

By Tom Engelhardt

Eternal invasion of privacy: the good, the ad and the ugly

ADS ARE EVERYWHERE. WE MAY not know exactly how many intersect our lives each day—5,000 is the latest estimate. We may not have read scholarly studies on the “ineffectiveness” of ads, on the inability of people to recall ones seen only seconds earlier, but we are at least faintly aware of how we edit ads out of our consciousness, of how we live with ads by dismissing them, deriding them or simply amusing ourselves with them.

Yet the more we tune ads out, the more they penetrate our lives, and the more they penetrate our lives, the more puzzling the ad enterprise becomes. It is as if advertising were using the averted stare that tune-out implies to slip into new nooks and crannies in our world.

That advertising is a great colonizing force in our era should be a commonplace, but the everywhere-ness of ads seems to rob us of the ability to grasp just what advertising is. Unable to escape the reach of the ad, we are hard put to find a vantage point from which to observe the ad enterprise.

Commercial potential: Curiously enough, one way to gain some distance on it is to become a regular reader of the ad industry magazine, *Advertising Age*. With its tabloid-sized, industrial blue, white and black front cover, its CEOs and company presidents staring out at you, *Advertising Age* seems an unlikely place for a new perspective on advertising.

Its regular features like “TV Power Shares” and its special reports like “Grocery Marketing” are unlikely to inspire curiosity in a non-marketeer. Only its enormous, glossy ads are sure to catch an outsider’s eye. In these, sexy ladies and sports celebrities jostle with high-tech graphic displays to promote the desirability of sundry magazines, TV stations, newspapers and communications empires as outlets for advertisers’ needs.

There’s something unnerving in an ad journal being a vehicle for stunning ads that badger those most committed to ads to advertise. It’s as if one has suddenly stumbled across the spot in space where advertising mysteriously loops back to fuse with itself. Yet *Ad Age* is unnerving in another, larger, sense as well. Unlike other trade publications, it lacks, at least in its collective reportorial imagination, all limits. In encapsulating the world of the ad, *Ad Age* also encapsulates the reach of the ad, and the ad’s reach turns out to be boundless.

They’ve got the look: At first the magazine’s concentration on the ad angle on all subjects only highlights our dismissive mind-set toward advertising. (After all, if the Chernobyl reactor goes up, ad budgets for tourism in Europe should not as-

sumedly be our primary concern.) In fact, everything about *Ad Age* conspires to encourage us to read it as a spectacle of the superficial, callow and peripheral. *Ad Age* seems at first only to remind us of how curiously insubstantial ads really are. They have the “look,” but not of anything in particular. What weight they carry seems borrowed from the products they promote, and their very lightness seems to remove all weight from the \$100 billion-plus advertising industry as well.

In this fashion, *Ad Age* takes us quickly to the limits of our everyday thoughts about advertising—and then beyond, for ever so slowly,

reading it undermines our comforting insistence on our own centrality to our world. True, in *Advertising Age* what we would normally consider the “content,” the essential core of any subject, is never discussed. TV

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reviews zero in on audience-share percentages, not program quality. Coverage of magazines focuses on “eye-catching editorial environments,” not the nature of the articles. Music pieces describe the cash nexus, not the sound.

It’s easy enough to dismiss this as further evidence—should anyone

need it—of the essential insubstantiality of the ad. If, however, one assumes instead that *Ad Age* is recording the ways in which the content of reality is being ordered in our age, then the eye-catching editorial environment, the cash nexus and audience-share percentages come to seem central to a new reality overshadowing our “normal” world. And our world seems strangely robbed of content, with us little more than surfaces on which advertising (and its sponsors) are intent on playing out their definitions of what is essential and what is significant.

The incredible, barely containable energy one feels in the pages of *Ad*

Age is persuasive in this regard. It is an energy, an intensity out of all proportion even to the goals consumer capitalism sets for the ad. In fact, it is hardly possible to flip a page without seeing expansive evidence of advertising’s great utopian project—to leave no space unoccupied. What *Ad Age* makes apparent is that, to the ad enterprise, any space free of ads and under our control is, by definition, threateningly empty.

In the beginning: Since advertising agencies first began to put images of their sponsor’s products on the sides of barns and on boulders visible from the windows of passing trains, they have constantly sought out new surfaces for display. In so doing, advertising has faced two problems. First, some of the space it sought to occupy was already occupied. So advertising became our century’s equivalent of those Christian missionaries who helped open



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up the Third World for the great 19th-century European colonial projects. In search of souls, the missionaries assumed that all space without God was functionally empty and so must, in effect, be emptied in order to be filled with their God. Advertising has had an analogous mission to perform as part of the imperial drive of consumer capitalism.

Second, much of what advertising sought to occupy was unsegmented space—space not necessarily thought of as space. One of corporate consumerism's great tasks in our time was the enclosure of this space. Almost all such common space has by now been redefined as consumer space, corporatized and colonized by advertising. Some small segments of this partitioned space have even been returned to the public for a price as "free" space, that is, space free of ads.

