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CHILD CONSUMPTION AND FOOD (IN)SECURITY IN BRAZIL*

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In recent times two significant documentary films have been launched in Brazil. Both are directed by Estela Renner and produced by Marcos Nisti. The first one is on child consumption and the second focuses on obesity among children. Entitled respectively, *Criança, a alma do negócio* (2008)¹ and *Muito além do peso* (2012)², they represent more than a clamor for visibility by the public opinion on the issues they address. These documentaries expose clearly and directly the social problems resulting from aggressive marketing and poor dieting.

Indeed, would it be too inappropriate to ask whether there is still childhood? After all, a precocious child generates an immature consumer. And maybe it is here that the focus of the television media is centered, because it only takes thirty seconds of exposure for a brand to influence a child viewer, who is vulnerable and cannot perceive such induction, and thus forces his parents to consume.

The child is then used so as to reach the adult. The target is the child in any advertising, any marketing, any media, and in the conception of any product, from a car to a toy. Therefore marketing objectives do not focus only on the things typical of childhood. A research study carried out in the last decade shows that 80% of the consumption impulse of a Brazilian family comes from children, and that includes food consumption.

Children influence their parents on the purchase of the type of food. That's because, while the rhythm of everyday life causes a gap between parents and children, advertising communicates with young people and potential customers all the time, through the media directed to adults and children, and the programming aimed at adults and children. As a result, this generation is bequeathing to its children a lower life expectancy in a country where 33.5% of children already suffer from overweight or obesity - a disease related to the largest

* in *Penser une démocratie alimentaire* (ed: François Collart Dutilleul and Thomas Bréger), Inida, Costa Rica, Vol. I, 2013. *The Lascaux program (2009-2014) is linked to the 7th Framework Programme of the European Research Council ("IDEAS")*. "Lascaux" is headed by François Collart Dutilleul, Professor of Law at the University of Nantes (France) and Member of the University Institute of France (to know more about Lascaux : <http://www.droit-aliments-terre.eu/>).

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¹ [Child, the soul of business]: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49UXEog2fi8>.

² [Way beyond weight]: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsQDBSfgE6k>.

contemporary pandemics (diabetes, cardiovascular complications, depression, some species of cancer etc.).

Meanwhile, acceptance in the social group is achieved through the consumption of certain goods. And even though the family tries to curb this negative influence, there is a network of social connections that emits external impulses of consumption, because advertising acts cowardly and encourages excessive competition among children.

There is a high quality publicity production, but there is no setting of due limits, especially when it comes to minors as a target audience. Advertising promises more than the joy of owning the good, "it promises the joy of inclusion in society", the social existence. Those who are not willing to become consumers will be kept away and eventually labeled as non-consumers of a certain product.

All this ideological construction begins in the world of childhood. The advertising content aimed at young children is not rational, but emotional. It is the emotion that will convey a certain content. One does not question the relevance of the development of desire in the child, but it becomes a problem when that desire is not real or natural, but implanted.

It is an ideal that conveys to the child a sense of well-being and psychosocial safety. But such ideal holds values that most often diverge from the cultural values of the social group where the child's family, or the child himself, is inserted. This is cause for extreme suffering for children, especially when they receive consumerist stimuli that their social position and their income level do not allow them to fulfill.

And even when such fulfillment is possible, it may occur that the child resorts entirely to consumption and nourishes from those symbols. However, it is not in those symbols that personal fulfillment can be found. Individual completion could be accomplished with more advantage in personal, family or emotional relationships. The typical childhood playing is being rapidly replaced by purchasing.

Shopping malls are places more frequented by children than collective living spaces or public recreational areas (such as squares, parks, beaches etc.). Children today often do not know the animals, the plants, the natural elements of life but readily recognize brands just by seeing their visual representations, even before they started to learn how to read.

Nearly half of Brazilian children have a cell phone. Children are quickly becoming adults and behaving like adults. They have more than they need; things often repeated. Families are getting into debt and going through serious financial constraints to foster the dreams of consumerist children.

Children are motivated to consume by their parents. And when children get the object of their desire, they do not even take their time to enjoy it. And so, they begin a vicious circle in search of other products, because actually that is not what they are looking for or need. It is so true that the products that more effectively attract their attention are the simplest ones.

The appeal to consumption leads to the irrational situation where high-income children or those from socially and economically privileged families receive identical stimuli to

consumption as low-income children do. But poor children, in most cases, cannot even afford to maintain a regular feeding.

Purchasing is the exercise of desire, and this desire is not the thing purchased, but the act of buying itself, due to the aforementioned sense of social belonging. Globalization, standardization and stylization of personal behaviors are also added to this context, because at the level of consumer relations all are equal.

Should we, however, blame parents? Parents are invariably placed as those who deny the satisfaction of their children's desires. As they have no time to establish a zealous and close coexistence with their children, parents end up rewarding them for their absence. Nevertheless, denial and frustration are essential presuppositions for the development of personality through the approximation with reality.

