

Comics and the poetic function in advertising

História em quadrinhos e a função poética na publicidade

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Abstract *The relation between advertising and comics goes back to the early 20th century, when comic strips published in newspapers got the attention of a growing number of readers. Based on the poetic function of the language, as defined by Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, and its use in advertising, this paper intends to categorize the main forms in which comics serve the needs of publicity campaigns. Through the characteristic elements of language's poetic function, advertising can bring useful information and keep itself interesting and marketable.*

Key-words: Comics; Advertising; Poetic function of language.

Resumo *A relação entre a publicidade e as histórias em quadrinhos remonta ao início do século XX, quando as tiras publicadas em jornais atraíam a atenção crescente dos leitores. Partindo da função poética da linguagem, conforme a classificação feita pelo linguista russo Roman Jakobson, e seu uso na publicidade, este texto pretende categorizar as principais formas em que os quadrinhos atendem às necessidades de campanhas publicitárias. Por meio de elementos característicos da função poética da linguagem, os anúncios podem trazer informações úteis e manter-se interessantes e vendáveis.*

Palavras-chave: Histórias em quadrinhos; Publicidade; Função poética da linguagem

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Introduction.

Advertising, much like comics, has been a constant presence of daily life. Its ubiquity makes it a large part of the baggage that forms much of the repertoire of the individual who has contact with it, not necessarily their cognitive capacity or their values, but the fact that it populates the memory and the imagination. In this sense, the text will continue with the differentiation made by Sant'Anna (2007, p. 75) between advertising and propaganda⁴.

This paper assumes that advertising, when combined with elements of language's poetic function, facilitates the understanding of certain content through aesthetic features that end up acting as content mediators. Thus, when advertising is combined with comics, it can become a symbolic system that serves not only to sell products, but as a means of spreading and questioning certain ideas. It is an exploratory level qualitative study with the use of documentary research techniques and the analysis of advertisement content which somehow relates to comics. The selected material has been produced at different times to characterize the perennial relationship between two massive cultural products: comics and advertising.

When it comes to propaganda that has informational content, one thinks of advertisements that enable the receiver to discuss anything from the habit it tries to establish to the product itself as a realization of this habit. All without placing the advertisers sale intention at risk. The starting point for inserting information in the ads is the knowledge of the repertoire of a certain public by some advertising executives.

Advertising is also expected to bring something new and different. Adds that bring information and standards that are similar to their competitors and redundant and uninteresting, "a case of uselessness in communication: total redundancy" (PIGNATARI, 1993, p. 52). These ads lose their utility, and do not surprise or enchant their audience effectively.

⁴ For him, the word advertising is related to making public or announcing, and is not normally associated with the sale of products, while propaganda is regarding an idea to be imbedded in the mind of the public.

The use of aesthetic and innovative resources is fundamental in making informational language compatible with the repertoire of the public and its interests. Excessive information can become entropy or noise that interferes with the faithful reception of the message, thus making its decoding impossible. According to Epstein:

(...) information or the maximum range of a set of events (or signal) occurs when they are mutually independent, i.e., they have no connection or mutual constraint (the disorder or entropy of the set, in this case, is maximum) and this is the ultimate stage of information, from which no form or Gestalt will emerge. (EPSTEIN, 1986, p. 6)

For there to be understanding and for the receiver to be able to 'translate' the message, that is, for the public to create a meaning for it, it needs form - something that can be recognized, so that the new content can go from unintelligibility to intelligibility. From the moment that propaganda places the product in the background and works with content that may be considered relevant and that effectively enriches the repertoire of the receiver, it can be said that the concept of information as is presented here is configured in this communication material.

The poetic function of language

Understanding the Poetic Function of Language is also indispensable for understanding the purpose of this article. Among the functions of language, according to Jakobson, namely: referential, phatic, metalingual, emotive, conative, and poetic, this study considers poetics to be the most efficient to work with content, complex or not, and bring them closer to the public, making them easier to understand. Among the six elements highlighted by the same author within the communication process - sender, receiver, code, channel, context, and message -, one always stands out in the communication process and it is this one that determines the predominant language function. If the predominant element is the context, the predominant function is contextual; if the receiver, conative function; issuer, emotive function; the code,

metalingual function; the channel, phatic function. When the emphasis is on the message, on the form of the transmitted content, the poetic function of language is predominate.

