

1934

# Our Master's Voice: Advertising

## James Rorty

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with a new  
introduction by  
Jefferson Pooley



*James Rorty*

OUR MASTER'S VOICE  
*ADVERTISING*

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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## 16 THE MOVIES

ALTHOUGH not a part of the advertising business proper, the movie industry maintains and is maintained by a huge and efficiently operated advertising apparatus—the dozen or so popular movie magazines whose combined circulation of over 3,000,000 ranks next in volume to that of the women's magazines.

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These magazines serve in effect as house organs for the \$42,000,000,000 movie industry which every week spreads its wares before 77,000,000 American movie-goers, including 28,000,000 minors. But like other mass and class publications these movie magazines are also house organs for their advertisers—chiefly manufacturers of cosmetics, drugs and fashion goods. How this dual rôle is worked out and how the movie magazines articulate into the general economic scheme of the movie industry becomes at once apparent when we examine their promotion literature. I quote from a looseleaf promotion booklet issued by *Photoplay Magazine*, the largest and most successful of the movie magazines:

*Photoplay* offers you a concentrated, compact audience of 600,000 predominantly younger women the New Wanters ... *Photoplay* ... is outstandingly tributary to the great sales-making, want-building influence of the screen.

We begin to glimpse what is perhaps the major rôle of the movie in our society, and a little later, in a signed statement by the editor, Mr. James R. Quirk, we find this rôle explicitly stated:

It became increasingly apparent to the publishers of *Photoplay* that the vast public who spent millions through motion picture box offices was interested in more than the stories flashed upon the screen; that they were absorbing something beyond the vicarious emotions and adventures of the screen folk.

The millions of young women who attended motion pictures began to realise that, closely observing the stars and leading women of the screen, they could take lessons to enhance their own attractiveness and personality. Hollywood became the beauty center of the world....

Following closely the new interests which the motion picture provoked in the minds of the audience, and the desires of millions of women to profit by their achievement of beauty, the magazine sent experts on beauty and fashions and famous photographers to Hollywood and reported to its readers every new phase of the development of feminine attractiveness. These subjects today share in basic importance with the news of Hollywood pictures and personalities.

That made *Photoplay* outstanding as a medium for advertisers.... Its readers are inspired by the editorial pages to buy the goods shown in its advertising pages. The editorial and advertising interests dovetail perfectly.

Its fashion and beauty editors, all of whom have had training in actual merchandising, are recognized by the trades as experts. Such stores as Marshall Field & Company of Chicago use its fashion pages in their selections and merchandising, and credit *Photoplay* in their newspaper advertising, recognizing the combined style promotion power of the screen and the magazine. Thousands of beauty shops throughout the country receive and display its announcements of new Hollywood coiffures and new beauty methods of the most beautiful stars.

One somehow gets the impression that Mr. Quirk knows what the motion picture industry is all about and what it is for. This impression is confirmed when we note that *Photoplay* lists over 80 well-known manufacturers of drugs, cosmetics and fashion goods among its 1931-32 advertisers. It is further confirmed by the following even more explicit statement of the nature of the business, quoted from the same source:

When women go to the movies they go to see themselves not in the mirror but in the ideal world of fancy. During that hour or two in the romantic world of make-believe, potent influences are at work. New desires are instilled, new wants implanted, new impulses to spend are aroused. These impulses may be at the moment only vague longings, but sooner or later they will crystallize into definite wants.

When the American woman sees her favorite screen actress and notes with very keen interest every detail of her attire ... she is immersed in that mood which makes her most receptive to the suggestion that she must have these lovely things for her own ... and she will scheme and plan to have for her own the charming frocks and appealing millinery, the smart footwear, the seductive furs and wraps—all the tempting possessions which the silver screen has so seductively exposed to her view....

*The motion picture paves the way. Photoplay carries on, renewing the impulses caught on the screen. It gives your product's address and telephone number.*

The facts are as stated, and the argument is logical and convincing. It is clinched on the next page by a skillful reference to what is without doubt the major asset of this movie-advertising coalition, which is Youth.

Last year two million, next year two million, in the next ten years twenty million, young men and women will come of age.... They will want necessities, pleasures, luxuries. And they will get them—because their *buying temperature* is high.... It will pay you handsomely to find the best point of contact with these millions of new wanters. It will pay you to lay your wares before them in the atmosphere of enthusiasm and romance in which the desire to own the good things of life is engendered.... Photoplay's audience, 600,000 strong, is predominantly with the younger women.

What is the nature of this admirable piece of promotion literature, prepared under the direction of one of America's leading publisher's consultants?

