

Building a Myth. Representing “Italianness” in Fiat 500 Commercials in The United States

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Abstract. Under the leadership of Sergio Marchionne, the Fiat brand has embarked on an important semiotic operation, redefining its system of values and symbols and building a true myth of “Italianness”, in which the Italian language features prominently. This essay will analyse three commercials that appeared in the U.S. between 2011 and 2014 to advertise the various versions of the Fiat 500. Without neglecting the functional dynamic of advertising (narratological structure and underlying rhetorical devices), this analysis will focus in particular on the decisive role played by “Italianness” and the Italian language.

1. Introduction

Advertising is an extremely fascinating object of study, above all for a discipline like semiotics which analyses meaning and studies social phenomena. The interest in advertising is first and foremost relevant because commercial messages are constructed with clear objectives: communicate, persuade and promote. To achieve these objectives, complex rhetorical techniques are used, connotations are triggered and values are set in motion (Marrone 2001). Secondly, advertising scripts, like all other texts, can tell us a lot about the social context that produced them: the image, for example, that a society has of itself, as well as the image it has of other cultural contexts; its system of reference values; its myths; its obsessions; its most widespread stereotypes; its ideologies, and so on. Umberto Eco emphasized this concept in his 1968 paper entitled “*La struttura assente: la ricerca semiotica e il metodo strutturale*” (“*The absent structure: Semiotic research and the structural method*”):

“La lettura di alcuni messaggi pubblicitari avrà dunque una duplice funzione: da un lato indicare come si possa articolare una mappa dei codici pubblicitari, dall’altro mostrare come l’analisi semiologica, nel momento in cui implica la considerazione di quell’Altro dall’universo dei segni che è l’universo delle ideologie, superi i limiti “formalistici” che sembrano esserle propri per contribuire ad un discorso più ampio che coinvolge [...] la situazione di una società nel suo complesso” (Eco 2016, p.165).

“The reading of some advertising messages will therefore have a dual function: firstly, to indicate how a map of advertising codes can be structured, and secondly, to show how semiotic analysis, when involving the consideration of that Other, the universe of ideologies, rather than the universe of signs, exceeds the “formalistic” limits that seem to define it to contribute to a broader discourse regarding [...] the situation of a society as a whole” (Self-Translation).

Today, however, those who study commercial advertising cannot help but broaden their analytical framework by also taking into consideration the newest actor who has made a disruptive entrance onto the stage: the brand. In the last few decades, brand names have acquired increasing importance in all consumer sectors, and even beyond. They have become powerful semiotic tools through their

tendency to condense values, ideologies, signs and meanings. As instruments with strong connotations and dynamics, brands have the extraordinary capacity of telling stories and creating symbolic worlds and universes (Fabris, Minestroni 2004, p.28).

They have therefore become an important comparative space for scholars who want to tackle “today’s myths” and contemporary narration. Brands have various instruments at their disposal to put forth their messages: among these, advertising is one of the most important as it provides the essential grammar of the narrative, ensuring readability, visibility and the multiplication of stories (Fabris, Minestroni 2004, p.28).

However, little has been written on the role that brands play in building and characterising the image of a country. If, for example, we take a moment to observe Italian brand advertising in international markets, we can see how, on many occasions, the image of Italy itself and its culture is also conveyed: a real symbolic and value-driven profile that is clearly defined and continually revisited¹. This complex symbolic system is the focus of various lines of research within the PRIN 2017 research program, “Italian language, global language market, Italian companies in the world: new linguistic, sociocultural, institutional, economic-productive dynamics”, which also includes this study².

To this end, Balicco (2015) makes an interesting point, when in a study on “Made in Italy”, he emphasizes that:

“l’Italia del Made in Italy sia stato un paese che è riuscito ad imporre con forza, nel mercato internazionale, un’immagine di Sé come modernità godibile. Un’immagine che è nello stesso tempo agita e subita, per un verso risposta ad una domanda del mercato internazionale (all’inizio, soprattutto statunitense), per un altro capacità autonoma di usare stereotipi, o eredità culturali soverchianti, a proprio vantaggio” (Balicco 2015, p. 8).

