

Florin Dumitrescu, *Tradiții la supraofertă. Între socoteala din agenție și cea de la raft, Cartier Antropologic, Chișinău, 2015, 191 p.*

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The advertising message is studied today from the point of view of many disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, literary criticism, cultural history. Heavily influenced by the utilitarian principle, the process of composing this type of text creates the need for an extensive knowledge of social realities and a creative use of various linguistic resources. From the linguist's point of view, advertising is also a particular context in which it is worthy to study the perlocutionary effect of speech. Experts in rhetorical argumentation in advertising were interested by the way communication acts over reality, and the relationship between the speaker and the receiver. The anthropologist would study the strategy through which the author of the advertising message manipulates certain ethno-cultural conventions or the psycho-social predispositions of the receiver. In the United States, where advertising was often analysed as indicator of opinion dynamics and taste changes specific to a society, specialists described the organization principles of diverse semiotic strategies that function within commercial communication (Marchand, 1985; Leach, 1993; Fox, 1997).

In the Romanian society, because the Western type of marketing was instituted as late as after the fall of communism, we could not talk about a “national specific” of the field before that moment, and we also had to wait a long time for the appearance of applied analysis on this kind of text. Florin Dumitrescu's volume is therefore part of this innovative study that could also be read as a short synthesis of the few key moments of post-1989 Romanian advertising dedicated to food products. From these several important moments, the graduate of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest chooses to concentrate on the advertising of the 2000s, when the

Romanian advertising market started to experience the promotion of products described through the use of cultural constructs with the topic of traditions, i.e. the ones identified with slogans such as “as mother makes it”, “as in the countryside”, “as in the old times” (p. 8). It is a trend that became steady in the last two decades, and that was initiated by the now famous *Untdelemn de la Bunica*[†].

The book was originally the author's doctoral thesis in social anthropology which he defended in 2014 under the coordination of Vintilă Mihăilescu. This research enjoys a particular significance in the Romanian academic world given the lack of a similar one that would give a detailed account on the Romanian commercial culture with an emphasis on ethnic specificity and cultural stereotypes. Yet, an exception to this rule was the post-communist research for creating a country brand for Romania that supposed opinion polls on the representative local cultural elements, and business and consumption models analysis (Bogdan, 2011).

The researcher benefits from his own work in the advertising industry between 1995 and 2000, after getting a graduate degree in rhetoric and argumentation theory. He therefore combines inside knowledge with the view from outside when he goes back to his colleagues from the creation and strategy departments of the most important local advertising agencies. Following a pertinent holistic approach, Florin Dumitrescu uses the responses from advertising *creatives*, the ones from a representative sample of buyers, as well as participant observation of buyers' behavior in the supermarket and of their direct reaction to the advertising message.

The traditionalist topic studied by the author here alludes to: nostalgia for origins, guarantee of

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[†]Translated literally as “Oil from Grandmother”, but with a lexical twist because of the archaism used for the word “oil”. The cooking oil became very popular in Romania during the 2000s for its so-considered more natural formula.

quality thanks to suggesting a legendary space and time, the promotion of local or national identity, the preoccupation for the purity of sources and a healthy diet (p. 9). Being aware of the existence of a jargon less available to readers outside the field, the scholar explains it in the introductory chapter (p. 14–16). In the first three chapters, the author analyzes historically the use of the traditional argument in commercial communication, and classifies its functioning in diverse compartments of the production cycle (p. 16–29), gives details on the buyers' expectations (p. 30–47) and examines the dynamic relationship and negotiation between the concrete hopes of customers and the creative expectancy of the advertising producers (p. 48–87). In the second part of the book, the author presents in detail a few important brand campaigns: *Untdelemn de la Bunica* (p. 88–108), the dairy brands *Napolact* and *Covalact* (p. 109–147), the processed meat brand *Matache Măcelaru'* (p. 148–153), and the pâté brands *Scandia Sibiu* and *Ardealul* (p. 164–170).

The rhetoric of marketing gastronomic traditions offers a new perspective on the status of tradition in modern times and illustrates the much discussed “glocalization”¹ in contemporary marketing. As Edward Shils, the prominent theoretician of tradition, analyzed historically and in contemporary forms, traditional manifestations are normative because they act as mediators of human behavior beyond their connection with the factual content (Shils, 1981, p. 24). On the same line of thought, the cognitive anthropologist Pascal Boyer demonstrated that the content transmitted from this traditional knowledge is less the opinions and worldviews specific to the past, but rather individuals identified as “conservative” unconsciously repeat the superficial features of cultural phenomena that are so dear to them (Boyer, 1991, p. 13–14). Therefore Florin Dumitrescu's research results confirm the interpretation of the theoreticians of tradition; he comes to the conclusion that is not the content of rhetoric that persuades the majority of buyers, but the attraction of the discourse about tradition. The perlocutory

function of traditionalist advertising exists not in the average message about the respective product, but in the fact that the respective product has a story. Contemporary Romanian consumerism is therefore motivated unexpectedly by this returning to the past strategy.

