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When Blended Spaces Become Branded Spaces*

Abstract: In this paper we use the language of Blending Theory taken from Cognitive Linguistics to provide insights into the functioning of visual discourse in unconventional advertising. We take a close look at advertisements that are based on the modification of physical entities in the urban space and show that the results of such modification can be fruitfully analyzed as a hybrid structure emerging from the blend of two input spaces. Understanding the multidirectional meaning-transfer set in motion by these hybrid structures can be important for several categories of audiences. First, makers of such ads could gain a deeper understanding of the consequences of their creative choices. The conceptual apparatus provided by this theory would allow them to follow with precision the semantic interaction between the two input spaces within the blend. Secondly, scholars interested in ethical aspects of advertising could extend the scope of their questions regarding the influence of these advertisements on the well-being of the public. Analyzing unconventional ads with the tools of Blending Theory can help highlight the moments when the meaning projected by a blend onto a physical object can conflict with its real-world meaning, derived from its basic functions in the public space. In addition, researchers could further wonder what the functioning of these hybrid structures says about the level of sophistication which characterizes nowadays audiences. The hybrid structure has a peculiar ontological and discursive status. To be able to make sense of it, people must be knowledgeable of a series of conventions which are learned through exposure to contemporary forms of public discourse.

Keywords: conceptual integration theory, unconventional advertising, visual rhetorical figures, input spaces, cognitive domains, blended spaces, persuasive discourse

* **Acknowledgement:** This work was supported by the *European Social Fund* in Romania, under the responsibility of the Managing Authority for the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013 [grant POSDRU/CPP 107/DMI 1.5/S/78342].

1. Current understanding of unconventional advertising

During the past decade, the increasingly cluttered media world has sent marketers searching for alternative ways to connect with the target audience. In the attempt to face the challenges posed by the overcrowded media space, they sometimes focused on crafting messages in unconventional ways. Shoking, disruptive or at the very least surprising content was required from the creative department, in the hope that this would make their messages stand out even when surrounded by hundreds of other ads (Newman 2003, Fallon 2008, Sugden 2012). Another solution to grab the public's attention was to replace (or supplement) traditional media with unconventional vehicles or supports to convey the message of a campaign (Moor 2003, Luchas and Dorrian 2006, Dahlen and Edenius 2007, Dahlen et al. 2009). Given this background of practices, any talk about 'unconventional' ads must first make clear which sort of conventions the ad departs from – those regarding the content of the message or those regarding its vehicle. As far as this paper is concerned, we use the term 'unconventional' to refer to those instances of ads which use unconventional vehicles and supports.

One of the popular forms of unconventional advertising consists in the modification of physical entities in the urban spaces so as to make them accommodate a message about a brand or a social cause. These ads are thought to have better chances at capturing the audience's attention than traditional advertising because such modifications represent a set of stimuli that are incongruous with the mental schema people have about the places they see every day. Zebra crossings, trees, telegraph posts, public phones, benches in parks are familiar stimuli for most of the members of the audience. When a sudden change is operated on them, the public's attention is won. The next step is for the envisaged audience to understand the point of the visual rhetorical figure created by this modification. Figure 1 provides an example of the species of advertisements under discussion.

2. Outlining the basics of Blending Theory

Blending Theory, also known as Conceptual Integration Theory, was originally developed by Fauconnier and Turner (1995, 2003) to describe a cognitive mechanism that is thought to be pervasive in our mental life. A blend is defined as a cognitive structure that emerges when putting together two or more input spaces – mental spaces derived from different



Figure 1. Lighting post modified to convey an unusual invitation to the local Zoo. Text says "Meet a giraffe".

domains of knowledge (Fauconnier and Turner 2003, 39-45). Mental spaces are defined as temporary conceptual packets of information constructed by the mind as it engages in thinking, talking and planning subsequent actions. They are partial assemblies of elements, structured by frames and cognitive models (Fauconnier 2001, 260). There are minimum four mental spaces involved in a blending process: the two input spaces mentioned above, one generic space containing the elements that are shared by the two input spaces and, finally, the blend – the emerging mental space possessing meanings extracted from the generic space but also new, emergent qualities that neither the input spaces nor the generic space possessed before entering the blending process.

