

The Role of Social Aesthetics in Public Relations: The case of Hippocrates and Luis Buñuel

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Ethical PR was originally aesthetic

Lucien Matrat's (1907-1998) appearance in the theoretical context of public relations represents the first great turning point in the theoretical construction of the discipline, both at a European and international level, matched only by the contributions of James E. Grunig, whose excellence dominant paradigm has its (unrecognized) origins in the postulates of this French practitioner (Xifra, 2006a, 2006b). If not born with Matrat, with/under him the theory of public relations at least reaches the level and maturity necessary to be considered a discipline. Matrat was the head of the public relations department of one of the largest French corporations, the Elf group. He founded the French Association of Public Relations (*Association Française des Relations Publiques*, AFREP) and the European Public Relations Confederation (CERP). Additionally, as an ardent proponent of ethical behavior in public relations who was inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he was the author of the international code of ethics adopted in 1965 by the International Public Relations Association in Athens (Xifra,

2006b, 2012). Matrat considered public relations to be an anthropological discipline because it is based on humans (*anthropos*). On the other hand, Matrat's body of knowledge was founded on his own experience as a professional, leading him to be considered one of the first public relations theorists to build his theory from and through ethnographic methods. As a result, a number of French authors and professionals who found common ground in Matrat's ideas –which became known as the “European doctrine (or school) of public relations” (Boiry, 2004, p. 1)– developed a series of public relations techniques based on ethnography (Xifra, 2012). His approach to public relations was marked by a concern for human beings and respect for their dignity, differentiating a public relations that was based on trust) from other forms of persuasive communication, such as advertising and propaganda (Matrat, 1971, 1975). Public relations therefore only made sense if it was practiced under the highest ethical standards, leading Lucien Matrat to draft the entire Code of Athens on the basis of the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights (Sellnow *et al.*, 2005). The code reflected a hopeful, post-World War II ethical framework-- it was an early strategic imperative of IPRA, established 10 years previously, and was coupled with a Code of Conduct, known as the 1961 Code of Venice (IPRA, 1961). Both codes were adopted by many national public relations associations and widely promoted. Among those who received presentation copies of the Code of Athens were Pope Paul VI and government leaders. First of all, it should be noted that, rather than being based on the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, the Code of Athens was virtually a copy of it. Matrat's intellectual work was practically nonexistent and for this reason, among others, the Code was not exempt from controversy. As Watson (2014) explains, the criticism was led by the UK's Alan Eden-

Green, Chief Executive of Public Relations for the British Oxygen Company (BOC), who considered the Code to be a set of rules —it said “must” and “must not”— rather than guidelines. This was not, however, Eden-Green’s only reproach, as there was also pragmatic criticism. Matrat did not respond immediately to the criticism (Watson, 2014). and when he did his main argument was based on religious grounds:

Matrat replied ... in early November 1967 defending his approach which was utterly based on the UN Declaration of Human Rights and citing the endorsement of religious leaders, including Pope Paul VI, as justification for the moral certainties that it expressed. He also proposed that IPRA could invoke the Code against a country which was restricting human rights or limiting the media. (Watson, 2014, p. 711).

What Matrat does in this response is resort to aesthetic¹ motivations to justify the ethical truth of the Code of Athens. And the legitimization of this ethical reason is based mainly on Pope Paul VI’s reception of the authors of the Code as a legitimizing act, because this reception was the factor that legitimized the Code of Athens. It is worth recalling at this point that Matrat was hugely influenced by the French personalist movement led by Emmanuel Mounier. Personalism was seen as an alternative to both Liberalism and Marxism, respecting human rights and the human personality without indulging in excessive collectivism. As a consequence, familiar with Emmanuel Mounier’s Christian phenomenology² in the French Personalist movement,³ Matrat had

¹ We consider aesthetics as the harmony and appearance pleasant to the senses from the point of view of beauty.

² Christian phenomenology concerns the experiential aspect of Christianity, describing religious phenomena in terms consistent with the orientation of worshippers.

