

INVESTIGACIÓN/RESEARCH

Recibido: 23/11/2014

---Aceptado: 27/02/2015

---Publicado: 15/03/2015

ADVERTISING AND CONSUMPTION IN *THEY LIVE*. A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON AD IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a cultural study on the effect of the ideology of advertising and consumption in contemporary society through the film *They Live*. The analyzed audiovisual piece shows that we live in societies determined by a system of growing production and consumption in which advertising, as a tool of the institutions, seduces citizens with the aim of maintaining the status quo. A research method based on analysis of audiovisual narrative is used, through an examination of the components of the story. Through a fictional story, the film develops a plausible description of how the systematic ideology, amplified by advertising, creates a hidden pattern of thought and social action at the service of companies and institutions. The main character of the film, John Nada, announces that dissent involves a violent and painful path that is necessary to achieve freedom.

KEY WORDS

Advertising - Consumption - Ideology - They live - Dissent - Freedom

PUBLICIDAD Y CONSUMO EN *THEY LIVE*. ANÁLISI CRÍTICO SOBRE LA IDEOLOGÍA PUBLICITARIA

RESUMEN

El trabajo que se presenta plantea un estudio cultural acerca del efecto de la ideología de la publicidad y del consumo en las sociedad contemporáneas a través de la película *They Live* (Están vivos). La pieza audiovisual tratada pone de

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manifiesto que vivimos en sociedades determinadas por un sistema de producción y consumo crecientes en las que la publicidad, como herramienta de las instituciones, seduce a los ciudadanos con el objetivo de mantener el *statu quo*. Se utiliza un método de investigación fundamentado en el análisis del relato audiovisual, por medio de un minucioso examen de los componentes de la narración. A través de una historia de ficción, la película desarrolla una descripción verosímil sobre cómo la ideología sistemática, amplificada por la publicidad, configura una pauta velada de pensamiento y de acción social al servicio de empresas e instituciones. El protagonista de la película, John Nada, mostrará que la disidencia implica un violento y doloroso camino necesario para conseguir la libertad.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Publicidad - Consumo - Ideología - They live - Disidencia - Libertad

1. INTRODUCTION

Current societies are determined by a socio-economic system of growing production and consumption. Almost no one doubts that consumerism is a major social practice. Individuals wish objects and services that producers of the system put into circulation. These desires can become needs when they are felt as lacks that must be met to achieve a high degree of comfort. In this context, advertising has been instituted as a tool for companies and organizations, either public or private. As already asserted by many authors (Williamson, 1978; Ibáñez, 1989; Scott, 1994; Hirschman, 2003; San Nicolas, 2006; Hellin, 2007; Eguizábal, 2009; Group Marcuse, 2009), advertising is a very powerful communication device by which producer groups consolidate their hegemonic positions and perpetuate the operation of the gear.

We speak in this advertising environment in a broad sense. A sense of advertising that accepts as such any form of mass persuasive communication at the service of a production and consumption device that does not accept a pause in its growth. In many cases, the stories of advertising can be confused with propaganda arguments, which tend to relate more to political or religious activities. Anyway, Ibanez (1989) already explained in the late last century that advertising and its speech act as religion and permeate individuals as a prevailing pattern of thought and action. Similarly, Williamson (1978) argued that advertising has a special institutional competence to create a particular meaning at the service of the system. Humans tend to create a vision of the world around them strongly influenced by the stories developed by advertising. And, in this context, the distinction between the imaginary and the real is not relevant because, through advertising, any argument from the system is instituted as real. However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the process

by which advertising creates patterns of thought and behavior for growing consumption and production is not perceived by most people.

The society in which we live is based on economic dominance over other social aspects. This economy is based on an idea that, in the terms in which it is used, comes from the eighteenth century: the idea of competition, well studied by Adam Smith and later developed by David Ricardo and others. It is assumed that there is perfect competition, although some authors prefer to speak of an economy that tends or aims to achieve perfect competition. Other authors prefer to speak of a free market economy, although the argument telling us that we currently move in an economy of capital accumulation is considered much more successful. In this context, advertising acts as an indispensable tool and as an economic engine of the system. According to Arens, Weigold and Arens (2008: 31-32), "individuals and organizations tend to act on their personal interests [...]. They always want more for less." According to other authors, this idea is based on the notion of the nature of economic competition. Therefore, it is, at best, philosophically debatable, since in the history of mankind there have been other economic organizations and even market organizations that have not resorted to the ideas of competition and accumulation of capital for their operation; these other economic forms have also been "natural" (Polanyi, 2014). But what is the role of advertising in this context? In congested economies like ours, where there are many vendors, millions of buyers and state institutions have reduced their economic role, advertising serves to tip the balance towards a few. That is, advertising helps companies and organizations to be differentiated (symbolically, imaginatively) and to attract potential consumers. Everything revolves around the idea of consumption (and production, a process that is inherent). Companies and institutions need to get into the heads of people and have a place in their memory, so that these individuals remember the brand, the product or the service and buy it, or at least wish it in an imperious manner.

