Sensory Storytelling, a Current Tool of Communication in Advertising

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Abstract: Through the concept of sensory storytelling, we enter a field of communication still insufficiently explored, but which allows us to find out how advertising discourse is organized and works in a way as close as possible to reality, even if the mechanisms that compose it are not always understood by consumer, but are well directed by those behind the scenes of advertising. The analytical categories of the advertising narrative text, partially addressed in studies of general narratology and advertising semiotics, confirm the importance of narration in advertising communication and the deepening of the process of storytelling for the senses so that the message is persuasive.

Keywords: *sensory storytelling, advertising, narrative text, communication, narratology.*

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1. Introduction

The present communication about sensory *storytelling* in advertising proposes a new approach in the analysis of communication in the field of advertising. In order to successfully fulfil the persuasive function in this field of culture and communication, we start from the premise that the iconic message needs a narrative textual support, even minimal, made possible by the presence of narration as a current communication tool in formulating the advertising message. If the study of advertising is not a new concern for researchers, the study of advertising narrative could be considered a topical one, especially since the stories, experiences, testimonies transposed in narrative text seem to enjoy a privileged place in contemporary advertising communication. Moreover, we are interested in the narrative texting of the senses in advertising, the product of this interaction can be called *sensory narration* or *sensory storytelling*. By this concept we designate the syncretic product resulting from the interaction between “possible narrative discourse” (Genette, 1972, p. 11) and senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste).

The importance and topicality of the proposed topic are related to the growing interest in the use of narrative in advertising, especially in studies aimed at the effectiveness of the advertising message, concerned with identifying new methods of argumentation and persuasion in relation to the consumer. Narration, frequently used lately in advertising, but not only, but also in management (as Christian Salmon shows in his 2008 paper, *Storytelling, la machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*), is a field open to research, especially if we focus on the sensory relationship and the impact of this syncretism (narrative + senses) on the receiver.

If in the field of advertising the image-sound couple enjoys a special attention from researchers, the narrative does not yet benefit from a major interest in this cultural field, although it has been the subject of study since antiquity (Plato and Aristotle). Advertising semiotics studies analyse in depth the typologies of signs and codes transmitted through advertising materials, directly related to the language and reading of images and sound, considered to be the main means of communication in this field. In addition to the advertising image, however, the text in its narrative aspect also participates in

the fulfilment of the advertising discourse. Being a form of communication with an essentially persuasive purpose, advertising will act especially on the consumer by awakening his senses, not only through image and sound, but also through text, story. Hence, this major type of advertising narrative, which we call *sensory narrative*, which depends on the meaning of the text or how the sense is put in the text (visual, auditory, olfactory narrative, etc.).

2. Advertising narrative in contemporary research

Just as there is a visual identity of advertising, there is also a narrative identity of it, which includes the advertising text in its narrative aspect. Narrative in advertising or advertising storytelling is still insufficiently explored, although approached in narratology research by authors such as Mieke Bal (1985). This is probably explained by the fact that advertising, as a cultural product of contemporary society, convinces mainly through image and sound, its narrative side being less aware of the consumer, although the narrative text of the message is strategically thought each time the sender of the advertising message, whose predominantly persuasive role remains indisputable.

By studying the advertising narrative text, we bring advertising and narratology into a common field of analysis and interdisciplinary at the same time, that of communication. The analysis and description of the advertising narrative text could start from the models of narrative discourse theory offered by Gérard Genette (1972), Tzvetan Todorov (1971; 1975), Roland Barthes (1964), Mieke Bal (2008), among others, to identify strategies for constructing the narrative or at least redundant and constitutive elements of such a type of text in advertising, without penetrating the deep structures of the story and the abstract logic of the narrative discourse, as they are treated in the works of the Russian formalist school (V. Propp, Greimas, Bremond, etc.).

Moreover, the notion of *sensory narration* with application in the field of advertising is not yet the subject of any analysis in the literature. However, the *sensory component* of advertising is already receiving the attention of researchers such as J.J. Boutaud (2005), as well as the *narrative aspect* of advertising discourse (Adam & Bonhomme, 1997; Charaudeau, 1983; Peninou, 1983, 1972; Riou, 1998; Salmon, 2008). However, the concept of

