

Brenden Gray

Critical Looking in Advertising;

Gerry Human's University of Johannesburg

Alumni Exhibition *Humanism:*

The Art of Selling

BIOGRAPHY

Brenden Gray is a Johannesburg-based artist, arts writer, graphic designer and arts educator. He works full-time as a Graphic Design Lecturer at the University of Johannesburg and is in the process of completing his Masters Degree in Fine Art in community-based art practice at the University of the Witwatersrand.

→ In 2008 Gerry Human, the chief creative officer of Ogilvy South Africa, was invited to exhibit pieces from his creative career as an alumnus of the University of Johannesburg (the former TWR) at the FADA Gallery. The ironic title of the exhibition, *Humanism: The Art of Selling*, suggested that Human was aware of the potential ironies and incongruities involved in exhibiting pieces of advertising within the context of a university art gallery. As a more or less reflexive practitioner, Human provoked in the framing of the exhibition questions about the power of advertising in a post-modern world where the field of legitimate culture, the aesthetic, and the university as institutional categories may have lost their potential to affect major social change. I examine the implications of this statement asking what methodological and theoretical approaches are most effective in examining complex, ironic and multilayered advertising products within a gallery context. In particular, I use the exhibition as a vehicle to ask how advertising may be pedagogically framed, to produce critical, media literate students in the field of visual culture (Willis 1999; Giroux 2005). In doing so, I explore the tensions that exist between understanding the consumption of advertisements and popular culture as passive, hegemonic and constructivist notions of creative consumption, problematising easy readings of advertising products in terms of WJT Mitchell's (2005) notion that images exert power over readers in complex ways, Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) understanding of the cultural field as one where social distinction is produced, and Jean Baudrillard's (1995) ideas around the proliferation of commodities and their value in an economy of signs.

A variety of visual methodologies (Rose 2006) are critically examined in terms of developing the “interpretative repertoires” of students in relation to the complexity of Human’s print advertisements. Human’s framing of the exhibition is examined in terms of critical discourse analysis and audience studies. A social semiotic/critical discourse method is proposed as a method for allowing students to unpack the structure of addressability of particular advertisements produced by Human. Here, I draw on Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen’s (2006) social semiotic methods, as put forward in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* – methods such as the “transactional gaze”, “narrative and conceptual structure”, “social distance and framing” – in order to argue for the predominant use of the declarative as Humans’ primary mode of visual and textual address. I link this visual strategy to Bourdieu’s (1993) theories of how class distinction is constructed through visibility and begin to unravel the complexities involved in dealing with advertisements in terms of class and the desiring gaze exploring the tensions that may exist between students’ lived experiences, the textually mediated world of consumer culture (Fairclough 2006) and the interpretative repertoires students are exposed to in a formal learning environment.

Freedom? A dream!

Everyone aspires to it, or at least giving the impression of aspiring fervently to it. If it is an illusion, it has become a vital illusion. Jean Baudrillard (2007:50).

Introduction

Gerry Human's *Humanism: The Art of Selling* was presented at the FADA gallery in 2009 as part of the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) alumni initiative, the first in a series of exhibitions that aim to showcase work produced by graduates from the Faculty who have made their mark in industry. Gerry Human has won numerous awards in the field of advertising, *inter alia* 40 Gold Loeries, three Loerie Grand Prix, 16 Cannes Lions, seven Creative Director's Forum Ad of the Year Awards, three Silver Pencils and the Grand Prize at the London International Awards. The exhibition was sponsored by OgilvySA (one of South Africa's leading advertising agencies and one of the most awarded at the 2008 Loerie Awards) for whom Human works as chief creative director.

Exemplars of good practice provide radical moments for communities of practice (educators, industry players and primarily students) to reflect critically on the broader social function of their disciplines. Although the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture alumni initiative exposes its student community to cutting-edge industry work, the initiative can perform many other functions as well. One of these is to provide pedagogical spaces where students can formulate their future roles as agents of change in respective fields and lecturers can examine critically the relationship between industry and the academia. Questions an exhibition such as Human's asks are: 'What critical tools do graphic design students and educators have at their disposal to critique advertising? What are the ideological/discursive functions of advertising in a post-colonial, post-apartheid context?'. In this paper, I attempt to address these questions by generating a theoretical framework around the consumption of advertising and examine the analytical modes graphic design students could employ to critically examine advertising

discourse and practice. Various visual methodologies, such as rhetorical analysis, semiotic analysis, critical discourse analysis, audience studies and psychoanalysis are discussed and compared in terms of their critical orientation in relation to *Humanism: The Art of Selling*.

Advertising discourse, consumer culture and youth

It is ironic that, at the entrance to the FADA gallery, Human hangs a sign that spells out the word 'free' in yellow neon script typeface. This is obviously intended to be the first element of the exhibition to greet the visitor to the exhibition (Fig. 1). It is entirely incongruous; a signifier without a signified, an image without a referent, as if it arrived there by chance. If this sign is imagined as a living thing with a voice, it makes no demands on the viewer – declaring nothing, asking nothing, having no capacity to command. It literally just is, an exclamation, an 'isness', entirely self-sufficient and jubilantly unconcerned about the world around it. That powerful and compelling word *free* that evokes the great struggle to realise human potential, the movements of history itself, is here reduced to sheer nullity, an obscure offering. And yet that small neon sign has a wry self-consciousness and poignancy about it, clinging to the glass like a limpet.

After entering the FADA gallery, the visitor encounters a giant, white plastic eyeball suspended from the ceiling and flickering television advertisements that appear in its pupil as if by magic (Fig. 2). Upon closer inspection the visitor becomes aware of an unnatural reversal in action. Instead of reflected light being projected onto the retina from the external world, the eye projects light of its own, namely television advertisements for brands such as Exclusive Books and Coca Cola, waiting with its headsets, tentacle-like from the ceiling for visitors to immerse themselves in its spectral programming. The 'free' sign mounted against the gallery window



Fig 1: Gerry Human photographed outside the FADA Gallery, July 2008, at the opening of *Humanism: The Art of Selling*. Photograph by Nadine Froneman, 2008

