

# TV ADVERTISING —SHAPING OR REFLECTING SOCIETY?

Wisdom involves an understanding of what is going on in the world around and about us. This article by **Simon Vibert** is especially concerned to offer a christian wisdom in relation to TV media.

## 'Television gives a distorted view of reality'

Most people would happily concede the truth of this statement. Take the view of reality given by Soap Operas as an example. Neighbours and Eastenders apparently bring home real life problems into our living rooms—but even a moderately careful consideration makes us realise that all of life's problems cannot occur in such a short space of time to such a limited number of people and be solved with such apparent speed.

The view of reality from the perspective of the news is not always much clearer. The emphasis on instant, immediate and digestible chunks makes analysis and assessment difficult. Pictures can dominate priorities for what makes 'news'. And news can exist in a picture vacuum divorced of logical or historical context.

Maybe these observations are a little too cynical. Nevertheless, considerations about what is shown and how it is shown mean that a TV view of reality that is given and received (however astute the audience) is likely to be distorted.

I should like to use TV advertising as an extended illustration of the problems of getting an unconfused view of reality from TV. It is easy to be critical of TV advertising: in a sense we are mostly aware of its dangers. However, I suggest, that we are swayed by TV advertising in spite of our awareness and our overall view of reality is distorted even when we are aware that what adverts portray is not reality. If this is the case, is it possible that the view of reality as seen through the whole span of the TV lenses actually has a more subtle effect on our view of the world than perhaps we sometimes appreciate?

## The real challenge of television advertising

Advertising is a lot older than television. It is not unlike evangelism. Even in a pre-media age someone could be seen walking through a village with a sandwich board around his neck. Similarly, the

Gospel is Good News and God is keen that we spread that news. Good marketing and advertising are essential for any product. So, any producer will be keen that a potential buying audience is informed about the merits of his product and will persuade you that his is the best. Understandably, in our multi-media and highly industrialised nations, advertising is of crucial importance.

So what is the problem? Is it possible to be negative about spreading good news about good products? It seems to me that the heart of the issue at stake is that we have moved out of the realm of information about a new product—away from a person persuading you that their product cleans cleaner, flies faster or tastes tastier—to one where the good news is almost irrelevant to what the product may actually be able to offer. Present day advertising compels you to buy into a system in which the image sold has no intrinsic relationship with the product on offer.

The advertiser in a previous generation preached the merits of his product and called you to accept his offer of salvation from drudgery, dirt and dreariness of life. What convinced the audience was the apparent truth of the words—certainly they were extolling exaggerated and selected information about the product, but even persuading a friend to come to a show with you involves that kind of advertising. You were persuaded by the apparent truth of what you heard.

How does modern TV advertising work? Certainly we may not dispute that it is effective, nor that advertising today is big business. What is it that is so effective about adverts which promise incredible (I use the word deliberately) rewards? Is it because I see myself in the advert? Or is it perhaps that I see myself as I'd really like to be if I had more time, more money, or, more particularly, that product! Reality? Or reality as I would ideally like it?

Certainly, it has to be said that commercials reflect the materialistic roots of our society—but at the same time we would be foolish to doubt that they do not also feed and nurture the twin desire for more and better. TV advertising both moulds and mirrors

society. Consider, for example, the sheer volume of TV advertising which we happily sit under. Have you noticed how enjoyable modern adverts are? No longer do we turn over or make the tea during these commercial breaks. We allow adverts to feed our minds.

Whether we, as consumers, are in a capable state to acknowledge it, my concern is that both the form and the content that television adverts take subtly alters the way in which we look at our world and our God. It seems to me that there are at least three problems with TV advertising.:

- 1) It confuses our perspective on reality;
- 2) It incites covetousness; and
- 3) It encourages judgement on the basis of appearances.

### 1. Not seeing straight. Looking at the world through television adverts

'A picture is worth a thousand words' is a popular truism today. Certainly this statement agrees with the sentiment of television advertising.

