

Communication and public space in Chile. An approach to visuals as ideological reference in the 70s¹

Comunicación y espacio público en Chile. Una aproximación a la gráfica como referente ideológico en los años 70

Comunicação e espaço público no Chile. Uma aproximação à gráfica como referente ideológico nos anos 70

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to reflect on the development of graphic communication and its relationship with the changes that Chilean society experienced in the 1970s. We focus our analysis on two types of visual communication media of great impact and prominence during that decade: the public space poster for the period between 1970 and 1973, and the print media advertisement in the press for 1975-1980. The qualitative study of the visuals revealed certain keys that show the tensions that the Chilean society experienced during that period and the role that communication played in the promotion of two economic development and modernization models for the country. In this regard, both visual elements can be understood as a product of a particular time that conditions them and as of stories that validate them and give them meaning.

Keywords: visual; communication; advertising; consumption.

RESUMEN

Este artículo busca reflexionar sobre el desarrollo de la comunicación gráfica y su relación con los cambios que experimentó la sociedad chilena entre los años 1970 y 1980. Para esto, se analizan dos soportes de comunicación gráfica de gran impacto y protagonismo durante esa década: el afiche de vía pública para el periodo comprendido entre los años 1970 y 1973, y el aviso publicitario publicado en prensa para el periodo 1975-1980. A partir del análisis de las piezas gráficas, realizado desde un enfoque cualitativo, se identifican algunas claves que muestran las tensiones que experimentó la sociedad chilena durante esa década y el rol de la comunicación en la promoción de dos modelos de desarrollo y modernización para el país. En este sentido, ambas manifestaciones se explican como parte de una época particular que las condiciona y de relatos que las validan y les dan sentido.

Palabras clave: gráfica; comunicación; publicidad; consumo.

RESUMO

Este artigo busca refletir sobre o desenvolvimento da comunicação gráfica e sua relação com as mudanças que ocorreram na sociedade chilena entre os anos 1970 e 1980. Para isto, se analisam duas ferramentas de comunicação gráfica de grande impacto e protagonismo durante essa década: o cartaz na via pública para o período abarcado entre os anos 1970 e 1973, e o anúncio publicitário publicado em imprensa para o período de 1975-1980. Após da análise das peças gráficas, feita com um enfoque qualitativo, foram identificadas algumas chaves que mostram as tensões que experimentou a sociedade chilena durante essa época e o rol da comunicação na promoção de dois modelos de desenvolvimento e modernização para o país. Neste sentido, ambas manifestações se explicam como parte de uma época particular que as condiciona e de relatos que as validam e fazem sentido.

Palavras-chave: gráfica; comunicação; publicidade; consumo.

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INTRODUCTION

In the catalog of the exhibition *Art i Poder. L'Europa dels dictadors, 1930-1945* (Art and Power. Europe under the dictators. 1930-1945), Josep Ramoneda (1996) argued that for Walter Benjamin fascism sought the “aestheticization of politics to better captivate the masses”, to which communism “responded with the politicization of art” (p. 8). Both perspectives account for the relevance that the relationship between art, politics and communication acquired during the first half of the 20th century. In the case of Chile, this relevance manifests with special strength from the 60s and becomes central during the government of the Unidad Popular, between 1970 and 1973. In this regard, the anecdote described by Chilean painter Roberto Matta during his visit to Salvador Allende on the day he assumed as President of Chile is exemplifying. He remembers that he arrived with a gift box for the new president, who asked him to sign it on his desk. He did so, and Allende told him: “This is the first thing that has been signed on this desk since I am President” (Carrasco, 1987, p. 203). This event, which impressed Matta, exemplifies the importance that art acquired and its relationship with politics since the beginning of the government of the Unidad Popular. This prominence is also reflected in President Allende’s letter *A los artistas del mundo* (To the artists of the world), on the occasion of the works donated for the future Museo de la Solidaridad, in which he describes this initiative with these words: “... Exceptional event, which inaugurates an unprecedented relationship between the creators of the artistic work and the public”, by approaching art to “the popular masses” (MSSA, 2016, pp. 108-109).

