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ADVERTISING AND MEANINGFUL STORIES

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Abstract: Starting from the premise that contemporary advertising is defined by a "literary turn", the paper proposes an investigation of the advertising stories from the perspective of Mircea Eliade's theory of the sacred and the profane. In the first part of the paper, I focus on the concept of storytelling, emphasizing also the major impact of new media on the manner in which we understand the advertising stories. Next, I discuss the most important aspects of Eliade's conception on the essential relationship between the narrative and the sacred, emphasizing the idea that the omnipresence of storytelling in the postmodern society is, in fact, stirred by this longing for meaning and for access to what is perceived as "truly real". Furthermore, the narrative core of advertising, understood in the terms provided by the theory the sacred of Mircea Eliade, contributes in a decisive manner at defining what Sheffieldd labels "the religious dimension of advertising".

Key words: advertising, storytelling, branding, Mircea Eliade, sacred, profane, myth.

1. Introduction

We are surrounded by stories, we have always lived like this, but today, more than ever, the stories find their way to us on many more channels and in more different forms. Whereas in a traditional society the stories are stable and shape the structure of the individual's own stories, as members of society and as individuals that live with each other, in the postmodern secular world, the fluid stories are bound to adapt themselves to the settings that are offered by the media. Nevertheless, the stories, regardless of the media through which they are transmitted, continue to fulfill, in fact, the same function, that is to say, to respond to the postmodern man's appetite for the sacred. And, in this vast territory represented by media culture, advertising is one of the most relevant, if not the most relevant, area for analyzing how symbolic structures are reintegrated into contemporary society and implicitly in the life of the postmodern individual. It has become a commonplace the idea that advertising has a special relationship with storytelling, being described as the "support of mythical speech" (Barthes, 1997, 252) or as a place where mythical structures are reactivated (Moraru, 2009, 21) in forms perfectly adapted to the world from which they emerge, preserving, at the same time, the core of the original story.

Even if advertising texts preserve the structure of a promotional message, in its essence, advertising does much more than simply promote a product or a service. Advertising "corrects the finitude of the object through the celestial infinity, and the pragmatic banality through the cosmic mystery." (Dâncu 2009, 207) And the most efficient way to achieve this is through stories.

The stories offer the opportunity to share the world and to humanise time, by the fact that the random events are encompassed in a story. (Kearney 2001, 4) Here we can find, in fact, the primary function of the story, since it offers the possibility of improving our relationship with time. (Kearney 2001) Mircea Eliade explores this essential dimension of meaningful stories when he says that the essential function of the myth is "the opening to and the reentering into the Great Sacred Time, by neglecting the profane historical time". (Eliade 1998, 28)

In "The Myths of the Modern World", Eliade says that, for archaic societies, "the myth expresses the absolute truth, because it tells the story of a sacred event, which took place in the sacred time of the beginnings, *in illo tempore*. Due to the fact that it is real and sacred, the myth becomes exemplary and therefore repeatable, the model and the justification of all actions." (Eliade 1998, 17)

Therefore, the myths hide the strong human desire to suppress time, to discover "the Great Escape – from death", (Kearney 2001, 6) a desire that is found, indeed, in secularized forms, also in the artefacts of media culture. The creations of the media culture codify elements that are linked to the deepest desires, fears, hopes of any human being, elements that in traditional societies belong to the myths. "Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into the human cultural manifestations. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic, ring of myth." (Cambpell 2008, 1)

The desacralisation of work and the placement of the man in front of the production band mark, at the same time, the exile of the myth which no longer dominates the essential aspects of life, but is repressed in the dark areas of the psyche, in the secondary, frivolous area of life. (Eliade 1998, 6) And what part of the individual's life seems nowadays to be more non-essential than advertising? A permanent and always blamed presence in our lives, advertising often shelters in its texts the essence of classic mythical stories, dressed in forms that are adapted to the postmodern world we live in, but which still give us the opportunity to "kill the time". This expression designates in Eliade's work precisely the possibility to brake the historical, profane time and to reintegrate oneself into the Great Sacred Time. The investigation, from this perspective, of the media culture artefacts already has an important and consistent history, and starts from the premise that "a myth is a symbolic, idealized representation of social reality to which is it organically related." (Asa Berger 2013, 32) When it is understood as a collective representation, the myth concerns all the aspects of a society. „Myths are part of this world of collective representations and are, like religion, social in nature in that we learn about them in the process of growing up in society." (Asa Berger 2013, 35)

Hence, the premise from which the paper starts is that many of the stories presented by the media culture hide a mythical core that makes them resonate with the "listeners." Without doubt, if we refer to advertising stories, this resonance is essential and, at the same time, raises extremely important ethical issues, which, however, do not make the subject of my analysis.

