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There! Did you see it?; Care! They do see you. . . Subliminal messages in advertisement, movie making and cartoons in a ‘not so-innocent world’. Profit driven or ‘dark’ conspiracy?

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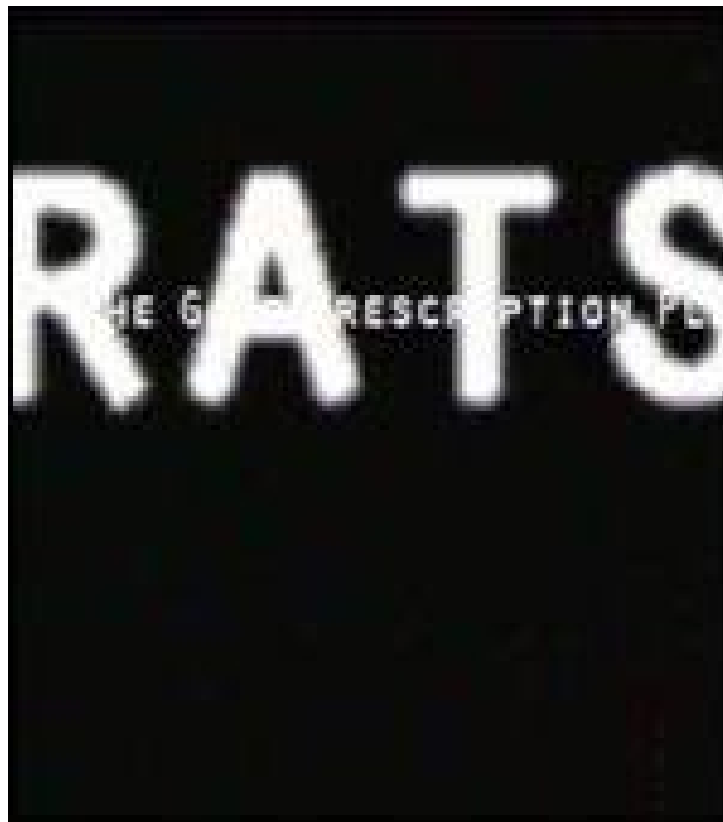
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There! Did you see it?; Care! They do see you...

Subliminal messages in advertisement, movie making and cartoons in a 'not so-innocent world'. Profit driven or 'dark' conspiracy?



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Democracy, Mass Media and the Internet
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There! Did you see it?; Care! They do see you...

Research on Subliminal messages in advertisement, movie making and cartoons in a 'not so-innocent world'

by Blagoy Klimov

Just why we are no longer content to leave our experiences in the subliminal state and why many people have begun to get very conscious about the unconscious, is a question well worth investigating.

-Marshall McLuhan

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Dedicated to all that see that, which ‘does not’ exist

Introduction

Subliminal effects are on the very dividing line of legal and illegal¹, humane and inhumane, hidden and confessed. They touch such sensitive issues as basic human rights and challenge societal groundings. But the power of these ‘semi-existent’ phenomena is so influential, that the temptation for their usage as powerful tools for policy-making, advertising or just a mere provocation is nearly irresistible.

According to the Skeptic’s Dictionary, *subliminal* refers to anything truly below the level of detectable sensation. The subliminal is generally said to be below the threshold of conscious perception. Thus, it is believed that one can influence behavior by surreptitiously appealing to the subconscious mind with words, sounds and images. It has been scientifically proven that visual subliminal messages can be perceived by the human brain, without consciously being aware of them. The debate arises when it comes to exploring to what extent messages, which are received below the conscious level implicitly affect behavior.

On the one pole are opinions belonging to people that believe not only subliminal messages have no effect, but that subliminal messages do not even exist. On the other pole are those, who believe that subliminal effects are part of a global conspiracy of major companies and think tanks around the world, which use them without limits to increase their profits by appealing to the subconscious of the people. The most common opinion is in between, namely: Even if there are subliminal messages, they can hardly affect human behavior.