Since the notion of emergent features attributed to cognitive products was largely discussed by metaphor scholars (especially Black 1979 with his interaction theory of metaphor), the reader might wonder whether there is not some overlapping territory between Blending Theory and Metaphor Theory. To clarify the relationship between these two, one can turn to Fauconnier and Turner's piece called "Rethinking Metaphor" published in the "Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought" (2008). According to the authors, metaphor is one particularly important and salient manifestation of conceptual blending (64). Counterfactuals,

analogies, framings, metonyms are other species of cognitive products resulting from conceptual blending. In other words, one must understand from the outset that the relationship between the two input spaces that make up a blend is not always equivalent to the depiction of one element in terms of another, as it happens with most metaphors. Blends can take a variety of other forms, which is why Conceptual Integration Theory claims to underlie most of our normal cognitive operations involved in our daily transactions with the world. Apart from this aspect, the aforementioned article demonstrates that many conceptual metaphors turn out to be more complex constructions than standard accounts such as Lakoff and Johnsons' (1980) imply. Metaphorical constructions often involve many spaces and many mappings in intricate networks constructed by means of overarching general principles. We will not get into the details of this issue because it is beyond the scope and intent of this article. Yet, a brief answer that suffices for present purposes is that Blending Theory can extend the scope of analysis of many cognitive products, some of which take the form of metaphors.

Given that blending as a mental process is a fundamental instrument used by the mind on an everyday basis (Turner 1996, 93), our present attempt to bring it in the analysis of unconventional ads might raise suspicions. Our inquiry might seem superfluous and pretentious in using technical language imported from another discipline to express a mere commonplace, namely that these ads emerge from the creative process of blending occurring in the mind of their creators. Yet, we believe we can say something truly new and important about these ads if we look at them as expressions of a blended space. The next section will outline our view on the theoretical gains that might be achieved by analyzing unconventional ads within the framework of Conceptual Blending.

3. What Blending Theory can bring to the current understanding of unconventional advertising

Understanding unconventional ads as hybrid entities that emerge from blending processes can provide the premises for a richer exploration of this form of persuasive discourse. Blending Theory can give important insights into the meaning-making process that occurs in the mind of the audience as they decipher the meaning of each unconventional ad, since such deciphering is in fact equivalent to the deconstruction of a hybrid structure.

Current accounts of this species of advertisements focus on the manner in which the object of persuasion (the brand or the social cause being promoted) is endowed with new meanings by the modification performed on its unconventional support. In the language of Blending Theory, this is equivalent to discussing how the meaning of one of the input spaces is changed or enriched by its blending with another input space. We believe this view tends to ignore important aspects of these ads. The conceptual tools of Blending Theory can help provide a more realistic image on the practical consequences of the creative choices made by advertisers.

To be more specific, the lens of Blending Theory can make advertisers aware of the fact that the emergent hybrid structure has an autonomous meaning, combining elements from the two input spaces but possessing features and connotations that none of them had separately. This happens in all cases of blends. In fact, one of the defining characteristics of a blend is that it has meanings that are not available in either of the input spaces. Therefore, one must wonder what this autonomy implies for the effects of unconventional ads. We will give examples of unconventional ads that make one wonder whether their creators were aware of the autonomous meaning conveyed by the hybrid.

Secondly, when choosing the physical space to accommodate the persuasive message, creators of ads must be aware of the complex role it will play in constituting the meaning of the hybrid structure. Its role goes beyond that of a concrete support for a creative stunt. The chosen space has certain semantic connotations of its own. It is precisely these semantic connotations that will become the second input space of the blend and will influence its overall meaning. In addition, the semantic interaction taking place between the two input spaces within the blend brings out specific features of each of them. This means that there might be a semantic transfer from the blend to both input spaces occurring in the process of deconstruction. In other words, it is not only the brand or social cause that is attached new connotations by the blend, but the meaning of the other input space is also affected. Particular aspects of it will be made salient, while others will remain unmentioned — therefore unrecognized in the enclave constituted by the hybrid structure, although they are fully at work in the surrounding territory. It might even happen for its meaning within the enclave to be incongruent with its meaning in the surrounding territory. We will bring a few examples to illustrate some problems that might appear when advertisers fail to understand the consequences of

such incongruities between the meaning attributed to the second input space by its rhetorical function within the blend and its meaning as a public functional object in everyday life.

