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ADVERTISING, GENDER STEREOTYPES AND RELIGION.  
A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** Feminist authors claim that many of the advertising messages are promoting stereotypical images of the genders. However, if in social sciences, gender stereotypes have been facilitated and enforced by religious ideologies, the connections between gender stereotypes in advertising and religious ideologies remain to be investigated. The purpose of this paper is to analyze these connections.

Using the tools and methods of philosophy of communication, the paper attempts to emphasize a double discourse of advertising: an external one that derives from existing religious ideologies, and an internal one that borrows the structure and elements of modern religiosity. If the first one is enforcing the gender stereotypes, the second one is more innovative and less related to stereotypical images of genders.

When advertising is approached from the perspective of philosophy of communication, its most conspicuous aspect is its narrative dimension. One way in which narratives of advertising are constructed is in the form of myth. We can see that, in some circumstances, advertising has a function similar to myth, or includes structures of depth coming from the world of myth or of religion understood in a broader sense. The power of those elements is derived not from the realm of merchandise value, but from the one of traditional mentalities and cultural representations. In order to illustrate my research on the relation between gender, religion and advertising, I choose a sample of ads, that I analyze using the tools of philosophy of communication. Thus, my research has led me to a nuanced understanding of the relation between gender stereotypes and religion in advertising.

**Key Words:** advertising, gender stereotypes, cultural representations, myth, narratives, religious ideology, philosophy of communication

## Introduction

Nowadays, advertising has become a global phenomenon having critical influence not only on commercial communication, but also on political or intercultural communication.<sup>1</sup> Both prior and simultaneously to its emergence as global structure, advertising is a phenomenon of daily communication, having a major impact on community life, and important consequences for interpersonal relations at a local and regional level, and an extraordinary integrating power over extended cultural regions. The influence of advertising is significant at any level of human behaviour analysis, action, mentality or worldview. The force that shapes advertising is better highlighted, on the one hand, through the negative influences it may have on consumer behaviour, especially through the phenomenon of addiction that it sometimes generates. On the other hand, a different dimension that gives prominence to the role of advertising is the field of ethics, the types of moral valuing, and the ways in which self image and the image of others is perceived or exploited through ethical lenses.

At this particular level, advertising has a major impact, because it belongs to the field of persuasive communication, whence it borrows the impact this type of communication exert upon human beings. In this paper, I will not contemplate upon the many forms in which ethics is relevant for understanding advertising from the perspective of philosophy of communication. I will rather discuss the way in which religious language and gender stereotype become visible and significant from the point of view of the above-mentioned philosophy.

Several features of advertisements emphasize them as particularly important aspects of the new media culture. Even since the 1970<sup>th</sup>, ads were everywhere. As Judith Williamson convincingly depicts:

“They are ubiquitous, an inevitable part of everyone’s lives: even if you do not read a newspaper or watch television, the images posted over our urban surroundings are inescapable. Pervading all the media, but limited to none, advertising forms a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence and an immense influence”<sup>2</sup>.

Nowadays, their presence does not seem to diminish, but rather to increase<sup>3</sup>. Having in mind this omnipresence of advertising, commercials are analyzed from a variety of perspectives and disciplines. Without neglecting the importance of other approaches, in this paper I wish to emphasize the perspective used by the philosophy of communication. Here I am considering a meaning of philosophy similar to that of Briankle

G. Chang, who states that “philosophy, always opposed to the occult or concealment and in favor of open exchange of bright ideas, is therefore always and already communicative in that it does not, and does not have to, enter into communication; it does not enter into communication because it is already in it.”<sup>4</sup>

For various categories of people, certain commercials can be depicted as offensive<sup>5</sup>, and they often capitalize on taboo subjects such as religion or sexuality. As already stated, my aim in this paper is to explore a connection which has been overlooked among specialists: namely, the connection between religion and gender stereotypes in commercials, using the tools provided by the philosophy of communication. In social sciences, gender stereotypes have been facilitated and enforced by religious ideologies.<sup>6</sup> Comparably, very few authors have attempted to discuss any similar connection in the case of commercials.

### Advertising narratives

If we approach commercials from the perspective of philosophy of communication, the most conspicuous aspect of them is their narrative dimension. Apart from other aspect, advertising are stories about merchandises and brands, but also stories about the creative agents who produced the brand messages and, increasingly significant, stories about and for the people who consume the products and the advertisements. Their narrative dimension is especially visible in commercial videos that are structured as theatrically organized mini-stories.

Narratives have been studied in recent years from a variety of perspectives and have become a buzz word in disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, anthropology and history. In this paper, narrativity interests me from the perspective of philosophy of communication that analyzes the commercial communication, language and imaginary which it generates.<sup>7</sup>

At the crossroad of linguistics, psychology and other social sciences, Merrill identifies three ways in which narratives are used by scholars to investigate scientific problems:

“The first is the general tendency to view narrative as a formative mechanism in the construction of self and reality. The second addresses ways narrative is conceptualized in terms of linguistic features, including structural and formal qualities, and how these features are studied in relation to social interaction. The third theme addresses how narrative is understood and employed as a method of social research.”<sup>8</sup>

All these three aspects are useful for an analysis of the advertisement: ads are more and more often analyzed in relation to self-construction and the production of reality; the structure of ad language can be helpful for analyzing them; and both features are important from the perspective of social interaction.

