

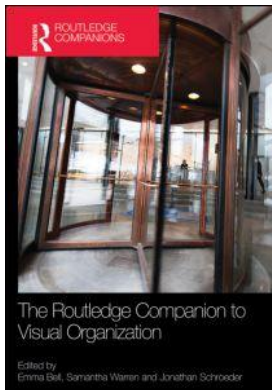
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Emma Bell, Samantha Warren, Jonathan Schroeder

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Norah Campbell

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8

The signs and semiotics of advertising

Norah Campbell

I think we have higher aspirations for our clients, and are more passionate about what our clients can be, should be, should try to be than they are. We're trying to tell them ... 'Hey, you can be more than just a pet food company. You can aspire to loving dogs rather than just feeding dogs'.

Agency Director at Chiat/Day

Advertising is the rattling of a stick inside a swill bucket.

George Orwell

Introduction

Advertising, in its print and media forms, in its direct and ambient modes, in its contemporary and age-old instantiations, is the most readily recognized, ubiquitous and contentious symptom of organization. Advertising acts as the 'aesthetic ambassador' of the organization (Campbell 2012). It is the way through which anyone outside the organization mythologizes an imaginary inside. Think the words 'apple', 'axe' or 'Amazon' – chances are that the images these words conjure are not a common fruit, a household tool or a river, but silver smoothness, girls on a beach, or a black and orange dotcom sign. Advertising *envisions and organizes meaning* for the viewer, the organization and society at large. In this chapter, I leverage that double-sense of organization – both as a corporate entity and as a common practice. I try to make the point that advertising organizes meaning in the world in the most powerful and generic of ways, as well as being a symptom of the organization, that is, something that indicates the existence of the organization.

Providing a simple definition of advertising risks reducing its complexity, but it is important to say that a famous definition does exist, describing advertising as 'a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future' (Richards and Curran 2002; O'Barr 2008). This has traditionally helped us to understand some aspects of advertising that make it different from other messages, though it could be argued that some messages have lost their 'paid' element; many media,

including YouTube and Twitter, allow advertisements to be uploaded for free on the Internet. The second substantial dimension to this famous definition is that an advertisement must use a medium to transmit a message; such media can be as diverse as the bombastic and direct appeal of made-for-cinema advertisements and corporate communications, to the amorphous and indirect messages of public relations that are embedded deep in the heart of non-advertising genres.

What has *not* been said about advertising? Despite changes in paradigms, there are two things about advertising that seem to remain constant: first, we are fascinated by it. A Google search of the term ‘advertising’ returns over a billion hits; there are over half a million advertisements uploaded on YouTube; my library holds 38 academic journals directly dealing with advertising; most marketing students want to work in advertising agencies. You can be quite certain that every university department in business, media studies, cultural studies, sociology, communication, journalism and graphic design has a module dedicated to advertising. This is even more remarkable when one considers how advertising used to be scorned as a practice and profession. Marchand (1986) recounts how it gained respectability in American culture in three ways – it became instrumental in enlisting soldiers during World War I, lending it a moral force which served more noble purposes besides commerce; it was elevated through its incorporation into education (Harvard University’s first course in advertising was in 1924); and it became adept at referencing styles and commissioning work from the realm of high culture.

Today, advertising is a subject of intense fascination for the general public. We have reached an era where advertising does not just produce culture, but culture produces advertising. This is evidenced in the creation of entertainment products based on the advertising profession itself, such as hit television series like *Mad Men*, which depicts life on Madison Avenue in the glory days of the 1950s, or the multi-award-winning 2009 documentary of advertising *Art & Copy*. Indeed, one of the central questions of advertising in contemporary times has been the extent to which it enframes everything within its discourse and logic. Advertising has been shown to be implicated in even the loftiest and most removed spheres of high art and used in even the most ancient of times, as wine advertising uncovered on the walls of ancient Rome shows (O’Barr 2008; see Schroeder 2006). Other research has explored the extent of non-obvious genres of advertising, including scientific advertising (Haraway 2000) and medical advertising (Cartwright 1995). If advertising is everything, what is it *not*? This is a crucial question about advertising and it is part of a larger, global and crucial debate about the commodification of life and previously inalienable aspects thereof, to which we will return later.

Second, advertising works. It was estimated that nearly half a trillion dollars were spent globally on advertising in major media in 2012, up nearly 5 per cent on 2011 (AdAge 2011). Of course, we are all familiar with the statistic that the average person living in the Western world is exposed to 3,000 advertisements a day. However, this actually tells us quite little, because it is debatable as to whether we process or can even attend to such huge amounts of data. Rather, it seems more appropriate to consider the deeper psychological impact of advertising. Every day, on many occasions, it transports me from this world to an imaginary one for a moment; I observe people exercising, eating, interacting with other people, working and sleeping. I see their bedrooms, cars, bathrooms and streets. I have been inside more houses through advertising than I ever have in real life. Advertising affects me in a non-obvious way; it offers, through a constant stream of visual cameos, implicit standards of cleanliness, sociality, family life, health and happiness, and a great many other values. Advertising does not work by making people feel like dupes or clones, nor does it depict fantastical scenarios completely out of reach. To do so would alienate its audience. Modern advertising works in the strangest way – by appearing not

to care if it works. Thus, when someone utters the immortal phrase ‘advertising doesn’t affect me’ – advertising has achieved its ultimate goal. Advertising *empowers* us to feel distant to it.

