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## **“ABSOLUT ADS.**

### **A critical analysis of an advertising phenomenon”**

**- Research Paper -**

**Martin Begoll**

Matr. Nr. 11975

6. sem. BA Cultural Studies

Seumestr. 22, 10245 Berlin

[martinbegoll@googlemail.com](mailto:martinbegoll@googlemail.com)

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## 1. Introduction

The motivation to this work was to compile a set of useful approaches to analyse the communication processes of printed advertising, using theories and methods of critical discourse research with a stress especially on visual communication. As the field of research to apply these approaches, I chose the as impressive as simple advertising campaigns of Absolut Vodka, next to Ikea and Volvo the probably most famous brand of Sweden and the third largest brand of spirits in the world market.

More than TV-, radio- or web-ads, which are dependent from time and electronic equipment, printed advertisements partially, provide the feature to contain aspects which seem to be outside the selling intention. They can be seen as art, used as decoration or regarded as symbols for certain styles and attitudes. They appear e.g. on walls, as well as on clothes and have this way access to a much broader public visibility than other kinds of ads. And, obviously, of all things the ads (or at least the brand signs) of alcoholic beverages seem to enjoy an outstanding great popularity.

In the early eighties the European advertisement agency TBWA started a unique marketing campaign for Absolut Vodka with focus on printed ads in magazines, using the same scheme again and again (the bottle or the bottle-shape, the brand name “Absolut” followed by another word and a full stop). In this way they presented their product in nearly every thinkable context, including cultural, social, regional, historical and more issues, entered this way complete different target groups and reached meanwhile a worldwide cult status.

To this day, more than 1,000 ads have been produced, all with the basic idea of interpreting things from the ABSOLUT VODKA perspective. The ABSOLUT VODKA advertising campaign is almost unprecedented in its popularity and has run in music, art and business publications as well as in the daily press. The product is always the hero in the ads. The ABSOLUT VODKA advertising and marketing campaign has won over 350 awards over the years. ([www.absolut.com](http://www.absolut.com))

In November 2003 the brand even advertised in the German interview magazine “Alert” with a missing page, what should evoke the imagination, an Absolut-fan had ripped it out to add it to his collection<sup>1</sup>.

This work shall be an attempt to analyse how this popularity and broad acceptance works and which effects it may have on social life. The example of Absolut Vodka advertisements is in this case an eminent challenge, because the plurality of the aspects, they communicate

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<sup>1</sup> [www.alertmagazin.de](http://www.alertmagazin.de)

through ads, in simultaneity with such a simplistic scheme makes it hard to catch a real kind of core functionality.

Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis appear as a useful approach, first of all because they offer excellent methods, not only for analysing texts and images adequately, but especially for putting them in analysable relations to socio-cultural processes and changes.

The research first introduces the main theories and their understandings of discourse, which provide the basement for the further work. The next part, which forms the emphasis of this analysis, divides the process of communication in analysable elements and relations, which are applied and proved then on different Absolut Ads. The last part analyses nine chosen single Absolut ads under different aspects, worked out before.

The here appearing work is part of a broader project in analysing alcohol advertisement discourses and their counter discourses.

## **2. Approaches to analyse print-ads – a theoretic inventory**

To pick out useful CDA methods to analyse the Absolut advertisement campaign, it has first to be said that the kind of ads which shall be analysed here use less text and more visuals. So, the first choice was on a method of analysing images, invented by Gunther Kress<sup>2</sup> and Theo van Leeuwen<sup>3</sup> who count as the probably most important figures in CDA whenever it is dealt with visual communication.

To set a main framework for the research and get superordinate items to refer to, whenever there is danger of confusion I took one of the founders of CDA, Norman Fairclough<sup>4</sup>. His approach focuses on the relation between power and language. For this paper, especially his 3D-model to analyse discourses is important. While the Kressian theories are more into explaining images, in Fairclough's approach the embedding of the whole field in the social life-world becomes important.

Another useful approach occurs in the work of Stuart Hall<sup>5</sup>, whose article "Encoding/decoding" offers researches a fruitful theory in understanding media communication, with emphasis on the production and reception process and different reading positions.

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<sup>2</sup> Professor of English and Head of the School of Culture and Communication at the University of London

<sup>3</sup> Lecture in Communication Theory at the London College of Printing

<sup>4</sup> former Professor of Language in Social Life at Lancaster University

<sup>5</sup> British Sociologist and Cultural Theorist

As the fourth theoretical influence in this work I chose Nigel Edley<sup>6</sup>. His concept of “subject positions” (originally taken from a rather gender-focused research project) is partially added, if they correspond well with the other methods.

### **2.1. Kress and van Leeuwen - Visual analysis**

Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, originally coming from a linguistic background, developed methods for analysing images, without just adopting the established linguistic theories and translating them to visual communication. They proclaim, that images have an own dynamic with own grammar structures and rules and require accordant methods: “We take the view that language and visual communication both realize the same more fundamental and far-reaching systems of meaning that constitute our cultures, but that each does so by means of its own specific forms, and independently.” (Kress 1996: 17)

Following this assumption, it is possible to regard language and visuals as a kind of two more or less diverging systems which form, shape, influence or even build the same culture. Both are drawn together in printed advertisements as multimodal messages. If or when the text should be seen as the central point included in a visual background, or, rather, the image putted in a ‘literary’ context, will be discussed later.

Kress and van Leeuwen also stress the importance of analysing visual communication compared to written and spoken speech:

[...] in a literate culture the visual means of communication are rational expressions of cultural meanings, amenable to rational accounts and analysis. The problem which we face is that literate cultures have systematically suppressed means of analysis of the visual forms of representation, so that there is not, at the moment, an established theoretical framework within which visual forms of representation can be discussed. (Kress 1996: 21)

Especially in the case of brands, the importance of the visual message is overwhelming and constitutes the main function of being remarkable, developing a clear, unique image and making the brand more communicational.

The methodological tools of Kress and van Leeuwen will be discussed in detail in following parts and build the main method for the analysis.

