VISUAL SEMIOTICS: HOW STILL IMAGES MEAN?
INTERPRETING STILL IMAGES BY USING SEMIOTIC APPROACHES

ALEV FATOŞ PARSA
aparsa@iletisim.ege.edu.tr
Ege University
(Turkey)

Abstract
Today people live in a visually intensive society and a world of spectacular and exciting images. They are bombarded with an orderly and continuously stream of visual stimulation from all manner of media every day. They see mediated images more often than they read words. Images sell everything. This paper offers an analytical framework for understanding how still images become meaningful in magazine ads by using semiotic approaches.

Özet
Günümüzde insanlar görselliğin çok yoğun yaşadığı bir toplumda, ilginç ve görülmeye değer imgelerle dolu bir dünyada yaşamaktadır. İnsanlar her gün kitle iletişim araçları aracılığıyla düzenli ve devamlı bir görsel uyarı bombardmanı altında kalmaktadır. Okunmaktan ziyade medyadan akan imgeleri daha fazla görmektedirler. İmgeler ise her şeyi satarlar. Bu çalışma, dergi reklamlarını göstergebilirsinin yaklaşımıyla çözümleyerek, durağan imgelerin nasıl anlaşıldığına ilişkin analitik bir çerçeve sunmaktadır.
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Introduction

There can be no words without images - Aristotle.

The world is surrounded with mediated images in such a way that has never been witnessed in the history of mass communication. Every era has expressed itself in its own way since the beginning. Antiquity was the time of legends, epics and mythical narratives. During the sovereignty of this era, meaning was constructed with ‘the word’ and its peculiar rules. Though the permanency of ‘writing’ as opposed to the fleeting character of the word has grown to be the symbol of authority and power, literary narrative which was developed together with the Enlightenment and the invention of printing process have brought out the freedom of ‘written language’. Whereas ‘writing’ was fundamental to the construction process of meaning and the meaning itself at that time, with the invention of instruments like photograph, cinema and television which are used to record the still and moving images, whole world has been caught up in an ever-flowing process, which can only be explained through the unique rules of an ‘audio-visual language’.

In this age when images gradually maintain their supremacy, cinemas, newspapers, magazines, books, posters, computer screens, television screens, clothes and even restaurant menus have been enclosed with images as it has never been before. In mass communication, the written culture has been step by step superseded by an audiovisual culture. ‘Reading’ has increasingly weakened against ‘watching and listening’. Obviously, an emphasis on visual messages does not mean that words are less important than images. The most powerful and meaningful messages are combined with words and pictures equally (Lester, 2000: x). Considering the rapid developments in technology, we come face to face with an era widely dominated visually.

Sings appear in various ways; they can be written and/or oral words or any kind of sound or visual image. Semiotic analyses of the images in the visual means of mass communication, that is, cinema, television, video images, posters, magazine and newspaper advertisements may help us to reveal their innate meanings. Of all the approaches used for the analysis of visual images, the most popular one is the semiotics.

Visual semiotics emphasizes the ways visuals communicate and the system dominating their usage. As an apparatus directly associated with culture, semiotics is fundamentally diverse from the traditional criticism. Obviously, traditional criticism primarily analyses the aesthetic object or the text according to their face values. Nevertheless, semiotics predominantly enquires into the ways through which the meaning is created rather than simply investigating what it is. Human being has always wanted to understand and interpret the world he lives in. He desires to get to know, and read, the nature, the universe, human being and his culture, which is why he needs to think about and analyze their meanings. The meaning doesn’t necessarily come out obviously, it often exists latently and waits to be disclosed, analyzed and read (Parsa & Parsa, 2002: 79).

In this paper, semiotics is used as methodology. Semiotics attempts to hint the ways in which an analysis might be done but, with the significant exception of Peirce’s categories of ‘index’, ‘icon’ and ‘symbol’, it suffers from an underdeveloped system of descriptive and analytical categories. In this brief analysis, after an introduction of still images and the theory of visual semiotics, it will be aimed to clarify the meaning construction process and its interpretation by the reader at the perceptive level.
and the course of shallow meaning units into the deeper levels of meaning in the selected magazine advertisements.

Representations of the Still Image in Magazine Ads

Images sell everything. They can sell soap, car, a company, a star, a politician or a political party. Over the past fifty years the images are simplistic and generally less important than the words. Today this situation is reversed. According to Boorstin (1963), “images have become more interesting than the original and in fact have become the original: ‘the shadow becomes the substance’. Advertisements, he argues, encourage extravagant expectations because they are more dramatic and vivid than the reality – reality cannot match up to the image.” Ads present us with images and than make them seem true (Quoted in Dyer, 1982: 82). The new and recent technological developments have changed the significance of the ‘image’ and ‘culture’.

