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## ARGUMENTATIVE MECHANISMS IN ADVERTISING

Advertising is more and more powerful and witty. It is a mirror and matrix of society, as it uses and produces stereotypes. Nevertheless it also has to face a very skilled audience, that doesn't simply want to be persuaded, but amused and entertained. This is an important engine to move from the old demonstrative strategies to the creative ones that are rather difficult to be grasped at first sight. Rhetoric, together with some of the most interesting argumentation theories, can be an interesting path to discover the goal of different messages and their contexts. Applying Perelman's simplification of *topoi* to some advertisements taken from a *corpus* collected mainly in Italian and English magazines, together with a pragmatolinguistical approach towards this "visual-verbal" speech acts, can be a first step in exploring the *inventio* and the *elocutio* of such argumentation. Finally a short glimpse into the *actio* will be given through the last avantgarde advertising trends.

We live in the age of advertising. Every space in our culture carries commercial messages. They are used to give ideal experience and to shape the consumer's identity. Nevertheless, apparently it is not very interesting to analyse advertising from an argumentative point of view. Everybody knows that any commercial is first of all a *speech act* whose goal is that of persuading someone to buy a product. However what makes it interesting is the use of strategies in order to let the viewer forget he is watching advertising. It creates a new "pact" with the viewer, involving his expectations, surprising him and creating a new world he would like to enter.

Therefore it is fascinating to find a way to penetrate the argumentative strategies of advertising. Even if we can witness an enormous amount of publications on this topic, many of them consider more its general aims, instead of analyzing its mechanisms. The study of advertising from an argumentative point of view is quite difficult as it contains two different codes, the verbal and the visual one. The visual part is particularly hard to be interpreted as it often uses highly symbolic language. However, if we consider the interaction between the verbal and the iconic part, we can infer the goal of the communication that normally concentrates on one main

message.

The corpus of examples has been collected mainly from English and Italian women magazines published in the past three years.

In the analysis, as the first step we will follow three principles of visual communication formulated by Leo Groarke<sup>1</sup> in order to interpret what we could call *visual* and *verbal argumentative speech acts*.

The first principle states that images designed for argument are communicative acts that are in principle understandable. Among other things, this principle implies that images that are absurd or contradictory if taken literally, should be interpreted in a non-literal way, since only in this way they can make a comprehensible contribution to discussion.

The second one is a principle of visual communication that argumentative images should be interpreted in a way that makes sense of the major (visual and verbal) element they contain. This implies a version that interprets plausibly each of these components, as well as their interrelations.

The third one is a principle according to which we must interpret argumentative images in a way that makes sense from an “external” point of view, in the sense that it fits social, critical, political and aesthetic discourses in which the image is located.

The application of Perelman’s simplification of *topoi* to some advertisements taken from a *corpus* is the second step in the analysis of *inventio* as displayed in this kind of argumentation. Then we will continue with the *elocutio* in order to analyze the form and the goals of the different messages. The proposed analysis of *elocutio* takes into account the distinction between “pragmatic functions” and “argumentative roles” (within Sorin Stati’s scheme<sup>2</sup>) through which we are going to interpret the illocutive force of some commercial and social advertisings. The study of one of the most interesting rhetorical figures used in advertising, i.e. the metaphor, will show the importance of humour in advertising. Finally, we are going to point out the growing power of *actio* in what can be called the avantgarde in advertisement, which took the name of guerrilla advertising or viral marketing.

This analytical approach reveals that very often the real purpose of the advertisement is “disguised”. This can happen in order to invent creative and surprising effects, but also to manipulate the communication influencing the consumers indirectly.

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1. Groarke, in Eemeren, 2002, p. 145.

2. Sorin Stati, 1990, p. 25-90.

## 1. Inventio. The topos of essence and the topos of persona

Perelman's<sup>3</sup> framework offers a simplified scheme of the classical *topoi*. Perelman calls *topoi* only the general premises which make possible to ground values and hierarchies, i.e. the ones that Aristotle studies among the *loci* of the accident: *quality*, *quantity*, *existence*, *essence*, *order* and *person*. Every kind of advertisement can be classified under these categories. In what follows I will concentrate on the topos of *essence* and that of *persona*, showing how they have been developed in the world of advertising and how they affect its audience.