This role of visual arts in the political field had a profound impact on the development of graphic communication, which came to be understood as a cultural device at the service of the profound transformations that the country was experiencing and in which the poster was a mass media of great communicational, cultural and political prominence. However, after the 1973 coup d’état, this prominence was significantly reduced as a result of the new political and economic model implemented by the dictatorship. Nevertheless, the graphic continued to exert a strong influence on the sociocultural level through advertising, especially in the case of the advertisement, which had an explosive development from 1975 as a communication support in the service of the installation of consumer logics typical of a market economy². In this regard, both the poster and the advertisement can be considered as

an expression of the great tensions that Chilean society experienced in the 1970s, i.e., as cultural artifacts at the service of two country projects –albeit antagonistic– that sought to lay the material and symbolic bases for Chile’s transition to modernity.

Based on the above, through this article we present the results of a research whose objective is to identify the main symbolic references present in the 70’s graphics and their relationship with the context in which it developed. A reflection of this nature, developed from a qualitative perspective, provides new background for the understanding of a momentous era in the Chilean history.

STATE OF THE ART

GRAPHICS, IDEOLOGY AND CULTURAL FIELD IN CHILE BETWEEN 1970 AND 1980

The development of graphics, as of any aesthetic-communicational manifestation, cannot be understood if it is not as part of a greater political, social and cultural context; i.e., if it is not dimensioned within the framework of a country-project that validates it and gives it meaning as a socio-cultural experience (Vergara & Garrido, 2011; Vergara, Garrido, & Undurraga, 2014).

In the period corresponding to the government of the Unidad Popular (1970-1973), following what was proposed by Catalán (1988), culture was conceived, at least implicitly, as an “ideological principle of revolutionary identity”, which explains its prominence through different artistic-partisan manifestations, in which the common element of the discourse was the instrumental conception of culture, understood as a “tool for the transformation of consciences in the context of class conflict”, oriented towards the “production of political and social identities functional to the revolutionary process and to the consolidation of a socialist society” (pp. 10-15). This sought to extend political-ideological action across the cultural field to broad sectors of society, historically marginalized from political processes. This explains why the idea of culture was subordinated to the political, a position corroborated in the Unidad Popular Basic Program of Government (1970), in which an explicit concern for culture is manifested through the creation of the National Institute of Art and Culture –which would not come to fruition– and that called to shape a new culture “oriented to consider human work as the highest value, to express the will of affirmation and national independence and to shape a critical vision of reality” (Catalán, pp. 27-28).

In this context, the media were considered fundamental for the formation of the new culture; thus, it was proposed to give them an educational orientation, beyond a commercial nature. One expression of this was the development of an entire cultural industry associated with the political project, such as the New Chilean Song, which although is prior to the government of the Unidad Popular and did not respond to an explicit governmental organization, developed an artistic proposal closely linked to the political process through musical ensembles such as Intillimani, Quilapayún, and singer-songwriter Víctor Jara (Subercaseaux, 2011). It is interesting to note that to this musical and militant initiative was added a graphic proposal created especially for it, in which a whole visual tradition related to the popular world was revindicated.

This way of understanding cultural manifestations, as a constitutive part of the political processes and the development of support and accompanying communicational supports, ended with the coup d'état of September 11, 1973. This fact, obviously, also meant for Catalán (1988) the end of a specific way of understanding culture, and the beginning of profound changes structured around a foundational, nationalist, unitary and homogeneous conception of culture at the service of the dictatorship's official discourse. However, for the same author, this cultural refoundation soon came into contradiction with the implementation of a free market economic policy and with the society project promoted by neo-liberal-oriented economists –the Chicago Boys–, who promoted a type of cultural industry characterized by self-financing and economic rationality.

In addition to the above, it should be considered that, as a result of this economic opening that began in 1975, Chile experienced in a very short period the entry of a large number of consumer goods along with new lifestyles promoted through advertising, which generated new segmentation criteria and had a significant sociocultural impact on the population (Fontaine, 2002). This commercial opening, along with the liberalization experienced by the media industry and the consequent explosive growth of the advertising industry, laid the foundations for an accelerated process of transformations that placed consumption at the center of the social life of Chileans in the next decades (Tironi, 1998, 1999; Moulian, 1997, 1998).

