No Comment

Towards a Theory of Iconism in Contemporary Advertising

Margaret Lonergan

Degree in Visual Communication

Towards a Theory of 'Iconism' in Contemporary Advertising

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

"NO COMMENT" - TOWARDS A THEORY OF 'ICONISM' IN CONTEMPORARY ADVERTISING

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN & COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF DESIGN
DEPARTMENT OF VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS

BY

MARGARET LONERGAN

MARCH, 1989

What characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs; they are therefore more literal, less fanatical, but also more false (less authentic) - something we translate in ordinary consiousness, by the avowel of an impression of nauseated boredom, as if the universalized image were producing a world that is without difference (indifferent), from which can rise, here and there, only the cry of anarchisms, marginalisms, and individualisms: let us abolish the images, let us save immediate desire (desire without mediation).'

Roland Barthes

Introduction

In no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual messages. One may remember or forget these messages but briefly one takes them in, and for a moment they stimulate the imagination by way of either memory or expectation.[2]

John Berger

In a broader sense, the critical study of the icon begins with the idea that human beings are created 'in the image and likeness' of their creator and culminates rather less grandly, in the modern science of 'image making' in advertising and propoganda.[3]

W.J.T. Mitchell

As advertising becomes increasingly sophisticated, new patterns of style and idea emerge. In Fine Art criticism, these patterns would be given names. Advertising, however, has never been considered worthy of such criticism or such nomenclature, although its use of imagery has been responsible for at least one major art-revolution in this century (e.g. Pop Art). The '*concentration of images*' and '*density of visual messages*' that are unique to our society, come from a branch of image-making that truly understands the notion of saturation: Advertising. Yet the movements and styles of advertising are not documented and explored.

The influence of advertising goes far beyond the surface commercial aspect. This is not to suggest that advertisers are, or could be, aware of many of the forms that this influence takes, or that, in some sinister way, they purposely aim towards it, using commercialism as a neat disguise. Rather, that by flooding the '*image pool*' with a constantly flucuating variety of new visual messages, they alter not only our preception of ourselves and out environment, but our perception of the visual image; our visual literacy. This is turn has an effect on Fine Art, politics, ideologies, movements, etc. Needless to say the effect is wholly reciprocal; a bit like the chicken and the egg riddle, in that now, it is often difficult to say which has come first. We can, however, see when advertising is involved in any of these movements. The work of Hans Haacke[4], for example, is a direct

reaction to corporate advertising in the United States and Europe. The level of influence on other less obviously affected artists is difficult to assess, but there are examples, most notably the move towards mass-media techniques such as video, performance, and film. This can be seen in the work that evolved from London's 'Artangle Trust'[5] where digital advertising boards were used to display messages from the artists rather than the advertisers who originated them. Apart from the media-techniques of advertising we must also consider the style of image-making employed in individual advertisements.

In an essay entitled *Watching the Detectives - The Enigma of the Female Gaze*, Lorraine Gamman suggests the posibility of producing new meanings about women 'within existing genres' i.e. within existing media-genres. She considers that,

> *the mixing of genres, the merging of fiction and non-fiction, pastiche and parody, could well be used by feminists to "subvert" dominant meanings about women in popular culture and to create pleasure, surprise and interest in feminism.*

She concludes that,

> *It is a great pity that <u>at the moment it is advertisers who are using these techniques to greatest effect</u>.*[6] (my emphasis)

So the influence of 'movements' in advertising is diverse and wide-ranging. It is strange then that there is no comprehensive history and crticism of Advertising in the sense that there is a history and criticism of Art.

The 'decoding' of advertisements by Semiotics etc., explores only their effect on the consumer and their means of operation in a commercial/selling context. Although this has been useful in the evolution of an analytical and thoughtful attitude to advertising, it is limited in that it looks at one aspect only, and also by the fact that once comprehensible 'rules for decoding' have been established, anyone can decode any advertisement as far as its effect on their consumer-psyche is concerned, but not further. The further effects of advertising can only be assessed by constant documentation, exploration, and analysis, i.e. in much the same way that the influences, effects, and developments of Fine Art are assessed through the history and criticism of art.

This study began with an attempt to explore one particular advertisement from the recent Smirnoff Vodka campaign. Preliminary research into the style, content and social context of this advertisement led to the identification of a new pattern in advertising. Further research revealed that these advertisements were part of a slowly evolving 'movement' that spans eight years of contemporary advertising history. Advertisements from this 'movement' displayed a marked increase in the use of images with irrational and ambiguous text, or images without text.

The evolution of these image-based advertisements was traceable from it's origins in cigarette advertisements from 1980/81 through to advertisements currently produced in the Smirnoff campaign and other comtemporary campaigns. The

technique and style of rendering used in these images was also new to advertising and seemed to belong more to the Fine-Art sphere of image-making. Some of these advertisements have been analysed through the application of Semiotic theories of signs. The Semiotic approach involves the identification of named sign-types and the subsequent decoding of messages that are inherent in all advertisements. One of these sign-types appeared repeatedly, the icon, or the iconic sign. This sign-type was most related to the image/advertisement types uncovered during research. Therefore, because it was more appropriate to name the new 'movement' by using a term from a previously established language of advertising analysis, 'Iconism' became the chosen title under which to group all the advertisements presented here.

This decision necessitated a deeper exploration of Semiotics; formerly in relation to its definitions of the Iconic sign, and latterly in relation to the application of this definition in recent anlysis of advertisements. In order to define the new 'movement' under the term 'Iconism', it was important to redefine or broaden the accepted usage of that term, and in order to prove the need for new approaches to the analysis of advertisements, it was necessary to explore the method of analysis and to show their limitations. Part One of the thesis, therefore involves a systematic exploration of the Icon in Etymology and Semiotics. Part Two is concerned with the evolution of the 'Iconic' advertisement, looking also at its treatment in Semiotic analysis. The contention is that

although Semiotics provides a useful tool for decoding the effects of advertising on the consumer, it fails to provide the sort of holistic approach necessary for the detection and examination of the broader aspects of advertisements. Therefore, when analysing the imagery of the Smirnoff advertisement, a Fine Art/Iconographic approach is taken in order to more sucessfully describe and present ideas towards a theory: the theory of <u>Iconism</u> in contemporary advertising which is also, interdependantly, a theory about methods of advertising analysis. The theory begins with the <u>icon</u> and ends in the 'modern science of image making...advertising.

PART ONE - THE ICON

Chapter One - What is an icon?

There have been times when the question 'What is an image?' was a matter of some urgency. In 8th and 9th century Byzantium, for instance, your answer would have immediately identified you as a partisan on the struggle between emperor and patriarch, as a radical iconoclast or a conservative iconophile. If the stakes seem a little bit lower in asking what are images today, it is not becuase they have lost their power over us, and certainly not because their nature is clearly understood, it is a commonplace of modern cultural criticism that images have a power in our world undreamed of by the ancient idolators.'

W.J.T. Mitchell

Introduction

Definitions of the word 'icon' are many and varied and their nature depends often on the motives of those who do the defining. (When a Science or a Philosophy do the defining, our acceptance of the definition may depend on the credence we give to the body of thought responsible for it rather than to the definition itself.) Nonetheless, in order to understand the concept of the 'icon' it is necessary to explore its origins in history and its description in thought. There is no single clearcut descriptions of what the word 'icon' truly means. There are, however, several categories under which can be found the most distinctive, most used and understood definitions of that word.

(I) Etymology and the Icon

Behold! human beings living in an underground den...Like ourselves...they only see their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave.

Plato

For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.

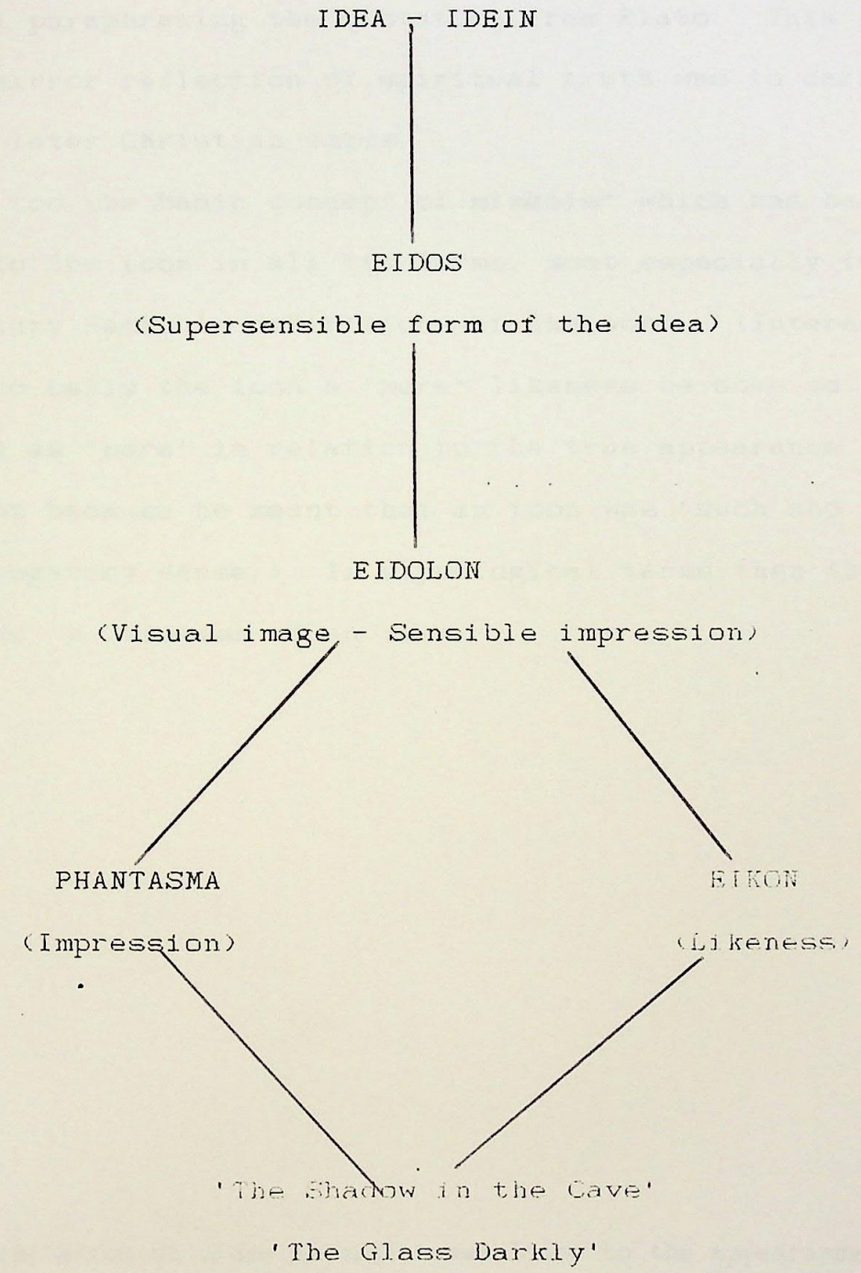
St. Paul

This short section explores the etymological history of the word, Icon. The word is usually associated with the religious Ikons of Byzantine or Russian origins. This association limits its range of meaning. The diagrams and explanations presented here will serve to broaden that meaning, and will also provide an introduction for usage of the word in the second section which deals with Semiotics and the Icon.

The etymological evolution of the word 'icon' is rooted in Greek philosophy and its concern with the disparity between the real and the ideal. This is the idea expressed by Plato in the quotation on the previous page and again by St. Paul in the quotation from his letter to Corinthians. Human perceptions of the ideal are likened to shadows on the wall of a dimly lit cave, or to vague impressions in a mirror. As the Platonic concept of the concealed idea was transferred into the Christian message by Paul, so too has the language used to express this concept been absorbed into our vocabulary. The words used by the Greeks to convey this notion of our imprefect perception of reality have come down to us retaining their original meaning in some small part, but mainly laden down with connotations not unreasonably gathered on the way. Icon, or *eikon*, is one of those words.

