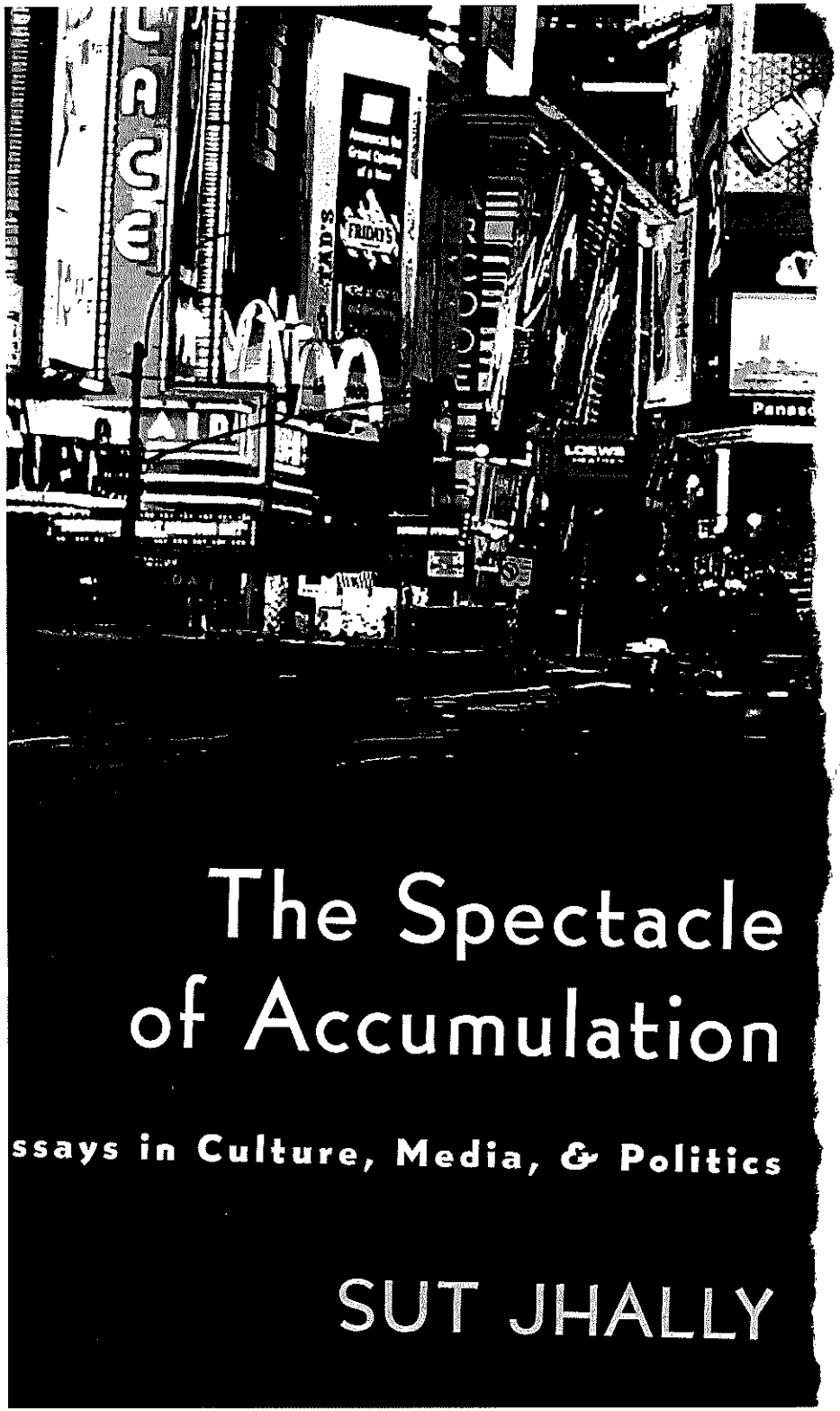
Questions for your first reading

(*Advertising, cultural criticism, and pedagogy: An interview with Sut Jhally*)

1. If you had to tell a friend, in one sentence, what this article is about, what would you say?
2. Page 3: Jhally claims you can never divorce communication from power. Why does he believe this?
3. Page 3: He continues "advertising is not just about selling products—it's part of the whole process of communication. Advertising is one of the major forms of communication in the modern world so we have to think about how it is linked up with power." What does he mean and do you agree?
4. Pages 4-5: What is Jhally's explanation for the shift from the power of retailers to the power of marketers.
5. Page 7: Jhally says we've been asking the *wrong* question about advertising, "Is it an effective way to increase product demand?" He claims we need to start asking the *right* questions. What does he consider the right questions? Have *you* ever reflected on what he considers the right questions?
6. Page 8: Jhally says that advertising tells a story about human happiness. What does he mean? Do you agree with his claim?
7. Pages 9-10: He asserts that our happiness is always a relative issue. Meaning, whether or not we are happy with the material objects we have depends on comparing ourselves with the material objects other people have. Explain his argument thoroughly. Do you agree?
8. Page 12: The author claims advertisers know that people get no pleasure from material goods, that instead it is novelty that brings real pleasure. How does he tie novelty to shopping?
9. Page 12: He goes on to say there is something that is true about advertising and there is something that is false. What does he mean?
10. Page 13: The author asserts that advertisers are child abusers. Why? Do you agree?
11. Page 14: What does Jhally mean when he says, "When you are watching commercial television you are engaged in labor the same way you would be in a factory." What does he mean?
12. Page 15: What does the author say to students thinking about going into advertising as a career?
13. Page 17: How do those in power limit choices (example: how did they limit Ralph Nader?)
14. Page 18: He claims, "If you personally make a decision to stop shopping, you won't change the world. It's like pollution—if you live in a polluted environment you can't do anything by yourself to change it. You have to change the causes of the pollution." Do you agree or disagree? Why?
15. Page 19: How does Jhally want us to think about activism?
16. Pose one question to the author of this piece
17. Pose one question for discussion to your classmates



Advertising, Cultural Criticism, and Pedagogy: An Interview with Sut Jhally

Conducted by William O'Barr

William M. O'Barr, Professor of Anthropology at Duke University, interviewed Sut Jhally in the spring of 2002 for the online journal Advertising & Society Review.