### **2.2. Norman Fairclough - Critical Discourse Analysis**

Fairclough developed a model for CDA which constitutes three three-dimensional boxes, nesting one inside the other. The inner box presents the text, what means the objects of

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<sup>6</sup> Senior Lecture in Social Psychology at Nottingham Trent University

analysis, the accordant method is description. The box in the middle presents the discourse practise, what means the processes of producing and receiving, the method is interpretation. The outer box presents the socio-cultural practise, what means the socio-historical conditions of producing and receiving, the method is explanation.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the discourse happens after Fairclough as a *social practice* (the box in the middle) on the interface between *social structures*, which set the frame for all possible realisations (outer box) and *social events*, which mean realised texts (inner box). The involved persons or users are considered as *social agents*. According to the printed ads, the process of advertising is seen as social practice, producer and receiver as social agents (what are in Kress terms the interactive participants) and the ad itself as a social event. The practice advertising – producing and –receiving only happens among the lines of social structures, but as it will be shown, these structures can be influenced or modulated through advertisement communication.

Fairclough also mentions different levels of dialogicality of a text and relates them to the *public sphere*, an adopted term of Habermas: “[...] a zone of connection between social systems and the ‘lifeworld’, the domain of everyday living, in which people can deliberate on matters of social and political concern as citizens, and in principle influence policy decisions.” (Fairclough 2003: 44) These interrelations are one main issue to analyse given constellations of communication, in this case an organisation producing ads is interacting with a private persons.

Another important aspect is different genres of texts. The generic structure can differ in its level of definition, advertisements mostly have a rather well defined structure and are most times easily to identify as ads. The use of genres makes communication more comfortable, because they offer schemes or patterns of clear conventionalized structures, which easier the production and reception of texts. The meaning and the effects of those patterns in connection with Absolut ads will be a main issue of the analysis in part 4.3.

### **2.3. Stuart Hall – Media reception and production**

Steward Hall sees media communication as a circle or a loop and divides the communication process instead of fixed elements into “linked, but distinctive moments” - production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction with according practices which are connected, but have each an own specific modality and conditions of existence. (Hall

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<sup>7</sup> Janks (1997): 329, 330

1980/94: 200) This approach provides that the product (the message) of the process takes place as an analysable part in every single distinguished moment.

Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences. In a 'determinate' moment the structure employs a code and yield a 'message': at another determinate moment the 'message' via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices. (Hall 1980/94: 202)

Like Kress and van Leeuwen, Hall takes a close look the specialties of a visual message:

Iconic signs are, however, particularly vulnerable to being 'read' as natural because visual codes of perception are very widely distributed and because this type of sign is less arbitrary than a linguistic sign: the linguistic sign 'cow' possess *none* of the properties of the thing represented, whereas the visual sign appears to possess *some* of those properties. (Hall 1980/94: 205)

In choosing the bottle as brand sign, the icon turns on the one hand to a symbol; on the other hand it stays an icon because it possesses still some properties of the product of Absolut.

To gain this simple strategy additional, Absolut chose a kind of prototype of a bottle, which fits exactly in the sense, Wilem Labov developed by detecting the "proto-cup" in semantics<sup>8</sup>, what means, a bottle can differ in its shape but only to certain degrees to be still seen as a bottle. The 'proto-bottle' would be in this case the one in the middle of the possible maximum extremes in shape criteria (thick/thin body, long/short neck, etc.).

Visual signs often are regarded as universal and not constructed but, like every arbitrary sign there are coded, too and their reception depends on cultural convention. In analysing ads it is crucial to pay attention to these codes, because nearly every visual aspect which is shown (in contrary to e.g. a holiday photo, etc.) holds meanings beyond its pure denotation:

Every visual sign in advertising connotes a quality, situation, value or inference, which is present as an implication or implied meaning, depending on the connotational positioning. (Hall 1980/94: 206)

In contrast to language, visual connotations are less able to be fixed like words; they tend to 'flow' from one extreme to another, what is a main aspect in visual analysis in general.

#### **2.4. Nigel Edley – Discursive psychology**

Nigel Edley regards Discourse Analysis as containing a wide range of various analytical approaches. While first, Discursive Psychology should be a symbiosis of discourse theory and

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<sup>8</sup> Labov (1973)

classic psychology, he describes it today as “[...] a complex field, underwritten by a multiplicity of different, sometimes even contradictory, ideas and arguments.” (Edley 2001: 189) In contrast to the ‘classic’ discourse analysis, which is mainly influenced by Foucault and captures a more monolithic conception, he sets the practice of *interpretative repertoires*, which are more fragmented and flexible. While the first view emphasizes power relations between subjects versus (constructed) social institutions, the second focuses rather on various different positions in human agency in general. Indeed, both disciplines merge to a high extent and a clear distinction is mostly impossible. This paper tends more to use interpretative repertoires because a mixture of different theories will be applied and merged here.

In his article “Analysing masculinity”, Edley doubts of a definite disjunction between a constructed and a material reality. In his opinion, gender identity is, though biologically influenced, always question of negotiation. Thus, identities are never fixed or unique, but fragmented and incoherent. Referring to Louis Althusser, who claims that subjects are created by ideology, in putting people in particular positions, he comes to the point, that constituting identities in discursive psychology is inadequately and introduces instead the term *subject positions*. How fruitful this concept works on visual communication with advertising, especially in the case of Absolut ads might stay questionable but it delivers a few appendages to wider the understanding of the field.