In Greek the word *idein* meant *idea*. The verb literally translates as, *to see*, *know* or *appear* and is also the root of the word *ideal* and *idol*. It was frequently linked with another Greek word, *eidolon* meaning *visable image*. The *eidolon* in turn was split into two sub-divisions of meaning, the *phantasma* and the *eikon* and was related to the word *eidos*, which in Platonic tradition was conceived of as a form, type or species of supersensible (i.e., beyond perception by the senses) *reality* (the *idein*). The *eidolon* or *visable image* was the sensible impression of that supersensible reality and it was composed of

two aspects; the *semblence* as expressed by the *phantasma* and the *likeness* as expressed by the *eikon*.



So there are many idea contained in these words and all have contributed in some way of the concept of the icon as it stands today. We have already seen how Paul adapted the notion of the *concealed idea* or *ideal* to represent the full understanding of Christ's message that is to come, even to the extent of paraphrasing the quotation from Plato. This idea of the dim mirror reflection of spiritual truth was to carry over into the later Christian *ikons*.

Here too the basic concept of mimesis* which has been central to the icon in all its forms, most especially in the 20th century Semiotic definitions of the word. (Interestingly, when Plato calls the icon a 'mere' likeness he does so because he saw it as 'mere' in relation to the true appearance of the ideal, not because he meant that an icon was 'such and no more' in a derrogatory sense.) In etymological terms then the word *icon* means *a likeness* of an *idea*.

mimesis : imitation or close natural resemblance to the appearance of another object

Chapter Two - Semiotics, the icon & iconicity

The sign type that has proved most difficult to assimilate into semiotics has been the icon, the traditional contrary to the verbal sign.'

W.J.T. Mitchell

Apart from its etymological history, the term Icon recieves its most recent definition from its rôle in the science of Semiotics. This chapter explores that definition. More importantly, it examines a science that is fundamental to all contemporary analysis of Advertising Images, and challenges some of the assumptions that are made in Semiotic theories. The first section provides a brief description of the history and nature of Semiotics. The second section deals with the rôle of the icon in Semiotics, the evolution of its status as a sign, and some of the arguments about iconicity that have taken place within the science. The third section present Umberto Eco's *Critique of Iconism*, which is also, in some ways a critique of Semiotics, and the final section consists of a brief and non-objective criticism of Semiotics as a form of Advertising analysis.

(I) What is Semiotics?

Semiotics is the *science of signs*; a science that is often catalogued in libraries or bookshops under sociology, or linguistics, or both. It is difficult to categorise since it is concerned with a wide variety of problems, taking its basis from the more particular discipline of linguistics. Semiotics involves the exploration, analysis and decoding of 'signs' that surround us; particularly image-oriented signs. This concept of signs is based on the idea that if something can be used to communicate, it is because it stands for something else. (This 'stand for' function is normally referred to as the *sign function*.)

Of course the science has many more complexities than need be described or discussed here, where the object of the research lies in Semiotic discourses on the nature and form of iconicity. Later, the examination of how the ideas formed by these discourses have been applied to advertising images, and how the production of those images has been affected by Semiotics, will form a part of the central argument.

(II) Pierce's icon

Thomas Sebeok tells us that,

> *In Western civilisation, the entire history of semiotics germinated in Antiquity.*[3]

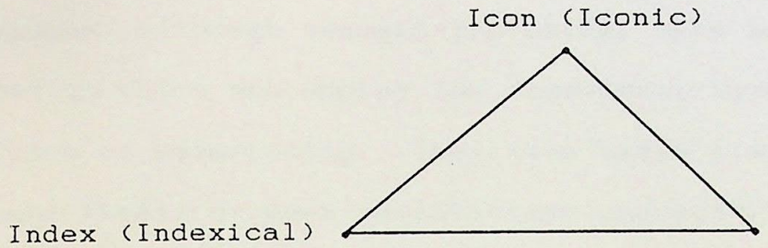
The tradition of interest in signs and communications continued into Medieval and Renaissance times until it acquired its present definition in the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinard de Saussere (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles Saunders Pierce (1839-1914). Saussere's work tends towards his linguistic background, and is most heavily influenced by that discipline. His book, *Course in General Linguistics* contains the germ of semiotic analysis as we now know it. Here Saussere divides the sign into two components, the *signifier* (*sound image*) and the *signified* (*concept*). These definitions coupled with the suggestion that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary were basic to the evolution of the science of semiotics.

But is from Pierce whom Charles Morris has called,

> *The heir of the whole historical philosophical analysis of signs,*[4]

that we derive the most influential semiotic definition of the icon where it is part of his second trichotomy of sign - the one he called his 'most fundamental'. This trichotomy has not only led to some of the greatest questions within the science itself, but is also the scheme that is most exhaustively adapted by non-semioticians attempting semiotic analyses of imagery, particularly of advertisements (See Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertising*[5] as a good example of this). This system

is known as the *icon/index/symbol triad* and gives us the subsequent terms, iconic, indexical, and symbolic; the three types of relation between a sign and its object (that for which it stands).



Now this tripartition is a division of sign in terms of a decrease in their respective degrees of naturalness. The *symbol* is the least natural of the three in that it is a sign based on a conventional connection between it and the object it represents (e.g., the shamrock, through a mystical/historical convention, is a common symbol for Ireland). It is the most basic 'stand-for' sign in the trichotomy; one which needs little explanation and one whose role has not been disputed.

The *index* is mouch more closely aligned with the icon. It has a near, or culturally evolved association with its object and can therefore be used to represent it in an indicitive way (e.g., in speech one might say 'the Crown', to indicate a reference to the King. In the same way, smoke is seen to represent fire by indicating its presence.). It is a more highly evolved 'stand-for' sign. Finally we come to the sign

that is considered to be most natural; the one that stands at the top of the triangle - the icon.

At this point it is important to note that Pierce's trichotomy is not without contention and has generated much secondary literature questioning its nature. These lenghty and diverse arguments, although thought-provoking, have had little or no effect on those who employ the *icon/index/symbol* triad in their analyses of advertising. They have taken place within the science itself between semioticians characterised by Sebok as 'iconophiles' and 'iconoclasts', and it is realatively safe to say that no-one has yet succeded in evolving a system to threaten the status of the 'triad' in the minds of the visual-media critics. This is not to say that these arguments are less accurate than the ones proposed by Pierce, just that, so far, his are the accepted form for those outside the science. Some of these counter arguments, particularly Umberto Eco's 'six naïve notions' of the icon in Semiotics, will be referred to in redefining the term 'icon' as it is used in relation to advertising. Firstly, however, it is necessary to explore the icon aspect of Pierce's trichotomy in a little more depth.

Sebok notes that Pierce's notion of the icon is as old as Plato's - *The sign imitates the signified.* He goes on to say that it was Plato who originated this concept of *mimesis* and handed it down to

> *theoreticians of literature from Aristotle to Aeurbach,*

but acknowleges that the icon owes

its entirely novel perspective[5]

to its juxtapostion in the trichotomy of icon, index and symbol.

Indeed it is difficult to summarise Pierce's icon in isolation as many of its characteristics are based on the assumption that they do not appear in the other two elements of the tripartite semiotic. Also, many characteristics that might seem to be missing in the solitary definition of the icon, can be seen to belong to either of the second or third definitons when they are viewed in tandem. However, as I am not a semiotician with a counter-argument (iconoclastic or otherwise), and since my motive in separating the three elements is in the cause of clarity, I believe that the above-raised issues can be taken as read and Pierce's definition of the icon described, for the moment, outside of the triad.

In the semiotic of Pierce the icon is said to

> *embody sign-relationships which are in the natural mode, i.e. of likeness...or a mere community in some quality.*[7]

Again, *the sign imitates the signified.* This is taken as the primary definition of an icon; the one which has been used extensively by semioticians and advertising analysts from Charles Morris (who took it to extremes that were later successfully challenged by Umberto Eco) to the authors of *The Language of Advertising*[8] (who use a black and white photograph of a glass of beer as an example of an icon becuase it resembles or 'has a community in some quality' with a real glass of beer).

An icon then is seen as a sign which resembles or is similar to that which it signifies. (In the context of the the triad; the sign which most resembles or is most similar to the signified.)

In Pierce's own words,

> *a sign may be iconic, that is, may representits object mainly by its similarity, no matter what its being*[9]

However, Pierce continued by dividing the icon into a further three parts; *image*, *diagram*, and *metaphor*. As Sebok warns, this division has long being ignored, an omission which has given rise to,

> *shallow and unenlightening theories, especially of art.*[10]

Sebok blames this on the exclusive focus of attention on the *image aspect* of this second tripartitiion. In this he would seem justified by the evidence of amateur semiotic analyses of advertising, which have failed to take account of the broader definition of the icon as suggested, for example, by Pierce's ideas on the diagram, where he specifically states that,

> *Many diagrams resemble their objects not at all in looks; it is only in respect to the relations of their parts that their likeness consists.''*

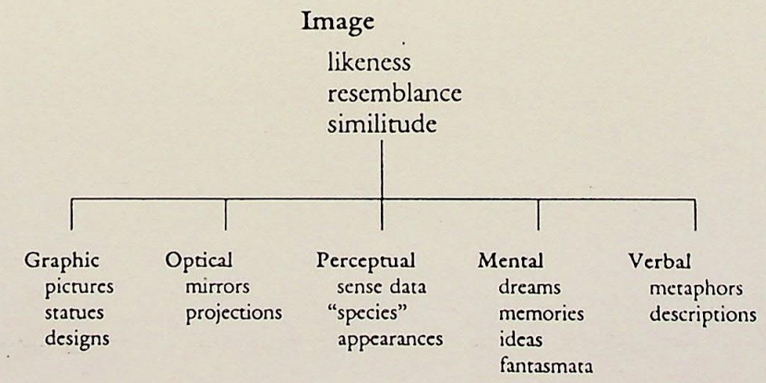
And, although Pierce seemed uninterested in the third division, it would appear to have, along with the second, a great bearing on the 'mere similitude' aspect of the icon.

The metaphor, which the dictionary describes as

> *a figure of speech by which a word is transferred from one object to another to imply comparison*[12]

is in itself a 'stand for' sign. (In the dictionary definition replace the context of words with a context of images and you get the visual comparison.) Therefore, even within Pierce's seemingly restrictive definition of an icon can have a metaphoric function and not just a mimetic function.

However this still leaves the argument that Pierce, although mentioning metaphor in the division, classes it <u>beside</u> the image rather than <u>as part of</u> image, thus assuming that all images are mimetic even if all icons are not: that the 'likeness aspect' of an icon is in the image division. Needless to say, were this argument pursued it could lead to what Wittgenstein (writing on whether verbal images are properly called images) has described as a *mental cramp*[13]. Instead of embarking on such an argument, I am quite happy to refer anyone interested to W.J.T. Mitchell's chapter *What is an Image?*[14] in *Iconology-Image, Text, Ideology* and to reproduce here his diagram of the 'family tree' of images to allow for a broader usage of the term in later analysis of advertisements etc.. For now I am satisfied in having established that the icon, even within the limitation of Pierce's trichotomy of sign is not <u>merely</u> mimetic.



(III) Umberto Eco's 'Six Naïve Notions about the Icon'

As an addendum to this I would like to refer briefly to Umberto Eco's *Critique of Iconism*[15] wherein he challenges 'six naïve notions' about iconic signs. Needless to say the theories formed by Eco in relation to these notions are complex and deserving of detailed study. However, in this context, I will refer only to those aspects which I consider relevant to the argument I wish to make, i.e. those aspects which contribute towards expanding the use if the term *iconic* in relation to visual imagery.

