

Chapter 4

The Image in Print Advertising and Comments to Val Larsen's Research Program

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors re-visit, with Val Larsen, the use of Peircean icons and symbols in print advertising and thereby find (some) formal conditions concerning its images. Even though they are inspired by Val Larsen's research program the authors are also critical of it. Hence, they set out to demonstrate how Val Larsen overlooks crucial parts of the semiotic potential of icons and symbols within print advertising. Furthermore, Val Larsen needs, they argue, the Peircean index within his research program. At the end of the article, and inspired by Val Larsen, the authors put forth nine Peircean points they find relevant for a research program concerning the image within print advertising. Here, ontological and methodological deductions are made from Peircean ideas and principles.

INTRODUCTION

Images play a central role, perhaps the most central role, in contemporary print advertising. It is a fact that images most often take up a large proportion of the composition of print advertisements (cf. Aydinoglu and Cian 2014). This is, of course, no coincidence. Images are seen, and rightly so, by researchers and practitioners (e.g., advertisers) alike as effective means to attract and convince consumers concerning the merits of products and services (cf. Messaris, 1997).

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However, according to the marketing theorist William Val Larsen (building partly on arguments stemming from Scott (1994) and McQuarrie and Mick (2003)), the image in print advertisement has not yet received the research attention it deserves.

In his very fine article “What the Symbol Can’t, the Icon Can. The Indispensable Icon/Symbol Distinction” (2008), Val Larsen sees research on the image in print advertising as a part of the development of a science of visual persuasion. Yet, this science cannot, according to Val Larsen, be fully developed unless the richness and complexity of images in print advertising are (much) better understood.

What Val Larsen has in mind is a deeper understanding of what the image in print advertising is – in itself, as certain qualities, qualities which as he says “...shape and limit our understanding of images...” (Val Larsen, 2008 p. 76).

In short, the ambition of Val Larsen is therefore to outline “...a research program that explores different levels of the ad system, including specific transformations that link the deep and surface structures of images.” (Val Larsen, 2008, p. 68); furthermore, to investigate the framework within which the image in print advertisement can be described.

According to Val Larsen, semiotics “...holds a great promise as a theoretical framework within which ad form variables may be rigorously defined.” (Val Larsen 2008: 69).

In particular, Val Larsen finds the semiotics of C. S. Peirce (1839–1914) to be particularly fruitful. Hence, what he sets out to do is to reestablish “...Peirce’s...distinction [between icon and symbol] as the foundation for an adequate analysis of the ad system.” (Val Larsen 2008: 70).

We find Val Larsen’s research program very interesting, indeed, and we still welcome it even though it now has some years on its back. We agree with Val Larsen that there still is work to be done concerning the image in print advertising, when it comes to understanding the image in itself, as an artifact having a semiotic potential, or, as Val Larsen notes, concerning “the qualities of the image” (Val Larsen, 2008, p. 76).

In the following, we will, therefore, take a closer look at Val Larsen’s research program as a research program concerning the image in print advertising. We will, however, be rather critical toward some points of Val Larsen’s research program.

Our critique will primarily concern the following points: We believe that Val Larsen, firstly, overlooks parts of the semiotic potential of both the icon and the symbol; secondly, he does not really see the relationship between the icon and the symbol; and thirdly, (and perhaps most crucially) he completely overlooks the index. Thereby he misses, we believe, important points concerning the image within print advertising.

Let us just mention here, how a research program based on Peirce’s semiotics cannot describe, for example, the image within print advertising as a perceivable/interpretable structure if the indexical sign is not involved. Through the critique of parts of Val Larsen’s research program, we will, at the end of the article, try to formulate a few points ourselves, which we find programmatically relevant in order to understand the image in print advertising.

Hence, we do, as such, acknowledge and agree with Val Larsen’s research program concerning its overall framework (Peirce), the important notions (icon and symbol), and fundamental axiom (e.g. the affinity between experienced and experience), but we do also see the need to put forth some critical comments. These critical comments and the few programmatic points that will follow, naturally, rest on thoughts stemming from Peirce.

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