



## IMAGE BECOMES LANGUAGE: MEDIA AND CAPITALISM IN BARTHES' RHETORIC OF THE IMAGE

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### Abstract:

This paper focuses on the power of image and how image gradually turns into language. In the postmodern era, media is an integral part in everyday life that dominates the capital market by using a plethora of images for media presentation and image production. In *Rhetoric of the Image*, Roland Barthes successfully shows the relation between media and capitalism. In his essay, Barthes uses the image of Panzani pasta through which he has conveyed different meanings that an image can represent. This essay is a classic semiotic text where Roland Barthes analyses an advertising image and uses it as a means of unraveling the mystery of how different messages are conveyed by a system of sign. In the light of Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image*, this paper scrutinizes how advertisement provides rich layers of meanings through a single image and the crucial role that the worldwide entertainment media is playing in the global capital market.

**Keywords:** image, media, capitalism, sign, rhetoric, postmodernism

### 1. Introduction

An image can have three different messages or meanings that Barthes (1977) has mentioned. Similarly, in advertisement an image often provides multiple layers of meanings. To analyze this fact in detail, reference from Barthes' *Rhetoric of the Image* has been used. Barthes explains the power of image and different meanings of image on the basis of Ferdinand de Saussure's sign system. In Barthes' essay, there is an example of advertisement of Panzani pasta in which there are "some packets of pasta, a tin, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, a mushroom, all emerging from a half-open string bag in yellows and greens on a red background" (Barthes, 1977). Barthes (1977) talks about three different messages that the image of Panzani pasta provides: linguistic, denotational and

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connotational message. This paper shows the multiple meanings of image and how image creates necessity among human beings about different products.

Media is used for expanding capitalism. The power of image and impact of globalization work here to make its motif successful. Image always conveys some messages either denotative or connotative. At first view, it seems that we just observe a picture but when we explain deeply then it becomes transparent that an image is not just an image. An image is followed by multiple explanations and meanings. Barthes (1977) gives an example and if we think about this example then it is a simple picture of Panzani pasta. If we explain it elaborately, we find a half-open bag that signifies returning from market and the products are fresh and are ready to be used or cooked. Besides, the color symbolism indicates "Italianicity" as it uses the colors of Italy's national flag. Thus, image and visual media use human emotion and sense of nationalism to make place for the products in the capital market. Here lies the interrelationship between media and capitalism.

## 2. Research Questions

The research questions are:

- 1) How does image convey several messages?
- 2) How does image gradually turn into language?
- 3) Why is the capital market dependent on visual image and media?

## 3. Different Messages of an Image

Barthes (1977) talks about the connection between word and image and the system in which image takes the place of words. He shows how picture is transformed as language and language is replaced by picture. Images, advertisements etc. are the products of consumer and visual culture. Our thoughts are now surrounded with advertisements and images. There is little room for human rationality and understanding. In the present world, image becomes ideological. Ideology is always purposeful; it is not so innocent. It has the power of domination, power to convince people. Food culture i.e. Panzani pasta is a part of cultural studies and it is a very movable culture. Now-a-days, culture is travelling and shifting too fast because of the power of image and globalization. The advertisement and its power is the basic focus of Ronald Barthes (1977). To begin with the most important problem facing the semiology of images is:

- *Can analogical representation (the "copy") produce true systems of signs?*
- *Can we think of an analogical "code" (as opposed to a digital one)?*

It must be remembered that any system constitutes a language only if it is doubly articulated (Barthes, 1977, p. 32). Barthes uses the example of Panzani pasta to support

his idea. This advertisement provides several messages: linguistic message that includes connoted and denoted message, literal message and symbolic message.



**Figure 1:** Panzani Pasta  
([source](#))

### 3.1 The Linguistic Message

The first message is made up of all the words in the advertisement, i.e., the caption and the labels and these are being inserted into the scene (p. 33).

**The denoted message:** The code from which this message has been taken is that of the French language.

**The connoted message:** The sign "Panzani" connotes "Italianicity".

### 3.2 The Literal Message

This message yields a series of discontinuous signs. It is to be remembered that the order of these signs (outlined below) is not important; they are not linear.

