

Hero as Salesman; Salesman as Hero: The Heroic Art of Representation

Marc Baldwin

With regular predictability, public opinion polls inform us that among the most admired Americans are celebrities in the music or film industry. According to those same polls, the least trusted, and thus one could assume the least admired, Americans are usually car salesmen. That's the commonly perceived dichotomy: celebrities as heroes, salesmen as villains. Yet, one wonders how the public feels when their celebrities turn into salesmen. Eric Clapton plays well the guitar, is called a superstar and thus elevated to heroic stature. Ray Charles, Phil Collins, Elton John, Michael Jackson and Paula Abdul, to name just a few more, also play their instruments well, whether it's a piano, a voice, or a gifted pair of dancing legs. They are some of America's superstars and heroes who, on the side, earn huge commissions selling beer and soft drinks in glitzy TV ads. They take the money and run.

Neil Young, a rock guitarist and songwriter now in his late forties and still going strong, took such commercial endorsements to task in his 1988 release "This Note's For You." Obviously spinning off Budweiser's slogan, "This Bud's For You," Neil sings:

Ain't singin' for Pepsi
Ain't singin' for Coke
I don't sing for nobody
Makes me look like a joke
This note's for you

Just how many of Michael Jackson's or Eric Clapton's fans perceive them as "jokes" is impossible to gauge, but as of this writing neither their album sales nor their popularity has waned. Bob Merlis, Vice-President/National Publicity Director for Warner Brothers Records, believes that although the recording industry is ambivalent regarding commercial endorsements, they do favor the "enhanced exposure" since the record buying public "doesn't seem to have a problem" with the practice. Young affirms, however, that when he performs

122 Journal of Popular Culture

“Note” in concert, it elicits “more of a crowd response than anything I’ve ever written.... The song draws a line, and we knew people would have to stand on one side or the other” (“MTV Nixes” 25). According to Merlis, however, Young’s is a minority position, for “rock and roll is by definition commercial music. Artistic purity is a relatively new notion.”

Ironically, although the notion of artistic purity may not be a problem for the public, it is for the sponsors. Pepsi abruptly canceled Madonna’s much ballyhooed commercial when they judged her “Like A Prayer” video to be too impure for Pepsi’s image. And for MTV, the music channel which showcases rock videos, Young’s “Note” was definitely not a funny “joke”: sensitive to their sponsors’ dollars, they banned the video. So much for free speech which debunks the devices of Madison Avenue.¹

Out of the limelight and on the far side of popularity reside the unknown men and women who sell things merely to survive. Though considered a superstar or hero only if he becomes fabulously wealthy—take Michael Milken or Donald Trump, for instance—the salesman, too, is playing a game or an instrument. His game, however, is not a spectator sport or one with rules, television exposure or media hype, nor is his instrument musical or otherwise entertaining. Rather, the salesman’s everyday game is all too real and every bit as heroic, for although the monetary stakes are smaller, the salesman plays his game for sheer financial subsistence.

Salesmen perform an essential function in a competition-oriented, free enterprise, market economy: the goods, once manufactured, must be sold. Salesmen determine a company’s relative profitability and market share, for without salesmen, the fickle public would be left to decide for themselves what product to buy. Companies need salesmen to assure their profitability; a market-based economy needs profitable companies; thus, our country needs salesmen in order to remain competitive in domestic and foreign markets. Successful salesmen are heroes to their companies; they are rewarded with bonuses, toasted at annual sales conventions, held up before their peers and associates as representatives worth emulating, model citizens in their community. And to many of their families they are heroes, as well; a good provider is a heroic husband and father.

