

TV ADVERTISEMENTS AND THE CLEVER AUDIENCE¹

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ABSTRACT

Television advertisements—and publicity media in general—have among their aims those of attracting the spectators' attention and reaching a target audience of potential consumers. These two purposes do not usually imply separate processes or different stages of perception on the viewer's part: if the advertisement achieves its goal, the interest it will arouse will mainly be the interest of those who are targeted as likely to buy the product or to perform whatever action the advertisement seeks to promote. The more precisely these people are contacted, the more specific, direct and, consequently, successful the effect of the message will be. It may seem a paradox that one of the procedures used to catch the attention of the audience is to introduce an advertisement whose meaning is not understood at first sight. But it happens to be a useful resource. The perception of some advertisements is similar to the reading of poems or even some short stories—we tend to read them several times. Maybe at the first reading we remain unaware of the meaning, but this acts as a challenge that leads us to read and read again until we find out what the message of the text is. When we reach this point, the effort becomes aesthetic pleasure and the filter that selects the audience selects the potential customer as well.

RESUM

Els anuncis televisius –i els mitjans publicitaris en general– tenen entre els seus propòsits els de captar l'atenció dels espectadors i arribar a una audiència de consumidors potencials. Aquestes dues finalitats no acostumen a representar processos separats o nivells de percepció diferents per part de l'espectador: si l'anunci assoleix la seva meta, despertarà un interès que serà l'interès d'aquells que es considera que tenen més probabilitats de comprar el producte o de realitzar l'acció que l'anunci vol promoure. Com més gran sigui la precisió a l'hora d'establir contacte amb aquestes persones, més específic, directe i, en conseqüència, reeixit, serà l'efecte del missatge. Pot semblar una paradoxa el fet que un dels procediments utilitzats per a atraure l'atenció de l'audiència sigui presentar un anunci el significat del qual no s'entén a primera vista. Però es tracta d'un recurs útil. La percepció d'alguns anuncis és semblant a la que es produeix al llegir poemes o certs relats curts, tenim la tendència a rellegir-los. Potser en una primera lectura no acabem de copsar-ne el significat, però això mateix es converteix en un repte que ens porta a llegir-lo una i altra vegada fins que descobrim el missatge del text. Quan arribem a aquest punt, l'esforç esdevé plaer estètic i el filtre que selecciona l'audiència també serveix per a seleccionar el client potencial.

RESUMEN

Los anuncios televisivos –y los medios publicitarios en general– tienen entre sus propósitos los de captar la atención de los espectadores y llegar a una audiencia de consumidores potenciales. Estas dos metas no acostumbran a representar procesos separados o niveles de percepción diferentes por parte del espectador: si el anuncio logra su objetivo, el interés que despierte será el interés de aquellos que se considera que tienen más probabilidades de comprar el producto o realizar la acción que el anuncio quiere promover. Cuanta mayor sea la precisión con que se entre en contacto con estas personas, más específico, directo y, en consecuencia, exitoso, será el efecto del mensaje. Puede parecer una paradoja el hecho de que uno de los procedimientos utilizados para atraer la atención de la audiencia sea presentar un anuncio cuyo significado no se entiende a primera vista. Pero se trata de un recurso útil. La percepción de algunos anuncios es similar a la lectura de poemas o ciertos relatos cortos, tenemos la tendencia a releerlos. Quizá en una primera lectura no acabemos de captar el significado, pero esto mismo pasa a ser un reto que nos lleva a leerlo una y otra vez hasta que descubrimos el mensaje del texto. Llegados a este punto, el esfuerzo se convierte en placer estético y el filtro que selecciona la audiencia también sirve para seleccionar al cliente potencial.

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Two basic objectives in TV advertising are, first, to attract the attention on the part of the audience and, second, to reach, in the most efficient way, those people who are expected to react to the publicity effect—by buying a car, for instance. As the recipients of the message happen to be, simultaneously, the audience of an audiovisual document and potential consumers of a product, something that for formal or aesthetic reasons attracts certain audiences to certain audiovisual styles may also —when the profile of the viewer is similar to that of the intended buyer—be able to select accurately the segment of the market targeted by the announcer.