According to Eco, any approach that declares a sign to be iconic on the basis of

> *the extent to which it itself has the properties of its denotata (Morris 1946) when pushed to its limit, would persuade both Morris and common sense to destroy the notion of iconism*

For in these definitions

> *the true and complete iconic sign of Queen Elizabeth is not Annigoni's portrait but the Queen herself (or a possible science fiction doppelgänger).*'[16]

Eco continues by challenging the notion of similarity itself. Taking the example of a glass of beer in an advertisement (an image that I have already mentioned as being the example of an iconic sign given in the book, *The Language of Advertising*) Eco has this to say:

> *Let us examine an advertisement. An outstrectched hand offers me a glass foaming over with freshly poured beer, while over the outside of the glass extends a thin layer of vapour which immediately conveys a sensation of coldness. It would be interesting to see which of the properties of the object this picture contains. There is neither beer nor glass on the page, nor*

> *is there a damp and icy film. I feel a certain visual stimuli...and I coordinate them into a given perceptual structure...and I produce a perceptum* <u>based on a previously acquired experience</u>.'[17] (my emphasis)

In this sense the quality of the similarity is a <u>similarity of perceptual response on the basis of previous learning</u>. The image, which is selective, is a graphic convention tapping into a <u>perceptual convention</u>.

Eco goes on to tackle what he calls the 'far subtler definition': that proposed by Pierce. Looking at geometric conventions, he concludes that,

> *similitude is produced and must be learned.*

Again when dealing with iconism and analogy he states that

> *even analogy, like similarity, does not exclude cultural convention; on the other hand it requires it as an operational starting point.*'[18]

What is important about all this is not the complexity or wit of Eco's argument, but the overall demonstration that the icon is composed of characteristics that are culturaly coded -

> *that similarity does not concern the relationship between the image and its object but between the image and its culturalized content.*'[19]

Therefore, in conclusion of this section there are certain things we can say about the icon.

We can say that it is considered by Semiotics to be a bona fide sign although its precise nature is dispuatable. especially on the rather insular (considering the science within which the dispute takes place) basis of the exact meaning of the word used to describe it.

We can say that it has largely been taken as a sign that imitates that which it signifies and that this assumption is based on arguable definitions

On the basis of Pierce's references to metaphor and diagram, we can say that the icon is not merely mimetic; that it has the possibility of containing other qualities which have been ignored in applications of the so-called Semiotic definition to visual images.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we can say that the icon, as explored by Eco, consists of characteristics that are culturally coded and that these culturally coded characteristics are vital in order for the icon to operate in the first place.

(IV) Semiotics as method of advertising analysis

At this point it is only fair to give what Lucy Lippard calls an 'Advocacy Criticism'[20] (criticism that is not objective, that reflects the writers political views etc.) of Semiotics, the science which, as will be seen, seems to have played a huge part in the language of advertising analysis. I have problems with Semiotics and so, I think, must anyone who tries to see it as an applied, or applicable science. Semiotics is really an insular, linguistic-based philosophy which has an overriding tendency to effect more change in itself than in the aspects of culture to which it is applied.

Everything proposed by Semiotic theories is arguable, not just from the point of view of another completely different science, but from within the science itself. This may be fun for Semioticians, but for the rest of us it can be frustrating, especially when it comes to advertising beacuse, where Semiotics is involved, the argument will not be about advertising but, inevitably, about Semiotics. Semiotics seems to be closest to a religious philosophy in that it is as much about itself as anything else. It constantly reinvents itself and is full of the traps of disputed meaning that make it applicable to life only if you have an unquestioning belief in it.

Having said all that, it must be recognised that when Semioticians like Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes step outside the narrow confines of academic Semiotic theorizing they make truly perceptive, useful, and witty observations on many

aspects of culture; observations, not conclusive rules or definitions. When Umberto Eco says that icons and other signs are culturally coded, he implies the need for a far more holistic approach than that allowed for by the ridgidly compartmentalised science of Semiotics, and it is this quality of holism which gives value to books like his *Travels in Hyperreality*[21] and Roland Barthes *Mythologies*[22]

However, despite all arguments against semiotics, it is impossible to deny the effects it has on all forms of visual communications. In this essay, its relationship to Advertising is seen in terms of its presence, reputation, and popular application, rather than in terms of its content or the accuracy of its theories. My purpose in looking at Semiotics stems from a twofold necessity: on the one hand the need to understand it as a form of analysis that has become almost a standard for contemporary studies of advertising (particularly those with which this thesis is concerned), and on the other, the need to focus on its arguable definitions of the icon in order that it might be possible to reveal the wider meaning of the word.

PART TWO - ADVERTISING AND THE ICON

Chapter Three - Advertising and the rise of iconicity

(I) Advertising, Semiotics and Iconicity - Judith Williamson

This chapter explores the origin of the 'iconic' advertisement as presented by Judith Williamson and Alan Browne and illustrates, to some extent, the way in which semiotics has been used to decode advertisements. It also serves as an introduction to the advertisements explored in the next chapter.

In 1978 Judith Williamson wrote *Decoding Advertisments - Ideology and meaning in Advertising*'. It stems from an attempt to come to terms with the effect of advertisements on the author, who found it difficult to reconcile her reaction to the images they presented with what she 'knew', i.e. what she had learned and believed to be true in Marxist Ideology. Armed with these 'feelings' and

> *a bulging file of advertisements collected over many years,*[1]

Judith Williamson applied a formal structure of approach; the theories of Structuralism or Semiotics combined with Freudian and post-Freudian psychology. What resulted was a sort of 'handbook' of advertising analysis which decodes over a hundred and twenty advertisements.

Chapter One of Williamson's book begins with Pierce's definition of a sign and a description of Saussure's theory of referents. Each advertisement is subsequently analysed according to *form*, *content* or, more accurately, according to *signifier* and *signified*. the analyses are thoroughly detailed and the advertisements are divided into categories defined by what they say rather than how they say it. In other words, the ideological stance of the author determines the grouping of advertisements under particular headings and the questions arising from that stance are dealt with in the main body of the text. The structure of each individual advertisement is then explored through a mixture of Semiotics and psychoanalysis in a

sub-text that accompanies them. This means that the semiotic input is eclectic: there is no single section dealing with iconicity or 'iconic' signs. Rather the iconic sign is pointed out matter of factly when it appears.

What is interesting in all this is that there is not one advertisement in the whole one hundred and twenty repoduced that is composed entirely of image without text. In 1979 the two advertisements that came closest to being wholly image-oriented were both Benson & Hedges cigarette advertisements. When analysing the first of the advertisements Williamson does not seem to think that this is important and focuses instead on what she calls 'the absent person' aspect. However, she titles her analysis of the second advertisement *No Words* and makes three observations. Two of these observations are concerned with the intention of the three words that do appear on the advertisement. The third observation may now seem understated in the light of what was to follow in later Benson & Hedges advertisements:

> *yet also part of the joke is that we know before it appears (and would know even if it did not appear) the name of the product. Everyone knows it because of the packet, the visual symbol; it is actually the gold box that provides the image of the advertisement, and the joke is its struggling to produce an unnecessary name for itself. The advertisement is about the creation of words and yet could not be so confident of its humour if it were not sure that <u>these words are superfluous to the basic image</u>.*[3] (my emphasis)

This is the begining of *Iconicity* in advertising.

(II) Where do you go next?

> *...Punk dress, music and performance...if not the direct result of semiotic studies, certainly marked a parallel consciousness of, and skill in 'decoding' and reusing social meanings...And advertising also began to show far more skilful, self-consious use of semiotics (whether under that name is irrelevant), so that many of the formal preactices of advertising...are now explicit.*[4]
>
> *Judith Williamson*

Judith Williamson, in the updated introduction to her book gives an example of how Semiotics itself has come to be recoded into one of the sign systems it sought to decode. She cites the Silk Cut cigarette advertisements which were obscurant and ambiguous in a way that she had not dreamed of when origionally researching and writing her book. She shows how thses advertisements used signs (the purple silk, the colour, the typography) that were originally introduced by a Cadbury's milk chocolate advertisement: images that were coded by Cadburys, decoded by Judith Williamson (Semiotics) and subsequently recoded by Silk Cut advertisers.

> *For where do you go next...[when] the notions that some of us struggled over years ago in Saussure and Barthes now seem to part of public imagery and a source of increasing refinement...the media.*[5]

Certainly, the advertisements that Judith Williamson dealt with in 1979 seem näive in relation to the advertisements that have followed since then. The gravest change in the form of advertising came with the Benson & Hedges/Silk Cut campaigns of 1981/etc., where the focus of attention moved from the verbal to the visual and then proceeded to change the nature of the visual from an element used in conjunction with text to an independant statement that relied wholly on a learned (rather than dicatated) process of pictorial (rather than verbal) recognition to the extent that the product name disappeared totally. Judith Williamson say that formal practices of advertising which were implicit in 1979 are now explicit.

> *I had no idea that Benson & Hedges would soon be using a cigarette packet as a pyramid or an electric plug -...literal manifestations of what I had seen as merely a formal theory...All this is the semiotician's dream - and also part of his or her worst nightmare.*[5]

What Williamson is talking about is the recoding of signs whose decoding has proven them to be, in the eyes of an advertiser, of a favourable and advantageous or powerful nature. Semiotics seems to have educated the advertiser towards the synthesis of advertisements that are iconic by pointing out the power of the iconic sign. We are now talking about a form of post-semiotic advertising.

The first of these post-semiotic advertisements have been dealt with in depth by Alan Browne in his degree thesis (NCAD 1986/87). He studies them in much the same way as their forerunners were analysed by Judith Willaimson. He shows how Benson & Hedges advertisements evolved from the example given by her and traces the developement of the 'Gold' from metaphor to object. This serves as an introduction to the Silk Cut advertisements. If Benson & Hedges advertisements set the precedent for predominantly image-oriented advertisements, then Silk Cut advertisements are placed firmly on the next step up the ladder. Alan Browne's analysis reaveals, without that intention in mind, a dramatic increase in sophistication of imagery and inference. While the Benson & Hedges advertisements worked with the fairly simple ploys of evolved color recognition and juxtaposition, or interchangability of

shapes, the Silk Cut advertisements create an identity based on a wholly new and invented emphasis.

This new emphasis, which is unfamiliar to the consumer, allows for a degree of ambiguity previously beyond the experience of asvertisements, and so creates a vehicle for the presentation of meanings which are increasingly subliminal or latent. And that would seem to be the end of the story; a spate of confusing advertisements that raised a storm among some radical feminsts and then faded into the archives of advertising to be forgotten about.

It isn't the end. There is still Judith Williamson's question to be answered, 'Where do you go next?'. Where do you go when an advertising campaign has succeeded in creating a brand new image for itself without text.

Chapter Four - The Anatomy of an iconic ad

The Smirnoff Campaign 1988/89

In this chapter an attempt is made to answer Judith Williamson's question, 'Where do we go next?'. In presenting, and exploring the Smirnoff campaign of 1988/89, it is hoped to show precisely where advertising did go next, and in this way to further illuminate the evolution of the Iconic advertisement. The following sections focus on one advertisement from the campaign. The advertisement is subsequently analysed from an iconographic, rather than a semiotic, viewpoint in order to provide an objective overview of style and content.

Introduction - The Two Types of Vodka

There are two types of advertisements in the present Smirnoff campaign: the first compsed of word and image, with these two elements bearing an indexical relation to each other; the second composed of image only. These types have two characteristics in common; they both portray some sort of relationship between a man and a woman and they are alwats at a slight angle to the edge of the magazine page so that, at certain points, they extend beyond the borders of the page. The word & imageadvertisements are of the same type discussed and analysed by Judith Williamson. They are unambiguous and easily decoded by Semiotic or psychological means. They are important only in relation to their companion advertisements in the campaign. The image only advertisements are different. (Fig. 1)

They are confused, ambiguous, and seemingly illogical. When words do appear they bear no relation to the image. The images are complex and surreal. Three out of four times they carry a message that reads 'No Comment'. They appear, unlike their counterparts which are confined to middle-of-the-road womens' magazines, in the most expensive, upmarket, unisex, but male oriented, 'yuppie' magazines. This study will explore the second type of Smirnoff advertisement.