A third point that will be made salient by this paper is that Blending Theory can help researchers give an accurate account of the ontological and discursive status of the hybrid entities that constitute unconventional ads. To the best of our knowledge, this topic is absent in current marketing literature, but we believe it contains the seeds of a fruitful research direction. A particular detail of our choice of words is actually related to this issue. In the title and throughout the text of this article we use the word *space* both when talking about mental spaces (packages of information created spontaneously by the mind when it engages in everyday problem solving) and when discussing physical spaces (throughout this paper, they consist mainly of places and items belonging to the urban world). Far from being a misleading pun, this choice of words is meant to make the reader reflect on the relationship between mental spaces and physical spaces in the context of unconventional ads. The blend is the outcome of the meeting between several mental spaces, some of which are being blended at one end of the communication line (the mind of the advertiser) while other mental spaces are being created in the process of perceiving the given blend from the other end of the communication line (the mind of the audience). The blend exists initially in the neurobiological structures of the minds of its creators, but it is only when it is embodied and occupies a physical space in the real world that it is perceived the mind of the audience. Its embodiment, its transfer from the world of ideas to the physical world has yet important implications, apart from the obvious discrepancy that might always exist between author and audience of a discourse.

Understanding an unconventional ad as an ad requires a certain amount of interpretive work on the part of the viewer, the start of which is the diagnosis that whatever change is operated on the environment, it is not *for real*, it is not to be taken *per se*, but it has to be *read* as a figurative way of sending a message. The audience needs to be familiar with the anchoring function (term coined by Roland Barthes 1964, 44-48) performed by slogans and brand names on an image. In other words, they need to be knowledgeable of advertising language with all its rules and conventions (Scott and Vargas 2007, 353-355), one of which is the fact that the name of the brand becomes a filter for the meaning-making activity in which the viewer engages when exposed to the visual discourse

(for a formal representation of the variables that inform the process of reading an advertising image, see Grancea 2012).

Their placement at the juncture of the physical world and the world of symbols created by advertising discourse gives unconventional ads their flavor, but also most of their practical problems, as we will show throughout the article. The conceptual tools of Blending Theory help us understand that the curious status of these ads requires the ability of viewers to think on two levels at once about these entities. By illuminating the multiple directions of meaning-transfer within the construction and deconstruction of blends, this framework can bring valuable insights into the sophisticated vocabulary possessed by contemporary consumers of media.

4. Illustrating possible results of the proposed analysis

In this section of the paper, we pick a few examples of unconventional advertisements and analyze their message with the tools provided by Blending Theory. Our intention is to prove that important aspects of these ads that are otherwise neglected can be brought into discussion and explored in depth once we are in possession of the language and angle of view provided by Blending Theory. The first set of ads we analyze is meant to prove the first important point of this article, namely that unconventional advertisements have autonomous meanings, that neither the item subjected to physical modification nor the object of persuasion (brand or social cause) had before entering the blending process. This autonomous meaning must be carefully considered by makers of ads when anticipating the consequences of their creative choices.

To begin with, let us take a look at the swimming pool in Figure 2. The unusual stimulus meant to catch the audience's attention is constituted by the appearance of a submerged city on the bottom of a swimming pool. Once the audience sees the text written on the margins of the swimming pool – text that states that British bank HSBC wants to let people know that global warming can have dreadful consequences – they may understand that they are in front of an unconventional campaign. Then they may deduce that the submerged city was only a figurative representation of the possible dangers caused by global warming, among which is the danger of massive flood which might send all cities under water.



Figure 2. The British bank HSBC attempts to raise awareness regarding the effects of global warming: the image of a city was glued to the bottom of a swimming pool

In the language of Blending Theory, input space 1 is represented by the mental content regarding global warming and the dangers of catastrophic floods. Input space 2 is represented by the swimming pool, with all its connotations: relaxation, enjoyment, water sports, leisure. If we try to understand the blending process that must have taken place in the mind of the creative team, it is clear that the generic space included the concept of *water* shared by the two input spaces. Yet, as it happens with all blends, the emerging structure has a meaning of its own, determined by the particular interaction of the two input spaces within the given context.

What the audience sees is the emerging hybrid structure represented by a swimming pool with peculiar traits. From an ethical point of view, the hybrid emerging structure seems a rather problematic choice. A swimming pool that invites the swimmers to consider one of the horrifying versions of our future is far from the ideal place for a weekend relaxation. But what are we to say about the potential persuasive effects of this hybrid structure? Does it have the power to bring the issue of global warming at the core of swimmers' preoccupations?

From our point of view, this hybrid structure has few chances to persuade the audience of the fact that global warming can affect humanity in a dramatic way. The mood in which swimmers are, combined with the placement of the ad, discourage any serious engagement with the issue. People swimming above the submerged city are implicitly told that they are not affected by this catastrophe. If such tragedy will ever come to reality, humans would most likely be underwater, not swimming serenely above the city.

