

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE CAPITALIST MYTH-MAKING: ADVERTISEMENTS AS MYTHS OF THE MODERN WORLD****PARVATHY P**

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**PARVATHY P****ABSTRACT**

Advertisements function as myths of the modern world. A myth serves “to provide a rationale for social customs and observations, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (Abrams 178). Taking up this role fulfilled by myths in societies, advertisements draw from allusions and create illusions to sew new patterns and combinations into culture. They function as a metalanguage through which the dominant power communicates its ideological standpoint and attempts to naturalise it. The stories advertisements tell, the ways it chooses to tell them and the ideologies that they advance, do a great deal to reproduce the dominant interests. With the ephemera of social life teeming with signs, advertising functions as a complex hierarchical semiotic register where signifier transfers from first order referents of meaning to second and third order ones. Rooting itself in the existing belief systems, advertisements implant into the collective consciousness of the society newer ideas and interests. Functioning as myths, they take the form of a system of communication which naturalises the political nature of a product’s consumption and production. The paper is an attempt to analyse advertisements from the point of view of Roland Barthes’ concept of Myth. A select number of advertisements from the visual media have been examined to arrive at a conclusion. The analysis gives insights into the ways in which advertisements constitute an ideological tool in the hands of the dominant classes in an advanced capitalist society.

**Key Words:** Advertisements, myth, narrative, Roland Barthes.

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Advertisements are one of the most important cultural artefacts affecting life today. Their existence in several media gives them a sort of independent reality that links them to life. Advertising has become “the face of popular culture itself: it knits us in and it knits us out, it tells us how we should and feel and what we need to be and do and have in order to lead fulfilling lives” (Williams 209). Advertisements invariably function as modern narratives. The stories advertisements tell, the ways it chooses to tell them and the ideologies that they advance, do a great deal to reproduce “the specific form of political and economic hegemony that is dominant in a particular place and period” (Williams 210).

Advertising also acts as myths of the modern world. Myth is to be understood as having two meanings. Firstly, it is, as its Greek etymology suggests, a legend, a symbolic account of the human condition. Secondly, it is a lie, a mystification. Since no society exists without some form of myth, today’s capitalist society which is based on the economy of mass production and mass consumption has evolved its own myth- advertising is the consumer culture’s version of mythology. Like myth, it touches upon every facet of life and makes use of the fabulous in its application to the mundane. Borrowing ideas and designs from history and the future, and from its own experience, advertising artfully combines them around the theme of consumption. The substance and images woven into advertising messages are appropriated and distilled from the unbounded range of cultural references maintained by the audiences. From baby products to automobiles, advertising creates around it myths that enter the consciousness of the society, nurturing and nourishing it.

A myth, according to Roland Barthes is “a type of speech,” “a system of communication” (Barthes 131). Myth is not a particular object, but rather the “the way in which [an object] utters [a] message” (Barthes 131). Barthes explains that “myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification”(Barthes168). A myth is a “metalanguage,” a second language through which the dominant power communicates its ideological standpoint and attempts to naturalise it by making its message, or ideology, seem self-evident and true;

myth is the system used to communicate that which the power wishes to be accepted as common-sense and universal. Just like Gramsci’s hegemony, myth produces an internalised form of social control which makes certain views seem *natural* or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all, just *the way things are*.

Barthes asserts that myth is a system of signification and connotation which circulates the dominant power’s values. This system of signification is found in everyday objects and signs. Myth goes beyond the ordinary linguistic level to enter a semiological level. A myth is a “second-order semiological system” (Barthes 137) in which the sign, which is the final term of the first semiological system becomes the first term, a signifier, of the myth system. The signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning and form full on one side and empty on the other. The sign is turned aside from its proper function, that is, its denotative function, since in myths, connotation is parasitic on denotation. Barthes considers the emptying of meaning by form and a continued restoration of form by meaning, what he calls “the constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form” (Barthes 142) as definitive of all myths. The picture of the Negro who salutes the French tricolour becomes the form with the signification that tacitly expresses the concept that a black man is serving French colonialism without objection. The concept according to Barthes is “at once historical and intentional; it is the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered” (Barthes 142). He continues:

