



According to the Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman, every aspect of a work of art is important. Taking this notion as a point of departure, this chapter analyzes in detail a print advertisement for Fidji perfume, considering 17 different semiotic signs found in the ad. The advertisement is also analyzed paradigmatically; that is, the polar oppositions that it suggests are discussed. In addition, a psychoanalytic interpretation of the advertisement and its symbols is offered. Finally, an aside on moisturizers and women's fears is followed by a brief discussion of perfume and anxiety.

# 7

## The Maiden With the Snake

### *Interpretations of a Print Advertisement*



- Hamlet:* Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?  
*Polonius:* By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.  
*Hamlet:* Methinks it is like a weasel.  
*Polonius:* It is backed like a weasel.  
*Hamlet:* Or like a whale?  
*Polonius:* Very like a whale.

William Shakespeare,  
*Hamlet*, act III, scene ii

In this chapter I offer interpretations of a remarkable print advertisement for Fidji perfume from the perspectives of semiotic analysis, paradigmatic analysis, and psychoanalytic theory.

## ❖ SIGNS IN SIGNS: A PRIMER ON APPLIED SEMIOTICS

I would like to offer an analogy that might be useful here. When you are acting as a “practicing semiotician,” think of yourself as being like Sherlock Holmes or some other detective investigating a crime. The detective is looking for clues, and everything is potentially significant. Remember what Pierce said: “The universe is perfused with signs, if not made up entirely of them” (quoted in Zeman, 1977). And as Yuri Lotman (1977) has explained, everything in a work of art is important.

The difference between the detectives in crime novels and the readers of those novels is that the detectives don’t miss important signs that readers gloss over. In novels, these important signs are frequently buried in descriptions, to which readers ordinarily pay little attention. So, let me ask: What might be important in a print advertisement or a radio or television commercial? What is important in any text? (In scholarly discourse about works of art of all kinds, the subjects of analysis are generally referred to as *texts*.) The answer—as Peirce would tell us—is everything!

It is possible to make a distinction between the sign/advertisement and the signs, semiotically speaking, found in the advertisement. For purposes of this discussion of advertisements from a semiotic perspective, it will be useful to think of each signifier within an ad as an elemental sign, or *signeme*—a fundamental sign that cannot be broken down any further. For example, a bottle of champagne is in itself a sign, but within that sign are such signemes as bubbles, foil, the cork, and the way the champagne gushes out of the bottle when the cork is popped.

Following is a list of important nonverbal signemes. This list does not, of course, cover all possible signemes to be found in print advertisements, television commercials, or any other visual texts, but it suggests some of the most commonly found signemes. Depending on the particular text, all of these signemes can have varying degrees of importance.

Hair color  
 Hairstyle  
 Eye color  
 Facial structure  
 Body type

Age  
 Gender  
 Race  
 Facial expression  
 Body language  
 Makeup  
 Clothes  
 Style of eyeglasses  
 Earrings and other body adornments  
 Setting  
 Relationships implied  
 Spatiality  
 Occupations  
 Activities going on  
 Background  
 Lighting  
 Sound effects, music  
 Typefaces in text  
 Design  
 Color

Verbal signemes may include the following:

Words used  
 Questions asked  
 Metaphors and similes  
 Associations (metonymy)  
 Negations made

Affirmations offered
Arguments and appeals made
Slogans
Headlines
Paradoxes generated
Tone
Style

Keep in mind that a word is a kind of sign, and that the definition of a word is based on convention and must be learned. This is, at least in part, why dictionaries are always being revised.

#### ❖ THE MAIDEN IN PARADISE: A CASE STUDY

Let's take an interesting print advertisement as a case study in applied semiotic analysis. The advertisement we will examine, for Fijii perfume, appeared a number of years ago in many fashion magazines (see Figure 7.1; although the ad is reproduced here in black and white, it appeared in magazines in color). The ad features a photograph that shows part of the face of an apparently Polynesian woman (from just below her nose) who is holding a bottle of Fijii perfume in her curiously intertwined fingers. Her fingernails are red. She has long, dark hair and full red lips (slightly parted), and a yellow orchid is tucked into her hair near her right ear (on the left in the photo). Around the woman's neck is a snake, part of whose body forms something that looks like an infinity symbol. The snake's head points downward, slightly covering the top of the perfume bottle. The lighting is rather dramatic, using chiaroscuro (which means, in essence, both clear and dark): Parts of the photograph are light, whereas other parts, particularly the upper right, are quite dark.

