

WRAITH: Seduction and glamour in advertising for luxury cars

WRAITH: Sedução e fascínio em publicidade de automóveis de luxo

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Introduction

Young boys are used to play with toy car miniatures, these remaining related to early childhood and young adulthood preferences. Little wonder that luxurious car models advertising is presently directed to masculine adult audiences, surrendered to the brands' charms and exquisite proposals. For some time now, car advertising frequently uses women models as decorative appealing patterns in the basic market segment. Women models appear in car exhibitions, brand merchandising and also in advertising spots. In the family car segment, especially in the economy class cars, for example, family images have been used quite often (depending on the type of car and also on the brand's investment - there is the concern about providing safety, comfort and non-expensive cars for family use.). This clearly contrasts with the luxury segment, in which attractive women and celebrity characters are called to play the decorative appealing part, providing beautiful and glamorous scenarios in which lust and pleasure play an important role.

In a significant number of advertising productions beautiful women are taken as figures for spot's narratives. They play the part of happy guests, cheerful participants in party contexts or seductive attractions that constitute an interesting decoration element for the object of the spot. When and if dealing with a luxury brand, the car itself becomes as appealing to adult men as miniature toy cars used to be for young boys. The predictable pleasure felt by adults when driving expensive cars matches the acknowledged fun felt by young boys at play

with their toy models – and car brands also have important investments in the toy market, exactly on the basis of providing resemblance between the real and the toy models.

This chapter presents a particular type of spot in which the roles played by the male and female characters are switched into contextual elements that only serve to stress and overvalue the object at stake: the fastest model of Rolls Royce, the WRAITH. In so doing, it is expected to expand the general view of advertising for luxury cars as a limited production designed for its market and exclusively working along with it. The art of producing short, bright and enjoyable films for the delight of the viewer remains seldom taken as truthful – and reserved to film producers. However the audience's adhesion and fascination to the glamour that sparks from luxurious spots deserves some accountability and research under the semiotic sphere, given the spectacularity and brightness of advertising spots for luxury products (Aguaded Gómez, 2000, pp. 87-88). A description of the RR Wraith TV spot will be provided in the next sections.

The spot

The *Wraith* spot lasts for 2min. but it takes an “eternity”. Time stops and lasts for as long as the viewer is subdued by the visual proposal on screen. It creates suspense and ends with an unexpected rejection towards the lady figure, which, in itself, is already unusual in advertising (Berger, 2005:116). It starts and ends in fast motion, dark surroundings and mysterious consequences. So it goes as a wraith, ghostly, as a phantom that passes by, transmitting surprise, astonishment and fear – simultaneously suggesting, presenting and imposing the power of the product.

WRAITH (*as in description*)

In TV advertising, it all starts with expectation (López Gómez, 1998:79). Somewhere on the road, in the middle of a dark and cloudy night, in a wood full of high trees.



Fig.1

A fast car comes, moving in strong racing noise. A lady in black long ceremonial costume hears the noise. She responds to the sound of the car by leaving the large, ancient and wealthy house and walking through the closed gates.



Fig.2

The car arrives in front of the gate. Time stops for 3 secs. Slow motion view of car and driver. The lady stares at the sight of car and driver, while the camera provides a circular travelling, during which water on the road stops involving the car, blocking the access and preventing the woman to approach.



Fig.3

The car races away while driver confidently looks back in the rear mirror. Moves away, re-enters the dark wood. Brand name appears: WRAITH; slogan follows: *and the world stood still.*

WRAITH (*as in spirit*)

As the spot continues, all along the two minutes of screening, the *steamed* image of what is intended to represent the *wraith* is recurrently shown *entering* the front of the car and apparently subduing both driver and spectator.



Fig.4

The brand is clearly focused as the *steam* that allegedly represents the exquisite spirit of the car possesses into the motor and drives the car and the driver, who, despite having a 3sec. stop near the lady, does neither allow her to come closer.

This *steam* does not even try to enter the car and have direct contact with the driver. Such is the high level of demand that luxury requests in terms of appearance and access to this brand. It requests the acceptance of being commanded by wraith. And to follow its dynamics of mystery and shadow.

Conveying a specific possibility of meaning through advertising is the result of a dynamic process of interpretation that is developed along an endless circle of interconnected signifying elements. This possibility is presented by Charles Peirce would have described it in his idea of unlimited *semiosis*. From one sign-image to the other, the spectator develops his interpretation of the object on the screen – and he will expect the advertiser to offer him some version of the true / existing object, beholding one or all of the characteristics that the spot suggests. The sign-image of the brand is presented on screen, for visual consumption.

