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## DRAMATIC TRANSACTIONS IN THE DISCOURSE OF ADVERTISING

### Abstract

My paper deals with dramatic transactions (as identified in advertisements), with a special focus on the roles of the Persecutor, the Victim and the Saviour, in different ego states (Parent, Adult and Child). These are present in many circumstances in people's everyday life and are also used by ad makers in order to influence and seduce the receiver. We use a multidisciplinary methodological approach which combines various fields, such as communication, psychology, psychotherapy, semiotics, rhetoric, transactional analysis and linguistics. We intend to define each of the three statuses, their roles and the mechanisms that govern their dynamics in the discourse of advertising. These are part of a game that triggers the attention and the desire of the receiver towards a certain product or service, which 'is meant' to improve his life. In order to determine the most important dramatic transactions in the advertising messages, we will investigate a few printed commercials from the interwar period, published in the Romanian weekly magazine *Realitatea Ilustrată* (*The Illustrated Reality*).

Keywords: advertising, transactional analysis, communication, semiotics, iconotext

### Introduction

Born and developed as a theory of personality, transactional analysis is used in the fields of psychotherapy as a method of improving people's capacity of observing and reconsidering their status and behaviour in the communication acts under any circumstances. This approach is used for a better understanding of the structure of the personality, viewed from a psychological point of view. It was created and developed by Eric Berne (1964) and Stephen Karpman (1968). Transactional analysis observes the social interactions – called *transactions* – to determine the aspects of the ego states of the communicators, based on their personality and their behaviour. This approach also offers a broader perspective on the field of the communication, because it helps people improve their psycho-cognitive and behavioural manifestations. It can be used at both the individual and organisational levels and the results improve the capacity of the person and the organisation to reconfigure their mentality/organisational culture and the attitude towards certain realities.

Transactional analysis is also used to determine the life script of children, by explaining how the behavioural schemes of adults actually began in their childhood. Therefore, transactions are already learned and tested in the past and transposed into the present life of the individual. The ego state was defined by E. Berne as a constant totality of thoughts and feelings associated with certain behaviours.

According to R. De Lassus, "life is full of dramas" and dramatic tensions (2000: 51). In our daily life, we often live conflicts which involve the roles of the Persecutor and of the Persecuted.

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These dynamics entail the manifestation of the third role, that of the Rescuer. This relation between the three factors creates a *drama triangle* (Karpman, 1968) and the roles are activated under specific circumstances situations, triggering a specific response from the other roles. Eric Berne, a Canadian-born psychiatrist, physician and psychoanalyst, observed the Freudian talk therapy and realised that he can get more results by watching the patients' social transactions. That way, personality and human relationships were seen from a different angle which provided more important insights.

### The States of the Personality

The three states of the ego are:

1 – *The Parent ego state*, with two different roles, the Critical Parent (in a positive way, he is Protective and in a negative way, he is a Persecutor) and the Nurturing Parent (in a positive way, he may be Caring and in a negative way, he may be a Rescuer).

The Parent state combines the values, the principles, the beliefs about life and about the world, norms, standards, rules that we collected throughout our entire life, but especially during childhood. Each individual thinks, lives and reacts according to them, even if he / she may not be aware of that. The Parent has a normative attitude when imposing these rules and norms through his / her verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal communication acts. In this ego state, the person acts in an educative, normative way, using an authoritarian attitude to authorise and prohibit opinions or behaviours. In the protective role, he / she will use his / her belief system and his / her behaviour to dictate, to lead, to judge, to criticise and to protect. On the other hand, the Caring Parent helps, encourages, appreciates, and takes over the responsibilities of others, thus being overprotective. In this way, he / she plays the role of the Rescuer of the others, who he thinks he / she must help. We often observe this status in ads, where a hero (human or not) comes to save the receiver, to rescue him / her from unhappiness and an unhealthy life.

