

The slow pace of change in advertising New family types in advertisements for people carriers

Stefano Traini

Faculty of Communication Science, University of Teramo (IT)

straini@unite.it

Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine in the context of today a theory put forward by Umberto Eco in 1968 (in his book *La struttura assente* [*The Absent Structure*]). Eco stated that advertising does not increase public understanding and is simply a consolatory art. In this paper I shall analyse a number of advertisements (made between 2009 and 2014) for 5 different models of people carrier to see what type of families are portrayed and how, in order to see if Eco's theory still holds true. The analyses in fact show that the way families are portrayed in advertising continues to favour traditional models and values, even though there are some indications of social changes that are taking place. In addition, as recent sociosemiotic studies have shown, advertising communication has a dual social and commercial status that obliges it to move slowly: so while it can portray innovations and increase public understanding, this must be done without any destabilizing effects and therefore must always take place very gradually.

Key Words

Semiotics, Advertising, Consumption, Sociosemiotics

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1. Umberto Eco: advertising as a consolatory art

In his 1968 book *La struttura assente* [*The Absent Structure*] Umberto Eco published some analyses of advertisements – including his famous analysis of the ad for Camay soap – concluding that the language of advertising does not “nourish” the public’s ideologies but is instead a “consolatory art”. Adverts do not invent new codes; rather, the codes are already institutionalized and metabolized by society and advertisers simply pick them up and reuse them. Why does Eco come to this conclusion? The Camay ad shows a man and a woman at Sotheby’s auction house, in London, looking at paintings and exchanging amorous glances. The characters take on an *antonomastic value*, in the sense that they represent all elegant refined young people, and thus become a model to be imitated. The visual register conveys highbrow connotations: culture, an international atmosphere, love of art; meanwhile the verbal register seems to focus on more material connotations: “Even a connoisseur of the fine arts can be seduced by Camay”. In general, Eco notes that the language used in the ad (both verbal and visual) uses basic mechanisms of persuasion, without offering radical changes to either rhetoric or ideology: “The global ideology that it connotes – Eco writes – is the one already alluded to when examining the topic areas suggested: success in life consists of erotic-worldly-economic success (in which art too is seen in terms of commercial value and as an indicator of success). Anyone who is successful in these areas is enviable and a model to be imitated” (Eco 1968a: 177, my transl.). The message is redundant both rhetorically and ideologically, and this seems to be the peculiar characteristic of advertising language: that it speaks a language that is already known, using very recognizable rhetorical techniques, and themes that already circulate widely in social discourse. In an essay published the same year, Eco (1968b) observes that if we see a live cow next to a can of condensed milk, we have no difficulty in interpreting this “ingenious metonymy”: the message is telling us that the milk in the can is genuine and wholesome and comes from the udders of the cow. We can easily decode the rhetorical artifice because it has been institutionalized and forms part of the code of advertising.

During those years Eco was attempting to use the tools of rhetoric to analyse adverts, just as Barthes had done a few years earlier when he analysed the visual of the Panzani pasta ad (Barthes 1964). I don’t intend to consider here the limitations of taxonomic rhetoric as applied to the study of advertising language, nor the positive results obtained during that period by the use of this approach:¹ I would only point out that in Eco’s view a rhetoric of advertis-

1 Discussed in Traini (2008: 24-30).

ing should demonstrate that the advertising creative, while believing that he or she is inventing new forms of expression, is in fact *spoken by his/her own language*. More than 40 years have passed since Eco carried out his analysis, and semiotics has paid a great deal of attention to advertising texts, using tools that are undoubtedly more effective than those available in the 60s. This means in my view that today we can return to Eco's intuitions and pinpoint his position more exactly, in the light of more recent research.

With this in mind I have chosen some Tv ads for five different people carriers to see what types of family are represented and how they are represented in terms of narrative and discourse. I will then sum up the results of these comparative analyses: the comparisons are diachronic because the ads were made in a period between 2009 and 2014, but there are also some synchronic observations on ads made in the same year.²

