

CLOSELY READING PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS AS VISUAL TEXTS:A GUIDE

Reading visual texts, such as photographs, advertisements, paintings and films, requires a different set of skills than reading printed texts. We must recognize that these texts speak another language, the language of image. When images address us, they often evoke emotion more viscerally than the printed word. However, images also communicate in a more ambiguous manner than print or speech. For example, if a woman asserts that "The happiest people are young, thin and rich"; her meaning seems clear enough! Yet if a film features slender and glamorous 20-something protagonists or a wine ad depicts a smiling group of young, thin, expensively-dressed professionals, these texts cannot be read quite so simply. The knowledge-structure of images is more complex, as we seek to "decode" their meanings without being reductive.

To read advertisements closely and critically as texts, we must first challenge a common assumption about ads within the cultural hierarchy. This popular view holds that ads, with a commercial motive, occupy a lower cultural rung and hence, embody less complexity than say, paintings or art photographs. This assumption about meaning may hold true for some ads, but not all. Upon close examination, many advertisements reveal multiple levels of meaning and employ similar symbols as "higher" art forms. The purpose of this short guide is not, however, to debate at length the categories of "high" and "low" culture, but rather to assert that ads must be examined, like other cultural texts, with critical attention and without preconception.

While we often recognize the value of taking time to analyze paintings, we commonly approach ads in a mode of speed and distraction. Advertisers plan for this in skillfully designing ads to capture readers in a perpetual state of inattention. Before analyzing an ad, think about the ways in which you typically look at advertising. How can reflecting on that experience help you understand the design of this ad? In what ways do you need to transcend that experience, to make a cognitive leap, before you can focus critical attention on the various elements of an advertisement as a visual text?

Most ads employ photographic images together with printed text. Analyzing ads mean, first of all, confronting the image-world of photography. In comparing commercial ads with other uses

of photography, we often recognize the artificiality of ad photography, which typically "perfects" reality through air-brushing and computerized magic. Yet, at the same time, we may not adequately recognize the ways in which any photography bears an affinity with the "real", and hence impacts us emotionally in a manner that other visual texts such as paintings or sculptures often do not.

In interpreting photographic images, the viewer must recognize the technical choices of the photographer, and read their meaning(s) within a given ad. While there may be some common or "preferred" meanings for specific techniques, these meanings may differ significantly in the context of a specific ad.

Advertising photographers typically pose and frame their subjects very carefully, using camera focus, angle of vision, and lighting in particular ways. After the photograph is taken, developed, and usually altered, it is positioned in the ad in interaction with printed copy.

Here are some examples of common interpretations of photographic techniques. Close-ups and extreme close-up shots are often read as inviting the viewer to gaze at the subject in an intimate or critical way. Depending upon the image (and the product being marketed), an extreme close-up may envelop the viewer in a sense of romanticized or sexualized intimacy with a person in the ad, or may encourage visual surveillance of "beauty flaws". Long shots may prioritize the geographical environment or product over individuals. Particular angles of vision may focus attention or highlight certain body parts or aspects of a product; distorting or wide-angle lenses tend to create a sense of uncertainty or humor. Brighter lighting connotes optimism, and can be associated with "clean outdoor fun", while softer lighting creates a romantic aura. The play of light and shadow may evoke a sense of mystery or highlight particular visual aspects of a given ad. Tinting photographs (or shooting with colored filters) may add to the visual meaning; gold is often associated with nostalgia, affluence or the West, blue with serenity, masculinity, outdoors or the sea, pink with innocence, romance or femininity. It is critical to remember that aspects of photography such as focus, angle and lighting, cannot be decoded mechanically, but need to be read flexibly within the context of a given ad.

Selecting Ads for Analysis:

1. What magazines did you select to survey ads ? How did you come to select these ?

2. Would you describe yourself as having a relationship to any or all of these magazines as a subscriber, regular reader or occasional reader ?

3. What patterns did you find in your survey of ads ?

4. Which pattern(s) engaged you most deeply ? Why ?

5. Why did you select this ad ? Why does it best exemplify this pattern ?

Inside the Ad

Record your immediate response to this ad

1. What's this ad about ?

2.How do you respond emotionally to this ad ?

3.What product(s) or product line is/are being sold ? How do you know, from looking at the ad ? How long does it take for you to recognize what exactly is being marketed ?

4.What character(s) and material goods appear in this ad ?

5. What is the time frame and environment of the ad ?

6.What story does this ad seem to tell/suggest (if any ?)

7. What do you imagine the characters in the ad are saying either to themselves (in interior monologue) or to one another ?

8. How is the camera looking at its subjects ? How is the camera inviting you to look at them ? How would you describe the photographic techniques used in the ad (e.g. close-up, out- of- focus, tinted ) ? How do you interpret these photographic choices ?

9. Within the ad, how are characters framed, posed and positioned?

In relation to the reader ?

In relation to each other ?

In relation to their physical environment ?

In relation to the product ?

10. Note the gender, race/ethnicity, age, occupation, status of persons pictured in the ad.

How do you interpret their poses and modes of positioning (what meaning does, e.g., a male hand on a female shoulder suggest ?)

11. What colors dominate this ad ? How do you read the use of color in this ad ?

12. Does this ad draw upon any popular or well-known cultural symbols or icons (e.g. Michael Jordan, Mona Lisa) ? How ? What does this ad assume about its readers ?

13. Does this ad engage with any public debates on social issues or historical events ? What does this ad assume about its readers ?

14. What emotional and cognitive associations are being made between the product and the images represented ?

15. What is/are the meanings of this ad ?