Shaping Belief: The Role of Audience in Visual Communication

As the goal of all communication is "to induce in the audience some belief about the past..., the present..., or the future," audience considerations are integral components of the process of visual communication. During that process, the designer attempts to persuade the audience to adopt a belief demonstrated or suggested through the two-dimensional object. The purpose of this persuasion is to accomplish one of the following goals: to induce the audience to take some action; to educate the audience (persuade them to accept information or data); or to provide the audience with an experience of the display or exhibition of a value for approval or disapproval, values with which an audience may wish to identify or may wish to reject. An exploration of the relationship between audience and communication goals will reveal how belief is shaped through design.

The relationship of the audience to the communication process is viewed in widely different ways. In one perspective, the object is seen as isolated as a formal esthetic expression, with the audience consequently, regarded as a spectator. For example, within design competitions, exhibitions, and publications, objects are often displayed with little or no commentary, with no discussion of communication goals. This presentation of design emphasizes the esthetic sensibility of the individual designer and severs the object from its relationship with the intended audience.

Another view characterizes the audience as a passive reader in the communication process. The audience decodes or interprets a visual statement but is not an active participant in the formation of meaning. This view is evident in Hanno Ehses's "Representing Macbeth: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric," in which the designer combines a variety of formal devices to construct different messages and the audience then interprets the message. Ehses's analysis is a grammatical model because it treats design as the construction of statements or visual sentences; linguistic and pictorial content are joined like parts of speech to form the message. In "Representing Macbeth," "classifications of speech," such as "antithesis," "metaphor," and "metonymy," provide designers with a structure for generating a range of messages. The designer begins with the subject and then explores concepts or themes by applying the grammatical model to the subject. In this model, the message

2) All the goals occur to some degree in one design, but a particular goal is dominant.

3) Buchanan, "Declaration by Design," 91.

7) Ehses, "Representing Macbeth," 189.
is examined in relation to the original subject and is clear or unclear, successful or unsuccessful. The audience either understands the message, finds it confusing (the message is not a “true” or “correct” interpretation of the subject), or finds it unintelligible. The audience is viewed as involved in no deeper engagement than that of decoding references to the subject. A grammatical approach thus emphasizes the scientific over the esthetic aspects of design. In addition, since the audience brings nothing particular to the process, it is not particularized in any way; it is both a nonspecific and a passive audience.

Semiotics, a third and closely related view, recognizes the specificity of the audience. An audience holds or recognizes certain beliefs and reads messages based on these beliefs. In Roland Barthes’s “Rhetoric of the Image,” denotation and connotation distinguish the literal and symbolic messages within visual communication. The audience reads the literal message while also interpreting the signs which express the “iconic message.” The potential readings of these signs outside the communication device are multiple, but the interpretations are particularized within the design through their combination with other signs and the denoted messages. The audience, with its cultural beliefs and understanding, is also involved in particularizing the symbolic (connoted) message, thereby becoming an active reader.

Yet another view, to be explored in depth here, is a rhetorical analysis of design. Within a theory of rhetoric the audience is not characterized as a reader but as a dynamic participant in argument. In this rhetorical view, visual communication attempts to persuade a specific audience through argument as opposed to making a statement within a grammatical structure or conveying a message within the dynamics of semiotics. Designers utilize existing beliefs to induce new beliefs in the audience. It is the use of existing beliefs, as much as the attempt to induce new beliefs, that contributes to maintaining, questioning, or transforming social values through argument. Designers persuade an audience by referencing established or accepted values and attributing those values to the new subject. The specific audience’s experiences within society and its understanding of social attitudes are an essential aspect of argument and necessary to the communication goal.

The selection of examples of design within this essay, though not comprehensive, shows the use of devices and strategies to construct argument, the use of existing beliefs in argument as a strategy to induce new beliefs, and the role of the audience in accomplishing communication goals. The formal devices in each example are discussed in terms of the primary deal of the design: to induce action, to educate, to create an experience.

**Persuading the audience to act**

Persuading an audience to attend an exhibit, travel to another country, or invest in a company is inducing that audience to take an

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14) A detailed exploration of formal devices is an important area of research, but is not within the goals of this paper.
action. In an attempt to persuade, the designer develops an argument within the two-dimensional space that defines and represents an audience's future experience. The argument becomes a promise: if one attends A, one will feel B; if one goes to C, one will see D; if one uses E, one will become F.