However, these two parameters—audience and consumers—are not necessarily equal. The set of viewers is one thing and the set of those people who may buy a product is another. Audience, here, may be identified, in Bell's terms, with auditors: those receivers who are not being directly addressed—in fact, in mass communication, direct addressees are not relevant.² In the intersection between the two groups (potential consumers and auditors) there will be a number of individuals interested both in the audiovisual document—that coincides with their artistic preferences—and in the product offered by the commercial. If we have a look at the audience, we can observe that some of the aesthetic resources that attract the viewers are coincident with those traditionally described as characteristic of certain narrative and lyric genres. According to Bell (1984, 1997), the potential audience determines the language of the media: in this case, it can be stated that the advertisements, thinking of a segment of market, assume certain stylistic preferences on the part of the segment of viewers they address and assume that these are also the preferences of an ideal buyer of the product on sale. Therefore, they try to encourage the audience-market by satisfying these preferences. The aim of this paper, then, will be to analyse how aesthetic structures present in advertising audiovisual documents, and which are similar to those from films and other artistic or literary works, connect to the tastes of some sectors of the audience, which, as we said, are at least partially made up of people that are prospective consumers as well.

Art works, as codified vehicles of contents, involve implicit audience design: not everything will interest everyone. The attention, however, is changeable. Few people, almost none, were interested in Van Gogh's pictures when Van Gogh was alive, but present exhibitions attract hordes of visitors, and the same can be said with respect to some literary works. Sometimes, the difficulty of the pieces keeps the reception within restricted limits³, but the interest is always variable. Artistic pieces are in a dynamic communicative environment, which determines a flexible audience. In any case, and leaving aside specific and circumstantial phenomena, there is a coincidence between structural features of a work and the demands of certain segments of public that become the audience of this work. Advertising may use similar procedures: even though the ultimate objective of commercials is not that of producing aesthetic pleasure, but persuading people to buy or do something (this is marketing), their first intention, as in the case of art pieces, is to draw attention to themselves⁴. This is gaining audience. Consequently, the closer audience and segment market are, the more successful an advertisement may be. In the case of translation, the preferences of the assumed audience determine, in fact, the choices. Translation is not

² See Bell (1984, 1997), Hatim and Mason (1996:82-84), Cutillas (2003).

³ The Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881-1958), for instance, knew this when he addressed his poems to "the immense minority". However, circumstances may change the situation a little: Juan Ramon Jiménez had probably more readers after he received the Nobel Prize. At present, almost 50 years later, his readers should be a minority less than immense.

⁴ We can remember here the words from the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky: "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*" (1965:12).

always advisable, because audiences from different cultural and linguistic environments will enjoy different aesthetic models, and the same commercial may have diverse effects—it can even have no success at all—depending on the degree of adaptation to the cultural norms of the viewers.

We shall consider two examples and shall start with the advertisement of an Audi TT Coupé. We see an Audi stationary in a parking place. A car is passing by, but it suddenly stops close to the Audi. After a few seconds, the car resumes its way. The same thing happens with some other cars: they stop close to the Audi and then leave. There are marks of tyres on the street, due to the sudden braking. After a while, the Audi leaves the parking place and a Mercedes parks there. Some vehicles pass by close to the Mercedes, but they do not stop. The advertisement ends with the name of the publicized car, the Audi TT Coupé. Perhaps the spectator will not be able to understand the images the first time she watches them. But she applies her knowledge of narrative codes: as opposed to real life, fiction makes sense, some sort of explanation must be found and there has to be a comprehensible story behind the apparently unconnected scenes. This viewer will observe the ad in several showings and will finally discover the explanation that puts everything together: the cars stopped because the Audi attracted its drivers. On the contrary, no one seemed interested in the Mercedes and the cars did not stop. Related to this decodification process, based on several showings of the advertisement, we find the purpose of drawing attention to the advertised product.

