Advertising Resonance: a Semiological Perspective

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A recent ad for J&B Scotch whiskey shows a slew of pebbles. The letters J&B are painted on each and the caption reads, J&B on the rocks." An ad for Christian Brothers brandy has the caption "CB in orange," accompanied by a picture of the guitarist Chuck Berry dressed completely in orange. These ads are resonant by the definition of this essay. Resonance refers to an echoing or a doubleness within an advertisement. As such, it is an aspect of the formal structure of an ad. In semiological terms it can be classified as a rhetorical device (Durand 1987; Dyer 1982). Although the use of puns and double entendres in headlines is probably the most common instance of resonance (Grinell 1987), other types of resonance can also be identified. The goal of this essay is to introduce and develop the concept of resonance with the aid of illustrations drawn from current magazine advertising.

It must be stated at the outset that resonance is a special case; most ads are not resonant by the definition above. At a guess, less than 10%, and perhaps less than 5% of magazine ads for consumer products make use of resonance. Perhaps more advertisers should adopt this strategy; certainly there is no a priori reason to believe that resonance is only appropriate for certain products or audiences. Nor is resonance so rare as to be a mere curiosity. Over the past two years, students of the author seeking to earn extra credit were able to gather over 200 instances of resonance in magazine advertisements. This judgement sample confirms that resonance does occur with some frequency, that it has been used by producers of a variety of products, and that it can be defined with sufficient specificity that novice judges can detect instances of it.

The primary focus of this essay is semiological rather than semiotic, in the usage of Holbrook (1987). Where a semiotic approach would seek to establish the effects of resonance on the viewer of an ad, the approach of semiology:

"essentially involves interpretation or hermeneutics rather than statistics or experimentation. It draws upon the researcher's personal introspection and subjective judgement and finds its major supporting evidence in the body of the text itself" (Holbrook 1987, p. 102).

This essay concentrates on what can said by means of the device of resonance; the kinds of meaning that a viewer can derive from a resonant ad. However, semiotic concerns are touched upon in the discussion of future research directions. Prior to examining specific instances of resonance, an expanded definition will be offered, and a conceptual background established in terms of semiology.

DEFINITION AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Resonance occurs when there is a repetition of elements within an ad, and when this redundancy is such that an exchange, condensation or multiplication of meaning occurs. Simple repetition alone is not sufficient to create resonance. The elements must echo one another, that is, they must be arranged so as to modify the meaning that either would have alone. Any resonant ad involves a doubleness: one thing or class of thing has multiple meanings, or multiple elements are joined into a single meaning. Some kind of play or twist is necessary for resonance to occur. If the two elements simply sit side by side within the text of the ad, without acting upon one another, then the ad will not resonate.

Because resonance is an aspect of the formal structure of an advertisement, semiology is promising as a source of understanding. Both semiology and semiotics (related disciplines originating respectively in the work of the linguist de Saussure in Europe and the philosopher C.S. Peirce in America) are concerned with how meaning is conveyed through signs and symbols (Holbrook 1987; Mick 1986; Umiker-Sceoeck 1987). As resonance is a semiological phenomenon of a specific kind, a brief explanation of certain semiological concepts will prepare the way for its interpretation in specific ads.

The basic concept in semiology is the sign, defined as a thing that refers to something other than itself (Fiske 1982). Any assemblage of signs, whether verbal or visual, is considered to be a text. It is helpful to consider a sign to be composed of signifier (the physical trace of the sign) and signified (the meanings associated with the signifier).

Semiological work with a syntactic focus concentrates on the relation between signifiers; work with a semantic focus concentrates on the
nature of the signifieds which can be associated with a given signifier. There are three basic modes of association between signifier and signified: the iconic, the indexical, and the symbolic. An iconic sign resembles or is similar to its signifier; thus, a picture of a man in a suit carrying a Wall Street Journal might resemble a businessman. An indexical sign has a factual or causal relation to its signified; thus, the picture of the WSJ might index investing, the financial markets, the management of money, and the like. A symbolic sign has a conventional or arbitrary relation to its signified; thus, in American society the WSJ could symbolize financial success and corporate status. Iconic signs operate as metaphors, while indexical signs operate as metonyms (in which the part stands for the whole).

Resonance is a syntactic relation with semantic consequences. The doubleness of signs in the text of the ad alters the nature of the signifieds associated with each and with the ad as a whole. As will be shown with examples, the use of resonance in ads allows a kind of *figurative speech*. (Many other kinds of figurative speech are possible in ads without the use of resonance). Figurative speech used for persuasive effect is the subject of rhetoric, and a number of scholars have studied rhetoric in advertising, in particular the rhetoric of visual images (Barthes 1985; Dyer 1982). Durand (1987) has proposed an exhaustive scheme for classifying rhetorical figures in advertising. Within Durand's scheme resonance can be categorized as a false homology: either two different elements are made to have one meaning, or two meanings are condensed onto a single element.

