The Cunning of the Hand,
the Weakness of the Heart

Theoretical Work in the
Advertising Profession

There is probably no activity more fully theorized in our culture than advertising. Almost anyone who thinks seriously about contemporary culture recognizes its pervasive power. Cultural theorists of all stripes have their say on the topic. Feminists, Marxists, psychoanalytic theorists, postmodernists, semioticians, rhetorical theorists—all have contributed to our understanding of advertising. There is also a great deal of vernacular theorizing on the topic: consumer protection groups and watchdog movements like Adbusters articulate formally what many consumers think and say about the advertising that daily surrounds them. My interest here is in the theories of advertising that are produced not by its academic theorists but by the advertising professionals themselves. Copywriters, art designers, agency representatives, brand managers, and marketing executives are of course practitioners caught up in the day-to-day work of advertising, and one might think that their busyness would preclude self-reflection. But in fact advertising professionals routinely reflect on the premises of their work and its implications. They would never define themselves as theorists, but rather as hardheaded practitioners. They often feel that their work is despised and misunderstood by what they see as the “dominant” theory of advertising as manipulation and trickery. They therefore write in a defensive and apologetic mode, offering what they see as a dissident theory that emphasizes the good that advertising does.

Advertising professionals take many opportunities to define and
discuss fundamental questions about their practice. They contribute feature articles to trade publications, give speeches to professional organizations and business groups, make presentations on college campuses, write advertising textbooks, reflect on their careers and the issues they’ve been involved in, and defend their profession in front of government and civic organizations. In these writings, I will argue, they articulate theoretical questions and propositions that constitute advertising’s theory of itself, a theory that ought to be recognized alongside more academic theories of advertising if we are to understand how advertising looks from the inside as well as how it looks when subjected to unfriendly critique. These are the theoretical reflections of the practitioners themselves, people who speak from within the institution they are theorizing. Their insights are shaped by their interests in advertising as a professional practice. As a general rule they do not gain or even seek the detachment of the cultural critic. Rather, they try to articulate the premises that guide their own practice and to reflect in their own terms on the results of that practice. This is insider theory; its strength is its intimacy with the dailiness of advertising practice, its weakness is its imperative to defend that practice against all comers.

These theoretical writings are surprisingly extensive. There is an extensive archive, for example, of writings and speeches by executives of the J. Walter Thompson Company, an advertising agency giant. These men and women engage in an intensive and ongoing process of self-reflection and self-defense, and the same kinds of writing go on in all large agencies. I should therefore begin by saying that I cannot and do not claim that the sample of advertising’s own theoretical writings that I have assembled here is representative of the industry, and all conclusions that I draw from these sources should be thought of as tentative and incomplete. My sources are such professional magazines as Advertising Age and ADweek, advertising textbooks, books written by current and former advertising executives, interviews with advertising professionals, and the archives of the Thompson agency. I have not analyzed these materials historically, in their changing relationship to economic and cultural contexts. A fuller study of advertising’s theory of itself might show how it changes in response to new social problems and opportunities. But throughout the history of modern advertising, there has been this persistent self-reflection and scrutiny. Many advertising pros are strongly committed to the written word, so it’s not surprising that they have tried to write about their own profession, but it should be noted that advertising as an institution promotes and supports these theoretical writings as an integral part of professional practice.

The result is a body of theoretical discourse that takes on an impressive array of fundamental questions. If theory is the process of examining the cultural premises that guide a practice, advertising’s theory of itself is extensive and deep. It takes on such questions as audience response and psychology, the conditions of creativity, aesthetic and economic value, the politics of advertising and marketing, advertising as a reflection of society and culture, rhetoric and persuasion, symbolism and iconology, identity construction, freedom and utopian desire, and gender and sexuality. Much of this writing is directly related to practice. Copywriters think about audience response in order to select the right word to make the sale; marketing experts think about icons because they want to connect the brand identity to the values of the target audience; advertising executives write about the social effects of advertising because they are being grilled in legislative hearings or attacked by consumer groups. The theoretical investigations produced by advertising professionals all arise out of local dispute and needs, occasions when fundamental questions need to be cleared up (at least for the moment) so that work can go on and the enterprise can be maintained and defended.

Fundamental questions, the kind of questions that I would call theoretical—e.g., not just how we expect particular readers to react, but what do we mean by reader reaction itself—are of interest to advertising professionals in part because the questions come up in the collaborative environment of advertising practice. Copywriters do not daily talk about audience in the same discourse as art directors do, or as market research specialists do, or as brand managers do. In order to get beneath these discursive conflicts, all involved must at times explain themselves to one another. We might call such efforts interdisciplinary theorizing, attempts to set the terms of discussion, translations from one discursive field to another so that practice can go forward in a coordinated way. But advertising also has to explain itself to a wider public, and as a result there is a large body of what I would call theoretical writing that amounts to an intellectual public relations effort. Advertisers realize that they live in a contentious
public environment. They face consumer skepticism and resentment which creates legislative and regulatory scrutiny. They must therefore articulate their own vision of what advertising contributes to society, how it addresses consumers, how it stimulates economic development, and how it derives from what they see as the basic nature of human being. The industry’s desire to clarify its terms and defend its practices has led to an extensive theoretical discussion of advertising within the industry itself, one that rivals and mirrors the theories of advertising produced by cultural critics.

But advertising’s theory of itself is severely limited by its apologetic and defensive tone. When advertising professionals write about their practice, they write inside a set of assumptions that they do not question. Advertising is necessary, inevitable, fundamental to human interaction, an honest enterprise that makes economic and political freedom possible. I have not found dissenting voices within the institution of advertising, writers who question the value of the enterprise itself. This is of course not surprising, given that these theoretical writings are always presented to a professional audience and that they are themselves part of a professional’s career. Those who truly dissent, it seems, must leave the profession. While this logic makes institutional sense, it means that advertising’s theory of itself suffers from a lack of radical self-questioning. Cultural theory as it is practiced within the academy allows and even welcomes critiques of its foundational principles. It is not surprising at all when cultural theory turns its critical eye on the institutions and powers that make it possible. But that kind of self-scrutiny is not part of advertising’s theory of itself. When these practitioners turn to theory, they can question everything but the enterprise itself, and as a result many fundamental questions remain mystified or are answered with the most shopworn ideological clichés, the sentimentalities of clever men. This is not to say that interesting theoretical issues cannot be raised, but that finally the theoretical work of advertising professionals has to rest inside an unquestioned faith.

