When we talk about advertisements or attempt to analyse them, most of us tend to assume that they are vehicles for the communication of usually somewhat distorted or exaggerated publicity; and that they are ‘transparent’ or invisible carriers at that. We tend to take for granted that what is on the screen or page is what the ad means and we ‘measure’ ads against some assumed reality which could replace the ‘unreal’ images which constitute most ads. The images of men and women in ads, for example, are usually considered to be mythic rather than real, and also stereotyped. This kind of criticism usually gets bogged down in arguments about the extent to which such images are true or false and seeks to replace distorted images with representations of people and situations as they really are. It assumes that there is a simple and better reality with which to replace the stereotypes and myths and ignores the fact that ads are in themselves a kind of reality which have an effect. In this sense ads are not secondary to ‘real life’ nor copied or derived from it. Ads are what some critics call ‘specific representational practices’ and produce meanings which cannot be found in reality. There is no simple reality with which to replace the falseness of ads, and there are no simple alternatives to stereotypes. In order to gain better understanding of the role that advertising plays in our society, we need to ask how advertising organizes and constructs reality, how ideology and meanings are produced within the ad discourse and why some images are the way they are, or how they could have been constructed.

In order to approach these questions we need to consider a framework for analysis established by semiotics, described by its founder Ferdinand de Saussure as ‘a science that studies the life of signs within society’. It is an approach which has adopted some concepts and tools of analysis from structural linguistics, which attempts to uncover the internal relationships which give different languages their form and function. Although language is a basic model, semiotics has cast its net wider, and looks at any system of signs whether the substance is verbal, visual or a complex mixture of both. Thus speech, myth, folktales, novels, drama, comedy, mime, paintings, cinema, comics, news items and advertisements can be analysed semiotically as systems of signification similar to languages.

This approach involves a critical shift from the simple interpretation of objects and forms of communication to investigations of the organization and structure of cultural artefacts and, in particular, to enquiry into how they produce meaning. It is argued that the meaning of an advertisement is not something there, statically inside an ad, waiting to be revealed by a ‘correct’ interpretation. What an ad means depends on how it operates, how signs and its ‘ideological’ effect are organized internally (within the text) and externally (in relation to its production, circulation and consumption and in relation to technological, economic, legal and social relations). Implicit in this approach is a rejection of much impressionistic criticism and ‘scientific’ content analysis which assumes that the meaning of an ad is evident in its overt, manifest content and ignores the form that the content takes. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, ads are not invisible conveyors of messages or transparent reflections.
of reality, they are specific discourses or structures of signs. As such we do not passively absorb them but actively participate in their production of signification, according to the way they ‘speak’ to or ‘ensnare’ us. We come to advertisements as social readers. According to Janice Winship ‘We all, so to speak, bring our social positions with us to the reading of any discourse; and we are not automatically “interpellated” as the subject(s) which the discourse constructs’ (1981, p. 28). She cites the example of a poster for a car which proclaimed: ‘If it were a lady it would get its bottom pinched’, and which was defaced with this rejoinder: ‘If this lady were a car she’d run you down’. This challenge is effective because it uses the same means of representation as the ad. It also highlights the fact that the original ad was clearly addressed to a male and that the social reader objecting was a female. It matters, then, who an ad is implicitly addressed to, which may or may not include you.

Most semiotic/structural studies of advertising texts distinguish between their outward manifestation and inner mechanisms—the codes and conventions which organize and release the meanings of a text in the process of viewing or reading. Such codes are what makes meaning possible. Texts result from the dynamic interplay of various semiotic, aesthetic, social and ideological processes within them which also operate in the culture outside them. The audience member is involved in the work of the text and the production of its meaning; his or her own knowledge, social position and ideological perspective is brought to bear on the process of the construction of meaning. As Judith Williamson argues:

Advertisements must take into account not only the inherent qualities and attributes of the products they are trying to sell, but also the way in which they can make those properties mean something to us…Advertisements are selling us something besides consumer goods; in providing us with a structure in which we, and those goods are interchangeable, they are selling us ourselves. (1978, p. 13)