“With Made in Italy, Italy has successfully established a clear image of itself on the international market, as enjoyable modernisation. An image that is, at the same time, acted out and imposed, partly responding to international market demand (initially, largely in the US), and partly demonstrating its capacity to use stereotypes, or impressive cultural heritage, to its own advantage” (Self-translation).

Within this framework, an interesting case of study is the Fiat brand, which, under the leadership of Sergio Marchionne, has embarked on an important semiotic operation, redefining its system of values and symbols and building a true myth of Italianness, in which the Italian language plays a decisive role. In view of this, we chose to analyse an exemplary case in the process of representing Italianness on international markets: the campaign to promote various versions of the Fiat 500 in the United States. In the following pages we will focus on three commercials aired between 2011 and 2014 in the U.S. Although the analysis looks at the functional dynamics of advertising, narratological structure and rhetorical devices underlying the different commercials, this paper will focus largely on analysing the decisive role played by Italianness and the Italian language in these advertising scripts.

The advertising campaign in question, as previously mentioned, took place between 2011 and 2014 within a communications ecosystem that was decidedly different to that of today. Both the evolution of consumption dynamics (Boero 2017) and changes linked to the pandemic (Spaziante 2020) have caused significant transformations in the field of advertising. Yet, we felt it was important to focus attention on the dynamics that characterise these advertisements, even if they belong to a restricted

¹ For a general overview of the image conveyed by Italian brands on international markets, please refer to: Paris, O., 2020, “Costruire un mito: marche, prodotti e la rappresentazione dell’italianità nel mondo”, in *Filosofi(e) Semiotiche*, Vol. 7, n.1, pp.142 – 153.

² This piece of work is part of the scientific research program PRIN 2017 (Research Project of National Relevance), cod. 2017K79S7T, entitled Italian language, global language market, Italian companies in the world: new linguistic, sociocultural, institutional, economic-productive dynamics. The project, funded by MIUR – Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, involves research units from four different Universities: Italian University Line, University of Florence, University of the International Studies of Rome, University for Foreigners of Siena.

temporal context. In fact, these represent the first and most structured example of an advertising campaign that is entirely focused on a symbolic and value-driven system associated with a national identity and culture. In addition to being a paradigmatic example, these commercials provide us with the first semiotic coordinates of a “euphoric” representation that has, over time, become “hegemonic”: Italianness in international advertising.

2. The launch of the Fiat 500 and the myth of Italianness: one strategy for Italy and one for the U.S.

As the initiative of Sergio Marchionne, the launch of the “New Fiat 500” in March 2007 represented for the Turin-based automobile manufacturer not only a way to advertise a car but also the beginning of a process to revive the brand itself by linking it to the history and identity of an entire nation, Italy. In this regard it is important to cite the advertising campaign claim that launched the “New Fiat 500”: “La nuova Fiat appartiene a tutti noi” (The new Fiat belongs to all of us). On the one hand, a strong group identity of “we” is created (as in “we the country,” “we” as a nation); on the other hand, Fiat presents itself as the collective patrimony of that “we”. This message is reinforced in the television commercial created by the advertising campaign that presents several scenes from the film *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* and recalls moments of contemporary Italian history, portraying some as positive and others as negative. (The original version of the commercial can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhZqFnR7HhU>).



Fig. 1 – “La nuova Fiat appartiene a tutti noi”

In this way, Fiat redefines its values, linking itself to national identity by an emotional thread, to the “we” that appears on billboards and in commercials. This manoeuvre is unique in itself: historical episodes, social norms and political events of the entire country are highlighted, while values are selected and forged to the brand. This amounts to a very bold and important strategic move, laden with symbolic value (Manzo 2010).

