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Perspective by incongruity in visual advertising: Applying Kenneth Burke's theory to the Adbusters anti-consumerism campaign

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Running head: PERSPECTIVE BY INCONGRUITY

Perspective by Incongruity in Visual Advertising: Applying Kenneth Burke's Theory
to the Adbusters Anti-Consumerism Campaign

A Thesis Presented to The Faculty of the Department of Communication
Rochester Institute of Technology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Science Degree in
Communication & Media Technologies

by

Elizabeth B. Gorman

August 15, 2006

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Perspective by Incongruity in Visual Advertising: Applying Kenneth Burke's Theory to the Adbusters Anti-Consumerism Campaign

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Abstract

Kenneth Burke developed the theory of “perspective by incongruity” in which he claimed that oddly juxtaposed symbols influence audiences to have new perspectives by challenging their habits of thinking. This study applies Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical theory of perspective by incongruity to the Adbusters anti-consumerism campaign. Twenty “spoof ad” postcards created by the Adbusters Media Foundation were analyzed to see how they utilize the technique of incongruous juxtaposition. The analysis concluded that the cards either juxtaposed two incongruous images, two incongruous phrases or words, or a combination of incongruous words and images in order to create new insights about consumer advertising and corporate practices. The study found that the “spoof ad’s” messages could be broken down into four general topic categories: branding, over consumption, body image, and product origination.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to analyze the use of Kenneth Burke's perspective by incongruity theory in the Adbusters anti-consumerism campaign. Specifically, this study looks at the use of juxtaposition of words and/or images found in the Adbusters "spoof ads," as a case study of anti-consumerism rhetoric.

Rationale

Although Kenneth Burke's perspective by incongruity theory has been used to examine a number of different facets of rhetoric and media, very few studies have been done connecting the theory to the field of advertising. This study will add to the literature about advertising campaigns and about anti-advertising rhetoric. It is also of social importance because advertisements have an effect on every one of us.

As a young woman seeking to enter the advertising field, I believe that it is important to delve into the power and use of this theory as it relates to advertising in general, as well as to anti-consumerism activities.

Introduction

Advertising is a major part of our every day lives and is closely linked to our consumer habits and behaviors. Society is bombarded with thousands of images every day urging us to buy things. While many people don't even notice the effects that advertising has on society, there are others that believe that consumerism is taking too

much of a role in our lives. One of the most active anti-consumer groups is called Adbusters. Adbusters uses the same techniques and rhetorical strategies used in traditional advertising to actively denounce advertising and consumerism in general. Adbusters spreads their messages through *Adbusters Magazine*, through their website and also runs anti-consumerism campaigns. For example, “Buy Nothing Day” is a day when Adbusters advocates that people not participate in buying behaviors for one entire day. “Buy Nothing Day” is observed all over the world. Another one of Adbusters’ campaigns is called “TV Turnoff Week”. “TV Turnoff Week is all about saying no to being inundated with unwelcome commercial messages. Saying no to unfettered media concentration. And challenging the heavily distorted reflection of the world that we see every day on the screen” (www.adbusters.org).

Advertising has employed a number of attention getting strategies to reach consumers. One of these strategies is using unusual juxtaposition of words and images to make a connection with overloaded audiences. A common example of juxtaposition in advertising is the “before” and “after” pictures in weight loss product advertisements. The “before” picture usually features an overweight man or woman caught in a candid picture that is not very flattering. That picture is then placed next to the “after” picture, a posed professional picture of the same person after losing a significant amount of weight. The juxtaposition occurs in seeing the same person in two completely different forms, fat and skinny, candid and posed. These photographs serve to draw in the attention of those who would benefit from the weight loss product being sold. Another example of juxtaposition used in advertising is the Benetton shock ads. These advertisements used

bold images to address the issue of racial politics. One advertisement shows a black woman wearing a red sweater while nursing a white baby. “The key to Benetton’s campaigns has been their shock value, their willingness to provoke by juxtaposing images that rub connotations the wrong way” (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 49).

Kenneth Burke, communication scholar and rhetorical theorist, developed the perspective by incongruity theory. This theory states that incongruous images and/or words that are placed together have the ability to impact an audience. Adbusters employs this technique in some of their “spoof” ads that take traditional advertising techniques such as glossy paper, big images, realistic models, bright colors, and prominent headlines and applies them in fake “advertisements” that promote anti-consumerism.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer two sets of research questions. (1) How do the Adbusters “spoof ads” use Kenneth Burke’s perspective by incongruity theory? Do the “spoof ads” juxtapose two or more incongruous images, two or more incongruous words, or do they juxtapose images with incongruous words? (2) What is the message of the spoof ads developed by Adbusters? How do the juxtaposed words and images create new perspectives for consumers according to Burke’s theory?

Definition of Terms

Websters defines congruity as “the state or quality of being congruous; the relation or agreement between things; fitness; harmony; correspondence; consistency”

(Websters, p. 303). In other words, two statements or images are congruous if they fit together following accepted logic. Incongruity is defined in Websters as “The quality or state of being incongruous; want of congruity; unsuitableness; inconsistency; impropriety” (Websters, p. 746). Statements can be incongruous if they are not a suitable pairing following accepted logic.

According to Burke (1954), perspective by incongruity occurs when one extends “the use of a term by taking it from the context in which it was habitually used and [applies] it to another” (p. 89). In other words, by using an image word, or phrase of outside of its expected context, juxtaposition is created. Burke’s theory says that new perspectives are created for audiences when their learned pieties are challenged via this juxtaposition. Burke (1954) defines piety as “the sense of what properly goes with what” (p. 74).

Social Historical Context

In today’s society there are many people who believe that consumerism has gotten out of control. Advertisements saturate our every day lives and we are unable to escape the influence of big business without huge efforts. According to McAllister (1996), advertising has begun to employ a number of new strategies in order to enhance the amount of control that they have in the market. Some of these new strategies include place-based media, zap-less ads, cross promotion, sponsorship, database marketing and advertising on the Internet. These tactics allow advertisers to gain access to many more consumers and also give them control over what and how much advertising an audience

is exposed to. While in the view of an advertiser these strategies are seen as positive, new innovations, in the eyes of anti-consumerism activists they are seen as troublesome and frightening. McAllister (1996) goes on to say, "Advertising is headed in a very frightening direction. It is a direction that puts promotional discourse on a collision course with a democratic society" (p. 248). In other words, it is frightening to some that advertisers are gaining so much control of our society. While a democracy assumes an informed public, advertising takes advantage of that public in order to persuade them into certain purchasing behaviors.

Klein (2002) points out that corporations no longer try to sell products, but instead they are selling their own brand identity.

The astronomical growth in the wealth and cultural influence of multi-national corporations over the last fifteen years can arguably be traced back to a single, seemingly innocuous idea developed by management theorists in the mid-1980s: that successful corporations must primarily produce brands, as opposed to products (Klein, 2002, p. 3).

Companies have been able to make more money and gain more control over society by switching from product oriented thinking to brand oriented thinking. Brand oriented companies don't concentrate on the image of each individual product, they instead promote the image of the entire company brand. By selling brands instead of individual products, companies are able to sell a larger amount of separate products under the same trusted brand name because consumers associate with the brand identity.

Scholars are not the only people who have something to say about consumerism in our society. In an article published in the December 13th issue of the *St. Louis Post* Cathy Luh (2005) writes, “Hoarding is an actual medical diagnosis, a suborder of obsessive-compulsive disease. There are 12-step programs for shopping addicts” (para. 4). In an effort to combat this cultural epidemic many have chosen to join the simplicity movement, described as, “... Voluntary simplicity, the national back-to-basics movement whose followers renounce consumerism in favor of stripped-down living. Seeing spiritual bankruptcy in the American Dream that equates success with possessions, they have deliberately decided to earn and spend less” (Erikson, 2000, para. 3). To some the consumer culture has become too commercialistic and they would rather live on just what they need. This movement has inspired many to give up most of their material possessions and live in a much simpler way. Tom Preble Peyton (2001) writes, “I buy what fits. That’s the point of being frugal. Don’t suffer, buy what fits you and buy carefully. Plan and save for your future. Buying to impress the neighbors or strangers on the highway is a path fraught with needless stress – a path that augurs bankruptcy or divorce” (para. 10). The simplicity lifestyle choice seems to be catching on around the nation as more and more people choose to give up their possessions and go back to the basics.

