BRAND DESIGN: IDENTITY AND CULTURAL MEDIATION

ABSTRACT

Generally, the brand raises a double problem of value: its own identity, generator of a myth, as a tale of its origins, supporting the deep axiology of its discourses; and its cultural background, that is, its universe of reference shaped by the genuine perception and concepts of a specific population. Our thinking focuses on value management through brand design. The brand Shiseido, born in Japan just before The Meiji Era, managed to develop a new approach of the cosmetics market and reinforce its mythic existence with an original graphic identity. We can observe the transition from a cultural oriented communication – highlighting traditional Japanese beauty – to a remediation via the meeting with the Occident – “another” woman, another beauty – allowing the brand to recreate its expression. We are looking for traces of Shiseido’s identity background in its culture, that is, the Place where the establishment of invariants relies on canonical discourses and on the process of re-invention itself, a dynamic process encompassing a relation with space-time and multiple operations of translation allowing innovation and the transmission of values. We propose to analyse images from our corpus where Shiseido uses an intercultural blended discourse. The transcultural strategy of the brand builds its myth through a social discourse analysable by semiotics; this “game” of rhetoric regulated by the expression plane allows the brand to resolve heterogeneities and create mediations between contradictory elements emerging from cultural hybridisation and the use of new forms.

Keywords: semiotics, brand design, innovation, culture, myth, Japan

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper we will discuss the operations of innovation and identity renegotiation through a brief analysis of the brand Shiseido. Carrying the values of a company, a brand forms a core of identifiers that live and flow through the plane of expression of its products (the design) and its communication. In the discourse emitted by a brand we can find a narrative that unwinds a rhetoric space connecting with its own universe. We can notice in TV ads and posters that designers put a lot of effort into creating “universes” for their brands. This type of material is very interesting relative to visual semiotics in culture analysis because it allows an understanding of how the universe of the brand feeds from its cultural background. In this respect we will consider a relation between a “primary” culture, a place and a language, and a “secondary” culture related to the area of activity, the practice, which tends to free itself from the “central” culture.

This analysis will encompass images created by Shiseido at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Shiseido, as a cosmetics brand, founded in 1872 has been both a witness and actor of the evolution of Japan through its meeting with Occident initiated in 1868. In those days, Japan was
disrupted by the discovery of foreign cultures and their vision of the world. The country quickly actualized its own way of life via a revolution occurring within every field of its culture. This phenomenon is therefore a great material for the analysis of a brand and its design, especially because companies and their communication are "barometers" of mass culture. In our paper, we will try to demonstrate how the otherness or inter-culturality flowing in Japan became a vector for the reinvention of Shiseido's design. We will consider images as places of mediation and identity-rebuilding. This paper will be organised around two points, the first aiming at thought on how an image stands as a mythic place, setting up the tales of a brand. The second, on how the brand renews its values and identity through its expression plane.

2 SHISEIDO

Founded by Arinobu Fukuhara, the company was a pharmaceutics manufacturer that evolved towards cosmetics after the founder travelled to the US and Europe. The original image of the brand is obviously based on traditional pictures despite the renewal of cosmetics and the use of lotion rather than white powder. The depicted woman is a reconstruction of a Heian typical beauty, thus recalling the period of the differentiation of traditional Japan, no longer mimicking China or Korea in the fields of literature and arts. This woman appears with a distinctive hair-style: long, very dark hair, so long that it covers up her body, already wrapped in a kimono (figure 1). This model diffuses a particular ethnicity carrying a norm that underlines the geographic origin of the product. We can note at the very beginning, that the brand introduces itself as a member of the recipient's population via a code referring to a fragment of its history.