The concept reconstitutes a chain of causes and effects, motives and intentions. Unlike the form, the concept is in no way abstract: it is filled with a situation. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth....The same goes for the Negro-giving-the-salute: as form, its meaning is shallow, isolated, impoverished; as the concept of French imperialism, here it is again tied to the totality of the world...it is not at all an abstract purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function. (142-143)

This openness makes myths available for appropriation, which appears to be one of its most fundamental characters and hence used by the dominant ideology as a strong political tool. Further, in myths, the same concept can be expressed through a variety of signifiers. This abundance of signifier compared to the relative poverty of concept lends myths to analysis. Again, the relationship between the myth's concept and its meaning is one of deformation, or distortion. The repetition of concepts in a multiplicity of signifiers and the distortion of form in relation with meaning are aspects that invite the attention of someone attempting an analysis of myths.

Barthes, thus, sees myth as the system through which the historical has become perceived as the universal. Advertising too works in a similar fashion. With the ephemera of social life teeming with signs, advertising functions as a complex hierarchical semiotic register where signifier transfers from first order referents of meaning to second and third order ones. Rooting itself in the existing belief systems, advertisements implant into the collective consciousness of the society newer ideas and interests.

Advertisements functioning as myths take the form of a system of communication which naturalises the political nature of a product's consumption and production. The paper analyses two television advertisements- for Surf Excel and Apple Macintosh- to find out how advertisements work as myth narratives.

The Surf Excel advertisement under discussion is first of their "Daag Achhe Hain" (Dirt is good) advertising campaign. Hindustan Unilever Limited introduced Surf in 1959, a time when laundry soap bars were used for washing clothes. Surf was the first detergent brand on TV and the brand initially used TV to effectively educate the consumers on how to use detergent powders for a better wash.

The ad opens with two kids (brother and sister) walking back home from school. The little girl falls into a puddle of mud and dirties herself. Crying, she looks at her brother for help. The brother gets an idea and starts "beating up" the puddle of mud. He dives into the puddle and starts smashing it with a barrage of blows, only to emerge out of it totally

dirtied with a triumphant smile on his face. The boy stands up and says, "sorry bola" (said sorry). The sister is happy that she has been avenged and as they walk back elated with their victory, the brother warns the puddle one final time not to do it again, with a smiling sister in tow. The female voiceover concludes, Surf Excel: Daag Achhe Hain (Dirt is good).

Not even once in the whole commercial is there a mention of the product being advertised. Sentiments and emotions are highlighted and showcased throughout the advertisement in one form or another and the product is kept discreetly tucked away. The advertisers knit into a typically Indian story the product to be marketed. The advertisement effectively exploits the psychology of the audience and makes use of children's appeal to convey the advertising message. The use of children in the advertisement lowers the guard of the viewer and exudes a certain warmth that the viewers easily identify with.

However, behind the innocence of the children and the story portrayed, there is an ideology that is being deliberately sold by the advertisers. The commercial can be read as a microcosm of the adult world. While reflecting a spirit that is truly Indian- the love bond between a brother and a sister and how the brother protects and cares for his sister- the advertisement is in fact reinforcing a norm prevalent in the society, a very patriarchal ideology.

When the advertisement begins, the brother and sister duo is seen walking back home after school. The brother is walking a few steps ahead of the sister. By extension this can be interpreted as a sign of a statement existing in the society. The fact that the girl walks behind her brother is an indication of how the society always places women as secondary to men. The boy walks disinterested in the girl's talk. When the girl falls into the puddle, she looks helplessly at her brother for support. The boy turns heroic and starts beating up the puddle while the girl sits beside. This is the denotation that is sent straight to the viewer. The connotation is that women are frail and fallible and cannot protect themselves. The fact that the boy doesn't fall into the puddle serves to ascertain the notion that women are frail and fallible.

