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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture
ISSN 1481-4374
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Volume 13 (2011) Issue 5 Article 13

Advertising and Autobiographical Discourse

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Recommended Citation

Rodríguez Fontela, María Ángeles. "Advertising and Autobiographical Discourse." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.5 (2011): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1911>

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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
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Volume 13 Issue 5 (December 2011) Article 13
María Ángeles Rodríguez Fontela,
"Advertising and Autobiographical Discourse"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss5/13>

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*** **13.5 (2011)**
Special issue ***New Trends in Iberian Galician Comparative Literature.***
Ed. María Teresa Vilariño Picos and Anxo Abuín González
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss5/>

Abstract: In her article "Advertising and Autobiographical Discourse" María Ángeles Rodríguez Fontela sketches a poetics of advertising in autobiographic discourse working from a selection of narrative and autobiographical spots. Emphasized in her narratological study is the contraction of retrospective temporality, the domination of the proleptic construction of the "I," the ellipsis in the outcome, the iterative and archetypical character of the narrated episodes, the confidential tone of the narrative voice, and the mythical projection of the narrated story. Rodríguez Fontela analyzes in selected television advertisements the ironic, comic, and parodic effects which show the hybridization of genres and the rhetorical function of the different models of identification between spectator and actor.

María Ángeles RODRÍGUEZ FONTELA

Advertising and Autobiographical Discourse

Translated from the Galician by Manus O'Dwyer

How can advertising, a discourse encompassing the complexities of semiotic fracture, marked by the persuasiveness and rapidity of its messages, possibly be paired with a literary genre such as autobiography, which is characterized by slow, reflexive narration? In my article I discuss two phenomena: advertising and autobiography. My motivation for the study of advertising and autobiography has been encouraged by the prominence of certain commercials, almost always for cars, although also for soft drinks, whose notoriety rests on a series of traits that are not usually associated with the discourse of advertising: a story is told from the perspective and in the voice of an actor speaking in the first person about his/her own life, apparently unconnected to the promotion of the product (sometimes an image of the product never even appears). The advertisement radiates strong, sentimental and emotional content and (above all) illocutionary force and inference mechanisms couched in cryptic, iconic-symbolic representation. In short, this is a new form of advertising: a "disconcerting" or "reflexive" advertising demanding potent hermeneutic activity in the viewer. It is an advertising of psychoanalytic inspiration "suggestive advertising," and determined by social identification models, a "projective advertising" (Adam and Bonhomme 26). With this new direction, the innovative poetic function of advertising language tends to construct stories with a mythical grounding. This is not the descriptive and direct advertising of earlier times, although certain early advertising featured storytelling. It would appear — and this is a common connection between the advertisements of yesteryear and today — that the expectations surrounding a story have always functioned as a first order enticement in advertisement although advertisers have not always been interested in extracting persuasive effects from wholly narrative advertisements.

An example in the apparently autobiographic aspects of certain advertisements of the past will be present in the memory of many Spanish adults. It is the "little Black from tropical Africa" who, upon introducing himself with a first person identity marker (we know that his grammatical index constitutes a first index, neither exclusive nor valid in and of itself in a biographical short story), informs us that he will "relate" to us the many unparalleled qualities of the product. The word "relate" suggests narration, but the radio listeners, expecting stories, are nevertheless immediately frustrated. What follows is a simple "relation," a linking, of the product to excellence in various sporting endeavors. Cola-Cao commercial listeners of radio in the 1950s and 1960s had memorized before seeing it and transformed into a commercial is not, despite initial expectations, an autobiographic advertisement although it does match the perlocutionary memorization effects of oral tales. That a medium like radio, a medium born in the heart of secondary orality (Ong), succeeds in assimilating the mnemonic characteristic of primary orality is an advertising bull's-eye. One feels, at least, "the illusion of direct *skaz*" (Eichenbaum 115) in this narrative attempt. Also strongly felt is the presence of the narrator and the processes of oral narrative, the latter being populated with those comic effects and resources so characteristic to advertising (Eichenbaum 115-19).

