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# Narcissus myth in perfume advertising campaigns

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*The present paper focuses on an analysis from the perspective of popular culture of the myth of Narcissus which is often reflected in the advertising of perfumes, with a case study on advertising campaigns (Chanel, Dior). Advertising is a form of communication today that reuses and reinterprets the mythical repertoire frequently, thus demonstrating what a profitable resource for creative solutions it is when designing a communication strategy for marketing a product.*

Keywords: *advertising, perfume, popular culture, myth, communication studies.*

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary society, the perfume's role consists in enhancing the identity of the individual who is wearing it. Therefore, advertising will focus its efforts on the individual's self-expression reached through the use of the perfume and project a feeling onto the owner that he/she is associated with a specific fragrance. Advertising for perfumes brings to the forefront a wide variety of female and male typologies, generally built from mythologies that merge with the respective roles of woman and man. Typologies, however, meet the natural and essential aspirations of each individual to join the identity that he assumes: to be different, to become the person he likes to be or believes to be, to affirm his/her self.

At first glance, a mercantilist activity that flourished as a result of the development of capitalist societies, such as advertising, does not seem to be in any way related to the ancient stories concocted by ancient peoples to provide explanations of the unknown phenomena that have occurred in their environment. Although both discourse types are not directly correlated, advertising and myths show some similarities in their structure as well as in content and functions as described by several authors who study the vast relationship between the two domains. In order to understand this link, it is necessary to pay more attention to

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everyday advertisements in which it is easy to identify characters and motives that refer to myths. These stories are the ones that have populated literature and art for centuries, as well as films and new forms of media, and are therefore concentrated in the representations of modern man.

## 2. Literature review

This paper focuses on a popular culture analysis of Narcissus' myth that is often found in perfume advertising, in a case study on advertising campaigns (Chanel, Dior), since advertising is a form of communication nowadays that re-uses and reinterprets mythical repertoire frequently. It is therefore a way of telling how advertising uses many elements that are already established in the mind of the public, guaranteeing recognition and identification. So, as a cultural material, perfume advertising identifies the current use of patrimony myths, which is one of the main features of popular culture. According to Spiridon (2013, 100), mythical containers are often recruited from a wide range of pre-fabricated materials. The presence of myths in contemporary society seems to be unquestionable; this phenomenon can be seen in many aspects of everyday life. Thus, it is not surprising to identify the use of mythical images, characters and subjects in current texts.

Ultimately, the media has the same function as the poets and storytellers in ancient times, but it also plays an important role in creating new stories which are assumed as reinterpretations of classical stories or as results of the media industry. However, myths are not understood in the same way as they were conceived in ancient times because they no longer include the sacred or religious component. In antiquity, myths served as paradigms of behaviour, or rather, of the behaviour to be avoided. From the perspective of the myth, the taboo could be noticed, and the consequences illustrated. The myth's mechanism used the extravagant details to spice the stories, to capture attention by making them both pleasant and memorable (Hartigan 1996, 43). Due to these details, myths have maintained their popularity even after their instructive function has disappeared.

Hardt argues in his work that the role of the media in contemporary communication means "mass communication is the discourse of society that defines, organizes and determines life in its social or political manifestations" (Hardt 2004, 3). Considering its role in society, mass media is the most effective way to propagate and reformulate myths. In this way, the perpetuation of the advertising image is also due to transmediality which is another important feature of popular culture. Thus, there is a perpetual dynamic between different channels

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responding to the consumer's inclination to escape at least partially from reality (Spiridon 2013, 136). Therefore, the media transmits those stories once known to our ancestors, and that in a certain sense is an essential function because mankind resorts to narratives to attain self-awareness and to understand the symbolic and conceptual universe; which is essential for the interpretation of its existence.

