The Color of Meaning: The Significance of Black and White in Television Commercials

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This paper illuminates the central role of coloration in television commercials. Utilizing a sample of over 10,000 advertisements collected in America and Japan over the last half decade, the data reveals the extent to which advertising depends upon color for message delivery and to facilitate meaning construction. Ads are often predicated on—even directed toward—color in purposeful ways. We see this, in particular, when we study the absence of color in advertising: cases where black & white is used and/or juxtaposed with color.

After a brief survey of semiology—focusing on color’s ‘‘denotative’’ and ‘‘connotative’’ functions—nine key findings are uncovered: (1) the great degree to which black and white are employed; (2) white often serves as a dominant signifier in Japan, whereas the use of black & white film is more widespread in America; (3) signification is consistent (insofar as certain associations between color and particular ideas are demonstrably invariant from commercial to commercial); (4) moreover, when these colors appear, it is generally for the explicit purpose of directed message transmission; (5) belying ad-makers’ unequivocal signification intentions, black and white are often used as metaphor, with black used to depict death, disease, misery, despair or evil, and white associated with life, protection, hope, purity and goodness; (6) in this way it can be said that black and white serve an intentional signification function; (7) the technique of alternating black & white and color or contrasting black with white works to establish an unambiguous discourse for the viewer; (8) importantly, no deviant or oppositional discourse can be found in ads relative to these colors; (9) through such discourse message transfer, emotional release and connection to the product can occur.

Considering such findings we conclude that for all the recent ruckus made about the polysemy of signs and the empowered audience, the use of color discussed here appears intentional, directive and connotatively univocal. Judging from how commercials in both America and Japan consistently employ particular colors, it would appear that there is universal agreement and shared cultural meaning (at least among producers) on certain symbolic content in television commercials.

KEYWORDS: Semiotics, Advertising, Color, Black & White film, Globalization

I. Introduction

1. The Significance of Color in Television Commercials

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the central role of coloration in television commercials. Utilizing a sample of over 10,000 advertisements collected in America and Japan over the last half decade, my data reveals the extent to which advertising depends upon color in message delivery and the construction of meaning. Much of ad word doesn’t just happen to happen in color, I claim. Nor do producers simply choose to utilize color or any old color, for that matter. Instead, color is often the primary tool for conveying meaning. Careful study reveals that ads are often predicated on—even directed toward—color in purposeful ways. We see this, in particular, when we study the absence of color in advertising: cases where black & white is used and/or juxtaposed with color. This is the focus of the present paper.

We will require certain intellectual tools to assist in evaluating these claims. Such tools reside in semiology—the study of the sign. A brief survey will demonstrate just how color functions as a sign at both the ‘‘denotative’’ and ‘‘connotative’’ levels. Its embedded, socially constructed meanings often operating as what Barthes (1972) would call ‘‘myth’’.

As for the data, it considers commercials involving black and white (or dark and light, shadow and bright) in both America and Japan. A careful review of the evidence demonstrates:

1. the great degree to which black and white are employed;

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1 The sample consists of ads collected via four operations (twice in America and twice in Japan), utilizing identical collection procedures. A sample of over 7,000 CMs was culled from the (then) seven national networks broadcast in Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A., and Sendai, Japan, in the spring of 1991. This recording was continuous for a four week period and the coding and analysis of this data has been extensively reported in other work (Holden 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996). An American-only sample was collected from Pasadena, California, three years later, using identical procedures. Since that time, the Japanese data has been supplemented via written requests to selected producers and a one month random sample of major networks during the period June—July, 1997. Altogether, this collection constitutes an extensive library of contemporary television ads from the two countries.

2 Note: this paper adopts the following convention: the connector ‘‘&’’ will be used in cases when the two colors (black, white) form one entity; ‘‘and’’ will be employed in cases where the colors should be thought of as distinct entities.
(2) white often serves as a dominant signifier in Japan, whereas the use of black & white film is more widespread in America;

(3) signification is consistent (insofar as certain associations between color and particular ideas are demonstrably invariant from commercial to commercial);

(4) moreover, when these colors appear, it is generally for the explicit purpose of such directed message transmission;

(5) belying ad-makers’ unequivocal signification intentions, black and white are often used as metaphor, with black used to depict death, disease, misery, despair, evil or retrogress, and white associated with life, protection, hope, purity, goodness and progress;

(6) In this way it can be said that black and white serve an intentional signification function;

(7) the technique of alternating black & white and color or contrasting black with white works to establish an unambiguous discourse for the viewer;

(8) importantly, no deviant or oppositional discourse can be found in ads relative to these colors;

(9) through such discourse message transfer, emotional release and connection to the product can occur.

Considering such findings we conclude that for all the recent ruckus made about the polysemy of signs (Fiske 1987) and the empowered audience (Ang 1985, Morley 1986), this particular use of color bespeaks a large degree of universal agreement on signification. At least in terms of producers, there appears widespread understanding about what symbols should be used to signify particular meanings. In our data, fixed connotations relating to particular colors were pervasive and repetitive. Significantly, little deviation or alternative readings could be found across countries and between producers. Such universality in symbolic use is the key finding in the present work. Before considering these dimensions, we should prepare the way by explaining a bit about the way advertising works, in general, and color’s role in that process, in particular.

