REVIVALS OF THE MYTH IN ADVERTISING CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

In this paper, our purpose is to demonstrate that the mythologizing symbolic image plays an important role in the advertising construction, leaving, by extension, its mark on the entire cultural and mental landscape of the contemporary world. Among the traditional mythical structures, several models which are able to steer imagination and reading, but above all, enable performative reflexes influencing consumer's actions, are frequently circulated in the advertising field; they are representative and effective, thus creating fantasy around consumer goods, by inciting desire to buy among customers who can relate to the story portrayed. We are also looking into models of narrative analysis that are most suited to advertising storytelling, focusing mainly on the actantial model proposed by A.J. Greimas and the model developed by Claude Bremond, which bring complementary perspectives: Greimas' model reveals that a product may be either an adjuvant/helper or an opponent in fulfilling a desire (of the consumer), whereas the Bremondian model integrates the product-consumer relationship in a procedural framework which is influenced by the transformation of the states of degradation and amelioration in order to fulfil a desire.

Keywords: myth, advertising, advertising discourse

1 Myths and advertising: converting the classical myth into an advertising show

A hybrid field in search of its creativity and performance resources by exploring every nook and cranny of social and cultural life, advertising reawakens classical mythology through the use of images, symbols or tales which are subsequently transformed and adapted to its own pragmatic dimension. Marketing products by instilling symbols, respectively by adding an affective component which triggers euphoric responses to a persuasive and informative speech, represents the fundamental mechanism of advertising.

The dominant position of the mythologizing symbolic image in advertising discourse leaves its mark, by extension, on the entire cultural and mental landscape of the contemporary world: "The Europe of the third millennium will not be dominated by either heads of state or military leaders, but by communicators (*faiseurs de mots*, *faiseurs d'images*), as no product (be it toothpaste or the presidency of the country) will be traded without a mythologizing speech, without a brand image, which is sometimes even more prominent than the political act itself or the quality of the product." (Daniela Rovenţa-Frumuşani, 1999: 135, *our translation*) In the tales it weaves, advertising resorts to images and collective representations, to mythical structures in order to sell products; thus, it manages to combine immutable elements, such as ancestral mythical constructs, with the practical needs of contemporary life.

Building upon the distinction made by Roger Caillois (in his study *The Myth and the Man [Le mythe et l'homme]*, 2000) between a *mythology of situations* (namely, an inventory of narrations recalled by a community) and a *mythology of heroes* (authors of exemplary deeds), contemporary advertising exploits both mythologies to the fullest, relying on the idea of a conflicting state developed under certain circumstances, to be settled afterwards by the intervention of a lifesaving hero.

Among the traditional mythical structures, several models (corresponding to a mythology of situations or heroes) which are able to steer imagination and reading, but above all, enable performative reflexes influencing consumer's actions, are frequently circulated in the advertising field; they are representative and effective, thus creating fantasy around consumer goods, by inciting desire to buy among customers who can relate to the story portrayed.

1.1. The myth of coming back to the origins (under the mythology of situations category) is one of the most marketable advertising scenarios, because returning to the earthly paradise or reaching the promised land is a very well-preserved image in several cultural products (cinematography, literature); moreover, the securing affective values conveyed by this model (the restoration of the primordial harmony) give the product a subliminal force of action which measure up to the universal expectations and desires.

Most advertisements for food products or mineral water resort to such imaginary, inviting us to return to nature or to our traditions, to patriarchal life forms and lifestyles, which remain untouched by urban development. For example, the commercial for the *Milka* chocolate brand portrays, through the use of synaesthesia, an escape from the present time and the return to a heavenly landscape: the view of the meadow, the country road and the two teenagers lying back in a hay wagon, contemplating the sky, the tamed wild animals in the background; these are all a guarantee of the fact that this product (a *Milka* bar of chocolate) will transport us back to the original habitat. Based on the idea of tradition, the campaign for *Timişoreana* beer brand follows the same pattern (by giving us guarantees), just as the advertisements in which the *Alexandrion* brandy is depicted as the liquor of the gods (under the slogan *Creat de zei, desăvârşit de natură/Created by the Gods, perfected by nature*) (*our translation*) refer to time immemorial (*illo tempore*), bringing forward the classic image of the beginning of the world and otherworldly communication (humanity-divinity).

