

# Symbolic Relationships in Advertisements

Costin Popescu

University of Bucharest, Romania

costinpopescu@rdslink.ro

## Abstract

The advertisements prepare to the products they recommend a rich symbolic life. What symbolic breadth can be bestowed to a product? Do different product categories require different symbolic breadths? For some products, creatives want to eliminate every hesitation in the interpretation of the proposed meanings; for others, by the contrary, they propose blurred readings, content-nebulas (U. Eco).

Advertising witnesses different symbolizing modes. The advertisements for fragrance prefer modes which, deploying content-nebulas, ask their readers to give several – and complex – interpretations. The paper presents an interpretation of an advertisement for *Boucheron's Jaipur* (the 1990s) and proposes another.

**Keywords:** symbolic relationship, positioning, values, icons

## 1. Introduction

The term *symbol* helps us throw light on an important part of the difficulties we have in integrating the world. And since the diversity of aspects this integration implies is huge, the term has acquired a wide extent and many senses. How do they circulate in advertising?

There is, in the history of commerce, a moment when, on a large scale, the products start to be presented as symbols. At the beginning of modernity, food is sold by cutting out small pieces from hunks, slabs, etc.: a wedge of cheese out of a block, two pounds out of a huge fish, etc. Different tools are bought at the fairs, clothes and shoes are made by tailors or shoemakers to measure. The symbolic potential of all these objects is unexploited. But some producers start to brand their products – by doing this, they diminish the retailers' power (retailers buy the cheapest products from producers, to be sure to sell in their turn to their customers). (Brierley, 1995: 11) Packaged products arrive in good condition to their consumers (biscuits, for example, do not crumble anymore) and, often, determine the latter to constantly ask for the former. Branded, the product is easier to be required to the retailer, who becomes interested in making stocks. The retailer does not recommend anymore what he wants, but tries to accomplish the consumer's wishes. Even more, the branded product compels the producer to guarantee it a constant quality. And the growing competition in every product category leads to better quality.

Comes a time when producers become numerous and their goods similar. To differentiate their goods, producers start to transform the products they make into symbols, to link them to ever more values (Brierley, 1995: 11). These trends get consistency at the beginning of the 20th century; from now on, the brands try to distinguish themselves by systematically incorporating a symbolic life. Those who detain them try to control as strongly as possible the transformation by advertising of the products into symbols.

All the authors point to the differences in the ways symbols are understood, whatever theoretical field they come from. For Gabriel Liiceanu, for example,

In contrast with conventional symbols, simple "contingent signals of a signified thing" "[G. Durand], thus *unequivocal* ways to signify, the symbol as product of artistic intelligence would be characterized not by the sharp establishment of signification, but by its *multiplication* [G. Shapiro]. And whereas the logician specifies from the beginning what a symbol means during the whole research, thus creating a public accuracy of the symbol, the artist creates symbols with inexhaustible potential of semantic energy. (Liiceanu, 2005: 35)

This is possible because the symbolic mode "conceals its own potential for meaning behind the deceptive appearance of something inexplicably obvious." (Eco, 2005: 143) We thus deal with an expressive element that establishes a relationship, the symbolic relationship, with a specific

content. Every term of this relationship, even if linked to the other, is available for other relationships too. The dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit *and* of peace. Symbols for peace are the dove (early Christianity) *and* the olive branch (attribute of Eirene, Greek goddess of peace). The interpretation of a symbolic relationship is made considering contextual and circumstantial selections. (cf. Eco, 1979: 105)

The symbolic mode requires a strong involvement:

It is a characteristic of the symbol that it remains indefinitely suggestive: everybody sees in it what his or her visual force lets him or her see. In the absence of insight [force to go beyond appearances – C.P.], nothing profound is perceived. (Oswald Wirth, apud Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1994: XV)

We thus conclude that a symbol – conventional or artistic – must be shared. Target audiences are taught the reasons to use products and services by symbolizing. Nowadays, preferred are the symbols able to associate as many persons as possible, symbols with a strong federative force (Riou, 2006: 86). Perfection one reaches by huge efforts is less federative than freedom or uniqueness.

