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**Absence Makes the Heart Grow
Fonder: The Tory Party's
*LABOUR ISN'T WORKING***

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**Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder:
The Tory Party's *LABOUR ISN'T WORKING***

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Abstract

In 1978, the British Conservative Party hired Saatchi & Saatchi to handle their upcoming General Election publicity. The *LABOUR ISN'T WORKING* poster is the most famous poster from that campaign and, indeed, one of the most well known in British history. This paper will examine the poster's visual rhetoric in order to establish how and why this poster became so famous. The paper concert that it is not just what is present, but what is absent is equally as important.

This paper will identify and account for the visual rhetoric of this poster by using a social semiotic analysis, similar to that advocated by Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress in *Social Semiotics*.

This paper has evolved has evolved from the author's Ph.D. thesis, which is a social semiotic analysis of the Conservative Party's 1979 General Election poster and print advertising. To date, there has been no other critical analysis of the visual rhetoric of this poster.

Keywords: Political advertising, Rhetoric and Social Semiotics.

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The phrase '*absence makes the heart grow fonder*' is used to suggest that the lack of something increases the desire for it – it is commonly used to describe the passion of absent lovers. This paper examines how the semiotic device of absence is employed in the LABOUR ISN'T WORKING. poster and this is achieved by using a social semiotic method of analysis. The paper contends that it is not just what is present, but that what is absent is equally as important. This examination of the poster's visual rhetoric will establish how and why the poster became so famous and so very powerful.

I will begin with an account of the logonomic system; that is to say, the unit of social messages, which determine the production and reception of the advertisement. An understanding of the complex and ever shifting nature of the meaning at work within the relevant posters can only be understood by examining the contribution of, 'speakers and writers of other participants in semiotic activity as connecting and interacting in a variety of ways in concrete social contexts' (Hodge & Kress, 1988). Thus, an examination of the production regimes (rules constraining production) of how, why and when the Conservative Party's 1979 posters were produced aids an understanding of the shifting nature by which meaning comes into being. This secondary level of regulatory meanings constrains the functioning of the ideological complex; the ideological complex encapsulates how ideological forms are constituted by contradictory elements. It relates to how some groups force their ideology on another group, or how other groups try to resist and offer their version subversively. Thus, an ideological complex functions to allow a contestation of different versions of the world. The ideological complex, in conjunction with the reception regimes they form the logonomic system. I will then proceed with an examination of how meaning is produced, by the semiotic process at work within the ideological complex. This will be followed with an account of how the reception regimes operating within the logonomic system contribute to the production of meaning.

The Conservative Party hired Saatchi & Saatchi in the spring of 1978. This was the first instance that a British political party had hired an advertising agency to produce all of its advertising and publicity, including Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) (Rosenbaum, 1997). Thus, the posters were not produced in accordance with the production regimes of political advertising. Previously, unpaid volunteers produced political posters, and a committee composed of MPS and advertising professionals vetted the posters. (Walsh, 2001).

Saatchi & Saatchi's posters for the Conservative Party employ a visual rhetoric typical of Saatchi & Saatchi, for they employ a dominant photographic image, a short, shocking and witty headline and an extensive blank white background. This visual rhetoric was different to anything that had previously been seen in British political advertising. Therefore, the LABOUR ISN'T WORKING. poster set a new visual rhetoric for British political poster design.

As with Saatchi & Saatchi commercial campaigns, the posters in the Tory campaign featured short, punchy and witty headlines that commanded the reader's attention. The Conservatives' LABOUR ISN'T WORKING. poster first appeared in the August of 1978, when the Conservative Party anticipated an Autumn General election. It features three pieces of copy and a colour photograph of a line of many people. The headline is '*LABOUR ISN'T WORKING.*' and it spans the whole width of the poster. The letters are large, black capitals, and *sans serif*. The second line of text appears below this reads, '*UNEMPLOYMENT OFFICE.*' The third block of text

is located at the very bottom left of the poster; it is '*BRITAIN'S BETTER OFF WITH THE CONSERVATIVES.*' Again, this appeared in black capital letters, but this is the smallest piece of text, that appeared on the poster. The final signifier is a colour photograph of a line of people and this snakes along from the bottom right of the poster to the top left.

