

The Fugue of the Five Senses and the Semiotics of the Shifting Sensorium

Selected Proceedings

from the 11th International Conference of the Hellenic Semiotics Society



editors:

Evangelos Kourdis
Maria Papadopoulou
Loukia Kostopoulou

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The Fugue of the Five Senses. Semiotics of the Shifting Sensorium

SOCIAL SEMIOTICS



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11th International Conference of the Hellenic Semiotics Society*

The scent of Typography in fragrance advertising

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Abstract

Olfaction is not only biologically essential to human life but also culturally. From the utilization of scent during religious ceremonies and burial preparations in ancient Egypt to olfactory branding nowadays, the sense of smell has been explored scientifically as a medium for the expression of psychological and social meanings. The ability of scents to trigger feelings and evoke memories has been central to studies of aroma. Additionally, the sense of smell and its correlation with emotional interpretations seems to have been taken into consideration during the visualization process in fragrance advertising, and it is often the case that bottles of aroma, as products, are assigned meanings such as sensuality, romanticism, exoticism, sophistication, dynamism, etc. The current study aims to present the semiotic aspects of the letterforms used to linguistically visualize the product meanings in fragrance advertising. In doing so, it will not only explore Typography as a semiotic system of its own, but also in respect of the cultural meanings of smell, 'sprayed' through fragrance adverts. Semiotic analysis as a methodology is used on a purposive sample of print advertisements to categorize thematically the prevailing exemplars and their typographic rendering. The findings of this study will contribute to the importance of Typography as a semiotic tool, in addition to interpreting product meanings of fragrance advertising in the context of the global market.

Keywords

product meaning

fragrance advertising

typography

semiotics

Introduction and fragrance advertising

Many civilizations, including ancient ones such as the Egyptian have an appreciation of aromas deeply rooted in their culture, while the sense of smell has been reason for speculation and fascination over the centuries (Philpott, Bennett & Murty, 2008). Classen and Howes (1994) investigate the meaning and power of olfactory codes in both, western and non-western societies and consider smell to be a powerful force, influential on physical, psychological and social levels. As scents are associated with good or bad experiences they can also evoke strong emotional responses. Additionally, odours can be 'invested with cultural values and employed by societies as a means of, and model for, defining and interacting with the world' (ibid, p.3). Although perfume was originally related to religion and the worship of gods, today the purposes of perfume have expanded to habits of cleaning, hygiene and well-being. Given its capacity to arouse sensations, perfume is also used as a *sign* in order to communicate something about the personality of the user (Peres Silva & Mazzili, 2014).

We argue, therefore, that under these circumstances, smell becomes a sign of commodity, and as such is branded and culturally constructed to evoke meanings. Throughout the history of selling fragrances, image, text, and sound have played a vital role in increasing sales through visual communication, and Typography in print advertisements can be a study in, and of itself during this process.

The large numbers of perfume ads in all kinds of media has increased steadily, as new fragrances are introduced periodically by beauty laboratories and fashion designers. Consequently, a demanding market requires constant updating, therefore advertising becomes a central tool in the commercial strategy and promotion of such products. One of the key elements of perfume advertising is that it relies heavily on visuals (Tuna & Freitas, 2012). Regarding this, Irvine (1996) argues that perfume advertisers depend on memorable visual imageries, on attractive sceneries and decors, on strikingly elegant performers, and on attractive landscapes to influence the consumer and convince him or her to buy the product. In addition, Lunyal (2014) notes that perfume advertisements may suggest seduction and sex to promote their products, and that images of international brands of perfumes such as 'Chanel', Gucci, 'Nina Ricci', and 'Prada', reveal a lot of female skin to give a sensual tone to perfume advertisements. The expressions in the eyes of female models flaunt sexual desire. In fact, the 'Guilty Gucci' advertisements that show a couple entwined leaving nothing to imagination, establish the presence of sex in perfume advertisements. In another study, Achemlal (2014) examines the manipulation of the female body in perfume advertisements. His study reveals that nudity and sexual scenes of women in perfume ads are used to increase the purchases of fragrances and to attract a wider audience. This process however, inevitably contributes to the reproduction of traditionally negative portrayals and representations

of women in culture, as advertisements have a major impact on society. Nevertheless, men also fall prey to perfume advertisers whose incentive is commercial profit. As we observe, regardless of gender, the human body becomes popular in images of fragrance advertisements. In fact, as advertisements become more visual than textual, they can be promoted in the global market more easily. This is in agreement with Tuna & Freitas, (2012, p. 97), who also claim that 'reliance on pictures, on the other hand, may be the result of an internationally oriented standardized campaign' and that 'perfumes are often marketed as part of an international brand's product range, which means that pictures are likely to be part of the overall advertising strategy'. While images are recognised easier in a global market, they need to be 'anchored' with textual information to be fully interpreted.

