

**More Than a Man, Becoming a God;
The Rhetorical Evolution of Michael Jordan**

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**A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the
Department of Communication
of Boston College**

May 2009

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Nike's television marketing of global basketball icon Michael Jordan during both the early and latter stages of his career. Drawing from the scholarship of Walter R. Fisher, William F. Lewis, Karyn and Donald Rybacki, and Richard M. Weaver, the Nike commercials produced between 1987 and 1990 are viewed as a singular narrative with specific sub-methodologies of anecdotes, characterization, and god vs. devil terms. This narrative serves the dual purposes of solidifying Jordan as the greatest player in the world and causing Michael Jordan to become synonymous with desirability. Next, the Jordan Brand commercials produced between 1999 and 2008 are then examined by employing 1). The narrative lens of Walter R. Fisher, William F. Lewis, and Karyn and Donald Rybacki 2). The American Puritan Jeremiad of Richard L. Johannesen, Mark Stoda and George Dionisopoulos, John M. Murphy, Sacvan Bercovitch, and John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland, and 3). The contemporary secular jeremiad of Richard L. Johannesen, Mark Stoda and George Dionisopoulos, John M. Murphy, and John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland. These applications support the notion that Jordan is projected during this time period as a living story, religious symbol, or teacher and wise old man. By comparing the two series of commercials it becomes evident that Nike effectively transitions Jordan from a Superman figure to that of an athletic religion over the course of his career.

"That was God disguised as Michael Jordan."

--"Larry Bird, after Michael Jordan set the NBA playoff record for most points in a game with 63 in a double-overtime loss to the Boston Celtics, 135-131." (Air Supreme)

CHAPTER ONE

FROM NORTH CAROLINA, AT GUARD, 6'6", MICHAEL JORDAN

During his thirteen year career in the National Basketball Association as a member of the Chicago Bulls, there was literally no equal to Michael Jordan. His athleticism made him fly through the air, his work ethic made him unstoppable, and his clutch performances made him a legend. Beyond the game of basketball, there has been a substantial amount of research conducted regarding the global economic impact of Michael Jordan, an impact largely attributed to Jordan's effective use of marketing. In fact, a 1999 issue of Fortune magazine estimated that over the course of his career, Michael Jordan had "generated \$10 billion for the U.S. economy" alone, "including...an additional \$366 million in merchandise" (Fortune, qtd. in Goff A1).

There is a noticeable lack of scholarship, however, concerning the specific television marketing campaigns employed by Nike at the beginning, middle, and end of Michael Jordan's career. Throughout each period, Jordan is touted as an individual that is "different," somehow separate from the typical human being. The manner in which Nike chose to present this concept, however, dramatically changes from the beginning to the end of Jordan's career. Chapter two commences by reviewing past scholarship on Michael Jordan and the man that played an enormous role in his initial Nike advertisements, Spike Lee. Chapter three provides backgrounds on Michael

Jordan, his relationship with Nike, and Spike Lee in order to familiarize the reader with Jordan, his feats, and his signature brand.

Chapter four immediately follows this reconstruction of context by analyzing ten Nike commercials that feature Michael Jordan, dating from 1987 to 1990. This section of the thesis contends that these early Jordan commercials revolve around the narrative structure, a construct fueled by Jordan's developing and unlikely relationship with Spike Lee's basketball wannabe character Mars Blackmon. Mars embarks on a journey in this early series of commercials, plotting to promote Jordan as the best player in the world, yearning to understand his breathtaking abilities, and aspiring to possess Jordan's incredible athletic power. In the process, Mars causes Jordan to become synonymous with desirability, repeatedly supporting Jordan's footwear and asserting firsthand that Jordan is in fact the best player in the world. These continuous endorsements grant credibility to the idea that Jordan is more than a man, a concept that is bolstered by constant comparisons to Mars.

Chapter five breaks down four commercials that air in the middle period of Jordan's career. These four commercials contribute in transitioning Jordan from his early years to his later years, moving Jordan's predominately silent, physical character towards three entirely new constructs discussed in Chapter six.

Chapter six explores the three main ways that the Jordan Brand markets Michael Jordan from 1999 to 2008, a period where Jordan is either a member of the Washington Wizards or retired. These commercials depict Jordan as a living narrative, a religious symbol, or as a teacher and wise old man. As evidence for these statements, an analysis of nine commercials stemming from this time period is

conducted using the methodologies of narrative, American Puritan Jeremiad, and the contemporary secular jeremiad. Broader implications of these messages are discussed at the conclusion of this chapter. Chapter seven compares Jordan's early commercials to his latter commercials, discovering that Nike effectively succeeded in moving Jordan from a player that was more than a man towards a more symbolic, mythic, and religious representation. The thesis concludes by forecasting some of the issues the Jordan Brand may face in the years ahead as Michael Jordan becomes further removed from his playing days in the NBA.

CHAPTER TWO

PAST SCHOLARSHIP DEALING WITH ATHLETICS AND ADVERTISING

In recent decades scholars have turned their attention to the intersection of athletics and advertising, analyzing how sports-themed advertisements are responsible for the creation of certain messages, perceptions, and desires. In particular, three consistent strategies contained within sports advertisements have garnered considerable attention: the inclusion and impact of recognizable celebrities, the use of narrative, and the strategic placement of symbols.

The Power of Celebrity

In their 1983 article “Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsers,” Charles Atkin and Martin Block set out to determine how successful those ads involving celebrity figures were in pushing a given product, as “despite the frequent use of famous endorsers, there [was] little published evidence regarding effectiveness” (57). Specifically, Atkin and Block turned their attention to how effective alcohol advertisements featuring celebrity endorsers were in persuading audiences to buy their product. Atkin and Block argued that “celebrity endorsers are considered to be highly dynamic, with attractive and engaging personal qualities” (57). They also recognized the fact that “the most widely used celebrity endorsers are sports figures, actors, or other types of entertainers” (Atkin and Block 57). Their findings concluded that “advertisements featuring celebrity figures produce significantly more favorable impact than non-celebrity ads,” as the two concluded that celebrity endorsers were perceived as “significantly more trustworthy and competent, and slightly more

attractive” (Atkin and Block 60). Interestingly, and highly relevant with regards to the sales of Nike basketball shoes, Atkin and Block determined that celebrity advertising impacted young people the most, stating that “the clear impact on adolescents suggests that young people may be more readily persuaded by a famous name linked to a product” (61).

In a more narrow analysis, E. Bun Lee and Louis A. Browne sought to uncover the impact of television advertising on the specific demographic of African American youths in their 1995 article “Effects of Television Advertising on African American Teenagers.” Coinciding with the theme of Michael Jordan footwear advertisements, the primary purpose of Lee’s and Browne’s study “was to examine the attitude among African American teenagers toward television advertisements on athletic shoes featuring African American athletes” (524). After surveying a large number of African American youths regarding their television viewing habits and analyzing consumer trends, Lee and Browne discovered convincing evidence supporting the notion that “exposure to television ads on sports shoes played a major role in the selection of shoe brand” (533). Furthermore, African American youths viewed African American athletes, particularly Michael Jordan, as “an extremely effective spokesperson for Nike products” (Lee and Browne 534). Lee and Browne theorized that this favoritism towards Jordan was perhaps due to the fact that “young African Americans identify with him easily or want to emulate him” (534).

Spike Lee’s Place in the Jordan Conversation

The celebrity filmmaker Spike Lee and his involvement with a long-running series of Nike ads promoting Jordan’s footwear has also been a topic for discussion

by scholars. In his 1991 article “Spike Lee, Corporate Populist,” Jerome Christensen both explained the origins of the popular Mars Blackmon character played by Lee, as well as cited a 1990 interview with Spike Lee from *The National* entitled “Don’t Blame Shoes for Society’s Problems.” In the transcript, the interviewer stated that Lee’s “commercials for Air Jordan irresponsibly promoted an appetite for expensive athletic shoes, which indirectly contributed to the epidemic of brutal black-on-black assaults and robberies,” to which Lee asserted that “the Nike commercials Michael Jordan and I do have never gotten anyone killed” (592). Christensen made the claim that Lee was attempting to evade responsibility for indirectly promoting black killings with his Air Jordan advertisements. According to Christensen, Lee needs to take ownership for the fact that perhaps his shoes are causing violence among black youths, stating that Spike “hopes to segregate himself from all bad actions” (592). Christensen maintained that “Lee has resorted to the strategy of denial and countercharges of racism” in the face of these acquisitions (595), rather than recognizing “the everyday truth that our acts have unintended consequences which, whatever our race, leave us liable for others” (593).

In a slightly different vein, scholars have also analyzed Spike Lee’s pervasive use of athletic imagery as tools to translate some of the messages and themes in his early films. As Kerr Houston stated in his 2004 article “Athletic Iconography in Spike Lee’s Early Feature Films,” Lee’s characters often use sports and sporting apparel as a means to make cultural statements, as “through intelligent references to historical and contemporary athletic figures, Lee creates a landscape of accomplished black stars” (Houston 647). Houston pointed to the Mars Blackmon character as a personification

of this idea, demonstrating how Mars' Georgetown t-shirt in the 1986 movie 'She's Gotta Have It' (directed by Lee) openly supported African American head Georgetown basketball coach John Thompson, conveying "a quiet sense of black pride" (638). Houston's article also addressed the popular Nike commercials that depicted a "pathetic Mars [that] hangs weakly from the rim, in a sharp contrast to Jordan's easy motions" (643). Ultimately, Houston asserted that Lee purposefully "uses established cultural codes as a means of characterization, and it creates, by extension, a general atmosphere of competition, or conflict, in which voices and visual images jostle and compete for legitimacy" in many of his early works (637).

Sport as a Narrative

In addition to the use of celebrities, another common practice in sports related advertising is incorporating the idea of storytelling. Gary Whannel addressed top performing athletes and the narratives attached to them through the medium of television in his 1992 book, "Fields in Vision: Television Sport and Cultural Transformation." Whannel noted that, "television sport involves the introduction of potential stars...and the establishment of audience identification with their successes and failures" (122). Whannel discussed how sport on television sets up the contrast between the "old experienced performers and the young newcomers," with youth being "celebrated" a majority of the time (124). Other common themes within the context of sport on television include work, race, the family, national identity, rivalry, aggression, and "the big showdown" (Whannel 121-148).

J. Robyn Goodman et al. focused on NBC's portrayal of Olympic athletes within their 2002 article, "Olympic Athletes and Heroism in Advertising: Gendered

Concepts of Valor?" Goodman et al. examined the ways in which advertisements for the 2000 Summer Olympics explored the concept of heroism and how this idea was used as a tool to gain the attention of an "ever-changing consumer audience" (375). Goodman et al. stated that sports figures are the primary heroes for the modern generation, and "people model their attire after athletes' clothing and shoes, consumable talismans that confer vicarious power" (375-76). They found that the commercials they analyzed "almost all portrayed male and female athletes as Warriors" (Goodman et al. 387). Additionally, male Olympians were more often "preparing for and doing battle," while female Olympians "were more likely to be celebrated for their athletic skills and achievements" (Goodman et al. 387).

While Goodman et al. focused on the advertisements displayed during the 2000 Olympics, Kathleen M. Kinkema specifically examined viewer interpretations of televised men's college basketball in her 1998 essay, "Making Sense of Sport: Experiences of Fans Watching NCAA Men's Basketball." Kinkema noted that, "The college basketball text was a narrative framed by the overarching theme of winning" (126). Sub-themes such as "competitive individualism, teamwork, and youth" were all highlighted as factors that contributed to victory (126). She concluded that the fans' "interpretations" of the college basketball games they watched "were largely aligned with preferred textual meanings" (Kinkema 127).

Janet C. Harris and Laura A. Hills also highlighted the presence of narrative devices in men's college basketball in their 1993 article, "Telling the Story: Narrative in Newspaper Accounts of a Men's Collegiate Basketball Tournament." Harris and Hills studied newspaper articles that dealt with the 1982 Men's Atlantic Coast

Conference basketball tournament, finding that “an intense and pervasive focus on winning is clear throughout the story” (108-21). The two scholars noted that the “characters' actions and personal qualities are shaped by their focus on victory,” as if winning is a dictating force unto itself (108-21). An undertone of this narrative was uncertainty, a feeling that “is emphasized and even magnified in the narrative by referring to an abundant collection of factors likely to influence the outcome” (Harris and Hills 108-21). Harris and Hills demonstrated how the narrative features of “theme, plot, and characters,” were all included in these men’s college basketball newspaper articles (108-21).

In contrast to Harris and Hill who dealt with the narratives contained within collegiate basketball, Leah R. Vande Berg and Sarah Projansky focused on the narrative components of professional basketball games in their 2003 article, “Hoop Games: A Narrative Analysis of Television Coverage of Women’s and Men’s Professional Basketball.” Vande Berg and Projansky examined “the narrative identities conveyed through the sport commentary provided during national television coverage” of two professional women’s basketball leagues (WNBA and ABL) as well as one men’s professional league (NBA) (28). Three reoccurring narratives that Vande Berg and Projansky discovered across the sports commentaries of these basketball leagues included “athletic prowess, agency, and adversity narratives” (29-32). In addition to these three non-gender-specific narratives, Vande Berg and Projansky reported on three narrative frames “used only in televised commentary during women’s professional basketball games” (28). These women-specific

narratives included “discipline narratives, diaspora narratives, and domestic role narratives” (33-37).