O'BARR: What do you hope to accomplish through your role as a cultural critic?

JHALLY: I really don't see myself as a cultural critic. I define myself much more as a teacher. Everything I do, everything I've done with the Media Education Foundation (MEF), and with my publishing, I see as an extension of my teaching role.

O'BARR: Then let me ask what you are trying to accomplish through your role as a teacher?

JHALLY: I believe that the role of teachers is to give students the tools they need to be able to negotiate a complex world and to give them the tools that they need to be in charge of that world—to be active participants rather than passive recipients of other people's actions. So what I always want to stress in teaching is that the world that we live in is a created world, that it's been constructed by someone, and that there is no such thing as a "natural" version of the world. The world we live in did not fall fully formed from heaven. It is always created by someone, and therefore the issue of *power* is what is central to how we analyze the world.

O'BARR: So how do you explain the construction of the world, that is, how it came to be how it is today, to your students?

JHALLY: History is absolutely essential to understanding this. It helps us to see that the world in which we live—the world that seems normal to us—wasn't always like that. It was created by specific institutions for specific ends. It was created with the motivations of specific individuals who had very specific things in mind.

O'BARR: Where does that history begin for you?

JHALLY: When I first started teaching, I used to go all the way back to the Stone Age in terms of looking at communication. If communication is always about power, if communication is always about constructing the world, and if communication is always about symbolic communication, then we have to look at the social and material conditions that are the determining aspect of that.

O'BARR: What is it that students need to know about communication in the Stone Age?

JHALLY: They need to know how language first started: Why do we have language? Language wasn't always a part of the communication "vocabulary" of what we consider to be the ancestors of the human species. If language is *the* key element of the development of the human species from our primate ancestors (and I think it is), and if the content of language is always arbitrary (that is, the result of social process and not given by nature), then the issue of power and communication is there right from our origins. And it's locating communication in very concrete, everyday circumstances. Let's not forget that our ancestors developed language as a survival mechanism when we were driven out of the thinning forests of Africa and onto the flat savannas.

O'BARR: How do you get from there to now? What do you need to look at?

JHALLY: You do it by understanding that communication is always a response to something. Communication is a creative act but is always a response to something. Every new development in communication—initially it was language and face-to-face, then it was mediated communication, such as drawing on cave walls. You have to ask, "Why are people drawing on cave walls?" It's because people started to think about broader issues, such as where do I come from, how was the world created, what else is going on around me?

O'BARR: So the way that advertising comes into this history is that advertising *is* communication?

JHALLY: Absolutely. The way I always frame why I study communication is that communication is a fundamental social process. I think we are human beings because we communicate. Our ability to tell a story—and to tell *our* story—is

essential to us as human beings. That is central to our construction of our identity and therefore part of what it means to be human. Communication is a part of what is natural to being a human.

The question then is: What are the *conditions* of communication? What are the contexts within which communication takes place? That's why you can never divorce communication from power. Even when language first develops, you start to have monopolies of knowledge around that ability very quickly.

O'BARR: Can you make this specific? What concrete example comes to mind?

JHALLY: Well, in terms of who gets to tell the stories within a traditional culture. Not everyone tells stories. The storytelling function quickly becomes specialized.

O'BARR: You are talking about sitting around the campfire?

JHALLY: Yes, sitting around the campfire not everyone tells stories. Some people tell stories—and they get to tell certain stories—and some people only listen to stories.

O'BARR: Later this becomes the church, for example?

JHALLY: Yes, the first form of monopolization of knowledge is around religious ideas. It gets codified around the church.

O'BARR: And this kind of situation is then true in all kinds of religious traditions, not just Christianity?

JHALLY: Absolutely.

O'BARR: So this is the historical road that you take your students along?

JHALLY: Yes, what I want to do is show my students how advertising is not just about selling products. I want them to understand that advertising is a part of the whole process of communication. Communication is fundamental, and advertising is one of the major forms of communication in the modern world. So we have to think of how it's always linked up with power.

The other reason we need to look at advertising is that it's dealing with a fundamental human relationship—*our relationship with things*. One of the other ways you can define the human species is as the maker and user of things. We create the material world. We don't just take the world as is. In fact, we change the world, and change it in very specific ways. That's the basis of what anthropologists and historians do—they look at the *material world* that people created, and they read from it the social world that surrounded it. The reason they can do this is the assumption that in objects are the social relations of their production as well as the social relations that surround production. That's what archaeology is about, that's what anthropology is about, and that's what history is about—an understanding that the relationship between people and things is central and fundamental to a culture. From that understanding it's relatively easy to get

to advertising because it is the modern form of talking about that relationship between people and things. It's talking about a very fundamental part of human existence and of the way we operate as human beings.

O'BARR: When you consider advertising within this broad frame of interpretation, where do you see its beginnings?

JHALLY: Well, you can go back a long way in terms of traders giving information about their goods and services, but I normally start in the middle of the nineteenth century (around the 1850s or so). It was brought about by the development of a market society and national markets in the United States and in Europe. It goes hand-in-hand with that. You can always talk about whether one creates the other, but the point is that those two things are fundamentally connected.

This is when it's especially crucial to look at history. You ask: Before the national market, what's going on? What kind of information about objects is there? If you go to a small town in America in the 1850s, what is people's relationship to objects? A lot of the goods they used, they made themselves through farm labor. How do they interact with goods in terms of the market? They buy things that are unbranded. They buy things from local retailers mostly, like lumber and textiles, which they then fashion into things for themselves. Flour is another example. They take the raw materials and fashion those themselves into whatever they need at that time. Their interaction with the market is relatively limited.

But there's always been a market to some degree where people have to interact with others around objects and services, say with the occasional traveling trader who brings in things from outside. Even in this context, when people do deal with things coming in from outside—there are some things that you do need from outside that can't be produced locally—the major players in providing market information are retailers, not producers. The major advertising in the nineteenth century is the advertising of retailers, where shopkeepers are announcing that this product is available. If you look at a newspaper, for example, in the mid-1850s, it's nothing but the advertising of local retailers saying that new objects from outside have arrived. There's no advertising for local products. There's no advertising for, say, a local lumber mill or the flour of a local gristmill. The advertising is the advertising of retailers about things coming in from the outside.