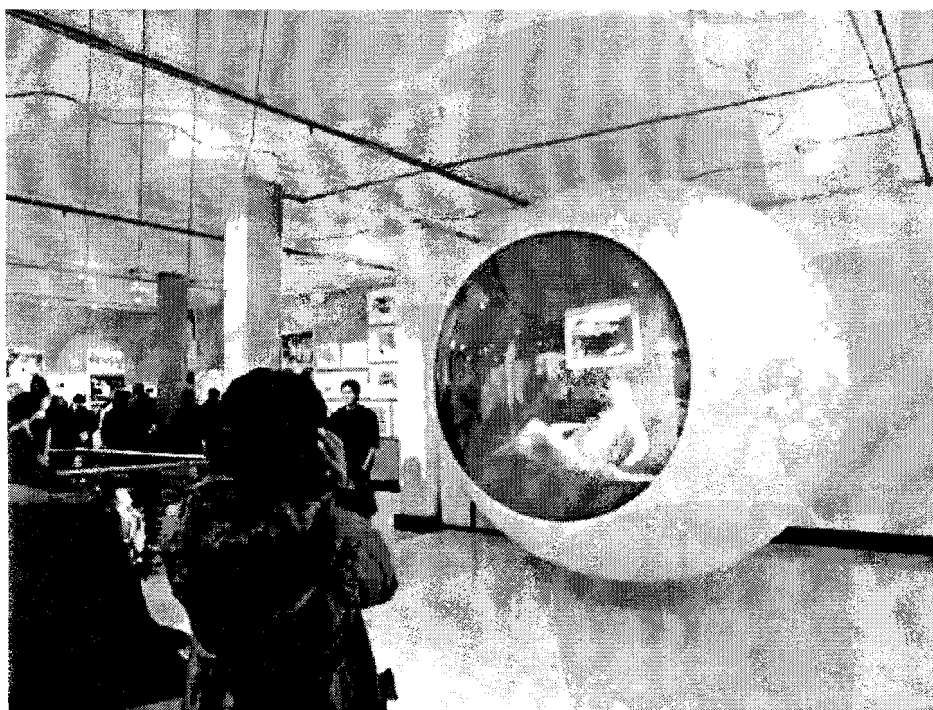


Fig 2: Gerry Human *Humanism: The Art of Selling*, 2008 suspended eyeball in the FADA Gallery showing advertisements for Coca Cola Brer campaign, Exclusive Books Fanatics. Photograph by Nadine Froneman

and lidless, self-sufficient eye raise the idea of visual discrimination. The neon sign is empty, connoting nothing, calling the viewer to no action. The passive and immobile eye has no lids, stripped of its ability to shut out visual information, but at the same time sees nothing; it is doomed to indiscriminate eternal devouring and outpourings of images. This eye, read as an ideal and pure biological form, acts perhaps as a metaphor of a media shorn of its ideological function, and emptied of its political specificity. It becomes the dream of 'the advertising man' where a direct and eternal conduit between the client, advertisement and the human appetite may be established and maintained. The visual statement is clearly ironic in its conflation of nature (eye) and culture (media), but does raise some interesting questions about the relationship between media and society. Stuart Hall (1981:396) explains that,

in modern societies, the different media are especially important sites for the production, reproduction and transformation of ideologies. Ideologies are, of course, worked on in many places in society, and not only in the head ... but institutions like the media are peculiarly central to the matter since they are, by definition, part of the dominant means of ideological production. What they 'produce' is, precisely, representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work.

In this respect, Human's lidless eye and free sign confront the student and critical educator with a challenge: 'To what extent can you exercise your discrimination in your own looking practices – what is your response to my projective and intrusive gaze; to what extent is your gaze implicated in mine? What interpretative strategies do you have at your disposal to counter my media hegemony?'. Given that the university is also an ideological apparatus in its own right, and that it too produces representations of the social world, it follows that the two domains of representation, the media and university, may here compete in the ideological arena for the resources of social subjects. The lidless eye is surely a provocative statement in the context of the gallery staking its territory in the ideological struggle with the university and the attendant world of the visual arts.

Media advertising throws into question the very meaning of what it is to be free in a late capitalist society. It is the art of persuasion, the stimulation of consumer demand for goods and services. It achieves this by using a variety of aesthetic, semiotic and linguistic strategies to humanise objects, and in so doing, dramatises the relationships between human beings and the objects

that surround them. Jean Baudrillard (1995:25), like Karl Marx, predicted that commodities would "proliferate"; gain a life of their own; become living signs in their own right and, in the uncanny vein of high theory, plot to overrun us. WJT Mitchell (2006:6-11) suggests that, more than ever, in a world saturated with mass media, images may indeed be alive, existing as a subaltern class of conscious beings with the capacity to desire and want things from the human species. As fetishes, idols and totems (Mitchell 2006:194) they hail us, they want us to want. A well-worn notion is that symbolic signs have superseded the commodity as the nexus of exchange between people. As a medium of communication, media advertising serves a function beyond merely making consumers aware of goods, provoking desire and persuading them to go shopping. The power of the advertising image is to fix the gaze, compel the imagination in the service of lubricating consumption. Yet beyond this, as a medium of communication, and as a form of expression, advertising both reflects and weaves itself into the fabric of post-modern societies. If the goal of so much *avant-garde* art produced in the twentieth century was to break down the boundaries between art and life, then advertising has vicariously and triumphantly achieved this end. Brands in particular, the symbolic associations that congeal around a company, product or service, have become the very material by which consumers construct and manipulate their identities, assert their social status, mark their bodies, organise their leisure time and understand the social world at large, because media advertising reifies the commodity, turning it into a sign, making it available for lifestyle accessorisation. If advertising mediates our relationship to the object world, as one where things are consumed, the gallery functions to instantiate a critical distance between viewing subject and object in the form of the disinterested gaze.

Given its overt ideological figurality, media advertising occupies an uneasy position in the discourse of graphic design; on the one hand advertising is regularly critiqued by leftist critics as ideologically suspect, but on the other hand more vacuous, conservative, platitudinous and uncritical commentary is spewed about it than about any other area in the field. Neither position appears entirely legitimate because it seems that no-one can escape the hegemonic machinations of capitalist modes of cultural production. Even the so-called radical subversions of the left (for example Adbusters) become a brand (like Benetton) in a cultural climate defined by consumerism. Cultural critics such as Naomi Klein (2000) contend that media advertising is unethical because it co-opts public space (Klein

2000:63-86; 165-194) and invades domestic space (Klein 2000:63-87), manufacturing consent by producing a docile citizenry content to work without resistance or complaint in exchange for the fleeting pleasures of consumption. Yet surely the social role of advertising cannot be so straightforward? Terry Eagleton (1990:42) argues that aesthetics were employed historically as an ideological strategy by the bourgeois class to keep the masses in check as an alternative to the use of coercive force. By deploying essentially aesthetic strategies, the dominant class (those who own the means of ideological representation) continues to produce the illusion that its values are universal and true without provoking dissent. This theoretical standpoint assumes that ideology is invested in things – a kind of contaminant encoded into a variety of texts.