In this sense, *They Live* (1988), directed by John Carpenter, is a film describing the way in which contemporary societies have abandoned criticism of the system of growing production and consumption and have joined its advertising practices, as it has been proposed. An example of hypercinema "bearing a marked tendency to reflect on itself, on the world, on the individual" (Lipovetski and Serroy, 2009: 213). Although it has been almost thirty years after the premiere of the film, *They Live* develops a valid description of modern society, as proposed by Zizek (2012). Next is a detailed analysis of the film, which provides an interesting description of the society of the time, according to its director and screenwriter, John Carpenter.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is the analysis of the advertising and consumption society in which we currently move, which is represented in the film *They Live* (1988). The secondary objectives of this piece of research are:

- The study of the relationship between the concept of ideology and concepts of advertising and consumption.
- Analysis of the components of audiovisual narrative and its relationship to current reality: perspective of the characters, created environments, narrative action and tone of the story.
- The cultural study of the modes of social dissent or the critical human action with the prevailing system of growing production and consumption, represented by John Nada, the protagonist of the film.

3. METHOD OF ANALYSIS

This piece of research develops a comprehensive analysis of the audiovisual narration of the film *They Live*, 1988. The method of analysis draws on a thorough qualitative examination of the audiovisual narrative. We have studied the narrative parameters set up in the film, with the aim of trying to interpret the cultural advertising perspective displayed in the film. The central argument of the film tells us about the relationship between advertising and consumption in contemporary societies; and it goes to a representation of reality based, in turn, on previous film products. It is therefore important to pay attention to the story, the plots and the relationships established between the characters, with special attention to the main character, John Nada. The central concept of the film, as shows Zizek (2012), is the ideology and its relationship with advertising and consumption. Therefore, there must be a critical analysis of the story to help us understand the various connections generated among the components of the narrative (Thompson, 1988: 359-383).

So, to launch the qualitative study of audiovisual narrative, we have analyzed the following parameters or narrative components of *They Live*:

- Construction of the characters:
 - Definition of characters: it mainly serves the characterization of the characters, with special attention to the main character, John Nada, who conveys the central plot. Therefore, we analyze mainly his personality and character, his physical presence, the way he appears on the scene and the action he performs.
 - Relationships among characters: it is the relationships that are created among the different main characters. As mentioned, being a movie in which the main argument always travels with the protagonist, the explicit analysis of

the main character and his relationship with the secondary characters is essential to draw conclusions around the critique of the ideology of advertising and consumption in contemporary societies

- Components of the story:

- View of the world of the protagonist: the vision of the protagonist emerges from the analysis of his relationship with the environment and with other characters. The worldview of the protagonist is central to understanding the plot of the film history and to understand the sociocultural sense that the directors aims to infuse.
- Environments: we preferably refer to the chronotope, as an imaginary construct in which the ideas of space and time converge (García-López and Hellin, 2014: 759-769).
- Structure of the action: this category mainly analyzes how the above categories of storytelling operate and relate and how time and space are managed within the story. Given the nature of the film, we especially analyze the dystopian character of the story, because what is shown is an undesirable fictitious society, although the intention is to bring the story to the description of contemporary reality as much as possible.
- Speech tone: the tone is the character of the speech, the dramatic nuance that will help to build the sociocultural perspective of the film; the tone gives us information on the intellectual, sociopolitical, ethical and moral of the story.

All components of the narrative we analyzed, based on the developed description of each one, provide valuable information about how characters relate, about the influence of the context or environment in which they relate and the effects of their behavior. As you can see, at all times there is a critical analysis of the narrative in the sense of Thompson (1988) and Bordwell (1995), a reflection on the ideological potential of advertising and consumption in societies grounded in increasing production and consumption.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

They Live, 1988, is considered an independent or author film, written and directed by John Carpenter and produced by Larry J. Franco. Notably, the curiosity that Carpenter used a pseudonym, Frank Armitage, for the role of screenwriter. From the point of view of the major Hollywood film productions, *They Live* was a resounding failure, since the initial box office receipts were very low during the eight weeks the movie was played. When released in VHS format, for domestic use, the revenue was

higher and somehow balanced the initial expenses. The film had a nomination for awards considered to be minor within the cinematic spectrum; among them, it is worth noting its nomination for best film for Fantasporto International Fantasy Film Award and two nominations to the Saturn Awards, in the categories of best music and best science fiction film. Despite all this, *They Live* currently is well assessed within the scope of the critics of worship.

