

# Understanding advertising to transform society

## Comprender la publicidad para transformar la sociedad

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to advance in an understanding of advertising through an approach thoroughly different from those repeated attempts directed to raise it to a scientific level, efforts whose declared or tacit goal is to legitimate the advertising activity. Our approach is based in a reflexive research method, which begins with the involvement of the researcher into the researched matter (Caro, 2007). This approach is exemplary in a double sense: First, because understanding advertising reveals its role as an instrument for social cohesion in nowadays consumer societies, and second, because advertising is the window to enter at the current capitalist system's nature, which is completely different from the 19th century capitalism analyzed by Marx. This exemplarity is the reason why understanding advertising can be a decisive stage to advance in the project directed to transform the capitalist society.

**Keywords:** *meaning advertising, semiocapitalism, sign/commodity, consumer value.*

### RESUMEN

*El presente artículo, basado en el método reflexivo, que parte de la involucración del investigador en la materia investigada, se propone avanzar en una comprensión de la publicidad radicalmente distanciada de aquel enfoque cuyo propósito es dotarla de un estatuto científico, en un intento más o menos explícito de legitimar la actividad publicitaria profesional. Esta indagación nos permitirá revelar: a) el papel como instrumento de cohesión social que la publicidad cumple en las actuales sociedades de consumo; y b) la función de escaparate y puerta de entrada que la publicidad ejerce, en la medida en que revela y permite penetrar en las peculiaridades del vigente sistema capitalista, radicalmente distanciado del capitalismo decimonónico analizado por Marx. Y son ambos resultados lo que nos permiten constatar que comprender la publicidad constituye un paso decisivo a la hora de avanzar en un proyecto de transformación de la presente sociedad capitalista.*

**Palabras clave:** *publicidad de la significación, semiocapitalismo, signo/mercancía, valor de consumo.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This article is based on the following observation: nowadays we lack—despite the numerous and important efforts made in this regard and the contributions from a large number of scholars—of an understanding of the advertising according to its real impact in the so-called “consumer societies” we live in, as well as in the daily existence of the individuals that compose them.

This finding is supported, in turn, in the following determinant: we will only have a true “understanding” of advertising as such approximation overflows the academia and permeates the society in which advertising currently plays—as we shall see in a moment—a vital institutional role. This will make possible that this “understanding” has an eminently *practical* role, emphasizing that institutional role to the community directly concerned, as well as the primary role that—as we shall also see—advertising complies within the current capitalist system.

This research is based on a *reflexive* methodology, i.e., with the involvement of the researcher in the investigated matter (Caro, 2007) over his many years of advertising *experience*, both as an advertising professional and professor and, obviously, as a recipient of it, and that continues in the line of other works of the author (see references).

## BEYOND THE “ADVERTISING SCIENCE”

The purpose of understanding advertising from which we start directly affects the long-debated issue regarding if advertising is or not a science. As it is known, opinions in this matter vary between the joyous proclamation of which some advertising pioneers made gala (among them, the Spanish Pedro Prat Gaballí [1917/1992] and the American Claude Hopkins [1923/1980]) and predominantly negative views of the majority of the researchers who have tried analyzing advertising from a theoretical perspective. For some of these, “the fact that its concepts, its way of acting, and its methods have become more scientific, is not a reason to say that advertising has become a science” (Cadet & Cathelat, 1971, p. 92). For others, “advertising is a system of action that is intended to be based on scientific basis, but it does not allow to speak of an advertising science and much less of

advertising as a science” (González Martín, 1996, p. 60). Such opinions lead another known theorist to the following observation: “there is (...) nothing tragic in advertising not being a science. Nor is the medicine” (Eguizábal, 2007, p. 16). This does not preclude that some of these same authors decided on a highly multidisciplinary approach, trying to compensate for that lack of scientific status with the “back up of other fields of knowledge” (González Martín, 1996, p. 65), before concluding, specifying that approach, that advertising “as economic instrument, as an ensemble of signs and as socio-cultural object can be studied scientifically” (*ibid.*, p. 212). Other researchers, meanwhile, such as Herrerros Arconada (1999) and the aforementioned Eguizábal, criticized such a multidisciplinary approach, since, in the opinion of the latter, it gave place to:

an atomized view of advertising, a patchwork of uneven parts, placed one next to the others, which was impossible to fit to obtain a clear picture of the advertising phenomenon and that, at all, brought understanding of the advertising phenomenon in its entirety. (Eguizábal, 2007, p. 19)

What was at the bottom of this attitude more or less reluctant or clearly negative of much of the advertising scholars surrounding its recognition in favor of a scientific status? The conviction, or simply intuition, that any proclamation of advertising as a science would not finally be anything other than a legitimation, from the authority of the academia and garnished with the itching of *objectivity* systematically attributed to science, of an advertising practice that precisely the scientific inquiry has the duty to analyze and weight from a detached and eminently *critic* perspective. Its purpose, in this regard, should be to reveal, among other things, the *intentions* that exist on the basis of this practice and the resources that it brings into play, as well as the impact that such intentions and resources have on the society of which advertising is part.

The understanding of which we talk overflows the limits of this purported and never completed advertising “science”. It is not about elevating advertising (that is, the advertising practice) to the category of scientific discipline comparable to the ones included, with more or less success, in the Unesco codes (such

as suggested, for example, Jesús Bermejo [2008] in an editorial in the journal *Pensar la publicidad*). It is, on the contrary—and as I stated before—about exercising an *understanding* of advertising which, on the basis of recognizing the role that it exerts within “consumer societies” in which we live, will contribute, for reasons which we will examine, to the transformation of those societies.

What ingredients or phases should be part of this understanding of advertising? Those are the ones we will try to define in the following section, summarizing and extending the conclusions that the author has reached in previous works.

### TOWARDS THE UNDERSTANDING OF ADVERTISING

Firstly, we have to clearly highlight the aforementioned institutional role which today plays the advertising, as has been recognized by different authors. For Potter (1954), advertising “dominates the media, it has vast power in the shaping of popular standards, and it is really one of the very limited group of institutions which exercise social control” (p. 167). To Jhally (1987), “advertising is the most influential institution of socialization in modern society” (p. 1) opinion with which Twitchell coincides (1987) when he says that advertising is “*the central institution*” of our times (italic in original, p. 1). Although, perhaps, the Spanish sociologist Jesús Ibáñez (1994, pp. 165-185) has better emphasized this institutional role played by advertising in current consumer societies, stressing how it has replaced other historical institutions, such as religion or politics, in the work of unite society around values and *presences* assimilated by all. Thus, if initially such values and presences were religious and later political, in present non-ideological consumer societies the values and presences (shaped especially as brands and consumption standards and guidelines) transmitted by advertising are assumed—in a way generally unconscious—practically by all its members, with the result that it actually performs the role of unifying cement of a society seemingly without values.

It is important to highlight, even briefly, the contrast between this institutional role played nowadays by advertising and the little or no attention given to

its analysis by the majority of social sciences scholars. This situation allows, however, the two following observations: the inadequacy of such studies to the reality that they aim to unravel; and the urgent need to opt for the already shown *understanding* of advertising able to account, among other things, of the institutional role that it currently plays.