The first word that the reader encounters is '*LABOUR*' and this is a particularly loaded signifier, although, the reader does not immediately interpret its full range of meanings. The eye focuses on this immediately, because in western culture we read texts from left to right. Also, the copy is in large, capital black letters - it is the largest signifier on the page and could not be any bolder. Then the eye naturally moves to the long line of many people, as it reads from left to right. After that the '*UNEMPLOYMENT OFFICE,*' sign at the left of the poster and at the end of the bottom line of the text, the reader would have reached the bottom right, where the queue began and the reader would have followed the queue to the pay off line and stop. The pay off line is, '*BRITAIN'S BETTER OFF WITH THE CONSERVATIVES,*' at the bottom right of the poster. This piece of copy was viewed last, since it was smaller and it was in the very bottom right of the page. As a result, the signifying process would have unfolded in a particular manner.

The long snaking line of people would have denoted a queue of people and judging by their languid and bored pose, they were waiting for something. The '*UNEMPLOYMENT OFFICE,*' sign obviously denotes an unemployment agency. Therefore, if these two signifiers are considered together then the signified would be an unemployment queue, or dole queue as they are sometimes called.

The Franklin Gothic typeface is austere and official looking and, therefore, would have commanded the reader's attention. The full stop is important, because it emphasised that this was not merely words or an elliptical sentence, but that this syntagm was a highly important statement. Therefore, as a reader we are made to accept that each statement contained vast areas of significance, which we have read into the statement. Thus, it might be said that the reader was expected to perform semiotic work, but that they were treated as readers who were already familiar with the desired meaning of the copy. The syntagm achieves this by a number of other visual and rhetorical devices.

The first element that the eye automatically encounters on this poster was the word '*LABOUR.*' An analysis of its paradigmatic plane begs a dictionary definition of the word. *The New Collins Concise English Dictionary* defines '*labour*' as, '*productive work, especially physical toil done for wages;*' '*the people, class or workers involved in this, especially, as opposed to management, capital*' (William, 1998). When all of these definitions are taken into account, it is apparent that this specific signifier was intended to have at least two different signified, which work off each other. Allied to that, '*LABOUR*' is also the name of one of the main two British political parties. Hence, '*LABOUR*' appears to have three different signified. Therefore, if '*LABOUR*' refers to the act of work, the people in the poster working and the political party and government at the time, it might be said to have been an example of a verbal pun. Then, if we consider the conjunction of '*LABOUR*' with '*ISN'T*' on the syntagmatic plane, it becomes apparent that there '*ISN'T*' any work being done, the people are not performing an act of work (they are unemployed), and on the third level the Labour Government was not solving the problem. By acting on three levels, like this the meaning unfolds immediately, since it was reinforced three

times and it punches the reader not once, not twice, but thrice. As Judith Williamson (1979) writes, *'Puns provide a short cut between a product and a referent system - we do not have to 'get through' the product to the reality it connotes, because the elision in language of the product and world brings them into a frame of reference simultaneously'* [Sic]

The simplicity of this short staccato headline was strength of the poster. It is concise, and easy to understand and remember, in the same way that other famous and influential slogans before it were, such as Marx's, *'Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains,'* and Macmillan's, *'You never had it so good.'* Another visual rhetorical device that contributes to the simplicity of the LABOUR ISN'T WORKING. poster is the expansive white background. Therefore, the LABOUR ISN'T WORKING. poster set a new visual rhetoric for British political poster design. As Saatchi & Saatchi's offices were based on Charlotte Street at the time of the General Election Campaign, this new form of political visual rhetoric became known as the 'Charlotte Street Formula' within the British advertising industry.

However, the design of the LABOUR ISN'T WORKING. poster may have been simple, but it is loaded with meaning. For example, the poster denoted that the high rate of unemployment is a consequence of the Labour government, and it implies that it would be lower if the Conservatives were to gain power, but it quotes no statistics to substantiate its claim and only gives the image of a sham dole queue as evidence. Yet, the reader was invited to and in many cases did accept its message as the truth and was persuaded to vote Tory. Roland Barthes (1976) discusses how myth simplifies the *'real'* facts and gifts them an aura of unquestioned acceptance,

'Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them: simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, and it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them clarity, which is not that of a statement of fact'.

