

The Foundations and Processes of Violence in Television Advertising

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- *Violence as a creative resource is usually a reason for scientific concern in research into violence and television advertising. However, it is also important to study the violent dimension inherent to advertising, independently of whether or not it shows violent content. The importance of this second area led me to tackle the systematisation of its main foundations, which are, broadly speaking, the intrinsic dynamics of the advertising goal, technology's contribution towards it and violence based on the image as the raw material of the TV advertising discourse. I will also describe the processes by which this violence is developed in television advertising.*

Violence is a phenomenon that concerns society and hence is widely analysed by social scientists who dissect its physical, psychological, sociological and other forms. A phenomenon that is as close as it is vague, as palpable as it is difficult to perceive overall is studied from diverse points of view, ranging from research into the individual status of violence through to detailed studies of its social dimensions and the way it constitutes human life in a community; studies that seek an explanation by referring to behavioural analyses or ones based on neuropsychological knowledge or theories of conduct, or anthropological and philosophical approaches. These are each attempts at providing a holistic understanding and have always been frustrated.

In recent decades, the media (particularly television) has been the focus of studies on social violence that take its possible influence into consideration. Moreover, as Salva-

dor Cardús i Ros says, "there are social debates which, precisely because they are so recurring and have been so extensively analysed without clear resolutions having been achieved, are suspected of hiding a number of traps that are very hard to avoid" (CARDÚS I ROS, 1998: 23). In this sense, the paths opened around this issue have often been founded on establishing correlations that are too rotund and which avoid the multi-dimensionality of the violence phenomenon. Research into violent content in different media messages (basically films and cartoons) has proliferated in all countries, very often following quantitative guidelines. However, the results have never been conclusive and, as we can see from an analysis of the scientific literature, have even been radically different.

1. Levels of Relationship Between Violence and TV Advertising

Advertising has not been the object of this growing academic concern, although it has a very close relationship with violence as understood in its broadcast sense. To present this argument, I would like to emphasise the levels at which the interconnection between the two phenomena occurs.

The first level could be considered as violence as a creative resource, i.e., as the content of the TV advertising message. This is the focus of attention and concern upon which the sensitivity of receivers and even academics nearly always rests - its final fracture is more limited than the second level of interconnection. The second level could be considered the violence inherent to advertising communications, i.e., not the violence *in* advertising but the violence *of* advertising. This type of violence is always at work - slowly, but insistently and perennially - and is gradually shaping individuals' life plans, i.e., changing them into consumers, upsetting their knowledge about the Other and

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the environment, and thus also their own identity, or 'I'.

It is important to bear in mind that this double dimension is justified from a concept of violence formed by two essential elements: the use of force and the provocation of evil. We can only talk about violence if these two components are present and are tackled from a broad perspective not restricted to the strictly physical arena. This leads us to question any positivist definition of it that includes only particular behaviours or attitudes with a number of specific characteristics. For example, the most bloody or perceptible is a simple and scientifically palpable procedure, but it involves a great simplification of the phenomenon itself. Looking in detail at the complexity of violence is a more complicated task, but it makes it easier to understand its multiple facets and implications.

Violence as a creative resource of advertising is behind different controversies that have arisen in recent years about the limits of the creative task and the social responsibility of advertising and which have sometimes forgotten, as Manuel Fernández Areal says, that, "a confirmation of abuses of different types in advertising activity (...) should not lead us to a regressive and irrational condemnation of mass communication in its most recent manifestations, which are essential for an acceptable life in society" (FERNÁNDEZ AREAL, 1996: 67). To date, legal and self-regulatory mechanisms have been an important mission for guaranteeing the divisions of a respectful use with the dignity of the receiver as a person. In this area, it is important to mention the work undertaken by the Association for the Self Regulation of Sales Communication and the Catalonia Broadcasting Council. However, it is true that violent content generally appears much less frequently in TV advertising than in other media products. Careful of the need to use the resource responsibly, this leads me to focus on analysing the second level of the relationship between violence and TV advertising, showing its main foundations and thus its risks.

