The ethical primacy of advertising rhetoric

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Abstract

What is the relationship between advertising and morals (this one as an object of ethical reflection)? Advertising does not depend on morality, but it can be moral or immoral. If advertising uses speech power to become effective, it is a rhetorical or a persuasive speech art requiring an ethical caution, because the goals are determined and do not justify the means. Advertising takes an ethical dimension, especially when it follows a cunning, fallacious or deceptive strategy. The topic of ethics is, *sic et simpliciter*, rational, dialectical and reflexive. Ethical issues are, as a rule, *aporias*. Thus, this paper focuses on a critical analysis of ethics in advertising and communication. The methodology is reflected in the conceptualization and questioning of advertising ethics as an aesthetic of rhetorical speech.

Introduction

> "We don't study ethics to know what ethics is, but to become ethical"
> (Aristotle, 1992: 1103b26-28).

The above quote from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* presupposes three significant and elementary aspects:

1) Ethical concerns date back to Greek Classical Antiquity and are related to rhetoric and policy, both arts or technical and social knowledge.

2) The study of human action basic principle have importance to social knowledge and practice, because ethics doesn't determines optimal behavior, doesn't analyze or make judgments, doesn't make the best decisions, but it is applied, i.e. it has to do with the exact life guidance, and so far it allows to live well.

3) Ethics lies on an essential element, the virtue (moral values in general) to the extent that virtue is the means to happiness, which in the end to be ethical is to be virtuous and that is sufficient and necessary to be happy. According to Aristotle, virtue is a habitual state driving the decision and establishing a useful relationship between virtue and wisdom to be virtuous (Aristotle, 1992: 1103b26-28; Santos, 2012: 17).

Concerning 1), Aristotle's rhetoric became a total art; it assimilates ethics which doesn't places efficacy in foreground, according to Philippe Breton (2002: 68). With the adaptation or transformation of the word into a technique to persuade, language passed through a technological and rhetorical omnipotence process. However, the use of this rhetorical technique (*tekhné rhétoriké*) must be associated to a specific ethics, in

accordance with Breton: "in fact, the word's technicization may be based on ethics and, at the same time, in a demand for effectiveness or lean in the search for pure efficiency at the expense of something" (2002: 69). The advertising messages are, in this respect, the product of the rhetorical technique, using text and image to become aesthetically more appealing and believable (Grunig, 1990: 8).

Regarding 2), ethics is not moral. While ethics is a critical reflection on moral and comes from the inner and from person's autonomy, moral comes from the outer and from everyday customs of social life: "moral has to do with actions committed by habit and customs in general, which favors the side on which the action is still foreign to the subject" (Renaud & Renaud, 1999: 960). Advertising can be amoral or moral/immoral. Advertising and moral are two distinct spheres. Unlike science, advertising's creative activity has no moral neutrality. Creativity establishes advertising as an artistic activity not depending on moral, i.e. it is amoral. However, it may be armed with morality or immorality. There is advertising with a moral sense, ethical concerns, practical teachings, but also immoral advertising.

With regard to 3), being ethical or virtuous and being happy are contiguous despite separating these two states of virtue and happiness. In certain cultures this separation is an unnecessary cleavage between following the virtue and the law (giving up being happy) and the pursuit of pleasure and success (instead of being virtuous). According to João César das Neves (2008: 20), in the first case, we may achieve goods of efficiency and effectiveness (the productive and professional success); in the second case, we may achieve goods of excellence (a full and meaning life) or the *aretê* to the Greek Classical Antiquity, i.e. "the attribute whereby something or someone shows excellence" (Barroso, 2008: 65). It is not through the first that something or someone is ethical; it is through the second case. Therefore, ethics has meaning if it is applied to everyday matters of practical life, i.e. as *phronesis* (practical wisdom), because it is not enough to know what ethical is if we don't practice ethics and become ethical. The usefulness of ethics lies in ethics and becomes *phronesis*.

In fact, the main issue is to know and to do what is necessary to become ethical in a given activity, such as advertising. Advertising is interesting for the application of ethics, because advertising is a communication strategy and technique that presents itself, as such, as a speech constructed by a complex structure, combining text (verbal signifiers) and image (iconic signifiers) to produce persuasive messages reported to a certain idyllic world. Advertising hyperbolizes itself when it proposes to solve all people's everyday life problems. This is the ingredient for the advertising's argumentative effectiveness.

