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Leading into Temptation - (The Sacred and the Profane in Advertising)

The true power and meaning of words seem increasingly lost. Likewise, we are losing this specific sensitivity to language inasmuch as the “big” words are frequently used in frequently not “big” moments. I would like to begin this article by quoting a fragment from a popular Polish hip-hop song because it seems emblematic of this devaluation of what has for ages been considered sacred:

“There is one small place in the Earth
Where nothing else matters but a heartbeat
I’m escaping there with all my love
I believe in you, I believe in my *sacrum* ...”¹

Sacrum from the quoted fragment, referring to what is sacred, transcendental, and not secular, becomes now identified not with God but a partner; a love between two people is compared to God’s love, and a lover belongs to the sphere of the sacred. When listening to such a lyric, do we not think about its contents? For most of society, the younger generation in particular, it is predominantly a metaphorical, extremely emotional, confession of love, stressing what in everyday life is the most important thing – the feelings between two people. What then has happened to the original meaning of the word ‘sacred’?

The phenomenon of the secularization of what is sacred and of certain religious symbols is evident in various examples of human activity, and such secularization has come to play an increasing role in marketing and advertising. Depending on their discipline and methodology, researchers have variously defined ‘advertisement’ for many years. Definitely, it is a phenomenon inextricably linked with the media, although it can be found in other spheres, such as economics, social communication, psychology, anthropology of culture, rhetoric, linguistics, and even art. Andrzej Kisielewski emphasises that:

“the advertisement is often an object of admiration, as is proved by *Euroshorts* and *The Night of Advert Fans* [Noc Reklamożerców] or by various festivals, competitions, and museum collections, such as the most prestigious one which has been created since the 1930s in the New York Contemporary Art Museum... [However,] it is still more often the object of serious critique” (45).

¹ The lyrics of a song by Mezo and Kasia Wilk (and a literal translation thereof.)

So what is advertising? Jacek Kall claims that “we speak about advertising when a product or service is presented in a personless way (without a salesman) and for money (as opposed to publicity)” (17). From the marketing perspective, an advertisement serves a producer to address the market (Kisielewski 45), whereas from the perspective of social communication, advertising is a form of mass communication using exclusively indirect and permanent data carriers, and a multi-code process of deploying information. Its aim is to create the positive attitude of an addressee of the message towards the main designate of the message, and the channelling of the decision making process associated with it (Albin 120).

The power of advertising consists in its double-plane structure: informative and persuasive. Advertising does not only carry information about a good, but its key target is to persuade its recipient. Bogusław Kwarciak illustrates this in a concise way: “advertising, to put it simply, is INFORMATION+PERSUASION” (12). This basic aim of advertising (alluring a recipient to buy, inciting a need to possess the offered product, suggesting satisfaction, and indicating arguments for the correctness of a consumer’s choice) has repeatedly been analyzed in depth². Linguists define the advertisement message as a complex speech act with a dominating persuasive function that consolidates and forms particular micro-acts:

“ADVERTISEMENT – one of the constant manifestations of mass communication and mass culture. It is communicated by means of various methods including technical appliances, and directed towards an anonymous and varied number of Recipients.

From the pragmalinguistic perspective, advertising is an indirect macro-act with a dominating persuasive function, consisting of micro-acts (direct and indirect): inciting, persuading, praising, suggesting, advising, guaranteeing, promising, as well as polite ones, the pragmatic functions of which are always subordinated to some governing function” (Skowronek 83).

