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The processes of idea creation

A study of the creative practice in the context of advertising in the city of Barcelona

Matilde Obradors

Bachelor in Psychology from the Universitat de Barcelona. Professor of Audiovisual Communication at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

Abstract

Introspective assertions by artists and scientists about their own idea-generating processes have been influenced by the myth of the creative genius and have contributed, eventually, to the creation of two theoretic positions when looking at the phases of the creative process: one which gives enormous importance to the unconscious, attributing to it complex functions of organisation, combination, and selection; and another which gives great value to conscious processes, as artists or scientists guide their choice throughout the process.

The results of a study carried out on admen, with the aim of knowing the concept of their work and to which parameters this concept pertains, stress the influence of the myth of the creative genius, as these professionals give little importance to the methods and techniques of creative advertising.

The myth of the creative genius

'I need great ideas / and I believe that, / if I were ordered to / make a plan for a new / universe, I would be / mad enough to set out / on this task'. Giambattista Piranesi.

Creating new, limitless universes is creativity's duty; this is what a creative individual feels, taking on duty with constancy, complete dedication, and even obsession; specific aptitudes are added with the devotion to the work which becomes the creator's life-project. Works which arise as a consequence of a creative job can turn out to be magical, but the truth is that the processes involved in their creation are not magic. However, creativity has been interpreted, from Plato's day to ours, in different ways: 'divine inspiration', 'inspiring Muses', 'the gift of genius', 'the mad artist', 'the absent-minded scientist'... all these concepts are part of the collective unconscious and have contributed to boost the myth



of the creative genius. In many cases, it has been the artists themselves who have boosted the legend, who have reproduced the model they had learned, and become obliged to respond to expectations raised by what is expected of an artist. We can differentiate between 'inspired' artists and artists who have been capable of explaining the genesis of their work. Among those 'inspired', and referring specifically to poetry, we could mention Rilke, who believed himself to be a messenger from God. However, poets like Paul Valéry liked to reflect on their work processes. Studying Leonardo da Vinci's work, Valéry referred to the method implied by a discovery. Edgar Allan Poe laughed at divine inspiration and asserted that most poets would be petrified if their rough notes, full of rejects, erasures, and corrections, came to light, where continuous organisation and reorganisation of work material can be clearly noticed, because even art and beauty are the result of a conscious implication in which the muses are not present.

Role of the unconscious in the creative process

Studying the creative process, the myth of the creative genius and divine inspiration, has given way to the role of the unconscious and the complex processes of mental activity. From this perspective, theoreticians do not look exclusively at issues of the great beyond, but rather focus on human beings, on creators themselves. In

this introspective look, the important influence of psychoanalysis in the set of theories which attribute the unconscious with a basic role in idea creation must be stressed.

In 1926, Graham Wallas published 'The art of thought', a work in which he established the famous definition of the four phases of the creative process: preparation, incubation, insight, and verification. This work immediately became a classic of literature on creativity and, consequently, an unavoidable reference for later authors. Wallas, like Poincaré (1913), Rostker, and Koestler (1964) defend the idea that the unconscious is the inventor of creativity, although they establish differences among the operations it performs. Poincaré speaks of associations, while Koestler speaks of bisociations. However, authors like Wertheimer (1945), Guilford (1950), Simon (1964), Gruber (1974), Weisberg (1986), Gardner (1982), Boden (1991), and Simonton (1993) –to quote the best-known– have thoroughly investigated what processes are implied in idea creation and elucidate the mental activity in these processes, and defend the intense participation of conscious thought in idea creation processes.