2. The Tools of Commercial Communication

The Centrality of Sound. Schwartz’s “resonance theory of communication” (1973) held that noise often serves as the basis for persuasive communication by making a powerful connection with the embedded experience of viewers. He often put this theory to the test, having sound precede the image in his political ads. Thus in his (in)famous “Daisy Spot”, he surrounded a pretty blond-haired girl with the sounds of spring. As she plucked petals from a flower, she kept an audible count. Her childishly misspoken sequence suddenly obviated by the counterpuntal cadence of an adult male. As the camera zoomed into the child’s eye, the male’s count reached “one”. Reflected in the girl’s iris was the dreaded mushroom cloud signalling nuclear destruction. As the billowing clouds faded to black, President Lyndon Johnson’s voice intoned a message of alarm and plea for peace.

The ad ran only once. Like Apple’s “1984” ad, one airing created a greater sensation than one thousand would have. The “daisy spot” was the epitome of unequivocal meaning wrought by sound. It left millions of voters certain that the president, not his hawkish challenger, was more apt to ensure the safety of the innocent girl in the field. Such a technique was powerful (and persuasive) for a generation raised on radio. But that was then and this is now.

The Primacy of the Image. Today we live in a very different era, surrounded and shaped by other media. Ours is a less linear, more visual epoch, a spatio-temporal environment Kellner (1995) calls “media culture”. It is a milieu in which image has become primary, where all words and sounds have a visual, image-based referent (see Taylor and Saarinen 1994). Echoing Boorstin (1961), the image has displaced all other media forms—above all, print and sound—as the primary mode of discourse.

A major reason for this change has been the explosion of image-based communications technology. Spurred by human demand, satellites have globalized news and information; CD-Rom has made possible the storage, retrieval and transmission of numerical and other visual data; fax machines and internet have enabled almost instantaneous transmission of visual text across far-flung spaces, linking diverse human communities.

The Importance of Color. This revolution in the use and possibilities pertaining to the image has called for attendant improvements in the technologies associated with it. Thus, just as black and white television succumbed to the demand for color, so, too, have computer monitors, copiers, fax machines and printers. Why? Because meaning is often contained in color. And a world composed entirely of black against white would leave viewers with essential gaps in understanding. To see this consider the following set of images.

Plates 1 and 2 present common images from Japanese and American television commercials. In the Japanese case (Plate 1), we are looking at corporate logos (which invariably cap each ad); in the American case (Plate 2), product packaging. The point of this exercise is that in an exclusive bi-chromal world, messages are often lost. Limited to black and white, the viewer is unable to perceive what is patently clear in color: the colors employed make national reference. In a word, color carries essential meaning and if we are limited to a two-tone world, information transmission becomes partial, imperfect—even incorrect. To invoke Shannon and Weaver (1949) a great deal of signal loss will occur. Viewed in this way, we recognize that true (i.e. full or perfect) communica-
tion in TV ads often hinges on color.

3. **Understanding Commercial Communication**

   *Meaning.* As a distinct field, communication studies has burgeoned in the last ten years. We have witnessed

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\footnote{Top to bottom: Shyosen (Japanese seasoning); Panahome (housing); Toyota (cars); Minshuto (political party); Hitachi (“fight Japan”).}

\footnote{Top to bottom: United States Postal Service; Reynolds’ Aluminum recycling; Ziploc plastic bags; A&W cream soda; Colgate baking soda toothpaste.}
a move away from the decades-long debate over just how effective media are (cf. Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Klapper 1960) to a swelling of attention concerning the audience (Lull 1995). Bolstered by semiotics—the theory of signs—one conclusion that has emerged from this work is that the audience possesses broad interpretive power (Fiske 1989, Tomlinson 1991). More, because individual consciousness is at work, any one sign may elicit a variety of interpretations—no matter what the producer may have intended. In effect, like an ink blot, visual representations often possess multiple meanings. The word most often invoked to describe this phenomenon is “polysemy” (Fiske 1987).

Advertising as Communication. At the same time, many visual symbols have dominant (or “preferred”) meanings. I have shown this in other work on TV commercials (e.g. Holden 1995). While content analysis may uncover up to forty or more “codes” embedded within any one ad, that does not mean that all forty codes dominate the ad—or the viewer’s consciousness. Ads, by their nature as vehicles of sale, work toward a specific purpose. They seek closure. They establish what O’Barr (1994) calls “primary discourse”. Yes, they strive to be as inclusive as possible—sending out signals that will unify divergent “types” of people into one “consumption community” (Boorstin 1973). However, ads also want to delimit the number of possible interpretations. In this way, they strive toward uni-vocality or unisemity. They seek to set a communication (if not a consumption) agenda. In my words (Holden 1993), ads are “selective”; they isolate a limited set of ideas for viewer attention; they are also “directive”; they channel viewers toward those ideas (and away from rival others). One point we are heading toward in this paper is that ads often perform this directive/selective work via color. In a word, color is a central tool in the agenda-setting function of advertising.

