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Seeing reasons

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Title: Seeing reasons
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ABSTRACT. It is a commonplace of discussion about the impact of visual media, whether visual images in print, televisual images or the images of the internet, to claim that it functions irrationally. This paper argues against that claim. First, the assumptions about the connection between rationality and linear, written, unemotional prose are unjustified. Secondly, using analytic techniques analogous to those used in identifying argumentation in verbal text, is possible to discern arguments in visual text, in particular in image based advertisements.

Introduction: Bond's Cottontails¹

As a child, I knew that proper people wore Bond's cottontails. They were the guarantee of propriety: huge bloomer shaped cotton objects, generally white, requiring two or even three pegs to attach them to the clothes line. The television advertisements of the early sixties took quite another line. Three available, elegant young women are shown: one entering a glittering cocktail, another a secretarial ladies, settled at her task, third a student or librarian carefully reaching for a book and whispering "sh" as an intruder enters. Each is transformed, with a questioning prompt:

'What do I wear?

They disengage from the crowd who looks on in admiring astonishment and shimmy across the floor singing

'What do I wear? Bond's cottontails. Smoothest fashion briefs'

At the clarion call, the society woman, the reliable secretary, and the student are transformed, as if the knickers empower them, turn them on. They swirl with outstretched arms, protecting and almost showing off their hidden underwear, as they move forwards to the front of screen, with a circle of admirers behind. The underwear is quite literally invisible, with not a line showing as they swing their hips from side to side. Then they draw a discreet blind across the action, with a *drawing* of a figure in the knickers, underscored with 'Smoothest fashion briefs'. In the final frame, the word 'smoothest' is replaced briefly by 'lightest', then by 'whitest'. Even in an advertisement, briefs had to be white.

The advertisement was bold for the time. It charted the divide between what could be said in public and what could not with exquisite care. You didn't *talk* about undies, but of course, the ads didn't either. The dreaded word, 'underpants', remained unmentioned. Instead we got 'Bond's cottontails', closely related to Peter Rabbit, no doubt, and 'briefs'. But the ads were touching on marginal ground, on issues we really should not talk about.

In an epoch for which underwear ads were already suggestive, they went much further. They were associating underpants and elegance, underpants and non standard behaviour. Like flowers unfolding in the speeded up photography of the early years of television, the young women

¹ I am grateful to Kym McCauley who gave me a copy of this ad, and the Caltex ad mentioned at the end of the paper. I have not been able to contact him directly.

emerged transformed by the mention of their underwear. As a child of eleven, I was fascinated but baffled.

The ad embodies, literally and metaphorically, several of the themes I want to raise today. The ad addresses itself to the audience, directly, face on. It is a dialogue from the hidden private self of the model to that of the viewer. It puts forward a case for buying Bond's cottontails, a case which is in part linguistic ('Smoothest fashion briefs') and in part images explicitly supporting the linguistic case (the invisibility of the briefs on the dancing maidens). Both these elements, I suggest work as argumentation, as an appeal from premises—the words and images of the ad—to a conclusion, the intention to buy on the part of the viewer.

But there is a further element. The structure of the ad carries argumentation, I suggest, that is purely visual. At one level, the transformation story of the three young women can be read as tantamount to a claim that, if you wear Bond's cottontails, you too will be transformed. At another level, the use of the framing audience facing out towards the front of the screen, and of the young woman dancing forward carries other meanings. It shows Bond's as the underwear of the future, blazing the way.

This approach to analysing advertisements, and particularly the visual elements of ads, is controversial. There is a long tradition of analysing visual images in art, and at least half a century, since the seminal work of Barthes, of analysis of the impact of advertisements and images in popular culture. There is also, with the work of Kress and van Leeuwen, a systematic semiotic theory of visual representation. I want however to take a slightly different analytic route through this material, drawing heavily on the tradition and the newer work of Kress and van Leeuwen, but taking another tack.

To claim that visual advertisements, on television or in magazines, are best analysed as instances of argumentation, is to make a claim about the way that advertisements function. The general form of an ad is

'If you accept the premises, you will be inclined to buy.'

