Book Review

Review of Nemorin, Selena. 2018. *Biosurveillance in New Media Marketing: World, Discourse, Representation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 324 pp. US \$64.99. ebook. ISBN: 9783319962160.

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We might feel relieved to learn that mass media advertising and marketing have finally moved beyond treating the brain as a passive “buy button” or viewing consumers as cultural dopes. Not only are these marketing strategies now thought to be aspirational or implausible, they have also proven to be largely ineffective and unprofitable, at least in the long run. Attempts by advertising companies to access the subconscious emotional networks of consumers—through subliminal messages that side-step, short-circuit, or disrupt conscious deliberation, for instance—are widely seen as futile or unpredictable. The notion that even the most gullible consumer or impressionable shopper, when targeted by the right sales pitch, can be “nudged” into impulse buying relies on a set of outmoded metaphors of the brain-as-hardware or emotions-as-software. Since mass media is no longer the *only* message, new media must look for other ways to stimulate the pain-and-pleasure centres that yield pay and profit.

Selena Nemorin’s *Biosurveillance in New Media Marketing* (2018) examines the dark side of the latest developments in what is now called “neuromarketing,” which uses brain- and bio-imaging technologies to track the cerebral, affective, and sensorimotor activity of consumers in an effort to anticipate and manipulate how they respond to advertising stimuli: “These moves extend the reach of marketing from the biopolitics of simply managing bodies to include the neuropolitics of also managing brains” (170). This now well-established field of marketing research both extends and supersedes the scientific management and behavioural psychology of the post-war era. In large part, it can now presume that consumers are thoroughly immersed in media-saturated lifestyles and commercially entrenched cultural environments defined by corporate brands, logos, and slogans. Nemorin aims to update earlier media studies by Vance Packard and Stuart Ewen while rethinking the critical perspectives of Theodor Adorno and Jean Baudrillard for our digital age. Her timeframe stretches from 1998, the year neuroimaging was patented as a marketing tool, to 2018, the first full year when more people connected to the internet with a mobile device than with a desktop computer. Drawing on a large collection of materials—advertisements, popular books, journal articles, news reports, and patents, as well as company websites, online talks, podcasts, and videos—she documents the birth of “dataveillance,” that is, the panoptic extraction, encoding, and classification of personal and population-specific information for the purposes of enhancing consumer profiles in the interests of prediction and control.

The main move of these new corporate strategies lies in shifting the focus from a machine-model of

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consumers as manipulated automata to an enhanced animal-model of targeted audience niches. This change in concept-metaphors is incomplete and imperfect, since technologies are themselves imagined to nudge, prod, and stimulate moods, emotions, and feelings while also training and tracking preferences, predispositions, and conditioned responses. The “Like” button on social media platforms, for example, is not just a data point for compiling consumer profiles but also a node in a multi-modal technical assemblage that merges corporate branding campaigns, privately funded university research projects, clinical laboratories, and psychological studies. Like lie-detectors or phrenologists, electroencephalography (EEG) and functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) machines serve as desire-decoders by recording heart rate, galvanic skin responses, pupil dilation, eye movements, facial modifications, and limbic brain reactions. The assumption guiding the use of these technologies for commercial purposes is that they can know the behavior of consumers or anticipate their preferences better than the consumers themselves (or better than the consumers can conceal from others), effectively bypassing critical thought by eliciting an emotional response.

A surprising and novel aspect of Nemorin's approach lies with her use of Heidegger's 1929–1930 lectures, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, to elaborate a phenomenology of the world of neuromarketing through a hermeneutic analysis of new media texts. In the idiosyncratic language of metaphysics, the marketing strategy of exploiting the “augmented animality” of consumer desires and aversions is said to entail the creation of restrained horizons or “circumscribed worlds” (*Umringen*) characterized by varying degrees of confinement and captivation (*Benommenheit*). “Niche-marketing” can therefore be understood literally as a technique for encircling and entrapping the life-world of the consumer by fusing content and context, figure and background, or public and private experience. The richly layered world-forming (*weltformend*) activities of human imagination and thought (the basic elements of the discerning and “agentic consumer”) are thereby dismantled and replaced by the world-poor (*weltarme*) reactions of instinctual shopping and impulse buying.

Perhaps the critical dimension of this phenomenological and hermeneutic approach to new media marketing lies in its “estrangement effect,” where it is as if we are asked to see our most taken-for-granted assumptions anew and from an odd angle. The all-too-familiar Marxian analysis of new media and its corporate controlled platforms is thus replaced by a more patient meditation on how “structures of understanding” (*Verstehen*) and “meaning-making” are shaped by technological media. Since so much marketing today consists of *tracking media devices* rather than *manipulating messages*, we might extend Nemorin's discussion of Heidegger's ontological examination of handtools (*Handzeuge*) in *Being and Time* to consider the cell phone, which Germans often call the *Handy*. The cell phone is “ready-to-hand” or available (*zuhanden*) insofar as we thoughtlessly carry it around, allowing it to recede into the background of everyday life. But it becomes “present-to-hand” or occurrent (*vorhanden*) when we reflect on it “thematically” as a means of communication, an instrument of world disclosure (*Unverborgenheit*) (105–106; 187), or when we lose or break it.

In terms of Marx's *Capital*, the latest advances in brain-mining and attention-capture intensify the primitive accumulation of land and labour through the commodification of intelligence, attention, emotion, and life itself (205–211). Nemorin tells us: “As capital produces workers, mass media businesses produce audiences and deliver them to advertisers. This process of socio-political, cultural and economic interconnectivity comprises... an assemblage with neuro-marketing as the agent of predictive intelligence offering scientifically grounded strategies to maximize advertising effectiveness” (162). Or as Heidegger might have put it in “The Question Concerning Technology,” neuromarketing enframes bio-data as a mere standing reserve (*Bestand*) through imaging-technologies that extract, refine, and redistribute them as an exploitable resource. Nemorin's book shows us how corporate biosurveillance, even more than its governmental counterpart, does not simply record desires and preferences but also redesigns environments and subjectivities from the inside out and at the tip of our fingers.