It's very interesting that if you look at those newspapers in the 1850s, you also see the future right next to the retailers' ads—and that's the ads of patent medicine manufacturers who are trying in fact to sell their very particular products. What they are doing is not announcing that this is available; they are trying to *brand* their product. The middle of the nineteenth century is a very interesting period in which you can see the early development of a market society, which is largely the information of retailers. And right next to it, you've got what is going to be the future of advertising—which is branding and the voice of manufacturers. We know, in fact, that many of the early advertisers came from patent medicines. They used the knowledge they had from branding patent medicines

to then brand other products. The idea of branding comes from the fact tha manufacturers have to distinguish their objects from other manufacturers'.

O'BARR: Well, it's gone pretty far since then. Even fruit is branded nowadays.

JHALLY: It's very useful to look historically at that because the branding come about because manufacturers had no market power. The market power lay actu ally with retailers. So the retailers would say to wholesalers, "Look, I need s many barrels of crackers" if it wasn't available locally. And what wholesaler would do is go to producers of crackers and they would be able to play then against each other based on price—because at this point there's no other distinc tion. And so the profit margins of manufacturers were tiny because they coul always be played off against each other on price. And so market power in tha sense lay with wholesalers. National advertising starts to develop partly becaus manufacturers say, "Well, hold on, what I need to do is create a demand for m product, not just for crackers, but for *my* brand of crackers." How do you do that You do that by advertising directly to consumers so that consumers will go i and ask for a particular brand. When that starts, wholesalers cannot continue t play the manufacturers off against one another in terms of price. That's the wa market power shifts. So advertising's absolutely fundamental in shifting marke power away from wholesalers to manufacturers.

O'BARR: What have been the critical steps in terms of advertising moving fron that beginning to the present state of things?

JHALLY: We get from there to here based upon the further isolation of the mas of the people from the means of production so that now those people are totall dependent upon the market for survival in all aspects of their lives.

O'BARR: By isolation from the means of production you mean that hardly an one is producing what they use anymore.

JHALLY: Yes, very few people are producing things that they can just make them selves and use. As people are driven off the land, they then have to go to th marketplace for food. One of the major ways you can think about this is to lool to see how bread has moved from being produced at home to being produce commercially. Over the course of fifty years from the middle of the nineteentl century to the beginning of the twentieth century, there's a huge shift in the wa bread is produced. By the beginning of the twentieth century, something like 6 percent of bread is commercially baked bread, and that's an indication of a gen eral movement whereby the market becomes much more important in terms o how people live their lives. When that happens, there's more competition for th dollars of those people buying things in the marketplace. Advertising expand exponentially along with this shift.

Throughout the course of the twentieth century, different communicatio technologies are integrated into advertising. In the beginning, what was availabl

were newspapers and billboards. Newspapers changed form from political newspapers to newspapers that we would recognize as based on commercial funds. At the end of the nineteenth century, the yellow press is brought about because advertisers needed to reach new audiences. Magazines also develop as advertising delivery vehicles around this time. Then comes the development of radio, which again starts off not being part of this commercial mix, but very soon becomes a fundamental part of the commercial system. And then you get television. Actually, once radio was determined to be commercial, the course was set. The last time we had a real public debate about how important advertising was going to be in the culture had to do with whether you were going to have a radio system funded essentially by advertisers or a system that could be supported in other ways.

O'BARR: The cases of Canada and Britain make interesting comparisons with what happened in the United States.

JHALLY: Canada and Britain operate in very different ways from the United States. They decided to operate their broadcasting systems as a state monopoly. The commercialization of communication is much, much less not just in Britain, but in Europe in general.

O'BARR: Are things really any different in those countries where communication is more controlled by the state?

JHALLY: Up until about twenty years ago, you could find some fundamental differences in the level of commercialization that was present on an everyday basis—how many messages people are exposed to, how powerful advertisers are in terms of the presence they have in the discourse of everyday life. I certainly think that you could measure that empirically.

O'BARR: In this age of globalization, do those distinctions still hold up?

JHALLY: That is the key. In the last twenty years or so, as media became more and more global, as giant corporations have put pressure on the national state broadcasting systems, those kinds of distinctions have started to break down. And so now we have broadcasting systems all over the world that are increasingly being penetrated by a commercial logic. And so I think the global differences are much, much less than they ever used to be.

In one sense that's what globalization is. Globalization is the commercial logic moving to center stage in more and more places. And even if it is not the dominant logic all over the world, it is the logic that's present everywhere, and every other logic has to at least deal with that.

If you go to India right now, you'll see that the commercial logic is there because of Star TV, because of satellite TV, and because of their targeting of a middle class that is largely Western educated. Religious organizations in India now have to deal with that commercial penetration. It's not as though it has

taken over everything, but it is now a constant presence all over the world, and that's where its power comes from. It will operate differently depending upon local conditions and upon local discourses, but it is there and present all the time. If you had asked me, what kind of power do you want if you want to influence something, I would say: Give me the power of presence, the power to be there all the time, so that someone always has to deal with me.

O'BARR: Up to this point, we've been talking about the historical steps. I'd like to ask about your sense of what is good and bad about this process that you've described.

JHALLY: To go back to teaching, which is where I started, what I want to say to people is: Look, this is the world that's been constructed. We know why. It doesn't require rocket science to figure out why advertising occupies the place in the world that it does today. The next question is: What is important about this? Why is it worth studying this? Why should we bother to look at this?

The typical way we've dealt with advertising in the past has been, I believe, the wrong way. In the past, we've typically said we need to study advertising because it fundamentally affects product demand. Our whole analysis of advertising until very recently has been about whether it's effective in increasing product demand. I think that is an interesting question if you are a manufacturer or if you are interested in using advertising to increase your profits. But from the viewpoint of society, this is the wrong question.