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**PLATE 1**

As will be shown, the false homology on which resonance rests functions to open up the meaning of an advertisement. Resonance is a device for generating ambiguity and paradox. As figurative speech (Stem 1988), the use of resonance moves advertisements in the direction of poetry, rendering their meaning open rather than closed (cf. Noth 1987). In the analyses that follow, the connotative power of resonance will be stressed. Resonant ads may also be considered symparactic in Kluge's (1987) sense. As a rhetorical device, resonance is a means whereby the advertiser may communicate in a non-literal, tact fashion that is suggestive and evocative. Resonance as a strategy is a far cry from Claude Hopkins’ "salesmanship in print" or the "reason why" school; it has more in common with the impressionistic school of Theodore MacManus (Fox 1984).

As a semiological analysis of advertising texts, this essay has a number of predecessors. A brief discussion of Barthes (1985) and Williamson (1978) will set the stage for the interpretations that follow (see also Levy 1981; Leymore 1975; Liess, Kline and Jhally 1986; McLuhan 1951; Mick 1986; Umiker-Sebeok 1987; Vestergaard and Schroder 1985).

**Barthes**

In the article "Rhetoric of the Image," written in 1964, Barthes (1985) analyzes at length a single magazine ad for a brand of pasta. This article is particularly useful in showing how elaborate and intensive can be the semiological analysis of a single ordinary ad. This essay follows Barthes in the explicit attention to image rather than language, to connotation rather than denotation in advertisement. In his analysis of the Panzani ad, Barthes points out that the syllables in the Panzani name will suggest an Italian origin to French ears. Furthermore, the pepper and the tomato shown in the ad, and the tricolor printing, will similarly suggest, in Barthes' phrase, "Italianicity." These connotations enhance the headline's literal statement of the product's Italian connection. Barthes goes on to point out that the opened string bag from which the vegetables spill suggests both a recent return from shopping, and a healthy image of a person who shops for fresh food. He notes further that the arrangement of the scene suggests a still life painting, thus incorporating by reference countless paintings of edibles. Drawing together these discontinuous signs, we may say that the advertisement connotes a product which is ethnic, perhaps exotic; fresh and wholesome; delectable in the timeless fashion of art.

Note that Barthes' semiological approach in this ad is primarily semantic, and that the emphasis is on the indexical and iconic representation of meaning. Barthes' approach is to apprehend various elements within the ad in terms of the figures of classical rhetoric. The layout in the Panzani ad resembles that of a still life painting (metaphor); the shopping bag spilled open connotes the shopping trip by representing one piece of that event (metonym or synecdoche). These are the primary routes whereby elements within ads acquire meaning: they either resemble or are associated with other objects, and acquire meaning thereby. Barthes' treatment differs sharply from the treatments of symbolism in advertisements commonly encountered in American textbooks on marketing, advertising and consumer behavior. These treatments tend to focus on the use of readily identifiable conventional/symbols (i.e., symbols as defined earlier). The Marlboro man is a good example. In these ads, cowboys and Western scenes serve as readily decoded symbols of a rugged masculinity, no tone and spirit of Barthes' interpretation of the Panzani ad is very different. It is more subtle and far-reaching.

Barthes frankly acknowledges the uncertain character of the meaning of images: "every image is polysemous; it implies, subjacent to its signifiers, a "floating chain" of signifieds of which the reader can select some and ignore the rest" (p. 28). This recalls the multivocal character of symbols discussed in Turner (1974). Barthes also states in uncompromising fashion that the creator of the image is no privileged authority as to the meaning of the image (p. 36); a position that also recalls anthropological work (Sherry 1987). Thus, the copy writer and art director who created the ad cannot necessarily tell us what it does and does not mean. The thrust of Barthes' analysis is to place advertisements alongside poetry, myth and dream, under the heading of image (p. 38). In summary, the approach taken by Barthes (1985) may be said to offer the reader of advertisements freedom of interpretation, a license to find meanings that are neither conventional nor patently obvious to all. This gift comes at a cost; there is no readily apparent means of verifying whether an analysis of connotation is correct or not (Liess, Kline and Jhally 1986).

**Williamson**

In her book, *Decoding Advertisements*, Williamson (1978) analyzes in detail 116 magazine advertisements. In parallel to Freud's dream work, Williamson speaks of an "advertising -work." This term refers both to the system of signs whereby meaning is Created, and more particularly to the idea that such systems contain a latent meaning that may be very different from the manifest meaning of the ad. An example will clarify this concept of latent meaning.

