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Advertising citizenship: an essay on the performative power of consumer culture

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The idea that audiences actively use and interpret popular culture has become something of a truism in cultural and media studies. The parallel concept, that consumers make discerning use of commercials, advertising and other genres of consumer culture has gained less standing (Fowles, 1996). In this article I suggest ways to look at advertising's potential as a form of public communication and a setting for the actualization of notions of contemporary citizenship. The latter includes more than the Marshallian triad of civic, political and social rights and obligations. Citizenship must also be seen as a feature of culture, operative as a dimension of individual and collective identities. Thus, as various authors have argued, citizenship has also to do with belonging and inclusion (Roche, 1987; Turner, 1990). To be a citizen is to be a member of something we (metaphorically) call a community. It also has to do with participation in that community (local, historical, political or cultural). The conditions of membership and participation, the processes which determine inclusion or exclusion must be understood broadly. They refer to public life in a more general way. To paraphrase Dahlgren (1995: 136): to be a citizen means to be included culturally, not just civically, socially and politically.

Historically, one of the main issues in critical debates on advertising, especially in relation to the representation of women, has been whether ads reflected reality more or less correctly (Friedan, 1963; Lazier-Smith, 1989; Schnerl, 1992). Another critical angle bypasses the epistemological issue of reflection and representation, and raises the question how advertising operates in the construction of identities and subjectivities (Bordo, 1992; Goldman and Papson, 1996; McCracken, 1993; Messaris, 1997; Slater, 1997). I want to widen the latter approach and explore the possibilities of

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advertising or promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) as a means to create positive notions of contemporary citizenship. Whereas this may seem an unexpected turn in critical approaches to consumer or promotional culture, there are enough examples to warrant an analysis of advertising's construction of so-called 'civic capital' (Charity, 1995), i.e. anything that improves the productivity of a community, its ability to meet crises, solve problems and live contentedly. Public journalists are not the only communicators who look for ways to strengthen their community's goodwill, cooperative habits, insights into where other social groups are coming from and other ground rules of democracy (Charity, 1995). Take for instance the work of an American advertising agency like Burrell Advertising. Its work is well known for its attempts to use advertising to shape people's (political) attitudes and in particular to advance racial understanding.

Burrell's ads and the other examples I will discuss more extensively can best be understood as positive forces for citizenship if we look at the performative side of advertising (Butler, 1993) rather than the epistemological one. By this I mean that we should look at advertising as the act of telling stories that enable a certain interaction with and management of 'reality' (Slater, 1997). Such a performative perspective is central to my understanding of promotional culture and involves a focus on both the production and reception of advertising: which stories are being told in promotional culture; which ones are considered worth telling; what do they animate/activate; how do they relate to other stories people tell and live in?

I will make my case for advertising using various sources and some preliminary results of my own research on outdoor advertising. First, however, I shall theorize the articulation of advertising and contemporary citizenship in more detail.

Advertising and citizenship

Apart from the vocabulary, framing advertising in a context of citizenship is not a brand new idea. On the contrary, more often than not citizenship has been the governing theme in discussions about the social impact of advertising. Until recently this debate has been dominated by critics who explained how ads stilted people's aspirations for change and their abilities to think about themselves as powerful and motivating citizens. Underlying such critiques is a perceived dichotomy between the values of production and consumption that can be traced to, among other things, the classic Marxist idea that work and production constitute the proper forms of human self-fulfilment. 'The mode of consumption, on the other hand, becomes an activity of human alienation, fetishization, and reification. It is finally a mode of misrecognition' (Birmingham, 1995: 6).

That basic opposition has been reworked in various famous works on advertising. Erich Fromm, for instance, a member of the highly influential Frankfurt School, wrote in his book *Escape from Freedom* that advertising appeals were 'essentially irrational; they have nothing to do with the quality of the merchandise, and they smother and kill the critical capacities of the customer like an opiate or outright hypnosis' (1941: 128).