Below, I list and briefly discuss some of the things a semiotician might address in interpreting this advertisement.

*The formal design of the ad.* In the minds of most Americans, formal design (approximating axial balance), simplicity, and spaciousness

Figure 7.1 Advertisement for Fijii Perfume



**Fijii de Guy Laroche**

Dr. Raymond's review of the Fijii Perfume

(a great deal of white or "empty" space) are associated with wealth and sophistication. Advertisements for expensive and "classy" products often are full of white space—that is, they are relatively empty.

*The warm colors.* The ad shows a yellow orchid in the woman's hair and full red lips and fingernails. Red is commonly used to suggest passion.

*The partial showing of the woman's face.* Because only the bottom part of the woman's face, from just above her lips, is visible, it is possible for women viewing the ad to identify with her more easily than if her complete face were shown. The woman's lips are partly open; open lips often are used to suggest sexual excitement or passion. Further, the lighting emphasizes her long and slender neck.

*The woman's ethnicity.* In the popular imagination, Polynesia is connected with fantasies of natural love and sexuality. The French painter Gauguin abandoned France for Polynesia, and many people are familiar with the story of his "escape" to paradise, where people are not burdened with rules and prohibitions (civilization and its discontents).

*The woman's hair.* Dark hair, in American culture, is often associated with warmth, heat, and sexual passion. Women with blonde hair, on the other hand, are often thought of as Nordic and cold, or as innocent and sexually unresponsive. The woman's hair is long, also—something frequently connected in the popular mind with youth and sexual abandon. (This explains all those commercials showing young women, their long hair flying in the breeze, running through meadows toward—presumably—their lovers.) It is quite common for women to cut their hair short when they get older, so they don't have to bother with it as much.

*The name of the perfume.* The name *Fidji* makes the connection between the perfume and Polynesia (and all the connotations that go with it) explicit. The copy in the advertisement reinforces this notion.

*The yellow orchid.* Flowers are the sexual apparatus of a plant, so there is a hint of sexuality in the use of the orchid, which, due to the lighting, is prominently displayed. Also, *flowering* is a word often used to describe a woman's becoming physically developed and, with that, sexually receptive. Flowers are signs of love. Orchids are thought of as rare and delicate and are associated with the tropics.

*The snake.* According to Freudian theory, snakes are phallic symbols by virtue of their shape—an example of iconicity that is used in both semiotic and psychoanalytic interpretation. (I should note that in some countries, a similar advertisement appeared for this perfume, but without the snake.) This image, a woman with a snake around her neck (it has been suggested that the snake in the ad looks like a corn snake) is also found in Piero di Cosimo's portrait of Simonetta Vespucci and other works of art as well—an example of intertextuality (as discussed in Chapter 1), the conscious or unconscious borrowing from one work for another.

The relationship between women and snakes goes back a long way, to the Garden of Eden, and the outcome of that relationship, Adam's

temptation, has been of considerable importance in Western history. One might argue that the snake in the story of the Garden of Eden is the prototypical advertising executive. According to the book of Genesis, "The serpent was more subtle than any beast in the field which the Lord God had made," and he convinced Eve that if she ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil she wouldn't die but her eyes would be opened. After she ate from the tree and convinced Adam to do the same, they were both thrown out of the Garden of Eden, and all kinds of things followed from that expulsion. Eve's excuse was, "The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat." Advertising executives have been beguiling the progeny of Adam and Eve ever since—although they have not been required to slide on their bellies and eat dust.

Another association with snakes is found in the Greek myth of Medusa, one of the Gorgons, whose hair was made of snakes. Any man who looked upon Medusa turned to stone. Hair, this myth suggests, has power.