The first ad in Williamson (1978, pp. 18-19) is for Goodyear tires. The ad celebrates the braking power of the tires, showing a car stopped at the end of a jetty surrounded by water. The headline and body copy are in the finest tradition of the "reason why" school of advertising (Fox 1984). Stopping distance, durability and road-holding power are the gist of the linguistic text. The story communicated through the ads, that the driver has sped down the jetty and then hit the brakes in complete confidence, effectively dramatizes the selling point. All of this is manifest in the advertisement, and it easy to imagine any professor of marketing or advertising explicating these points of technique to a class of students.

Williamson begins her interpretation of the latent content of this ad by establishing an equation between the jetty and the tire. She justifies the equation in terms of the rounded end of the jetty and its suggestion of treads, and also the inclusion of the two tires hanging off the right side of the jetty. (These elements are resonant in the sense of this essay). Given this equation, or substitutability, between tire and jetty, the product is able to appropriate the qualities of the jetty: its sturdiness, its resistant qualities, its stopping power, its protection against water and chaos. And in fact, there is a substantive analogy between the functions of a sea jetty and an automobile tire which both permits and assists this substitution of one for the other. As a result, the message about the product is augmented; at some level the receiver takes away a stronger impression of the advantageous qualities of Goodyear 6800 Supersteels.
A key contribution of Williamson to the decoding of advertisements is precisely this emphasis on juxtaposition as a device where by images convey meaning.

... what seemed to be merely a part of the apparatus for conveying a message about braking speed, turns out to be a message in itself ... which involves a connection being made, a correlation between two objects (tire and jetty) not on a rational basis but by a leap made on the basis of appearance, juxtaposition and connotation. (p. 19)

She goes on to note that such meanings are created by the formal structure of the advertisement, rather than being spelled out linguistically. This is the syntactic focus spoken of earlier; a semantic approach to this ad might have lingered instead on the exact nature of that signified which a jetty signifier is suited to connote. Furthermore, because the connection is not explicitly stated, the viewer must draw it, and in so doing actively participate in construing the ad. Finally, the ad does not create the meanings associated with a sea jetty, but assumes the prior existence of a system of meaning in which jetties figure. The ad appropriates this system, and so in so doing creates the jetty as a sign that carries certain meanings. When successful, this appropriation constitutes that sign as a carrier of certain values, i.e., as a currency. Once constituted as a currency, the jetty can exchange value with some other signifier, in this case the Goodyear tire.

These three ideas about reading advertisements—juxtaposition and other types of formal structure communicate meaning, that a relatively active participation of the reader is required before such meanings can be realized, and that signifiers connected by formal structure can exchange meanings—are all fundamental to the decoding of advertisements undertaken in this essay. These insights, in conjunction with Barthes’ (1985) demonstration of how metaphor and metonym can serve to unlock the “floating chain of signifieds” associated with an ad, provide the basis for the interpretive techniques used to unravel the meaning of resonance in specific advertisements.

A TAXONOMY OF RESONANCE WITH EXAMPLES

A review of ads thus far collected suggests that at least four types of resonance can be identified in magazine ads (Exhibit 1). These include resonance which is purely verbal, purely visual or which involves both verbal and visual elements; there are also instances of visual puns. Examples of each type will be briefly described, along with an indication of the meanings conveyed (cf. Pollay and Mainprize 1984).

Visual resonance occurs when two pictorial elements in the illustration echo one another’s shape, contour or color. This is resonance among the signifiers, in which two elements are made to have a common meaning. The ad for Tartar Control Crest is a good example (Plate 1). Although the copy explicitly states the parallel in function between this toothpaste and that dentist’s tool, the same statement is made again visually. The contour of the dollop of toothpaste echoes the shape of the dentist’s pick. This visual echo may be more difficult to deny, and in any case augments or seconds the message in the literal text. On a more subtle level, the dentist’s pick occupies the spot in the composition that would normally be filled by a tube of toothpaste. [This interpretation suggested by John Sherry.] This substitution in itself acts to equate the toothpaste and the tool. A second example is the ad for Aziza Mink Coat Mascara (plate 2). Here the visual resonance is more elaborate. The spikes of mink fur exactly echo the eyelashes of the model, establishing an equivalence between the characteristics of mink fur and any eyelash to which this mascara has been applied. Also, the triangle of face outlined by mink coat and mink hat echoes the shape of an eye photographed in profile. The implied statement is that this product will surround your eye with mink. Finally, the sharp spikes of fur, the triangle of the face, all echo the angles in the letters “A” and “Z” in the brand name. An exchange of meaning among Aziza, mink, and mascara is accomplished.

