

THE (CONSUMER) VISION THING

"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

by Rutherford

In the Middle Ages, the Church and its teachings were illuminated (in both senses of the word) by visions in stained glass. With access to the Holy Bible effectively restricted to the clergy, the supremacy of the Church and the penalty for disobedience (called Sin) were vividly proclaimed in an allegory of Gothic glass and stone. Like the celebrity endorsements of a later day, a parade of heroic icons - saints, martyrs, princes, and prophets - testified eloquently on behalf of their sponsor. Looming from above like the apparitions from some dream or divine revelation, they demanded our submission to the corporate authority.

Speaking directly to the superstitious and highly impressionable imaginations of a mostly illiterate congregation, these images exerted a profound influence over the medi-

eval world view. By creating stylized and graphic depictions of the previously abstract notions of Heaven and Hell, the myth-making power of the visual language was discovered to be a most useful means to impress the public - and maintain absolute social control.

Reinforced by the haunting faces of the damned, we imagined our immortal souls suspended precariously between salvation and exquisite torment. The Holy Roman Church, like a candle in the darkness, was our only protection. By painting a picture of reality to suit its own political interests, the Church could ensure that the horrors and injustices of the feudal system (as well as the Church's direct benefit from them), came to be accepted as part of a divinely inspired (and therefore unquestionable) social order. These horrors became a

sacred burden to be happily, or at least passively, endured in the desperate hope of securing a Church-sponsored admission to paradise.

Thus confirmed and unassailable in its role as self-appointed interpreter of God's will, the Catholic Church was able to dictate and enforce clear limits on 'dangerous ideas' and open discourse. It set restrictions modern society would find wholly unacceptable. But the power of visual media to preach the gospel and shape public opinion has lost nothing in more than a thousand years. Today, society's interpreter is television.

All through the ages, great works of art - religious and secular - have moved us by appealing, not to our reason, but to our imagination, the part of the mind which orders reality and assigns meaning to our indi-

vidual experience through visual symbols. Psychological studies have shown that we respond to the countless images around us by making associations - unconsciously - with fragments from the storehouse of our memory or imagination. The interpretation or 'meaning' which we then find in the image is, of course, wholly subjective and is very often simply a reflection of our own strongly felt (and consciously repressed) emotional needs. Unlike verbal language, these images have no definite 'objective' meaning. Rather, their meaning depends entirely upon the context in which they are seen and on the motives and values imposed by our own culture or personal bias. Their enormous power to influence our conception of the world (and our behavior in it) extends from their direct and unhindered access to the pre-verbal level of the mind - the place where our ideas, impressions, and insights, originally conceived in the form of mental images, coalesce into core beliefs about ourselves and the world.

The specific visual images chosen to illustrate every thing from the (supposedly objective) nightly news to the (obviously subjective) commercial messages constitute an opportunity for the media and its sponsors to shape the meaning of the events they describe. While words speak to the logical Left side, it is the other, the highly impressionable Right hemisphere of the brain, that is the target of advertising and propaganda. Whispering, serpent-like into a sleeping ear, the emotionally resonant visual symbol allows the sponsor to make claims and draw inferences with a power of persuasion much greater than that of verbal language - and well beyond the reach of any truth-in-advertising legislation.

With an increasing number of people now relying on the visual media for an explanation of the world, the obvious potential for a sponsor to influence, limit, and thereby effectively control informed

public debate is as alarming as it is enormous.

A great deal of media attention has been given to discussing the widespread problem of illiteracy - including its personal, social and economic costs to modern society. Yet, an equally important subject has been largely ignored: illiteracy in the Visual Media and its well-established role in maintaining effective

social control. Of course, most of us have little or no difficulty in recognizing (and rejecting) the most obvious attempts to manipulate us with words, but when confronted by the very same lies or propaganda expressed visually, we are more likely to accept those claims without protest or hesitation. Our subconscious absorbs meaning from visual symbols, but our conscious



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cannot check the onslaught of information. In their frightfully effective use of film and other media, the Nazis demonstrated very clearly the potential of images to manipulate public opinion: a lesson obviously not wasted on those who today produce news and advertising for the commercial media.

