Myths in advertising
Current interpretations of ancient tales

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Introduction

At first glance, a mercantilist activity that emerged from the development of capitalist societies such as advertising, does not appear to be related to any ancient tales passed down from primitive people to give explanations about the phenomena happening in their environment. However, although both discourses are not directly connected, advertising and myths present some similarities in their structure as well as their contents and functions, as described by several authors who study the extensive relationship between both disciplines. In order to be aware of this connection, attention needs to be given to present-day advertisements where it is easy to identify characters and motifs which reference myths. These tales are those which have inhabited literature and art for centuries as well as films and new media forms and therefore are present in modern-man´s psyche. Thus, although they seem to be unrelated, "advertising shares with myth a number of features. They are both integrated systems and they both share a structure and basic themes" (Langholz, 1975: 155).

This article focuses on the presence of myths seen within advertising, since, as a form of emotional communication, advertising addresses the audience's feelings and connects people through its mythical component. Therefore, this represents an account of how

advertising utilizes many elements which are already established in the audience's mind, guaranteeing its recognition and identification. Essentially, it refers to the representation occurring at the *surface level*, where it is possible to recognize the use of mythical characters in the name of a product, or in reference to some myths in certain commercials. Acording to Greimas (1990), who establishes three levels of significance (i.e. figurative / thematic / axiological level), the values in the deepest level are conceptualized in themes through *narrativization*, which are finally materialized in perceptible figures such as characters, scenes, etc. in the superficial level. Emphasis, therefore is given here to the figurative level, analyzing the perceptible presence of myths in contemporary advertising.

Myths and mythical thinking

Although, the conceptualization of the object of inquiry should be the starting point of every study, the definition of the term 'myth' implies a challenging exercise, since it has plenty of cultural, social, and historical connotations, as well as subsidiary meanings which describe it as a rumor or a falsity. Mircea Eliade notes that "the word is employed both in the sense of «fiction» or «illusion» and in that familiar especially to ethnologists, sociologists, and historians of religions, the sense of «sacred tradition, primordial revelation, exemplary model»" (1975: 1). Nevertheless, the ambiguity which sometimes surrounds the concept is compensated by a vast bibliography concerning myth and its meaning within different civilizations. Among the mythographers' contributions to the field, Eliade's interpretation can be highlighted since it summarizes the essence of the term when noting that a "myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the «beginnings»" (1975: 5). While it would not be possible to present an extensive account of myths and their implications here, the basic functions in ancient societies should be noted as to better understand their manifestation in the contemporary world.

According to experts, who stress different dimensions, myths serve as a behavior model –"the foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities" (Eliade, 1975: 8) –; thus it plays an important role in the configuration of a group or nation, since it is conceived as a powerful unifying strategy and an account for customs or commu-

nity rituals. Furthermore, myths are also understood as symbolic forms by which "the spirit proceeds towards its objectivization, i.e., its self-revelation" (Cassirer, 1980: 78), reflecting both individual and "collective consciousness", as promoted by Jung (1994) who notes that it consists of archetypes which are similar in every individual. Concerning the nature of the collective imaginary, Izod remarks that it [collective imaginary] "is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals" (2002: 34). Thus, myths also enclose a universal dimension, given that they seem to be a common characteristic of humankind, present in every place, since the beginning of time. A possible reason for the striking omnipresence of myths in distant cultures around the world might be the human endeavor to understand the universe (Sellers, 2001: 2). In fact, Dorfles notes that myths are manifested in every society, from the traditional ones to the most developed ones; therefore, myths are believed to still be alive today, but under new formulations (1969: 158).