This recurrence leads us to draw a comparison between commercials and certain literary works, more than other audiovisual products. It is possible, in effect, that we do not completely understand a film at a first viewing, and it may even happen that groups of spectators discuss possible interpretations of a movie (this is clear if we think of films such as *Eyes Wide Shut* or *Mulholland Drive*); but it is also true that movies are to be understood the first time we watch them—at least in their basic traits— because most viewers will not go and see them two, three or more times. A movie can be seen again and again and each time new things will be discovered, but this is probably not the most common model of reception the producer was thinking of. Yet, what occurs with commercials is just the opposite: they will probably be broadcast on multiple occasions, and this is something that constitutes their communicative essence. In fact, this is similar to what happens with certain literary genres such as the short story and, mainly, poetry: works are not completely understood at first and readers have to go over them several times until they are able to give them a meaning. This is part of the common process of reading. Commercials can play with similar effects and, since the audience will go through them several times, they have to try to attract permanent attention to themselves. Initial curiosity for the meaning of the message keeps the audience interested in the advertisement and in the merchandise. After that, aesthetic pleasure derived from a more or less difficult process of understanding—similar, as we have said, to that derived from reading poetry—reinforces the perception both of the message and of the advertised product.

We will consider another example, also from Audi. This is an advertisement in which different objects appear in apparently isolated black and white scenes: the steering wheel of a concrete mixer, the pedal of a paper basket in a toilet, the lever of a slot machine, the wheels of a shopping trolley, an intermittent light used to delimit a construction site, the pointer of a weighing machine, the engine of a grass mower, two wipers on a window, two seats in a waiting room, two lights in an almost empty swimming pool... The impression is always that of decadence: used objects in sullen environments. The absence of colour in the images and the slow and sad music reinforce this impression. After these scenes, at the end of the advertisement, a sentence can be read in the Spanish version, “¿Y si las cosas soñaran con una vida mejor?” (“May things dream of a better life?”) and we hear the end of the song: “... who you should become”. Finally, we read “Audi A4”. These final elements give meaning to

the previous dispersion and constitute the core of a narrative proposal.⁵ In effect, as in certain literary stories, we must reach the end to know how to interpret the data we have received: a last piece of information allows the recipient to give meaning to the puzzle he has to construct. The plot is not clear until we reach the end. The viewer must go back and interpret the small portions of information he has: the objects actually refer to different parts of a car. Of course, the most receptive audience to this kind of message codification, the audience who will best appreciate and understand it, will be the one who is familiar with audiovisual and literary genres in which these structures are frequent.

The way the scenes acquire meaning is also related to these genres. In fact, each one of the images proposes a metonymic displacement (and a metaphor as well) that brings us the mental image that really interests the advertiser: that of the Audi vehicle. We say mental image because the procedure is so effective that no car is needed as a visual icon; the actual car is not seen: the steering wheel of the concrete mixer, the pedal of the basket, the lights in the swimming pool... all these ordinary objects create the image of the car. Let us take the basket: the spectator can see a foot stepping on the pedal. Even though on a first viewing this spectator does not know it, he will eventually select an object from the scene, the pedal (and the action of stepping on it), which will also appear—with slightly different connotations, of course—in the final mental image, that of the car. A key element here is the question we have at the end—“¿Y si las cosas soñaran con una vida mejor?” The structure of the advertisement emphasizes the value of the sentence: it is closing the clip. Moreover, no such verbal message—in letters and in the centre of the screen—has appeared in this commercial before; in fact, the only verbal code we receive up to this point is a song. As a consequence, the intuition of the viewer—not naïve intuition, but product of his aesthetic experience—starts data processing: on the one hand, some objects do not have the best possible destiny and, on the other hand, there is a reference to Audi A4. Semantic connotations associated with this specific brand—exclusive vehicles, high quality engines and sophisticated design, among others—are contrary to the previous scenes. These images, then, will be decoded from parameters of opposition to Audi but at the same time from identification with the brand: opposition because of those aspects we have pointed out, the references to objects that have desired to be something they are not—parts of an Audi—and identification, because the only way to make sense of the series of scenes is from this allusion to the car; each scene, as we have seen, being related to an element of the car and the expectations of the component that wanted to be a part of this car. At this point, we have to consider the role of these humanized objects: they are endowed with affective connotations that are eventually projected to the vehicle, which, as a paradox, represents a status these objects will never achieve. If the pedal of the basket has feelings, the pedal of the car may feel as well. However, the advertisement does not show the car, it seems to be on a level of reality which is inaccessible from daily life—whereas this daily life is represented by the ordinary objects that are certainly visible. The expectations of the objects are projected onto the viewer's—and maybe consumer's—expectations, as the last step of the metonymic movement: from the weighing machine to the pointer and from here to the speedometer (which we do not see), from the basket to the pedal of the basket and to the pedal of the car, which is again only in our mind, and so on. At the same time, everything constitutes an allegory: there is a series of metaphors in which the real object—steering wheel, pedal, lever, wheels, lights, pointer, engine, wipers, seat—is also, as an imaginary object, a part of a car, exactly the part that it would like to be. And, finally, these parts are put together in a whole, the car itself, which is not the concrete mixer, the swimming pool, the shopping trolley or any other object, nor is it a mere combination of them but, rather, suggests a scenario of completely different connotations.

