THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

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THE ETHIC DESIGN AND THE SEMIOTICS OF OBJECTS: EXAMPLE OF FOOD PACKAGING DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays the society is sensible of the importance of the ethics in different areas of human activity. The design, being the mediator between the man and the society, is heavily involved. It has to conform to the society demand as well as to the human expectations. So, the paper touches upon the problem of ethical communication through the packaging design.

The study focuses on resolving two problems. Firstly, it is to show how the semiotics methods, particularly the semiotics of objects and the sensitive semiotics contribute to the contemporary conception of design. Secondly, the research touches upon the ethical problems of design communication concerning the environment preoccupations and interpersonal relationship. On the example of the analysis of the food packaging design we will demonstrate how ethics emerge trough the different structure levels which compose the object: material object, the packaging as well as the object of sense, its discourse. The results of our research prove the high efficiency of semiotic methods at different steps of design conception.

Keywords: ethics, semiotics, food packaging design, brand communication, action

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is to discuss the problem of ethical communication through the packaging design.

I will begin with observing the link between the ethics, design and semiotics.

The notion of the ethic design is either not precise or well determined. We propose to define it in accordance with the three tendencies that influence the design.

Firstly, the ecological and social crisis imposes upon all social actors the new imperative of the eco-conception and of the eco-consumption. At present this principle guides the object conception activity. It is implicated at all steps of the object conception and its use: the use of materials, the biodegrability of the object, the energy economy, etc.

Secondly, the ethic design is characterized by its end (aim). This ethics arrives to the user's life with the notion of the social design. Its destiny is to answer to the true man's needs according to the global purpose to improve the other man's life and to create the space of life in common.

Thirdly, the ethics is manifested by the designer's responsibility who takes part in the creation or in the recreation of the social and cultural reality through the

objects. The object, created by the designer, mediates the person's attitude towards himself, towards the world and towards the other person.

Our research is based on the hypothesis that the objects impose upon the consumers the manners to do things and to be through the discourse which composes its structural levels. The aim of this paper is to describe the objects and the manner they influence our life and our decisions. We will compare the packaging of "Volvic" mineral water and the packaging of "Burn" energy drink. We will demonstrate the manifestation of different forms of life (ethics) that the object proposes adapting to the consumers. We will also describe how the packaging communicates with its user and how it transfers its competences to him.

We will use the semiotics methods as the methodological base for the description. The semiotic tools will allow as to describe the meaning of the object through its structural levels. So, we will distinguish the level of the object itself: the form, its constitution, the material, the color as well as different discourse levels.

Our study shall rely on the several semiotic approaches: i. the structural approach will allow us to describe the meaning of the objects in the reciprocal relation between two planes of the languages: the signified and the signifier; ii. the sensitive semiotics will help us to study the process of the human perception through different senses; iii. the semiotics of objects considers them as the active participants of the social practices and for this reason as the factitive objects, in other words as the objects that influence its users.

Now, I'd like to move on to discuss the question of the power of the objects.

2 THE POWER OF THE OBJECTS: THE ETHICAL QUESTION

The idea we'd like to defend in our research is that the objects which compose our reality take part in the meaning categorization and they create this reality. This is a type of belief that imposes upon the humans the programs of action, the manners to do things and to be.

This thought was discussed by the different researchers in different branches of science.

In philosophy - by Stephane Vial who focuses on the idea that the design modifies the qualitative mode of our existence experience, the mode of our being (presence in the word) (Vial, 2015: 93). He calls this phenomenon "ontophanies". In his opinion the design is not the field of objects but the field of effects.

We think that the semiotics approach provides further than any others to explain this phenomenon.

So, Andrea Semprini points out the intersubjective relationship between the subject and the object. Accordingly, the object becomes the mediator and the catalyst of the relationship of the individual to himself and to the other person. In his study "The Object as the Process and as the Action", he notes that the object obtains the meaning only in the observable human practice, and the perception of this meaning engages not only the cognitive activity of their members but also their body and the sensitive faculties. The object is the

energetic practice. "The object is both a driver and the energy source of the socialisation modes" (Semprini, 1995: 22).