One of the things teachers have to do is to pose the right questions. My question about this world—in which advertisers and corporations have this enormous amount of power—is what is that power being used for? What values are being stressed through it? What is the morality that's being communicated? What are the ethics that are being discussed? It's important to ask this because the ideology communicated through advertising has an enormous influence. Even if people don't buy the products advertised, they are influenced by advertising anyway.

O'BARR: What are some examples of the values communicated through advertising?

JHALLY: Well, first of all, let me say that I don't think advertising is some kind of trick. If it were a trick, it wouldn't work so well. I don't think advertisers simply manipulate people. Human beings are much too complex to be manipulated in some easy way just by controlling communication. You can do it, but it's a very difficult process.

O'BARR: You are talking now about things like subliminal advertising?

JHALLY: Yes. I think a lot of our discussion about advertising has asked the wrong question. Whenever people think critically about advertising, they think, "Oh, there's sex and death in those ice cubes!" Or they will look at a Ritz cracker to see what things are baked into it. What I want to look at is not what's hidden

in advertising but what you can see up front, what's there on the surface, because that's what's impacting us.

I think that the fundamental thing that advertising does as a discursive form is that it tells a story about human happiness. That's how it sells. That's how it does its job. It sells products by convincing people that their happiness is connected to buying products. And particularly by buying *this* product. It is a story that says human happiness is connected to the provisions of the marketplace, is connected to *objects*. That's the fundamental story told in every ad. If you're successful in telling that story, it is not just a story for individuals but the story by which you organize the whole society. If the story is true, then what we need to do is to make more products, and we need to make more products in a better way, because that's the way toward human happiness. This story has been fundamental in highlighting the strategy of economic growth. What politicians then have to do is to get the economy to grow and grow. It has put economic questions at the center. Not the questions of whether economics is connected to justice and who has a role to play in how we think about economic policy. Instead, it's done it in a very simple way by saying that economic policy is always about *growing the economy*, to use President Clinton's famous words, and the promise that human happiness will come from that growth.

It's an interesting story, but what if it's not true? What if, in fact, human happiness doesn't come from things? What happens if we don't get happier if we get richer? That's the heretical question that never gets asked.

O'BARR: How do you answer it? How do you assess the degree to which people are happy or not?

JHALLY: Well, first of all, I think asking it is the most important thing you can do. The assumption is that the story we get told about objects and happiness is true. In asking it, you are questioning the assumption.

The way you answer it is empirically. I am a social scientist. As a teacher I don't want to impose my views or my ideology on people. The classroom is not the place for that. Now, I don't think the classroom is some kind of objective place where there is no power. There's always power. But what I try to do in a classroom is to tell people, "Look, there's always power operating in communication. If someone tells you there's no politics in a class, they are lying to you. Choosing the very subject matter is a form of power. It's a form of politics. So I tell you up front that this class is a place where power is operating. And my power is, in fact, pretty strong here. I can define what questions are going to be asked. It's up to you to figure out if those questions are the right questions. Then we use the best tools to study the issues, whatever they may be. But the real power lies in defining what is going to be asked in the first place."

So, once you've defined happiness in the way this story does, that becomes an empirical question—how to measure happiness, how to determine if the equation

between wealth and happiness is true. Luckily, people have studied this. It's a difficult question because you are talking about how to measure *subjective* happiness.

O'BARR: Happiness is always subjective, isn't it?

JHALLY: Yes. The issue is how you reach some objective conclusions about something that is ultimately subjective. Luckily, I don't have to come up with ways to do this because there are researchers who study this, who have tried to measure the level of human satisfaction across time and across space.

O'BARR: What does the body of that research show?

JHALLY: It shows that the link between happiness and wealth does not hold over time. In the United States right now, we are, in absolute terms, a richer society than we were fifty years ago. We have access to a higher standard of living. We have better cars. We have better houses. We have better washing machines. However, that does not seem to be linked with higher levels of satisfaction for the society as a whole. The same proportion of people seem to be happy, and the same proportion of people seem to be dissatisfied within the society. If happiness is supposed to be connected to things, and if we have access to more things, why aren't more of us getting happier?

O'BARR: Why not?

JHALLY: We have to understand how happiness and satisfaction function. Human beings are very complicated social animals. What the research shows is that our level of happiness is not defined in some isolated way. Our level of happiness is always a relative issue. Whether we are happy with the material objects we have is connected to what other people have. There is a level of what Thorsten Veblen called *conspicuous consumption* in which people who have access to a higher standard of living within a society seem to be happier than people who don't have access to that. Happiness is always relational. You are always comparing yourself to something. The question is what you are comparing it to. If you were comparing it historically and said, "You know, actually, I have much more than my parents did, I have access to more things, my cars are better," and if the correlation worked, then you would be happier. But that's not the comparison we make. We don't make the comparison to our parents' generation, and we don't make the comparison to people in poorer countries. We don't say, "Look at me in comparison to people in Africa, in India, in Eastern Europe." If we did that, then Western societies would be far happier overall. What we seem to do is to make our judgments relative to the people closest to us and to other people in our society in our particular time. So, as the overall level of material well-being rises for everyone, the average rises for everyone as well. The same proportion of people are above and below the average. And the same proportion of people are happy and unhappy.

O'BARR: Have psychologists explained this principle of the relativity of happiness and how it works?

JHALLY: It is a good question. Why are we always comparing ourselves to others near us right at this moment? That may have something to do with the immediacy of human experience. In one sense, we are always a local species rather than a global or historical species, although, interestingly, television is changing that, so that the Joneses we are now trying to keep up with don't live on our street or on the next street over—they live on television in unbelievably upscale environments. So our comparison is with Rachel and Ross on *Friends*. That's why we are in such financial debt as individuals. We are chasing a lifestyle that exists in the symbolic dream life of the culture (advertising-based television) as though it's real.