2 – *The Adult ego state* (has a mature behaviour / attitude, thinks and feels as a reaction to here and now). This state acts like a computer which “compares, evaluates, analyses, thinks, registers and communicates information, [and] demands” (De Lassus, 2000: 38).

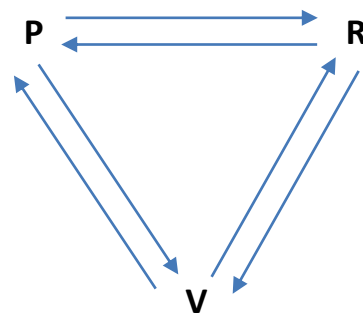
3 – *The Child ego state*, with two roles, the Adaptive / Adapted (in a negative way, he / she is Rebellious and has a submissive or vindictive behaviour) and the Free Child (he / she has a spontaneous behaviour, he / she is creative and intuitive). The Adapted Child “adapts to the needs of the others (obedience), stays aside and devaluates himself (V[ictim]), sustains systematically the contrary (rebellious)” (*ibidem*). The Free Child is spontaneous, behaves naturally, and easily expresses his / her feelings and emotions (*ibidem*) He / she mostly manifests the felt experiences of his body and heart (*idem*, 39).

When a person thinks, feels and behaves like a Critical Parent, he / she takes on the role of a parent who impacted his / her life during the childhood. If someone thinks, feels and behaves like a child, he / she is in the child's ego state. We may observe these ego states accordingly in the discourse of advertising, as well as the transactions between them. It might be surprising that ad makers choose “to invite” the receiver in a dramatic model of communication, but they are creating this game knowing that the consumer already has the appropriate beliefs and behavioural systems to respond in a specific way to their message. Actually, they create the ad's message on this basis. The education we received, the models we had around us in childhood and all our experiences contributed to our actions and reactions in the present.

### Dramatic Transactions in Ads

In a psycho-dynamic and communicational approach, we will observe how the messages of commercials are conceived in order to address the public persuasively. In a semiotic approach, these manifestations of the Persecutor, the Rescuer and the Victim act like psycho-affective and cognitive codes in the advertising message (Klinkenberg, 2004: 42-44). “Drama begins when these roles are established, or are anticipated by the audience. There is no drama unless there is a switch in the roles” (Karpman, 1968: 40).

The drama triangle proposed by S. Karpman, in 1968, with the switching of the three roles (Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim), is reproduced below.



*Drama triangle* (Karpman, 1968: 40)

Referring to the drama, Karpman compares it with *transactional games*, admitting that drama “has a greater number of events, a greater number of switches per event, and one person often plays two or three roles at once. The games are simpler and there is one major switch, *i.e.* in « I’m only trying to help you » there is one rotation (counterclockwise) in the drama triangle: the Victim switches to Persecutor and the Rescuer becomes the new Victim” (1968: 40). Also the drama stops when the individual recognizes his thoughts, feelings and behaviours, being aware that what he manifests triggers a certain behaviour from the other pole of communication.

The Victim, positioned at bottom of the Karpman’s Triangle, relates to both the Persecutor and the Rescuer, situated in the top positions. This role is guided after the formula “Poor me”, “I’m a victim”. When a person plays the role of the Victim, he / she feels fear, shame, powerless, helplessness, guilt, unsafety, uncertainty, hopeless, and he / she is oppressed and victimized in all circumstances where he/she plays that role.

The Persecutor builds his actions and reactions based on the formulas “It’s your fault!”, “You don’t know.” He uses the argument of the authority to suppress, to blame, to judge, to criticise, exploiting the weaknesses of the Victim.

