



# Age transcended: A semiotic and rhetorical analysis of the discourse of agelessness in North American anti-aging skin care advertisements ☆

Kirsten L. Ellison<sup>1</sup>

Joint Graduate Program in Communication & Culture, 3013 TEL Centre, 88 Pond Rd., York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 18 October 2011

Received in revised form 24 October 2013

Accepted 9 December 2013

Available online 18 January 2014

### Keywords:

Anti-aging

Agelessness

Advertisement

Discourse analysis

Semiotics

Visual rhetoric

## ABSTRACT

Drawing from a collection of over 160 North American print advertisements for anti-aging skin care products from January to December of 2009, this paper examines the discourse of agelessness, a vision of esthetic perfection and optimal health that is continually referred to by gerontologists, cultural theorists, and scientific researchers as a state of being to which humankind can aspire. Employing critical discourse analysis through the use of semiotics and visual rhetoric, this paper explores the means through which anti-aging skin care advertisements present to their viewers a particular object of desire, looking, more specifically, at how agelessness is presented as a way out and ultimate transcendence of age. Through the analytical tools of semiotics and visual rhetoric, four visions of agelessness are identified and explored in this paper: Agelessness as Scientific Purity, Agelessness as Genetic Impulse, Agelessness as Nature's Essence, and Agelessness as Myth. Whether found in the heights of scientific purity, the inner core of our genetic impulse, the depths of nature's essence, or whether agelessness itself has reached its own, untouchable, mythic status, the advertisements in this study represent one of the most pervasive vehicles through which our current vision(s) of ageless perfection are reflected, reinforced, and suspended in a drop of cream.

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## Introduction

In his introductory remarks at the fourth annual conference for the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, the President of A4M, Dr. Ronald Klatz, declares triumphantly to his audience: “We, the leaders of the anti-aging movements, will help to usher in a new modern age for humanity, The

Ageless Society. We will make REAL humanity's oldest dream: to bring an end to aging as we know it” (1996; 28). Using such verbs as degenerate, destroy, bankrupt, ravage, and crush to describe the danger of an unkempt population, Klatz proclaims vehemently that we are “on the brink of becoming a geriatric society full of wrinkled, frail, disease-ridden, liver-spotted economic parasites,” and looks to the “higher truth” of science and technology as our only hope of salvation (28). In her ethnographic study of the anti-aging industry, Courtney Mykytyn (2008) argues that current anti-aging practitioners, such as those members of the A4M, have moved beyond the pathologization of the aging process, where the disease-model of aging is no longer the dominant perception. Instead of denying the naturalness of the aging process, anti-aging researchers and practitioners emphasize the agonizing yet ameliorable pain of this process and the

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E-mail address: [klelliso@ucalgary.ca](mailto:klelliso@ucalgary.ca).

<sup>1</sup> Present address: Department of Communication and Culture, 2500 University Dr. NW, SS347, Calgary AB T2N 1N4 1520 16th Ave SW., Calgary AB T3C0Z8, Canada. Tel.: +1 403 220 3239.

humanness of our drive to overcome, to pursue through intervention liberation from the biological harnesses of bodily decline. Referred to by Mykytyn as a “hierarchy of nature,” this pursuit of liberation is conceptualized by anti-aging proponents as more innately human than the desire to age naturally (320). For Klatz and other proponents of anti-aging technology, in the march to human progress and esthetic perfection, age has become yet another hurdle to overcome. Although he does not deny the inevitability of our mortality, Klatz argues that age itself, through the pioneering work of the physicians and scientists of A4M, will one day be put on hold, bringing us, in our lifetime, to an era of agelessness.

While the topic of agelessness and anti-aging technology has been widely discussed, critiqued and explored over the past decade, very little has addressed the actual process of signification underlying this discourse. Drawing from a comprehensive sample of North American print advertisements for anti-aging skin care products from January to December of 2009, this paper examines how the notion of agelessness, and by its opposition, aging, is conceptualized and reified within the advertisements under study, specifically speaking to the rhetorical ordering of ‘human nature’ referred to above. Employing discourse analysis through the use of semiotics and visual rhetoric, this study explores the means through which anti-aging skin care advertisements present to their viewers this particular object of desire, looking, more specifically, at how agelessness is presented as the liberation from and ultimate transcendence of age. Analyzing each advertisement individually and the collection of advertisements more generally, my research aims to uncover larger patterns within representations of agelessness and aging, and their place in the wider North American Anglo-culture in which they operate.

### Anti-aging technology and the ageless self

Although the claims made by Klatz and his followers may be deemed extreme in most circles, the notion that age can and should be transcended underlies an industry that has profits in the billions in the United States alone. Paired with the spending power and consumer habits of a characteristically youth-oriented generation, the search for a means of taking control of and ultimately conquering age has been met with a surge in available products and procedures to meet this demand. With the introduction of Retin A- and AHA-based products into the cosmetics market in the early 1990s, over the counter anti-aging skin care products, or ‘cosmeceuticals’, have taken off from \$3.1 billion in profits in the United States in 1997 to almost \$5.1 billion in 2001 and had been projected to reach over \$8 billion in profits by 2010 (Bayer, 2005; De Guzman, 2007). Today, bio-identical and human growth hormones have entered the anti-aging scene, promising not only a more youthful appearance, but also a longer, healthier life (Weintraub, 2010).

What is inherent in the promotion of anti-aging products and procedures, and explicit in many of the advertisements and medical texts that have been analyzed, is the broader discourse of agelessness, a vision of esthetic perfection and optimal health that is continually referred to by gerontologists, cultural theorists, and scientific researchers as a state of being to which humankind can aspire. While critiques of the obsession with youth and overall disdain for old age have