There are different theories concerning the universal nature of myths, such as Jung's psychological interpretations or structuralism represented by Lévi-Strauss. Their notion about the "collective conscious", which Durkheim (1992) conceives as a common pool where myths come from, is understood as the starting point for the ideas presented in this article. Nevertheless, despite the debate between theories, the fact remains that the universal nature of myths persists in society, and they survive by adapting to every era and by adopting different representations. For example, take the recurrent image of the 'warrior woman' which contrasts with the traditional representation of women as weak beings in need of protection; said archetype is rooted in ancient civilizations and gains a new significance in modern times, due to feminist movements. This way, the Amazons who were a nation of warrior women, are reinterpreted as a primary sign of female power, (used by a branch of feminism called 'Amazon feminism') which takes new forms nowadays, such as the comic character 'Wonder Woman' (1941), her videogame counterpart Lara Croft from 'Tomb raider' (1996) or 'Xena: Warrior Princess' (1995), all of them transformed into today's feminist icons. Moreover, this motif can be seen in advertising, as we can see in the

Figure 1

promotion of the 6th season of the popular TV drama 'Desperate housewives' (Figure 1), where the characters are depicted as (attractive) warriors.

According to some experts, such as Arroyo Almaraz, it is easy to visualize the utilization of ancient myths and how they are recreated into modern forms. Almaraz states that it is not the discourse itself that is modified, but the form of the discourse instead (2007: 353). From this, he discusses the idea that myths are still present today, and that the set of heroes, deities, and creatures which constitute Greek mythology, for example, are found in our daily routine but in different ways. These modalities include linguistic terms whose etymology is based in the name of a certain creature (like 'titanic', from Titan, or 'odyssey', which refers to the hero's trip to Ithaca), to products which use their name (*Pegasus airlines, Centaur Media PLC, Nike*), or even certain objects ('atlas' is a collection of maps named for the titan who carries the heavens on his shoulders or 'aphrodisiac', a reference to the goddess of love and sexuality). In this sense, literature stands out for its essential role in spreading or reinterpreting ancient tales through centuries, from antiquity to present day, and several experts remark the contribution of art masterpieces to the survival of mythology within western culture (Eliade, 1983: 168). Given this, the study of myths has been traditionally related to their presence in literature, since "literary works may be regarded as 'mythopoeic' tending to create or recreate certain narratives which human beings take to be crucial to their understanding of their world" (Coupe, 1997: 4). The horizon of study has gradually expanded to media forms such as films, comic strips, or advertisements, since they perpetuate ancient archetypes under new interpretations.

All the same, there are specific periods of time in history when myths were especially powerful, such as Romanticism, since an increasing interest in myths as well as a return to mythical universes is noticeable in every social, cultural and ideological dimension of that time (Duch, 1998). This is what happens in a postmodern context like today's world:

> one has only to consider the magical feelings attaching to authority, or the glamour attributed to celebrities, or the power of divided historical origins and cultural traditions

to set modern communities […] to see that the myth has
lost neither its imaginative purchase nor its living power
as a historical force today.
(Samuel & Thompson, 1990: 4).

Current society presents two dimensions. On the one hand, it is
dominated by an extreme rationalism, as an inheritance of the En-
lightenment era, and on the other hand, myths are expressed in
different ways, such as those seen in mass media discourses, which
are understood as the means by which ancient tales are still alive.
Therefore, it could be said that "myth and mythopoeia have sur-
vived the individual attempt to demythologization" (Coupe, 1997:
12) despite the influence of the science discourse.

Myths, contemporary culture, and mass communication

The presence of myths in the present world seems to be undeniable,
and such phenomenon can be seen in several aspects of today's life.
The influence of the so-called 'emotions era' spreads over the most
pragmatic sectors, such as the business world, where the emotional
factor is understood as a differential value. An example of this is
'emotional branding', whose aim is to connect with the target by as-
sociating life experiences to the product through the reformulation
of myths and archetypes, and which is being increasingly used by
corporations due to its proven effectiveness (López Vázquez, 2007).

