

MEDIA AND CULTURE

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ART SILVERBLATT

Media and Culture as Manifest
in Male Individualism

by

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We are living at an important and fruitful moment now, for it is clear to men that the images of adult manhood given by the popular culture are worn out; a man can no longer depend on them. By the time a man is thirty-five he knows that the images of the right man, the tough man, the true man which he received in high school do not work in life. Such a man is open to new visions of what a man is or could be.

Robert Bly
Iron John (preface)

The male as individualist has a long history in Western culture. Men in the West take great pride in perceiving themselves as single individuals, that each one is special, that each has a distinct character of being which sets him apart from his fellow man. With only slight variations in wording several dictionaries define individualism as, “the habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant,” and “a social theory favoring the free action of the individual,” but also as a “self-centered feeling or conduct; egoism.” (Readers’ Digest p. 757) Hence, we have the dichotomy of self-reliance vs. self-absorption.

Are there lasting positive trends afoot which can counter the male egoism evident in most mass media especially in narcissitic and misogynistic advertising? It is hoped that this paper will serve as an indicative study toward these questions. By using the Media Literacy keys regarding Cultural context, this paper will examine these issues. This paper also intends to explore how the image of male self-reliance can turn into self-absorption as manifested in current American-Western culture magazines.

I have chosen three popular magazines that offer some indication toward the current self-view of males in the mainstream: *GQ*, a men’s style and fashion magazine; *Men’s Health*, a top health and fitness magazine for men; and, *Parenting*, a magazine

focusing on child-rearing. It is hoped that these magazines will be representative samples of male demographics.

I will split my analysis of each of these magazines into two categories: advertising and written content such as editorials, letters, articles, features, etc. Again, the scope of this paper is to raise important questions, offer the author's viewpoint for consideration by others and modestly hope that the issues raised might be explored in more depth at a later date. This paper is by no means anything more than an indicative study.

As I read through each of the above magazines I was struck by several of the keys to media literacy, but saw the need to narrow my focus on cultural keys as they relate to male individualism. I quickly realized that the most powerful icon for the advertisers was the one of myth.

The Myth of Individualism and Personal Choice. Manipulation's greatest triumph, most observable in the United States, is to have taken advantage of the special historical circumstances of Western development to perpetrate as truth a definition of freedom cast in individualistic terms. This enables the concept to serve a double function. It protects the ownership of productive private property while simultaneously offering itself as the guardian of the individual's well-being, suggesting, if not insisting, that the latter is unattainable without the existence of the former.

Herbert I. Schiller

Mass Media, Power, and Ideology

Sources: Notable Selections in Mass Media (p. 189)

In GQ magazine, the articles and features provide style and fashion such as "how to" instructions, "Is Your Tie Too Short?" and "Lose the Goatee and Other Life Saving Advice." A few articles cover topical current events such as "Politics: The 20 Most Powerful People in Washington D.C." or "Would You Cheat on This Woman?" an article on actress, Uma Thurman.

As to be expected in a fashion magazine, the advertising went straight for the male ego depicting such rugged male activities as snowboarding, playing sports, or swimming, but always looking sharp in current clothing trends and wearing expensive watches. As Joseph R. Dominick states, "Advertising is directed at many forms of need fulfillment, some of them subtle and personal." (The Dynamics of Mass Communications, p. 370)

GQ appears to target the young single male who sees himself in the "hip" and "fast" lane. This person's self-image is sharp, handsome, in the know, and always on the prowl; hence, the plastering of Uma Thurman in a slip on the cover. It is entirely in step with the tone of the magazine's inner content.

As I thumbed through the advertisements in GQ I was inundated with the rugged male motif (samples attached). While the goatee may be out, as the article title on the GQ cover states, facial hair is defiantly not. Several of the ads show a man in a rugged pose sprouting either the now deplored goatee or some degree of beard stubble. The type of clothing shown in the ads also adds to the rugged male icon, hefty winter coats, and other outdoor wear, for example.

The great outdoors has always been a symbol for individualism, the pioneer spirit such as Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, Lewis & Clark, Richard Byrd, the Antarctic explorer, to name a few. All of them have become cultural myths for the lone wolf who blazes ahead scenario. Admiration for this type of male is so engrained into our culture that I found myself responding to the ads even though I know what the ads are attempting to provoke. On a second thought, however, I am fully aware that what I would think more about is how cold the outdoors in the picture looks, how alone the

man in the wilderness appears, and various other types of practical, survival responses. I also realized that as I looked at each individual ad I responded with the thought impression, “he's a rugged individualist.” But, after a moment I realized after several of these ads, ‘If every guy is out there in the woods doing this, dressed like this, just how individualistic is it?’