J.-M. Floch proceeds with saying that the object reveals the project of life, the ethic aim which can be analysed through the structural levels of the object (figurative: iconic and plastic, narrative, axiological, emotional, and practical). The semiotic methods allowed him to describe the "identity style" of the social groups through the object discourse and to reveal "the coherent deformation" of these identity styles. They got visible (observable) through the rhythmic style which transfers the competences of the object to the user (Floch, 2010).

So, from the point of view of semiotics, the design is considered as the communication act that takes part in the enunciation scene and represents the semiotic situation where the object mediates the interaction between the enunciator (designer) and the receiver (user). It makes the manipulation and contributes to transforming the cognitive and emotional mood of the user.

In other words, the object is considered as being manipulated and as the manipulator. It becomes the mean of the social power as it has the ability to influence its users' actions. It is a performative and a factitive object. This approach to the objects study, assimilated to the communicative act, emphasizes the persuasive efficiency.

Ann Beyaert in her study "The semiotics of design" (Anne Beyaert, 2012: 4) indicates that the semiotics suggests studying the object not from the point of view of its functions but of its values. The values are the semantic characteristics (features) of the objects and at the same time, the consumers' preferences that drive (motivate) their actions. This is a central notion of the semiotic theory of ethics.

Moving on to the next part I wish presenting the methodology of our study as well as the definition of ethics from the semiotics point of view.

3 THE ETHICS IN SEMIOTICS AND THE METHODOLOGY OF ITS STUDY

The ethical question concerns the study of the action, which includes two central axes: the ideal and another man.

It is the level where the values gather in the systems which influence the individuals' actions. The ethic is manifested by the specific meaning organisation defining the project of life of the individual who is guided in his action by the value that marks the subject position in the action field. Thus the value determines the aim of the action. The values are embodied in the objects that become the object of value or the object of human desire. By getting these objects, the man obtains happiness and finalizes his identity construction. Therefore, the values define the project of life, a vision of life, the belief that forms the man's behaviour and influences his decisions.

So, the ethical question in design concerns i. the modelisation of the relationship between the subjects by the intermediate of the objects; ii. the construction of the value systems, integrated in the objects, circulating in the society; iii. also the integration of these values in the body of subjects through the sensitive modes of contact in the distance and in the proximity, and through the sensorimotor areas.

The ethic design and the semiotics of objects: example of food packaging design

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For our research, we will apply several theories of Paris Semiotics School.