The advertising campaign essentially aims to consecrate the Fiat brand, for which the new 500 becomes the image and symbol. To revive the brand in its entirety, a car is chosen that is already associated to numerous connotations and whose features possess powerful symbolic value: the Fiat 500 stirred the memories of many Italians, from first love and friendships to black-and-white movies. In short, a past full of positive memories is evoked, to which an entire country has a sentimental bond: the years of the economic miracle.

The strategy adopted by the Fiat brand for the U.S. market, by contrast, is quite different. As we have seen, in Italy the Turin automaker evokes Italianness through its use of “we”, proposing a strong sense

of belonging and embarking on the construction of a national identity which is difficult to oppose. In the U.S. the concept of Italianness is also central, yet not with the aim of creating a cohesive identity but rather of treating it ironically: in this case Fiat decides to regard its origins jokingly by reinforcing certain stereotypes that have long been associated with Italians. Italianness is proposed here as a lifestyle: marked expressivity, openness to one's interlocutor, spontaneity and cheerfulness, with body language and sensuality at the core. To these characteristics two other important clichés are then added: elegance and style. The Italian language, in particular its musical quality and the various connotations associated with this, takes on a central role in this dynamic: Italian is spoken in each of the analysed commercials, even if the targeted audience is English-speaking; and in some cases the Italian is not even subtitled.

3. Seduction speaks Italian: the “Fiat 500 Abarth”

The first commercial that we will consider is the one which launched the Fiat 500 Abarth in the U.S. It was introduced for the first time at the Los Angeles Auto Show in 2011.

(The commercial can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gh8OHHE-wYg>).



Fig. 2 - “Seduction”

The title of the commercial is “Seduction”. It enjoyed great success in the U.S., with a million Internet viewings in a single week. It was run during the long evening of the 2012 Super Bowl, which is perhaps the most viewed event on American television. What strikes the viewer immediately (and this will be further analysed below) is indeed the Italian language: even though it was conceived for an Anglophone audience, the only language used in the commercial is Italian, which is not even subtitled. Thus, Fiat decided to run a commercial during one of the most important television events in the U.S. in a language different from the one viewers are used to hearing: this is a strategic decision that an analysis of the commercial cannot treat as a secondary consideration.

3.1 Breakdown of the script and the narrative syntax: desire as the motor of narration

The sixty-second commercial is made up of a total of forty frames, which can be divided into four sequences.

The first sequence, containing thirty frames, opens with a young man who is probably on a break from work. He is holding a typical large cup of coffee as he quickly walks down the sidewalk of an American city, probably New York, more specifically Manhattan. Suddenly the young man slows down and eventually stops, as his attention is captured by something. A change of camera shot shows an alluring woman in a seductive pose as she is adjusting her shoe. When the woman realises that she is being



observed by the young man, she confronts him aggressively: “Che cosa guardi, eh?” (What are you looking at?), she asks him in Italian, turning towards him. “Che cosa guardi?” she repeats and slaps the young man in the face. “Mi stai spogliando con gli occhi” (Stop undressing me with your eyes). At this point the two are directly in front of each other, and the woman observes the young man’s face: this is when she seems to change her demeanour. “Poverino, non puoi farne a meno” (Poor thing, you can’t help it), she tells him. The moment enters a passionate climax, as the woman changes from aggressive to seductive and provocative. The young man seems passive throughout the scene and on the verge of experiencing the height of passion: he closes his eyes to receive her kiss. At that point the camera shot changes, showing the Fiat 500 Abarth in front of the young man, thus revealing the commercial’s playful message: the Italian woman actually represents the car. The link between the two subjects is created by their common external appearance: they both wear the same colours, red and black, and they both bear the image of the scorpion – the symbol of the Fiat 500 Abarth, which appears tattooed on the woman’s neck.

The second sequence is made up of just two frames: it is external to the story and reveals the sender of the script, which turns out to be the Fiat brand. In the second frame the 500 Abarth logo appears. An off-stage voice says, “The Fiat 500 Abarth. You’ll never forget the first time you see one”. The third sequence contains seven frames, once again outside the main narrative. These show details of the interior and exterior of the Fiat 500 Abarth, while the car speeds along the roads, performing several choreographed skids. The fourth and final sequence is made up of a single frame which returns to the principal narration: the enraptured face of the young protagonist of the story as he looks at the contours of the car.

