

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Visual Schematization: Advertising And Gender In Mexico



Abstract:

The theoretical topic developed in this paper is the schematization of a visual object as a cultural and semiotic micro-universe, an ideological construction of a class of objects oriented towards a social representation. The analytical topic is gender ideology and its rhetorical functioning in Mexico. The genre studied is advertising of women's underwear.

We have developed a model based on an adaptation and change of the simplest proposal put forth by the Neuchâtel School (Grize 1974). Consequently, we have studied five basic visual logical operations:

- 1) "Introduction" (Finnegan 2002).
- 2) The object's visual "determination" (Groupe μ 1992).
- 3) "Enunciation" (Fontanille 1991).
- 4) "Involvement" (Fontanille 1991).
- 5) Visual taxis (Thürlemann 1982, Everaert-Desmedt 2003).

Main words: visual object, visual schematization, visual logical operation, point of view, identification.

In this paper, the premise we take for granted is that we argue by means of images and visual constructions. We consider argumentation models can be adapted to visual arguments (Finnegan, Fontanille, Lisacattani, etc.). Groarke (OSSA 2005) has tried to use the Toulmin model to study visual arguments in its dialectical dimension. Now we are trying to develop the Neuchâtel School's model (Grize 1974) to study visual logic and rhetoric, adopting a more dynamic and dialogical point of view than the original Swiss perspective, and simpler than the current complex Swiss model.

The paper is divided into two main sections: In the first one, we develop the definition of a visual schematization and each of the five basic visual logical operations we propose; in the second section, we apply the model to an

advertising campaign launched by Vicky Form, a women's underwear firm. The selection of the corpus is because of its importance for the emergence of a new and popular gender paradigm in Mexico as reflected by the Advertising Discursive Formation.

1. *Schematization of visual objects*

The schematization of a visual object is a cultural and semiotic micro-universe, an ideological construction and reconstruction of a class of visual objects oriented towards the social and dialogistic dispute for a point of view, according to certain conditions of production, circulation and interpretation. It indicates how large groups of individuals use the same set and group of arguments (what we may call an "argumentative script"), the same Discursive Formation, the same Ideological Formation, and/or the same historical and cultural horizon of interpretation. Visual objects are schematized in order to persuade, convince or win the other, modifying his state of certainty, belief, emotion, perception or action.

Underlying the dynamic production and interpretation of visual arguments is a logical visual functioning, a sign organization which enables the sense to emerge by means of different possible operations. We will try to define these operations with the help of some semiotic and argumentative theories.

- (1) The cultural *introduction* or how the object is anchored in the cultural field and ground.
- (2) The object's visual *determination*, the ascription of properties, ingredients and relations to the objects.
- (3) The *enunciation* anchoring the visual to the situation.
- (4) The *involvement* or how the object is considered by the subject of the semiotic production, and/or interpretation in order to make it receivable, plausible and acceptable in accordance with a certain modality.
- (5) The visual configuration or visual *taxis* organizing the visual elements.

Based on the description of the Visual Natural Logic operations, we then evaluate the visual arguments exposed. But please consider that the operations are just analytic, the whole effect is crucial and different, and there are some overlapping operations, specially in the case of (4) and (5), because both are a matter of enunciation.

Anchoring the visual to its cultural field. To be acceptable, every image must first

be understood. We do not learn to see as we learn to talk. There is a strictly perceptual and neurophysiologic aspect in a visual identification (Magariños, in Gimete Welsh 2000, p. 1051). But we also recognize and identify objects culturally and, based on that recognition, we interpret images to make the visual correspond to a certain model, a certain idea or a certain affect. In this sense, visual “pre-constructions” (both neural and cultural) determine the arguments, situating us in the realm of certain prejudices, stereotypes, cultural-ideological emotions, identity factors, narratives, values and thoughts that allow us to interpret images in a peculiar way.