1.2. The erotic myth is just as well grounded as the earthly paradise myth, and they both cross paths in terms of their meaning, focusing on the promise of harmony, security and happiness; passed on to consumer goods, the idea of seduction turns the Eros myth into a very effective advertising tool and, for this reason, it is used on a wide range of products. The advertising field resorts to several versions of the erotic myth, such as:

a) love as temptation and seduction;
b) hedonist love;
c) the paradisiacal love of the beginning of the world;
d) domestic love.

a)   As it became a ritual, the idea of *love as temptation and seduction* is recurrent in most coffee commercials (*Jacobs, Elite / Don-Café*) whose plot is a romance: love stories about seduction, dance or how to win someone's heart, they are all incorporated into the coffee ritual, which is often associated with domestic values or values of harmony and stability, for the purpose of building consumer loyalty. Fragrances, jewellery or other accessories for women are also part of the range of products resorting to this pattern, all of which promote an irresistible, enticing eroticism: one relevant example consists of the explicit message of *Camay* cosmetics which reads *Arta irezistibilă a seducţiei/The irresistible art of seduction* (our translation), next to the image of a woman dressed in pink.

b)   *The image of hedonist love*, where the ritual of temptation is turned into sexuality and functional eroticism can be observed in various advertising productions, such as the commercials for the Romanian chocolate brand *Kandia – ciocolată cu dragoste / chocolate with love* (our translation), the product's image undergoing personification using metonymy and being depicted by means of a very sensual femininity, whose synesthetic representation incites the senses: the taste, the seeing and the touch.

c)   *The model of paradisiacal love* is often used in perfume advertising, as it promotes the image of an ideal, angelic and pristine femininity (a print created for the *Nina Ricci* brand depicts a dainty woman in a room overflowing with tempting apples that she doesn't even pay attention to as she is gazing at an apple-shaped perfume bottle instead).

1.3. The myth of the hero is built on the idea of an act of selfless bravery setting an individual apart from the others, making him truly unique, as he is also the one to sacrifice himself for the community, by bringing others certain benefits or promising them salvation (the myth of Prometheus, the religious myth of the sacrifice of the Saviour). By definition, the hero is the one to solve conflicts, find solutions, an idea that has been successfully taken in advertising scripts, by leading consumers into thinking that they identify themselves with the hero or by transferring the representation of the hero onto the product. In this regard, there are several patterns of heroic identification:

a)   The product is the reward for the user's heroic deed, which transfers the qualities onto future consumers (commercials for *Timişoreana*: *În vreme ce războiul şi setea măcinau o armată întreagă, un om simplu prin omenia sa a schimbat cursul istoriei. Iar cel pe care-l ajutase nu l-a uitat şi i-a oferit toată cinstirea cuvenită la inaugurarea primei fabrici de bere din România / As war and thirst were wiping out an entire army, a simple and kind man changed the course of history. And he was not forgotten by the one he had given a helping hand, who honoured him the way he deserved at the opening of the first brewery in Romania*) (our translation);

b)   The product conveys the heroic dimension to humans, as they consume the product and identify themselves with it (*De la Zaraza, pentru adevăraţii domni din România: numai RESPECT / From Zaraza to the true gentlemen in Romania: nothing but RESPECT*) (our translation);

c)   The product on its own is a hero by the way it works and the qualities thereof, setting itself apart from all other products and solving problems of greater complexity (see ads for cleaners - *Mr Musculo*, *Mr Proper*);

d)   The product is associated with the image of various personalities, assuming their authority.

Apart from making use of and transforming some mythical structures, the advertising discourse preserves a series of *features* of the myth that have also been functionally adapted to its own system:

a)   An essential feature of every myth, the **narrative character** crosses into the advertising discourse, and the fundamental *mythical story* (of heroic deeds and beginnings) is turned into a similar *product story*, envisaging to become a founding, universal story (hence, car commercials tell stories about safety, speed, comfort, whereas perfume commercials tell stories that transport us into a universe of euphoria, mystery and seduction, etc.);

b)   **Exemplarity** or a myth's capacity to provide models becomes, in the advertising field, a standing invitation to assume symbolic self-images and ideal identities;

c)   The **etiological function** (providing an explanation for certain original phenomena, restoring the causal pathway) is resumed in advertising as the course of the stages in which a product comes to life, providing a more in-depth look over the production/ manufacturing process (e.g., the commercial for the *Murfatlar* winery: *Vinul bun începe din vie / Good wine begins with good grapes*) (our translation);

d)   The **temporal dimension** aims at placing the commercial scenario in a moment out of time (inspired by the model of the sacred time of the myth);

e)   The **collective dimension** focuses on the collective endorsement of some particular events (inspired by the model of mythical heroism), hence a guaranteed and comprehensive symbolic identity.

