Catherine Gudis, *Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape*
(New York: Routledge, 2004).

Reviewed for *The Iowa Review Web* by Mike Chasar

Catherine Gudis's *Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Landscape* follows James Fraser's 1991 *The American Billboard: 100 Years* as one of the few histories devoted to the once omnipresent and surprisingly rich medium of the commercial billboard. Exhaustively researched, *Buyways* occurs at the intersection of such other popular scholarly works as Stephen Kern's *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, Jackson Lears's *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, Roland Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*, and Cecelia Tichi's *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America*—all of which aim to further access what Raymond Williams would call the "structure of feeling" of a turn-of-the-century America consumed by issues of speed, mass production, efficiency, leisure, and expanding technology. Through the unexpectedly significant and dramatic portal of outdoor advertising—though perhaps "tollbooth" is a more appropriate image in this context—Gudis explores the larger culture of American mobility, the decentralization of the market, and emerging concerns over the stewardship of nature and the highway landscape.

"*Buyways*," Gudis writes, "is organized around the themes of production, distribution, and consumption" and begins with a reminder that the construction and use of billboards emerged from the competitive and sometimes violent practice of nineteenth century billposting that converted urban and rural landscape alike into one that was "slathered in paper and paste." The advent of the automobile, however, changed the dynamic of that slather as it forced advertisers to deal with newly "mobile audiences" while converting American highways into

"corridors of consumption"—a market shift that would eventually have substantial impact on urban design, among other things. Billboard execs discovered that their traditional text-heavy messages couldn't contend with the potholes, shifting gears, and scenic landscapes that vied for the speedy reader's attention, and so, Gudis argues, billboard advertising gradually began to feature "more simplified, abstract, and streamlined means of representing and selling the lessons of mobility." Hence the birth of logos and single images, "messages yielding unblinking recognition," and even forays into modern art forms and designs, to develop a medium that wouldn't just "survive the inattentive gaze of viewers but rather *thrive* on the inattention of viewers."

If Part One of *Buyways* can be read as the formal development of the billboard as genre, then Part Two looks past the board to the organization of the outdoor advertising industry—its professional affiliations, implementation of industry standards, attempts at self-regulation, etc.—and, even more importantly, to how the industry "developed an architecture of mobility expressly suited to the decentralizing commercial arena" in the U.S. These billboards construed travelers as twentieth-century flaneurs taking in the world from "the private space of their cars" and attempted to direct them how, when, and where to consume while helping to culturally "zone" the strip and its parking lots, grocery stores, gas stations, etc. In "fostering" what Gudis says is "our present sense of placelessness and the meandering of the market beyond geographic boundaries," these billboards took on increasingly elaborate tasks, with some even including theatrical stages and "showroom" windows on and behind which real people demonstrated the products being advertised around them. Not only did billboards sell individual products, Gudis argues, but by including electricity, clocks, on-site car dealerships and parking lots, they helped to construct and sell an entire culture of mobility and technology as well.

As billboard culture threatened to become as chaotic and competitive as the bill posting industry out of which it grew—editorial cartoons of the time show drivers walled-out from the landscape by billboards placed end-to-end along highways—public sentiment began to turn sour. Part Three of *Buyways* chronicles the "scenic sisters" and other largely women-led attempts to lobby for reforms aimed at restricting "billboard barons" and the "visual pollution" (elsewhere called "landscape leprosy" and "billboard rash") obstructing the driver's experience of nature and the landscape. In demonstrating how these women attempted to extend aesthetic control over the domestic realm into a cluttered and unsightly public sphere, Gudis makes some of her more original and insightful contributions, especially in "The Pastoral View" which examines how reformers "cast the highway, like the department store and picture palace, as another site of mass consumption, and the panorama of nature was the commodity for sale." Far from preserving the landscape, these efforts sought "to produce a good picture according to very specific cultural and aesthetic principles."

