The Relationship Between Image and Spectator: The Case of the Advertisement

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At one time in history, advertisements were confined to the print page. In contemporary society, we are surrounded by them everywhere we look. Advertisements did not truly enter the private sphere until the first television advertisement aired in 1941.[1] In less than a century, advertisements have firmly invaded almost every aspect of our lives. They remain ubiquitous on the print page, on billboards on the streets, and on televisions in our homes. Now, they are even held in our hands. Furthermore, they are now pointedly targeted, as corporations use personal data to tailor advertisements to specific subsets of the population. As they become omnipresent, it is more important than ever to examine them closely and with a critical lens.

Advertisements are images that serve a specific and unique role, firstly because of the type of image that they are. Herbert Read writes that "the artist cannot in any effective way avoid the economic conditions of his time; he cannot ignore them, for they will not ignore him."[2] This is certainly true: Karl Marx describes art as being a part of the superstructure of an economic system.[3] Images can be processed, understood, and analyzed through the lens of their role in the economic system under which they were created. However, advertisements are images that have an even closer connection with their economic system. In modern times, art can be used as a tool to propagate an economic system and a political ideology, like in the case of Soviet Socialist Realism in the 20th century. In this case, these images must be understood and analyzed not just

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[1] Daniel Ganninger, "The World's First Television Commercial," Medium (Knowledge Stew, July 14, 2019),
https://medium.com/knowledge-stew/the-worlds-first-television-commercial-4f0b73f27b07#:~:ta
rgetText=)
[2] Herbert Read, "What Is Revolutionary Art?" (ART THEORY, accessed December 3, 2019,
http://theoria.art-zoo.com/what-is-revolutionary-art-herbert-read/)
[3] Isabelle Alfandary, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (class lecture, Topics in Comparative Literature: Critical Modernity: New Forms, New Experiences, l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, November 11, 2019).

through their status in culture and society, but also in close connection to this economic system. Although it is often the purpose of works of art to change the way that people think, in the case of advertising this purpose is more explicit: to exert influence over people's beliefs, desires, and actions. Furthermore, the role of spectator to image is changed when a spectator is viewing an advertisement, because the spectator is also firmly inhabiting the role of a consumer. There are many conflicting ideas about the relationship between spectator and image. Writers such as Jacques Rancière have attempted to de-emphasize the power of the image in order to accentuate the individuality of the spectator, while other thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Guy DeBord have argued that the image is a dangerous and powerful tool with the capability to affect masses of people in the same way. Depending on how the relationship between spectator and image is defined, the critical value, transformative properties, or revolutionary ability of images changes as well.

DeBord's explanation of this relationship emphasizes the power of the image, and places the image as the very object which mediates relationships in society. Some would argue that images are an incredibly powerful tool in the process of the fetishization of commodities. However, Rancière has an opposite stance in reaction to these opinions, and argues that the dissensus of the contemporary aesthetic regime means that the image does not have the power others have assigned to it. There is a pre-existing body of literature from the 20th century that examines the role of an image and the relationship between spectator and image for many different types of images, but none of them focus on advertising. However, the ideas put forth about whether or not images have the power to affect the masses, what type of freedom spectators have, and the mechanisms by which images are persuasive can be utilized to examine

the case of the advertisement. How can the relationship between spectator and image inform the

relationship between consumer and advertisement?

This paper will argue that the relationship between consumer and advertisement cannot

be analyzed on an individual scale because advertisements are proven to have the ability to

change the attitudes and actions of society as a whole. A de-emphasis of the power of the image

ignores this persistent effect on society, and the mechanism by which an image persuades not

just individuals, but masses of people, is clearly at play in the case of the advertising image.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin traces

mechanically reproduced images, or works of art, from lithography to photography to the sound

film. Not only is advertising certainly a mechanically reproduced form of artwork, it is also one

that Benjamin would say is similar to the film in that it is "completely subject to or [..] founded

in, mechanical reproduction."[4] Benjamin's point of view for critically analyzing mechanically

produced art is also useful, because he writes that "the question of whether photography is an

art" is a futile one, and the "primary" question should be "whether the very invention of

photography had not transformed the entire nature of art."[5] In outlets like *Forbes* and *The

Harvard Business Review* many articles have posed the question: Is Advertising an Art? This

paper will try to situate advertising within the pre-existing body of literature written about art,

regardless of its status as art or non-art, and to examine in which ways advertising has

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[4] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," accessed
December 4, 2019,
https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm)
[5] Ibid

transformative properties or critical value. In analyzing mechanically reproduced art Benjamin writes of the concept of aura:

> "One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements."[6]

Aura is a negative phenomenon in that it is only experienced when it is lost -- when it is present, it is not noticed, but its absence, according to Benjamin, is felt and changes the nature of the artwork.[7] When art is mechanically reproduced the aura is absent, because the aura is what constitutes the aesthetic experience as unique, and mechanically reproduced works are inherently not unique because there is no original and each copy is identical.[8]

One question seemingly posed by his piece is: What are the political and aesthetic consequences of the loss of aura?[9] He writes that "mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art."[10] One of the ways that it does so is through the shift from contemplation to distraction. He writes:

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[6] Ibid

[7] Isabelle Alfandary, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (class lecture, Topics in Comparative Literature: Critical Modernity: New Forms, New Experiences, l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, November 11, 2019).