I argue that subliminal messages are not so innocent and that they do not receive enough public and scientific attention. However, it is too paranoid to presume that there is some kind of global conspiracy that coordinates their usage. What is really worth investigating: *Do global advertising agencies and their clients really employ an*

¹ Although in 1974, The US’s Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopted a policy saying that subliminal advertising was contrary to the public interest it was not defined as strictly illegal.

intensive usage of subliminal effects in political campaigns, advertisement, movies and even cartoons?

Because an ultimate answer to be given to this question in one research paper is rather ambitious task, my aim is to empirically prove that there are much more subliminal messages in the public space, than we suppose. Unfortunately, they and their creators are much more ‘interested in us’, than we are in them.

1. What is subliminal message?

‘Subliminal or similar techniques’ refers to any device or technique that is used to convey, or attempts to convey, a message to a person by means of images or sounds of a very brief nature that cannot be perceived at a normal level of awareness. A very important distinction should be made. The classical definition for subliminal refers to something, which we *cannot be* actually conscious of through our physical senses. These are the *classical subliminal messages*, such as the effect of 25th frame, for example. In this research, I explore not only them but also effects, which *could be* marginally perceived by our senses, although with great difficulty, for which the precise term is *semi-subliminal*. Examples of such effects are images, hidden in the texture of bigger images, objects, which could have double meaning or images embedded within or overlapping with other images. They are most typical in ads in broadcasting and printed media. Both subliminal and semi-subliminal effects ‘are (equally-BK) manipulative as they do not permit viewers to consciously consider how they ought to respond to them i.e. freedom of choice is denied to anyone who looks at these ads’². That is why I will refer to both of them as ‘subliminal’ in the broad meaning of this term, for everything (such as still and moving images, iconographic techniques, etc.) that is used to purposely mislead the public.

² Hagart, Jim. ‘Jim Hagart’s Semi Subliminal World’. <http://www.subliminalworld.com/sampler.htm>. Last modified: 09-20-2001, la: 12-27-2002

2. Historical Outline of the First Subliminal Message Experiment

The subliminal effects appeared in the public sphere in the summer of 1957, following an experiment, conducted in a New Jersey movie theater by James Vicary. While projecting the movie 'Picnic', he flashed a couple of different messages on the screen every five seconds. Each of the messages was displayed for only 1/3000 of a second at a time far below the audience's threshold of conscious perceptibility. The messages were short and articulate- 'Hungry? Eat Popcorn' and also – 'Drink Coca-Cola'. Vicary reported tremendous increase in the sales after the experiment: popcorn sales had risen by 57,8% and Coca-Cola sales by 18,1%. Although government authorities and scholars pointed that the authenticity of these results had never been scientifically proven, the idea of subliminal messaging had become a major contentious issue in the public sphere.

2.1. Consequences of Vicary's experiment

The Vicary's experiment was the impetus that unlocked the imagination and 'creativity' for thousands of social actors, which started using hidden messages in advertisement, movies and cartoons. There are two major factors, that also contributed to that development- lack of proper legislation and lack of clear scientific explanation, which are explored below:

2.1.1. Proliferation of subliminal messages and the 'deficiencies of law'

Did Vicary demonstrated the awesome power of subliminal advertising to coerce unwary buyers into making purchases they would not otherwise have considered³ or he was just an ordinary cheater is not so important for this research. The major point of interest is that following that experiment, hundreds of TV and radio stations aired thousands of subliminal messages, mainly commercials. This was followed by a change in legislation, leading to the 24 January 1974 announcement by the FCC that subliminal techniques, 'whether effective or not', were 'contrary to the public interest', and that

³ Rogers, Stuart. 1993. 'How a Publicity Blitz Created the Myth of Subliminal Advertising.' Public Relations Quarterly. p.12-17. and also 3.

any station employing them risked losing its broadcast license.⁴ However the policy saying that subliminal advertising was contrary to the public interest, **did not define it as strictly illegal**. This loophole in the law, was embraced by major companies and other social actors to continue creating and disseminating thousands of advertisements and movies, that use hidden effects for one or another purpose.

