Advertising:
The propaganda of 20th century society

The shopping malls are quieter now. The Christmas rush is over. Even the Boxing Day sales have run their course. The weekly local papers are no longer over-stuffed with ads that claim to have the best products at the best prices. "The lowest price is the law!" The radio jingles have a more subdued tone and the ads on television are offering good deals on carpet and upholstery cleaning, now that "the kids and grandkids have left and life is back to normal." Advertising is undeniably a powerful force in today's economy. Yet, ask any teen, or adult for that matter, if they are affected by advertising and they will likely answer, "Not really. I buy things because I like them, not because of what other people say." If only that were true...

A powerful force

Jean Kilbourne, educator and producer of several videos that address the image of women in advertising, suggests that most people cling to the illusion of being personally exempt from the influence of advertising. In a lecture at Harvard University in 1989, she stated that, in reality, advertising is one of the most powerful educational forces in today's society. It is one of the major ways people learn the attitudes which shape their behavior. On an average day, an American will see 1500 advertisements, and in a typical lifespan will spend one and one half years watching TV ads. Pick up almost any popular magazine and calculate what percentage of the pages are advertising. In most instances it will be at least 50 per cent. Advertising is America's propaganda. Although one may take issue with Kilbourne's feminist perspective, her analysis of the power of advertising should give us pause to think.

Kilbourne maintains that advertising is the foundation of the mass media — of TV especially, but also of radio, magazines and newspapers. Advertising is the lifeblood of the mass media. The primary purpose of a TV program is to round up an audience and to deliver this audience to the advertisers. Unbelievable? Then think of the phenomenal sums of money advertisers have been willing to spend for a single ad during the recent Atlanta Olympics or during the annual Super-Bowl. Or spend a Saturday morning watching cartoons, and you will no longer wonder why little children, even those who can barely talk, ask for toys by their brand name. Not just a doll, but a "Baby Wiggles and Giggles," or for the older set, a "Jewel Hair Mermaid Barbie." Not just a train, but an "Elmo Express Train."

Selling values

Advertisements sell products, but they sell much more than that. They sell values and images; they sell a culture's concepts of love, sexuality, romance, success and popularity. They tell us what is "normal;" they tell us who we are and what we should be. The world of advertisements is a mythological world, where almost everyone is young and beautiful. Disabled people — physically or mentally — are virtually non-existent. It is a bizarre world, where everyone talks only about products. We all know that this is an illusory world, yet almost unconsciously we compare our own lives to it.

Advertisements try to make us insecure about ourselves: about our appearance, our weight, our popularity, our financial success, our ability to compete in the job market. And what is the answer to this insecurity? Buy a product, and all your problems will be solved. We can insist all we want that we are immune to this pervasive force, but common sense compels us to admit that

advertisers in North America would not spend hundreds of billions of dollars each year if they did not achieve the desired results — increased sales and profits.

Few of us have expertise in the field of advertising. We are ignorant of the techniques and technologies advertisers use, and we are not encouraged to look at ads and take them seriously. Camera angles, layout, airbrushing, use of shape and color are all unfamiliar territory. Yet advertisers know that an ad must have immediate appeal. As we flip through a magazine we spend only a second or two looking at an ad. Yet the cumulative effect is undeniable. We get the message, whether we're totally aware of it or not. Advertisers are willing to spend thousands of dollars on a single ad to ensure that we do.

Impossible standards

One of the most unfortunate aspects of advertising is the influence it has exerted in establishing society's concept of beauty. In most ads, the women are young; their faces have no scars, no wrinkles; in fact, they do not even have pores. This is an impossible ideal. It can only be achieved in a mythological world, where computers enhance skin texture and every "blemish" is removed. Yet this perfection becomes the standard of beauty and even of worth. Women are judged against that standard whether they want to be or not. It can only be artificially achieved by buying the right product. For the cosmetic industry, it is a boon. In the U.S., women spend one million dollars on cosmetics every hour of every day.