To these structural transformations, others of a sociocultural nature should be added. As Subercaseaux

(2011, p. 253) states, social imaginaries, both in their revolutionary and reformist aspects, that had been developed in Chile since the profound reforms initiated in 1964 (such as the Agrarian and University Reform), were strongly impacted by the coup d'état and the subsequent dictatorship. It was not just a political regime that ended in 1973; it was a whole project of ideas and desires that disappeared, which for that author was also influenced by the disappointment of real socialisms and their gradual disarticulation. All these elements created a favorable climate for the implementation of a new belief and value system around consumption as a symbolic reference of the new capitalist modernization model.

IMAGES, COMMUNICATION AND MODERN PUBLIC SPACE

When analyzing the *poster*, Susan Sontag (2001, p. 246) states that this, unlike the simple public information of antiquity, presupposes the modern concept of the public. Indeed, if the public information was only to inform, the poster, both in its advertising and propaganda dimension, aims to seduce, sell, convince and attract. For Sontag, the poster, as an integral element of modern public space, entails –in turn– the creation of an urban environment understood as a terrain of aestheticized signs.

Another modern dimension that the poster and its materiality acquire is given by its low-cost reproductive logic, aimed at a mass audience and, consequently, at influencing the configuration of public space. These characteristics, along with technological dependence, make the poster an exclusively modern aesthetic and communicational phenomenon. This logic described by Sontag responds to the attributes of modernity that, from a sociological perspective, Thompson (1998) links to the living conditions of modernity and the configuration of modern public space. In the case of Latin America, authors such as Ortiz (1997) and Martín Barbero (1994, 1996) have intimately linked the modernization processes with the development of communications. This association has led to consider the media as great referents that, along with deterritorializing and decentralizing symbolic consumption, are vehicles for modernity, making them central devices for Latin American society models, by promoting new forms of social interaction. This concept of modernity refers to the generation of a project expressed through media and communicational devices that have the function of connecting daily and subjective experiences with a greater account of society,

which encompasses and gives meaning to individual experiences.

From this perspective, both the poster and the advertisement constituted communication mediums at the service of modernizing political projects, which, in turn, were tributaries of different aesthetic traditions and influences, both local and international. Indeed, and as in Europe, where the poster incorporated elements of the aesthetic avant-gardes such as cubism and abstraction, in Chile this period included other referents that influenced its development. As designer Waldo González has pointed out, his work is influenced by the tradition of Mexican muralism, the work of Chilean engravers such as Pedro Lobos and Santos Chávez and the Cuban graphic developed after the revolution, among other aesthetic references (Castillo, 2010). In the Cuban case, this influence was the consequence of the development of an aesthetic of its own that became known worldwide, in which its graphic language was an ideological reaction to the American mass culture³. However, for Vico (2016), in the case of the poster in Chile there were other influences during the 1970-1973 period, as was the case with Pop Art, Psychedelia and the International Typographic Style.

In the case of the Chilean advertising graphic, it can be said that it is a depository of the influence exerted by transnational advertising agencies, which had a great expansion internationally during the post-war period, starting in 1945. In Latin America, this expansion, understood by several authors as part of the so-called Cultural Imperialism (Schiller, 1969; Janus & Roncagliolo, 1978; Murciano, 1992), was not only expressed on a strictly economic level, but also through a communicational-advertising know-how and an aesthetic expressed in a specific way of composing the advertisement. On a graphic level, this was seen in the increasing prominence of photography and in a tendency towards realism in the projected image of the products offered. This influence has its correlation at the editorial level, in the case of continental American magazines, such as *Life*, which had a special edition for Latin America and whose graphic proposal (and the advertising contained therein) constituted a true reference for local publicists.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this analysis is to address the graphic pieces, both posters and advertisement, from

a qualitative-interpretative perspective, which seeks to study the discourse of both graphic-communicational supports. Therefore, through this analysis, we seek to identify the intentionality of the pieces at an explicit and implicit level, understanding both supports as significant artifacts, part of a broader symbolic system that invigorates the existence of a specific social imaginary.

