When Seduction Meets Desire
Posters in Fin-de-Siècle à Paris

Liat Kosovich (Kellerman)
The two last decades of the 19th century saw an irrevocable change in the face of all urban centers, not least Paris, the French capital. New colorful advertisement posters, pictures of glowing consumer goods and beautiful girls, called from the city walls to consume and to visit fashionable or popular shows. The enormous quantity of posters threatened to cover every available surface in the city, even public monuments. Indeed, the collector and critic Ernst Maindron pressed the authorities to intervene and regulate the posting of advertisement. For although he obviously enjoyed the new visions, he collected posters, he recognized that the overwhelming exposure to advertisement denied people learned choices and frustrated controlled preferences.

In this contemporary society of spectacle, we surely agree with Maindron and I will show, from an art historian’s perspective, how posters worked. From its modes of attraction and seduction I will present here three interconnected actions. Branding: how posters position the specific product or establishment in the minds of potential clients; the relationships between text and image, the way the verbal and the visual serve as focalizers to one to the other; and finally modes of address: how the posters’ protagonists hail the viewer and tempt him or her to answer the call, which is clearly, the ultimate end of all posters.

The posters varied in style, but their basic mechanisms and most particularly the mechanism of branding was largely identical. The question of branding is to determine how consumers perceive the product, the unique brand. In order to explain this mechanism I will use Roland Barthes’ structural theory as presented in his *S/Z*. Here two observations are needed. One, the theory is somewhat extreme and some scholars even consider it a parody of structuralism, yet I find the Semic code, one of the codes that Barthe suggested, important for the understanding of branding. Two, Barthes uses the codes to analyze the working of literary texts, nonetheless, they can also serves to read advertisements. For Barthes then there are five codes that regulate a text and help readers to understand it. The semic code, or what Barthes calls *sèmes* are sparks of meaning that emerge from the text and attach to elements in the narrative, in order to
set the atmosphere and create a unique character, location or object. For example, if a female character is described as wearing a beautiful dress made of silk, the adjective that comes to mind and attaches to the character is feminine. The reader perceives the woman as feminine even though the adjective ‘feminine’ doesn’t necessarily appear in the text. In posters, adjectives (or semes according to Barthes) emerge from the image and attach to the brand’s name - the product or the establishment, and set the desired connotations in the mind of the potential client.

The advertisement Palais de Glace (1896) designed by Chéret for an ice-skating rink presents an ice-skating couple (particularly it shows the woman in great detail). The first thing we remark is the woman’s clothing. In the 19th century as well as today it allowed to immediately place the couple in a specific social class. The woman is wearing an ornate dress with fur trimming, a fur coat and an equally ornate and elegant hat, the viewer instantly knows that she belongs to the upper-middle class. We don’t exactly see the man’s clothing but his hat reveals that he belongs to the same upper middle class. That is, the semes that emerge from the image are elegant and bourgeois. These semes do not only attach to the figures like the seme that labels the woman wearing the silk dress as feminine, they also extend to the text that names the establishment. According to Barthes when a text and an image are presented in close proximity, the messages mix and the closer they stand the messages mix on a more denotative level. If an image bears a caption, that is, the text is placed very close to the image, we automatically presume that the text describes the image and vice versa. Going back to Palais de Glace, since the text is placed very close to the image we perceive them as describing one another, the verbal and the visual merge – he image represents revels in the Palais de Glace and since the semes that emerge from it are elegant and bourgeois these same semes attach also to the name of the establishment. The name of the establishment – Palais de Glace, the ice palace, in itself engenders the semes wealth, elegance and luxury, consequently, the poster brands the ice-skating ring as an elegant bourgeois establishment suited for high society. When Ernst de Crauzat, a renowned collector of posters, described this poster in a review, he started with the words “an elegant Parisian”. Obviously the artist succeeded in raising the seme elegant in the minds of contemporary viewers and so he branded Palais de Glace ice-skating rink as such. This is not accidental.