sensory narration is based on major works by four researchers: Genette (who refers in Figures III, more precisely in the chapter “Metonymy to Proust”, to the importance of taste sensations in triggering involuntary memory based on the *metaphorical relationship*, that mix of analogy, contiguity, transfer and metonymic irradiation), Mieke Bal (who proposes the concept of visual narration), J.M. Adam and Marc Bonhomme (who offers in his work *L’argumentation publicitaire. Rhétorique de l’éloge et de la persuasion*, 1997, an overview of the semiotic approaches to advertising in the second half of the twentieth century, as well as a description of the procedures of advertising rhetoric, speaking of a *visual and verbal rhetoric* in advertising) and Christian Salmon (who, in his work *Storytelling, la machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*, 2008, proposes the concept of narrative marketing). In addition, the work of researcher Mieke Bal, *Naratology*, published in 1985, gives us an overview of the basic structures of the narrative text and a more complex approach to it, including in the analysis the figure of the reader and the importance of culture in interpreting the narrative text, thus encouraging the study of narrative to other areas, such as advertising.

In addition to famous names in the semiotic analysis of advertising, such as Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, Jean-Michel Adam and Marc Bonhomme, we also list some names of contemporary researchers who have explored sensory advertising, but from a semiotic point of view: Yves Krief, Georges Mounin, Jean-Jacques Boutaud, Andrea Semprini. We find therefore that the authors of studies of advertising narratology are reduced in number, mentioning here some names with authority in the field such as Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman, J. Courtes or Christian Salmon, or Francoise Revaz.

The analysis of the sensory narrative text in advertising still remains an open field for research.

3. Sensory storytelling and its discursive functions

Although we have not identified in the theoretical framework studied so far a definition of the term *sensory narrative* in advertising, we will define this concept as the syncretic product resulting from the interaction between “possible narrative discourse” (Genette, 1972, p.11) and senses

(sight, hearing, tactile, smell, taste) which depends on the intended sense of the text or how the sense is put into the text (*visual narrative*, identified by Mieke Bal, for example, *mixed sensory narrative*, which combines several senses giving rise to a vocal chromatism that Genette talks about in *Figures*, 1972, p. 69 etc.). Moreover, depending on the relationship between advertising and narrative, three types of relationships can be established: *narrative relationship* (refers to the involvement of narrative in advertising discourse), the *sensory relationship* (refers to the involvement of the senses in the advertising narrative) and the *dialogic relationship* (refers to the opening of the advertising narrative to the world external through the functions that narration or *storytelling* fulfils in relation to the receiver).

Regarding the structure of the *sensory narrative* in advertising within the *narrative relationship*, it is based on the elements of the narrative text identified by Gerard Genette in *Figures III: récit* or narrative utterance, story, text, narrative discourse that relates an event, *histoire* or *diégèse*, meaning or narrative content and narration or producing narrative act.

As for the “*possibilities of narrative discourse*”, they are defined by Genette (1972) as “particular cases, predictable and deductible combinations” of elements that make up the work. Moreover, starting from the grammar categories of the verb identified by Todorov, Genette (1972) distinguishes the main analytical categories of the narrative text: the temporal relations between *récit* and *diégèse* (between story and history), modalities (forms and degrees) of narrative representation, where a key concept it is the focus or point of view and the narrative courts (reporting to the subject of the utterance and the involvement in the narrative of the court producing the narrative discourse).

Regarding the *sensory relationship* and the ways of realizing the sensory narrative in advertising (rhetoric, involvement of actors and effects produced), it is necessary to report on key concepts used by Genette in 1972, such as metaphor and metonymy, *metonymic relationship* (analogy mix, contiguity, metonymic transfer), with the concept of *sensory narration*, *minimalism* and *narrative amplitude* (with reference to the size of the advertising narrative text, concepts identified by the researcher Françoise Revaz in 2009).

As for the *dialogic relationship* in which sensory narration is engaged in advertising, we evoke here concepts such as *sequential diversity* of the story (evoked by Yves Reuters in his work *L'Analyse du récit*, in which he proposes a differentiation of the sequences of a narrative text in relation to the function on which has it at the level of discourse: narrative, descriptive, explanatory, argumentative, injunctive or performative sequences, which invite action and dialogues, based on the exchange of remarks (2012, p. 82), *narrative marketing*, as a contemporary sales technique (Salmon, 2008, p. 42, p. 224) or the concept of *intertextuality* (necessary to explain how the advertising narrative fits into a culture and to highlight its relationship with other narrative forms, written or oral, which precede or which it imitates, therefore, to describe its relationship with the external world or openness to the external universe, etc. (Genette, 1982).

