

The Brand – Economics of Signs, Iconographics of Economy. About the Necessity of a Semiotic Criticism of the Concept "Brand"

by Dr. Klaus M. Bernsau, Wiesbaden/Germany
dr_bernsau@yahoo.de

Starting, I would like to present the personal and academic background this text arose from. I am not a semiotician in my main profession though I learned at the Congress of the International Association of Semiotic Studies in Lyon 2004 that nearly no one addresses themselves as a “semiotician by profession”. I myself have been working for 15 years as a consultant and conceptionist in advertising and marketing agencies. You can therefore rest assured that I know what I am talking about when I talk about branding and marketing. What is more, I have now been working for 10 years as a part time teacher for corporate communication, communication theory and semiotics at the University of Duisburg and Essen. The content of this essay is partly the result of a row of courses held in 2003 and 2004.

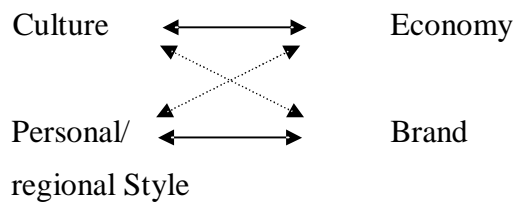
Living under the smiling shopping bag

Independently from political viewpoints and their corresponding values, the majority of us have the feeling that companies, and above all the so-called branded companies, are the element which spreads the fastest in and through united Europe. And in the meantime the periphery of many European cities look like image No.1. No matter if you are in Lyon, Stockholm, Bucharest, or as here in Prague, everywhere we find shopping areas under the sign of McDonald’s, Ikea and Tesco. Our lives are lived under the totem of the smiling shopping bag (cf. image No.1). Condensed, it seems as an illustration of the weekly German newspaper “Die Zeit” shows: brands are the multicoloured robes of the modern economic imperialism (image 2).



Image No. 1: The smiling shopping bag. The landmark of a shopping centre in Prague. Source: KMB
Image No. 2: “Enjoy capitalism” – Illustration of Tolga Kocak in: Die Zeit (26/2005: 44)

As the starting point of my considerations about the roles of brands within social reproduction and cultural innovation in globalizing Europe, I would like to show an opposition in accordance with Greimas` semiotic square (Greimas and Courtés 1979: 29 et sqq.; Volli 2002: 72 et sqq.):



The first critical diagnosis would describe this opposition as follows: from the primacy of culture –including regionalism and social identity –we move towards a control by economy. This can be realized on the surface, where the brand gains importance as economic and consumptive founded expression (Holbrock/Hirschmann 1993), whereas style as a cultural and socialisation-related expression loses importance through the rising power of economy (Klein 2005). And within these developments of “economization” and “globalization” of social meanings, “semiotization” (that is to say branding, marking, iconization, and medialization), plays a more and more important role. Impeaching brand as the motor of capital imperialism makes it necessary to have a closer look at the concept of the sign “brand”. It seems the critics of a quick and powerful economization of our lives seem to help themselves to the concepts of their ideological opponents, thereby possibly making the same fundamental mistakes in their argumentation.

“It’s branding, stupid!”

“The entire universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs”
(CP 5.448)

„... brands are nothing else but mental pictures in the consumers’ minds. Hence brand management has to begin with the consumer’s existing brand knowledge. Brand controlling is mind controlling!” (Esch 2001: VII; translation by KMB)

The sign „brand“ seems to be the most powerful intellectual, economic tool we have, not only if you look at these two quotes, one from Charles S. Peirce, and the other from Franz-Rudolf Esch, the leading marketing and brand scientist in Germany. The idea of “brand” is one of the most-mentioned concepts concerning the methods of (marketing oriented) corporate management. The concept “brand” seems to be, next to “discounting” and “customer-relationship-management”, the only way of giving hope in a time of economic uncertainty with price-battles and dramatically falling margins, in spite of all the set-backs branding might have suffered from in the last years. Two main opponents of branding have to be referred to: first, cultural criticism with its protagonist and “brand” Naomi Klein’s „No Logo“ (Klein 2005), and second, the controlling-driven clearance of many brand portfolios (Bussmann/Harter/Hirsh 2006).

