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Negotiating Books' Ads: “Seeing through Things”

Meanings in the media can be understood either by doing a very detailed analysis of media texts, or “by asking individuals how they interact with media in localised and specific ways” (Bignell 1997: 3). Bignell suggests five basic assumptions: the patterns and signs in media texts condition the meanings which can be communicated and read (“seeing things”); the reading of signs in media texts in social and cultural context (“seeing through things”); considering specific and common features of each media; relationships between texts, media and their audiences; different and diverse ways in which audiences understand and enjoy the media (“seeing things”). The importance of the negotiation of meanings (“seeing through things”) between media and audiences, “in establishing terms through which we understand ourselves and our culture” (Bignell 1997: 3) must be taken into consideration.

In order to start with patterns and signs, we will take the semiotic point of view, relying on semiology and one of its branches, the study of linguistic signs. We will also consider photographs, which carry meanings in the linguistic sense. This means that the same semiotic approach can be used to discuss both language-based media and image-based media, because, “in either case we find signs which carry meanings” (Bignell 1997: 6).

One of Saussure’s conclusions is that signs shape our perceptions instead of reflecting our reality. What we see is not what is already there (what already exists in a pre-given, ‘natural’ state), but what is shaped. This means that the language system and sign systems we use create our concepts of reality. They also provide the means for communicating about reality. Media plays a central role at this stage, because together with signs they are not used only as channels “which translate pre-existing thought and reality into communicable form, [but] signs and media are the only means of access to thought or reality which we have” (Bignell 1997: 7).

We are surrounded by all kinds of messages that contain both visual and linguistic signs. They are governed by the same principles (both contain a material signifier, which expresses the sign, and a mental concept, a signified, which accompanies it). Visual signs belong to codes too, are arranged in syntagms, and selected from paradigms, and can be approached the way we approach linguistic signs. But, of course, there is a great difference in it. While the relationship between the signifier and the signified, and between sign and referent, is a matter of the conventions established by *langue* (symbolic sign), in visual signs the signifier which expresses the signified greatly resembles its referent (iconic sign). Iconic signs merge the signifier, the signified and the referent, which is not easy to notice. But, there is one more group of signs which combines the symbolic and the visual ones (indexical). Indexical signs have a concrete and “often casual relationship to their signified” (shadow, smoke). Classifications are never all that simple, which means that we frequently come across certain signs that have mixed symbolic, indexical and iconic features.

In order to show “seeing through things” when examining the advertising of books, one more element should be considered. That is Roland Barthes’ explanation of myth, which does not refer to mythology in the usual sense of traditional stories, but “to ways of thinking about people, products, places, or ideas which are structured to send particular messages to the reader or viewer of the text” (Bignell 1997: 16). In advertising, news, TV or film texts, it is clear that linguistic, visual, and other kinds of signs are used not only to denote something, but also to express the connotations attached to the sign. This is what Barthes calls a social phenomenon (the bringing together of signs and their connotations to shape a particular message, the making of ‘myth’). Thus the sign “John Sutherland” (literary detective) on the cover of a book becomes the signifier attached to a signified ‘excitement’. In this way, myth shows that it not only denotes, but also “picks up existing signs and their connotations and orders them purposefully to play a particular social role” (Bignell 1997: 17). In fact, myth communicates a social and political message about the world.

Myth serves the ideological interests of a class of people who own or control the industrial, commercial, and political institutions of the society. Its function is to make the existing system appear natural and acceptable to everybody. It plays its role by taking social realities out of the arena of political debate and by discouraging us from asking questions or raising objections. The fact that one of the fundamental principles of dominant ideologies is consumption must not be forgotten. This is more obvious in advertisements, which make use of myth by “attempting to attach mythic significations to products by taking up already meaningful signs” (Bignell 1997: 27).

