

*Scary Monsters... and Super Creeps* (2012)

Combining cinematic visuals, deadpan delivery, the innocence of youth and spiritual choral music, Monster.com's award winning ad *When I Grow Up...*<sup>1</sup> employs an insidious montage of ideology and humiliation in its pitch to sell job opportunities. Highly stylized visuals are often used by advertisers to seduce consumers and this ad, produced by Mullen Advertising, does not hold back. But, beyond the artful design, Mullen furtively exploits psychology to pander to our fears and desires around attaining the American Dream. Featuring children of different races, each shown against a backdrop of the American landscape - specifically Middle America - Monster.com's message is delivered. Out of the mouths of babes comes our degradation and shame. As our failures and weaknesses are spoken aloud we respond, likely in the privacy of our own thoughts, in an attempt to validate our position in society or, even worse, in self-deprecation. Writing about the use of montage in advertising, Robert Goldman says, "Each person is presented as a node on the communication network. Instead of a single narrative voiceover, the serial montage compiles the narration as the sum of the participant's voices. In such ads, the narrative often takes the form of a litany. Or, more precisely, it registers as litany because of the way it is performed."<sup>2</sup> While the visuals are beautiful and compelling the sum total of the young voices and their scathing assessment of the adults on whom they depend is potent. All at once subtle and overt, *When I Grow Up...* is like a scary monster creeping around in the shadows of our unconscious waiting to pounce on our weaknesses.

Interestingly, from the perspective of the advertising world the ad was a huge success: it was the winner of the *Advertising Age* Best of Show commercial for 1999: "*When I grow up. . .*

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<sup>1</sup> *When I grow up...* Monster.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myG8hq1Mk00>.

<sup>2</sup> Goldman, Robert. Papson, Stephen. Kersey, Noah. *Landscapes of Global Capital*. St. Lawrence University. Canton, NY. 1998-2003. Web.

hits the nerve to become a defiant manifesto... IT WAS CLEVER. It was funny. It was poignant. It was inspirational. It was motivating. It was surprising. It was daring. Director, Bryan Buckley, who cast real looking kids instead of child actor stereotypes, mined the text for irony instead of punch lines... *'When I grow up...'* became an anthem, a mantra, a defiant manifesto of employee dissatisfaction."<sup>3</sup> And for Monster.com it was a tremendously successful boost to business: "Before the Super Bowl, Monster.com's traffic was running at about 1.5 million unique visitors per month. For the remainder of 1999, it averaged 2.5 million visitors per month. And the number of resume searches, on the day after the Super Bowl, increased by a factor of 300."<sup>4</sup> This analysis and data says a great deal about the effectiveness of the ad from the industry's perspective. But it falls short in its analysis of the psychological impact of the message on the consumer: if you have not attained the American Dream, you are unambitious, subservient, even sycophantic. No sensitivity is shown to the unjustly unemployed or working class. The ad was, in my opinion, in no way an anthem, a mantra, a defiant manifesto of employee dissatisfaction but rather a keen example of the Machiavellian tendencies of advertising and a misguided notion of the American Dream.

Fortunately, as some scholars fear the commercialization of culture, they devise ways of measuring the cultural character of advertising. They are evaluating the complex and layered ways in which advertising mirrors social values. *When I grow up...* exemplifies how, in the construction of advertisements, some cultural values are addressed and others discarded. Richard W. Pollay, advertising historian and Professor of Marketing at the University of British Columbia writes, "Advertising has recently been termed 'The distorted mirror'. The conventional mirror metaphor is apt because advertisements do reflect a culture. The mirror is

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<sup>3</sup> Garfield, Bob. "*Monster.com: Best of Show*". Advertising Age 71. 23. May 29, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

distorted, however, because advertising reflects only certain attitudes, behaviors, and values. It models and reinforces only certain life-styles and philosophies, those that serve the seller's interests."<sup>5</sup> For scholars these insights may seem obvious but, for the average viewer, the implications likely pass by unnoticed. It requires a heightened sense of criticality to comprehend the hidden agenda and psychological manipulation employed by the advertising world. Advertisers and advertising agencies capitalize not only on our naiveté or ignorance but also on the ubiquitous onslaught of advertising. Robert Goldman writes, "More often than not the actual act of constructing significance is accomplished without much reflexivity. Since the advertising structure is so familiar to us, the routinized act of valorizing an advertisement takes only a minimal amount of attention and agency."<sup>6</sup> Both the distorted mirror and the lack of reflexivity allow for a great deal of manipulation on the part of advertisers. Carefully crafted to operate differently on conscious and subconscious levels, the true beneficiary of advertising is often not clear.

In regards to the advertiser, let us consider Monster.com's mission: "to inspire people to improve their lives."<sup>7</sup> Is the improvement of one's life predicated on one's place in the corporate hierarchy? This seems simplistic and narrow, the vast majority of American workers will never have access to corporate upper echelons. Moreover, the advertisement does not encourage viewers to seek education or training. Nor does it inspire people to find creative ways to make the best of a bad economy. Nowhere does it address prevalent issues of low pay or lack of jobs. And it most definitely does not reflect corporate America's reluctance to share the profits. The job listings on Monster.com's website reveal that they are, in actuality, an unlikely resource for

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<sup>5</sup> Pollay, Richard W. & Gallagher, Katherine. *Advertising and Cultural Values: Reflections in the Distorted Mirror*. *International Journal of Advertising*, 1990, 9. 364.