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid

[10] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," accessed December 4, 2019, https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm)

> "Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one."[11]

The idea of the spectator as an absent-minded and distracted examiner who is not paying full attention to the image in front of them is also present in the spectator-image relationship when it comes to advertising. Television advertising "engages the audience in low-involvement learning."[12] Due to the fact that the spectator is paying little attention to the advertisements on television, they are engaging in "learning without involvement." This phenomenon is described by Michael Schudson in "Advertising as Capitalist Realism" when he writes:

> "In such learning, people are not 'persuaded' of something. Nor do their attitudes change. But there is a kind of 'sleeper' effect. While viewers are not persuaded, they do alter the structure of their perceptions about a product, shifting 'the relative salience of attributes' in the advertised brand. Nothing follows from this until the consumer arrives at the supermarket, ready to make a purchase."[13]

Just as Benjamin describes the spectators of films to be distracted examiners, as are the consumers in front of the television, in that they are "relatively unwary. They take ads to be trivial or transparent or both,"[14] which is precisely the reason why advertisements are successful. This is consistent with consumer behavior research, which shows that when consumers are distracted when they see a persuasive message, it is more likely to be effective because the consumer is not paying enough attention to engage in internal counter-arguing against the

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[11] Ibid

[12] Michael Schudson, "Advertising as Capitalist Realism," *Advertising &Amp; Society Review* 1, no. 1 (2000), https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2000.0023)

[13] Ibid

[14] Ibid

persuasive message.[15] Advertising images have taken advantage of the distracted spectator that

Benjamin speaks about in order to persuade them of their message.

Benjamin also ties his critical analysis of mechanically reproduced artwork to political

movements. In his epilogue he writes "This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering

aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art."[16] Fascism aestheticizes politics by using

new technologies to evoke an emotional reaction through its rallies, flags, army formations, et

cetera.[17] Rather than evoking an emotional response and support through its actual political

ideology, fascism relies entirely on aesthetics. Benjamin contrasts this idea of political aesthetics

to communist art. As a part of the communist economic superstructure, art is used as a tool to

persuade.[18] To be clear, Benjamin isn't praising communist art as revolutionary or politically

efficacious, he is merely drawing a distinction between the types of aesthetic experiences present

in Fascism and Socialism.

In order to delve further into Benjamin's final statement about communist art, one can

examine the Soviet Socialist Realism movement, which was the official style of art under the

Soviet Union. Soviet Socialist Realism was the only accepted form of art under the Soviet Union

and was sponsored and governed by the Soviet Union. According to the definition given by the

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[15] Daniel O'Keefe, (class lecture, Theories of Persuasion, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, May, 2019).

[16] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," accessed December 4, 2019, https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm)

[17] Michael Loriaux, "The Problem With Photography" (class lecture, Critical Studies in Politics: Art, War, and Decadence in the Twentieth Century, l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, October 2, 2019).

[18] Isabelle Alfandary, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (class lecture, Topics in Comparative Literature: Critical Modernity: New Forms, New Experiences, l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, November 11, 2019).

First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, socialist realism was "an art obliged to present 'correct historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development' and to do so in a form that will educate 'the working masses in the spirit of socialism.'"[19] Although this definition implies that socialist realism was faithful and accurate to life under the Soviet Union, this was not exactly the case. Rather than being entirely realistic, art created under Soviet socialist realism had the goal of projecting an image of what the Soviet Union wanted the masses to believe was reality. In other words, it presented an idealized and romanticized version of Soviet life, one that was often far from the reality of life under the Soviet Union. In this way, the images created under socialist realism were also intended to serve as inspiration, and to portray a "life worth emulating."[20]

One image that is an example of Socialist Realism is Yelena Melnikova's "Excursion at the Sharikopodshipnick Factory" from 1937 (Figure 2). It shows a group of men and women of all different racial identities gathered around a desk, in a modern glass office building, working on an unspecified engineering project. In reality, the Soviet Union did not have the level of perfect equality in terms of race and gender as is shown in this painting. This image of equality was not portraying the reality of life under the Soviet Union. Every aspect of the image is idealized -- the clothing, the style of the building, the expressions on individual faces, and the flowers on the table. The painting provides a pleasurable aesthetic image of the kind of life that the masses should not only strive for, but one that they can and should achieve under Soviet communism. There are many parallels to be drawn between the persuasive, aesthetic style of

[19] Michael Schudson, "Advertising as Capitalist Realism," *Advertising &Amp; Society Review* 1, no. 1 (2000), https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2000.0023)
[20] Ibid

Soviet Socialist Realism and advertising images. Take this description of a Coca-Cola

commercial:

> "One Coca-Cola commercial I saw screened at a convention of advertisers showed a boy running in a field. It cut to the farmyard where two attractive people, obviously mother and father, were standing by the barn. They open the barn doors and the camera goes back to the boy running faster. Back to the barn, a pony is brought out. The happy faces of the parents - sharing, by the way, a Coke. The boy, surprise and joy on his face, coming closer. The parents, smiling at each other, drinking a Coke, perhaps tears in their eyes. The boy, joyous, hugging the pony. The proud parents. The boy, looking lovingly at his Mom and Dad. The parents, looking at each other. At the boy. And that was all. It was beautifully done. It brought the hint of tears to my own eyes and it evoked great enthusiasm in the auditorium. The advertisement does not so much invent social values or ideals of its own as it borrows, usurps, or exploits what advertisers take to be prevailing social values. It then reminds us of beautiful moments in our own lives or it pictures magical moments we would like to experience."[21]

Just as the situation portrayed in Melnikova's painting does not exist, neither does the situation

described in this Coca-Cola advertisement. The people in the advertisement are not real, and the

circumstances depicted are very unrealistic. The advertisement is providing an idealized and

romanticized version of modern life. Everything about the advertisement is idealized -- the

attractiveness of the people, the emotions they are feeling, the love between them, the animals

present, and the beauty of the location. The aesthetic experience provided by the advertisement is

pleasurable to the spectator, as evidenced by the fact that it brings tears of joy and emotion to his

eyes. Rather than inspiring the masses of spectators who view it to believe in Soviet communism

and to achieve a better future, the Coca-Cola advertisement proposes an even simpler solution.

