Digital Graphics and the Still Image 2009

ADBUSTER

By Verity Carney

www.smh.com.au
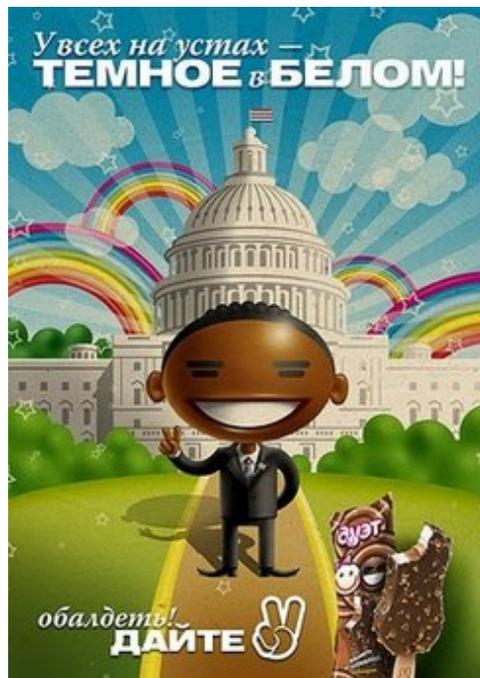
news.yahoo.com/photos

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I have selected two very different images The currency trading add was from an online source (www.smh.com.au) and the cartoon image of Obama was found in the world news (news.yahoo.com/photos) and was from a Russian print ad, advertising ice-cream. Their contexts, audience, market and historical points of reference are very different. In terms of the semiotics of sign and signification, each Ad utilises very different elements between the product and its signifier. Yet the ads share a historical significance in the now, in that they represent two very decisive moments of contemporary history that have occurred in quick succession: the financial boom before the collapse, and; the election of Obama. Both are salient reflections on the different emotions provoked by these two historical and present-day occurrences. In each Ad the visual articulation of social meanings are constructed from an interactive reciprocity between viewer and the represented participant which is abstracted: in the case of the online trading ad as an anonymous trader, and; the Russian ad, Obama is represented in a way somewhat akin to an iconic devotional purpose. (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 118) The images in themselves tell an interesting story about these times that may be ascertained from an analysis of visual grammar, metaphor and subtext, and this is what will now be analysed an discussed in further detail.

The visual grammar of the online trading ad is very literal. Thick block text, in capitals, demand that interactive participants (the viewer) read the message. This message is posed as a somewhat rhetorical question. The message directly asks whether the viewer wants to trade in the foreign exchange (currency) market s. And if so then CLICK HERE to find out how.

The typography is dominant yet non-descript. It looks like Arial Rounded MT Bold. There is something very two-dimensional about it. The layout of text and image is two dimensional. The perspective is flat and there is almost a cut and paste like boundary between word and image that is similarly basic in layout. Have the makers of the Ad neglected the role of composition and layout as structuring devices?
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Certainly there is no 'holistic visual impression' (van Leeuwen 2005: 138) created from the text, apart from a few basic assumptions implicit in the relative size of words and their colour, and the image of hands counting money. The most notable aspect of the typography is that the word (verb) TRADE is in a larger font than the rest and the lower part of the message is in green. The green text is a basic reference to the colour of money – the US greenback as international reserve currency. The message is action centric: read, click and trade.

The image is of anonymous hands counting money at a computer. The human agency is completely objectified in this abstract representation. The image is tempting, as any image of counting large wads of cash can be, yet it seems very far away (foreign currency) – accessible only by the internet perhaps. The sensory experience of working through a keyboard is communicated through the image, conveying the impression that trading is online.

At a macro perspective, the message seems to suggest the belief of late capitalism that money begets money. A completely fetishised (Cartwright & Sturken, 201) notion of the nature of value, that the represented form of money as currency is the source and mechanism for abstract profit. Money is commodified beyond its use as exchange value. The image appeals to an emotion of greed. Yet it is circumspect insofar as the Chinese currency is the image used to represent money. Somewhat ironic that a communist countries currency could be the source of lucrative trade in late capitalism. Yet the irony is lost partly in the wholly un-self-reflexive and literal overtones of the ad – that erode (potentially collapsing) our sense of history. Could it be that the makers of the ad thought about the relationship between image and text as the explicit consumption of otherness, as central to the financial market trade they are advocating? (Cartwright 222)