According to Perelman, "we call loci of essence (...) everything that better represents a type, an essence, a function, (and) is for this same reason made valuable"<sup>4</sup>. In other words, the *topos* of essence is based on general premises that show the value of representativeness.

In advertising, a leading role is played by testimonials. Real people ground on the *topos* of essence. The *fictional testimonials* are created on purpose to represent a particular human character or a way of life, with which the audience can identify. *The Marlboro Man* (ex. 1), for instance, grounds on the "western encyclopaedia." It underlines the impact of movie culture on the audience. In this commercial, the aura of a "macho" cowboy is displayed onto the product. On the one hand, this enhances the *charme* that the cigarettes bestow upon their users. On the other hand, it is an attempt to remove doubts on the unhealthy effects of the cigarettes.

The commercials based on the concept of essence have a great impact on gender stereotypes and affect the consumer's perception of femininity and masculinity, becoming at the same time a mirror and matrix of society. The essence of femininity has nowadays become a social space that simultaneously acts upon and is acted upon mass media discourse. According to Dorothy Smith the construction of the feminine social space is both actuated through and on the feminine body. Women contribute to this creation by disciplining their bodies to the social frames proposed by advertising: "Women aren't just the passive products of socialization; they are active; they create themselves. At the same time, their self creation, their work, the uses of their skills, are co-ordinated with the market."<sup>5</sup>

Advertising creates not only fictional testimonials but also fictional interlocutors. In the case of feminine products, it is as if women were members of a completely

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3. Perelman & Olbrechts Tyteca, 1989, 90

4. Perelman-Tyteca, 1989, 100, translation mine.

5. Hall & Bucholtz, 1995, 145

different community: the world of women. However, this female community does not share the same mechanisms as the general community. It rather creates an *artificial sisterhood*, an intimate world, a shelter of secrets, which often leads to dynamics of comparison and jealousy. If we take teenagers' fashion advertising, we will see in the majority of cases two girls dressed in a very similar way, simulating a couple of best friends to create a sense of unity and mutual understanding based on the act of consume.

Let's take for instance the campaign of Onyx (ex. 2), a fashion label. The image does neither have an *headline*<sup>6</sup> nor a *body-copy*<sup>7</sup>. The *visual*<sup>8</sup> is staged on the road and depicts two girls dressed with the casual clothes promoted. We can infer that they are about to leave because "Bye, bye" is clearly spelled out within a white cloud like in comics. It is a micro-narration of an everyday scene, cherished by young people, as it is the moment between school and homework, a time of confidences and news. Their similarity implies an attitude of emulation to share with the young customer.

Adult women, instead, are portrayed very differently. They are portrayed as tools that demand constant maintenance. They appear as dissected bodies whose simple parts need specific products. Images concentrate from time to time on face, eyes, feet, nails and breast, giving a synecdochical vision of the woman.

The emotional universe of girls and women is also dealt with differently. The first are depicted as shameless and cheeky, while they make fun of boys, as in *Sisley* advertisement (ex. 3). The role of adult women is still instrumental to male desires. Women construct their image in connection with a man.

The common place of essence can be applied to material things or to a particular atmosphere. The essence of romanticism, as well as its exotic implication, has never ceased to exist. What has changed, however, is the romantic landscape. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the exotic overlapped with the sunny orient. Now, the metropolis and New York in particular, has become a source of romantic imagination, the catalyser of many stereotypes among which also that of "*Sehnsucht*", a German term that evokes a nostalgic frame of mind. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, most probably the tendency will increase.

The *topos of persona* is widely adopted by the advertising discourse, too. It relies heavily on *real testimonials*, such as pop stars, politicians, top models etc. These people in their professional life may use or not the products they promote. In the first

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6. Slogan.

7. Text that articulates the arguments implied or suggested by the headline.

8. Images or graphic framed by an advertising.

case, the *real testimonials* are used to witness the quality. They are also a guarantee for the truth of the argument, as it happens with famous scientists that assure the positive effect of beauty treatments or that of sport champions who promote fitness accessories. In the second case they simply lend the power of their popularity to advertising.

