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ABSTRACT

A study examined the influence of viewers' backgrounds on their interpretation of "associational montage" in television advertising (editing which seeks to imply an analogy between the product and a juxtaposed image possessing desirable qualities). Subjects, 32 television professionals from two urban television stations and 95 customers of an urban video rental store (57 with a college education and 38 without), viewed either a narrative or a non-narrative television advertisement containing an associational montage. Subjects were interviewed immediately after viewing the commercials to explore their interpretations of these visual devices. Results indicated that awareness of the analogies implied by the editing was highest among the viewers with television production backgrounds and lowest among the high-school-educated viewers. (RS)

VIEWERS' INTERPRETATIONS OF ASSOCIATIONAL MONTAGE: THE INFLUENCE OF "VISUAL LITERACY" AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

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ABSTRACT

This study was concerned with the influence of a viewer's background on his/her interpretation of "associational montage" in TV advertising, i.e., editing which seeks to imply an analogy between the product and a juxtaposed image (or set of images) possessing desirable qualities. Three groups of viewers -- high-school-educated; college-educated; and TV professionals (also college-educated) -- were shown two TV advertisements containing associational montage. One ad was for a popular brand of fruit preserves and involved a juxtaposition between the preserves and images of nature, farm life, etc. (implying purity and wholesomeness). The other ad, which had been used in Ronald Reagan's 1984 re-election campaign, juxtaposed the scene of his first inauguration with images of Americans going to work (implying economic regeneration and a "new beginning"). Individual interviews with the viewers explored their interpretations of these visual devices. Awareness of the analogies implied by the editing was highest among the viewers with TV production backrounds and lowest among the high-school-educated viewers.

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In a much-discussed scene from Sergei Eisenstein's film Strike (1924), images of government troops massacring striking workers are intercut with brief shots of the butchering of animals in a slaughterhouse. This kind of editing, which is usually referred to as "associational montage" in the literature on visual communication, may be thought of as a visual approximation of the verbal simile: the juxtaposition of two objects or situations with the intent of imputing to one some of the qualities of the other. Although associational montage is often thought of as being especially characteristic of the films of Eisenstein, its use was in fact quite widespread during the era of silent cinema. After the coming of sound, however, this device quickly became a rarity in fiction films, perhaps because -- as Andre Bazin (1967) argued -- it was seen as being incompatible with Hollywood filmmakers' increasing tendency toward unobtrusive narration (the so-called "invisible style" of Hollywood cinema). But associational montage lives on in the more recent medium of TV advertising, where it is routinely employed as a means of dramatizing, in an attractive visual image, those qualities of a product which the advertiser is trying to highlight (see Prince, 1986). For example, Exxon commercials have blended images of a speeding car with images of a charging tiger ("Put a tiger in your tank"); Xerox ads have

juxtaposed the Xerox logo with images of a champion ice-skater (a topical reference during the Winter Olympics); and ads for Chevrolet's Barracuda have cut back and forth between the car and the sleek, powerful fish whose name it bears. Furthermore, associational montage is also a frequent element in political advertising, as, e.g., in an ad in which a relatively youthful N.J. gubernatorial candidate (Peter Shapiro, Democrat, who didn't win) sought to associate himself with the Kennedy years through the interpolation of several images of that period in his campaign ads.

The purpose of the study described in this paper was to investigate viewers' interpretations of this sort of editing. As noted above, Bazin and other writers have viewed associational montage as a relatively obtrusive device, since its use in narrative contexts will usually (although not inevitably) entail some disruption of the continuity of the events in the narrative. One might therefore expect that awareness of associational montage should come easily to viewers -- at least in narrative contexts. In other words, viewers should not find it difficult to recognize that editing is being used to make some point. However, ease of recognition does not necessarily lead to ease of interpretation, i.e., being able to infer what kind of point is being made. Unlike language, which possesses a set of conventional symbols for making explicit the presence of an analogy (e.g., "The workers died like animals in a slaughterhouse"; "Exxon is as powerful as a tiger"; "Xerox

dominates its competition in much the same way as the ice skater dominates hers"), movies express analogy solely through the juxtaposition of two or more images. Figuring out the intent of the juxtaposition is up to the viewer -- and, while there are probably some images whose pairing would automatically suggest an analogy to almost any viewer, there is no reason to suppose that such will always be the case. For example, the Xerox commercial described above could be seen simply as a claim that Xerox made possible the skater's championship performance (since Xerox equipment was used by Olympic Games officials, a fact noted in the commercial's sound-track). In other words, the juxtaposition of Xerox logo and ice skater could be seen as implying causality rather than analogy. The two aren't incompatible, of course -- in fact, advertising often relies on precisely this kind of "overdetermination" of the meaning of product-image juxtapositions -- but, since the commercial's sound-track favors the causal interpretation, we might reasonably expect that the analogical interpretation would be less obvious to viewers in this example than in some of the others cited above.