Verbal resonance occurs when the headline or body copy makes use of puns, word play or double entendre. Purely verbal resonance, with no assistance from an illustration, is not that common. Most often, as in the next category, a picture is required in order to convey the twist or second meaning. When verbal resonance alone is used, it typically occurs in the headline. Two examples from the food category are: “Berried Treasure” and “Fry first class.” The first headline, for Weight Watchers frozen desserts, functions to equate the sponsor’s strawberry shortcake with treasure. The copy also contains the words “ruby,” “crowning,” “pearly,” and “richly,” along with two further mentions of “treasure.” This is resonance among the signifieds: a condensation of the meanings of (rich) food and treasure is brought about. The effect is to communicate richness of taste in a manner difficult to convey in plain language. The second headline, for Idaho potatoes, functions to equate french fries made from Idaho potatoes with a higher level of quality. The copy also includes the statements, “the only way to fry,” “the choice of frequent frys,” “first class serving ideas,” and “help your products soar.” A very humdrum product has been linked with the exhilaration of jet travel, and the status associated with flying first class.

Perhaps the most common type of resonance links verbal and visual elements to accomplish a twist or duality in meaning. An ad for Mink International shows a woman wearing a mink top and dark sunglasses, striding toward the viewer. An inset shows the same woman dressed less fashionably. The one word headline, “Minkover,” effects a double pun: The model is wearing a mink pullover, and the inset of a “before” picture puns on the makeover offered at cosmetic counters. Wearing mink Provides a makeover, according to the ad; it will transform you. And indeed, the contrast between “before” and “after” is marvelous to behold; before, a bedraggled coed, hair untidily tied back, collar askew, hands held ready to be handcuffed, downbeat; after, a smiling, confident person, hair loose over the shoulders, striding forward, with eyes covered over and hands covered, upbeat. Before, the model is looked at, in Sartre’s sense; after, she looks at you, become now an impenetrable observer. Before and after equates to under and over. The message generated by the resonance is that you should buy something mink and get on top of things; pull mink over you and cover whatever you may need to hide.

Another example of verbal-visual resonance is the ad for MasterCard, in which the headline, “The world of golden possibilities,” is echoed by a solid gold picture of the planet with continents embossed (Plate 3). The phrase “golden possibilities” suggests a future of hope and promise, and these feelings are transferred to the gold card by means of resonance. The gilded planet visually communicates that the gold card is accepted the world over. There is also the suggestion that with a gold MasterCard, you can buy anything in the world, perhaps the world itself. Anything is possible in this golden world.

The ad for Philip Kingsley styling spritz is somewhat more fantastic. A bottle of the product is shown with a lighted fuse along with the headline, “Blow up your hair.” Multiple puns on the explosion theme continue throughout the copy. The literal function of the product—to add volume to limp hairs dramatized by the second meaning anchored in the illustration: that your hair will be explosive, that you will sparkle. “Me resonance is completed by the faint “hair” of sparks thrown off from the fuse attached to the “head” of the bottle.

The ad for Finesse hair care products (plate 4) provides an example of resonance that directly incorporates the brand name (cf. Lutz and Lutz 1978). The product enjoys a name which has its own meaning in the language, a meaning which is quite appropriate to a hair care product. “Making Waves Takes Finesse;” you need this product to make hair this curly. Or, it takes a delicate skillful touch to make hair look this good. Or, only a person with finesse (read: knowledge of the correct hair product and its use) could manage blond curls this beautiful. Or, use of this product will enable you to cause a stir. This headline is a fine example of how a cascade of favorable meanings can be made to circulate within the text of an ad. The body copy continues in this vein with its statement that the product “lets you get hold of a splashier style.” This both continues the watery theme, suggests making a splash, and reminds one of the movie Splash, in which Daryl Hannah, a beautiful blond woman with a head full of curls, stared as a mermaid. All favorable associations, and all cycling back to the product.
The ad for Gates ski gloves (plate 5) helps to make a point about the proper use of resonance. The picture shows a glove opened up, its fillings and materials exposed as if it were an animal on a dissection table. The headline reads, "No other glove company has the guts to run this ad." The pun comes across immediately: this glove contains filling materials and has internal structures that no other glove has. But the cliche meaning of "guts" continues to operate. The sponsor has courage; the other manufacturers do not. In this example, both meanings within the resonant ad are preferable; both enhance the sponsor. As a practical matter, this criterion may be the key to the successful commercial use of resonance: that the matrix of meanings generated by the resonant structure be largely or completely favorable. Compare an ad directed at restaurant owners that shows teacups full of tea with the headline, "Get your customers into a lot of hot water." The ad is resonant, but the double meaning does not enhance the product: why should a restaurant want to get its customers into trouble? When resonance does not serve to enhance the sponsor's product, it may be merely a trick used for shock value, of dubious merit.