The above definitions illustrate the variety of associations with advertising. All of them, however, indicate its commercial character as the advertisement message is constructed in such a way as to persuade an addressee to buy a product. The persuasive mechanisms can be operative in different ways and with varying degrees of intensification. Overall, persuasive power depends on the internal relations between addresser and addressee. This function dominates in the structure of the message because in a period of the free

² The most popular scholarly schemata, formulas or models that reflect addressees’ behaviour with the consumption market are: a) SLB (*Stay, Look, Buy*); b) AIDA (*Attention, Interest, Desire, Action*); c) AIDCAS (*Attention, Interest, Desire, Conviction, Action, Satisfaction*); d) DIPADA (*Definition, Identification, Proof, Acceptance, Desire, Action*); and e) DAGMAR (*Defining Advertising Goals for Measured Advertising Results*). See: A. Benedikt. *Reklama jako process ko0munikacji*. 140-141.

market, the struggle for a customer and for persuasion come to be more important than the information itself:

“If a recipient buys a product or uses a service under the influence of an advertisement message, the persuasive procedures have achieved the intended result; in other words, the message persuaded a recipient that the offered product is of some value to him or her (it is necessary, useful, needed, etc.). Persuasion dominates in advertisements and all its linguistic means are subordinated to it” (Kamieńska-Szmaj 77)³.

In order to incite a customer, advertising employs a whole gamut of techniques and devices of persuasion, such as rhetorical techniques or psychological mechanisms. That is to say, in advertising we can find various stereotypes, literary and film motifs, or particular social linguistic constructions, collocations, all encoded in language. Further, advertising always plays with what can attract a potential customer’s attention, so it entertains customers more often than it shocks. Such a commercial activity frequently enters the realm of religion; the use of phenomena traditionally associated with the sphere of the sacred has recently become bolder and bolder. This begs the question of the function of such a use of Christian symbolism, of the reception of it, as well as of the awareness of both believers and atheists.

Usually, reality as presented in advertisements is unequivocal, schematic, and easily decoded. The mechanism of simplification of the devaluation (Lewiński 55) gives rise to a number of binary oppositions: good – bad, white – black, or dirty – clean. At the same time, an advertisement seems to be a reference to particular *topoi* existing in the consciousness of the users of a language. Such contrastive world-making appears in advertisements that use Christian symbolism. There the following oppositions can be found: hell – heaven (paradise), fire – water, angel – devil, cleanliness – temptation, and light – dark. The confrontation of goodness and evil, of an angel representing sensibility and what is good for health, and a devil leading to a temptation to eat unhealthy but definitely delicious food, has been presented in an advertisement for a digestive medication. Thanks to that medication, one can eat anything in whatever quantities. So the offered product reconciles both sides – the patient is healthy and happy.

An amusing deployment of the clean – dirty opposition can be found in a number of advertising campaigns, including one for a cheese called *The Monk’s Secret* (*Sekret Mnicha*). The name of the product somehow “justifies” the presence of the religious symbolism in the advertisement. Let us analyse one of them; it presents a monk working hard

³ Definitely, the distinction of the informative and persuasive functions only in advertising does not suffice. It is therefore crucial to add that other functions are also important: aesthetic, conative, expressive, and ritual (see: J. Bralczyk. *Język na sprzedaż*. 62).

mixing the ingredients to make the advertised product. After a while, another monk inquires indifferently, "What are you doing?" The first, waking up from the drudgery, replies, "Oh, I have sinned and now have to stir in a different direction". The situation introduces a comic element that helps to win over the audience. The voiceover in the background praises the fine taste of the mouldy cheese and its unchanged recipe. The last shots show a woman consuming a piece of the cheese; the advertisement ends with the slogan: "The Monk's Secret – it's a sin not to try"⁴. The suggestiveness of the appearance of the product and the satisfaction of watching an attractive woman eating it work persuasively, introducing factors of sensuality and delight. The category of sin introduced twice, first by the working monk, and second in the product's slogan, strengthens the suggestiveness of the message, inciting one to buy and try the product⁵.

