Automobile Advertising in Le Soir, Brussels 1905-1950

As a result of intense mechanization and automation during the second half of the nineteenth century, the market economy in industrialized countries gradually was transformed from a production economy into a consumption economy. In the words of Stanley Resor, head of the leading American advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, cited by Fox in his pioneering work The Mirror Makers: 'The chief economic problem today is no longer the production of goods but their distribution. The shadow of overproduction, with its attendant periods of unemployment and suffering, is the chief menace to the present industrial system' (Fox, 1984, 94). Advertisements were to play an important role in this new constellation. During the first decades of the twentieth century a whole array of persuasion techniques were being developed. John E. Kennedy's 'reason-why' shortly after the turn of the century (Fox, 1984, 50), the genteel pictures of the 1920s and the hard-boiled copy of the crisis years (Marchand, 1985, 285-334) were to join the traditional price/quality arguments, in an attempt to convince broad strata of the population of purchasing objects which until then they had produced and exchanged outside of the market, or never even possessed before. This has been called 'modern advertising', and the magic word is 'appeal'. In trying to appeal to the potential customer advertising has made use of about any idea, image or value society had to offer. Moreover, advertising has also added a new set of 'icons' and 'parabels' to our modern symbolic environment (Marchand, 1985, 206-284). Apart from being a central element in the economic process of market echange, modern advertising, through its strong visual (and auditory) presence in our social environment, has functioned as a medium in se, broadcasting both explicitly and implicitly moral and emotional statements. The twentieth century has seen the rise, not just of an 'advertising economy', but also of an 'advertising culture'.

However, the impact of modern advertising upon people/customers is, both on the economic and cultural levels, 'dubious', as Michael Schudson puts it (Schudson, 1986, 155-157). Modern advertising is one out of many elements in the complex networks of cultural exchange in modern society, a vast array of dynamic and multi-layered social processes, which include important and hardly explored psychological patterns. A one-dimensional approach towards the effects of advertising culture on modern society is bound to lead us into a state of false consciousness. At present, we need much more in-depth historical research of twentieth-century advertising, its business, its practices, and the contents and presence of advertisements in the media market, before entering the grey zone of symbolic patterns in modern society. In what follows, I will describe what kind of advertising an average newspaper reader may have been confronted with for a specific product (automobiles) in a specific region (Brussels) during the first half of the twentieth century, without venturing however to speculations over the effects this may have had on the public.

Advertisements, as a medium, have a history of themselves. Ad research may lead to insights in such diverse fields as economic science (marketing), social science (communication), linguistics, anthropology, psychology, but also art history, philosophy, law history and so on. Social history however might find more fertile grounds in widening the perspective, and considering advertisements as part of a social process. While focusing on advertising rather than advertisements, we should consider such diverse factors as production techniques, the commercial strategies of individual producers, the general state of the market, as well as the background of published media, know-how of advertising creators, or existing channels for reaching the public, surrounding the product. What arguments will be used within advertisements, either 'traditional' price/quality arguments or more 'modern' appeal arguments, will be the result of the global process of commercialization of a given product as well as the natural outcome of the historical development of an advertising culture.

1905 - Classified Ads

Automobile advertising in 1905 was not quite a case of media saturation. In the leading Brussels newspaper Le Soir we find no more than three advertisements throughout the year. One tiny ad was published in June by F. Hesch, producer of the modest Belgian automobile make 'Météor', another one in September by a Brussels businessman Mulders de Bagenrieux, general agent of the Italian automobile model Fiat, and another tiny advertisement by Garage Ixellois in October. Compared to the leading advertising sectors —pills and powders, and the Grands Magasins— this was close to no advertising at all.

The Météor ad was a typical one: modestly sized, it would have been hard to distinguish it from the classified ads, were it not being published outside of the classified ad sections. It showed a tiny picture of a car, obviously the only model Météor was offering at the time, followed by the name of the model, a short technical description (ten hp, motor fabricated by the French company Dion), the price of the item, and the name and address of the producer. On the left side a simple slogan was added, vertically positioned: 'Chauffeurs essayez' ('Drivers, test this'). Still not quite an exemple of modern advertising.