When discussing narratives, a fact that can be easily overlooked is their supposed objectivity and matter-of-fact-ness. What does an advertisement depict is as important as what it doesn't, and it always reflects someone's options. Narratives are not neutral discursive forms, claims Hayden White, and therefore history and fiction are not opposite binaries: "narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspects as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications"<sup>9</sup>. When applying this to commercial advertisements, if nothing else, a version of the ideology of consumerism is embedded in them. However, apart from it, various ideological commitments (either spelled out or more subtle, either intentional or unintentional) may be deciphered. And those ideological commitments belong not only to their creators, but more important, they belong to the consumers: "advertisers conventionalize our conventions, stylize what is already a stylization, make frivolous use of what is already something considerably cut off from contextual controls. Their hype is hyper-ritualization."<sup>10</sup> Narratives of advertisements are particularly powerful because they establish connections between the world of people and the world of merchandise or, more recently of brands. This is the way one should understand the statement of Judith Williamson: "advertisements... provide a structure which is capable of transforming the language of objects to that of people, and vice versa."<sup>11</sup>

One way in which narratives of advertising are constructed is in the form of myth. We refer here to the structural analysis of myth introduced by Levi Strauss. The myth is essentially a story, an inaugural story that connects various types of elements (human, animal, natural, supernatural). According to Levi Strauss, myths are particularly helpful to the society because they mediate between opposing binary categories (such as life/death, us/them, nature/culture)<sup>12</sup>. Following Levi-Strauss and Leymore's perspectives, Serra A. Tinic<sup>13</sup> adds that advertising represents the capitalist society's equivalent to traditional mythology. This explains why all relations, irrespective of their level (interpersonal or intercommunal) are mythically shaped. By borrowing either the structure, or the mythical signification, advertising draws the line such as "fundamental problems of dichotomies such as we-they, life-death, war-peace, happiness-sadness are mediated by advertising."<sup>14</sup> This is exactly why analyses such as those of Marchand and Tinic, integrating elements from anthropology and communication theory, single out the importance of the mythic-symbolic explanatory force of advertising. Advertising works not only as an expla-

nation system of reality, but also as a way of highlighting the discursive practices that build, affirm and strengthen the social structures.<sup>15</sup> An additional position is that of Leymore, who states that advertising is similar to the myth, because it contributes to the demise of anxiety at individual level and of its accumulation at community level. One is mentioning here the contribution of myth and advertising as constitutive factors for an existential therapy offering solutions to problems at the level of human condition.<sup>16</sup> Apart from one's customer behavior of the advertising consumer, the buyer purchases not only a product, but also an image attached to it. Most often, the image is accompanied by the illusion of life improvement, of a perceived prosperity, and even of the belief in something better added to life and to existence. Aiming at perspectives related to the primal nostalgia, the present-day wellbeing and the faith in a better future, advertising has a huge power in society, even when we neglect the evidence of it.

The powerful emergence of advertising influence is also connected to its generalized presence in public space, with aggressive pervasion in the private space as well. The commercials dominate the public space; they overflow it in various forms: banners, posters or more unconventional types of display. Ads also occupy large amounts of the broadcasting times on all types of screens (TV, PC, tablet, smartphones, etc.). Advertisements are "central to the entire political economy of the media"<sup>17</sup>, conditioning the types and contents of TV shows or newspapers columns. Moreover, advertisements over-impose themselves on various cultural events and artifacts, some authors claiming that in doing this, commercials end up mediating the mere access to culture<sup>18</sup>.

The other trait of commercials is the type of persuasive message they transmit. In an interview from my research, I have asked: "What is specific for ads, in relation to other types of messages, to the news for instance, or media stories?" One of my interviewees, RS answered: "Compared to other ways of processing information through mass media: ads are messages designed to persuade you"<sup>19</sup>. Commercials are skillfully and creatively designed to transmit a promotional kind of message, which tries to persuade the consumers to purchase various types of commodities.

A separate but connected function of advertising is to create (new) significations, a feature that is crucial for Judith Williamson: "it has another function, which I believe in many ways replaces that traditionally fulfilled by art or religion. It creates structures of meanings"<sup>20</sup>. The meanings are articulated inside the narratives. Advertising creates structures of meaning, similar to the myth, which also creates structures of meanings. This is exactly where a nuanced discussion on the relation between religion and advertising may intervene. The possibilities are countless: one may start with the idea that there could be no connection between the commercial spirit of advertising and the ethical and spiritual aspirations of religion; or, equally valid, one may attempt to find elements

of the religious imagery that are able to carry the messages of advertising; one could even be tempted to locate similar structures and specific functions that both religion and advertising can provide, in order to fulfil the sweeping needs of human beings. These structures are present and highlighted in the narratives; and respectively deconstructed and reconstructed departing from the narratives.

