The "1984" Macintosh Ad

by Sarah R. Stein

> **On**
>
> **January 24th**
>
> **Apple Computer will introduce**
>
> **Macintosh.**
>
> **And you will see why**
>
> **1984**
>
> **won't be like "1984".**

The half-time of the 1984 Super Bowl featured a 45 second ad that would be declared in 1995 the best ad of the last 50 years5. The commercial, directed by Ridley Scott (Alien, 1979, and Blade Runner, 1982) for the Apple Corporation, announced the imminent arrival of the Macintosh computer. The ad cost $1.6 million to produce, and Apple Corporation paid $500,000 for the one-minute time slot in which it ran. It ran only once.

The commercial is elegant, filmic, and a powerful cinematic narrative. It contains allusions to legendary films and cultural myths, and sets in place a trajectory involving issues of balance between the organic and inorganic, between nature and culture that I follow until 1995.

As the ad begins, excess is very much in evidence. The hall is monumental, the line of marchers/workers appears endless. The air is thick with smog , a bluish-gray haze overlaying everything, reminiscent of Scott's vision of the future Los Angeles in Blade Runner; the pallor and sickliness of the workers are accentuated. The scenario invokes the George Orwell novel, 1984; a Big Brother figure ceaselessly intones the slogans of Newspeak, while the public masses appear automatized by the rigidly controlled totalitarian society.

The ad begins with an extreme long shot of a line of men, dressed uniformly in gray prisoner-style clothing, marching in a circular tunnel, much like that of an underground train system. The audio, which extends for most of the piece, consists of a rumbling background with the sound of marching feet, and a sustained electronic tone. Mixed over this, at first almost inaudibly and then in full force, is the voice heard throughout, with the words "information/purification" the first clearly intelligible.

The image cuts to a mere flash (a quarter of a second) of a woman running, carrying a long-handled hammer. The woman is in color. She is dressed as a track and field athlete, with short blond hair, a white sleeveless T-shirt with a schematic drawn on the front, and bright red shorts. Her entrance is heralded by two electronic notes, a high D, followed by another, one octave below, whose decay seems to ring out continuously underneath the following shots, until the high D is sounded again. This audio motif acts as a clarion call that announces each one of the shots of the woman running.

The next shot is a close-up of the workers' faces as they march by. Only white males are visible, all with shaven heads and blank, fixed stares, a few wearing gas masks. The image cuts to a brief shot of men in face-obscuring helmets, running with rifles in their hands. The long shot of the marchers in the tunnel reappears, the camera framed to cut their heads out of the frame. Their bodies move along mechanically, arms hanging inertly. Television monitors are attached to the walls every few feet along the way. The camera cuts to a close-up of their feet, marching in lockstep.

The runner appears, again briefly. The voice has intoned over the last three shots: "A garden of ideology where each one can bloom, secure from the pests of contradictory forces," the word "forces" hitting over the image of the runner. The image cuts to reveal for the first time the source of the relentless voice. In an extreme long shot, a huge hall is seen filled with workers already seated as others march in, the back wall of which is an enormous screen, filled by the talking head of an elderly man in glasses. The screen resembles that of a computer monitor, and computer code can be glimpsed along its borders. The man's face is framed so that the top of his head and the bottom of his chin are cut off. He appears hollow-cheeked and steely-eyed, the cinematic stereotype of the psychopathic tyrant. As he speaks, his words appear in white type-face on the screen below his mouth, each word preceded by a round dot of light, the proverbial bouncing ball.

We see the runner for the first time in full-body, flanked by enormous marble columns. Noticeable now are the red shoes on her feet, and the power of her stride. Behind her the cadre of guards appears. The camera cuts to a panning shot of the workers, staring passively at the screen as if mesmerized. The words "powerful weapon" are heard from the screen. Once again the camera pans over workers sitting inertly, one or two now visible as quite young, and all with shaved heads. The voice builds in intensity: "We are one people…" Cut to the runner in slow-motion in an extreme long shot that reveals the Metropolis-style hall. "...with one will." Cut to a medium shot of the faceless guards: "One resolve."Then, the camera reveals the full computer screen, the tyrant face filling most of the frame: "One cause. Our enemies shall talk themselves dry..." The image cuts over the last words to the runner stopping and beginning to spin with the great hammer. For the first time we can just make out the drawing on her shirt--the Macintosh logo of the apple and monitor-keyboard. The guards are approaching in the background. The image cuts to a medium shot of the guards running fast. The runner spins again. The voice continues, with the image cutting in mid-sentence to a full-frame closeup of the face on the screen, venomously mouthing the words as the bouncing ball follows the words on the screen: "but we will bury them with their own confusion."

