Globalization, Aging and the Power of the Image

This chapter argues that neoliberal globalization proceeds by the use of instruments of power it has at its disposal. The most subtle of these instruments is the power of the image which is deployed by the large multinational media corporations towards three ends: constructing easily manipulated consumer subjects, creating a world of illusion, and stigmatizing groups and experiences that are undesirable and/or recalcitrant. This chapter analyzes how the power of the image, specifically in “globalized” advertising, is deployed to marginalize and stigmatize the aged and the experience of aging.

The process of neoliberal globalization proceeds, despite resistance, by means of the instruments of power that its dominant institutions have the capacity to deploy in its interests. Of these interests, the primary one is the creation of a global environment for maximum profit-taking by the large multi-national corporations which now dominate the global economy. To this end, conventional instruments of power continue to be deployed, albeit somewhat differently than in the past. These conventional instruments are economic power, deployed through free trade agreements and global authoritarian institutions; political power, deployed through support for formal democracies, dictatorships, and authoritarian regimes; military power, deployed by means of arms sales, training, and especially covert interventions; and ideological power, deployed through think tanks, policy planning groups, universities and the mass media (Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007; Roy, 2012).

The recent social movements throughout the world, the “Arab spring,” the anti-austerity protests in Europe, and the Occupy movements in the U.S, have demonstrated the limits of these instruments of power. And the global economic crisis of 2008 has revealed the ideology of the free market to be a thinly disguised justification for increasing inequality in wealth, income and power. A more subtle and more powerful instrument of power continues to be deployed on a global scale; one that is under analyzed relative to its importance for achieving the goals of neoliberal globalization.. This instrument of power is the image, and it is being deployed by multi-national media corporations.

As neoliberal globalization proceeds, so does the expansion of the multi-national media corporations that are located in the “first world” countries, especially the United States. Privatization, deregulation, open markets, intellectual property rights and free trade, all components of the instruments of economic and political power, have allowed these multi-national corporations to dominate global media. They have done so by various means, ownership, partnerships, and distribution agreements. According to Edward Herman and Robert McChesney (1999), only ten large multi-national media corporations located mainly in the United States dominate global media, with another forty large corporations making up a second tier. The trend is for even greater concentration of ownership and control by the largest of these corporations. Obviously this global expansion is beneficial for these media corporations whose primary goal is profit. But the success of neoliberal globalization depends upon the power of the image deployed by these media corporations. As McChesney and Herman say, “ the global media’s news and entertainment provide an informational and ideological environment that helps sustain the political, economic, and moral basis for marketing goods and having a profit driven social order” (p. 10). Western media content is present everywhere in the world and even where the content does not yet dominate, the content of local media is influenced by Western media. Globally, the most watched movies, the most listened to music, and the most watched television shows are products of these media corporations (Condry, 2012).

The image as an instrument of power had been recognized by the late nineteenth century. In The Crowd, Gustave Le Bon analyzed the relationship between the image and power. He argued that the lower classes were susceptible to persuasion through the use of images. He says, “A crowd thinks in images and the image . . . calls up a series of other images” (p. 41). The images create illusions by which the masses could be governed. Whoever, he concludes, controls the image, has the power to produce illusions and has the power to control the masses. Le Bon’s analysis of the crowd influenced other sociologists, social psychologists, political theorists, the emerging public relations industry, and business people. Edward Bernays, the “father” of public relations, believed that the image was so powerful that it could create “the truth” (Ewen, 1996). The questions then that need to be answered are first what is the power of the image, why is it unique and why has it proven to be a successful instrument of power, and then, to what ends is the power of the image being deployed by the mass media.

First, the power of the image is not limited in the same ways that the other instruments of power are. Geographical boundaries can not limit the power of the image because the technology that disseminates the image can reach anywhere on the globe. The surrender of national sovereignty encoded in free trade agreements and the statutes of the World Trade Organization have eliminated national borders as boundaries that limit the dissemination of the image. Cultural boundaries can still limit the power of the image, but even these boundaries have been overcome by the power of the image (Herman and McChesney, 1999; Postman, 1985).

