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Postmodernism made a strong impact on the visual analysis of advertising. Still, it tends to confine visual analysis, as this article demonstrates through a case study of a print advertising campaign for Stolichnaya vodka in the USA in 1994. A new visual figure of speech, "semiotic tension," is introduced. Semiotic tension is structurally related to the concept of resonance, with its focus on a positive syntactic relationship. However, semiotic tension extends this theory by incorporating syntactic relationships that bind two elements in their negative relationship to each other. The aim is to contribute to a more diversified, semiotically informed methodology for a visual approach to advertising.

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The Commercial Appeal of Communism. Semiotic Tensions in the U.S. Stoli Advertising Campaign
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In 1994, the advertising campaign for Stolichnaya vodka appeared in the U.S. consumer magazines. The original works of young Russian artists were united into a campaign with the slogan “Freedom of Vodka.” The ads attracted attention with colorful images created in the style of what a few in the U.S. have been familiar with as Russian Lubok, Russian Constructivism, and Socialist Realism. The Stoli advertising campaign is a juncture where several topics that have been the preoccupation of recent advertising studies, such as the predominance of visual imagery in contemporary advertising, the relationship between art and advertising, and the changing nature of advertising in postmodern age. The campaign provides a ground for advancement in the analysis of advertising. This article establishes a new visual figure of speech called “semiotic tension.” Semiotic tension is the syntactic relation that binds two elements in their negative relation to each other. The specific quality of semiotic tension is the affective interpretive pleasure of tension. The moment of closure is focused more on the recognition of tension than the emergence of a coherent semantic solution. The dominant syntax of the Stolichnaya ads is based on the juxtaposition of opposites, driven by the basic antagonism of addressing North-American consumers with an anti-capitalist, Soviet-style aesthetics.

The time of the binary division between the “hard-sell” advertising with its logic and the “soft-sell” advertising, with its emotional appeal, is long gone. Instead, advertising together with the western affluent societies became more colorful, faster, louder, and more complex. The science of semiotics offered a set of tools to make this new world readable: as Saussure defined it, “a science which studies the life of signs at the heart of social life” (1974, 16).

In our analysis of the Stolichnaya campaign we want to demonstrate a semiotic process that has been neglected in advertising semiotics so far. We suggest a layers of tension model, that emphasizes an advertisement feature charged by a tension between elements within the ad. First, tension can be constructed on the level of re-contextualization, based on the use of referent systems in the ad. The second level of tension can occur in setting up the syntactical relationship between the relevant elements of the ad. While we take on a structuralist perspective in the textual mechanism of the ad, we do not assume a requisite resolution of the tension between the elements. In this aspect, we adhere to a post-structuralist perspective, emphasizing a more active reader in the negotiation of meaning and the possible openness of realized meanings.

Semiotic tensions are similar to the ad feature of resonance, developed by McQuarrie (1989), McQuarrie and Mick (1992). They define the rhetorical figure of resonance as a repetition of elements within the ad which echo with one another and lead to a multiplication of realized ad meanings. Resonance does not include simple ambiguity or opaqueness, but a doubleness of elements. Semiotic tension is also based on a syntactic relation, but, rather, the echo rests upon the negative feature of oppositions than the resonant positive feature of sameness. Metaphorically, the two semiotic features share a similar force binding two elements and can be distinguished as adhesion based on tension and cohesion based on resonance. Contrary to resonance, semiotic tension emphasizes more the interpretive process than the final semantic result. Based on the aesthetic theory of Berlyne (1971) and Meyer (1956) we argue that for a positive affective aesthetic response to an ad the activated expectation is temporarily inhibited. In the semiotic tension model the disparate elements are the cause of the inhibition. Contrary to the post-structuralist position of permanently inhibited closure, we see the moment of closure in the perceived tension.

All the images of the 1994 Stoli advertising campaign have several features in common, such as original art stylized to look like early Soviet propaganda arts and the slogan, “Freedom of Vodka,” written across each image. On the macro level, these features create a common tension in each image, such as a negative echo between the goals of public agitation, aiming to change the mentality of the whole human being versus commercial agitation, aiming to change one aspect of life, the purchasing patterns. Another persistent semantic tension is between the different meanings of freedom to the Soviets and Americans. While ideological propaganda claimed that Soviets were free from the oppressive forces of capitalism and hailed a freed freedom from unemployment, the U.S. ideological propaganda elevated freedom of choice, especially in the consumer goods realm; free to choose Stoli over other vodka. In addition, each ad contains individual tensions created by relations between elements that have to do with the meaning of symbols in a different cultural contexts.

The 1994 Stoli advertising campaign can be viewed as an act of symbolic cannibalism where representations of the enemy’s ideology are appropriated. On an ideological level it definitely helped that the old enemy was brought down and lost the power of a latent threat. However, the old symbols still regained a certain charge, defined in a symbolic opposition.

We argue in this paper, that the quality of the campaign remains abstruse when analyzed in a post-structuralist and postmodern perspective. To see the Stoli ad as another example of a free-floating signifier chain is missing the point of a connectedness between the sign elements that comes from the negative echo of semiotic tension.

With our paper we nourish the hope for a more semiotically enlightened analysis of advertising that remembers again the virtues of methodological pluralism and gets over the choking postmodern fixation.

REFERENCES