2.1.2. The spread of hidden messages and the ‘deficiency of social scientists’ categorical opinion’

Since 1957, great number of psychologists, sociologists, cognitive scientists claim that ‘...years of research have resulted in the demonstration of some very limited effects of subliminal stimulation’ and no support for its efficaciousness in behavior modification.⁵ However they also claim that subliminal effects can be perceived and that the subconscious could be communicated through them. The ambiguous opinion of social scientists, which do not categorically reject the possibility for subliminal behavior modeling, is the second major factor along with weak legislation that stimulated further mass subliminal usage.

3. Empirical research on subliminal effects in Political Campaigns

Political campaigns are the ideal environment for subliminal pollution. The last Republican US’s presidential campaign in 2000’s elections was nearly looted, after a



Democrat in Seattle spotted an apparently subliminal message in a 30-second Republican campaign advert. The advertisement was intended to face one of the most controversial domestic issues - the provision of prescription drugs for the elderly. At one point this

Figure 1. Republicans' subliminal campaign' add

⁴ Mikkelsen Barbara and David P. 1995-2001. Urban Legends Reference Pages, <http://www.snopes.com/business/hidden/popcorn.htm>, last accessed 12-20-2002

⁵ Hines, Terence. 1990. ‘Pseudoscience and the Paranormal’. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.

slogan appears on the screen: 'The Gore prescription plan - bureaucrats decide'⁶. The Bush prescription plan - seniors choose,' It shows an image of Vice-President Al Gore, followed by fragments of the words "Bureaucrats decide". The word "RATS" briefly flashes on the screen before the entire word "bureaucrats" appears. (see fig. 1) After the media disseminated the case, a big national scandal was growing. The Democrats pulled the ad from the media to prevent further negative effects on their campaign. The creator of the add Alex Castellanos, initially announced that the flashing word 'RATS' was purely accidental. Later he changed his mind and said that it was there, but had nothing in common with the rodent, and the 'RATS' just wanted to underline the coming word 'bureaucrats'. But the public opinion was already highly critical:

'Somebody made this frame specifically. You can see the word is in a larger font and comes on top of the previous text.'
Lynn Vavreck, from the Department of Political Science at Dartmouth College

'It's cheap and manipulative. It certainly takes the level of political discourse down several notches,' Loyal Rue, who studies political deception at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, is very critical of subliminal messages in advertising.⁷

Whatever the truth was, this case showed that the public becomes more and more aware of the 'subliminal bombarding' and it is becoming more difficult for proponents of the subliminal techniques to create both still visible, but not so consciously perceivable hidden messages.

⁶ See Democrats smell campaign rat. 2000.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/americas/2000/us_elections/election_news/921830.stm Im: 09-12-2000. La: 12-28-2002 and also 7.

⁷ RATS ad: Subliminal conspiracy. 2000.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/americas/2000/us_elections/election_news/923335.stm, Im: 09-13-2000. La: 12-28-2002

4. Empirical research on subliminal effects in Advertisement

What you see, does not exist- **Jim Hagart**

This section will examine the best environment, where subliminal messages appear - the advertisement business. Jim Hagart⁸ explains the function of semi-subliminal advertising as ‘presenting information in a disguised manner and triggering emotions and influencing the formation of ideas. Their function is not to depict reality accurately, nor for the figures to be consciously recognized and appraised.’ Thus in subliminal ads there are two clearly distinguishable levels: on one hand the influence the surface level, where ‘meaning appears logical, reasonable, and definite’⁹. That is the ‘simplistic’ vision that we can easily perceive on the screen, which communicates with our conscious on the intellectual level. On the other hand the hidden messages in the ads influence us on the emotional, rather than on the intellectual level, where communication is ‘devious, subtle, complex, contradictory, and lies chaotically above and below the thresholds of consciousness’¹⁰. By playing with our emotions on the subconscious level, they create some kind of unexplainable close connection between ‘us’ and the product. We feel an inexplicable desire and association with this product. They ‘trigger emotions’ by using universal symbols and signifiers.

