



SWIFT

The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence Charles R. Acland

VIEWING

Swift Viewing

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CHARLES R. ACLAND

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For
Haidee,
Lillian Ava,
and
Stella Lucy

In the whole field of mass communication, the “hidden meaning” is not truly unconscious at all, but represents a layer which is neither quite admitted nor quite repressed—the sphere of innuendo, the winking of an eye and “you know what I mean.”

THEODOR ADORNO, 1953

. . . an excess of speed turns into repose.

ROLAND BARTHES, 1957

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Prologue

BLACK MAGIC ON MARS

The star persona of Orson Welles had many facets: whiz kid auteur, arbiter of middlebrow taste, charismatic actor, bon vivant raconteur, and tabloid darling. He was also a symbol of media deception, a status augmented by his interest in magic. Already famous for his innovative stagecraft and recognizable as the mysterious baritone radio voice of “The Shadow,” he captured national attention, and found an enduring place in the history of media effects, with the Mercury Theater’s radio broadcast on 30 October 1938 of H. G. Wells’s classic *The War of the Worlds*, rewritten by Howard Koch as an on-the-spot radio documentary. Welles was able to bamboozle reportedly thousands into believing that an invasion of aliens, and the destruction of cities along the eastern coast of the United States, was real. Accounts of people telephoning loved ones, dashing for safety, crashing automobiles, and praying madly helped contemporary commentators see the response as a genuine mass panic. In their scholarly account of the incident, *The Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic* (1940), Hadley Cantril, with Hazel Gaudet and Herta Herzog, described “a panic of national proportions,” terrorizing people from “Maine to California.”¹

The broadcast came at a time of rising attention to ideas about media influence, especially on the part of scholars. Before the establishment of a lasting institutional presence for the study of mass communication after the Second World War, media re-

search appeared in any number of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and political science. The movement toward consolidation of this research into a single discipline was evident in the late 1930s, as interdisciplinary research programs worked toward a formalization of what mass media research might be. Especially influential in this endeavor was the work of the Rockefeller Foundation, which invested in research and cultural programs that included live theater, film, broadcasting, libraries, microphotography, and museums. Among the enterprises that the foundation supported was the Princeton Radio Research Project (PRRP). Beginning in 1937 the project undertook cooperative research ventures with business in order to understand listeners' activity. The Viennese labor and statistics scholar Paul Lazarsfeld, who arrived in the United States in 1933, was the director of the PRRP, which included as associate directors Frank Stanton, director of research at CBS (later to become its president), and the Princeton psychology professor Hadley Cantril.²

With these rumblings of research activity Welles's momentous Halloween broadcast was timely, arriving as a new social science configuration was beginning to be institutionalized. On the night of the broadcast Stanton, working coincidentally at the network that carried the Mercury Theater's weekly radio play series, received a late-night telephone call from Lazarsfeld, who described early reports of panic incited by the show. As Stanton tells it, the two knew instinctively that the broadcast provided a golden opportunity to study an unusual media effect.³ They composed a survey and interview questions, and set out to gather as much information as possible on the thinking of the audiences. Fortuitously, while the Welles broadcast originated from New York City and was carried by ninety-two stations, the setting of the radio play was New Jersey.⁴ As Cantril put it, "Since it happened that the study was conducted from Princeton, the interviews were almost all made in the northern New Jersey area for reasons of supervision, convenience and economy. Fortunately the first Martian machine landed only a few miles from the source of the investigation."⁵ Thus a fledgling research project was near the site of the most intense hysteria. The Mercury Theater broadcast was a star-making media phenomenon for Welles, the researchers at the PRRP, and the up-start academic discipline of communication studies.