Secondly, this purpose of advancing towards the understanding of advertising is about highlighting the effective role that it plays within the capitalist economic system we live in. It is a task that requires clearly delimiting the specific time that such system lives and the model that is at the base of its operation; a model which—we should specify—highly overflows the conclusions that Marx reached in relation to *productivist* or *mercantilist*<sup>1</sup> capitalism of his time. In fact, it is a *semicapitalism* (Berardi, 2003, 2011), within which the sign/merchandise (Baudrillard, 1974; Caro, 2009) has replaced the goods as their elementary or nuclear form; a sign/merchandise whose *semiolinguistic* manifestation is the brand (Caro, 2011), and which in turn is the result of a specific *semiotic production* (Berardi, 2003; Caro, 2009, 2011), which has replaced the material production as the core of the production process. Such substitution has originated—or, rather, accelerated—a process of *de-materialization*, whose end result is the domain of the financial assumptions within the current capitalist economy from the moment in which—as pointed out in 1994 by the sociologist Alfonso Orti in the presentation in Madrid of the posthumous book of Jesús Ibáñez (1994)—, “*significatization* of the economy is the first step of its *financiation*”.

Now, what is the role that advertising plays in the framework of semicapitalism and, more specifically, within the mentioned *semiotic production*, which in turn equals largely to what in management language is known as *marketing*? Its primary objective is to provide brands with a *specific* significance, measurable in direct relation with the nature of its target audience or target population, making it distinguish itself favorably from the competition and provides it, as result, certain *consumption expectations*, of which the *value* that they will reach in the market depends (value that, according to the above, should be called “value of consumption”: cfr. Caro 1967, 2002a). This significance and its corresponding value will no longer have to

be a mere *reflection* of the reality of the product or service that is at the base of the brand in question. From the moment in which the advertising acts in the mentioned semiocapitalist framework where the sign/merchandise has replaced the goods as elementary form of production, it has a *freedom of significance* that enables channelling such significance in the direction considered to be the best by those who manage that semiotics production (or, in other words, by those who decide marketing plans that have come to constitute the center of business activity). Therefore, *advertising significance* (Caro, 2002b) that results in the necessarily *imaginary* meanings with which advertising sheathes the brand, considering that such meanings do not respond to any kind of *prior reality* of the advertised product or service, but they *create the significance* – and, ultimately, the entity – *of the brand to the same extent that they advertise it*. This way, the advertising that we are talking about is a paradigmatic example of “self-fulfilling prophecies” of which Daniel Boorstin spoke at the beginning of the 1960s in relation to the “pseudo-events” that characterized, and characterize today, the American public scene, and of which advertising was, and remains today, the exponent par excellence. So, as Boorstin (1987) writes: “The successful advertiser is the master of a new art: the art of making things true by saying they are so. He is a devotee of the technique of the self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 216).

Advertising, in such conditions, is well far from limiting itself to meet the purely *advertising* function to which the term responds (and that, however, was adequate regarding the advertising practice as it developed in the context of the 19th century mercantile-productivist capitalism). Advertising (of significance), on the contrary, enunciates the brands (Caro, 1994, p. 120), whose significance is indiscernible thereafter of its own advertising enunciation. Advertising, ultimately and as stated by Ibáñez (1994), *announces itself*, from the moment when:

an imaginary world is constructed through the ads: buy the advertised product is a voucher that entitles you to penetrate (imaginarily) in that world. The advertising is no longer what indicates the product, it is the product that indicates the ad (p. 234).

The above results, according to Jean Baudrillard (1998), in the configuration of a *consuming totality formed* by all recipients of a specific advertising manifesto and, by extension, the whole of them, since, as the author writes: “every image, every advertisement imposes a consensus –that between all the individuals potentially called upon to decipher it, that is to say, called on, by decoding the message, to subscribe automatically to the code in which it has been couched” (p. 125)