Advertising is the poetry of the modern age: a sophisticated genre which draws on the philosophical angst and the cultural sophistication of the audience. To say it has the general form of an argument is not in any way to downgrade the complexity: to the contrary, the elaborate argumentation patterns are witness to the complexity of ads. Nor is it to deny the subtlety of lifestyle ads, which suggest that you too can be thus and so. Or the apparent absurdity and irrelevance of other successful ads. It is to say that those ads are set in a social context in which the assumption is that viewers will untangle the complex reasoning of the ads and, impressed, still decide to buy. It is to say that argument is what makes ads so effective, as long we do not too narrow a notion of argument.

So, in the Cottontails ad, we have a series of premises, that Cottontails are briefs (a verbal claim, made in the song), that wearing cottontails is conducive to the sort of unconventional behaviours displayed in the ad, (a claim made in the visual narrative of the ad, which cunningly cuts to the unease of the generation of women bred to behave suitably in public, and quite differently in private), and that by using cottontails you will be able to escape the mundane given everyday world (represented in visual semiotics, in western cultures, according to Kress et al, by the hand segment) and move downwards to the future. We can read this last claim a generalisation

People who wear cottontails look to the future,
 It is not valid then to claim
 If you want to move into the future, you should wear Bond's cottontails,
 but it is suggested with the sleight of hand typical of lifestyle ads. We can then detach,
 assuming

You want to move into the future
 It follows
 You should wear Bond's cottontails

It then follows that, if it is common knowledge that you do not wear Bond's cottontails, and that they can be bought, that

You should buy Bond's cottontails.

This is a brutally quick argument, but it shows the line of thought I am adopting. It is one that is far from generally accepted.

Visual messages are irrational

The view that advertisements, and particularly visual advertisements, are arguments is at odds with the popular account of advertising as irrational. In Poster's terms, an advertisement of this type

stimulates not an object choice, a cognitive decision, a rational evaluation, but works at other linguistic levels, to produce the effects of incorporation and attachment between the viewer and the product... [it] works with simulacra, with inventions and with imaginings (1994: 177-8)

These are familiar claims. Advertisements, together with a large portion of the electronic media, do not function rationally. We find such views throughout the literature dealing with the transformation of society through technology; from both sides of the pro and contra new technology divide, and indeed, from both post and pre modernists. Technophobes such as Postman (1993) decry the impact of the new media, suggesting that the linear patterns of thinking may be undermined by the immediacy and impact of television, and that hot links on the internet also fail to encourage the development of logical thinking skills. The general argument is what might be called technological relativism—a form of neo McLuhanism—that how we think and see the world depends on the technologies of communication available to and being used. Postman for instance, calls on Eisenstein's (1983) finely worked analyses of the impact of print to suggest that television, with its plethora of clues, limits the imagination and the demands made on the viewer. Print, on the other hand is both 'linear' and demanding - the imagination is working double time to think through images given in language, while at the same time interpreting the logical links explicit in written language.

Prophets of the new media such as Douglas Rushkoff share Postman's assumption that television alters reasoning skills, but welcome the consequences. In *Children of Chaos* >*[*Surviving the end of the World as we Know it*], Rushkoff talks of the expectations of young viewers; of their inability to tolerate linear patterns of television viewing. He claims that the addiction to channel surfing and highly complex television product is evidence of the

sophistication of what he calls ‘screenagers’. As he puts it, television has changed: ‘the linear story just broke apart as the programs reached turbulence’ (1997:45). He goes on to argue that the turbulent viewing behaviour of the young is a new paradigm;

The “well-behaved” viewer, who never listens quietly, never talks back to the screen, and never changes channels, is learning *what* to think and losing his own grasp on *how* to think ...the viewing style of our children is actually more adult (1997:49)

Rushkoff characterises the new viewing style in terms of abilities to ‘navigate chaos’ (1997:100); to recognise the fractal patterns that chaos theory identifies, in which a pattern at one level is repeated at other levels, in much the way that the seemingly irregular pattern of a coast line seen in broad view is repeated at ever more detailed levels of focus. What appears to be random can be understood and predicted, by chaos theory—and that is the sort of understanding that characterises kids who surf channels. They can see a pattern, identify content from a fragment of television, and keep moving.