This mythicisation of the facts was in keeping with Thatcher's particular method of presenting political rhetoric, for she would reduce complicated political rhetoric to common sense values. By so doing she was able to naturalise ideology and make it disappear and seem to operate unconsciously. Thatcher recognised that it was impractical to describe the complexities of economic theories such as Keynesian economics, or Monetarism to the electorate, because they would find it uninteresting and incomprehensible. Instead, she conveyed them in a way that appealed to their experiences, morals and common sense, by presenting the national economy as a large-scale household budget. With this analogy she managed to persuade the majority to perceive themselves as self-reliant and responsible, rather than dependent on the State and by so doing offered an alternative to Socialism's *'caring society.'*

Furthermore, the phrase 'UNEMPLOYMENT OFFICE' was actually painted on a sign, or banner supported by two white poles. Obviously, there is no unemployment office in the picture; it is merely denoted by this sign. This omission was essential, for a photograph of a real unemployment agency would be less effective; as contemporary ones appear to be comfortably furnished, with thick carpets and potted plants (even if the chairs are screwed to the floor). Such an interior

would complicate the poster and made it seem less harsh and so make the sign system less effective.

In reality, an unemployment queue is usually of some fifteen people, although, they can extend beyond this number. In fact, the image of the dole queue is historically resonant; for it connotes similar images of unemployment queues, at Labour exchanges, during the interwar years. During the interwar period unemployment assumed dimensions that the country had never previously seen, for between 1921 and 1939 there were never less than 1 million unemployed and in the peak year, 1932, it rose to over 2 1/2 million --22 per cent of the working population (Burnett, 2001). Images of vast dole queues can be seen in *Picture Post* in an article entitled 'Unemployed!' (Anonymous, 1939). The iconologist, J. W. T. Mitchell (1998) has discussed how images exist in the human imagination, mutate and multiply, like viruses. Hence, '*an image is an immaterial entity that circulates across the boundaries among the media,*' and so an artefact, like the LABOUR ISN'T WORKING poster '*is not an image: It is the bearer or vehicle of an image*' and the artist/designer is not the original creator, but a 'midwife' who delivers it into the present'. In these terms, the dole queue became a code for not just unemployment, but extreme poverty, suffering and social shame. By employing this type of connotation the poster worked on the level of Barthesian myth. Jonathan Culler (1976) has described how this process works,

'Myths are connotations that appear to be denotations. This 'trick' allows myths in texts, to structure the meaning of communication without appearing to do so, they efface their own existence. Like continuity editing, myths position the audience in a specific relationship with a sign and simultaneously disguise themselves'. [Sic]

In 'Draft Recommendations for an Advertising Campaign' Saatchi & Saatchi (1979) suggested that, the Conservative Party should define itself as the Party of Opposition. It also recommended, that as the Party of Opposition the Conservatives should demonstrate that, LABOUR ISN'T WORKING., because it has the '*wrong philosophy*' and '*to ensure that the electorate is dissatisfied with the Government and considers a real alternative exists, viz: oppose and propose.*' According to Stephen Kline (1997) negative advertisements tend to focus on the emotions such as anxiety and fear. The sub-genre of negative political advertising is composed of two different forms and these are the wheel-of-emotions effect and referential advertising. The LABOUR ISN'T WORKING poster consists of both themes, as it takes the reader from being afraid of the threat of unemployment, to being reassured by the connotation that a Conservative government could bring down the rate of unemployment. It is also an example of referential advertising, for it encourages the reader to transfer, or refer positive and negative affect from emotionally laden symbols to the Labour and Conservative Parties (Kern, 1989). It is a most effective device, since once a negative statement has been made, there is doubt placed in the minds of the electorate (Kline, 1997).