There's a very interesting book, one of the best books I've read on happiness, by an economist, Tibor Scitovsky, called *The Joyless Economy*. The joyless economy was *our* economy. He looked at all the psychological literature and looked to see what the psychologists have concluded makes us happy. He found that what seems to make us happy subjectively is stimulation—a change in a level of stimulation. We like novelty. We like it when new things happen. That is what seems to be connected to happiness. Think about the basic things that give people pleasure, like food. You get hungry, and, before you get to discomfort, you eat food. There are different ways of eating food. It's not just putting nutrition into your body. People have a high degree of pleasure or displeasure depending on the kind of food that goes into their bodies and the level of taste that it has. No wonder that so many of our social activities are based around food. Food changes our level of stimulation. We go from possibly being hungry to then having intense pleasure because of the taste that we get from food. That's what makes us happy. The same with sex. Why so much focus on sex? Sex is about going from one state to another state. There's a change in the level of stimulation. That's why drugs work and why they have such an initial hold on people. In the same way, art gives us stimulation. When you see something that moves you, that change in the level of stimulation is what seems to be at the base of happiness.

Given all this, and that we know that what makes people happy is new experience, the question then becomes what are our social institutions doing? Do they stress novelty? Do they stress pleasure? Do they stress the things that make people happy? Or, in fact, is our bad luck that what the society provides for us as a source of happiness (goods) can't deliver what really makes us happy? That's the situation we are in.

Look at the research. Look at the quality-of-life studies that have been done. If you ask people what they want out of life, very few people respond with "a BMW" or "a big house." If they do, and you ask, "What's the BMW going to give you? What's the big house going to give you?" Once you start probing those, you find that the things that make people happy are relatively simple. What people want out of life is a life in which they have control. They want a life in which they have some autonomy through which they can express themselves. They want to have good friendships. They want a social life. They want a family life that is meaningful and rewarding for them. They want intimate, romantic lives. They want leisure time that is really free and that really allows them to relax. People want independence. All of these things have to do with social relationships, and they have nothing to do with products.

O'BARR: Are these findings true cross-culturally, or are these findings specific to America?

JHALLY: No, these things are pretty much cross-culturally true. Although I try to stay away from essentialism, the more I teach, the more I come to think that there are some things that are pretty essential about human beings. We are a social species. We like being in contact with other people. We are a species that is connected to our bodies in a very fundamental way. We like pleasure; we like novelty.

O'BARR: This is very interesting. What you are doing is something that I have seldom heard—linking up advertising to the human condition. You are interpreting it in terms that take into account the kinds of creatures to whom it is addressed.

JHALLY: Yes. The reason I talk about all of this is that I want to get back to advertising. As somebody who studies advertising and wants people to think about the world they live in and question that world, what I'm trying to do through my teaching is to give people the kinds of tools they need to become active participants in the world in which they live. That means they have to question the world in which they live. And if they question it, and if they come to an understanding that the world is not providing us what we need, both individually and societally, that is an impetus to change. That requires them to ask how can we have a world that reflects what human beings really want, to ask how can we have a world that reflects genuine human needs?

O'BARR: What kind of personal answer do you give as to how to have that kind of world?

JHALLY: Do you mean what would a different world look like?

O'BARR: Yes, and how would we get there?

JHALLY: That becomes the political question.

O'BARR: If this is just a rhetorical question for the classroom . . .

JHALLY: Oh, no, no, no. The reason I think advertising is such a great teaching tool is that it points to fundamental questions about the world in which we live. It's an entry into those broader questions because advertising is fundamentally

connected to the ways in which our society is organized and to the ways in which we think about ourselves. The reason I'm teaching advertising is that I want to get to those broader questions. Advertising works as a rhetorical tool because everyone thinks they're experts in it. In one sense, everyone loves it. They are surrounded by it. And the most creative stuff is in advertising.

O'BARR: Where else is everyone an expert?

JHALLY: That's actually one of the major things I have to fight at the start of a course.

O'BARR: Believe me, I know.

JHALLY: The fundamentally heretical question is to ask what happens if we take advertising seriously. Everything we've talked about here, advertisers know. They know people get no pleasure from goods. They know that people's major forms of pleasure and satisfaction come from social relationships. If you know that and yet you are stuck with the problem of selling objects, because that's your job, then what you've got to do is connect what fundamentally moves people to the things that you have to sell. You have to convince people, at least for a brief moment, that somehow buying the object that you have to sell for your client is connected to the things that will make them happy, even though we know it will not.

One of the only ways in which goods are connected to happiness is through the concept of novelty bringing pleasure. So, when people say that when they get depressed, they go shopping, there's a real basis for the alleviation of unhappiness. When you first buy something, it does bring you happiness. The moment you leave the store, the moment you get home, the happiness changes. That should tell us why our relationship to objects is always shifting. There's nothing in objects themselves that make us happy. What makes us happy is the act of buying and the novelty that initially comes with that. If we were always happy because of the objects we've bought, then our dustbins would be much less full, and we wouldn't do as much shopping. But that's the thing. It's the novelty that keeps people coming back.

What advertisers have to do is to link up what keeps people happy with the things that they have to sell, which are objects. That's the falsity of it. What's real about advertising are the dreams that it recognizes in the population. And that's why advertising is full of adventure. It's full of independence, it's full of sex, it's full of family, and it's full of social relationships. It's full of meaningful work. What advertising has to do is to take those images of what makes people happy and connect them to objects. There's something that's true about advertising, and there's something that's false about it. What's true and what's real about advertising is that it reflects the desires and dreams that people have. But it takes these things that are very real—and that's why advertising works so effectively—and it links them up to a place that, by its very definition, cannot provide it: the marketplace and the world of things.

We know that objects won't really bring us happiness, and yet we are constantly seduced by this idea. People know their real-life experiences. They buy stuff, and they get it home, and it doesn't work the way it is supposed to work. It doesn't give them the same kind of pleasure that it's supposed to give. Advertising is like a drug dealer in that way. It's the pusher on the street. We know products are not particularly good for us, but every time we try to break this, advertising is there offering us another hit: "This will make you really happy. Look at what this product will deliver." It has a way of keeping us from asking whether the equation between happiness and goods is actually true, or if there is a different way of organizing our lives and our society.

There are a number of different images that I call on to describe advertising. I think the ways we describe advertising are much too benign right now. One of the things I want to do is to change the metaphors we use. I think the drug dealer is a good metaphor for advertising. It hooks us on the world of things.