³ Personalism was seen as an alternative to both Liberalism and Marxism, which respected human rights and the human personality without indulging in excessive collectivism.

his Code of Athens reflect its proposed Christian humanitarianism approach to public relations as a result of the effects of Christian phenomenology on the post-war French intellectuals, thinkers, and scholars. Additionally, Matrat and his colleagues saw the code as a repudiation of propaganda. In fact, one of the pillars of his theory, known as the European doctrine of Public Relations (Xifra, 2012), is the clear distinction between advertising, propaganda and public relations. While advertising is seen as the strategy of desire that motivates the demand for a product or service and propaganda the strategy of conditioning that replaces reflective actions with reflex acts, public relations is the strategy of trust that lends communication its authenticity (Matrat, 1971). This near obsession with opposing public relations and propaganda from such anthropological and Christian approaches seems to respond to a rejection of the Catholic origins of the term propaganda. A Christian idea of public relations, said Marat, emphasizes ethics, claiming that public relations is the only discipline that guarantees human rights. In a campaign of presentation before “Christian society” and its highest representative (the Pope), Matrat elaborated an ethical code and made an aesthetic justification of public relations as the *only* form of ethical humanistic communication, as opposed to the anti-humanistic communication served up by advertising and propaganda. Therefore, although this humanistic dimension of public relations defended by European doctrine might be thought to be the clearest example of the Western humanism of the field, it was in fact an operation of social aesthetics, epitomized though a photo of different personalities holding a copy of the Code of Athens, including the spiritual leader (Pope Paul VI). Thus, the most famous code of ethics in public relations history was principally an aesthetic campaign. This fact need not surprise us or meet with our disapproval. It

forms part of the history of persuasion. Indeed, this strategy was not new, since it had been practiced from classical Antiquity to the present day. In fact, aesthetics has played a fundamental role in the history of humans' concern for their social recognition and reputation, as fundamental as the one it has also played in the diffusion of ideas. Thus, this chapter will provide examples as different and distant in time from one another as 3rd century (BC) Greek physician Hippocrates and the 20th century Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel to show that behind the idea of building a public image or an environment of trust there have always been aesthetic elements that have taken precedence over ethics, and that ethics have often been justified in aesthetic terms. The case of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* constitutes the most evident proof of our argument, and is yet another example of what we know today as public relations being nothing more than a manifestation of very ancient aesthetic approaches to societal concerns.

Reputation as a matter of aesthetics in the Hippocratic Corpus

The collection of Greek medical writings handed down to us under the general name of *Corpus Hippocraticum* (*CH*) comprises, 53 mostly short, treatises generally written in a concise style that refer to a broad subject matter, ranging from general considerations about the profession and the ethics of the physician to studies on physiology and pathology, dietetics and gynecology, among others. Most of the texts included in the *CH* are a product of the research and teaching of several writers who composed their works during the final decades of the 5th century and early 4th century BC; that is, they were written by contemporary physicians of Hippocrates, if not Hippocrates himself, and his disciples from the following generation (Jouanna, 2017). It is worth recalling,

incidentally, that it was precisely at this time that the written word imposed itself as the definitive vehicle of cultural tradition (while the oral transmission of knowledge remained an archaic procedure), and when the Sophistic Enlightenment⁴ spread new and critical ideas (García-Gual, 1983). Among the most distinguishing intellectual figures of the time, together with historians, philosophers and sophists, politicians and orators, we find physicians who entrusted writing as a decisive technique of expression and dissemination of their wisdom and their ideas about the human world.

Within this context, the issue of the physician and his decorum was treated in considerable detail, to the point of it becoming the object of a 1st and 2nd century treatise, *Decorum*, which deals with the reputation of the physician and the relationship of his reputation with his aesthetics. However, the question was not confined exclusively to this treatise, but rather also appears in the other more generalist texts known as *Physician*. In *Decorum*, however, we find the following:

More gracious is wisdom that even with some other object has been fashioned into an art, provided that it be an art directed towards decorum and good repute. (I).

Dress decorous and simple, not overelaborated, but aiming rather at good repute, and adapted for contemplation, introspection and walking. The several characteristics are: to be serious, artless, sharp in encounters, ready to reply, stubborn in opposition, with those who are of like mind quick-witted and affable, good-tempered towards all, silent in face of disturbances, in the face of silence ready to reason and endure, prepared for an opportunity and quick to take it, knowing- how to use food and temperate, patient in

⁴ Cultural movement that, in the Greece of the 5th century BC, tried to renew traditional mental habits through the analysis of language and its use to influence citizens.

waiting for an opportunity, setting out in effectual language everything that has been shown forth, graceful in speech, gracious in disposition, strong in the reputation that these qualities bring, turning to the truth when a thing has been shown to be true. (III).