But even though everyone is talking about brand we still lack an accepted brand-theory. The everyday marketing technique looks for instance like this: “Put your product together with desirable characteristics and moments in a picture” (cf. image No.3). Winfried Nöth (1975) described this as indexical transfer of characteristics. But since then we haven’t really learned more about this technique, and whether it works.

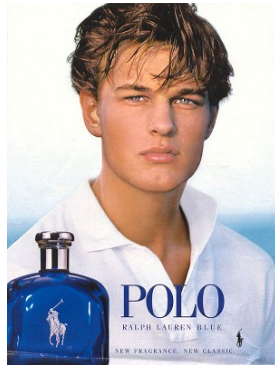


Image No. 3: Pars-pro-toto: typical advertisement for a life-style product, a men's fragrance of Polo Ralph Lauren with the actor Leonardo di Caprio (source: Life Style press)

And Esch's handbook of modern brand management (Esch 2001), gives us the impression of 'branding' as a highly complex but widely inconsistent collection of very specific single scientific results: marginal detail knowledge and stylish micro theories, mixed with best practice reports, combined with the belief in the self-fulfilling-prophecy ('Treat your product as a brand and it becomes one'), and put all together within a rather abstract corporate policy scope.

The blind spot

This unsatisfying theoretical and academic situation has mainly two reasons: First it is not satisfyingly clear if one can speak of a brand as an epistemological subject or if it is rather an aid to decision making in terms of the classical economic management theory (Wöhe 1993: 26).

Second – and this is clearly the more important reason – the construct brand exceeds clearly the possibilities of economic theory building, even if we follow more behavioural-orientated economics integrating parts of sociology and psychology (Wöhe 1993: 83). Though the practical acts of many companies and employees circulate around brands, 'brand' is a blind spot on the retina of economics. Economic theories, used to following the principles of the homo oeconomicus, cannot operate with a scientific model of 'brand', nor can a management and decision-making doctrine close to Anglo-American case-study-mentality.

Finally economics must fail because brand as basically a sign phenomenon is far beyond its epistemological scope. Questions about production of meanings or results of communication can not be solved by management or marketing sciences, they have to leave them for those theories or sciences that do have meaningful, cooperative, and intentional sign phenomena per definitionem as their core business, e.g. linguistics, communication science, and most of all semiotics.

I would like to give a very first sketch of the potentials that semiotics of the brand has, and which support it could give to economic theory and business practice. Also I will refer to the theories and methods from which semiotics of the brand has to develop. As all semioticians know, semiotics of the brand as well as semiotics in general is science in progress and is not as methodologically or institutionally stable as economics, psychology or sociology are. Although or maybe just because semiotics doesn't offer a settled set of theories and methods, semiotics has enormous potential. Of course this paper isn't the right place to fully elaborate these theories, but I will try to give an overview from which basic future brand knowledge will appear.

If everything wants to be a brand, the brand-idea becomes an empty case

But let's start with the very lowest, but therefore the most necessary basics. To light up the marketing night in which every company, product and logo seems to be a grey brand, distinction seems to be the most important part. Distinction in best semiotic tradition in:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• brand• product• company• point-of-sale /outlet as economic distinction | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• brand• motive• meaning (of life)• personality as psychological distinction |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• brand• buying• consumption/owing/using• life style/status/milieu as sociological distinction | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• brand• logo• sign• communication as semiotic distinction |

Even more provocative is the distinction posted by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1992) between signs and no-signs. Even if the world is filled with signs (CP 5.448) and everything can potentially be interpreted as such (Eco 1972: 361 et sqq.), the world does not only consist of signs. Following these findings I worked out relevance criteria together with the students in my seminars to identify a (real) brand:

- Individual relevance, i.e. being a brand has to have effect on my personal behaviour
- Social relevance, i.e. being a brand is referred to in my social context. It is realised in community and it changes behaviour
- Economic relevance, i.e. brands must have an economic output, normally the potential of setting up higher prices
- Semiotic relevance, i.e. the effects of the brand have to be grounded on semiotic factors for example design, interpretation, brand's history, incorporated meanings, and not on –in this consideration – non-semiotic factors for example the power of a company in the trade channel, the physical presence or absence of products.

After that basic definition of brand and no-brand it makes sense to talk about a couple of aspects of the claim and the methods of a semiotics of the brand. I would like to start with a Tour d'Histoire of the semiotics for non-semioticians, which can be skipped by experts. Maybe you should re-enter at the "basics of applied semiotics" because they do not follow the "common sense of semiotics".