Several contemporary authors speak about a trend very present in contemporary advertising which seems to detach itself from the product it tries to sell, as well as from the direct interest of persuasion. As Naomi Klein puts it, much of the contemporary advertising purposefully eliminates direct references to the product and emphasizes the character of “super brand” and its symbolic connections. Naomi Klein explains that these new “super brands” rather stress the adhesion of fans that are cultivated and seduced. The product dissolves itself in the “brand”/“super brand” that is able to speak the language of values, feelings, symbols, asking for loyalty from the part of consumers the same way in which a church asks for the loyalty of its believers or to that of football clubs’ fans<sup>21</sup>. To illustrate such a trend, the favorite examples are the super brands, such as Nike, Coca-Cola, MacDonalds<sup>22</sup>.

According to Serra Tinic, one of the first brands who purposefully separated its ads from its products was Benetton. Benetton is, to this respect, emblematic for the controversy generated by its provocative campaigns. It did so by using strong images (hinting at provocative political and social issues), transgressing the genres of advertising, images that did not depict any Benetton products, they only displayed their logo. The Benetton campaigns from the 1990s closely resembling the public service announcements, with a twist: by displaying side by side a social issue and a corporate logo, the campaigns decontextualize the issues and turn them into commercials:

“In contrast to the public service announcement, Benetton’s incorporation of social dilemmas, removed from their usual “context,” is seen as a design feature to attract public attention to the company and its goods. In the case of United Colors, social issues become commodities.”<sup>23</sup>

Recontextualizing and tempering a particular type of message brings us in the area of the way gender relations are depicted in advertising. Thus, feminist authors from different periods claim that many of the advertising messages are promoting stereotypical images of the genders<sup>24</sup>, by reducing women and men to exaggerated, simplified, and gender-biased hypostases and by assigning women and men to fixed and rigid social roles (women as happy housewives, men as experts, women as sex symbols, men as authority positions).

The issue of gender stereotypes is extensively discussed in theoretical papers, in codes as well as in juridical documents. Although there is a vast literature on stereotypes in general and gender stereotypes in particular<sup>25</sup>, we prefer to use the term following the meaning of the EU Parliament Resolution 2012/2116, titled “Elimination of gender stereotypes from society”<sup>26</sup>. This document is essential for all the levels of communication, and is expected to have a special impact especially over the educational programs from the communication field. According to this Resolution, academic programs from the communication field should mandatorily include the gendered dimension of communication. Especially in the field of media and advertising, a greater sensitivity for gender issues is required. Although the EU Parliament Resolution does not offer an exact definition of the phrase “gender stereotypes”, the meaning may be derived from the text - hyper-sexualisation, (sexual) objectification, maintaining rigid gender roles. We use the document because it attempts to advocate the case against gender stereotypes, thus elaborating on the notion of a (purely) negative and reductive image of a stereotype. The European document is also of interest because it focuses on various aspects of social life (politics, education, media & communication, advertising, work). It aims, among others, at eliminating negative gender stereotypes in advertising and using creativity in advertising to promote non-stereotypical gender images.

More recent advertising (post 1990s) has been described as more violent concerning women (for instance, using such techniques as “cropping”, or “mock assault”<sup>27</sup>), but at the same time promoting a new stereotype of a “new superwoman” who is combining all characteristics “intelligent, accomplished, effortless beautiful, a wonderful hostess and perfect mother who also holds down a demanding professional position”<sup>28</sup>. Most real women are doomed to fail if compared with this model. At the same time, contemporary advertising has incorporated a tamed version of feminism into one of its niches - namely, the “commodity feminism”<sup>29</sup>, which attempts to offer a parodic version of feminism, devoid of all critical content. In addition, recent ads objectify not only women, but also men, and try to overpass any difficulties by using irony and post-modern self-referentiality<sup>30</sup>.

## Religion and Gender in Advertising

With that in mind, in cultural interpretations, one oftentimes tends to support the thesis that there is a strong connection between traditional religious views and gender stereotypes, but one needs to be reminded that the connections between gender stereotypes in advertising and religious ideologies remain to be investigated, and this is what this paper attempts to do. I wish to emphasize from the very beginning the very diffuse meaning of religion, when one attempts to connect it to advertising. I have

discussed in the past the differences and similarities between religion and spirituality<sup>31</sup>, which I want to present now as difference between religion and religiosity. Religion in its strong meaning refers to religion as a visibly social institution (church, synagogue, mosque, temple, etc.), as religious community of the faithful, as a collectively organized institution. The second meaning is closer to the individual spirituality, being of diffuse, diluted, postmodern religiosity, however, touched by the sacred (in the form of symbols, icons, traces). Both meanings are dealt with in this text, and one can find multiple relations with advertisements. A third intermediate meaning between religion and religiosity is the notion of “religious imagination”, in the sense developed by Schmalzbauer. As he describes the construction of a Catholic vs. Evangelical imagination in the media, he refers to several features of each religion that, being borrowed from the religions themselves, are nonetheless symptomatic for many believers and transcend the religious environment to become visible in media stories<sup>32</sup>. These features are schematic and idiosyncratic, and do not erase the divergent pluralism manifested by various believers. The notes of Schmalzbauer are of great importance for the realm of advertising, where various feelings generated by products may be depicted as loosely “religious” in the sense of being a product of a “religious imagination”, or even an “imagined religion”.<sup>33</sup> I do not intend to further develop these lines, because I am not discussing here the issue of religion from a philosophical perspective, but rather the issue of advertising in the framework of religion/spirituality/religious imagination. Because the issue at stake here is not religion, but advertising, I have decided to use an encompassing sense of the manifestation of the sacred, and circumvent it under the loosely term of “religion”.