2. Advertising and its sacred objects

When advertising is addressed in terms of its religious dimensions, usually the focus is on the power of advertising to transform the status of an object, the manner in which the nature of the object is perceived and the relationship between the object and the consumer. Sut Jhally is one of the researchers that have a major contribution at defining the

meaning of the phrase "advertising as religion" (Jhally 2000). Jhally considers that the most suitable concept for understanding the cultural force of advertising is the fetish. His analysis focuses on the relationship between people and objects in an Marxist key, underlying that "advertising, then, as a discourse concerning objects, is dealing with one of the fundamental aspects of human behavior." (Jhaly 1987)

Tricia Sheffield proposes a different analysis of the advertising discourse, starting from Durkheim's theory on totemism, seen as "a body of ideas with explanatory possibilities for the understanding of contemporary advertising and religious beliefs". (Sheffield 2006, 34) In a framework determined by Durkheim's idea that every society constantly creates sacred things and ideas, Sheffield analyses the cultural force of advertising, whose totemic dimension explains also its power of presenting and imposing certain values and worldviews. (Sheffield 2006, 47)

By putting the totem at the center of her investigation, Sheffield identifies three main ideas that are relevant for applying Durkheim's theory to advertising. The first one states that the collective produces sacred things by means of the impersonal force of the society. Then, the object *per se* isn't sacred, but the community creates the idea of sacrality around the object and, as a result, it becomes sacred. The third idea states that even in an individualistic society, the individual acts within the group and this fluid movement between the individual and the society is fundamental for the mechanisms of advertising. (Sheffield 2006, 48) Accordingly, Sheffield says, advertising always refers to the consumer clan, a clan that is build on the commodity-totems that allows the consumer to become a member of that clan. Among the elements that are essential for the clan, Sheffield mentions the collective conscience, the guilt and the shame as powerful forces of the clan over the individual and, of course, the logo and the brand images that offer to the individual symbolic material needed in order to show his/her belonging to that clan. „By changing the object into a symbol for consumption, advertising sacralizes the commodity-totem and gives identity to its owner. By wearing this mark, one is given status and power in the group." (Shefield 2006, 94) Thus, in the reading key proposed by Sheffield, the cultural force of advertising is explained by the system of totemic symbols that unites the consumer through the transformed objects that have become sacralized. (Shefield 2006, 107)

Sheffield's analysis is very relevant also when we refer to the evolution of consumer communities, tribes or clans in the context of new media revolution, where "the linking value of the brand", rather than its utilitarian or hedonistic value, has become even more important than in traditional advertising. (Cova and Cova 2001, 67) The recent developments in communication technologies offers huge possibilities for the establishment of consumer communities, which are

defined by the presence of four major elements: a social network, one or more common denominators, a shared ethos and a common culture. (Schouten and McAlexander 1995)

This type of community is essential in social media advertising. However, I consider that the essence of the community cannot be explained solely by the force of advertising to transform the nature of the object by sacralizing it. In the following part of the paper, I will focus on the narrative dimension of the advertising texts, which has become the central element of the consumer communities.

3. Advertising and its stories

Brand stories are essential for the contemporary advertising and the process of creating these stories is extremely complex. The storytelling trend isn't new and great advertising stories have been told for decades, starting with the early '90 famous Benetton campaign. Yet, the digital era deeply changed the brand storytelling. One of the revolutionary elements in the evolution of brand storytelling is the growing involvement of the consumers in the process of creating these stories. As an illustration of this phenomenon, we can mention social media campaigns that focus, in fact, on stories told by the consumers. These stories usually tell the consumer's experience with a product or a service, but their key trait comes from the fact that they are personal stories, told by real people. While influencer marketing represents a major part of the storytelling trend in advertising, I consider that the aim of the paper is better served by mentioning the campaigns that present the stories of "common people" and their struggles, such as the Dove campaign #dadscare. Respecting the brand's philosophy that is built around the idea of challenging the gender stereotypes, the campaign presents tips and tricks coming from ordinary persons for dads to use in the relationship with their children. The Dove campaign is a good example especially because there is no reference to the product in the stories, only a short frame with the brand and the hashtag #dadscare, the key element of the message being the story itself and its insightful lesson and certainly not the product promoted.