Instead of a history of Semiotics

Semiotics suffered a long time from the dispute between its modern roots, the pragmatic semiotics – connected with the name and the work of Charles S. Peirce (e.g. Peirce 1991) on the one hand and the structural semiology – deduced from the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure (de Saussure 1967) on the other.

For a long time structural semiology was represented especially by the provoking, practical applications and its strongly popular representatives like Umberto Eco (e.g. Eco 1972, 1991)

or Roland Barthes (e.g. Barthes 1966, 1988a). Their ideas dominated Europe and Germany. Here you can find already small parts concerning advertising or brand (Eco 1972: 267 et sqq.; Barthes 1988b). Also the development of structuralism, and the post-structuralistic deconstructivism was highly represented in the medial and cultural discussion. And (post-) structuralism found its way into brand-product-companies, agencies, marketing research-companies and the art directors club (ADC) via expressions such as “fractal markets” or “semantic net”.

The basic ideas of structural semiotics can be summed up as follows: Signs are coins with two inseparable sides: first you have the form, which separates a sign from other signs, and second you have the meaning-carrying content. For both sides you can work out very small, differentiating entities. These entities mark the discrete steps, in which one can change form or content. On a higher level one can consider a sign consisting of form and content as only one part, either the form or the content part of a higher sign. Commonly this process is referred to by the concept of the context. For structural semiology, meaning, often used synonymously with communication and effects, is a system of selecting form and content out of a given set of options (syntagma) and of combining the selected signs with other signs (paradigma) (Nöth 2000: 45).

Not until the last 10 to 15 years –disregarding the Stuttgart School of Semiotics by Max Bense (Bense 1967) –the superficially very demure and very epistemological semiotics by Charles S. Peirce started to be accepted by the applied European semiotics, first of all by the fact that pragmatics became more and more popular.

In semiotics the stiff dyad of form and content extends to the dynamic triad of sign carrier (representamen), object and interpretant. At the same time the sign transfers from a semantic structure to a dynamic active process of adoption of the world (interpretation) and influencing the world (communication). Sign becomes a theoretically never-ending process of sign-emerging and sign-interpretation and so gains an (individual and social) historical dimension (Nöth 2000:59).

And especially the acting oriented-ideas of pragmatics succeed in reconciling the heuristically rich analysis of the material aspects of signs given by the structuralists with the epistemological thinking about the sign per se, given by philosophers since the old Greeks. With this new integrated semiotics we might have an outline of a theory that is now able to reach the secrets which distinguish mankind from other forms of life (Eschbach 1993: 43). Semiotics could be the theory not to overcome but to moderate the differences between Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences. As a prototypic example for those conflicts there are the Brain-Mind-Discussion (Searle 1991; Geyer 2004) or the contrast between the individualistic isolation of the monad of Leibniz and the postulation of an inter-subjective, social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1980; Soeffner and Luckmann 1987). These are questions that haven't been solved in a satisfying way, neither by biological AI-research (Simon and Nevell 1994), nor by the System-Theory (Luhmann 1995: 113 et sqq.).

Basics of an applied semiotics of brand

An applied semiotics, how it is slowly developing and how I myself described it on some occasions (Bernsau 1997, 2003) is founded on the following basic ideas and roots:

- The basic model of sign as threefold relation of sign carrier, sign-object and interpretant outlined by Peirce. This relation is connected to its theoretically never-ending sign-development-process. A process which includes also its permanent, pragmatic acting and decision based interruption

- Further, the basis of all human being and especially of our communication in social and world-oriented interaction – as Gerold Ungeheuer described it first in Germany (Ungeheuer 1987), and its further development to a soft Socio-Constructivism as described by Lenke, Lutz and Sprenger (1995)
- on the other hand we have the findings based on the structuralism concerning the inter-subjective construction of sign-systems and the possibility of systematically describing and reading these systems
- to this belong the findings of Feruccio Rossi-Landi (1976, 1992), that sign-production and sign-interpretation (can) cross the border of subjectivity and therefore achieve sensuous sociality

Those points are summed up again and again in publications but without developing a current semiotic paradigm, a common impetus or at least a commonly accepted text book. It is not yet clear if this will ever happen in the future. One reason is that semiotics sees itself as an interpretative and discursive science.