One of the most complex questions these professionals raise is the issue of value. The issue arises, for example, in the case of “parity products,” competing brands whose substantive differences from one another are minuscule—soaps, detergents, socks, basketball shoes, phone services. In this kind of competitive situation, advertising is crucial, in that it has the power to create a personality for a brand, thus differentiating it from its virtually identical competition and making it memorable and satisfying to the consumer. Advertising’s theorists want to undo the commonsense assumption that in these circumstances the similarities are real because material and the differences are unreal because imaginary. Those “unreal” qualities, if they become part of consumers’ perception, are then real features of the product as consumed, they argue, and advertising therefore adds real value to the product. Perception of difference constitutes real difference. Value lies not in the material qualities of the commodity, but in the commodity as it is perceived and valued by consumers, and if the brand image is part of that perception, then it is part of the commodity itself. Louis Kaufman describes this function of advertising in his textbook Essentials of Advertising: “There are psychic values in a product that provide satisfaction for the purchaser. Consumers want more than transportation in an automobile: they want style and status and pizzazz” (513). Advertising plays a very large role in creating status for a car, these theorists say, but in doing so it appeals to a real need in the consumer and creates a real satisfaction for that need. Advertising professionals often claim that advertising gives meaning and value to objects, but that from the consumer perspective, those meanings and values are then in fact part of the object. Judie Lannon and Peter Cooper of J. Walter Thompson cite in their article “Humanistic Advertising: A Holistic Cultural Perspective” a scientific study showing that branded aspirin gives more relief than chemically identical but unbranded aspirin because of the confidence that the brand identity creates. The brand name, they claim, should be thought of as an ingredient in the product (206). Similarly, Jerry Conlon, director of marketing information at Nike, in an interview with a researcher from the Center for Advertising History, argues that the Air Jordan concept creates extra meaning and symbolic value, which is part of what the consumer purchases.2

Both Lannon and Conlon understand that advertising creates such meanings and values because it taps into preexisting cultural systems. It is part of the task of advertising to find out what meanings and values matter to its target audience and to associate the product with those factors. Conlon discusses, for example, the need for adolescent males to feel free, to escape the restrictions on their lives. Air Jordan’s powerful imagery of flight and its symbolic association

2. Tapes of interviews with Nike executives are available through the Center for Advertising History at the National Museum of American History, part of the Smithsonian Institution.
with freedom then become part of what such consumers buy. In these and similar discussions, advertising's theory of itself has its postmodern moment. Value resides not in objects, but rather in the subject's perception of those objects, which is determined by the subject's position within a cultural system. Furthermore, the object itself can be thought of in antimaterialist ways, as when Dan Seymour, at the time (1968) president of J. Walter Thompson, describes commodities as "simply ideas in solid form" ("Challenge" 20). Seymour is discussing in this talk the ability of products to cross national and political borders, and thus to bring with them the ideas that made them possible, i.e., ideas of freedom and private enterprise. This argument again dematerializes objects, casting the entire process of exchange in ideational and psychological terms. The product itself in its materiality is merely a switching mechanism whereby the idea of the producer is transferred to the mind of the consumer. Advertising is the activity by which the idea of the commodity becomes the consumer's lived experience.

Advertising also adds to the product the value of the pleasure of advertising itself. In the thirties, Don Francisco, then vice president of J. Walter Thompson, argued in a presentation to the Boston Conference on Distribution that advertising is an "essential ingredient of democracy" in that it glamorizes products and thus creates the incentive to work: "The desire to possess, and therefore the desire to work, would be much less were it not for the influence of advertising in dramatizing the pleasures and satisfactions that the possession of things will bring." (6). Advertising creates an expectation of satisfaction, a predisposition to understand the value of the object in nonmaterial and nonutilitarian terms, as the satisfaction of a desire, and to understand the moment of purchase as itself a pleasurable experience. All these intangibles become part of the commodity itself, and advertising can therefore think of itself as intrinsic to the production process, adding real value for the consumer.

Advertisers need to make these arguments because they are often accused of fabricating the symbolic identity for particular brands of parity products. Some of the most offensive ads you can think of work in precisely this fashion. Think of Mr. Clean or the Tidy Bowl man, both attempts to give personality to products virtually indistinguishable from their competition. While I am attracted by the sophistication of these postmodern interpretations of value, I'm also committed to the commonsense approach that says this is precisely fabrication, the creation of sheer fiction which places consumers in a virtual reality theater of trustworthy Volvos and perky phone companies and macho Nikes and sophisticated Heinekens and just folks Wendy's.

But on what ground does one stand in order to reassert the existence of some "real" materiality that exists prior to and independent of the identities and values created for it by advertising? Is there a critical mindset that comes out of consumer experience that gets past those identities and sees products for themselves, as merely utilitarian objects? Consumers can see through some of these fictions but not all. We all buy into some of these images, probably the ones that come closest to our image of ourselves. Advertising's theory of value and perception is at once a convincing argument and an intellectual cover-up. If only one writer within the advertising profession would say, "Yeah, but we're just making this stuff up!" I'd be more convinced by the counterargument. Advertising's postmodernism seems to me too easy. It's one thing to deconstruct the opposition between truth and fiction; it's another thing simply to bypass it. Parity products are in fact parity products, and it takes a critical eye to recall that in the face of advertising magic.

Advertising professionals are also very interested in questions of aesthetic or formal value because they want to maximize the pleasure that advertising adds to the product. What makes a good advertisement? What makes good copy? What makes a great campaign? Advertising's theorists are interested not only in making critical judgments about particular ads, but also in defining quality in general, in articulating a notion of style and effectiveness. Of course in advertising the discussion of form is never pure in the sense that literary formalists require. That is, an aesthetically great ad fails as an ad if it does not further the business of the client. Bob Garfield, for example, in an "AdReview" column for Advertising Week recognizes the bizarre genius of the Dennis Hopper/demented referee commercial for Nike, but since he can't see how it will help Nike sales, he sees it as an advertising failure. He calls it "an arresting, wild, hilarious [advertisement]...that should be pulled off the air" (44). Advertising theory's sense of form, then, is finally dominated by the requirements of advertising as a rhetorical strategy, and therefore finally by its conception of audience. Depending on whether you believe the consumer is dominated by the head or by the heart, you will value in copy, for example, either the elegant presentation of factual and informational material, or the precise choice of a word that will press the right emotional button. I will discuss
advertising’s theory of audience and rhetoric later, but such concerns can’t be ruled out of a discussion of aesthetic value in advertising.

Discussions of copywriting in advertising theory tend to sound like Strunk and White. Less is more. Precision. Know the product, know the audience, communicate the value of the product in terms that will appeal to the audience. Beauty for its own sake is replaced by the beauty of precise and effective communication. One such critic/theorist was James D. Woolf, longtime copywriter and vice president of J. Walter Thompson, who wrote a column called “Salesmanship” in *Advertising Age* for many years after his retirement in the fifties. His column took on specific problems and issues in advertising, particularly in copywriting. His own aesthetic requires an ad to address itself straightforwardly to the “personal benefit” that the consumer can expect from the product. All decisions about copy and art flow from that understanding. Since those benefits are both emotional and rational, the advertisement should be at its best “an artful blend of algebra and music,” an appeal to emotion that does not insult the intelligence of the consumer. Like many of advertising’s theorists, Woolf has a strong sense of the power of words, and he is alert to the importance of stylistic decisions that honor the particular powers of specific words.

