

The mythical transfer in the advertising field

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Abstract: *The present analysis has set itself the purpose to approach the mythical dimension of the advertising performance by identifying the specific traits of several myths: the myth of returning to the origins, the erotic myth and the heroic myth. Among these I have focused my attention especially on the last one (the hero's myth) which can often be spotted in advertisements, endowed with a partially modified image in comparison to the classic perspective. The intention is to prove that advertising reactivates mythical structures which then it organizes and also allows the possibility of recognizing the old levels of significances. In this article I have shown the hypostases of the hero in advertising depending on the relationships between the product and the consumer. The approach is based on examples taken from the Romanian advertising performances which represented also the basis for my reconstruction of the heroic profile within the contemporary data. Finally, I have underlined some of the myths' features discovered inside the advertising performance. The analysis of these characteristics relies on the definition of the myth from the narrative perspective, as a sacred and exemplary history, as it was suggested by Mircea Eliade and Claude Lévi- Strauss.*

Argument

The very point of this article is to prove that advertising re-activates structures which it organizes and exploits in different ways. Together with cinema and theatrical performances, this field offers a real show through the powerfully outlined narrative

dimension. As Mircea Eliade stated it, “any myth tells a sacred tale; it narrates an event which took place in the primordial time, the fabulous time of “the beginnings”¹ (Eliade, 1978, 7-8). Advertising builds stories which start getting more and more distance away from the product and showing off by means of narrative coherence rather than the benefits. One classification borrowed from the *The Myth and the Man* by Roger Caillois makes the distinction between two types of mythologies: the happening one and the heroic one. (Caillois, 2000, 18). We decided upon this classification precisely because it highlights the diegetic feature of the myth. The mythology of the happening is illustrated by an inventory of narrations printed in the collective memory. And in their turn these get consecrated in the modern cultural products such as movies, videoclips and ads spots. On the other hand, the heroes are symbolical figures which highlight the epic patterns as they are the authors of exemplary deeds. The two “mythologies” share the idea of conflicts developed by a situation in order to be solved by the hero in due time. In addition, the hero’s deeds justify the sequence of events and they represent a way to underline narrativity. How can we explain the fact that the importance of the characters acting in ads often overcomes the products’ importance? The answer is very simple: ordinary people in modern society embody in these characters their desire for success and control over other people. Eliade considers that this will for power, a characteristic of the contemporary society, “is a translation of the obscure desire to transcend the limits of the human condition.” (Eliade, 1978, 174) This particular article goes for identifying several hypostasis of hero in advertising which label the product with a particular halo amidst the category it represents.

1. Mythical representations in advertising field

In the advertising show there can be easily identified some mythical traditional structures used consequently and differentiated after Caillois’s classification. We’re actually talking about the myth of the earthly paradise, the erotic myth and also the hero one. The first two of them illustrate, in an explicit way, the idea of the happening mythology not only through the narrative structure, but also through building some contexts where myths can be easily recognized in the contemporary times.

1.1. The first myth can be associated with the myth of coming back to the origins, which Eliade thoroughly analyzed in the book called *Nostalgia for the Origins*.² This belongs to the category of the mythology of the situations. Eliade’s perception emphasizes the recovery of the earthly Paradise and the explanation of another myth derivation, the myth of the promised land in the American space, that came out after

¹ The translation was made using the Romanian version of the book, entitled *Aspecte ale mitului*, see bibliographical notes.

² The Romanian version of the book, is entitled *Nostalgia originilor*, see bibliographical notes.

the discovery of the continent made by Columbus. Such a vision upon the recently discovered land was due to the Reform which had anticipated the revealing of a New Jerusalem. For European people, the idea of the promised land had been treasured for years. America was the promised land, far away from communist countries, the new Babel Tower which protected the artists, the writers and the magic dream of the oppressed people. The continent became an earthly paradise, where one can drop the old interdictions, where the races have been mixing and having a hard time learning to live and let live. This image was very well depicted in cultural products (literature and cinematography) and also exploited in journalism and advertising. The earthly Paradise was actually the expression of democracy and freedom. It was preserved in the advertising field through encouraging to live “the American dream”, to dream about the pleasures of life.

