Archetypes in Today's Advertising

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Abstract: *This paper explores ancient myth and mythological figures in contemporary advertising as a means of communication with consumers. In a hermeneutical and analytical way, through psychologic and semiotic theories, we classify and analyze the most recurrent themes: mythical time; beauty and eternal youth; success and power; idyllic environment, the search for the lost paradise. Based on universal archetypes, we see how advertising becomes an excellent vehicle to effectively reach the receiver's subconscious and act as an inciter to consumption.*

Keywords: Gods, heroes, advertising, myths, archetype, corporate image, emotional branding.

Introduction and methodology

> *"Gott ist tot! Gott bleibt tot! Und wir haben ihn getötet. Wie trösten wir uns, die Mörder aller Mörder?"*
>
> *(Friedrich Nietzche)*

However, it may be that from the context of current advertising, this statement may no longer be so valid. Today, through advertising and corporate images, the mass media performs a function similar to that used by yesteryear poets: it recounts heroes' exploits and presents role models. Advertising connects with the human conscience's eternal desire: to lift the spirit towards the hero's ideal or God.

"The foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities"[1].

As one Volkswagen publicist claimed, advertising is not a science. It is an art: the art of persuasion. The function of advertising is to sell, but not just objects. Ads sell more than products. They sell values, concepts of love,

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[1] Mircea Eliade: *Myth and Reality*, Harper and Row, New York, 1975, p.8

sexuality, success, and, above all, ideas of normality. It somehow tells us who we are and who we should be.

We think we ignore advertisements, yet we cannot deny their influence because it is rapid, cumulative, and for the most part, it remains stored in the subconscious. According to a study promoted by Rance Crain, former editor of Advertising Age, only 8% of the advertising message is received by the conscious mind. The rest is stored and processed over and over again in the brain, in the non-conscious part.[2]

This article explores the connection between myths or classical mythological figures and advertising. Advertising has assumed and incorporated all kinds of discourses that in principle were alien to it, from literature to cinema, fine arts, poetry, music, politics, or religion. In this appropriation process, advertising has found that it can exploit the myth for persuasive purposes. Through model archetypes, they become an excellent vehicle to reach the receiver's unconscious most effectively and operate as a powerful incentive for consumption by sustaining it in symbolic forms. Furthermore, given the growing process of trivializing the market, where all products are alike, and there are almost no intrinsic elements that significantly differentiate them, advertising has been forced to create that difference artificially. Thus, it has endowed products with an over-significance, a symbolic value that has little or nothing to do with the specific properties of the object to be sold but which, nevertheless, is decisive when buying. As Pérez Tornero writes, the use-value of objects no longer counts, but rather their symbolic value, the semantic dimension.[3]

Through the historical substrate, myths have been magnified as iconographies, symbols, and representations of great significance and visual power that regenerate and cement postmodern society's imagination. Faced with such a phenomenon, the problem that arises is whether, in the first place, there is a pattern that theorizes and supports the use of archetypes and mythological figures as an instrument of advertising discourse and branding or, on the contrary, it responds to arbitrary and devoid productions of a correlative pattern of theoretical and pragmatic content.

This article is based on the premises of several theories starting with the conception of myth as an intrinsic and constituent part of advertising discourse since it is understood that advertising is a manifestation of human thought that extends beyond the symbolism and cultural meaning that mythology has transferred to it. Therefore, methodologically, we will not start from an a priori etymological approach or a historical journey of the inheritance of mythology in postmodern society or mythical consciousness[4],

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[2] Jean Kilbourne, *Can't buy my love: how advertising changes the way we think and feel,* Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000.

[3] J.M. Pérez Tornero, *La seducción de la opulencia*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1992, p.81.

[4] G. Gusdorf, *Mito y metafísica*, Nova, Buenos Aires, 1990.

but we will confront the analysis of campaigns with the various theories that build this framework referential: speculative such as those of Carol Pearson and Margaret Mark[5] based on the composition of the intangible values that make up the brand image; theories that treat myth as a core element of advertising discourse, as is the case of Adrián Huici[6] or when advertising discourse seeks emotionality from a mythical register: its stories, representations, images, personifications and symbols are addressed to the viewer[7]; and, in a more hermeneutical and analytical way, those that try to analyze advertising from the myth: the case of José Luís León[8] and his conception of the Mytoanalysis of Advertising, in which he even divides this relationship into three dimensions: literal, allegorical and reconstruction of the figurative meaning.