Yet the techniques of advertising were known by and available to the automobile producers, as the Fiat ad proves. What is noticable about it is that it was hard to identify as advertising. This huge advertisement (one quarter of the page) was disguised as editorial copy and presented as if it were just another article, using the same letter fonts and column size. If its explicit title ('F.I.A.T.' in large type) would not have raised any suspicion, the average Le Soir reader might easily have been misled. The text told the story of a journalist who had been intrigued by the recent successes of Fiat in international automobile races, and who

decided to pay a visit to the general agent of Fiat in Belgium. Needless to say that, according to the text of the 'article', the qualities of the Fiat car were 'amazing' and 'undeniable', that the Italian automobile industry was to produce 'the car of the future', and that the Brussels Fiat store turned out to be remarkably well supplied.

Why then, was there so little automobile advertising in 1905? The answer lies in the specific situation of the automobile market. The automobile was an expensive item, and did not seem to have much future outside of the small stratum of the wealthy bourgeoisie, about one tenth of the population. Demand was high and rising within this group, especially its young and forward-looking members, who were well acquainted with one another. They paid a lot of attention to automobile races, so that there was sufficient knowledge available concerning the product and its potential market. Automobile factories had not yet adopted assembly line techniques, however, so production output was limited. A good deal was being exported.

In other words, the automobile industry was still pretty much in the earliest phase of its development. When sales started to lag behind production, the most obvious strategy was to widen the reach of the international market, and to go looking for new agents in new countries. As for the internal market, the firms could reach the limited number of these customers through the direct mailing of elegant brochures, participating in automobile racing, and being present at automobile salons. There seemed to be no point in addressing a wider range of the population by newspaper advertising.

Still, if this were true for automobile producers, the situation was different for automobile retailers, known as 'garages'. Most of the garages in this period offerred several models for sale, and were engaged in the second-hand market as well. All of them were limited to the city and its surrounding area (though Brussels, as the capital of a centralized state, was a special case), and faced fierce competition. Why then, apart from what was

mentioned above, was there no advertising by garages to be found?

As a matter of fact, there was. But to notice it at all, the traditional definition of an advertisement has to be extended. We need to retrace the history of advertising to its roots in the classified ad sections, and consider the special position of the leading Brussels newspaper, Le Soir. This penny paper had a special history in regard to advertising: it had been distributed by the end of the nineteenth century as a free paper, financed by its advertisements (Luyckx, 1978, 308). In 1898 it became a subscription paper, but its well-known advertising sections still occupied an important part of the paper, and its publisher, Emile Rossel, was also the owner of the 'Agence Rossel', an important Belgian advertising agency. A classified ad was not the same thing as an advertisement: it was mainly used by private persons rather than by commercial firms, and its common reach was the second hand market.

However, there were two characteristics that made the classified ad sections interesting for commercial advertisers. Firstly, the difference between 'classified ads' and commerial advertisements had not always been as explicit as it came to be in the twentieth century. Both had common historical roots: the commercial advertisements had grown out of the classified ad sections during the nineteenth century. This common historical background was clearly visible for those products which had only recently entered the market, like automobiles. Advertisements for such products were put together at the last pages of the paper, and mingled in with the diverse sections of classified ads. Moreover, the shape and layout of the early automobile advertisements did not differ greatly from the classified ads. They might have been a little bit bigger, and somewhat more elaborate, yet it was not uncommon to use conspicious fonts and add modest graphic elements to the classified ads as well. Unlike the more elaborate advertisements by, for instance, the department stores, automobile advertising had not yet broken free of the classified ad pages. Secondly, Le Soir

had a reputation for its classified ad sections. An average newspaper reader knew that automobile advertisments could be found by turning to pages that contained the classified ads. Any consumer interested in purchasing a (second hand) automobile would go and look for it in the well-known advertisements pages of the Brussels paper. This was a focus point of consumer attention that already existed, and was accessible to commercial advertisers.