While ignorance of written language does severely limit the scope and nature of our relationship with the outside world, our inability to recognize ideas, inferences and especially conclusions when expressed visually, does not insulate us from their content - but only ensures that the sponsors' subtly encoded (and value-laden) messages will go unchallenged by critical thought. It is this potential of visual language about which Wittgenstein warns us: its power to restrict, not only what we know, but our ability to recognize its enormous influence over the forum of public debate. And until we are prepared to acknowledge and understand the extent to which these images have already shaped our picture of the world, we will continue to see ourselves from the carefully contrived perspective of the corporate sponsor.

Central to all Western religions has long been the belief that grace, validation, and the solution to all problems is to be found outside the Self. In times past, we looked to the gods and later to Christ and the Church; but, having overthrown these arbiters of meaning as the source of our salvation, we nevertheless retain the need for the important function they served. So it is that we now seek to establish and demonstrate our individual worth through the acquisition of Things - and reverently look to them for redemption and remedy. Always looking for an easy solution to our personal problems, we are encouraged to buy products in an attempt to assert our individuality, prove our independence, announce our achievements, or reinforce our flagging self-confidence.

Corporate communications and

advertising encourages us to believe that all of our problems, regardless of their nature, are simply a lack of Some Thing. Accordingly, all achievement is defined by the acquisition of the Right Things. If you doubt it, just ask yourself why you want that particular car; chances are that your preference has more to do with the image you want to adopt and project than it does with any mundane practical consid-

We don't buy cars, we buy Freedom. And that's not deoderant, it's an Aura of Competence.

erations. It's not beer we're buying, it's Friends and Companionship; not long-distance we're paying for, but Intimacy; and not colour film, but rose-coloured memories of Happy Family Times.

How often have we smiled indulgently at tales of so-called primitive cultures who, frightened by the ominous spectacle of a solar eclipse, throw spears at the monsters who devour the sun? Silly natives... But are we really so different? So superior? When, alarmed by our reflection in the commercial media, we react instinctively: throwing an endless stream of consumer products at our own Shadow, trying to pacify our lonely and wounded inner child with presents. So constant are the reminders of our inadequacies and so successfully have we been conditioned to look to mass-produced solutions, that we're willing to spend the Earth in a desperate bid to buy a better Self.

While there is no denying the broad and likely appeal of ready-made solutions to all life's problems, they are not without their risk. If we continue to believe we can establish and prove our value as human beings through the magical power of The Product, we will be forced to accept the media-sponsored image of ourselves as perpetually incomplete and inferior. When the image

of a problem's solution is enough, when appearance is indistinguishable from reality, then the consumer becomes the ultimate 'product' of modern consumerism.

Many contemporary advertisements, for everything from cars to personal care products, base their appeal not on the product's quality, or its relative merit over 'another leading brand', but on its ability to procure the

appropriate human companion - in the desired mood and at the desired hour. Having been successfully conditioned to look to objects to meet all of our needs, it was inevitable I suppose, that we should begin to look at people the same way: to define and assess our relationships with others in terms of their ability to meet our need for friendship, comfort, status, or sex. The Personal classified sections of any major daily will attest to just how effective this campaign has been: we now shop for people.

Another unfortunate (if wholly predictable) result of our society's mass conversion to the modern Church of the Mass Consumer has been the gradual realignment of our notions of happiness, success and worthiness to conform to the corporate ideology. Once the experience of personal fulfillment was individually defined. Now, these sensations are skillfully packaged and successfully marketed as gifts to be bestowed by the Almighty Product — the Holy Bringer of the Instant Solution. Keenly aware of our anxieties about our appearance, our popularity and our hope for finding true love, corporate advertising (and its handmaiden, market research) has developed a frightfully effective array of techniques to arouse our fears and to suggest, through emo-

tionally charged words and images, that the remedy to our ills is to be found in mass-produced consumer products. We don't buy cars, we buy Freedom. And that's not deodorant, it's an Aura of Competence.

The most persuasive advertising campaigns encourage us to project our insecurities onto the characters in their commercials and to invest ourselves in their fate. They have the ability to drive our fears and anxieties to near fever pitch, portraying us as having somehow lost, or as about to lose, our happiness, health, status, or security. In each case, this impending crisis is obviously due to our lack of some essential quality. It's ironic that what's missing is the very self-confidence we are so effectively denied by our unquestioning dependance on external 'product' solutions.