In *Metamorphosis*, Ovid portrays the unfortunate story of nymph Echo, which attracted the admiration of Aphrodite because of her wonderful voice and, at the same time, the anger of Hera, wife of Zeus. The later, being deceived by the nymph' stories that covered Zeus's infidelity punishes Echo by always repeating only the last words she hears. During a hunt, Echo hopelessly falls in love with Narcissus, a young man whose immortal beauty resembles that of the gods Bacchus and Apollo. As such, Narcissus rejects the nymph's love in a gesture of arrogance. Broken-hearted, Echo asks Aphrodite for help. Aphrodite makes her disappear, leaving only a voice heard by all. Narcissus's heart was untouchable, wounding through his indifference all of those who have ever fallen in love with him. The goddess of revenge, Nemesis, decides to punish him, by making Narcissus fall in love with his own image reflected on the surface of a pond. In this way, Narcissus will feel the same pain of unrequited love that has extinguished Echo, and as a result he dies with a broken heart and vanishes leaving instead a white flower with a yellow heart on the edge of the pond. Though he understood he fell into his arrogance trap, as a hybris, he could not save himself, and so his tragic story ends with him metamorphosing.

Following this myth, advertising for designer perfumes has built up many campaigns, including television commercials with various elements that refer to this myth, the models most often used are actresses / actors, celebrities. Through the actions they perform, these models promote the feeling of an unearthly environment, where even for a moment they feel like gods / goddesses, and all of this as a result of the perfume they use. The purpose of advertising is obviously to stir up the consumer's desire to possess the object and thus to spoil himself, like the characters in the advertising spot. However, Baudrillard (2008, 98) identifies other ends of the desire, that of "the metaphorical or misdirected expression of desire, that of producing a social code of values through differentiated signs." As he also stated, advertising does not "refer to real objects, to a real world, to a reference, and sends from one sign to another, from one object to another, from one consumer to another" (Baudrillard 2008, 159). Advertising campaigns are built to create a kind of complicity among the consumers of these brands, and they reward the founding of their micro-community by embracing the product they believe in. At the same time, the brands represent the outlook on quality, image, lifestyle and status due to their promises (Nechita and Rusu 2009).

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According to the classification of general publicity techniques, Danesi (2012, 199-200) states that advertising for perfumes uses positioning, mythologization and aestheticization. Positioning refers to the identification of a specific target group for which the product is intended, mythologization uses recurring themes in collective imagination to represent some products, and aestheticization often involves the use of certain techniques mastered by visual artists. Therefore, it can be argued that advertising is one of the elements of Western culture that sustains the vitality of myths in contemporary society. As Hardt (2004, 23) highlights "advertising is the twentieth-century literature of the masses and a source of their knowledge. (...) advertising also strengthens the myths (of freedom and equality, among others) that society relies on." This statement comes in spite of the fact that, although myths and advertising seem to be completely independent discourse types, belonging to distant epochs, with different purposes and contradictory mechanisms, the truth is that they are very much related. In this way, when creative strategies are designed, advertisers appeal to those pre-existing elements that constitute the collective imagination. Those elements, archetypes, stereotypes and myths, depending on the perspectives from which they were analysed, involve a set of ideas, values and symbols that structure the mind of a community. In this way, the use of these pre-existing elements is understood as an effective resource in order to build arguments, as it helps to increase the persuasive potential of the advertising message.

## 3. Case study: Chanel Egoiste Platinum (1994), Dior Homme (2010), Dior Midnight Poison (2007), Chanel No. 5 (2009)

Handling the myth of Narcissus in advertising recalls the well-known theme of dualism, the perpetual struggle between good and evil that dwells in man, usually illustrated by its reflection, its shadow or its double. This specific myth was recurring in Victorian literature in works such as *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (1891), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson (1886), *Peter Pan* by James Barrie (1904), etc. familiarizing the general public and taking root in people's imagination. The use of themes originating from this myth in contemporary advertising will ensure the audience´s apprehension, since images such as mirrors, shadows, and portraits are recognized as clear references to dualism, as seen in the 1994 Chanel Egoiste Platinum perfume advertisement where the character struggles with his shadow (his double) in order to regain the bottle of his favourite perfume. The action in the advertising spot takes place in a modestly decorated Hausemann apartment with a large mirror that captures the reflection of modern-day Narcissus, the Italian actor Paolo Seganti, while

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the haunting voice of his shadow projected on the wall provokes him to a duel. The high stake is represented by the bottle of perfume, which is recovered and placed on the window sill, in the background being heard the echo of the female voices that chant the name of the perfume, and implicitly the flaw of its owner.