On a narratological level (Greimas, Courtés 1979), the protagonist of the story is the young American with a coffee in his hand. The object of value towards which the protagonist gravitates, and on which the entire narration is focused, is the Italian-speaking woman who initially plays the actant role of the oppositionist, or anti-subject. At first the subject does not appear to have the necessary competence to reach the object of value; in fact, he is rejected. The subject has a strong desire and feels great attraction, but these are not reciprocated. Something, though, changes in the middle of the narration and the protagonist seems at a certain point to reach his goal. At the height of the passionate tension, at the moment the young man prepares to kiss the woman – and therefore to unite with the object of value – a dramatic turn of events occurs: the woman disappears and the Fiat 500 Abarth takes her place. Both leave him under the spell of his strong passion: he has been seduced in the presence of what is the true object of value, the car. No final approbation takes place, as the object of value is not obtained, but only desired. The narration plays precisely on this fact, the strong tension that flows between the subject and the object of value. This tension never subsides: in fact, the desire is not satisfied but is left alive. The protagonist does not attain his object of value but continues to be separated from it and to desire it intensely. It is specifically this desire that is both the motor of the narration and the conclusion of the commercial: the last shot is a close-up of the young man as he contemplates the Fiat 500 Abarth; his face is the plastic representation of the feeling that he is experiencing. This advertisement illustrates some general trends related to the emotional investment of present-day advertising, such as those described by Bianchi (2015):

“[...] il prevalente investimento diaforico dell’attuale pubblicità, che propone un alto grado di intensità di coinvolgimento dei soggetti in gioco, a discapito della strategia “argomentativo-informativa”, tipicamente adiaforica; la prevalenza di passioni del presente [...] e del futuro[...] mentre sono problematiche quelle del passato; un’aspettualità collegata strettamente alla tensività [...]” (2015, pp.142-143).

“[...] the prevailing diaphoric investment in modern advertising, which features intense involvement on the part of the subjects concerned, at the expense of the “argumentative-informative” strategy, which is typically adiaforic; the prevalence of passions relating to the present [...] and to the future[...] while those relating to the past are problematic; aspectuality closely linked to tensivity [...]” (Self-Translation) .



In effect, the “informative-argumentative” strategy is almost absent in this commercial, while there is a strong diaphoric investment, with a predominant passion for the present and a structure for the terminative dimension of passion.

We will not discuss the sexist dimension of this commercial or the coarseness of the age-old association of woman and car. This description of the commercial should suffice to show the decisive role played by the subject’s desire, which is triggered by the object of value and by the passion that it generates in him. The elements of the body and the spoken language have a central place in this dynamic: their integration creates and kindles the element of passion. Through the choice of certain filming techniques, in fact, the construction of the commercial emphasizes these components: central roles are played both by the dialogue (or better, the woman’s one-way dialogue that foregrounds the Italian language) and by the close-up shots, which are continuously used to focus attention on the woman’s body and on her seductive poses. The soundtrack also plays its part, dividing the different narrative phases and further increasing the passionate effects generated by the images and dialogues for which it provides the backdrop.

3.2 The passionate construction of attraction: the body and the Italian language

As we have seen, two main components of the commercial contribute to constructing the allure of the woman: her body and the language she speaks.

The body is an essential element in generating the commercial’s message, as it is both the object of passion and the space on which passions are manifested.

