The Late-Night Infomercial as an Electronic Site of Ritual Self-Transformation: The Case of "Personal Power"

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that a late-night television infomercial displays the structure of a ritual rite of passage. It tracks how the infomercial creates a state of ideological liminality that is redressed by a series of poetic (linguistic) parallelisms. This culminates in a trope of incorporation that transforms the social identity of the viewer from "unsuccessful" to "successful." Ritual in form yet electronic in medium, the conclusion relates the ritual merging of consumer and new product type in processes of commodification to the ways in which cultural analogy, ideological and otherwise, moves certain kinds of social meanings into new arenas of practice.

Anthropologists have long concerned themselves with capitalist processes of commodification, yet much of this work uncritically takes on the received categories of classical political economy and its latter day epigoni, such as the Frankfurt School, which together imply that "the commodity" is some kind of discrete object and that "commodification" is an ominous all-encompassing process that imperils modern life. In recent work, Agha (2011a, 2011b, 2011c) offers an extended critique of this approach and presents a semiotically informed alternative. He argues that "nothing is always (or only) a commodity. Rather, things *acquire* (or lose) commodity formulations as they pass

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through criterial frameworks of semiotic engagement" (Agha 2011a, 25). Agha shows that advertising and marketing practices produce specific types of commodity formulations that identify features of a target market (through market research methods) and incorporate these features into the ad's textual design (through advertising practice), seeking to move tokens of the product beyond the point of sale. And yet when they pass into the possession phase of their social existence, the sign-values of such objects are reanalyzed through uptake formulations that yield entirely distinct cultural forms.

The present analysis focuses on one such product type that first emerged on the market in the early 1990s, namely, late night infomercials purporting to sell "success." In offering this analysis, I contend that there are insights to be gained from tracking the metasemiotic frameworks involved, attention to which shows that objects that come under "commodity formulations" necessarily have other object formulations, as Agha shows, although the manner in which they do so in the case at hand is entirely unlike anything discussed in the literature.

I focus on a single late-night infomercial—Anthony Robbins's Personal Power, which attempts to sell a set of "self-help" tapes as a new, legitimate product type. I argue that it does so through constituting a real-time rite of passage. For at least some members of the infomercial's target audience, this new product type becomes linked to a contextually transformed individual identity. The experience of the infomercial itself creates a distinct kind of social identity. The rhetorical success of an infomercial such as this relies upon ideologies shared by most consumer products: the promise of easy and instantaneous individual happiness and satisfaction. Yet this new product type differs from conventional products in far more significant ways.

Although the self-help tapes in this case study promise to help individuals in "virtually every aspect of their life," the relevant aspects are culturally predictable. They include the focal areas of life that had slowly been developing as topical products within self-help infomercials in the early 1990s, when this particular infomercial first aired.

As a product type, this set of tapes is unconventional in two ways. First, it attempts to help its consumers with not just one, but all of the problem areas to which self-help tapes had become linked in the then developing self-help industry: success in personal relationships, in the workplace, in losing weight, in quitting smoking, and in managing personal finances. Second, the attempt to establish the product type as a legitimate one, which lies at the heart of this infomercial, seeks to oppose long-established systems of accreditation and their ideological supports and to supplant them with new ones. In the period in which this genre emerges, it is commonly supposed that accredited professionals are

the people who know how best to help individuals in these different realms of their lives; they have expertise earned slowly through extended periods of professional training and certification; that is what makes them the experts. The idea that self-help tapes could match expert capabilities in these areas and deliver transformative change in a matter of weeks, promised to be an uphill rhetorical battle for the developers of Robbins's infomercial. Yet, in certain ways, the resulting infomercial is nothing less than a semiotic masterpiece. The infomercial effectively manages to enact a rite of self-transformation and make it available to its target audience.

Beginning within the infomercial itself, I look at particular (genre) segments marked by distinct activity types, shifts in setting, and camera cuts. I then provide a table that lists a (partial) ordering of these segments within the infomercial as a whole. At that point attention turns to two distinct types of foregrounding. The first class consists of elements designed primarily to solve the problems of the (then) unconventional characteristics of product type and of the type of salesman at the heart of this infomercial. They attract attention to the man and his product in ways that attempt to undermine the doubts that most viewers would be likely to have about them.

The second set of foregrounded signs gains additional indexical depth by being involved in a parallel series of interrelated poetic structures that unfold across the real-time viewing of the infomercial. These signs are functionally more complex and constitute in interrelated ways the semiotic mechanisms that come to define the ritual transformation that unfolds in this infomercial.

I focus in what follows on the poetic or metrical organization of the infomercial. Although it is customary for scholars to investigate the poetic organization of face-to-face discursive interactions by using a line by line segmentation of speech, I argue that this approach is not adequate for the kind of multimodal ritual text now at issue. Following the techniques pioneered by Parmentier in his analysis of Belaun oratory, I argue that this infomercial (itself a type of mediatized public-oratorical performance) acquires its efficacy through organization into several thematically distinct "episodes" that have "thematic and formal coherence" within an overall "linear or syntagmatic architecture" that informs the text as a whole and constitutes its characteristics as an "indexical icon" of social-interpersonal ritual transformation (Parmentier 1994, 93–94). I analyze these features of the infomercial in some detail below.

The theory of ritual here is adapted from classic sources (Turner 1969, 1978, 1992). In general, the assumption is that individuals are transported into new identities and relationships in the "real" social world through a ritual process. They are removed from their normal everyday world and put into a liminal

state in and by the ritual process; that is, they are made to live in some way in a world in which normal practices and ideologies are reversed, inverted, or rendered irrelevant. Then a ritual is performed in which the categories of local participation are indexically (and often iconically) aligned with the new social identity that they are going to take on, so that, once the ritual is successfully completed, the individual returns to the community in a new social role.

Episodic Organization and Metrical Structure

A dominant internal segmentation of the infomercial's multimodal textual form (speech and visual imagery) is produced by camera cuts that switch between distinct settings, activity types, represented personnel, and participation frameworks. Attention to these internal cues reveals an initial overall segmentation of the infomercial into several identifiable episode types, many of which recur several times, thus imposing an episode-based metrical structure on the infomercial as a whole.