Therefore, in addition to images, the power of typefaces, Typography and graphic design in general, play a vital role, either for the brand's status and name on the packaging or for linguistic messages when incorporated in print advertisements. Under this concept, the current paper will examine the visualization of verbal elements in fragrance advertising through a semiotic analysis of specific ad examples.

Verbal elements and fragrance advertising

Even though there is a precedence of visual over verbal elements, visual iconicity often extends itself to a verbal matter, as in the case of special letterings that 'signify' the product by means of a metonymic relationship or even to the container of the product itself (Tuna & Freitas, 2012). On the other hand, Lunyal (2014) discusses how perfume advertisements have quite limited verbal text. Through a specific example she argues that 'the non-verbal takes precedence over the verbal' (ibid, p. 127), however combined with verbal texts, it carries ideological meanings of cultural stereotypes. In respect of letterforms' design, Goddard (1998, p. 16) refers to the ways that verbal texts appear in advertisements and notes that they can suggest specific qualities because of their writing, which 'is a form of image-making' that has its own paralanguage. For example, typefaces that imitate handwriting are considered to be 'more personal and individualistic than machine-produced typefaces'. Subsequently, we argue in this paper that Typography can be studied as a semiotic system on its own.

Print ads can be highly revealing and expressive, though they depend on one single image, unlike TV commercials in which we have a complete audiovisual sequence of music, voice-over, in addition to visual resources. There are many ways that verbal elements that can be analyzed in a print ad, such as the name of the fragrance, the colors, the letterforms, the scale, the orientation or the position of the text. Most of the studies are usually preoccupied with the visual elements in a perfume advertisement. Even though the verbal elements and typography of an advertisement can signify many different meanings, they have mainly remained understudied.

According to Van Leeuwen (2006), typography can be used ideationally to represent actions and qualities. He provides the example of a 'scratchy' font that can be used to illustrate the idea of a headache or a soft, smooth, rounded 'script' font to express the idea of 'indulgence'. He also argues that designers are increasingly interested in such illustrative uses of typography, and in blurring the boundaries between letterforms and images. Typography can also enact interactions and express attitudes to what is being represented. A word can be changed into a 'warning' or a 'question' through typography, and typographic signs alone can also be used to express attitudes towards what is being represented.

Thus, in addition to being described in terms of its constituent parts, a given letter, and typeface can also be described in terms of its characteristic features (Norgaard, 2009). The distinctive features combine in different ways so that one typeface will be described as bold, expanded, sloping, rounded, connected, oriented towards the horizontal dimension and regular, whereas the combination of distinctive features will be quite different for another typeface. With many features, the contrast is not binary but gradual, so that, at least in theory, we may, for example, have degrees of boldness and expansion, but as producers of text we are often only presented with a binary choice of either 'bold' or 'regular' (Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 148).

Typographic choices always serve a purpose and influence the way that a message is communicated. Just like in parole, typographic actions have semiotic interpretations and cultural meanings. Van Leeuwen also refers to designers Bellantoni and Woolman, who believe that 'the printed word has two levels of meaning, the 'word image', i.e., the idea represented by the word itself, constructed from a string of letters, and the 'typographic image' (ibid, p. 142).

Like in Classic versus Rock music, if a brand perfume name is 'dressed-up' with a script formal typeface (that has its origins in seventeenth century formal writing styles) it instantly has a different iconicity, a romantic sense where sensitivity and fragility start to appear, compared to Script Blackletter/Lombardic fonts that look like manuscript lettering prior to the invention of movable type (Haley, p. 67), and allude to gothic practices. Interestingly, we can also observe how in most packaging design for perfumes the sense of touch also plays a vital role. For example, wood-free recycled paper is used for 'Dsquared-wood' for men and a glossy gold paper is used for 'Paco-Rabanne-1 million'. All these contribute to an inter-sensorium of meanings that the products want to sell, through vision, smell, sound (for example, the perfume opening or the spray of it) and touch (the material of the paper/package-shape of the perfume bottle).