If we assume, then, that the viewer's ability to infer analogical intent in associational montage cannot (always) be taken for granted, we are led to inquire about the circumstances which might enhance or hinder this ability. One obvious factor, as in the Xerox example, is the availability of alternative interpretations. But this, in turn, will undoubtedly depend to a considerable extent on characteristics of the viewer

himself/herself -- specifically, on the viewer's degree of familiarity with visual conventions, on the one hand, and on the viewer's general experience with analogical thinking, on the other. In the Xerox case, a viewer who was knowledgeable about visual conventions might be more likely to sense the similarity between this ad and previous uses of similar juxtapositions for analogical purposes (e.g., use of ice-skaters in Oldsmobile ads and use of a ballerina in ads for the Visa card). A viewer more attuned to abstract analogical thinking (someone with more formal education, for example) might be more sensitive to the possibility of an analogical connection between the excellence of the copier and the performer. It is these two viewer characteristics which are the focus of the present study. More specifically, the study is concerned with the role of visual production experience and general education as predictors of a viewer's facility at interpreting associational montage.

Method

The study was based on two ads containing associational montage. In one ad this device was embedded in a narrative, while the other ad was non-narrative. Each ad was shown to viewers from three different backgrounds: TV-production professionals (all college-educated); college-educated viewers with no production experience; and viewers with no production experience and no college education. Individual interviews with each viewer were used as a basis for analyzing the influence of a viewer's background on: awareness of the image juxtapositions in

the ads; recognition of an analogical meaning to the juxtaposition; interpretation of the analogy; as well as a number of other issues.

The Ads. Non-narrative ad: The non-narrative ad was a thirty-second commercial for a popular brand of fruit preserves. In this ad, images of fruit and of the final product (jars of preserves) are intercut with images of nature and life on the farm (a valley with mountains in the background; children climbing over a picket fence), suggesting the purity and wholesomeness with which such scenery is traditionally associated in American culture. The "obvious" implication is that the fruit preserves are themselves pure and wholesome.

Narrative ad: The narrative ad was extracted from a longer political advertisment used during Ronald Reagan's 1984 re-election campaign. In the shorter, self-contained unit used in this study, the oath-of-office ceremony from Ronald Reagan's first-term inauguration in 1981 is intercut with a number of images of Americans going to work in the morning (a farmer driving away from the farmhouse, workers entering the gates of a factory, a commuter joining a car-pool, etc.). The intended theme (stated verbally by the President himself after the conclusion of the segment shown to our viewers) was "a new beginning": literally, in the sense of America going back to work; more metaphorically, in the sense of spiritual renewal.

Viewers. Viewers with a professional background in TV production (directing, camerawork, and editing) were recruited

from two urban TV stations. There were a total of 32 viewers in this category, 17 for the non-narrative ad and 15 for the narrative ad. Interviews with these viewers were conducted on the premises of the TV stations where they were employed. These viewers will be referred to henceforth as "visual professionals."

The remaining viewers were recruited from among the customers of two urban video-rental stores. The customer base of these stores represents a fairly diverse group of people, and it was therefore possible to secure a purposive sample of both college-educated viewers (i.e., people with thirteen years or more of formal education) and viewers without college education. The former group will be referred to henceforth as having high education, the latter as having low education. There were 57 high-education viewers, 23 for the non-narrative ad and 34 for the narrative ad. The corresponding numbers for the low-education viewers were 38 (total), 20 (non-narrative ad), and 18 (narrative ad). All viewers in these two categories were shown the ads and interviewed in the video stores in which they were recruited.

The Interviews. The viewers were all interviewed individually immediately after the screening of whichever of the two ads they had been assigned to. The interview schedule had been designed to progress from general and non-directive questions about the contents of the ads to questions with a more specific and explicit focus on the juxtapositions of images and on their meaning. Thus it was possible to analyze not only

whether a viewer had seen an analogy in the editing but also when in the course of the interview this was mentioned. This variable was used as a measure of how obvious the viewer felt the analogy to be, although they were also asked the question directly.