4. Story and senses in the advertising of some brands

If sensory marketing is a concept that already underlies contemporary advertising, storytelling sublimates advertising communication, involving the senses and transposing them into the story. Contemporary advertising is increasingly taking into account this persuasive communication strategy. In fact, advertising discourse has at least three ways of promoting the qualities of a product: by associating it with a particular brand, by associating it with a certain territory, or by inscribing the product in a “possible world, most often in a universe of narrative nature” (Revaz & Pahud, 2012, p. 52).

The empirical field of identification of such narrative structures that provoke the senses of the receiver describing the taste, smell, sounds, visual or tactile sensations can be easily identified in advertising materials of well-known brands, some luxury, which already have a legend behind them, a story, some even recent, but notorious. To exemplify, we will evoke here an example of Chanel 5 advertising, as presented on the company's website, selecting an excerpt from the 32 commercials that tell the story of the house through the story of 32 perfumes. Advertising for perfumes, made by Chanel is relevant in terms of narrating the smell. The fragment we will show below is part of the advertising spot for the legendary Chanel 5

perfume, created in 1921. The story of this perfume opens on the house's website the book with success stories of perfumes created by Coco Chanel, the narrative sequences being impregnated here with descriptive sequences that transpose the olfactory sense into the story: "(...) a woman's perfume, with a woman's scent. (...) Coco Chanel appeals to Ernest Beaux, creator of perfumes at the court of the countries. Ernest Beaux will go in search of inspiration beyond the Arctic Circle, in the freshness of the lakes of the Great North and in the warmth of the Midnight sun. The seamstress (Chanel, n.d.) encourages him to have more audacity and to put more fragrance of jasmine, the most precious essence. May rose, Haitian vetiver, ylang-ylang, sandalwood, orange blossom, cocoa beans from Brazil; he (Ernest Beaux) composes for her (Chanel, n.d.) a bouquet of more than 80 scents, an abstract perfume full of mystery, without a dominant note, but with an intoxicating floral richness. (...) Chanel 5 has become an icon of the twentieth century. He entered the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1959. (...) For the first time Chanel 5 invents a new way of communication in the world of perfumes (...)” (excerpt from the Chanel 5 perfume commercial, in free translation from French, cf. Chanel.com). Obviously, the communicative strategy to which this narrative sequence refers, it has a direct relation to the conquest of the receiver's senses through storytelling, to their capture in the narrative text for persuasive purposes.

Another relevant example to exemplify the concept of sensory storytelling can be identified in narrative sequences presented as commercials of La Maison du Chocolat in Paris (relevant advertising for texting taste through video - movies posted on the website of the house, but and on 4 social networks simultaneously). This time, the narrative sequences reproduce the aromatic taste of chocolate, provoking the senses of the receiver in the sense of arousing his interest to taste: “Taste is the ONLY LIMIT: (...) Nicolas Cloiseau ingeniously nuances the finest types of cocoa to reveal them in a few grams of chocolate. In his art of mixing, only the balance of taste matters. (...) The characteristic alchemy of cocoa beans is revealed in exceptional ingredients. The sensations follow one another in shades and length in the mouth without ever masking the chocolate. *My creations are born from a long series of combinations around the infinite shades of*

chocolate. I extract from “my library of sensations”, nourished by discoveries and encounters. Sometimes a simple detail is enough”, concludes the story of Nicolas Cloiseau, the master chocolatier of La Maison du Chocolat – Excerpt from an advertisement on the website of La Maison du chocolat in Paris, in free translation from French (n.d.).

5. Conclusion

Through the concept of sensory storytelling, we enter a field of communication still insufficiently explored, but which allows us to find out how advertising discourse is organized and works in a way as close as possible to reality, even if the mechanisms that compose it are not always understood by consumer, but are well directed by those behind the scenes of advertising. The analytical categories of the advertising narrative text, partially addressed in studies of general narratology and advertising semiotics, confirm the importance of narration in advertising communication and the deepening of the process of storytelling for the senses so that the message is persuasive. It remains to be seen, however, whether the analysis of the narrative text in the advertising field is subject to particular challenges, already anticipating the existence of constraints related to space and time that could condition the dimensions of the advertising narrative text differently. We refer here to a certain minimalism of the advertising narrative, in general, and of the sensory narrative, in particular, due to the conditionings determined by the space and time reserved for advertising, but also to the (trans) media involvement in transforming the message, so the narrative text from this domain. But, beyond these conditionings, advertising is, as Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy say in the book *L'esthétisation du monde*, “a poetry of the street”, which awakens a “new spirit”, being considered the “most creative, the more daring field” of life (2013, pp. 249-260).

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