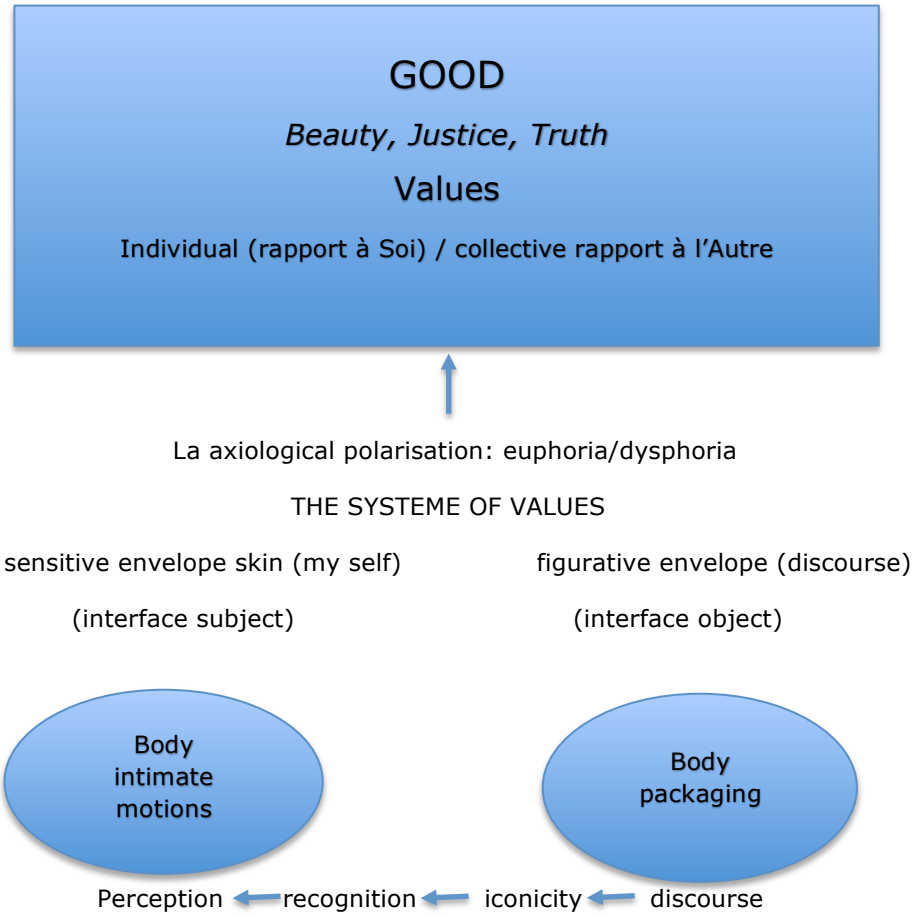
Firstly, we will follow the suggestions of J. Fontanille and X. Arias Gonzalez who propose to consider the objects as the languages and to study them by the intermediate of the traces that witness for the social interactions.

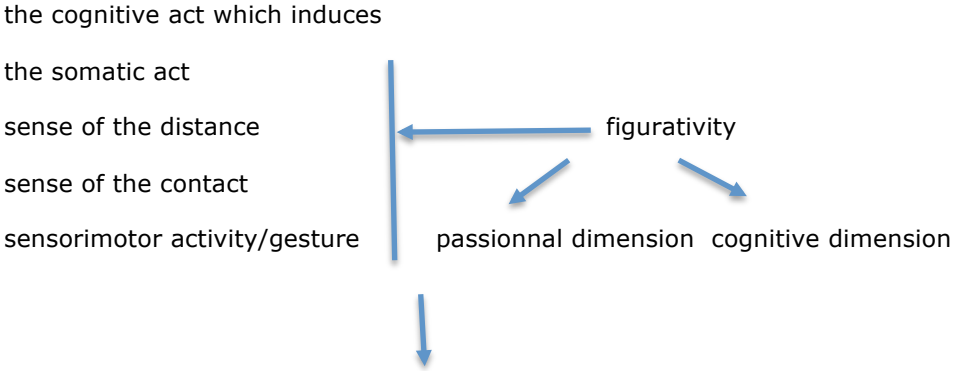
"The interactions "mark" the body of the objects, provide them with the capacity of the memory or of the anticipation towards the users. These marks show the traces which can be interpreted and make the objects communicable. The forms of these traces also acquire the rhetoric and persuasive function which results from the creation of the figures on the object body" (Fontanille, Gonzalez, 2009: 53).

Then, our question concerning the interaction between the subject and the object needs to study the mechanism of the values transfer from the object body where they are integrated as traces, to the subject body, the users.

In other words the factitivity (the performative power) interlinks with the identity transformation (ethos) of the consumer by the intermediate of the packaging. The identity transformation comes with the transformation of the manner to do (action program) and the formation of new habits.

We propose the scheme of the interaction-modelisation between the object body and the subject body. This scheme is inspired by the studies of J. Fontanille (Fontanille, 2004).





Secondly, looking forward to describing the forms of life, imposed by the objects, we will rely on the definition of the forms of life proposed by J. Fontanille: "The forms of life conceived as the configurations where "the philosophy of life" is manifested by the coherent deformation of the totality of the structures defining the project of life" (Fontanille, 1993).