This chapter considers advertising as a primarily visual sign system, that is, an institution that organizes meaning as powerful as other systems at work to organize meaning – medicine, law or education. I am trying to leverage the double-sense of organization; it is both a corporate entity and a common, indispensable practice of human beings. I want to make the point that advertising organizes meaning in the most powerful and generic of senses, as well as being a symptom of the organization, that is, something that indicates the existence of the organization. We will first consider how this visual sign system has evolved by surveying a hundred-year history. We will then take the most obvious statement that can be made about signs in advertising – that they communicate – and examine the philosophical underpinnings of such a statement. The importance of semiotics – the formal study of sign systems – will be discussed using an emblematic but quite neglected example from Roland Barthes and highlighting how similar conventions continue today. We will overview the range of research conducted on the most represented object in advertising – the human body. One of the reasons why advertising is intensely interesting to the public is because it is such a highly visible, accessible site of ideological contest; therefore, we shall briefly discuss how advertising can be thought to be ideological. By way of concluding, we will point to three ways advertising might evolve in the future.

The history of advertising signs

Histories of advertising are useful because they trace this sign system in its context – economic, political and socio-cultural. This enables us to observe shifts in how advertising signs change over time. The vast majority of such studies are centred on the emergence of advertising in the United States (Leiss *et al.* 2005; Lears 1994; Schudson 1985; Marchand 1986).¹ Marchand’s historical study places the 1920s and 1930s as modern advertising’s coming of age. Advertising was always there of course, but it is around this time that its signs underwent a qualitative shift in sophistication. This ushered in a new era in advertising when personalized testimonials began to be more common than the simple hard-selling ads of the time; social dramas around objects trumped mere announcement, and a participatory tone of voice was adopted, which became more widespread than the direct imperative command to purchase that characterized many previous advertisements. Through the system of advertising, consumer goods became more than mere economic entities; they embodied values that had normally been attributed to humans and the natural world. This must be seen in context in order to appreciate the enormity of the change. As Freud and many others have shown, the pace and scale of rationalization, depersonalization and urbanization brought about by modern industrial capitalism had exerted a toll on the human psyche. Ironically, rather than being the hallmarks of identity, the products produced came instead to offer mini-solutions to the dilemmas of modernity. This was possible only through the system of advertising, which recalibrated the meaning of the good by focusing not on the mere material product, but rather by imagining the product as a *benefit sought* by the consumer. Or, in Marchand’s words, advertising brought ‘illumination instead of lighting fixtures, prestige instead of automobiles, sex appeal instead of mere soap’ (1986: 10). The sign system of advertising had become more mobile, more creative with potentially boundless ways to create compelling signs.

If advertising’s golden era was the 1920s and 1930s, its nadir came in the 1950s and 1960s when its public image turned sour. Advertising, it was widely suspected, had moved from its public role of sign identification, to the private and psychological space of one’s mind and interior life. Perhaps the most famous example of this proposition was Vance Packard’s 1957

book *The Hidden Persuaders* (1983), which became one of the biggest-selling books in the field. Packard's book depicted the rise of 'depth men' – people in advertising agencies that reportedly used psychoanalytical techniques to uncover the subconscious needs, desires, insecurities and fears of consumers. Their job was to create advertisements that would present products as the unconscious fulfilments, solutions, comforts and fantasies to them. In the book, Packard plays the role of a detective, looking for clues about signs that a consumer does not consciously process, only decoding them on a deeper, unconscious and emotional level. Packard's implicit theory of signs is an interesting one – far from consciously visible, logically rational marks, signs existed at the emotional level of human consciousness. Some examples that Packard uses in the book – from Betty Crocker cake mix to Esso's 'Tiger in your Tank' campaign – have become staple short-hands in popular culture for the alleged power of small groups of people to organize meaning on a massive and uncontrolled level.

Let us take a lesser-known example from *Hidden Persuaders* to demonstrate the dynamic of Packard's analysis of signs. In the book, Packard argues that advertising agencies had become suspicious of the rational answers they were receiving from respondents buying home freezers. Post-World War II sales in home freezers had dramatically increased, despite the fact that the initial investment and the cost of energy to run them had made them uneconomical. Interested in this apparent contradiction, Packard describes how the Weiss and Geller advertising agency conducted psychiatric studies of home-freezer owners. The agency concluded that the freezer was not a device for cooling foodstuffs. Rather, it was a nostalgic site of security in a threatening environment. People who were insecure, they argued, needed more food around than they could eat. Freezer advertisements had to leverage the anxiety about food shortages resulting from post-World War II rationing. They had to link freezers to a nostalgic childhood, which, according to motivational research, was when the giving of food was linked to love.