The concept of *sign* concerns the reference to something external to the sign itself, of which it becomes an *interpretant*, i.e., a second sign, more developed than the first one, because it is enriched by the user's capacity of developing meaning in a certain aspect or capacity of the given object, a capacity that he himself is capable to acknowledge. The concept is *grounded* upon an object of reality, i.e., an *existing object* to the eyes of the user. The flow of meaning through this process allows for the continuous generation of *interpretants* and therefore the process at stake is a neverending process (Peirce, CP 2.227 ss). Such is the human capacity of interpretation that underlies every processes of symbolic interaction.

The sequential elements are sober but meaningful. The cloudy dark woods, the beautifully well dressed and seductive woman figure, the pristine gentleman driver, not to mention the elegant car model, convey the atmosphere of the spot as something that is intended to inspire luxurious sensations, maintaining the audience receivers alert and attentive and expectant until the end of the spot.

When viewing the spot under this perspective, its flow of images appears to follow the rhythm of a triadic spiralling development; there is a cyclical appearance of three main images on the screen and they are in fact sequential, therefore reproducing their order of appearance from the beginning to the end of the spot. Every represented element in the spot is repeated in a regular sequence, before and after the central moment when the camera provides a slow motion circular travelling around the object and involving all human figures on the screen. Such sequence is illustrated below:

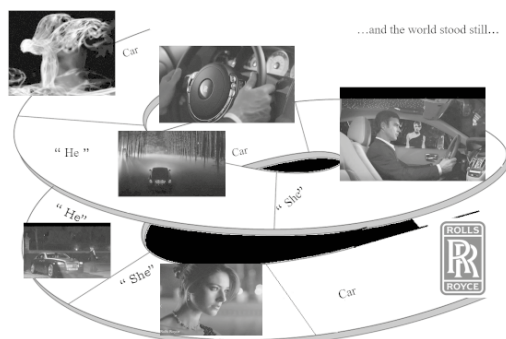


Fig.5

The science of semiotics provides the theoretical ground for understanding the circuits of visual meaning (Magalhães, 1998, p. 110). Even though the iconic elements are present and visible along the whole film, the first minute of the spot offers viewers the possibility of acknowledging the suspense that is pasted in the attitude and in the face of the human lady figure. Light effects provide the necessary relevance to details such as the shiny diamond earrings and necklace, the dotted black dress and the starred roof of the car, which is actually a characteristic of the WRAITH RR model. Computer effects provide the slow scattering of water drops both in the window through which the woman watches the road in the beginning and also during min. 01:16, when the image petrifies. Water drops create a “shield”, or a barrier that prevents approximation and therefore there is no physical contact between the woman and the vehicle or its driver: only eye contact.

The spiral designed and presented above illustrates each sign as representing a given object (the water drops) moving to the possibility of generating a second sign in the mind of the interpreter (the shield against the woman figure). Along this spiral, meaning circulates and performs a never ending circuit of signification that allows for the permanent expansion of the original sign (the RR car). The car exists in some reality of industrial production: but it also exists as image, as representation, both on screen and inside the brains of the seduced spectators.

The main elements that foster human communication and ultimate understanding of visual meanings are, in this case, iconic elements: they are simultaneously direct images of reality and of real contexts (the wood, the man, the woman, the car), and formulas that suggest to viewers some sort of adequate perspective related to the spot (the man who owns such a car is protected against the threat of a feminine presence and is even able to ignore her [?]). These elements eventually promote a relational network between individuals and objects and develop this network in such a way that film objects are perceived through their degree of resemblance to existing objects in the market (Magalhães, 1998, p. 88).

Resemblance to phenomena of the known reality is the key element that establishes the degree of iconicity of any sign. Sounds, as well as images, constitute in various levels the materiality of resemblance – either because of the possibility of immediate identification or because of the differentiation that subsists in some cases of closer involvement between signs and meanings (Williamson, 2002, p. 52). This condition of resemblance remains essential when the advertising argument is established along the frames of this spot.

Each of the chosen illustrative frames has been chosen because they provide a register of iconic signs in the spot, although they tend to overcome their iconic value of pure resemblance and to embrace a higher level of representation. In such conditions they therefore become *symbols* according to Peircean categories.

It remains a fact that each frame *communicates* who/what it is about, which message it aims to convey and to whom it is addressed. Moreover, it establishes the theme that will be exposed, even if this does not depend on subtitles nor does it possess any type of verbal translation. Such is the process that allows icons to become symbols. This process is only possible through the eyes of an interpreter, i.e., it is only possible because it fosters the semiotic process of interpretation.

