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# Environmental issues in unconventional social advertising: A semiotic perspective

**Abstract:** Even though semiotic analysis of media texts has always viewed advertising as an exemplary object of investigation, only a limited number of research studies has concentrated on *unconventional social campaigns*.

As we will try to demonstrate through the analysis of some international *environment-oriented* case studies, social advertising is not merely a subgenre of advertising language, and the effectiveness of communication strategies used by social campaigns in fact depends upon a sort of “semiotic autonomy.”

Using a textual semiotic approach, we will focus on some of the most frequently recurring unconventional strategies in environment awareness campaigns, with the aim of exploring the issue of social advertising effectiveness in depth.

**Keywords:** Media semiotics; social semiotics; unconventional social advertising; enunciative praxis; guerrilla marketing; environment

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## 1 Introduction

From a macro perspective, social advertising can be defined as the media practice whereby classic formats of commercial advertising are used to raise public awareness about “social” issues, encouraging or discouraging associated attitudes and behaviors, as well as serving to raise funds in favor of the organizations promoting such advertising (Vulli 2005). Even though semiotic analysis of media texts has always viewed advertising as an exemplary object of investigation, curiously only a limited number of research studies have concentrated on *unconventional social campaigns*, a complex area in the radically changing global communicative scenario (Peverini 2009, 2011). As we will try to demonstrate through the analysis of some international environment-oriented case studies, social advertising is not merely a subgenre of advertising language, and the effectiveness of communication strategies used by social campaigns in fact depends upon a sort of “semiotic autonomy.” In an increasingly crowded semiosphere, the subjects of social advertising discourses are faced with a very complex and tricky issue/

question: how to portray deep-rooted environmental problems of difficult solution in an incisive manner, thereby unexpectedly involving spectators who are accustomed to all kinds of shocking images (Sontag 2003).

An advertising campaign's textual structure is based on the need to renew or enhance the perception of an ecological emergency linked to some underexposed topic. According to the guerrilla marketing lexicon (Levinson 1984; Levinson and Hanley 2005; Levinson and Horowitz 2010), the aim is to highlight a social issue and then attempt to "infect" the media system, as though with a "virus." Consequently, the effectiveness of a social advertising campaign should rest upon its ability to trigger a sort of mediatic "contagion." If, on the one hand, the metaphor of viral infection is commonly used to describe the processes behind so-called unconventional marketing, on the other, from a sociosemiotic perspective, some theoretical problems emerge. What does unconventional mean? What is its opposite? *Can the idea of a widespread epidemic be transferred to the communication field?*

Starting from such questions, and using a textual semiotic approach, we will focus on some of the most frequently recurring unconventional strategies in environment awareness campaigns, with the aim of exploring the issue of social advertising effectiveness in depth.

## 2 Unconventional social advertising

Any attempt to identify the characteristics of unconventional promotional texts is virtually **futile**, because whenever an unseen creative strategy is used to catch the attention of a spectator, the innovation is quickly codified within the stock of guerrilla marketing "weapons." So inevitably, the more unconventional an advertising action may seem, the more ephemeral its effectiveness is **destined** to be. Nonetheless, this term is commonly used to define a vast range of textual practices that radically redefine the relation between a text and its spectator. A first tentative definition of the phenomenon can be formulated by observing, in particular, the communication strategies (Bertin 2003) behind advertising texts, the tactics used in their distribution within a cross-media context, and the active involvement of spectators.

From a marketing perspective, strategies of unconventional communication commonly:

- address a spectator who is used to reading and rapidly interpreting traditional forms of advertising (TV spots, poster campaigns, radio commercials, etc.)

- attempt to reproduce and simulate languages and styles that are recognized and shared by consumers and that mimic UGC and 2.0 web practices
- prefer not to interrupt entertainment or information programs but present themselves as recreational textual forms or unexpected and original occasions to think about a topic. Some classic examples used to obtain maximum media coverage are the apparently unprofessional videos distributed on the Internet or the *mise en scène* of unexpected and disorienting performances strategically staged in urban locations
- aim to amplify the message by attempting to spark word of mouth reactions, and direct relations between typical social media users. The audience is expected to help in spreading the message, thereby intensifying the symbolic value of the campaign

Within this framework, unconventional social marketing is typified by some particular features and, as we will try to demonstrate, its persuasion potential relies on these specific characteristics. When exploring the radical transformation in contemporary social advertising tactics, a standard definition of “unconventional” is by no means sufficient. In order to examine the complexity of the phenomenon, it may be useful to focus on the semiotic notion of *text*, identifying the different levels at which innovation occurs in communication strategies. In this sense, it is first of all essential to distinguish unconventional texts, with the transgressive use of images, sounds, and words in their advertising message, from the entire unconventional process of ideation, production, and distribution within the social campaign, i.e., from the pragmatic frame of the communication process.