The 19th century in Western European history allowed for the first time social mobility. Many people aspired to accede to the middle-class, therefore, branding a product or an establishment as elegant or bourgeois was an efficient way to seduce people to consume the product or to visit the establishment. In order to attract different target audiences posters branded the product or in different manners. The advertisement Tournée du Chat Noir (1896) designed by Steinlen for the cabaret Le Chat Noir presents a black cat, whose head rests against a gothic rosetta. A contemporaneous description of the poster by de Crauzat used the adjectives: impressive, pompous, and artistic, in this case then the image brands the cabaret as an artistic establishment. By contrast, the advertisement Do Mi Sol Do (1878) by Chéret for a show in the café-concert Folies-Bergères is designed in an entirely different manner – it is loaded with details: a conductor wears a crazy red outfit which covers his feet, behind him a band is playing with one of its members falling off the stage and a train crosses the image. The background is also loaded – the letters are large – the header is rounded and the footer is written in italics. This image generates semes that differ greatly from those of Tournée du Chat Noir – instead of artistic, this is crazy and explosive – as is also evident in J.K. Huysmans’s review of this poster.
between the two posters derives from the different crowd each establishment sought to attract. The Chat Noir was a cabaret, a gathering place for artists, so it was more exclusive and artistic. It was known for its shadow shows and of course the black cat denotes that specific spectacle. The Folies Bergères, by contrast, was open to people from all classes at the price of 2 francs. The show which this poster advertised was a performance of the Hanlon Lees – a group of acrobats that preformed in a style which later developed into the knockabout comedy. And so, the two posters brand the establishments they advertise in an appropriate manner in order to attract the desired crowd.

6 In the examples I presented the images produce positive adjectives that attach to the name of the brand that appears in the text. In other words, the image and the text serve as focalizers to one another. According to Mieke Bal’s theory of focalization events in a story are always presented from a certain point of view (this theory, like Barthes’, was originally used to analyze literary texts, but Bal herself adjusted it to visual art and claimed that every work of art must have a focalizer that helps the viewer to understand the scene). The agent that presents the point of view is called the focalizer, and the action he, she or it performs is called focalization.  

7 The advertisement Nestlé’s Swiss Milk designed by Steinlen and published in 1895 exemplifies the notion of focalization. It depicts a young girl drinking something from a bowl. By looking at the girl’s dress the viewer realizes that she belongs to the middle class, that is, the seme that rises from this figure is bourgeois. The viewer doesn’t know what the girl is drinking, all the more since she looks pretty indifferent to it, but the cats serve as focalizers – they desire the drink, they look at the girl eagerly, one of them even places his paw on her dress, so the viewer learns that the drink is milk (because according to a common stereotype cats like milk), and he/she learns that it is desirable. Similarly, the brand’s name – Nestlé’s Swiss Milk, that appears in the text does not reveal the product’s qualities, but the image acts as a focalizer telling the viewer it is a desirable milk for young bourgeois girls. The text also acts as a focalizer for the image explaining that the desired milk this young bourgeois girl is drinking is not any milk, but Nestlé’s Swiss milk. If the viewer reads carefully he/she also learns that it is the richest in cream (which is probably why the cats like it so much). This text raises the question of typography and fonts. Typography is an integral part of the image and contributes to the semes that rise from it. At the same time, the particular fonts determine the text’s legibility. The text at the top of the poster is immediately legible, but the text at the bottom demands prolonged looking. One won’t be able to read it while walking down the street. In order to understand what fonts suit the readers and serve their purpose it is important to understand the modes of spectatorship that were common at the time. According to 19th century publications, people saw the posters while walking down the street, normally distracted, so a text like the footer in this poster missed its purpose. It did not act as an efficient focalizer because people did not actually read it. In fact, this poster was originally designed by Steinlen for the Guillot Frères milk company. The original poster is no doubt an efficient advertisement for milk, because the image works very well regardless of the company, but since the text is difficult to read, the poster doesn’t advertise the specific brand of milk and fails to distinguish it from other milks. Consequently, when Nestlé bought the rights to the image, it hired a professional typographer to re-design the text that announced the brand name.

8 The last point I wish to consider is modes of addressing the viewer. The posters divide into two groups according to the protagonists’ position. The first group consists of images
in which the figures are aware of the viewer and present themselves to him or her. Michael Fried called this type of images theatrical. The other group consists of images in which the characters are immersed in the actions that take place within the frame so they are unaware of the viewers, and Fried called them absorbed.\(^9\)