First, the standard "commercial" segment, which has become quite common in infomercials, recurs at a number of places: while looking at the product or actions related to it, an announcer's voice-over gives the price and other relevant ordering information. Second, endorsements of several types are also found, which I distinguish by the following criteria: if the person making the endorsement knew Anthony Robbins personally, I label it a "recommendation." If the endorser did not know Robbins personally but offered specific explanations for liking the product, I label it a (regular) "endorsement." If the speaker neither knows Robbins nor gives specific reasons but merely displays effusive excitement and bald faith in Robbins or the product, I term it a "testimonial." A subcategory of this type of endorsement is the "before and after endorsement," which is thematically distinct and therefore worth identifying as a partially distinct subtype.

Third and less frequent are segments that include clips from a mock "interview" between Robbins and his friend, Fran Tarkenton, a famous ex-football player. Fourth, "summary" segments occur that are hosted by TV personality K. C. Kasem (of Top 40 fame). In these segments, Kasem provides background information on other upcoming segments in addition to his own personal recommendations of Robbins. Fifth, Robbins himself appears in what I call "performance" segments, where we watch him carrying out the activities to which he has been linked by others. Finally, in a segment toward the end of the infomercial, Robbins sits facing the camera and engages the television viewers in direct "address."

As indicated previously, there is nothing about these larger level segments that is particularly surprising for commercial advertising. All of these segments had been seen before this infomercial first aired. The question pursued here, however, concerns how the infomercial seeks to persuade people (*a*) that a new product type legitimately exists and (*b*) that they should purchase it.

This effort relies on a distinct set of features: within and across the segments isolated out above, a number of foregrounded tropes recur, which appear designed to attract the attention of the late-night audience and to legitimate Robbins and his tapes. These tropes seek to undermine the many doubts that late-night viewers were likely to have about both Robbins and the product he was trying to sell.

In the discussion below, I first document the types of foregrounded language that is rhetorically aimed at undermining viewer skepticism. Since each of these tropes recurs many times throughout the infomercial, I provide only a few examples below. I then consider patterns of poetic repetition among some of these types of foregrounding.

Marked Person Reference

Patterns of foregrounded reference are common in advertising language, and many segments of this infomercial contain foregrounded forms of person reference and address. Since acts of referring to persons presuppose social relationships between speaker and referent, differential uses of person-referring terms discriminate forms of social relationship (Agha 2007, 278–300), some of which form recurrent patterns in the infomercial itself.

In the following representative example, a member of a yachting team that had recently won the race for America's Cup refers to Robbins (the foregrounded term appears in italics): "The part that Tony Robbins played was a very important part. No question. Because it began as such a dream. I think what *Tony* did in a short period of time was to have us believe in our fellow crew members and never give up." The foregrounding form here refers to Robbins by his first name. When addressing an audience of unknown others (i.e., the television audience), the use of a first name presupposes a close personal relationship between speaker and referent. But co-textual cues cancel this assumption. The man speaking was not the owner of the yacht and thus was not the person who would have hired Robbins to coach the crew. He was simply one of the sailors working on the yacht. Moreover, as we learn from other parts of the infomercial, the help Robbins gives to sports teams and businesses typically comes in the form of an inspirational lecture. It is thus very unlikely that this particular sailor and Robbins

would have been on a first name basis. One would have expected either "he" or "Mr. Robbins" instead of "Tony." What kind of foregrounded figurement does the use of first name produce? If it used often enough it creates the illusion that Robbins is on a friendly, first name basis with all of the different kinds of people who benefited from his product. It thus creates a "personal touch" that humanizes Robbins in the face of other negative stereotypes that he faces.

Denotationally Empty Lexemes

In addition to marked forms of address, the use of denotationally empty lexemes is highly recurrent in this infomercial: here one finds objects being described with undeniably positive, yet indeterminate, qualities. For instance, the tapes Robbins is selling are referred to as being "specially produced." While it is clear that something undergoing a "special" type of production is better than it being produced in a generic way, the nature of special production is never specified and has no straightforward construal (such as the one it would have if, for example, the tapes were said to be produced "in stereo" in opposition to monaurally). Such a foregrounding appears to endow the product with a penumbra of better-than-normal quality without the quality itself being specified. Such denotationally empty lexemes are found frequently in the infomercial and constitute one of its recurrent partials.

Confidence-Building Predicates

The infomercial appears to presume that its broadcast faces a skeptical television audience. This presumption is evident in the fact that much of its verbal material is aimed at building up positive narratives about Robbins and his product. This is achieved through the use of a series of confidence-building predicates, which recur throughout the infomercial. Here is a representative set of examples:

Anthony Robbins is:	unique; a super motivator; 100 percent positive energy; a loving husband and caring father; a charity giver; someone who empowers you to be more than you actually are; someone who really cares; sincere; unselfish; honest and pure; direct; genuine (not a phony).
The [Personal Power] Tapes (are):	real; really work; not just a pump-up; a set of tools or strategies to make changes; a tool chest for life; tools that make sense; hard-hitting skills; a simplified formula for success; bring measurable results; transform your life; find [a person] in you that you weren't using; one distinction, one new way of looking at the world that you hadn't seen before that unlocks your inner potential; make your dreams a reality; answer life's problems; make you the best you can be; change your life forever; teach you to believe in others; teach you to never give up; teach you skills that allow you to keep up and meet the new challenges of our

> times; get you what you really want from your life; change the "no's" to "yes's" in your life.

This is a partial list, and I do not include a number of other attributions and predicates.[1] I highlight these here because many of them recur a number of times in the infomercial and thus create a poetic structure of person and product qualities.

Perhaps most noteworthy are the attempts to legitimate Robbins and the correlated attempts to undermine any negative representations about him as a dishonest businessman or worse. The positive ideologies indexed in the descriptions are as obvious as they are numerous. Adding them up, one is supposed to be convinced that Robbins is a successful leader with a dynamic and inspiring, yet honest and sincere, personality. He is one who manages to make time to give to charity while remaining a model father and husband.