Although it is not always easy to determine what is in an ad and what is not, we can see that the advertising industry is economically significant in modern societies. Advertising today asks for highly creative and educated people, especially

those who can apply semiotic analysis in their work. But, our task is something quite different; the semiotic analysis of the signs and codes in the advertisements of books. Can we agree with Judith Williamson who in her classical study of semiotics of advertisements, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (Williamson 1978: 11–12), claims that apart from selling things, advertising creates structures of meaning by encouraging us to participate in the decoding of its linguistic and visual signs and to enjoy this decoding activity. While we are reading and decoding the signs in ads ("seeing through things"), we participate in the structure of meaning that ads use to represent us, the advertised product, and society. In fact, we are asked to participate in ideological ways of seeing ourselves and the world.

The semiotic analysis of ads, while a bit limiting, requires many complex and challenging tasks at the same time: separating ads from the real environment in which they exist, identifying the visual and linguistic signs in the ad, deciding which social myths the ad draws on, examining the potential ambiguity of the meanings of the signs and the various potential decodings of the signs.

The first step in analysing an advertisement is to identify the signs it contains (linguistic, iconic, graphic...). Then, to find out what they denote ("seeing things"), and then what they connote – to find out the meanings which come out from our culture ("seeing through"). Some of these we recognise consciously, and some we are unconscious of until we start looking for them. In this way, a path from the sign's denotative meaning to its connotative meanings is created. In fact, these connotative meanings are the ingredients of myth, "the overall message about the meaning of the product which the ad is constructing" (Bignell 1997: 35). The ad first shows a sign whose mythic meaning is easy to read, and then it places this sign next to another sign whose meaning is ambiguous. Thus, the mythic meaning of the iconic sign is carried over onto the linguistic sign.

Bignell summarises the procedure how the semiotic analysis of ads work at a basic level. First viewers identify the signs in the ad and then try to decide which social myths they invoke and how these mythic meanings are transferred to the product being advertised. Finally, viewers identify how the mythic meaning constructed in the ad relates to their understanding of the world outside the ad and how it is to be discovered ("seen through"). Obviously, the technique of advertising is to correlate feelings, moods or attributes to tangible objects, things, linking possibly unattainable things with those that are attainable, and thus reassuring us that the former is within reach (Williamson 1978: 31). Buying and using the product (the book), possessing it, means possessing some of its social value as well.

What else do people buy exactly when they purchase advertised books? They buy social status, membership of particular social groups, and the sense of being special. Which books they read, which genre, period, from which publishing company, are indexical signs of social identity, signs with a certain social value. These signs tell much about the people who buy and use the products. As Bignell

concludes, ads “have an ideological function, since they encourage us to view our consumption positively, as an activity which grants our membership of lifestyle groups” (Bignell 1997: 39). However, ads also serve the interests of those who own and control the industries of consumer culture; they support a consumer society. They have been critiqued as one of the social institutions that naturalises dominant ideologies in any culture, and especially ideologies based on consumption.

The ideological critique of ads is not an easy task. Its aim is not only to “see things” but to “see through things” (through the ideological myths perpetuated in advertising). Although the critique of ideology sets itself apart from what it analyses, this discourse of science is one more ideological perspective. Bignell explains that this position “from above” in order to “see through things” “gives automatic priority to this point of view over others” (Bignell 1997: 40). That is why scientific truth turns out to be a mythic meaning based on positive connotations of objectivity and depth; a meaning that comes from the use of signs with positively valued connotations, a cultural construct, not necessarily superior to the discourses which it analyses.

What does Bignell’s breaking of belief about the superiority of scientific discourse point out? It is only a warning to be more cautious when dealing with semiotic analysis and the theory of ideology. In order to move from the signs on the surface (“seeing things”) to the mythic meaning (“seeing through things”), from the mythic meaning of a particular set of signs in a text to an ideological way of seeing the world that the myth naturalises, to move from observation to knowledge, from a particular instance to a general theory, to reveal what is really true by going beyond, behind and underneath what appears to be true – many steps have to be taken.