Advertising, mythology, and emotion. Theories and classification

Current society presents two aspects: on the one hand, it seems that a strong sense of rationalism as a result of the Enlightenment Era rules, and on the other hand, the myth appears present. Ancient tales are brought alive, recreated, and trusted. There is a spread of emotions over even the most pragmatic sectors, such as the business world, where emotional value is used and given as a differential value.

In today's business world, especially in advertising, emotional value takes on the importance of an element of significant differentiation. Thus, we have emotional branding, whose goal is to connect with the audience by associating life experiences with the product, just through the reformulation of ancient archetypes and myths.

The argumentation of creative persuasion brings together visual qualities and expressive resources that support those qualities to produce substantial effects: evoking feelings and emotions that provoke the triggering effect of persuasion.[9]

The receiver of the message recognizes the themes and characters and identifies with them, which creates an emotional connection. Products like Acqua di Giò, Gillette Venus, Versace Eros, Nike are examples of brands that reach us using this type of message. These products' purchase results from the emotional bond created between the product, associated with mythical figures, and the consumer.

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[5] Mark, M.; Pearson, C.S., *The Hero and the Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands Through the Power of Archetypes.* McGraw-Hill, New York, 2001.
[6] A. Huici, *Mito y publicidad. Cuestiones publicitarias* 1: 72-86. 1993.
[7] R. Barthes, *La Antigua Retorica*, Buenos Aires, 1982.
[8] J.L.León Sáez Ybarra, *Mitoanálisis de la publicidad*, Ariel, Madrid, 2001.
[9] Ricarte, José M., *Creatividad y comunicación persuasiva*, Universidad Autónoma, Aldea Global 4, Barcelona, 1999, p.67, p.78-84.

Using images and motifs that exist in the collective imagination, on a conscious or unconscious level, seems to predestine the product for a safe sale. These elements that inhabit the receiver's psyche imply that he recognizes the themes and characters of the story and identifies with them, establishing an emotional connection. He lives his adventures and his experiences through them, with them when he sees them. Moreover, although the information is sometimes not recognized (the recipient does not know exactly which myth the story of a particular ad comes from), each person has a basic outline in their mind that arises from an inactive state when specific images, characters, or themes are reactivated. A story built on a myth, based on a myth, has a certain solidity because its background already exists in the receiver's imagination.[10]

It is true that now myths are not understood in the same way since they do not have that religious or sacred yesteryear component. It is a secularisation process and demystification, but that does not prevent societies from creating myths that continue to carry out certain social functions.

Advertising does not simply assimilate or embrace the myth since it is evident that, for it to be readily accepted by contemporary culture, it must be adapted, translated into the current postmodern narrative, and, ultimately, must be shaped as a readable cultural melting pot.

This adaptation could be classified using the mythemes proposed by León[11], of which the most common are:

- the promised paradise: Eden
- the ideal of perfect beauty: Aphrodite, the archetype of sensuality
- rejuvenation and eternal life: Persephone, the archetype of youth
- heroism: Ulysses (cunning), Hector (defender), Achilles (hero par excellence with a weakness)
- power: Zeus
- temptation: the song of the sirens
- the victory: Athena (Nike)
- success: Narcissus, the archetype of complacency and individualism
- rebellion against order: Perseus, the archetype of a savior; Prometheus, the archetype of a rebel who sacrifices himself for the human being.
- the search for treasure: Jason and the Argonauts and the search for the golden fleece.
- carpe diem: Dionysus, the archetype of party and joy
- freedom: Artemis

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[10] Fernández Gómez, J.D. y Pineda Cachero, A., *La belleza embriagadora: el mito de Dionisio en la publicidad.*: Alfar, Sevilla, 2002, p.18.