Given this, it could be said that not only are myths updated
within literature, but they are constantly reformulated within oth-
er creative discourses, such as art, film plots, music compositions,
etc. (Herrero & Morales, 2008: 13). Moreover, the authors also note
the active role of myths within the seductive rhetoric which oper-
ates in advertising and in the manifestation of certain ideological
values that politicians present in their speeches in order to get the
citizen's support (ibid.). In much the same way, Barthes claims
that "not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema,
reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support
to mythical speech" (1979: 110). Thus, it is not surprising to iden-
tify the use of mythical images, characters, and topics in current
texts. Mass media, therefore, performs the same function as the
poets and story-tellers of ancient times, but it also plays an impor-
tant role in the creation of new ones, which are understood as the

reinterpretation of the classical stories or the results of the current media industry (i.e. 'Superman' or soccer players, who are glorified as contemporary heroes). Nonetheless, myths are not understood in the same way as they used to be conceived in the ancient times, since they do not include a religious or sacred component anymore. The process of secularization and demystification within the modern world does not imply, though, that the so-called "logo societies" do not create their own myths which still perform certain social functions (Senís, 2008: 589).

Mass media as transmitter of myths

Most authors highlight the role of mass media among the contemporary means of communication, since "mass communication is the discourse of society, which defines, organizes and determines life in its social or political manifestations" (Hardt, 2004: 3). Given its role within society, mass media stands as the most efficient way of expanding upon myths and ensuring its diffusion in today's world.

Therefore, the media transmits those tales which were once known by our ancestors, and this in a sense represents a crucial function because mankind utilizes narratives to achieve self-awareness and to understand the symbolic and conceptual universe; which is essential for the interpretation of its existence. In this sense, "stories play a formative part in creating who we are since they present a medium through which we can organize, communicate and remember our experiences, proffering ready-made schemata that equip us to understand and evaluate our lives by connecting what happens to us to a wider community" (Sellers, 2001, preface vii). Given this, it is logical to recognize the influence of myths in television plots and film narratives which serve as channels for tales and stories which are known by the viewer:

> Any popular icons of the day may carry an archetypal charge. Activities subject to the focused passions of large numbers of people (such as televised international sporting contests) may do so too. In fiction, an entire narrative (in whatever medium) may be archetypal if it springs from a source that feeds (and perhaps springs from) the unconscious needs of substantial audience numbers
> (Izod, 2002: 36).

Myth and advertising

Not only does mass media perform as a transmitting means which amplifies mythical structures, it also generates new ones. In fact, today's society creates its own myths, praising characters such as those found in cinema, music, TV, and sports; in other words, anything related to mass industry. From the Critical Theory's perspective, said industry and its products constitute a business of constant distraction which is supported by the social system market; the culture industry whose, in Horkheimer and Adorno's words, "control of consumers is mediated by entertainment" (2002: 108).

Several authors talk about this contemporary phenomenon which is defined as 'mythification'. In this sense, it is surprising how some objects can gain such a mythical dimension; cars are outstanding examples to understand the phenomenon, as pointed out by Barthes who defines them as a creation "consumed in image, if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object" (1979: 88). For Frankfurt School philosophers *mythification* of products could be conceived as one of the consequences of the deceptive promises that consumers are incessantly offered by the culture industry; "The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise, which actually comprises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come, that the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002: 111).

In this sense, Hardt notes that "Mass communication facilitates the 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" (2004: 42). Moreover, those modern myths which are product of the media culture present an ephemeral nature that contrasts with the perpetuity of ancient tales, which act as the basis for new stories (López Vázquez, 2007: 101).