But one of the most interesting reflections on the aesthetics of advertising that I encountered was Jerry Conlon of Nike’s analysis of why “Air Jordan” was a successful nonverbal “icon.” Conlon argues that the image of Michael flying through the air, legs scissoring, arms extended, ball held powerfully in the hand moving toward the basket, works so well because it creates an instant communication, beyond the limits of language, a direct perception of the message that the advertiser wants to convey. Along with the icon, the phrase “Air Jordan” itself moves beyond ordinary language because it has multiple meanings, referring simultaneously to the man Michael Jordan, the technology of air support in the shoe, and the style of play that the shoe promises to provide. The icon creates “...meaning...aura, through a symbol, without language, the most direct form of communication.” In this interview with the Center for Advertising History, Conlon describes himself as a Zen devotee, attracted to Nike because of his meditative experience with running. Zen is for him a critique of linear rationality, a discipline of nonverbal appreciation, direct and ecstatic perception of the here and now. At its best, he argues, advertising creates that direct perception by teasing its audi-

ence out of verbal consciousness by multiple meaning and visual communication. The most aesthetically pleasing ad would be the one that spoke eloquently without speaking, that communicated a feeling, that added to the product the psychological value that the consumer is looking for, and did it so perfectly that the feeling and the product would be inseparable in the audience’s mind.

David Ogilvy, the galvanizing spirit of the huge agency Ogilvy and Mather, tells in his book *Confessions of an Advertising Man* that even when he ascended to high executive levels in the company, he continued to write ad copy on occasion, in order to “remind my brigade of copywriters that my hand has not lost its cunning” (7). For Ogilvy the cunning of the hand is the result of a strict discipline that produces an exacting aesthetic. He set out rules for copywriting but believed that such rules could lead to creative breakthroughs. He argues: “Shakespeare wrote his sonnets within a strict discipline, fourteen lines of iambic pentameter rhyming in three quatrains and a couplet. Were they dull?” (90). The discipline of the copywriter derives from a thorough knowledge of the product, an awareness of the existing brand image, and a knowledge of the audience. The word “cunning” refers to knowledge—if a copywriter is cunning it is because he or she knows the audience, respects their desire for information, understands their desires: “The cunning of the hand” is a skill based on knowledge. Know who you are addressing, and you will know how to craft an aesthetically pleasing message that makes sense to them. But the word “cunning” also clearly suggests a tacit recognition that there is at least cleverness if not trickery in this craft. “Cunning” is necessary in order to ensure that the audience doesn’t feel manipulated, but rather addressed as a rational person, even at the moment when the right emotional buttons are being pushed. The aesthetic value of advertising copy cannot be understood outside this rhetorical context, outside a theory of audience.

Or more accurately theories of audience. At least three fully articulated theories of audience emerge out of the writings of advertising professionals: (1) each member of the audience is a sovereign individual who makes rational choices aided by the information provided by advertising; (2) each consumer is driven by powerful internal forces and desires that advertising can and does exploit; (3) the identity of each consumer is constituted by membership in demographic and psychographic groups, and the rhetoric of advertising depends on knowledge of that overdetermined subject. These three theories circulate and interrelate in complex ways within ad-
ministration, Cherington puts a political spin on this theory of audience by praising that "horse sense" in the public's opposition to strikes and violence and to the very concept that the poor are exploited by the rich. Cherington is speaking to the need for business to respond to leftist critiques of the Depression thirties, and he argues that the public can be trusted to accept those responses: "Public opinion, when left free, is perhaps the wisest of all things human, but can be herded and thrown into panic" (8-9). The way to arrest that panic is to appeal seriously to the reasoning powers of the common man. Cherington assumes that reasonable subjects will see and accept the logic of the market economy. This same line is followed by later JWT executives like Burt Manning, who tells Ford dealers in 1982 that "we have raised a generation of critics—and now we have to know how to cope with them" (11). These "connoisseurs of advertising" refuse to believe any ad that insults their intelligence. They want information from ads, and "they want to be persuaded, not snowed" (23). Dan Seymour, in one of his addresses to the Kraft Corporation (1968), describes consumers as "difficult, suspicious, slow with a dollar, hard-headed, and even ornery individuals..." (15).

There is no question that this theory of the audience is shaped by advertising's awareness that many people think of it as manipulative and deceitful, but we should not therefore dismiss this theory as simply self-serving. For one thing, it actually informs the practice of a whole school of copywriters who believe that ads should present information-heavy copy so that consumers can make informed choices. Ogilvy expresses this attitude in the pithy phrase "The more you tell, the more you sell" (Confessions of an Advertising Man 108), or to put it more personally:

The consumer isn't a moron, she is your wife. You insult her intelligence if you assume that a mere slogan and a few vapid adjectives will persuade her to buy anything. She wants all the information you can give her. (96)

Many advertisements for durable goods (cars, stereos, computers) are full of data offered as advantages that any rational person would accept. I am not persuaded that the J. Walter Thompson executives mentioned above were as convinced of the popular intellect as their statements suggest. After all, JWT and Cherington in particular were pioneers in the kind of market research that aimed at uncovering consumer motivation well below the rational level. And the advertising textbooks that preach about the critical, independent con-
sumner then go on to teach ways of knowing consumers that lead to appeals to feelings and values rather than intellect. Nevertheless, as I will argue later, I am not ready to dismiss this image of the consumer. I am convinced that there is truth in this theory of the audience, even if those who offer it do so in self-defense.

Equally common in advertising's discourse about itself is a theory of audience that frankly admits that consumption is about desire and emotion, and that the craft or "cunning" of advertising lies in the ability to take advantage of those feelings. Even Burt Manning, whom I quoted above saying that "we have raised a generation of critics," says in a 1978 speech that advertising appeals to "involuntary, unspoken—maybe even unconscious... fundamental responses" (2). In this style of discourse there is often talk of pushing the right button, or of understanding the weaknesses of the target audience. The great dean of copywriting James Woolf talks about understanding people's powerful "subjective hangerners," and argues that all rational appeals have to make sense within an emotional appeal because "emotional beliefs... persuade us to do most of the things we do." From this perspective, the best advertising strategy is to appeal to people's "inadequacies" (Woolf) or "lacks" (James Webb Young). Once the consumer is understood in these essentially psychoanalytic (or even Lacanian) ways, the next step is to associate the product with the filling of that lack, the satisfaction of those unconscious desires. Once advertisers know the individual's depth psychology, creating the actual ad is relatively easy.