Second, in the descriptions of the product itself there is overlap with the foregrounded pattern of denotationally empty lexemes analyzed in the preceding section. While many of the descriptions are positive, they are often based on empty oppositions that make them only vaguely positive and, without further specification, difficult to reject. Who in general would not want to be the best they can be? Similarly, while one would surely prefer a product that was "real" and offered "hard-hitting" skills to one that was "fake" and promised "low-impact" skills, neither has a clear referent in relation to this kind of product.

Third, and finally, detailed descriptions of what is on the tapes are virtually absent. The most explicit description is found toward the end of the infomercial. We learn that there are twenty-four tapes in all, designed to constitute a program lasting a month in length. Each tape gives consumers a single change in significant areas of their lives on each given day and provides them with a plan for carrying out those changes, one at a time, over the thirty-day period. The program thus operates on the idea that as individuals make these changes, they continue to build on them over the days of the program and through the other tapes that follow. This is, in fact, all we come to know about what is actually on the tapes over the course of the entire infomercial.

Voicing Hyperbolic Expertise

If we attend to a distinct repertoire of hyperbolic locutions—whether lexical items, larger phrases, or styles of logical argumentation—across the different seg-

1. Additional attributes include a long list of facts about Robbins and the tapes that detail his achievements, both personally and through his tapes, e.g., the amount of money he is paid to speak, how many languages the tapes have been translated into, the famous people that Robbins knows, etc. They clearly fit into the larger project of legitimating him and his product, but they are not metrically recurrent in the infomercial.

ments of the infomercial, we find foregrounded uses of institutionalized "voices" (Bakhtin 1986). Functionally, all such uses attempt creatively to project a degree of legitimacy onto Robbins or his product by talking about them using language taken from talk authorized by other institutionalized forms of representation. From this perspective, the infomercial borrows professional jargon and modes of reasoning from science, industry, business, advertising, and even religion to legitimate Robbins and his product. One representative example combines such borrowing with overlapping denotationally empty terms: the tapes themselves are described as teaching a "technology," as if science or industry were involved. Business marketing also makes an appearance when the tapes are said to provide "tools" and "skills." In this way, too, Robbins can claim to have created a system of "success conditioning," in which behaviorism meets science and marketing.

The discourse of science is present again when Robbins argues in several different places that the contents of the tapes are the result of what amounts to an empirical study of successful people. He studied them and then generalized across their methods to arrive at the contents of tapes that have shown "measureable results." Similarly, Robbins uses the language and logic of the twelve-step program created by Alcoholics Anonymous: using the tapes is said to give individuals the ability to take "baby steps" each day and build on each day's successes to help themselves with what amounts to their seeming "recovery." Indeed, even an appeal to religious rhetoric is present when the "testimonial" segments are considered; there, no basis beyond "heart-felt belief" in Robbins and/or the product itself is needed—or provided—to convince viewers of their promise.

Taking stock at this point in the analysis, when we consider how often the various types of foregrounding reviewed above repeat across this infomercial, the interpretations offered above appear suspect. Although it is common to use these types of foregrounded language to create positive product characterizations in commercial language use, the degree to which it is found here foregrounds even the expected norms of foregrounding in other forms of commercial advertising. Interpreting them presupposes an array of legitimating institutions and ideologies. Some of these moves, one imagines, may have had the effect of reducing a viewer's skepticism about the man and his product. Yet given the sheer number and overlapping presence of these foregrounded patterns of language use, a kind of hyper-foregrounding emerges that can itself be grounded as a kind of rhetorical overkill; Robbins runs the risk of sounding like the negatively stereotyped used car salesman who will do and say anything in order to make a sale. The result is that these rhetorical moves may cast even

more doubt on Robbins and his product because they suggest that he is "trying too hard."

Thus, in the light of features thus far considered the degree to which the infomercial has undermined the viewers' potentially negative evaluations of this product remains at best unclear. Although many viewers will have undoubtedly changed the channel by now for the reasons elaborated above, others may be curiously drawn in by the high degree of foregrounding. Either way, a more significant question for the analysis here remains thus far unpursued: even if some target viewers accept Robbins and his product type as legitimate, what would make them want to buy it? It is here then that we must return to consider how the ordering of the segments was poetically foregrounded so as to enable real-time parallel structuring to give them additional meanings. It is here, then, that we begin to examine how this infomercial constitutes a ritual rite of passage.

Episodic Organization and Word Magic

To better understand the workings of the poetic patterns among the segments as they unfold in real time, consider their ordering in the partial listing displayed in table 1.[2] In the previous discussion of distinct types of foregrounding, I merely mentioned the fact that they repeated frequently across all of the different segments. I left out the importance of this fact.

These foregrounded uses of language were repeated across what would have appeared to viewers as notably distinct settings. Embedded in quite different kinds of activities, they were uttered by different kinds of speakers with different goals and agendas. The overall effect is a kind of creative "word magic." Although they may be individually unnoticed, the serial recurrence of these repeating foregrounded uses of language itself creates an illusion, namely, that they refer to an intersubjectively shared and thus relatively "real" social world of meanings for a diverse array of people in a wide variety of situations. Writ small it is akin to socialization into general society: it is socialization into the world in which Robbins and his product exist.

The word magic can easily slip by unnoticed. However, a few segments, such as the following representative example, make the point rather dramatically.

2. The list is abbreviated. Only those segments that were relevant to the parallelisms being analyzed here were listed. In particular, we will be attending to the numbered "endorsement" segments. Though not the focus here, the lettered segments, endorsements A and B and then later C and D, were unrelated because they were only locally relevant to the segments that immediately preceded them. The focus here is on the numbered endorsement segments as they play a central role in the parallelism involved in the unfolding ritual as a whole.

