

recognized and subsequently controlled. This is the function of semiotic analysis. Nochimson (1992: 198) puts it appropriately in the following way:

The only real counterforce to the oppressiveness of the commercial television emphasis on ratings and income from sponsors is *knowledge*. The quality of a form is most easily imagined by its practitioners and its audience through knowledge of and respect for the history of the form: what it has been and how it has grown. [italics mine]

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THERE'S MORE TO PERFUME THAN SMELL!

Preliminary Remarks

A few years ago, the following ad for a man's perfume, named resonantly *Drakkar noir*, filled the pages of magazines all over the world. This particular version of the ad is taken from an Italian magazine*:



Drakkar Noir de Guy Laroche

L'Autre L'arôme pour Homme de Guy Laroche

At first, the ad seems intent simply on spotlighting a perfume bottle with very little else in the way of meaning-making. At this surface textual level, the ad seems to be saying: "Look at this great bottle of perfume. It's for you!" But a closer analysis will reveal that the ad is imbued with many subtle, hidden connotations and innuendoes that transform it, at an unconscious level, into a powerful meaning-making text. To start off, let's look at some of its iconic features. Note that the bottle is painted a ghastly, frightful black color and that it has been placed right in the center of the picture. Note as well the dark background whose foreboding dimness is interrupted dramatically by a beam of mystical white light that just misses the bottle but illuminates the platform on which it stands. This *chiaroscuro* effect is overwhelming, evocative of awe and veneration. Now, ask yourself, where have you seen this kind of picture? What is it reminiscent of? What feelings does it elicit?

Let's attempt a few guesses. Darkness in our culture connotes fear, evil, the unknown. Children are perpetually afraid of the dark; we stay away from dark forests; we talk of "black masses;" we expect our evil personages in movies and in fictional lore to be dressed in black (just think of how fictional evil characters like Dracula, Darth Vader and others are portrayed); we sense that forbidden, mysterious, happenings occur at night; etc. The placement of the bottle in the middle of what could be interpreted to be an "altar" setting is also suggestive of an evil, taboo ritual being performed in the darkness. The sepulchral name of the perfume, *Drakkar noir*, reinforces our feeling that something dark, mysterious, evil, forbidden but nevertheless desirable, is about to happen. The guttural sound of *Drakkar*—obviously suggestive of *Dracula*, the deadly vampire who would mesmerize his sexual prey with a mere glance—instills both a surreptitious fear and a feeling of lust in the viewer. It's as if the bottle were being worshipped on an altar of dark sexuality—recall that the complete name of the perfume is *Drakkar noir* ("black"). Perfume is, of course, worn with one specific goal in mind—to enhance one's sexual attractiveness. Sexual activity, moreover, is normally conducted in the dark. The verbal part of the text *Intense come la notte* ("Intense like the night") reinforces this mode of interpretation.

To complete the picture, the piercing beam of light is evocative of several possible scenarios; the turning on of the light after sexual intercourse; a symbolic sign "from above" warning us about the unholy paganism of sexual urges; a "breakthrough" in satisfying our lustful desires; and the list could go on and on. Semiotically, light is the paradigmatic opposite of dark.

If you still have any doubts that the underlying meaning of this text is anchored in a web of sexual and macabre connotations—darkness of the night = sexuality = forbidden pleasures = pagan rites = collusion with the

devil = fear = desire = mystery = etc.—then take a closer look at the shape of the bottle. The perfume is meant for men to wear. Now, ask yourself, what sexual objective would men have in wearing the perfume? What is the specific target of their desire? The vaginal shape of the bottle answers this question rather bluntly.

There is obviously much more to perfume than smell, at least according to the makers of ads. The *Drakkar noir* ad illustrates rather strikingly how powerful visual texts are in making messages and how they enlist various levels of interpretation. In a certain sense, this ad is a small "work of art," which has, however, the specific commercial purpose of enhancing sales of a product. Such ads put on display a vast range of sign-making techniques employed in the process of message construction. For this reason, they are especially significant for semiotics as signifying texts that go far beyond their apparent surface simplicity. The iconic structure of the ad (recall the strategic placement of the perfume bottle, the effective juxtaposition of light and darkness, the fear-inducing sound of the perfume's name, etc.), the symbolic connotations that this structure evokes (recall the meaning of black, the allusion of the name *Drakkar* to sinister personages, etc.) and the accompanying verbal text ("Intense like the night") all intertwine thematically to create a *subtext* with many *intertextual* ramifications. The term *subtext* is used here to mean any message which a given text connotes that is not immediately accessible to interpretation. A *subtext* is a text hidden within a text. In the case of the above ad, the subtext inheres in the constellation of meanings derivable from the name and shape of the bottle, as well as the iconic features of the text (the placement of the bottle, the strategic use of darkness, etc.). *Intertextuality* refers to the feature by which some texts allude to other culturally-defined or culturally-institutionalized texts. The placement of the bottle in the center of the scene with a dark background broken by a beam of light recalls sacrificial texts and rituals.

