Semiotic Landscapes in Commercial Communication: A Preliminary Reading of Greek-Cypriot Shop Signs

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ABSTRACT

The analysis of a sample of characteristic commercial shop signs in today’s Limassol, Cyprus, asserts their anchorage function as syncretic/polysemiotic texts relying upon the synergy of semiotic systems, in their commercial and broader informational function. The study of intersemiosis, i.e. of the translation between pictorial and linguistic semiotic systems and their hierarchy, can provide the basis for an in-depth semiotic study of the socio-economic and historical-aesthetic landscape of the city. This study offers a preliminary methodological separation of sign systems on the shop signs in Limassol, showing up the ways intersemiosis remains the standard historical communication method of shop signs since the advent of mass commerce.

KEYWORDS

Graphic Design, Intersemiosis, Semiotic Landscape, Shop-Signs, Translation
DISCUSSION

With growing quantities of visual information reaching us every day, it is becoming more and more necessary to distinguish and investigate older and novel modes and methods of producing pictorial meaning (Sonesson 1993, p. 332). The commercial shop sign is our case in point. This paper will attempt a first reading of the semiotic function of the commercial shop sign in Cyprus, and more specifically in the town of Limassol.

The shop sign operates as an open-air advertisement upon the consumer before he or she enters the actual space of the commercial establishment. It functions in competition with a number of other graphic stimuli in the city, and should be examined in relation to the whole visual environment, commercial and other. In this paper, we study specific shop-signs that deal with different types of intersemiotic translation to show how verbal and non-verbal semiotic systems work in synergy to communicate messages. These messages do not exclusively serve commercial function, or, if they do so in a very broad sense, positioning the store within its urban and historical environment. Interestingly, in the case of Limassol they reveal a whole economy of images that operates below the radar of global design standards, and also parallel to the corporate brand visual culture.

This paper will examine, on the level of micro- and macro-design, those graphic parameters which, according to Bertin (2011, p. 42), contribute to the semiotic structuring and transference of meaning in design applications such as shape, scale, value (tone), texture, color, orientation and location. Through these parameters, the commercial sign becomes a hyper-sign for a local economy parallel to a fully integrated global one, with interesting consequences for our understanding of the primary role of intersemiosis on shop signs in a local market attending to the inner-city needs of a multilingual customer basis, and especially a tourist, student and newcomer-resident basis.

THE DOUBLE FUNCTION OF SHOP SIGNS: COMMERCIAL MESSAGES AND TECHNIQUES OF AESTHETIC INTEGRATION

The shop sign is one of the most attractive tools for visual communication. They are part of our everyday life. Treu (2012, p. 323) states that “[i]n present day parlance, a (commercial) sign has loosely come to be understood as any kind of graphic in the built environment, be it an advertisement, a shop identification, or a set of directions”. Shohamy (2008, p. 142) also considers shop signs (sometimes called shop-front advertisements) similar to advertisements in newspapers and magazines. Both advertisements and shop signs are used to promote a product, the main difference being that advertisements are published in the press or broadcast over the air, while shop signs are displayed in public space. We will add that, despite the specificities of electronic communication, one could say that ads in digital space have a similar anchorage function. The power of the anchorage function requires the effective synergy of multiple semiotic systems (language, image, color, typography, graphics, proxemics) as well as intersemiotic translation and rhetorical techniques. As Pires De Carvalho (2011, p. 48) mentions:
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