Advertisements do not simply manipulate us, inoculate us or reduce us to the status of objects; they create structures of meaning which sell commodities not for themselves as useful objects but in terms of ourselves as social beings in our different social relationships. Products are given ‘exchange-value’: ads translate statements about objects into statements about types of consumer and human relationships. Williamson gives the example of the ad for diamonds (‘A diamond is forever’) in which they are likened to eternal love: the diamond means something not in its own terms as a rock or mineral but in human terms as a sign. A diamond cannot buy love, but in the ad it is the diamond which is made to generate love and comes to mean love. And once this initial connection has been made we almost automatically accept the object for the feeling. People and objects can become interchangeable as in, for example, the slogans ‘The Pepsi generation’, ‘The Martini set’.

It is in this sense that advertisements should be seen as structures which function by transforming an object into something which is given meaning in terms of people. The meaning of one thing is transferred to or made interchangeable with another quality, whose value attaches itself to the product. In the simplest of cases, we can see how something (someone or some place) which we like or value transfers its qualities to the product. Two things are made interchangeable or equal in value—‘Happiness is a cigar called Hamlet’. Williamson calls this transfer of meaning between signs in an ad ‘currency’. The cigar represents or replaces the feeling of happiness: ‘Currency is something which represents a value and in its interchangeability with other things gives them value too’ (1978, p. 20).
Feminists have pointed out that ads addressed to women define women in terms of the commodity. Goods like convenience foods, domestic appliances, toilet products and fashions are sold not as commodities but in terms of what they can do for relationships (with men, with the family, with neighbours). Women are made to identify themselves with what they consume—‘You, Daz and your Hotpoint automatic’, ‘You and Heinz together make a perfect team’. Success with the family and friends can be purchased for the price of a packet of detergent, a bottle of cough syrup or a jar of moisturizing cream. Of course, it is women who usually do the washing and cook the meals, but they are made to feel inadequate without the commodities which help them perform the tasks which constitute their family and social relationships.

So in order to understand the image of a woman in an ad, it is important to identify how she is signified and positioned in the ad as a female person, and to remember that any representation is also partially defined in relation to the material position of women ‘outside’ the ad, within what feminists call ‘patriarchal relations’—their economic, political and ideological position in society.

**Semiotics—concepts and methods**

In order to clarify the contribution that semiotics/structuralism can make to the analysis of ads as signs and sign systems, I will describe some of the basic features and concepts of the structuralist model and apply them to different advertisements.

Structuralism (and I am taking this word to be more or less synonymous with semiotics) usually makes a distinction between the systematic and social part of *signifying practices/structural systems*—the material, conditioning and determining aspects of culture—and the resulting *individual signifying practice*. The former is usually referred to as *langue* (language) and it consists of structural rules and conventions, which are independent of the individual use of them. The individual use is called *parole* (speech), and is the manifestation of the selected, combined and articulated elements of *langue*. In language itself, the distinction between *langue* and *parole* is perhaps more clear-cut than in a system like advertising. Nevertheless it could be argued that an advertisement is the *parole*—the ordered combination of verbal and visual signs into messages—and that *langue* is the means (codes) which allow the messages to function. *Langue* conditions and is conditioned by *parole* and consists of a diverse set of social constraints, references and discourses, images, formal techniques and rhetorical figures which advertisers draw upon to create the publicity message.

A second distinction, which is important for understanding how sign systems work, is that made between the two parts which make up the sign, be it visual or verbal. A sign is made up of the *signifier*, a material vehicle, and the *signified*, a mental concept or reference. A signifier has potential but not actual meaning whereas the signified is the concept or meaning which the signifier refers to. The two are materially inseparable, although it is useful to distinguish between them for the purpose of analysis in order to see how the sign works. A simple example will illustrate the two aspects of the sign.