In *De Officiis*, Cicero showed his disagreement about the above-mentioned cleavage between virtue and happiness. Cicero advised: "To all who intend to have a good career, moral philosophy is indispensable". Four issues are subordinate to this Cicero's advice:

a) The explanation ("to have a good career") through which it is recommended ethics is itself ethical?

b) Does ethics have place, for example, in the advertising or business fields?

c) What to do when being ethical harms one's career or business?

d) What is the *media*'s ethics for?

Ad primun, it is obvious that to achieve a good career we should learn the craft or the technique (e.g. Advertising, Public Relations, Journalism, Accounting, Finance, Management, Economics, etc.). Therefore, the reason alleged by Cicero in order to recommend ethics is not ethics itself (Neves, 2008: 7), because "to have a good career" has nothing to do with ethics. It is absurd to think that being ethical serves for to have professional success, because we have other ways (more direct, effective and few ethical ways) to produce the desired success.

Ad secundum, the question about the opportunity for ethics in the advertising and business fields is complex, because ethics should be present *a priori* in all human dimensions. Being ethical is to be naturally human, because "ethics is the construction of a life, a construction we do whether we like it or not" (Neves, 2008: 9). Being ethical doesn't means giving up on business success; it is independent of having a good career. However, it is clearly useful to be ethical and have a good career more than to be not ethical and have a good career. In general, ethics promotes to have a good career, according to Cicero. The justification for ethics is indisputable, because "ethics does not treat of the world; ethics must be a condition of the world, like logic" (Wittgenstein, 1979: 77, 1999: § 6.421).

Ad tertium, when we are being ethical and this condition damages our career or business, knowing what to do means knowing what is the right thing to do in a given situation in which we are involved. In this perspective, having ethical itching and moral concerns not only does not lead to the success but also difficult the success achievement. Having goods of excellence make difficult the achievement of goods of efficiency and effectiveness.

Ad quartum, the *media* fulfils the well-known public service, on the one hand, but the *media* cannot stop being economically profitable business (Camps, 1996b: 145). "The *media* are not altruistic non-profit groups as a non-governmental organization. The *media* are business with a healthy desire to cover expenses and to benefit economic greed", i.e. to maximize the benefits as any business goal (Camps, 1996b: 153). According to João César das Neves, "ethics has nothing to do with the definition of the optimal behavior, perfect management or unpolluted attitude. This is a fiction, whose usefulness has a tendency to be very doubtful. We are human beings, not angels. [...] Ethics is just the attempt to be good" (Neves, 2008: 10). The *media* are also startled by ethical concerns. Especially in a consumer society producing in excess and must sell everything it produces. Mass production creates the need to cause mass consumption, even if the products are useless, superfluous and without quality. To trigger this mass consumption, we have advertising and marketing, for example, both techniques of persuasive communication.

Ethics is, *sic et simpliciter*, a rational, dialectical and reflective topic. As a rule, ethical issues are aporetic and, therefore, this paper focuses a critical analysis of ethics in advertising and communication. The methodology is reflected in the conceptualization and questioning the ethics of advertising as a rhetorical speech aesthetic.

2. Ethics and rhetoric of advertising

Advertising is a strategic communication technique. The effective application of this technique intends the production and the use of certain connotations in persuasive messages. Such technique is a rhetorical technique, because rhetoric is the art of speech, the supreme good which gives freedom to who uses it and also gives domain over other people", as explained Gorgias, i.e. "the power to persuade through the speech" everybody (Plato, 1999: 452e). In general, rhetoric is "the ability to discover what is appropriate in each case in order to persuade" (Aristotle, 1998: 1355b). As in Greek Classical Antiquity, the social structure of current and complex societies is based on the ancient *versus* modern (or tradition *versus* modernity) parallelism. This parallelism leads to the resemantization or reconversion of the "ancient", as Roland Barthes admitted on the designated "ancient rhetoric" face the modern, stating that "the world is incredibly full of ancient rhetoric" (Barthes, 1987: 19). The essence of advertising is, *ab ovo*, to attract the attention, to stimulate the interest, to arouse the desire, to allow the memorization, to lead the action and to repeat the action. Therefore, advertising becomes an ancient and modern rhetoric technique.

