

**Author claims:**

# Subliminal seduction makes customer victim

By AGNES KRUCHIO

**Subliminal Seduction**, by Wilson Bryan Key, Prentice Hall Inc., 206 pages, \$7.95

Whatever else this book may be, it is a must reading for all students of communications, mental health politics, business and, in general, all those who are concerned with personal freedom and the quality of our life.

Its message is nothing less than the age old adage: let the buyer beware. The buyer Wilson Bryan Key is talking about, is not even aware of the fact that he is about to become a buyer — he is only a passing, passive consumer of advertising in magazines, newspapers and television. The fame of which he is a victim, is the most expensive and the most dangerous — the subliminal manipulation of the consumer by an eight-billion-dollar-a-year advertising industry.

**INCREDIBLE CLAIMS**

Yet, the book is full of incredible claims and Key gives little allowance for the sceptic. Some of Key's claims include: a five member orgy embedded in a Gilbey's gin ad, S-E-X embedded just about everywhere, including children's toy ads, "U BUY" printed in mirror writing in a brand glass for Bacardi rum ad; suggestive shapes and figures in any and all ice cubes, which, he claims need be painted, as "you can't photograph ice under hot floodlights; and sexual innuendoes and symbolism in just about every form of advertising, from beer commercials to cigarette ads.

While he has a good supply of photographs and elaborates extensively on some of them, the inevitable question that arises and which Key fails to answer is: given that these things are present, do they really work?

Key fails to substantiate his claims with any kind of theoretical or experimental backing, and the psychological research conducted by universities in this area, as he points out, is very meager.

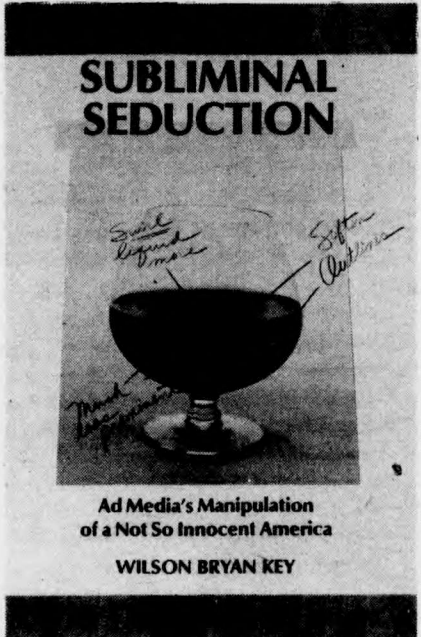
Nevertheless, he fails to connect his theory to this body of research. A quick scan of his bibliography reveals little perceptual research material. He discusses occasional studies he has conducted with his students, but we are not given a breakdown of the details, and thus we do not know just

how strict controls were in his experiments.

**FINANCIALLY FEASIBLE**

His claim is that that in any large segment of the population, subliminal signals work sufficiently to render the phenomenon statistically significant. Therefore it is financially feasible and advantageous for companies to pay as high a sum as \$15,000 for the art work that goes into the back-page ad on a high-circulation magazine like Time.

The only credibility he does have is in his background — ten years in



various capacities and associations in the communications media, as producer, consultant, and head of an international research and development corporation. He has a doctorate in communications and has taught at various universities. At present he teaches journalism at the University of Western Ontario.

**BASIC FLAWS**

A basic flaw of the book, aside from the lack of substantiation of the effectiveness of the use of subliminal stimuli, is the inaccurate use of the term "subliminal", which Key uses to cover everything from actual sub-threshold signals, to suggestive shapes, symbolic meanings and the implications suggested in situations that are portrayed, in the ads.

He relies heavily on Freudian symbolism, and without substantiation some of these interpretations do seem far-fetched and damage his case more

than support it.

Combing through a book to separate the wheat from the chaff is a rather aggravating process, in spite of a brisk, entertaining cannot-put-it-down-until-you're-finished style.

He sometimes takes an annoyingly male-chauvinistic attitude as he interprets some of the symbolism, and he is grossly inaccurate as a result. For example, any oblong shape from a woman's relaxed arm to a teaspoon have phallic significance for him, and an attractive woman in a recruiting ad for army nurses is automatically masculine because she wears a uniform.

**NO OGRES**

Key does not set up the advertising industry as some sort of an ogre or as a conspiracy to invade the privacy of the individual. He claims, simply, that these things go on, they happen because of the economics of the situation, when rather large sums are involved in advertising a product. As a result, a company has to make sure that its advertising is effective.

There is a substantial amount of private research that had been conducted on behalf of industry, commerce, and the advertising and research companies they employ on the use and effects of subliminal stimuli, and at the same time negligible amount of research by universities.

He calls therefore for the appropriation of this research in the interest of the public good. In the meantime he urges readers to be more aware of the affect advertising has upon their lives.

**THEME VALID**

While the book's basic theme is valid, (i.e. knowing about the nature of the emotional hooks advertisers use allows for more awareness and therefore more freedom of choice), unfortunately, Key fails to prove his case regarding the effectiveness of subliminal stimuli and his investigations may be in fact damaging in terms of discouraging further research into the area.

Awareness of the emotional manipulation that is often not quite so subliminal reduces the extent of the

influence of the manipulation. The meager experimental evidence that does in fact exist points to the fact that an individual who is repressed and unaware of his motivations is more vulnerable in the face of subtle and

subliminal stimuli.

Self-knowledge, then, makes for a wary buyer: this is the theme of the book; the rest can be taken with a grain of salt. However far-fetched, this book should be read.

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