Research questions and methodology

Peirce's model definition of *sign* is triadic and consists of *the representamen (S/R)* which is very similar to Saussure's signifier (*Sr*), *the interpretant (I)* that corresponds to Saussure's signified (*Sd*) and an external reality—*the object (O)*—referred to by the sign itself (Crow, 2010).

If we were to apply this definition of *sign* to examine how cultural meanings are assigned to perfumes through advertising, we can argue that the *objects* to be represented are the perfumes, the *representamens* are the advertisements and the *interpretants* the consumers/viewers (Zakia & Nadin, 1987).

Based on this framework, and given that 'This approach allows us to evaluate three distinct relationships that constitute the sign' (ibid, p.8), the following research questions can be formulated

1. How do advertisements represent perfumes? (object/representamen)
2. How well do advertisements communicate? (representamen/interpretant)
3. Is the communication successful? (interpretant/object)

However, for the purposes of the current study we are investigating only the first question, upon which we build to formulate an even more specific research sub-question, namely:

- 1b. What is the semiotic role/contribution of Letterforms/Typography in the representation of perfumes in print advertisements?

To answer the question above, a set of a *perfume advertiser's metaphors* (what advertisers take into consideration to develop mood associations through verbal and non-verbal messages) paired with a *perfumer's metaphors* (conceptual metaphors listed for perfumes, according to the olfactory families they belong to) as defined by Velasco & Fuertes (2006) is used. Particularly, as suggested by Hubbard (1994) in Velasco & Fuertes (2006, p. 227), a *perfume advertiser's metaphors* (ibid) are concluded to be the following six:

1. "PERFUME IS ELEGANCE/CLASS" which associates the product with wealth and status by the use of gold and silver, crystal, rich colors, and prestigious product names.
2. "PERFUME IS SENSUALITY/SEXUALITY" which encompasses sensuous pleasure exhibited in various ways, through passionate facial expressions, exposed body parts, full nudity, suggestive postures, etc.
3. "PERFUME IS POWER/STRENGTH" which includes strength or power over others, as in business or sports.
4. "PERFUME IS ROMANTICISM/LOVE" which contains tenderness and love to a man/woman exhibited through gentle, tender behavior and words that indicate love and affection.
5. "PERFUME IS SOLITARY GRATIFICATION" which comprises the gratification of a man/woman pursuing solitary pleasure such as riding a motorcycle, shopping, or enjoying natural scenes. He/she appears alone and content.
6. "PERFUME IS FAMILY" includes expression of emotion in family security showing, for instance, a father with child, etc.

The first four perfume advertiser's metaphors correlate, to a great extent, with the perfumer's metaphors, and interestingly Velasco & Fuentes (2006, p. 227-228) suggest the following combination of olfactory metaphors, and conceptual metaphors in fragrance ads to obtain the following four pairs:

1. "PERFUME IS AVANT-GARDISM/ELEGANCE"
2. "PERFUME IS SENSUALITY/SEXUALITY"
3. "PERFUME IS ACTION/POWER"
4. "PERFUME IS ROMANTICISM/LOVE"

Consequently, this pairing of metaphors seems to be appropriate as a semiotic framework to answer the research question in respect of the major typographic elements/exemplars in the advertisements of the current study. They are as follows:

1. "LETTERFORMS/TYPOGRAPHY IS AVANT-GARDISM/ELEGANCE"
2. "LETTERFORMS/TYPOGRAPHY IS SENSUALITY/SEXUALITY"
3. "LETTERFORMS/TYPOGRAPHY IS ACTION/POWER"
4. "LETTERFORMS/TYPOGRAPHY IS ROMANTICISM/LOVE"

Semiotic analysis as a methodology will be used on a purposive sample of four print advertisements, aligned with the four aforementioned metaphors. Specifically, the 'smell' of letterforms/typography is explored through four print advertisements of the perfumes *J'adore* by Dior, *Hot Water* by Davidoff, *Invictus* by Paco Rabanne, and *Romance* by Ralph Lauren.