The contemporary advertising industry originated as a psychologically-designed marketing strategy at the threshold of the present century. The premise which propels this industry is that an ad's consumption-inducing effectiveness is proportional to its capacity to evoke appropriate subtexts and intertexts in the consumer. This is, after all, the reason behind the use of so-called "subliminal" techniques in advertising (e.g. Vestergaard and Schrøder 1985, Ewen 1988, Dyer 1988, Barthel 1988, Key 1989). Whether or not the psychological effectiveness of such methods is demonstrable empirically is beside the point of the present discussion. The fact is that ad creators continue to employ them in a variety of ways for a wide array of products. The study of ads as message- and meaning-making texts is of obvious relevance to

semioticians. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to look at ads from a semiotic standpoint, focusing especially on perfume ads because these provide salient examples of how advertisers attempt to tap into/create subtextual and intertextual structures in the unconscious mind.

Advertising

It may come as a shock to discover that advertising is over 3000 years old! A poster found in Thebes in 1,000 BC, is thought to be an archaeological relic of one of the world's first ads. In large letters it offered a whole gold coin for the capture of a runaway slave. Similar kinds of posters have been found by archeologists scattered throughout ancient societies. It would seem that throughout history poster advertising in marketplaces and temples has constituted a popular means of disseminating information and of promoting the barter and sale of goods.

The dawn of the modern era of advertising occurred in the fifteenth century when Gutenberg made the printed word an accessible mode of communication. Fliers and posters could be printed easily and posted in public places or inserted in books, pamphlets, newspapers, etc. In the latter part of the seventeenth century, the *London Gazette* became the first newspaper to reserve a section exclusively for advertising. So successful was this venture that by the end of the century new agencies came into being for the specific purpose of creating newspaper ads for merchants, artisans, etc. Advertising spread rapidly throughout the eighteenth century and proliferated to the point that Samuel Johnson felt impelled to make the following statement in *The Idler*: "Advertisements are now so numerous that they are very negligently perused, and it is therefore become necessary to gain attention by magnificence of promise and by eloquence sometimes sublime and sometimes pathetic" (quoted in Panati 1984: 168).

By the turn of the present century, advertising had become a large business with a stock set of techniques and methods. The goal of advertising in consumerist cultures is to get people to think of themselves as "market units" rather than as individuals or as a public. Advertising promotes consumerism and constitutes an ideology that proposes marketplace solutions to all our social problems. We live in a culture that views shopping as much more than just acquiring the essentials required for daily living. No wonder, then, that the shopping malls are filled with thrill-seekers who would otherwise become stir crazy. We live in a world conjured up by lifestyle ads and TV commercials. Ewen (1988, p. 20) puts it eloquently in the following manner:

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If the "life-style" of style is not realizable in life, it is nevertheless the most constantly available lexicon from which many of us draw the visual grammar of our lives. It is a behavioral model that is closely interwoven with modern patterns of survival and desire. It is a hard to define but easy to recognize element in our current history.

The emergence of our advertisement-mediated world occurred in the decades between 1890 and the 1920s when industrial corporations grew into the mammoth structures that they are today, transforming the workplace into a mechanized, automatic system of mass production. At that point in time advertising became a crucial medium not for informing people about the availability and qualities of goods, but for restructuring perceptions of lifestyle that could be associated with the goods. Business and aesthetics had obviously joined forces by the first decades of this century. From the twenties onwards, advertising agencies have continued to broaden their approaches, attempting more and more to build an unbroken, imagistic bridge between the product and the consumer's consciousness. Everything from product name, design and packaging to the creation of lifestyle moods now falls within the purview of the advertising business.