2. The Foundations of Violence in Television Advertising

TV advertising has a violent side, i.e., it is a form of violence. That is because it features the two elements necessary for talking about violence. On the one hand, force is a

constitutive part of advertising, obviously considering it not just as physical force but derived from an up/down imbalance, i.e., a position of power in the hands of commercial structures and over the individual receiver. On the other hand, in the case of violence in advertising, evil is understood as a reduction of the freedom or ability to act; in this way, the coercion that is inherent to it constitutes a modality of symbolic violence. Even when an advertisement provides information that promotes freedom because the receiver can choose among the products on offer, it ultimately reduces the freedom to decide on the basic dilemma, i.e., whether or not to consume, and thus promotes the attitude that consumption is something necessary for living in a society.

Three main pillars or foundations support this violence in TV advertising. Firstly, the dynamics intrinsic to the advertisement's communication goal, crossed with the desire to condition the freedom of the receiver/consumer. Secondly, technology's determining contribution to this goal, which is essential for understanding the phenomenon of modern advertising. Thirdly, violence based on the image as the raw material of the TV advertising discourse.

2.1. Violence and the Advertising Goal

Violence that involves the dynamics intrinsic to the TV advertisement's communication goal is based on its aspiration to be an all-encompassing product, i.e., an ad aims to make the concept of reality presented the only one possible, which explains the above-mentioned reduction of freedom that it leads to. As Luis Sánchez Corral says, "the advertising discourse is formed in such a way that it presents a proposal of free choice, when in reality what is at play is a situation of dilemma. Having accepted the statement contract, there is no possibility of not choosing such-and-such a brand as the best and only one. The person who enters the discourse's 'supermarket' cannot escape the consumption space of signs without having chosen from among what is promoted (...). But, precisely because the feeling one gets is of having made a choice when in reality the option doesn't exist, the advertisement has to meet the requisite of the formation of the discourse itself, i.e., that the simulacrum of free choice hides the reality of the dilemma" (SÁNCHEZ CORRAL, 1997: 209). This violence inherent to the advertising goal is achieved using a number of simultaneous and different processes.

2.1.1. The Construction of Reality

The first process is the social construction of reality, in which advertising participates by redounding on a same version of the world, given that it features a number of values repeated over and over again while others are excluded because they fail to generate more consumption of the products or services on offer. Thinking about advertising, writes Juan Benavides, "means thinking about the reality that people suffer or enjoy, because what it means is each time a person communicates they seem to speak less than what is possible, as they express themselves through (or from) advertisements, images and fictions that are continually being exchanged" (BENAVIDES, 1995: 96). This is a function of reality construction that some researchers, such as Armand Mattelart, say conceals a serious risk of homogenisation. He says that the noisy space of desire and the dream with which the aim is to seduce the market-world network in the search for the calculable and predictable individual is certainly not that of the Utopia hidden from the subjects of the city-world. The international nature of the management of feelings is presumably not the cosmopolitanism of cultural otherness (MATTELART, 1989: 232).

In this sense, as we have already seen, TV advertising awards itself an all-encompassing role: the version of reality is the one transmitted through these channels, while at the same time it makes it hard to obtain any other version of the facts. It is in this restriction that we can see where a basic part of advertising violence is concealed. As Carlos Lomas says, "perhaps the advertisement's art of seduction and conviction, by putting us in the paradise of objects, is not, when all is said and done, to (categorically) confirm the absurd (and unreal) aspects of thinking about the world in a different way" (LOMAS, 1997: 50).

This construction of reality involves a parallel contribution that shapes people's attitudes, habits and beliefs, i.e., it is not a simple conditioning factor of perception, but rather through it the process is completed and generates changes in these other dimensions and thus in the development of individual and social life.

2.1.2. The Construction of Desire

In the case of TV advertising, the construction of reality goes further, to hinge to a large extent on the status of what is desirable. Unlike with other media communications, in

advertising the influence on what is desirable is not just a collateral or secondary effect but the main goal of the communication process, i.e., the feature that makes advertising what it is. Advertising can pursue the shaping of reality as perceived by an individual and thus condition habits and attitudes, particularly the ones that in one way or another end up leading to the purchase of the advertised object, but it is its purpose of exercising control in the area of desire that makes it so unique. Advertisements aim to guide people's desires and condition what they want in order to present the advertised object and its acquisition as a form of satisfaction and even fulfilment. In short, to the construction of reality we have to add the construction of what the receiver wants that reality to be.