If ideology can be said to be invested in texts it can also be imagined as dispersed as a kind of “repressive logic” of high capitalism as explained by Baudrillard (in Ganes 1991:71-73). Consumption as *the* cultural condition of post-modernity imbues human interactions with a mood of passivity so entrenched that ideology cannot be recognised for what it is. For Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, advertising is an anathema, an obstacle to human emancipation; popular culture as it is manufactured by the mass media is a sort of inescapable aroma that imprisons the human race, blunting its capacity to aspire to or gain critical consciousness. The visual arts (because of its ties to the critical traditions of the academe) promises the ushering in of a critical and intellectually liberated citizenry, but its role has been usurped by the entertainment industry, which operationalises the aesthetic and in so doing offers pleasures far greater, more socially profitable than anything the world of high art can muster on its own. It is interesting how the discourse of advertising has wholly penetrated the domain of the visual arts industry through sponsorship and patronage (Bolton 1998:37-47).

If advertising is a colonising and assimilatory medium that has entrenched itself in other forms of cultural production and communication, then what is left outside the sphere of its influence? Richard Bolton (1998) asserts that there is nothing left. For him, advertising has even succeeded in superseding architecture as the dominant mode of cultural production, the discipline most archetypal of modernism's relation to the social. In *Architecture and Cognac*, Bolton (1998) describes a print advertisement for Hennessy brandy that portrays a night scene in which an architect is seated in his office high above the glittering grid of the

city talking on the telephone, presumably to a client, his plans spread before him. He is interrupted in this telephonic conversation by his attractive secretary who asks him to join her for a glass of brandy. The advertisement, according to Bolton (1998:88), allegorises the “shift in power from architecture to mass media”. The female (described by Bolton as devouring, proliferating, chaotic and Dionysian) signifies the media that seduces the modernist architect (productive, civilised, rational, Apollonian) with the promise to return the male to the pleasures of nature. The female character invites the architect to forgo his phallogocentric excursions into the social and submit himself to the private pleasures of consumption that, of course, only the commodity can provide. Bolton's article points out that advertising, as the medium of post modernity *par excellence*, renders the masculinist idealism of critical modernism absurd and impotent. The cultural hegemony of advertising, here, is stereotyped as feminine, as a lack, whose power is realised in the mode of seduction. Bolton (1988:88-89) writes:

[L]ike the contemporary city, the media seem without center or boundaries; everywhere, but from nowhere. The media present to us a decentralised system, seemingly full of disruptions; on the surface of the media, discontinuities abound. But differences are entertained only to be made entertaining ... beneath these discontinuities; a centralised system of order still exists. No resistance is offered to the underlying uniformity of experience, no challenge is made to the advancing homogenization of social life.

Advocates of ideology as a way of understanding the social world assume that advertising in the twenty-first century is an ‘underlying’ force, sitting ‘beneath’ text and that by some kind of magic neo-liberalist, imperialist ideology is capable of colonising discourse and identity without resistance or appropriation on the part of the so-called ‘consumer’. The shift in orientation from Althusserian ideology to Foucauldian discourse; from penetrative models of analysis to looking instead at the effects and affects that texts produce; arguably makes for a reading of consumerism that is far more nuanced in terms of its understanding of how power works in advertising. However, if ideological analysis is naïve in its own way, discourse analysis sometimes lacks self-reflexivity because it cannot identify how its own discourse (that of the analyst, for example) is implicated within broader hegemonic systems (Rose 2006:170). How is it possible to act and think critically, if the very discourses we employ are shot through with power? Generally this reflexive resistance to the idea that ideology is always lurking in the structure of a text is typically expressed in the form of irony.

Irony acknowledges immediately, in the way that a text undermines its own legitimacy, that there is dialectic at play between the colonisation/commodification of identity through language and its capacity to appropriate the very language that is oppressing it. Through irony advertisements can exploit the resources of self-reflexivity for the purposes of entertaining or selling goods and services. Clearly, irony as a post-modern reflexive strategy is not just the province of more so-called sophisticated forms of cultural production such as the visual arts and architecture. If advertising attempts to construct complicity between the participants in a communicative transaction through the use of irony, then representation becomes a site of struggle in which various profits are produced, negotiated and exchanged by participants in the communicative act. Irony makes explicit the struggle for meaning by foregrounding the semantic relationality of the communication act (Hutcheon 1995:57-66).

As I attempt to show in this paper, the way advertisements work is complex because of the transactional nature of the text. The analysis of advertising texts is patently not a simple matter of identifying a problematic ideology at work underneath the skin of the text. Rather, identities are negotiated in the transaction that is reading. For Pierre Bourdieu (1991:481) linguistic transactions are to be understood in terms of their ideological and rhetorical value: “[U]tterances are not only (save in exceptional circumstances) signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also signs of wealth, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority, intended to be believed or obeyed”. However, he adds that communication is relational, marked by and appearing within the field of capital, and argues that

the value of the utterance depends on the relation of power that is concretely established between the speaker's linguistic competences, understood both as their capacity for production as their capacity for appropriation and appreciation; it depends, in other words, on the capacity of the various agents involved in the exchange to impose the criteria of appreciation most favourable to their own products (Bourdieu 1991:481).

In this way, the transaction becomes dialogised in terms of a struggle for distinction, with various forms of capital and competence on each side vying for the upper hand. Advertising complexifies the transactional exchange because the advertisement is a second-hand text that represents the interests of the producer, and therefore sets up an imaginary or indirect transaction between the reader and the text (Kress & Van Leeuwen

2006:117). Advertisements thus overtly stage communicative transactions.

Paul Willis (1999), in the context of critical pedagogy, argues that brands, commodities and advertisements, rather than colonising identity, provide the very material by which consumers may exert radical creativities. Young people who have grown up in a consumer society, who know nothing else but its repressive logic, may not share the view that consumption is passive, but rather show an aptitude for shaping their visual identities, symbolically, by appropriating the material of mass/popular culture for their own – sometimes subversive – purposes (Willis 1999:162-163). In a multimodal technological environment where all representations are up for recycling, the critical student may be rethought as the *bricoleur* who uses the material to hand to satisfy his/her creative impulse. Convenient access to information via the World Wide Web and the availability of image and text editing software allow young people to rework texts more quickly and more radically than could have been imagined 30 years ago. In a multimodal context, there exists the possibility that the old behaviourist model of the transparency of communication, or the idea that ideology may be distributed and amplified through text, seems outdated and insufficient to explain the uses to which advertising is put by young, post-modern ‘consumers’. The experience of a student in an information/knowledge economy is far more textually mediated and multimodal (Kress 2003:17) than was the case 30 years ago. As Norman Fairclough (1999:150) explains,

Textually mediated social life cuts both ways – it opens up unprecedented resources for people to shape their lives in new ways drawing upon knowledges, perspectives and discourses which are generated all over the world. But in so doing it opens up new areas of their lives to the play of power. There is a colonisation-appropriation dialectic at work here.