In symbols, we have seen, G. Shapiro considered multiplication of meaning. We can ask ourselves: what meanings does advertising convey? These meanings are euphoric (advertising talks to individuals “about themselves, praising them according to the seductive circuit “(Volli, 2008: 113)) and come from not too numerous axiological fields: security, adventure, eroticism, exoticism, individual excellence, status, demiurgy (products reflecting technological progress symbolize the creative power – considered as infinite – of mankind) ... (Popescu, 2005: 35). The multiplication of meanings in the symbolic messages of advertising follows some well-defined directions. And this orientation of the symbolic relationships toward certain axiological fields is facilitated by the cooperation between visual and verbal languages.

## **2. Practices of advertising**

The practice of advertising uses different ways of symbolizing.

### **2.1. Visual symbolic potential stressed by verbal commentaries**

The simplest is the presentation of the product image whose symbolic potential is stressed by the verbal commentary.

*Constellation*, watch by *Omega* (Figure 1), is a symbol of individual excellence (*When you know your worth*, says the headline). The short text placed near the icon of the watch (*Omega Constellation. Ladies' watch in 18 k gold. Scratch-resistant sapphire crystal. Water-resistant. Swiss made since 1848.*) pertains to the descriptive kind. But in the advertisement, near the headline, the slogan, and the icon of the watch – its reflection on the reflecting surface is the Greek letter *omega*, symbol of perfection –, the descriptive elements become arguments for excellence. *Omega* has associated its products to excellence long before the *Constellation* watch; now it refreshes a well-known link.

An advertisement for *Chivas Regal* having for headline *To the host it's half empty, to the guest it's half full* (Figure 2) shows on a dark monochrome background a bottle sufficiently turned around to let beholders see it is half empty. The whisky is fine: guests hurry up to drink it, hosts panic at the idea that there will be no whisky to pour. The former sees the full half of the glass (well, of the bottle), the latter – the empty half. *Chivas Regal*, the headline helps us understand, is the symbol of a quality nobody can stay away from (even if it is not polite to drink the host's bottles to the bottom). The icon of the bottle is placed in the vertical axis of the visual field, privileged position. The monochrome background facilitates the convenient perception of the form.



Figure 1.  
Omega's Constellation



Figure 2.  
Chivas Regal

## 2.2. Product's icon as part of a network of forms

Another way of symbolizing puts the icon of the product in a network of forms; thus, the product takes profit of the network's symbolic aura (certainly, on the one hand, the other forms' symbolic relationships are already recognized and validated in society, on the other hand, the symbolic mechanism – the association between a material entity and an abstract meaning – is very early assimilated by all the individuals in their lives).

In the image of an advertisement for *Godiva* (Figure 3), chocolates take the place of jewels. Here is the copy: *Et si les pralines Godiva ne s'achetaient pas au poids mais au nombre de carats. Chaque pièce délicatement précieuse, praline d'exception, semble ciselée par un maître-joaillier et renferme des saveurs exquis.* (You don't buy Godiva chocolates by the pound but by the number of carats. Each piece of exceptional praline seems delicately crafted by a master jeweler and contains exquisite savours.)

The chocolates force their position in the symbolic universe near the jewels, near the precious stones, in order to borrow fine meanings from them. Because

the jewel is not only the precious stone in its natural condition; it is a stone that has been crafted and mounted, a jeweler's and a goldsmith's work, and the persons who has ordered or chose it. It is the moment when an alliance between soul, knowledge and energy is made, and the jewel symbolizes the person who wears it and the society that appreciates it. The whole personal and collective evolution is thus involved in the specific interpretation of jewels. (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1994: 124)

Visually, the symbolic "infiltration" of the chocolate becomes intelligible with the help, on the one hand, of a contextual element (the casket) and, on the other hand, of the allusion to the way jewels are presented in the advertising images (a jewel in the casket, other pieces of jewelry nearby, on a background with color / brightness gradient). Verbally, the term *précieux* (precious) helps the beholder avoid every possible error when interpreting the substitution.