The ad for gold (plate 12) consists of the photographic image of two people in profile. They can be identified as a woman and a man, although only part of their faces are showing and the ‘eye-line’ of the photo is their shoulders (naked). We assume they are about to kiss. She has her hand on his shoulder and this reveals a gold wedding ring and a gold
Plate 12 Signifier and signified
bracelet on her wrist. A linguistic caption, strategically placed between them, proclaims: ‘The strongest links are forged in gold’. At one level this message can only mean that the links in her bracelet are made of gold and that they are strong and durable. This is more or less a rational/objective statement about the properties of the metal. Thus one of the signifiers of this ad is the gold bracelet; its signified is that this piece of jewellery is long lasting and a sound investment. But there is an assumed narrative in the ad which works beneath the surface. We need to delve deeper into the ad’s rhetoric. He has given her a gift, she is rewarding him with a kiss. Their relationship is founded on this transaction: gold is the basis of their ‘link’. Their (and by implication your) relationship will therefore be strong and durable. Much of this ad then, works at an unconscious level where a connection is being made between a gold bracelet (signifier) and an intimate (sexual) relationship between two people (signified). The significance of the message lies in its implicit narrative, the world it creates (which denies questions about the object’s production—who made it, where does it come from, for whom is it intended) and the relationship it coins between the significance of love and its transference to gold. We have to make the connection. It is only implied by the visual message, although somewhat helped by the punning linguistic message. Gold is a precious and valued (expensive) metal; its currency is recognized outside the ad. This meaning is incorporated into the ad and carried by it. Romantic love is similarly an ideal in our society. The two are made interchangeable. The value of each is attached to the product—a gift of jewellery.

A further point can be made about this ad and that is the way in which colour is used. It is obviously no accident that the two unclothed bodies appear to have golden tans. The background is a simple, neutral colour. Again a connection is being made between the couple in the ad and the commodity, gold. Many ads use colour as an ‘objective correlative’, where the colours of the product, a packet of cigarettes, a cosmetic range, etc. are echoed by its surroundings: the décor in a room or a natural setting, by the clothes a model is wearing or by an object placed next to the product. The assumption is that the qualities and style of one will enhance the other through this visual link. The people or the world they inhabit in the ad become accessories of the product.

The colour technique is also used in TV commercials. The Kellogg’s cornflakes advertisements, for instance, rely on the connection between the golden colour of the flakes and fine sunny skies, golden beaches, etc. In one commercial for this product, the image on the screen of cornflakes cascading out of a packet is spliced in with an image of a person jumping on a trampoline with the same abundant exuberance. The movement of flakes and person is almost continuous although the subjects of the two juxtaposed images are different. Here the formal techniques of cinematic editing act, like the colours, as signifiers of an implicit signified: energy, youthfulness, happiness, etc.

An ad for Renault cars (plate 13) sets up a correspondence between the car and a woman through the content and form of the signifiers. The woman is made synonymous with the car through the shiny dress she is wearing and through its colours, and in addition through the formal techniques of cinematic dissolves and the montage of images. The silk-clad, slinky, fashionable model lies in a sensuous horizontal position in the first frame of the commercial. Her image dissolves slowly into the image of a car in the next few frames, the curves of her body forming the outline of the car. Subsequent frames show
Plate 13 Renault cars
the fragmented parts of a woman; her hands, head, torso, etc. are juxtaposed with, dissolved into or made to stand instead of the car’s instruments, headlights and reclining seats. Elongated fingers and manicured, painted nails sensuously touch and caress the control panel and the car’s phallic-looking locking mechanism. Woman as a sign, shaped and moulded like a car, displays herself to be looked at by men. She is made into a decorative, passive object available and controllable like the car. She is moulded in the form that men desire; she is controlled by the gaze of the absent man and is represented by the imagined fetishes which men are supposed to respond to. She adorns and caresses the car and men are invited to caress their cars/women. The images are misty and the music throbs. This kind of ad expresses women’s sexuality in men’s terms; it invites the signified voyeurism and sexual power and control through the forms of the signifiers.

The important thing to remember about signs is that their meaning can only be assessed in relation to their structure and their structural relationships with other signs. A sign not only means in and for itself but also through its place in other signifying systems, for instance the individual ad within advertising. The signified does not exist except as a function of a particular signifying system. Meanings are organized in ‘chains’ of signification and signifieds can become signifiers for further chains of signification (see denotation and connotation below, p. 127).