The anti-consumerism movement has many aspects. There are those who object to consumerism because they disagree with the business practices of corporations. The Nike Corporation has been in the forefront of major controversy concerning the production of their sneakers. “Consumers were dismayed to learn that their \$130 Air

Jordans (produced for \$30 in Indonesia) had been made by poorly paid Indonesian workers, as well as sweatshop workers in New York City” (Stabile, 2000, p. 198). Nike chooses to produce their sneakers in countries where they can pay their employees less than the minimum wage in order to save money on production. This corporate greed causes many people to look down upon consumerism.

Environmentalists are another group who oppose over-consumption as advocated by advertising. In her article entitled, “Environment as Consumer Icon in Advertising Fantasy” (2002), Diane S. Hope looks at how advertisements use images of nature and of the Earth. She writes, “The fantasy’s appeal provides consumers the means to deny the terrible dilemma of the commodity culture – the reality that over-consumption accelerates the pace of environmental degradation” (Hope, 2002, p. 164). In other words, advertisers use images that promote a fantasy where over-consumption does not directly lead to the pollution of the environment and other hazards. Hope (2002) goes on to say, “For consumption without guilt, consumers must pretend to believe that buying things is just a good thing to do – even without direct appeal to environmental issues” (p. 165). Hope seems to imply that consumers are aware of the environmental hazards caused by over-consumption but are able to look past these concerns in order to go on living their lives as consumers.

The Adbusters Media Foundation is making efforts to counteract the culture of consumerism. Through *Adbusters Magazine*, campaigns like “Buy Nothing Day” and pieces like their “spoof ads”, Adbusters is making strides to promote a less wasteful way of life.

Literature Review

Perspective by Incongruity Theory

Burke's theory rests on the assumption that the juxtaposition of incongruous symbols presented to an audience will influence the perspective of that audience by calling special attention to the message being portrayed. The audience's habits of thinking may be changed or challenged by the new perspective. He goes on to say that perspective by incongruity is, "a constant juxtaposing of incongruous words, attaching to some name a qualifying epithet which had heretofore gone with a different order of names" (Burke, 1954, p. 90). In simpler terms, perspective by incongruity is achieved through taking one image or word and juxtaposing it against another image or word that is not normally associated with the first.

Because we each have ideas of what is congruous and what is incongruous, we must first decide where these beliefs come from before we go any further. According to Burke, these beliefs are called *pieties*. We first develop these ideals during childhood and then improve upon them as we age. "The connection between our *pieties* and our childhood should seem clear, since in childhood we develop our first patterns of judgment, while the experiences of maturity are revisions and amplifications of these childhood patterns" (Burke, 1954, p. 71). As individuals grow up, they learn traditional pairings and accepted contexts. Incongruity occurs when the juxtaposition of two images, words or a combination of the two contradict our *pieties*. "*Pieties*, then, function as stable frames of reference which direct human perception and determine our

judgments about what is proper in a given circumstance” (Rosteck & Leff, 1989, p. 329).

We judge all things against our accepted pieties as frames of reference.

The following example given by Burke in his book, *Permanence and Change* (1954), serves to illustrate perspective by incongruity.

The lion, if the usual psychoanalytic theory of symbolization is correct, is the male or father symbol *par excellence*. Yet the lion is scientifically included in the cat family, whereas the cat emotionally is female. In both great poetry and popular usage, it is associated with female attributes. Here we have, in our rational categories, an association which runs entirely counter to the associations of our emotional categories. A linkage emotionally appropriate becomes rationally inappropriate (Burke, 1954, p. 73).

In this example the two symbolic associations made with the word lion are contradictory. A lion is almost always thought of as male, “King of the Jungle”. However, a lion is a cat and cats are seen as female. Therefore, a symbol of a lion carries incongruous meanings which can be used in messages intended to alter perceptions.

Tonn and Endress, elaborate and apply perspective by incongruity in their rhetorical study of Ross Perot’s 1992 presidential bid. They write, “Burke conceives of shifting perspectives by means of incongruity planned, as a rhetorical strategy designed to open space for reform by disrupting conventional norms, and likens it to the deliberate antics of a court jester” (Tonn & Endress, 2001, p.287). In other words, Burke’s application of incongruity in his theory is deliberate in order to catch an audience’s

attention like a comic performer would do. The authors go on to examine the distinctions between planned and unplanned incongruity.

During his campaign, Perot did not utilize traditional media as was common practice in politics. He was able to create incongruity between his own actions and those of a typical politician, giving him credibility in the public's eye. "Merely by challenging ingrained political conventions, Perot disrupted the spiral of tragic alienation and cynicism ... Perot's enigmatic campaign signaled that he would not be limited or compromised by the usual trappings of traditional politics" (Tonn & Endress, 2001, p. 288). By acting in a way that was contradictory to the traditional politician, Perot was able to stand out. While Perot's campaign style exemplified the benefits of planned incongruity, it may have been unplanned incongruity that ultimately lost him many votes. "Two pivotal events inadvertently were the primary catalysts for this phenomenon: first was Perot's shocking July withdrawal from consideration; second was vice-presidential candidate James Stockdale's disconcerting debate performance" (Tonn & Endress, 2001, p. 294). These two events were incongruous with the American public's view of what a President should be. That is, if Perot couldn't choose a worthy vice-presidential candidate, how could he then make good decisions to run the country?

Dow (1995) looks at perspective by incongruity as it was used in Larry Kramer's essay "1,112 and Counting", that appeared in *The New York Native*, a gay New York newspaper, in 1983. According to Dow, Kramer used perspective by incongruity to alert the gay community of the AIDS epidemic and to arouse them into action and out of denial. "Kramer's purpose in '1,112 and Counting' is twofold: first, to shatter that

disbelief and denial, challenging the 'propriety' of gay attitudes toward AIDS; and second, to offer new orientation around which gays can coalesce to deal more effectively with AIDS" (Dow, 1995, p. 230). In this case, perspective by incongruity is used as a means to an end, the end being the formulation of a "genuine argument", "an attempt to existentially disrupt a person's world and to shock him/her into a willingness to examine fundamental beliefs and values" (Dow, 1995, p. 226). In simpler terms, a "genuine argument" occurs when a person's core beliefs are questioned and he or she is willing to examine them. Dow's study differs from others in that she looks at perspective by incongruity's effect on an individual's identity. "Perspective by incongruity is Kramer's primary means for facilitating that 'moment' of genuine argument when, having re-conceptualized the meaning and the implications of AIDS for their community, gays confront the possibility of a radical transformation of their behavior and identity" (Dow, 1995, p. 230). Kramer effectively uses perspective by incongruity to create his genuine argument in order to shock the gay community into rethinking their behaviors. Kramer "attempts to create shock, anger, and guilt among gays – emotions that motivate a radical shift in their perceptions of AIDS and of themselves (Dow, 1995, p. 226). This is another example of how the rhetorical strategy of perspective by incongruity has been used as an instrument of social change.

Scholars of visual communication and visual rhetoric have extended Burke's theory of perspective by incongruity to visual images. Bostdorff (1987) examined perspective by incongruity theory as it relates to political cartoons about former Interior Secretary James Watt. She wrote, "Incongruity occurs by misnaming those things which

are the focus of the orientation; one calls them '*the very thing in all the world they are not*' (Bostdorff, 1987, p. 44). In this case, Bostdorff suggests that perspective by incongruity occurs when an image is shown and is called something that it's not. Bostdorff (1987) states that according to Harrison, "The cartoon has a unique ability to produce humor for it can 'juxtapose incongruous visual elements and pair unexpected verbal and nonverbal combinations in such a way that they are decoded together, suddenly'" (as cited in Bostdorff, 1987, p. 44). By taking perspective by incongruity to the realm of the visual cartoon, artists are able to create juxtaposition and humor because of the endless visual pairings available. Furthermore, "While language is superior to pictures alone at conveying information and formulating arguments, the visual image is 'supreme' in its ability to arouse emotions" (as cited in Bostdorff, 1987, p. 43). Because of the cartoon's ability to appeal to the emotions of an audience with juxtaposing images and words, they are excellent examples of perspective by incongruity in action. For example, one cartoon used in Bostdorff's study shows a boy-scout troupe listening to their leader on a trip to a national park. The park is covered with oil towers instead of trees. The leader is telling them what gas companies own the oil towers in the oil field that has replaced the forest. This is a great example of perspective by incongruity theory as visions of oil towers are contradictory to the sign proclaiming this place to be a "National Park".

