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THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN ADVERTISING:
CASE-STUDY ON THE “BATMAN” TV COMMERCIAL

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Abstract This article tells, in academic terms, the story of a famous Romanian TV ad: the one where two men throw a priest from a tower mistaking him for the famous Batman movie character and hoping he would fly. As expected, this spot gave rise to a lot of discussion and debates over the years. But this is not the main reason that recommends it for this type of analysis. The most interesting aspect about this spot is the fact that although it was subsequently censored and it was aired on TV only for one day, it is still incredibly popular and it still receives important awards at various advertising festivals. Besides its popularity, this TV commercial is bringing forward very important aspects regarding the interesting relation between orthodox religious symbols and advertising. In the first section of my article I shall focus on the way profane media myths are responsible for framing the social reality. The second section consists in an empirical research conducted on first-year students enrolled in a communication and public relation program. The main objective is to determine some of the reasons that make this commercial so attractive despite its offensive script. The last section of this article consists in an analysis of the reasons why the mainstream Christian faith is being replaced by magical thinking and irrational beliefs in the magical power of the brands.

Key Words: religious symbols, consumer society, information market, media myths, commercial ads

Media myths and commercial ads

As I already stated, this article aims to tell the story of a controversial ad. The Batman TV commercial is a well-known ad where two men are throwing a priest from a tower mistaking him for a TV character. I consider this ad to be the perfect opportunity for a media researcher to investigate the ways profane myths are replacing the religious ones. 1956 is the year where one of the most important French linguists and philosophers Roland Barthes wrote the book that initiated a new direction in the analysis of media products. He was one of the first and most important authors to claim that myths underpin every media story.

“In fact nothing can be safe from myth. Myth can develop its second order schema from any meaning.”¹

The idea of finding narrative structures and exemplary characters resembling the ones characterising the myths in the everyday media contents proved to be very fertile and it produced important results² of media myth analysis in the so-called *media anthropology*. The Romanian researchers had to catch up with their peers after the collapse of the ex-Soviet block and the appearance of the commercial press. But the anthropological research of the media content proved to be very tempting³ since there is almost no media story that cannot be read at a more profound level as a myth. The media message is so important that some researchers claim it can alter our identity⁴.

The journalists and advertisers are not always conscious of manipulating cultural and ideological symbols along with their stories. Their declared aim is to objectively inform the public (if we are talking about journalists)⁵ or sell products (if we are talking about advertisers). My hypothesis is that we cannot have a clear perspective on the way certain media contents are functioning if we take into account only their *significants*, i.e. their manifest form. The idea of finding a deeper meaning beneath the explicit textual or visual message is not new. It has a millenary tradition if we think, for example, to the huge influence of the Kabbalah as a hermeneutical tradition. But the last century was the one where the importance of the “hidden” latent message grew significantly. This is the reason why Paul Ricoeur is speaking about a certain “school of suspicion”⁶ referring to the very influential works of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. Trying to investigate the latent content in terms of unconscious instinctual drives (psychoanalysis) or in terms of class struggle (Marxist critique) or the will of power are all intellectual endeavours later dismissed by another French philosopher responsible for placing the discourse in the centre of philosophical and linguistic investigations. In his terms,

(...) discourse is not simply the which manifests (or hides) desire – it is also the object of desire, and since, as history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is the thing for which and by which there is a struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized.⁷

Despite placing the discourse at the centre of his philosophical endeavour Foucault's project of discourse analysis should by no means be assimilated with the psychoanalytic or semiotic attempts of analysing written or visual messages. As stated earlier he dismisses the "penetrative" attempts of finding the hidden instinctual drives (psychoanalytic) or dominant codes, narrative structures and myths (semiotics) in the manifest message. His main concern is to see how power works in the institutional production of discourses:

"Here is the hypothesis that I would like to put forward tonight in order to fix the terrain – or perhaps the very provisional theatre – of the work I am doing: that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain master over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality"⁸

The main concern of this type of discourse analysis is to underlie the procedures that lead to the production of a certain discourse. Foucault has less to do with the message by itself and more to do with its production.

This very short introduction into the various accounts on the complex structure of apparently trivial media messages proves a rather disappointing fact. It shows that there is no common ground, no common vocabulary and no common research criteria when it comes to *visual methodologies*.⁹ In fact, when dealing with visual messages there are numerous analytic traditions: content analysis¹⁰, visual rhetorics¹¹, compositional interpretation¹², semiology, discourse analysis. As Gillian Rose is emphasizing throughout her entire book, every type of method, whether quantitative (content analysis) or qualitative (semiology), whether focusing on manifest visual representations (compositional interpretation) or focusing on the production of the message (discourse analysis), has its benefits but also its pitfalls. The logical outcome is the attempt of combining two or more of the methods available at the present time in order to get a wider perspective on the analysed visual message.

Since combining all the “visual methodologies” is not possible one has to assume right from the beginning the relative nature of his research outcomes and choose one or more of methods presented above. In this case, since I believe that in this spot there is a clear case where popular culture mythologies collide with religious ones, I shall assume the “penetrative” semiotic method of analysing the underlying myth that inevitably accompanies every written, spoken or visual message. I shall also take into account some of the persuasive techniques that visual rhetorics is putting forward.

The classical semiotic tradition is based on the definition of the sign as the process of putting together a concept (signified) and an acoustic representation (signifier). When trying to describe the structure of the myth Roland Barthes is still using those concepts. But, as he claims, the myth is a second order sign.