That is why advertising has become a fundamental basis of the market economy. With the game of supply and demand, the stage is set for the capitalist society to triumph in its attempt to create desire and offer obliging mechanisms, both of which are always at the service of the incessant economic machinery, using advertising and its inherent violence as a means to guarantee the survival of the system. To generate new needs, there are new means to respond to them, although they are not put within the reach of all receivers, thus generating numerous processes of frustration.

Furthermore, we should remember that desire is not projected only on the objects themselves, but also the representations of the goals as shown by the ad. As Jesús González Requena says, "the desirable is never the empirical object but rather its image. The best proof of this is found in the inevitable disappointment that always accompanies the possession of the desired object. This disappointment shows the lack of adjustment between an image (the object of desire) and the empirical object that can really be possessed. The structural insatiability of human desire depends on this lack of adjustment and is capital to understanding the statute of the image and its essential link to the subject of desire" (GONZÁLEZ REQUENA and ORTIZ DE ZÁRATE, 1999: 16).

2.1.3. Omnipresence

The processes of constructing reality and desire are reinforced by their omnipresence, which provides increased efficacy to the TV advertising message, involves greater

forcible persuasion of the individual (who is increasingly conditioned by his or her vision of the facts and what is desirable) and reduces his or her ability to act. In this sense, omnipresence is a basic factor in the examination of TV advertising violence, because it makes it possible for its effects to survive and occupy all life phases and better guide the activity of subjects with regard to them and the advertising messages inserted in them.

This omnipresence begins in the message itself, where the advertising object/desire becomes a full and self-sufficient element: the advertising message's strategy is to change the advertised desire into full desire and the advertised object into the total satisfaction of desire. Once the advertised object has been made the omni-object, it is necessary to make it omnipresent in the life of the consumer/individual and so the different media become the informational support for the omnipresent omni-object. At the same time, by occupying the public and media space, the advertisement also becomes omnipresent in people's private spaces or directly impacts their privacy.

2.2. Violence and Technology

The violence of television advertising grows exponentially as communication technologies are perfected: that is why technology is the second basic pillar on which it is based. Speaking about advertising violence requires looking more deeply into technological developments for different reasons.

2.2.1. The Technological Basis of Advertising

Firstly, advertising was the result of a period in which technical progress was determined by the appearance of commercial activity and thus the communication involved. Some historians locate the origins of the advertising phenomenon in distant times, with the first use of informational billboards, or even seals and emblems, as examples of elements that sought identification and differentiation. Although that may well be true, it is also certain that modern advertising as we understand it today does not date back to the times of classic antiquity, nor did it appear with the birth of the printing press and its great capacity for dissemination, but rather can be located in the economic and social expansion that arose from mechanisation and the technological exploitation of the Industrial Revolution.

Therefore, if at that time industrial progress was linked to the commercial peak that established the bases of modern advertising, these days technological development, particularly with regard to communication technologies, continues to play a major role in economic and social environments and thus in the field of advertising.

2.2.2. The Amplification Ability of Technologies

Secondly, in the case of advertising, this new technology explosion allows the existence of new spheres for disseminating the message, but more important is the enormous amplification power of communication technologies. This multiplication ability is another reason for relating advertising violence with technological development. "Contemporary advertising, fuelled by the surprising broadcast technologies available today, is materialising the construction of an imaginary visual representation at a rate unprecedented in the history of human representation" (GONZÁLEZ REQUENA and ORTIZ DE ZÁRATE, 1999: 86). This amplification ability makes a decisive contribution to the processes of advertising violence, not because it generates them but because it allows their influence to take greater hold.

Amplification also occurs because the new media formats and the technologies on which they are based allow a greater and faster dissemination of the advertising message, which leads to a rise in its ability to impact and the omnipresence I mentioned before. Furthermore, it occurs because of the rise in new media formats that have other expressive possibilities that are more easily able to attract people's attention and complete the processes of violence inherent to advertising.

2.2.3. The Risks of Television Technology

Thirdly, it is important to mention that technologies are not neutral, but rather their features influence their possible effects, and by generating new risk spaces that can later be used by human beings. On this point, Fernando Broncano recognises that, "the pragmatic possibilities opened up by the existence of a technique are objective possibilities, in the sense that they go further than the current representations that the subject makes of them. By developing a technique, in some way we create a set of possible or future worlds able to be realised that would not have been attainable were it not for the technique, so that

we constitute a set of action opportunities, some desirable and others not, some legitimate and others not" (BRONCANO, 2000: 234).