The Influence of Sports Advertisements and Their Use of Symbols

Outside of celebrity and narrative components, the third and final topic discussed by current sports advertising scholarship is the incorporation and use of symbols. Both the Jordan Brand and those advertising firms that feature Michael Jordan in their marketing campaigns rely heavily on the symbols of the “Jumpman” logo (representative of Jordan soaring through the air), as well as Michael Jordan the icon.

“Jumpman” Logo

Teresa A. Swartz studied the messages linked to product brands in her 1983 article, “Brand Symbols and Message Differentiation.” Swartz observed how the products consumers buy have certain messages attached to them, and that consumers use these products and their accompanying messages to make statements about themselves (59). She stated that, “The individual feels that the purchase or use of a particular brand will enhance the image which others have of him” (Swartz 59). The findings from Swartz’ experiment concluded that “different brands of the same product...result in different interpretations” (62). Swartz’ conclusions can be applied

to the wearing and advertising of Jordan Brand apparel, and how these actions are meant to convey certain messages to the observer(s).

Sung-Joon Yoon and Yong-Gil Choi also addressed sports advertising in their 2005 article, “Determinants of Successful Sports Advertisements: The Effects of Advertisement Type, Product Type and Sports Model.” Yoon and Choi argued that, “Advertisements in which a product and a sports model appeared had more influence on product preference than... advertisements in which only a product appeared” (203). Furthermore, Yoon and Choi concluded that a product linked to a sports figure is more likely to be preferred than a product that lacks this association (204). These findings offer a suggestion as to why those products that Jordan endorsed/still endorses have found such commercial success among consumers.

Given his significant stature in the world at large, the specific marketing impact of Michael Jordan has been a repeated topic of study for researchers, yet most commonly in terms of economics and race. In their 1997 article, “The Wealth Effects Associated with a Celebrity Endorser: The Michael Jordan Phenomenon,” Lynette Knowles Mathur et al. explored the power sports figures demonstrate through their advertisements. In particular, Mathur et al. examined how Michael Jordan’s return to the NBA in 1995 following a premature retirement was significant, as “rumors of Jordan’s return certainly affected the stocks of Jordan firms” (68). Mathur et al. conducted research on the subject and applied specific formulas, concluding that “the actual impact of Jordan’s impending expected return was about \$1 + billion on the combined market values of the five Jordan firms” (71). Clearly those advertisements

featuring Jordan and Jordan-endorsed products are important not only from a humanistic perspective, but from an economic outlook as well.

In his 2001 article, “Representing Michael,” Norman K. Denzin noted that the appeal of Michael Jordan goes far beyond that of an ordinary man. Denzin confirmed that Jordan “has become something more than Michael the NBA All-Star,” proceeding to outline what exactly this ‘something more’ entails (4). Initially, he described how Jordan became symbolic of the very products that he was endorsing in the early portion of his career (4). This reality was achieved through a specific form of advertising, a plan that strove to make Jordan and his products synonymous entities. Eventually, this relationship reached the point where it was exceedingly difficult to think of one without the other. Another stance argued by Denzin is that the black Jordan is “racially neutral,” a wholesome image that can be successfully packaged and distributed to white American consumers, thus turning enormous profit (9). He concluded his essay by exploring a final concept in regards to what Jordan symbolized: the protector of basketball’s integrity (Denzin 10). Denzin claimed that this was Jordan’s most important symbolic role, as he embodied a simpler, bygone era where basketball players played for the love of the game as well as for the sake of “competition and self-pride” (9). Life is viewed as a game, with Jordan seen as the ultimate player and winner in that game.

Michael Hoechsman also perceived Jordan as an embodiment of different symbols and ideas in his 2001 essay, “Just Do It: What Michael Jordan Has to Teach Us.” Hoechsman argued that “Air Jordan embodies personality, performance, prowess, and – in his status as a commodity sign – a branded consumer product”

(271). He referred to Jordan as an “extremely instructive figure” who participated in a “tale,” a tale that can teach our society about our preferences (Hoechsmann 270).

Similar to Denzin, Hoechsman looked at the issue of race surrounding Michael Jordan and his advertisements, saying that Jordan “transforms race for white viewers, providing a desired alignment for white folks with a black personality who does not appear to pose a threat” (273). Regardless of race, both Jordan and his shoes are the “embodiment of cool, a vehicle for youth dreams and desires,” serving as an individual and collection of objects that represent being “cool” and “the best” (Hoechsman 274-75).

Taking Flight with an Analysis of Air Jordan Commercials

As illustrated above, both communication and sociology scholars have examined the intermingling of sports and advertising. Through their analyses, they have singled out celebrities, narrative, and symbolism as common elements within these types of commercials. Notably, these three traits are all present within those Nike commercials portraying Michael Jordan. In the ‘Mars Blackmon’ series of Nike advertisements that aired throughout the early stages of Jordan’s career, filmmaker Spike Lee is repeatedly featured as Mars, a figure that blends urban flavor with comic relief. A noticeable shift occurs during the latter part of Jordan’s career, as not only do many of his ads focus on stories regarding the ups and downs of his life as an athlete, but they also prominently feature the “Jumpman” logo at the conclusion of each commercial. There is, however, a gap in the discourse with regards to the specific celebrities, symbols, and narratives used so effectively in those Nike advertisements that revolve around Michael Jordan. Given the monumental impact of

Michael Jordan-endorsed products, both on a consumer and economic level, it is appropriate for these factors to be examined.

Furthermore, what other devices besides celebrities, symbols, and narrative are employed by Jordan advertisers to gain the attention of their target audience? What roles do the featured celebrities assume in order to win over their audiences? Finally, and most significantly, how does the manner in which Nike markets Michael Jordan and his brand change over the course of his legendary basketball career? This essay demonstrate how those ads produced during the beginning of Michael Jordan's career largely focus on a journey of desirability, as narrated by Spike Lee's character Mars Blackmon. These hip commercials are built upon the eccentric cornerstone of Blackmon, a multi-layered main character that embarks on a quest to discover Jordan's power, ultimately hoping to understand and share in his dominance. Contrary to the show-stealing Mars, Jordan is viewed as the flawless yet largely impersonal jock in the background of Mars' antics, admired far more for his physical gifts than anything else.

Following this early-year analysis, this thesis turns its focus to those advertisements that aired at the end of Michael Jordan's career. In the process, it illustrates how this legendary sports figure gradually became viewed in one of three dominant ways: as a living narrative, as a religious symbol, and as a teacher and wise old man. All of these representations contribute to the current perceptions and reverence of Michael Jordan, even though he has been retired from the professional game of basketball for more than five years. A side-by-side comparison of the commercials from these two different time periods ultimately reveals how Nike

became far more comfortable promoting Jordan as the sole image and voice of his best-selling brand.

CHAPTER THREE

ENTER A MORTAL, LEAVE A GOD; MICHAEL JORDAN'S MARKETING TRANSFORMATION

A Star is Born

The story of Michael Jordan has been relayed so many times by sports writers, books, and television programs that it has almost reached the point of being termed cliché. Michael Jordan grew up in North Carolina and, as the story goes, was cut from his high school's varsity basketball team during his sophomore year. Jordan's notorious work ethic was partially forged in this failure as he rededicated himself to the sport. Eventually, Jordan received a basketball scholarship to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Jordan's fame grew when, as a freshman in the 1982 National Collegiate Athletic Association championship game against Georgetown, he hit the go-ahead shot with little time remaining, the first of many game-winning shots for Jordan. Drafted third overall by the Chicago Bulls in 1984, Jordan was an immediate sensation, winning the 1985 NBA Rookie of the Year Award and gaining attention from fans and sponsors alike. One of those sponsors, a shoe company based out of Beaverton, Oregon, would transform Michael Jordan into an icon, forever altering the relationship between sports and brand marketing.

Jordan's Relationship with Nike Through the Years

Michael Jordan was the perfect storm in the sports-marketing world, a man that transcended his sport. In 1971 Phil Knight founded Nike, a running shoe company that had originally done a majority of its business out of the trunk of

Knight's car. Upon being drafted into the NBA in 1984, Jordan signed one of his first contracts with Nike, who in turn "created the Air Jordan line of basketball shoes around the budding superstar's swooping and soaring style of play" (Alm). As a May 2008 article in Business Wire describes, the Air Jordan "instantly became the industry's best-selling basketball shoe" (Nike Names Keith Houlemard). The Jordan phenomenon had begun, as consumers everywhere wanted a piece of Michael Jordan. These consumers quickly discovered that their dream could be realized by buying a pair of Air Jordan sneakers. Anyone that possessed the desire and cash to purchase a pair of his shoes could "Be Like Mike," allowing customers to channel the ultimate in societal winners. In turn, the success of the Air Jordan shoe "helped rocket a one time runner-up sneaker company to the top," as Nike began raking in previously unmatched profits with the Jordan line of sneakers (Marchini and Lisovicz). By the time he had retired from the Chicago Bulls in 1999, Jordan products had earned Nike close to \$2.6 billion dollars (Hepp E6).

Recognizing the impact of Jordan-endorsed footwear and apparel, Nike created the Jordan Brand in 1997, "inspired by the dynamic legacy, vision, and direct involvement of Michael Jordan" (Jordan Brand Unveils). Since then, the subsidiary company of Nike has blossomed into its own force to be reckoned with, as 1999 saw both the first ad featuring the leaping 'Jumpman' icon of Jordan rather than the Nike swoosh (W&K Ads for Brand Jordan), as well as Jordan Brand's expansion into other athletic disciplines as an overall "sports brand" (Friedman 3). As recently as 2007, the Jordan Brand was spending \$8.8 million a year on media in order to gain consumer awareness for their products (Jordan Keeps Scoring). Today, Jordan is viewed as the

man responsible for taking “basketball footwear...from canvas sneakers to patent-leather” (Wright 17), a trendsetter that still plays a large role in defining fashion for individuals across the world.

Molding a Global Icon

The advertising campaigns that Nike aggressively produced throughout Jordan’s basketball career played a large role in transforming Jordan into one of the most familiar celebrities in the world. Jordan’s globally recognizable face and logo are the main reasons why Nike feels that the Jordan Brand “will be viable long after his basketball career has ended,” as “the superstar’s brand transcends sports” (Friedman 3). His success is unparalleled both on and off the court, reaching the point where one young fan from Tokyo proclaimed, “He’s not a human being; he’s a god” (Woodruff). Jim Andrews, an expert in the celebrity endorsement field, goes so far to say that “you have people who have never seen him play basketball, probably people who have never seen a basketball game, yet they know who Michael Jordan is” (Marchini and Lisovicz). Although Michael Jordan has always been a star, the way in which he was marketed by Nike over the course of his career changed dramatically from beginning to end. With this in mind, it is necessary to reconstruct the context surrounding the manner in which Michael Jordan, his footwear, and apparel were sold to the public. This analysis focuses on two stages: first, from 1987-1990, and second, from 1999-2008. This thesis demonstrates that Jordan emerged from Spike Lee’s mere physical sidekick in his early commercials, eventually becoming an autonomous voice and image attached to a set of ideals.

Yo! Jordan's "Main Man," Spike Lee

No individual was more influential in marketing and promoting Michael Jordan at the beginning of his career than filmmaker Spike Lee. By directing a succession of funky and entertaining commercials for Nike beginning in 1987, Lee granted adoring fans and Air Jordan aficionados access to Michael Jordan off the court. The first half of this thesis' analysis correspondingly deals with those Nike commercials produced from 1987 to 1990.

Shelton "Spike" Lee, the director/main character of these early commercials, was born in 1957 to a middle-class African American family in Atlanta, Georgia (Biography for Spike Lee). Soon after, Spike, whose nickname originated from his "tough nature," moved to Brooklyn, a city where basketball was considered king (Biography for Spike Lee). Lee began to take an interest in film during his undergraduate years spent at Morehouse College in Atlanta, an institution that "marked him as part of the black elite" (Once Upon a Time). After graduating from Morehouse College, Lee attended New York University Film School, completing his degree in 1982 (Spike Lee Biography (1957 -)). While at NYU Film School, Lee's considerable skills behind the camera began to be noticed, as he earned a prestigious Student Academy Award for his thesis film 'Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads' (Spike Lee Biography (1957 -)). "After struggling unsuccessfully for the support of a studio" to back his first independent project, 'She's Gotta Have It,' Lee scraped together \$175,000 and set to work on the film that would forever alter his professional path (Nike Pairs Michael Jordan).

The film 'She's Gotta Have It' (1986) centers upon a complicated relationship between the main character, Nola Darling, and three disgruntled male suitors all vying for her affection. Lee himself plays one of those suitors, Mars Blackmon, a "fly-mouthed [bike] messenger who does everything, including making love, in a pair of Air Jordans (Fucha). Ironically, in a 1996 interview with Charlie Rose, Lee stated that, "The only reason I was in that film playing Mars Blackmon was because we couldn't afford to pay anybody else" (Fucha). Regardless of initial intent, Mars' crazy antics and charisma were highly influential components to the critical and commercial success of 'She's Gotta Have It,' as the movie grossed nearly seven million dollars and established Lee as a legitimate filmmaker.

