Messages, Signs, and Meanings

A Basic Textbook in Semiotics and Communication

3rd edition

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Messages, Signs, and Meanings: A Basic Textbook in Semiotics and Communication Theory, 3rd Edition
by Marcel Danesi

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Canadä

Advertising

Advertisers are the interpreters of our dreams— Joseph
interpreting for Pharaoh. Like the movies, they infect the routine
futility of our days with purposeful adventure. Their weapons
are our weaknesses: fear, ambition, illness, pride, selfishness,
desire, ignorance. And these weapons must be kept as bright as
a sword.

E. B. White (1899–1985)

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The contemporary advertising industry was founded at the threshold of the
twentieth century on the premise that sales of a product would increase if the
product could be linked to lifestyle and socially-significant trends and values.
Indirect proof that product advertising has, in fact, achieved its goal of blurring
the line between the product and social consciousness of it can be seen in the
fact that it is now used as a persuasion technique by anyone in society who
wants to influence people to do something—to endorse a political candidate,
to support a cause, and so on and so forth. Business firms, political parties and
candidates, social organizations, special-interest groups, and governments alike
use advertising routinely to create favorable "images" of themselves in the
minds of people. Since the 1960s, advertising campaigns have also been mounted
and directed towards issues of social concern (cancer, AIDS, human rights,
poverty, etc.).

But it is the messages of product advertising that are everywhere. They
are on billboards, on the radio, on television, on buses and subways, in
magazines and newspapers, on posters, on clothes, shoes, hats, pens—and

the list could go on and on. To say that advertising has become a ubiquitous form of message-making in today's "global market culture" is an understatement—it is estimated that the average American is exposed to over 3000 advertisements a day and watches three years' worth of television commercials over the course of a lifetime. Using both verbal and nonverbal techniques to make its messages as persuasive as possible, advertising has become an integral category of modern-day culture designed to influence attitudes and lifestyle behaviors by covertly suggesting how we can best satisfy our innermost urges and aspirations.

The semiotic study of advertising has become a hugely popular one. The basic focus of such study is, of course, the view of advertising as a sign-creating system. That will be the focus of this chapter as well.

WHAT IS ADVERTISING?

The term *advertising* derives from the medieval Latin verb *advertere* "to direct one's attention to." It designates any type or form of public announcement intended to promote the sale of specific commodities or services, or to spread some kind of social or political message. Advertising is to be distinguished from other materials and activities aimed at swaying and influencing opinions, attitudes, and behaviors, such as *propaganda,* the term used in reference to any systematic dissemination of doctrines, views, beliefs reflecting specific interests and ideologies (political, social, philosophical, etc.); *publicity*, the term used in reference to the craft of disseminating any information that concerns a person, group, event, or product through some public medium; and *public relations,* the term commonly used to refer to the activities and techniques deployed by organizations and individuals to establish favorable attitudes towards them among the general public or special groups.

In the twentieth century, advertising evolved into a form of persuasive social strategy intended to influence how people perceived the buying and consumption of goods. Over the century, it became a privileged discourse that replaced, by and large, the more traditional forms of discourse—sermons, political oratory, proverbs, wise sayings, etc.—which in previous centuries had rhetorical force and moral authority. To this day, the advertising subtext aims to exalt and inculcate Epicurean values. As pointed out in chapter 11, Roland Barthes (1957) used the term *neomania* to emphasize the overall social consequences of living in a consumerist society informed by advertising messages. He defined neomania as an insatiable appetite for new objects of

consumption induced into groupthink by ads and commercials constantly blurting out one promise to all: "Buy this or that and you will not be bored, but you will be happy!" With a handful of hedonistic themes—happiness, youth, success, status, luxury, fashion, and beauty—the general message of the advertising subtext is that solutions to human problems can be found in buying and consuming.

Advertising falls into three main categories: (1) *consumer advertising*, which is directed towards the promotion of some product, (2) *trade advertising,* in which a sales pitch is made to dealers and professionals through appropriate trade publications and media, and (3) *political-social advertising*, which is used by special-interest groups (such as anti-smoking groups) and politicians to advertise their platforms. The focus of this chapter is on the first type, which can be defined semiotically as a form of representation designed to promote the sale of marketable goods and services through persuasion.