Over time, Shiseido tried to build an image of luxury, elegance and glamour as a manifestation of the word “rich” used as the core value by Shinzō Fukuhara, son of the founder of the company and renowned artist during the Meiji era. This value is conveyed through a fantasized vision and the illusion of exoticism reinforced by scenes of leisure. In fact, this lifestyle was unattainable for Japanese women in those times. Shiseido's premium identity was based on quality goods as well as a self-styled image. (G.Weisenfeld:2010) In the ads, Shiseido depicts a specific idealization of beauty conveyed by both visual designs
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and the products’ exhibition places. Shiseido simultaneously followed its cultural legacy and aiming at building a model based on beauty as a universal concept. The company wanted to convert this feature into the engine of the shifting of its identity from local-traditional to international-modern, and then, using imported figures rather than those made by Japanese people.

3 IMAGES ANALYSIS

For our analysis, we will use a method developed in visual semiotics that proceeds by cutting image space (limited by the frame) into its different components in order to study their relations. Greimassian semiotic analysis is based on sorting out topographic, eidetic (shapes), chromatic (colours), texture and light as categories, setting up the conditions for an image to be grasped as a language with its rules and « games ».

We will extract representations of women from our corpus of images and closely analyse them. The cosmetics’ brand does indeed communicate on beauty but first of all, the “web” of values supporting the discourse of the brand, seems to be organized by the main promise: beautifying consumers. Our images show portraits of women and focus the communication on the presence of the model that takes over a part of the frame embodying the brands’ values via its actantial role (Fontanille-Zilberberg: 1998). The word « embody » is not insignificant, in fact the subject pictured or painted is more than a network of points and lines but must become « flesh » to meet the requirement of a potential dialogism with the observer.

All the characters are represented following the « Newtonian » reference frame, that is, complying with the up/down opposition that will guarantee the recognition of a human being. The figure of the woman stands as a basis considered as a “universal”, triggering recognition. All our characters have a body: a construction of limbs and a head (body parts). We can notice the existence of interrelations between these parts as well as a relation between the whole and its parts sustaining a basic anthropomorphic model. Japanese tradition provided rules to the expression that are known as motifs observed in the art of Edo period. Japanese art depicting the body emphasizes hair, the contrast between deep black hair and a pale face, the neck or more precisely the nape of the neck, the disappearing of the body and the appearing of hands as well as an indirect or diverted gaze. This canonical schema is dominant in our corpus and supports the hypothesis of a grammatical norm in images. Let us observe « from top to bottom », component by component, how Shiseido depicts its women.

Hair can be sorted by length, texture and colour. Regarding length, four images feature long hair, four feature medium length, four medium-tied hair and four short hair. The texture is based on the opposition /straight/ vs /wavy/. Four pictured models have wavy hair. For the colour analysis we will consider white hair, or rather « blank » hair, in our black and white images, as blond. We note that all /black hair/ is /straight/ and that almost all /wavy hair/ is /blond/.

As a second step, we will study faces as a sum of their constitutive parts: mouth, nose, eyes, eyebrows, global face shape and orientation.
Only one model has distinguishable eyes, the others have “almond shaped eyes”, that are almost closed, among which only one clearly shows its pupils.

Noses are « equivalent » with the exception of two models using a more geometrical style.

Mouths are always tiny or even reduced on two images. Lips are coloured on two images.

Two images referring to Heian Period depict the peculiar shaved-and-painted-above eyebrows style used in those times. The eyebrows in other images are sketched as a long curve.

Eight images are in profile while the others appear three-quarters on.

Only one image seems to be looking at the observer directly.

We notice that models represented three-quarters on are all wavy and fair-haired women as well as the only image looking at the observer.

In our corpus, hands appear on five images, once with a model combining /dark hair/+/straight/+ /profile/. The other models where hands could potentially be featured hide them under their garment.

Finally, let us have a look at the body in general, including the garment and the overall chromatic aspect. Body as flesh is only used once, it can also be seen on another image picturing the chest, and only suggested in another one. Otherwise, the body is covered up with garments and the outline (silhouette) is even « denied » in five examples. We can observe the representation of kimonos on two images while the others depict different textures of fabric, sometimes even constructing clearly western garments, on six images at least.