Advertising, like language, is a system consisting of distinct signs. It is a system of differences and oppositions which are crucial in the transfer of meaning. In the commodity market there are many products such as soap, detergent, cosmetics, breakfast cereal, margarine, beer and cigarettes which are essentially the same. Ads for these products have therefore to create differences and distinctions through the use of signs arranged in structures. The most obvious way of creating a distinction between products and to make one stand out from the rest is to give it a distinctive image. Perfume ads, for instance, try to create an image of the product because of the lack of any ‘hard’ information that can be given about its properties. And cigarette ads use brand images extensively. For instance, the series of ads for Marlboro cigarettes trade on the well-established image of cowboys, cattle round-ups, wild horses, wide-open prairies, etc., drawn from the mythic world of cowboy films. These images of the old wild west transferred to the world of cigarettes act as signifiers for the signifieds: adventure, masculinity, freedom, etc. The product substitutes for the scene and is meant to signify these attributes too. Virginia Slim’s cigarettes also appropriate a referent system, this time women’s history: their exploitation and oppression, and also their ‘quaint old-fashioned’ ways. This image is juxtaposed with one of today’s women—free, swinging, carefree, sophisticated—a contemporary system of reference to the liberated woman. Hence the slogan ‘You’ve come a long way baby’.

Ads continually move between systems of meaning like this, transferring from one meaning we are already aware of to create a new meaning.

**Iconic, indexical and symbolic signs**

It is worth digressing here to explain in a bit more detail the nature and form of signs, since they are the bedrock of communication. It is easy to be misled by advertisements, which consist mainly of photographic representations.
Photographic images look like the thing, place or person being represented. This makes them *iconic* signs, and the signifier-signified relationship one of resemblance or likeness. A portrait of a person is an obvious example of an iconic sign, because the picture resembles that person. Some signs go beyond the mere depiction of a person or thing and are used *indexically* to indicate a further or additional meaning to the one immediately and obviously signified. For example, the idea of Paris or Parisian holidays can be indicated by a picture of the Eiffel Tower, a landmark in the city which is frequently associated with it. The costume a person is wearing may denote iconically the mode of dress worn by a person or character in an ad, but at the same time stand *indexically* for a social position or profession. A character’s movements may simultaneously represent some (dramatic) piece of action and indicate his or her frame of mind, habits or livelihood. For example a man who walks with a rolling gait is probably a sailor and one who has a swagger might be a cowboy. A woman in ads is often represented indexically by bits of her body—hips, eyes, head, hands or legs—which signify not only in themselves but also her whole being. They can also signify a commodity—lipstick, eye make-up, shampoo, nail polish, tights, etc.—thus suggesting that women are commodities also.

If an advertiser wants to convey the idea of heat he or she could show a picture of a thermometer rising, beads of sweat on a person’s brow, hot, shimmering colours, etc. As with all indexical signs, there is a sequential or causal connection between signifier and signified—the mercury in a thermometer rising, sweat, or shimmer, and the idea, concept or feeling of heat.

The relationship between signifier and signified in some signs is arbitrary based neither on resemblance nor on any existential link. In other words, the signifier does not resemble or cause the signified, but is related to it only by convention or ‘contract’. This kind of sign is called a symbol. A rose is a symbol of love or passion not because a rose looks like love or passion or even because the flower causes it. It is just that members of some cultures have over the years used the rose in certain circumstances to mean love; just as in the ad campaign for gold we are invited to connect gold with love; and in cigarette ads, cool, refreshing things like mountain streams or fresh-looking and tasting foods, are made to symbolize (very unhealthy) cigarettes. In some ads, people like judges, policemen or nurses are used to mobilize feelings associated with the job or profession. In many cases the symbols used to convey meanings or ideas are not entirely arbitrary: the symbol for justice, a pair of scales, for instance, could not be replaced by any other symbol. In other words there are the rudiments of a ‘natural’ bond between signifier and signified in many symbols. An example of a pure symbol, with no such bond, would be that of the white horse used by White Horse Whisky, where the horse standing in a bar or on top of a mountain or at a building site stands for the bottle of whisky itself, although there is no ‘logical’ connection between the bottle and the sign horse. The sign and its referent co-exist in the brand name. The function of presenting a horse in these ads is to make more real the meaning the brand name gives the drink and is backed up by the slogan ‘You can take a White Horse anywhere’. Brand images generally act as symbols for their products, but it is perhaps important to note that in most ad campaigns iconic, indexical and symbolic signs invariably overlap and are co-present.