The woman’s body is above all an object of desire. Her initial pose is what triggers the entire narrative. The young man’s body, meanwhile, is taken over by a passion so strong that it paralyses him, leaving him unable to react: the close-up shots of his face show the moment in which this passion is manifested physically, tangibly altering his body; his rapture is evident, bordering on ecstasy. The two figures come into relation with each other and communicate through body language. This communication is guided by the woman, who at first rejects the young man, even slapping him, but who later moves her body differently, with the aim of conquering him. She employs the basic techniques of seduction: she holds him by his tie; she comes up close to his face to speak to him; she whispers into his ear; she strokes his cheek; she places her finger in the foam of his cappuccino and then on his mouth; at the height of the passionate climax, she pulls him towards her by his tie as if to kiss him. The woman’s body, therefore, plays the role of the object of passion: the revealing dress, the poses she makes and the language she speaks, Italian.

During the first forty seconds of the commercial, out of a total of sixty, the only language heard is Italian (without subtitles). The Italian spoken by the woman is a neo-standard variety which does, however, contain instances of colloquial language. But beyond the strictly linguistic level and beyond the meaning of the words spoken by the woman, what is fundamental in creating the sense of the commercial is the musicality of the language, which is variously modified by the woman as she uses it as a weapon to seduce the young man.

In addition, with regard to the dynamics of the filming of the commercial, the soundtrack heard in the background is perfectly integrated into the words spoken in Italian, in terms of rhythm, intonation and intensity. The Italian words and the music seem to form part of the same soundtrack, one accompanying the other in a combination that creates an element of deep passion. The advertisement is clearly based on two Italian language stereotypes: the age-old association of the Italian language and the world of love is well known, as is that of Italian language and musicality. When it comes to musicality, this advertisement puts some phonological characteristics of Italian to use, making it (in a certain sense) a “musical” language. These characteristics, as Palermo (2015) recalls, are:

“la sonorità, frutto della presenza di molte di molte vocali e di un elevato numero di consonanti sonore, la mancanza di vocali indistinte e turbate, le sillabe prevalentemente libere, il principio dell’isocronia sillabica, che consente di soffermarsi nel canto anche sulle sillabe atone, la mancanza di nessi consonantici complessi” (Palermo 2015, p. 267).



“sound, the result of many vowels and a large number of voiced consonants, the absence of indistinct and disrupted vowels, predominantly free syllables, the principle of syllable isochrony, which makes it possible to linger in singing, even on atone syllables, the absence of complex consonant clusters” (Self-translation).

4. The second wave of Italian immigrants is coming: the Fiat 500s



Fig. 3 - “Immigrants”

The second commercial that we will analyse appeared in the U.S. in 2012 with an emblematic title: “*Immigrants*”. Once again, the brand plays ironically with its origins by recalling the wave of Italian immigrants to the U.S. which peaked between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

4.1 Breakdown of the script

This is also a 60-second commercial with four sequences; it has a total of 37 frames. The second-to-last sequence is made up of a single frame which reveals the sender of the message, which is naturally the Fiat brand itself.

The first sequence contains 21 frames showing the different models of the Fiat 500 speeding along the winding roads of the Amalfi coast. The cars also pass through the narrow streets of a town (probably Amalfi), first coming across a wedding and then a pair of cyclists, before driving into the sea, one by one. The first car dives in from a cliff, the second from the beach and the third from a pier; then several others enter the water from a beach and a cliff. In this first sequence, the soundtrack is a pop version of the 1902 song “Torna a Surriento.”

The second sequence, composed of 15 frames, shows the cars re-emerging on the other side of the ocean. The language of the soundtrack changes to a song sung in English. The 500s drive out of the water in New York: they first pass by two fishermen and then speed down the streets of the city. The soundtrack is the song “Sexy People,” whose rhythm evolves into a dance beat, which is only interrupted when a car stops in front of a bar and an off-stage voice says, “The next wave of Italians has come to America and they’ve come to party.”

The third sequence reveals the sender of the commercial, the Fiat brand occupying the centre of the frame, with the 500 logo below. The off-stage voice then says, “The Italian design, Fiat 500.” The last sequence returns to the main story with a single frame showing a crab letting go of the car’s muffler.