When the boy beats up the puddle, the girl simply sits by the puddle and asks her brother to 'beat up' the puddle more. The girl is portrayed throughout the advertisement as passive and helpless; though still the root cause of all the commotion. The double edge of accusation and abasement divide the boy and the girl into two discrete worlds, reinventing their separate roles and forcing them to play them according to the rules of patriarchal society. The girl is smeared with more than dirt now: she has the mark of her slavery written all over, though she appears to be more than satisfied and happy about it.

The advertisement ends with a voice over that says "If dirt can bring happiness, isn't dirt good? Surf Excel: Dirt is Good." It is with the voice over that the connection between the narrative and the product is made. However, it can be noticed that the voice is not that of a man but of a woman. The disembodied voice of the woman, now alienated from the real situation of the girl in the narrative, becomes godlike and invents a dream of power and autonomy for the women, which is strictly predicated on the male intervention that patriarchy has both promised and imposed. In addition to selling the product, the advertisement is also selling a very patriarchal ideology.

The second advertisement under study is that of Apple Macintosh. The advertisement opens into a momentarily black scene. A footage of Albert Einstein is shown and the voice over says- "Here's to the crazy ones -the misfits; the rebels; troublemakers: the round pegs in the square holes; the ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules and they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do." The voiceover is backed by some piano music. As voice over progresses, the first footage is followed by a slide show of images of a number of famous people from across the world belonging to different fields: Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard Branson, John Lennon with Yoko Ono, Buckminster Fuller,

Thomas Edison, Muhammad Ali, Ted Turner, Maria Callas, Mahatma Gandhi, Amelia Earhart, Alfred Hitchcock, Martha Graham, Jim Henson (with Kermit the Frog), Frank Lloyd Wright and Pablo Picasso. The final image that is shown is of an anonymous young girl and the voice over "Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do" coincides with her introduction. The scene then fades into black and the words in white "Think different" fades in. A moment later, the familiar multi-coloured Apple logo appears above the text, and the commercial ends.

The advertisement can be seen as a typical example of a myth narrative. The most conspicuous feature of the advertisement is that the product-Apple Computers- is not shown in the entire advertisement. Instead a narrative is formulated and the product is sold through the soft-sell approach- a brand image is created through the process of association. Most advertising is about linking a particular product or brand to a particular set of qualities or benefits in the consumer's mind. This linkage is often achieved through juxtaposition. The viewers are invited to the narrative and are told a story. A myth is created in the first place and 'sold' to the audience who buys it before buying the product proper. In the advertisement under discussion, an array of individuals is shown, all of them great individuals of the twentieth century, in fairly distinct fields. They are identified as people who saw things differently, who were "round pegs in square holes"- the crazy ones.

Dylan, Lennon, Hitchcock, and Henson were some of the most influential entertainers of the latter half of the century; King and Gandhi revolutionary social activists of the century; Einstein and Fuller made innumerable contributions to science, in addition to their work in less esoteric fields; Turner revolutionized the television industry; Ali and Earhart are famous for feats of physical ability and Van Gogh and Picasso, two modern masters of painting. Apparently these individuals have nothing to do with Apple Computer or their products - none of them is shown using computers, and some had been deceased long before Apple was even founded in the nineteen-seventies. The link is achieved through juxtaposition of the images with the brand.

The advertisement begins with a voice over that directly addresses the 'crazy ones'. The narrative begins by rooting itself on an accepted definition of the 'crazy ones'. The crazy ones are identified as the misfits, rebels and the trouble makers. The lexical meaning of the word crazy is immediately forgotten with the image of Albert Einstein appearing on screen. The viewer immediately associates the word with a lighter colloquial meaning and the voice over strengthens the intended association in the viewers mind by further describing 'the crazy' as people who see things differently. "They're not fond of rules, and they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them". In the first order semiological system the signification is that greatness is achieved by people who 'think different'.

