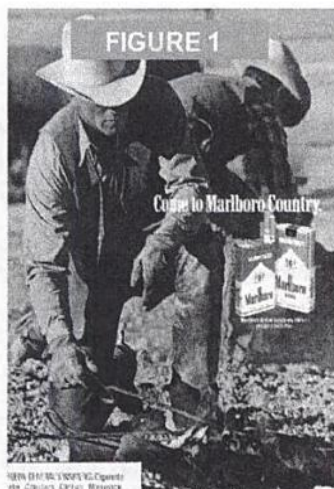


Like television narratives, advertising too can be seen as providing some functional equivalents of myth. Like myths, ads frequently resolve social contradictions, provide models of identity, and celebrate the existing social order. Barthes (1972 [1957]) saw that advertising provided a repertoire of contemporary mythologies,



and in the following discussion I depict how cigarette ads contribute to identity formation in contemporary society. The following analysis is intended to show that even the static images of advertising contain subject positions and models for identification that are heavily coded ideologically. As in the previous discussion, I argue here - against a certain type of postmodern formal analysis - that the images of media culture are important both in the mode of their formal image construction and address, as well as in terms of the meanings and values which they communicate. Accordingly, I discuss some print ads which are familiar, are readily available for scrutiny, and lend themselves to critical analysis.

Print ads are an important sector of the advertising world with about 50 percent of advertising revenues going to various print media while 22 percent is expended on television advertising. Let us look first, then, at some cigarette ads, including Marlboro ads aimed primarily at male smokers and Virginia Slims ads which try to convince women that it is cool to smoke and that the product being advertised is perfect for the "modern" woman (see the illustration following).¹⁰ Corporations such as those in the tobacco industry undertake campaigns to associate their product with positive and desirable images and gender models. Thus, in the 1950s, Marlboro undertook a campaign to associate its cigarette with masculinity, associating smoking its product with being a "real man." Marlboro had been previously packaged as a milder women's cigarette, and the "Marlboro man" campaign was an attempt to capture the male cigarette market with images of archetypically masculine characters. Since the cowboy, Western image provided a familiar icon of masculinity, independence, and ruggedness, it was the preferred symbol for the campaign. Subsequently, the "Marlboro man" became a part of American folklore and a readily identifiable cultural symbol.

Such symbolic images in advertising attempt to create an association between the products offered and socially desirable and meaningful traits in order to produce the impression that if one wants to be a certain type of person, - for instance, to be a "real man" - then one should buy Marlboro cigarettes. Consequently, for decades, Marlboro used the cowboy figure as the symbol of masculinity and the center of their ads. In a postmodern image culture, individuals get their very identity from these figures, thus advertising becomes an important and overlooked mechanism of socialization, as well as manager of consumer demand.

Ads form textual systems with basic components which are interrelated in ways that positively position the product. The main components of the classical Marlboro ads are the conjunction of nature, the cowboy, horses, and the cigarette (see Figure 1). This system associates the Marlboro cigarette with masculinity, power, and nature. Note, however, in the Marlboro ad in Figure 2, how the cowboys decline in size, dwarfed by the images of desert and sky. Whereas in earlier Marlboro ads, the Marlboro man loomed largely in the center of the frame, now images of nature are highlighted. Why this shift?

All ads are social texts which respond to key developments during the period in which they appear. During the 1980s, media reports concerning the health hazard of cigarettes became widespread - a message highlighted in the mandatory box at

the bottom of the ad that "The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking is Dangerous to Your Health." As a response to this attack, the Marlboro ads now feature images of clean, pure, wholesome nature, as if it were "natural" to smoke cigarettes, as if cigarettes were a healthy "natural" product, an emanation of benign and healthy nature. The ad, in fact, hawks *Marlboro Lights* and one of the captions describes it as a "low tar cigarette." Many 1980s Marlboro ads deployed imagery that was itself "light," white, green, snowy, and airy. Through the process of metonymy, or contiguous association, the ads tries to associate the cigarettes with "light," "natural," healthy deserts, clean snow, horses, cowboys, trees, and sky, as if they were all related "natural" artifacts, sharing the traits of "nature," thus covering over the fact that cigarettes are an artificial, synthetic product, full of dangerous pesticides, preservatives, and other chemicals.¹¹

Thus, the images of healthy nature are a Barthesian mythology (1972) which attempt to cover over the image of the dangers to health from cigarette smoking. The Marlboro ad also draws on images of tradition (the cowboy), hard work, caring for animals, and other desirable traits, as if smoking were a noble activity, metonymically equivalent to these other positive social activities. The images, texts, and product shown in the ad thus provide a symbolic construct which tries to cover over and camouflage contradictions between the "heavy" work and the "light" cigarette, between the "natural" scene and the "artificial" product, between the cool and healthy outdoors scene and between the hot and unhealthy activity of smoking, and the rugged masculinity of the Marlboro man and the Light cigarette, originally targeted at women. In fact, this latter contradiction can be explained by the marketing ploy of suggesting to men that they can both be highly masculine, like the Marlboro man, and smoke a (supposedly) "healthier" cigarette, while also appealing to macho women who might enjoy smoking a "man's" cigarette which is also "lighter" and "healthier," as women's cigarettes are supposed to be.