Histories of advertising reveal the crudeness of visual sign systems in the early part of the twentieth century, replete with simple psychology and bald appeals to status and social acceptance (Williams 2000 [1980]), only to be followed by this type of more sophisticated motivational research and appeals. What this reminds us of, of course, is that people were not more naive or inexperienced than they are today, but rather advertising is a form of literacy that, like any grammar, had to be learned. As Lears attests, advertisements in the early twentieth century 'constituted a new and bewildering code, a set of verbal and visual signs for which the referents were unclear ... As frequency of exposure mushroomed, the underlying advertising codes become familiar, taken for granted and unproblematic' (1983: 21, in Goldman 1992: 68). The sign system of advertising is not static; an historical perspective reminds us that, as sure as we look back at the obviousness of early modern advertising sign systems, generations to come will regard contemporary sign systems as rudimentary and easy to decode. Ultra-sophisticated images will appear antiquated and perhaps even humorous. Images that seem to us mundane today will be pored over for their sophisticated sign systems. The way in which advertising today visualizes software, the environment or nanotechnology as seemingly undeconstructible and transparent, will be staple examples in classroom curricula. We will return to this idea later.

Advertising as communication

The most obvious and immediate way to conceptualize advertising is as a system that creates signs with the purpose of communicating meaning. It has been argued that focusing on, and developing theories around, the advertising image itself could only ever tell one part of the dynamics of signs and their meaning. In comparison to the fields of sociology and cultural studies, the discipline of marketing has been the most supportive of the investigation of image

consumption. A raft of qualitative and quantitative research has been conducted proposing various strategies for factoring in the consumer's response to the sign.

Early models of advertising – the so-called 'ancestral' models – followed hugely important developments at the time in information theory, which reflected, and continue to reflect, how we understand the philosophy of what information and communication are. In 1949, Bell Laboratories technician Claude Shannon sought to provide a theory of communication using the term 'information' as a technical measurement. Up until then, 'information' was a rather poetic and spiritual term, more at home in philosophy than engineering. In Shannon's (1971 [1949]) work, information became universalized as a component of any system that communicated. This simple but powerful notion was adapted to the field of advertising by researchers who argued that advertising works by a sequence of stages, or a so-called 'hierarchy of effects' – cognitive to affective to behavioural, or a variation thereof – which a person goes through following exposure to the advertisement (Strong 1925; Lavidge and Steiner 1961). Such a powerful theory resulted in numerous acronyms over the last century as new refinements were developed; the advertising landscape is filled with AIDA models, DAGMAR models, AIETA models and STARCH models, as well as more recent models and scales such as ADTRUST, AdSam and PrEMo. Such work was concerned with the effectiveness of advertising developing scales to informationalize and measure aspects of advertising such as the rate of advertising wear-out, the effectiveness of advertising during the product's life cycle, effect on price sensitivity, attitude formation and the impact of advertising on emotional states.

It is important, and fascinating, to understand the informational theory of communication as a reflection of larger scientific and philosophical aims at the time. The goal of mathematical theories of information and communication was to apply scientific measurability to an ineffable phenomenon, to universalize and standardize a dynamic with the aim of providing codified models that predict response, and to enframe communication within a logic of relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness. Such theories dominate managerialist discourses and practices of advertising, and, despite their theoretical weaknesses, are extremely influential precisely because of their underlying goals.

Further, theories of communication that dominated advertising textbooks in the last 60 years are gradually being supplemented with measurement techniques stemming from neuropsychology (see Plassmann *et al.* 2007). A number of issues are of interest here: first, the extent to which neuroscientific techniques locate areas in the brain that are purportedly associated with different emotions. For example, Daimler-Chrysler measured people's reactions to different cars using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), a technique that measures brain function. It was found that the reward areas of the brain were significantly active when viewing sports cars compared with sedans (Erk *et al.* 2002, in Plassmann *et al.* 2007). Second, the question arises as to whether there are far too many extraneous factors in the environment to monitor causal links between advertising and behaviour, particularly when it comes to more long-term behaviour and affect, such as brand memories or brand equity, where the pathways to this are so numerous and complex that only the crudest approximations are possible within laboratory settings. Third, neuroscientific measurement seems not so much concerned with originality of results but with finding a neurological basis for what is already intuitively well known. Finally, the drive for empirical results in neurological advertising is driven by the goal of gaining economic advantage for organizations. Thus, there has been relatively little critique in the use of neurological measurement in advertising (Kenning 2007).