The runner makes her final windup and lets go of the hammer with a loud cry, as the guards are almost upon her. We see the hammer in slow motion flying through the air, then a wide shot of the screen with the hammer approaching. The onscreen presence finishes in diabolical triumph "We Shall Prevail" just as the hammer explodes the screen in a blinding flash and the sound of a detonation. A synthetic chorus of wordless cries is heard, behind which is a sound like rushing wind. The camera pans over the workers, flooded with white light, their mouths opened in awe, hands gripping the benches beneath them, uniforms blown back against them. A black type-face title begins a roll up the white screen, as we hear the familiar television advertising voice of authority of the cultured, white male:

The ad's production values are those of high-budget feature quality. The great visual lushness of the images presents a futuristic scene at once frightening and enticing, reminiscent in the

feel of the lighting of parts of Scott's Blade Runner. The cinematic technology, with its telephoto lenses and mattes, is supplemented by the electronically generated slow-motion flying hammer and blinding white light that fills the hall at the end of the spot.

The aural code is complex. The meaningless sloganeering of the tyrant puppet on the screen continues unceasingly, destructive of thinking, of reflection. The marching feet, the great hall ambiance, the electronic rumble, all work to create an aura of dread, of industrialized enterprises and great human misery. The multilayered sound seems designed to mesmerize. The body is prevented from truly contacting itself when sound intrudes that way, creating a kind of disorientation on so cataclysmic a level that it is impossible to reconnect the mind and the body. The body becomes an automaton, running on pilot, programmed by the aural bombardment6. Then, the clarion call, announcing the running woman: an alarm, an audio hailing, something that has escaped from the iron-fisted control of the aural environment.

Orwell's novel, written in 1948, is a critique of power, directed specifically at Stalin and his gulag and evident in the mass of prisoner/workers assembled on the screen in the "1984" Macintosh ad. The ad's use of this theme, while an obvious choice on the surface, suggests, however, some intriguing political slippages. The identification of IBM/Big Blue with Big Brother and Stalin is clearly intentional, though IBM might be argued as quintessential, and certainly blue-chip, American. Indeed, this could be viewed as a critique of capitalism: the promise of emancipation of the workers from the tyranny of capitalism and dehumanizing technological progress.

The IBM culture was famous for its rigid rankings, and insistence on a uniform, blue-suited corporate look and attitude. Steven Wozniak and Steven Jobs, founders of Apple, had already been brought into the public eye by media stories highlighting their hippie, garage-grunge style and anti-corporate, anti-hierarchical stance. Steven Jobs previewed the 1984 Macintosh ad for Apple Corporation stockholders and employees at the beginning of January, 1984.7 In a videotaped speech, Jobs chronicles Apple's part in the personal computer industry from 1981 when Apple II was the leader, Apple had become a $300 million company, and IBM finally entered the market with the IBM PC. By 1983, Jobs notes that Apple and IBM were each selling approximately $1 billion worth of personal computers, and were each planning on investing $50 million in research and development and another $50 million in television advertising in 1984. Jobs's speech then moves to the fierce competition in the personal computer market:

The shakeout is in full swing. The first major firm goes bankrupt with others teetering on the brink. Total industry losses for 1983 outshine even the combined profits for Apple and IBM for personal computers. It is now 1984. It appears IBM wants it all. Apple is perceived to be the only hope to offer IBM a run for its money. Dealers initially welcoming IBM with open arms, now fear an IBM-dominated and controlled future. They are increasingly and desperately turning back to Apple, as the only force that can insure their future freedom. [LOUD CHEERS AND APPLAUSE INTERRUPT FROM UNSEEN AUDIENCE]. IBM wants it all, and is aiming its guns on its last obstacle to industry control: Apple. Will Big Blue dominate the entire computer industry? [SHOUTS OF 'NO' FROM FLOOR] Was George Orwell right about 1984? [LIGHTS DIM AND THE MACINTOSH '1984' AD IS PROJECTED, FOLLOWED BY A HUGE WAVE OF APPLAUSE AND CHEERING]