In the case of television advertising, the role of technology is particularly important because it permits the above-mentioned amplification and without which its effects would greatly reduced or even nullified. But there are other features inherent to the technology that television ads use for transmission that constitute the violence of advertising. It is therefore important to bear in mind the risks of the so-called tertiary mediums, and more particularly those of the television sphere.

With respect to the first of these features, television, as a tertiary medium, contributes to the redeployment of the primary medium, i.e., body-to-body, face-to-face contact, promoting a loss of sensitivity in favour of knowledge of the world in a mediated form. This is the violence inherent to broadcast technology, which, under the form of images and by removing the individual from primary experiences, leads to invisibility: if the ability to see is restricted, television advertising generates its highest level of violence.

On the other hand, there are a number of added risks in television technology that pertain to audiovisual texts and therefore also to the television advertising discourse. They are characterised by leading to a strong conditioning of perception that can set off processes of communication and advertising violence. For example, an ad is based on the goal of proposing meanings at a great speed through an immediate communication and often by forcibly persuading the perceptive processes, although without encroaching on subliminal advertising and other legally and ethically outlawed limits. On the other hand, an ad is constructed holistically, making up small micro-fictions that require no alien element to provide significance, which means they determine the perceived reality and condition purchasing attitudes through veils that do not allow viewers to see the reality in all its dimensions. It is also important to add other features of the broadcasting language in general, and thus that of television advertising, as well.

Finally, TV is a visual technology, i.e., it is also important to specifically consider this dimension when considering its forms of violence. Some of the risks mentioned up until now are based, or at least their importance is based, on considering the television message as the product of a

vision technology. However, and given the importance of this aspect, it is necessary to study its peculiarities in detail. That is why when we talk about the television text, we have to refer to the image, which is the raw material of vision technology: the image provokes invisibility, limits the receiver's field of vision and conditions, even if it is not designed to do so entirely, his or her orientation and sense of the view.

2.3. Violence and Image

The underlying violence of the image is generated in this invisibility. Given the widely held belief that the broadcast media leads to increased visibility on the world - Gérard Imbert even talks about *hypervisibility* (IMBERT, 2000) - the effect it provokes is the opposite, giving rise to what Santos Zunzunegui calls "that contemporary species of the seeing blind man" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 1998: 24). Although *seeing/viewing* has been fundamental at all times throughout history as the ability to make sense of the world, it is true that today this importance has grown drastically, because of the preponderance of the sense of distance that the new technological developments provide. That is why Román Gubern talks of "interfacial techno-culture" (GUBERN, 1987), characterised by replacing the face-to-face aspect with communication via machines. The technology on which TV advertising is based and via which it is disseminated supports this trend and with it, by reducing primary communication in favour of a mediated one, the risks of limiting visibility, and hence, violence, increases.

2.3.1. The Nature of the Image

This invisibility/violence establishes the bases of the features inherent to the nature of the image. Together with materiality, as its support is a physical medium, I mean its substitutive nature, because the image represents reality (i.e., it maintains a relation of similarity). However, the process is not closed with the representation but rather the very representation leads to substitution. As Zunzunegui says, "the key factor of the representation is not in the relationship of similarity that can be established between the object and its representation, but in that they both meet the same *function*, i.e., the *function of substitution*, or the logical and historical precursor to the portrait (similarity), where creation proceeds from communication. Beginning from this

point, *representation as substitution* requires two conditions: *that the form authorises the significance* with which it is invested and *that the context determines the significance* in the appropriate manner" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 1998: 58).

Another essential feature of the image is its reproducibility capacity, which is enabled by evolution in the processes of image production that facilitate the generation of copies in an ever-increasing number and a shorter time. This ability for reproduction strengthens the substitutive function. When the image replaces reality and the replacement is multiplied in virtue of reproducibility, the visibility of reality is further decreased. In reducing the visibility of the world, we also reduce our imaginary, both as individuals and as a society.

2.3.2. Fictionalisation and Mimicry of Appearance

We can see two basic processes that arise from the nature of the image, i.e., fictionalisation and the mimicry of appearance, by which the advertising image contributes towards invisibility. Violence begins when there is a loss of perception of the limits between reality and fiction, i.e., between what is being represented and the representation. "By fictionalising the real and materialising new fictions, by tending to confuse drama with docudrama and real accidents with reality shows, television moves yet again from the thesis to the antithesis, 'from the window open to the world' to the 'wall of images', from music to noise and vice versa. It is this unpredictable oscillation that is perhaps its ultimate truth," says Régis Debray (DEBRAY, 2000: 297-298). This fictionalisation of reality is the anchor of the very origin of the violence of the advertising image. Reality is supplanted by signs of reality, which is completed with the institutionalisation of what is apparent as a valid value.