In advertising the image is perfect ‘re-presentation’ of life. According to Barthes (1964), “in advertising the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional; the signifieds of the advertising message are formed _a priori_ by certain attributes of the product and these signifieds have to transmit as clearly as possible. If the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is _frank_, or at least emphatic.” (Barthes, 1999: 33).

Significant images are an important part of advertising. Nike, with their “Just do it!” campaign has provided the intended audience – young athletic men and women – with rewarding praise for the physically fit and consistent inspiration for the unfit to chuck their lethargy, to stop the tendency to accept the societal norm, and just do it. This imagery is heightened through excellent photography, the use of celebrities, and dramatic situations. It is a type of advertising called, rather literally, _image advertising_ (Sutherland, 1993: 8).

In classical communication studies, a message is encoded by the source, transmitted through a channel and decoded by a receiver. In advertising the message is put into words and images by a creative team, approved by a purchaser, distributed through a medium like radio, television or magazines, and it is decoded by the targeted audience. The messages of advertisements have to use appropriate signs and symbols to stimulate the individual’s perceptual system into action. Magazines are also a valuable medium and their ability to reach many pre-selected and targeted audiences.

Still images are _drawings, paintings_ and _photographs_. Images are the central medium of information, and the role of language has become that of a medium of commentary (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 38). In today’s new world order, visuals are dominant images.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen, “the dominant visual language is now controlled by the global cultural/technological empires of the mass media, which disseminate the examples set by exemplary designers, and, through the spread of image banks and computer-imaging technology, exert a ‘normalizing’ rather than explicitly ‘normative’ influence on visual communication across the world.” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 4).

Advertising is what René König has termed ‘a restless image’ (Quoted in Myers 1983: 221). Today, encompassing all means of mass communication and knowing no boundaries, advertisements forms up a superstructure which holds an independent existence and an effective power, especially by the help of visual narrative. Our focus in this study is placed on magazine ads, which are the texts to be read and analyzed, designed for a predetermined purpose, published in certain media and time
periods and produced with a great deal of visual and mental creativity due to its limited space and time. For example, a still image of a beautiful female model in a perfume or cosmetic ad is not simply a sign denoting a particular person who has been photographed. The picture of the model is also a sign which has connotations like beauty, youth, slimness, health, etc. This means that signs can work as the signifier for the mythic meaning and signified ‘feminine beauty’.

The discourse of women’s magazine, comprising the discourses of articles and ads, constructs an imaginary for the women reader. This imaginary consists of a ‘woman’s world’ in which femininity is both satisfying and attainable as an identity. The mythic meanings which still images in ads generate are usually focused onto products. As according to Jonathan Bignell (1997), ads endow products with a certain social significance so that they can function in our real social world as indexical signs connoting the buyer’s good taste, trendiness, or some other ideologically valued quality. So ads give meanings to products, to buyer of products and to readers of ads, and to the social world in which we and the products exist.

Paul Messaris (1997) has outlined in his book Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images In Advertising, in an ad visual images can play three major roles. Those are, “They can elicit emotions by simulating the appearance of a real person or object; they can serve as photographic proof that something really did happen; and they can establish an implicit link between the thing that is being sold and some other image(s).” (p. vii). Messaris (1997) argued below that these three functions of advertising images stem from underlying, fundamental characteristics of visual communication.

Advertisements have their own particular language. Their goal is to communicate information about the company and the image they want to create to the audience. Words are most often used in advertisements to reaffirm the impression that companies want the audience to feel. Words are frequently used to tie the images created in advertisements to the product they are trying to sell. Language is used in advertisements to implant ideas/images into the mind, it is these images that are later remembered, whilst the words themselves are often forgotten (Dyer 1982, 86). The language of images is the predominant language of advertisers, as the structure of magazine advertisements confirms.

A Visual Semiotics Theory

Surrounded with symbols, images and various signs, human being has always strived to signify them and utilized for communication. The meaning comes out of an interaction between the message and its reader (audience). While handling a text, one must consider not only its components but also the relation between those components, all the impressions it has created and the techniques used for creating such impressions as well. When the images urge us to react, we are aware of its effect upon us, which is resulted from myths, ideologies and connotations embedded in the images. Only through a sophisticated analysis, the hidden meaning under the obvious one could be formed. Visual semiotics deconstructs the communicative visuals while in its attempt to attain the meaning and ideology. Human being is acquainted with this signs throughout his life learning to use and signify them.

