Selling homes: the polysemy of visual marketing

Joar Skrede & Bengt Andersen

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Selling homes: the polysemy of visual marketing

Joar Skrede[a,b] and Bengt Andersen[c]

[a]Department of Heritage & Society, Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research, Oslo, Norway; [b]Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway; [c]Work Research Institute, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

In this article, we will demonstrate how a social semiotic reading of a housing advertisement campaign differs from the audience reception of it. We have talked to the campaign's producer – the Norwegian housing developer Block Watne – whose reflections are somewhat different from our own. The producer emphasises a policy of selling homes by choosing certain semiotic resources at the expense of others; however, in contrast to our academic reading, the producer does not pay particular attention to the grammar of visual design, such as composition and modality, which is understandable, because specialist language is required to do so. This is also the case for the audience, without compromising their ability to criticise the campaign in different ways. Furthermore, while we read gender roles in the campaign, the producer and the audience do not. We will demonstrate that incorporating knowledge about sign makers' intentions and audience reception of visual marketing, provides additional insight into the dynamics of communication.

Introduction

The critical assessment of marketing and its potential ideological effects is an established field of academic enquiry. Researchers analyse how representations – textual, visual or other – function as semiotic constructions that are able to generate the desired consumer behaviour. Such investigations are often carried out without inquiring about the producers' intentions and motives behind the marketing. We may of course assume that they need to make money, but the ideas leading to the selection of certain semiotic resources at the expense of others may provide additional insights (see e.g. Machin and Niblock 2008, 246–247; Abousnnouga and Machin 2011; Johnson 2011; Machin and Mayr 2012, 212). Of course, we do not need to know producers' intentions in order to analyse a semiotic representation. Neither do ideologies have to be consciously intended to be socially explained (Bhaskar 2011, 79). Knowledge of text producers' intentions is not always relevant, as van Dijk (1993, 262) has demonstrated with reference to the discussion of whether (and how) a discourse is racist or not. However, this does not mean that information about producers' ideas is irrelevant; Machin and Niblock (2008) even claim that the question of intentionality is one of the least developed in discourse studies.

In this article, we will demonstrate that the producer of a housing advertisement campaign by Block Watne does not reflect on a series of multimodal texts in the same way as we – the authors – do, by means of drawing on the methodological toolkit from social semiotics. During the research process we have interviewed a selection from the audience about their reading of the campaign. Analyses of audience reception are not very common in social semiotics, although there is no inconsistencies between the two. In an interview with Theo van Leeuwen, he comments on his career and the future of social semiotics:

> We had all sorts of academic divisions, and while I was too production oriented, audience theory was really the going thing. I thought that was a rather consumerist approach to media studies. Luckily this binary division has begun to blur a bit, but all the more important to think about practices of interpretation and their contexts and how they work. And to realise that production and interpretation use the same kind of resources, maybe in the same way, maybe differently, depending on the context. Those things are top of the agenda for me right now. (Hestbæk Andersen et al. 2015, 111)

Recently, he and his co-author have also stated that it is important to ask what semiotic choices mean and for whom:

> Further empirical research, including user interviews and participatory research, can increase our understanding of these issues and remind us that semiotic technologies, much as they constrain and influence semiotic practices, do not determine them and that the resources deployed in the production of a given text may not be identical to those deployed in its interpretation. (Ravelli and Van Leeuwen 2018, 293)

Both ethnographers and social semioticians are interested in the diversity of resources that people use, and both do so from a perspective that favours social over cognitive explanations (Dicks et al. 2011, 228). In this article, we have combined social semiotics and interview data to investigate into the dynamics of communication. This "complementarity" will allow us to ask whether our reading/interpretation could be made more "secure" by understanding more about the "customer" (Kress 2010, 245). We have used the following strategy: First, we analysed the housing advertisement campaign by means of concepts from social semiotics. Second, we interviewed the housing developer about the very same campaign. Third, and finally, we interviewed a selection of lay persons from the audience who have been exposed to the campaign, in order to map how they read the multimodal texts.[1] As we will demonstrate below, our empirical investigation has uncovered interesting differences in the intersection of producer intentions, our own "academic" reading and audience reception.

We have structured the article as follows: After a brief outline of the campaign, we describe our data and methods. Thereafter, we conduct our own social semiotic analysis of the campaign, and then compare it with Block Watne's intentions/motives and the audience reception. We will discuss how our own analysis differs from the interpretations of both Block Watne as well as the audience before concluding this study.

Background – outline of the "move out of the city" campaign by Block Watne

In 2018, the housing and suburban real-estate developer Block Watne launched a campaign that targeted urban dwellers living in the Norwegian capital of Oslo. The campaign's dominating features were two images and three multimodal texts published in several

newspapers, social media and displayed on trams, buses and underground trains. All the posters, in large print, appealed to the audience to "move out of the city". The readers and the passengers were also urged to visit Block Watne's homepage, displaying additional images and a longer text promoting the benefits of a suburban way of life. Here, we see and read about a young couple and their kids who tell us that they moved from Oslo and have a much better life in the suburbs (Block Watne n.d.). The campaign caught our scholarly interest for several reasons, one being that the stated message from the private housing developer to "move out of the city" ran counter to the official urban policy of compact development and densification, parallelling a conflict we had previously examined (Andersen and Skrede 2017). Our main purpose in this article is to scrutinise whether our social semiotic reading of the campaign differs from the audience reception and the producer's intention.