And yet, no corporate promise of free space, no matter the purchase price, seems to hold against advertising's colonizing drive. Typical is the VCR experience. From approximately 1950 on, the TV became the major force through which corporate consumerism has colonized our at-home time by turning it into viewing time. What was to be viewed, it turned out, was the Ad, which might be said to have colonized the zone TV created in our time. In recent years the VCR has been sold to consumers as a way to buy back a part of that space, a way to recreate a new ad-free "private" viewing space. Now, however, with 56 percent of U.S. households owning at least one VCR, the ad (as meticulously reported in *Ad Age*) is once again creeping up on the address space we purchased.

Chrysler helped break the ice by inserting a 45-second Lee Iacocca "tribute" to Vietnam veterans at the front of the videocassette of *Platoon* (part of the launching of its new Jeep Eagle division), and others soon followed. At the same time, according to *Ad Age*, ads also spread experimentally onto the seven-by-four-inch cover space of the boxes that hold the cassettes. Adcorp, the company responsible for this marketing idea, says it has "signed about 9,000 independent outlets in 35 states, representing more than 20 million boxes nationwide" to try these "Vidcotaggs."

By year's end 1988, more complex video experiments were in progress. For "The Eight-Week Cholesterol Cure" video cassette, for example, five advertisers, including Pam cooking spray and Worthington Foods' Morningstar Farms Scramblers egg substitute, were trying out not only ads on the tape or box cover but redeemable coupons in the package itself.

The address movie channels are evidently soon to face a similar assault. Undoubtedly, new, more specialized, technologized space will then be segmented off and offered "ad-free" to consumers. But what advertising has already conquered and settled is unlikely to be won back.

In the larger sense, there may be no such thing as a failed experiment in advertising. Whether ad experiments "work" or not (whether anyone can even tell or not), in our time advertising has rarely been dislodged from a space it entered.

Colonial style: The ad enterprise's colonial drive assaults geography on the grandest scale, by attempting to remove whatever boundaries to the ad still exist in the world. One could almost hear the cheers in *Ad Age* as it reported on the coming of the first International Advertising and Marketing Congress to China, a country "which once completely closed its doors to advertising," or on the first appearance of Western ads in the Soviet media, a country "historically frosty to Western marketers."

But this transformation of national into multinational space is only one aspect of advertising's colonizing drive. One can also see reflected in the pages of *Ad Age* an ongoing, industrywide drive to redefine all "space." The intensity of thought that goes, for instance, into pondering how to hack previously unimaginable space out of the ether is eerily impressive. Behind this effort lies a problem that, by frustrating the ad, helps power the ad industry to a sort of creative frenzy in the consumerized heartlands of the First World.

In recent years, the most obvious spaces in our society have been filled to saturation (and beyond) with advertising's images. As a result, we have now entered a Baroque Age of ads, and advertising is forced to "discover" new space in unimag-

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Take, for example, the humble parking meter. In a piece entitled "Parking meter ads find slot in urban life," *Ad Age* reports on an ongoing experiment by Warwick Ofsowitz to turn the meter into a minor outpost of the advertising enterprise, "a possibility in mankind's restless quest to conceive and perfect new advertising formats." Ofsowitz has developed—and is marketing through his Baltimore-based company, American Parking Meter Advertising—"a way of attaching messages to the tops of parking meters."

He backs up his invention with research data "showing the potential of parking-meter marketing." Men, it seems, spend an average of 12 seconds feeding money into their meters; women linger for a full 14 seconds; while the hapless pedestrian, passing five consecutively placed meter ads, needs a full 26 seconds for a walkby, long enough in each case for an "impression" to be made.

And so the object through which we rent temporary space back from the city for our car becomes itself a space to be filled (or, in this case, topped) by the ad.

The space race: Everywhere in *Ad Age* one sees signs of advertising's restless micro-search for space. Already-occupied space is no necessary barrier. Take, for instance, the mailbox. It is being progressively emptied of "mail" and filled with junk mail, turning the post office into the world's largest facilitator of advertising materials. Of these, one fast growing segment is the catalogue. (According to *Ad Age*, in 1986 the post office "shuffled 11.8 billion copies of 8,500 different catalogues through the mails.")

The catalogue as an ad form is, in turn, segmenting its own space as it proliferates, adding new forms like the "specialog" and the "videolog." At the same time, it is taking on a magazine-style format (becoming, in *Ad Age*'s phrase, a "magalog"), a look or "patina" which facilitates its further penetration of non-ad space.

Ad Age reports that catalogues have for the first time been test-marketed to a whole new range of customers in 1,000 Waldenbooks stores as well as on newsstand racks. There, sold, not given away, they undoubtedly gain an extra "patina" of non-adness. Each of these developments blurs the very adness of ads, transforming them into "real" commodities in our daily lives.

As the catalogue enters "real" space, it also becomes a good vehicle for—of all things—advertising. In the Bergdorf Goodman clothing

catalogue, right beside the models, will be an ad for, say, the newest Chrysler LeBaron. In this way, the ad's elaborate micro-segmentation of old space and its micro-penetration of new space barely keeps pace with another phenomenon, the complex interpenetration of one ad space by another.

