

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has its origins in an interdisciplinary workshop on German advertising and public relations held at McMaster University in November 2003. During a fruitful three-day meeting, European and North American scholars representing a variety of fields (history, art history, film studies, and environmental studies) met to share their newest insights on the historical and cultural significance of advertising and product promotion. This collection of essays, while primarily a work of history, seeks in a modest way to draw together those interdisciplinary interests and lay a foundation for future studies.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1959 economist and market researcher Wilhelm Vershofen noted a curious phenomenon in West Germany: “There are still contemporaries who fundamentally reject advertising.” In the midst of the “Economic Miracle,” this fact was indeed puzzling. Consumer goods were flooding shops and showrooms, and West Germans were enjoying the fruits of the country’s postwar recovery. Yet at the same time, critics were denouncing advertisements as psychologically manipulative, vilifying their creators as sinister brainwashers, and dismissing advertising as an expensive and ineffective medium that drove up the price of a product. Against this backdrop, Vershofen drew attention to an odd paradox: critics of advertising were dismissing the very practice they “freely took advantage of.”¹

Today such sweeping rejections of advertising are harder to find. Companies take for granted the necessity of using advertising for the effective marketing of goods and services. Indeed, by 2004 advertising alone accounted for 1 percent of the global gross domestic product, and the figure continues to rise.² Advertising serves not only an essential economic function in advanced industrial societies, but plays cultural and social roles as well: European moviegoers look forward to a half hour of product promotions before a feature film; many Americans watch the National Football League’s Super Bowl Championship “just for the ads”; ad slogans permeate the language of popular culture; and there are annual awards throughout the world for the best television commercials, radio spots, Internet ads, and even in-flight airline promotional films. Yet popular and scholarly critiques of advertising—its strategies, its pervasiveness, its effectiveness—have by no means disappeared.