### 3. Components of print ad communication – designing an approach

In a visual discourse, Kress and van Leeuwen constitute *represented participants* (people or things that are mapped on an image) and *interactive participants* (normally producers and viewers). Among all these participants consists relations. There are strong parallels to the three levels of semiotic, developed by Charles S. Peirce: the relation between the represented participants can be considered as syntactic, between the represented and the interactive participants as semantic and between the interactive participants as pragmatic. In Discourse Analysis it is especially important how these relations are inbound into social institutions and structures of power and how they turn out their effects on them:

Interactive participants are [...] real people who produce and make sense of images in the context of social institutions which, to different degrees and in different ways, regulate what may be ‘said’ with images, and how it should be said and how it should be interpreted. (Kress: 1996: 119)

The further work divides the advertising-discourse in four main relations. These relations interfere with each other and are not completely separable. The first scrutiny focuses on the relations in between the image (between the represented participants), the next two the

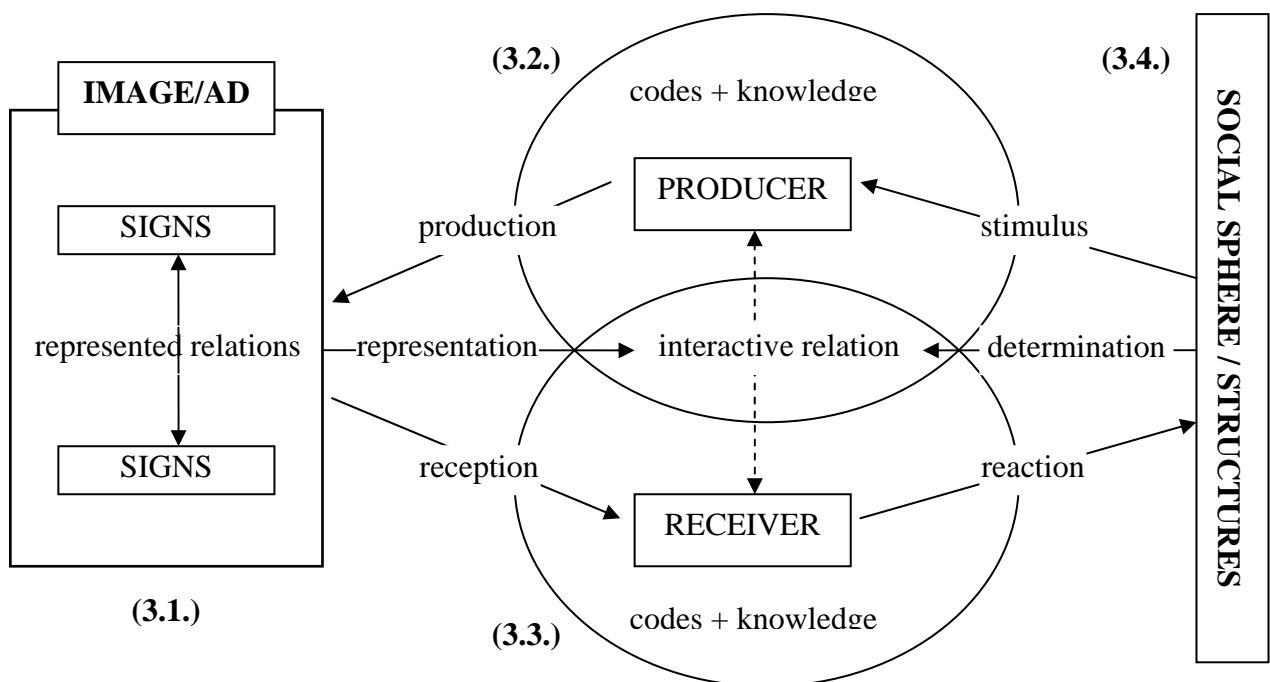
positions first of the producer, then of the receiver towards the image and the last one the placement of these processes as a whole in the social sphere.

From a Fairclough-based perspective, one can say, that the first part contains the textual level, the following two the processes and the last one the conditions of production and interpretation.

Hall's approaches will thereby be used to illuminate especially the relation between producer and viewer.

Additional, Edley's concept of 'subject positions' will be attempted to dissolve from being bound to subjects only and being added to the Kress terminology, so to the concept of *participant positions*, because in the further analysis a distinction between subjects and objects can not be maintained in some cases.

Taking influences, among others, from Hall and Kress (see 2.1. and 2.3.), a communication model is developed here, to visualise the communication processes, explained in the following.



**Fig. 1 Communication model for print ad-/mass media communication**

The image is composed of signs, (represented participants) which are putted in certain relations, the syntactic structure of the image. Its representation constitutes the relation between producer and receiver, because in print ad communication this relation would be more or less irrelevant without the existence of the image.

The producer is stimulated by the social sphere, his environment, etc. to have the intention to publish a certain message; he composes this message out of his available codes and knowledge to formulate this intention.

The receiver interprets the message in respect to his codes and knowledge, a valid communication, respectively interaction only maintains to this degree, the codes are shared with the producer. The effect of the message then returns to the social sphere as a reaction of the receiver, which can be e.g. a change of an attitude.

The interaction between producer and receiver is (in mass media/print ad production) rather indirect, because of separated production-/reception-contexts) but determined by the social sphere in respect to e.g. given a certain status or position, the participants have towards each other.

### **3.1. The visual ad**

The fact that the product (or at least the package) is itself part of the visual message of the brand, divides absolute from brands like Apple, Adidas, Jägermeister, etc., which make use of an extra symbol. On the one hand this is an easy, direct way to identify the product with the brand (the association of an apple with a computer for example is rather far fetched) on the other hand it is not so determined and individual, because a bottle can be symbol for the most beverages indeed. This might be an aspect of distributing and in a certain way conditioning the “audience”. In the following, the work concentrates more on syntactic.

Making clear that the shape of the bottle and the word “Absolut” stay constant in all ads, we can now concentrate the scrutiny on three other aspects: 1.) the inconstant lexical item, 2.) the consistence or composition of the bottle (or of this, what shall represent it) and 3.) the background or context.

The relations, which result from these three (inconstant) represented participants, differ from ad to ad in their importance for the composing of the image. Between the bottle and the background, the following three constellations are possible, which can occur also all at the same time: a) the bottle stands for itself, e.g. “Absolut Paradise” (p. 17, Fig. 5); b) the bottle is part of a more complex composed background, e.g. “Absolut Accessory” (p. 17, Fig. 6) and; c) the bottle is composed of other elements, e.g. “Absolut Peak” (App., Fig. 17).

