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# SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO ANALYSIS OF ADVERTISING

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## **Abstract**

As Gilbert Cohen-Séat says, we live in a universe of icono-sphere. We are surrounded by number of signs of different nature and different affiliation to sign systems. The same is true for advertising that works with signs and sign systems quite significantly, utilizing them particularly for commercial purposes. However, it is not easy to understand each sign immediately. We may suppose that the recipient and the advertiser have common interests (although their motives are quite different) and one of these interests refers to the need to understand signs in the best and quickest ways possible. Semiotics refers to the explanation of mechanisms and functions of the text as well as visual communicators and gives us a chance of better understanding of the nature of the social processes. It studies how the signs produce meanings while presuming that such meanings depend on structural alignment of signs that comes into existence through the processes of signification. Advertising seeks to influence recipients and motivates them to purchase goods or services or change their awareness of a brand. Production and reception of advertisements is linked to characteristic processes of semiosis that are different than in case of other types of audio-visual products. We work with an assumption that the advertising is 'full of *other* denotative and connotative stimuli' for the semiotic analysis. As well as the culture, the advertising cannot be reduced only to semiotics – as it is impossible to reduce material life only to mental events – since creating advertisements is not only about signification and communication. On the other hand, the insight into advertising *sub specie semiotica* allows us to understand it more thoroughly. In the presented article we aim, on the ground of semiotics, to reveal elements of the process and functions of advertising in order to explain the ways it influences the recipients.

*Keywords:* interpretation, mass communication, persuasion, symbol, television advertisement

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## **1. Introduction**

It is hard to imagine the semiotics as a science that is concerned explicitly with language systems, particularly from the contemporary perspective. The process of signification is also related to experimental music, art film or fine art. Just like the linguists, the artists also code their ideas and imaginations through

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using specific sign systems, starting processes of semiosis. Paintings by Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel or Vasilij Kandinskij may serve as an example – almost all of them were painted with regard to strong symbolism.

The first semiotician, who has applied the theory of signs to the interpretation of art, was Jan Mukařovský. He has interpreted a work of art as an *autonomous sign* that simultaneously refers beyond itself, towards the social reality, and to itself as well. The discourse on visual signs has been significantly expanded by Umberto Eco, when he refused ‘the myth of language model’ and stated that the visual phenomena are not of the linguistic nature, as proclaimed by former linguistic hegemony. Therefore, he confirmed the right to perceive visual phenomena as messages that include culturally manifested meanings, which we try to express by words. However, as written by Ján Bakoš, rejection of the linguistic nature of visual phenomena do not mean also disqualification of their sign value – visual phenomena may be, as any other communication phenomenon, defined by signs [1]. Eco defines these signs as *iconic signs*. They are not isolated from other areas of human communication, but they are independent and typical for the given reality. *Iconic signs* are conventional and contextual, so we see them as analogous and ‘weak’ codes – their interpretation depends on several circumstances and it may vary case by case. If done relatively right, the process of interpretation itself can be defined as an ‘art’.

## **2. Interpretation as semiotic method**

There are three basic semiotic methods of examination: interpretation, formalization and language analysis. Every cultural output may become a semantic unit [2]. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, only interpretation is suitable for understanding of such units, on semiotic, as well as on semantic levels [3]. Meanings of semantic units depend on different factors: sense of exactness is natural for sciences, therefore they require clear interpretation of signs; high art leads us to connotative ambiguity and philosophy usually doubts any meaning.

Regardless of what the interpretation deals with, the way we interpret is always important [4]. The concepts used especially from 1960s to 1980s state that in the moment the text leaves its author’s hands, it finds itself in the endless queue of possible interpretations (limited or unlimited by the context). For example, according to the theory of *deconstruction*, it is impossible to interpret a text definitely and various interpretations are – almost always – legitimate, because each sign might be cited in any way and it also might be separated from the original context to create new contexts, unlimited and free from any interpretation criteria. According to a theory of unlimited *semiosis*, the text is a part of an interpretation chain that should continue without the presence of its author and in consideration of the context, *ad infinitum* [3, p. 40]. The texts were also described as tools for production of unlimited ‘postponing’ of the meaning. The language was understood nearly in Freudian spirit: it speaks more than it pretends to speak. This idea was, more or less, defended by every old theory,

whether based on deconstruction, independent interpretation, *misprision*, libidinous reading or free *jouissance*.