Consumer advertising, incidentally, gave birth to the first agency for recording and analyzing data on advertising effectiveness in 1914 with the establishment of the Audit Bureau of Circulations in the US, an independent organization founded and supported by newspaper and magazine publishers wishing to obtain circulation statistics and to standardize the ways of presenting them. Then, in 1936 the Advertising Research Foundation was established to conduct research on, and to develop, advertising techniques with the capacity to enhance the authenticity, reliability, efficiency, and usefulness of all advertising and marketing research. Today, the increasing sophistication with statistical information-gathering techniques makes it possible for advertisers to target audiences on the basis of where people live, what income they make, what educational background they have, and so on in order to determine their susceptibility to, or inclination towards, certain products.

Advertising is thus closely interconnected with marketing. Advertisers and marketing agencies conduct extensive and expensive surveys to determine the potential acceptance of products or services before they are advertised at costs that may add up to millions of dollars. If the survey convinces the manufacturer that one of the versions exhibited will attract enough purchasers, a research crew then pretests various sales appeals by showing provisional product designs to consumers and asking them to indicate their preference. After the one or two best-liked designs are identified, the manufacturer produces a limited quantity of the new product and introduces it in a test market. On the basis of this market test the manufacturer can make a decision as to whether a national campaign should be launched.

THE ADVENT OF ADVERTISING

The first advertising materials of human civilization were the many outdoor signs displayed above the shop doors of ancient cities of the Middle East. As early as 3000 BC, the Babylonians used such signs to advertise the stores themselves. The ancient Greeks and Romans also hung signs outside their shops. Since few people could read, the merchants of the era used recognizable visual symbols carved in stone, clay, or wood for their signs. Throughout history, poster and picture signs in marketplaces and temples have, in fact, constituted popular media for disseminating information and for promoting the barter and sale of goods and services. With the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, flyers and posters could be printed quickly and cheaply, and posted in public places or inserted in books, pamphlets, newspapers, etc. The printing press also spawned a new form of advertising, known as the *handbill*. This had an advantage over a poster or sign because it could be reproduced and distributed to many people living near and far apart.

The growing use and influence of advertising in the nineteenth century led to the establishment of the first advertising agency by Philadelphia entrepreneur Volney B. Palmer in 1842. By 1849, Palmer had offices in New York, Boston, and Baltimore in addition to his Philadelphia office. In 1865, George P. Rowell began contracting with local newspapers as a go-between with clients. Ten years later, in 1875, N. W. Ayer and Son, another Philadelphia advertising agency, became a rival of Rowell and Palmer. In time, the firm hired writers and artists to create print ads and carried out complete advertising campaigns for clients. It thus became the first *ad agency* in the modern sense of the word. By 1900, most agencies in the US were writing ads for clients, and were starting to assume responsibility for complete advertising campaigns. By the 1920s, such agencies had become themselves large business enterprises, constantly developing new techniques and methods that would be capable of influencing the so-called "typical consumer." It was at that point in time that advertising came to be perceived primarily as an instrument of persuasion by corporate executives. Business and psychology had joined forces by the first decades of the twentieth century, broadening the attempts of their predecessors to build a semiotic bridge between the product and the consumer's consciousness.

In the 1920s, the increased use of electricity led to the possibility of further entrenching advertising into the social landscape through the use of new electronic media. Electricity made possible the illuminated outdoor poster; and photoengraving and other printing inventions helped both the editorial and

advertising departments of magazines create truly effective illustrative material that could be incorporated into ad texts. The advent of radio, also in the 1920s, led to the invention and widespread use of a new form of advertising, known as the *commercial*—a mini-narrative or musical jingle revolving around a product or service. The commercial became immediately a highly popular form of advertising, since it could reach masses of potential customers, print literate or not, instantaneously. The commercial became even more influential as a vehicle for disseminating advertising messages throughout society with the advent of television in the early 1950s. TV commercials of the day became instantly familiar across society, creating a perception of the product as being inextricably intertwined with the style and content of the commercials created to promote it. Recently, the Internet has come forward to complement and supplement both the print and commercial (radio and TV) forms of advertising. As in TV commercials, Internet advertisers use graphics, audio, and various visual techniques to enhance the effectiveness of their messages.