On this plane, according to Algirdas Julien Greimas’ distinction between the level of immanence and level of manifestation in a text, tackling the theme of unconventional use of advertising language means focusing on strategies of narrativization and representation of social issues and values. In advertising language in particular, the potential for transgression depends on the ability to break certain rules and stereotypes relating to the figurativization of thematic isotopies. When analyzing the international environmental advertising scenario, two extreme solutions generally emerge: the option, on the one hand, of causing shock through the intense realism of images, and on the other, of using an ironic and often paradoxical approach. In the first case, the aim is to involve the spectator, going beyond do-gooding rhetoric, favoring an imperative and prescriptive approach that reduces audiences’ interpretive margin. According to the concept of *veridiction contract* (Greimas and Courtés 1979), which defines truth as an effect of discourse, the peculiarity of the message here consists in re-marking the *referential illusion* through the process of iconization (Greimas 1984), using close-ups

and hyperrealistic details to catch the spectator's eye, attempting to recapture the urgency and dramatic nature of a social issue. This very common communicative strategy, *fear arousing appeal*, aims to persuade rather than to explain: it solicits an emotional reaction rather than involving the viewer in a dialectical interpretation. The content plane of this genre of social advertising (concerning issues such as pollution, deforestation, endangered species, global warming effects, etc.) is characterized by *dysphoria*, often represented through a set of figurative and plastic clichés. This semiotic strategy is so widely used in social marketing that its effectiveness is largely compromised.

The second social advertising typology pits surreal displacement, black humor, and visual paradoxes against the strategy of dramatization: the communication framework is brought onto a different level, the viewers' attention and complicity are stimulated, and also, therefore, their interpretive cooperation. When analyzing a wide corpus of international green campaigns, one relevant element emerges: this strategy is being increasingly developed so as to raise awareness about a social issue, and the enunciation of social discourse is seemingly autonomous from the grave urgency of environmental issues. Whereas until recently advertising unconventionality meant visual shocks and an authoritative and prescriptive tone of voice (often triggering public debate about the ethic assumptions behind the supposed effectiveness of texts), at the moment this second approach is undeniably prevailing. An interesting semiotic tactic has thus gained relevance, enhancing the apparent distinction between the dysphoria of the content plane and the plastic and figurative characteristics of visuals, which are used to enhance a kind of "euphoric" tone of voice on the expression plane.

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration is the semiotic process of interpretive cooperation; whereas the aim of fear arousing appeal campaigns is to impress the spectator emotionally and unexpectedly, this second strategy follows a two-step procedure. A first step in which the phatic function prevails and visual/verbal rhetoric is used to emphasize the unpredictability of the message, forcing the viewer to stop and look at the text; and a second, argumentative step where copy and logo inform the viewer about the social problem, the complex scenario, its causes and possible solutions.

From our perspective, the potential efficacy of social advertising relies, first of all, on the ability to reinforce the credibility of the enunciator, enhancing the flexibility of the expression plane as against the content plane, in particular with regard to the latter's basically limited and static thematic repertoire. To strengthen the message, three very common discursive strategies in social advertising such as *warning*, *suggestion*, and *condemnation* are increasingly redefined through the tactic of *irony* (Odoardi 2011), often sparking impassioned public debate about the ethic propriety of presenting dramatic situations in a humorous manner.

### 3 Unconventional practices: Ambient marketing in social advertising

In the changing scenario of social advertising, the classic notion of a text based on different types of formats and genres needs to be extended to include a whole range of practices that encompass the entire life cycle of a campaign. On this plane, the unconventional approach breaks out of the codified territory of media texts, gaining relevance as a stance that completely redefines the aims and modalities of outdoor advertising.<sup>1</sup> As we will see in detail through some particularly innovative and controversial case studies of environmental campaigns, the effectiveness of such unconventional practices is based upon a deep reassessment of the interpretive competences and skills of receivers who become, in a literary sense, targets, “victims” of an ambush, an unavoidable attack/impact/assault. It is hence necessary to broaden the perspective, to analyze the entire pragmatics of social communication: unconventionality does not in fact lie merely in the more or less radical oddness of a billboard or a TV spot, but in the complex series of strategies and tactics used to plan intermedial campaigns. Paradoxically, if, on the one hand, the constant increase in successful keywords such as *guerrilla*, *viral*, *buzz*, *ambient*, *ambush*, *astroturfing* attests to creative dynamism, on the other, the inaccurate use of such terms does not help to define the characteristics of a constantly changing scenery with any precision. To identify the intricate relation between means, strategies, and aims, it might be useful to critically re-examine the nexus between such “labels” and concrete social communication practices, in an attempt to find some interesting array of analogies and differences.

The starting point is guerrilla marketing, an expression introduced by Jay Conrad Levinson in 1984 that refers to radically alternative marketing tactics conceived with the aim of maximizing the productiveness of small budget projects. In the context of marketing strategies, the term “guerrilla” clearly refers to semiotic mechanisms. First of all, guerrilla means reviewing some pre-existing signs, texts, and spaces through a second-level enunciation. In most of the relevant cases, creative actions are based on a metatextual approach to advertising, on the tendency to reopen texts, manipulate signification processes, “inoculate” paradoxes into the original message: in other words, to distort the semantic coherence.

One of the most common unconventional techniques in social advertising is, for example, *stickering*, the practice of placing messages in unusual locations within the urban territory, out of their customary context. One of the most recent

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1 For an accurate semiotic analysis of the tactics and strategies of classic outdoor advertising see Fontanille (2008: 179–215).

exemplary cases can be seen in the award-winning social campaign against traffic-caused air pollution, *Green Pedestrian Crossing*, commissioned by the China Environmental Protection Foundation. In the city of Shanghai, some zebra crossings, very common elements in anonymous urban spaces, were re-semanticized by covering the alternate black and white stripes (quite “dumb” signs) with a large canvas portraying a tree without leaves. Sponge cushions soaked in environmentally friendly, washable green paint were placed on both sides of a busy street. As pedestrians crossed the street, they stepped onto the green sponge, and then onto the canvas, leaving green footprints on the tree. Each “green” footprint looked like a leaf sprouting from the formerly bare branches, which made people feel they could create a greener environment just by walking.