The poster was so very affective, because the following Winter months became know as the Winter of Discontent in Great Britain; it was a period of extensive trade union action, strikes, food shortages, power cuts, etc. It was played out on television screens across the country, as news reports carried stories about rubbish

mounting in the streets, rats roaming the streets and patients going untreated in hospitals. They portrayed all of these problems as the fault of the Labour Government and their inability to control the Trade Unions and their strikers. This theme was also prevalent in the national newspapers. *The Sun* carried an article entitled ‘Winter of Discontent,’ on 30 April 1979. It portrayed the Labour Party as unable to co-operate with trade unions and stated that, the long, cold months of industrial chaos that brought Britain to its knees. The LABOUR ISN’T WORKING poster summed-up the problems of the then Labour government and the nation succinctly. It compressed the miserable months of the Winter of Discontent into three words and an image and suggested that the Conservative Party offered a more promising future. Indeed, Williamson (1979) discusses how advertisements seem to represent reality,

‘The catch is that signs in ads do, of course, refer to a reality – real things are represented; lifted from the materiality of our lives. But these are set up as a symbolic sign system which does not represent the real place of these things in our lives: they are re-placed, given a new place ideologically, made to mean something new ... This is why ideology is so hard to pin down or unravel: because it constantly re-interprets while only claiming to re-present reality. And in the sign’s setting itself up as a simple representation of ‘reality’, it contributes to ideology’s claim to ‘transparency’ and ‘obviousness’.’ [Sic]

However, members of the Labour Party and staunch Labour supporters formed a different reading of the text; they formed a negotiated reading of it. According to Hall, this happens when the audience negotiates their interpretation of the text with its dominant hegemonic meaning. As Hall (1986) has discussed,

‘Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemony definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules - it operates with exceptions to the rule’.

A negotiated reading of the LABOUR ISN’T WORKING. poster involves a trading process, whereby a bargaining process takes place between the text, reader and context. In this process of deciphering the poster, the electorate would have drawn on their own memories, knowledge and cultural frameworks, and this would have taken place on a conscious and unconscious level. The interpretation of the poster would have been a mental process of acceptance and rejection of meanings and associations through the force of dominant ideologies. With this process, the reader of the LABOUR ISN’T WORKING. poster would have struggled with the dominant meaning and so would have enabled personal and cultural specific meanings to transform and even overpower the producer’s intended meaning.

At first, the Labour Party decided to attack the poster, on the grounds that the models were not genuinely unemployed people. Dennis Healey said of the poster, ‘*the*

fundamental technique used by the Tories is faking' (Anonymous 1, 1978). Healey was not the only Labour MP, to have complained about the people in the queue not really being genuine members of the unemployed.

It was also claimed by the Labour Party, that to reduce the political message to a simple statement of only three words and an image was to insult the intelligence of the British electorate and debased the currency of the political debate. It was necessary for Saatchi & Saatchi to reduce the Conservative Party's unemployment policy to three words and a slogan, since the late 1970s saw the rise of a media literate audience, who were able to decode advertisements at an ever-increasing rate. It has been estimated that the average person is bombarded with two thousand messages everyday, from billboards, newspapers, magazines, television and even packaging (Skinner, 1978). Therefore, the political message had to be rapier sharp to cut through the media jungle (Saatchi, 1979).

The Labour MPs, like Denis Healey, who protested against the artificiality of the poster recognised, that the LABOUR ISN'T WORKING. poster articulated a set of emotions that chimed with the mood of the electorate. In fact, the Labour MPs did not treat the poster, like an emotive piece of advertising, but as if it were a political pamphlet, the like of which had been the custom of both the Conservative and Labour parties to distribute; they tried to break it down and criticise it, but because of the economy of words in the poster there is nothing to contest. Hence, the Labour MPs were forced to criticise the only thing they could about the poster, which was the artificiality of the queue. Therefore, the visual rhetoric of the LABOUR ISN'T WORKING. poster forced them to behave in a particular way.

The Labour Government, most interestingly, did not contest the message of the poster. Bell has suggested it was exactly because Healey and other Labour MPs were over concerned about the people in the queue, that the poster generated so very much publicity. In fact, Bell has described how he and other members of Saatchi & Saatchi could not believe how Healey appeared to be so preoccupied by the authenticity of the unemployment queue, but failed to recognise that it was the same few people, photographed over and over again. However, it was always Saatchi & Saatchi's intention to cause a media controversy to panic the Labour Government with the poster, in order to gain a political forum and give the Conservative Opposition the opportunity to persistently present their solutions and to express their dissatisfaction with the present Labour Government. Saatchi & Saatchi's (1979)'Draft Recommendation for an Advertising Campaign' stated,

'A combined attack on the Government and the electorate should start as soon as possible in fact we have been campaigning for nearly two years and should not stop. The last few weeks have created an unconstructive hiatus. Quiet becomes invisible, invisible becomes unconsidered. Noisy becomes visible. Visible becomes worth considering. The opposition and proposition should be presented consistently at all levels'.