Advertisements do not look at the whole person. Body parts simply become objects that are in need of improvement. If the face has blemishes, buy an acne cream to get rid of them. Wrinkles? Buy an anti-aging lotion. "If your hair is not beautiful, the rest hardly matters," proclaims a full page ad for shampoo and conditioner. The body is, in effect, hacked apart ... dismembered. True enough, sometimes these ads are humorous: "Every woman should have a Remington shaver, because life is hairy enough." They seem harmless and trivial, yet the cumulative effect is the devaluing of the person as a whole. The underlying message is that no part of our body will do; no part is good enough without enhancement.

Disturbing trends

The standard of beauty as proclaimed by the advertising industry involves a trend which is so far removed from reality, that it's scary and even dangerous. Over the last years, the fashion models have become thinner and thinner. At last year's October Chanel show in Paris, the model Stella Tennant drew grasps of dismay from the normally shock-resistant fashion crowd. She was modeling the latest in swimwear. *"With her black hair, white skin and exposed ribs, she looked like a skeleton heading to a ghostly beach party ... she made Kate Moss look like a candidate for Jenny Craig"*(*Vancouver Sun*, August 13, 1996).

According to *People* magazine, the average height and weight of an American woman (a variety of Canadian sources show little difference) is 5-foot-4-inches and 142 pounds (163 centimeters and 64.4 kilograms). The average height and weight of a model is 5-foot-9-inches and 110 pounds (175 centimeters and 50 kilograms). Being thin has become an essential criterion of our culture's standard of beauty. Kilbourne suggests that the message is loud and clear — *"contempt for anyone who is 'overweight.'"* It is a message that women are listening to, sometimes with devastating effects. Eighty per cent of all American women believe they are overweight. One in five young women in college suffers from an eating disorder, and a recent survey of fourth graders revealed that 80 per cent of the girls were on a diet — all longing for the "ideal" body which is natural for only very few women.

Another disturbing trend is the tobacco advertising aimed at young people — especially at young women. The most notorious-of these is the Virginia Slims' long-running campaign, *"You've come a long way, baby,"* suggesting that part and parcel of being a free, liberated woman is choosing to smoke. Ironically freedom and independence are equated with addiction. The more recent Slims' headline reads, *"It's a woman thing."* And that is what smoking has become. Young women are the only group in which the number of smokers is increasing, especially those under the age of twelve.

Shock value

Today it takes quite something to shock a TV viewer or magazine reader. Times have changed. Almost 80 years before astonished readers flipped open their favorite magazine to see a half-naked Kate Moss in a Calvin Klein ad and before television subjected viewers to the sight of 24-year old mountain biker Missy Giove endorsing Reebok (with every square centimeter of Giove's skin painted silver), *Ladies Home Journal* of 1919 ran an ad for a woman's underarm "toilet water" named Odorono. The ad shows a couple standing close together, the woman's bare arm raised to meet her partner's hand.

Underneath the picture ran the slogan: *"Within the Curve of a Woman's Arm: A frank discussion of a subject too often avoided."* The written copy continued: *"A woman's arm! Poets have sung of its grace; artists have painted its beauty. It should be the daintiest, sweetest thing in the world. And yet, unfortunately, it isn't always. Try it tonight and notice how exquisitely fresh and sweet you will feel."*

Readers were horrified. The advertisers of Odorono had blundered over — or perhaps intentionally trespassed — the line of public propriety. The ensuing furor shook the advertising industry. In 1919, such an ad was shocking: the faintly erotic suggestiveness of its slogan; the declaration that it would be a "frank" discussion about the taboo subject of body odor. It threw the readers of the esteemed *Ladies Home Journal* into paroxysms of righteous anger.

Two hundred readers canceled their subscriptions. Publishers begged the company to pull the ad. James Young, the copy writer of the offending ad, recalled in the book *The One Hundred Greatest Advertisements*: *"Several women who learned that I had written this advertisement said they would never speak to me again — that it was 'disgusting' and 'an insult to women.'"* He added: *"But the deodorant's sales increased by 112 percent that year."*

Shock advertising: the norm

The Odorono ad may well have been the first example of shock advertising. Back then it stood out as an anomaly. Eight decades later, shock advertising is the norm. In a 500-channel universe and a market glutted with products it seems that the only way to get the consumers' attention is to stop them dead in their tracks. What had been a clear line of propriety has become blurred and vague. Advertisers now go looking for the line, just so they can cross it. As the creative director of Vancouver's biggest ad agency, Chris Staples, suggests, *"In Your Face is good. It's advertising that demands to get noticed. You have to break through the clutter"* (*Vancouver Sun, Saturday Review*, August 10, 1996).