Advertisers know that the contemporary consumer has an insatiable desire for pleasure. Their technique, therefore, is to speak indirectly to the unconscious, factual level of mind where sensory stimulation and the Freudian *Id*—the unconscious part of the psyche actuated by fundamental impulses toward fulfilling instinctual needs—can be triggered artifactually. The senses of touch and smell, which are largely downplayed in our culture, can be evoked rather effectively by the ad subtext and used to induce an unconscious desire for the product by association. As Freudian psychoanalysis emphasized, any one of the factual sensory structures that a culture represses can be manipulated and actuated easily by suasion techniques into motivating forces and drives.

In this world of image and style, there is an incessant need for change, for new objects of consumption. Barthes (1967) referred to this new restlessness and madness for constant novelty as "neomania." Obsolence is, in fact, regularly built into a product, so that the same product can be sold again and again under new guises. All the glitz and imagery of ads and commercials yells out one promise to all: "Buy this or that and you will not be bored, but you will be happy!" The sad truth is that what we call happiness cannot be bought.

We are living in a very unstable world which puts much more of a premium on satisfying consumerist urges than it does on spirituality and wisdom. This is why advertisers rely on a handful of hedonistic themes—happiness, youth, success, status, luxury, fashion, and beauty—to peddle their products. Their general message is that solutions to human problems can be found in buying and consuming. You can join the Pepsi Generation to be a part of the action, wear a Benetton sweater to help unify the world, save the environment by buying some recyclable garbage bag and so on.

It was probably Roland Barthes (1957) who first drew the attention of semioticians to the value of studying the field of advertising. Barthes inspired the first semiotic works analyzing signification in ads. Today there is considerable interest in the semiotics of marketing (e.g. Umiker-Sebeok 1987, Umiker-Sebeok, Cossette, Bachand 1988). If there is one theme that can be extracted from this new line of inquiry that is of specific relevance to the present discussion, it is that many ads are interpretable at two levels—a “surface” artifactual level and an “underlying” factual one. The surface level contains the actual iconic and verbal signs of the ad. These are both the “reflexes” of, and the “traces” to, the underlying level; i.e. the surface elements cohere into signifiers that conjure up an array of signifieds in the underlying level. More often than not, the signifieds inhere in mythic, or archetypal, subtextual and intertextual structures that work psychologically at a subthreshold level of mind.

The perfume ad discussed above, for instance, creates archetypal genital and taboo ritualistic symbolism at an unconscious level. Indeed, when the underlying subtext is decoded we tend to become alarmed and repulsed by the ad’s hidden message. The makers and advertisers of *Drakkar noir* have obviously learned their Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis rather well.

Advertisers refer to *positioning* and *brand image* as the key ingredients in marketing a product. *Positioning* is the placing or targeting of a product for the right people. *Drakkar noir* is positioned for a male audience, *Chanel* for a female audience. The marketing of *Audis* and *BMW*s is aimed at yuppie consumers, the marketing of *Dodge vans* is aimed at middle-class suburban dwellers. *Brand image* is the creation of a personality for the product. This implies that a product’s name, packaging, price and advertising style creates a recognizable personality for the product that is meant to appeal to specific consumers. Take beer as an example. What kinds of people drink *Budweiser*? Your answer would probably include remarks about the educational level, class, gender, etc. of the targeted consumer. The personality of the one who drinks *Budweiser* is vastly different from that of the one who drinks *Heineken*. The former is a rough, vulgar, country-and-western type male; the latter a

smooth, sophisticated, yuppie type. Note as well that *Budweiser* commercials are positioned next to a sports event on television, whereas *Heineken* ads are found primarily in “highbrow” magazines. The idea is to speak directly to the one who drinks a certain kind of brand. The *Bud* drinker is one who holds old-fashioned patriarchal views; he usually drives a Dodge or Plymouth (especially a truck or van); he also drinks Coke or Pepsi; he eats at McDonald’s; he loves Jello-O; and so on. Advertisers have indeed reshaped the world. They have gotten consumers to see their own personalities in the style and substance of the products they consume or buy.

Decoding the Ad Text

The semiotic analysis of an ad constitutes an act of decoding, of unraveling the subtext(s) and intertext(s) that are hidden below the ad text. *Decoding* refers to the fact that there is a hidden code in the ad text that unfolds in subtextual, intertextual and metaphorical terms. The opposite of *decoding* is *encoding* which refers, of course, to the opposite process of creating codes. There are three relevant questions you must ask yourself when decoding an ad:

- For whom is the ad intended?
- What do the iconic and verbal features connote at subtextual and intertextual levels?
- What metaphorical structures make up the subtext?