At the beginning of the 1990s, *Nokia* spread advertisements (with headlines as *Dichiarazione di futuro* – Statement about the future, *Godetevi il futuro* – Enjoy the future, *Chiamate il futuro* – Call the future, *Siate curiosi del futuro* – Be curious of the future) to introduce PCs, telephones, telecommunication tools, etc. In the image of one of these advertisements (Figure 4), a baby considers very closely a mouse (he is about to touch it). And if, as an advertisement copy starts, *il futuro è il bambino di adesso* (the future is the child of right now), it seems obvious that the mouse attracts not a child, but the future. *Nokia* portrays itself as a symbol of the future, made

luminous by technology.

The advertisement for *Nokia* announces what remains to be proved as the general strategy of advertising: linking the products to attractive meanings, it hopes to impose new symbolic relationships, to give them the prestige of symbolic relationships that have proved their strength for centuries. Behind the new symbols shown in the images there are old gratifying abstractions (future, passion, comradeship, etc.).

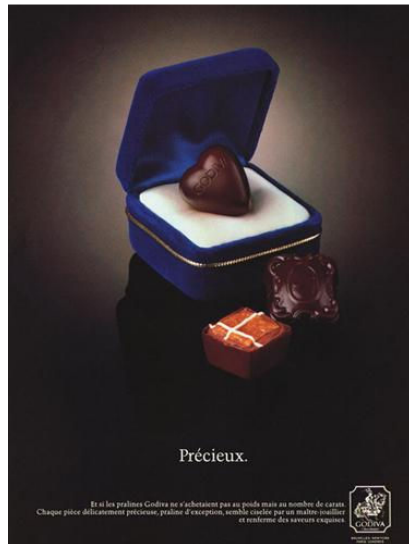


Figure 3  
*Godiva's pralines*



Figure 4  
*Nokia: Siate curiosi del futuro*

In some situations, the decoder of the message finds it is not easy to interpret the new symbolic relationship where the icon of the product and the icon associated to it are placed as expressive terms. The latter icon does not quickly and easily remind its symbolic relationships culturally validated (as the child of tender age does, linked to hope and future). A series of advertisements for *Ebel* (the slogan of the campaign is *The architects of time*) puts the case of a watch on natural elements of different consistency, but of comparable resistance: the body is separated from a rock (Figure 5), surrounded by water drops... Nota bene, this is not a completed watch (with case, dial, hands...), but a case. Are we invited to think that dial and hands will be added, metaphorically speaking, by the person wearing the watch? Is this a way to indicate that time becomes *his* or *her* time, and that its flow is *markedly subjective*?



Figure 5  
*Ebel: The architects of time*

Stone and water, as every element usable as a symbol, have different symbolic valences, and the one used in the advertisements for *Ebel* is not the most common. Stone symbolizes hardness and

absence of life, water is a symbol of life, of purity. The advertisements for *Ebel* confirm the complexity of symbols, stressed earlier (Eco, Liiceanu): do we deal with a value – eternity – we can long for, a meaning that stone and water do not select easily, quickly for their symbolic relationships (and thus the watch integrates durable matters)? or do we deal with an invitation to continue, we who use the watch, the work of architect of time assumed by its producer (the watch will be completed by us, in our own manner)? or...

### 2.3. Iconic network claimed by the brand

Another way of symbolizing is the presentation in the advertisements, sometimes with (short) verbal commentaries, of a visual network bringing together different icons, but not the product's; its icon (placed near the image or overlapping it), the logo or both indicate who claims the symbolic relationship proposed. The advantage of this technique is that the product is withdrawn from the ideological forefront of the message.