Cleanliness – sin, a topos known from the paradise of the forbidden tree and original sin, has always inspired artists. Now it inspires advertising experts as well, and the 1990s advertisement for the Renault Clio motor car is a good case in point. This is a summary of the plot: the scenery suggests the action is taking place in Eden. A naked Adam and Eve are hiding in the bushes when the woman, instead of reaching for the apple, goes towards an intriguing car (a cartoon version of the serpent on its top "in no way resembles the biblical serpent-Satan" (Horodecka 171)). Magically, the first man and woman are suddenly dressed in modern clothes and are enjoying a ride amongst mountains by the sea. The slogan at the end – *Renault Clio – Straight From Paradise* – emphasizes the extraordinary features of the product and suggests its supernatural origins; "this car has been made in the image and likeness of God's prototype" (Czaja 150). The advertisement was practically devoid of any other verbal elements: no information about technological innovations or comfortable fittings. Apparently, this was not necessary since "words get silent when perfection appears" (Czaja 150). The advertisement imaginatively and comically presents the "genesis" of a car that succeeded in tempting Eve and then Adam – and now millions of customers.

Religious motifs do not only function as elements of binary oppositions such as good – evil, but they also organize the structure of a message on their own. The binary opposition in such a case can seem a by-product of another general, dichotomous division addressing the advertisement's recipients, and bifurcating into two categories: 1) WE, that is, the addresser and those who enter the paradise of consumption by buying

⁴ The advertisement available at http://www.bongrain.pl/pl/Reklamy_telewizyjne2.html

⁵ Monks' life style has also been used in another way in a mobile phone advertisement, in which the monks circumvent the monastery regulations of silence by texting.

a given product, and 2) YOU, the competition and those who have managed to resist the irresistible (Zimny 249–250).

By means of the play on ambiguity referring to Christian symbolism, but stripped of deeper meanings, advertising messages indirectly participate in an expanding secularization. The examples analysed illustrate that the elements of the sacred, entering a new, secular and commercial space, acquire a new, non-religious, and often (hand-in-hand with the advertisement itself) shallow meaning:

“A Christian symbol employed in an advertisement very often acquires a new and non-religious identity, completely different from the original one. Devoid of sacred connotation, it comes to be reduced to a sign that refers to no mystery, or to no extrasensory reality. The symbol becomes just a sign and nothing more; a sign of a specific, informative, and persuasive function” (Turek 80).

Such an instrumental treatment of values and the use of what is held sacred in order to increase sales can offend conscious users of a language. As a result, adhering to the end-justifies-the-means strategy that pertains to taboo-breaking can turn out to be socially unacceptable. Still, despite their frequent blasphemous character, advertisements increasingly feature the elements of the sacred. The decreasing moral and ethical sensitivity of Western society, a shifting of the lines of tolerance towards mindless acceptance of everything, and the undermining of authority cause advertisement makers to incite customers with new and more interesting means, and sometimes lead these makers to shock the public in the process. It is not a rare situation indeed for scandal to help create a useful atmosphere around a product. Tomasz Wiścicki argues that “since an advertisement maker is evaluated by his or her efficiency measured by the sales of the marketed product, it is extremely tempting to use a means which, however awkward, may boost sales” (52). Everything depends upon the target group, and whether it falls for the religious elements in advertisements: “If the religious values are a vital point of reference for a target group, we can assume that advertisement makers will be more prone to use them. If the group is indifferent or hostile to religion, some makers will attempt to use that attitude as well” (Wiścicki 53).

Taboo breaking (not only in relation to religion) is one of many manifestations of alterations in social mentality: of secularisation, the celebration of materialism, and a pervading crisis of traditional values, such as God, homeland, ethics, and love. The need to surprise an audience causes the addresser often to profane what traditionally was held sacred, and to elevate objects of the profaned. Let us examine a specific example from the popular Polish weekly *Polityka* – an advertisement for a Suzuki car: “In the beginning was the Motor” (2003 (45)). The reference to the famous line from the Bible serves, on the one hand, to ennoble the product and, on the other, to elevate

what was Suzuki's first product. Comic though it might seem, the intention is rather risky, because a recipient might not interpret it correctly, and transferring positive connotations of the biblical line onto the commercial product can turn out to be unfortunate. Poles do not entertain as much distance towards biblical references as, say, the French or Americans. The Polish national mentality tends to respect religion, and such innovations, relaxing moral, cultural, and religious norms as they do, can be seen as inappropriate. Yet advertising campaigns, looking for new ways to achieve eye-catching expression, do not usually step back from breaking a moral taboo and thus from profaning the sacred.