Table 1. Real-Time Ordering of Segments

Speaker(s)	Mode	Segment			
Host	Speaks directly to audience			Recommendation A	
Robbins	In "live" performance		Performance 1		
Host	Voice-over		Performance 2	Recommendation B	
Sailor	Staged interview	Endorsement 1			
Actress	Staged interview	Endorsement 2			
Comedian	Staged interview	Endorsement 3			
Host	Speaks directly to audience			Recommendation C	
FT/AR	Mock interview by poolside		Interview 1		
Shopper	"Spontaneous" interview				Testimonial 1
Business 1	Staged interview	Endorsement A			
Business 2	Staged interview	Endorsement B			
FT/AR	Mock interview by poolside		Interview 2		
Trainer	Staged interview	Endorsement 4			
Actress	Staged interview	Endorsement 5			
Coach	Staged interview	Endorsement 6			
Busboy	Staged interview	Endorsement 7			
Owner	Staged interview	Endorsement 8			
Announcer	Ordering information				Commercial
Host	Speaks directly to audience				Summary
Announcer	Product description				Commercial
. . .					

						Endorsement/ Transformation 1
Screenwriter	Staged interview					
Man in wheelchair	Staged interview	Endorsement 9				
Athlete	Staged interview	Endorsement 10				
FT/AR	Mock interview by poolside		Interview 3			
. . .						
AR	Direct face to face to audience		Address			
Announcer	Ordering information			Commercial		
Woman	Interview				Testimonial 2	
						Endorsement/ Transformation 2
Screenwriter	Staged interview					
Announcer	Ordering information			Commercial		
Handicapped	Staged interview				Testimonial A	
Black woman	Staged interview				Testimonial B	
Trainer	Staged interview				Testimonial C	
. . .						

Note.—FT = Fran Tarkenton, AR = Anthony Robbins, . . . = segments omitted.

The first quotation is taken from Robbins's mock interview with Fran Tarkenton. The second appears later in the infomercial and is uttered within a testimonial provided by a "random" shopper outside a store, "somewhere" (foregrounded magical word use in italics).

> Robbins: It is important to be able to . . . to be positive . . . but by itself that's not enough. You've got to have a strategy—not just a *pump-up*. . . .
> [an interval of several minutes]. . .
> Shopper: Oh . . . I truly believe it from my heart. It's not just a *pump-up*.

Viewed from a critical perspective, of course, such a foregrounding could not possibly have emerged "naturally." The likelihood that the nominal use of "pump-up" would appear in both the speech of Robbins and then, shortly afterward, in that of a woman "on the street" whom we have no reason to suspect would have heard him use it, is magical in the ways described above: it goes beyond any reasonable understanding of "coincidence." That said, and recalling that this is but one example of many, such uses create patterns of repetition that can lend a kind of legitimacy to descriptive attributions of Robbins and his product.

Parallel Endorsements

As noted above, a parallelism allows signs to carry more indexical depth than they would when used in more conventional settings. While the segments isolated out in table 1 are all relatively conventional within western commercial genres, some participate here in parallelisms that endow them with meanings that only emerge in terms of the specific unfolding parallelisms found here. A closer look at the ordering of the numbered endorsements begins to make clear how this takes place in real time for target audience members.

The default target audience, as I discuss below, is the lone white male, sitting up very late in his living room and watching the infomercial. He is likely watching precisely because his life is not going very well, and he is unlikely to be a particularly receptive viewer since very few people enjoy watching commercials and fewer still relish watching infomercials for products that defy easy cultural classification. What, then, is catching this target viewer's interest? The viewing audience knows of every endorser who appears in the infomercial for one or more of the following three reasons: they are famous and known to viewers already; they are introduced to the viewers by the host; and/or they are named and described in writing on the screen during the infomercial. With this knowl-

edge alone, we can uncover a developing parallelism that brings the endorsers closer and closer to the target viewer sitting at home watching this infomercial. This developing "trope of incorporation"—one that will ultimately engulf the viewer socially, psychologically, situationally, and verbally—moves along several distinct paths that are established by the parallelism itself.

In the first set of endorsements (1–3) in table 1, the sailor worked on a racing yacht that had at the time recently won an international race in a surprising upset; thus he was part of a very recent, exciting, and famous event. The actress, Pamela Anderson, is and was generally considered to be a famous celebrity in the entertainment world and was likely to be well known to the infomercial's target audience. Finally, the comedian, although not likely to be known by name, had had his own special on a major cable television station and was by all accounts an up and coming comedic star at the time. The parallelism is thus constructed out of a set of three famous individuals who have all, of course, benefited from Robbins's tapes. They are set up in local opposition to each other in that the first one's fame is fleeting but widely discussed, the next one's fame is firmly established, and the last one is of up and coming fame. From the perspective of the television audience, however, they are all similar in that they are all "famous" and "successful" individuals who are maximally distant from the world in which the viewer is located.

In endorsements 4–6, there is an internal opposition that adds meaning to each parallel case both locally and—in comparison with the prior set of three—globally as well. In this second set all three individuals are again famous and successful. The local difference this time is that they each come from distinct worlds: self-help, entertainment, and sports. At the global level this parallelism thus repeats the function of the first: while documenting the success of the product through endorsements, it does so with individuals who are still distant from the target audience. As it has now repeated, it thus establishes the regularity of this particular global, internally complex, three-part parallelism.

In the next parallelism in endorsements 7–8, a more significant change occurs. What locally unites the two cases in this third set is that they demonstrate a kind of before-and-after picture of the beneficial effects of the tapes. Unlike the former pattern, where there are two parallel repetitions of three cases each, the pattern here is that there are only two individuals in each case and they are, by contrast, "regular" (not famous) people. Moreover, before listening to the tapes, they are both presented as having had a past that was decidedly negative. The famous individuals in the two previous sets of the global parallelism had, in contrast, biographic pasts that were either unmentioned or at least par-

tially successful. In this third set of parallel cases, however, both individuals were not only worse off than the famous individuals who preceded them in the two globally opposing parallelisms, but they were perhaps even worse off than many in the target audience. Only after listening to the tapes do these two individuals end up becoming (far) more successful than the viewers. Indeed they claim that the tapes helped them to conquer precisely the kinds of problems that Robbins had promised they would. In one case, an overweight busboy not only loses weight but ends up owning the restaurant in which he used to work. In the other, a woman who lost her job (through no fault of her own) and who could not find a new job (because she was depressed, divorced, older, and lacking a college degree), listens to the tapes and then starts up a company that she later sells for millions of dollars.

