

AN ALMOST SATANIC SEMIOTIC PROJECT

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"THE GREAT WORK BEGINS, DARK LORD"

THEORETICAL PRESENTATION

Before we dive into the semiotic analysis of the poster ad, we must ensure that we are all on the same level of understanding for all terms and theories that will be used in this analysis. I will briefly summarise here on the ideas from Louis Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes and Charles Pierce, as well as define some of the terminology used.

Semiotics is the science of sign. It allows us to discover how something is created and understood. Semiotics focuses on the use, structure and the function of the signs. One of the common goals in thereof is to unravel the meanings that are built into all kinds of human products. Such products can consist of words, images, art, symbols, stores, theories and so on, pretty much anything that communicates something. One of these products is the print ad poster I will analyse later in this project.

Throughout time there have been many semioticians which took the science an extra step further. Three of them are Louis Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes and Charles Pierce. Here are their ideas.

Louis Hjelmslev communicated that a sign is characterised as being a signifier for something else. It represents and makes present that of which is absent. For example, if I were to slide you a piece of paper with a drawing of an elephant on it. There is no actual elephant in the room for me to show you, however you still are able to understand what I meant by “elephant”. The Drawing was a signifier, making present of the elephant (the signified) that was absent, it signified to you, as an interpretant, “elephant”. Every sign is connected to something else, for as Hjelmslev exclaimed, in absolute isolation no sign has any meaning, the meaning only arises in context. The sign is an expression that points to a connection outside of the sign itself, without the external connection, there is no sign.

Hjelmslev also believed that language is a tool in order to create new signs, and not a sign itself. For if a language were not so ordered, it would be a tool unusable for its purpose (to communicate thoughts). The thought here is that with the tools of language such as grammar, letters and phonemes, they are not signs themselves, but rather tool to create new signs that communicate ideas.

Charles Pierce broke the sign down into three parts, the representamen, object and interpretant. The representamen being the meaning of the sign, the object is the sign itself in form and the interpretant is the sense made by the sign, often by the interpreter. The object is what brings into relation the representamen. If the sign did not follow this triadic model, then it was not a sign. Pierce went on to discuss how semiosis was the process of meaning-making, taken from the connotation from the sign. The connotation being the socio-cultural and personal associations produced from the sign through a secondary ideological meaning.

He also took it as a liberty to create a categorical system for signs. Splitting the object of the sign into three, the Icon, Index and Symbol. The icon is an object felt through firstness, it is what you see. The Icon is a sign that is made to resemble its referent through some form of replication, resemblance or simulation. The index is an object felt through secondness, it is what brings something into relation, pointing out something real or imaginary (in temporal special or relational terms). The index is a sign that suggests the absence of something and can be found in examples such as a pointing finger or in words such as “this”, “here”, “I”, “she” and “after”. The third and final Piercean category of object is symbol, which is an object felt through thirdness. It is what one interprets, how the sign elicits meaning. It represents or refers to something in an arbitrary or conventional way: any sign referring to an abstract notion. Any sign can be symbolic because the object has been bound to meaning, therefore can be felt through thirdness.

Roland Barthes is the last semiotician I will speak of in this theoretical presentation. Barthes is a man that had grand ideas on the semiotics of language. Believe that its social aspect is a collective contract which one must accept in its entirety if one wishes to communicate, something which the individual user cannot change on their own. Barthes wrote on that language cannot exist without speech and vice versa, speech being the individual act of selection and actualization through psycho physical mechanisms. Speech is an individual act of language, an act of selecting an actualization of thought.

He had his own beliefs on what the sign is broken down into, being the expression (signifier) that is in relation to the content (signified). He further broke down the sign into denotational (the primary and natural meaning) and connotational (the secondary, ideological meaning) parts of the sign. Barthes describes that since connotative meanings are secondary, always relating to something other, it creates a connotative chain, linking one sign to countless others in context. Similar to how Pierce spoke of how symbols grow as they connect to the development of other signs, adding to Barthes chain of connotation.