I also think it's a child abuser, as well, in the way in which it targets children as part of the market. Nowadays, advertising targets kids while they are still in their cribs. If you think about the whole concept of children's advertising, by its very nature what it is doing is child abuse—given that kids don't have their own money to spend. Mostly, the reason that kids are being targeted is that kids are being trained to become lobbyists for products against their parents. They are being targeted so that they will become lobbyists for particular kinds of products, so that the parents will be pestered to buy them. And they are also being targeted so that by the time they really have money, they will already be branded in some way. What advertisers are doing in that sense is targeting children, not for children's own needs and desires, but for the advertisers' needs and desires. The only defense of advertising you see is always based around the argument that people are rational; people are always independent; they can always evaluate the information they get, and they can reject it; and there are always other people who can provide alternative information. Well, when it comes to kids, kids are not rational. We know that rationality is something that develops over time. So you take the most vulnerable segments of the society, and you target them, so that they will give you their money when they start having some. And you also want to turn them against their parents, so that they are constantly nagging their parents for the right product. I'm amazed that families have allowed an alien presence into the corner of their living rooms when that alien presence is designed to break down family life and to cause nothing but tension within it. So that's why I think that the whole idea of children's marketing is, from a moral point of view, abhorrent. If I had my way, I would ban all advertising to children under eight years old. Even eight is, I think, a problem.

O'BARR: Do you think the Canadian efforts to restrict advertising directed at children have been successful?

JHALLY: The question is about national policy in a globalized environment. Does Canada's doing that in the media that it controls have any real influence when in fact you can turn on a satellite station and pick up all these other channels?

O'BARR: Plus, the vast majority of Canadians live very close to the U.S. border.

JHALLY: The Scandinavian countries also tried this as well. They wanted no advertising whatsoever directed to children. Children are going to be reached in a general way by marketing campaigns directed at the general population, but what I'm talking about are those specific campaigns that are directed toward kids and that adults are not supposed to see. Although it's difficult within a global society to isolate those effects, I think that any society that doesn't even think about those questions, any society that simply gives advertisers carte blanche to do whatever they want with the kids, is essentially opening up kids' bedrooms to child molesters.

O'BARR: That's a pretty powerful metaphor. I think it's useful in teaching sometimes to have that shock value because it really makes people think about what you are saying. I guess that's part of what you are doing, right?

JHALLY: It is shocking, but I also fundamentally believe what I'm saying. The other reason to use the metaphor is that it also refers to the media, as well as advertisers. And that's got to do with how commercial television is organized, because when you are watching commercial television, you are engaged in labor the same way you would be in a factory. What the networks are trying to do is gather you together the way the factory owner would gather laborers together. They are drawing value out of your watching, out of your labor. So the image I'm creating here is not that you are being given messages but that value is being drawn out of your labor. If people didn't watch television, networks would have nothing to sell. If NBC turned out the evening news tonight and no one watched, they couldn't give that advertising time away. It's fundamentally dependent upon people watching. And, therefore, you are trying to organize an audience, and you are trying to extract value out of them the same way you would be in a factory. And when you start doing this to two-year-olds and three-year-olds, it is like child labor, like a global factory. And we have opened up our doors and allowed people to come into our homes to manipulate our children and to draw value out of them. That's why I think the metaphor of child molestation is so powerful. It makes people examine these issues I've just described.

O'BARR: Well, it certainly is an eye-opener. When you explain how you think about the issues of advertising to children, it explains why you need such a powerful metaphor to describe something so powerful.

When you say all of these things to your students, what do they think about all this? What kind of attitude do they have toward the possibility of going into advertising after hearing ideas like this laid out over the course of a semester?

JHALLY: I don't think that one course is going to change people's lives. But I do think it encourages a questioning attitude toward the career path they've laid out for themselves. What I say to people is, "Look, I'm not here to tell you what you should or should not do. What I've laid out for you is an analysis, a perspective that says that the world you are going into—if you are going into advertising—is a fundamentally powerful world. It has a huge amount of cultural impact. If you go into that world, you have responsibility that comes along with that power. You have to think as moral beings. You have to think as ethical beings. What kind of world do you want to participate in? I'm not here to tell you whether you should go into advertising or not. I'm here to say to you that if you choose to go into advertising, it is not like going into, say, making shoes or something peripheral. You are cultural workers who are implicated in the major ways in which the society is thinking about itself. That gives you responsibility. That gives you moral responsibility. I want you to think about that. I want you to think about that in terms of what your own values are and whether what you do reflects what your own values are." That's the only thing teachers can do. You can't give people answers. Often, people will say, "You've said everything that's bad about it, but you haven't told us what to do." My answer to that is, "Look, I have already too much power in your lives. My role is not to tell you what to do. My role is to give you the tools to be able to understand the world in a new way and to point out that there is no such thing as innocence in this world. No one is innocent. Everyone should go into whatever they go into with their eyes fully open. And if my analysis makes sense, you've got to take that on as part of how you understand your role in the world."

O'BARR: Do you have some students who've gone into advertising?

JHALLY: Absolutely.

O'BARR: What do they tell you about dealing with these issues when they are in the business?

JHALLY: I don't have too much feedback on that. Oftentimes I do get people saying back, "Yeah, everything you said was correct. It's a dead world. And I got out of it quickly. It was all about making money, and it was deadening as a world." Other people say, "Actually I love doing the creative stuff. I really love it. And everything you say is true, but you have to make a living. I think I can work better on these issues from the inside. I think I can have an influence by changing some of the images, changing some of the content from the inside." That's fine with me.

If you gave me a choice and said, "Here are two groups of people in front of you. Here's one group of people who are not going to go into advertising, and here's another group who are going to go into advertising, which one do you want to speak to?" there's no question. I want to speak to the group that's going into advertising. I want them to recognize the immense amount of power that they have and the immense amount of responsibility that they carry and to really think about it in a serious way.