## 2. Elocutio. Pragmatic Functions and Argumentative Roles in advertising

The notion of loci could be further used to explore other themes, but it is not enough to analyze the illocutory force of the messages. This explains the usefulness of Sorin Stati's classification of pragmatic functions and argumentative roles<sup>9</sup> in the analysis of *elocutio*. Although both are relatively similar, only the second ones transform discourse into argumentation.

Sorin Stati's typology of *pragmatic functions* and *argumentative roles* may be synthesised as follows:

Pragmatic functions
performing function. (the speaker performs an act of doing rather than an act of saying)
recall function. (the speaker reminds to his interlocutor facts he has to know, or invite him to note an evidence)
erotetic function (pertaining to question or to a rhetorical question)
assertive function (phrasal content that gives a new information.)
epistemic function (locutor's utterance that proves that he knows something)
directive function. (orders, invitations, advices, divided into two classes: 1: directives whose goal is to provoke a verbal action. 2: directives whose goal is to provoke a non-verbal action)
expressive emotional function
commissive function (its two main variants are: menace and promise)

9. Sorin Stati, *Le transphrastique*, Paris, PUF, 1990

Argumentative roles	
Positive	Negative
approval	disapproval
justification	objection
self-critique	blame
thesis/conclusion	

According to Stati<sup>10</sup> “the pragmatic function and the argumentative roles are relatively similar factors, as they concern the goal pursued by the locutor, his communicative intentions” (author’s translation).

However, while the pragmatic functions are necessary conditions representing “*grosso modo* the illocutory force of the speech act”<sup>11</sup>, the argumentative roles are not. They are an added value which can support a function or transform it completely. This distinction is particularly appropriate in the analysis of the verbal part of advertising in connection with the *visual*, from which we have often to infer the argumentative role. The interaction between them is surprising because often the first hides the goal of the second one.

The condom’s company *Durex* shows the *erotetic* function constituted by the couple: *question-answer*. In advertising this is a good strategy to pretend to have a direct dialogue with the consumers. The *headline* goes:

*How good is new easy-on Durex?  
Here’s a demonstration.*

This slogan is placed on the top of an image that depicts a crowd of spermatozoa against *Durex*. It is a pun between demonstration meaning “protest” and at the same time “evidence”. The argumentative role is that of an *ironical approval*.

Another function which is very persuasive is the *epistemic*, as it underscores that the speaker “knows something.” The advertisers resort to this strategy in order to convince the consumers of the quality of a particular kind of product, to show them that the producer knows what is best for the customer. The following ad by *Adidas*, *Deo performance for women* is an example for this kind of argumentation:

*Because we understand how your body works.*

10. Stati, 1990, 16: “Les fonctions pragmatiques et les rôles argumentatifs sont des facteurs sémantiques relativement semblables, dans la mesure où ils concernent les buts poursuivis par les locuteur, ses intentions communicatives.”

11. Stati, 1990, 26.

This simple sentence is a declaration of competence. It is a way to *justify* (and this is the argumentative role) an implicit thesis: “*Buy it trustfully!!*”, without using a real argument to support it. This assumed knowledge is stressed also by the *pay off*<sup>12</sup> that concludes the message like that:

*Performance through body knowledge.*

This time, the noun “performance” is used both to evoke the proper name of the product and to support the effect of the product on the woman’s body, while the verb “know” is replaced by the noun “knowledge” in order to strengthen its impact.

Grounding the assent on emotion is another way to persuade. This happens every time when *pathos* prevails. We call it *expressive emotional function* and this is one of the most commonly used in advertising. The trend to evoke emotions mainly through images has provoked an almost total loss of the verbal message. That is the case of many fashion labels, that use only their brand-name and the visual. This attitude has also caused abuse of positive emotions, which have become unbelievable and even ridiculous. Therefore, many advertisers have started using negative feelings, to shock or also to create participation and compassion, even if in most of the times they are not directly connected with the promoted product.

One of the last campaigns of the fashion label *Miu Miu*, for instance, places the model in a dark background, in a space from which it tries to escape. *Moschino* promoted its glasses with a model dressed like an Italian widow. The emotional factor in these cases is used for its own sake and it has an effect of surprise on the audience that feels a sort of unconscious recall that we can only infer without having the possibility to determine it linguistically.