According to another well known critic of Western culture Christopher Lasch (1979), advertising serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life. Ads 'educate' the masses into a way of life that celebrates consumption as an end in itself. Lasch extends his critique to the consumption of new experiences as a means for more personal fulfilment. Consumption is the answer to problems like boring and meaningless jobs and empty lives. 'Consumption promises to fill the aching void; hence the attempt to surround commodities with an aura of romance; with allusions to exotic places and vivid experiences; and with images of female breasts from which all blessings flow' (Lasch, 1979: 137-8).

Lasch underscores that the 'propaganda for commodities' serves a double function. First, it upholds consumption as an alternative to protest or rebellion. Instead of changing one's life, ads are presenting goods as a cure to feelings of loneliness, sickness, weariness or lack of sexual satisfaction. Advertising proposes consumption as the cure to personal insecurity, anxiety of people about their professional and personal status or their ability as parents to nurture their children. In the second place, advertising turns alienation itself into a commodity. Ads create new forms of discontent that can only vanish or be cured by new products. Although Lasch concludes that advertising serves the status quo, he is not immune to the performing qualities of the industry.

The apparatus of mass promotion attacks ideologies based on the postponement of gratification: it allies itself with 'sexual revolution'; it sides or seems to side with women against male oppression and with the young against the authority of elders. The logic of demand creation requires that women smoke and drink in public, move about freely, and assert their right to happiness instead of living for others. (Lasch, 1979: 139)

Lasch states that the advertising industry encourages the pseudo-emancipation of women and similarly flatters and glorifies youth in the hope of elevating young people to the status of full fledged consumers in their own right, 'each with a telephone, a television set, and a hifi in his own room' (Lasch, 1979: 140). He acknowledges that the 'education' of the masses has altered family relations, but only to subject women and children to the new laws of the advertising and fashion industry.

In a Marxist vein, Judith Williamson writes that 'advertisements obscure and avoid the real issues of society'. For her the real issues of society involve the organization of production: 'those relating to work: to jobs and

wages and who works for whom' (1978: 47). In her view, advertising alters the issues concerning labour into matters of consumption. She seems to agree with Lash as she states: 'The basic issues in the present state of society, which do concern money and how it is earned, are sublimated into "meanings", "images", "lifestyles", to be bought with products not with money' (1978: 47).

Thus, in many critical perspectives advertising and citizenship seem to have been solely and unambiguously defined as a contradiction in terms; advertisements choke the abilities of people to act and think as independent citizens. Advertising manipulates people into being consumers and instils false values. It extols a materialistic and consumerist ethic and it deals in emotions and irrationality because it leads people to buy unnecessary things or overvalued items. In short, advertising leads to consumerism and consumerism marks an identity and a lifestyle which are emptied of civic virtues. The critical articulation of citizenship and consumer culture is therefore one of strong opposition.

Quite another paradigm comes from anthropology, and in particular from the work of Mary Douglas and her co-author the economist Baron Isherwood. Their joint enterprise *The World of Goods: Toward an Anthropology of Consumption* (1979) provided a different way in to consumer culture, starting from why people want to obtain goods in the first place. Douglas and Isherwood create a different link between the buying of commodities and people's sense of themselves as social beings. They argue that material possessions have carried social meanings from the beginnings of humankind and not just since the beginnings of the industrial revolution as Marxists tend to claim. Quite unlike Stuart Ewen, who warns in his book about the *Captains of Consciousness* (1976) that 'social change cannot come about in the context where objects are invested with human subjective capacities', their cultural analysis is concentrated upon the use of material goods as communicators of social meanings. People do not obtain goods to escape the real world. On the contrary, the consumption of goods lies at the core of human existence because goods make meanings manifest and provide a means for people to situate themselves within that culture (Appadurai, 1986). While the ability to ascribe meaning to otherwise inanimate objects and thus to transform commodity goods into social communicators is not solely the purview of advertising — it is in fact the necessary requisite of human culture, in which all objects, even the most mundane, must be mediated within a symbolic field in order to have any utility, value or worth at all — it is the work of advertisements to make things come alive. Douglas and Isherwood's work opens up the argumentation that ads must not be condemned beforehand as the designer tools for daily spiritual deprivation. On the contrary, they could be thought of as a rich source of information about daily life.