Regarding Roman Jakobson's poetic function of language, Solange Bigal (1999, p. 43) considers that the "the context of poetic or aesthetic language is the message itself, which makes up its operational ambivalence. The message returns to itself, to its own structure, for its own production of meaning. "

In the same context, two or more functions can occur simultaneously: a poem in which the author shares what it feels like to write poetry has the same poetic, emotive, and metalingual language at the same time.

Starting with the principle that the quality of the message is determined by how the factors that make up the act of communication relate, and that that these relations appear in different hierarchical orders with the predominance of only one, where the association, verbal structure, or message profile will depend on the predominant function (BIGAL, 1999, p. 42).

The analyzed advertisements have a poetic-aesthetic advertising composition, which according to Bigal (1999, p.17), "will expand the information quality of society's average repertoires." The goal is to see how such ads can contribute to the repertoire, making their information palatable with the use of the poetic function of language. The "poetic-aesthetic composition" will occur when the aesthetic effect provided by the advertisement makes the message its most important point, i.e., the elements that compose the ad configure it in such a way that the predominant language function is the poetic function.

For Epstein, based on the study of Roman Jakobson (1986, p. 45), "the poetic function places the center of gravity in the very configuration of the corresponding message about the aesthetic function of signs." For it to predominate in a message, the poetic function of language makes use of any element that gives its content an aesthetically pleasing form, highlighting more 'how' something is said than 'what' it's said. Rhymes, figures of speech, neologisms, rhythm, graphics, spatiality and other forms of aestheticizing content are resources used by the poetic function

of language. Here, they are all considered capable of making the content of the message more attractive and amenable to understanding.

The poetic function of language, when it is predominate in the communication process, breaks paradigms of organization and even the functionality of signs, moving it closer to the object due to its aesthetics. This is the ability of the language to become more efficient in its role on inserting new data in the repertoire of a given audience.

Poetic language, in general, is strongly present in advertising discourse. An advertisement can become memorable by a number of factors that make it a democratic ad, in which elements of art, merchandise, current events, many vestiges of everyday life, and the imaginations of the receivers all coexist. The use of poetic language and the predominance of the poetic function of language make this dialogue more enjoyable for the receiver.

In addition, the advertising poetic-aesthetic composition increases the “durability” of the ad: by causing aesthetic pleasure in the receiver, it will serve as a basis for reflection, and thus they may turn to it forever. This characteristic of the announcement allows the receiver to explore it several times, discovering new information in each one that will provide a new interpretation.

Max Bense - a philosopher, physicist, and mathematician who advocated “scientific aesthetics” in order to eliminate the evaluative and interpretative judgment of traditional aesthetics - in his “repertoire theory” says that “the repertoire from which aesthetic states are generated, that is, artistic objects can, of course be considered unlimited. Only finite repertoires can be manipulated, and thus are selectable “(BIGAL, 1999, p. 22)

Repertoire is understood as the diversity of issues that a person has and acquires for intellectual development. In preparing an advert, research into the repertoire and customs of the target audience is needed to be able to select the elements - inside its repertoire - that compose this ad. The combination of these elements will be taken from the syntax of other languages such as novels, films, theater, and many other sources, forming the syntax of advertising. The advertising syntax is not fixed or predetermined.

Stimulating the receiver with the use of elements that will probably be recognized but are informative stimulates emotion, and a desire to interact with the ad. For Gibson (1986, p. 242), “the qualities of the objects are specified by information; the qualities of receptors and nerves are specified by the sensations. Information about the world affects the qualities of sense. In this same vein, Pignatari (. 2004, p 18) says that: “A poem conveys the quality of a feeling. Even when it seems to be conveying ideas, it is transmitting the quality of the feeling of that idea. An idea that can be felt, not just understood, explained, and peeled.” And he adds: “Most people read poetry as if it were prose. Most want ‘content’ - but do not perceive form. In art, form and content cannot be separated.”