Color, Communication and Meaning. In spoken language we often associate color with certain physical or mental states. We speak of “being green with envy” or “being so angry that we see red.” Human behavior, as well, is characterized by color: blue stands for depression, yellow for cowardice, grey means ambiguous motives or meanings, black often conjures up images of evil, while white can signify either purity or surrender. Classes of people, too, are associated with color. Not just those groupings based on the shade of one’s skin—as for instance, red denoting the American Indian, black for African, yellow for Asian and brown for Hispanic... but gender—pink for female, blue for male... and political ideology—red for authority or browns for pollution and green for environmentalism, as well.

Plate 3. Color as Signifier (1): Classes of People.


1 Top row, (left to right): Cotton; Bank of America; M&Ms (candles); Bottom row, (l to r): Circuit City (electronics); M&Ms; Chevrolet Trucks.

2 Rows 1 to 4 (left to right). R1 (1): Luvs diapers; (r): Pampers diapers; R2: “Gouchisousama” (cooking show); DoCoMo Telecommunications; Suntory Whiskey; R3: Suisei Likido; Hietarou (cooling patch); Calpis (drink); R4: Sekisui Haimu (housing); DIA Kensetu (condominiums); Calpis (drink).
In this way we talk about color as a "signifier". It is a sign which draws meaning by making reference to something else. White means "surrender" if it is depicted on a waving flag (though not a wedding dress). The white cloth brandished in the context of a contest is the signifier for the mental concept of surrender. The mental concept—the thing to which the white flag refers in the receiver's mind—is known as the "signified".

In doing its reference work in the mind of the so-called "reader", there are two levels at which a sign works. The first is the common-sense, obvious meaning of the sign—for example, that part of the color spectrum from which the color comes, the fact that the color depicts a flag or is related to the product. This is what Barthes (1968) calls the "denotative level" of meaning. Signs seldom function only on the denotative level. And this is certainly true of advertising which is predicated on the aggregation and interplay of numerous signs. Ad work is about the producer intentionally loading meanings into a signifier and seeking to transfer those meanings to a reader. It is hoped that sign will engage the reader's experience in such a way that meaning will be transferred (progress) from the simplest level to a deeper level of meaning.

In the case of ads about paint or film (below) the surface meanings suffice simply because the product's existence and operative logic is, itself, color-based.

Not all (in fact, relatively few ads) are about color-based products. As a result, ads that utilize color in their sign-work function at a level of meaning beyond denotation. When this is the case, color is treated differently by ad-makers. They accord it an expanded role. Like images, words and sounds, they employ color as a tool to assist the viewer in constructing mental associations. In this way, the use of color is intentional. Its function is to create associations between the product and some other good (a pleasurable, generally positive, occasionally negative, but always purposeful) message. Ads do this in any number of elegant and complex ways. Before exploring some of these methods, let's consider the first step: the move from denotation to connotation.

At first glance the images in Plate 7 will likely strike the reader as scenes from laundry commercials. Deeper scrutiny will reveal that all these scenes are shot in white (Plate 7a) or bright (Plate 7b) colors. Prolonged study will unveil even deeper levels of meaning. It is not just white being presented; rather, there is also the thing white represents. In this case, all these white backgrounds, bright clothes, shiny surfaces, and crisp, sunny days symbolize purity and cleanliness—at least in the minds of the ad producers. The hope is that the viewer will transfer such connotative meanings to the signified—the product. Lest this point be lost on the viewer, ad-makers commonly insert the so-called “preferred reading”, contrasting the signified (the outcome) with a negative (prior) condition: dirty, greasy, muddy clothes (Plate 7c).

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7 Top row, (1 to r): Pennzoil (motor oil); Circuit City (electronics); Circuit City; Bottom row, (1 to r): Japanese ad council; Toyota; Mercedes Benz.
Plate 6. Denotation in Advertising: When Color is Merely Color.⁶

Plate 7. Denotation and Connotation: Split Levels of Meaning.⁷

⁶ Top panel of sixteen: Kodak film; Second row: Lucite paint; Third row: Panasonic (Gaoo television); Fourth row: Sofina Aube (lipstick); Kanebo Tessimo (eye shadow); Shiseido Cosmety (nail color).
⁷ 7a: Surf detergent (left); Tuf detergent; (right); 7b: Ultra Downey softener (left); Cheer detergent (right); 7c: Wisk detergent (Top row), Cheer detergent (Bottom row).
Conclusion: Meaning in Color. And so it goes in any number of ads. Each color has its own connotative meaning.10 Red, purple, yellow, orange, black and white. These connotative meanings work not only at the level of the product (primary discourse), but at the level of society—what O’Barr calls “secondary discourse”. It is in the repetition of such deeper messages that we begin to talk about “myth” (Barthes 1972)—of consistent ways in which the signified is encountered and reproduced in the viewers’ minds, transferred first to their beliefs and then to their practices. In the sections to follow we will look at specific colors (and their combinations) as case studies of myth. We will consider widespread universality in how black, white, black contrasted with white and black & white vis-a-vis color are treated in television commercials. By doing so, we will be able to see the powerful connotative role that color—or, at least, certain colors—plays in advertising and, by extension, the reproduction of society.11

II. The Connotative Function of White

We saw in the last section that white is a complex signifier—perhaps the richest of all color referents. A partial list of its range of meanings include purity, cleanliness, surrender, old age, promise and heat.12 White can also be associated with the spiritual world—by referring to ghosts and graveyards—and, in this way, death. More often, though, it serves as the signifier for life.