Demo uses perspective by incongruity to analyze the works of the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist art activist group from New York. Demo's research is especially important to this study of the Adbusters' campaign, because, like Adbusters, the Guerrilla Girls seek to

promote cultural change through their demonstrations and artwork. “The use of terms, images or ideologies that are incongruous reorders – even remoralizes – a situation or orientation in a process akin to consciousness raising” (Demo, 2000, p. 134). The Guerilla Girls make posters and other materials that juxtapose images and words against each other that do not match with traditional ideas of art and museums. “The Guerilla Girls’ rhetoric, then, demonstrates how planned incongruity not only pokes fun at the failures of the social structure but also offers a comic corrective to such failings” (Demo, 2000, p. 134). One of the posters made by the Guerrilla Girls takes the odalisque figure, an image of a reclining naked woman “appropriated from Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’s 1814 painting of the *Grand Odalisque*” (Demo, 2000, p. 148), and places a gorilla mask over the woman’s head [see figure 1].



Figure 1

The image is placed next to a headline that reads, “Do woman have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” (Demo, 2000, p. 148). “The text/image juxtaposition and implied contrast between the Ingres and Guerilla Girl odalisque create an argument by

incongruity that challenges art world claims of gender equality” (Demo, 2000, p. 148).

This poster juxtaposes a well-known art image with text and a gorilla mask. By using such a bold image, the Guerilla Girls were able to make a strong statement using incongruity. The Guerilla Girls are able to harness the power of perspective by incongruity and use it to further their cause, helping women artists and educating the public about women artists.

Adbusters

“We are a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age. Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we will live in the 21st century” (www.adbusters.org). Through the use of a well kept website (www.adbusters.org), Adbusters Magazine, and anti-advertising images reproduced on posters, postcards and calendars Adbusters Media Foundation seeks to undermine the consumerism that has taken over our society. “Adbusters magazine is a not-for-profit, reader-supported, 120,000-circulation magazine concerned about the erosion of our physical and cultural environments by commercial forces” (www.adbusters.org). Adbusters promotes the belief that society is being harmed by an overabundance of commercial influences.

We want to change the way information flows, the way institutions wield power, the way the world keeps the peace, the way the food, fashion, automobile, sports, music and culture industries set their agendas. Above all, we want to change the

way we interact with the mass media and the way in which meaning is produced in our society (*Adbusters* July/August 2003, p. 4).

The Adbusters Media Foundation challenges the entire corporate media world. In order to fight this “enemy”, *Adbusters* uses those same strategies employed by big business to reach their consumers, this technique is often called “culture jamming” (Klein, 2002, p.280). “‘Pranksters’ deploy the tools of the mass media and marketing in order to take advantage of the resources and venues they afford” (Harold, 2004, p.189). By using advertising techniques that consumers are already familiar with to promote an anti-advertising campaign, Adbusters is able to reach an audience using a language that they already understand. According to Naomi Klein (2002), “The most sophisticated culture jams are not stand-alone parodies but interceptions – counter messages that hack into a corporation’s own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended” (p. 281). Adbusters uses this technique in an attempt to overthrow the culture of consumerism.

Advertising

In a society where thousands of images bombard consumers on a daily basis, it is important for advertisers to find ways to stand out in the clutter. Because there is an overabundance of advertising, consumers have become indifferent to the images presented to them. In order to counteract this indifference, advertisers employ a number of different strategies to “hail” (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 85) the attention of consumers. In addition to the juxtaposition of incongruous words and images, some of

the more common approaches used in advertising are reflexivity, appeals to nostalgia, and the display of authenticity. “Advertisers have altered their mode of address to appease viewer alienation by self-consciously drawing attention to advertising’s subtexts” (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. vii). In other words, in order to get the attention of viewers who have become cynical of advertising in general, advertisers have taken to making fun of their own tactics in an outright manner in an effort to gain back credibility with these consumers. The authors go on to give an example of this phenomenon,

TV ads began to call attention to the system of codes and clichés that constitute ads. Recall the Sunlight soap ad that reflexively asks ‘Who writes this stuff?’ as it mocks the typical theme of dishwashing soap ads: that men are attracted to women whose dishes sparkle and shine (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 89).

Advertisers also use nostalgic images to get themselves noticed in the mass of advertising. “Signifiers of history, memory, and tradition provide important frames for advertising aimed at people who nostalgically yearn for a sense of sociocultural place and moral certitude” (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. vii). Historical images and sounds used in ads help to create a good feeling about the advertisers in the minds of consumers. “When invoked as a formal category in ads, history is usually represented as a source of value, which when placed in formal equivalence with the corporate name, lends value to the sponsor” (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. vii). For example, a company that has been in business for over 100 years may choose to make a commercial using images of the business in its early years. The audience may then view this commercial and equate the

company's history with excellence because they have been around for so long. Thus, the company is able to use its own history to increase its credibility in the current market.

Authenticity is another strategy used in advertising. "Questions of authenticity revolve around what is real, honest, pure, and true, whether it be the individual subject, or an object, or even a matter of representation" (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 142).

Authenticity occurs when something is seen as real and true. However, it is difficult for advertisers to harness authenticity and use it in their ads. "The advertisers' quest for signifiers of authenticity is a self-defeating one, because as soon as new decontextualized representations of authenticity register on the screen they begin to appear inauthentic and fabricated" (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. vii). This phenomenon mirrors the fashion industry and what is currently "in". A new style makes its way into the high schools of America and when only a few have the trend, it is considered cool, or authentic.

However, once the trend spreads it becomes overused and those who then wear it are considered to be "poseurs". Therefore, when advertisers seek to appear authentic, they must continuously stay on top of the market and are always looking for new angles of authenticity. Adbusters mimics all of these advertising approaches in various spoof ads. This thesis focuses only on the use of juxtaposition of incongruous images and words in Adbuster ads.

Method

Out of the 41 ads available, 20 "spoof ads" made by the Adbusters Media Foundation over the years were chosen for their use of juxtaposition of images and words

in some combination. These “spoof ad” postcards are analyzed for their use of perspective by incongruity. All images were taken from the Adbusters culture shop link to < www.adbusters.org > accessed on July 28, 2006. They are analyzed to see how they use juxtaposition and what “pities” are being challenged. First, it is determined if the ads juxtapose incongruous or contradictory images, incongruous or contradictory words, or a combination of both words and images. By rhetorical analysis of the “pities” that are being challenged, we discuss what message Adbusters intends to send by presenting such “incongruities.”