It is, quite evidently, by way of being applied sociology and psychology. It is supplemented by tables and graphs showing the buying power of *Photoplay's* readers, these being based on the research of Daniel Starch, Ph.D., who operates a well-known and successful commercial research bureau. Dr. Starch's figures seem startlingly high, but there is really no good reason for supposing that his study was less honest, less "objective," than that of the group of sociologists, psychologists and educators who conducted the Payne Fund study of the motion picture with respect to its influence upon children and adolescents. Dr. Starch was employed by the allied motion picture-advertising business which has an axe to grind, and admits it. The Payne Fund investigation was financed by a philanthropic foundation and instigated by a middle-class reform organization, the Motion Picture Research Council, which also has an axe to grind, a moral axe, if you will. A little later we shall encounter another eminent sociologist and psychologist operating in this arena, namely Mr. Will Hays, who also has an axe to grind and more or less admits it, although in the nature of the case Mr. Hays' operations require a lavish output of pragmatic make-believe.

But first let us attempt to construct, on the foundations already laid, a slow-motion picture of what this business is and how it works.

As in all other forms of advertising, the causal sequence traces back to mass production as the most profitable technique of exploiting the "art and science" of the motion picture. Mass production requires mass distribution (including block booking and blind booking) and mass advertising; also standardization of the product in terms of maximum salability and a systematic "production of customers by a production of systematized illusions." The Payne Fund investigators discovered with horror that between 75 and 80 per cent of current motion pictures deal with crime, sex and love—obstinately refusing to merge the second two categories.

Surely this is pretty much beside the point; an analysis of Shakespeare's plays would probably show an even higher content of such subject matter.

The *Photoplay* promotion booklet, written by people who really know something about the industry, hits the nail on the head in emphasizing the standard content of romance, luxury and conspicuous expenditure. This is not only the commodity of maximum salability, but in the process of its manufacture and sale there emerges an important by-product which is duly sold to advertisers by the movie magazines.

Why does the motion picture with a high content of "romance," "beauty" and conspicuous expenditure represent the standard movie product of maximum salability? Because the dominant values of the society are material and acquisitive. And because the masses of the population, being economically debarred from the attainment of these values in real life, love to enjoy them vicariously in the dream world of the silver screen. The frustrations of real life are both alleviated and sharpened by the pictures. As in the case of sex, the imaginative release is only partially satisfying, and the female adolescent, particularly, leaves the motion picture theatre scheming, planning "to have for her own ... all the tempting possessions which the silver screen has so seductively exposed to her view." From this point *Photoplay* carries on, and renews the sweet torture in both its editorial and advertising columns, so that the stenographer goes without lunch to buy her favorite star's favorite face cream. The sales cycle is now completed, and the following mentioned profit-makers have duly participated: the producer, distributor and exhibitor of the motion picture; the motion picture magazine; Dr. Starch, who helped to present the merits of the motion picture magazine to the advertiser; the advertising agency which got a 15 per cent commission on the cost of the advertising space; the advertiser and all the distributive links ending with the drug store that sold the stenographer the vanishing cream (net manufacturing cost eight cents, retail price \$1.00).

But we are not through yet. The exploitative process as above outlined runs counter to the residual Puritanism, both consumptive and sexual of the American middle class, particularly the middle-class resident in that section of America referred to in the shop talk of the industry as "the Bible Belt." The movie industry is obliged, for honest commercial reasons, to break down this Puritanism. But the Puritans feel obliged to organize and effectuate their sales resistance, if only to protect their children from the corruptive influence of the movie industry. They also feel morally obliged to protect the children and adolescents of the lower classes and prevent them from enjoying almost the only kind of emotional release which their economic condition permits them.

So censorship movements spring up here, there and everywhere, usually sponsored and financed by the church groups, women's

clubs, parent-teacher organizations, etc., through which the middle class expresses its view of the morals, expenditure and conduct appropriate for an eighteen-year-old proletarian typist. These movements provided jobs and salaries chiefly for preachers without other "calls" and for women's club leaders enjoying more eminence than income.

Naturally, the industry felt obliged to defend its vested interest in the exploitation of the American masses, and specifically of the American kiddy, sub-flapper and flapper. That made more jobs, and since the industry was better organized and in a position to pay adequate salaries to such genuinely gifted propagandists as Will Hays, the industry invariably won. Mr. Hays makes use of a well-known principle of applied sociology which is expressed in the formula: "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." With his characteristic evangelical enthusiasm, Deacon Hays has managed in one way or another to "join" almost every movie-reform movement which has appeared on the horizon during his long tenure of office as President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc., popularly known as the "Hays office."

