Applied Studies in Discursive Research

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Connecting Visual Discourse and Consumer Response: a Critical Examination of Mainstream Taxonomy[*]

Abstract : One of the most exciting areas of current research in advertising rhetoric concerns the patterns which can be identified in the structure of visual discourse according to the different types of consumer response it elicits. In this article I take a critical approach towards a largely accepted taxonomy of visual rhetorical figures and examine the hypotheses derived from it concerning consumer response. I show that this mainstream classification fails to account for the meaning-operations elicited by figurative images in advertising. I suggest a theoretical apparatus which will help future research be more accurate in evaluating advertising effects. I discuss the implications of my contribution for the construal of future hypotheses regarding belief, recall and persuasion of visual figures in pictorial advertising.

Keywords : visual discourse in advertising, visual rhetorical figures, brand meaning, consumer response, persuasive imagery in commercial communication.

1. Placing the issue against current theoretical background

In the past twenty years of research on commercial communication there has been a growing trend in analyzing visual advertising from a rhetorical perspective (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 874-875; Scott 2008, 301-304). Ever since 1994, when Linda Scott (1994a) published a seminal article arguing that pictures should not be dismissed as peripheral cues in advertising and demonstrating that they can contain complex tropes or sophisticated arguments, scholars focused on developing theories about the way in which images persuade in the realm of brand communication.

One of the most interesting questions that emerged was this: could we draw any connection between specific types of visual discourse and specific classes of consumer response? (McQuarrie and Mick 1999, 37-39) Although it is widely accepted and proven that consumers' various interpretations of advertisements are shaped by their own life interests and cognitive capacities (Mick and Buhl 1992, 332-336) many researchers have shown that the structure and aesthetic properties of the visual discourse itself can also influence the mode

in which the audience will engage it and the inferences it will draw from it (McQuarrie and Phillips 2010, 384-385; Scott 1994b, 471-473; Scott and Vargas 2007, 349-351).

Edward McQuarrie, one of the leading figures in this field, emphasizes this idea:

> "In the marketing area, the promise of rhetoric is that new insights into the structure of advertisements may be gained, and that the differences so identified will make a difference to consumer response. It is this commitment to causal understanding that permits one to call himself both a rhetorician and a marketing scientist' (McQuarrie 2008, 93-94).

Therefore, any attempt to classify visual rhetoric in advertising should address this connection if it is not to be considered 'mere taxonomizing' - an accusation which rhetorical theory has had to face through the ages.

Bearing this guiding principle in mind, I will try to assess a classification of visual rhetoric in advertising which is widely accepted in this field of inquiry. It was set forth by McQuarrie and Phillips in their article, *Beyond Visual Metaphor* (2004). I believe their contribution is an excellent basis for discussion, but it contains several weaknesses which I will point out. I will also outline the main steps required to solve the theoretical problems that emerge from these weaknesses.

The authors explicitly adhere to the previously stated principle that a taxonomy is useless if it does not predict different types of consumer response. I wish to answer one clear question: to what extent do these authors succeed in deriving testable hypotheses which establish connections between differences in visual discourse and differences in consumer response? I will carefully examine the argumentative route of this article in order to see if the derived hypotheses relate to the assumed principles of classification and if they can predict relevant distinctions in audience response to advertisements.

After completing the discussion of these authors' approach on classes of visual rhetoric, I will suggest a few distinctions which I believe to be essential for understanding the different types of consumer response construed as a function of visual discourse structure.

2. General outline of McQuarrie and Phillips' taxonomy

In the following I will outline the main points of McQuarrie and Phillips' classification of visual rhetorical figures and explain in what respects I consider it to be inadequate. I will draw a few important distinctions which will then lead to a more complex discussion concerning the interplay between source-domain and target-domain in decoding the meaning of an advertisement. I will argue that the current mainstream account of visual rhetorical figures fails to capture crucial aspects of advertising rhetoric. But first let us state briefly what the authors' contribution consists of.

The authors state clearly that they only classify visual rhetorical figures and consciously leave out other forms of visual discourse such as 'degree-zero

discourse'. The distinction between pictures which involve figurativity and pictures that are 'straightforward' or 'degree-zero' was first suggested by Groupe Mu[*]: figurative images require an inference on the part of the reader to make sense of what he sees; the viewer is supposed to read-into the picture, to replace the observed level with a construed level in order to interpret the message. 'Degree-zero' images, by contrast, show the viewer exactly what he is meant to see (Groupe Mu 1992, 252-259).

In the realm of advertising, 'degree-zero' discourse means showing pictures of the product or of typical users (for example, an image of a horse promoting riding courses). Figurative discourse consists in showing readers an image which requires decoding in order to be connected to the brand message (for example, an image showing a flying horse to convey the power of some batteries). McQuarrie and Mick define figurative images as a form of 'artful deviation' which work in a similar way in visual and verbal discourse. In both texts and pictures, the 'artfully deviating' discourse creates an incongruity in the mind of the 'reader' who is then challenged to engage in a process of decoding in order to understand the author's intended meaning (McQuarrie and Mick 1999, 38-39). It is with this type of images that Phillips and McQuarrie are intending to deal with in the classification under discussion.

The first criterion for their taxonomy of visual rhetorical figures is what they call 'visual structure'. The authors assume that all rhetorical figures are 'concerned with the relationship of one thing to another' (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 117). The two elements an image connects may be presented in three ways: by juxtaposition (both elements present in the image), by fusion (parts of the two elements are combined to create an unitary object) or by replacement (only one element is present, the other being suggested). I will provide a few examples shortly after stating the second criterion of their typology, which concerns the way in which the two elements are to be related in the mind of the audience.