Advertisements may look ‘real’ and ‘natural’ and the connections they make between dissimilar things may have the appearance of a system that is ‘logical’, and belongs to a
‘real’ or ‘natural’ order, but such connections are not inevitable. Even in the incongruous and illogical case of placing a white horse in a bar or living room or an enormous bottle of whisky on top of a mountain, the ‘system’ of the ad makes more ‘real’ the natural signification that the brand name gives to the drink, which is never out of place in a bar, as a horse never is on a mountain side, and vice versa. The whisky becomes a natural object through the white horse. In the end we come to accept the ‘logic’ of the system without question. The signs of other meaning systems, which have certain images, feelings or ideas attached to them, are transferred to the products rather than springing from them and are given the status of ‘facts’. We are of course meant to see the meaning of the product as already there in its image on the screen as it unfolds. We rarely notice the inherent dissimilarity of objects and products placed together. As Judith Williamson has pointed out, ‘a product and image/emotion become linked in our minds, while the process of this linking is unconscious’ (1978, p. 30).

This linking of thoughts, emotions or feelings with something ‘objective’ and external is not a new phenomenon; it forms the basis of much art and many myths and rituals. However, advertising has a particular function in evoking emotions and feelings through promises of pleasure connected to the purchase or possession of a product. A product can even go from being the signified of a correlating thing, person or lifestyle which acts as a signifier, to generating or being that feeling, e.g. ‘Happiness is a cigar called Hamlet’, ‘Bacardi and friends’. The act of consuming the product sign releases or creates the feelings it represents. As Williamson reminds us, when the product precedes the feeling we can end up not only speaking but feeling in clichés: ‘The connection of a “thing” and an abstraction can lead them to seem the same, in real life’ (p. 37).

Syntagmatic and paradigmatic sign relations

Before discussing the coding of photographic signs in more detail, I need to introduce another pair of semiotic concepts. De Saussure proposed a distinction between the syntagmatic relation between elements in a language, and paradigmatic relations. Syntagmatic relations are the permissible ways in which elements succeed each other or combine together in a chain of discourse. These elements have nothing in common and are brought together by virtue of ‘combinatory (syntactic) rules’. A syntagm is defined by its opposition to that which follows or precedes it.

In advertising the syntagm is the advertisement or series of advertisements as they appear on the screen or page—a ‘chain’ of visual, verbal and aural signs. In order to discover the paradigm and eventually the rules of an ad’s signification we have to break up the syntagmatic chain and isolate (for the purposes of analysis) a distinctive unit, in order to find the roots of its meaning. A unit or sign thus identified, for example a stallion in a Marlboro ad, can then be (theoretically) classified according to its paradigmatic (vertical) relations, which in this case consist of all other functionally similar objects: ponies, donkeys, mules, dray horses, foals, mares, etc. Obviously the stallion was chosen to appear in the Marlboro ads because of its particular associations. It recalls a system of meaning beyond the immediacy of the syntagmatic (horizontal) text. Paradigmatic structures facilitate the associative and connotative use of terms: they assume a code or coding. A stallion is understood by virtue of its relation and opposition to mules, asses, cows, etc. but it is connotative due to a
‘deeper’ paradigmatic relation. Connotation relies on the reader’s cultural knowledge of a system which can relate ‘stallion’ to feelings of freedom, wide open prairies, masculinity, virility, wildness, individuality, etc.