In myth we find again the tri-dimensional pattern I just described: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a *second order semiological system*. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system becomes a signifier in the second system.¹³

Barthes is analysing the image of a colour person enrolled in the French army who is proudly saluting the flag. The second order semiological system refers to the fact that this image is bearing deeper meanings: the French imperialism and its naturalized way of presenting itself in different visual representations: the colour soldier saluting the flag, the catholic nurse tending to the needs of colour children, the white teacher surrounded by very cheerful small children of the minorities, etc.

Closer to our days Margerite Helmers and Charles A. Hill¹⁴ are analysing one of the most famous photographs of all times taken by Thomas E. Franklin in 2001 *Firefighters at Ground Zero*. This is a picture depicting three male firefighters rising the American flag on the ground of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It took a very long time for the public to become media wise and learn to interpret this type of photographs. And this is because the technical solutions that enable us to capture images do not guarantee that those images are neutral. On the contrary! While pretending to be real this type of photographs puts a powerful label on the events since they inevitably frame “reality” according to social values and normes. The powerful critique of this image that was supposedly representing the American’s people remarkable ability of recovery after a disaster came from the Women firefighters of New York.¹⁵ The photograph was not doing them any good since this particular representation of their work field in the media privileged the image of the white men.

I consider this type of debate is taking place at the second order semiological system: the image is the carrier of much deeper meanings. The naïve perspective that the images are “representing reality” is replaced by a more media savvy one: instead of representing reality, they are framing reality as a result of the socially accepted procedures that guide their production.

But not all publics are media savvy and the exposure to huge amounts of media messages, movies, TV commercials, internet banners, street ads invading the public space, etc leads to what Barthes and others are calling the *naturalization* of certain values using the myth. That is, the myth is always an instrument:

“What is the characteristic of the myth? To transform a meaning into form. In other words, myth is always language robbery. I rob the Negro who is saluting, the white and brown chalet, the seasonal fall in fruit prices, not to make them into examples or symbols, but to naturalize through them the Empire, my taste for Basque things, the Government.”¹⁶

This is the subtle process through which a discourse heavily loaded ideologically discourse becomes the natural, neutral one.

As stated earlier, in the Batman TV commercial there are two kinds of mythologies colliding: the profane one produced by the popular culture and the religious one. But they are both subsumed to a more important logic: the logic of consumption. At the first semiological level the story is quite simple: not being able to by a TV set one of the two main characters is asking his friend to tell him what happened in the movie. He is later convincing his friend to through a priest from a tower mistaking him for Batman. The hilarious conclusion is quite simple: if you are tired of others telling you what happened in the movie by a Teletech TV set. That is, only the direct experience of seeing the movie for yourself could prevent you for mistaking a priest for a TV character. What is even more appealing to this ad is the much deeper meaning: people are so caught up in the media myths they tend to interpret reality only through this type of patterns. They believe more in what they see on TV and less in the directly experienced reality. Although the Batman TV commercial it is a caricature and this idea is presented in a very hilarious key the famous cultivation theorist George Gerbner – at a different time and using completely different tools – is claiming the same thing, as we shall see later in this article.

Advertising uses religious symbols to get closer to the audiences

The second step in our analysis of the complex relation between advertising and religion consists in investigating the main reasons why advertising is using religious symbols in order to get closer to its audience. There are mainly two directions in which the religious symbols are being used. Political advertising is known for the constant appeal to religion in order to please its public, while commercial advertising is usually using religious symbols to shock the audience and create awareness for the product. Taking into account the famous principle *bad publicity is still publicity*, advertising professionals use their freedom of expression rights to create ads that use religious symbols in controversial ways. On the other hand, many politicians rely on religion to influence their voters¹⁷. Religion proves to be among the most important persuasive weapons in the political debate. Most of the research regarding the way religion is used in political advertising is related to the USA voters and their politicians¹⁸. It is not the main objective of our present paper to further investigate this particular use of religious symbols. It is important to note that politicians never use religion in a controversial way since their goal is to prove they share the same moral values as their voters. This is not entirely true when it comes to commercial advertising. Some of the commercials use religious symbols to sell different products generating vivid debates about the morality of such campaigns¹⁹.

Yet, there are commercials that use religious values in ways which shock their audiences. Nowadays consumer society provides no shield for core religious values. On the contrary, the freedom of expression principle shields the controversial religious ads:

“Even Christianity, the religion of the majority in the United States, is no longer shielded against offensive attacks (Torcia 2009). Since the middle of the twentieth century, the Supreme Court started recognizing the “neutrality” principle, according to which the state must assume a neutral position in relation to religion. Blasphemy statutes have been repeatedly struck down as unconstitutional”.²⁰

This is not the case of Romanian institutions. The “Batman” Teletech commercial was banned by the National Audiovisual Council since it was considered a blasphemy. But the story of this spot is not a typical one. In 2003 a Romanian firm, Altex, was intending to launch a new electronic device: the Teletech television set. They went to one of the most important Romanian advertisers, Bogdan Naumovici, and asked him to shoot a commercial for the product. He was reluctant to give the