For Rushkoff, we must replace

so called rational thought, linear thinking, and empirical repeatable evidence (1997:18)

with chaotic non linear thought, and

nonlinear stories [which] don’t define causes and effects, heroes or villains, good or evil.. (1997:66)

Thus, for critics from both sides of the fence, there is an intimate connection between the medium whereby we receive communication and the possibilities and ways we think about it. The new age of television and the internet will no longer be the age of the printed word, of the critical thinker, of the individual; but will be one of the image, and multimedia, of the chaotic thinker, of the fragmented identity.

The association between the linear display of sentences, the stability of the word on the page, characterised by print, with individual authorship and critical thought on the other is at the heart of much of the debate about the new media. This paper deals with the issue of whether the interpretation of visual images in advertising and the new media is irrational. Far too often, there is an uncritical assumption that there is one canonical form of linear reasoning which is paradigmatically found in print. This paper argues against that view. Being reasonable is fundamentally a feature of discourse and action, not of written linear texts. It is only a contingent feature of our culture that extended patterns of reasoning do normally appear in print. Reasoning, in the broad sense, is closely linked to descriptions of how we act and rationalise our acting in the world. But it is also, and fundamentally, linked to discourse. Framing the rules whereby we extract arguments from extended passages of print, let alone of television, is difficult, as is determining the rules of good reasoned discourse. But this does not mean it is impossible to do so.

Reasoning in the new media

The view that the new media in general and advertisements in particular are incompatible with reason is commonplace. The strategy of this section is to identify the assumptions of three versions of this view, then to reject the assumptions². The three views that are identified are often

² In the longer paper I spend some time defining rationality, a process I have elided here.

held together, to form a network of related theses. Nevertheless, it is illuminating to consider the views independently.

The theses concern the *meaning* of elements of advertisements. They move from the particular to the general, from the meaning of elements, or images, through the meaning of segments, to the emotional meaning.

1) The meaning of elements of advertisements is not rational.

This is a common view. One version runs

Advertisements are not rational, but function to persuade the viewers irrationally, by creating structures of meaning, or signification, in which the product and the consumer are identified.

This view so wide spread, even in the industry itself, as to be common knowledge. It is identifiable in a Barthes' (1972) classic work on the impact of advertisements. For Barthes, soap powders for example, consisting as they do of harsh chemical cleaners, have had their meaning transformed through advertisements so that they are perceived as soft, gentle and loving, like the mothers who use them. Judith Williamson's (1981) text *Decoding Advertisements*, take the analysis further. She suggests that:

in providing us a structure in which we, and those goods are interchangeable, they are selling us ourselves (1981:13)

A variety of semioticians have developed and refined the analysis, to the extent that is widely argued that symbols used in advertisements, like images in the electronic media in general, act not to refer to reality, but are, to use Baudrillard's word 'simulacra'.

The assumption here is that simulacra, and second order signifiers, function irrationally.

2) The meaning of non print based forms of communication is irrational

Often associated with 1 above is the claim that non print based forms of communication are non rational, non linear, even chaotic. One version is

Understanding advertisements and understanding the new media requires non-rational processes of thought.

Here we may cite theorists as various as Postman (1985, 1993), Poster (1994), Rushkoff (1997) and Sartori (1998).

The assumption is that print is uniquely well suited to argument.

3) The impact of advertisements and the new media is emotional and hence irrational

A further claim is associated with 1 and 2 above, but has a long history independent of post modernism:

The claim that the new media, especially television, invoke emotional reactions in viewers that are unmediated by reason. The argument is particularly strong with respect to advertisements, where the psychological literature on persuasion is invoked.

The *locus classici* of the view can be found in Plato's *Republic*, in which he wished to ban music and poetry as liable to evoke emotions and hence lead the people astray. It has become the general wisdom of Advertising 1, as taught in the nineties³: According to the orthodoxy, there are advertisements for high involvement products (HIPs), such as cars, and for low involvement products (LIPs), such as shampoo. The ad may make a rational or an emotional appeal, although there is little room for rational appeal for LIPs. Television, given its costs and the style of impact, tends to appeal to emotions. The assumption here is that emotions are irrational.