The item refers to the context sometimes in an obvious way, sometimes it demands the viewer (or reader) to think and require possibly special knowledge. This is first of all a question of required codes (see part 2.3.).

With the approach of Kress and van Leeuwen, the obvious main represented participants are the bottle or its shape, the background in which it is placed and two lexical items. By analysing what they call ‘the meaning of composition’<sup>9</sup>, we can say that the image, which is constantly placed above the text, represents the ‘ideal’, while the text represents the ‘real’, what leads to assume that e.g. “Absolut Tradition.” (p. 16, Fig. 3) is understood as a fixed, real fact, while the scenery depicted above shows, how this tradition should look like. This work will put only low attention to the textual context, in which the image appears, for a closer look on the meaning of the word “Absolut”, see part 2.2. of the work of Katrin Umlauf.<sup>10</sup>

Further it appears hard to compile a reasonable categorisation of the different meanings in which the bottle appears, considering the diverse masses of published Absolut ads. An obvious group is e.g. the Absolut city campaign, which often depicts landmarks or other symbols of towns. This is an interesting use of intertextuality, regarding the fact, that cities communicate a high range of meanings and discourses and can be also seen as identification models.<sup>11</sup> The diversity of cities, used in Absolut ads mirrors the bandwidth of the Absolut campaigns in general. From quiet, idyllic places to big metropolises everything is included. Also the depicted elements differ from the main tourist attraction to chosen single aspects of culture or lifestyle.

Absolut also construct the product in the image often in an obviously “active” or “humanly” position, what can be seen on ads like “Absolut Beauty” (p. 16, Fig. 2). This leads to the question, taking the assumptions of Edley, how the bottle as “subject” is positioned against a background of possible “others”. Exactly in terms of Edley, the Absolut product yields instead of a clear, coherent identity a very flexible range of different positions, it can be placed as human, animal, plant or object; as male or female, as typical Swedish as well as a landmark for a Polish city (App., Fig. 19)

### **3.2. The position of the producer**

To identify the producer at all is confusing, due to the characteristics of mass media production in general, because many persons and organisations work together. The spirit company (V&S group), the advertising company TBWA, the designer of the ad, the photographer, the magazine in which the ad appears, the eventually depicted places or names

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<sup>9</sup> Kress (1996): 181-229

<sup>10</sup> Umlauf, Katrin (2006): 5

<sup>11</sup> for further information about cities as text see the according article by Martine C. Middleton (Middleton 1999)

and so on seem to be all involved in the production process and merge to a multiple institution, whose clear identity stays undefined.

Another central aspect in mass media communication, which stands in contrast to face-to-face communication is, that the producer and the viewer of advertisings are spatiotemporal separated from each other; “[...] there is a disjunction between the context of production and the context of reception, the producer is not physically present [...]”, so he is not able to intervene the process of reception (Kress 1996: 199). This fact constitutes two more or less different contexts and situations, which legitimate the separation of the production- from reception-process, like done in this paper. From Hall’s perspective, the encoding and the decoding processes take place as relatively autonomous, determinate moments but “[...] the product of these processes ‘appears’ in each moment ” (Hall 1989/94: 200). Or with Kress’ words “All they have is the picture itself, as it appears in the magazine. And producers, similarly, can never really know their vast and absent audience, and must, instead, create a mental image of ‘the’ viewers and ‘the’ way viewers make sense of their pictures.” (Kress 1996: 119)

Taking the view of the producer, it is hard to get a valid feedback about the reception of published ads. Next to quantitative social research, one index can be the mass of sold products but seldom there is a direct, causal relation between the intensity of advertising and sold pieces. Also, the measure of sold vodka bottles can not assure clear information about the popularity of the ads, because non-drinkers might enjoy the Absolut ads also.

Finishing, two diverging assumptions shall be mentioned here, regarding the identity of the producer again: following Roland Barthes and his theory of “the death of the author”, one can say, the product, when distributed is abandoned from the producer and given to an endless range of interpretations, which can be completely dissolved from any intentions of the producer. Contrary stand the theories of Sigmund Freud, who would regard a produced message rather as a big source of information about the producer.

It is possible here to detect three parts of a message, from which at least one of them always takes place: an intended part which is clearly understood, an intended part which is not understood and a part which is understood but not intended. This is a matter of shared codes. When there are discrepancies in the use of codes between producer and receiver there is miscommunication.

### 3.3. The position of the receiver

It comes now to examine, how the viewer's position is determined through the image. Kress and van Leeuwen differentiate images in *offers* and *demands*. This divides pictures, where the viewer is a kind of 'invisible onlooker' from those, which clearly address the viewer with a message. These differences get especially obvious, when people are depicted (mostly realized through the gaze).

According to different camera perspectives in films, Kress and van Leeuwen detect different kinds of (represented) *social distances*, realized through spatial distance (like close/medium/long shot), which put the viewer either in a rather close and intimate, or in a rather reserved and distal position. These social distances correspond to those, people keep in everyday interaction (how close people near each other, depends usually on the social relation, which exist among one another).

Another form of positioning works through different horizontal or vertical angles, in which the represented participants occur. The horizontal angles decide, to what extend the viewer is *involved* in (frontal angle) or rather *detached* from (oblique angle) the depicted scenario. These different degrees of involvement or detachment correspond, to some extent, to possessive pronouns in language, with the differentiation, that in images these degrees are not fixed, while in language exist no different levels of 'ourness' or 'theirness'.

The vertical angle represents a relation of power between represented participant and viewer (this is also adopted from film technology): a high angle depicts a higher power of the interactive participant towards the represented participant and a lower angle vice versa. If they are in the same height, the power relation is balanced.

Kress' terminology also constitutes different kinds of *modality cues*,

[...] signs which have arisen out of the interest of social groups who interact within the structures of power that define social life, and also interact across the systems produced by various groups within a society. [...]