been raised before (see e.g. De Beauvoir, 1970; Freidan, 1993), the same arguments have been picked up with increasing urgency as advancing developments in anti-aging technology further reinforce the notion that the ‘possibility’ of agelessness can in fact become a reality. Explored by gerontologists (see e.g. Cole, 1992; Estes, Biggs, & Phillipson, 2003; Katz, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001/2002; Katz & Marshall, 2003; Lupton, 2000), and cultural critics (see e.g. Andrews, 1999; Angus & Reeve, 2006; Bayer, 2005; Brooks, 2010; Gibson, 2000; Gullette, 2004; Hendricks, 2005; Jakobovits, 2003; Twigg, 2007), this new vision of anti-aging or agelessness has been critiqued in terms of an increasingly ‘anti-aging’ culture of consumption and the effect that these recent advances in body modification have had on our perception of what it means to grow old. From the field of critical discourse analysis, scholars such as Calasanti (2005, 2007; Calasanti & King, 2005; Calasanti, Slevin, & King, 2006); Johnson (2008); Vincent (2006, 2007; Vincent et al., 2008); and Coupland (2003, 2009) have focused on the discourse behind the pathologization of age and aging. Vincent’s work in particular, analyzes how the language and rhetoric of scientific texts which surround anti-aging medicine have shaped our cultural understanding of the aging process. Continuing from where these scholars left off, the focus of this particular study moves beyond the stigmatization and pathologization of age to an inquiry into the discursive construction of what it means to achieve this state of being outside the bounds of age. How, in other words, is this particular “hierarchy of nature,” to borrow from Mykytyn, mobilized in anti-aging advertisements? What are the rhetorical devices deployed in these advertisements to move consumers to this particular path of liberation? The aim of this study is to identify and explore the representational means through which this notion of ‘agelessness’ is packaged and commodified, to understand how, in short, if we are able to overcome age, this conceptual state of being is ‘made meaningful’ within the larger discourse of consumer culture.

Although this study very much relies on the structuralist roots of semiotic and rhetorical analysis, the aim of this work is not to reveal any essentialist notion of the ‘deep structure’ of the advertisement, but rather to employ these analytical devices as a means of illuminating larger patterns of representation. Advertisements, as Roland Barthes (1977) once remarked, are unique from other forms of representation; they are designed with a specific purpose in mind: to sell goods. For Johnson (2008), advertisements have become the “engine of consumer culture;” it is through advertising that the values and belief structures of the surrounding cultural landscape are reflected, reinforced, and magnified into widely consumed signifiers, repeatedly resurfacing in the discursive practices of everyday life (1–4). Within an anti-aging culture of ageless beauty and body maintenance, anti-aging skin care advertisements have played a major discursive role in both the articulation and reception of what has become a discourse of agelessness. In the promotion of anti-aging skin care products, this study addresses the semiotic and rhetorical means through which agelessness is placed in relation to age as a means of selling these particular products. By moving beyond the single text in isolation, this study does not attempt to speak to any ‘true’ meaning of aging or agelessness, or any ‘true’ reading of their representations. The aim of this study is rather to identify the dominant ways in which these concepts are represented in consumer culture.

## The reading of agelessness: a theoretical and methodological framework

“Semiotics offers the promise of a systematic, comprehensive and coherent study of communications phenomena as a whole, not just instances of it.”— Hodge & Kress: Social Semiotics (p. 1)

In order to break apart and work through the meanings embedded within each advertisement, the analytical structure that I have developed is grounded in the theoretical contributions of Roland Barthes and Kenneth Burke. Applying Burke's ‘terms for order’ to Barthes's theory of connotation, the analytical framework of my study is based upon the relationship between three levels of signification: *denotation*, *connotation*, and the *ultimate*.

The first of these levels has been adopted from Saussure's (1994) original conception of the *sign*. Briefly, the sign, according to Saussure, is the sum of two parts: the *signifier*, or sound-image, and its correlating *signified*, or concept, where the signifier carries the concept being signified. Referred to by Barthes as part of the language-object or *denotation*, the signifier and its signified have direct contact with the object world. Described as being made up of *positive* terms, Burke (1969) refers to this level of signification as the “terminology of perception... ‘positive’ in its everyday, empirical availability” (184).

Working within the realm of *myth*, Barthes argues that the second-order system of signification, *connotation*, draws on, or ‘grabs hold of’, the denoted sign of the first order, transforming it into a signifier of the second (Fig. 1). The signifying process of the first order is thus reduced to a single unit of meaning, a sum total, presented as a natural, indisputable statement of fact. The function of the denoted message is always that of naturalization; as Barthes states, “it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation,” grounding it in the seemingly ‘objective’ innocence of the ‘being-there-ness’ of the image (1984; 45). For Burke, the terms of this order work within the realm of the *dialectical*, describing it as essentially *titular*, a conceptual term which signifies an *idea* of the real, or as he states, they “refer to *ideas* rather than *things*” (185), they “are the words for *principles* and *essence*” (184; italics his). The choice of one denoted sign over another is made with a conscious awareness of the type of condensation or essence of reality that this particular signifier will connote. According to Barthes, it is a choice which holds the rhetorical significance of the message as

a whole. As he states, “*ideology* is the form ... of the signifieds of connotation, while *rhetoric* is the form of connotators” (Barthes, 1968; 91). In other words, while ideology shapes *what* will be signified, rhetoric shapes *how* it will be signified.

When applying this analytical structure to the realm of advertisements, Barthes (1977) states that the connoted visual meanings of an advertisement are always accompanied by a linguistic message, functioning to guide the viewer's reading of the image, controlling not only the focus of his or her gaze, but also how this vision is understood and interpreted. As he argues, its function is inherently ideological, stating that, “by means of an often subtle *dispatching*, it remote-controls [the reader] towards a meaning chosen in advance” (40; italics his), unifying the associative articulations of the connoted message under one global concept.

Beyond the first- and second- orders of signification, however, there is a third, unifying principle that provides value and order to the connoted meanings of any given message. Burke calls this term the *ultimate*; it is the hierarchical structure behind the competing voices of the titular terms, and it is both “the fulfillment of the previous order and the transcending of it” (197). In the context of Barthes's analysis of the advertisement, while the linguistic message may anchor the plethora of connoted meanings into a particular concept or knowledge of reality, it is the ultimate term that gives *value* and *placement* to the connoted message in relation to its context. Beyond mere connotation, it is thus this guiding order that gives substance to the message, providing it with the context through which it becomes meaningful. Looking beyond the connoted message, agelessness may unify the concepts presented in the advertisement, but it is how agelessness is presented in relation to aging, as something that it is without, that is the focus of my analysis (Fig. 2).

Essential to my reading of the conceptual relationship between aging and agelessness within these advertisements is the foundational work of Judith Williamson (1978). For Williamson, nature is the ‘raw material’ of culture; everything is made meaningful through its relation to nature. Borrowing from Levi-Strauss, Williamson refers to the process of transforming a natural object into a cultural, symbolic text as a process of ‘cooking’. As she states, “Nature’ has simply become a referent of a ‘cooking’ society; it has meaning in terms of its relationship with what has transformed it, but it is not valued in itself,” becoming “a symbol, not of *nature*, but ... of the *culture* that has worked it over” (104). It is this process of transformation that is essential to the relation between the

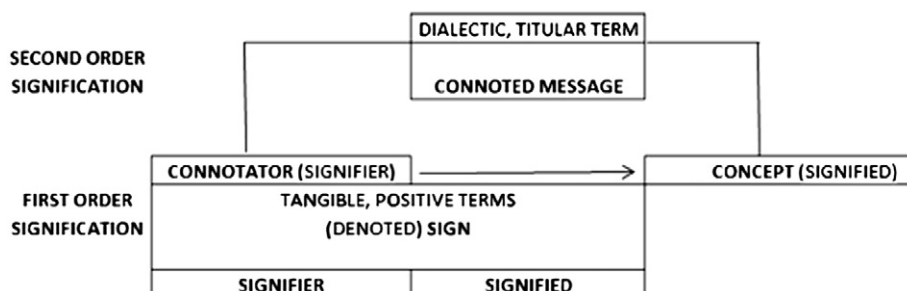


Fig. 1. The sign, the signifier, and the signified: a sketch of the relationship between the denotative and connotative planes of signification.