information about the script to his client since he feared a sure rejection. After accepting to play the central part in the spot, he told Dan Ostahie, the Altex representative, that he was going to do the spot on his own: "Dan, you convinced me, I shall play in the next Teletech commercial, but I am not telling you what it is about. I am not telling you, I am shooting the ad for you. I am not revealing anything, but trust me, it will be cool. I knew that if I reveal the fact that we are going to throw a priest from a tower he would say "Get out of here with your crazy idea!". But I gave him what he wanted: me playing in the spot. This way I was able to lure him to let me do the spot on my own"²¹. According to producer Bogdan Naumovici, the spot is an adaptation of a joke he had heard at the time. The spot consists in two men dressed in white uniforms throwing away a priest from a tower. After witnessing the inevitable, the priest falling to the ground, the main character interpreted by Naumovici says to the other: "Well, you moron! I told you he was a priest! But you kept pushing me: he's Batman, Batman!". The moral of the spot is: "If you are tired of others telling you what happened in the movie, buy a Teletech television set". According to the producer, the spot was considered extremely funny by the Altex representatives and they immediately accepted it. The spot was produced in May and it was designed to be aired in August. This is where the story becomes interesting: "But we shoot the ad in May and it had to be aired in August. And somewhere between May and August, I don't know how, it "escaped" on the Internet. This happened sometimes around June or July. I don't know how, I imagine it was someone in the production house, knowing that it was produced two months ago, probably thought it was already aired and sent it to someone and it was released on the Internet. It somehow reached the National Audiovisual Council (NAC)". A representative of this regulatory institution contacted Ruxandra Vodă, marketing director at Atex, and told her: "Do not put it on air because we shall ban it". This is why we only managed to broadcast the spot for one day on MTV so we could present it in festivals. Otherwise it was never aired."²². There was a lot of speculation on the way the spot "escaped" from the production firm on the Internet. Since there are no clear regulations in this field and the Internet is a highly deregulated medium in Romania, we must rely on the producer's testimony. It is of course highly possible that he feared the consequences of broadcasting such a spot and put it on the Internet so he could escape the NAC regulations. It is equally possible that he informally sent it to the NAC representatives to see how they would react to it. But this is not the most interesting part.

What recommends this spot as one of the most interesting is the fact that it still receives awards in various advertising festivals. Although it was released more than a decade ago, it is still famous. According to the producer, this was never expected: "To my surprise, after two years people come to me on the street with "Laser, bro!", "The black one having trouble breathing" [another famous commercial for the same product].

But one day someone came and told me: “Let’s get a picture” [...] and he told me “Batman, Batman”. And I said: What? How come you know about Batman? And this is how I learned about the power of the viral and of the Net. And even now half the people on the street call me “Batman”, not “Laser, bro!” despite the fact that this one was aired for five years from 2003 to 2008. But people still call me “Batman”. [...] Here in the club someone showed me he had the Batman ad on his cell”²³.

In order to test some of Bogdan Naumovici’s claims I conducted an empirical research having as main subjects first year students enrolled in a communication and public relations program. I shall not interpret their reactions in conservative terms, but, since the spot was banned by the NAC on the ground of being offensive for the public, I shall take into consideration the hypothesis that the students, as part of the public, find it offensive too. I consider that the popularity of the spot can only be explained if we consider the fact that most of the research conducted in our country is focused on quantitative aspects. Although the 2011 census showed that 81% of the Romanian population declared to have Orthodox beliefs²⁴, it was possible for a highly offensive religious commercial to gain huge popularity. This is probably the sign that this type of quantitative analysis should be doubled by in-depth research focusing on the real commitment to the Orthodox religion. The example of Great Britain proves to be highly relevant in this case. Why do I consider it is highly important to take into account the example of Great Britain? Because it presents close similarities with the Romanian one: thus, while declaring themselves true believers, the citizens of Great Britain do not truly believe in highly important elements of the Christian doctrine, such as the belief in the Devil or the afterlife, for example. So, let us take a closer look to the example of the Great Britain.

In 2009 an advertising campaign was launched in London. On the buses circulating around the city the marketers begun “advertising the non-existence of God”²⁵. In other words the slogans written on the busses were: “There is probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” This created a lot of stir, but the campaign was not rejected by the public. This made researchers wonder about the relevance of statistical data when it comes to religion:

“According to the 2001 census, only 7 million people in Britain said they had no religion, while 37 million said they were Christian. 1.5 million were Muslim, half a million were Hindu, 390,000 were Jedi Knights (there was a conspiracy among younger Britons to mock the process by claiming allegiance to the religion of Star Wars), 329,000 were Sikhs, and 260,000 were Jewish. Those numbers suggest that Britain is an overwhelmingly Christian country, with under 20 per cent of the

population non-believers. Yet three-quarters of the people in Britain do not go to church even once a year. On an average Sunday only six per cent of the population is in church, and that figure has been dropping at two per cent per decade since the 1970s. Something doesn't add up here.”²⁶

This is the main reason why proper research has to be done considering more subtle aspects of religious beliefs. The statistical instruments proved to be inadequate in this case:

“When the International Social Survey Program conducted a more in-depth study of religious belief almost 20 years ago (1991 and 1993), it asked people if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “I know God exists and I have no doubts about it.” In Britain, only 23.8 per cent of people said they agreed”.²⁷

In 2010 a research was conducted in order to investigate more profound aspects of Romanian’s religious beliefs²⁸. This research revealed that only 53% of Romanians go to Church every week. Even if we left the research aside, we can easily see that there are profound and subtle aspects of religious commitment that are hard to grasp when using only quantitative tools. This is part of the reason why we don’t have a clear image of how many of the 81% of the declared Orthodox are truly faithful to their belief.

The empirical research I conducted on 61 students proves some of the claims regarding the popularity of the spot. The first question of my research regarded the awareness level for this commercial, given the fact that it was released only on the Internet ten years ago. Not surprisingly the vast majority of the students had seen it (Table 1).