Reading as the site of this dialectic must be understood as central in understanding how young people, and particularly graphic design students, engage with advertising texts. Given the shifts in the reading and sign-making practices of young people, and the textually mediated nature of the social environment, the power of consumerist culture to shape the way young people think and perceive the world demands to be taken seriously, especially when it is exhibited in a university gallery for the benefit of students learning the business of communication design. It may be useful to imagine the student as a potential constructivist, a designer of social meanings, working at the intersections between

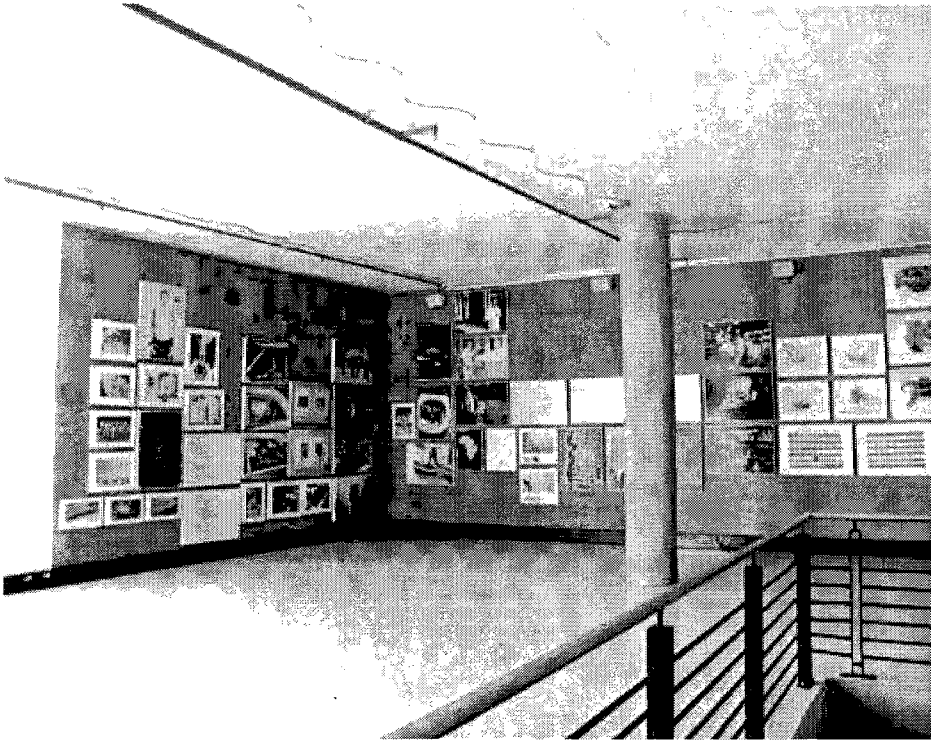


Fig 3: The FADA gallery
Print advertisements in
Gerry Human's *Humanism
the Art of Selling*, 2008
Photograph by Brenden
Gray, 2008

Fig 4: *Humanism The Art of Selling*, 2008. Exclusive Books.
Photograph of print in FADA Gallery by Brenden Gray, 2008
Courtesy of Ogilvy and Mather

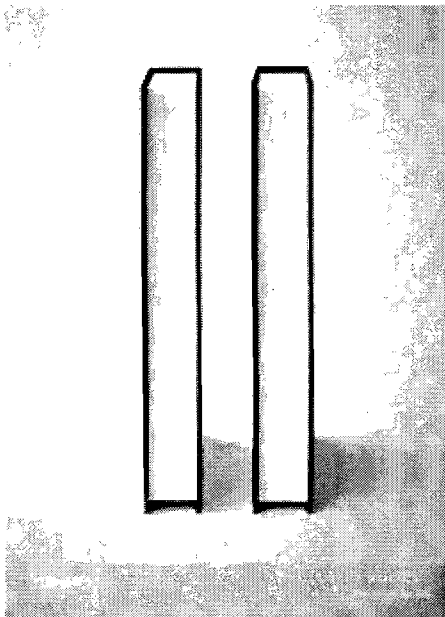


Fig 5: Gerry Human, *Humanism The Art of Selling*, 2008. For
M-Net. Photograph of print in FADA Gallery by Brenden Gray, 2008
Courtesy of Ogilvy and Mather.

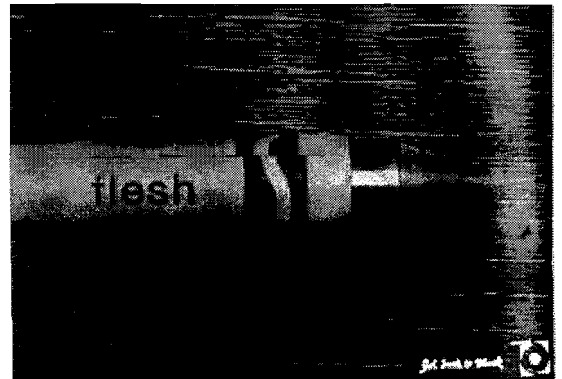




Fig 6: Gerry Human
Humanism: The Art of Selling, 2008. Tabasco Sauce print advertisement for McIlhenny. Conceived by Mike Martin and Alison Hingle. Creative director, Jonathan Beggs. Photograph by Mike Lewis 2008



Fig 7: Gerry Human
Humanism: The Art of Selling, 2008. For Channel O. Get Back to Black campaign. Photograph of print in FADA Gallery by Brenden Gray, 2008. Courtesy of Ogilvy and Mather



being a consumer and being a producer, a potential that is especially apt in the context of design education.

