

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

Locher's PARIS *advert* in COILHOUSE

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COILHOUSE magazine, in which the ad I study in this analysis appeared describes itself as ‘a love letter to alternative culture’ and at the date of this writing has printed a total three issues. It carries three to four full A4 page advertisements in a publication of circa 80–90 pages. The magazine’s writers also run an on-line ‘webzine’ version to foster its readership. The selected advertisement was drawn from issue 2, an ad for Locher’s PARIS, the indie female fashion brand.

Issue 2, page 5 of Coilhouse carries a full-sized and colour A4 page advert for the indie female fashion brand Locher’s PARIS. I have selected this advert for a number of reasons. Firstly, I am a reader of the publication and in addition follow the online webzine. Secondly I wanted to select an advert for a product or service that was less well-known and was not published in a popular periodical likely to be available at common newspaper outlets or the like; rather I wished for something from an alternative publication with its target readership probable to include members of a western subculture (in this case, goth, punk, rave, &c). Finally, I would note I consider myself a member in some regards to these subcultures and relate to many of the values and interests that these subcultures hold and pursue — I hope this only aids in my interpretation and analysis.

On the simple, denotative level, the advert itself features an inset photo of a young caucasian woman with frizzy auburn hair wearing a Locher’s PARIS cotton petrol-blue coloured top complete with the stylised embroidery. The woman seems relaxed, leaning somewhat against the black leather whip which she sports in her hands that she has running behind her neck whilst in her stare (which is directed at the beholder) she appears to be quizzically noting the observer. Behind her is a light-beige patterned floral wallpaper surrounded by an imposed pink dashed border. In the top left corner is an imposed pink-coloured band that runs at 45° to the page serving to hold the the Locher’s PARIS logo, and symmetrically opposite in the bottom right corner is another similarly styled pink band featuring the fashion atelier website. These three prime signifiers can thus be categorised: the photograph as an iconic sign — the photo clearly resembles the woman it represents — whereas the company logo and its on-line web address is written in the Latin alphabet and consequently classifies as an indexical sign. Further less-prominent signifiers within the photo include the floral wallpaper, the embroidery on the clothing that the model is wearing, the pink bow in her hair, the black leather whip she holds, her stance and the gaze she offers the viewer, her make-up and lip balm she is wearing and the pink border that holds to contain the advert.

Each of these single signifiers functions to build upon each other, forming together to signify to the viewer a number of attributes (Saussure, 1915, p. 66–67). These include exquisiteness, elegance, beauty, complexity, ‘Europeanicity’ (notably ‘Frenchnicity’ — Locher’s

PARIS being a French fashion atelier) and quality, as denoted by the fancy script typeface employed in setting the text “Locher’s” and the Victorian-style sans serif small capitals used for “PARIS”, by the floral patterned wallpaper, by the pink bow in the model’s hair, and by the light make-up she is wearing. Signifiers may operate to signify a number of different concepts, and here they do: attributes of seduction, femininity, sexual empowerment, sexual domination, deviousness (when considering her identity in regard to the social norm), beauty and exquisiteness (again), musing, romance and love (which may easily be linked to Europeanicity or Frenchnicity) can be constructed from the stance and stare of the model, from the whip which she bears, and from the style of her clothing, hairdo, and make-up.

Having constructed these relationships between the apparent signifiers and the signifieds it is now possible to deduce the non-apparent coded or connotated message that the advert implies. This message reads that Locher’s PARIS fashion and accessories will make the viewer a powerful, spirited, passionate woman, who however retains socially traditional feminine qualities of beauty, elegance, sexual attractiveness, complexity &c. There is no object correlative — the product itself at first is used in relation (by being worn) to the qualities emphasised through the denotated signs, and then the product takes over and acts as the signifier (Williamson, 1978, p. 36); the clothing is meant to *reflect her*. This *myth* makes use of the simple, denotated signs in unison to construct this arbitrary relationship (Saussure, 1915, p. 67–68) — this transference of value or significance — between the employed signs as a whole and the product (Barthes, 1992).

It is vital to note that the “transference of significance does not exist in the completed ad” (Williamson, 1978, p. 19), it instead requires us to make the connection; the viewer must be aware of the signifiers used to in order to construct a relation with any signifieds for signification to occur. As a result “a system of meaning must already exist” (ibid.), and the advert does this by drawing upon several external referent systems (ibid., p. 20) in order for the viewer accurately to construct these attributes and linked concepts. Without access and knowledge to and of the external systems — the *langue* (Thwaites, et al., 1994, pp. 34–35) — these signs may not be interpreted accurately or not at all; those who are not familiar with symbology of floriography — the language or *langue* of flowers — may not be able to construct the association between the signifier that is the floral pattern of the wallpaper to signify femininity, love, beauty, passion, &c; without knowledge that a whip is an instrument within the kink and BDSM community associations may not be made that as a sign it signifies sexual empowerment.

Locher’s PARIS — not at all unlike other adverts — relies on differentiation. The clothing crafted by Locher’s Paris differs in reality little from similar likely less expensive styles created by cheaper labour forces in Africa or Asia otherwise also sold worldwide; Nike

shoes, in contrast to what Nike may want its consumers to believe, also are likely to differ little from shoes created by Puma, or other less-known brands created cheaply in Asia — in fact it is likely that these are made in the same regions if not by the same types of labour forces. Therefore in order to convince consumers of inherent differences between similar products, adverts also aim to differentiate and “[i]t does this by providing the product with an ‘image’ [...]” (ibid., p. 24). This Locher’s PARIS advert is not exempt. Through creating a subject, read the ideal consumer (ibid., pp 40–42) (the woman who wants to empower herself whilst remaining feminine) Locher’s PARIS have differentiated themselves from perhaps the majority of the range catering to the western female fashion market. The advert as such is successful in that it has created an identity, an image, that quickly informs what the product does not imbue or deliver and what it does — “[t]he identity of anything depends more on what it is *not* than what it is” (ibid.; emphasis Williamson’s).

Having analysed both the denotated and connotated meanings that the signs offer, and the myth of the advert and how it is constructed we can now with certainty surmise that the target audience of the advert are women, particularly young women who want to in some form break or already have broken from the heteronormative qualities that are socially bestowed upon them. The myth of the product offers this; the product acts as a currency towards achieving the desired qualities that have been linked in the advert (ibid., p. 38). Analysing the ethics behind the subject position that is normalised is outside the scope of this semiotic analysis, but sufficed to say it certainly differs from the traditional, heteronormative subject positions that many mainstream adverts construct.

References

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- Williamson, Judith (1978) 'Advertising work' and 'A currency of signs', in Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, London: Marion Boyars, pp. 15–42.

The product featured in the advertisement is indexed on-line on the Locher's PARIS website. It is available at <http://lochers.com/collection4.html> (accessed 28 September 2009). The photograph used within the advert is available on the next page (it lacks the logo, web address and border that have been imposed on the photo). Photos of the advert as it appears in Coilhouse magazine are featured on pages 7 and 8.





