



10

There's More to Perfume than Smell: Advertising, Pop Culture, and Meme Culture

Advertising is the greatest art form of the twentieth century.
—Marshall McLuhan (1911–80)

There is one final scene on Martha's video that is worth discussing before summing up. Near the end of the evening, Cheryl turns inquisitively to Ted and says: "The cologne you're wearing, Ted, smells very nice. What is it?" "Yes," replies Ted. "It's called *Drakkar Noir*. Do you like it? I decided to try it on because of an ad I saw a while back on a YouTube retrospective of historical ads." "Oh, can you describe the ad to me?" retorts Cheryl. Ted's description of the ad follows. "Well, actually, I remember the bottle was a ghastly, frightful, black color. It was placed right in the center of the ad against a dark background that was shattered by a beam of white light which just missed the bottle but illuminated the platform on which it stood. That had a bizarre effect on me. I felt as if I were in awe of the bottle!"

The semiotician would find Ted's description of the ad text intriguing. With the themes of advertising, pop culture, and meme culture we have come full circle, back to the human fascination with apparently trivial, but still meaningful, objects such as cigarettes, high heels, and cologne bottles. Ted's reaction to the ad indicates that advertising images are effective. These are designed to produce a need to buy—a compulsion that Roland Barthes called "neomania."¹ The smartly constructed ads harbor a constant subtext: Buy this or that and you will not be bored; you will be happy; you will be famous; you will be liked.

The sad truth is that happiness cannot be bought, as an old proverb warns us. We are living in a world that often puts more of a premium on satisfying

desires than it does on gaining wisdom. Advertisers rely on a handful of themes—happiness, youth, success, status, luxury, fashion, and beauty—to promote their products, promising solutions to human problems in the form of cologne, deodorant, beer, cars, mobile phones, and the like.

Let's start the discussion in this chapter by interpreting Ted's *Drakkar Noir* ad. Darkness connotes fear, evil, mystery. This is why villains in classic adventure stories are often dressed in black, and why forbidden or mysterious happenings occur in the dark at night. The dark bottle and the dark background of the ad tap into these connotations. The bottle's placement in the middle of the scene, as if it is on an altar, is suggestive of veneration, idolatry, of a dark ritual being performed secretly. This is reinforced by the sepulchral name of the cologne. Its guttural sound—obviously reminiscent of Dracula, the deadly vampire who mesmerized his sexual prey with a mere glance—arouses unconscious fear and desire at once. To complete the picture, the piercing beam of light (the paradigmatic opposite of dark) that just missed the bottle, illuminating the platform on which it stood, makes the bottle stand out as the "center of attention." Since colognes and perfumes are worn to enhance one's attractiveness and to entice a prospective mate, the ad elicits a web of sexual connotations: *darkness = night = sexuality = forbidden pleasures = fear = desire = mystery = vampirism*. This lacework of meanings is built into the visual signifiers of the ad. In a real sense, the ad is a small work of art, which has, however, the specific commercial purpose of enhancing sales.

The two main notions semioticians use to decipher such texts are those of subtext and intertext. The term *subtext* refers to any meaning, message, or interpretation that a given text evokes subconsciously and that is not immediately accessible to interpretation. The subtext in the *Drakkar Noir* ad is, as argued, *darkness = night = sexuality = forbidden pleasures = fear = desire = mystery = vampirism*. The traces to this subtext are the visual signifiers discussed previously. *Intertextuality* refers to the parts of a text that are understandable in terms of other texts. The placement of the bottle in the center of the scene with a dark background broken by a beam of light recalls stories where light and dark are in tension, including origin myths in which light emerges from the dark. The most critical intertext here is, however, the Dracula myth, a vampire figure that has come to symbolize so many things to us, including forbidden pleasure and the search for immortality. This interweaving of allusions and suggestions to other texts is what makes ads very powerful emotionally. And it also opens up the number of possible interpretations. The one given here is only one interpretation; there are many others. Like art, it is impossible to pin down one and only one meaning to an ad text, which, clearly, is more than a simple announcement about a product.

Advertising

Why are such subtextual themes and images used by advertisers? What's their relation to the product the ad promotes? Is the association itself between myth and product the trigger that gets people to buy the product? These are the questions that a semiotic approach to advertising attempts to answer.