**The first sign:** the scene represents the idea of returning from market, a signified which implies two euphoric values: that of the freshness of the products and that of the domestic preparation for which they are destined. Here the signifier is the half-open bag that allows the ingredients spread out over the table and it is "unpacked". To read this sign, we have to understand the widespread culture of "shopping around for oneself" as opposed to the "stocking up" of a hi-tech civilization.

**The second sign:** its signifier is the bringing together of red (tomato), green (pepper) and yellow (packet) and the signified is Italy or "Italianicity". This sign stands in a relation of redundancy with the connoted sign of the linguistic message, i.e., the assonance of the name Panzani. The knowledge it draws on is specifically French. An

Italian would barely notice the connotation of the name because it is based on a familiarity with certain tourist stereotypes (p. 34).

**The third sign:** the serried collection of objects which transmits the idea of a total culinary service, as though:

- a) Panzani furnishes everything that is needed for a balanced meal and
- b) the concentrate in the tin were equivalent to the natural produce surrounding it (pp. 34-35).

**The fourth sign:** the composition of the image conveys an aesthetic signified namely "*nature morte*" (the still life).

Moreover, some signs tell us that this is an advertisement, i.e., place of the image in the magazine and the emphasis of the labels (p. 35). Thus, four signs constitute this image. We comprehend that together they form a coherent whole.

### 3.3 The Symbolic Message

The symbolic message is in fact the second "iconic" message. The signifieds of this (the third) message are constructed by the real objects in the scene and the signifiers are photographed. The sign of this message is not drawn from an institutional stock: it is not coded (p. 36). Here we confront the paradox of a message without a code. All the knowledge we require to analyze this message is bound up with our internalization. We need to know what an image is and what the objects are. The first message is literal and the second message is symbolic (p. 36).

If this reading is comprehensive, we can say that the photograph manifests three messages:

- 1) a linguistic message that means all the words inscribed in the advertisement;
- 2) a coded-iconic message that means the visual connotations derived from the arrangement of the photograph; and
- 3) a non-coded iconic message which indicates the "literal" denotation, the recognition of identifiable objects in the photograph.

However, it should be obvious that the distinction between a coded-iconic message and a non-coded iconic message is not easily made. The viewers receive at one and the same time the perceptual message and the cultural message. This confusion in reading these iconic images corresponds to the function of the mass image (pp. 36-37).

## 4. Corporate Darwinism

Today's world is a competitive world where there is always the question of survival of the best company with the fittest company, best product with the fittest product. Media plays a very important role here to promote the quality or utility of a product. The text or linguistic message of any image presentation or advertisement adds meaning and both the text and image work together to convey internal meaning. Thus, media is used for capitalism and image has power because it is supported by global capital. Because of globalization, capitalism now expands all over the world. Image becomes ideological in

this capital market and the ideology of capital market is of course commercial ideology. Image can create brand and brand can promote trade and commerce. To make any product famous, authenticity is important and for this authenticity linguistic message is important. For example: Made in USA/Japan/Germany, Original product, 100% fresh, Natural product, 25% extra, Great taste, less waist, Buy 2 get 1 free etc.

By using these coded linguistic messages, the media plays a vital role to attract consumers' attention. Thus, image has a great role to promote the capital market by convincing its viewers or audience. Image has a skimming value. Each image contains a code and a message (Barthes, 1977). Sometimes, the message is what it is and sometimes there is metaphorical and connotative meaning of the message. So, each image contains code, denotative and connotative messages (Barthes, 1977).

*"So now we are presented with an injunction, being that 'only that which can be "seen" can be believed'. Such formalism allows no distinction to be made between 'phenomenal form' and 'essential form'. Any attempt to retrieve the latter is either diverting or facile, we must look-at-things-as-they-are (Keat and Urry, 1975) in each case. The prime central value now becomes 'face value'. A pre-modern faith in the deity has been replaced by modernity's faith in the precision of human optics, buttressed by a serious commitment to surface" (Jenks, 2005, p. 161).*

## 5. Rhetoric of the Image

Image becomes rhetoric when it goes beyond itself. Rhetoric always uses stylistic language such as simile, metaphor, irony, euphemism etc. When an image has different layers of meanings then it becomes rhetoric. Now, we are living in a world of signs, in a world of images presented by television, computer, internet, social media etc. Image, media, screen, visual presentation etc. create our necessity. What actually is necessary for us we are not sure about it all the time. The capital market raises our necessity, our desire and then we are hankering after these. Here, nothing is what it seems to be. We are in a world where we are at the end of production. There is no production, only reproduction (Jameson, 1991). We are happy not realizing what is going on around us. We are living in the world of floating images. It is a world of signs; it is a world of simulacra.