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The Russian ad on the other hand is full of symbolic imagery and historical reference. This ad is communicating something profound about the state of international politics and alliances in the post cold war world.   The new millennium, the new age of Obama, and the optimism of the new post soviet Russian political culture, are all radiating out of this cartoon

The US Capital Building (a classical symbol of perfection) is placed in the mid distance behind Obama. The rainbows with their perfect colour spectrum radiate from the distance behind. Part fairytale - a bit new age – it radiates beams of light and star shaped sparkles. Rainbows and rays of light and the light and semi transparent clouds are suggestive of the passing of a storm. Once cold war foes building nuclear weapons to threaten each other, America and Russia are now finally at peace. And the image in itself is a testimony to the joy felt by the majority of people.

Obama is flashing the victory sign whilst standing on a path that could almost represent the yellow brick road. The signification of the yellow brick road is full of powerful suggestion. The desire for courage, heart and mind of Dorothy's companions take them on an epic journey to the Land of Oz – but what we all learn is that there is no place like home. Perhaps America represents the Land of Oz, yet it reinforces Russia's autonomy in its ability to reflect on America's fairytale new era of Obama.

The semiotics of the image use metaphor and connation to suggest a historical, moral as well as personal victory - in an idyllic and childlike enthusiasm. The victory sign is repeated twice – once in the carton image and again next to the subtext. It is suggested by Cartwright and Sturken (2001) that this strategy of repeating a motif is used to keep viewers attention by varying the elements within a motif. (207)

Yet at the level of macro-perception there exists a double and if not almost trivial message – the product - it is simply an ice-cream Ad. In this sense, the macro-perception is somewhat disjointed in a twofold

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message. The juxtaposition between product and represented participant (text and image) does have

the effect of trivialization of the macro perception. It is almost as if the ice-cream is an out of context

product – or perhaps it is a Willy Wonker like treat for a candy covered cartoon reality. The state of

international politics is the metaphor (canvas) on which a very innocuous product is introduced and

marketed. There seems no relation between the represented participant and the commodity that is

being advertised. Are we being asked to consume the product or the signs in the semiotic reference to

the cultural meanings and connotations attached to the image? (Cartwright & Sturken 2001: 205)

The text reads "Everybody is talking about it": "dark inside white". Initially on first impressions this

slogan provokes questions of appropriate racial comments. But the reference may well just also be

about an African American in the White House. Such misunderstandings possibly arise from intercultural

differences in interpretation (Kress & Leeuwen: 124). Literally, with reference to the actual product, it is

talking about the chocolate ice-cream inside vanilla. But this slogan is the nexus between the product

and the image. At this level it is a contentious ad in some sense, in that it makes us ask about the

protocols of representation. Is Obama misrepresented as a cartoon figure in an ice-cream commercial?

Or is the visual articulation of an idyllic new age fairytale creating a reciprocity between viewer and

represented participant akin to an iconic devotional purpose? (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 118) Is this

juxtaposition enough to provoke desire for the product? Or does it warrant criticisms of opportunism on

the part of the makers of this ad?

Neither image use the device of a gaze to convey some sort of reciprocal imaginary relation. In the

context of the online trading ad – there is not face – no identity to the active participant apart from the

denomination of the money he or she is holding. In the Russian Obama ad – Obama is a cartoon

resemblance – the gaze is indirect in that his eyes are painted lines. The reciprocity in this case is created

through the smile and the victory sign. He is communicating to us - expressing his happiness at being in

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the Whitehouse. We are "asked to enter into a relation of social affinity" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006:118) with him and possibly America. The trading Ad on the other hand places the image in a window like space, that contains a gesture that invites the viewer to watch them trading and counting money – it is a vicarious relationship between represented and interactive participant – that is at the same time an invitation.

The images I have chosen are each imbued with a different narrative – in subtext, symbolism, sign and signification. They are interesting to discuss because the images used in each are removed from their real context. In the case of the Russian Obama Ad it is politically and culturally borrowed from another realm – from the world of international politics to confectionary. The online trading ad is reifying foreign currency – in fact the Chinese currency – as the source of wealth - and does this under the banner of the Sydney Morning Herald to reach the middle to upper-middle class readership. These Ads both mark historically significant times. There approaches are completely different. The Ad for the lucrative trade is done on the cheap yet the ad for the cheap product is spared no expense. This is interesting. But a more interesting point of comparison of these two ads is in the methods by which they abstract and objectify the macro perspective in ways that make history iconic and symbolic.

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