However, the usage of this type of ads raises the whole spectrum of ethical issues. The fact that they influence people, without their consent, directly defines them as ‘*manipulative*’. The public opinion is increasingly becoming more and more negative on subliminal advertisement. That is in conflict with the interests of major transnational advertising agencies and their clients, who would like to continue regarding people as easily manipulated, ignorant mass public. As Hagart found ‘for many years advertising professionals have attempted to convince critics (and general public opinion-BK) that ‘subliminal’ advertising does not exist.’ Or with Hagart’s words they are trying to assure us that what *we see* does *not exist*. Even if at some point agencies like Advertising

⁸ Hagart, Jim. ‘Jim Hagart’s Semi Subliminal World’.

⁹ Marshall, Mcluhan. ‘Subliminal Advertisements’. <http://members.shaw.ca/subliminally/index.html>, la: 12-27-2002

¹⁰ Ibid. Mcluhan

Standards Association, the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising or the American Association of Advertising Agencies, agree that there are hidden messages in their ads, they claim that they cannot produce any significant effect on human behavior. Summarizing the last statements a logical question comes to mind - If the subliminal messages do not have any effect, why the global companies use them so intensively and increasingly?

Who is right? People who 'see what does exist', or people 'seeing what does not exist' is not so important. What *is* important is that there is something to be seen. The



advertising professional do not want us to see, they want us to feel. By providing some empirical data below, I strongly support the argument, that there is abundance of hidden messages in many popular ads and that we really see what *does* exist.

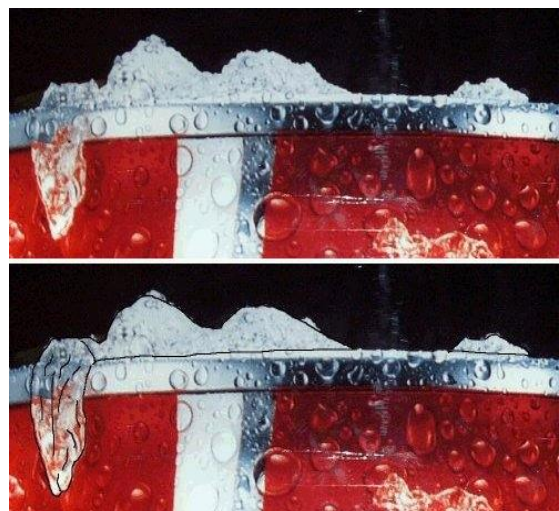
One striking example is that with the vending machines of Coca-Cola, which are located all over the globe. As Hagart¹¹ noticed there are at least four hidden symbols, shaped by the melting ice (see fig. 2). The ice on the top of the can (the yellow square numbered with 1 on the machine), for example resembles the backside of a female body, lying on one side, with her hair falling freely, along the rim.

(see fig. 3 on next page)

Figure 2. Standard Coke Vending machine

Figure 3. Female image on Coke machines

This subliminal resemblance makes an association between the coke and the sexual



¹¹ Hagart, Jim. 'Jim Hagart's Semi Subliminal World'.

desire on the secondary unconscious level. It implies a connection between drinking coke and sexual activity. The fact that this type of association is extensively used points to the conclusion that major advertising companies and their teams of behaviorists, sociologists, psychologists have found that the human brain is susceptible to such ‘persuasion’.

