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All Ads Are Narratives

Abstract

This inquiry starts with a quotation from Michel de Certeau about the amount of time people spend with narratives. We proceed to demonstrate that narratives in advertisements have a syntagmatic or sequential structure and move from one event to another over time. In addition, people watching these narratives perform paradigmatic interpretations of the characters and events in these narratives. Demonstrating the importance of narratives in people's lives, the article suggests that some print advertisements can have a narrative element to them. The discussion engages in demonstrating possible methodological approaches derived from this assumption and it offers, among others, an analysis of a classic television commercial, the Macintosh *1984* commercial (1983/1984), which is an example of intertextuality. Another important focus of discussion is overview of the different levels of interpretation one can make of events within a narrative framework of advertisements and commercials.

Keywords: printed advertisements, commercials, narratives, syntagmatic and paradigmatic approaches, levels of interpretation.

Wszystkie reklamy są narracjami

Streszczenie

Przedstawione tu podejście badawcze wychodzi od cytatu z Michela de Certeau na temat czasu, który ludzie spędzają na odbiorze narracji. Artykuł opiera się na założeniu, że narracje, również narracje reklamowe, mają strukturę syntagmatyczną (lub sekwencyjną) i przechodzą od jednego wydarzenia do następnego w ciągu czasu. Dodatkowo, podczas wizualnego odbioru narracji ludzie podejmują paradygmatyczny proces interpretacji postaci i wydarzeń w tych opowieściach. Demonstrując rolę narracji w ludzkim życiu, autor artykułu sugeruje również, że niektóre drukowane reklamy bazują na wyraźnym elemencie narracyjnym. Dyskusja zmierza do zaproponowania możliwych metodologicznych perspektyw w ramach tego podejścia i omówienia tego na przykładach. Między innymi analizie została poddana reklama telewizyjna Macintosha *1984* (1983/1984), ukazując, jak działa w niej zabieg intertekstualności. Innym ważnym aspektem dyskusji jest przegląd różnych możliwych podejść interpretacyjnych do wydarzeń w ramach danej ramy narracyjnej w reklamach drukowanych i telewizyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: reklama drukowana, reklama telewizyjna, narracje, podejście syntagmatyczne i paradygmatyczne, poziomy interpretacji.

Motto:

Captured by the radio (the voice is the law) as soon as he awakens, the listener walks all day long through the forest of narrativities from journalism, advertising, and television narrativities that still find time, as he is getting ready for bed, to slip a few final messages under the portals of sleep. Even more than the God told about by the theologians of earlier days, these stories have a providential and predestining function: they organize in advance our work, our celebrations, and even our dreams. Social life multiplies the gestures and modes of behavior (*im*)printed by narrative models; it ceaselessly [sic] reproduces and accumulates “copies” of stories. Our society has become a recited society, in three senses: it is defined by *stories* (*recits*, the fables constituted by our advertising and informational media), by *citations* of stories, and by the interminable *recitation* of stories. These narrations have the twofold and strange power of transforming seeing into believing, and of fabricating realities out of appearances¹.

Research Problem

This article concerns itself with the nature of narratives, their role in people’s lives as a way of apprehending reality, and their social, economic, and cultural impact. It demonstrates that since advertisements incorporate syntagmatic or sequential structures, they influence the modelling of addressee judgements, which stems from their deeply rooted experience (narrative thinking) and the means of representing the world. The discussion focuses upon the problem of whether there can be narratives in print advertisements and offers an example of how narratives inform television commercials in its discussion of the Macintosh “1984” commercial.

Methodology

The article offers a cultural studies approach to its topic – a multidisciplinary analysis that makes use, primarily, of semiotic and psychoanalytic theory.

In this investigation, the author:

1. defines advertising;
2. defines narratives;
3. considers the impact of advertising on society;
4. discusses different ways of analyzing advertising;
5. argues there can be narratives in print advertisements,
6. offers a case study of a narrative in the “1984” commercial;
7. offers conclusions about advertising and narratives.

¹ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, Berkeley 1984, p. 86.