Cantril's study involved a combination of research methods, including comparison with CBS's own survey, as well as Herta Herzog's detailed descriptions of individual subjects. The researchers attempted to itemize

and weigh the panic's precipitating factors, including personality traits, income, religious convictions, and education. Cantril deemed these factors "causal," which he admitted did not fit traditional behaviorist definitions of the term.⁶ Cantril discussed the historical context of totalitarianism and low degrees of economic security elsewhere in the world, particularly emphasizing that the crisis in Europe was the main news story in the fall of 1938, which made invasion topical and deadly serious. More generally, the researchers reasoned, the rapidity of twentieth-century scientific discovery had been mystifying to most and appeared to come from "a universe of discourse completely foreign to the perplexed layman."⁷ Many technologies seemed otherworldly to people, and "the telephone, the airplane, poison gas, the radio, the camera are but specific manifestations of a baffling power."⁸ In this, Cantril felt, there resided a potential fatalism concerning the state of the world and one's ability to do anything about it—a general sentiment and assessment of contemporary society shared, interestingly enough, by another member of the PRRP, Theodor Adorno. The study pointed to some determining features of suggestibility, though it concluded that there was no single cause of the panic. Those most frightened did appear to share a lack of criticality about the broadcast. Avoiding laying blame at the feet of media corporations, and appropriately acknowledging the complexity of mass panics, the study's summation stated, "It is not the radio, the movies, the press or 'propaganda' which, in themselves, really create wars and panics. It is the discrepancy between the whole superstructure of economic, social, and political practices and beliefs, and the basic and derived needs of individuals that creates wars, panics or mass movements of any kind."⁹ With this explanation Cantril fell neatly on the side of trusting the protective and restorative powers of education and reason, citing the irrationality of lynch mobs as a dangerous counterexample.¹⁰ Arming people with the critical abilities necessary for rationality was the pressing project for mass democratic society, not to mention for the new field of mass communication research.

It is curious that such a careful and expansive analysis was prevented by its liberal presumptions from investigating the sentiment at the root of the broadcast panic. Why was belief in, and concern about, new technologies of travel and communication (not to mention species!) understood as a mark of irrationality and gullibility? In the late 1930s spacecraft would not reach the Red Planet for several decades, but they would

eventually get there and elsewhere. Only a few decades earlier a significant bestseller and curiosity in the field of psychology was Théodore Flournoy's *From India to the Planet Mars*, which recounted in detail a person's recovered memories of past lives and space travel, and in so doing was taken as a document of the complexities of the unconscious mind.¹¹ The authenticity of the material may have been questionable, but the book is an example of the power that parapsychological ideas had long held for lay and expert audiences alike.

The reasonableness of expecting the unexpected, and the unimaginable, was lost on Cantril and his co-authors. Quite directly, Cantril pronounced the escapist popular pleasures of movies, pulp stories, gaudy décor, and religious fanaticism to be signs of psychological deficiency.¹² This conclusion is all the more questionable if one considers how loosely the authors used the term "panic." To measure the extent of the panicked response, a survey performed six weeks after the original broadcast asked respondents whether they had found the broadcast frightening: 28 percent said they had thought the drama was a news report, and 70 percent of those people claimed to have been frightened or disturbed by what they heard. This translates into 1.2 million of the estimated audience of 6 million. Cantril went further, presuming that the true number was higher because people would likely have been embarrassed to admit to an interviewer that they had been frightened.¹³ Given the structure of Cantril's analysis, it is impossible to separate fright from panic among his respondents, or to identify the relation between the two. Moreover, his survey included the question "How do you account for the fact that many people became frightened and hysterical during the broadcast?"¹⁴ Thus Cantril's research presumed panic rather than documenting whether panic is the most accurate term for what happened.

Further and most obviously, the broadcast coincided with Halloween, an occasion that welcomes mischief and mayhem, which should lead us to wonder if people were willfully seeking out terrors. At what point is a listener who is scared by a Halloween broadcast contributing to a so-called national panic? Is being frightened by a ghost story really evidence of gullibility or psychological deficiency? In his work on nineteenth-century magic shows, Simon During argues that one characteristic of the modern era is the organization of different forms of understanding for entertainment and for scientific truth: "consumers of modern culture learn to accept one set of propositions in relation to the domain of fiction,

and another in relation to the everyday world.”¹⁵ The ability to accept unbelievable events in fiction that one would not accept in life speaks of an attentive and agile mind; it is a modern condition of being able to temporarily give oneself over to impossible and improbable things. And yet, as During notes, believing too much or being too much taken with the illusion can mark someone as childish or irrational, in contrast to the ironic disposition of someone fully rational. Might a similar split have been in operation on that October evening in 1938? The logic of Cantril’s study conflated belief in the veracity of the drama with real panic. A telling problem was that Cantril’s interview questions did not allow for the possibility that listeners might have been aware that they were listening to a play and yet were frightened at the same time.¹⁶ The methodological and conceptual limits of the survey tell us something of a deeply ingrained view of mass audiences as lacking the ability to tell the difference between representational fiction and actuality. People were presumed to be easily manipulated, anti-liberal, and irrational.

