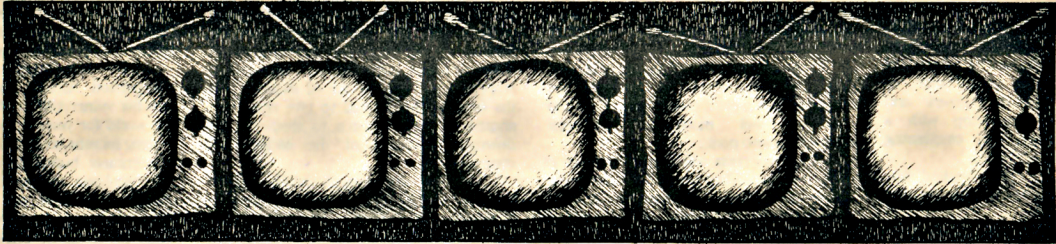


EYE LITERACY



Rutherford

Have you noticed just how often commercials for automobiles are filmed in natural and idyllic surroundings - rather than in the midst of the urban congestion and degradation they cause? A carefully selected background or 'set' assists the sponsor in making subtle (but, to our visually-literate unconscious, absolutely unmistakable) claims about the power of the product or the authority of its official spokesmodel.

The setting in which an advertisement is filmed can symbolize or suggest: the comfort and security offered by time-honored tradition (neoclassical architecture, pillars, or rich wood paneling); compassionate scientific credibility (a woman wearing a white lab coat in a doctor's office or chemistry lab); attainable material wealth, status and success (a fashionably decorated and expensively furnished home, office or restaurant interior); and even spirituality (pastoral scenes, tropical islands, or primeval forest).

The visual images all around us have an enormous power to shape our opinions and form our 'picture of the world': a power which extends from their direct and unhindered access to an ancient 'pre-verbal' level of consciousness, that part of our mind which 'thinks in pictures' and which is the source of dreams, insights and emotional or intuitive reasoning. This is why our response to great art is primarily emotional. Recorded and processed in a kind of 'pictorial shorthand', our (largely unconscious) assumptions determine the way we interpret what we see. By constructing a narrative in this language of intuitively understood visual symbols, an advertising or public relations campaign can similarly influence our response to The Product, The Politician, or The Right Priorities. To our highly impressionable and visually-literate uncon-

"The effect of making men think in accordance with dogmas, perhaps in the form of certain graphic propositions, will be very peculiar. I am not thinking of these dogmas as determining men's opinions but rather as completely controlling the expression of all opinions. People will live under an absolute, palpable tyranny, though without being able to say they are not free."
(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 1937)

scious, seeing really is believing.

A society under immediate physical threat experiences "Media Control" as an absence of messages. But, in our society, constantly overwhelmed by media messages and believing ourselves safe from the threat of tyranny and oppression, the corporate or political advertiser has access to a power of persuasion far greater than that of verbal language and well beyond the reach of any truth-in-advertising legislation. This potential to manage and limit information - and to thereby effectively control the parameters of public debate - is as alarming as it is enormous.

It is in describing something that we decide what it is and what it means. Illustrating everything from the (supposedly objective) nightly news to the (obviously subjective) commercial and political advertisement, carefully crafted images are able to bypass our critical filters to shape our view of the world. To defend ourselves against the constant barrage of mindless consumer propaganda, we must develop a 'functional literacy' in the lexicon of visual symbols and psychological 'hooks' used to persuade us. Some of the most common examples include: the use of warm (yellow-orange) lighting, reminiscent of firelight and Home (warm, safe and familiar); low camera angles, making the product (or its pseudo-expert) appear important, powerful and authoritative by seeming to tower over the viewer; slow-motion 'panning' over the product, evocative of the sensual, loving caress and implying that the product is deserving of our unrestrained affection; back-lighting of actors to create silhouettes, into whose empty forms we are known to unconsciously project ourselves (and allowing the producers to, in effect, direct

our actions within the scene); and the use of rapid, pulsating edits which reflect, or mimic, the highly idealized tempo of a contemporary Western 'lifestyle' (suggesting that the product is 'in tune' with the conflicting demands of wife, mother, supershopper, professional) and helping us to project an image of success and competence.

Even the colours in an advertisement are selected for their ability to imply meaning and to evoke a predictable emotional response from the audience: Red suggests vitality, passion and sexual energy; Yellow represents youth, hope and good cheer; Green, in addition to fertility, health and growth also means environmentalism; Blue is associated with serenity and rest, the color of the sky - transcendental and spiritual (statues of the Virgin Mary are traditionally coloured Blue).

In addition to the obvious symbolic value of the products themselves (jeans for youth, antiperspirant for competence, cars for independence and sexual power), ordinary objects, too, are used as symbols in advertising; houses with peaked roofs (for Home, comfort and security); open doors (for future or pending opportunities); windows (for insight and premonition); skies and clouds (for hopes, aspirations and unlimited potential); office towers viewed from below (for a faceless and impersonal bureaucracy); long shadows (for impending danger); and animals (dogs for loyalty and companionship, cats for refined and discriminating tastes, wild horses for power and stamina, birds for grace and freedom). The list of examples goes on. The creators of the most successful advertising and public relations material expertly mix and employ these and many other well-

researched psychological techniques in order to promote an emotional dependence on products.

Throughout history we find examples of pictures and symbols used to shape our beliefs and influence our behavior in the interests of a ruling elite. In the Middle Ages, the Church and its teachings were illuminated (in both senses of the word) by visions in stained glass. Like the celebrity endorsements of a later day, medieval icons of saints and martyrs, princes and prophets testified eloquently on behalf of their corporate sponsors. In this century, Josef Goebbels and the powerful Nazi propaganda machine demonstrated just how effectively the images in art, film, spectacle and popular entertainment could be used to influence public attitudes and so advance a partisan political agenda: a lesson in the persuasive power of the visual media not lost on those who shape the content of news and advertising in the interests of a corporate sponsor - and whose motives we have good reason to question.

Until we are prepared to acknowledge and examine the extent to which the carefully crafted images promoting 'The Product, The Politician, or The Right Priorities' have already conditioned our emotional responses and habits of thought, we will continue to see ourselves and the world in accordance with the commercial agenda of the corporate sponsor: a source of information whose motives may not be in our own best interest. By paying closer attention to our emotional responses to the countless commercial images we see around us, we will also gain an invaluable insight into the meanings we have assigned, usually unconsciously, to visual symbols: allowing us a greater understanding of ourselves through an awareness of the fundamental beliefs and assumptions we live by and which are the source of our (supposedly conscious and rational) decisions.

Rutherford is a Toronto writer, photographer and teacher of visual art.

Liu Jian
the Italian tale

March 15 through April 1

Louise Robert
new works

April 5 through April 22

CHRISTOPHER CUTTS GALLERY

23 Morrow Avenue, Toronto, Canada M6R 2H9 (416) 532-5566