The term *advertising* derives from the Medieval Latin verb *advertere* ("to direct one's attention to"). It designates any type or form of public announcement intended to direct attention to specific commodities or services. Advertising is, thus, a form of discourse, which is designed with rhetorical (persuasive) force. It exalts and inculcates consumption by playing on fears and archetypal desires—fear of poverty, sickness, loss of social standing, unattractiveness, and so on. As Barthes claimed, in a society that relies on mass consumption for its economic survival, it is little wonder that the trivial has become art.² One of the first known methods of advertising was the outdoor display, usually an eye-catching sign painted or attached on the wall of a building. Archaeologists have uncovered many such signs. A poster found in Thebes in 1000 BCE is thought to be one of the world's first "ads." In large letters it offered a gold coin for the capture of a runaway slave. An outdoor placard found among the ruins of ancient Rome offered property for rent; another, found painted on a wall in Pompeii, called the attention of travelers to a tavern located in a different town. Similar kinds of posters have been found scattered throughout ancient societies.

Throughout history, advertising in marketplaces has constituted a means of promoting the barter and sale of goods. Criers employed by merchants read public notices aloud to promote their wares. With the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, fliers and posters could be printed easily and posted in public places or inserted in books, pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines. By the latter part of the seventeenth century, when newspapers were beginning to circulate widely, print ads became the primary means for the advertisement of products and services. The *London Gazette* became the first newspaper to reserve a section exclusively for ads, which showed considerable rhetorical and graphic skill aimed at persuading readers to buy the products. The era of modern advertising had clearly dawned. Print advertising spread rapidly throughout the eighteenth century, proliferating to the point whereby the writer and lexicographer Samuel Johnson (1709–84) felt impelled to make the following statement in the newspaper *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."³ Ad creators were

starting to pay more attention to the language, design, and layout of the ad text. The art of coining and inventing new expressions to fit the ad text (now called slogans) was also becoming a basic technique. Advertising was thus starting to change the meaning of commodities. Everything, from clothes to beverages, was promoted as part of something more than the actual or practical functions of the product—as a key to success, popularity, and the like. These techniques transformed products into signs and codes standing for meanings that extended beyond their physical qualities. Advertising had become rhetorical art.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the advertising agency came onto the scene. By the turn of the twentieth century, such agencies had themselves become large business enterprises, constantly developing new techniques and methods to get people to think of products as signifying structures rather than just products. Throughout the twentieth century, advertising focused on promoting and ensconcing consumerism as a way of life, proposing marketplace solutions to virtually all psychological and social problems. No wonder, then, that the shopping malls are filled with thrill-seekers who would otherwise become stir crazy. Perhaps, as many social critics warn, we do indeed live in a world conjured up by lifestyle ads.

The pervasiveness of advertising today raises a number of issues. Has it become a force molding cultural mores and individual behaviors or does it simply mirror the cultural tendencies of urbanized, industrialized societies? Is it a legitimate form of artistic expression, as the Cannes Film Festival clearly believes (awarding prizes to the best advertisements)? The starting point of the debate on advertising was probably Vance Packard's 1957 book *The Hidden Persuaders*, which inspired an outpouring of studies examining the purported hidden effects of advertising on individuals and on society at large.⁴ Packard argued essentially that advertising was brainwashing.

Is advertising to be blamed for causing culturally-based afflictions such as obesity and its tragic counterpart anorexia? Are advertising moguls the shapers of behavior that so many would claim they are? Are we all the victims of advertising rhetoric, as Brian Wilson Key quips?⁵ There is no doubt that advertising plays a role in shaping some behaviors in some individuals. Any text, a semiotician would claim, has an effect on us because of semiosis—the interplay between signs and the mind. However, although people have become conditioned to mindlessly absorbing images, and although these may have some effects on behavior, people accept the images, by and large, only if they suit already established preferences. Advertisements are not in themselves disruptive of the value systems of the cultural mainstream; rather, they reflect shifts already present in that mainstream. If they are indeed psychologically effective, then it is primarily because they tap into the system of everyday life more successfully than do other forms of rhetorical discourse.⁶

The messages in ad subtexts often offer the kind of hope to which religions and social philosophies once held exclusive rights: security against the hazards of old age, better position in life, popularity and personal prestige, social advancement, better health, happiness, eternal youth. The advertiser stresses not the product, but the psychological and social benefits that may be expected from its purchase. The advertiser is becoming more and more successful at setting foot into the same subconscious regions of psychic experience that were once explored by philosophers and artists. However, blaming advertising for social ills is like blaming the messenger for the message that is embedded in the materialistic ethos of consumerist societies.