Interestingly, from the material that Cantril and his colleagues provide in their study, it is apparent that there was some degree of critical involvement by the listeners, though it may not have been developed and applied appropriately. People may have been recognizing the codes of a news broadcast, reasoning that there could have been technologies and scientific achievements not yet publicized, that invading armies were real prospects, and that the first reports of a sudden invasion would be only partially reliable. Indeed, some respondents said that they had understood the broadcast as a report of an invasion by earthly enemies, having missed or not heard the “Martian” part.¹⁷ Soon enough, global war was to begin and killing machines were about to be released that at this point were just the province of the imagination. If a comparable event had occurred during the nuclear anxiety of the late 1940s or the space race of the late 1950s, and some people had mistakenly assumed that their annihilation was nigh, would we have come to the same quick agreement about the irrationality of the masses?

Even with their nuanced conclusions, Cantril and his colleagues were echoing a stable idea about the innate feebleness of the modern mass mind. At least since Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd* (1895), mass populations have been understood as fearsomely irrational and antidemocratic entities.¹⁸ Significantly, this idea was not the purview of élites and ivory tower thinkers alone. As Jeffrey Sconce puts it, the “War of the Worlds”

broadcast has become “a familiar chapter in the popular memory of American media and stands even today as a common reference point for critics who wish to invoke a parable of the media’s awesome power over its audiences.”¹⁹ This famous production circulates ideas about the workings of masses, minds, and media, and the notion that psychological deficiencies were revealed in the panic continues to be a dominant popular understanding. This story of mass panic, in condensed and varying forms, has been retold with great frequency, with each retelling reinscribing the certainty of mass irrationalism sparked by popular culture. In Frank Morgan’s comedy vehicle *Hullabaloo* (Edwin L. Marin, 1940), an old vaudevillian performer causes a national panic with a fictional on-the-spot news radio broadcast, “Battle of the Planets.” Kenneth Fearing’s novel *Clark Gifford’s Body* (1942) depicts a revolution in the United States during which the first step is to capture the radio stations. Describing the necessity of this tactic, the title character explains, “You may remember certain historical political broadcasts, so-called panic broadcasts with the most amazing results.”²⁰ When the voice of God first interrupts regular radio broadcasting in the film *The Next Voice You Hear . . .* (William A. Wellman, 1950), one of the explanations is that it might be a hoax, or, as one character says, “maybe it’s one of those Orson Welles things.”

Beyond the prominent place that the Mercury Theater’s performance occupied as a sociological puzzle in the history of mass communications research, the tale of the panic took on a life of its own and, as Sconce observes, circulated as an idea about media influence. Here is one additional example. Over a period of two years beginning in 1947, Orson Welles was filming *Black Magic* (Gregory Ratoff, 1949), an Italian–United States coproduction based on the novel *Memories of a Physician* (1850), by Alexandre Dumas, *père*. The novel introduces an enduring character, the evil hypnotist Cagliostro, whom Welles plays in *Black Magic*. The film was a big-budget period piece, and it was rife with production troubles that saw Welles act as an uncredited director. Overdue and over budget, the film nonetheless had unusually elaborate publicity. For instance, the distributor, United Artists, paid the athlete Shirley May to swim across the English Channel with “Black Magic” “well displayed across her ample bosom,” as one report put it. Though she didn’t quite make it to France, the ship following her was rechristened *Black Magic*.²¹ This stunt coincided with the film opening on four hundred screens across the United States.²²

