

Assignments:

1. **Summarize** the methods many US American advertising companies currently apply to sell products for their clients, according to the author. (20 %)
2. **Analyze** strategies (e.g. stylistic devices, tone, register etc.) Sonny Bunch uses to convince readers of his opinion. (40 %)
3. Choose one of the two following assignments: (40 %)
 - 3.1. Is it ethically justifiable to play with people's emotions for commercial purposes, especially when it comes to instrumentalizing the (old concept of the) American Dream in a politically divided USA?
Discuss.
 - or
 - 3.2. **Write** a letter to the editor of the Washington Post in which you critically **reflect on** the arguments raised by Sonny Bunch in his article.

Advertising sells us the American dream — and the American nightmare

By Sonny Bunch

August 19, 2021

America isn't a place so much as an aspiration. And advertising is aspirational at heart; as "Mad Men" protagonist Don Draper spent the better part of a decade teaching us, you're not selling people a product so much as a lifestyle. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that advertisers often use the ideal of America to sell us on entirely unrelated products.

- 5 And the visions of America that big corporations employ often say a lot about what they think America is. If using waving flags and cornfields to sell trucks or movies feels corny, be careful what you wish for: As a new spot shows, the alternative could be nastier and much more divisive.

- 10 When Dodge's Super Bowl ad for its Ram trucks in 2013 consisted of little more than a slide show of hard-workin' American men and women backed by Paul Harvey's 1978 speech "So God Made a Farmer," it wasn't selling a vehicle.

Any truck can haul hay; any truck can drive through a field; any truck can be parked in a barn. Dodge was selling an idea of America as a hardscrabble, self-made nation, one filled with folks who wake early, work long into the night and rarely complain.

- 15 But Dodge makes more than trucks for hard-workin' folk. Dodge makes cars that are fun, too. Fun and powerful. So when a Dodge spot from 2010 stuffed a George Washington look-alike in a Challenger and had the general take a run at a line of stuffy redcoats during the American Revolution, the company was targeting a different idea of America held by a different segment of viewers.

- 20 "Here's a couple of things America got right," a narrator says at that advertisement's end as Washington dismounts from his 250-to-425-horsepower steed and takes his place by a waving flag. "Cars. And freedom." It's a different sort of nostalgia from Harvey's, an irony-tinged yet deeply earnest appreciation of two things that make America great: our liberty and the conveyances that sustain it.

- 25 The single greatest advertisement I've ever seen for a movie makes a strikingly nonpartisan case that America can be great again, and that we all have a role in getting it there. The 1-minute 52-second teaser trailer for Christopher Nolan's 2014 film, "Interstellar," includes maybe 20 seconds of actual footage from the film. It's less an ad for a movie than for a country.

- 30 Shots of lush cornfields and the devastation of the Dust Bowl give way to a brief montage of the American side of the space race. We see Americans breaking the sound barrier. Americans putting men on the moon. American newscasters rubbing their hands with childlike joy at the wondrous things American engineers have done.

The semiotics couldn't be clearer. Matthew McConaughey provides the voice-over in his Texas-inflected twang. And there's no doubt to whom he is referring when he says "we." "We've
35 always defined ourselves by the ability to overcome the impossible. And we count these moments ... when we dared to aim higher, to break barriers, to reach for the stars." And as the viewer sees an image of the American flag on the side of a space shuttle, the crux of the thing: "We count these moments as our proudest achievements. But we lost all that."

We, we, we, we, we: the first-person plural, a unifying idea and ideal. McConaughey doesn't
40 have to say the word "America" because Nolan is showing us the America we aspire to be, the beacon of the world, humanity's last, greatest hope. "Interstellar" is selling us on the idea of America refusing to give up in the face of malaise, strife and managed decline.

A recent ad for We the People wine is a bizarre "Interstellar" teaser, an inverse nightmare
45 image of the idea of unity in resilience. The spot preys upon fears of division and disunity, using a Ronald Reagan voiceover against images of rioters dancing on police cars, supposedly disloyal athletes kneeling during the national anthem while children twerk and comedians proclaim the greatness of abortion.

The enemy of the people firmly established, the spot cuts to a montage of the loyal and the
50 good — religious figures; football players with hands over heart; soldiers saluting — and closes, jarringly, with a blurry, quick photo of a bottle of wine. The message in this ad is the opposite of the "we" in "Interstellar." "We the People" wine isn't really about we the people at all: It is about "us" and "them," us vs. them. It is purity vs. impurity, cleanliness vs. ugliness. Choose your side wisely.

The wine isn't really the product here. Instead, it's an America that is irrevocably broken,
55 Manichaeian, split. The ad asks viewers to choose a side, specifically the one that just happens to drink overpriced cabernets from California.

It's an ugly vision of the nation. But the market for it is clear. As the country tears itself apart
60 over a pandemic, and elected officials and commentators declare that we should abandon Afghans rather than risk importing a single security risk, it's all too easy to see why some brands would bet on disunity.

Words: 935

Source: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/19/advertising-sells-us-american-dream-american-nightmare/> (Last access 08/06/2023)

Annotations:

- (I. 2) "Mad Men" a recent American television series set in the 1960s
- (I. 17) redcoats a colloquial term for British soldiers in the American Revolution who typically wore red uniforms
- (I. 27) "Interstellar" the name of a dystopian film from 2014 set in a future where people struggle to survive
- (I. 33) semiotics the study of signs and symbols
- (I. 55) Manichaeian following an old religion which breaks down everything into good or evil