A historical reality, the very embodiment of capitalism, the salesman has enjoyed a privileged position in our society from its inception. None other than that great American hero Benjamin Franklin, himself, touted the heroic virtues of making money. In his autobiography, Franklin quoted the Proverbs: “Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings” (Prov. 22: 29). Cotton Mather often made use of the same verse in his sermons which have since become known as the American Gospel of Success. In *The Hero*

American Style, Marshall Fishwick notes that in the mid-nineteenth century “the heroic model became the American businessman” (85). The nadir of vulgar analogizing was the 1924 book *The Man Nobody Knows* which depicted Jesus as history’s greatest salesman. Written by an advertising executive, Bruce Barton, *The Man* claimed that Jesus, in forming a sales organization of his disciples, was the founder of modern business. The book was a bestseller, perhaps confirming both the sales profession’s ideological permeation of American society and its attendant hunger for heroic models.

Finally, in 1950, American salesmen crowned one of their own a superstar to idolize and emulate. On February 27, 1950, the subject of *Time* magazine’s cover story was TV’s biggest star, the \$1 million per year phenomenon, a salesman named Arthur Godfrey. Godfrey, reported *Time*, “is the top moneymaker and outstanding personality on the air” (“Oceans” 72). This “greatest salesman who ever stood before a microphone” enjoyed his stardom because he was, according to CBS Board Chairman William Paley, “a wistful projection of the average guy” (qtd. in “Oceans” 72). The average guy *is* a salesman and in Godfrey he found his heroic ideal: a salesman as television star.

Nonetheless, despite such an entrenched position so shored up by historical, mythical and televised privileging, salesmen are keenly suspected by the very public of which they comprise such a large share. Of course, the source of that suspicion is the salesman’s notorious reputation for mis-representing reality, for distorting the truth, for, in plain words, lying to make the sale. In effect, salesmen are playing the classic American confidence game. As Gary Lindberg says of con men in *The Con Man in American Literature*, a salesman:

is a covert cultural hero for Americans.... It is not our official pieties that he represents but our unofficial reward systems, the strategies that we have for over two centuries allowed to succeed. He clarifies the uneasy relations between our stated ethics and our tolerated practices. (3-4)

The truly heroic salesman—one who never misrepresents, who is always honest and forthright both to his company and his customer—is a mythical being, an ideological creation. There may exist a few men and women of such heroic integrity, but they are, alas, aberrations, for salesmen are soldiers in the war between companies. Since sales executives are paid to execute the competition, one company’s ruthless executioner becomes the other company’s hero. Recall that Machiavelli, the master philosopher of power and warfare, believed man’s nature to be not genteel and honest, but brutish, greedy and deceitful. According to Machiavelli, the very essence of man, his normal communicative mode, is lying. As he so frankly noted, in war questions of

124 Journal of Popular Culture

morality and integrity, honesty and brotherhood, are at once irrelevant, naive, counter-productive and immaterial. Further, as Max Weber stated in his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: "Absolute and conscious ruthlessness in acquisition has often stood in the closest connection with the strictest conformity to tradition" (58).

Of course, this unflattering reality is backgrounded, suppressed by the dominantly foregrounded corporate image represented in staged multi-million dollar productions starring the heroes of popular culture, performing artists: movie stars, rock stars, superstar athletes, etc. Corporations employ the public's heroes to hawk their wares precisely because the heroes are not salesmen. A mythical, untouchable, larger than life symbol of success, the beautiful, talented figureheads need merely appear on screen; their presence is their pitch. In a highly expressionistic dislocation of external reality, the heroes project themselves into a sensually personal consumption of the product. In this radically unreal vision, where fantasies are actualized, the product contains the satisfaction of suppressed desires. Our heroes represent what we lack, thus reinforcing both our admiration for them and our desire for their approval. The historian Kenneth Burke calls the ad men "economic mercenaries...[who] create...commercially stimulated desire" (332-33).

Obviously, for the cognizant consumer, this process is transparent. Yet, doublethink is at work here, for although with one side of our mind we know it's all an absurd performance, with the other side of the same mind we buy it because it *is* a performance *by* a heroic image we have always already bought. In so doing, in so willfully accepting this misrepresentation, we have participated in a ritualized rehearsal of the actual negotiating process. As an ideological apparatus of the corporate state, advertisements which feature our heroes endorsing products serve a vital function in reinforcing what's been inscribed into us since our objectification as customers: that in sales negotiations, absurd claims and outright lies are acceptable, because it's not really lying, it's business. Michael Jordan and Bo Jackson can play ball like they do because they wear Nikes; M.C. Hammer would be just another dull lounge singer if he drank Coke instead of Pepsi. And Ronald Reagan might never have been elected President if he had not been a hero in grade-B movies and the image of the model man in the Van Heusen shirt ads.