We practice an *introduction operation* the very moment we have a visual object. We understand the visual by means of “image vernaculars” (Finnegan 2002), of our cultural-historical horizon (Gadamer), our Ideological and Discursive Formation (Pêcheux) and the “argumentative script” (Plantin) or the chain of arguments in which the dispute for and against a point of view has been framed with respect to a certain *quaestio* in a specific moment.

To sum up, there is a well established *visual doxa* behind visual creation (adapted from Vignaux, in Plantin 1993, p. 442-456): the *generic image* of Marilyn Monroe as “the” woman, the *occasional image* of a cow skeleton as an index of starvation, the *archetype* of the Twin Towers as a symbol of New York before September 2001, the *image type* of a flag as a symbol of identity, the *image figure* of a posture as an allusion to sexual invitation; the *accidental figure* of a dead rat’s beauty, etcetera. To begin a process of visual argumentative schematization, we do a *selection operation A*, which determines what to show and how to do it.

The *enunciation*. The visual iconic *enunciation* immediately establishes a visual situation or scenario, according to each genre and dialogistic context. In iconic images, the *enunciation operation B* is linked to a twofold *énonciateur*: the one who sees (the point of view organizing the scene) and the one who is the image’s protagonist (*the casting operation B1.1*). They are associated with the one who takes the responsibility for what is seen (for example a mark or an author), or what is said or written in an audiovisual or visual-written sign (The responsibility operation B1.2). The “here” is the visual space as a totality (*the spatiality operation B2*). And the now is the moment captured, a highly aesthetic and ideological operation in the case of visual signs (*the localization operation B3*).

The “I”, the “here” and the “now” may be multiple in the visual case, because it is simultaneous and not linear, as our languages. And this *ego-hic-nunc* is related to

the narrative operation allowing us access to the reasons of the enunciation.

The *visual determination*. Vision is a discovery process, based on visual objects, what is present in the world and where it is. The visual is made precise by various means of interpretation, due to its own nature and the type of effects the visual produce in a *determination operation C*: the salient features determining its sense (*the forming operation C1*: shape, volume, texture, frame); the main oppositions and differences (*the contrast operation C.2*: big/little, color/black and white, bright/dark, figure/ground, etc.); and the semiotic-discursive functioning in general. And, in this discovery process, determination and involvement cannot be strictly divorced. We can only partially separate the more general mental-perceptual identification and recognition. And we recognize in a dynamic way, we have an ecological perception, because our sensory systems are systems of perception-action. There are no visual objects if there is no visual subject looking at them in a certain way.

The involvement. Every image is by definition imagination, emotion and subjectivity. The subject's involvement with the image is studied in three main ways: the *narrative operation D1* organizing the image according to one or various points of view and one or more perspectives and narrators; *the identification operation D2* constituting a process of ideological recognition of visual arguments (Fontanille, 1991); and *the figurative operation D3* as a kind of visual modality (an operation we include here, deferring from Grize and his discursive model). These operations are the basis for reaching an argument.

The point of view from which every thing is observed organizes and constitutes what is shown; it is the visual axis (Casetti 1989, p. 43). A vision constructs a visual narrator, more or less objective or subjective. The visual situation is captured in a certain moment and place, linking involvement, anchorage to the cultural field, and enunciation.

The visual operations of modality or *modalization* (and here we speak semiotically, not in Toulmin's restrictive sense of modals) indicate the argumentative relevance scales, and what is outstanding. This *modalization* is the indicator of our subjectivity, of how it is inscribed in the visual production and/or interpretation.

The clue to really initiate an argument as a visual interpreter is the identification: I assume (or not) the role proposed. When this happens: "adherence is implied in the very conditions of reading (sic) and the "enunciataire" is conquered from the

very moment in which he (or she) begins to construct the discourse's significance." (Fontanille 1991, p. 125). We identify with the point of view or with the iconic protagonist, according to a certain cultural and historical horizon, and a certain ideology. Only then (adapting Anscombre and Ducrot 1986) is the image used to make the point of view acceptable. The visual argumentation is a result of the trajectories we have developed, according to how each culture, time and ideology have "individuated" us (Marcellesi and Gardin 1979, meaning there are signs that identify each group, visual signs in our case).