This theory of audience also has political implications. In contrast to Paul Cherington's praise of the fundamental wisdom of public opinion, JWT executive William L. Day argued in the twenties and thirties that public opinion is not "ordered and reasoned," but rather that people "do not wish to think things out for themselves." "The public can—at its worst—behave like a wild beast," and "those responsible for shaping human thought" should understand that "emotional and not intellectual bases must be used to lead, inspire, and direct the mass action of the public." (See "What Shall the Public Think?" [1929] and "How the Public Thinks" [1937].) From this perspective "propaganda," both political and commercial, is necessary for the life of any society.

Not all advertising theorists see a real opposition between these two positions. For some like James Woolf the real question is strategic rather than philosophical. His rule of thumb is to appeal to reason with information when you are selling necessities, appeal to emotion when you are selling luxuries and self-indulgences. A more overtly theoretical JWT writer like Alvin Achenbaum makes the claim that this abstract opposition always breaks down in any real rhetorical situation. His 1971 address to the Federal Trade Commission responds to critics who want advertising to be limited to the presentation of factual information for consumer comparison. Achenbaum argues that information can never be presented without appealing to the interests—including the emotional interests—of the audience being addressed. No neutral language for description exists, and appeals to emotion are legitimate and inevitable elements of all rhetoric. Because reason and emotion are inextricably related, appeals to emotion are not forms of compulsion that produce automatic and uncontrollable responses, but acceptable forms of persuasive appeal to important elements of the human mind that do not exist separately from or antagonistically to the reasoning capacity. Achenbaum's explanation articulates a feeling among many advertising professionals that they do in fact appeal to emotion, but that they do not thereby disarm the reasoning abilities of their audience. They are acutely aware that many advertisements are dismissed and that many campaigns fail, despite their efforts to manipulate response. One could argue that advertising's theory of itself invokes freedom and reason as a cover for a practice of emotional compulsion, but I believe that advertisers in fact encounter a critical and skeptical audience every day, every time they fail to secure the response they seek.

The strategic question of whether to appeal to mind or heart plays out in very interesting ways in Nike advertising. The Center for Advertising History at the National Museum of American History has produced a series of oral history interviews with advertising professionals involved in major campaigns of the last twenty years. The Nike collection is particularly interesting in that the company's advertising evolved from information-heavy ads aimed at expert consumers to powerfully emotional ads aimed at huge and emotionally volatile markets. Nike began with and now attempts to hold onto an image of itself as a company that makes shoes for serious athletes, particularly runners. Its early advertising was dominated by descriptions of technological breakthroughs, endorsements by world-class runners, and explanations of the contribution that the shoes could make to performance. But the company's exponential growth was fueled by the fact that athletic shoes became fashionable and that millions of nonathletes became interested at least to
some extent in fitness. This change in audience is reflected in more recent Nike advertising, which depends on arresting images, powerful emotional appeals, endorsements by celebrity athletes, and stylish visual design. The interviews in this project track this change and demonstrate that the advertising professionals involved in the process were extremely aware of the issues that their practice raised.

One issue was brand image. Phil Knight, founder and president of the company, tells the interviewer that Nike advertising can be diverse, but it can never ‘distort the brand.’ As the market for athletic and fitness gear changed, the biggest challenges to the identifiability of the brand were the problems raised by marketing to women. Women who were competition-level athletes were not the problem, but the huge numbers of women who were interested in fitness activities like aerobics and walking could not be addressed in the rational discourse of the serious athlete that Nike was used to. Advertising and marketing experts working for Nike understood that there had to be more attention to style and color in design, and more attention to affect in advertising if this market was to be reached. People involved in the planning of Nike advertising, like Cindy Hale, advertising manager at Nike from 1982 to 1987, Peter Moore, creative director at Nike from 1983 to 1987, Janet Champ, copywriter at Wieden and Kennedy, Nike’s most important advertising agency, and Susan Hoffman and Charlotte Moore, art directors at Wieden and Kennedy, discuss in these interviews how the opposition between reason and emotion connected to gender differences. All seem to work on the assumption that men need information and women need emotion, that men are more interested in performance, women in style. There is no effort to question those assumptions, but there is a great deal of thought about how to negotiate these differences without ‘distorting the brand.’

This is not to say that emotions play no role in marketing to men. In fact, Dolan and Champ and market information expert Jerry Conlon talk a lot about the emotional satisfaction young men derive from emulating their heroes. Conlon argues that young men see shoes as status symbols because they associate the shoes with celebrities they idolize, and that they define their identity by these talismanic physical objects. The emotional appeal to women, they explain, has to be subtler and more powerful than that. Women have to think of the activity that the shoe allows them to engage in as part of how they define themselves emotionally. Charlotte Moore and Janet Champ talk about how Nike had to associate its product with women’s emo-

tional issues, particularly with the survival of identity over time and aging. The activities that Nike makes possible, the ads aimed at women suggested, allow them to deal with aging in healthier and more natural ways than plastic surgery or restrictive diets. Exercise allows women to hold onto the identity they retain from their youth, in spite of the passage of time. Nike therefore produced a series of ads aimed at women that connected Nike to the entire life cycle of a woman’s emotions. The danger was that the brand identity might be lost and that Nike could no longer hold onto its integrity as a shoe for the serious athlete. One answer was to use powerful images of women engaged in the activities, that is, to depict them as athletes, and to ground the emotional appeal of the ad in the feelings created by athletic activity itself. The ads attempted to hold onto Nike’s commitment to serious athleticism without using an information-heavy communication style. And as the shoe market changed from running to basketball, with its market of young men, almost all of Nike’s advertising except for specialty ads aimed at competition-level runners and athletes came to emphasize emotion rather than information. Nike advertising was thereby “feminized,” to use the terms that guided this particular professional practice. And throughout the process the issues of gender and psychology and their connections with commercial rhetoric were explicitly addressed and discussed by the practitioners involved.

