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Mass Moralizing

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MASS MORALIZING

> "The right question would [be to] ask about the cultural role of advertising, not its marketing role. Culture is the place and space where a society tells stories about itself, where values are articulated and expressed, where notions of good and evil, of morality and immorality, are defined. In our culture it is the stories of advertising that dominate the spaces that mediate this function. If human beings are essentially a storytelling species, then to study advertising is to examine the central storytelling mechanisms of our society. The correct question to ask from this perspective, is not whether particular ads sell the products they are hawking, but what are the consistent stories that advertising spins as a whole about what is important in the world, about how to behave, about what is good or bad. Indeed, it is to ask what values does advertising consistently push."
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> Sut Jhally, *Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse*

The Noble Lie

In Book 3 of the *Republic*, after laying out the procedure and criteria by which the ultimate guardians and rulers of the *kallipolis* will be selected and trained, Socrates proposes that they and all the citizens be told a "noble lie." He frets a bit about how people will receive this lie, since we are to be told that what we usually think of as what happens to us is a kind of dream. While we think we are undergoing the various experiences of this world we are really, we are to be told, "down inside the earth being formed and nurtured" and so should treat the land in which we live as a kind of mother to whom we owe care and advocacy. Further, we are to be told that the gods and the earth have formed us with particular characters, mixing into this one gold, into another silver, and into others iron or bronze, and that we are to take up the responsibilities and duties imposed upon us by our characters rather than those we might select from preference. The lie is necessary, Socrates argues, to provide for a stable social structure.

This lie would seek to persuade all who hear it that there is another story to tell of our experiences beyond a mundane or pragmatic frame of reference that focuses upon the job we must get to and do or the meal we need to prepare and eat. It would persuade us that our lives are spent in more than mere events, but in activity bearing relations of obligation and responsibility. It would privilege tradition over interest and duty over advantage in order to convince us not only to find the best among us to take up the responsibility of safeguarding all of us, but that each of us has a role to play in that process. It seeks to replace a frame of reference in which relations in the world are constituted by individual agency and control with a frame of reference that privileges a fictional ordering, a pattern of categories and relations that are posited as natural and/or divine, as *a priori* and autochthonous. It is an odd story, in an odd passage, in what even the characters of the dialogue admit is an odd project of imagining the ideal state.

I call this story to mind because I want to argue that all ethics take the form of Plato's "noble lie." The rhetorical strategy behind any articulation of ethical guidelines is to posit a human subject which is capable of entering into the description of human nature or world structure that it offers with the idea that such a person will then act in ways that are better for her and better for all. We may be skeptical of some or all ethical formulations because they foreground some particular possible relations or behaviors on the basis of one or another particular view of human being that we may not agree with. But is that skepticism really to the point? Each ethical theory describes how one acts once one accepts a description of what generally matters and how the world is, not whether that description has ever been or is really the case historically or theoretically. This is to say that an ethical system will always posit a human subject which is capable of

entering into it, that the posited human subject does not pre-exist the frame but arises with the ethical framework which has described it into existence. Each theorist frames interactions and elements of human nature corresponding to the demands his ethics makes of the people it describes.[1]

Ethics, then, primarily for actual people in the process of living their lives, but also in the process of philosophical theorizing, is and has always been a narrative process. Ethics requires and inhabits stories. We tell stories, not just about human subjects and the sort of thing being human is through stories about what being a friend or being courageous means, but also about the way things are, the way the world is, such that this or that character or action is right or good. That is why, for Socrates, some story must be told, true or not, which provides the ground for specific obligations and relations which form the foundation of those values. We don't know how to posit such valuations without a narrative frame within which they achieve the character we assign to them and that provides the criteria for that valuation. They achieve that character, moreover, not as a result of their congruence or isomorphism with some rule or immutable category, but within and through the narrative elements as they are coherently related by a given story. Finally, then, a very important aspect of moral thinking involves the natural critique that all stories perform upon each other. Moral choices are informed by the way that one story always and inevitably critiques another.[2]

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[1] I owe some of the formulation of the ideas of this paragraph to Chris Elford, an exceptional student in my History of Western Philosophy: Ancient class in the fall of 2007.

