

Advertising and Public Memory: Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Ghost Signs

Edited by Stefan Schutt, Sam Roberts and Leanne White

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Advertising and Public Memory: Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Ghost Signs is one of the latest additions to the *Research in Cultural and Media Studies* series published by Routledge. It is also one of the most intriguing books to have landed on my desk in recent years. Edited by Stefan Schutt, Sam Roberts and Leanne White, the book is presented in response to a growing international interest revolving around the phenomena of “ghost signs”. Consequently, it offers the first interdisciplinary collection of accounts exploring the faded remains of advertising signage as its objective emphasis.

Primarily targeting an academic audience, the volume contrasts some thoughtful, probing and scholarly analyses to shape a rich and rewarding range of perspectives that should leave the reader with much to reflect upon. That is not to say that the book’s readership is limited to this market, although its broader appeal might be restricted until such time that the inquisitive reader has begun to explore the evidently poignant scope of its attraction.

For those uninitiated with the topic of “ghost signs”, the opening two chapters appositely set the scene for a fascinating journey, one which seeks to examine and remedy the apparent void where painted advertising, history and culture meet. The following 20 chapters are then thematically organised according to the volume’s critical scope. These broadly revolve around the social (Part I), cultural (Part II) and historical (Part III) dimensions expressed in the book’s title as each chapter considers some or all of these concerns.

Having addressed the requirement to justify the book’s remit (White *et al.*, Chapter 1), the territory is then problematised (Roberts and Marshall, Chapter 2) to provide the reader with a usable definition of its central focus, as well as a useful frame of reference for what follows. The editors openly acknowledge that “there is considerable overlap between the chapters and groupings, given that many of the [contributions] span a range of conceptual and practical concerns” (p. 11). In this sense, it is perhaps unusual to find an interdisciplinary text where such a breadth of overlap exists. However, this degree of interconnectedness is also one of the book’s core strengths as it holds together the overall aim of the volume very well. As would



be expected, a variety of interests and a number of theoretical lines of inquiry are evident among the contributions – explicitly drawing upon themes of modernity and urban life (e.g. Warnaby and Medway, Chapter 13); urban memory and nostalgia (e.g. Love, Chapter 3; and Lewis and Wright, Chapter 4); sociality, space and place (e.g. Carletti, Chapter 5; Schutt and Mead, Chapter 6; Hyde and Barnes, Chapter 7; Clements, Chapter 17; Jackson, Chapter 19; and Wong, Chapter 20); and semiotics (e.g. Kasabian, Chapter 10) – and it is notably apparent that the editorial team has succeeded in drawing together such a diverse range of perspectives in a fluid and engaging manner.

The book contains many original and novel contributions. Although too numerous to simply list here, the fact that insights are drawn from the personal experiences and extensive research efforts of historians, heritage professionals, archivists, educators, digital media scholars, advertising practitioners and signwriters signifies the intent to capture a holistic breadth and depth of debate.

Those with an interest in advertising, retailing or the inescapable impact of digital and online contexts will also find much to draw upon in the respective accounts of Crawford (Chapter 12), Bernstein (Chapter 14), Warnaby and Medway (Chapter 13), Carletti (Chapter 5) and Hyde and Barnes (Chapter 7). However, while many contributors typically examine painted advertising or signage remains in Western contexts, those seeking to explore realms of meaning elsewhere will find Nualart's exploration of Vietnamese painted signs particularly illuminating, especially while considering the historical limitations of previously published research on the topic of advertising in this region (Chapter 9). Furthermore, Hodges *et al.* (Chapter 11) develop this line of interest through their examination of the Peruvian *Chicha* aesthetic, extending a vibrant body of scholarly activity which also seeks to connect online archival accounts to the economic and socio-cultural contexts in which signs and messages emerge and survive as an aesthetic of mainstream advertising. Indeed, while the interpretation of prior contextual meanings (e.g. Schutt and Mead, Chapter 6) is relevant to many of the contributions provided, the methodological significance of archival material ensures that a number of those accounts located within Part III of the book (Chapters 15–22) will be of interest to many.

Overall, the book captures a theoretically rich reminder of the need to acknowledge the social and cultural importance of the past as a conduit for a more serious engagement with the future, not least in its recognition of the potentially destructive and detrimental effect that modern gentrification practices may have on the human condition. In this vein, *Advertising and Public Memory: Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Ghost Signs* should be of interest to anyone working in the fields of property and real estate management, marketing, tourism and leisure, retailing, geography, public administration, sociology, planning and design. It leaves the reader with a great deal to reflect upon.

As I place the book back onto my desk, I find myself revisiting and adapting the concluding words of Warnaby and Medway's account (Chapter 13, p. 183) – concerning the faded remains of retail signature – to underline a question with far wider-reaching implications, particularly for those in a position to influence the social and cultural perspectives of future generations. To what extent should “ghost signs” as this seemingly small, but by no means insignificant, part of our

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socio-economic history and cultural heritage be preserved for future reflection, learning and appreciation?

Priced at £85.00 (hardback), this book deserves its place within university libraries and, while of particular interest to scholars from a range of disciplines, its reach and potential impact should resonate more widely, capturing the imaginations of those far further afield.

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