But what about the pictures we see on television adverts? We have noted that the TV view of reality is distorted, but how do adverts have such an effect upon us? What do we believe about the products we see on television? What do we believe about those who use these products?

Experiments in subliminal advertising are well documented. Unconscious persuasion of an audience is the advertisers dream—and subliminal suggestion seems to make dreams like this come true. As far back as the 1950s numerous experiments were carried out in which it was discovered that a frame of film could be put into the middle of a movie with a remarkable effect. Whether words 'Buy Popcorn' were used, or whether a picture of someone enjoying Popcorn was shown, the effect was the same. The thing which is most useful about such advertising is that the frame

## Inducing desire, without a conscious acknowledgement of seeing the product being enjoyed, has remained a goal for the producers of TV commercials.

would go past so fast that the conscious mind made no recognition of seeing the words or picture—only the desire to buy Popcorn was uppermost in the viewers mind! The suggestion happened below the threshold of conscious reasoning.<sup>1</sup> For this reason subliminal advertising was banned by *The Television Act* in 1964.

Inducing desire, without a conscious acknowledgement of seeing the product being enjoyed, has remained a goal for the producers of TV commercials. There are many reasons why advertising works so successfully on television. First, the passive receptivity

of the audience makes them open to 'subliminal' suggestion. Pictures of a product being enjoyed stick with the unconscious memory without needing to use the single frame techniques of the experiments in New Jersey. Secondly, the visually titillating scenes we see offer an END product we all desire; happiness, wealth, comfort, luxury, acceptance, friendship, success.

We may summarise the two issues with regard to the view of reality which the adverts give: Communication techniques transcend conscious reasoning; effects unrelated to the advertised product are emphasised rather than the affect. Let us look at both of these in a little more detail.

#### A) VISUAL SUGGESTION WORKS EVEN IN MODERN ADVERTS

While we may concede that it is difficult to define whether subliminal techniques have been used in an advert,

'influencing the minds of members of an audience without their being aware or fully aware of what is being done'<sup>2</sup>

is clearly illegal. The visual suggestion in modern advertising works using similar techniques to the experiments with 'subliminal' suggestion. The main difference is that the advertiser has discovered that the visual suggestion still works below the threshold of reasoning without necessarily having to use a single frame of film.

The advertiser will always have a target audience in mind. He is not concerned to persuade everybody, only those who are likely potential buyers. Technically speaking he is not engaging in Broadcasting, but 'narrowcasting'. Adverts for soap powders, cars, quick snacks, perfumes, holidays or cigars have different audiences in mind.

The advertiser seeks to create a 'Responsive Chord'. The true effect of an advert is not measured by the reaction of the viewer when it is watched. No, the immediate effect may vary. However the effectiveness of the advert is measured by the way people react when they are next pushing their trolley around the supermarket.<sup>3</sup> The responsive chord is what we might call the 'sub-rational' intuition which makes you burst into a jingle, associate with the images selling the product, or have high expectations of the effectiveness of a product when you see the logo or visual packaging of the advertised product.

The visual suggestion which is associated with the advert creates a kind of 'photo-prompt'. It is as if the mind has the ability to take a photograph of the pictures of satisfaction or delight which are shown—however briefly—to be associated with the said product. This has meant that advertisers have developed the now popular technique of showing a full length advert for the first few times. Later, once we have grasped the story line, all we need to create the necessary prompt is a much briefer summary.

For a time, the extensive use of video machines created a problem for the advertiser. However this does not seem to be the case now. We now so enjoy adverts that we have little desire to turn off or turn

over when the adverts begin. And, even if we did choose to forward through a commercial break, advertisers have learnt that the visual suggestion may still be effectively communicated at high speed: It is what we see that matters, not what we hear. I argue that it is the difficulty of applying the Broadcasting Act which means that modern adverts can get away with transcending reasoning.

**B) EFFECT OF AFFECT?**

The advertisers motto could be described like this:

'First paint a picture of the type of person you would like to be and we will show you how our product will enable you to reach that goal.'

