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A VISUAL RHETORIC OF ADVERTISEMENT

Doctoral Thesis

Summary

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Structure

INTRODUCTION

1. *The subject of the dissertation and the motivation for it*
2. *Its place in the field of studies*
3. *Theoretical framework and structure*
4. *Theoretical theses and hypotheses*
5. *Objectives*
6. *Presentation of the research methods and explanation for their selection*

I. VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS AND PICTORIAL ACTS. ADVERTISEMENT IN THE SIGN-STRUCTURES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

1. *Picture and picture-meaning*
 - 1.1. **The picture era**
 - 1.2. **Paradigm shift: the iconic turn**
 - 1.3. **Concept of pictures. What is an image?**
2. *Pictorial objectivations as sign-structures*
 - 2.1. **Objectivation theory**
 - 2.2. **Picture's modes of existence**
 - 2.3. **Pragmatics of picture-use**
 - 2.4. **Advertisement's place among pictorial representations**
 - 2.4.1. *Brief examination of advertisement*
 - 2.4.2. *The characteristics of advertisement*
3. *Advertisement as a pictorial perlocutionary act*
 - 3.1. **Speech-act theory and pictorial speech-acts**
 - 3.2. **Advertising as a tool of action and a tool for action**

II. ADVERTISING FROM A VISUAL RHETORIC AND ARGUMENTATION THEORY PERSPECTIVE

1. *Advertising and pictorial cognition. A communication theory approach*
 - 1.1. **Visual communication**
 - 1.2. **Modes of visual messages**
 - 1.3. **Intended communicative acts**
2. *Advertising as an element of strategic act. A philosophical approach*
 - 2.1. **Digression: formal logic**
 - 2.2. **Toulmin's model**
3. *Advertising and rhetoric. A rhetoric theory approach*
 - 3.1. **A conceptual reflection: traditional notion of rhetoric**
 - 3.2. **New rhetoric**
 - 3.3. **Media rhetoric**
 - 3.4. **Visual rhetoric**
 - 3.5. **Advertisement image and rhetorical argumentation**

4. *Advertising and media-persuasion*
 - 4.1. **Argumentation or manipulation?**
 - 4.2. **The theory's problematical sides**

III. THE PERSUASIVE FORCE OF ADVERTISMENT

1. *Toward a visual argumentation theory*
 - 1.1. **The relation between objectives and tools**
 - 1.2. **Argumentation: the relation between pragmatics and logic**
 - 1.2.1. *Formal logic and pragmatics*
 - 1.2.2. *Argumentation theory from a pragma-dialectical approach*
 - 1.3. **Visual argumentation from a pragma-dialectical aspect**
 - 1.3.1. *Visual-verbal synergy*
 - 1.3.2. *Interpretation in a pragma-dialectical medium*
 - 1.3.3. *Visual argumentation: a new approach*
2. *Roles and strengths of visual argumentation in advertisements*
 - 2.1. **Advertisement image and argumentation**
 - 2.2. **Propositionality of images and advertisement images**
 - 2.3. **Proposition and relevance-theory**
 - 2.4. **Static and narrative advertisement images**
 - 2.4.1. *Intellectual and intuitive thinking*
 - 2.4.2. *The argumentative force of motion*
3. *The role of rhetorical devices in the argumentative discourse of advertising*
 - 3.1. **Argumentative visual rhetorical figures**
 - 3.2. **Rhetorical argumentation and advertisements**
 - 3.2.1. *Static advertisement images*
 - 3.2.2. *The advertising spot*
 - 3.2.2.1. *Advertising spots containing verbal elements*
 - 3.2.2.2. *Advertising spots containing no verbal elements*
 - 3.3. **Argumentational strategies and figures of argumentation**
4. **The decoder of the argumentative discourse**

IV. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. **Description of the methodology**
 - 1.1. **Library and internet research**
 - 1.2. **The survey**
 - 1.2.1. *Objectives*
 - 1.2.2. *Participants*
 - 1.2.3. *Structure*
 - 1.2.4. *Procedure*
 - 1.2.5. *Observed factors*

V. RESULTS

1. **Interpretation of the results**

2. Limitations of the survey

SUMMARY

PICTURES

APPENDIX I.

APPENDIX II.

