

An academic Alice in Adland: Ethnography and the commercial world

In summer 1997, I quit my tenured university lectureship in Media Studies and sought a job in advertising. I didn't do it because I wanted a drastic career change; it was more that I desperately needed to do fieldwork. An advertising job, if I could get one, would solve two research problems in one fell swoop: funding and access. Although it would lead to ethnographic work of an extremely involved kind, I was convinced that, as an experienced participant observer, I could maintain a critical eye. At thirty-something, I was also fully socialised into academic ways of doing and thinking, so I couldn't imagine 'going native' completely. Besides, time spent in the advertising industry would appease my longstanding curiosity about consumer culture and commerce.

For me, ethnography is more than just a research method, it's a way of life. I've come to enjoy the sense of sink-or-swim submersion that comes from diving into another culture. I get a perverse kick from the initial stress of not knowing exactly what is going on and from the risks involved in trying to pass muster in a new role. I am fascinated by the way different environments transform the self. Gradually, you start to use a different vocabulary and intonation, wear different clothes and postures; then, all of a sudden, those you knew in a previous life (in another country, job or research circumstance) have difficulty recognising you.

Although I have been inspired by many proper ethnographers, there is a literary character who has long offered an odd point of identification. She has interested writers from literary, psychoanalytic, philosophical and historical perspectives, but is perhaps less noted by sociologists who might be surprised to view Alice as a participant observer in Wonderland.¹ Alice asks questions whose answers are obvious and irritating to Wonderland's inhabitants. She is curious and Wonderland is 'curiouser'. She is not there to prove something she already believes, to validate a hypothesis or provide empirical evidence for a theory grand or small. On the contrary, she is

initially there to pursue a rabbit worried about the time, then to explore, marvel and criticise.

Led there by a sense of adventure and independence, Alice is a model of admirable female daring. As a participant, she is part of the experiment; she has to eat and drink, shrink and stretch to gain access and see through the eyes of Wonderland's inhabitants. Few sociological researchers take real risks or put their world view in any danger. Even more unfortunately, with heavy teaching loads and scarce research resources, few academics have the time or the money really to wonder any more.

Alice's story is also relevant to ethnographers in its dream-like mood. My most significant research moments have always felt surreal. They are times when the obvious comes as a shock or the expected hits you unexpectedly. For an instant, you're estranged from the situation at hand – like a fly on the wall, watching yourself interact, thinking, 'This is absurd to me, but deadly serious to them'. Other times, the implicit is suddenly made explicit and you wonder, 'Did he actually say that?' Ethnographic revelations are oxymoronic: the banal becomes strange, the prosaic becomes poetic.

Alice's adventures are also germane as a narrative of experiential learning. Good research is a journey and my favourite ethnographic writing captures the texture of experience, identifies the telling details and carries the reader along. It gives the reader a sense of being there. While 'old fashioned' ethnographies (principally anthropologies) have taken the form of stories, contemporary ethnographies (particularly sociological ones) have increasingly abandoned the art in favour of theory and strict exposition. An abstract account *appears* to make the research less particular and more general. However, a concrete rendering takes advantage of the strengths of the method – particularly the qualitative richness of lengthy cultural exposure. The following episodes are part of my attempt to capture some of the tangibility and temporality of ethnographic experience – or at least my own experiences as an academic in the *wonderful* world of advertising.

Headhunters and madhatters

Converting myself from a lecturer to a potential ad agency employee did require more than lipstick, contact lenses and a Joseph pin-striped suit. However, I needed these superficialities to avoid being dismissed as a 'useless', 'pretentious', 'frumpy' academic. These stereotypes haunted my every move, particularly in the beginning. Unless the people I met had a lecturing sibling or had once embarked on a PhD, many loved to loathe academics. As one adman warned me, the 'perception of academics ranges from boredom through fear/horror to "shoot them"'.

More fundamental to my transformation was the process of studying relevant business books and trade magazines in order to become suitably immersed in the logic and jargon of the industry.² Terms like 'below the line', 'brand strategies', 'econometrics' and 'relationship marketing' had to roll off as if they were part of my mother tongue. I had to keep track of a huge number of abbreviations, not just to discuss concepts and categories like USPs (unique selling propositions) and FMCGs (fast moving consumer goods), but to talk shop about other ad agencies and their accounts. It is no surprise that the only agency that is widely known outside the marketing world is Saatchi & Saatchi, because the rest have such unmemorable names as BMP DDB, DMB&B, BBH, AMV BBDO, WCRS or Euro RSCG Wnek Gosper.