According to the official press release, the *Green Pedestrian Crossing* was installed on seven thoroughfares in Shanghai. The campaign was then extended to 132 roads across fifteen cities in China, with the participation of more than 3,920,000 people. Media interest, both online and offline, was significant. After the campaign launch, there were more than 300 thousand redirects and 50,000 posts on the Sina Microblog. Research revealed that general public awareness about environmental protection had increased by 86%. After the campaign, the *Green Pedestrian Crossing* print was exhibited at Shanghai’s Zheng Da Art Museum.



Fig. 1: China Environmental Protection Foundation – DDB China Group (2010)

From a semiotic perspective, the entire effectiveness of guerrilla action is based on a complex relation between media and urban spaces (Leone 2009, 2012), intended not merely as contexts but as *stratified co-texts*. As Ruggero Eugeni affirms, in the “post-media condition” where *the medium is the territory*,

media are not limited to spreading within a territory, but end up losing their specificity in this movement; conversely, territories are not merely occupied by media, but become media devices themselves. In other words, within the current “post-media condition,” the medium is the territory . . . More specifically, with regard to cities and urban spaces, it is not difficult to see that the city is not just a territory occupied by media devices, but an instrument of appropriation and creation of new territories. (Eugeni 2010: 9)

This first type of guerrilla action uses a strategy that is widely implemented in social campaigns, a sort of “canon” delineated in manifold variations according to the social issue that is to be promoted, hence it is extremely useful to consider one particularly relevant aspect: the effectiveness of the unconventional ambient marketing approach does not merely rely on visual appeal or repulsion, the impact that stickering has on bystanders goes far beyond technical accuracy. The narrative level is crucial in starting an empathic process between citizens and the dramatic scenario represented in the text. The realism of the figures cannot ensure that the campaign maintains its force over the course of time. An original narrative structure or an unpredictable script empowers the campaign, encourages the reader’s competence, inviting him or her to assume the actantial role of the helper, fostering consciousness. Unlike the common rhetoric of accusation and **pietism**, a campaign’s originality does not rely so much on stunning visuals, as on the ability to involve viewers’ narrative intelligence.

In the context of conversational media, the analysis of social guerrilla actions means, first of all, delving into a media strategy delineated through semiotic practices that aim to generate a collective word of mouth reaction, by means of a series of different tactics and techniques. In this sense, we propose to critically reconsider terms like *ambient*, *street*, *viral*, *buzz*, *ambush*, *stickering* as being tactical variants of the same unconventional semiotic strategy. The spread of such expressions, introduced to label the most “radical” and unusual advertising campaigns, is often misleading because of an ambiguous assimilation of different categories. These terms do not indicate dissimilar strategies, but rather a repertoire of variable techniques that all embody the same ability to subvert the common rules of advertising (Lasn 1999). Consequently, to analyze this intricate scene, it is necessary to distinguish between different levels of pertinence concerning:

- Semiotic characteristics of texts
- Media used for the campaign
- Social diffusion of campaign effects

The tactic of semantic subversion of spaces is crucial in social advertising, where it is widely used in specifically addressing selected audiences. In a semiotic theoretic frame, the effectiveness of such unconventional actions relies upon two different **preliminary** observations concerning the *model reader profile* and the *potential symbolic value of the territory to be occupied*. The potential strength of this guerrilla approach consists in **accurately** selecting the receiver, while at the same time planning a temporary action directly within a territory so familiar as to appear absolutely ordinary. Since this category puts together various differing unconventional actions, it is particularly useful to enter into details by identifying at least three different levels:

- type of technique used to produce the text
- characteristics of spaces where advertising actions take place
- temporary relation between the semiotics of space and the semiotics of social advertising

Obviously, all these planes are not clearly distinct within the text. On the contrary, they are closely interconnected, yet their differentiation allows us nonetheless to reconsider ambient marketing as not merely a chaotic set of actions, but an original communication strategy that aims to subvert all the common mechanisms of advertising.

## 4 Unconventional techniques

The ambient marketing series of techniques is directly related to some functional requirements:

- low budget
- maximum impact in terms of visibility and memorization within the territory
- easiness of execution
- speed in staging the action

Stickering, for instance, aims to optimize the relation between the simplicity of the support and the impact of the message, but the effectiveness of such action is also related to a sort of “semiotic **parasitism**”: the superimposition of texts on the urban territory is not only a matter of technique, but also calls some tactics into play. The first and most frequent option consists of establishing a close relation between space and campaign social issues, acting on the thematic level and on its visual representation. To strengthen this kind of tactic, *prosemantic rules are usually disregarded*. By drastically reducing the distance between the receiver and the text, social advertising tries to prevail over the disinterest of passersby on



both a cognitive and pathemic level, by simulating a symbolic and unpredictable aggression. The effectiveness of stickering actions is spread along a continuum, where the predictability of the action and the physical distance between the text and the spectator are crucial. The maximum grade of involvement is reached when *stickiness* and *camouflage* are so closely combined that the passerby's body is temporarily used as a physical support for the message. The UNICEF campaign about landmine victims was probably one of the first and most popular ambient campaigns and has surely been a model for many other subsequent environment-oriented actions.



