

Adam Berenstain 2/26/07

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### **Learning to Love Big Macintosh**

It's 1984 in Ronald Reagan's America. Let's talk about you. You've got a white-collar job and a smart Volkswagen convertible with one of those new CD players in the dash. You're on the fast track and you know it. But you're not just another yuppie. You know the shadow of the Cold War hangs over the world and there's no telling if—or *when*—the nuclear hammer will come down. But what can you do? You're just one person. You work hard and do what you can, but sometimes you just need to chill out.

It's Super Bowl Sunday, after all, and you're watching the game at your apartment with your friends Liz, Jason, and Alex. Everyone's having a good time when suddenly, in the third quarter, a commercial catches your eye. Or you *think* it's a commercial. This thing looks more like a science-fiction movie. You and your friends get quiet and watch.

The scene opens on a futuristic city, where workers as drab as their gray uniforms shuffle silently along and a disembodied voice drones on about “the glorious anniversary of the information purification directives.” *Okay*, this probably isn't another McDonald's ad. There's a flash of color as a woman runs toward the camera pursued by sinister-looking policemen, their faces hidden under mirrored helmets. Suddenly the workers are filing into a hall dominated by an ominous face on a giant TV. You realize

that the man looming over them is the same one who's been going on about "a garden of pure ideology."

Alex points to the screen. "Big Brother," he says. "Awesome."

You read *1984* in college, but you never expected to see George Orwell's ideas pop up during the Super Bowl. This is getting interesting, you decide, even as you realize you still have no idea what's being sold—or if this is actually a commercial at all.

Then the woman is back, still running, and you can get a better look at her. *Nice bod*. Major babe. She looks like a cross between a marathon runner and a model from one of those MTV music videos.

"Hey," you say to no one in particular, "is that a *sledgehammer* she's carrying?"

"Running shoes," Alex says. "Gotta be selling running shoes."

"Sledgehammers, more like," Jason adds.

Now the woman is in the hall with the drones and Big Brother. Radical, she's winding up to hurl that sledgehammer just as the cops are about to nab her, just as Big Brother announces that his dystopia "shall prevail." The hammer flies through the air and smashes the screen, flooding the room with light and waking up the drones. Okay, you think, here comes the commercial's announcer and the pitch. Wait a minute...this was a commercial for *Apple Computer*? And they're coming out with something called *Macintosh*? What the hell is *Macintosh*?

You've never liked computers. There are a few IBM's at the office, but nobody wants to use them. They're big and boxy and boring, even uglier than the Selectric typewriters they replaced. You just can't get used to those green-on-black screens, or remember how to type out the text commands that get the damn things to do what you want. Computers are supposed to be the wave of the future, but you're not sure you like it.

Then everyone in the room starts talking about the commercial.

"I think it's refreshing to see a strong woman in an ad for a change," Liz begins. "Who has the power in most commercials? Men. But this woman isn't some helpless housewife or a sex object like Madonna. She's the hero of the story. She even smashes a huge screen dominated by a man." Liz raises her eyebrows, adding, "Glass ceiling, anyone? And she doesn't just crack the thing, she *destroys* it."

"It doesn't hurt that she's...uh...*fit*," you offer.

Liz smiles. "Sure, being attractive is a safe way for powerful women to be represented in the media. But while her body grabs a viewer's attention, she isn't just window dressing. Her role is crucial."

"Gender is part of it," says Jason, leaning back into the couch. "Certainly the ad is about empowerment, but I think it's tapping into the broader American ideal, not just women's liberation. This ad is about the rugged individual fighting tyranny. It's Orwell

with a happy ending, and it's selling products to boot! What's more American than that? That the main character is a woman is...." He trails off, gesturing with his wine cooler.

"Secondary?" offers Alex. "No, her gender is no accident. What does Apple make, computers? And who do we picture when we think of computers? Poor saps chained to their desks, pushing buttons."

"Hey," you protest, "Some of us saps happen to be very nice people. Some of us even refill the pretzel bowl."

"This ad is trying to change that perception," Alex continues. "You can use a computer and still be active and sexy, and you can even be a woman. What you're not, when you use this Macintosh thing, is another poor sap. It's right there in the ad."

"But you're forgetting something," Liz says. "We have no idea what this Macintosh thing is. The ad's main purpose is to drum up interest, and it does that by talking about ideas, not products. If this commercial talked about a specific device, we could make up our minds about it. Instead, the commercial dazzles us by looking like nothing else on TV, drawing us into a short film. Only at the end are we even told that something is for sale. We're left wanting more, so we have to *wonder* about Macintosh."

"Right," says Jason, sitting up and adjusting his glasses. "And that predisposes us favorably toward Macintosh when we *do* find out more. Presumably there are more ads coming, and when we see them we'll expect to find out how *great* Macintosh is, not how adequate it is. We can't help but build this thing up in our heads."

“Don’t forget those production values,” you say, returning with a fresh bowl of pretzels. “They dazzle you, but don’t they also convey a seriousness of purpose, a promise that Macintosh will be worth your interest? I think you had a good point, Liz, about the focus of the ad not being on the product. That sets a dignified tone that works with the *1984* literary angle. The ad isn’t insulting your intelligence, that’s for sure.”

“And doesn’t that say volumes about its target audience?” asks Alex. “This ad is speaking to people who have read *1984*, who are maybe a little more culturally aware, and the small percentage of the population that uses computers every day. But at the same time there’s enough novelty in the commercial to make anyone curious.”

Liz looks like she’s just remembered something and says, “You know, there’s a scare tactic at work, too. If there was no Macintosh, then Big Brother would win. It’s subtle, but the commercial plays on our fears about the future. Think of that awful city. It looks like a fallout shelter. Gives me the creeps.”

“I picked up on that, too,” you add. “So the woman, and Macintosh, represent a kind of hope for the commercial’s world and our own.”

“It’s an interesting way for Apple to stack the rhetorical deck,” Liz says. “I can’t think of any figure of evil with less appeal than Big Brother. Even Satan has his sympathetic side. Big Brother is inhuman, nobody roots for him. You can’t help but empathize with anyone opposed to him, so you end up wanting what the woman wants, in some small way.”

“It’s diabolical,” Alex says with a laugh. “We’re all learning to love Big Macintosh!”

“*Nooo!*” says Jason, “*Sell it to Juuuulia!*” Everyone cracks up.

“You know,” you say when the laughter dies down, “I think we’re just scratching the surface here. Consider the three main urges in the commercial: authority, in Big Brother; passion, in our running friend; and reason, in the announcer who wants to sell you a solution. Together they’re the Superego, Id, and Ego. This commercial is positively Freudian!”

“I think sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” Jason says. “And a sledgehammer is just a sledgehammer.”

“Maybe,” you say, “but what the hell is Macintosh?”