In my research concerning the relation between gender, religion and advertising, I have selected a sample of ads (videos) from professional websites (IQAds, AdAge, Creativity Online)<sup>34</sup>. I have selected for analysis a total of 20 videos. All videos have elements that can be related to religion/spirituality/religious imagination and characters that, from a gender perspective, may be labeled as either stereotypical, or innovative. The analysis was qualitative, using the tools of the philosophy of communication<sup>35</sup>.

One advertising campaign perfectly illustrating this controversial doublet - religion/gender in advertising is the famous Benetton campaign from the 1990s “Priest & Nun”<sup>36</sup>. Here, two characters, wearing monastic clothes displaying Catholic features – a young priest and a young nun are portrayed involved in a passionate kiss. The interdiction, taboo element is suggested by the angle of the photo: the man is almost flipped, his back directed towards the viewers, while the woman is half-section. The facial features of the couple are partially hidden, especially the priest’s ones. However, if their position could be perceived as offensive from a religious standpoint (they broke twice the vow of chastity, and visually suggest, by

kissing while wearing black and white, the idea of a married couple), from the perspective of gender relations the image fits perfectly the stereotypical imagery: the woman is obviously shorter, thinner and younger than the man, she is situated in the background, and her facial features are more visible. Her face suggests total abandonment – closed eyes, lips offered to kiss, the head slightly tilted back (“licensed withdrawal”, using the terminology of Goffmann<sup>37</sup>), while the posture of the man suggests control (the gesture is top down, the posture is more restrained, and his facial details are almost invisible).

Whether such an ad is effective or not is still subject to debates in the literature<sup>38</sup>, however commentators attempt to understand why such campaigns bring out extreme reactions, from international acknowledgement to banning the ad<sup>39</sup>. The type of advertising introduced by Oliviero Toscani at Benetton has been labeled in various ways either as “shock-vertising”, or “ideological advertising” or even as a mixture between “advocacy advertising” and “controversy advertising”.<sup>40</sup>

An ad that seems to have a direct reference to Benetton “Priest & Nun” is the Coke Light “The Priest”<sup>41</sup>. The ad, however, did not provoke a similar reaction between religious authorities.

The commercial depicts two good-looking characters: an attractive young man getting out of the sea and a young woman wearing a mini dress, who is visibly attracted by the man and, meanwhile, cools herself with a Coke Light dose. The sizzle of the dose gets the man’s attention, while the camera follows alternatively the mutual gazes of the two characters, intensifying the visual elements of a sexually driven tension: the tensed muscles of the man, his gestures while dressing up, the sensual gestures of the woman (who looks obliquely, bites her lip, slightly pulls up her skirt over her thigh). When the man finishes buttoning his shirt, the white collar reveals him as a (Catholic) priest. The woman looks disappointed, but tension arouses again when the man gets closer, touches the Coke dose and uses the water to sketch a cross sign on her forehead. The clip takes a playful standpoint both for religious elements (the cross sign is made with the help of the Coke dose, the priest collar is juxtaposed to the blue jeans) and for the gender ones (both the woman and the man are simultaneously subjects and objects of the gaze – not only the woman is object of the gaze, but also the priest). Here, both gender stereotypes and religious ideologies are simultaneously affirmed and contested – the woman resembles the superwoman stereotype – conscious of her beauty and sexuality; the male character is object of the gaze, cropped, judged and objectified by the female gaze, the way usually women are looked, and the end is ambiguous – their final touch is both ritualic and sensual.

A commercial differently mixing religiosity and gender stereotypes is Coca-Cola’s “One World, One Game – The Brazilians from Caracal”.<sup>42</sup> The first clip is part of the Coca-Cola campaign for the World Cup Championship of Brazil– Everyone is invited<sup>43</sup>. The campaign took

different supporters from far away communities and invited them to assist live at the Championship. The community of Caracal presented in the clip is a rural community beyond the poverty threshold. The video is filmed in slow motion, with ample images that depicts the sheer poverty, the domestic universe of the main characters. Religion is a constant presence in the clip, both the institutional version (Virgin Mary icons, crucifixes, etc), and symbolic religious images (the pigeon as symbol of the Holy Spirit). However, the “true” religion of the main characters is football. Many authors have emphasized the symbolic-religious values of football, speaking about the resemblances between the football fun and the faithful of a religion<sup>44</sup>. In this movie we can see the way characters transform themselves, transfigured, the football is a sort of Messiah that liberates them from the mundane problems. Football makes them forget about daily struggles, makes them forget about the prejudices, racism as well as poverty or sufferance.