The inspiration for Mars Blackmon, as explained by Spike Lee, stemmed from a suggestion originally made by Lee's grandmother. Growing up, she had "had a great uncle Mars, who was crazy," a concept Lee developed into one of 'She's Gotta Have It's' main characters (McMillan 38). In the actual movie, Mars is a fast-talking, generally lazy sports nut that craves the attention of the promiscuous Nola Darling. Mars is certainly the comic relief of the piece, as his catchy sayings and one-liners add an element of humor to an otherwise heavy film. He is often shown repeating himself, a habit Lee chose to incorporate into the Nike commercials with Michael Jordan. Other crossover elements existing between the film and the Nike commercials include Mars' athletic garb (most often having some sort of basketball connection), his inquisitive and pest-like nature, and his signature 'Brooklyn' hat. The string of Nike commercials also mimics 'She's Gotta Have It' in the physical style, as Lee chose to apply the "look of the French film noir movies of the 1940s and 1950s, and

to achieve this effect, it could only be done in black and white” (McMillan 22).

Interestingly, there are many Nike and Jordan-related undertones in the film, as in separate scenes Mars is shown wearing Nike high tops (possibly Air Jordan 1’s) and Nike shorts. Finally, when Mars is talking on the phone to Nola, a vertical poster of Jordan outstretching his arms is prominently hung up behind him, a detail that seems far from accidental. These strategically-placed props would eventually catch the eye of a powerful advertising firm looking to take Nike’s golden boy, Michael Jordan, to next level of marketing.

Hiring Spike Lee to direct Michael Jordan in a Nike shoe ad was an idea that originated when Jim Riswold, the associate creative director of the advertising agency Wieden & Kennedy, saw “a trailer for *She’s Gotta Have It*, in which Lee wore his Air Jordans” (Spike and Nike). Riswold reasoned that, “Mars Blackmon was already recognized by [followers] of funky, off-the-beaten-track filmmaking, which in turn, made Mars the perfect performer in an off-the-beaten-track ad campaign” (Spike and Nike). What transpired was an ad that set about “juxtaposing his Airness with the nerdy urban blowhard’s Everyman,” a pattern that began in 1987 and continued for a total of ten spots (Garfield). Throughout the series of commercials the relationship between two distinctly different individuals is highlighted, as “Spike Lee does all the talking, while Michael Jordan restricts his efforts to 360-degree reverse slam dunks and other forms of basketball artistry” (Nike Pairs Michael Jordan). Viewers responded positively to the unique approach of these advertisements, as Mary Huhn cites their “hip urban slang, gritty reality and tongue-in-cheek humor” as major selling points for audience appeal.

On an even larger scale, Lynn Hirschberg contends that “the ads helped shape Michael Jordan's image -- and helped establish Lee's reputation.” In essence, these commercials allowed Jordan to be viewed as a winner that possessed the best of both worlds, as “opposing teams got the killer, and the fans watching the Nike commercials got the charmer, a man of humor and intelligence, someone everyone seemed to like” (Once Upon a Time). As a result of these commercials, Jordan became a marketing machine, as the advertisements’ “cumulative effect was to create a figure who had the power and force and charisma of a major movie star” (Once Upon a Time). These end results aligned with Riswold’s initial goals, as the Nike spots had ultimately set out “to present the human side of [Michael Jordan], not just the magnificent dunking machine” (Nike Pairs Michael Jordan). Ultimately, the series of Nike ads featuring Mars Blackmon brought Michael Jordan, the man who could fly, down to earth so that his audience could more easily identify with him.

Redefining a Legend

When Michael Jordan retired for the third time from the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 2003, Nike and its subsidiary company the Jordan Brand were faced with a daunting challenge; How to keep the Jordan Brand relevant to consumers even though Michael Jordan was no longer an NBA superstar. Previous sports endorsement giants such as Babe Ruth and Muhammad Ali had faded into relative obscurity upon their respective retirements, unable to appeal to the general public once their careers had ended (McCall). At the same time, however, there had never been an athlete of Jordan’s magnitude in the global world of endorsements. No single individual had ever possessed the marketing impact of Michael Jordan, a fact that

caused many of Jordan's endorsers to believe that his image could still make them money even after his playing days were over.

Nike and the Jordan Brand answered the challenge of Jordan growing older and retiring through an abundance of carefully crafted ad campaigns, all bent on transitioning Jordan into a new set of ideas and constructs in the minds of the consumers buying their products. In 1999, Jordan Brand President Larry Miller said that the post-retirement Jordan Brand ads would portray Michael Jordan as he "transitions from athlete to businessman and mentor" (Michael Jordan 'Overjoyed'). Furthermore, Miller stated that the Jordan Brand was "looking at marketing more Michael the person... things like hard work and dedication, excellence and being prepared" (Friedman 3).

Roman Vega, overseer of brand management and marketing, says that, "One of the things we are working on is transitioning [Jordan] from player to the "coach" of Team Jordan," a collection of sports stars that spans athletics (Jordan Keeps Scoring). Finally, Phil Knight, Nike's founder, views Jordan's retirement "as the beginning of Jordan the legend, bigger than the game" (McCall). One of the most recent campaign's includes the 'Become Legendary' commercials, which Howard White, Vice President of the Jordan Brand, says inspires "people...to 'Become Legendary' in all aspects of [their] life" (Jordan Brand Unveils). Furthermore, the campaign is "intended to [cause] consumers to exceed expectations, challenge conventional views of sportsmanship, and explain that greatness is attainable" (Jordan Brand Unveils). Accordingly, the second half of this thesis' analysis focuses on how those Nike and Jordan Brand advertisements produced from 1999 to 2008 sell and

redefine the man that “transform[ed] basketball from a second-tier American pastime to a global sports-marketing juggernaut” (Caramanica sec. 2).

To Them, It’s All About the Shoes

Nike and Jordan Brand advertisements certainly have a defined target demographic, yet there are slightly different takes regarding who exactly this target audience encompasses. Before the official Jordan Brand, Nike briefly operated a Jordan-oriented company named ‘Two3,’ specifically focusing on “25-to-35-year-old-men who grew up in the hip-hop culture” (McCarthy) Kathleen Sampey explicitly states in her 2003 article “An All-Star Support Team for Jordan Ads” that the “consumer target” for the Jordan Brand is “Males 14-24” years of age. Another general demographic that the Jordan Brand is said to appeal to is that of kids. As one CBS News report put it, “to kids, Jordan is idolized, a role model who seemed to understand their need for one and they, in turn, seemed to understand his needs” (Michael Jordan Expected to Announce). Along similar lines, a coach of the 2002 Nike Capital Classic basketball game in Washington, D.C. was quoted as saying, “Jordan Brand stuff is hip. Kids just really like it” (El-Bashir D1). At any rate, it can be systematically reasoned that the potential audience for Jordan Brand clothing and footwear is most likely males, with a heavier emphasis on those males that play basketball or enjoy sports.

Regardless of actual ages, the main difference between the Jordan Brand and its competitors lies in the fact that Jordan Brand advertisements are deliberately aimed at “consumers worldwide,” not just those in the United States (Nike Names Keith Houlemard). Just as it did during the playing days of Michael Jordan, Nike and

the Jordan Brand recognize the influence of the overseas market, making a strong effort to craft their messages so that they appeal to all nationalities.

The Architects of Jordan's Current Image; His Commercials

This thesis analyzes the different ways Nike chose to market Michael Jordan at both the beginning and end of his career. By comparing the commercials from these two time periods, one observes how drastically the company's approach changed with the progression of Jordan's notoriety, influence, and legend. Prior to undertaking this study, a chronologically arranged list containing the majority of Nike and Jordan Brand commercials produced during Jordan's career was accessed via the website solecollector.com ("Official: Air Jordan Commercials"). After clicking on a specific commercial's link, one was subsequently redirected to youtube.com where the commercials had been stored. A representative sample of these Jordan Brand advertisements was then selected from the original solecollector.com list in a fairly uniform and entirely unbiased fashion. In addition to accurately reflecting the breadth of the Nike and Jordan Brand advertisements during these periods, this sample effectively demonstrates that clear-cut themes exist among each generation of commercials.

1987-1990

In the beginning of Jordan's career, Nike chose to focus on Spike Lee's character Mars Blackmon and his zany personality rather than the man who inspired the shoe line in the first place, Michael Jordan. As a result, Nike produced 'Jordan Dunks on Mars Blackmon,' 'Nobody in the World Can Cover My Main Man Michael

Jordan,' 'Nola,' 'Mars Rapping,' 'Can, Can't, Can,' 'Action Photos in Spike's Room,' 'Is It the Shoes?' 'How Does Michael Jordan Defy Gravity?' 'Genie of the Lamp,' and 'Flight School' (YouTube.com). Throughout the duration of these commercials, Jordan serves as the steadying and desirable force to Mars' absurd antics and trash talking. Furthermore, Jordan does not speak often in these initial ads. Instead, he is typically seen displaying his physical gifts as he soars through the air in magnificent displays of athleticism and acrobatics. Surprisingly, Mars Blackmon is the one that constantly demands the audience's attention throughout the series, as this early collection of commercials focuses on Mars' journey as "the ultimate fan" that introduces his hero to the world and reinforces the idea that Jordan is a bonafide sports icon (Spike and Nike). Over the course of these commercials, the audience comes to realize that Mars' eventually desires to share in Jordan's stature. The narrative construct serves as a viable reference point for comprehending the quest Mars undertakes in this early series of commercials.

1999-2008

Contrary to Nike's early commercials, the Jordan Brand's more recent advertisements concentrate on one predominant figure that draws from a specific collection of messages. Also unlike the original commercials, these themes are much more Jordan-centered, as Michael Jordan has stepped out of Mars Blackmon's shadow and has become the dominant spokesman for his company and brand. The three marketing strategies employed in this latter set of commercials include Jordan as a narrative, as a religious symbol, and as a teacher and wise old man. Those Jordan Brand commercials selected for analysis that project Jordan as a narrative include

‘Spike Storytelling,’ ‘What is Love?’ and ‘Maybe It’s My Fault’ (YouTube.com).

The Jordan Brand commercials that argue Jordan as a religious symbol include

‘Voices,’ ‘Much Respect,’ and ‘The Ghost and the Darkness’ (YouTube.com).

Finally, to show how Jordan is crafted as a teacher and wise old man, this thesis

examines ‘It’s Not About the Shoes,’ ‘Let Your Game Speak,’ and the aptly titled

‘Student’ (YouTube.com)

After breaking down the commercials that aired at the conclusion of Jordan’s career, it becomes apparent that Nike and the Jordan Brand did indeed stick to their strategy of Jordan passing the torch on to a new generation of athletes. In addition to this strategy, the creators of these messages tapped into the heroic story of Michael Jordan, as well as the icon/god-figure that he became during the course of his career. Interestingly, many of the Jordan Brand commercials from this time period could be placed into multiple categories, perhaps demonstrating that these complex advertisements were all meant to funnel towards a singular, overarching message.

CHAPTER FOUR – THE EARLY YEARS

SPIKE AND MIKE AS A NARRATIVE DUO

The most helpful construct for understanding Michael Jordan's early set of commercials with Nike is that of the narrative. The narrative methodology is applied to both the early and latter collection of Jordan commercials featured in this thesis, yet this application slightly differs depending on the time period. When the early campaign featuring Mars Blackmon and Michael Jordan is viewed as a singular whole, one observes the presence of an overarching story, an inter-related tale fueled by specific sub-methodologies. The scholarly works of Walter R. Fisher are widely regarded as the foundational touchstones where narrative is concerned, as Fisher defines narration in his 1984 work "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument" as "a theory of symbolic actions - [both] words and/or deeds - that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" ("Human Communication" 375). Fisher continues on by saying that the narrative format "bind[s] the facts of our experience together in a coherent pattern," and that this connection allows our "notions [to] gain their full intelligibility" ("Human Communication" 377).

Fisher further defines narrative as "a type of human interaction" between two or more characters, interaction that is often colored by an "accounting for human choice and action" that "takes the forms of theoretical explanation or argument" ("Human Communication" 381). Fisher explains that a narrative is composed of many lesser parts, contemplating the idea of an episode and comparing it to "the

process by which one or more authors generate a short story or chapter” in relation to the greater whole (“Human Communication” 383).

In his 1985 article “The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration,” Fisher expands upon his previous sentiments by saying that “no text is devoid of context; that is, relationship to other texts” and that “there is no story that is not embedded in other stories” (“Elaboration” 358). With regards to the credibility of these interwoven stories, Fisher cites the narrative paradigm as a tool useful in distinguishing “whether or not one should adhere to the stories one is encouraged to endorse or accept” (“Elaboration” 348). Ultimately, the narrative paradigm serves the rhetorical function of “a mode of social influence,” critical in determining “whether or not a given...discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world” (Fisher, “Elaboration” 351).

While narrative serves as the larger framework for this series of Nike advertisements, there exist many reoccurring elements as well, elements that can be understood as the defining sub-methodologies within the broader tale of these commercials. The sub-methodology most closely related to Fisher’s narrative is the inclusion of anecdotes, as outlined in William F. Lewis’ 1987 article “Telling America’s Story: Narrative Form and the Reagan Presidency.” Lewis begins by classifying anecdotes as “quick stories, jokes, or incidents that are the verbal counterpart of the visual image” (244). He builds a connection between these quick stories and jokes to those that live them by explaining that “anecdotes define the character of an issue at the same time that they illustrate, reinforce, and make his policies and ideas more vivid” (Lewis 244). It is the “narrative logic” contained

within these anecdotes that succeeds in “emphasiz[ing] the connection between character and action” (Lewis 245). Lewis concludes by echoing similar sentiments to Fisher, stating that “the perception of truth depends upon the story as a whole,” as the most “persuasive narratives...express and assume a knowledge that is shared by the community” (Lewis 252-256).