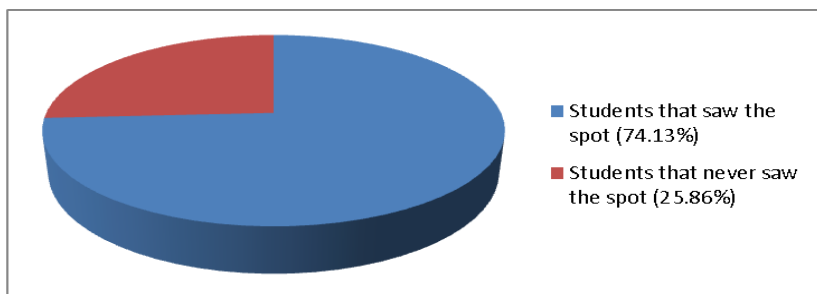


Table 1

The second question of my research regarded the NAC’s intention of banning the spot. I asked the students if they knew about NAC’s intention of censoring the spot. Since the producer used informal channels to find

out what the NAC representative’s intentions were and since it was not an official ruling in this case, an important part of the students were unaware of the fact the spot was considered a blasphemy by NAC’s representatives and aired for only one day (Table 2).

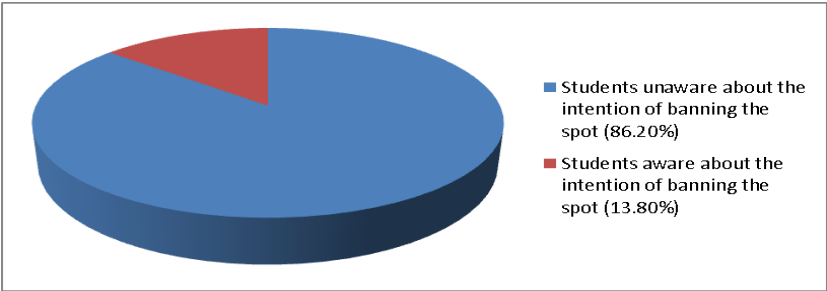


Table 2

The next two questions in my study regarded the way the religious beliefs could influence the perception of the spot. First of all I wanted to see whether the students consider that Orthodox religious symbols are tarnished in this TV commercial. The results confirm my suspicions. Orthodox religion is taught in all Romanian schools from first till last grade. The students were familiarized with the Orthodox values and norms. Those were the same norms and principles that stood behind the NAC decision of banning the spot. The students, as part of the Orthodox majority, do not consider such an ad to be religiously offensive (Table 3).

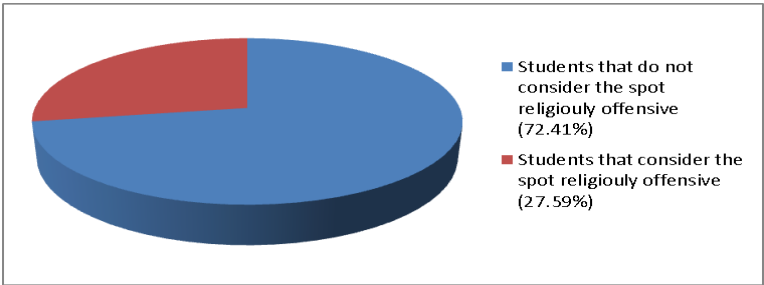


Table 3

After releasing this spot, Bogdan Naumovici was accused by the NAC (National Audiovisual Council) of instigating people to violent acts against Orthodox priests. The spot contains violent images of two men throwing a priest from the tower of a famous Romanian castle, the Mogosoia Castle. Still, the students considered the spot was funny and it did not constitute an invitation to commit violent acts against Orthodox priests (Table 4).

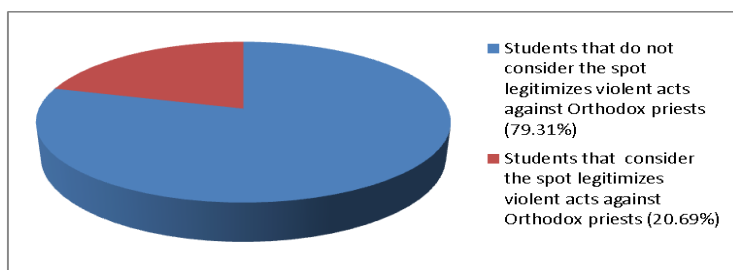


Table 4

In the last part of my research I asked the students to comment about the particular moment of time that Bogdan Naumovici declared he produced the spot: “It was on Easter Day, I am telling you, the Sunday the Easter was celebrated, we threw that priest [from the castle tower]. What can I do, this is how things were, that was the time we could shoot it. Our commitment to the brand and to the client was so big, that even if it was the Easter Sunday we went to shoot that ad”²⁹.

Four of the 61 students I interviewed refused to comment on the producer’s declaration. I was able to separate the rest of the commentaries into four different categories. The first category consists of students that affirmed the Orthodox values claiming that what Bogdan Naumovici did is incredibly offensive and inexcusable. An important part was not for or against the gesture of shooting this ad on a Holy Day since they considered it was a mere coincidence. The third group considered this spot as a pamphlet, something very funny that we should be laughing about. But most of the students considered he was coerced to do so, because the pressure his clients, the brand, the time and the money had imposed on him was huge! (See Table 5)

The students upholding the Orthodox values were the most offended, as one could easily predict, by the fact that Naumovici used that particular moment of time to shoot the commercial. They believe this is extremely offensive. “This ad was banned by the NAC because they considered it represents an act of violence. [...] Maybe God wanted this to happen because it was the Easter Day when they shoot it and that day they should have rested.” – This is what one of the students participating in the study declared. The student considered the NAC banning was in fact God’s punishment for disregarding the Orthodox religious rule stating that people should rest on Sunday. Other students affirming Orthodox beliefs considered that their values were even more obviously tarnished since the producer seems to brag about the choosing the most sacred Christian day to throw a priest from the castle tower: “I consider that NAC had every right to ban this ad since it is a clear defamation of the religious symbols and moreover it was produced on Easter Day and the advertisers were aware of that” (declaration of a student participating in the survey)