In a commercial for the brand *Ford Escape*, the car crosses a waterfall, as if it defeats the forces of nature, but at the same time as if it would borrow its vitality. The prints and the spots created for *Marlboro* are starring the image of the hero conquering the wilderness, that cowboy, who dominates the skyline from the height of his horse. On one hand, this image became a constant through years, a permanent worship to the idea of force and power. On the other hand, as Eliade noticed, the worry for the eternal youth and the nostalgia of the initial point of the Creation became a stifling one. “The hope for rebirth to a new life and the expectation for a future not only good, but also in a state of perfect happiness can be identified in the American cult for youth, too.” Beyond this individualized perception about America, coming back to the origins has also a biblical connotation: recovering the heavenly mood of unknowing the suffering and the pain caused by hard unrewarding work. It is the atmosphere before the Fall, dominated by the Tree of Life, the eternal freshness of the nature and the initial love. The death haven’t thrown any shadow yet, upon the balance inside Eden, because Evil had not become the rival of Good yet. From this entire picture, advertising kept only the idea of temptation, that is a moment of perfect happiness troubled by breaking some rules. The heavenly image is often mocked through the idea of the allowed sin, especially referring to the initial couple.

The commercial ad for the 7 Sins wine suggests the return to origins, inside an unaltered picture of Eden. Two lovers have lunch in a garden very alike to the garden of Paradise. Somewhere, on a stage, somebody backgrounds their affair with a song. The very part kept identical from the biblical picture is the idea of temptation, coming along with the symbol of the serpent, and with femininity, too. As mentioned earlier, the serpent is an attachment of the humans’ romance, and is given the part of the dashing night minstrel. He’s playing *Stranger in the night*, cheering up the couple’s glances and woman’s lustful gestures. One can also notice a parallel to the return to origins as seen in classic mythology, displaying the classical mythical portraits. The projection into myth is done through allegoric transfer. Hence, *Alexandrian* brandy is strictly mentioned only as *God’s liquor*, reminding of ambrosia, the beverage destined

exclusively for gods, the noble beings. The slogan *Made by human, accomplished by gods* brings back to life the genuine picture of the beginning of a new world, when the land's fruits were blessed by gods, when thanksgiving by humans.

1.2. **The erotic myth** has the same structure as **the terrestrial paradise** and the two of them have in common certain logical sequences. In the first place, love is either capricious or forbidden, belonging to the gods, often incompatible, or the adamic one, since the beginning of the world, where the purpose is the enduring of the race. The pre-Christian perspective is centred on Cupid's figure, which always plays with people's destinies and ignores the rules of love. What is kept in advertising is the mockery of love and a certain facetious aspect, where people are suddenly caught by love and blinded by this inexplicable feeling. This idea of temptation is frequently met, in so doing love getting a ritual nature. Most of the advertising made for coffee (Jacobs, Elite) contains a love story underneath. The mother is explaining to her daughter how she conquered her father's heart, and the latter, as a result, also tries to apply the recipe, directing the flavour to a television character. The product becomes a means of seduction and is associated with the feminine image, which fascinates people all around using the coffee ritual, for example. The couples are formed through the fascination of the product. This first dimension is tributary to the classical myth, where Zeus, disguised in different animals used to trick the young maidens he met.

Gradually, the ritual of temptation and the building of a relationship have changed into sexuality and functional erotism. The feeling loses its spiritual meaning, but retains the sexual provocation, especially of feminism. The erotic myth is the image of hedonism, of pleasure given back and of love expressed through a total identification between both partners. The best examples containing this symbolization are the chocolate advertisements, where the concrete image of love is represented in a sensory way, at a synaesthetic level, through the stimulation of the visual, tactile and savoury senses. *Kandia is the chocolate with love* and its advertisements indicate the image of the provocative touch. The product's image is personified through metonymy – it is actually the feminism that awakens the pleasure of taste, of rapprochement. The video segment called *Melting* overlaps the two images by a chromatic parallelism: the woman's skin shade is brown as the chocolate, as well as her dress. The advertisement culminates with the final embrace. In his book, *Happiness as obligation*, François Brune explains that everything sums up to pleasure and even analyzes a few chocolate slogans. Decoding the complexity of the love myth which decanonizes biblical rules, he imperatively states: "The permitted pleasure forever nullifies the forbidden apple myth. To free of guilt the pleasure of chocolate (which might remind of ration times or childhood prohibitions), binding it to the pleasure of Eros, also passably admitted." (Bruen, François, 2003, 64) Brune considers that the support of such a perspective is the need of trespassing certain interdictions. Chocolate is the product that accompanied an individual ever since childhood, when it was a desired prize and well-balanced by adults' worry of excess, until maturity, when he/she was surrounded by the first

words of love. The product has become a sign of the individual's turnout and growing in the spirit of freedom, assuming the excess as their own.