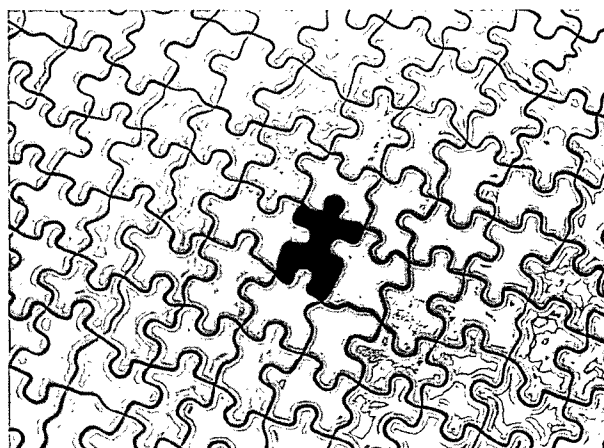
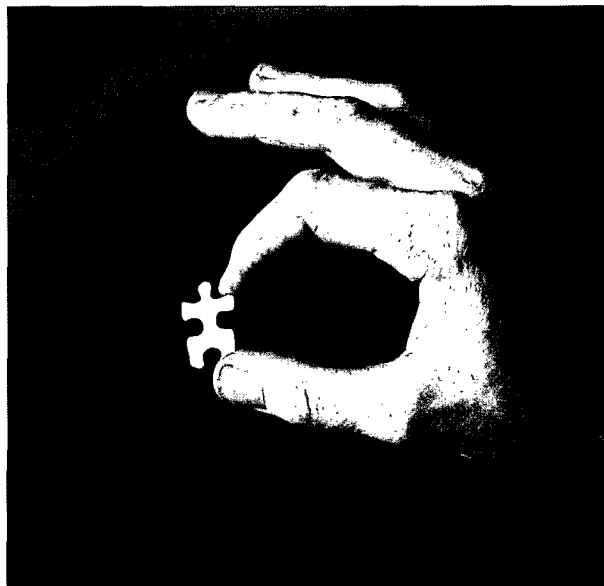
To summarise, we can speak of two theoretic-investigative positions on the phases of the creative process. One which gives great importance to the unconscious, attributing complex organisation, combination, and selection functions to it; and the other, which does not deny the existence of unconscious processes, nor automatic processing of very well-learned habits, but gives great value to conscious processes, as artists or scientists guide their choices along the process and the solution which, although experienced as a great discovery expressed by the term Eureka! as the answer to what seems sudden inspiration, does not come from the unconscious, but from absolute dedication and continuous organisation and reorganisation of work data.

Creative advertising process

If we refer specifically to advertising, although the creative process represents an important part of the the advertising process and advertising business in general, this is one of the least studied areas. In this sense, systematic analysis of idea creation in advertising is a completely innovating fact. If admen, influenced by the myth

of the creative genius, justify their creativity as something mystic and abstract and consider it fruit of a special talent, it would not, in principle, seem easy to carry out investigations with the aim of systemising and, above all, rationalising the creative advertising process.

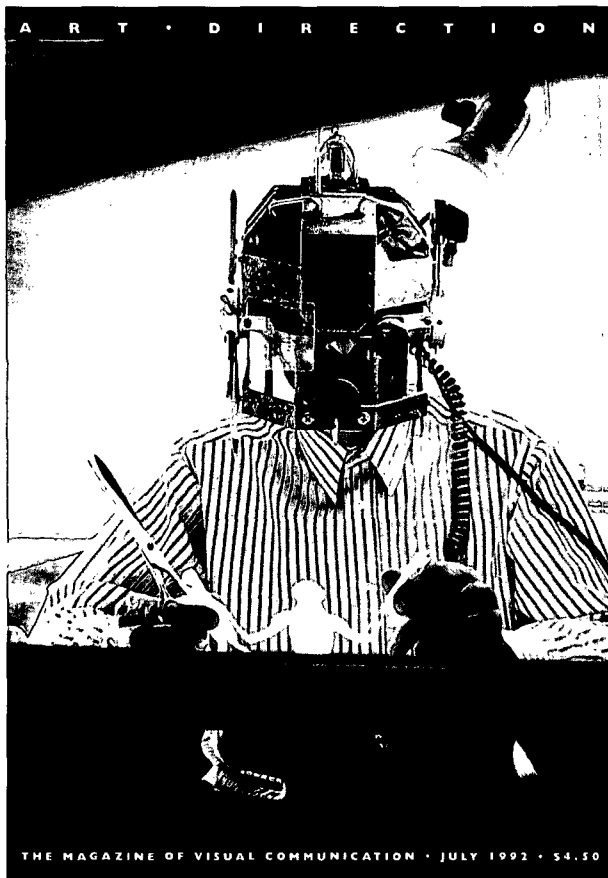
Faced with the extensive bibliography about the advertising process (which excludes the creative process), we find few references specifically aimed at explaining the creative advertising process and we must stress that most of them treat the issue in a quite superficial way. Among the few admen who have taken on the creative advertising process, we must mention William Bernbach, David Ogilvy, and Marçal Moliné. Bernbach (1973) is considered one of the most creative admen in contemporary advertising and is famous for his Volkswagen campaigns. His concepts are not very pragmatic, as he is a great defender of the idea that there are no rules for creation and that admen follow non-rationalisable processes. Ogilvy (1983) on the other hand, presents positive contributions on how to make advertising, pointing to the steps which, according to him, structure the creative process although he is also of the opinion that the best ideas spring from the unconscious. Moliné (1982) describes the act of creation as a combination of ideas. Luis Bassat (1993) proposed a classification of creative routes, but without establishing an order for the process of advertising creation. For his part, the American adman Young (1982) has worked on the stages of the process of advertising creation (information, digestion, incubation, insight, and verification) and the creation of ideas, while Joannis (1992) proposes a method of advertising creation based on the study of motivation. Another author who stands out because of his theoretic contributions is the Brazilian Roberto Menna Barreto (1978). According to Young (1982:46), 'An idea is born from a new combination of specific knowledge related to the product and the audience it is directed at, and general knowledge related to life and its events'. For Moliné (1982), the idea comes with a sudden leap of all the images we have stored in our memory: trips, feelings, childhood scenes, film editions, book fragments; the idea springs from this combination, and it is therefore logical to deduce that the more things we have stored in our memory, the more possibilities it has to make combinations and consequently more possibilities of ideas coming. Moliné also proposes thinking about the problem by 'freeing the brain of the sequential



