

Book Review: *Designing Fictions: Literature Confronts Advertising* by Michael L. Ross (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015)

By Astrid Van den Bossche

“Are we dealing here with apples and oranges, or rather with two variants of genetically the same fruit?” (p. 12)

Michael L. Ross's *Designing Fictions: Literature Confronts Advertising* makes the compelling argument that, as the quote above suggests, literature and advertising are closer bedfellows than we have cared to admit. Ross continues the journey started by Jennifer Wicke in *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement & Social Reading* (1988): the discovery of the cross-pollination between these two bastions of cultural production. Importantly, what is obvious at first sight is that the distinction lies in the transparency of advertising's goals of persuasion. This function has often served as a reason to demote the artistry involved in advertising, and the too-close relation to literature has been seen as a threat to the latter's greatness. Is the unease or downright disdain displayed by some critics also present in the interaction between literature and advertising, or is it purely an artefact of (sometimes elitist) cultural meta-commentary?

From the onset, Ross takes care not to fall too much in any camp: advertising's nefarious consequences are neither to be ignored nor overplayed. Conversely, the way in which literature necessarily relies on self-promotion is neither denied nor given ontological precedence. Instead, Ross keeps an open mind that is crucial to documenting the tense, diverse, and often contradictory ideological currents that

energise classic stories. A close reading of 10 novels and one television show sketches the telling literary rendition of the advertising world.

After a rather pleasurable prologue that ties together Philip Larkin's poem, "Sunny Prestatyn," a passage from George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, and Jay and Daisy's dance of conspicuous consumption in *The Great Gatsby*, Ross begins his first chapter,

"Baudrillard's Dream," with a truly lucid exposé of advertising's cultural scholarship.

The overview—organised in broad thematic musings on the cultural significance of advertising, positive and negative—gives voice to many great commenters that span across a range of creeds: Baudrillard himself, of course, but also Barthes, Bauman, Ewens, Lawrence, McLuhan, Meyers, Twitchell, Wicke, Williams, Williamson, and more come to bear on the general discussion. Summarising a plethora of viewpoints that foreshadows the literary analyses, Ross documents how some fully condemn or laud the advertising endeavour, whilst others express a more nuanced and uneasy tension between its economic necessity, and its shadow product, promotional culture.

Chapter 2 sets the tone for the rest of the book, in which the author delves into readings of literature intimately connected, in one way or another, with advertising. In "Henry James and H. G. Wells: Seductions of Advertising," Ross contrasts *The Ambassadors* (1903-1909) and *Tono-Bungay* (1909) for their use of advertising as a way to comment on, in the former, a clash between old-world and new-world values, and in the latter, its seductive vacuousness compared to other, higher, pursuits, such as science. Wells even went as far as including sketches for fictional ads, displaying a cunning understanding of persuasive design that was in keeping with ads of the time. Weaving in historical insights on the rise of the advertising agency and contemporaneous practices, Ross makes the case that promotional culture was at the

heart of these works, thought the two novelists did not quite foretell the full extent to which this culture would bloom in subsequent decades.

In “Battles of the Bookshops: Christopher Morley and George Orwell,” advertising gains an increasingly pivotal role in the cited authors’ lives and works. Although he might not sound familiar to many nowadays, Morley was an exceedingly well-known during his lifetime as “a man of *belles lettres*” who contributed extensively to American literary society as a novelist, critic, journalist, and poet. Yet some of his success, argues Ross, might be attributable to his savvy self-promotion; not only was he heavily involved with the marketing of his own texts, he even occasionally lent his services to the industry as a copywriter. Morley’s divided attitude towards advertising shines through in *The Haunted Bookshop* (1919), in which the promotional and the literary end in an uneasy but somewhat productive stand-off, and *Thunder on the Left* (1925), which explores the conflicting identities of an aspiring artist-adman. Having similarly experienced the power of promotion by generating propaganda for the BBC, Orwell did not achieve such a balance and instead addressed advertising’s noxious forces head on. In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), Gordon Comstock flees his advertising agency for the high grounds of the bookshop, yet grows angrily disillusioned by the mediocrity of his wares. Ross adeptly dissects the unravelling force of promotion when it comes into contact with seemingly more hallowed pursuits. Both novelists—but Orwell more urgently—question value and truth, and in the latter’s case, the theme can be gleaned right through *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s propaganda-ridden dystopia (1949).