The 1983 Virginia Slims ad pictured in Figure 3 attempts in a similar fashion to associate its product with socially desired traits and offers subject positions with which women can identify. The Virginia Slims textual system classically includes a vignette at the top of the ad with a picture underneath of the Virginia Slims woman next to the prominently displayed package of cigarettes. In the example pictured, the top of the ad features a framed box that contains the narrative images and message, which is linked to the changes in the situation of women portrayed through a contrast with the "modern" woman below. The caption under the boxed image of segregated male and female exercise classes in 1903 contains the familiar Virginia Slims slogan "You've come a long way, baby." The caption, linked to the Virginia Slims woman, next to the package of cigarettes, connotes a message of progress, metonymically linking Virginia Slims to the "progressive woman" and "modern" living. In this ad, it is the linkages and connections between the parts that establish the message which associates Virginia Slims with progress. The ad tells women that it is progressive and socially acceptable to smoke, and it associates Virginia Slims with modernity, social progress, and the desired social trait of slimness.

In fact, Lucky Strike carried out a successful advertising campaign in the 1930s

which associated smoking with weight reduction ("Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet!"), and Virginia Slims plays on this tradition, encapsulated in the very brand name of the product. Note too that the cigarette is a "Lights" variety and that, like the Marlboro ad, it tries to associate its product with health and well-being. The pronounced smile on the woman's face also tries to associate the product with happiness and self-contentment, struggling against the association of smoking with guilt and dangers to one's health. The image of the slender woman, in turn, associated with slimness and lightness, not only associates the product with socially desirable traits, but in turn promotes the ideal of slimness as the ideal type of femininity.

Later in **the** 1980s, Capri cigarettes advertised its product as "the slimmest slim!", building on **the** continued and intensified association of slimness with femininity. The promotion of smoking and slimness is far from innocent, however, and has contributed to eating disorders, faddish diets **and** exercise programs, **and** a dramatic increase in anoxeria among young women, as well as rising cancer rates. As Judith Williamson points out (1978), advertising "addresses" individuals **and** invites **them** to identify **with** certain products, images, **and** behavior. Advertising provides a **Utopian** image of a **new**, more attractive, more successful, more prestigious "you" through purchase of certain goods. Advertising magically offers self-transformation and a **new** identity, associating changes in consumer behavior, fashion, and appearance **with** metamorphosis **into** a **new** person. Consequently, individuals are taught to identify **with** values, **role** models, **and** social behavior through advertising which is thus an important instrument of socialization as well as a manager of consumer demand.

Advertising sells its products and view of the world through images, rhetoric, slogans, and their juxtaposition in ads to which tremendous artistic resources, psychological research, and marketing strategies are devoted. These ads express and reinforce dominant images of gender and position men and women to assume highly specific subject positions. A 1988 Virginia Slims ad (shown in Figure 4), in fact, reveals a considerable transformation in its image of women during the 1980s and a new strategy to persuade women that it is all right and even "progressive" and ultramodern to smoke. This move points to shifts in the relative power between men and women and discloses new subject positions for women validated by the culture industries.

Once again the sepia-colored framed box at the top of the ad contains an image of a woman serving her man in 1902; the comic pose and irritated look of the woman suggests that such servitude is highly undesirable and its contrast with the Virginia Slims woman (who herself now wears the leather boots and leather gloves and jacket as well) suggests that women have come a long way while the ever-present cigarette associates woman's right to smoke in public with social progress. This time the familiar "You've come a long way, baby" is absent, perhaps because the woman pictured would hardly tolerate being described as "baby" and because women's groups had been protesting the sexist and demeaning label in the slogan. Note, too, the transformation of the image of the woman in the Virginia Slims ad.

No longer the smiling, cute, and wholesome potential wife of the earlier ad, she is now more threatening, more sexual, less wifely, and more masculine. The sunglasses connote the distance from the male gaze which she wants to preserve and the leather jacket with the military insignia connotes that she is equal to men, able to carry on a masculine role, and is stronger and more autonomous than women of the past.