MTV and UnNatural History: In this intense colonization in miniature, advertising not only promiscuously penetrates our space, but its own as well, creating ads inside ads inside ads. The creation of secondary and tertiary levels of ads within ad space plays with our assumption that ads are just a backdrop against which the "real" stands out. As the ads in a catalogue and the catalogue's existence on a newsstand tend to lend it an aura of non-adness, so, too, to take another small example from the pages of *Advertising Age*, does MTV's Museum of Un-Natural History play with what is and isn't an ad. The "museum" is a

"three-dimensional traveling display" offering "previews of new high-tech, lifestyle-oriented products, futurama exhibits, video art and music," with a "vid head" (a mannequin with a video monitor) for a guide.

A joint venture between MTV and Marketing Entertainment Group of America, it involves a three-tiered structure of "sponsorship," since Swatch Watch U.S.A. is the museum's "presenting sponsor" and MTV had plans to add a total of 12 to 15 "participating" or "patron" sponsors as well. The museum's mission is to travel from shopping mall to shopping mall in the service, as *Ad Age* puts it, of "sponsors eager to reach young consumers in a retail environment."

To try to unravel this for a moment: one starts with a cable TV channel that is really a music catalogue of the airwaves, playing promotional videos for buyable records, themselves set off by the patter of MTV disk jockeys and by more traditional ads, both of which seem to certify that the music videos one is watching are not ads but entertainment. This ad environment masquerading as an entertainment environment is now sponsoring another ad environment masquerading as an entertainment environment which is to be set in a mall environment of purified merchandising, the whole "tour" to be backed by \$1 million worth of "on-air promotion and local media" (including, undoubtedly, MTV itself). A human being entering this mall within a mall and ad within an ad environment might be pardoned if he or she mistook the inner space of the "museum" for "real" space and the ads within the ads alone for the real ads.

Of course, the space in which we live most of our lives is a good deal messier and less controllable than the mall environment. Nonetheless, the advertising enterprise proceeds apace, breaking down the line between the ad and us with manic energy. While, for instance, the worn ad—the sandwich board—has a long history, it is only recently that people have proved willing to pay, rather than be paid, to be the human billboards, ambulatory ads sporting an endless variety of logoized clothes for friends, neighbors and passersby.

Free to lose: A similar small-scale ad breakthrough lies in the recent willingness of parents to rent from video stores animated, feature-length ads for toys (often produced in conjunction with the companies that make the toys) as entertainment for their children. In this innocuous fashion the VCR has helped advertising establish a historic beachhead in our lives by convincing us that it is acceptable to pay to broadcast an ad—for G.I. Joe or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles today, but undoubtedly adult products tomorrow—inside one's home. (Previously, it took the complete panoply of "free" entertainment on TV to get ads onto a screen inside the house.) As a read-

ing of *Advertising Age* makes clear, similar blurrings and reversals are now occurring in the worlds of film, music, sports and any other cultural arena one cares to mention. In each of these areas, ads are becoming less recognizably ads and, in the confusion, it is possible that we are becoming less recognizably ourselves.

In this blurring process spun off from consumer capitalism's drive to penetrate markets, to create newer, more desirous customers, the ad enterprise shows every evidence of gaining a momentum, a force of its own, one quite unintended by its creators. At least two "needs," however, hold that force in check, making its full realization hardly likely.

The first is its need for us. We do, after all, occupy our own space, and occupy that space with our own sometimes outmoded and, for that reason, resistant frameworks of thought, our own sense of how space should be used, and advertising, whatever it may become, cannot yet exist without us. So it must constantly sidle up to us, sneak in so close that sooner or later it slips under our gaze, under our very definitions of how the world works. The one thing it cannot do is simply pour itself in, unchallenged, where we already exist.

Facing us, the real means advertising has at hand to continually push forward the boundaries of its domain is not its effectiveness as a selling or persuading tool, but its "ineffectiveness"—exactly the phenomenon that most worries the ad industry and the corporations that pay its bills. "Ad clutter" and the mass tune-out by millions of the profusion of ads that surround us have been presented as advertising's great problem, its ongoing failure. But such a formulation obscures the deeper realities of the ad enterprise. After all, a truly "effective" advertising industry would leave us, the consumers, either crazed from the impulse to buy or, more realistically, in full-scale critical resistance to the enterprise itself.

It is the very ineffectiveness of advertising, the fact that the mass of ads hum along hardly noticed as individual entities, that allows the ad the possibility of creeping into every nook and cranny of our lives. Ineffectiveness, it might be said, is the camouflage under which the advertising enterprise deals with its need for us. It is through ineffectiveness that advertising flourishes, spreads, succeeds in its own terms (if not necessarily those of its corporate sponsors). Ineffectiveness is, in essence, advertising's means to a sort of quasi-independent status.

Performance anxiety: Just as advertising is not free of us, so it has been unable to free itself from the need for the Product, or simply for a subject, the subject invariably being dependent on corporate capitalism. Again, however, it is possible to think of ineffectiveness as the means by which advertising controls and limits its dependence on

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