It becomes apparent that this industrial narration is the parallel of the socio-political narration of the ad. The baby-faced, long-haired Jobs, with his slingshot aimed at the IBM giant, fulfills the David and Goliath myth evoked by the ad. The "personal" in personal computers resonates

with both Jobs' industrial story and with the ad's moral tale of the overthrow of tyranny by the individual, but formidable, will, a narrative given considerable stature in the American myth of progress and conquest.

Orwell's dystopic tale is the most directly quoted framework for the ad's narrative structure , but there are other important cultural symbols invoked along with it. The opening shot of the marching workers is taken from Fritz Lang's 1927 Metropolis, a film which depicted the destructiveness of capitalism and the misery of the working class in a plea for compassion and equity. That film begins with a series of shots of the bent and exploited workers, including one of them in a circular tunnel, directly quoted in the Macintosh ad, leading to their underground city and the machines they die maintaining. The hall in which the head on the screen addresses the mass of men is architecturally similar to the oppressive Master's building in Metropolis. There is an important difference between the two narratives, however. Orwell's narrative projected stasis and immutability in the totalitarian state of 1984, while Lang's story allowed for resistance and the redistribution of control, a theme central to the ad's industrial agenda as well as to its narrative.

In looking closely at the Macintosh ad, we discern the tension between one of the signs of industrialized tyranny--the bent and broken workers--and popular representations of the computer age. The "workers" in the "1984" ad are all white, all male. The racial mix that would make up a contemporary manufacturing setup of the kind alluded to in Metropolis is missing. Further, it is primarily Asian women who make up a large part of the oppressed labor force producing electronic components. I suggest, therefore, that the mass of automatized humanity represented in the Macintosh ad evokes both the executive level of IBM and DOS users.

There is another cultural icon, perhaps one of the most famous of American fantasies, that contributes to the powerful resonance of the "1984" Macintosh ad. Allusions to the Wizard of Oz appear in several of its visual codes. The running woman is in color, her blonde hair and red shorts in sharp contrast to the hazy, bluish black and white of the other scenes, paralleling Dorothy's entry into Oz and color, from the black and white of the Kansas scenes. The computer screen talking head is similar to the disembodied head of the Wizard. Toto's revelation of Frank Morgan behind the curtain is parallel to the hammer shattering the screen in the Macintosh ad, revealing the virtuality of the tyrant and unmasking the artifice. When the running woman is finally shown in full shot she can be seen to be wearing red shoes, and the fully saturated colors of the Apple logo lighting up the screen after it is shattered tells us we are not in Kansas anymore.

In his essay Strategists of Display and the Production of Desire, William Leach calls the author of the Wizard of Oz, L. Frank Baum, one of the "earliest architects of the dream life of the consumer age."8 Baum was the first significant advocate of the aesthetic display of consumer goods, and believed fervently in "the virtues of consumption and leisure and in lifting taboos on the expression of desire."9 The late nineteenth century saw the move from an agrarian to an industrial society, transforming America from the "Land of Comfort" to the "Land of Desire." The visual vocabulary of desire was expressed in new forms of representation, recreating both the look and the meaning of commodities and commodity environments.

The aesthetic energies mobilized on behalf of consumption were fed by technological developments in the production of colored glass and electrical light. Baum's fascination with these fueled his success in creating a new language of commodity interpretation, influencing

merchants and department stores to create visual environments for goods that evoked magical associations. Baum's animation of products, according to Leach, helped to accustom Americans to living in artificial environments, even to finding them superior to the natural. When Baum began writing his fictions in 1900, after 25 years as a merchant, his literary works followed the aestheticization of machinery begun in the mid-nineteenth century and culminating around 1915 with the pleasure palaces and their new "aesthetic of artificiality."