[2] Cite Wayne Booth here. It exceeds the scope of this paper to begin an argument about the relative cogency of rules-based or character-based moral theories. But I would argue, given the opportunity, that rules-based morality mostly fails to map onto real moral heuristics, and that ethical theorizing through western philosophical history has more often reflected the dominant epistemological priorities of the age than the life practices of human beings at that time or generally. There have been notable exceptions, such as early Greek ethical theorizing, which recognized, at least in part, the narrative dimensions of morality as primarily connected to character, or, more recently, the ethical ideas of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.

The heart of this interpretation is the claim that we are fundamentally and even primarily narrative beings. Most of our cognitive activity, those activities aimed at understanding ourselves and our world, including memory, are exercised in creating a coherent narrative that makes sense of experience. We are first and finally storytellers, telling stories of ourselves to ourselves and to others into a world we fashion as story. On this point, Jhally and I are in agreement, and this article intends to explore more fully just the question Jhally poses, the relation of current dominant modes and forms of narrativity in our culture to moral narrative and moral heuristics.

Narrative, in its wide array of forms, has always been crucial to personal and social identity. Dominant narratives shape the ways we see the world, and so shape us and the world. But the last century has seen the progression of a set of developments, not always intentionally linked at their outset, which have produced a new set of dominant narrative sources and forms. Of these, I focus upon two that at least purport to tell us about the way things really are: mass marketing and mass media journalism (particularly television journalism, whose structures and techniques have set the standard for all journalism). These are the "truth-telling" media. And it is important to recognize at the outset that these media trade largely in morality tales, with their stock figures and *topoi* of good and evil.

In our world, mass marketing is the dominant source and medium of narrative and argument. It achieves this status if for no other reason than its saturation levels. As Louise Story wrote in a recent *NYTimes* article, there is very little space that isn't occupied by marketing.[3] There was perhaps a time when marketing was a kind of hawking of products, not unlike a mass mediated version of the snake-oil salesman, or the

[3] Story, Louise. "Anywhere the Eye Can See, It's Likely to See an Ad." *New York Times* January 15, 2007.

carnival barker, whose clear job it was to arrest attention and induce consumption of whatever ware they had to sell. In such cases, the public distinguished the activity of the hawker from the normal activity of the majority of their lives. Such activity was a break from the norm, an entertainment, perhaps, but a novelty at least. Now, not only is it difficult to find any space that isn't carnival space, as it were, that isn't crowded with mass media barkers, but, if we take into account the way marketing has integrated into most other mass media, such messages are the stuff of daily life, the primary interpreters and narrators of experience for many of us.

Marketing is clearly about telling particular stories, both concerning the products about which it is ostensibly informing us, and, more importantly, about the way the world and we in it really are. Because its discourses are the primary discourses we encounter, its particular form of argument is the argument form with which we are most familiar. Outside of the law courts, or a few other very specialized and formal practices of arguing in our culture, no other practice is as fully engaged in "argument" in the classic sense of that term: a discourse that aims to produce conviction or provide persuasive conclusions by means of linked evidence in the form of grounds for belief and authoritative backing. Marketing arguments purport, or at least promise, to tell us if not the "truth," at least what we should believe.[4]

Moreover, it has risen to dominant status by colonizing other narrative forms taking them up as their own. This adoption and adaptation has allowed marketing to fold itself "seamlessly" into entertainment media, of which journalism has become an

[4] Cf. Douglas Walton's just published book on mass media argumentation.

extremely interesting and complex element.[5] Infotainment, a category that has swallowed all of journalism, stands apart from most entertainment media if only because it still claims that its narratives are truth-telling, factual as opposed to fictive. We may consume far more entertainment media than we do infotainment media, but we still recognize that suspension of disbelief is necessary for that media to entertain us, even so-called "reality" programs. The news is still largely taken, if not as much believed, to be a narrative report of what is the case, what is happening. It purports to inform us, to reveal the nature of events and people, and to illuminate the ways things work. Most importantly, what most of us learn or know about any other "fact-finding" method in our world, such as the various sciences, we learn via journalism, unless we are among the few engaged in one of these practices, and even then, we learn what we know about the others primarily from journalism.