Moreover, advertising images not only mimic reality but also end up mimicking each other, making up a game of views or reflected images - in short, continually mimicked appearances. This is a manifestation of what Jean Baudrillard called "the deadly power of images, assassins of that which is real" (BAUDRILLARD, 1993: 17).

2.3.3. Loss of Body and Present

These processes mean that invisibility turns into violence towards the receiver by promoting the loss of body (space) and present (time). Looking at the first, it is important to say that by restricting the ability to see, the processes also

curtail knowledge about the 'I', because generating invisibility towards the world, towards the Other, i.e., that which is different, means that the advertising image provokes the loss of oneself, as in falsifying otherness it ends up falsifying identity, because the second is only possible from the first. It is only when we perceive difference that we have an identity. In this vein, Marc Augé says, "when a ritual blocking, a symbolic deficit, a weakening of the mediations (of the cosmologies or the 'intermediary bodies' that Durkheim talked about) is produced, i.e., when there is an interruption or reduction of the identity/otherness dialectic, signs of violence appear. Second observation: the new communication and image technologies mean that the relationship with the Other is becoming increasingly abstract: we are becoming accustomed to seeing everything, but what is not certain is whether we will continue to watch. The fact that the media has replaced mediations contains in itself a possibility of violence" (AUGÉ, 1998: 29).

The loss of oneself first translates into the loss of the body, as the visible manifestation of the 'I'. We should remember that vision, together with the organs of balance and perception that each person has of him or herself, is one of the elements through which the sense of the body is achieved. If the advertising image reduces this vision it will lead to changes in the latter. The consumer will even end up accepting the loss of his body and aspire to the physical models presented in the advertising messages broadcast on TV, which shows that by falsifying reality the individual ends up rejecting his or her own body and desiring that of another. The most extreme cases, which Mònica Figueras has studied, are anorexia and bulimia, in which the loss of body translates into violence against the body. She reaches the following conclusion: "It is interesting to note that as physical violence is decreasing in our society, other, more subtle forms are created, which generate compliance with the system and even self-violence. This is the case of illnesses like anorexia and bulimia, in which we can see a clear self-violence with respect to one's own body" (FIGUERAS, 2003: 338).

However, the advertising image not only leads to the loss of the 'here', i.e., the body, but also the 'now', i.e., the present. Behind this lies *presentification* as one of the basic features of the TV advertising discourse. Motivated by the need to surprise and offer a new message, advertising

avoids the past. At the same time, it rarely refers to the future or long-term strategy and, when it does, it changes it into the present, i.e., something close and possible for consumption expectations.

This presentification ultimately generates the loss of the present, as once any reference point to the past or future has been erased, the result is a now that is continually renewed; and as identity is not possible without otherness, neither can there be the present without the past or future. Consequently, by mutating space and time, body and present, the advertising image promotes its symbolic violence.

2.3.4. Overdose of the Image and Social Iconophagia

The violence of television advertising is shored up by two aggravating circumstances. Firstly, the overdose of images in contemporary society, which allows the intensification of these processes. Moreover, the consumption of images is increasingly occurring from different types of perception. The younger generations more quickly assimilate the image's enormous ability: adapted to the new medium, they perceive images from other points of view, which allow them to make sense of and even respond to the rapid succession of them. Technological advances that promote speed, and which are also in over-abundance, lead to new forms of perception.

The overdose of images is linked to the second of the aggravating circumstances: society's increasing iconophagia, or consumption of images. The consumption of images is today the main way presented to individuals to obtain information on their environment and social integration. However, as consumption rises, so too does the volume of images to which we have access, normally immersed in processes of mimicry themselves, which means that the knowledge and visibility the imaginary consumption dominates only leads to invisibility or lack of knowledge about reality and fundamental questions. This iconophagia is manifested not just when individuals devour images but when the images themselves, which mimic each other, end up being images of other images, signs of other signs, iconophagic images that shape the abyss of the loss of reality where media messages in general and television advertising in particular drive individual consumers.

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