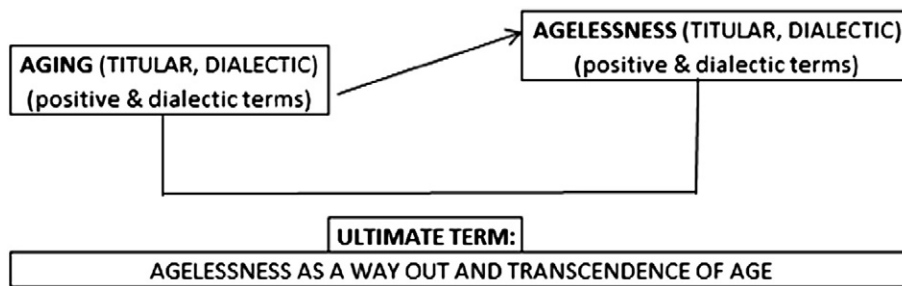


Fig. 2. The ultimate term: ordering agelessness in relation to age.

underlying concepts of aging and agelessness, where the two states of being are brought into common dialog as two ends of one process, articulated through *ultimate* terms.

In her analysis of advertisements, Williamson outlines three themes surrounding the 'cooking' of nature: Science, the Return to Nature, and Magic. Described as the most prestigious 'cooking' process, Science as a form of knowledge, relies upon the control, capture, and re-ordering of nature; as Williamson states, it both defines and supersedes the image of Nature. In the Return to Nature, 'the natural', on the other hand, is the hollow form of nature, 'cooked' and filled with cultural significance. According to Williamson, in the process of 'returning' a product or concept to nature, the product or concept can therefore "never quite get back to *nature*, because it can never be signified *as* nature, only as natural: 'the natural' is the meaning extracted from nature, and there is an invisible but impenetrable barrier between the two" (122). Magic, the third process of 'cooking' described by Williamson, is a process of transformation whereby the process itself is *absent*. Magic, she claims, is instant, "it just 'happens', metaphysically, and does not *work materially*" (141). Using her three processes as a guide, I have identified a fourth ordering principle in my analysis, one that lies between the realms of Science and Nature. Instead of the return to or scientific control of and escape from Nature, the fourth 'cooking' process is articulated as the *reawakening* of 'true' Nature through Science, as *reactivating* what is already a genetic impulse. In all of these cases, meaning is derived from transformation, from the relation between the 'raw' and the 'cooked'. In the context of my work on the discourse of agelessness, these processes are used as guiding themes of signification, where (cooked) agelessness is placed in relation to (raw) age.

The analysis then consists of a semiotic and rhetorical reading of each advertisement, as well as a larger thematic reading of how these individual texts relate to or contrast one another. While grounded in the theoretical framework outlined above, my work is inductive in its attempt to identify emerging themes among the data that has been analyzed. My analysis involves a process of categorization, close reading and thematic reading, moving continuously between texts as new patterns emerge.

### The sample

The sample of this study consists of 167 unique anti-aging print advertisements collected from fourteen North American

women's consumer magazines from January to December of 2009. The sampling method was purposive and non-random, with the magazines being chosen based on their average monthly circulation, median age and gender distribution, as well as their overall subject focus, attempting to choose advertisements that reach the maximum amount of female viewers within the median age range of 25 to 60+, ages at which these products would most likely be consumed. As this is a North American study, an effort was made to include both Canadian and American magazines. That said, as most of the top circulating American magazines are also widely available in Canada, and as their national circulation figures are significantly higher, ten of the selected magazines are American, while only four are Canadian. The resulting magazines selected for this sample are published in English, a reflection of the circulation figures of both Canadian and American magazines. As such, my work can only speak to a North American *Anglo*-culture, and only as it is reflected in a *mainstream* and widely distributed women's magazine publication.

The American magazines were selected from a list of the top 100 American consumer magazines based on the total verified circulation figures provided by the Audit Bureau of Circulation for 2008. Within these 100 magazines, eleven were selected based on gender distribution and subject focus, excluding from the study's scope magazines that focus on housekeeping, cooking, or any specialized activity such as parenting or gardening. As the advertisements being studied are promoting products which target appearance in particular, the three categories of magazines selected for this study reflect this bias and are as follows: 'Lifestyle', 'Beauty/Fashion', and 'Fitness/Health'. The term 'lifestyle' as a category could include a variety of magazines, including the specialized subjects listed above. For this study, however, I use the term to imply an overall *consumer* lifestyle, excluding magazines such as *The Oprah Magazine*, *Martha Stewart Living*, or any of the celebrity gossip magazines. The three American magazines included under this subject focus are *Redbook*, *Vanity Fair*, and *More*. Under the category heading 'Beauty/Fashion', I selected the following five magazines from the 'Top 100' list: *InStyle*, *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *Allure*, all of which carry relevance to the topic of aging, as personal appearance and style falls very much in line with the visibility of the feminine aging body. For the category 'Health/Fitness', I selected *Shape* and *Self*, two magazines which place particular emphasis on the body, both in appearance and in physical and mental well-being.

In order to ensure breadth within my sample, four Canadian women's magazines were also included. Falling



under the 'Lifestyle' and 'Beauty/Fashion' categories, *More Canada* and *Elle Canada* were selected as direct comparisons to their American editions. As a Canadian counterpart of the 'Lifestyle' category, I also included *Chatelaine*, a Canadian magazine which ended up having the most anti-aging skin care advertisements within the specified time frame, with a total of 92 placements. Under the 'Beauty/Fashion' category, I also included *Flare*, a magazine self-acclaimed to be "Canada's Fashion Authority" (Rogers Publishing Ltd, 2010). Unfortunately, I could not find any counterparts to the American 'Health/Fitness' magazines; however as all of the American magazines included in this study are widely circulated in Canada as well, they carry relevance throughout North America. The above Canadian magazines were only included so as to ensure the inclusion of specifically Canadian products and Canadian advertisements.