In accordance with the above, the proposed methodological approach takes as conceptual references the work conducted from a socio-semiotic perspective by Williamson (1978) and Barthes (1986) and, recently, by Amigo, Bravo and Osorio (2014) and Amigo, Bravo, Secail, Lefébure and Borrell (2016). From this perspective, the greatest potential for significance of graphic pieces is given by their connotative dimension; i.e., the analysis focuses on the implicit dimension present in the messages. For McQuail (1991, p. 231), the relevance of this type of analysis is given by its revealing nature of society and culture, since the different communication supports reflect and inform the features and characteristics of the social reality of the moment.

In the investigation that gave rise to this article, 100 posters from the period between 1970 and 1973 and 100 advertisements published in the press between 1975 and 1980 were selected. To analyze them, we designed a matrix that considered the description of the technical aspects of their production, as well as a qualitative interpretation of the communicational proposal of each graphic piece. Considering the limitations of the format, for this article we created a subsample of four pieces, the analysis of which is presented in the following section. This selection was made based on criteria related to the richness and symbolic variety of the graphic pieces, so it constitutes an intentional selection, which does not seek a statistical representation of the analysis, but rather to deepen in to the significant dimension of the visual elements examined.

RESULTS

From the corpus analysis of the pieces selected during the research, communicational and aesthetic references emerge, both in the case of posters and advertisement, which refer to production contexts in which different traditions and technical competencies interact. In the case of the poster, the beginning of the 70s was marked by a strong need for communication, especially from the State, towards different sectors of

Chilean society to involve them in the transformation processes that the country was experiencing. This was in line with the growing importance of communication within political-partisan activities.

This communicational role of the poster is not the consequence of an explicit cultural policy from the government, but rather responds to specific actions of institutions, mainly State ones, that saw in the poster an important medium for mass communication. This is the case, for example, of the posters designed for the local lottery (called *Polla Chilena de Beneficencia*), which were commissioned to the González-Quiroz design office with the aim of promoting their weekly raffles and, along with this, the dissemination of social messages that sought the prevention of problems related mainly to the health of the most vulnerable population.

The analysis allows to identify influences of different kinds and a strong emphasis on the conceptualization of the messages. This approach to mass culture and the communicative demands of a social environment highly stressed by the changes experienced by Chilean society explains the presence of visual references of a visual language close to American Pop Art, along with other elements of the rationalist tradition heirs of the Bauhaus and Ulm design schools. Another aspect that may have had a considerable influence on national designers during this period was the arrival to Chile of magazines specialized on graphic issues –such as *Graphis* and *Gebrauchsgraphik* (Vico & Esteban, 2015; Vico, 2016)–, which showed proposals that were characterized by greater simplification in forms and the search for a greater symbolic load in their messages.

It is possible to identify this type of influence in the work of designer Vicente Larrea (figure 1) through the use of symbols and archetypes present both in the popular imagination and in mass communication and, on the other hand, in the repetitive use of elements related to the American cultural industries. In the case of the piece analyzed, along with the aesthetic influences indicated above, it is possible to identify an appeal to community and solidarity work as a main element in the construction of a type of society, which is expressed metaphorically in the construction of a nest (the home) by a couple of birds, which in turn symbolically represent the generosity and dedication of university youth, committed to the active task of contributing to Chile's future through volunteer work.

At the communication level, it is not strange that –as a consequence of the transformations that Chile was experiencing in a democratic context and with a

limited media infrastructure– the poster would become a central actor when it comes to incorporating broad sectors of the population into the political process that the country was living. This thematization of the public discussion about the political process materialized the demands of a society that sought an alternative modernity, and in which the actors of the popular world (the working woman, the laborer, the miner, etc.) were called to be the builders of this new type of society. This attempt to incorporate sectors apart from the political processes resulted in the consideration of the popular world as a subject, albeit abstract, endowed with its own images and communication. For this, the Unidad Popular had the support of an artistic world that was close to it and the State institutions worked as spaces that allowed a greater circulation of its artistic-communicational proposals: demonstrations that were enhanced with other cultural dissemination agencies that found a support for their creations in the State apparatus. An eloquent example of this link between actors from the popular world and the dissemination of messages in line with the changes that Chile was experiencing from the State apparatus is in the poster *El menor de un año necesita más cuidado* (Children under one year need more care, 1973) (figure 2), which represents by means of a graphic language that refers to muralism the image of a mother with mestizo features that observes her son with concern, prostrated in the lower part of the poster; the text refers to the importance of taking children under one year to medical check-ups. In symbolic terms, the piece seeks to represent the country through the image of a woman-mother who protects and cares for her children. This graphic piece tried to communicate the importance of health in childhood and the need to become aware of responsibilities as a society, with a message that exalted the woman-mother as a social actor and childhood as Chile's future.