Figure 6  
*Havana Club, brand of rum*



Figure 7  
*Success. It's a mind game (TAGHeuer)*

The headline of an advertisement for *Havana Club* (Figure 6) is *In Havana, it's not your shoes people look at, it's your feet*. Every visitor of Havana attracted by the exuberance of its music and dance, by their eroticism (the shoes, red, stress the elegance of the feet; and the woman has a partner), can pronounce these words. But there is a brand of rum that pronounces them, and it claims the role of symbol of exuberance and eroticism. To force the acceptance of the symbol, the headline and the image communicate the same idea.

*Success. It's a mind game* is the headline of a campaign for *Tag-Heuer*: advertisements in which a runner leaves behind greyhounds, a swimmer is faster than sharks... Success is thus a matter of determination and know-how. The baton of a relay team, in fact a dynamite baton, cannot be thrown away, the team would be disqualified, it has to be carried till the end of the race – and before it explodes (Figure 7). If things go the way we all wish, success is the effect of will, speed and knowledge, a combination everybody dreams of. The watches declare themselves symbols of these reunited qualities.

In time, advertisers may vary the symbolic relationships. Since the hierarchy of values, a society uses is subject to changes, the meanings attached to symbols change in their turn. In the 1950s and 1960s, *Pepsi* had another target audience than it has now (established after the youth movements from the end of the seventh decade of the last century (Danesi, 2006: 107)).

In an advertisement for *Pepsi-Cola* from the 1950s (Figure 8), a man gives a woman a record. On the ground, there are some sandwiches and two bottles of *Pepsi-Cola*. The copy says it is

nice to have a modern woman around; she is slim (she eats lighter food and drinks “never too sweet“, “refreshing without filling“ beverages) and likes... jazz (by the floor lies the cover of the record, where one can read *jazz*). *Pepsi-Cola* symbolizes dynamism, modernity.



Figure 8  
Pepsi advertisement in the 1950s



Figure 9  
Pepsi poster in the 2000s

In 2004, in the streets of Bucharest there were posters urging *Live for now* (Figure 9). In the “districts” (confined areas) that make up the visual field (Lynch, *apud* Arnheim, 2009: 51) we see teenagers on the beach, scenes from pop concerts, the icon of the product and details with the drink in a glass, with ice cubes. *Pepsi* symbolizes now the intensity – highest – with which young people must live every moment of their lives. Different music, different meaning of modernity, different reasons to drink...

The polyvalence of the symbolic expression can be considerable in the visual artefacts. Certainly, advertising, a field of symbolic production, shows symbolic relationships of different complexity. The advertisements for fragrance are especially prone to high complexity.

### 3. Boucheron's Jaipur: interpretations

Toward the mid-1990s, *Boucheron* launched *Jaipur* (Figure 10). Its advertisement was commented as it follows by Messaris (Messaris, 1997: 27):

the view from the back is likely to acquire a sexual dimension. Whereas the exposed flesh of the person in the image may arouse the viewer's sexual curiosity, the rear view denies that viewer a fuller look. In this context, then, the rear view becomes a means of attracting the viewer's eye through the power of suggestion. [...] In the Jaipur ad, the woman is naked, and the unusually shaped perfume bottle actually encircles her hands, imparting a hint of kinkiness to the image.

Messararis compares then the advertisement for *Jaipur* to an advertisement for *Chivas Regal* where a woman looks at the sea and cradles a bottle in her hands, behind her back (the dress exposes her shoulders and back):

In both cases [...] there is a suggestion of an interaction with someone whom we do not see. So here, the rear view becomes doubly intriguing. It creates interest not only in the women but also in the men with whom they are presumably interacting, and yet it gives us a limited view of the former and no view of the latter.