APPENDIX III.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

KEYWORDS: cultural objectivation, advertisement, speech act, pictorial act, visual argumentation, visual rhetoric, pragma-dialectics, formal and informal logic, syllogism, enthymeme

1. The subject of the dissertation and the motivational reason for its selection

The topic of my dissertation is about the underlining theory pertaining to the usage of pictures for the purpose of advertising. Overall, I tried to answer and analyze the following: to what extent do advertisements affect us, what are the resulting implications if we consider them as objectivations, how do pictures function as advertisements, and what kind of role do they play in the sign-structures of everyday life. In order to fulfill my objectives, first I had to define and characterize the imagery of pictures and its figurative functions, as well as the pictorial speech act's role in communication, including visual rhetoric, which reveals the argumentation aspects of pictures.

Advertisements can be perceived as a communication and cultural medium. In order to fulfill various objectives, they can appear in different forms and compositions. Advertisements not only promote a product or a service in form of a billboard or a commercial spot, but they can also appear as banners, guerrilla and ambient commercials, and can even function as political campaigns or as a medium for raising public awareness. As evident by the above list, there are a myriad of advertisement types to choose from, but to narrow down my research, I only examined the still and moving pictures, namely the billboards and television commercials. Based on the assumption that advertisements in general are visual persuasive messages, I analyzed their rhetorical content from different viewpoints. I observed and differentiate the persuasive tools used in advertising, noticing their effects on the viewer and indications of their acceptance. Also the advertisements' perception aspects and their modes of visual demonstration: imagery, representational design, figures, meanings, arguments and inferences.¹

Advertisements, when viewed from a standard social philosophical perspective, are part of the system of cultural and economic objectivations; where the economy is the procurer, the catalyst. These are the types of artificial pictures that utilize countless conceptual and pictorial elements and allusions in a culturally formalized or unofficial way; inundating our daily lives, all while reshaping and altering the general viewing public's beliefs, values and behaviors. Yet, because often times they accomplish this in a clever innovative manner (just consider the dynamic nature of most of the recent commercial spots, interactive ads, guerrilla marketing, etc.), they break free from the standard system of cultural objectivations. That's because the cultural objectivations can only refer to the emergence, and the static and historical aspects. As I point out in my

¹ Based on Aczél Petra. See: Aczél Petra: *Médiaretorika*. p. 54.

dissertation, since static pictures work quite differently, we have to employ other methods for motion pictures and with the help of the time element we are able to tell stories.

2. Theoretical framework and structure

The conceptual framework for this dissertation is based on Ernst Gombrich's picture theory; Ludwig Wittgenstein's, Rudolf Arnheim's, W.J.T. Mitchell's, and Kristóf Nyíri's philosophy of pictures; Søren Kjørup's and David Novitz's pictorial speech act theory; Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's, and Frans H. van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst's informal logic; as well as, Leo Groarke's and David Birdsell's visual argumentation. In the introduction I write about the nature of pictures, as based on the fundamental philosophical and semiotical literature, and like Reiner Ruffing and Heller Ágnes, I also classify advertisement under the category of pictorial and cultural objectivations. In order to be able to discuss how pictorial objectivations, in the form of television commercials, billboards, banners or ambient ads, constitute visual arguments, we must examine their functionality. But my thought process demands that I first talk about the notion of advertisement as a picture, in particular, define what exactly is a picture and how can it function as an advertisement; including discussing the concept of visibility, the strategic action theories, and within them, the pictorial speech acts.

Therefore in the first chapter I outline the picture's existence and its relation to text. According to the academic literature, this relation can be divided in three groups.² First I present the viewpoints that prioritize pictures over language because of their earlier existence. Gombrich, for example, considers pictures as natural, implicit visual entities. However this view contradicts the wittgensteinian usage-theory, according to which a picture can only function as one if we see it as such, and the only way we can decipher the hidden meanings if we notice them and perceive them accordingly. Nyíri goes even a step further and refines the above mentioned viewpoint by proclaiming that in fact some pictures can convey meanings all on their own without the necessity of accompanying words. The second group consists of those perceptions that regard pictures as ambiguous entities and the distinctions are the debates over what other elements, besides language, can facilitate with the comprehension and make pictures less ambiguous. Although from an

² See: Nyíri's *Kép és idő*.