The language of advertising has become the language of virtually everyone—even of those who are critical of it. As Twitchell (2000: 1) aptly puts it, "language about products and services has pretty much replaced language about all other subjects." We assimilate and react to advertising texts unwittingly and in ways that parallel how individuals and groups have responded in the past to various kinds of artistic texts. They thus shape social trends in a synergistic fashion. Advertising has become one of the most ubiquitous, all-encompassing forms of social discourse ever devised by humans. There are now even websites, such as AdCritic.com, that feature ads for their own sake, so that audiences can view them for their aesthetic qualities alone.

The two main techniques that make advertising so powerful are called *positioning* and *image-creation. Positioning* is the placing or targeting of a product for the right people. For example, ads for Budweiser beer are normally positioned for a male audience, whereas ads for Chanel perfume are positioned, by and large, for a female audience. The advertising of the Mercedes Benz automobile is aimed at socially upscale car buyers; the advertising of Dodge vans is aimed, instead, at middle-class suburban dwellers. Creating an *image* for a product inheres in fashioning a "personality" for it so that a particular type of product can be positioned for specific market populations. The image is a sign that is made up of an amalgam of the product's name, packaging, logo, price, and overall presentation which create a recognizable character for it that is meant to appeal to specific consumer types. Take beer as an example. What kinds of people drink Budweiser? And what kinds drink Heineken instead? Answers to these questions would typically include data about the educational

level, class, social attitudes, etc., of the consumer. The one who drinks Budweiser is perceived by people as socially different from the one who drinks Heineken. The former is imagined to be a down-to-earth (male) character who simply wants to "hang out with the guys," the latter a smooth sophisticated type (male or female). This personification of the product is reinforced further by the fact that Budweiser commercials are positioned next to sports events on television, whereas Heineken ads are found next to current affairs programs, and certain types of sitcoms. The idea behind creating an image for the product is, clearly, to speak directly to particular types of individuals, not to everyone, so that these individuals can see their own personalities represented in the lifestyle images created by advertisements for certain products.

Product image is further entrenched by the technique of *mythologization*. This is the strategy of imbuing brand names, logos, product design, ads, and commercials with some mythic meaning. For instance, the quest for beauty, the conquest of death, among other mythic themes, are constantly being worked into the specific images that advertisers create for beauty products—a strategy that can be literally seen in the people who appear in ads and commercials, who are, typically, attractive people, with an "unreal," almost deified, mythic quality about the way they look. In a phrase, the modern advertiser stresses not the product, but the social or mythic meanings that may be expected to materialize from its purchase. The advertiser is, clearly, quite adept at setting foot into the same subconscious regions of psychic experience that were once explored only by philosophers, artists, and religious thinkers.

Advertisers are also among the most creative users of new technologies. Since young people are highly expert Internet users, advertisers are using this new medium in ways that are pushing advertising techniques in new and interesting directions. On the site for Barbie dolls, for instance, visitors are invited to design their own doll and then buy it. At the Hot Wheels website, visitors are invited to play games, and then buy the toy cars.

No wonder then that advertising has become an issue of debate and a target of legislation across the world. For example, in some countries, the law prohibits or restricts the use of women simply to attract attention in advertisements unless the product is relevant for women as consumers. In other countries, advertising for sanitary products and toilet paper is forbidden. Clearly, in the global village some cultures are scrambling to protect themselves against the images that emanate from the advertising image factory—images that emphasize sex, attractiveness, youth, and pop culture trends that have become routine and part of the global village.

BRAND NAMES AND LOGOS

To create a personality for a product, one must construct a signification system for it. This is achieved, first and foremost, by giving it a *brand name* and, whenever possible, creating a visual symbol for it known as a *logo*. By assigning it a name, the product, like a person, can be recognized in terms of its name. No wonder, then, that *trademarks*—which is the legal term for *brand name*— are so fiercely protected by corporations and manufacturers. So important is the brand name as an identifier of the product that, on several occasions, it has become the general term to refer to the product type. Examples include *aspirin, cellophane*, and *escalator*.