One particularly curious promotional tie-in for this film saw Orson Welles and Superman team up to battle a Martian invasion in the comic book *Superman #62* (1950). “Black Magic on Mars” opens with a besieged, swashbuckling Welles in period costume, sword in one hand and radio microphone in the other, yelling, “Watch out, Earth! The Martians are coming.” Eggheaded Martians in military uniforms threaten Welles with ray-guns. Superman, strangely drawn to appear smaller than Welles, arrives to save him by blocking a ray-gun’s blast. The opening expository panel explains that Welles unearths a plot to invade the Earth, but when he tries to alert his home planet, “the world laughed, for this was the second time that Orson was crying wolf.” Only Superman believes him and comes to the rescue of Welles, the Earth, and *Black Magic* (though even Superman couldn’t protect the movie from becoming a monumental box office dud).

After this opening full-page illustration, the comic’s narrative begins with Welles and an opponent dueling on a rooftop. Welles loses the battle and falls to a cobblestone street below. Out of frame, someone yells “Cut!,” revealing that we are on a movie set and that Welles is fine. This is the final scene in “*Black Magic*, starring Orson Welles as the sinister magician, Cagliostro.” There is a ball that evening, and everyone is told to remain in costume, so the incongruous dress remains for the entire story. Welles and his co-star Nancy Guild take a drive into the Alps, reminding us of their casting: “I enjoyed playing the villainous Cagliostro!” “And I enjoyed playing Marie Antoinette!” These first panels are vaguely documentary in design. They mirror other behind-the-scenes promotional texts, like on-set shorts, presenting the work involved with movie making. But whatever naturalism had been developed to this point evaporates when Welles and Guild come upon a rocket ship, which an inquisitive Welles immediately enters. Nearby, unbeknown to our movie stars, is a crowd gathered to watch the launch of the first rocket to Mars. Welles hears the countdown, but it’s too late and he is trapped inside. In outer space he looks back at a receding Earth and says, “When I fooled the world with my Martian invasion broadcast—I never dreamed I would invade Mars myself!”

Stepping out of the ship onto Martian soil, Welles is greeted by English-speaking, Nazi-attired midgets with a “Hail, Welles!” They explain that they have studied Earthlings with their version of television and got to know quite a bit about Orson. He is brought to the leader, the

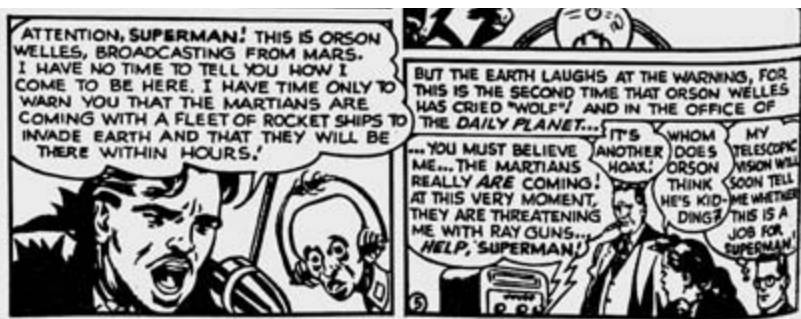


"Black Magic on Mars!," Superman #62, 1950, DC Comics, all rights reserved.

Great Martler (get it? Martian Hitler), who reveals his plan for universal conquest, starting with Earth because of its uranium. Martler then offers Welles a job as propaganda minister on Earth. Rebellious as ever, and still holding his sword from the film shoot, Welles forces the dictator into the Martian broadcasting studio. He sends out a message to Superman that is distributed to other Earth-bound television viewers: "This is Orson Welles, broadcasting from Mars." Listeners at the *Daily Planet* scoff, "It's another hoax!" and "Whom does Orson think he's kidding?" Only Clark Kent knows that he must investigate. Now as Superman, he editorializes: "That hoax of Orson's, years ago, about a Martian invasion, sure backfired!" A panel shows domestic listeners commenting that the warning about a Martian attack is the funniest show in ages, "better than Bob Hope." Apparently the gullible listeners of the 1930s have become the skeptics of the early 1950s.