The public relations machinery operated by the Hays office is in effect a two-way system of diplomatic communication between the industry and the various pressure groups which represent public opinion as applied to the movies. Since Mr. Hays is employed by and responsible to the industry, he is expected to see that these pressure groups interfere as little as possible with the business as usual of the movies. But being a man of talent, and a sociologist of parts, the good deacon does a lot better than that. He strives always, and often with notable success, to induce these reform groups to become propagandists for the Hays office and salesmen of the Hollywood product, to the end that the Hays office, far from being merely a defense against censorship, may become a positive and useful sales promotion department for the industry as a whole. With this in view he has built up three major instrumentalities: (1) the National Board of Review, which clears and effectuates the judgments of ten organized pre-viewing groups: The International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, National Council of Jewish Women, National Society of Daughters of the American Revolution, the Congress of Parents and Teachers, National Society of New England Women, General Federation of Women's Clubs, Women's University Club of Los Angeles, Boy Scouts of America and Young Men's Christian Association. Note that these are all middle-class organizations, chosen because it is in middle-class pressure groups that censorship movements originate, although the bulk of the industry's income is derived from the lower classes and lower middle classes. In other words representatives



of the ruling middle and upper classes are invited to pass on what movies the masses are permitted to see.

(2) The local Motion Picture Councils, Better Film Committees, etc., consisting usually of club women, church women and local parent-teacher groups organized to deal with the 12,000 "neighborhood theatre situations" into which Mr. Hays breaks down his field organization problem. In 3,000 of these "situations" there is today a public group of some kind working with the theatre manager, and the membership of these groups is somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000.

(3) The Studio Relations Committee in Hollywood, which digests and clears the data coming in from the field, determines broad lines of production policy as it is affected by the organized opinion of these groups, and enables each producer to learn from the mistakes of the others.

Now watch what happens when this machinery goes into action. Some of these pre-viewing groups pass some pictures; others pass other pictures. In the end most of the pictures are likely to be passed by some one of the groups. This permits Dr. Hays to announce in his annual report for 1932 that of 476 feature films reviewed by seven committees 413 (86.7%) were "variously endorsed for family, adult and child entertainment ... by one or more of these committees." There we have not merely censorship reduced to innocuity, but a positive testimonial asset which the Hays office duly capitalizes by spreading the glad news to his field organization that "unsophisticated films pay ... more than 80 per cent of box-office champions of last year also endorsed in National Previewing Groups selections." And the motion picture committee of the General Federation of Women's Clubs sends out a statement of its program for the year urging each local club committee to take as its slogan, "Be Better Film Buyers."

But this isn't all. When the motion picture code hearings were held in Washington a group of representative club women appeared to protest against the evil of double features, which the producers also object to for profit reasons. And when Henry James Forman's book, *Our Movie-Made Children*, appeared the *Pennsylvania Clubwoman*, according to an article in the *Christian Century*, attacked this popularization of the Payne Fund studies and the Motion Picture Research Council which instigated these studies.

So that a neutral layman, listening to the hue and clamor about the movies, finds it a bit difficult to determine whether the Hays office has joined the reformers or the reformers have joined the Hays office. But the result is not in doubt. The industry has won every battle thus far, including the battle of Washington at which the motion

picture code was signed. In this code the industry got practically everything it asked for, including an undisturbed continuance of the blind booking and block booking practices by which the big producers are enabled to ensure a part of their market in advance of production. What did the reformers get? They got President-Emeritus Abbott Lawrence Lowell, of Sacco and Vanzetti fame, sitting on a committee with Eddie Cantor and Marie Dressier to safeguard the morality of the movies and the interests of the artists. This was supposed not to be funny, but Dr. Lowell couldn't see it that way and resigned. Dr. Lowell is now president of the Motion Picture Research Council, which instigated the Payne Fund studies of the effects of the motion pictures upon children, and that was also a serious matter.

Prior to the Payne Fund studies, the reform of the motion picture had been almost the exclusive province of preachers, club women, parent-teachers, Y. M. C. A. secretaries, Scout Masters, etc. Naturally the sociologists, educators, psychologists and other academic savants wanted in; there was a considerable overproduction of social scientists during the late New Era, and the universities and colleges were not able to absorb the surplus. Moreover, the Great Movie Argument, what with one thing and another, and especially Will Hays, had become loud, raucous and most unscientific. It was clearly up to the social scientists to Establish the Facts.

The Facts, as determined by eighteen assorted sociologists, psychologists and educators, are set forth in nine volumes published by Macmillan, and are also summarized and popularized in a book by Henry James Forman entitled *Our Movie-Made Children*.<sup>1</sup> It took four years to dig up the Facts, which, however, turned out to be pretty much what everybody knew all the time: that children who attend the movies frequently are likely to be stupider than children who don't go to the movies at all (this is also probably true of adults); that very young children are frequently shocked and nervously injured by horror pictures; that the movies not only reflect our changing sexual mores but also *affect* them—girls learn about men from John Gilbert and Clark Gable; boys learn about women from Clara Bow and Greta Garbo. Life then proceeds to imitate the art and pseudoart of the movies, in respect both to sex and to other aspects of conduct. Other findings were that children do learn from the movies and retain much of what they learn; that the movies constitute in effect an independent, profit-motivated educational apparatus rivalling and sometimes surpassing in influence the home and the school; that the movies can be and are used as propaganda for and against war, for and against different racial groups; that gangster pictures, with or without moral endings, tend to teach gangsterism.