A question that remains, however, is why are human beings nowadays collectively involved in the enterprise of mass consumption? Recapitulating the influence of the anthropological angle, Jib Fowles (1996) underlines Douglas and Isherwood's suggestion that because people need goods to articulate meanings in their cultural world, should that cultural world for any reason enlarge, then so would the number of matters demanding new symbols and more goods. The authors turn around the critical Marxist argument of the commodification and — therefore — devaluation of values. In their interpretation, the commodification of values, the transformation of values into goods, and thus the production of new goods could be interpreted as a sign of the emergence of new values and fresh symbols for novel cultural phenomena. The enlargement of the cultural world requires an enlargement of the amount of available goods. New cultural values need new products to come alive, so to speak. Reasoning from the perspective of Douglas and Isherwood, Coca Cola is not just a very popular soft drink, not even the symbol for an ever expanding universal lifestyle for young people, but the expression of a new way of living and a new understanding of global cultural values.

This type of argument makes even more sense if we relate it to the historical emergence of the modern individual. The formation of modern human beings with their unique sense of self forms one of the main differences between earlier societies and our Western cultures. Since the 19th century, the Western concept of the individual has been in transition. The increasing prominence of the individual occurred at the expense of some of the rigour of such framing institutions as church, community, ethnicity, lineage, profession, family and gender (Fowles, 1996). Earlier, these institutions had assumed near complete responsibility for granting people firm definitions of themselves as well as social locations. Socially inscribed categories for personal definition (like Catholic or Protestant, Dutch or German, Caucasian, Jewish or African-American, from Amsterdam or Veendam, farmer or pharmacist) now seem old fashioned and inadequate. The categories have been succeeded by the answer to questions on the order of 'What is she like?' or 'What kind of person is he?' The question of individual identity becomes more prominent and is also posed introspectively: what kind of person am I (Fowles, 1996)? The project of the self has been changed from an engraving of social concepts on to the individual to practices and technologies that are used by the individual to constitute him- or herself as a subject (Foucault, 1988a).

The individuation of human life demands that not just each household but each person has to possess an adequate measure of symbolizing goods in order to manoeuvre in the modern cultural world. The identities of the self that were once shaped by constraining and imposing social forces were now more likely to be created and nurtured by the individual. Grant McCracken (1986: 80) notes that 'contemporary North American culture

leaves a great deal of the individual undefined. One of the ways individuals satisfy the freedom and fulfil responsibility of self-definition is through systematic appropriation of the meaningful properties of goods'.

In his recent book *Consumer Culture & Modernity* Don Slater writes that consumerism is central to this self-obsession (1997: 91). This is partly because we not only have to choose a self but, as Foucault suggests, we have to constitute ourselves as a self who chooses, as a person who consumes, a consumer. Slater claims that one implication of this 'ideology of choice' is that we are deemed personally responsible for every aspect of ourselves: we could always choose to do something about our appearance, health, manners. Wearing this, eating that, looking like this are all read as reflections of the self. As a result, all aspects of our existence are monitored and scrutinized as objects of instrumental calculation in the creation of the self, and the self is itself as much a thing one must produce as the person that one is. In Slater's line of argument, consumer industries stand ready with things one can buy in order to address all these technical problems in the production of ourselves. Moreover, he underscores, advertising and the media routinely offer aspirational narratives of the self — images of lifestyles, goods, advice — with which the viewer can offer up the very idea of the self as a narrative form, a story to be told and retold and to be constructed through individual choice and effort.