The advertisements themselves were selected based on the criteria that follow. To begin with, each advertisement promotes an anti-aging skin care product. These products are topical, and sold over the counter, thus excluding products and procedures such as injections, lifts, implants, or anything that requires the involvement of a physician. While these advertisements are of equal significance to the topic of agelessness, the focus of my study is on a vision of aging that permeates *everyday* beauty regimes that take their place right next to such accepted products as face and body wash, hair products and makeup. By 'skin care product', I am also excluding anti-aging hair products, or products that are used specifically for the lips. By 'anti-aging', I am referring to products whose ingredients are described as addressing the *visible* signs of aging – such as wrinkles, sagging jowls, and fine lines – through reversal, elimination, or any other process that does more than just conceal.

As many of the advertisements appeared repeatedly between January and December 2009 among the selected fourteen magazines, there are a total of 817 advertisement placements within the sampling frame outlined above. Most of these advertisements, however, are repetitions, as larger brands have several magazine placements each month, bringing my collection of unique advertisements to 167. As a collected mass, while these advertisements are not inclusive of all 2009 print advertisements for anti-aging skin care products, they provide insight into the plethora of accumulated texts that make up part of a discourse of agelessness, and thus a means of identifying larger patterns of representation within them.

## The findings

### *Agelessness as scientific purity*

According to Williamson, the term 'Science' has come to take on an identity that exists above the practices and systems of knowledge that provide it with a tangible existence. As she states, Science "is spoken about as having achieved things and discovered things, as owning knowledge which ... no actual person is credited with knowing; it becomes a unified entity, rather than a practice" (111). In Burkian terms, it is titular, carrying with it values of dominance, control, truth, sterility, precision, progress, as well as other systems of knowledge such as medicine and technology. By defining, categorizing

and translating the observable into some impermeable truth, Science actively mediates our experience of the natural world that surrounds us; it 'cooks' Nature into an edible system of signs, ready for our consumption. Employing the combined theoretical contributions of Barthes and Burke, my analysis of the advertisements within this category reveals an image of Science as an instrument of control, a means of conquering and transcending the unruly aging processes of Nature. Agelessness, here, exists as if beyond the natural order, belonging to a higher order of truth, perfection and eternal beauty. Out of the 167 unique advertisements included in my sample, more than half were grouped under this category.

The majority of these advertisements include graphs, microscopic illustrations, before and after images, labels, and often the visual imprint of technological intervention on the face or body, visually connoting an overall theme of scientific conquest of the body and age. L'Oreal's New Advanced Revitalift® advertisements, for instance, depict arrows actively altering Andie MacDowell's face in order to illustrate how the product physically shapes and controls the aging process. Another interesting depiction of scientific inscription onto the woman's body is Elizabeth Arden's PreVage® Body advertisement, where the body has been replaced by a manikin and each 'problematic area' identified, labeled, and diagnosed. With the linguistic anchor "Health is Beautiful," Vichy's four-page advertisement for Liftactiv Retinol HA not only employs the visual strategies outlined above, but, taken as a whole, the compositional design of the advertisement itself is structured very much like a medical diagnosis. Beginning first by identifying the problem: age, and its symptoms: wrinkles, the page turns to reveal Vichy's solution: the product, followed by the desired result: an image of "ageless beauty", and finished finally with a page dedicated to the statistical validity of the advertisement's claims. The overall connoted message of this particular advertisement reads that through health, Vichy, and all that it now unifies, age can be fought, neutralized and 'true beauty' attained.

The connoted image of 'conquest' is also depicted through the visual conquering of space and time, often achieved through the use of light. One example is Estee Lauder's Time Zone advertisement, where the woman's metallic ring, placed at eye level, reflects a piercing sheen of light that breaks through the digitalized numbers depicted in the background. For the most part, however, narratives of conquest are achieved through the use of linguistic anchors, with words such as repair, reverse, lift, strengthen, resist, transform, battle, defy, deflect, revolutionize, and so on.

Another aspect of 'scientific conquest' illustrated in these advertisements is the notion that the product is a *protective* force from Nature, the environment, and above all, age. While this aspect is not as overt in some of the advertisements, Elizabeth Arden's PreVage® Day advertisement uses an antique fencing mask in order to illustrate the protective nature of their scientific ingenuity, with the caption: "Prepare yourself for the beauty battlefield" (Fig. 3). A more subtle approach can be seen in Roc's Retin-Ox™ Wrinkle Filler advertisement, where the woman is shown holding an umbrella over her head, sheltering her beauty from the world outside. Beyond protection from Nature and the aging process, the advertisements in this section are also all depicted in a space that is outside natural scenery, often against a solid

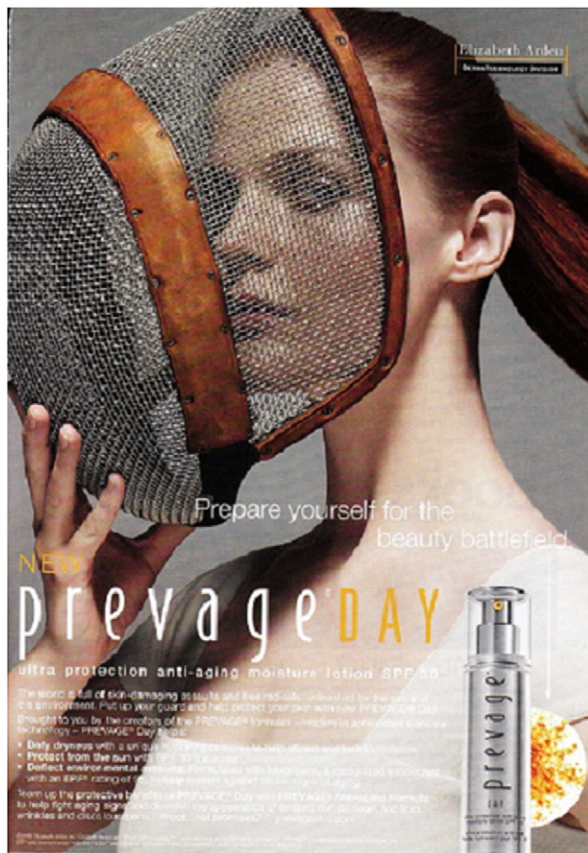


Fig. 3. Agelessness as scientific purity in Elizabeth Arden's PrevaGe® Day: "Prepare yourself for the beauty battlefield."