The evolution of modern person who is bombarded by encompassing audio-visual messages transmitted out by the means of mass communication is defined by Mehmet Rifat as follows: “the new name of human being striving to signifying the world around him ‘Homo Semioticus’… the whole life of the signifying human is a “reading” odyssey from then on” (Rifat, 1996: 41). Reading is one of the most essential activities carried out by humans when encountered with a meaningful construction. It occurs in three basic levels: Perception, memorizing and interpretation and reconstruction of the signs (Günay, 2001: 17). A literary or musical work of art, a portrait as a visually
meaningful construction or a TV advertisement, in other words, the entire body of any kind of images designed for creating a meaning can be read, signified and analyzed by the perceptive skills of its reader.

Every text produced by the means of mass communication is a fictitious world reaching its audience or its reader with a certain narrative form; however, this fictitious world gains a meaning through the encircling real world. The relations and the information in the fictitious world are interpreted through an analysis done in the light of the information of the real world.

Semiotics (semiology in Europe) is the science of signs. Semiotic analysis is used in the study of sign processes in various fields such as communication, linguistics, anthropology, architecture, medicine and so on. Semiotics was first described by its founder, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1985) as ‘a science that studies the life of signs within a society’. Simultaneously, American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce published his own ideas about the effect of sign on society.

It is important to place what ‘semiotics’ is, and has been in this age. Three schools of semiotics have applied ideas from the domain of linguistics to other, non linguistics mode of communication. The first was the Prague School of the 1930s and early 1940s. It developed the work of Russian Formalists by providing it with a linguistic basis. Notions such as ‘foregrounding’ were applied to language as well as to the study of art (Mukarovsky), cinema (Jakobson) etc. The second was the Paris School of the 1960s and 1970s, which applied ideas from de Saussure and other photography (Barthes), fashion (Barthes), cinema (Metz) etc. The ideas developed by this school are still taught in countless courses of media studies, art and design, often under the heading of ‘semiology’ and by referring to various terms like the ‘langue’ and the ‘parole’; the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’; ‘arbitrary’ and ‘motivated’ signs; ‘syntagmatics’ and ‘paradigmatics’ and so on. The third was contrary to the former kind of semiotics, which is called the ‘social semiotics’, first began in Australia where the ideas of Michael Halliday inspired the studies of literature (Threadgold, Thibault), visual semiotics (O’Toole, Kress and van Leeuwen), and music (van Leeuwen), and other semiotic modes (Hodge and Kress) (Quoted in Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996:5).

Visual semiotics is a new branch of the field of semiotics -originating in 1990’s- and has been defined by Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) book, Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, “We intend to provide inventories of the major compositional structures which have become established as conventions in the course of the history of visual semiotics, and to analyze how they are used to produce meaning by contemporary image-makers.” (p. 1). Because of meanings are not given, but constructed.

The sign is the key term in any semiotics. A sign is simply anything that stands for something else. The ‘stands for’ process is the point where meaning is created both through encoding (by the source) and decoding (by the receiver or reader) as in these stylized representations of people (Moriarty, 1994). But what is not sign? According to Paul Martin Lester (2000), “that is a good question because almost any action, object or image will mean something to someone somewhere. Any physical representation is a sign if it has meaning beyond the object itself.” Consequently, the meaning behind any sign must be learned. And also Umberto Eco stressed, “Signs are correlated with what they stand for on the basis of a rule or a convention” (Eco, 1985:196). Thus, if signs which are understood by the receiver or reader are used in an ad, images will be much more memorable and interesting.

A sign can be a word, a sound, or a visual image. Saussure (1985) divides linguistic signs into two components—the signifier (the sound, image, or word) and the signified, which is the concept the signifier represents, or the meaning. As Berger (1990) points out, the problem of meaning arises from the fact that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and conventional. In other
words, signs can mean anything, and they can mean different things to different people. The arbitrariness is true in most written and spoken language; however it is clear that visual signs are not arbitrary.

The American cognitive philosopher Peirce suggested for the production of meaning a triadic model in Figure 1:

![Peirce's triadic model](image)

According to Peirce’s the sign system;
“A sign... [In the form of a representamen] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen’ (Peirce 1931-58, 2:228). The interaction between the representamen, the object and the interpretant is referred to by Peirce as ‘semiosis’ (ibid., 5:484).” (Quoted in Chandler, 2003)

The interaction between these triadic models is referred to the process of infinite semiosis. According to Currie (1995), on the semiotic view, all representation is conventional, and the idea that pictures might in some sense be like the things they picture is part of a benighted ideology of realism.