In effect, the name on its own generates a signification system for the product. Here are some examples:

- Names referring to the actual manufacturer evoke connotations of "tradition," "reliability," "artistry," "sophistication," etc.: e.g., *Armani, Benetton, Folger's.*
- Names referring to a fictitious personality elicit specific kinds of images associated with the names: e.g., *Wendy's* evokes the image of a "friendly young girl," *Mr. Clean* of a "strong toiler."
- Names referring to some aspect of Nature bestow upon the product the qualities associated with Nature: e.g., *Tide, Surf, Cascade, Aqua Velva, Mountain Dew.*
- Names constructed as hyperboles emphasize product "superiority," "excellence," etc.: e.g., *MaxiLight, SuperFresh, UltraLite.*
- Names constructed as combinations of words elicit composite meanings: e.g., *Fruitopia* ("fruit + Utopia"), *Yogourt* ("yogurt + gourmet").
- Some names are designed to tell what the product can do: e.g., *Easy Off, Lestoil, One Wipe, Quick Flow, Easy Wipe.*
- Some names are designed to show what can be accomplished by using the product: e.g., *Close-Up Toothpaste, No Sweat Deodorant.*

To continue to be effective, however, brand-naming must keep in step with the times. In early 2000 some carmakers, for instance, started looking at newer naming trends that were designed to appeal to a new generation of customers accustomed to an Internet style of communication. Cadillac, for instance, announced a new model with the monogram name CTS in 2001.

Acura also transformed its line of models with names such as TL, RL, MDX, RSX. On the other side of the naming equation, such abbreviations are hard to remember, especially for older customers who have not yet tapped into Internetese.

Brand names, clearly, do much more than just identify a product. As the above examples show, they are constructed to create signification systems for the product. At a practical informational level, naming a product has, of course, a denotative function; that is, it allows consumers to identify what product they desire to purchase (or not). But at a connotative level, the product's name generates images that go well beyond this simple identifier function. Consider Armani shoes as a specific case in point. Denotatively, the name allows us to identify the shoes, should we desire to buy them rather than, say, Russell & Bromley shoes. However, this is not all it does. The use of the manufacturer's name, rather than some invented name, assigns an aura of craftsmanship and superior quality to the product. The shoes are thus perceived to be the "work" of an artist (Giorgio Armani). They constitute, in effect, a "work of shoe art," not just an assembly-line product for everyone to wear.

In the world of fashion, designer names such as Gucci, Armani, and Calvin Klein evoke images of *objets d'art*, rather than images of mere clothes, shoes, or jewelry; so too do names such as Ferrari, Lamborghini, and Maserati in the world of automobiles. The manufacturer's name, in such cases, extends the meaning of the product considerably. When people buy an Armani or a Gucci product, they feel that they are buying a work of art to be displayed on the body; when they buy Poison, by Christian Dior, they sense that they are buying a dangerous, but alluring, love potion; when they buy Moondrops, Natural Wonder, Rainflower, Sunsilk, or Skin Dew cosmetics they feel that they are acquiring some of Nature's beauty resources; and when they buy Eterna 27, Clinique, Endocil, or Equalia beauty products they sense that they are getting products made with scientific precision. No-name products do not engender such arrays of connotations.

Iconic brand names are also effective, because they are memorable. A name such as Ritz Crackers, for example, assigns a sonority to the product that is simulative of sounds that crackers make as they are being eaten, as well as associating the product with the extremely expensive Ritz Hotel in London. Another example is the name Drakkar Noir, chosen by the Guy Laroche for one of its cologne products. The dark bottle conveys an imagery of "fear," the "forbidden," and the "unknown." Forbidden things take place under the cloak of the night, hence *noir* (French for "black"). The sepulchral name of

the cologne is clearly iconic with the bottle's design at a connotative level, reinforcing the idea that something desirous in the "dark" will happen by splashing on the cologne. The name Drakkar is also obviously suggestive of Dracula, the deadly vampire who mesmerized his sexual prey with a mere glance.

Incidentally, branding was, originally, the searing of flesh with a hot iron to produce a scar or mark with an easily recognizable pattern for identification or other purposes. Livestock were branded by the Egyptians as early as 2000 BC. In the late medieval period, trades people and guild members posted characteristic marks outside their shops, leading to the notion of the trademark. Medieval swords and ancient Chinese pottery, for instance, were also marked with identifiable symbols so buyers could trace their origin and determine their quality. Among the best-known trademarks surviving from early modern times are the striped pole of the barbershop and the three-ball sign of the pawnbroker shop. Many trademarks are, in fact, indistinguishable from logos.