The narrative proceeds to build a new definition for "the crazy"- they are people who change things; "They push the human race forward". The idea is elaborated by the voiceover: the greatest people are seen as "the crazy ones; the misfits," but they are the ones that "push the human race forward." The implication here is that the best changes in the world are made by special people, often deemed "crazy" or otherwise different by the society. Thus the link between the images displayed and the message is made explicit and the intended message of the "crazy as genius" is sent straight to the viewer. The message is reinforced by the synchronization of vocals with the video: while the voiceover carries meaning perfectly well on its own, the words when coupled with the images take on stronger meaning. The phrases spoken during each individual's appearance correspond roughly to the popular conceptions about each individual. The viewer hears "crazy" and sees Einstein; "misfit," and sees Dylan; "troublemakers," and sees King. Lennon and Ono "aren't fond of rules." Fuller has "no respect for the status quo." We can agree with Gandhi or disagree with Ali, or vilify Turner - but "about the only thing [we] can't do is ignore" them. Henson is a genius. Van Gogh is, again, crazy. Finally, the "ones who do" are the children and the image of an anonymous child is shown.

Before the logo is shown the text "Think different" appears on the screen. The text too can be seen as mythical speech. In the first order system the text is the signifier and the signification is simply a direct appeal to the viewer to think differently. The viewer is asked to think different like the many "different" individuals in the commercial. The viewer is intended to consider "different" as an adjective, or possibly even as a noun embodying some abstract measure of deviation. It is simply an invitation to "think differently," albeit in a "different" grammatical form than the viewer is probably used to encountering. In the mythical system, the sign however takes a different signification. Apple establishes itself as different from other companies. The footage of the great personalities serves the purpose. Just like they are different from the common mass so is Apple. It is different from other products. The signifier thus takes a new signification- Apple is different.

The theme of "different" is reinforced one final time with the appearance of the multi-coloured Apple logo. Until the logo appears, all footage has been in black and white. The use of black and white footage serves well earlier in the commercial, when it conveys impressions of great figures of history. It serves in another capacity at the end of the commercial by providing a strong contrast to the bright hues of Apple's apple logo. This contrast then provides another instance of how Apple is "different," and supposedly better because of it. Though Apple is different like the different heroes of history, it is also different from them: a difference that is rooted in technology replacing the human in line with a technocratic world where Apple products thrive better. This embarrassed relation with past constitutes the tortion that gets expressed through the mutilated form of the apple in the logo. The artificiality of the whole form is reinforced by the sign ® carefully placed in close proximity to the apple. It is as if by distorting nature, Apple has reserved its rights over nature, and overridden it.

The advertisement is obviously aimed at the members of the global village. By directly addressing the audience and asking them to be the agents of change, Apple is asking the viewer to stand out in the crowd by joining their league with others across the world. The advertisement may be

considered paradoxical in that it appeals to the audience as individuals, to their individual tastes and the desire to stand out from the crowd, by asking them to join a group-the group being the owners of mass-produced items. A lot of advertising emphasises individuality as being based on superiority when the main benefit they are stressing is membership of a club of owners. This kind of advertisement promotes a society of competitive individuals, who labour under the illusion that possession of certain consumer goods makes them better than their fellows: different, in short.

Both the advertisements we have discussed tend to 'naturalise' a contingent and historical idea: in the Surf Excel ad, patriarchy is equated with sibling love; in the Apple ad, the radical and the revolutionary is pressed into the service of the commercial intentions of an advanced technocratic capitalism. In both, the signifying chain of language is co-opted and transformed into a signifier of a concept that is contiguous with capitalist ideology. Their primary commercial purpose of selling the products appears to be the more innocent of their concerns. Thus both these advertisements ultimately contribute to the mythology of the bourgeoisie, which specialises in de-nominating itself, in self-effacement and disappearance that allow the class to efficiently operate incognito. Thus, as myths, advertisements do what Barthes has said myths do in the modern world: they make the historical and the contingent appear as natural, universal and given. This it achieves by obscuring significance, by stating everything as a fact that does not warrant an explanation. This depoliticization is the ultimate achievement of advertisement's myth-making function.

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