Comics and advertising

Within the spectrum of the poetic function of language in advertising, comics provide verbal and plastic-visual elements to adverts and campaigns. Sequential art, as defined by Eisner (1989, p. 5) is “a vehicle for creative expression, a distinct discipline, an artistic and literary form that deals with the disposition of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea.” Therefore, comics combine therefore the art of writing (script), design, lettering, and coloring. The graphic style of the artists - the way they depict people, landscapes, and objects, using various techniques and strokes - make up the aesthetic, and often metaphorical, framework that comics lend to advertisements.

You can categorize this relationship between comics and advertising from the ways in which these products interchange their languages and discourses:

- Ads and campaigns that use the image of a character known by the public to lend “their fame” to the product or brand;
- The characters themselves become consumer goods or lend their names to products;
- Prominent characters who participate in institutional campaigns;
- Ads or campaigns that adopt elements of comic book language;
- Ads that take on the form and narrative of comics;

- Entire comic stories, sometimes covering an entire publication, used to sell a product or an idea.

The first case is almost a "testimonial" in which the character gives their guarantee of the quality of the product. Gordon (1998, p. 3) states that researchers in the United States located the emergence a mass consumer culture in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the next century, due to "economic and technological factors, especially transportation and communication, large-scale production, the dissemination of advertising on a national scale, and a new leisure culture."

To Kotler (2000, p. 103), "many strategic alliances take the form of" marketing alliances. He identifies four major categories, including promotional alliances, in which "a company agrees to promote a product or service of another." The fast food chain McDonald's, for example, partnered the Walt Disney Company to offer figurines of the Mulan character to those who buy their sandwiches.

According to Gordon (1998, p. 37), the mischievous Buster Brown (known as Chiquinho in Brazil), created for newspaper strips in 1902 by Richard Felton Outcault, was one of the first characters of American comics⁵ to be licensed along with *The Captain and the Kids* (written by Rudolph Dirks) and *Happy Hooligan* (by Burr Opper), for publishing in other newspapers. Along with the strips, which reached their full potential, the author went on to license the character for manufacturers of a wide range of products. In Figure 1, for example, the boy and his dog Tige show the strength of a sock named after the character in an ad published in the early twentieth century.

Because of his popularity, however, this child character even advertised cigarettes "that papa likes" in the pages of *O Tico-Tico* in the 1930s, just like the friendly Joe Cammel, an anthropomorphized camel wearing sunglasses, created in 1974, who appeared in Cammel cigarette ads. The use of children characters in advertisements has generated

⁵ In the United States, comics are called comics called due to the fact the first strips, published in newspapers in the late nineteenth century, were humorous. Then, regardless of the genre (horror, science fiction, heroes etc.), the name was retained.

debate and new regulations that seek to prevent children from being exposed to stimuli that leads to the consumption of products or services that may endanger their health (especially ads for alcoholic beverages or foods that lead to obesity), where Resolution 163 of CONANDA⁶ is an example, since it considers the “practice of targeting advertising and marketing communication at children with the intention of persuading them to consume of any product or service” using, among others, “children characters or presenters, cartoons or animation” to be abusive.



Figure 1: Print advert for socks starring Buster Brown (Chiquinho); in Brazil, the same character appeared in ads for various products, without its creator’s knowledge.

Sources: <http://knickoftime.net/2014/08/antique-graphics-wednesday-buster-brown-advertisement.html> e <https://keyimaguirejunior.wordpress.com/2014/10/03/d-quixote-um-gibi-dos-velhos-tempos/>. Acesso em: 10 ago. 2015.

Geandré, the cartoonist and creator of the alternative newspaper *Ovelha Negra*, regarding these characters of the consumer culture used in products sold in supermarkets such as food, hygiene, cleaning and health, calls them *marketing comics*. For him (1996: p. 25-26), there are two types of characters: the living (people, such as actors and personalities who embody a particular type) and the animated. There is also the difference between the licensed characters, belonging to a company (such as Disney, for example), and those created specifically for ads and advertising campaigns - Geandré calls them *character-logos* (1996, p. 17).

