

Common Threads in the Tapestry:  
Mythical Values in American Commercials  
(モザイク社会における共通の縦糸：  
アメリカのコマーシャルにおける神話的価値観)

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**SUMMARY IN JAPANESE:** 本論文はアメリカ広告における潜在的内容の分析調査である。7,000本以上の広告サンプルから、1,132本の広告を理論的サンプルとして(Glazer and Strauss 1967) 50以上の項目についてコーディングした。これらの項目の12%は社会的コントロール、コミュニティ、自由、個人主義、平等、疎外、理他主義などの社会政治的内容に関連したものであったが、政治的内容のみのケースは全部で715件あった。

過去の論文において、アメリカ広告における自由や個人主義などの神話的価値観の形態は"chains of signification" (Barthes 1967)として融合することを立証した。今回の研究においてもより限定された社会政治的価値が先のような"chain"として存在することが考察された。それらは次の9点として明示される。(1)頻度からいえば自由はアメリカ広告における主要な神話的価値観ではない。(2)社会的コントロールやコミュニティなどの方がより有力な神話的価値である。(3)多くの民族学的学術研究で報告されているような個人的利益を求めるようなイメージよりも行動的でグループ中心のコミュニティ観の方が多く描かれている。(4)個人行動や個人差が全く無視されている訳ではない。(5)(4)のような場合、個人主義は自分自身に対する強い信念という形で描写されている。(6)個人差によって生じた軋轢は全ての人が適応できる分割化された多様主義によって不透明にされている。(7)社会階層や人種・性差別などの存在認識を非常に躊躇している事が示唆されている。(8)神話的価値観間の衝突を避けようとする願望があるにも係わ

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らず、競争という大義名分の元で特定な価値観が主張されていることがしばしばある。(9)競争主義による弊害、極端な個人主義、疎外感、博愛によって回避できるという認識に至っている。

本論文は、アメリカ公告に神話的社会政治的価値が確実に内在することを提示し、検証する。

## Introduction

### Advertising: The Global Tapestry

There may be no more important force in modern society than advertising. Not only is it an ubiquitous and inevitable part of everyday life (Williamson 1978:11), it is one of the few social forms humans hold in common. Like language—which serves as a major vehicle—ads are levellers; like technology—which makes them possible—ads democratize (cf. Boorstin 1978). In saturating everyday existence, ads standardize discourse, thereby “produc(ing) and reproduc(ing) the material and ideological supremacy of commodity relations” (Goldman 1992:2). Given the fact that such relations are the crux of capitalism and that capitalism is fast becoming the central institution in a globalizing society (see Featherstone 1990; Fukuyama 1992; Giddens 1990), advertising is being hailed as “the official art form” (Dyer 1982) in society. Viewed in this light, ads may justifiably be called the most important device for social reproduction.

Advertising, however, is not monolithic. While serving as a floor for everyday life, weaving itself like threads in a tapestry through our experience, its images are heavily contextualized: they are processed at a personal level and experienced in idiosyncratic, individualized terms. Ads are also contingent: their presentation (and, thus, impact) is random, discontinuous and infinitely juxtaposed. This leads to a kind of hyper reality Taylor and Saarinen (1994) call *simcult*, the mediaization of the real. Fiske (1989) positively points to this as the “polysemic openness” of ad text. Media messages interact with viewers’ experience and interpretive constructs (i.e. Berger and Luckmann 1967)—their matrix of axes (Fiske 1989:30)—in a large number of ways. Readers deconstruct and reconstruct image texts in multiple, often

empowering, ways (Jenkins 1991).



**PANEL 1. Cotton: the Blur of Reality or the Fabric of American Life?**

It would, however, be a mistake to assume that ads are a confused jumble of images. Even at their most ad hoc, such as the Cotton ads presented in Panel 1, they are something more than mere “pictures in our heads” (Lippmann 1922). The incessant flow of ideas may speed up reality (Littlejohn 1975)—by compressing time (Ranney 1983) and space (Holden 1994a)—but there is little substantiation to the old claim that the steady stream numbs the minds of recipients (Toffler 1970). Rather, the parsimony and managability of ads may actually confer a kind of unity to life. As Dyer (1982:135) opines, ads are “richer... fuller and less ambiguous than (a human’s) glimpses of real life.” Fuller and more intelligible because of the deeply embedded codes which communicate to citizen-viewers what is latent within (and important to) a society. Cotton, the first panel asserts, is “the fabric of our lives” , but, in fact, it is the form as much as the content that makes cotton’s case. We can hear McLuhan (1964) calling: advertising, as form, is content. It is the seamless

fabric; a tapestry more organized, organizable and intelligible than actual social activity.

The organization of ads inheres in its codes (see Jhally 1987). Such codes are repetitive, narrow and, above all, dynamic. They stretch beyond the boundaries of any one commercial, linking themselves into long chains of signification (see Barthes 1967). Such chains enable viewers to reconstruct and make their way through everyday reality. In earlier work (Holden 1994b), I demonstrated that these chains coalesce in the form of mythic values such as liberty and individualism. In the present work, I wish to search these chains for other socio-political values. I conclude that, at least in terms of American commercials, a limited set of such mythic threads wend their way through the daily advertising tapestry.

### **Socio-Political Values in Advertising**

After years of debate, there has been rapprochement of sorts concerning advertising effects. They are now considered diffuse and long term (Dyer 1982), capable of projecting central values in the consumer culture (the MacBride Commission 1980), socializing message recipients into the codes of expected behavior (Potter 1954), thereby serving some social interests rather than others (Fiske 1987). In the words of my earlier work (Holden 1993), ads are "directive and selective". They promote particular lifestyles and images while suppressing others; they choose to depict particular attitudes rather than others, presenting them as all that viewers should value (see also Schudson 1984). In this way ads serve an agenda-setting function (viz. , McCombs and Shaw 1972; Cohen 1957) in contemporary consumer culture.