First, an ad has to be separated from its context. Then the construction of its meaning is to “be seen.” This is the way to an underlying meaning of an ad, “relating the ad to mythic meaning and ideological value which is justified only by the rigour of our analysis, rather than by any other proof which would ensure that our reading is correct” (Bignell 1997: 41). In this way the main issue can finally be approached; the examination of certain ads in detail, and “seeing” or “seeing through” what semiotic analysis may reveal when the advertising of books is concerned. A large group of ads in advertising book catalogues from different British publishing houses is taken as a corpus.

The Oxford University Press Catalogue, *Literature 1999–2000*, from the area of cultural studies, advertises the book *The Sixties* by Arthur Marwick (the picture is on the cover of the catalogue). This ad, like many similar ones, is accompanied by another piece of information next to the ad – a picture. The picture showing an eye full of flowers is not only “seeing things,” but “seeing through” them. In this way semiotics is best applied to its task. First, viewers notice iconic signs, denoting an eye made of flowers. There are linguistic signs as well: the title of the book

and the name of the author and a graphic sign, and the logo of Oxford University Press. Seeing the eye with flowers first, viewers can immediately recognise the signs that belong to familiar cultural codes. To decode this ad more fully, the linguistic signs placed beneath the picture (the title of the book) selectively control the process of decoding. The world has not always been seen through such eyes but only since "the sixties." Still, there is a puzzle here, which can only be solved by referring to another text. What in the sixties was seen through such eyes? To decode the meaning, it is necessary to know something about the sixties. It involves travelling through time and space after buying the advertised book. Further meanings of the ad are only communicated once we decode the intertextual reference to the mysterious eye in the ad, using our cultural knowledge to solve the puzzle the ad sets.

The ad borrows signs and meanings from another media text but only certain selected meanings, and the semiotic richness of the ad depends on the cultural currency of the visual among its readers. As catalogues are made for élitist readers, this risk is greatly reduced, especially, "once the signs 'bigger on the inside' show us how to decode the ad. This linguistic syntagma anchors the meanings of the image and of other linguistic signs" (Bignell 1997: 44). Two other ads illustrate the above conclusions; one advertises a literary study on beauty which offers the puzzle of an eye again, but also a possible answer that, "placing the responsibility for beauty firmly with the eye of the beholder, explains that it is in this 'eye' that gives rise to beauty" (Manchester University Press). Another "eye" is a visual sign (a window through which we can see clouds) on the cover of the book, *The Scandals of Translation* (Routledge Literature 2000).

Another group can be identified: it is made of ads in which semiotics is applied in a bit too obvious, but still confusing way. We have again chosen two ads from Routledge 2000. In the first one the book *Literature and Gender* is advertised. First, iconic signs are present, denoting a pair of female shoes. Naturally, there are linguistic signs: the title of the book and the name of the author, as well as a graphic sign, the logo of Routledge. Not only the puzzle of this sign engages the decoding process. The linguistic signs (of the title) which selectively control the process of decoding also bring about some confusion. The following questions are raised: does gender only mean female? If it does, what is its connection to literature? If it does not, why is not one shoe male and another female? What then is the answer to the puzzle? Does it mean that the only way to know is to buy and find the answer in the book itself? Can only then the further meanings of the mysterious pair of shoes be discovered? How much depends on the cultural currency of the female pair of shoes? An ad for the book *Lovesick* can be analysed in a similar way. In this ad iconic signs are presented by two men sitting on a sickle with one man's hand put on another man's shoulder. They are formally dressed and they look happy. The linguistic signs are the same like in the above described ad, but they bring about even more confusion. What is sick about this love? What

is the symbolic meaning of the sickle? Is it the golden sickle as well? How is it related to literature? Does it mean that the only way to know it is to buy the book and find the answer there, like in the previous case? Can only then the further meanings of the mysterious pair of male couple be discovered as well? How much more depends on the cultural currency of the male couple?