Another sub-methodology within the larger narrative of these Nike commercials is that of character. Karyn and Donald Rybacki partially focus on character in their 1991 article “The Narrative Approach,” but open by defining narrative as “symbolic action in the words and deeds of characters that provide order and meaning for an audience, who then create, interpret, and live that action” (108). Applicable to Michael Jordan during this “Spike and Mike” time period, a narrative “can affirm new ideas and images, seeking acceptance for them” (Rybacki & Rybacki 108-109). On the flip side, however, a narrative “can eviscerate ideas and images, showing their impossibility or absurdity” (Fisher, qtd. in Rybacki & Rybacki 109).

Concerning specific characters, Rybacki and Rybacki grant considerable weight to “symbols that tell a story of characters, their deeds, and the setting in which those deeds were performed” (110). A tremendous focus is placed upon “what happens to the characters in the tale,” as well as the “dialogue spoken by the characters to each other and the action they engage” (Rybacki & Rybacki 111). Finally, a narrative can only be considered complete once it has incorporated “memorable characters” that “are defined by their decisions and actions and the values reflected by their choices” (Fisher, qtd. in Rybacki & Rybacki 115).

The Nike commercials stemming from Jordan's early years certainly possess memorable characters, yet it is the nature of this relationship between the two main characters that provides the final sub-methodology for this analysis. The association between Mars Blackmon and Michael Jordan is best conceptualized by what Richard M. Weaver deems "god terms" and "devil terms" in his chapter entitled "Ultimate Terms in Contemporary Rhetoric," found within his 1953 book *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Although this study views Blackmon and Jordan's relationship as closer to Superman vs. Common Man than "god" vs. "devil," the ideas behind this construct are useful in making sense of this polarized cast.

Weaver defines "god term" as the "expression about which all other expressions are ranked subordinate and serving dominations and powers" (212). He contends that in addition to our "god terms" "pass[ing] increasingly into the role of master of nature," there exists "a natural presumption that the latest will be the best" (Weaver 213-217). According to Weaver, "the counterpart of the "god term" is the "devil term,"" as "an enemy would have to be invented to take care of those expressions of scorn and hatred to which people must give vent" (222). Weaver provocatively suggests that "perhaps the truth is that we need the enemy in order to define ourselves" (222).

By applying this series of past scholarship to the Nike commercials starring Mars Blackmon and Michael Jordan during Jordan's early years in the NBA, the overarching methodology of narrative is proven as the driving force behind these televised ads. However, the sub-methodologies of anecdotes, strong characterization,

and a pervasive Superman vs. Common Man comparison also reveals a complicated series of messages robust with numerous meanings, innuendoes, and implications.

The Story of Mars and His “Main Man Money”

The narrative of Mars Blackmon and Michael Jordan is introduced to consumers through the 1987 black and white spot entitled ‘Jordan Dunks on Mars Blackmon’ (YouTube.com). Each of the ten commercials are shot in the same black and white style, adding a feeling of continuity to the narrative as a whole. In ‘Jordan Dunks on Mars Blackmon,’ the viewer is immediately greeted by Mars Blackmon, an eccentric character who asks, “Do you know who the best player in the world is? Me, Mars Blackmon.” This inner-city blowhard is the same character that becomes the voice of the next nine Nike commercials promoting Jordan and his footwear. In addition to the diminutive character’s opening statement, Mars Blackmon is further cast as an absurd clown through his wearing of a loud and busy outfit with many patterns and styles. The camera zooms out slowly to reveal the hero of the commercial, Michael Jordan, a man dressed conservatively in an all-white t-shirt and black shorts. Mars is literally standing on Jordan’s shoulders in order to hang on the rim, what Rybacki would consider a symbolic action. When Jordan looks up at Mars, it is as if he is noticing him for the first time. He blows Mars off by shaking his head while walking away, exiting the shot and leaving the “best player in the world” to teeter precariously on the rim without any support. Jordan re-enters the frame a moment later to forcefully dunk his basketball on a scared and unsure Mars. Unlike Mars, Jordan never says a word and has little facial expression.

In this first commercial, Mars makes the point to ask the audience, “Do you know how I get up for my game? That’s right, Air Jordan, Air Jordan, Air Jordan.” Mars is engaging in Fisher’s concept of endorsement by highlighting the product on his feet, Air Jordan sneakers. Furthermore, if Jordan is dunking on the self-proclaimed “best player in the world,” one must wonder what this commercial is insinuating about Jordan’s own freakish abilities. This original advertisement establishes Mars as dependent on Jordan in multiple regards, while Jordan is projected as an entirely independent force. However, as Weaver would suggest, although Jordan may be a god, it is far easier to define himself against the laughable character of Mars. This reality ultimately lends the unlikely partnership both relevance and a purpose. Mars is flashy and a loudmouth talker, while Jordan is the one who possesses the stature and ability. Interestingly, Jordan smiles when he leaves Mars hanging on the rim, perhaps hinting at the subtle ruthlessness for which he was known to play the game of basketball.

Mars and Jordan’s second commercial ‘Nobody in the World Can Cover My Main Man Michael Jordan’ begins to recognize Mars as a supporter of Michael Jordan, straying from the competitive nature of the first advertisement (YouTube.com). Definitive roles have already been established, with Mars playing the pretender to Jordan’s contender. The spot opens with a close up of a smiling Michael Jordan standing in the middle of the half-court circle, as if he is a target amid a bulls-eye. Mars begins his portion of the commercial by incorporating Fisher’s “relationship to other texts,” as he says “Mars Blackmon here again...” Barely into the second commercial, the audience understands that Mars Blackmon will be a

recurring character in the series. In addition to assuming this reporter-like role, Mars has changed his tune entirely. While Jordan practices by dribbling through his legs at a breakneck pace in the background, Mars confidently asserts that, “Nobody in the world can cover my main man, Michael Jordan.” Mars simply *says* Jordan is incapable of being guarded, but it is Jordan the physical presence who proves that his counterpart’s statement is correct by ferociously dunking the ball five times in succession. The focus is then shifted back to Mars, who rapidly repeats “Nobody, nobody, nobody,” followed by the word “impossible.” All the while, Jordan has dunked six more times, confirming Mars’ spoken words.

Jordan is then painted as a humble sports star when he approaches the ranting Mars and puts his oversized hand over Mars’ mouth. Without discounting Mars’ statements, Jordan says, “However, it’s easy to cover Mars Blackmon,” further highlighting the distance between the two figures. In addition, the physical differences are clearly noticeable as the two stand side-by-side in the same shot. Mars continues to dress goofily, requiring large glasses and wearing a gaudy gold chain that spells out his own name. Jordan, on the other hand, wears a simple white t-shirt and has a clean-shaven appearance, signifying a far more wholesome and pure individual.

The third Air Jordan commercial visits a dynamic unexplored in the previous two, effectively extending the ideas and innuendo attached to Air Jordan footwear. In the spot entitled ‘Nola,’ the audience immediately sees Mars standing in the foreground, with Jordan smiling and embracing a girl in the background (YouTube.com). Visually, one recognizes that Mars looks like a little boy compared

to Jordan, as Mars' funky style is no match for the smooth and polished look of Jordan's all black outfit. The commercial seems to have commenced during the middle of an argument, as Mars asks Nola, the female lead, "Is it because he can do a vicious high-flying 360 dunk?" "Because he's taller than me?" "Because he's loved, adored, and worshipped by millions?" To each of these queries Nola responds with the exasperated, "No, Mars." Spliced between these questions are images of Jordan alone in a gym, flying through the air and dunking a ball. By listing off a few of Jordan's attributes, Mars is continuing to set himself in sharp contrast to Jordan. Furthermore, by recounting a few of Jordan's tangible achievements, Mars is increasing his alter ego's attractiveness as a basketball player and role model.

Unable to take any more of Mars' pestering, Nola finally tells Mars that the reason she likes Jordan so much "is because he's got the new Air Jordans, Mars." Nola's revelation regarding her source of attraction to Jordan positions the Air Jordan basketball sneakers in an entirely new light; as sexual objects that are desirable for men to own in order to "get the girl." This concept aligns with Rybacki and Rybacki's notion that a character's deeds and associations "provide order and meaning for an audience, who then create, interpret, and live that action" (108). To reinforce this idea, Jordan is shown smiling at Nola's statement, in no way disagreeing or disapproving with her logic. Once it dawns on Mars that Jordan's shoes are the difference between his and Jordan's luck with women, Mars exclaims, "Oh sweat! Mr. Nike, you gotta' hook me up!" While saying this, Mars' head is positioned at Jordan's feet, staring at his shoes. In the same thirty-second span, one observes Mars

close to ground level, while Jordan is flying through the air in a world of his own, a sexual conquest waiting for him once he leaves the basketball court.

By the time the fourth commercial entitled 'Mars Rapping' airs, the audience is comfortable with Mars' character and familiar with his outlandish style (YouTube.com). Spike Lee and the Nike executives use this comfort level to outright promote the Air Jordan line for the first time, as Mars plays the dual role of both friend and promoter. This blatant marketing once again aligns with Fisher's theory, as Mars' memorable character is the deciding factor for "whether or not one should adhere to the stories one is encouraged to endorse or accept" ("Elaboration" 348). To further illustrate this point, Mars begins the commercial by shouting "Yo Homes!" a slang term that means 'friend.' Because he is a friend, Mars is a figure that the audience can trust, a fact that makes the rest of his message all the more meaningful.

Nike also appeals to the consumer audience by connecting Mars to a hip, stylish image in this commercial. A hip-hop medley plays in the background as Mars raps his message, features that make the commercials fast-paced as well as more identifiable to the inner city demographic clamoring for the latest Jordan footwear. Rapid cuts and a variety of camera angles aid Mars as he builds anticipation into those viewers that have not yet purchased a pair of Air Jordans, as he exclaims that, "The new Air Jordans from Nike are here!" According to Mars, time is running out to buy them, as "Every homeboy is bump rushing to get some." Mars reassures the audience that "they're hyped...and I ain't frontin'!" but this does little to dispel the fear of being left out by not buying these expensive shoes.

In ‘Mars Rapping,’ Jordan is barely in the commercial (at least physically) and has no speaking parts. Rather than using Jordan to tell us how gifted he is, Nike decides to incorporate Mars as the herald of this news. Blackmon adheres to William Lewis’ strategy of “emphasiz[ing] the connection between character and action,” as Mars stands around the basketball hoop and tells us that Jordan has been “serving up hard jams all day.” By relating Jordan’s exploits after they have transpired, Mars is acting similar to a vendor that sells high-end souvenirs after a spectacular display of athletic prowess. In this situation, the souvenirs are the shoes that Jordan wore to achieve his “hard jams,” a truth that Mars stresses by repeatedly holding up pairs of Air Jordans to his head.

The fifth commercial ‘Can, Can’t, Can’ succeeds in moving Mars from a friend and promoter to a devoted follower of Jordan (YouTube.com). Mars introduces himself and Jordan in succession for the first time by shouting “Yo! This is Mars Blackmon, and this is my *main man* Michael Jordan.” This pattern is one that he follows for the next three spots, a notion in line with Rybacki and Rybacki who state that a narrative “can affirm new ideas and images, seeking acceptance for them” (Rybacki & Rybacki 108-109). Similar to the previous commercial, a hip electronic beat plays in the background, music that establishes a fun-loving theme and stimulates the senses.

Mars has become committed to Jordan by this point and feels uninhibited in proclaiming his beliefs. Once again, this fact is important to Rybacki and Rybacki as “memorable characters...are defined by...the values reflected by their choices” (Fisher, qtd. in Rybacki & Rybacki 115). Mars contrasts Superman’s abilities with

those of the Common Man in this spot, with Jordan's athleticism bringing to light the "impossibility or absurdity" of normal human beings (such as Mars) performing these feats (Fisher, qtd. in Rybacki & Rybacki 109). While holding up an Air Jordan shoe, Mars says, "This you can buy." The commercial then cuts to Jordan dunking, to which he flatly states, "This you cannot do." By highlighting Jordan's talent as a priceless gift, Mars is asserting that Jordan is special, someone worth paying attention to and admiring.

Weaver's concept of ultimate terms also plays a large part in 'Can, Can't, Can,' as Mars and Jordan continue to assume sharply contrasting roles. Similar to previous commercials, Jordan serves solely as a *physical* presence whereas Mars *verbally* defines what the consumer can and cannot accomplish. Whether he speaks or not, Jordan does not dash the audience's dreams by telling them they cannot be like him. This is insightful when considering Weaver's belief that, "An enemy would have to be invented to take care of those expressions of scorn and hatred to which people must give vent" (222). In this particular application, the word 'enemy' more appropriately aligns with an individual that is different. Jordan seems to welcome the possibility of others possessing his abilities, an unspoken statement that causes the audience to like Jordan more than Mars. Remaining in the conflicting "god" vs. "devil" mind-frame, Jordan dunks and moves about the world entirely unimpeded, whereas Mars is obsessed with the material possession of Air Jordan sneakers and seems glued to the ground with awe. Once again, Mars holds the shoes up to his head, believing that the shoes somehow define who he is. Michael Jordan, on the other hand, could not seem to care less.