The concept of agenda-setting goes hand in hand with ideological theories of media which "stress that all communication and all meanings have a socio-political dimension... This ideological work always favours the status quo, for the classes with power dominate the production and distribution not only of goods but also of ideas and meanings." (Fiske 1990:177)

Herein we find the connection to Barthes' (1972) "myths". In his conception, myths are products of distinctly entrenched social classes who utilize these products to naturalize history and, thereby, support their socio-political position. In the present study we wonder, just which myths exist, which socio-political values can be located in the chains of signification, which valuational threads can be found woven through the American



commercial tapestry.

### **Socio-Political Values in American Advertising**

The recurrent presence of socio-political values such as liberty and individualism in American television commercials serve to socialize us into the logic of our deepest seated cultural myths. They are also potentially reproductive: their repetition refines and redefines such myths for consumer/citizens. My earlier work (Holden 1994b) demonstrated that the contemporary spin ads put on core myths such as freedom and individualism constitutes a change from the past. American society was initiated via collective political action. The freedom leading to such expression was a robust chorus in three voices: religious/communal, Hobbesian/negative and Lockean/positive. By contrast, commercials in our sample revealed that, by the 1990s, both the religious and Hobbesian dimensions have been eschewed in favor of the communal and, most dominantly, the Lockean dimensions.

Moreover, and not surprisingly, the major valuational threads attached to the freedom myth are not family, fraternity, or equality; they are individualism and self-orientation. Despite Carter's (1979) stern warning of a "crisis of confidence" in American institutions, a loss of faith in community, social fragmentation and a self-indulgent lifestyle, American commercial messages appear closer to the individualized values of the 1970s than the fundamental values of family, church and local community preached by Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton in the 1980s and 1990s.

In the present paper we analyze American commercials, asking: "Can any other mythical threads be located in the commercial tapestry and, if so, which ones?"

### **About the Study**

The ads used in this research were gathered as part of a comparative study of latent content in American and Japanese television commercials. The procedure has been detailed elsewhere (Holden 1993). From a pool of over 7,000 CMs, a theoretical sample (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was constructed. The 1,132 ads in the American portion of the sample were then content analyzed using a predesigned, pre-tested coding sheet of over 50 variables. Of

these variables 12 percent dealt with socio-political content. The following table reproduces the values, the number of commercials in which each appears, and the percentage relative to the entire sample.

**TABLE 1: Frequency of Primary Values in American Commercials<sup>1</sup>**

Code	Number of CMs	% of Total Sample
Social Control	247	21.8
Community	206	18.2
Liberty	84	7.4
Individualism	84	7.4
Equality	44	3.9
Isolation	34	3.0
Altruism	16	1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>715</b>	<b>***</b>

Clearly, 700 occurrences of such content is not trivial; nonetheless, insofar as 10 codes were found per CM, the percentage of socio-political values in our sample is closer to 7 percent than 70. This, itself, is not without significance. Socio-political values are common and repetitive in American commercials. At the same time, they are not the pervasive presence we often hear they once were in the fabric of American life (see Tocqueville 1961; Bellah, et al. 1985; Herson 1984; Holsworth and Wray 1987) or that the numbers above might suggest.

## Findings

The cotton ads presented in Panel 1 depict a complex, multi-layered human world. Through the ads, a portrait of America also emerges. It is a pluralistic world, comprised of old and young, black and white. It is a world of love, companionship, compassion and care. Other ads in the series show it to be a competitive world, one of achievement, a place of isolation and union, family and community. A place for celebration, celebrity; one bounded by events like birth, death, marriage, economic crisis and war. It is an institutional world, housing government, church, military, police, business and family. These ads present almost all the essential parameters of American life: essential values

(such as freedom, equality, individualism and community), lifestyles and bounding conditions. These elements, it turns out, recur regularly in other American CMs. In the following section I seek to show the form in which these



**Family**



**Commerce**



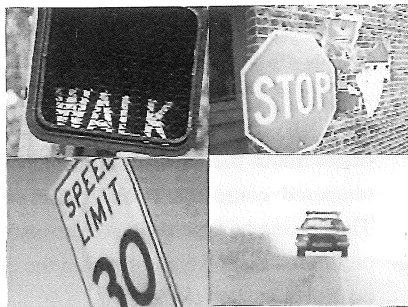
**Nation**



**Practices**



**Bureaucracy**



**Sovereign**

**PANEL 2. Symbols of Institutional Control: Family, Practices, Bureaucracy, Sovereign, Commerce and Nation**

values surface and just what is communicated to the citizen/consumer.

### **Social Control**

While America's core mythology indisputably concerns freedom, it is the opposing value—social control—which appeared most frequently in our sample. We coded social control whenever evidence of societal belonging and/or boundedness could be found. Most often, this attachment was expressed within institutional subunits such as government, family, interest groups, school, church and corporation. Recurrently, such attachment was symbolized by tokens such as wedding rings, uniforms, corporate titles and offices, government labels and formatic rules of behavior. Panel 2 reconstructs the plethora of ways in which control is signified for the commercial viewer.

At this juncture let us be clear. There was not a single commercial in our sample that could not be coded in terms of social control. From the red tie and blue blazer worn by the talking head to the salutations employed in speech... at some level control can always be detected. We humans are, after all, trapped within the institutional embrace; we are embedded in contexts which are socially defined and circumscribed. For this reason frivolous counts of control were ignored; only those signs *emphasizing* structure and regulation were counted. In a word, our counts were confined to cases in which control figured prominently in the ad; where a conscious decision on the part of the producer/transmitter or a mental connection by the receiver/reconstructor could easily be inferred. Frequently spied signs included wedding bands, rituals of family enclosure and expansion, dance forms, authoritative commandments, national flags and corporate uniforms. Utilizing this pared down standard, the number of incidences was, nonetheless, considerable.

The issue of control, clearly, is problematic in a society whose major myths are liberty, individual will and plurality of difference. hallowed texts make no bones about the need for control;<sup>2</sup> even the enduring ideal is recognized as tempered: contextual bounds stand sentinel over thought, speech and action.<sup>3</sup> The tension heightens in an ever-institutionalizing environment<sup>4</sup>—predicated on limited empowerment within the context of authoritative structures. Social control is pushed to the fore.