[11] J.L.León Sáez Ybarra, *Mitoanálisis de la publicidad*, Ariel, Madrid, 2001.

Model archetypes and placement.
Recurring mythological themes in advertising.

Advertising also builds its discourse using the main categories and mythical schemes, such as **eternal time**, **idyllic space**, or the **pursuit of happiness**. As Pérez Tornero commented: "advertising seems to understand that a consumption process is an act that occurs in a non-contradictory reality. That is to say, an ideal reality and superior to the daily one in which it seems that wishes always come true".[12]

The ideological aspiration of advertising is not to resemble reality but to make it resemble reality.[13] The key lies in imitating a prestigious model that will free us from our banal and cruel reality to transport us to an ideal world. The equation is simple: to ensure access to that higher reality for our lives subjected to time degradation, we must imitate the announcement's gods and heroes. We must appropriate that immortality-giving nectar that they use. Only here that divine food is replaced by the product for sale.[14]

The concept of a higher reality that we speak of would correspond to the mythical category of time. This **mythical, eternal time** is a different time, superior to the profane one that refers to the origins, to the time when gods and heroes lived among men and established the norms and guidelines of conduct that man still has to obey and imitate since they belong the sphere of the sacred[15]. Speaking of myth, Eliade defines his role as revealer of exemplary models for all relevant rites and human activities. According to Jung, myths serve as a model of behavior and reflect both individual and collective consciousness since they encompass universal archetypes similar in all individuals.

Returning to the characters who live in the time and space of the spots, we said that they could be classified as gods, they emulate the gods because their bodies are always beautiful and perfect, and they enjoy eternal youth - which constitutes another recurring theme - a coherent set with that circumstance of living in no-time.

When analyzing the temporal component, we cannot forget the spatial component. Just as we have the fantastic immemorial, eternal time, we also have the **mythical, idyllic space**, the perfect place, **Eden**: the stage where the show of heroes and gods takes place. That is also a different space from our usual one. It is a privileged, superior, better place. These are the places where God consumes the object: natural environments of spectacular beauty or luxurious, bright, and comfortable interiors.

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[12] J.M. Pérez Tornero, *La seducción de la opulencia*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1992, p.81.

[13] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, Harper and Row, New York, 1975, p.61.

[14] A. Huici, *Mito y publicidad. Cuestiones publicitarias* 1: 72-86. 1993, p.77.

[15] Eliade, Mircea, *El mito del eterno retorno*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1980.

By imitating the God or the hero's gesture, consuming the same product, and perhaps, in the same way, we will also have access to that sacred time and space that constitutes another ideal reality.

We have already mentioned a type of classification of recurrent mythological themes in advertising under the name of *mythemes* – myth and themes [16]. Above, we discussed the promised paradise, Eden: see Estée Lauder's perfume advertisements, *Beyond Paradise Blue* or *Eden Le Parfum Défendu* by Cacharel.

Here are more examples of campaigns according to the mentioned themes and corresponding archetype:

- the ideal of perfect beauty, Aphrodite, the archetype of sensuality: advertisement for Giorgio Armani's *Acqua di Gioia*; or *Venus Gillette*;
- rejuvenation and eternal life, Persephone, the archetype of youth: Christian Dior's *J'Adore*;
- heroism, Ulysses, the archetype of adventurer, warrior hero: *Marlboro/Marlboro Man* or *Harley Davidson* motorbikes;
- power, Zeus, the archetype of the supreme God: Paco Rabanne's *Invictus*;
- the temptation, the song of the sirens: *Evian water*;
- the victory, Athena: Nike campaign, *Just do it*;
- success, Narcissus, the archetype of complacency and individualism: *Axe range of deodorants*;
- rebellion against the order, Prometheus, the archetype of the rebel who sacrifices himself for the human being: *Apple world launch in 1984*;
- carpe diem: Dionysus, the archetype of party and joy (Diesel jeans);
- freedom: Artemis (the ads for Harley-Davidson motorcycles could fit under this category too: there are ads which could combine several archetypes and themes; here we could have BMW's ad from 2001 *Do you like driving?* and many other car ads).