Source: *Allure: The beauty expert* (October 2009). Condé Nast Publications, 58.

backdrop of white, blue, gray, or black. The images are very clear and concise, controlled and organized, and depict either the product or ageless beauty as somehow transcendent of all dangers associated with age.

In all 87 advertisements collected under *Scientific Purity*, scientific intervention and eventual conquest over Nature, and thus age, is the true means through which one attains a state of agelessness. In Burkian terms, aging and agelessness are here ordered along a hierarchy founded upon values of precision, symmetry, and mastery, upon the detachment from and transcendence of all that is of earthly, primal Nature. In these advertisements, aging, as such, is placed in relation to that which must be controlled, or cooked, by Science. Aging, in the majority of these advertisements, is a threat, something to be guarded against in the struggle to *control* and *maintain* the appearance of one's body. Agelessness, here, is the end result of complete scientific control, the conquest of time and the body, and the carrier of the valued traits of health and beauty. Whether through the physical manipulation of or imprint on the body itself, Science is presented as the only means through which the human body can transcend the carnality of biological aging, and enter into a realm of eternal health and beauty, into a state of purity, a life cleansed of age.

### Agelessness as genetic impulse

The advertisements discussed above share an ordering principle of scientific conquest, where agelessness stands as a state of being beyond the grasp of the laws of Nature. For advertisements in this section, however, the source of agelessness comes from within the human body, with Science as the key to unlock it; it is through Science that the *natural* genetic impulse of the body to defy aging can be awakened. Although these advertisements make up a much smaller sample than those of the preceding section, this theme has become increasingly popular as new products are introduced into the market. The notion that we have been genetically designed to fight aging, with the aid of modern technology, complements the notion that the body is *hiding* or *masking* one's true ageless self behind the visible markers of age and physical decline. In these advertisements, it is thus not about transcending the body, but rather awakening its inner core, and returning it to its genetically determined state of being.

While visually the advertisements collected under this category could be grouped fairly easily with those of the previous category, in each of these advertisements there is at least one linguistic anchor which grounds the entire connoted message along the ordering principle of genetic impulse. Active verbs such as "rejuvenate," "stimulate," "boost," "restore," "amplify," "enhance," and "bring out" are applied to "cell regeneration," "the skin's fundamental matrix," "the synthesis of the three natural skin fillers," "your beauty's DNA," "skin's sleep repair cycle," "skin's ability to restore natural moisture," "your skin's youthful strength and plumpness," "the natural surface regeneration process," "your genes' vital impulse" (Fig. 4), and finally, to "your inner strength." In all of these cases, while Science is a necessary component of halting the aging process, it takes a supporting role, essential, yet secondary. The primary actor is the youth generating, or age resisting mechanism buried deep within the body's genetic core. Unlike the advertisements of the previous section, these key phrases anchor the advertisements deep within the ordering principle of genetic reactivation, pushing Science to a supplementary role in the hierarchical relation between aging and agelessness.

In addition to the above linguistic anchors, there are two visual mechanisms apparent in many of the advertisements that further set them apart from those of the previous section. One is the visual display of *unveiling*, either through the composition of the advertisement as a whole, or the depiction of unveiling as a process. One example can be seen in Lancôme's four page insert for the spring launch of Génifique Youth Activating Concentrate where the first image is made up of the images from all four pages, each page slightly narrower than the page that follows. Depicting an illuminated white rose, suspended against a backdrop of blue, the advertisement unveils the source of youth re-activation, revealing with it the linguistic anchor: "Youth is in your genes," "Re-activate it one drop at a time." Another example can be seen in Clinique's advertisement for Turnaround™ Body cream, where cloudy wax paper is being ripped off the image of the product to reveal its smooth and vibrant surface beneath. In both cases, the connoted message places the product at the center of this unveiling process, actively uncovering the depths of the body's inner youth.



Fig. 4. Agelessness as Genetic Impulse in Biotherm's Skin Vivo: "Rejuvenate your skin through your genes' vital impulse."  
Source: *Elle Canada* (December 2009). Les Publications Transcontinental-Hachette Inc., 18–19.

The second visual mechanism used in these advertisements is the inclusion of microscopic images of DNA strings or cells, floating in the background of the advertisement, visualizing, through Science, the true source of the body's anti-aging potential. Examples of this can be seen in advertisements for Biotherm's Rides Repair, Lancôme's High Resolution Refill-3x, Absolué Precious Cells and Absolué Ultimate Night Bx, and Lise Watier's Resist-Age Metamulsion Cell Matrix. Although the advertisements are, for the most part, visually very similar to those of *Scientific Purity*, the above mechanisms further anchor the connoted messages of the advertisements in the ordering principle of agelessness as genetic impulse.

Unlike the previous section, the advertisements in this section do not define agelessness as a way out of nature, but as a fulfilling of it, as its inner truth, its ultimate state of being. Aging, here, is thus connoted not as a symptom of Nature, but an opponent to it, a destructive force that tests the strength and power of one's genetic essence. Year after year, aging takes its toll, unarming, bit by bit, the body's *natural* anti-aging defense mechanisms. As such, through the help and guiding strength of scientific ingenuity, the body's core must be reawakened, recharged, reactivated, in order to once again overthrow the damaging blows of temporal existence. In Burkian terms, the rhetoric here follows that, with the help of Science, it is through the genetic makeup of the body that age can be transcended and agelessness attained. Breaking through the physical marks of time, the body's innate, inner strength sets *itself* free from the chains of temporal existence.

#### *Agelessness as nature's essence*

In her chapter entitled "Back to Nature," Williamson distinguishes between nature, the raw material of our cultural

environment, and what she terms 'the Natural,' the symbolic system of meaning extracted from and standing in for, nature. Culture, according to Williamson, appropriates the *form* of nature, devoid of content, and 'cooks' or *transforms* it into a cultural symbol, where it is introduced by Science into a system of differentiations, "giving it an order and a cultural place which enable it to 'mean'" (103). As she states, the product or culture, more generally, "having 'cooked' nature, can then offer a safe passage 'back' to it. It can *re-present* nature to us in a form where it may be consumed" (120; *italics mine*). But this return back to nature, in whatever form it may take, can never be experienced without the lens of culture; the 'cooked' symbols taken *from* nature stand in *for* nature as 'the Natural'. In the context of the previous example of Lancôme's image of the rose, the advertisement strips the denoted form of the flower of raw content, and fills or 'cooks' it with the cultural symbols of beauty, delicacy, and above all the 'purity' of Nature, re-presenting the essence of all that is 'naturally' beautiful. The symbolic meaning or content that such an image can represent, however, is not fixed, nor inherent to the form itself, but rather reflects the surrounding cultural and political environment, the underlying ideological agenda that drives the mythical sign. Here, unlike the previous two categories, Nature is external to the body, *curing* the body of its *human*, biological ills. Thus, although Nature is depicted as inherent to the human core of the advertisements of *Genetic Impulse*, these advertisements depict Nature as severed from humanity, a pure state that lies outside the laws of *human* genetics. The role of Science is again that of mediator, identifying, capturing, and condensing into its purest form the power of Nature, invisible to the untrained, unaided, human eye. For the 35 advertisements grouped under the category *Nature's Essence*, by aligning agelessness with Nature and 'natural beauty,' the



advertisements present the quest for the fountain of youth as not only desirable, but inevitable; it is the source of absolute fulfillment, *the* object of desire.