Still, one of the most interesting aspects of media journalism is the ironic tension between the claim that the news informs us about the world, and the feeling that what we watch there is hermetically sealed off from our lived lives. Perhaps the primary factor in this tension is the simple fact that the news is, after all, a packaged media product, indistinguishable in many aspects from entertainment media. The images are often the same, the graphics and soundtracks, the "sets." Both are broadcast through the same physical box, which, of course, no matter how large and immersive its pictures grow, is still a box, separate from the house and the lives in that house. What we watch on TV, we watch knowing that what we view is something distant, something elsewhere, happening to others. The real distinction between news and entertainment media are the

[5] In the first decade of the 21st century, a dominant marketing strategy has been the attempt at "seamless" integration of marketing into most, if not all, other mass media forms. Cite some examples/sources.

truth conventions of each. News claims to be real, entertainment, mostly, fictional. This difference is largely a propaganda difference; it is at the very least a narrative difference. But it is a difference that matters in terms of our reception.

Into these dominant truth-telling narratives, which have always exhibited a moral impulse, we have recently transferred a great deal of moral authority. We now live in a media age, an age of image and carefully tailored, exquisitely focused, and breathtakingly numerous messages broadcast to audiences of staggering proportions at unimaginable frequencies and saturation levels, all saying largely the same few things. During the last few decades, a fascinating shift has occurred in which many of those messages have become even more overtly moralistic. If we are essentially storytellers and story consumers, and if our ethical possibilities are narratively fashioned and narrativistically consumed, if our morality is a matter of narrative models and essentially narrative choices, then we have handed over the role of primary and central moralizer to a loosely, but increasingly synergistically related set of mass media voices.

Tribes

These new narratives are largely ethical by virtue, if nothing else, of being about identity and identity choices. Marketing, and so now almost all mass media, offers prepackaged identities as consumable products, but it does more than this in the process: it tribalizes.[6] In other words, not only does Dr. Pepper invite us to be a Pepper too, suggest quite strongly that we, of course, really want to be a Pepper too, and imply that not to choose to be a Pepper too is at least odd, perhaps wrong; but such marketing presupposes and constructs a new tribal identity in the process of applying the age-old

[6] Cite McLuhan.

marketing formula (buy our product and become the special person you always wanted to be and knew you deserved to be). As silly as it may seem on the surface, the invitation to tribal affiliation is almost always genuine. We may scoff at being Peppers, but there are many, many more tribes to choose from. These tribal identities offer themselves as largely shallow but still more or less coherent sets of social, political and moral values, that is, as ideologies. Of course, these are the largely shallow but still roughly coherent ideologies of our culture. Being a Pepper is not really being anything new or different. Still, these tribes cut across biological and social realities of all sorts, across historical and physical dynamics. They offer belonging as choice, rather than genealogy, as free and freeing, while simultaneously binding and grounding. The choice is always presented as double: not just who to be as an individual, but *with whom* and to what larger community we may belong. Being a Pepper matters much more *because* we can be a Pepper *too*.

Obviously, who we decide to be, what kind of person, is the central ethical question; but what we owe each other, both in and out of our "communities," is a more central moral question. Marketing restructures both questions, and joins them into a more coherent unit than 2500 years of moral philosophizing has been able to accomplish. In marketing, the decision of who to be is at the same time the decision of what to belong to or whom to belong with, and both are framed as consumer decisions, not social or political, much less historical, decisions. Marketing relies upon the fiction that we are completely free to make such moral/ethical consumer choices. Therefore, in a strange conceptual twist, systems of values and responsibilities, codes of behavior and duty, may be shopped, not as the corollary of market choices (if we want to be a Pepper then we necessarily join all Peppers in community and take on the duties of that community,

however minimal or nebulous), but as the point (we want to be a Pepper *because* a Pepper is articulated *as* a set of values and relations to others and the world that we desire or desire to perfect).

The self purchased, the self acquired through market decisions is not one who consumes and feels pleasure through brands, but is constituted as consuming, as identified with and through brands. Such as self *is* a Pepper, not something else who happens to like Dr. Peppers. That's the primary significance of Dr. Pepper's slogan. It doesn't invite us to purchase cans of corn syrup and feel pleasure in drinking them, or even in attaching ourselves to their brand. It doesn't invite us to take on new loyalties. It invites us to *be* that brand. That is the point of brands. They are not understood by marketers to be lifestyle symbols or commodity loyalties. They are understood to be pre-packaged meaning systems we can choose not so much to inhabit as to become.