The second dimension of the taxonomy is 'meaning operation'. The authors believe there are only two ways a consumer makes sense of a visual rhetorical figure: either by 'connecting' two elements or by 'comparing' them. It must be said that 'connection' is such a vague term that it does not tell us much in the context of visual figures: it is trivially true that two terms are supposed to be connected under some aspect, otherwise there would be no point in putting them together. So it is not clear to me how this 'connection' criterion is supposed to form a basis for a classification. Still, the authors explain that they will place under the umbrella of 'connection' anything that does not imply *comparing* the two items. The operation of comparison is further subdivided to distinguish between comparison aimed at identifying similarities, on the one

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[*] Groupe Mu is a Belgian group of scholars who contributed to important developments in recent scholarship on rhetoric, including a rigorous linguistic theory of figurative language. In the last two decades they devoted a special attention to visual rhetoric. Their *Traité du signe visuel* published in 1992 distinguishes between types of rhetorical operations which occur in visual communication.

hand and comparison meant to emphasize the opposition between two elements, on the other.

By crossing the two dimensions - 'visual structure' and 'meaning operation' - the authors come up with nine distinct types of visual rhetorical figures. What is important to note here is that the resulting matrix is not meant to be a mere enumeration of the existing visual figures nor a guide for those working in the creative department of an advertising agency. Its main purpose, as stated explicitly and repeatedly by the authors is 'to link taxonomical categories to empirical differences in consumer response' (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 117). They argue that *complexity* increases as one moves along the visual structure dimension from juxtaposition to fusion to replacement. They also claim that the operation of comparison, whether directed at similarities or differences, is inherently *richer* than the operation of connection (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 120). Finally, they take richness and complexity as key variables in predicting consumer response.

Although this idea of connecting visual structure with audience reactions is a valuable starting point for a deeper understanding of how advertising imagery works, I have some serious misgivings about some of the assumptions underlying the classification itself, which I will make explicit after examining a few print advertisements and trying to see how they fit in the authors' taxonomy.

3.   Opening the critical discussion: analysis of sample print ads

I will now analyze a few examples of randomly selected print ads in order to make clear how this taxonomy works and also to pave the way for discussing some serious shortcomings of the authors' view on meaning-operations.

Let us take a look at a print ad for Zurich Chamber Orchestra (see Fig.1). Under the 'visual structure' aspect, we are dealing with an instance of *fusion* meant to express the effects of listening to the music of Zurich Chamber Orchestra: the first element (the girl playing the flute) and the second element (a woman's face expressing strong emotions and tears) are fused in order to suggest how touching music can be and to promise a strong emotional experience when attending this Orchestra's shows.
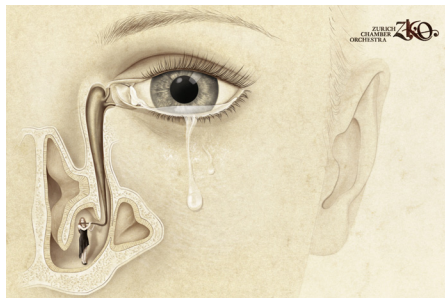

Fig.1   Print ad for Zurich Chamber Orchestra

As far as the meaning-operation is concerned, we are dealing with a causal relationship between the two elements: the girl playing the flute (who metonymically represents Zurich Chamber Orchestra) causes such intense feelings in the audience (metonymically represented by the close-up of the crying eye). McQuarrie and Phillips would probably place this causal relationship under the label of 'connection'.

The following example, although displaying the same visual structucre, will show an important dissimilarity with the first one. This will lead us to the first objection which can be made to the authors' account of meaning-operations. Let us examine the print ad for a newspaper from Switzerland, SonntagsZeitung (Figure 2). Famous characters of the American political scene are fused in the form of a Russian Matryoshka, suggesting that behind every influential decision-maker there is another person who actually holds control of his ideas, words and actions. The text, 'SonntagsZeitung. The insight story' expresses the brand promise: this newspaper will unveil the true reasons for political decisions and will uncover the connections which exist between political actors. Their readers are promised a deeper perspective on the real causes of political moves.
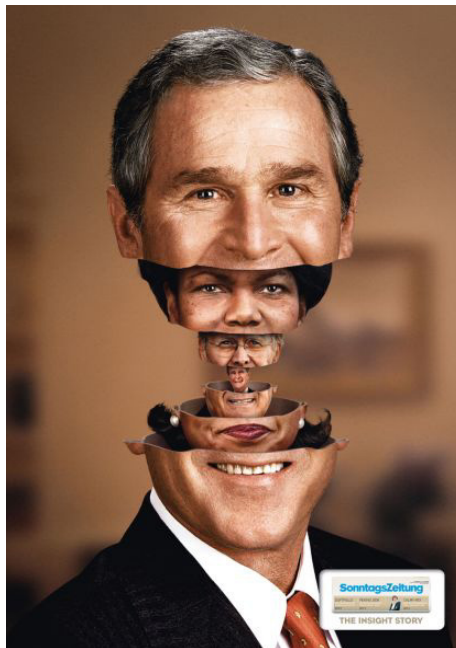

Fig.2   Print ad for SonntagsZeitung

Now let us think how Phillips and McQuarrie's taxonomy applies to this case. As for visual structure, it is clear we are dealing with fusion. But what about the meaning-operation the consumer is invited to make? Does it stop at judging the relationship between the elements that get fused, as the authors

claim? Actually this is not what is happening here. Yes, a consumer will look at the image, will identify the fusion and will wonder what it is supposed to mean. He will probably arrive at the idea: 'Behind George Bush, there is Condoleezza Rice and behind her there is Donald Rumsfeld and so on' - he will realize the image suggests the intricate threads of the political games. But in order to understand the meaning of this advertisement, he will take yet another step: he will wonder how this image is relevant to the brand promise expressed in the text. Only then will he understand the picture as a figurative representation of the newspapers' promise to deliver the 'insight story'.