By playing up the tension between structure and the impulse toward liberation, American advertising may end up reinforcing the myth of social control. One of the implicit aims of advertising is to sell consumers on the

notion that the particular product will secure escape (in no matter how small a way) from the fetters of their present (however slightly) imperfect existence (e.g. Vestergaard and Schroder 1985:117). When symbols of social control are employed to set up the emotional release centering around liberation and possibility, it is likely that we save the leg, but lose the life. The limited advertising objective may be achieved, yet the reproduction of such scenarios may culminate in a sense of oppression and control. The solitary message consumer may cultivate a myth of control, positional dissonance and valuational conflict.

### **Community**

This would seem to apply equally to the value of community. After all, this mythic form is the situs for the battle between individual will and social control—a point demonstrated by theorists, critics and observers as diverse as Orwell (1949), Wolff (1970), Nozick (1974), FitzGerald (1981) and Louv (1985).

For reasons other than its role as a counterpoint to individual action, it is not surprising that the mythic value of community frequently cropped up in our sample. After all, it is the primary generative value for liberalism. The conception that individuals were but a part of a more perfect collective entity was deeply embedded in the Western tradition. Aristotle perceived the State to be the highest form of association—a formation to which individuals were naturally drawn. Hobbes, arguably the first liberal theorist, recognized the essential need for a communal framework: without it humans were destined to engage in a brutal, incessant, unmitigated free-for-all, ending in utter destruction. Locke, a more optimistic theorist, argued that freedom had positive expressions, yet concluded that the fruition of individual liberty was the formation of political community.

It is out of this intellectual context that American society was founded. The earliest European settlers—politically persecuted refugees—argued that community was the only recourse for survival. Mutual aid, love, charity, walled cities, wagons drawn in a tight circle were the espoused ingredients for success. Messages of community continued to the time of the political reformation, culminating in Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence". In that document rebellion was justified on the grounds that sacred bonds based on blood, trust, respect and affection had been broken. In effect, community had

been dishonored and, thus, the compact compelling obedience was rendered null and void. Political community—still the highest ideal—was rescindable if it violated core liberal codes.

Messages of community persist to the present. The Republican party's 1995 "Contract with America" is but the latest take on mutual endeavor. In the 20th Century notable expressions abound: from FDR's "Commonwealth Club Speech" (the shrill rebuttal to Hoover's "Rugged Individualism") to JFK's paradigmatic revision of liberalism as activist community ("Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country") to Ronald Reagan's reclamation of the puritan vision ("We shall be as a city upon the hill") to George Bush's enigmatic plan for privatized welfare ("a thousand points of light").

Such messages are ubiquitous in American advertising. Surprising or not, community outnumbered expressions of individualism and freedom *combined*. In isolation, community was voiced two and a half times more than either core value. Community, however, was not of one type. In fact, three distinct expressions could be discerned: collective action, fellowship and affection. Collective action refers to people working in concert, usually cooperating or facilitating a group goal. Affection is associated with contact between members organized in pairs, triads or larger groups. The contact takes the form of emotional connection in the pursuit of shared activity and mutual involvement. No clear goal or specific task may be depicted. Fellowship is a distinct class which often straddles the poles of emotion and action. It is a shared involvement in an activity, which is goal-directed, often involving people in intense emotional union. In almost every case expressions of community in ads are positive, rather than negative; connective rather than distancing; successful rather than merely extant.

Of the 206 instances of community, 67 were identifiable as affection; 42 as fellowship; the other half fell into some form of helping behavior or collective action. A representative sampling of each is reproduced in Panel 3.

Comparing the mythical content of these ads to the observed world leads to an interesting contrast. America has long been regarded as an "interest group society" (Berry 1984), its politics defined in narrow group-based terms (Schattschneider 1960). Collective action, when it exists, is portrayed as taking the form of and serving narrowly-defined interests (e.g. Olson 1965). Yet most American ads send a different message: group action is most often in the



**Collective Action**



**Fellowship**



**Affection**

**PANEL 3. Three Kinds of Community: Collective Action,  
Fellowship, and Affection**

interest of others. Life is depicted as constituted by personal connections, rather than anomic detachment (Slater 1970); other orientation is projected,

rather than self-involvement (Lasch 1979). This contradiction with the observed is underscored by the great disparity in our data between community (18 percent) and isolation (3 percent) themes.

### Liberty

The collective response represents a particular use of freedom: circumscribed, jointly defined, proactive. Different, perhaps, from the rugged individualistic conception most see as America's core myth. For most, liberty is the first value: the first in both time and right. Selected in opinion polls as the most preferred of all primary values,<sup>5</sup> it was, nonetheless, only the third most frequently appearing value in our sample. While counter-intuitive on the surface, this is not surprising. After all, too many reminders about a consumer's agency might prompt the viewer to question the entire capitalist/commodity culture enterprise.

It is likely the reason that limited pushes of the freedom button are so powerful. Narrow, repetitive messages such as Virginia Slims' long-running "You've come a long way, baby" campaign are effective in this regard. Limited, one-shot approaches, such as Apple's controversial "1984" offering, are also particularly resonant with consumers.

In earlier work (1994b) I distinguished three kinds of liberty: positive, negative and gendered. I also discerned clear consequences: difference, radical individualism and segmentation. We turn to these elements next. A few points, though, bear reminder: all these aspects—fast becoming, if not already having attained mythical status—flow from freedom. Second, virtually none of this



**PANEL 4. A Woman, a Car, a Beach, Some Jeans and a Strip-tease: Elements of Modern Liberation.**



freedom can be defined as “developmental”, as so many political philosophers (e.g. Mill 1956; Macpherson 1973) seek. Instead, commercial freedom is most often limited, extractive or parasitic—generally placed within the confines of existing socio-political structures and economic relations. It is spending that makes us free, we are told. The mind, body or soul is liberated by a product.