Fig. 2: UNICEF – Leo Burnett Frankfurt (2008)

Without the passersby realizing it, stickers with self-adhesive topsides that perfectly reproduced the texture and colors of the asphalt, were scattered on the sidewalk outside various UNICEF Information Booths: the people who **involuntarily** found one stuck to their shoes, on removing it discovered to their surprise that they had been involved in a humanitarian campaign. The figurativization of the theme was provided by the landmine picture on the underside. The slogan, copy, and logo gave the reader information about this very common and tragic situation, which, had it not been a simulation, would actually have caused their mutilation in many countries.

In a second tactic, the *rhetoric of the visible* (Groupe  $\mu$  1992; Migliore 2011) takes on the actantial dimension of spaces and objects, feeding on narrative functions (Marrone 2001) that help or impede the realization of common practices in everyday life. The positions and gestures necessary to perform a banal action are here used as trigger devices of a second level of enunciation. Spaces or objects in citizens' everyday life, which have helper or opponent functions in the realization of simple actions (for example elevators or trash cans), here become supports to stage a new visual discourse, even more striking when located further away from places where social campaigns discourse usually occurs. The efficacy of an action comes in this case from the ability, on a visual rhetoric level, to reinvent a pre-existent discourse regarding a space and the typical practices for which it is used.



Fig. 3: WWF – Ogilvy & Mater Sofia (2008)

In a third tactic, the narrative dimension of a space or pre-existent object is absorbed into the social tale, radically transforming spectators from external observers to main actors in the narration, often abruptly discovering that they embody the victim's or helper's role. In this campaign, for example, the enormous *trompe l'oeil* (Calabrese 2011) sticker placed on the bottom of a swimming pool serves the function of manipulating the spectator both on a cognitive and pas-sional dimension, clearly allotting him or her the narrative role of the helper.

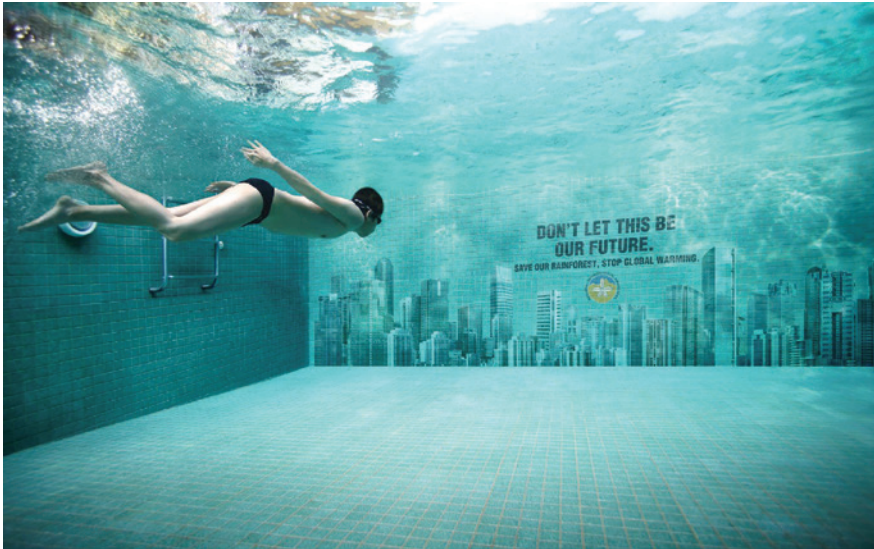


Fig. 4: Malaysian regional Environmental Awareness – Naga DDB (2007)

A second technique that allows ambient marketing to explode very rapidly onto the urban territory consists of the use of silhouettes.

Unlike stickers, silhouettes are easily movable, high impact and light-weight shapes that are silent but able to give voice to the unheeded actors of collective dramas. In the heterogeneous world of social advertising, silhouettes are extremely interesting semiotic figures: their strength is not based on mimicry, as occurs with stickers, but on flaunted artificiality, on appearing to be out of place. Silhouettes are deeply rooted in the collective imaginary, their semiotic depth derives from a constant use as film, television, and visual arts props. An unusual social campaign dedicated to the preservation of Spanish beaches, for example, used a balloon, the comics graphic sign par excellence, to “give voice” to the environment, invading the space with direct questions and pushing the communicative axis onto a decidedly more informal tone of voice.



Fig. 5: BCNeta (2006)

A last technique used in ambient marketing consists of bringing objects to the street. Into this macro-category fall all the interventions of space resemantization that not only simulate the presence of a disturbing figure, but literally practice a form of *détournement*, physically setting the object in the urban context. Real objects, real-size reproductions or grotesque copies enter into a dialectical relation with the space, constructing a text together with the territory. The repertoire of combinations is unlimited, the only recursive semiotic logic is that of favoring unexpected combinations, compelling two different semiotics to coexist, with the purpose of opening up to new meaning effects.

Objects, shapes, and functions are used in an enunciation strategy aimed at establishing an active contact with spectators, stimulating their interpretive cooperation, and **manifestly** contradicting the coherent rules of their encyclopedic knowledge (Eco 1976, 1979, 1994).

