

CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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Citation reference: Harvey, L., [1990] 2011, *Critical Social Research*, available at qualityresearchinternational.com/csr, last updated 9 May, 2011, originally published in London by Unwin Hyman, all rights revert to author.

PART 2 CLASS

2.8 Judith Williamson—Decoding Advertisements

2.8.1 Introduction

Judith Williamson (1978) regards advertisements as one of the most important cultural factors moulding and reflecting our everyday life. Advertisements are pervasive and immensely influential and have an ‘apparently autonomous existence’. In *Decoding Advertisements*, Williamson is not concerned with assessing the influence of advertisements but investigates the way that advertisements work.

In selling things, advertisements address both the qualities of the product and the ways in which they can be made to mean something to the reader.²⁹ Advertisements translate use-value into symbolic exchange-value. A ‘50 miles per gallon car’ is translated into a ‘careful, thrifty driver’. Advertising thus sets up a relationship between a type of consumer and a type of product. In this sense, advertisements sell by making objects meaningful. However, the meaning they create is contrived, both at a consumer level and at a societal level. Williamson provides a methodology for decoding advertisements.

Decoding Advertisements was originally submitted as a project for a course in popular culture at the University of California, Berkeley. In its transformation to a published text, Williamson made explicit the basis of a theory for the analysis of advertisements. However, Williamson is not just interested in developing a methodology for looking at advertisements in the abstract. She also wants to provide a basis for a critique of advertisements in the context of consumerist society. Although her book has emerged as a ‘theoretical analysis’ she is ‘impatient with any theory of ideology which is not tied to anything practical, to the material factors which influence our feelings, our lives, our images of ourselves’ (Williamson, 1978, p. 10). Her analysis thus draws on a vast amount of empirical material, more than one hundred advertisements, in developing a theory of the decoding of advertisements.

Williamson argues that the real distinction between people in Western society is based on their relation to the process of production. Advertising re-presents that as a distinction based on the *products* of work. The real structure of society is obscured by a distinction based on consumption of particular goods. Consumerism identifies people by what they consume and not what they produce. Fundamental class differences are recreated via consumption of manufactured goods. Meaning becomes ideological. An analysis of advertising has also to be an analysis of the ideological distortion of the relations of production.

2.8.2 Signifier, signified, sign

Williamson sees advertisements as sign systems operating on a denotative and connotative level (Barthes, 1967, 1974, 1977).^{29A} Signs, according to Barthes, consisted of signifiers (sounds, pictures, words) and signifieds (the concept meant by the signifier). Williamson's basic premise is that 'it is part of the deceptive mythology of advertising to believe that an advertisement is a simply a transparent vehicle for a 'message' behind it' (Williamson, 1978, p. 17).

Advertisements work by simultaneously creating meaning and drawing on the reader's already existing meanings. There is a transfer from a set of referents pointed to by the advertisement and the product. Williamson deconstructs the process by which meaning is created, and along with it, the way in which advertisements create consumers. She breaks down the simultaneous working of advertisements. Initially she addresses the formal arrangement of advertisements in order to reveal the way that transfer of meaning is enabled. Then she addresses the interpretive act that the reader has to perform to make sense of the advertisement. Finally, she looks at the nature of the referent systems that advertisements draw on, that makes them meaningful here and now. In Barthes' terms her analysis moves from a cynical reading, through the exposure of the mythologist to the ideological analysis of the myth-reader.

Signifiers are not passive carriers of the overt meaning of the advertisement. Signifiers in advertisements do not just lead to the ideas contained in the signifieds but also have a role in producing an alternative 'less obvious' meaning. Advertisements, in Barthes's terms, denote one thing while connoting something else. This connotation or latent meaning requires work on the part of the reader of advertisements. Unlike the overt meaning of the advertisement the latent meaning is not completed. The latent meaning involves the correlation of two elements in the advertisement, the product and a referent. This is effected through the formal composition. This connection has to be made by the reader. The reader has to have a prior set of meanings that can be brought to bear in ensuring the transference of meaning.