Now let’s see social advertising whose aim is not to promote a product, but a behaviour, an attitude or a different point of view. Once social advertising did not use to be conceived of as a commercial promotion. Now, on the contrary, it is becoming more and more important. In many countries, social problems have become advertising’s leading engine. Interestingly, social and commercial advertising share the same strategies and even the same agencies. According to Fabris<sup>13</sup>, this is due to the fact that there is not a big difference between the two, as the commercial strategies have often been used to stress social problems: “In reality, the insufficient definition of the new phenomena hides the theoretical emptiness, (...) the tendency

12. Short sentence that normally concludes the advertising. It is generally placed on the right corner under the logo of the brand name.

13. Fabris in Gadotti, 2001, 11.

to translate *sic et simpliciter* from the commercial field principles and methods, as if the new application side was, in reality, a new product advertising applies to.” This becomes surprising if confronted with a general definition of social advertising given by Gadotti<sup>14</sup>: “a social communication, (...) which gives in the public interest, an impartial information about topics of collective interest”. This definition suggests that the social advertising message is of public interest and at the same time impartial, contrary to the commercial advertising, always strongly partial and of private interest. Does the social campaigns use communication in a fair way, while the commercial campaigns are tempted by fallacious discourse? The answer lies in the way argumentation is created.

The first example of social advertisement is taken from a series made by Saatchi and Saatchi for a campaign against drug addiction (Fig. 4). The page shows four pictures of famous singers and actors. They are part of what we can call the “Beautiful and damned’s Olimpo.” They have become true icons among young people even if two of them died in the late sixties. They are legendary models of transgressive living, true teenagers’ evergreen icons. Even if it is possible to read their names (Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, John Belushi and River Phoenix), a large part of the audience will recognize them at first sight. The headlines goes:

*In advertising, they say one of the surest ways to get your message across is to put celebrities in your ad.*

This message contains a *phatic function* through which the locutor checks if the communication is working, using expressions like: “Is it clear?” or “Do you understand?”. In other words, he makes comments on the communication efficiency. In this case, it is used in its *metalinguistic* version, or better in its *meta-advertising* version. The message illustrates one of the main strategies previously enhanced: the use of testimonials. At the same time it reminds to the reader something that he surely knows, using also the so-called *recall function*. Yet, underlining these two aspects is not enough to understand the goal of the message. So let’s try to infer the argumentative role, which is that of *blame* connected with the *expressive emotional function*. The visual reinforces the message using close-up images that, contrary to the usage in the commercial musical posters, depict the characters as ugly and not glorious. Moreover, near their names it is possible to read the date of birth and death. The sense of fear reinforces the appeal of the ad. It is not particularly shocking because everybody knows the story of these stars, but it changes the romantic frame in which

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14. Gadotti, 2001, 211.



they are normally seen, transforming them in what Perelman calls “anti-model.”

Another interesting social advertisement plays again on the argument of the “anti-model”. This is a campaign promoted by the *Centro italiano per l'adozione* (Italian center for adoption) against the exploitation of children by western tourists. We can see a headline which splits in two lines and a long *body copy*. The headline is a quotation of a famous book “Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde” and plays an *assertive pragmatic function* through which the speaker says or - in this particular case - shows a different aspect of a problem.

The visual is also divided in two images. The first one shows a man and a little girl in a domestic setting. They are probably a father with his daughter, laughing together, as usually depicted in a family photo.

In the second picture we see the same man with another little girl, but this time the background is wild and exotic. They are almost in the same position, but there are slight differences in their *actio*. The man wears sunglasses, he is tanned, he smiles and he looks like an adventurous tourist. The little girl, on the contrary, is serious and frightened. She is an Asian native who appears to be a victim of sexual exploitation.

In connection with the visual, the headline becomes an accusation which clearly shows the *argumentative role of blame*. The critique is directed against those who conduct a respectful life until they go to foreign countries where nobody knows them and where they feel free to taste transgression and unknown experiences. The message is very well explained by the long body copy that articulates the message concluding that

*A child is a child everywhere in the world.*

### 2.3 The rhetorical figure of irony in advertising

The rhetorical figures are included into the classical *elocutio*. In this study, we will concentrate on the figure of irony, articulating semiotically its narrative and trying to grasp different aspects of this important and creative construction. Irony, more than other rhetorical figures, requires and creates deep complicity with the interlocutor.