Another subliminal image (square 2 in the machine picture) represents something like a sitting beggar.(fig.4)



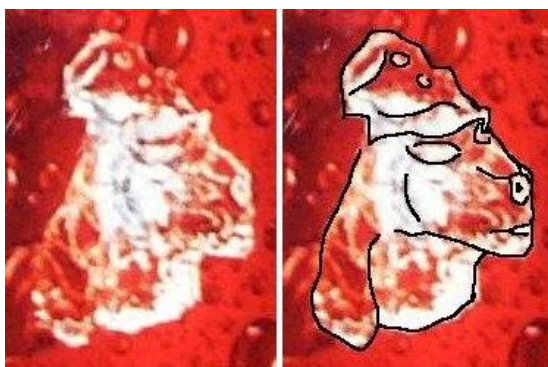
Figure 4. Beggar image on Coke machines

A possible explanation of the hidden effect of this image is to influence us that the product is really cheap and we are actually not spending a lot of money purchasing it. This image is

probably in connection with the female body image, thus connecting pleasure with minimal expenses. The resulting effect should be ‘Buy pleasure at no expense’.

Figure 5. Head of a dog on Coke machine

Square 3 circles an image resembling the head of a dog, wearing something resembling



a Santa 's cap. (fig.5) The effect the producers of this subliminal message want to produce could be linkage between the emotion we have for our pets and the Coke product. So to summarize the Coca Cola vending machines trigger sexual, economical and

emotional association on the subliminal level, trying to link them with their product.

Despite the Coca Cola's numerous subliminal examples, hidden messages are most commonly used in cigarette and spirits ads. It should not come as surprise that

cigarettes are perceived as ‘sexy’ by most of the smokers. This might be consequence of the fact, that nearly all-major tobacco companies use ads, which contain elements, which could be regarded as sexual hidden images. In most cases inserting the word ‘SEX’ or a phallic objects somewhere in the background or in the product itself achieve this. They directly connect in our mind sexual activity with smoking. The other type of images, cigarette giants use are those triggering feelings of stress and tension and the cigarettes are presented as the relief for the latter. This effect is produced by embedding images of demonic faces, objects that cause fear, somewhere in the texture of the ad. Other type of subliminal stress messages is for stressed people, who find such a product conforming to their mood and thus are inexplicably attracted to it.

Figure 6a and 6b. Kool cigarettes add N1

A very interesting example is the Kool cigarettes advertising campaign. In this add



there is ‘gross phallic and sexual symbolism’¹². There is a symbolism in the relations between the pump attendant that is positioning the pump and the woman, who is definitely not interested in him. She has the eye only for the man, holding ‘Kool’. The pump attendant is ‘left to himself and the pump’.



Figure 7a and 7b.

Kool cigarettes Add N2

The next example is again from Kool cigarettes advertisements. The girl is giving an eye to the man with the Kool cigarettes,



¹² Ibid. Hagart

while holding the hands of another man who himself is distracted by another girl, next to him, with the 'Kool aura' above her head. The subliminal effect of this ad is that Kool cigarettes equal (guarantee?) sexual experience.

This is enhanced by the tattoo on the wrist of the man, holding the pack, which is a stylized version of the word 'SEX'. Hagart describes it as 'the S is clear to the left of the tattoo. The e is large but in lower case and there is an additional character in between the e and the X with part of that character running through the X.'



Figure 8a. Carpet merchandisers' advertisement (below)

Figure 8b. The same add reversed-No comment (below)

Subliminal advertising is not only employed by major companies. Subliminal messages



could be found in adds of small and unknown companies and brands. We should not forget that they also very often use the services of the big advertisement agencies. Here we observe a carpet supplier and flooring company add, with an innocent image, albeit not very connected to the firm's activity. (see fig. 8a). However, when the image is reversed a rather indecent

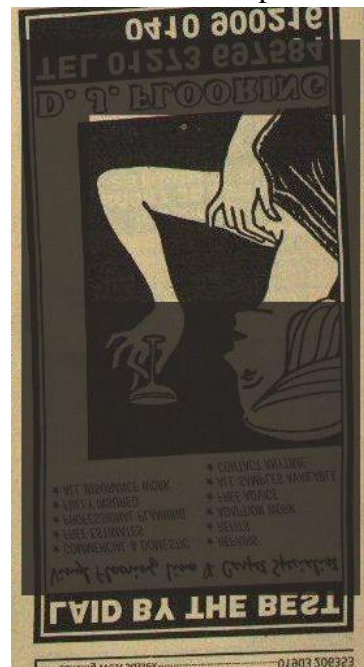


image is revealed. (fig 8b) Thousands of pages will not be enough to explore all subliminal ads, appearing in the public space. The task of this research is to prove that the great quantity of such ads rejects the theories of mere coincidence or people's

pervert imaginations. There definitely is something rotten in the profit world ‘out there’.