For example, a magazine advertisement³⁰ for Belair cigarettes has the simple message 'Fresher tasting'. A packet of Belair cigarettes is pictured in front of a bowl of fresh fruit and salad vegetables. All the items in the bowl are crisp (apple, cress, lettuce) and sprinkled with droplets of water. Right in the front of the bowl is a section of cucumber. The formal composition links the cigarette packet with the bowl of fresh produce. The reader knows the foods are 'fresh tasting'. This information is transferred to the cigarettes, 'the other oral pleasure'. We might wonder how a cigarette can be 'fresh', yet 'it seems to be because of the dewy drops on the cucumber'. The unstated message is the 'coolness' of the cigarettes, and the known correlative of 'cucumbers for coolness' is invoked to sell us 'an unknown and unproved correlative'. The reader has 'to make a leap of credibility' via the known correlative object. The words in the Belair advertisement make no claim. It is the close positioning of two things that suggests the transfer of meaning from the fresh tasting produce to the cigarettes (Williamson, 1978, p. 33).

An advertisement, then, makes a connection that evokes meaning for the reader between the object being sold and some referent. This is done through juxtaposition and other formal elements in the advertisement. The link between the product and the referent can be made by colour; by formal arrangement; by linguistic connection, such as a pun, or replacing one for the other in a narrative.

However, the formal arrangement only works if it taps our pre-knowledge. Advertisements appropriate the formal relations of pre-existing systems of differences that exist in social mythologies. For example, Chanel used the face of Catherine Deneuve in their advertisements for Chanel No.5.³¹ In so doing, it used an existing mythological system: Catherine Deneuve as signifier for the signified, 'classic French glamour and beauty'. If we are unaware of this signification, or cannot deduce it from our store of knowledge on confronting it, then the advertisement has not worked.^{31A}

Advertisements, then, equate commodities with meanings and transfer the meaning of the referent to the commodity.³² Meaning then flows from one to the other in an apparently autonomous fashion. Advertisements transfer meanings by juxtaposing two objects simultaneously given the same value (or 'currency') but they do not do so entirely within the closed world of the advertisement. The advertisers signs have meanings only in relation to a wider set of meanings. It is through this wider set of meanings, which consumers have, that products are turned from signifieds into signifiers.^{32A} As receivers of advertisements we create the meaning but only because we have been called upon to do so (Williamson, 1978, p. 41).

Advertisements work by simultaneously creating meaning and drawing on the reader's already-existing meanings. There is a transfer from a set of referents to the product. For the purposes of analysis, Williamson breaks down the simultaneous dialectical process of meaning construction in advertisements into four linear stages. These are, first, the way we create the meaning of an advertised product; second, how we take meaning from the product; third, how we are created by the advertisement; fourth, how we create ourselves in the advertisement. The semiological system that operates in the first two stages is inextricably linked with a psychological one that operates in the last two stages. What connects the two parts of the process is ideology. It does not do it overtly but 'provides the invisible cloak' through which their 'intermeshing is rendered transparent'. The transparency is, ironically achieved through our own agency. We do not simply receive advertising messages but are active in the process of constantly recreating them. So the process 'works *through* us, not at us'. As readers we are not being deceived by false ideas that someone is 'putting over' on us. Ideology works in a far more subtle way, it 'is based on false *assumptions*' (Williamson, 1978, p. 41).

Ideology operates by making assumptions about the world that we do not question because they are seen as already true. Advertisements create an 'alreadyness' of 'facts' about ourselves. Advertisements assume that we are consumers who will freely buy things, that this freedom is encapsulated in our freedom to choose what we will buy, and that this choice is determined by certain values.

2.8.3 Exchange and creation

Taking the first part of this deconstructed process, Williamson examines the way the reader creates the meaning of an advertised product. The exchange of value that takes place in an advertisement only works if the reader is somebody for whom the currency has value in the first place. We give Deneuve's face its meaning for use in the advertisement for Chanel No. 5. The advertisement did not create that meaning, it appropriated an already-created meaning. We did not (necessarily) know that we already knew the value of Deneuve's face until it was used in the advertisement. The point is that

it is in their use that ideas have currency, not in their abstract existence. 'Values exist not *in* things but in their transference' (Williamson, 1978, p. 43).