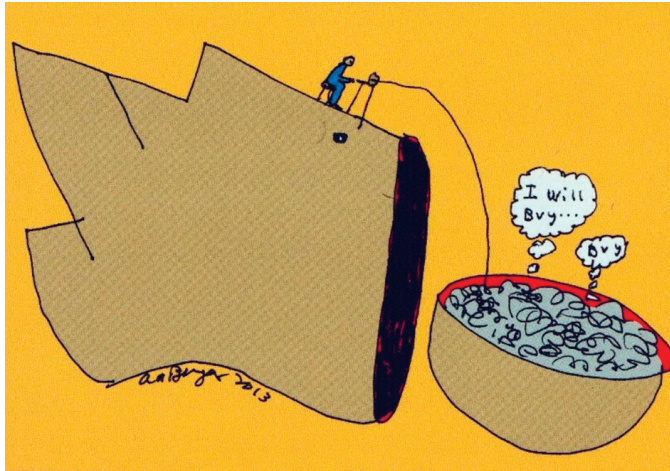


Figure 1. “Advertising and Consumption” (Berger, 2013)

The above drawing shows the way media (as represented by a person with a computer or some kind of electronic device, presumably carrying advertisements) can affect people (sending them directly into the brain of the man) and make them wish to purchase the advertised products or services. Their brain responds, “I will buy.”

Defining Advertising

Advertisements are mass-mediated commercial messages meant to attract attention, stimulate desire, and lead to the purchase of objects and services, and in politics, to the election of candidates for offices.

Conventionally, we use the term “advertisement” for these messages in print and “commercials” for these messages on television or radio. It can cost many thousands of dollars to make the advertisement by an advertising agency and thousands of dollars to purchase air time for a typical commercial. An article on the Internet reports:

For a broad overview of how much money was spent on advertising in 2021, Statista reports global advertising revenue was \$649.22 billion. Despite pandemic-driven budget cuts in 2020, by the end of 2021, the industry as a whole has grown 11.2%².

So advertising is an enormous industry and plays an important role in every society where it is found.

² K. Bennett. *Is the Advertising Industry Growing or Declining?*. “Oracle Advertising Blog”. Oracle. Released: 20.10.2021, <https://blogs.oracle.com/advertising/post/is-the-advertising-industry-growing-or-declining> (accessed: 1.08.2022).



Figure 2. 1982 magazine advertisement for Fidji perfume

Consider the Fidji advertisement shown above. It is reasonable for viewers of this advertisement to have questions about the woman featured in the advertisement and for them to construct an imaginary narrative to explain who she is and how she got where we find her. There is a substantial semiotic analysis of this advertisement in Arthur Asa Berger's book, *Ads, Fads and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Culture*³.

Defining Narratives

Narratives are stories. That is, they are texts have a linear or sequential structure ending in a resolution of some kind. They take place in a given time period and involve relationships of some significance.

A Russian folklorist, Vladimir Propp, wrote a book, *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928 that is regarded as a classic study of narratives⁴. He argued that all characters in narratives have certain functions, which he defined as the actions of characters in stories and the consequences of these actions. He wrote about folktales but we can

³ Chapter 8 titled *Analyzing Print Advertisements or: Six Ways of Looking at a Fidji Perfume Advertisement* [in:] A.A. Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character & Society*. 6th ed. Rowman & Littlefield, Latham, MD 2021, pp. 167–182.

⁴ V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), University of Texas Press, Austin 1968.

use his theory, in modified form, about functions to analyze print advertisements, television commercials and all other kinds of texts.

We may think that narratives are of trivial importance but that it a mistake. As Laurel Richardson writes in *Narrative and Sociology*:

Narrative is the primary way through which humans organize their experiences into temporally meaningful episodes.... Narrative is both a mode of reasoning *and* a mode of representation. People can “apprehend” the world narratively and people can “tell” about the world narratively. According to Jerome Bruner [...] narrative reasoning is one of the two basic and universal human cognition modes. The other mode is the logico-scientific. [...] the logico-scientific mode looks for universal truth conditions, whereas the narrative mode looks for particular connections between events. Explanation in the narrative mode is contextually embedded, whereas the logico-scientific explanation is extracted from spatial and temporal events. Both modes are “rational” ways of making meaning⁵.