Confronted by the frighteningly accurate reflection of our most secret fears - validated and confirmed by an 'objective' media - we see in the character's eventual redemption the possible means to our own. Even prepared to accept that advertising stretches the truth 'just a little', we nevertheless reason that, if even half of what is claimed can be believed, then surely this product will offer some relief... and when our most recent purchase fails to meet our exaggerated expectations, we are conditioned to see that failure as further evidence of our own inadequacy: "I must be really pathetic if even this doesn't help..." and quickly seek relief in some new thing. Desperate for an available remedy, we're an easy target for the adman's pitch when the sponsor presents The Product As Ideal Solution to all of the personal inadequacies so effectively brought to our anguished attention through the enormous subliminal power of visual language.

Do you sometimes wonder if the sponsors are aware of the widespread frustration and anxiety we feel when the promised rewards fail to materialize? Sure they are. And to prove it, they'll gladly sell you just the thing to balm that nasty feeling of failure and inferiority. The message is certainly clear enough: we can be made whole through the miraculous power of The Product.

That mass-produced products will never succeed in satisfying what are primarily psychological needs ought to be obvious. But it's not obvious - nor is it intended to be. The most effective advertising (for everything from breath-mints to automobiles) also operates on a subconscious level. Well-designed to evoke an emotional rather than logical response, advertisements (and the values they intend to impart) are able to safely bypass the critical faculty of their target audience. Like the hypnotist at the carnival who can slip the watch from your wrist and return it to you - only to take it again, advertisers remain confident that you'll never catch on.

Defending ourselves against this onslaught means learning to recognize the many visual symbols used to manipulate our desires and sell us things. Among the most common are: 'warm' lighting (reminiscent of

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LIVE BAIT THEATRE

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The Mystery of Irma Vep



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a hysterically funny
and frightening
tour-de-force for two
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Salt-Water Moon

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a young couple spends a
moonlit night on the
front porch and falls
under the magical spell
of the moon and stars
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Starring Kiersten Tough
and Martin Burt
August 4 - 21



FLUX



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activist... a comedy about
communication
Directed by Mary Vingoe
Starring Lorne Pardy
and Randy Follett
A co-production with
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Tickets	Season Passes
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Live Bait, c/o Mt. A. U., Sackville, NB, E0A 3C0

The (consumer) Vision Thing
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firelight) which is used to create an impression of Home: warm, safe and familiar; a lower-than-eye-level camera angle, making the product (or its pseudo-expert) appear important, powerful and authoritative; slow motion 'panning' over the product, evocative of the sensual, loving caress; silhouettes, into whose empty outline we are known to project ourselves - allowing the producers to (in effect) direct our actions and behaviour within the scene; and the use of sudden, pulsating editing which mimics the idealized rhythm of a contemporary lifestyle, suggesting that the product is 'in tune' with the demands of our daily life: that it is able to keep pace with, complement, and reflect our desired image of 'super-competence'.

Filming against a carefully selected background is also a very effective and common technique. Various settings are used to make subtle, but unmistakable, allusions to the symbols of: security and time-honoured tradition (wood paneling); demonstrable material success (a beautifully furnished home of office interior); scientific respectability (chemistry lab and white lab coat); or even, in an occasional burst of cynical irony: spiritual purity and non-materialism (pastoral scenes, tropical islands, or primeval forest). Have you ever noticed how often automobile advertisements are filmed in rural or idyllic surroundings - rather than in the midst of the urban congestion and degradation they cause?

In addition, there are also numerous objects which convey subliminal meaning: houses (for comfort and security); doors (open or closed for opportunities won or lost); windows (for insight and illumination); skies and clouds (for hopes, aspirations and unlimited potential); mountain peaks (for a major achievement); the open road (for progress, growth, and the future); office towers (for a faceless and impersonal bureaucracy); and animals (dogs for loyalty,

cats for refined and discriminating tastes, wild horses for power and freedom.) The list goes on... Advertising has become very adept at mixing and employing these and other symbols in order to send the desired message to our highly visually literate and impressionable subconscious.