In the following part of the paper, I will address the narrative dimension of the advertising texts from the perspective of what could be called, in Eliade's terms, the "mythological dimension" of advertising discourse. While advertising has an essential relationship with the object, or the commodity, the contemporary advertising discourse eludes this association in an effective way and, in my opinion, the concept of story plays a major part in the construction of this elusive mechanism.

The definition of the human individual as "homo narrans" (Lund et al. 2018) has never been easier to understand and to accept. Of course,

the story has always been a constitutive part in the human way of being, and during the recent decades the "storytelling movement" (Radner 2008) has achieved impressive results and has conquered various domains. The "literary turn" in corporate environment (Loudis 2018), for instance, is just one of the examples that prove that storytelling is "a good instrument in media communication, in motivational and leadership discourse, in public relations, publicity, marketing, brand communication, philosophical counselling and in all communication activities." (Frunză 2019, 130) Whether we refer to the "corporate storyteling" (Schönthaler 2018) as a technique meant to give soul to a business, or as the ability that could give our children the opportunity to change the world, (Zipes 2017) storytelling is ubiquitous and it certainly seems to remain so.

But the importance of the narrative is nowadays even more evident. There are, of course, many and very complex causes that contributed to this situation. Among them, the development of new media technologies plays a major part, especially because it essentially changes our relationship with stories; it offers the individuals the most efficient means to tell their stories and, at the same time, it offers to the public the possibility to enjoy these stories, in a way that avoids the limitations of the traditional stories.

Storytelling is nowadays an essential aspect in communication, many authors underlying the fact that there is the same line that connects the ancient myths and the stories that animate our postmodern world. Moreover, the digital culture is the scene of an impressive evolution of storytelling. This notable development is explained mainly as "a reaction to a new obscurity" (Schönthaler 2018) that characterizes an era in which we are overwhelmed by information, that is both too much and too abstract, storytelling techniques offering a much needed compass. At the same time, "digital societies rediscover myths with their role of telling about significant things for human life, they bring to our eyes the real, values and meaning." (Frunză 2019, 165)

One of the most impressive developments of storytelling techniques is found in the field of branding. (Mucundorfeanu 2018) Storytelling has become a constitutive element of branding, due to the fact that it can be the savior element in a world in which the consumer is flooded with advertising messages. (Moin 2020, 3) Whether we are referring to the story of the brand or to the stories told by the consumer, *via* social media, "stories become part of the logic of brand construction, whether it is the company brand, product brand or personal brand." (Frunză 2019, 131) Sandu Frunză addresses storytelling as an "instrument of self-discovery and personal development" and identifies three meanings of storytelling: a first one is related to the intense experience of storytelling, a second one is the

"metaphysical meaning" of storytelling, offering stories about the human being and its condition and, thirdly, the personal stories that tell the one's life philosophy. (Frunză 2019, 136)

4. The story and its mythical core

These little stories that still animate our desacralized postmodern world can be better understood by approaching them from the perspective of Eliade's view on the sacred. For Mircea Eliade, the sacred is "an element in the structure of the consciousness" (Eliade 1994, 6) that becomes manifest through the mythical behavior that is circumscribed by the myth, understood as "a true story that took place at the beginning of Time and that serves as a model for the human behavior." (Eliade 1998, 25) It is essential for Eliade's view on the sacred the idea that the sacred and the profane are "transitive categories; they serve as maps and labels, not substances." (Rennie 1996, 217)

The narrative has a privileged relation with the sacred, mostly because for Eliade the sacred is essentially interconnected with the myth. Especially in the modern society, the sacred is "present and active mainly in the imaginary universes" (Eliade 1984, 128) of the intense, "concentrated time" that is specific for theater and cinema. (Eliade, 1998, 28) Thus, the categories of the sacred are defined by the perception of what is considered to be "truly real". We go even further, and say that the sacred cannot be conceived independently of experience, "the sacred is constituted by the mode of perception rather than the contents of perception." (Rennie 1996, 216)