Sign-makers choose what they regard as apt, plausible means for expressing the meanings they wish to express. We are therefore focussing on the range of signs from which such choices can be made – some of them specialized modality markers, others part of a much wider and more general range of means of expressing meanings of truth and falsehood, fact and fiction, certainty and doubt, credibility and unreliability. (Kress 1996: 159)

These modality cues constitute on images, among others, in different levels of colour saturation/differentiation, brightness, depth, and abstraction etc. and are markers for how 'real' or 'unreal' an image appears. Under which criteria an image is seen by the receiver as real depends on different *coding orientations*. They can be seen as a kind of attitude towards

the reception of an image. How adequate we see things represented as 'real' depends from a certain viewpoint. This is partially a matter of genre. A scientific diagram would appear less reliable if it would depict things in details; with high colour saturation and so fourth, which are not necessary for the understanding of the matter, while a photograph would not (this aspect is part of the analysis in 4.3.). Advertisements are usually not supposed to depict things complete real. We know that things can appear exaggerated or reduced to the main important aspects.

The regarding of the positioning viewer vs. image does not explain the whole of the receiving process. A receiver is not only positioned by the image but also in by himself as an individual, by his socio-cultural background and by a given situation. That means that receivers always have their own complex framework of codes, knowledge about the world, attitudes, beliefs and expectations towards the received image, which additionally can differ in the contexts and situations, the receiving takes place. So, it can never be clear defined, how the reader's reception and reaction will constitute, thus there does not exist anything like "the" reader.

Nevertheless, Absolut often tries often to activate clear defined target groups, what gets obvious at a closer look on some magazines:

Ads with musical instruments, like "Absolut New Orleans" (App. Fig. 12) or "Absolut Electric" (Fig. 13) appeared in music magazines, like "Rolling Stone" or "Spin". "Absolut Frankenstein" (Fig. 14) and "Absolut Psycho" (Fig.15) were published in the Mexican film magazine "Cinemanía", and Absolut Peak" (Fig. 16) and "Absolut Vail" (Fig. 17) in the US magazine "Ski". The Absolut bottle in rainbow colours was printed in the Canadian gay magazine "Xtra" with the title "Absolut Pride" (Fig. 18). Furthermore, many ads from the Absolut city campaign, e.g. "Absolut London" (Fig. 7) or "Absolut Rome" (Fig. 14) occurred first of all in traveller magazines.

But in contrary to the American vodka "Skyy", which advertises with a certain lifestyle to address a relatively clear defined, wealthy public<sup>12</sup>, Absolut tries to address widely differing groups, including also minorities.

The image of the viewer they create mostly appears individual and is often putted in the position of a thinkable person with knowledge; it nearly seems that the viewers are supposed to be creative by themselves.

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<sup>12</sup> see Dörflinger (2006): 5

### 3.4. Absolut ads in the social sphere

By regarding the effects of Absolut ads to society it gets obvious that the status of their vodka bottle is constructed not longer as being a jar to contain liquid but as a distinctive, unmistakable symbol, that implies qualities, associations and so on, which go far beyond its material constitution.

Coming back to a producer–receiver relation and according to Fairclough again, the conditions shall first be regarded. It has already been said that the contexts of production and reception are separated but also the constellation of the two interactive participants is asymmetric. There is a social difference in the relations of power.<sup>13</sup> While the producer is an institution with sub-organisations, financial resources, the possibility to publish mass media and stays to a certain part anonymous, the receiver is a private person, without a direct possibility to react. It can be said that in between the structures of New Capitalism, Absolut is in the stronger position.

In western civilization, advertising is an all day-genre, people are confronted with it everywhere, get used to it, get some kind of conditioned by it and are often annoyed by it, too. This matter can be seen as social structures in which the advertising discourse maintains. We can regard social structures as norms, which dominate our culture and set rules for any kinds of communication. These rules had risen out of history and convention. They are omnipresent and not to deceive but nevertheless changeable. Changeable, not by single persons, but in society and time. Communication indeed has to follow these rules but it ‘lives’ in the same way from injuring these rules (or norms). E.g. a joke takes it’s effect from breaking taboos, art reaches popularity by depicting things not along the lines of visible ‘reality’ and so forth. In this way, communication gets ‘interesting’ and ‘individual’ by trying to loosen the existing norms to certain degrees. Absolut ads can be regarded as such an attempt. By making ads ‘not normal’, funny, interesting or entertaining they reach advantage in popularity. So, through actual practising of this kind of communication, the “injuring” can develop to a new norm. Mass media production institutions, like these, Absolut make use of, are in the position to spread those norm-injuries millionfold and can change this way norms and structures to a high extend faster. That is why an Absolut ad can nearly be seen as an own new genre, that conditions people in a certain way and make up new conventions, like it will be shown in part 4.3.

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<sup>13</sup> compare with Fairclough 2003: 41

Seeing mass media communication as a circulation, in which a message turns to a discourse and then move into the structures of the social sphere (see 2.3.), is easily comprehensible at the example of the spoof ads published by the media organisation Adbusters.<sup>14</sup>

In the way Absolut ads are designed and published in giant masses, they offer a kind of visual pattern for transporting other or even contrary messages too. But through the fact that the spoof ads make use of these patterns, they support in some respects the ‘language’ of Absolut and help by the same way its popularity.

Although the message can be clear formulated and encourages a critical cogitation, they support in some respects the dispersion of the codes invented by Absolut and which infiltrate in certain ways social structures, respectively the ‘common’ cognition.

The fact, that advertisements can have an entertaining factor far beyond the selling intention and that they are partially treated as objects of desire is not new yet. Also that the enthusiasm for such ‘cult objects’ often might move far from the enthusiasm for the product itself. But nevertheless the original intention would not loose necessarily its effect through that behaviour; it is in most cases even an important part of it.