C. S. Peirce categorized also the patterns of meaning in signs as iconic, symbolic and indexical.

“In iconic signs, the signifier represents the signified by apparently having a likeness to. This type of sign is often very important in visual images, especially photographic ones. Diagrams are also iconic signs, since they show the relations between the parts of their objects.

In indexical signs, there is inherent relationship between the signified and signifier. Index based on contiguity or causality: e.g., smoke as a sign of fire.

Symbolic signs have a conventionalized but clearly arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, as in Saussure’s ‘arbitrary’ sign: e.g., a balance scale is a symbol for justice. In a society the meaning of this kind of symbols must be learn.” (Rose, 2001:78).

In visual semiotics iconic signs look like its object. They are more ‘motivated’ signs. The indexical signs draw attention to the thing to which it refers. The symbol signs, - e.g. a red rose is a symbol of ‘passion’ in Valentine’s Day and means ‘love’ – are unmotivated or arbitrary. In a different culture this color of flower may not signify ‘passion’ or ‘love’.
Signs are both denotative and connotative. In semiotics, denotation and connotation are terms describing the relationship between the signifier and its signified, and an analytic distinction is made between two types of signifieds: a denotative signified and a connotative signified (Chandler 2003). Meaning includes both denotation and connotation. In photography, the denoted meaning is conveyed through the digital or mechanical reproduction of the image: a dog is a dog. Connotation is the result of human intervention such as camera, angle, focus, color, lighting, depth-of-field, special effects, etc. (Tomaselli, 1996:31). As also very well known Fiske puts it ‘denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed’ (Fiske, 1982: 91). They are the means through which directors draw attention to objects and ideas which are invisible.

Codes are the meaning systems shared by the members of a culture. It consists of both signs and the rules and negotiations determining the context and the style of those signs as well as the possible combinations in order to build up more sophisticated messages (Parsa & Parsa, 2002: 36). Signs are strung together in codes. A code is a set of conventionalized ways of making meaning that are specific to particular groups of people. According to Rose, “Indexical, symbolic and connotative signs refer to wider systems of meaning. These wider systems can be characterized in a number of ways. They have been called ‘codes’ by Stuart Hall (1980), ‘referent systems’ by Judith Williamson (1978), and ‘mythologies’ by Roland Barthes (1973). Each of these terms means something rather different, and each has somewhat different methodological implications” (Rose, 2001: 88).

New disciplines such as semantics, hermeneutics and pragmatic emerged in the second half of the 20th century and analyzed the systematical structures and codes of the meaning in a variety of fields. Any information, if not directly provided, is gained via a process of interpretation. Texts are not always produced recognizable codes in a communicative process. Usage of symbolic narratives, metaphors and metonymy may restrain the comprehension and signification of the text. In other words, in the exploration of the connotations and the associations, one requires to “make interpretations”.

Still images found in the selected magazine ads are explicates with the signifier / signified opposition by the help of visual semiotics and then analyzed through a denotation / connotation dimension in the signification level.

Analysis Of Magazine Advertisements with Semiotics Approach

Sign Analysis of the ‘Baileys’ Advertisement

Figure 2. Baileys Original Irish Cream Advertisement (in Harper’s Bazaar – Feb. 2004)
Signifier and signified which altogether make up the sign are cannot be separated; they have to complete each other just like the two sides of a coin. But, in semiotic analysis they are temporarily disintegrated.

Medium: Color still photography
Product: Baileys Original Irish Cream

**Figure 3.** Sign analysis of the Baileys ad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baileys magazine advertisement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signifiers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An image of a man and a woman embracing each other while smiling and having a glass of drink in their hands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A perfectly harmonious couple, happiness, beauty, health, pure love and romanticism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Baileys is an alcoholic drink, a blend of Scotch whisky, fresh cream, vanilla and cacao. The product is presented with the same advertisement almost in all newspapers and magazines. The pure and rich blend of the product is introduced with the pure love of the couple in the ad. Baileys is a harmonious and perfect blend of vanilla and cocoa, which, metaphorically, is meant to represent the harmonious and happy affair of the couple.

The image of a man and a woman embracing each other, smiling and holding a glass of Baileys drink in their hands composes the stereotype of the consumers of the product. They let themselves, as suggested by the ad, into the flow of emotions and love with this special drink.