The theories of audience I have described—consumer as rational decision maker and consumer as desiring and feeling subject—have in common that they define the audience in individualistic terms. The rational decision maker stands alone in the supermarket aisle, weighing the costs and benefits of the commodities available. The desiring subject is driven by personal weaknesses and dreams. A third theory of audience derives from advertising’s dependence on market research: from this perspective audiences are understood as demographic and psychographic groups, any individual consumer is constituted by his or her membership in these groups, and the act of purchasing specific commodities is precisely what confirms membership and thus identity. Many J Walter Thompson executives write from this perspective. JWT has always been known as a research house. The agency pioneered, for example, the use of census data in the planning of advertising and distribution. One of the patriarchs of the company, James Webb Young, sets the tone as early as the 1930s: “An individual lives, moves, and has his being as a member of a group or many groups. . . . Even his most powerful in-
stincts (if there is such a thing as instinct) are controlled by a group” (Lectures 3). Young argues that humans are gregarious by nature, and that their desire for acceptance creates a pressure to conform to group norms. This desire can be exploited by advertising that presents a product as a way to achieve social prestige (Lectures 27, 61). Young also argues that any message aimed at a large public (he is thinking in this case of political propaganda) must take into account these group identities, and appeal to the “completely unconscious assumptions” visible in “all the practices of a people” (“Do We Need a College of Propaganda?” 85). In Young’s writing and in others’ who speak in market research terms, a vision of the self emerges that resembles very strongly the postmodern, decentered, socially constructed self of poststructuralist theory.

The craft of advertising then becomes what Bovee and Arens call in their textbook Contemporary Advertising a combination of the behavioral sciences and communication arts. Knowing the consumer in demographic and psychographic terms precedes and determines the creation of advertising texts. Defining the audience entails questions of gender, race, class, income level, family status, geographical location, etc.—all of the “external” categories that shape more “internal” qualities like lifestyle, attitudes, self-concept, values, personality, and even perceptual style. Advertisers have to know the psychographics of the demographic groups they are addressing. They then shape the brand image to appeal to the needs and values of that group. In the depth of that knowledge contemporary advertising shows its cunning and exerts its power. Market research is power/knowledge at work. JWT is famous for hiring psychologists—most famously the behaviorist James Watson, whose work for the firm has attracted extensive commentary—as part of their market research effort. Psychological testing experts like Timothy Joyce and Arthur Koponen communicate to the creative staff that it is possible to know the audience intimately and that media selection and copy preparation should flow from that knowledge (Koponen 10). In practice, this theory of the self sometimes connects with the theory of the desiring, feeling self, in the sense that knowing demographics and psychographics leads to a knowledge of what consumers fear and desire, but it differs in that it disperses the self, which is governed by different group affiliations and identities in different consumer situations. There is no integral, desiring self, but rather a set of group-inspired desires that temporarily inhabit particular consumers.

The discussions that surround Nike advertising operate inside this market-based theory of audience. Ads are aimed at socially defined market segments—men or women, young men or older men, competitive athletes or fitness freaks. And there is very confident talk about a psychology typical of the demographic group. Jerry Conlon distinguishes for example between younger men who value shoes as status symbols and boomer men who value them as “empowerment vehicles.” Liz Dolan and others generalize confidently about how men emulate heroes and women don’t. The assumption behind that confidence is that personal identity is a function of factors beyond personal control. An individual goes through life stages that bring about predictable psychological crises. A senior citizen with lots of assets finds himself becoming more conservative than he ever was before. Age and income and gender and geography and all the other demographic categories bring with them attitudes and values that shape the identity of subjects.

These assumptions are an ordinary part of the daily life of advertising professionals. The fragmented, socially determined self that their practice implies may not align well with the more humanistic image of the self that advertising’s spokespersons present to the public, but the contradiction rarely comes to the surface of advertising’s discourse about itself. Perhaps this is because when advertising professionals reflect on their lives and careers in the business, they represent themselves as the imperial self, engaged constantly in a battle for money and prestige within the agency and profession. Jerry Della Femina’s strange book, From Those Wonderful Folks Who Brought You Pearl Harbor, and John Lyons’ Guts: Advertising from the Inside Out, both chronicles of and reflections on a life in advertising, revel in the competition, the game of agency against agency, the hustle for the new account, the presentation with everything on the line, the tricks of intra-office combat. Della Femina talks with great relish about how information can be used strategically and how rumors can be orchestrated for the agency’s benefit. In all the career stories I have read the teller of the story was a lone warrior struggling for power, suffering defeat, regaining ground. Advertisers see themselves as sovereign egos and characterize their audience in the same way, even if their practice is often based on the assumption that there is no such thing.

One of the most controversial questions in advertising’s theory of itself is whether this knowledge of the psychological structures and feelings of the public allows advertisers to create desires. This is also
one of the most common criticisms aimed at the profession, that it stimulates overconsumption of products that are necessary for the satisfaction not of any reasonable need or desire, but only for the desire stimulated by the advertising itself. There is no single answer to this critical question in advertising theory. Rather, you can find writers who deny that advertising has such power, writers who proclaim the creation of desire as the right and proper duty of advertising, and writers who say advertising has the power to create desire for a product only if it is connected to a fundamental preexisting desire.

The answers depend in great part on how the question is asked. If the question focuses on a particular product, advertising's theorists tend to emphasize the difficulty of creating desire. The consensus seems to be that advertising can create desire for a product only if it can be connected to a basic and perennial desire. Jerry Della Femina jokes about how advertising created "vaginal odors" as a social problem and thus created the desire for vaginal sprays (Pearl Harbor 35). And it is part of JWT folklore that the agency created body odor and halitosis and therefore desire for the products that could cure them. But James Webb Young made it a matter of institutional conviction that such desires could be created only if they connected to a "pre-existing want that was seeking satisfaction," in all of these cases the desire for social acceptance (Lectures 59). Advertising textbooks often take the same line. Advertising can't save a product that doesn't meet an existing desire, and it is the business of marketing and advertising to find out what the public desires so that the product can be designed and advertised as a satisfaction of that desire.

But when the question of creating desire is asked more globally—does advertising in general stimulate desire—advertising's theorists are more likely to say yes, and to take pride in the profession's ability to stimulate consumption. A bold example of this claim is the writing of Dan Seymour, onetime president of JWT. Seymour's writing is typified by grand rhetorical claims about the role that business in general and advertising in particular plays in the modern world. In fact, he defines advertising as a modernist, Enlightenment project:

Advertising has become a potent force in our lives because it is part and parcel of the economic, technological and scientific developments of our age, developments which rest on the unraveling of secrets, breaking with the past, and extensions of the boundaries of man's mind. ("World of Demand" 6)

The role of advertising in this project is clear to Seymour; to increase its demand:

Our business is training consumers... people had to learn that they needed soap, washing machines, indoor toilets, insurance, showers, refrigerators, cod liver oil, safety razors, sewing machines, paper towels and even automobiles. (1-3)

Seymour often describes advertising as an educational practice. Consumers, especially consumers from developing countries and from newly affluent classes, have to be educated in material desire. They may be working off of what Seymour calls "latent desires," but their specific commodity desires have to be educated into them by advertising, which is the most powerful force that gives new concepts to the peoples of the world, the force that upgrades their diet, that teaches them what to do with leisure time, how to house themselves and clothe themselves, what to do with their home life, how to stay healthy, how to educate themselves, where and how to travel. (14)