Paradigmatic relations are those which belong to the same associative set by virtue of the function they share. So a sign is in a paradigmatic relation with all the signs which can also occur in the same context but not at the same time. An example from Barthes’s *Systeme de la Mode* (1967b) might help to clarify these concepts: In the garment/fashion semiotic system, the paradigmatic order is ‘A set of pieces; parts or details which cannot be worn at the same time on the same part of the body, and whose variation corresponds to a change in meaning of the clothing: toque-bonnet-hood, etc.’ (p. 63). The syntagm consists of the ‘juxtaposition in the same type of dress of different elements: skirt-blouse-jacket’ (ibid.).

A linguist, Roman Jakobson, extended the idea of paradigm and syntagm to the notions of metaphor and metonymy: metaphors belong to a paradigmatic order and metonymy to a syntagmatic order. Metaphor is a matter of the selection of elements from an associative plane; metonymy is concerned with combination at a horizontal level (see Jakobson, 1971, p. 67).

### Denotation and connotation

The concepts denotation and connotation are two of the most important in semiotic analysis (although they are not exclusive to semiotics). Roughly speaking, denotation and connotation refer to first and second levels of meaning in a sign. The term denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign; to what is ‘objectively’ present and easily recognized or identified. Connotation is a term used to refer to meanings which lie beyond denotation but are dependent on it. Connotative readings of signs are introduced by an audience/viewer/reader beyond the literal meaning of a sign and are activated by the means of conventions or codes. Roland Barthes elaborates these concepts in *Elements of Semiology*, where he says ‘the first system (denotation) becomes the plane of expression or signifier of the second system (connotation)…the signifiers of connotation…are made up of signs (signifiers and signifieds united) of the denoted system’ (1967a, p. 91). We the spectators can only join up or make sense of these two systems by our knowledge of cultural codes and associative meanings without which the second system, connotation, is not possible. A rose, for example, means on the denotative level, a flower. This signified can become the signifier (vehicle) of another signified at another level. Depending on the context, the rose can connote love or passion. In the context of a historical film like *Richard III*, the images of a red or white rose would connote the houses of Lancaster or York. In the context of an ad for beauty preparations or perfume, a well-known film star signified by a photo can in turn become the signifier of the connoted meaning glamour, beauty, sophistication, fame, etc.

Readers or spectators have actively to introduce cultural codes in order to interpret a sign by uniting signifier and.signified. In an important essay on semiotics and publicity images, Barthes draws attention to the levels of meaning in ads. He calls the denotative, first level of meaning of an advertising image, a non-coded iconic message and the second level, a coded iconic, or symbolic, message. The latter is based on pre-existing bodies of knowledge of a practical, cultural, national, historic or aesthetic nature. According to
Barthes, interpretation at the iconic, denoted level is relatively unproblematic and even suggests that the photographic image is a ‘message without a code’.

In the essay ‘Rhetoric of the image’ (1977) Barthes lists the component (discontinuous) signs of an ad for Panzani pasta products. These are some packets of pasta, a tin of spaghetti sauce, a sachet of parmesan cheese, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, and a mushroom all in or emerging from a string shopping bag placed on a surface (table). The colours are predominantly greens and yellows on a red background. Barthes analyses the ad at the connotative level in terms of a narrative or story.

the idea that we have in the scene represented is a return from market. A signified which itself implies two euphoric values: that of the freshness of the products and that of the essentially domestic preparation for which they are destined. (1977, p. 34)

Further signs are present; the vegetables and the colours of the picture signify Italy or Italianness just as the connoted sign of the linguistic message, Panzani (the product’s brand name and the ad’s caption) itself signifies Italianness. The collection of different objects falling out of the bag also communicates the idea of a ‘total culinary service’, and the composition of foods (and container) in the image evokes the memory of innumerable still-life paintings.

Barthes’ analysis of the Panzani ad demonstrates how the ad’s meaning is constructed not just by the discrete signs but by the ordering of events or the ‘world’ it implies. It is a ‘frozen moment’, but with a before and after created by the advertisers. In a critique of photographs, Manuel Alvarado argues that photos, including those for ads, have possibly more than one level of narrativity—the order of events implied by the photograph and an implicit or second level of narrativity:

The second would question the actual history of the production, circulation and consumption of the photograph within particular institutions and under the regulation of technological, economic, legal and discursive relations and practices. (1980, p. 8)

Alvarado suggests that the second level is invariably repressed in favour of the first, but that this line of analysis suggests some further questions: namely that it challenges the authority (verisimilitude) of the photograph and suggests that ‘How it could have been is politically a more interesting question’ (ibid.).