Consider another slogan from *Polityka* (2005 (20)): "Jeep Almighty". It refers to the collocation "God almighty", and therefore alludes to the values associated with God – omnipresence, omniscience, unlimited possibility, and absolute power. The innovation works by replacing God for a Jeep, in line with the context. The result is that the advertised car seems to feature all God's characteristics, although this seems a glaring semantic violation. (Perhaps *Bruce Almighty* inspired or incited the use of such a modification, and the slogan, in fact, refers to the 2003 film.) Nonetheless, the iconic aspect of the advertisement enforces the meanings as connoted by the slogan; it illustrates the "power" of the advertised product: a luxurious car is going along a bridge; it is reflected in water in such an unusual way that it really seems almighty; it is going over a river and water is splashing from under its wheels. The image of the car going on water unmistakably refers to another biblical image: that of Jesus. The caption further ascribes God-like features to the car: "the king of the wilderness. For evermore... the luxury of reigning over the roads. It makes you almighty..." Such a strategy in the advertisement relates to greed and vanity inasmuch as it suggests that the owner of such a car will become on par with the Absolute as the lord of space. The form of the advertisement, however, shocks with its hyperbolic qualities and may well violate religious beliefs. It definitely proves the point of a developing fetishization as something symptomatic of an expanding relaxation of norms.

The direct and evident references to God discussed above have yet to dominate advertising discourse in Poland. Nonetheless it is easy to find them; Godly connotations appear in the case of an advertisement for "Absolut" vodka, as the mere name of the product may suggest. It seems, however, that the offer of the product is not so controversial. Andrzej Turek observes that such messages can be placed within a difficult-to-delineate area of the borderline between the sacred and the profane:

"It is universally acknowledged that in Christian nomenclature God is the Absolute, the Highest and Most Perfect Being. But the vodka brand does not connote in the same way, obviously,

and it would be a mistake to accuse its makers of a consciously committed blasphemy or underhand provocation of believers (mainly because not all of them associate God with the Absolute). We may rather claim as more probable that the creator of the idea simply did not know what he was doing. Therefore, we should rather sympathize with him because of the poverty of his symbolic associations and lack of elementary aesthetic sensitivity; this, on the other hand, can seem a sort of derivative of the fact that for some people vodka is absolutely (!) the entire world" (32).

Let us look at one of the advertisements for the drink. The slogan in *Polityka* (2001 (19)) closing the advertisement message reads: "Absolut Security". The explanation of the mystery of the entire and unconditional security of the vodka is presented in the main text of the message, saying that from 2001 (the publication year of the magazine) "each 'Absolut' vodka bottle is going to be equipped with a special dispenser that guarantees that the bottle is filled only with the original 'Absolut' vodka". The name of the brand repeated twice in one short sentence appears functional, because it serves to specify the contents of the message and helps one remember the product. The message also suggests that the company cares for its customers, and about the positive perception of the brand and the fine taste of the product. The catchy pun with the English word "absolute" is brimming with various meanings; as a noun, the word is taken to name the product as well as to refer to God or a perfect being; as an adjective, the English word means complete, total, or definite. All the intermingling significations strengthen the overall persuasive effect and suggest outstanding quality. To demonstrate the advertised addition, the dispenser, the picture presents a bottle of the vodka whose neck has been magnified with a magnifying glass.

Sometimes it is difficult to prove that a given message relates to and uses elements from the Christian *universum*. The symbols of the sacred that function in the secular world are often deprived of their original context and are, therefore, not treated as religious elements. Arguably, the consumers of the above mentioned drink have nothing against its name.