Taking the example of the autobiographical story, especially that of a narrating actor who tells us, in the first person, of his/her life experiences, I selected a corpus of forty commercials for my study. These commercials correspond to campaigns by influential brand names in the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. I argue that the temporal limit in radio advertising (normally between fifteen and sixty seconds), the immediacy of the image in the graphic medium, and the interactivity of the internet do not constitute adequate channels for the minimum sequential narrative process of an autobiographic story. Starting out from this corpus and taking into account the Cola-Cao advertisement I mention above, I suggest that although the commercial frequently opens with the perspective of a story, this either becomes inexistent or is interrupted by an anecdote or foundational story (the second part of the announcement, the fundamental part, abandons this narrative status in order to deviate towards showing, explaining, and demonstrating), or limits itself to a quotidian temporal framework

Without entering in depth into the theoretic question as to whether all publicity is narrative (see Sánchez Corral, citing Greimas's *actants* scheme in the dichotomy of lack / elimination of lack,

sustains that all publicity is narrative) or merely a portion of it, I take into consideration the arguments of Jean Michel Adam and Marc Bonhomme with regard to the elements which must necessarily be present in any story: a minimum succession of events that tend towards a final; the presence of at least one actor that is, does, or has something that defines the subject's state; unity of action, transformation of the predicate and place in a situation of intrigue; and the existence of, in the advertising story, as in other narrative genres, the final evaluation or "moral" (the argumentative part of the advertising story). As is the norm in advertising, stories dealing with the quotidian usually possess an iterative character not only for the evident benefits from synthesis that iterative abstraction boasts, but for the persuasive representative effects of a model representation — of little value in and of themselves — of history.

In my analysis I take into account the presence of an actor, narrator, and protagonist, who assumes a testimonial function in first person, praising the product. Second, I analyze advertisements in which the advertiser has placed faith in creative teams of contracted advertising experts. This shows deference towards the commercial target and is geared towards the model spectator of whom is required hermeneutic competence in different areas: advertising, psychoanalysis, oral stories and writings, film, publicity, painting, etc., as well as an ability to appreciate the artistic achievements of the commercial. The semiotic complexity of the advertisement implies the elevated status of the potential consumer. Meaning thereby transfers from the diegetic to the pragmatic level and thus I demonstrate the hermeneutic capacities of the products' hypothetical buyers. It is in this type of indirect exaltation of the product that one finds in the automobile industry, which, as a rule, aims for a public with elevated purchasing possibilities. Some of these companies, like Audi, are characterized by their efforts to connect the emotional and sentimental world of the spectator through the use of autobiographic strategies.

A commercial which features an actor speaking in first person about his earlier life (his passion for painting, his relationship with his daughter) and whose audiovisual manifestation is presented with iterative value is particularly innovative, paving the way for future Audi commercials. The most outstanding aspect of this commercial, in our opinion, is that the protagonist actor, an individual with a face and a voice, but without name, attempts to restore the past in a proleptic vision of the "I" (Castilla del Pino 262) through, to speak technically, an autobiovisual-auditive reconstruction of his lost and yearned-for identity. The strategy of the autobiographical story in its intertextual base sustaining the secondary orality of the announcement is constructed with minimal and couched references to the promoted product. Only the expression, which we could translated as "steer my life" ("conducir mi vida") reminds us, in a tropological leap, of the automotive referent. The logotype "attitudes," a discrete but effective substitute for the imagotype of the brand Audi, with its specific typography and color, allows the advertiser to be identified throughout a series of commercials containing similar characters.

With respect to the tropological leap, I believe that in advertising, as Roman Jakobson thought in regarding poetry, "any metonymy is lightly metaphorical and any metaphor has a metonymic tint" (42). This lack of definition, or contamination, of tropes is especially visible in televised advertising discourse where the meaning of visual images and auditive effects usually has metonymic reinforcement, and where metaphor also occupies a particular position as a perceptive and mnemonic analogical resource of the first order. Relevant here, too, is the work of Roland Barthes, who had noticed the presence of these two tropes in advertising. Metaphor and metonymy also play an important role in the lightness and mnemonic power of the narrative plot based on autobiography. In short, we can cite a few recurring facets in advertising discourse: the present narrative as a hinge linking a retrospective temporality with another prospective one; sentimental individual and axiological-cultural possibilities which sustain coherently and persuasively both temporalities from the fictionalized world of the represented character to the real world of the spectator (with face, voice, and name); the metafictional reflection on time carried out by the narrator-protagonist through voice. These and other elements of the commercial are narrative signs our age of advertising has adopted, albeit only recently, perhaps, with respect to literary and cinematic stories, but which present the added, but happily resolved, difficulty of connecting a personal story to a primarily argumentative discursive axis.