1.3. To closely illustrate the typology of Roger Caillois I have chosen **the hero's myth**, for it reunites the aspects of the classification previously presented (the mythology of the situations and the mythology of the hero). In literature, the fairytale delimits the appearance of the hero, depending on specific moments in his evolution. Gilbert Durand identifies the mythic destiny in the work *Mythic Images and Faces of the Opera*³ using the term 'structures' or MITEME. The first structure consists in "the announcement of the exceptional destiny through all the wonderful happenings having accompanied the hero's birth", (Durand, Gilbert, 1997, 174) the second consists in the hero's actions and the last one marks the accomplishing of the task. Roger Caillois extends the heroic dimension to any conflicting moment and considers the hero to be inherent to every mythic situation: "By definition the hero is the one solving [the conflicts] them, finding a happy or an unhappy escape. This is because the person suffers the most from the impossibility to escape from the impending conflict. Any solution, even a violent or dangerous one, seems acceptable for him: but the social prohibition makes it impossible for him, even more under the psychological aspect than the material one." (Durand, Gilbert, 1997,174) So, the heroic dimension relies in the ability to exceed some conflicting situations. This coexists in relation with every erotic thrill or nostalgia for the Eden's world. The two situations previously presented (the erotic myth and the myth of returning to origins) are, actually, particular ways of highlighting the third myth, the one of the hero.

The pre-destined route does not interest anymore, nor the happy-end of the conflict. Caillois underlines the social side of the hero's intervention, confronting with the prejudices of the whereabouts it lives and acts. The main concern in the present times is continually simplifying the work, the living conditions and being satisfied as fast as possible. The representation of the hero remains the dynamic one, since a solution to a situation assumes actions, trials, which have as a goal, the reinforcement of the unusual qualities. In this case, the hero's myth depends on the rites, which if it does not have, it will not pass the test, just like the character in the fairytale: "If far from the rite, the myth is losing, if not the ration of existing, at least what is priceless in its power of exaltation: the capacity of being lived." (Durand, Gilbert, 1997,174) From the religious point of view, the rite is a set of rules to be obeyed in a church, in a religious community. From the anthropological point of view, the French dictionary Larousse specifies that the rite is defined: "dans certaines sociétés, acte, cèrèmonie, fête á caractère répétitif, destinés á réaffirmer les valeurs et á assurer la relance de l'organisation sociale (in some societies it represents the action, the ceremonial and

³ The Romanian version of the book, is entitled *Figuri ale operei – de la mitocritică la mitanaliză*, see bibliographical notes.

the holiday which follow a repeating pattern, intended to reassert the values and to ensure the social organization)" (*Le petite Larousse*, 2005, 938). Obviously the hero will confirm his value by surpassing all the obstacles, by a ceremonial of confrontations and celebrations of his victories. The repetition of his actions demonstrates his heroic statute and his showing off in the community. C.G. Jung considers that the group is the holder of some kind of "common animalic soul, that is the crowd has a strong force of suggestion." (Jung, C.G., 2003, 133). Every person in the crowd feels the need to identify with the hero, to copy his behaviour, because his example **encourages** them and removes the fear of **responsibility**. In the end, the hero is a **projection** of every person, which **invests** him with their wishes, with the power of exceeding some of their personal incapacities and they see him the way they would like to see themselves.

