Ego Meets Alter and Alius on the Marketplace:
New Directions in the Cultural Semiotics of Brand Communication

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ABSTRACT

Marketing is always a kind of inter-cultural communication, in the sense defined by the semiotics of culture: a message from someone in a group who says “I” to a group he sees as “You” or “Them”. But marketing is also an inter-cultural message in a narrower sense: it often emanates from a global company, which needs to sell a product on a local market. To do so, it may also make use of classical group values, notably national identities, which it can ascribe to the products it wants to sell. In the first part of this article, the author discusses communication within the framework of cultural semiotics, with a particular emphasis on the marketing situation. In the second part, the author looks at particular cases of visual rhetoric, in which cultural values are used to sell specific products. These are exemplified by the ascription of European values to a Swedish product (Absolut Vodka), and Swedish values to a product most of the time produced elsewhere (IKEA), as well as the assignment of American values to a Turkish service provider.

KEYWORDS

Branding, Communication, Cultural Semiotics, IKEA

1. INTRODUCTION

Whatever else it might be, marketing is no doubt an act of communication. As such, it is occasionally employed for bridging different worlds. This is particularly true when such worlds consist of different cultures (and sub-cultures), societies, and/or nations: in a globalized world, marketing not only is required to target its messages to different cultures, but also tends to make use of the values that distinguish one culture from another as rhetorical arguments. If, as a working definition, culture is taken to be whatever group of which Ego (the one who speaks, or the instance that initiates a message in any way) is a part, and whose perspective he or she endorses, it may also be claimed that such an Ego speaks to the other as Alius, while often presenting that other as an Alter. What this means is something we are going to explore in the following pages, by taking a deep look at the semiotics of culture and the phenomenology of the Lifeworld.

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2. APPROACHING THE LIFEWORLD: MODELS OF HOME-CULTURE AND ALIEN-CULTURE

All kinds of communication rest on a fair amount of shared presuppositions. To the extent that all subjects involved in communicative exchanges are human beings, there are a lot of things they presume to be self-evident. The founder of phenomenological philosophy, Edmund Husserl (1954), called this web of mutually held presuppositions the Lifeworld, while the social phenomenologist Alfred Schütz (1962-66) talked about “the world taken for granted”. Husserl also used the term Urdoxa for those propositions (doxic positionings) shared by all members of a Lifeworld. The psychologist James Gibson (1982) named the same phenomenon “the world of ecological physics”. Others have used terms such as “background”, “presuppositions”, “commons”, and in recent cognitive science and the philosophy of mind, a similar notion has appeared, but divided up into “naïve physics”, on the side of nature, and “folk psychology”, on the experiential side. In the Lifeworld and in ecological physics, contrary to the world described by modern physics, the sun goes up every morning and down every evening. Certainly, we have to take this proposition for granted, if we are going to be capable of knowing when to switch on the light to browse through a paper. However, this is such a general presupposition as not to be taken into consideration every time we plan to formulate a message, let alone create an advertisement (cf. Sonesson 1989, 2001b).

There are also presuppositions that are specific to particular socio-cultural Lifeworlds, which may correspond to countries, such as Germany, Sweden, or Turkey or to wider domains such as Europe or the Occident, and even to groups of people within a particular Lifeworld. The idea of there being different socio-cultural Lifeworlds has been extensively elaborated within the phenomenological tradition by Aron Gurwitsch (1974): just like the Lifeworld in general is defined by the presuppositions common to all human beings, different Lifeworlds may be characterised by those assumptions that are taken for granted by people living in particular societies or sub-cultures. Since one of advertising’s main objectives consists in finding ways whereby an audience may be persuaded to subscribe to the propositions of a sender, we must be capable of strategically leveraging the presuppositions that are taken for granted by particular target audiences in particular acts of communication. To this end, in the following sections we shall examine how these presuppositions and the specific Lifeworlds they make up may be investigated through cultural semiotics. But first, let us take a short detour into semiotic theories of communication, which are inextricably linked to cultural semiotics.

2.1. Communication as the Presentation and Concretisation of Meaning

To gain an understanding of communication, either between cultures or within a single culture, it is important to start by rejecting the model of communication of the mathematical theory of information (see Shannon & Weaver 1949) that has gained a big following both in semiotics and in media studies. This model conceives of communication as consisting basically of the processes of “encoding” and “decoding” and of transport (moving something from one locus to another), but none of these is really necessary for communication to take place. All kinds of communication, in a semiotically relevant sense, consist in presenting an artefact to another subject and assigning him or her the task of transforming it by means of its concretisation into a percept (see Sonesson 1999, 2014). This contention, here extended to all kinds of communication, constitutes an adaptation of the model of artistic experience proposed by Mukařovský (1974), the main figure of the Prague school of semiotics in the 30s. However, the possibility of this adaptation is inscribed in the model’s original inception in the context of the phenomenology of Husserl – or, more exactly, that of his follower Roman Ingarden (1931[1965]). What Mukařovský brings to this model, nevertheless, is the addition of a social dimension.

Mukařovský is commonly mentioned, in the context of semiotics, for having added the aesthetic function to the three functions recognized by Bühler (1982[1934]), that is, the emotive, conative, and referential functions, involving, respectively, the sender, the receiver and the referent of an act of
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