However, making my academic work relevant to advertising folk in one or two user-friendly sound-bites was initially my most daunting task.³ Eventually I developed a reasonable patter which involved the general substitution of words like 'culture' and 'society' with 'market' and 'consumer' (e.g. swapping 'youth culture' for 'youth market', 'subculture' for 'niche market', 'social group' for 'consumer group'). These terms highlight the ways the two disciplines – business and sociology – look at the same object from different perspectives and describe what they see with distinct discourses.

Although business and sociology enjoy many parallels in theory, there are fewer correspondences in practice. Their different recruitment methods are a case in point and a hurdle I had to overcome. Universities advertise their posts, publicly outline their employment criteria and establish hiring committees. Although accountability and consensus are also at issue in agency hiring, the process is much more overtly personal. Few jobs above secretarial and trainee level are advertised, so my first meetings (and perhaps my most important) were with recruitment consultants better known as 'headhunters'. I had to convince these gatekeepers of human resources not only that I could make the change convincingly, but that they could place me without putting in too many precious man-hours. In the end, I contacted two headhunters and both kindly took me on and got me job offers.

Between March and June 1997, I was interviewed by twenty-seven different people in eleven different companies. The interviews were, with only a few exceptions, one-to-one. Contrary to academic stereotypes of advertising people, almost everyone I met was charming and intelligent – at least for the forty-five minutes I spent with them. Even the most rigorous interviews were congenial and conversational – nothing like the acrimonious grillings by university committee that I'd experienced before.

Although ideas about advertising were at issue, the questions that seemed to loom largest were: *Do I like this person? Will others in the team like her? Is she or can she be one of us?* While it would be considered an inappropriate *official* criterion for an academic post, personality is a legitimate concern in a business where working in teams and pleasing clients are essential.

Nevertheless, these interpersonal questions were rarely explicit. In fact, in some cases, they may have been unconscious. During one atypical interview, however, concerns about personal attitudes and values were made surprisingly overt. After a successful conversation with his boss, I was brought down to Robert's office (not his real name) and introduced without warning. Robert alternated between being flirtatious and big brotherly. After some standard questions about why I wanted to work in advertising, he started asking me about my dealings with people: 'How do you think you'd get along with the Creatives? They can be egotistical bastards. Some take drugs. How would you handle that?' Caught off-guard by the taboo-violating drugs reference, I focused on it in my reply: 'I did my PhD on nightclubs and my husband works in the record industry. Drugs are not new to me.' However, leaning forward in his chair, he continued to probe the subject and I eventually confessed that 'I wouldn't want my direct boss to have a serious coke problem'. His reaction to this statement was immediate. He swung back, crossed his arms, raised his eyebrows and said, 'Then I guess we'd better stop talking now'.

Obviously, I'd hit the nail on the head. This was one of those Alice moments. Our interview seemed to go into slow motion and I took in his office for the first time. It was utter chaos. Mountains, hills and valleys of white loose-leaf paper – not even piles of files. He'd been rolling around on his swivel chair but had just come to rest in the centre of the room. I looked up and couldn't quite believe my eyes. There were four gargoyles looking in from each corner. It was 3.30 on a Tuesday afternoon and my potential employer was as high as a kite. Somehow I back-pedalled and managed to withdraw my confession, not because I didn't mean it, nor because I had any interest in working for him, but because I didn't want to have to walk out of his office right there and then. The interview continued along a personal vein, discussing husbands, wives, nannies and holidays. Later, I commented on the gargoyles, 'I guess they ward off evil spirits?' He seemed astonished, then touched, that I'd appreciated one of his personal eccentricities. Incredibly, I was invited back to that agency for two more interviews. I went along to them even though I knew that this oddly amiable madhatter and the agency's corporate culture were not for me. This agency was more 'political' than most and, for lack of a better word, 'sexist'.

An interviewee's sexual codes of conduct are an important, if always tacit, concern. Despite the flirtation during the interview, I did not get the feeling that Robert was particularly interested in me sexually (although he was the only interviewer whose feedback to the headhunter referred to my looks). Instead, I suspect he was trying to gauge how I might behave within the organisation once hired. Nothing would be more inconvenient, stressful and threatening than if I were to report to him but, say, have an affair with his boss or someone else higher up or across the hierarchy. Nothing destabilises the power structure or puts a spanner in the political works more than sexual affairs.