Roland Barthes also brought forward Abduction, deduction and induction. Abduction being what allows us to reasonably assess what something is, without knowing for sure. Deduction is the specific conclusion, a logic created by causality. Induction being the already received knowledge, general rules that are learned through acquisition.

In this project I will use structuralism to analyse the print ad as shown on the next page. I will first identify, divide or separate key denotation. Then consider the connotations of that specific denotation, rounding it off by looking for possible congruence of the signifiers and signified. It is believed that ideas are encoded the same way they are decoded, and with this analysis I will be able to see how the creators of the ad encoded meaning through my decoding of the print. However, with Barthes' chain on connotation, I will have to limit how far I take my decoding. Starting with splitting the print into two types of code: linguistic (which will break down the top and bottom text separately) and the visual code (which will be strictly of the girl, the light, the blanket, the cat, the magic 8 ball, the book and the glass, as well as how these codes interact).

INTRODUCTION

The print ad I will be analyzing is one used to promote an American web television series called “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina”. The poster came out before the first season aired, and presumably designed to inform others of the shows existence as well as entice to watch it. The show is streamed primarily on Netflix and is a darker adaptation of the “Sabrina the Teenage Witch” comic series. It takes place in the same universe as the ever popular “Riverdale” Netflix show.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS OF RIVERDALE

CHILLING ADVENTURES OF
SABRINA



26 OCT

NETFLIX

THE LINGUISTIC CODE

The linguistic code of this can be split into two major parts, top and bottom. The linguistic code I will cover are all iconic signs as they are meant to resemble the speech we use. I will first take on the top section and then follow with the bottom, as that is the common American way of organizing things. All linguistic code found on this print ad is in English, suggesting it is targeted towards Anglophones as an English speaking show.

In this section, the top text is “FROM THE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS OF RIVERDALE”. It tells the viewers that the show is created by the same people as Riverdale, an incredibly popular show. This signifies to us that we should expect the same level of quality for this other show, to expect the same amount of popularity as well as to expect similar style of storytelling. Since Riverdale has a cult following, where watchers are expected to have watched the newest episode as soon as possible in order to be able to participate in discussion and avoid spoilers, by mentioning that the show is similar to Riverdale, creators also expect you to carry the same behavior and to watch all available episodes as soon as possible and participate in discussion.

The text for “FROM THE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS OF RIVERDALE” is set in a small white font with a large about of tracking between characters. The White symbolizes peacefulness and innocence in western cultures, hinting at us to trust the producers like we trusted them with Riverdale, that all is good and to welcome this new show. The white is also a sharp contrast to the darkness of the image. The tracking that stretches the breadth of the print is an indexical sign, displaying that the producers too will cover everything there is needed to be done with the show, sending a sense of security.

The second half of the top part is the logo for the show, containing the whole title, “CHILLING ADVENTURES OF SABRINA”. What fascinates me most is the traditionally in titles for stories structures similarly to this (adjective verb of noun) there usually is a “The” precedent to the title, the omission of the “the” hints to me that the “adventures” told in this show is not the conclusive collection of the adventures of Sabrina, which begs the question “what is the conclusive collection of Sabrina’s adventures?” Bringing into relation the comics of which the show is adapted from, but also how Sabrina is a fictional character that can be countlessly adapted and brought on new adventures, hinting at an infinite number of stories.

“Chilling” is an adjective for horrifying, connotating at the dark satanic plots of the show, a contrast to the bubbliness that could be found in the comic, however similar to the dark twists that took place in Riverdale. “Adventures of Sabrina” further describes the plot of the show, how it is of the unusual and exciting activities of

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Sabrina, the main character. Since Sabrina is culturally a girl's name and there is only one girl on the cover, the title indexes that the girl is Sabrina.