Ironic advertising has become a very structured genre. As Bill Bernbach (discussed in Mancina 2007) theorised, irony appeals to the readers' intelligence and promotes them as active partners of the author. Ironic advertisements are particularly

widespread in the UK, as well as in many other countries, even if conservative advertising still plays the leading role.

Advertising agencies and their clients are afraid of breaking the well-known communicative rules since they do not trust the perspicacity of the audience. In Italy, for instance, they prefer to use the “easy laugh” based on very old-fashioned techniques, such as gags with people who fall or use dialects. Moreover, the international trends are adopted with a certain delay.

The use of irony is not only a consequence of a general trend in advertising. More generally, it is a contemporary alternative to the modern age “fixed-way” of thinking. In a post-modern era, characterized by skepticism and relativism in every cultural field, the doubt (caused by irony) becomes an important tool to analyze and also to mirror reality.

There are different narrative variants of irony and comedy in advertising. They implement pragmatic functions and argumentative roles, as presented in Sorin Stati’s scheme presented above.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1994), irony rests on the perception of a discrepancy between a representation and the state of affairs that it represents. Kerbrat-Orecchioni<sup>15</sup> considers irony as a trope and underscores its pragmatic nature: “a trope is a simultaneous actualisation of two levels of values, whereas one is literal, the other is generated by derivational mechanisms. These values can be both of pragmatic or of semantic nature.” Marina Mizzau (2004) states that the discrepancy lies in the contradictory character of this trope, as it has an appearance of a lie without being a lie. The goal of irony is not to hide, but, on the contrary, to enlighten in order to unveil a different truth. This discrepancy is the basis of all varieties of ironic narratives.

Fabbri<sup>16</sup> adds another important aspect: “The irony, figure of quotation, requires a multiplication of the postures of enunciation and a distance from making, to which we are committed and from which we de-consolidate. The same is requested from the viewer, who is not a controller of sense at all, but is invited to occupy alternatively and simultaneously, the two extreme of the act of belief: complicity and ingenuity.”

In this study, irony will be analysed as a complex speech act which can lead to a strong critique or to a funny joke. It is inserted within a dialogue which always shows a critical, emotionally intense vision. It “stirs up” and puts into

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15. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1980, p. 110. Translation mine.

16. Fabbri, 2004, p. 68. Translation mine.

question things we believe and we normally take for granted. The discrepancy which characterises irony will be analysed through the categories of pragmatic functions and argumentative roles inside some “ironic narrative” variants.<sup>17</sup>

Verbal irony is the use of an expression (verbal or visual) in order to convey the opposite of its literal meaning. It is a so-called antiphrase. An example of verbal irony is given by the brand *Vitasnella*. The headline says:

*Tra mangiare e nutrirsi c'è una LEGGERA differenza.*  
(Between eating and nourishing, there is a slight difference).

This is an advertisement of a diet yoghurt. The word *slight* is used in a verbal ironic way, meaning *large*. Visually, the ironic word *slight* apparently loses its ironic power, becoming denotative again because it shows a girl so thin and tiny as to be able to use a yoghurt pot as a swing,

The previous advertisement invites the interlocutor to reflect upon his superficial concept of “eating,” differentiating between the meaning of the verb *eat* and that of the verb *nourish*. The first becomes synonymous with a basic, even primitive action, while the second is presented not only as a primary need, but as a way of taking care of oneself.

Dramatic irony is a narrative form whereby the narrator or one of the interlocutors demonstrate that they know something that one or more of the characters does not know, about their situation. Effective dramatic irony was created for the campaign of the video-telephone *Pupillo*. The irony is entirely based on the visual, which shows an old satisfied woman comfortably sitting on an armchair, listening to the music. Nearby, we can see the kitchen flooded by the water overflowing from the sink because the tap was left open. The headline says:

*Se succede lo sai.*  
(If it happens you know it).

