

Selling America: How Post-Recession Ads Told Americans the Story of Themselves

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Abstract

This work argues that after the recession in 2007, a kaleidoscope of similar themes about industrial Americana and the beauty of work came to dominate representations of “Americanness” in advertising and pop culture. Brands like Levi’s, Walmart, and Chrysler depended on the careful overlaying of collective imagination with existent myths about work, class, and grit, to create a distinct picture of America’s industrial past and establish themselves as part of its heritage. In doing so, they helped populate American culture with a hegemonic sense of national identity. They depicted an America built from greasy hands on Rust Belt factory floors, “summed up” (as Jameson or Barthes might put it) in whiskey, grit, and the frontier, in skyscrapers and pick up trucks. In turn, this reconstructed past helped inform an understanding of what made America, America and the things that would keep it that way: labor, hard work, “making.” In a post-industrial economy where widespread anxiety about industrial decline helped wage a Presidential campaign on promises to restore America to its former industrial glory, the stakes for remembering our past in this way are particularly high.

To better understand how our past came to be remembered in this way, I look to modern culture’s blurred lines between entertainment and advertising, memory and fact, identity and myth, a phenomenon that has allowed advertising to disguise itself as historical fact and embed itself in collective memory. In capitalizing (quite literally) on anxieties of the modern moment to appeal to traditional American notions, it is able to reinforce and re-invent them in the process.

Keywords: (Collective) Memory, Identity, Nation, Politics, Media, (Popular) History.

Introduction

In the 2012 Superbowl, Chrysler ran a commercial, dubbed “Halftime in America,” as the second installment of its “Imported from Detroit” campaign. The spot repurposed the low-talking, Western icon Clint Eastwood into a representative of the grit of urban, industrial America. It came just four years after the official “end” of the 2007 recession, when car manufacturers were especially struggling to keep factories open (even despite government bailouts) and the American public—still feeling the effects of a dismal economy—was attempting to name the American Spirit and give it a visible representation onto which nostalgic sentiments could be focused and from which could be built an image of the future. The spot provided such a representation, locating that spirit in both the physical space and emotional register of the bygone industrial urban. It drew easy parallels (explicit, even) between the character of factory-laden Detroit and the character of Americans. Through these familiar themes, the car manufacturer struck emotional-political chords with its audience on advertising’s main stage, calling for a resurgence of the roar of both the country’s engines and its fighting spirit.

Chrysler’s America—like the America of other brands who tapped patriotism to build their brands during that decade—is a familiar one, drawing on and reinforcing longstanding American beliefs to build a new sense of collective memory and national identity, as well as fodder for new cultural discourse. Through an analysis of these brands themselves as well as an exploration of the relationship between identity and advertising, this work will interrogate how these types of ads may have helped Americans tell the story of themselves, creating implications for pop culture, politics, and mass consumerism in the process.

Mass Media in a Consumer Culture

In order to understand how advertising, arguably the basest of all modern media, could come to inspire such a sense of identity, we must first understand that advertising had continued to gain significance in American culture since WWII. Spurred by a new mass media climate and a post-war American public armed with newfound disposable income, it was a decade that saw not only the birth of modern American consumerism, but also the birth of modern American advertising.

During this time, the growing presence and influence of television made it easy for brands to move from isolated ads on the pages of local magazines and newspapers onto the main stage of American life, becoming household names. To do so, these big, now-classic brands (Coca-Cola, Kodak, Tide) developed brand identities that would be meaningful to the entire American public they were now able to reach. Today, we call this “lifestyle marketing.” Instead of pushing a myriad of product benefits through benefits- or claim-based advertising (“Buy this brand, or you’ll be sorry you didn’t!”), brands made themselves known to consumers through cohesive—often-catchy—brand narratives that endowed them with national meaning. A large swath of the nation could identify the Chevrolet jingle, Kellogg’s Rice Krispies’ animated spokespeople “Snap,” “Crackle,” and “Pop,” or a Coca-Cola ad.

Coca-Cola in particular, whose iconic ads not only established an iconic look for the

brand in its own time, but also a representation of the decade for posterity, serves as one of the best and most enduring case studies in lifestyle marketing. Its ads almost always featured a combination of smiling people, red Coca-Cola paraphernalia, and some kind of decade-specific setting—a soda fountain, a drive in, a vintage-looking vacation. They don't extol the virtues of Coca-Cola *itself*, but rather the values it aligns with, the kind of people who drink it, the feelings that surround it. From these ads, a *lifestyle* emerges in which smiling families, TV sets, jukeboxes, and station wagons abound. By now, ads like these are a familiar and predictable way of representing that 1950's way of life, so much so that the 1950's began to look a lot like a Coca-Cola ad, and Coca-Cola ads began to define the 1950's. As we'll see, the national culture constructed by the likes of Coke was one of consumer "plenty," a representation that would slowly reinforce the idea that this democracy of material things made America, America and Americans, American (Stieigerwald, Marchand, Sivulka, Cohen, McGovern 98).

This relationship between advertising and representation is particularly significant in what Lizabeth Cohen called the "consumer's republic," her term for the United States after WWII, when the country had put mass consumption at the forefront of economic and political policy, making consumption both the site and reward of participation in a shared American culture (Cohen). Lifestyle advertising not only *facilitated* this form of "consumer-citizenship," but also became a lens for understanding it (McGovern). By this, I mean that Americans came and still come to know themselves through this kind of advertising. As Lisa Lowe writes, it is through the "terrain of national culture that the individual subject is politically formed as an American citizen"—and in the consumer's republic, advertising is often indistinguishable from national culture (as quoted in McGovern, pg. 9).

As advertising continued to reflect culture and commercial culture began to overtake America's way of life, these cultural forces coalesced in a way that one could no longer separate American culture from consumer culture from mass media from advertising. Advertising's "sheer size" and sheer influence had grown to a point that one could no longer justify theories that separated it from culture, like those of Adorno and Horkheimer, but instead demanded scholarship that considered the relationship between the two (Purvis 19). This relationship would prove to be an enduring one, positioning advertising to maintain a significant role in culture for decades to come. As Chris Wharton's anthology—*Advertising as Culture*—reveals, that new role (which only continues to grow in today's digital mass media landscape) was to be the "very collective air of everyday life and relationships," to become an element so embedded in American culture that it is received "similarly to other cultural products, such as novels, films, actors, athletes and politicians," helping, as they do, to represent and form meaning in our culture (Bagust 205, Holt 359). Though some scholars disagree that commercial culture and popular culture are the same,ⁱ the differences between them are almost insignificant insofar as they relate to their roles in forming meaning in everyday American life. To form this meaning, ads use a set of cultural signs and symbols, a "set of themes," that help them to function quite like some of those cultural products Holt mentions: great American novels, iconic films, legendary American figures, which can all be powerful tools for transmitting meaning and establishing ideological identity (Hirschmann and Thompson 44).ⁱⁱ

This is one of the biggest strengths of lifestyle marketing for the brands that use it—through a familiar set of themes, it can help construct the ethos of a time, a people, a history. Using Coca-Cola as an example, if you had no information about life in the ten years between 1950 and 1960 and could use only their ads as information, you'd have a now-clichéd--but somewhat accurate--understanding of what the 1950's looked and felt like, which we'll explore in more depth in a later section. If taken at face value, you'd likely determine that in those ten years, everyone was happy, had a station wagon, and enjoyed simple pleasures like refreshing Coke. This is of course untrue, making it likely that these ads didn't connect with its consumers by directly reflecting their lives. So what about these ads connected with consumers? Why would Coke choose to reflect its moment so inaccurately? Was it purely aspirational, representing a life its consumers wish they had? Did it simply seek to reinforce a cycle of consumerism? Or, was it something else entirely?