The film falls into the thriller and science fiction genres (as already told, the dystopian nature of the story can be perceived in an explicit way). This is a story based on a short story by Ray Nelson called *Eight O'clock in the Morning* (1963) and on the cartoon *Nada* (1986), an adaptation of the previous short story that can be seen at number 6 in the series of the comic *Alien Encounters*. The story of the film focuses on John Nada, its protagonist, played by Roddy Piper. Striking is the surname of the main character, Nada (the nickname is used in Spanish in the original version, perhaps to somehow cover up the explicit meaning), which refers to the lack of critical criterion in most contemporary citizens. The whole argument focuses on the experiences of John Nada, a person who has no job, no home to live, an outcast of the postmodern world. The plot begins when Nada finds a job as a mason in the western United States, in Los Angeles.

The dramatic core is triggered when John Nada puts on pair of glasses that he found in an abandoned box. Soon he realizes that these glasses discover the ideological veil that covers the thinking of people, how to see the world. The vision provided by the glasses reveals the intention of the hegemonic powers of society: the chrematistic interest. And with them, John Nada realizes that those who pull the strings of the economy and politics are actually aliens. Nothing stands as a sociocultural dissident activist. Nada's worldview is altered by the glasses and he can no longer believe in the status quo. The protagonist feels the need to open the eyes of other citizens, who are dazzled by the advertising messages that flood the city. In fact, any cultural manifestation contains a hidden advertising message related to increasing production and consumption. The aliens aspire to become a superior species on Earth and, for this reason, they need to tame humans, they need to generate an extreme individualism which produces flat minds, slave brains. However, you can note the satiric tone of the film, trying to make a description of postmodern societies, rooted in individualism. This is a film that talks about advertising as a systematic tool for the promotion of increased consumption, which is based, in turn, on the exponential production within a neoliberal socioeconomic gear.

4.1 John Nada, a dissident with glasses

The formation of the characters is simple from the perspective of the construction of the audiovisual narrative. However, the main characters reveal their personality from

the beginning; the viewer must not strive to characterize any character. It can be argued that this film simplifies the eternal debate between the importance of the plot and characters. This is so because the plot is set in the very construction of the main character. As McKee (2002: 131) explains, "We cannot assess what is more important, if the structure or the characters, because the structure is the characters and the characters are the structure".

As explained, John Nada is the protagonist of the film, who conveys the whole argument. The protagonist is the bearer of the anti-capitalist sense of the plot. Nada's character is forged in his anti-advertising activism through the glasses, which make him reveal the ideological pattern, a brand that is inherent in every story of advertising and consumption. The main character is a real hobo, a loser who has neither home nor a job. In finding the glasses and realizing about the world behind the ideological curtain of any conduct proper to the prevailing economic system, John Nada attempts to save humanity. We are facing a kind of forging of the hero, as Sánchez-Escalonilla (2009: 136) explains. We can assure that John Nada is a star in the making, following the considerations of Truby (2009: 79), to whom the protagonist "is the person who is the central problem and that drives the action in an attempt to solve the problem". And all this is done by Nada with obstacles proper to his attempt to redeem his fellow citizens, with the weaknesses and needs created by the system itself, by the corrupt networks of consumerist machinery shown in the narrative.

At the beginning, the protagonist is supported by his friend Frank Armitage, played by Keith David, a simple guy who helps him find shelter. Everything goes smoothly until Nada finds the glasses, which are the trigger for the plot. The glasses allow him to see a world in black and white, more real than the one in which he had lived so far, despite the adversities he had endured in his life. The glasses are the tool allowing criticism, the glasses give rise to decoding a world driven by powerful beings that use the media and advertising to numb the masses. When Nada starts acting against the system, all the characters around him reject his conduct in defense of an alleged welfare state they crave for, since they not even live in real conditions of happiness.