Going back to our taxonomy, what should we say this meaning-operation is? Is it connection, comparison for similarity or comparison for opposition? Well, that depends on which level of the meaning-deriving process we are placing the question. If we are to follow the authors and only explore the relationship between the elements that get fused, then we should classify it as 'connection' - referring to the connection between the various characters portrayed. But this is not the decoding-level where the key to the message actually is. Going deeper, we realize that in fact there is a comparison for similarity: the work of SonntagsZeitung's journalists is compared to the act of opening the Matryoshkas. An abstract idea is delivered through a material, concrete representation and the relationship between the two is to be decoded in a figurative way. McQuarrie and Phillips' taxonomy does not cover this deeper level of understanding, which is actually the essence of the meaning-operations performed by consumers when 'reading' a visual trope as a vehicle for a brand message.

Their failure to account for this level of the decoding process should not be seen only as a 'labelling' problem. In fact, if it turns out that their account of meaning-operations is not properly constructed, the essence of their contribution may prove to be misguided. In their conceptual system, the type of meaning-operation determines the 'richness' of the ad. They use 'richness' as a key variable in predicting the type and intensity of consumer response to that ad (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 128-129). But if their operationalization of the dimension 'richness' ignores an important part of the decoding process a consumer performs, their predictions about audience response have few chances of being accurate. The richness of a visual trope in advertising will not be adequately assessed if one stops at identifying the relations which exist between elements of the picture. As important as this identification may be, it sometimes represents just one step in the decoding process. Neglecting the other one - the connection between the image itself and the brand message - can lead to erroneous predictions about consumer response to the ad.

To state my point with more clarity, I will bring forth two more examples. While the cases discussed so far were based on *fusion*, the following two display the visual structure of *replacement*. This is how the authors define replacement: 'the most complex way to present two image elements is to have one replace the other in such a way that the present image calls to mind the

absent image' (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 117). As for meaning-operations, the 'reader' of an ad may be invited to compare, contrast or connect the present image and the absent one (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 116).

With this conceptual apparatus in mind, let us proceed to the analysis of the print ad for Monster.com, presented in Fig.3. The present element is a ballerina in the middle of a team of soccer-players. Since it is clearly not a case of juxtaposition or fusion and since the authors claim that these three types of visual structure exhaust the possibilities of putting together two elements, we will diagnose it as a case of *replacement*. So one of the soccer-players is replaced by a ballerina. By creating a powerful contrast with the rest of the image, the ballerina then becomes the focal point of the print. The key to the message is offered by the text: *Stuck in the wrong job?* followed by the brand name, Monster.com, a website for job-seekers.

Fig 3. Print ad for Monster.com

Now let us reconstruct the process of meaning-deriving which a consumer would take when encountering this print ad. His attention would probably be drawn by the element which seems out-of-place there and he will implicitly ask himself: why is she (the ballerina) there (in the wrong place - the team of soccer-players)? The schema-violating function of this image is obvious. When confronted with this type of incongruity, the reader will turn to the text hoping to find there a key to the message. Most modern consumers are used to the *anchoring* function (term coined by Roland Barthes 1964, 44-48) which the verbal elements have in relation to the images in advertising. In this case, the question 'Stuck in the wrong job?' - followed by the address of the website - provides an unequivocal interpretation of the image. The reader will then infer that the ballerina was metaphorically representing those people who feel they do not belong at their workplace. The meaning-deriving process will not stop here,

though: the audience is expected to see Monster.com as the solution to this problem. By entering this website, people are promised to find a job more suitable to their skills. On a more subtle level, employees are suggested that perhaps there is nothing wrong with them if they are not fully-appreciated at their current workplace. Maybe the environment is simply not the best to make full use of their capacities.

The meaning-deriving process elicited by this ad can be represented schematically as heuristic steps performed by the reader:

> Step1: spot the incongruity (ballerinas do not fit in the soccer-player schema);
> Step2: connect the question 'Stuck in the wrong job?' with the image => decode the figurative representation: the ballerina represents people who do not fit in at their workplace;
> Step3: understand Monster.com's promise to be a solution to this problem.

It is important to note that McQuarrie and Phillips' taxonomy only accounts for the first two steps of this process. When they talk about meaning-operations, they only refer to the relationship which can be established between the present element in a picture (in our case, the ballerina) and the absent one (the missing soccer-player). Based on the meaning-operation so identified, they proceed to assessing the richness of the ad and then predict consumer responses according to it. I believe their failure to capture crucial steps in the meaning-making process elicited by an advertisement has deep roots in a weakness of *ad rhetoric* literature in general: the failure to distinguish clearly between brand message (purpose of an ad on a semantic level, which usually consists in attaching a meaning Y to brand X, the result of *inventio*) and form of the ad discourse (resulting from a second-level *inventio*, which usually consists in *diegesis* creation as well as *elocutio*, which concerns the stylistic choices employed in the ad). It often happens that an ad tells a story or employs visual metaphors which are indirectly connected to brand values and a multi-layered interpretation is required from the consumer to make sense of the ad. Many rhetoricians start with the assumption that if brand X is attached meaning Y, at least one of the two 'terms' must be pictorially represented in the ad itself (Forceville 1996, 67-81, Maes and Schilperoord 2008, 227-228), which is clearly not the case. I will dedicate the last part of this article to solving this theoretical weakness in mainstream literature and to clear the ground for future research in consumer response to visual advertising.