5. Empirical research on subliminal effects in Movies

Tyler says the things you own, end up owning you. It's only after you've lost everything that you're free to do anything. - Fight Club

Hollywood movies are also crowded with subliminal advertisements. (The main hero drinking Coke, or smoking Camel, for example). I will not regard them further in this research, because I have explored similar subliminal techniques in the previous section. What I am interested is movie subliminal messages that are either not connected with advertisement or at least advertise their own product.



Figure 9. Fight Club

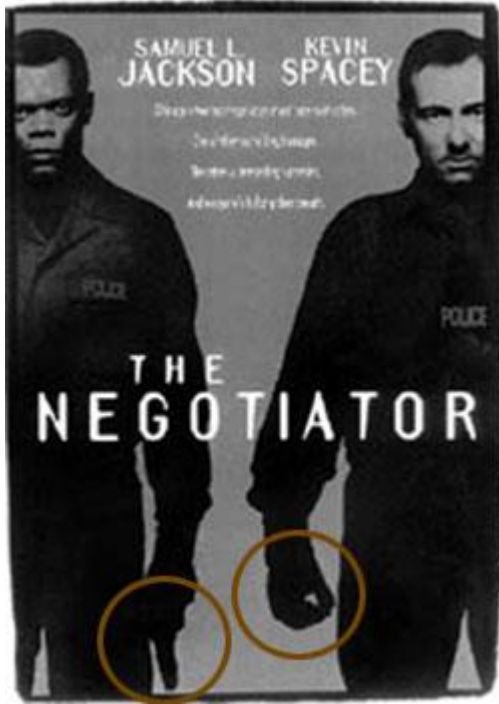
A bright and rather unique example of the former is Fight Club production (1999), which breaks all rules. It is a revolt against a society that ‘sells you on consumerism as way to happiness, success, sex and beauty’¹³. This movie ‘plays’ the public with the same manipulative tools, used by the ‘consumeristsociety’, they are fighting with. In the beginning Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt), who works in a movie theater is shown to insert nude scenes, like subliminal messages, into family movies. Later all these nude shots appear in the ‘Fight Club’ itself, as transitions between different parts of the story. The movie uses also hundreds of ‘slashing editing, subliminal cuts, and a jerky film-coming-out-of-the-sprocket effect to shake you up’.¹⁴ The result is a brilliantly manipulative movie, fighting with manipulation. The final

¹³ Roten, Robert. 1999. Laramie Movie Scope: Fight Club
Social commentary descends into comic madness, <http://www.lariat.org/AtTheMovies/fightclub.html>, la:
12-29-2002

¹⁴ Ibid. Roten

scene is an explosion, followed by semi-subliminal flying huge phallus, which fills the whole screen and disappears. Is this parody, aimed against subliminal proponents, or it is a subliminal message itself, aimed against the innocent public? There is not a definite answer. The only definite thing is that the giant phallus is there. (the very last scene).

Figure 10. Sexual euphemism?



An example of movie, advertising itself subliminally is ‘The Negotiator’ case. The hidden message is incorporated in the movie poster. The position of the hands and the gun of Samuel Jackson and Kevin Spacey could be regarded as sexual euphemism. (fig.10) The shading and the texture of the poster are tuned in such a way, that on the subconscious level the hand of Kevin Spacey represents the female genitalia and Samuel Jackson’s gun, the male. We clearly have another example of manipulative association between

sexuality and a product.