Data and methods

When pondering on the possibility of analysing this campaign (the images, reception and so on), we contacted Block Watne (the producer) and asked for permission to reproduce the images for academic publication purposes, to which its representatives positively responded. As we continued our work, it struck us that it would be very interesting to talk to the producer's representatives about their reasons for making this campaign. How did they go about selecting or producing the images they ended up using? In their view, what were the effects of the campaign? Block Watne was pleased to oblige us, and we interviewed the head of marketing and his co-worker in their offices for an hour and a half. As well as asking them questions, the representatives of Block Watne were also interested in hearing our interpretations of the images. Thus, we briefly swapped roles as interviewers and interviewees.

In addition to the producer's views and explanations, we wanted to examine how the audience interpreted the images used in the campaign. Here, we used a targeted or a non-random selection/recruitment process. As the campaign was clearly aimed at young couples/families with young children living in the city, trying to persuade them to move to the suburbs (as Block Watne told us when we interviewed them), we used two approaches. First, we had already designed a survey sent out to all the residents of two neighbouring inner-city districts in Oslo, as well as to people who had recently moved out from these two districts to more suburban areas.[2] Here, we asked the respondents if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview, and if so, to provide their contact information. Among those who said yes, we selected middle-class people within the appropriate age range (middle twenties to forties), who had young children and/or were married/living with a partner. Of course, other groups could be of relevance, but we found it particularly interesting to investigate how the audience that Block Watne wanted to communicate with interpreted the campaign. We then interviewed three individuals to test our research strategy. Slightly modifying a tried and tested interview guide previously used in more than a hundred interviews about neighbourhood and housing preferences with residents and intra-urban movers in the Oslo region, we still held on to a form that facilitated a semi-structured face-to-face interview, where the interviewee would mostly "hold the conversational floor" (Irvine, Drew, and Sainsbury 2013, 100). During the interview, and after the interviewee had completed a specific narrative topic, such as why they had moved to their current house, we introduced the topic of

Block Watne. We briefly told the interviewees about the campaign (including its title) and then asked if we could show them some images. Everyone was positive about the idea. We then put one image at a time on the table (some interviewees also picked it up to scrutinise it closely), simultaneously asking the interviewees to freely associate and tell us what they thought when they saw that particular illustration. Even though the campaign had received a lot of attention (also in the media) and sparked some controversy, none of our interviewees remembered the specific images, and few recalled having seen the campaign at all. In total, we interviewed 12 persons about the Block Watne campaign, and each interview lasted between one and a half and three hours.

Some key concepts in social semiotics

A social semiotic approach to meaning making is concerned about what people do with semiotic resources. It is a theory of language and communication based on the available choices between semiotic resources (Ledin and Machin 2020, 15). The aim is to explore the kinds of ideas, moods, attitudes, modalities, values and identities that can be signified with these resources (Abousnnouga and Machin 2011, 178). The visual is very prominent in the Block Watne campaign; however, no visual representation can denote all aspects of a case. Thus, we may ask what and who have been omitted, including people, actions, settings, backgrounds, contexts and so on. Visualisations typically add, foreground or subordinate elements, and we may ask how this affects the communicative event (Machin 2013). Another concept frequently used in social semiotics is "experiential (or metaphorical) associations," based on physical experiences of objects and representations that carry certain qualities. The meaning potential of these experiences can be used as semiotic resources (Abousnnouga and Machin 2011). To identify how images forward certain world views, we may also look for "modality cues" (Hodge and Kress 1988, 128). Modality is the perceived reality of the content of a representation; "modality is that property (or combination of properties) of a representation which is understood as construing it as more or less real" (Ravelli and Van Leeuwen 2018, 277–278). Modality is not about whether a given proposition (representation) is "true" but whether it is represented *as* true or not (Ravelli and Van Leeuwen 2018, 278). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 154–174) originally distinguished amongst eight forms of modality in images, such as contextualisation of a background (a scale ranging from fully articulated to the absence of a background). A social semiotic approach can also involve considering the meaning potential of composition, such as asking what is placed to the left, to the right, at the top and at the bottom of a multimodal representation (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 175–214). Furthermore, we may ask how the meaning potential of a semiotic representation changes if someone has established eye contact with the viewer or not (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 114–116). In our analysis of the Block Watne campaign in the next section, we will demonstrate how this toolkit can be applied to analyse multimodal communication. It is important to emphasise that this is not a formalist approach that will always produce the same and "correct" reading:

> Traditional semiotics likes to assume that the relevant meanings are frozen and fixed in the text itself, to be extracted and decoded by the analyst by reference to a coding system that is impersonal and neutral, and universal for users of the code. Social semiotics cannot assume that texts produce exactly the meanings and effects that their authors hope for: it is precisely the struggles and their uncertain outcomes that must be studied (…). (Hodge and Kress 1988, 12)

In what follows, we will attempt to illustrate this polysemy by carrying out our own social semiotic analysis of the Block Watne campaign, supplemented by interview data from the producer and the audience.