I want them to care as much as I do about these issues. What people often say about me in my teaching is that I care about what I teach. Oftentimes, people disagree with what I have to say, but they are so unused to teachers standing before them and believing passionately in what they are teaching about and believing passionately in the intellectual vocation. That it is not just job training but is central to how citizens are supposed to operate. I guess I got that from watching Stuart Hall lecture when I was at university. To see that you can have great ideas and be at the intellectual cutting edge and, at the same time, you can be speaking to a group of undergraduate students and make absolute sense to them and give a sense of not only why intellectual work is important, but also why it's fun. Hall was able to communicate that to me. Not everything is based on this, but I did get a notion that intellectual life is not only about doing intellectual work, but it is also about communicating that intellectual work.

O'BARR: Do you have any optimism for change? There is a certain pessimism that comes from this analysis.

JHALLY: Yes, there is. The response to my analysis, from my teaching perspective and from some of the tapes we've done at the Media Educational Foundation—MEF is the way I've tried to put my teaching into a form that gets beyond my classroom into other classrooms and community groups and have this kind of discussion—can be one of two things. Some people say they are just paralyzed by it. "Wow, everything you say is true. When you do the analysis, I see it is true. But what it's done is to paralyze me, because what you have talked about is power, the unbelievable power that corporations have in this world. And it seems there is no way anyone can fight against it." So, on the one hand, it leaves students feeling impotent. When people tell me that, I am horrified. I don't want this analysis to paralyze people. I want my analysis to drive people toward activism. It's a fine line to draw, because you have to do the analysis. Intellectually, you have to do the analysis.

O'BARR: What would activism look like? What would be, in your opinion, a constructive approach to these kinds of questions? Given that we live in this kind of society, it's hard to imagine the value of a Walden-like approach to things. That wouldn't solve any problems. We went through that kind of thing in the sixties. What prospects are there for people to live in the kind of world that we live in and yet really change things in ways that are more productive and gives them things that they are really after?

JHALLY: I'm actually quite optimistic. Let me tell you why. In one sense, you have to be. The optimism is about a vision for the future. If you don't have a different vision for the future, then you are condemned to live the present and the past over and over and over again. I have a vision for the future. I can imagine a different world that is based much more on justice, on equality, on actually giving people the lives they want to live. I have that vision, and I think it is my moral responsibility to try to take actions toward actualizing that vision.

There's another reason that I'm optimistic—and it's sort of perversely related to the pessimism—and it is this: Why do corporations, why do advertisers, why do media have to spend billions of dollars every day to convince us of these things? If the game were over, if there were no possibility of change, then why would they keep doing this day after day after day? And why would they go out of their way to make sure that no other idea gets into the minds of the population? They have to do that because they know that if they don't, then the world will change. In fact, if people are left to their own devices, and if other voices come into it, and if people are given real choices, then the decisions that they make will be based on real alternative choices.

O'BARR: When you say "real choices," what do you mean? You've said this before in the things you write, but what does it mean to say "if people were given real choices?" Is it like people saying in another situation, "We don't really have a choice about the political system because we only have two candidates to pick between?"

JHALLY: Well, I don't think we do have real choices in politics either. The question is whether we can have a choice that breaks with the limited choices that are given to us. There is a reason why a progressive, such as Ralph Nader, has to be marginalized and to be kept out of things like presidential debates. Not that he was going to win, but what he would have brought into it was, in fact, a different vision based on a sort of populist understanding of democracy. And so what you have to do is to make sure that Ralph Nader, as representative of that vision, was not allowed entry into the discourse. And that the discourse had to be about whatever difference there was between the Democrats and the Republicans. If Nader was that marginal, that much of a lunatic, that much of a no-hoper, why wouldn't they let him in? Why wouldn't they let people see how idiotic he was? They didn't let him in because they knew that if they let him in, his vision, in fact, would resonate with the vision of large parts of the population. And so you have to keep it out. You have to keep out this notion of a radical economic democracy in which workers would have some say over how their workdays are based.

O'BARR: Do you think that people would actually respond to someone with that kind of vision?

JHALLY: I think people would respond to that vision because it more closely reflects what people actually already believe. It's really a myth that most people are conservative. If we had a world that reflects public opinion as is, we would have a military budget that is a fraction of the size that it is, we would have much more money spent on education, and protecting the environment would be high up on the list. When you look at actual public opinion, it's much more to the left than our political elites are. And so what our political elites have to do is somehow convince us that the only choice is what they offer and to isolate individuals in their own beliefs. So individual people think, "That's not really what I believe, but no one else believes what I believe." There's this notion that you have to go along with it, because everyone else believes in these polices and these values. That's why you have to keep people separated. Once people can see another public vision that reflects what they think, there'll be tremendous support for that. I think our present political leaders know that, and that's why they have to keep that vision out. The present commercial leaders know that if there is alternative product information that comes across, people will start to question and challenge their consumption. That's the basis of boycotts. The whole movement around the global practices of the sneaker industry has been an incredibly successful way in which people have used Nike advertising, for example, to raise issues of global justice.

O'BARR: But we still have Nike. We still have advertising.

JHALLY: Social change doesn't happen overnight. But now you have, in fact, a generation of people who have on their radar the issue of third-world labor. Phil Knight, CEO of Nike, said, "I'm fed up now that whenever people think about Nike, they think of exploitive practices in the third world." Nike can do a lot to change all that by the power of their own advertising, by the billions of dollars they spend on advertising. They have to do that, because they know there is this grassroots stuff coming up. You've now got a generation of kids in college who think about Nike in a different way. Whether that will make a difference in whether they buy Nike or not, that's another open question, because this, again, is limited to what choices there really are in the marketplace. If I want to buy, say, underwear, where do I buy underwear that's not produced in the third world? The fact of the matter is it's very, very difficult to buy sneakers, underwear, and other clothing that are not a part of the system. So you can't change the world through shopping. Shopping will never change the world. It's like pollution. If you live in a polluted environment, you can't do anything by yourself to change it. What you've got to do is change the causes of that pollution. So what I want to do when I talk about Nike, about globalization and where products come from, is to have people understand this new world in which we live, in which products

are made for pennies by third-world labor, and then huge amounts are spent by Nike on advertising to build up the Nike brand, to link up Nike with sports, and then that idea is put on these worthless products so that they can charge $90 for them. I want people to understand that system, and I think that if you understand that system, it won't change consumption immediately, but I think that Nike is worried enough that it will change consumption that they've had to adjust their practices. They've had to give voice at least to this notion that somehow they are not going to use poorly paid labor or that their subcontractors are going to have a different code of behavior. I don't think it will change consumption, but you now have a generation of kids at the college level who now have this on their radar and for whom now this is how they are going to operate. That's how social change works.