On a narratological level, we do not have a complete storyline here, but rather a metaphorical allusion to the voyage undertaken by Italian immigrants to reach the U.S. There are numerous analogies: Italy



is depicted as frozen in time, in a period that could be the early 20th century (we will analyse this point below); the soundtrack, a pop version of “Torna a Surriento,” is a song from the beginning of that century; the Fiat 500s travel by sea; when the first 500 “disembarks” in New York, the first thing we see is the reflected image of the Statue of Liberty on the car’s windshield, precisely the first thing seen by Italian immigrants arriving in New York. Finally, the off-stage voice says, “The next wave of Italians has come to America...”. With reference to Roland Barthes, we can state that this claim has a precise role: to “anchor” the reading of the commercial and to provide the interpretational key of the entire story, which is a metaphor of the “new wave of migration”³.

4.2 Italianness divided in two: from the “postcard” stereotype to the sexy image

In the first part of commercial, Italy is presented as suspended in time, in accordance with a deep-rooted stereotype. The scene opens with a view of Amalfi: the bright colours of the town and sea together with a “wide angle shot” transport the viewer inside a postcard. This opening sequence alternates medium and long camera shots; all the frames are aesthetically perfect, created with great care: the colours, the depiction of the people and the panoramic views. The streets along which the 500s drive are empty, and the only figures they encounter are true clichés: a waiter, then an Italian wedding, cyclists, wooden boats on the beach and on the sea. All the figures are frozen in time and in line with the historical period of the first half of the 20th century.

The commercial thus represents a reassuring exoticism, an image of Italy and Italianness so stereotyped as to be artificial, one which is seconded by the soundtrack, the pop version of the song “Torna a Surriento.” Through the soundtrack, the commercial exploits the extra-textual semiotic legacy which the song brings with it: its popularity and its connection with another cultural entity, in this case Italianness and “Neapolitaness”. Composed in 1902 by Ernesto De Curtis, “Torna a Surriento” is probably one of the most sung and best-known Italian songs in the world. The version played in the commercial is a pop arrangement with a more upbeat rhythm, more suited, therefore, to the commercial and its montage.

The Fiats move through this scenography that we have described as if down a fashion show runway: their design is fundamental. Their form and trajectory come into synergy with the curved architectural contours of the town, the streets and the coastline itself, (in semiotic terms we might speak of an eidetic rhyme). This synergy identifies the automobiles with the style of the town and the landscape, fully entering into the “postcard” representation.

The arrival of the 500s in America is signalled by a change in the soundtrack: the language becomes English and the rhythm of the music takes on a dance beat. It is indeed the soundtrack that introduces us to another time and another place: we are in the New York of today. The lyrics of the song, which keep repeating “sexy people,” and the shots of the curved contours of the Fiats that race through the streets immediately provide us with an interpretive key: presented as the fruit of refined design, the car takes on an enhanced playful and aesthetic value (Floch 1990). And there’s more: the off-stage voice at the end of the second sequence says, “The next wave of Italians has come to America...and they’ve come to party.” We therefore again have Italianness displayed as elegant and stylish, but also as festive and playful.

³ On the concept of anchorage, we recommend Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957.

5. Italian style as an “object of value”⁴



Fig. 4 - “Italian Family”

A complete analysis of this commercial has been published in the journal *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*. Nonetheless, I have decided to briefly return to a small part of the results of that study given their relevance to the broader reflection that is the aim of the present essay.

This commercial was released in the U.S. in 2013 to advertise the Fiat 500L, giving rise to widespread debate: it was in general well received by the press, even if there were criticisms, above all on the part of those who saw it as just another version of a series of stereotypes of Italianness.

(The commercial can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fBFm4OD2W0>).

5.1 Breakdown of the script and the narrative syntax: a journey into Italianness

The commercial begins with a young American couple purchasing a Fiat 500L; upon buying the car, they discover that among its “accessories” is a typical Italian family. The ninety seconds which follow are a journey through amusing stereotypes of Italianness.