All that the masses need to do to achieve the romanticized vision of the present shown in the

image is buy a Coca-Cola. This idealized version of life is not just present in Coca-Cola

advertisements. One study conducted by Brigitte Jordan and Kathleen Bryant analyzed five

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[21] Ibid

hundred magazine advertisements in which couples were pictured. They found, of the couples, that they were:

> "Almost always portrayed as happy, having fun, being affectionate, expressing sexuality or demonstrating commitment to each other. There are no old, poor, sick, or unattractive couples in the ads. However the couples are pictured, they are invariably attentive to each other. As Jordan and Bryant argue, couples in life often are doing different things, even when they are together; there is regularly "mutual inattentiveness in the company of each other." Not so, in advertising. The authors found only six ads out of five hundred in which the couples were not shown in "explicit mutual reference."[22]

Although they certainly overlap in portraying romanticized depictions of life, Soviet socialist realism and advertising do not overlap by every measure. Firstly, advertising is not a type of image that is sponsored and governed by a strict regime, so it varies in style and content much more. The aesthetic style of advertisements, especially modern ones, is often much more cinematic and rich in detail as opposed to the bold and simplistic style of images created under Soviet socialist realism. Schudson emphasizes these differences when he writes that "Soviet art idealizes the producer, American art idealizes the consumer; their tractor in the fields is matched by our home entertainment center in the den. Our advertising is clearly different from the univocal, centrally organized, and tightly controlled Soviet propaganda efforts."[23] This distinction between capitalist advertising images and Soviet socialist realism points to the overarching contrast between the two economic systems. Under communism, the producer is the hero, as shown by the many Soviet socialist realist images which idealize the worker, the engineer, and the farmer. In capitalism, the consumer is given the "freedom" to "choose" what commodities to consume, and the image of the consumer is the one which is romanticized in

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[22] Ibid
[23] Ibid

advertising images. When viewing communist art, the spectator is supposed to self-identify with the producer. Upon viewing advertising images, the spectator is most often identifying with the consumer, with the consumer serving as the idealized figure in the image.

However, generally, images produced under Soviet socialist realism and advertising images both persuade by providing idealized images of the present, therefore showing the potential of the present and implicitly providing a means by which spectators can unlock the potential of the present.[24]

One explanation of the similarities between Soviet socialist realism and advertising is that they are both forms of propaganda. Edward Bernays, who is widely known as the father of public relations and is the nephew of Sigmund Freud, wrote a book on his theory of public relations and advertising and named it *Propaganda*. He defines propaganda as "the mechanism by which ideas are disseminated on a large scale [...] in the broad sense of an organized effort to spread a particular belief or doctrine."[25] In this book, he ties individual psychology to the psychology of the masses, and uses this to detail what he sees as effective advertising imagery and the mechanics behind it. He writes that:

> "It is chiefly the psychologists of the school of Freud who have pointed out that many of man's thoughts and actions are compensatory substitutes for desires which he has been obliged to suppress. A thing may be desired not for its intrinsic worth or usefulness, but because he has unconsciously come to see it in a symbol of something else, the desire for which he is ashamed to admit to himself. A man buying a car may think he wants it for purposes of locomotion, whereas the fact may be that he would really not prefer to be burdened with it, and would rather walk for the sake of his health. He may really want it because it is a symbol

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[24] Ibid
[25] Ibid

of social position, an evidence of his success in business, or a means of pleasing his wife."[26]

Bernays provides a simplified understanding of Freud's writings about individual psychology. He describes the concept of the unconscious mind, which holds all the thoughts, emotions, memories, and urges that are repressed in an individual's conscious mind. Freud argues that many actions are a result of what is repressed in the conscious mind and contained within the unconscious mind.[27] Bernays ties the theory of the unconscious mind to consumer behavior, arguing that purchasing actions can often also be a result of repressed desires.

Bernays proceeds to take his application of Freud a step further, saying that this understanding can be applied not just to the individual, but also to the masses. This is made clear when he writes that "This general principle, that men are very largely actuated by motives which they conceal from themselves, is as true of mass as of individual psychology."[28] Clearly, he believes that this process of persuasion is not simply confined to the individual level, but also that mass persuasion is taking place. In fact, he writes that this form of new propaganda "takes account not merely of the individual, nor even of the mass mind alone, but also and especially of the anatomy of society, with its interlocking group formations and loyalties. It sees the individual not only as a cell in social organism but as a cell organized into the social unit."[29] The foundation of Bernays' understanding of modern propaganda lies in its ability to persuade the masses, and even to persuade society as a whole.

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[26] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1936), 52

[27] Isabelle Alfandary, "*On Dreams*" (class lecture, Topics in Comparative Literature: Critical Modernity: New Forms, New Experiences, l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, October 1, 2019).

[28] Ibid

[29] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1936), 52

There is also a connection to be made between Jacques Rancière's image analysis in "The Intolerable Image" and Bernays' theories. Rancière writes of images whose purpose are also to change the beliefs of the spectators who view them. He first states that "There is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action."[30] However, he does compare different types of images which attempt to change beliefs in some way. He writes that art that presents an "intolerable image" it is not effective because the spectator can simply close their eyes or avert their gaze to the "intolerable image" shown to them. Using the example of Martha Rosler's "Bringing the War Home" he says that in order for the image to be effective, the "spectator must already be convinced that what it shows is American imperialism, not the madness of human beings in general."[31] That is, in order for this type of image to be persuasive the spectator must already be inclined to understand the specific belief that the image is trying to convince them to adopt.