Because of this ethos, it should come as little surprise to find that advertising, brands, and pop culture have become integrated today. Take, for example, the Disney Corporation cartoon character Mickey Mouse. In 1929, Disney allowed Mickey Mouse to be reproduced on school slates, effectively transforming the character into a logo. A year later, Mickey Mouse dolls went into production and throughout the 1930s the Mickey Mouse brand was licensed with huge success. In 1955 *The Mickey Mouse Club* premiered on US network television, further entrenching the brand—and by association all Disney products—into the cultural mainstream. The case of Mickey Mouse has repeated itself throughout modern consumerist societies. The idea is to get the brand to become intertwined with cultural spectacles and trends (movies, TV programs, and so on).

Another way for product advertising to blend into the cultural mainstream is through the ad campaign, which can be defined as the systematic creation of a series of slightly different ads and commercials based on the same theme, characters, jingles, and so on. An ad campaign is comparable to the theme and variations form of music. One of the primary functions of ad campaigns is to guarantee that the brand's image will be in step with the changing times. Thus, for example, the Budweiser ad campaigns of the 1980s and early 1990s emphasized rural, country-and-western ruggedness, and crude female sexuality seen from a male viewpoint. The actors in the commercials were “Marlboro men,” and the women their prey. In the early 2000s, the same company changed its image with its “Whassup!” campaign to keep in step with the changing socio-political climate. The campaign showed young urban males who hung around together, loved sports, and did whatever such males seemingly loved to do together in order to bond. So appealing was the “Whassup!” campaign that its signature catchphrase was joked about on talk shows, parodied or mimicked in various media, and used by people commonly in their daily conversations. The makers of Budweiser had clearly adapted their advertising style to mirror social changes and trends.

Indeed, the most effective strategy is not only to keep up with the times but also to co-opt them. In the 1960s, for example, the rebels and revolutionaries, referred to generally as hippies, who genuinely thought they were posing a radical challenge to the ideological values and lifestyle mores of the mainstream consumerist culture, ended up becoming the incognizant trend-setters of the very culture they deplored, providing it with features of lifestyle and discourse that advertisers adapted and recycled into society at large. Counterculture clothing fashion was quickly converted into mainstream fashion, counterculture music style into mainstream music style, counterculture symbolism and talk into society-wide symbolism and discourse—hence the crystallization of a social mindset whereby every individual, of every political and ideological persuasion, could feel that they were a symbolic participant in a constant revolution.⁷

Campaigns such as the Pepsi Generation and the Coca-Cola universal brotherhood (“I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony...”) ones directly incorporated the rhetoric and symbolism of the hippie counterculture, thus creating the illusion that the goals of the hippies and of the soft drink manufacturers were one and the same. Rebellion through purchasing became the subliminal thread woven into the ad campaigns. The Dodge Rebellion and Oldsmobile Youngmobile campaigns etched into the nomenclature of the cars themselves the powerful connotations of rebellion and youthful defiance. Even a sewing company came forward to urge people on to join its own type of surrogate revolution, hence its slogan “You don’t let the establishment make your world; don’t let it make your clothes.” In effect, by claiming to “join the revolution,” advertising created the real revolution. This is why, since the 1970s, the worlds of advertising, marketing, youth trends, and entertainment have become synergistically intertwined. As Leiss, Kline, Jhally, and Botterill aptly put it, “there is no longer a separation between advertising and culture, culture and commerce, culture and politics.”⁸ This is particularly obvious in the realm of online ads, which pop up continually and thus surreptitiously. There are now websites that record advertising history and that discuss the aesthetics of ads. Ad culture has become virtually synonymous with pop culture.

The answer to curtailing the power of advertising is not to be found in censorship or in any form of state control, as some proclaim. 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 how advertising produces meanings with semiotic analysis (as illustrated above). In that way, we will be in a much better position to fend off the undesirable effects that it may cause.

Pop Culture

The term *pop culture* was coined in analogy to *pop art*, which was discussed previously. Pop culture is, by and large, a carnivalesque culture. It is culture for the people by the people, that is, a form of culture produced by common people, not by artists commissioned by the nobility or the church on purpose to do so. Pop culture rejects the distinction between “high” and “low” culture. It is highly appealing for this very reason. It is populist and popular, subject not to aesthetic canons, but to the vagaries of the marketplace and of changing tastes.