In the following panels (8 and 9) we find such reference. The first is from an advertisement for air bags. Over a billowing cloud of white the written text informs us: “people who survive near-death experiences often report seeing a blinding flash of white. Here’s what it looks like in slow motion.” Out of the steering column: a burst of white... and air bags fill on both the driver and passenger sides.

Plate 8. Life Comes in a Flash of White.13

White in this ad signifies life, but it also implies the suspended state between life and death. The air bag is the wall of separation, the protector that staves off death and delivers us back to the side of the living. And, viewed in this light (pardon the pun), it is significant that the bag is colored white: not only the sign of life, but of its preservation.

This latter signification is made clear in the following ad. In it, Mercedes Benz, a German car company, depicts a young woman in a bathing suit on a sun-bleached beach. With her tender skin exposed to the harsh rays, she smears white sun screen on her face. It is not only the lotion—but its color—which is signal here. The

11 I explore the connotative function of colors other than black and white in a second paper, “Colors of Significance: Reading Culture through Color in Television Advertising.” (1997b).
12 Importantly, though, it rarely signifies more than one of these at any one time. In advertising, my data shows, meaning is selected for (and determined by) the particular context established by the other elements (actors, gesture, story-line, verbal text, lighting, etc.) in the ad.
13 Source: Acura (automobile).
white cream serves as what Williamson (1978) calls "currency": symbolic value which, when exchanged for the product, invests it with value, too. In this case, white aims at demonstrating Mercedes' commitment to customer safety and welfare.

III. The Connotative Function of Black

Life's opposition, of course, is death. And just as white is often used to symbolize life, its contrasting color (black) is invoked to symbolize death. This is apparent in the following panel of images.

Death is everywhere in the AIDS panel (Plate 10a). It is in the stark coloration—the red stop sign turned black; the brick wall we know to be red, also black; the black skin of the trumpeter, stained with a descending tear; the man's black armband, crying out for attention against his starched white shirt; the black backing to the heart-rending message written in white.

This same approach is adopted in the second panel (Plate 10b). Set against a black backdrop, white words flash silently on the screen. The absence of music and narration sets a somber, bleak, even desperate tone. In

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14 Source: Mercedes Benz (automobiles).
15 10a: Campaign for Our Children, Inc. (AIDs); 10b: California Department of Health Services (anti-smoking campaign).
both cases the words "death" and "die" are visually coupled with the color black, driving the stakes home. For the ad reader, black IS death.

IV. Five Signification Functions of Black & White Film

1. The Absence of Color: Tension Heightener

In the introduction we talked about what is there: colors which, when associated with particular objects or situations, produce particular meanings. However, social scientists often like to talk about the importance of what is not there. What we can't see is sometimes no less present, nor any less powerful, than what can be seen (Block 1987). For example, the choice to depict the "STOP" sign in black & white (rather than red) is a conscious decision. So, too, the decision to clothe the girl on the beach in dark blue (rather than orange or green or pink or floral). In the latter case, "the failure by the ad-makers to reject blue" (or the existence of "not green" or "not floral") may be missing from the reader's calculus; nonetheless, it is seminal to the signification equation.

Of course, seeing what is not there requires a special act on the part of our imagination. As such, we are often at a loss as to how to give substance to that which is hidden. It is here that the so-called "meaning school" asserts the essential power of the audience (e.g. Fiske 1989). The act of interpretation is within the sign reader's hands, it is argued. He could posit any sort of meaning for the appearance of "blue" or, for that matter, "not pink" or "white". Agency and subjectivity mean any interpretation is possible.

However, since ads are most often directive, they generally emphasize "preferred readings". They seek to provide the audience with only "closed" or "optimum" readings (see Barthes 1977). Such signs limit how "active" a reader can be. Such closure is certainly the case when absence is spoken to—where a particular thing in an ad is presented with the intention of getting the audience to infer the existence of its opposite. Under such circumstances, ads try to get the reader to recognize idea-objects by establishing a "discourse" (Foucault 1972) built around a set of confined meanings.

This is why ads utilize black & white. The invisible referent is the vibrant, animate, "natural" world of color.

Plate 11. A Fully Black & White World: Tension Unresolved.14

14 Source: Nike (shoes).
While virtually unheard of in Japan, American ads resort to this technique often, and always for a specific purpose. Almost always it is employed to create an unwanted foil to play off of and overcome; a disturbance for the viewer to eradicate. As we saw above, for instance, black & white often signifies tragedy, death or sadness; commonly, it is coupled with an unsavory tension that unsettles the viewer and cries out for resolution. Such is the case in the following Nike campaign.

Life, these companion ads suggest, is Hobbesian. A never-ending competition (that ceaseth only in death). It begins with the fight for 12 spots on a high school roster. In the process, a young boy must battle the trophies of the past, the coaches’ incessant whistles and critical eye, potential teammates, opposing players, college scouts, the media, hype, fans, the lure of riches, fame, and the elusive championship ring which serves as declaration that he has finally reached the pinnacle of his profession. Since the quest is never-ending (there is always another season, a new struggle for superiority) and since few ever achieve the fruits mentioned, this ad carries with it the discomforting feeling of perpetually unfinished business.