As a general idea espoused in *Decorum*, Jones (1923) suggested that wisdom preserves man from evil, and the best kind of wisdom is the one that has become art. That is to say, the art of making life more decorous and honorable, according to the typical point of view of late Greek thought and particularly the Stoic perspective.⁵ If we accept Jones's interpretation to be essentially accurate, then we should expand upon it and qualify it with some further considerations. As is well known, at the time that *Decorum* was written, it was common to find orators on the most diverse subjects, defending or criticizing knowledge acquired in all fields of wisdom. There were many kinds of sophists: some may have been mere ignorant charlatans selling useless knowledge, but others were skillful dialecticians. Others criticized the former as mere tricksters, arguing that only the type of wisdom that leads humans to proper conduct enables them to act correctly in all orders of life.

The author of *Decorum* begins by making his own the opinion of those who defend the usefulness of wisdom; however, under the influence of Stoic thought, he only admits that wisdom which serves for good living, for right behavior, and for good reputation. This is because, according to him, most of the varied knowledge that the sophist orators offered their listeners was totally useless for life. *Decorum's* author did not think that all knowledge was equally useless; there is some knowledget (that of the good dialectics) which at least

⁵ Stoicism is a school of Hellenistic philosophy founded in Athens in the early 3rd century BC. Stoicism is predominantly a philosophy of personal ethics informed by its system of logic and its views on the natural world.

has the benefit of exercising the mind, and this already prepares one, to some extent, for a good life. That said, *Decorum's* author found it was much more fruitful to speak of true and useful knowledge for life, which is also wisdom and which also leads medicine to good behavior and good reputation.

As García-Gual

(1983) pointed out in a commentary on *Decorum*, one of the goals proposed by *Decorum* is that of achieving a fair reputation. The thirst for prestige was fairly widespread among Hippocratic physicians, even if they also criticized it as being excessive at times. Lain (1970) highlighted some passages of the *CH* where this can be clearly discerned: *Joints* (XLV) considers it embarrassing for a doctor to carry much external apparatus and refers to doctors who presume to be “elegant” as attempting to impress those who witness such doctors when they try to cure a hip dislocation with procedures that, although correct, are theatrical (LXX). Similarly, *Physician* (II) criticizes those who seek reputation through the luxury and brilliance of the metallic instruments of their *iatreion* (office). In *Decorum*, prestige and good reputation are based on the doctor’s correct behavior, and not merely the aesthetics of their appearances. The treatises point to the virtue of an effective treatment (XVII) and a successful prognosis.

In order to give a fairly complete account of what was considered good manners and good behavior for doctors in ancient times we must add to *Decorum* the first chapter of *Physician*:

The dignity of a physician requires that he should look healthy, and as plump as nature intended him to be; for the common crowd consider those who are not of this excellent bodily condition to be unable to take care of others. Then he must be clean in person, well

dressed, and anointed with sweet-smelling [ointments] that are not in any way suspicious.

This, in fact, is pleasing to patients. (I)

In this chapter we are making a connection between the content of the Hippocratic Corpus and today's public relations, from an aesthetical dimension. The attempt seems novel, but this is not the first time that Hippocrates has been linked with the theory and practice of public relations. In 1993, Dean Kruckeberg presented a paper at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association entitled "Hippocrates and Bernays: A Medical Ethics Perspective on the Ethics of Public Relations." In it, the author argued that public relations practitioners should attempt to emulate a metaphorical "physicians' role" as "healers" within their organizations their societies. Nevertheless, the metaphor did not refer to the medical specialist one may encounter today; instead, public relations' use of the physician as a metaphor considers the public-relations-practitioner-as healer as the physician supposedly and ideally had performed his role in the past. Kruckeberg (1993) concluded his research by stating that the role of the physician as "healer" provides an ideal metaphor for "excellent" public relations, and the ethics for such "excellent" practice remain exceedingly simple: love. As we shall see later, this idea of love is not far removed from the origins of one of the most ethically justified activities of public relations: corporate social responsibility.