Human/ Humanism: discourse analysis and audience studies

Human clearly designed the exhibition, and materials supplementing it, to ironise the invitation extended to him by the Faculty to exhibit in its gallery and, in so doing, he problematises the easy reception of consumer culture. This is especially registered in his titling of the exhibition, the physical recontextualisation of pieces of advertising in the gallery, and the disruption of the rituals associated with gallery culture. Apart from the 'russians and chips' *hors de oeuvres*, cocktails offered to guests at the opening, and the hunky 'liquid chefs' bartenders serving drinks at opening event, the title of the show, *Humanism: The Art of Selling*, immediately poses the problem of situating advertising artefacts as art in a gallery context. By combining the transcendental values connoted by 'Art' with the rather more mundane, everyday practices of the marketplace indexed in the word 'selling', Human points toward the incongruencies between the world of 'high art' and advertising. The pun on his name – 'Human' transformed into 'Humanism' – reinforces this contrast: unlike the art industry that tends to fetishise the individuality of the artist in the production of unique and transcendental objects for a closed circle of readers, in the advertising industry ephemeral images are produced collaboratively for a mass audience. The 'ism' in Humanism points to the lack of homology between the reception of visual arts and that of advertising, but also seems to indicate that in a late capitalist context advertising has displaced other visual practices such as the visual arts. By invoking 'humanism' in the context of the gallery space, Human ironises his own vanity as an 'art' director and his artistry as a crafter of words by converting his own surname (a marker of his specific identity and personal history) into a marker of a philosophical position (the generic and universal humanism) thereby jokingly suggesting that he has become so successful as an advertiser that he can lay claim to represent the interests of a broader 'humanity'. In this way, the title of the exhibition also playfully suggests that 'advertising men', like Human, occupy positions far more potent than those of university academics, artists and educators with regard to in affecting social change (of whatever kind), perhaps pointing to the uselessness of the university's mission to humanise society in any significant way by producing rational, enlightened, critical agents. The title cocks a snoot at the tendency of universities – and 'fine' arts

departments in particular – to denigrate advertising as an inferior visual practice (or a purveyor of vulgarity, kitsch, and dirty ideology), which, if it does feature in academia, does so as an object of study rather than as a discursive agent in its own right. Human is parodying advertising as a fantastic body that is laboured on by the rational university. In universalising his surname, Human inverts the relation of power between the advertising man and the professor. The title points out that FADA, in situating his work in a gallery, has misrecognised the practice of advertising, asking why an institution would want to co-opt a practice that is so misaligned with the presumed critical orientation of the university.

Given Human's ironising of the institutional struggle between the ideological apparatus of media advertising (producer of rhetorical texts for easy consumption) and the university (producer of critical texts for close reading), discourse analysis and audience studies may provide the critical educator with a useful resource in framing students' encounters with the complexities presented by such an exhibition, because their reading practices are situated at the interstices between these poles. Audience studies are a visual methodology that looks specifically at how texts are decoded within specific sites of reception (Rose 2006:196). The approach recognises that interpretations to texts and images are multiple, and decoding practices are context bound, wound up with the everyday rituals performed around the consumption of images and texts, never assuming that there can be a direct match between the encoding and decoding of a text.

Image acts and social semiotics - designing the position of the reader

A semiotic analysis of this exhibition might direct the student's experience to the south-east corner of the gallery where Human has arranged individual pieces for closer scrutiny. Here (Fig. 3) viewers are presented with exquisitely crafted hard copy versions of advertisements for print and television, framed in white and resembling pieces of fine art hung against a crimson red wallpaper backdrop that indexes the glut of mass media imagery. Pieces from campaigns directed by Human for clients such as Exclusive Books, Harley Davidson, Viagra, Channel O, Duracell, Viagra, MTV Base, Audi, and Greenpeace are displayed. Unlike the lidless eye and the flashing 'free' sign, the presentation of printed material in this section of the gallery seems to draw the viewer's attention to minute detail amid the indexed chaos of messages, activating the

power of the eye to discriminate. Like pieces of fine art, advertisements require specific competences in order to decode their meaning, whether it is on the level of recognition or connotation. Human's pieces are characteristically detailed in terms of their 'painterly' effects, compositions, and choice of iconography. As Bourdieu argues in *Distinction* (1993), *Photography* (1996), and *Love of Art* (1990), the appreciation of art is a learnt competence that is linked to class, social origin, capital and habitus, and the reading of advertising is no different. The images presented on the exhibition reveal that they are designed specifically for a highly literate, educated and fairly affluent class of consumers that possesses the prerequisite cultural capital in order to understand and appreciate the encoded messages. Who other than such viewers would be able to understand the disparate connection between the image of two upright, parallel black books standing on a severe white surface and the index 'terrorism' (Fig. 4), or an electric toothbrush and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* shower scene (Fig. 5)?

What does this declarative mode of address, predominant in this body of work – *Humanism: The Art of Selling* – suggest about its ideal reader? For one thing, it implies that a privileged class of consumers may not be addressed through the interrogative, exclamative or imperative mode, directly as it were, because the demand would threaten its power as a class, the members of which feel no need to answer questions, tolerate exclamations or comply to commands issued by these advertisements. To do so would be, in a word, vulgar. The declarative is the mode of address for the affluent, educated and tasteful consumer, *par excellence*. The services and products are on offer because the offer lends itself to a discriminating eye. The nature of the audience and client provides the producer of such advertisements the freedom to operate in very much the same way as a contemporary fine artist would, within his/her field, synthesising a range of genres to create that signifying chain that leads to the satisfying 'aha!' moment when the privileged reader understands the connections established between the content of the advertisement (the scenario) and the client's offer (usually closed by a tagline or logo). This is clever communication, and makes readers feel clever in turn by giving them the distinction of cracking the advertisement's code. Here there is no overt economic imperative driving the construction of the advertising message; the designers can set up sophisticated semiotic games with the audience because the latter is literate and discriminating.

Human's choice of declarative mode is distinctive in this body of work. The declaration is a form of statement that offers up information-as-truth, where subject matter is generally depicted as passive, presenting itself to the human gaze rather than meeting this gaze with its own. This positions readers as powerful, invisible and stable onlookers (which I problematise later), capable to decide for themselves whether they want that information on offer, deem it to be true, valuable, or not. It is interesting to note in terms of the declarative mode of address, that Human encourages the extensive use of *objects* in this body of advertisements; consequently, this collection of work becomes a tribute to the lives and times of inanimate objects. The use of the object is perhaps the most obvious sign of the declarative address, because objects (generally) have no gaze or agency of their own: the viewer has almost complete control in the transactional exchange. In order to enable this transaction, Human aggressively employs metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy to highlight the attributes of a product, service or brand, be it the explosive nature of Tabasco sauce (Fig. 6) or the longevity of Duracell batteries. The idea of black pride associated with Channel O is communicated through the vehicle of objects offered to the gaze. In one example, an image of a black woman's finger is followed by a 'flesh' coloured plaster and crayon – a sequence that points out the absurdity of universalising white skin as 'flesh' coloured (Fig. 7). In another, a woman of indeterminate race offers up her buttocks for inspection to sell chocolate (Fig. 8), a conventional trope used in colonial advertisements of the past to make a connection between goods and the black body as commodity (Pieterse 1992). In another striking series, which seems to essentialise black identity, various objects such as Sunlight soap, newspaper and stockings are offered up with annotations, as a celebration of the improvisational skills of people living in townships (Fig. 9).