The terms of “high,” “low,” and “popular” culture have been used to differentiate between levels of representation within society. “High” culture implies a level considered to have a superior value, socially and aesthetically, than other levels, which are said to have a “lower” value. Traditionally, these two levels were associated with class distinctions—high culture was associated with the Church and the aristocracy in Europe; low culture with common folk. Pop culture emerged in the early twentieth century to obliterate this distinction. Already in the Romantic nineteenth century, artists saw “low” or “folk culture” as the only true form of culture, especially since they associated “high culture” with the artificial demands made of artists by those in authority. Pop culture emerged shortly thereafter to efface any residue distinctions between levels of culture.

The inventors of early pop culture forms were young people. Setting themselves apart from the adult culture, the youths of the 1920s emphasized a new sexual freedom with musical trends such as the Charleston and jazz. Although the older generation initially rejected them, the trends eventually caught on for a simple reason—they held great appeal. Pop culture engages the masses because it takes the material of everyday life, as well as common emotions, and gives them expression and meaning. Everything from comic books to fashion shows have mass appeal because they emanate from people within the culture, not from authority figures. As such, pop culture makes little or no distinction between art and recreation, distraction and engagement.

The spread of pop culture has been brought about, in part, by developments in mass communications technologies. The rise of music as a mass art, for instance, was made possible by the advent of recording and radio broadcasting technologies in the 1920s. Records and radio made music available to large audiences, converting it from an art for the élite to an art for one and all. The spread and appeal of pop culture throughout the globe today is due to the advent of Internet technologies. Pop culture is a transgressive culture, since it shatters authoritative social structures, by giving voice to common people.

Satellite television, for example, is often cited as bringing about the disintegration of the former Soviet system in Europe, as people became attracted to images of consumerist delights by simply tuning into American TV programs. McLuhan claimed that the spread of American pop culture images through electronic media has brought about a type of “global culture” that strangely unites people in a kind of “global village.”

Young people have always been the creative force behind pop culture’s trends and products. So, in a fundamental sense, there are few differences between youth and pop culture. However, since young people become old, trends change with new generations of youth. The main difference between pop and youth culture is that some of the trends of the former do not coincide with those of the latter. Youth culture and pop culture are thus different in the fact that previous youth culture is recycled by those who carry it over into their later years. There is, nevertheless, a constant dynamic between youth and pop culture. However, all this does not mean that pop culture is incapable of producing truly meritorious and lasting art. Indeed, some of the modern world’s most significant artistic products have come out of pop culture. The comic book art of Charles Schultz (1922–2000) is a case in point. His comic strip *Peanuts*, which was originally titled *Li'l Folks*, debuted in 1950, appealing to mass audiences. Through the strip, Schultz dealt with some of the most profound religious and philosophical themes of human history in a way that was unique and aesthetically powerful.

The medium that has been the most effective in spreading pop culture into the mainstream, since the 1950s, is television. Television service was in place in several Western countries by the late 1930s. By the early 1940s, there were a few dozen television stations operating in the United States. It was not until the early 1950s, however, that technology had advanced far enough to make it possible for virtually every North American household to afford a television set. By the mid-1950s, television was becoming a force in shaping all of society. TV personalities became household names and were transformed into celebrities. People increasingly began to plan their lives around their favorite television programs. Performers like Elvis Presley and the Beatles became culture-wide icons after appearing on TV.

The role that television has played (and continues to play) in cultural evolution cannot be stressed enough. By the 1970s, television had become a fixture inside the household. Most people alive today cannot remember a time without a television set in their homes. Like the automobile at the turn of the century, television has changed society permanently. Some social critics are even claiming that TV satellite transmission is leading to the demise of the nation-state concept as television images cross national boundaries. When

asked about the stunning defeat of communism in eastern Europe, the Polish labor leader, Lech Walesa, was reported by the newspapers as saying that it “all came from the television set,” implying that television undermined the stability of the communist world’s relatively poor and largely sheltered lifestyle with images of consumer delights seen in Western programs and commercials.

Like any type of privileged space—a platform, a pulpit, and so on—television creates icons by simply “showing” them. Think of how you would react to your favorite television personality if they were to visit you in your own home. You certainly would not treat their presence in your house as you would that of any other stranger. You would feel that it constituted an event of momentous proportions, an almost unreal and other-worldly happening. TV personalities are perceived as larger-than-life figures by virtue of the fact that they are “seen” inside the mythical space created by television screen. The same reaction would apply to any celebrity, because of the power of the electronic screen.