In advertising we can encounter the classical perspectives, but the hero's representation gets more diverse, too, when appearing often embodied into a product, that saves its user from quandary. So there takes place a change of the balance between product and consumer, based on enhancing the heroic qualities. Thus we distinguish the next ways of analyzing this myth of the hero:

- a) The product is the reward of a heroic act of the user, that will achieve a transfer of his qualities onto the next consumers;
- b) The product transmits to the human the heroic dimension by being consumed and by identifying with the latter.
- c) The product itself is a hero **through** what he does, **through** the fact that it gets detached from the other products in range and resolves situations of a greater complexity.
- d) The product is associated with the image of some personalities in different fields, which is supposed to assume their authority.

In order to rank the presented issues, we will first analyse the heroic dimension of the user. The first example highlights the historical dimension, when the human is rewarded for his kindness and effort, through tasting the product. It is the moment when attention focuses on the *Timișoreana* campaign, which arouses the interest from many points of view. During the siege of the city by the Ottomans, a simple man saves the life of a noble that will also change the destiny of the war. The ample text persistently underlines the status of a hero: *In times when the war and thirst were grinding an entire army, a simple man through his humanity changed the course of history. And the one that he helped hasn't forgotten him and he offered all his due respect at the inauguration of the first beer factory in Romania.* In this case, the product is the confirmation of the heroic deed of the simple man that proved his nobility in a crucial moment. The inauguration of the beer factory is a situation of collective celebration that draws the peasant-hero out of anonymity.

Remaining in the same sphere, the hypostasis of the simple man who became a hero through sacrifice in a moment in which the product does not represent a prize, a reward, but a duty and a responsibility is also notable. It is obvious that in this case this positioning is being made through the traditional configuration. A visible

scenario built on this grid is the *Murfatlar* campaign, the spot being conceived as a testimonial: the son relates how he took over the secret of viticulture from his dad. The real hero is the father, who, although imprisoned into a concentration camp during the war, sends the recipe to his son, with the price of his life. He becomes a hero because he goes beyond his conservation instinct and makes the keeping of tradition possible. The whole text is a plural first person narrative only to express the bond between generations and the authenticity of the confession. "We have been working this vineyard for about 2000 years. My grandfather, God rest him, had a saying that always said to my father: «The good wine begins in the vineyard». This made him always put the vineyard above anything else. My dad listened to him and gave me in written words the crafting of the wine even with the price of his life. Today I am doing nothing but carrying their teachings further on." The Murfatlar wine became the symbol of self-sacrifice, making the brand even more valuable, this myth intersecting here with the myth of creation. In addition, the message also transmits the idea of accumulation in time, therefore the age of the wine, meaning quality.

b) The second dimension regards a strong relationship between the product and the customer in order to determine the latter to become a myth. It transmits different values which, if appropriated by a man, make him a hero among the other people ignoring them. In this way, the product helps him make a better selection, but being fully aware of the situation. Selecting it appoints the capacity of recognizing its qualities, thus valuing it in the range of products. A spot which impressed with its message and simplicity was the one made for the *Zaraza* cognac. The text says: *Zaraza treasures the ones who can tell who the gentlemen from the banknotes are, even when they do not have many of them. Zaraza greets the ones who think that on the 5 lei banknote there is the pictures of the new mall and the ones who appreciate the greatest Romanian historian, even if he is on the 1 leu note. From Zaraza to the real gentlemen in Romania: all the RESPECT.* The message is clear: *Zaraza* is the wine of the noblemen, in the way that they do not choose to be superficial and snob and repel the image of all mighty money. By choosing this drink qualities such as the interest for culture and history are transmitted. The text gives an opposite positioning from the ones who are ordinary and another one for the specialized public. The heroism consists in being different, in making it different and taking a distance.

c) Regarding the last but one view of the product, the one of a product resulting in a hero by personification, the dominant idea is to solve a critical situation. For making a name out of itself, the product is caught in action, and, in the relationship with the user, it has the role of a rescuer, the final solution. This is the way the advertisements for cleaning products are conceived, such as *Mr. Muscolo* and *Mr. Proper*. The product is personified and it has the power of performing miracles, saving the kitchen and having *Superman's* abilities. Even the way the character is introduced into the advertisement is the same: it is invoked and called to solve everything. It becomes a hero because it overcomes obstacles which are considered a real challenge by human beings, defying the time and the effort taken by them. Its role is to metamorphose a reality into another

one by presenting its positive outcome in a hyperbolic way. Sometimes, the product is personified using a method called intertextuality, assuming a *Superman's* outfit or the distinguishing mark of *Batman*. The ideal embodied by this hero is similar to the one in fairytales. He succeeds, by intelligence and power, to surpass all of his kind, aware of his existence. Mircea Eliade goes further with the analyses, thinking that "Superman's myth satisfies the secret nostalgias of the modern man, which, knowing himself limited and low down, dreams to reveal himself one day as an 'exceptional character', as a 'hero'." (Eliade, Mircea, 1978, 173)