*The intertwined fingers.* The woman's fingers are intertwined in a rather curious way, with a finger of one hand shown poking between two fingers of the other hand—giving the vague impression of a penis coming between two legs. We find intertwined fingers in some well-known works of art, such as Alessandro Botticelli's *Primavera*, so there is another intertextual relationship that might be considered.

*The bottle.* The perfume bottle has a large stopper and is shown with strong highlights that run across it. A vertical black line runs down the middle of the bottle and a horizontal black ribbon is wrapped around the neck of the bottle, below the stopper.

*The woman's nakedness.* The woman is not wearing any clothes, which reinforces the photo's paradisiacal image. Before Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, they were naked, and nakedness is associated in Western consciousness with innocence (and in the case of nudists, for example, with a desire to regain the innocence of paradise). Curiously enough, we do not see any indication of the woman's breasts—they seem to have been airbrushed out. Showing breasts might suggest maternity and related matters, which would not be conducive to fantasies of primordial sex with a natural (read "uninhibited") woman. Showing breasts is much different, I would argue, from showing cleavage and subtly indicating breasts—which is a sexual turn-on for men.

*The use of French.* The text of the ad is all in French, which is undoubtedly used because of its metonymic qualities—because Americans tend to associate the French with style, sophistication, and sexiness (whether any of these associations reflect reality is beside the point). The French language also acts as a means of separating those with refinement and “class,” who know French (or at least can understand the French that is used in this advertisement—which is not very difficult), from the “masses.”

*The copy.* In the upper right-hand corner of the advertisement, in relatively small type, we see “Fidji: le parfum des paradis retrouvés.” I would translate this as “Fidji: the perfume of paradise regained (or rediscovered).” You really don’t have to know French to understand most of the headline. The key French that it helps to know is *retrouvés*. The phrase “paradise regained” is one that people with any degree of education are familiar with. So even if they don’t know what *retrouvés* means, they can most likely figure it out. Thus a person doesn’t really have to know French or be particularly “sophisticated” to be able to understand the headline.

On the bottle, the words “Parfums Guy Laroche Paris” appear, along with the Fidji logo. The only other verbiage is at the bottom of the ad, on a light band below the image of the woman and the snake, which reads in a roman face “Fidji de Guy Laroche,” and then in small italics, “De la Haute Couture à la Haute Parfumerie,” which translates, roughly, as “From High Fashion to High Perfume.”

There is, then, rather little in the way of copy in this ad. The image of the woman and the snake is used to sell Fidji, rather than any verbal arguments. This style is rather common in perfume ads, because they are selling, in one way or another, fantasies of sexual abandon, parasocial sex, and similar notions.

*The “hidden word.”* The curves of the snake’s body can be seen as forming the letter S; the highlights on the top of the bottle’s stopper, on the top of the bottle itself, and on the bottom of the bottle can be seen as an E; and the woman’s fingers clearly form an X. Thus the word *sex* is hidden, or embedded, in the image and, so some scholars argue, even though people who look at the advertisement may not consciously see the word hidden in the image, they pick it up unconsciously and are affected by it.

*The crucifix.* The vertical black line on the bottle and the horizontal ribbon at the bottle’s neck may be seen as a highly stylized crucifix form,

a bit of symbolism that possibly links the passion of Christ with sexual passion in ordinary people. The way the F in the Fidji logo is designed also vaguely suggests a crucifix.

*The infinity sign.* Part of the snake’s body, where it loops around on the woman’s shoulder, appears to form the symbol for infinity—perhaps an indication of the infinite nature of the passion a woman will generate by wearing Fidji?

*The painted fingernails.* There is something incongruous, one might think, about a “natural” woman, in Polynesia, having brightly painted fingernails. Maybe the subtext of this advertisement is that you can have the best of both worlds—modernity, sophistication (the perfume is French and therefore, in the popular mind, sophisticated), and elegance as well as the kind of guilelessness and passion we associate with the innocent and natural woman. This duality is, in fact, at the core of the advertisement: a natural woman holding a bottle of French perfume. The bottle mediates between the primitive woman “within a woman” and the average woman’s socialized, enculturated, everyday life.