“Americans like to see themselves as rugged individualists, in the mold of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. However, a delicate balance exists between individualism and conformity. People who are too different become cultural rejects (nerds, geeks, etc.). The trick to rugged individualism, then, is to stand out by being the epitome of style. The Marlboro man simply leads the pack of conformists.

Art Silverblatt

*Media Literacy: Keys to
Interpreting Media Messages* (p. 224)

To Mr. Silverblatt’s mold of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood I would propose adding James Bond as the urban cowboy or city alternative to the less refined Wayne or Eastwood.

Looking at GQ demographics we quickly find the age group, 25 to 34, makes up 38% of the readership while 29% of the readership belongs to the 35 to 49 years old group. The 18 to 24 year olds make up 24% of the readership while the 50 to 64 year old males make up only 8% and the 65+ age group makes up only 1%. 91% of the readers are under 50 years of age. Over 36% of the male readers graduated college while another 37% attended college. 64% of the males have an income of \$50,000 or more, 11% have an income of \$40,000 or more, 8% at \$30,000 or more and the balance are the \$20,000 or more at 7% and the \$10,000 or more and the less than \$10,000 having 10% of the male readership between them. Clearly, the worldview of GQ is through the eyes of a young, educated, and wealthy American male.

GQ's advertising choices reflects the attitudes, values, behaviors and preoccupations of these well-to-do readers and of the "one-of-these-days-that'll be me" readers, also termed the "wannabes." Directly channeled into the myth of the rugged individual is the successful individual; hence, the advertisements for very expensive cars, watches, and exotic vacation locales throughout the pages of GQ (see attached examples). Of course, no rugged, successful individual would be complete without sexual conquest(s), virility being another aspect of his mythic make-up (see samples attached). Paraphernalia for success (in pleasure and business) include cologne and liquor choices made by our intrepid individualist at exactly the right time,

In short, the view of life presented in the pages of GQ is good, very good. In Media Literacy, Silverblatt writes, "Many political ads capitalize on our cultural self-image; not what we are, necessarily, but how we see ourselves – what we'd like to be." (p. 295) By only altering a couple of words, what Mr. Silverblatt writes about political ads can be said for consumer ads as well. I am reminded of Ricardo Monttabor's famous line, "It is better to look good than to feel good." Slightly altered to fit the message in GQ, it would read, "If you look good, you feel good."

When I turned my focus on *Men's Health* magazine I quickly saw that it shares many similarities with GQ, but because its focus is on health and fitness and not style, its motto might read, "If you feel good, you look good." Tag lines on the cover read, "Fight Fat & Win! The 15-minute Workout," "More Muscle In Just 21 Days," "Backache.....Gone!" and the telling "31 Ways To Look Better Now." While the top of the cover page banner reads, "1,047 Vital Health, Fitness & Nutrition Tips." A

staggering number of tips! Apparently, in the world of men's health you cannot have too much information.

The readership demographics for *Men's Health* magazine is as follows: 18 to 24 year olds at 21%, 25 to 34 year olds at 28%, 35 to 49 year olds at 33%, 50 to 64 year olds at 14% and 65+ seniors at 4%. *Men's Health* appears to have a slightly larger number of "older" men readership than does *GQ*. but not much more by the time the men are over 50. 33% of its subscribers graduated college and nearly 36% attended college. In regards to income nearly 64% of the male readers make \$50,000 or more, only 9% make \$40,000 or more, 10% make \$30,000 or more, 8% make \$20,000 or more, nearly 6% make \$10,000 or more and under 3% make under \$10,000. It would appear that the 50 and above year olds may be rugged individuals, but they are also concerned about their health.

There are more articles on a wider range of topics in *Men's Health* than there are in *GQ* magazine, perhaps implying that there is more "out there" than just good clothes, fantastic vacation spots and good food and drink. On closer inspection, however, the individualist who reads *Men's Health* and the individualist who reads *GQ* have more in common than not. *Men's Health* is rife with rugged male models posing to sell all kinds of products. The standard cars, clothes, and watches are ever prevalent.

The *Men's Health* articles offer interesting topics such as a profile of Sir Bob Geldof and his child custody battle with his ex. The table of content summary states, "His high profile and bitter battle with Paula Yates over their children makes the former Boomtown Rat well qualified to illustrate the male viewpoint on custody issues." Another article is on Dr. Anthony Busuttill, the international expert in forensic pathology,

best known for his work after the Lockerbie disaster involving Pan Am Flight #103. He “delivers a unique and, at times, gruesome insight into the things that kill us.” In the guise of pop psychology, another article is entitled, “Let Her Pick You Up.” The writer, a woman, advises men how to spot the “Man-eating females” so that they can become “her dish of the day.” The author writes, “Men have a hard job. They have to be approachable and kind, yet they must show the power and status that women are attracted to.” The above quote from the article belies the seemingly cheesy topic of “pick-up tactics” which the title implies.