TV is where moral issues and politics are showcased. The horrific scenes coming out of the Vietnam War, which were transmitted into people’s homes daily in the late 1960s and early 1970s, brought about an end to the war. A riot that gets airtime becomes a momentous event; one that does not is ignored. This is why terrorists have often been more interested in “getting on the air,” than in having their demands satisfied. The mere fact of getting on television imbues their cause with significance. Political and social protesters frequently inform the news media of their intentions to stage demonstrations, which are then carried out in front of the cameras. Television takes such events and fashions them into dramatic stories; and we call them reality.

In semiotic terms, television can be characterized as the medium that provides a *social text*, an authoritative textual point of reference for evaluating real-life actions, behaviors, and events. To grasp this concept, imagine stepping back in time, living in some village in medieval Europe. How would you conceive and organize your daily routines in that village? The routines of your day, week, month, and year would no doubt be centered on a Christian worldview. Some of the offshoots of that worldview are still around today. This is why religious dates such as Christmas and Easter are celebrated in a predominantly secular culture. In medieval Europe, people went to church regularly, and lived by moral codes that were iterated in church sermons. The underlying theme of the medieval “social text” was that each day brought people closer and closer to their true destiny: salvation and an afterlife with God. Living according to this text imparted a feeling of emotional shelter. All human actions and natural events could be explained and understood in terms of the text.

With the scientific advances brought about by the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, the Christian social text lost its grip on the system of everyday life. Today, unless someone has joined a religious community or has chosen to live by the dictates of the Bible or some other religious text, the social text by which people live is hardly a religious one. We organize our day around work commitments and social appointments, and only at those traditional “points” in the calendar (Christmas, Easter, etc.) do we synchronize our secular social text with the more traditional religious one. The need to partition the day into “time slots” is why we depend so heavily upon such devices and artifacts as clocks, watches, agendas, appointment books, and calendars. We would feel desperately lost without such things. In this regard, it is appropriate to note that in his 1726 novel, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) satirized the reliance of society on the watch. The Lilliputians were intrigued and baffled that Gulliver did virtually nothing without consulting his watch. Today, most people would similarly deem it unthinkable to go out of the home without a watch or a cellphone that records time in the same way. We always seem to need to know “what time it is” in order to carry on the business of our daily life.

When television entered the scene in the 1950s, it almost instantly became the modern world’s social text. With cable television, satellite dishes, HBO, TV streamlining, and the like, this text now appears to be a highly individualistic one, tailored to meet the needs of individuals, rather than of society at large. But there are still various social functions related to current TV, including that of village moral gossip. Talk shows are moral dramas, replacing the pulpit as the platform from which moral issues are discussed and sin is condemned publicly. The host has replaced the medieval priest, commenting morally on virtually every medical and psychological condition known to humanity.

Television has become so intertwined with life that we no longer distinguish between its contents and reality. This was brought out by the 1998 movie *The Truman Show* directed by Peter Weir. The main character, Truman Burbank, is the unsuspecting star of his very own reality TV show. The first baby to be legally adopted by a corporation, the show’s creator has filmed and documented every moment of Truman’s life for a voyeuristic TV audience to witness. Truman goes about his life living in the largest studio ever constructed (without knowing it), a world within a world, filmed by more than 5000 cameras all controlled from a room at the top of the domed studio. Truman’s friends and family are carefully selected actors. After becoming the most popular television show ever, with a gross national product equivalent to that of a small country—all revenues generated by product placement—a series of accidents and a dose of paranoia lead Truman to discover the truth, despite attempts to stop him from doing so.

The world manufactured for Truman is that of the 1950s bolstered by current technologies. Life is reassuring and inviting, even nostalgic. This mix of old culture and new technology, however, also signals to the audience that something isn't quite right. Truman drives a 1990s-model Ford Taurus, uses an ATM card, and works on a computer. This technology seems anachronistic when compared to the simplistic world of the 1950s era. The subtext of the movie is a transparent one—the hyperreal world of TV and actual reality are now psychologically the same. They have formed a simulacrum. TV programming itself has morphed into a kind of has become a sort of Truman world. Starting in 2000 with *Survivor*, the reality TV genre exploded. A program called *The Joe Schmo Show* followed a contestant, who was unaware that everyone else on the show was an actor. The most popular primetime series of the last couple of decades are reality shows such as *American Idol*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Bachelor*. The appeal of the unscripted program, which blurs the difference between reality and fiction, lies in its “text-in-the-making” nature. As with Luigi Pirandello's (1867–1936) great 1921 play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the audience is presented with real-life characters in search of a script and a narrative. The fun is in figuring out how this will come about.