Rey points out the paradox of today's world when he describes that individuals immersed in a secular, rational, and materialist society will witness the re-appearance of mythical, imaginary, religious, and irrational components, all of which are found within the advertising discourse (2006: 75-76). Therefore, it can be said that advertising is one of the elements of western culture which maintains

the vitality of myths in our society. As Hardt notes, "advertising is the twentieth-century literature of the masses and a source of their social knowledge. [...] Advertising also reinforces the myths (of freedom and equality, among others) on which society relies" (2004: 23). Thus, regardless of the fact that myths and advertising seem to be completely unrelated discourses, belonging to distant eras, with different goals and contradictory mechanisms, the truth is that they are tightly connected. For example, the motif of the *locus amoenus* which traces back to Homer's and Ovid's pastoral poems, has become a rhetorical commonplace for literature and art that is used by advertising to recreate an idealized setting for the presentation of the promoted product. This technique is especially effective in items related to nature, such as food or cosmetics, as seen in this *Esteé Lauder* perfume advertising (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Huici asserts that, given that advertising is based on symbolic forms and model archetypes, it exploits myth with persuasive goals, and thus it becomes an excellent vehicle that reaches the addressee's unconscious in a more effective way as well as to serve as a valuable consumption incentive (1993: 74). This way, when designing creative strategies, advertisers turn to those pre-existing elements which constitute the collective imaginary. Those elements –archetypes, stereotypes, and myths, depending on the perspective from which they are analyzed– involve a set of ideas, values and symbols which configure the mental structures of a community or group. Thus, the use of those pre-existing elements is understood as an effective resource in order to build arguments, because it contributes to increasing the persuasive potential of the advertising message. The fact of using images or motifs which are already set within the collective imaginary seems to be a guaranteed sell, assuming the fact that the one who is addressed is expected to understand the message (Rey, 1993: 100); this way, myths are believed to be especially effective in advertising due to the use of a known code which is part of the popular imaginary. And, this is even more meaningful if it is taken into account that advertising is an ephemeral communication which needs to transmit clear and direct ideas in just a few seconds. Take for instance, the well-known theme of dualism which presents the struggle between the good and evil side of man, usually expressed by his reflection, shadow, or double. The motif, which comes from the mythical story of Narcissus,
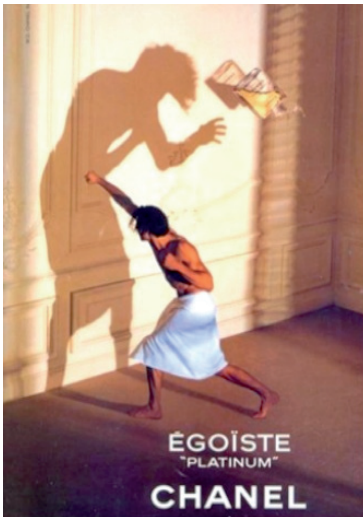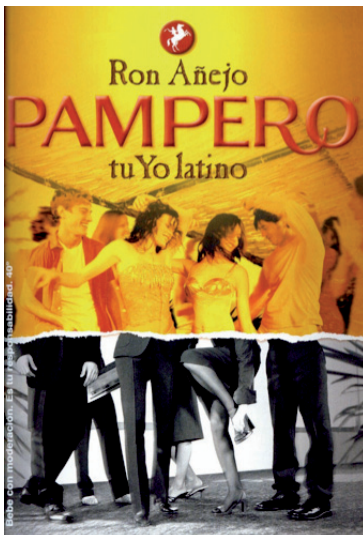
Figure 3

Figure 4

is especially present in fantastic Victorian literature works such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886), *Peter Pan* by James Barrie (1904), *Through the looking glass* (Lewis Carroll, 1871), etc., thus, it can be said to be present in people's imaginary. Using this theme in advertising would guarantee the effective comprehension of the audience, since images such as mirrors, shadows and portraits are encoded as references to dualism, as it can be seen in a *Chanel* advertisement (Figure 3), where the character fights against his double (shadow) in order to get the perfume back.