In the case of press advertising, although it already existed and had an important graphic tradition before 1973, the evolution, dominance and development at the level of the printed press must be valued from the implementation of the economic market model since 1975, which resulted in a significant increase in advertising investment, impact on media financing and, consequently, in a growing role in the public space after the coup d'état. This change of approach responded to the need to build a visual imaginary associated with a new universe of products from the cultural logic of consumption as a catalyst element of a new



Figure 1. *A trabajar*, 1972 (Let's work!)

Fondo Larrea-Albornoz.

Source: Originals archive. SLGM. FADEU. Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.



Figura 2. *El menor de un año necesita más cuidado*, 1973 (Children under one year need more care)

Source: Waldo González-Mario Quiroz Collection. Archive of the Universidad Tecnológica Metropolitana UTEM

type of social relations. In this regard, it is interesting to highlight, first, the disappearance of the author as the articulating subject of the graphic proposal, as opposed to the authorship of advertising agencies. At the graphic language level, we find a growing domain of photography over illustration, which translates into a fiction of daily life imaginary enriched by the presence of new products. These pieces seek to position the product as a means capable of projecting the viewer towards an imaginary experience of himself/herself through the promise of an enriched daily life. The aforementioned has a direct impact on the conditions of production of the advertisement, which seeks to value the ability of the product to act on two complementary levels: on the one hand, to positively influence the individual daily routine of the consumer and, on the other, to act as social articulator exerting a mediation between different social actors who share the same symbolic universe. This means that the advertisement proposes meanings that, although they are appropriate individually, allow the identification of social coordinates within the new

social structure. In this sense, the realism present in the pieces is outlined as an ideal of photographic production, in which the physical conditions and the potential for desire of the product are exaggerated in the everyday context of the consumer: to be more real than the real.

This protagonism of the object, its individual appropriation and the ability to transform everyday life into an enriched experience, can be seen in figure 3 where, through careful photographic production, the product is presented in a close-up, giving it a leading role in the scene and, in the background, we can see a part of the naked body of a young woman. The symbolic association between the product and the body of the woman refers to the properties of this product and its associations –not explicit– in the field of sensuality. It is interesting to note that the type of relationship established between the product and the character is private; it is through the intimate dimension that the subjectivity of social relations mediated by consumption is expressed. In this same vein, there is

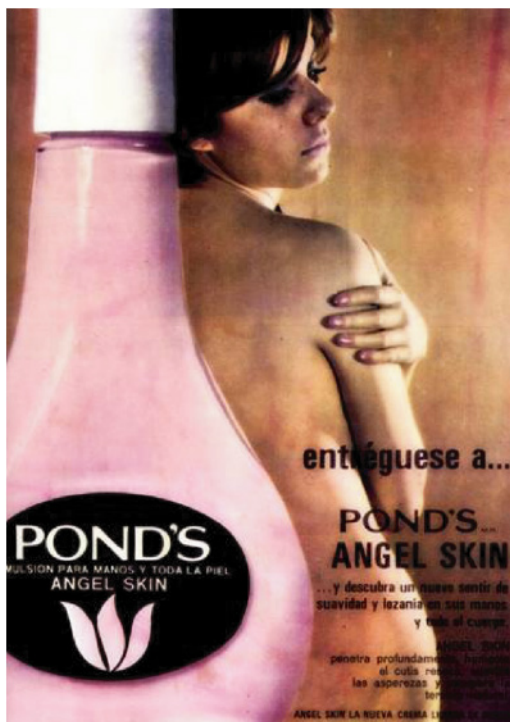


Figura 3. *Entreguese a ...Pond's...Angel Skin*, 1978 (Surrender to Pond's. Angel Skin).

