

From Ayers Rock to McRock: Advertising Uluru

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*"yeh, the taste of Australia is here today
and McDonalds good times are coming your way
a taste of Australia is here today
at McDonalds."*

(excerpt from *A Taste of Australia*: McDonalds television advertisement-produced by DDB Needham 1984.)

McDonalds is a leading player in the world's fast-food economy and a major producer within the Australian market. On advertising alone, McDonalds annually spends \$22 million inside Australia and over \$1 billion world-wide. During the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic games, the American multinational hamburger giant strategically slotted its advertisement that linked its product message to selected images of Uluru (or Ayers Rock as it is widely called by non-Aboriginal people), amongst other famous national landmarks, into the Australian television coverage.

[Permission to reproduce these images was denied] Ed.

This television commercial, produced by DDB Needham, won an advertising award for excellence at the time. The award was won in the face of outspoken criticism from the local Anangu, the Aboriginal custodians of Uluru and its surrounding country, for whom Uluru is a sacred site. This criticism largely fell on deaf ears at the time. This analysis argues that the advertisement portrayed a narrow, two dimensional view of Uluru that, while helping to sell hamburgers, did nothing to enhance a greater understanding of Uluru and its complex place within Anangu culture.

Entitled, *A Taste of Australia*, the campaign was seen by Anangu as a violation of their sacred laws regarding Uluru. Simply stated, the advertisement semiotically reduced Uluru to the status of a giant hamburger. *A Taste of Australia*, was constructed by melting together images of the Australian outback and American corporate capitalism to produce a form of hamburger internationalism. Fast-food post-colonialism rides on the back of indigenous signs. In this case, there is a food chain effect whereby Australian nationalism feeds on Aboriginal images and in turn, Australian icons become the

popcorn of American advertising departments. Myth in the second degree. How exactly was the "Taste of Australia" myth framed and marketed?

Throughout this ad, images of hamburgers were not simply cut into the flow of familiar tourist scenes, rather, a series of famous landmarks were cooked up and resold as a product line of outback metaphors. Through a similarity of form between hamburger and landmark, specific cultural and political differences were filmically and rhetorically dissolved into each other. And in so doing any questions of a political, economic or historical nature remain unasked and unanswered. Kata Tjuta (The Olgas) was metamorphosed into a Big Mac, while the Twelve Apostles were resurrected as a packet of fries (chips), and Uluru was recast as a drive-in McDonalds restaurant. Together, these visual metaphors build up through a process of substitution (of name, object, form, content, and location) a typology of McIcons. Like some sleight-of-hand magic trick, old and familiar signs are replaced by new signs, same signifier, different signified. These metaphors semiotically work to naturalise the McDonalds hamburger's place in the Australian dietary landscape. The more hamburgers you eat, the more patriotic you are supposed to feel. The philosopher Brillat-Savarin, whilst in his kitchen said, "You are what you eat". McDonald's have turned this 18th century proverb into a 20th century slogan.

To naturalise something means to rob it of its history. A gap in meaning is created by importing new meanings and values which key into the local culture and law in a seamless and smooth movement. This process of naturalising the colonising product through the appropriation of national icons, wraps, burgers, fries and shakes in true blue myths of the pioneer outback spirit. Big Macs are elevated to the level of national symbols which in turn familiarises their taste, ('McTaste') making them more palatable to the Australian market. The selection of iconic images overlaid with an orchestral soundtrack and anthem-like lyrics, act to mythologise the place and role of McDonald's in the Australian market. McDonald's were following a successful advertising strategy exercised by previous American companies eager to exploit the Australian market. In the 1930s, for instance, the American company Wrigley's sought to overcome consumer resistance to the perceived "dirty American habit" of chewing gum, by sponsoring the famous Australian radio program *Dad and Dave*, seen at the time to connote all that was Australian in characterisation. John Potts noted that Wrigley's effected, through the advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, a "taste of transfer" between the "archetypal bush family" in *Dad and Dave* and American chewing gum.

The lyrics of the McDonald's advertisement state that their special taste ("a taste that's really ours") also embodied the "special taste of Australia". McDonald's located itself as the new source of original recipes for Australian nationalism. So what are the steps in this process of burgerising the nation? According to the journalist, Deidre Macken, who enrolled in a burger arts course and became privy to the management secrets of the McBosses, the first step is to develop a McDonald's ego. This metamorphosis by consumption dictates that you "lose your old identity, forget your surname, your background, and your old ideas. McDonald's has no room for competing identities."¹⁰⁷ Once you've forgotten what and who you once were, then you are taught a new language (a learnt lexicon of McWords), a uniform with badges, new methods of behaviour. This new notion of the self extends to a new facial expression, the McSmile. This frozen smile, symbolising the magic moment of total satisfaction, has since been stylised into the Ecstasy logo which is the dance-club and street-drug equivalent of the Big M logo - both are yellow coloured and typographically rounded in shape. As Peter Richie, the managing director of the

Australian wing of McDonald's restaurant commented, "manipulation is more effective than coercion." This doctrine can be applied to images as well as staff behaviour, architectural designs, real estate ventures and unions. Whenever poorly paid teenage staff at a McDonald's grow rebellious or stop performing at peak levels, they are pulled in for a 'rap session' which involves "the combination bull session, psychodrama and interrogation." They are then given a copy of the official McBible, *Behind the Arches*, written by Ray Crock, the founding father of the 'quarter pounder' philosophy course. Ray's political philosophy advocates the exclusion of all unions, the removal of anti-discrimination politics and a barring of local cultural practices inside the restaurant environment. When asked if he thought the company was turning people into robots, Peter Richie answered that, "we're accused of creating robots but doing things by numbers, like in the army, is one of the best ways to operate."¹⁰⁸ If people are treated as numbers then hamburgers can be read as so much ammunition to be fired at a target market while their advertisements serve to direct and motivate symbolic raids through a semiotic process of motivating specific signs into a montage of military-like strategic planning and proportions.