2. Models of family in ads for people carriers

2.1 Renault Scenic³

The Renault Scenic ad that came out in 2009 was very interesting in that it focused on a blended family inside a car whose internal space has been expanded. The ad's narrative structure is quite complex. The actant-Subject (a true hero) is the driver: he has various children, wives, families. The Subject has a number of different Narrative Micro-programmes: he has to take his son Daniele, the child of his first wife Elena, to the swimming pool; then he has to pick up and take home: the twin sons of his new wife, Marco and Luca (from the tennis club); Sofia, the daughter he has had with his new wife (from her dance class); Mattia, the son he has only recently discovered; and Arturo, the neighbour's son. In this situation the car is the *transformational operator* which allows the Subject to carry out his plans quickly and efficiently. So at the start we have *separate elements of the family*, scattered around various locations and engaged in different activities (*paratopic spaces*), and then – in the car – their movement towards the *utopic space* (the home), where the different elements of the family come together again.⁴

In the 2012 ad for the Renault Scenic Xmod, a little boy is in the car with his aunt and uncle. They show him the fairground, the play park, the sea, but without ever stopping the car or getting out, because for them the enjoyment consists in driving the Scenic. For the adults the external space has value only

2 The analyses of the 2009 ads were presented at a talk I gave at the School of «Semiotics of advertising» in the Department of Communication at the University of San Marino 12 December 2009. The subject of the analyses was the representation of space in car ads.

3 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXeznNLQjc4>>. You can also see this TV ad and the others on the Ocula website.

4 In Greimas's semiotic theory the *utopic space* is the place of performances (where actions take place, where the Subject is united with the desired Object), while *paratopic spaces* are the places where competences are acquired (where the Subject prepares to carry out the action, acquires abilities and capacities, gets permission and so on. See Greimas and Courtés (1979; the entry for “spatial localization”); Greimas (1976).

insofar as it is observed from the internal space of the car, while the child experiences the internal space in a dysphoric way and his only desire is to go home and be reunited with his mother.

The 2013 Renault Scenic XMod ad shows some trends that have been revived over time: dance, graffiti, museums, and ending with the Renault Scenic, which was “reborn” in 2013 with a new design and renewed engineering. All these revivals are observed by a family travelling in a car who at one point stop to admire a view of the city. While experiencing a range of external events (in *paratopic spaces*), the family reaffirms its unity, which in this case too takes place in the *utopic space* of the car as vantage point.

There are no people in the 2014 ad: all we see is the car, outside and in, while its technical specifications are described. The family appears only in the verbal register (“designed for families”), connected to a highly technological vision of spaciality.

2.2 Ford C-Max⁵

It’s not until three-quarters of the way through the 2009 ad for the Ford C-Max that we see a car: we see a man with a little boy (so in this case too we have a *family*, albeit a “limited” one) in a park, with other people. We see them moving along a road lined with buildings. Suddenly, with a succession of changes in framing and editing, the collective Subject “family” is transformed into a collective Subject in a car. The car – the *transformational operator* – moves along an empty road and reaches home. The ad’s *narrative structure* resembles that of the 2009 Scenic ad. We have a family outing and a return home by means of the *transformational operator*, which is the car. Assuming that this is not the whole family, in the park and on the road (*paratopic spaces*) the different elements of the family are separated, and it is the car that makes it possible to move towards the *utopic space* (home) where the family becomes whole again.

In the 2011 ad for the new 7-seat Ford C-Max a man puts the car together piece by piece, starting with a seat and moving on to the chassis, the interior, the engine. Here too we have the idea of a final unity that is reached by way of fragmented parts, but the fact that the construction is connected to a single person rather than a family (despite the final claim “Moving Modern Family”) is very surprising. The 2013 ad, on the other hand, shows a classic traditional family (parents and two children, a boy and a girl) putting together the C-Max. The individual parts come together in a single final project, the accent is decidedly on the car’s technological features, but the family is clearly the co-protagonist.

Another ad from 2013 shows the B-Max, C-Max and S-Max (the Ford Max Family), and seems to provide a different and innovative view of family. First we see a woman getting married and a son, already fairly grown-up, walking her up the aisle. Then we see a husband and wife who separate for 90 minutes every week because they support different teams, taking one child each with

5 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lkss2wodAQQ>>

them. Finally we see four married women – all lovers of the sea – go surfing without their husbands or their children. “Whatever your idea of family, there’s a family of cars designed for you”, says the voiceover at the end. Here too we see separations, but they are all led back towards unity by the *transformational operator* in the form of the car. For this reason what we see is not so much a different and innovative view of family but rather the re-presentation of classic traditional models, with a few careful acknowledgements of more modern ways of life.