As just one example, consider Panel 4, above.

As other authors (e.g. Gitlin 1986) have noted, freedom is often associated in car ads with wide-open space and fast, unrestrained movement. In the ad depicted in Panel 4, a woman secures liberation via a car. The vehicle enables escape, propelling her toward open, raw, untamed nature. The expression of freedom is embodied in her stripping away all attachments: symbols of her enslavement to civilization. Yet, as for the project of developmental freedom, such individualized micro-acts of personal escape are, in the words of another ad, “as good as it gets”.

### **Individualism**

The pursuit of freedom has been a flight from community (Nisbet 1953). It has provided the opportunity for self-indulgence, which has heightened individuality. In the American context, expressions of radical individualism are pervasive in advertising. They appear coupled with, flow from and, likely, modernly substitute for expressions of liberty.<sup>6</sup>

Although incidences of individualism equal those of liberty in the data, it has been argued that the former has become most dominant in American consciousness (Fiske 1989:3). This presence is commonly found in ads, as the following panel indicates.



**PANEL 5. Levi's 501 Jeans. The Contemporary Commandment: “Be Yourself.”**

Here the protagonist declares his desire for difference by playing roller hockey on the boardwalk, jumping into the sand with his blades on, recklessly

careening into the fence, and walking along the water's edge in a pork pie hat with stick and skates slung over his shoulder. His personal philosophy is no less important. "Can't fake me," he trumpets to the camera. "I'm just me." He asks in wonder: "How can a person not be himself?" Then he advises his audience: "Be yourself, always. . . don't let anyone stop you."

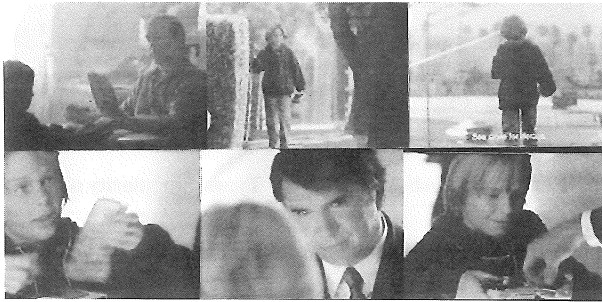
This admonition has perhaps a stronger impact given the fact that we are situated in a Japanese context. On these shores, for instance, the norm is sought; conformity is the rule; no nail should be allowed to protrude (Taylor 1983). Thus an ad like Lucky Strike which depicts "an American Original" leaves a powerful impression. In America, however, there is no shortage of messages about originality and difference. Perhaps because of the constant struggle with institutional bounding and social control, such messages are endemic. They are essential viewing. A necessary norm.

Perhaps this will make the point. One of the century's more renowned American poets, Robert Frost, penned his "The Road Not Taken" on this theme. Reflecting on his life, a man recalls a turning point: the moment he stood before a fork in the road. He can see down neither due to the undergrowth. He has to make a blind choice. He settles upon the one which appears less travelled—which he now realizes has made all of the difference.

Though the poem is judgmentally neutral—it is not clear whether this choice was wise or not—Frost is articulating a distinctive American myth: acting in the way that is either less common or less popular. This theme of choosing and pursuing the uncommon path finds expression in an ad campaign for Twister, a fruit drink made of less usual flavors. In order to sell the viewer on the desirability of difference, the ad shows a variety of unflattering human types: old, fat, greasy, lower class, country club glitzy, car salesman slick, Bible-thumping conservative. None of them approves of the drink. They see the unusual combination of tastes as "decadent, deviant, perverse and sinful... Certainly not normal." At this, the narrator intones: "Normal is Boring!" The audience is left to form its own conclusion. "Do I want to be like the woman sitting outside the trailer in the floral housecoat and pink curlers or do I want to take the less travelled path?" Twister's producers are assuming that the average American consumer is going to declare: "Give me some of that abnormal brew. I'll take a shot of difference."

**The Responsible Citizen: the Flip-side of Liberty and Individualism.**

When people choose to act by themselves, for themselves, in charge of their own destinies, they must also be responsible for the consequences. This theme—of obligations astride rights—is one of the earliest values in the American context. Its origins can be found in Winthrop's "City on a Hill" and Jefferson's civic republicanism (See Ketcham 1987; Tussman 1987). As a core value this notion of citizen as self-actuated and self-actualizing is not lost in the American commercial landscape.

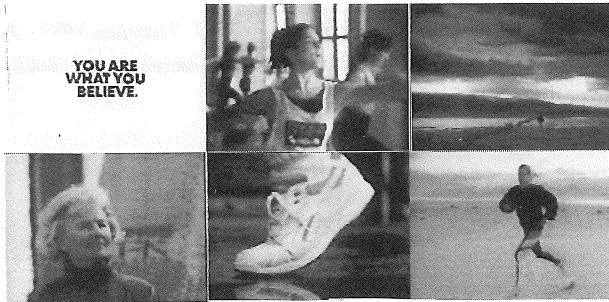


**PANEL 6. Circuit City: The 'Do It Yourself' Lifestyle  
Confronts Itself.**

As this vignette opens, the young boy has learned that the Walkman he purchased the week before at Circuit City is now being advertised for less at a rival store. His father, quite unsympathetically, declares: "Well Matt, you've got to handle it." The boy then sets off on an individual trek, past playgrounds (where children play free of worldly concern), by freeways—symbols of vast, depersonalized, aggressive space—into a large corporate institution (which we have been taught to believe are faceless, inhuman and unforgiving). Yet, the clerk turns out (surprise) to be friendly. With his aid, the helpless lad (symbol of all impotent souls adrift in the anomic universe) is able to achieve something by himself. The message, clear and consistent with American mythology, intones: stand up for yourself; success will come through personal initiative.

This CM, not atypical of American ads, has tangible mythical content. It explicitly articulates a philosophy. It speaks directly to the viewer about the parameters of and possibilities in American life. The consumer is told about his boundaries, options and preferred course of action. A common thread in such

ads is the exhortation that the consumer maintains an awareness of who he is, believe in himself, and remain committed to living in a personally truthful manner. This formula emerges clearly in the following ad for women's athletic shoes.