For Williamson, any system of values constitutes an ideology. As values exist in their transference, then ideology exists only in as much as the component values are regenerated through transference. The constant decoding of signs, as embodiments of values, reproduces ideology. The advertisement transfers an empty relationship, it is filled by what we already know. The referent system (the world of glamour) is inextricably linked to the product system (the world of perfumes) through the form of advertisement (e.g. juxtaposition of images and colours). The ideology of the referent system is constantly being regenerated as the reader engages the advertisement. The reader is thus active in reproducing ideology. Advertisements provide a meta-structure where meaning is not simply decoded in one structure but transferred to create another. This process of transference is not just one of transferring already constituted meanings but it is also one of participation in ideology through its very creation. The advertisement appeals to the knowledge of the reader, that which is implicitly known about the referent system. It assumes a meaning that we provide and leads us to irrationally apply the meaning of the referent to the commodity. The advertisement takes this anterior knowledge for granted (Deneuve means glamour), refers to it, and the reader does the work of transference in understanding the advertisement. The active subject has thus been created by assumption. The 'space' between the bottle of perfume and the face of Deneuve (which are only linked by their formal juxtaposition, not by any explicit claims) is bridged by the reader. The reader is the space, the subject is signified through the transaction in the advertisement. Advertisements thus *work* by a process in which they invite us 'freely' to create ourselves 'in accordance with the way in which they have already created us' (Williamson, 1978, p. 42).

Having gained meaning through the transference in the advertisement the product gives meaning back to us. This is the second stage of meaning construction in advertisements. The meaning applied to Chanel No. 5 in the Deneuve advertisement is used to differentiate the user from the user of other perfumes. The advertisement thus serves to create a new system of groups. Take, for example, the Kraft Superfine Margarine advertising slogan 'Is your Mum a Superfine Mum?'. With a small 's' this endows the mum with the qualities of superfine-ness. But with the large 'S' it identifies her as part of the Superfine group, a clan of Kraft margarine users. Of course the synonymy of the two spellings indicates that the quality of superfine-ness is strictly limited to Superfine Mums. The product translates between the quality and the person; or rather intervenes. You can only have the quality or meaning within its parameters. We are thus created not only as subjects but as particular kinds of subjects through products in advertisements (Williamson, 1978, p. 45). So, at one level advertisements enable the product to appropriate a desirable state (for example, glamour, happiness). At a second, more subtle level the advertisement draws on the 'alreadyness' of the reader. The reader does not buy the product to become part of the group it represents, but must already feel a natural belonging to the group; therefore the product will be purchased.

Advertisements do not operate by conjuring up an image hoping that the reader will retain it until such time as they become purchaser. The advertisement is not about influencing the reader's choice in the shop. It attempts to create the reader's self-image so that the reader has already chosen when confronted by an array of perfume or margarine,

or soap powder, or whatever. Advertisements thus appeal to the 'freedom' of the unique subject to choose but constitutes the subject as part of a 'totemic' group existing around a product. The advertisement is a contradiction appealing to the reader's difference from other people but also their similarity to (a sub-group of) other people. Social class is subverted to consumerist groupings on the one hand and individuality on the other.

The third stage in the meaning construction of advertisements is the process by which the reader is created by the advertisement. Advertisements address the reader as an individual even if they are part of a group. The Player's No. 6 advertisement that carried the message 'People like you are changing to No. 6' indicates, through the associated picture, that 'ordinary people' are moving to smoking No. 6. It also makes it clear that they are not just any ordinary people but ones like you, the reader of the advertisement. Advertisements project an imaginary reader that does not exist but in being appealed to, by stepping into the totemic space created by the advertisement, becomes part of the totemic group centred on the product. We become 'the person who is like the No. 6 smokers in the picture. We constitute a totemic set of one, we find our identity as part of a group the rest of which does not exist. We are appellated as already in a group of one' (Williamson, 1978, p. 51). The reader is trapped by his/her 'alreadyness'. The current experience of the reader in front of the advertisement is displaced by the advertisement into an already constituted past. The reader already is the type of person who smokes No.6, or uses Chanel perfume.