<sup>6</sup> Goldman.

<sup>7</sup> *Who we are*. Monster's Mission. 2012. Web. 11/3/2012.

attaining the American Dream. Most of their listings are for low to moderate paying jobs in fields that offer few opportunities for advancement: couriers, dental assistants, paralegals, security guards. These are all very respectable jobs but hardly stepping stones to upper management positions. Considering that the prestigious Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania has 5,000 undergraduate MBA, executive MBA, and doctoral students; more than 9,000 annual participants in executive education programs; and a powerful alumni network of 91,000 graduates<sup>8</sup> all well-groomed for upper management positions in companies around the world, it seems unlikely that the average American worker would be able to compete. Add in the graduates of the Ivy League schools and other respected programs and one can easily deduce that the accessibility to upper management job opportunities requires far more than anything Monster.com could possibly offer.

Clearly *When I grow up...* speaks to the American Dream. But their attempt to assert that anyone can make it or that anyone can be successful is twisted. Rather than encouraging actions that potentially lead to a path of greater achievement, it victimizes those whose ambitions and desires fall short. In contrast to Monster.com's approach, competitor Career Builder portrayed a different sort of victimization in their Super Bowl ad, *Parking Lot*.<sup>9</sup> They relied far less on touting cultural values and more on overt humor. The ad's premise is that if a bunch of monkeys are faring better than you in the job world, you need Career Builder's help. After all, we can't have a bunch of monkeys making fools of us. The ad ended up evoking quite a bit of controversy. On ere.net John Zappe explains, "Over at The Wall Street Journal, a panel of chief marketing and creative executives and others experts liked the CareerBuilder ad. Lars Bastholm, Chief Creative Officer, Ogilvy New York, offered this opinion: 'Monkeys are always a winner...

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<sup>8</sup> *About Wharton*. Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, 2012. Web. 11/3/2012.

<sup>9</sup> *Parking Lot*. Careerbuilder.com. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRDx18GYITw>.

monkeys are a good, safe choice.” However, “This year’s *Parking Lot*’ ad brought a complaint from the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, opposing the use of monkeys in advertising. Bringing back the monkeys may have scored with the experts and with the newspaper ad panel, but in Facebook voting its mere 68 Likes (as of the time this was written) puts it pretty far down the list.”<sup>10</sup> It is disturbing to me that in the public’s view, an ad that resorts to fear and anxiety is so admired whereas an essentially benign (albeit still problematic) ad is panned. It is my opinion that in both cases the experts got it very wrong: neither slick cinematic montage nor funny monkeys are a good, safe choice. In Monster.com’s ad the cinematic is a thin veil for psychological abuse and in the Career Builder’s ad humor is a thin veil for the abuse of animals. It seems, in the advertising battle for corporate profit, abuse is merely collateral damage... Machiavellian indeed.

Airing to a massive cross section of the American TV viewing audience during Super Bowl XXXIII, *When I grow up...* stealthily entered the American psyche. Artfully-crafted and seductive, the styling veiled the message: if you are not at the top, you have failed to make good on the American Dream - and it is your fault! Even more maliciously though, it asserted that to be middle management, office workers, struggling for higher pay, subservient, essentially in any way at the mercy of upper management is nothing less than humiliating. We are drawn into this ideological mind fuck like lambs to the slaughter. Judith Williamson writes, “We see that the form of advertisements is a part of ideology, and involves a false assumption which is the root of all ideology, namely that because things are as they are (in this case, because certain things are shown as connected, placed together etc.), this state of affairs is somehow natural, and must 'make sense' simply because it exists.”<sup>11</sup> All of this effort and cruelty just to steer some business

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<sup>10</sup> Zappe, John. *CareerBuilder’s Monkey Ad Is Super Bowl Favorite*. Ere.net. Web. Feb 7, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Williamson, Judith. *Decoding Advertisements*. Marion Boyars. London, UK. 1978. P29.

to Monster.com. I have no doubt that Monster.com is able to help people find work, yet it is highly unlikely that they are a portal to the American Dream. Driving our consumerism and sense of self, the monstrous psychological chicanery of advertising creeps in under the radar, seemingly beyond our comprehension. As criticality appears to be a luxury of academics and institutions, the American Dream remains an ungraspable dangling carrot. Yet advertisers are well aware that the concept of the Dream is still a dominant gravitational force in the American ethos. If we are unable to raise the collective consciousness and empower consumers to see through advertisers tactics then advertisers will continue to chip away at our self-esteem and our already strained bank accounts. Countless tales of myth, literature and popular culture tell us that the monster can be defeated. It is a daunting task.



Still image from *When I grow up...* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myG8hq1Mk00>

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