6. Empirical Research on subliminal effects in Cartoons

A most debated issue is the usage of subliminal messages in something so pure and innocent as child entertainment? Well, I argue that the world is not so innocent and the answer might well be-‘Yes’. *Walt Disney Pictures* was the first to be accused of using hidden sexual and other images within the realms of its major motion pictures.¹⁵ In



Figure 11. Cocaine and its seven stages?

¹⁵ Horse, Paul. What You Get Isn’t Always What You See, <http://www.uoregon.edu/~ovoice/subliminal.html>, la- 12-18-2002

this research on cartoon subliminals, I use Barbara and David Mikkelson's 'Urban Legends Reference Pages'.¹⁶

Walt Disney Pictures have been accused of conveying subliminal ideas since their first full-motion cartoon- 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.' A construction worker of Walt Disney World, resigned, saying that Walt Disney had been a cocaine addict. He insisted that 'Snow White was (symbolizing-BK) cocaine, and the seven dwarves were the symptoms of various stages of cocaine addiction: Grumpy, Sleepy, Grouchy [sic], Dopey, Sneezzy, Happy, and so forth'.¹⁷ Although this accusation is highly controversial and possibly unrealistic, the more recent examples make us doubt more and more that Disney's cartoons are 'pure child entertainment.'

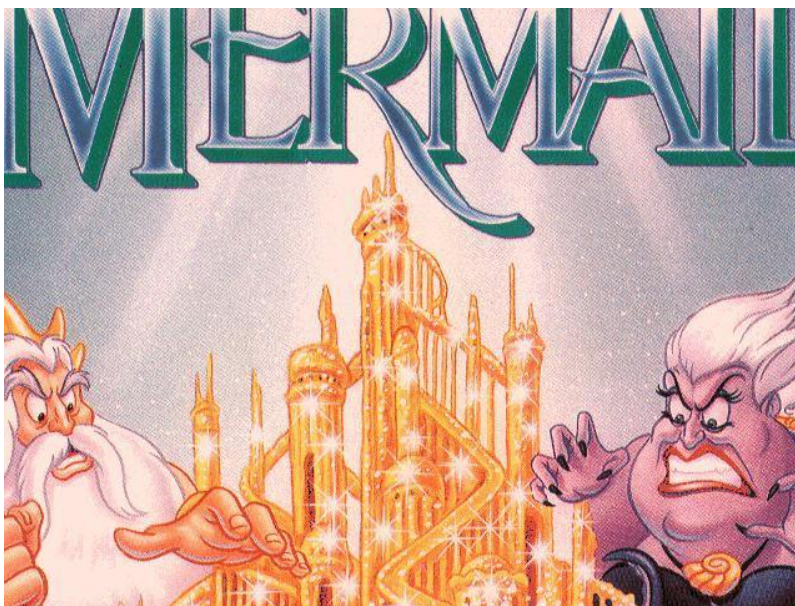


Figure 12. Subliminal effects in The Little Mermaid

A vivid example for this is *The Little Mermaid* Picture, where one of the towers of the castle bears an unmistakable resemblance to a phallus (fig.12), so much so that many people are unwilling

to dismiss the drawing as mere accident or coincidence.¹⁸ It has even been reproduced on the official promotion poster of the movie. The Walt Disney Pictures immediately responded that the resemblance between the castle spire and a penis was purely accidental, and that it was people's imagination that ignites such associations. Following the wide dissemination by the media of this case, and the consequent public

¹⁶Mikkelson Barbara and David P. 1995-2001. *Urban Legends Reference Pages*. <http://www.snopes.com/disney/films/>, Im: 2001 Ia: 12-28-2002

¹⁷ Miller, D.M. 2001. *What Would Walt Do?*. San Jose, CA: Writers Club Press. (p. 96)

¹⁸ Mikkelson Barbara and David P. 1995-2001. 'Urban'

protest, later issues of the cover were altered, with the contentious tower removed. (Close-up view of *The Little Mermaid* poster enclosed).

