

VISUAL ADUCATION

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Twenty years ago Marshall McLuhan made this prophetic statement in his book Understanding Media: 'The historians and archeologists will one day discover that the ads of our times are the richest and most faithful daily reflections that any society ever made of its entire range of activities.' (McLuhan, 1964)

Semiotics is a useful tool in discovering the sophistication and richness of ads. By deconstructing an advertisement, we learn how it was constructed and discover its underlying message. And by discovering its message, we also discover the way in which words and pictures work together to reinforce the message, how the alphapictorial (word and picture) components utilize gesture, art, myth, and symbol to give emotional impact.

To show how semiotics can be used to analyze an advertisement and how it might be used to aducate the general public to the subtlety and strength of advertisements, we have chosen what at first look appears to be a simple and direct ad. The ad is for Fidji perfume and has appeared in women's fashion magazines for several years (Plate 1). Some general observations can be made.

1. Only part of the model's face is shown. Because of this omission of the upper half, the viewer can do an insertion--complete the face in his or her image --and participate in the fantasy.
2. The model is face-to-face with the viewer, but there is no eye contact--or is there?
3. Color is symbolic--ambers and yellows are considered warm, tropical, sensuous colors.
4. Note the unique way in which the model holds the elevated bottle of perfume and the finger-weave she uses to support the bottle.
5. The presence of the snake (serpent is a more romantic substitution) is obvious. Not obvious are the other things we can attribute to this symbol of the Garden of Eden. They will be revealed later.
6. Note the yellow flower in the upper left corner of the ad. One would have to look far and wide to find such an exotic flower. Could it be out of the Garden of Eden?

Semiotic Theory and Practice

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7. What might be hidden in the dark abyss to the right of the model's face--if anything? We will never know.

Semiotics has been defined as the: 'knowledge science of signs' by Peirce; 'general theory of representation' by Morris; the 'theory and practice of mediation' by Nadin; and a 'general theory of signs in all their forms and manifestations among man and animals, normal and pathological, linguistic or non-linguistic, social or individual' by Eco. Since we are concerned here with advertisement, we ask, 'How does an ad mediate between the consumer and the product, Fidji perfume?' A paradigm showing how signs function is helpful as a visual reference (Figure 1). At the left leg of the triangle is the Object to be represented (Fidji perfume). At the apex is the Representaman (advertisement) and on the right the Interpretant (consumer). The function of the ad is to mediate between the product to be sold (Fidji perfume) and the consumer. This approach allows us to evaluate three distinct relationships that constitute the sign: Object/Representaman (How well does the ad represent the product?); Representaman/Interpretant (How well does the ad communicate?); and Interpretant/Object (Was the communication significant; i.e., did the product sell?). For this paper we concern ourselves with only one component of the sign--representation.

We now analyze the Fidji ad to discover how the advertising talent which designed the ad represented Fidji perfume. To assist us, we will use another paradigm--an Interpretant Matrix® (Figure 2). The alphapictorial components of the Fidji ad will be identified in terms of three characteristics: iconic, indexic, and symbolic. These three terms can be distinguished by using a car as an example. Iconic refers to likeness (a car looks like a car); indexic refers to imprints left by the car (tire tracks); and symbolic is the abstract convention used to represent the car (the logo).

The three identifiers--iconic, indexic, and symbolic--are placed in the vertical column of the interpretant matrix. In the horizontal rows are the descriptors that probe the intended meaning (or what we think is the intended meaning) of the various elements which make up the ad.

After carefully and critically studying the Fidji ad, we begin to assign several possible meanings such as EXOTIC, SENSUAL, SOPHISTICATED, ANDROGYNOUS. (The list could continue, but these four meanings are adequate for illustration.) We now search the ad and isolate the

alphapictorial elements that we feel support the meanings we have assigned. In a way, we are testing our hypothesis that the ad is exotic, sensual, androgynous, and sophisticated.