The chosen creative solution is far from offering the viewer a sense of what it would be like for humanity to go through such an experience. The overall impression the audience is left with is that what they see is not for real – hardly the kind of message one would want to send out when intending to shake consciences regarding a pressing issue. The ludic and detached air are intrinsic to the experience of swimming in this pool above the submerged skyscrapers. Anybody who would be truly affected by the topic would be unable to enjoy swimming for leisure in that particular pool. Most people who would be able to enjoy the swimming pool are definitely not the ones who will perceive the gravity of the problem – or any personal menace regarding its consequences, for that matter.

Such examples should prompt advertisers to consider carefully the emergent meaning of the hybrid structure before proceeding to transform their ideas into reality, before taking the step from the blended space in their minds to the branded space that will be a constitutive part of the message of the campaign. Sometimes it is the novel, emergent set of meanings that will determine the success or failure of an unconventional ad.

Another example is presented in Figure 3. The receiver of a public telephone is modified to look like a fist directed against a woman's face. The slogan "Pick up the phone and save somebody!" sums up the message of the campaign. By means of this visual rhetorical figure, the act of picking up the receiver is rendered equivalent with the act of taking the fist away from the woman's face.

Seeing this phone as a hybrid structure that possesses autonomous meaning brings two important issues into the spotlight. One of them regards the answer to the following question: what happens when the receiver is put back? What does the fist placed back on the woman's face say? Apparently, makers of this ad did not consider this issue. The second aspect that comes to light when we look at this phone as a hybrid structure is that the configuration of relationships is not particularly

involving for the viewer. The visual arrangement is made in a manner that does not make the audience feel directly envisaged by such situations. There is no clue to remind them that they too could be victims of domestic violence.

Apart from this, it is also questionable whether this manner of representing the victims is ethical. From our point of view, the position and the dimensions of the victim compared to the saviour is rather humiliating for the victim and is quite far from encouraging a true sense of empathy on the part of the potential saviour. Of course, one might object by saying that this is only a visual rhetorical figure which will inevitably be filtered through the personal system of values of each individual and that we should not overanalyze the effect of each ad element. Yet, from our point of view, it is worth understanding all signals and connotations of each rhetorical figure we analyze, because our mind can be vulnerable to such details, especially when their effect adds up with that of other campaigns.



Figure 3. Romanian social campaign encouraging witnesses of domestic violence to call the Police and thus to prevent the aggressor from further hurting the victim

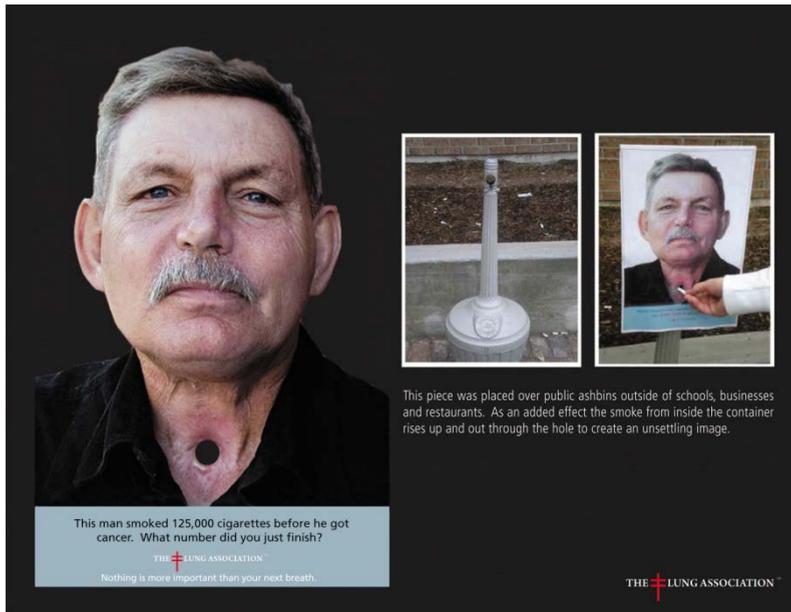


Figure 4. Anti-smoking unconventional campaign

Similar ethical problems are posed by the unconventional ad presented in Figure 4. Public ashbins became the site for an anti-smoking campaign. The ashbins were blended with the picture of a man in a way that created the impression that the hole in the ashbin was the stoma of a man who suffered from throat cancer. The text under the image of the man said "This man smoked 125.000 cigarettes before he got cancer. What number did you just finish?". The solution is undoubtedly a powerful one, having great chances of creating a visual shock to any passer-by, smoker or not. For smokers, it might create a startling moment which might give them an impulse towards the decision to put an end to their playing with their health. A standard analysis would stop here, but looking at this unconventional ad through the lens of Blending Theory can provide additional insights into its functioning.