As the analysis of the *Drakkar noir* ad reveals, it is helpful to know who the primary target of the product’s and ad’s subtext is. The vaginal shape of the bottle suggests that the target audience is primarily male. It is not always the case that a product intended for the consumption of males is advertised with male fantasies and psychological urges in mind. An ad for men’s perfume can, and often is, aimed at female consumers, so that they can be induced to buy the product for their lovers. In the case of the *Drakkar noir* ad there is a seemingly hidden play on male fears and fantasies. The feeling of mystery and fear that females engender in males constitutes the source of many archetypal or mythic structures in the unconscious mind. The image of the “huntress,” for instance, can be seen to have a sexual-erotic mythic structure in most Western cultures. The image of a fierce, powerful and sexually

dangerous female surfaces in all kinds of popular narratives—from ancient myths such as that of Diana to contemporary movies such as *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*. The figure of the “female-as-hurtress” seems to form a kind of paradigmatic cultural counterpart to the figure of the “female-as-mother.”

The iconic configuration of the ad’s visual signifiers normally implies an “action.” The scene in the *Drakkar noir* ad suggests a secluded, dark place where the vaginal bottle is to be worshipped and then conquered. This scene, with its erotic and macabre connotations, is reinforced at the surface verbally by the phrase “Intense like the night.” But the ad does not stop there. It also plays, as mentioned above, on a mythic fear in potential male consumers—the fear of women. As Campbell (1969: 59-60) has observed, the fear of women has been “for the male no less an impressive imprinting force than the fears and mysteries of the world of nature itself.” So, at the level of mythic unconsciousness this ad tells male customers that they will relentlessly seek and, at the same time, fear the erotic enchantments of women.

It is to be noted that the subtext of such lifestyle ads is generally structured metaphorically. In the case of the *Drakkar noir* ad, there is at least one metaphorical interpretation—sex is a *hidden or forbidden desire*. Indeed, the metaphorical open-endedness of the subtext’s meaning and message gives the ad its semiotic richness. The more literal an ad, the less effective it is. Note that what is emphasized in the subtext is not the actual act of sexual intercourse, but the ritualistic feelings that accompany it at the “altar” of female sexuality.

Subtexts create symbolic associations between the product and what consumers covet. Recall the *Budweiser* versus *Heineken* discussion above. To my own taste buds, both beers taste about the same. But, as mentioned, *Budweiser* ads speak to a working class audience, while *Heineken* ones speak to an upscale one. So *Bud* ads and TV commercials are set in working-class bars which play hard rock or country and western music, where people wear cowboy-style clothes and boots, where the men look rugged and tough, and where the women appear to be very little more than sex objects. The subtext in these ads is: “You’re one of the guys, bud,” so “this *Bud’s* for you!” *Heineken* ads, on the other hand, show a much more sophisticated scene—nightclubs, country clubs, etc.—where yuppie customers seemingly listen to soft rock, jazz or even classical music, where the men look country-clubbish, suave and debonair, and where the women are chic, sophisticated, charming.

As one decodes more and more ads, one eventually comes to the realization that advertisers perceive our culture to be an egomaniacal one. Almost without exception, ads speak to the Freudian ego. Diane Barthel

(1988: 18) puts it appropriately as follows:

Would-be advertising men are advised that the one word consumers never tire of is *me*. Advertisers simply tell them who that “me” is, and how to make it ever more attractive, comfortable, exciting, appealing. To do this, advertisers must do more than communicate information on a product. They must communicate *image*. Their task is somehow to position a product within a market of competing goods and to aim it toward an identifiable population. They must give it a personality.

The Perfume Ad: A Case in Point

I started off this chapter by decoding a perfume ad aimed at men. The ad constitutes a case in point of how to decode an ad’s subtextual, intertextual and metaphorical levels. Perfume can be defined as an artifactual extension of the olfactory system. At the factual level humans, like other animals, are responsive to odors and scents that they receive from the environment. The sense of smell is especially functional as a sexual stimulant in all animal species. Although the sense of sight has largely replaced the sense of smell for sexual arousal in humans—we are more inclined to respond to erotic images than we are to bodily smells—the need for activating the olfactory sensory system at the more basic factual level does not go away.