Tele-Being

This aspect of tribal marketing, the commodification of value systems, is enhanced by an important structure in television journalism, or television generally. "Televising," in the sense of the mechanical reproduction of "what happens," transforms what transpires into what is transmitted. What happens in the world of our activity, our lives as lived, is not really consumable. This world is a world of engagement and interaction, not products. But filming that world, editing and packaging that world, changes the ontological status of that world. From a world in which, as Heidegger would put it (by means of profuse hyphenation), we are *already-alongside* as *ready-to-hand* (equipment) *together-with* involved in some project, we are transformed into objects, *present-at-hand*, now able to be examined, questioned, appropriated. The world shifts

from a *world-we-are-in* into a *world-over-against-at-a-distance*.[7] Less clumsily (with all due apologies to Heidegger), the world of our activity, familiar and intimate, the context as it were of our being and doing, becomes an image world, the world of seeing and being seen, a little strange and distant no matter how familiar. It becomes spectacle. This transformation is not, or not much, an epistemological transformation, not a matter of seeing the world differently. It is an ontological transformation, a different way of *being* the world and being in it. One is a world in which our behavior is the substance of what happens, the other a world in which our behavior is the content of a completely other happening. This is a little technical, philosophically, but important to get clear about.

This ontological shift is not new, of course, and not created by mass media. It has always been around as long as inquiry has been around. To take some part of the world with which we are engaged in activity toward some goal and begin to ask after its nature is to perform the same ontological shift. Television, however, as perhaps the most reproductive of the various mechanical reproductions of reality, has naturalized and normalized this shift in interesting and influential ways.

This matters a great deal for a number of reasons. Different ontological status entails different commitments and different potentialities. Both worlds are not habitable in the same ways with the same purposes. To vote, for instance, and to view voting broadcast as part and parcel of some election event, have almost nothing in common as activities. The broadcast of voting is not merely the representation of the other activity, or if so, it is coming to the point where the activity of voting is the particular instance as

[7] I offer such coinages if only because Heidegger is a central figure in illuminating this ontological shift as a feature of human being.

representation of the larger pseudo-event. Rather, both of these activities present completely different dynamics, goals, consequences, and meanings from each other. Further, the element of mechanical reproduction confuses these ontological distinctions. The broadcast of voting, for instance, is the broadcasting of some people actually voting. It is the representation of the substance of some activity as the content of another, the one we are actually engaged with at the moment, the viewing of the news.[8]

It is only in the past decades that images of life in action have achieved a fidelity to lived experience such that they can begin to effectively blur the ontological boundary just adduced. Only the most recent generation has grown up fully in an image world where life and image are so fully conjoined and integrated, so mutually referential and reflective. Before this generation, there was a clear distinction between the world as lived and the world as represented. There was life and there was image and the two were not only clearly separate, but one was dominant and occupied the vast portion of our experience, while the other was an occasional, perhaps novel, and largely recreational encounter. This relation has been turned on its head.

Parallel to this phenomenon, there was a time, perhaps, when the interpretation of the world offered by marketing and the actual condition of the world was clearly distinct for most auditors, even stark in its contrast at times on those occasions when the world presented in marketing found itself juxtaposed against the world presented by journalism in the morning paper or during the commercial breaks of the cable news program, or, in the case of those classes whose conditions do not include consumer power, those occasions when marketing images spread into their decidedly different circumstances and

[8] And this is before we even begin to factor in the various poll and analysis dynamics by which voting, as a future or underway activity is parsed into a sporting event where what matters is who leads and who is coming from behind and what the odds are.

environments. But for many people, those who enjoyed a sufficient level of socio-economic privilege, the actual conditions of the world came to resemble quite closely those they encountered in marketing, and when other worlds impinged, they did so mostly in images, offering a glimpse of a distant world brought close but still removed. As such, the "actual" but distant world was encountered in exactly the same way as the marketing world, as a series of narrative images; and we were at least implicitly and structurally invited to encounter them in the same way, so that the image of the "actual" world, of the tragic event, was subsumed under the marketing image.