FIG. ONE. Smirnoff advertisement from **"EXCEL"** magazine - August 88

Smirnoff advertisement from **"LOOKS"** magazine - January 88

(I) The pattern & style of the Smirnoff campaign

1 - 'Internal' pattern

Every advertisement in the Smirnoff campaign is a part of an 'internal' pattern that is part of the presence of the series as a unified whole. This 'internal' pattern relvolves around the placement of the advertisement on the page. Each of the advertisements in the campaign, whether part of the first or second type, is contained in a rectangular shape placed at an angle to the straight edges of the magazine, leaving a white border around the image. This gives the series a structural identity; a format in which diverse images can appear and yet allow the advertisement to remain part of a characteristic pattern. Although many advertisements have a similar structure, none of them requires this pattern to the extent that the Smirnoff advertisements do. The reason for this will become apparant as the analysis continues

Each of the advertisements is also involved in a pattern that is dictated by the editorial style of the magazine in which they appear. The 'internal' pattern and the 'dictated' pattern are closely related and, to some extent, interdependant. Because of the style of this advertisement, these patterns must also function as an element that distinguishes the advertisement from other images in the magazine. therefore they are dictated by the immediate environment in which the advertisement is placed.

2 - Style

The style, i.e., the colour and print quality of advertisements in this campaign changes depending on the overall style of the magazine in which they appear. The glossy, sepai-toned version comes from the January edition of *LOOKS*, a magazine aimed at late teenage women, and is identical in rendition to other advertisements in the series that appeared in *LOOK NOW* (a market twin of *LOOKS*) and *EXCEL* (a similar magazine with a male market in mind). Both the advertisements that appeared in the magazines marketed towards women, were sepia toned, and the third was tinted blue. The hazier, full-colour, hand-tinted version come for the November 1988 edition of *CUT*, a 'unisex' non-glossy magazine with a music-review look to it. (The nature of these magazines and the type of market at which they are aimed will be an important factor in further exploration of these advertisements.) It is quite clear from the photographs of pages from these magazines beside versions of the Smirnoff advertisements that appeared in them, that each time an advertisement from the campaign is used it is stylistically tailored to its immediate environment. (Fig. 2) There is a less sophisticated precedence for this fusion between an advertisement and the publication in which it appears.

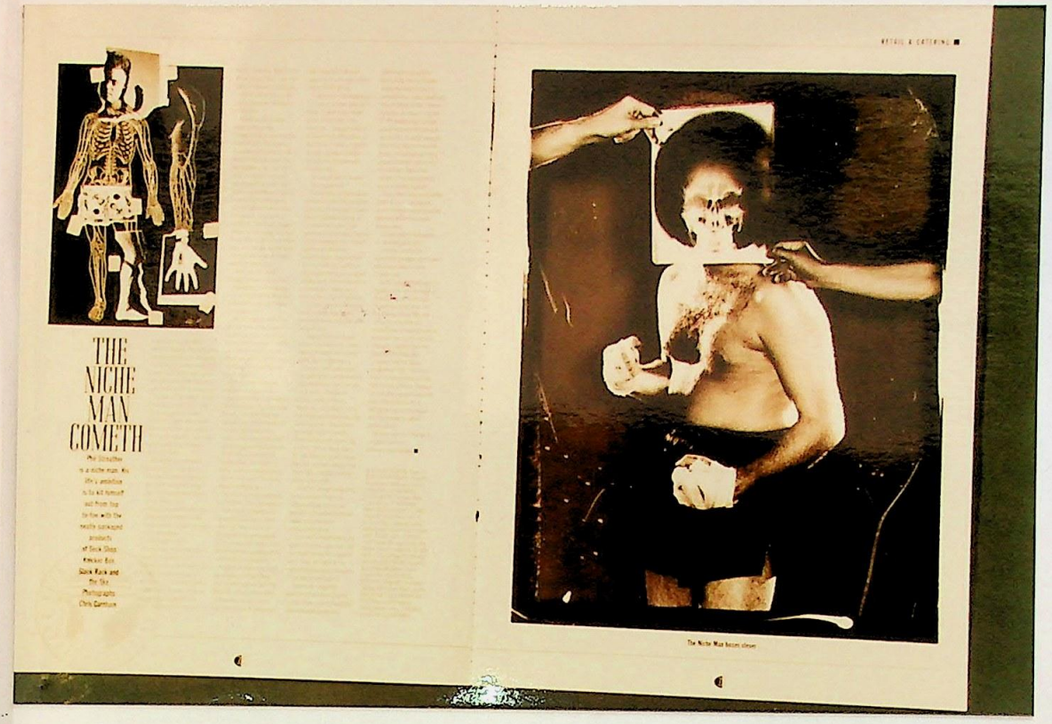
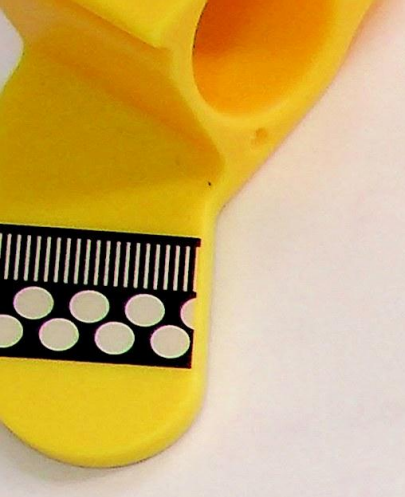
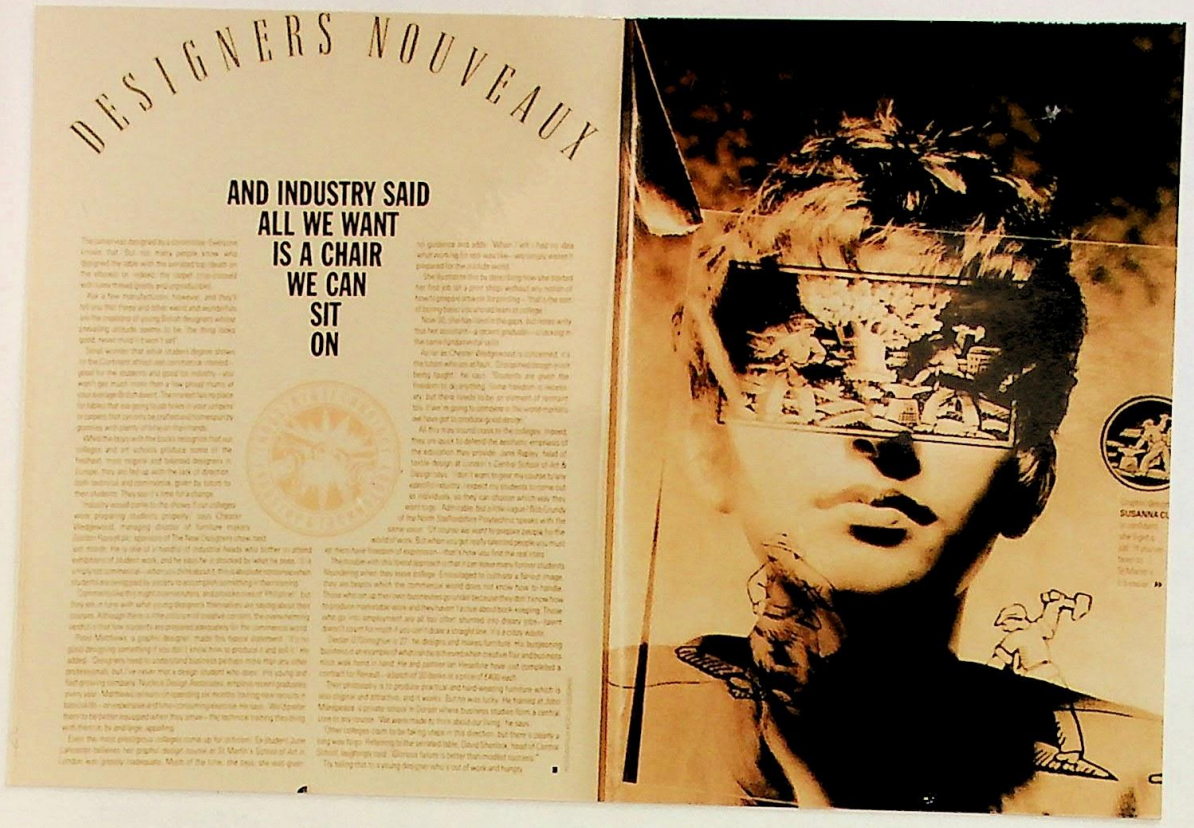


FIG. TWO Smirnoff advertisements beside pages from the magazines in which they appear.




DESIGNERS NOUVEAUX
AND INDUSTRY SAID
ALL WE WANT
IS A CHAIR
WE CAN
SIT
ON

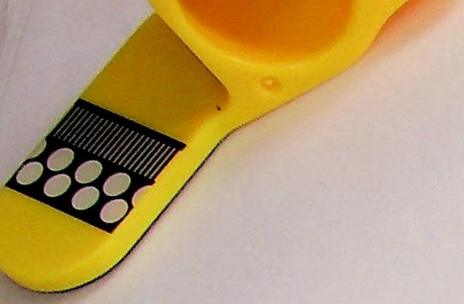

SMIRNOFF
NO COMMENT

Often, an advertisement will try to gain the confidence of the consumer by mimicing the editorial style of the magazine or newspaper that carries it. This is called 'Ad.-Ed.-Osmosis'.

In the past advertisements that used the 'Ad.-Ed.-Osmosis' trick were largely composed of text with accompanying illustrations and looked very much like the editorial article. The only thing that differentiated between these advertisements and the articles in the magazines was the word 'advertisement' which appeared at the top of that page that carried the advertisement. It would apear that there is a new brand of 'Ad.-Ed.-Osmosis' on the market - one that is image oriented and that does not carry the word 'advertisement' on the top of the page.

(II) Approaches towards an analysis of the Smirnoff campaign

FIG. THREE **"NO COMMENT"** - Smirnoff advertisement from **"CUT"** magazine. Nov. 88



The first impression given by the images in this advertisement (Fig. 3) is of wealth and beauty. This is due to the appearance of opulence and taste indicated by the clothing and hair-styles of the man and the women. The second impression, one of energy, youth and fun combined with love and romance, is read from the couple's facial expression and from the fact that they are holding hands. When these impressions are connected with the brand-name that covers the man's eyes, the consciously recieved message becomes, Young, happy, well-to-do lovers having fun and drinking Smirnoff vodka.

In fact, they're not drinking anything at all, but somehow the message got across and youth, happiness and pleasure were equated with the physical action of drinking a particular brand of vodka. Semiotics shows how this assumption is made - we have learned how to read the signs. From this point it would be relatively easy to follow Semiotic structures of decoding to produce a simple analysis of the advertisement - an analysis that would give a clear description of how these signs have been manipulated to achieve the desired effect. The usefulness of this is questionable. A sign is like a typecast actor; it appears in different 'stories' but it always plays the same part. Advertisements provide some of the 'stories' in which these sign-'actors' appear. A Semiotic analysis describes the rôle of the 'actor' in a new 'story' but it fails to investigate the nature and history of the 'story' itself. If the intention of the analysis of an advertisement is to show

the functioning of signs in a new context, then Semiotics provides a structure that enables this to happen. If the intention is to explore the advertisement itself, then it is necessary to formulate a wider and more holistic approach.

Therefore, the following section presents an iconographic exploration of one Smirnoff advertisement, through which it is hoped to achieve an objective overview of style, format and image-type as they appear in this new advertising genre.

(III) An iconography of Smirnoff imagery

1 - Primary imagery; The man and the woman.