Second, the image conceals its relation to power. It appears as “objective,” as a representation of reality. The truth, though, is that everything in the image, both foreground and background, is selected with a purpose. In visual advertisements, not only everything within the advertisement is selected, but the visual techniques used are an essential component of the image. They are the same techniques that were developed earlier for film and television. They include techniques such as editing, camera angles and movement, lighting and sound (Gianneti, 1996). Because the image’s relation to power is concealed, the subject/object of manipulation does not know that it is being persuaded by the image. As Stuart Ewen says in his book All Consuming Images, “The secret of all true persuasion is to induce the person to persuade himself.” (p. xxx). And the image escapes rational critique because as a rhetoric of images, it does not reveal itself as discourse. “The image was conceived to be an effective antidote to critical thought” (p. xxxvi).

Most importantly, the image has the power to not only persuade, but to produce, or create subjectivities that can be easily manipulated, and the power to create a “reality” for these subjectivities to inhabit, a world of illusion in which they can delight. As Ewen says about the objects of persuasion, they are able to take “delight in the unreal.”

The main ends towards which the power of the image is deployed by the mass media is to construct compliant, easily manipulable, subjectivities, consumers, who remain oblivious to the social forces that construct them and their desires. The power of the image is also deployed to create a second order reality of illusion that these compliant subjectivities can inhabit, a socially constructed “unreality.” And the image as an instrument of power is deployed by the mass media towards the end of stigmatizing and marginalizing specific groups who have been identified as being “less desirable” and/or recalcitrant in relation to the goals of neoliberal globalization.

The socially constructed subjectivities have several common traits. First of all, they suffer from anxiety. The source of the anxiety is the continual experience of lacking something. These subjectivities exist in a perpetual state of desire. The consequence of this is “all elements of lived experience constitute potential flaws” (p. 89). The subject becomes an eternal object of manipulation by the rhetoric of images.

The second trait is that the personality is unreflective. It lacks the capacity for critical self-reflection because it experiences itself as an object, an object that can only establish an identity through its participation in the world of desire. The limited reflection it can engage in is that it is “flawed.” It can not even imagine other possibilities because the capacity to imagine has been shaped by the power of the image. The third trait is arrested development; the personality does not develop; its life is an endlessly repetitive present, an “eternal return.” The power of the image creates desire, the subsequent anxiety compels the subject to engage in the act of consumption. This act of consumption is only temporarily satiating, because the rhetoric of the image continues to manipulate the consumer subject with new objects of desire in the world of illusion that it creates.

A metaphor in Ruben Alves book Tomorrow’s Child captures this. Alves suggests that we imagine spending our lives in a small cabin from which there is no exit and no view of the outside world, no doors and no windows. We would consider ourselves prisoners. However, he suggests that we imagine spending our lives in a mansion with a thousand rooms but still without windows or doors. Each day we would be allowed to go from room to room, and in each room there would be new delights for us to experience, but there would still be no exit and no view of the world outside. This is our world and, he says, we call it freedom.

The mansion with a thousand rooms is the world of illusion that the power of the image has created for the consumer subject. Hannah Arendt (1976) analyzes what she calls “the lying world” in the context of totalitarian movements. She says that the ideology of the totalitarian movement creates a world that is more desirable than the real world; she calls this “the lying world.” This is analogous to the world of illusion, a utopian world that is created by the rhetoric of the image. This utopian world is “imagined” in the foreground of the advertisement , but even, more importantly, it is imagined in the background of the advertisement. In this utopian world there is no traffic, all inhabitants can afford luxury vehicles. Work is never onerous, dehumanizing, or alienating. Leisure time can be spent in bars and restaurants filled with beautiful, happy people, consuming without limits. All homes are upper middle class set in idyllic neighborhoods, uncontaminated by foreclosures, decaying infrastructure, homelessness, or gangs. There is no pollution, almost everyone is healthy, and if they are not, prescription drugs are accessible and affordable. Technology is progressive and helps utopians communicate anytime from anyplace at faster and faster speeds, with an almost uncountable number of “apps.” Technology allows utopians to be fully entertained in their upper middle class homes; everyone has access to the internet, utopian children are internet geniuses and adults through tutoring by their children can become competent. Three D movies in Blue Ray and the most technologically sophisticated video games are in every home. Corporations are good citizens in this utopia. They focus on what is best for the consumer, retirement plans, affordable comprehensive health, accident and life insurance, and clean energy production to maintain the healthy environment of the utopia.

