

REVIEW ARTICLE

Attack the machinery of permitted consumption

Advertising Shits in Your Head: Strategies for Resistance

London: Dog Section Press, 2017; 122pp: ISBN 9780993543517

Subvertising: The Piracy of Outdoor Advertising

London: Dog Section Press, 2017; npp: ISBN 9780993543524

In 2003, in a small town bordering West Yorkshire, I sat in the back of a police car next to my accomplice. He was shouting at the officers who had caught us: ‘Class traitors, you’re the criminals here, arresting us while people are being bombed in Iraq!’ Rather than join in, I was desperately trying to remember the lyrics to ‘The Arrest’ by Conflict, which contained advice on the right to remain silent. James, who I’d met through the Anarchist Youth Network and with whom I shared a love of punk, obviously couldn’t remember the lyrics either. Two hours earlier we’d set out with a rucksack full of spray paint to spread the anti-war message, but had ended up targeting anything corporate or that we felt represented authority. As I was spraying ‘fuck the police’ on the local police station, a car with flashing lights pulled up. ‘This is so unlucky’, I remember thinking, as we made an escape attempt. The car seemed to know exactly which backstreet we would run down, and promptly drove to the end of it to greet us. In the back seat I was glad the police seemed more focussed on making ‘caught you red handed’ jokes than asking why we’d just vandalised their station. Though, if I’d had the chance to read these two books, *Advertising Shits in Your Head: Strategies for Resistance* and *Subvertising: The Piracy of Outdoor Advertising*, I might have been able to add to James’s rant, with a dose of my own propaganda.

Advertising Shits in Your Head begins with an essay introducing the reader to the history of advertising. It points to the work of Sigmund Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, often considered the founder of the modern public relations industry, to make the argument that propaganda, PR and advertising are all part of the same mechanism; one that is intent on promoting endless consumption and passivity over active political participation. The author is explicit in stating that

subvertising is inherently anti-capitalist because it challenges consumerism and conformity, but acknowledges that advertising is not inherently evil in itself. The problem, it seems, is that through the twenty-first century advertising has become too adept at promoting a system which is responsible for 'economic crises, resource wars, widening inequality and, perhaps most alarmingly, environmental destruction on a global scale' (p16). Anyone familiar with Adam Curtis's 2002 film *The Century of the Self* will remember Bernays and his 1920s 'Torches of Freedom' campaign, which tackled the taboo of women smoking in public by linking the act to female emancipation and women's liberation. But the more interesting parts of this essay are Bernays' thoughts on democracy. He suggests that we are governed, our minds moulded and our tastes formed largely by people who we have never heard of. Not politicians, but PR agencies. Instead of being concerned by this notion, he thinks it's 'a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organised. Vast numbers of human beings must co-operate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society' (p14).

This democratic ideal, with its focus on paternalistic coercion through apparently benign PR, is exactly what subvertising wants to make visible. Bill Posters, the man behind the group 'Brandalism', believes that '[a]dvertising ... is a visceral, powerful form of pollution' (p19). If you agree with that you can get on with reading the next section on subvertising's origins (Guy Debord, the Situationist International and *détournement*), and why it isn't a reformist movement aiming for balanced advertising, but rather a tool of empowerment to give people the weapons to resist capitalism's propaganda. It offers many case studies of subvertising groups and extensive tips on how to take part yourself. It doesn't, however, tackle the issue of the marketing industry's ability to co-opt anti-commercial sentiment and sell it back to us in trendy anti-marketing-marketing. In *Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord ruminates that a second assault against class society might feature a new General Ludd, advocating the masses to 'attack the machinery of permitted consumption' (point 115). After reading *Advertising Shits in Your Head* I'm left with a question: how is it possible to attack the machinery, when the machinery attacks itself for you?

Luckily, *Subvertising: The Piracy of Outdoor Advertising* contains an important contribution on this matter. Kay Cameron, writing a short article towards the end of this more photo-heavy book, is also concerned about anti-capitalist resistance being turned into marketing spin. As an example she cites a real-estate development in Elephant and Castle where under the cranes of regeneration a pop-up street food vendor called 'Exarcheia' sits, named after the Exarcheia neighbourhood in Athens, 'known for its history of resistance and lively anarchist scene'. Her argument is

that although subversive movements can and will be used to sell products, it's not a reason to stop being involved with them or fight advertising. Although subvertising can be an act of self-indulgence, she adds, it can also be an experiment in 'collaborative action'. Even if some of the work fails, failure is an important tool in self-reflection, a tool we very much need in the 'escalation of struggle'. What Cameron touches upon here is the need to continue positive actions even if they risk co-option, because action leads to more than just the physical result. By acting together to change our environment we resist our surroundings being only shaped by those with the capital to do so, and we further the cause against Bernays' controlled masses, by pushing an agenda of solidarity not individualism. Perhaps this is the most important underlying message in these two books. *Advertising Shits in Your Head* is an effective pocket history and manual to the subvertising cause, its insightful background helps the reader understand where the movement came from and how to get involved. *Subvertising* is more the coffee table photo book. Though not as context heavy as the former, it contains some gems in the form of short texts by different writers and an interview with the artist Hogre, whose artwork the book is primarily about.

Back to 2003, and the punishment for my teenage 'criminal damage' was to be given a substantial fine and a youth referral order by the magistrate. One of the women on the referral panel I was sent to had a son serving in Iraq, and our debate became emotional as I argued that my criminal act was, if stupid in some ways, trying to make people aware of the greater stupidities being committed abroad. I remember realising, upon her explaining she was also anti-war, that things weren't as black and white as I'd first imagined. In some small way, the fact I acted on my beliefs had brought me to face a wider community, and to engage in a more complex debate, beyond the physical act, as suggested by Cameron. After our meeting the panel ordered me to attend meetings with a youth justice worker who would help 'rehabilitate' me. Those sessions held in the local community college were another interesting journey. The self-confessed socialist youth worker ended the last meeting by saying, 'I think what you did was great, just don't get caught next time, ok?' If I was to re-start my subvertising career now, these two books would surely help me refine my targets.

Huw Wahl, Filmmaker or Artist, depending on who's asking