Is not the modern world full of ancient rhetoric, as Roland Barthes said? Today, societies are more hedonistic; we have more distractions; it is more difficult to lead a contemplative and self-reflective life; there is an increased awareness about experiences fugacity and time shortage; there is an increasingly apparent dilution between "the private self" and "the public self"; the "screen culture" and the iconolatry proliferates in the public space, etc. For all this, it is necessary to reflect, to interpret and to discuss the building of that visual culture or "civilization of the image", according to Gilles Deleuze. This civilization is a "civilization of cliché", to which contributes advertising as a sophisticated modern rhetoric. The contents and forms of advertising, the products and brands advertised, the strategies and the speeches proliferation are social reproductions of this civilization. Advertising represents what a given culture values, uses and consumes, i.e. advertising reveals what it is: the homogenization of social values and moral principles, lifestyles, needs, and desires.

According to Chaim Perelman, "argumentation theory [...] covers the whole field of speech that seeks to convince or persuade, no matter either the audience to which it allocates or the subject on which it focuses" (Perelman, 1977: 19). In *The Semiotic Challenge*, Roland Barthes delimited rhetoric as a metalanguage, whose object-language is the speech. As poetics, rhetoric is a speech about the speech. Poetics and rhetoric involve several practices, since both are a technique or art of persuasion, a teaching, a science or proto-science, a moral and a social practice (Barthes, 1987: 20).

Advertising is a sort of rhetoric or persuasive speech art, because it explores speech potentiality to become an effective message. Assuming advertising rhetoric requires an ethical care in the use of this communication technique, given that the purposes are determined and do not justify the means. In this sense, it is better to assume the ethics or the applied ethics in the advertising.

Advertising takes a rhetorical dimension because it is an art and a technique: it is an art for the aesthetic or beautifying that makes the speech more seductive; it is a

technique for the speech persuasion. Advertising also assumes an ethical dimension, taking into account the strategies it uses to achieve intended purpose. However, the strategies can be cunning, fallacious or deceptive.

The main problem is to reflect on advertising's ethics and rhetoric. Both (ethics and rhetoric) have a match and an opposition. On the one hand, there is a match, because both are mutually implicated; there is no advertising language that uses rhetorical strategies or consent without the intent to produce meaning and to respect speech ethics. Ethics has no sense without linguistic forms to express it publicly. On the other hand, an opposition arises, because either advertising rhetoric or advertising ethics belong to distinct domains: the rhetoric belongs into the speech and meaning production processes with certain purposes, taking into account the *logos* (wide field of rationality and words use); the ethics belongs in the righteous ways to exercise linguistic *praxis*, taking into account the ê*thos* and the *pathos* (wide field of moral values and principles).

The rhetoric delineates strategies for speech production. The rhetoric belongs to the expressible field and it follows the maxim "the end justifies the means". The ethics is inherent to the *homo politicus* who shares culture patterns and lives in community. The ethics belongs to the inexpressible field. So, how to reflect on an ethical rhetoric? How to reflect on moral principles and values and self-interested and convenient public speeches production and use, as advertising?

In Aristotle's typological system, the works on rhetoric have the goal to produce effective speeches and, for this reason, they fall into the productive or poetic sciences classification; the works on ethics fall into the practical (or action guidance) sciences classification. Adopting Aristotle's view, these are the advertising coordinates, which have an aesthetic aspect (i.e. speech adornment, including text and image) and concerns about moral and social values (the use of a particular communicative rationality).

The role of moral principles and values on the public use of words connects rhetoric and ethics. The rhetoric has never ceased to be applied professionally, i.e. in its essence as speech art. Regarding properly the rhetoric as speech art, it is relevant noticing the practice of injustice related, on the one hand, to eloquence and, on the other hand, to people's character and the power to influence other people in fair decisions (Aristotle, 1998: 1372b).

The duty to use arguments that "cannot" be refused is shown in advertising messages, because these arguments are imposed to the addressees in a recognizable and acceptable manner. The arguments are advertised with appearance of irrefutability. The advertising message design seems a rhetorical artifact (i.e. it is meaningful, transmissible, rational, and directed to a particular audience) relies on the rhetorical perspective of a speaker who seeks to persuade. These procedures comply or not moral principles which regulate socially the language use? They should or should not be guided by ethical standards?

The relevance to associate rhetoric and ethics is justified by the idea of truth, which flows out sometimes from the principles governing advertising speeches production. Despite some arguments lean toward rhetorical speech production art or toward principles

and values of truth and justice, advertising messages deviate from this guideline in an accepted way, given the specificities of these messages that everyone recognizes as opposed to pure true information. Therefore, the advertising rhetoric is in opposition to the ethical ideals of truth, because it neglects the rules and procedures that lead to the good use of the argumentation, i.e., to the fair and accurate use of rhetoric to persuade.

