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AUTHORS	Noel Murray
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Noel Murray (USA)

The rise and fall of the Hummer class: narrative strategies in the construction of an identity myth

Abstract

The paper examines the advertising myth construction process for the Hummer campaign over a period of several years. The analysis studies the emergence of cultural fissures in the U.S. that serve as a necessary condition for acceptance of the Hummer origin myth. Authorship of the Hummer myth is reviewed and is situated in the context of reception and retransmission by the culture industries. A detailed narrative analysis of select television executions is offered to illustrate the crafting of the cultural branding strategy. Finally, the demise of the Hummer myth is examined in the context of new emerging cultural fissures in the U.S. and the decline of the popularity of militaristic adventurism in the popular imagination of market segments.

Keywords: advertising campaigns, identity myths, Hummer, cultural branding, narrative analysis, popular culture.

Introduction

By the mid 1990s the Humvee (predecessor to the Hummer/H2) had become the motorized equivalent of the Statue of Liberty, the American flag, and the Liberty Bell all rolled into one (Padgett, 2004, p. 10). How did a mechanical behemoth, with a menacing front stance, become a defining icon for a generation of lawyers, stockbrokers, surgeons, and eventually, affluent soccer mums? This paper examines advertising narrative strategies employed in constructing the myth of the Hummer. The advertising myth construction process is situated in advertising's parasitic relationship to emerging trends in the populist world (Holt, 2004, p. 9). These cultural trends are refracted by the culture industries, among which, commercial advertising is shown to be a key player. A narrative analysis of key television commercials reveals how advertising can feed on cultural fissures and emerging ideologies in society to fashion identity segments for core Hummer audiences. First, we will look to the cultural source material with which the narrative of the Hummer advertising strategies is fashioned.

1. Literature review

In the late 1980's the professional and entrepreneurial classes were making substantial financial gains in society while feeling that they received little recognition or respect for their achievements (Frank, 2001, p. 29). Indeed, popular culture portrayal of the professional and entrepreneurial class in mass media was mostly negative, focusing on the darker side of excessive individualism and self-interest. Oliver Stone's movie *Wall Street* depicted a financial subculture in New York that seemed to epitomize the excesses of capitalism. The entrepreneurial and professional classes were portrayed in the popular media as ego-centric, dismissive of charity, lacking in compassion, loners, greedily amassing fortunes,

hostile to the environment, hostile to consumers, victim-blaming, winner-takes-all mentality. The entrepreneurs and professional class however saw themselves differently; as the new inheritors of the frontiersman boon¹ (Lauer, 2005, p. 151). They saw themselves as mobilizing vast resources and creating wealth, as defenders of freedom and the "American-way" (Frank, 2001, p. 118). They believed themselves to be risk-taking individualists, ready to make bold decisions to buy or sell hundreds of thousands of dot-com stock, or make life and death decisions on the surgeons' operating table. They saw themselves as not hostile to those on the margins of society, but rather, as supportive of those who help themselves. And they resented not getting the societal respect that ought to be accorded them (Frank, 2001, p. 21). They championed the "land of freedom and opportunity"; they loved "great Americans", and they supported the troops in "Desert Storm". They were awed by the triumph of the technological superiority of the U.S. military machine, and the images of brave troops in their Humvees (Segal & Walczak, 1991, p. 133). Their hero was Pat Tillman, who gave up the glamorous lifestyle of a professional football star with the Arizona Cardinals to join the Army Rangers. They revered his memory as a role model of courage and patriotism after he had been killed by "hostile forces" in action in Afghanistan. Indeed, the co-option of images of the Humvee portrayed on CNN was central to the marketing of the Humvee and Hummer (Strnad, 1991, p. 8).

Other powerful cultural forces including the socialite/political commentator, Arianna Huffington were aligned against Hummer devotees (Padgett,

¹ The Frontier Myth serves as a theory of economic development and motives that promised wealth to the proprietors of the American colonies. The Frontiersman is often depicted as a dangerous character. The myth has persisted long after the colonial period. See for example *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800 to 1890*, by Richard Slotkin, Athenium, 1985.