A social semiotic reading of the Block Watne housing advertisement campaign

The Block Watne campaign consisted of two images, and three multimodal texts (text and images). We had analysed these *before* talking to Block Watne and the selected informants to avoid being influenced by our informants' reading. We had analysed three of the representations (1–3) in the context of another project (Skrede and Andersen 2019). The two others (4–5) are analysed as part of this project. In the first image, viewers see two young girls with water pistols (Figure 1).

The girls are foregrounded, and they engage in effortless play after having moved out of the city. The girl to the right points at viewers with her pistol and establishes eye contact. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) make a distinction between "demand" images and "offer" images. The first type of image demands, in an imaginary way, that the viewers provide some form of response. A demand can be triggered by establishing eye contact, for instance. The lack of a demand "offers" the viewers a chance to look at the image without feeling obliged to respond (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 114–116). Demand images contribute to a stronger engagement with the person or persons who are involved than "offer" images do, in which the spectator identifies with the topic rather than with the individuals (Machin 2007, 112). This semantic choice allows viewers to create an "interpersonal" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 15) relationship with what is depicted. The viewers – including parents – then come to believe that if they also choose to move out of the city, they – and their offspring – will enjoy as much fun and

Figure 1. Suburban playfulness. © Block Watne.

playfulness as these girls do. The background is rather decontextualised; the viewers see some pine trees, which connote the Norwegian countryside, but the setting could be almost anywhere in Norway. Decontextualised backgrounds are particularly marketable because they work in many different settings, and people can read their own contexts in the images (Machin 2004). The viewers see two examples of modern architecture to the left and to the right in the background, evoking a metaphorical association with a distinguished lifestyle that has not been lost despite moving out of the city. Furthermore, the background is slightly out of focus, and viewers observe some refraction from the sunlight, creating a misty impression. We may also read the light and slightly out of focus background as suffusing the image "with a feeling of brightness and airiness" that connotes "a happy world of positive thinking favoured by contemporary corporate ideology" (Machin 2004, 320) – an impression strengthened by the girls' playfulness. Moreover, "angles" may establish social relationships that are similar to the use of eye contact or the lack of such, and these will typically be metaphorically associated with power (Machin 2007, 113). The girls are placed just above the viewers' eye level, which provides a sense of social strength. Finally, viewers may ask what has been deleted and subordinated in the picture. There is no interfering visual noise, such as deteriorated woodwork, graffiti or a mismanaged garden, which we would expect to see in an urban context. What is represented is a clean environment in which to spend one's childhood.

Many of the same traits that are found in Figure 1 apply to the second image (Figure 2). The background is decontextualised and could be almost anywhere in suburban Norway. However, in contrast to the previous image, no one looks directly at the viewer; hence, no

Figure 2. Suburban leisure. © Block Watne.

eye contact is established, which makes it an offer picture. The viewer is able to look at the scene as an observer who is not called upon for a response and can thus relate to the theme rather than with the individuals (Machin 2007, 112). The scene is composed of three family groups. Most of the participants are looking towards what is foregrounded in the middle of the image: an athletic man with a young boy on his shoulders. The sitting groups are looking towards the males, who display their strength and balance. Vertical angles are often associated with power. If people look "up" to someone, that could mean that the person is in a stronger position than they are; conversely, if the angle is lowered, the social relationship changes, and the person of focus becomes more vulnerable or even inferior to the onlookers (Machin 2007, 113–114). The image here may imply that the females are taking care of their children, while the male virtues are underscored.

In the third representation from the Block Watne campaign (Figure 3), we direct particular attention to the picture's left – right composition. While Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have identified a certain regularity in how images are composed vertically, they have also identified a horizontal regularity in visual compositions. The left is often the side of the already "given" – what the observer is assumed to know already as part of the culture (Kress 2010, 180). Correspondingly, the "new" is placed to the right. This is something that is not yet known and thus requires special attention from the viewer. The new may be contestable, while the given is presented as self-evident (Kress 2010, 181), although this does not apply to all images. However, anthropologists have found left – right symbolism in most cultures. In Western societies, people write from left to right, and in speech, they begin with what they assume is already known before proceeding to the information that they wish to impart (Machin 2007, 139). Therefore, the peculiarity of this image is that this composition is the opposite. The urbanites (the target group) view two kids (a boy and a girl) sitting on a fallen tree trunk in the woods, smiling towards the observers. Both establish eye contact with the spectators, making the photo a demand image. The "real" section – at the bottom – states: "This could have been your kids". What the viewers are witnessing is not the given or what they take for granted but what they can achieve if they move out of the city. If they get lost in the dream and move on to the right side of the picture, reality hits. The text in the "real" section states, "But it's not". What the viewers perceive is not a new untroubled life in suburbia but their present life. A possible reading is that the "reversal" of the typical left – right order leaves the observers with an unpleasant feeling, contrary to what is typically evoked in commercials – unless these are produced by health authorities that aim to prevent people from smoking, for instance. The viewers then witness a scene where a boy is screaming at a girl. There is a bunk bed, indicating that this is a nursery shared by the boy and his sister. No eye contact is made, making it an offer image, and the viewers identify with the topic rather than with the individuals (Machin 2007, 112). The boy is presented to the left in the "given" area as if the viewers are assumed to know that all boys are noisy troublemakers. His crew-cut hair style evokes a metaphorical association with rebellion. The girl is positioned below the boy and indicates uneven levels of social power. She is powerless and seeks comfort in a soft, round toy, suggesting femininity, harmlessness and innocence. Compared with Figure 2, it can be assumed that if the viewers move out of the city, they will not have to place their kids in cramped rooms such as this; they can instead relax in the peaceful and wholesome environment of suburbia.