The most effective advertising actually relies on the anguished imagination of the target audience to assemble and complete the crafted image. It encourages us to imagine the hero/ine we could be... if only we buy the right product. It is therefore ideally suited to evoke our personal demons and to 'push all the right buttons'. There is real genius at work here; you've got to hand it to them (...it's not as if they give you a choice.) What a frightfully effective way to shift inventory!

As the primary source of the information used to provoke and manipulate our desires, the market research industry has done very well out of the current recession. Desperate to maintain and increase their market share, companies of all sizes continue to invest millions on the search for the psychological key to consumers' wallets. And, these keys are made increasingly accessible to sponsors when consumers participate in focus group discussions, and answer questionnaires on product preferences. We permit a bizarre kind of emotional blackmail in which, for a nominal fee, the victim-to-be willingly contributes to the design of an ever-more-effective subliminal appeal to the most compelling of our emotional needs.

One of the most successful strategies recently identified by the

market research industry assists companies in appearing to be responsive to the growing demand for greater corporate responsibility towards waste, over-packaging and pollution. Capitalizing on the public's growing awareness of global environmental problems, market research has helped to create and maintain a secure market for ever more products - using GREEN, RECYCLABLE, and ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY in order to foster the notion of guilt-free consumption. Like NEW AND IMPROVED and ALL-NATURAL before them, such labels are only the latest in a long series of vacuous public relations gimmicks with no meaning beyond their value in engineering the all-important 'positive product profile'.

A particularly disturbing element of this strategy is the subtle, yet unmistakable suggestion that the solution to our environmental crisis lies in simply buying more of the right things. The message is that by



Rutherford

taking responsibility for the environment we will be required to make no more of a sacrifice (in terms of our continued consumption of things) than we are currently expected to make in dealing with any of our personal problems. To the slogan "Consume and Be Happy" we can now add "Consume and Save the Earth".

"Buy only what you need" is the

standard response of the environmental movement, and it's good advice - as far as it goes. But how can I tell which of my needs are genuine and material and which are psychological? It's not easy to recognize which of our purchases are made to compensate for something deemed missing in our lives, especially when our confusion can be so easily and profitably exploited by advertising and the commercial media.

With its continued growth and survival dependant on our unquestioning and absolute faith in the status quo and the prospect of an instant solution, an economy based on ever-increasing consumption actively discourages its customers from participating fully as citizens by substituting the token gesture (of buying and voting) for a more meaningful involvement with our Selves and our community.

It comes as no surprise that political candidates are also 'sold like soap'. After all, it is the very

Willingly Disenfranchised. Longing for simple answers, we now seek someone capable of (at least promising) an easy way out and all too often opt for a candidate whose manner effectively discourages us from examining too closely the specific measure they intend to impose or whose interests they clearly intend to serve. Like the pharmaceutical industry's support for the 'YES' side in Canada's recent referendum, these 'solutions' eventually reveal the economic and political agenda of its designers - and to whom our candidate will ultimately offer allegiance for the success of his or her campaign.

With the collapse of constructive and informed public debate, it's only natural that we should feel increasingly alienated from our 'democracy' and frustrated by a sense of utter powerlessness. Believing ourselves unable to do anything but choose between competing (but essentially identical) political ideologies, we merely vote (or not vote) and walk

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same emotional needs which are so effectively exploited in their campaigns - and by the exact same techniques. This was the reason for Reagan's success; appealing to our already well-established dependance on the shopper's solution, his media persona was carefully constructed to present him as Product/Father Knows Best - and in doing so created a whole new political class: The

away. We prefer instead to invest our energies in the pursuit, however futile, of more tangible and immediate rewards - leaving the development and execution of important social policy to the very same 'experts' who are the authors (and prime beneficiaries) of our alienation.

If we continue to allow corporations to set the public agenda and

restrict debate, we will rapidly lose sight - not only of any alternative goals for public policy, but of our ultimate responsibility for directing that debate. Allowing the powerful to get away with murder, we amuse/abuse ourselves with stupid pleasures which will certainly cost us the Earth as we continue to feed finite resources to the insatiable maw of corporate greed and human insecurity.