In his introduction to *Advertising the American Dream*, Roland Marchand asked himself similar questions, noting that “day by day a picture of our time is recorded completely and vividly in the advertising in American newspapers and magazines...Were all other sources of information on the life of today to fail, the advertising would reproduce for future times, as it does for our own, the action, color variety, dignity, and aspirations of the American Scene” (Marchand xv). He finds that advertising is not “an authentic and uncomplicated social mirror” or a “profusion of documents aimed precisely at reflecting...social values and popular attitudes” (Marchand xv). Instead, it is a “Zerrspiegel,” distorting the things it sees, but nevertheless reflecting in some way everything “within its field of vision.” Therefore, it is not just through pure *reflection* that lifestyle marketing reveals important cultural truths—it is through this *distortion* that truths that would not otherwise be revealed tend to emerge. This is especially true in the case of Marlboro's “Marlboro Man” (1954), Coca-Cola's “Hilltop Ad” (1971, colloquially referred to as “I'd like to give the world a Coke”), and many other iconic campaigns of the creative revolution of the 1960's.ⁱⁱⁱ Their deliberate *lack* of reflection of their moments as they were is critical for understanding those moments as they *sought to be*, along with the underlying anxieties that fueled those aspirations. It is through this connection to their time that brands like Harley Davidson and Marlboro for Frank, and Coca-Cola, Nike, and Budweiser for Douglas Holt (which Holt has dubbed “identity brands”) have come to stand for more than their products alone (Holt 2004). By representing the past through powerful symbols and myths, they were able to “soothe collective anxieties resulting from acute social change,”^{iv} earning a meaningful place in the minds of consumers. In doing so, they produced Marchand's zerrspiegel, *reflecting* the underlying anxieties of a moment, through the exact opposite of a mirror image (Holt 11, Google Books).

This is precisely what the Marlboro cigarette company set out to do when it introduced its most enduring spokesperson—the Marlboro Man. It sought not to reflect American reality, but its deliberate opposite, calling on a well of symbols and myths to do so. A citizen of fictional Marlboro Country, removed from “the city's fouled social relations, compromised political affairs, and clogged streets,” the Marlboro Man was “a cultural symbol which speaks to the collective imagination of the American people” (Lohof 447). Marlboro Country represented the

“virgin frontier” and the fundamental values it produced, “reminding Americans of where they have been and inviting them to vicariously return,” all the while hinting at the stark contrast between that frontier and that moment’s “race riot[s]...ghetto[s]...mushroom cloud[s]” (Lohof 447-448). By the time the Marlboro Man emerged in popular culture, “Marlboro Country and the virtues which flourished therein” had all but disappeared, making the Marlboro metaphor all the more appealing to the American imagination, becoming a metaphor for “innocence and individual efficacy,” for a place “despoiled by technology” (Lohof 448). Marlboro Country imagined a simpler, more peaceful—though more unforgiving—nation that “evokes within the cultural consciousness a nostalgic and reverent image of its own mythical heritage” (Lohof 444-447). “Indeed,” Lohof writes “so envious are harried twentieth-century Americans of the pastoral ideal that it spills out of their serious art and across their commercial advertising” (Lohof 445). So does a cultural consciousness become culture itself, helping to define both a nation’s past and the “harried” present that longs for it. In this most “inaccurate” depiction of American life, we find an exceptionally *accurate* portrait of American hopes, fears, and values.

Similarly, the now landmark Coca-Cola “Hilltop” ad saw its moment at a critical distance, and capitalized on the insights afforded by such a perspective. Bill Backer, the man behind the ad, had a sophisticated understanding of the way brands could participate in national culture and conversation. During an emergency stopover in an Ireland airport, as he watched others enjoying Coca-Cola together, he realized that the product was “more than a drink.” And that the company’s tagline “Let’s have a Coke” could be seen as “a subtle way of saying, ‘Let’s keep each other company for a little while’... a tiny bit of commonality between all peoples” (Ryan). When Backer pitched the idea to the account’s music director, Roquel “Billy” Davis, Davis “wasn’t convinced that all people really need is some ice-cold carbonated sugar water” (Hartmann). If not a Coke, Backer asked Davis what he would buy the world instead. Davis responded with “I’d buy everyone a home first and share with them in peace and love” (Ryan). Though Davis didn’t see how Coke could fit into such a lofty transaction, Backer instructed him to write something with that home in mind, and a song—perfectly and organically in tune with collective emotions—was born. For Backer, Coke was both a commodity that could facilitate this peaceful sharing, and a brand that could bring that concept into national consciousness. It spoke directly to an eager public with this “higher meaning,” and became iconic because of it. When the ad was finally released (in one of the greatest examples of ads-becoming-culture), the song eventually became so popular that it was requested on the radio and rewritten as the well-known “I’d like to Teach the World to Sing” (not the other way around). The original reads:

I'd like to build the world a home and furnish it with love / grow apple trees and honey bees, and snow white turtle doves / I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony / I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company / That's the real thing / What the world wants today / is the real thing (Ryan).

If you place the lyrics in their historical context—an economic crisis and the Vietnam War—they speak to the common wants, fears, and anxieties of a time. At a moment of social discord, here was a moment of perfect harmony, in both its ideas and its music. It participated in culture not just as a song on the radio, but also as a gauge of its moment, because in striving to

be one, it would inevitably become one. Moreover, it is a superb example of the way a product can sell its unique version of the American Dream, or at least the thing that everyone wanted—peace, safety, comfort—without *actually* selling it. The best “identity brands” do this well – they establish themselves as “political authorities” on threads of cultural discourse. For Budweiser it was “championing a world in which working men can be respected members of American society”, for Jack Daniel’s it was its connection to the frontier through its whiskey and those who drank it, for Levi’s, Walmart, and Chrysler decades later, it would be the preservation of American manufacturing heritage (Holt 2004, 125 and Holt 2006, 363-368).

