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## What's Behind the Billboard: Dead Men and Private Parts. Object? Sign? Thing?

### Abstract

It is a truism that objects and visual sign systems convey meaning. But the meanings shift radically according to the viewer and how the signs are read. Several years ago I asked an American student to photograph scenes which either shocked her or perplexed her upon her arrival in France. One photo is of a publicity panel at the entry to Le Père Lachaise cemetery. The panel consisted of nine magazine covers, including covers for magazines on children, cooking, hunting, and computers, as well as two pornographic magazines. The young student focused on just the last two covers, thus masking out the others to create her shocked meaning. Other viewers, such as a housewife, would have been expected to mask out the pornographic magazines and be enticed by the magazines centered on the home. A more global reading of the billboard reveals rhetorical links, narratives, and ironical juxtapositions between the magazines, thus creating dispersed and contradictory meanings drawn from this miniature map of contemporary France.

### Keywords

truism, objects, visual sign system, sign, convey, viewer, read, reader, American student, shocked, photograph, perplexed, France, Le Père Lachaise cemetery, magazine covers, pornographic, meaning, create, rhetorical links, narratives, ironical juxtapositions, contradictory meaning, contemporary France

## What's Behind the Billboard: Dead Men and Private Parts. Object? Sign? Thing?

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One cannot think of objects in isolation. They are defined by their context, and they also define the space and time that surround them. Twenty-five years ago a Coca-Cola bottle placed on the table on the terrace of a vacation home in Southern France suggested either the presence of an American among the French, or a French snobbishness and desire to be different. In all likelihood, it would clash with the surroundings and our image of the "French." Ten years ago the same bottle might have indicated that some Frenchman was drinking a mixture of Scotch and Coke, a chic mix at the time. Today the bottle, now in plastic, would be but one more sign of the integration of American commercialism into French society. In yet another context, Andy Warhol graphically transformed the same bottle into an art object which became a sought-after artifact for someone's living-room wall, whether in France or the United States.

At the same time, an object has the value we assign to it. Utilitarian objects, such as a bottle opener, have a very clear use and a first meaning: "to open bottles"; but, as Barthes demonstrated many years ago in *Mythologies*, nearly all objects have a second and third meaning. For an American, a certain kind of bottle opener can signify "France" and "Frenchness," or another can suggest wealth. Other objects can be said to have no first level meaning or utility, for example a rock (which is not there to be thrown at someone) placed on a coffee table: it signifies at once "beauty," "art," and "nature." This paper is devoted to objects that have a practical, direct utility and which are located in an economic system with a need to sell products by stimulating desire, thus favoring the second meaning.

In order to create the desire for a specific product, the advertise-

ment-objects resist conceptualization and demand that the viewer isolate the image of the advertisement from its surroundings.

An explanation: This exercise is part of a larger project which for the moment I have entitled reading and misreading in everyday life and literature. As part of the project, I have asked students going to France for the first time to take a throwaway camera with them and to photograph objects, events, or people which they could not immediately understand, which might disconcert them, or even shock them. The aim is double: to rediscover what we, as seasoned travelers to France, really no longer see as different and foreign and to note what the inexperienced viewer or seer finds truly foreign. It is assumed that these phenomena are not part of their own upbringing or part of the youth that nurtured them. Many of the photos are to be expected: very small cars, narrow streets, musicians playing in the metro. Others are more interesting, such as a series of photos centered on a French phone booth. A phone booth that takes a card and contains a mysterious "volet" at first disconcerts the American mind and its impression of France. A simple object, the telephone, is suddenly a confrontation of cultures and technologies and poses questions which go beyond the object itself ("Where does one buy the card?"). Here it is not the telephone, but the American who is out of context and out of touch with modern French society, which manipulates the objects without having to think.