In a visual pun, a picture is constructed that allows the viewer to read off a verbal message. The picture exists simultaneously as itself and as a verbal message, making it a pun. An example of a visual pun is the Travelers insurance ad (plate 6). A common office tape dispenser is shown loaded with red tape. "Red tape" is probably high on the list of the dissatisfiers that consumer associate with the insurance product category. The visual pun dramatizes the red tape concept in a way no mere words could do. It also facilitates the play on "stuck" in the headline: "you won't get stuck with this." The tape that is normally loaded into that dispenser is sticky; the visual pun communicates the sticky aspect of insurance paper work at a glance. The resonance is completed by the inclusion of the red umbrella at the bottom. The red tape and the red umbrella nicely summarize a duality at the heart of the insurance product. On the one hand, insurance is a restriction, a source of hassles, a quagmire of paperwork (sticky tape); on the other, insurance is protection, shelter against the storm, a bulwark against loss (umbrella). The formal structure of the ad encompasses this duality.

EXHIBIT 1

TYPES OF RESONANCE IN MAGAZINE ADS

PLATE 3

PLATE 4

A legitimate question is whether resonance is a novel strategy growing in favor, or whether it may enjoy a long history of occasional use. Puns in headlines probably go back a long ways (Grinnell 1987); but the deliberate use of verbal-visual resonance may be a relatively recent development. Some evidence relevant to this point comes from an examination of liquor advertisements. The collection of 200 ads gathered in 1986-87 contains over a dozen instances of resonant ads for liquor products (Exhibit 2). Several products, notably J&B whiskey, Christian Brothers brandy, Absolut vodka, Grand Marnier liqueur, and Johnnie Walker Red have based whole campaigns on series of resonant ads. Perhaps liquor advertising has always been this way; but it is notable that the advertising agencies for Christian Brothers and J&B whiskey got into a public spat over who deserved credit for "inventing" this new style of advertising (Alsop 1987). This suggests that the deliberate, systematic use of resonance may be a new style about to enjoy a vogue. This, in turn, may be a direct result of the diffusion into the advertising community of applied semiotics (Pendry and Holmes 1986; Umiker-Sebeok 1987).

To summarize, various types of resonance can be identified. All share a common characteristic: either two or more elements within the execution are related through resemblance, or, one element has two or more meanings. This doubleness is generative; it produces meanings that might not have been present if only one element had been included, or if the resemblance between the elements had been suppressed. Doubles is of this kind opens up the advertising text. The meaning of the ad is destabilized, rendered fluid. To show the extent of the meanings that can be generated through a resonant construction, two additional ads will be interpreted. The elaboration of meaning in these ads is so extensive as to suggest the term complex resonance.

Glamour Magazine

An ad directed toward potential advertisers in Glamour magazine is headlined, "GLAMOUR ZIP." It shows a woman wearing an outfit unzipped at one shoulder. She holds a gloved hand so that it partly covers her face; this glove is also unzipped, and one eye peeks out between two fingers. The tag line reads "Glamour readers run up big department store tabs ..." Ostensibly, the message is that readers of this magazine spend a great deal of money in department stores. At this level, the ad is an instance of "reason-why" advertising: buy space with us because our readers spend a lot of money on products like yours. The multilevel pun on "zip," however, opens up a more complex message.

Almost every meaning of the word "zip" functions in the service of the sponsor. First, something about the type face in the headline suggests the Post Office's advertisements for the Zip code. The implication is that with Glamour magazine, you can reach readers where they live. Given the use of Zip codes in marketing, there is a further implication of targeting; you can reach exactly your target market through buying space in Glamour. This is their true address, and you can best address your customers through this vehicle. The second pun on zip involves the two zippers shown in the ad. You can zip up your market with this vehicle, cover your most important prospects. You can unzip your target audience; advertising here will help you uncover what she really wants. She is open to you when she reads this magazine; you can unzip her, penetrate her indifference, get through to her. All of these plays on zipper are linked to the copy by the pun on "tabs." Zippers have tabs, and so do these readers have tabs, at department Stores; you can pull these sales in your direction through advertising here; you can open up a market, close a sale. The third and fourth relevant meanings of "zip" are "fast" and "energetic." The female reader of Glamour is perhaps a little fast; she will respond readily to your entreaties if you advertise here. You can put some zip into your sales; these are energetic consumers.