However, the Conservative Party and Saatchi & Saatchi took quite a gamble, for the British voter may have reacted to an overkill of abuse by sympathising with its target (Anonymous 2, 1978). Of course, it is difficult to establish exactly how effective the LABOUR ISN'T WORKING. poster was, as there is no data in the

Conservative Party archives that analyses this. If there were any survey material, it would be difficult to discern its validity, for it would be polling results, or focus group results. Both research methods are not without their flaws, which makes drawing any reliable conclusions from them difficult. In the case of polling results conclusions are drawn from statistics and the statistics are not always accurate representations of the sample group. Similarly, it is difficult to know if focus groups are an accurate representation of the sample population. In both cases, it is difficult to know if the sample people are telling the truth, especially in concern of politics, since people often wish to keep their vote secret. Indeed, American Political consultants refer to political advertising as possessing the ‘Listerine Phenomenon;’ that is to say, nobody admits to being influenced by mouthwash ads, for no one wants to admit to having bad breath. Yet Listerine sells. In actuality, it can only really be seen as a media text, integrating with other media and social texts (Prescott and Nukki, 1996). As Hodge and Kress (1988) write about *The Sun*’s campaign against ‘Red Ken’ Livingston and the extreme Left of the Labour Party,

‘Hegemonic processes do not work in simple ways. But we also wish to insist that The Sun’s campaign against the left of the Labour has had its effects, together with very many other texts, from many other sources. Texts are social objects, and the production of texts involves social processes. Texts as social processes have social effects.’

The LABOUR ISN’T WORKING. poster appears to be a poster, that has become famous in its own right, for as 1999 came to a close, the advertising journal Campaign nominated it, ‘poster of the millennium’ and news of this made ITN’s News at One. In fact, Chris Powell (Chairman of BMP DDB) has spoken of the poster as, ‘the most famous poster of the twentieth century and certainly the most successful and well known political poster of all time’ (Powell, 2000). Indeed, the ‘LABOUR ISN’T WORKING.’ poster won the Gold and Grand Marketing Awards for Poster Advertising (Vinney, 1979).

The poster was so very powerful, because it is so very minimal and, therefore, there is so very little to argue against. As I have already discussed, the poster has a very concise headline, that does not substantiate the claim it makes and so, it gave the Labour Party, or any other reader, for that matter the opportunity to contest, or criticise its claim. Thus, the poster can be said to give the reader very little to negotiate, or to weigh up and it is because of this, that the poster either seems to chime with the reader’s/voter’s experiences of the world, or does not (Radio 4, 2003). The poster can be said to articulate a set of emotions, rather than giving a detailed political argument about how and why the Labour Government are failing to govern, and are responsible for the highest rate of unemployment in post-war history. As Maurice Saatchi has expressed, his agency’s political advertisements were effective, for they possessed, ‘simple logic, simple arguments, simple visual images’ (Fendley, 1995). Thus, it can be said that Saatchi & Saatchi used a specific visual rhetoric in order to address the different modes of reception.

Indeed, the fractured nature of society leads to a number of different meanings competing and contesting each other. It is precisely because meaning is unstable that texts seek to anchor down their meanings as the correct, or at least the dominant meaning. The Conservative Party’s 1979 General Election posters

and print advertisements were texts operating in a world of competing political ideologies. These texts produced by Saatchi & Saatchi functioned by recognising that there were competing political views out there, and that the voting system apparently functions by offering one vote per member of the electorate. In doing this Saatchi & Saatchi's posters deflected attention from the fact that, their point of origin was deeply rooted in capitalism and the market place. In this manner, Saatchi & Saatchi's posters sought to and indeed, did manage to establish their values as the only possible solution. This is how meanings are established on an ideological level.

It is highly debatable if this poster swayed the electorate, or the Conservative Party's marketing techniques swayed the 1979 election in their favour, since the General Election result was probably more a result of the electorate's dissatisfaction with the Winter of Discontent and the then Labour Government, or to quote a cliché, 'Governments lose elections. Oppositions win them.'

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