evolutionary perspective pictures existed before words, both spoken and written, they're not as suitable for communicating information or as a form of unequivocal expression. Yet they operate with similar performative force, but according to Kjølrup and Novitz, pictures are in need of assistance to convey properly, relying on text, labels, that guide with the process of decoding the underlining messages. In fact, Gombrich develops the same opinion in his latter works. Furthermore, Kjølrup and Novitz, and later on, van Eemeren and Grootendorst, take into account the significant role context and background knowledge play in the reconstruction and understanding of the messages. Along the same lines, after extensively researching the related documents, I found another relevant factor that could aid in the deciphering of visual communication, even when it's represented in a complex, purely pictorial form. That factor is: time. According to Töpffer, whose work I reference several times in my dissertation, we can convey stories in different ways: with words and with pictures. When we introduce the time factor into a pictorial act, the temporal succession of images and the systematic way our eyes scan those particular images, gives us the opportunity to be able to decode the messages without the help of words. The third and last group which I briefly mention, but don't examine any further in my dissertation, has to do with the synergy that exists between pictures and words. The proponents of this concept don't want to detach pictures from words, or vice versa, they want to keep them together, because according to them, they can only exist in unison, dependent on one another in equal relation. From Paivio's perspective, pictures and words are in a constant codependent interaction.³ In fact, this particular view is one of the most commonly used approaches when analyzing and writing about pictures. However nowadays when the role of pictures becomes increasingly more significant, I believe we should instead evaluate pictures on their own merits, without the influence of words, and hence study advertisements from this distinct point of view. The slogan, jingle and other verbal elements' influence in advertisements became less important than it was five, ten or even twenty years ago. With the recent emergence of guerrilla marketing, ads utilizing augmented reality techniques, and interactive graphical tablets, which rely more on images and visual techniques, the language and its former useful functionality in advertisement becomes less relevant.

³ Nyíri: *Kép és idő*. p. 20.

After the discussion on picture theories and a more detailed analysis regarding the nature of pictures, in the second chapter I turn my attention towards pictorial speech acts as they pertain to advertisements. Commercials employ strategic action tools and thus result in complex sign-structures. They're designed with a particular purpose in mind, so therefore they must be analyzed from multiple angles; such as, elements of visual communication, and from a visual rhetoric and argumentation theory perspective. Approaching them from a communication theory standpoint, advertisements are part of the media, they're pictorial communicative acts, a channel through which a message prorogates from the seller to the prospective buyer. If we want to answer how this is accomplished, then we have to approach the question from a rhetorical perspective. Billboard and television commercials are types of sign-structures that greatly affect the consumers' senses and actions, grab their attention, exploit their goodwill, persuading them about the product's or service's usefulness by highlighting all the positive attributes. To achieve these manipulative results, advertisers must know how to use pictures effectively. Not only that, they also have to have an in-depth understanding of the target audience, be aware of the specific communicational situation, and be able to identify which persuasive methods would work the best in that particular situation. Fortunately, with the help of rhetoric, we're able to fine tune this ability to manipulate the senses with strategic arguments, or we can restrain this analytical aspect (logos) for a more favorable emotional (pathos) and authoritative (ethos) appeal to motivate decision making. In fact, Bencze considers this analysis method of advertisements from a rhetorical argument's perspective as a form of artistic rhetorical argumentation.⁴ It doesn't follow the rules of formal logic.

In the third chapter I expand on the topic of visual argumentation, since one the main goals of my dissertation is the analysis of the rational viewer, to show the persuasive power of advertisement without the need to rely on purely manipulative deception. Not every advertisement is irrational and we certainly are not irrational viewers. So therefore I felt the need to highlight some of the ways a billboard advertisement or commercial spot can be decoded rationally. But before delving into some concrete examples, I discussed the related literature. Visual argumentation theory is somewhat of a new field that studies the existence and possibilities of expressing purely visual arguments; defining and analyzing the particular tools of visual argumentation, which of them has the potential for greatest impact in persuading the unsuspecting yet rational viewer, etc. Groarke and Birdsell were

⁴ Bencze Lóránt: Stephen Toulmin és a bizonyítás természete. Érvelés a posztmodern demokráciában. p. 21.

among the first to examine this topic more intensely, and generated proof for the argumentative aspect of pictures. They make assertion about it in several of their published papers, claiming that under certain context we're able to argue with pictures. One of these contexts is advertisement since it always embodies an implicit conclusion from which we can reconstruct the premises and thus completing an enthymeme. However, this notion is questioned by Fleming and Johnson, because they stipulate that an argument can only be created verbally, and as a result, pictures must always be translated into words, otherwise we won't be able to reconstruct the argument. Blair, on the other hand is more accepting of the idea and tries to compromise somewhere in the middle, giving some specific instances where it's possible to recreate the arguments from the pictures directly. Roque, Kjeldsen and Slade are the newest supporters of purely visual argumentation. These three proponents believe that pictures, especially the ones used for advertisement, can be very "demanding"; that is to say they're illocutionary acts, the types of performative pictorial acts that motivate us to think and in the best case scenario they achieve their intended purpose by enticing and convincing the viewer to buy the advertised product. By gaining the goodwill of the viewer, this so-called willing participant is going to gradually decode the pictorial signs and ultimately reconstruct the argument. Plus, as I mentioned earlier, referring to van Eemeren and Grootendorst's observations, words are not necessary in order to decode the message; many other factors can contribute to our understanding of the picture, such as, context, background knowledge, the time element, as well as the various rhetorical instruments which narrow down the possible meanings and guide the decoder to find the embedded message.