If one looks at this entity as a hybrid structure with autonomous meaning, one can quickly perceive some ethical problems it poses. The most striking is the fact that a human being is presented like the recipient for other people's garbage. The proposed relationship between the agents is humiliating for the man with throat cancer. The situation is made worse by the fact that both agents – the man throwing the remainders of a cigar and the man with throat cancer – are smokers. The asymmetry between their situations is not only insulting to the man with cancer (and by

extension to all other people with similar medical problems), but it is also unjustified given their similarity in what concerns their relationship with cigars.

Also, the objection made earlier to the domestic violence-campaign is maintained here. How much empathy is cultivated by this type of message? On an unconscious level, people are primed not to put themselves in his shoes, but to detach themselves from his situation. He has a problem that passers-by (including current smokers) do not (yet) share. This is hardly the best way to make somebody aware of the dangers caused by smoking, especially given the well-known conviction of many smokers summarized by the words "It won't happen to me". Another point worth considering when looking at this hybrid structure is its public exposure, which means that many non-smokers, including young children, will get to see not only the traumatizing image of a suffering man, but also the dreadful combination between his throat and the hole of an ashbin, an association which is insulting to human dignity.

The examples selected so far were meant to show that each hybrid structure attains its discursive effects as an autonomous entity, often having emergent connotations, different from those provided by its input spaces. The following cases will focus on how the same input space can be differently reconstructed by the audience, according to the nature and meaning of the blend it formed. This stage of our analysis will provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the multidirectional process of meaning-making that underlies the construction and deconstruction of a blend.

To be more specific, we suggest that there is also a reverse projection of meaning than the one that is standardly considered. We believe that the blend also endows the input space with specific connotations. To prove this, we will pick three different unconventional ads, all of them performed on the same kind of physical entity, namely a bench. A close analysis of these ads will reveal that the meaning attributed to a park bench will differ from campaign to campaign, according to the generic space suggested by the *blend*. Some problems may emerge when fiction meets reality, due to the physical nature of these unconventional ads: real uses of a bench may conflict with the functions attributed to them within the *blend*.

Let us take a look at the bench in Figure 5. The bench embodies elements of the visual and verbal identity of the KitKat brand. The colour, the shape as well as the slogan "Have a break. Have a KitKat" reflect the brand identity of the popular wafer biscuit bar covered with chocolate.

From the point of view of professional branding, this is a bright if atypical commercial discourse - hard to miss and hard to misattribute, since it includes so many brand-specific elements.



Figure 5. Unconventional commercial discourse authored by the KitKat brand. Benches with elements of the brand's visual and verbal identity were placed in public location

If we look at it through the lens of Blending Theory, we identify a generic space consisting of the semantic sphere of the concept *break*. Both the bench and the KitKat bar can provide moments of indulging oneself, moments of relaxation, sweet escapes from the tough world of work. This atypical bench offers not only the possibility to actually take a break (sit on it), but also to be visually delighted by its colour and shape. Although the bench invites consumption of a KitKat, we clearly know that not all people seeing it or sitting on it will share a craving for this product. But it is highly possible for most of them to feel a certain amount of gratitude for the placement of the bench in that area as well as a certain degree of esthetic pleasure caused by this creative transformation of an otherwise monotonous sight.

During the reconstruction performed by the mind of the audience, the blend endows both input spaces (the brand and the bench) with additional connotations. The brand becomes now the author of a good deed, an active social actor offering a stimulus that is more than welcomed by people leading a stressful life. The bench, in its turn, has its own connotations that are brought to light by the *blend*. The bench is seen as the entity that makes *the break* possible at the given time. The break is

assumed to be needed, desired and the brand voice even recommends it (by the text written on it). The following two examples present the bench in a fairly different light. In their case, the connotations projected by the blend to the input spaces raise some new problems, because they may conflict with the real-world meaning of the items they modify for the purposes of the campaign.