Advertising oracle Leo Burnett (founder of the famous publicity agency that now bears his name, Leo Burnett, from 1935 in the USA) showed that the correct icon could sell almost anything to almost anybody. Leo Burnett created personalities as products. He realized that humans could not connect with a product, but they can with a specific character (here the *Marlboro man*). *Marlboro man* is considered the most successful and the most reviled advertising icon in history[17]. When they first sold in the 1920s, Marlboros were targeted at women. They came complete with a red filter tip

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[16] J.L.León Sáez Ybarra, *Mitoanálisis de la publicidad*, Ariel, Madrid, 2001.
[17] Sell and Spin, *A History of Advertising*, TV documentary written by Gary H. Grossman, Rob Blumenstein, Sean P Geary, 1999.

to cover up lipstick stains, and they were sold with the tagline *Mild as May*. Sales were flat after a few decades, and Phillip Morris decided to redesign the brand for men. The aim was: the population of white-collar workers who had been in World War Two and now came back and were stuck behind desks, so Marlboro was a kind of means of escape into a fantasy of virility and freedom. The promise of the *Marlboro man* is this: *Come to where the flavor is! Come to Marlboro country!* When *Marlboro man* went national in 1955, the product's annual sales jumped an astounding 3000% from the previous year. This product went from small usage to massive consumption solely on the basis of a brand making this object human: endowing it with this powerful archetype image. Undoubtedly, it is a clear example of model archetypes' influence on consumer trends, but it is not an exclusive case. This manly and lonely figure also brings together - broadly speaking - the archetype of the adventurer who has also promoted the brand insights of brands such as *Harley Davidson*, *Camel*. The adventurer archetype also has certain nihilistic and relativistic connotations, as it is a clear apology for carpe diem, postmodern individualism, and the overstimulation of oneself.

We also observed in many of these advertisements the **playful dimension** related to time and mythical space. The inhabitants of these settings have a life free of all worries, given over to pleasure and total enjoyment. It´s the **pursuit of happiness**. There is a permanent state of unconcern; they live in a game situation. It is an approach to the world of childhood. They are children who play dress up in one way or another, drink a soda or another, have fun without any limitation. Besides, in the infantile world, adult psychology rules do not work; for example, there is no postponement of pleasure. What one wants must be achieved immediately, in the here and now. The materialization of desire occurs in the present, an absolute present that completely forgets the past and does not look to the future, which annuls history.

In the child, we can see it clearly: the only thing that interests him is that the adult satisfies his desires immediately, without considering the effort that may have taken to get what he wants (past) or the consequences that its consumption may have for him (future).[18]

The advertising always attracts using phrases such as "leave it all and come and try" or "take it now! because you are worth it!"; it focuses on life in a playful light, and it is considering child consumers whose compulsive desire (or stimulated to be compulsive) cancels the reflection on the causes and effects of their attitude.

By integrating the playful aspects into advertising along with the other elements of the myth, it is given a communal character: if we want to

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[18] A. Huici, *Mito y publicidad. Cuestiones publicitarias* 1: 72-86. 1993, p.79.

stay in the group, we must do what everyone else does. Otherwise, if one does not wear the appropriate marks, one will be expelled, uncommunicated.

As we mentioned earlier, myths serve as a behavioral model and play an essential role in shaping a group or a nation. Advertising takes advantage of all possible subtleties and tools to gain the ground of consumption. The reference to supernatural beings, gods or heroes, in advertising, as consumers of the advertised product, confers authority on the discourse, recommends the product, and justifies its purchase.

It is interesting to see how myths and their adaptation to current life are noticeable even at the linguistic level. There are terms whose etymology is based on the name of a specific creature: *titanic* from *Titan; odyssey* from Ulises' trip back to Ithaca*; atlas,* the object, representing the collection of maps, from the titan who carried the heavens on his shoulders, to name just a few examples. We see it in products that use their names directly: Pegasus Airlines, Centaur Media, Nike, Hermes Paris.

What would be other reasons for this continuous reproduction of the classical gods or heroes in advertising?