If we are to find any measure of real contentment or self-acceptance, our ideals and values must evolve from our direct personal contact with the world - not simply adopted whole(sale) from a source whose motives we have good reason to question. To reclaim our independence and defend our impressionable 'image' of the world, we must recognize and confront the corporate agenda and develop a 'functional literacy' in the visual language of symbols. We can begin by studying all commercially produced images - regardless of their apparent objectivity - with the same care with which we (should) read a manufacturer's warrantee. Paying special attention to our subjective impressions of its message, we can learn to decode the various symbols and techniques used to manipulate us and thereby rob them of a significant portion of their otherwise formidable suggestive power.

If undertaken with honesty, perseverance, quiet reflection, and a little humility, such an exercise will also provide us with invaluable insight into our own preconceptions (many of them fostered, if not wholly created by, the commercial media.) As well, we may better understand the specific meanings with which we imbue visual symbols - thus allowing us more complete awareness of the values and assumptions by which we live, and through which we make our (supposedly conscious) decisions. **■**

Rutherford designs communications material for non-profit organizations, and is a lecturer in visual art.

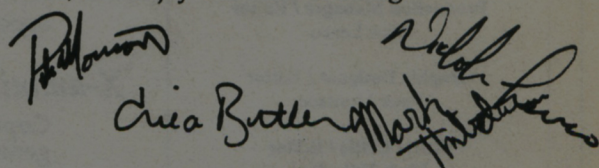
W elcome to this, the third edition of FREE Magazine. During the course of putting together this issue we realized that the views represented within its pages are, to say the least, varied. From Stompin' Tom's unequivocal 'love it or leave it' to Andrew Sneddon's plea for a national movement directed towards growth and change, the opinions presented run the gamut. And that's just the way we like it.

We feel that variety and an openness to unorthodox ideas are the lifeblood of our publication, and there is nothing that is less appealing to our sensibilities than the prospect of becoming an invitation-only party, presenting to the reader only those views with which we agree. That would be

unfair to the many writers out there, with undoubtedly varied political and philosophical positions, who have work that deserves to be published. And it would be boring, too.

And so, FREE Magazine's editorial slot once again becomes a call to arms. If you are a writer and want to see your work in print, send it our way. We promise not to go behind your back and sell it to some big American publishers. Got a gripe? Put pen to paper and send us an angry letter. Feeling particularly inspired? Write a short story and mail it off. We'd like to see your stuff.

For the time being, however, kick back, relax, and enjoy our latest offering.



To the Desks of FREE

July 26, 1993

Editors:

I made it through the first two essays in your July 16 issue, and was disgusted.

Really — those articles whine about American culture in a very dishonest manner. "Bushian" title both (editorially sloppy), and both try to mask "the real culprit" under the cant terms of "North America" and "capitalism." If you are really "FREE," you'd call a spade a spade and let the cards fall as they may.

Before you, the editors, or your writers publish something on American culture and its influence, please read Frye's (a Canadian's) *Essays On Canadian Culture*, where he states that there is nothing American in the debasing of standards — it is simply a matter of human inertia.

You, the editors, as well as Morrison and Rutherford, are, ironically, puppets of the master you condone. Morrison laments the passing of the Golden Age, and

longs for the preservation of a romantic conception of the state. His position dovetails neatly with one of the driving forces of America, i.e., we can go back to the past, the Golden Age. Rutherford's article is ironic in that he uses a standard Marxian analysis that condemns both past and present. This theme was Mark Twain's simplistic *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. (I should add that Rutherford's analogy between medieval stained glass and modern media is flawed — John Ruskin's *Stones of Venice* for the humanistic angle.)

Anyway, be honest and be smart. I think articles on American "culture" are even more boring than American "culture" itself.

Sincerely,

A New Yorker
F. Chirico
Fredericton, N.B.

To: FreeMagazine@Mta.ca

Wed, 28 of July 1993 13:23:51 EST

Wow! What a discovery! Your FreeMagazine has certainly aroused my interest, especially after reading that article by D. J. Rutherford. I MUST have one copy of it for each of my first year philosophy students! Any chance of getting fifty copies for early September? I would like to open the first-year course with a combination of his article and Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. If you can't send 50 complimentary copies of the Magazine, could I have your permission to xerox it for class distribution???

Also, if D. J. R. were ever in Fredericton I would love to have him speak to my class! In any case, I'll be taking out a trial subscription. Wishing you every success,

Sincerely,

Leo C. Ferrari
Philosophy Dept.
St. Thomas University
Fredericton, N.B.