and obligatory path of logical thought', and in this state, images stored in the memory 'cohere with the problem', thus producing 'an explosive combination' (1982:121).

We can say that all the admen quoted consider the unconscious very important in the processes of idea creation. The model they present is the following: a prolonged preparation phase, a second, waiting phase in which Ogilvy asserts he disconnects by means of external stimuli and Moliné speaks of freeing the brain from logical thought, a phase leading to insight; and a last phase of verifying ideas.

Before going on to set out the investigation carried out, it is necessary to define, albeit briefly, what admen's work consists of; this work is subject to an assignment.



The adman receives instructions on what is to be said about the product and has to manage to find out how to say it. The basis of advertising creation is, thus, finding a way to explain, as notoriously as possible, the benefits of the product. The creation process is the search for this 'genius' idea which relates (surprisingly, ingeniously, newly, etc.) the product to its benefits, to convince the target audience.

Investigation outline: aim, design, sample

The main purpose of the investigation which follows is knowing what concept admen have of their work and to what theoretic parameters this concept is due. To carry out this study we drew up a questionnaire with 60 points; as a questionnaire with these characteristics did not exist, we drew up a model which would give answers to our set objectives. The contents of this model were established by previous

interviews with admen-managers, as well as the literature referring to creativity in general and focusing on the advertising field. The purpose of the field study is analysing and comparing admen's answers so as to unify concepts referring to the creative process in advertising. In short, the study is based on the search for an explicative model by means of a test.

The sample is made up of individuals who carry out advertising creation work in advertising agencies. The territorial and geographic field corresponds to the city of Barcelona, as this city is considered representative of the total volume of business existing in the Spanish State. The questionnaire was given to admen-managers in advertising agencies who are, despite the sampling problems exposed later, representative of the advertising activity carried out in the city of Barcelona. At the beginning, the sample was drawn up as follows: giving the questionnaire to an adman-manager at every agency in Barcelona (between thirty and forty agencies). When we began the investigation and saw the difficulties raised by admen answering the questionnaire, even with collaboration from secretaries in the creative departments of the agencies we contacted, we resorted to giving the questionnaire to admen who proved to be more accessible. Thus the criterium of one adman per agency was discarded. When we had to discard the first considered sample, we questioned the reliability of the data resulting from the criteria of most accessible admen. But, keeping in mind that admen do not talk about the idea-creating process among themselves and that agencies have not systematised a process of idea-creating as in other phases of the advertising process as, for example, the copy strategy, the questionnaires given to admen in the same agency are valid for this investigation because they correspond to individual criteria and not company criteria. Once we had discarded the first sample, we sent forty questionnaires to accessible admen and agencies, of which only twenty finally answered. The fact that admen did not answer the questionnaire could be due to their packed work schedule, the length of the questionnaire, or not believing in the investigation and being reluctant to participate in an investigation about systematising the creative advertising process.