2. Conversion to Color I: Negating Negative Condition

If the ad producer is not willing to allow “surplus meaning” (Goldman 1992) to surface, he will fill in the oppositional meanings, creating (and controlling) both sides of ad discourse. This is particularly effective if the ad is organized as a story and tension/resolution is its structural form. When this happens, tension is invariably encoded in the black & white film and resolution is coupled with color. Discourse, then, is established as a negotiation between the meanings represented by black & white and those established by color with the former (and its associated meanings) negated by the latter.

When this occurs, it is patently clear to the reader that black & white is a distinct (and less preferred) enclave. Rarely is this convention challenged. Thus, ads use color and black & white to establish competing visions; worlds at opposing ends of the meaning/values/goals spectrum. And invariably, in such a calculus, black & white is used to signify a world of danger, competition, outdated (and inferior) methods, social control, or unpleasant physical condition.

Thus is black & white (or sepia) used to signal testimonials by criminals of theft and home invasion:

Plate 12. Black & White Juxtaposed with Color: Criminality Negated.17

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17 Source: Brinks home security systems.
an overly competitive world:

Plate 13. Black & White Juxtaposed with Color: The Competition Negated.\(^{18}\)

strict regulation and outdated morality:

Plate 14. Black & White Juxtaposed with Color: Old Morality Negated.\(^{19}\)

\(^{18}\) Source: Old Spice anti-perspirant.

\(^{19}\) Upper panel of four: Isuzu Rodeo; Lower panel of nine: Virginia Slims (cigarettes).
an unsavory past condition:

Plate 15. Black & White Juxtaposed with Color: The Unsavory Past Negated.²⁰

the "social problem" of unattractiveness and obesity:

Plate 16. Black & White Juxtaposed with Color: Our Old Selves Negated.²¹

In each case, color is suddenly introduced to bracket the unwanted. Everything painted with the black & white brushstroke is presented as a problem to be overcome. The use of color neatly packages and disposes of it. Color is the signature of transcendence. It signifies eradication of the past reality. In this way, a stark tale of burglary dissolves to a warm picture of a hand touching the buttons of a home security system; male aggression on the basketball courts has its payoff in a full-color embrace with the "fair maiden" afterward; children's harrowing reports of past bad tooth check-ups become exhilarating exclamations of present triumph (thanks to the toothpaste, Crest); the heavily-regulated pre-school world of "staying within the lines" is demolished by a free-spirited woman wielding a "V-6 crayon"; similarly, the Victorian world of regulated attire and controlled (female) sexuality is resoundingly defeated with the coming of vibrant, fully-animated women in charge of their lives; unflattering portraits of once-overweight subjects are contrasted with their newer, slimmer, livelier, more "colorful" incarnations. This technique, then, sets the black & white world up as a straw man. It prompts the

²⁰ Source: Crest (toothpaste).
²¹ Rows 1 through 3: Nutri-systems; Row 4: Ultra Slim-fast.
viewer to blow it down. When that moment comes—in the form of color images—a union with product is also effected. While some might label this “manipulation”, it is actually the height of signification—of meaning coupling and message transfer—at work.

3. Conversion to Color II: Emotional Signifier

American ads intentionally play on (and up to) a reader’s emotions. As I show elsewhere (Holden 1997b), they do this, above all, via the soft focus lens, orange hues and, as in the following case, through themes aimed at the heart. The shift from black & white to color is often integral to this process of emotional foment, working as a signifier and, thus, manipulating the reader’s feelings. Consider the following ad:

Plate 17. From Black & White to Color: Converting Tragedy to Triumph.\textsuperscript{22}

The ad concerns organ donation. Through the narration of two parents it tells the tale of life and death, of loss and gain that touched them. These themes are established from the outset with the fluttering of doves—sign of life—yet photographed, oddly, in black & white. The darkened birds, which the reader associates with white, alerts us that all is not right here. Then the narration begins. A father introduces us to Katie, “the youngest of six children, a tomboy, full of life.” The viewer watches colored snapshots of Katie running, vamping and throwing a ball to the heavens. At which point the red sphere blackens—sending a chill up the viewer’s spine. The father says: “and when she died...” and the ball hangs in the sky as a dead weight for a moment, before descending. The father explains how they had “wanted to do something.” He doesn’t say so, but implied is the desire for Katie to live on—even if only one small part of her. Then it is a mother’s turn. The film again shifts to color and we see a boy running. She tells of Tommy’s illness and how without Katie’s contribution he would not have survived. Tommy is pictured reaching for the ball Katie has tossed. The ball he catches is red. As he catches it the mother says: “Yesterday, Tommy did something we never thought he would: he turned six.” The doves flutter once more, again in black & white. The story is complete, the last act played out. There is a transfer of life, the release of Katie’s soul, the final journey to heaven. The emotional power of this tale is greatly enhanced by the juxtaposition of color and black & white film.

Japanese ads, though subtle (some might say less ambitious or sterile) by contrast, are not without their emotional tugs. Most often, it is a sound (such as a gurgling mountain stream or the pinging of a chime in the summer breeze) or else it is a situation (such as the lonely salaryman toiling deep into the night) that is used to signify a certain mood to the viewer and elicit strong emotional response. Occasionally, however, color is assigned the task. For instance, blue becomes signifier of loneliness or orange captures the warm glow of an old memory.