The visual taxis. Visual objects are organized in a *dispositional operation E*. A formal artifact may be applied to images in order to know with sufficient neutrality its elements' disposition. The instrument to do so is Thürlemann's (1982) dispositional net (grille). It consists of applying the aural proportion net to an image, and then moving it to adjust the net to the visual product's specificities, dividing it into nine subspaces in a *configurative operation E1*.

In combination with the dispositional net, we must determine two more things:

(1) The possible trajectories of seeing, because of the salient conspicuous figures, the oppositions and the cultural and ideological anchorage and starting point (by analogy with the language, we talk about trajectories of interpreting - some reject this analogy, I consider it fruitful - in a *seeing operation E2*. This operation is logical, not temporal, and it is closely related to the spatiality operation.

(2) The conjunctive relations of judgment supporting the argumentative point of view: the *justification operation*. This last operation may be considered crucial and independent of the disposition. Here we link the visual and the discursive arguments. And we also relate justification or even explanation, narrative and figurativeness, to arrive at the abstract visual argument.

We do not dissociate production and interpretation. There is a continuous chain of the visual operations of production and the visual operations of interpretation. Nonetheless, the identification and justification operations are particularly correspondent to the reception process.

Figure 1: The argumentative schematization of a visual object

Selection operation A

Enunciation operation B:

Casting operation B1.1; responsibility operation B1.2

Spatiality operation B2

Localization operation B3

Determination operation C:

Forming operation C1

Contrast operation C.2

The involvement operation D:

Narrative operation D1

Identification operation D2

Figurative operation D3

Disposition operation E:

Configurative operation E1

Seeing operation E2

Justification operation E3

2. The Vicky Form campaign

We will apply the model we have presented to a single image (see Figure 1), and then we will make some generalizations associated to Vicky Form underwear's entire advertising campaign.

2. 1. The visual and cultural introduction

a) *Vernaculars and stereotypes.* The argument is read by means of two vernacular expressions: 1) the discursive use of the lexeme "ligas", associated to different lexicon entries: elastic bands, garters, and the verb "ligar", meaning "flirting"; and 2) the visual stereotypes. The text uses the ambiguity and develops the typical dual structure of some advertisements: the figure associated to the verb "ligar" (flirting) and the argument's foreground and main object (to sell garters). The underwear stereotype leads us toward the narratives of a wedding, a situation in which women may use the white garters and the white shoes. The woman's stereotype is the typical blonde, contrasting with the rest of Vicky Form's campaign, centered on popular brunette Mexican models. And the color stereotype leads us toward femininity, but also, in association to the posture stereotype, to sex and passion.

b) *Horizon.* The historical and cultural horizon in which the image is produced is one in which morality, women, and weddings are changing in Mexico. We cannot imagine this text decades ago: a bride overtly showing her underwear and sexy

shape.

c) *Ideological Formation*. The ideology producing the advertisement still exhibits a typical gender situation, but it shows a shift from women's passivity to women's assertiveness and affirmation of their sexuality and initiative. Ideology postulates the link with the purity of white, and with the passion and feminine character of the pink-reddish color.

d) *Discursive Formation*. The image is understood in the frame of the gender formation, but also in the frame of advertisements: eulogy of the product, "essentialization" and repetitions of the product and the trade mark.

e) *The argumentative script*. The argument emerges from the stereotype of seduction, blondeness, white purity and slim figure as the necessary properties of a woman who is getting married.

2.2 *The visual enunciation*

a) I. The I looking at the advertisement is a voyeur. The protagonist is the model. She is showing herself. It is unclear, though, who is asking: "¿Ligas?" The viewer, the voyeur, or the model?

b) Here. The space is ethereal, indefinite, but may be identified with a studio.

c) Now. The time has no other marks other than the hair style and the underwear, placing the girl in contemporary age.