2. Reawakening the narrative structure of the myth in commercial storytelling

A common fundamental feature of myth and advertising discourse, the *narrative dimension* articulates images, representations and symbols, which are shaped as stories/ scenarios, thus becoming a prominent conveyor of sense and meaning. Based on the fact that human beings are always willing to tell and listen to stories, the mythical and symbolic thinking becomes coherent by giving rise to narrative situations in which archetypes and symbols can be integrated or developed following a logical pattern. Each myth can thus be investigated in relation to the chain of events and the switch between their constituent units, which are all evocative aspects in the shaping of entire mental universes.

By analogy with *mythical storytelling*, but in a totally different functional system, *advertising* often shapes its messages into legendary stories or by retracing a product's path for the purpose of explaining the process by which such a product came to light, as a remembrance of a founding process (typical of the mythical approach). No product, service, item is chosen without telling its story, persuading the consumer into believing that it has an authentic history, an original life story, and that it deserves to be purchased so that the transfer of meaning can take place (the product's peculiar history may become, by transfer, an interesting personal story). Bearing the products' subtle and alluring symbolism, users take the place of mythical heroes, becoming models for the community, as they assume the identity of the manufacturing brand.

Just like mythical stories, advertising storytelling entails a sequential organization of facts and events according to a narrative logic that gives them consistency, pinpointing the starting time, the course of and change in the processes, respectively the final moment where all actions come together. Revealing itself by means of a substantial condensed narrative (using both iconic and verbal narration), an advertising spot is regarded just like a mini-movie that unfolds a storyline forged around a feud and the settlement thereof, bringing in characters that can deal with challenging situations, advertising a product that can either be the hero or an instrument in the respective commercial, voicing a yearning based on which the scenario unfolds.

Amongst the models of narrative analysis that are most suited to advertising storytelling, focusing mainly on the actantial model proposed by A.J. Greimas and the model developed by Claude Bremond, which bring complementary perspectives: Greimas' model reveals that a product may be either an adjuvant/helper or an opponent in fulfilling a desire (of the consumer), whereas the Bremondian model integrates the product-consumer relationship in a procedural framework which is influenced by the transformation of the states of degradation and amelioration in order to fulfil a desire.

2.1. Translatable in the advertising field as well, the **actantial model developed by A.J. Greimas** is effective precisely because it is structured into two fundamental axes, namely *a vertical axis of desire* and *a horizontal axis of communication/transmission* between the sender and the receiver (engaging support or opposition), which conveys the object of desire. The model is so simple, yet so suitable for advertising storytelling, due to the fact that everything is centred on the *object of desire* targeted by the *subject*, serving as an object of communication between the *sender* and the *receiver*; the likelihood of desire fulfilment is either facilitate or hindered by the *adjuvants' (helpers')* and the *opponents'* actions.

Easily recognizable in advertising, this narrative model can be interpreted as follows:
-    *The sender* is the brand or the manufacturer/producer;
-    *The receiver* is the target audience;
-    *The object of desire* is not the product itself, but the fact that it is able to satisfy needs, aspirations (addressing something in particular that can be perceived as a desire);
-    *The adjuvant/helper* is the product by means of which the desire is satisfied;
-    The *opponent* may be either a matter that needs to be addressed so that balance can be restored, or by a similar product that the public is not satisfied with or any other hindrance related to the public.

For instance, in the commercial for the *Zaraza* spirit drink, the verbal message (which goes beyond and is deeper than the script) may be decoded using Greimas' schema: *Zaraza îi salută pe toţi cei care nu apar în reviste, pe cei care nu au maşini şmechere, amante adolescente sau cariere politice spectaculoase. Zaraza îi felicită pe cei care ştiu ce înseamnă cuvântul "fortuit" şi pe cei pentru care Kafka nu este un fotbalist ceh. De la Zaraza, pentru adevăraţii domni din România, numai RESPECT! / Zaraza welcomes anyone who is not featured in a magazine, who does not have a fancy car, a teenage lover or an impressive career in politics. Zaraza compliments anyone who knows what "fortuitous" stands for and the ones for whom Kafka is not a Czech footballer. From Zaraza to the true gentlemen in Romania: nothing but RESPECT!* (our translation).