Reagan's is a particularly interesting case for, as actor and salesman turned "statesman," his image is most decidedly his substance. In *Reagan's America*, Garry Wills credits Reagan's success to his "endlessness of surface that becomes a kind of depth" (371). According to a General Electric publicity director, Reagan was fond of saying of himself, "We sell the difference," and for him the difference was "appearance" (qtd. in Wills 283). He became what

Hero as Salesman 125

Jeane Kirkpatrick called a “ ‘symbol specialist’...a supplier of entertainment, comfort, distraction, and healing symbols, entirely a creation of the media” (qtd. in Wills 101).

Reagan’s launching pad to success, to public acceptance of both his image as a leader and consequently his career as a politician, was determined and manufactured by his numerous roles: in movies, in Van Heusen shirt ads, as actor, host and Public Relations man for General Electric and their “General Electric Theatre” television show and as the “host” for 20 Mule Team Borax’s “Death Valley Days” television show. Many of his movie roles and the TV shows associated him with the metaphor of the quest: Reagan became America’s self-made man in an often hostile, warlike environment, leading the nation and the side of right against Nazis, Indians, government, and/or blistering desert heat. Whether warfaring or wayfaring, Reagan became an American hero, the man to rely on to get us through the tough times. Robert Metzger, in his *Reagan: American Icon*, notes that:

Warner Brothers had molded him...[as] the decent common man, the ordinary guy next door whose rugged but responsible individualism was unambiguous and incorruptible. He was a dutiful, democratic man of principle, courage, stoicism, and integrity in the best American tradition. (20)

He acted just well enough to get by, but not too well to distance him from us. He was always himself, always Ronald Reagan, no matter what the role. Says Metzger, Reagan “maintained the ability to inhabit his own identity to the fullest” (21). It was precisely because he was not a brilliant actor that he was able to sell his part and make us believe that we too could sell our parts. In his mediocre good cheer, he was always, paradoxically, “real,” never really a heroic warrior, or a Van Heusen man, or a mule team driver. It was always a role, a game, fun, the way life should be and is when he’s around. Reagan became the image of America, where business is selling is acting is pleasure. The equation equaled presidency and unprecedented popularity. Even with the Iran-Contra affair, the nation simply could not believe that Reagan lied because he never lied, really, he just acted, and that’s business, that’s his job.

As a celebrity, Reagan was canonized by stardom, elevated to icon status and thus, like an advertised product, was problematically metaphorized beyond belief. As a metaphor, Reagan became not unbelievable, but exempt from questions of belief, for metaphors cannot lie because they are by nature the troping or yoking of disparate things. One does not expect a metaphor to tell “the truth”; one simply admires and goes along with the lie of its make-believe “truth.”

Having considered both the historical privilege and presidential precedent

126 Journal of Popular Culture

for selling lies as truth, I would like now to turn to an extended look at one industry and the disparity and contradictions between its media/marketing image and its down and dirty, one-on-one street warfare, more euphemistically known as sales techniques. In the automobile business, they don't sell cars, they sell heroic metaphors. Pontiac sells not cars, but "excitement"; Chevrolet is not merely another automobile, it is the "heartbeat of America"; Oldsmobile's cars are the "new generation," capable of whisking Leonard Nimoy and his daughter off into outer space. Patently absurd, one and all. But heroic. And Joe Izuzu parodies car salesmen with his blatant lies while at the same time saving his customers from the misrepresentations of Toyota. Recall how Joe heroically rescues people who are just about to buy the competition's lies. Again, although we see through this, we are nonetheless being indoctrinated into expecting it, into accepting it, into playing along with it. It's okay for our heroes to misrepresent, because it's all a performance, all part of the game.