2.3 *The visual determination*

a) *Oustanding features*. The color of passion in the logo (the butterfly), and the underlining of "Ligueros" and the pink background are salient and emphatic. The white is also prominent in the question, the underwear and the information at the bottom. Three elements of the model are salient: posture, face and gaze. And the underlining and the question in the center of the image also stand out.

b) *Oppositions and differences*. Contrasting with the salient features we have the Internet address and the logo at a second level. There is a contrast between the pink-reddish color and the white bride's situation: passion and purity; sex and marriage. The shining of the white stocking against the average light. And, finally, there is the flat position vs. the underwear decoration (the only relief).

2.4 *The visual involvement*

a) The point of view. It is the point of view of someone looking at the eyes of the model. And there is a clear gaze-contract, capturing the pose, the moment when the girl lifts her bottom. The model looks at the "you" of the interpreter.

b) The identification. If we identify ourselves with the model as an iconic

protagonist, then this means we are a possible buyer of Vicky Form's garters and we may desire the same trajectory suggested by the advertisement: passion and wedding for exhibiting our beauty.

c) *Modalization* and figures. We have already talked about the importance of the different figures of repetition: repetition and variation of expressions linked to the garters, emphatic underlining, emphatic repetition of the color shared with the butterfly in the trademark logo. Indeed, these are also forms of the visual taxis and the argumentation.

2. 5. *The visual taxis*

a) *Configuration*. If we divide the advertisement with two vertical and two horizontal lines, we have three horizontal boxes, going from top to bottom:

- (1) the proposition of the *quaestio ¿Ligas?* (Do you flirt?);
- (2) the visual product: the model's body with the underwear; and
- (3) the lower part of the arms, the hands, the buttocks, the shoe, the discursive product (Nuevos ligeros: new garters) and the black rectangle with the company information.

We also have three vertical boxes:

- (1) The face and the arms with the opening question mark;
- (2) The body and the center of the logo at the bottom; and
- (3) the closing question mark with the legs and the white shoe.

The nine spaces created are in order from left to right and top to bottom:

- (1) The face with an opening question mark;
- (2) the main expression "Ligas";
- (3) the closing question mark;
- (4) the falling hair and the arms;
- (5) the body with the underwear, making a V figure;
- (6) the crossed white legs;
- (7) the hands and the beginning of the letters;
- (8) the buttocks and the main part of the logo;
- (9) the end of the title *Nuevos ligeros* (New garters), the shoe and the end of the logo's letters.

We could also create two zones from the beginning: the black one with the company's information; and the image zone. If we do so, then we need to reconfigure the horizontal zones:

- (1) the question;
- (2) the upper body:) face, breasts, and part of the legs;
- (3) the lower body: the hands, the buttocks, the *Nuevos liqueros* title and the shoe.

The net's upper focal points lead us toward the model's gaze trajectory, and an indifferent point in the background. The lower focal points mark the armpit and the legs' point of inflection, establishing the swing of the buttocks.

b) *Visual ideological trajectories*. The seeing trajectory is quite clear in the text: it is like a circle going from the question to the model's face, to the underwear, to the title *Nuevos liqueros*, and again back to the question. But there is a second dimension going from the model's face and gaze to the spectator: it is an appeal.

c) *The conjunctive relations of judgment*.

To the question *¿Ligas?* ("Do you flirt?"), we may respond: "yes" or "no". If the interpreter responds "no", argumentation is suspended. If she responds "yes", there is an identification process, and then, the argumentative interpretation begins.

Indeed, the gaze route stops for a while in the question and in the top part of the photo, before beginning the hermeneutic and argumentative process. Then, the visual ground is established: "Ligas" (You flirt), through the assumption of the girl's seductive image. And the construction of Toulmin's scheme begins in his rhetorical and visual operation, by means of the procedure of paronomasia (association of the senses through the similarity of sounds).

The gaze route, sometimes after a considerable lapse, takes us to the second step in the "visual argumentative reconstruction". The warrant is established when the attention is fixed on the "ligas" (garter) of the girl dressing. This means: "if you want to flirt, use garters" (*si quieres ligar, usa ligas*).