Of course advertisers would have to be careful: the attention of the consumer consulting the classified ads was to second-hand purchases in first instance. The challenge was to disguise the commercial identity of the advertiser, grasp the attention of the consumer by offering a second hand automobile in first instance, and then somehow transfer this attention to the more lucrative trade in new cars. By taking a closer look at the classified ads in the 'Vélos, automobiles' section ('Bicycles, automobiles'), we find that approximately one third of the automobiles offerred for sale give an address which belonged to a garage; but only half of those identified themselves as garages in the ads. At least twelve garages in Brussels were publishing classified ads, esteemingly offerring second-hand cars, without making it clear to potential consumers that they would be dealing with a commercial firm instead of a private person when turning to the address mentioned in the ad. The classified ad sections, in other words, was where the real automobile advertising took place in 1905.

This strategy of advertising-in-disguise was clearly not very favourable for developing modern advertising techniques. Still, the terms and abbreviations used in the classified ads published by garages appear to be carefully chosen. A typical ad looked like this:

3,500 FR.

Automobile de Dion-Bouton, 9 HP, type V., mod. 1905, 3 vitesses pneumatiq. Michelin 760X90, carrosserie tonneau, bois naturel, garnit. cuir vachette, lanternes phares et accessoires. 9 et 10 pl. du Marché.[1]

[1] Le Soir, 13 November 1905, p. 10.

Typically the ad did not say whether or not a second hand car was involved. The address mentioned however was that of Garage Bouvier, and both the price and the novelty of the automobile seem to indicate that a new car was being offerred. Most common techniques were prominently mentioning the price, and summing up a range of attractive accessories or luxury items, in other words the traditional price/quality argument. Some extra notions might be added as well, as in the following example:

ST-NICOLAS

Auto Vivinus tonn. 4 plac., vérit. de Dion c. neuve à vend. p. 1350 fr., essai à vol. 137, b. Léopold II.[2]

Perhaps an automobile was not the most obvious Santa Claus present. The garages however simply took over the tradition of the department stores which organized special sales for special occasions. Apart from this, the notion ‘essai à volonté’ (‘test as much as you like’) was a common feature offerred to potential customers, but not typical of a private person putting a second-hand car on sale.

1920 — Genteel pictures

By 1920 full-scale automobile advertising had come into existence in Belgium. If we leave out the multitude of very small, simple and repeatedly published advertisements, we find approximately fifty advertisements or advertisement campaigns throughout the year. An exact number is hard to provide: often an advertisement was published several times, yet with more or less pronounced differences in size, shape and content. The word ‘campaign’ obviously is too strong to describe such a practice, still to consider these repeated insertions

[2] Le Soir, 3 December 1905, p. 10.

as one single advertisement might not make sense.

The advertisements were rather small. Not more than a fifth were larger than 200 cm^2. The models publishing advertisements of a larger size were either American (Ford, Buick, Overland and Maxwell) or French (Citroën, Mors and Salmson). There were thirty automobile producers advertising in 1920, but only two published more than five different advertisements: Buick (nine) and Ford (six). Seven other models published two or three advertisements, of which three were American models (Cadillac, Chevrolet and Maxwell), three French (Mors, Delage and Citroën) and one was German (Mercedes). The others published only one advertisement, though eight of those appeared several times (Bignan, Cita, Delahaye, Westcott, Monitor, Overland and Vauxhall).

The common design of an automobile advertisement was a frame of approximately ten to fifteen cm square, containing the logo and a picture of the product, and either a short text or some information concerning the models available. Usually at the bottom the address of the nearest dealer was added. A slogan was optional. The pictures in particular were conspicious, showing off seductive scenes of artistically designed cars in the foreground of a genteel environment. This was however an exclusive feature of the American models, with the notable exception of Citroën.

The conclusion is clear and remarkable: automobile advertising in Belgium in 1920 was almost completely dominated by American producers, with Citroën the only real exception. There was as good as no advertising at all by Belgian producers: the leading models of the time, like Germain, Imperia, Minerva, F.N., Excelsior, Pipe, Métallurgique et cetera simply did not advertise in the leading Belgian newspaper. This could not be blamed on the aftermath of the First World War: by 1920 most of the models (that is, those that survived the war) had begun production again.

