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The Magnificent Obsessions of an Adman

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To reflect on the visual and advertising work of Armando Testa is in my view to acknowledge two significant facts. The first of these is that Armando Testa was Italy's greatest advertising creator. He took advertising in this country by the hand when it was still in its shy infancy, incapable of autonomously detaching itself from the quaintly provincial, if potentially huge, demands of companies and from the restrictions of a mass communications and distribution system that at the time was still in the dark ages. Testa led advertising to the threshold of the era of the marketing imperium, when every graphic choice, every commercial initiative, every advertising pitch, every pen and brushstroke began to be calibrated and measured with the precision of an apothecary's scales, as though it were a hazardous poison. This calculation sometimes reached excessive levels, impeding the slightest creative urge, as innovative proposals became imprisoned within the iron bars of market research and the laws of the economy.

The second point concerns what I would call Armando Testa's *specific visual world*, by which I mean his style and signature, gesture and sign, both in graphic and advertising terms. Because without doubt Testa, as much as Ross Reeves, Bernbach or Ogilvy, occupies a key place in the world panorama of advertising on which he left his mark by constructing an individual style if not a veritable poetics of advertising.

My intent here is to trace, using the tools of semiotics, a description of Testa's work that captures something of its expressive strength and ability, and so delineate a sort of explanatory model which can in some way help us understand its particular stamp. And in doing this I will also try to uncover and describe the semiotic forces that lie behind the success and instant recognizability of his work.

What We See

The first, deliberately ingenuous question we must ask about Testa's work is a very general and wide-ranging one: what do we see exactly when we look at a visual text?

The response to this question I shall articulate in three points. We see, in fact:

our own conceptual, visual-in a word, encyclopedic-knowledge; the materials perceived;
the strategic-interpretative operations which construct the communicative level.

Absent from this short list is the physical environment and the possibility of integrating this with the visual phenomena (and by physical environment we mean, for example, a particular light or else a "sound" whose interference may impede calm or correct vision, etc.). But by a small effort we might include this physical environment under the heading "materials perceived," in as far as it concretely, and in some sense even brutally, weighs on the observing subject, with the same insistence as the picture or artwork he happens to be looking at. Finally, in our list we haven't

considered the neuro-cerebral aspect of vision. In other words we shall not be dealing here with the biological conditions which permit vision.

The first point to look at is the subject's own knowledge. Every "thing seen" is in fact received within a particular framework of cultural reference. Each sign, color and figure in some way refers to what has already been observed, which is to say to the degree and level of visual experience and knowledge that a given subject possesses. For example we can, at least in part, refer what one is looking at to a particular current or currents in painting so as to better understand and categorize it. That is to say there is a reservoir of images that we grab hold of every time we are exposed to visual phenomena, our warehouse of icons. And in the case of an author producing advertising texts this reservoir is above all that of media intertextuality. Figures and plastic aspects¹ are plundered from movies, Tv, newspapers and magazines; or else sometimes visually rendered stories, narratives and anecdotes that can be reworked, manipulated and used. Or at least this is what happens in the case of run-of-the-mill-advertising. But for Testa it's a different story. In order to fully appreciate the work of this Turin adman we have to widen the reservoir to include currents in painting and key works in the contemporary arts, to which Testa in some way refers or which he even anticipates.

The second point in our list "the materials perceived" concerns an aspect that Pierce, the inventor of pragmatism and Anglo-American-style semiotics would call "diadic."²

The third point regards strategic-interpretative processes which signal how the visual text we are looking at is organized and also the way we come to understand this organization.

When in the century of enlightenment, Diderot began to visit the ateliers of painters, he was startled to discover a new language as well as a particular way of recounting painting. For this reason he decided to divide his presentations of paintings into two sections: in the first the picture would be presented in the traditional manner, with a description of what it showed and what its intentions were, while the second would describe the artist's *modus operandi*, his way of arranging the pictorial materials, his technique and material interpretation-in short, the process by which the artistic representation was constructed by the artist's hand.

Taking up these precious though somewhat distant intuitions, semiotics, its approach to visual texts, follows two lines of investigation which it defines as the figurative and the plastic.³

The plastic element of a visual text is the way in which the figurative is constructed, because it is also important to understand *how* one arrives at a figure. This is a highly significant stage of analysis that can lead us to a more profound understanding of the work. Indeed plastic data may even reformulate or readjust an interpretation constructed at the figurative level. The visual text communicates in many different ways, not merely through "what we recognize" but also through "what we see." The plastic undoubtedly refers to latter aspect of "what we see" and has nothing to do with the former, which in dealing with "the act of recognition" pertains to the figurative level.