Superman arrives on Mars, and Martler, still recruiting, immediately offers him a job, but the attack on Earth has already begun. The Man of Steel chases down the invading rockets but finds that many are mirages. There are too many for him to hunt through to find the real rockets before they reach their destination. Meanwhile Welles performs stock magic tricks to dazzle and confuse the Martians, throwing flames and making a rabbit appear. Superman uses the gravitational pull of one of Mars's moons to trap the invading forces, and Earth is saved from the Martian invasion. In perhaps the most bizarre moment in this odd tale, Superman operates a television camera while Welles, having learned a few words of Martian, holds up the unconscious Martler to broadcast a ventriloquized message of peace to Mars: "There must be no more war. We will stay on our own planet!" One Martian viewer comments, "Great news! Now we can go home to our families! I never did want to fight anyway!" It seems that we share gullibility about the media with other planets and species. And it seems that tricks with broadcasting integrity are still a successful part of Welles's repertoire.

Back home, Superman returns the original rocket to the scientists, who are happy to receive the data from Mars. Welles appears as planned at the costume ball. Nancy Guild asks him, "Tell me, Orson, was your broadcast this time another hoax . . . a publicity stunt . . . or the truth?" "Ask Superman!," he replies. And in the final panel, a news story written by Clark Kent titled "Orson Welles Really on Mars!" is in the trashcan,



Orson Welles calls for Superman's help, "Black Magic on Mars!," *Superman* #62, 1950, DC Comics, all rights reserved.



Another hoax?, "Black Magic on Mars!," *Superman* #62, 1950, DC Comics, all rights reserved.

his editor bellowing out of frame, “This is a newspaper—not a science-fiction magazine! Get down to 10th and Western and cover that fire.”

This crazy little fantasy, light in tone, relies upon background knowledge of Welles’s notorious career and of the character he plays in his forthcoming movie. The comic character is an amalgam of movie star illusionist and movie character mesmerist. This hybrid creature appeared elsewhere, beyond the world of comic book fancy. For instance, the review of *Black Magic* in the *LA Times* voiced these themes yet again, declaring, “Orson Welles Pulls Mass Hypnosis Act on Us All.”²³ Here we confront a startling figuration for the cultural producer: the artist as a deceiver, manipulator, and liar. The idea that the “War of the Worlds” was a hoax, as the Superman story states, is intriguing. It presupposes that the panic broadcast was an “untruth” constituting a betrayal of trust rather than a scary story misinterpreted by an audience that had misplaced its critical abilities. This, even though all that the Mercury Theater was entrusted with was the telling of a rousing science fiction tale. Welles seems to have been confused with the leading character in his most famous film, the tragic and unscrupulous newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane, who creates a singing sensation of his shrill-toned wife with ridiculously lavish front-page praise and invents a war by reporting a fabricated incident as reality (“You provide the prose poem, I’ll provide the war”). *Citizen Kane* (1941) is in many ways a story of media fallibility, following the calculated efforts of Kane to shape public opinion and the doomed enterprise to report on the “real” Kane that frames the entire film.

The narrative of the comic “Black Magic on Mars” plays with media manipulation and illusion by alternately concealing and revealing it to the reader at several points: the expository page invites the reader to remember the famous “hoax”; the first three panels situate the story in eighteenth-century France, only to be exposed as a movie set; the Nazi Martians have a ministry of propaganda, for which the master manipulator Welles would apparently be the ideal director; Welles makes a truthful but fruitless warning to Earth—though only Americans are shown—meaning that the members of the diegetic audience see themselves as being able to break through the falsehoods of broadcasting, while the comic reader, following the logic of the fantastical tale, knows that they are being dangerously smug; the Martians create illusionary rockets to confound Superman; Welles’s prestidigitation confuses his alien foes, who turn out to be “superstitious savages”; the deceptive broadcast by

Superman and Welles to the Martian people is media manipulation for peace; the editor of the *Daily Planet* kills Kent's story of the invasion, thus hiding the truth from the public; and Welles, his co-star, and his new movie are swept into Superman's universe, his character's anachronistic costume reminding readers of the promotional specificity of the *Black Magic* tie-in. The comic's joke operates at multiple levels of meaning and encourages a process of judgment about various kinds of media manipulation: reference to an actual "hoax," images of naïve audiences, illusions used as weapons, tactically productive instances of media deception, and story selection by a newspaper editor.