In his study of fashion, the German sociologist Georg Simmel argued that life has a dualism, which as a unity tends on the one hand to universalization and on the other to particularization (Carnevali, 2016). In society, this metaphysical dualism materializes in fashion, which manifests itself as "a form of practical synthesis between the psychological tendency to imitation and the psychological tendency to distinction"

(Vandenberghe, 2001, p. 55). These words could find their historical origins in the role of decorum for the Hippocratic physicians. Indeed, having defined fashion as a form of association between the aristocratic tendency of distinction and the democratic tendency of imitation, Simmel immediately reveals an analogy shared by both fashion and reputation. Both are products of the formation of social classes and have the function of gathering together their peers in a circle that isolates them from others. All things being equal, its function is analogous to that of the frame of a painting that "characterizes the work of art as unitary, solidarity-based, a world in itself, and at the same time cuts out all relationship with the social environment" (Simmel, 1905, p. 71). It is very interesting to apply the metaphor of the frame to the use of art in conveying persuasive messages. In this case, it would be easy to fall into the trap of simplifying the metaphor and use it to justify any artistic manifestation in which the author has clearly delimited space such as, for example, painting or cinema, in which the frame is bounded by the outline of the space in which the message takes place (statically in the case of a painting, dynamically in the case of cinema). A cinematographic case will allow us to show how Simmel's sociology of fashion is a theoretical framework that can be applied to public relations and, thus, to further evidence of the aesthetic dimension of public relations.

The Aesthetics of Public Image: The Cinema of Luis Buñuel

The aim here is not to analyze Buñuel's best-known work, our object of study being a documentary that does not appear in the Spanish director's filmographies: *Menjant Garotes* (*Eating Sea Urchins*, 1930), a "five-minute Lumière-style home movie made by Buñuel and cameraman Duverger of Dalí's father and his spouse in their holiday home in

Cadaqués” (Gubern and Hammond, 2012, p. 26). On December 16, 1988, three Spanish researchers preparing a documentary on Spanish surrealism --Román Gubern, Ian Gibson and Rafael Santos Torroella-- went to visit Anna-Maria Dalí, the elderly sister of the painter Salvador Dalí. Anna-Maria told them that Buñuel filmed a documentary about Dalí's family when he came to Cadaqués to locate scenarios for *L'Âge d'Or* (*The Golden Age*, 1930), showing them the 35mm roll of the film. As Fanés (2000) has pointed out, this is not the usual home movie, because the sequence of shots builds a discourse, even if only a brief one. Why did Buñuel make it? Clearly, something must have drawn his attention to what he saw there and awakened his “documentary” sense that he would later develop while in Las Hurdes, filming *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin Pan* (*Land Without Bread*, 1933). The film was shot in April 1930, taking advantage of the fact that Buñuel was already shooting *L'Âge d'Or* on the property belonging to Dalí's father on Llané beach. Gubern and Hammond (2012) have argued that it was made to placate the powerful hero and facilitate filming in Cadaqués and its surroundings. However, Fanés (2000) has suggested that, at the time, Dalí's father had quarreled with his son and disinherited him, thus justifying the film's strategic dimension as a product to restore trust between father and son through Buñuel's status as best friend of the latter. Regardless of this, the film does not interest us as an exercise in restoring paternal-filial relations, but as a strategy for building the image of a bourgeoisie that was targeted by the attacks of the Surrealist movement⁶ of which Dalí and Buñuel were prominent representatives.

Aside from Fanés' (2000) particular

⁶ Surrealism is a 20th Century avant-garde movement in art and literature which sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images. Buñuel is considered the most important surrealist filmmaker.

suppositions –which are important because he is the only scholar who has studied the film in depth– *Menjant Garotes* is an example of how art (in this case, cinema) is a vehicle for image construction, or, in other words, how aesthetics is and has been a key element in building, in order, a certain 1) perception, 2) impression, and, 3) reputation of an organization, brand, idea or social structure. In this case, cinematic aesthetics became the catalyst for the social aesthetics of the bourgeoisie represented in Buñuel's film; a bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who were characterized in terms of housing, family, leisure, and their capacity of authority (Maza, 2003).

