

Commercial semiotics : the structuralist (vs culturalist) perspective

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To the average speaker of English, terms such as “structure”, “structuralist” and “structuralism” seem to have an abstract, complex, newfangled, and possibly French air about them : a condition traditionally offering uncontested grounds for the profoundest mistrust.

Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*
(London, Routledge, 1977)¹

A recent misadventure prompted me to embark on writing the present article and share the views that it has inspired me. It made me realise the gap, nay sometimes the abyss, that separates the Anglo-Saxon strand of semiotics (mainly represented in the UK, but also on the other side of the ocean and a few other English-speaking countries) and the continental long standing Greimasian² tradition of the discipline (mainly represented in France, Italy, Switzerland, North Africa and in a number of Latam countries).

Indeed, the word “semiotics”, at least in the marketing and market research arenas, is extremely ambiguous (and should undoubtedly be, at long last, semiotically explored by semioticians themselves in order to stabilise it for good

¹ Quoted by A. Basunti, “Semiotics and marketing in the United Kingdom”, *E/C*, 2005.

² A.J. Greimas was the founder of the “Paris school of semiotics”.

and once and for all...). And one of the problems is that clients who commission semiotic research for the first time sometimes do not even know what they are buying (or simply have a vague idea), and more than often end up either disappointed by the findings or, worse, forever put off by semiotics and semioticians.

Let me briefly tell the anecdote that triggered my wish to share the views that are going to follow. Although it took place within a very tiny academic circle, it is full of lessons when it comes to what the word semiotics vaguely stands for and to the fuzzy remits of a few so-called semioticians. The starting point was an academic research paper that I wrote some time ago about the identity of the MUJI brand and its internal generative logic, such as they can be unearthed and elicited from the strict semiotic analysis of its print advertising campaigns (posters) and its product designs, both exclusively taken as the sole objects under scrutiny³. I had used the methods that Jean-Marie Floch (*the* pioneer in matters of commercial semiotics) so often called upon in many of his brilliant analyses, along with the interactional model recently developed by the socio-semiotic branch of the “Paris School of Semiotics”, whose prominent figurehead is Eric Landowski. The academic and methodological frame of reference was thus very clear (and substantiated in the bibliography), and I demonstrated how the brand ethics (or philosophy) of “emptiness” and its corresponding brand aesthetics (or style) equally manifest in both 2D and 3D signs and are conjointly governed by the same regime of interaction and significance. I then submitted the text to a peer reviewed English-speaking international journal (the name of which I will be considerate enough not to disclose, except the fact that it contains the word « semiotics » in its title⁴, that I was naive enough to take at face value). The outcome of the reviewing process was a real roller-coaster ride.

Two referees had evaluated my work. The first one was enthused up to the point that he asked the journal to request my permission to include the paper in a bibliography that he was intending to hand out to his students for them to read over the next term (one of his laudatory remarks was : “It is an excellent article, with an interesting and original subject, presented in a very logical and sequential development”). The other referee held exactly the opposite view and fired a barrage at me with systematic rebuffs concerning about 90% of the content of the article, that he very disrespectfully, and even offensively tagged as “a string of thoughts jolted [*sic*] on a piece of paper”. The latter’s main line of demolition had to do with the absence of information about the “effectiveness” of the advertising campaign : the lack of figures to substantiate the analysis (percentages of market shares, measures of the coverage and penetration of the campaign, or levels of resulting brand awareness, and so on), the omission of the account of the effects of the campaign on the consumers’ perceptions of the brand, the absence of reference to the “brand myth”, to the “marketing mix variables”, to the brand’s “positioning strategy”, to their “copy strategy” and “MIC plans”, to

3 This article was eventually published in this journal, “The value of emptiness : Muji’s strategies”, *Acta Semiotica*, I, 2021, pp. 67-85.