The relationship between John Nada and Frank Armitage, his friend, is essential to understand the outcome of the plot. In one sequence, Nada tries to explain to Armitage what happens with the glasses. However, Armitage does not believe him. Still, Nada, who has become a fugitive from society, tries to forcefully put the glasses on his friend. At that point begins one of the most important scenes of fighting in film history, as Žižek (2012) argues; a scene that lasts eight minutes and which some authors have compared to other violent scenes like the one starring John Wayne and Victor McLaglen in *The Quiet*

Man (Swires, 1988). After the fight, Nada gets succeeds in putting the glasses on Armitage, who understands everything that Nada had explained about the advertising essence of the sociocultural system. From that moment on, both of them

will undertake activism against the manipulation of the system. But they will not have it easy, because they are persecuted by the defenders of the aliens, the guarantors of capitalism.

Nada and Armitage soon realize that aliens seek to control the Earth to deplete their resources, causing unavoidable global warming. By the time they destroy the Earth, the aliens will undertake another trip to control other habitable planets. This revelation that occurs through Nada and Armitage calls attention because it is an early realization of what would happen later, during the first two decades of the twenty-first century: overpopulation, global warming, depletion of resources, generation of inequalities. One can argue that Nada and Armitage are announcing the situation we live in today; ie, an ecological crisis, growing planetary social inequality and the challenges posed by technoscience (Riechmann, 2014).

4.2 *They Live* as a critique of the consumer and advertising system

The components of the narration in *They Live* show that the media and advertising tools of our capitalist system act as guaranteeing languages of what should be. Both the media and advertising are persuasive structures that appeal to citizens and determine their thoughts and behavior; it can be said that they function as vehicles transmitting the beliefs of the contemporary sociocultural system (Ewen and Ewen, 1982). It is a kind of advertising rhetoric that permeates any sociocultural environment and is used by states and by powerful companies to anchor social behavior in unstoppable consumption. To do this, they use the strategy of seduction, of attainable happiness, although the actual living conditions of most humans are far from the environments and characters that are advertised. We can make a parallel between what the movie argues and what Weil explained about the advertising grounds of countries supported by capitalism: "the state is a civil partner and gets down its pedestal: it renounces its being only normative and imposing behaviors in order to invite attitudes or behaviors "(Weil, 1992: 231).

Thus, both the worldview of the protagonist and the environment and the structure of the narrative action tell us that the media and advertising reaffirm the mode of belonging to a system of growing production and consumption that supposedly provides the shortest road to absolute happiness. The dominant ideology, which is controlled in the story by the aliens, articulates all the media messages of the described society. Any object contains intrinsic advertising. Commercials are shown as they are: advertising. But beyond their individual message (with such a car you will feel safer, making such a trip you can feel happier), any advertising story hides short, easy to understand messages hidden by other messages distracting one's attention; and they all are messages that tell people what they have to buy more and more, to spend money, since that practice is what will make them feel good. In any case, the ideological device always remains hidden. Without the glasses, feedback of

the system is ensured, there is no alternative, no other possible system that favors harmonious coexistence. The constant reiteration of subliminal messages, which are alerts on how people have to behave naturally, enables individuals to gain a worldview that acts as a barrier to change the sociocultural model.

The satirical tone is constant throughout the film, which tells us of an inescapable criticism of the system by Carpenter, its director and screenwriter. We cannot ignore the ill feeling of Carpenter to the main actors of the production and consumption system proper to the emerging extreme capitalism in which United States used to live in the eighties, a system that will be assumed as normal in subsequent years (Sampons, 2011: 61). However, the satirical tone implies a ferocious criticism to any commercial product. In fact, *They Live* was made on a low budget, especially compared with the big Hollywood productions. So the film shows how individuals today are the target for the dominant strata, who, in turn, represent the values of exacerbated capitalism. These actors guaranteeing the system strive to generate meanings that stick to the products, the services and even the individuals themselves. Alien messages, which are messages of the ruling class, become natural laws, through the mechanism of ideology. It is a kind of "commodity fetishism", as explained by Marx (2010: 43-102), an ideological product that enables human relations to behave as relations among things, as constant exchanges carried out by money, that great fetish.

All movements of humans are commercial behaviors that develop naturally, almost through social inertia, which makes them become culture. And everything is produced by the hegemonic, neoliberal and capitalist ideology. So, as you can see, the possible criticism of individuals is canceled by the system itself, which ensures that consumerism and therefore the exponential production of goods and services are assumed to be the natural way of life. And in this framework, state and corporate powers are perceived as entities that guarantee the alleged common good. Because the hierarchy of the different social strata, although presented as a reality, is also accepted as natural. *They Live* shows that effective social differences are covered with advertising distracting messages and media. In the best case, such discrimination is accepted as necessary for proper social functioning. So that advertising and the consumer system it underlies give rise to more docile and malleable groups of people with homogeneous thoughts and behaviors. Actually, the film is constantly talking about the concept of society as audience-mass, a sociocultural structure with greater load of standardization and more homogeneous than what the concept of class proposes.