2002, p. 187). Huffington equated driving a Hummer with supporting terrorism (Kennedy, 2003, p. E1). The Evangelical Environment Network (EEN) promoted the notion that for Christians, transportation choices are moral choices. EEN asked “What would Jesus drive?” (Harvey, p. B4). The Sierra Club criticized the Hummer for its rapacious, gas-guzzling thirst, for its monstrous size, and for its perceived elitism. The Club later made a television commercial with the title “Hummer: Pollutes Like Nothing Else” (Hakim C5). Keith Bradsher of the *New York Times* wrote a book that was titled “High and Mighty-SUVs: The World’s Most Dangerous Vehicles and how they Got that Way.” Bradsher argued that Hummers were a deadly menace to smaller cars because of the Hummers’ weight and the unique rigidity of their construction (Bradsher, 2000, p. 413). The National Highway and Transportation Safety Authority (NHTSA) suggested that Hummers were a menace to their own drivers, citing an internal study that concluded that SUVs had a fatality rate, due to rollovers, three times higher than passenger cars (Vartabedian, 2003, p. G1).

Popular animosity to Humvee owners peaked in 2003 with revelations of a loophole in the *Jobs and Growth Act* of the Bush Administration that permitted owners to deduct up to \$100,000 as capital equipment depreciation on their Humvees (Landrews, 2004, p. C1). Media reports of acts of vandalism against Hummers proliferated. The most extreme act of vandalism was carried out by the Earth Liberation Front on August 23, 2003 when more than 20 Hummers were destroyed in West Covina, California (Dixon, 2004, p. A20).

So how did a single, late-to-the-game SUV, come to evoke such destructive emotions? To address this question we have to delve into the origins of the powerful myth surrounding the Humvee and its later sibling the Hummer.

1.1. Humvee: myths of origin and the role of the culture industries. The story is told how in 1990, on the set of *Kindergarten Cop*, Arnold Schwarzenegger saw a military Humvee pass the set. Schwarzenegger would later declare “I needed a vehicle that matched my personality” (Padgett, 2004, p. 91). He inquired of AM General – the original manufacturer of the Humvee before it was acquired by General Motors – if a civilian model could be made available (Lamm and DeLorenzo, 2002, p. 21). AM General agreed, after having dissuaded Schwarzenegger from the version with the gun turret (Padgett, 2004, p. 76). Schwarzenegger, a former bodybuilder, understood that the emergent ideology in the United States was about aggression, strength, power, wealth, ostentation and narcissism. The Humvee seemed the perfect embodiment of these qualities.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the United States seemed poised to emerge from the protracted shadow of defeat in Vietnam, where technological superiority and kill ratios had become indexes of failure (Walton, 2002, p. 104). The cultural malaise produced by stagflation, oil crises, and Iranian hostages seemed on the cusp of something more optimistic. ‘Desert Storm’, showcasing the impressive results of military technological superiority, bolstered the confidence of a nation in its ability to impose its will on other nations (Bin, Hill and Jones, 1998, p. 74). Ronald Reagan had ushered in a new era of optimism, patriotism and national pride (Skinner et al., 2004, p. 821). The Berlin wall fell and America had won the Cold War. American auto drivers seemed poised to assume more active, powerful, and dynamic identities. The arrival of the Ford Explorer in 1990 – shepherding in the age of the SUVs – appeared to have perfect timing. The Blazer, the Bronco, and the Trailblazer soon followed. American drivers seemed poised to explore the frontier space once more. Sales of light trucks soared from 20% of the market in 1980 to 52% in 2002 (Padgett, 2004, p. 37).