The opinions of Umberto Eco formed a new line of thinking about interpretation. He stated that an interpreter should not have been authorized to say that a message may have had any meaning. The intention of the text is important. "We can accept something like Popper's principle, according to which there exist rules for making decisions about what interpretations are the best, but there is also a rule allowing us to learn which ones are 'bad'. (...) Internal coherency must be seen as the parameter of interpretation." [3, p. 70] Eco defined the limits related to infinite quantity of meanings proposed by Pierce's unlimited semiosis in so called *encyclopaedia* – global semantic system that is a complex set of knowledge and cultural conventions of the particular audience.

Eco has criticized both positions of 'epistemological fanaticism': at first, he eliminated structuralistic precondition of objective nature of the text that defined the interpretation as a passive process of code decryption and later he denied formerly known pragmatic theory, according to which any text may be interpreted by infinite number of ways. He also introduced theories of *opened work and model reader*, in which a work of art is perceived as a multivalent message – as a set of different meanings that are included in one meaning carrier [5] and absolutely dependent on *intentio operis* (the goal of the text) so they would not be a subject of over-interpretation or misinterpretation of the text. Eco's idea of *opened work* underlines the reader's role in the process of interpretation, thus *intentio lectoris*. At the same time, he understands that it is necessary to work with respect to intention of the opened work. Interpretation is mutual cooperation of the reader and the text. The process results in creation of so called *empiric reader* that represents a *model reader* and it tries to reveal model author within the text as personalization of *intentio operis*. Irrelevancy of *intentio auctoris* (the author's intention) in the interpretation process proposed by Umberto Eco is clear also in thoughts of Roland Barthes. In his post-structuralistic essay *The Death of the Author*, he defended the opinion that the meanings of the text limited to the readers, they arise only in the process of textual analysis and the author's intentions are somehow 'melted' in the text itself. "The author is dead", writes Barthes [[http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death\\_authorbarthes.pdf](http://www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf)].

To summarize the outlines mentioned above, we conclude that the text is accessible to either semantic (naïve) or semiotic (critical) reader that is able to identify inner meanings not even intended by the author. Such interpretation is justified, or more precisely right only if it follows the intention of the text. Discovering of meanings not intended by the author should be, at the same time, *a priori* pleasure for the author himself/herself, because, as Umberto Eco writes, it pays respect to both the author and the text [6]. The main goal of the authors should be to form a *model reader*, who will think of the text's intentions.

We assume that a similar way of thinking is essential also for functioning of advertising. To be successful, an advertisement must appeal to the model recipient's perception particularly. It should be constructed as a medium with a specific message planned in advance that will be communicated as simply and clearly as possible. From the recipient's point of view as well as from the viewpoint of the advertiser, we do not consider the creative over-interpretation by Jonathan Culler or entering a spiral of Pierce's infinite semiosis as appropriate parts of analyzing the effects of television advertisements. Typical successful advertising does not need, by its nature, to exist in the environment full of infinite possibilities to interpret connotative meanings. Its principles of functioning predestine it to the 'meaning conservatism' – the most important thing is to affect, wilfully or subconsciously, the shopping behaviour or subconscious opinions on a brand, ideally in the way chosen in advance, by producers themselves [7].

### **3. Advertising from the viewpoints of Semiotics, mass communication and Psychology**

Jarmila Doubravová points out that visual semiotics has not been fully implemented as a semiotic movement yet [8]. Not only Umberto Eco or the Prague Linguistic Circle, but also filmmakers and film theorists dealt with it in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. They wanted to find out what makes the films easily understandable and provably experimented with production through semiotic thinking. However, their adherence to the semiotic stream may be proved in far more prosaic way, if we accept the hypothesis formulated by Roland Barthes: there is no better evidence of reading than the reading itself, quality and stability of its semantics.

Similar way of thinking has also influenced several researches aimed at the topic of advertising. Researches working in the field of film [9] and television advertising are logically similar to each other in many factors: in the beginning, both fields worked with amateur psychology of author and interpretation levels, while they imagined connotative meanings of signs decoded by the model recipient (we can mention for example the Russian formalism), and then both of them tried to find out to what extent the audio-visual works are coded and also aimed to define the nature of such codes [D. Bordwell, *The Viewer's Share: Models of Mind in Explaining Film*, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/essays/viewersshare.php>]. These tendencies can be proven by 'boom' of formalism amongst film theorists and producers.

French theorist Christian Metz was among the first significant researchers who dealt with the film semiotics. He necessarily influenced also research on advertising, especially by stating that the film is not coded primarily by verbal language, but by narrative designation. Metz wrote that any film is a paradigm of decisions, therefore a result of creative choices made by the author. Metz abandoned the so called 'objective semiology' and, by doing a research aimed at possibilities of psychodynamics, he developed a line of thought that continued in

the tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure, Sigmund Freud or Jacques Lacan. Therefore, we may state that Christian Metz – together with other theorists – attached more importance to *intentio lectoris* than *intentio operis*. According to neo-formalist David Bordwell, Metz held the view that a spectator does not primitively solve a flow of signs through codes, but that he (or she) is pulled into the meanings of the film much more than it looks at first sight.