The sixth installment of the narrative between Mars and Jordan, ‘Action Photos in Mars’ Room,’ returns Mars to his roles of friend and promoter (YouTube.com). The commercial takes place in Mars’ bedroom, as if the audience has left the gym and been invited over to Mars’ house afterwards. Just like any kid would do when their friends come over, Mars immediately wants to show off his most valuable possession. He opens by saying, “Yo! Mars Blackmon in the house with action photos of my main man Money!” For the rest of the commercial, Mars flaunts an array of pictures that document only Michael Jordan’s feet soaring throughout many diverse regions of the world. By displaying these pictures of Jordan’s feet in different regions, Mars is subtly showing that Jordan’s appeal is prominent and global. These micro-stories are important, for as Lewis notes, anecdotes are “quick stories, jokes, or incidents that are the verbal counterpart of the visual image” (244). Hip music with a funky beat adds to the feel of being in an urban apartment with Mars, as his bedroom seems small and honking taxis are clearly audible. These taxis cause Mars to stop what he is doing and yell out the window for the cabs to “shut up,” as if he lives in a neighborhood where he knows everybody.

The visual elements contained within Mars’ bedroom are prominent in this commercial as well, far from those in the typical commercial’s dark and empty gym setting. For the first time, Mars no longer wears his signature gold chain that spells out his name, rather, he sports two smaller circles with indecipherable writing on them. Perhaps this new chain symbolizes Mars’ altered direction and view of life, as he has certainly progressed from the self-centered individual first introduced in ‘Jordan Dunks on Mars Blackmon.’ There is various Jordan-related paraphernalia

scattered about Mars' room, with Wheaties boxes in the background, a poster of Mars and Jordan hanging above the headboard of Mars' bed and, of course, Air Jordan shoes thrown on the ground. In addition to feeling somewhat office-like, Mars' room is extremely cluttered, quite the opposite to what one would imagine how Jordan's room would appear. This contrast in cleanliness only adds to the mental divide separating Jordan and Mars. Nonetheless, Mars proves to be a gregarious host, as he makes the audience feel comfortable by telling jokes that relate to the specific regions where the pictures of Jordan's feet were taken. Begrudgingly, the audience must admit that although Jordan is clearly still superior, Mars has become more likable and, at the very least, is entertaining.

'Is It The Shoes?,' the seventh installment of the Jordan and Mars story, is dedicated primarily to focusing on the power relationship between Jordan the Superman and Mars the Common Man, once again drawing from Weaver's "god" vs. "devil" construct (YouTube.com). Following Mars' now-standard introduction of himself and Jordan, Blackmon asks, "Yo Mike, what makes you the best player in the universe?" Mars' question corresponds to the work of Lewis, as the most "persuasive narratives...express and assume a knowledge that is shared by the community" (Lewis 252-256). Clearly Mars has accepted the fact that Jordan's talent far outweighs his own, and he is anxious to discover Jordan's secret.

Mars' inquisition casts him as the less-dominant individual in this relationship, as Jordan is the one that holds both the power and the answer. Mars begins to pester Jordan about the source of his supremacy, in the process naming all of the elements of basketball that Jordan has changed. As if he were a scribe, Mars

asks Jordan if it is his “vicious dunks” that make him the best, or his “short haircut, short socks, or extra long shorts.” Although mostly a physical presence that continues to dunk nearly incessantly, Jordan does patiently respond to Mars by saying, “No Mars,” after each inquiry. The interaction between these two characters is predictable to Fisher, who states that the “accounting for human choice and action...takes the forms of theoretical explanation or argument” (“Human Communication” 381). Gradually, Mars becomes more impatient with his questioning of Jordan, insisting that, “Money, it’s gotta be the shoes!”

Mars says the word “shoes” ten times throughout the course of this commercial, whereas Jordan never does. The footwear focus is indisputable, as Mars repeatedly returns to his belief that it is a material factor that makes Jordan the best. He is greedy to learn the truth while Jordan, the all-knowing, stoic god-figure, calmly assures Mars that it is not the shoes, flatly stating, “I’m sure, Mars” with quiet conviction. Although similar to a manikin on display throughout this entire series of early commercials, Jordan is nevertheless consulted in order to understand the answers to tough questions. He is the spiritual, flying figure to Mars’ groveling character, as Mars once again presses a pair of Air Jordans to his head and positions himself at ground-level so he can get a better view of Jordan’s sneakers. Mars, the individual that spends most of his time being with or thinking about Michael Jordan, has missed the point entirely.

In the eighth commercial of the overarching narrative, ‘How Does Michael Jordan Defy Gravity?’, Mars has taken his search for the source of Jordan’s baffling power to the next level (YouTube.com). Mars greets the audience with a slight twist,

shouting, “Yo! Mars Blackmon here with my main man Michael Jordan, and Professor Douglas Kirkpatrick of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics.” Mars is so desperate to learn Jordan’s secret that he has hired an astrophysicist in Professor Kirkpatrick. The gym doubles as a basketball laboratory in this spot, with a giant chalkboard set up in the background containing many complicated formulas. Jordan himself is emotionless and expressionless, an indifferent physical specimen under the metaphorical microscope. He appears to be part of a zoo-like display, having no control of the scientists’ tests. As a result, this moment proves to be the singular instance of the entire narrative where Jordan’s independence is questioned.

Mars proceeds to ask Professor Kirkpatrick, “How does Mike defy gravity?” This question adheres to Weaver’s “god” outline, as he argues that “god terms” “pass increasingly into the role of master of nature” (213). As an individual that can bend the laws of physics and take flight, Jordan certainly falls into this category. In response to Mars’ question, the astrophysicist recites a complicated formula to reiterate the complex series of numbers and letters already written on the chalkboard behind him. This response only succeeds in making Mar more confused, symbolizing that the answer to Jordan’s greatness cannot be reduced to an equation or concept. This signifies to the audience that rather than questioning Jordan’s abilities they should merely accept and appreciate him for what he is. Although he is still obsessing over Jordan, Mars is physically moving towards a more traditional human being in this commercial. His outfit is slightly more conservative than previous episodes, as his chain with the two circles now rests on a plain basketball jersey that is over a

neutral t-shirt. While Mars is still a long way off from being Jordan, the commercials have succeeded in gradually moving Mars closer to Jordan's image, with the ultimate payoff occurring in the next spot.

The ninth commercial of this series entitled 'Genie of the Lamp' features the culmination of Mars' daunting search for answers, as he finally realizes his dream of being able to understand and use Jordan's abilities (YouTube.com). Mars begins by proclaiming, "Yo! Mars Blackmon, here with Aladdin's Lamp!" It seems as though Mars has ditched science altogether in his search for the answers to Michael Jordan's greatness, instead turning to the forces of magical powers. When Mars rubs the magic lamp, the singer Little Richard pops out in a poof of smoke, saying that he is the genie that will grant him one wish. Little Richard is wearing plush slippers with Nike swooshes on the sides, implying that Nike products can make one's dreams come true.

Initially, Mars is hesitant and does not know what to wish for. This is in direct contrast to the character Jordan portrays in the series, as he is almost always pictured moving about the world at his own pace and on his own level. To help Mars along with what he should wish for, Little Richard suggests "a million dollars," or "a new car." Mars turns down both before finally exclaiming, "I've got it!" In a flash of smoke, the camera pans up to reveal Michael Jordan dressed as Mars Blackmon. Instantly, the viewer realizes that the only way Mars could fulfill his desire of understanding Jordan's power was by physically becoming the basketball phenomenon. Mars' pivotal choice corresponds with Rybacki and Rybacki who state

that, “memorable characters...are defined by their decisions” (Fisher, qtd. in Rybacki & Rybacki 115).

After he becomes Jordan, Mars immediately says, “Look, mom, I can fly!” as if possessing non-human abilities goes hand-in-hand with being Michael Jordan. It seems as though Mars has finally arrived at his goal of understanding Jordan, realizing in the process that the material route is not the wholesome way to go, as he turns down money and cars for the chance to be Michael Jordan. Once he has been transformed into Jordan, Mars states his satisfaction by asserting, “I like that, Genie.” The commercial closes with Little Richard screaming, “I am the greatest” while the Jordan “Jumpman” logo flashes across the screen.

Now that Mars is no longer driven to gain/understand Jordan’s abilities, the viewer wonders what Mars will do in the future. This question is answered by the tenth and final commercial of the series, entitled ‘Flight School’ (YouTube.com). This spot is a commercial within a commercial, as a grainy television set blasts an infomercial that begins with a miniature Mars shouting, “Yo! It’s the Michael Jordan Flight School!” Not surprisingly, Mars Blackmon has decided to use his newfound knowledge to make money, teaming up with Jordan to sell admittance to “Flight School.” As Mars advertises, “Flight School” is a program where one can “learn how to increase your hang time, learn how to dazzle defenses, learn how to wear really great sneakers, learn how to sign lots of autographs, learn how to stick your tongue out during the game, learn how to play golf during the off-season, learn how to make the All-Star team” and finally, “learn how to star in lots of commercials.”

Unfortunately, Mars has reverted to his role of greedy promoter, trying to sell “Flight School” and cause others to invest in his basketball wisdom.

The main target of this commercial within a commercial proves to be Jordan’s fellow NBA competitors, as the spot concludes by showing Jordan’s peers sitting together on a couch, longing to acquire the Jordanesque traits guaranteed by Mars. Subtly, Nike is signifying that the dynamic of envy is no longer between Jordan and Mars, but between Jordan and the NBA as a whole, and the entire world for that matter. After all, if Jordan and Mars are now business associates, he must need a new “enemy in order to define [himself]” (Weaver 222). For his part, Jordan seems to be equipped to assume the next stage of his career by stepping out of both the shadow of Mars and the dark, lonely gym. For the first time in the narrative, the viewer observes Michael interacting with fans, playing golf outside, and doing a great deal of smiling. Ultimately, this commercial marks the end of Mars and the beginning of Jordan as the focal point for these types of Nike advertisements. Jordan is now ready to shed his role of casual observer and become a more active participant in the marketing of his brand and overall image.

When examined on an individual level, these ten commercials serve as witty, entertaining spots that succeed in capturing the audience’s attention and promoting Air Jordan footwear. When these same ten commercials are viewed as a singular narrative, however, specific patterns begin to emerge regarding the overall behavior of Mars Blackmon and Michael Jordan. These behavioral patterns feed into larger messages about the two characters, as they form constructs and reinforce ideas regarding the topics of greatness, power, and what it means to be a ‘common man’.

Perhaps most importantly, these ten Nike commercials educate the consumer on how they should treat and revere Jordan, as well as those products attached to his name.

Forging the Desire to “Be Like Mike”

Narrative analysis is useful when examining the early series of Air Jordan commercials featuring Mars Blackmon, as this methodology aids in identifying the broader messages attached to Michael Jordan and his footwear. The theme that is visited most extensively is the concept of consumerism and want. Throughout the series, Mars Blackmon, the nerdy everyman to Jordan’s polished Superman, constantly ‘wants’ something of Jordan’s. ‘Jordan Dunks on Mars’ establishes Mars as an individual that wants to be the best in the world, an idea that is as laughable as it is improbable. Once Mars has accepted the fact that he cannot be the best in the world (unlike Michael Jordan), ‘Nola’ portrays Mars as wanting Jordan’s shoes in order to get the girl. Mars’ desire for Jordan’s shoes is justified, as the viewer never sees Jordan without them on, almost as if they are a physical characteristic permanently strapped to his body.

Next, Mars wants to promote Jordan and his greatness, which he does in ‘Mars Rapping,’ ‘Can, Can’t, Can,’ and ‘Action Photos in Mars’ Room.’ Through this promotion of Jordan, Mars indefinitely links himself to the Jordan sensation and, as a result, is viewed by the general public as a major contributor to Jordan’s overall image. Through this action, Mars elevates his own status above that of the Common Man. Although his basketball skill level remains insignificant when compared to Jordan’s, Mars experiences a degree of Jordan’s fame by participating in this promoter lifestyle.

Embedded within this promotional set of commercials is the symbolic act of Mars repeatedly holding Jordan's shoes to his head. This association causes the viewer to believe that once one has endorsed Jordan, they will be better suited to acquire those material possessions (such as sneakers) that they originally desired. Following these promotion-based commercials, Mars is portrayed as accepting the fact that Jordan is superior. It now appears as though Mars simply wants to discover the *source* of Jordan's power. 'Is It the Shoes?' and 'How Does Michael Jordan Defy Gravity' set out to answer this question, although Mars is disappointed to realize that neither his own suggestions/inclinations nor science can explain what makes Jordan so powerful. The mystical forces of Little Richard in 'Genie of the Lamp' allow Mars to conclude that magic is in fact responsible for making Jordan the greatest. The moment Mars is transformed into Michael Jordan by Little Richard, he unintentionally succeeds in accomplishing both his original and latest desires, as not only is he the best in the world, but he understands where Jordan's power originates from.

Now that his pursuit of Jordan's abilities and knowledge has ended, the insatiable Mars requires a new direction for which to aim his attention. He solves this dilemma by deciding to sell his newfound knowledge in a get-rich-quick scheme, opening the Michael Jordan Flight School and advertising this institution to the general public. The profits Mars reaps from Jordan are not as random as they might originally seem, as throughout the ten commercials Mars repeatedly refers to Jordan as, "My main man Money." In the back of his mind, it looks as though Mars considered Jordan as a fortuitous source, a goldmine that could not be fully tapped

until he had come to understand Jordan's abilities. After that understanding has been achieved, Mars strives to use his "friend" as a resource to become wealthy.