Analysis

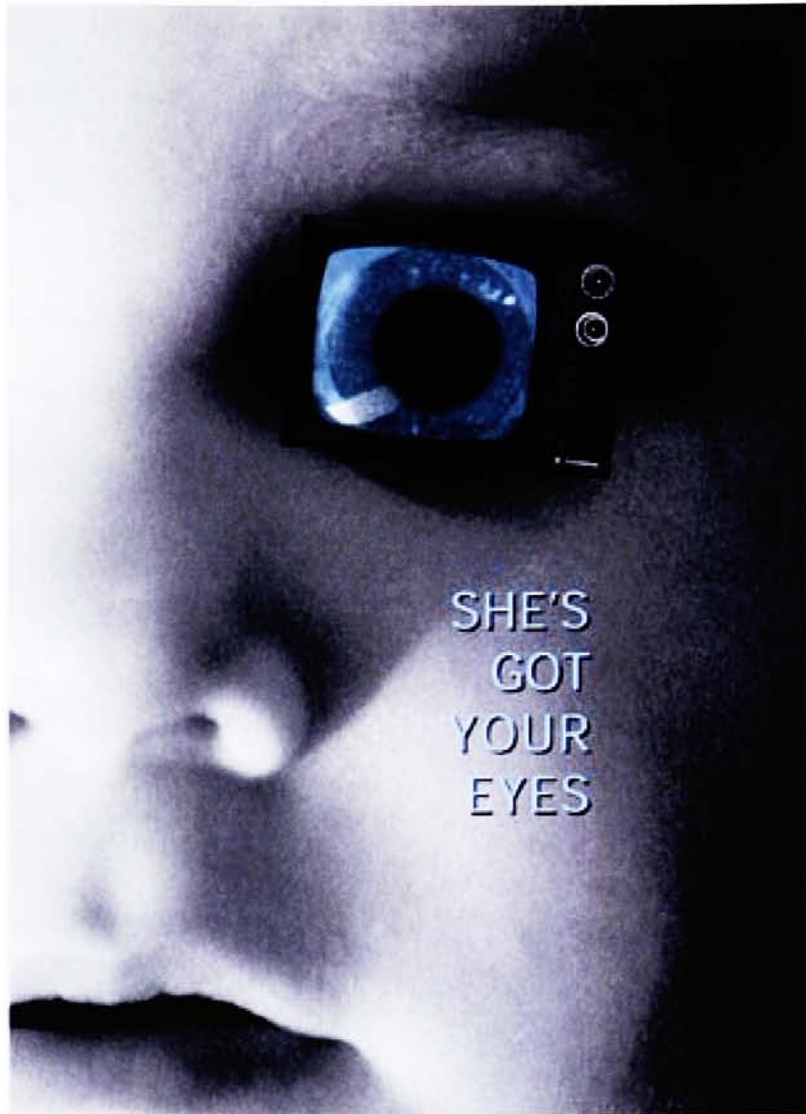


Figure 2

Figure 2 juxtaposes two images and a phrase. It shows a very close up picture of part of a baby's face. Where the baby's eye should be there is a small television with an eye on its screen. The words "She's Got Your Eyes" are printed over the baby's cheek. The message of this ad spoof is found in the juxtaposition of the images and the phrase. The image of a baby is commonly associated with innocence while television is seen as corruptive by the anti-consumer culture. To pair two images, one symbolizing innocence

and the other corruption, is contradictory to “pities” about children and jarring to an audience. The words “She’s Got Your Eyes” are commonly said to parents regarding their children. To put this phrase in this context places blame on the parents for exposing their children to a consumerist culture at an early age. According to Matthew P. McAllister and J. Matt Giglio (2005), advertisers purposely target children. They say, “The flow of commodities on children’s television often blurs the distinction between content and promotional forms, dramatically illustrating the intense level of commercialism targeted at this audience” (p. 27). Furthermore, to show a human having machine parts also jars an audience and causes them to take notice of the image. Through this spoof ad, Adbusters is able to chastise parents for exposing their children to the consumer culture while also showing disapproval of that consumer culture.



Figure 3

Figure 3 shows what looks like your typical Absolut Vodka ad. *Adbusters* uses the well known Absolut fonts and centered large image of the bottle to get their message across. However, the vodka bottle is squished down, there is a little bit of liquid spilled next to it, and the cap is leaning against the bottle's side. Underneath the words "ABSOLUT IMPOTENCE" are printed. Absolut Vodka is advertised as a fun, hip exciting alcohol—a learned piety about alcohol consumption. According to Bonnie Dow (1995), "perspective by incongruity can do more than test audience assumptions about

their external world; it can also question fundamentally their identity in relation to that world” (p. 229). This postcard uses perspective by incongruity to make people think about the consequences of drinking. Adbusters takes the Absolut image and pairs it with the word “impotence” which is completely contradictory to the brand image. To drive their point home further, Adbusters also shows the Absolut bottle slightly deflated—a pictorial reference to a flaccid penis. This postcard uses brand image and sexuality to challenge common beliefs about sex and alcohol in an attempt to scare consumers away from purchasing Absolut.

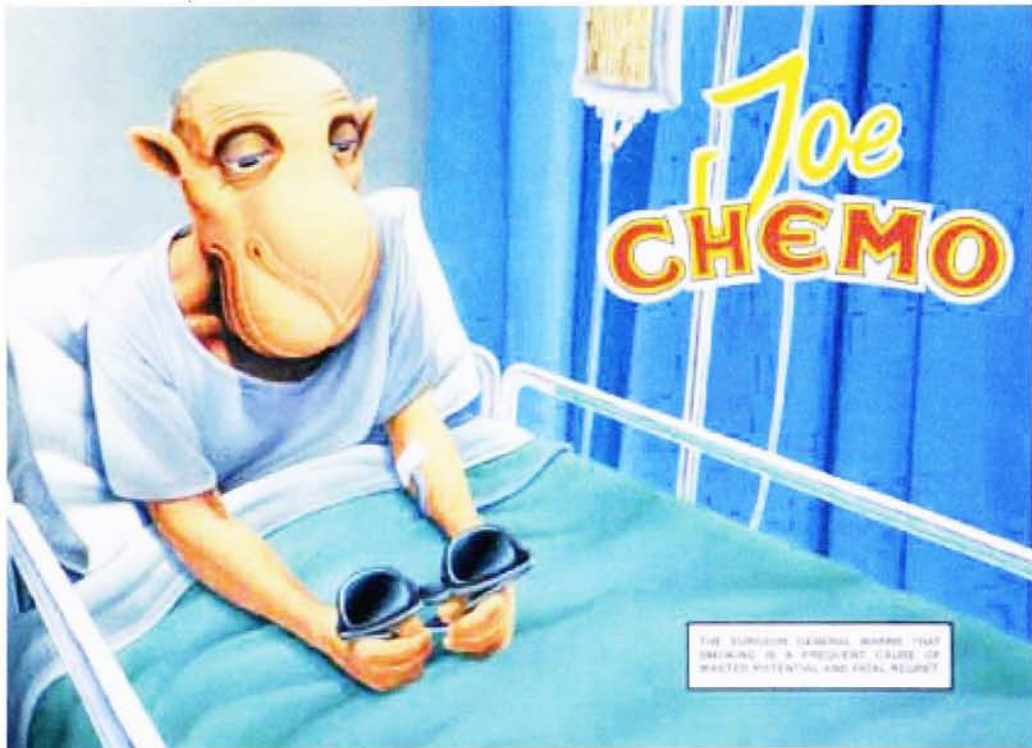


Figure 4

Figure 4 shows the famous cigarette cartoon icon Joe Camel sitting in a hospital bed hooked up to an I.V. drip. In the Camel brand font the words “Joe Chemo” appear. Cartoon characters are normally associated with laughter and are not to be taken

seriously. Therefore, the picture of a famous cartoon character getting chemotherapy is incongruous to our attitudes. The purpose of this message is fairly clear. Smoking cigarettes causes cancer and that is a well-known fact, however, to show an icon of “smoking is cool” fighting the disease is completely contradictory to the messages sent out by the Camel cigarette company. There are many public service announcements and other efforts made by anti-smoking groups on a daily basis. These messages can sometimes be powerful, however they are somewhat predictable in that we are already aware of the dangers of smoking. Adbusters has taken the anti-smoking campaign a step further in showing a cartoon cigarette mascot in a different light. This shows that no one is immune to the effects of cigarettes, not even those who peddle them, thus shattering the piety that cigarette smoking is cool and that the representatives of tobacco—even if they are cartoon characters-- are immune.