2.3 Toyota Verso⁶

The narrative structure of the 2009 Toyota Verso ad is similar to those we have already looked at. Here too we have a family outing and a return home in the car. The separation of the family is represented in a different way, however: the little girl and the father “detach” themselves in their imaginations from the family, the girl imagining herself on the seabed while the father soars into the air. At different stages the car is both paratopic and utopic space: when they “escape” we are in the *internal paratopic space* of the car and the external one of the imagination; the pair then rejoin the family group in the *utopic space of the car*. So the space for the reunion is no longer the home but the car and – as Baudrillard observed (1968) – the car may be considered a “second home”, because it allows an extraordinary compromise to occur: that of being at home while being away from home.

In the 2010 ad we don’t see the family, but the objects that appear first in the house and then in the car (high chair, games, cuddly toys) are signs of a family that is growing. Toyota Verso is the answer to the family’s new needs, but the objects seem to recall a traditional family, without any innovative features. In the 2013/2014 ad, by contrast, the main character is an extraordinary dad who transforms himself into a superhero and a gunfighter to entertain his daughter (the narrator). In this way the ad idealizes the figure of the father, who at one point – dressed as an astronaut – takes the Toyota Verso (with the family inside it) into space. Yet what we have is still a classic, traditional family which forms a compact unit around the car being advertised.

2.4 Citroën Picasso

In the 2009 ad for the Citroën Picasso we have a family that is travelling. The journey is without limits, as the verbal register tells us. From the internal space of the vehicle’s interior, the children have the “magic power of imagination” with which they manipulate the outside world. This is an interesting notion, because in some ways the internal space of the car modifies the external space, recreating it through the imagination of the actors who are located there. As we saw previously (in the 2009 Toyota Verso ad), we have two actors (the children) who “detach” themselves from the family unit using their imaginations and transform the world outside the car with “magic touches”.

6 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLWooUVKpeU>>

Even though they stay inside the *internal paratopic space* of the car, the two children find a way to escape, “returning” to the family unit when their mother looks at them on the back seat: from this point the internal space of the car becomes a *utopic space*, and in this case too we can see the car as a «second home» (Baudrillard).

In the 2013 ad three astronauts are approaching a planet, in an atmosphere that recalls *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The three touch down on the planet which promptly begins to transform itself, taking the shape of a Citroën C4 Picasso. “The whole world in your car”, says the voiceover at the end. External space and the internal space of the car fuse together, but the ad does not show family models. Rather we see an all-comprehending space that is capable – according to the ad – of including “your whole world”.

In the 2014 ad we are back on earth, with a father who is followed by his three children throughout his daily activities (they are literally attached to him) and who finds peace only in his Citroën C4 Picasso. As in other cases we have seen, there is an external *paratopic space* and a *utopic space* inside the car, which has the function of reunifying the family. Although we only see the father with his children, we should note that the family does not depart greatly from the traditional typologies: indeed, the attempt to redefine the stereotype of the father, who is presented as an active figure who looks after the children and makes a practical contribution to family life, simply reinforces, in my view, the traditional image of the family, with a few small changes brought about by the modern world.

2.5 Peugeot 5008⁷

The 2009 Peugeot 5008 ad shows the family, which has spent time at the funfair, preparing to return home by car: the internal space of the car is paratopic and utopic: *paratopic* in the first phase when – in the father’s imagination – different characters take the wheel: his daughter, the dog, a female contortionist, and finally his wife; *utopic* because in the second and final phase the car itself puts the family back together. The family returns to being an orderly and compact unit simply by changing the driver.

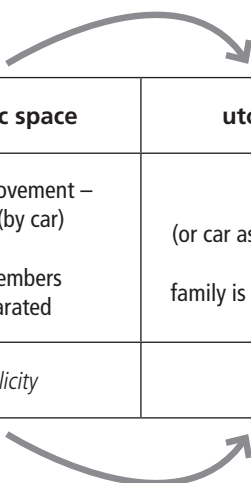
Two ads from 2013 show a completely different tendency. In the first, Peugeot presents its crossover model, a combination of people carrier, SUV and family saloon. In the film we see the characters playing at hide and seek, finding the Peugeot 2008 in various part of the city and driving it to different destinations. The focus is on the car’s versatility, which makes it suitable for different conditions and various driving styles, but no family models are shown. The second ad, filmed in Monument Valley, shows how the city can be seen differently. The urban space with its small daily events is recontextualized in the surreal desert space of Monument Valley. As always, the car is the operator of this narrative and discursive artifice. The family is not emphasized in this ad either, which instead focuses on the possibility of seeing daily life from a different perspective, thanks to the vantage point provided by the Peugeot 2008.