Each viewer that in fact understands the message in the spot, acts as a semiotic user and is truly involved in the process of ascribing meaning to every frame.

Iconicity in a given sign or sign sequence remains centred within a given identification that is grounded upon resemblance. Different degrees of resemblance imply different types of icon. Metaphors, for example, are iconic sequences of signs that imply a blended relationship between the known world of reality and the imagined world of the broadcasted reality, in the case of the spot. In fact, as *figures of thought*, metaphors produce a schematic form of reading the images on screen, and by following this reading, every viewer manages to understand his own version of the images on film (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 52 –ss.)

Viewers are confronted with a range of images that trigger sentiments of expectation, shock and delusion in three sequences that are blocked between the close-up of the “smoke” entering the front grid of the car and the final definition of the RR logo, *the spirit of ecstasy*, immediately before the clear exposure of the brand and model logo and name.



Fig.6

The *spirit of ecstasy* consists in the silver steel figure of a guardian angel, a protective spirit that the brand has placed in the front of the car, ahead of all danger and protecting the machine. It becomes, in the spot, the wraith that protects the car and driver from the womanly desire, as if all possible needs are actually fulfilled and the woman becomes disposable in terms of car to be mastered or driven. The narrative strategy of the spot remains clear as far as advertising techniques are concerned: the triumph of the brand over temptation (?) is guaranteed through escape and fast movement (Volli, 2003, p. 25).



Fig.7

WRAITH (*as in sense and meaning*)

WRAITH is a multi-meaning noun and its literal meaning suggests a relationship with expressions such as *ghost*, *vision*, or *beam of light*, among other possibilities. Wraith is a spectre, therefore shedding light upon its receivers in such a way that it provokes shock and paralyzing reactions.

The spot presents several moments of sparkling light spread over the object (the car), and, seen from the outside, there are plenty of situations that spark: the woman's dress, her earrings and necklace; the car's roof; the water drops, shining and elevating from the ground in a protective way; finally, the image of the *spirit of ecstasy*, built from the fog that has entered the car through the front grid in the beginning of the spot and that becomes the ultimate logo of the RR brand.

Different layers of image sequences are presented along the spot. They aim to intensify their effect upon viewers by increasing their address and their presence against the viewer's eyes. The first sequence of *close-up* images includes the front of the object / car, the direct stare of the woman and the hands on the steering wheel of the man (together with the logo RR centred in the frame). Then, at min. 01:16, the viewer sees the whole set, in the frames where the camera travels around the still car as it stops for 3 secs.; and the next sequence of *close-ups* is the exact opposition to the first but complements it. Viewers are forced to face the woman's jewellery and the man's direct stare through the rear mirror of the car.

Viewers are confronted with both figures' direct eye stare, fixed into a space that is located *out* of the screen and is therefore involving every receiver as viewer of the spot. This generates a second meaning to the semiotic concept of metaphor and includes the notion of creativity in it as a correlational element that is necessary to provide a clearer insight about this spot.

The concept of metaphor as a *figure of thought* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1989), suggests that this is a controversial spot when compared to other spots related to the same category of objects (luxurious car models). Human feminine figures are usually included in such spots and are associated with the possibility of seduction that remains an argument of purchase for such type of car models. They are necessary as seductive element because they consist in an asset of elegance and glamour themselves due to their exquisite fashionable appearance aside to an expensive car.

However, this spot argues that some models are just more valuable than money can afford. This, we take as the main axe of advertising value in the case of the RR WRAITH.

The spot includes some elements of the material world, albeit narrative, and therefore it presents a certain type of action that is performed by two subjects and a moving object. In the sense that these elements share real world characteristics and are therefore they resemble true components of the world, knowledgeable and assumed, the spot is composed by iconic signs. Viewers are not allowed to doubt about the fast behaviour of the car, the beauty of the woman or, least of all, the racing profile of the driver. They also do not doubt about the brand, its logo and eventually its extreme quality and luxurious characteristics. This implies that resemblance exists to an undeniable degree and receivers / viewers are confronted with their own acknowledgement of this resemblance.

It also implies that the symbolic value of the brand, that is present in many ways along the spot, is recognised and purposely exposed, e.g. by the logo, the model name and the mascot.

There seems to be a conceptual difference between the image on the screen and the mental image that both, the existing car model and the car model in the spot actually represent. The spot connects these images that in fact are of different nature in relation to the reality they belong to. It succeeds in doing so because it includes semantic pieces of information that the viewer recognises and therefore becomes familiar with, probably enjoying the fantasy effects of the spot.