In this elaborate representational play we see that Welles's 1938 broadcast is a recognizable reference for the very concept of media manipulation, even in this most popular of forms, the comic book. This is the starting point for the present study: the powerful and lasting way in which popular ideas about media effects circulate and are used to negotiate and understand the role of media in our lives. This book examines popular ideas about media, in particular the idea that certain kinds of media texts can have an immediate and shockingly effective impact on what is thought to be a roundly uncritical public. In a somewhat contradictory way, a thinking mass public imagines an "unthinking" one. Welles's production has been incorporated into a chronology of popular understandings of media effects and irrational masses. But there are other historical moments in that chronology, ones that reside as quiet influences upon our understanding of contemporary media technology and its users. This book is about one of those moments.

Subliminal Communication as Vernacular Media Critique

CHAPTER ONE

As news events, presidential elections in the United States are unusual creatures. Resources and funds flood the proceedings over a lengthy period, shaping coverage of the extensive primary process and the presidential race proper. Control of the presentation of the candidate and party underlies every decision. The orchestration of image and platform enlists experts in population profiling, spin doctoring, speechwriting, event planning, media consulting, and commercial producing. Managing the release of information to the media, the actions and appearances of the candidate, and the impressions made upon those most likely to cast a vote are tasks confronting any election team.

Nothing ever goes exactly as planned. Campaigns seek to capture media and public attention, and doing so results in high visibility for the statements made and the responses given by candidates and their representatives. Consequently, even the smallest verbal slip, inexpertly located phrase, or unthinking gesture can produce headlines and talk-show topics. Just as presidential election campaigns strive toward careful coordination, the attention they receive from the numerous print, broadcast, and Internet news agencies makes unpredictable developments ever more likely.

The election of 2000 made a generous deposit in the bank of unforeseen complications and challenges. The razor-close tallies

in Florida, the subsequent recounts and stories of tampering, and the interventions of the Supreme Court were the culmination of months of news oddities. The CBS news anchor Dan Rather rambled all through election night, treating the audience to bewildering aphorisms like “If a frog had side pockets, he’d carry a handgun” and “This race is tight like a too-small bathing suit on a too-long ride home.” Media outlets jumped to call races that later required embarrassing retractions, prompting Rather to blurt out, “We’ve lived by the crystal ball, we’re eating so much broken glass.” Not letting a tragic plane crash hamper his campaign, the deceased Democratic candidate Mel Carnahan remained on the ballot in Missouri and won, beating the incumbent John Ashcroft for a Senate seat. Ralph Nader’s presence on the presidential ballot assured that at least some media attention turned his way, if only to try to discredit his run by portraying him as an idealistic buffoon. George W. Bush’s malapropisms became legendary. While deepening a popular mistrust of the democratic process, the elections left behind new phrases that are now stuck in the popular lexicon, “fuzzy math” and “hanging chads” among them. And one of the strangest twists was Al Gore’s accusation that the Republican Party was using subliminal suggestion in its advertisements.

In a slick television spot on Bush’s plan for affordable prescription medicine, we see the candidate meeting with, speaking to, and shaking hands with senior citizens. The music hits a dramatic “duh-dum” punctuation as the commercial introduces Al Gore’s competing “big government plan.” Gore is not shown in contact with people but as a distant talking head on a television monitor, thus reiterating visually a theme running through the campaign—that Gore lacked warmth. Where the words “affordable R_x plan” and “the Bush plan” appear steady and clear as they accompany images of Bush, the flashing and unsteady phrases “interfere with doctors” and “bureaucrats decide,” against a black background, graphically represent Gore’s proposals. Momentarily, only parts of these words are visible, so that for a fraction of a second one reads only individual letters rather than whole words, including, most notoriously, the letters “rats” before the word “bureaucrats” appears.

Democrats challenged the Republican ad, declaring that imperceptible, embedded messages were sneaky and unfair. With them Bush’s campaign was attempting to manipulate voters without their awareness, so the claim went, and some members of Gore’s campaign distributed information on subliminal communication to support their accusation.