This assimilation of the lie to an entertainment-type value effectively blurs the message. Bruce Springsteen's 1984 megahit, "Born in the U.S.A.," perfectly demonstrates this phenomenon of radical misrecognition and tolerance as repression. The lyrics clearly mark "Born" an anti-anthem, an ironic protest of the dark, repressed side of America's role in Vietnam and its disgraceful treatment of vietnam veterans. Yet, despite what the verses say, the public seems only to have heard the chorus, misrecognizing it as a patriotic anthem. About the lie of American society and the contradiction between the hero and the reality, "Born" has been, nonetheless, received as a positive, nationalistic song of American pride. Lee Iacocca offered Springsteen \$11 million to use it in Plymouth commercials. He turned it down. President Reagan even cited it and Springsteen as an example of the young American spirit during his 1984 re-election campaign. Madison Avenue must have grinned delightedly at such misrecognition, at Springsteen being unwittingly turned into a salesman of American chauvinism, a hero of car salesmen and presidents. As epitomized in Reagan's case, our corporations thrive upon just such entertaining lies, on peddling the persuasive message that it's okay for our heroes to also be salesmen, because salesmen are heroes, rescuing the unsuspecting public from the competition.

There's a curious thing about competition: nearly everyone will espouse the party line that's been inscribed into them since birth, that competition is great, wonderful, the American way. But ask them about competition in their own business, in their own town and the answer becomes less enthusiastic. Ask about direct competition right down the street, and they become defensive, closer to asserting that there's just not enough room for both themselves and their competition. Heroes at a distance or on your own side are idolized and

idealized, but someone else's hero challenging your territory is an enemy. Competition and opposition breeds and pits heroes against heroes.

Every day, every moment on the job the car salesman must live and do battle in stifling proximity to his stiff competition. Unlike the heroes in commercials, he has no fans and no admiring public. His lines aren't scripted for him by a Madison Avenue advertising phenom. And therein lies a critical difference between the hero salesman and the salesman hero: the real life salesman lives in a logocentric world. His survival hinges upon his rhetorical ability to sell not the steak but its sizzle, to customize a deal for each customer, to represent not only a car but himself. He must verbalize the expression of desire and sell it to the stranger before him, face to face, not on a TV screen. The hero far removed and canonized by the screen has the advantage of speaking or singing scripted verses on a closed set. The car salesman must adlib for a live audience. The hero is the set-up man, the car salesman must close the deal. The hero's performance is short and sweet, the car salesman's is often a long, ugly battle. The teleology of his sales pitch is to convince the customer that he's not lying. The moment of truth, as it were, is when the salesman says "It's a good deal" and the customer signifies his belief by signing his name. When speech gives way to writing, when closure is achieved, when the contract has been signed, representation corresponds to the ideal and mimesis has triumphed.

Rhetorically speaking, the entire sales procedure demands heroic fortitude. The salesman must bravely control and lead a total stranger on a harrowingly detailed, step-by-step discourse toward a deal. Unaccustomed to the discourse, the customer needs guidance and direction. To affect a deal, the salesman must verbalize what Roland Barthes calls a "writerly" text, working throughout his presentation toward a "readerly" text. That is, the salesman must pick and choose words which allow the reader, the customer, to participate in the creation of meaning, gradually fixing each term until, at the end, his text achieves closure upon the closing of the deal by the customer signing his name. For example, when the customer first asks for a price, when he says "So what can I buy this for? I mean, how much are you taking off the sticker price?" the salesman must treat "price" as a floating signifier and defer its fixation until all the other floating signifiers which contribute to misreadings have been pinned down. The process truly is heroic, for the salesman must at first allow and encourage a freeplay of signifiers, an infinite indeterminacy, while gradually, one signifier at a time, leading the customer into agreeing to the salesman's own preferred, intended interpretation of the terms. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "Heroes do not fix, but flow, bend forward ever and invent a resource for every moment."