The headline is directly connected with the pay-off:

*Tu video chiami e vedi ciò che vedi.*  
(You video-call and you see what it sees).

In this case, the interlocutor who knows more than the character becomes a spectator himself. He sees this funny, but also dangerous situation without being able to help. The humorous atmosphere makes the recipient think about the importance

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17. See Polesana, 2005, p. 66-70.

of taking care of old people.

Socratic irony is based on a dialogue in which the discrepancy lies between the self-confidence of the locutor and the sense of superiority that Socrates allows his interlocutor to indulge in. It has the form of a question (each question also contains a part of the answer). With this method, the addressee realises little by little what the questioner wants to teach him.<sup>18</sup>

The following social advertisement (Fig. 5) against alcoholism is relatively complex. The visual consists of three photos in progress. The first one shows an ugly and clumsy girl, the second – a relatively beautiful girl, the third one – a very beautiful woman. As they all wear the same clothes and they are always in the same position, within the same setting, we can infer that it is a metamorphosis of the same person. The headline, written in very small type, says:

*Do you really need more proof that drinking impairs your judgment?*

The message has the pragmatic function of an ironic question, not to be confused with a rhetorical question. “We must distinguish the rhetorical questions from the ironic questions (in Socratic sense, being this kind of irony the art of questioning that hides one’s own opinion). It is the rhetorical process of *dissimulatio*, which is used by the speaker to simulate incertitude or lack of conviction. As the speaker pretends not to know the answer, he doesn’t want that the addressee understands this strategy, these sentences are real questions.”<sup>19</sup> It seems to be a result of a long dialogue which we can visually infer from the images which symbolise an exchange of opinions.

Romantic irony is a narrative in which all representations - and, in particular, the poet’s own ambitions - are seen as illusory. Irony is a medium to leave the utopian world, to come back to reality, on a trip back to earth. Most of the examples based on romantic irony use fairy tales, deconstructing their stereotypical narration in favour of a more authentic and, therefore, unexpected vision.

We can see it in an advertisement of one of the last Levi’s Jeans campaigns (Fig. 6). The visual quotes the fairy tale *Snowwhite*. The deconstruction of the fairy-tale involves the visual, which shows a beautiful dark woman standing in front of a mirror in an old-fashioned sitting room with many red apples in the corner. Through a headline, which is nearly obscene, the disenchantment is completed.

*Adesso ha il più bel sedere del reame.*

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18. Sperber and Wilson, 1990, p. 148.

19. Stati, 1988, p. 177. Translation mine.

*(Now she has the most beautiful bottom of the realm).*

The pay-off: *Finalmente un jeans di cui ti puoi fidare* (Finally the jeans you can trust) confirms the narrative function of romantic irony, implying the importance of abandoning the picturesque world of fantasy, in order to enter a new, more realistic, but still fascinating one. The main pragmatic function is that of *recall*, in which the locutor reminds the addressee of something he has to know or he invites him to note something evident: the wonderland and its *topos*. The pay-off shows also another pragmatic function: the commitment, because it promises a product which can be trusted. “This category which we inherited from the writings of Austin and Searle defines the speech acts that we commonly call promises and menace.”<sup>20</sup> There are many argumentative roles, but we will stress the main ones, those of *conclusion* and *agreement*. The role agreement is revealed by the exclamation *finalmente* in the pay-off, which shows how the speaker is delighted about his *conclusion*. The *conclusion* is another important argumentative role, justified by the visual and introduced by the adverb ‘*now*’ in the headline.

Fate irony or “*cosmic irony*”<sup>21</sup> is a narrative form in which the context changes the effects and the expectations of a certain situation-or person. The protagonists of the following ad are famous people of contemporary history who are nowadays part of the past. The visual shows three old-fashioned photos of three couples

*Mr and Mrs Thatcher - Parents of Margaret Thatcher*  
*Mr and Mrs Noriega - Parents of General Noriega*  
*Mr and Mrs Ceausescu - Parents of Nicolae Ceausescu*

The sense is constructed through the interaction of the three images. At the end of the series, the headline characterises the product and makes the fate irony come true:

*If they had only used a Jiffi condom.*

These people are portrayed as common middle class members who were totally unable to prevent the destiny of their children. At the same time, the pragmatic function of *recall* and the *expressive emotional* one, with the argumentative role of *blame*, transforms a commercial of a somewhat embarrassing product into a strong *critique*.