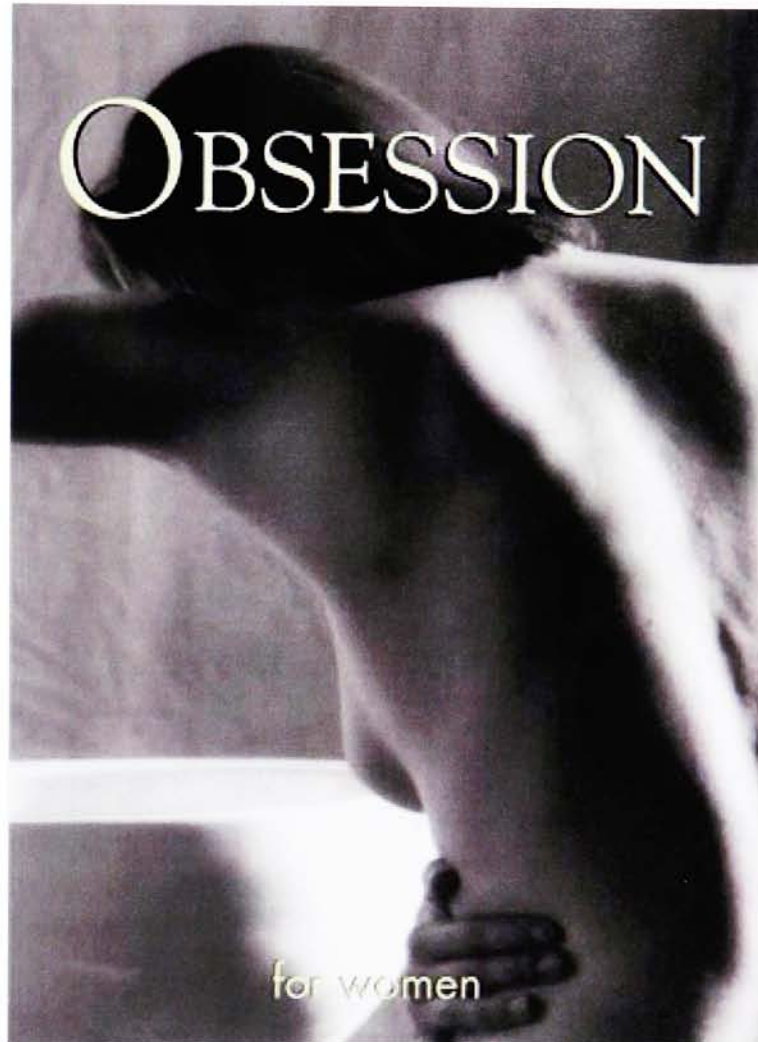


Figure 5

The headline “Obsession” appears on the top of the image and “for women” is printed on the bottom. An extremely thin woman is seen naked from behind leaning over. She is so thin that the bones in her back are visible to us. Upon first inspection this looks just like an actual Obsession perfume advertisement, however, when looking closer it becomes evident that the model is leaning over a toilet, indicating she is vomiting, a direct association to the eating disorder, bulimia, indicating an “obsession” with body weight. This image challenges the piety that beautiful people are flawless and that we

should try to look like them, by showing how models remain so thin. According to Christine Harold (2004), “The ad tells viewers that women are dissatisfied with their own bodies because ‘the beauty industry is the beast’” (p. 190). This postcard also juxtaposes an image of “beauty” with a social issue by using a combination of one word—the brand name-- and two images—a woman’s body and a toilet bowl.



Figure 6

Figure 6 is the male counterpart to figure 5 and juxtaposes an image and a word. Perfume and cologne advertisements have a very distinct style. They usually have one or two extremely attractive people wearing little clothing, printed in black and white and posed provocatively. Figure 6 has the general look of an actual Obsession cologne advertisement but has a much different message. Instead of the expected good-looking male model posing in a sexy position for the camera and looking at the viewer or off into space, the model is looking into his Calvin Klein boxer-briefs. The brand name “Obsession” is printed as a headline across the top of the image and the words “for men” appear on the bottom. The ad juxtaposes what we would expect to see in a cologne advertisement with a cultural issue. The image of a cologne model is paired with a man obsessed with his penis. Christine Harold’s thoughts can also be applied to this ad. The beauty industry is also under attack here, only this time from a male perspective. This postcard takes the word “Obsession” from being a brand name and transforms it into a cultural commentary that challenges the piety of “beautiful people” using both images and words to make its point that the obsession with body image promoted in many advertisements is a form of mental disturbance.

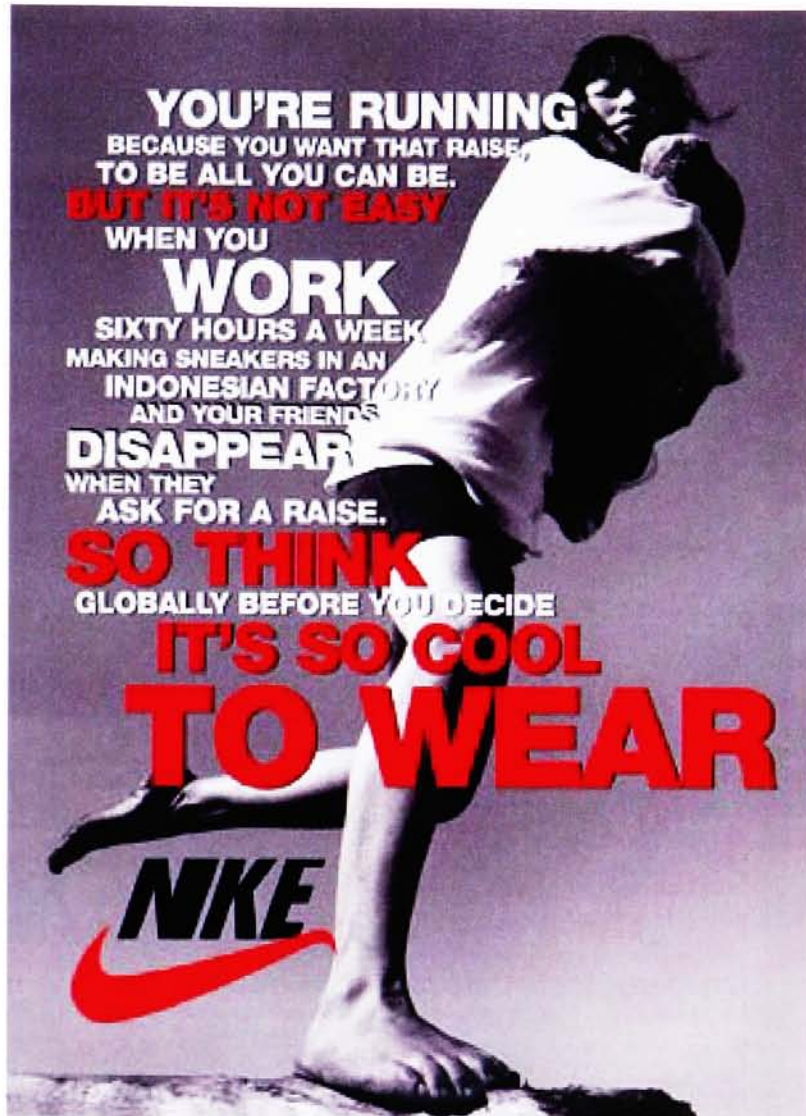


Figure 7

Figure 7 juxtaposes the Nike brand name against the image of a barefoot woman running while holding a baby wrapped in a blanket and looking frightened. Over the picture there is a passage that reads, “You’re running because you want that raise, to be all you can be. But it’s not easy when you work sixty hours a week making sneakers in an Indonesian factory and your friends disappear when they ask for a raise. So think globally before you decide it’s so cool to wear Nike”. The Nike brand image strives to be

associated with athleticism, strength, and excellence and has worked hard to keep this association in the minds of its consumers. However, in this piece the Nike brand logo is paired with images and words of poverty and fear and recalls the controversy over Nike “sweatshops” as discussed in the article by Stabile that points out the Nike corporation’s modes of production. This controversy has caused many to look down upon Nike and associate the brand name with corporate greed instead of excellence. “When the actual manufacturing process is so devalued, it stands to reason that the people doing the work of production are likely to be treated like detritus – the stuff left behind” (Klein, 2002, p. 196). This postcard challenges the piety that we don’t need to think about how or where our fashions are produced.