The goal of the first example (figure 1) is to persuade the audience to visit the New York Aquarium. The poster's argument, made through formal devices, defines the audience's future experience at the aquarium: if you go to the aquarium, you will have an emotional experience based on a friendly, intimate relationship with members of the animal kingdom. Intimacy between audience and mammal is created through scale. The mammal takes up most of the space, creating the appearance that it is close to the viewer. Personal contact is also suggested because the mammal appears to make eye contact with the audience. Standing in such close proximity to a large animal could be frightening rather than intimate, but any feeling of confrontation is avoided through the dreamy, soft quality of the image, the profile position of the mammal (it is not coming directly toward the viewer), and the friendly expression on its face (it appears to smile).

The formal devices suggest the nature of the aquarium experience by referencing and reinforcing beliefs regarding the relationship between individuals and nature — i.e., nature is friendly toward human beings and animals enjoy being the object of our attention. Although the word "aquarium" indicates confinement, the image defines it as vast, showing no cage or boundaries.

While the aquarium poster promises the audience an experience based on an emotional relationship with the subject, the PanAm travel posters (figures 2 & 3) offer a future experience predicated on distance and observation. The communication goal is to persuade the audience to travel to Bali or Japan. The posters argue that the audience will have an esthetic experience in these countries. The first poster, of Bali, is a rural scene of a terraced agricultural area and the second, of Japan, features a sunset and two figures in traditional clothing. Like the aquarium poster, both travel posters use monumental imagery. But the large-scale imagery in these travel posters, combined with other formal devices, makes a very different argument. The PanAm images are architectural in nature: the terraced land forms a contrasting figure/ground pattern; the two people standing with their backs to the audience become shapes against the sky. People and land become objects of beauty. Distanced from the scene through perspective and the lack of any reference back to the viewer, the audience thus remains "outside" a beautiful, tranquil scene. Landscape and people are frozen in time for the audience to view as they choose — as in a museum of artifacts. Both posters promise the audience an esthetic, nonparticipatory experience if they travel to these distant lands.

The travel posters have transformed these foreign countries and people into art, referencing a paradigm which says that art is to be


Fig. 4) Caremark, Inc. 1985 annual report; Designed by Jim Berte, Robert Miles Runyan & Assoc.; Reproduced from *Graphic Design USA: 7*, Courtesy of the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

Fig. 5) Congaree Swamp brochure designed by Bruce Geyman © 1991 L. Chapman
observed, not experienced. The posters reinforce a belief that these cultures are static and removed from the audience’s own experiences. This is achieved through formal devices that create the appearance of a nonparticipatory audience relationship. The audience appears in the role of observer, yet they do participate by bringing cultural beliefs about beauty and art to the argument.

The final example of design that persuades an audience to act is an annual report. The primary communication goal of annual reports is to persuade the audience either to invest or to maintain their investment in a company. Designers persuade the audience by making an argument that represents the company’s philosophy, achievements, and financial solidity. The argument is often made through the company’s employees or people using their services; in this way, the audience attributes the values embodied in these individuals with the institution they represent.

The Caremark Inc. 1985 Annual Report (figure 4) makes its argument through Dominick Petone, an individual benefiting from the company’s services. The design argues that Mr. Petone, and therefore Caremark, has strong, moral values; he is hardworking, trustworthy, and straightforward. The dominant image is a photograph of a hardworking man in working-class clothing with his tools in the background. The audience knows he is hardworking because he is wearing a T-shirt, is slim, and appears to be serious in the workplace. The written text states that, though ill, Mr. Petone continues to work. From this information we can gather that work and self-sufficiency are important to him. He is also a rugged individualist: the lighting highlights and accentuates his facial features. He is portrayed as a role model, a hero. The portrait is isolated on the page as in an art catalogue; the borders around the photograph are the same proportions as in traditional art matting while the small serifed type of the written text reinforces the serious and classical image. Yet Dominick Petone is approachable: he makes direct eye contact with the audience, his gaze is open, not aggressive, and he gives the audience a “Mona Lisa” smile.

Although Mr. Petone is separated from the investor audience by his economic class, the audience identifies with him through the shared moral values of responsibility, honesty, and stability. These values are also intended to represent the institution and are shared by the image (Mr. Petone), the producer (Caremark), and the audience (investors). The beliefs represented by Dominick Petone are values that bind the culture, values that the audience recognizes and then attributes to Caremark.

