

# The Op-Ed Page



By Rutherford  
The Toronto Star

In the recent (and largely justifiable) complaints of business executives, academics and journalists about the decline of literacy in our society, a related issue of equal importance has been overlooked: illiteracy in the visual media.

While ignorance of the written language severely limits our ability to cope with the world, an inability to recognize ideas when expressed visually means that their subtle insinuations will go unchallenged by critical thought.

Confronted by platitudes, exaggerations or blatant lies in written or verbal language, most of us can still recognize false conclusions. But when subjected to the equivalent in visual design, we often succumb without protest.

Why this happens is a question that is central to the future of public debate and democracy. A society largely ignorant of how the dominant form of communication works is a society susceptible to a kind of subtle totalitarianism.

Furthermore, when television's commercial (and highly subjective) message is mixed with (supposedly objective) broadcast journalism, the juxtaposition is doubly frightening. Horrific images are interwoven with comforting ones — a report on an earthquake is followed by a feel-good commercial. Tragedy and farce are placed on the same level, desensitizing the viewer and rewarding the escapist impulse in all of us.

The unparalleled effectiveness of the visual medium is its capacity to broadcast directly to the pre-verbal level of the mind through the use of emotionally-charged images. Every image arouses personal associations from the storehouse of

emotional needs.

In advertising, the primary appeal of the product usually has little to do with its relative merit, but rather with our desire to see ourselves, or to be seen by others, as possessing the particular qualities the product appears to confer.



— Citizen file photos

Preaching gospel, old & new  
Stained glass and television ad

image to appeal, not to the critical faculty of an audience, but to its vulnerable psychological underbelly: our (often unbearably desperate) need for social and self-acceptance. Especially effective are those situations that provoke common fears about our unworthiness.

By evoking these themes through the use of visual symbols, the sponsor is able to make claims and draw inferences with an emotive power beyond that of formal language, and well beyond the reach of truth-in-advertising legislation.

Faced with what appears to be a frighteningly accurate reflection of ourselves in the advertiser's cyn-

## Why Johnny can't read PICTURES

Worried about illiteracy?  
Then you should really be worried  
how many people can't interpret the  
major language of our age

our memory and produces an impression, usually in accordance with our most strongly felt (and actively repressed) psychological or

ical little drama, "our" shortcomings are resolved when "we" are finally made whole through the miraculous power of the product. Consume and be happy. What a frightfully effective way to shift inventory.

There is a spiritual dimension to all this, too.

In the middle ages, the Church illuminated its teachings by visions in stained glass, revealing to a mostly illiterate public the Christian view of the world through a series of mythological motifs based on, and clearly depicting, the prescribed social morality.

Today, we can see that, in television, the power of visual art to preach the gospel has lost nothing in more than a thousand years.

An unfortunate if predictable result of our society's wholesale conversion to the new Church Of The Shopper has been the complete realignment of such fundamental concepts as Happiness, Success, and Worthiness. But if it is to assist us at all in the search for happiness, our image of perfection must evolve directly from our personal experience of the world, and not be simply adopted whole from a source whose motives we have good reason to question.

The only way to defend ourselves, and our impressionable view of the world, from the most brazen of these visual assaults is to develop a "functional literacy" in the visible language. To be media-wise is now as important as learning how to read.

By bringing the encoded message under conscious scrutiny, we can then rob it of a portion of its otherwise formidable emotive power. In fact, close attention to the composition of visual statements will reveal the traditional characteristics displayed by all languages.

Just as in verbal language, its elements and their relationship to one another function as words in a sentence, part of the overall structure built by, and containing, the intended meaning.

By studying commercial images the way we would a book, paying special attention to our subjective impressions of its message, we can begin to decode them and find the "message in the medium." This will provide invaluable insight into the individual preconceptions we bring to the media, allowing a better understanding of the values that we live by and that are the source of our (supposedly conscious) decisions.

(Rutherford is a communications consultant and lecturer in visual art.)