\textsuperscript{22} Source: The Council on Donation.
Although rare, Japanese ads also employ the black & white to color strategy favored in American ads. When used, as in the following political advertisement from the Social Democratic Party, the possibility exists of communicating a change in human condition.

Plate 18. From Black & White to Color: Humanizing the Message.

The previous panel reflects an attempt to signal transformation. With the change in coloration the reader is asked to recognize that the actors are real humans, vibrant and alive. They are not instrumentalities viewed in rational black & white terms (which, the ad implies, is how the rival political parties see them). Rather these are people brought to life by a political party capable of recognizing their human qualities. Unlike the organ donation ad, though, this spot has no narration. The reader is expected to finalize the reading themselves, filling in the gaps in meaning as images shift from black & white to color. The “optimum reading” is assisted, though, with a full-color ending in which the party leader pledges to try her best for the public. All of this signification may have been beyond the ken of the average voter: the SDP fared poorly in this particular election.

4. Conversion from Color I: the Bracketing Function

Black & white is not always used in negative ways. As we saw in the organ donation spot, it can often bracket the story being told. In a sense it serves to suspend judgment and place a hold on real time. Doves are as much a sign of life arriving as they are an indicator of its fleeting nature. This is the significance of their presence at both the beginning and conclusion of the ad. Thus we would say that black & white serves as an indicator. It is an index which our internal tape recorders stop for. It is a pause which recognizes the moments in which a true test has arisen and for which real feelings will be summoned. Such black & white “time outs” become the moments of deepest meaning. Schnabel has said, “the pauses between the notes—ah, that is where the art resides!” And that is precisely the function that black & white film often serves when coupled with color. It operates like rests in passages of music. Through the blending of color and black & white film, special meaning is conferred. The lapse of one and beginning of another communicates to the viewer that special meaning is to be attached, that an essential meaning is to be derived. This technique can be seen in the following plate.

This plate (like the one to follow) depicts action at the beach. Both intertwine color and black & white segments, the latter being employed to emphasize emotional and/or sexual activity. Each ad treats black & white as moments of lapsed or frozen time. From there, however, the approach and purposes of black & white diverge. In the ad depicted in Plate 19, individual human action is contrasted with moments of interaction. The ad depicts a world of restraint—communicated by colorful scenes of treacherous ocean and rocky beaches. The protagonists must conquer these obstacles in order to be joined. In these moments of intercourse the film shifts to black & white and is rolled in slow motion and/or frozen frame. Uncharacteristically, this is a positive use of black & white and, for that reason, is striking to the viewer.

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23 It is important to note that in the past year Japanese commercials (both television and, in particular, poster ads) have begun interjecting black & white elements with more frequency into their visuals. While still paltry, the increased presence of this technique should be monitored. Of particular import will be whether use can shed light on the question of local practices (and, thus, ideosyncratic meanings) as contrasted with universal uses (and, thus, uniform meanings).

24 Source: Shumin to political party.

25 For a full account of the media campaign—Japan’s first—see my “‘How Can We Say It in 15 Seconds?’: Assessing Japan’s First Mass Media Election”, The Journal of the Japanese Society (Forthcoming A).

5. Conversion from Color II: Liberating the Product

Plate 20 utilizes a similar bracketing technique, although it functions quite differently than the previous ad. A woman drives her red convertible (the color symbolic of desire, the car a sign of unencumbered liberty) to a secluded beach, performs a strip tease and takes a dip in the ocean *au naturel*. Here is an act of perfect freedom. What to make of the interludes of black & white? First, as in the previous plate, this technique lends a voyeuristic quality to the audience's viewing. More importantly, though, it enables the producer to establish a set of (color-based) associations: escape, nature, freedom, actualization, product. Unlike the previous ad, it is the

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27 Source: Old Spice (after shave).
28 Source: Chic jeans.
black & white which serves as the force of restraint. The lack of color indicates to the reader the bound nature of the protagonist's everyday world. In this way, it sets up the punchline (liberation)—which is delivered in color.

This is a more common use of black & white and color in commercials. It surfaced in a recent Japanese ad. Again invoking the surveillance motif, again stripping a woman of her outer wear, the ad establishes a dueling discourse of black & white and color in which the former is a harsh outer world and the latter, the vital, fragile, inner condition.

Why are ads structured this way? As we saw in the discussion of absence, black & white pauses serve as the foundation upon which the dominant discourse can be erected. Surveillance and refracted time may be at work, but it is the moments of color which better secures the reader's interest and emotional response. Not coincidentally, it is in these moments of coloration that the product is presented. Color (and, hence, product) become the dominant discourse to which all prior and subsequent black & white pauses refer.

A similar example is found in the following ad.