So, the aim of our description is first to identify these coherent deformations in the discourse through the linguistics traces, in other words "the fixed iconic forms" that characterize the identity of the social group inside the culture. After that we'll proceed to the comparison of these social identities.

The figurative and plastic manifestation of the drink discourse will allow us to capture the fixed configurations defining the strategic style as well as the values specific to an identity type. Then, through the constant elements of the plane of expression we'll be able to define an ethic (or an esthetical) style (sensitive), which conforms to the constant contents of the deep level (axiological level) defining the form of life. Moreover, by studying the strategic combinations we will characterize the cognitive properties (dimension) of the forms of life, and by observing plastic and the figurative configurations, we will identify the esthetical type (style) (the sensitive dimension) of the identity type.

4 PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH BODY

Now, we'll present the body of our research. It is to reveal the peculiarities of the packaging communication which has become important for our analysis.

1. If the design of the object of everyday life like a table or a chair is in conformity with the intention to satisfy the true human needs: comfort, praticity, aesthetic, it is not the case of the packaging. Caring the traces of the social interactions, the packaging reflects many practices which are in the interaction. Their objects often come in confrontation and provoke the axiological conflict. On the one hand, the product representation is supervised by the marketing strategy which principal goal is to present the product different from the concurrent ones. On the other hand, the discourse strategy must be able to be in conformity with the interests of consumer who require the ethical communication and the true information. And finally this strategy will have to be able to take into account the society requirement, expressed in laws and deontological codes of the ethical communication that aims to improve social and environment conditions. The brands enhance the ethical contents which express the strategical positioning. The ethical engagement will allow them to

sell their goods. So, the packaging as an object represents for us an interesting example of the practices accommodation and regulation guided by the ethics.

2. The packaging offers us a complex case of discourse stratification on different levels: i. plane of the expression and plane of the contents of the surface of the pack (sticker) as well as the stratification of the object itself. The different discourse layers (levels) interact in order to express a form of life, a particular vision of the world and to make the consumer adhere to these manners to see and to act. These are the syncretic and multimodal texts composed of different languages of the manifestation, which act together.

3. Our work hypothesis is the packaging discourse is a discourse in act. Through its figurative and plastic expressions it condenses the identity of the target actant, the collective actant, its manner to be present in the world, to live and to do which are concentrated around the kernel. In its foundation, there is the hierarchical organisation of values with a more important value in the centre and the others, subordinate values at the periphery. This value hierarchical organisation manifests the priorities which motivate the actions and which are organised in programs.

So, the ethic in our study is manifested at two levels: as the axiological positioning and as expressing the idea of the supreme Good (marked ethical contents). Nowadays the ethics promotes the idea of the social justice reflected in the concept of fair trade, sustainable development and organic farming.

5 **ANALYSE**

I'd like to start with describing Volvic bottle which represents the category of mineral waters, the collective actant composed of many identities (Evian, Badoit, Vittel). In spite of their differences, there are competences that they have in common. So, the identity of the group is composed of the set (combination) of competences distinguishing this identity from the other ones. We have chosen Volvic bottle as a presenter of the mineral water category because of its ecological character reflecting the tendencies of our epoch.

The second object that will be compared with Volvic bottle is "Burn" tin, the energy drink. It also represents the combination of competences characterizing its category. "Burn" tin is manifesting the project of life different from the mineral water one.

« VOLVIC » bottle

The values which the green bottle expresses and that are associated with "Volvic" brand are manifested by the means of the isotopies. The isotopies in semiotics are the constant and repetitive contents. They determine the themes of the communication. They characterize the form of "sustainable" life. The values which compose this form of life, are balance, stability, well-being, worry for oneself and for another person.

The "sustainable" form of life emerges (or appears) through the figurative structure of the bottle form as well as its iconic and verbal organization of the sticker. The aim is to identify the fixed discourse configurations at all object levels (figurative, narrative, modal, axiological and the object level itself) which manifest the coherence, congruence and cohesion.