The final stage is the way the reader creates her/his self in the advertisement. Advertisements appeal to the reader and ensnare the subject through the exchange of signs. This is effective only if the referent coincides with the subject's desires. Advertisements work to ensure this coincidence. Williamson sees Lacan's notion of the mirror-phase³³ as essentially the process operating in advertising in the way advertisements present an image we aspire to but cannot achieve.^{33A}

Advertisements constitute 'us as one of the objects in an exchange that we must ourselves make'. They are alienating as they appropriate an image from us that gives us back our own value. In the No.6 advertisement '*you* give the product its image/value (because it's people like *you* who smoke it) and then in buying the product you receive this image back. So *this alienation takes place via the product*' (Williamson, 1978, p. 64). However, there is more to it than that. The people in the No.6 picture are also giving the product its value. The reader is in the same relation to the product as those depicted. The advertisement projects the product as the mirror through which the people depicted are reflections of the reader.

What advertisements dangle before us is that which we desire. In the advertisement, the sign is never the referent. The picture is not what it represents. Desire does not acknowledge this. The advertisement creates an imbalance between one sign and another (Deneuve's face and the bottle of Chanel No. 5), which the subject fills through the mirror axis of the product (Chanel perfume) reflecting the desired signified (glamour) onto the self. We want to traverse the space in the advertisement. We desire to make up the lack. We want to merge with, to be part of, something that signifies us only through its separation from us. Desire must always make a leap, across that gap between self and other, in its attempt to unite them (Metz, 1975).

Advertisements claim parts of the subject as separate objects that must be reclaimed (purchased) in order to recreate the self. 'We are both product and consumer'.

We create our own lives through buying those products that combine to form the ‘identikit’ of various fragmentary images of ourselves.

Thus Williamson has shown how advertising, as an ideological system has appropriated systems of signification and psychic processes (hence the role of semiology and psychology in decoding advertisements). The formal structure of advertisements functions ideologically in signifying the reader. However, the subject should appear to be ‘free’ and in control of the system rather than part of it. Advertisements constitute the subject as the decipherer of signs. They conceal the fact that the reader is already signified.

Williamson also discusses the way that hermeneutic advertisements, as she calls them, work. Click [here](#) for more detail and examples.

2.8.4 Analysis—an illustrative example

Having established the principles of decoding, Williamson shows how advertisers adopt different formal structures to enable meaning transference.³⁴ The major referent systems adopted by advertisers include history, nature and science.^{34A} These referent systems are ‘cooked’ so that they become idealised and devoid of material content, and are simply evocative, reusable empty referent systems. Mushrooms are shown as made of, and as meaning, cans of soup; Stonehenge is propped up by a cigarette packet; and so on.

Williamson expands on ‘cooking’; for more detail and examples click [here](#).

Williamson develops her analysis through many different types of advertisement but the basic principles are summed up in one of her concluding examples that shows how advertisements appropriate and empty out ‘real’ systems. The advertisement is for Holsten lager. The magazine advertisement has a large picture bottom left taking up half the area of the advertisement. The picture shows the portion of a droplet-speckled bottle on which the brand label is stuck. This is bordered on two sides by a light coloured area with text and a small inset picture of an old monochrome etching of a brewery. The text banner reads:

In 1188 Duke Adolph III granted the city of Hamburg its own brewing rights.
The rest is history

The text is an ‘explanation’ of the banner message, which wraps round the picture of the label. The foot of the column has, in heavy type:

Holsten.
The historic beer of Germany.

Williamson decodes the advertisement in the following way. The historical figure of the Black Knight, that symbolizes Holsten is insubstantial. The advertisement even tell us this —‘*Nobody knows for certain who he is*’—despite the fact that it is his substantial ‘historicity’ that is meant to transfer this quality to the beer. So history becomes identified with a total mystification but is somehow suggested as being both unknowable and yet ‘obvious’. ‘*The rest is history*’ implies that it need not be told, it stands so objectively and solidly on its own. So a completely hollow symbol is used to

signify both history and the beer: and in connecting the two the beer becomes the '*historic beer*'. Clearly the material substance that has been knocked out of history has been transferred to the beer: the referent system may be empty, but the beer has a '*full distinctive taste*'. What history has lost, the taste of the beer has gained.