The house was and remains a symbol of the bourgeoisie – specifically of its owner's economic success. All the action in *Menjant Garotes* takes place in the summer residence belonging to Salvador Dalí's father, who was the notary of the city of Figueres (in the north of Catalonia). The residence is located in a privileged spot on the Costa Brava, in the Mediterranean town of Cadaqués. It is the setting of the film and its surroundings that clearly marks the social position of the protagonists: Dalí's father and stepmother. The strategy adopted by Buñuel –who was also an excellent photographer– was to award indirect importance to the outside courtyard where the action takes place, the beautiful background landscape and the family mansion façade that appears in the upper left-hand corner. Everything is perfectly laid out to emphasize the grandeur of the Mediterranean mansion. The film also depicts the idea of acting not intended to reflect reality as it is, but to recreate it (Goffman, 1959), highlighting some elements over others and shaped according to the director's objectives. For instance, the fact that no one looks at the camera gives the feeling that the images have been objectively captured, when it is clear that we are seeing non-professional actors who know they are being filmed and

consequently overact. We therefore see a couple aware that they are acting before an audience that did not share the same context. Regardless of the motives that led Buñuel to make this film, with *Menjant Garotes* the Spanish filmmaker offered an idyllic representation of a bourgeois family during a moment of leisure. Thus, bourgeois elements, like family and leisure, are constantly present in the film, to the point of forming, with housing, the thematic triangle of this fascinating portrait of the bourgeoisie.

Less present, but no less fascinating, is the capacity of authority, the fourth characteristic element of the bourgeoisie. From an impression management viewpoint, when Goffman (1959) described the operation of groups of people who are part of a performance, he argued that “when we examine a team-performance, we often find that someone is given the right to direct and control the progress of the dramatic action” (p. 60). In Buñuel's film, this "someone" is obviously the notary Dalí, but the most interesting aspect is the aesthetic symbolism used by the filmmaker to signify this capacity for authority.

Through *Menjant Garotes* Dalí senior restores his authority and his reputation as paterfamilias. The symbolism of the film, and especially the gastronomic act of consuming sea urchins with which the film ends, has been analyzed in depth by Fanés (2000), who concludes that the film shows the notary as a “Pantagruelian, fierce, terrible figure, who devours his own creature, who destroys his son’s work” (p. 213). We cannot dwell on this fascinating aspect, which could be the subject of a whole chapter, but would highlight the fact that the film contains takes that depict the notary in an almost identical way to how his son portrayed him in 1925 (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 here

Three takes in the film constitute the particular portrait Buñuel wished to paint of Dalí's father, which shares certain features of portraits we find of monarchs in the modern age. That is to say, it is a portrait that represents the patriarch in his legitimate place, within his territory, where there can be no doubt regarding the foundation of his authority. And this, as Bodart (2012) has pointed out regarding the portraits of the Spanish monarchs of the Habsburg dynasty, cannot be considered propaganda, but an element of legitimacy. Buñuel does the same, restoring the image of a representative of the local elite so that there can be no doubting his authority following his problems with his son. And he does this through the use of the new medium, cinema, and following aesthetic parameters similar to the pictorial ones his friend Dalí used to portray his own father. Filming the notary Dalí, Buñuel also updates, both aesthetically and in terms of prestige, the public figure he is depicting. With *Menjant Garotes*, Buñuel tries to aesthetically construct an ethics of the bourgeoisie, legitimating the image of the father of his friend Salvador Dalí, who was an important, respected and influential member of the local elite.

Public relations as a function of social aesthetics

The cases of Hippocrates and Luis Buñuel are two examples, distant both in time and in elements employed, that highlight the importance of aesthetics in the construction of an ethical image throughout history. Also, the two examples allow us to illustrate the thesis of public relations as a function of social aesthetics or, in other words, how social aesthetics becomes a theoretical perspective with which to approach public relations and

image construction from ancient times to the present.

Although the case of Hippocrates forms part of a historical moment in time that makes it a clear antecedent of social aesthetics as an inseparable pillar of professional ethics, the importance of Buñuel and his film is that, just as Proust did in the literary field a few years earlier (Carnevali, 2008), the Spanish filmmaker understood, through the new mass media (cinema), the complementarity --even the identity-- between the social element and the aesthetic. From this perspective, Buñuel was one of the discoverers of social ethics..

This complicity between aesthetics and society is important for an aesthetic understanding and appreciation of *Menjant Garotes*, as already enunciated by the Hippocratic texts analyzed previously. That is, this complicity determines the particular style in which the bourgeoisie is depicted, since it involves converting the sensitive form into the mode of expressing and constructing the public image of a representative of that social class, Salvador Dalí's father. Thanks to his observational skills as a social entomologist (Buñuel was passionate about entomology, so he observed individuals in their social relationships as an entomologist observes insects), Buñuel discovered the dimension of social aesthetics, demonstrating a special sensitivity towards the subject of reputation.