Figure 3. A child-friendly suburbia contrasted to a cramped (urban) nursery. © Block Watne.

This tense social scene is foregrounded against a decontextualised grey background, signifying that this situation is valid everywhere except in suburbia, where the viewers can expect to enjoy the privilege of a separate nursery for each child. Conversely, the boy sitting on the fallen tree trunk has natural hair, which may invoke a metaphorical association with something organic. He is in harmony both with nature and the girl and has managed to temper his destructive masculinity in his spacious and peaceful surroundings. It can even be assumed that there is no need for siblings to quarrel in the suburbs

because they engage in gender-balanced and respectful social relationships, as demonstrated on the left side of the picture or in the "given" of suburbia. This portrayal is quite different from the girl's passive and subordinated status in the nursery. Finally, in the "real", the viewers can read the following statement: "Move out of the city and give the children more space". Below, there is a red rectangular section separated from the illustrations above by a white horizontal line. In this we can read: "Move out of the city". The font is curved, round and partly connected and connotes something "smooth", "soft", "natural" and "emotional" (Machin 2007, 99). This semiotic choice creates a sense of nostalgia. The letter "y" has a curved tail shaped as an arrow, on its way upwards towards the right (we may assume). This shape is easily associated with "movement", contrary to jagged lines that may be associated with "pain causing" (Ledin and Machin 2020, 113).

In another representation (Figure 4), the viewers see a man gardening on the left side and the same man taking care of a potted plant on the right side. He has a small garden trowel in his hand and is smiling towards the urbanites – the campaign's target group.

He makes eye contact with the viewers, which makes the image a "demand" picture. At the bottom of the scene on the left, the viewers read: "This could have been your man". In the context of the nuclear-family ideal presented elsewhere in the campaign, this statement indicates that the ideal reader is most likely a woman. What observers witness here is not the "given" – as Kress and van Leeuwen's scheme suggests – but what they may achieve by moving out of the city. If they become seduced by the suburban dream, reality hits on the right side of the image. The text states: "But it's not". What the viewers see here is not an untroubled life outside the city; it is their cramped urban life. The left – right composition may leave them with a somewhat unpleasant feeling since the "new" on the right side is a negative evaluation of their present life. The man on the right side does not establish eye contact with the viewers, who identify with the topic rather than with the individual (Machin 2007, 112). The topic is cramped living, a condition that makes gardening difficult. The man's balcony is so small that he must lean his back against the wall to allow enough space to look after his potted plant. The background shows a grid-shaped steel rail, and the floor is covered by a rib-shaped construction, also in steel, both of which conjure a metaphorical association with a prison cell or a confined room.

The situation is different on the left side, where the background is decontextualised. This is not a specific suburb, since the decontextualised background only indicates general characteristics that may be found in most green and spacious surroundings. The eye contact assures the viewers that for urbanites, it is possible to achieve this way of life, provided that they move out of the city. The man wears a baby blue shirt with rolled-up sleeves, which may elicit a metaphorical association with middle-class and business life, in contrast to the man on the right wearing an ordinary t-shirt that does not say much about his social status. The middle-class sensation to the left might appeal to (potential) middle-class customers. This may be a reasonable interpretation, inasmuch as Block Watne's products are rather expensive. If we fancied replacing the man with an ungroomed person in workwear, the meaning potential would change.

We now show a final representation from the campaign (Figure 5). On the left side, viewers see a dog running freely on a green field. Like the previous examples, the background is decontextualised and serves as a generic illustration of the untroubled suburban and life. The modality is lowered and evokes an eternal and dreamlike feeling – since this is

Figure 4. Suburban and urban gardening. © Block Watne.

Figure 5. A dog's life. © Block Watne.

a dream that the viewers may achieve by moving out of the city. The dog has a ball in its mouth, indicating that the dog and its owner are engaged in play. The dog runs at full speed above the grass, with just one paw touching the ground. International image banks have many categories of images to describe emotions, and under the heading "freedom", viewers typically find pictures where people are jumping and stretching their arms towards the sky (Machin 2004, 331). The running dog correspondingly elicits a metaphorical association with freedom. Below, in the "real" section, viewers read: "This could have been your dog". If the viewers look at the scene on the right, the situation is different. Here, the dog sits on the doorstep of an urban apartment building, staring emptily into space. It does not make eye contact, and the viewers identify with the topic regarding the boredom of being inactive and tied to the gutter – the opposite of the life the dog could have enjoyed in a suburban environment. Without specific knowledge of this building façade, it could be anywhere in the city. It is a generic setting that connotes something urban – an impression strengthened by the graffiti on the wall, inferring that such visual "pollution" is non-existent in more "natural" surroundings. This visual representation is accompanied by the text stating, "But it's not" – in case the viewers would believe that this was their dog. The left – right orientation is similar to the two previous examples, which the viewers may interpret as a semiotic choice that creates a peculiar contrast between the suburban as something good (the "given") and the urban as something bad (the "new").