Intimacies of this kind disrupt the regular flow of information. This is the reason why so much of what goes on in the name of 'office politics' is about knowing who is who and knowing what to say and not to say to exactly whom. A good agency player knows that, when in doubt, discretion is safer than disclosure and circumspection smarter than commitment. However, the 'politics' of agency life are not just about information, they are also about emotion. They're about making people feel good about themselves, their position and ideas in a way that respects the power structure of the company without being obviously obsequious. In this regard, perhaps the most important moment in my interview with Robert was when I appreciated the purpose of his gargoyles.

'Contrariwise' creatives

When I eventually took a job, I joined what another adman called a 'bog standard multinational'. Of course, those at the company preferred to think of the agency as a 'safe pair of hands' for well-known household brands. Either way, no one would claim it was a creative 'hotshop'. Like many in the Top 20, this company was headquartered in the US and had offices in over fifty countries. Globally, its 'billings' (the relevant barometer of its revenues, as agencies take a percentage of the advertiser's media spend) were in the billions. A big international business perceived as standard was exactly the kind of organisation I was looking for. This one had the added bonus of several senior women who were sharp, admirable and fascinating.

Like most major agencies, our 'accounts' or 'brands' were serviced by teams whose members occupy one of three roles: managers, planners or creatives. The account managers are the 'suits'. They represent the client's interests, organise the team and oversee the production process from the first meeting to the last. The planners are, for lack of a better analogy, the intellectuals of the industry. They – or rather we (as it was in this capacity

that I was hired) – represent the consumer, conduct and analyse market research, and develop the advertising strategy, which is written up in a ‘brief’ to be passed on to the creatives. The creatives are the magicians. They imagine or invent the ad (in literary terms, they’re responsible for producing the text). With the aid of a consumer insight supplied by the planner, they conjure up the advertising idea which is executed with the aid of the in-house production department and out-of-house directors, photographers, etc. As their name suggests, ‘creatives’ are positioned as the key repository of corporate imagination and inventiveness.

Different modes of decorum and even dress are considered appropriate for each job. Planners, for example, are allowed to make deep and complex statements as long as they can sum up their thoughts in a single memorable ‘insight’. They can get away with more casual attire like cardigans and loafers, while the account managers are traditional power dressers. (Even though I was a planner, I generally wore suits to counteract being positioned as an academic without commercial instincts and to integrate more fully into the agency.) Creatives, by contrast, are not supposed to wear business attire – perhaps a jacket for an important meeting with a client, but very rarely a shirt and tie. This might undermine their claims to creativity. For example, after an all-agency summer meeting when the chairman recommended that staff refrain from wearing jeans or shorts (even on ‘casual day’ Fridays), a good proportion of the creative department came in wearing shorts – some of them obscenely short. What would have been perceived as childish behaviour in others was not only seen as acceptable, but as reassuring evidence of the ‘creativity’ of the creatives.

Creatives are the *raison d’être* of the advertising business – not unlike the way ‘artists’ are at the centre of the record industry. As a result, they require protection from clients and some measure of mystification. Otherwise, a brand owner might decide to make their ads in-house. Benetton, Calvin Klein and many of the fashion houses, for instance, create their campaigns within their own marketing departments without the aid of an advertising agency. While making noticeable, likeable, original ads is a difficult job that requires freedom and confidence, I was surprised by the way account managers and planners were expected to treat creatives not just with respect but with reverence.

‘Creatives’ come in pairs: one art director (responsible for the images) and one copywriter (responsible for the words), both of whom develop the concept together. Often one or the other partner is dominant in social interaction, if not the creative process. Creatives are sometimes said by others, frustrated by their power and ‘bad’ behaviour, to come in Tweedledum and Tweedledee combinations. In fact, one day over lunch

around the corner from the office, my agency colleagues jokingly generated a rogue's gallery of creative types: Screwed Up and Normal, Sulky and Smoothy, Prima Donna and Acolyte, Jaded and Lecher, Nice and Nasty, Sensitive Flower and Gratuitously Nasty and, finally, Stroppy and Stropier.