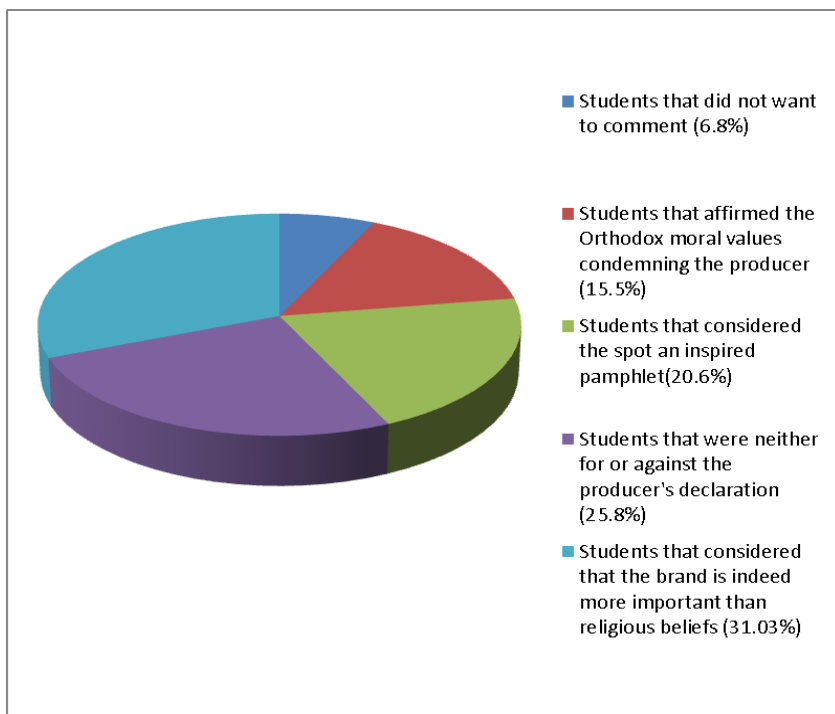


Table 5

An important group of students considered this to be a very funny ad, an inspired pamphlet that should be treated as such. In their opinion, the freedom of expression rights should guarantee the possibility to make such funny ads even if religious symbols are tarnished: "It seems to me that this TV ad is a pamphlet. From my point of view it is no more a defamation of religious symbols than it is instigation to violence. It is a little TV ad that makes you laugh" – one of the students declared. This group of students considers the NAC's reaction exaggerated since the spot is funny and harmless. This confirms the actual trend enforced by current regulations in trademark law in the USA³⁰. The rights concerning the freedom of expression are offering a powerful shield against those trying to defend religious values.

Another group of students could not decide in favor or against what Bogdan Naumovici did. "I consider he does not want to make the Church appear in a negative light and more precisely the priests. What he is trying to do is to make the ad funny even though he is using "unorthodox" means to do that. In his declaration he is just confirming that he is only interested in the commercial aspects and he does not care about any kind of religious principle nor is he susceptible of any kind of disrespect for the Church". – It is difficult to place such comments as agreement or disagreement with the advertiser's decision to choose the Easter Day for

shooting the commercial. This is why I decided to place them under the category of undecided subjects.

One of the most interesting results of this empirical research consists in the fact that the most important group of students considered that the market imperatives are more important than the religious beliefs. There were students who thought that the producer had to do what he had done since his action was coerced by the *time* factor: "The fact that the ad was produced on Easter Day does not mean he has something against the Church. They had to respect the deadline and they had no more time left". Other students believe that his *bosses*, i.e. his clients, were coercing him to do that: "The producer declared that his bosses did not care about how the spot was done as long as they achieved their goal. So, even if it was a Holy day he had to go and produce it." There are also students who try to explain his behavior as being the result of *competition* pressures: he is simply trying to stand out in the crowd and be creative: "As a director you have to get out of the line in order to be successful, and this is exactly what Bogdan Naumovici did".

Besides those trying to put the blame on *time*, *bosses*, *clients* or *competition* there are some declarations that perfectly sum up the situation. Since "the stakes are too high" he cannot offer himself the luxury of having religious principles. "Bogdan Naumovici is well-known for his devotion to the corporations and brands. It is offending to commit an attack on moral values for the money, but it is understandable: we live in a capitalist, consumerist era". This student's declaration is helping us get a wider perspective on this phenomenon. As shocking as it may seem, what happened with this commercial is only a particular instance of the way the whole system works. The fierce competition between advertisers to get clients makes them bend any kind of rule; the impossible deadlines make them race against the clock just to be sure their spot gets first to the client, the constant chase for profit wipes any religious or moral constraints. "I consider Bogdan Naumovici did nothing wrong. Each and every one of us has to do what is has to be done to earn his daily bread." I consider this declaration to be the proof of a harsh reality: the days when the Church could impose moral rules or the days when different forms of secular religions tried to do the same thing are far gone. This is simply because religious and political constraints have been replaced by financial constraints. We are living in a society where earning the daily bread means competition, efficiency, rationality, i.e. emotional detachment and, last but not least *moral flexibility*. Or, to summarize: "From my point of view this declaration of Bogdan Naumovici is the proof that nowadays the power and value of the money matters more than at any other time before in our history" (declaration of a student participating in the research I conducted).