These were big ideas – safety, security, a more rugged nation – all being communicated through commercial culture. Without the proper background, one might assume that advertising would be an unlikely outlet for these ideas, but advertising had begun to be part of the national conversation in this way since the Great Depression. For example, in 1934 when the J. Walter Thompson (JWT) agency took to advertising itself and the sheer value of advertising in a depression, it advertised that its “new campaigns promoted advertising as embodying fundamental political principles” and “great ideas of American history” like right to self-government, equality, and westward expansion. It showed these as “the great motivating ideas of American history and as the stuff of Thompson’s own work” (McGovern 227). Most interestingly, JWT compared its work to the work of landmark political ideas—in particular, the Gettysburg address. In one ad, JWT claims: “One basic idea is enough to overturn a government...to carry an inconspicuous product to leadership...Nothing else approaches the force of a basic idea because nothing else communicates itself to the minds of so many people. And in politics, war or plain selling, it is the minds of the plain people which must be reached” (McGovern 227). As a medium, “advertising carried important ideas of American history to the masses, leading and serving them at the same time,” capable of forging for an entire country an identity as strong as the one born of the greatest moments of American history (McGovern 227). Advertising could not only use the truth of a cultural moment to connect with consumers, but could tell the truth of a people in the process.

The self-consciousness with which JWT understood its role as both a creator and vehicle of cultural understanding implies advertising’s deep role in forming national identity and social discourse, particularly in a culture so inundated with consumerism. In Cohen’s consumer republic, the centrality of commercialism in American culture gave an agency like JWT—and the agencies and campaigns that would follow it—license to make such statements, affording advertising a voice and a larger role in American life, even beyond its consuming habits. In other words, brands began to sell more than products, or even the story of their time (as did Coke in the 1950’s) – *they began to sell Americans the story of themselves*.

Such stories—or narratives to use a better word—can help us form a “narrative identity,” something now sought-after by not just individuals, but by brands, institutions, and even nations.^v To build these identities, audiences look to mass media and advertising as a “symbolic resource” to “give sense to our life history,” *especially* as they relate to a larger national history of which we are part (Elliot and Wattanasuwan). As they make sense of that history, they must

participate in the ongoing process of collective memory and take on “prosthetic memories” (to borrow a phrase from Alison Landsberg) of their own.^{vi} These memories, when seen through “re-collection, re-remembering, and re-representation,” are “crucial in the mapping of significant historical moments and in the articulation of personal identity” (Johnson 317). Though the mapping Johnson refers to is physical—through monuments and public spaces of memory—her thesis rests on the notion that memory can be “ordered...around sites of collective remembrance.” Advertising, as I’ve demonstrated, can serve as such a site. Her understanding implies that people remember their collective past through the overlaying of individual identity with mediated representations of that past (323). Moreover, it is through the “putting together of [the past’s] constituent parts into a single, coherent narrative” that a “popular nationalist identity” is born (317). This is precisely the job that advertising has taken up in the past half a century, helping us (through the assemblage of decades of myths and symbols) to establish our place in an imagined community (Anderson) and find solidarity and identity in the past we collectively share.

Myth, Memory, and Meaning

In the years following the Recession, brands helped construct such a narrative identity by telling a new version of American history, based on established “truths” (myths) about work, grit, the middle class, and the making culture that once dominated the U.S. economy. Of course, not *all* brands from this time sought to construct such an identity—and the ads in the following section represent only a small subsection of the many ads that Americans were confronted with in the last decade—but the history they collectively construct is enough to serve as an example of how mass advertising can constitute a kind of public history, using the past (in ways somewhat unique to the medium)^{vii} to transform our understanding of it.

This is the focus of Holt’s 2006 exploration of Jack Daniel’s whiskey, which is perhaps the only academic work (in conjunction with his earlier 2004 book *How Brands Become Icons*) that attempts to unpack the unique significance of a given brand’s symbolism and mythology in the context of a larger national discourse, or the “particular role played by iconic brands in narrating the imagined nation” at a particular point in time (Holt 359). To do so, he analyzes nearly 50 years of the whiskey brand’s history, finally narrowing in on the brand’s use of the “gunfighter myth, an immensely powerful myth in the post-war era” as the thing that gave the brand its iconic potency (Holt 360). In the last decade, brands like Chrysler, Walmart, and Levi’s among others have used a cluster of similar symbols, myths, and values to not only establish distinct brand voices, but a distinctive voice for Americanness *itself*.

In an increasingly visual and aesthetic culture,^{viii} amplified by the speed and truncation of a technological world, the words and images an ad uses must be extremely illustrative so that they can be quickly read as an ethos (Sivulka 299). There is no time for consumers to wonder about the basic elements of the ad (who, what, where), and no time to explain to consumers what they already know.^{ix} Therefore, they rely on words, places, people, and things that already retain deep symbolic meanings in American culture to get their points across, some meanings of which advertising may have created in the first place.^x The meanings they stand for are largely myths,

which is defined by Holt as “imaginative stories that selectively draw on history as source material, which function to continually re-imagine and revitalize the nation’s ideology” (Holt 2006, 359).

To form this definition, he called upon the work of French literary theorist Roland Barthes who systematically outlined the nature of myths in his seminal work *Mythologies*. For him, the words or symbols (like factories, cars, or cowboys) that represent these myths function as “mythical signifiers,” filled with fabricated or nostalgic meaning, but emptied of most historical truth.^{xi} If we use this system to evaluate the Marlboro Man, we see how he symbolizes a “breed of humanity untarnished by—indeed ignorant of—the acrid fumes of modern civilization” that appealed to the “collective imagination” of a culture that was rapidly becoming post-industrial. With his reverence for the values of capitalism, hard work, and a “masterful grasp of material things,” the Marlboro Man became a “nostalgic and reverent image of [the nation’s] own mythical heritage,” celebrating and proving what Lohof would call the “folk myth of American labor” (Lohof 442-448). At the hands of such a symbolic figure and the equally symbolic land to which he belonged, real frontier history is nearly effaced altogether, though we do not notice. Marlboro Country *becomes* our history, our actual understanding of the frontier.

After the recession began in 2007, similar words and symbols began to circulate in advertising and culture, revitalizing old myths with new sets of meaning. Words like “factory,” “work,” and “frontier” came to inhabit not just their traditional place in American culture but became a bittersweet reminder of that heritage that had been lost and an invitation to return. Many of the myths these words represent are ones that Holt calls “critical for the nation to function” and have been called upon at critical moments in our history (Holt 57). Of course, one doesn’t need this paper to see *why* such symbols may have emerged at this time—the recession is reason enough^{xii}—the important thing to consider is *how* they use and construct an understanding of our past to affect change in the present and the way we will come to regard it in the future.^{xiii}

In that 2012 Chrysler SuperBowl ad discussed in the introduction, Clint Eastwood read the following two-minute manifesto:

It’s half time. Both teams are in their locker rooms discussing what they can do to win this game in the second half. It’s halftime in America, too. People are out of work and they’re hurting. They’re all wondering what they’re gonna do to make a comeback. And we’re all scared because this isn’t a game. The people of Detroit know a little something about this. They almost lost everything. But we all pulled together. Now Motor City is fighting again. I’ve seen a lot of tough errors, a lot of downturns in my life, times when we didn’t understand each other, it seems like we’ve lost our heart at times. The fog, the division, the discord, and blame made it hard to see what lies ahead. But after those trials, we all rallied around what was right, and acted as one. Because that’s what we do. We find a way through tough times and if we can’t find a way we will make one. All that matters now is what’s ahead. How do we come from behind? How do we come together? And how do we win? Detroit’s showing us it can be done, and what’s true about them, is true about all of us. This country can’t be knocked out with one punch. We get right back

up again and when we do, the world's gonna hear the roar of our engines. Yeah, it's halftime, America. And our second half is about to begin (Chrysler).