This specific pattern of advertising can only be understood by linking it to the

products that were being advertised, their conditions of production, and their position in the market. All of the American models, and Citroën, had in common that they were pioneers in mass production, in contrast to the Belgian producers. Mass-produced American cars were being exported to Belgium after the First World War, trying to break into an automobile market that had been dominated by domestic and French producers. Those two elements explain why automobile advertising was an almost exclusive American practice in Belgium in 1920.

Things were even more complicated. What is meant by 'American advertising'? The American producers did not sell cars directly to the Belgian customers, but delivered them to a Belgian importing firm. This firm could sell the cars itself, or go looking for local agents; most of them were combining wholesale and retail trade in one way or another. Some of these local dealers —like Cousin for Buick, Pisart for Oldsmobile and Plasman for Ford— were to play important roles in the transformation of the automobile market, as contrasted with most of the French producers who preferred to establish their own branches ('succursales') in Belgium. It is quite impossible to distinguish between producers and dealers in decisions concerning publishing automobile advertisements in this period. Apart from this the role of the advertising agencies, central agents in the creation of American advertising[3], was bound to be fully different on the Belgian market. One good reason for this was that advertising in Belgium could not be done in English. Therefore, new advertisements had to be designed, but who would do this? Advertising agencies had never been as important in Belgium as they were in the United States (Fauconnier, 1962). Probably the best known agency was the Agence Rossel, the owner of Le Soir. But this agency was not quite a pioneer in modern advertising techniques.

A reconstruction of the creation of advertisements for American automobiles in

[3] Both Fox and Marchand put strong emphasis on the role of ad makers and their agencies (see also Mayer, 1958).

Belgium in 1920 would look like this. The American producer would provide graphic material, such as logos and pictures. The local dealer would add the text (in French, or in Dutch for the Flemish newspapers) consisting of slogans, reasons for purchasing the car, or information concerning the models available, prices, and addresses of local dealers. The publicity service of Le Soir finally, would put all of this together and work out the final lay-out. Still there were several exceptions to this. The Overland ad in July pictured a view of the Belgian Royal Palace[4], and Central-Auto - the local Westcott dealer - used the service of the advertising agency Polmoss[5].

As a rule however, the average advertising for American automobiles would be both innovative and typical at the same time: clearly a result of the complex process of creating these advertisements. A good example is the Buick ad of 2 February[6]. An eye-catching picture of a genteel beach scene is at the core of the ad. This was innovative: the product is not just being shown, it is situated in the middle of a social setting. The scenery is socially upscale, reflecting a general feature of 1920s American advertising (Marchand, 1985, 127). No element of the pictured scene, of the persons being portrayed or of the landscape will remind the newspaper reader of a real or realizable situation. Moreover, the text of the ad bears no relation whatsoever to the picture. It is a stereotypical drawing, published over and over again. Similar pictures were used for other Buick advertisements. This February ad seems to have been commissioned by the local Brussels dealers Riga & De Cordes, but general Buick agent Cousin was also using drawings from the same series. Finally, the number visible at the left side tells us that the Agence Rossel had assisted in putting the ad together. A more elaborate example is in the September Maxwell ad[7]. The rather oversized

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[4] Le Soir, 4 July 1920, p. 8.

[5] Le Soir, 10 October 1920, p. 8.

[6] Le Soir, 2 February 1920, p. 8.

[7] Le Soir, 28 September 1920, p. 8.

car is illustrative of the ‘Heroic Proportions’ icon (Marchand, 1985, 265-267), introducing another advertising technique to Belgian newspapers. The city under the wheels of the car appears to consist of buildings that might relate to American neoclassicism, yet apart from this it would be hard to tell what continent the automobile is driving through. The car is being driven by a man, but it is not possible to say whether he is wearing sports outfit or a chauffeur’s costume. The two female passengers might be friends, or a wife and a daughter. All possibilities are open: the power of a good stereotype.