**PANEL 7. Lady Reebok. Plurality of Types, Singularity of Belief.**

The ad presents a series of active images accompanied by voiceovers. Each woman encountered offers a concise belief.

"I believe 'Babe' is a four letter word."

"I believe that the person who said 'winning isn't everything', never won anything."

"I believe sweat **is** sexy."

"I don't believe in lifeless action."

"I believe that 70 is a long way from being old."

"I believe you should go big or stay at home."

The women depicted are young, old, white, Asian. They are all active. Dance, aerobics, distance running, and walking punctuate the statements. Despite the plurality—the difference in thoughts, styles, ethnicities and age—there is singularity of purpose. All women share a common posture: the notion that one must have a core of belief, a firm sense of self. From an individual philosophy, all action follows. In this way, this Reebok ad shares commonality with the Levi's ad, above. Out of belief, action flows. Each ad, thus, serves as a mythic exegesis; a prod and guide.

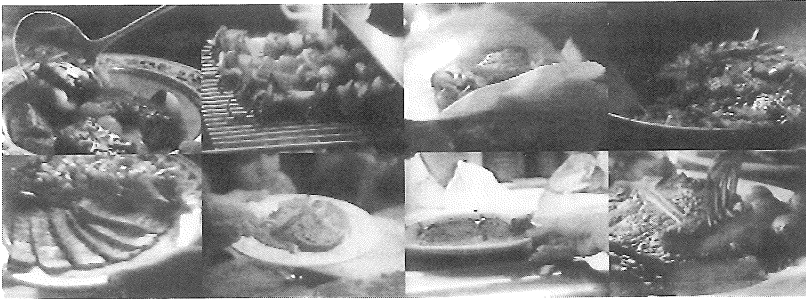
## Pluralism

The value that one should be oneself, believe in oneself and do for oneself depends, of course, on freedom. It is also supported by a view propagated at the founding that the constitution will protect and the society will tolerate all manner of difference: in belief, background and practice. These values have produced the great multiplicity that is contemporary American society. This tolerance for difference was a major factor in the magnet pull of America. Immigration was how America began and was built; plurality was how it evolved and grew strong.

The standard metaphor for America has been a melting pot—a contrivance that enabled disparate peoples from around the world to be blended into a singular entity. In time, that metaphor was replaced with one which could better account for an accreting pluralism. The image that has become common is a salad bar. The intended meaning is of a sphere in which distinct types exist, come into contact, yet retain their integrity; rather than blend, they coexist as discrete, recognizable morsels.

In my view, the social evolution of the past two decades mandates a third metaphor: fast food. To understand why, consider that American society is in the throes of what I call a “self-enclosure movement;”<sup>6</sup> a “fortress mentality” (Louv 1985) reflected in the tendency by citizens to organize into “lifestyle enclaves” (Bellah et al. 1985), closed communities based on commonality, aimed at meeting all leisure, consumption and self-defense needs. These modern walled communities enable citizens to segment, or package, themselves. Like take out food at McDonald’s, they may co-exist in the same bag, but are individually wrapped in order to minimize the amount of seepage between incompatible morsels. When seepage occurs, it most often progresses no farther than the wrapping. What self-enclosure (and its cousin, externally-imposed enclosure) enables is the perpetuation and further development of the pluralism myth. Radical heterogeneity, based on segmentation, is thus able to prevail in American society. This kind of segmentation and insularity is no better reflected than in the following ad for beef (Panel 8).

In other work (Holden 1994a) I showed that heterogeneity and homogeneity are companion parts of a theory of standardization—ways of conceptualizing diversity and uniformity in social form and content. In the panel above, beef is presented as a singular entity with the ability of appealing to the wide diversity of American tastes. It is both an indicator of homogeneity and a force for



**PANEL 8. Beef: Standardizing Taste or Segmenting Lifestyle**

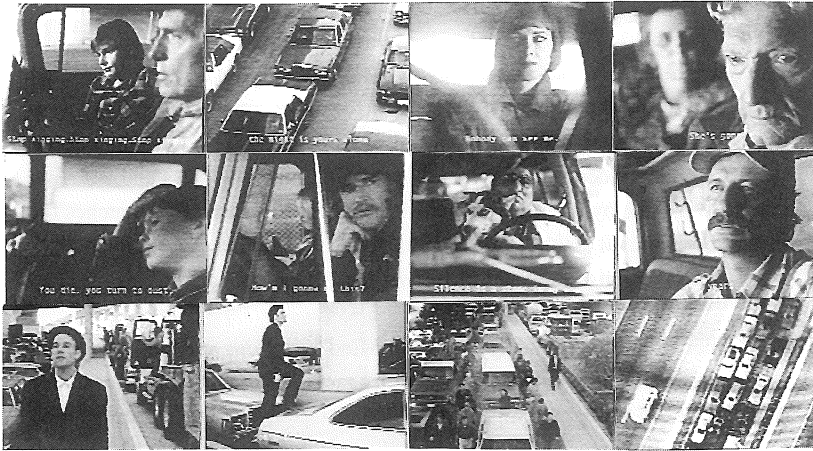
heterogeneity. Each panel above corresponds to a different region of the country, a different ethnic grouping, a different style of production and consumption. From upper crust northeast to laid-back surf west; from bustling noonday Jewish district to neon-nighted Chinatown; from the black south to Yuppie big city. When all is said and done, "At the end of each day, all over the country . . . nothing satisfies so many people in so many ways."

The ad makes the claim that despite ethnic, racial and geographical differences, Americans can be comfortably accommodated. They can be bound together—despite their differences—via use of a common product. Mythically, it is simply a matter of packaging. Each group can have its needs served; none has to be wrapped up with any other. To invoke a fast food slogan in service of my metaphor: consumers can "have it their way".