**Advertisers have learnt that the visual suggestion may still be effectively communicated at high speed: It is what we see that matters, not what we hear.**

We have already hinted at the confusion which this approach to selling creates—the distorted perspective in which visual satisfaction is shown as the end result may mean that products are being bought in the hope of returns which they could never possibly give.

My main concern is that such visually exaggerated claims bear no resemblance to the words spoken about the products. I tried a number of experiments with television adverts. First I listened to the adverts without watching the screen. Then I reversed the process—watching the adverts with the sound turned down. It was in doing this that I first became acutely aware of the way in which the verbal and the visual were in juxtaposition. Information about the product—yes selected—but nevertheless quite true was what I heard. What I saw was consumers of the product radically changed in their outlook on the world, eminently more attractive, likeable and wealthy. Promises of satisfaction and happiness are not usually made verbally, but they are illustrated visually. The effect shown could not possibly be related to the affect of the product!

**Integrity**

Both of these issues concerning TV reality relate to issues of truth. But how do we judge truth claims in the realm of television advertising? It would be self-evidently unacceptable to claim that any one product could make you healthy, wealthy or wise. If, then, it is illegal to lie about the affect of a product, can we say the same about what is shown about a product?

Apart from the fact that such cases of 'visual lying' would be impossible to prove—dealing with such insubstantial evidence as impressions given and subconscious ideas induced—in the light of the experiments made about the effectiveness of sub-

liminal suggestion, the effect of an advert is not always consciously registered.

Issues of truth centre around words. Perhaps words like 'integrity' and 'transparency' should be applied to the visual associations made with the product claims.

The same screen which brings us Bugs Bunny, Neighbours, World News and Sport, also intersperses all these programmes with the fantasy world of television advertising—or is it real life? How can we be sure of what we are watching and whether what we see is true?

One example of this confusion has surrounded three adverts put out by National Westminster Bank. The adverts showed three 'real' people who had worked their way into satisfactory positions in the bank. It showed some of their work life and their private life, as well as giving some of their personal history. Here's where the confusion arose: First, the Bank itself received an influx of job applications assuming that the adverts were recruitment drives offering the possibility of fulfilling similar ambitious goals. The second wave of confusion swamped the national press in letters from disillusioned watchers when they learned that these employees were actually actors playing out assigned parts. Even though we were told their personal life history, we are supposed only to see that as representative of the type of people who DO work for the National Westminster Bank.

What surprised me about both of these responses is that anyone should react at all! Are we not well-familiar with the way in which advertising works? Don't we all critically evaluate what we see?! Apparently not. Apparently the correspondence from irate watchers of the adverts confirms the very confusion between reality, appearance and truth which any advertiser surely hopes to achieve!

Perhaps we should at least recognise that we cannot hope to see straight as long as we fail to recognise the way in which adverts works? Such confusion over truth is inevitable when the visual and verbal messages are different.

**2. 'Thou shalt not covert . . . anything!' A theological critique of advertising**

There is more to be said in criticism of television advertising than can be said here.<sup>4</sup> I shall concentrate on Scripture's clear prohibition of covetousness.

A Biblical framework for a critique of the non-Christian value systems presupposed by the advertisers orientation could begin with Jesus' word in John 17:12-19. Jesus prays three things for His disciples:

- 1) that they will be protected from the world (v15);
- 2) that they will be involved in the world (v16);
- 3) that they will be transformers of the world (v17).

Protection from the standards of the world, involvement with the people of the world and transformation of the world's culture seems to be a good place for us to begin. Perhaps the Church is as easily seduced by the advertiser's taunts as is the world. Perhaps, rather than being protected we are being defeated; rather than being involved we are ignorant; and

rather than transforming we are being transformed?

Adverts incite desire. The Bible calls desire for the things of the world covetousness. Such warnings about the dangers of covetousness are very clear (e.g. Exodus 20:17; 1 John 2:15–17; cf Genesis 3:6f.) and must be heeded.