Advertisements rely heavily on the affective responses they elicit from readers/viewers (Rose 2006:110). However these responses always implicate more complex issues of 'othering', fetishisation and voyeurism. Race, gender, class and sexuality are combined in a complex matrix of desire. In this regard, social semiotics, as a somewhat dry, grammatical and ideological approach to analysis, has much to say about how advertisements hail readers but little about how advertisements create visual pleasure through the provocation of guilt, anxiety and desire, how commodities come to be fetishised, or how advertisements fix the gaze.



Fig 8: Gerry Human
Humanism: The Art of Selling, 2008. For
Gianduja Gndiva Chocolate
Directed by Alexa Craner.
Photograph by David
Prior, 1999. Catalogue
for *Humanism: The
Art of Selling*, 2008
Johannesburg: Hot Dot.

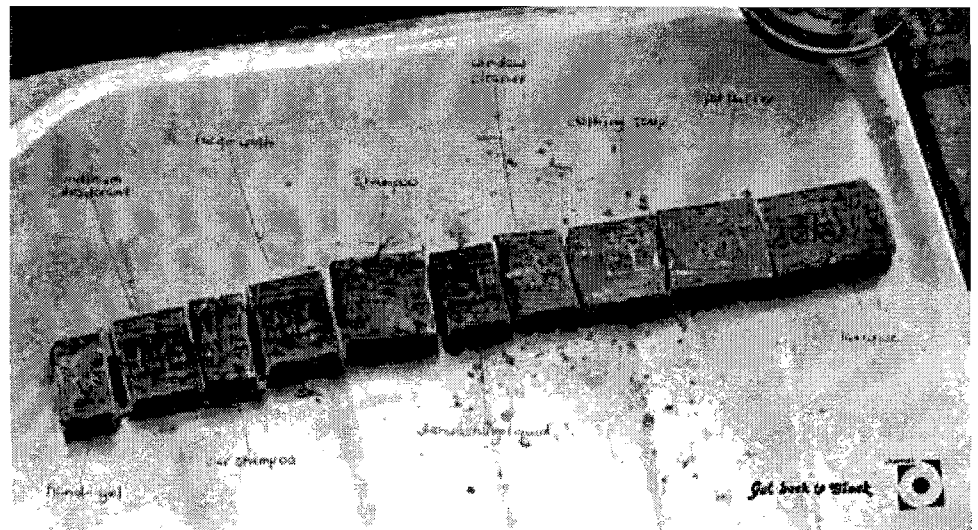


Fig 9: Gerry Human,
*Humanism: The Art of
Selling*, 2008. For Chanel
O, Get Back to Black
campaign. Photograph
of print in FADA Gallery
by Brenden Gray, 2008
Courtesy of Ogilvy and
Mather.



Fig 10: Gerry Human.
Humanism: The Art of Selling, 2008. For Harley Davidson Motorcycles Catalogue for *Humanism: The Art of Selling, 2008* Johannesburg: Hot Dot



Fig 11: Gerry Human.
Humanism: The Art of Selling, 2008. For Harley Davidson Motorcycle tours. Conceived by Peter Little, Sanele Ngubane. Creative direction Fran Luckin. Photograph by Shahn Rowe, 2005. Catalogue for *Humanism: The Art of Selling, 2008* Johannesburg: Hot Dot.



Fig 12: Gerry Human
*Humanism: The Art of
Selling* 2008 For Harley
Davidson Motorcycle
rentals. Conceived by
Mike Groenewald and
Neil Ross. Photograph
by David Prior, 2003.
Catalogue for *Humanism:
The Art of Selling*, 2008
Johannesburg Hot Dot

Distinction and the pursuit of visual pleasure

Producers of rhetorical texts such as advertisements rely on setting up subject positions for readers and viewers to adopt. Texts in general attempt to produce relations between their texts and readers. In advertising this is usually achieved, visually, by constructing a system of signs internal to the text that implies a specific gaze with which a reader may or may not identify, and in writing, through the construction of voice. Human's advertisements are sophisticated because they offer more than a simple process of identification to readers, or a homology between the voice/gaze of the advertisement and the target audience ('the character represented in the advertisement is like me'). Beyond mere identification, these advertisements offer a 'meta-gaze', by making the reader aware that they are looking through the eyes of one of many possible constructed subjectivities (those set up by the art director). For the viewer who can recognise that a meta-gaze is on offer it becomes a supplementary position from which viewers and readers may relate to the subject matter presented. The gazes set up by Human's advertisements may or may not align with the intended or 'target' audience of a given campaign but they do offer a framework or point of entry by which a range of viewers and readers, regardless of the context of reception or intentions of producers, may relate to the text. In this way the implied gaze set up by these advertisements is a static and relatively well-defined, *a priori* category in comparison with the range of viewers that may come to engage with it as an advertisement in both ill-defined and well-defined contexts of reception.

In this section of the paper, I imagine the advertisement's implied gaze as a discursive space, a limited hermeneutic frame that although within the context of editorial attempts to hail a particular kind of reader (its target) also offers a potentially limitless number of readers/viewers a position that may be occupied or resisted to varying degrees and for different reasons. The reading of an advertising text is largely dependent upon the relationships established between the implied gaze (or the subject position offered by the producer of the advertisement), the context in which the text is received and a given reader's social place. The tension between these three positions may therefore produce different encodings, namely, in Hall's (1993:101-103) terms, "preferred, negotiated or oppositional". Producers of rhetorical texts attempt to control and constrain this dynamic (the number of positions made available in the act of semiosis) by offering the

reader a somewhat well-defined, stable imaginative space that may be adopted to get their message across in the form of an implied gaze. Clues internal to an advertisement may be analysed to arrive at this implied gaze. Here, rather than discussing Human's advertisements in terms context, or normative categories such as 'target audience', I focus on the imaginary social spaces set up by the advertisements and the semiotic strategies Human and OgilvySA employ to generate implied gazes/readers in the semiotic construction of the text. I am therefore less concerned with the context of reception (whether this be an editorial or gallery context) influencing semiosis so much as how the implied gaze internal to an advertising text attempts to position a reader.