Arnold Schwarzenegger’s product endorsement as Hollywood action hero was critical to creating the emotional bond between Hummer owner and real life action heroes at war with Saddam Hussein’s army. The war in Iraq gave the Humvee an internationally recognizable patriotic role, while Schwarzenegger lent the Humvee elite, high octane credibility. This first wave of buyers was mostly high income males, disproportionately concentrated in Sun Belt regions, and especially in the luxury car market of Southern California (Schulz 61). The car itself embodied aggression, with its ultra-wide stance and its menacing oversized front grill. Market surveys found the Hummer to be the highest ranked aspirational vehicle for male teens. Indeed, the Hummer soon became the number one best selling die-cast model, displacing perennial favorites, Lamborghinis and Corvettes (Padgett, 2004, p. 131).

The earliest television ‘commercials’ for the Humvee however, were to appear on Cable Network News (CNN). Here the Humvee played a leading role traversing the desert and scattering Saddam’s troops. The Humvee came to symbolize the technological superiority of the newly assertive United States imposing its scheme for democracy and liberation on Iraq. Vietnam may have been the first television war, but ‘Desert Storm’ was the first live action war broadcast. Embedded reporters, frequently sharing the Humvee with soldiers, streamed live-video to viewers’ sitting rooms. Internal GM marketing studies indicated that young people in particular were fascinated by the real live action war (Padgett, 2004, p. 130).

Soon the Humvee would play leading character roles in popular movies including: *Last Action Hero*, *Clear and Present Danger*, *Crimson Tide*, *Independence Day*, *A Few Good Men*, *Lost World*, and most importantly, *Blackhawk Down* (Padgett, 2004, p. 94). Music videos further developed the street credibility of the HUMMER, including videos by Tupac Shakur, 50 Cent, Missy Elliot, Puff Daddy and Notorious Big. Star power from the culture industries added to the HUMMER myth as it became part of the garage stable for Al Unser Sr. and Jr., Andre Agassi, Bjork, Dr. J., Dennis Rodman, Howard Stern, James Earl Jones, Ted Turner, Tom Clancy, George Foreman, and Mike Tyson (Padgett, 2004, p. 93). These HUMMER devotees were in the rarified strata of professional attainment and income. These early product adopters gave wider credibility to the mythic HUMMER image of being the ultimate toy of society's elite achievers (Lamm and DeLorenzo, 2002, p. 103).

In short, the cultural industries had transformed the Humvee into a cultural icon. But what role would advertising play in shaping the meanings associated with this new cultural icon? As a cultural icon, the Hummer had become a site of contested and negotiated meanings held by various contestants e.g., off-roaders versus environmentalists. The key strategic advertising objective of General Motors was to shape desired iconic meanings to help achieve broader strategic marketing goals and increased Hummer sales. It is to this broader strategic context of the Hummer advertising campaign that we now turn our attention.

2. Analysis and findings

AM General/General Motors did not initially foresee a civilian role for the Humvee (Padgett, 2004, p. 91). The military vehicle seemed unsuited for that role, sporting many features unlikely to appeal to a civilian consumer market. The Humvee could be out-drag-raced 0-60 miles per hour by a 45 horse power Ford Fiesta. Who would want to purchase a vehicle that was intended to leak water? The military designed the vehicle for traversing rivers, so that water would drain out, as well as in (Padgett, 2004, p. 95). The Humvee's windshield is vertical so that it does not reflect light and give away its position to the enemy. Indeed, AM General initially thought the market for the Humvee would be limited to extreme off-road uses such as search and rescue teams, oil drilling companies, utility companies, and perhaps some farmers and ranchers (Kiley, 2003, p. 7B). However GM calculated that if an iconic star such as Schwarzenegger were willing to spring for a Humvee without the usual seven figure Hollywood celebrity endorsement fee, then perhaps there would be a viable niche civilian

market segment (Padgett, 2004, p. 162). Work began in 1998 to turn the war machine into a consumer must have accessory.