Connection between the system of signs related to advertising and the perception of such signs by the recipients was indirectly confirmed also by an expert in the field of advertising communication, Gillian Dyer, who stated that the advertisements are means of representation and creation of meanings form autonomous ideology within themselves, but they also integrate external codes shared by the whole society – and just on the ground of such cooperation they are able to function effectively [10]. We consider this kind of thinking as very important for the advertising. The particular semantic interpretations articulated by the recipients function as basic principles of advertising and its existence. In science, one sign has one clear meaning in certain context; creation of art is based on assumption that one sign may hold many meanings which is, in this case, absolutely desired. However, potential ambiguousness of advertisements is also subordinated largely to the need to persuade the recipients or sell products.

### ***3.1. Advertising as mass communication and subject of semiosis***

Advertising is defined a form of communication, whose author or sponsor sends a message to a recipient (consumer) with the explicit intention to sell a product (or idea) to the customers [11]. This process has its particularities and it is linked to both propagandistic model of communication defined by McQuail and persuasive concept of communication described by the semiotician Jarmila Doubravová [8, p. 102]. Well-known linguist Guy Cook considers advertising as a ‘parasite discourse’, because it takes over the contents, forms, authors as well as recipients of other discourses (similarly as the literary criticism depends on literature and the Sport News – on sport) [12]. Moreover, Judith Williamson indirectly builds on the idea of ‘parasite discourse’ by Dyer’s characterization of advertising essence as something that uses the elements of real life and aims to create ‘new world and new language’. “The job of advertising is not to create a new meaning, but to translate signs of the system that we have already known”, writes Williamson [13].

To make it simple, advertising functions as the famous painting by surrealist painter René Magritte titled ‘This is not a pipe’. Illustration of a sign referring to an object is not yet the object itself. When we forget that, the act of full identification occurs. This principle is utilized by advertising to communicate e.g. that the coffee means delightful experience and home comfort, or that the given car has been tailor-made *right for me* and it will bring *me* a higher status in the society. Another essential factor is the ability to remember: “The job of advertising is to become remembered, so that it can effect decision

to buy. The job of those who plan the advertising campaigns is to make people remember them.” [14]

### **3.2. Advertising as communication model**

By the transmission model of communication, the source (sender, communicator) transmits a message, encodes it using the language or image code and sends it through a transmitter using a certain channel (route, medium) to a receiver (recipient). The recipient receives the encoded message through a certain receiver and decodes it. The content is then prepared to interpretation – such interpretation depends also on the amount of communication noise. The way the recipient reacts is called feedback [D. Foulger, *Models of the Communication Process*, <http://davis.foulger.info/research/unifiedModelOfCommunication.htm>]. Advertising communication has the following characteristics: the communicator is the author or sponsor of the advertisement, the recipient is the potential consumer and the transmitted message is a commercial message that aims to fulfil the advertising goal [15], because all communication desire for a feedback.

The propagation model of communication by Denis McQuail is, in several points, almost identical with the advertising communication. Its basic aspects are self-presentation, attracting attention at the expense of presenting new information, cultural expression, values or faith. Denis McQuail mentions the propagation model in connection with mass media and those communicators, who use them for achieving desired effects: “Those who utilize the mass media for their own benefit really hope that behind the attention and propagation, there are some effects (as for instance, influence on an attitude or sale). Therefore, attention is usually considered as the immediate goal and then it is often taken as the measure of success or failure.” [16] However, this kind of immediate attention is neutral in terms of values and meaningless, as long as it is deprived of quality, stronger emotional response, further repeating and does not build on existing awareness of the brand. (Naturally, there are also opinions which state that the attention is not the key factor and the spectators perceive the information more subconsciously than consciously. However, in accordance with our point of view, Erik du Plessis persuasively argues – supporting the notions by his own research – that this kind of theoretical possibility is admissible only under certain circumstances and to limited extent) [14, p. 131].

