

## Book reviews

**Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, *Landscapes of Capital: Representing Time, Space, and Globalization in Corporate Advertising*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011, 224 pp.**

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*Landscapes of Capital* by Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson has now been out for a couple years, and continues to offer a fresh though rigorous perspective on the implications of high-tech globalization and contemporary capitalism. The book was published in a very timely fashion, at the height of the palpable consequences of the 2008 economic crisis.

Starting from the basic premise that contemporary capitalism not "only produces flows of goods and monies but also flows of signs" [p. 14], in this book Goldman and Papson set out to understand how "Capital" represents itself and the world that it shapes and envisions. At a theoretical level, the book aims "to produce a picture of how Capital itself is branded" [p. 15], with particular emphasis on tropes pertaining to the spatial, temporal, technological and social relations that are at the heart of the "new" global economy. More broadly, this research aims to explore the relationship and correspondence between advertising as a cultural economy of signs and the economic logics and forces of capitalism.

At the empirical level, the book's main aim is to examine "how specific corporate campaigns work to brand corporations" [p. 15] and therefore also how a corporate "sign value" is established and reinforced. With a dataset of 2400 corporate television advertisements dating from 1995 to 2010, Goldman and Papson are able to offer a comprehensive snapshot of corporate advertising at the turn of the millennium. In their analysis, they offer a meticulous description and contextualization of key representational structures such as the montage and "preferred signifiers" like "beams of light, globes, trains, monks, nuns, eyes, handshakes, children, camels, rockets, satellites" [p. 198] as well as other "floating grand signifiers" [p. 17] like transparent surfaces and speed blurs. It is also worth noting that the authors originally developed their sample as a digital database, which they made available online, thus also creating a collaborative platform for engagement and discussion as their research project developed (<http://it.stlawu.edu/~global/>).

From a methodological standpoint, *Landscapes of Capital* combines a Marxian perspective with a semiological approach that is clearly and assertively grounded in the work of Jean Baudrillard. This framework enables Goldman and Papson to make important linkages between the economics and semiotics of global corporate capitalism. For example, they note how the "new economy" is discursively produced and recounted in ways that point to the commodification of family and community, the apparent erasure of class relations and inequalities, the invisibility of sites of material production and labour, the disappearance of nation-states, and the deployment of diversity and multiculturalism (most often through the technique of serial montage) as generic appeals rather than substantive claims. As they highlight in their analysis of corporate ads produced for companies in finance, computing and biotechnology among other sectors, "[h]ierarchy and authority seem non-existent; social connection is constituted on the

lateral axis” [p. 84]. In doing this, corporate advertising also deploys rhetorics of transparency and speed, insofar as these “depict capitalist relations not only as they are, not even as they have been, but as they might be – full of openness, hope, and possibility” [p. 17].

What is perhaps most thought-provoking in Goldman and Papson’s analysis is the recognition that the discourse that characterizes these ads is inherently self-contradictory. As they write:

The same ads that deny the conditions of class also fantasize about the pleasures of privilege; the same ads that paint a utopian moment of retirement unconstrained by either scarcity or the performance principle also acknowledge that capitalist work relations are essentially a constraint on human potentialities; the same ads that betoken freedom and flexibility in new wireless technologies also treat it as a necessary leash. [p. 101]

In other words, contemporary Capital (throughout the volume, the authors purposefully capitalize this word) manifests itself through a series of ambiguous claims, which however also display its intrinsic reliance on seemingly oppositional narratives such as equality, diversity and even freedom from capitalist structures.

In a fashion that has been typical of traditional semiological and political economy approaches to communication and media culture, *Landscapes of Capital* does not directly research the institutions, agencies and individuals that are behind the production and distribution of corporate advertising. A sociological or ethnographic grounding of the authors’ claims in relation to the intentions, motivations and causes behind the encoding processes underlying the ads would add empirical depth to this work. At times, Goldman and Papson seem to end up being culpable of what they claim that corporate ads contribute to doing, that is, nominalize Capital as if this were an agentless – and therefore also inevitable – phenomenon that does not originate in the material and symbolic practices of specific institutions, corporations and governments.

Nevertheless, Goldman and Papson’s analysis is brilliantly embedded in an in-depth understanding and explanation of key aspects of contemporary economics. For example, they highlight corporate ads’ tendency to substitute concrete products or services for a recurrent series of abstract signifiers in an attempt to add “sign value” to their brand, and in turn equate this symbolic practice to the economic notion of “hyperreal capital” – that is, financial capital that is based on layers of derivatives generated by computer models, and which is therefore eminently removed from its actual, basic assets. As we know, the development of derivatives is largely responsible for the increasing abstraction of the stock and credit market, which led to the current state of economic crisis.

While this work may benefit from using language that is more widely accessible, its target audience will not find it too difficult or arcane. The book seems to cater to a specific brand of critical theory, located at the nexus of postmodernism and political economy. This said, it is also firmly rooted in the previous work of both authors, who have become very well established in communication and media studies over a period that spans nearly a quarter of a century. Overall, *Landscapes of Capital* is an important

contribution to the growing “landscape” of scholarship on key discourses and narratives of global capitalism across the humanities and social sciences.

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