Repeatedly publishing the same advertisement, a common practice in this period, could hardly be called a ‘campaign’. Some attempts were made to introduce more elaborate techniques. Overland used a consistent style of advertising, close to reason-why. In a series of advertisements the same lay-out was used over and over, but the heading and the text changed each time: ‘la voiture économique’, ‘la voiture de qualité’, et cetera. Paul Cousin, local dealer for several General Motors products, also gave preference to ‘reason-why’ copy. Chevrolet had a short experiment with teasers.

1935 — Hard-Boiled Campaigns

It was no longer rare by 1935 to find automobile advertisements in the daily paper. With almost 150 ads appearing during that year, a third of which was published more than once, chances were high to find at least one automobile advertisement every day of the year. Most of them, however, were still to be found on the back pages, where the classified ad sections were, with the major exception of the Ford and General Motors ads. But the advertisements were no longer to be confused with the classified ads. Compared to the 1920 ads, their average size was much larger, between 200 and 500 square cm, with a quarter

above this average, and three whole page ads appearing throughout the year.

The number of automobile producers however had hardly increased: 34 automobile producers were advertising in Le Soir in 1935 (compared to 30 in 1920), which was approximately half of the models available on the Belgian automobile market. Domestic models had almost completely been pushed out of the market: one single F.N. advertisement appeared in May. Apart from that only Imperia was an active advertiser, but by 1935 this firm had become the local producer of Adler cars and could hardly be considered any longer to be a Belgian model.

There was a clear dominance of automobile advertising by the two leading American producers, Ford and General Motors. The single model most often advertised was Ford, with eighteen different advertisements and several smaller announcements. Ford was closely followed by Chevrolet with sixteen ads. But if we add the advertisements of all eight G.M. models available in Belgium (Chevrolet, Opel, Oldsmobile, La Salle, Pontiac, Buick, Cadillac and Vauxhall), we get the amazing sum of 57 advertisements, which means that General Motors alone was publishing more than one out of three automobile advertisements. Ford and G.M. taken together were in for more than half of all automobile advertising in Belgium in 1935. Other regular advertisers, like Renault, Packard, Peugeot, Nash, Imperia, Willys, Hudson-Terraplane or De Soto never even approached this frequency of advertising. Moreover, the size too of the Ford and General Motors advertisements was notably higher than their competitors. No less than three quarters of the advertisements larger than the average 200 to 500 cm^2 were published by either Ford or General Motors, including the three whole page ads. Ford gave preference to the 500 to 1000 cm^2 size category, whereas General Motors was known for its extra large size advertising. As to the contents of their advertising, both Ford and General Motors made a clear effort to diversify their ads: less than a third of the advertisements being published more than once came from the two leading American

producers.

This dominance of Ford and General Motors was remarkable, as was the almost full absence of domestic producers. This situation can only be understood by linking it to the developments within the automobile market. The automobile had entered the mass production era, but the Belgian producers were too small to follow this evolution. They had been pushed back to the tiny segment of luxury cars, and were about to face bankruptcy (Kupélian, 1980). There was no point in addressing a wide range of the population through newspaper advertising.

In the absence of any major domestic producer, the Belgian automobile market was divided among the leading European and American models. More than any European producer, American producers had a longstanding tradition of using advertising as a commercial tool. But that would hardly explain the gap in advertising. In a consumption economy, characterized by mass production, producers in general will be more likely to take up advertising than retailers. Producers have bigger budgets, a wider reach of customers, and are lacking personal contacts with their customers. Both Ford and General Motors had established important production units (assembly plants) in Belgium during the 1920s (Laux, 1992, 101), and hence were advertising directly as producers. Most other models had their cars imported to Belgium and sold by a network of local dealers. There was a notable difference in advertising between producers and dealers: the former would have more, larger and more elaborate advertisements[8]. General Motors used a mixed formula: it had selected several local dealers for its different models (Buick, Cadillac, La Salle, Opel and Pontiac to Cousin, Chevrolet, the leading seller, to Wismeyer, and Oldsmobile to Pisart), and was publishing its own advertising (for all its models), and collaborating intensively with its

[8] Some of the French models, like Renault, Citroën or Peugeot, had also established production units on Belgian territory, yet these were much smaller and exclusively producing for the domestic market, whereas the large assembly plants of Ford and General Motors produced both for local consumption and for export. Laux, The European Automobile Industry, p.

dealers. The presence of large assembly plants of Ford and General Motors on Belgian soil may help explain why automobile advertising in Belgium was dominated by American firms.