Figure 8

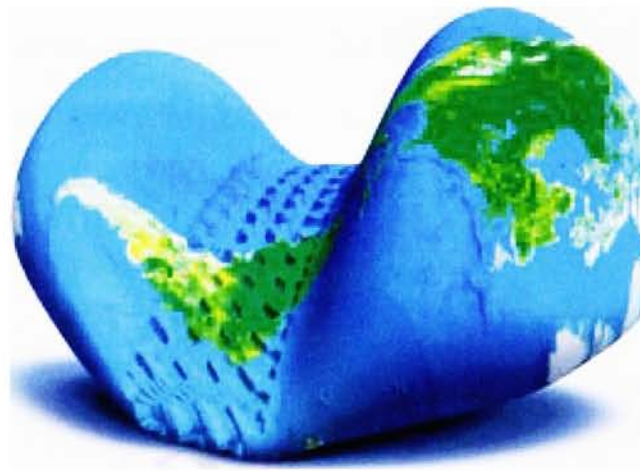
Figure 8 plasters the words “ORGANIZED CRIME” in big red letters over many company logos replicated in smaller print juxtaposing these two words against the many images of company logos. The term organized crime is associated with the mob, not usually with big business. This ad shatters the piety that big corporations are “good” and makes viewers think about “crimes” in a new light. For those involved in the anti-consumer culture, big companies are criminals and the enemy of the public. However, for the average person pairing the words “organized crime” with well-known company logos is at first shocking as it challenges their pieties. But the association recalls the many criminal trials of corporate leaders and may inspire new thinking in consumers. Bostdorff (1987) states that, “Perspective by Incongruity involves altering an orientation or expectation by viewing an incongruity, which is inconsistent or not in agreement” (p. 44). This postcard does just this. It presents an incongruity between the average person’s view of corporations and that of someone involved in the anti-consumerism movement.



Figure 9

Figure 9 shows a fifties housewife holding a giant orange box that reads, “Prozac Mood Brightener”. The box is designed to look just like a Tide laundry detergent box. The tagline “Wash Your Blues Away” appears toward the bottom of the image. The most common piety associated with fifties housewives is that they are considered to be perfect wives. They cooked, cleaned, and kept the house in order while their husbands went to work each day. Goldman and Papson (1996) say that ads that use shock value,

“engage the spectator in a candid discourse of reflexivity; reflexivity about ads and their underlying assumptions, reflexivity about commodity fetishism and the norms of consumption, and reflexivity about the arbitrary character of commodity signs” (p. 88). This postcard takes the idea of the “perfect woman” and replaces her laundry detergent with Prozac, an anti-depressant. Since anti-depressant drugs are commonly prescribed, these two images in juxtaposition are “shocking” to the cliché of the happy housewife.



What was that bump?

Figure 10

Figure 10 offers a social commentary on how vehicles are destroying the environment. The card shows the earth deflated with a tire tread going through the middle of it. Underneath this image it says, "What was that bump?" Images of the Earth are associated with the environment, nature, and "Mother Earth". Cars can be seen in many different lights including luxury, convenience, and on a more negative side, pollution. The creators of this postcard have a very clear message. Our obsession with the convenience of cars is killing our planet. This message mirrors the concerns found in Diane S. Hope's article as discussed earlier. However, unlike the advertisements Hope mentions that use images of the globe to create a fantasy where over-consumption doesn't affect the environment, this postcard points out the harsh realities of consumerism concerning the environment. The piety that motorized vehicles have made life more convenient and therefore better, is shattered by this postcard. By taking two images that seem to have nothing to do with each other and placing them together, a very powerful message is effectively delivered.



Figure 11

Figure 11 juxtaposes two images, employees pledging their allegiance and the McDonald's company logo. The postcard shows two McDonald's employees standing as though they are pledging allegiance while in front of a huge McDonald's company logo. The way the two are standing reflects a piety of loyalty and pride that is usually associated with pledging allegiance to the United States by saluting the American Flag, not to a fast food chain. By pairing this image of loyalty with the company logo, this

postcard says that McDonald's employees are trained to be loyal to the company as a substitute for the nation.



Figure 12

Figure 12 has a background of raw beef and foregrounds an image of a cow made of lettuce. Since cows are “beef” the image reminds us that beef is dead cows. The lettuce is a symbol for vegetarian food and presents an alternative to eating dead cows. The card challenges the piety that we need to eat meat to survive. This postcard has no words and is able to get its point across juxtaposing only two images.

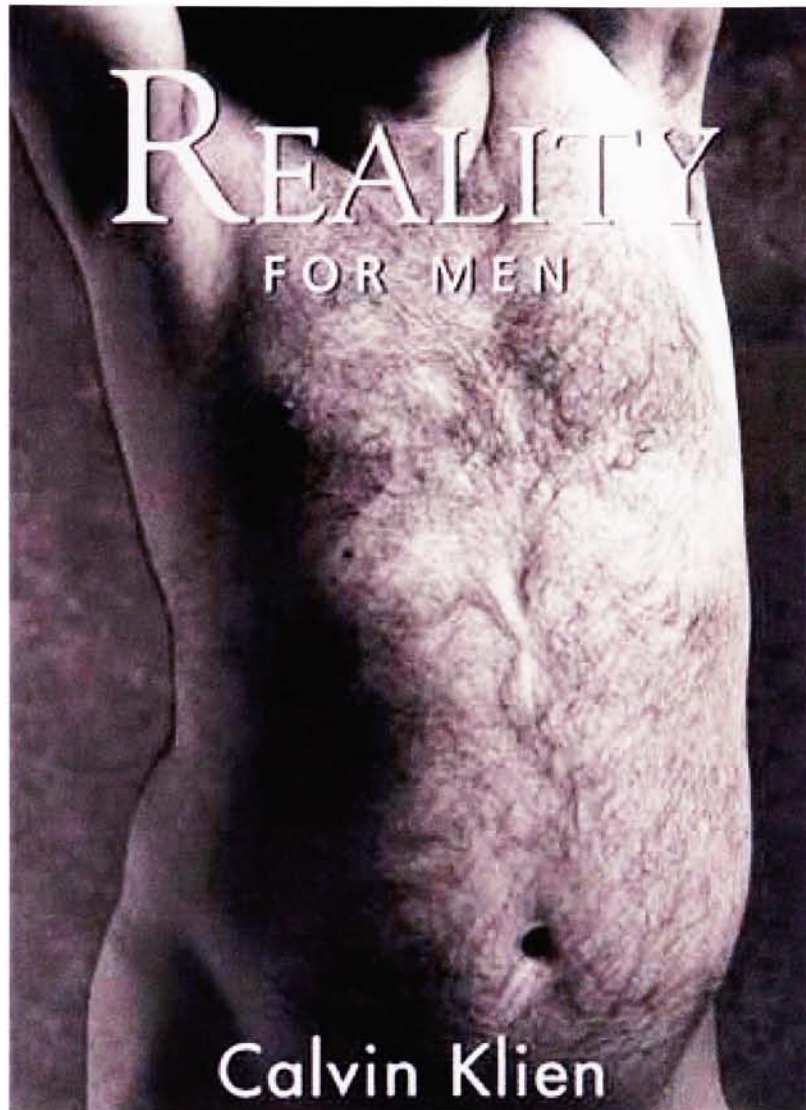


Figure 13

Figure 13 is also a parody of a perfume/cologne advertisement like figures 5 and 6. This ad juxtaposes an image and a word. Cologne ads are known for their use of extremely good-looking men. However, while figure 13 resembles a cologne ad in that it's black and white with a nude model posed provocatively, the model is not your typical good-looking man. The headline reads "Reality for men". This card juxtaposes the expected model of a cologne ad with a normal, overweight man and uses the word

“Reality” to make the point that perfume and cologne ads promote a body image that is unrealistic for the average person. The piety that ads represent how real people look is challenged in this image. As in figures 5 and 6, Christine Harold’s statement that the beauty industry is the enemy is also applicable to this advertisement.