With 50 pages of notes, *Buyways* is a welcome—seemingly comprehensive—synthesis of multiple, disparate, and oftentimes hard to find sources, and it should serve as an indispensable source book for those working with related subjects in the future. At the same time, Gudis's argument could benefit from a more sophisticated theoretical framework. This is a historical project, to be sure, but one senses that Gudis too often tries to fit the history of billboarding and its billboards under one rubric, treating it as a more or less single commercial project rather than a diverse array of communication or speech acts. Gudis is at her most compelling when she allows time to work through critical evaluation, and more "close readings" of individual billboards would have elicited more in the way of cultural significance and highlighted the multiplicity of strategies at work within the medium. Surely, billboards painted to look like the

landscape surrounding them (*Ce n'est pas un billboard*) and the complicated logistics of "showroom" billboards involving living people could benefit from a variety of approaches.

A special and larger case in point concerns how Gudis configures billboard literacy and how to understand the process of driving through, and reading, a textual and/or commercial landscape. Gudis begins *Buyways* by noting the textual collage and palimpsests created by almost manic bill posting on walls and trees, but by Chapter 4 ("The Aesthetics of Speed and the Powers of 'Picturization'") she argues that billboards sought the more efficient image rather than "clever verbal devices" to "consolidate the message" and thus attempted, as much as possible, to eliminate words. "Pictures, not text," she writes, "were best remembered." This opens up an interesting discussion of the relationship between billboards and modern art, but the focus on image allows Gudis to short the textual landscape in her writing—even though that landscape was, and would continue to be imagined by the larger culture as, one largely made up of words and oftentimes very memorable words at that. From the "Book Boards," which were "'free-form' billboards in the shape of an open book" erected in the 1920s, to Paramount Studio's 1932 boards which had four "pages" that were actually turned by attendants, advertisers never seemed too far away from the bibliographic in their ideas.

This sense is confirmed elsewhere, as when, for example, Gudis quotes an advertiser who explains, "Every panel is like an open book held up before the reader's eye, and the book is always open to your page. . .It has no cover on it." At other times, the medium is described as one which could "talk the vernacular. . .the language of the common people" and was thus valuable for teaching people "a knowledge of letters." One also thinks of the successful Burma-Shave billboard campaign that, for nearly forty years, featured poems and no images, as well as another similarly poetic pitch that I happened upon in the General Outdoor Advertising

Company's archives at the Indiana Historical Society. (See the graphic accompanying this review.) Punctuated by line drawings that attempted to illustrate the poem in between its words, this hybrid of text and image reads:

> Look both ways when crossing streets—
>
> Walk S-l-o-w-l-y use your head!
>
> No matter if you're in a rush
>
> For jam and taystee bread!
>
> P.S. It'll wait—it stays fresh!

The poem's subject matter of slowness, caution, and waiting, along with its attempts to slow the reading experience by interspersing images and breaking the word "slowly" into its component parts, seems worth a second look for the ways in which it's not so clearly "unblinking" after all. Such closer considerations would not only help us to better understand this one textual landscape, but to more clearly come to grips with how the new media and especially the Web—the "virtual highway" that Gudis describes as "the ultimate in billboard aesthetics"—affect our reading and sense of literacy as well.

In "Reading as Poaching" from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes that "readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across field they did not write. . .Indeed, reading has no place." This note of "placelessness" is the same note that Gudis sounds throughout her book. De Certeau's reader and the decentralized American market don't readily go hand in hand, however, and would seem to offer a challenging and fruitful opportunity for further study. Despite this bump in the road, though, *Buyways* is a smooth ride and a very welcome spotlight on one of our more neglected media.

Mike Chasar has written about Burma-Shave's billboard poetry as well as the effect of billboards on the work of William Carlos Williams. His recent reviews and essays appear in TIRWeb 6.3, Rain Taxi, and Word for/ Word.

www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/tirweb/feature/nickm

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