### **3.3. Persuasive and linguistic function of advertising**

The goal of advertising is to persuade, acquire, evaluate, influence – in other words, to form consciousness of the recipients, to strengthen their need to buy a certain product or service. As a kind of persuasion, advertising is affected by verbal, non-verbal, word-forming, syntactic and lexical factors, whose influence is individual and varies from person to person. It uses also a lot of persuasive techniques [17]. The definition of language function is supported by

Jakobson's formula that consists of six basic factors (sender, recipient, message, context, contact, and code), which form six language functions: expressive, referential, phatic, poetic, conative and meta-lingual [18]. Every message includes several functions. **Referential function** is cognitive and aimed at given denotation. It results from the context that has to be recognized by the recipients; therefore, while creating advertisements, producers should know about the attitudes of their target audiences. **Expressive function** is connected with a factor of a speaking person, who enriches the advertisement by emotions, but also by music, colours, etc. **Conative function** is linked to the need to attract the recipients and, in Jakobson's understanding, it is identical with persuasion. **Phatic function** results from the need to keep contact with the recipient. The advertisement tries to transfer the spectator into a virtual world far from the reality, encouraging certain desires. **Meta-lingual function** includes lingual and non-lingual elements used in the advertising. And finally, **poetic function** represents the **aesthetic value** of the text (advertisement).

#### **4. Semantic images created by television advertisements**

Visual portrayals are able to communicate considerably more information than words and noises, so they are logically the main subjects to semiotic analysis of any television advertising. The spectators process and adopt the images more quickly and remember them more than the words [19]. The images do not transfer only essential information, but they also serve for creation of mood – the whole emotional influence on the recipient, similarly as music. We will deal with colour, shape, and font, as well as with perception of persons or specific emotions. It is important to note that understanding of each of the elements may differ in different cultures and social classes, because the advertisements are formed by the culture and, on the contrary, help to form the culture. It is impossible to rely on generally valid symbols, because they are culturally determined. “The advertising presents the product in compliance with criteria related to a supposed lifestyle of a certain social group and the presented products may become symbols of social status on the basis of effective advertising campaign”, psychologist Elena Hradiská points out [20].

Humans are social beings. Our perception has been adjusting through millenniums; we are able to intuitively recognize human faces also in seemingly unrelated objects. We can define emotions by facial expression or quickly show our empathy towards other people. These processes are based on both contextual and external signs. The contextual signs result from the environment (a rock concert, a billionaire's residence) and they become a part of complex perception of persons that may sometimes characterize these persons more precisely than any detailed description. External signs are perceived in three categories: physiognomic signs (physical aspects of human existence), adjustment of appearance and demonstrations of behaviour (from the ways we act to the poses of our bodies). We observe spontaneously and evaluate all these signs, but their importance differs subjectively. Several things are important for advertising. For

instance, defining the origins of the effect of ‘primacy’ – explaining why the signs that are perceived at first dominate over the signs perceived later. Or by trying to explain we modify the signs perceived later in relation to the original image of a man to confirm our own judgments – this process deforms our perception of the reality. Also, we have to consider the ‘halo effect’, which puts an excessive emphasis on one sign or more signs. If we attend a social event and therefore perceive more persons, the factors of order and contrast seem to be crucial [21]. Or, as people, we also like to compare: if we consider one man as hard-working and his associate is only a little bit less active, we feel that the associate is absolutely lazy [22]. Not to speak about stereotypes, expectations and psychological dispositions of the observer [23].

Each advertising sign has its own shape – whether it is big, small, rounded or angular – and by changing shapes, the advertisements reach certain rhythm. Naturally, colour plays an important role too – mostly by putting particular shapes into our attention. The basic shapes have their own symbolism. The square indicates stableness and unity, but, paradoxically, advertising uses it only rarely. The rectangle is rather typical for print media than for television advertising, but it can be stated that its characteristics are similar as in the case of the square. The triangle is symbolically connected with spiritual world [24]; it can symbolize flame, God, infinity, movement, pyramid or fertility [25]. The circle may affect the recipients as easy impression; it reminds us of perfection or change. Generally speaking, the oval shapes evoke balance and peace. In thousands of cases, they are directly implemented into the corporate logo. Unfinished shapes are the best for attracting attention, although they do not always communicate the most desired meaning.

Music is, undoubtedly, the most used acoustic element in advertising. It is related to symbolic audio stimuli that are able to prevail over all thought diegetic noises of environment (non-symbolic audio stimulus), or more precisely represent them. Music can function without any natural language. Its fundamental elements are tones created by music instruments. Symbolic meaning is included precisely in tones grouped into accords, their sequence, height, pace, repetition, execution, etc. Certain regularity of tones allows us to talk about creation of joyful, sad, nostalgic and many other emotions. The essential goal of advertising is to connect the reaction to music with the reaction to the product – to identify the unconditioned stimulus (music that the recipient likes) with the conditioned stimulus (product), so that the conditioned stimulus (product) is able to, even without the presence of music, achieve the conditioned reaction (pleasure).