The represented placement of Absolut Vodka in this endless range of different contexts makes it on the one hand accessible to a wide set of different reasons, places or situations which ever can occur in society. The main message seems to be here that ‘anything goes’, it is complete universal and absconds itself from any special classification. In this way you get pretended a thousand reasons or situations you *can* drink this vodka. But on the other hand it seems like the vodka drinking itself gets more or less diminished and is instead replaced by this endless set of different cultural objects or contexts. By this way, the Absolut brand turns into an institution, which is distanced from its own product and not longer bound to drinking alcohol. Their emphasis on creativity (like quoted in the introduction) seems to verify this assumption. The question is can we really dissolve the creativity of the ads from the alcohol discourse, regarding the ads as pure art or entertaining objects? The issue, emerging as a central point out of the work is, that a campaign with the intention of leading people to buy (and drink) alcohol attends, with all meanings, to be seen as an only-aesthetic phenomenon. If you follow the statement “enjoying means accepting”<sup>15</sup> the strategy can be seen as a creeping influence. The danger here lies in a resulting belittlement. To see it as this cult which it intends you to regard it might result in a loss of any objective view towards a company, whose very first

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<sup>14</sup> for further information see: Causse (2006) and Umlauf (2006)

<sup>15</sup> compare with Umlauf 2006: 6

main interest lies in selling as much as possible of it's product and support, additional, the spreading of alcoholism.

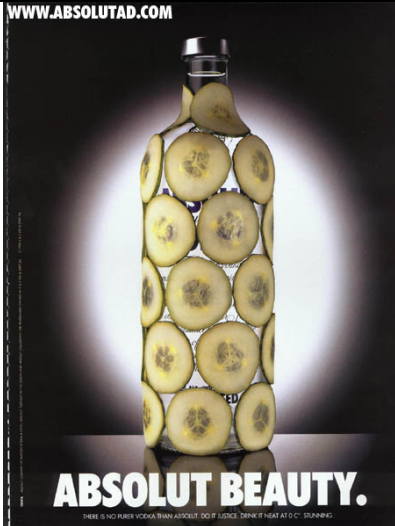


The way Absolut “swallows” culture can also be seen at the art campaign, started with Andy Warhol, who was the first artist, painting an Absolut bottle in 1985. From that moment it was a matter of prestige for many artists in the world and today there exist a lot of painted Absolut images with the inscription “Absolut” + the artist’s name. Of course this offers a platform to reach popularity for a lot of painters. The practice of publishing and distributing art to a big audience can hardly to dissolve from commercialisation and seem to need institutions like Absolut. So, in one way Absolut supports art, in the other, they realise their own interests. The art seems hereby to pay the price to be bounded contextual with a global vodka company.

**4. Absolut realisation – an analysis**

Here, some small-scale analyses shall show the bandwidth of different aspects appearing on Absolut ads.

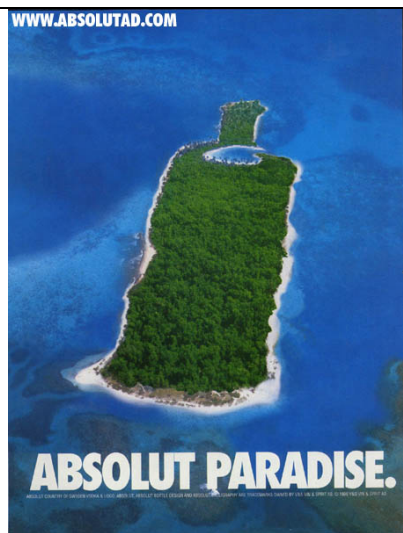
**4.1. Absolut composing**

This comparison will show how the depicted participants are composed, putting themselves in particular positions towards the hole.

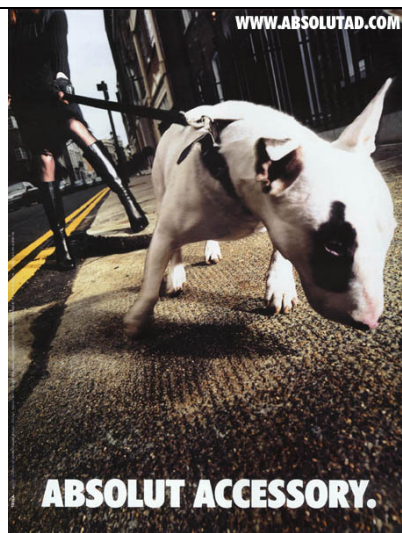
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| <p><b>Fig. 2 Absolut Beauty.</b></p> <p>The Absolut bottle is placed central and in no contact to a background or other elements. Here, the bottle is the absolute star (gained by the</p> | <p><b>Fig. 3 Absolut Tradition.</b></p> <p>The Absolut bottle is made up by other elements. This could be seen as communicating, many little pleasures constitute a whole event (like Christmas), and</p> | <p><b>Fig. 4 Absolut Mix.</b></p> <p>The Absolut bottle is part of a bigger background, the salience of this ad is owned by other components, the Absolut shape appears very subtle.</p> |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <p>spotlight), stands in the middle point and assumes human qualities, with the cucumbers as cosmetic practice also female gender.</p> | <p>also as the model train is a (traditional) part of Christmas, Absolut vodka shall be it in the same way. The product appears here in a harmonic attitude, could communicate that it is a kind of essence to build up this harmony.</p> | <p>The appearance aims on lifestyle, action, nightlife, music, dancing, etc. The role of the product is placed here in a rather ‘next-to-it’ position, as a low important but constant participant of the whole scenario.</p> |
|--|---|---|

**4.2. Absolut positioning**



**Fig. 5 Absolut Paradise.**



**Fig. 6 Absolut Accessory.**



**Fig. 7 Absolut London.**

The viewer is positioned in a high angle, the “paradise” seems to lie beneath his feet and is completely overviewed by him, so the power balance is on the side of the viewer and the depicted things evoke a peaceful impression.

The low angle causes a position of lying on the street, what constructs a higher power, respectively a dominance of the depicted participants, gained by symbols like black leather boots, leash and bulldog.

The eye level angle constructs a balance of power between represented and interactive participants. Additional, the “bobby” next to the door evokes in this case rather the impression of security instead of power and dominance.