Seymour provides here an image of advertising as an intimate teacher, entering into the most private aspects of people's lives and forming their tastes and desires. No part of life is outside advertising's influence—the entire world of personal desire is shaped by the power of advertising. Seymour is also clear about why advertising must have this power. Speaking in 1964, Seymour sees increased production capacity, large numbers of people entering the American workforce, and therefore a need to incite demand. He punches this theme hard in his speech to the Economic Club of Detroit: "I speak of the supreme urgency of increasing consumption... We must upgrade the standard of living everywhere... We must expand consumption to match production" (11). And Seymour has no doubt that advertising can bring about this result: "It is important to realize the power of the advertising motor in starting and in powering the economic drive shaft," he says (13). And, "We who work in advertising are very much aware of its force. We do not argue among ourselves about its power as a dynamic force in economic growth—we live with the lightning and respect it" (14). The lightning works by knowing who consumers are, knowing what they lack, stimulating their dissatisfaction, providing them with powerful images of what money can buy, and adding excitement to the act of consumption.

In these passages Seymour articulates a faith in the power of advertising that precisely matches the horror of advertising's critics. Stuart Ewen and many others have accused advertising of this all-intrusive manipulation of consumers. Ewen's famous articulation of
this activity is to call corporate leaders “captains of consciousness,” eager to extend their power from the sphere of production to the more intimate sphere of consumption. Seymour doesn’t just admit to this power, he proclaims it. The power that he describes makes advertising “a major civilizing force” (“World of Demand” 16), and we will see later that he is proud of the global reach of that force as well. Seymour is enough of a theorist to be able to articulate in general terms an understanding of the relationship between advertising and its audience, but he is not able to consider the possibility that the relationship might have a negative side to it, that the intimate reach of advertising might sound frightening to the public, like Big Brother on the make. Seymour is too far inside the enterprise to question it down to its roots.

In spite of the power that Seymour and others claim for advertising, I come away from these theories of audience wanting to hold onto the doubts that advertising raises about its own powers, onto the image of the critical consumer, capable of resisting the power of advertising's strategies. I believe there is some truth to the claims of advertising's defenders that those who attack advertising often underestimate the critical abilities of consumers. Cultural studies as a discipline has moved from images of passivity to a sense that audiences actively process all media messages. It would take another essay to begin to discuss the ways that consumers read advertising critically, but I am convinced that people not only engage in routine doubt about the truth claims of individual commercials, but have a strong sense of what advertising as an institution is trying to do to them. Many people choose to remove themselves from the commercial networks altogether. Others endure the advertising that intrudes in their routine, but pay no attention to it. Others look at it carefully, make informed decisions about its truthfulness, and engage in skeptical buying habits. Others are always on the lookout for deception and manipulation. Consumers take advantage of relatively independent sources of information like *Consumer Reports*; anti-advertising activists join groups like Adbusters or local media literacy campaigns. Teachers promote critical viewing skills by analyzing print and media advertising. All these varied activities suggest that advertising's audience really does demonstrate the skeptical, resistant attitude that advertising on occasion describes in them. I would suggest that in this case advertising tells the truth in spite of itself, and that cultural studies of advertising should concentrate on the active, critical nature of its audience.

These theories of audience are matched by a serious theoretical debate about the conditions of creativity. The debate centers on how the process of producing effective advertising texts can be managed most effectively. And the terms of the debate are similar to discussions of audience: one side of the debate argues that creativity must be disciplined by a rational system of management and information; the other argues that creativity is best fostered by a supportive affective climate and by granting creative people freedom to experiment and fail, to unleash their unconscious creative powers. I did not uncover a fully developed theory of creativity that matches the demographic/psychographic theory of audience, though it is true that agencies often hire professionals from the same identity groups they want to address. In the bipolar debate between reason and intuition, I would place David Ogilvy and JWT on the rational side of the debate, and the creative people at Nike and its agency Wieden and Kennedy on the affective side. This opposition has important daily consequences in the advertising world, since it defines the culture of an agency and the daily conditions of work, and it is widely debated in advertising writing.

David Ogilvy is a cunning proponent of the disciplined, informed approach. He admits that creativity requires “more than reason,” that it is “inspired by the unconscious,” and realizes that it must be encouraged by music, whiskey, gardening, walks, and vacations (*Confessions of an Advertising Man* 20). He recognizes the existence of genius that is “disagreeable” and hard to manage but must be tolerated (87). But Ogilvy does not therefore believe that the creative people who work for him should be allowed perfect freedom to indulge their genius. Rather, he sees the agency as an extension of its leader, a “formidable individual” or master who sets the tone and indeed sets the rules that govern the creative process (22). A great agency, he says, is “the lengthened shadow of one man” (66–67). And Ogilvy embodied his own shadow in a set of rules that governed practice, rules about headlines, copy, sentence length, word choice, layout, use of illustrations and photographs, etc. His company is known for its “corporate approach to advertising, emphasizing research into the product and its competitors and rigorous knowledge of the audience. Ogilvy wanted writers who write to be read, who appeal directly to the target audience, who draw attention to the product, not the ad. And he believed that his rules did not discourage the creativity of his creative people, but rather that they provided the discipline necessary for successful creation. He compares his rules, as I said earlier, to the con-
straints under which Shakespeare wrote his sonnets, constraints that
encouraged creativity. But for all the emphasis on research, Ogilvy
still believed that "advertising seems to sell most when it is written
by a solitary individual" (98) rather than by a careful committee.
Ogilvy believes in the creativity of the powerful individual, but he
wants to subjugate such individuals to his own rationalizing power,
to make them work within the shadow of his ego. He will set the
rules, and they will assert their individual creativity only within the
parameters he sets.

When JWT writers discuss creativity, there is none of Ogilvy's
sense of a galvanizing individual who sets the rules, but rather a
sense that discipline derives from information, from a commitment
to knowing the consumer. JWT marketing experts provide knowl-
edge of audience to the creative staff, and they make clear that cre-
ative practice ought to derive from such knowledge. Creative deci-
sions always depend on a knowledge base, including media buying,
copy strategies, imagery, and brand identity (Koponen 10). That is,
JWT understands creativity in terms of rhetoric. Design and copy
are successful only if they are addressed properly, aimed at the right
audience. As early as 1932 Don Francisco was saying that "unique
style in advertising is a handicap," and that the best advice he could
give to novices was to "study the crowd" ("Innovative Advertising"
3, 88). Effective advertising is produced not by aspiring to the stand-
ards of the elite arts, but by gaining a knowledge of the common
people. If corn works, James Woolf says, use corn. JWT creative
people are expected to discipline themselves by attending to the rhe-
torical bottom line.