The key questions in the interview were as follows:

* A preliminary question: "If you were to describe this advertisement to someone who hadn't seen it, what would you say?"

* A follow-up question: "In your opinion, what do you think is the point of this advertisement?"

* A pair of direct questions: "Did you find yourself making any connections between the pictures or not? [If yes] What connections did you make exactly?"

* "Do you think this advertisement was suggesting a connection or comparison between the preserves (alternatively: President Reagan) and something else in the advertisement? [If yes] What would that be exactly?"

These questions were all accompanied by a variety of probes. In conclusion, the viewers were asked at which point in the commercial they had realized the point they mentioned, how obviously they felt that point had been made, and how successful they felt the ad to be in making the point in question. They were also asked whether they remembered having seen the ad before.

Results

Non-narrative Ad. Two major questions were at the center of our analysis of viewers' responses to the ads: (a) Was the

viewer aware that part of the strategy of the ad was to juxtapose the image of the product (or the candidate) with another set of images? (b) If so, did the viewer see an analogical element in this juxtaposition? In the case of the non-narrative ad, these two questions become, respectively: (a) Was the viewer aware of the implicit connection between the images of the fruit preserves and the images of nature and farm life? (b) Did the viewer interpret this connection as suggesting that there was some common quality between the former image and the latter? In analyzing viewers' statements regarding these issues, it was important, for obvious reasons, to avoid treating technical vocabulary ("montage," "metaphor," etc.) as a prerequisite or even as a sufficient condition for an affirmative response to either question. As it happened, however, few viewers, even among those with professional TV-production experience, use such terms. Thus, the criterion for awareness of the juxtaposition of images was simply the acknowledgment of a connection of any kind between the preserves and the other images in the ad; and, similarly, the criterion for analogical interpretation was the perception of any common quality as the basis of the connection. For example, the statement, "The commercial brings out the different fruits [this brand] puts in their jellies," was taken as evidence of awareness of juxtaposition (shots of fruit vs. jars of preserves); but, since the viewer does not go beyond the literal, narrative level in connecting the two (the fruit goes into the jars of preserves), this statement by itself was not

considered evidence of analogical interpretation. On the other hand, the following response (by a viewer who had already commented on the juxtaposition between the preserves and the images of farm life) was taken as signifying an analogical interpretation, since the viewer extracts a metaphorical quality from the latter images: "It's a commercial about honesty and the American way; they don't just have jelly on the assembly line."

With the exception of a single viewer in the low-education category, awareness of the juxtaposition occurred in all viewers' responses to the non-narrative ad. However, with respect to the prevalence of analogical interpretations the low-education viewers differed markedly from the other two groups. Among the high-education viewers (N=23) and the visual professionals (N=17), analogical interpretation was universal. Among the low-education viewers, on the other hand, only 10, out of a total of 20, gave evidence of analogical interpretation. (The difference between this figure and that for the high-education viewers is significant at $p<.001$ [chi-square = 12.3]).

Beyond examining the overall question of whether or not any particular viewer was aware of the juxtaposition and its analogical aspects, our analysis also attempted to measure how obvious these elements of the ad were for those viewers who indicated that they were indeed aware of them. One possible measure of obviousness is the point in the interview at which a viewer mentions the juxtaposition and/or the analogy: during the

preliminary questions, during the follow-up questions, or during the direct questions. This aspect of the analysis revealed a difference between the high-education viewers and the visual professionals, as well as a sharpening of the prior distinction between the low-education viewers and the other two groups. 52.9% of the visual professionals (9 out of 17) mentioned the juxtaposition during the preliminary phase of the interview. The corresponding figure for the high-education viewers was 26.1% (6 out of 23), and, for the low-educaton viewers, 5% (1 out of 20). With a handful of exceptions, all other mentions of the juxtaposition, in all three groups of viewers, came during the follow-up questions. Thus, both general education and specific visual experience appear to have made an independent contribution toward the salience of the juxtaposition for these viewers. (The difference between the high-education viewers and the visual professionals was significant at $p<.05$ [chi-square = 7.1]). A similar pattern emerged with regard to analogical interpretation. Among the visual professionals, 47.1% (8 out of 17) referred to an analogy during the preliminary phase of the interview. Among the high-education viewers, this figure drops to 17.4% (4 out of 23); and among the low-education viewers it is 5% (1 out of 20). Once again, virtually all the remaining cases of analogical interpretation occurred during the follow-up phase of the interview. Hence, analogical interpretation too may have been more salient for the visual professionals.