The twenty admen participating in the investigation belong to the following agencies. The number in brackets is that of individuals:

- Bassat Ogilvy & Mather (2)
- Bates (Delvico/Bates) (1)
- Cabús Communication (1)
- Casadevall Pedreño & PRG (1)
- Dayax (1)
- DMB&B (2)
- Lafayette. Espartero (1)
- Publicis-Arge (1)
- Rodergas, Barrera & Associats (1)
- SCPF (3)
- Tiempo/BBDO (4)
- Free-lance who had worked four years at the Cid agency (1)
- Free-lance who had worked six years at Tiempo/BBDO (1)

Those who answered the questionnaire mostly correspond to advertising agencies, except for the two free-lances, who also had previous experience in advertising agencies.

Contents of the questionnaire

The aim of this investigation (knowing what concept admen have of their work and to what theoretic parameters this concept is due) can be broken down into the following intentions:

- Knowing how the studied admen describe their work process.
- Discovering if this creative process is systematical.
- Defining the phases of the creative advertising process.
- Establishing whether advertising creativity follows a lineal process.
- Determining how admen catalogue unconscious processes within the general process of idea creation.
- Finding out stimuli used to create ideas.
- Describing methods used to create ideas (inspiration).
- Deliberating on factors proper to advertising which can condition the process of idea creating.
- Observing whether admen are influenced by implicit creativity theories which defend that creativity is something mystical and, thus, out of the reach of any study trying to systematise it.

In short, the general base making up the contents of the questionnaire is:

1. Advertising process
2. Stimuli/Inspiration
3. Search for factors proper to advertising which can act as conditioners in the process of idea creation:
 - Idea/Briefing relation
 - Idea/Slogan relation
 - Opinion of the product
 - Delivery date
 - Alternatives (number and kinds)
 - Relation between the kind of product and the type of process
 - Relation between the kind of product and the type of inspiration
4. The whole process. Phases and method.
5. Knowledge and use of creative stimulation techniques.

The order of the sixty questions was planned to force the interviewee to think about the same issues from different considerations and to verify the validity of answers given to the questions.

Conclusions

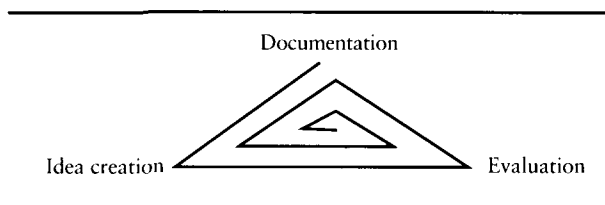
The results of the investigation are as follows:

1. Wallas' propositions (preparation, incubation, insight, and verification) and Young's propositions (information, digestion, incubation, insight, and verification) seem to refer to phases which are water-tight compartments within the over-all process and activate the step towards the next step. We cannot, however, discard the possibility that the process of advertising creation cannot be segmented into clearly-defined phases. In the cases studied in this investigation, we detected the following irregularities when comparing with the models of Wallas and Young:
 - We could speak of a common pattern among interviewees, as they describe a first phase of preparation or research very differentiated from the

second phase in which creation and evaluation go hand-in-hand and in which they also detect research, although it is different from that carried out in the first phase. That is, a first phase which consists of a prolonged and conscientious research on the product and the study and contrast of the briefing data and the strategy, and a second phase in which creation and evaluation are carried out alternately and recurrently. (Research continues to be present in this second phase).

- In a first stage we can deduce that admen do not carry out a process which adapts to a lineal style as most of them assert that if they have an idea, they continue to look for new routes (that is, they re-initiate the process) and they also declare that they often read the briefing all throughout the process (that is, they return to the research stage).