4 Which doesn’t say much, does it ?

how they count on “brand evangelists” (to spread the brand’s “Gospel”, I guess), etc., etc. In brief : tons of marketing and advertising “facts and figures”. But more importantly, the mortal sin was that I overlooked the key analytical scrutiny of the *cultural* gap between Japan, where the brand originates from, and the rest of the world : in other words, the differences in attitudes and behaviours towards MUJI amongst the local Japanese population (the image of the brand embedded in their minds, that Professor Know-it-all arbitrarily purported to be that of “a discounter, in the same fashion that Ikea is considered a discounter, or Aldi or Lidl”), as opposed to how other cultures perceive and understand it.

Now then, the key (semiotic) question is : what does this mishap *mean* when it comes to precisely defining the perimeter of “commercial semiotics” ? What are the legitimate borders of the semioticians’ remit ? The answers will greatly vary depending on which “cultural” background you come from.

Commercial semiotics was born in France, in the 1970’s, under the influence of Roland Barthes and George Peninou, but it really gathered momentum and flew the nest in the 1980’s, essentially thanks to the remarkable work of Jean-Marie Floch⁵ whose books quickly became big hits, not only locally but also globally, as soon as they were translated into English and other languages. Since then, Floch has been unanimously recognised for having given very powerful insights that laid the foundations for the fruitful development of the application of semiotics to marketing. The subtitle of his first book, *Beneath the signs, the strategies*, was a succinct but precise definition of the semiotic project. In his own words, “*signs do not constitute the actual object of a semiotic inquiry : they are merely surface units in and through which one discovers the play of underlying significations*”⁶. In other words, for the French strand of semiotics, the purpose of an analysis is to dive *inside* signs (whatever their natures), to disassemble them, so to speak, and to take them to pieces in order to understand the internal logic at work between their different components, with a view to describing the mechanisms that produce meaning.

This approach is “structuralist” in essence : it endeavours to discover the underlying organisation (or “structures”) that preside over the advent of signification. It allows to explore a market discourse or a brand discourse in depth and elicit the ideologies, the philosophies, the “hidden agendas” that subtend them and give value and meaning to their offers out there on the market. In this perspective, a brand is viewed as a “small semiotic engine”⁷, with a generative power, whose end-productions : adverts, packs, products, points of sale, etc., obey internal rules that the brand has (intentionally or not) enacted for itself and are therefore specific and even unique to it. From there on, the job of the

5 And his followers : Andrea Semprini, Benoît Heilbrunn, Patrick Hetzel, Giulia Ceriani, Gianfranco Marrone, and many others. About Floch himself, see the dossier “Jean-Marie Floch, un sémioticien pour aujourd’hui”, *Acta Semiotica*, II, 3, 2022.

6 J.-M. Floch, *Marketing, sémiotique et communication. Sous les signes les stratégies*, “Hors du texte , point de salut”, Paris, P.U.F., 1990, p. 5 (our translation, our stress).

7 An expression borrowed from Per Aage Brandt (1944-2021), a regular contributor to this journal. See “A la mémoire de Per Aage Brandt”, *Acta Semiotica*, I, 2, 2021.

semiotician is to bring them to light, in order to allow the marketer to better steer the brand in the long run, and maintain its identity over time and across its diverse expressions, manifested through many other signs that, in their turn, will ideally be chosen or designed to make their components function according to this very same internal logic and system of relation.

On the contrary, in the Anglo-Saxon world, *signs* (and groups of signs, labelled as “codes”) are what is considered as the core of the semiotician’s concerns. They will, for instance, be catalogued by types (symptoms, signals, symbols, icons, indexes, etc.), or segmented by stylistic characteristics (metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches, tropes, etc.). And along this same line, the empirical and social dimensions of signs become of utmost importance, insofar as the notion of *shared code* is viewed, according to most theories of the so called “communication science”⁸, as the necessary condition for any “sender” and “receiver” to effectively interact with one another. This slant taken by commercial semiotics, mostly in the UK but also in the US⁹, led semioticians to depart from the initial continental structuralist project and embark on the tasks of “decoding” and “re-coding” the signs used by marketing discourses.