He then makes the distinction between these types of "intolerable" images and another general type of images, those which focus on constructing a narrative and relying on the testimony of a witness. Although he previously states that there is no clear way that the viewing of an image leads to direct change, he thinks that we must prefer the "virtue of testimony" to the "indignity" of photographic proof.[32] In other words, to convince people to adopt a new belief or to change their beliefs, it is not enough to confront them with what Rancière calls an "intolerable

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[30] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London, Verso, 2011), 75
[31] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London, Verso, 2011), 85
[32] Michael Loriaux, "Art and Revolution" (class lecture, Critical Studies in Politics: Art, War, and Decadence in the Twentieth Century, l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, October 16, 2019).

image," but rather, in order to truly affect change, artists should create an image using speech, narrative and the labor of the witness.[33]

This same general distinction is made by Bernays when he writes of the old, less persuasive propagandists, saying that they "tried to persuade the individual reader to buy a definite article, immediately. This approach is exemplified in a type of advertisement which used to be considered ideal from the point of view of directness and effectiveness: 'YOU (perhaps with a finger pointing at the reader) buy O'Leary's rubber heels -- NOW.'"[34] This type of direct appeal can also easily be ignored by a spectator, and is only effective if the spectator already believes that O'Leary's rubber heels are the best or cheapest, and wants to buy them. Only then could the spectator be convinced to go buy the rubber heels at that moment. Just like Rancière, Bernays did not accept this type of image as persuasive. Bernays was hired by Lucky Strike to help them develop an advertising campaign to convince women to smoke, which was socially unacceptable at the time. One of the advertisements created under his direction (Figure 1) shows a woman looking directly into the camera, with a speech bubble next to her. However, rather than *telling* the viewer of the image what to do, she speaks using the "I" pronoun. The woman, while not exactly the same type of witness as Rancière refers to, is certainly providing her testimony in the image. Using the photograph of the woman, her testimony, and additional writing about the positive aspects of Lucky Strikes, the advertiser has created an image that cannot be merely ignored by the spectator like the old type of advertisements Bernays speaks about. Rather, this image is a narrative, one that forces the spectator to acknowledge and engage with it. While this type of advertisement forces the spectator to engage with the image, the

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[33] Ibid

[34] Edward Bernays *Propaganda* (New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1936), 54

spectator is still firmly bound within the constraints of the role of the consumer, and is not

"emancipated" in the way that Rancière describes.

All of these understandings of the way in which the spectator-image relationship is tied to

the consumer-advertisement relationship rely on the idea that it is possible for the "masses" to

perceive an image in the same way. Bernays' understanding of persuasive advertising is

predicated on the concept of individual psychology being tied to group psychology. Benjamin's

frequent referral to the public's reception of a film ignores the response of the individual

spectator in favor of analysis at the group level. In order for Melnikova's "Excursion at the

Sharikopodshipnick Factory" and the Coca-Cola advertisement to have a significant impact, a

majority of individuals who view them must perceive them in the same way: the one that was

intended by those who created them. This idea of a "sensus communis" is directly in contrast

with Rancière's understanding of our current aesthetic era.

Rancière describes art of the modernist era, saying that it "more or less loosely connects

its 'being apart' with the 'being together' of a future community."[35] He sees Rosler's piece

"Bringing the War Home" as belonging to this modernist movement, because it attempts to

persuade the spectator by presenting an intolerable image of the present and asks the viewers to

come together, fix the intolerable present, and join in a utopian future.[36] The Lucky Strike

advertisement engages in the same process of constructing a narrative with testimony, therefore

inviting the spectator to join the community of the individual in the image. However, it goes one

step further and actually provides a concrete way to join in the community which is to buy the

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[35] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London, Verso, 2011), 59
[36] Michael Loriaux, "Art, Politics, and Community" (class lecture, Critical Studies in Politics: Art, War, and Decadence in the Twentieth Century, l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, November 27, 2019).

material object it is selling. Every spectator who engages with the image and buys a pack of

Lucky Strike cigarettes has joined a community not only just with the woman in the image, but

also with every other spectator who also bought a Lucky Strike. This phenomenon does not just

take place in this specific advertisement, but also in the field of advertising in general. Schudson

describes this, writing "Among other things, it connects the consumer not only to an item for sale

and a person selling it but to an invisible, yet present, audience of others attuned to the same item

for sale and the same symbols used to promote it. The advertisement, like the sales talk, links a

seller to a buyer. Unlike the sales talk, it connects the buyer to an assemblage of buyers through

words and pictures available to all of them and tailored to no one of them. Advertising is part of

the establishment and reflection of a common symbolic culture."[37] One of the mechanisms by

which Bernays' advertisement persuades consumers is connected to Rancière's understanding of

the way that all art in the modernist era attempts to persuade spectators.

However, Rancière argues that this type of modernist art is ineffective because of the

dissensus, or disconnected nature, of the present. As a result of this dissensus, the individual

spectators will not agree on what the image is saying, and therefore cannot be persuaded by an

image. The idea of a certain type of image being more effective at persuading "the public" or

"the masses," in Rancière's mind, is impossible because it does not fall in line with the structure

of the current aesthetic regime. What are the characteristics, in Rancière's view, of our current

aesthetic regime? Rancière describes the dissensus of the modern era by first tracing the

characteristics of the aesthetic regimes which have come before it. He writes:

> "The aesthetic break has generally been understood as a break with the
> regime of representation or the mimetic regime. But what *mimesis* and

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[37] Michael Schudson, "Advertising as Capitalist Realism," *Advertising &Amp; Society Review* 1, no. 1 (2000), https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2000.0023)

representation mean has to be understood. What they mean is a regime of concordance between sense and sense. As epitomized by the classical stage and classical doctrine, the theatre was the site of a twofold harmony between sense and sense. The stage was thought of as a magnifying mirror where spectators could see the virtues and vices of their fellow human beings in fictional form. And that vision in turn was supposed to prompt specific changes in their minds [...] Because there was a language of natural signs, there was a continuity between the intrinsic consistency -- or autonomy -- of the play and its capacity to produce ethical effects in the minds of the spectators in the theatre and in their behavior outside the theatre. [...] The stage, the audience and the world were comprised in one and the same continuum."[38]