Qualitative research in advertising has better recognized that the act of reading advertisements is likely to call for research designs that acknowledged the holistic nature of the human, the fluid boundary between advertising and everyday life, and the multitude of often

contradictory interpretations people could simultaneously hold about signs – research that, in other words, focused on ‘real readers reading’ (Mick and Buhl 1992; see, for example, O’Donohoe 1997; Otnes and Scott 1995; Scott 1994; Hirschman and Thompson 1997). However, this is not to say that qualitative advertising research does not have a managerialist axiology (Zaltman 2003).

The a priori assumption of advertising as informative communication is argued by many to be a reductive procedure that neglects how advertising has other uses, as part of the ‘spectacular vernacular’ of social fabric (Scott 1993). In researching advertising, one could argue that there are three sites of investigation; one is the site of consumption or ‘reception’, the field of meaning from a consumer’s perspective, and primarily the one that managerialist research deems most important. The second is the site of production, taking a route to understanding by investigating the processes involved in making ads – something that is favoured in media studies and ethnographic approaches to advertising. The third is what could be called the site of the ‘image itself’ (van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2006). As van Leeuwen and Jewitt argue, ‘[a] mode of analysis which restricts itself to the evidence of the text may not ... by itself demonstrate how viewers understand and value what they see or hear or what producers, deliberately or otherwise, intend to communicate’ (2006: 7). On the other hand, they argue that analyses of the image itself, independent of intention and reception, are the most powerful way to show what images include and exclude, drawing influence primarily from the disciplines of history, philosophy, sociology and linguistics. In each site, the advertisement plays a different role.

Although primarily concerned with the managerialist implications of advertising, business disciplines have slowly seen the merit of investigating the advertisement itself. One of the most influential writers that moved beyond the thrall of measurement is Grant McCracken. In 1986, he published a model of how meaning moved from the world of advertising to the world of the consumer, offering an insight into the complex and subtle ways in which advertising is integrated into the life-world of people. McCracken’s model, despite its theoretical weaknesses (see Otnes and Scott 1995; Mick *et al.* 2004; Venkatesh and Meamber 2006), is influential because it sees advertising as a powerful translator of the cultural world and a central arbiter of meaning in consumer worlds. As critiques and elaborations of the model have since elucidated, advertising is also a two-way process, where consumers affect the process of advertising as much as they are affected by it. For example, advertising is not mere communication; people incorporate advertising so that it functions as a social glue within groups (Ritson and Elliott 1999).

The semiotics of advertising

In the 1950s and 1960s, advertising theory began to be influenced by the semiotic turn, in other words, the study in other disciplines of the formal properties of signs and their meaning, and emanating from the work of semioticians such as Barthes, Saussure, Peirce and Jacobsen. Semiotics can be regarded as one of the most comprehensive studies of sign systems. The work under its various manifestations provided a conceptual vocabulary to talk about the formal properties of signs and codes and their relevance within social groups.

Semiotics proposed that advertisements were, in fact, bundles of signs that formed finely constructed conventions. In semiotics, the image is a text, and, like any language, possesses its own grammar; understanding the grammar will give us access to the language. And this grammar is articulated through the image’s composition, lighting, framing, focus, gestures, spacing of forms, and so on. Mick *et al.* (2004) break down this grammar into three levels of sign analysis:

the micro-, mid- and meta-level. The micro-level conceives advertising signs as tiny units, such as the vectors, colours and forms within the visual plane (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Mid-level analysis decomposes signs into human-level characteristics of gender, hairstyle, posture, facial expression, buildings, as well as rhetorical devices in the image such as metaphor and troping (McQuarrie and Phillips 2005; McQuarrie and Mick 1996; Scott 1994). A meta-level range of semiotics reflects on the narrative structure of the advertisement, one that is often mythic in nature (Holt 2004; Stern 1995). One of the most important characteristics of semiotics was its ability to see embodied in the properties and dynamics of the image the macro properties and dynamics of the social world; a characteristic that made semiotics a political and ethical intervention into the interrogation of images. As Davison (Chapter 2, this volume) notes, semiotics presents a system for looking at images that is both structured and flexible, and shows how it can be used as a tool to deconstruct the ordinariness of organizational images, from annual accounting reports to food labels. It is this structured flexibility that semiotic approaches offer that allows the researcher the scope to find patterns in very diverse data.

The French semiotician Roland Barthes was, of course, particularly good at showing how the new medium of the photographic advertisement was not a transparent reflection of the world, but a codified structure. His two-page description of the advertisement of Italian pasta brand Panzani is surely the most referenced analysis in the whole field of semiotics. It is worth turning briefly to a less-known, but still powerful example of semiotic analysis by Barthes – that of the Citroën, DS,² a car model where the product is its own advertisement. We will then show how Barthes' semiotic analyses are still valid in contemporary advertising.