I argue that advertisements, like the new media, are no more or less irrational than any other medium of communication. They are used for communication: and understanding what others mean, linguistically or non-linguistically, requires complex reasoning. In understanding the force of a gesture or an utterance, we have to assume much about another's intentions, their use of codes and their beliefs about those they communicate with. To count as communication, the process must involve an elaborate process of reasoning, not an irrational leap in the dark.

The most convincing model which relates dialogue to argumentation in a non *ad hoc* fashion is due to van Eemeren et al (eg 1993). Their view is that argumentation is a social and dialectical practice which is 'externalisable'. It is possible, using generally motivated linguistic principles along the lines of Searle's (1969) and Grice's (1975) principles of speech act theory and meaning, to reconstruct argumentative discourse. This model of reasoning as requiring amplification is now widely accepted. But given that amplification is accepted for spoken argument, why should we expect anything different of the rationality of images?

Let us apply this model to the assumption of first of the claims above, 1, namely that simulacra, and second order signifiers, function irrationally. Very often the claim that certain practices are irrational really amounts to the claim that to make sense of the practice requires a certain type of amplification. Many of the symbols used in advertising are highly contextual and elliptical. To make sense of them, we need to amplify their role, whether that consists in the extended (print) explanations of Barthes, Williamson or Poster on the role of advertising elements, or other theoretical practices. To say that the use of images, colours and elisions in advertisements are designed to short circuit rational evaluation and encourage 'incorporation and attachment' (Poster, 1994:177) is to claim a rational etiology for the use of such elements.

So much for the assumption underlying the first thesis. What of the second thesis that print is uniquely well suited for logical thought, for reasoning, since it is linear, displayed on the page and stable?⁴ First, I have suggested above that not print but dialogue is the basis of argumentation. It is not our practice of writing arguments that is at the heart of being rational, it is our practice of essentially interpersonal debate, of justifying ourselves to others. In this sense, argumentation is linear only metaphorically. It is a metaphor to think of time as a line and arguments take time. In so far as we analyse arguments, their linear appearance, as a coherent argument presented in steps, is generally misleading. A full explanation of the argument will nearly always require amplification, or cases where two or more alternatives are considered. It is

³ Thanks to Annabel Beckenham, a long term teacher at the University of Canberra, for her version of the field.

⁴ If this claim is correct, then the preceding argument is vitiated, for however much we spell out the meaning of a signifier in print, we are doing so in an alien medium, not that to which it primarily belongs. We return to that argument in the next section, but for now let us concentrate on the essence of the second claim, that print is linear and uniquely well suited to argument and reasoning.

not a coincidence that branching ‘natural deduction trees’ are such a useful format in logic, and that versions of topological spaces are used in some formal semantics. Arguments are often messy. Van Eemeren’s models normally display the branches of argument on a page, but they are far from unidirectional and linear. Print gives us the formal techniques for representing validity, since it allows the representation of argument structures. But the argument structures themselves are no more print based, than the arithmetical relations $A > B$, $B > C$ so $A > C$ are essentially print based relations. In so far as the relations $A > B$, $B > C$ so $A > C$ relate anything, they relate classes of objects, normally numbers, and only by extension anything at all in print.

It is true that the stability of print has made reflective criticism of argument possible. The new media, such as television and the internet, being less permanent than printed books, contain arguments which would not get past a print editor. The gatekeepers of the internet, when they exist, do not play the role of a good print, radio or TV editor in correcting apparently irrational material. But can we blame the medium? It is true too that the reactions of viewers of television and the user of the internet are less easily controlled than those of book readers. Television viewers flick through channels, pick up, as Rushkoff puts it, the fractal patterns of self-similarity between two different programs. But this is not to say that television viewers are irrational. In effect, television encourages a sort of argument by analogy, a recognition of similarities in one respect which lead the viewer to assume similarities in other respect. But argument by analogy is just another perfectly rational form of argument.