This way advertising no longer plays, in reality, a merely auxiliary role as an *intermediary* between production and consumption, assigned to it by economic orthodoxy. Far from it, it works within the framework of the semiocapitalism now in place as an important mechanism of *creation of value*, as stated by Martin Mayer at a date as early as 1958; insofar as, in his words, advertising “adds a new value to the existing values of the product. (...) He [the consumer] finds a difference between technically identical products because the advertising has in fact made them different” (Mayer, 1961, p. 320). Advertising –as a primary component of *semiotic production* which has replaced the material production as the core of the production process in the framework of semiocapitalism– is an essential ingredient in the process of capital valorization. Essentially, it replaces labor in its role as a measure of the value (of change) in the productivist nineteenth-century capitalism. Such substitution obviously affects both the nature of the goods of this productivist capitalism and of the *signs/merchandises* characteristic of semiocapitalism, as in the current value in both cases: *value-labor*, substantial and “natural”, in the case of productivist capitalism and *value of consumption*, evanescent and “artificial” in the case of semiocapitalism. (So, parodying Bauman, we can say that from the *solid* productivist capitalism of the 19th century we have arrived to the present *liquid* semiocapitalism, which in turn constitutes the preamble of gaseous capitalism currently in configuration process and which enshrines the domain of the *virtual*, the financial and the speculative over the material or “real”).

Thirdly, it is about conceptualizing and including in a certain theoretical model the effective functioning of advertising, as it takes place in the heart of the professional organizational structures. We refer to a

theoretical model under which such activities transcend their purely functional approach and can be *thought* in accordance with the implicit assumption beating at the heart of them, thus ceasing to be considered “raw facts” or “incontestable assumptions” coming from the practical reality, such as they are seen by most of the authors who have dealt with the issue (see for example, Mazo, 1994; Pérez Ruiz, 1996; Fernández Gómez, 2005; Victoria Mas, 2005); with the exception, perhaps, of José Ramón Sánchez Guzmán (1981), who conceives the advertising activity as a complex system in which the action of different stratum, each with their particular points of view and interests, can be distinguished.

Based on recognizing the complexity characterizing, as says Sánchez Guzmán and reaffirms González Martín (1996), the advertising system today, it should be think of –as the author has already proposed earlier and synthetically enunciated– in the form of a specific *operational device* (Caro, 2010, pp. 184-213), in turn encompassed within a certain *framework* primarily economic in nature, and at the heart of which the action of *semiolinguistic advertising operation* takes place. It is an operation whose product connects with its recipients in a specific *communicative situation*, from which derive a series of social, cultural and psychosocial effects, exceeding the explicit intentions of those who implemented this operation, and finally specified in the ideological-institutional function which, as we have seen previously, advertising plays in the “consumption societies”.

The conceptualization of this advertising operational device, which we have here exposed in its essential guidelines, involves the following two results: first, framing the action of advertising in its different facets in an operating model, showing clearly how it transcends the necessarily restricted point of view of professionals, who limit in a reductive way such action to the fulfillment of the advertiser’s objectives. And secondly, to model the different activities part of the development of the advertising product, as those are integrated –again put in a summarized way– in a particular *semiolinguistic operation*, through which the basic objective pursued by this elaboration is tried to be reached; this is, to attribute an *imaginary significance* to brand advertised in each case. And so, as outlined in more detail in

Caro (2010), the first component of this operation is *significant production*, in the course of which the planners try to delimit such significance among all considered possible. The second is the *discursive texting*, stage within which the creative team tries to shape the significance in terms of “idea” and focus it towards its recipients in accordance with a given discursive strategy. And finally, the third is the *linguistic manifestation*, state within which different specialists try to sheathe such form of the corresponding expressive material. It is clear that this model allows to *think* the advertising profession, transcending the professional context in which this is outlined *prima facie* and contextualizing this activity in the general framework that encompasses the action of advertising (and this without counting the added result of help advertising professionals to take awareness of the real extent of their work and its significance in the context of the consumption societies we live in).