Among the photos taken, the most disconcerting was not of the telephone, but rather of a billboard, an object shared by both Americans and French. The billboard is located just outside the Cimetière Père Lachaise, and the photo was taken by a 21-year-old woman student from the Midwest. The billboard is comprised of nine panels in color advertising nine different types of magazines. On a white margin there is an advertisement for a tour book of the cemetery as well as a panel advertising the works of the spiritist Allan Kardec. Because the print is small and at times blurred, I will spell out the texts:

*Ozé* [Daring] . . . immediate encounters  
 Pussy-Mag  
 I'll give you that on 36 15 Fem Tel  
 Super big breasts  
 Super lesbians notebooks  
 Amateur shavings  
 Sex shop at home  
 3615 Monica



**Savor**

**Malta. The archipelago of honey.**  
**American Whiskey.**  
**Cheese: brie, the king of the platter.**  
**Travel to the heart of the Piedmont.**  
**Dijon.**  
**All the heritage of the tradition.**  
**Snipes with cepes.**

**Indispensable**

**The Hunting Guide**  
**Everything about hunting in 316 pages**

**Play and win a Ford Sierra four by four**  
**The Home Magazine**  
**The Child's bedroom**  
**Back to school in color**  
**Art Deco: a style, some objects**  
**The new painted wall papers**  
**Special budget: furniture at the right price**  
**A desire for luxury**  
**Two apartments full of ideas**  
**A selection of 35 couches from 3,000 to 55,000 francs**

**couple 36-15**  
**Couples: the meeting place for couples**  
**Personal ads 24 hours a day**

**I learn**  
**The magazine that teaches everything**  
**to the little ones (children)**  
**I learn**

**Novelty. Tender images for little princesses**

**Collection of self-adhesive stickers**  
**Sarah Kay's stickers**  
**A world of softness**

Let's exchange our images

DBF

d base

Fox pro

Nantucket

Paradox

The magazine of microdata

It's here

The new catalogue Vpc Promotion

The specialist of all sizes for a low price

Fall-winter catalog

All sizes up to 64

On sale here

The covers are randomly distributed so that magazines with common themes do not touch—sexual topics are not contiguous nor are the children's magazines next to one another. Each panel contains a well-selected and homogeneous set of objects, thereby making a unity within each of the individual advertisements. But, taken as a whole, the panel of nine advertisements presents a cacophony of objects, each set of which creates its own message:

Pussy-Mag . . . super big breasts . . . Super lesbians notebooks  
. . . Monika . . . The archipelago of honey . . . American whisky  
. . . chesse: brie, the king of the platter . . . The Hunting Guide  
. . . a Ford Sierra four by four . . . some objects . . . The new  
painted wall papers . . . furniture at the right price . . . 35 couches  
. . . the magazine that teaches everything to the little ones (children)  
. . . Tender images for little princesses . . . Collection of  
self-adhesive stickers . . . Sarah Kay's stickers . . . A world of  
softness . . . d base . . . Fox Pro . . . Nantucket . . . Paradox.

The objects themselves vary from a child's stickers to furniture, a car, cheese, whisky, women's breasts, and a woman herself. The advertisements are objects (pieces of paper with color) which in turn represent other objects, which the viewer is invited to possess in one way or another. In some cases, such as the furniture and the stickers, the viewer physically possesses the objects. But Monika and the sexual organs start as real people who, through the photographic work, are transformed into objects. The naked woman may

be attained (possessed) physically, or she may remain an imaginary object of a viewer's mind, with only telephone contact to fuel his/her imagination. Yet a similar work of the imagination is not excluded from the other ads, since it is improbable that all the objects in the magazine will be purchased. Instead, it is highly probable that the reader will peruse the magazine with his or her imagination continually moving from one representation to another.

What would a young American female student see and be so struck by in the panel? Obviously the two ads for skin magazines—the crass nudity, the English-language obscenity in broad daylight, the blatant sexism, by American standards. In short, sex for sale next to a cemetery. Not real sex, but sex stared at between the covers of a magazine or heard over a phone—sex as close as the nearest newspaper salesman or local Minitel. The American student would probably not understand the magic code of 36-15, but the sexual messages would block out the messages of the other ads, leaving the stark contrast between sex and domesticity in the surrounding color blocks. The French would note that the economics of eroticism is nestled among ads for domestic and electronic bliss, but their gaze would not be locked into fascination and repulsion over the two ads. Instead it would float over the possibilities suggested by the other covers.