The actants in this model are:
-    an authentic recipient, interested in education and culture;
-    the object of the quest is nobleness, virtue, classic literature;
-    the opponent is represented by the typical politicians, snobs, illiterates;
-    the adjuvant/helper is the spirit drink itself as it helps us identify an authentic, untainted human type; the drink is a reward because it is associated with respect and becomes a prerequisite for dismissing human downgrading.

2.2. Claude Bremond's model of the narrative sequence focuses on the analysis of the processes engaging the roles: the storyline is broken down into a complex of *roles*, resulting from the merge between several *processes*; each process features three stages of development (*virtuality*, *actualization*, *achievement*) during which one can follow the transformations concerning the *agent* and the *patient*; the term *process* designates the action or the event triggering *syntactic relations* such as succession, simultaneity, causality, involvement; they help handle critical situations; the *narrative cycle* concept alternates two complementary processes, *degradation* and *amelioration*.

Degradation is about experiencing a state of discontent or discomfort, which, as it deepens, ends up setting off the conflict. The hero's attempts to handle the uncomfortable situation engender a complementary, *ameliorating*, action. In doing so, the main character (the hero) plays the role of the *agent*, being able to impact the unfolding of the action, whereas the other characters become *patients*, being subjected to behavioural transformations, as the action is engaged upon them; in addition to these fundamental roles, the *influencer* role kicks in as well, which can affect the agent's actions towards amelioration or degradation.

Due to its simplicity (as in the case of the model developed by Greimas), Bremond's model turns out to be effective when analysing the advertising storytelling, managing to capture the chain of narrative sequences, events and processes which focus on the history of a product in terms of its evolution from a deficient phase to an improved or ideal phase.

When put to use for the sake of advertising storytelling, Claude Bremond's model focuses on observing certain standards such as:
-    identifying the actors engaged: *agent*, *patient*, *influencer*, *ameliorator* and *degrader*;
-    establishing the relationships between the narrative sequences according to the two processes: *degradation* and *amelioration*;
-    identifying the defining *narrative cycle* in the alternation between amelioration and degradation;
-    the *voluntary* and *involuntary* nature of the action;
-    the relations of *succession*, *simultaneity*, *causality*.

 A frequently encountered genre in the advertising field, *fairy tale commercials* are best suited to the Bremondian analytical model, which associates the myth of the hero with the myth of love, featuring actors that are capable of overcoming certain challenges and achieving an initiating transformation of the state of degradation into an ultimate amelioration. A revealing example in this regard is the commercial for the sunflower oil brand *Soreanca*:
-    set out in search of his chosen one, the agent comes across a devastated field of sunflowers and gives a helping hand to the Sunflower Queen, who will become a key adjuvant/helper towards fulfilling the main character's wish;

-       the adjuvant/helper holds sway over the king's daughter as well, who turns into *the beautiful Soreanca*;

-       the agent looking for his chosen one, together with the royal princess, become   patients in the amelioration process;

-       in the domestic environment, the amelioration achieved extends to the household skills of the young woman, who had magically married the agent: *Cu aceeaşi dragoste şi grijă se face şi astăzi uleiul natural de floarea-soarelui, Soreanca. Şi nu-i de mirare că vestea i-a mers peste tot ca fiind uleiul acela de găteşti ca-n poveşti... Soreanca – găteşti ca-n poveşti! / The same love and care is put into the natural sunflower oil, Soreanca, to this day. No wonder word got around and everybody knows that they are cooking their way into the land of fairy tales with this oil... Soreanca – cooking your fairy tale food!* (our translation).

In summary, advertising discourse resorts to images and collective representations, to mythical structures in order to sell products; thus, advertising manages to combine immutable elements, such as ancestral mythical constructs, with the practical needs of contemporary life.

Contemporary advertising makes use of traditional mythical structures which are able to steer imagination and reading, but above all, enable performative reflexes influencing consumer's actions, are frequently circulated in the advertising field; they are representative and effective, thus creating fantasy around consumer goods, by inciting desire to buy among customers who can relate to the story portrayed.

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