Bush campaign ad attacking Gore's prescription drug plan, 2000. Author's collection.

A minor flurry of media reports followed over the next few days, offering denials from Bush, no comment from Gore, assessments of media experts, and historical backdrop to the concerns about subliminal messages. The ad's producer, Alex Castellanos, maintained that the appearance of "rats" for 1/30 of a second was purely accidental, though he admitted that once it was brought to his attention he did not pull the spot. Many found his claim of ignorance implausible. Castellanos had previously been the target of comparable accusations. An ad that he prepared for Senator Jesse Helms in 1990 presented a white job applicant being informed that although he had superior qualifications for a job for which he had applied, he had lost out to a minority candidate because of a "racial quota." Augmenting the race baiting, a strange blemish appears on the letter read by the frustrated job seeker, a marking that resembles a black hand. Kathleen Hall Jamieson described this visual tactic as a form of negative campaigning intended to elicit a visceral response.¹

The "rats" spot ran 4,400 times over two weeks in sixteen states, and the Republican campaign spent approximately \$2.6 million on it.² When asked about the accusations on a tarmac in Florida, Bush replied, "Conspiracy theories abound in American politics. I don't think we need to be subliminal [sic] about the differences between our views on prescription drugs."³ Bush feigned naivety, saying that he did not know what subliminal suggestion was, let alone know how to use it for campaign purposes. As if to emphasize the point, Bush mispronounced the word "subliminal" repeatedly. Whether deliberate or not, his verbal blunder was met with wide ridicule. How could he not know what the term is or even how to pronounce it? Was he as intellectually underdeveloped as had been suspected, or was he insincere in his protestations? The talk-show host David Letterman ridiculed Bush, saying that the mispronunciation made him wonder, "Gosh, do you think this guy is 'electimable'?"⁴

For a short time Bush's "subliminal" was homologous to Dan Quayle's "potatoe."

The Republicans pulled the ad, insisting that they had always planned to do so and that the controversy played no part in their decision. Bush and his representatives dismissed the affair as a ridiculous effort to distract from the real issues. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) took the ad seriously, and investigated 217 stations that had aired it to decide whether they had willfully participated in deceptive broadcasting. Several months later the FCC concluded that no penalties were in order.⁵ Playful responses followed as well. To an admiring Letterman, his guest Geena Davis, a Democrat, bawdily described her sheer dress as a subliminal ad for Bush.

Whether an accident or an effort to deceive, this incident is not unique. There were similar charges by Andrés Manuel López Obrador against the right-wing candidate Felipe Calderón in the Mexican presidential elections of 2006, in which the color scheme for a popular soft drink and its publicity mirrored those of Calderón's party. Opponents saw the similarity as a sneaky way to circumvent campaign spending limits by a corporate supporter of Calderón.⁶ Similar suspicions in 2008 that John McCain's and Barack Obama's campaigns had planted hidden messages in their spots were rampant on the Internet, with occasional, temporary appearance in the mainstream press. Both MSNBC and ABC reported on McCain's "subliminal" attempts to link Obama with terrorism, Islam, and hypersexuality. Here the accusations referred to design choices rather than fleeting images: the messages were entirely visible, but their use was seen as unethical because they appeared as innuendo. The concern was not just the unfair ideas, but some sense that the subtlety of their appearance had an unrecognized effect upon the viewing audience, and ultimately upon voters.

The public understanding of the "subliminal" may range from the exact to the fictional, but it is undoubtedly part of popular language. Survey research published in 1983 found that 81 percent of respondents claimed to have some knowledge of subliminal advertising, of whom 81 percent believed that subliminal suggestion was being used by advertisers and 44 percent believed that it had some effect on buying behavior.⁷ Surveys in 1994 demonstrated that approximately 75 percent of the population in the United States believed that advertising companies used subliminal advertising, that they did so to influence consumer behavior,

and that the technique worked.⁸ The gap between the questionable scientific validity of subliminal influence and the popular response to it is often captured in psychology textbooks. For example, one definition of subliminal advertising notes that it “has been received with much excitement but as yet little empirical support.”⁹