“Brands are the New Religion”

This famous *dictum* is not just a fashionable way to dismiss the way advertising is shaping the social reality. It is also the direct consequence of assuming a more profound and complex philosophical perspective: the social reality is shaped by our language. There are influential philosophers in the XXth century that emphasize the role of the language in the *social construction of reality* to refer only to one of the most important authors, John Searle³¹. There are also other authors that take into account the possibility that “communication constructs reality in the globalized postmodern society”³². Besides George Gerbner who analyzes the role of the media in shaping the social reality, Michel Foucault who analyzes the way discourse is the means and also the goal of power struggles between representatives of various social classes or John Searle who insists on the function of the language in creating social institutions – if we are to name only a few of the most famous authors who insist on the huge role our language plays in representing what we call *reality* – there are also important Romanian researchers who devoted a great part of their work to investigate this problem. In the effort of identifying the close relationship between stereotype and the myth, Mădălina Moraru is trying to underline the close connection between the two concepts and their role in shaping social reality³³. Analyzing the broader concept of *communication*, Aurel Codoban claims that what we usually call *reality* is the product of a social practice - namely communication³⁴. If we accept this assumption, it becomes clear that the Batman TV ad is the result of a battle between two ways of representing reality through discourse: the religious perspective (the man that is thrown from the tower is a priest) which is defeated by the popular culture perspective (the two men mistaking him for a famous TV character, Batman).

For centuries the function of telling stories and thus creating myths was fulfilled by the religious representatives, as the famous cultivation theorist George Gerbner emphasizes³⁵. But once the media become a constant presence in our lives they are the ones telling almost all the stories. This is why there are numerous authors emphasizing the role of the media in creating new myths. In fact, since the media are the only ones telling the most important stories nowadays, as Gerbner suggests³⁶, they are the most important provider of schematic stories that help us represent the surrounding reality. The importance of those stories is immense “Most of what we know or what we think we know, we have never personally experienced. We live in a world erected by the stories we hear and see and tell (...) Stories socialize us into roles of gender, age, class, vocation and lifestyle and offer models of conformity or targets of rebellion”³⁷. The stories are never neutral as their providers would perhaps like us to believe. Pierre Bourdieu devotes a great part of his intellectual endeavors to prove that we call the “normal language” is in

fact the result of class struggle since the surviving language is the one spoken by the dominant class³⁸. Since the beginning of the XXth century we are accustomed with the idea that “the linguistic sign is arbitrary”³⁹. Yet we never ceased to name someone who did not speak what we call the “correct” language a vulgar person, uneducated, stupid. Thus, the most important means of communication – our language – cannot escape the power struggles. It is very important to keep that in mind when discussing the media landscape and its importance in shaping social reality. This is because the stories the media tell us are never neutral – they are bearers of more important meanings than the apparent ones. At this level, the Batman TV ad is the proof that, as George Gerbner suggests⁴⁰, once the technological means of communication have evolved, the Church was replaced from its dominant position of being the most important source of stories that cultivate our personal identity. Otherwise, it is the media that provide the most credible and reliable myths that allow us to interpret reality. This seemingly obvious truth has to be seriously taken into account since, as stated earlier, there is no such thing as a “neutral” language. “Giant industries discharge their messages into the mainstream of the common consciousness. The historic nexus of church and state is replaced by television and state (...) For media professionals, the changes mean fewer opportunities and greater compulsions to present life as a saleable package.”⁴¹ But the fact that television is currently holding the dominant position as the main source of myths is not as harmless as it may seem. The Batman TV ad is a joke we do not expect anyone to really mistake a priest for a movie character. But the fact that we can make fun of a priest does not mean that we can make fun of a brand as I shall try to show in the following paragraphs of my article.

“Brands are the new religion” – this is a well-known quote used on various occasions nowadays. Advertisers and marketers worldwide are preaching this new type of faith:

“Brands are the new religion. People turn to them for meaning. Y&R's [Young and Rubicam] claim follows a report last year from Fitch, the London design consultancy that also deified consumer brands. Fitch said many people flocked to Ikea instead of church on Sundays. Since 1991, it added, 12,000 people had been married at Walt Disney World, and it was becoming common in the US for Harley-Davidson motorcycle aficionados to be buried in Harley-branded coffins.”⁴²

The marketing and advertising are among today's most profitable activities. Branding gurus such as Wally Olins are well aware of the fact that the production costs are far less important than advertising costs⁴³. When the globalization process opened the door for the

exploitation of the third world's labor power the production costs decreased significantly⁴⁴. That was not the case in the advertising business⁴⁵. Today lots of firms have access to highly sophisticated technological means of production and cheap labor power, while the brand is the one thing making the difference. The current struggle is not to create a commodity but to get a "place" in the consumer's minds. Most of us don't even know that Nike does not even have a shoe factory, since, according to their own declarations, they are not selling shoes - they are "selling a way of life". The *cradle to grave fidelity* is the principle guiding the marketers today when we enter a new phase of consumerism⁴⁶. Products are no longer sold for their immediate value and this is a phenomenon that started decades ago⁴⁷. In the era of the symbolic advertising products offer more than we could expect from such trivial objects. If when you buy a pair of sports shoes you feel like you are buying "a way of life", what we are witnessing is some sort of "secularization in reverse". The spiritual beliefs do not make way for the rational ones but still persist. The only difference is that they are guided to other things, the profane things such as commodities of all types. As the founding fathers of the advertising business claimed right from the beginning, the "masses are irrational"⁴⁸ and the only way out of the over-production crisis is to link mass-produced goods to people's unconscious desires⁴⁹. If people guided their purchase decision after the actual qualities of the product, at one point, they would simply stop buying. It is not important what the product does for you, but what it says about you⁵⁰. Consuming means communicating since brands are "the new identity guide"⁵¹. The actual qualities of the product have to make way for the *brand promise*. Just as in communion, we are not eating a piece of bread but the body of Jesus Christ - similarly, we are not simply buying goods. We are buying the promise of democracy when we go to Ikea, the idea of friendship when we go to Starbucks, the idea of caring for the environment when we buy Beauty Shop cosmetics, the idea of freedom and manhood when we buy Marlboro cigarettes. The profane objects become empowered with magical powers. But this is by no means different from the process of transforming a piece of wood into a magical object having the power to protect you in difficult times, that is, creating a *totem*, in Durkeim's terms⁵². This process seems closer to the magical than to the religious thinking since it relies on very primitive and irrational representations of the world. The implications of this process of transforming profane commodities into sacred objects are very complex and difficult to fully grasp at this point. What is important is the fact that buying goods means more than simply acquiring profane commodities.

