

ADVERTISING AND ITS MENTAL PICTURES

The soul never thinks without a mental picture.

Aristotle

The question is not what you look at, but what you see.

Henry David Thoreau

Experience is not possible until it is organized iconically. The brain's record of everything [is] iconic.

Oliver Sacks

Do you picture life as ‘a path to be explored’, ‘a journey to be enjoyed’, ‘a ladder to be climbed’, or as ‘a competitive struggle against hostile forces to be won’? The way in which you mentally picture (IMAGINE) what life ‘is’ will not only dictate your goal, but the rules you must follow in order to achieve it. How do you mentally picture ‘success’? Is it the accumulation of wealth and the accumulation of material possessions? The achievement of personal or professional status? The attainment of power over others? The possession of a beautiful, youthful body granted the sexual favours of varied and attractive partners – or is it the joy in being worthy of the love and respect of those around you? The way in which you IMAGINE your goals determines the ‘evidence’ you will pursue as their proof – and what you pursue will shape the life you will lead.

It is only by discovering what makes us truly happy and fulfilled (as distinct from the momentary and superficial experience of gratification found in buying what advertising encourages us to assume will make us ‘better’) that we can achieve it. To do this, we must learn to recognise the way in which we ‘picture’ it.

The use of ‘mental pictures’ is the oldest form of human cognition – our most basic way to assign meaning and to know what something ‘is’. In other words, *what* we think of something is determined by *the way in which we mentally ‘picture’ it*. Close your eyes and think of ‘Home’, ‘School’ or ‘My Ideal Job’ and your mind will spontaneously summon up a visual image. Hold this picture in your mind and examine it carefully: this image not only *stands for* the idea, memory or experience but, in the particular visual details from which it is assembled, it also *describes* your feelings, assumptions and attitudes about the idea it represents. (Imagine ‘a terrorist’ and notice how the visual elements of your mental picture suggest its negative associations. Now imagine ‘a welfare recipient’: Do you ‘see’ an international corporation benefiting from government tax breaks worth billions of pounds – or do you ‘see’ a single mother in social housing?)

Similar in function to what Postman calls our *stories*, it is through these meaning-full visual images that we find (or, more accurately, *make*) meaning of appearances, actions and events which, in turn, form the basis of our most important assumptions, including who – and what – we are, as well as:

- *What kind of place is this world? (Is it benign or hostile?)*
- *What are its rules? And what is the reason we should not break them?*
- *How we ‘know’ that something is ‘good’ and that something else is ‘bad’?*
- *What kinds of things are ‘worth doing’ – and what is not?*
- *What sources of information do we trust – and why do we trust these more than some other source?*
- *Who do we include when we say “us...” – and who do we mean when we say “them...”?*

In addition to their impact on our lives and career decisions, the stories based on our mental pictures also shape our behaviour in the world around us. Drawn from our memory and imagination, history and culture, popular entertainment and advertising – our mental pictures for everything we encounter ‘out there’ (and the largely unconscious judgements they promote) are the basis for most of our (supposedly) rational and objective decisions. Like the soldiers concealed inside the Trojan Horse, within our mental pictures for *Female, Homosexual, Fat, Black, Arab or Jew* are powerful cognitive reflexes that influence our perceptions – and therefore our judgements – about the things they describe. (It is worth noting that many of our most potent negative stereotypes¹ are actually reflections of things we fear and detest within *ourselves* because they threaten the self-image we need to maintain to believe that we are ‘okay’. To protect ourselves, we unconsciously project these characteristics onto Others where they can be safely despised and persecuted. If you need to be wealthy to feel ‘good enough’, you will oppose social programmes; if your self-esteem depends on being a ‘real’ Man, you will despise homosexuals.) By battering women, bashing gays, belittling children, blaming Muslims or immigrants, waging war on the Enemy-of-the-Day or by supporting policies that punish the poor and vulnerable, we are trying to convince ourselves that ‘We’ are superior to ‘Them’ and are therefore among Life’s winners. This isn’t politics, it’s exorcism – and it’s been known to kill.

Increasingly, our mental picture of the world is shaped by the socio-economic ideologies embedded within (and transmitted by) the visual presentation of information in the commercial media. Through these, the corporations that produce the ‘products’ of popular culture have an enormous influence over the way in which we mentally picture (IMAGINE) ourselves and others. In my lectures, I will draw on recent studies in anthropology, communication theory, evolutionary biology, history, mythology, psychology and semantics in an effort to demonstrate the power of visual communication to shape the perceptions – and through these, the attitudes, values, decisions and behaviours – that inform contemporary society. As ~~students~~ (sorry, I mean ‘consumers of education’) in our neoliberal culture within which the purpose of university education is increasingly ‘seen as’ job training, most of you are here in order to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to compete successfully for an exciting and well-paid career within the creative industries. As your lecturers, we have a responsibility to you as well as to the future of these industries to ensure the practical relevance of our courses. But there are still a few of us who believe that we also have a duty to another, higher objective: to prepare you for the challenges of shaping the new ‘post-factual’ world that we will not live to see. Accordingly, in addition to teaching the strategies and techniques of advertising from a corporate perspective (what I will call *How We Do It to Them*), I will also examine *How They Do It to Us* in order to offer you both the means and the incentive to consider critically the implicit ideologies about *the Product, the Politician and the Right Priorities*.

Although you have no control over many of the metaphors you have inherited, you are now sufficiently mature to accept the responsibility for examining the pictures you carry around in your head and considering their role in shaping your beliefs and assumptions – including those about *Truth on Television, Social Justice through Market Forces and Achievement through Consumption*. I will therefore encourage and challenge you to ‘see’ yourself as more than just consumers and aspiring professionals – but as *human beings* and as *citizens*² and to accept the responsibility for considering critically both the origins and the implications of the mental pictures by which you live, because these will determine not only the life you will lead, but the shape of the world you leave behind.

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¹ The Oxford Dictionary (ninth edition, 1995) defines *stereotype* as: “A person or thing that conforms to an unjustifiable fixed mental picture”.

² *Archaic*: Term by which consumers and target markets defined themselves prior to the Neoliberal Revolution. Its brief period of currency coincided with the popularity of the (now-defunct) notions of *Democracy* and *Informed Consent*.