The 1988 ad is highly antipatriarchal and even expresses hostility toward men with the overweight man with glasses and handlebar mustache looking slightly ridiculous while it is clear that the woman is being held back by ridiculous fashion and intolerable social roles. The "new" Virginia Slims woman, however, who completely dominates the scene, is the epitome of style and power. This strong woman can easily take in hand and enjoy the phallus (i.e. the cigarette as the sign of male power accompanied by the male dress and military insignia) and serve as an icon of female glamour as well. This ad links power, glamour, and sexuality and offers a model of female power, associated with the cigarette and smoking. Ads work in part by generating dissatisfaction and by offering images of transformation, of a new personal identity. This particular ad promotes dissatisfaction with traditional images and presents a new image of a more powerful woman, a new lifestyle and identity for the Virginia Slims smoker. In these ways, the images associate the products advertised with certain socially desirable traits and convey messages concerning the symbolic benefits accrued to those who consume the product.

Although Lights and Ultra Lights continue to be the dominant Virginia Slims types, the phrase does not appear as a highlighted caption in the 1988 ad as it used to and the package does not appear either. No doubt this "heavy" woman contradicts the "light" image and the ad connotes instead power and (a dubious) progress for women rather than slimness or lightness. Yet the woman's teased and flowing blonde hair, her perfect teeth which form an obliging smile, and, especially her crotch positioned in the ad in a highly suggestive and inviting fashion code her as a symbol of beauty and sexuality, albeit more autonomous and powerful.

The point I am trying to make is that it is precisely the images which are the vehicles of the subject positions and that therefore critical literacy in a postmodern image culture requires learning how to read images critically and to unpack the relations between images, texts, social trends, and products in commercial culture (Kellner 1989d). My reading of these ads suggests that advertising is as concerned with selling lifestyles and socially desirable identities, which are associated with their products, as with selling the product themselves - or rather, that advertisers use the symbolic constructs with which the consumer is invited to identify to try to induce her to use their product. Thus, the Marlboro man (i.e. the consumer who smokes the cigarette) is smoking masculinity or natural vigor as much as a cigarette, while the Virginia Slims woman is exhibiting modernity, thinness, or female power when she lights up her "slim."

This sort of reading of advertising not only helps individuals to resist manipulation, but it also depicts how something as seemingly innocuous as advertising can depict significant shifts in modes and models of identity. For example, the two

Virginia Slims ads suggest that at least a certain class of women (white, upper-middle and upper class) were gaining more power in society and that women were being attracted by stronger, more autonomous, and more masculine images. Advertising campaigns attempt to incorporate such images to associate their products with the socially desired traits which are then further promoted with the ads' attempts to promote their products.¹²

A comparison of late 1980s Marlboro ads with their earlier ads also yields some interesting results. While the Marlboro ads once centered on the "Marlboro man," and in the early 1980s continue to feature this figure, curiously, by the late 1980s, human beings disappeared altogether from some Marlboro ads which projected pure images of wholesome nature associated with the product. The caption "Made especially for menthol smokers," the green menthol insignia on the cigarette package, and the blue and green backdrops of the trees, grass, and water in the ad all attempt to incorporate icons of health and nature into the ads, as if these menthol Lights would protect the buyer from cigarette health hazards. Undoubtedly this transformation in the Marlboro ads points to growing concern about the health hazards of cigarettes which required even purer emphasis on nature. Yet the absence of the Marlboro cowboy might also point to the obsolescence of the manual worker in a new postmodern information and service society where significant sectors of the so-called "new middle class" work in the industries of symbol and image production and manipulation.

The prominent images of the powerful horses in the late 1980s ad, however, point to a continued desire for power and fantasies of virility and masculinity. The actual powerlessness of workers in contemporary capitalist society makes it in turn difficult to present concrete contemporary images of male power that would appeal to a variety of male (and female) smokers. Eliminating the male figure also allows appeal over a wider range of social classes and occupational types, including both men and women who could perhaps respond more positively to images of nature and power than to the rather obsolete cowboy figure. Further - and these images are clearly polysemic, subject to multiple readings, - the new emphasis on "Great refreshment in the flip-top box" not only harmonizes with the "refreshing" images of green and nature, but points to the new hedonist, leisure culture in postmodern society with its emphasis on the pleasures of consumption, spectacle, and refreshment. The refreshment tag also provides a new legitimization for cigarette smoking as a refreshing activity (building on the famous Pepsi "pause that refreshes"?) which codes an obviously dangerous activity as "refreshing" and thus as health-promoting.