It is also important to underline the increasingly cryptic aspect of advertising. The difficulty in its interpretation has to do with an increased difficulty in perception, discussed by Russian formalists, as it relates to the poetic function. This artistic-aesthetic function combines with another persuasive facet — pedagogical in nature — within the realm of publicity. In fact, as Marçal Moliné reminds us, creativity in advertising applies the same principles as pedagogy insofar as "the mind records the messages that it has had to discover for itself" (360; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Rodríguez Fontela and O'Dwyer).

In the advertising campaign of 2001 (in Spain), Audi took advantage of the appeal of the aforementioned narrative-autobiographical commercial by launching two more of a similar character, using this autobiographical pattern in particular. In these two there are striking parallels, not only in the timing of the advertisement on the same day and in the same hourly time slot but also in all that concerns the emotional content of both commercials. Both commercials have "episodic memory" (Castilla del Pino 271) as their main idea. In both cases, the narrator evokes concrete situations from his childhood (in the first commercial) or from different phases of his past life (second commercial) which are transcendent in the construction of his current self: in one ad we see scenes of liberty, vitality, and dynamism, lived with a baby-sitter and in another the moments (not without parody and intertextuality) which mock self-governance. In these commercials the main actor evokes situations, objects, and people which caused feelings of personal achievement, security, dynamism, and liberty throughout his life. Obviously, these feelings are recuperated proleptically thanks to Audi, whose image in the commercials is the silent *evidentia* of a yearned-for identity. The narrative autobiographic framework is supported by the mythical structure of the romance as long as the purchase is enacted and that which is lacking in the story is ultimately fulfilled: the hero returns to his origins with the help of a car called Audi.

The mythical revitalization in advertising in Spain is also shown in a Pepsi commercial in which the construction of the narrative identity of the protagonist-narrator — the soccer player Roberto Carlos — is established thanks to two motives which have achieved comic effects. These are, in order of presentation, the mytheme of the rebirth of the hero, thanks to a "revelation" or conversion and the image in the mirror. I note at this point the function of the image in the mirror in Jacque Lacan's narrative of identity formation: the image of the mirror can be seen as a milestone of great symbolic power in the construction of the "I." Humor, parody, and irony, which frequently appear in publicity in connection with mythic representation, according to José Luis León, are also present here, in the revitalization of myths or in their demystification, depending on which way one looks at it. Their function connects directly to the liberation from individual anguish and the transformation of a repressive society into a more open and tolerant one (León 145). It is easy to guess, in this context, that the target of these ads is a young, outgoing, and athletic public which will soon be consumed with the difficult task of becoming an adult, searching for their own identity.

The parody of *Bildungsroman* represented by Pepsi commercial — the identity of the actor with a famous character and thus the mythical supports of identity — are, by themselves, evidence as to the persuasive power of the autobiographical motif in advertising. In the Pepsi commercial, as in other Audi commercials, the autobiographical script is with emotive-mnemonic reinforcement in the audiovisual medium: the waterfall of visual images, the deft combination of sound (the confidential voice and the silence) and image, the manipulation of perspectives (sharp angles to denote insecurity, hesitations, lacks; frontal and close-ups for the images of the product and the narrator, who has successfully found his identity), among other filmic elements. Thus, as Francis Bartlett and Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest, that which is concretely presented is more memorable and more persuasive. This is all, as one must not forget, thanks to the memorable character of humoristic effects which narrators of oral storytelling have long understood (Bartlett 339). The Pepsi commercial, when compared to the Audi commercials, is not quite as cryptic, nor is it as emotional. Narrative components and the intertextual presence of an autobiographical narration including myths and symbols are more perceptible than in other commercials, just as their humoristic effects are more perceptible, as well as persuasive.