For now, I would like to bring forth one more example which will make the need for these theoretical distinctions even more salient. In this example there is one image that points to another image in a figurative way, but the meaning-decoding process is not completed by finding the relationship between the two images. Another step is required, which is getting from the emerging idea to the brand signification, a step which cannot be captured by McQuarrie and Phillips' approach.

Let us take a close look at the print ad for a Fides, a private health-care center (Fig 4).

Fig. 4   Print ad for Fides Salud

We see a big number 14 personified, walking on crutches in the hall of a hospital. Nobody around to help, the grey background intensifying the feeling of loneliness and despair. The text says: 'We needed a health care provider that treated people like people' followed by the brand name, Fides Salud. It is, again, a case of replacement: the number stands for the sick person. It indirectly conveys the message that most other hospitals ignore the fact that their patients are individuals with particular needs, whose lives are precious and who need all the dedication they can get from doctors and nurses. The impersonal feel of other hospitals is brilliantly conveyed through this visual trope.

If we are to follow the meaning-deriving steps a consumer would take, we would again realize they do not stop at finding the absent element which the present element alludes to. If it were so, all a consumer would get from this ad would be the sadness of sick people's condition. But in fact there is an additional step which the reader of the ad takes: by reading the text after having grasped the image, he will understand that Fides promises to provide the opposite of what is seen in the picture.

One can understand better the importance of this interpretive step if one contrasts the meaning of this image *as a magazine photograph* and its meaning *as an advertisement*. To do this mental experiment, let us start by ignoring the part of the print which contains the brand message. If we were to read an article about the awful conditions sick people go through while being in hospitals, this image could be a powerful rhetorical device to convey the feelings of the patients. People reading the article would see the personified number in the

picture as a figurative representation of most nurses' attitude towards the ill. Now if we add the text and the brand message, the the meaning-deriving process goes further in order to grasp the semantic structure of the ad: 'brand X has meaning Y' here translates into 'Fides Salud is a health-center where people's individuality is treasured' and one might add 'This is what makes Fides different from its competitors'.

This experiment indicates that perhaps Phillips and McQuarrie's account would in fact be accurate if we treated the image as a magazine photograph. The only meaning-operation a reader would have to make in that case concerns the relationship between the two images. If a reader's interpretation stops there, he is not missing any key-point. But this does not work if we see it as an advertisement, because in this case the message is not adequately understood unless the reader takes the additional step of connecting the image he sees with the brand signification. This point becomes more clear of we try to place the two instances (magazine photograph and advertisement) into the authors' classification. If it were a magazine photograph it would clearly be diagnosed as a figurative analogy with the condition of real patients. We would deal with what the authors coined 'comparison for similarity'. But if we see it as an advertisement, we are faced with a serious difficulty in deciding what type of meaning-operation is elicited by this ad: apart from the aforementioned analogy (the image figuratively points to the way other hospitals treat their patients), there is also an obvious *opposition* here, between Fides Salud and the other hospitals. In fact, this opposition is actually at the core of the brand promise. So if we try to follow the authors' classification, we encounter the same dilemma we discussed for the Monster.com ad: we are unable to diagnose the meaning-operation according to the typology because there are distinct levels on which the meaning-decoding process occurs and the authors' approach can only account for the primary one (the one connecting one image to another image).

Should we conclude from this experiment that Phillips and McQuarrie's classification only covers visual tropes in general, but does not capture their specificity in the realm of advertising? That would be a tempting thing to say, since in many instances their typology seems to ignore precisely that which defines brand communication: the additional level of connecting the idea which emerges from the visual trope with the intended brand signification. It might seem reasonable to dismiss their categorization as dealing with general instances of visual figures. This would inevitably discredit all their predictions about *consumer* response to advertising, since the reader-consumer differs from the reader precisely because he is by default searching for brand information.

Still, I believe such dismissal would be a mistake since their typology actually works for prints such as the Zurich Chamber Orchestra ad discussed earlier and for a large number of examples invoked in their own article. In these cases the meaning-operations can be properly labelled according to their matrix and used further to predict consumer response. But their approach cannot properly diagnose the cases where an image figuratively stands for an idea (level

1) and then that idea is further connected with the brand's conceptual identity in a surprising way (level 2 of meaning-deriving). Their conceptual apparatus turns out to be misleading in those cases where figurative decoding goes well beyond getting from one image to another.

Keeping in mind the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the examples discussed so far, I will now proceed to summarizing the main objection I have to the authors' account of visual rhetorical figures. I will also try to identify the roots of that mistake and indicate what I believe to be a good solution to this theoretical problem.

4. Weaknesses in McQuarrie and Phillips' account of meaning-operations

McQuarrie and Phillips start with the correct idea that any visual figure in advertising is meant to establish a relationship between one thing and another (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 117). Indeed, if an image is to work as an advertisement for a brand, it must show something which directly or indirectly helps to convey a feature of the brand, may it be an attribute, a benefit or simply an idea which is part of a brand's conceptual identity. On a semantic level, any advertisement has this structure: brand X has meaning Y (Batey 2008, 207-212; Maes and Schilperoord, 2008: 227-228). No matter the degree of fiction or figurativity involved, any advertisement will create a context in which the brand is attached a specific meaning.