Nevertheless I have worked out the following promising moments of an applied semiotics (Bernsau 1997):

- semiotics as method
- sign process as basic condition
- sign as function, in the acting of communication, finding or interpretation
- context or problem-based approach
- historical and society-based approach
- “final lecture”, that is, the formation of a pragmatic, and stable interpretation through sign-users and sign-process-interpreters (semioticians)

With these elements one can quite well observe the history of the rise and fall of brands.

Semiotics of brand –how and why?

Which direct profit can you earn with such a semiotics of brand for the knowledge of brands? The simple claim “a brand is a sign” is not enough. Not even if I, like many authors in the field of advertising and marketing-research, repeat this idea again and again.

Roland Posner had already in the 1980s referred to the Semiotic Triangle as a semiotic theory in “reduced shape, easy to handle” (Posner 1988: 185). Indeed a simple parallelisation of logo=sign carrier, product=object and brand=interpretant doesn't lead us very far. Also the diagram of a chain of sign-process that you may find in different writings doesn't help either because it suggests a inevitability and naturalness of a stable brand meaning. Therefore I would recommend the idea of the “saw tooth of semiotic work” (image 4).

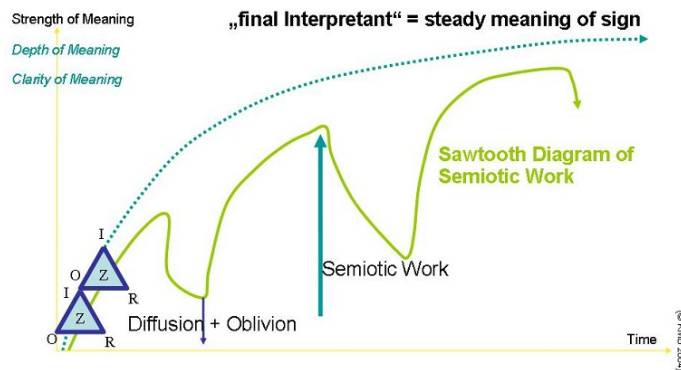


Image No. 4: The brand-sign-process during the time (source: KMB)

In my opinion this matches better with the real conditions of the world of brand signs: In steady semiotic work I have to row sign to sign, sign process to sign process, to work against effects of diffusion and oblivion and create a steady sign meaning. And the steadiness can have different axes like strength, depth or clarity. If planned, long termed sign-acting, resources, and matching external conditions come together as we find it in successful brand-sign-stories (Bernsau 1990: 143), the “final interpretant ”brand arises.

Finally the semiotic method, thinking in the categories of a steady process, with the named element and the saw tooth-model leads to:

- a description of interpretation and communication process in marketing and branding based on a sign-theory
- a deeper understanding of function and effect of branding
- the use of the critic potential of an understanding, semiotic brand-theory
- the development of control-instruments concerning range of goods, product and brand-meaning
- a better distinction of brand and not-brand
- new findings about the role of brands as offers for a sense of life
- descriptions of brand-geneses
- a semiotic criticism of branding and marketing

One must not forget the very different functions of signs in the marketing-communication and the different time dimensions they have. Not every promotion can and should end in the development of a brand. Sometimes it remains (on purpose or not) at the attention-attracting activity of a market barker or a puffer (Domizlaff 1992: 19 et sqq.), or it is only advertising but without a brand-development-goal (Ries and Ries 1999). Also, most of the companies can't afford the money, the patience, and the endurance to work on the real setting of long-term acting-influencing interpretations (i.e. final brand-interpretants), even if they wanted to. Last but not least, much of the brand-communication slides into meta-communication for experts, with no interest for the common consumer, and distracts from economic intentions (Turner and Reichenbach 2000). Or it develops a ritual self-checking for a closed circle, without any meaning for many others who are only allowed to be aware of the external forms of the rituals.

First “final lectures” of the sign brand

If you come closer to the phenomenon "brand" from this point of view, you can learn a lot about it. The following theses I would like to declare as an intermediate result of my long-term, semiotic-affected dealings with theory and practice of brands:

- 1) You can't create brands – they emerge. Brands are, twice over, historical events, because they develop in a certain time and they can only be explained in their time
- 2) Brands (as signs) are social events – supported by (relatively) economic potent groups
- 3) Brands – per definitionem also economic events – have effects beyond the pure economic
- 4) There are communication forms and techniques which can support the development of a brand. These techniques are not enough for the generation of a brand though
- 5) Most of the (self-)called brands are not brands! They are only branded/branded products, products and services advertised with the methods of brand-communication, but mostly only chimaeras: pseudo-brands.
- 6) Brands are signs! Only the semiotic quality of a brand is able to grab all aspects forming a brand as a whole, and not only single ones like economic, psychological, sociological, or design aspects.
- 7) Semiotics is the only academic method to describe and research brand-phenomenon comprehensively. Semiotics is an interdisciplinary method that examines a brand with all relevant and subject-oriented tools and synthesises them through an abstract sign theory.