128 Journal of Popular Culture

Consider two other floating signifiers which must be pinned down before “price”: the exact “car” and “time” to buy. No agreement can or will be reached as to the meaning of the signifier “price” until the customer agrees to buy an exact signified “car.” It is the salesman’s herculean task to defer all discussion of “price” until the customer has exhibited a readable desire to purchase one specific, concretely real car. No abstract “maybe this car” or “maybe that car” or “maybe I will, maybe I won’t” will do. And then the signifier of time must be established. Will he buy “now”? If not “now,” “when”? Until the time stops floating and becomes a determined “now,” no discussion of the floating “price” is fruitful for the salesman, because the customer unwilling to commit to the signifier “now” will take the signified “price” and float off the car lot. William James, that great American pragmatist, might have been referring to car salesmen when he noted that “heroism is always on a precipitous edge, and only keeps alive by running. Every moment is an escape” (qtd. in Howe 35). The car salesman is forever the pragmatic escape artist, slipping out of straight answers and unfavorable terms.²

I offer for evidence a faithful replica of an actual Sales Procedure [see Appendix] which I received in a sales meeting one morning in San Diego. The used car manager composed the text and on a scale of car salesmen I’ve known—and I’ve sold cars at six different lots over a span of 15 years—he is as close as the business gets to honesty and integrity. Note his style and skill with grammatical matters. They, too, are about as good as it gets among car men. One is mindful of Althusser’s dictum that subjects are subjected to the very system that authorizes them. Thinking, too, is forever and inextricably woven by and with the rhetorical devices that fabricate it. The manager reminds his salesmen to “horsetrade”: one must be a shrewd negotiator. And a hero: “Always say—‘If I can will you?’ ” The salesman leads and controls by always already seeking closure. And in the *Close*, note that the heroic salesman tells the customer: “I am going to try to get your deal, I am going to fight your battle.” This is heroism at its best. The sales act, ultimately, becomes heroic, for the salesman helps the customer find himself, solve his problem, end his lonely quest and quit wasting his time by buying this car, here, now, for an agreed-upon price. It is a dialogic, as Mikhail Bakhtin calls it, for the salesman engages a customer in a dialogue through which the customer comes to terms not only with the salesman but with himself. A customer enters a lot lost and leaves it found.

The public is not ever likely to perceive the salesman in such an empathetic light, so I submit for consideration two final images of salesmen and heroes. Camus once said that the heroic image of our times is that of Sisyphus endlessly pushing his boulder back up the hill. Sisyphus had the heart of a heroic car salesman, endlessly pushing for another sale. As for the hero as

salesman, Arnold Schwarzenegger, currently America's biggest box office draw, now sells 32 oz. soft drinks for Subway. In a joint marketing scheme, the movie "Terminator 2" and Subway sandwich shops have plastered Arnold's face on plastic cups which the public can buy and take home, run through their dishwashers and use again and again. The slogan on the cups: "Thirst Terminators." Who among us wouldn't buy such a convincingly heroic mug?

Notes

¹Although, according to Merlis, Young's indignity has neither helped nor hurt his popularity, such apparent public indifference is, as I shall demonstrate, inherent in the hero/salesman phenomenon. Fittingly, however—call it poetic justice, if you will—"This Note's For You" won the record industry's Video of the Year award.

² I elaborate more on the sales process in "Discourse of the Deal," *Dominant Symbols in Popular Culture*, eds. Ray B. Browne, Marshall W. Fishwick and Kevin O. Browne (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990): 165-68.

Works Cited

- Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes Toward History*. Boston: Beacon, 1961.
- Fishwick, Marshall. *The Hero, American Style*. New York: David McKay, 1969.
- Howe, Irving. *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*. New York: Horizon, 1968.
- Lindberg, Gary. *The Con Man in American Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1982.
- Merlis, Bob. Personal Interview. 9 July 1991.
- Metzger, Robert. *Reagan: American Icon*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989.
- "MTV Nixes Young." *Rolling Stone* 532 (11 Aug. 1988): 25.
- "Oceans of Empathy." *Time* 27 Feb. 1950.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons. New York: Scribners, 1958.
- Wills, Garry. *Reagan's America: Innocents At Home*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1987.