#### ❖ A PARADIGMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE FIDJI ADVERTISEMENT

One of the most famous statements Saussure (1915/1966) ever made explains how people find meaning in their experiences: “Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with other terms of the system.” He adds, “The most precise characteristic [of these concepts] is being what the others are not” (p. 117). In essence, it is the way language works, by forcing us to see differences, that explains how we make sense of things. Meaning is relational, not based on the essences of things themselves.

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1967) developed a method of analyzing myths that involves finding oppositions in them. In this section I adapt this method of analysis, paradigmatic analysis, to an examination of the Fidji advertisement. Let’s look at some of the oppositions generated by the Fidji ad, which suggest what it is not (see Table 7.1). My thesis is that when people look at the ad, they go through the process of generating such oppositions—if they are to find meaning in it.

**Table 7.1** Polar Oppositions Drawn From the Fijii Advertisement

<i>Woman of Color (Polynesian)</i>	<i>White Woman</i>
Nature	Urban society
Escape	Imprisonment
Paradise	Hell
Dark hair	Light hair
Free sexuality	Inhibited sexuality
Magic	Rationality
Fijii perfume	Other perfumes

I am not suggesting that people consciously make a paradigmatic analysis when they see the Fijii ad (or any other advertisement), but if Saussure is correct, and concepts have meaning differentially, viewers of the ad must do something like this on an unconscious level if the advertisement is to make sense to them. The oppositions are, then, implicit in the advertisement.

There is also a good deal of redundancy in the Fijii advertisement, to help get the message across. We see the word *Fijii* three times—in the caption, on the bottle, and in the copy in the upper right-hand part of the ad. Further, the image of the woman with a flower in her hair (like the women in Gauguin's paintings) and the snake reinforce the Fijii-paradise theme. The perfume promises magic—to transport women back to earlier times, before life was so complex, and their lives were so full of everyday bothers—back to when, so we imagine, sexuality was natural and uninhibited. The fact that this primitive maiden is holding a bottle of very expensive French perfume is an irony that, no doubt, is lost on most of those to whom the advertisement is directed.

#### ❖ PSYCHOANALYTIC ASPECTS OF THE FIDJI TEXT

In the semiotic analysis above I have already covered a number of the psychoanalytic aspects of this text, such as the matter of the snake as a phallic symbol. As Freud notes in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1965), "Many of the beasts which are used as genital symbols in mythology and folklore play the same part in dreams: e.g. fishes, snails, cats, mice (on account of the pubic hair), and above all those most important symbols of the male organ, snakes" (p. 392). This

symbolization, he adds, is found not only in dreams, but in other areas as well:

Symbolism is not peculiar to dreams, but is characteristic of unconscious ideation, in particular among the people, and it is to be found in folklore, and in popular myths, legends, linguistic idioms, proverbial wisdom and current jokes, to a more complete extent than in dreams. (p. 386)

So we are always being affected by symbols—in waking life as well as in dreams. These symbols are, from Freud's point of view, disguised manifestations of latent or unconscious thoughts and desires.

Erich Fromm (1957), as I have noted in Chapter 3, reminds us that for Freud these symbols represent either males and females by their shapes or their functions. Flowers and bottles, according to Freud, obviously represent women, so the Fijii advertisement has very female symbols to go along with that preeminent phallic symbol, the snake. Thus it can be argued that the Fijii ad, through its basic symbolization—the snake, the bottle, and the flower—generates very strong sexual fantasies. Attached to these fantasies are the notions we have about paradise, the tropics, innocent passion, and so on, stemming from what we know about Gauguin's life and our exposure to various novels about life in Polynesia.

There is, for many people, an element of anxiety and fear connected with snakes. Among women, this may be tied to unconscious anxieties and ambivalent feelings they have about men's genitals "penetrating" them. Erik Erikson (1968) has suggested, based on his observations of children at play, that women represent an "incorporative" modality and men a "penetrating" modality. (To sum up Erikson's observations in greatly abbreviated manner: The little girls he watched created enclosures, whereas the little boys built towers.) We also find this penetrating/incorporative polarity in electric plugs and outlets, and in other tools and hardware.