Brands – commercialization of culture?

To come back to the starting question of the role of brands in a globalizing world I would like to turn now to my former client Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola indeed is working with global standardized marketing as you can see here with the example of banners for menu boards in quick service restaurants of three different Eastern Europe countries (image 5).



Image No. 5: Standardized advertising boards in quick service restaurants in Russia, Ukraine, and Slovakia (source: Coca-Cola HBC)

But cultural characteristics like different drinking-habits turned out to be very stable. Company-internal researches of Coca-Cola in these countries showed that in Hungary as well as in Poland and the three Baltic States, carbonated soft drinks (all producer of soft drinks, not only Coca-Cola) are by far the favourite drink. Basically the consumption – as to be expected – of the younger group is higher. But only in Hungary is the group of carbonated soft drinks at the first place in the 12-39 year-old age group. In the Baltics they don't belong to the preferred drinks in the groups older than 20. So the power of marketing and the economically effective fascination of the brand is clearly limited. And you need a long-termed sign-process (the saw tooth) to create change. The greater number of youths drinking Coca-Cola in Eastern Europe can be explained by the longer life time under the brand Coke.

Another example also shows that the role of brands in terms of standardization and commercialization of consumption and culture is not as strong as many critics say. In May of the year 2005 the 50th Eurovision song contest took place in Kiev. Especially music is in my opinion an area of rapid and commercially supported adaptation of taste, style and culture. These young ladies (cf. image No. 6) are seven of the 24 finalists. If you take into consideration that one third of the competitors are male and the last third are groups, you get an idea, here reduced to visual aspects, how strong the assimilation of cultural artefacts is. Or are you able to tell who is Greek, Estonian, Russian or Spanish? The lady in the first row on the right is the Greek winner, by the way.



Image No. 6: Images of the female finalists of the Eurovision Song Contest 2005 in Kiev (source: www.eurovision.tv)

And not one of the artists or their songs have achieved brand status yet. In the brand discussion you can observe the mistake that Naomi Klein made in her book “No Logo” (Klein 2005: 2005 et sqq.) that phenomena being accompanied by brands, like the exploiting of the Third World or the economic-aggressive acts of companies, are considered as the basic quality or even as a logically consequence of brands, without realizing that this happens also to not-branded, generic products or pseudo-brands. So you have standardization and assimilation in music without any use of branding.

Nevertheless I don't want to display brands as not concerned in the current globalization discussion. Brand consumption and brand production is surely an expression of interpretation and quest for meaning through consumption and economic behaviour (cf. very different positions at Klein 2005: 123 et sqq.; Koppelman 2005; Sywottek 2005). And so the point of

this short introduction into the semiotics of brand under the guiding theme of “reproduction of societies and cultures” is, in fact, that brands are one important way of re-producing the western cultural, social, and economic system. And in the same way as style is more than form and has a more meaningful function (Pfisterer 2004: 337), brand means something to us and is more than just marketing technique. Products and signs without this meaning are not brands in terms of the claimed distinction. But where you meet brands there is also a deeper sensuous value of the world of consumption and so the thesis of brand as “signs of economics” and as “economy of signs” became true. Of course, a meaningful form of expression of western society can be found in brands. And at the same time this western culture implies an economisation of personal and social forms of expression, which is most obvious in the marked, standardised, buyable and consumable style patterns, i.e. brands.

I think that despite the shortness and the compulsive volatility of this text one can sense the potential of a semiotic of brand as well as the necessity of further and deeper examination with the material. I only can hope that both disciplines I am working with – marketing and semiotics – move towards each other. Marketing, because of the enormous gains in understanding, and semiotics because this is the field with the highest spending for professional sign placement and sign reading (ZAW 2005) you can work in. Money that is not readily available in the humanities and social sciences nowadays.

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