The same thing happens in the advertisement constructed by using the image of fairytale characters: *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow-White*. These activate a specific range of expectations: the hero from the fairytales is the author of some predictable actions, well-known from the main story. Therefore, he is recognized more easily because two representations are superimposed over the consumer: the one taken from the fairytale and the one offered by the product.

d) Generally, the association with an important personality from different fields (science – Albert Einstein, music – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, cinema – Charlie Chaplin, painting – Salvador Dali, history – Adolf Hitler, Nicolae Ceaușescu) grants the product the value and importance on the market. These famous people are often portrayed under shots of parody, but they do not lose their statute as heroes, defined through notoriety, by their position as **leaders** in the particular field. The product is camouflaged and it stays in the shadow of its hero. An example is offered by the campaign from *Renault Modus* which used in the promotion the image of the personalities above. All of them wear a T-Shirt on which there is drawn a *Renault Modus* and the following message: *Grow up. What for?* Even if the car is from the small series, the importance of the product is reversely proportional with it. What is actually emphasized is the image of the brand encouraged by the celebrity of some people who changed many things in their world, surpassing **their** contemporaries. The hero is not confronted with a critical situation here, but he gets to approve the acquisition of the product, by solving a difficult dilemma and establishing it as a leader. The display of satisfaction and content of the characters in the images is a guarantee certificate of the product, so it earns more credibility. Einstein or Dali have the sense of value, therefore, the product lends some of their criteria to help the consumer make a good choice. In this case, the myth of the hero is built through the reason of authority written on the universal notoriety of the personalities who become characters.

2. The characteristics specific to the myth of hero found in advertising

2.1. A first feature of the myths is its quality of offering models which can justify the traditions, behaviours and beliefs of a given age. Mircea Eliade identifies this trait as being "**exemplarity**". "Being real and sacred, the myth becomes exemplary and, therefore, repeatable, because it functions as a model and at the same time as justification of all the human acts" (Eliade, 1998, 17). The mythical acts of the

heroes or of the deities have been assumed by people, going from individual level to collective level. This feature is also explained through man's tendency for "mimetism", to remodel one's destiny and to reconstruct life stories. In advertising, the argument of the authority or of the example frequently uses the image of a public person, a celebrity, whose behaviour of buying and consuming the product becomes exemplary. The act of choosing the product and, therefore, buying it is based on a repeatable behaviour. In this manner, the advertising show has a mythical dimension, by promoting ways of usage and collective behaviours. Often, people buy these exact models of life and, less often, the product by itself. The effect of using a product is exemplary and the act of buying it with the purpose of conserving the gained image is repeatable. The myth of the hero, previously analyzed, has been self-conserved through its persistence of manifestation. To repeat means to remake history and to consolidate certain features.

2.2. Moreover, the myth has an **etiological function** because it shows out and reactivates things that happened in the beginning of the world, in the beginning of its shaping. In publicity, a product is certified in the eyes of the consumers by the dissolution of the mechanism of its fabrication, especially when alimentary usage is the subject. In this case, the commercials are analytical and with an obvious narrative substratum. They rerun step by step the stages of a product's birth and detail the action of processing. Depending on the product, the mythical dimension arranges differently the moments of evolution and the emerging transformations. There are certain scenarios where the ingredients are randomly combined and only the result draws one's interest: the miraculous product. On the other hand, there are scenarios where a leap is made in the pyramid of transformation, towards its base and then everything is remade thoroughly. In the commercial of the *Murfatlar* brand the first statement obviously schemes this leap: *A good wine begins in the vineyard*.

