

Pictures in America:

IT ISN'T JUST ABOUT HOW MANY WORDS THEY'RE WORTH

by Cameron Granger

During my high school years my family hosted three different exchange students, for a year apiece. When I asked Sanna, a foreign exchange student from Finland who lived at my house during my junior year, what Europeans thought of when they thought of America, she said MTV and George Bush. "Greeeeeeeeaaaat," I sarcastically thought, as I pictured the America someone would form based on only these two things. I know people have a better grasp of what America is like than just George Bush and MTV, but Sanna's comment made me start to ponder the question of how people's thinking, not just Europeans', is influenced by how the media presents America. And as I thought about this, the more I thought that perhaps even Americans aren't sure what America is like sometimes.

We may live in this country, but we are frequently exposed to media that attempts to tell us who we are. The visual media that we absorb is nothing more than pictures. Even video media is just a series of ordered, individual pictures being run through our televisions at a fast enough rate for our minds to perceive them as a fluid, working reality of motion. That "a picture is worth a thousand words" is a lie. They're worth more. We see pictures every day (on the front of a cereal box, on the front page of a newspaper, or on posters on the walls in our dorms) that hold more meaning than we can sometimes fathom, and sometimes we pick up on those messages without realizing it.

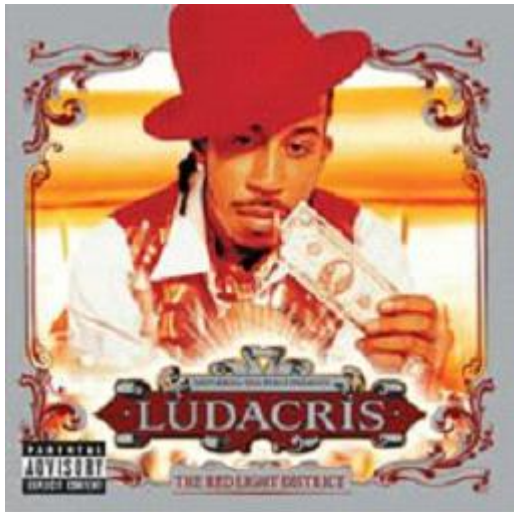
We know that there are messages in pictures that can affect our thinking, but rarely, if ever, do we consider the relationship between these messages and reality. Pictures are merely representations of real things, so someone who has not seen or experienced the actuality of what the picture conveys has nothing but the picture to judge that thing on. This idea may not seem like anything new, yet it is important to consider because images can misrepresent something important such as one's culture. The culture a person grows up in has a huge and lasting effect on the development of that particular person. Culture, in some ways, provides its members with a general way of thinking because the popular way of thinking (created by the culture) is generally accepted by the individual as the appropriate way to think. This acceptance of popular thinking is inevitable but also dangerous because our ways of thinking determine our actions and actions have repercussions. With this worrying thought in mind, one must consider the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and his culture.

If I lived alone on an island somewhere, then the culture of that place is determined by what I carry about from day to day and by how I think about things. That is it. The culture of that island is a direct reflection of myself. However, let's say we add a guy named "Mike" into this island scenario. Now the culture of the island must change to incorporate how Mike acts and thinks. By adding another person, parts of the original culture are lost because Mike thinks and acts differently than I do (naturally, since he is a different person). So, the culture of the island adjusts to encompass both Mike and me. With each person added, the gap between my culture and me grows greater.

The greater the number of people in a culture, the greater the distance between the individual and his culture. But what does this mean for people living in America? There are millions of people in America and only one culture for all of us. The culture of such a large population must become an "estimate," or "average," of what those people do and how they think because there is no way it could represent every individual. In fact, the individual in such a large population has very little hope of ever

affecting his own culture unless he is able to make a substantially large portion of America think in the same way he does so that the “average” thinking of the country changes. By this logic, the number of people an individual can affect translates to how much capacity he has for shaping his culture. With this in mind, the people who produce the visual media (commercials, magazines, billboards, television, and so on) have a gargantuan capacity for affecting our culture because they reach out across all of America. While the media commands a powerful position, we, the individuals, have little-to-no capacity for affecting our culture and are left to be fed only a version of our culture from the spoon that is popular media.