In Leach's words, "Display was fantasy, childhood, theater, technological play, and selling all rolled into one for Baum, as it would be for later display artists infatuated with the same urban commercial forms"10 And the show window was of primary importance to Baum, leading him to exhort department stores and fellow merchants to ever larger windows, in which theatrical effects and a new enchantment could be offered for the consumer's imagination.

Baum proved a significant force at a time of transition in which discursive conventions were being formed for new ways of relating to commodities, in aperiod when leisure and consumption became the focus of individual fulfillment.11 In 1984, the emergence of a new form of computer that was to revolutionize the consumer market once again called on new ways of representing re-enchantment. Macintosh brings color and life back to the world of computing, to reawaken aesthetic pleasure and appreciation. The magic and enchantment glimpsed through the early department store windows is evoked in this new promise of a computer screen to be filled with color and light, a promise realized later in the multimedia capabilities of the mid-nineties. These new commodities signal a shift in their use value, from the Big Blue world of business and commerce to leisure and designer lifestyle. The extension of leisure, consumption, and expressions of desire can be seen in the discourses centering on personal computers, particularly those produced by Macintosh.

The Wizard of Oz as a cultural text works in this ad on a number of levels. It serves to defuse somewhat the negative association with computers in the dystopia represented. By introducing themes of fantasy and wonder, the association is forged between a repressive corporate sensibility and 1984, rather than between computer technology and the invasion of human freedom and spirit graphically depicted. This is a necessary step to break an associative link between computers in general with robotic and debased humanity that could easily contaminate the perception of Macintosh computer as well as the IBMs. The association with the Wizard of Oz facilitates a move into the realm of fantasy/fiction/magic and invokes the playful, inventive possibilities of the new computers, reassuring to the parents of children for whom the earlier Apple II computer would have been bought almost as a plaything. The fantasy element introduced by the Oz inflection will be a stronger presence in the George Clinton/Macintosh ad of eleven years later, which I will elaborate on in a later chapter.

The tension nevertheless exists in the 1984 Macintosh ad between these elements of magical play/cinematic delight, and the technophobia that has repeatedly been found in cultural responses to technological development. In the ad, bodies and machines are in antagonistic relation to each other. The bodies of the mass of prisoner-workers have been stripped of cognition and volition, rendered automatons by bureaucratic machinery as well as technological innovation. The narrative in this sense is modernist, expressing the fears and distrust of industrialization. The bodies are inscribed with the marks of a disciplinary society, in which in Foucault's terms a body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.12

Power is present as a destructive force and rendered visible in the technology, the inimical all-seeing presence of Big Blue/Big Brother. The splitbetween body and mind is paramount: the disembodied talking head on the huge computer screen controls the collective body, the roboticized masses at the will of the master. But power, as Foucault points out, is always local and unstable, and in the "1984" ad, it is present as well in the figure of the running woman.13

Casting a woman as the heroic rebel who shatters Big Blue/Big Brother marks several discursive strategies at once. In 1984, the feminist movement, though already facing some of the backlash against women in the public sphere that continues to this day, would have still have allowed for a wide familiarity with a woman as signifier of the iconoclast rule-breaker. Perhaps the principal signification visible, however, is the reference to Eve and the Garden of Eden.

The Macintosh logo is the Apple with a bite out of it, with its obvious tie to the Tree of Knowledge. Invoking the Edenic myth, with its contradictions of the pain and death as well as the pleasure and knowledge the woman's act precipitates, points as well to Leo Marx's reading of the "machine in the garden."14 Marx uncovers the metaphor of contradiction pervasive in American literature and thought of the idealization of the pastoral in the face of the grim realities of industrialization and the increasing domination of the machine in the visible world. That this metaphor of contradiction is again present in the "1984" ad affirms the tenacity of the pastoral ideal in our cultural imagination. Further, the computer can sign as the "fruit of an Edenic tree, with its links to notions of a clean technology, free from polluting and robbing the planet's resources, while making the Tree of Knowledge within everyone's grasp."15 James Carey refers to the early twentieth century neo-conservationist Patrick Geddes, who envisioned a neotechnic "Eutopia" undergirded by the miracle of electricity, in which a world redesigned to look like a garden would support a new "partnership of man and nature."16

Our Eve wears a T-shirt inscribed with the Apple corporate logo--the bitten apple and the computer terminal. She thus becomes, as is asserted in Jean-Christophe Agnew's17 work on "commodity aesthetics," a self-consuming artifact. The woman bears the "sign" in ads as both the consumer and the consumable.