Men's Health advertisements on the other hand, could be interchangeable with *GQ* magazine. As already stated, instead of health or fitness oriented advertisements, the ads run an all too familiar gambit with clothing, cologne, cars, women, and watches. In fact, the Omega watch ad has Pierce Brosnan (our current James Bond) as the model (see attachment). The advertisements seek to reinforce the existing self-image mythos of the rugged individual male who's at the top of his own game and therefore at the top of everyone else's (see attachments).

The people who populate the ads of *GQ* and *Men's Health* magazines are upbeat, healthy, in-the-know, sexy, and independent. The ads convey, "They don't need you, but you need them." The men in the ads are in control of their own destinies. A wise-cracking tone to the writing gives it a chummy feel. The attitude is the writer is just like you while the ads emanate, “You are (can be) one of us.”

As Silverblatt goes on to write in Media Literacy, “American ads frequently tap into cultural myths....the worldview of advertising is optimistic. Even the most troublesome problems can be resolved through the acquisition of consumer goods We can ...

assume control of our own destinies through prudent consumerism.” (p. 223). It would seem in today’s modern-Western culture, ironically, the rugged individual in the ads is best serving his purpose in life as a leader of conformity, a Pied Piper of consumerism.

In Robert Bly’s book, *Iron John*, he writes about the continuing evolution of what it is to be a man in Western culture.

We talk a great deal about “the American man,” as if there were some constant quality that remained stable over decades, or even within a single decade. The men who live today have veered far away from the Saturnian, old-man-minded farmer, proud of his introversion, who arrived in New England in 1630 ... In the South, an expansive, motherbound cavalier developed, and neither of these two “American men” resembled the greedy railroad entrepreneur that later developed in the Northeast, nor the reckless I-will-do-without culture settlers of the West. Even in our own era the agreed-on model has changed dramatically. (p. 1)

Lamenting a spiritually bankrupt male psyche, Bly would no doubt be horrified at advertisers’ manipulation of male self-concepts. Bly made a huge distinction between the individual male who was trying to attain some degree of self-knowledge and the culturally chained male who was only striving to reinforce his materialistic self-belief through external deeds and actions. “I speak of the Wild Man ... and the distinction between the savage man and the Wild Man is crucial ... The savage mode does great damage to soul, earth, and humankind; we can say that though the savage man is wounded he prefers not to examine it. The Wild Man, who has examined his wound resembles a Zen priest, a shaman, or a woodsman more than a savage (Preface X).

The great psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) proposed an alternative to individualism, he dubbed it individuation. This was a conscious process by an individual who wished to achieve a higher level of being or, if you will, a complete wholeness of being. Such a topic is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important

to recognize an alternative approach to individualism that, in its process, removes the self-absorption cycle and promotes the completeness of the male as a whole individual.

Part of the charm, allure and enticement of consumerism is that it is tied to self-identity, to the discovery of self through the purchase of material items. The “I have the really cool manly things therefore I must be cool and manly,” mind-think. I contend that advertising which appeals to male individualism is so successful because men are consciously and unconsciously striving to know who they are. These attempts to “know themselves” can be expressed in terms of fads, fashions and crass consumerism, or they can take on a more sinister turn.

In the case of men, there are many who either had no initiation into manhood or who had psuedo-initiations that failed to evoke the needed transition into adulthood. We get the dominance of Boy psychology. Boy psychology is everywhere around us and its marks are easy to see. Among them are abusive and violent acting out behaviors against others, both men and women; passivity and weakness, the inability to act creatively or effectively in one’s own life and to engender life and creativity in others (both men and women); and, often an oscillation between the two -- abuse/weakness, abuse/weakness.

Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette
King, Warrior, Magician, Lover (Preface XVI)

Unfortunately, when so many are under the influence of Boy psychology infantile behavior reigns supreme, “It seems that we as a species live under the curse of infantilism – and maybe always have But at least there used to be structures and systems – rituals – for evoking a greater level of masculine maturity ... All that is changed now, cashed in for personal wealth and self-aggrandizement, the currency of the day....”(p. 6) As the old saying goes, “The only difference between Men and Boys is the price of their toys.”

One structure that still has a multitude of rituals and rites of passage, if one is brave enough to try it, is parenting. In becoming a father, many men are able to realize aspects of themselves that until then had lain dormant. More today than ever, men from culturally diverse backgrounds are playing active roles in their families lives. Some men are taking on the role of "most active parent" or going as far as to be the chief nurturer while the wife goes to work. A high profile example of this was John Lennon and Yoko Ono. John stayed at home with Shawn while Yoko went into Apple Studios and conducted Lennon/Beatle business.