Of course, the ad ennobles this defect, the fragrance giving it a unique air. The 1994 campaign appeared four years after Chanel Egoiste's launch, but unfortunately the first version of the perfume wasn't very successful on the market. The perfume was too innovative and unusual for the average consumer, so Egoiste Platinum was launched, with a much more conservative scent than the first one and preferred by a larger group of consumers. The techniques mentioned by Danesi, namely, positioning and mythology (the poster of the campaign best sums up the influence of Narcissus´ myth) are highlighted in the case of this advertising material. In addition, from the perspective of popular culture, the re-use of a pre-existing mythical prefabrication is identified (Spiridon 2013, 103), as well as the fact that it is a transmediality receiver, this time from the literary sphere.

Another ad spot that draws attention to its mythical compound, but with a different approach from the earlier Egoiste Platinum, belongs to Dior Homme 2010, a mini-movie made under Guy Ritchie's directorial wand, his second collaboration with British actor Jude Law. This time, the tactics of promoting the luxury brand perfume change, advertisers conceived a 5-minute short film called *Un Rendez Vous*, which takes place in Paris and starts in a hotel room, furnished in '50s style. Jude Law interprets the role of the mysterious man, who carries a cryptic discussion on the phone. During the conversation, a beautiful woman, the model Michaela Kocianova, starts dressing him with a suit. During the short movie, it is understood that the woman is a chimera, and he intends to meet her in front of the Eiffel Tower. The two are going to recognize themselves because of the perfume. The soundtrack is provided by Muse whose Exogenesis Symphony piece amplifies the mystery of the actions taken. The ad illustrates a charming, confident man, a self-conscious Narcissus, and the sequence that demonstrates this occurs while he looks in the mirror and develops a monologue, repeating that he will find her. Kocianova also represents a strong woman equal to a Dior man, and a feminine version of Narcissus, the camera focuses on her while she is applying lipstick and perfume looking in the mirror, admiring herself and saying "there might be two of me: me and... naughty me". This reply is a clear reference to the reason of the double, often correlated with the Narcissus myth. The short movie reminds through its mysterious atmosphere of Ritchie's directorial signature on Jude Law's role in the Sherlock Holmes movie, namely Dr. John Watson. According to Spiridon, advertising is "ingeniously acting as a player on the vast trans-media market, starting to relate to the big screen movie" (Spiridon 2013, 137).

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The next advertising spot that reunites the popular culture features by using both the Narcissus myth and the inherent transmediality was designed for Dior Midnight Poison 2007 directed by Wong Kar Wai and starring Eva Green. A feminine version of Narcissus who embraces her beauty and sensuality, she is surrounded by mirrors and looks fascinated by her face and body in a dark blue dress like deep waters, emanating from the indulgent and voluptuous state she feels when applying perfume. In the filmed frames the presence of blue tones is remarked (intense, cobalt, marine), enhancing the atmosphere of mystery and elegance, both attributes of the perfume. The ad reminds also of Cinderella's clock that this time announces the beginning of the party; in turn, the ballroom refers to Casino Royale (2006), the last film Eva Green played in. Aestheticization is very well set up, creating an enchanting environment, the *amoeus locus* motif, often found in Ovid's writings, has become a rhetorical commonplace for literature and art, being used by advertising to reconstruct an idealized framework for the presentation of the promoted product. Eva is the personification of the perfume, she is strong and seductive, a dark beauty like the midnight and a dangerous as poison. This time too Muse contributes to the soundtrack with its Space Dementia song, whose piano and lyrics fit the story, giving a voice to the desire, the persuasion behind the image "she is my choice, it gives me everything I want". The ad is indeed an attractive one, highlighting all the strengths of the product, and taking into account what the female audience would like to see on the screen and in magazines, the poster that captures Eva admiring her reflection in the mirror. This ad campaign brings together popular culture features including the updated narrative myth and references to Cinderella’s fairy tale and Casino Royale movie, Eva's character from the Dior spot resembles her role as Vesper Lynd.