The Rescuer is the one who helps the Victim and he feels guilty if he does not do it. He follows the slogan “Let me help you!”, “I’m the only one who can help you.”, “Your life / safety / health / happiness depends on me.” When the Rescuer interferes with the capacity of the Victim to help him- / herself, this one remains in the powerless state and cannot assume the responsibility and create the optimal strategies and tactics to process his / her needs and to overcome the drama. As long as the Victim plays this role, he / she will automatically attract the Persecutor and also the Rescuer. This creates an interdependent dynamic between the three roles. When the Rescuer is too busy to help someone else, then he will not concentrate on his own issues. Therefore, the danger to project his own dramas on the people he tries to save is imminent.

Any switch of each one of these roles will reconfigure the transactions and the roles may change, so, for example, the Victim may realise that he / she fulfils this role, and the anger may arise because he / she observes that his / her helplessness was exploited in order to keep him / her in that state of powerlessness. In that moment, the Victim becomes oppressive and starts to play the role of the Persecutor. The Persecutor becomes an oppressed Victim and therefore he / she needs a Rescuer. These mechanisms are active and they act and switch as long as the actants continue to play those specific roles.

The three roles are visible in the wide spectrum of the creative advertising messages, where they exploit all the possibilities of expression in order to seduce and persuade the receiver, while giving him / her the false impression that he / she made a conscious choice. The creators of ads use all the seductive-creative mechanisms to persuade the Victim that he / she needs a Rescuer, in order to have a better life, regardless of the promoted product or service. The unsafe state of spirit of the helpless consumer is resolved by the Caring Parent who will help him get out of the uncomfortable place. They are both attracted in a dramatic context, which needs a finality, intended by ad makers from the very beginning. Every Victim state requires a Rescuer state while suffering because of a Persecutor, and every Rescuer needs a Victim in order to fulfill its role and functionality to save and protect. Therefore, we may suppose that this manipulative strategy was especially prepared for the receiver to respond in a positive way to the message.

1 – The By-Oxine commercial (*The Illustrated Reality*, 1935) – appendix 1

In a normative and moralising way, the Critical Parent uses judgements, stereotypes, cultural metaphors and various proverbs through words and expressions with an educational touch. For example, in the commercial By-Oxine, the moralising attitude addressed to the receiver amplifies the importance of the product through a comparison of the latter with the long process of conquering the trust of the public: “The trust of the public is not so easy to win. You have to earn it... It’s the case of the product By-Oxine – a serious dentifrice”. The Emitter plays an educational role, just like a parent would teach his child an important lesson: that it’s not so easy to earn something important in life and the worthy things must be deserved. The normative-protective attitude of the Critical Parent is emphasized by the transmitter by adding the word “serious”, to reiterate the importance of what he stated in the first part of the message.

2 – The Chlorodont commercial (*The Illustrated Reality*, 1936) – appendix 2

This commercial uses a moralising message to disempower the receiver: “No matter how much you know, you don’t know enough! It’s not the same thing, dear friend, if you wash your teeth in the morning or in the evening. Of course, taking care of your teeth in the morning is better than nothing, but it’s more important to wash your teeth in the evening. In this way, during the sleep the food remaining between the teeth decomposes, forming the lactic acid, which destroys the enamel so precious for the teeth. Therefore, the last thing in the evening, and the first thing in the morning let it be Chlorodont. The big tube 30 Lei, the small tube 19 Lei” (translation mine). The imperative tone of the first affirmation, “No matter how much you know, you don’t know enough!” is representative of the critical manifestation of the Parent ego state. The emitter literally affirms that the receiver “doesn’t know too much”, therefore, he has to listen to what he has to say and to follow the imperative instructions.

The first impression of the receiver could be of a diminished status and a deplorable cultural level, by negating him any chance to “know” something. No matter how big are the efforts of the Adaptive/Obedient child, the Critical Parent gives the verdict that he still “doesn’t know enough”, that’s why he is not fully accepted the way he is and in order for him to be accepted and to be *smarter*, he has to learn how to use properly the Chlorodont toothpaste. The severe Parent doesn’t appreciate the intelligence of the child and directs him towards the key to the new reality that has the power to make him smarter. From this ego state, the Critical Parent leads through authority, judging and imposing his personal beliefs. By unfolding the advantages and the benefits of the usage of the Chlorodont toothpaste, the Critical Parent switches from the judgemental position to a positive status, becoming protective for the helpless child. His arguments are meant to support the affirmations made at the beginning and to reinforce them.

