



## The Rise of mass advertising: law, enchantment, and the cultural boundaries of British modernity

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Rise of Mass Advertising: Law, Enchantment, and the Cultural Boundaries of British Modernity**, by Anat Rosenberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, xx + 406 pp., illus., £70.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-285891-7

*The Rise of Mass Advertising* traces the growth and legitimization of print advertising practices in nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. Rosenberg has structured this history around two arguments: First, as opportunities for mass advertising proliferated, cultural and legal boundary work sought to distinguish it from other domains such as the press, the arts, and the sciences. Each of these domains is examined in Chapters 2–4, and each had an uneasy relationship to the role that advertising played in their own development. Newspapers, for example, benefitted from casting advertising as an inferior type of information, thus creating both a source of revenue and a set of vague delineations that insulated journalistic content from discrediting profit motives (Chapter 2). A similar discrediting dynamic resulted from the legal disentanglement of quackery from a nascent medical profession, again with the aim of preserving the credibility of the latter (Chapter 4). Both created avenues for the legitimization of exaggeration and excess in advertising practice, though the appearance of hoardings, endemic in the urban visual landscape and full of artistic potential, illustrates how billboarding trades sought to conciliate the aesthetic and promotional dimensions of public spaces (Chapter 3). All three chapters show how advertising was a serious force in the organization of these cultural fields, but that due to its construal as informationally, aesthetically, and scientifically inferior, it was not to be taken *too* seriously.

Throughout these chapters, Rosenberg starts hinting at her second argument, which is that this boundary work evidences a continuous disavowal of the enchantments mediated through the market. To demonstrate how prevalent enchantment was to the everyday consumer, Chapter 1 details the kinds of flights of the imagination or enchanted travel that advertising could engender, as well as audiences' persistent 'will to enchantment' in the face of an intensification of advertisements across print media. This will did not imply a lack of scrutiny on the reader's part; fantastical expectations of what the market could offer were measured up against background and local knowledges, as well as discerning and specialized modes of reading. Negotiation was key here, and Rosenberg shows how its apparent failures (leading to, for example, legal proceedings or press outrage) offer a window onto the development of a market society. Readerly discernment was bred, in part, in response to puffery, which Rosenberg argues in Chapter 5 was tolerated in law as a necessary market phenomenon, but this stance also cast legal ridicule over advertising more generally, and diverted attention from its capacity to enchant. Debates on gambling advertisements and 'indecent' messaging (Chapter 6) could have engaged enchantment head-on, but the recourse to censorship equally stymied deeper theorization thereof. As a result of these disavowals, advertisers began embracing a professional identity as market enchanters whilst attempting to frame their expertise in rationalist explanations of persuasion and promotional practice (Chapter 7). Rosenberg therefore demonstrates that enchantment far from dissipated in the wake of rationalist modernity: it became an uncomfortable undercurrent in popular, legal,

and professional discourse, and its everyday manifestations are palpable in the book's sources.

Rosenberg's empirical work is rooted in wide-ranging reception evidence from personal ephemera (e.g., scrapbooks) to cultural works (e.g., fiction and paintings). More uncommonly, she also draws on legal archives, including court case documentation and transcripts, legal treatises, and case reports. These sources are of particular note: upholding a cultural theory of law, Rosenberg dissects legal judgement and debate as a way to unravel the norming of advertising environments. Far from succumbing to legalese, however, Rosenberg's expository style foregrounds the human implications—for the consumers, but also for the publishers, advertisers, judges, and pundits—of the experiences that led to these legal proceedings.

*The Rise of Mass Advertising* is an expansive endeavour—but it is delivered with astute specificity. Besides providing an extensive account of the formative decades of British mass advertising, the book engages and complements works that question sweeping narratives of modern disenchantment such as Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton University Press, 2001) and, more recently, Eugene McCarragher's *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Harvard University Press, 2019). Rosenberg shows how drawing out the experiential, material, and mystical qualities of promotional culture can illuminate advertising as more than a brute force in the march of capitalism, and restore its place as a site of institutional and societal negotiation of the profound changes brought on by British modernity.

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