Our analysis indicates that Block Watne creates a (positive) suburban dreamscape that stands in a dichotomous relationship with the (negative) urban life (see also Skrede and Andersen 2019). This purpose is achieved by choosing certain semiotic resources at the expense of others – particularly concerning the left – right orientation and the decontextualised backgrounds, as well as by means of other modality cues. They reproduce stereotypical gender roles, with passive females and active males. The nuclear family seems to be taken for granted, in contrast to the diverse household constellations in urban environments. There are no visible ethnic minorities in the images, eliciting the nostalgic interpretation that this must be a period that predates the non-Western immigration to Norway from the 1970s onwards. This immigration has markedly changed the demographic composition of a city such as Oslo, where ethnic minorities constituted about one third of its total population as of January 2018 (The Municipality of Oslo n.d.).

Block Watne's intentions behind the campaign

In the preceding section, we carried out our social semiotic reading of the Block Watne campaign and now turn to the producer's intentions when creating it. When we entered the reception area in Block Watne's offices in downtown Oslo, we saw a large screen on the wall where the home sales so far in 2019 were continuously updated, (unsurprisingly) indicating sales at the heart of the enterprise. The representatives first explained that Block Watne's business model involved purchasing properties outside the cities, regulating these areas for development and then designing and building houses to be sold. The head of marketing and his marketing consultant informed us that they tell those who live in downtown Oslo that "you can trade in your urban apartment for a single-family house in the suburbs". "So, this is what we do, we are developing suburbs outside cities". The executive told us how the family that founded the company was fascinated

by the suburban developments in the USA. When asked about the campaign and how it came about, the representatives explained that they used the idea of a house with "a small garden plot to lure people" to relocate from Oslo to the suburbs. "And it worked", they told us. It generated a lot more traffic "on our website and much activity in social media; people were really engaged". With their campaign, they were trying to cater to the "dream of people [who live in an apartment] to have a house", as well as to evoke a sense of nostalgia in order to make people remember their own suburban childhood (safe and untroubled). The market consultant said that an important context for their marketing strategies was the fact that most of those who live in Oslo have moved from the suburbs to the city. Now they wanted the Oslo residents to move out and into a house designed by Block Watne. However, since they were selling houses that were not yet built, they intentionally omitted detailed illustrations of a house's exterior as "people have to envisage what they want" (see also Andrew and Larceneux 2019, 1371).

The producer's strategy of creating a sense of nostalgia corresponds to our reading of the campaign. The producers also emphasised their desire to create a humorous and pro- vocative campaign, playing on Oslo's disadvantages. For instance, they tried to make adults with young children feel sorry that they lived in a small apartment in Oslo when they could let their children have a more spacious suburban home. In the suburbs, the families would be "comfortable both inside and outside the house" (interview, 23 April 2019). However, they had paid no particular attention to gender or the lack of ethnic diver- sity in the images – as shown in our analysis – although a few employees (with immigrant backgrounds) at Block Watne had criticised the campaign for being too "white". After having talked for a while, they asked us how we read their campaign. They were struck by our comments on the peculiar left – right order. They had never thought about com- position, but found our reflection very interesting. As the manager said, "It is a funny and cool observation; it could be one of those pattern-interrupting things that makes people stop and pay attention". We may wonder if sign producers such as Block Watne are uncon- scious about the "grammar of visual design", in fact, they still seem to use composition strategically as a semiotic resource, although the "grammar" may not be recognised or used intentionally.

Audience reception of the campaign

There are both similarities and differences between our reading and the audience recep- tion of the Block Watne campaign. We will discuss some main topics in this section.

Grammar of visual design

Almost none of our informants commented on composition, modality or other formal qualities in the images and multimodal representations. However, two informants referred to the set of images as "black and white", not regarding colour but as a metaphor to describe the dichotomous representation of the urban as bad and the suburban as good. One informant said that Figure 3 was a before-and-after image, since she had seen such structures before. It is therefore interesting that this is actually the opposite structure – an after-and-before image, due to the order of the "given" and the "new". Gen- erally, we may argue that our interest in the left-right structure is not shared by the

audience reception. However, one informant recognised the modality cue "lens flair" in Figure 1. This informant, with a background in visual design/creative industries, argued that this semiotic choice turned the image into a cliché. Apart from that, it was primarily content, not composition, modality or how images were formally constructed, that the audience commented on. They responded to the campaign in a rather "impressionistic", not systematic way (cf. Ledin and Machin 2020, 11).