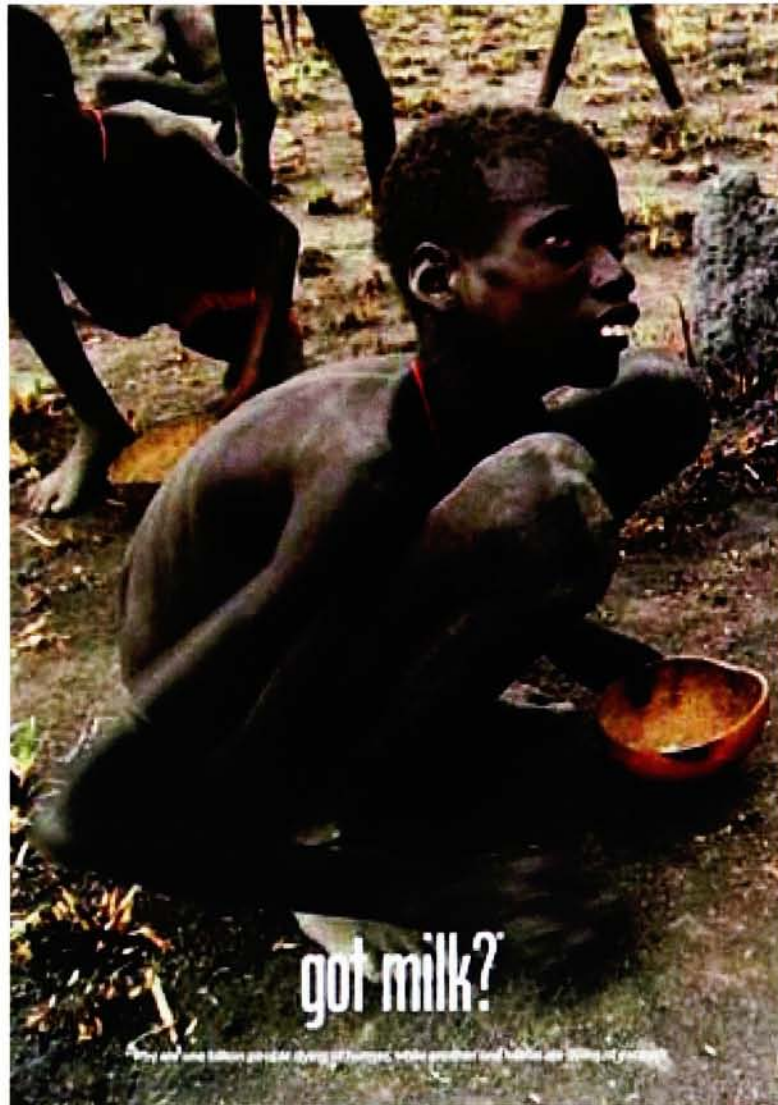


Figure 14

Figure 14 shows the image of a starving child crouched on the ground holding an empty bowl. Below the image are the famous words, “got milk?” This postcard points out that while here in America we worry about whether or not we have enough milk in the fridge, elsewhere in the world there are children starving. Parents often saying things like, “There are people starving in Africa” when they want their children to eat. This postcard takes that pious statement and gives starvation a face. This piece aims to show that there are those who are less fortunate in the world and effectively uses juxtaposition of a powerful image and well-known slogan to do so.

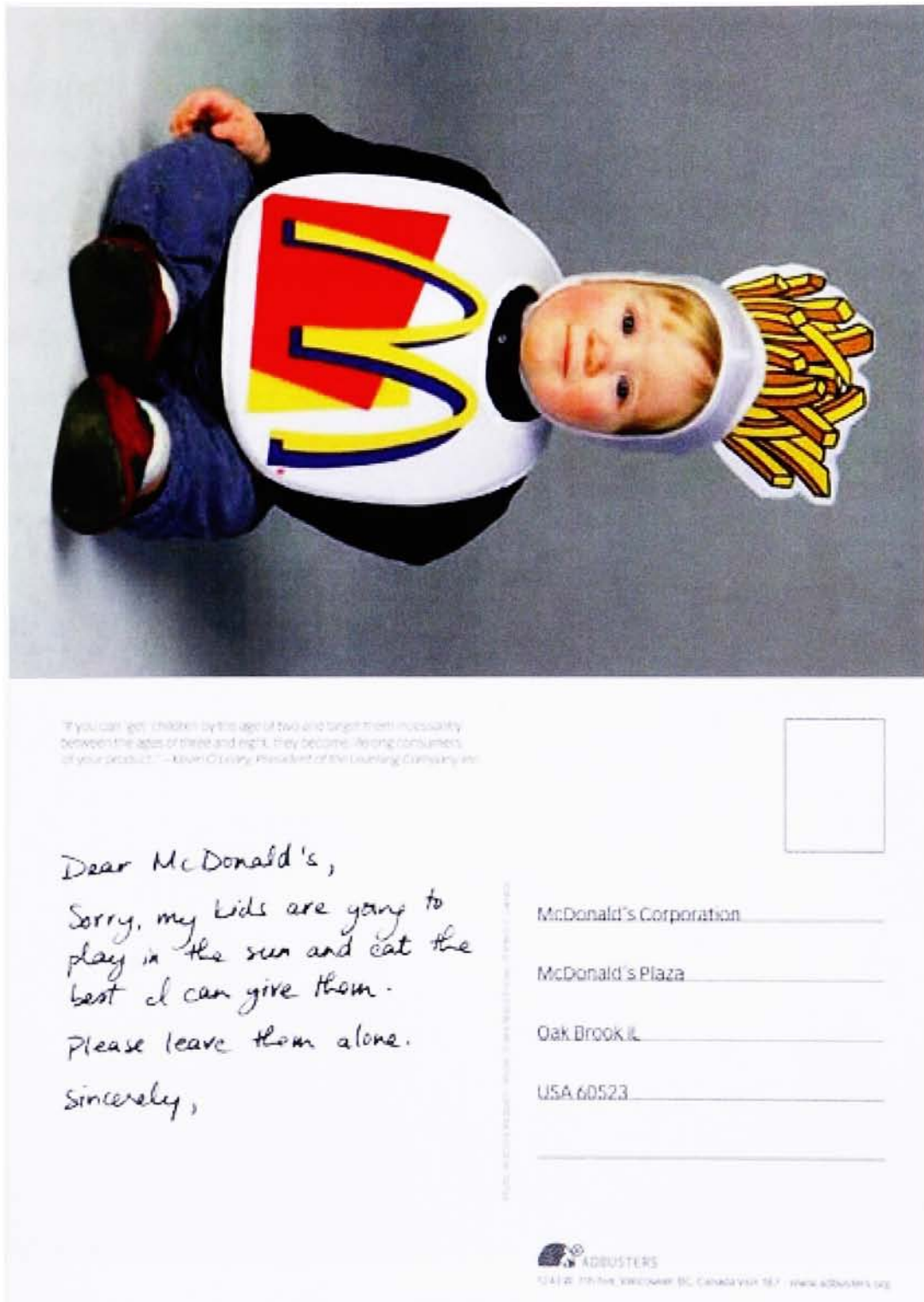


Figure 15

Figure 15 uses juxtaposition in a different way. On the front of the postcard there is a picture of a cute toddler dressed as a box of McDonald's french-fries. This image alone suggests support for the McDonald's corporation. However, on the back of the card there is a message that reads, "Dear McDonald's, Sorry, my kids are going to play in the sun and eat the best I can give them. Please leave them alone." The image on the front of the card is completely contradictory to the words on the back. By juxtaposing the toddler image usually associated with innocence with the disapproving message on the back, Adbusters is able to catch the audience's attention by challenging the pieties that restaurants provide healthy food and that McDonald's is a family eatery.



Figure 16

Figure 16 again uses a child to symbolize innocence as in Figure 2. There is juxtaposition between many different images. The postcard shows a baby feeding from its mother's breast, as she stands nude holding him. The baby is also nude, however it's entire body is tattooed with company logos. The act of a mother breast-feeding her child is seen as one of the most pure and natural occurrences. This image juxtaposes that natural act with the act of branding as if to say that we are actively feeding our children consumerism.



Figure 17

Figure 17 also features a number of different company logos and is able to show juxtaposition using only images. However, instead of being plastered on an innocent baby, the logos are in place of the stars on the American flag. The American flag is the

most patriotic symbol that there is for people in this country and is in the forefront of the piety of national pride. The stars on the flag represent each of the nation's fifty states. By replacing those stars with company logos, Adbusters suggests that we no longer have pride in our heritage, but instead that we have become so obsessed with commercialism that we associate having many successful companies with national pride.



Figure 18

Figure 18 shows two men in the military firing a weapon out of an airplane. Underneath the image are the words, "Terrorist or Freedom Fighter?" The American military is commonly seen as respected, honorable, "good guys" by those living in the United States. This postcard takes the American military and associates it with the word "terrorist" which is contradictory to the pieties that Americans hold about our own forces.

However, in other countries our military is seen as a terrorist group that is not there to help but rather to occupy. This postcard makes that point clear by juxtaposing an image of American pride with a word associated with fear and dishonor.