Ultimately, however, reality TV is voyeurism plain and simple. And it is spreading. The boundaries between the private and the public have been eroded through the influence of TV and especially now by the Internet and social media. Everyone, from celebrities to housemakers, is airing personal laundry in public for everyone to see on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the like. Virtually the entire globe now has access to the spectacle of human “reality” at its most trivial. Maybe at some deep unconscious level we are all trying to understand what human life is all about through the media simulacrum. It certainly seems to be a bizarre way of doing so.

Meme Culture

The medium that may be taking the place of TV as a social text is the online one. Indeed, as we find out at one point on Martha's video, Cheryl and Ted initially made contact through a dating website. In the history of human communications, no other medium has made it possible for so many people to interact with each other virtually instantaneously, irrespective of the distances between them. The Internet has also led to an online culture that may be bringing pop culture, as understood traditionally, to an end. The online culture is a virtual one with nano-celebrities, nano-spectacles, and nano-trends—

that is, celebrities, spectacles, and trends that have a short shelf life. Andy Warhol's "fifteen minutes of fame" prediction for everyone has become the norm. The Internet is blurring the lines between performer and audience, giving free reign to self-expression like never before, producing a DIY form of culture that is based on the viral video, rather than on a recurring program or event.

In the Internet Age what is popular can be something very different to every person. Certainly, the dichotomy between entertainment and engagement is still there, since we can get both from online venues. Celebrities, narrative genres, lifestyles, fads, and other aspects of the popular are also still around, but in different ways. The primary use of the Internet is for individualistic entertainment, that is, entertainment experienced as a person outside of an audience setting. And the time frame for a spectacle or event is measured in minutes, rather than hours. Even knowledge transmission is made to fit this the online mode, as the Ted (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talks indicate. These started in 1984, but in the contemporary Internet Age they have evolved into online presentations blending knowledge and entertainment that last around fifteen minutes—recalling Andy Warhol's prophetic aphorism.

In previous eras of pop culture, a few people—agents, radio announcers, TV producers, and the like—decided who or what would be put on a stage, played on radio, or shown on television in view of achieving popularity. Now the decision of what becomes popular is influenced by memes. Memes have replaced agents and the other previous makers of pop culture. Memes are the new marketers. However, they carry only the content that is fleetingly popular, as decided by social media users. This implies that pop culture is now likely giving way to mem culture. Posting a photo of people involved in humorous situations is replacing *Funniest Home Videos* and people dancing some new style on YouTube is replacing previous dance shows—at least in part. Television networks, artists, and musicians also have Facebook sites for communicating with fans, followers, and audiences generally. Facebook has become a major agency for the spread of trends in entertainment culture.

Social media are, in sum, where memes are created and disseminated throughout cyberspace; but in its vast expanse they have little chance of gaining stability. The life span of Internet memes through social media sites became dramatically obvious, when in December of 2012, the so-called Gangnam Style video became the first YouTube clip to be viewed more than one billion times. Thousands responded by creating and posting their own variations of the video on YouTube and on Facebook. But the meme quickly evanesced in cyberspace. The same story can be told for virtually any meme that surfaces on

the Internet. There are now even popular meme genres, which reveal how the Internet and participatory Web 2.0 culture are redefining the meaning of popular.

Sometimes, however, an Internet meme can crossover into the traditional art world. The best example of this is the Grumpy Cat meme—which has migrated from the Internet to other areas of society, including to art museums and other referential points in pop culture: that is, it has made its way into other media and other channels of dissemination. One can claim this is the ultimate in banality, but there is much more to it than literally meets the eye. The cat fits in with contemporary perceptions of animals as pets and ersatz humans, which has always been a part of pop cultural representations—from the Disney animated movies to the *Looney Tunes* cartoons. Grumpy Cat is a meme that has become a celebrity, in the style of other animal celebrities. Walter Benjamin addressed this issue already in the 1930s when mechanical reproduction technology made art reproductions common. He suggested that this was part of an ever-growing democratization of art, leading to a demise in the notion of originality and the ways in which art was viewed and appreciated as something truly unique. A successful meme is, in fact, something that is highly reproducible, recognizable, and easily shared.