Regarding global colour, the skin of our model is generally pale or extremely pale like shown in figure 2, benefiting contrast emphasis with a saturated background. Two models (figure 3 and 4) have darker skin pigmentation. We must advise that the figure 4 seems to be constructing a negative, the general tone is brown, and the scenery features the same colour as the skin and garment of the character. We could conclude here that this is a rhetorical effect, inverting coloration.

Figure 2 (cc MIT)
After this brief comparative analysis we can construct two opposite models. A prototypical character with dark straight hair, bundled up in a garment denying the body-shape; on the other hand, a character featuring wavy blond hair, pictured three-quarters on and wearing fairly suggestive clothing. Both these models can be regarded as stereotypes widespread in Japan during this period. On one hand a representation of the Self, reinforced by its rooting in ancient tradition and relying on the syntax of the image based on norms and codes inherited from the Japanese society before its opening. On the other hand, the image of a woman with distinguishing features. We notice that the western woman is depicted through every trait that opposes her to the Japanese woman and not through the common things between some of the individuals from both « worlds ».

4 MYTH AND CULTURAL MEDIATION

We have seen that images representing women construct types via the organisation of traits and their variations. Therefore, we can define image as a meeting place, or a discussion space, between these types standing as transitory forms between the Japanese woman in her traditional form and the western woman appearing after the Meiji opening. We must underline that we work on a corpus of images emitted by the brand Shiseido targeting its contemporary people, in Japan. It means that all the types featured in our case study are in
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fact « sublimations » (enhancement) of Japanese woman, a dream of beauty for the consumers.

In that respect, the myth of Shiseido can stand out in the history or the tale of the Japanese people and evade, as a form, that is expected by cultural norms. "Le mythe apparaît comme un récit (discours mythique) mettant en scène des personnages, des situations, des décors généralement non naturels (divins, utopiques, surréels etc.) segmentables en séquences ou en petites unités sémantiques (mythèmes) dans lesquels s’investit obligatoirement une croyance – contrairement à la fable ou au conte. Ce récit met en œuvre une logique qui échappe aux principes classiques de la logique d’identité." (Durand: 1992) We are indeed considering here myth as a structure supporting a paradox, in our case the one defining beauty via the opposite of the reality of the contemporary woman. That way, we would concur with native southern Americans who saw Spanish conquistadores as an incarnation of the images of their gods. However, our case is not the issue of combining the divine and the occident, but rather the representation of a concept or a fundamental quality via a figurative level depicting an ideal.

The spatio-temporal force proves here to be like a second relevant vector of modellisation. Up to this point we have talked about topology, as in, image as a place of meeting and organisation for an « alternative » mythic reality setting the opposite of the norm of a population as a figure representing its ideal. Through the convocation of a figure from the Heian period we have already glimpsed a time skip operated in order to inject information concerning a traditional Beauty and thus, the idealisation of a period dwelling in the spirit of Japanese people as authentic sensitivity. Hence, the value of a woman embodying this figure is high while superimposed with a model becoming a formal « purity ».

In the imported model’s perspective we can also notice a temporality at stake. This temporality emerging from a scene extracted from its geographic and historic space in order to disseminate, at the crossing with Japan, the sparkling strangeness that can only exist at the outskirts of a semiosphere. Before explaining this last term, let us clarify these observations. According to the way we analysed our images, by cutting them into subunits, we found out that most of them, for instance those inspired by Heian period, collect their imaginary world from a defined space-time. Therefore, we observe in our corpus what we can identify as a « Marie-Antoinette », an Italian woman from Renaissance, a character from ancient Egypt and another one from ancient Greece. All these characters fit into a scenery that integrates itself in the myth of the brand proceeding by relocation to contributing to an artificial continuity regulating the heterogeneity.