Jean Baudrillard (1993) uses these terms simulation, simulacra and hyperreality in his essay *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Today's world is a developed world, we are living in an era where science and technology shapes our everyday life. Because of the development of science and technology, this is now a world of infinite production, infinite simulacra. With the help of camera, photography, our present world turns into a simulated world. Postmodernism is basically a product of visual culture as Baudrillard has asserted and visual culture depends on image that is very artificial. *"Production itself has no meaning; its social finality is lost in the series. Simulacra prevail over history"*. (Baudrillard, 1993)

Image becomes rhetoric and it implies multiple meanings. Now, ideology, ethics, and morality these words are just grand narratives and fairy tales; there is only one ideology that is business ideology. The purpose of business ideology is to make profit as well as to promote capital market, for example: national flag. National flag is the symbol of pride, patriotism, independence, and sovereignty for any nation. In the postmodern period, the capital market uses this flag to manipulate human emotion. Different advertisements of SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards are made by showing the image of this flag. Now, patriotism lies in using Grameenphone SIM, Airtel SIM or Robi SIM<sup>2</sup>. Thus, Bengali nationality, emotion, feelings are manipulated in advertising Bangladeshi products. Patriotism now lies in SIM advertisements that use our heart touching colors *Lal Sobuj* (colors of the national flag of Bangladesh). In *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debort announces the 'materialization of ideology', in the form of the spectacle which '*is ideology par excellence*' (p. 215).

## 6. Brand Value

*"In our society consumers do not buy their clothes, cars, or even their food, for their use-values alone. Rather, they see in these objects' symbolic significances, which determine their patterns of consumption"* (Hawkes, 1996, p. 169). Image creates brand value and that is important to make any product famous. Capital market creates this brand value by using the fame of prominent celebrities. Popular singers, actors, actresses, and cricket players are made brand ambassadors of the products. Image is always self-referential.

*"This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by "intangible as well as tangible things", which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist over it, and which at the same time are recognized as the tangible par excellence."* (Debort, 1967, p. 36)

People buy products seeing its brand value not by its utility value. New arising fame of different popular figures is also used by media and capitalism. *"Another way of thinking about this is in relation to Saussure: wearing a suit is like the speech act or "parole". The speech act is given meaning by the system of language or "langue" overall, not the individual speaker. Thus, Baudrillard's consumer indulges in acts of consumption (wearing suits), which are given meaning by the system (e.g. the fashion-system or code)"*. (Lane, 2003, p. 76)

Whenever a dancer, singer, actor, cricketer becomes famous, s/he is made the brand ambassador of different products. Advertisements are also made by using their face value. All over the world, we see Shahrukh Khan, Salman Khan, Aamir Khan, Katrina Kaif, Deepika Padukone, Priyanka Chopra<sup>3</sup>, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Sakib Al

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<sup>2</sup> Commonly used mobile networks in Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> Popular Bollywood film stars.

Hasan<sup>4</sup>, Shacin Tendulkar, Shourov Ganguly<sup>5</sup> advertising different products. Their face value and popularity help create brand value. Katrina Kaif, Deepika Padukone are made the brand ambassadors of LUX just to manipulate people about its market value and also product value. When the popular and well-known figures come to the screen with advertisements of a product, the audience or viewers are being manipulated very easily. The common thought will be that this star uses this product or s/he talks about this product, so this product is obviously good or the best. So, the value of a product lies in image and presentation.

*"In the consumer societies of the late twentieth century, exchange value (a purely symbolic form) has become more real, more objective, than use value (a material phenomenon). Objects are conceived, designed and produced for the purpose of making money by selling them, rather than for reasons of practical utility". (Hawkes, 1996, p. 169)*

Thus, the media manipulates the consumers in this postmodern society where the media creates a world of simulation. Media controls our thoughts and the consumer's logical judgment is grabbed by media and image presentation. This is how global capital is conducted by using media, image and screen.

## 7. Linguistic Message turns into Photographic Message

From Barthes (1977), it is clear that image itself now becomes rhetorical. At present time, linguistic messages have been reduced gradually and photographic messages have gradually taken the place of linguistic messages. Media always keeps itself updated according to the demand of time.