Lying

There is an aspect of the Internet that is worth emphasizing here, in the era of so-called fake news. The Internet has made lying, dissimulation, and confabulation respectable modes of interacting. The Internet has enabled the pathological or compulsive liar to gain a voice that can be spread widely. Can we ever know the truth of anything in a world where lying is simply an alternative way of communicating information? It is little wonder that the scientific study of lying has become widespread in academia, crisscrossing various disciplines. This includes semiotics. Recall Umberto Eco's definition of semiotics as anything that can be used to lie. It is relevant to note that the historical father of semiotics, St. Augustine, had written two books on lying—*De mendacio* and *Contra mendacio*, in which he divided lying into eight categories according to the harmful effects these brought about:

- Lies in how religion is taught and presented.
- Lies that are harmful and serve no foreseeable social purpose.
- Lies that are harmful but are intended to help others.
- Lies told for the pleasure of lying.

- Lies told in conversations to make the discourse fluid and smooth.
- Lies that harm no one but help someone materially.
- Lies that harm no one but help someone spiritually.
- Lies that harm no one and that protect someone from some form of defilement.

Augustine concludes that all lies are sinful, no matter how severe or beneficial their effects. They are unethical and impermissible. Not until Eco had Augustine's particular purview on how lies affect behavior been contemplated by semioticians. A lie, in fact, can be recast as a fabrication, an invention, a piece of fiction, a falsification—all features that are present in the current era of political populism. As Eco put it, a lie is itself a sign function: "Every time there is possibility of lying there is a sign function; which is to signify (and then to communicate) something to which no real state of things corresponds. The possibility of lying is the proprium of semiosis."⁹ People lie all the time, often to avoid negative outcomes or to gain some advantage. Moreover, people typically tend to ignore the signs of lying when speaking with others. As psychologist Ken Ashwell observes:¹⁰

Often lies go undetected because we do not attempt to detect them, a phenomenon dubbed the "ostrich effect" by psychologist Aldert Vrij. It may reflect the emotional cost of recognizing and dealing with lies—in other words, people do not always want to hear the truth.

Given the power of mendacious memes to influence outcomes, from elections to choices in friends and dates, at no time like the present has semiotics emerged as an important—indeed critical—science. By unmasking something as purposefully mendacious we can hopefully instill or restore truth in the world. The analysis of the ad with which we started this chapter is an example of how to approach and unmask what is essentially a lie—the promise of attractiveness through a cologne. Eco was right after all—the study of lying is the study of semiosis.

Of Cigarettes and High Heels, Again

My purpose in this book has been to illustrate what a semiotic study of everyday life would entail, what things it would focus on, and what insights it might provide into the human condition. My treatment has left out many of the technical details of semiotic analysis, and many of the debates (such as

structuralism versus post-structuralism), which inform its current practice. My objective has been simply to show how “interesting” the study of meaning can be and how many areas of human activity it embraces. My underlying premise has been that there is an innate tendency in all human beings to search for, and to make, meaning in the world. The task of the semiotician is to look everywhere for the signs that render this tendency manifest. My hope is that this excursus into semiotic analysis has engendered in readers an inquisitive frame of mind with which to view their own society up close, unimpeded by habits of thought. In a fundamental sense, semiotics is a dialectic exercise in *knowing oneself*.

I contrived my presentation of the subject matter of semiotics around an imaginary courtship display. The gestures, bodily postures, dialogue, and other features that characterize such a display testify to the fact that humans carry out their everyday life schemes with a skillful deployment of signs. This display also testifies to the fact that we live our lives like characters in a play, constantly rehearsing, acting out, and at times changing our social roles. Semiotics catalogues the features of the play's unconscious script. Our imaginary scene occurs in bars, restaurants, and cafés throughout American society. I must emphasize that the characters in my vignette, Cheryl and Ted, are prototypical characters. Changing their ages, race, ethnicity, or adapting the lifestyle codes they deployed in the vignette to meet contemporary standards will not change the basic message of this book. On the contrary, it will confirm one of its themes: that semiotic codes are dynamic, flexible sign systems, adaptable to the whims of individuals and entire societies.