Exotic refers to something strikingly or excitingly different, something foreign. How is the exotic shown in the Fidji ad? We identify as iconic a rather unfamiliar, perhaps foreign, flower to the left of the woman's face. We notice the indexic quality of words 'Paris, France' which refer to a familiar yet foreign country and the fantasies it evokes. The fragrance of Fidji is also indexic and can be inferred by the head of the snake that appears to be attracted by the smell. As for the symbolic aspect, the text in the upper right is in French; the model's color and face (partial view) suggest she is Fijian; and the snake (serpent), of course, relates to the story of the Garden of Eden. We also note the elongated phallic shape of the model's neck and the strange flower to the left. These observations can now be abbreviated and put into the matrix.

<u>Exotic</u>	
Iconic	Foreign flower
Indexic	Paris, France Suggested fragrance (snake smells it)
Symbolic	Text in French (Fidji: le parfum des paradis retrouves)  Native woman Serpent (Garden of Eden) Phallic neck and flower

Next we search out the alphapictorial components that suggest the ad (perfume) is sensual. Iconically, there are the partially opened and inviting lips, the long flowing neck line and the long, loose hair. Indexically, a long feminine finger points to Fidji. Symbolically, there are the unusual interlacing or interlocking of the fingers, which is obviously staged, the warm red, amber, and yellow of the ad, and of course the curving and coiled serpent. Again, we put these into our matrix as before.



Sensual

Iconic	Partially opened lips Long flowing neck line Long loose hair
Indexic	Feminine finger pointing
Symbolic	Interlocking fingers Warm red, amber, yellow colors Curving, coiled serpent

The third meaning assigned to the Fidji ad is Sophistication. Iconically, the model's face is elevated and we feel that she may be looking down at us as she holds a rather fancy bottle which is laced and sealed to protect its contents. Indexically, there are the Paris address on the bottle and the French spelling of the distant Fiji Island. The placement of the ad in magazines such as Vogue is also an important factor. Symbolically, the golden glow of the bottle and the overall warm colors in the ad suggest richness and warmth. The serpent appears poised as a pet or as a signal for danger and risk. And of course we have the rather sophisticated, stage finger language which broadcasts the promise of Fidji.

Sophisticated

Iconic	Elevated face Fancy bottle laced and sealed
Indexic	Paris address Fidji (the Fiji Islands) Placement of ad in <u>Vogue</u>
Symbolic	Rich warm colors in the ad Serpent as danger and risk (take a chance) Finger language

We now test the hypothesis that the ad has both female and male pictorial components that suggest it is androgynous. Iconically, the model's smooth face, extended neck, and slender fingers are very feminine. The flat chest and rather broad shoulders that extend beyond the ad are very masculine. Indexically, the ad is seen as a unity even though it is split down the middle--the left side with very light colors while the right side is dark and heavy. Symbolically, the yellow flower in the

upper left has both male and female attributes. And the interwoven fingers which form an alter on which the perfume rests suggest both male and female genitalia.

### Androgynous

Iconic	Female: face, neck, fingers Male: flat chest, broad shoulders
Indexic	Ad is half light colored (female) and half dark (male)
Symbolic	Yellow flower and fingers: female/male forms

(To further test the hypothesis that the ad is androgynous, we informally had a number of people smell the fragrance of Fidji and tell us if it has a feminine or masculine fragrance. Most pondered the question after testing the fragrance and then, a bit puzzled, said it was somewhere in between.)

Through the use of a logical, analytical paradigm such as the interpretant matrix, we now have supporting alphapictorial evidence of how the ad was constructed to represent the Fidji perfume as exotic, sensual, sophisticated, and androgynous. By deconstructing this ad, we have constructed its meaning, the meaning to be communicated to the interpreters (the audience). We are but two interpreters, and what we have presented is what we perceive as the message of the Fidji ad. The use of an interpretant matrix to deconstruct or to construct an advertisement has been used in teaching graphic design students. It has been successfully applied by a number of professional designers for various products (extending from ads to product design, communication messages, art and literature, photography, motion pictures, computer-user interface, etc.). It could and perhaps should be used in teaching photography students specializing in advertising photography.