In all of the advertisements collected under *Nature's Essence*, aging and agelessness are ordered along the same underlying principle, where the aging body can transcend age and enter into a state of agelessness through the essence of Nature. One of the major mechanisms through which the advertisements in this chapter express these ultimate terms is the use of a 'natural setting' as the backdrop for the women featured in the advertisements. This can be seen the advertisements by Aveeno® (Fig. 5), Garnier Nutrioniste™, Burt's Bees®, Jamieson®, Revlon® and Fusion Beauty®. In all of these cases the 'ageless face' of the advertisement is immersed in Nature; through the processes of connotation, she has become one with it; she *is* Nature. Fusion Beauty®, however, takes the imagery of Nature one step further, where the advertisement depicts the woman as completely naked, wearing nothing but a "USDA Organic" stamp on her rear. According to its linguistic text, the product has *infused* her with "USDA organic superfood ingredients," thus transforming her into a USDA organic superfood ingredient. Her nudity connotes her purity, stamped and sealed with scientific approval.

There are two other visual means through which the advertisements connote Nature. The first is through the depiction of a 'piece of Nature' that has been taken from its

original setting and placed along the backdrop of scientific clarity. One of the most explicit examples is in two of the Perricone MD Cosmeceuticals® advertisements, where in one, the advertisement depicts Dr. Perricone as holding a bouquet of strawberries, and in another, a Swiss chard leaf hanging off the stem and chestpiece of his stethoscope. Standing against a completely white, sterile background, wearing his clean white doctor's coat and white shirt, Perricone signifies the essence of Science, physically carrying the potency of Nature's power. Other examples include advertisements such as Clinique's Youth Surge SPF 15 which depicts a turtle along a white backdrop, carrying the product on his back; DDF®'s Advanced Protocol, depicting powdered turmeric on a Petri dish; Exuviance®'s Bionic Eye Creme, depicting cucumber and green peas beneath a scientific sketch; Kinerase®'s C8 Peptide Intensive Treatment, depicting the tip of a leaf being immersed into a beacon filled with the product's age-defying, 'natural' formula; as well as Exuviance®'s Vespera Bionic Serum and Night Renewal HydraGel, Lumene®'s Deep-Repairing Cream and Serum, and Origins' Youthtopia™, all with different flowers depicted beside their products. In all of these cases, the essence or potency of Nature is connoted as having been extrapolated by Science and represented through Science, 'cooked' and ready for consumption.

Another means through which the image of Nature is brought into the advertisement is through the use of pie charts. Similar to the above strategy, these advertisements further extrapolate Nature's essence, often through the use of microscopic imagery, and translate it into identifiable and measurable ingredients that make up an age-defying whole. In the Garnier Nutrioniste™ Ultra Lift Pro™ advertisements, for instance, the "EXCLUSIVE SKIN NUTRIENTS", made up of "BEECH TREE EXTRACT, VITAMIN A, AND OMEGA 3 + 6" are visualized for the viewer through the use of a three-tier pie chart containing close up images of a kiwi, three gel capsules, and a tree, divided by a thick white line. In both of these cases, either through the suspended drop of white cream hanging from the base of the chart, or through the metallic instrument holding a dollop of white cream just below the base of the chart, the chart itself represents a microscopic image of the cream or product. The same can be said for the other Garnier Nutrioniste™ advertisements as well as the advertisements for Jamieson®'s Provitamina Hydrating Gel-Cream.

In all of the advertisements collected under *Nature's Essence*, there is one element which runs throughout: the emphasis of a *natural* ingredient. Whether plant-derived, or reptile-mimicking (as in the case of Clinique's turtle), each advertisement claims for itself the authority and legitimacy of Nature. In almost all of the advertisements this claim is accompanied by the connoted 'scientific proof' that Nature is indeed effective. Often through reference to clinical studies, visual graphs, numeric results, or before and after images, these advertisements legitimize our trust in Nature through our trust in Science.

Unlike the advertisements in *Scientific Purity*, the source of agelessness is not created by Science, but revealed by it. Here, the source of agelessness is something which must be extrapolated from the depths of Nature, an element so pure and microscopic that it can only be consumed once retrieved and cooked by Science. It is the purest image of the fountain

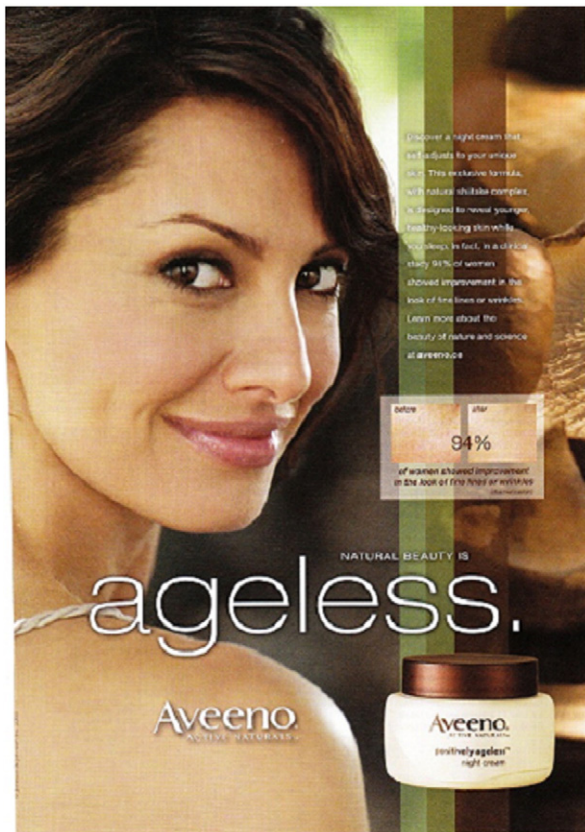


Fig. 5. Agelessness as Nature's Essence in Aveeno®'s Positively Ageless Night Cream: "Natural Beauty is Ageless."  
Source: *Allure: The beauty expert* (January 2009). Condé Nast Publications, 19.



of youth condensed into molecules and complexes, packaged, processed, and translated into a jar of cream. If agelessness is natural then, according to this logic, the body and the effects of biological aging are *unnatural*, *impure*, and in need of cleansing. In ultimate terms, it is through the cream-lined paths presented by the products in these advertisements that the body can shed its damaged, impure shell. Located in the heart of the coveted Garden of Eden, agelessness is Nature.