As a historical artifact, the ad is a profoundly successful account of the year and the nation's mood. At a moment where the failing automotive industry had become the poster child for the bleak state of work and economy in America, Chrysler—already part of the ephemera of Detroit automobile culture—employed that period of American industry (and the nostalgia for it) to write new meaning onto that automotive past. Through this, Detroit becomes an imaginary all its own. It at once represents a dead industry *and* the golden years of industry, decay but also prosperity. If we consider “Detroit” a “mythical signifier” in Barthesian terms, we can see that its “form is empty but present, its meaning absent but full” (Barthes 124). In order to make Detroit, in one word, stand for the loss of the once powerful auto-manufacturing industry *and* the overall tradition of American industry, one must “empty” Detroit of its history, keeping only the parts that contribute to proving this innate truth of American manufacturing.^{xiv} That said, it's not *really* about Detroit; rather, Detroit and its heritage provide a backdrop on which to craft a narrative. In other words, Detroit defined us once (by sheer size, economic power, and existing iconic meaning), and is re-defined to soothe our nostalgic longings and allow Detroit and its Motor City spirit functions as a metaphor for a *national* spirit.

The effectiveness of this ad, perhaps more so than the others I will discuss in this section, depends on what Raymond Williams understood as the dominant, residual, and emergent meaning of a word (Taylor, Williams). In this structure, there is a co-existence of meaning as new ones come into existence and old ones fade, all the while referring to one another. For example, one must know what the factory once meant—as both an institution and a (positive or negative, depending on who you were) symbol of the might of American industry—to understand its nostalgic transformation over the past decade and the longing for its triumphant return. The prior meaning does not disappear, in fact it's integral to the new meaning, but the old, purer meaning of “factory” can no longer be understood on its own. In this case, one must know Detroit's innovative, automotive heritage to understand the significance of its downfall and purported revival. Without this background, and the backdrop of the recession, the ad would not make emotional sense. As decades of messaging are added to collective memory, they create these kinds of layered meanings.

In that recession-laden backdrop, a near-obsession with “making” made its way into politics and advertising, though it's unclear which used it first. As more and more manufacturing jobs left the United States in the second half of the 20th century (presumably, and always vaguely, to China), the concept of “making” in the United States (or lack thereof) had become a familiar facet of political discourse. However, in the years after the recession, “making” began to take on a more substantial, almost moral meaning – it, like work, became a thing that made Americans, American. It was a political and economic value to be leveraged for political or economic gain by brands, personal or corporate. And it *was* leveraged, often and loudly.

For example, in his 2014 State of the Union Address, President Obama emphasized the need to prepare the workforce to capitalize on the next wave of technology manufacturing jobs. This not only speaks to the desire to keep alive an industrial way of life that helped make America prosperous in the 1950's, but also emphasizes the blue collar mentality of the President's voter base who view "making" as a fundamental component of a successful American economy. When he spoke to the resurgence of a making culture in Detroit ("the auto industry came roaring back, Andra Rush opened up a manufacturing firm in Detroit"), he perhaps unsurprisingly drew on the meanings of Detroit that Chrysler also used (CBS News).

That same year, the third installment of Chrysler's "Imported from Detroit" campaign, a Superbowl spot featuring Bob Dylan, demonstrated a similar fascination with "making." In it, Dylan read:

Is there anything more American than America? 'Cause you can't import original. You can't fake true cool. You can't duplicate legacy. Because what Detroit created was a first and became an inspiration to the rest of the world. Yeah Detroit made cars. And cars made America. Making the best, making the finest, takes conviction. And you can't import the heart and soul of every man and woman working on the line. You can search the world over for the finer things, but you won't find a match for the American road and the creatures that live on it. Because we believe in the zoom, and the roar, and the thrust. When it's made here, it's made with the one thing you can't import from anywhere else: American pride. So let Germany brew your beer. And Switzerland make your watch. Let Asia assemble your phone. We will build your car
(Chrysler).

The spot draws on an assumed understanding of an American heritage of making things, especially big things, tough things (not delicate things like watches and iPhones). It less explicitly references the fact that we make *less* things, but bestows a degree of importance to the sheer act of American making. Implicit in this understanding of "making" is expertise, or a superior level of quality and craft that Chrysler is associating with American cars (in comparison, we assume, to foreign makes). This creates an assumed history of craftsmen and "self-made" men, a history of "working men" and "men of action artisans," all archetypal myths adopted by iconic brands (Holt 57, 98).

For example, a lesser-known 2011 Jeep Cherokee spot called "The Things We Make, Make Us" also made use of a conglomerate of these myths. Unsurprisingly, it was created by Oliver Francois, the French then-president-CEO of Fiat's Lancia brand who also created Chrysler's "Imported from Detroit" campaign. The spot is laden with gritty Americana—men hammering in a railroad spike, a locomotive chugging by, sparking welding equipment, the Wright Brothers' airplane. A voiceover reads:

The things that make us Americans, are the things we make. This has always been a nation of builders, craftsmen. Men and women for whom straight stitches and clean welds are a matter of personal pride. They made the skyscrapers, the cotton gins, colt revolvers, Jeep 4x4's. These things make us who we are. As a people, we do well when we make good things, and not so well when we don't (Jeep Cherokee).

We see baseball, steel crossbeams being moved into place, more trains, a man swinging a pickaxe, the Empire State Building. The voiceover says, “The good news is: this can be put right. We just have to do it.” The word choice is powerful—it asserts definitively that a history of making has “always been” and therefore makes up the stuff of Americanness. It makes undisputable the heritage of hard work and a good hand, what Stanley would call a “grand narrative” that “makes it seem both normal and natural that certain things are associated with [the country]” (Stanley). This naturalization is required for myths to gain traction, making “unquestionable”^{xv} a history and heritage as they do (Barthes 100-102).

Jeep, like Chrysler and President Obama, recognizes not only the personal pride attached to details of manufacturing, but also the national pride associated with making things. It goes so far as to say that making is integral to the country’s success, that America is not America without its ability to “make.” Such a claim would be impossible to make without the widespread notion that America was *always* a making culture (akin to Barthes’ that which “goes without saying,” or Said’s that which “unquestionably is”^{xvi}) and that the flow of making jobs to foreign countries, namely China, by large corporations was a threat to American culture.

At the moment that these ads were being made, this was a topic that dominated social and political discourse, making it obvious why Walmart would choose to combat the notion that it opposed America's making by inviting it to make again in its 2014 “American Jobs” campaign, which was created to advertise Walmart’s pledge to buy \$250 billion of American-made products over the following 10 years, “honoring the men and women who make them” (Walmart).