Not everyone would have the cultural authority to author the civilian version of the Humvee myth. It would be inconceivable to have the myth authored by Toyota, Hyundai, or Mercedes. The Humvee brand DNA must be 100% American; conceived by the military and executed by the "All American" company located in the heartland. Modernista, a Boston advertising agency with a reputation for groundbreaking, anti-establishment creative campaigns, was chosen as the script writer for the HUMMER myth in October, 2000. The stage was now set for one of the most memorable auto advertising campaigns of the decade (Irwin and Gianstacio, 2003).

2.1. Crafting the cultural branding strategy.

Advertising professionals employ the cultural branding approach to develop identity myths for their target markets (Holt, 2004). They draw from tacit knowledge of popular culture and from market research profiling studies for insights into the cultural sweet spot of the brand. Market profiling studies by General Motors indicated that younger people were fascinated by vehicles with militaristic styling that echoed their interest in 'Desert Storm'. Profiles of those with the discretionary income to afford a Hummer however revealed two distinct demographic and psychographic segments (Lamm and DeLorenzo, 2002, p. 103). The first, and smallest market segment, were labeled 'rugged individualists,' people who were often artists, and were more attuned to the outdoors. This group would include celebrities such as Bjork, Dennis Rodman, and Tom Clancy (Padgett, 2004, p. 77).

The second and larger group was largely made up of the professional class. It was labeled 'high achievers' and included groups such as affluent surgeons, engineers, accountants, and corporate managers. This group had incomes higher than \$150,000 and consisted predominantly of younger professionals aged 30 to 44. They viewed themselves as take-charge individuals willing to take risks, not necessarily dodging Improvised Explosive Devices (I.E.D.s) on the airport road to Baghdad, but on the battlefields of business boardrooms and the high stakes, winner-takes-all arenas of the NASDAQ and New York Stock Exchange (Schulz, 2005, p. 65). Women also bought HUMMERS. They thought of themselves as grown-up feminists, inheritors of grll-power, ready to compete with males on the same hyper-masculine terms (Schulz, 2005, p. 67). In a magazine ad aimed at women, the HUMMER is shown in heavy urban traffic. The copy reads: "Threaten the men in your office in a whole new way" (Kiley, 2002, p. 6B).

Unlike their husbands, these women did not need their spouse's permission to buy one. Indeed ethnographic studies indicated that in some cases husbands bought Hummers in response to their wife's ultimatum (Schulz, 2005, p. 65). What was now needed to successfully execute the cultural branding strategy was the construction of a powerful advertising myth to link these newly emerging cultural segments to the Hummer. This was the task assigned to Modernista, with a first year media budget of \$20 million (Irwin, 2000, p. 1).

2.2. Constructing the advertising myth for the Hummer. A myth is a story whose function it is to explain the nature of the world and the justification for social conduct in a given society (Campbell, 1968, p. 117). Iconic brands work like myths by addressing cultural fissures in society, the collective concerns of a culture. An emergent ideology, such as that embraced by the new professional and entrepreneurial classes, needs recognition in society. Iconic brands have the potential to provide such recognition. Iconic brands address identity anxieties and desires in the emergent ideology (Holt, 2004, p. 7). Iconic brands such as Apple, Nike, Hummer or Guinness, represent a type of narrative, an identity myth that helps consumers reconcile their identity with that of the emergent ideology. Advertising is but one of the authors of a brand's narrative. The brand narrative receives by-lines from the culture industries and from communities of consumers who champion the brand. For the Hummer, these communities include the weekend warrior groups who travel in packs to test their off-roading skills in wilderness areas and national parks. Their stories and conversations can be seen in Web forums such as Humvee.net. These consumer authoring communities are small in number, are perceived as outside of commercial control, and are motivated by intrinsic interests in the brand (Hanlon, 2006, p. 89). It is because iconic brands are so useful in buttressing identity that they come to have mythic status.