We can assume that the covers of the sex magazines are directed toward men—the ad for “couples” does not carry a gender designator, but it would be difficult to imagine a proper middle-class French woman taking home a copy of “Couples” for evening reading. Yet a woman would have a wide range of choices from the other magazine covers, which would correspond fairly closely to a stereotyped map of her life: cuisine, decoration and furniture for the home, and two magazines for the children: a sticker book for little Sarah Kay and a book of knowledge for sprouting Quentin (we are assuming that knowledge in the stereotypic world is reserved for little and big men while little princesses place pre-pasted knowledge on appropriate spaces). Finally, there is the great arrival of the clothes catalog, appealing to every taste and every size, even for the large or robust woman. There is little to attract the male: a magazine for tracking and killing animals and a computer magazine, with those poetic program titles for a very unpoetic world: Fox pro, Nantucket, and Paradox. (One might protest that computers are also part of a woman's world, but advertisements in both French and American computer magazines target the mathematically endowed male



with the power to push programs. Electronics, like hunting, is the realm of the male, where process and pursuit dominate).

The billboard is designed to be taken in at a glance as one walks in the street, with the hope that one or two titles will catch the eye. After all, it would be difficult, if not perverse, to imagine anyone wanting to buy all the magazines. The viewer sees parts of the billboard—discrete parts but not the whole, monstrous, heterogeneous combination. It is unified on one level while being disjointed. The similar design and formats of the nine magazines, the repetition of primary colors such as blue, yellow, and black, and the repetition of borders and blocks of letters gives an illusory sense of unity. But to avoid scandal, the viewer cannot attempt to read the entire billboard: it defies unification and demands that the parts remain separate.

Advertisements, whether in a magazine or in the street, demand that we block out what is next to the ad. We are not, for example, supposed to associate an AT&T ad for a calling card with the contiguous article on Clinton's marital activities. Likewise, in two pages from a recent *Rolling Stone*, we are not supposed to associate the ad for a woman's perfume on one page with the famous photo from the Kent state slayings on the facing page. Such an association would be outrageous. Whether French or American, we are taught to focus, block out, and train the eye not to see. These images refuse contextualization in order to be accepted. The photos and ads become isolated objects with an autonomy of their own. To conceptualize creates meanings the objects wish to deny.

If the French eye sees and reads the discrete parts, what does it not see, what does it refuse to perceive? It does not perceive the possibilities of unification, the potential for establishing relationships, the possibility of moving from one closed world to another. It does not—cannot—see the entire context. The eye does not see the potential for narratives and the possibility of grotesque combinations of fragmented lives. But these images do in fact generate several narratives of modern life. One reading of the billboard produces a woman's life, from childhood, arranging the stickers, stealing knowledge from older brother, to adult life, with cooking, the house, and clothes. This narrative is violently disrupted when a foreign element is introduced, that of the naked female body offering itself provocatively. The woman who sticks on stickers, decorates, feeds the family, and clothes herself, is suddenly unclothed, stuck among aggressive words, and is offered up as an appetizing object of desire.

The male narrative is far less elaborate but in some respects more complete: computer work, hunting, immediate encounters, and ready satisfaction. A life in which death and sex are unified with modern technology, where the program, the search, the pursuit bring together apparent opposites.

As for the combinations and the scandal of continuity, let us glance at some of the associations emanating from the center magazine cover for "couples" and try to figure out how to read them: by metaphor and similarity or opposition, or cause and effect?