Names were first used towards the end of the nineteenth century. Previously, everyday household products were sold in neighborhood stores from large bulk containers. Around 1880, soap manufacturers started naming their products so that they could be identified—e.g., Ivory, Pears', Sapolio, Colgate, etc. The first modern-day brand names were thus invented. As Naomi Klein (2000: 6) aptly observes, branding became the general practice among manufacturers of products because the market was starting to be flooded by uniform mass-produced and, thus, indistinguishable products: "Competitive branding became a necessity of the machine age." By the early 1950s, it became obvious that branding was not just a simple strategy for product differentiation, but the very semiotic fuel that propelled corporate identity and product recognizability. Even the advent of no-name products, designed to cut down the cost of buying them to the consumer, have had little effect on the semiotic power that branding has on the consciousness of people. Names such as Nike, Apple, Body Shop, Calvin Klein, Levi's, etc., have become "culture signs" recognized by virtually anyone living in a modern consumerist society. As Klein (2000: 16) goes on to remark, for such firms the brand name constitutes "the very fabric of their companies."

Logos (an abbreviation of *logogriphs*) are the pictorial counterparts of brand names. They are designed to reinforce the signification system for a product through the visual channel.

Consider the apple logo adopted by the Apple Computer Company:

It is, clearly, an iconic sign suffused with latent religious symbolism suggesting, above all else, the story of Adam and Eve in the Western Bible, which revolves around the eating of an apple that contained forbidden knowledge. The logo reinforces this symbolic association because it shows an apple that has had a bite taken from it. The creator of the logo, a man named Rob Janoff of Regis McKenna Advertising, denies any intent to connect the logo to the Genesis story, claiming instead that he put the bite there in order to ensure that the figure was not interpreted as a tomato. Whatever the truth, the bite in the apple evokes the Genesis story nonetheless because we cannot help but interpret signs in cultural terms.

Logos can sometimes harbor a complex signification system. Consider the Playboy logo of a bunny wearing a bow tie:

Its ambiguous design opens up at least two interpretive paths:
- rabbit = "female" = "highly fertile" = "sexually active" = "promiscuous" = etc.
- bow tie = "elegance" = "night club scene" = "finesse" = etc.

The appeal and staying power of this logo is due, arguably, to this inbuilt ambiguity. Ambiguity, as a matter of fact, is what makes signs psychologically powerful. By not being able to pin down what the Y is in the $X = Y$ relation, we start experiencing the sign more holistically and, thus, attributing great significance to it (at least unconsciously).

Logos have now become part of an everyday visual symbolism that interconnects products with daily life. Until the 1970s, logos on clothes, for instance, were concealed discreetly inside a collar or on a pocket. But since then, they have been displayed conspicuously, indicating, not surprisingly, that our society has become "logo conscious." Ralph Lauren's polo horseman, Lacoste's alligator, and Nike's "swoosh" symbol, to mention but three, are now shown prominently on clothing items, evoking images of heraldry and, thus, nobility. They constitute symbols of "cool" (Klein 2000: 69) that legions of people are seemingly eager to put on view in order to convey an aura of high-class "blue-blooded" fashionableness. To see why logos are so powerful semiotically, consider briefly the Nike symbol:

As a visual sign suggesting speed, it works on several levels, from the iconic to the mythical. At the iconic level, it implies the activity of running at top speed with the Nike shoe; at the mythic level, it taps into the idea of speed as symbolic of power and conquest (such as in the Olympic races). The combination of these two signifying levels creates a perception of the logo, and thus the product, as having a connection to both reality and narrative history.

Given their psychological power, it is little wonder to find that logos are used as well by non-commercial enterprises and organizations. One of the most widely known of this kind is the peace sign, often worn on chains and necklaces:

Derived from an ancient runic symbol of despair and grief, it became the logo for philosopher Bertrand Russell's (1872–1970) "Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament" in the 1950s. The logo's first widespread exposure came when

it surfaced in the 1962 sci-fi film *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, leading to its adoption by the counterculture youth of the era.