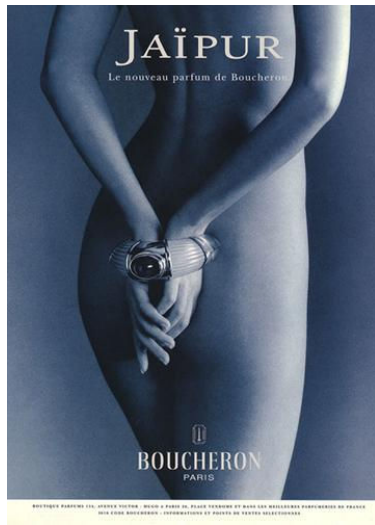


Figure 10  
*Boucheron's Jaipur*



Figure 11  
*Vanessa Paradis for Chanel*

Before commenting this interpretation, let's recall two conceptions – (i), (ii) – on the visual artefacts. According to (i), the elements brought together in the visual artefact must integrate, its global meaning is generated by a network uniting all of them. According to (ii), these elements maintain a certain autonomy, the relationships between them do not explain the whole semanticism that the elements bring in the artefact (there are components in them that do not contribute to a general meaning). Thus, several symbolic relationships can exist in the same visual artefact, and not all the elements of it must be engaged in every relationship. It follows that the symbolic links get more numerous and that interpretative richness grows too (if not the interpretative confusion also).



Figure 12  
*The nutcracker in Cincinnati*

In other words, depending on his or her intellectual formation, on his or her aesthetic education, on the period when he or she lives, the beholder searches in the visual artefact he or she contemplates for either an integrated symbolic relationship, able to satisfy a single interpretative direction, or a suite of symbolic relationships with accumulations that take him or her on different interpretative directions (the effect can be an interpretative wandering supposed to bring satisfactions).

An Associated Press photograph shows four dancers in *The nutcracker* in Cincinnati (Figure 12). The four forms dance; even if their movements are not identical and simultaneous, as we expect, they have enough grace. They have beauty. The expression of the woman in the center shows the intense pleasure dance can bring. This symbolic relationship weaves close meanings: grace, youth, happiness, eroticism... The image evokes the first conception on symbolic

relationships.

An advertising from the 1990s (*Coco. L'esprit de Chanel*) for *Coco*, fragrance by *Chanel*, shows a woman (Vanessa Paradis) on a pedestal with stairs (Figure 11). Wearing a kind of feathered dress, the woman embraces a huge bottle of perfume. A red rope is tied around her left ankle. Danesi opens the listing of the possible interpretations of the advertisement with these words: "The number of subtextual meanings suggested by the text is unquantifiable." (2006: 73) He retains four: a) the *Coco* name evokes cocaine, narcotic and aphrodisiac; in different slangs, women are called *birds*, *stuffing a bird* means "having sex with a woman"; the fragrance seems to allow women "to be sexually wild and inhibited"; b) women, especially tied to a rope, are "pets", "maintained" ("enslaved") by men in search of sexual amusement; c) the woman is a "sexual slave", "the rope tied around her ankle had a spermatozoid shape, although it was colored red – a symbol of female sexuality" (73); the fact of being barefoot is suggestive "of the female's biological role as mother and as an earth-bearer"; she holds the bottle next to her face and breast, as she would a child; the woman juxtaposes eroticism and modesty ("her slightly turned bodily orientation, concealing her private parts, was suggestive of modesty"); d) the advertisement is "a work of surrealist art – the art form that attempts to express the workings of the subconscious through fantastic imagery and the incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter." (74) Nothing about the pedestal.

Interpreted as it was by Danesi, the image evokes the second conception on the visual artefacts; for him, the woman with the bottle is a symbol of sexual wilderness and of maternity. We may certainly ask ourselves if the creators of such artefacts intend to make them complex expressions of pluri-symbolisms, more or less coherent.

Danesi considers the name of the fragrance, *Messaris* ignores it. Or, its participation at the symbolic meaning of the advertisement is very important. Jaipur is the capital of Rajasthan (Land of Kings), India's largest state. The term, which can inspire more or less conventional representations of India, can be analyzed in French as made by a lexical variation of *jaillir*, to spring, and *pur*, pure. Let us retain the spring of purity.