In the mimetic regime, the image -- in this case a play -- was able to produce specific changes, or

ethical effects, in the spectators who viewed it. This is because in the theatre, the image and the

spectator inhabited the same space. In other words, there was a togetherness between the sensory

experience and its mode of presentation. In the mimetic regime, images were able to effectively

change the minds of the masses due to this very togetherness and consistency. Thus, they were

able to prompt a "sensus communis" or consensus of thoughts. According to Rancière, the

masses who viewed images during the mimetic regime were much more likely to reach this

consensus than in our current aesthetic regime. After the "aesthetic break" from this "mimetic

regime" comes our current era. Of this era he writes:

"There is no longer correspondence between the concepts of artistic *posies* and the forms of aesthetic pleasure, no longer any determinate relationship between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*. Art entails the employment of a set of concepts, while the beautiful possesses no concepts. What is offered to the free play of art is free appearance. This means that free appearance is the product of a disconnected community between two sensoria -- the sensorium of artistic fabrication and the sensorium and its enjoyment."[39]

The sense of togetherness that defined the mimetic regime has disappeared. The mode of

presentation and the intent of the artist are completely disconnected from the spectator's

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[38] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London, Verso, 2011), 60-61
[39] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London, Verso, 2011), 64

reception, perception, and emotion in reaction to the image. The "stage" and the "audience" no longer exist on the same continuum, which means that the consensus, which was previously possible, is now made impossible. The image no longer holds the same power to produce the desired ethical effects in the minds of spectators, as each individual spectator now has a different reaction to the image. In our current aesthetic regime, according to Rancière, the image has lost its power to produce the same effect in the mind of each spectator. Whereas in the mimetic regime the spectators could be referred to as one "mass," because they were all perceiving the image in the same way, now they are defined by their individuality and their perception is not cohesive.

Rancière's understanding of our current aesthetic regime would imply that the very foundation of Bernays' influential thinking about advertising is incorrect. An image cannot persuade the masses of anything, because each spectator will perceive it in a different way. The problem with this view of the contemporary aesthetic regime is that it is inconsistent with the reality of the effects of advertising. Advertising images do create actual changes in the minds of consumers, and those effects have real world implications on economic markets and purchasing behaviors. In a large-scale study to measure the degree of advertising effectiveness, Martin Eisnend and Farid Tarrahi write:

> "By analyzing 324 metaanalytic effect sizes taken from 44 meta-analyses that included more than 1,700 primary studies with more than 2.4 million subjects, the meta-meta-analytic effect size of .2 shows that advertising is effective. The findings differ across advertising inputs and outcomes, and identify different hierarchies of effects due to different underlying processes. The source primarily influences attitudes and behavior due to an acceptability– inference process; the message influences cognitions and emotions due to an emotion–cognition process; strategies foster processing and effects on memory due to a retrieval process; and receiver characteristics primarily influence attitudes, cognitions, and emotions due to a sense-making process. These findings

provide quantitative evidence for the effectiveness of advertising and major advertising tools"[40]

This study provides empirical evidence that advertising is effective not only in affecting purchasing behavior of consumers, but also in changing people's attitudes and beliefs about products and brands. In fact, even when it doesn't directly affect purchasing behavior, advertising images serve as cultural cornerstones and referents. Schudson writes of advertising:

> "At the same time, it is a distinctive and central *symbolic* structure. And, strictly as symbol, the power of advertising may be considerable. Advertising may shape our sense of values even under conditions where it does not greatly corrupt our buying habits. I want now to take up the position of the UNESCO MacBride Commission (and many others) that advertising "tends to promote attitudes and life-styles which extol acquisition and consumption at the expense of other values."[41]

For advertising images to be this effective at shaping consumer behaviors and actions, and for them to have as much social influence as they obviously do, it is clear that they must be effective at getting masses of people to view them in the same way. Advertising images would not have this significant impact if each individual spectator perceived them in a different way -- they clearly have the ability to affect significant portions of "the masses" or "the public" in the same way. Bernays' understanding of the relationship between image and spectator was correct in that the masses can be persuaded to change their beliefs due to effective imagery. These findings directly contrast Rancière's explanation of the dissensus of our current aesthetic regime.

One explanation of this contradiction is that advertising operates outside Rancière's description of our current aesthetic regime, and that advertising images are perhaps more in line

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[40] Martin Eisend and Tarrahi Farid "The Effectiveness of Advertising: A Meta-Meta-Analysis of Advertising Inputs and Outcomes," *Journal of Advertising* 45 (2016), doi:10.1080/00913367.2016.1185981.

[41] Michael Schudson, "Advertising as Capitalist Realism," *Advertising &Amp; Society Review* 1, no. 1 (2000), https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2000.0023)

with his understanding of the mimetic regime in that they prompt a "sensus communis." Part of

Rancière's understanding of the "aesthetic break," which characterized the move away from the

mimetic regime, involved aesthetic marginalization. When art moved away from community

theatre, a large faction of society became aesthetically marginalized. This was because the

average citizen lost access to art when it moved out of the theatre, and because the type of life

that the art was representing was no longer relatable to them.[42] However, advertising images are

characterized by their accessibility and their realism. Although they may present a romanticized

version of reality, they are, for the most part, not representing an "elitist" form of reality. In order

for them to be effective, which they clearly are, they must be both relatable and accessible. They

are not locked away in art museums, but are instead accessible, pushed into the homes and the

hands of billions of people. They are purposefully made to be relatable and "real," as argued in

this description of the specific type of realism in advertisements:

> "At present, efforts at a kind of realism or even super-realism dominate
> the making of advertisements, even in ads that are not, in dramatic form, realistic.
> For instance, there is a vogue for actors who do not look like actors. Karl Malden
> (for American Express Co.) and Robert Morley (for British Airways) are actors
> with character rather than beauty, "real-people actors." Robert Meury, copy chief
> at Backer & Spielvogel says, "We've been using celebrities in our Miller Lite
> spots from the start. But never just any celebrity - and never just any context. We
> make sure our stars are guys you'd enjoy having a beer with. And the locations
> we film in are always real bars. We even let our celebrities have a hand in the
> copy - the more involvement the better. After all, it isn't a performance we're
> after; we just want our spots to feel *real*."

