Chapter 2

Visual Literacy and Visual Rhetoric:
Images of Ideology Between the Seen and the Unseen in Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Advertising imposes ways of seeing, thinking, feeling and acting; it leads consumers to act without them noticing; it creates an ideal social imaginary of a “perfect world” or “happy ending” for the daily needs and problems of consumers. Advertising does this by formulating a proposal for a collective and ideal good. Following a theoretical strategy and a critical analysis, it is an approach intended to relate rhetoric, ideology, and literacy of advertising image, exploring the implied ways of the seen and the unseen (i.e. what visual messages say and show). Advertising is a public and massive myth-poetic and logo-poetic device and an increasingly multiform, omnipresent, seductive and visually persuasive. It is important to understand the elements of (explicit or implicit) meaning and the corresponding processes and mechanisms through which the meanings produce effects. This chapter assumes itself as a contribution to a desideratum that may be called visual advertising literacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Modern and Western cultures are increasingly visual and rhetorical. In these cultures, ubiquitous images convey messages appealing everything all the time. These messages are not innocent. On the contrary, they follow planned strategies of seduction and persuasion, imparting ideas, ideals, values and imposed ways of seeing, thinking, feeling and acting (ideologies) mixed with seemingly simple and understandable information.

The most common, inevitable and influential messages are those of advertising. Advertising is everywhere, showing images as command words, such as “buy it now”, “try”, “drink”, or “enjoy”. “Advertising has become an accepted part of everyday life” and “the symbolic attributes of goods, as well as the characters, situations, imagery, and jokes of advertising discourse, are now fully integrated into our cultural repertoire”, argues W. Leiss et al. (2005, p. 3). Using an imperative form and a seductive image, the effectiveness of advertising messages is mostly due to the visual impact. The images are simply to understand and to follow their commands.

For example, advertising is strategically designed to highlight the characteristics of the product, using images of certain elements (sun, heat, summer) and colors (red, yellow, blue), so that these characteristics, thus evidenced, raise the audience’s desire of consumption. Therefore, beer advertisements use visuals to suggest the taste and texture of the product, i.e. to call to mind the heat (the consumer’s need or problem) and the refreshing sensation (the consumer’s satisfaction or solution) drinking the beer.

In this chapter, the visual literacy applied in advertising is focused in the potentialities of the image, on what the image shows without showing (the implicit). The advertising’s visual literacy is an ability to read / understand the rhetorical strategies of advertising messages. It is necessary to identify the practices of meaning production that makes up the advertisements and dismantle its engine to see how advertising works, i.e. to break down the advertising strategy itself and to understand the forms of advertising in the societies in which they are inserted, as well as the effects of meaning.

However, the application of this strategy of understanding and observing advertisements requires (such as advertising literacy) the ability to critically analyze and interpret content or statements, interrelating psychological, social, symbolic and ideological processes.

The main objective of this chapter is to understand and critically analyze the strategies and mechanisms of the meaning of visual representation as a socio-cultural construct. To understand visual literacy as a cultural and practical competence is also to recognize the importance of these skills of cultural understanding and visual hermeneutics against the visual rhetoric used by advertising strategies.

This chapter aims to analyze the advertising rhetoric, i.e. the strategic exploration and creation of myths or mythical meanings expressed publicly in advertising images. It is argued the increasingly secular, tautological and paradoxical semiocracy and iconocracy in the public space, because of a screen-society based on public and massive (advertising) speeches, which are myth-poetic and logo-poetic devices, i.e. paradoxical public discourses (namely screen images) with argumentative fallacies and a sophisticated visual rhetoric. This public space becomes both a social and mythological imaginary and a mode to express ideologies.

Meanings are constantly produced and influence us everywhere. Every day we receive and make use of a large variety of advertising signs. Thus, literacy is relevant to let us know or find a way of understanding how these signs and meanings are as expressive as influential. The power of signs (to create representations) increases the persuasive force of advertising and the pertinence of literacy approach lies in its awareness about the wider field of meaning-making. For this reason, the primary focus of