—Ozé 'daring' and *Couples* obviously complement one another, both offering sex—*Saveur (Aroma)* and *Couples* is too obvious and crude to comment on, whereas *Le Guide de la chasse (Hunting Guide)* and *Couples* suggest the defilement of romantic love and tranquil domesticity because sexuality becomes physically, as well as visually, violent, when search and "kill" take on a double meaning.

—*J'apprends*—"le magazine qui apprend tout aux tout petits" 'I'm learning, the magazine that teaches everything to the younger set,' is a most humorous juxtaposition and use of the word "tout" and "tout petits," especially when we recall that seeing is knowing and to know is to "see." Does young Quentin, as he seeks out knowledge, see it all, does he learn what "couples" might teach him? Does knowledge run from one cover to the next? Of course not, unless we take the surface knowledge as real knowledge and take literally the child's magazine's claims. But if we do not keep the child in his place, he might just see (and know) all.

—The women's clothing magazine presents a simple opposition between clothed and unclothed, the correct and the obscene, independence and submissiveness. In a similar way, one might say that the innocence and tenderness of Sarah Kay contrasts with the erotic, unless one wishes to argue that the couple is in a very tender embrace. But it also calls up a series of perverse and troubling questions. Are we to suppose that the woman in *Couples* is the antithesis of the woman-child in the sticker magazine? Or is little Sarah Kay to grow up and be part of the magazine couple? And what of her stickers? What does she do with them? Where exactly does she put them? Could we go so

far as to suggest that little Sarah Kay is responsible for those red stickers on the porn mags? Can youth blot out adult (male) desire?

—The juxtaposition of the couple with a database program brings us to an ironical halt for a moment. Both offer special secrets to the buyer and both open new worlds, but of very different types: eroticism and computer computations. The irony is most evident in the background, where a representation of a Greek goddess holds a small computer, one breast discretely exposed to the viewer. Eroticness and the computer muse's inspiring presence find their place together.

—The domesticity of the furniture can be taken as complementary to the skin magazine (What does one do after an orgy? Or where does one have an orgy?) Or it can be seen as its polar opposite: sound bourgeois values grounded in the blue and white color scheme.

Without going further in this transgressive and abusive juxtaposition of discrete objects, it is clear that we should not break down the barriers, that we should keep our eyes focused on one part at a time and not read between the lines. The French see (i.e. know) that they should not read too much or too fast across the lines and between the pictures.

While we have seen into and across the patches of ads stuck together, we have not gotten behind the billboard, or even into its margins, where death is lurking and a different type of vision is announced. In cold black and white, the viewer is offered a book of death, a guide for finding one's favorite dead person, whether it be Edith Piaf, Jim Morrison, or Kardec, a.k.a. Hippolite-Louis Rivail, author of *Le Livre des médiums* (1862). Just as the viewer cannot see the contents of the magazines nor the cemetery behind the billboard, the spiritist cannot see the dead person, only the cold stone of the tomb. Unlike the porn magazine, where the pages can be opened and the body parts exposed, the tomb cannot be opened. But for a privileged few, the inanimate bones and the dried flesh come alive, and a voice can be heard—not by dialing 36-15—but by listening with all of one's force at the foot of Kardec's monument.

Although he was a medium, Kardec saw himself above all as a teacher and healer in the tradition of St. Vincent de Paul, Fourier,

and Auguste Comte. He listened to spirits so that he could teach a new harmony in the cosmos, where opposites such as male and female merge morally and ontologically, and the body and soul fuse as parts of a larger, cosmic “vital principle” or “universal fluid.” The search for love and sympathy and the hope of healing the world’s problems finds satisfaction in the fluid-like harmonization of Kardec’s “kindred feelings.”

The metaphorical vision offered by Kardec’s teachings and practice stands as an antipode to the graphic visual force of the magazines, where vision (looking at the ad) triggers the hallucinatory power of desire, whether it be sexual desire or desire for a new couch. In Kardec’s world, hallucination creates the physical manifestation of a dead person. Put in other terms, in the erotic magazine, a person becomes object; with Kardec the object becomes person. Thus a part of the dead man from the nineteenth century—who wrote as Hausmann drew up his plans (or “plan de Paris”) for the modern city—Kardec’s disembodied voice still speaks from the margins of a billboard and from the margins of philosophy to a marginal few—mostly women—and fills them with vital assurance in the face of the objectification of humans in the same modern city.