Human makes extensive use of complex strategies of objectification and condescension to provoke both humour and desire in his campaigns. As I have discussed, much of Human's *oeuvre* uses objects as metonyms and personifications and in this process reification and fetishisation of the commodity takes place. In this section, his treatment of the human form in relation to desire and especially in terms of the gaze is explored. His Viagra and Harley Davidson campaigns are particularly apt in this regard, because they can alert the viewer to the problematics involved in how advertisements set up matrixes of desire through the construction of the gaze. Human generally deflates the phallogocentrism/scopophilicisism, so central to the male gaze in advertising, by making readers conscious of the externality of an assumed gaze by inverting conventional notions of masculinity. In the section of her book that deals with psychoanalysis as a mode of interpreting images, Gillian Rose (2006) points out that Jacques Lacan's theorisation around the gaze problematises feminist critiques of the male gaze because, "the Gaze is striated with inherent failure"; "the Gaze fails precisely because it is structured through a screen of signs" (Rose 2006:127-128), and because "in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at that is to say, I am a picture ... What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside." For Rose, the gaze indexes human mortality because it outlives us and because the "the subject is annihilated", not only by death, but by the lack that the structures the (visual) Symbolic" (Lacan cited in Rose 2006:127-128). In other words the power of the gaze is undercut by its relation to mortality. As I argue, the inclination to problematise the patriarchal gaze by externalising the gaze, takes place in Human's Viagra and Harley Davidson campaigns at the expense of a particular class, namely working class men. Perhaps



Fig 13: Gerry Human. *Humanism: The Art of Selling*, 2008. For Harley Davidson Motorcycle, Bikes for Women. Conceived by Bridget Johnson and Robyn Bergmann. Art direction, Vanessa Gibson. Creative director, Fran Luckin. Photograph by Clive Stewart, 2006. Catalogue for *Humanism: The Art of Selling*, 2008. Johannesburg: Hot Dot. Courtesy of Ogilvy and Mather.

this objectification is indicative of the inherent problem with any oppositional or essentialised theory of identity, predicated on the existence of an enemy-other (Mouffe 2005:15). The question arises as to how alternative/oppositional gazes establish themselves in relation to other lacks. The way that the gaze is refracted through class becomes a fertile opportunity for students to reflect on their own looking practices, and how their subjectivities are marked by and in images.

Given that the Viagra and Harley Davidson campaigns are essentially selling virility and phallic power, they are appropriate vehicles with which to explore how gendered subjectivity is constructed in terms of image-making. Predictably, given Human's interest in the carnivalesque and grotesque, the phallogocentrism – that lends itself to both products – is undercut, thus creating humour through irony. In both campaigns Human frames his human subject matter in such a way that spectators recognise immediately that they are there to be looked at through the use of clues that suggest an implied gaze. This subtle staging is achieved in various ways: subjects are presented within frames internal to the advertisement itself (for example the image of a terrified baby seen through the rear window of a car (Fig. 10)), or the advertisement's edge

is consigned to another framing technique (for example the camera's viewfinder is implied in the representation of a class of pregnant teenage school girls posing with their female teacher for a class photograph (Fig. 11)). Finally, bodily postures in combination with camera angles, and positioning models off-centre with wide or close cropping, suggest an awareness on the part of the represented participant of an invisible onlooker; a man revealing his stick-on tattoo (Fig. 12), the trailer park resident looking out of the frame for the return of his wife (Fig. 13), the pool cleaner overtly striking a pose to be looked at through an implied window outside the frame of the print advertisement (Fig. 14).

Human uses these interpellating devices to alert the viewer to the fact that they are being asked to take the position of an external gaze with which they may or may not necessarily identify, and in so doing, are encouraged to momentarily take on the identity of another, whether it be that of a biker wife, a male school photographer, or a passing shopper or pedestrian. Much of the humour in Human's work relies upon this trope. As a result of this device, the spectator is aware that their looking has almost been set up in advance of their seeing of the image by the omnipotent art director. This places spectators in a position of visual mastery

Fig 14: Gerry Human
*Humanism: The Art of
Selling, 2008* For Viagra.
Courtesy of Ogilvy and
Mather.



Fig 15: Gerry Human
*Humanism: The Art of
Selling, 2008* For Viagra
Conceived by Mike
Groenewald and Catherine
Conradie, Creative director
Fran Luckin. Photograph
by David Prior, 2008
Courtesy of Ogilvy and
Mather.



but only if they can recognise the constructedness of the social place that Human offers them. The body of work in the FADA gallery tends to suggest that the role of the creative director (especially in terms of photographic art direction) is to generate a plurality of possible positions for the reader of the advertisement to assume. The viewer's awareness that their reading is at once identificatory and mediated might produce an uncomfortable social distance between themselves and the represented subject so that, paradoxically, the possibility of empathy is disallowed. Rather the viewer must become complicit in the representations of the art director. The meta-narrative of many gazes (rather than a primary hegemonic one) as presented in these advertisements generates, at a conceptual and cognitive level, a social distance between reader/spectator and human subject. The plurality on offer, a sort of marketplace of the gaze, may decentre the power of the phallogocentric gaze, but this comes at a cost. Only the privileged spectator who has the decoding competences to share the art director's appreciative codes (self reflexivity, irony, and multiplicity) can wholly enjoy the humour. The pleasure in decoding these advertisements is partly derived from a voyeurism based in a desire to maintain social distinction, but also from the sense that the sophisticated reader has a power over subjects without signifying power; in the case of the Harley Davidson and Viagra campaigns, it is power over working class white males.

Consider, for example, the Viagra advertisement depicting the uniformed postman (Fig. 15). The external gaze set up by the art director here appears to be that of a middle-class, middle-aged, white woman. She is looking out from her front door or window at a white, middle aged postman who is trying to solicit her attention, waiting at her garden gate for permission to be 'let in'. His gaze is averted from hers but she can look at him from her window with relative freedom. He allows her to do this by merely appearing there. In contrast, we assume that because she is gazing out at him from her house, his perspective on her is partial because she may not be in full view, cropped by a window or door frame. Additionally, the slight high angle shot indicates that she is looking down at him from her house thus occupying a superior social position. Given that she is surveying him from her house (a symbol of her economic stability) we assume that it is her class that gives her power over him. She owns a pretty house, he has his bicycle. Yet, although her gaze draws its power from her property, it is also this that pacifies it. Although the advertisement does not explicitly state it, the suggestion is that she is a kept woman, a housewife, dependent

economically on her now absent husband/partner. She can look in a transgressive and adulterous way at another man because her husband is absent. Although she has social power over the postman they share a common position of liminality and lack – both yearning for something more. Given his social position, as a working-class, menial labourer, but also as a desiring and desired subject, with goods and services on offer, he is frozen at the boundary between the street (public – his domain) and the house (private – her domain), or between alienation (his) and confinement (hers). The advertisement sets up the fantasy that, because they both share a sense of existential and sexual loneliness, this encounter may allow both to transcend their social position and consummate their desire as sexual equals. The interstitial status of the postman is reinforced by the high modality of his uniform, which becomes a kind of skin between his authentic self (his disposition as a lover), and his other, social self (his position as a lowly postman). The presence of the bicycle as a somewhat phallic symbol serves as a reminder of his limited social mobility, which he leaves in the street temporarily to submit himself to a woman with more power than himself. His weak social position is reinforced in the social distance established between the house, the property he desires and his body. In terms of gesture and bodily hexis (the way the body occupies social space), he strikes the passive pose of a longing, desiring servant, but in gesturing toward his crotch he promises to actively fulfil the implied female viewer's desire. Notably her body is unseen to the actual reader, and possibly partially hidden to the postman which means that she cannot be judged by the postman or reader in this transactional exchange. Like her husband she too is absent.