Enchantment and rejection of the suburban – urban dichotomy

Although they were not explicit about how images were composed, the majority of our informants rejected the dichotomous representation of the urban condition as bad and the suburban as good. This reaction may be triggered by the left – right order (Figures 3–5), a semiotic choice that we have analysed as efficient. However, several informants missed nuances (cf. the black-and-white comment) and told us that there is also nature in and around urban areas. Correspondingly, many informants were critical of the attempt to tarnish the urban as cramped since (as they said) there were also small nurseries in suburbia, and we could find a lot of nature in the city. Two informants also argued that building large dwellings outside the city would be unsustainable because we would have to travel a lot and leave a heavy ecological footprint. Without wholly rejecting the dichotomy, these voices were critical. However, others were more invested in the suburban, most pertinently those who felt nostalgic for their own childhood and wanted to return to this state. One informant said that Block Watne was selling a dream – without criticising them for trying to sell something not "real". As mentioned, modality is not about what is or is not real but about what is represented – and what people perceive – as real (Ravelli and Van Leeuwen 2018, 294).

Compared with our analysis, we can identify some differences regarding the suburban-urban dichotomy. We have also emphasised the same dichotomous relationship between urban and nature; however, we paid more attention to how this is achieved by means of selecting certain semiotic resources, rather than either rejecting or accepting the narrative.[3] This issue pertains to the fact that we have concentrated on using tools from social semiotics in an attempt to identify "the affordances and co-articulations of semiotic modes" (Ledin and Machin 2016, 5), whilst the audience immediately relate the campaign to their own lives and biographies, considering whether or not they like it. As such, we may argue that the audience's analysis is more spontaneous and "impressionistic" than our more systematic reading (Ledin and Machin 2020, 11).

Demography and social relations

We have tried to "read" the Block Watne campaign by means of (a selection of) analytical concepts from social semiotics; however, no one is able to read images without some form of values involved. Even though the Weber doctrine argued that social science must be value-free, it nevertheless has to be value-relevant (Bhaskar 1998, 55). In our analysis, we have claimed that the campaign reproduces classic gender roles, where the females take care of the children, and the nuclear family is taken for granted. This reading is informed by our background from the social sciences, where it is a tradition to critically scrutinise whether equality exists in societies. As such, our own reading is not "distant",

but informed by perspectives from critical social science. It is also interesting to note than none of our informants mentioned gender roles in their reading of the campaign. On the other hand, a few mentioned "whiteness" and the lack of immigrants when arguing that the images did not correspond to the "real" urban demography. We also recognised that there were no immigrants, but did not view this as "right" or "wrong"; rather, we tied this fact to the belief that Block Watne wanted to impart a sense of nostalgia (a period before immigration started in the 1970s). Here, our interpretation differs from that of the audience, comparing the campaign to the present demography of Oslo with a significant number of immigrants. Regarding the lack of ethnic minorities in the illustrations, we focused more on Block Watne's possible intentions and how semiotic choices are used to this end than on relating the campaign to a "real" demography. Several informants also said that the social relations, particularly in Figure 2, were "arranged" and did not look natural. They were comparing the groups of families with "real-life" situations, which would be more mixed and not so "perfect" and well organised; however, they did not criticise that it was the nuclear family that was visualised, in contrast to our interpretation.

Interpersonal relations

As mentioned in our analysis, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) distinguish between demand and offer images. A demand image, where someone establishes eye contact, is able to create an "interpersonal" relation with the spectator. It is interesting to note than none of our informants commented on whether or not the depicted people made eye contact with the target audience. Only one informant – a woman – made a point about the man gardening outdoors (on the left side of Figure 4). She interpreted this portrayal as an attempt to inspire people – both men and women – to spice up their sex life. This reaction may be triggered by his promising gaze and the text in the "real" section: "This could have been your man". The man to the right does not make eye contact and does not demand any response. Thus, readers typically identify with the topic – cramped urban living – rather than with the individual. However, it is interesting to note that in our analysis, we interpreted the baby blue shirt with rolled-up sleeves as a semiotic choice that was meant to evoke a metaphorical association with business life and middle-class belonging. The cited informant rather read it as an expression of being in harmony with oneself, unstrained, an impression strengthened by the inviting eye contact. We – two male social scientists in our mid-forties – did not read the image in this way, which demonstrates that knowledge of who the audience comprises is important for communicators such as Block Watne.

Decontextualisation and props

We have made several comments on how the backgrounds in this campaign are decontextualised, so that the members of the audience can "read" themselves into the settings. The majority of the informants did not question that these were urban and suburban settings, which they clearly recognised as generic environments. They did not question where the settings were, since the locations could be anywhere in cities or suburbs. However, one informant noticed a trash bin on the right scene in Figure 2. Props are important in generic

images, as "research" or "science" may be demonstrated by a person in a white coat, wearing glasses and working with a test tube (Machin 2004, 322). Analogously, the trash bin on the right side of Figure 2 made the informant conclude that the scene – although portrayed in green surroundings – was close to a city or might even occur in an urban park, since it indicated the existence of some form of infrastructure. In our analysis, we have not paid special attention to this prop, since there may be trash bins in suburban areas as well, but the informant demonstrated that props would be important to consider. It is quite possible that Block Watne simply did not recognise that the trash bin was included in the image, and if they did, perhaps they would have removed it to strengthen the suburban impression of the social event taking place on the green site.