The Hands

The clapsed hands of the man and the woman are closest to the foreground of the apge. Initially, this appears to be a romantic or loving gesture. It also implies energy, movement and dance. However, on closer inspection, this would not seem to be the case. (In this analysis, it is helpful to use your own hand as a model.) If we look at the way the woman is holding the man's hand we can see that two of her fingers are pressed into the soft part of his hand between the thumb and forefinger. The other tow fingers balance this by holding tightly to the had just above the wrist. The man is holding the woman's thumb, almost as if to bend it back in the wrong direction. He also has quite a pointed grip on that tender part of the arm immediately below the bicep. This may not be an afectionate hand-clasp.

Stance

The man's stance is rigidly vertical, with only the head inclining forward slightly. The woman's stance is different. Her left shoulder is low and swinging to the right of the picture-frame as though she is using it as a weight to move away from the man whose grip seems to pull her right shoulder forwards and towards him.

Facial Expression

The facial expressions initially suggest laughter and excitement. Yet, because of the doubtful nature of the hands and stance, this is questionable. The women's mouth could be formed in the shape normally associated with laughter, but could equally well be formed in the shape of an angry scream or a cry of fear. The angle of her eyebrow could make the latter posibility more likely. The man's face is similarly contorted although his eyes are hidden by the Smirnoff label which makes it more difficult to read his expression. Nevertheless, when these elements are combined with the other body-language it becomes difficult not to read a degree of distress and violence in the whole appearance of the couple. We can therefore conclude that these 'primary' images are ambiguous and obscure; appearing to say one thing but possibly saying another.

2 - Secondary Imagery

The 'Stage'

In this sense the 'stage' is the space in which the various elements of the advertisement play their parts and a 'secondary' image is any other element besides the 'primary' image (the man and woman), and the words. At first glance, the background/secondary images are rendered almost invisible by the foreground/primary image. After the foreground image has been explored, it is possible to see them, temporarily, in isolation. A line is drawn by the horizon of a rubble-like

landscape. This line supports a series of images in a tableau format; one to the left of the man, one between the head of the man and the head of the woman, and one to the right of the woman. The landscape itself, which is also reminiscent of a satellite photograph, is host to a series of floating repeated images. In other versions of the advertisement, these can be seen more clearly. The 'stage' is set against an eerie blue sky.

The images on the horizon line

The first image (to the left of the man) is of a middle-aged man with glasses, wearing a while suit, and a distinguishable watch. He appears to be digging a grave. There is even a headstone. A psychoanalytic analysis might explain the image of a man in a dinner jacket digging a grave, but what is it doing in an advertisement for vodka?

The next image on the horizon line is of another man near some buildings that look like part of a mining operation. The man is looking through a pipe that closely resembles a periscope.

The third and final image is of a helicopter with a giant size bottle of vodka tied to the bottom of it. This is the simplest image in the horizon line tableau.

What do these images mean? Psychoanalysis and/or Semiotics could provide an answer for some of the images, and for some of the groups of images; e.g. if you take it that the man is threatening the woman, then the gravedigger in the dinner

jacket could symbolise this threat; death in a disguise. If you take the reapeated white blobs in the landscape to be dinner plates, and you suppose that the couple are having a row, then the helicopter (symbol of rescue) could be airlifting the Smirnoff in to save a potentially ruined dinner party. Based on all these 'ifs', and on spurious connections between selections of the images, the possibilities are endless. However, the fact remains that the images are stressful, dream-like and confusing. Any structural analysis that is applied to them fails to decode them convincingly without becoming surmise and supposition. Iconographically speaking we can only conclude that these images are ambiguous and obscure and that they enhance the ambiguity and obscurity of the 'primary' images.

3 - The 'text'

'SMIRNOFF'

The Smirnoff label has two definite functions; it is another unifying device in that it appears in all the advertisements from this series, and it is, simply, the name of the product. The question of its meaning arises only when its placement on the page is considered. Again, there are many connotations, Freudian and otherwise. It could refer to blackmail, or it could be sexual and relate to bondage. These are inconclusive suggestions. The fact is that this label covers always covers the eyes of someone in the advertisement

(in two, the woman, in one, the man, and in one the man and the woman). In this advertisement it covers the man's eyes.

'No Comment'

The oldest advertisement in the series (Summer 1988) has the title 'Good friends' written in red at the bottom right of the page. These words are not necessary; they mean nothing. We could say the comment is non-existant - superfluous to the image. In this advertisement it has been replaced by the small read stamp that says in effect, 'a comment is not necessary'. Now, retaining an iconographic perspective, we can say what this means.

First of all, it is an admission of the power of the image to stand alone - it acknowledges pictorial supremacy. Secondly it admits that it is (as we have found) impossible to say anything about imagery of this kind; it is meant to be as pictorial as possible, totally open to interpretation. In this way the ambiguity is confirmed. The advertisement is permitted to be obscure and the viewer is permitted to be as imaginative as they want.

4 - The image-making

The maker of this advertisement uses the technique of photo-montage with hand-tinted photographs. The other advertisements use straightforward toned photographs. The similarity of appearance between them is so great that this

photo-montage could be taken for a real photograph, were it not for its fantastic and surreal imagery, its size relations and its innacurate lighting.

Some of the images are colour-coordinated; the women's hair with the helicopter and the man's jacket. The man's hair is colour-connected to the images on the horizon line. Apart from the colour of the women's dress, all the other colours are repeated throughout the image as a whole. This colour scheme is less 'natural' than a black and white photograph, or the toned photographs in the rest of the series. It makes the images of the man and woman static and lifeless. It freezez a moment of illusionary time. The notion of photo-montage, which has a highly politicised profile in art history (re. Johnny Heartfield and contemporary photo-texts, for example) implies a certain process of the art image, rather than the advertising image. It indicates a certain freedom of expression on the part of the person who made it. It also indicates a freedom of interpretation on the part of the person who recieves it.

(IV) Towards a further analysis of the Smirnoff Imagery

This simple iconographic exploration of one advertisement from the Smirnoff campaign raises many questions. The first of these questions is about the meaning of the iamges: What do the images mean? Through observation and description they have revealed themselves to be ambiguous and mysterious. What are they trying to say to the consumer viewer?

The preceeding sections exposed the structure and content of the Smirnoff advertisement through iconographic exploration. Before thses elements can be viewed as whole, there is one question to be considered: How much of the imagery in this advertisement is directly involved in the sale of a product, and how much is indirectly involved? There can be no doubt that two elements directly sell the product. These elements are not very different from the 'selling signs' in other advertisements - they are; the name of the product, and the first impression we recieve of the man and the woman. The point of direct sale rests with the message that says, 'young, happy, well-to-do lovers having fun and drinking Smirnoff'. So what is the function of the other images, and what about the ambiguity of the 'sale' image.

It is necessary to note some practical reasons for the nature and function of the imagery before explaining these question. As we have already seen, tobacco and alcohol advertising is legally bound to abstain from the use of imagery that portrays the physical action of smoking and drinking. There are other rules as well - some relate to the age of the characters in the advertisement, some to the suggestion of pleasure or enjoyment in what is a potentially dangerous substance. It could be said that these rules are limitations, but when we look at the power of the early Benson & Hedges cigarette advertisements along with much similar advertising that has followed in the wake of this legislation, it is

difficult not to conclude that they are more of a form of stimulation. Suddenly, it was necessary for the imagery to become more sophisticated; less directly related to the actual fuction or characteristic of the product. As the imagery became more sophisticated, as the codes were learned by the consumer, and as the governments took it upon themselves to print large health warnings on the same page, the need to use text disappeared. Once there was a health warning consumers knew it was an advertisement for cigarettes. All that was needed to tell them what brand of cigarette, was a strong, slowly evolved image-identity. The advertisement then became a presence, rather than an all-out sales pitch. It is quite easy to see how this applies equally well to alcohol advertisements.

Needless to say, this is not to underestimate the röle of the advertiser in the evolution of such imagrey. True, a change in style was necessitated by legislation, but it is certain that if the advertiser did not already believe in the superior power of this type of imagery, some other way around the law would have been found. It also must be accepted that while all this imagery is not involved in the direct sell, it comes from a world that has a long history of dealing in pictures and what they can mean. Therefore, it must be concluded that these images are no less pre-meditated than those that appear in easily decoded advertisements, and that any <u>hidden meanings</u> are not accidental, or even incidental. These are the meanings we explore when we look beyond the direct-sale images.

Chapter Five - Hidden Meanings

This chapter looks at hidden meanings in advertising. In order to explore the hidden meanings of the Smirnoff advertisement, it is first necessary to understand how they work. This section presents some practical information about hidden menanings and about the processes involved in th eproduction of an advertising campaign. It also focuses briefly on one aspect of violence in recent advertisements.

(I) Hidden meanings (Part One)

All advertisements have hidden meanings. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes describes the hidden meaning in a simple picture of a young black soldier in a French uniform, saluting and with eyes uplifted. He writes,

> *I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism that the zeal this young black shows in serving his so-called oppressors.*[1]

So we see how simple pictures are infected with meaning.

Anne Treneman, in her essay, *Cashing in on the curse - Advertising and the menstrual taboo*, calls advertising images

> *. . . premeditated conjurings dedicated to the production of hidden meaning.*[2]

The purpose of hidden meanings is to provide associations that will help sell the product. In most advertising these images work at the same level as Barthe's black soldier; they are simple evocations of family, wealth, history, or any other aspect of our culture that the advertiser believes to be capable of enhancing the 'personality' of the product. However, in the advertisement-type characterised by the Silk Cut advertisement, the Smirnoff advertisement and other presented here, we are dealing with an entirely different form of hidden meaning. This difference rests with characteristics of the advertisement-type that were explored in the inconographic study of the Smirnoff advertisement; the lack of typography, the style of the rendering, the juxtaposition of

text and image, and most importantly, the nature of the image content as it emerged through the description of the advertisement. Because the style of exploration was descriptive, rather than analytical, questions about the nature and meaning of the imagery were purposely avoided in order to first achieve an objective presentation of differences in style and format between iconic advertisements and their less sophisticated predecessors. It would have been very easy to become trapped in arguments about meaning that would have distracted from the points that were pertinent to that section. Nonetheless, it not possible to ignore the hidden meanings of the iconic advertisement because they are as new as the stylistic elements that compose them, and it is their presence, rather than the restraints of legislation which may have necessitated that change in style.

Some methods for the divination and analysis of these hidden meanings were alluded to in the previous section; Freudian psychoanalysis, or Semiotics are two of these. However, the application of these analytical formulae is not really necessary, as the hidden meanings have already revealed themselves to a large extent in the icongraphic exploration.

As each of the images was explored the overall ambiguity of meaning increased. It became difficult to see the images as anything other than violent. the man and woman appeared to be involved in some argument or violent quarrel. Their faces evoked feelings of stress, fear and anger. Their body language implied that a struggle was taking place between them, and that

this struggle involved the infliction of pain. All this took place in a surreal and nightmarish landscape.

As the iconographic exploration progressed, more questions were raised (Why is there a man digging a grave? What does the landscape represent?) and the questions became more frustrating and less easily answerable. Any attempt to answer these self-evident questions immediately involved an attempt to tell a story about the imagery. If only it were possible to place the events leading up to this moment in a chronological order then surely we would have the answers. Isn't what we see here the middle of a 'story'? If we can tell the begining and the end of the 'story', we can know the meaning of the moment represented in the advertisement. This is understandable, but malformed reasoning. What we see in the advertisement is not part of a story - it is not a still from a film, or a journalistic photograph. It is a ficticious, static moment created in a studio and then transmitted by an artist/illustrator to become part of a surreal landscape. The implication that it is part of a linear progression of events distracts our attention from the moment itself. It gives us the illusion of reason that we inevitably seek. The desire to place the characters in a story is a desire to explain, or to explain away, the ambiguity of an incomprehensible moment. What is important to remember is that there is no story - what we see in the advertisement never was anything more than a moment. The action was created for a moment, lasted for a moment, and belongs to that moment. There is no slowly

evolving series of events, even though the sense of speed and action might imply this. The only 'story' that could be told about the advertisement was the iconographic story; the slow and careful description of a frozen image. This description assumed nothing about elements outside the image itself, yet it revealed the presence of hidden meanings, not through the application of a theory, but through pure, commmonsensical observation.