In Genesis 3 sin is at least partly related to sight. The serpent promised Eve that no harm would come to her if she obeyed him rather than God—in fact her eyes would be opened. The fivefold downward step consisted of Eve 'Seeing . . . desiring . . . taking . . . giving . . . eating' (v6).

Is there a deliberate contrast here between the desire incited by what they saw and the obedience expected from what they had heard? 'But God did say . . . they heard . . . they hid . . . ' (v3, 9). Is there also, perhaps, an implied contrast in Hebrews 11:1 where faith is related to what is *not* seen?

TV also encourages us to 'look and want', making covetousness a driving force in consumption. Why is this wrong? In answer to this we need to note that there are two words which could be translated as 'covetousness' in the Bible:

#### 1) EPITHYMIA

This word is usually rendered 'desire, want, lust . . .'. It is used, for example, in the Septuagint in Exodus 20:17; it is usually translated as 'thou shalt not covet'. This word can refer to either good desires or bad desires. Galatians 5:16f expresses the Christian conflict in the form of contrary desires; the bad need starving and the good need feeding. Romans 12:2 and 1 John 2:15–17 illustrate this same Biblical stance that desire motivates the will: If good desires are fostered, good conduct follows; if bad desires are fostered, bad conduct follows.

**Television advertising encourages us to put our faith in another god. What sort of god do we get from TV? Like any false god: service of this god allows us to be an individual, to be independent, indulgent and to worship self.**

The 'lust of the eyes' (1 John 2:16) is dangerous because for Jesus the desire and the act are on a sliding scale. (Compare Matthew 5:28 . . . Mark 4:19. N.B. Etymologically the word 'pornography' comes from the Greek word *porneia* which was a marital act of unfaithfulness. One wonders whether the way we use the word pornography—in referring to visually stimulated lust—is a recognition of this sliding scale: Desire incited affects the will, which controls conduct. It is interesting to notice that entertainment,

violence, adultery and fornication are largely visually stimulated.)

#### 2) PLEONEXIA

Paul uses this word to always refer to *bad* conduct. The word is variously translated:

2 Cor. 7:2; 12:17f.—'exploit'; 1 Thess. 2:5—'Greed'; 1 Thess 4:6—'take advantage'; 2 Cor 2:1—'outwit/deceive'; Eph 5:5—'idolatry'; Eph 4:19, Col 3:5—'lust'.

The assumption is made in each case that the desire will pull men away from serving God and enslave them in the values of this world.

**I suggest, that we are swayed by TV advertising in spite of our awareness and our overall view of reality is distorted even when we are aware that what adverts portray is not reality.**

Self-centred, unsanctified desire pulls us towards the way of the world. The compounding of sin following judgement (spoken of in Romans 1:18ff.) indicates that the sin we desire becomes our master.

### 3. How do these two words illuminate the danger of TV advertising?

WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) is computer jargon promising that the on-screen image can in reality be reproduced—as it is seen. Inevitably, absorption with the image makes us 'image-oriented' people. Jacques Ellul argues that people need to be convinced of the need to be consumers before they will be convinced about a product:

'It is not so much a matter of motivating people to buy products, or creating new needs, or making people into consumers. These are still (the advertisers) objectives, but it is not by such means that advertising now functions. If one considers technique a system or milieu or "nature", then to make people buy what is offered they must be integrated into the system and made parts of the whole.'<sup>5</sup>

Any frequent repetition dulls our ability to make a critical response and erodes away our initial doubts. So what application do we make concerning the influence of TV advertising? Surely the one doubt we should have concerns the joint claims made by the advertiser and the product concerning divinity! Am I overstating it? Is there 'an advertising god'?

\* Consider the apparent *omnipotence*—Adverts can 'call the shots' as far as programming and timing are

concerned. This may not be quite as apparent at the moment, but will become increasingly the case as we move towards more commercial television.<sup>6</sup>

\* Consider the apparent *omniscience*—television IS everywhere; is WATCHED everywhere; and SPEAKS everywhere. Its influence is all-pervasive.