To do this, it re-imagined the symbols of the factory and assembly line, drawing connections between previously established imaginings of work and the traditional aesthetics of the American Dream—portraying work as a builder of lives, families, and economies. It featured three ads: “Lights On” and “Working Man” (both which featured men and women on factory lines, the latter set to Rush’s 1974 homonymous song) and “I Am a Factory,” which is spoken from the perspective of a factory no longer in use. In its reverence for work’s fundamental role in American history, this third ad transforms the factory into a symbol, as a voiceover read:

At one time, I made things. And I took pride in the things I made.
And my belts whirred. And my engines cranked. I opened my doors to all. And together, we filled palettes and trucks. I was mighty. And then one day, the gears stopped turning. But I am still here, and I believe I will rise again. And we will build things. And build families. And build dreams. It’s to get back to what America does best. *Super*: Over the next ten years, we’re putting \$250 billion to work to help create new manufacturing jobs in America. *Voiceover*: Because work is a beautiful thing (Walmart).

Beyond a collage of things that *look* like what the American Dream *means*, it’s an allusion to a time when “things” were abundant and when the American Dream was made possible through those things. It uses decades of codes, connotations, and accumulated

understanding of the meaning of the factory and the assembly line to patch together an industrial past. Similarly, Chrysler's "Born of Fire" is a mish mosh of Diego Rivera's "Detroit Industry," steel mills, glowing heavy machinery, and a voice over that declares, "add hard work, conviction, and the know-how that runs generations deep in every last one of us—that's who we are" (Chrysler). It combines the connotations of pride and doing associated with "making" with the intrinsic value of a work ethic to create a new *vision* of work – at once reminding us of work's fundamental place in the US, but also of its disappearance (at least in its traditional, manual form). It seems obvious, then, that these brands would celebrate what Carlo Rotella would call a kind of good-with-your-hands-ness (Rotella). The years between 2007 and 2016 saw immense leaps in technology that significantly decreased both the need for certain manual trades and the overall value of manual craft in general. The demise of the old way of doing things seemed to be edging closer with every Tweet, every 3D-printer, and every new app. It wasn't just temporary economic decline—it was the decline of an entire industrial way of life, an entire making economy. For these brands, that way of life could still be preserved in a certain kind of person, and the rallying cry that they flock to—those who sustained the American spirit.

Perhaps predictably, this isn't the first time that reverence for work appeared in advertisements at time of economic distress. During the last recession in recent memory—the 1970's slump that saw massive inflation and unemployment rates—Budweiser hopped on the coattails of a burgeoning Reagan constituency in the American working- and middle-class and rode its way into the canon of brand iconography. With a "parade of blue-collar workers from all walks of life, each of whom practiced his trade with consummate skill and enthusiasm" and the tagline "This Bud's for You" Budweiser created a working-man's manifesto that saluted and rallied disillusioned working-class Americans. Like many of the brands we've seen, "Bud's vision of work directly opposed the economic realities of the times," presenting stories of a breed of men that many feared was disappearing (Holt 101). Unsurprisingly, this work forged for the brand an enduring association with Americanness, so much so that in 2016 in preparation for the nearing election, the brand changed its name simply to "America." Tosh Hall, the creative director on the project explained that after decades of America-laden advertising, the brand had license to associate itself with the nation. "We thought nothing was more iconic than Budweiser and nothing was more iconic than America," he said of the idea's inspiration (Wilson). In these few words, Hall demonstrates how the close connection between Budweiser and Americanness established not just another chapter for an iconic American brand, but also established America *itself* as a kind of iconic brand. The stuff of one made up the stuff of the other, layering and borrowing meaning between the two, establishing an understanding of America made up of Budweiser-ian vignettes from the past half a century. The can both forms an emblem of the country and encapsulates all that brands are capable of today.

Jack Daniel's also underwent a similar symbolic transformation after WWII, as consumers "demanded a revised version of the gunfighter myth" and as a "homogenized culture" and "economic reconfiguration" seemed to threaten "men's freedom." Suddenly, the brand stood for more than just good whiskey—it stood for the values of old Westerns, rugged individualism, and the American frontier (Holt 2006, 363). The campaign that resulted posed Lynchburg, TN

(the birthplace of Jack Daniel's) as the frontier, thereby championing a genre that "had become the most potent rebuke to the glossy modern suburbs as well as a nervous call-to-arms to revive the gunslinger to fight the commies" (Ibid 368).

If you consider all of this work in their contexts, their symbolism becomes abundantly transparent—not only were the companies behind the ads the kinds of big-business villains that sent their jobs to China for cheap labor and put thousands of American workers out of work, but they were also talking about work at a moment when work was not just a beautiful thing (to use Walmart's terms), but a scarce thing.

In the years leading up to the recession, it had begun to be scarcest in the Rust Belt, a place that would come to take on symbolic meaning in the years that followed. Geographically and historically, the Rust Belt refers to a large cluster of states spanning Michigan to Pennsylvania that were formerly hubs of industry and manufacture of heavy raw materials, who at the time of their prosperity were collectively referred to as the Manufacturing Belt, the Steel Belt, or the Factory Belt. As early as the first half of the 20th century, some of these areas began to experience the decline that would eventually result in the Belt's mass population and economic decline, loss of jobs, and the halting of machinery that would birth its new moniker, The Rust Belt. Yet in practice, "The Rust Belt" became almost metonymic for towns in economic decay after the recession, regardless of whether they were former steel towns or even fell into the correct region of the U.S. Many of the locations in the Chrysler commercial are not Rust Belt cities (they are Midwestern country roads, suburbs), but the commercial portrays them as if they were, likening the whole of the United States to Detroit and America to the Rust Belt. The actual history of the Rust Belt or its actual geographic location is replaced by a semblance of Rust Belt "values."

Levi's 2010 "Go Forth to Work" campaign similarly conflates geographic boundaries in order to associate the traditional significance of "the West" and the frontier with the brand's representation of work, determination, and the value of a pioneer spirit. The "Go Forth to Work" campaign was part of a larger "Go Forth" campaign that began the previous year, created to "infuse new energy into an authentic and beloved brand" by creating "a new portrait of America" "inspired by the passion Walt Whitman felt for the potential of America and promise of the future" (Wieden + Kennedy). In an effort to make good on that new American promise, the brand set its sights on Braddock, PA, a former steel town 10 miles outside of Pittsburgh that had seen the same fate as many a Rust Belt city—a massive decline in population, rows of abandoned homes and businesses, and a once hard spirit dulled into near nonexistence. There, Levi's would shoot a series of films and print ads and contribute more than a million dollars to the city's revitalization efforts (Elliot).