Despite Slater's emphasis on the performative power of advertising in the construction of selves, he keeps on condemning the practice of advertising as the selling of false selves (disguised as authentic selves) to so-called real selves that are in fact permanently under construction. The self constructed as a consumer does not seem to be capable of citizenship. The citizen and the consumer are still miles apart and very unlikely candidates for the same story. If Slater states that advertising offers up the very idea of the self as something you can construct through individual choice and effort, he offers a disapproving statement. Notwithstanding its postmodern views on identity, Slater's book has a firm Marxist imprint in its denunciation of advertising for instilling false hopes and desires. There is no such thing as a choosing self, he reminds us, choice is always and exclusively an ideological category, not an authentic possibility. Apparently he has serious doubts about people's ability to transform themselves into the persons that they aspire to be. Furthermore, he does not believe that advertising is capable of instilling good narratives of the self, let alone good lifestyles and good advice. Indeed, consumerism may turn you into an anti-social egotistic human being. But why should it not be capable of changing you for the good?

The commodification of citizenship: advertising civic virtues

If advertising is about setting up and instilling ideals, could not the installation of these ideals be as easily capable of transforming you into a good citizen? In order to argue that advertising has something to offer in this respect, I'll discuss two sets of advertising that offer visions of the good life and the good society: the first comes from the Burrell Agency mentioned earlier. It is the largest black-owned advertising agency in the world and is said to define the standard for quality advertising addressing black audiences. Burrell makes ads that celebrate 'black citizenship'. The second set was produced for two Dutch companies — the multinational beer brewery Heineken and a life insurance company Amey whose campaigns both incorporated enjoyable visions of cultural differences and alternative lifestyles.

The Burrell Agency

Underlying the so-called Burrell style are two key concepts: 'psychological distance' and 'positive realism' (Cassidy and Katula, 1990). The owner and founder of the agency, Thomas Burrell, describes psychological distance as a feeling of separation between the black consumer and mainstream products, like Crest toothpaste. Black people will immediately admit to the quality of these products but will not buy them because they do not envision themselves as 'belonging' to these brands. To overcome the perception that 'this product is not for me', Burrell's ads associate the product with portrayals of black people at their best — images of what Burrell calls 'positive realism': 'people working productively, people engaged in family life ... people being well-rounded ... and thoughtful; people with dreams and aspirations; people with ambition' (Cassidy and Katula, 1990: 94). Burrell's basic assumption is that the best way to sell products to the black consumer market is through the projection of positive images. An ad made for McDonald's may serve as the typical example: it shows a responsible, community-oriented businessman teaching a lesson in economics to school-children. In the text it says in large letters: 'John A. Dawkins has a Degree in Chemistry and Still Goes to Grade School'. In smaller letters the text continues:

Like so many McDonald's owner-operators, John A. Dawkins believes customer service should extend far beyond the doors of his restaurants. To him, giving back means reaching out and getting involved. Because at McDonald's, community relationships start with personal relationships.

Burrell's principle of positive realism is at the heart of the McDonald's ad which clearly comes out of the concept of using the trustworthy male, the father figure, as a positive, laudatory, image of black manhood. The ad

directly counters three of the current negative stereotypes of blacks: the lazy nigger, the irresponsible father and the ghetto drug dealer. According to Burrell, the idealization of the responsible father/business figure is something that would make the female heads of households that the ad is talking to feel good about the advertisement and — by implication — the product (Cassidy and Katula, 1990). Supposedly, the black female consumer would like to have that male figure in the house, or in front of her kids' classroom. Talking from the kids' point of view, the agency used the father/business man as a key figure. The man is caring, wants to be part of the kids' life and which child would not want to have such a family man around (Cassidy and Katula, 1990).

The work of the Burrell Agency offers a new and powerful impulse to the debate around the social impact of advertising. It stimulates advertisers and marketing researchers to think about the use of positive, laudatory stereotypes that create so-called win-win situations, images which are good for the market and can change people's ideas about themselves and hopes for society.