The analysis of the figurative level shows us that the bottle belongs to the vegetal world and to the nature, to something of "not pollutant", alive, eternal ones. It is opposed to the culture, to everything chemical or artificial and to everything that brings to death. These contents become observable through the bottle form that looks like a leaf or a petal or growing as a flower. The strips on the bottle surface have not got any practical vocation (to squeeze) but to mark the similarities with the veins in a leaf.

Figure 1

The cognitive discourse is expressed by the intermediate of the motives on the bottle sticker. They concern the product, the packaging, the brand and the consumer.

Figure 2

At the foreground of the picture we see the logo with the volcano in the centre and the brand name in big letters - "Volvic". The text stresses the geographical origin of the product and its natural and ecological characteristics: "Born in the volcano eco-system". So, both, the picture and the text focus the attention on the same content, called the "isotopie" in semiotics. As for the brand's name "Volvic", it is composed of two words and two concepts expressing the brand values which the marketing strategy is founded on: Volcano and Life.

Even the letters typography reminds the water jets playing with the iconicity degree (between the picture and the text). We see that different expression modes (iconic, graphic and verbal) are in the perfect coherence to express the idea of the natural origin of water highlighting the idea of its quality.

This coherence is observable not only between the different parts of the sticker but also between the parts of the bottle. The trace of the logo is on the green bottle cap (volcano and the brand name). The information concerns also the recycling because this bottle is 100% recyclable, according the sticker's data.

Then, the ethics arises here, firstly, by the positioning that the object occupies among the other objects (other bottles of the same category; other mineral waters) or among the objects of other categories of products (energy drinks, sodas, fruit juices). Secondly, by the obvious presence of ethical expressing the idea of living together in the social space for long. These contents transfer the idea of the (fair) exchange in the usage of the planet resources. The bottle sticker reveals here the temporal extension of the justice (the relation between

the present and the future). At the same time another Volvic bottle expresses the spatial extension of the justice, because the brand is engaged to provide the Sahel inhabitants with water they need.

Figure 3

On the sticker we can see the photos of smiling people who express their happiness. The contact with the consumer is established by the mean of the eyes of the people in front of us on the sticker. The photography here has the authentication function. It has been arrived. So, the enunciation assures the junction between two spaces and between two worlds: the world of here, the space of the consumer doing his shopping and the space of somewhere, of the Sahel people obtaining the water due to the actions of the brand and the consumers who buy Volvic water. So, the brand engages itself as well as the consumers to do the ethical action buying Volvic water.

On the narrative level the packaging tells a story of the bottle life and proceeds to different periods of its existence: the cycles of its life, and particularly the last phase, recycling. Taking into consideration that the end of the bottle life presents the danger for the environment, the brands try to rectify this situation by their argumentative strategy. We see many appeals to recycle, the instructions for manipulating the bottle before recycling it. The bottle of vegetal origin which is better for the environment then the other ones. So, Volvic looks forward to anticipate the social requirement and the consumers' expectations.

The cognitive discourse (speech) reflecting the worry for another person by preserving the natural environment and by defending the social justice comes together with the sensitive discourse. This discourse invokes the plastic characteristics: colour, graphics, forms, and topological properties – space disposition). They play an important role for creating the object sensible (esthetical) style, to provoke an emotion, a particular mood. The concept of the naturalness which brings the nutritional value (good for the health) to the water is transferred through the green colour of the sticker and the cap. The matter is that previously Volvic bottle was has been blue stressing the idea of purity but then it has been substituted by the green colour which expresses this meaning differently. Firstly, it focuses the users' attention on the ecological origin of the bottle and the water and then, on purity as a consequence of the preserved nature.

The esthetical style of the majority of mineral water bottles is characterized by the horizontality, emphasizing the static position and the stability. This is the case of the mineral water of the mountains of Auvergne and Badoit.