One of the political functions of myth in the service of advertising, is to empty symbols of their meaning and substitute new and often opposite meanings in their place. If we analyse the McDonald's sleight of meaning performance a little further, it can be seen that any Anangu significance of Uluru is stripped (excluded) from the narrative. What is retained is the Rock's formal properties (the shell) of the symbol. In short, Uluru is valued as an object in so much as it resembles the moulded appearance of a hamburger.

Within this economy of hamburger appearances, Uluru is valued not as a unique sacred site within Anangu law, dependant upon an ecological and cultural balancing act of extreme sensitivity, but rather as a popular icon with rhetorical take-away potential. Uluru, the national symbol, is here metonymically located as unified and condensed into a conceit that speaks of an essence of Australia. The Rock stands for the whole of Australia's natural outback beauty. Linked to this notion of an essence is the pun on "a taste" which mixes both geographical and gastronomical meanings. "A taste of Australia" includes the "taste of McDonald's" which is reinforced by a visual analogy involving Ayers Rock and a Big Mac hamburger. "A taste of Australia" also becomes essentialised later in the advertisement "the taste of Australia". By a neat process of inversion, Australia now tastes of McDonald's. The keywords "we've" and "our" in the opening lyrics form the signifying pivot around which the process of naturalising McDonald's revolves. The words refer collectively to both McDonald's and Australia. Taste and property are here brought together by metaphorically connecting the possession of territory to a desire for "a taste that's got it all" only at McDonald's. As we fly over Uluru and Kata Tjuta and witness their transmutation into take-away food products, the lyrics tell us that "Australia's standing tall" as a hamburger or a packet of fries.

Throughout this advertisement, the Australian landscape is rapidly McFried into separate easily digestible and marketable products. This desire to render concrete or real the abstract notion of "the taste of Australia" can be found represented in a host of Australiana ventures. At the Yulara Resort customers can order a "kangaroo sirloin, the taste of Australia" from the menu in the Sheraton Hotel at Yulara resort.¹⁰⁹ The visual analogy continues in the McDonald's television advertisement, with a cut-shot from Uluru to a McDonald's restaurant. At sunset, the Rock becomes a restaurant, with allusions to a polystyrene Big Mac container.

The outback is still the advertising heart of our nationalist mythology. The colonial dream (image) of the outback preceded the movement of historical mapping. Mapping helps determine the way the landscape is conceived and perceived. The map is not just an innocent metaphor for getting around the outback; it's an instrument of power. Advertisements can also be seen as commercial maps for directing and controlling markets through the consumption landscape. McDonald's identified the outback as such and fried up a menu of national symbols in the take-away service of American owned interests. "Everything you see" in this advertisement "means quality" of product cooked to an ideological (and secret) recipe. Any conflicting political doubts and questions are culturally and technologically condensed then purified. We consumers are left in no doubts since "McDonald's knows just how". As Judith Williamson has deduced from the structuralist anthropologist, Levi-Strauss, "the product, 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."¹⁰⁹ In this sense, Uluru is represented as canned nature; that is, a cultural re-presentation of nature.

Metaphorically reconstituted as a Big Burger Thing, Uluru is now held up as the gold standard of Big Macs across the nation. All hamburgers can now be traced back to the Rock, towards some mysterious, secret truth of hamburger origins. Uluru plays a role, within this fantastic narrative reading, of the Dreamtime Hamburger monumentalised into a rock. Our god-like point of view in the ad is from above. The camera eye moonscans above desert sand-dunes then cuts to a shot of flying above a tray of real hamburgers laid out in a military style grid formation. In McSpeak terminology, the top of a hamburger bun is call a 'hill' and the bottom, a 'crown'. In a mythical sense, McDonald's has reshaped Uluru as a hamburger hill complete with sesame seeds (gibber pebbles) on top.

This burgerisation of Uluru in the final few shots of the advertisement superimposes the McDonald's golden arches logo over an old stone arch bridge. The whole scene is bathed in a golden light which, while denoting the golden brown colour of take-away food, also has a strong Christian fundamentalist (born again) connotation. Australian taste buds can now find themselves supported by the golden plastic arches of a futuristic Gothic bridge upholding a multinational marketing strategy that turns a toasted bun into a holy sacrament. In a supporting role during the ad, the famous Twelve Apostles landmark is born again as a packet of symbolic fries stamped with their own golden logo.

In the final signature shot of the ad, Uluru is also stamped with the Big M logo. Ordained as the largest of all McProducts, Uluru is converted (or baptised) into a 'quarter pounder'; dripping "pure Aussie" juices and topped with sesame seeds. Sold to all as a holy relic, Ayers (Mc)Rock eternally offers itself to visitors, as the big Rock to end all hamburger icons. Uluru continues to serve as a screen for the projection of commercial fantasies. However, all myths come to pass if no one chooses to speak their name. The Australian market and Anangu alike have waited long enough for the cultural indigestion to pass before changing their diet of rhetorical metaphors.