Figure 6. Unconventional campaign for footwear brand Nike.
The text says "Run"

Nike removed the actual seat bottoms of park benches. The upper part was tagged in Zorro-style with the Nike logo and the text "Run" (the example in Figure 6 is taken from their Spanish campaign and the text says "Corra" – the Spanish equivalent of "Run"). When deconstructing the blend, we find the bench being attributed new meanings. It is not the provider of an innocent moment of self-indulgence any more, as it was in the KitKat ad, but a dangerous temptation. So dangerous, in fact, that it must be removed. For professional runners, sitting on a bench is now rendered equivalent with giving up the race, with abandoning the competition, with not giving all you can give. If we consider the larger audience of the campaign (not just its core target, the sportsmen), other secondary meanings may come out of this unconventional ad. The bench might be seen as the symbol of a sedentary lifestyle, one that could lead to unpleasant consequences in what regards the body weight. Therefore, to remove the extra-layers of fat, one should get running. The removal of the

lower part of the bench might be an allusion regarding the parts where body fat sits most comfortably when leading a sedentary lifestyle. Whatever meaning we choose to draw out of this hybrid structure, one message is clear: benches are not recommended, benches are for the lazy, sitting on a bench is undesirable. Running is not an option, but a commandment. Indeed, perfectly coherent with the Nike brand personality, summarized by the "Just do it" slogan. But how coherent is it with everyday experience people have with benches? Just consider people with real health-issues who are counting on a familiar bench to still be there in the park they know, but encountering this change. How would they feel about it? Given that it is a public space entity, the feelings of all inhabitants of the city must be considered, not only those of the target audience of the campaign.

The same problem arises for the unconventional ad in Figure 7. Denver Water sponsored a social campaign advising people to save water. The message "Use only what you need" was written on modified park benches. The modification consisted in leaving only one seat – corresponding to the one person who was assumed to sit on it.



Figure 7. Park benches were modified to promote the core message of the social campaign: save water, use only what you need.

The message about water saving is sent out in a clear manner and it reflects creatively what *settling for less* would amount to in what concerns water consumption. In other words, the blend is effective in putting one of the input spaces in an adequate light so as to ensure the persuasive impact

of the campaign. Yet, when deconstructing this blend, we realize that the other input space, the one corresponding to the park bench, is endowed with a pretty well-defined meaning that is far from being realistic. The bench is implicitly defined as a place that on average is used greedily by one single person who does not consider anything else but his own interest at the given time. This person is assumed to be using the entire bench for oneself, perhaps stretching to have a nap or simply to enjoy a more comfortable position. Yet, needless to say, there is a severe incongruity between this conceptualization of a bench and its real-world meaning, where more than one person may need to sit on it, case in which there would be no greed issue involved. Inhabitants of the city might not appreciate the fact that the advertiser did not consider their real necessities when removing the other part of the bench. As a public space entity, access to it should not be restricted by advertisers whose creative minds dwell in other conceptual realms.

5. Concluding remarks

This article took the first steps on what will hopefully become a rich research direction in advertising theory. For this initial stage, our priority was to illuminate some of the most immediate gains brought to the analysis of unconventional ads by the conceptual tools of Blending Theory. We showed that advertisers sometimes ignore certain implications of their creative choices and that this can be avoided by looking at the unconventional ad as a hybrid structure with meanings of its own, meanings which are not reducible neither to any of the input spaces, nor to the generic space. Advertisers must bear in mind the fact that the audience that sees this unconventional ad will first see the hybrid structure as it is, with its autonomous meaning. Then they will proceed to the deconstruction of the blend, a process that will have as a result the endowment of both input spaces with particular meanings. We have indicated some of the reasons why it is necessary to look more closely at the relationship between the meanings public entities derive from participating in the blend and the meanings they derive from their functions in the real world. The tension between these two can raise ethical problems and should be kept in mind by ad creators.

We hope that this article managed to give a clear direction for future investigations of unconventional ads. In our view, they could constitute a rich topic for those authors who explore consumer response to advertising visual language (Scott and Vargas 2007, Joy, Sherry and Deschenes 2009). Most unconventional ads subjected to analysis in this paper use

some portion of a physical space. Yet, their ability to function as persuasive discourse depends on their being perceived as enclaves within the physical world surrounding them and as exclaves of the world of advertising. Just like enclaves are legally distinct territorial entities although physically they are situated within the territory of the host country, the spaces modified by ads exist in the physical world but have a distinct status. Just like an exclave is politically attached to a territory with which it is not physically contiguous, so unconventional ads are an integral part from the larger universe of advertising discourse, governed by specific rules and conventions. It is advertising language that needs to be known for viewers to be able to make sense of what they see.

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