Yet, while more and more men are readily accepting the role of father, many more are still stuck in the past. "Absentee Dad" is still an active word in many households. Drug, alcohol, and physical abuse still abound in many homes. Perhaps with all the past history and current infractions, it is small wonder that society at large still chooses to see men as the secondary parent or worse. Now and again there are exceptions, but for the most part men hold an invisible role in mainstream culture's ideas and approaches to childrearing.

In searching for my third magazine I quickly discovered that men were lucky to be represented at all in parenting magazines. I settled for *Parenting* magazine because of the three parenting magazines I found, *Parenting* implied to me that men were represented. When I opened to the table of contents I was rewarded with a picture of a man smiling as he leaned his right ear toward the bare belly of presumably his pregnant wife. The caption reads, "What he sees when you're pregnant." This was not the male parenting angle I had hoped for, but at least it was a start. One article is entitled "Mom Envy" and I thought I might have something here: Dad jealous of Mom

and the Baby. But, no, the article is about Moms who have well-behaved kids vs. Moms who have ill-behaved kids. A monthly column entitled, "Your Relationships" featured an article, "Love and War: When you fight in front of the kids, it's easy to forget who's listening." The writer, a woman, relates the article in first person, but the topic includes the male parent as well. Luckily, men are present in the magazine, but any form of male individualism is basically non-existent. For any male who is self-absorbed or at the very least self-centered this can be disconcerting. However, for a male seeking individuation, reading a magazine such as *Parenting* can be quite liberating.

Parenting magazine has a total subscription base that is 44% higher than GQ's and 18% higher than *Men's Health*. Slightly more than 18% of the subscribers are men with nearly 14% of those falling in the 25 to 49 years old range. Between 25 to 34 years old and 35 to 49 years old the male readers are practically 50/50. The men who read *Parenting* magazine are educated with 32% graduating college and 30% having attended some college. Income levels reflect a similar leveling with nearly 59% making \$50,000 or more. The \$40,000 or more group made up 13% of the male subscribers. Over 10% of the men make \$30,000 or more. Surprisingly, 3% of the subscribers are in the under \$10,000 a year category.

While male individualism is non-existent, a male/father/husband presence does exist. In bold over-sized type, one article states, "40: percentage of working fathers who say they'd be stay-at-home dads if their spouse earned enough money for the family to live comfortably." Also, a few ads have a dad or husband in the picture. And, the last monthly column, on the last page of the magazine is called, "last word." This month's feature is entitled, "How to raise Mom and Dad. Instructions from an older

sibling to a younger one.” The last ad, on the back page shows a family lying on the grass looking out at the reader: a mom, two sons and a dad.

Most of the advertisements depict children in various activities and in various stages of growth. While little girls dominate, little boys are represented throughout. Other ads are from the mother’s point of view or reflecting her concerns. The worldview depicted is one of caring, sensitive and problem-solving mothers, and to a lesser degree, fathers. There is an inference of cohesion between the articles, features and advertisements.

Of course, parenting is not for everyone. Even being an Uncle or “adopted” Uncle is more than some men can handle. On the other hand, the Big Brothers organizations and others like are successful for a reason. Men are discovering that the “old ways” are not the only ways and that indeed as Bly espoused, much of the old ways should die. But if the 60’s and 70’s taught us anything, we are not all Alan Alda’s either. (Alda came to represent the sensitive, nurturing male type during the 70’s and 80’s.) In attempting to truly achieve male individualism, taking individuation as the verb and individualism as the object, we must each decide who we are and how we can best meet our own needs and therefore the needs of those around us for whom we care.

By utilizing our media literacy skills, we might see that the magazines are on to something with their informative, sometimes witty and always caring articles which say we are not alone, we are a tribe. And yes, next to these articles are the rugged, individualistic, self-promoting advertisements which scream “You are worth something! Buy it!”

However, instead of conforming to the consumerist pack and thinking we are all individuals because of what we buy, perhaps we can achieve a kind of liberating-caring, a state of mind achieved through our actions that helps us manifest our true individual worth, like the Zen priest, the shaman, the woodsman, or even the king/warrior/magician/lover.

Our effectiveness in meeting these challenges is directly related to how we as individual men meet the challenge of our own immaturity. How well we transform ourselves from men living our lives under the power of Boy psychology to real men guided by the archetypes of Man psychology will have a decisive effect on the outcome of our present world situation.

King, Warrior, Magician, Lover (p. 145)

If ours is an age of individualism in the deepest as well as in the most shallow sense, then let us be individuals!

King, Warrior, Magician, Lover (p. 143)

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