The print ads featured real citizens of Braddock and phrases like "Everybody's work is equally important" and "We are all workers." A two-minute film that accompanied them invoked Walt Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" an 1865 poem that at the time of its publications spoke to the heart of would-be explorers, miners, and settlers, propelling them to explore the West and

establish the United States we know today, the kind of United States that Levi's extols. Stuart Elliott of the *New York Times* called the campaign a "salute to the pioneering spirit of young Americans," which seems an accurate appraisal of the film's copy. A haunting voiceover uses phrases like "We were taught how the pioneers went into the West" and "Maybe the world breaks on purpose, so we can have work to do," or "People think there aren't frontiers anymore. They can't see how frontiers are all around us" (Levi's).

By invoking Walt Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" in this film, by overlaying scenes of depressed Braddock with an ode to the West in another, and by setting a third to an original wax recording of Whitman reciting his poem "America," the brand adopts and inhabits the figurative space of the West without ever showing it, or even being in it. There is a *character* that emerges from this work, one that was developed through "violent confrontations on the frontier" and is held by the "men that America relies on when the going gets tough" (Holt 362). In doing so, teenagers in blue jeans, bonfires, fireworks, and streets lined with average homes come to embody Levi's version of The West, superimposing new meanings onto old. This transformation of meaning is the work of most iconic modern advertising that I have discussed, assimilating traditional values and collective nostalgia into the everyday life of the consumer, both solidifying the values themselves, and those values' role in consumers' lives, providing a "material connection to myth" (Holt 2004, 60).

Levi's, more so than Chrysler or Walmart, makes an explicit attempt to retell (and *retail*) American history, or at least the values that spring from it. It draws on a pioneer past and the patriotism of Walt Whitman's America to create a historical account all its own. By using real historical documents, real American people, a real American town, and more "facts" than vague patriotic rhetoric, Levi's is able to tell a convincing, tangible story that one can locate in some kind of truth. Though it may use the West and the frontier as symbols, they are not symbols functioning apart from that which they symbolize – they are read within a material context, giving them a degree of credibility. As Jack Daniel's at one time used Lynchburg, TN as its un-"frontier," so does Levi's transform post-industrial Pennsylvania into a front for a new frontier and a backdrop for the performance of frontier values (Holt 368).

Imagined History: Aesthetics and Connotation

Moreover, it is not just the *words* in these ads that cue a new American history, but the aesthetics with which those words are represented. Jack Daniel's established its frontier not just through words, but also through evocative images of its rugged and straight-shooting Lynchburg (overalls hanging on a clothing line, "men overseeing charcoal burning") (Holt 369). In the work described in this section, the factory, the West, Detroit are not just represented by words, but also by the same gritty aesthetic, the same familiar themes. They create spatial imaginaries both for the things that come to mind when one encounters the words that represent them *and* for the way they are imagined visually.

To quote Chris Wharton, the "strategies of visibility and visualization at work in advertising and consumer culture" helps to promote "historically produced cultural knowledge,"

or, as I might put it, “culturally produced historical knowledge.” By this, I mean that a “knowledge” of the past is reinforced through repetition of cultural representations of a collective history (Wharton 19 and Hennessy, as quoted in Wharton).^{xvii} The way Detroit “looks” is a composite of geographical facts and its representations; the way the American industrial past looks to a modern consumer may well be a collection of gritty Chrysler-ian vignettes. Together, ads form what Sontag might have called a “portrait chronicle” of American history, providing not just the chronological facts of American history as understood through ads, but also a visual understanding of what that chronology looks like. Of course, this chronology is often filled with connotations rather than historical facts, creating an increasingly blurred line between historical reality and Hennessy’s cultural knowledge (Sontag).

Jameson, borrowing from Barthes, uses the concept of “connotation”^{xviii} to describe not just how things can be “summed up culturally,” but how the “history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history,” which is a process at work in almost all of these ads (Jameson 20). The “fifties” becomes a thing that can be named and visualized by “short haircuts, early rock and roll, longer skirts,” station wagons, and Tupperware (Jameson 279). Though these things are not “invented” and are therefore “in some sense authentic,” they are not “a list of facts or historical realities...but rather a list of stereotypes, of ideas of facts and of historical realities” (Jameson 279). Advertising often views “the ‘past’”—or, I would add, sometimes its own present—“through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image, and ‘1930s-ness’ or ‘1950s-ness’ by the attributes of fashion” (Jameson 19). These brands represent the past “as a kind of thing,” a thing “that can be dated and called the eighties or fifties,” and establishing their *representations* of historical moments *as history* (Jameson 284). For example, in the acclaimed TV series *Mad Men*, the late 1950’s and 1960’s is communicated through aesthetic markers that are stereotypical for the period:

Images and sounds from late 1950’s and early 60’s advertising: Doctor’s selling cigarettes. Athletes selling liquor. Bathing suit models with vacuum cleaners. And most importantly, proud Dads with their perfect wives and children driving their cars to some green suburban utopia. We get a sense of the time and its ideals (Set directions, *Mad Men*, Series One: Episode 1; opening set. Purvis 24).

These cues, with the help of decades of mass media representation, have come to define this era so that when *Mad Men*’s audience was confronted with them, they immediately recognized it as the 1950’s and 1960’s. More importantly, the set direction suggests that a historical moment can be communicated by a “sense,” thereby perpetuating these stereotypes by which we view the period. However, it’s worth noting here that we’re also intended to get a sense of the time’s *ideals*, not just the time itself—the symbols and aesthetics that are chosen carry with them a suggestion of a deeper meaning.

To better understand how this applies to ads, we can use the example of a 2011 Jack Daniel’s commercial, in which the brand lends an “aesthetic style” to the past it believes gave America its Americanness. Over a montage of American products—jazz guitars, televisions,

cars, blue jeans, cowboy hats—and the callous-handed people who make them—a gruff voice over read:

Americans, we're the creators of things born of an independent spirit, designers of the great, architects of the useful, composers of the loud, builders of the beautiful. We live in a country that lets people make things they believe in, and that's as American as, well, [Jack Daniel's]. *As a bottle of Jack Daniel's whiskey is placed on a counter, the words, "Here's to the American spirit" appear on screen.* (Jack Daniel's).

The spot creates a vision of down-home America that refers to no specific time or place, but to some past time that simply *feels* American. Using its existing brand legacy, it evokes the sense of West-ness and an authenticity that comes only with whiskey. Almost every product shown in the spot is vintage—the jukebox, TV, radio, and car all belong to a bygone era—presumably to indicate both that the time in which we made things has passed and to substantiate the “American spirit” in something material. The hardened voiceover helps animate an archetypal figure—the real, hard-working American. For Jack Daniel's, the formative parts of American history *are* Lynchburg, blue jeans, and the belief that the products Americans make say something about their history. This America, if it ever existed, was never the entirety of the country as Jack Daniel's might have you believe. In a new economy, Jack Daniel's didn't resort back to using the gunfighter myth that became popular in the years after WWII, but rather uses its accumulated political authority on rugged individualism and hard work to tap into Lohof's “folk myth of American labor.” Through this, it creates an understanding of authentic America, and the things that authentic America should produce.