Advertising language works as an object of consumption. For example, "The reason moved by choice" (Fiat) is a paradoxical slogan, because the inversion of the terms "reason" and "choice" is mediated by the word "moved". The aim of this slogan is not to tell any truth; it is to persuade. The persuasion process confuses intentionally the meaning. Advertising generate meanings using strategic confusion. For these reasons, there are some ethical issues related to the role and social influences of advertising, especially nowadays, the proper time for the spectacle's triumph, global market liberalism or, as noted Giorgio Agamben, whatever the name one wishes to give to the process dominating world history today, such as "the alienation of language itself, the linguistic and communicative humankind, the *logos*" (Agamben, 1993: 62).

Agamben's advice is against the emerging society of the spectacle; a global period in which communication appears as an ideology of modernity, whose most obvious consequences are the crisis of values and the losses of humanity, sociability and, paradoxically, communicability. According to Agamben, "what prevents communication is communicability itself, men are separated by what unites them" (Agamben, 1993: 64). There is a sort of a human linguistic alienation, to which advertising also contributes.

This linguistic disconnection or new *homo comunicans* alienation is due, in part, to these times of excess of communication and pretended knowledge. According to Victoria Camps, the current political and social systems are converted into a "mediacracy" dominated by a "fast culture" and "fast thinking" or ready-to-think new elite (Nietzsche 1998: 228). A new elite specialized in consent and consensus manufacture, as Walter Lippmann (2004: 134) had already warned in 1922.

3. Communication ethics

One of the most interesting fields of contemporary ethics is the objectivity and plurality post-metaphysical, particularly linked to verbal communication or discursive interaction. In this field, the purpose is the ethics objectification and its extension to all areas, including all forms of life and the environment itself.

The focus of ethics turned from the subjectivity of human nature to the internalization of reason. This ethical turn was made possible through the employment of human self-awareness, which follows the rule generated by it. The idea of an ethical self-awareness goes back to Greek Classical Antiquity, as it was previously stated when I mentioned the Aristotelian ethics about what is estimated as good (*eudaimon*) and it ended with the solipsistic, monological and intimate Kantian ethics. Regarding to the latter ethics, the Kantian one, the person imposes on himself a code of conduct in a way it may become universal rule, i.e. valid rule for all persons. With Kant, deontological ethics concerned to moral rules is focused on what is imposed as obligatory, the "good will" (Kant, 1992: 21).

The mentioned ethical turn is a caused by the modernity and secularization of life (e.g. the loss of moral values), which overcame the metaphysical (cosmic) and theological (based on divine principles) model and brought the reason as the only foundation of ethics (based on principles of the self-legislator freedom). Ethical norms are no longer natural and theologically heteronymous and became rationally autonomous, i.e. imposed by the reason on itself, as Kant argued with the concept of "goodwill", pointing out the grounds of the categorical imperative as a norm of morality.

After Aristotle and Kant ethics, a new kind or model of ethics imposes itself as practical wisdom (*phronesis*), causing another ethical turn: from a mentalist ethical model (in which consciousness or reason are the core of principles that should guide moral action – the moral person is a conscious person) to a linguistic ethical model (in which learning to use words leads to a way of thinking, acting and organizing the world). This latter model is relevant to be subsequently approached on this text, because the ethical turn takes place from the individual consciousness and goes to the inter-subjectivity and communicative interaction. This linguistic ethical model advocates the idea that through the words we make the interpretation of things, we communicate and understand reality.

Language is useful not only to express thoughts or feelings, but also to act socially, albeit to communicate is already *per se* to interact, to produce actions. To communicate is a form of acting; and advertising, while a rhetorical technique of communication, exponentially represents this ethical requirement through its purpose of persuading to sell, i.e. to use communication as means to an end: to sell the product or the brand. The rhetorical technique becomes a powerful tool to colonize people's minds, being far away from the ancient ideals of its republican genesis, because this is the meaning of Nietzsche's expression about the rhetoric as an art essentially republican (Nietzsche 1995: 27).