The world of the advertising photograph or what Barthes calls ‘the common domain of the signifieds of connotation’ is ideological, and ‘cannot but be single for a given society and history no matter what signifiers of connotation it may use’ (1967a, p. 49). Ads as a means of representation and meaning construct ideology within themselves through the intervention of external codes which are located in society. The ad will use images, notions, concepts, myths, etc. already available in the culture. An ad does not simply reflect ideology; it reworks it, thus producing new meanings. It uses objects which are signifieds of ideological systems and thought that already exist and then makes them signifiers of another structure (the ad). Its connotational process depends on our knowledge of the forms of ideology that advertisements employ.
In advertising there is almost no denotative communication. Although it is useful to distinguish between denotation and connotation for analytical purposes, denotation is not neutral or untouched by ideology. It may seem to be more fixed and taken for granted but it is still dependent upon a context of meaning and association. The supposed absence of a code at the iconic, denotative level merely reinforces the myth of photographic naturalness. According to Barthes, ‘it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation, which is extremely dense in advertising’ (1977, p. 45). And in S/Z (1975) he expands on his earlier ‘innocent’ definition of connotation:

denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so. Under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations…the superior myth by which the text pretends to return the nature of language to language as nature. (1975, p. 9)

This is why the ideology of advertisements is so powerful; it is naturalized by the image, the neutral realm of the signifier.

We should not forget that ideology also works through the linguistic message—Barthes’s third level of meaning in an ad. This level ‘fixes the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs’ (1964, p. 37). All images are made up a number of ‘floating’ signs and subject to a variety of interpretations. The function of the linguistic message—caption, headline, copy, etc.—is to ‘anchor’ the variety of possible meanings, inviting some interpretations rather than others and resolving ambiguity or contradictions in the image. As I mentioned the linguistic message of the Panzani ad aids identification and also connotes, backs up or secures the meaning intended—‘Italianness’.

The linguistic message can also function as ‘relay’. This is rare in fixed images, but important in moving images such as TV commercials, where dialogue, for instance, elucidates the image and advances the action or narrative, spelling out what cannot be found in the images. Sometimes it is the linguistic message and not the image which predominates, and the image is used to ‘anchor’ an eye-catching but unspecific or puzzling caption.

Photographic and filmic images have their own connotative abilities in addition to those drawn from the wider ‘maps of meaning’ in a culture. For instance, a scene can be shot from different angles, the camera can be moving or static and the film stock can be colour or black and white. The stills in plate 14 illustrate some of these connotations.

(a) The mother and young daughter in the ‘Comfort’ commercial are shot in soft, fuzzy focus and the lighting gives a golden, warm hue to the scene. The characters are lit from behind to emphasize softness and the scene exudes caring, warmth, mother love, etc.

(b) The ‘Ladyshave’ commercial is similarly shot in soft focus but the hues are bland and white, suggesting a sophisticated coolness without detracting from the implied femininity of the scene. (Notice the model’s narcissistic interest in her own body, with the implication of a male’s attention and gaze.)

(c) The ‘Krona’ commercial is crisply focused to give the impression of ‘objective’ reality. The main character poses in the stance of a news reporter and the distance between him and the camera lens/screen also indicates objectivity and factual reporting unlike the close-ups in the previous two examples.
We derive meanings from kinds of shots and other filmic techniques because we have learned the codes and conventions of TV and film practice. We unconsciously compare high-angle with low-angle shots and know how to distinguish between the two and what they both indicate. The fact that a certain shot conveys a meaning depends not only on our ability to relate it to other potential shots in a paradigm of shots but also to actual shots that precede or follow it in the syntagmatic discourse. Thus an isolated shot might mean something different from the same shot in the context of a sequence or chain of shots/events.