This shows precisely that the loss to the referent system is always replenished by the product: history may have been relegated to the level of 'tradition' ('*tradition* says the Black Knight is Duke Adolph III and it's a happy explanation'), that is, not 'true' necessarily, but 'happy' (since it coincides with the mythical origins of the product). To sustain this the 'wood-engraving-style' picture of beer being made has the caption '*History in the making*' and thus history and beer have become totally confused because they are both subject to the same mythological structuring.

Once a reality like history has been made into a 'symbol' about which 'nobody knows for certain' and a 'tradition' which may offer at the most a 'happy explanation' (in other words, a myth), its elements have become, not significant of *themselves*, but signs. The 'historical' bit of the advertisement here tells us absolutely nothing about Duke Adolph or Germany but nevertheless implies that there is a whole body of knowledge (but *unknown* knowledge) that suggests a 'body' to the beer (Williamson, 1978, p. 172–3).

2.8.5 Conclusion: engagement

When people are asked about advertising they nearly always say that advertisements are misleading, dishonest, and that they are not influenced by them. This would seem to raise doubts about the point of advertising. Williamson argues that advertising is not ideological brainwashing forced on us, on the contrary they work, as has been illustrated, because we collude in their working. Advertisements work because they empty out content. It is not the overt message in an advertisement that is important. The reader may not believe that X washes whiter than Y. It is the exchange, the referent system that replaces the overt message that is insidious. It is the images of the referent system that remain, not the claims for the product. Williamson argues that this is why advertising is so uncontrollable.

This is where Williamson's overt political concern is voiced. She argues that while advertisements can be attacked on the grounds that their messages are capitalist or sexist, critique must go further and engage ideology. Advertisements work through ideology, not the overt message. Exchange systems cannot be controlled by law, only overt claims.

Williamson warns against complacency in critiquing advertisements. Having revealed some of the formal strategies is only the first stage of an ongoing struggle with advertising. A struggle that it is hard to keep abreast of.³⁵ Advertising has been quick and adept at incorporating critical material in increasingly subtle ways. Advertising is highly adaptable and tenacious because it lacks real content: 'a framework can be filled with anything, and structures of social myths are re-used and re-used'. Ideology cannot be entirely overturned only engaged. This engagement makes use of structural analytic tools. However, Williamson warns against allowing analysis 'to become a *value in itself*—in some way making perception more important than *what* is perceived'. One must not lose sight of the context and settle for an introverted structural critique. 'Ultimately it is *not* this knowledge in itself that is valuable, but its potential to change the system which is its

object' (Williamson, 1978, p. 178). Advertisements must be criticised and their values fought.

Williamson's analysis of advertisements is clearly critical in its deconstruction of the advertising process. She reveals what is going on beneath the surface by abstracting out the formal process by which advertisements operate to project a latent meaning behind an overt message. The analysis of the process emphasises the re-production of ideology; linking the advertisement to wider social structures through the analysis of referent systems. She views advertisements as a total system in which meaning does not arise in advertisements in themselves but only in relation to other elements in a totalising structure. Advertisements are addressed as socio-historically specific despite their attempt to usurp and subvert history and create themselves as timeless, in the manner of all ideology. Finally, she has a clear praxiological intent to engage and oppose the insidious values of advertising. The aim is the continued critique of the way advertisements appropriate referent systems in order to sustain a critique of the shifting ideology of consumerism. The very process of decoding and thus revealing the way an advertisement works provides the reader with a basis for reconstructing the meaning in a way that enables a distanciation from the product. The 'alreadyness' of the advertisement is fractured through the decoding. The decoder of advertisements is no longer a passive colluding reader but a critical reader, revealing and effectively denying the efficacy of the process of meaning transference.

²⁹ The subject to whom the advertisement is addressed will be referred to as the reader. This is not meant to imply that only advertisements in texts, etc. can be analysed in this way. The 'reader' may be a 'viewer'. Williamson uses reader, viewer, subject, and 'you' as terms to refer to the person to whom the advertisement is addressed.

^{29A} Williamson acknowledges that while influenced by Marx she also draws on structuralist thinkers. She states that she uses other peoples' ideas as tools, that this is not eclectic, but practical. She refers to, and makes use of, the work of Levi-Strauss, but it is Barthes' sociological semiology which is most apparent in her treatment of advertisements as sign systems. Indeed, the book can be read as an attempt to take up Barthes' (1977) programme for the ideological analysis of myths and apply it to advertising. Taking her cue from Barthes, she draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to augment the more conventional semiotic analysis of advertisements as sign systems.