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## REFERENCES

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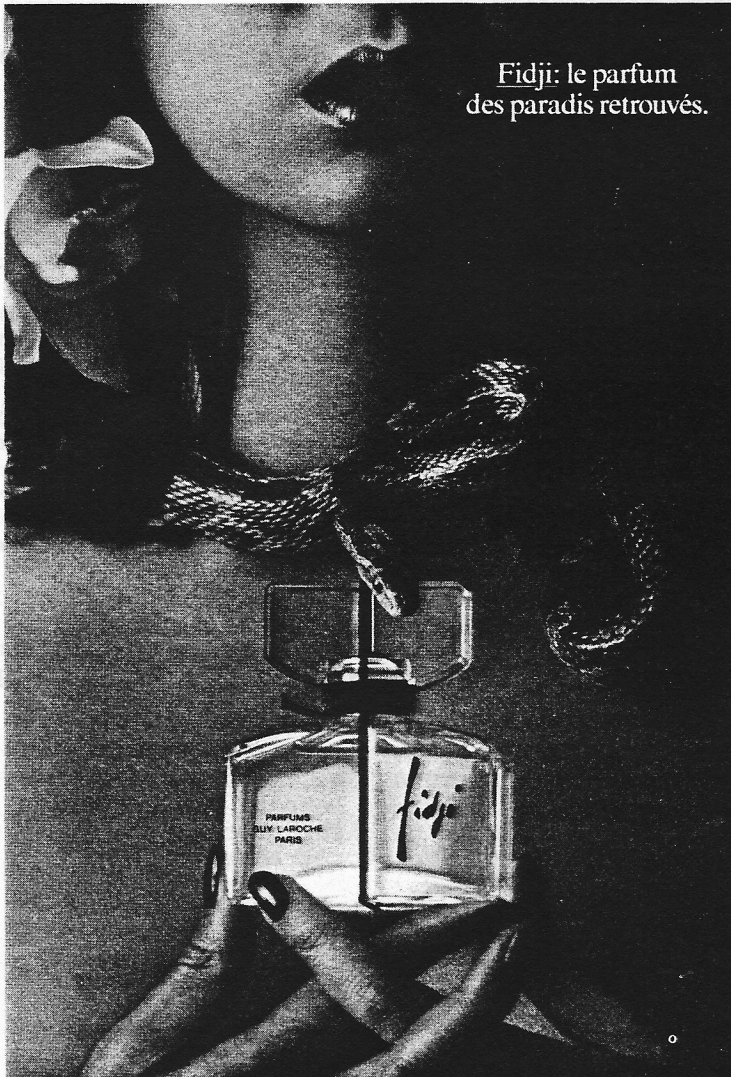


Plate 1. Fidji advertisement (colors in the original ad are amber, yellow, and red).



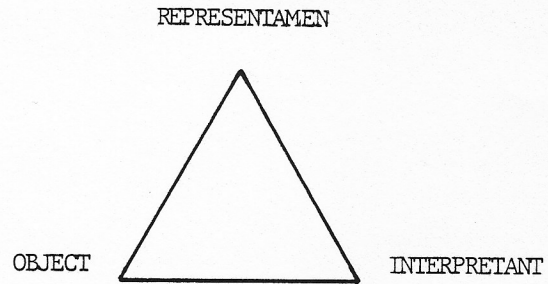


Figure 1. Paradigm showing how signs function.

Object of Advertisement	Meaning <sub>1</sub>	Meaning <sub>2</sub>	Meaning <sub>3</sub>	Meaning <sub>i</sub>
Iconic				
Indexic				
Symbolic				

Figure 2. An interpretant matrix.