The concepts of brand and logo have been extended to include not just products, but entire corporations (IBM, Ford, etc.) and even specific characters that represent, in some way, a corporation. Take, for example, the Disney Corporation cartoon character Mickey Mouse. In 1929, Disney allowed Mickey Mouse to be reproduced on school slates, effectively transforming the character into a logo. A year later Mickey Mouse dolls went into production and throughout the 1930s the Mickey Mouse brand name and image were licensed with huge success. In 1955 *The Mickey Mouse Club* premiered on US network television, further entrenching the brand and image—and by association all Disney products—into the cultural mainstream. The case of Mickey Mouse has repeated itself throughout modern corporate society. The idea is to integrate the brand with cultural spectacles (movies, TV programs, etc.) and render it indistinguishable as a sign from other culturally-meaningful signs and sign systems. In the case of the Disney Corporation, for example, toys, TV programs, films, videos, DVDs, theme parks, and the like have become part of the mythology of childhood. This is why children now experience their childhood through such products.

ANALYZING THE AD

It was Roland Barthes (1957) who drew the attention of semioticians to the value of studying advertising. Today there is considerable interest in this area. If there is one theme that can be extracted from this line of inquiry that is of specific relevance to the present discussion, it is that many ads are interpretable at two levels—a surface and an underlying one. The surface level is the actual ad text. The way in which the text is put together, however, is both a reflex of, and a trace to, an underlying subtextual level: that is, the surface elements cohere into signifiers that conjure up an array of connotations in the underlying subtext. The main intent of a large portion of contemporary advertising, as this line of analysis shows, is to speak indirectly to the unconscious mind.

To elucidate how the subtext is constructed, it is instructive to analyze a lifestyle print ad. For this purpose, I have selected an ad for *Marilyn Peach*, a sparkling wine, that was found in many European magazines a few years ago:

The peach background (which is not discernible in the black-and-white reproduction here) matches both the color and the taste of the wine. Subtextually, however, the idea that comes to mind is that of the dawn, and thus the connotations that it evokes, as can be discerned in expressions such as *the dawn of creation*, *the dawn of life*, and so on. Are there any surface level signifiers to help us ascertain the subtext? The woman's hand is holding out a drinking glass in an obvious toasting gesture. Is this a social gesture or a temptation? The fact that the woman is wearing a bracelet in the form of a snake suggests the latter—in the Book of Genesis, the devil came to Eve in the body of a snake to prod her on to tempt Adam. A male partner is probably the one who is being seductively offered the glass. Will he take it? Since, "his glass" is on the table, it would appear that he cannot resist. If you still have doubts about this analysis, just read the accompanying French verbal text— *La pêche, le nouveau fruit de la tentation* ("Peach, the new fruit of temptation")—and you will be left with little doubt about the Garden of Eden subtext built into the ad. Note as well the name of the wine—*Marilyn*—which is suggestive of pop culture's version of Eve, the late actress Marilyn Munroe, who became an icon of tragic femininity in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Whether or not this ad will induce consumers to buy *Marilyn Peach* is open to question. It is certainly not the point of semiotic analysis to determine this. Nor is it the goal of semiotics to criticize makers of such ads. On the

contrary, a semiotician should, in theory, approach an ad like he or she would any text. Advertising textuality provides an opportunity to examine how varied sign processes are realized in a contemporary textual form.

It should also be pointed out that the interpretation of any advertising text is just that—one possible interpretation. Indeed, disagreement about what something means is not only unavoidable, but part of the fun of semiotics. Differences of opinion fill the pages of the semiotic journals and lead, like in other sciences, to a furthering of knowledge in the field. The point of the above analysis was simply to illustrate the technique of semiotic analysis itself, not to provide a definitive interpretation of the *Marilyn Peach* ad. The key to unlocking the underlying subtext is to consider the surface signifiers in a chain, like a comic strip, in order to see where they lead. This technique can thus be called "connotative chaining." In the above ad the connotative chain is:

> the peach background = dawn = dawn of creation = Garden of Eden scene = Eve tempting Adam = prodded on by a serpent (bracelet) = he who drinks the wine will yield to temptation (*La pêche, le nouveau fruit de la tentation*).