This early series of Air Jordan commercials thus succeeds in accomplishing two distinct goals. First, the idea that Michael Jordan is in fact the greatest basketball player in the world is repeatedly reinforced, irrefutably settling this debate. Mars' continual highlighting of Jordan's abilities supports this notion, as Mars gives voice to the many skills that separates Jordan from his competition. The era of Larry Bird and Magic Johnson dominating the NBA is long past, and Michael Jordan is marketed as the newest and sole torchbearer of the game.

This first goal is the lesser of the two, however, as by watching Michael Jordan play on the Chicago Bulls during this time period one could have arrived at the same conclusion, without the effervescent influence of Nike advertisements. With this in mind, the second goal that these commercials succeeded in accomplishing was establishing Michael Jordan as synonymous with the concept of desirability. Through his many interactions with Mars, Jordan is projected as a means for achieving any dream consumers may wish for, as Jordan possesses all of the ingredients that Mars wants: status, women, shoes, dominance, fame, and wealth.

The Air Jordan basketball shoes are the keys capable of granting consumers access to their desired and true selves, with Mars serving as the representation of this journey. The sneakers are projected as a means for mere mortals to become like Jordan, just as Mars did, allowing them to progress from Common Man towards Superman. Mars uses the commercials to demonstrate to his viewers that once they accept Jordan as the most gifted and powerful basketball player, endorse and promote

him publicly (thus spreading his influence), and invest in him by buying Air Jordan shoes, they will be in a position to become Jordanesque. The radical character of Mars is able to illustrate this progression so that the overall change is at its most noticeable. However, Nike and its advertisements make sure to imply that, in order to truly become Jordan, one would require the help of magic (a.k.a. a Genie of the Lamp), yet this is a detail that becomes lost amid the exciting promise of ability, fame, and wealth. Overall, these commercials establish the idea that the consuming public inherently *needs* Jordan, making their personal meaning and growth dependent on him and his actions.

This series of early Nike commercials marks the beginning of the idea that Michael Jordan is far superior to an average human being. This belief is revisited in those Jordan Brand commercials produced during the end of Michael Jordan's career, spots that are analyzed later in this thesis. It is important to point out that, although he is more than a Common Man at this stage of his career, Jordan is not yet a god figure in these early commercials. Although independent for the most part, Jordan does not yet have the ability to stand alone as his own voice. Mars does nearly all of the talking in these early spots, and it is Mars who serves as the chief interpreter of Jordan's powers rather than Jordan himself.

Concerning the topic of Mars, Jordan is also not yet a god due to his exploitation at the hand of Mars. An all-powerful god figure would not allow themselves to be used for personal profit like Jordan is by Mars, as Jordan seems very passive in the face of his sidekick's actions. Jordan's trademark fire and toughness is missing from his early commercials, characteristics that are worked into the Jordan

persona through the commercials that transition Jordan from his early career to his later career. A sample of these commercials include '100 Foot Rim,' 'Tell Me I Can No Longer Fly,' 'Failure,' and 'Goodbye Mars' (YouTube.com). It is necessary to briefly touch on these commercials before continuing on in order to appreciate and comprehend how Jordan moves from a Superman force to that of a god figure and religion unto himself.

CHAPTER FIVE – THE MIDDLE YEARS

FANNING THE FLAME; JORDAN'S TRANSITION FROM SUPERMAN TO DIETY

The first commercial that contributes to moving Jordan from a Superman figure to a religious leader/god is '100 Foot Rim.' The commercial begins with Jordan stepping into a dimly lit gym and looking up to see a 100-foot tall basketball hoop at the other end of a basketball court. From the start, one notices that Jordan is by himself in this commercial, no longer reliant on an outside character to provide meaning or a voice. A beam of white light streams down from the rafters in this ad, an ethereal beacon that one could argue represents a divine force. Regardless of the light's meaning, Jordan takes the 100-foot obstacle as a challenge as he sizes up the jump, sets a determined expression on his face, and begins dribbling his basketball at high speed towards his goal. As he nears the hoop Jordan leaps into the air, elevating himself beyond human limitations until he finally reaches the pinnacle of his flight and dunks the basketball. After Jordan has achieved his goal he hangs from the rim and realizes how high and how far he has flown. This realization is communicated by the precarious look on his face. Put simply, Jordan has left earth and does not want to return. Although he has literally reached new heights in this advertisement, Jordan refrains from saying anything during the course of this spot, a fact that proves he has not yet transitioned into his final, complete self.

'Tell Me I Can No Longer Fly' further shifts Michael Jordan from Superman to legendary icon and god figure. The most noticeable feature of this spot is that it opens with Michael Jordan's deep, passionate voice as the narrator. In a challenging

tone, Jordan says, “Disrespect me. Tell me I’m older. Tell me I’m slower. Tell me I can no longer fly. I want you to.” These words, coupled with a few direct gazes into the camera, dare the audience to doubt this celebrated athlete. The commercial pictures Jordan alone in the weight room and gym, illustrating his single-minded focus and determination. The spot ends by showing Jordan taking off from the foul line and dunking, even though his body is admittedly older. This physical display, along with Jordan’s resonating words, reveal Jordan’s competitive nature and cause one to reflect on his legacy, impact, and drive.

In ‘Failure,’ Michael Jordan once again provides the commentary as he recites all of the times in his professional life where he came up short of reaching his goals. As Jordan recounts, “I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.” This brutally honest admission proves that Jordan is highly reflective, capable of learning from his mistakes and growing as a result of them. Jordan is dressed in street clothes as he walks into a building in this commercial, signifying that his influence now extends beyond the game of basketball. The audience views the world from Jordan’s perspective in this spot, as the camera is angled down on those that admire Jordan. This aesthetic move signifies Jordan’s realization that others look up to him and that he has responsibilities to uphold. The advertisement ultimately suggests that Michael Jordan wins even when he loses, as he is entirely unafraid of failure and welcomes it as an opportunity to get better.

The final commercial that transitions Jordan beyond the Superman image of his earlier years is 'Goodbye Mars.' This spot takes the audience full-circle, airing during Jordan's third and final retirement from the NBA and enlisting the help of Jordan's old friend and promoter, Mars Blackmon. It appears as though Mars has grown noticeably older since the audience saw him last, yet he is still stuck in Brooklyn and has reverted back to wearing his gaudy gold chain that spells M-A-R-S. In direct contrast to the early Nike commercials, Jordan is now merely a voice on the other end of Mars' phone, entirely unaffected by Mars' influence. When Mars calls Jordan "on speed dial," it takes Jordan a considerable amount of time to even remember this character from his past, as he repeatedly asks who is calling him. Once he does recognize Mars and the conversation progresses, Jordan becomes increasingly frustrated with him, a fact that culminates in *Jordan* ending the conversation and hanging up on Mars. It is clear that Mars' control and influence is simply a memory to Jordan, as he has moved on to become his own man and will not require Mars' help during his post-basketball career.

As one observes, these commercials effectively transition Jordan beyond the Superman image of his early commercials towards a new and more complete construct. As a Superman figure, Jordan was oftentimes reliant on Mars to grant him a voice, yet Jordan demonstrates in this series that he has broken away from Mars' influence and has become his own man, his own voice, and his own life force. Over the course of his career Jordan has experienced a tremendous amount of joy, pain, sacrifice, and victory, and it seems as though he is finally willing to lend his perspective to the feats and missteps that molded him into the greatest basketball

player the world has ever seen. This analysis next examines the latter set of Jordan Brand commercials that aired during the end of Jordan's basketball career, advertisements that successfully portray Michael Jordan as a living narrative, religious symbol, and teacher and wise old man.

CHAPTER SIX – THE LATER YEARS

MICHAEL JORDAN AS A LIVING NARRATIVE

In order to comprehend the narrative theme that defines Michael Jordan in many of his latter commercials, it is necessary to further examine past scholarship that deals with this framework. As discussed previously, the narrative construct, outlined in the seminal works of Walter R. Fisher, is of tremendous use in understanding this era of Jordan Brand advertisements. In addition to those narrative elements formerly touched upon in this thesis, Fisher states that the narrative paradigm is the strongest form of rhetoric, owing to the fact that life can only be understood through an appreciation of its inherent “narrative structure” (“Human Communication” 377-381). At their core, stories aim at exposing “truths” about the human condition that many of us can relate to (Fisher, “Human Communication” 381). Once the audience has entered this narrative paradigm, a suspension of reality is experienced where the story is simply evaluated for its content.

When examining a story, Fisher states in his 1985 article “The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration” that the narrative paradigm serves as a framework “for determining whether or not one should adhere to the stories...as the basis for decisions and actions” (“Elaboration” 348). He continues by asserting that stories “generate adherence” when “they are coherent and ‘ring true’ to life as we would like to live it” (Fisher, “Elaboration” 362). Ultimately, Fisher believes that a convincing story “provides a rationale for decision and action,” and takes into account “coherence, consistency, and noncontradiction” (Fisher, “Elaboration 364).

Similar sentiments regarding content and consistency are echoed by William F. Lewis in his 1987 article “Telling America’s Story: Narrative Form and the Reagan Presidency.” Lewis states that a narrative must be devoid of “inconsistency with itself” and that the narrative is essentially “permanent,” meaning that the audience will not accept other variations (253-260). In addition, these plots must “provide a moral direction” that the audience can strive towards (Lewis 254). Regarding the audience, Lewis believes that stories are most persuasive when they “express and assume a knowledge that is shared by the community,” as well as encourage the audience in their belief that “that the direction and outcome of the story depend[s] upon [them]” (Lewis 247-256). These assertions by Lewis point out that audience interaction is essential in achieving effective narration.

In their 1991 article “Communication Criticism: Approaches and Genres,” Karyn Rybacki and Donald Rybacki make the claim that there are two forms of statements within narrative discourse: process and stasis statements (111-112). In particular, stasis statements include “elements that exist in the story over and above what the characters do and say,” components such as “music, and narration” (Rybacki & Rybacki 112). Concerning the physical layout of the narrative, Rybacki and Rybacki reference the importance of plot and how “all narratives seem to involve some degree of crisis and conflict” (113). The main characters’ personal qualities must be on display so that the audience can decide whether or not they can trust the main character and buy into their story (Rybacki & Rybacki 116). With this past scholarship in mind, by applying the elements of strong characterization, plot, and

audience participation to three Jordan Brand advertisements, the narrative components within these commercials can be effectively exposed.

Narrative Components: Jordan's Qualities

The first way in which 'Spike Storytelling,' 'Maybe It's My Fault,' and 'What is Love?' demonstrate narrative is through their inclusion of strong characterization (YouTube.com). In each commercial, the audience's attention is focused on Michael Jordan during his career and in some cases his childhood. 'Spike Storytelling' establishes Jordan as a hardworking individual, as he woke 'up at 5 every morning to train.' 'Spike Storytelling' continues, describing Jordan as a winner, explaining how both his college team at the University of North Carolina and his NBA team the Chicago Bulls won numerous championships. Jordan is also quoted in 'Spike Storytelling' as saying, "I can't accept failure. I can't accept not trying," providing Michael Jordan's 'moral direction' that Lewis refers to (254).

Strong characterization is also present within 'Maybe It's My Fault,' as Jordan himself narrates the 'behind-the-scenes' version of his life story. Jordan begins by describing how many people think "It was easy when it wasn't." He continues to highlight his tremendous work ethic by stating that his accomplishments started "in the gym," and that his game was built on "fire." This mentality is expanded upon when we see the long list of the exercises Jordan performed daily, as well as the locker room light turning on, signifying Jordan being the first one to practice. Jordan's resiliency is put on display when he affirms that, "Failure gave me strength...my pain was my motivation." These words accompany a shot of the high school gym where Jordan was cut as a sophomore. Finally, the enormity of Jordan's

success is visually apparent, as we see the long list of Jordan's career accomplishments inscribed on the side of his statue outside of the Bulls' stadium, as well as his personal trophy case full of awards.

'What is Love?' is primarily a visual journey, as we are actively able to witness Jordan in his role of hero. We see him hitting the buzzer-beating shot, scoring his career high sixty-nine points, and winning his six NBA championships, all of which are narrated by Jordan. We are also exposed to Jordan's freakish athletic ability and intensity that made him so unique, as he flies through the air to dunk a ball from the foul line and battles the villainous Detroit Pistons by standing up and confronting them when they send him to the ground with a hard foul. This confrontation aligns with Ryback and Rybacki's perception of "narrative...involv[ing] some degree of crisis and conflict" (113). Finally, Jordan's philosophy is revealed to us, as Jordan defines love as "playing every game as if it's your last." These traits of Michael Jordan all align with Fisher's "moralistic myth of the American Dream," including such qualities as "effort, persistence, 'playing the game,' initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success" ("Elaboration" 360). The audience can identify with and idolize Jordan, as he is someone that works hard, does not back down, and always ends up victorious.