What differentiates the two cases in this third set from the two sets of three cases before them is that these are "regular" (not famous) people who begin in situations with which regular people who are down on their luck may be able to directly relate (through personal experience), or with which they may indirectly sympathize. Indeed, in the discourses that ideologically inform the construction of the self in consumer society, their situations exemplify the sets of stereotypic ills that compromise one's ability to achieve happiness and success. This third instance of a set of repeating parallelisms thus takes an indexical step closer to the target audience by providing cases of regular people with common—indeed, stereotypically overdetermined—problems. If not literally similar to the target audience, these two characters, and with them the promised success of the tapes, inch closer to the target audience by sociological stereotype (i.e., "of people having a tough time").

Finally, consider endorsements 9–10. Following the local and global parallelisms here, how does this set make the effects of the tapes ever easier for the target audience to identify with? Again we find only two cases presented as before-and-after endorsements. What differentiates them is that the first person is not famous while the second person is. More significant still is the nature of the before-and-after logic here: the two cases constituting the fourth set condense the logic of all of the previous parallelisms in order to offer two final appeals.

The first case is far from typical, and it is unlikely that most of the target viewers will be able to relate to it directly. Indeed, the man in the wheelchair in this case starts in the "before" picture in a far worse situation than could be stereotypically presumed for target audience members. The man is in a wheelchair because a terrible accident left him without the use of his legs. Despite tragic

limitations, pronounced by doctors as insurmountable, he goes on to prove everyone wrong: he ends up owning his own businesses, racing in marathons, playing sports, and marrying the woman of his dreams who—again continuing the reliance on stereotypic overdetermination—just happens to be a former state beauty queen. For the viewing audience, the appeal that emerges is beyond a sympathetic one based on an implicit comparison between his problems and the viewer's own problems (since that is perhaps more likely to lead to self-pity). Instead, the appeal is presumably an inspirational one: "if he can do it, the least I can do is try!"

The second case in this set is the story of a famous kicker in the National Football League who, after being one of the best, becomes too old by league standards and falls into a terrible slump that seems to mark the end of his career. After listening to the tapes, however, he defies the stereotypical effects of age itself and arguably becomes the best kicker in league history. Significantly, then, in the emergent logic amid these complex overlapping parallelisms, the two final endorsements both document near miraculous cases of personal transformation. The logic of the global parallelism up to this point, then, is that this can happen to literally anyone—whether famous or not, successful or not, whether the change they need in their life is minor and incremental or miraculous. The product is now formulated as being "useful" or "needed" by everyone.

How exactly does it do so? The endorsements began with famous people with neutral pasts, who were maximally distant from target audience members. They then moved to individuals who were successful (not famous) and who possessed negative pasts that were stereotypically overdetermined and, as such, likely to be worse than those possessed by the target audience. Finally, they presented a successful and a famous individual who each transcended different negative, overdetermined stereotypes to undergo miraculous transformations. In this way, the global parallelism moved forward in real time to sociologically incorporate target audience members in order to rhetorically persuade them that the tapes can work for them too. The global parallelism detailed here thus creates a real-time trope of sociological incorporation: beginning at a maximal social distance, it moves toward target viewers, ultimately engulfing them from above and below.

In combination with all that has been done throughout the infomercial to undermine negative characterizations of Robbins and his tapes, up to this point in the analysis some work may have been done to undermine the effect of the rhetorical overkill discussed above. That said, the differences traversed are still social ones. The logic is one of social situations and stereotypes; it has not aimed more directly—more personally—at the target viewer at the particular moment

in time when the viewer is at home and watching this infomercial on late-night television.

Commercials

Following the close of the parallelisms analyzed above, a series of commercial segments remind the viewer of the terms for purchasing the tapes. If the parallelism were to be returned to, it is difficult to imagine what sort of local two or three part parallelism could be made relevant to the global pattern analyzed above. In fact, what does follow starts in a recognizable if somewhat mysterious way. The global parallelism returns through two familiar features: a "before-and-after endorsement" that is about a "regular guy." Although this "regular guy" transforms in the "after" picture to become a famous screenwriter, his "before" condition, along with a few other significant variations, mark this parallelism as a very significant one. The organization of this trope differs from the preceding ones in several ways.

First, this time around there is only a single case. Local parallelism has been dropped in service of the larger global one analyzed above. Second, unlike every other case, this endorser is not describing how the tapes changed his life in general; rather, he provides a historical recounting of his experience on the night that he decided to buy the tapes. As a white, middle-class male, he is also (commercially) unmarked in gender and racial terms for the target audience of this "product." Semiotically speaking, we have literally arrived at the targeted individual in his living room late at night watching this infomercial. Indeed, the trope of incorporation continues. Since the content of his recollection is significant, I reproduce it in full:

> I called the 800 number. . . . I felt very silly doing it. . . . I felt very strange doing it. . . . It was the middle of the night. . . . These people are strangers! . . . I never saw this guy before. . . . I ordered the tapes. . . . As soon as I put down the phone, I felt tremendous. . . . I felt like for the first time in I don't know how long I was finally in control . . . and I realized what the power of one decision is and from that decision and the time it took, I've written six movies for three major studios and a network. I'm going to keep writing until the day I decide it is not fun anymore because I'm having the most fun I've ever had in my life.

A few aspects of this reported experience are crucial for their contribution to the parallelism's developing incorporation of the world of the target viewer. Moving beyond social situations and stereotypes, the approach is now a verbal

and psychological one that takes the infomercial's world and begins to map it directly in and on to the target audience member's late-night television-viewing experience. It does so in several ways.

First, the delivery has a kind of iconic rhythm to it that mimics the thought process of a historically relived experience as well as, potentially, the kind of thought process that the target viewer might be experiencing at that moment. The screenwriter is not just telling us what happened when he ordered the tapes; in narrating the experience, he is potentially guiding the television viewer into and through the very experience of ordering the tapes themselves.