In the most interesting cases, objects are not simple tools in the hands of a creative *bricoleur*, but become the center of a temporary and unexpected narration that transforms the sense of a space. Whereas massive guerrilla sticker actions often resort to a camouflage strategy (Fabbri 2011; Casarin and Fornari 2010),



Fig. 6: Ifaw – Republic of everyone (2007)

objects are more frequently brought into play by emphasizing their extraneousness to the urban context. In many of the cases belonging to this macro-category, social advertising plays with its own typical formulas and builds credibility ironically by using its repertoire of stereotypes, emphatic tones, hyperboles, and exaggerations in the figurativization of passions. One of the most frequent tactics is to establish a relation with the receiver through the ludic function of the object. For example, the campaign against deforestation *Plant More Trees* uses a jigsaw puzzle as a text, asking the reader to transform the original image of an arid landscape by superimposing other pieces that depict green bushes.



Fig. 7: Ecological Justice – Creative Center (2007)

A similar operation consists of breaking an object and asking the receiver to piece it together from the fragments, reassembling them into the original message.



Fig. 8: Red Cross Argentina – Leo Burnett Argentina (2007)

The Argentinean Red Cross distributed some transparent plastic bags in public spaces that contained pieces of paper, fragments of a postcard depicting buildings, and a card with the Red Cross logo and the slogan of the initiative: “After an earthquake, the first thing that needs to be rebuilt is the **lives** of the people who suffered it. Peru needs your help.”

In this case, too, the effectiveness of advertising lies in its ability to solicit interpretive cooperation, to leverage readers’ curiosity, to stimulate their involvement on a pragmatic level. In ambient campaigns, objects are called upon to fulfill a crucial task: they represent the topic, they materialize the narration of a drama within a space and, above all, they give voice to the feelings, to the pathetic dimension of social advertising. In this sense, objects are at the center of an advertising strategy for passionate involvement that concerns both aspects of the enunciated and enunciation. The strategic function of an object cannot be reduced to the mere representation of an environmental emergency, the level of a picture’s realism does not allow renewal of those visual stereotypes that the audience of the advertising discourse has by now completely digested.

The most interesting cases demonstrate how creatives do not consider objects as being enunciated, but overall as instruments of enunciation: they are not content with merely shifting the representation of a topic from the well-regulated and reassuring public advertising spaces to an unfamiliar environment. On the contrary, they essentially transfigure objects, radically manipulating their form and reshaping their outline, turning them into visual hyperboles.

Thus, the entire communication action is invested with passion, and the urgency of the issue is “shouted” in an original way, separating the dramatic message from a veristic style, from the extreme quest for the highest degree of objectivation.

In many popular international campaigns, objects emphasize their own **inappropriateness**, being out of scale, out of place. Excessive dimensions, alterations in the shape, non-customary materials, often transform banal utensils into the ironic tools of guerrilla actions. Thus, with regard to the pathemic dimension of text, the dysphoria, which is a specific characteristic of environmental issues discourse, is assimilated into a ludic strategy that playfully engages the reader’s cooperation and sense of humor.

## "Black Cloud"



While the Chinese economy is booming, the skies above its cities are darkening. One of the biggest causes is the phenomenal growth in the number of cars and exhaust emissions. To kick off their 20 tips for sustainable development campaign and drive people to their 20to20.org mini-site, WWF expressed one tip in dramatic fashion. Along with an increase in new volunteers, WWF received coverage of the event in a number of Chinese newspapers as well as on CCTV 9, Beijing TV, Phoenix TV, even international news stations as far away as Deutsche Welle Broadcasting in Germany and Al Jazeera in the Middle East.

On balloon:  
Drive one day less and look how much carbon monoxide you'll keep out of the air we breathe.



Fig. 9: WWF – Ogilvy, Beijing, China (2007)



The exaggeration strategy is used above all in eco-oriented social campaigns. An emblematic case is a WWF China campaign, whose efficacy is based on the grotesque representation of urban pollution.

Ogilvy creatives played with a visual stereotype of black exhaust smoke, using the typical style of cartoons and comics. An enormously heavy cloud, connected to the exhaust pipe of a car, transformed a paradoxical object into an original semiotic tool that combined irony and denunciation, one giving strength to the other, with effects on the territory and on passersby. The WWF slogan and logo, thanks to their position and to the chromatic contrast, drew attention to the message: “Drive one day less and look how much carbon monoxide you’ll keep out of the air we breathe.”

An alternative and opposite strategy consists of manipulating the expression plane, subtracting elements from the surface of an object to reveal its hidden structure. The city of Denver, for example, planned its hydric resources campaign by refusing *a priori* to base it on a wide range of visual stereotypes, preferring a more bewildering strategy: to attract the attention of passersby, some elements of urban equipment were partially dismantled and the remaining surface used to display a neat slogan: “Use only what you need.” A bench, a large outdoor poster, a car, were consequently transformed into unusual witnesses of an urgency that concerns the whole community. The strength of this idea does not simply rely on the creative intervention in figurativization of some pre-existing materials, but on the semi-symbolism process (Calabrese 1999). These disfigured and irregular objects enter a relationship with normal and functioning ones, they occupy the same space and stimulate a determined relation between the expression and the content plane of the advertising campaign.

E Regular Forms	versus	Irregular Forms
<hr/>		
C Resources Waste		Responsible Saving

The objects’ semiotic strength becomes disruptive in that their manipulation allows the intended use to be cleverly overturned, in an unpredictable performance charged with symbolic values, for example, with an appropriate social responsibility philosophy.

