

## ***In memoriam Virginia Valentine***

Virginia Valentine, who died on 30th November 2010, was an influential member of the growing international community of commercial semioticians.

Ginny, as she was known to friends and colleagues, pioneered a distinctive application of commercial semiotics in UK in the late 1980s/early 90s. Inspired by a course on the analysis of folk tales at North London Polytechnic, where she completed an English degree — and by the ferment in critical theory at that time — she put together a mix of techniques adapted from Barthes (cultural meanings and codes), Propp (structure of narrative) and Lévi-Strauss (reconciling cultural contradictions through myth) — the latter inspiring her ‘myth quadrants’, a hallmark of the Valentine approach to analysing brand communications in cultural context.

Based, nomenclature notwithstanding, more on European semiology than on the Peircean tradition, this approach owed much of its commercial success to Ginny Valentine’s drive, analytical acumen and proactive response to three key historical and methodological opportunities:

(1) The rise of brand strategy and brand management in the 1990s along with a growing appreciation of a marketing need to nurture brands’ symbolic and cultural assets.

(2) The rise of the megabrand with the globalization of markets. By presenting semiotics as primarily cultural (as opposed to the psychological approach of qualitative research direct with consumers via depth interviews and focus groups) Semiotic Solutions put in place a readily marketable set of tools in terms of application to cross-cultural projects. Against the drift of lowest-common-factor global advertising,

semiotics offered a unique ability to formulate highest common factor international communication strategies while also contributing detailed recommendations on executional opportunities and no-go areas in specific local markets

(3) The introduction of something new not covered by academic semiological/semiotic thinking. This was the identification of ‘emergent codes’ in culture, advertising, packaging, retail design etc. It was based on a notion adapted from the work of Raymond Williams — that at any point a culture (or, in this new take on applied semiotics, any area of brand communications such as car advertising, for example) is characterised by a mix of Residual (dated, recalling the past), Dominant (today’s mainstream) and Emergent (dynamic, future-oriented) codes. By using this model to map out future trajectories of change the Semiotic Solutions approach allied itself with the trends analysis much loved by brand strategy and youth culture research — and later became a successful commercial technique for understanding rapid change in emerging markets.

Many of today’s best known commercial semioticians, inside UK and globally, learned or refined their skills under Ginny Valentine’s tutelage. The methodology she evolved at Semiotic Solutions became the basis of a commercial approach widely applied in the UK through the 1990s and now internationally. Alumni of this pioneering consultancy currently running their own successful companies include Greg Rowland (*Semiotics for Brands*), Rob Thomas (*Practical Semiotics*), Gill Ereaut (*Linguistic Landscapes*) and Malcolm Evans (*Space Doctors*).<sup>1</sup>

*Malcolm Evans*

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<sup>1</sup> See also <http://www.semionaut.net/virginia-valentine/>, for an extended commemoration. A glimpse into the fascinating global arena of commercially applied semiotics please see <http://www.semionaut.net>.