Second, although he represents the unmarked consumer who, in this case, is another parallel case of the regular before-and-after success story, he does not focus on how the product helped him in the conventional senses. Rather than locating the product's value in terms of the successes it has brought him, he locates its value in the very experience of deciding to order the tapes. This move puts him in a mirrored psychological present with those who are "now" considering buying the tapes. Moreover, he gives a reasonable "voicing" to the doubts that viewers are likely to be having (or now will be having). Indeed, his reexperiencing of the ordering of the tapes for (or is it now with) the viewing audience includes a noteworthy move into the historical present tense ("These people are strangers!"). In quoting himself this way he is both recalling how he spoke to himself in the past as well as giving voice to the target viewers in their living rooms "right now." This move will be seen again and take on greater significance below.

What happened in the screenwriter's first turn at talk is vital to the unfolding ritual of self-transformation. What has become more important than what is actually on the tapes—about which, of course, we have heard almost nothing substantive—is the viewer's making the decision to order the tapes. Making the call to order the tapes is the transformative moment. Experiencing "the power of one decision" is what transforms a person into someone who is "in control" and thus happy and ultimately successful. We turn now to consider how this is ritually enacted in real time.

Ideological Liminality

After the screenwriter's recounting of his decision to buy the tapes, Robbins, for the first and only time, sits in a chair facing the camera and directly addresses the target audience "face to face." He summarizes what he and others have been saying (sometimes magically) throughout the infomercial. He focuses on one central question: if one is not successful in any area of one's life, who is to blame?

Up until this point, his answers to the question have been implicitly consistent but never explicitly stated. Robbins is now explicit about the answer to this question.

Robbins places the blame for failure of any sort squarely on the individual. "The world isn't boring," as he states early on in the infomercial: "you are." Selecting carefully from available ideologies about the world at the time, he puts the target audience at home in a state of "ideological liminality." He does this by ignoring or rejecting any appeal to typical ideological oppositions here. No mention is made of social prejudices or hierarchies or of the differential benefits that accrue to those who start from different places in life—that is, to other dominant political discourses of our era. Rather, Robbins creates a much simpler world. He borrows from media representations of a society in difficult and challenging economic times, and he adds to this the associated ideologies relating to greater competition and the resulting need for greater (economic) efficiency. In then metaphorically extending these established ideologies from the business world to the self in a form of "self-management," he refines what has been asserted in various ways throughout the infomercial in the most explicit of terms. He tells us "the truth."

Despite the times, according to Robbins, individuals have complete control over their own destiny. There are those who succeed and those who fail. What differentiates them is that the successful have decided not to live in fear. They make decisions and take action. Translating this for us, we learn that this means, "they are employing a force that shapes our destinies," a force that one taps through "the power of a conscious decision." Somewhat surprisingly then, that force is not "personal power," per se; rather, it is the same power that the screenwriter reported when he relived his own ordering of the tapes. Robbins closes by urging viewers to give themselves a "gift" and experience the power of a decision that will alter virtually every aspect of their lives. That is, he urges viewers to call in and order the tapes.

The Moment of Ritual Transformation

A ritual of self-transformation requires a contextual moment in which a particular act has meaning in both a local and a ritual context of action. When that act is then performed, in that very moment the old self can be understood to have existed in both worlds simultaneously and emerged, if the ritual was successfully performed, with a new identity in the local context of action. But

how can this happen given the mediatized nature of the focal ritual here—carried out, as it is, electronically and at a distance, but requiring a phone call and point-of-sale transaction here and now?

The screenwriter returns one last time to offer up additional recollections about his decision to buy the tapes. The following was delivered almost immediately after Robbins's direct address to the target audience:

> You know I was one of those guys who just sort of sat there with his arms folded and said, you know, "I don't need a coach. I don't need assistance. I don't need to read a book. I don't need to go to seminars. I can get these all by myself" and then I said, "if you can get these all by yourself, where are you?" and where I was, was in my living room at four o'clock in the morning and I wasn't where I wanted to be. I was dreaming up things that weren't going to happen because I was too scared and I was too disappointed to make them happen and I asked myself, "what if you stopped being scared? what if you stopped being disappointed? what if you just kind of lose all that?" what if you just do it for thirty days and just decide that for the next thirty days I'm going to buy into something else and I can always go back to being skeptical, disappointed, and afraid, but "what happens if I say how about being fulfilled? how about taking some action? How about grabbing your life and taking it and riding with it and deciding where you are going to go and going there."

The screenwriter thus returns to a recounting of his experiences the night he decided to buy the tapes. For our purposes, this recollection consists of four parallel sets of direct self-quotations that form a global parallelism in this specific turn at talk. Though obviously a part of his narrative retelling of his experiences, each set of self-quotations in turn takes on greater significance when considered in its dual function as a series of ventriloquated "voicings" of the screenwriter "then" and for the viewer at home "now." In fact with the significant addition of a few other parallelisms embedded within the four parts of the global parallelism, all analyses come together here at the end of this "endorsement" to complete the trope of incorporation and mark the moment of ritual self-transformation. Put simply, the screenwriter's story of his own personal self-transformation will come to model and enact the very terms in and through which some target audience members will undergo the same transformation. In this final stage of incorporation, those target audience members

who have been persuaded effectively become one with the ritual character of the screenwriter. Consider now the details of this process.

To begin to trace the parallel progression here is to contrast the meanings of the parts of the screenwriter's story with those that emerge for the television viewer at home. Focusing only on the narrative structure for the moment, the screenwriter recounts a relatively simple story of personal transformation. Skepticism about the means and need for Robbins's tapes is followed by a confession. After admitting to his problem, he then openly ponders freeing himself from the cause of his problems. Finally, he considers doing something about his problem and taking positive steps to change. In order to understand the establishment of a transformative rite of passage here, however, we must ask what role the four sets of directly quoted speech play in the screenwriter's narrative. How, that is, does each local parallel set of self-quotations serve creative ventriloquations of a viewer's voice—be they as potential thoughts or literal utterances? We must ask what changes globally and locally from one set to the next in order to understand what adds meaning to them in real time. Here, as we will see, those parallel changes emerge based on overlapping indexical signs linked to word magic and certain grammatical categories.