And JWT believes that this skill can be rationally understood and
taught. Pioneers in the company like James Webb Young devised "the
Thompson T square," an intellectual system for understanding ad-
vertising tasks reminiscent of Kenneth Burke's pentad—what are we
selling, to whom are we selling it, where and when are we selling it,
and how do we sell it? Young also analyzed advertising by distin-
guishing the proposition (the product or idea being sold), the mar-
ket (the audience), the message (the ad itself), the carrier (the me-
edium), and the delivery (the distribution system) (Lectures 1). He also
defined five basic uses of advertising—to familiarize the public with
a product, to remind the public of a product they already know
about, to spread news associated with a product, to overcome inertia
in consumers, and to add value not in the product by associating it with
a powerful feeling. Clearly in Webb's work advertising is subject to
a systematic knowing. Creativity in advertising is not a mystical pro-
cess, a gift from the gods; rather, it is a skill that can be learned. JWT
was known as the "university of advertising." The company trained
its own creative people—see for example Gelston Hardy's One Way
to Write Better Advertising Copy (written for "girl apprentices" at JWT
in the twenties)—supported salons for the exchange of ideas, spon-
sored guest speakers at staff meetings, and encouraged self-reflec-
tive writing in advertising professionals. Creativity at JWT is man-
aged by a rational knowledge of the market and by a rational
knowledge of the process itself. Everywhere in this writing is the as-
sumption that creativity needs to be managed if advertising is to suc-
cceed. There appears to be little room in this vision for a truly maver-
erick sensibility, the kind that is perhaps better suited for a boutique
agency than for a "corporate" agency like JWT, with its huge clients
and their time-honored products and markets.

This is not to say that managing creativity at JWT entails a nar-
row, restrictive approach. For example, when Gelston Hardy tells
the "girl apprentices" what will make them good copywriters (a skill
that he says does not respect gender differences), he points to
wide and creative reading as the key ingredient. That is, he is less
interested in training their verbal skills than in widening them. And
Denis Lanigan, when he tries to define the "Thompson philosophy"
in 1983, does not lay down a set of rules that guide practice; rather,
he describes a workplace atmosphere and a corporate culture that
encourage experimentation, humane treatment of employees, free-
dom of expression, constructive challenges to received opinion, fair-
ness, moral rectitude, and truthfulness. He argues that a company
with such an ethos will support true creativity in advertising. Inside
the discipline of knowledge, creativity is fostered by a humanistic
environment, a civilized, courteous, stimulating, caring workplace.

Conversations with professionals associated with Nike advertis-
ing emphasize this connection between the feel of the workplace
and the creativity of the ads. Although there is a strong commit-
ment at Nike and at Wieden and Kennedy to a knowledge of the consumer,
there is also a strong commitment to the creative freedom of the ad-
vertising professional. Here the emphasis is not on knowledge and
rational management of creativity, but rather on the ways that flashes
of insight and innovation can be encouraged. For example, when
Janet Champ and Susan Hoffman of Wieden and Kennedy tell the
story of how they created the "Revolution" ad that used the Beatles
song in connection with handheld, black and white cinematogra-
phy, they emphasize the serendipity of the process and the trust and intuition of their bosses. Hoffman recalls that Wieden and Kennedy were trying to shake up the usual work habits of the agency by assembling new creative teams and by asking all of the creative staff to think about campaigns to introduce a “revolutionary” new shoe. This break with routine allowed new approaches to emerge in unplanned flashes of insight. Hoffman and Champ report that they were out to lunch at a restaurant in Portland called the Dakota Café, sitting under a photograph of the Dakota apartments on Central Park West in New York, where John Lennon lived and died. If the shoe is a revolution, they thought, why not use the Beatles’ song “Revolution #9”? They thought the liveliness and rawness of the song fit well with some raw video footage of athletes they had recently seen, and the idea for the ad was born. What is particularly noteworthy in this narrative is that their superiors at the agency supported the idea, not because they tested it on audiences but because they intuitively saw its appeal to the market they wanted. They trusted the creativity of the team and the intuitive appeal of the idea.

Many of the advertising people who work for and with Nike believe that this trust and intuitive decision making are fostered by the corporate culture of Nike. Charlotte Moore, an art director at Wieden and Kennedy, credits Nike’s decentralized decision making, its commitment to consensus and democracy. Jerry Conlon, Nike’s director of marketing information, explains that Nike’s organizational structure promotes creative thinking. He sees three coexisting structures at work in the company: a hierarchical structure or chain of command; a set of matrices that are brought together around particular projects and problems; and a complex network of more personal and informal relationships related to friendships, hallway encounters, shared interests, and compatible personalities. He argues that Nike is driven by networks, and that this irreverent, anti-establishment style accounts for the creativity of the company and its advertising. It is this loose, sixties style that attracts a creative person like Conlon, who speaks extensively with the interviewer about Zen meditation and its connections with his work at Nike. Phil Knight, founder of the company, liked to call it the “Saturday Night Live of the Fortune 500,” and Bob Strasser, once a marketing and advertising guru within the company, quotes with approval Steve Jobs’s comment that “we want to be the pirates, not the navy.” Peter Moore, creative director at Nike, says that the company wanted to produce advertising that not only spoke to the consumer but also articulated the philosophy of the company and reflected its corporate culture and atmosphere. Nike advertising professionals report that that culture fostered creative freedom and intuition. There is almost no talk of discipline or of tailoring the ad precisely to research knowledge. Rather, the creativity and intuition of the ad pros are respected. They know who their market is, and they are given the freedom to address them in new and creative ways.

My sources for examining advertising’s theory of itself have been writings in which the explicit concern has been the examination of basic premises and assumptions in advertising practice. The writers are either professionals in one of the crafts of advertising—copywriting, art direction, market analysis, etc.—or advertising executives speaking on behalf of their profession. But there is another genre in which advertising professionals speak about their practice—personal narrative. My life at the X agency, my career struggle. In these writings the purpose is not theoretical but autobiographical. As I mentioned earlier, advertising writers tend to tell their life stories as heroic struggles of the sovereign ego. Books like Jerry Della Femina’s From those Wonderful Folks Who Gave You Pearl Harbor, John Lyons’ Guts, Bart Cummings’ The Benevolent Dictators, etc., depict the world of advertising as a field of competition, with battles, winners, and losers. They are interested not so much in advertising as a practice as in advertising as a business. From the perspective of executives in advertising and those who write about them, what’s interesting about advertising is what’s interesting about any business—finance, management, public relations, acquiring and losing accounts, warfare within and between agencies, negotiations and deals, personality clashes, insider gossip, celebrity status, survival and defeat. The practice of advertising, the skill and insight of creative people, is simply the commodity being sold. Many advertising executives are as interested in advertising as executives in light bulb companies are interested in light bulbs. But they too have a theory of advertising, one that emphasizes not the premises behind the practices but the real world location of these practices, the hypercompetitive market of goods and services. These writers don’t seek a humanistic explanation for what they do. They are engaged in a struggle for economic survival. Advertising is simply the occasion or site of the struggle.