Competing brands cannot easily duplicate the value that mythic brands author since they do not possess the cultural authority to do so. For example, no Japanese auto brand could successfully author the myth of the Hummer. The cultural authority to author the myth resides in the all-American company General Motors. Brands become mythic when they create new identity myths that help consumers resolve identity anxieties in the broader culture (Holt, 2004, p. 96). Consumers lay claim to the identity myth through ritual consumption of the brand (Hirschman, 1988, p. 350). The brand becomes an embodiment of the mythic narrative so that as consumers drive their Hummers they become

action figures in their own storyline. The process is Mittyesque¹. The Hummer myth provides the source material to fuel the fantasy. Identity myths originate in these populist worlds (Holt, 2004, p. 9). The populist worlds' may be located in Desert Storm's Iraq (Hummer), in the Irish village pub (Guinness), or in the hip hop rhythms of inner-city enclaves (Nike). Mythic brands mine the populist world as source material to craft an identity for the target audience whose lives are given meaning by these myths (Holt, 2004, p. 65).

A mythic brand entails a psychological make-over of sorts for consumers, a change in how consumers value and view themselves in relation to the broader undercurrents of society. The mythic deeds of a new entrepreneur can be embodied in a shaggy haired tech wizard of the New Economy, ably assisted by Arthur Andersen Consultants with the soundtrack of Iggy Pop in the background (Frank, 1985, p. 28). In this sense, mythic brands are subversive of the norm. An upwardly mobile Beijinger entering a McDonald's is not just buying a burger but is expressing an openness and commitment to an outside world of global consumerism; a world from which his/her parent's generation has been shut off (Yan, 1997, p. 41). Mythic brands demand breakthrough creative that commands its audience to look and listen (Holt, 2004, p. 106).

As we will see in the following narrative analysis, Hummer advertising directly addresses the cultural fissures in post Desert Storm North American society. It assuages the collective anxieties of a culture with an in-your-face, can-do attitude, that glorifies the frontier individualism of Americas' new frontiersmen – the high achieving professional class (Frank, 1986, p. 16).

2.3. Narrative analysis of Hummer advertising. We select three television commercial executions to illustrate how the myth of the Hummer is constructed and developed over time. The three television commercials were chosen because each advances the myth in an important way. A narrative and frame analysis methodology is employed (Murray, 2006, p. 1083). This approach is informed by the long tradition of textual analysis of advertising such as that of Barthes in his approach to the *Panzani* ad (Barthes, 1977, p. 33). The approach is also informed by cinema theory and the extensive textual and visual analyses of the works of the classic directors including Ingmar Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock, Akira Kurasawa, Stanley

¹ Walter Mitty is a fictional character in the short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" authored by James Thurber. Mitty is a mild man with a vivid fantasy life. He is an ineffectual dreamer.

Kubrick, Yasujiro Ozu¹. The executions are analyzed in chronological order of their campaign appearance. We begin our narrative analysis with “Whatever” which aired first in 2003. The “Big Race,” a one minute execution, is singled out for more extensive analysis. Finally, “First Day” is analyzed to illustrate the challenge involved in advancing the myth over time.

2.3.1. *Whatever/supers*² (30 second treatment) 2003.

The opening shot reveals a bright yellow Hummer racing across a wilderness area. Vegetation is sparse, suggesting perhaps a protected area, sanctuary of the arch-enemy – the environmentalists. Hummer has claimed ownership of the color “yellow” for this ad campaign not only because it is the brightest color in the color spectrum, and therefore visually impactful, but because it screams masculine qualities. The Hummer is the bright yellow power tool in the garage, not the winter blue ‘Dustbuster’ in the kitchen. If the Hummer cannot hide behind military camouflage, it will scream “I’m here; look at me!” No driver is visible in the vehicle since the Hummer itself is the action hero. Audio commentary is entirely absent. This is a silent movie in which the visuals are center stage. Subtitles provide the running commentary. These ‘subtitles’ are however, different, more like ‘centertitles’ since they dominate the geometric center of the screen with big, bold, capitalized, center-justified, white letters. Unlike the mice-crawl of most disclaimer subtitles, these centertitles demand attention. The centertitles intertextually mock the subtitled disclaimers we see in other commercials. In a legalistic society where there are too many legal caveats, too many disclaimers, and too few individually-shouldered consequences for poor personal choices, ad subtitles are just one more illustration of the excesses of caution. Most of the centertitles are in the form of a command, issued by an off-screen parent – the pesky type who likes to badger children.