1940s radio advertising heralded an increased pervasiveness of promotional culture in the American media landscape, and its moral questionability took hold of the public's imagination. As such, chapter 4, "Radio Days: Wakeman's *The Hucksters* and Wouk's *Aurora Dawn*," introduces us to the 1946 and 1947 titular novels's Don Draperesque protagonists and their existential quandaries. Although substantially different in delivery, both novels describe Madison Avenue as a heady world of pretence and deceit. Both protagonists grow gradually disenchanted with the riches of their morally reprehensible careers, and both retreat from the industry. Yet the condemnation does not evolve into a true rejection of promotional culture, as these bestsellers would not have been such without it. As Ross notes astutely, *The Hucksters'* film version of 1947 did not deliver the full implications of the novel's critique, probably because Hollywood could not peddle any revisionary utopias that went beyond mockery of the establishment.

A jump to 1969 brings us to the publication of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, the subject of chapter 5, "Doors of (Mis)Perception," and notably the first novel that considers a female perspective in what was a female market. Although Marian MacAlpin compares to Wouk and Wakeman's protagonists in her rejection of advertising culture, she differs in that her qualms issue from a quest of identity. Appearances, which are the backbone of promotion, only serve to obscure and distract from the wholesome and the authentic. Ross carefully considers how Marian's fleeting but revealing love affair with Duncan breaks through these consumerist "illusions," leaving her slightly more in control of her own behaviour vis-à-vis the consumer world, and her life.

In the last chapter dedicated to novels, “Creative Creatives,” Ross discusses *South of the River* by Blake Morrison (2007), and *Then We Came to the End* by Joshua Ferris (2007). By now, advertising has become a global phenomenon with no sign of relenting, and Ross describes the two novels as primarily interested in the subjectivities of creatives employed in the field. Both novels describe either dissatisfying or stressful working cultures that govern the fictive agencies, and the protagonists’ battles to retain a measure of sanity in their lives, if not creative pride in their work. In *South of the River*, Libby Raven’s career as a successful advertising executive is continuously belittled in face of her ex-husband and his (ex-)lover’s vocations, the first heavily wearing his creative high ground despite being a failed playwright, the latter forsaking even literary pursuit as commercially tainted and dedicating her life to humanitarian aid instead. *Then We Came to the End* features a number of executives who fear for and eventually lose their jobs, whilst the head of the agency, Lynn Mason, fears for her life following a cancer diagnosis. There seems to be no escape from the moral and creative dubiousness of advertising.

Though it does not count as literature, such a collection of readings cannot forego at least a passing allusion to the reference point most contemporary audiences would have: AMC’s *Mad Men*. Scholarly work inspired by the series abound—one compilation was [reviewed in a previous issue of the *Advertising & Society Review*](#)—but Ross ties in and highlights the many themes recurrent in his previous chapters. As has often been noted before, the show is deeply ironic in its simultaneous celebration and repudiation of the Madison Avenue lifestyle.

Ross' epilogue touches on one final book—Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001)—to illustrate how advertising ideology may colour a novel that is not about advertisers themselves, but their consuming audience. But Ross also choose it because of Franzen's clear unease with the storm of promotion that goes hand-in-hand with the publication of his novels. Far from being afterthoughts, both themes recur throughout Ross's analyses of all the other novels and their authors. At the core remains the question we started with: the relationship between the creative business of advertising, and the cultivated heights of literature.

It is unclear whether, after all these readings, Ross remains as agnostic on the matter as the first chapter would suggest. After all, advertising comes out mainly as a fertile ground for indecency and deceit; anyone mixed up in the advertising world is either morally abject or in moral torment. Although advertising's creative potential is not always denied, it is not really celebrated either—at least, not in a way that liberates it from suspicion. Advertising never does seem to transcend its plebeian roots.

It could be, of course, that these carefully dissected novels accurately represent the literary landscape, and give us more insight into the prevailing discourse on promotion. After all, *Designing Fictions* not only documents literature's confrontations with advertising as a subject, but also serves as a repository of the many views on consumer culture. Commentary on advertising is, after all, commentary on society. Marketers would do well sitting back and enjoying the ride through this literary rendition of the advertising world—be it imagined artistic, corrupting, scathing, or fantastical.

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