The overarching theme of this book has been that systems of everyday life provide networks of shared meanings that define human cultures. Such networks have come about in our species, arguably, to make possible the formulation of answers to the basic metaphysical questions that haunt humans everywhere: Why are we here? Who or what put us here? What, if anything, can be done about it? Who am I? As philosopher Johan Huizinga has put it, these questions constitute the psychic foundations of cultural systems: “In God, nothing is empty of sense; so, the conviction of a transcendental meaning in all things seeks to formulate itself.”¹¹ The goal of semiotics is, ultimately, to unravel how culture guides the human search for larger meaning and, thus, how it influences the ways in which people think and act. By seeing the answers of any one culture to the questions of existence as tied to a meaning network, semiotics provides a strong form of intellectual immunization against accepting those answers as the only ones that can be devised. It also encourages acceptance of the “Other,” which in a troubled world has become a critical necessity.

Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychoanalyst, was fond of recounting how culture had the power to affect even what one sees. During a visit to an island tribal culture that had never been exposed to illustrated magazines, he found that the people of that culture were unable to recognize the photographs in the magazines as visual representations of human beings. To his amazement, he discovered that the islanders perceived them, rather, as smudges on a surface. Jung understood perfectly well, however, that their interpretation of the photographs was not due to defects of intelligence or eyesight; on the contrary, the tribal members were clear-sighted and highly intelligent hunters. Jung understood that their primary assumptions were different from his own, and from those of individuals living in cultures where magazines were common, because they had acquired a different form of semiosis that blocked them from perceiving the pictures as visual signs.

Overall, I have attempted to argue and show that the thoughts and actions of human beings are shaped by forces other than the instincts. The most powerful argument against reductionist theories of humanity is the fact that humans can change anything they want, even the theories they devise to explain themselves. This is made possible by the human imagination—the creative force behind the great works of art, the great scientific discoveries, the profound ideas contemplated by philosophers, and, of course, cultural change. There is no way to explain the human condition. We can, of course, develop philosophies, mythical narratives, or scientific theories to explain it, but these are of our own making. The twentieth-century poet T. S. Eliot argued that knowledge of who we are starts with understanding the past, with comprehending the historical forces that have made us what we are today.

Semiotics attempts to make good on Eliot's idea. We can know ourselves today only by knowing how we got here. The history of cigarettes, of words, of names, of rituals, of art works, tells us where our search for meaning has led. History is nothing if not a record of our search for meaning. Hopefully, this book has shed some light on how we search for it, and why we will continue to do so.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).
2. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957) and *Système de la mode* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).
3. Cited in Marcel Danesi, *Interpreting advertisements: A semiotic guide* (Ottawa: Legas Press, 1995), 16.

4. Vance Packard, *The hidden persuaders* (New York: McKay, 1957).
5. Brian Wilson Key, *The age of manipulation* (New York: Henry Holt, 1989), 13.
6. This opinion is based primarily on my own experience with advertisers and marketers as a consultant on the meanings that their ads generate and on the kinds of reactions that subjects have to them. This experience has given me a behind-the-scenes look at the whole advertising and marketing business.
7. The concept of cooption was formulated by Thomas Frank, *The conquest of cool: Business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
8. William Leiss, Stephen Kline, Sut Jhally, and Jacqueline Botterill, *Social communication in advertising: Consumption in the mediated marketplace*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 286.
9. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 58.
10. Ken Ashwell, *The brain book*. (Buffalo: Firefly, 2012), 211.
11. Johan Huizinga, *The waning of the Medieval Ages* (Garden City, Conn.: Doubleday, 1924), 202.

Bibliography

- Ashwell, Ken. 2012. *The brain book*. Buffalo: Firefly.
- Barthes, Roland. 1957. *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil.
- . 1967. *Système de la mode*. Paris: Seuil.
- Danesi, Marcel. 1995. *Interpreting advertisements: A semiotic guide*. Ottawa: Legas Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 1976. *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Frank, Thomas. 1997. *The conquest of cool: Business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Huizinga, Johan. 1924. *The waning of the Medieval Ages*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Key, Brian Wilson. 1989. *The age of manipulation*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Leiss, William, Stephen Kline, Sut Jhally, and Jacqueline Botterill. 2005. *Social communication in advertising: Consumption in the mediated marketplace*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
- Packard, Vance. 1957. *The hidden persuaders*. New York: McKay.