And the blue light that bathes the whole visual field. In their researches on the meanings of the chromatic associations, Wright and Rainwater (who used five descriptors: happiness, elegance, warmth, forcefulness, and showiness) (Groupe  $\mu$ , 1992: 235-236) noted that saturated blue communicated "elegance". To what meanings can elegance be more easily linked?

The woman's body, naked. It seems obvious, the first meaning people establish nowadays for nakedness is of sexual nature (the fact determined a student at the University of Bucharest to write in 2015 a graduation paper with a polemic title: *Eroticism without skin*, without naked bodies). This perspective is in a certain measure a deviation from a much anterior perspective and culturally more fertile: a body expresses the *whole* character of a human being, the *living* unity (hence, the *eros*) between physical and spiritual. Commenting the way Greeks conceived the nude and expressed it sculpturally, Kenneth Clarke notes that

no nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling, even though it be only the faintest shadow – and if it does not do so, it is bad art and false morals. (Clarke, 1959: 29)

And, because the art historian makes the difference between naked body and nude (Clarke, 1959: 23), we have to ask ourselves what we see in the advertisement for *Jaipur*. In the ancient times, the nude told a process of essentialization; we have liberated ourselves from passing things, from contingency, we are better prepared to recognize what we really are at a higher, profound, level of existence, beyond the variety of our evolutions in *this* world. When represented on coins as gods, the Roman emperors had their torso naked ("heroic nudity") and the forehead defined by the laurel wreath or the radiate crown. (Babelon, 1950: 136) That is probably why we should not consider the body from the *Jaipur* advertising as a simple erotic-sexual stimulus.

#### 4. Conclusions and final questions

Its arms and hands help us understand how we could consider it. If the bottle makes us think at handcuffs, we will ask ourselves why the arms are so separated from the body and if the wrists have enough freedom to let the palms partially superpose. The degree of separation of the arms from the body evokes the separation of the wings from the body of the bird ready to take flight; the superposed palms indicate the way birds keep their wings when they do not fly: either on the lateral parts of their bodies, or partially superposed on their dorsal part. Is it possible to imagine a woman as a bird? A bird soars upwards, it defeats gravitation. If matter is attracted toward magnetic centers, the spirit flies, soars, floats, defeats the gravitational force. Does a woman wish to spiritualize? If our answer is positive, we meet the purity in the name of the Indian city / of the perfume. (That we are not wrong when linking nudity also to essentialization (= spiritualization) is proved by the advertisements for other brands from *Boucheron*; on the one hand, they avoid nakedness, on the other hand, they sometimes evoke the mythical-spiritual heritage of humanity).

What place for the bottle? If the name of the perfume does not have anything to do with the image and its meaning, the bottle around the woman's wrists is likely to produce, as Messaris puts, *a hint of kinkiness*. Is that a sign of sadism (bondage)? What does *kinkiness* make us think at? If we try to attract the name of the perfume in a symbolic relationship, the naked body tends to become a nude, becomes spiritualized (Messaris never uses *nude*, he writes *naked* twice; *nudity* appears once, but *nudity* is more common than *nakedness*; we finally can accept in the image a hint of spiritualization if we recall the force of sexual meanings, nowadays prominent, in a front-view of an unveiled body).

May we consider the perfume a symbol for spiritualization? May we consider its use a liberation by flight (spring)? The idea of spiritualization is put into difficulty by the bottle (handcuffs). But perhaps the bottle simultaneously indicates a) the fact that, before spiritualization, the woman is a prisoner, and b) the instrument bound to liberate the woman from flesh is the perfume.

Is it possible to accept, in the advertisement for *Chanel*, such an irregular accumulation of symbolic relationships, as to see in the visual artefact maternity *and* sexuality, modesty *and* sexual wilderness? Is an advertisement entitled to accumulate as many symbolic relationships as the recommended product and its icon can develop, in association with other objects (and icons), ignoring the contextual pressure? Is it possible to establish a coherence level below which the visual artefact should be considered as failed?

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