Subliminal suggestion has a particularly strong association with sexuality. In his history of sex in advertising, Tom Reichert writes, “When I mention my research, many people I speak with say, ‘Oh, yeah. You’re researching naked people in ice cubes.’”¹⁰ For their part, advertisers have long complained about the tenaciousness of the concept because it gives a tainted impression of their business. In light of the debate that swirled around the initial revelation of their existence—to be discussed at length in coming chapters—subliminal techniques deserve a place in the history of advertising, and the last thirty years of advertising scholarship have obliged. Stuart Ewen devoted a page and a half to a specific illustration of subliminal advertising in *All Consuming Images*.¹¹ Bryon Reeves and Clifford Nass included a short chapter on the topic in *The Media Equation*.¹² James Twitchell offered a mocking take on subliminal advertising, though he nonetheless concluded that “the real work of advertising is subliminal. But not in the sense of messages slid below the surface, but subliminal in the sense that we aren’t aware of what commercial speech is saying.”¹³ In a book on composition, iconicity, and the indexicality of magazine advertising, Paul Messaris included a dozen pages on the debate and research on the persuasiveness of subliminal elements, taking a relatively neutral position on the issue. His section on subliminal advertising continued with a discussion of the connotations of gender, social status, and youthfulness.¹⁴ Max Sutherland’s mainstay text on the relationship between the unconscious and advertising presented itself as a practical and reasonable exploration of the topic, unlike other works that see advertisers as possessing “witch-doctor-like powers.”¹⁵ Sutherland represented many frustrated advertisers and advertising researchers when he wrote, “I hate the term ‘subliminal.’ There has been so much nonsense talked about so-called ‘subliminal advertising’ that there is always the risk that when I talk about it, I will fuel the uninformed hype.”¹⁶ He explained that a better term for the phenomenon was “shallow mental processing,” implying that the audience was barely attentive to stimuli and that the advertising was therefore very ineffective.¹⁷ An editorial in the *Journal of Advertising Research* complained of the persistent allegations: they were a

problem not because “they make advertising into more than it is, though they do, but because they make ad recipients less than they really are. It is as great a sin for a critic of advertising to depict the consumer as an unthinking pawn as it is for a creative to treat his or her audience condescendingly.”¹⁸ The author called upon critics and advertisers alike to “melt the ice cubes of doubt and suspicion” on the topic.¹⁹

Little melting has occurred. On an anecdotal and personal level, teachers of media and cultural studies know that the idea of subliminal influences enjoys popularity among students, a popularity that curiously exists side by side with the view that the media have little or no impact upon an individual’s thinking. Teachers regularly confront and attempt to manage the pedagogical frustration associated with these contradictory beliefs. On the very final day of a very bright undergraduate’s education, in the very last class, after years of being introduced to the intricacies of representation and cultural practice, the student might well say, “But of course they use subliminal messages to get us to buy things.” After an obligatory moment of self-loathing — “What have I done wrong?” — I am usually tempted to respond firmly that the student’s assumption is unfounded and that there are more pressing forces for us to consider in the organization of power and culture. Truthfully, this is not a very satisfying response. In the end we still have to confront the appeal and longevity of the concept. For present purposes, the veracity and strength of a “subliminal” effect is a different and, I would venture, secondary concern. The empirical evidence of its reappearance in multiple situations, and its relatively elastic application, suggests that subliminality resonates as a common explanation for certain kinds of quotidian media experiences.

And what is supposed? Well, many things. Literally and traditionally, the term “subliminal” refers to something below (sub) the threshold (limin) of awareness or consciousness. But for many, it does not just describe this realm. Colloquially it implies that something can happen to us without awareness, unconsciously, and thus, as it is popularly used, the word harbors a thesis about effect and causality. For psychology, the subliminal marks a distance between perception and sensation, hypothesizing that some sensations may not be perceived but can nonetheless find their way into our minds. You may not see, feel, hear, smell, or taste something, but that external phenomenon might still register unconsciously and you may be able to respond to it. You may, in essence, discriminate without being aware of what you are discriminating about.