The line between "real" and image was further blurred when marketing began using images of the non-commercial world, of revolution or famine, of conflict or social crisis, in its own campaigns, as material for its own world constructions. Marketing is always looking to inhabit new representational territory, and so is always looking to transform elements of radically non-commercial ways of life into stock elements in its own constructions. It is aided in the process by the phenomenon I am calling attention to: the way that so many non-commercial ways of life have been "captured" *as* televised images.

The point I want to make is that the technological advances of mechanical reproduction, occurring as often as not first in marketing rather than media entertainment, coupled with the swing of mass media journalism toward entertainment and marketing motifs has perhaps eradicated this boundary between the actual and the image. The images we receive from journalism of an "actual" world of crisis and conflict, pain and need, are both in substance and in style, both in technical detail and narrative framing, no different from those images we encounter in marketing. There may have been a time

when encountering, in some journal or newspaper, an image of starving children in Ethiopia while viewing on the facing page or under the fold some advertisement for perfume or a luxury automobile might have caused some cognitive dissonance, might have generated some at least momentary recognition that the world is not wholly market, that not all events or choices confronting us are consumer choices and opportunities.

I deeply suspect that this is no longer the case. We have seen too many images of both sorts, and there has been too much crossover.[9] And even if some images of world conflict do not include in their frame the familiar consumer symbols and signs, these are not necessary for the interpretive conflation to occur. Since marketing no longer intends those symbols and signs to gesture toward particular consumer products but rather to evoke emotional and moral identities, to call up formulaic narratives of possible lives, then the image and narrative of the "actual" world we encounter, even without those symbols and signs, may be, and usually are, viewed as instances of those established and pre-packaged formulas. Marketing has made mass media journalism an extension of its short-hand and simplistic set of possible perspectives, possible interpretations of the ways the world works. We view "real" events in the world as examples of the limited sets of dynamics that marketing has worked hard to create. Such a tendency is perhaps a natural development of normal human heuristics, magnified by the increased general familiarity with a limited set of near-universal motifs that truly mass (global) marketing technology has propagated. But the categories are vastly more general now, and the authority for forming them has shifted from personal experience and local authorities to mass media.

[9] Witness the Benetton ads where images of war or racial conflict (or harmony) or death and illness are presented, without commentary, as commercial images harnessed to the purpose of exciting consumer interest in their products.

The Sunopticon

Of course, as marketing infiltrates every possible space to break through the clutter, as it develops new techniques explicitly designed to eschew the markings of marketing, to appear to be journalism or advocacy or public discourse or simply the "real" world, then the fact that it is the same medium, the same vehicle of image and narrative as is used by all other forms of discourse just mentioned, increases the conflation of the message. It is, for all practical purposes, the *same voice* telling us about both, after all. Telling us about the world no longer occurs in clearly distinct categories with clearly distinct functions and mediators, such that we can recognize the authority and motivation of the "truth tellers" as different one from the other, teacher from reporter from salesman. I am not talking about the way in which one form of "truth telling" can be seen to be "like" another, as when we collapse any distinctions under a reductive recognition. I am talking about the very real way in which none of the "territory" of any one of these forms of "truth telling" has remained intact and discrete. There is no "content" or "process" of education that hasn't been appropriated by the other forms, and vice versa. All these forms of world talk, of world presentation and representation, have both intentionally and unconsciously borrowed from each other, if only as a result of the perhaps innocent impulse to innovate, to use the latest technique/technology, to borrow and adopt the most appealing narrative frames.

