Erica Demarco

Polytechnic of Turin
First School of Architecture
Course in Graphic & Virtual Design

Abstract from degree thesis

The image of persuasion.

Female stereotypes and types in the advertising language.

I decided to work on this degree thesis after visiting the exhibition "Advertising with sensitivity" celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Institute of self-discipline in advertising. This event showed all the advertisements which violated the code during the years. I was inspired to work on feminine stereotypes and the exploitation of women in that area.

My approach was from the graphic point of view instead of a sociological or communication one.   In this sense the approach is more creative than destructive. There is not a moralistic criticism about advertising including women as subject, but a new type of feminine subject.

After studying advertising communication in my work I came to an important conclusion: advertising is woman.

Woman, because she produces an effect of: identification when the communication target is feminine; persuasion when the target is masculine. This was both my starting point and final point.

From this perspective I mark a type of woman respectful of the person's dignity and at the same time I give back to advertising the value it merits: a value that defines advertising as a form of creative art.

I divided my work into 4 parts:

1. Sociological and cultural point of view: definition of the role of advertising in society and introduction of the important concept of "stereotype" to which I postponed the concept of "Type". This is a new concept introduced by the expert Paola Righetti in a seminar in 2005. It is necessary to explode the myth that in order to talk to the masses and be understood and appreciated it is necessary to build or re-cycle a stereotype. I started to study, researching and speaking with experts on that.

The stereotype is defined as a conventional and recurring model pre-created referring to both a speech or a behavior.

The type is an example, a model from which we can copy; it is a character whose characteristics are ordinary and common.

The stereotype is artificial and one dimensional, while the type has more dimensions and so is more realistic.

Then I recognized the feminine stereotypes in advertising, with examples from cinema and spots. I never wanted to abandon the reality so I made a personal reflection about the image of woman in Italian society, referring to recent events which put women's bodies as the protagonists of public debate (violence against women, the image of woman in politics, aesthetic surgery, etc.)

2. Historical point of view: the most relevant events in advertising from the sixties until now. I discovered how feminine stereotypes changed in the decades until the end of the nineties. I examined the role of the Institute of self-discipline in advertising especially some examples of sentences against advertising regarding articles 9 (violent messages, indecent and vulgar) and 10 (offending a person's dignity and offending moral, civic and religious convictions) of the code, whose incriminating subject was woman's body.

3. Through the 3rd part I understood the way in which woman is utilized in order to satisfy the communicative and persuasive purposes of advertising. I analyzed spots in order to discover the ways in which woman is represented in magazines through psychological and semiotic disciplines. I studied some articles like those for electrical household appliances, commercial proposals and food. Stereotypes are used in more than 50% with the physical aspect, expression and feeling as predominant: sensual woman, serene woman (internal peace and harmony with the behavior) and the mother. Both Serene and sensual woman produce a process of possession toward the masculine target and identification towards a feminine target. We will see other characteristics in the slides.

I also discovered some scandalous material which I included in my work in order to draw attention in two ways: common sense with which my personal criticism is directed towards the incriminating advertising and one of closure as the attitude of those people so sensitive to the instrumental use of the feminine body and at the transmission of media messages which distort or denigrate woman's body.

I added some local projects with the purpose of sensitizing common opinion and the people involved in the field. I was supported by different people involved in politics of gender and women's associations.

4. In the last part I gave some guidelines in which it is possible to find theoretical and practical elements in order to present and represent a new "type" of woman in opposition to the stereotype. It is a more realistic alternative of the image of women in advertising.

Finally I can say that through my work I was able to consider different factors connected to the physical definition and human dimension of woman. What emerged is that the dimension of sensuality is not unilateral. We can see now an imperfect beauty which is aesthetically subjective. People who are not perfect but at the same time charming. This is not an invitation to use nudity.

It was also clear, analyzing feminine representations in television and in society that even if it is not exclusively the work of advertising to change social structures, it is important for those working in the field, to take responsibility.

In conclusion my objective was not to face the argument in terms of criticism or moral values, but to give a contribution to the fight against feminine stereotypes in advertising. I want to use an aphorism of Pablo Picasso:

"Every act of destruction is, first of all, an act of creation".