So perfume is definable semiotically as an artifactual surrogate for sexually-meaningful scent. Perfume works on the sexual emotions and is therefore quite apt to make a long-lasting impression. Odors generally are mnemonically evocative. Years after our first infatuation we seldom fail to recognize a perfume fragrance that was worn by our loved one. This is because odor is often associated with a meaningful situation. A perfume fragrance can bring back vividly to mind a past situation and reawaken the corresponding feelings associated with it rather easily (Engen 1982: 13). It has even been found that adults in a T-shirt experiment would value the body odor of their sexual partner as more pleasant and fragrant than the corresponding odor of a stranger (Schleidt 1980). Odors are also associated with meaningful spaces and places. We prefer the familiar “smell of home” to that of other abodes. We react negatively to the smell of places such as elementary schools, dental offices, etc. where we might have had unpleasant experiences.

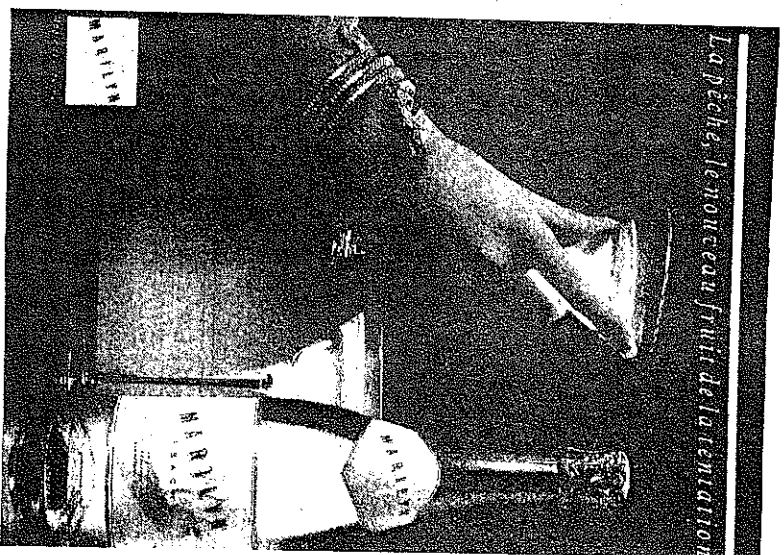
Since bodily odors are stigmatized in contemporary industrialized socie-

ties, perfumes and deodorants have taken over the biological functions associated with olfaction. Our culture also makes categorical paradigmatic distinctions between "healthy" versus "unhealthy," "sexy" versus "unsexy," etc. in terms of specific kinds of scents. The perfume ad plays precisely on such paradigmatic dichotomies, defining sexuality in an artifactual way. Indeed, most perfume ads implicitly present their products as improvements on nature. As Vestergaard and Schröder (1985: 159) remark, such ads present their product as "somehow superior to their natural source," offering, in effect, "to lend nature a hand." The overall message transmitted by such ads is: "You too can be sexually attractive by simply wearing the fragrance of perfume X." As in the case of beer, perfume also assumes a personality in advertising. Some perfumes are portrayed as "rugged" and "virile," like *Bruf*; others as "smooth" and "refined," like *Blue Velvet*. *Drakkar noir* obviously appeals to the dark, macabre, sinister side of masculine sexual fantasies. And it is evocative of mythic portrayals like Don Juan, Dracula, and even Mephistopheles, the darkest of all. Is *Drakkar noir* alluding to the intertext of Faust selling his soul to the devil so that he could satisfy all his desires? Does wearing *Drakkar noir* constitute a pact with the devil to achieve erotic power? There is certainly much more to perfume than smell in this image-mediated world!

Other Kinds of Ads

Dyer (1982) and others provide useful typologies of ads according to target audience. Clearly, an ad meant for a specialist in ophthalmology is going to be conceptualized and designed differently than a perfume ad meant for today's upscale office worker. But there is general consensus among semioticians that lifestyle ads are the ones which generate the most meaning-intensive subtextual and intertextual structures.

As another case in point consider the following ad for *Marilyn Peach**, a sparkling wine, which was found in many European magazines a few years



The first thing to note is that the background in the ad is in a peach color, apparently to match both the color and the taste of the wine. But a closer look reveals that the background is highly suggestive of the dawn. In fact, by reflecting on the mythical meaning of the dawn in expressions such as the "dawn of creation," the "dawn of life" and so on, we can start gaining access to the subtextual and intertextual domains of meaning.