From a narratological standpoint (Greimas, Courtés 1979), the story’s protagonists are the young American couple. The object of value towards which the protagonists gravitate is represented by Italian style. This style, a certain way of being and doing, is therefore the object of value that the couple wishes to obtain. In this context, the advertised car, the Fiat 500L, together with the Italian family, represent the aides.

Cultural and linguistic differences render this journey into Italianness a complex process, but thanks to the style of the Fiat 500L and to the Italian family, the American couple manages to complete the act of transformation and to unite with the object of value. In the final internal scene of the narration, the two have been transformed, aesthetically and culturally: they have “Italianised”. Their transformation is definitively sanctioned by the Italian family, who then leave, as their role is no longer necessary. They leave a letter in which the transformation of the protagonists is acknowledged: “All’inizio pensavamo che foste noiosi, ma non lo siete più perciò possiamo andare avanti” (At first, we thought you were boring, but you aren’t anymore, so we can move on).

This is how Fiat opted to advertise its new version of the famous 500, an object that made a decisive contribution to the myth of Italy and Italianness as early as the 1950s. The car is indeed presented as a

⁴ A more complete analysis of this commercial can be found in: Paris, O., 2019, “The Fiat 500L commercial: a journey into Italian style”, in *Semiotica. Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*, n. 229, pp. 237-246.



necessary ingredient in that myth, a way of being which so characterises Italians, at least in the eyes of Americans.

The automobile manufacturer thus makes an important choice in deciding not to focus on the technical qualities of the car, but only on its style and the values which, thanks to its history, it has come to embody. Along the journey into “becoming Italian”, the car, which is the advertised object, contributes to this process, thanks to its aesthetic characteristics and style. In this way, the purchase of the Fiat 500L allows the protagonists to begin their journey. In the narration, the “style” of the car maintains a leading role, while the Italian family makes its contribution by demonstrating the Italian way of being and doing.

5.2 Italianness: language and body

In the commercial two main components contribute to constructing the concept of Italianness on the level of expression: language and body. The variety of language spoken by the family is neo-standard Italian, in which a slight southern intonation is evident. From a lexical point of view, no particular regionalisms or expressions in dialect are heard; rather, the characters use the standard diction of average educated speakers. We do however note a certain linguistic register of colloquial Italian, used to talk about everyday facts concerning the routine of everyday family life. The expressivity and involvement shown by the characters as they speak of these facts reinforces this register, giving the language a particular musicality, which is quite important in the dynamic of the commercial. One might say that the musicality of the Italian language provides the real soundtrack of the advertisement. The choice of language spoken by the Italian family is by no means a secondary one. We know that a particular linguistic cadence charges a message with subtle connotative and ideological meanings. In Hollywood film production, and in the production of mass culture generally, a semi-educated Italian with a strong southern intonation has always been associated with families that emigrated to the U.S. and that were involved with the Mafia. However, Fiat chose to keep its distance from this image.

A marked expressivity of the language, as we previously mentioned, is supported by the role of the body in the advertisement. In Italian this is fundamental and can be seen in particular through gesticulation and physical contact. In this commercial, Italian is used for the first time in the opening sequence, when the salesman takes his leave of the Italian family: “I’m gonna miss you guys, Ciao”. The “ciao” is accompanied by a kiss and an almost satirical movement of the hands. In this way, the American salesman utters an Italian word accompanied by a marked gesture. During the commercial, the Italian family continues using this mechanism, to the point of exasperation.

In the first part, the Italian family and the American couple are at two opposite poles, two cultural and linguistic spheres that do not relate to each other. In this sense, the second sequence is characteristic: sonority, expressivity and gesticulation of the family that speaks Italian versus the composure of the American couple that speaks English. The following sequences represent the gradual process of transformation in which the American couple first learns to gesticulate and later even speak Italian. This transformation begins in the fifth sequence when the American girl joins the “chorus” of the Italian family, imitating them. In the seventh sequence, it’s the American boy’s turn to copy the Italian gesticulation when celebrating a goal during a soccer match playing on the radio. In the eighth sequence, having learned these particular gestures, the American couple begins to use Italian during an argument that reveals that their language skills are still imperfect and influenced by English. In the ninth sequence, the transformation is complete, and the two Americans speak and move like the Italian family: they each hold a cup of espresso, they are well-dressed and they gesticulate and speak like true Italians.