Colours are amongst the essential symbolic languages of advertising. They appeal directly to our feelings and stimulate our emotions. Combinations of colours help us to create fictitious worlds. The correlation of colours with attributes from the external world leads to creation of myth related to the advertised product [13, p. 25]. Psychologists state that the effects of colours can be defined by connection with the world around us and they are a matter of spirit [19, p. 83], occultism seeks relations between colours, numbers and sets of notes



on a musical scale. Although the characteristics and also the individual perception of colour slightly differ across cultures and historical periods, empirical researches on colour preferences allow us to come to certain conclusions, which (supposedly) may be generally applicable. Of course, none of them can be seen as absolute.

## **5. Text, word and emotions in television advertising**

Let us proceed from image and noise to text, words and typography. Their function in television advertising is irreplaceable – very few authors are able to communicate the desired content effectively in visual language only since this kind of presentation refers to the vagueness of interpretations.

With respect to the language as a communication instrument, Karl Bühler mentions three essential functions [26]: (1) The word represents real contents that may be material as well as abstract. Its meaning respects this principle and it is expressed either by writing, or by spoken form. (2) The word is an expression that, from the speaker's point of view, expresses more than just simple articulation. Its meaning is affected by intonation, accent, facial expression, or gesticulation. (3) The word is a signal for the recipient, a bearer of certain information. At the beginning, it is just a graphic or acoustic shape, which gets its meaning only through interpretation by the recipient. Created subjective meaning then corresponds, more or less, with the subject that is represented by the word, also taking into account anything that the sender desires to express.

Words and images have their denotative and connotative meanings. Television advertising intentionally puts emphasis on a more descriptive level. The same preferences are obvious also in the context of selecting between rationally and emotionally oriented signs, and also between positively and negatively 'emotionalized' signs. The signs with positive emotional value (related to love, happiness, and safety) are more pleasant, but they cannot attract as much attention as the signs with negative emotional value (scare, threat, and loss) and their convincingness within the frame of the sign system is quite low [27]. On the other hand, the negative signs in their acute forms are rather refused and do not function in compliance with the desires of the advertisement sponsors, unless they communicate a message. The standard advantage of negative emotions without any additional value is certainly the ability to attract short-time attention of the recipient; but on the other hand, this kind of attention may not be so different from attention paid to a vandal screaming on the station. Therefore in most cases it is better to communicate meanings rather positively, seeking for a way how to be recognized in the crowd, although this process is often much more complicated than communicating negative emotions.

Words able to invoke vivid internal images within the human are also important, since they create associative fields of meanings, for instance by using personification, hyperboles, metonymy or metaphor. Accompanying meanings of words come into existence on the basis of intra-textual relations, contextual connections and personal experience of an individual. Since television

advertising nowadays typically lack attention of the spectators, the producers have to pay special attention to proper presentation.

## 6. Conclusions

The recipients of advertising are not and even may not be a homogenous group; therefore, their interpretations of particular product will always vary. In addition to Eco's theory of the *open work* this concept is also related to the statements of Stuart Hall that define how particular groups and sub-groups of the society bring their own experience into the process of interpretation. For instance, perception of the works is influenced by personal interests, opinions, but also by current level of attention. The involvement of intellect during watching advertisements is limited; this fact has been confirmed also by the research of psychologists Daniel Kahneman [27] and Amos Tversky [28]: emotional, automated brain processes that have been defined as *System 1* correspond with the setting of the spectators that is related to common reception of any advertisement – they watch it intuitively, react to it rather emotionally than rationally, while these tendencies are, in most cases, intentionally supported by the advertising itself – it is as much accessible as possible, mostly focused on the emotional communication. Absence of thorough thinking about advertising naturally does not mean that the recipients accept the products without any objections. For instance, their attitude is influenced by experience. Advertisements try to form or relive this experience. To find the best techniques to do so, many researches pay attention to their convincingness, memorability and ability to be recognized. However, convincingness is especially relevant for direct purchase of products. Truly effective advertising has a long-time effect that influences shopping behaviour by recalling the memory of a part of its content. Most memories are formed by the end of the advertisement itself, what is probably caused by *peak-end* effect. Guy Cook calls the advertising a positive discourse, as it takes other discourses, their content, form, authors and also recipients; however, we have to point out that it often does so in quite imaginative ways. Identification of the symbolism while taking into account other meanings should lead us to replacement of stimuli that are very different from each other. Not everything connotative must be necessarily a symbol, metaphor or metonymy. Television advertisements still include quite significant amount of such stimuli. Their interpretation shows how these clearly commercially-oriented products may head for pursuing higher (a little more artistic) objectives than only attracting the immediate attention of the recipients.

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