#### ❖ AN ASIDE ON MOISTURIZERS AND ANXIETY

Moisturizers also mine the anxieties many women have about their sexuality and fecundity. A considerable amount of cosmetic advertising emphasizes wetness and moisture, generating anxiety in women

that their bodies are continually in danger of becoming dry, arid, and desertlike—that is, devoid of life, infertile, and uninteresting. These ads work to generate anxiety in women about losing their body fluids, which is tied to anxieties they may have about being unable to reproduce or getting older. This, in turn, is connected to matters such as sexuality and desirability. Advertisements for moisturizers create fears that the body is continually “gushing water” and is in danger of becoming a kind of wasteland, a desert. Dehydration becomes a metaphor for loss of sexual attractiveness and capacity—that is, desexualization.

An advertisement that appeared in *Vogue* some years ago, for a product called Living Proof Cream Hydracel by Gemmesse, explained:

Water keeps a rose fresh and beautiful. A peach juicy. All living things living. The millions of cells in your skin contain water. This water pillows and cushions your skin, making it soft and young-looking. But for a lot of reasons, cells become unable to hold enough water. And the water escapes from your skin. (If you'll forgive us, think of a prune drying up and you'll know the whole story.)

Thus a little drama is created and a very powerful metaphor is generated. Advertisements say to women, in effect, “You, who were once young and sweet and juicy, like a plum, face the danger of becoming old and drying up and ending up like a prune, if you don't use our product to moisturize and thus protect yourself.”

#### ❖ FINAL COMMENTS ON PERFUME AND ANXIETY

The other side of the anxiety generated by the snake is that without some kind of magic, a woman will not be able to attract a man, and thus she really needs to use Fidji if she is to have a rich and satisfying sexual life. Perfume advertisements are, deep down, about magic and the fantasy that the power of a particular smell (made of flowers, let us remember) will excite a man and thus lead to some desired form of sexual consummation.

Magic, according to Freud, is based ultimately on the omnipotence of thought. And what is equally interesting is the way magical thinking switches from the motives or goals of a magical act to the means of carrying out the magic. Thinking makes it so, but having magic agents, such as perfume in this case, helps.

We know that aromas do affect us in rather profound ways, so it is not too far-fetched to suggest that certain scents may have the ability to excite people sexually. What may add to the mix is the advertising that makes this argument, over and over again, and associates certain smells with mass-mediated fantasies found in advertisements and commercials.

Perfumes may work, to a considerable degree, on the basis of a “placebo effect.” Wearing perfume may convince a woman that she is sexually alluring, and this confidence may be what is important, not the particular smell (Fidji, Chanel No. 5, Target's best). Could it be that one thing that perfume can do is either mask the “flop sweat” of women who are anxious about whether some man will find them attractive or prevent it by giving them enhanced confidence in themselves? (It is interesting that in most cases the bottles that perfumes come in cost more to make than the perfumes themselves.)

There is something curiously peaceful about the Fidji maiden in paradise with the snake around her shoulders. Her face doesn't reflect any anxiety about the snake, and she holds her bottle of Fidji in her fingers, awkwardly, with a sense of security about herself. Presumably she is wearing Fidji, and thus she need not fear that she will lack companionship. Could it be that Fidji perfume (and every other perfume) is, in mysterious and magical ways, like snake venom—a powerful agent that has an incredible effect on those on whom it is used? But what does this say about women who use perfumes?

#### ❖ STUDY QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What aesthetic considerations should you keep in mind when you analyze advertisements?
2. How is semiotics useful for interpretation of the Fidji advertisement featured in this chapter?
3. Discuss the various signemes in the Fidji advertisement.
4. What is the secret significance of moisturizers?
5. What role does figurative language play in advertising? Consider the role of metaphor in the Gemmesse moisturizer ad mentioned in this chapter.

# MEDIA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

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