Based on the data exposed, we could easily speak of a recurrent spiral pattern rather than of a lineal pattern (Research – Idea creation (anything goes) – Evaluation):



- We confirm that there are three types of research along admen's process of idea creation and that they are reflected in the following paragraphs:
 - A prolonged initial research given by the study of the briefing and the strategy, and the deep knowledge of the product.
 - A research which lasts all during the process of creation so as to catch people's ideas and motivations.
 - A review of the briefing to evaluate ideas.

Consequently, it is not clear that we can speak of the existence of a spiral resourcing system, as it does not seem that they re-start the process and inform themselves about the product and the briefing, but only use the research (briefing) to evaluate ideas or research motivations. What is questioned is that

this is a lineal process like those presented by Wallas and Young.

2. When most spontaneously declare that they use 'talking to people' as stimulation, in some cases they refer not only to stimulus but also to verification and research. This fact could lead us to several conclusions:

- that when they 'talk to people', they are capable of carrying out all three operations 'almost' simultaneously; they verify previous ideas, they research the product and people's motivations on the product, and this is a stimulus for creating new ideas;
- that they choose different sorts of people whether they try to assess ideas, research the product and motivations towards the product, or getting inspiration. They talk to colleagues and people they know well to evaluate ideas. They talk to people who correspond to the target if they are researching people's motivation on the product, and generally talk to any sort of person of the types previously mentioned (or, in one specific case, 'to intelligent, interesting, open, expressive people) for inspiration.

This answer, about which most interviewees agree, should not surprise us, not even if we consider that it is not a suggested question but rather a spontaneous one, as Hopkins (1927) (1980:31) stressed the effectiveness of talking to people: 'In advertising you learn more in a week talking to people on the street than in a year at school'. Obviously this opinion is based on the fact that talking to people we know their motivations, and we all know how important individual's motivations on the product are in the advertising message. This act of talking to people on the street, used by Hopkins, also implies any of the former operations: research, inspiration, or verification. (We also find references about the usefulness of talking to consumers with the induction method detailed by Kotler and in declarations by admen such as Leo Burnett).

Otherwise, we must stress that 'talking to people' favours applying empathy (putting yourself in others' shoes) principle which is basic for carrying out creative advertising work.

3. The first, or research, phase of the creation process in advertising is systematic, while the later phase is

completely personal and all admen seem to have their own ways of solving it.

We can conclude that the creative advertising process (according to data given by admen studied) is characterised by the following:

- It is not a process with a lineal structure.
 - It is made up of a first, systematic phase in which a prolonged and detailed research on the product, the briefing, and the strategy is done, a second, non-systematic phase in which creation, research on consumer motivation, and evaluation by means of the briefing and conversation with people are carried out alternately and recurrently.
4. We have contrasted the influence on the creation process by factors proper to advertising (besides the intrinsic factor which is working on assignment and with very exact specifications) and have reached the following conclusions:
- The briefing must be closed.
 - Generally, the first thing that is looked for is the idea, and after that the slogan is drawn up, that is, from abstract to concrete.
 - It is easier for ideas to emerge when there is a lot of time; however, in advertising time given for ad ideas is always very short.
 - There are differences in inspiration between making up an ad for a product with a rational kind of position (eg. detergent) and an ad for a product with an 'emotional' kind of position (eg. perfume).
 - The budget and the type of client have a great influence on the process of creating ideas.
5. Almost all of the admen interviewed agree with Young and Moliné; the more things stored in their brains, the more possibilities of an idea emerging ('It gets easier the longer you live' 'You have to keep the tank full'). However, we must keep in mind that:
- this is a suggested question,
 - they do not specify that having data stored in the brain makes the unconscious associate, as Poincar defends in his thesis and,
 - they do not make clear, as do Young, Ogilvy, and Moliné the importance of combining spe-

cific product information and the target audience with general knowledge about life and events or with admen's emotional memories. However, they talk about stories, anecdotes, or living as well as possible.