What do the images circulated in America have to say about our culture? In our country, ownership is a sign that we are successful. There are three things we try to own, and they are money, space, and power. How can a person own space and power when these things are merely concepts? The answer is that we can't truly own space or power, but we have created artificial ways to “buy” what can't be sold. We buy physical representations of concepts, and our culture accepts these representations as the actual thing. Images, then, can reflect, distort, and perpetuate culture as expressed in three dimensions of American culture: money, space, and power.



By analyzing some of the pictures circulated in America, we can begin to peer into the details of this idea that images reflect culture. Ludacris is a very famous and rich rapper whose image can be found anywhere from the pages of Maxim magazine to the televised images of MTV. Here we have Ludacris's newest album cover. This is an image that's placed across CD racks all over the world where millions of people are exposed to it.. At first glance, one might not see anything to this picture, yet upon closer inspection and thought, we notice details such as how Ludacris's clothes speak of high price tags, and the only thing in the picture that isn't Ludacris himself is a crisp hundred-dollar bill. The bill is poised in his hand as if he

is about to slap it down on a table to spend on something; and his eyes say that he doesn't care--he's got more where that came from. There could be anything in his hand, but what's in it is money; and the cool, calm look on his face says that's what he wants. The message conveyed in this image about American culture is that money is paramount, which might not be too far from the truth.

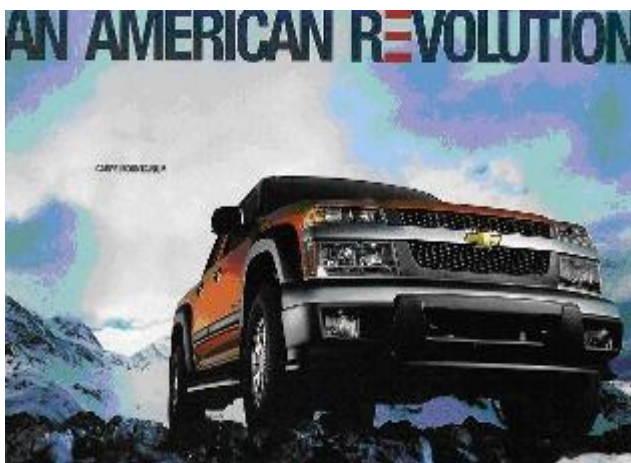
Just as the music culture circulates images that send messages about America's culture, so does the food aspect of our culture. It seems that size is the most important dynamic of our food here in America. Nearly every food commercial we see on television goes for the size appeal. The very names of some of these advertised foods are enough to clue you in: The Big Mac, Biggie fries, and the monster thick burger. This hulking mass of bacon, cheese, bread, and Angus beef is Hardee's newest burger. It is clear to the eye that this is not a weak burger. The



beef alone weighs 2/3 of a pound! This burger's size is stressed as the most important aspect of this food: its size is the key marketing point, and the dominant thought in the mind of any viewer of this picture. The double-stacked beef just explodes out of the burger as the bacon sticks out of the sides like sleeves that dangle out the edge of an over-packed suitcase. The cheese looks as if it is attempting to cover the beef, but there is just far too much beef to be covered, and the sesame seed bun looks almost feeble trying to contain the contents of the burger. With the ingredients ready to burst into life, the image taunts Americans with an "I dare you to eat me" challenge, as if a person's ability to finish this burger decides if they are truly American or not. With its hugely commanding size, this burger conveys a sense of power. This image strikes a chord with me because it is a veritable monument to America's love of excess. Who needs this big a burger? A lumberjack who has been working all day, maybe. One thing is for sure: this burger is not suited for the average American. However, thousands of Americans see this image, with all of its underlying messages, daily (on decals pasted on Hardee's windows, in newspaper advertisements, on television commercials) and say, "Hey, that's what I need." With as many monster thick burger images as are out there, the "voice" of this visual media has made itself heard, and this voice is very loud.