On the purely visual level, there are a series of openings and revealings. One shoulder is laid bare by an unzipping, one wrist is similarly exposed. These two wedge-shaped openings echo a third: the space between two fingers from which the model peers out at us. The theme throughout is seeing; you see a lot of her, as she will see a lot of you. Your ads will be seen in Glamour, you will get the exposure you seek; she will be exposed. What had been hidden will be revealed: your product, her preferences.

This ad indicates the wealth of meanings that can be invoked by the use of complex resonance. 'Me meanings read from the formal structure of the ad are generated by the resonance among the elements. The uncertain meaning of "zip" in the title, in conjunction with the pictures of zippers, sets up a flow of meaning.

Dean Markley Strings

In this ad for guitar strings, an old man's face is shown on top of a muscular young man's body, which strikes a performer's pose (plate 7). In conjunction with the headline, the message is straightforward: you are going to play guitar for a long time, until You're old; these guitar strings will go the distance with you.

The resonance begins with the picture of Jimmy Dean, over the mantel. Jimmy Dean is a symbol of youthful rebellion, and his signifieds are closely associated with the signifieds connected with "rock-and-roll." The pun on the brand name helps to associate this manufacturer with the spirit of rock and roll. Jimmy Dean died young, but the model in this ad has clearly lived a long time. A polarity is thus set in motion.
between youth and age, a polarity close to the heart of rock and roll. This polarity, figured most clearly in the body of the model, is echoed by the other furnishings in the room. The rocking chair by the fireplace, the tasselled ottoman, the pattern on the rug, the plate on the wall, the nick-knacks on the mantel, and the lamp are all of a style that we associate with the old and elderly. This is a grandparent's living room. The kinetic posture and bare muscled chest of the model are in marked contrast, a contrast that brings you back to the quintessential old man's face on the model, where the eyes of Jimmy Dean are locked, Jimmy Dean who died so young.

EXHIBIT 2

A PARTIAL LIST OF RECENT LIQUOR ADVERTISEMENTS MAKING USE OF RESONANCE

The resonance continues in the body copy: "Old rockers never die, they just lose the tension in their G string." An explicitly sexual element enters the text with this pun. An old guitar string is like a man who has lost his potency. Counting the headline and package there are altogether eight mentions of the word "long" in this ad. The words "strong" and "powerful" also characterize these strings. Is there something else which is long, strong and powerful? A theme of potency versus death and decline now matches the polarity between youth and age. Both these should resonate with the intended audience for this ad: people who play rock-and-roll music on guitar. The themes echo a tension that is central both to this style of music and to the young men who are enthusiastic about it.

It is appropriate for a manufacturer of guitar strings to attempt to create this rich tapestry of elaborations on potency, age and death. Few people care about guitar strings in themselves; it is guitars that are the focus of consumers' enthusiasm. Resonance functions here to enrich a mundane product. The strings are assimilated to matters much grander than themselves, and this serves the sponsor's purpose.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This essay attempts only to identify and explicate the phenomenon of resonance. Future research could be conducted along either semiological or semiotic lines (Holbrook 1987). Each of these avenues will be discussed in turn.

Semiological Research

Further research on the nature of the meanings generated by a resonant text could take several forms. The basic stance of this essay has been that resonance creates a more elaborate text, richer in meaning and more complex in implication. This thesis could be pursued much further. First, a way might be found to enumerate the meanings generated by various types of resonance, and to compare these to the volume of meanings generated by other kinds of rhetorical figures. Second, the rudimentary taxonomy presented here could be developed further, along the lines of Durand's (1987) rather complete schema for rhetorical figures in general. It may have occurred to the reader that in each of the ads analyzed, the operation of resonance was slightly different. A large collection of ads systematically analyzed might produce a more differentiated picture of how resonance operates to generate meaning. Third, investigations could be conducted into the kinds of meaning best conveyed through a resonant construction. This essay has concentrated on resonance as a means of conveying equivalence, i.e., a claim that the sponsor's product is akin somewhere else, resembles it or is intrinsically connected to it. Since a very common strategy is to promote a product through associating it with things that have value in their own right, this capacity of resonance is of wide import. Might resonance also be suited to the communication of other kinds of meaning? Only further semiological work with a broad array of resonant constructions can determine the answer.

