



### **Now This...**

*The Sponsored Life—Ads, TV and American Culture*, by Leslie Savan. Temple University, \$16.95

### **I.D. Magazine**

1994 may have been a year of Republican victories, the O.J. pre-trial media blitz, a major league baseball strike and the Pope's book deal, but it was also just another year when advertising - words, images and attitudes - crept closer to dominating nearly every moment in our daily lives. From cyber-shopping on the Internet to this magazine's budding romance with Absolut vodka, the business of selling is big business. Microsoft, for instance, in their new campaign claims there is really nothing else: "Business is the engine of society. Without it there would be no advancement," while computer rival Apple continues to tell us what's cool to keep on our hard disks. But Advertising Age recently cleared up all pre-millennium doubt and anxiety with reassurance that "a whole new age is upon us. One that will have a profound impact on every aspect of our lives: business, entertainment, information, and education...the Interactive Age." Oh, that.

In *The Sponsored Life*, Leslie Savan, advertising columnist for the *Village Voice*, presents a portrait of the national psyche through her collected essays and shows how our consciousness is constantly formed (and re-formed) by an ever growing commercial culture. From birth to old age, or as Savan puts it, "from Huggies to Maalox" our needs are satisfied by one advertiser or another. "The sponsored life is born," she explains, "when the culture sells our own experiences back to us. It grows as those experiences are reconstituted inside us, mixing the most intimate processes of individual thought with commercial values, rhythms and expectations." Although we may be what we eat, we are even more what we buy to eat, buy to wear or buy to drive.

In *Our Bodies Our Sells*, one of six thematic chapters that organize the book, Savan's "Boys Under the Hood" recounts the 1993 Hyundai ad equation that well endowed guys drive small, low-priced imports. After dissing Hyundai's "genital-jousting" as a cover for class shame (Hyundai's Excel is the lowest priced car in the country) she asks rhetorically, "could Hyundai be overcompensating for a...sales shortage?" and admits that she prefers men who walk. "Generation X-Force" in the chapter titled Shock of the Hue has Savan taking Madison Avenue to task for their obsessive genuflecting before the \$125 billion annual market of 46 million people between 18 and 29, "selling a cramped package of stylized resentment with grunge-art-directed campaigns that say the word 'generation' a lot." Although Savan never explicitly connects ads with organized religion, in "The Ad Mission" she explores how advertising addresses our bruised boomer/Xer egos and spiritual needs through soothing repetitive images of sky and clouds, flying swimmers and endless Enya music for Volkswagen, Northwest Airlines and KitchenAid appliances. "Ads minister us to the Promised Land where struggle will cease and peace (a.k.a. "satisfaction") will reign." And where will we find that peace? "in front of the TV, absorbing sermons from corporations...just sit, don't talk, and let the heaven wash over you."

*The Sponsored Life* departs from standard academic critiques of mass culture that bog down in semiotics or rely on conspiracy theories and heavy-handed threats of imminent cultural collapse. In the book's extensive index, where the scholar might expect to find Williamson, Judith (*Decoding Advertisements*, 1978) there is only Will, George and Winky Dink and You (a 1953 interactive TV cartoon). Marx, Karl is not included either, but there are references to Madonna, Magnavox, Magritte (Rene), Maidenform, Malcolm X and Male-bonding. Even Freud, Sigmund didn't make the cut, although Savan includes Jobs (Steven), Jockstrap (female) and Joe Smooth (ad mascot). While the dense and often apocalyptic ideologies of Marxism, feminism and postmodernism have prevailed in cultural criticism, Savan's sharp, witty and passionate first-person reports slice through the clutter to reveal how ads work to shape our beliefs. And though she surely knows these theorists, they exist safely below the surface of her writing.

Ads are rarely examined in the press and only when they make the news by offending our tastes or through scandal and product failure are they discussed by journalists. But Savan regularly violates media's "positive environment" policy for advertisers and threads ordinary ads into the larger social weave, tying loose ends to public and political issues. She tells us that Phil Dusenberry of BBDO, was the clear thinking creative mind behind the ads for Crystal Pepsi—"Change is sweeping the country and Crystal Pepsi symbolizes that change— and was also responsible for Reagan's '84 opus "It's Morning in America" and the Arthur S. De Moss Foundation's highly effective (and repulsive) antiabortion ads, "Life, What a Beautiful Choice." Sometimes a clear soda is not just a soda.

When it seems like all that is left, as an ad defense is ironic distance, *The Sponsored Life* tells us that has been co-opted, too. Advertisers know that we know that we can't be flattered and seduced unless we want to. "Irony is a leaky condom," Savan warns, "in fact it's the same old leaky condom that advertising brings out every night." Ads have to be as cool, hip and ironic as we think we are.

So it's hopeless, or is it? Maybe not. *The Sponsored Life* demonstrates that cultural criticism can be both a pleasure to read and a necessary antidote, especially as we enter the new 24-hour, all-you-can-eat, high-definition interactive multimedia world, where there's a smile and an outstretched hand welcoming us...

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