As Boorstin foresaw, the pseudo-event has supplanted the event.[10] Things don't seem to us to be events unless they bear the marks of having been processed to be seen. In this way, and as Bourdieu has made clear, journalistic narratives have lost their

[10] Cite this.

dynamic aspect.[11] They don't unfold. We do not see cause and effect, just effect, for which a cause must be manufactured and reported, or increasingly, merely puzzled over.[12] We do not learn of the world in ways that show us the development of the "events" we view. So the "events" have no real event dynamics. It is odd, but the immediacy of media has made media images the narrative equivalent of still-frame photographs, capturing no more than a moment in time, an artificially truncated and objectified representation of life, not life itself, however endlessly replayed. The illusion of film or video is that we are seeing the world unfold. This aspect of media journalism has been reinforced by the essentially "eventless" nature of marketing, which, as Berger suggests, exists always in the future (and *subjunctive*) tense.[13] Events don't unfold in marketing either, no matter how a particular marketing narrative is structured to look like an event. Instead, they only promise an unfolding for the consumer upon the condition of their participation in the market. And it's always the same promises. The marketing world, for all its sometimes jittery (multiple frames per minute) presentation, is static. The same goals beckon, the same procedures apply, the same mechanisms obtain. The only variable is the material element: this car rather than that, or rather than a particular airline or even clothing item, offers the same promise of freedom or luxury.

A consequence of this conflation is that none of the images of the world we encounter seem to be or are taken by us to be about us, about our world. It is always

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[11] Cite Bourdieu.

[12] I have come to view television journalism under the lens of what Jon Stewart once referred to as *Mystery Science Theater 3000* journalism. Not only has investigative reporting died out through the budget cuts that seek to increase profit in a stultified market by means of cost reduction or been co-opted by such blatant infotainment programs as *Dateline*, and not only has much cable "news" devolved into five-minute segments where two "experts" present polar binary perspectives, but much of television news now occurs as the presentation of some image captured on the scene of some "event" while anchors who know no more than we do about what is happening comment.

[13] Berger. 153.

some distant other: either some frequently anonymous distant other as offered by journalism, or some other and future possible self as offered by marketing. If our moral sensibilities are excited, and both marketing and journalism have come to depend upon exciting our moral sensibilities as a primary attention strategy, they are excited by and projected upon that other, never to ourselves, as we are, now, here. Experience is deferred and projected. Everything that happens in these worlds happens to someone else somewhere else. We are invited to and can merely observe, envy, judge.

Another interesting feature of marketing is that a person's qualities are never presented as their own, recognized as such, detached from how others view them, and not grounded in anyone's desire to emulate them, as they are sometimes in journalism. In marketing, a person's qualities are presented as potential, grounded in a social dynamic, requiring a social system of validation. In both cases, however, the moral import is remarkably similar. The person of particular and independent individual moral character as presented in journalism serves as a model, usually in the negative sense, of the sort of person that the consumer who fails to actualize the promise of advertising can become. In both cases, the dynamic is social, because the person whose moral character is his or her own as presented by journalism is presented within the frame of exemplar, as moral lesson. The moral exemplar in journalism exhibits moral qualities pretty much set and actualized, while that presented in advertising exhibits moral possibilities that require the correct (consumer) actions of the auditor to realize. But both are framed within the same social sphere with the same moral norms. The actor of set moral character is never presented by journalism in reference to himself for our recognition only, but in reference to the moral norm of our own moral promise for our edification.

Another extremely important feature of mass media and marketing, for our analysis, is the fact that such media does not choose to or know how to reflect society to itself as a society, as a community. Marketing, of course, does not need or want to, since societies don't buy their products or become brand loyalists, individuals do. Marketing always markets to individuals. One of the most interesting aspects of marketing dynamics is the way in which each mass market message needs to say to each individual viewer that the message is to him or her, individually, and about their individual lives, while, of course, simultaneously saying that to millions of people, making each feel the same, as if they were unique and uniquely addressed.

Journalism doesn't know how to reflect society or community. As Bourdieau has noted, journalism focuses upon the individual actor because it can film him or her.[14] It cannot present video footage of social or political structure, unfolding dynamics of change, multiple vectors of power and influence. It can only present footage of events isolated from their historical and even larger physical contexts, which it almost always reduces to individual agents and the consequences of their acts. It shows us people, individual people, but as paradigms, models for personality types, or symbols for narrative motifs and characters. It is important to note that this feature, by itself, has significant moral consequences. Most moral issues are social issues, community issues. The fact that mass media narratives frame the world as composed of individuals and their individual needs and desires, that they reconfigure social obligation as consumer tribal affiliation, has the potential to radically alter our moral sensibilities.