The image of the brand attempts to capitalize on these religious features of the football game, by emerging as a *deus et machina*, a savior that takes them out of the prosaic reality and promises them the fulfilment of a sacred dream – actually attending the World Cup from Brazil. If the clip is rich in religious references, it also upholds gender stereotypes. Thus, all the male characters are outgoing, active, appear in outdoor activities, playing football and having a great deal of fun, whereas the few female characters that appear are all dressed up traditionally and are involved in performing domestic chores – they assist men in packing their suitcases, prepare the meal, carry stuff, dance, or are simply young and beautiful. The said community is depicted as a traditional one, with rigid gender roles, especially in what concerns women.

A second clip from the same promotion campaign of Coca-Cola, mixing religiosity and gender stereotypes is “One World, One Game – Ramallah, Palestine”<sup>45</sup>. If the first clip is enforcing the gender stereotypes, the second one, from the same Coca-Cola campaign, is more innovative and less related to stereotypical images of genders. Here, the community depicted comes from Ramallah, Palestine. The clip is constructed on a reverse stereotype, that of females players in a feminine football team<sup>46</sup>. The trainer is a man (thus not so anti-stereotypical after all), who declares himself impressed by the girls’ commitment to soccer. Two girls, the main characters in the clip, declare to be motivated to change the world they live in with the help of football, seen as “a fundamental need”. One of them claims football is similar to oxygen, thus vital. Football plays the same role as savior as in the previous clip (The Brazilians from Caracal), only this time liberation comes from social, religious and gender stereotypes. In the first part of the clip, older women speak about gender restrictions that are religiously driven. Official religion (Islam) is verbally and visually referred (the veil the older women wear). The clip however attempts to insist on the political element (the unclear status of the

Palestine region), the religious element being dissolved in the political one. The brand is once more integrated in the messianic, *deus et machina* narrative: women manage to transcend their condition and accede to the World Cup.

Another clip that is fully integrated within the narrative “football – a new religion” is FOCA – Football religion<sup>47</sup>. The product advertised is a beer that claims it has obtained juridical recognition for football fans, as an official religious cult. This will allegedly help supporters to enjoy all the benefits of religious believers, including that of skipping annoying meetings with their boss for going to a football game (and drinking the promoted beer as well). The clip distribution is all-male, although the supporters come presumably from both genders. The clip reinforces the connection football-religion, sequentially displays images with men involved in religious activities (prayers), displaying religious outfits (such as chipa), entering religious institutions (churches, synagogues, mosques) and extending this connection to the brand as well (described as “the holy water of football”).

In these commercials, one can note that gender stereotypes are present, in the same way as in traditional cultural communication. Although they cultivate stereotypical images, they do not become apparent, or they can be ambiguous (as the Coke Light “The Priest” example). However, one can find commercials that, through the lenses of an ethics of advertising, can be considered offensive. Offensiveness as a feature connected to gender and religion in advertisements may be a feature that leads not only to breaking the deontological rules, but also to breaking laws of advertising.

One possible example is the commercial “Hot Girl vs. Zombie - An AXE Halloween Horror Film”<sup>48</sup> where the brand is AXE, which is well-known for its campaigns depicting foolish women losing their minds after hot supermen spraying themselves with the product<sup>49</sup>. This particular video clip emphasizes the same image of feminine stereotype, sustained by references that ideologically belong to religion. The characters are one attractive woman and a male-looking repulsive monster. The clip is a sort of parody of the cultural cliché *The Beauty and the Beast*. During the first part of the video, the atmosphere is inspired by horror movies – night, sleep, darkness, the terrifying sounds of the hunting between monster/heroine. The religious elements are the symbolism of the zombie, the living dead, a character found at the threshold of two worlds. He rather mobilizes a diffused religiosity, with accents of B-type movies. The male zombie is the anti-hero type (often used in the AXE ads) who attracts the woman’s attention as soon as he gets the miraculous spray dose. The female character is perpetuating the stereotype of the irrational woman who cannot resist the miraculous odor, even if it comes from a monster. The caressing and passionate kissing of the two characters with its horror-comical accents (such as the falling of the zombie’s arm) are the signature

mark of “the AXE effect”, of transcending the fear and disgust towards mutual love, after the miraculous odor was sprayed.