The signifier of the advertisement, the black jacket worn by the young white male, resembles the black bottle of the drink. Metaphorically, man stands for the whisky and woman stands for the cream, whose blend recalls the love affair tasting as good as the drink. The body codes of the man and woman imply a close affair between the two. The man’s back leans on the woman and his posture is turned towards outside. The woman, on the other hand, embraces him on the back and offers a glass of drink with one hand closing his eye and trying to turn his face towards her with the other. Leaving alone the denotative picture, the image refers to the closure of the man’s extrovert character and to turn his entire attention to the woman. The image of the woman in the advertisements represents the woman who is supposed to be fair, thin, beautiful, good looking and young. Her red night dress with its thin straps calls for a passionate love.

In still images, whether in painting or photography, the most significant technical characteristic is to add “the sense of motion” into the picture. One of the contributing elements is the depth of field, that is, the technical codification of the background, middle and frontward image. On the frontward image appears a bottle of Baileys with two filled glasses, in the middle the woman and man stand presenting the product and on the background there are some people in a party. Such an organization directs the attention of the reader onto the couple in the middle creating a depth of field. Framed in the lower angle, couple is aimed to “be sublimed” along with Baileys. Indeed, at a connotative level, love and emotions as well as the product are sublimed. The other element contributing to the sense of motion is the woman’s blonde hair streaming in the breeze. Also, the smooth lines in the smiling faces of the couple evoke a feeling of vitality and motion. Smooth lines, in still images, always refer to eroticism.
The advertisement picture is, generally, dominated by warm colors such as red, yellow and orange, which inserts a kind of “life energy” into the atmosphere.

What kind of relation between the images and the written codes should be established? “Let you into the flow of emotions” is an advice made by an omniscient narrator. Connotatively, the reader is suggested that he can share exactly the same emotions by having this special drink as they did and let themselves to the flow of emotions.

**Paradigmatic Analysis of the ‘Baileys’ Advertisement**

The Paradigmatic Approach emerges from the structuralist work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) and considers the patterns of oppositions that exist within the narrative and how they contribute to the development of the text (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, Newbold, 1998: 142).

Signs are organized in such a way that they constitute syntagms or paradigms in a text. Paradigmatic analysis, commonly used by many semioticians, involves revealing binary oppositions. Shaping readings, such oppositions expose deep and hidden meaning levels in textual structures. Consequent oppositions are ideological at the same time, and provide connotation readings of the photographs. When we proceed to analyze the text in detail, we carry out ‘paradigmatic analysis’ in which oppositions in the text come about. Profound structure, that is, abstract structure, cultural values and ideological frame of the Baileys ad photograph become more apparent during the meaning disintegration with paradigmatic analysis.

Photographs of the magazine advertisement were taken indoors, which is preferred to the opposition of outdoors. Besides, young, beautiful people with fair skin (white race) are preferred to the old, the unattractive and the people of color (the other race). Emotions are placed in opposition to the reason; and love is placed contrary to hate.

**Visual Metaphor in ‘Adler Jewellers’ Advertisement**

Figure 4. Adler Jewelers advertisement (in Harper’s Bazaar Magazine/ Feb. 2004)
In semiotics glossary (Chandler, 2003), ‘metaphor’ expresses the unfamiliar (known in literary jargon as the ‘tenor’) in terms of the familiar (the ‘vehicle’). The tenor and the vehicle are normally unrelated: we must make an imaginative leap to recognize the resemblance to which a fresh metaphor alludes. In semiotic terms, a metaphor involves one signified acting as a signifier referring to a rather different signified. Metaphors initially seem unconventional because they apparently disregard literal or denotative resemblance. Metaphor can thus be seen as involving a symbolic as well as an iconic quality.

Medium: Color still photography
Product: Adler Jewellers

The advertisement of Adler Jewelry is an example of visual metaphors. Bull fighting is a very popular game in South America and Spain, mainly composed of a fight between the bull and the matador and generally regarded as an art performance rather than simply killing animals. In these fights, matadors elegantly exhibit their courage and mastery against a wild animal, which is why they use a special term “torrero” instead of matador. As it can be read from the written codes of the advertisement, the design of this special jewelry was inspired from the cape of a torrero and named as “torrera”, the female matador.

When the sign of Adler jewelry advertisement is read in the context of signifier / signified and denotation / connotation, it appears that the woman is pictured with a necklace with brilliants and orange sapphires in her hands instead of a red cape, which is managed with the help of photo-montage techniques. The woman matador elegantly holds a set of brilliants as if she was standing opposed to a wild bull. Matadors use their red capes to attract the attention of the bulls. Connotatively, the reader is suggested that she can attract the attention of the men and enchant them.

Moreover, as the woman matador exhibits the necklace holding in front of her, she causes a communication barrier with which she implies that she can be possessed in exchange of this necklace.

References