⁶ Department of Human Rights - National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents - Resolution No. 163 of March 13, 2014.

The Brazilian cartoonist who best took advantage of his characters was Mauricio de Sousa: since the mid-1960s, the artist knew how to produce, distribute and license his creations. In cartoons made for television, *Turma da Monica* (Monica's Gang) advertised the Cica brand products such as marmalade, and especially the Elefante brand tomato paste starring Jotalhão (with the slogan "The most beloved elephant Brazil"). In the 1970s, with the publication of periodical comic books - initially by Editora Abril, then by Globo, and at the beginning of the century, by Panini - these types became popular and started selling toys, food, hygiene and cleaning products and textiles (clothes, bedding, bath, and table), among others.



Figure 2: Elefante Tomato paste with Jotalhão illustration, Monica doll, also a Nissine noodles ad and Bauducco *Turma da Monica's* cookies.

Source: Acervo do autor

However, by lending their image to promote certain products or services, the characters may change to adapt to the characteristics of the brand or campaign. This was the case of Popeye the sailor, who draws his strength from eating spinach but, in a play performed in the late 1980s, he eats Quaker Oats to face and defeat an alien. Another campaign that caused outrage in comic book readers was McDonald's with Asterix and his friends. As a defender of traditional French culture, the idea of a Gallic warrior eating standardized food from a global fast food brand is strange. Usually, at the end of his adventures he shares his exploits with the members of your village for a feast washed down with roast boar and wine.



Figure 3: Popeye faces an alien eating oatmeal and the fellow countrymen of the Gallic warrior Asterix visit a restaurant of the American fast food chain McDonald's.

Source: Acervo do autor

The stories and comic book characters are not only used to sell and disseminate consumer products. Consider, for example, the institutional or educational campaigns that address issues related to the environment and are used to propagate concepts of citizenship, the defense of the environment, and social inclusion.

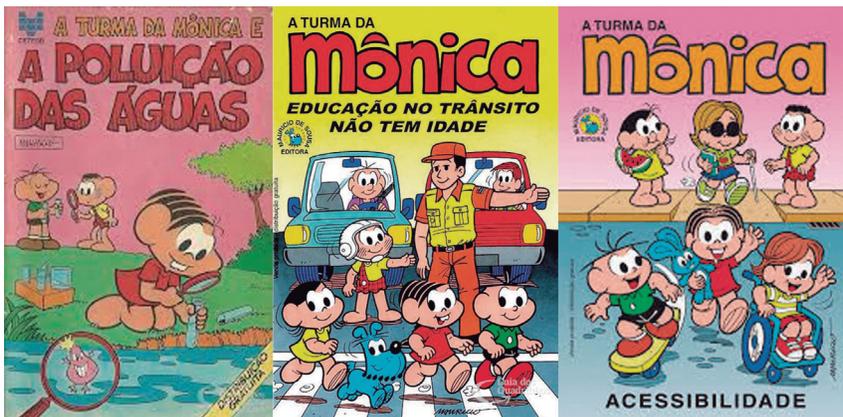


Figure 4: Institutional comic books produced by Mauricio de Sousa and distributed for free that address ecological, educational and social issues.

Source: Acervo do autor

Another example of the use of comic books to disseminate important social issues occurred in the 1980s, when AIDS was spreading and there were doubts and prejudice against the disease. The American publisher DC Comics held one page narratives, starring young super-heroes from their comics, to address the issue. These short stories appeared inside their main titles such as the *Justice League*.



Figure 5: Educational Advertisements in the form of comic books that address issues related to AIDS and discussed by DC Comics heroes.

Source: Acervo do autor

The language of comics, easily recognized by its audience, may be appropriate for advertising. It is one of the peaks of the poetic function in the relationship between comics and advertising. Kinetic lines (lines indicating spatial displacement), speech or thought bubbles, and onomatopoeias, (representation of sounds, usually noises like explosions

and impacts) are adopted in some ads and end up as part of the poetic function of language and are quickly identified ready because they are part of a popular cultural product.