Barthes makes a number of strikingly insightful remarks in his short reading of the new car model by Citroën, DS. First, the car appears to us in a state of almost impossible newness; it 'appears at first sight as a superlative *object*' (Barthes 1977 [1972]: 88). What is fascinating is that Barthes argues, like others after him, that objects which appear at first sight as completely finished present to us 'at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter ... and in a word a *silence* which belongs to the realm of fairy-tales'. Barthes examines not just the impact of an image on the eyes, but also what a visual image *sounds* like. Further, as is the case so often in Barthes' work, it is not just the substance of the image that is examined, but also *how* it is composed. Here, he points out that the DS erases any signs of its construction through the presentation of extreme smoothness. To Barthes, smoothness is not a property of a material, but a social value:

[S]moothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling: Christ's robe was seamless, just as the airships of science-fiction are made of unbroken metal ... there are in the DS a new phenomenology of assembling, as if one progressed from a world where elements are welded to a world where they are juxtaposed and hold together by sole virtue of their wondrous shape, which of course is meant to prepare one for the idea of a more benign Nature.

(1977 [1972]: 88)

In a single analytic gesture, Barthes uncouples the car from its mundane and obvious denotation, or first-order signification and describes how its image follows longer lines of visual convention, from religious painting, science-fiction film and the politics of nature. This second level or order of analysis – this *connotation* – exposes that linkage not to be a natural one, but rather one that has been slowly constructed over the past 2,000 years of Western culture.

The traditional privileging of single, synchronic advertisements of units for analysis is a weakness of semiotics that can be compensated by the building up of visual genealogies, which trace the use of visual conventions across long time periods. For example, Donna Haraway's work, which analyses contemporary images of technology and science, argues that most so-called high-tech and ideologically neutral images of science 'quote, point to, and otherwise evoke a small, conventional, potent stock of Renaissance visual analogues, which provide a legitimate lineage and origin story for technical revolutions at the end of the Second Christian Millennium' (Haraway 2000: 237). In an attempt to highlight how a visual convention continues through time, let us provide a contemporary visual analogy to Barthes' Citroen reading – an advertisement for Siemens entitled *Building Blocks* (2005). This advertisement draws attention to what Barthes so insightfully termed the 'phenomenology of assembling'. In other words, Barthes asks the right question of the image – what sign constructions do Westerners use to tell the story of how technology comes to be present in the world.

In Siemens' advertisement, a band of technology – in the forms of panelling, vents, wheels and bolts – moves silently through the sky, floating to earth to form office blocks, hospitals, street lights, airports, shuttles and stadia. The striking absence of labour heralds a universe of self-organizing, invisible agency. Technology is an invisible force that is lighter than air, rearranging itself into whatever seems to be needed (Figure 8.1). By removing the visibility of human labour from the equation, we no longer see a world where technology is fashioned, melted, hammered, soldered and generally forced into the natural order; instead, Siemens' technological products are so natural they fit the world like a glove. The agency that organizes is non-pollutant, non-disruptive and non-energetic. The Siemens products float into place, as naturally as a pure white snowflake falling to the earth. These calm, precise movements seem to be guided by an invisible hand, lending the scenes an almost divine sense of inevitable fate. The white aesthetic, the soundtrack and the voiceover serve to anchor this message as the music passes from slightly cacophonous (as technology seeks its home) to harmonious and melodic as it finds its rightful place. The voiceover follows:

Our innovations make the world brighter, safer, more efficient and better connected. Siemens. We're turning the dreams of business and communities into reality.



Figure 8.1 Self-organizing technology, Siemens *Building Blocks* (Publicis, New York 2005)

Like the Citroën reading, technology in this advertisement possesses the quality of weightlessness; it emanates from the sky above rather than the ground below. *Infrastructure*, literally meaning structure from below, has been replaced by an orientation of an imagined *supra*-structure. Since at least Barthes' time, images of technology have followed a similar geometric orientation. In *Building Blocks*, technology is apotheosized by extending its self-organizing capabilities, lending it a divinity which is universal, inevitable, natural and just. Let us now turn from an under-investigated site of advertising – technology – to perhaps the most visually studied object in the universe – the human body.

The sign of the human

Much of the interest in advertising is generated from the representation of the human body – especially the female body and the racially marked body. Indeed, the human body is by far the most depicted object in advertising – evidence of our fascination with images of ourselves. Neurological research has shown that we humans have more synapses for interpreting the human face and body than we have for any other object in the universe. The body in advertising has revolved around a number of debates; the depiction of the female body in advertising (Kilbourne 2000; Scott 2005); the mainstreaming of research on the representation of male bodies (Patterson and Elliott 2002); sex in advertising (Reichert and Lambaise 2003); and advertisements that depict futuristic human bodies (Buchanan-Oliver *et al.* 2010; Campbell 2010), the racially marked body (Merskin 2001) and the disabled body (Shakespeare 1994). All this work centres on the important, and unresolved, question of whether advertising reflects the world, or shapes it. Such work focuses on how signs such as the human body's poise, gesture, positioning, gender role, and interaction with other bodies and objects reproduce, create, normalize or subvert the often unequal power structures that exist between male and female bodies, old and young bodies, white and black bodies, able and disabled bodies, rich and poor bodies.