An important problem that future semiological work will have to address is the validity of the kinds of interpretation of resonance offered in this essay. It is apparent that the interpretations constructed by a scholar in his study are unlikely to correspond in detail to the interpretations made by naive viewers of the ad. The assumption underlying this account, however, is that an ad that responds to the scholar's efforts is also one which will stimulate more interpretation, in total, among the mass audience. In other words, the claim is that the interpretations made by individual viewers—their noticing the ad at all—will be substantially fragmentary and incomplete in comparison with the scholar's exegesis, will as a total set be more elaborate than in the case of a non-resonant ad. Qualitative research among a sample of ordinary viewers could go a long way to reassure the skeptic that the intensive examination made by the scholar in fact corresponds to the meanings received by a general audience. Pendrey and Holmes (1986) offer an example of such qualitative research. Since the fundamental source of validity for any semiological interpretation is the text itself (Holbrook 1987), convergent readings of a text by different readers may be as far as one can go toward satisfying more traditional social science concerns regarding validity.

Semiotic Research

Like semiology, semiotics is devoted to the study of signs; unlike semiology, semiotics concerns itself with the effect of signs upon the readers of a text (Holbrook 1987). Thus a semiotic perspective on resonance would focus on what effect this kind of formal structure might have on the audience for an ad. The emphasis would lie more on whether resonance works, from the standpoint of the advertiser. Research would focus on the conditions under which a resonant construction will or will not succeed in producing a particular kind of effect upon viewers. A semiotic investigation would permit the finding that resonance has no unique or attractive communication effects, regardless of whether or not it is a distinct semiological phenomenon. In the author's opinion, resonance is no panacea, nor is there any reason to believe that resonance is an intrinsically superior execution from the standpoint of selling a product. Thus, the most recent edition of Which Ad Pulled Best? includes a number of resonant executions, few of which were notably successful by the criteria used (Burton and Purvis 1987).

Experimental semiotic research might take one of two avenues. The first would involve common sense perspectives tested through the usual apparatus of advertising research: measures of recall, persuasion, attitude-toward-the-ad, and the like. The second would link up with recent developments in cognitive psychology concerning non-verbal elements in advertising (Hecker and Stewart 1988). Me first avenue will be discussed briefly, followed by a more detailed account of relevant work in cognitive psychology.

PLATE 5

PLATE 6

PLATE 7

Common sense would suggest two likely effects for resonant executions. Because a resonant construction produces a more elaborate meaning structure, resonance might increase viewer involvement with the ad. With the availability of generally applicable measures of involvement (Zaichkowsky 1985), it ought to be possible to compare consumer response to a set of resonant ads against that to a control set of ordinary ads. A more behavioral measure of involvement—time spent viewing—could also be used. A precursor of such experiments would be Lutz and Lutz (1978), whose category of interactive imagery recalls resonance, and who were able to show superior memory for interactive executions involving the brand name. The key difficulty in such experiments will be the selection of a control group of ads similar to the resonant ads in all respects save the presence of resonance. While it may not be possible to meet this requirement of internal validity in the case of a collection of actual ads, there is also danger in assuming that the experimenter can concoct resonance for purposes of constructing a stimulus set. Non-professional and possibly uncreative instances of resonance manufactured for laboratory use may not adequately represent the phenomenon.
In addition to stimulating greater involvement in the advertisement, resonance might act more generally to influence attitude-toward-the-ad. The more complex structure and the use of figurative speech could cause viewers to like the resonant ads more, and this positive affect could generalize to the brand. Alternatively, puns may irritate a substantial fraction of the audience, causing a more negative attitude-toward-the-ad (Percy and Rossiter 1980). For some viewers, resonance may amount to no more than a joke that fails.

Resonance may also prove to be a particularly persuasive means of communicating equivalence between a product and some desirable quality. What makes resonance attractive as a device for conveying equivalence is its non-literal and tacit character. When a sponsor makes an explicit verbal claim that a product is like some other thing, the viewer can readily counter-argue. The explicit, verbal statement is an obvious influence attempt and it automatically alerts the viewer that resistance may be in order. With resonance, however, equivalence is connoted rather than denoted; the equation is not made straight out but simply implied. Because it is not stated, refutation becomes more difficult. Research has shown that receiver counter-arguments are a key obstacle to persuasion (Wright 1974); hence, a tactic that forestalls counter-arguing may have much to recommend it.

Resonance that involves both verbal and visual elements may be related to cognitive psychological investigations on picture-word processing (Houston, Childers and Heckler 1987). Research in this tradition has suggested that the co-presence of verbal and visual representations of an object may facilitate memory for that object. Explanations for this effect vary. A depth of processing explanation would point to the greater number of elaborative operations performed by a viewer faced with related visual and verbal representations (Craik and Lockhart 1972). Alternatively, some theorists have argued that the brain uses dual coding, with separate systems for visual and verbal information (Paivio 1971). In that event, resonant ads would succeed not because of more elaborative processing by the receiver, but because they would leave a stronger memory trace through being coded twice. Edell (1988), in her review of nonverbal elements in advertising, draws on Bower’s (1972) work on paired associates learning to categorize these explanations in terms of “strength of association” and “cue redundancy.” Ads which stimulate elaborative operations strengthen the association between two stimuli, while brand names which are represented both visually and verbally benefit from cue redundancy.