<sup>1</sup> [Henry James Forman, *Our Movie Made Children* (New York: Macmillan, 1935). On the Payne Fund studies, see Garth Jowett, Ian C. Jarvis, and Katherine H. Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).]

Although the investigators made much pother about the "objective" "scientific" nature of this fact-finding study, they could scarcely escape value judgments, and Mr. Forman frankly applies such judgments in his popularization. They are middle-class value judgments, derived from the conventional mores of the middle-class community, and applied to an industry which is organized to serve not the classes, but the masses. These value judgments crop out when Cecil De Mille's ineffable "King of Kings" is cited as a "good" picture, and when Mr. Forman quotes the testimony of high school and college youngsters, asked to describe what effect the movies had on their lives. A college boy remarks sensibly enough:

The technique of making love to a girl received considerable of my attention ... and it was directly through the movies that I learned to kiss a girl on her ears, neck and cheeks, as well as on the mouth.

The implication is clear that such techniques are highly reprehensible, whereas on purely objective grounds there would appear to be something to be said for them.

But what the Payne Fund investigators didn't find is almost more interesting than what they did find. For instance, they failed to remark the rôle of the movie as commercial propaganda in promoting the enterprise of the advertiser. The consistent class bias of the movies also escaped attention although it is apparent enough both in the news reels and in the feature pictures. During the 1932 Communist-led Hunger March on Washington the newsreels were even more unfair than the press in deriding and misrepresenting the marchers. And who ever saw an American movie featuring as hero a successful strike leader?

As one of our three major instruments of social communication, the movie is an instrument of rule. Naturally, in a business-ruled society, the movie serves the propaganda requirements of business, both as to commerce and politics. Why did the industry get what it wanted and the reformers get nothing when the movie code was signed? Isn't it possible that the administration felt that it needed the good-will of the industry in order to stay in office?

Dr. W. W. Charters, director of the four-year study financed by the Payne Fund, remarks in his introduction to Mr. Forman's volume: "the commercial movies present a critical and complicated situation in which the whole-hearted and sincere co-operation of the producers with parents and public is essential to discover how to use motion pictures to the best advantage of children."

One is tempted to ask "What parents and what public?" The middle-class, more or less religious, more or less Puritan parents would doubtless like a good deal less frank sex in the movies, more

"education" and more "wholesome" romance of the *Ladies' Home Journal* variety. But the younger generation of the great cities might be expected to assert, with some justice, that there is both more art and more health in the sex movie at its worst than in the average woman's magazine romance. There would probably be equally violent disagreement concerning other varieties of social content. The radical labor movement, if it were strong enough to have an effective voice in the reform of the movies, would presumably demand that the producers stop using news reels and feature pictures as anti-labor propaganda, and even give them an occasional picture with a strike leader as hero. One doubts that the middle-class reform groups would either make or support such a demand.

The dilemma, which would have become apparent if, as originally planned, a competent and sufficiently unorthodox economist had been included in the group that made the Payne Fund study, is that the movie industry represents Big Business operating in a cultural field, but for purely commercial purposes. The industry will co-operate "wholeheartedly and sincerely" with anybody and everybody for the good of the industry as determined by box office receipts. Pressure groups, whether middle-class or proletarian, which would like to see a different set of value judgments, will in the end, one suspects, be obliged to shoot their own movies and build their own audiences.

No mention has been made of the use of the movie for direct advertising purposes. The "sponsored" movie—a more or less entertaining short subject, advertising a commercial product or service and introduced into a regular program—was tentatively tried out in 1929 and 1930. The idea was to sell the advertiser a given run of his sponsored short in chain theatres. The theatres "owned" their audiences, or thought they did, and would have been glad to sell the "fans" at so much a head to the advertisers. But the audiences proved restive and the idea was pretty much abandoned. A certain modicum of two-timing is observable in the current run of pictures, but it ordinarily takes the form of propaganda rather than of advertising. The industry frequently needs to use the paraphernalia of the army and the navy. It is therefore good business to permit a percentage of army and navy propaganda in the pictures. As for the use of the pictures and endorsements of movie stars in advertising, that is merely a by-product of the industry and a part of its promotion technique. Whether or not the public credits the sincerity of these endorsements is unimportant; they sell goods and they advertise the star.