Despite having heard tales of creatives' extremely rude behaviour, I was still unprepared for my first encounter with Nasty without the moderating influence of his partner, Nice. Unfortunately, Nice was locked up in a Soho post-production suite putting the finishing touches to a toothpaste ad which was supposed to be on air that evening during *Coronation Street*. So only Nasty was available for the team to brief. I should have been suspicious when my fellow team members started bailing out of the briefing, but I was too busy worrying about the wording of the creative brief. By the time we were meant to go upstairs (and one always seemed to meet creatives on their turf, in their offices on the floor *above*), it was only me and the brief – a sheet of A4 outlining who the advertising should speak to and what it should motivate these people to do.

To make matters worse, the brief was a particularly difficult one. It was for a brand of trainers that had failed to carve out a distinctive brand identity for over a decade. It was still perceived by the all-important 15–24-year-old target market as 'wannabe Nikes'. Word had it that we were going to lose the account, so few would want to waste mental energy on, let alone be associated with, the lost business. To cut a gruesome experience short, Nasty looked down at me from atop his raised swivel chair and launched into a tirade about how much he loathed Americans, Americanness, and American claims to have originated anything (I presume he thought I was American despite my Canadian roots). From my extraordinarily low sofa seat, I politely suggested that we had in fact talked to many consumers who believed that the brand's American associations were an asset important to its authenticity. I explained our analysis and why, after much discussion, we had decided to include 'Americanness' in the brief. Clearly, this was not what he wanted to hear. He glared at me, then forced a contorted smile, tossed the brief onto his desk, then turned to look out of the window. My audience with His Nastiness was evidently over. I got up, resisted the urge to curtsy, and walked away down the corridor, half-expecting him to scream, 'Off with her head'.

Over the next twenty-four hours, I came to understand how misplaced it had been to worry about what exactly was written in the brief. Although the words on the page can be meaningful, particularly the one-line ad proposition, the people and politics revolving around this piece of paper are much more determining. The creative director had not signed off the brief

and no one else, let alone anyone of stature, had chosen to come along to the meeting. In this context (in marked contrast to what you would expect in academia), my writing was next to irrelevant. This copywriter was not going to take me or the brief seriously.

Consumers through the looking glass

When I first took the job as a planner, responsible for conducting and analysing consumer research, I felt empowered by the prospect of having so much information, that was too costly or confidential for most academics to access, at my fingertips. My favourite panoptic toy was the TGI machine or Target Group Index database which contains material on the attitudes, usage, purchasing and media habits of 24,000 representative Britons. It is a single source database that enables you to cross-reference any brand with any activity and answer questions as detailed as, 'which breakfast cereal are people who attend the opera more likely to eat than the rest of the population?' (Answer: Alpen.) In fact, the TGI offers overwhelming evidence of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the correspondence of taste and class. For instance, *Sun* readers do eat puds and pasties and use tea bags, while *Guardian* readers do eat pasta and drink filter coffee.⁴

However, it was not long before the exhilaration produced by this statistical voyeurism began to wane. First, the more I learned, the more I discovered what I didn't know and had to learn. Second, I was quickly confronted with the marketing cliché that it is a good deal easier to determine what consumers did last month than to predict what they will do next week. Third, I had thought I'd a good instinct for the values and habits of certain categories of consumer, like young people, and probably did. However, after being steadily and necessarily interrogated by the many players involved in the advertising process, I lost confidence in my own common sense. Fourth and finally, within the world of the agency, it is easy to become alienated from consumers. When it is a commercial imperative to control consumption, 'target' consumers seem to evade capture. They become fickle, inscrutable, more unruly than ever before. For these reasons, the initial thrill of omniscience was replaced by a humble sense of the enormity of consumer culture.

This is one reason why the industry is heavily reliant on 'focus group interviews' – not so much to come face to face with consumers in their homes as to observe them through one-way mirrors in 'viewing facilities'. Surrey has the highest concentration of viewing rooms due to its proximity to London, Heathrow and Gatwick airports, and is therefore one of the most researched parts of Britain. There, the marketing team from the client

company and the account team from the advertising agency might sit together in the dark, eating cut sandwiches and drinking hospitality plonk, watching a 'moderator' ask eight women about how they feel about Mars bars and what they think of a set of possible advert 'scrapomatics' (a.k.a. mock-up commercials made with found footage). If the group is a good one then the discussion will be open, cooperative and constructive; perspectives will develop and change. The participants will move beyond rational justifications of their behaviour to more telling emotional explanations and we will not be wearied by extended irrelevant anecdotes nor rigid adherence to a repeated point of view.