2.3. Considering this aspect of remaking a route, to attest a product as valuable, or to explain a situation through which an individual becomes a hero, it clearly comes out that the temporal dimension is a main characteristic of the myth. The publicity show endeavours to elude the present: it either offers the exemplary image of the past, going back to the models of its origins, or it goes to the future, through the promises brought by the benefits of the product. Going back in time is used especially when the hero is the product itself. There is also the possibility of overlapping the time of the origin with a historical moment, like with the *Timisoreana* beer. The hero is initially author of a kindness gesture, his act to be later on rewarded with the product that became the prize and the link between the past and the present.

In the *Murfatlar* commercial, there clearly arises a time to tell and a time that is told, and the testimony is not made by the hero, but by the one who carries on the mission given by the hero. The spot is built up on the testimonial idea with the son giving testimony of his father's sacrifice. In the movie, the narrator is a witness of the ongoing events, the one who's watching, so he can later tell and carry the mission on.

2.4. Temporality, as well as the exemplary nature are easily pointed out in a social context, one to admit, on the one hand, the recognition of the hero's quality, and on the other hand, the sequential delimitation of his actions. The stability in time of the mythical structures, as well as their permanent reactivation are also due to the fact that they are meant for **the larger community**. At this level we can talk about contouring a certain behaviour, as well as of the birth of heroes. The legends and mythical histories preserve individual events, which they project on a group scale.

The objective world becomes an archetype, just because man projects in natural phenomenon his symbolic levels of the unconscious and of the soul. Gradually, these collective representations are shared and then carried on from one generation to another. Communicating these original structures is made possible through symbols which determine man to construe the things around him, to understand their meanings. Carl Gustav Jung explains the relation between symbol and the instinctive part, but also between symbol and sign: "The living symbol translates an essential fragment of the instinctive part, and the more widely it is spread, the more general its effect is, because it vibrates in each common chord." (Jung, 2003, 490) The symbol contains in itself what is common to a community, to a large number of people and therefore it makes a strong influence on them. Through symbols people vibrate, because they interpret symbolically a world that has become unitary. In the myth's setting in advertisement, the hero is identified by a whole crowd. His individual act becomes collective through this recognition and is taken as a model. Each community is reflected by its heroes, and, in our case, this is made up from users of certain products or a category of products. The advertisement show is meant for them, and the hero is presented through the argument of authority, being a person entitled to be the product's image.

2.5. The dynamic nature is remarked in the setting of the hero's myth at the level of the transformations that intervene along with his manifestations. The hero's acts and overtaking the conflicts demonstrate the flexibility and diversity of its typology. In advertising, the dynamic is played-back through certain elements of narration: the segmentation of the hero's acts, the moment of conflict and its solution. The recognition of the hero status by the community is made by transferring their own aspirations to the one able to change the destiny of the collective. C.G. Jung states in the book previously quoted that myths and fairy tales are well known forms of archetypes. Fairy tales are often built up on the actions of the hero, who is a collective representation. Moreover, in advertising the hero transforms after using a certain product, after making a choice, or after giving up a behaviour to acquire another one. Even if the myth of the hero has lost bravery as an essential dimension, and the confrontation is not aggressive anymore, in time the classic features can be figured out (the power of sacrifice, the nerve, the spirit of initiative). A profile of the hero cannot be standardized and, because of this, the dynamic of the myth reassures its resistance in time. In different eras and original cultural contexts certain layers of the myth are affirmed, according to their expressivity.

3. Conclusions

These characteristics of the myth are visible in the publicity show and they illustrate man's need of narration, by reconstructing the hero's portrait. In advertising, the hero is defined according to the relationship between the product and the consumer, the true acts of bravery consisting in making the choice, buying and using the product. The advantage of constructing a commercial based on this myth covers, especially, the triggering of certain collective representations about power and admitting it. The hero reveals some of his mythical layers based on the age and interest for a certain trait (maturity, boldness, power, courage, intelligence, responsibility etc.) that has become a priority. Following the example of phonemes and morphemes in the linguistic study, these layers were called mitemes or constitutive structures by Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Structural Anthropology*.⁴ These units can form inter-relations which prove the dynamic, but also the conservatory character of the myth through its possibilities to always be found within the modern cultural products.

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⁴ The Romanian version of the book, is entitled *Antropologia structurală*, see bibliographical notes.