Many people believe that narratives can be found in television commercials but not in print advertisements, but I will suggest that there are implicit or imagined narrative elements in print advertisements.

In the United States, people watch around four hours of television a day, and since there are around fifteen minutes of commercials in an hour of television, it means Americans are subjected to an hour of commercials every day when they watch television.

Narratives Impact on Society

We may ask – do these commercials affect us in important ways or do we become immune to them after a while? There is a good deal of debate about the impact of advertising, in general, and television commercials, in particular, on American society and culture. It has been estimated that Americans spend four years of their lives watching television commercials. As David Mumpower suggests in an article pointing to this fact in its title:

Commercials during network programming are more than just an inconvenience as you try to enjoy some entertainment. In truth, commercials are time burglars, vampires that drain away a shocking portion of your life – roughly 4 years over the course of a normal American life. The data doesn't lie. What follows are some stunning statistics about how much of your time you've wasted watching commercials as well as some extrapolations about the rest of your life. Spoiler: you're about to feel depressed and more than a little bit angry.

To decipher how much time you spend watching commercials during the course of your lifetime, the first thing you must calculate is simple. How much television do you watch on a daily basis? While people are snowflakes and everyone's answer is different, statistics

⁵ L. Richardson, *Narrative and Sociology*, “Journal of Contemporary Ethnography” 1990, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 118.

show that Americans watch 282 minutes each day. That's four hours and 42 minutes spent in front of the boob tube or, for anyone under the age of 30, in front of a computer monitor or smart phone. In other words, we as a people watch way too much television.⁶

If Americans spend this much time watching television commercials, it is reasonable to suggest that they are having a profound effect on people and are generating a consumer culture that shapes our everyday lives, our societies and our politics. We must remember that advertising agencies are full of very talented marketers and creatives who spend their time trying to convince people to watch the commercials they create and who assume their target audiences will be affected by them.

Ways of Analyzing Advertising

Imagine, if you will, a group of scholars from various disciplines are sitting in a room looking at a television commercial. Each scholar will look at this text somewhat differently, from within the confines of their discipline. Or, in the case of cultural studies scholars, from their core disciplines: semiotics, Marxism, sociology, psychoanalysis, and others. I offer here an attempt to imagine the range of possible cultural studies perspectives on commercials. The semiotician looks at the signs in the commercial, at its narrative structure, at any intertextual references and at the codes needed to interpret the text correctly (and avoid aberrant decoding). The Marxist sees the commercial, and advertising in general, as a means that the ruling classes convince people that their ability to function in a consumer culture is a means of dealing with the alienation they feel and is more important than their exploitation. Advertising shapes what Marxist describes as "false consciousness." The sociologist is interested in what it reveals about class differences and the role the commercial plays in teaching viewers what their roles in society should be, how the products or services being advertised confer status and other aspects of social differentiation. Feminist scholars would be interested in the way women are presented in advertising and in representations of gender in general.

The psychoanalyst wants to know how the commercial resonates with unconscious imperatives in its viewers and how it affects their thinking and behavior and various psychological difficulties they may be dealing with. It is assumed that the unconscious plays a dominant role in people's behavior. A marketer and psychoanalyst, Clotaire Rapaille, has suggested, in his book, *The Culture Code*⁷, that children during the first seven years of their lives are "imprinted" with the codes of their culture and these codes play an important role throughout their lives.

⁶ D. Mumpower, *Americans Spend 4 Years of Their Lives Watching Commercials*. "Soda". News. Released: 2.08.2016, <https://www.soda.com/news/you-literally-waste-years-of-your-life-watching-commercials> (accessed: 1.08. 2022).

⁷ C. Rapaille, *The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People Around the World Live and Buy as They Do*, Broadway Books, New York 2006.