### **Social Segmentation and Socio-political Solution**

The trouble with difference is that it can lead to segmentation; even conflict. Physical, cultural and ideational differences tend to stratify and divide. The founders wanted citizens who were free to pursue their beliefs as they wished. So often, though, this positive freedom has led to a kind of competition for the most personally-beneficial result. Advancement is often gained at the expense of others (see Thurow 1980). This has ramifications for equality, as we shall discuss next.

Partitioning in American society has transpired as a natural outgrowth of freedom, individualism and pluralism. It has taken multiple forms: racial, cultural, regional, social and personal. In a society which holds equality as one of its seminal myths, segmentation which can disadvantage is perceived as a



**PANEL 9. REM's 'Everybody Hurts': Contemporary Alienation  
and a Call for Collective Action.**

problem to be dispensed with. In the previous music video—another form of advertisement in American culture (Kaplan 1987)—solutions based on long-standing socio-political myths are communicated. In this way the viewer is integrated into the political discourse concerning freedom/individualism/pluralism/segmentation/inequality.

This video uses a congested freeway as metaphor for modern America. All are stuck on a shared pathway; progress checked; ensconced in separate vehicles. The metal boxes not only separate, they keep the occupants isolated in their separateness. The riders all differ from one another: demographically, valuationally, experientially. . . except in one particular: their alienation. Moreover, though their lives don't apparently intersect, the video argues, they actually do.

Realization of intersection—collective unification—comes only after the viewer has explored the inner worlds of each. We become privy to private turmoils: a teen contemplating flight; a trucker pondering suicide; an older man thinking about terminating a relationship; a son bracing for death; a couple fighting; a minority railing against injustice. Inner voices claiming: "they're going to miss me"; "if I had a gun"; "you die, you turn to dust"; "look at me. . . nobody can see me" and more.

The inner dialogues, the individual entrapment, the collective stagnation prompt one to act. The bleakness of the human condition can be overcome, the video argues, if we can endure, show strength, rely on friends. If we act collectively, as the myth of America's founding instructs, solutions to contemporary over-individualization are possible. The hidden, deeper message in this video is that strangers can unite; that loneliness and isolation can be overcome by joining together with one's fellow man. This matches the myth of communal action at the heart of the earliest American settlements; it fits the mass action at the heart of Jeffersonian democracy.

Another video, En Vogue's "Free Your Mind", explores a second dimension of contemporary segmentation: division by racial difference. Cut to coincide with the 1992 Summer Olympics, the video juxtaposed images of competition with sexual brashness, pleas for morality, racial harmony and historical remembrance.

The lyrics, while pedestrian, speak of the need to recognize similarities, rather than accentuate difference.



**PANEL 10. En Vogue's 'Free Your Mind': The Racist Threat and a Call for Collective Action.**

Let's come together, be as one  
Mother and daughter, father and son;  
We stand united, divided we fall  
Make your contribution, whether big and small



The solution set is based on consciousness. The chorus instructs:

Free your mind. . and the rest will follow...  
Be colorblind, don't be so shallow.

### **Equality**

Mass action, of the kind espoused in the REM and En Vogue videos, requires an ability to supercede the partitioning wrought by difference. It also requires a relatively similar social condition. Without it, jealousies, resource advantages and differences will conspire to obstruct union. What has damned American society has not been liberty's priority, but the fact that when asserted, liberty has unequalized. Moreover, because the values exist in a dialectical relationship, when the pendulum swings it cuts a course away from the other mythic value. Thus, in American history, when equality has been sought, it has often taken liberty away from others. I have referred to this as the "democracy paradox" (1992). We might also call it the "liberty/equality dialectic". Indeed, much of American socio-political development could be explained by recourse to this conception: outgroups seeking equal entitlements with privileged in-groups. The resulting push/pull between the mythic values—at the ballot box, in legislatures around the country, in Congress, in the courts—occurs when the asserting group (the valuational "have not") perceives disadvantage at the hands of its socio-political rival (a valuational



**PANEL 11. Kellogg's 'Rope Climb': Surmounting Barriers of Gender and Racial Inequality.**

“have”).

The extensive assertion of equality in American history designates it as a seminal value to search for in commercial media. Despite the preference for liberty (in our sample twice the frequency of equality) and the relative lack of equality in society, the myth is present in CMs. Perhaps the best example in our sample was the ad for a breakfast cereal (Panel 11).

A grade school student struggles to climb a rope in gym class. The viewer knows nothing about the student other than a name: “Davis”. Sexually and racially, all is neutral. A couple of white boys snicker in the background, but not until the hand touches the tassel and the coach yells out that Davis has set a record do we learn that the record-setter is a black female. This knowledge has a powerful effect. It shocks the viewer into recognition that anything is possible; barriers don’t exist in life. We are forced to confront our gestalts: we, the audience, expected Davis to be a white male all along.

There are other positives in this ad. Not only is the authority figure a minority, he, as well as most of the students, support Davis’s achievement. This sense of fairness is present in other ads, such as the Olympic installment for Seiko watches. Men and women from numerous countries compete as a somber narrator declares: “We must have no loyalties. We take pity on no one. We have no sympathies, no prejudices. We root for no one.” These words resonate with the American viewer, for they mimic the hallowed myth of American jurisprudence: “Justice is blind”.

Full-blown, unconscious equality is present in numerous ads. It is seen where gender roles and race- and sex-specific employment assignments can no longer be discerned.



**PANEL 12. Catholic Neighbors: Equality in the Workplace and Under God.**

The previous panel depicts a number of social types—black male, black female and white male—working together on an assembly-line. The job, while honest, is menial, hard, and lowly on a prestige scale. Yet, it is work done in an

open, friendly, sharing spirit. It is not the two white males and the two blacks partitioned and speaking in their segregated pairs as the REM video depicted. Instead, it is an intermingling of both race and sex, bespeaking full equality.

### **The Matter of Class: (Out) and (In) Equality.**

At the same time, let's be clear: this is not the norm in American ads. While equality may exist, it tends toward similarity in isolation—as the section on pluralism argued. American ads “code” groups by dividing them by racial, social and class characteristics. In an egalitarian society, this is a tricky business. Potential consumers cannot be made to feel excluded; at the same time bigots cannot be led to believe that too much blending is going on.