3 – The Chlorodont commercial (*The Illustrated Reality*, 1936) – appendix 3

Another Chlorodont commercial uses the same dramatic transaction: “What you learn when you’re young is good for you in your old age. The children do not know the bad consequences of the neglect of the teeth. They must often suffer because of that, while not being guilty of anything, their childhood becoming a torment because of the toothaches. As the mother familiarises her child with the water and the soap, so must she teach him as soon as possible, to clean his little teeth with the toothpaste Chlorodont, because the healthy baby teeth make the entire dentition, which is forming, to become healthier. A special advantage of the Chlorodont toothpaste is its cleaning and so fine component, as well as the pleasant taste of mint which make the toothpaste to be gladly used by children on a daily basis daily basis. Chlorodont, the big tube 30 Lei, the small tube 19 Lei”.

Again, using the authority pattern, the emitter begins the argumentative discourse with a *wise saying*: “What you learn when you’re young is good for you in your old age”. He situates himself in the position of a leader, playing the role of the normative Parent. He teaches the Adaptive Child the importance of cleaning his teeth, from the status of an experienced person. Emphasizing the importance of that first statement, the Critical Protective Parent teaches the obedient children a lesson, because they “do not know the bad consequences” of not cleaning their teeth and “they must often suffer because of that”, even if “they are not guilty”.

The Critical Protective Parent doesn’t blame the child, but continues to give him instructions. The arguments he uses are unfolding in a persuasive discourse which reinforces the function and the importance of taking care of the teeth from an early age.

4 – The Ady 75 commercial (*The Illustrated Reality*, 1937) – appendix 4

In this commercial, we encounter the ego state of the Critical Parent, which is expressed through a common saying: “« Believe and don’t research is not our slogan ». Research the fabric and the beauty of the pantyhose « ADY 75 » and you will convince yourself of the quality of this product. Simple. Supple. Elegant. Lasting.”. The Nurturing Parent indicates to the Adaptive / Obedient Child to search and research and not to believe everything. He reinforces the importance of the first sentence “Believe and don’t research is not our slogan”, where he uses the negation to accentuate actually the importance of that affirmation. The Argument of the quality is expressed through the word itself, “quality”, which is followed by a series of attributes that empowers it: “Supple. Elegant. Lasting.”. The Parent becomes protective by encouraging the Adaptive Child to explore the quality by him- / herself.

5 – The Palmolive commercial (*The Illustrated Reality*, 1938) – appendix 5

“Keep in mind this lesson! «For the skin nothing is better than the oil D’Olive ». Because Palmolive – in the composition of which there is olive oil and palm oil – is so fine for the sensitive skin of the little Dionne, of course that it will be as satisfying for you as well! Indeed, the nature didn’t create anything more efficient than these vegetable oils to tone the skin, making it fine and tender in the same time. Therefore, lady, try this very night the Palmolive soap. The five Dionne twins use only Palmolive, the soap with d’olive oil.” This ad is a clear model of communication between the Critical Parent and the Adaptive child. The first one even begins his discourse with a specific didactic-moralising sentence: “Keep in mind this lesson!”, and accentuates his authority role by using the word “lesson”. Also, using the exclamation point, the Critical Parent emphasizes the imperative tone of the *wise teacher*.

## Conclusions

In all these messages, the receiver is trapped in the role of the Victim. When the emitter plays the role of the Critical Parent (both the negative – the Persecutor – and the positive side – the Protector), communication is oriented from top to bottom, from a superior source of knowledge and wisdom to an inferior and imperfect individual. Perfection is being imposed in imperative sentences, using different formulas to accentuate the argument of the authority (“serious”).