But, unfortunately, this is not the only thing that could make us believe in the religious power of the brands. As Katya Assaf shows⁵³, this type of magical thinking about brands has perpetrated the way trademark laws are designed. That is, the Church values are no longer protected

against advertisers wanting to make fun of them to boost their profits, but, as odd as it may seem, brands are. You can take God's name in vain, because this is a pamphlet – the Batman TV ad proved it. The interesting thing is that when someone tried to mock the slogan “General Electric – Imagination at work” and intentionally misspelled the name transforming it into “Genital Electric” – the judges decided in favor of the corporation⁵⁴. Assaf is offering a lot of examples of this kind, when the trademark law seemed to protect the brand above everything else. While I consider the examples offered by Assaf extremely important, I do not fully agree with her explanation. She considers the trademark law has been influenced by the magical thinking system. I am inclined to believe in a different type of explanation. I consider that this is simply a case where state's institutions are simply no longer working to protect the interests of the citizens but that of the corporations.

I focused earlier on the elements leading us to believe that indeed, we must follow the advertising guru's new slogan, that brands are the new religion. Most of the researchers that focus on proving this hypothesis take into account the way the consumers relate to the brands. Yet, taking a closer look on those preaching what we buy will immediately reveal the crucial difference between the religion and the brands: those selling us the promise of the brand do not actually believe in it. Advertisers and religious people were both fascinated with each other's powerful persuasion techniques. But, at least before the Church decided to embark on the paradoxical task of “selling” God through marketing techniques, it was assumed the preachers believed in what they preached. Moreover, they did it for the good of the others and not for the profit of the corporation. The creators of brands could not care less about the consumer's wellbeing. They simply think in terms of profit, return of investment, market opportunities, reducing production costs, finding cheaper labor power and other cynical yet precise economic terms. We do not have to be surprised if they call the consumers “targets” and usually despise their public⁵⁵. So before letting ourselves get too fascinated with slogans such as “Brands are the new religion” we must take into account not only how the consumers relate to brands but also how their producers relate to them. This will put us in front of an irreconcilable difference between religion and brands. Brands are designed to bring huge *material* profits in *present times* while religion offers the promise of *spiritual* rewards in the *afterlife*. It must be concluded that, for the reasons stated above, once many of the Christian churches decided to enter the information market they can be easily mistaken for corporations, but at least in the conservative sense they pursue the wellbeing of their followers.

Conclusions

The story of the “Batman” Teletech commercial represents one of the most controversial cases in Romanian advertising. Shooting a TV ad where two men are throwing a priest from the tower of a famous Romanian castle on Easter Day set a precedent very hard to compete with. But as the current analysis showed this is a particular instance of a whole system of mass-persuasion in the consumer society. What this controversial TV commercial revealed are some important aspects of how the media and the mass-persuasion systems work. What we saw is that religious symbols are no longer shielded against unscrupulous marketers using their freedom of expression rights to tarnish them. This type of offensive advertising is shocking the audiences and creates enough awareness and boosts sales to a level where even the costs of eventual lawsuits are covered. The second aspect is that we cannot place the blame on a single individual. Although Bogdan Naumovici can be blamed for his controversial business choices, as the empirical research revealed, he is “earning his daily bread” in an environment so competitive that moral rectitude is a luxury few can afford. Another important aspect revealed by this analysis is the fact that once the religious speech enters the information market it is swallowed by the mass-persuasion mechanism and transformed in plain commercial speech.

I have analyzed three logical possibilities when it comes to establishing the relation between religion and advertising. Religion uses advertising techniques to reach its followers. Advertising is using religion to create awareness for the products. Advertising or more precisely brands are replacing religion. If religion, fascinated by the powerful marketing techniques, uses advertising to deliver its message to the audience, the message is transformed by the harsh laws of the information market into commercial speech. If on the other hand advertising is using religious symbols it is doing so to boost sales. Anyway, in our consumer society the religious symbols are means to a higher end: maximizing the profit. Finally, when it comes to the possible replacement of the religion by brands, I consider that this is a very tempting hypothesis. Still, it is equally important to see how the consumers relate to brands but also how their producers use them. This will prove that brands are a religion for those who are supposed to be emotionally connected to them: the consumers. For their producers this is no longer true. This way probably the more accurate slogan should be: *Brands are the new religion for their consumers and the new profit booster for their producers*. The analysis of the Batman TV ad is showing a great inequality between the providers of media myths and their consumers. When the church was the main institution holding the dominant position in providing acceptable descriptions and prescriptions for its followers, its representatives – the priests – were expected to follow the same rules as their true believers.

The same rules applied to everyone. Nowadays television is such an important provider of myths that ordinary people could mistake a priest for a TV character – as the analyzed TV ad would make us believe. But the rules that the providers of myths and their targeted audiences must follow are quite different since stories are no longer told having in mind a common goal – rejoining God in the afterlife. In our world of hyper-commercialized media, the goal of the storytellers and of their targets lie on opposite sides since the formers' gain is their audience's loss.

