



SUBLIMINAL SALESMANSHIP—Critics say it is akin to George Orwell's "1984"; proponents say it is part of "freedom to communicate."

Most Hidden Hidden Persuasion

Now TV faces the challenge of the subliminal, or phantom, plug —painless, odorless, noiseless and definitely sneaky.

By GAY TALESE

IN order to wreak their will upon television viewers, Madison Avenue pitchmen have hired beautiful women to sell automobiles, athletes to babble about razor blades and bears to peddle beer, but now the admen may have the greatest sales weapon of them all—the hidden commercial.

The hidden commercial, or phantom plug, is a sales message pitched so fast by a projector onto a TV or movie screen that it is not consciously seen by the viewer. It is painless, odorless, non-fattening and very sneaky.

Everything was top-secret about this jig until recently when, at a Manhattan press conference, an announcement was made by a few gentlemen representing

GAY TALESE, a New York Times staff writer, subjected himself to a subliminal "pitch" but maintained his sales resistance.

the Subliminal Projection Company, Inc., which claims to have developed it. They said that more than a year ago their hidden commercials went to work secretly in a New Jersey cinema for six weeks in front of 45,699 movie customers. On alternate nights, "Eat Popcorn" and "Coca-Cola" were flashed every five seconds all through the film for a three-thousandth of a second — too fast for anyone to be aware of seeing them. The messages were fainter than the picture on the screen — a sort of watermark.

NOTHING was said to the 45,699 about the messages before or after the movies. Presumably, nobody consciously saw the Coke and popcorn flashes, but subconsciously they did, and this process worked on lowering the sales resistance of the moviegoers. During the

six-week test period, at any rate, popcorn sales rose 57.7 per cent; Coke sales went up 18.1 per cent, Selah.

How does the hidden commercial work? The Subliminal Projection people, all smart men, said they could not tell too much about it since they did not yet have a patent, but they did say it thrives on the long-accepted psychological belief that we can be stimulated below (*sub*) the threshold (*limen*) of consciousness. In other words, we supposedly can be stimulated without being consciously aware of it.

"Man and animal have been stimulated subliminally since the beginning of life," said Arthur Koponen, a psychologist with a leading Madison Avenue ad agency. "We can attend consciously to only part of our physical environment. Chances are that there are noises about you right now that

you are not consciously aware of until you focus your attention upon them."

Subliminal experimentation in the psychology laboratory is strictly old hat. Historically speaking, Dr. George S. Klein of New York University says, several lines of thought stand out in the development of subliminal research. He said one line went back to Freud, who pointed out that people are aware in dreams of things they are only subconsciously aware of during the day.

"In 1917," Dr. Klein went on, "an Austrian neurologist, Otto Poetzl, seemed to confirm Freud's observations. Poetzl exposed landscape slides on a tachistoscope for one-hundredth of a second and asked his subjects to tell what they saw. They didn't see much. But he told them if they dreamed anything that night he'd like to hear about it the next day. The next day, some subjects told him the details of their dreams. Poetzl found that some of the material in the dreams included details they had not consciously seen the day before in the landscape slides. In other words, information which registered without awareness was enlisted by whatever process operates in the construction of dreams; and it was utilized in forming some of the content of the dream."

IN 1956, an experiment in subliminal projection was tried on 5 million people, an audience of a British Broadcasting Corporation TV program. During the program, which featured ballet dancers, a four-word message was flashed subliminally on the screen at a twenty-fifth of a second. Arthur Garratt, the chairman of a panel of scientists who worked on this show, later wrote, "We did not say anything about it until the end of the program, when I told viewers we had put up a news item — of course I did not say what it was — and asked anyone who had seen anything to write in."

Mr. Garratt said he got 430 replies. Twenty people had the message word-perfect; 130 more had it nearly right. "An interesting reply was from a lady," he said. "She saw nothing, but kept waking up that night with the word 'break' on her mind. Most remarkable was the lady who wrote in to say she did not get any message until sometime later, when she kept thinking about the runner Pirie, and his new record. The message we actually screened was 'Pirie Breaks World Record.'"

JUST about the time the Subliminal Projection Company, Inc., was making its announcement to the New York press, a few N. Y. U. psychologists reported that they, too, had some exciting news about the subliminal monster. They had fooled twenty subjects into thinking that a line drawing of a man's expressionless face projected onto a screen was changing from "happy" to "angry." Actually, the face did not change at all. But the psychologists intermittently flashed the word "happy" onto the screen for a few thousandths of a second and, subconsciously, the audience saw it and tended to think they saw the face becoming happier. When the psychologists slipped the word "angry" onto the screen, the subjects believed they saw the face becoming less happy and, in some cases, downright wrathful.