There is of course another side to that approach: the positive image of the black successful business and family man is firmly based in white, middle-class values and it raises the question how much the picture shows of black culture, if anything. Such controversy over the use of positive middle-class images has also surrounded the reception of the *Bill Cosby Show*, one of the few other black mainstream media successes (Downing, 1988; Dyson, 1991; Gray, 1989; Real, 1991). Yet, it seems a bit cynical to repine the 'positive images' approach when the overwhelming majority of mainstream American media culture is populated by stereotypes like the lazy nigger, the welfare mother, the irresponsible father, the ghetto drug dealer or the violent, unemployed youth. There is an additional up-side to the Burrell approach which is especially relevant in the context of the performative power of advertising. These ads not only show likeable people, they also offer new stories to live by. Carolyn Heilbrun (1989) has argued that we can only live our lives by the stories we have read or heard. The McDonald's ad makes visible and imaginable a new story of responsible black male citizenship that can be a source of inspiration and guidance for men and women, whites and blacks. The ad draws people into a valuable and a socio-cultural awareness of (good) citizenship and it calls for a new and just lifestyle.

Amstel/Heineken beer

A Dutch counterpart of the Burrell approach can be seen in an advertising campaign for the multinational beer brewery Heineken. Its advertising agency created a story of multicultural citizenship to transform the image

of one of its brands Amstel from average and middle-of-the-road to something more urban and special. Different commercials show sites of leisure like a park, grand café or harbour where people of different ages, colour and sex are walking different sorts of dogs, are dancing different sort of dances and are sailing different sorts of ships. The commercials share the same text: 'In the end, we all want the same thing.' Although what it is that we all want in the end remains somewhat vague, the viewer is invited to identify with a cheerful community of very diverse individuals who are relaxed in their free time, loyal and helpful towards one another, healthy looking and free-spirited. Drinking beer can elevate your spirits and is accompanied by the happy feeling of multicultural camaraderie.

The Amstel ads offer a commodified version of multicultural citizenship. The campaign explicitly and deliberately, according to Heineken's marketing director Paul Waterreus, celebrates the authenticity of every human being by stating: 'In the end we all want the same thing', which in this context refers to 'We are all different and yet all the same' (personal interview, Paul Waterreus, 18 April 1997). However, the concept of global citizenship accompanied by the message 'In the end, we all want the same thing' did not work out as expected. Marketing research suggested that Dutch consumers found the message of the campaign unsettling. Apparently, they did not want to be hailed into the utopian future of infinite friendship across ranks, classes and colours. They preferred a feeling of togetherness on a much smaller scale with family, friends and neighbours. The new Amstel campaign therefore shows a sense of brotherhood in a more literal way (friendship among young white men) and on a much smaller scale, the local pub.

Should we conclude, with the director of Heineken, that the commercial was too utopian in nature and that one must turn back to more 'realistic' and thus more intolerant portrayals of Dutch neighbourhoods or Dutch multiculturalism? I would hope not. I firmly believe that we must invent better stories. What is special about the Amstel myth is the concept that, together with the introduction of drinking beer as a crucial part of adult life, it inscribes tolerant multicultural citizenship as an essential moment of adulthood. According to marketing research (which may have its own questionable logic), something in these particular narratives provided a disturbing rather than an exhilarating experience. Maybe they were too new and too utopian. Perhaps they were loved as stories, but not as practices, as visions of 'reality'. The concept, however, is worth repeating in a different format.

Amey

Recently (autumn 1997) the Dutch life insurance company Amey made a comparable effort with their TV commercial about civic 'daring'. The

famous soundtrack of Nina Simone ('Ain't got no home . . .') accompanies three visual messages: a young boy defies the social pressure of peer group and coach by refusing to jump off the diving board [in letters on the screen: dare to refuse]; a Turkish man, at work in a grill-room, imagines a better future, while selling a bun with *shaarma* (roasted lamb) to the chauffeur of a wealthy old man who is waiting outside in his limousine, contemplating his (probably poorer) past [text: Dare to dream!]. The last lesson is about an old and helpless looking man entering a launderette and getting help from the least expected source: an angry looking guy [text: Dare to be alone!]. A profit-making industry like a life insurance company thus produces civic capital: three televised stories of people who act and dream as citizens. Could this be a case of public advertising?