In another example, the brand is Libresse, and the clip is “Libresse Pink Ticket”<sup>50</sup>. The clip presents a series of female characters who behave crazily and enthusiastically in some of their most intimate moments (at toilet), after finding a winning ticket in their menstrual pads. The stereotype is that of the hysterical woman, who does not care about norms or social conventions when she enjoys herself. The women are depicted displaying a kind of ecstatic, mystical effusion that cannot be controlled or tamed. At the same time, apart from the mystic imagery, the commercial conveys the idea of social taboo, concerning the type of behavior that is admissible in situations when control and discretion are rules. The woman who crashes the shelves above her head or gets out of the toilet without her underwear represent social taboos, perfectly illustrating the image of a whimsical woman who is an irrational creature, dominated by her feelings. As George Hari Popescu ironically comments:

“Is it a vulgar ad? Is it one without inhibitions? What does it matter? The campaign euphoria and the enormity of the price make us apply cognitive dissonance. The new generations from the advertising industry are exhibiting themselves because they are freed from red and encountered pink”.<sup>51</sup>

In these ads, one can see gender stereotypes enforced and strengthened by a certain religious imaginary; however, the research led me to another nuance of the relation between gender and religion in advertising. There is a category that may be labeled “non-stereotypical commercials” that are not displaying negative gender stereotypes. An interesting example of non-stereotypical message with a religious flavor is the one from the promotional clips of the festival Anim’Est from 2012<sup>52</sup> and 2013<sup>53</sup>. In the first commercial, the main character is a shepherd who finds out the image of Jesus when he cuts his onion. At first, the shepherd is skeptical and tries to get rid of the image by continuing to cut the onion, but the image does not disappear, but becomes even more miraculous, starting to tear (a typical trait of a miracle-working icon) and the character abandons his skepticism by displaying a faithful behavior. The subsequent year, the second commercial continues to develop the topic of “miracles”, by showing a handful of people who queue and pays for the privilege of getting their own icons out of various vegetables. A new skeptic appears, this time portrayed by a woman bringing a jar of jam. Although initially the shepherd is disconcerted, as the miracle seems to vanish, it is brought back when the shepherd has the idea of cleansing the knife over a slice of bread, on which a new biblical image is formed (Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus). The woman abandons skepticism and falls on her

knees, copying the attitude of the shepherd from the first commercial. It is important that, during the two commercials, both religious fervor and skeptical disbelief are democratically shared by the two genders, neither of them being favored or discriminated. One possible principle of differentiation could be the image that materializes – Jesus on the cross for the shepherd, Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus for the woman. However, as Jesus already appeared twice (once in a potato and once in cabbage) to other characters, before the episode of the jar, one could speak here more about the diversification of the religious imagery than gender differences. Although the rural universe could seem to lead to a stereotypical approach of gender, the makers of the commercial preferred a non-stereotypical approach.

### Instead of Conclusions

The presence of myth, ritual, religiosity, spirituality, or any other element that could be associated with the sacred or the religion proves to be significant from the perspective of a symbolic thinking that builds representations with a special persuasive appeal. This thinking is rooted in archetypal thinking and in its remnants at the level of deep structures, belonging to human condition. The types of archetypes that, according to Mircea Eliade, are to be found in diminished, hidden or degraded formats in contemporary life<sup>54</sup>, manage to enter via advertising in the main communication stream. The existence of traditional roles, of stereotypical representations, of basic schemes for valorizing the world, all of these and many others, may be ascribed to a heritage that comes from the global religions, enter into the sphere of ideology and from there are taken over by the commercials. On the one hand, one can note that the introduction of elements connected to the sacred is done ideologically and, on the other hand the identification grid and the interpretation of their presence is not made from a religious, but rather an ideological standpoint. In order to understand the relation between gender and religion, one is always situated on the field of ideology and its ambivalence. Ideology is rarely regarded as neutral; more often, it implies a positive or negative engagement<sup>55</sup>. The same goes for the way in which mythical, religious or symbolic structures are perceived in advertising. They can be used in a negative way, or may be valued in a positive one. One may find here, always involved, both an existential and an ethical dimension.

This duality is perpetual – whether it is linked to the ambivalent character of the sacred, or the existential duality implied by the sacred/profane dialectic. The duality manifests itself at the level of languages and functions of advertising not only via the imaginary, symbolic representation or ritualized behaviours, as other researches demonstrate<sup>56</sup>, but also at the level of the social and economic dual

function that advertising can fulfil or promote. Thus, one can accept that advertising:

“Although it is one of the most effective means of reaching a large, dispersed audience, it is also bounded by its consumerist nature. Regardless of what political philosophy a sponsor wants to convey, this means of communication will always be limited by the advertisement’s inherent bias: the sales pitch<sup>57</sup>.”

On a market of continually changing images and of a continuous search for the new, one can note that visual culture uses not only innovations of the imagined content, but also traditional, even stereotypical representations. The market of ideas and representations is the one encouraging the presence of schematic images, and here the (negative) stereotypes play an important part. They become powerful when coupled with structures coming from the religious sphere. However, religion can also be mixed with non-stereotypical, innovative images; and viewers, guided by regulations, can tip the balance over the creative ones.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This research has been supported by „Babes-Bolyai” University scheme of Grants for Young Researchers, project number GTC\_34044/2013, titled “O abordare filosofică a stereotipurilor de gen în publicitate” (A Philosophical Approach of Gender Stereotypes in Advertising).