At the heart of this ad is the tension function we spoke of before. Windy, grimy, stark, shot at odd angles, we witness a basketball player dribbling full-bore across the naked skeleton of a skyscraper, balancing precariously hundreds of feet above the ground. Completing a set of impossible starts, stops, skips, launches and landings, the viewer is relieved to see his act (dunking a ball through a basket) completed. This relief is mirrored by those on the ground who have been watching in astonishment and horror. Just as quickly as relief comes, however, it disintegrates. Suddenly, the player launches himself off the edifice. Viewing his plummet from above, the viewer’s shock yields to sad recognition: the man was crazy. Just as this newfound state of realization has sunk in, though, it is shattered as a parachute opens. The crazy man wasn’t crazy after all. He is safe! Viewed from above, the company name appears on the unfurling chute. Its bold red and blue colors spell out “Fila”—the savior. White—the signifier of safety (as we saw in the Mercedes and Honda ads)—just happens to be the parachute’s color. The roller coaster of tension grounds to a satisfactory halt. Thus, is it that through the interplay of color and black & white—the intentional friction between visual opposites—that release (both for protagonist and ad reader) is secured. The clash of colors has created meaning.

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29 Source: Shiseido Anessa (U.V. Sunscreen).
V. Metaphoric Functions of Black/White Coloration

As discussed at the outset, colors often come with their own predefined meaning. Red is recognized as symbolizing passion, heat or desire, white as a sign for purity, darkness as a sign of death or foreboding. In this way, colors work a metaphoric function. Important in carrying this function off is the existence of pre-established, socially agreed-upon, associative meanings attached to particular colors. When specific colors crop up in an ad, the meanings they represent become inserted into the reader's interpretive experience and can be exchanged for the product—for both positive or negative purposes. Consider the following ad, an anti-smoking campaign in which black is used as metaphor, conjuring an aura of pestilence and doom.

Here the dark, dirty, unseemly world of garishly-dressed, ill-mannered actors functions to transpose meaning from one plane (the metaphoric) to another (the actual). Color facilitates meaning exchange: the black (signifying dangerous, bankrupt behavior) traded in for the negative connotation (smoking is bad). In this way the producers utilize the metaphoric function of a particular color to de glamorize smoking. This is impressive (and complex) signification work. For, to debunk the object, they set discourse within the parameters of a fashion show—normally a connotator of glamor and haute couture! Consistent with the structure of that event, attractive women work the runway; consistent with the ad-makers' objectives, however, the women dress, pose and act in ungainly ways. In this way the producers create negative associations for the ad reader. But this is not quite enough. In order to drive the point fully home, they cloak the entire episode—from clothing to house lighting—in the darkest of tones, completing the sense of gloom and despair. The color delivers the message to the reader that smoking is a bleak, ominous, hopeless business. In such a way, color has been intentionally selected for its metaphoric function. The darkness is woven into the fabric of the ad to underscore the producer's preferred meaning (the despicable ugliness of smoking). Such a narrative depends entirely on color to achieve this purpose. The same is true of the following ad.

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30 Source: Fila (basketball shoes).
31 I document this at length in another work on color. See Holden (1997b).
Plate 23. Color As Metaphor for Human Practice: Black Equals Evil.\textsuperscript{32}

Plate 24. Color As Metaphor for Historical Condition: Lightness versus Darkness.\textsuperscript{33}

This ad plays off of the association (employed with virtual uniformity in the mythology, arts—even electoral politics\textsuperscript{34} of the world’s cultures) of light standing for goodness and dark representing evil. Stated less melodramatically, light is used to depict a positive condition (progress) and dark is employed to characterize a negative one (retrogress). In this particular ad, GE, a major American lighting concern, presents the viewer with a case study in tonal metaphor. The place is Hungary; the time: the tumultuous transition from communist to liberal-

\textsuperscript{32} Source: California Department of Health Services (anti-smoking campaign).

\textsuperscript{33} Source: General Electric.

\textsuperscript{34} Recall Ronald Reagan’s depiction of America as the shining “city on the hill” opposed by the Soviet Union, a Darth Vader-like, black-clad, “evil empire”.
democratic rule. Throughout, the ad utilizes white light to signify this changeover from a "darker" era into this "brilliant" moment in world history. "A new light is dawning over eastern Europe. . ." the ad trumpets. To support the metaphor the ad brims with scenes of jubilation, exultation, exhilaration and vitality. Citizens—both young and old—dance, students take to the streets arm in arm, workers embrace, professors and politicians pontificate on the significance of the moment. Punctuating each scene is the white of candles, street lamps, stage beams. Lights turn on in practice halls, opera-houses, office buildings, along bridges, through the streets. The narrator explains GE's role in assisting the Hungarian people in "bringing a new light" to the fledgling country. Metaphor is wrapped up in color, in service of capitalist moralizing and commercial ambition.

VI. Endings and Beginnings

I have sought to show that meaning in advertising often emerges as a result of color. While we have witnessed the anomalous case where the same tonal strategy (for instance, the shift from black & white to color) is employed differentially, for the large majority of ads, practices concerning color are highly regularized. This is true both within and between countries. American and Japanese ads adhere to similar conventions, such that when particular hues appear, specific, narrowly-defined (or "closed") readings will result. In a word, the intentional use of given colors by ad-makers works to deliver specific meanings. Of course, the agency of the reader still exists, but within the context of the ad (i.e. as determined by an array of formatic and content variables), a particular hue, its negation by other colors, or its wholesale absence places a strong pressure on a highly particularized (I would argue, univocal) reading. This directive function toward so-called "closed readings" is color's significant, signifying role.