In order to decipher the language of aesthetic-social phenomena, it is necessary to be able to blend (1) the attentive sociologist's view of the dynamics of power and social stratification, and (2) the vision of the art connoisseur, who knows how to appreciate the smallest details and differences in style and form. Buñuel's biographical experience (Aranda, 1976; Gibson, 2013) and his perception of the social world (that of an aesthetically involved bourgeois) exerted an important influence on shaping the

sensitivity he has shown in many of his films, despite him being stereotyped as a surrealist filmmaker whose aim was the diametrical opposite of any sensitive manifestation. Thus, if in the *CH* there is a clear identification of an aesthetic that legitimates a *profession's* ethics, *Menjant Garotes* is a manifestation of the aesthetic dimension of *society*, that is, it serves as an example of social aesthetics at the service of the construction of a personal reputation and, indirectly, the public image and legitimation of a social group: the bourgeoisie. Thus, the film could easily have been entitled *The Indiscreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (this is the title given to it by the Film Library of Catalonia).

To paraphrase Hegel's definition of beauty, we could define social aesthetics as the knowledge that aims for the sensitive manifestation of society (Carnevali, 2013). This knowledge considers society as an aesthetic phenomenon: all that is social—and public relations is a social manifestation, since it is a manifestation of social relations—has an aesthetic dimension. But what does this form of knowledge consist of and how is it exercised? To the extent that we are worldly beings—beings who relate to each other through their senses and, as such, are necessarily and constantly immersed in the dimension of appearance—we know all about social aesthetics: we know its laws, we speak its language and we are familiar with its artifices, although in most cases this knowledge is unthinking and presented in the form that Bourdieu called “practical sense” (Carnevali, 2013). When we call a professional (architect, designer, public relations practitioner, etc.) an expert, this knowledge is presented as *savoir-faire* or sophisticated, founded on the semi-spontaneity (and convenience) of habitus (i.e., tendencies) and the dispositions that guide us in the thousands of small daily gestures that build social appearances (Bourdieu, 1984).

To carry this further, the practical-aesthetic sense, which we could simply call “social taste” (Carnevali, 2013), produces aesthetic judgments and rules by appreciating the spirit of a situation or by elaborating a way of looking according to the circumstances, following the dynamics analogous to those of artistic improvisation. Taste is the compass that guides us in the world of social appearances: it determines how others appear before us and how we stand before them (Dalí's father in Buñuel's film, for example). It teaches us to choose the most appropriate dress for a mood or encounter (the Hippocratic physician, for example). The north of this compass is ethics, that is, the moral conversion of appearance. For this reason, ethics is often a matter of aesthetics, as can be seen in Kruckeberg's (1993) aforementioned ethical analysis of *CH*. Indeed, when Kruckeberg linked the ethics of public relations to love, he was not far from the truth, at least etymological truth. As Garcia-Gual (1983) pointed out, the Hippocratic physician was a traveling intellectual, like the sophist and the historian, a member of a professional guild, eager to gain attention and renown for his knowledge, acting according to clear ethical principles and who stood out as much for his love of science as for his love of humanity; that is to say, for both his *philotechnie* and his *philanthropie*. However, it must be borne in mind that the word *philanthropie* is absent from the most genuine treatises in the *CH*, since in its sense of “love for humanity” it is a Stoic concept, and therefore comes much later. Humanitarianism is a very typical feature of medical ethics and, from the outset, is associated with appreciation for one's own profession (Edelstein *et al.*, 1967). Furthermore, love can be considered as one of the highest expressions of sensitivity and therefore a fundamental element of the aesthetic dimension of society. Recognizing that philanthropy is part of corporate social responsibility and, by