The long shot, like the view from an airplane constructs a

The close shot evokes a high involvement – the viewer is

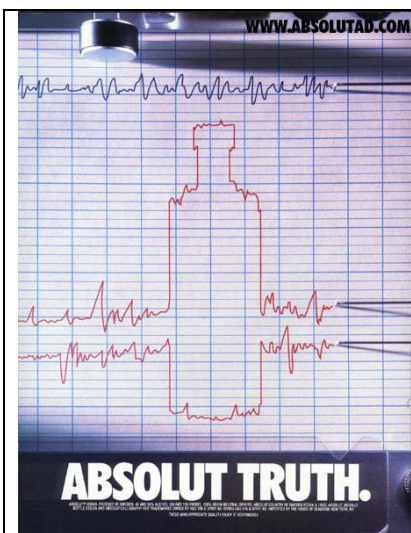
The medium shot represents a normal social distance, like at

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| <p>far social distance which could gain possible desires, connected with items like “island” or “paradise”, e.g. holidays, etc. Although the picture is an <i>offer</i>, the central element is not reachable.</p> | <p>nearly too “intimate” with the dog, what might evoke in this case feelings of danger and brutality. This picture is rather a <i>demand</i> and the viewer can be seen as a <i>goal</i> of the represented participants.</p> | <p>an all day situation on the street. There is no <i>transaction</i> between the represented participants and the viewer; both are constructed as rather passive.</p> |
| <p>The high colour saturation overstresses the modality, so the image appears rather fantastical, dream-like.</p>  | <p>The rather low contrast and the presence of dark colours evoke a scary atmosphere, which seems to be rather beyond reality.</p>   | <p>This image constitutes a high modality; the normal colour saturation appears real and natural.</p>  |

Here it can be seen, how the viewer is positioned by the ads, what is partially an index for the addressed target groups. It would be a little hard to say they can be divided in this case in optimists/dreamers, sadomasochists and bourgeois but it seems to go nearly in this direction.

**4.3. Absolut conditioning**

This analysis shall show how Absolut makes use of expectable patterns, which occur in society and are strongly influenced by cultural coding.



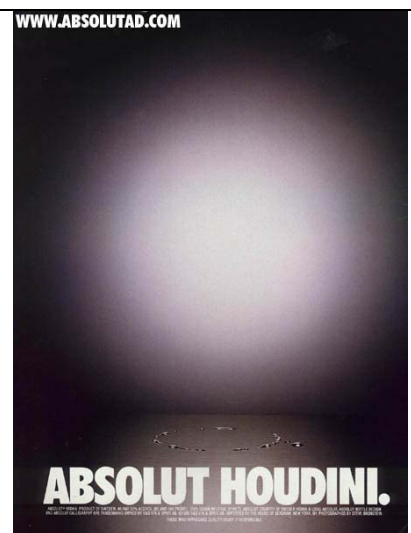
**Fig. 8 Absolut Truth.**

This ad makes use of an expectable pattern, offered by the lie detector, which makes



**Fig. 9 Absolut Pin-Up.**

The fact that pin-ups appear on lockers is another expectable scheme,



**Fig. 10 Absolut Houdini.**

This seems to prove that Absolut has turned their ads themselves into a global

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| <p>it possible to show the bottle very abstractive but nevertheless receivable. The cultural coding is high, because it requires knowledge about the existence of a lie detector, which puts the coding orientation to expecting no high range of details, but of abstract diagrams.</p> | <p>determined by cultural practice. Here, the ad makes a sign out of the popularity of the Absolut ads themselves. This is another ambition to appear as a star or a celebrity. The Absolut-fan might see himself represented in the image. The modality is high and depicts the set as real (as real as Absolut sees its popularity).</p> | <p>pattern or even an own genre. Although the bottle is completely absent and only the light-spot, a circle of water drops and the inscription is depicted, the viewer associates the bottle by being familiar with other Absolut ads. The decoding of the message depends on knowledge. First the scheme of Absolut ads has to be known; second that Houdini is a conjurer to understand this ad.</p> |
|--|--|--|

## 5. Conclusion and reflection

The very first problem of this work was to decide, which ads shall be taken out of thousand and especially under which criteria they should be distinguished and which appeared aspects shall stay in the foreground without letting important points out or getting overloaded with a randomly chosen, unstructured mass.

A missing, but useful work would have been a quantitative analysis with the attention on which kind of ads were published where/in which magazines or places and to what intensity/numbers. But the source of possible findings out of the field are not exploited yet for sure, maybe this work can offer a first approach to put some 'hooks' into the whole field of Absolut campaigns and inspire other researchers to work on this field; an end of the rising number of Absolut Ads is not in sight yet.

I do not want to conceal, that by getting in first contact with these masses of different ads, I developed a strong enthusiasm for this kind of advertising, but it was exactly this enthusiasm and admiration, which led to the question, why it is so hard or nearly impossible, not being affected by the way Absolut Vodka (respectively TBWA) creates their ads. From a rather neutral point, one would say they are just good in what they are doing. But, then, it can also be seen as a gigantic strategy, first of all invented to build up an image for a brand, which is compatible to a worldwide market and reaches access to every aspect of life, culture and

society. And, partially the stress on their own popularity in the ads and their offensive struggle for constituting the product as a universal cult nearly tends to mad ambition.

The problematic matter is, are the approaches and findings of this work useful to criticize the 'institution' Absolut Vodka fruitfully or do they rather confirm it in their status as a 'creative cult'?

Two contrary views issue here as possible: on the one side stands the main reproach of money making with alcoholism. From a radical view, one could say Absolut tries to inject alcohol into every part of social life, or other way around, they 'steal' (elements of) culture, press it into a bottle shape and *brand* it in every meaning with the intention to sell a drug. On the other side it has to be said that alcohol is a hardly to eliminate part of our society and the reproach of selling it can hardly be maintained. Also it is a main function of advertising to interest people and by looking at masses of rather annoying ads, Absolut shows a welcome alternation.

