

Metaphor and metonymy

The extract is taken from David Lodge's *Nice Work*. It reports an argument the characters had during a drive and the objective of the narrator in writing it, is to reflect on the way language works especially when it resorts to the use of metonymy and metaphor. Indeed, the discussion regards the advertisement of a cigarette brand (Silk Cut) that the characters saw numerous times during their trip.

To tell the truth, advertising adopts the devices of literary language and combines words with images that stick into the reader/watcher's mind in order to reach its objective, that is, to raise selling data. To be more precise, advertising is a sort of persuasion and its rules look back to the ancient Greek rhetoric.

Robyn is the character who is fascinated and interested with the implicit mechanisms of advertising and takes the posters as a challenge, a message to descramble and analyze in depth, while Vic has got a very practical and material attitude toward life and he represents the naive customer that advertising tries to impress. As a consequence, the dialogue is a comparison between two different approaches to reality that the intelligent reads is asked to consider, through the example of cigarette brands.

Silk Cut advertising hides a metaphoric message appealing to sensual and sadistic impulses that only Robyn is able to unveil. Indeed, the expanse of purple silk with a slit is not only "a picture of the name. Nothing more or less" as Vic suggests, but an icon of "the desire to mutilate as well as penetrate the female body", according to Robyn's interpretation. In fact, silk has got a shimmering and sinuous texture which reminds the watcher to the female body while the cut in a light color is the representation of a vagina.

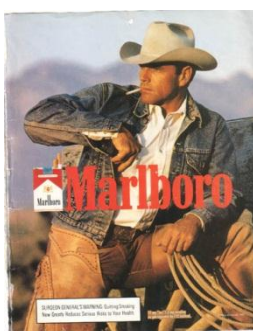


What interests the reader most is the "perpetual sliding of the signified under a signifier", that is, the same message the advertising agency of Silk Cut wants to convey, that is, smoking these cigarettes your health will be preserved "as smooth as silk", can be expressed in many different ways, through many different advertising campaigns.



It seems as if the metaphor could assume different meanings to different people and the relationship between signifier and signified is often unconscious. That's why the advertising campaign raises curiosity within costumers and increases the sale of cigarettes.

On the contrary, Marlboro advertising is an example of metonymic message:



it is based on a cause-effect relationship between smoking that specific brand and being strong, healthy, independent and brave like a cow boy. It seems as if buying those cigarettes, the costumer became a “macho”, as Robyn explains. It follows that in this case, curiosity is replaced by stability as spur to selling. It is not coincidence that Vic buys Marlboro cigarettes: since he seems to be the self-made man who wants to always be right and superior to the others, the icon of the cowboy coincides with his vision of the world but at the same time the choice unveils his recondite frailty and naivety that Robyn loves provoking with her questions. It seems as if the female character had perfectly understood Vic’s weaknesses; she ignores his provocations and signs of defiance or neglect (spluttered of derision, said warily, I’ll pass my time) and explains him the theories and convictions she believes in, trying to involve and stimulate him since, as the narrator said in the second chapter, “she has a natural inclination to try and make a world better place” .

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