The semiotic aspects of typography and graphics in print advertisements will be examined through Bertin's (1967) seven semiotic graphic design parameters, which are *Shape/form*, *Size/scale*, *Value/tone*, *Texture*, *Color*, *Orientation*, and *Placement*. It is also important for these elements to take into consideration what Saint-Martin (1990, p. 17) notes in the *Semiotics of Visual Language*: '[n]one of these visual variables can be considered independently as a basic unit of visual language, because at the same time that one is present, the others are manifested.' Looking at typography as a connotative/cultural mechanism, in addition to the denotative or connotative linguistic message, as suggested by Barthes (1977), is a practice that has not been found in similar studies (Zantides, 2016) and seems to be a semiotic dimension that is of equal importance as verbal and non-verbal messages.

The 'smell' of letterforms/typography is *avant-gardism/elegance*

J'adore (for women) by Dior, could be an appropriate example for examining the semiotic parameters of *avant-garde/elegant* letterforms. In this specific advertisement, there seem to be two major layers of visual information: the actress Charlize Theron walking as a model, and the perfume bottle at the right bottom of the advertisement, accompa-

nied by the typography popping out from its top. Almost at similar levels of hierarchy and visual demand, we can argue that what Saint-Martin (1990) calls *coloreme*, i.e. the visual entry point of the advertisement, (where the gaze is firstly focused and semiosis begins) would be the perfume bottle, leading like an arrow to the typography and then through the actress to the rest of the image.

This visual journey takes us over a series of iconic messages, and contributes to the olfactory metaphor 'perfume is avant-gardism/elegance' in many ways. The 'fluid', drop-shaped, feminine, curved bottle seems to contain a golden potion, as if it had magic powers similar to the potions in bottles used in fairy tale illustrations and Disney movies to seduce a character. Through the linguistic message, 'j'adore' Dior, we meet the aristocratic, entirely golden, very elegant and luminous presence of Charlize Theron. Like a fairy tale princess, she walks toward us face to face, in a determined, confident and strict gaze, demanding to be looked at. Her angelic figure glows in front of a celestial light, suggesting a divine presence that simultaneously constructs an avant-garde, spiritual atmosphere which could also allude to metaphysical references. The scene takes place at *The Hall of Mirrors*, the central gallery of the Palace of Versailles in Versailles, France, whose historical associations raise further the product to wealth and an elegant status.

Dior is a leading French fashion house headquartered in Paris and founded in 1946 by the legendary fashion designer Christian Dior. The company is known for its elegant designs and avant-garde style. The Dior logo is a simple wordmark that features the brand name with a font very similar to Nicolas Cochon Regular, designed by Georges Peignot in 1912. It is based on the copperplate engravings of French 17th century artist Nicolas Cochon, from which the typeface also takes its name. It is categorized as a Transitional serif typeface, and is a classic typeface with good legibility that shares features of elegance and beauty. The font also used for the linguistic message similarly has a small x-height with long ascenders which particularly characterizes it. This distinct elevation of ascenders can only lift the linguistic message up to a spiritual, luxurious level of 'avant-gardism', class and glamour. Furthermore, the playful placement of these friendly and distinct lowercase letters reflect a 'joyful attitude' as well as an aspiration of 'adoring Dior'. The use of white color in the Dior logo, as well as in the linguistic message, portrays a natural feeling of purity, and the overall typography provides a very prestigious, yet sophisticated, elegant impression.

The 'smell' of letterforms/typography is sensuality/sexuality

Through the *Hot Water* (for men) advertisement by Davidoff, we can explore the semiotic dimensions of letterforms and Typography as sensuality/sexuality. Initially, we can observe that an intensive contrast between the black and white image and the red perfume with the typography on top, provides us with almost two equally similar options of

reading entries. Reading from left to right, we, most probably, witness what is about to happen: a passionate kiss in the summer heat. Two 'wet-sweat' naked bodies come out of the sea in a lustful pose, leading the viewer to a red perfume bottle. The shape of this container is long, red and rectangular, as should be for a product of masculine characteristics, and points at the linguistic message which is also in red and appears intensively for a second time: 'DAVIDOFF HOT WATER'. Interestingly, this specific image seems to be a 'Cinematographic: Intertextual Non-Verbal Message from a Film Source' as defined by Zantides (2016, p. 71), in other words is an image that alludes to a popular scene from a film source. Specifically, we argue that the image refers to the classic black and white cinematographic act of sensuality and passion of the famous kiss scene on the beach in the film *"From here to eternity"* (1953), directed by Fred Zinnemann. At the same time, the dominant color of bloody red that stands out by the typographic elements and the bottle, provides us with a feeling of strength and dominance along with sexual tension, desire and love.