Research in this tradition tells us that, despite potential ambiguity in images, we as visual consumers are always presented with a 'preferred reading' (Hall 1980: 134) or a 'potentialized meaning' (Mick *et al.* 2004: 4). All images, it is suggested, are controlled by discursive limits, and these limits tacitly frame the range of possibilities within an image. Indeed, it is claimed that this is the subtlest ideological weapon of advertising; images give us the impression that we can freely create and form new identities. But, in fact, the narrow range of identities has already been determined in advance (Arvidsson 2006; Williamson 1978). This is the paradox of identity construction; the consuming subject chooses among a limited repertoire of 'iterated' or pre-existing identities provided by marketing and advertising (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003), all of which – despite nods to the contrary – serve to consolidate traditional identity roles (Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Advertisers sequester meaning by 'mortising' or 'steering' viewers in preferred directions (Goldman 1992), or through the process of co-optation – where advertising pretends to acknowledge a competing discourse or ideology, but only pays lip service to it, ignoring its real, radical challenge (Williamson 1978). It is at the site of the human body where much research focuses on the concept of the ideology of advertising.

Ideology and the advertising sign – is advertising magic?

Advertising is a system that instils products and services with cultural and social values that are not intrinsic to them. One of the reasons why advertising is intensely interesting to the public is because it is such a highly visible display of ruling-class interests. Advertising is the site where capitalism and aesthetics merge – indeed, it has been described as the 'face of capitalism'

(Schroeder 2002: 141). Many academics of advertising and public intellectuals alike have argued that advertising is the pre-eminent way in which the interests of the powerful minority maintain the docility, alienation or servitude of the majority (Elliott and Ritson 1997; Pollay 1986, Herman and Chomsky 1988; Williams 2000 [1980]; Berger 1972). Raymond Williams famously declared advertising to be a magic system, possessing the power that magic objects had in primitive societies. Appealing to the supernatural ability of advertising is an interesting strategy; magic can conjure an object from its immediate material rootedness and animate it with a much more potent energy. For example, an advertisement for a mobile phone is not an *announcement* about a technological device; it is a *suggestion* about a certain design aesthetic, a certain role in professional life, a certain sexual appeal and a certain social network. Advertising, some argue, is magic not just because of its transformative power on objects, but because it is also able to *erase* human experience of the monotony of consumption with its transient satisfactions, and reinvigorate it anew with fresh promise-claims. Thus, advertising, as Williams (1980) argues, 'operates to preserve the consumption ideal from the criticism inexorably made of it by experience'.

Such critique, diverse as it is, centres on the idea that advertising's signs are not simple reflections of the state of the world, but carefully constructed, highly selective and distortive ways of seeing. Such critiques are theoretical, exploring how advertising produces false consciousness, commodity fetishism, docility, passivity, manipulation of unconscious desire and environmental degradation (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979 [1947]; Marcuse 1991 [1964]; Klein 1999; Curtis 2002; Jhally 2005). It is also technical, in that some research analyses the processes by which signs actually achieve their aims, through mortise and framing work, cropping, reification, interpellation, co-optation, the gaze, face-ism and individuation (Althusser 1970; Williamson 1978; Goldman 1992; Jhally 2005; Schroeder and Borgerson 2005).

For the sake of making concrete these quite technical terms, let us take one of these processes and show its dynamics in advertising. Interpellation is a concept developed in the writings of the political philosopher Louis Althusser on ideology in the early 1970s. Althusser argued that subjects are created through material practices; going to church and kneeling down to pray precedes my subjecthood as a spiritual person. Interpellation is the process by which we are called or 'hailed' into subjecthood through practices – and these practices may be imposed onto us from outside interests. In his work on interpellation, Althusser uses the oft-cited example of the police officer hailing someone on the street: 'Hey, you there!' The person makes a 180-degree turn, stops, looks at the policeman, and becomes a subject of interest to the law.

Recruitment advertising is the interpellative genre *par excellence*. The more authoritative and convincing the source of interpellation, the more likely we are to disregard the framing work that is done to legitimize and de-legitimize positions within the interpellation. Through the practice of response, we enter into the predefined parameters of relation with the organization. The advertisements in Figures 8.2 and 8.3 show recent recruitment drives by both Apple Inc. and Microsoft. Both have very similar stylistic qualities that are worth noting.