Rebellion is in the air. But not just against domineering parents, but also against an over-controlling social order. In a postmodern society where image and reality are often reversed (Grenz, 1996, p. 35), and documentary realism is replaced

with “re-enactments,” certainty is always a contested concept. The first centertitle *Re-enactment* not only parodies a medium replete with postmodern contradictions and ambiguities but also foreshadows and mocks the legally required disclaimer subtitle which emerges later in the commercial – “Professional driver, closed course.” Next, the centertitle *For Outdoor Use Only* appears and is followed by *Restricted*. Collectively, these centertitles mock the excesses of tort and commercial laws. Though no speaker is overtly given responsibility for voicing these centertitles, we can infer that they represent the voice of bureaucrats and the legal class. The entrepreneurial class has always chafed under the restrictions of what they feel is an over-regulated society (Frank, 2001, p. 21). The bureaucrats and the entrepreneurial class stand in opposition to each other.

The next sequence of five centertitles harkens back to Bergmanesque³ memories of a severe childhood filled with unjustified admonishments: *Do Not Do This, Do Not Do That, Stop Mumbling, Sit Up Straight, Eat Your Vegetables*. There is the hint of something darker in the recesses of childhood memories that motivated the professional success of the Hummer’s high achieving demographic. The guitar riff by Jon Florencio, lends a garage band-like quality of teenage angst to the commercial execution. The succession of intertitles suggests that society is acting like an older parent, admonishing us that they know better. The “*Whatever*” narrative pokes fun at these parental rebukes and champions a new libertarianism as the solution to postmodern cultural anxieties. The legally required disclosure “Professional driver, closed course” is undercut with *Take It Easy* and *Calm Down* which co-exist on the screen as if to anticipate viewer reaction to the disclaimer. The centertitles visually contest versions of a legalistic and over-controlled society.

The emergent ideology of the new frontiersman is all about breaking the mold and taking risks. “*Whatever*” exhorts the Hummer owner to refuse the call of the beaten track and to take the fork in the road. The daring Pat Tillmans of the world, the ‘True American Hero’, would have never chosen the path they chose if they had listened to the sage advice of elders (Bogner, 2004, p. 11C). Subsequent centertitles mock parental admonishments: *Cool Your Jets, Give it a Rest, Play it Safe*. If the professional and entrepreneurial class had played it safe, like so many bureaucrats, they never would have attained the economic success they now enjoy. Three additional centertitles echo reprimands and

¹ See for example, Frank Gado “The Passion of Ingmar Bergman”, Ingmar Bergman “The Magic Lantern”, Donald Richie Ozu, James Goodwin “Akira Kurosawa and Intertextual Cinema”, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto “Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema”, Stephen Prince “The Warrior’s Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa”, David Boyd and Barton Palmer “After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation, and Intertextuality”, Mario Falsetto “Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis”, Alexander Walker, Sybil Taylor, and Ulrich Ruchti “Stanley Kubrick, Director: A Visual Analysis”, and Mikhail Iampolski “The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film”.

² The Hummer television commercials analyzed in this paper can be seen in their entirety at the Web site of Modernista.com or by doing a Hummer + title search of YouTube.com.