As the viewer may have felt or still feels, the screenwriter recounts his own initial skepticism in the first local parallelism here. He syncopates a list of "thoughts" in the first person, historical present tense (i.e., "I don't need a coach," etc.). Each of them is a grammatically similar criticism. As such, they define what is the same in the local units of the first global parallelism. Note that word magic is overlappingly present here as well, as needing a personal life "coach," for example, is specifically mentioned by Robbins during his interview with Fran Tarkenton. Generally, the ventriloquation here allows the viewer at home to identify with the screenwriter's skepticism.

What follows in the second global parallelism in this narrative of self-transformation is a "confession" of a very particular sort. Word magic reappears. In admitting that he had a problem because he was afraid to act, the screenwriter magically links together the need to give into the power of a conscious decision with the force that prevents it in Robbins's world: fear. This time, however, the parallel ventriloquation is a single rhetorical question posed now in the (conditional) historical present tense. While it is followed by first person, past tense utterances answering the self-quoted rhetorical question here, note the influence of the move to the second person here: "If you can get these all by yourself, where are you?" This move addresses the viewer more directly than the screenwriter's use of the first person in the first parallel set of quotations. Thus,

this recollected confession from "then" functions for the viewer "now" as a ventriloquated appeal to confess to the same problem "now." Indeed, note finally how the incorporation of the viewer's real-time context does not stop there. The infomercial was originally aired only during the late night/early morning hours. The cited time of day, four in the morning, is both historical "fact" in the screenwriter's recounting as well as unavoidably true in the ongoing experience of the viewer.

The third global parallelism is again defined by self-quotations. Locally, we find a group of structurally similar grammatical constructions as we did in the first parallelism above. The quotations are again framed with the first person past tense ("I asked myself"). Similarly, the screenwriter stays in the (conditional) second person. Here he strings together three questions, which given the ongoing endorsement are clearly rhetorical: "What if you stopped being scared?" "What if you stopped being disappointed?" and, summarized generally, "What if you just sort of lose all that?" Through word magic here, "all that" in the final question has come to stand for shedding an entire identity—one that is linked to all of the fear-based kinds of personal failure identified in the infomercial. Presumably on the precipice of ritual transformation at the time, the screenwriter "asked" himself if he wanted to be freed from his confessed flaws. As in the parallel part above, movement from the first into the second person has the screenwriter now speaking less directly to himself "then" and more directly to the target audience member "now." This parallel change allows his self-directed quotations to become less a part of a past story about his own transformation and more an attempt to persuade the viewer to convert as well by challenging them in their own voice to give up what is holding them back in life. Note other differences in this parallelism that support this general change.

The screenwriter uses a past tense condition ("stopped") to frame the first two ventriloquated voices in the local parallelism here. Then note how he moves to a present tense condition in the final parallel part ("sort of lose"). This local change in tense moves the (ventriloquated) speaker through a conditional world of past restrictions that held him back and into a present one in which there is a chance to give them up and achieve freedom. The local parallelism within the global parallelism here thus makes a tropic use of grammatical tense to bring the viewer to the precipice of change by challenging the viewer to leave behind a completed, flawed past and accept a new, hopeful present.

The final part of the screenwriter's narrative is where the real-time transformation takes place and where the trope of incorporation is completed; as such, it is internally complex with a few additionally significant local parallelisms within

it. If we consider the final part of the global parallelism, it is again narratively quite simple. What is interesting is the way in which the earlier reliance on ambiguous reference, running throughout most of the infomercial, is reversed here. Although the meaning of "being fulfilled" and "taking action" is in general quite vague, here they have a very clear and specific meaning. Paraphrasing across the entire final global parallelism here: to be fulfilled is to give up fear and be able to take action, and to take action is to make a decision. Making the phone call to order the tapes, however, has been defined here through word magic to be the only decisive action that brings (immediate) satisfaction and fulfillment. Moreover, this ventriloquated endorsement continues to challenge the viewer to act on his confession now; that decisive action to transform a possibly positive present into a real one however is now linked by word magic to making the phone call to order the tapes. As above, consider now the specific comparative parallel changes that unfold to increasingly incorporate the experience of the viewer at home in order to bring about a transformation in real time.

Consider first the change in the framing verbs from "said" and "asked" in the first three cases to "what happens if I say" in the last. The screenwriter is no longer framing his ventriloquated utterances as having happened in the past. Rather, he has incorporated even the tense of the framing itself within the ventriloquated voicing in the (conditional) present. Viewers at home can now literally hear themselves in every word he says. Note as well that by the second local parallelism here ("how about taking some action?"), he has through ellipsis omitted the conditional present tense marker ("what happens if I say"). In all the remaining local parallelisms in this fourth and last part of the global parallelism, one finds clauses with verbal gerunds that have interpretations that indexically shift based on the context in which they are uttered.[3] As embedded here within a conditional, historical present tense, "How about taking some action?" ventriloquates into a proposal that urges the viewer to act in an open-ended present that increasingly leaves behind its conditional and historical present tense framing. With gerunds that are inherently in the progressive aspect then, these parallel changes in verb tense and aspect are, through ventriloquation, simultaneously creating a context in which it makes sense to make a decision to act now and persuading the viewer to move further into it.

The second set of local parallelisms (within the global parallelism in this final turn at talk) is found in an ordered sequence of verbal actions: "grabbing

3. Compare "How about pizza?" If quoted from a prior conversation it can take place in the past. If proposed in a conversation between friends, it will have relevance in the present as a suggestion. Finally, if proposed in a meeting on world hunger, it has present/future relevance.

your life and taking it and riding with it." From the perspective of lexical aspect, the first two verbs in the sequence are punctual in that they have no internal temporal duration.[4] Given their larger framing within a sequence, they happen without internal duration, and we read one as logically happening after the other in a metaphorical journey that thus begins with two punctual decisive acts of "taking control." The final verbal noun here "riding with it" is a continuous verbal action because it shows internal duration. Thus, within an already continuous sequence of verbal nouns, two punctual actions open up into a final continuous action that characterizes the ongoing metaphoric journey itself here. These tropic uses of grammatical categories contribute to the ventriloquated appeal to the viewer to "convert" by turning an internally continuous, open, and positive conditional present into a real one by ordering the tapes.