On the other hand, advertising executives are often called on to speak to the public about the value of advertising. They visit cam-
and JWT educating the world about good nutrition and unifying the women of the world around their commitment to wholesome food by means of “world communication designed especially for women and made available by one of the world’s great food purveyors,” with the ultimate purpose of “world education, world prosperity, world peace” (“Communications Unlimited” 9). Here is the end of Seymour’s address to Kraft executives on global marketing:

For all the revolutions that have benefited and afflicted mankind, no revolution is greater than the Communications Revolution. In it lie the hopes of the sacred books of all the faiths, that man shall talk to man and thus bring about the day when there shall be no strangers (11).

It is a sign of the weakness of advertising’s theoretical discourse that such inflation goes unchallenged. No one seems capable of saying, “Yo, Dan, we’re talking macaroni and cheese here!” In this world where “all men are virtually neighbors” (3), there is no room for worrying about cultural imperialism, destruction of indigenous economies and agriculture in the face of attractive, modern packaging, or the loss of local distinctiveness. Seymour sees advertising as an unquestionably positive force, a part of the Enlightenment:

Advertising has become a potent force in our lives because it is part and parcel of the economic, technological, and scientific developments of our age, developments which rest on the unraveling of secrets, breaking with the past, and extensions of the boundaries of man’s mind. (6)

Seymour also associates advertising with man’s fundamental nature. “The true business of man is business,” he tells Kraft (“Toward the Consumer Revolution” 6). He thus puts all the criticisms that might be raised about advertising outside the realm of human possibility. Advertising is inherent to man, part of his natural tendency toward improving his lot and civilizing the world. Seymour’s rhetoric cannot be questioned except by those outside his discursive context, and their voices are either marginalized or delegitimized in advertising discourse.

But as I said earlier, I believe that those questioners and critics exist throughout the culture. When Stuart Ewen says that corporate powers promise us through modern advertising that the products it offers will cure the ills brought about by those very corporate powers, I believe that most TV viewers and consumers would chuckle and agree. When poststructuralists say that advertising creates for
products symbolic values that consumers assemble in the quest for personal identity, I believe most people—even the hippest and most skeptical—would admit to a flinch of recognition. I would like to end this study by speaking as a consumer, as one of those TV watchers, one of the marketed. My own perspective on advertising has been shaped by readings in culture studies and by an awareness of various critical reading strategies, but it has also been shaped by the ordinary experience of watching TV, reading mass circulation magazines, going to sporting events, listening to radio in the car, being immersed in mass culture as an everyday experience. As a conclusion, I’d like to comment more personally on advertising’s theories of itself, from my position as a critical consumer and reader of mass culture.

My reaction is divided: I found it informative and useful to read the writings of advertising professionals on their own practice. How they think about audience, what they think constitutes an effective advertisement, how they think about meaning and value—all these discussions deepened my understanding of how advertising works. But I found the pronouncements of advertising executives and spokespersons on the social value and significance of advertising to be almost completely self-delusive. Can it be that advertising professionals think of their daily activities in such self-aggrandizing terms? Or are these humanistic pronouncements simply the required public relations, the platitudes that all institutions offer as self-justification? I think of the cloying rhetoric of family that my 12,000-student university uses to describe itself. My sense is that there is always a gap between the public announcements of an institution and the daily assumptions that practitioners within the institution operate under. I do not see in the writings of advertising professionals speaking out of their own expertise the same kind of vacuous claims that I see in the PR for advertising. The practitioners seem more interested in articulating the grounds for their practice, though I’m aware that there is always also a gap between a practitioner’s characterization of his or her practice and the everyday practices themselves. Still, the practitioners writing within this discourse seem more realistic, more acute, and more insightful about the role of advertising in contemporary culture.

I was particularly struck by the emphasis in this writing on the connections between knowledge, writing, and power. My anxiety about advertising before reading this material was centered on trickery, deceit, manipulation. It is clear to me now that almost no individual ad deceives, though advertising as such is deceptive, and that individual ads don’t operate by manipulation as much as by knowledge. Much contemporary advertising has as its goal creating a brand image that will appeal to the needs of a specific market. This strategy requires a rigorous and profound knowledge of people’s desires and fears, hopes and anxieties. In some cases this knowledge is gained by systematic psychological testing, in other cases by a more intuitive connection with generational or subcultural issues. That knowledge then shapes the modes of address of the advertising text. Much of our irritation with advertising is a reaction to texts not really addressed to us. But the pleasure of being addressed successfully is part of the reason for the success of an ad. If the audience feels known it is flattered by the effort behind that knowing and the intimacy of address it allows. For a critical viewer of advertising it is embarrassing to be known so well. I was furious the first time I heard The Band song “The Weight” used in a Diet Coke ad, but I admit that the emotions that the song evoked made it a successful commercial communication to me and to anyone who admired the independence and raw authenticity of The Band, qualities that the song passes on to the tough woman in the commercial who is dumping her worthless boyfriend, qualities desired by anyone who works everyday in institutions that don’t value independence and raw authenticity, qualities that evoke nostalgia in boomers and self-satisfaction in younger consumers. Writing in advertising is the process of crafting a communication perfectly suited to the audience, deriving from a knowledge of their unconscious lives. Many of the practitioners who write about advertising explicitly define their enterprise in this way. They are surprisingly open about these strategies of knowing, and they realize the power this knowledge gives them. As I said earlier, they are careful about power claims for any given advertisement, but they are rightly confident in the power of advertising as such to stimulate desire and consumption. Advertising promises that the products it offers and the very act of purchasing them will solve the problems, satisfy the desires, ease the anxieties, fulfill the dreams that its practitioners know we experience. Advertising’s theory of itself is clear enough on how that promise is constructed, but it cannot even face the possibility—I saw no trace of any writer’s doing so—that the promise is a lie, that material satisfaction of psychic desires is always a failure that leads to more and increased desire, to what Lacan calls the endless pursuit of “the object a.” To admit to the lie would be to reveal the fact that advertising succeeds
precisely because the promise fails. Always more desire, because no product satisfies; always more fear, because we feel the failure coming; always more anxiety, because we see an endlessly repeating future. Advertising has blinded itself to these possibilities; it has no tragic theory, no sense of the harm it does. Advertising is in denial, and platitude replaces radical self-questioning. The institutional placement of advertising theory—in an institution that ends careers because of false steps—keeps it from gaining the kind of power and sweep that more independent theoretical questioning can achieve.