But it is perhaps the ubiquity of the representations, the degree to which we are flooded with our being in the world *as content* of mechanically representing the world as

[14] Cite Bourdieau.

happening that has contributed most to the blurring of the boundaries between these two worlds. The world we inhabit as agents has been remapped as the world we observe as spectacle. We are, famously, hyper-aware of ourselves as objects and image, televisualizable if not always or presently or even ever actually televised. We have come to think of our world of activity as a model or instance of the spectacle rather than the other way around. I don't want to belabor this point, as many others have articulated this phenomenon with great care and insight. I simply wish to call attention to the way in which this conflation, this transformation, in which this reproduction subsumes the production, allows for our world of activity to be seen by us as consumable after all, as product, as marketable good.

Tele-Morality

This conflation colludes with the dominant motifs of marketing in which values and ideals are transformed, packaged and repackaged, into consumable goods. Morality, a real aspect of our real lives, is thus transformed into market options, consumer choices. The moral agency we necessarily enact in our lived lives becomes the moral narratives and clichés of those lives reflected back at us as spectacle which then, because they echo across all spectacle, all forms of representation, including marketing, represent themselves to us as moralized products and consumer choice. Reporters and anchors, talk show hosts and commercial announcers are all now spiritual guides, guardians of middle-class and middle-of-the-road morality. They are constantly telling us what we should think, how we should act, and how the world should work.

As in all marketing, these narrative moral/ethical products are presented as something we lack, but can gain, merely by participating in the marketplace and making

smart consumer choices. Just as with the promise of a sparkling clean kitchen or a more exciting and appealing self, morality is offered to us not as a necessary and deeply contingent aspect of living our lives, but, through the representation of values and moral sentiments as the point of almost all products we can actually buy, as the thing *we are indeed buying* when we buy products like soft drinks or cars, morality is represented as something just out of our current reach but attainable by joining the right tribe by means of buying the right stuff.

All of this is further complicated by the fact that marketing genres participate in a very limited range of motifs. Most marketing narratives are collapsible into each other. They all present consumer choice as identity choice along an attenuated spectrum of human being. However, since the identity packages we are offered are thoroughly moralized packages, our moral choices are located along the same attenuated spectrum of human being.

One of the more interesting aspects, or oppositional tensions, within marketing is the need to simultaneously create dissatisfaction in the auditor with his/her life and lifestyle, while also validating, even valorizing the pop culture lifestyle in general. The goal is not to make the consumer dissatisfied with the world, just his/her place in it. This has interesting connections to moral heuristics, since, in large part, it offers a similar dynamic. Moral rules serve to perpetuate and consolidate a moral order. Moral deliberation as popularly understood -- the individual application of general rules to one's behavior -- usually results in the failure to fully realize this order. Contemporary media journalism feeds this dynamic by having the moral order glorified in the breech, as it were, telling us stories of one moral failure after another which, paradoxically, serves

both to cast into doubt or despair the moral systems in which these acts count as failures, but also to more firmly entrench it. Marketers play off this dynamic of a failure to realize a more perfect moral universe by suggesting that we are failing to live up to our culture's possibilities, to be as sexy and successful and happy, not as we *might*, but as we *ought* to be. Our failure to realize our more perfect potential in the material universe *is a moral failure*.

Jhally has called our attention to how marketing, since the 1920s, has explicitly sought to link products to the real social desires of people:

> No wonder then that advertising is so attractive to us, so powerful, so seductive. What it offers us are images of the real sources of human happiness – family life, romance and love, sexuality and pleasure, friendship, and sociability, leisure and relaxation, independence and control of life. That is why advertising is so powerful, that is what is real about it.[15]

The truth of an ad is not measured in the potential of a product to fulfill the promise of the ad, nor in the relation of the world of the ad to our lived lives (the *real* world), not, at least, in terms of material culture (such as that the truth of the extravagantly beautiful burger in a McDonald's ad is some correspondence with the burger we buy and get). The truth of an ad is measured in the relation of the ad's narrative world to the narrative worlds of our fantasies. The truth of an ad is the truth of our desires. Advertising executive Jerry Goodis puts it this way: "Advertising doesn't mirror how people are acting but how they are dreaming."[16] Berger insists that:

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[15] Cite. Jhally, Sut, Apocalypse

[16] Nelson, Joyce. 1983. "As the Brain Tunes Out, the TV Admen Tune In" *Globe and Mail*.