³ See for example *Fanny and Alexander* for themes of childhood rebellion against the perceived overbearing control of a stern father figure.

put-downs during the teenage years – *Cut it out, Knock it off, Grow up*. A pan shot signals the close of the commercial and the Hummer exits the frame. It is the visual equivalent to “I’m outta here. I’ve had enough”. There follows a cut to a close-up of the Hummer’s imposing shock absorbers, a visual metaphor for the Hummer’s ability to dampen the up and down oscillation of life’s tribulations. The final centertitle is significant, not only because it lends it title to the commercial, but because it represents a change in point of view; the Hummer and its occupants speak back – whatever – the ultimate teen expression of indifference to authority. Ironically, ‘authority’ has the final say in the last commercial frame of “*Whatever*” with the return of the subtitled disclaimers “MSRP as shown \$53,465. Tax, title, license and other options extra.”

2.3.2. *Big race (60 second treatment) 2004*. In the next execution, “*The Big Race*” American individualism and creativity are championed. The narrative serves as a countervailing force to those who denigrate the achievements of the emergent professional class; those who see their financial success as evidence of the correctness of their convictions. The myth of individualism and its emphasis on hyper-competition, self-reliance, self-interest, personal growth and self-fulfillment are all evidenced in the commercial narrative (Shain, 1994, p. 243). The narrative advocates a type of individualism which seeks to locate value in the creative, inquiring, and discovering person who seeks personal fulfillment through existential action. S/he is personally responsible for the choices made. Such individuals however are not free of societal conventions and constraints. Thus a cultural fissure opens. Each side must choose a course of action and take sides. The narrative of “*Big Race*” addresses the cultural fissure by legitimizing a code of behavior espoused by the target audience. It is a Machiavellian code of behavior where rules may be bent to win the race.

Significantly, the soundtrack for the “*Big Race*” is *Happy Jack*, from the British classic rock group, *The Who*. “Happy Jack” may very well have had a difficult youth: “*The kids couldn’t hurt Jack. They tried and tried and tried*”. Indeed, he may not have “won the girl,” but now he has made it successful and “they” (society) cannot hold him back. ‘Happy Jack’ has done well in the game of life and it is time to unabashedly pronounce it to all.

The opening shot of “*Big Race*” features a quick zoom-in to a hand-painted notice on tree: “Race: First One Down Wins!” *Happy Jack* anthem soars on the audio track. There is a cut to a view of a treacherous, downhill derby car track. The mise-en-scene looks like the somewhere in heart of

Pennsylvania. The ‘All-American’ car requires an ‘All-American’ treatment. Jack diagrams a map of the proposed race track and visualizes the finish line. The race is serious business. There is no place for second best. Jack works in secret in a tool shed by his house. There are no parents hovering over him or offering helpful advice. Jack is resourceful; he figures things out for himself. A cute neighborhood ‘girlfriend’ finds him a spare steering wheel. To fulfill the promise of the myth, the idealized ‘Jack’ of our childhood must be successful in love as well as in war. Indeed, ethnographic studies of male HUMMER owners reveal that the purchase “was often spurred directly or indirectly by the preferences of the women most important to him” (Schulz, 2006, p. 65).

Race day has arrived, and a crowd has gathered at the starting line. We see that Jack’s car is unlike any other. It is a miniature Hummer. The Hummer gets off to a slow start – as it would in real life. Jack takes a shortcut through the perilous hills (in a scene highly reminiscent of Will Smith’s downhill daredevil drive in a Hummer in the movie *Bad Boys II*). Long telephoto shots flatten depth of field and make Jack’s Hummer descent seem impossible. His girlfriend, like the medieval princess cheering her knight at a joust, monitors his progress from afar. There follows a frenetic pace of quick zoom-ins, close-ups, and Kurasawa-like¹ blurred action pans. Jack’s ‘short cut’ wins him the race. In sum, Jack cheats. He looks back on his competitors with scorn. The mythic import of the commercial is clear; break the rules, win in real life. The final lyrics of *The Who* song provide the necessary summation for the bigger metaphor of life “And they couldn’t prevent Jack from feeling happy.” Feeling happy in this mythic rendition equals winning.

