

Observational writing, Semiotic Analysis = up to 500 words

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I am about to deconstruct an image used in the advertising campaign for Levi Jeans, called the Greatest Story ever Worn" at a time when the company was celebrating 150 years of its design, the iconic 501.



fig1

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, the Swiss Linguist, semiotician and philosopher, there are two parts of any linguistic sign, the literal, which he calls "the Signifier" and that which it refers to, "the signified." (Ferdinand Saussure, Language of Things)

In the image, "the Signifier" would be group of people of both sexes, varied ages, in an outdoor setting, holding up an item of clothing and "the signified" being what we understand about them. So, the people look like a group who might know each other, be a family perhaps, due to the variety of sexes and ages, that are joyous at having received a barrel from abroad, and are holding up one of the contents, a pair of 501 jeans.

Roland Barthes goes further in his book "Mythologies" where he develops the idea of "Myth." "Myth," a construction of culture, where we weave our story, our experience and influence by those in power. So, the image above creates a deeper narrative, where we imagine the group of people to be of a particular place and ethnicity, Afro Caribbean, in somewhere like Jamaica or Antigua. We imagine them to be materially poor, but culturally rich, with a strong bond in community. It does not matter if they are family or not, because their community may as well be family.

Our modern society is so strongly embedded in the visual, that Judith Williamson's book "Decoding Advertisements" is important in trying to understand the underlying messages, that the images around us convey, often on a subliminal level. Every nuanced, visual cue tells us a story that is linked to our understanding of the world, our cultural codes. In the Levi ad, we know that the people will not have many possessions, that these jeans may be the only clothing they invest in. The warm rich colours hint at the warmth that the linking of common dress in their community provides. The use of colour has a 70s nostalgic feel, which underscores the brand and design longevity. It has become so iconic that we barely need to see any reference to brand at all, just the tiny red label is needed for us to recognize and know which brand it is.

So highly is the design and brand regarded, that the young boy holds the jeans up in reverence, in a gesture that is reminiscent of "The Assumption of the Virgin, 1516-18 by Titian." The colors too have a richness and warmth like the painting.

The Assumption of the Virgin, 1516-18 by Titian



Courtesy of www.Titian.org

Fig2

Today it is not enough to show an image, it is often accompanied by video or film that creates its own story, culture and we become its tribe. In this case, the advert depicts the true story of people who have been asked to attend a loved one's funeral and requesting that they wear their favourite 501s. While another story tells of 100s of people who requested to be buried in their 501 jeans.

Fig 1, Levi's 501 jeans advertising campaign 2023 as seen in hypebeast.com

<https://hypebeast.com/2023/2/levis-celebrates-150-years-of-the-501-jeans-with-the-greatest-story-ever-worn>

Fig 2, "The assumption of the Virgin" <https://www.titian.org/the-assumption-of-the-virgin.jsp>

Bibliography

Barthes, R. (2009) Vintage Classics "Mythologies"

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Williamson, J. (2010) Marion Boyars "Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and meaning in Advertising"