As an additional measure, however, of how readily viewers

came to their interpretations of the ad, they were asked directly to rate the ad, on a 1-to-5 scale, as to "obviousness" and "clarity"; and, with regard to these ratings, there was no indication of a difference among the three groups of viewers. The average obviousness rating was 4.1 for the low-education viewers, 4.0 for the high-education viewers, and 3.8 for the visual professionals. The clarity ratings for the three groups, respectively, were: 4.3, 4.1, 4.4. Thus, when it comes to viewers' subjective perceptions of how easy it was to get the point of the ad, there was a consensus that the ad was both obvious and clear. As a final measure related to this issue, viewers were also asked whether they thought the ad had been successful in making its point. In all cases, the overall judgment was positive.

Narrative Ad. In the case of the narrative ad, awareness of the juuxtaposition was determined on the basis of an acknowledgment, by the viewer, of a connection of any kind between Ronald Reagan (or the event of his inauguration) and the images of various Americans going to work. For example: "This advertisement is showing the people of the country the President represents." Here the viewer makes a literal connection between these images, and the statement was therefore not considered adequate evidence that analogical interpretation had also occurred. The criterion for analogical interpretation was some perception of a common quality (of any kind) between the President and the other images as the basis of the juxtaposition.

For example: The ad makes the point that "Reagan is an everyday person on the ranch. It's an attempt to relate Reagan with down-home American values."

As with the non-narrative ad, awareness of the presence of a juxtaposition in the narrative ad was virtually universal in our sample of viewers. Only two viewers, one each in the low-education and high-education category, failed to indicate such an awareness. With regard to analogical interpretation, however, the numbers for the narrative ad were somewhat lower than those for the non-narrative ad. Only 22.2% of the low-education viewers (4 out of 18) interpreted the narrative ad analogically, and the corresponding figures for the other two groups were 58.8% (20 out of 34 high-education viewers) and 86.7% (13 out of 15 visual professionals). (The difference between the low-education viewers and the high-education viewers is significant at $p<.05$ [chi-square = 4.9]).

As these numbers indicate, there is an overall trend among all three groups with regard to analogical interpretation of the narrative ad, whereas in the case of the non-narrative ad the visual professionals were no more likely to exhibit analogical interpretation than viewers in the high-education category. (Of course, since the figure for analogical interpretation of the non-narrative ad was 100% for both of these groups, this may have been a case of a ceiling effect in operation.) Unlike the case of the non-narrative ad, however, the responses to the narrative ad did not exhibit any significant

trends regarding point in the interview in which they appeared. Awareness of the juxtaposition tended to be expressed somewhat later here than in the non-narrative case, with the bulk of viewers in all three categories mentioning the juxtaposition during the follow-up phase of the interview (66.7% of the low-education viewers [12 out of 18]; 61.8% of the high-education viewers [21 out of 34]; 53.3% of the visual professionals [8 out of 15]). A similar pattern occurred with regard to analogical interpretation, although the numbers here are complicated by the fact that large proportions of the low-education and high-education viewers did not make analogical interpretations at any point in the interview. But, in all three categories, when analogical interpretation did occur it occurred most frequently during the follow-up questions: among the low-education viewers, in 11.1% of the cases (2 out of 18); among the high-education viewers, in 35.3% of the cases (12 out of 34); and, among the visual professionals, in 53.3% of the cases (8 out of 15).

In general, then, the narrative ad appears to have been somewhat more difficult to interpret analogically than the non-narrative ad; and this difference may be a reason for the slightly lower ratings of subjective obviousness and clarity for the narrative ad. The average obviousness ratings were: 3.4 for the low-education viewers; 3.6 for the high-education viewers; 3.6 for the visual professionals. The average clarity ratings were: 3.5 for the low-education viewers; 3.6 for the

high-education viewers; 4.1 for the visual professionals. (The difference is not significant.) Furthermore, in contrast to the uniformly positive judgments regarding the success of the non-narrative ad in making its point, judgments of the success of the narrative ad included some negative responses: 33.3% (12 out of 18) for the low-education viewers; 14.7% (5 out of 34) for the high-education viewers; and 13.3% (2 out of 15) for the visual professionals.