After this brief attempt to analyse some of the most widespread forms of irony,

20. Stati, 1988, p.170. Translation mine.

21. Polesana, 2005, p. 68.

it is possible to state that the efficacy of the taxonomy used is relative; nevertheless, it can be considered a tool which can be used from a very superficial level to a deeper one, within a non-dogmatic methodology.

### 3. Actio. Guerrilla advertising between viral marketing and audience-specific marketing

*Actio* is the final part of the rhetorical method of creating texts. Within advertising, this aspect could be analysed in many different ways, including non-verbal language, soundtracks, gestures, settings, multimedia messages, and so on. To conclude this short study, however, it seems to be more interesting to stress the fact that *actio* is becoming a new, autonomous trend in advertisement. Ephemeral performances have sometimes substituted billboards and ads on paper, promoting a new way of persuading the audience through almost pure entertainment. No headline, no visual, no posters, no spots, no banner but street actions, stickering campaigns, performances between the so-called “candid cameras” and conceptual art practices. This is what is called “Guerrilla Advertising”.

“‘Guerrilla advertising’ is a catch-all phrase for non traditional advertising campaigns that take the form of theatrically staged public scenes or events, often carried out without city permits or advance public hype. It was first coined by Jay Conrad Levinson in 1984 to refer to unconventional, non-big-media-dependent brand-building exercises (...). These were once low-budget strategies for start ups and small businesses unable to afford a thirty-second spot.”<sup>7</sup>

“Guerrilla Advertising” origins are very similar to those of public art, which emerged as an answer against the big and rich art world, to create new spaces for creativity. It creates performances and happenings that provoke an unexpected interruption in every-day life. They appear all of a sudden and they are oriented towards the audience, not towards a given or chosen space. They imply an interaction with the public and correspond to what is normally called viral marketing. As its name implies, it is a way of spreading one’s message like a virus from person to person.<sup>22</sup> For example, Microsoft covered Manhattan in butterfly stickers. Amnesty International celebrated the 60th anniversary of human rights in 2008 with *Frau im Koffer*, “Woman in a suitcase”, an ambient advertising campaign at German airports. “Woman in a suitcase” (Fig. 7). It consisted of putting a woman in a transparent suitcase and sending her around the baggage carousel of the airport, again using the

22. <http://digitallabz.com/blogs/11-examples-of-viral-marketing-campaigns.html>

visualization instead of the verbal thesis to shock and to criticise our indifference towards this problem.

Now, for a variety of reasons, even big-name brands are taking the guerrilla approach. It offers a way to engage highly targeted audiences, to develop a streetwise identity or simply to reach consumers who, being annoyed by advertisements, tend to even ignore them. All of a sudden, poor and low budget guerrilla methods like stickering, graffiti, etc. have become new and creative earning opportunities. This trend has however disempowered the political feedback of these operations.

Near the viral trend, there is also another tendency, i.e. creating big scale temporary site specific installations, more decorative than argumentative. These are very high budget campaigns which create big urban installation to promote in an unexpected way the products. Ravensburger (Fig. 8), the manufacturer of many popular puzzles and games, recently launched a billboard campaign in Berlin (Germany) to promote sales of its 1001 piece puzzles. The boards are shaped like puzzle boxes and they contain images of internationally recognized landmarks, such as The White House. The “boxes” are surrounded by real, three-dimensional rubble, giving the impression of a “life sized” puzzle. Nevertheless this visual hyperbole remains a figure of style that simply creates a sense of wonder and a “fairy tale effect.”

## Conclusions

Is it possible to analyse advertising, and other visual phenomena, using verbal categories and inferences? It depends on what the interlocutor is looking for. The answer is affirmative if he is looking for a dialogue with these complex texts, if he enjoys the ability to fill the white spaces, as Eco puts it<sup>23</sup>, left in the text for the pleasure of the reader.