What advertising has traditionally done is to sell consumers on the idea that they want to “keep up with the Joneses”, but do so in their own zones of exclusivity. Ads tell us that parity can be achieved with rival status seekers, but it can be secured within the context of one's own groupings and social conditions. Equality is thus presented in internal/external, like me/different from me, in/out terms.

Such segmentation sends the message that, although different from me, others can have roughly the same lifestyle, status, opportunities and conditions. This flies in the face of the prevailing reality: America is not—nor has it ever been—a unitary class society. In fact, inequality abounds—more so perhaps after the Reagan-Bush years (Edsall 1984). It is threatened again in the face of the Republican party's so-called “Contract with America”. Recent evidence suggests that “the poorest 20 percent of the nation received only 3.6 percent of the national income... (while) the richest 20 percent received over 48.2 percent of the overall income.” (Risen and Shogren 1994:17). The proposed redistribution of earnings from lower income classes back to the wealthiest threatens to stratify American society even more than it already is.

For a culture which seeks to convince all consumers that a particular (high)



**PANEL 13. McDonald's 'Going Up': Corporate Institutions as Class Equalizers.**

level of consumption is within their reach, ads depicting class differences are sparse. A rare exception is the McDonald's ad (Panel 13) :

The situation is this: four executives are riding an elevator. It stops and an average salaried man—typed by his brown suit, short stature, bald pate, hunched shoulders and clearly intimidated demeanor—gets on. The following dialogue ensues:

Executive 1: McDonald's, huh?

Salary Man: Yeah.

Executive 2: Smells good.

Salary Man: Thanks.

Executive 3: If this ride was any longer, you'd have to  
fight for those fries.

(Nervous laughter all around. Lights blink off, then on. Engines whine to a standstill).

Executive 4: We're stuck.

(All look down at the worker who smiles nervously. CM fades out).

Central to this ad is asymmetry in power and status. This grates against the dominant societal myths. McDonald's asks us to gloss over this dissonance by encouraging the viewer to laugh at the predicament of the poor slob who is about to be worked over by the team of slick execs in three piece suits over a bag of fries. But that still leaves the question why McDonald's—the paragon of corporate capitalism—would intentionally present a potentially destabilizing scenario for public consumption. One answer is that it needs the asymmetry in order to reach all segments of the population. It must show that its product is a great equalizer. Members of distinct socio-economic strata share a fondness for the product. More, they are not ashamed to admit it. Like many ads, the product serves as a means of transcending difference and, however temporarily, delivering social transformation.

### **Facing up to Inequality?**

Another McDonald's ad—not reproduced here for reasons of space—depicts a teenage African American rising up the corporate ladder. While merely promoted to shift manager, the grapevine elevates him—gossip call after gossip call—first to full manager, then franchise owner, and finally owner of the entire chain. The tag at the end proclaims: “What you want is what you get:

McDonald's". The message is clear: there are no barriers to success. In America anything is possible. The institution—the mega-corporation—is the means for class mobility and racial equalization.

This image does not jibe with the America familiar to social analysts. That America is one of diminished opportunity and inequalities. While American ads, for the most part, sugar coat such realities, inequalities **can** be spied. In one, a “simulated queen” is confronted by loudly protesting subjects. The clamoring mass is demonstrating for a particular fat-free foodstuff which, after some deliberation, the queen decides to provide. The commercial may be in questionable taste, but it does suggest that when class must be stratified and politics too closely intersects reality, American advertisers find it easier to set the action in a foreign context. Political conflict is not a subject for sustained treatment.



**PANEL 14. The Politics of Inequality: Only in a Foreign Context.**

### **Competition**

By contrast, competition of other sorts is. American ads may do a good job of deflecting consumers' attention from the prevailing political reality—which is competition for scarce political and economic goods by antagonistic social groups. This is likely due to the dialectical nature of freedom and equality, discussed before.

Competition is the operative principle. Political goods are not just handed to any group seeking rights and privileges. Most often, such goods must be taken. In a pluralistic society we often find our neighbor is our rival—whether in social, economic, political or moral matters. While this value was not a founding one—in many ways antithetical to the ideals of Winthrop and Jefferson—it is an idea which has grown steadily throughout American history. It now commands a firm presence in the system of electronic



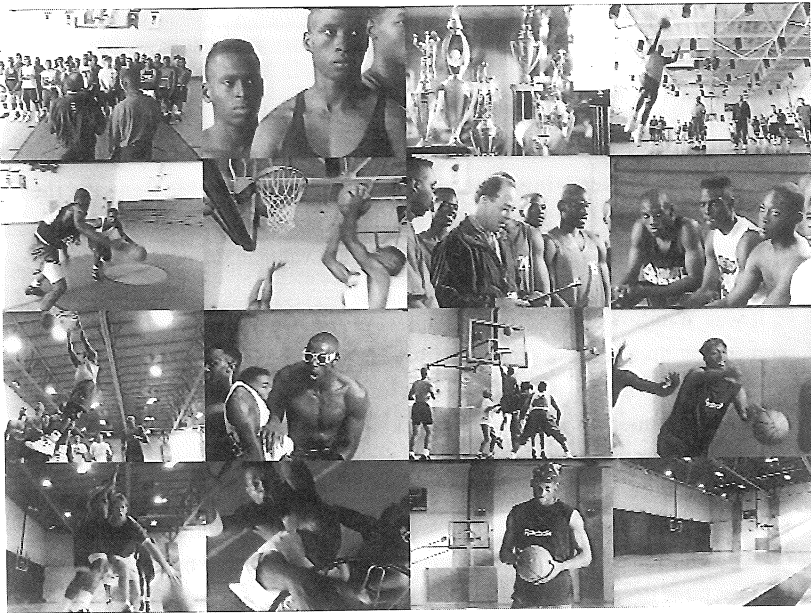
**PANEL 15. “American Gladiators”: Reinventing Competition as a Basic American Value.**

advertising.