As we observed in the analysed commercial from the interwar period, the advertising addresses the Parent’s ego state. It does that by using the criteria of the values, the beliefs and principles from the collective consciousness, the traditions, the proverbs, the well-known sayings, the cultural rituals, the interdictions, the norms etc. These are used as an argument to impose authority to the Child.

As long as these three ego states maintain the dramatic tension, the advertising message will exploit the vulnerability of the receivers and it will act from a persuasive, authoritarian and protective position, which allows it to have all the solutions to all already known problems of the consumer. In this way, every time the receiver perceives the message, he finds the answers to all his / her problems, as if someone already knew what these are. The solution is seen like a miracle, like a life jacket in the turbulent ocean of apparently pressing needs.

Being unconsciously lured into a space of shortage, the consumer becomes the Adaptive Child who starts to believe that he needs that product and that service in order to become more safe, happier, and healthier. While he unconsciously decides and chooses from this position, he acts like as if he were totally aware of his choices. In the analysed commercials, we observed that the arguments used by the Critical Parent gave him a protective status, which took him out of the negative role of Persecutor.

According to M. Jouve, “the advertising gives the possibility to the Parent state to affirm what he believes, to prove his capacity, to have in turn a role of example and of support. Through his very pronounced normative and educative role, advertising often situates its emitter in this state of Parent” (2005: 52).

In a strategic game created by ad makers, the messages function like invitations into a utopian world, where the Rescuer offers a solution to the problems, the lacks and the needs of the receiver,

through the products and the services they promote. The receiver plays the role of the victim without even realising it, sometimes being even amazed by the way the messages actually respond to his / her needs.

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- \*\*\* *Realitatea ilustrată*, personal collection, 1935-1938.

#### APPENDIXES



Appendix 1



Appendix 2



**Ce înveți la tinerețe,  
prinde bine la bătrânețe**

Copiii nu cunosc urmările rele ale neglijării dinților. De multe ori trebuie să sufere, nevinovați din cauza aceasta, copilăria lor devenind un chin din pricina durerilor de dinți. Dupăcum mama își obișnuiește copilul cu apa și săpunul, tot așa trebuie să-l învețe cât mai din vreme, să-și curețe dinții cu pasta de dinți Chlorodont, căci dinții de lapte sănatoși fac ca întreaga dantură, ce li se formează, să fie tot sănătoasă. Un avantaj deosebit al pastei de dinți Chlorodont este componentul ei curățitor atât de fin, precum și gustul plăcut de mentă, cari fac ca pasta să fie întrebuințată zilnic de copii, cu plăcere. Chlorodont, tubul mare Lei 30.—, tubul mic Lei 19.—.

Appendix 3



**CREDE  
ȘI NU  
CERCETA**

nu e deviza  
noastră.

Cercetați țesătura și frumusețea ciorapului „ADY” 75, și vă veți convinge de calitatea superioară a acestui produs

**75**

**ady**

- SUPLU
- ELEGANT
- DURABIL

Appendix 4

*Retineți această lecție!*  
„PENTRU TEN, NIMIC NU ESTE MAI BUN DECÂT ULEIUL D'OLIVE”



Deoarece Palmolive - în a cărei compoziție intră ulei d'olive și ulei de palmier - este atât de fin pentru pielea sensibilă a micuțelor Dionne, desigur că va fi tot atât de binefăcător și pentru Dy. Într'adevăr, natura n'a creat nimic mai eficient decât aceste uleiuri vegetale pentru a tonifica pielea, făcând-o în același timp fină și fragilă. Așadar, domnă, încercați chiar astăzi scara săpunul Palmolive.

**PALMOLIVE**

Lei 20  
BUCATA

**CELE 5 GEMENE DIONNE NU INTREBUINTEAZĂ DECÂT PALMOLIVE, SĂPUNUL CU ULEI D'OLIVE**

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Appendix 5