On the dark, corporate side of the looking glass, the atmosphere might be agreeable, sociable and fun – an evening out with the gang. Other times, it can be tense and twisted, like watching a race where the onlookers have secretly bet their life savings and will die if their horse doesn't win. In these cases, an agency observer might like nothing more than if one of the more articulate consumers were to pour scorn on a script idea backed by a rival. Other times still, particularly when the account is pan-European or global, the activity behind the glass is more like a United Nations meeting characterised by formal introductions and conversations that immediately get down to business.

One of my more surreal experiences of focus group research was in Frankfurt, when the number of professionals behind the mirror was the same as the number of consumers in front of it. Client and agency people had flown into the city for the day from London, Milan, Brussels and Dusseldorf. People kept drifting in and out of the room, making apologies about delayed planes and excuses about calls that had to be taken. Occasionally, the Germans would break into conversation in their own language, but otherwise all talk was in English. Typically, this also included the utterings of the ten German women on the consumer side of the looking glass who were being simultaneously translated into English by an inspired translator who gave each woman a different voice and, in some cases, even different accents. We wondered if she was making judgements about geographical equivalents by converting, say, Bavarian into Mancunian, but no one was quite sure.

The mirror just happened to have the same proportions as a cinema screen and, unlike most viewing facilities, there was a front row of cinema-style seats, behind which stood the more conventional table and chairs. The women had been recruited as heavy users of cosmetics, aged 35 to 49 years. A large number had dyed blond hair and a few must have lied about their age because they didn't look a day under 60. One such lady, a textbook case of 'mutton dressed as lamb', had the stretched, clownish grimace of one

addicted to plastic surgery. Although the group had been told that they were being observed, she'd obviously forgotten, and kept preening herself in the mirror, fingering the sides of her mouth for rogue traces of lipstick and checking her low-cut red jumper for signs of her bra. To sit and watch her felt embarrassing and oddly menacing. I was reminded of the mad-woman played by Bette Davis in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* but, sadly, this was live and unscripted, a private moment not intended as a performance.

This strange moment of intimacy with an anonymous consumer seemed perfectly to embody the paradoxical blend of reality and artificiality, drama and tedium that characterises the focus group. Focus groups, particularly in viewing facilities, are oddly familiar and estranged. On the one hand, the questions asked of consumers are invasive and answers expected often confessional. On the other hand, the consumers are kept at one remove, quite literally behind glass. The accepted reason for the one-way mirror is so that corporate observers don't corrupt the research. But, it would seem that the glass equally protects ad folk from being threatened by consumers who might resent their play at power and manipulation.

'Who are *you?*' said the Caterpillar

Back at home by my computer with a cat sitting on my notes, my life in the agency takes on the qualities of a 'curious dream'. As is often the case with participant observation, when you leave the field and the intensity of the experience wanes, it all seems a bit unreal – perhaps all the more so because you are altered by the research. This kind of ethnographic work is not only an investigation, but a period in your life which is changed by it. At the moment, people are pressing me to define my identity. Academic or advertising professional? Until I've reintegrated myself back into university life, I can honestly answer only as Alice did:

'Who are *you?* said the Caterpillar . . .

Alice replied rather shyly, 'I – I hardly know, Sir, just at present – at least I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.'⁵

Notes

All names and account details have been changed.

- 1 See Robert Phillips (ed.), *Aspects of Alice* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971). Exceptional sociological references to Alice include: Geoffrey Pearson and John Twohig, 'Ethnography Through the Looking Glass: The Case of Howard

Becker', in *Resistance through Rituals*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Unwin & Hyman, 1976), and Erica Carter, 'Alice in Consumer Wonderland', in *Gender and Generation*, ed. Angela McRobbie and Mica Nava (London: Macmillan, 1984).

- 2 For example, Don Cowley (ed.), *Understanding Brands* (London: Kogan Page, 1996); Don Cowley (ed.), *How to Plan Advertising* (London: Kogan Page, 1996); Gary Duckworth (ed.), *Advertising Works 9: Papers from the IPA Advertising Effectiveness Awards* (Henley-on-Thames: NTC Publications Ltd, 1997). Also the trade magazines: *Campaign*, *Marketing* and *Marketing Week*.
- 3 See *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995) and *The Subcultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997). My key asset was an expertise in youth, the consumer group generally perceived by the ad industry as an opportunity to generate adventurous, sexy, 'creative' advertising.
- 4 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 5 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There: The Centenary Edition* (London: Penguin, 1998), 40–41.