

Worshipping at the altar of false images

"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 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 in oral 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 the kind of subtle totalitarianism feared by Wittgenstein.

Furthermore, when television's commercial (and highly subjective) message is mixed with (supposedly objective) broadcast journalism, the juxtaposition is doubly frightening. Images of horror 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.

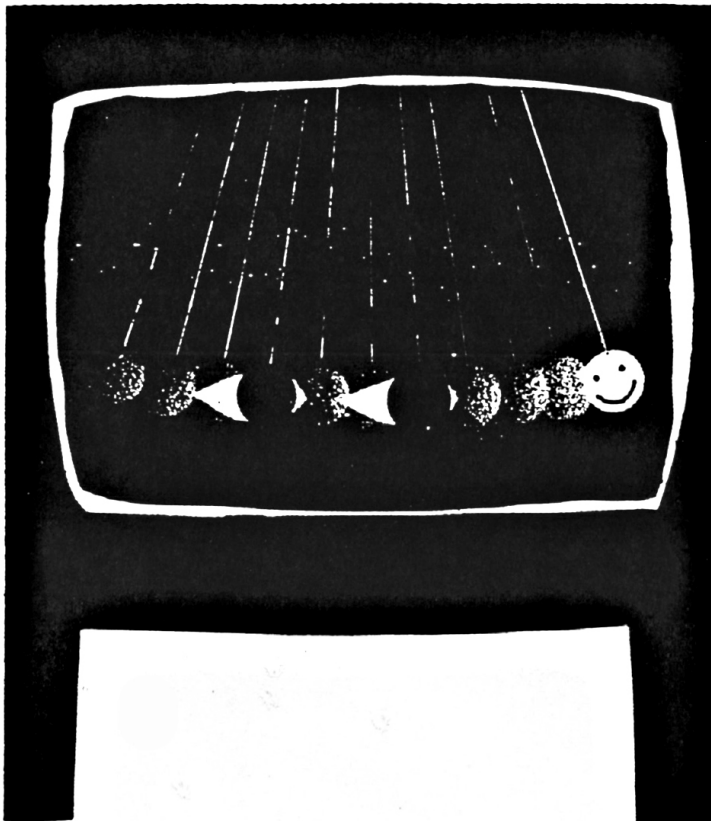
THE unparalleled effectiveness of the visual medium is its capacity to broadcast directly to the pre-verbal level of the mind through the use of emotionally-charged images. Every image arouses personal associations from the storehouse of our memory and produces an "impression," usually in accordance with our most strongly felt (and actively repressed) psychological or emotional needs.

To be ignorant of this fact is to blithely accept the interpretation of the sponsor, and to ingest it in so insidious a way as to render subsequent analysis almost impossible.

In advertising, the primary appeal of the product usually has little or nothing 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.

In a current TV ad, for example, when a young urban professional meets his future self, he realizes that

In a world of rapid-fire, TV imagery, 'visual literacy' is at least as important as learning how to read



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his future health, happiness and success is determined entirely by money and lies in the hands of a large financial institution.

Kodak has made a reputation by assuring its customers that — when recorded on Kodak film — their memories of events will reflect all the splendor and beauty of paradise (no matter how dull the original experience).

An anti-perspirant makes clear that without its protection, we will be seen as weak, incompetent and powerless. Definitely not the image we want to project.

Creators of visual imagery learned long ago how to design an 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 which 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.

Ironically, this missing quality is all too often self-confidence. Faced with what appears to be a frighteningly accurate reflection of ourselves or our situation, this cynical little drama is then resolved when "we" are finally made whole through the miraculous power of the product. Consume and be happy. Thus, the advertiser has presented a fait accompli, The Product As Solution to the millions of (now personal) crises: a custom-made advertisement for each and every member of the audience — in less than 30 seconds.

What a frightfully effective way to shift inventory.

THERE IS A spiritual dimension to all this.

Central to all Western religions is the belief that grace, authentication, and the resolution of all problems comes from elsewhere: at all events from outside.

In times past, we looked to the gods, and later to Christ and the Church; but, having overthrown these as our arbiters of meaning and imparters of salvation, we nevertheless retain the need for the function they served.

In the Middle Ages, the Church and its teachings were illuminated (in both senses of the word) 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.

In order to defend the integrity of the new faith (and, by extension, of its followers), all must adhere to its canon and agree to define achievement in the same way: that is to say through the acquisition of things.

To do otherwise is heresy and recognized as an affront to the body politic.

While there is no denying the comfort and convenience offered by ready-made and prepackaged values, such a moral system is not without its risks.

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 we live by and which are the source of our (supposedly conscious) decisions.

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