As a communication technique, advertising informs, but this is not its main purpose. The information is an instrument for the influence or persuasion process; to inform is not an advertising goal. The purpose of advertising is to persuade to sell, "to influence and cause a buying behavior" (Breton, 2002: 59). Sometimes, it creates spurious needs and desires in people, fostering an increasingly post-modern or secular, hedonistic and consumerist society. The advertising "models the consciences", in so far that it "conveys itself a consumer society and mass culture defense" (Breton, 2002: 60). Advertising can be based on a given dominant sensibility in the culture where it runs to make the promo-message more effective. For example, the concept of "portugality" exploited by Sagres (beer) and Gallo (olive oil) brand advertising.

However, more than a commercial communication technique, advertising increasingly places itself as a sample of moral values of a given culture or society. This circumstance puts advertising under a severe and careful ethical scrutiny.

The principle of ethical universality is based on a universal pragmatic perspective with consensus requirements, i.e. an actuating perspective over all participants to whom the norm has ethical value. Jürgen Habermas developed this idea of universal practical reason inside his theory of communication which he called the theory of communicative action. This action is social. The good and justice are two complementary values and

both play an active role in life. It is communication that inter-relates persons and become the link between universal rationality (ethicity) and everyday life (contextualization).

Modern rhetorical techniques, such as advertising, built a speech production and emission new elite, forming a "mediacracy". If we add to this idea what Habermas, for example, he said in his *The Theory of Communicative Action* denouncing the economic, political, and social colonization of our life, it is emerging, following Habermas advice, to refuse and to resist colonization in order to preserve life from contamination.

The communicational issue (or the so-called communicational paradigm) is a mark of modernity and it has been emerging. First, because it has interest at a present time of technological change; second, because it implies, as always, communication as a basic condition for social life. According to Habermas, "the orders of legitimacy regulating social relations, the available knowledge in interactions, and the socialization process generating individual identities are all shaped" from communication (Habermas *apud* Esteves, 2003: 40).

Habermas distinguished between communicative action and strategic use of language, based on the demand (i.e. on the strategic action) of interlocutors through understanding and influence (Habermas, 1984c: 181-183). The strategic action is the one in which a speaker uses his interlocutor as an instrument to accomplish a specified interest (and not just to communicate) through an utterance. For Habermas, "there is only communicative action when the interaction is focused on valid understanding and the participants of the dialogue harmonize unreservedly their illocutionary purposes" and get consensus (Magalhães, 2010: 155).

This is a global social action theory, in which the action is located within an interaction based on rules grounded in communication. For this reason Habermas is interested in the universal models of action, which structure the linguistic communication as a set of saying and doing (i.e. the pragmatic universal). There is a dual feature of communication: a) the communication is directed to the production of agreements for consensus; b) the internalization of coded ideological forms causes systematically distorted communicative forms in the person (Habermas, 2003: 24; 1984b: 278). Therefore, the general assumptions for rationality and truth should be grasped in the communication relations framework, in order to distinguish the distorted communication from the authentic communication. Advertising is at the heart of the ethical issue, because it is both a technical rhetoric to persuade and a practical activity to sell, regardless the means and strategies used.

Communicative action is guided to understanding and it is eminently a social action. Habermas defined society on the basis of rational communicative acts linking interlocutors. These acts are guided in view of an agreement or success (Sfez 1995: 12). Therefore, communication is at the heart of social links. Given these assumptions, understanding processes are accomplished and some actions are intended according to certain preferences and interests (Habermas, 2010b: 21).

Habermas's theory of communicative action points out the ethics of the speech and the universal practical reason. Habermas's intention was to build a moral perspective forming a judgment or impartial and universal ethical principle without being a sort of single imperative as Kant proposed. This ethical principle or judgment would be a

reference point or observation parameter to evaluate, judge and discuss the validity of moral norms (Rasmussen, 1991: 60-62).

Unlike Kant, who argued an universal principle of action, starting from the person itself imposing to all other persons a maximum to become universal law, Habermas argued the person should submit his maximum to all other persons in order to his intention for universality be examined and discussed (Pegoraro, 2006: 146). The turn is from the Kantian formalism (which prescribes that we should act in such a way that our action becomes a universal maximum) to the Habermasian linguistic formalism (which prescribes the individual presents for analysis, discussion and validation a contested individual norm which should become universal and consensual.