extensions, the practice of public relations, it would seem to follow that the humanism is a critical part of public relations. And from a functional perspective, public relations can be conceptualized as a socially aesthetic function. An academic field like public relations, which is concerned with the public image of organizations, people and ideas, is one of the intellectual territories where there can be no ethics without aesthetics, since aesthetics is an ontological element of public relations. From the moment that reputation became the axis on which practically all public relations professionals pivot, aesthetics became a vital organ of public relations. For this reason, social aesthetics and public relations work in tandem; they are two faces of the same coin. Carnevali (2013) considers samples of social aesthetics to be oratory precautions, cosmetic interventions, rules of diplomacy, politesse (or etiquette) issues, in short, any behavior that involves or affects the social appearances and public image of people and organizations. In fact, the whole rhetorical dimension of public relations implies an aesthetic dimension that can be hidden behind high-voltage ethical discourse. In fact, social aesthetics infuses our lives and public relations cannot be alien to this fact. The sociological theories of Thorstein Veblen, Max Weber, Norbert Elias, Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu are all good examples of a sociological tradition preoccupied with and attentive to appearances. More deeply, such perspectives are concerned with the roles and routines of lifestyles within social stratification and, as a consequence, offer insights on symbolic phenomena that carry a strong aesthetic appeal such as reputation and charisma.

Aesthetic implications for public relations

One of the main approaches of public relations is to construct meanings. Indeed, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, “public relations and symbolic politics are both a meaning-construction process through use of symbols, interactions and interpretations” (Zhang, 2006, p. 27). Correspondingly, aesthetic processes are based on the creation of meanings. Consequently, public relations deals with aesthetics, and public relations processes can be approached as aesthetical processes.

In their essay on the aestheticization of the world, Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013) recall how Marx, in his youthful writings, argued that the human-social world differed from the animal world in the fact that it cannot be embodied without regard for the laws of beauty. These laws of beauty are at the origin of social relations, because men have produced a multitude of aesthetic phenomena, culminating in an aesthetic capitalism. Indeed, style, beauty, and the mobilization of tastes and sensibilities are imposed as strategic imperatives of brands and ideas: the consumer, design, fashion, decoration, film, advertising and public relations industries transmit the affections and sensibilities that make up a specific aesthetic universe, one which characterizes modern-day capitalism (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2013).

Unlike reputation and social recognition, public relations is the fruit of capitalism. Indeed, public relations as a professional activity arises from the need to adapt the philosophical-sociological phenomenon of social recognition to a new reality derived from capitalism and comprising equally new actors: organizations. But the phenomenon of social recognition and its aesthetic foundations have existed since the emergence of complex societies somewhere in the ancient Near East (Xifra & Heath, 2015). This has two consequences. First, it shows the senselessness of limiting the history of public relations to its origins as

a profession. Second, it shows that public relations forms part of the system of aesthetic capitalism and plays an important role in this process. The cases of Hippocrates and Buñuel lie light years away from one another, but ultimately they respond to the same dynamic of what we consider today as reputation management. Reputation management has been considered a key element of public relations to the extent that it has been considered a core activity or, at least, reputation has become a structural element of any public relations process (Heath & Xifra, 2016).

An aesthetic approach to the phenomenon of public relations also affects the definition of some of its elements. Thus, reputation can be considered as the artfully sensitive representation of the social status in the public space or, in other words, the social hierarchy represented in an artfully sensitive way. Likewise, the concept of public can be defined as the group that meets for a common aesthetic hope, such as listening to the same things or seeing the same images. In any case, building a concept of public based on sharing feelings is a methodology that public relations theory should explore. Applying this methodology would surely allow us to discern when we are faced with a strategy of aesthetic and/or ethical nature. From this perspective, we would surely realize that, for example, a field such as corporate social responsibility has more to do with aesthetics than with ethics. And not only because it can be considered as a made-up operation of the organization that wants to present itself as socially responsible, but because it is addressed at an audience composed of members who share sensibilities, even if the outcomes of CSR strategy do not necessarily improve the lived experience of this shared sensibility.

In this essay we have based our reflection on two examples from different ages and professional segments. Our purpose has been to suggest that public relations can be

approached as a function of social aesthetics. From this standpoint, the theory and practice of public relations offers a new critical perspective of analysis of public relations within new capitalism, in which production and consumption are two processes towards the same goal: the reproduction of the world according to our wishes. Accordingly, we are immersed in an aestheticization of the world in which the ethics of production and consumption becomes aesthetical ethics. Nonetheless, those processes are not new, and have their roots in Antiquity as has been suggested with the role of physicians in ancient Greece. Public relations and reputation management have had a crucial role in those processes, since building public image and reputation is an ontologically aesthetic phenomenon that affects all levels of human activity.

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FIGURE 1

Figure 1. *Portrait of my father* (Salvador Dalí, 1925).