<sup>2</sup> Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements. Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Today, they are still seen in all parts of our mostly urban landscape: “Ads are everywhere you go: on your way to school, to work, at the bus stations, everywhere. Not to mention all types of media... You see all over the same messages, you cannot escape them and, worse, you cannot protect your children from them” Interview with Romina Surugiu, lecturer at the School of Journalism and Communication, University of Bucharest. As a matter of fact, even in the places where we would expect only a minimal presence, advertising has a large share of participation in commercial communication. See for instance Dan Chiribucă, Andra Hanță, “Drug Advertising – Configuring Factors and Communication Strategies: A Case Study on Television Broadcasted Advertisements in Romania”, *Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială*, 41, (2013): 7-27.

<sup>4</sup> Briankle G. Chang, “Of “This” Communication,” in *Philosophy of communication*, ed. Briankle G. Chang, Garnet C. Butchart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion on the offensiveness in the relation advertisement/religion, see Karen L. Mallia, “From the Sacred to the Profane: A Critical Analysis of the Changing Nature of Religious Imagery in Advertising”. *Journal of Media and Religion*. vol. 8 issue 3 (2009): 172-190

- <sup>6</sup> Susan A. Basow, *Gender: Stereotypes and roles* (Belmont, CA, US: Thomson Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.,1992).
- <sup>7</sup> For the Romanian context, an approach to narrativity and advertising is proposed by Mădălina Morau, *Mit și Publicitate* (Bucuresti: Nemira Publishing House, 2009).
- <sup>8</sup> John Bryce Merrill, "Stories of Narrative: On Social Scientific Use of Narratives in Multiple Disciplines", *Colorado Research in Linguistics* 20 (2007): 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of the form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987), IX.
- <sup>10</sup> Ervin Goffman, *Gender advertisements* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 84.
- <sup>11</sup> Williamson, 12.
- <sup>12</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Antropologia structurala* (Bucuresti: Editura Politica,1978), especially the chapter "Structura mitului".
- <sup>13</sup> Serra A. Tinic, "United colors and untied meanings: Benetton and the commodification of social issues." *Journal of Communication* 47, no. 3 (1997), 13.
- <sup>14</sup> Tinic, 13.
- <sup>15</sup> Tinic, 13-4.
- <sup>16</sup> Varda Langholz Leymore, *Hidden myth: Structure and symbolism in advertising* (New York: Basic Books, 1975) 154, 156 apud Tinic, 13, 22.
- <sup>17</sup> Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 73.
- <sup>18</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo. Tirania marilor* (Bucuresti: Comunicare.ro, 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Romina Surugiu.
- <sup>20</sup> Williamson, 11-12.
- <sup>21</sup> Klein considers that to be convenient for the producer (who can overlook the conditions of production for the said merchandises and products – sweatshops in fiscal paradises), for the consumer (who can project his/her own fantasies over the brand phantasmatic image) and for the creative agency (that can expand the profits).
- <sup>22</sup> Klein, 319 and subs.
- <sup>23</sup> Tinic p. 12
- <sup>24</sup> Lori D. Wolin, "Gender issues in advertising — An oversight synthesis of research: 1970–2002." *Journal of advertising research* 43, no. 01 (2003): 111-129.
- <sup>25</sup> See for instance the legal perspective on gender stereotypes in the book of Rebeca J. Cook and Simone Cusack, *Gender Stereotyping: Transnational Legal Perspectives* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). For the field of advertising, see also Madalina Moraru, *Mit si publicitate*, especially the chapter on stereotypes, 118-183. For connecting media, advertising and stereotypes, see Laura Grunberg (coord.), *Mass media despre sexe* (Bucuresti: Tritonic, 2005), especially chapter III; Daniela Roventa-Frumusani (ed.), *Gender, Mass media, Representations: Social Realities and Media Representations* (Bucuresti: Ed. Universitatii Bucuresti, 2014); Ioana Borza, Laura Grünberg, and Theodora Eliza Văcărescu, *Cartea neagră a egalității de șanse între femei și bărbați în România* (Bucuresti: AnA, 2006); Oana Băluță, Alice Iancu, Andreea Molocea, *Femeile spun nu publicității ofensatoare* (București: Maiko, 2013).
- <sup>26</sup> Resolution 2012/2116 (INI) /March 12, 2013 of the EU Parliament, titled "Elimination of gender stereotypes from society".
- <sup>27</sup> Gill, 80-81
- <sup>28</sup> Gill, 81-82.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon L. Smith, "Commodity feminism," *Critical studies in media communication* 8, no. 3 (1991): 333-351.

<sup>30</sup> Gill, 83.

<sup>31</sup> Mihaela Frunza, "Ethical Aspects of Spiritual Medicine. The Case of Intercessory Prayer Therapy," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 6, no. 17 (2007): 102-103. For an interesting and useful discussion on religion in media, that has consequences for advertising and religion, see also Romina Surugiu, "Media and Religion in Romania Three Contexts and a Discussion." *European Journal of Science and Theology* 8, no. 4 (2012): 205-213. For a theoretical discussion of the relation between religion and advertisement, see Iulia Grad, "Religion, Advertising and Production of Meaning". *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 13, no. 38 (2014): 137-154.