Another informant commented on the graffiti – a prop – on the wall behind the dog sitting on the stairs (Figure 5). To the informant, it connoted a run-down urban environment, which demonstrates how props works. An additional comment was made that the entrance door was "rusty", although it is difficult for us to observe that it is rusty. It is a painted wooden door with a glass panel on the upper part, and there are only some minor steel details liable to rust. However, we believe that the informant was using a metaphorical association with rust as something "shabby", lacking maintenance, possibly triggered by the sign producer's use of graffiti as a prop to associate undesirable qualities with the urban setting.

Laughter

Many of the informants started to laugh when they were presented with the images and multimodal representations. This particularly happened when they saw the multimodal texts where the dichotomy between the urban and the suburban was most explicitly spelled out, corresponding to the images with the mentioned left – right orientation (Figures 3–5). They simply did not take the campaign seriously, yet after having thought for a while, many were also provoked by the campaign (as mentioned above). As such, they did not know whether to laugh or cry. As mentioned, Block Watne said that they wanted to create a "humorous and provocative campaign, playing on Oslo's disadvantages". The audience reception demonstrates that they probably succeeded at both; however, the humour, irony and hyperbole were not equally appreciated or recognised by all interviewees. There were also several critical voices in the media, and one person on Facebook stated that "the idea that you cannot have a good childhood in an urban environment is 'fucking bullshit'" (Velle 2018). This demonstrates that an analysis of audience reception could provide additional knowledge of how people respond and react to marketing. Therefore, mapping audience reception may add insights into how marketing is received and interpreted – in combination with social semiotics or other linguistic-inspired ways of reading multimodal representations.

Conclusion

We have argued that the Block Watne campaign has reproduced a nostalgic discourse concerning traditional gender roles and ways of life. Nostalgia involves a longing for the past. The Swiss physician Johannes Hofer defined nostalgia as a "pathological longing

for a distant homeland" (Leone 2015). It is also a "nostalgia for the future" (Davies 2010) achieved by choosing certain semiotic resources at the expense of others. We may even speak of a "semiotics of nostalgia" (Leone 2015). The marketing strategy expresses a compelling vision of good family life when freed from the ills of the chaotic city; life is "restored to harmony with nature", endowed with a comfortable home, "protected by a close-knit, stable community" (Knox 2008, 20). However, this is our reading, and it only partially overlaps with the readings of those we have talked with. Social semiotics is not a machine that you can put texts into, and expect the result to come out in the other end.[4] Neither the producers nor the audience we interviewed seemed to reflect on the issue of gender roles; rather, they questioned the conventional trope that the suburbs are the appropriate environment for families with children, while the city is unsuitable. This was intentionally used by the producer and often recognised, yet opposed by the audience. The "grammar of visual design" was neither mentioned by the producer nor the audience, despite the former's interest in it after we elaborated on the left – right order in Figure 3–5. However, this does not mean that we are "right", and the producer and the audience are "wrong". What it demonstrates is that scrutinising the producer's intentions and the audience reception, by combining social semiotics and interview data, may provide additional insights into how people read images and multimodal texts. Kress suggests that the "path of complementarity" may benefit from the specialised insights of each (Dicks et al. 2011, 231; Kress 2011, 246, see also Sarkar 2019, 280; Vannini 2007). Our analysis of the Block Watne campaign is meant as a contribution in this respect.

Notes

1. By "lay persons", we simply mean individuals without particular expertise in semiotic analysis. The relation between experts and lay persons is relative; people without expert knowledge in semiotics may be experts in other academic fields (Kalleberg 2012, 43–52). No one can be an expert in more than a rather narrow area of academic enquiry (Giddens 1994, 95).
2. This is an ongoing survey that more than 700 people have completed by August 2019.
3. In an analysis of mediating persuasion in British property shows (e.g. Selling Houses), Lorenzo-Dus (2006, 757) found that the shows promoted certain lifestyles, rather than simply offering a series of arguments for and against them. This is different from Block Watne's positive and negative evaluation of rural and urban environments, respectively.
4. This argument was found in an interview with Theo van Leeuwen on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qaK2K02Lk0&list=PLGzF-dGWO-1GR67Mz7×6hA2jV0EUYU5ou&index=1.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Notes on contributors

Joar Skrede (PhD) is a sociologist/research professor. His research interests include Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies, Heritage Studies and Urban Studies.

Bengt Andersen (PhD) is an urban anthropologist/research professor. His research areas include segregation, architecture and urban development/planning.

References

Abousnnouga, Gill, and David Machin. 2011. "The Changing Spaces of War Commemoration: A Multimodal Analysis of the Discourses of British Monuments." *Social Semiotics* 21 (2): 175–196.

Andersen, Bengt, and Joar Skrede. 2017. "Planning for a Sustainable Oslo: The Challenge of Turning Urban Theory Into Practice." *Local Environment* 22 (5): 581–594. doi:10.1080/13549839.2016.1236783.

Andrew, Mark, and Fabrice Larceneux. 2019. "The Role of Emotion in a Housing Purchase: An Empirical Analysis of the Anatomy of Satisfaction from Off-Plan Apartment Purchases in France." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 51 (6): 1370–1388. doi:10.1177/0308518(18817539.