One of the peculiarities of the Pepsi commercial, relevant to the consideration of its autobiographical character, is the identity of the protagonist-narrator with someone from the real world: the soccer player Roberto Carlos. With this choice, the creators of the commercial succeed in

solidifying the mythical structure of the represented story (a process of feed-back: these commercials obtain persuasive benefits from the very myths they help to create or consolidate), at the same time hoping that the audience adheres to the "moral" of the story owing to their identifying with the character possessing these mythical qualities (Lejeune 307). This advertising version of the autobiographical pact — the identity of the protagonist of the fictitious story, of the narrator, and of the actor, who furthermore is a character in real life — is a normal tool in advertising thanks to the persuasive virtues of the proposed identification model. In this sense, the audiovisual image of the soccer player identified with the voiceover of the narrator in the first part of the commercial and with the speaking voice in the second part is equivalent to the notion of an author of written stories -- represented with his/her real name. More than twenty years ago Philippe Lejeune felt that the tendency to express "the lived" corresponded to a strong demand for hearing and reading about vital intimate experiences. He adds that "all media (above all, radio and television) infuse all the messages broadcasted, be they political, or commercial, literature, or sport: from the moment in which the button is pressed, one is awash in intimacy, direct, man to man" (312).

As far as the audience's identification with the "mythified" character of the commercial, Hans Robert Jauss's historical explanation of identification models is functional and clarifying. In my opinion, in all advertising a model of associative identification dominates, so that, "the individual is unable to form a subject for himself … if he has not felt himself in the relative character of his role … developing his identity in the assumption and acknowledgement of roles from the perspective of a social group which surrounds him" (Jauss 260). In this sense, the socializing games that advertising offers awaken auto-identificatory potentialities in the viewer of the commercial at a pragmatic level, independent of whether or not it represents an autobiographic history. Advertising beckons the hypothetical buyer, inculcating values — images of others for him/her — which he/she will later project upon his/her practical life. Within this associative identification, we find superimposed admiring identification, as found in the commercial for Pepsi. The promoters of the product hope the viewers will admire — imitate and emulate (Jauss 264) — not just some audiovisual fictional being, but, rather, as an image of success we recognize in the activities of daily life.

In the commercials by Audi, we observe, above all, the presence of the sympathetic identification model, an "aesthetic emotion consistently putting itself in the place of the distant I" (Jauss 270). It is certainly true that this solidarity with the hero that suffers is generally not contradicted in many advertisements, and not in those Audi ads either, with their laughing at and laughing with present in ironic identification (Jauss 283-91). In any case, autobiography which contributes to these commercials shows itself to be an especially ideal channel for the process of assimilating the viewer's own autobiography. The viewer construes his/her narrative identity in the real world following the models given to him by fictitious narratives, as Paul Ricoeur observed. Through these fictional (as well as advertising and autobiographic) stories "the affected being according to the type of fiction is incorporated into his own affected being according to the 'real'" (Ricoeur 366).

In conclusion, I ask what effects are produced in the interaction between autobiography, this literary and epidictic narrative genre and advertising's audiovisual semiotic system — at its roots a fundamentally persuasive system? In commercials I emphasize the ironic, humoristic, and parodic effects of the hybridization of different codes; the strong contraction of retrospective temporality; the scope of the proleptic construction of "I" through the ideal satisfaction in the face of sentimental, emotional, and voluntary dearth; the ellipsis in the ending, substituted for the rhetorical epiphenomenon of the story (Adam and Bonhomme 180) and whose inference is only aided by the product's image, the imagotype (and) or logotype of the brand; the iterative and archetypical character of the narrated scenes; the confidential tone of the narrative voice which contributes towards reinforcing the affective connections of identification between narrator and receiver; the mythical projection of narrated history, and the persuasive virtues of the models of identification proposed in the commercial. Intimacy converted into fiction, even spectacle, in the various genres of diverse media and today's mass communication is manifested in advertising as well with suggestive, aesthetic, and persuasive stories using the autobiographical paradigm.

Note: The above article is a revised and translated version of María Ángeles Rodríguez Fontela, "Publicidad y discurso autobiográfico," *Autobiografía en España. Un balance*. Ed. Celia Fernández and María Ángeles Hermosilla. Madrid: Visor, 2004. 589-98. Copyright release to the author.

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