Figure 2: Three Soap Advertisements  
(sources [1](#), [2](#), [3](#))

<sup>4</sup> Popular Bangladeshi cricketers.

<sup>5</sup> Popular Indian cricketers.

In figure 2, in the first advertisement, there are lots of coded messages inscribed on the picture. The bold linguistic message "*Dancing through Helen's heart*" provides the meaning that to get the beauty of Helen, it is important to use Lux. In the second advertisement, there are words inscribed on the image but in contrast to the first one the linguistic message is less. Here, the coded message is "*My complexion stays lovely with Lux*" that also means the quality of Lux and the importance of using it to become beautiful. In the third one, there is only image presentation but no inscribed code or linguistic words or message. This is how image has taken the place of words now-a-days. The general belief is that as Katrina Kaif is there, this product is undoubtedly the best. "*What gives this system its originality is that the number of readings of the same lexical unit or lexia (of the same image) varies according to individuals*" (Barthes, 1977).

Thus, the media has taken the place of human rationality and their ability of judgment. The consumers and viewers grab everything that image and media present in front of them. In the world of advertisement, now we can see this kind of gradual transformation of linguistic message to message without code. "*Realism had already inaugurated this tendency. The rhetoric of the real already signals that its status has been radically altered (the golden age of the innocence of language where what is said need not be doubled in an effect of reality).*" (Baudrillard, p. 454)

This world is a simulated world where everything is just presentation and representation, production and reproduction. The necessity of the audience and consumers is created by image and media presentation. Nothing remains now without image and sign. This is a world of images; the substitution of image is also image. We are now continuously being stimulated and digitalized. Art is dead in the old/ classical sense. We are in a world of continuous reflection. Reality now is no longer stranger than fiction, we are now completely in capture of image and media. "*The simulation principle dominates the reality principle as well as the pleasure principle*". (Baudrillard, p. 458)

## 8. Ideology Confines in Image

Ideology now turns into commercial ideology whose only purpose is to make profit. The revolutionary figures, *Che Guevara*<sup>6</sup> and *Fidel Castro*<sup>7</sup> now exist in image among the young generation. We can see the popularity of t-shirts, hats, and bags containing the image of Che Guevara but may be their role and contribution to world history remains unknown and unacknowledged to those image holders. Capital market commercializes their fame and identity for profit seeking tendency. The ideology and philosophy also now turn into image and also confines in image. This is only because of the profit seeking capital market.

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<sup>6</sup> Argentine Marxist revolutionary.

<sup>7</sup> Cuban communist revolutionary.





**Figure 3:** Image of Che Guevara in Products  
(source [1](#), [2](#))

*“The end of spectacle brings with it the collapse of reality into hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography.”* (Baudrillard, p. 454)

The reality does not exist now, but we are happy not realizing what is going on around us. We are living in the world of floating images. Because of science, technology, camera, photography, this is now a world of infinite production. We are now in a world where values are temporary and changeable. Everything has exchange value more or less but now this lies only in image. Image becomes symbolic and it creates exchange value to the consumers.

*“What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of evermore novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentalism.”* (Jameson, p. 560)

The fame of people, the contribution of famous people, and the necessity of people, everything now turns into image. We are entangled by media coverage and image presentation. Image represents now the ideology and philosophy of people where their real contribution and sacrifice remain covert.

## 9. Conclusion

In this paper, the power of image has been exposed. Image can be rhetoric; Barthes (1977) has shown it in his essay *Rhetoric of the Image*. Rhetoric means when an image is not only just an image, but it represents something else. The capital market uses this rhetoric for enhancing their business. Media is used here to promote the capital market. Image becomes so powerful that it surpasses reality in most of the cases. It creates a simulated world where everyone is grabbed by image and media. The capital market uses this

market policy by manipulating people's emotion and thought by image presentation. Later, several postmodern theorists like Jean Baudrillard (1993), Fredric Jameson (1991) also talk about the power of image and how image creates simulation. Jameson shows how image contributes to reproduce things and promote the late capital market in his essay *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. So, this article has shown how image becomes rhetoric and can provide different messages to the viewers. It also shows the relation between media and image and the relation between image and capital market. Image and media are used to promote capital as well as the late capital market in the postmodern world.

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