We also cannot avoid observing that in the specific example, the classic script formal writing is not used in the Davidoff logo, but a different sans serif lettering has taken its place. Could it be that the sensitive script formal lettering wouldn't fit well with the masculine attributes emphasized in the image? We think so. All lettering is in upper case letters, using sans serif fonts and centrally justified with the perfume. The most emphasized word, 'hot', is written in Peignot. It is a constructed sans serif display typeface, designed by A. M. Cassandre in 1937, which mixes capital and lowercase forms. Commissioned by Charles Peignot for Deberny & Peignot, 'this typeface has almost become a symbol for France and things French' (Peignot by Linotype, 2000). Its "multi-case" combination of traditional lowercase and small capital characters makes it a daring letterform, whilst the alternating but balanced contrast between thin crossbars and thick stems of sans serif shapes in red, reflect a strict and bold way of expressing 'hotness'. While occasionally classified as "decorative", the typeface is a serious study of typographic form and legibility – as shown in this upper-case example of 'Hot Water' Davidoff, it succeeds in sensually communicating the notion of passion for the specific perfume.

The 'smell' of letterforms/typography is action/power

In the third advertisement, we are examining how letterforms/typography is action/power. A good example by which to discuss these semiotic parameters would be the Paco Rabanne advertisement of the *Invictus* perfume for men. With the majority of the non-verbal and verbal elements placed in the middle, the only object that seems to stand alone from the overall composition is the trophy that Nick Youngquest, an Australian model and former professional rugby league footballer, holds with great satisfaction. Just like Zeus, the king of the gods above mountains in stormy skies, his strength, vic-

tory and masculinity is doubly profound. Once, by the lifting up of his trophy in absolute triumph, and second by the placing of another cup in the shape of Invictus' perfume bottle in front of his genitals. Interestingly, the bottle is positioned to stand vertically among two female figures that seem to allude to representations of *Nike*, a goddess who personified victory in ancient Greek mythology. For Paco Rabanne, there is not only an alchemical quality at play but an aphrodisiac one: 'Invictus was born out of a desire to speak about sports in an innovative manner, by sublimating the social fantasy it represents, and a quasi-god rugby man is chosen to personify this idea.' (Wagner, 2013). In respect of the typographic elements, both brand names are manipulated to look three-dimensional and to stand out from the picture. In fact, they attempt to be stronger than flat based typography as to exert more power. As part of a new website, Paco Rabanne introduced a new logo and identity designed by London-based Zak Group. For the group,

The old logo is, literally, really old, having been the same since the label started in 1966, rocking a geometric sans serif way [...] The logo was fine but mostly looking like a default typesetting lacking any sense of craftsmanship or daringness. The new logo opts for a minimal evolution, keeping the overall silhouette of the old logo but exaggerating the thicks and thins as curves meet stems that instantly give the wordmark more personality and a more richly sculpted aesthetic. The resulting shapes are like a cross of Futura and Antique Olive.' (Armin, 2016)

These attributes are quite organic, smooth and heavy, however in the specific advertisement the logo appears in a three-dimensional version using a silver grey color, probably to create tension in the composition and to match the muscular characteristics of the athlete's body with the martial values inherent in sports.