The figurative aspect of a visual text is defined by what the author wishes to represent and what we the viewers recognize. It borrows figures from the real world (which it renders iconic), such as houses, faces, people, animals and trees, but also geometrical figures, whether complete or incomplete.⁴ As regards incomplete geometrical figures we should recall the lesson of *Gestalt* theory, which teaches us that even when faced with an incomplete trait of a sign we tend to reconstruct the missing parts, and with the assistance of the linguistic formulation of "looks like" we refer apparently inexpressive signs to lines, circles, ellipses or to objects of the natural world.⁵ In this way, for example, we might happen to affirm that this or that form "looks like a semi-circle." Or that "this vertical stroke looks like a lance." But we also produce "looks likes" that create analogies between one figure and another, of the order: "That saucer looks like a sombrero." Or "those intertwined fingers look just like Aztec bas-reliefs." Lastly the linguistic work performed by "looks like" may also construct analogies between figurative and abstract elements: "That curved back

looks like an ellipse which looks like a saucer which looks like a sombrero." Also pertaining to the plastic approach are chromatic and eidetic categories. If the plastic approach takes into consideration the way a painter applies his color and uses his brushstrokes to construct figures recognizable from the real world, chromatic and eidetic categories in turn take into account respectively the actual colors and forms themselves.

At this point we are now in possession of a panoply of instruments sufficient to approach Armando Testa's work with greater semiotic awareness. We will now place that work under close scrutiny to evaluate better its variables and constants and to see whether it is possible, as we said earlier, to outline a semiotic model able to take these into account. We'll limit ourselves to looking at Testa's posters, sketches and commercials, leaving aside the experience with "Carosello," which would mean introducing other elements such as the analysis of narrative and dynamic aspects typical of TV programs-elements that would make the work heavier and make it impossible to carry out with due scrupulousness the task we have set ourselves.

On the other hand it must be said that Testa's ways of producing visual texts such as posters and billboards, in short the kind of advertising that might appear in newspapers and that would provide the ideas that would later be transformed into TV ads, seem themselves to constitute the hard kernel of Testa's artistic work. We would therefore say that "Carosello" represented a natural, often highly accomplished, extension of an initial creative idea, a "thing seen" that sprang from the author's expressive obsessions which he then transformed into a TV ad story. Everything seems to indicate, in fact, that for this author what was most important was the form, after which came the application. If this is how things were for Testa, that first he worked on the forms that in some way emerged in his mind, and then thought about how to use them, how to adapt them each time to this or that client or product, or to "Carosello," perhaps by coming up with new characters, Testa's famous characters, then it might be of great importance to analyze these forms so as to draw up a kind of grammar of Testa's artistic imagination, a grammar of forms.

Obsessions

Taking a rapid look through Testa's work it is fairly easy to identify a number of constants, which could even be called "obsessions," to borrow a term used in film theory to define the iconic *topoi* frequently revisited by certain directors, such as staircases, corridors, corners, drops of water or techniques such as the insistent extradiegetic use of slow-motion. Such obsessions heighten recognizability and serve as indices of the particular style of a given author.

In Testa's work we undoubtedly find the following obsessions.

Obsessions Already Figured

Fingers

Eyes

Letters

Bolts

Dice

Even if we only have a rough idea of Testa's biography, we learn that his early works as an apprentice were in the field of typography, where one uses one's hands and fingers to move letters and manipulate typographical characters. This seems to explain the insistent recurrence of such figurations over the years, and further suggests that the artist was in some way profoundly struck by these real-world elements which he saw in action. However, such information serves only to explain the origin of the figure, not the expressive impact it has when artistically transposed. In other words,

is it that these figures from the real world are able to be transformed an artistic expression after passing through the author's productive grille? This is a fundamental question which naturally applies to any type of artistic production or art form, and to which there is no definitive answer.

In Testa's work the figurative - and here too we can uncover the signs of a visual *topoi* - is realized according to a modality that in part appears to be deliberately restricted to rigorous geometric forms and in part subjected to a poetics of "subtraction." This means that to delineate a face and describe expression requires only a white stroke on a black figure (chromatic obsession, a subject to which we shall return) and suddenly we have the emergence of a smile, such as that of Antonetto (1960, 1973). A simple V even without eyes suffices to portray an irritated look; a white space is enough to convince us that Paulista, the Lavazza character, has pearly white teeth. All of which is encased in a geometry which seems stolen from Mondrian but which also easily takes in De Chirico, Klee and Kandinsky, as well as anticipating several key artistic currents.

In plastic terms, we find another set of obsessions.

Chromatic Obsessions

Black

Red

Acid colors such as in the famous Punte Mes glass of 1954.

Eidetic Obsessions

The ellipse form, in all its infinite possible variants, whether full or empty, which we may find figured in a cyclist's back curved from effort (Superga, 1947), or in an egg (Papalla, 1966), in a sombrero (Lavazza, 1960), a saucer (again Lavazza, 1962), in the spinning-top figure of a gentleman in a top hat (Riccadonna, 1948), or lastly in the famous elephant proboscis which turns into a tire (Pirelli, 1953).