Educating the audience

The second communication goal is to educate the audience or to persuade the audience to accept and interpret information. Information can be seen as valueless, as not reflecting a particular belief system. But all communication involves an interpretation of information.

an interpretation based on data, perspective, analysis, and judgment. Educational materials are no exception; information is interpreted and communicated according to the paradigms of academic communities. Educating the audience often includes making an argument that the information is "fact," that it is "true."

The map and guide to the Congaree Swamp (figure 5) is intended to educate the audience about the swamp’s ecosystem. The argument suggests that nature has an inherent logical order and that the information provided is scientific, i.e., rational and factual. For information to appear factual, it must seem stable, unchangeable. Various formal devices such as detailed illustration techniques, minor changes in scale, and a lack of tension in margin and spacing mitigate against an emotive response by the audience, while a heightened sense of order is achieved through the clearly visible organizational grid system. The brochure is basically a diagram — codified information without expressive characteristics that might suggest individual authorship. Information, such as this, is presented as data and appears to be communicated through an omniscient voice. When the omniscient voice of science is used, the audience seems to be nonparticipatory. The audience is, apparently, only a reader. This dynamic is similar to that of the travel posters (figures 2 & 3), but here the image lacks a sense of drama or emotion, eliminating the appearance of interpretation or perspective. In sum, the organization of facts in the Congaree Swamp brochure is an argument relying on a scientific paradigm. While learning about the swamp’s ecosystem, the audience’s belief in the rational order of the universe is also reinforced.

The goal of educating an audience also occurs within communication from the business community and through objects not generally classified as educational materials. Corporate and institutional logos are an example of design that attempts to educate. The logo defines the company and persuades the audience that the qualities of the logo are also the qualities of the institution it represents. The audience includes both the company employees and those who come in contact with the company. Audience identification with the values of the organization serves the goals of management as well as those of public relations.

Simplified, geometric logos became the symbols of large corporations and dominated design in the 1960s and 1970s. These reductive icons were developed to represent the “modern” corporation as a large, anonymous entity driven by technology and the values attributed to science — rationality and objectivity. The icons reference science through formal devices such as diagrammatic imagery, an efficient use of line and shape, and an emphasis on positive and negative space. (figures 6, 7, 8) As in the swamp brochure (figure 5), the elimination of individuality and emotion suggests an omniscient voice and the presentation of fact. Geometric simplification of form continues to be applied to logos, but the 1980s also saw the rein-

Fig.6) Angeles Corporation logo; Designed by Robert Miles Runyan, Robert Miles Runyan & Assoc.

Fig.7) Screen Gems Inc. logo; Designed by Tom Geismar, Chermayeff and Geismar, Courtesy of Tom Geismar.

Fig.8) Seatrain Lines Inc. logo; Designed by Tom Geismar, Chermayeff and Geismar, Courtesy of Tom Geismar.

16) Logos are then applied to communication devices and those devices may have other primary goals, such as inducing the audience to buy a product.
trodition of more formally complex shapes and "naive" representation. The icons began to take on some of the qualities of folk art imagery by referencing individual (handmade) characteristics. These new logos (figures 9, 10) reflect the same communication goal: educating the audience by defining the organization. Rather than referring to the values associated with science and distancing the audience, these logos communicate a more emotional relationship with the audience. The quotidian quality of the logos represents the company not as an anonymous institution but rather as an organization comprised of individuals like the audience. The audience's relationship to the organization is based on self-identification. Though not overtly participatory, an argument involving personal identification recognizes the audience's existence.

In the previous examples, existing beliefs are transferred to the subject to create new beliefs. In posters within an exhibition titled "Visual Perceptions," existing beliefs are replaced with new beliefs. The goal of the posters is to educate the audience regarding the stereotyping of African Americans within the print and broadcast media. Several posters in the exhibition invoke stereotypical images and racist values and then refute those beliefs within the argument. Beliefs are not only a strategy of argument but the subject of the posters as well and so must be clearly visible to the audience.

"Triptych," a series of three posters in the exhibition, alters the audience's relationship with and interpretation of the information over time. The first interpretation is ambiguous and may lead to a stereotypical conclusion, while the information received later exposes that stereotype. For example, in the last poster of the series (figure 11), the audience first sees a blurred figure of an African-American man running juxtaposed with the headline "CRIME." The photograph suggests anonymity through cropping, motion, and soft focus; this is a man portrayed without individual characteristics. The large type screams like a tabloid headline and a label. Both the image and headline are ambiguous in meaning. Did the man commit a crime? Was a crime committed against him? The audience can only read the small type after coming closer to the poster, after the opportunity to form a stereotype has presented itself. The small type, contrasting in size and detail, shifts the ambiguity and tells the audience how to interpret the poster. "... Seeing my color makes me a criminal. But what is my crime?" Through the text the man must now be seen as an individual trapped within the context of racial stereotyping. By making the audience aware of their participation in the argument, the poster challenges the audience to recognize and confront their own beliefs and assumptions as well as those of the media. The formal devices that divide the audience's interaction into two clearly defined segments are merely expressions of a deeper engagement by the audience. Through this device, it is revealed that the audience holds or understands the beliefs demonstrated in the argument and that the audience is attributing those beliefs to the subject.