Like the Thomas Burrill ads, both the Amstel and the Amev commercials featuring visions of the multicultural society met with serious criticism. Critics argued that these types of commercials mythologize multiculturalism by selecting only images signifying tolerance of others and recognizing individuals' uniqueness (Goldman and Papson, 1996: 179). This goes as much for the Amstel and Amev spots as for the famous Coca Cola commercial that gathered peoples of the world on a mountain top to sing of Coca Cola as a totem of togetherness. Underlying such comments is the familiar conception of advertising as a means to transfer positive associations on to the commodity. But with the increasing 'media-savvy' of consumers, one may wonder whether this transfer does indeed take place. Nava and Nava (1992) suggest, for instance, that young people consume commercials independently of the products advertised. In the case of the public commercials, consumers would not have to transfer the positive associations of responsibility, self-confidence and friendship on to McDonald's, Amstel or Amev, but they could read such commercials as mere short stories — or fairy tales — of multicultural tolerance, human subjectivity, friendship and, in a wider sense, contemporary citizenship.

Thus, advertising may make people aware of various civic virtues and values that one would otherwise only encounter in the informative genres of the various public spheres. As more and more people turn away from those, advertising becomes one of the few mainstream and popular cultural sites where it is possible to find such narratives of utopia. An example from Mary Gillespie's (1995) research on young Punjabis living in London, further illustrates this point. Gillespie shows how they articulate their preferences, distinctions and aspirations through talk about television commercials. She describes how a classroom discussion of a group of 16- and 17-year-olds of the Levis 501 and LA Gear commercials, reveals a hierarchy of values and styles. 'Classy' types who are 'cool' are located at the top. 'Coolness' emerges as a matter of detachment from specifically local and territorially based styles. Thus being cool means being cosmopolitan which can be understood as:

... a willingness to engage with others, an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experience, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity, a matter of competence and skill in manoeuvring more or less expertly within a particular system of meaning. (Hannerz, quoted in Gillespie 1995: 183)

By contrast, at the bottom of the hierarchy of the young, are people caricatured as locked into a closed local style. Whereas the specific hierarchical order may be seen as the product of the particular and strained location of these Punjabis as intermediaries between the local cultures of India/Pakistan and England, what matters in a more general sense is the way in which commercials and consumer culture function in their construction of subjectivity and individuality. Certainly, the 'classy' authentic labels matter, yet it is not one label itself that matters, but its articulation into an overall look. Classics see uniformity and seek to distinguish themselves as individuals. The cosmopolitan style reveals itself as a kind of civic attitude organized and produced by multinational companies and mediated by talk about their commercials.

Outdoor advertising and citizenship

Next to the expression and accommodation of new forms of citizenship through commercial narratives of utopia, consumer culture may produce citizenship in other, more traditional ways. As is clear from the critical reception of the commercial multicultural utopias, one (wo)man's dream is another's nightmare. My own research on outdoor advertising shows that billboards displayed in public spaces can lead to considerable debate among citizens over, for instance, the boundaries of private and public decency. Advertising thus lands in a traditional Habermasian public sphere as a legitimate object of discussion and civil consideration; some ads, like the Benetton ones, even deliberately aim to do so (Falk, 1997). Whereas one may question and distrust the sincerity of such ads, their impact nevertheless is civil agitation rather than consumerist oblivion.