It seems that these attempts by advertisers to create realistic images are more in line with

Rancière's description of the mimetic regime, not of the contemporary aesthetic regime. These

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[42] Michael Loriaux, "Art, Politics, and Community" (class lecture, Critical Studies in Politics: Art, War, and Decadence in the Twentieth Century, l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, November 27, 2019).

advertisers are attempting to "prompt specific changes"[43] in the minds of spectators just as

Rancière talks about. The advertisements are supposed to represent the "real world" -- a world

that consumers feel they also inhabit. This is evidenced by the use of actors who look like they

belong in the real world. By using these types of actors, the viewers see people that look familiar

to them, and therefore the world of the advertisement also appears familiar. The advertisement

also sounds familiar, as the ultimate goal of the copywriters is to create dialogue that reflects and

imitates the language of their audience. In this way, advertisements do not exist on a different

plane than the world of the spectators who view them but exist within the same continuum and

are viewed within the same continuum. This perspective on advertising images shows that they

are more in line with Rancière's explanation of the mimetic regime and not with his

understanding of the current aesthetic regime. Characterising them in this way can explain the

contradiction between Rancière's understanding of the relationship between spectator and image

and the actual, real-world effects of advertising images.

Rancière's writings were in reaction to Guy DeBord's *Society of the Spectacle*. In this

work, DeBord describes his understanding of contemporary society, in which people are

experiencing an impoverished and oppressed form of life and are fragmented and separated from

each other. Furthermore, in contemporary society, social relations among people are mediated by

images. He sees the only process of reunification as occurring through these images, which

contain that which is missing from people's lives. He calls this type of image "the spectacle,"

and sees it as the way that individuals find unity. However, this unity is false, as these images of

the spectacle serve to justify the current, oppressive form of society rather than to critique it or

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[43] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London, Verso, 2011), 60

question what allows it to flourish. Therefore, the spectacle renders the spectator passive, rather than active or responsive, and only serves to continue this oppressive form of life.[44] On this concept of the spectacle Rancière writes:

> "Our artists have learnt to use this form of hyper-theatre to optimize the spectacle rather than to celebrate the revolutionary identity of art and life. But what remains vivid, both in their practice and in the criticism they experience, is precisely the 'critique of the spectacle' - the idea that art has to provide us with more than a spectacle, more than something devoted to the delight of passive spectators, because it has to work for a society where everybody should be active. The 'critique of the spectacle' often remains the alpha and omega of the politics of art'."[45]

Rancière is in conversation with DeBord. Here he is expressing his skepticism at DeBord's idea of the relationship between spectator and image, and is critiquing the idea that spectators are passive consumers distracted by the spectacle. In this quotation, he expresses his distrust that "political" art makes spectators aware of their oppression. As is described above, that is not how Rancière sees the spectator or the relationship between spectator and image. However, due to the clear effectiveness of modern mass advertising, DeBord was the one who appears to have a more accurate understanding of the relationship between image and spectator when it comes to contemporary advertising. Take DeBord's writings on the idea of the spectacle:

> "Outside of work, the spectacle is the dominant mode through which people relate to each other. It is only through the spectacle that people acquire a (falsified) knowledge of certain general aspects of social life, from scientific or technological achievements to prevailing types of conduct and orchestrated meetings of international statesmen. The relation between authors and spectators is only a transposition of the fundamental relation between directors and executants. It answers perfectly to the needs of a reified and alienated culture: the spectacle/spectator relation is in itself a staunch bearer of the capitalist order. The ambiguity of all 'revolutionary art' lies in the fact that the revolutionary aspect of

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[44] James Trier "Guy Debord's "The Society of the Spectacle"," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 51, no. 1 (2007), JStor

[45] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London, Verso, 2011), 63

any particular spectacle is always contradicted and offset by the reactionary element present in all spectacles."[46]

This description of the spectacle correlates to the previous analysis of advertising images in this paper. Advertisements serve as cultural referents which allow people to share a common language and relate to each other. The realistic nature of advertisements, although often an idealized reality, makes people believe they are gaining insights about "real life" through advertisements. However, advertising executives and creatives who create advertising images do serve as "directors." Every choice they make is intended to change the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of spectators. Furthermore, the spectators serve as executants, as the data about the effectiveness of advertising proved. Through their images, those who create advertisements are ordering the spectator to do something, or to believe something, and the spectator is executing that order. In this way, advertisement-spectator relationship is carrying out the capitalist order. The advertising image persuades people to have positive attitudes about brands, and therefore corporations, and to participate in the cycle of consumerism that the system of capitalism relies upon. The cycle of consumerism is symptomatic of the capitalist order, because capitalism needs to exponentially increase the amount of capital. Under capitalism, capital always needs to be growing, so there is a need for a culture of consumerism. Because of this, the idea of "the spectacle" carrying out the capitalist order is true of the advertisement perhaps more than any other spectacle -- the "order" given by advertisements is literally the behaviors on which capitalism is built.

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[46] Guy DeBord, "WRITINGS FROM THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL – GUY DEBORD," Art Theory, accessed December 7, 2019, http://theoria.art-zoo.com/writings-from-the-situationist-international-guy-debord/)

Furthermore, DeBord's statement about the revolutionary element in the spectacle being contradictory also applies to advertisements. Even when advertisements portray or emphasize values that are seemingly "noncapitalist," they are still firmly "capitalist" due to the very nature of their role in society. For example, the Coca-Cola advertisement portrayed family kinship, a value that is seemingly at odds with capitalist values of private ownership and individuality. However, the image showing this value is also implicitly promoting the acquisition of a commodity.[47] It seems that, just as DeBord says of the spectacle, it is impossible for an advertising image to exist without promoting the dominant economic power structure of capitalism. In this way, it seems that advertisements can not hold any revolutionary abilities and rather contribute to and advance the current condition of society.