Source: Museo Publicidad/ Universidad Diego Portales Collection.



Figura 4. *Dolca, el otro café*, 1980 (Dolca, the different coffee)

Source: Museo Publicidad/ Universidad Diego Portales Collection.

a growing prominence of the brand as a catalyst for an imaginary that seeks to exalt the qualities of the object. The product is assumed as an object loaded with meanings, and its aesthetic is part of its identity. On the communication level, the advertisement needs to be interpreted inversely as the poster before 1973, since it is now about articulating—from the individuality—the relationship with the social context through products; i.e., society is built from the individual and is conveyed through consumption, and not from a collective project.

This same appeal to the individual dimension is observed in the case of figure 4, whose emphasis is given by the construction of an ideal of everyday life enriched by new styles that give account of new quality of life standards. These are mediated by a wide repertoire of objects, in which the product and the brand stand out as the main articulators of a new promise of society, and where the social is limited to the intimate scope of interpersonal relationships. In other words, it is no longer the collective and abstract dream present in the poster; it is the concrete and immediate possibility of

generating a space and a life experience that is accessed through consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

From the above, it is possible to notice important transformations both in terms of the production and processing of messages and the configuration of public space in Chile in the 1970s. In this context, the idea of a modern public space refers to the articulation of a project expressed in cultural artifacts aimed at connecting everyday experiences with a story that contains and gives meaning to individual experiences. Hence, the graphic of this period is understood as a communicational device aimed at generating experiences on two levels: on the one hand, on the aesthetic level, understood as the sensitive experience of viewing the pieces in which the receiver is linked to a specific proposal of style and format and, on the other, on the ideological level, by decoding and identifying a socio-political frame of reference. In

this new scenario, graphic communication and, in a broad sense, advertising activity in general, sought to establish new articulation formulas in the individual-society relationship. This is where we are faced with a displacement that goes from the articulation of massive social subjects with ideological connotations linked to the definition of a popular national identity, towards another that seeks to emphasize the individual and the role of objects as a form of social integration, through a communication that highlights the product as the protagonist and its ability to project a desirable imaginary, under the concepts of need and satisfaction as engines of personal and social subjectivation.

This implies a communication reconfiguration of a country project, from the collective in the 1970-1973 period towards the individual for the 1975-1980 period; in other words, from the citizen-revolutionary function anchored in the collective, to another in

which the consumer is the one who autonomously accesses a new imaginary of expectations linked to a new social status. However, it is important to consider that both cases –poster and advertisement– point to the construction of a story that proposes a fiction of both the collective-popular and the individual-consumerist, giving both types of graphic pieces identity features based on references recognizable, differentiable and associated to a political and cultural project. This displacement in the construction of the stories is reflected at the aesthetic level, in a change in the formal treatment of the pieces, which passes from a gestural illustration, distanced from reality –the hand of the creator– in the case of posters, towards a photographic realism in which the characteristics of the products and the benefits associated with them are exalted, a transformation of immediate reality through consumption in advertisement.

NOTES

1. This article presents the research results of the Fondecyt Regular Project, No. 1110616 *Arte, poder y consumo en Chile: la gráfica como artefacto cultural entre 1970 y 1980. Del afiche al aviso de prensa (Art, power and consumption in Chile: graphics as a cultural artifact between 1970 and 1980. From the poster to the advertisement)*.

2. After the 1973 coup d'état, some urgent liberal measures were introduced to face the country's economic crisis. However, it was from 1975 and after strong tensions within the regime itself, that the neoliberal economic model was implemented.

3. The aesthetic reflection posed by Chilean writer Jorge Edwards regarding the visuality of the Cuban revolution by pointing out that "in front of the golden calf, in front of the loud and liar vulgarity of the North, the Hispanic-African-American world offered a bearded face, scored by sleeplessness, without ornaments that disguise the stubborn and hard reality" (1991, p. 38) is particularly interesting.

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