Another telling example of a similar case was a billboard hung on one of the buildings of a well-known Polish brewery on the 150th anniversary of its establishment: "It All Began Here". The advertisement, of local and not national reach, was to underline the historical importance of the brewery in the region. At first glance, an unsophisticated slogan did not carry any specific, but sentimental connotations. However, for many Christians in Poland, and the citizens of Żywiec in particular, the slogan was an obvious reference to John Paul II's words, uttered during his final 2002 pilgrimage to Poland, and their profanation. The Pope said then, "It all began here, in this town, in Wadowice. Life began here, school began here, and studies began here,

and theater began here, and priesthood began here” (qtd. in Furtak). The brewery apologized for the (unconscious as far as they were concerned) mistake, and instead of the controversial slogan, a new and “politically correct” one was hung, “Nothing Has Changed. Superbrands. For Żywiec Again” (Furtak).

Here is another advertisement employing a biblical phrase socially acceptable and printed in another Polish major weekly, *Wprost*: “Your Alpha and Omega” (2001 (37)) The advertisement is about a contest organised by a bank; by opening an account, you can participate in a prize-draw with two major prizes, Omega watches and Alfa Romeo cars. The innovation in the slogan comes down to the addition of “your” before the biblical collocation of “alpha and omega”. It results in new meanings: the possessive adjective “your” is frequently used persuasively, since it stresses the impressive function and directs the message at an addressee. Furthermore, this adjective presupposes a sort of familiarity, or at least the unofficial character of the message, dialogism, shortening of the distance between the addresser and addressee, and, finally, it expresses possessive relations (something for you → something yours). The sum of the metaphorical meanings of the idiom and the context of the advertisement brings about a play of associations, verbal humour, and simultaneously it works persuasively and plays a part in winning potential customers – take our offer → open an account and have a chance to win a watch and a car → Alpha and Omega can be yours. The collocation from the Bible has an extremely strong persuasive power. Indirectly, the positive connotation of the biblical phrase comes to be transferred upon the prizes (the watch and the car), the organizer of the draw-prize (the bank), and also the customer who takes up the offer. The elliptical construction of the slogan (no verb) further augments the suggestiveness and unconditionality of the message.

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It is worth emphasising that if advertising uses religious symbolism, it transforms its image into a more secular one (Turek 85). As a result of various marketing devices, the meaning of the symbols becomes shallow and empty. In addition, religious symbols start to live an extra-religious life, and a curious paradox here is that “in advertisements, by breaking the religious taboo ... the Christian symbol plays the very same religious role, faithful to its roots and sacred connotation” (Turek 82). Commercialization enters all forms of life, religious life included; running after the fashionable and the gaudy, popularization and desacralization of contemporary culture result in a simplification of values and norms. An exceptionally good case in point is Christmas, when people

tend to overlook mutual respect, love, and Church-associated values because of “shopping fever”.

Advertising is one of the mechanisms causing fetishization, desecralization, and devaluation and, at the same time, creates styles and opinions. Therefore, it is an extremely powerful and frequently unconscious mechanism. Advertising provides evidence for pop culture’s and image culture’s departing from spoken, and deeper meanings, in favor of image and simplification, the seen. Kisielewski presents a general and sad truth about advertisement and its addresser, who, in a sense, becomes the product of the advertised product, thus:

“Factories manufacture goods that are more or less identical. Consumers, however, do not buy common goods; they buy brands and “value added” with them. The fundamental role of advertising, therefore, is a differentiation of goods from the same category ..., by which is meant a creation and differentiation of customers since they differentiate themselves on the basis of what they buy, and, effectively, by identifying themselves with a purchased good, they create their consciousness.... Consumers purchasing a brand, consciously or not, purchase their “image” – real, imagined, or simply desired – which pertains to a preferred “lifestyle” one attribute of which is the purchased object.... The world created by advertisers is very often considered by a target group to be their own. Simultaneously, it strengthens, preserves and shapes an addresser’s patterns of thinking and behaving by means of reflecting them” (47–50).

Therefore, by purchasing a given product or using a given service, customers do not only buy the product, but also a promise, and the “package” of the advertisement. Consumers, in a way, enter the paradise of consumption. Advertising tempts – buying things is buying oneself: the one you want to be – appreciated in the social group with which you identify yourself.

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Andrzej Nowakowski, *Landscaps 4*