However, one more group of ads can be identified, the group in which semiotics are precisely applied to its task. In these ads the same iconic signs show the cultural currency of the visual in the most obvious way. In combination with various linguistic signs, they can be decoded into several meanings, and they also support the ideology of consumption. These ads address a special audience, intellectuals, élite, presenting them with a sign of admiration and power. Those social meanings, according to the ads, can only be attained by those professors who read these advertised books. To buy the books is to ‘buy into’ an ideological myth that professors should present themselves as objects of admiration. What is paradoxical is the possibility that the ad seems to be constructed so that it can disarm an ideological critique of its meanings. The irony in the ad signifies that professors can both choose to become admirable and, at the same time, distance themselves from being perceived as objects of admiration by others. In this way, Cambridge University Press or Routledge Books become a sign of professors’ power over the way they are perceived; they are perceived as both admirable, and in control of the social meaning of their admirability. Obviously, the meanings of signs are always multiple, but we have to think about the limitations and assumptions behind analytic techniques and make use of the critical power they offer as well.

Polysemic signs and cultural codes have their place where readers are concerned, and psychoanalytical theories of subjective identity have contributed to semiotic analysis. The visual space and perspective of the book ad addresses ‘you,’ and invites the reader to recognise himself/herself as an individual being spoken to, as a member of a group (a professors’ élite), ‘professors like you’. It claims to address individuals with unique desires and needs, promising that the contents of the book will fulfil the needs of the individual or his/her group. In this way the ad is not only selling us a product, but also a future image of ourselves as happier, more admirable, more important or... The advertised book stands for the better self. It “is actually feeding off that subject’s own desire for coherence and meaning in him or herself” (Williamson 1978: 60).

The reasons for understanding why we identify ourselves with images of other people can be found in Lacan’s mirror stage theory (Bignell 1997: 68–69). This theory has the same kind of underlying structure as the theory of ideology which has been used so far in this study. Our imagination coded into book ads is also ideological since the connotations of the ad’s signs construct mythic pleasurable identities for real readers (professors) to identify with. The mythic importance (admirability) provides an imaginary importance for us. Since “our world” is an

imaginary representation built out of signs, it can hardly be condemned for being unlike our real experience. On the other hand, the intellectual imagination in book ads can be criticised for offering a form of questionable pleasure. Are these readers really more self-confident after reading an advertised theoretical study, or...? Must readers first feel insecure, as McCracken claims (McCracken 1993: 136), to be self-confident? These are some of many questions that can be raised. An answer might be found in a few ads for theoretical and similar books (which is an exception to the rule of the ideological assumption that they are so lofty that they do not need any advertising at all) from *Oxford University Press Catalogue 2008/9*.

The three chosen ads: *French Tales*, *Cervantes in Seventeenth-Century England*, *Film and Media Studies* also contain a combination of all signs: linguistic, iconic (images) and graphic. Firstly, iconic signs can be identified. The images (imaginary) we are expected to identify with the form, the realm of the Other, are quite the opposite of the realm of sign (the 'symbolic'). In fact, the imaginary realm where there is no lack, no difference between signifier and signified, is illusory. We and our image on the cover of the book are not really the same, which means that despite the pleasure of identifying with the imaginary world of book ads, this world cannot deliver a new and perfect identity for its readers. A bit of a comfort? Obviously, book catalogues communicate their mythic meanings by means of signs, which means that their representations of the imaginary are dependent on the symbolic, the signs which do the communicating.

Finally, we can conclude that semiotics still provides an essential analytic perspective for studying the media. Semiotic analysis of these ads has shown how the meanings of signs in texts are at once constrained by codes and signs, but it has also shown how signs can be read in different ways because they always depend for their meaning on their relationship with signs in other texts. It has also shown how meanings are made and fractured from within and, at the same time, scattered by interactions with other meanings. Every ad shows how it becomes meaningful only when an individual subject decodes it, and it naturally presupposes a reader for whom its signs will make sense.

In trying to find an answer to the question, "What do we do when we advertise books of literature?" we have become even more aware of the fact how multiple and polysemic the meanings of signs are. That is why we have to ask the same question many times: What do we really do when advertising these books? We do many things we have to do, but first of all we have to decode these meanings by taking up different subject-positions. The process also operates in reverse; by constructing and reconstructing the ads in different ways, we put ourselves in the same position of the meanings of book ads, so the identity of our subject is continually fixed and shifted.

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