Figure 4

Volvic gathers horizontality of the volcano with the verticality of the volcano jets which are presented by the mean of the brand name letters, elongated vertically and the circularity, represented by the logo. All these plastic characteristics aims to express the idea of permanent renew of the nature and the water cycles as well as the permanency and the stability of the brand values.

The modal level is also important because this level is responsible for the transformation (modelisation) of the mood (soul state). The first requirement to begin the communication between the brand and the consumer is to provide the fiduciary agreement assuring by the modality "to believe" or "to trust"). This modality allows to transfer the competences from the object body to the subject (user's) body. If the consumer trusts, the brand he adheres to his values and buy the product. Otherwise, the lack of this belief brings to the rejection of the values embodied in the object.

On the level of the object the belief is created by the transparency of the bottle which allows to the consumer to "be able to see" the water in contrast to the energy drink tin. Its opaque tin prohibits to "be able to see". This bottle transparency, as the communication one, are due to the material properties (transparent plastic). The material also expresses the isotopie "ecology" because it is a more important point of the Volvic communication: "Vegetal bottle. 20% vegetal origin. 100% recyclable". The "being able to see" of the consumer allows him to be assured and as a consequence to accept the form of life that the brand proposes to him be the intermediate of the object.

Our research confirms the observation of the scientists-semioticians (A. Beyaert, J. Fonatnille) who indicate the importance of the material for the object meaning construction and its close relation with practices.

Concerning the deontic modalities the bottle incorporates the combination of "having to do /must do" and "having to be/must be" that the society imposes on its citizens: save natural resources and energy, make the selective sorting, contribute to the reduction of the carbon emission, share the goods. The brand adheres to these modal values and it proposes them to consumers through the different expression modes: verbal, visual, mixed (icons, pictograms, typography). They are manifested in the communication dynamics through the rhythms and emotional style. Then, the ethics (the values –content element) and the aesthetic (expressive, sensible style) act together in the order to make living the consumer in the world of their values.

« BURN » tin

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The communication of the energy drinks reveals the ethics (project of life) quite differently to us.

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

The difference between the content quality of the drink (there is no question to promote the healthy lifestyle) obliges the brands to position the product differently and to choose a strategy which focuses on the passions but not on the arguments.

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

As for the figurative level we see that the cognitive discourse is poorly presented. We observe the list of the product components as well as some warnings at the backing of the tin: the drink is not recommended to children, pregnant women and people sensible to caffeine. So, the drink is dangerous. The communication on the surface of the tin is reduced by the plastic mode of expression. Our attention is caught by the presence of the bright colours mixed with the anthracite colours which mean the intensity of the effect, produced by the drink but also the intensity of the emotion of the living experience. This intensity marks both, the object and the subject bodies.

The second peculiarity that characterizes the energy drink communication is the graphics features. As for the lines the energy drink values the horizontality in the order to mean the vertical movement (direction) of the energy which liberates in the body and which deploys outside.

The visual figures going with the brand names also present the high energetic potential, even a certain aggressivity which the degree changes for different drinks. So, we pass from the angelic word of the mineral waters to the diabolical word of the energy drinks.

"Burn" packaging plays with the intense colours: black, red, yellow and white. They appears both in the brand name and in the picture. A yellow-red-white

flame appears on the black background of the pack. The contours of the flame as well as the alternating colours provoke the effect of intense movement (motion). The letter's typography also reminds the flame motion that expresses the verticality. There is a perfect coherence between the verbal and iconic expression.

Then, the drink draws attention to the person's interior word. It delivers the Ego, but not the reasonable one but emotional (sensational one). It encourages us to being carried away by the passion, imprisoned in the body and delivered by "Burn" drink that inflames. This communication invites us to live in a present moment without worrying about future like a flame that gets born, gives the light and dies without leaving any traces. The drink provides intense energy that doesn't serve to create but to live carried by the passion. The night, the uncountable energy and the passion are the dominant isotopies of this communication. It is important to stress that the manner with what the visual discourse on the tin surface creates the links between the figurative meaning, the quality of the content, the drink and the interior (sensitive) world of the consumer. Burn imposes the program of the action and the practices to adopt in life which expresses the life project: live intensively at the present moment. The time is denied, temporary period is short, the social space is reduced.