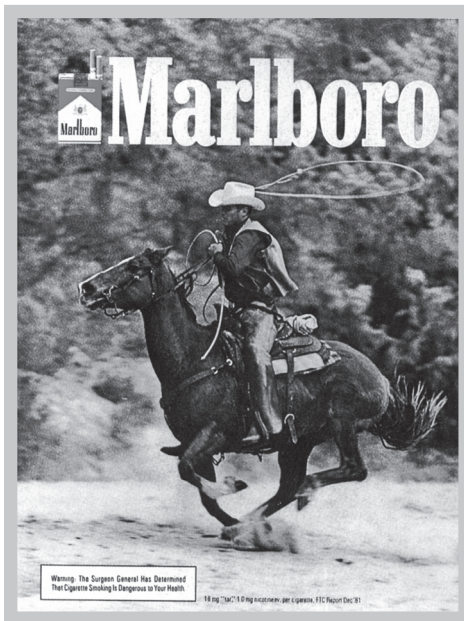
However, in order to be able to question a text, it is very useful to have some points of reference to begin with. In our case, these are the common places through which it was possible to identify the different ways in which a context is evoked, while the *pragmatic functions* and the *argumentative roles*, as well as the rhetorical questions, are the tools with which to test the argumentative power of the message. We can witness a large number of ironical messages in commercials and, more generally, in visual culture. This unveils the tendency to teach the audience by delighting, surprising or entertaining. Nevertheless, this delight is not simply provoked by a subtle ambiguity, which hides soft agreement or disagreement. On the

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23. Eco, 1998, p. 5.

contrary, the argumentative roles which prevail express strong critique, blame, and commitments.

The power of displacement of irony overwhelms the commercial message. The product becomes a part of a narration, much bigger than the product itself. Displacement becomes one of the preferred strategies also in the new trend of guerrilla advertising. It shows, on one hand, that the avantgarde trusts the consumers so much as to create “off off theatres” instead of using well known advertising’s media. On the other hand, this also witnesses the need to find unexpected ways of persuading. The audience is so fed up with media-messages that there is an increasing anaesthesia towards communication in general. Our society could be defined as *message-proof*. One should be aware of it, in order to put into question the notion of evidence, which is no more to be taken for granted.

### Illustrations



*Fig. 1. Marlboro*





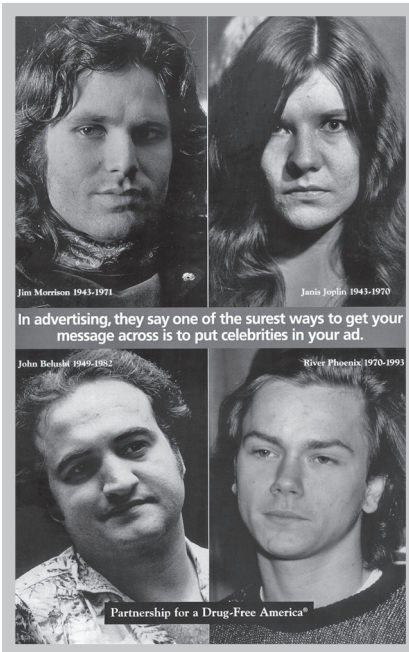
[Fig. 1. Marlboro]



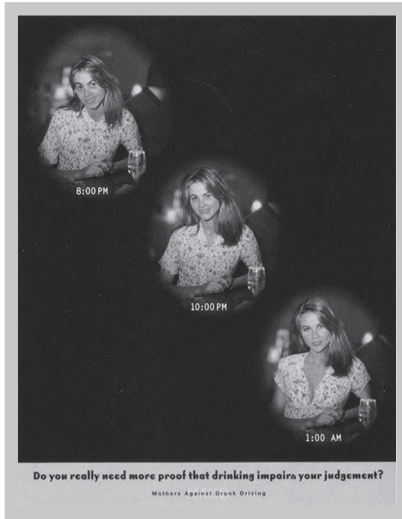
Fig. 2. Onyx



*Fig. 3. Sisley*



*Fig. 4. A social advertisement for a campaign against drug addiction.*



*Fig. 5. A social advertisement against alcoholism*



*Fig. 6. Levi's Jeans campaign*



*Fig. 7. “Woman in a suitcase”, an ambient advertising campaign at German airports.*



*Fig. 8. Ravensburger*

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