The body is crucial for another reason: the way it’s dressed and taken care of. The transformation of the American couple is also an aesthetic one: between the first and last sequence, the two change their way of dressing, conforming to the style of the Italian family.

As we began to see above, the aesthetic dimension of the car-object also plays a central role. The first sequence of the commercial opens with a shot of the exterior lines of the 500L, which are further



emphasized by a subtle forward movement of the camera, followed by the opening dialogue. The conversation between the American couple and the salesman introduces the theme of the Fiat 500L's "stylishness": "How are we feeling?" asks the salesman. "Well, it would certainly be the most stylish car we ever had," the American girl answers. This beginning plays an important role in the overall dynamic of the commercial because it tells the viewer what to look for, namely, the beauty and style of the Fiat 500. Eight of the ten sequences which make up the story begin, as we have seen, with a take of the exterior lines of the Fiat 500L. The contours of the car are the characteristics of the advertised object which the commercial brings to the foreground, in part because they remind us of the original 500. This similarity, this connection with the past, imbues the car's aesthetic with crucial symbolic value: for over half a century, the original 500 embodied the myth of Italy and Italianness.

6. Irony as the interpretive key of the FIAT 500 advertising campaign in the U.S.

As we have seen in the analyses of these three commercials, the aim of the campaign is not simply to advertise the car-object: contrary to what usually happens in automobile advertising. The Fiat 500 is not lauded for the power of its engine, its road traction, its fuel efficiency or its comfortable interior. The advertising campaign foregrounds the aesthetic contours of the car, which have an important connotative value (in recalling the original 500 and what it represented), and at the same time the symbolic wealth of the Fiat brand. As we have noted, we are presented with an Italianness as a certain "way of being": a set of qualities related to the subjects represented in these texts. First of all, a "social" way of living: openness towards the interlocutor, the central role of the body and likeability, but also style and elegance. In the analysed cases we find ourselves in front of "mythological" advertising texts, where the characteristics of the advertised product fade into the background and a "utopian/ludic" image predominates (Floch 1990): both the product and the brand are invested in values linked to Italianness. These are existential/self-defining values, that although impractical, correspond to the fundamental concerns of being (Floch 1990): in the cases studied here, these values concern identity – the way of being Italian.

Nonetheless, in this sense a first reading could lead us to believe that the cultural apparatus used, and the messages transmitted seem disproportionate and exaggerated: we in fact find ourselves up against true stereotypes that could appear annoying and even nauseating. This effect is partially mitigated, however, by a mode of presentation that points to a parodistic and playful reading of the messages of advertising: the "exaggeration" and clear hyperbole triggers in us the mechanism of irony. In short, Fiat makes fun of its Italian origins and through irony seeks to create an effect of complicity with its audience.

In this regard the words of Denis Bertrand are pertinent: he describes three characteristics of irony, one of which is defined as a "mode of conciliating different subjectivities": this type of irony brings the receiver into play who thanks to their capacity for interpretation participates in producing the message:

"Più che ogni altra forma di discorso, l'ironia si rivolge al destinatario, gli domanda di operare una complessa costruzione interpretativa e ciò in base ad una confidenza postulata [...]. La complicità installa quindi sulla base di un <<tacito accordo>> [...] la solidarietà implicita dei soggetti" (Bertrand 1993, p.136).

(More than any other form of discourse, irony addresses the recipient, who is called on to operate a complex interpretative construction, which is based on an assumed familiarity [...]. In this way, on the basis of an <<unspoken agreement>>, complicity installs [...] implied solidarity between the subjects). (Self-translation)



The subjects, in this case, include not only the sender but also the receiver of the message. Indeed, through this advertising campaign the brand is merely promoting contact between itself and the audience: brand and spectator become true “accomplices”.



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