But then the authors take a fallacious step and claim that all visual rhetorical figures are concerned with the relationship of one *image* to another *image* (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 119) and go on to assume that the meaning-operation 'X has meaning Y' is reducible to the relationship between one image and the image it stands for. The analysis I conducted so far on randomly selected print ads was meant to show precisely that the two meaning-operations (image1→image2 and brand X→meaning Y) often occur at different levels and we will arrive at wrong predictions about consumer response if we consider them to be identical. I believe their mistake is rooted in a confusion that is maintained in the mainstream literature on visual rhetoric in advertising.

When discussing visual tropes in advertising, most authors make the following set of assumptions. They take from linguistic and cognitive studies the idea that a metaphor consists in putting together a target-domain and a source-domain. The operation a reader has to perform consists in mapping the features of a source domain onto a target domain (Forceville 1996, 108-118; Lakoff 1993, 202-211). Nothing wrong up to this point. But when applying this theory to advertising, they tend to oversimplify the meaning-making process an advertisement involves. This oversimplification is most obvious in Maes and Schilperoord's work who give an otherwise brilliant account of visual rhetoric but fail to capture the second-order signification process that is characteristic to advertising. The following quotation illustrates their standpoint:

"All [advertising] messages can thus be subsumed under the generic conceptual template *product X is somehow related to Y,* or, in a quasi-formal notation: $X \sim Y$ [...] In terms of the propositional template $X \sim Y$, the first analytical step should thus identify the X and Y objects. If the source and target terms are identified, the $X \sim Y$ can be rephrased as an instance of a metaphorical $X = Y$ relation" {Maes and Schilperoord 2008, 229-233).

This statement illustrates the mistaken underlying assumption that the target of a visual trope is the brand message. While this is true of some prints, it is not what generally occurs when visual figurativity is employed in advertising. Actually when we investigate real advertisements, what we find is that in many cases there are two distinct levels of meaning-creation. On the first level, there may be two images, one being the source and the other one the target of a metaphor. They may indeed be put in relation to one another by juxtaposition, fusion or replacement, as McQuarrie and Phillips suggest. But in many instances there is yet another level, where the brand may be put in a variety of relations with the target-source couple which the image points to.

For the purpose of clarity, let us translate this double level of meaning-creation into a formal notation thus:

Step 1: What does the image stand for?
        P (the picture he sees) $\rightarrow$ Z (another image, an idea, a situation)
        The reader must identify, construct or reconstruct Z departing from what he sees.
Step 2: How does Z stand for brand signification?
        (Z & X) => (X≈Y)
        The reader must figure out how Z relates to the brand X. Once he understands that, he will arrive at a meaning Y attached to the brand X.

In order to see how the examples of print ads discussed earlier fit into this scheme, I will now suggest a brief reconstruction of the steps necessary to derive the meaning of these advertisements. In all the examples below, I will use the following notations: X for brand, Y for the meaning attached to it and Z for the context which the image points to, the target of the visual metaphor.

Let us consider the case of SonntagsZeitung first (Fig.1):

Step 1: P (the Matryoshka doll) $\rightarrow$ Z (political ties underlying decisions of leaders)
Step 2: (Z&X) => [(X≈Y) translates into 'SonntagsZeitung ≈ delivers the insight story to their readers')]

The meaning-decoding route elicited by Monster.com's (Fig.3):

Step 1: P (the ballerina in the middle of soccer-players)$\rightarrow$Z (people feeling out-of-place at work)
Step 2: (Z&X) => [(X≈Y) translates into 'Monster.com ≈ solution to get a suitable job]

The print ad for Fides Salud (Fig.4) calls for a similar meaning-decoding route:

> Step 1: P (the personified number) → Z (hospitals take people for lifeless entities)
> Step 2: (Z&X)=> [(X≈Y) translates into 'Fides Salud ≈ health-care center that treats people well)

If one follows this analysis on a sufficient number of print ads which employ visual figures and then takes a look at McQuarrie and Phillips' taxonomy, one will see quite clearly where the roots of their mistake are. Their mistake lies in rendering equivalent the first level of decoding (P→Z) and the other level [(Z&X) => (X≈Y)]. It is this confusion that makes their account of meaning-operations so misleading.

Having sorted out this confusion, I will now explain how my contribution refines the authors' hypotheses about consumer response. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to the first level of meaning-making the *ad discourse-level* and the other level, *the brand meaning-level.*

5. Implications for hypotheses regarding consumer response

5.1. Hypotheses regarding belief

The authors predict that 'richer visual figures will result in a greater degree of belief change when specific beliefs are measured'(Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 129). I have mentioned earlier that their operationalization of the concept 'richness' concerns the scope of the meaning-operations performed by the audience when interpreting the ad. If we bear in mind the results of the analysis conducted so far, this hypothesis should be reconsidered under two aspects.

First, richness will be measured differently, taking into account the two levels of meaning-deriving a consumer must go through. As I have demonstrated, an ad's interpretation often goes beyond establishing a relationship between two images which may be put together by juxtaposition, fusion or replacement. In order to assess the richness of an ad, consumer researchers will have to take into account the two interpretive steps elicited by the respective ad and according to these steps they may place the ad in a suitable spot on the continuum ranging from unequivocal interpretation to ambiguity.