2.3.3. *First day (30 second treatment) 2004*. According to Modernista, the objective of “*First Day*” was to highlight the Hummer’s family appeal and real life utility. The advertising campaign was now targeting second wave buyers whose demographics differed from those of the first wave (Schulz, 2006, p. 63). As such, *First Day* strays from the core populist world that gave birth to the Hummer myth. In an attempt to portray the Hummer as suitable transportation for ‘soccer mums’ General Motors risks alienating core Hummer constituencies by expanding the myth treatment. Soccer mums with the financial resources to purchase a Hummer represent a natural strategic extension of the target market. This

¹ The Japanese film director, Akira Kurasawa was famous for the intensity of his action scenes in his Samurai movies. Perhaps the best examples of the effectiveness of his blurred action pans are to be found in the movie *Seven Samurai/Shichinin No Samurai* (1954) Criterion Collection DVD 2003.

demographic however is far removed from the core audience of Hummer's populist world. Appeals to soccer mums risks alienating base support for the cultural myth (Schulz, 2006, p. 80). Female Hummer owners, for example, are more likely to cite safety as a motivation for purchasing the product (Schulz, 2006, p. 66). *First Day* leverages the fact that young kids are magnetically drawn to the Hummer. However, while the narrative feeds the fantasy of the teenage die-cast toy audience, it is far removed from the core populist world of rugged individualists and off-roaders.

The opening shot is a close-up of a boy gazing apprehensively out of car window. A female off camera voice asks "First day nerves?" Next, we cut to a tall, blond, attractive woman behind the steering wheel. The camera zooms out to reveal several other kids in the rear of the Hummer. The mother asks "Want me to drop you off here so you can walk up?" The son replies nonchalantly "Na, you can pull right up." The boy looks out of the window at envious school mates who are gawking at the Hummer. The mother inquires "Sure you're going to be alright?" The boy retorts, "should be". The son gets out and walks a gauntlet of menacing looking school kids. They back away from him to make room. He coolly asks "whassup?" barely acknowledging their presence. Next, we cut to the mother lovingly observing the scene. She raises the window and smiles to herself, knowing that her son has made the right impression. We can infer that she now believes that she has made the right purchase in the Hummer, guaranteeing her kids 'street credibility'. Next, kids say "nice ride" to her son. Cut to black Hummer for the final parting shot. Mission is accomplished; both kid and mother are "cool" in this reworking of the original Hummer myth.

Contributions to research and conclusions

"*First Day*" is a transitional execution. It marks the beginning of the end of the HUMMER myth. The

H1 stopped production by the end of 2006 due to plunging demand. H2s were being heavily discounted, and a mini 'environmental' H3 was introduced in 2006. The Iraq war was unpopular and widely perceived to be not going well (CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll, December 2006). Tillman's heroic sacrifice at the hands of the enemy turned out to be a military-fabricated myth intended to hide a, perhaps equally heroic, but less marketable fratricide (Vecsey, 2008, p. D1). The grand design to export American style democracy was being replaced with more modest objectives (Kaplan, p. 197), and Americans were returning home from foreign vacations feeling unloved and misunderstood by the rest of the world. Seventy three per cent of Americans felt the country was going in the wrong direction (Pollingreport.com). The Hummer myth had lost traction. And Arnold was now trying to escape paparazzi in his Mercedes G55 SUV (Welkos, 1998).

The narrative analysis of the Hummer campaign which situates the advertising strategy within the context of cultural branding approach highlights the power and potential of cultural branding. Relative to psychological based advertising, or other micro models such as multiattribute models or even emotions based appeals, the cultural branding approach offers the power to connect products to people by tapping into powerful cultural rifts occurring in society. The challenge for culturing branding lies in the inability of marketers to control cultural fissures in society and the need to evolve the brand in the context new emerging cultural trends. One useful avenue for future research would be to examine the successfulness of advertising campaigns that have attempted to radically shift the positing of the brand based on emerging cultural trends. The *Old Spice* campaign which attempted to create a viral campaign out of the "Moustaffa" character would be one such candidate.

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