On another level, Kardec is much closer to the billboard’s portrait of modern life than first appears. The American female student was scandalized not by the pictures of “normal” life, but by the intrusion of the naked body, as object of desire, on the domestic and everyday scenes. Yet the objects in the porno mag ads, like the black-and-white portrait of Kardec, offer an escape from the visual and from everyday stress and doubt. Escape and satisfaction do not necessarily result from peering at naked body parts or slabs of stone; rather a voice, or voices of disembodied persons bring truth to one group of women and displaced satisfaction to a group of men. In the end, we don’t see body-parts and soul; we hear them or else we write to them on yet another object, the modern computer-phone, the Minitel.

With the aid of Minitel, the visual object on the front of the magazine becomes a modern version of the Arabian nights story—the 1001 tales, mechanically typed out rather than told. As with the original tales, life and death are at stake. In the original, the tale could not end, because with the end of the woman’s narrative came her death. The women (and men I suppose) of 36-15 must spell out their tease and their stories as long as possible to make more money and to make sure that the phone line does not go dead.

The billboard stands out because it does not offer reconciliation or unification as do artistic texts, such as in Flaubert's ironical scene of the local fair in *Madame Bovary* or Eisenstein's intellectual use of montage. There is no irony in the juxtaposition of the proper Sarah Kay and Monique, and the creators of the billboard do not want any intellectualization of their product. But the ad is not a simple product of bad commercialism, because it is typical of modern commercial street scenes, whether in Paris, New York, or Tokyo. The juxtaposition of unlike objects dates to the beginning of the commercialization of the street and the use of walls for more than support of structures and protection from the weather. With the advent of the automobile and subsequent introduction of street signs, lights, and route markers, the urban space soon became saturated with signs of the most heterogeneous kind. Within this context, our billboard is an integral and undistinguished part of the urban landscape, where the viewer is trained to screen out, to focus, and to run his or her gaze over the myriad signs present at any moment. Repression and focusing are signs of the times.

Yet, the French billboard does retain a specifically French character, particularly for the American female student. She was scandalized by the sex-object and the explicit show of flesh. Her total repulsion was saved by a block of paper which hides not the object but the "chose," the sexual organ, denied to both French and Americans. She was shocked by the unseen, by the tease of what must be there but can't be shown. We could say simply that, as the old cliché goes, the French are less puritanical than Americans. Yet, if they let it hang out, they still make sure to hide the "chose."

To conclude and to return to the billboard, the stickers keep sticking in my mind. But more than the stickers, the name Sarah Kay keeps asserting itself. That name in a French society is much more than a simple magazine cover because the name is not at all French and it is not at all common. Why then Sarah Kay? Why not Francine or Catherine or Françoise? She too stands for something, for the genteel exoticism of an ideal English childhood. Purity and innocence are elsewhere, they are in a foreign name, not in the thing.

#### Aix-en-Provence

Epilogue: Sarah Kay does exist, as a lingerie chain in France. Prominently displayed in the window of the shop in Aix is a model wearing underwear that sports a colorful profusion of parrots: the "wildness" of eroticism is tamed and literally stuck in the middle of a

plastic model's body. The red rectangle of the billboard is expanded and transformed into decoration, which in turn attracts while covering the sex. In a process of objectification, the covering becomes a sign in its own right, signifying exoticism, attractiveness, and gay frivolity (the colors). The body's sexual signification is displaced to the parrots because it acts primarily as a support or hanger for the underwear. Our attention is displaced from the sex to a representation of parrots who no longer talk but seem to gaze at the viewer as the viewer gazes at them. Dead parrots, stuck, not stuffed, re-place the live woman.