It is also true that the new media often exploit ambiguity and levels of meaning. The interplay of visual, spoken and written texts in television and the internet given rise to what Barthes would call ‘a ‘floating chain’ of signifieds’ (1977:39), that is a multiplicity of meanings and readings. However, the phenomenon of multiplicity of meaning exists at the level of language. In a finely tuned poem, metaphoric and literal meanings proliferate. Even with less elevated examples of print, the process of interpretation notoriously demands sensitivity to levels of meaning and to the vagaries of context and intention. There is nothing unique about the new media in this regard, just an acceleration of a familiar process.

The very fact that Rushkoff can appeal to a mathematical theory, that of chaos theory, to describe how viewers watch television is evidence that we can give a rational explanation of the way that the young make sense of the new media. Chaos theory may not be linear, but it is a paradigm of complex argumentation.

Far more serious to the defender of the rationality of the new media is the role of emotion. The final claim 3 identified above is that emotion is irrational. Since emotional response is the aim of much advertising and much television, that response is consequently irrational.

At least since Hume, it has been argued that emotion is irrational, inconsistent. It has been said that the fact that written languages divorce the word from the immediacy and emotionalism of the moment allows the written text to distil the rational. A written language requires imagination to visualise, or to recreate emotion: it cannot recreate emotion the way a film or spoken poem may. Written texts leave a space for recapitulation, for reconsideration. They allow a gap between the first emotional response and a composed and rational reaction. Television short circuits that gap; flinging out fireworks of undigested emotion. Advertisements and visual advertisements operate the same way.

We cannot dismiss this final thesis too rapidly. Vision *is* more immediate in some senses than reading. And considered rationality takes time, time which is rarely given in the television

news report or the online chat room. But emotion is not in itself irrational. My own view is that immediate reactions may be as rational as they are emotional, merely that it may take time to spell out the ratiocination in emotional situations, in linguistic terms.

Visual reasoning

Not all images involve argumentation. Indeed, most do not. Images in advertisements carry dialogical weight, in part because of the context and the generic style of advertisements. Is there a specific form of visual reasoning? Can it be reduced to a linguistic form, or is it purely visual and independent of language? There is a substantial body of literature on the meaning of visual symbols, but, for the purposes of this paper, we consider only those which provide a tentative basis for a theory of visual argument. These are again identified as a network of claims 4 to 6, perhaps better regarded as suggestions.

4) Images may function as speech acts

Mitchell (1994) suggests that there is a ‘pictorial turn’, a turn to images in place of language in post-modern culture. Mitchell argues that after a century characterised by the so called ‘linguistic turn’, we are now in a time in which, both at the level of practice and of theory, the pictorial image and the possibilities of representation it presents are central

On the one hand, it seems overwhelmingly obvious that the era of video and cybernetic technology, the age of electronic reproduction, has developed new forms of visual stimulation and illusions with unprecedented powers. On the other hand, the fear of the image, the anxiety that the “power of images” may finally destroy even their creators and manipulators... has become a technical possibility on a global scale (1994:15)

For Mitchell, unlike the theorists above, the pictorial turn is as rational⁵ as highly culture bound and as complex, as the print culture:

There is, *semantically* speaking...no essential difference between texts and images;...there are important differences between visual and verbal media at the level of sign types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions’ (1994:161)

Images need a general theory of semiotics to explain their force. Mitchell’s approach sets him apart from those who merely identify meanings of particular symbols. He is concerned with the complexity of pictorial meaning, with its structural and metalevel import. Pictures, he thinks, may have the force of speech act, and indeed have had so since the beginning of human communication. The change is that we now have increasing dependence on the image, which we need to understand in its own terms. His argument is that we cannot reduce the meaning of the pictorial component to the linguistic.

5) Images are to be interpreted in terms of their own, culturally specific, semiotics

The suggestion that images have their own semiotic system, not parasitic on that of language, is implicit in Mitchell, but is made explicit in theories of social semiotics and especially in the field now known as ‘Discourse semiotics’ (eg Kress *et al*, 1998). Just as

⁵ This is so even as we accept that Mitchell is investigating the ‘paradox’ of the pictorial turn expressed by the two views mentioned here. There is no paradox without reason.