In the third and final local parallelism here, some viewers are now presumably riding along with increased control over their lives. The first verbal action here ("deciding") is structurally parallel with the ones discussed above. It is again a verbal noun with a continuous aspect embedded within a continuous sequence that is far removed from its conditional, historical present tense framing. What follows, however, foregrounds this local pattern. What is new here is the use of the grammatical prospective aspect ("going to go", cf. "about to X"). Moreover, this is embedded within an actual present tense progressive construction ("where you are going to go"). This parallel contrast establishes two important moves here. First, the use of the grammatical prospective aspect in the present progressive creates the illusion of a future action in the present. Though this entire construction is still embedded, recall, in the conditional historical present, the ventriloquation here presents the viewer with a decision that is about to happen. Indeed, that decisive action is linked back to an ongoing metaphoric journey because it has a (telic) endpoint—"where" the viewer is going to go. Note the transformative work done here with the return to the final verbal noun ("going").

The screenwriter enacts a tropic transformation when he states "deciding where you are going to go and going there." The parallel use of the present prospective progressive sets up a deictic goal for the journey in a seeming "future." "Going there" thus marks the end to the continuous verbal sequence that has been unfolding. This aligns the ongoing transformation with the endpoint of

4. The best way to see these distinctions is by opposition. Considering the verbal nouns in this sequence, the first two are punctual because in the larger sequence in which they are embedded here, they do not make sense in frames that would mark them as having continuous aspect: "grabbing it for an hour" and "taking it for an hour." In contrast, consider the acceptability of placing the third verbal noun in the series in this frame ("riding with it for an hour") as it is marked for continuous aspect here.

the journey. To decide to be "going there" ends the continuous present that has been unfolding—leaving behind its conditional, historical present tense framing—while at the same time aligning itself with the present progressive action that, as it were, gets the viewer "there": making the call to order the tapes. The condensed references here are very specific and have been tightly constructed by word magic throughout the infomercial: to make a decision is to order the tapes and to go anywhere decisively therefore is to move away from fear and toward happiness and fulfillment (by ordering the tapes).

For those for whom the ritual transformation has been working, the transformation takes place at this point. Words that were used to transform the screenwriter are being reuttered to reenact how they worked on him, but also—more importantly—to effect the transformation of the viewer/addressee who hears himself/herself in or through these words. Indeed, across the global parallelism and again here in these last lines, note the movement from first to second person. As above, the screenwriter is moving more and more toward challenging the viewer in the viewer's own voice, rather than recalling his own past experiences.

The screenwriter has thus enacted a parallelism of persuasion within which at the close of this turn at talk, he and the viewer have become one as "transformed consumer." Ritual time and real time are one. The ritual transformation takes place when a viewer picks up the phone and, displaying the power of a conscious decision, calls to order the tapes. This is the decisive action in the present that is mirrored in a ritual world of meanings. This is the action that transforms the individual from a hopeless loser—isolated and abandoned in an ideological liminality—into a happy and inspired person who is full of hope because he has experienced the power of the decision to change. Indeed, the trope of incorporation is now essentially complete. It has moved forward to engulf the target audience member with various types of sociological and psychological verisimilitude and ultimately ended with a doubly voiced parallelism that relied on magical words, grammatical tropes, and ventriloquism in the ongoing ritual context itself.

Conclusion

The question of how "commodity formulation" (Agha 2011a) can effectively be given to specific new products in new areas of social life is a question worth investigating. Here a detailed case study has documented one way in which a new product type can be created. As a new cultural practice, with little to no coherent ideological support, it is not surprising that a ritual rite of passage was

needed in order to create a new, coherent type of identity within an expanded consumer self. A few characteristics of the specific rite of passage uncovered in this analysis are worth detailing by way of conclusion.

First, what is particularly interesting about this rite of passage is the way in which this new product type tries to extend the reach of typical commodities into a world of objects that in comparison should not be available to it. This ritual essentially tries to transform institutionalized forms of professional "knowledge"—legitimately gained as educational achievements by experts—into regular commodities. That is, if ordering the tapes will make you happy, this transforms "knowledge" into a regular commodity through a single, emotionally charged experience of self-determination to be the consummate "consumer." One can essentially buy all that consumer products promise with a single purchasing decision.

Second, consider the ideologies in play here as their role in cultural practices is one of the central interests of those working at the intersection between language and culture. The challenges that the writers of the infomercial faced were not unlike those faced by any producers of culture who attempt to create a practice that lacks or even contradicts normative and ideological practices. We learn from this case study a lesson that is likely generalizable: nothing is completely new. As noted above, in order to "sell" the tapes, the infomercial's writers relied upon a fundamental ideology in consumer society. They semiotically set up the presupposition for buying in general—instantaneous satisfaction linked a product to a new consumer identity—as the motive and argument for why knowledge too can be a regular commodity.

Indeed, others have cited this kind of analogical process as being of great general interest to the way in which language and culture intersect (e.g., Parmentier 2009). Gal (1992) has documented the movement of language ideologies as they spread into other ideological realms, such as stereotypes. Urciuoli (2003) has documented how shifting indexicals are used to help move higher education more in the direction of a business model. Finally, and of most direct relevance here, others have noted the analogical similarity between religion and capitalism: specifically, the rituals of daily life under capitalism replicate the world and thus constitute selves in ways similar to those found within religiously defined worldviews (i.e., Sahlins 1994, 1996; Applbaum 2004). Specific beliefs aside, whether one is putting one's hands on the television in order to be healed or picking up the phone to order self-help tapes, comparable forms of redemption are arguably being ritually enacted in both contexts. If, in the former, one is reaching out to a supernatural being for "salvation," in the latter one is reaching

out through a fundamental tenet of capitalist consumer culture for "success." The ritual analyzed here then is in the final analysis a rich testament to just how beautifully ordinary our own culture is among all the others "out there."

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