Furthermore, the technique of turning to those elements which are already stored in the receiver's psyche seems to be a safe bet, since the addressee recognizes the themes or characters of the tale and identifies him/herself, and thus establishing an emotional connection. Fernández and Pineda mention that, despite the fact that in most occasions receivers of this information do not know which myth is represented in a specific advertisement, each person has a basic scheme in his/her mind which seems to come out of a lethargic state when specific images, characters or themes are reactivated (2002: 19). The same phenomenon is noticeable in the creators, as pointed out by Winkler, "frequently, popular authors and other creative artists do not acknowledge direct or specific influences but instead let their works speak on their behalf; many do not even possess any conscious knowledge or awareness of what has shaped their creative impulses" (2001: 21). Thus, even though advertisers might ignore the myths which operate in their unconscious when designing an idea, they turn to the structure which is located within the collective imaginary to which they belong to. This way, the images which an advertiser utilizes when expressing the atmosphere of a party in an alcoholic beverage advertisement, for instance, will be determined by his/her culture. In a South American Rum advertisement (Figure 4), the enjoyment is expressed by the antithesis between Dionysus and Apollo. This opposition is shown by the contrast between the professional and restraint, which is represented in black and white –located below – and the lack of inhibition within the celebration; a fun time where life is in color.

As a result, it could be said that one of the advantages of turning to myths in advertising is the fact that mythology is understood as the basis, and already integrated within the collective imaginary,

from which to create persuasive messages; "a story which is built upon a myth base counts with soundness, since it has penetrated the target's imaginary" (Fernández & Pineda, 2002: 18). Concerning the nature of the mythology which works as a profitable resource, some authors (San Nicolás Romera, 2003) note that there is a limited number of pre-existing elements, and consequently, there is no innovation in this sense, but recreation and re-adaptation in any discourse which takes it as basis. Chillón states that the content of every advertisement tends to participate from those pre-existing elements, which belong to the cultural memory of the individual and of the community, so to speak, from the tradition understood as a vast anthropological deposit (2000: 136). Therefore, it is a fallacy to think that the idea of 'the new' is marketable (Fernández & Pineda, 2002: 21); "As such, myth is precisely like advertising, a conservative force. It is not concerned with revolutionizing the existing order of things but in preserving it. […] Far from changing values, it very much follows and upholds existing ones" (Langholz, 1975: ix-x). Hence, advertising uses commonplaces (i.e. standardized settings, defined as Aristotle's *topoi* or *loci*, by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) which have been internalized by the society so that it does not need to introduce new ones, but reviving those which have already been obtained.

These settings are part of the collective imaginary and remain within each person's interior, waiting to be activated and to be adapted to the prevailing formats and discourses of each historical moment (López Vázquez, 2005: 176). We can observe them through certain images, characters, and narrative configurations; they are not immutable, but they do change through time and under social and cultural evolution. This is observed, for example, in an advertising campaign by *Magnum Ice cream* ('Magnum Temptation'), where Eva Longoria can be primary understood as the current representation of the Biblical Eve, but also as a reference to the Greek Pandora, and/or a representation of the seductive *femme fatale*, so to speak, as it refers to woman as the embodiment of sin and temptation (Figure 5).
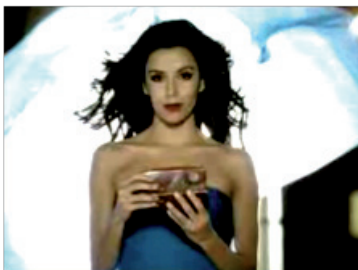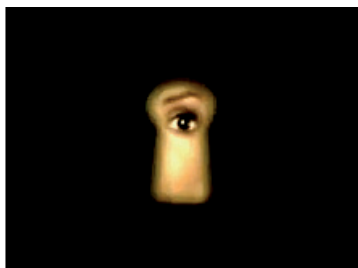

Figure 5

Mythology as a creative resource

Mythology is said to be a very effective and creative resource when looking for insights to connect with the target, or in other words,

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10
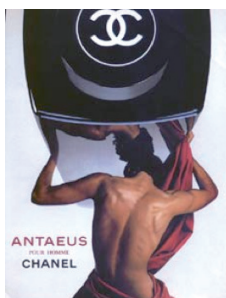