According to Lotman’s model, the semiosphere, we can note the existence of the opposition norm vs. innovation from a different point of view. Lotman proposes a model of culture, describing semiotic space as a structure around an organizing

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1 Myth appears as a story (mythical discourse) putting on a performance: characters, situations, sceneries generally non-natural (divine, utopian, surreal, etc.) that can be divided into sequences or smaller semantic units (mythems) in which a belief is always invested – unlike in fables or tales. This narrative implements a logic eluding the classic principles of identity logic.
centre, filled with norms and fixing the rules via a natural language, triggering a singular vision of the world (Lotman : 1999). Its outskirts include a bundle of linguistic components that become more and more disarranged the further we pull away from the centre but that offer new information as a compensation. In the heterogeneous part of the semiosphere there is a permanent conflict to access the centre and establish itself as the new norm. Lotman explains that the centre’s point of view comes under the « I » considering the outskirts as « they », « the others ». He describes the stages of the integration of a foreign product from outside to the centre in four steps. First, what comes from the outside looks strange, exotic and has great value, the imported vision of the world breaks up with tradition. Then, the product is translated and adapted to fit the receiving culture until the new element is seen as a genuine part of the old. Imported products will be considered as naturally tied to the receiving culture, their own origin being denied. Finally, the new products are dissolved and used to create new elements sending them back to the outskirts.

The brand and its images studied in this paper are subject to this mechanism. If we project the analysis into Lotman’s process, we notice that the western body is first perceived as strange, this observation is made thanks to the models depicting the antithesis of traditional representations. Initially, Shiseido intends to vehiculate the image of the West as the idealization of its own values. The Meiji opening was a period of intense reception of western ideas in Japan; many fields imported directly western concepts without previously criticizing their basis. (Frédéric: 1985) Valuating the new appears as the main engine for the brand’s ambitions as it identifies itself to this opening. The second phase, from translation to absorption, is also identifiable in our corpus through sceneries extracted from their original territory and then « naturally » pasted into the brand’s history. We do not have enough images in our corpus prepared for this paper to peer into the next phases, but in our thesis based on a larger corpus, phenomena described by Lotman are obviously observable. The phenomenon has not been one sided and it is fair to point out that the imaginary of Japan also influenced Western countries. Nowadays, we can witness how the products from both cultures can develop into the other before coming back under another shape, often stereotypical, thus constructing a mirror of the Self.

5 TRANSLATION, CONVERSION AND INNOVATION

So far, we have determined the mechanism underpinning the direction followed by Shiseido and, from here, we will try to understand how a brand reinvents itself in terms of expression. To proceed, we will have to examine the process of translation constituting an operation of conversion.

The scenes we identified as « imported » are interpretations by the local designer in order to serve the brand. The establishment of such elements into communication requires the recognition from the targeted audience involving syntax and coding constraints. As we already explained, natural language and its grammar belong to the core of the semiosphere, standing as the place where the brand originates from and gathers the consumers. Thus, images inherit canonical motifs of Japanese art or generally images of women spread in the local area. Considering diachronically the shapes identified in our corpus, we notice that, if the figure of the western woman featuring wavy fair hair, appears quickly as a symbol of beauty, its figurative construction remains tied to the Japanese culture.
Figure 5 depicts a reified woman whom of which only the face appears between her thick hair and a standardised garment denying the curves of her body. This item keeps invariants like indirect gazing, a face three-quarters on, and the hidden body. The scenes featuring « Marie-Antoinette » plays with the distortion of a foreign canonical image to transcribe it using local visual syntax (figure 6). The character from French history can thus be found pictured in profile, highly stylised, we could even add from our point of view: « Japanised » by the rework of contours and lines. Hybridization hence becomes an engine for innovation of which we have a fair example with figure 7.
Besides the use of the couple of « tricks » described earlier, this representation follows the tradition of bijin-ga (実写) actual in Utamaro’s works. This kind of Japanese « mannerism » constructing fixed poses held by willowy stretched bodies to give them a feeling of lightness can be found in limbs and neck proportions. It is also strengthened by « fringes » on sleeves and the feet fading into geometric shapes. The woman who looks like a westerner in this image plays the role of an ancient beauty, and Edo geisha that would be re-inserted into modern daily life. This syntaxic and figurative hybridization supports the establishment of the brand as intermediary between local values and the daily providing of an aesthecisation of lifestyle and the Self.