DeBord elaborates on the mechanism by which the spectacle specifically advances capitalist society when he writes:

> "This is obviously a complex mechanism, for if it must be most essentially the propagator of the capitalist order, it nevertheless must not appear to the public as the delirium of capitalism; it must involve the public by incorporating elements of representation that correspond -- in fragments -- to social rationality."[48]

Again, DeBord's description of the spectacle aligns with the mechanisms by which advertising images persuade the public. Throughout this paper, the particular "realism" of advertising images has been emphasized. Here, DeBord explains how this realism corresponds to the means by which the spectacle functions. Advertising images are clearly promoting the capitalist power

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[47] Michael Schudson, "Advertising as Capitalist Realism," *Advertising &Amp; Society Review* 1, no. 1 (2000), https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2000.0023)

[48] Guy DeBord, "WRITINGS FROM THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL," ART THEORY, accessed December 7, 2019, http://theoria.art-zoo.com/writings-from-the-situationist-international-guy-debord/)

structure, but they cannot be transparent in this effort. By promoting values which may seem to be "noncapitalist," advertisements avoid the very "delirium of capitalism" that DeBord writes about. Furthermore, by employing "real" actors and attempting to achieve a "realistic" appearance, they correspond to "social rationality." Clearly, advertising images align to the idea of "the spectacle" and therefore use the same mechanisms to persuade the public.

The understanding of the ways in which images have the power to persuade the masses were crafted years ago. Advertising has changed drastically since the 20th century, and its scope has expanded exponentially. DeBord wrote *Writings from the Situationist International* in 1961. This was before the advent of the Internet, smartphones, and targeted advertising. DeBord wrote that "the improvement of capitalist society means to a great degree the improvement of the mechanism of spectacularization."[49] The mechanism of spectacularization has improved, as evidenced by advertising's expanded scope. When Benjamin wrote "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," it could be argued that mechanical reproduction was merely in its infancy.[50] Almost a century later, it is impossible to know what stage of life mechanical reproduction is in, but it has clearly matured since Benjamin's seminal writing. Even Bernays could have never imagined just how much the expansion of technology would affect the possibilities of advertising. In *Propaganda* he wrote that the radio "is at present one of the most important tools of the propagandist" and that "it may compete with the newspaper as an

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[49] Guy DeBord, "WRITINGS FROM THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL – GUY DEBORD," Art Theory, accessed December 7, 2019, http://theoria.art-zoo.com/writings-from-the-situationist-international-guy-debord/)
[50] Isabelle Alfandary, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (class lecture, Topics in Comparative Literature: Critical Modernity: New Forms, New Experiences, l'Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, France, November 11, 2019).

advertising medium" because of "its ability to reach millions of persons simultaneously."[51] Bernays' understanding of the incredible power of the "new propaganda" to persuade the masses was based upon what is now considered a rudimentary form of technology. The persuasion made possible by these new technologies is now at a much higher level than Bernays wrote about.

The relationship between image and spectator in the case of the advertisement has been defined, and the advertising image clearly holds the ability to persuade masses of consumers. Furthermore, as a paradigm example of "the spectacle," the advertising image propagates our current capitalist system, and continues to place spectators in the role of "distracted" and "passive" consumers. This is even more pervasive now that advertising can reach more people than ever before, more often than ever before. The expanded scope of advertising is not inherently negative or evil. However, when spectators belong to the masses rather than being individuals, when they are distracted, and when they are placed in passive roles, they are not being critical about the images surrounding them. Masses of people being persuaded by images, and not being critical about exactly what those images are persuading them of, is historically very dangerous, and is just as dangerous now. The power of advertising images has forced spectators into the role of blind followers by persuading them to serve as executants of those who create advertising images. As executants, they are propagating the power structure of capitalism, and furthering the cycle of consumerism. The current iteration of both capitalism and consumerism has lead to countless negative and oppressive consequences for the world, many of which cannot be reversed.

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[51] Edward Bernays *Propaganda* (New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1936), 54

Not only is advertising reaching more consumers via the Internet and smartphones, advertising is also becoming more powerful aesthetically. Modern technology allows companies to create advertisements which are indistinguishable from the type of art that one might find in an arthouse cinema or an art museum. This increased aesthetic power means that spectators may not venture to other venues to consume art which may hold more revolutionary properties. Just as Benjamin wrote of the ability of fascism to aestheticize politics[52], so does advertising hold the ability to aestheticize capitalism.

The use of modern technology to display advertising images has relegated masses of people into the role of a passive and distracted spectator. The public has been used as a cog in the machine of capitalism and consumerism, two forces that need to be examined critically for their negative impact on the modern world. However, the situation is not hopeless, as there are many other types of images which hold revolutionary properties and transformative value, even if advertisements do not. The purpose of DeBord's *The Society of the Spectacle* was not to introduce the concept of the spectacle and lament the downfall of society but rather to propose solutions. He writes that he "wants the most liberating change of the society and life in which we find ourselves confined" and "we know that this change is possible through appropriate actions." [53] He belonged to The Situationist International, an organization which reached its height in the 1970s. Situationists introduced the concept of the spectacle, but they also introduced two