As to the advertising itself, apart from its larger size and modest use of photography, the most visible characteristic was its emphasis on price. The cost of a car was the major sales argument in 1935. More than half of the models explicitly mentioned the price of their products. Within the range of 20,000 to 30,000 Belgian francs customers could choose among three French makes (Renault, Citroën and Peugeot), three British makes (Austin, Morris and Hillman), three American makes (Chevrolet, Ford and Willys), furthermore two models of mixed German-American origin (Opel) or German-Belgian origin (Imperia, local license for Adler), and one make out of the former Austrian empire (the Czech Skoda). One major exception was Fiat, which surprisingly did not resort to price arguments. The predominance of the price argument may come as a surprise, for it is not quite typical of modern advertising. The explanation is to be found once more in the situation of the market. The first half of the 1930s had been severe crisis years, slowing down the expansion of the automobile market. Appeal arguments, typical of modern advertising, have stronger product-introducing than product-comparing power, whereas the opposite is true for price/quality arguments. In a stagnant or shrinking market, when few new customers can be gained, appeal arguments lose much of their impact. Emphasis will be placed on defending the existing position on the market against competitors. Thus price/quality arguments are likely to gain in importance. By 1935, the genteel pictures of the 1920s had given way to hard-boiled numbers, stressing the ‘economic qualities’ of the product.

This is not to say that advertising had returned to patent medicine era standards. One other major characteristic was the linking of different advertisements published over a longer period in time. Advertising in other words had become a matter of campaigns much more

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than occasionally presenting a single advertisement, or repeatedly publishing the same advertisement over and over again. A good example is the way Ford promoted its 'V8'. In February the company presented a whole page advertisement. Notwithstanding its size, the ad looked rather traditional. Under the slogan 'La Ford V-8 pour 1935' was a huge drawing of the car. The rest of the page was covered with text. At the bottom the well-known Ford logo was shown. Clearly the ad was mainly intended to inform the public about the new 1935 type, hence its conspicious size. In the months to follow Ford would publish ad after ad, each of which would emphasize one single commercial argument. These advertisements had in common their size (approximately a quarter page), and the abundant use of graphics. In May, under the heading 'la zone du confort' the comfort the car had to offer was stressed; in June, with an exotic drawing of a Sahara scene ('Rallye du Maroc'), the sport aspect was drawn attention to, namely a series of successes in a rally through the desert; in September ('Rendez-vous compte! Une 8 cylindres en V pour 29.9000 frs', 'Be aware! An 8 cylinder V car for 29,900 francs') the price argument was put forward; in October and November more emotional arguments were being used: 'Avec une Ford V-8 les distances sont plus courtes' ('With a Ford V-8 distances are shorter'), and 'Suivez le mouvement du Progrès' ('Follow the line of Progress'). Later in November and December the argument of number was being used, as Ford announced first that one million of V-8 cars had been sold in ten months time, then that world wide sales had mounted to two and one quarter million. In December advertisements were being published emphasizing the service argument of the reliability of the Ford dealers and price reductions for replacement parts[9]. The campaign was completed with a series of small size ads that simply showed the Ford V-8 logo and the price of the car, appearing in the days between the large ad publishings. This kind of advertising was followed by several other producers, but in a more modest way.