The spherical form, which is obviously found in the celebrated ad for Punt e Mes (1960), but also in the Martel bowling balls (1950s).

Brushstroke Obsessions

Though obsessions with particular brushstroke forms are considered plastic obsessions, they constitute a separate subcategory since a stroke is composed both of form and color. For example, a black or red - in any case full - color brushstroke which dries on the canvas leaving its characteristic grain - in fact the kind of stroke Testa performs obsessively - draws on both chromatic and eidetic categories, producing a new category which is that of the stroke.

Figurative and Plastic Formants

We shall now attempt to conduct an experiment in what we shall call visual semiotics. Let's consider the Pirelli elephant. If we look at it with our eyes half-closed, almost distancing our gaze a little, we manage to ignore the figurative elements and observe the basic contours. That is to say we are able, in semiotic terms, to observe the figurative formant that delineates and outlines the figure we are looking at. This is an operation that we might call topologization: considering the relationship between fullnesses and voids and keeping in mind only the confine which divides the fullness of the figure from the void which surrounds it. The topological aspect of the figure consists in this: it permits us to retain of a form only that which delimits and in a certain sense produces it. If we glance quickly through other works by Testa we discover that the silhouette of an amicable Arab woman (in the sketch for an ad never realized for Uso soap, 1951) is exactly the same as that of the Pirelli elephant.

According to Greimas the plastic formant is the constructed form which may be invested with diverse meanings, which is to say that it may become, apply itself to or even generate different figurative formants, i.e. generators of further figures. So, with the experiment we have just conducted we have first of all identified the figurative formant of the elephant and then discovered that such a formant turns up again, though this time invested by other interpretative grids for reading the natural world, in a quite different figure, that of the Arab woman. At this point we may say that the formant in question is a plastic formant which becomes figurative in the moment it is actualized in the form of an Arab woman or an elephant. Testa's work contains many other similar such cases. The man Antonetto, for instance, exploits the same plastic formant as the ad for Fiom (1948), and vice-versa. Both have the same stature and silhouette that in the case of Antonetto figures the man finally relieved of his suffering after having taken the indigestion pill, and in the case of the Fiom ad figures a screw-nut penetrated by a pen-nib. The fact that these are two (extremely) different figures is on account of their differing figurative formants. But the fact that we have recognized them in some way as the same figure is due to fact that both are subtended by the same plastic formant.

There are many other cases where we witness the same phenomenon. The figures that we see, if we observe them and try to perceive their figurative formants, appear to our eyes to be similar to other completely different figures on account of the fact that they share the same plastic formant. We find Stobbia's wide-brimmed sombrero (1955) in innumerable other figures that appear in Testa's work.

Conclusions

Is it possible therefore to construct an explicative model for Armando Testa's work? Has semiotics been of help to us in our analysis of his artistic expression?

Well, first of all, it has shown that Armando Testa did not work in the manner of the traditional adman, in the sense that he didn't simply enliven cheese, but if anything referred the product to his own artistic world, composed of obsessions and forms that were in some way pre-existent. He was a *metteur en scène*, in a thousand different guises, of a number of forms, colors and fundamental poetic choices that together comprised his artistic grammar. These forms had the strength of simplicity - what could be simpler, in fact, than an ellipse, a sphere, or a solid color like black or red, or again the geometric simplification of a figure?

Moreover, semiotic analysis has enabled us to rediscover a number of nervalures in Testa's work, that is to say plastic trajectories that were capable of giving it vital jolts, bringing it to life and making it self-referential and to a certain degree self-forming. Like Escher's famous hand that comes to life by itself, emerging from the page in the act of drawing itself, so too Armando Testa's work lives on its own resources, feeding on itself and completely transforming itself into an aesthetic object; and here we may find an interesting attempt to respond to the question we posed a few pages back.

To restate the question: why does the simple transposition of a banal everyday, or even vulgar object (such as Duchamp's celebrated urinal) when placed within the framework of an artist's oeuvre become a work of art and aesthetics? Because the object thus transposed enters into a nervalure which gives it life and nourishes it, since the transposition is in fact a form of self birthing, a palingenesis that feeds on the author's obsessions, which feed on it in turn. It is for all these reasons that Armando Testa's work constitutes a great aesthetic construction with its own inimitable life-force.

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¹ On the notion of figurative and plastic, see text.

² Cf. Charles S. Peirce, *Semiotics* (1980).

³ Cf. Algirdas Greimas (1991), p. 39. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵ It was Giampaolo Fabris (1997, p. 123 on) who first used *Gestalt* theory in reference to advertising to explain one of the ways in which an advertising text is able to attract the public's attention, by asking them to "fill in" what the text says or shows but never completely displays openly or completely defines, which therefore must be completed by the spectator's gaze. This process of completion (which is in fact a *Gestalt* operation) requires attention and a small amount of time, which is in principle what advertising seeks: to obtain the consumer's time and attention in order to drum its message into them.