**Codes**

The concept of code is central to semiotic analysis. The formation and understanding of messages (encoding and decoding) is made possible by codes—a set of rules or an interpretative device known to both transmitter and receiver, which assigns a certain meaning or content to a certain sign. We recognize the signifier, long blonde hair for example, as a sign of femininity when we interpret it through the code of femininity as the signifier of a certain signified, woman. Within that code there is a sub-code which assigns this long-blond-haired woman a particular meaning—a particular kind of ‘healthy sexuality’. Codes are forms of social knowledge which are derived from social practices and beliefs although they are not laid down in any statute. Codes organize our understanding of the world in terms of ‘dominant meaning patterns’, patterns which vary from culture to culture and from time to time but which we largely take for granted and which are uppermost in our minds when we interpret things or think about them.

There are a number of codes at work in both press and TV commercials. Before the ad reaches the page or screen it undergoes a complex coding process involving a large number of people, including at the outset an account executive/team, a copywriter, an art director and possibly a graphic artist or photographer. These people make decisions about the finished advertisement and have a determining influence on what it will look like. At a further stage in the encoding process, decisions have to be made about what kind of transmitter will be used (photographic stills, drawings, film, actors, voice-over, etc.). The lighting technician, set designer, costume designer, composer, camera operator and actors in their capacities as performers and creators are also involved in the ‘coding’ of the ad and they draw on their own general knowledge, social, professional and technical skills and aptitudes. Actors in ads are themselves multiple coders: their bodies, voices and metonymic accessories like costumes and props act as transmitters of signs.
Plate 14 TV commercials: (a) Comfort (b) Ladyshave (c) Krona
(c)
In effect, ads consist of many messages; several channels are used simultaneously although in synthesis. The viewer interprets this complex of messages—images, speech, gesture, costume, setting—as an integrated text according to the media/cultural codes at his or her disposal. In addition to the multi-levelled nature of an advertisement, there is the question of the mediation of the ad as a whole. We are, as Goffmann points out, willing and ready ‘to switch at any moment from dealing with the real world to participating in make-believe ones’ (1979, p. 23). Commercial realism like other forms of fiction requires that we frame it off from the rest of life; indeed it has advantages over real life, probably being richer and fuller and less ambiguous than glimpses of real life. We are normally perfectly aware that ads are ads however much we might believe in them, and this is due to our ability to bracket off and to accept the ‘factitious’ in advertising texts.

An advertisement could be said to be ‘semiotically thick’: it comprises a heterogeneity of signals and is characterized by its spatial as well as temporal dimensions. Each image or frame operates spatially, whilst linguistic messages and the unfolding of the text/message is temporal. Movement, however, is both spatial and temporal.

We can begin to understand how an advertisement works if we look at the complex of codes which permit a range of messages to be brought together in a text. Not every ad will contain every possible code available to it. Most ads contain a broad type or class of code—a linguistic code and an ‘iconic’ code. These enable us at a minimum level to understand them as pieces of communication. Further, there is an advertisement or framing code, which probably comes into operation and allows us to apprehend it in its own terms. Similarly, we bring to an ad our knowledge of generic and stylistic rules relating to ads and the more general cultural, behavioural, ideological and ethical principles which we apply in our everyday social activities.³

Notes

1. See also chapter 8 for a discussion of advertising’s use of metaphor and metonymy.
2. See also Berger (1972), chapter 7, for a discussion of the way publicity appropriates art to lend allure or authority to its own message.
3. See Appendix IV for a taxonomy of advertising codes.

Suggestions for further work

1. What are the main advantages of analysing advertisements as sign systems like language? What would the equivalents of words and sentences be in advertisements? (See Barthes, 1968, and Williamson, 1978.)
2. Analyse the ad for Philips Ladyshave (14b) in terms of its codes and conventions. What is the relationship between the way this ad is organized (coded) and social experience? How important is our experience of other texts and discourses to the understanding of this ad?
3. Why is there little iconicity in ads? Collect some ads in which a photo image of an everyday object is meant to signify more than itself. Have these images become indexical signs or symbols of another, additional meaning? Collect some examples of brand images (e.g. Marlboro cigarettes). What are their meanings? How are these conveyed?