The current advertisements of the major luxury brands in the perfume industry are increasingly appealing to the promotion through the short film that reveals a beautiful story, offering a promise to the future consumer. The ad is on its way to become a miniature cinematographic work. Following this idea, we shall further focus on the happily received Chanel No. 5 (2009) campaign, whose protagonist was the French actress Audrey Tatou. Like the association between Jude Law actor and director Guy Ritchie, there is a third collaboration between Tautou and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, who directed *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001) and *A Very Long Engagement* (2004). The short film is titled *Train de Nuit*, a story about chance and destiny exploring a chance encounter between a man (Travis Davenport) and a woman (Audrey Tautou), both traveling from Paris to Istanbul by the night train, Orient Express. The destinies of the two are united by the iconic perfume. Also, in this ad fragments from the myth of Narcissus are inserted, references are suggested by the reflections of the actress and the actor

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on the train window and the shadow of the Chanel bottle that covers the protagonist while she is asleep. The beautiful faces of the two mirroring on the window are a confirmation of their harmonious fit, and the proper representations of Narcissus. The emphasis is on Tautou, which redefines Chanel No. 5 new feminine ideal: the young woman, traveling alone, strong and confident, looks into the glass of the window, while looking into her reflection, she ponders on an inner journey, from which it is expected that she will be reunited with both the past and the future. The only form of luxury she wears is reduced to the shape of a large, five-pointed star pendant on her neck. Her ruffled hair, the black dress she wears in her final sequence, her casual air, the expressive look, all speak about the effort that marks the new direction of the luxury brand, addressing a new clientele. This new direction represents the reflexes of a well-motivated team that monitors the perfume image on the market and responds in a rather modest manner, but no less esoteric approach to visualizing what essentially is more of a dream than a perfume. The promotion team used the three techniques Danesi (2012) identified in building advertising for perfumes: they identified a new target group, appealed to representations rooted in collective imagination, and created a magical tale, giving a voice to the intangible. Jeunet's directorial influence is seen in the sudden changes of frames, while Audrey's ingenuity reminds of Amelie, but also her interpretation of Coco avant Chanel (2009), directed by Anne Fontaine, playing the role of the famous fashion designer. Therefore, the commercial has two cinematic references, a valid example of contemporary transmediality.

In conclusion, all four ads divided by their central characters, whether men or women, all refer to the Narcissus myth using mirrors and shadows or specific motifs such as the double or echo of female voices. The popular culture's concepts of transmediality and pre-fabricated materials, in particular, the Narcissus myth, have also been identified and applied, because publicity often appeals to mythical containers. It is obvious that the mythical dimension is one of the characteristics of mankind, closely related to its nature. Although contemporary society is strongly influenced by technology and science, mythical stories proliferate by upgrading myths or creating new ones, and this is manifested through various means. Myths have a multifunctional character and are consistently operative in every period. In turn, advertising is one of the most influential forums in the current culture, and can also be understood as one of the most persuasive media discourse types. In essence, advertising benefits from what the use of myths involves, since the use of mythology as an advertising tool will instantly reach the imaginary collective that is already present in our society, and this, in turn, becomes a profitable resource for creative solutions when designing a communication strategy to market a product, in this case perfumes.

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