Habermas' ethics of discourse is an ethics of formal procedures for the "formulation of a universal principle of justification or validation of moral norms" (Pegoraro, 2006: 139). This principle would be universal due to the language which transcends both time and culture boundaries. It is a dialogical ethics, because it emphasizes understanding and consensus among interlocutors through the mediation of language and discursive rationality regarding to the truth, as well as considering the context of interactions mediated by language. Habermas intended to resolve any argumentative conflicts between speakers and to present the basis for a conciliatory regulation for the conduct and social practice. The existing and conflicting moral norms can be converted into valid norms accepted by all, i.e. the argumentative construction of a universal consensus. In this sense, it is also the case of a methodological ethics (it is fulfilled as such) and constructive ethics (it is built by the participants themselves to resolve conflicts and build consensus), so it is completely inadequate comparing to advertising discourse's field of intervention and influence.

Habermas' ethics is designed on the discourse. In its turn, this discourse must be true or, at least, have the aspiration to state the truth. Therefore, language always involves two basic conditions: i) rationality; and ii) reference to the truth. The advertising discourses do not follow these two basic conditions nor should, because they would move away from its essence if they did, since they exclusively intend persuade to sell.

Advertising cannot commit the procedure proposed by the universal pragmatics, because it does not justify the communicative rationality with validity aspiration in the ethical discourse. The ethical discourse is always based on reality, because it is the result of a pragmatic universally built with the participation of all moral agents, i.e. of all elements caused by a given culture where they live and belong.

Contemporary societies are increasingly dominated by a specific logic, the one of the instrumental reason. This logic has a strategic nature and also has interests and discussions on practical issues. In this strategic field, the attempts to persuade are through fallacious and favorable rhetorical procedures, regardless the truth or the validity criteria, omitting the facts that contradict the argumentation. We may verify these communication strategies in advertising and marketing, both totally uninterested and apart from the truth, the validity, and the communicative rationality.

In these cases, how do we apply or to follow an ethics of discussion if such ethics

is harmful and contrary to the intended persuasive strategy? It would not be possible, because the ethics of discussion is deliberately counterfactual (Santos, 2012: 260). Such ethics is indifferent to the intention, even if the intention is good. Therefore, if the message says something contrary to the validity principles of communicative rationality, without respecting the argumentative game rules, the discourse is not invalidated or collapsed.

4. THE ADVERTISING'S SECULARIZATION

In the subliminal advertising, certain messages with indirect and inconspicuous public influence are hidden in others presumed innocent, casual and fleeting messages. The most recent example was the Samsung's advertising message in an apparent casual situation: Ellen DeGeneres's selfie during the Hollywood Oscars, a live ceremony broadcast for all world. DeGeneres took a selfie with a Samsung device as part of an advertising deal with ABC. It was not a spontaneous act, as it intended seems to be, but an adverting strategy for Samsung, a product placement masked of innocence and spontaneity.

The manipulation in the media field is a serious ethical problem, which cause large-scale effects because it is mass communication. For example, the "advertising without borders", according to Gilles Lipovetsky designation (1989: 247), continues to invade new spaces and take new and artistic cloths from art and cinema, more and more visible and influential. "If it is true, as Séguéla says, that the 'real' advertising follows the star-system methods, it is even more true to say that it is a structured communication, like fashion is, more and more under the spectacular, the appearances personification, and pure seduction dependence" (Lipovetsky, 1989: 251).

Advertising is not only performed in the consumption field; it also raises awareness before certain problems, leading to the change of social behaviors, such as alcoholism, drugs, road safety, etc. Advertising impress and guide certain moral attitudes and behaviors. However, it is not a totalitarian or doctrinal manifestation (Lipovetsky, 1989: 260). Advertising "influences without threatening, it suggests without intending the doctrinal domination, it works without Manichaeism or blame" (Lipovetsky, 1989: 260). Advertising diffuses norms and ideals not too much practiced. "Advertising does not undertake the complete redefinition of human race; it explores what is in embryo, making it more attractive for more people" (Lipovetsky, 1989: 261).

Advertising messages are effective, because they have a persuasion power and a vast area of influence. Having such power and influence requires an ethical reflection on its effects. However, this reflection is not always performed, because advertising is submitted to the market logic. Even so, advertising activity has not the responsibility to guide morality or ideology, to redefine social values and cultural patterns or alter human nature itself. If there is a persuasion and influence power, there is necessarily a target to cause effects and an impact.