The advertisement for Job cigarette rolling paper designed by Chéret in 1889 belongs to the first group. Chéret, who designed it was an expert on theatrical representation of attractive female characters. The woman is wearing a pompous yellow dress so the sense that rises from this image is bohemian. She looks confident and content so she also acts as a focalizer telling the viewer that Job cigarette rolling paper is suitable for confident attractive bohemian women. This poster addresses the viewers in a very active and sexual manner. The figure is not only aware of the viewer, but looks him/her in the eyes with a seductive look, which makes her an active agent that calls out to the passersby in a direct way. Louis Althusser explains that direct hailing or interpellation almost always work. People always acknowledge when they are called because the calling establishes the individual’s sense of subjectivity and so this type of interpellation is useful to recruit subjects to an ideology (obviously, advertisements always act as agents of a certain ideology).\(^11\) In other words – when an individual feels that an advertisement calls him or her in particular, that individual tends to answer the call because it strengthen his/hers sense of subjectivity. It might seem that such sexually evocative posters address men, but not necessarily. As is well known, in the late 19\(^{th}\) century advertisers targeted women as well as men. Women went shopping and visited entertainment establishments by themselves. It was considered dignified and they didn’t need male escort. From Prof. Iskin’s study of *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*,\(^12\) we also know that women were becoming more and more aware of their affect on their surroundings, consequently the attractive women in the posters, did not only seduce men who wanted to date them, they also acted as models for other women who wanted to become as attractive and as seductive as the image.

The advertisement *Tombola* (1888) by Steinlen belongs to the second group. It represents children dressed in sailor suits and elegant dresses, so the sense that emerges from it is bourgeois. The text acts as a focalizer telling the viewer what is happening in the image – the children on the left are playing a raffle and the children on the right are playing with the toys they have already won. This poster addresses the viewer in a very different manner then the Job poster. In this case, the image is passive. It doesn’t call out to the viewer but lets him/her take the active role. Fried claims that when looking at this sort of an image viewers feel more comfortable drifting in thoughts. These posters work because they set up a reciprocal relationship with the collective wish-image. They depict an ideal vision of life – a utopian image of plenty, which people aspire to achieve. Their seduction is based on both shaping the ideal image of life and creating the false perception that if only you buy this product or attend this establishment you land in utopia – your life is eternally perfect. In this case – if you only take your children to play the raffle you’ll have the perfect bourgeois family.

19\(^{th}\) century publications make it abundantly clear that the posters worked, and we know that they still do; otherwise they would not have continued to infest all our public spaces and even invade our interiors. But why does it all work? How is it that posters influence old and young, men and women? Mikhail Bakhtin argues that every social significant verbal performance can infect certain aspects of the language with its intentions and to create slogans, curses, and the like. That happens because language, which we now
believe shapes thought, can change and absorb new meanings, if the change is a socially important performance. In the 19th century and up until this day and age posters constituted no doubt a social significant performance, therefore they possessed the power to introduce new couplings into the language. They were and still are able to address the viewer and shape his/her perception of the advertised brand.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

6. Ibid.

ABSTRACTS

In the last two decades of the 19th century colorful advertisement posters covered the walls of Paris. They called out to passers-by from all corners of the city, seducing them to buy luxurious goods or to attend the numerous entertainment establishments that swamped Paris. For the men and women who lived in that era, they constituted, no doubt, not only a significant part of the growing consumer culture, but an overwhelming visual experience. The present paper discusses this extensive phenomenon and examines three of the posters’ modes of attraction: Branding – how posters position the specific product or establishment in the mind of potential clients; the relationships between text and image – the way the verbal and the visual serve as focalizers to one to the other; and finally, modes of address – how the posters’ protagonists hail the viewer and tempt him or her to answer the call.

Durant les deux dernières décennies du XIXe siècle, de grandes affiches publicitaires colorées couvraient les murs de Paris. Elles interpellaient les passants des quatre coins de la ville, les incitant à acquérir des produits de luxe ou des tickets d’entrée pour les nombreux établissements de spectacle et de divertissement qui envahissaient la ville. Pour les citoyens de l’époque, ces
affiches représentaient non seulement un aspect important de la nouvelle société de consommation, mais aussi une expérience visuelle impressionnante. Cet article analyse ce phénomène de grande ampleur et examine trois procédés d’attrait de ces affiches : le marquage [branding] : comment l’affiche positionne le produit ou le lieu de divertissement spécifique dans la conscience de l’observateur ; les liens entre le texte et l’image : la façon dont le verbal et le visuel deviennent des focalisateurs réciproques ; enfin, les modes d’interpellation : de quelle façon les protagonistes d’une affiche sollicitent les passants et les incitent à répondre à leur appel.

INDEX

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AUTHOR

LIAT KOSOVICH (KELLERMAN)

Liat Kellerman is a PhD candidate at the University of Haifa. Her master’s thesis focused on the posters of Jules Chéret and Théophile Alexandre Steinlen in the last two decades of the 19th century. She is now studying Max Ernst’s collage-novels under the supervision of Prof. Esther Levinger.