Small Town Kid Conquers World

The plot serves another critical role in the narrative of Jordan's career. In each telling, there exists a strong stasis, as 'Spike Storytelling' is narrated by Spike Lee, Jordan's longtime friend, while 'Maybe It's My Fault' and 'What is Love?' are narrated from the primary source of Michael Jordan. The music in these three

commercials rises and falls in correspondence with the stages of Jordan's career, providing an up and down feeling to the story that mimics life. With regards to the layout of Jordan's story, the most important aspect is that this narrative remains consistent throughout each of the three commercials, a familiar tale that can go unquestioned and be taken at face value. The standard plot entails Jordan as a boy that grows up in North Carolina who uses his incredible athletic gifts, work ethic and intensity to win championships, defeat his foes, and become the greatest basketball player of all time. Jordan repeatedly runs up against the crisis and conflict of physical opponents and his own love of the game, managing to emerge victorious every time. Regardless of whether or not the Jordan Brand commercials tell this story in a barbershop, school bus, gym, or through moving images, the story does not possess "inconsistency with itself" and stays the same from the one telling to the next (Lewis 253).

Putting the Audience in a Pair of Air Jordans

The final way in which 'Spike Storytelling,' 'Maybe It's My Fault,' and 'What is Love?' demonstrate qualities of a narrative is through Lewis' concept of audience inclusion. 'Spike Storytelling' opens with Spike Lee saying "Our story, children, begins..." as if he is gathering and preparing the viewers to listen to the tale written in the oversized book on his lap. More importantly, at the end of the commercial, Spike looks directly into the camera and says, "Somewhere, someone is practicing," followed by the words "Will You Be the **One**?" flashing across the screen.

Audience inclusion is also used in ‘Maybe It’s My Fault,’ as Jordan allows the audience into previously off-limits locations from his career. We are shown the inside of the weight room where Jordan worked out, Jordan’s dorm room in college, his high school gymnasium and locker room, the dirt court where he learned the game, and even the inside of his parent’s home in North Carolina. In this light, the audience becomes more like a friend to Jordan, as these locations would be inaccessible for anyone that did not know Jordan on a personal level. Jordan also causes the audience to question themselves, as he ventures that “Maybe, you’re just making excuses,” a statement that has meaning beyond the game of basketball.

Finally, audience interaction is prevalent in the commercial ‘What is Love?’ as Jordan teaches the audience his unique definition of love. Once again, through such definitions as “Love is silencing your critics” and “Love is playing on nothing but heart,” the audience is allowed access into Jordan’s mind, giving them the feeling that they have a deep connection with Jordan the athlete and the person.

This section has exposed the ways in which narrative can be observed within Jordan Brand commercials. Strong characterization of the central figure, Jordan, is generously presented, as is a consistent plot that always results in victory, with a heavy application of audience participation. We all want to be Michael Jordan, and these stories grant us the next best thing by allowing us to gain insight into the legend that surrounds Jordan the human being.

JORDAN AS A RELIGIOUS SYMBOL

Moving away from a discussion of narrative, the next manner in which Jordan Brand advertisements can be viewed is that of the jeremiad. When dealing with Jordan as a religious symbol, it is appropriate to apply the American Puritan Jeremiad as the methodology. Later, this thesis transitions by examining Jordan as a teacher and wise old man by utilizing a similar jeremiad, what Richard L. Johannesen refers to in his 1986 article “Ronald Reagan’s Economic Jeremiad” as the contemporary secular version.

In their 2000 article “Jeremiad at Harvard: Solzhenitsyn and ‘The world split apart,’” Mark Stoda and George Dionisopoulos state that the American Puritan Jeremiad originated when the Puritans landed in America with the belief that they were “chosen by God for a special purpose” (32). These early Puritans were convinced that their role was to serve as a “city on a hill” for others in the world, as the moral guidepost between right and wrong (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 32). As Johanessen reiterates, “A key assumption was that the American Puritans had a unique mission or destiny” (80). However, as John M. Murphy cites in his 1990 article “A Time of Shame and Sorrow,” the Puritans also believed that they had inevitably sinned against God (403). In this regard, the jeremiad was used as both a “sermon” and statement on the “state of the covenant” between God and His chosen people, as outlined by Sacvan Bercovitch in his 1978 book “The American Jeremiad” (4).

The American Puritan Jeremiad is influential in that it “casts the rhetor in the role of prophet, acting as an intermediary between a god-like authoritative message source and the intended audience” (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 31). This message was oftentimes one of doom, as “evils and calamities” were seen as the punishments for failing to keep [the] covenant with God” (Johanessen 80). According to John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland, this breaking of the covenant is the basis for “the power of the rhetorical jeremiad,” as stated in their 2005 article “A Covenant-Affirming Jeremiad: The Post-Presidential Ideological Appeals of Ronald Wilson Reagan” (159)

Although the messages of the jeremiad were often harsh, they were not without hope. Ultimately, the jeremiad strove to “fetch good out of evil” and deliver the Puritan people back into God’s graces (Bormann, qtd. in Murphy 403). The prophetic teachings sent by God in the form of Biblical and spiritual norms were instrumental in this return to God’s graces, as they brought “the promise of a bright future” (Stoda and Dionisopoulos 33). In addition, other strategies of reconciliation could be employed, as “prayer was not simply a response to passing events; above all else it expressed the people’s commitment to God’s plan” (Bercovitch) By attempting to return to the “principles of the church” it was said that God would grant forgiveness and “restore the progress of his chosen people” (Johanessen 80).

An analysis of those Jordan Brand commercials occurring between 1999-2008 illuminates the presence of the American Puritan Jeremiad structure within these types of messages. In particular, the elements of a chosen people, evil/sin, prophets,

prayer, and hope for a brighter future can be found within the Jordan Brand commercials entitled ‘Voices,’ ‘Much Respect,’ and ‘The Ghost and the Darkness.’

The Traditional Jordan Jeremiad

The first element of the American Puritan Jeremiad found in Jordan Brand commercials from this period is that of a chosen people. In ‘Voices,’ the chosen people are the Celtic greats of old, players such as Bob Cousy and Bill Russell, with legendary coach Red Auerbach being included as well. These individuals are being interviewed after winning world championships, raising banners to the rafters, and in Red’s case, lighting a victory cigar. In addition, the voice of a broadcaster from this era crackles to life, stating that the Celtics “are the greatest sports dynasty in the history of professional athletics.” ‘Much Respect’ also explores a chosen people, as many groups of children playing different sports are depicted throughout this commercial. These children are constantly learning, whether it’s how to play stickball and hit a homerun or how to assume the correct boxing stance. Finally, ‘The Ghost and the Darkness’ includes a chosen people, as there are two opposing fan sections watching a game of basketball. Both sides are tremendously caught up in the action of the game, yet only one side is chosen to experience the glory of winning or being saved.

Evil and sin is also apparent in this group of commercials, with the most prominent illustration of these villainous forces occurring in ‘The Ghost and the Darkness.’ In this commercial, there are two opposing sides, with the evil side ahead in the game by one point as the sequence begins. The crowd cheering for the team that is ahead adds to this evil entity, as they heavily outnumber the other team’s fan

base. The majority of these individuals are pointing, booing, and making aggressive gestures in the shadows. Many of the individuals in the stands are faded and distorted, as if they are watching a battle between good and evil. Darkness shrouds much of the gym where the event is being held, adding to the feeling that there is a looming menace. The bench of the team that is originally in the lead, coincidentally called 'The Wildcats,' also serves as a representation of evil, as when the ball is eventually stolen they scream, jump up and down, and literally go wild as if they are some form of demonic beast.

Jordan Brand prophets account for a great deal of the narratives in this collection of commercials. First, in 'Voices' the audience sees Ray Allen, one of the best basketball players in the NBA, as the center of attention. Allen's hands are clasping and unclasping as if he is in prayer and communicating with a higher power. At the end, we see Allen with a very thoughtful expression in his face, after which he opens his eyes and stares directly at the camera, as if he has received a mission through his prayer and has now returned to his physical self. In 'Much Respect,' the Jordan Brand representatives of Eddie Jones, Michael Finley, Derek Jeter, and Roy Jones Jr. are all depicted as going out into the world and effecting change in the lives of those that are playing their sports. Jones and Finley, originally coaches of a pickup basketball game, decide to shed their warm-ups and participate in the scrimmage. After seeing a game of stickball among a group of kids, Jeter parks his car and engages with the youths. Jones Jr. is running through the street in his opening shot, only to eventually be seen in a gym teaching young boys the proper boxing stance and technique.

In 'The Ghost and the Darkness,' the prophet takes the form of black-clad figure that emerges from the shadows to steal the basketball from a player on the team that is winning. The evil crowd is thrown into tremendous agony once the black figure steals the ball, watching helplessly as the prophet wearing a Jordan Brand armband plants his Air Jordan sneaker and takes flight. Eventually, the prophet assumes the pose of the Jumpman logo and dunks the ball over the Wildcat defenders, winning the game. In these ways, Jordan is projected as a god figure, with the aforementioned athletes serving as his disciples that spread his influence throughout the world.

Prayer is another element from the American Puritan Jeremiad evident in these commercials. In addition to its physical depiction in 'Voices,' prayer is apparent through the haunting background melody that one might hear while in church. In 'Much Respect,' the song being sung is an interesting choice, as it includes lines such as 'Life is not promised,' 'Shine your light on the world,' and words such as 'passion,' and 'heart.' Most notably, the stanza 'One god, one light, one man, one voice,' is included, contributing to the fact that these lines are decidedly spiritual in nature. 'The Ghost and the Darkness' not only depicts fans of the raucous crowd clutching their hands together in an attempt to stop the prophet from scoring, but also shows the Wildcat players falling to their knees once they have lost, signifying their need for repentance. Furthermore, this commercial's music sounds like a gothic church choir, with the inclusion of a haunting violin and words sung in Latin. Depending on what is being depicted onscreen, the music is at times uplifting and at

times depressing, noticeably uplifting when the prophet succeeds in his earthly mission of dunking the ball.

Finally, these commercials all include the message of a hope for a better tomorrow, one of the defining elements of the American Puritan Jeremiad. 'Voices' depicts Ray Allen purposefully opening his eyes after meditating on the deeds of past Celtics, as if he now knows what he must accomplish. 'Much Respect' portrays an abundance of children being taught firsthand by Jordan Brand athletes the proper ways to play their sports, an education that signifies the potential for greatness from this generation. 'The Ghost and the Darkness' depicts the channeling of the Jordan Brand and how this can alter the fortunes of any team when it seems as though all hope is lost. At the last second, the black figure adorned in Jordan apparel comes forth from the shadows to save his team and win the game.

This section has highlighted the fact that Jordan Brand advertisements can be viewed using the American Puritan Jeremiad as a methodology, as there exists a chosen people, evil/sin, prophets, prayer, and hope for a brighter future in these types of commercials. It is now important to determine how an application of the contemporary secular jeremiad to Jordan Brand commercials alters the perception of the key figure portrayed, specifically that of Michael Jordan.

JORDAN AS A TEACHER AND WISE OLD MAN

With time, the American Puritan Jeremiad transformed into what is referred to as the contemporary secular jeremiad. Although the contemporary secular jeremiad still possesses many of the same features of the American Puritan Jeremiad, it also includes a few notable differences. Whereas the American Puritan Jeremiad focuses

on how to return to God's graces after breaking the covenant, the contemporary secular jeremiad merely warns against straying from the covenant (Jones and Rowland 161). This framework is not without hardship, however, as this type of jeremiad deals with "crisis and redemption" (Murphy 403). In order to deal with this crisis and redemption, the contemporary secular jeremiad employs secular teachings unassociated with religion as a rectifying measure (Jones and Rowland 161). These teachings focus on a set of "basic values" that are meant to "help us find the answers to the problems we face today" (Jones & Rowland 161). A commitment to these values results in what Johanessen deems "social cohesion – a sense of community, shared effort and sacrifice, and national unity."

New challenges and pressures are found within the contemporary secular jeremiad, as both the teachings and chosen people of today "must measure up to past ideals" (Johanessen 81). According to Johannesen, other differences include an "intertwining" of "spiritual and material blessings," the presence of an "exemplary individual identified with a nation at large," and an elevation of the "founding fathers" to a "heroic, almost mythic, status" (81). Overall, less fear surrounds the concept of change in the contemporary secular jeremiad; instead, the "straying from traditional principles is presented...as an opportunity for greatness" (Johanessen 81). Stoda and Dionisopoulos affirm that this type of jeremiad lends hope for a "better tomorrow" and frames "the past, present, and future in terms that make sense and provide hope" (34).

Interestingly, the Jordan Brand commercials produced when Michael Jordan was either a member of the Washington Wizards or retired have the ability to be

examined using a methodology based upon this contemporary secular jeremiad. The contemporary secular jeremiad elements that are referenced in this analysis include crisis and redemption, a set of teachings based on values, a mythic founding father, and the opportunity for greatness. The commercials that are analyzed consist of ‘It’s Not About the Shoes,’ ‘Student,’ and ‘Let Your Game Speak.’

The Contemporary Jordan Jeremiad

Crisis and redemption is an overall theme that hangs over the Jordan Brand commercials of ‘It’s Not About the Shoes,’ ‘Student,’ and ‘Let Your Game Speak’ (YouTube.com). At the time, Michael Jordan and his skills were either fading or completely gone. Correspondingly, there was an incredible urge from consumers and marketers alike to discover “The Next Michael Jordan.” This problem was partially rectified through the presentation of different potential successors to Air Jordan. In ‘It’s Not About the Shoes,’ the stories of Ray Allen, Derek Jeter, Chris Paul, Terrell Owens, Richard Hamilton, Joe Johnson, Marvin Harrison, and Carmelo Anthony are displayed as fresh narratives to the Michael Jordan narrative that has become old and inactive. In ‘Student,’ Carmelo Anthony is further singled out as a viable solution to this crisis, as the spinning, whirling image of Michael Jordan gradually turns into Carmelo Anthony via digital effects. ‘Let Your Game Speak’ shows that even if none of these current athletes work out as successors to Air Jordan’s throne, there exists a whole new generation of ‘mini-Michaels’ that have adopted his jump-shot, aerial acrobatics, and tongue wagging among other aspects. It is inferred that perhaps these children possess the potential to fill the void left by Jordan’s departure from the game.