The modal values is manifested not only by the intermediate of the figurative dimension and expresses the intensity of the individualist "wanting" or "desire" (wanting to enjoy life pleasures), but also by the intermediate of the material of the pack. The drink is always hidden inside the opaque packaging as if there was a secret in this "not to being able to do". It has been done not to show the drink's quality but to describe its effect (impact). But as a consequence the drink's buying will be entirely resulted from the meaning effect created by the packaging. The presence of the modality "not being able to see" can provoke two strategies. On the one hand, the secret induces the desire to discover, buy, drink and try. On the other hand, this absence of the visual information allows not to focus attention on the chemical components of the dangerous drink and to speak about other subjects, in other words, to hide.

At the narrative level, the lack of the consumer that the product promises to provide him, is the emotional intensity. We have founded the pictures that show the product with the actors and the in practices where it takes part and which allows the consumer to accomplish the program of his identity construction.

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

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Figure 15. Apprends qui tu es !

So, the product by the packaging mediation takes part to in the practice and it invites the consumer to participate repeating the same program of action.

6 CONCLUSION

Starting our analysis by the figurative level and going through the themes we have reached the axiological level (of values) organising the forms of life. We have also defined the project of life, the aim (la visée) which supports and guides them.

First of all we have revealed the values at the paradigmatic level characterizing the forms of life. According to the fundamental category of the continuity and discontinuity, we could identify two opposite types manifesting two strategic types of the consumers:

continuity / nature

temporality / aspectuality : durable action, link between the past, the present and the future, the time is valued

rythm, tempo : horizontality (statics), soft colours ; slow tempo

values : health, well-being, longevity

passions / emotions : balance, absence of affects

valorisation de l'espace social : wide space (me citizen), another person (nature, future generations, Sahel inhabitants)

high extent (+++), low intensity (+)

Ethics of sustainability

discontinuity /culture

temporality / aspectuality : intense action but it does not last, live by present moment, the time is denied.

rythm, tempo : verticality (dynamics), bright colours ; quick tempo

values : live l'intensively by the present moment

passions / emotions : affects, emotional intensity

valorisation of the individual space : « me », narrow space

high intensity (+++), low extent (+)

Ethics of rupture

The tensive model expresses the modulation of the action force (power), manifested by every form of life (strategic type).

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The semiotic approach has allowed us to describe the organisation of two strategic styles. We have observed that the organising centre is supported by the values systems for each form of life. This value gives a particular orientation of the discourse construction concerning different levels (immanence planes). It is interesting to note that the sustainable form of life is manifested through the installation of the cognitive strategy as the use the rational argumentation. This strategy needs employing the verbal means of expression while "BURN" brand uses the emotional strategy by the intermediate of the iconic and plastic means of expression.

Through our analysis, we have also tried to show the manner that the object proposes to the consumer sharing its values as well as sharing its action program. This transfer is made at cognitive, sensitive and gesture levels. It is to stress the importance of the figurative level that assures the mediation between the world and the subject, on the one hand, and the discourse and the subject, on the other hand.

We hope that our research is able to make a little contribution to the more important problem: the designer role in creation of the social and cultural reality through the object as well as the use of the discourse resources by brands in order to create the objects. With the help of our analysis we'd like to open up the discussion on several questions (problems) which have not been thoroughly studied.

1. Is it possible to practise the ethic design in the field of the industrial design, for example, the packaging? Or will the marketing aim always control other aims?

2. How to regulate the practices which goals come into conflict?

3. We think that it is important to redefine the material status in the design as well as the interaction the object levels (material and formal support) with the surface inscription.

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