The meanings concealed behind the 'smiling' faces relate to death, and possibly to rape or murder. Images in the other Smirnoff advertisements, though not so violent, are also nightmarish, surreal and confusing. The question that begs to be asked is, 'Why would images of violence, death and fear appear in an advertisement?'. In order to answer that question we have to ask some more questions about advertisers and advertising in general.

the first, and most important, truth about advertising, a truth that some people find difficult to accept, is that nothing is acidental or incidental. In his book *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, Michael Schudson investigates the awareness of the advertiser in a chapter entitled '*What Advertising Agencies Know*'. Just how much they know is surprising.

(II) What Advertisers Know

The advertising agencies investigated by Michael Schudson are of the same size and type as Saatchi & Saatchi, the originators of the Benson & Hedges advertisements. As Schudson points out, this is 'big business', involving vast amounts of money; in American terms, gross annual incomes of 15-100 million dollars. The largest agencies gross up to 300 million dollars annually. In Ireland, it costs up to a thousand pounds to buy one page of advertising space in *Womans Way* magazine. Advertisers responsible for accounts with large companies like Smirnoff, are working with huge sums of money. Their advertisements have to pay off or the account will be lost to another agency. It is this knowledge that stands behind the thinking process of any advertiser and makes the need for a high awareness of human responses and the nature of advertising images crucial for continued success. Despite this,

> *most criticism of advertising is written in ignorance of what actually happens inside these agencies.*[4]

Schudson presents a scheme that is employed by agencies approaching the production of a campaign. It consists of four basic questions:

1. What is the product (and what, if anything, makes it distinctive)? This means that the advertiser and agency must also know what are *rival* products.
2. Who is the audience or group of consumers most likely to be interested in the product?
3. Through what media can this target population be most efficiently reached? (An idea about which media to use often guides a campaign from early on, although the actual "media buying" generally is the final step in setting up the campaign.)
4. Strategy—what kind of advertising appeal will be most effective? and execution—what art and copy will best do the job?

These expertise of each department within an agency is them brought to bear on whichever question is most relevantto their sphere of knowledge. Schudson shows how seriously involved each of these departments becomes in the evolution of the advertisement, even to the point of having product classifications like the one represented here.

	Thinking	*Feeling*
High Involvement	car, house, furniture	jewelry, cosmetics, apparel, motorcycles
Low Involvement	food, household items	cigarettes, liquor, candy

This type of classification represents the agency's involvement with the product. The audience comes under similar scrutiny. Here agencies look to statistics gathered through national, international, media-based, consumer-based, and psychology-based surveys for information about the potential audience, its habits, likes, dislikes, in fact, every single characteristic.

Advertising agencies also look at studies of attitudes and behaviour that are projections of what the audience will be like in the future;

> *Marketeers need to know not only who the target population is today, but who it is likely to be tomorrow.*[5]

Psychology, social science, and even census statistics are all part of the knowledge vital to the advertiser. Schudson lists

some of the pieces of information that advertisers have mentioned to him as being invaluable. They are worth reproducing here. For example, they know that; a quarter of business travellers are women; it is 'primarily' women who recieve emotional support and satisfaction from their pets; only 25% of men use electric shavers; that a very small percentage of society drinks a very large proportion of all beer; that pupil-dilation is out and eye-excitment is in; that women, not men, are the primary advertisement audience (surprisingly), to the extent that the hypothetical consumer is always called 'she' in ad-speak! In the words of Michael Schudson,

> *Advertising practices employs a vast array of notions of the consumer and ideas of human nature in an utterly ad hoc and opportunistic way.*[6]

There is one thing that can be said for certain at the end of all this and that is nothing in advertising happens by accident. Though the sources of the advertisers knowledge may be eclectic, and the conclusions spurious, it is a fact that the content of any one advertisement is the result of comprehensive research into the market at which it is aimed. What does this tell us about hidden meanings in the iconic advertisement?

(III) Hidden meanings (Part Two)

The appearance of violence as an aesthetic/stylistic device in advertisements.

Michael Schudson's research reveals that hidden messages in advertisements purposely exist because the advertiser 'knows', or presumes to 'know' that they appeal to the consumer. The hidden meanings present in the Smirnoff campaign could not be called positive. They are surreal and nightmarish images. If the research done by the advertiser is accurate, then these are the meanings which are seen to appeal most to the target audience. The social reasons for the appeal of the violent image are many and varied and have been explored in other studies. Its appearance as an asthetic/stylistic device used in advertisements is more pertinent to this study.

If ideas for advertisement campaigns come from any identifiable place, it is from the culture of advertising generally. Agencies eagerly pursue the work of other agencies. The violence detected by feminists in the Silk Cut advertisements is present in the Smirnoff campaign. An advertising precedent had been set and a style of hidden meanings has evolved in the 'inward-looking' world of advertising. This explains the presence of this new type of hidden meaning but it does not explain the popularity of the partially concealed violent image in cigarette and alcohol advertising. Perhaps another aspect of the advertising world can explain this popularity.

Trevor Millum notes that agencies look not only to their own field for precedents and patterns but also to other media.[7] The level of violence in most contemporary popular culture is extremely high. From the 'driller-killer' horror movie to the television drama documentary, the the increasingly popular adult-comic, one element is predominant; the violence of the imagery. This would seem to have transferred into advertising imagery. In order to understand how this imagery can have become a selling-point for a product it is necessary to look at the target audience and also at the subsequently defined nature of the product. The two are inextricably linked.

Chapter Six - The New Aesthetic

(I) The Magazines

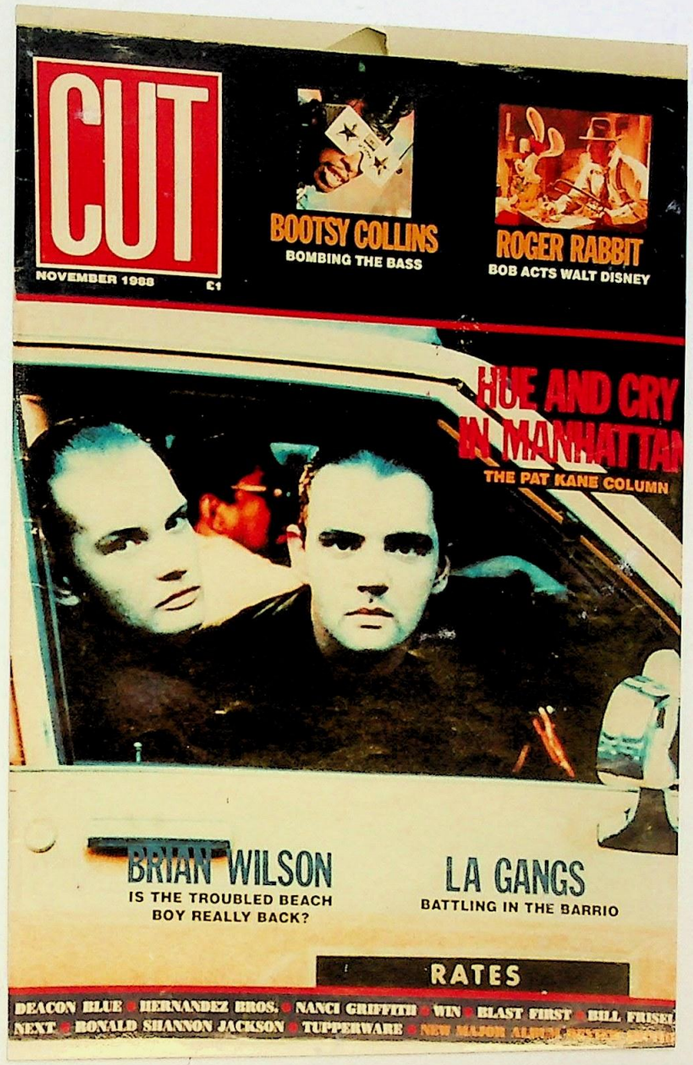


FIG FOUR. Cover of **"CUT"** magazine

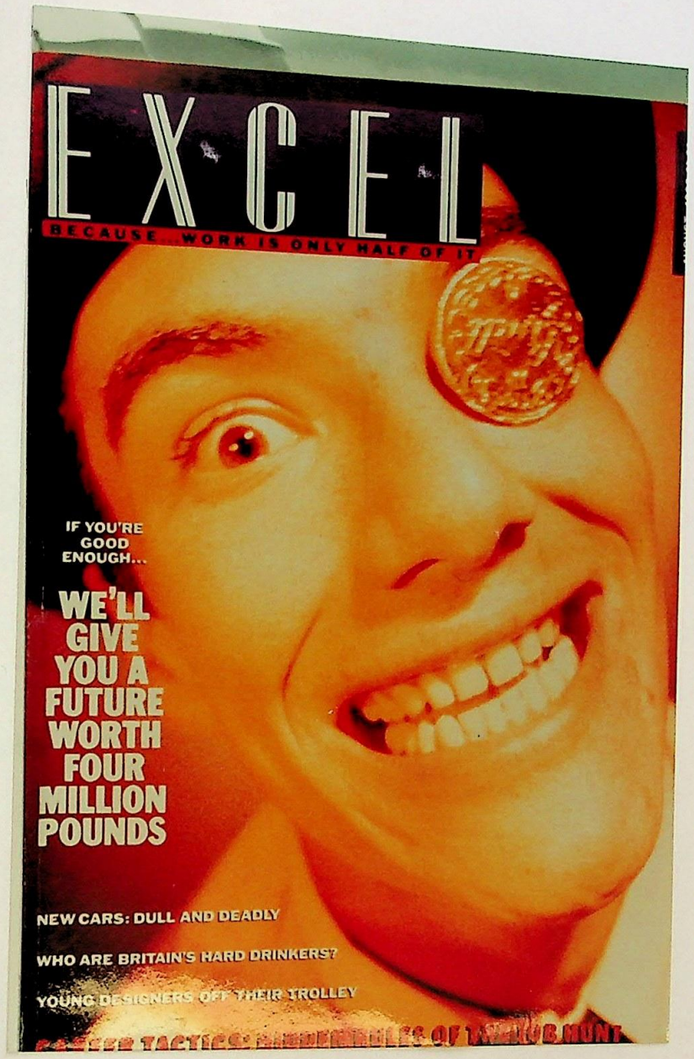


FIG FIVE Cover of "EXCEL" magazine

In the case of all magazine advertising, the target audience of the advertisment is dictated by the target audience of the magazine, it is possible to identify that target audience.

The advertisments presented here come from a range of magazines. The first of these is called *CUT*. (Fig. 4) *CUT* is monthly magazine, costing STG£1 or IR£1.52. It is produced and published by 'Complete Print International Limited', a British based company. Its articles are predominently media-based, examining semi-fringe trends in music and the 'arts'. Essentially it presents articles on the sort of popular culture that is peripheral enough to be considered 'fringe'. Some obscure singles and albums, alternative comedians like French & Saunders, new film reviews, and a retrospective of the relationship betweeen Elvis Presley and his manager, Colonel Potter, entitled, 'The Thing is dead, long live the Thing', are among the subjects tackled. Recently produced Adult Comic books with a quasi-political message also come under the scrutiny of the contibutary writers. The Advertisment Sales department gives special rates for bands. The design is slick, competent, confident, and very atractive. The magazine is larger than A4 in size. The paper is neither glossy nor matt; it has a plastic-coated texture. A large percentage of the magazine is printed in full colour. The overall effect is a stylish, aesthetically pleasing package that contains stylish,

aesthetically pleasing, 'aware' articles. The advertisment in *CUT* follows this pattern.