A conversion of the image occurs through the filter applied by what Lotman names the frontier that controls the passing of elements from a foreign culture to the centre of the local culture. The Japanese designer himself has to adapt his practice to the restitution of a value by way of hybridization. Imported figures can be instantly identified and related with their contexts. When it is not the case, the feeling of strangeness emanating from the figure when adapted to local visual narration will give the observer the skill to take over an idealised, fantasized, almost oneiric universe. Consequently, dialog will occur on the level of artistic practices. The designer who originally worked by means of engraving offers a black and white finish combining darkened pages with white motifs. The line is hence thicker to highlight contours. We can observe this phenomenon in figure 8 reminding of the Heian Period.

This technique widely spread during the Edo period, before the Meiji opening, can be observed in prints and a large number of illustrated artefacts traded in the streets by merchants and artists. The renewal of representation methods, as well as the object of the depiction, that is, a blond western woman with wavy hair conveying this ideal whiteness –important criteria in Japanese imaginary - encourages innovation. In this respect, figure 9 and 5 both feature a reduction of the line to depict a more ethereal hairstyle, freeing itself from the constraints of black colour to more iconize its model.
We mentioned the evolution from darken shapes to a single line but the role of colour itself has to be studied. We will not dwell on the theories of culturality and colour, but many consider that every culture organises colours on the basis of criteria related to social universe (Groupe μ: 1992). Cultures classify their colours, name them and distinguish their own tones. Researchers pointed out that Japanese artists emphasize a small number of motifs and expressions among which we can count colours (Lucken: 2001). Instead of drawing up the inventory here, let us examine our corpus focusing on the conversion of an image from the Renaissance to Shiseido advertising.
If we cannot confirm that the image is a direct reference to the portrait of Della Francesca (fig.10), we can nonetheless compare them on a chromatic level to illustrate our remarks. The striking tonal contrast is not solely the result of a difference of materials and technique. In this work we can observe the same colour range as the art of print with a desaturation, lightening the image and making the character almost diaphanous (translucent). The landscape does not have the « realism » and gravity displayed in the painting from the renaissance but it marks out coloured areas describing a simple minimalist landscape. The
garment worn by the character does not bear the same feeling of austerity and wealth as the original one – we must explain that a strict copy would have initiated a conflict with the colour code used by the social hierarchy in Japan – but displays stripes and finely coloured motifs that can recode the fact that the character is a stranger, but this time from a Japanese interpretation (point of view). Consequently, this image is clearly a reference. This kind of image is absolutely dialogic and the brand extracts from this conflict between the outside and the inside of its semiosphere, the potential to generate an excess of meaning and above all, innovation ability. Novelty no longer dwells in the transplanting of a construct (Groupe µ:1992) but in its interaction with norms of the semiosphere. Thus, the brand can challenge the norm and apply to become a centre of the semiosphere, that is, building itself a cultural core that will organise « texts » according to its own conventions.

While taking position regarding the norm and spreading out images of the West, the brand carries out an adjustment unveiling (revealing) its strategy. This remark may lead to an analysis of the brand as a living form (Fontanille: 2008), that is, an organism reinventing itself through repositioning and ruptures with its own norms.

If Shiseido relied, as a beginning, on local ideals to build an identity easily recognizable in its original environment, then the brand moved to a revamping of its values though the integration of western models and the iconization of a woman as a symbol of these values. What we showed here are the premises of a process that was followed up until now. Across history and evolution of society, the brand had to keep reinventing its graphic identity indefinitely. It illustrates well what Lotman (2001) noticed back then: fashion is proof pointing to the dynamism of social structure. He justified regular returns to tradition because it is an « extravagant mean to deny extravagance ». Fashion as a form of behaviour involves the continuous checking of what is allowed or not. Brands’ innovation thus extracts new forms of their creativity at the frontiers between cultures.

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6.2 INTERNET
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