The presence of a set of teachings based on values is most effectively portrayed in the commercial ‘It’s Not About the Shoes.’ In this commercial, the voice of Michael Jordan teaches that it is “not about the shoes” a.k.a. the material possessions in life, but values such as “knowing where you are going,” “not breaking when you are broken,” and “doing what they say you can’t.” Through these messages, the wise Jordan stresses that the most important possessions in life are those values that live within, including integrity, determination, poise, focus, endurance, and strength. Accompanying these images and teachings there is a triumphant song playing in the background, reinforcing the fact that these qualities are capable of producing joy in one’s life. Although Jordan no longer possesses the physical skills, the life lessons that he has gained from personal experience garner respect, as they are capable of being applied outside of sport altogether. In ‘Let Your Game Speak,’ Jordan nods to a young player that is mimicking a clutch shot from his career. This slight action reveals that Jordan is happy with the current progress of his pupils, fully endorsing the fact that they are building upon his contributions to the game of basketball.

The component of a mythic founding father can be seen in each of these commercials as well. In ‘It’s Not About the Shoes,’ the clips of different athletes eventually builds to a quick and shaky flash of Jordan as a young boy playing basketball. This moving image reinforces the awe and mystique surrounding the story of Michael Jordan, as well as what he would eventually become. ‘Student’ initially portrays Jordan speaking to the camera as the originator of the message. Upon taking a dribble and spinning with the basketball, Jordan vanishes and transforms into

Carmelo Anthony. Besides the Jumpman logo on Carmelo's shirt, all other traces of Jordan have disappeared once this move has been executed. Interestingly, when Jordan is speaking in the beginning of the commercial, he is framed as being much larger and far more serious than Carmelo, communicating a hierarchical power relationship between teacher and pupil. In 'Let Your Game Speak,' the audience is treated to the best moves from Michael Jordan's career, only they are reenacted by men, boys, girls, and international players alike. At the end, the wise teacher and creator of these moments, Michael Jordan, is shown watching a game with his arms crossed, smiling and nodding at the next generation of players that have adopted his moves, style, and habits. Although the video footage exists, the commercial is effective in that the audience is left wondering if that same old man nodding to the young basketball player truly executed those seemingly impossible moves, a question that adds to the myth of Jordan.

The final element of the contemporary secular jeremiad that can be observed in the Jordan Brand commercials is that of an opportunity for greatness. As the narrator in 'It's Not About the Shoes,' Jordan verbally lays out what it takes to achieve greatness, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that the most important thing in life is remaining true to oneself and "being who you were born to be." The visual story is told through clips of famous Jordan Brand athletes when they were young, demonstrating that these individuals seized their athletic dreams and became great. In 'Student,' Carmelo Anthony flatly declares that he is 'not Michael Jordan.' This much is also evident through the visual component of this commercial, as the close ups of Anthony's cornrows and tattoos inform the audience that Anthony is in stark

contrast to the image that Michael Jordan projected during his career. However, Anthony firmly declares that he *is* Michael Jordan's "student," causing the audience to believe that Anthony must be a sensational player with tremendous potential for greatness, otherwise Jordan would never have agreed to teach him. 'Let Your Game Speak' portrays individuals using Jordan's moves as a blueprint for achieving similar success at the game of basketball. By channeling Michael Jordan and his most famous habits and athletic feats, others have the ability to taste greatness and bring out the best in themselves. Once again, Jordan fully endorses these actions, as evident through his slight nod and smile at the child hitting a three-pointer on the playground.

This section has applied the contemporary secular jeremiad to the Jordan Brand commercials airing between 1999-2008. As mentioned previously, Roman Vega, overseer of strategic development and marketing for the Jordan Brand, explicitly stated that the Jordan Brand wanted to transition Michael Jordan from player to "coach" of Team Jordan, as he possesses a "tremendous amount of knowledge about the game of basketball and how players should carry themselves on and off the court" (Jordan Keeps Scoring). These commercials most certainly place Jordan in the role of "coach" or teacher and wise old man, as they incorporate the elements of crisis and redemption, a teaching of basic values, a mythic founding father figure, and the opportunity for greatness.

The Passion of the Jordan

As a whole, this section has demonstrated the three predominant ways in which Michael Jordan is marketed to consumers in his Jordan Brand ads airing on television from 1999 to 2008. Jordan repeatedly assumes the role of either a living

narrative, religious symbol, or teacher and wise old man, observations that are granted credibility through the application of narrative analysis, American Puritan Jeremiad analysis, and contemporary secular analysis. When taken separately, however, these constructs do not suffice in fully explaining the appeal and success of the Jordan Brand in marketing a figure that no longer plays the game upon which he built his legacy. Additionally, the three categorizations of Jordan are characterized by countless overlaps between one another. It can be argued that, when looking at the larger context of how these messages influence and interact with one another, these overlaps succeed in creating an ultimate identity for Michael Jordan that resembles an athletic religion.

The philosophical discussion of what constitutes a religion could literally go on forever, yet there are basic religious components within Michael Jordan's late-career and post-retirement commercials that cannot be ignored. The consistent narrative of Jordan's career and accomplishments serve as the text of this athletic religion, as Jordan is said to be incarnate of athletic perfection. He was so good at playing basketball in the NBA that he became bored and decided to retire on two separate occasions, as if he were a god playing with mere mortals. This concept of Jordan as an immortal being is conveniently supported by the notion of 'Air Jordan,' an idea that Jordan could in fact bend the laws of gravity and fly through the air, at least for a short while.

The basic story of Jordan's career is also littered with the Christian concepts of resurrection, as Jordan figuratively "came back from the dead" not once but twice, abandoning two different retirements for a chance to play basketball again at the

highest possible level. Furthermore, the narratives in these commercials serve as a “cleansing of sin,” largely ignoring Jordan’s playing days as a member of the Washington Wizards where his ability was closer to that of a common man. This disregard is most likely purposeful, as Rybacki and Rybacki state that one of the roles of narrative can be to “purify ideas and images [of an individual] by healing or cleansing them” (109).

The story behind Jordan’s career is unquestionably consistent and coherent, yet its true impact can be found in the lessons that it teaches. Through firsthand experience as a basketball player, Jordan and his story are capable of communicating what ‘love’ is, the qualities necessary to achieve greatness, as well as inspiring hope for the future and granting the ability to understand what truly matters in life. These lessons allow the audience to grasp a far deeper, spiritual meaning for Jordan’s earthly deeds, much more significant than any image of a Most Valuable Player award or NBA Championship trophy.

As mentioned in the section discussing Jordan as a religious symbol, Jordan has a band of disciples that move throughout the world spreading Jordan’s influence and ideals. Similar to any major religion, this is a truly global effort that attempts to transcend cultural boundaries, as demonstrated by images in these commercials of children playing basketball as far away as Asia. Both Jordan and his disciples have managed to create a generation of believers, a group of individuals both young and old that are constantly included in these commercials. They seem to ask themselves the question ‘What Would Jordan Do?’ when playing basketball, as they are depicted as imitating everything about Jordan the player; from the way he dribbled a

basketball, to the way he played defense, to the intense glare he held in his gaze while on the court.

Perhaps most importantly, these individuals are always adorned with the Jumpman symbol. This symbol appears at the end of each Jordan brand commercial regardless of the advertisement's content, reinforcing the overall theme of the Jordan Brand being closer to an idea than some tangible entity. This symbol has an abundance of meaning attached to it, as the audience is meant to assume that anything that accompanies the Jumpman logo is perfect and idealistic. The Jumpman logo serves as the religious pendant for Jordan's followers, a common talisman that identifies their allegiance while simultaneously representing the physical and spiritual messages associated with Michael Jordan's career.

Overall, it seems as though these commercials contribute to Jordan being born again, experiencing rebirth as a myth, god, and religion in the world of basketball, athletics, and life. Those Jordan Brand commercials ranging from 1999-2008 that predominately employ narrative can be viewed as the eulogy for the old Michael Jordan, what Burke would refer to in his 1957 book *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* as Jordan the basketball player's "symbolic suicide" (36). Those Jordan Brand commercials that depict Jordan as a religious symbol aid in moving Jordan towards his new identity of being more than a man, yet this transition is not completed until "the substance of the abandoned identity has been replaced" (Burke 36). Jordan's ultimate rebirth and "new identity" is achieved once he is portrayed as a teacher of lessons and wise old man in the final collection of

Jordan brand commercials, as Michael Jordan the player has been replaced by Michael Jordan the all-knowing, legendary symbol of excellence.

CHAPTER SEVEN – IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

“IS IT THE SHOES?” VS. “IT’S NOT ABOUT THE SHOES”

Throughout his career Michael Jordan has consistently been crafted by Nike advertisement campaigns as a physical specimen capable of rising above human limitations, an unstoppable force that methodically and fatally renders any and all of his opponents obsolete. By analyzing and comparing those Nike television advertisements produced during the beginning of his reign to those Jordan Brand advertisements produced during the latter stage of his career, it becomes evident that this superhuman concept fundamentally changed over the course of nine years. In the early series of commercials airing from 1987 to 1990 Jordan is projected as a freakish Superman athlete that Mars Blackmon desperately tries to corral and understand so that he too can share in Jordan’s power. Mars’ overly vocal character promotes Jordan as the best in the world, serving as the essential compliment to Jordan’s reserved character that possesses pronounced physical gifts and abilities. Jordan rarely speaks in these early commercials, settling for simply dunking a basketball with controlled power and finesse. Jordan’s footwear is a central highlight in many of these spots, as if Jordan is incomplete and incapable of performing these feats without his signature shoes. There is no way Nike could have predicted the unprecedented media exposure and success Jordan would eventually experience in the global marketplace after these early ads were aired.

Following the transitional commercials produced during the middle of his career, the latter television advertisements created by the Jordan Brand ranging from 1999-2008 project Jordan as a living story, a religious symbol, and a wise teacher.

Ultimately, these ideas overlap and converge, causing Jordan to be viewed as a god figure in an athletic religion. Jordan's influence has spread throughout the world in these spots, and his life narrative serves as a textual reference point for any that wish to follow in his footsteps. The focus of these commercials no longer rests upon a certain pair of shoes. The first series of Nike commercials already established Jordan sneakers as synonymous with desirability. Instead, the audience now seeks to align themselves with the ideals that Michael Jordan was built upon and embodies, ideals such as victory, drive, passion, fire, heartache, and love. The Jumpman logo serves as a common talisman for the masses to worship and follow, a subtle reminder of who the audience would like to become. In an ironic twist, Nike has also transitioned the audiences of these commercials towards a role vacated by their original promoter Mars Blackmon. They may not own the 'Brooklyn' hat or a gaudy gold chain but, similar to Mars, they are true believers that seek to know Jordan, struggling to find meaning and make sense of Michael Jordan's powers now that he has walked and played among them.

THE JORDAN BRAND'S POTENTIAL STRATEGY AND FUTURE

Going forward, the obvious goal of the Jordan Brand is to remain relevant and to keep selling Jordan Brand footwear, clothing, and accessories. One of the best ways to generate interest in the Jordan Brand is through the effective use of advertisements, a concept that both Michael Jordan and this company seem to appreciate.

In the short term, the Jordan Brand's advertising strategy should keep the Jordan Brand afloat. The narrative Jordan Brand commercials have educated a whole

new generation of potential consumers on the career and legend surrounding Michael Jordan, as much of today's youths were too young to remember Michael Jordan's accomplishments as a player on the Chicago Bulls. The Jordan Brand commercials featuring Jordan as a religious symbol with an earthly following of prophets satisfies those consumers that had doubted that the Jordan Brand legacy could continue once Michael had retired. It can be argued that these commercials targeted those individuals that had broken the covenant and stopped believing in the selling power of Jordan. Finally, those Jordan Brand commercials that feature Jordan in his new role of teacher and wise old man renew interest and loyalty, satisfying those consumers that had strayed from the covenant. Ultimately, Michael Jordan now represents a fresh, exciting potential in his new identity as legend and myth, qualities that consumers will most likely be eager to acquire.

The long-term success of the Jordan Brand and the direction of its advertisements are far less certain. Eventually, the cycle will once again require rejuvenation, as there will be yet another generation that is even further removed from Michael Jordan that needs to be educated on his career, transition, and subsequent mystique. This repetition has the potential for becoming problematic, as the same narrative that already seems to be exhausted has the potential for being told until it reaches the point of boredom. One solution to this problem is to discover the 'Next Michael Jordan,' a search that is inevitably bound to remain fruitless, as there will never again be a player quite like Michael Jordan. A far more likely solution for Nike is the creation of an entirely new brand and set of ideals, something that they currently seem to be doing with basketball sensation LeBron James. As with anything

in life, only time will tell what happens to the Jordan Brand, yet the irrefutable fact will remain that the way Michael Jordan and his ideals were promoted forever altered the relationship between sports and brand marketing, both on a national and global scale.

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