The text for "CHILLING ADVENTURES OF SABRINA" is set in a bold red font which is unorthodox and wild in style, appearing to be handwritten with its uneven stroke endings and natural curves. The wildness comes from how hastily the brush strokes appear to be drawn, how close the characters are to one another. "CHILLING ADVENTURES OF" is set in a smaller type than "SABRINA" displaying that the "SABRINA" is of utmost importance where the "CHILLING ADVENTURES OF" is just there to help communicate what "SABRINA" is. The "T" in "SABRINA" is a pentagram instead of the usual dot, further extending the unorthodoxy of the typeface and also symbolising Satanism. By placing the pentagram as part of the name, it indexes that Satanism plays a large role and is a strong part of Sabrina's character.

Red is a colour chock full of meanings, it can be defined as an extreme color, signifying passionate love, violence, anger as well as adventure. It is also the colour of blood and fire, two primal life sources. In addition, Red is a magical and very religious colour. Having the title/logo of the show entirely cast in this colour brings the reader to reinterpret these meanings, all of which are related to the shows plot of satanic witchcraft, teenage romance and defiance.

The brushstrokes are very vertical, pulling the characters up and down, symbolising at the shows unsteady plot of high and low moments. The brush strokes are also indexes, the upward ones bring into relation the text above and the ones that are downwards point further down into the print ad. Some point at other visual codes such as the "R" pointing towards the black cat, both "A"s and the "B" point towards the girl, and the "S" stretches on to point to the left edge of the ad, symbolising that there is something beyond what we see iconically on the poster, perhaps in the show itself.

In the second section, located in the bottom left corner, there is other information about the show, yet not to the story. It is there as an indexical sign telling the viewer of the ad when and where they can go to watch the show. There is minimal information so it heavily relies on the viewer to have a large knowledge of American communicative culture to understand this code. The first part is set in a white text much like the first part of the top section, here there is "26 OCT" this is code telling the viewer that the show will be first released on the 26th day of October, it does not say the year at all so we are left to assume that it is the upcoming 26th of October, which would've been in 2018. The shortening of "October" symbolizes the informality of the event, shortening it so that it is also easier to remember.

Below the date there is the Netflix logo, to tell the interpretant of the print as where to go to watch the show on the release date. The Netflix logo is larger than the creators of the ad deem it as more important than the date. This information would only be conveyed if the reader understood what Netflix was and what relations it could have on the show. The "NETFLIX" is also in a red similar to the title of the show, bringing in the same connotations to the streaming platform.

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THE VISUAL CODE

In the print advertisement we have the photograph of a teenage girl, laying upside down in bed surrounded by a small collection of oddities, including a cat. The image could be classified as a “Demanding Image” as both the girl and the cat are looking out past the fourth wall of the advertisement, luring the viewer in. There is a light cast onto the subject that would otherwise be in a dark area. I will break down these parts of the visual code and describe how they fit into all three of Pierces categories of Object.

The focus of the print as is on the girl, lets call her “Sabrina” as the title suggests she is named. Through the iconic signage, I can dissect that she is lying down over some blanket with her head towards the bottom of the ad and her feet near the top. There is a light cast upon her that appears to be in the shape of a pentagram, with the point right by her head.

Sabrina is wearing black knee socks, a black skirt, and a red sweater. The outfit suggests through symbolization that she is a school girl in the semiformal aura of the attire and especially with the knee socks which has been commonly linked to school girl attire in western cultures. The black colour symbolizes the teenage rebellion, strength, mystery, evil and sophistication of the character, whereas the red brings on the symbolism of passion, energy, danger and power. She accessorised her look with red lips, which is a culturally seductive look, and a gold necklace which she has her hand upon. The way Sabrina is holding the necklace, in addition to having it wrapped around her neck, is an indexical sign that shows there is a strong connection between Sabrina and the necklace, especially as it is the only piece of jewelry we see on her.

The way that Sabrina is laying down is quite fascinating. First off, she is upside down to how people usually are, suggesting that her world is upside down to ours, completely different through being a satanic witch. Her feet stem from the top of the ad and run under the title, creating an indexical connection between the two, all the way down to her head, which is in the bottom right corner, also known as the prime spot for a lasting impression. Fully ensuring the lasting impression by having her face pointed forwards with eyes that appear to be looking right back at you.