7 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuGHhUwFWqY>>

2.6 Semiotic considerations

These analyses seem to reveal a recurring syntactic matrix: we move from a state of separation, with disconnected elements (family outing, scattered car parts, imagination and invention), to a state of recomposition (family members reunited, car parts put back together, a return to reality). This syntactic matrix seems, however, to be the *conversion* of a deep and thus more abstract semantic category: “*multiplicity vs unity*”. It seems to be this deep category that contains and determines the narrative and discursive conversions we have seen. The movement from “multiplicity” to “unity” provide a *syntactic orientation* for the category: the same *syntactic orientation* as the narrative transformations. The *paratopic space* represents the “centrifugal phase” in various ways: we saw that it is frequently the vehicle itself that shows the radial flight towards the exterior (through the individual activities of the various characters, and through imagination and invention); at other times it is the external spaces that visually express this phase, for example the locations for recreational activities (lake, park, etc.). The *utopic space* represents the “centripetal phase” by showing the home, or by showing the car as a “second home” (making great use of the car’s space-form), or by showing the car that has been put back together by carefully reassembling the parts.

We can summarize what has been said so far using the following analytical scheme:



surface discursive level	paratopic space	utopic space
surface narrative level	outings – movement – journeys (by car) family members are separated	home (or car as “second home”) family is put back together
deep narrative level	<i>multiplicity</i>	<i>unity</i>

Until now we have considered the car as a *transformational operator*, that is, one that causes a change in state. If we also want to examine the car’s status as *passional operator*, we have to ask how the descriptive terms “multiplicity” and “unity” are axiologized. Here it seems to me that there is a *euphoric valorization* of both terms; that is, of both the multiplicity of the family, with its centrifugal impulses, and its subsequent unity, with its centripetal reassembly. Both the scattering of the family in the Scenic ad and the flights of fancy in the Toyota Verso and Picasso, as well as the various ways in which the families rediscover their unity, are euphorically enhanced. This is why when we move

from deep thymic space to modal surface space, the car becomes *desirable* (*wanting to be*), *indispensable* (*having to be*), and even *inevitable* (*unable not to be*), etc. In short, the car appears to us as the transformational and passionate operator that contains and causes to coexist within itself, in a way we might refer to as “mythically” (Lévi-Strauss), the “multiplicity” and “unity” of the family, separation and reassembly.

These elements help us understand which models of the family are being represented in advertisements, and how. The classic traditional family predominates, shown gathered compactly around the car, and even when the ads move away from the classic model they do so in a reassuring way, without any radical restructuring of the underlying values. There is almost always a movement from separation to unity: the members of the family meet up again either at home or in the car, just as the separate parts of the vehicle come together to form a technological unity. Fathers on their own have wives waiting for them at home; women on their own are escaping only temporarily from the family setting; and even when the families are clearly split up, the traditional basic values remain strong: unity, harmony, affection. This confirms Eco’s theory: advertising is a consolatory art that does not invent codes but rather reworks those that are familiar. There are some indicators of change, however: we see some blended families, more modern roles for fathers are shown, new female models are slowly emerging. There is not a complete absence of novelty; so we need to consider further the pace and the methods adopted by the language of advertising when it portrays social change.

3. The sociosemiotic gaze: advertising discourse as a mirror of society

It is true then, as Eco said, that advertising does not invent new codes, instead picking up on social types and stereotypes; indeed this is what advertising creatives do: they identify trends, pick up languages, dip into society’s well and pour everything into their productions. Advertising people don’t want to disorient their audience; rather they want to reassure them by offering them familiar models. In this sense advertising *mirrors* social reality, reflecting and suggesting existing models and trends. However, when it sees itself reflected in advertising’s mirror the social community changes to some degree, just as we change when we look at ourselves in a mirror and adjust our appearance as a result. Society is reflected in advertising texts – we can see this if we look at ads from the 80s, where we find the society of those years faithfully portrayed with all its stereotypes – but then observes itself as portrayed in those texts, and what it sees there disposes it to change. As Eric Landowski writes: “mirror-like, society creates a spectacle of itself, and by doing so finds the rules that are needed to play its own game” (Landowski 1989: 13). Considered from this point of view, advertising is not just a “consolatory art” but a *mirror* that society uses to change itself.