A second aspect I want to emphasize is the sharp distinction between belief concerning brand meaning (previously noted with X≈Y) and belief concerning the content of the image itself and what it stands for (previously noted with P and P→Z). This distinction is essential for the accuracy of measurements concerning consumer response. These two dimensions of an ad's credibility need separate questions in any interview with consumers. To illustrate

my point, consider the case of SonntagsZeitung. After understanding the ad, the consumer may hold two distinct beliefs. One of them concerns the image itself and what it stands for (P→Z) and the other one concerns the brand message (X≈Y). The former would translate into the question 'Do you believe that between these political personalities there are intricate relationships so that one's voice reflects another's interests and opinions?' The latter would be expressed through a completely different question: 'Do you believe that this newspaper has the ability to unveil these hidden stories?' For any research dealing with the credibility of an ad, the issue must be parsed experimentally. Taking these two distinct dimensions for one is a serious mistake which would prevent researchers from giving a correct report on how consumers perceived a particular advertisement.

This distinction is not only important for accurate measurements in real marketing contexts. Its theoretical relevance goes deeper than that: it enables us to predict differences in consumer response among different advertising genres. In some genres the *diegesis* of a commercial is itself fictional (therefore not aspiring to 'believability' in the first place) but the brand promise is truth-comitted, while in others both levels are subjected to 'credibility' judgments. Think of the campaigns for Milka chocolate, for example. The *diegesis* contains purple cows, talking marmots and bears working in a chocolate factory. By employing so many fictional elements, Milka ads are clearly aimed at attracting the complicity of viewers who are expected to engage the commercial as a pleasant story and not make any judgments on whether these events could occur in reality. So there is no point in assessing the 'believability' of the *ad discourse* itself (the 'P' variable in my notation). But there are of course relevant questions which can be asked about the *brand promise* (the 'X≈Y' in my notation): do people believe the milk really comes from healthy cows in the Alpen? Do they believe this chocolate contains more nuts than the competing brands? Or do they dismiss it as 'commercial talk' they are deeply skeptical about?

If we contrast this kind of ad with the so-called 'testimonials' or 'slice-of-life' commercials, we will see more clearly the need for the distinction I urge. In testimonials, for example, both the *ad discourse* (P) and the *brand message* (X≈Y) are expected to be believable. People who talk about products should seem honest and should provide proofs for the claims they make about the respective products' benefits. In 'slice-of-life' commercials, the *diegesis* (P) should be a realistic depiction of the audience's normal environment. If it employs artificial dialogues which would never occur in real life, it already misses its point and will most likely be thought to be a 'bad ad'. People will be drawn away from it precisely because it departs from the expectations implied by this genre. Of course, no consumer will consciously evoke such sophisticated reasons when asked about his reaction to a specific ad. Nobody will say 'I do not like it because it departs from the genre conventions'. But he will object to a dialogue in a testimonial by saying: 'Nobody says that in real life' referring to the preposterous unnatural tone of the advertising characters. In contrast, no such

remarks will be made concerning the Milka ad - no consumer will say 'Marmots do not talk in real life', precisely because of the genre-conventions people implicitly make use of when judging a commercial.

We will understand why these considerations are crucial to the present discussion as soon as we remind ourselves that the authors' declared purpose was to draw a connection between visual discourse and consumer response. The distinction I suggest enables us to draw such connections. These examples show that the distinction between belief concerning the first level of signification (P and P→Z) and belief regarding the second level (X≈Y) might predict the way consumers engage various genres of advertising. When a consumer watches a testimonial, he implicitly assesses 'believability' for both levels. When he watches an ad with Star Trek characters, he will restrict expectations concerning 'believability' to the second level (X≈Y).

It is essential to see that such expectations are a consequence of the type of visual discourse employed, not of individual differences among consumers[*]. Therefore when working toward a theory that conceptualizes consumer response as a function of the visual discourse, we need to distinguish between the two levels in order to account for the reactions an advertisement elicits. If we take 'believability' as a variable, we can then distinguish between ads where both levels are supposed to be believable and ads in which it is only the brand promise that is truth-comitted. According to the level which is subjected to 'believability', we will then be able to predict the evaluation criteria a consumer unconsciously uses when deciding whether he likes the advertisement or not.

5.2. Hypotheses regarding liking and recall

The importance of the distinction I urge will become even more salient as soon as we discuss another hypothesis of McQuarrie and Phillips'. The authors predict that more complex visual figures and richer visual figures are better liked and better recalled subsequent to ad exposure (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 129). Once again, the question needs experimental parsing: what is it that gets better liked and better recalled? The ad image (P), what it stands for (Z) or the brand meaning (X≈Y)? This parsing leads us to an

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[*] Such differences are undoubtedly important and have received a lot of attention in marketing literature. For example, Mick and Buhl (1992) profile the way in which consumers' personal background shapes their readings of advertisements. But these differences are not relevant to our present discussion. If we want to develop a theory that links consumer response to the rhetorical devices employed by a visual discourse, we must search for patterns in consumers' reactions to the ad (ways of engaging the ad) that are constant across different types of viewers. It is easy to understand this if we see how genre-theory works in literature or movies. People expect a comedy to be amusing, but they have a different set of expectations when watching a tragedy – nobody will leave the cinema by saying 'It did not make me laugh' if he knew the movie was not supposed to be a comedy in the first place. It is only when such expectations differ according to the genre, not to the individual differences among consumers, that we can diagnose them as a consequence of the discourse itself.

important condition for the effectiveness of a visual trope in advertising: there must be a clear connection which between the first level ($P \rightarrow Z$) and the second one ($X \approx Y$). If this connection is relevant and easy to grasp, then the advertisement has good chances of being liked. Also, if the ad discourse ($P \rightarrow Z$) manages to integrate the brand meaning seamlessly, there are higher chances that people who remember the ad will also remember the promoted brand.