Historians would concern themselves with how advertising has evolved over the years, with important figures in the advertising world, with significant advertising agencies and perhaps with advertising's role in contemporary American society. For political scientists, advertising's role in the political process would be of major interest. Politicians running for office must raise enormous amount of money to pay for commercials from agencies and time on television stations, radio and other media. It has been suggested that advertising agencies play a role in shaping the way politicians behave and in election planning. We can see, then, that commercials are of considerable interest to scholars from many different academic disciplines.

Narratives in Print Advertising

In the 1973 print advertisement of Bulova Accutron Watch for men and women "Time Waits for No Man," we have the basic elements of a narrative, with the four images of a woman and the indication of the time that is passing. I use it to suggest that it is possible for print advertisements to have a narrative dimension. The title of the advertisement shows the woman waiting for four minutes, and is very clever. We must assume the woman is waiting for a man, but not for very long.

TIME WAITS FOR NO MAN.

You've been late just once too often. And now people who would have waited an eternity for you, won't sit still for it. What you need is something that will prompt you to be on time—an Accutron® watch.

Unlike ordinary watches which have balance wheels, Accutron has a tuning fork movement. So you're guaranteed the exact time to within a minute a month.*

After all, why keep people waiting so they have time to sit around and count your faults?

BULOVA ACCUTRON.
For men and women.

Shown ©1973. Water and shock resistant. Date/Day window. \$115. See our many other styles. All time watches and movements tested. From \$85. *Timekeeping will be obtained on the calendar. If necessary, it is required to Accutron dealer from whom purchased within one year from date of purchase.

Figure 3. *Time Waits for No Man* Bulova Accutron May 1973 "Playboy" Print Advertisement

I would suggest that print advertisements can have a linear quality to them and that when they do not do so, readers supply an imaginary narrative to explain to themselves how the people involved in an advertisement got where they are. We can describe this as imaginary or invented narratives people construct when seeing an image in an advertisement.

A Case Study of the “1984” Macintosh Commercial

One of the most significant television commercials in recent years was the McIntosh “1984” directed by Ridley Scott.



Figure 4. The revolutionary in the Macintosh “1984” TV commercial

It has a very strong narrative line and ends with the revolutionary woman tossing her sledgehammer at the image of a brainwasher and ending his hold on the inmates of the institution where they are confined. We have intertextual references to the novel by George Orwell and the story of David and Goliath in the Bible.



Figure 5. The sledgehammer being tossed in the Macintosh “1984” commercial

This image occurs at the end of the commercial when a sledgehammer, thrown by the blonde woman, crashes into the gigantic image of Big Brother on the screen and precipitates a big explosion.

The storyboard for this commercial offers a pictorial view of its narrative structure. It shows some of the most important scenes in the commercial, which only aired once, in the 1984 Superbowl but which was shown on countless news programs and sites involved with advertising.



Figure 6. Storyboard of Macintosh “1984” commercial

This commercial is analyzed in detail in one of the chapters⁸ of *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society* by Arthur Asa Berger. What follows is a list of the topics discussed therein.

In the chapter we find a discussion of the intertextual relationship between Orwell's novel and the "1984" Macintosh commercial, discuss the image of a total institution that is presented, and consider the significance of the prisoner's boots, the role of the blonde woman as a symbol, and the importance of the Big Brother figure shown in the image with the sledgehammer. There is also a psychoanalytic interpretation of the commercial and deal with its function as a marketing device.

The blonde woman has a mythic significance, playing the role of David to Big Brother's Goliath. She also can be interpreted as an Eve figure since her attack on Big Brother leads to the inmates gaining the knowledge of good and evil in the reverse of the Garden of Eden in which they are imprisoned.

There is also a discussion of the id, ego and superego figures in the story and a character, the woman, who mediates between the monstrous superego figure of Big Brother and the de-energized ids of the inmates.