#### *Agelessness as myth*

In his cultural analysis of the history of American advertising, Jackson Lears (1994) claims that by the 1900s, an aura of magic was deeply embedded in the discourse of advertising. Surrounding the exotic artifacts and mysterious elixirs that overflowed the peddler's pushcart, this aura held out the promise of miraculous personal transformation and a world transcendent of material realities. According to Lears, however, the 'magic' of modern advertising was based on the dematerialization of desire, with the allure of the products laying less in the things themselves than in the transformative powers they represent. As he states, "[r]ather than referring to a set of rituals for summoning up supernatural powers within a coherent cosmology, the word *magic* began to imply a mere sleight of hand, or a diffuse sense of the marvelous erupting amid the everyday" (19). Today, in the context of contemporary advertising, this theme of magical transformation persists. Identifying a third category of representation within the advertisements under study, Williamson describes the theme of magic as "simply the heading, the organizing mythology, under and in which a multiplicity of transformations, productions, and actions can be short-circuited or misproportioned without explanation — since the explanation is that *it's magic*" (140).

The theme of magical transformation lies at the heart of the discourse of agelessness. Beyond the referent systems of *Scientific Purity*, *Genetic Impulse*, and *Nature's Essence*, the advertisements in this section bring agelessness to its final term, to its sum of signification. Through its appeal to mystery, metamorphosis, and the unknown, the concept of agelessness in these advertisements transcends the necessity of reason or explanation, impenetrable by the realities of material existence. And it is here, at the locus of personal transformation, that agelessness becomes myth. Unlike the previous advertisements, here, the potency of agelessness is not found in the abundance of signifiers, but rather their *absence*.

For Williamson, the concept Magic is not an object but an action, a process. In her own words, she states that rather than drawing on a referent system in relation to which one would be misplaced by ideology, Magic, as a process, "represents the misplacement itself, and is an area of transformation rather than an area of time or space in which our position may be transformed" (140; italics hers). It is the referent system of cooking itself, where the final product is about the transformative powers of the action rather than its relation to what has been transformed. Under this thematic heading, Williamson details what she calls the 'iconography of magic': Alchemy, Spells, the Genie in the Lamp or World in the Bottle, and the Crystal Ball or Magic Circle, all of which involve the misplaced relation between time and space. Functioning as part of a larger

meta-system of transformation, these 'magical properties' run through all of the categories outlined in the preceding chapters; whether ordered by claims of *Scientific Purity*, *Genetic Impulse*, or *Nature's Essence*, each category includes advertisements which draw on some element of magical transformation. These advertisements, however, only hint to the magical properties of their products; Magic does not make up the entirety of their signification, each draws on a discourse of legitimacy that lies outside the realm of the supernatural. Often through the use of scientific graphs, 'proven results', or appeals to the 'natural order', the legitimacy of their claims does not, in other words, rely on our trust in Magic alone. Instead, the logic underlying these advertisements is of the following: it is magical *because it is science*; it is magical *because it is natural*; or it is magical *because it is the essence of our very being*. The appeal to Magic alone, on the other hand, needs no explanation, for it has an authority all on its own. The transformation, in this case, would thus be magical *because it is magic*. According to Williamson, this type of transformation, this particular action, necessarily relies upon its own absence since, as she argues, "magic is instant, it just 'happens', metaphysically, and does not *work*, materially" (141). Thus, while the advertisements of the previous sections demonstrate to the viewer *why* or *how* the product transforms the aging body, the 'magical' advertisements described by Williamson provide no explanation at all, only that the transformation is.

Out of the 167 advertisements collected under this study, only 14 fall under the category of agelessness as myth. What unifies the advertisements in this particular section is not magic per se, but rather the underlying absence that Magic necessarily implies. They are unified, in other words, by the *lack* of explanation, the absence of the materiality of production or origin. Agelessness is not because it is of *Scientific Purity*, nor because it is of *Genetic Impulse*, nor of *Nature's Essence*; agelessness is because it is Ageless. Hiding under the guise of tautology, the fourth of Barthes's seven principal figures of rhetoric, agelessness escapes the logic of rational thought. As Barthes (1984) states, "one takes refuge in tautology as one does in fear, or anger, or sadness, when one is at a loss for an explanation" (28). Tautology, for Barthes, is the death of reason and the acceptance of this death; it creates, in his words, "a dead, motionless world" (28). Agelessness is accepted in these advertisements as a statement of fact, as an immovable and unchangeable reality, a *thing* in and of its own right.

In the previous advertisements, agelessness, and aging, is given meaning in *relation* to already-established mythic orders. That claims to *Scientific Purity*, *Genetic Impulse*, and *Nature's Essence* provide legitimacy and significance to the concept of agelessness points to their acceptance into the realm of common sense. Here, however, it is agelessness itself which has become myth. However, just as with *Scientific Purity*, *Genetic Impulse*, and *Nature's Essence*, the myth of agelessness relies upon intertextuality, upon an accumulation of connoted imagery and text external to the frame of the advertisement, a grounding substance whose naturalization is complete. It is precisely *because* agelessness has been carried on the backs of the preceding mythic orders that it has reached its own mythic status, frozen in time, an image washed of the imprints of history and human motive. The function of myth, according to Barthes's *Mythologies*, "is to

empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible *absence*" (1957/1984; 20; *italics mine*). The tautological representation of agelessness condenses the accumulation of imagery into the purity of its form; all that remains is its underlying order of valuation, that is, agelessness is necessarily and innately a *way out* and *transcendence* of age.

Nestled between images of beauty and high fashion, Chanel's advertisement for Lift Lumière illustrates one means through which myth is signified. Aside from the images of refinement, elegance, and beauty that the brand itself brings, the images of this advertisement are simple yet powerful. As with many of the advertisements in this study, the first image that pulls the viewer in is the seductive yet defiant gaze of the woman's eyes on the right side of the page. With the left side of her face and neck drenched in shadow, her lightness seems to be emanating from within. Employing visual and verbal contrasts between light and dark, regeneration and degeneration, the advertisement places the 'look' of aging and the 'look' of agelessness along a hierarchy that parallels the mythic transcendence of good over evil, light over dark. With an aura of the mysterious and unknown, agelessness is presented as a state of being as beautiful, fashionable, and elegant as the images that surround it; it has become an untouchable reality, without need of justification or rationale. Through the theological "synergy" of Chanel's Lift Lumière and the consumer's will to defy the look of aging, the abyss of darkness splits open, and the illuminated face of ageless beauty emerges (Fig. 6).