An exemplary case is the popular environmental pollution campaign *Catch of the Day*, launched by non-profit organization Surfrider Foundation, which transformed harmless everyday objects like plastic food packaging into unconventional guerrilla marketing weapons, displaying them at local farmers’ markets to disturb consumers by leveraging rational and emotional mechanisms that determine their choices.



Fig. 10: Denver Water – Suple Advertising & Design, Denver, USA (2008)



Fig. 11: Surfrider Foundation – Saatchi & Saatchi (2009)

Condoms, cigarette butts, rusted padlocks and chains, and spray cans were hand-picked from various American beaches and neatly packaged in plastic food trays. The semiotic dialectic between pretense and unveiling is taken to the extreme, the campaign slogan and the foundation logo are printed on a label that perfectly reproduces the classical supermarket price and expiration date tag. The

packaging and its function are invested with symbolic meaning, the plastic wrap becomes a rhetorical weapon, an instrument to motivate the public towards collective action for environmental conservation. The semiotic overturn is fully completed: the object is not protected by the plastic wrapping, but denounced and tendered in evidence. Metaphor and metonymy intersect, body-copy illustrates the tragic pollution scenery, leveraging consumers' competence, reinforcing the visual shock with written information.

The performative nature of guerrilla action once again frames this text within the text. The association's slogan, "Make waves, go to [surfrider.org](http://surfrider.org)" is an urgent and compelling call to action that fully embraces word of mouth principles, aiming for a contagion that is able to transform isolated individuals into a virtually cohesive movement.

From a semiotic point of view, social advertising intervenes therefore in every aspect of the construction of an object: form, function, positioning and, obviously, materials.

Communication agencies ever more frequently organize micro-events in the territory that are constructed around the sensitive qualities of objects, intervening not only in the form of expression, but also in substance, in the tactile qualities of surfaces. In order to visually represent a concept in a dramatic way, some campaigns play on the utilization of progressive materials and the **spectacularized** destruction of objects. Another WWF campaign, launched on the occasion of the G8/G20 summit in Canada, utilized an ice sculpture portraying a polar bear to visualize the risk of extinction due to global warming. The entire effectiveness of guerrilla action revolves around the pathemic dimension. The spectator is involved in a representation that attempts to create the highest level of authenticity: the ice is not fake and actually melts, but it happens, inevitably, before the bystanders' eyes.

In a guerrilla action, as we have seen, space is not merely the setting in which a temporary narrative text is placed, with an aggressive style and without warning, but it is the protagonist. Planning where to intervene requires a preliminary step, a proficient reading of the complex urban co-text's potentiality to generate elaborated meaning.

Cities are plural texts (Marrone and Pezzini 2006, 2008; Volli 2005), subject to continuous transformation and to manifold different readings and practices (de Certeau 1998). Space is recognized, interpreted, played upon, starting from the tracking of a deep narrative logic, closely connected with social and personal action. According to Gianfranco Marrone (2001: 318–319) "in different narrative situations there are Object spaces and Subject spaces, but also Destinant and **Destinatory** spaces, Helper and Opponent spaces, Anti-Subject and Anti-Destinant spaces, that, on a discursive level, take the shape of real places, but thematized

and represented through different *topoi*: doors, walls, corridors, squares, rooms, tunnels and so on.”

From a semiotic perspective, as occurs with every other text, space deploys its expressive resources according to an ideal interpretation strategy, in other words, it gradually reconstructs the profile of a model reader.

Subway stations, hotel lounges, tunnels and road networks, elevators: in the complex and intricate semiotic geography of urban areas, every figure elaborates and defines more or less codified narrative programs of its own use, becomes available for different activities, permits some behaviors and obstructs others. This is the process by means of which *enunciational subjects of space* are shaped, model user profiles that give positive life to the narrative potentialities of a place. Clearly, then, comprehension of this plane is essential in reconstructing the criteria that guide every eco-oriented action aimed at capturing the attention of passersby, distorting their expectations, relieving them of their usual roles, starting an unexpected discourse.

As happens with all genres and forms of textuality, space too, in all its manifestations, can be used in unexpected or forbidden ways. Thus the efficacy of urban guerrilla marketing campaigns does not merely rely on the ability to occupy a space and capture the attention of people in the verbal and visual chaos of metropolitan areas; it also relies on the ability to translate the tested reading and consumption processes of spaces into a communication project rooted in the territory, which can transform the sense of a place and the identities of its inhabitants.

In a global semiotic strategy, the diffuse desemantization of everyday-life actions is a pre-condition for the effectiveness of ambient marketing strategies.<sup>2</sup> The life of an individual in a metropolis is necessarily organized around gestures and experiences so well-trying as to lose depth on a content plane, to downgrade to the status of merely automatic and, in some cases, alienating behaviors (Greimas 1976).

Common actions, such as opening a garbage bin, adjusting a rearview mirror, putting a cigarette out in an ash tray, are codified and “anaesthetized” practices that ambient marketing stimulates and “awakens,” using them as triggering devices of unannounced semiotic actions, micro-narratives that contain an unpredictable representation of a theme. The communicative strength of a campaign is

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<sup>2</sup> As Greimas (1976) significantly suggested in his fundamental study on topological semiotics, desemantization is not only an urban problem, but rather a general phenomenon based on the substitution of meaningful human behaviour by automated programs.

often based on *mimesis*, on an apparent reproduction of a common use situation of places. Consequently, an ambient marketing action deploys its various expressive means in two steps:

- detection and occupation of spaces and desemantized objects
- resemantization due to the superimposition of a second-level discourse.