Finally, these successive inquiries are assembled, or in the process of assembling, in a holistic understanding of the advertising that allows us to decant an overview of how it works today; an understanding that strips it of the topics –both globally derogatory as uncritically laudatory– with which is usually seen and allows to glimpse the complex work that it plays in the societies we live in; a work whose greater significance lies probably in the mentioned institutional task that advertising plays as a vehicle for social cohesion, but which also affects the very core of semiocapitalism now in place. And this to the extent that, as we have seen, the *value* of what we consume and what we exchange is directly associated with the *significance* of the signs/merchandises-brands, in whose construction advertising, as primary component of semiotic production, plays a decisive role. And it is the demiurgic dimension attributed to this eminently advertising product that is brand –from the moment in which *everything* can be a brand, provided that it is the subject of the corresponding semiotic production, and can be part, therefore, of the *spectacular semiosphere* where the prestigious brands are exposed to the social collective– which is at the origin of its expansion by all kinds of domains, beyond the initial economic sphere of departure. Two examples: the Spanish State is nowadays trying to reconfigure itself as the

*brand Spain* and the Real Madrid football team figures, according to the latest ranking of Interbrand corresponding to 2013 (Interbrand, 2014), among the twenty most valued brands in Spain.

### CONCLUSION: UNDERSTANDING ADVERTISING TO TRANSFORM SOCIETY

The study of advertising as we suggested it –led to its *understanding* and not to the assignment of a scientific status that elevates it to the status of science and legitimizes, as a last consequence, the professional advertising activity– is equipped with a radical exemplarity, for two basic reasons:

- 1) Firstly, because this understanding of advertising allows us to reveal how the exercise of social institution within the framework of existing consumer societies really works; and
- 2) Secondly, because it allows us to also penetrate into the interior of the model that the existing capitalist system presides –beyond the established places and what the manuals of one and another sign claim; system in which, as we have seen, the *sign/merchandise* has replaced the merchandise as elementary form of the system and in which the *semiotic production* has replaced material production as the core of capitalist production. This replacement has accelerated the process of dematerialization that was already present in the concept of merchandise of the productivist capitalism –to the extent that, as Marx (1966 [1867], pp. 36-47) highlighted, the exchange value had replaced the use value as a standard for the production, thus giving rise to what he called “the fetishism of commodities”- originating as a consequence that an *artificial consumption value*, in direct relation with the significance attributed to the brand on the frame of that semiotic production, replaced the *value-labor* as the source of that change value, thus triggering, as a last consequence, expropriation and continuous suction of genuine social values which are at the origin of the so-called

“postmodernism”.

In this latter sense, advertising is the *showcase* that gives access to this capitalist way existing nowadays. Advertising represents the inexcusable testimony that a particular product is *worth more* on the market than its competition for the simple reason that, as said Martin Mayer (1961), “the advertising has in fact made [it] different” (p. 320), without an objective reason from the materiality of the product and its specific qualities, which supports such superiority in most of the cases. Advertising, this way, reveals the existence of a *semiotic production* which, as such, is inconceivable according to the parameters with which capitalist economy is usually analyzed –both from the liberal as the Marxist perspective. And this advertising statement allows access to a genre of capitalism, as we have seen, that has replaced the merchandise –whose exchange value is always supported, as Marx pointed out, by a certain use value– by some evanescent signs/merchandises, in continuous process of recreation and that self-generate their own value based on the expectation they arise in the market through the *imaginary significance* that advertising, among other mechanisms, gives them. And so *understanding* of advertising reveals itself as an invaluable instrument to reveal the keys that presides today’s capitalist economy.

And is by virtue of this double exemplariness as the efforts aimed at the understanding of advertising –radically distanced, as we have seen, of the attempts to include it within the category of respectable “sciences”–, which exceed by definition the instrumental and reductive vision that prevails in professional circles and tends to spread to the academia, are especially effective when it comes to understanding the whole of society from which it is part and the keys that preside its functioning. Understanding which is essential when it comes to tackling its necessary transformation, as demands increasingly urgently the systemic crisis in which, according to a large number of authorized voices, we are immersed.



## FOOTNOTE

1. Mercantilism in the sense that, as Marx himself established, the merchandise is the basic form of the productivist nineteenth-century capitalism.

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