Figure 19

Figure 19 shows a fast food hamburger with “52% FAT” printed in large type. Fast food restaurants usually show pictures of their food coupled with good words to

associate them with such as “100% real beef” or “100% delicious”. This ad instead takes an unexpected approach and points out the hamburger’s fat content. This is incongruous juxtaposition because it is contrary to what a viewer would expect to see in a hamburger advertisement. According to Anne Demo (2000), “The mix of outlandish imagery and statistics forms a credible hyperbole that raises consciousness about the inadequacies of the social order without scapegoating” (pp. 153-154). While the image of a hamburger is not “outlandish”, juxtaposing it again the statistic mocks “normal” fast food ads seen on a regular basis. This is another attempt by Adbusters to point out the nation’s unhealthy eating habits by juxtaposing an image with a phrase.

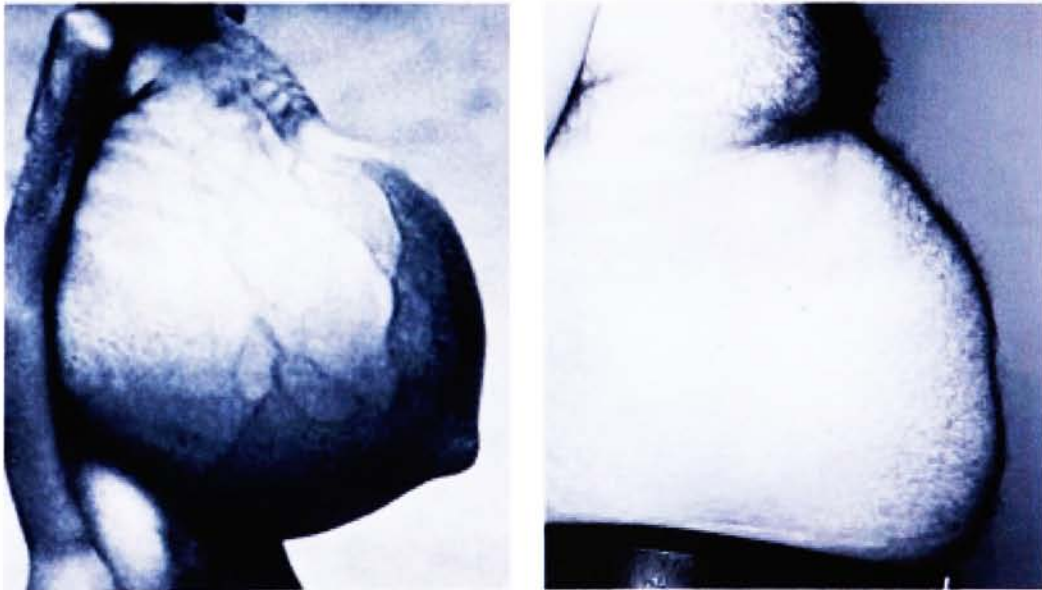


Figure 20

Figure 20 juxtaposes two separate images. The first image is of a starving man with a large distended stomach. The second image is of a very overweight man's fat stomach. One stomach is large from starvation and the other from over consumption. By juxtaposing the two images next to each other, Adbusters points out once again that there are those who are dying from starvation while Americans suffer from obesity. Adbusters points this out in the hopes that people will think twice before over eating while others have nothing.



Figure 21

Figure 21 is very different from the other images analyzed thus far. Instead of using juxtaposition to make a point, figure 21 explains clearly how companies use juxtaposition to sell their products. In the right hand corner of the postcard is a photo of a fast food hamburger as in figure 19. Underneath the picture is a passage that points out that the burger is more than half fat and yet it is marketed to children by a "happy"

clown. Next to the hamburger is a pack of Marlboro cigarettes with a passage that addresses the fact that millions have died from smoking trying to emulate the Marlboro Man. The company uses a cool and calm cowboy to sell death and disease. In the bottom right corner is a picture of a sport utility vehicle. Above it there is a paragraph that points out that SUVs are marketed as vehicles that help you to escape to the outdoors and yet they cause tons of pollution and use much more gas than the average car. Finally, in the left bottom corner is a picture of the John Lennon "Peace" shoe made by Nike. The passage that accompanies this image states that Nike has reached "a new low" in its marketing efforts. In the middle of all of these different images is the headline, "From sick minds come sick products".

Conclusions

Research Questions Restated: (1) How do the Adbusters "spoof ads" use Kenneth Burke's perspective by incongruity theory? Do the "spoof ads" juxtapose two or more incongruous images, two or more incongruous words, or do they juxtapose images with incongruous words? (2) What are the messages of the spoof ads developed by Adbusters? How do the juxtaposed words and images create new perspectives for consumers according to Burke's theory?

Of the twenty Adbusters "spoof ads" analyzed, seven used juxtaposition of two or more images only, thirteen used a combination of words and images in juxtaposition and no ads juxtaposed only words. The themes of these postcards can be broken down as follows: destroying the innocence of children (1), anti-drinking/smoking (2), body image

(3), where products come from (2), the branding of America (4), depression (1), the environment (1), American eating habits (4) and the military (1). These themes fall into four general message categories. These categories are branding, over consumption, body image, and product origination.

The branding category includes six “spoof ads”, some dealing with the over branding of the American society and others concerning the destruction of our children’s innocence through a force-feeding of consumer culture. Messages about over consumption occur in six “spoof ads”. Those concerning the unhealthy eating habits of Americans, starvation elsewhere in the world, Anti-alcohol and smoking advertisements are included in this category. There are three “spoof ads” dealing with body image issues that send the message that advertising encourages people to have unhealthy attitudes about their bodies. The first two point out that even those who appear to be flawless have imperfections and the third brings to light the unrealistic standards of beauty shown in the media. Finally the product origination category includes two advertisements. One reflects the sweat shop controversy associated with Nike athletics and the other concerns the origins of beef. The three remaining “spoof ads” deal with the American military, depression and the environment.

Discussion and Future Research

The Adbusters Media Foundation created these “spoof ads” with specific goals in mind. They wanted to get people thinking about the ways in which we live our lives. If these advertisements are successful, the world would be a much different place with both

positive and negative consequences. For example, if body issues were addressed by people around the nation, people would be happier with themselves and able to lead more fulfilling lives. If beauty was not equated with thinness there might be less anorexia and bulimia. The positive consequences continue if we discuss the implications of ending over consumption. If some countries didn't consume so much food, there would be more to go around and world hunger could be ended. The issue of branding also poses some interesting scenarios. While *Adbusters* preaches that branding has gotten out of control and that society has become entirely too obsessed with consumerism, it is important to remember that consumerism drives the world's economy. Branding has become so popular that a generation of branded people has emerged. Naomi Klein (2002) writes, "Corporate sponsors and the culture they brand have fused together to create a third culture: a self-enclosed universe of brand-name people, brand-name products and brand-name media" (p. 60). This branding culture drives individuals to purchase brand-name merchandise, adding to the wealth of our nation.

In looking through the letters to the editor in issues of *Adbusters Magazine* there is a mixed reaction to the organization's efforts. While some praise them for their "TV Turnoff Week" as an escape from consumerism and a way to bring families together, others seem concerned that the group has gone too far in trying to enact change. One reader from New York named Ethan Timm writes, "Urgency must not become militancy, for that will destroy us. Remember to bring us change, not destruction" (*Adbusters Magazine*, July/August 2003, p. 3).

The study is limited in that there is no analysis of how the Adbusters campaign changed over time. Further no attempt to judge the effectiveness of the spoof campaign was made. While this study analyzed the Adbusters “spoof ads” for use of perspective by incongruity there are many other directions for scholars to take. For example it would be interesting to study the advertisements found in Adbusters Magazine and determine what other advertising approaches are mimicked in the anti-consumer ads. The Adbusters Media Foundation is a fascinating subject for the world of communication because they seek to enact social change through efforts. Their magazine is the perfect candidate for an analysis of their anti-advertising advertisements. Many studies have already been done on mainstream advertisements and their effects. However, Adbusters uses the same advertising techniques to send a different kind of message and to reach a different kind of person. The effects of these advertisements could and should be studied in the future.

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