Since the phenomenon is so widely known among (Continued on Page 59)

Most Hidden Hidden Persuasion

(Continued from Page 22)

psychologists, what do the Subliminal Projection people have that they can patent? "The process," said its inventor, James M. Vicary, 42, a market researcher by trade. One of his associates later explained that the patent application covers the "means of creating this process" and the patent would also include the "apparatus," which presumably is the projector that enables the hidden messages to sneak onto a movie or TV screen. Mr. Vicary said these projectors are now being manufactured in New York but would not say where.

In addition to Vicary's buddies at Subliminal Projection in New York, there is also a New Orleans outfit, Experimental Films, Inc., which is experimenting with subliminal methods for



advertising use. But they are not talking much about their work; more or less they seem to be waiting to see what becomes of Mr. Vicary and his partners, who so far are absorbing all the criticism, slings and arrows from the anti-hidden-commercial factions.

The hidden commercial and its possible use have touched off great debates along Madison Avenue and elsewhere. Politicians, pitchmen and psychologists have all gotten into the act.

Most Madison Avenue admen who are opposed to Mr. Vicary's psychic hucksterism just don't like the gimmick on ethical grounds; they fear it because it takes people completely unaware. Other admen doubt that it will work, but cannot explain why. Some smaller admen say that big admen will not touch the subliminal method with a ten-foot pole because they did not think of it first.

SOME people who have read George Orwell's "1984" say the hidden commercial is akin to Big Brother. Senator Charles Potter, Republican of Michigan, and Representative William A. Dawson, Republican of Utah, both urged the Federal Communications Commission to make sure that admen were not slipping the "secret pitch" into the TV sets of unsuspecting viewers. All three major networks quickly declared that they are not using the hidden commercial in advertising and will not. The National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters is now opposed to it, too. One of the few outfits that seems to

have nice words for the hidden commercial is Vogue magazine, which featured a new subliminal dress "tapping out its message to the subconscious" in black silk crêpe—about \$160 worth.

Other people claim that the unnoticeable commercial is just as ethical as the slick visible commercials long used by Madison Avenue's "hidden persuaders," a group of admen so powerful that, according to the writer Vance Packard, they somehow have made millions of Americans feel inadequate for not owning high-tailed automobiles. A psychologist who works in a large New York agency said he would welcome invisible commercials because they would enable advertising to be honest and to-the-point and would halt the subtle, soft-selling method now prevalent.

VICARY himself believes that his invention should be regulated "either by the industries which use it or by the Government." He explained that he had spent many years developing the process because he realized that commercial television would eventually reach a point where there would have to be excessive use of commercials in order to satisfy advertisers' demands for time.

"Many nights I've tried to watch the Late Show movie on TV," Mr. Vicary said, "but just before John kisses Mary, some sewer-cleaning commercial interrupts the show. Sometimes I wonder how many people really watch TV commercials."

At their Manhattan press conference, the Subliminal Projection people treated newspapermen to a special movie. It was a short film about underwater life, with 169 hidden Coca-Cola messages flashed among the swimming fish on the screen. None of the newspapermen was aware of seeing them, and it was not until the man in the projection room deliberately darkened the messages that anyone had proof they were actually there. A few days later, this reporter went back for more free movies at Subliminal Projection's headquarters on East Fifty-seventh Street, and had 230 more unnoticeable Coke messages shot at him. He found he was not consciously aware afterwards of any urge to drink Coke; nor did he consciously experience any visions, dreams, drives, images, trances, inclinations, or hangovers that were not directly attributable to conscious guzzling of something else than Coke the night before.

WHAT? "There is a very good reason for your failure to get the Coke message," a visible press agent explained. "You don't like Coke. And a guy who doesn't like what's being advertised will not unconsciously go for it. Subliminal ads are strictly 'reminder' ads. They might move you to do something you like doing, but they'll never make a Democrat out of a solid Republican and they'll never make a Scotch drinker out of a teetotaler."

N.Y.U.'s Dr. Klein added that the response to subliminal stimulation is usually small and subtle. "Subliminal messages do not put something new into the mind," he emphasized. "Instead, the messages activate what is already there in the subconscious mind—memories, ideas and such." Dr. Klein

(Continued on Following Page)