Bhaskar, Roy. 1998. *The Possibility of Naturalism. A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

Bhaskar, Roy. 2011. *Reclaiming Reality. A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy*. London: Routledge.

Block Watne. n.d. "Flytt ut av byen [Move out of the city]." Block Watne. Accessed August 7. https://www.blockwatne.no/flytt-ut-av-byen.

Davies, Jeremy. 2010. "Sustainable Nostalgia." *Memory Studies* 3 (3): 262–268.

Dicks, Bella, Rosie Flewitt, Lesley Lancaster, and Kate Pahl. 2011. "Multimodality and Ethnography: Working at the Intersection." *Qualitative Research* 11 (3): 227–237. doi:10.1177/1468794111400682.

Giddens, Anthony. 1994. *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hestbæk Andersen, Thomas, Morten Boeriis, Eva Maagerø, and Elise Seip Tønnesen. 2015. *Social Semiotics. Key Figures, New Directions*. London: Routledge.

Hodge, Bob, and Gunther Kress. 1988. *Social Semiotics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Irvine, Annie, Paul Drew, and Roy Sainsbury. 2013. "'Am I not Answering Your Questions Properly?' Clarification, Adequacy and Responsiveness in Semi-Structured Telephone and Face-to-Face Interviews." *Qualitative Research* 13 (1): 87–106. doi:10.1177/1468794112439086.

Johnson, David Cassels. 2011. "Critical Discourse Analysis and the Ethnography of Language Policy." *Critical Discourse Studies* 8 (4): 267–279.

Kalleberg, Ragnvald. 2012. "Sociologists as Public Intellectuals and Experts." *Journal of Applied Social Science* 6 (1): 43–52. doi:10.1177/1936724411435747.

Knox, P. L. 2008. *Metroburbia, USA*. Chapel Hill, NC: Rutgers.

Kress, Gunther. 2010. *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. London: Routledge.

Kress, Gunther. 2011. "'Partnerships in Research': Multimodality and Ethnography." *Qualitative Research* 11 (3): 239–260. doi:10.1177/1468794111399836.

Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. 2006. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.

Ledin, Per, and David Machin. 2016. "A Discourse–Design Approach to Multimodality: The Visual Communication of Neoliberal Management Discourse." *Social Semiotics* 26 (1): 1–18. doi:10.1080/10350330.2015.1089652.

Ledin, Per, and David Machin. 2020. *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*. 2nd ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Leone, Massimo. 2015. "Longing for the Past: A Semiotic Reading of the Role of Nostalgia in Present-Day Consumption Trends." *Social Semiotics* 25 (1): 1–15. doi:10.1080/10350330.2014.950008.

Lorenzo-Dus, Nuria. 2006. "Buying and Selling: Mediating Persuasion in British Property Shows." *Media, Culture & Society* 28 (5): 739–761. doi:10.1177/0163443706067024.

Machin, David. 2004. "Building the World's Visual Language: The Increasing Global Importance of Image Banks in Corporate Media." *Visual Communication* 3 (3): 316–336.

Machin, David. 2007. *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Machin, David. 2013. "What is Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies?" *Critical Discourse Studies* 10 (4): 347–355. doi:10.1080/17405904.2013.813770.

Machin, David, and Andrea Mayr. 2012. *How To Do Critical Discourse Analysis. A Multimodal Introduction*. London: Sage Publications.

Machin, David, and Sarah Niblock. 2008. "Branding Newspapers. Visual Texts as Social Practice." *Journalism Studies* 9 (2): 244–259.

The Municipality of Oslo. n.d. "Befolkningens landbakgrunn." The Municipality of Oslo. Accessed August 7. https://www.oslo.kommune.no/politikk-og-administrasjon/statistikk/befolkning/landbakgrunn/.

Ravelli, Louise J, and Theo Van Leeuwen. 2018. "Modality in the Digital age." *Visual Communication* 17 (3): 277–297. doi:10.1177/1470357218764436.

Sarkar, Sreela. 2019. "A Mission to Converge for Inclusion? The Smart City and the Women of Seelampur." *Media, Culture & Society* 41 (3): 278–293. doi:10.1177/0163443718810905.

Skrede, Joar, and Bengt Andersen. 2019. "A Suburban Dreamscape Outshining Urbanism: The Case of Housing Advertisements." *Space and Culture*, 1–13. doi:10.1177/1206331219850443.

van Dijk, Teun A. 1993. "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis." *Discourse & Society* 4 (2): 249–283.

Vannini, Phillip. 2007. "Social Semiotics and Fieldwork." *Qualitative Inquiry* 13 (1): 113–140. doi:10.1177/1077800406295625.

Velle, Vegard. 2018. "Sterke reaksjoner på reklamekampanje fra Block Watne som oppfordrer folk til å flytte fra byen [Strong reactions against advertisement campaign from Block Watne that encourages people to move out of the city]." Accessed March 27, 2020. https://vartoslo.no/bjornar-tretterud-block-watne-hele-oslo/sterke-reaksjoner-pa-reklamekampanje-fra-block-watne-som-oppfordrer-folk-til-a-flytte-fra-byen/176481.