Sabrina’s arms are also indexical signs. First with her hand on the necklace spoken of earlier, but then with her elbows. Her right elbow points up back at the title and/or the cat further creating a relationship. Her other elbow brings the viewers path of eye to look at the information in the bottom left text.

There is a light that is cast over the scene in the shape of a pentagram, it is an index sign hinting at a pentagram shaped light source above Sabrina, possibly a window. This seems to be the only source of light in the scene, as everything else is cast



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in a navy darkness, similar to that of night. Which further indexes that the scene is during night time, where the light is coming from the moon. The entire pentagram is not captured in the advertisement, signifying that it extends beyond what we see here. One of the points that is the defining difference between pentagram and pentacle (where the star points) is pointing downwards, as if to Hell. The point is also right by Sabrina's head, symbolising that she is with Hell as well.

Below everything is a blanket, it appears to be a worn cream coloured blanket with red, black and gold border of small flowers along with a black tassel hem. It looks beloved through use and card for as it was delicately laid out before being laid on. The cream white colour is a contrast from the overload of red and black we have been getting, the colour symbolizes innocence, purity, safety and perfection. When the blanket is below the character, it seems to be the base which the character was built upon. The innocence could be related to what Sabrina's character is now, or when combined with the ages appearance of the blanket, what Sabrina used to be more like. The sense of safety is an extension of how comfortable Sabrina looks, it is as if Sabrina feels safe with these satanic objects surrounding her. The purity and perfection could be further symbolizations of Sabrina's character. The little red and black flowers in the border creates a sense of dainty femininity, however it becomes an oxymoron as they are painted in such strong and fierce colours such as red and black. The gold details symbolise a sense of value to the product, possibly



sentimental as the blanket seems to have been near and dear to Sabrina for a long time. The black tassel hem is like a border of black around the contents of the image, trapping the contents in a state of evil, it is also an index as the tassels point out of the print ad, deepening our curiosity to see what is beyond this scene.

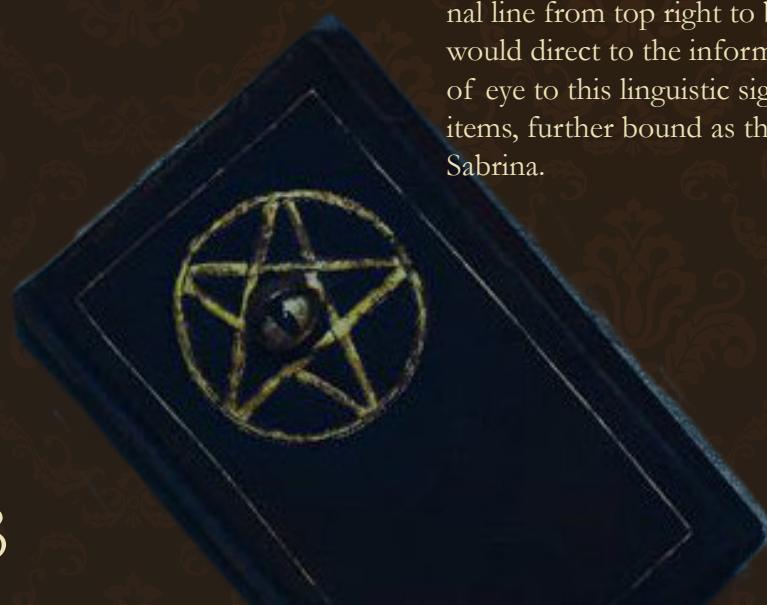
There is a cat near the top right of the image. A black cat has been culturally bound to be the familiar of a witch or a form which the devil often takes. If the cat is the witches familiar, and Sabrina was a witch, it would signify that Sabrina takes great care in this cat and the cat takes care of Sabrina. Their close relationship is shown with their close proximity on the scene to one another. Black cats are superstitiously linked to bad luck in western cultures, however good luck for a witch (lets not forget that Sabrina's world is upside down to ours). Its paw points downwards, just like the pentagram and Sabrina's head, creating its own connection to hell. The tail of the cat circles and eventually points back to itself, creating and indexical sign of repetition. The cat is looking up and through the fourth wall of the advertisement, much like Sabrina, adding to the Demanding sense of the image as well as adding a humanizing touch to the cat. Which bring the symbolic relation of the cat from the Archie comics, or the Sabrina the Teenage Witch tv show which features a funny talking cat. This character was a common favourite in the comics and old tv show, by including it on their poster its creators hope to lure back to fans to this new show.