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Providing the audience with an experience through the display of values

Though all design creates some type of experience for the audience, experience is rarely the primary communication goal. If the goal of a design is experiential, then it is often interpreted as a focus on the esthetic moment. Experience, is a display of values, however, and esthetics is simply one of any number of values. When an experience is the goal of an agent, the design displays or exhibits particular values for the audience to consider. The audience may identify with the values or they may condemn or reject the values.

A display of esthetic values can be seen in “Typography as Discourse” (figure 12), a poster directed toward an audience of designers. Formal devices in the poster raise issues of the role of esthetics in typography and design. Because words are broken, displayed backwards, and read in different directions, the audience experiences the letters as shapes, patterns, and codes. Type becomes a symbol, not of language, but of an esthetic. In creating an experience for the audience, the poster argues a particular esthetic. Adherence to an esthetic is a cultural belief and this poster develops an argument for a certain esthetic, a specific cultural belief.

Experiencing social beliefs as a primary goal is demonstrated in the controversial series of ads produced by Benetton, the clothing manufacturer. The ads reproduce documentary photographs that reference values. These images, placed within an ambiguous context when used in an advertisement bearing the name of Benetton, are used without any explanatory or contextualizing text. The ads, which have included images of a death-bed scene of an AIDS patient, an overcrowded ship of Albanian refugees headed to Italy, and a newborn infant with umbilical cord, blood, and mucus, create an experience for the audience through displays of social values.

It could be argued that the goal of these ads is to induce action, to induce the audience to buy clothing. In fact, the ads may result in an audience remembering Benetton and supporting the company if the audience identifies with the values the ads seem to imply. Or it may be argued that the goal of these ads is to educate, to induce in the audience an awareness of the issues and values referenced. But the ads do not interpret the beliefs referenced, so the argument does not attempt to persuade the audience of a particular belief. And so no particular belief is attributed to Benetton either to induce an action or to educate. The argument of these ads is a display of beliefs and the role of the audience within that argument is to experience the beliefs exhibited.

The formal devices within the Benetton ads define the audience’s role and also suggest the audience’s deeper engagement with the communication process. The quality of the photographs expresses their documentary origins. Some of the photographs have the harsh graininess of an enlarged snapshot, some express the immediacy of a captured moment, and all place the viewer as a voyuer in a private, emotional, or intimate scene. Audiences have become

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accustomed to this voyeuristic role in the context of the news media. By altering the context and placing the image where the audience expects to see a product, the audience becomes uncomfortably aware of its role as an active participant in the argument.

**Shaping belief**

The goal of visual communication is to persuade an audience to adopt a new belief. However, this necessitates a reference to existing beliefs through formal devices. In developing an argument, a designer does not have a choice of referencing beliefs or not referencing beliefs; the choice lies in what beliefs are referenced. In making this choice, existing beliefs will be affected (maintained, rejected, or transformed) and a new belief will be shaped. The designer, of course, cannot combine just any set of beliefs with a subject to reach the communication goal. Communication is directed toward a specific audience and that audience comes to the argument with particular cultural beliefs and understanding. The audience is a dynamic participant in the argument and the designer must discover the argument that will persuade a particular audience.

The range of argument achieved by varying the combination of formal devices seems limitless, and experimenting with formal devices within argument has been a major focus in graphic design. By examining the shaping of belief and the role of the audience in argument through a theory of rhetoric, what are some additional directions for investigation in design? Currently, there are many discussions concerning the responsibility of the designer in relation to the subject. What of the designer’s responsibilities in referencing beliefs? And as an active participant in shaping belief, does the audience have a responsibility within the communication process? Are there avenues for exploring argument other than varying formal devices or varying the beliefs referenced? Are there communication goals not yet explored through visual communication? Questions of this sort may set a much needed new agenda for design inquiry.

Fig. 13) Benetton Advertisement; Photo: Oliviero Toscani for Benetton; Courtesy of Benettons

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