A signs of secularization lies in the means used to convince. The means depend on the dominant values in the society where they are used. According to Victoria Camps, "secularization privatized or individualized everything", insofar as "everything is relative,

including those values our culture and our tradition conceived as universal" (Camps, 1996b: 61). Therefore, we live in a given confusion where our own moral values become relative, subjective and less credible.

Living in a democratic system and in an information society paradoxically means the existence of more freedoms, more processing and dissemination of information, more plurality of media and mass-media messages and more transparency of media activities, but also more strategies of consciousness manipulation.

However, the power of advertising is relative, because "advertising only has effective action on the accessory and the indifferent" (Lipovetsky, 1989: 261). According to Lipovetsky, given the messages superficiality, "advertising itself is merely a surface power, a sort of power's degree zero, once it is measured by the individual existence yardstick" (1989: 261).

Advertising does not annihilate the public space of discussion and criticism, but it can amplify false values, it can release certain references and celebrities into circulation, making alike the superficial and the deep, standardizing desires, uses, tastes, fashions. Advertising has the strategic power to redefine lifestyles centered on what it promotes: consumption. "Advertising helps to declassify the ethics of saving, favoring the ethics of spending and immediate enjoyment" (Lipovetsky, 1989: 264). Advertising inseminates a hedonistic culture and become an individualization agent, accelerating the search for personality and new forms of expression.

In his book entitled *A L'Ombre des Majorités Silencieuses - La Fin du Social*, Jean Baudrillard identified a collective requirement for new forms of expression, culminating at the end or death of the social (the social vacuum) and, by contrast, the masses' apogee: "the masses scandalously resist face this rational communication imperative. We ascribe meaning to the masses and the masses want spectacle. No effort is able to convert them to the content's seriousness" (Baudrillard, 1982: 15).

5. Conclusion

How is it possible to report a persuasive and paid lies, which is sometimes visible in advertising messages? It would be absurd to normalize a characteristically rooted widespread practice around the lies, insinuation, manipulation, excess or exaggeration, omission, distortion and attack the competition. The means and ends, lies and truth, good and evil, fair and unfair, information and commercial advertising or ideological propaganda, image and voyeurism, public and private belong all to the same problem field and are hybrid social practices.

The informative advertising (a sort of infomercial, i.e. a portmanteau word mixing information and advertising) is an example of the permanent development or improvement of cunning strategies and new insidious forms of media power abuse. The infomercial is a pernicious hybridism, because it is, in essence, always some advertising, not respecting the journalism newsworthiness criteria of impartiality and objectivity. In this case, the obligation and need strategy to sell creates sensationalism and misleading headlines.

Charles Taylor pointed out this new ethical paradigm. In *The Malaise of Modernity*, Taylor presented three diseases of modernity: i) the individualism and the loss of collectivism; ii) the predominance of the instrumental reason over the critical reason; iii) the decrease of political participation or abstention (Taylor 2009: 19-24). These three malaises of modernity stimulate a narcissist, conformist, and dependent post-modern culture. The source of morality is within the person, according to Taylor, and it allows the intuitive distinction between good and evil.

In *Paradojas del Individualismo*, Victoria Camps argue a noncommunicable society, although communication is the cultural paradigm of the twentieth century and technique makes communication very simple: "The ability to communicate is a value of our century, a value that probably took the place of the illustrated values of progress and reason" (Camps, 1996a: 143). "The communication society is not more supportive or more affective" (Camps, 1996a: 21). If the media, paradoxically, "do not let us to communicate, but, on the contrary, to isolate ourselves in our own world", as stated Victoria Camps (1996a: 21), the ethical question arises when we investigate whether the media should be used for what they are used.

The post-modernity is the hallmark of Western capitalist societies, in which deep changes in mass behaviors are visible from the 1980's. The concept of "post-modernity", first presented by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979, in his book *The Postmodern Condition*, claims the modern paradigm disbelief, culminating in the illegitimacy of ideals, utopias, mega-narratives, precepts and imperatives of duty. Another neoliberal and amoral paradigm arises, that of the mass production and consumption, industrialization and neo-liberal technology, indifferent individualism and neo-Dionysian hedonism powered by free spectacle, seduction and immediate pleasure.

Advertising is shown in multiple social fields and it is omnipresent in everyday life in an irrefutable way. It is so, mainly in the denominated cultures, societies and markets of masses, where the level of production and consumption of material goods is increasing. The public of advertising is credulous, thoughtless, suggestible and impulsive. The call of trends and impulses becomes easier. The public is impulsive and easily adheres to the message (Uceda, 2001). The discourse of advertising is an "*ortho-doxy*" concerning desires and sensations.