³⁰ Williamson's substantive analyses all refer to magazine advertisements, for logistic reasons.

³¹ The magazine advertisement has a full-page close-up of Deneuve's face. Next to her face, and overlaid in front of her neck and left shoulder is a bottle of Chanel No. 5. In very small print across her right shoulder is the caption 'Catherine Deneuve for Chanel'. Across the bottom of the advertisement in large letters is the name of the product 'Chanel No. 5'.

^{31A} Advertisers make connections between objects, Williamson argues, in order to differentiate their product from other similar products. Deneuve is used to differentiate Chanel No. 5 from alternative perfumes, including those in Chanel's own range. When, for example, Babe, a new perfume (in the 1970s) was launched it was represented by the

active, 'liberated', Karate-kicking, figure of Margaux Hemingway, to clearly differentiate it from Chanel No.5 and other perfumes.

³² Once the link has been made between the commodity and the meaning of the commodity, the symbols of exchange that are generated become taken-for-granted by the consumer. For example, diamonds may be marketed by linking them to eternal love. The mineral is no longer a rock but a sign that comes to 'mean' love and endurance. Thus, the marketing relationship between diamonds and eternal love becomes reversed. The sign comes to mean what it signifies; a diamond means eternal love. This becomes objectified and the consumer no longer translates one to the other, the connection has been made and the object is taken for the feeling. An advertisement showing a packet of JPS cigarettes laying on the edge of a roulette board with the reflection of the wheel and the 'high class' players in its shiny black surface has moved towards this reversal. The message, 'John Player Special. A reflection of quality', implies that 'The Quality' (i.e. upper class) is encapsulated in the cigarettes which literally reflect the people. This reversal is completed in advertising jingles such as 'Beanz Meanz Heinz'. No longer is Heinz signified as being beans, rather beans are completely enclosed by the signifier Heinz.

^{32A} Williamson adds, "Therefore an examination of signs and sign-systems inevitably involves more than a structural analysis of those systems in themselves: such analyses are valuable as synchronic representations of signifying relationships, but to investigate the dynamics of these relationships we must enter the space between signifier and signified, between what means and what it means. This space is of the individual as subject: he or she is not a simple receiver but a creator of meaning. But the receiver is only a creator of meaning because he/she has been called upon to be so. As an advertisement speaks to us, we simultaneously create that speech (it means to us, and are created by it *as its creators* (it assumes that it means to us). Thus we are constituted as 'active receivers' by the ad." (Williamson, 1978, p. 41)

³³ Lacan in his reworking of Freudian psychoanalysis sees consciousness as created not inherent. A major element of Lacanian theory adopted and adapted by Williamson is the theory of the mirror-phase. Lacan developed this by observing children in front of mirrors. Crucial to this is the distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which comes about, Lacan (1951) argues, when the child is aware of the nature of its reflection in a mirror. On the level of the Imaginary the child is aware of the identity of the image and the self. But at the moment of such an awareness the imaginary unity (Ideal-Ego) is destroyed by the coincidental awareness that the reflection is a sign which signifies something. The sign (the reflection) *means* the child but cannot also *be* the child. The awareness of difference provides access to the level of the Symbolic. The access to the *Symbolic* creates the 'social-I'. It is then impossible to return to the old, unified, 'Ideal-Ego', because the mirror image now reflects the Social-I which is itself a symbolic representation and with which the child can no longer merge.

^{33A} 'People like you...' assumes both a coherent ego... and an explicit 'non-youness' - a system of differences. It has already been pointed out that difference is crucial to signification: a sign is defined by what it is not. In order to be a sign at all, it must also point to an Other, the referent which it *is not*, but which it *means* (Williamson, 1978, p. 60). Advertisements do not always address a coherent ego, sometimes advertisements

draw on the multi-layered personality but nonetheless assume that the product unites them and that there is a desire for a coherent self.