In most ads, the subtext can be wrested from the technique of connotative chaining, which also involves taking into account the shape of a product (e.g., a perfume bottle), shadows and colors in the ad text, the name of the product, and all the relevant surface level signifiers.
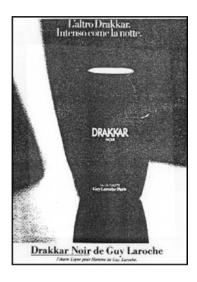
THE LANGUAGE OF ADS

The above caption, *La pêche, le nouveau fruit de la tentation*, is evidently designed to reinforce the subtext. In advertising, language is generally a means for reinforcing, alluding to, or simply stating the subtextual meaning. There are many verbal techniques that advertisers use to realize this objective and, more generally, to get the product into social consciousness. Some of these are:

- *Jingles and Slogans*: These enhance memory of the product: *Have a great day, at McDonald's; Join the Pepsi Generation*.
- *Use of the Imperative Form*: This creates the effect of advice coming from an unseen authoritative source: *Drink milk, love life; Trust your senses*.

- *Formulas*: These create the effect of making meaningless statements sound truthful: *Triumph has a bra for the way you are; A Volkswagen is a Volkswagen.*
- *Alliteration*: The repetition of sounds in a slogan or jingle increases the likelihood that a brand name will be remembered and be imbued with a poetic quality: *The Superfree sensation* (alliteration of *s*); *Guinness is good for you* (alliteration of *g*).
- *Absence of language*: Some ads strategically avoid the use of any language whatsoever, suggesting, by implication, that the product speaks for itself.
- *Intentional omission*: This capitalizes on the fact that secretive statements like *Don't tell your friends about...; Do you know what she's wearing?* grab people's attention.
- *Metaphor:* Metaphor creates powerful imagery for the product: e.g., *Come to where the flavor is ... Marlboro country.*
- *Metonymy:* Metonymy also creates powerful imagery for the product: *Bring a touch of Paris into your life.*

In addition to these, the brand name itself, as mentioned, is a signifier in creating a signification system for a product and, thus, for understanding the subtext of any ad created for the product. Consider, again, the Drakkar Noir product. The ad below filled the pages of Italian magazines a few years ago. Note, first, that the perfume bottle has a portentous, ominous black color but aesthetically pleasing elliptical shape:

Darkness connotes fear, evil, the unknown. Forbidden things take place under the cloak of night. The sepulchral name, Drakkar Noir—obviously suggestive of Dracula—instills both a surreptitious fear and cupidity in the viewer. It thus reinforces the subtextual message that something dark, scary but nevertheless desirable, will happen by dousing oneself with the cologne, as suggested by the visual text:

darkness = evil = something desirable = Dracula = sexuality = etc.

This is reinforced by the caption *L'altro Drakkar, intenso come la notte* ("The other Drakkar, intense like the night"). The "other" Drakkar is, by implication, the other Dracula (the one who buys the cologne?) who is intense like the night. Note, as well, that the statement is at the top of the page, descending upon the bottle and, thus, reinforcing the sense that something truly mythic and metaphysical is involved in the whole scene.

Whatever the ad means, the point to be made here is that it is completely synchronized with the signification system built into the product name. The ad can almost be compared to a work of surrealist or abstract art, whereby interpretation is a matter of sense and feel, rather than of straightforward understanding.

AD CULTURE

As the foregoing discussion implies, advertising is an art form. This has in fact been acknowledged concretely by the fact that it has its own prize category at the annual Cannes Film Festival. Advertising is adaptive, constantly seeking out new forms of representation reflecting fluctuations in social trends and values. Although we may be inclined to condemn its objectives, as an aesthetic-inducing experience we invariably enjoy advertising. Advertisements sway, please, and seduce.

Aware of this, some societies have enacted restrictive legislative measures to constrain advertisers. Sometimes, however, these backfire. In early 1998, the US Congress was mulling over banning the Joe Camel and Marlboro Man figures from cigarette advertising. In response, the ad creators came up with ingenious alternatives. In an ad for Salem cigarettes, for instance, there is a pair of peppers curled together to look like a pair of lips, with a cigarette dangling from them. Benson and Hedges ads in the same year portrayed cigarettes acting like people—floating in swimming pools, lounging in armchairs, etc.

Ironically, the new, "government-permissible" form of advertising was a huge success, as cigarette-smoking rates among young people rose dramatically. The ads were even more effective in communicating the glamour and "cool" of smoking than was the Joe Camel figure.

The signification systems that are built into brand names and logos are transferred creatively to ad texts. And these now tend to become part of general culture. This integration into the mainstream is perpetuated and reinforced by the ad campaign, which can be defined as the systematic creation of a series of slightly different ads and commercials based on the same theme, characters, jingles, etc. An ad campaign is comparable to the theme and variations form of music—where there is one theme with many variations.