Since the sacred and the profane designate "two ways of being in the world," (Eliade, 1995, 15) for Eliade, the narrative plays an essential part in what he calls "the outbreak of the sacred in the world." (Eliade 1995, 37) Even in a secularized society, the time isn't homogenous, and the human being lives both in the historical, profane time, and in a sacred duration, *in illo tempore*. The modern man's ability to escape the historic time is linked to his relation with the imaginative narrative. As Bryan Rennie states, "imaginative, narrative creations of the human mind, which can be enormously increased by a being of infinite creativity, themselves become a conditioning factor in human experience, and one which is historically revealed to be of the greatest significance." (Rennie 1996, 224)

When addressing the presence of the myth in the secularized society, Eliade notes two significant facts that emphasize the essential relationship between narrative and the sacred. On the one hand, he considers that the passion of modern man for novels shows, in fact, the desire for "mythical stories" that are masked in profane forms. On the other hand, this need "seems to be consubstantial with the human

condition and hence irreducible." (Eliade 1963, 179) The same resistance in face of Time and the same hope to escape the "Time that crushes and kills" (Eliade 1994, 180) is found in the desire for stories of both the modern man and of the archaic man.

Therefore, as Bryan Rennie shows, Eliade characterizes modernity as "implicitly religious" since it doesn't definitively cuts the links with the religious, but has become the scene of "the triumph of a particular, concealed religious attitude of valorization of the empirical as the major manifestation of the real." (Rennie 1996, 220) And, given the fact that the sacred is perceived as the real and is expressed in myth, the passion of the modern man for the stories and their possibilities to reveal what is real and meaningful for the human being can be described as having a religious dimension and as having the main traits of the mythical behavior, namely: exemplary model, repetition, the rupture of the profane time and reintegration in the sacred time. (Eliade 1998, 25) The need to invest with meaning the daily life by means of various stories belongs to the same family as the myths of archaic societies. "A meaningful life is the result of a dialectical process that can be named as manifestation of the sacred." (Eliade 1994, 6)

The omnipresence of storytelling in the postmodern society is, in fact, stirred by this longing for meaning and for access to the real and the essential. In a manner similar to what Eliade calls "the living myth", the postmodern stories, in their various forms, provide models for individual's behavior and, thus, gives an image of what is meaningful and valuable in life. The idea of a meaningful and authentic human life intrinsically has a religious dimension. "In fact, man's becoming aware of his own mode of being and assuming his presence in the world together constitute a "religious" experience." (Eliade 1984, 9)

Beside the example of the cult of celebrities, of their mythification through mass-media and of their transformation in an "exemplar image", (Eliade 1963,184) Eliade mentions in the same category of the acts of the modern man that could be seen as "outburst of the sacred in the world", indeed, a desacralized world, "the rediscovery of Nature, the uninhibited sexual mores, the emphasis on "living in the present" and freedom from social "projects" and ambitions, etc." (Eliade 1984, vii). All these share a common element, namely the desire for the real, the meaningful, the authentic, or to put it briefly, for the sacred. Bryan Rennie capture the essence of Eliade's view on the sacred by describing it as "the intentional object of human experience which is apprehended as the real." (Rennie 1996, 21)

5. Advertising, authenticity and storytelling

As we already said, nowadays, storytelling is defining a major trend in communication. Everything and everyone has a story that

needs to be told and we are all challenged to tell our story. Moreover, new media, and especially social media are compelling us to become a story in a way that is, in my opinion, different from anything in the history of man. We all are *storiefied* (Loudis 2019), but even more significant for my analysis, is the fact that "storifying" has become one of the most important tasks of advertising.

We can easily say that, more than ever, advertising is nowadays shaped by storytelling. The number of papers, books, conferences that address storytelling in advertising is truly impressive and usually the key idea that transpires is that brand storytelling offers the possibility to "save the brands in the hearts of their customers who find meaning through brand experience, brand engagement and brand consumption." (Moin 2020, 3)

Storytelling techniques combine efficiently the rational messages and the emotional elements in a way that, in fact, aim to offer the consumer the possibility of a „transformative journey". (Moin 2020, 9) Moreover, one of the most important changes in advertising in the digital era, that is, the fact that the consumer becomes an active storyteller that share his/her stories with the others, contributes in a decisive manner to the shaping of the key trait of advertising storytelling that contrive to diminish the presence of the object in favor of the meaningful content and experience. This trend in advertising isn't something new since it was initiated by what Lipovetsky calls the third phase in the evolution of consumer society, (Lipovetsky 2007) its main mechanisms being revealed in analysis that have become classic, such as Baudrillard's or Barthes'. Yet, the conditions of the digital era and the evolution of storytelling, seen today as an universal panacea in communication, mark an essential shift in advertising.