Conclusion

Audiences usually react to major investments of visual effects and this is also a productive point to consider when analysing the spot. Both human figures are engaged with the viewer through direct close-ups in which they look into the viewer / receiver's eyes, directly addressing them, not only as viewers but as respondents. In so doing, the figures in the spot act intimately, entering the visual sphere of viewers and questioning them beyond any doubt.

Another interesting issue to consider when thinking of the possibility of directly connecting viewers and advertising spots is the proximity with which the elements that are intended to express the economic value of the object on the spot are presented to viewers. Both figures, man and woman, present a remarkable sense of high luxury and economic wealth. Viewers are offered the sight of the man at the steering wheel of the car, in which the logo RR is perfectly visible. The sight of the woman follows, with her diamond earrings and necklace exposed as she stares at the car moving away. Her long night dress is sparkled with shinning materials. Little doubt remains about the market segment that this spot is addressing, even though the possibility of possessing the visual contact with the spot remains as a valuable asset in terms of broadcasting.

Lady figures in bright and pristine gowns are no longer accepted as convincing assets for luxury car brands to use in advertising. The feminine figure in this spot appears as a mere observer who does not have the power to stop the driver and therefore remains irrelevant for the success of the driver (and of the brand). RR stresses the object characteristics as seductive and therefore powerful and successful, instead of coordinating these characteristics with feminine images of wealth and beauty. The object is therefore presented in every senses as an icon of perfection and independence, providing its owner / driver / receiver with a special behaviour and sense of personal power that overcomes all exterior possibility of seduction.

Scenic elements remain obscure and of smaller relevance in order to enlighten the proposed message. Colour on the screen remains obscure as the only relevant element is the possibility of shine that the car presents and overcomes the shine of the jewellery (also present in the spot as ornament). This is an element that permits the recreation of power associated to light and brightness and it dismisses the relevance of colour or of any other visual concern. The car speed and the driver's independence remain the major gain in such products.

Visual effects serve as illustration of symbolic strength of the brand name. Logo and brand symbol remain the most stressed elements on the screen and they are the most valued elements in the spot as they are present in all the sequences of frames that intend to captivate the viewer's attention and attraction. The brand *spirit of ecstasy* is a protective one, transforming each driver in an unattainable individual who is capable of blocking every tempting danger.

Spot receivers are addressed in a nonchalant disguised way, hence reinforcing the value of the advertised object instead of expectations. Only twice in the whole spot are receivers directly addressed to, by means of direct *close-ups*. The gap between the audience and the producers of the spot is bridged in these sequences forcing each viewer to keep the focus on the screen for the total spot.

Finally, the verbal slogan is aimed at confirming the brand power. The slogan "*And the world stood still*" stands for the brand power itself since the spot strongly focuses on the possibility of communication about the force of the car racing speed, confirming it as the fastest RR model ever built. Moving fast whilst the world stops...

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to present a semiotic analysis of a TV spot for Rolls Royce WRAITH car model by using Charles Peirce's Theory of Signs and his development of the understanding of sign categories accordingly to the relationships between the signs themselves and their processes of connection with the phenomena of the world. We propose the reading of the spot accordingly to semiotic processes of resemblance in their various degrees. The working hypothesis describes the understanding of the spot and the symbolic meaning of the car model name, these being aimed at a specific audience: the luxury market's consumers. The visual content of the spot expresses a specific trend in creative endeavours related to gender issues in advertising for objects that are usually seen as adult toys: luxury cars. Receivers visually

absorb the object desired characteristics of *power, protection, security and comfort* which belong to the chosen brand – Rolls Royce.

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo é apresentar uma análise semiótica de um spot de TV para o modelo de automóvel WRAITH, de Rolls Royce, usando a Teoria dos Signos de Charles Peirce e seu desenvolvimento da compreensão das categorias de signos de acordo com as relações entre estes e seus processos de conexão com os fenómenos do mundo. Propomos a leitura do spot de acordo com processos semióticos de semelhança nos seus vários graus. A hipótese de trabalho descreve a compreensão do spot e o significado simbólico do nome do modelo do automóvel, visando um público específico: os consumidores do mercado de luxo. O conteúdo visual do spot expressa uma tendência específica em empreendimentos criativos relacionados com questões de género na publicidade para os objetos que normalmente são vistos como brinquedos para adultos: carros de luxo. Os receptores absorvem visualmente o objeto desejado, assim como as suas características de energia, proteção, segurança e conforto que pertencem à marca escolhida - Rolls Royce.