This can be seen as a negotiation of 'meaning-making' and 'meaning-finding'. The potential structures of enjoyment for alcohol really seem to be existent in society so broad and multiple like the Absolut ads make us aware, but they get activated and gained and partially extended by the ads. This process might be a rather 'normal' main issue of advertising in general. What is special at Absolut (like already mentioned in part 3.4.) is, that they enter this already available field of meanings and draw away the drinking-discourse (which is indeed the only discourse which offers a reason for publishing their ads) by stressing the meanings of creativity and culture and constructing this way their product as a cult-object, not longer as an alcoholic beverage.

The understanding of how these processes of changing and influencing discourses might be not enough to formulate a clear critique to 'attack' these strategies of advertisement, it stays questionable if it is really possible in this case. But it should show what possible changes of meanings can apply and what dangers are connected to it.

## Appendix



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

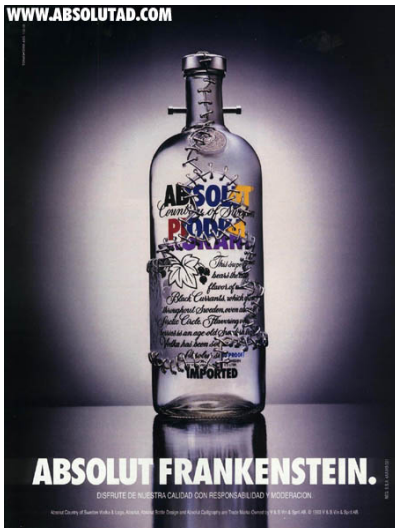


Fig. 14

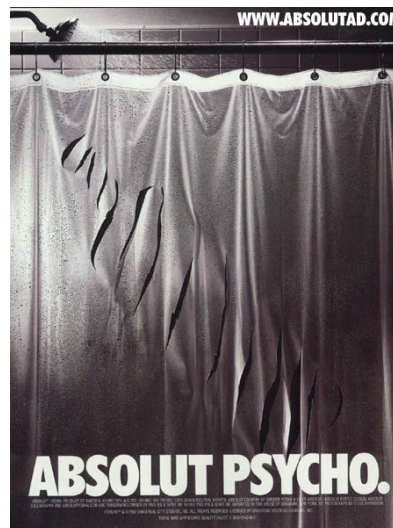


Fig. 15

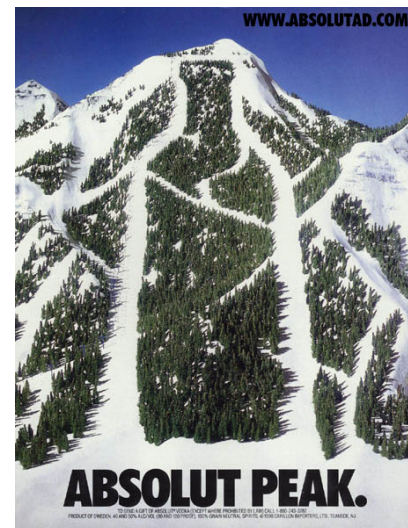


Fig. 16



Fig. 17

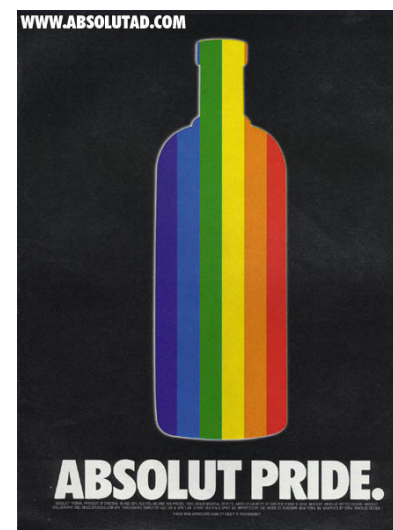


Fig. 18

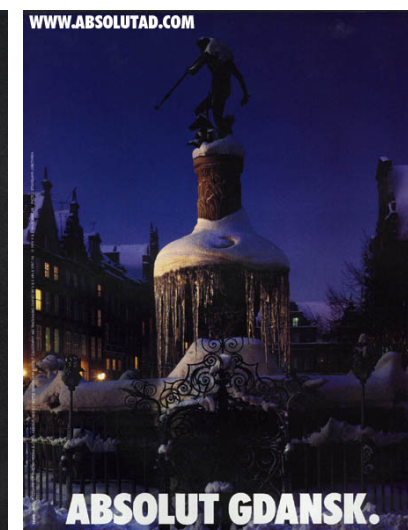


Fig. 19

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(30.10.2006)

## **Abstract**

Diese Arbeit ist Teil eines breiter angelegten Projekts mit dem Ziel, Alkoholwerbung und ihre Gegendiskurse mit Methoden und Theorien der Kritischen Diskursanalyse zu untersuchen. Der vorliegende Teil beschäftigt sich mit einer theoretischen Erarbeitung einer Methode zur Analyse von Werbekommunikation und deren Anwendung auf die außerordentlich vielfältigen, wie breit angelegten Werbekampagnen für den schwedischen Wodka „Absolut“. Die Besonderheit hierbei stellt die Verwendung des immer selben Schemas der Flasche, bzw. ihrer Form, dem Wort Absolut und einem weiteren Wort dar. Diese Konstellation wurde in über tausend verschiedenen Werbeanzeigen verwendet, welche sich diverser kultureller Symbole, Orte, Künstler, Persönlichkeiten, bis hin zu historischen Ereignissen bedienen und auf diese Weise nicht nur verschiedenste Zielgruppen für sich begeistern konnten, sondern die Werbeanzeigen selbst zu weltweit beliebten Kult- und Sammelobjekten machten. Inwiefern diese Werbestrategie Einfluss auf soziale Strukturen und auf die Verwendung solcher Symbole in der Gesellschaft hat wird in dieser Arbeit untersucht.

## **Declaration of originality**

I hereby declare that this thesis entitled:

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is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institute of tertiary education. Information derived from the published and unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is given in the bibliography.

Berlin, October 30<sup>th</sup> 2006

Martin Begoll