In a diachronic approach, the author explains the great turn from the beginning of Romanian post-communist marketing, represented by accentuating the Western interface of the product—a logical need of imitating famous Western products and the Euro-Atlantic commercial values desired by advertising *creatives* and also by consumers—to a rediscovery of the lost charm of local tradition (p. 38). This rediscovery of tradition took shape under nostalgia for the past, for the tastes and the products of the past, for the fanciful and picturesque rural land. Dumitrescu sees here a change which motivated the creation of a few retrograde brands by the important advertising agencies in Romania (p. 42). This phenomenon appears against the explicit preference of advertising *creatives*, who already specialized in the tradition of Western marketing and reacted negatively to the retrograde classic themes, such as: the Mioritic fatalism, the eternal complex of “peasantism”, the Ceaușescu-age memories, agrarianism or the old national-communism.

Having to act against their own will and preference, branding experts responded positively to customer requests and produced peasant-like messages which transformed them into “manipulated manipulators” (p. 86). Dumitrescu persuasively describes this difficult negotiation between the buyers' Arcadian pleasures and the Western pragmatism of brand creators. The reconciliation of the two came about in the creation of a *sui generis* traditionalism, having as main content the dominant local cultural clichés, even though the staging was inspired by Western models. Disgusted by the old nationalism, the photography directors created a new one following the attractive Western culture (p. 57). From this forced reconciliation we see an ironic distance and a detachment characterizing the presentation of the

¹Term introduced in the 1990s in social sciences and economics to designate the effects of both globalization and localization in the functioning of contemporary social, political and economic systems. In sociology, the term was introduced and explained by American social scientist Robert Robertson who took it from the Japanese business jargon (Robertson, 1995, p. 29ff). It will be first applied by Wellman & Hampton (1999, p. 651): “We call this process glocalization: the combination of global connectivity and local activity.” As market strategy, which is a field where glocalization became highly popular lately, it supposes the adaptation of global brands to the expectations and preferences of local consumers (Dumitrescu & Vinerean, 2010).

Romanian rural world; we have in this presentation a strong indigenous humour and edgy contours of the peasants' and traders' portraits.

The interviews with the housewives-buyers provide information about their preference for the anthropic reference, i.e. the brand characters promoted strongly by commercials and by the artistic product label, even though they acknowledge the artificial image and the convention behind the advertising strategy: "Briefly stated, they like to believe that it is from Coana Chiva[‡], though they prefer to know it is mass-produced" (p. 78). Continuing this argumentation, the biographies of traditionalist products illustrate even further the articulation of this negotiation and the whole process of brand making. Noteworthy in the chapter dedicated to explaining the market success of *Untdelemn de la Bunica*, is the interview with the "*Bunica's father*", George Nicolae, the man who had "the genius inspiration to realize that the past will *sell* in the future" (p. 99). In order to connect with the local buyers' expectations, the name creator of the cooking oil did not use market studies, as would have been expected, but works on the history of mentalities and cultural anthropology, books on Romanian myths and legends made famous worldwide by Mircea Eliade.

The stories of the traditionalist brand characters, analysed from an esthetic, rhetorical and anthropological perspective occupy most of the next chapters. For example, the brand character Coana Chiva, the one that generated the market success of the *Covalact* yoghurt, embodies the transformation from Grandmother's gentle face to the more edgy voice of the typical merchant in a peasant fair (p. 129). In the same category appears the portrait of Matache Măcelaru[§], presented as a famous maker of salami and sausages in Bucharest two centuries ago, that creates the image of "the stereotypical merchant from the golden age" (p. 151). The advertising strategies of *Scandia Sibiu* and *Ardealul* pâtés emphasize the reconfiguration of an idyllic commensality, the togetherness and the collective

celebration of flavor (p. 159).

The buyers' desire of being seduced by advertising rhetoric using traditionalist themes comes in opposition to the great consumption rates, the highly industrialized and efficient environment of the supermarket where people face the products. While being faithful customers of mass-produced food, the buyers appreciate nevertheless the story told on the label of the product's unique nature. Florin Dumitrescu finds in this behavior people's nostalgia for the atmosphere of old fairs, with their specific noises and gestures. This is also the interpretation that the author finally provides for this entire phenomenon of "bringing traditions into the supermarket" in the chapter appropriately titled: "From the fair to the supermarket and back again" (p. 171–181). Describing the staging of the old-fashioned fair in today's supermarket resembles the author's first book (Dumitrescu, 2013). In that one, he tried to explain the long protests in the Universității Square in Bucharest, that took place in the 1990s by seeing them as a manifestation of both sacred and profane, commercial and carnival-like elements of the old peasant food markets.

While it is hard to deny the importance and innovative character of this research, placing it within the broader context of classic American histories of advertising would have been a great addition. The American experts noticed decades ago how commercials in the flourishing interwar American retail market were pushing forward this socio-cultural imaginary of home abundance and idealized family life, as well as using animistic images of traditional societies (Samuel, 2001, p. 3). From an anthropological standpoint, advertising becomes in a way a field of magic (Williams, 1980) or one, as Roland Barthes describes it in a famous text on the semiotics of advertising, that unravels the most profound areas of human life (Barthes, 1963, p. 95), even in an age so heavily dominated by the myth of progress in market communication.

[‡]The brand character of the *Covalact* yoghurt. The appellative *Coana* is an old polite formula of Græco-Turkish influence in Romanian, introduced during the Phanariot times, and the given name is also of Greek origin.

[§]*Măcelaru*: Romanian archaism for "the butcher".

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