In the advertising, the contents and forms of language are increasingly sophisticated, due to psychology and sociology contributions to influence consumers' behavior. The text and image are adapted to get the ability to influence human unconscious and stimulate desires, besides both "carrying cultural messages that determine behaviors to the exposed individuals" (Verissimo, 2008: 18). The public buys the product and consumes the sign, as Baudrillard warned. This sign is based on the brand image of the acquired product and it is the image that consumers want to express about themselves. Advertising uses and shows positive images of life through an optimistic, seductive, sensual, and attractive speech around satisfaction and pleasure feelings, ideal models and social stereotypes to follow and to imitate, as if it were a believed collective fantasy. According to Baudrillard, "the most interesting and current aspect of advertising is its disappearance,

its dilution as a specific form, or simply as a *medium*. Advertising is not anymore (has it ever been?) a means of communication or information. [...] If the merchandise was in a given moment its own advertising (there wasn't another), today advertising has become its own merchandise" (Baudrillard, 1991: 116).

The disappearance of advertising is justified by its dilution as a specific form of communication or a simple *medium*, as it would be or should be. Baudrillard argues that there is a structural and essential advertising transition, from *medium* of communication and information of merchandise to merchandise, i.e. advertising becomes its own merchandise.

Advertising is confused with itself, because the strategies it uses, e.g. eroticism, are indicators of what is advertising itself. Advertising is a *medium* transformed in its own message, i.e. in itself, narcissistically. Advertising is merchandise and, therefore, it is submitted to the market laws, such as searching advertising because it is itself what it is.

Therefore, from this perspective, it is meaningless to evaluate or believe in advertising, because its messages have no longer an external content to transmit and advertising become itself an unbeliever, ideological and capitalist product. Advertising obeys the social logic of consumption, being itself a product or service of consumption.

The advertising discourse is always the result of an intentional speech act, which was the subject of a detailed study before being transmitted, i.e. a pre-defined plan, a deliberate strategy to make it more persuasive and able to influence the target. The advertising discourse is not innocent. The fundamental goal of an advertisement is not just to show or to inform about a product or a brand; the goal is to provide a motive or reason to buy.

Umberto Eco also argued an examination for advertising communication through which the focus should be shifted: "on the one side, there are several semantic configurations, while object of inquiry, that begin to interest us as iconograms; on the other side, there are open perspectives defining a hypothetical visual rhetoric" (Eco 2001: 156).

Between rhetoric and ideology, the immediate parallelism comes up with a different relationship: communication and culture. That is, communication is to culture as rhetoric is to ideology. "Reading some advertising messages has a dual function: on the one hand, it indicates how one can articulate a map for advertising codes; on the other side, it shows how semiotic analysis, when it involves the Other from the universe of signs which is the universe of ideologies, overcomes the 'formalist' limits that seems to be proper and began to contribute for a wider discourse involving (as a correct semiotic discourse, and not overcoming the semiotic discourse) the situation of a society as a complex" (Eco 2001: 157).

For Umberto Eco, the advertising technique seems based on the assumption that "an advertisement would attract more spectators' attention as more it violates the acquired communicative norms (and subverts a system of rhetorical expectations)" (Eco 2001: 157). Following several codes (iconographic, taste and sensibility, rhetorical, etc.) the advertising communication is based on the proposal of taste archetypes that fills expectations in accordance with a current sensibility.

According to Umberto Eco, a responsible advertiser with aesthetic ambitions will always try to make his appeal through original solutions. He would look for genius recognition attached to the advertised product, causing sensation of pleasure, identity and satisfaction to the consumer (Eco 2001: 157). Eco identifies the importance of emotional and aesthetic components for advertising, including the figures of speech or rhetoric, to cause effects.

A critical case concerning the use of advertising images causing controversial effects, shock and ethical discussions was Oliviero Toscani, the photographer of United Colors of Benetton between 1982 and 2000. Toscani explored the concept of "shock" on certain taboos (e.g. homosexuality, racism, AIDS, sex, etc.) that have nothing to do with the product (Breton 2002: 60). In this case, does ethics was kept in mind or helped to advertise or to sell the product? No, because the opposite happened, the primacy of rhetoric over ethics and the brand got what it wanted: brand positioning and brand awareness.

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