Figure 8.2 *Hey Genius* Microsoft Recruitment Campaign, Wexley School for Girls, Seattle 2010

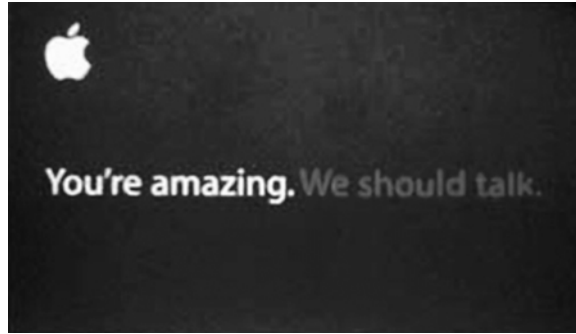


Figure 8.3 Recruitment card for Apple Inc., circa 2010

In these cases, the act of interpellation has three dimensions – the first is the act of defining the subject – one who is special, unique, an individual among the masses. The second is the use of the collective pronoun, ‘we’, which serves to close the subject and the organization within a circuit of common purpose. The third and most important is what is missing – a concrete visualization of working life in the organization, an absence which allows the reader to project his/her own fantasy onto the space. Instead of images of people in the workplace, these advertisements powerfully evoke this intended future in the most understated manner – through the typography of the interpellative text – comic book, childlike and disarming in one case, lower-case, understated and sexually suggestive in the other. Interpellation is ideological in both cases because it infantilizes the organization in order to empower the subject, which represents an imaginary relationship to the real conditions of our existence. The act of interpellation functions to empower the potential applicant, but it also subjects him/her to the circuit of identity produced within the address; he/she must willingly take his/her predefined place within it in order for it to have meaning.

The future of the field

The disappearance of advertising, the reappearance of advertising

Trends in advertising suggest a disappearance of the advertisement in its traditional form of billboard, print and television, and its intensification and hybridization in oblique ways and through new media, such as adver-gaming, twitter-piccing or virtual-worlding. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, advertising as a rhetorical force moved from information-heavy selling to dramatic persuasion. We could say that we are now in a third era of advertising, characterized not by communication through information or persuasion, but through entertainment.

Product placement – the unobtrusive embedding of branded goods and services primarily in films and video games – does not begin to describe the scope and sophistication of this era of advertising. The practice of staging products in films is surpassed by an embedding of brands so deeply into the fabric of the film’s narrative that they serve not as *props*, but as *object-actors* that propel the plot. HBO’s *Sex and the City* is emblematic of such a practice. To give another example: some major brands leverage the creativity of consumers to create artistic output in the form of short stories, films and poems, the only stipulation being that they mention the product category within them. Advertisements thus have another rhetorical purpose: they do not inform or persuade as much as they entertain. The original function of advertising

was 'to warn' – stemming as it does from the French verb *avertir* in the early fifteenth century. In the future, advertising will lose its original function as warning or announcement and become entertainment.

Advertisements are alive

All work in advertising revolves around the ways in which the image seems to produce something that is more than the sum of its parts. Images are ontologically cryptic, in other words, we conceive images to be both agentic *and* passive, residing in *and* affecting many spheres simultaneously. The image is variously used to mean 'visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality' (Mitchell 1994: 16). It exists 'within a distinctive socio-legal environment – unlike textual or verbal statements, such as product claims or political promises, pictures cannot be held to be true or false ... elud[ing] empirical verification' (Schroeder 2006: 7). Such multiple ontologies move images beyond simple categories of analysis, because it is difficult to say *what* an image is to begin with, or *where* it resides, what constitutes the border between the image and not-image, whether they are active agents or passive conduits. Images are extra-organizational entities; they are designed by the organization but become quixotic and uncontrollable.

Images are often referred to as 'complex' without paying due attention to what this concept requires in terms of methodological and epistemological approaches. In thinking of images as complex, theorists often begin by arguing that there exists something about the image that is beyond analytic investigation. Mitchell says that the question of meaning has been exhaustively explored by hermeneutics as well as semiotics, 'with the result that every image theorist seems to find some residue or "surplus value" that goes beyond communication, signification, and persuasion' (2005: 9). There exists an ineffable extra in images, impossible to put into words (van Eck and Winters 2005), which remains 'in excess' of the processes of mediation and connotation (Jay 1994: 275).

In defending images from simplistic comparisons with text, Schroeder attests that, ironically, 'the vast body of writing *about* art confirms nothing more than that words fail miserably to "account for" the communicative and expressive power of images' (2002: 19). In a similar vein, Rose points out that there exists in art historical methods an acknowledgement of the overall 'feel' of an image, its 'expressive content' as she calls it, which is elusive and slippery because 'breaking an image into its component parts – spatial organisation, colour, content, light – does not necessarily capture the look of the image' (2007: 48–49). Barthes talks about the vitalistic qualities of images that cannot be pinned down, and terms this surplus value 'the third meaning' – that magic within the image that cannot be explained away, as Davison explains in Chapter 2 in this volume. Images are complex precisely because they exceed the sum of their parts. Through their very complexity, they are constantly mutating in meaning and significance. Second, they cross aesthetic borders and are not confinable to a particular domain; they are at once aesthetic, political and social, artefactual and imaginary. Third, they act on all domains recursively, which means it is impossible to describe in linear fashion how the aesthetic life of images affects the political life of images. Instead, we could see this as a recursive, infinite gesture; the aesthetic affects the political affects the aesthetic affects the political.