3. Objectives and hypotheses

Visual rhetoric is a communicational artifact, a tool for creative acts.⁵ Numerous types of pictures can be rhetorical. In my dissertation I concentrated on their nature, function and the persuasive power they're able to generate in advertisement. Applying McQuarrie and Mick's scheme of rhetorical figures, I tried to illustrate each of these concepts with examples and also carefully observed which particular ones are applicable with pictures; analyzing the way we can utilize adjection, detracting, fusion and immutation techniques in advertising. I also observed the interaction between these

⁵ Foss: Theory of..., 143. old.

manmade signs, which are intentionally injected in certain structures in order to convey a message, and the public, in particular, the intended viewer. As a consequence, an inherent dialectical discourse is established as the receiving viewer attempts to decipher the deliberately encoded message sent by the advertiser. The context will definitely reveal some clues and ease the decoding process; not just the context in which the picture is shown, but also the context of the embedded signs themselves. In addition of course, the viewer's own background knowledge and previous experiences will play a major role in the interpretation of the concealed message. The willing, engaged, rational viewer will discern and pick out the pertinent information and reconstruct the advertisement.

The aim of this dissertation is to argue along the following hypotheses:

H1: If we are able to see (note Wittgenstein "seeing as") and use pictures in several ways, then we are also able to "read" advertisements as perlocutions resulting from a pictorial act, thus as an argumentation.

H2: It's complicated to argue with pictures, because many times the pictures are ambiguous, we can interpret them in different ways. But if the use of words (label, slogan, brand name, etc.) and time make the pictures comprehensible, then the visual argumentation can be deciphered and understood.

H3: Visual argumentation is one of the components of visual rhetoric (logos) and thus we must analyze its characteristics. After observing the most successful modes of rhetorical argumentation, we can conclude that using rhetorical figures is the most suitable method for coding and decoding visual arguments, because it initiates a pragma-dialectical interpretation.

H4: If we accept this notion that the most suitable method for constructing visual arguments is though the use of rhetorical figures, then we can further examine what are the best strategic tools that we can combine them with to complement each other for greater effectiveness.

The last two chapters of my dissertation pertain to a survey I generated and posted online to test and validate my hypotheses on the general public. The survey was completed by 107 people from various countries. Based on the analysis of the feedback I received from the survey takers, the general consensus seems to support my hypotheses. These average viewers of the advertisements that appear across various media platforms are able

to recognize and interpret some of these advertisements as visual argumentation. According to these survey takers, when the advertisements seem ambiguous to them, then the accompanying words seems to help with decoding the intended message, but overall they understand more clearly those advertisements conveyed through moving images, like picture stories, than those depicting static images, like still billboards. According to this observation, we can conclude that the use of rhetorical figures, and more importantly, a time sequence, which creates movement in the pictures and engages the viewer's eyes to scan more intensely, will definitely facilitate the decoding of these embedded signs. When I requested the survey participants to rank the various advertisements according to their personal preferences, I found that those advertisements that employed a form of rhetorical strategy were more favorable and ranked higher; they considered those more creative and worthy of their time and consideration. And when asked to reconstruct an argumentation based on the picture they were shown, almost everyone was capable of it, especially when they could decipher all the essential encoded information; when they could use their cultural familiarity and background knowledge or the help of the context.

The purpose of my dissertation is not to be normative; I don't want to impose rules or guidelines. This dissertation simply summarizes and explains the relation between advertisements and the audience in the course of everyday life. Its aim is to help the viewers get a better grasp of advertisements and facilitate with their overall understanding, with the reconstruction of messages, and acceptance of the rational aspects of these messages. Visual rhetoric and argumentation greatly contribute to the simplification and aid of cognitive elaboration. In part, my research and survey results may contribute to the expansion of our knowledge about advertisements and marketing communications.

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