As mentioned earlier, the images are deployed for three main ends: the creation of subjectivities who are compliant and passive objects of manipulation, the creation of a world of illusion, a utopian world, and to symbolically stigmatize and marginalizing those groups that are less desirable and recalcitrant segments of the population. The aged and the process of aging are targets of the latter.. The questions to be considered are the reasons why the aged are a less desirable and in fact a recalcitrant population, why aging is devalued, and how the power of the image is deployed in advertising, specifically television commercials, to stigmatize and marginalize aging and the aged.

The aging and aged are a less desirable and recalcitrant population for several reason. First, the aged have common interests, the main ones are security in their “retirement” and affordable and accessible health care. These common interests stand in conflict with the interests of the large multi-national corporations. Privatization of social security systems and private ownership in the health care industry are two of the main goals of financial institutions and the health care industry. And privatization is one of the main themes of neoliberal ideology. The aged are a growing segment of the population in the first world countries and even in the hollowed out liberal democracies, the neoliberal state, of these countries exercise some political power.

Public discourse, such as it is, in the U.S. has been directed at stigmatizing the aged and the aging population. This discourse ranges from blaming increasing debt in the U.S. on Social Security and the rising cost of Medicare to the “talking points” in the corporate media that Social Security is a “ponzi” scheme. And as the aged population increases disproportionately, the talking points continue, the young will carry an increasingly heavy burden supporting this top heavy population of the aged, and in the end will be faced with a bankrupt social security system. However, this discourse, despite being trumpeted by influential members of the ideology elite, has been notably ineffective. The current beneficiaries of these programs, the aging, and also the majority of the population view them as successful and necessary. Resistance like this is serious from the point of view of the institutions that would benefit from the full privatization of both programs. And both programs, especially Social Security, offer compelling practical examples that challenge neoliberal ideology. Because of their success, it is necessary to use whatever means to stigmatize the programs and those who benefit from them (Greenhouse, 2008).

Secondly, in many countries and cultures, including to some degree, even in the U.S., there is the belief that being human means more than being a consumer and aging involves not just “getting older,” physical and chronological aging, but maturing. In this understanding of aging, persons undergo a process, through experience, in which knowledge about “life” itself and wisdom is gained and character is developed. The idea and belief that aging is a valuable and meaningful experience is an obvious obstacle to the goal of creating homogenous subjectivities who exist in the eternal now of the world of illusion. The aged, those who have undergone this experience, are the members of the communities in many societies who transmit the world view of the culture to the younger members. They embody and transmit different values, beliefs, ideas, and norms. These different world views and those that embrace them become targets of the power of the image.

The aged are an undesirable demographic group to advertisers despite the fact that they are an increasing per cent of the population and many have disposable incomes. It is almost a shibboleth of advertisers that the aged are no longer easily persuaded and manipulated as they were in their youth to pursue their lives based on the “world of illusion”. The undesirability of the aged to advertisers is demonstrated on a near nightly basis in the Nielsen ratings for television shows in the United States. Television shows are rated by the share of audience that a particular show has in its time period, for example, how does a show compare with other shows in the Monday 8PM time slot, and then by the viewership of what advertisers consider the desirable demographic group, ages 18-49. Only then do the ratings look at total viewership. This latter category would include the aged. But the overall rating of a show, what is most important to advertisers, is determined by the viewership of the desirable demographic group, 18-49 (Nielsen Ratings).

The main means by which the power of the image is deployed is through advertising. Advertising now saturates cultural space in the developed world and in many of the developing countries. The amount of money spent globally on advertising is half a billion dollars and in the U.S. advertising and marketing make up almost one sixth of the gross national product. The most powerful advertising medium is television and the television commercial. Forty-two per cent of advertising expenditures globally go to television which now has three and a half billion viewers. Advertising is global now, not national. Consumers everywhere can buy the same products everywhere on the globe, they can purchase them in similar shopping venues, and consumers everywhere are exposed to the same television commercials (website). The power of television as a medium for advertising was recognized early in the 1950s when it was referred to as the “dream machine.” Rosser Reeves, one of the “fathers” of television advertising boasted that "we could take the same advertising campaign from print or radio and put it on TV, and even when there were very few sets, sales would go through the roof" (Halberstam, p. 255 **)**. How then is the power of the image deployed in television commercials to stigmatize the aged and the process of aging?