Landowski’s ideas form part of what is known as sociosemiotics: an approach that is not completely separate from semiotics, but one which pays careful attention to collective and social aspects of signification and commu-

nication. Eric Landowski, who was the creator of this strand of study, wrote that: “what is essential, in advertising discourse, is its sociocultural value, the fact that it is a tool that makes an important contribution to the construction of a shared image of social reality, and to the reproduction and transformation of collective models” (Landowski 1989: 52). In Landowski’s view, advertising is one social discourse among many; it is part of reality, acting on it and modifying it. By reflecting social and collective models it helps to transform them. Guido Ferraro (1999) drew attention to the anthropological aspects of this approach, underlining the way in which advertising discourse contributes to the construction of the shared image of a social community. Ferraro reminds us that advertising creatives must capture the tastes and trends of society, so that advertisements become a “mirror” of the cultural system in which they are produced. In short, sociosemiotics looks at advertising discourse in the context of the socio-cultural system and in its connections with other socio-cultural discourses.⁸

The sociosemiotic approach has helped us to understand the dual function – social and commercial – of advertising language: a language that has to reflect new trends but very cautiously, because it also has to sell. Advertising language has to innovate while reassuring, has to amaze without destabilizing. This is why advertising communication moves slowly and very carefully: it is true, as Eco observed, that it does not produce radical innovations, but we can add that it innovates gradually, while always remaining anchored in tradition. Marianna Boero (2014) recently analysed some advertising visuals showing new family models which caused a furore: first of all the 2012 Ikea ad, which appeared in the press and showed two men shopping and holding hands (“We are open to all kinds of families”); this was followed by the Eataly ad (which shows two women holding hands with the slogan “We at Eataly are also open to all kinds of families”). New types of families are breaking into advertising discourse, then, but Boero observes that beyond the surprise which these images cause on first viewing, they do not communicate any change in the values that lie at the heart of the family; rather they represent an *extension* of the modes in which the same underlying values are expressed (love, respect, union), so that the value of *tradition* is gradually associated with an unconventional family model. The idea is interesting, because it would confirm the notion that advertising language is static rather than innovative: a social language that only introduces novelties very slowly. It is true that insofar as it is a “mirror,” advertising forces society to rethink itself, but it does so extremely slowly, extending widely shared values an inch at a time. To use terms introduced by Lotman (1992), advertising always progresses *gradually* and only very rarely *explosively*.

One example of “explosions” was undoubtedly Oliviero Toscani’s campaigns for Benetton in the 80s and 90s. Toscani above all disoriented his audience by introducing codes that were innovative and not in the least consolatory: we need only recall that this was the first time that a product had been associated with aggressive and shocking images of death (a cemetery, a

8 On sociosemiotics see also Marrone (2001), Pozzato (2001), Semprini (2003).

femur, illegal immigrants, an electric chair, a burned-out car, a patient with Aids). Toscani also attempted to use advertising to break into other fields of discourse: science (with themes such as disease and birth control), politics (for example with the theme of the mafia), religion (the image of the priest and the nun kissing). However the fierce opposition to his campaigns – which also had a serious impact on sales – made it clear that advertising is not socially legitimated to deal with certain themes, cannot risk moving into areas that do not belong to it, and cannot radically change the rules of the game.⁹

Advertising moves slowly. Evening sopas aimed at families and mainly at an older audience are more daring when it comes to subjects such as blended families, unmarried couples and gay couples. But this has always been – and continues to be – the fate of a language that has to reflect new social and anthropological trends, but also has to reassure its audience in order to sell them stuff.

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⁹ For a perceptive analysis of Oliviero Toscani’s Benetton campaign see Semprini (1996).

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Stefano Traini is Full Professor of Philosophy and Theory of Language and Dean of the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the University of Teramo (Italy), where he teaches Semiotics. He is the author of the volumes: *La connotazione* [*Connotation*], Bompiani, Milan, 2001; *Le due vie della semiotica. Teorie strutturali e interpretative* [*The Two Branches of Semiotics: Structural and Interpretative Theories*], Bompiani, Milan, 2006; *Semiotica della comunicazione pubblicitaria* [*Semiotics of Advertising*], Bompiani, Milan, 2008; *Le basi della semiotica* [*Basics of Semiotics*], Bompiani, Milan, 2013. Main research areas: semiotic theory, text semiotics, semiotics of culture. At present his research is concentrating on the theoretical aspects of semiotic methodology.