> The gap between what publicity [marketing] actually offers and the future it promises, corresponds with the gap between what the spectator-buyer feels himself to be and what he would like to be. The two gaps become one; and instead of the single gap being bridged by action or lived experience, it is filled with glamorous day-dreams.[17]

When a McDonald's ad shows a dad and a young daughter bonding in the drive through lane, all smiles and excitement, it is claiming that eating at McDonald's with one's child is a way of giving to the child, perhaps repaying the child for neglect, a way to foster warm family relationships. We do not measure this claim against the *real* world, we measure it against our desires for this to be true, for it to be possible. The marketing argument is that believing enough in the possibility that having a cheap burger in a McDonald's playland will constitute good parenting, wanting enough for that to be so, can make it so. No amount of believing can make the cheap hamburger a nutritious meal; so McDonald's shies away from claims of that sort. It makes carefully calculated claims that can be measured not against some testable quantity of the material world, but only against our psyches.

All of this has an impact on our collective sense of morality. Our ideas of morality are attenuated to what is modeled by the moral scandals and less frequent positive models on mass media journalism, to what gets explicitly labeled as moral concerns and problems in our public discourse as filtered through mass media (poverty, questions as to the value of life, sexual morality and questions of integrity like truth-telling and fairness). The values which serve as the commodities of marketing then seem to constitute some other kind of category of life, and we come less and less to recognize

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[17] Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing* (NY: Penguin) 148.

interpersonal and familial relations as properly constituting morality. This complex dynamic might be part of the reason we have become so ideologically polarized around such a limited number of narrowly construed moral issues. We are offered the opportunity to belong to explicitly moral tribes as the consumer process of assuming personal identities, of becoming who we want to be. As is the case in all marketing, in explicit mass media moralizing we are repeatedly positioned as needing to pick certain prepackaged moral issues to inhabit and fight for in order to gain moral character at all, because, until we pick those issues, we lack it. Many people say they are not "political" because they do not vote and do not pay attention to politics (as if it were possible not to be "political" and live in a nation state). Many people claim or feel that they are not concerned with "moral issues" because they have not attached themselves to one or another of the limited set of moral causes constantly parading through mass media.

Many people have recognized that, again as Berger puts it, consumer choice has supplemented political or social choice, the act of consumption substituting for the democratic act.[18] I want to argue that consumer choice, with its always implicit, and often explicit, register of personal identity formation, has come to stand for moral choice. The ethical question of who one desires to be, what sort of person one will actualize, is sublimated by the consumer question that carries the exact same significance. Whatever else they are, marketing, journalism, even our educational systems are moral systems. They valuate the world, and interpret it in morally charged terms. They construct, borrow, fashion and refashion interconnected and relational systems of moral symbols, values, and entities.

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[18] Cite.

I do *not* want to argue that one system of moral values (more to be desired or better in some moral or extra-moral sense) is being replaced by another and consumerist system of values (of a worse or more shallow sort). I want to argue that our historical and cultural systems of values are being (re)configured *as* consumerist. I think current and dominant mass media discourse practices invite us to inhabit our old familiar world, the world of our cultural narrative frames, attenuated significantly, adopted and adapted, but still recognizable as our values and our meaning systems. The radical change is that it invites us to do so in ways that make of those values and meaning systems commodities, market goods, to be purchased as a way of becoming who we are, as opposed to allowing them to remain non-commercial ways of living and being which, through actualization in our activity, shape who we are in the living (rather, then, in the consuming). Is this change for the better? For the worse? I don't know how to answer that question without invoking some, perhaps impossible, rubric that stands apart from the very system I am analyzing. But I do, obviously, think we are participating in dynamics that is changing the way we think and act in the world, and being aware of that change, of those dynamics, is important, if only to keep open the possibility of direct and effective agency on the part of each individual. It is fair to ask, and important to be able to ask, whether we want a world in which everything, even the questions of who to be and to whom we owe obligation and responsibility, is product, and in which every choice, even moral/ethical choice, is a market choice.