[9] Le Soir, 16 February 1935, p. 9; 6 May, p. 11; 3 June, p. 9; 5 September, p. 13; 6 October, p. 15; 4 November, p. 9; 11

1950 — Elaborate strategies

The situation in 1950 had not fundamentally changed since 1935. A greater number of advertisements was being published, well over 200, but this was mainly because a greater number of makes was present on the automobile advertising market. There were 43 makes advertising in 1950. Only six published more than ten advertisements during that year: Ford and the General Motors divisions Cadillac, Oldsmobile and Vauxhall, joined by the British low budget models Austin and Morris. The dominance of General Motors was still very strong, approximately a quarter of the total number of automobile advertisements were published by General Motors models. The situation was comparable to 1935, if somewhat less clear, as in the latter year General Motors took up almost half of all advertisements. In absolute numbers however, Ford and General Motors published more or less the same number of advertisements. They had been joined by predominantly cheaper makes, like Morris, Austin, Volkswagen or Simca. The greater number of advertisements was being compensated for by their lesser size. Six out of seven advertisements were smaller than 500 cm^2, whereas in 1935 this had been two out of three. The large size advertisements were the exclusive domain of the big producers, i.e. automobile companies that offerred a pool of makes: General Motors (Opel, Vauxhall, Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick, Cadillac) in the first place, and further the British companies Rootes (Humber, Hillman, Sunbeam), Nuffield (Wolseley, Morris, Riley, MG) and Standard (Standard, Vanguard, Triumph).

In other words, we find more or less the same picture as in 1935: domestic makes had now fully vanished from the advertising scene, Ford and General Motors were leading the

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November, p. 11; 4 December, p. 15; 9 December, p. 9; and 16 December, p. 11.

way, and several European brands were trying to follow. The American dominance was less explicit however, and several newcomers had made a conspicious entry. The difference becomes clearer if we consider the prices being advertised. The average price of an automobile on the Belgian market in 1950 was between 50,000 and 70,000 Belgian francs. Only two makes came in below this line: Morgan and Moskvitch. Very cheap makes however were not very popular: most customers were suspicious about the quality of too cheap cars (Scholliers, 1992, 9). Within the average price category Renault, Volkswagen and Morris offerred the lowest prices, but the other makes followed at close range. A remarkable exception was Ford. The great American automobile producer seemed to have withdrawn from the low price cars, and was clearly aiming at the middle segment of the market, offering models in the 80,000 to 100,000 francs category. Taking a closer look at the advertising strategies of that other American giant, General Motors, similar features become visible. Three makes of General Motors were being advertised in the average price category, i.e. Opel (61,500 francs), Chevrolet (64,000 francs) and Vauxhall (66,000). But these prices were not very competitive, and the advertising efforts of General Motors were not quite focussing on the latter makes. Much more attention was given to the advertising of Oldsmobile and Cadillac, two models being positioned on the (higher) middle strata of the automobile market. The American producers, in other words, were no longer pathbreakers. As for mass-production technology, they were no longer in the lead. European producers had caught up both on production and advertising techniques, and had become fierce competitors. Most of all the British makes Austin and Morris, and the German make Volkswagen, newcomers in the Belgian market, were challenging the French positions. It was no coincidence that precisely these makes were to be found among the cheapest models.

A policy of differentiation determined the look of automobile advertising. Two kinds of advertising could be distinguished. The first kind consisted of advertisements of on

average 200 to 500 cm². They were either published only once, or in short series, with each new version presenting a new argument. Graphic elements were abundant and conspicious. The second kind consisted of tiny advertisements, mostly smaller than 50 cm². They had a very primitive layout, almost like classified ads, and in general showed no more than a small picture of the car, and the names of the make and the nearest dealer. These small advertisements were then being published over and over again, almost daily, and for several months.