Although many of the advertisements under this category share in the use of light/dark contrasts, each draws on the allure absence in subtly unique ways. Chanel's advertisement

for Précision Ultra Correction Lift, for instance, may be visually very similar to the other Chanel advertisement through its use of light/dark contrast, but its descriptive caption, "THE CHANEL CELLULAR LIFTING EFFECT," gives agelessness and Chanel a scientific quality, and the *lack* of any further explanation suspends this signification into myth (*italics mine*). Olay® Total Effects® Touch of Foundation is another advertisement that uses a similar light/dark contrast, with the product, as opposed to the ageless face, shining through the darkness behind. Here we see Williamson's alchemic 'magical property', where it only takes a *touch* of foundation to move beyond hiding or treating the aging face; through darkness and mystery, the product brings you somewhere *new*. Agelessness is the future, transcendent of all that we know. Another advertisement that draws on the image of the future is Shiseido's Future Solution LX. With the caption, "The science of Shiseido. The future of infinite beauty," followed by: "From centuries of Japanese wisdom, a revolutionary, award-winning discover emerges," the advertisement combines both old and new, ancient *exotic* wisdom and the future of *infinite*. With the visual encircling of the products, the advertisement furthermore employs Williamson's crystal ball effect, showing us the 'future of infinite beauty'. Agelessness, here, is of both old and new; it is as true to our past as it is to our future. Again, with a lack of further explanation, this image of agelessness is suspended, frozen, and presented as fact.

The advertisements in this section present agelessness as an unquestioned *thing*, unreliant upon the legitimacy or authority of surrounding established referent systems. The advertisements give justification to agelessness and its pursuit precisely through the absence of any such justification; agelessness is not because it is scientific purity, nor



Fig. 6. Agelessness as Myth in Chanel's Lift Lumière: "Firmly Resist the Look of Aging". Source: *Elle* (March 2009). Hachette Filipacchi Media U.S., Inc., 80–81.

genetic impulse, nor nature's essence; agelessness, in these advertisements just *is*. According to Barthes (1984), myth “organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves” (20). In the myth of agelessness, the underlying valuation of agelessness as a *way out* and *transcendence* of age is all that remains, frozen and impenetrable, a truism buried beneath the potency of its own self-evidence.

### *Beyond the myth of agelessness*

Although the advertisements in this study appeared in print over four years ago, the same themes of transcendence continue to re-emerge, and with increasing pervasiveness. In the April 2013 Anti-Aging Special issue of *Allure Magazine*, for instance, not only are there 19 unique, full-page anti-aging skin care advertisements in comparison to the 13 of its 2009 Anti-Aging Special issue counterpart, but there are additionally three anti-aging *hair* product advertisements as well as a total of five articles on various anti-aging techniques for ‘turning back the clock’. For those advertisements focusing on anti-aging skin care products, over half can be categorized under *Scientific Purity*, with one promising consumers a new “sonic weapon” in the “war against aging.” Interestingly, two out of the four advertisements that can be categorized under *Nature's Essence* draw heavily on the authority and expertise of science in addition to the appeal to nature and while the appeal to magic only appears in one advertisement in the 2009 issue of *Allure*, and only make up 10% of all the advertisement placements in the study, 5 of the 19 skin care advertisements in this issue can be categorized under *Myth*. Whether presented as “nothing short of miraculous” or as part of a “simple equation,” the products in these advertisements are validated through the absence of a claim to legitimacy or authority. Four years later these themes continue to surface, with new products, new imagery, and new ‘weapons’ in the fight for transcendence.

These advertisements, however, are only one entry-point into the broader discourse of agelessness. Anti-aging skin care products are only one avenue promoted among a long list of anti-aging techniques and medical practices available to the optimistic consumer. The anti-aging industry, on a global scale, is supported and propelled by an endless sea of international, national, and regional associations, boards, societies, networks, and academies. Since its inception in 1992, the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, one of the largest non-profit anti-aging organizations, has grown to include over 26,000 members, comprised primarily of physicians and scientists, and represents over 110 nations (A4M, 2013; “A4M Overview”). It funds and facilitates fellowships, certifications, conferences, publications, and research, and states that it is dedicated to the advancement of anti-aging technology, the promotion of research, and to the education of physicians, scientists and the public in issues relating to anti-aging developments. On the official website, continuing in the same language as the academy's President, Dr. Ronald Klatz (1996), A4M declares itself the leader of what it calls “The Anti-Aging Movement,” and directs its potential members to “Join the Ageless Society,” where “Together, we can END

AGING in our own lifespan” (A4M, 2013; “Join the Anti-Aging Movement”). For the practitioners and scientists of A4M, anti-aging medicine and technology is not about maintaining a ‘normal’ experience of the aging process, based on treating symptoms and ameliorating pain, but about transforming what it means to age, or not age, altogether. Emphasizing the prevention, treatment and reversal of the effects of age on the body, A4M looks to a new model of health and wellbeing. As they state,

“Among the fastest-growing medical specialties in the world, Anti-Aging medicine is an innovation in health-care, blazing new advancements in advanced preventive medicine... The goal of Anti-Aging medicine is not to merely prolong the total years of an individual's life, but to ensure that those years are enjoyed in a productive and vital fashion” (A4M, 2013; “Join the Anti-Aging Movement”).

The products advertised in this study are all found over-the-counter, they are easily accessible and *relatively* inexpensive, and they are designed to be adapted to everyday beauty routines. Their advertisements represent the commodified, or rather consumable packaging of these broader ideals expressed by Klatz and members of A4M, where the pursuit of amelioration, or optimization, has been translated and simplified in these advertisements into a pursuit of health, beauty and transcendence. The advertisements in this study make up a total of 167 print advertisements, found in over one hundred magazine issues from fourteen different publications over the span of a year. Visually, these advertisements comprise a significant portion of our visual landscape of ageless beauty. Whether found in the heights of scientific purity, the inner core of our genetic impulse, the depths of nature's essence, or whether agelessness itself has reached its own, untouchable, mythic status, the advertisements in this study represent one of the most pervasive vehicles through which our current vision(s) of ageless perfection are reflected, reinforced, suspended in a drop of cream.

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