Back to the lower left side we have the Magic 8 ball, an object that indexes towards a possible plot point but also back in time as a nostalgic piece, added in order to lure those who enjoy nostalgia, especially as Sabrina was created in a comic series that was popular around the time the Magic 8 ball was. The ball also symbolizes chance and ques-



tions that require answers. It signifies that there will be a role of risk in the shows' plot. Since in the image we see the "8" side of the ball but now the windowed side, it signifies that the answers to our questions are not so easily known.

Below the Magic 8 ball is a black book with gold details, much like the one you are holding now. There is a golden pentagram on the cover with an eye in the middle. The cover of the book leads us to think that it is a satanic book, possibly filled with witchy spells. The eye on it also looks out and past the fourth wall, however the singular eye in the middle of the pentagram could be a beasts or the devil's eye there to watch us. How Sabrina keeps the book close suggests that she studies it regularly, yet how it is right by the magic 8 ball suggests that Sabrina searched for answers from both equally.



The last iconic sign I will analyse individually in this paper is the golden chalice or bell that's in-between the cat and Sabrina. With its moon engraving and moon handle, it symbolises that is it a tool for witch ritual. Witches are known to be creatures of the night. The positioning of the chalice/bell indexes that it was or will be used soon as well as further connects the cat and Sabrina with a near horizontal imaginary line.

Speaking of imaginary lines, it is as if the objects of cat, chalice, the teenage girl, the magic 8 ball and the book are aligned in a diagonal line from top right to bottom left, if we were to extend the line it would direct to the information in that corner, creating another path of eye to this linguistic sign. The line also creates a unity of these items, further bound as they are all placed within the pentagram with Sabrina.



SYNTHESIS

From linguistic to visual code, the meanings are not most similar. The linguistic code carries meaning of information related to the show, communicating level of quality and the style of the show through the iconic title logo. The logo carries the most similar meanings to the visual code, however that may be attributed to how it is partially also a visual code as well ad the linguistic. The meanings they share is a sense of excitement, darkness and satanism.

The visual code is able to carry much more meaning through symbolism, going with the phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words”. Beyond the excitement, darkness and satanic the visual code communicates tones of youth and teenage rebellion, a sense that the world is upside down relative to ours, seductivity and fierceness with the start contrast of innocent origins. Risk and ritual, nostalgia and the night. All communicated with the satanic cherry on top that is cast over and a part of everything. The visual code manages to signify further what the plot of the show entails, enticing the interpreter to learn more where as the linguistic communicates how they can find the show.

In this analysis i have discovered the code the creators were trying to communicate to us through decoding the smaller signs which were composed in this larger sign of the print ad. The sign is very effective in how it manages to accurately and quickly convey to the viewer that the show is about and important information on how to access the show really well. As someone who has watched the show, I have found the signs to be true to the plot. In review of the print ad after having this information, it was fascinating to see how they encoded these themes into the print ad.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the print advertisement for the web tv show, Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, successfully communicates and allures viewers to watch the show with this demanding image. There was use of the the linguistic code and the visual code where their meanings had some overlap and together they were able to powerfully deliver the message about the show. It is evident that when creating an advertisement as such, the signs they use are selectively chosen and placed, as when done right, together they can deliver a forceful message, like that of Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, leaving an impression on the interpretant of the sign.

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