Unfortunately, mainstream literature almost never discusses the *additional* requirements rhetorical figures *in advertising* must fulfill in order to be effective. But one of the most important ones is this: there must be a clear, relevant connection between what a person sees and what the intended brand meaning is. In fact, what distinguishes commercial imagery from other types of visual persuasion is precisely this second-order connection which pictures must convey: the connection with the brand-meaning. One and the same visual trope could be brilliant as a magazine poster but awful as an advertisement because it may not be relevant to the advertised brand. No matter how creative the ad discourse is, the consumer will by default search for a connection to the brand; if he does not succeed in finding it, then he will simply consider it to be a bad ad. We have all heard disappointed remarks from people watching a commercial and asking 'What is the connection?' instead of the 'Aha!' moment which accompanies the successful resolution of a puzzle. If the reader cannot make sense of the ad, he will most likely reject it. And for him to be able to make sense of it as an ad he must be able to see the connection with the brand.

So brand-meaning-connection is a condition for consumers to like the advertisement. What about recall? The fact that consumers often remember the ad but fail to remember the promoted brand is a widely-known problem which advertising practitioners have discussed extensively (for an excellent account of this problem see Batey 2008, 207-223; Sutherland and Sylvester 2000, 208-268). Therefore perhaps it would be a good idea for academic researchers to move from the overused question 'What are the effects of visual tropes in ads?' to a more interesting one such as 'What features should visual tropes have in order to be both relevant for the envisaged audience and for the brand?'. Finding systematic relationships between specific features of the ad discourse and stronger brand recall would be a fascinating avenue for research, one that could enrich our understanding of the specificity of persuasive imagery in advertising. But it is an avenue we cannot take unless we first grasp the distinction between the ad discourse ($P \rightarrow Z$ in my earlier notation) and brand meaning ($X \approx Y$). To make an analogy, we could not discuss how the pedal must be connected with the wheels to form an efficient breaking-system if we artificially merged them together under a vague concept such as 'the structure of a car' and then went on to measure different parametres which concerned this 'structure' taken as a whole while ignoring the difference between what function each of them must execute. In order to analyze the various ways in which ad discourse can be built so as to integrate brand identity and to lead the reader towards a clear brand

meaning, we need to understand that these levels elicit different meaning-operations on the part of the consumer-reader.

6. Further implications for research on tropes in advertising

6.1. From belief to persuasion

The distinction I argue for also has implications for the assessment of another dimension, 'persuasive impact' of an advertisement. Most researchers start off with the assumption that an ad needs to be 'persuasive' and then proceed to asking consumers how believable they thought a specific print or video ad was, because they know persuasion and belief go hand in hand: one can only be persuaded by a discourse if one believes the arguments set forth in that discursive sequence. But this approach has little connection with what goes on in reality when an advertisement is effective.

It happens many times for consumers to enjoy the story of a brand or to immerse in the aesthetic pleasure caused by a visual metaphor, none of which aspires to be believable since they employ fictional elements. In these cases consumers *like* the advertisement and remember the brand promoted. This may shape their brand preference and, provided that all other things concerning pricing and real quality of competing brands are equal, they may buy the branded product (this indirect route to persuasion in advertising is beautifully described by the famous practitioner Michael Newman 2003, 142-198).

But this type of persuasive impact has less to do with *believing* a set of arguments and more to do with *enjoying* a brand's artful discourse. In the notation used earlier, we might say that in many cases the *ad discourse*-level (P→Z) is a source of aesthetic pleasure for the audience of an ad. This pleasure may subsequently shape brand preference, despite the fact that the ad discourse (P→Z) can often depart from any claims of believability because of the genre it pertains to.

It is important to note here that this 'departure from claims of believability' does not have any ethical connotations whatsoever. It is not to say that some brand promises are true, while others are false. Such concerns have nothing to do with the nature of the present investigation. What I argue is this. When an ad employs a story or a joke instead of a plain talk on product attributes, the default evaluation a consumer makes is not: 'Do I believe it?' but 'Do I like it?' This does not imply any manipulative moves, since we do not say of people engaging a science-fiction movie or a comedy that they are being manipulated. It is a different way of engaging the text, not as a piece of news, but as fictional discourse. But these fictional features only apply to the first level (P→Z) not to the second level (X≈Y). The truth-requirements of the brand promise itself (X≈Y) remain untouched.

Consider the ad in Figure 5, for example. The print is part of an international campaign meant to promote a brand of dogfood, Frolic. The image

shows two dogs who form a rather peculiar couple: she is a slender, elegant and fine-mannered poodle, while he is a charmless, fat bulldog. The text says 'She's only with him for his biscuits'. Does anybody wonder whether this personification is *believable* or not? It is quite unlikely for this to be the typical audience response to this image. Rather, the audience will probably enjoy the good joke. They may think it alludes to those relationships in which one is after the lover's money and find it funny to see this situation translated into the dogworld, with the center of interest being the Frolic biscuits.