An important point is that resonance is more amenable to an elaborative operations or strength of association explanation than to a dual coding or cue redundancy explanation. In fact, it is possible for dual coding to occur based on redundant verbal-visual cues without resonance being present. Consider an ad for Mink Difference hair products. “Mink” is present verbally, in the brand name, and visually, as a mink coat worn by a woman with beautiful hair; but this arrangement produces no resonance, no echo, no twist, no play on meanings. The mink coat, Laken as a symbol of rich softness, may enhance the brand by its presence, and the visual image of mink may assist later retrieval of the brand name; but none of this involves resonance. Cue redundancy, then, is not a sufficient condition for resonance. The other two mink ads discussed earlier (Plates 2, 3) have redundant verbal-visual cues, but also have something more.

Pulling together these possible avenues for semiotic research suggests the following core proposition.

Proposition: Elaboration in the stimulus invites elaboration as a response.

This suggests that cognitive responses of consumers ought to be a key dependent variable in experimental investigations of resonance. A resonant ad has a more elaborate text, and the most straightforward effect that can be imagined is a more elaborate response on the part of the viewer. This elaboration may have effects on memory, learning or persuasion, but should be evident in the cognitive responses made by consumers.

CONCLUSION

The interpretations offered in this essay have been fairly elaborate, and undoubtedly strike some readers as far-fetched. At worst, what has happened is that I have appropriated individual advertisements for my own aesthetic consumption. After all, I have spent hours looking at certain of these ads, and have come back to them day after day. This is a treatment normally accorded only to works of art, myths, and other key components of culture. The actual experience of these ads by ordinary consumers is probably very different. The pages of a magazine are turned; a headline is read, an illustration glanced at; and then the page is turned again. Can there be a meaningful correspondence between the scholar’s interpretation and that made by typical member of the viewing audience when their situations are so very different?

Painting the problem in these stark terms also points the way to a solution. From the standpoint of semiology, the ecological difference between the attentive scholar and the naive consumer is really irrelevant to whether the scholar’s interpretation is useful or valuable. I grant the reader that no other viewer may ever have drawn the precise interpretation that I offer of certain ads. All that matters to me is that these interpretations be possible. It is the potential meaning of a resonant ad, and not its actual meaning to a concrete individual, that is of primary concern. I shall assume that the greater the ad’s potential for meaning, the more likely it is that its realized meanings, as grasped by the collective audience for the ad, will be richer rather than thin, many rather than few. Any individual consumer will probably experience only a fraction of the potential meanings of the ad. But if the assumption be granted that greater potential equals greater realization of meaning in the collective audience, then the efforts of the scholar become a means of measuring this potential. Correspondence obtains not in terms of realized meanings, but in terms of meaningfulness.

In terms of practical implications, this essay may be read as encouragement to consider a resonant style. I would suggest that as the culture grows more saturated with promotional messages, and as consumers become increasingly inured against straightforward sales pitches, the subtlety and richness of a resonant style gain in appeal (Kloepfer 1987). As Fox (1984) argues, the "reason why" approach of Claude Hopkins has always been opposed by the softer, more allusive approach associated with Theodore MacManus. Resonance may simply be the latest version of this alternative style. From another perspective, Schudson (1984) describes consumer advertising in America as "capitalist realism," an art form which celebrates the principles and presumptions of our economic system and way of life. This essay can then be read as art appreciation for capitalist realism. As art appreciation, it may encourage creatives to go a little farther than they might otherwise have, and to seek even richer textures of meaning.

REFERENCES


The sociological approach to communication theory is based on assumption that there exists a definite relationship between mass communication and social change. Some of the relevant theories which are going to be discussed here are: [1] The cultivation theory: It was developed by George Gerbner in 1967.Advertisers create adverts based on profiling certain groups and try to strike a chord with them &€“ advertising recycles existing cultural practices in a manner that resolves psychological distress and uncertainty among people within these groups. Leiss and Holt and Cameron all argue that we should understand advertising as the product of a dialogue between creative professionals and specific social groups. Once again to reiterate the above, advertising may well help people resolve psychological crises they€™ve developed because of having alienating jobs and busy-
hurried lives, but the consumpti