NOTES:

¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press 1972), 131.

² S. Elizabeth Bird, ed. *The Anthropology of News and Journalism. Global Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

³ Mihai Coman, *Mass-media, mit și ritual*, (Iași: Polirom, 2003).

⁴ Mădălina Moraru, "Reshaping American Identity through Advertising. Standardization vs. Localization", *Journal for the Studies of Religion and Ideologies*, vol. 12 issue 35 (2013): 39-62.

⁵ This professional standard is seriously undermined by the commercial pressures and even the most important public media institutions are bending the deontological rules as a result of this type of financial influence. Maria Cernat, *Ethics of Financial Journalism* 3 (2014): 59.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *De L'interpretation: Essay sur Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1965).

⁷ Michael Foucault, "The Order of Discourse", in *Untying the Text: a Poststructuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young, (Boston: Routledge, 1981), 48-79.

⁸ Foucault, 52.

⁹ Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: Sage, 2001).

¹⁰ C.A. Lutz and J.L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

¹¹ Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers, *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (New York: Routledge, 2004). This rather new discipline still fighting for its scientific status proves to be very fertile especially when trying to prove that the rhetorical means of persuasion are not restricted to the written text.

¹² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: British Broadcasting Association and Penguin, 1972).

¹³ Barthes, 113.

¹⁴ Hill, 7.

¹⁵ Hill, 11.

¹⁶ Barthes, 131.

¹⁷ Weber et. al., "Courting Christians: How Political Candidates Prime Religious Considerations in Campaign Ads," *The Journal of Politics*, 74 (2012): 400-413.

¹⁸ Weber et. al., 410.

¹⁹ Mone Spindler, "Surrogate religion, spiritual materialism or protestant ethic? Three accounts of the function of religiosity in anti-ageing," *Journal of Aging Studies* 22 (2008): 322-330.

²⁰ Katya Assaf, "Magical Thinking in Trademark Law," *Law & Social Inquiry* 37 (2012): 595–626.

²¹ Sonia Ardelean, "Povestea completă a spoturilor Teletech - "Star Wars" și "Batman," spusă de Bogdan Naumovici," <http://www.iqads.ro/articol/16595/adbrea-43-povestea-completa-a-spoturilor-teletech-star-wars-si-batman-spusa-de> (accessed January 5, 2014).

²² Ardelean, <http://www.iqads.ro/articol/16595/adbrea-43-povestea-completa-a-spoturilor-teletech-star-wars-si-batman-spusa-de> (accessed January 5, 2014).

²³ Ardelean, <http://www.iqads.ro/articol/16595/adbrea-43-povestea-completa-a-spoturilor-teletech-star-wars-si-batman-spusa-de> (accessed January 5, 2014).

²⁴ *The 2011 Census*, online document <http://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-2/>

²⁵ Tomkins, 6.

²⁶ Tomkins, 2.

²⁷ Tomkins, 4.

²⁸ Lazăr Vlăsceanu, Adrian Dușa, Cosima Rughiniș, "Știință și societate. Interese și percepții ale publicului privind cercetarea științifică și rezultatele cercetării," *www. Stisoc.ro*, 2010. (accessed January 14, 2014)

²⁹ Ardelean, <http://www.iqads.ro/articol/16595/adbrea-43-povestea-completa-a-spoturilor-teletech-star-wars-si-batman-spusa-de> (accessed January 5, 2014).

³⁰ Assaf, 623.

³¹ John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin, 1995).

³² Sandu Frunză, "Does Communication Construct Reality? A New Perspective on the Crisis of Religion and the Dialectic of the Sacred," *Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială*, 35 (2011): 180–193.

³³ Mădălina Moraru, *Mit și publicitate* (București: Nemira, 2009).

³⁴ Aurel Codoban, *Comunicarea construiește realitatea. Aurel Codoban la 60 de ani*, ed. Timotei Nădășan (Cluj: Ideea Design & Print), 7–27.

³⁵ George Gerbner, "Who is telling all the stories?," *Intersections* 1 (2001): 5–8.

³⁶ Gerbner, 5.

³⁷ Gerbner, 6.

³⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce que Parler Veut Dire: L'economie Politique des Echanges Linguistiques* (Paris: Fayard, 1982).

³⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Curs de lingvistică generală* (București: Antet, 2011).

⁴⁰ Gerbner, 7.

⁴¹ Gerbner, 8.

⁴² Tomkins, 11.

⁴³ Olins, Wally, *Despre Brand* (București: Comunicare.ro, 2010), 5.

⁴⁴ David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, (Oxford University Press: 2010), 20.

⁴⁵ Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, (Canada: Picador, 1999).

⁴⁶ Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy. The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York, London, Toronto: Scribner, 2004), 13.

⁴⁷ Stuart Ewen, *PR. A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

⁴⁸ Edward Bernays, *Cristalizarea opiniei publice*, (București: Comunicare.ro, 2003), 75.

⁴⁹ Ewen, 34.

⁵⁰Jean Baudrillard, *Societatea de Consum. Mituri și structuri*, (București: Comunicare.ro, 2005), 97.

⁵¹Wally Olins, *Noul ghid de identitate - Wolff Olins* (București: Comunicare.ro, 2003).

⁵²Emile Durkheim, *Formele elementare ale vieții religioase*, (Iași: Polirom, 1995).

⁵³Assaf, 612.

⁵⁴Assaf, 615.

⁵⁵This idea is supported both by Juliet B. Schor and Naomi Klein.

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