As such it feeds off the subject's own desire for coherence. Advertisements signify objects of desire through transference, but that desire is ultimately grounded in self: what the reader is (or is assumed to be and becomes through the act of filling the space between object and referent). Thus, the advertisement clearly signifies the object of desire that becomes the self. This is central, Williamson argues, to the advertising process. Sometimes, as Williams points out, the alreadyness is the reader's individuality that will be brought to bear on the mass-produced commodity. The reader is not already a user and part of a group but already an individual who will be a user by being an individual. This is exemplified by Pentax who individualised their mass produced cameras by depicting the Pentax cameras used by the famous (for example, David Hockney, Ken Russell). These bore marks of individuality whilst also putting the user in a discerning group.

We cannot, however, just assume a universal desire for individuality and coherence. It is necessary to address the historical conditions in which this has come about and thereby allows advertisements to work. How the self is produced is fundamental to undertaking an analysis of how advertisements work through reproducing the self.

Williamson develops this analysis of the self by drawing selectively Lacan's mirror-phase as a metaphor for all social and external reflection of the self. Williamson sees this as essentially the process operating in advertising.

Advertisements appropriate and represent the Imaginary and thus embody the contradiction of offering us an image of some other while inviting us to become the same, thereby 'capitalising on our regressive tendency towards the Imaginary unity of the Ego-Ideal. In offering us *symbols* as the objects of unity they ensnare us in a quest for the impossible' (Williamson, 1978, p. 65).

³⁴ In the second half of the book, Williamson addresses the way in which advertisements hollow historical meaning from structures and is thus able to work on anything because, like ideology (Barthes, 1957), it deals with referent systems devoid of content. Williamson thus examines in detail the way subject's knowledge is appropriated by advertisements, via reference to major referent systems, for ideological ends.

The reader of an advertisement is a subject who is drawn into the advertisement as one who knows. This reflects the nature of ideology. It is the re-presentation of ideas that stand in an ahistorical vacuum with no beginning or end. Ideology already exists as a synchronic structure, an inevitability. It is re-created through re-use. Nonetheless, such systems are historically specific though they deny it.

When anterior knowledge is brought to an advertisement, such knowledge is not 'true' and does not make the advertisement 'true'. What happens is that the advertisement is endowed with 'truth' by the attachment of anterior knowledge. We can only effect the exchange between Catherine Deneuve and Chanel No.5 and relate it to one between Margaux Hemingway and Babe perfume, if we are already in a position of knowing. This exchange takes place by pointing to another structure; the connoted referent structure. What is denoted is the product. However, there is a circularity because having connoted the reference system, the advertisement makes the referent system denote the product

through placing it in a system of meaning. Williamson uses Barthes (1957) analysis of signs. The denoted sign becomes the signifier for a connoted sign. A photograph (in a Chanel advertisement) denotes Catherine Deneuve but this is the signifier for the connotation 'chic Frenchness'. The signified 'Margaux Hemingway' becomes a signifier for 'aggressive femininity' at the connotive level.

Signification operates at the denotative and connotative levels by intersecting with the knowledge of the reader. This knowledge consists of whole systems of referents. Williamson looks at some of the referent systems used by advertising. All these she notes involve a transformation. 'We are placed in a reconstructed and *false* relationship to *real* phenomena' (Williamson, 1978, p. 102).

Williamson concentrates on the way advertisements misplace the subject in time and nature, thereby emulating ideology, (although she also shows how other systems such as magic can be made into a referent system just like nature and history). Indeed, advertising can appropriate any referent system and empty it out, including critical ones such as Women's Liberation or revolution and protest. Advertising can even use itself as a referent system, as in the Carling Black Label remake of a Levi Jeans advertisement. This analysis of referent systems shifts the analysis of advertisements from the realm of the mythologist to that of the myth-reader.

^{34A} An exemplary case is an advertisement for Panasonic televisions that seems explanatory but only *refers* to scientific knowledge but does not actually *offer* it. Nobody reading the advertisement can have any idea of the scientific technicalities. The whole advertisement is a sign pointing to 'Science', and thereby transferring all the taken-for-granted notions of 'Science' to the product, but being totally empty of science.

³⁵ For example, the way that Holsten have amended their use of the Black Knight symbol in their advertising campaign. It is now clearly identified as the symbol of Duke Adolph III.