So at this point let us assume the hypothesis that the subtextual and intertextual levels allude to the creation theme of the Bible. Are there any other indications that this is a plausible hunch? Look at the woman's hand which is holding out a glass of the bubbly drink in an obvious toasting gesture. Could this be an offering, or a temptation, just like the one of Eve in the Book of Genesis? Just look at the woman's wrist and there you will see a bracelet in the form of a snake. Recall that the devil came to Eve in the body of a snake to prod her on to tempt Adam. It would seem that our working hypothesis is

being corroborated iconically. Adam, of course, is the one who will have to pick up the other glass. Will he do it? Well, if you offer him a glass of *Marilyn Peach*, how can he resist? If you still have doubts about this analysis, just read the accompanying French verbal text—*La pêche, le nouveau fruit de la tentation* "Peach, the new fruit of temptation"—and you will be left with little doubt as to the presence of a "Garden of Eden" intertext in this ad and all its sexual-erotic connotations. Note as well that the peach is a cultural metaphor for female genitalia, given its isomorphic shape to the vagina.

In my opinion the hidden code is aimed at female consumers. The subtextual message is: "If you want to ensnare your man, offer him a drink of *Marilyn Peach*; and he, like Adam, will not be able to resist your charm." Metaphorically, the offer of the drink is equivalent to the offer of the vaginal "peach." So, like the *Drakkar noir* ad, this one too taps mythic subtextual structures that apparently reverberate effectively in the realm of the subconscious *Id*. Note, finally, that the color, design and "feel" of the two ads are in paradigmatic opposition. This clearly reflects cultural models and perceptions of sexuality that are differentiated along gender lines.

Concluding Remarks

It has been said that the best "art" of the late twentieth century has been produced by advertisers. In a sense, this is a correct statement. As we have seen in this chapter, ads generate a truly interesting and rich array of meanings, and thus can be compared to the great paintings and sculptures of all time. The main techniques employed in decoding an ad—the search for a subtext, the search for intertextuality, the identification of any metaphorical themes, etc.—are, more or less, the stock methodological tools used by art critics.

But there is something about advertising that is illusory and, in my view, ultimately destructive. The art of a Michelangelo or a Renoir was not conceptualized to entice someone to buy a manufactured product. At the risk of sounding elitist, I believe that the traditional forms of visual representation document humanity's search for meaning: advertising, on the other hand, exploits our need for meaning to enhance sales of a product. In the end, advertising may be reshaping the world in more ways than we might think. As I look at people shopping, at parties, driving down the road, sitting at an outdoor café sipping coffee, etc. I cannot help but see in their bodily movements, in the way they wear their clothes, in the discourse they generate, etc. a reenactment of the images created by advertisers. People are seeing

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themselves more and more in terms of those images. I witnessed a striking example of this a few years ago when I attended a party of young upscale professionals. At a certain point during the evening, I saw an interactional scene that reminded me of a beer commercial that was popular on television at the time. The young men and women were posturing towards each other in ways that were almost identical to those of the actors in the television commercial. A culture mediated so pervasively by advertising images is asking for trouble. What Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 199) have to say about the psychosocial effects of television applies, in my view, as well to advertising:

Because consciousness is necessarily formed by exposure to information, media fare helps define what our most important and salient goals should be. Being an intimate part of the consumer society, television tells us that a worthwhile life is measured in terms of how many desirable material objects we get to own, and how many pleasures we get to feel. To achieve such goals complex skills are unnecessary. Even though some people spend a great deal of attention in trying to find bargains, in monitoring prices and sales, in developing culinary taste and fashion sense, in keeping abreast of new models and new gadgets, for the most part consumption does not require much disciplined effort and therefore does not produce psychological growth.

The answer to the dilemma of advertising is not to be found in censorship or in any form of state control of media and information. Even if it were possible in a consumerist culture to control the contents of advertising, this would invariably prove to be counterproductive. The answer is, in my view, to become aware of the signifying effects of ads and commercials with the help of semiotic analyses such as the ones illustrated in this chapter. When the human mind is aware of the hidden codes in texts, it will be better able to fend off the undesirable effects that such texts may cause.

NOTE

* The *Drakkar Noir* and the *Marilyn Peach* advertisements were taken from an Italian magazine *PM: Panorama Messe*, Arnoldo Mondadori (ed.), Milano: PMPress.