It is interesting how Human stages these dreams in terms of class, using the same strategy of substitution in each of the print advertisements in the Viagra campaign. The gaze in all three Viagra advertisements, depicting the pool man, postman and milkman (Figs. 14 & 15 respectively), is clearly fantastic, a staging of desire, where the implied viewer may dream of lost objects. The postman advertisement gives the implied female reader two options: she can renew her own sexual life or redeem that of her husband/partner with the help of the product on offer. As the advertisement is explicitly directed at her it suggests that she is primarily responsible for this conversion and that the product can magically facilitate the redemption of her sexual life acting as a friendly and sympathetic accomplice in this endeavour. Note the innocuous Viagra logo in the bottom right corner of the advertisement. The appearance of the image of

the postman at her doorstep offers her two conflicting fantasies. The first promises to fill her erotic longing by restoring the image of her husband/partner; the second is designed to provoke anxiety and excitement by substituting him for a stranger. In the first instance she can imagine the impossible, that this is her husband dressed up as a postman who, by taking on this inferior social identity (a working-class subject), has shown a willingness to submit himself to her desires. In this role he may be redeemed because he is willingly subjecting himself to a sexual make-over that she can now affect thanks to the product. In this sentimental fantasy the husband exposes his loss of phallogentric power by masquerading as a socially and economically vulnerable 'other'.

In the second fantasy, this postman is not her husband at all but a substitute, a stranger, in which case his presence is a potentially transgressing and threatening one making him, despite his age and decrepit body, an exotic and desirable sexual commodity. The stranger offers her services and goods her husband/partner cannot but that is all he can offer – a blunt, dehumanised and instrumentalised masculinity. The first fantasy promises love and the second a 'good fuck'. The tension between these two staged fantasies in the mind of the implied reader creates an anxiety between two versions of sexuality, the first defined by intimacy, fidelity and continuity ('this is my husband') and the second by shock, newness and thrill ('at my age I should not be doing this'). The necessity of making a choice between these two offered states creates anxiety which of course the product will relieve because by purchasing it she can have it both ways: she can keep her husband and enjoy the thrill and strangeness of a body that has been made over by the product. Without the product the implied reader must live with her stasis and cannot move, locked into a feeling of perpetual longing, constraint and passivity.

The advertisement relies on this imaginary anxiety to produce a humorous effect. It achieves this by offering the familiar and the strange in equal measure making the entire scene *unheimlich*. The product promises a radical makeover of the underperforming middle-class husband by linking his sexual potency with the threat implied in a lower social class. The husband-stranger figure regains his virility because he is associated with a class of people that threatens the bourgeois order, namely, the urban proletariat. The husband/partner can recover his sexuality in the eyes of the implied reader by submitting himself first to a woman's gaze and by masquerading as a working-class subject. In both

instances (the submissive husband and the domineering stranger) the image of the working-class is invoked, which suggests that this advertisement was designed for a middle-class, white, female audience.

This advertisement draws on a number of social and gender stereotypes (a kind of social unconscious) to construct a position that an actual reader can adopt. The advertisement is humorous because of its disturbing social connotations but also because the reader is aware that an imaginary construct/position has been set up for him/her to momentarily embody. The humour works because he/she is complicit in the construction of these stereotypes. Advertisements such as these offer a rich social imaginary and a degree of self reflexivity in their construction that mediocre advertisements do not. However, this all of course depends on who is looking. A sophisticated reader can adopt, refuse or resist the position offered to them and make ethical judgements in relation to it. This raises the question: 'To what extent can graphic design students be critical of these staged imaginaries in their transactions with advertisements?'. Students need to become savvy to how advertisements attempt to interpellate their readers through the construction of complex fantasies.

Conclusion

I have argued that the reflexivity and conceptual density of print advertisements in Gerry Human's *Humanism: The Art of Selling*, reflected in the matrix of analytical methods required to decode his work, offers an opportunity for FADA to develop a critical framework with which students can engage with advertising products and, in so doing, denaturalise their consumption of advertisements. I have imagined the advertising text as the site of a struggle over legitimate meaning, asking what visual methodologies FADA may use to develop the visual literacies and what appreciative competences students need to consume and produce advertising texts. A question that arises is how visual methodologies may be employed to realise, more broadly, a critical pedagogical approach that links students' lived experiences to the discursive demands of academia, allowing them to explore the possibility that "identity is positionality" (McLaren 1995:98), and allowing FADA to work toward what Peter McLaren (2005:151) calls a "revolutionary, multicultural pedagogy".

If students cannot deploy a range of interpretative strategies, in their engagement with a range of texts, to construct or assume a position, it may become difficult to develop a

pedagogy that links the social identities of marginalised and oppressed groups – particularly the working class, indigenous groups, and marginalised populations – with their reproduction within capitalist relations of production. It [a revolutionary, multicultural pedagogy] also examines how the reproduction of social, ethnic, racial and sexual identities, as particular social and cultural constructs as well as shared histories of struggle, is linked with the social division of labour (Mclaren 2005:151).

Developing a critical stance in students means empowering them to reflect on the very discourses that produce and produced them as subjects in the first place. This endeavour would entail a discussion about how habitus influences students' decoding practices, which is a critical issue for further research in the area of visual literacy. What makes art, design and architecture education both unique and problematic is that it expects students to draw on resources in the 'world out there' to inform the encoding of the texts they are required to design. Students who, by virtue of their privileged social origin, enculturation, and exposure to legitimate forms of culture outside the environment of the university (their habitus), are predisposed to achievement

because they possess the appreciative codes and the feel for the game of legitimate culture that allows them to decode and encode texts in a sophisticated manner. Students without cultural capital accrued in the 'world out there' are dependent upon the learning strategies of the university to develop their interpretative-appreciative repertoire, which may be found to be central in building disadvantaged students' cultural capital. In this sense, it is imperative that, from their first year of study, students are given opportunities to develop their interpretative skills in relation to their own experience and are exposed, explicitly, to the cultural and symbolic resources that they need to become sophisticated readers and producers of texts. The *Humanism: The Art of Selling* exhibition provides such an opportunity. In a South African context educators cannot ignore how class influences the performance of students, and should strive to address social inequality by providing students with the interpretative repertoire and appreciative dispositions that they need in order to engage with advertising materials critically.

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