It's not just burger places that try to harness America's love for power through size. We've all seen the Taco Bell commercial where a car pulls up to the pick-up window, a man is handed a grilled, stuffed burrito, and the car tips over from its now immense weight. So what causes us Yankees to have such love for excess? Surely, it is partially because we are influenced by images shown in advertisements as with the Monster Thick Burger, but I think there is more going on here in the internal workings of our culture.

I see such emphasis on size everywhere in the messages popular media sends. Therefore, it was no surprise to me when I read a survey in Men's Health magazine concluding that men who take up more space (through actions such as stretching one's legs out or throwing one's arms across the back of a bench when one is sitting) are perceived as commanding more power. It didn't surprise me because I have seen how our culture has had an influence on the meaning of space and size. This phenomenon starts with money. If you have money, then you have power. If you have money, then you spend that money on things that allow you more space (such as bigger houses and cars). After a time, society begins to associate amount of space with amount of power. Upon investigation of this association, one finds that boundless power equals, by American standards, boundless space.



If we want proof of this, all we need to do is look around us. We see a couple buy an enormous house and a single person driving a huge 7-passenger Suburban. Other countries see this too--the fat American, driving his road-hog vehicle with supersized drink in the double cup holder and supersized burger in hand. Why do we waste so much space? What causes us to think, consume, and act this way? Perhaps some of these answers can be found in the analysis of this next image [Fig. 3]. Here is the mammoth Chevy Colorado. The patriotic vibe is so strong in this

advertisement that I can almost feel Abe Lincoln patting me on the shoulder as I peer at it. “AN AMERICAN REVOLUTION” is printed across the top with the dominant Chevy Colorado standing atop some mountain rocks along with the caption, “CARPE MOUNTANIUM” on the left side of the truck. At the bottom of the advertisement is the slogan, “Colorado: That’s Latin for ‘go wherever you darn well please.’” Clearly, the people who came up with this advertisement knew what they were trying to accomplish. The bold print, the capitalized phrase, “AN AMERICAN REVOLUTION,” yells out at the viewer. It tells the viewer that this product is not only American, but that it is so powerful that it can be called a revolution.

Concurrent with the marketing strategy style of the American food industry, the theme here is definitely size. The camera has been set at a low angle, making the Colorado look even bigger and taller than it otherwise would. Mountains loom in the background, and even the words are capitalized to increase their size! “Carpe Mountanium” it says, as if to imply that with the size of this truck, we can seize the day and conquer a mountain. With the sentence, “Colorado: that’s Latin for ‘go wherever you darn well please,’” the implication is that with this truck’s size, we have enough power to go wherever we feel like going. The ad implies that, with this truck, we can drive on our neighbor’s lawn or down the wrong way on a one-way street if we feel like it because we have the power to do so. This advertisement attempts to harness the American-man icon. It wants the viewer to see himself in this vehicle and see how the size of the vehicle can get anyone anywhere, so Chevy has capitalized on, and perpetuated by doing so, the American obsession with space and size and power to market its product.

Whatever the purpose of the photographer, or the people who present these images to the eyes of Americans, these images send messages about material wealth, space, and power. We can’t stop the messages from being sent, but our minds can act as filters if we think about what we are being told and then decide if we agree with those messages or not.

Every human being is born into a culture. It is something we cannot control or pick. However, although we have been born into a particular culture, we can in time become an active, sovereign part of it. This means that as adults we can make decisions based on our own thinking rather than letting our culture do the thinking for us. This ability to function outside of our culture’s natural trends is what has allowed me to step aside for a moment to consider the workings of the culture I am a part of, and I encourage every person to do the same—for aren’t we first individuals, cultural consumers, second?