Differentiation was also to be found in the contents of the campaigns. A fine example was General Motors advertising. The General Motors plant in Antwerp was doing only part of the advertising for its models, the dealers had their own advertising (Cousin for Buick and Cadillac, Pisart for Oldsmobile and Vauxhall, Wismeyer for Chevrolet, Mabille for Pontiac, and 'Automobiles Opel' for Opel). General Motors started the advertising year rather late, in April, when its '1950' models were introduced. A huge campaign was set up, for all models in general: 'La clef General Motors… Symbole d'une plus grande valeur … d'un plus grand confort … d'une plus grande sécurité … d'une plus grande économie' ('The General Motors key, symbol of greater value/greater comfort/greater security/greater economy')[10]. After that, in May and June, new campaigns followed for its different models. In the meantime, dealers were publishing their own advertisements. There was no coordination between the two lines of advertising. Remarkably, however, General Motors did not publish separate advertising campaigns for all of its models. It did so for Oldsmobile, Buick, Cadillac and Pontiac. Chevrolet got rather modest advertisements, and Opel and Vauxhall no advertising support at all. Clearly the General Motors plant chose only to advertise its fancier models, withdrawing from the fierce competition among the cheaper cars.

The opposite could be said of the advertising for the British Nuffield group. Its more

[10] Le Soir, 29 April 1950, p. 14.

expensive models, Riley, Wolseley and MG, were being advertised in general campaigns for the pool as a whole, but only for Morris, one of the great European successes among the cheapest cars (Laux, 1992, 120), were separate campaigns set up.

As for the content and look of the advertisements, not much had changed since the 1930s. The emphasis on price arguments was not so high anymore. Instead the picturing of a family scene had become very popular. The automobile market was about to enter its second take-off, and prospects were good in 1950. Gradually appeal arguments would return to automobile advertising, in an effort to convince some of the young families enjoying rising levels of income. The most successful make in the years to come would be Volkswagen. The German producer had a good product, low prices, and presented the most attractive advertising of 1950. Like its renowned American campaigns (Flink, 1993, 322-326), a touch of humor was involved. But —and this was a major difference as compared to the 1930s— the advertising was not done by the producer this time, but by the local Belgian importer, d'Ieteren. Another splendid example of modern advertising was to be found with Studebaker, another make with which d'Ieteren was dealing. More examples showed up in 1950 of local dealers who had clearly learned the art of advertising: L'Auto-Locomotion for Simca, Fiat and Hudson, Imperia for Standard, Helaers for Skoda, Grand Garage for BMW and DKW…

Linking advertisements to products

The disinterested attitude of the automobile producers towards advertising before the First World War was not due to a lack of advertising know-how, but simply a consequence of the specific position of the specific product automobile on the market. Similar patterns can be retraced in the interwar period, when modern advertising introduced appeal arguments.

Several authors on advertising culture have stressed the ‘symbolic dimension’ of modern advertising. An early example is to be found with Atwan in 1979:

Since the 1920s, advertising has played an integral role in determining the over-all design of automobiles and has contributed proportionately to the additional expenses that luxurious "appointments" and tempting "options" ultimately mean to the consumer. It has done this - as it has performed so many everyday "miracles" —by persistently wrapping the commodity in so many layers of sociocultural abstractions that it becomes nearly impossibly to use or merely look at the object without participating in the collective fiction. Nobody simply buys a car; rather, one purchases a Buick, a Cadillac, a Volkswagen, along with the entire range of values each "package" has, through heavy advertising, come to embody. Because it deals with an extremely vital cultural phenomenon, automobile promotion offers an excellent record of how modern advertising eventually made the use-value theory of classical economics as obsolete as the Model T. As Thorstein Veblen recognized, advertising created an additional economic dimension for everyday goods —their symbolic value. Automobile advertising accomplished this by consistently promoting the car as the fulfillment of a modern desire for style, status, sex, and speed. (Atwan, 1979, 154)

Without denying the importance of symbolic values inherent in modern advertising, I have tried to argue that arguments used in advertisements should be linked to commercial strategies as well as to broader cultural backgrounds. Advertising is never just advertising, it is always advertising for something. The presence —or absence— of appeal arguments has been a function of production techniques, commercial positions and the general situation on the market for the product involved. Arguments used in advertising do not just come into existence as an outcome of a natural process of evolution. Within an expanding market, the product-introducing force of appeal arguments can be useful. Yet producers will be likely to return to price/quality arguments whenever the market becomes stagnant, and competitive

pressure rises.

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