Sales Procedure

Greeting

Smile, introduce yourself-get prospect's name, use it as often as possible. "What May I Show You Today"—"Welcome to X Pontiac"—etc. Never—"Can I Help You."

130 Journal of Popular Culture

Qualify

- A. What model car, what equipment, what color, etc.
- B. Is Prospect Qualified?—Least important, but get all information possible.

Presentation

Sell the car, create desire in the prospect.

- A. Control the prospect, do not let him control you.
- B. Control gained by telling the prospect to do certain things, and having him do it.
- C. Point out features of the car—exterior and interior.
- D. *T-O IF YOU CANNOT SETTLE THE PROSPECT ON A CAR.*
[T.O. means turn over the prospect to another salesman.]

Demonstration

Do not ask if prospect wants to go on demo ride, take them.

- A. Use proper procedure. Salesman to drive car first, then prospect, both, if a couple.
- B. Have a definite demonstration route that you use.
- C. When prospect is driving car, ask questions. Get as much information as possible, i.e., is present car paid for? Did he finance or pay cash? etc. Where does prospect live? Where does he work? How many in family? Own home? etc.
- D. *T-O IF YOU CAN NOT GET THE PROSPECT TO GO ON A DEMO RIDE.*

Close

Prospect must be in booth. You cannot sell a car leaning on the fender. Use work sheet, not scratch paper. Get prospect's name, address, phone number, etc.

- A. Ask full list price on our car—write big. Do not cut price. If no trade and price is the factor, reduce retail small amount at a time, write down figure each time, and draw line thru old figure.
Always use—“IF I CAN, WILL YOU?” SELLING A CAR IS LIKE HORSE-TRADING, HORSE-TRADE.
- B. Start low on trade-in. If you must go more on the trade, go up a little at a time. Again, if you must go up draw a line thru the previous figure,

Hero as Salesman 131

and write in your next offer. Horsetrade.

Always say—"IF I CAN, WILL YOU?"

- C. Ask for large cash down (one-third or more). Write down the amount you ask for. Come off that figure as necessary, but always draw a line thru the previous figure, and write in the new figure. Try to get as much as possible. Horsetrade.

Always Say—"IF I CAN, WILL YOU?"

- D. Quote high payments. Write down amount you ask. Come down a little at a time, as necessary, drawing line thru original amount, and write in new figure. Do not quote number of months voluntarily, only if asked, also do not quote interest rate.

Always say—"IF I CAN, WILL YOU?"

- E. Commit the prospect to buy.

IF PROSPECT WILL NOT COMMIT, T.O. IT IS BEST TO T.O. BEFORE YOU GET TO THE POINT WHERE YOU DO NOT HAVE A DEAL

- F. Get credit statement, military statement, title, keys to trade, down payment, etc.

- G. Set up for break. As you are leaving room with all of above, turn to customer and say—I do not know how I am going to get you this deal. I know that we need more than you want to pay for this car, or, I know that we should have more down, or, You want way too much for your present car in trade, or, the payment that you want is far too low, but, I am going to try to get your deal, I am going to go fight you battle. Then, shut up and leave.

- H. Take the deal to the manager on duty (appraisal, trw, etc.).

- I. Manager will instruct what to do next-go for break, etc.

Contract

Take customer and all necessary information to finance office.

Deliver Car

Explain operation of all controls to your customer. If possible, introduce your customer to the service manager. If possible, always test drive the car before delivery, to insure that all is o.k.

Follow-Up

Call your customer in a few days, inquire if everything is all right, and always ask for prospects. If you did not make a deal, always call back in a few hours, or as soon as possible the next day. Your prospect will buy within hours.

132 Journal of Popular Culture

Note

*T-O No Prospect should be permitted to leave unless he is T-O'D NO
EXCEPTIONS....*

**Never ask a question that requires a "YES" or "NO" answer, give
prospect a choice.**