In that respect, they were greatly influenced by the prevailing British streams of “cultural studies”¹⁰ and “media studies”, and, for instance, started to discriminate codes (i.e. signs) between those that they deemed either residual, dominant or emergent on a given market, with a view to predicting to their clients the future direction into which it would be more effective or differentiating to steer their brands, thus somehow becoming “trend analysts” on top of being semioticians. In order to do so, they necessarily had to consider two things : *i*) start taking into account the broad “context” into which these codes circulate, that is the surrounding “popular culture” in which the actual, physical “senders” and “receivers” participate, and *ii*) also start including in their analyses both the intentions of the former and the perceptions of the latter. In doing so, and under the pretext of having an “empirical, anti-theoretical and anti-intellectual pragmatism”¹¹, the Anglo-Saxon commercial semiotics has been drawn closer and closer to the fields of marketing and advertising themselves, that it is supposed to service with its analyses. This “culturalist” shift somehow blurred the borders between arenas¹², as evidenced by what happened to my research paper at a very early stage of the peer review process rigorously imposed by a prominent international journal of “semiotics”.

At the end of this short comparison, let me clarify one major point : I am not trying to say that one school of semiotics is superior to the other. I am just

8 E.g. Jakobson’s or Shanon and Weaver’s models.

9 Under the influence of Thomas Sebeok, a very business minded scholar.

10 Founded by the academic critic Raymond Williams.

11 M. Evans, quoted by A. Basunti, *art. cit.*

12 Sometimes, the only remaining difference resides in the jargon used by each community : *synchronic* (rather than *contemporary*), *diachronic* (rather than *historical*), *paradigm* (rather than *choice*), *utterance* (rather than *message*), *receiver* (rather than *target audience*), *re-coding* (rather than *innovation*), etc.

observing that under one same tag, “commercial semiotics”, two utterly opposite realities coexist, ignore one another and very seldom converse : one is exclusively concerned with the endogenous features of the object under scrutiny ; the other is more enclined to encompass exogenous data in order to enlighten it from outside, with all the weight of the analyst’s own knowledge of the “pop culture”, the trends in play, the influence of the mass media, etc. etc. In other words, the former uses a microscope, the latter a “macroscope” (if I may use this neologism invented by a French [!] futurologist¹³).

Hence the second referee’s obsession for heaps of peripheral details, extraneous and circumstantial information, entirely extrinsic to the finished objects that I had chosen to analyse. What happened is that my paper was unfortunately evaluated by a so-called semiotician, and that this arrogant scholar, who proved a complete ignoramus with blinkers, missed the whole point by simply mistaking a strictly structuralist semiotic analysis for some sort of clumsy and dubious cultural study about the marketing effectiveness of an advertising campaign.

Under such conditions, what should be done ? My belief is that both schools, instead of competing against one another (cf. my risible misadventure), should try to complement each other insofar as they both look at the same kind of objects (brands, products, adverts, pack designs, etc.) from distinct but compatible angles. There should exist marketing research programmes proposing to use both approaches in order to get the depth and width of analysis respectively provided by each type of semiotic enquiry so that clients can make really thoroughly informed decisions.

The last question is, should they continue to call themselves the same name (use the same signifier for two distinct signifieds) ? In view of my above suggestion, the answer is clearly no. I would therefore simply propose to call “cultural semiotics” the Anglo-Saxon strand of the discipline, and “structural semiotics” the continental Flochian tradition. But, of course, this is up to the international community of commercial semioticians to debate and come to an agreement. Will they be wise enough to manage to do so ? It is my belief and hope that they will sooner or later have to. Otherwise, how will they be able to continue to claim to be “smart and clever” and make their clients pay for their brains and marketing advice ? But alas, in the meantime, the shoemaker’s children will continue to go barefoot.

Key words : commercial semiotics, cultural semiotics, marketing, structural semiotics.

Authors cited : Jean-Marie Floch, Terence Hawkes.

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¹³ Joël de Rosnay, *Le Macroscope : Vers une vision globale*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.