One of the primary functions of ad campaigns is to guarantee that the product's image keep in step with the changing times. Thus, for example, the Budweiser ad campaigns of the 1980s and early 1990s emphasized rural, country-and-western ruggedness, and female sexuality seen from a male viewpoint. The actors in the commercials were "Marlboro men," and the women their prey. In the early 2000s, the same company changed its image with its "Whassup!" campaign to keep in step with the changing sociopolitical climate. Its new ad campaign showed young urban males who hung around together, loved sports, and generally behaved typically. So appealing was the "Whassup!" campaign that its signature catch phrase was joked about on talk shows, parodied on websites, mimicked in other media, and used by people commonly in their daily conversations. The makers of Budweiser had clearly adapted their advertising style to social changes and trends.

Indeed, the most effective advertising strategy is not only to keep up with the times but also to co-opt them, so to speak. In the 1960s, for example, self-proclaimed "rebels" and "revolutionaries" referred to generally as "hippies," who genuinely thought they were posing a radical challenge to the ideological values and lifestyle mores of the mainstream consumerist culture, ended up becoming the incognizant trend-setters of the very culture they deplored, providing it with features of lifestyle and discourse that advertisers, since then, have been able to adapt and recycle into society at large. Counterculture clothing fashion was quickly converted into mainstream fashion, counterculture music style into mainstream music style, counterculture symbolism and talk into society-wide symbolism and discourse—hence the crystallization of a social mindset whereby every individual, of every political and ideological persuasion, could feel that he or she was a symbolic participant in the "youth revolution."

The Pepsi Generation and the Coke universal brotherhood ("I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony...") campaigns directly incorporated the rhetoric and symbolism of the hippie counterculture, thus creating the illusion that the goals of the hippies and of the soft drink manufacturers were one and the same. Rebellion through purchasing became the subliminal thread woven into the ad campaigns. The Dodge Rebellion and Oldsmobile Youngmobile campaigns followed, etching into the nomenclature of the cars themselves the powerful connotations of rebellion and defiance. Even a sewing company, alas, came forward to urge people to join its own type of surrogate revolution, hence its slogan *You don't let the establishment make your world; don't let it make your clothes*. In effect, by claiming to "join the revolution," advertising created the real revolution. This is why, since the late 1960s, the worlds of advertising, marketing, youth trends, and entertainment have become synergistically intertwined.

Today, the integration of ad campaigns into social discourse has become so versatile and ubiquitous that we hardly realize how pervasive it is. Here are some of its current forms:

- using the something-for-nothing lure (*Buy one and get a second one free! Send for free sample! Trial offer at half price! No money down!*);
- using humor to generate a feeling of goodwill towards a product (as in the Budweiser campaigns);
- getting a product endorsed by celebrities;
- inducing parents to believe that giving their children certain products will secure them a better life and future;
- appealing to children to "ask mommy or daddy" to buy certain products, thus increasing the likelihood that parents will give in to their children's requests;
- promoting such goods and services as insurance, fire alarms, cosmetics, and vitamin capsules by evoking the fear of poverty, sickness, loss of social standing, and/or impending disaster;
- the use of erotic, sensual, mythic, and other kinds of psychologically powerful themes and symbols in campaigns.

These techniques have become so common that they are no longer recognized consciously as stratagems. Advertising has become the fuel for an entertainment-driven society that seeks artifice on a daily basis as part of its routine of escapism from the deeper philosophical questions that would otherwise beset it.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is no exaggeration to say that the history of modern culture is intrinsically interwoven with the history of advertising. In looking back over the last century, it is obvious that the messages of advertisers, their ad campaigns, and their peculiar uses of language have become the norm in other creative domains, from cinematography to pop music. As McLuhan (1964: 24) aptly put it, advertising has become the "art of the modern world."

The answer to curtailing the power of advertising is not to be found in censorship or in any form of state control of media, as some proclaim. Even if it were possible in a consumerist culture to control the content of advertising, this would invariably prove to be counterproductive. The answer is, in my view, to become aware of how advertising produces meanings with semiotic analysis. In that way, we will be in a much better position to fend off the undesirable effects that it may cause.