⁵ We agree here with Umberto Eco, who affirms that verbal registers in advertising usually fix the meaning of the message, because visual codes tend to be ambiguous and admit several alternative interpretations (1989:256). There is no doubt this is the case of our example.

There is a parallel implicit reading here, which considers the role of the viewer. There are things that dream a new future they will never achieve, that is, the objects feel as human beings do: in some aspects, as it has been said, they are on the same level as people. Therefore, perhaps, in a similar process, the spectator would also like to see her dreams come true. Will it be impossible for her as well? Not really. The trolley, the pedal and so on will never get what they want because this would imply for them a change in their physical nature, and they cannot realize this. But the viewer, on the contrary, who may also want to change her destiny, does not need to modify her condition to accomplish her desires and effectively achieve the same real representation the objects want, the car. If the objects must be something different in order to leave their miserable life, and this is not possible, the recipient of the message does not need to change herself to reach a similar goal. The only thing she has to do is to realize the dream: buying the car will allow her to escape from an ordinary environment. "It is something you can achieve, let's not wait, do it, abandon your life and enter a new one", the advertisement insinuates.

Apart from this, the decoding takes place with the help of the viewer's previous experiences with respect to certain artistic genres that use similar resources, as we said before; not only literary or cinematographic genres, but those of publicity as well. Among them, the specific codes related to the brand. The fact of not actually showing the vehicle constitutes a remarkable procedure in the ad—not new in Audi, by the way. Apart from other considerations, this is possible because the spectator has been receiving previous messages and has become familiar with certain semiotic codes associated with the advertised car. And, in the same way as the reader of Petrarch's sonnets applies his knowledge of aesthetic, ideological and referential codes to the reading, such as the notions of platonic love and so on, we, viewers of an Audi commercial, project the conventional knowledge that we have acquired in our experience of advertisements and, specifically, of those of Audi. Thanks to this, the image does not need to be explicit: in this case, the conventions of genre suggest our perception. And in a very efficient way, because the connotations remain open: the spectator will fill the gap information in the form of expectations, probably more relevant than the information that would be provided by the actual image of a car.

One more interesting aspect of this advertisement is its cyclic and reiterative structure, that reminds us of certain literary works and which we can relate to the famous sentence with which Jakobson defined the poetic function of language: "the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" (1960:358). In our commercial, each sequence becomes the equivalent of the following one; all the scenes are similar in conception. In the end, representations that seemed unconnected are perceived as parallel and acquire meaning together. Moreover, as we said before, the effect of recursiveness must also be taken into consideration: advertisements are designed to be seen several times, and making perception slow attracts attention in successive showings. If the message is not understood at first sight, the recipient has to face a difficult process of understanding. He has to play with the idea of different possible meanings and this game is itself as important as the ultimate interpretation. In the end, of course, we find the object of the ad. Because, if it is true that artistic work attracts attention to itself, in this case attention must go further. If not, the advertiser may find that the spectator that could be interested in buying the car remains in a state of mere aesthetic contemplation and does not consider that something is on sale. It would be an interesting advertisement in this case, but not a good one. In the end, a basic difference between a commercial and any other kind of audiovisual product—or, let us say, a poem—lies in the persuasive aim. Before reaching this point, the procedures may be similar. Therefore, each cultural and linguistic area will suggest the appropriateness of when to translate and when not to. Translation may be a good idea when

the commercial satisfies the aesthetic preferences of the potential audience. Selection of audience becomes selection of market, and this is how poetry becomes marketing.

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