I consider that Mircea Eliade's "ontology of the sacred" can offer a possible reading key that provides conceptual tools for understanding the core of this phenomenon. As we already mentioned, Eliade's account of the place of "homo religious" in the modern society is underlined by the assumption that "the sacred is an originary dimension of human being's mental structure." (Frunză 2019, 156) Besides, a key element in defining the complex and ambiguous concept of the sacred is, for Eliade, the idea of the real, of the meaningful and of the authentic that can be reached by the man captured by the profane, historical time through specific acts that disguise a mythical core. Therefore, the recent evolution of advertising communication is characterized by a prioritization of the narrative dimension of the message that can be understood in the terms of the powerful and meaningful stories that address the consumer's need for the "really real".

"It takes authentic people to write authentic stories", says an advertisement featuring Julia Roberts. The question that pops up here

is: what does *authentic* mean in advertising stories? An illustrative example is the controversial Nike commercial that presents, in 30 seconds, an episode of the story of the sexual scandal in which was involved Tiger Woods, in 2010. The commercial presents a single black and white shot of Tiger Woods looking into the camera, while the voice of his late father, Earl Woods, is heard saying to him: "Tiger, I am more prone to be inquisitive, to promote discussion. I want to find out what your thinking was. I want to find out what your feelings are. Did you learn anything?" An interesting element in the story of this ad is the fact that the audio of the commercial was taken from a 2004 interview in which Earl Woods was not talking about his son, but about his wife. (Goldman 2010)   To give an answer to the question if, in this case, there are "authentic people" telling "authentic stories" is not an easy task, given the fact that the characters are real people and the context is also real. This mixt of fiction and real could be better understood if it is placed in the category of the meaningful stories that we discussed in the precedent part of the paper.

The fundament of every efficient brand storytelling strategy is authenticity. Of course, there is a certain dose of irony in speaking about authenticity in advertising stories, or, as a matter of fact, in a postmodern world infused by the commercial logic. An useful insight on the matter is offered by Sarah Banet-Weiser who analyses this difficulty. She starts from the idea that the authentic is usually associated with something that cannot be commercialized, that is immaterial or that is linked to the inner self. Yet, Banet-Weiser shows that the postmodern society compels us to address authenticity in different terms: on the one hand, as a cultural space defined by branding, and, on the other hand, as the relation between the consumer and branding. The classic conflict between the two sides: the anti-consumerist side and the consumer-as-agent side does not capture the perspective that understands power as a dynamic process, as a contradictory force that defines "brand cultures who are ambivalent, often holding possibility for individual resistance and corporate hegemony simultaneously." (Banet-Weiser 2012, 12) This ambivalence marks also the concept of authenticity. "Within contemporary brand culture the separation between the authentic self and the commodity self not only is more blurred, but this blurring is more expected and tolerated." (Banet-Weiser 2012, 13)

6. Conclusions

Whether or not we are open to the idea of a reconfiguration of authenticity in terms of a brand culture, as Banet-Weiser suggests, we have to accept that the nostalgia for authenticity is a powerful presence in advertising storytelling. We can understand better the role and the

force of advertising stories, if we conceive them as stories that tell us something significant, meaningful, as stories that respond to "the audience's regressive wish for unveiling and simple truths." (Schönthaler 2018, l187)

What could be called the "literary turn" in advertising is defined by the capacity of the little advertising stories to transmit meaningful lessons and simple truths. We consider that the narrative dimension of the advertising text has become the aspect that defines contemporary advertising. At the same time, the narrative core of the advertising, understood in the terms provided by the theory the sacred of Mircea Eliade, contributes in a decisive manner to what is known as "the religious dimension of advertising" (Sheffield 2006). Even if this religious dimension is usually defined mostly by the magical power of advertising to transform the nature of the object, we consider that the role that storytelling plays in contemporary advertising can be conceived also in religious terms given the fact that, especially in the context of digital era, the advertising stories still respond to the consumer's need for the "really real".

The meaningful lessons and these simple truths are camouflaged within the commercial form, and yet they are received and acknowledged. Maybe this is one of the explications for the fact that the public usually overlooks easily the inconsistence between the brand stories and the concrete actions of the companies. Even when the public sanctions the ethical slippages of corporations, the stories doesn't seem to lose their power and continue to respond to the need for significant stories, so acutely felt by the postmodern man.

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