In this context, we could argue that it is better to think of advertising images as *alive*. This argument follows recent philosophical debates about the ascription of life to previously lifeless entities. For example, the visual theorist W.J.T. Mitchell wonders if it is not better to regard the image as a *species*; a species that reproduces, desires and holds us in thrall; one that seeks attention, one that has power:

Images are, then, like *species*, and pictures are like organisms whose kinds are given by the species ... Perhaps, then, there is a way in which we can speak of the value of images as evolutionary or at least co-evolutionary entities, quasi life-forms (like viruses) that depend on a host organism (ourselves), and cannot reproduce themselves without human participation ... 'Does [this image] go anywhere?' 'Does it flourish, reproduce itself, thrive and circulate?'

(2005: 84–87)

Thus, it might be fruitful to consider advertising images as alive. The first reason why is because it inverts the relationship between humans and their images, enabling us to reconceive them more realistically as something not fully under human control, but rather able to spread through the host organism (humans themselves) using any suitable carrier. It accounts for why some die and some become pandemic; they reproduce themselves in order to survive with varying degrees of success.

Second, thinking this way helps us give a different account of the evolution of new media forms. New media come into existence because of the ever-growing impetus of advertising to reproduce itself in new forms, to the extent that advertising *creates new media to propagate itself*. Consider phenomena as diverse as search engines and social networking sites – two globally pervasive and path-changing forms of media that would not exist without advertising revenue. A generation ago, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan made his famous pronouncement that the medium was the message; that we should look at the structural nature of the media, rather than what it contains, to observe how it changes social behaviour and values. But, inverting this, we could contend that in the twenty-first century the message is the medium. In other words, advertising is a species that creates media in order to allow it to replicate. Such a conceptualization repositions advertising from a thing that we humans create and put in media as an incidental extra to an originary agent of meaning.

Visualizing the invisible – the task of advertising in the twenty-first century

Finally, in many respects, the task of advertising in the twenty-first century will be to render the invisible into compelling visualities. Advertising will play a large role in visualizing the qualities that organizations privilege today, qualities such as 'complexity'. The term complexity is used in organizational discourse to articulate the unpredictable, multi-layered, de-centred, emergent and globalized world of the twenty-first century, and organizations are keen to highlight products themselves as complex while at the same time responding to complexity by making life simpler. Complexity is thus a metonym for the technological, adaptable and multi-layered, and the organizations that can best visualize the complexity of their products will be the most successful. Therefore, a task for advertising research will be to investigate how complexity and other privileged but invisible qualities such as 'network' or 'information' are translated into the public imagination through the advertising image.

In a similar vein, corporate advertising will play a vital part in creating legitimacy for new, as yet unvisualized technosciences such as nanotechnology. This is a crucial, though unexplored avenue of investigation. An interesting contribution in this direction is Goldman *et al.*'s six-year media project *Landscapes of Capital* (1998–2003). *Landscapes of Capital* explores how advertising, particularly corporate advertising, visually depicts the phenomenon of globalization. The authors' goal is to investigate how such representations affect the cultural imaginary and shape our political sensibilities with respect to life in high-tech globalism. Despite the massive and global private and state investment into sciences like nanotechnology, little work has investigated

the *imaging* of such sciences. Given the fact that technosciences such as nuclear fusion and genetic crop modification have a bad *image* in the public imagination, it would be useful to explore the evolution of corporate images of nanotechnology and citizens' perceptions of it. This is equally true for other amorphous phenomena such as counter-terrorism or climate change, which in the future will require high-stakes visualization work on the part of various stakeholders.

Conclusion

This chapter considers advertising as a primarily visual sign system, that is, an institution that organizes meaning as powerful as other systems at work to organize meaning – medicine, law or education. It presents a potted history of the past hundred years of advertising in order to show that it is a form of literacy that is learned, and a lexicon and grammar that can be fruitfully investigated using semiotic approaches, and this chapter takes examples as diverse as automobiles and recruitment advertising. Advertising is shown to have three sites – the site of production, the site of consumption and the site of the image itself. This chapter argues that the site of the image itself offers the most insight into what advertising is. It makes the argument that advertising is the realm where capitalism and aesthetics merge; this makes research in advertising one of the most important research priorities in any discipline today.

Notes

- 1 Historical databases such as Duke University's *Ad Access* (<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess>) and the British History of Advertising Trust (<http://www.hatads.org.uk>) are noteworthy archives of advertising over the last centuries in both countries, and provide ample evidence that advertising is a visual instantiation of social life.
- 2 'DS' when pronounced in French sounds like 'goddess'.

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