This conclusion concerning the relative universality of signification conventions vis-a-vis color fits with previous findings (Holden 1994; 1996): large areas of societal overlap can be found in ads from very different cultural contexts. In the case of content codes such as body, freedom, technology or social problems this is likely due to the common form (i.e. modern, industrialized, democratic, market societies) shared by the focal societies. In the case of color, though, similarity is more likely the result of ideas and practices universal to all human societies (i.e. goodness, evil, life, death, purity, corruption, progress, retrogress) which have historically been associated with color.

The greatest area of overlap between societies, though, doesn't involve content; rather form. Not just the ad form per se—the act of presenting a product for sale in the span of a 15 to 30 second spot—but the form in which color, image and sound are fit together in ways which will signify something of deeper meaning to the viewer. Because this is what all ads seek to do, we can say that there is great universality in ads; homogenization of particular forms of culture.

Plate 25. Local Uses of Black & White (1): Remembrance of Things Past.15

15 Top row: Ajinomoto General Foods; Second row: Daishin (Do-it-Yourself stores); Rows 3 and 4: Sekisui Haimu (housing).
But, is this really so? Is it not the case that the three meaning-conferral agents (i.e. color, image, sound) possess their own local uses? This is the contextualist's claim. It is the view that no matter how much the world tends toward globalization, distinctiveness will always exist. Let's spend some time with this point.

First off, one can find instances in Japan where conventions surrounding black & white appear to differ from those in America. Above all, monochromal film is used not only to recall the past, but to do so fondly (rather than in fear or anger).

Most often, however, black & white is utilized in Japanese ads more flexibly. Often it is strategically placed to accent a particular moment or essential message.

In this way, as in American ads, black & white performs a bracketing function—though in its own localized incarnation.

Consider, though, the following ad.

Here a Japanese pop idol sits astride a motorcycle, hugging a rippling western male, both decked out in leather. A Japanese ad? Entirely in black & white? For that time, 1993, quite unusual. A presage of impending globalization? Possibly. But, with such alien qualities—its foreign reference, its other-world discourse—shouldn't the audience be confused, alienated or shunted? No. And color (and specifically, local convention vis-a-vis color) is the reason why.

In Japanese ads, red logos are employed—flashed usually at the end (but here in the beginning) of the ad. Like the darkened doves beating in the American organ ad, the logo serves notice to the viewer. Unlike the organ ad, however, the logo operates to declare that, while things may at first glance seem different, everything is actually in order. The logo is like a hanko, professing corporate responsibility and offering assurance to the viewer. Like so many thousands of other ads on Japanese television this mark declares that the message belongs to Japan; it is for and of the Japanese people (Holden 1997; Forthcoming B). Most importantly, it primes the viewer as to how to read the ad. The centered red script signals that no matter what comes next it has been fit through the filter of a Japanese company; it has been pre-screened, sanitized and passed inspection, thus it is suitable for the Japanese audience. With this decoding function now performed, the ad can fit within the reader's pre-existing frame—their commercial "paradigm" (Fiske 1990) or "symbolic universe" (Berger and Luckmann 1967). In this way, the ad is now free to stretch its limbs, explore, push the envelop—with the advanced guarantee that it will never break through.

Plate 26. Local Uses of Black & White (2): Persuasive Communication.36

36 Top panel of sixteen: Nike; Left column: Kao Burone (hair coloring); Middle column: Hirose (rentals); Right column: Subaru Impreza (car); Bottom panel of eight (plus one): Gunze (stockings).
Thus it employs an array of uncommon elements (black & white film, a wide-open desert backdrop, western “beefcake”, a motorcycle, leather clothes and exposed pecs, a (then) seldom-seen intimate cinch, the use of the English word “YES” in the closing shot). The ad’s “foreigness” (which has already been bracketed) is eradicated with the final shot. Normalcy is restored as black & white succumbs to color. The product has tamed the machine, the actors no longer in sight (but implicitly off together). In dissolving black & white to color the multiple tensions established in this short black & white piece resolve. No different than an American ad.

Thus, while this ad exhibits distinct local patterns, like virtually all ads across national boundaries it achieves message transfer via coloration. The black & white signals to the reader that this is a unique event falling outside the parameters of everyday experience. The use of color communicates that some things—such as the product and its promised rewards for livening up one’s mundane world—are possible. As this paper has shown, this is a standard practice—a universal way in which color functions in advertising.

Color is an essential part of the commercial communication system. It enables readers to explore the world, yet, through fixed meanings established via social agreement and convention, keeps readers within narrow interpretive frames. This research suggests that, in the case of certain colors such frames exhibit relative universality. I would suggest that future work seek to determine whether colors other than the narrow set addressed here reflect cultural universality. While I believe that color in advertising may very well serve as an indicator of encroaching socio-cultural uniformity, it may also hold the key for demonstrating inherent bounds: areas of ideational and practical uniqueness between societies.

NOTES

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37 Source: Calbee (potato chips).
38 This distinction between “viewers” and “readers” is one I would advocate to help us through the empirical morass of just how active is the receiver/perceiver. In my conception, these are split functions—roles performed by the receiver at various times of textual encounter. “Viewer” refers to their moments of passive reception; “reader” to those moments of active decoding, construction and use.
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