
The Multimodal Analysis of Television Commercials

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Preface

Why TV Commercials? Why Multimodal?

Multimodal analysis has become a buzzword in many fields of inquiry, especially what could broadly be described as the field of discourse analysis. But why devote a whole book to the multimodal analysis of television commercials? One reason may be summed up in the phrase “follow the money”; throughout the world billions of dollars are spent on making and distributing TV ads by, among others, multinational corporations such as L’Oreal, Johnson and Johnson, Proctor and Gamble. It stands to reason that such large amounts of money are spent to influence viewers and that this would not happen if TV ads were irrelevant. Moreover, although online advertising is growing at a greater rate than TV advertising, spending on the latter is still unquestionably higher. Money, however, is not the only reason for our dedicating over a hundred pages to television advertising. Thousands of people are annoyed, amused or fascinated by TV ads judging solely from comments on ads on YouTube. Many viewers go online every day to find out the name of songs featured in TV ads and some actually end up buying them, or at least adding them to their playlists. Thousands of controversies –too many to be mentioned– have been sparked by TV ads ever since their humble beginnings in the 50s. To sum up, TV commercials are still very influential in spite of the onslaught of online advertising.

The fact that this book contains the word “multimodal” in the title begs the question: Is there any other kind of analysis that can be carried out on TV commercials? The answer, based on the evidence to be found in many books and journals, is in the affirmative. There are several analyses of TV ads that rely entirely on the examination of the written and/or spoken word. Most of these publications, however, contain a caveat explaining why only this semiotic(referential) mode has been used. However, no-one would deny that to investigate the full meaning of a TV ad one would have to take into account all the semiotic modes involved in getting across meaning. But what are these modes and is it possible to delve into each of them in the same amount of detail? To answer the first part of this question we can identify three main modes apart from



coded verbal language. Probably the most important, given the attention it gets in scholarly circles, is the visual mode made up of still and moving images. Another set of meanings reach us through our ears: music, diegetic and extra-diegetic sound, paralinguistic features of voice. The third is made up of the very structure of an ad, which subsumes or informs all the other levels, denotes and connotes meaning, that is, lecture-type ads, montage, mini-dramas. The second question is a difficult one. In this volume we have seen that attempts have been made at a holistic analysis of individual ads but is it possible to do large scale analysis of tens, hundreds or thousands of ads? Traditional content analysis found in studies on gender and marketing tend to reduce ads to a small number of variables which can be treated statistically but this is not the same as extending the in-depth multimodal analysis of one ad to a whole series of ads. Multimodal analysis poses other challenges for the researcher. It is possible to embed images in an article, book chapter or whatever vehicle for scholarly study we choose but it is not, for example, possible to include sound—at least for the moment. As Cook¹ (2001: 43) points out multimodal analysis is paradoxical in that the only way to provide an exegesis of a multimodal object—apart from the inclusion of the odd still image—is by using one of the modes it is made up of, that is, verbal language. If the medium is indeed the message then multimodal analysis is doomed to failure. But fail it does not and the reason is that a multimodal analysis should not be the reproduction of a multimodal object but its interpretation and as Poyatos² (2002: 49) remarks, the main tool to achieve this end is, inevitably, verbal language. From an epistemological and methodological point of view those of us who are involved in multimodal analysis are exegetes whose work also consists, from time to time, in providing our own input on how a multimodal object manages to convey a meaning or meanings to those who contemplate it. Thus, the main thrust of this volume is the exegesis and explanation of TV commercials from several different cultures and from different theoretical stances. We hope the contributions offered here provide food for thought and spark new approaches to the analysis of television advertising.

1 Cook, Guy, 2001. *The Discourse of Advertising*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

2 Poyatos, Fernando 2002. *Nonverbal Communication across Disciplines: Culture, Sensory Interaction, Speech, Conversation*. (Vol. 1) Amsterdam: John Benjamins.