EXCEL (Fig. 5) is a glossy A4 size magazine with a heavy cover. It is subtitled, 'Because...work is only half of it'. As can be seen from this reproduction of the magazine cover, it deals mainly with concerns of career movers - young, upwardly moblile, males. *EXCEL* magazine is published by 'The White Line Publishing Company' and retails at STG£1.60 and IR£2.20. It runs articles entitled, 'Powerplay' and 'Working Tactics'. Every article is punctuated with designer cartoons, photographs and illustrations, many of which have little or no realtion to the articles. A section entitled 'EXCEL Challenge' runs a competition in which it is possible to win an old red telephone box. the advertisments in *EXCEL* follow this pattern both in style and content.

LOOKS and *LOOK NOW* are similar magazines with one exception - they are aimed towards a female audience.

These are the publications in which the 'iconic' advertisment appears. They cater for a market that has become obsessed with having a 'designer lifestyle.'

(II) The Designer Lifestyle

What is a 'designer lifestyle'? If a person has a home that was a docklands warehouse, a dairy that is a filofax, a telephone that belongs in a 'Film Noir' movie and round glasses that they don't need, then they are obsessed with having a designer lifestyle. The designer lifestyle is central to the 'New Aesthetic' and the 'New Aesthetic' provides all the stylistic guidelines for the production of an iconic advertisment.

These magazines are full of the 'designer lifestyle'; the filofaxes, the glasses, the telephones, the careers, the small, black designed 'things' that have become our modern icons or motifs. These motifs become part of the persona of the person who buys them. So too does the magazine that contains them and, in turn, the advertisments that the magazine contains. These advertisments sell products that are part of the 'designer lifestyle', in magazines that are part of the 'designer lifestyle'; using images that belong to the same socio-aesthetic ethos. They are products (including the magazine itself) where 'the consumers economic investment is slight, but his or her ego investment may become very high'. This attitude characterises not only the commercial and social aspect of the product, but also of the magazine and more importantly, the style of the advertisment itself. The magazine, the product, and the advertisment must all be part of the same new aesthetic of the designer-'badge' - possessions

that express 'a persons public self, and in which people have a psychological investment'.

Any advertisment that appears in these magazines must become part of this new aesthetic in order to be sucessful. It is this dimension that decides much of the style and content found in the 'iconic' advertisment because the 'New Aesthetic' demands a style of image with which the consumer would want to be associated - one that is attractive, colourful, interesting, weel designed, maybe even slightly bizarre, but certainly one that is not hindered by too nuch text; one that is not too much like an advertisment: the 'designer' advertisment for a 'designer' lifestyle. The advertisers automatic response to this is the production of an ambiguous, image-dominated advertisment, as represented by the Smirnoff campaign and others presented here. In this guise, any hidden meaning can become acceptable. Under the New Aesthetic the advertisment itself becomes part of a range of possessions. The most important selling point of any campaign that appears in these magazines, is its ability to become part of the aesthetic whole. The concept of the 'New Aesthetic' explains to some extent, the presence of the 'iconic' advertisment.

Chapter Seven - Definitions of an Iconic advertisement

The preceeding chapters have presented a detailed analysis of one advertisement, and through references to etymology and semiotics have defined it, and others like it, as belonging to a slowly evolving movement in advertising. These advertisments were name 'Iconic' advertisements and the movement was named 'Iconism'. In this chapter, these ideas are gathered together to form a series of points which illustrate the basic characteristics of 'Iconism' and the 'Iconic' advertisement.

The points presented here begin with ideas presented in the first and second chapters, and end with ideas introduced in the detailed analysis of one advertisement. therefore, the first set of points relate to the nature of the term Iconism and the second set of points relate to the nature of the Iconic advertisement.

From the etymological research presented in the first chapter, it was concluded that the word icon means a likeness of an idea, or ideal. Advertisements do not give us a likeness of the reality of products they sell. Rather, they give us a likeness of an ideal view of product they sell. The Advertisements explored in the preceeding chapters were seen to have little or no direct reference to the reality of the product, or to an ideal view of the product. What these advertisements did refer to most strongly was an idea behind the product or associated with it; a pictorial image-based idea. 'Iconism' is first present in Advertisements in this aspect - the presentation of a wholly, or predominantly pictorial likeness of an idea.

In chapter two, Semiotics was discussed in depth to the extent that certain conclusions were reached about its nature as a science and, more importantly, several arguments were presented against the accepted Semiotic definitions of iconicity. It was necessary to show that the icon was nopt merely a natural, mimetic sign; that to say that something is iconic purely insofar as it imitates that which it signifies provides an overly limiting definition that has outlived its usefulness in the decoding/analysis of images, particularly advertising images. In order to do this it was important to stay rigidly within the science's own arguments about itself. Umberto Eco's critique of iconism, for example, proves that the term has a lot more to offer; that it is culturally coded and

that any aspect of similarity has more to do with the culturalized content of an image than with its qualities of imitation. We have seen how the advertisements presented here relate strongly to one aspect of our culture - the 'designer' lifestyle, or the 'New Aesthetic'. In this sense, the culturalized content of these advertisements has contributed to their iconicity.

In chapter three the work of Judith Williamson was explored, in order to reveal the rise of iconicity in recent advertising. This placed the iconic ad on an evolutionary scale - a scale that begins with the early Benson & Hedges advertisements and ends with Smirnoff advertisements. This chapter also showed how much of what Semiotics said about signs in advertising has been recoded into advertising - making the iconic advertisement a post-semiotic phenomenon.

Following sections exposed the structure of the iconic advertisement and reaffirmed some of the conclusions previously reached. It also introduced the stylistic characteristics of the iconic advertisement.

From the points rasied in these sections it is possible to list the characteristics of an iconic advertisement.

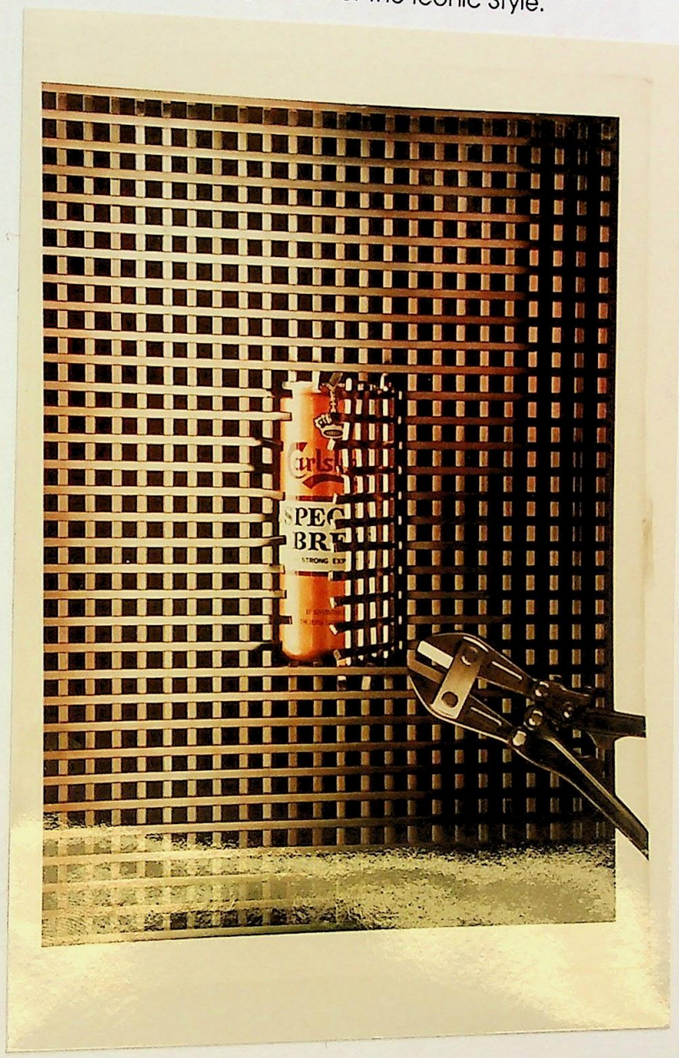
- The iconic advertisement is purely pictorial, or predominently pictorial
- The iconic advertisement refers to an idea, rather than to the real or the ideal

- The iconic advertisement is frequently obscure and ambiguous
- The iconic advertisement follow a style and pattern dictated by its immediate environment, i.e. the medium, and the tone of the medium in which it appears, determines the style in which the advertisement is executed - colour, format etc..
- The iconic advertisement is the direct descendant of Gillian Dyer's 'sophisticated' advertisement, Judith Williamson's early Benson & Hedges advertisement, and the subsequent advertisements explored by Alan Browne in his degree thesis.
- The iconic advertisement is directly related to the desinger lifestyle as it appears in designer magazines.
- The iconic advertisement is post-semiotic in that it belongs to a style that had absorbed what Semiotic criticisms of ot and used then to its advantage.
- The present Smirnoff campaign is a working model of the iconic advertisement theory.

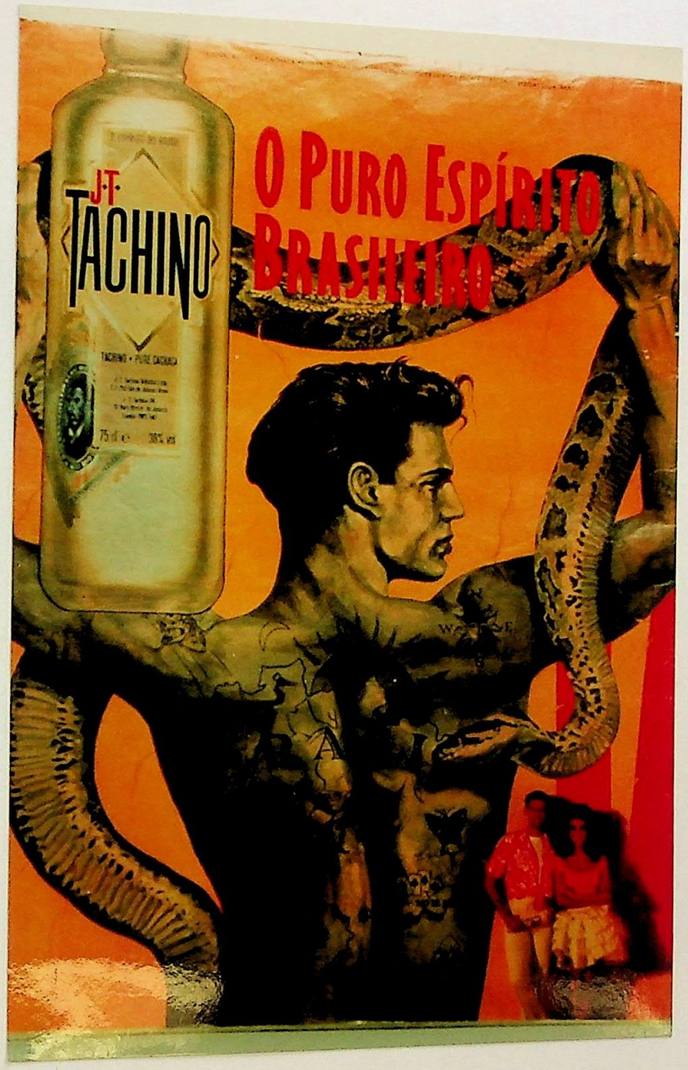
Some sophisticated iconic advertisements from further editions of "CUT" magazine.

Since writing, less complex examples have begun to appear in a wider range of magazines. Some of these are worth noting e.g., The new **"RAFFLES"** cigarette campaign makes direct reference to previous **"BENSON & HEDGES"** cigarette advertisements. The **"RAFFLES"** image is predominantly black and urges the consumer/ viewer to ,**'Forget the gold'**!