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[52] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," accessed December 4, 2019,
https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm)
[53] Guy DeBord, "WRITINGS FROM THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL – GUY DEBORD," Art Theory, accessed December 7, 2019,
http://theoria.art-zoo.com/writings-from-the-situationist-international-guy-debord/)

concepts that they believed could combat the spectacle. Both are centered around the idea of awakening the masses and bringing them out of their passivity. The first is *derive*, which DeBord defines as "a technique of transient passage through varied ambiences."[54] The second is *detournement*, which is "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble."[55] In other words, detournement involves re-appropriating images and ideas from dominant societal power structures and using them to promote revolutionary objectives. One example of detournement in contemporary society could be street art, as it occupies the same space as advertising images on billboards, but is of an entirely different nature as it is not trying to sell a commodity. One explicit example of how street art can serve as detournement is shown in the work of Thom Thom, a Parisian street artist. He mutilates actual advertisements pasted onto walls, in order to create a new image made out of layers of advertising images (Figure 3). In doing so, he uses their pre-existing elements to create new meaning. Earlier this paper showed, in contrast to Soviet socialist realism, that the idealized consumer is a dominant figure in many advertisements. The figure of the idealized consumer is present in many of the images on this wall. This is clear in that the models in the photographs are either markedly beautiful, or joyous, or both. However, in cutting and peeling these images, the artist has transformed the previously idealized consumer into one that is disfigured, and at times demonic. Perhaps he is questioning the ability of consumption to create real happiness in individuals. He could also be questioning if these types of people truly exist in our world, as they are likely photoshopped and digitally enhanced. In physically tearing apart these advertisements, he is calling into question the very foundations of what makes them persuasive to spectators.

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[54] Ibid
[55] Ibid

When walking by these images, rather than viewing them in a distracted and passive manner, spectators are startled by their modified appearance. Although the specific meaning intended by the artist is not explicitly stated, in examining them the spectator is forced to go through the process of considering their meaning. They are forced to engage with them and examine how the reappropriation of advertising images changes their meaning and calls them into question.

Although DeBord would characterize detournement as a tool in the ultimate goal of overhauling the capitalist system, it can also be seen as a way to "awaken" spectators in another way. The true danger of advertising images comes from their ability to persuade the spectator without the spectator truly thinking about them in a critical manner. The spectator is constantly surrounded by advertisements, is not actively considering their true meaning, and is being persuaded by them. As this paper stated earlier in relation to Benjamin's concept of "distraction," this persuasion is taking place due to the low-level of thinking the spectator engages in. Advertising images are more persuasive when spectators are viewing them in a distracted manner, because the spectator is not engaging in internal counter-arguing about the image and its reasoning. However, if the spectator were to "awaken" merely into taking a more active role, and began engaging in the act of internal counter-arguing, the passive spectator would become a critical one. In this way, advertisements would lose some of their power.

Although this street art image is just one practical example of detournement, it serves as evidence that even though advertising images seem to encompass every space in society, there are still ways to critique them. One way that society could push back against the influence of advertising images is to support the creation of street art such as Thom Thom's. This is already

occurring in the 13th arrondissement in Paris, where an initiative began that allowed artists to create images on the streets, which was supported by the local government.

Furthermore, the expansion of technology does not just aid the growth of advertising images, but images of all kinds, including ones with revolutionary capabilities. Although advertisements are no longer confined to the print page, cutting-edge art is also now not confined to art museums. Social media has become a tool for revolutionaries and activists to spread images, ones that are critical of the oppressive systems which advertising images can often support. Although advertising images may render the masses into passive consumers, there is still the possibility for spectators to gain power. The very means by which advertising images are spread easily among the masses also allow for the spreading of different types of images -- ones with the ability to awaken the masses and turn them into consumers who conduct critical analyses of advertising images.

This paper first described the increasing prominence of advertisements, and stated the need to critically analyze their role in society. This analysis of advertisements took the form of a deeper inquiry into the relationship between spectator and image, using the writings of Benjamin, Rancière, and DeBord. Real-world research about the effects of advertising and quantitative writings about their role in society showed that the relationship between consumer and advertisement was more in line with Benjamin and DeBord's theories. There are many close connections between their writings about the properties of an image and its relationship to the spectator and the case of the advertisement. However, Rancière's writings about aesthetic regimes provided further insight into the aesthetic functions and capabilities of the advertising

image. Through analysis of Benjamin, DeBord, and Rancière, this paper showed the mechanisms

by which advertising images persuade spectators. Advertisements are powerful images which

have the ability to persuade not just individuals, but also masses of people and even society as a

whole. However, there are tools which could fight against this power, such as detournement,

which allows images to have political and revolutionary effects. This paper ended by describing

the ways in which people have the ability to create images which will awaken the spectator by

negating, transforming, or changing the way that spectators view advertisements. This will

hopefully lead to a consumer base that is more critical of the advertising images that bombard

them on a daily basis.

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Figure 1. Lucky Strike Advertisement. Source: thesocietypages.org.

Yelena Melnikova - Excursion at the "Sharikopodshipnik" Factory, 1937 - Oil on canvas; 150 x 180 cm.
State Museum and Exhibitions Centre ROSIZO, Moscow

Figure 2. Yelena Melnikova's "Excursion at the 'Sharikopodshipnik' Factory (1937). Source: Critical Studies in Politics: Art, War, and Decadence in the Twentieth Century class slides.
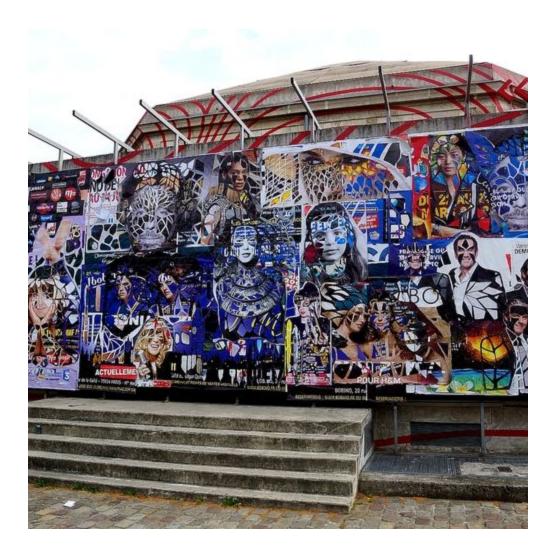
Figure 3. Thom Thom's Street Art. Source: Urbacolors.com artist profile.

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