Calvin Klein broke through "the clutter" with his CK Jeans and Obsession campaigns. He has honed his ability to sell products by attracting the wrath of those who still adhere to decent moral standards. Kate Moss has posed naked for Klein's Obsession ads. These ads did not run in some obscure magazines, but could be found in such periodicals as *Time and Chatelaine*, the kind we might bring home with the weekly groceries. But Klein outdid himself with his CK Jeans TV campaign, where teens, dressed in underwear and jeans, were interviewed by a middle-aged man sitting off-camera. Shot in front of a backdrop of cheap-looking paneling — it gave the air of a cheap porno movie — the teenagers respond to the man's questions with the halting innocence of youth still unaware of the power of its sexuality. The contrived amateur quality, the claustrophobic dimensions of the set, even the man's dislocated voice coming from off-camera, gave the viewer a sense of being a voyeur, of accidently engaging in an illicit peep show.

Complaints poured in. Media watchdog groups denounced Klein. He was ostensibly "taken aback" that anyone could find his ads distasteful. They were withdrawn, to great fanfare. A victory for the consumer? No. He did withdraw the ads, but Staples suggests that Klein had planned to all along. Before the ad campaign, Calvin Klein was not one of the top designers for teens. Now his jeans are number three. As in 1919, so in the 1990s, bad news is good news in advertising.

Sex sells

In one sense, Klein is doing nothing new. For decades advertisers have known that sex sells, whether it's an attractive woman draped over a shiny new vehicle or a bikini-clad girl dominating a picture advertising the latest water-ski equipment. Sometimes it consists of using slogans with a double meaning. A recent *Canadian Living* ad for water faucets suggested, *"You'd want to be made of stainless steel parts too, if you got turned on twenty-six times per day."*

What is more disturbing yet is the trend towards gender blending. In some of the Calvin Klein's ads, but recently also those for Gap and Roots (teen clothing labels), it takes at least a second look to tell the girls from the guys. This is deliberately done. (Klein's own lifestyle demonstrates that this causes him no concern.) Roots and Klein have both developed cross-gender colognes: *Roots Uniscent*, *CK one*, and *CK be*. Is it wrong for a girl and a guy to wear the same scent? Of course not. But Calvin Klein and others like him are deliberately blurring the line between male and female, in direct contradiction of God's created order.

Unfortunately, the Calvin Klein culture is winning in our society. More and more, it is becoming passé to be definitively masculine or feminine. Perhaps, as Christians, it is time to boycott certain brand names. On the top of my list would be Calvin Klein. His despicable ads, and his own vile lifestyle should easily convince us that CK is one brand name we can live without. Last year, as I boldly made this suggestion to my husband and sons, they readily agreed — until my husband noted that at that very moment he was wearing Calvin Klein socks ... 100 per cent cotton and very, very comfortable. It isn't easy to take a stand.

Be aware and be wary

Advertising is indeed 20th century society's propaganda. Ads are everywhere, even in schools, in libraries, and in parks. We get thousands of ad messages every day. They intrude on every aspect of life, becoming little more than a seemingly inexhaustible source of mental pollution. We need to be aware and be wary. This propaganda teaches us to be consumers. It teaches us that happiness can be bought, that there are instant solutions to life's complex problems. It teaches us that buying the advertised products will bring fulfilment and meet our deepest human needs. In reality, it motivates us to buy things that we do not need.

What we need to understand is that advertising is inherently exploitive. It depends upon making us anxious and insecure. It would not work otherwise. We need to become aware of what ads are doing to us. To suggest that this mythological, chimerical world has no effect on us is to delude ourselves. But we also know that we need *"have no anxiety about anything,"* and that there is only One who can fill our deepest need.

S Vandergugten