For all of these brands, America is (and always was) a montage of Detroit, sparking factory equipment, pick-up trucks on country roads, and assembly lines. These things are modern incarnations of an America that has always existed; it doesn't matter that there was a time before the factory was part of American life—before it, there was the frontier, the farm, and the West, which maintain the same American values as the factory. They use film that is noticeably grey, gritty, and harsh, an aesthetic that characterizes all of the campaigns and gives tangible color to the American attitude they try to articulate. They all imagine the past in vignettes—snippets of historical scenes that simplify eras into images and give visual identity to popular myths about work, the factory, and the innate American entrepreneurial spirit. The series of images they present—railroads, pick-up trucks, skyscrapers of New York City—come to be seen as a timeline of landmark American moments, strung together not by historical chronology, but by a sense of patriotic historical significance. Most importantly, they give audiences a constructed sense of what the past *actually looked like*.

In these examples, the phrase “seeing is believing” takes on new meaning—we believe that we can understand what America is by visualizing our culture.^{xix} To see ourselves is to understand ourselves completely—we are content with substituting our complex identity with a simple “theme” that, through repetition, eventually comes to seem like truth (Wilson 14). Like for Fanon, who felt that he was constantly reduced to themes and connotations about his race, feeling “battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial

defects, slave ships, and above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (Fanon), this type of “visualism in anthropology” ignores real history and replaces it with its nostalgic, idealized, or fetishized counterpart, built from decades of images and conceptions (Wilson 14).

To use Sontag’s phrase again, this constructs a “portrait chronicle of the past, a history *of* and *imagined in* advertisements. History becomes a series of the themes from ads – the 1950’s as suburbs and vacuum cleaners, the 1970’s as discord and calls for peace, the Old West as cowboys, gunslingers, and hard workers who built the country. Historical eras are likened to their representations, the “sets” on which we expect them to take place. As Jameson put it, they represent a “collective future,” a “vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum” (Jameson 12).

This is the kind of historical understanding that Peter Seixas recounts in an essay on public history and history education in Canada. When asked to identify the major events of the twentieth century, Grade 11 Canadian history students responded with answers that reflected an episodic view of history and suggest a visual, or at least thematic, understanding of the past. In one response, the “rise of convenience” is followed by “plastic is invented” (Seixas 20). One can see the visual thinking this student did, linking the image of a vacuum-wielding housewife to an image of a Tupperware set—the ethe of the two moments had been used closely and interchangeably to represent the Populuxe era, so it makes sense to use those images to sum up the progress achieved in those years. In the case of this student, “*history*” does not so much refer to actual history as it does to historical *representation*: the history he or she recounted is a retelling of the way ads see the present and the past.

In these situations, we are often entirely unaware that the narrative identity we derive from this history is more pastiche than it is simple fiction or nostalgia. Our “national purpose” is not so much based on historical events to which we’ve assigned meaning as it is on our *representation* of events to which we’ve assigned meaning. These ads present copies of a past that never existed, or worse, they re-present copies of themes that connote a past that never existed. We create a historical double-blind not just by repeating reality, but repeating its representations.

The Past in Pastiche

The real past gets lost in the pastiche—accessible only by things, people, and events untouched by national meaning-makers (movies, books, ads, politicians). As Jameson writes, “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” it becomes a “series...of superseded genres, or simulacra” (Jameson 18, Felluga). We are left with nothing but pastiche, no substance behind the satire, no realization that it’s satire at all—we are drawn into these themes and reproduce them as fact, as guiding truths. “In such a world of pastiche, we lose our connection to history,” and we become unable to “understand the past except as a repository of genres, styles, and codes ready for commodification” (Felluga).

If the role of ads is to be what Jameson called a “schoolbook history manual”^{xx} for the production of knowledge and cultural know-how, then that figurative history book would contain a version of American history that is quite different from what actually happened – filled with excerpts from not just ads, but political speeches, Bruce Springsteen songs, and Ken Burns documentaries that all recycle the same now-cherished elements of Americana (Seixas, Jameson 23). The myths and symbols they leverage have not been proved by history, but by constant use and re-use.

Most importantly, this mediated understanding of our history influences the way we will change the course of that history in the future. If we are inclined to believe that an America without “making” is not an America at all, what choices will we make to maintain that? What leaders will we choose to represent us? If we cannot adapt to a post-industrialized economy, or risk abandoning what we understand to be our time-tested values, how can we succeed? What steps will we take to preserve those values in a new economy? Which brands will adopt this new Americanness and emerge as iconic in the future?

Though at the time of this publication, the implications of the Trump presidency are still unknown, the now-successful rhetoric that President Trump used throughout his campaign seems to support the idea that a large swath of Americans identify with the same blue-collar, “making” aesthetics leveraged by post-recession advertising. They are eager to rally around those themes rather than face an uncertain, post-industrial future. Though in this environment of mass media, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between fact and representation, Americans should be wary of the version of the American Dream that emerges from our popular culture when trying to navigate our collective future (Sivulka, Marchand).

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ⁱ McAllister argues that the two are distinct, but overlap in significant ways (McAllister 2003). In their 1997 work in the *Journal of Advertising*, Elizabeth C. Hirschman and Craig J. Thompson argued that advertising should not be treated as a “domain distinct from news and entertainment media” despite the fact that advertising researchers tend to treat it as such (Hirschman and Thompson 43). They argue that a “large body of work suggests that such distinctions are not relevant to the *ideological* aspects of consumer socialization” and that advertising has profound effects on the way consumers receive “non advertising forms of mass media” because of the “perceived meanings they derive from advertisements” (Ibid, 43). In seeking to create meaning and “[promote] a consumer mindset,” advertising is part responsible for establishing the “set of themes” and codes and “ideological systems” through which cultural meaning is read (Ibid, 44).

ⁱⁱ In 1997, Hirschman and Thompson sought to expand the body of work analyzing consumers’ processing of meaning in advertisements. They noted that a great deal of research “focused on the processes use[d] to decode the information conveyed in an advertisement or the situational factors that influence consumers’ processing strategies” but not much existed on the “influence of consumers’ background knowledge on the meanings they derive from advertisements” (Hirschman and Thompson 43). Their guiding thesis was that consumers “process advertising for meaning rather than information,” in ways similar to the way they process “the material in which they are embedded” (magazines, television, etc.) (Ibid 43). They conclude that the way consumers receive “non advertising forms of mass media” is an “essential aspect of the perceived meanings they derive from advertisements” (Ibid 44). In other words, the way consumers have learned to derive meaning from other forms of mass media has influenced the way they learn to derive meaning advertisements.

ⁱⁱⁱ The period between 1959 and 1970, dubbed the “Creative Revolution,” bred some of the most landmark campaigns of the 20th century, like Volkswagen’s “Think Small” (1959), Pepsi’s “Pepsi Generation” (1963), and President Lyndon Johnson’s “Daisy” Ad (1964). *AdAge* describes the period as “advertising’s ‘coming of age,’ when the industry mastered the language of TV, appropriated the medium of photography and produced work of unprecedented creativity” (AdAge 2003).