Exploring the ever-changing forms of this complex dialectic that involves three dimensions, advertising, space, and daily practices, means venturing into a wide and uncertain scenario. Under an omnivorous gaze, city forms and boundaries are **re-read** to play on their balance and harmonies, dysfunction and paradoxes. Center and suburbs, natural places and cathedrals of culture, monuments and anonymous spaces, squares and alleyways: social advertising bursts into every corner, becomes text colliding with text, radically transforms the horizon of expectations that affect social behaviors. The choice of a space is thus strategic, so much so that it necessarily needs some prerequisites:

- defining a connection to the campaign theme
- selecting the target, the enunciational subjects of the advert
- boosting the visibility of the promotional announcement

This distinction undoubtedly helps to examine the territory's resemantization more analytically. Displaying a shocking image on a sidewalk is not in fact sufficient to make the communication effective, instead it is necessary to operate at all levels simultaneously, prodding passersby to undergo immersive experiences. As in every narrative text, even in ambient marketing semiotics, the choice of a space always starts from a hypothesis about the role of **destinataries**, their competences or limits, and the complexity of their *encyclopedia*.

Setting up an installation to raise social awareness means, first of all, foreseeing the forms of its consumption, starting with a definition of the audience that will be involved. Guerrilla advertising in our cities can consist of texts addressed to audiences that are **relatively** broad or narrow, critical or naïve, collaborative or not. Some field actions hence narrowly select their ideal spectators: this may happen for example when environmental campaigns choose private spaces, such as cars, for their scenario and use stickers installed on rearview mirrors to catch the driver's eye, relying upon image and slogan to effectively and immediately communicate the meaning of such **intrusive** actions.

A small adhesive label covers the lower side of the mirror, simulating one of the effects of global warming: flooding. The connection with the theme is assured by the *trompe l'oeil* (image realism and perspective), which intercepts the attention of drivers, compelling them to read the portion of space framed in the rearview mirror in a new way.



Fig. 12: Bicara Communications, Jakarta, Indonesia (2007)

Figurative characteristics and image positioning thus have a phatic function, while the campaign's conative dimension is represented by the slogan "Global warming won't stop, unless you act," which invites the receiver to pass from interpretation to action, from reading to direct mobilization.

As we have seen, objects and spaces possess an actantial nature, fulfilling their narrative function, encouraging or impeding the realization of narrative programs. As Greimas affirmed, the desemantization of urban lifestyles stems from the automatic realization of manifold narrative programs. It is precisely at this point that the narrative nature of ambient marketing is revealed: stories of heroes and victims, of desperate missions and brave acts are superimposed on the customary function of objects and spaces, enacting possible worlds, cultural constructs displayed before the eyes of citizens, who are invited "to dialogue" with them.

The surprise effect that is a characteristic feature of many urban performances can consequently be reconsidered: a text really has an effect on a subject, for he or she recognizes a narrative reversal of habitual space functions. The emotive impact of images and the consecutive gap reduction are amplified by the actantial role of space: the places where narrative programs usually take place, such as

escalators, bus stops, the doors of public toilets, become texts in which spectators are led to ponder over existential values. In this sense, waiting at a bus stop loses its function, becoming a completely redesigned experience within an advertising discourse.



Fig. 13: Auckland City Council and Heart of the City – Colenso BBDO (2008)

## 5 Logos among spaces

As with other types of advertising, social campaigns also elaborate their strategies by seeking a balance between the *mise en scène* of themes and the flaunting of their distinctive and identifying marks. The vast number of social communication logos reflect the intricacy of a broad and ever-evolving scenery and, within a text, lead to distinct subject identities. Texts within texts, logos are complete semiotic entities (Marrone 2007), endowed in some cases with a remarkable semantic complexity, acquired over time. To the spectator's eye, they condense values and incorporate a universe of connotative meanings: from a semiotic point of view, brands represent an explicit case of delegated enunciation, they are simulacra of the subject who commissioned the advertisement. In this sense, as happens in commercial advertising, words and images concur to reassert the **emitter's** identity, fields of action, and peculiarities. Caged animals, earth,

rainbows, trees, leaves, are all examples of essential elements that, combined with lettering, lay the foundation for the representation of themes like environmental engagement and civic cooperation.

However, the ways in which logos relate to the overall structure of texts in social advertising differ from the rules applying to commercial advertising: in the latter case, we generally observe/witness the valorization of brand image and enhancement of core values, whereas nonprofit communication follows different rules. Commercial brands are forms of *embrayage*, an enunciative operation that enables the subject of enunciation to reassert the connotative universe of a text whereas, in social advertising, logos in fact become crucial and delicate signs.

The effectiveness of communicative action in the territory is favored by *surprise effects, mimesis, camouflage and ambush tactics*, which invade the subject's personal space without warning. Subjects are hence compelled to rethink traditional forms of logo representation and positioning, and the balance established between the brand, visual and copy: the presence of logos in social ambient advertising is fundamental, even if they occupy a secondary position compared to visual elements, slogan, and body copy.