As an undesirable population, they are “disappeared” most television commercials, there are exceptions, but they are usually not the main characters in the commercial, but they are also not in the background world of the commercials. If one analyzes the television commercials, foreground and background, selling products by biggest television advertises, the aged are not there. The aged do not drive luxury automobiles on traffic free highways, they do not dine at restaurants and socialize at bars with the other inhabitants of the utopia. They celebrate with the other inhabitants of the utopia the new 4G I phones. And they do not work, so they can not enjoy the playful comradeship and socialization, for example, flirting with co-workers over low calorie sandwiches. They have been “cleansed” from the utopia.

There are two important exceptions. The aged can be found in television commercials for prescription drugs, especially those drugs which have been developed to treat the physical illnesses that are associated with growing older. Examples of these diseases are arthritis, cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart and cardiovascular illness, high cholesterol, and loss of, or problems with, hearing and sight. These drug commercials are more likely to be positioned in television shows whose overall viewership has a higher per cent of aged. Sunday morning news programs, Jeopardy, Wheel of Fortune and early prime time dramas are examples of this. The characters in these commercials are the aged, their illnesses are those associated with aging, and the prescription drugs being advertised cure the illnesses, or at least treat the symptoms of the illness effectively. The aged in the commercial then continue with the activities of their lives of leisured retirement. In a commercial for an anti-inflammatory drug, the painful symptoms of arthritis are overcome to a soundtrack, so that the attractive but arthritic elderly in the commercial can do Tai Chi, row, and play on a scooter with their grand children .

. The second exception is commercials selling activities associated with the conventional wisdom that the norm for the aged is to enjoy the leisure time of their “golden years.” These commercials are populated by the aged, those apparently without the above health problems, or who have benefited from the drugs, and who have sufficient disposable incomes. The golden years is “imagined” in these commercials as an idyllic world of travel. The best examples of these commercials are cruise line commercials. These commercials are populated by elderly people, enjoying the wonders of the cruise ship, the places it visits, and the fellowship of other aged.

While the aged are disappeared and marginalized in the world of television commercials, aging, or the prevention of aging, is central. The reason is that the rhetoric of images has so successfully defined youth as the norm of the utopia and simultaneously the physical changes of aging have been defined as deviant, or pathological. A corollary to this is that aging is reduced by images to only physical deterioration. Any idea or belief that aging is a positive process is eliminated. The body is identity, according to the rhetoric of the image, and it is flawed: dry and cracked skin, grey hair, hair loss, wrinkles. Commercials that sell products claiming to preserve the image of youth range from beauty products that conceal wrinkles, to hair coloring products that conceal grayness, to skin products that conceal dry and cracking skin, to cosmeseutical drugs that eliminate wrinkles, grow eyelashes, grow hair, and to drugs that will increase sexual performance. Skin, hair, sexuality are stigmatized in these commercials. One’s body is flawed. But the world of illusion provides the solution and prove it through magical imaging. Visual techniques show wrinkles disappearing, skin becoming smooth and soft, hair changing color, or just returning.

In sum, the rhetoric of images in television commercials cleanse the utopian world of the aged, offers the aged some hope of existing in a “marginalized” world with the therapeutic benefits of prescription drugs. The images in television commercials define aging as a process of physical change only, physical deterioration, and because of that physical change transgresses the norm; it is a process that needs to be resisted. It also reinforces more, consumer subjectivity, the acceptance that aging is as it is defined in advertising, and that the solution to the anxiety that the commercials creates in the consumer can be resolved by buying and using the product. The images that the commercials deploy to define those who have aged is similar. The aged must cope with the pathology of aging; this is inevitable because the diseases are a normal part of aging. And those aged that have money must spend their money actively enjoying their retirement, their golden years. The real power of the image is revealed; it imagines the diseases associated as old age as being the natural result of aging, like physical change, and persuades the aged that prescription drugs, consuming, is the solution. Most diseases that are “imagined” in the commercials are caused not by aging, but by the behaviors normalized by a consumer culture;: poor diet of a fast food culture, fat, sugar and salt, lack of exercise because of overwork, when employed, and stress when unemployed, and/or a failed health care system.

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“Television’s ‘super media’ status strengthens.”