<sup>32</sup> For instance, he mentions the difference between the Catholic sacrament (the idea that sacred can be found rather in the realm of *things*) as opposed to the Evangelical Biblicism (the idea that *words*, rather than things, are sacred). This opposition goes much farther than the doctrine of the two confessions would actually permit; however, it functions really well for a majority of believers. See John Schmalzbauer, "Journalism and the Religious Imagination". In *Quoting God. How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture*. Eds. by Claire Hoertz Badaracco. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005), 22.

<sup>33</sup> Schmalzbauer, 22-4.

<sup>34</sup> For similar analyzes of advertising, see Theodora-Eliza Vacarescu, "Caz 21: Clipul publicitar pentru anuarul Pagini aurii", in *Mass media despre sexe*, ed. Laura Grunberg (Bucuresti: Tritonic, 2005), 267-8; Oana Băluță, Alice Iancu, Andreea Molocea, *Femeile spun nu publicității ofensatoare* (București: Maiko, 2013).

<sup>35</sup> For each commercial I made a sheet, registering the product, details of the campaign, its message, the existence of religious/spiritual elements (if any), the description of the characters, a typology of gender stereotypes (if any), the description of elements of creativity and originality (if any).

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.adforum.com/creative-work/ad/player/21462>

<sup>37</sup> Goffmann, 47-58.

<sup>38</sup> An example of research which reveals the effectiveness of Benetton campaigns among a young audience is offered by Dahl, Darren W., Kristina D. Frankenberger, and Rajesh V. Manchanda. 2003. Does it pay to shock? reactions to shocking and non-shocking advertising content among university students. *Journal of Advertising Research* 43, (3): 268-280.

<sup>39</sup> The mentioned poster was banned by the Italian Advertising Authority, however it received prizes at international advertising festivals. Among the explanations of the Benetton' strategy, see one articulated about the notions of philosophy of communication in Niskanen, Tuija. "More than Sweaters and Shocking Pictures. On the Corporate Philosophy and Communications Strategy of Benetton." In Sam Inkinen (eds.) *Mediapolis. Aspects of Texts, Hypertexts and Multimedial Communication*. Berlin, New York (1999): 358-379.

<sup>40</sup> See Tinic, 11-12; Dahl et al.

<sup>41</sup> Coke light - The Priest, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EV-agX8H-g>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.iqads.ro/creatie/34531/coca-cola-brazilienii-din-caracal>

<sup>43</sup> The whole campaign "Coca Cola - Everyone is invited" gathered several documentary-style films shot in several far-reach communities from Otsuchi,

Japan; Eastern Europe, the Amazon; and Ramallah, Palestine <http://www.coca-colacompany.com/fifa-world-cup/everyones-invited-global-coca-cola-campaign-celebrates-inclusive-power-of-2014-fifa-world-cup> See also below the analysis of the videoclip from Ramallah.

<sup>44</sup> See for instance Eliade, Mircea. *Sacrul și profanul*. Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1995; Gavriluta, Nicu; Cristina Gavriluta. *Sociologia sportului. Teorii, metode si aplicatii*. Iasi: Polirom, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jb7YBtwVvuA>

<sup>46</sup> Some feminist authors would nonetheless comment that women exceptionalism, provided that remains an exception to the rule, happily coexists with gender stereotypes. See Mihaela Miroiu, “Ce învățăm, de regulă, despre femei și bărbați din publicitate?”, in *Mass-media despre sexe*, ed. by Laura Grunberg (Bucuresti: Tritonic, 2005): 220-2.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrHLocS-bZo>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgEKpggG8gI>

<sup>49</sup> An article discussing this type of stereotypical gender portraying is Rebecca Feasey, “Spray more, get more: masculinity, television advertising and the Lynx effect.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009): 357-368.

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0JcYb8fAs0>

<sup>51</sup> George Hari Popescu, “RECLAMĂ O mulțime de femei cu chiloții în vine strigă în cor”, 28/04/2014, <http://www.cyberculture.ro/blog/2014/04/28/reclama-tampoane/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23pp4552w5I>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYG1u9VyRjC>

<sup>54</sup> Mircea Eliade. *Sacrul și profanul*. Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1995.

<sup>55</sup> See my discussion on ideological frameworks in Mihaela Frunza, *Ideologie si feminism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Presa Universitara Clujeana: Cluj-Napoca, 2014), especially chapter 1.

<sup>56</sup> See for instance Sandu Frunză, *Advertising constructs reality. Religion and advertising in the consumer society*, (București: Tritonic, 2014); Sandu Frunză, *Comunicare simbolică și seducție. Studii despre seducția comunicării, comportamentul ritualic și religie* (București: Tritonic, 2014); Doru Pop, “The Wizards of the Violet Flame. A Magical Mystery Tour of Romanian Politics”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 13 issue 38 (2014): 155-171; Cristina Nistor, Rares Beuran, “Exploring Media and Religion - With a Study of Professional Media Practices”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 13, issue 37 (2014): 178-194; Iulia Grad, “Religion, Advertising and Production of Meaning”. *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 13, no. 38 (2014): 137-154.

<sup>57</sup> Tinic p. 23.

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