The claim is: "ligueros" (garters), appearing again in a verbal fashion and with an underlined term, linking the word "ligueros" to the trademark, through the pink-reddish color of the underlining. It is similar to that of the background and the butterfly that makes up part of the company logo. Thus, the claim is "use Vicky Form's garters".

In conclusion, the argumentation by paronomasia works like this:

1. Verbal question: "¿ligas?" (Do you flirt?).

2. Visual Ground: “ligas” (You flirt).

3. Visual Warrant: “ligas” (garters) with all the “force” of what is concrete and present.

4. Verbal-visual Claim: Vicky Form “ligueros” (Vicky Form garters), strongly emphasized. Then, the eyes read at the bottom the trademark’s phone number and e-mail address.

From the cultural semiotics of Mexican weddings, the white shoes and the white woman’s stocking are an identity element. So we are not dealing with a liberal or a “femme fatale”. There is a second level of the argumentation, a debate with the doxa:

- The question: “¿Ligas?” (Do you flirt?).
- A (the doxa): Morality says “no”, because it is a fortuitous love, not a serious one.
- B: the visual text says “yes”, because it can lead you to the altar.
- CLAIM: if you flirt (ligas), then you need garters (ligas).

There is a double sense in the text, playing with the forbidden object, like the passage to the pristine or a move toward the sacred - the white lingerie and the shoes presupposing the church wedding. The implicit drives us from the above scheme to the “body offer”. Of course, we may consider that not every woman has the same seductive body, even with the same lingerie. We can criticize the link between flirting and lingerie or criticize the fallacy of equivocation. But, finally, this argumentation is only a paralipsis: it skips over the matter (sex), yet manages to reveal it.

3. *Conclusion*

An expansion of Grize’s theory helps us understand the ideological and cultural functioning of schematizations that form part of every visual argument: image vernaculars, visual disposition, visual determinations of an object and subjective engagement through stereotypes and modality. Toulmin’s layout of arguments as a conjunctive operation enables us to combine schemes and schematization, the discourse and the visual sign.

As we can see, there is a crucial link between the notions of “point of view”, “modality” and “identification” and visual argumentation (Fontanille 1991). For Anscombre and Ducrot (1983) there is an argumentation act whenever a speaker identifies himself as an enunciator, arguing and presenting one or many utterances (E1) addressed to make admissible other utterances or set of

utterances (E2). Ducrot's formula is translatable to visual language.

When we are dealing with "visual argumentation" there is need of a clear subjective approach. If I identify myself with the visual point of view, I may begin or simulate an argumentative process. Otherwise, I will construct another interpretation route or, maybe, I will not understand the discourse.

In our example, the one who utters the phrase identifies with the girl (the iconic protagonist) and the argumentative process begins. This happens when the interpreter identifying herself with the protagonist gives an ideological horizon to interpretation. There is an "individuation" process (Marcellesi and Gardin 1979) in the image's production and interpretation, singling out the social groups of codifiers and interpreters.

Images are "visual vernaculars". We can consider them as symbolic entities that have history, culture and memory. We are trained in their interpretation, according to each socio-cultural and semiotic-discursive field.

The visual identification process drives us to the deontological modality: "I must be her"; this means: "I must flirt" ("I must get married"), obviously, an ideological option. If I want to get someone, I must use garters (ligas). It may seem that we are dealing with the traditional role. But the discursive object of women flirting, at least in Mexico, is anchored in an emergent ideology of a more active and assertive woman.

Identification shows us how the emotional mode is relevant in the visual arguments. And the kisceral mode (the mode of belief) is also important, providing a broad space for interpretation. We cannot evade a persuasive visual force, which is immediate, energetic and concrete. Finally, we must remark that the visual "point of view" is directly related to outstanding features: mainly light, color, texture, volumes and position. These elements are related to perspective and space construction.

Figurative salient elements remark on many important and collateral aspects: lips of the same color as the background, the underlining of *ligueros*, the whitening of the background where the "bride" stands, the girl's suggestive position, etcetera. Finally, we show how the visual arguments may have several different interpretations, like in our example, arguing at the same time about garters, flirting, sex, morality and weddings.

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