

Looking at Art

by Shane Steinman



Images are everywhere. Signs on the street. Packages on the grocer's shelves. Magazines and books on the coffee table. And what home would be complete without televisions strategically located throughout?

The modern human seems to exhibit an insatiable capacity to consume images of endless variety. In the graphic communications business, this hunger has truly become the source of our daily bread and butter. But how often do we pause (from looking) long enough to ask ourselves why this is?

If it were simply a matter of conditioning, then that possibility would dredge up myriad scenarios in which we, as the consumers of such fare, would be little more than trainable puppets with invisible strings draped in marionette-like fashion from the manipulative fingers of what shadowy powers there may be. And that's just too cynical a view—even for me.

It's certainly not that I prefer, by default, the Pollyanna perspective—more that I like to envision our existence as being somewhat more complex and therefore less prone to such simplistic control.

The more likely proposition is that we are predisposed at a genetic level to the interpretation of our respective circumstances through visual stimuli. It's hardly surprising that we respond so strongly and so directly to images of pets and babies. And while it may be true that a particular preference for one image over another comes from past conditioning, it does not entirely explain away our need to comprehend things by way of looking.

The marketing and advertising industry has long been the guardian of special skills for eliciting emotion and action by graphical representation, i.e. getting us to think, feel and do specific things by showing us the right pictures. In order to be most effective, the “art of advertising” has to operate at a semi-clandestine level. It must trip our conditional ‘switches’ without being so blatant as to actuate a negative rebound effect by tickling our sensitively attuned ‘manipulometer’. And yet it can't be so subtle as to function entirely at the subliminal level—at least insofar as provoking an immediate response is concerned.

For example, a jarringly contradictory statement (i.e. an obvious lie) will not succeed, where something more closely approxi-

mating reality will achieve the desired effect, especially if the more veritable scene or situation is saturated with enviable—though unlikely—realism.

There is a legal mandate that advertising should not be deceptive, although that requirement (pursued to the extreme) would eliminate virtually all advertising from paper and the airwaves. It's less than controversial to say that advertising lies to us—it's a de facto standard! Advertising does not reflect true reality, although it does purport to suggest an alternate and attainable one.

The industry has even gone so far as to mock itself in this regard. You may recall the old Isuzu commercial wherein the smooth-talking pitchman is pictured with his SUV atop a vertical column of rock, precariously perched hundreds of feet above the southwest desert landscape. He goes so far as to say that he drove it up there himself—an obvious lie—and the caption at the bottom of the screen even says so. Although the verbal lie is countermanded by the written word, the viewer is left with the distinct visual impression that this vehicle can take you anywhere you wish. Funny and effective. I even bought one.

But is there danger in blurring the line between fiction and reality? Can the consummate skill of the image creator do harm to the psyche of a populace so graphically inundated? Probably not. In fact, some would say that to insist that such is the case is a statement of outright condescension toward the human intellect. After all, leaving aside sensational and exploitative films, people have been watching movies for many generations with arguably little damage to their aggregate mental well-being.

From an objective standpoint, the most resonant themes in film and graphics often deal with subject matter toward which the viewer has already developed a certain affinity well in advance of the particular incidental exposure. The most popular themes are those which mimic reality to a significant degree. However, in order to achieve a state of empathy between the viewer and the circumstance of the exposition, it's vitally important that most artifacts of the technical creative process be removed or disguised.

There is a much-studied principle in the film industry called “suspension of disbelief”, without which audience members would not be able to separate their objective selves from the fact

Each era is a palimpsest of residual and emergent forms.

—Hal Foster
The Art of the Real

Morphica
www.shinntype.com

that they are just watching a series of pictures flickering at 24 frames per second. The movie has to become “real” enough for them to set aside judgment and identify with the character or situation depicted.

Today, we might laugh at old movies which were shot at 18 fps because they are sometimes played back at 24 fps, causing an increase in the speed of motion in the film. Similarly, no one is going to believe that Superman is actually flying around on screen if the suspension harness and wires are clearly visible.

The same goes for static graphics. When we first indulged in the use of computer-assisted design, illustrations started to become quite rectilinear. In contradiction to the real world—where nothing is optimized quite so geometrically—computer art had far too many perfect angles.

Pattern recognition is one of the mind’s most impressive skills, so it was overtly obvious when Adobe Illustrator introduced simple patterning tools and gradient blend capabilities. Designers and illustrators used them non-stop for a span of two years in virtually every piece. And the gravest insult one could offer to offend the artist was, “It looks like it was done on a computer.” Some critics took it even farther by pinpointing the presumed version number of the creative application.

At a more micro level, the printing industry applies certain guidelines which, in general, the creative artist doesn’t even need to be aware of. For example, halftone screens for darker colors are rotated into a position in which they are less apparent to the human eye. Black ink is typically printed at 45° because the eye distinguishes linear patterns more readily when they are either horizontal or vertical to the viewing orientation. Also, smaller dots of ink are used whenever compatible with the print condition, giving the final rendition of the design as smooth and continuous a finish as possible.

Regardless of the degree of complexity and hard work involved in the production of any visual art, it is undoubtedly advantageous for the resulting image to evoke complete acceptance in the mind of the viewer which is consistent with the intent of the creator. Unintentional artifices or repetitive patterning or inadequate resolution (among many factors) only serve to break the spell that the designer wishes to cast, resulting in a return to the native human state of disbelief.

Despite what artifactual “clues” may remain with respect to the technical genesis of any design, the residual holistic effect is what’s really important. Although a work may contain many messages at many different levels, it may still fail to impress unless it transcends the effort that created it—unless it becomes something more than the sum of its strokes, fills, angles, images and text.

Then you’ve got something worth looking at. 🍷

Shane Steinman is president of ArchAngel Media Inc., a Toronto-area graphics consulting and software design firm specializing in workflow development technologies. He may be contacted by e-mail to shane@archangel.net.