Fig. 5   Print ad for Frolic biscuits

Believability of the ad image itself (P) or the situation it stands for (P→Z) will not come into question here. But this does not mean that the believability of the brand promise itself is not important. The brand promise (X≈Y) here is this: 'Frolic biscuits are so delicious that dogs become passionate about them'. This brand promise must be believable, otherwise there are few chances for this ad to have any effect. Moreover, the real quality of the biscuits must rise up to the level of this brand promise, if the campaign is to have any sales results. But from these ethical considerations no special request follows in what regards the first level of signification (P→Z). This level may employ a wide variety of fictional elements, which the reader might enjoy as a piece of fiction or as figurative language, therefore suspending any truth requirements.

This example shows once again that it is important to distinguish between the two different levels of meaning-making of an ad because – according to the genre – these two may elicit different assessment criteria on the part of the reader. A correct conceptualization of the relationship between visual discourse and consumer response can only be achieved if we understand which

'effects' are the result of the first level of signification and which are elicited by the second level.

6.2. The construction of hypotheses on the effects of tropes

The fact that the audience may use different evaluation criteria according to the structure of the advertisement's visual discourse has yet another consequence for the way we derive hypotheses about consumer response. We must pay close attention to the way we construe the question 'What happens in terms of consumer response when an ad employs a rhetorical figure?' Most experimental designs are meant to find out if ads with figures are more or less memorable, likeable or persuasive than 'degree-zero' ads (McQuarrie and Mick 2003, 580-583). To put it more bluntly, they are trying to see if the mere presence of a trope makes the ad more effective.

In the light of the present discussion, this question could be construed in a completely different way. The presence of a trope actually changes the way a consumer engages the ad. If he encounters a visual figure he will enter a 'puzzle-solving mode'. If he manages to solve the riddle and understand what the image stands for and he further understands how it relates to brand meaning, he may like the advertisement. His liking it will be (at least in part) a consequence of the quality of the trope itself. This 'puzzle-solving' mode involves a different 'reading-strategy' on the part of the consumer than the one he would employ if the ad showed a realistic depiction of the product together with a text about product benefits.

In other words, maybe it would be a more fruitful area for research to ask what new evaluation criteria are implicitly applied by the reader-consumer when the advertisement employs a visual rhetorical figure than to ask whether ads with figures are more effective than ads without figures (also referred to as 'literal' ads or 'degree-zero' ads). When analyzing an image which implies a rhetorical figure, the consumer is doing something else than when judging an image which shows a realistic depiction of a product. In the former case he is trying to decode the message - if the trope itself is challenging he may end up enjoying the ad itself and then by association he may like the brand, as an implied author of that message. When the ad has no visual figure, the consumer expects it to say as clearly as possible what the benefits of that specific brand are. He will judge the ad strictly according to the relevance of the brand promise itself, paying little or no attention to other executional features of the ad discourse.

I strongly believe that future research on the subject will get closer to the essence of advertising communication if more attention will be given to differences in ways of engaging the ad according to the degree of figurativity or fiction employed by the respective ad. Moreover, I believe the current aim of comparing literal with figurative ads, no matter the context, departs from a basic

requirement of good rhetorical analysis, as it is made explicit by the authors themselves somewhere else:

> "It is not good rhetorical practice to claim, for example, that rhyme is - always and everywhere - effective; rather, the goal of rhetorical inquiry is to discover *when* rhyme is effective"   (Phillips and McQuarrie 2008, 9)

I believe that if we accept this principle we should dismiss any questions regarding whether ads with tropes are generally more effective than ads without any figures. This dismissal would also be supported by advertising practice. It is clear that there are cases when a short straightforward informative message might be the best way to promote a product. If the product is new on the market and people need to know what its basic uses are or if the target-audience has little capacity for deep processing of subtle literary games, then it is highly recommended to go for a 'degree-zero' ad. In these cases research on the comparison between figurative and literal ads will inevitably be irrelevant, because the external marketing context will provide criteria for the most suitable persuasive route to pursue.

But this does not mean we should dismiss all research concerning the link between visual discourse and consumer response. All the contrary, I believe it is very useful to see in which way the criteria for effectiveness change according to the changes in visual discourse. This can only be properly understood if we see that the presence of a trope calls for a different way of engaging the ad and implies a different set of expectations from the reader-consumer towards that ad.

7. Conclusions

I will now summarize the most important points made by this article as well as their implications for future research on commercial imagery.

I have taken as the target of my analysis a typology of visual tropes in advertising suggested by McQuarrie and Phillips, two leading figures in advertising rhetoric. Without aiming to discuss the overall merits of their classification, I focused only on those aspects that concerned the relationship between types of visual discourse and types of consumer response.

One serious shortcoming of their classification was its oversimplified account of the meaning-operations elicited by an advertisement which contains visual rhetorical figures. I performed a critical analysis on their description of what occurs in consumers' minds while decoding an advertisement which employs visual rhetorical figures and I demonstrated they were leaving out key-elements which had to be taken into account when elaborating predictions about consumer response. To do this, I first conducted a close examination of randomly selected print ads trying to uncover the meaning-operations they require on the part of the audience and at the same time trying to see how they

would fit in the authors' classification.With the results of this analysis in mind, I tried to describe formally the semantic structure of advertisements which contain visual tropes. By way of this illustration I was able to show that the authors were mistaken in rendering equivalent two distinct levels on which meaning-operations occur. I then discussed the way in which this mistake affected the relevance of the empirically testable hypotheses they set forth. Finally, I explained how the reconceptualization I suggested would help visual rhetoric researchers reconsider the main focus of their investigations with regard to advertising recall and persuasion.

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