The media are currently the first factor that acts in the construction of subjectivity and values, replacing church, school and the family. So no matter how much one uses his imagination it's hard not to fall into the traps of what is ready or previously articulated. Consequently, children are abandoning the characteristics of their age and are projected in time and space. This imaginary life prevents their effective maturity; even more if we consider the huge stimulus to sexuality, and to precocity in romantic relationships, to subversion or distortion of social conduct of future adults, as in the case of women as objects of seduction.

According to research conducted by ANVISA - National Health Surveillance Agency³, in 2006, about 80% of food advertising directed at children promoted foods high in calories, high in sugar and fat and low in nutrients. Ignorance and poor intake of healthy foods have led to many health complications even in the first years of life. To worsen this scenario, the commercialization of processed foods provides a low cost and is almost always linked to characters of literature, children's animations, cinema, television or to access to fad amusements.

The consumption of processed foods without the necessary information from parents along with childhood sedentariness led to a state of alert in public health. But it is also true that food quality is not always available and within reach of families, either by geographical or socio-economic reasons. The result of poor eating habits points to an average intake of more than 50 kilos of sugar per person a year in Brazil.

Should not there be a more ethical and more responsible media to preserve the children from the aggressiveness of advertisements? In other words, how to compete with such powerful, multimillionaire and easily accessible media that are everywhere all the time? We are faced with an abusive advertising that should be banned because it gradually mischaracterizes food culture and destroys the democratic bonds between consumers and those excluded from consumption.

In some countries, the regulation of advertising has strengthened the protection of children in some aspects, but in few of these countries this regulation has a broad and

³ <http://portal.anvisa.gov.br/wps/portal/anvisa/home>

definitive nature.⁴ In Brazil there is no specific legislation on the advertising of children's products. It is up to the standards of the National Council for Advertising Self-Regulation – CONAR⁵ and parental control to mediate the information that comes to children.⁶

But if children are considered incapable by the civil legislation in force, how can persuasive advertisements be addressed to them? There should be a co-regulation between State and market in order to reconcile the freedom of expression of advertising and child protection. The inefficient supervision by public agencies has marked the trajectory of children's advertising in the national territory. What remains, then, is the indispensable, but corporatist action of CONAR.⁷

Thus, the confrontation between opinion makers and companies producing child consumer goods will always be evident in a market that moves billions of *reais* annually. To the contrary, the protection of the human person, the conservation of the environment and the concreteness of the social values of the current time are at the mercy of fate, perpetuating a lifestyle guided by the unsustainability that ranges from malnutrition to obesity. The commitment to responsible consumption will reshape the global space of food security where we intend to coexist.

⁴ "Sweden: TV advertising directed at children under 2 years of age is prohibited before 9 p.m. England: it is forbidden to advertise foods high in fat, sugar and salt in and during television programming to viewers under 16 years of age. United States: there is a limit of 10 min and 30 seconds for advertising per hour on weekends, 12 minutes per hour on weekdays. Testimonial merchandising is prohibited. Germany: children's programs cannot be interrupted by advertising. Canada: it is prohibited to advertise products intended for children in children's programs. In Quebec: it is prohibited to advertise products for children up to 13 years of age in any media. Portugal: any kind of advertising in schools is banned." Among others.

⁵ <http://www.conar.org.br>.

⁶ Law 8,078/1990 (Consumer Protection Code) when addressing abusive advertising (art. 37) generally prohibits advertising that takes advantage of the lack of judgment and experience of the child (§ 2). In the private normative context, the Brazilian Code of Advertising Self-Regulation (1980) devotes particular attention to children and young people (art. 37), but its application is restricted to entities affiliated with CONAR. A Bill (#5,921), which provides for publicity or commercial advertising directed at children and adolescents, has been under consideration in the Chamber of Deputies since 2001.

⁷ "**MISSION.** *To prevent misleading or abusive advertising from causing embarrassment to consumers or businesses, and to defend freedom of commercial speech.* Constituted by advertising professionals and professionals from other fields, CONAR is a non-governmental organization that aims to promote freedom of advertising expression and to defend the constitutional prerogatives of commercial advertising. Its mission includes mainly to hear complaints from consumers, authorities, partners or formulated by members of its own board of directors. Complaints are judged by the Ethics Council, with full warranty and full right of defense for those responsible for the advertisement. When the merits of a complaint are proven, it is its responsibility to recommend changes or suspend a placement. CONAR does not exercise prior censorship on advertisements, since it deals only with what is being or has been advertised. Maintained by the contributions of the main entities of the Brazilian advertising industry and their affiliates - advertisers, agencies and media outlets - CONAR is headquartered in São Paulo, and operates throughout the country. It was founded in 1980." (<http://www.conar.org.br>. > Sobre o CONAR > Missão)

References

CRIANÇA, a alma do negócio. Direção: Estela Renner. Produção: Marcos Nisti. Cidade: São Paulo, Maria Farinha Produções, 2008. DVD (49min).

MUITO além do peso. Direção: Estela Renner. Produção: Marcos Nisti. Cidade: São Paulo, Maria Farinha Filmes, 2012. DVD (1h23min).