Figure 6: Ads using elements of comic book language (visual metaphors, kinetic lines, speech bubbles, and onomatopoeias).

Source: <https://quietriple.wordpress.com/2013/06/11/put-a-tiger-in-your-tank/> (acesso em: 10 ago. 2015) e acervo do autor

Certain ads are presented with the narrative structure of the comic book, i.e., from the sequential relationship established between images and texts. Advertising campaigns - like those of companies such as Esso, Shell and Kia Motors - explore the use of balloons, onomatopoeias, and illustrations that enhance the poetic and aesthetic sense of the ads. Kia symbolizes the beep noise of a parking lot with an onomatopoeia, somehow placing the sound in its static image, and “changes”, making that sound also an image. Shell enables its *character-logo*, the elephant gas station attendant, to talk to the public, while Esso makes creative link between its title and the main image (the tiger, whose strength and speed characteristics are transferred metaphorically to product), while the car is shown in fast motion by the visual metaphor of smoke and kinetic lines. The three ads exemplify a breach of advertising standards by using comic book characteristics in their layout.

The traditional comic format can also be an option for graphical presentation of advertisements. But the advertising-comic relationship is not always accepted by researchers of the Ninth Art. Srbeč (2006, p.35), for example, says that,

with speech bubbles, drawings, and division of frames⁷, showing that it is possible to tell a story making propaganda. The narrator tells a story with images and texts arranged sequentially, while the advertised product is exhibited. The amalgamation of the advertising-comics relationship is the point that achieves the “sale” objective, that is easy to read. “Very sophisticated layouts or an overly elaborate technique, which can overwhelm and distract the reader and take over the story, are counter-productive in this format,” says Eisner (2013, p. 40).



Figure 8: Pirelli wire and cable campaign shown in a long narrative; Variguiinho gets his own magazine with comic and adventure stories featuring the Varig character-logo.

Source: Acervo do autor

The airline Varig created the Variguiinho character-logo, designed by advertising executive Delcio Pereira. The company invested in the character, which was initially just a mascot, but eventually became the protagonist of his own comic books with adventure companions. The electric cable company Pirelli submitted a campaign for Pirastic flame retardant wire, in the form of comics (comic book), to explain the use

⁷ For Duncan and Smith (2009, p. 131), “the encapsulation process involves selecting certain moments of the main action of the imagined story, encapsulating or defining pieces of those moments in a confined space (a unit of comics which is called vignette, regardless of whether there are frame lines or not).”

of the product and to show all of the problems that could be avoided through its use.

Concluding Remarks

Comics, as part of the poetic function that can be used by advertising, facilitate the public's understanding of the advertising message. Cesar (2009, p. 39) notes that comics (either because of their famous characters, their narrative, or their language), as mentioned in this text, join the importance of the idea and form to win over or persuade more viewers. "When you create an ad, everything needs to be functioning as a gear. If a part is missing, it won't work. Always think of the whole. Text must complete image; image must complete text."

Thus, using creativity, a key element of both the advertising and comics, the ads use comics and their language to reinforce the concepts of the campaign without necessarily employing arguments based on the referential function of language, but on the fantasy generated by the amplitude of senses generated by the poetic function, which captures the public's attention regarding the intention of the campaign, and adds new information. These facts show that the use of comic/graphic narrative can be a high point for advertising creativity, as ad executive Roberto Menna Barreto recommends:

If the path to this end (creativity) is through humor, we use humor, if it is through detailed explanation, we will use detailed explanation; and so on. (BARRETO, 2004, p. 105)

In the examples analyzed, in addition to the visual-graphics and aesthetic elements of comics (graphic style, colors, etc.), the actual sequential narrative that employ images and text continuously serve as argumentative reinforcement for the advertising message. Since this narrative is fragmented into several vignettes, the reader can fill in the gaps and give meaning to the content connected to their imagination

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