O'BARR: Tell me what you think the world will be like in another decade or two? Where are we headed?

JHALLY: It depends on what we do. It depends on what kind of opposition there is to our present mode of operating. As I said, I'm actually fairly optimistic that there will be at least the movement toward change.

O'BARR: Coming from where?

JHALLY: Coming from young people, from the generation that is going through college right now. People talk about them as Generation X, a generation, and therefore a demographic, that's cynical and jaded. Well, they are. But you are only cynical and jaded if you don't know where to go, and I think part of the job of political activists is to give a really positive vision of social change. I think that has been part of the problem of the Left. We've said, I mean, everything has been about the problems of capitalism, and you have to be an activist almost out of duty. I think the Left has been very bad at this. Activism needs to be talked about much more positively. It's going to be fun to change the world in a positive way, much more fun than buying Nike sneakers, much more fun than buying the latest car that's going to give you pleasure for about two minutes and then it's going to be a drain on your pocketbook. Changing the world is fun; it's about pleasure. The Left has not talked about pleasure. Advertisers talk about pleasure, and that's why everyone is buying the products of our system. Because they think that somehow pleasure will come from that. I think that we have to talk about pleasure in a different way and ask where does pleasure really come from?

For instance, what would happen if we take advertising seriously as a vision of the future? We would have a world in which everyone's work would be valued. How do you create that? The present world is not a world in which people's work is valued. We'd have a world of economic democracy. We would have a world that stressed family life. We'd have a world that was about relaxation and linking friends up in some way. None of our institutions do that at the present time. The institutions of the marketplace, in fact, work against all of those things. If you

wanted a world that looked like advertising, we would, in fact, have to create a very different set of institutions. Again, this is what makes me optimistic. What we have in advertising, I think, is a vision of what a different world will look like. I've always been struck by the fact that capitalism has had to go to a different vision of society to sell itself, to a world that looks much more like a vision of socialism. In one sense, the images of the future are already there. What we have to do is uncouple them. At the moment, those images are coupled with the marketplace and with capitalism. The reason these images are there is that they are very powerful, they reach deep into the popular psyche. I want to take them and uncouple them from the present system and couple them with a different kind of society in the future.

O'BARR: The so-called socialist economies didn't fare very well in the twentieth century. How do you explain all of what happened?

JHALLY: Well, they were not really socialisms. We haven't had a society that manifests this vision yet, a vision of *democratic* socialism. That is not going to be a socialism like we had, which was a state-dominated socialism in which one form of power, capital, was replaced by another form of power, the state, with the same kinds of impacts upon ordinary people. Also, communism never gave up on the idea that somehow more things would make more people happy. They eventually went broke trying to compete with the West on that basis (as well as at the same time squandering so many resources on the military).

O'BARR: What you've described is a socialist situation that had a vision of capitalist wealth in it and a capitalist situation that has a vision of socialist theory in it.

JHALLY: Those socialist societies were never able to free themselves from the global influence of the capitalist market. You are always connected to that in the present world. My views are less about policy than they are about vision. If we can get people to think about the world in a different way . . . for example, how do we have a world in which people have more fun? I'd be quite happy to have that as the basis of political discussions. If you can't answer that question, then you are not on the train of politics. The Left's visions of fun have to be more powerful than those other visions of fun. At the moment, the Left has not talked about fun and about pleasure. I want to talk much, much more about that. I think that, in fact, the Left is much more committed to pleasure, much more committed to fun, much more committed to satisfaction, much more committed to individual freedom, and much more committed to democracy than capitalism. I want to use the images that are in capitalism. That's what makes me optimistic.

O'BARR: What will happen to goods if your vision is realized?

JHALLY: There will be less of them. We will, of course, never do without them. We need goods. But I think that there will be less of them and that we will, in

fact, have a deeper relationship to goods and a deeper relationship to the material world because it really will be linked up to the kinds of things that make us happy. At the moment, we are not happy. Objects are linked up to the interests of corporations. I want to have a world in which objects are linked up to the interests of ordinary people. We will have goods, of course. This is not an argument for poverty. We need to have a certain level of material existence so that we can live every day in comfort. But going beyond that, the material world doesn't give people the kind of satisfaction that advertising insists is there. I think that if we recognize this and ask, "What other kinds of things would give us that satisfaction?" it will get us to think in very different ways about the future and about politics.

O'BARR: Thank you very much. You've managed to start at the beginnings of what you understand about the origins of modern advertising, to put it in a really interesting historical context, and to find, in all your analyses, some optimism for the future about how things might work themselves out.

You did something very interesting when we started this interview. I suggested that you are an important cultural critic—which I still consider you to be despite your disowning the term. What's the problem with being a cultural critic?

JHALLY: There's not a problem. I think we need cultural critics. I guess I am just used to a different way of describing my approach. I want to focus on connecting to the audience, not just being a critic or just commentating, but on how to communicate with the audience.

O'BARR: Emphasizing the dialogic nature?

JHALLY: Yes, absolutely. Again, I think the Left has not been very good about this. There's been incredible thinking on the Left around these issues, incredible critiques, but a lot of those critiques have remained at a very intellectual level. I don't object to this notion of a cultural critic, but I want to stress the idea of being a teacher, of linking up with the audience. Unless cultural criticism is put in a form that links up in a way in which ordinary people understand the world, I think it will remain impotent and marginal to the real lives of people. We have to figure out a way to connect intellectual work with nonintellectual lives and nonintellectual work. We have not been very good at that. The Media Educational Foundation is, I hope, an attempt to try and do some of that.

O'BARR: Well, thank you very much. I think this is a good place to stop.