Halliday offers a classification of the functions of language in as having an interpersonal role, a representational role or a textual metafunction, so semioticians suggest, images have the same functional possibilities. A systematic approach to the force of images within particular context does not, however, consist in merely dubbing a linguistic function with a non-linguistic substitute. The visual codes have their own functions. For instance, in Western cultures with a left to right written text, the layout on the page is, Kress *et al* claim, significant. The left side of the page is the given, the right what emerges; the upper part of the page is the ideal, the lower part the real. Thus an advertisement like the Bond's cottontails ad would be analysed as having significant left right up down meanings. Perhaps we might say that the given of the mundane job on the left, leads to the future. The aim is to show we can spell out the code, which is essentially visual and spatial, not linguistic.

6) Images and metaphors contain their own argumentation structure

The suggestion that images and metaphors contain their own patterning of argumentation is made explicit in Johnson's influential book, *The Body in the Mind* (1989). The particular argument of interest here is his suggestion that schemata which may be linguistic or nonlinguistic allow us to 'have a world'. A schema is for Johnson

'a recurrent pattern, shape, and regularity in or of the ongoing ordering activities'
(1989:24)

Thus a pattern of images, or a metaphorical model, may serve as a schema and determine how we experience our world as comprehensible.

Images or metaphors drive argument, so that reasoning is not purely propositional, but may be visual. In an earlier work, Johnson with Lakoff (1980) pointed out the visual component of much language about argumentation. We 'point out issues', 'see an argument' and so on. Argument is both imbued with and embedded in the language of visual discrimination. Johnson argues that thought itself is irredeemably metaphoric. The binding of necessity we *discern* in argumentation is itself a metaphor, and one which has visual roots.

Putting the suggestions from 4-6 together, one can envisage(!) the case for visual reasoning. The visual impact of images, at least in certain specified contexts, should not be explained as irrational, or unreasoned. It is based on and derives from reasoning at a visual level. Certain images contain and give rise to complex patterns of reasoned thought, patterns which are intended to be discerned by the viewer and which modify or determine the communicative act. This implies that there is logically significant structure in the visual 'utterances'⁶. Both Kress and Johnson give guidance as to how we might discern such structure. The structure must be resilient enough to support argument: with amplification, it must be possible to show how elements of the visual might correspond to, or play the role of premises and conclusions.

Conclusion: Sabrina sells Caltex

The final example I will touch on is an ad for Caltex. A hugely buxom Sabrina drives up in a convertible to a garage manned by the real Australian man. He then sets her right, explaining that

⁶ It is no part of the suggestion here that we deduce the meaning of images from 'bare particulars'. We deduce in seeing the images (cf Wittgenstein, 1953) 2, xi

Caltex grease is more effective by heating it in an electric frypan, domesticating the science for the little woman.

‘Oh it’s hot’ says Sabrina. He places two phallus shaped wedges of grease, one from Caltex, the other from the ‘conventional’ competition, in the frypan. One falls flaccid and melts immediately. The ‘fair dinkum’ Australian product stays dark and rigid as the other collapses in a damp puddle. Sabby says she will certainly choose Caltex!

Why use Sabrina to sell Caltex grease? To make it sexy? The heavy handedness of the sexual overtones would, I imagine, raise eyebrows now, but at the sexual innuendo, because it was so shocking, would have remained inexplicit, merely for the cognoscenti. But the ad does not argue – or at least it does not only argue – that Caltex is sexy. It plays a far more complicated reasoning game than that.

Caltex is cast as the Australian male, against the female alien: sexy by all means, but vulnerable. The Caltex driveway attendant was the precursor of a Crocodile Dundee figure, ‘fair dinkum’. The service station attendant is actively out there working the driveway. These days the simple narrative would serve as an implication

If you want driveway service, go to Caltex.

But the visual images also serve to reinforce message. Sabrina’s shape, unfitted as it is to working under cars, her white pullover, are *arguments* for her to hand over control. The rolled up sleeves of the attendant, his amiable explanation, are likewise arguments. Conceptually and analytically, the petrol station is portrayed within its own frame, as if by entering it the driver gives up autonomy. The movements within the images, in to the inner sanctum, reinforce the message that this is the private space of expertise. The very continuance of the convertible, every line of which screams technology and speed, is dependent on the expertise.

If you want to keep driving, go to Caltex.

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