Moreover, the absence of human figures in the late 1980s Marlboro ads could be read as signs of the erasure of the human in postmodern society, giving credence to Foucault's claim that in a new episteme the human itself could be washed away like a face drawn on sand at the edge of the sea (1970: 387). Yet the human cannot so easily be washed away and lo and behold in 1989, not only human figures, but the Marlboro man himself returned in a new ad campaign. One ad provides an example of a new advertising strategy which requires the consumer to produce the

meaning herself, much like a modernist text. This fully two-page ad portrays giant hands (presumably those of the Marlboro man himself) holding a pair of gloves, with a cigarette held between two gnarled and weatherbeaten fingers. The only caption - besides the federally mandated list of ingredients and warnings to one's health - says: "Come to where the flavor is." There is no Marlboro cigarette box, portrayed nor any caption stating the brand name. Instead one has to look quite closely at the small brand name inscribed on the cigarette itself to discern precisely what brand is being advertised.

Half of the two-page ad is buried in darkness with only the caption and difficult to decipher fragments of images emerging. The other half of the ad centers on the gnarled hands, perhaps projecting the subliminal message to those concerned with the health risks of smoking that it is possible to smoke and survive. For the heavily lined hands are obviously those of someone who has lived life to the full, whose vicissitudes and experience are etched into the very skin of his hands, whose deeply textured skin attests to a long-lived life. In this way, the cigarette is associated with survival and a full life, thus assuaging worries that smoking constitutes a serious risk of cancer and other dread diseases and providing subliminal functions of anxiety reduction - a typical task of contemporary advertising.

This Marlboro ad is one of a genre of contemporary ads which forces the consumer to work at discerning the brand being sold and at deciphering the text to construct meaning. The minimalism of product signifiers appeals to readers jaded with traditional advertising, tired of the same old stale images, and bored with and cynical toward advertising manipulation. To the cool postmodern reader, the association of masculinity with smoking Marlboros might be laughable, yet even such minimalist ads utilize product differentiation and use new images while building on old cues. In addition to appealing to a survivalist urge in the contemporary smoker, the 1989 ad invites her to "Come to where the flavor is." The emphasis on flavor appeals to hedonist tastes, to enjoy the flavor, to light up for pleasure. Such appeals interpellate contemporary individualist-hedonist impulses to have fun, to do what one wants and pleases at all costs - even the destruction of one's health.

The textual system of this 1989 Marlboro ad as a whole thus addresses its reader as an individual, as someone able to read the complex ad and to choose their own pleasures as they will. There is thus a subliminal appeal to the individual's freedom and creativity which invites the reader to interpret the ad as one chooses and to light up the cigarette when one pleases in disregard of the obligatory government warnings linking cigarettes to health risks. The gnarled hands as well are those of an individual who is in charge of his life and who makes his own decisions, so the text as a whole is structured to associate smoking Marlboro with individuality and power. Interestingly, this ad and the other Marlboro ads which erase human subjects play down gender identity and one might read this as a decentering of gender identity in contemporary society, as a disassociation between the product and gender, as a bracketing of the centrality of gender in the constitution of identity.

The appeal here is directly to use-value, to the pleasure and flavor that the cigarette produces rather than the sign value of masculinity, or the appeal to power.

Moreover, this text works to get the reader to identify with the product and to produce a pleasurable feeling from the feat of producing meaning, from reading the ambiguous text, that is presumably then transferred to and associated with the product, so that the image of Marlboro is associated with free choice and creativity. And yet the highly paid cultural interpreters who work for advertising agencies are hedging their bets concerning the Marlboro ads of recent years. For the 1990s has seen a return of the previous realist ads which center on the old Marlboro cowboy, along with production of a new type of ad just analyzed, as well as a new series of pure nature imagery.

In the 1990s, Marlboro has returned to recycling old images, especially of the famous cowboy and nature. The December 11-17, 1993 *TV Guide* back-cover ad, for instance, features the cowboy riding a horse, followed by another horse which he has roped and is leading through a snowy field. The white snow is blowing behind the cowboy deploying the images of nature. Thus, the image combines power and control with images of nature, implying that if you want to be a natural man and in control, smoke a Marlboro. Curiously, however, although the corporate insignia "Marlboro" is featured in bright red script there is no pack of cigarettes, or even a single cigarette, shown, nor is the cowboy, pictured hard at work, smoking. It is as if Marlboro is embarrassed by their product and can only sell the qualities of nature and masculinity - and death, as the Surgeon General's warning, boldly emblazoned in a letter box in the bottom right-hand corner notes.

The multiplicity of strategies in cigarette ads show that the advertising agencies of contemporary capitalism are not at all sure as to what will attract consumers to their products, or with what images consumers identify. For, as I have been arguing, one of the features of contemporary culture is precisely the fragmentation, transitoriness, and multiplicity of images, which refuse to crystalize into a stable image culture. Thus, the advertising and cultural industries draw on modern and postmodern strategies, and on traditional, modern, and postmodern themes and iconography.