^{iv} In the book (2004), Holt “establishes the central role of national myth/ideologies in the development of American iconic brands,” but does not do the opposite, which is what this work intends to do. He takes an empirical, systematic approach to unpacking how certain brands have come to inhabit an iconic or symbolic place in American culture and how other brands can do the same, noting that the myths or “selective history” “function to continually re-imagine and revitalize the nation’s ideology” (Holt 2006, 359). In his later work on Jack Daniel’s he gets closer to the ways that advertisements form a symbiotic relationship with national myth and identity, but does not quite interrogate the imagined past that results from such a relationship, or the new set of myths that it creates. In all of this work, he makes unprecedented strides in demonstrating not only what the ideology of iconic brands are, but how the things going on in society and culture make those ideologies “appealing” and have a profound effect on consumers (Holt 2006, 358).

^v In a media-saturated and Internet-driven world of online personalities and PR stunts, personal branding has taken on a new importance for individuals and businesses alike (Montoya, Gabler).

^{vi} In her introduction to *Engaging the Past*, Landsberg lays out the foundation of her argument – that “one’s understanding of the complexities of the past, one’s image of it has inevitably been affected by the images and narratives that have circulated in mass culture.” For Landsberg, these are called “prosthetic memories,” personally felt public memories that result from the experience of a mediated representation of the past.” Though Landsberg’s book focuses largely on representations of the past that are intentionally historical (like *Mad Men*, etc.), this same kind of historical knowledge can come from representations, like the Chrysler ad, that are not “historical” in the same sense.

^{vii} In *Revenge of the Crystal*, published in 1999,^{vii} Jean Baudrillard dissects the system of myths and signs and “trademarks” in which advertising exists and which it perpetuates, exploring how meaning is assigned to objects, Americanness, and then again to the myths themselves. Advertising, which he calls “the most remarkable mass medium of our epoch,” does not simply speak to one object or product (as one would assume), but instead “to a totality of objects and a universe entirely made up of objects and trademarks” (Baudrillard 91) He describes a consumer society that is “engulfed by its own mythology” (82) in which objects, products, and brands gain meaning only in relation to other meanings and one another. In other words, distinct objects can no longer be seen for what they are themselves, but “disappear in a discourse of connotation,” understood only by the way they can be

interpreted as signs in a larger established system of signs, meaning, and connotation (80). In this culture (what he called 'Americanism'), "the truth of objects and products is their trademark" or brand (82).

^{viii} Sivulka quotes art critic Robert Rosenblum, who notes that the epochal introduction of the television at mass scale had shifted the nation from a "literary culture" toward a "more visual culture" (Sivulka 299).

^{ix} As John Tagg notes, "truth is circulated and consumed" through various forms of mass media, and gain credibility by repetition and cross-echoing by that media. (Tagg 265). When we are presented with a familiar image, like an image of victorious troops or an image of cowboys, this image "recalls" a "reservoir of similar 'texts,'" that reinforce each other and give the illusion of reality (Tagg 271). Though it seems that behind these familiar images there must be some kind of originating truth, "what lies 'behind' the image is not reality," but more references to other similar images, to a "complex fabric of notions, representations, images, attitudes, gestures and modes of action which function as everyday know-how," to a "whole hidden corpus of knowledge" (Tagg 271).

^x As Elliot and Wattanasuwan note, "advertising is recognized as one of the most potent sources of valorized symbolic meanings" (citing Grunert, 1986; Lannon and Cooper, 1983; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Sherry, 1987). They describe the dialectical relationship between advertising and culture – "advertising not only helps in creating, modifying and transforming cultural meanings for the consumer (Lannon and Cooper, 1983), but also represents cultural meanings taken from the consumer's world view and invested into the advertised product" (Elliot and Wattanasuwan 136). Therefore, advertising functions not just as a reflector of culture as I have mentioned before, but a creator – it is "both a means to transfer or create meanings into culture and a cultural product itself" (*Ibid*, 136).

^{xi} Barthes note that with the "mythical signifier," "its form is empty but present, its meaning absent but full" (124).

^{xii} When Holt diagrams the process by which brands utilize myths, he notes that there must be a myth market for them. These markets are subject to the winds of culture and politics, often propelled by major shifts in the status quo, causing widespread anxiety or emotions, as in the case of Budweiser and Jack Daniel's. When the dialogue changes, so must the myth (Holt 59).

^{xiii} Chrysler, Walmart, Levi's, Jack Daniel's, whether they knew it or not, had some kind of perception of the "futurepast" a term that Zeynep Gürsel coins in her book *Image Brokers*. The term more or less refers to the ability to anticipate how future generations of audiences and newsmakers alike will want to visualize the past (our present) in the future. They do not just add this moment's chapter on to the narrative of history, but also *alter* the existent narrative of the past by using it and manipulating it in the present.

^{xiv} Barthes mentions that cultural symbols or images imbued with meaning for a social purpose (like Detroit) are "deprived of their history, changed into gestures" (122). By this, he means that in order to use Detroit as a signifier for not just the city, but as an "alibi" for an industrial past, the fullness of its history must not be seen or mentioned.

^{xv} Edward Said, when discussing the nature of stereotypes and how they become naturalized, noted that they become that which "unquestionably 'is'" through a process of signification and mis-representation (Bhabha 373). They are no longer recognized as stereotypes, but as fundamental truths.

^{xvi} In *Mythologies*, Barthes advises that one should be wary of things that seem to "go without saying," as it is often those natural or "given" truths that are sites of myth (Barthes).

^{xvii} Though Hennessy originally intended the phrase to describe the method by which commodities in a capitalist system gain meaning and reality based on historical knowledge of those commodities resulting in a form of oppression, Wharton uses her phrase "historically produced cultural knowledge" to explain cultural know-how that is reinforced over the passage of time through advertising. Though the signs and symbols used in advertising do often fall into that category of things understood through repetition over time, in this case, I want to use almost the exact converse of his concept to get at a different knowledge production process—I use "culturally produced historical knowledge" to mean an understanding of the *past* that is reinforced through repetition in culture (Hennessy, as quoted in Wharton).

^{xviii} In the "The Romans in Films" chapter of *Mythologies*, Barthes addresses this idea of connotations and visual understanding, identifying a distinct "fringe" as the connotation of "Romanness," and sweat on one's brow as connoting deep thinking (Barthes 26-27). Jameson describes Barthes as showing "connotation as purveying of imaginary and stereotypical idealities: 'Sinité', for example as some Disney-EPCOT 'concept' of China" (Jameson 19).

^{xix} Fabian argues that one could understand a culture just by seeing it (Wilson). Barthes also explains how this

happens in Mythologies, mentioning that cultural symbols or images imbued with meaning for a social purpose are “deprived of their history, changed into gestures” (122).

^{xx} Jameson described mass media texts aimed at fostering an understanding of culture as “school book history manuals,” “devised” for transmitting historical know-how, something similar to the historically produced cultural knowledge Hennessy mentions (Jameson 23).