In a larger, multi-method research project on consumer culture, we interviewed 54 Amsterdam inhabitants of different age, sex and ethnicity about outdoor advertising in general and shock-advertising (ranging from the so-called catastrophe adverts like Benetton's [Falk, 1997] to pictures of more or less naked men and women) in particular, because the combination of the two seems to create the most animated public discussions.¹ Many interviewees frame their opinion of outdoor advertising in terms of age. In their eyes, age is the discriminating factor between their own 'liberal' views on public respectability and the supposedly conservative opinion of (other) older people. Whereas 'feel good' advertising like the Coca Cola, the McDonald's or the Amev ads seduces people to conform to certain

civic values, shock advertisements confront people with their (often subconsciously held) values and beliefs (Falk, 1997). Karel (22) calls himself a 'liberal':

As long as outdoor ads are posted at legal places there shouldn't be any limits, as long as the images are more or less proper. As long as you do not discriminate against somebody, I think much could and should be possible.

Commenting on a shocking poster announcing a photo exhibition of Andres Serrano 'A History of Sex' (showing a beautiful young woman who urinates into an attractive young man's mouth) he volunteers:

I thought it brave what they had done. Personally, I think that it should be allowed, but I am of a younger generation and will understand very well if other people cannot manage it.

Interestingly, older people also tried to position themselves as 'liberal' by distancing themselves from other (generally older or religious) persons. It seemed an important aspect of individual identity to be called or recognized as 'liberal', in the sense of being open-minded and tolerant to the sensitivities of others. This open-mindedness can be very well thought out and contextualized as the comments of Carmen (60) on the public display of women's bodies in advertising shows. Whereas she does not mind public nakedness as a fact in itself, she does take exception to the style of ad in which women are positioned as objects (the Pamela Anderson ads). She fears the exploitation of female bodies:

It gives people, especially boys some ideas. I think you have to avoid being disrespectful of women. It can lead to abuse of women. I am seriously against this practice and fear its consequences.

Quite unexpectedly, the same woman does not mind the Serrano poster:

Look, that's an equal situation, just like the one of van Gils [perfume ad — ICM]. You may very well use women if the situation is one of equality. That woman clearly wants this to happen and according to me, she is the one who grabs him by his hair. Yes, I consider it a very fresh photograph.

A less liberal and familiar line of argument comes from Nora (55) commenting on the thinness of the models and fearing an increase of cases of anorexia nervosa or bulimia.

These posters of beautiful women are very dangerous, because it is not without reason that scary diseases like anorexia exist nowadays. Young girls want to look that way and they go to extremes to succeed. Horrible.

These examples show how outdoor advertising stimulates people to think about themselves in terms of liberal or conservative, masculine and

feminine, even black and white. Precisely because of their public display and their resulting enforced public reception, they incite public debate much more than the private consumption of other forms of promotional culture. Outdoor advertising is experienced on the street, while walking, cycling, driving a car or waiting for traffic lights or at bus stops. While talking with others about the ads, people give meaning and substance to civic values, for those tend to be formed not in the privacy of one's own minds but by talking things through with other people (Charity, 1995).

Coming back then to the performative perspective on advertising, we can see how particular commercials tell valuable stories of the good life in postmodern, multicultural societies; stories that in their optimism and gaiety are hard to find in other forms of mainstream communication. Such stories should be seen as part of the wide array of practices and technologies with which individuals nowadays have to constitute their sense of self as — among other things — citizens of ever expanding communities. Likewise, advertising tells stories which may annoy us or which we assume will offend our fellow citizens, and as such they may inspire new civil attitudes and lifestyles. In such a light it seems impossible to maintain the modernist dichotomy between the consumer and the citizen; let's consider consumer culture instead as an as yet unmined source of civic capital.

Note

1. As well as 54 in-depth interviews, we carried out 200 street-interviews, analysed all the billboard images shown in Europe between 1995 and 1997 and researched the decisions (between January 1995 and May 1997) of the Dutch self-regulating commission of the advertising industry, the Reclame Code Commissie, and interviewed 10 spokespersons of advertising agencies about their policies on outdoor advertising.

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