What is fascinating about the typography in this advertisement is the capital letterforms used for the word *Invictus*. Using Trajan fonts, it couldn't better reflect the iconicity of the linguistic meaning. Trajan is an old-style serif typeface designed by Carol Twombly in 1989. The design is based on the letterforms of *capitalis monumentalis*, an ancient Roman form of writing, also used for the inscription at the base of Trajan's Column from which the typeface takes its name. Just like in the inscription, Trajan is an upper-case typeface only. As such, it reflects dynamism and strength, and there couldn't have been a better choice than to 'dress' the linguistic meaning of the word 'invictus', which means "unconquerable" or "undefeated" in Latin. Trajan is also very popular in film posters, television shows and book covers, especially wherever narratives of heroes, winning actions and power are involved. It is also used in a lot of university logos and political parties to indicate status. It is indeed a typeface that can be used for action, power and victory/triumph.

The ‘smell’ of letterforms/typography is romanticism/love

For the final exemplar, we are looking at the semiotic parameters of letterforms/typography as romanticism/love, through an advertisement of ‘*Romance*’ (for men and women) by Ralph Lauren. A young couple expressing very affectionate gestures is placed centrally in the advertisement with their bodies mingled in ways signifying tenderness, care and love. As emotions are linked to facial expressions, we can see a calm, content but also latent smile of, most probably, joy portrayed on the woman’s face, while this is less evident on the limited exposure of the man’s face. The two participants in this nostalgic greyscale image are lightened from above, and consequently white color dominates the overall aesthetics of the image. The scene becomes a romantic moment that is, at the same time, celestial, pure and innocent. The fetal positions in which both bodies are found allude us to notions of protection, love and safety, while the female participant seems to act as a mother too, protecting her lover as a child (a kind of primitive gesture, an imagined return to the safety of the womb). Through these iconic messages, we encounter a romantic moment of pure love and protection, probably taking place by the sea—as we observe water reflections behind the fence—without any sexual implications whatsoever. While leaning against, and worshiping each other, two perfume products in different shapes for gender differentiation, namely, a vertical, rectangular-shaped one for men and a horizontal one for women, are placed at the bottom of the advertisement as a conclusion for this romantic moment.

With very limited and district typography, only the brand names ‘Ralph Lauren’ and ‘Romance’, alongside ‘for men’ and ‘for women’ in white color are present as linguistic messages in the advertisement. Probably this form of writing is a customized version inspired from standard Bodoni typefaces. In fact, the original serif letterforms were first designed by Giambattista Bodoni (1740–1813) in the late eighteenth century and frequently revived since. Classified as Serif Neoclassical/Didone, the typeface’s features deal with logotypes for high-end fashion labels, fashion magazine spreads, magazine covers and posters, due to its pleasant aesthetics when set in bigger sizes. With a fascinating sharpness of contrast between thick and thin strokes, it is also known as an ‘easily recognizable Romantic typeface’ (Christensen, n.d.) which seems constructive in this specific use. As upper-case characters are used for emphasis and stress importance (Haley, 2012, p.332), the additional tracking (letter-spacing) in the words contribute to this need as well, also offering an additional differentiation to the verbal message. It is also interesting to note that linguistically, the brand name *Romance* coincides with the metaphoric values defined by the fragrance and the aforementioned theoretical framework used in this paper.

Conclusions

The visualization of linguistic messages in print advertisements, and generally in all visual communication, is a semiotic process and parameter of equal importance as the linguistic meaning of the verbal text itself. Letterforms are symbolic images that correspond to sound, and apart from being considered verbal, they simultaneously carry similar semiotic attributes with non-verbal elements.

Although images are usually dominant in the advertisements of perfumes, we can observe that the semiotic nature and power of Typography contributes to the construction of cultural metaphors just as verbal (linguistically) or non-verbal messages do. The choice and arrangement of letterforms in the advertisements seem to be socially and culturally aligned with the fragrance metaphors used in perfume advertising. In the present study, the ways that brands and words are visualized relate to *avant-gardism/elegance*, *sensuality/sexuality*, *action/power* or *romanticism/love*. Additionally, we notice that the Typography used in the brands and the linguistic messages reflect the contextual and cultural codes of the advertisements through the use of *Shape/form*, *Size/scale*, *Value/tone*, *Texture*, *Color*, *Orientation*, and *Placement* of the letterforms.

Interestingly, the current study can provide a platform for further empirical research where viewers/participants are invited to investigate how well these advertisements communicate, and whether they perceive the semiotic aspects of letterforms and Typography, in respect of the fragrance metaphors suggested.

For color versions and references of the print advertisements used, please contact the author.

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