Bearing a mark, as such, also evokes the unavoidable association with the "cursed" Eve of the Old Testament, she who accepted the proffered apple and took a bite of the fruit of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. As Apple adopted the bitten apple as their corporate logo, clearly the notion of partaking of the Tree of Knowledge in the post-Edenic world that follows the bite is a privilege that supersedes the original divine injunction against knowledge. The figure of the woman invokes reproduction of life as well, an important key to register as contemporary technology figures so insistently in issues of reproduction and extension of human life. As so often occurs in the most complex popular discourses, however, other cultural mythic resonances are mobilized. The tensions that exist in the larger culture in response to women asserting their own power must evoke an inevitable ambivalence to the portrayal of a rebellious, and therefore dangerous, woman.

The running woman has the look and stride of a true athlete, distinct from the beauty and fitness models who will appear later in the decade. She gleams with sweat and runs with fierce and unswerving, indeed courageous, determination. What I find of special interest, however, is that the producers have cast a woman with full, and easily visible, breasts. They move discernibly as she moves. We have become accustomed to the androgynous body, one predicated on the male physique. Contemporary Olympic-level athletes are lean, muscular, and their outfits are designed to hold what breasts they have tightly against their bodies. The

running woman of the Macintosh ad is reminiscent of Sarah Connor, the female protagonist of The Terminator released the same year--also a woman whose physique was womanly rather than masculine, and in whom sexuality was configured as a life force she could call upon in her warrior role. The runner, like Sarah, is a lone figure, a woman consigned a terrible and heroic task, one that she risks death at each moment to accomplish. Equally, both woman face an enemy that threatens the future of humanity as a viable species. (By Terminator 2: Judgment Day in 1991, Sarah Connor has transformed her body into the sinewy, sleek masculinist body of the professional athlete, and the muscularity of the body builder, points I will elaborate on further in this chapter).

The woman in the "1984" Macintosh ad is a significant figure in contrast to depictions in the later commercials I will be analyzing. She represents a powerful body able to execute a plan with great risk, formulated with a mind capable of maintaining its autonomy. She equally represents a political figure, one aware of the repressive powers of advanced capitalism and willing to use revolutionary tactics in response. The rigorous training of her body, then, is in protest and defiance of the docile, subjected bodies of the roboticized masses. Though she bears the corporate logo, Apple retained at that time an image of the maverick, of an anti-corporate, individualistic American entrepreneurship, and the runner--the rule-breaker--reflects that cultural myth. Hers is the uncontained, disruptive body, and the body aligned with, and as an appropriate vehicle for, a courageous and independent mind. This woman presents a formidable figure, one that will not be repeated in the later ads we will view.

The clarion call and the subversion of the established order that the runner represents are about to nose-dive into the backlash of the '80s. The patriarchal oligopoly that Big Blue represents is mobilizing in this period to move to subvert the feminist movement and the interventions made against sexual, racial, and economic inequality. The running woman may narratively have survived her assault on Big Brother in 1984, but she will not survive the mass media's symbolic annihilation of her kind in the '90s.

The ad makes manifest two other cultural preoccupations that will resurface later in the period I am studying. The roboticized, automaton-like workers materialize the fears expressed from Carlyle on that not only will machines become more human, but that humans will become more like machines. In a less overt way, these figures also evoke the haunting specter of joblessness, of the displacement of humans by machines, a concern that has become increasingly manifest for Americans in the 1990s.

The other cultural fear expressed is that of the obsolescence of the physical body. If the computer is an invention and extension of the human mind, the bodiless head floating on the screen is a symbolic reenactment of covert anxieties over the human body becoming obsolete, a fear that is materialized in even more threatening terms in The Terminator, released the same year.

From: *Redefining the Human in the Age of the Computer: Popular Discourses, 1984 to the Present* by Sarah R. Stein, © 1997, University of Iowa.