6. Most admen interviewed asserted that they classify the alternatives of ads they carry out but they also assert that they do not base making ads on this classification; the idea comes first, and then they hang the label on it.
7. According to data extracted from answers referring to operations carried out when drawing up ads with a 'rational' position and ads with an 'emotional' position, and those referring to classifications they carry out in ad alternatives, we can establish a relation between kind of product, type of classification, in relation to product benefits, type of classification, in relation to the way of solving the drawing-up of the ad, and type of inspiration.
8. As to stimuli/inspiration (data obtained by spontaneous questioning), we can classify answers based on:
- external stimuli: watching videos, reading books, looking at photos, going to the cinema, and
 - mental operations: relating ideas, looking for metaphors, studying mental associations, working analogies.
- It is extremely important for the conclusions of this work to specify that admen never carry out this classification, that is, they do not specifically speak of external stimuli and mental operations.
9. As to the way of getting inspiration (data obtained by suggested question), the most used external stimuli are photos and videos of festivals and competitors. We find different ways of inspiration among admen from the scriptwriter work positions and those from the art director work positions. Admen from the scriptwriter work positions use more external stimuli as sources of inspiration. It seems that admen from the scriptwriter work positions very often use the dictionary for inspiration.
10. Admen interviewed assert that they do not use stimulation techniques for creation and most believe they are of no use; however, and keeping in mind the considerations in point 8 corresponding to these conclusions, the fact that they do not give a name

to these processes does not mean they do not use them; we have seen that they assert that they look at photos and read books, that is, they use external stimuli techniques and we have also seen them carry out mental operations and develop capacities proper to creativity, but they neither use them systematically, nor are they conscious of developing capacities proper to creativity.

11. As we saw in point 1 of these conclusions, when referring to process phases, there is no literal specification of the concept of incubation nor of inspiration. Neither it does not seem, judging by the results, that they hold the conviction of everything being solved in the unconscious as they do not specifically declare, like Ogilvy, 'that great ideas come from the unconscious'. Only one of them openly declared that he trusts unconscious processes more than conscious ones.
12. Interviewees did not generally detail anything clearly related to the myth of the creative genius; in general it does not seem that admen consider themselves 'artists'. On only a couple of occasions in the questionnaires does the word 'artist' appear, one of them to assert quite the contrary, 'we are not artists, we are professionals'. However, there is data which can be significant for an analysis of the issue: one is that individuals belonging to the most creative agencies appeal more to genius than rationality, as they do not specify processes and frequently answer to different questions that there is no method (a certain insistence is detected); another is that most interviewees agree that they do not use techniques or methods and that they are of no use, an assertion which is not far from believing in the existence of divine inspiration, inspiring Muses, or the gift of genius as the only causes of idea creation.

The assertion that 'they do not use techniques or methods and that they are of no use' can refer us to the myth of the artist's genius if we establish the relation between subject, method, and results: saying that a method does not exist gives the starring role to the subject, that is, giving priority to the subject's own processes and consequently making him unreplaceable as he possesses the gift of genius; on the contrary, if the method is strong, the subject is obviously replaceable.

13. We can assert that some admen are more conscious than others of the process they follow to

create ideas, while specifying that there is a possibility that those not apparently conscious are influenced by the myth of the creative genius and thus are reluctant to recognise that a method does exist.

14. Admen studied generally have a low reflection level about the process they follow for working. It is possible that, being used to finding ideas, they have never had to think about the process they follow to reach them.
15. As a general conclusion, we can assert that admen carry out specific mental operations (analogy, metaphor, association) and use methods and techniques, although these are not systematic or reasoned. Tavares (1996:3) who set out, from a pedagogic point of view, to rationalise the creative process so as to teach creativity and ad scriptwriting students a method which would allow them to take on the creative process and draw up ads systematically, asserts: 'Professional admen seem to suffer from deep unhappiness which is expressed in the following way: Admen know badly what they do well'.

The basic issue of creativity, which is yet to be cleared up, is the role played by the unconscious in the process of creating ideas. In this sense, we can speak of three different concepts of the unconscious, which correspond to three theoretical models:

- the Freudian unconscious, which speaks of inner desire and conflict
- the unconscious which associates –as defended by Poincar, Roster, and Wallas– or biassociates, according to Koestler
- the grammatical unconscious defended by cognitivist psychologists, and which refers to those rules we use but do not know, rules which suppose a detailed competency in a language or type of discourse but which are not conscious. According to this latter concept, it is possible that admen do not know which rules they use, it is possible they do not know them, and because of this it seems to them that what they do is free and random. However, being conscious of knowledge handled unconsciously will lead to a greater mastery of it and, consequently, result in accurate alternatives in less time and with less effort.

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