Two final issues must be mentioned briefly before moving to a discussion of the results presented above. At the conclusion of the interview, the viewers were asked if they had seen the ads before. 31.7% (19 out of a total of 60) could recall having seen the non-narrative ad before, while 20.9% (14 out of 67) could recall having seen the narrative ad. However, previous exposure was not found to make a significant difference to any of the variables examined in this study. Another variable which was not found to affect our results was the viewer's gender. (58.3% of the viewers for the non-narrative ad were women [35 out of 60]; 59.7% of the viewers for the narrative ad were men [40 out of 67].)

Discussion

As we have just seen, virtually all of the viewers in this study, regardless of their backgrounds, expressed an awareness of the image juxtapositions entailed in the two ads used in the study. This finding is in accord with the notion (discussed earlier) that associational montage is a relatively

obtrusive editing device. On the other hand, our findings indicate that the tendency to actually see an analogy between the images which this device brings together is not as widespread and may depend on the viewer's background: Viewers with less formal education were less likely to give analogical interpretations, of either ad, than their more-educated counterparts; while viewers with professional TV-production experience were most likely to mention an analogy with respect to the narrative ad, and quickest (in terms of the interview sequence) to mention an analogy with respect to the non-narrative ad. Among all three types of viewers, analogical interpretations were somewhat less frequent for the narrative ad than for the non-narrative ad; and, while this may say something about the nature of the analogies involved (a new President vs. other citizens going to work; a jar of preserves vs. wholesome rural scenery), this finding may also reflect the audiences' differential familiarity with narrative as opposed to non-narrative instances of associational montage -- since the latter is used in ads much more commonly than the former, and the former is virtually extinct in larger narrative programs (including movies). Less interestingly, this discrepancy may also be due, of course, to the simple fact that more viewers recalled having seen the non-narrative ad before than was the case with the narrative ad (although, as noted earlier, no differences were observed between those who had and those who hadn't seen the ads before).

The finding that a viewer's background makes a difference

to his/her ability to discern an analogical element in associational montage reinforces the results of a study by Messaris (1981) on the role of visual experience in film interpretation. In this study, viewers with film-production experience were found to be more likely than other viewers (college-educated, but with no production experience) to give an analogical or metaphorical interpretation to a scene in which shots of a department store were juxtaposed with shots of a church. Both the present study and the one by Messaris can therefore be seen as supporting the idea that the interpretation of associational montage requires some degree of "visual literacy" -- which is likely, of course, to be most advanced among actual practitioners in the film media. However, the present study also suggests that formal education per se may make an independent contribution to the interpretation of this particular device, since the perception of an analogy in editing requires skills of conceptual abstraction in addition to visual sensitivity.

The fact that "visual literacy" seems to be required for this aspect of TV and film interpretation, however, should not be taken to imply that all kinds of editing are similarly dependent on prior experience for their interpretation. Although it is commonly assumed that in every respect we must learn to see a film or TV program (e.g., see Peters, 1955), recent research with an isolated tribe in Kenya suggests that there are, in fact, many aspects of editing which a first-time viewer can interpret quite

readily on the basis of everyday, "real-life" visual habits (Hobbs et al., 1989). The contrast between these findings and those of the present study (as well as the Messaris study) suggests that there may be something particularly "difficult" about associational montage which sets it apart from the more accessible forms of editing. A possible clue to this "difficulty" comes from the work of Worth (1982) regarding the difference between images and words. Worth argues that a major distinction between these two modes of communication is that images lack the propositional quality of language. Images present us with a situation, but they do not make truth claims about it -- or, at least, they do not possess a set of conventional symbols for making such claims. Since associational montage is in fact a visual attempt to make a proposition (this is like that), it can be argued that it represents an attempt to do something which images are not very well equipped to do -- the result being that viewers are jarred into an awareness that something is afoot but may not always see that something in quite the way intended by the director, editor, etc. This view certainly accords with the findings which we have presented here.

Finally -- and in a more practical vein -- we may also ask about another aspect of this study's findings: Do our results imply that the use of associational montage in ads is "wasted" on a significant proportion of the TV audience? Not necessarily. It must be remembered that ads are made to be shown -- and seen -- more than once; and repetition may enhance

effectiveness in not one but two ways: first, it may make the analogical element in an ad more evident (an effect not observed in this study, but still a possibility); second -- and perhaps more important -- it may bring about an unconscious association between product and image even for those viewers who were never consciously aware of the intended analogy. This "Pavlovian" effect has been shown to work with images (see Eysenck & Nias, 1978), and, to the extent that awareness of its working might diminish its power, one might be tempted to conclude that, for the advertiser, the relative opacity of associational montage is by no means an unambiguous defect.

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