Another brilliant example for hidden messages is the 1977 animated film *The Rescuers*. On 8 January 1999, *Walt Disney Pictures* announced a recall of 3 400 000 copies of the home video version of this movie from the US market, because it contained an ‘objectionable background image.’¹⁹ In a scene, 38th minutes from the beginning, as rodent heroes Bianca and Bernard fly through the city, a photographic image of a topless woman can be seen at the window of a building in the background in two different (non-consecutive) frames: first in the bottom left corner, then at the top center portion of the frame. (see fig.13 below).²⁰

Figure 13. Subliminal pictures in The Rescuers



The most interesting about this case is that unlike the cases with the *Little Mermaid* and many others, *Disney* do not deny the hidden pictures of the naked woman, inserted in the *Rescuers*. Moreover they admitted that they *have been purposely put in the*

*cartoon.*²¹ They claim it has been inserted not by the animators, but in the post-production process. Why did this time *Disney* admitted the presence of subliminal pictures, unlike ‘the salacious images and sounds allegedly to be found in *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*’²². Why *Disney* did not recall from the market any of these movies, as they did with ‘*The Rescuers*’? There are two possible answers.

¹⁹ Davies, Jonathan. 11 January 1999. ‘Disney Calls in ‘Rescuers’ After Nude Images Found.’ *The Hollywood Reporter*. .

²⁰ Mikkelsen, Barbara and David P. 1995-2001. ‘Urban...’

²¹ Howell, Peter. 13 January 1999. ‘Disney Knows the Net Never Blinks.’ *The Toronto Star*.

²² Mikkelsen, Barbara and David P. 1995-2001. ‘Urban...’

On one hand, the power of the Internet would spread out the story so quickly, that they preferred to counteract. And on the other, (as Mikkelson and Mikkelson provide a possible ‘cynical’ explanation for Disney’s action), the best ways to boost sales of a slow-selling video would be to announce its recall due to the presence of some ‘objectionable images.’ So in this case the story is all about advertisement, profit and sales, rather than some deviant conspiracy group, which would like to pervert the mind of the child audience.

Figure 14. Jessica Rabbit exposed

In the picture ‘Who framed Roger Rabbit’ Jessica Rabbit is riding through with Bob



Hoskins in a cab. As the taxi engages in a car accident, Jessica and Hoskins are thrown away from the car; ‘Jessica lands spinning, which causes her red dress to start hiking up her body. For a few frames of Jessica's second spin her underwear supposedly *disappears*, revealing Jessica's unclothed nether’ (fig. 14).²³ These are frames 2170-2172(side 4)-laserdisc version.²⁴

Conclusion

Do global advertising agencies and their clients really employ an intensive usage of subliminal effects in political campaigns, advertisement, movies and even cartoons?

In conclusion, as a result of this research we observed that the public space is highly polluted with subliminal messages. The answer of the question, that was posed in the introductory part is: Yes, obviously global advertising agencies and their clients,

²³ Ibid. Mikkelson

²⁴ See also Fleming, Michael. 14 March 1994. ‘Jessica Rabbit Revealed.’ *Daily Variety*. (p. 1).

political campaign leaders all over the world, Hollywood and other movie companies' advertising centers use *intensively* subconsciously perceived and marginally perceived messages in political campaigns, advertisement industry, movies and cartoons. We are being constantly bombarded by them in tremendous quantities in all aspects of the public life. Can we fight for the time when *we will see all that exists*, or we will fall in total 'slavery of the mind' to the global merchants, a process helped by the coming digital revolution?

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Social commentary descends into comic madness,
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Fig.1 **RATS** ad: Subliminal conspiracy. 2000.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/americas/2000/us_elections/election_news/923335.stm, lm: 09-13-2000. La: 12-28-2002

Fig.2,34,5 **Hagart**, Jim. 'Jim Hagart's Semi Subliminal World'.
<http://www.subliminalworld.com/full.htm>

Fig.6a, 6b,7a, 7b **Hagart**, Jim. 'Jim Hagart's Semi Subliminal World'.
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Fig.8a, 8b **Subliminal Advertisements.**

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