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

when building up arguments which will eventually hook the public's attention. In much the same way, it is possible to refer to the use of mythical settings from a strategic point of view, where it can be used to understand the collective imaginary as a vast repertoire where advertisers can find creative concepts. Since advertising is essentially an economical activity subject to market demands, it is logical to conceive myths as pragmatic tools for advertisers, and as a recurrent technique that was once used by artists and writers. In fact, several authors like León (2001: 36) or Fernández (2000: 61) talk about the *instrumentalization* of myths by advertising discourse. In this sense, it is interesting how ancient tales are used in a creative way to generate hypothetical new stories which actually perpetuate conservative patterns. It is the creative impulse which renovates traditional archetypes by adapting them to current times.

If mythology is used in advertising as a creative resource, then it is not difficult to locate mythical characters in any kind of advertisement. Examples are found in both the name of the product itself, like *Gillette Venus* 'Reveal the Goddess in you' (Figure 6) or in the representation of the goddess herself, like in a magazine ad from *Acqua de Giò*, where we can see a young woman emerging from the sea, according to the Greek story of Aphrodite (Figure 7). Furthermore, mythology presents a wide range of picturesque and recurrent characters, which are efficient alternatives when looking for ideas. Therefore, it is easy to identify mythological creatures such as mermaids, centaurs, fauns (Figures 8, 9, 10), as well as characters such as Pegassus, Zeus, Antheus even though the promoted product is not symbolically related to a specific mythical character (Figures 11, 12, 13). This artificial, yet intentional, connection is especially noticeable in visible consumption items, because it is necessary to associate certain values to the product in order to generate a purchase as the result of the emotional tie between the product and the consumer. In this sense, some authors also highlight myths and advertising as discourses of authority which legitimize specific behaviors. Taking into account the undeniable influence of the mythical universe over culture, this aspect can also be understood as a benefit of utilizing myths. One could say that because supernatural beings are used often in advertising, they are considered as a persuasive resource; thus, a mere reference to a god or hero who consumes the product seems to justify its purchase and to

Figure 14

confer authority upon the discourse. As an illustrative example, a *Philadelphia* campaign highlights the phrase, 'A little taste of heaven,' featured by angels, who can be understood as validators when consuming the product (Figure 14).

Conclusion

The main idea that can be drawn from this analysis is that myths survive, in both thought and narrative form. Therefore, the idea of solely interpreting myths as legends that primitive civilizations created in order to give an explanation about the world is myopic, because myths present a multifunctional nature and, consequently, they are operative in every era. It seems obvious that the mythical dimension is one of humankind's features, intimately linked to its nature. Despite the fact that contemporary society is highly influenced by technology and science, mythical narratives proliferate, by the creation of new myths, or the updating of ancient tales, and they manifest by different means. From a critical theory viewpoint, the cultural industry would reinforce the *status-quo* by perpetuating ancient myths under new interpretations and forms.

Due to the social relevance in such a mediated culture, mass media can be highlighted among those sources that disseminate myths today. Their visual and emotional character makes them exceptional instruments for the transmission of tales, above all if their massive impact and their influence over the public are taken into account. In fact, individuals are witnesses of the appearance of new consumption goods, stories, and characters which, regardless of whether they are real or fictitious, are exalted as objects of massive worship. Advertising, clearly one of the most influential forums in our culture, can be understood as the most persuasive media discourse as well. In essence, advertising benefits from the advantages of what the use of myths implies, because utilizing mythology as an advertising tool will instantly tap into a collective imaginary that is already present in a society and this in turn becomes a profitable resource of creative solutions when designing a communication strategy for marketing a product. Thus, from a pragmatic perspective, it would be recommended for advertisers to study which myths are most suitable to meet their goals. In this sense, it seems necessary, due to the scarcity of studies in this field, to analyze how specific myths

function within concrete advertisements by establishing an effective analytical model[1].

Notes

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