The crassest example of this may be the “American Gladiators”(Panel 15), a television program where combatants battle as the fighters of old: in multiple, primal competitions; fenced in, ringed by an ecstatic audience. The fight, though not to the death, is brutal and, in many cases, until only one antagonist is left standing.

Programs such as these (and there are others) both reveal and reproduce the competitive organization of American society. This theme of contest abounds in advertisements, as well, serving to reproduce the myth of conflict and competition. In one series of ads, for men’s cologne, every situation—the basketball game on the court and the contest between the sexes after—is framed as a test: to survive, to achieve, to prove oneself, to secure the prize. Each encounter is about winning and losing.

A second series of ads—also centered around basketball—communicates



**PANEL 16. Reebok: The Court, the Comp, and the Love.**

the structure of society and what is confronting members as they grow into it (Panel 16).

These ads not only emphasize competition, but the multiple barriers blocking ascent in American sport. In high school, there are the coaches, player rivalries, scouts, colleges, and television. In the pros, a very different set of obstacles await: money, fame, idolatry, immortality. There is constant battle, perpetual competition. It begins with 28 guys fighting for 12 slots. It never stops until one player sits at the top of his chosen world. But even so, the ads remind us, hunger and desire, pure skill and lust for dominance are not enough. There is a central, missing ingredient: love. In order to succeed in this cut-throat world, the ads exhort, you must have love. Surely, the irony cannot be lost on the viewer: how to reconcile these incommensurate, yet intertwined threads.

## Conclusion

### Mythical Reconnections

In many ways, this is the best place to end our exploration of mythic values in American advertising. For we have come full circle. Beneath the commercial gloss of the Reebok ads, the slogan sends a hidden mythic reality: love was the start of it all. The true instantiating value in the American socio-political context.

It was Winthrop, the original architect of the American experiment, who argued that love and Christian charity were to be the foundations of the new world. One hundred years later, Thomas Jefferson asserted that primary among duties was honoring kindred ties and showing fealty to brethren. Love, America's founders argued, was the core mythic value. Though no longer regarded as core, it *is* a theme still heard in commercials today. This gains in poignancy insofar as it contradicts the portrait of isolation, alienation, detachment, self-concern and despair so widely constructed by analysts over the past three decades.

### Common Threads in the Tapestry

The findings reported on these pages clearly demonstrate that the system of electronic commercial communication in America is a vehicle which transmits dominant political and social ideas. My earlier work on liberty showed that: (1) there is a deep conflict between the mythic values of liberty and equality; (2) liberty holds priority over equality; (3) positive is valued over negative liberty; and (4) individually-defined personal action is now preferred to socially-defined collective action.

This research has uncovered more startling, often contradictory, certainly refined conclusions. First, measured in terms of frequency of appearance, liberty is not first, but the third most important myth in American commercial culture. Social control and community are the predominant myths. Interestingly, pro-active, group-regarding conceptions of community tend to be depicted, rather than images of narrow self-interest reported in most ethnographic academic research. Fourth, individual action and difference are not neglected. Yet, when such myths appear, individualism is depicted in terms of a deep belief in oneself, in the need for a basic personal core. Sixth, any



conflict which might arise as a result of individual difference is deemphasized in favor of a partitioned, fast-food style pluralism, capable of accomodating everyone. Seventh, and in the same tenor, a reluctance can be perceived in admitting the existence of social class and other inequalities such as race and gender. Eighth, despite a desire to avoid the clash between competing myths, values often are asserted within the context of competition. Finally, recognition seems to have emerged that only through love will the ills of competition, radical individualism and isolation be averted.

### The Seamless Tapestry?

Mythic socio-political values are ubiquitous in American commercials. But, as media research has struggled to reconcile for decades, there is a gulf of difference between output and input. It is by no means certain that ads, alone, are sufficient to inculcate cultural myths. Transmission, yes; reception. . .?; social production, indubitably; social reproduction. . .? Common threads: unequivocally; a seamless tapestry. . .?

### Notes

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- 1 These figures require further elaboration. Evidence of sociopolitical content was found 715 times in the sample. Each value was counted only once per commercial—even if multiple expressions existed within the same ad. For this reason, percentages relative to the entire commercial pool could be calculated. Thus, utilizing this standard, it was possible to determine that liberty, say, was present in over 7 percent of the sample of 1,132 CMs. However, because multiple codes were embedded in each CM (for instance, individualism *as well as* liberty, social control *as well as* community, isolation *as well as* image of women, altruism *as well as* technology, equality *as well as* gender roles), we do not deem it meaningful to calculate what percentage of the entire pool of over 10,000 codes socio-political content constituted. Were such a procedure to be invoked, the figures would fritter to nothing. More, lost in the infinitesimally small quantitative measure would be the qualitative evaluation: the degree of importance or impact of that particular occurrence. In a large number of cases of sociopolitical content, the value stands out; it is not submerged in a sea of competing symbols.

## Common Threads in the Tapestry

- 2 One's thoughts turn immediately to the *Federalist Papers* which argue: in framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself," (1961:322).
- 3 See Holmes' famous (1919) opinion in the Schenck case. "The character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done. . . the question in every case is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent."
- 4 What I have elsewhere called the "neo-symmetric society" (Holden 1995).
- 5 A 1980 Gallup survey found that in a choice between political values, 72 percent of Americans polled stated that personal freedom was more important than equality (Source: Lipsitz 1986: 177).
- 6 If so, one might be tempted to merge counts, thereby creating a hybrid "freedom/individualism". Doing so, however, does not alter the ordering of priority: social control (247) and community (206) still rank ahead of the combined value (168).
- 7 For further development of this idea, see T. Holden, *Standardizing Society?: A Theory of Social Organization and Change*, (1988) unpublished doctoral dissertation, and "The Paradoxes of Uniformity in Modern Society," *Bulletin of the College of General Education, Tohoku University*, (1992) 59:123-157.

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## Common Threads in the Tapestry

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