Logo placement quite often tends to favor reduced dimensions at the less visible margins of a text. Rarely does a brand claim **immediate** attention: most of the time, its position, width and colors are just the last step in a reading path. It is relegated to the margins of social discourse located in urban common spaces, but at the same time its presence is necessary for the spectator to discern the difference between the real world and the advertising text, between a dramatic reality and a plausible fiction.

A variant of this tactic consists in separating copy, slogan and logo from visual elements, so as to develop an effective communication plan in two steps that are combined in rapid succession: a preliminary shock followed by information.

Obviously different logos from different public interest entities respond to distinct political, economic and semiotic reasons. Particularly in the panorama of non-profit organizations, social discourse and fundraising are indissolubly interconnected and logos acquire a twofold strategic value: in semiotics they ensure the building/reinforcement of a recognizable visual identity, while from the economic point of view, they are distinguishing elements in a competitive market. In this sense, the case of public interest communication developed by institutions is slightly different: there is a risk here in fact of tilting the culture of service towards self-referential promotional needs. In some significant cases, institutions that commissioned an environmental campaign that was intended to appear in public spaces have avoided the temptation of signing it with their own logo; in some circumstances, the message prevails over the signature, institutions disappear from the text, self-referential symbols give way to the main themes of campaigns



and, consequently, information is not suffocated by self-promotion: logos do not overshadow the message.

## 6 Viral Videos

For social advertising semiotics, Audio Visual Media are a particularly congenial field of action. In the last few years, new ways of developing social advertising, which are alternative to consolidated expressive formulas and the narrative canons of television, are indeed gaining ground. In the domain of unconventional techniques, videos have evolved into what we call “viral.”

Apart from the enthusiasm shown by web and social media marketing experts for this well-known formula, the expression “viral advertising” is as catchy as it is vague and opaque:

Viral marketing and viral advertising refer to marketing techniques that use pre-existing social networks to produce increases in brand awareness or to achieve other marketing objectives (such as product sales) through self-replicating viral processes, analogous to the spread of pathological and computer viruses. It can be word-of-mouth delivered or enhanced by the network effects of the Internet. Viral marketing is a marketing phenomenon that facilitates and encourages people to pass along a marketing message voluntarily. Viral promotions may take the form of video clips, interactive Flash games, advergames, ebooks, brandable software, images, or even text messages. The basic form of viral marketing is not infinitely sustainable.<sup>3</sup>

From this reductive point of view, a video is viral insofar as its appearance guarantees that it gain social media popularity and rapid diffusion based on word of mouth. An initial difficulty in defining the phenomenon stems from the attempt to circumscribe its boundaries: it would be useful, for instance, to compare a viral video and a traditional commercial in semiotic terms, but this would not be a feasible option: commercials that were originally planned for television broadcasting, for example, may find favor among social network users, get published on blogs and gain unexpected visibility, while at the same time nobody can guarantee that a web video production will go viral. The metaphor equating pathology with the diffusion mechanism of advertising discourse is thus problematic. The subject of a viral infection is in fact an unaware victim, a link in a chain, out of control, whereas users in advertising are conscious infectors, potential subjects of enunciation, who could intentionally decide to share the text. Despite pristine

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<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia contributors, “Viral Marketing,” *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral\\_marketing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral_marketing) (accessed 26 December 2013).

intentions, mediatic contagion cannot be precisely planned: it is the effect of social practices that trace irregular and unpredictable **trajectories**. The strategy of contagion, which so-called viral videos are based on, is an *art of simulation*, of **counterfeiting**, of mimicry; as happens in ambient marketing, these texts dissimulate their real nature well at first sight, concealing their original intention. Like small Trojan horses, they disguise their genre and their thematic isotopies, tending as far as possible to resemble something authentic, familiar and naive, concealing an unexpected charge within, which is ready to flare up in an unpredictable finale. As with ambient marketing actions, most successful videos do not focus directly on the question at issue, but explore innovative, unexpected strategies of narration, often selecting and recombining well-known pre-existing texts through an *enunciative praxis* (Floch 2000).<sup>4</sup> The Greenpeace versus Volkswagen campaign, for example, is a metatext that aims to critically reread a recent popular Volkswagen commercial which, in turn, pays **homage** to the iconic sci-fi saga, Star Wars. A true spoof that uses the very same well-known imaginary from the original automotive campaign to ironically but incisively accuse Volkswagen of allegedly lobbying against climate laws.

Contagion is thus a final destination, not a starting point: it is the community of users who reward the creative smartness of a campaign, amplifying its message on the social media. This is, after all, the ultimate aim of the semiotic guerrilla: to rethink the balance between ends and means, share the pleasure of reading a text with a wider audience, and actively participate in the development of the story that recounts its unpredictable social circulation.

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<sup>4</sup> As Jean Marie Floch observed in his analysis of Visual Identities:

As with other enunciative practices, bricolage means calling upon a number of already established forms. However, the enunciative activity involved in bricolage does not lead to the production of merely stereotyped discourse. Rather, in this case, the selection and exploitation of the facts of usage and the products of history lead to a kind of creativity that constitutes the originality of bricolage as an enunciative praxis. We can, in fact, think of this as a double creativity. For, on the one hand, bricolage leads to statements that qualify as independent entities; while, on the other hand, any such statement will give substance, and hence identity, to an enunciating subject. (Floch 2000: 5)

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