The aliens, who accumulate most capital, reaffirm the idea that there are no social classes anymore, since the functioning of society is based on the idea of freedom. But this peculiar idea of freedom only lets humans decide from a few choices that always fit in the system of rising production and consumption. Again, the best tool for the dissemination of these ideas is advertising; we cannot forget that, in the film, any media discourse is necessarily advertising. In this environment, the concepts of democracy and equality are assumed just like that, without any critical thinking to define these concepts.

As already explained, the tool to perpetuate the system is advertising. However, the ideology is the ammunition loading that gun, which aims to subdue the weak individuals. In this case, weakness is a feature found in any human, because everyone is reduced to a puppet by the advertising action of a ruling class, this cohesive set of aliens who have a hegemonic position within the sociocultural gear. As Marcuse explains, "free choice of masters abolishes neither masters nor slaves" (1985: 37). And ideology, as the backbone of the system, is used to produce social cohesion. The protagonist, John Nada, and then his friend Frank Armitage will live this in their own flesh, they will see how the other humans defend the status quo engendered by capitalist aliens.

The glasses are the critical element, the medium through which the protagonists are able to notice the mistake in which they were immersed. The sense of social cohesion is another tall tale of the system created by the aliens who have allegedly been freely elected by the majority. Following the contributions of Marcuse, "spontaneous reproduction, by individuals, of superimposed needs does not establish autonomy; it only proves the effectiveness of controls"(1985: 38). So all the messages that start from the ruling class have to get dressed as natural reality. This is the necessary condition of any hegemonic communication, which is always advertising within the plot. As Zizek tells us (2012), the ideology is not imposed on us simply, the ideology is our spontaneous relationship with the social environment and how we perceive each meaning. To some extent, most individuals enjoy their ideology, because going out of it causes pain. Efforts should be made to overcome the dominant ideology. "This is a paradox that we have to accept. The extreme violence of liberation. If you rely just on your spontaneous sense of wellbeing, you will never be free. Freedom hurts" (Zizek, 2012).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The film *They Live* is a critique of contemporary society, underpinned by an economic culture of growing production and consumption. The homogenized individuals experience homogenized lives due to the effect of the advertising messages launched by the aliens who have colonized the Earth to exhaust it. In this environment, the aliens represent the ruling classes of our world; groups of powerful people who hold important positions within the largest private companies and public agencies. For these hegemonic groups, their main tool to lull the population is advertising, which even permeates any message from the media, including the news. However, any advertising account uses the ideological process of concealment.

John Carpenter develops an acidic critique of consumerist and individualistic society. He shows the daily miseries and the inequalities proper to the so-called affluent societies. John Nada represents the people who suffer the current endemic problems: unemployment, poverty, difficult access to housing. The glasses, which help to unmask the aliens and to clearly perceive what their intentions are, are the element that provides the critical sense. At the time Nada wears the glasses, which represent critical thinking and reflective capacity, he will become a sociocultural dissident. Putting on the glasses entails unclogging the dictatorship of our current democracies, according to Carpenter. Freedom is an apparent fact covered by an invisible order.

Social groups accumulating most of the capital, who actually are a minority, use advertising to create consensus among the majority of citizens. The hegemonic groups use advertising messages to create a sense of social cohesion. Through persuasive messages of consumption, the powerful represented by the aliens impose their worldview and force, in a way, to follow a particular culture; ie the hegemonic groups use advertising messages to provoke homogeneous thoughts and behaviors around the idea of exacerbated consumption, which implies an increasing production capable of causing the destruction of the planet.

However, John Nada is not alone, as shown in the film. The protagonist will meet more hidden dissident people during the development of the plot, subjects who have discovered the trick of the glasses, as happens to his friend Frank Armitage. Although the opponents are a minority, they are all characterized by fierce activism against the ruling classes. This roughly highlights that currently there are two minor and one major stratum. The two minor strata are the dominant and the critical outcasts. The major stratum is made up of the majority of citizens, whose thinking and behavior are screened by the ideological action; those individuals seduced by advertising dreams of wealth, capital accumulation and individualism. That audience-mass has not yet perceived what lies behind the actions of this consumerist system in which they live, they have not yet put on the glasses. Still, Carpenter tries to communicate that there is a possibility that subordinate social and cultural movements able to act against the totalitarian and anti-ecological practices of the capitalist world arise.

6.

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