Barthes affirmed that we are all deciphers, creators, and consumers of myths as if postmodern society somehow needed to complement the absence of stable values and traditional models with other exemplary models that embody desires, chimeras, and beliefs. The postmodern dreams evoke him far from this reality to memorable times, idyllic paradises, ideals of beauty and power.

These phenomena respond to some of the characteristics that define postmodern society, such as the need for referents in the face of a materialistic culture. It is about cultural elements that applaud the struggle against reality, with the established order and the continuous search for escape routes, for idyllic paradises that provoke in man the belief of a fantastic reality.

Mass media's present role as myth creator

Advertising maintains the vitality of mythology today. It is a kind of mass literature and a source of social knowledge. Mass-media communication, in general, is a discourse that defines and organizes life in its social or political manifestation.[19] Consequently, mass media stands as the most effective way of reviving and transmitting mythical structures in today's world.

It even creates its new own myths, praising a new type of superhero: soccer players, actors, singers, personalities found in sports, cinema, music, TV (all related to mass media industry): "Mass communication facilitates the

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[19] Hardt, H., *Myths for the masses. An essay on mass communication.* Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA. 2004, p.23.

ascension of the new gods of mass culture, who rise in quick succession to preach their sermons, while devoted audiences flock around them to affirm their status as disciples, or fans, reminiscent of their behavior as congregations in the lap of their communities"[20] .

It is interesting to observe that current media presents an ephemeral nature that contrasts with the eternal nature of old myths, which serve as fundamental for the new tales.

Conclusion

It is a kind of paradox of the current world that individuals immersed in a secular, rational, and materialistic society are witnesses and followers of the reappearance of the mythical, the imaginary, religious and irrational, all components of the current advertising discourse. Despite being highly influenced by technology and science, our society is full of myths, old myths that persist and are revived or re-adapted, and new myths created due to recent experiences and living in the present.

The cultural industry reinstates the status-quo perpetuating myths and ancestral tales under new interpretations and forms, manifesting varied meanings. One can also witness the appearance of new gods or heroes, stories and characters that, regardless of whether they are real or fictional, rise to objects of mass veneration. Advertising is one of the most influential media in our culture, the most persuasive media discourse in our society. In essence, advertising, by using the advantages offered by the use of myths and archetypes or symbols, by connecting with that collective imagination and directly with the emotional world of the consumer, becomes one of the most profitable industries in our society, whose presence and influence is impossible to ignore.

Beyond its aesthetics, composition, and discourse, advertising, as one of the most important industries on the planet, it is consequently regulated and oriented to achieve its objectives in the most effective way possible. Therefore, the audiovisual, verbal, and semiotic resources that make up the advertising campaigns have an economic value and a clear function: to put the advertiser in contact with the consumer through advertising language and to become a determining factor in their purchasing decisions. Advertising takes allegorical and symbolic components from myth, forming a sufficiently persuasive rhetorical compendium to, directly and indirectly, influence consumer trends and cause that hedonistic and pleasant effect on the consumer before and after the acquisition of the advertised goods and services.

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[20] Hardt, H., *Myths for the masses. An essay on mass communication.* Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA. 2004, p.42.

Having underlined the dilemma between the different interpretations of the myth and its relevance to the advertising discourse and to the postmodern society that incurs them, it is more than feasible to verify that the use of myth as a persuasive tool does not have an arbitrary or casuistic function. Instead, it is considered deliberate.

It is also focused on the different advertising strategies based on market studies and what is known as consumer psychology. It is also aimed not only at persuading the recipient, who is part of an eminently consumerist society, but also at entering their mind—in this way, creating attractive ideas, pulsations, and imaginaries that make up the brand image through the repeated reproduction of characters and mythological values that, since time immemorial, have been part of the culture and language of the human being.

However, the valid conclusive claim of this article is that there has been, so slowly and progressively that the consumer has overlooked, the replacement of myth by advertising: the allegorical messages, promises, patterns, and values that constitute the postmodern advertising discourse have replaced the archetypal models that classical mythology has bequeathed to the cultural substrate.

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