\* Consider also the bold *offers of salvation* made by the products:

- Kellogg's All Bran 'makes you feel all right'
- 'Refresh yourself with Radox—it's second nature'
- Spa: 'A source of purity'
- BP: 'For all our tomorrows'
- Shape: 'For those who absolutely refuse to compromise'
- Vauxhall: 'Once driven, forever smitten'
- 'Thank Crunchie it's Friday!'

If we couple these observations with the Biblical perspective that the desire for sight is one of the marks of idolatry (see Exodus 20:3–6) television advertising encourages us to put our faith in another god. What sort of god do we get from TV? Like any false god: service of this god allows us to be an individual, to be independent, indulgent and to worship self.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

My concern is two-fold. First, I do not think that we have fully appreciated just how much television advertising *does* effect us—even when we are apparently aware of its subtle ways. The second concern naturally flows from this: Having failed to recognise the influence of advertising, we have failed to see how much of the world has seeped into the Church: Rather than transforming the way we think about the world, we have allowed ourselves to be squeezed into its mould.

## Commercials reflect the materialistic roots of our society—but at the same time we would be foolish to doubt that they do not also feed and nurture the twin desire for more and better.

Hedonism, self-seeking, covetousness and entertainment orientation can be thinly disguised in Christian forms of worship and service—but to be so-squeezed is in antithesis to the Gospel. Peter Moore's observations are helpful:

'The obedience to God's will which Jesus exemplified and called for in all his disciples is the antithesis of the "Buy now, pay later" ethic of the hedonists, whether ancient or modern. The future

is both too wonderful and too terrible to be ignored in the decision making that must be done day to day. Because that future impinges on the present, obedience becomes a way of being set free from immediate demands in order to make decisions in the light of greater realities.'<sup>8</sup>

It seems to be that we have to do at least two things if we are going to take the Bible's teaching about reality seriously. The first is that we must 'Tune in' to the advertisers ways. Appreciating what is going on, and recognising how susceptible we are is at least the first step towards changing our natural desires and allowing visual suggestion to hold sway.

Secondly: do 'Turn off!'. Television excels when it enables us to be 'present' at what are essentially visual activities—particularly sport and nature programmes. But, to use television as our means to unwind is not only to rob us of the art of conversation, to sap our ability to read, and fail to exercise our limbs—it is also to willingly play into the hands of a world which is out to make us conform. J.B. Phillips translation of Romans 12:2 is helpful:

'Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.'

To be aware of the way of the world is of course paramount. Gaining a comprehensive perspective on our culture requires the appreciation that television both moulds and mirrors society. Any Christian analysis of television has to involve an assessment, not only of the message of TV, but the very means and media itself.

## Footnotes

1 Guy Playfair in *The Evil Eye* Jonathan Cape, London 1990, quote an experiment in a New Jersey cinema using the words 'Eat Popcorn' and 'Drink Coca-cola'. After six weeks popcorn sales were up by 57%, Coca-cola sales by 18%.

2 *The Broadcasting Act* 1981 Section 4.3.

3 Playfair talks about the 'shoppers trance' which is induced using the same principles as post hypnotic suggestion. op. cit. p.75f.

4 See Jacques Ellul *The Humiliation of the Word* Eerdmans 1985. Jacques Ellul *The Technological Bluff* Eerdmans 1990. Also my article in *Churchman* 'The Word in an Audio-Visual Age: Can we still Preach the Gospel'.

5 *The Technological Bluff* W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990. p.350.

6 Not the effect of the *Broadcasting Bill* published 6th December 1989.

7 Note the inextricable link made in the Bible between idolatry and immorality.

8 Peter C. Moore *Disarming the Secular Gods* IVP Leicester p.140.

**Simon Vibert is an ordained Anglican minister who works in Carlisle.**