Recent **"JOHN PLAYER SPECIAL"** advertisements have begun to use a more complex iconic imagery in their latest campaign also. These advertisements can be found in magazines dating from March 1989. The appearance of these advertisements indicates the rapid progression of the Iconic Style.

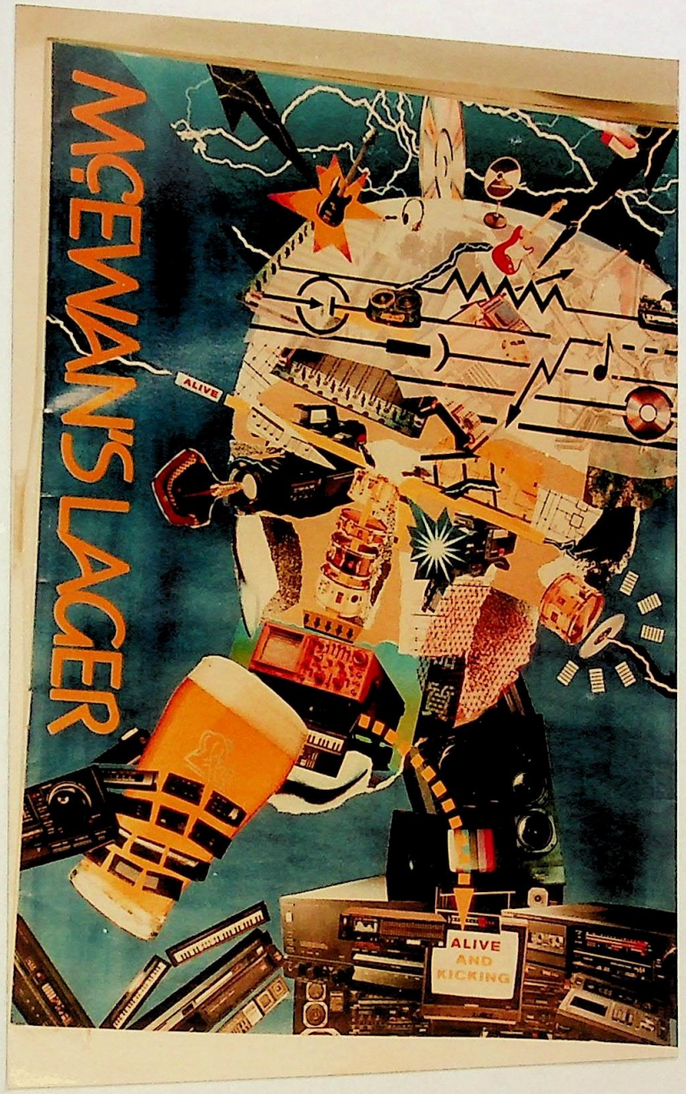


Advertisement for **"CARLSBERG"** lager from **"CUT"** Nov. 88



Advertisement for "**TACHINO**" from "**CUT**" Feb. 89

Advertisement for **"STELLA ARTOIS"** lager from **"CUT"** Nov. 88



Advertisement for "**MC EWANS**" lager from "**CUT**" January 89

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

This study began with the contention that as advertising becomes more sophisticated, new patterns and styles emerge and yet remain undocumented due to the limitations of present forms of advertising analysis. The aim, therefore, was to document one of these patterns through the application of an approach normally associated with the history and criticism of Fine Art images.

The term "ICONISM" was chosen as a name for the identified 'movement' for two reasons - firstly on the basis of its description of all things pictorial; of representations that are image-based, and secondly, because of its prior existence and usage in the sign-system of Semiotics. The term expressed not only notions about imagism but also belonged to a pre-existent language of advertising analysis. This thesis began with the icon itself and ended in the exploration of 'ICONISM' in one advertisement - an advertisement that represents all other advertisements from thre new 'movement'. In this way, it was possible to trace the evolution of a new style in advertising - from its first appearance in advertisements explored by Judith Williamson to its most recent manifestation in certain contemporary magazines. The historical/iconographic/observational process applied, enabled the presentation of an overview of one type of advertising imagery.

The study also made an important connection between a new style of advertising and a new 'aesthetic' that is discernable in some aspects of contemporary consumer society. This aesthetic of the 'Designer Lifestyle' has transferred into all imagery produced in designer-magazines. The change in advertising styles is not just an insular one - it relates to a change in attitudes to image- design as a whole: Design-quality in advertisements has become a selling point in itself - a "product" to be sold on the basis of its aesthetic appeal and on its ability to conform to the style and presentation necessary to satisfy the aesthetic-based ego/persona of the new consumer.

This thesis also strongly suggests the need for a new way of looking at advertising - a way of seeing that is iconographic/observational, rather than purely analytical. The problem with forms of analysis that seek to provide answers about meaning is that they are based on surmise and supposition. We must accept that many of these new advertising images are completely open to interpretation and that these interpretations will differ depending on the viewpoint of the analyst/viewer/consumer. Anything written about the 'true meaning' of these advertising images that attempts to lay down 'rules' or constants is nothing more than a didactic, educated' guess'. The fact that many of these guesses may seem more educated than others, or that some of them may have the weight of an evolved credibility behind them, does not preclude them from remaining within the realm of hypothesis. The usefulness of this type of analysis is questionable. It succeeds in providing a range of optional 'answers' to choose from but mainly it contributes to the endless continuation of argument and counter-argument. Frequently, important ideas are bypassed as these arguments become increasingly circular. Advertising is not an isolated phenomonen - it is related to and influenced by all other media elements. Most importantly, advertising is a product of society and the meanings belong to all of us in so far as we are willing or able to understand them, The meanings do not belong solely to the advertiser or to the analyst/critic, but to the consumer/viewer. Therefore, there can be no dogmatic or constant definitions of meaning. Types of advertising analysis that attempt these methods of decoding meaning produce only a constant repetition of 'equations of meaning'. Once the formulae for these 'equations' have been learned, any meaning can be decoded in so far as the chosen method allows. It is the contention of this thesis that these equations of meaning bypass thewider based

questions of mass-culture/media patterns - in short, the place of advertising in popular culture is avoided.

In its place we are given a 'mathematics of meaning' which concentrates the mind on individual problems while whole chunks of media-history go floating by, unchallenged and undocumented. If Marshal Mc Luhan's "historians and archeologists ... one day discover that the ads of our time are the richest and most faithful daily reflections that any society has made of its entire range of activities" then they will also find us a society most unaware of these reflections - most unaware of their styles, patterns, and movements.

In an essay entitled, "The provisional vision of Blake's Jerusalem"(1) Molly Rothenberg refers to two ways of 'reading' images and text; the Structural/Transcendental method and the Phenomenological/incarnational method. She says, "The structural/transcendental 'reading' sees words and visual images as referential, representational, iconographic containers of a univocal meaning that originates with an authorial intention....Whether we choose to read referentially (representationally) or allegorically (iconographically) *we are stil deciphering codes in the belief that we are uncovering the messages left by others.* (my emphasis)

This type of 'reading' depends heavily on the assumption that 'meanings' are unequivocally present as a direct result of authorial intent. It assumes that these meanings are constant and that, based on prior knowledge of the author or of authorial practice/intent, it is possible to accurately decode them. Molly Rothenberg supplies another option - a second type of 'reading' that "acknowledges the absence of the author/authority that can guarantee meaning: instead of deciphering codes, this reading marks the ways in which the work appears to generate meaning,...its compositional processes"

This is a precise description of the type of 'reading' applied in this thesis. In this study, the "absence of the author/authority that can guarantee meaning" has been acknowledged because, in the case of advertising, we are forced, by the imposed anonymity of ad-'authors', to accept this absence. Advertisind analysts who continue to ignore this absence produce 'decodings' based on a false premise.

This thesis attempts to provide one step towards a reassessment of contemporary advertising imagery. In the identification, exploration, and naming of an advertising 'movement', it is hoped to provide some insight into a potential avenue of investigation previously ignored in analyses of advertisements. It also provides the answer to Judith Williamsons question' "Where do you go next?" and in this way charts the progression of a new style in advertising -:

the post-Semiotic, Iconic advertisement.

FOOTNOTES

Introduction

1 Roland Barthes - quoted by Peter D'Agostino, Antonio Muntadas, Berta Sichel in The Un/Necessary Image P 98

2 John Berger - Ways of Seeing P 129

3 WJT Mitchell - Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology Introduction

4 Hans Haacke - German Artist concerned with the subversion of corporate advertising imagery

5 Artangel Trust - The Artangel Trust is a funding and initiating organisation for the visual arts. It presents art in public locations - collaborates with artists and curators to win new audiences beyond the museum. It encourages work of political and social intervention and suports works which are not gallery based. The Artangel Trust is based in London at 137 Oxford St., London W1R 1TD

6 Lorraine Gamman - The Female Gaze P24

Chapter One

1 WJT Mitchell - Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology - Introduction

2 Plato - The Republik Bk. 5 , 473-C

3 Paul - Corinthians 1 13 : 1

Chapter Two

1 WJT Mitchell - Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology - Introduction

2 Umberto Eco - A Theory of Semiotics - PP 191-217

3 Thomas Sebeok - The Sign & its Masters - Introduction

5 See Bibliography

6 Sebeok - The Sign & its Masters - P110

7 ibid. - P110

8 Torben Vestergaard, Kim Schroeder - The Language of Advertising - P 37

9 Quoted by Sebeok - The Sign & its Masters - P 113

10 Sebeok - ibid. - P117

11 Sebeok - ibid - P 117

12 Oxford English Dictionary

13 Quoted by WJT Mitchell - P 30

14 See Bibliography

15 Umberto Eco - A Theory of Semiotics - PP 193-194

16 ibid.

17 ibid.

18 ibid.

19 ibid.

20 Lucy Lippard - Cultures in Contention - P 243

21 Umberto Eco - Travels in Hyperreality - Picador Books

22 Roland Barthes - Mythologies - See Bibliography

Chapter Three

1 See Bibliography

2 Judith Williamson - Decoding Advertisements - Intro. to first edition

3 ibid. P 89

4 ibid. - Intro to second edition

5 ibid. - Intro to second edition

6 ibid. - Intro to second edition

Chapter Five

1 Roland Barthes - Mythologies - P 16

2 Anne Treneman - The Female Gaze - P 156

3 Michael Schudson - Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion PP 44 - 89

4 ibid. P 45

5 ibid. P 55

6 ibid P 65

7 Quoted by Michael Schudson - ibid. P 85

Summary and conclusion

1 Molly Rothenberg - The provisional vision of Blake's Jerusalem - from Word & Image - A Journal of Visual & Verbal Enquiry - VOL 3 NO. 4 PP 305 - 311

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barthes, Roland
Mythologies
Grafton Books
London
1972

Berger, John
Ways of Seeing
Penguin Books
London
1972

Peter D'Agostino
Antonio Muntadas
The Un/Necessary Image
Tanam Press
1982

Dyer, Gillian
Advertising as Communication
Methuen
London & New York
1982

Eco, Umberto
A Theory of Semiotics
Macmillan Press Ltd
London 1977

Gamman, Lorraine
Marshment, Margaret
The Femlale Gaze - Women as viewers of popular culture
The Women's Press Ltd
London
1982

Mitchell, WJT
Iconology - Image, Text, Ideology
University of Chicago Press
Chicago
1986

Schudson, Michael
Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion -
its dubious impact on American society
Basic Books Inc
New York
1984

Sebeok, Thomas
The Sign & its Masters
University of Texas Press
1979

Vestergaard, Torben
Schroeder, Kim
The Language of Advertising
Basil Blackwell Publishers Ltd
Oxford
1985

Williamson, Judith
Decoding Advertisements
Marion Boyars
London and New York
1978

Rothenberg, Molly
The Provisional Vision of Blake's Jerusalem
Word & Image -
A journal of verbal/visual enquiry
Vol 3 No 4 pp 305-311