



Hard to believe, but Marlboro cigarettes were originally directed at the 'sophisticated market' of professional men and especially women. Marlboro 'caught on' when it plugged into the fantasies of the office worker.

sliding signifiers

Lacan's famous essay on '**The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud**' introduced the notion of 'sliding signifiers.' Because each sign has a (metaphoric) signified/representation and other, independent material and semiotic qualities, it is capable of becoming detached from its conventional signified and contributing to a new constellation of meanings. This, in effect, is how new meaning ('hapax') is born - through a 'reverse logic' where some metonymical aspect becomes the basis for an 'empty center of meaning' that Lacan identifies with the '**sinthom**'.

Zizek cites the example of the Marlboro Man. After World War II, returned veterans occupied with office jobs fantasized about their past adventures and attached these fantasies to parts of the American experience that had not yet been fully colonized by post-war society. Marlboro cigarettes, formerly a brand aimed at the 'sophisticated' (= woman) smoker, decided to draw on this fantasy projection and began to use rugged male models engaged in high-testosterone occupations.

The Marlboro Man illustrates how it's possible for a cowboy, a metonymical part of the larger ensemble of rural western landscapes, could become a 'hapax' phenomenon, a signifier pointing to something ('Marlboro Country') that did not formerly exist and still does not 'really' exist.

In general, signifiers slide until they are 'fixed' or 'quilted' (Lacan's preferred term) by a metaphoric constellation that frames and determines more or less permanent signifying relationships. With a frame of reference and defined point-of-view, the quilted metaphor *seems to be a projection* of some authoritative source (such as the mythical Marlboro Country Values). The non-existence of a real Marlboro Country works better than if there were really such a place.

Another example of the empty center of signification is Coke. Guaranteed not to quench thirst but increase it, emptied of calories and caffeine in some forms, Coke has nothing to be but 'It', as the commercials emphasize.



Hard to see, but this is really a space with two vents in it, and Melancholy (seated, right foreground) gives the clue. Picasso's friends and sympathetic critics hated 'Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon' when they first saw it, but Picasso knew it was a true 'metapainting' that marked a shift from representational space to the curved space-time of iconistic painting.

sinthom

'Sinthom' is Lacan's neologism for a 'constellation' of signifiers that circulate around an empty center. There is no 'objective' basis for meaning in the case of a sinthom, but, like the psychological 'symptom' of the individual, the sinthom supports a structural relationship among subjects, and between subjects and the object world they support through belief, action, and knowledge.

Sinthoms are common, particularly where the perceiving subject must invest heavily in some object or source of authority. The king is a king, says Pascal, because his subjects believe he is. Take away that belief, and the king has no power - indeed, he has no identity as a king. Pascal went further to show how the metonymical practice of religion was more effective than real belief, because it created around the subject a context of belief that was more reliable and effective than sheer belief would be. 'Kneel and pray,' Pascal advised. 'The rest will come later.'

'Going through the motions' may sound cynical, but most relationships, such as the famous Hegelian master-servant relationship, which permeates social relationships and structures, is based on just such actions. The participants may express cynical attitudes, claim that they are 'just going through the motions,' but in effect they are subscribing to the symbolic network effectively.

Artists use sinthoms in the form of repeated motifs that effectively guide audience attention to 'empty centers of meaning' that resist interpretation but serve important, indeed crucial, structural roles. An example would be Hitchcock's use of tracking shots to focus on some (metonymic) detail that transforms the meaning of a scene, as in the long tracking shot in 'Notorious' that ends by framing the key Alicia has stolen that will open up the secrets of her Nazi-husband's wine cellar.

Picasso's development of sinthoms, in combination with various anamorphic tricks, is notable. In 'Les

Desmoiselles d'Avignon,' a figure on the left holds a curtain back to reveal the space of representation, an iconistic reference *par excellence*. With the same flair for planting puzzles from literature, the figure on the right signals the theme of Melancholia, who was always shown seated, with elbow on knee and hand on chin. The figure at the rear looks in on the 'room' from a cosmic perspective. The 'curtain' is really the blue sky, admitting a 4th-dimensional element akin to the audience's own intrusive sagittal line. Entrance and exit to the 'embodiment' of representation duplicates the cosmos described by Macrobius, where souls enter and exit through the same 'layers' of planetary influences. In birth, the soul acquires qualities from each planet; in death the pattern must be narrated in reverse, like a palindrome, to effect a successful cleansing and final rest.

Sinthoms are different from symbols because of their 'open-ended' meaning. Instead of determinate archetypes, sinthoms involve the *act of interpretation*, including ignorance and misinterpretation along with the 'enactment of meaning' guided by a structure that insures direct, rather than indirect, realization.