Id	Ego	Superego
Inmates	Blonde	Big Brother
Perverted	Normal	Perverted
No energy	Strong	No heart

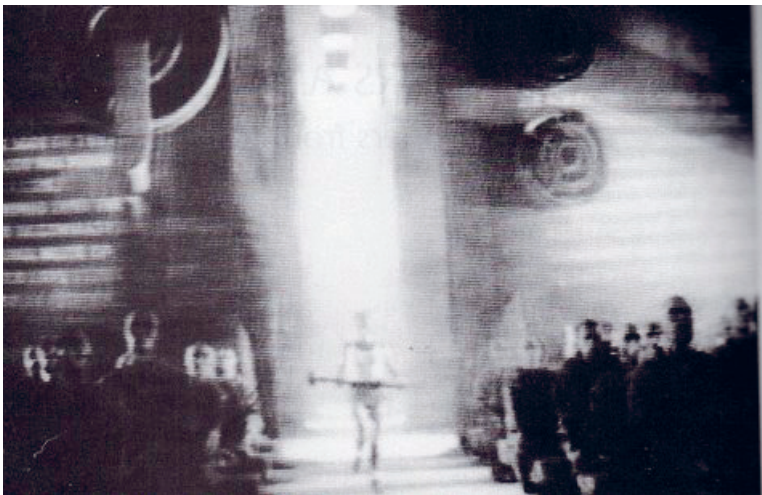


Figure 7. The blonde woman enters the brainwashing room. Image from Macintosh "1984" television commercial

⁸ Chapter 9 *Analyzing Television Commercials* in A.A. Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character & Society*, 6th ed, Rowman & Littlefield, Latham, MD 2021, pp. 183–204.

There are four levels in which we can analyze the scene of the blonde woman throwing the sledgehammer at Big Brother:

The literal level

The image of the woman we see in the commercial

The textual level

Where the image fits in the text

The intertextual level

The way the image calls to mind “1984”

The mythic level

The story of David and Goliath and also of Eve in the Garden of Eden

The moral of the commercial is that Apple (the blonde) will save computer users (inmates) from IBM (Big Brother). The commercial was an enormous success is now considered on the most important television commercials ever made. It only aired once nationally but was shown endlessly on news programs.

Conclusions

Narratives play a more important role in our lives than we recognize. We are exposed to narratives in most of the programs we watch on television and to the commercials that are found in those programs. Most of the programs we watch are narratives, as well. I am not only talking about dramas here. News programs, football and other sports are narratives, and so are the jokes comedians tell us.

De Certeau’s discussion of the role of narratives in our everyday lives is correct and points out how they pervade our entertainments. They are also in our dreams, which are also narratives.

There is an article by Berger, “A Time to Be Born and a Time to Die, a Time to Sell and a Time to Buy: Narratives in Print Advertisements and Television Commercials,” that appeared in *Time and Culture in Linguistic and Literary Discourse*, which concludes:

There are two basic approaches to analyzing narratives: the syntagmatic or linear approach that focuses upon the events that take place in the narrative and the paradigmatic approach that elicits sets of hidden oppositions in narratives and tries to determine what they mean to readers and viewers of these texts. I would suggest they both operate at the same time when we view texts.

The syntagmatic approach was developed by a Russian folklorist, Vladimir Propp’s approach was syntagmatic. He examined narratives in terms of the functions of the characters in a text and explained his approach in a classic book, *Morphology of the Folktale*.

The paradigmatic approach stems from the work of the great French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss⁹, whose focus was on what we might describe as the hidden meanings of narratives. He found these meanings by eliciting polar oppositions found in them, such as good versus evil, happy versus sad, strong versus weak, and so on.

It is through the polar oppositions we find a text that helps us make sense of what is going on. We interpret what happens in narratives by interpreting events and characters in terms of polar oppositions¹⁰.

What this suggests is that there is work involved in dealing with narratives in that we must search for meaning in the events that take place in narrative texts, so watching television commercials as well as other kinds of narratives is not effortless. And in the case of commercials, it can be costly.

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⁹ We find this kind of analysis in his book *Structural Anthropology*. C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Doubleday, Garden City, NY 1967.

¹⁰ A.A. Berger, *A Time to Be Born and a Time to Die, a Time to Sell and a Time to Buy: Narratives in Print Advertisements and Television Commercials* [in:] *Time and Culture in Linguistic and Literary Discourse. International Colloquium Proceedings*, Moscow State Pedagogical University, Moscow 2020.