

Explorative Research and Praxis

Affect Theory and the advertising encounter

The purpose of this lecture is to consider the application of critical theory in the context of creative practice.

We will apply aspects of **affect theory** to contemporary advertising.

A representational approach to how we interpret visual communication is central to semiotics and also John Berger's seminal text *Ways of Seeing*.

However, Berger does not consider an affective response in this exchange. Many of his key points spring from traditional notions of representation and semiotic theory.

What Berger fails to contemplate fully is our sensory response to any piece of visual communication. He gives little consideration to the intense personal transformation that can take place internally during the encounter. Instead he deconstructs messages and arrives at meaning through notions aligned primarily with semiotic theory.

The result of this is that our understanding and reaction to any advertising message is one of social construction rather than personal impression.

Semiotics

As we have seen previously, semiotics direct our shared understanding of what we see and how we 'read' any image or artwork. It provides us with meaning and context with the aim of heightening our intellectual encounter with visual communication and art.

All communication is the result of the interplay between representamen, interpretant and idea.'

(Macey, David. 2000: 294).

For this reason semiotics is the prevailing structuralist model persistantly used to deconstruct contemporary advertising.

Let's quickly apply a semiotic interpretation ...



TBWA Paris, 2007

ICON - MANNEQUIN = man

SYMBOL - FLOWERS = romance, care, love, etc.



ANCHORAGETEXT - 'The perfect man' (in) 'An Absolut World'

INDEX - RUDDY COMPLEXION &
DISHEVELLED HAIR = bewildered, irritable, etc.

What about affect theory?

With its roots in psychology, affect theory works at the opposite end of the perceptive spectrum.

Lawrence Grossberg, a cultural studies commentator, highlights the antithetical position of affect theory in relation to representation, describing it as follows. As we have said previously:

‘Everything that is non-representational or non-semantic – that’s what we now call affect.’

and he succinctly expresses it as:

‘... what it feels like to be alive ...’

(Gregg, Melissa and Seigworth, Gregory J. 2010: 316)

Affect is visceral, a non-rational evocation, experienced through an intervention or an encounter.

With affect our response is intensive rather than extensive. Unlike many cultural theories it does not insist on a single ideology. It is a fluid construct; it is spontaneous and personal.

Affect operates not metaphorically but phenomenologically.

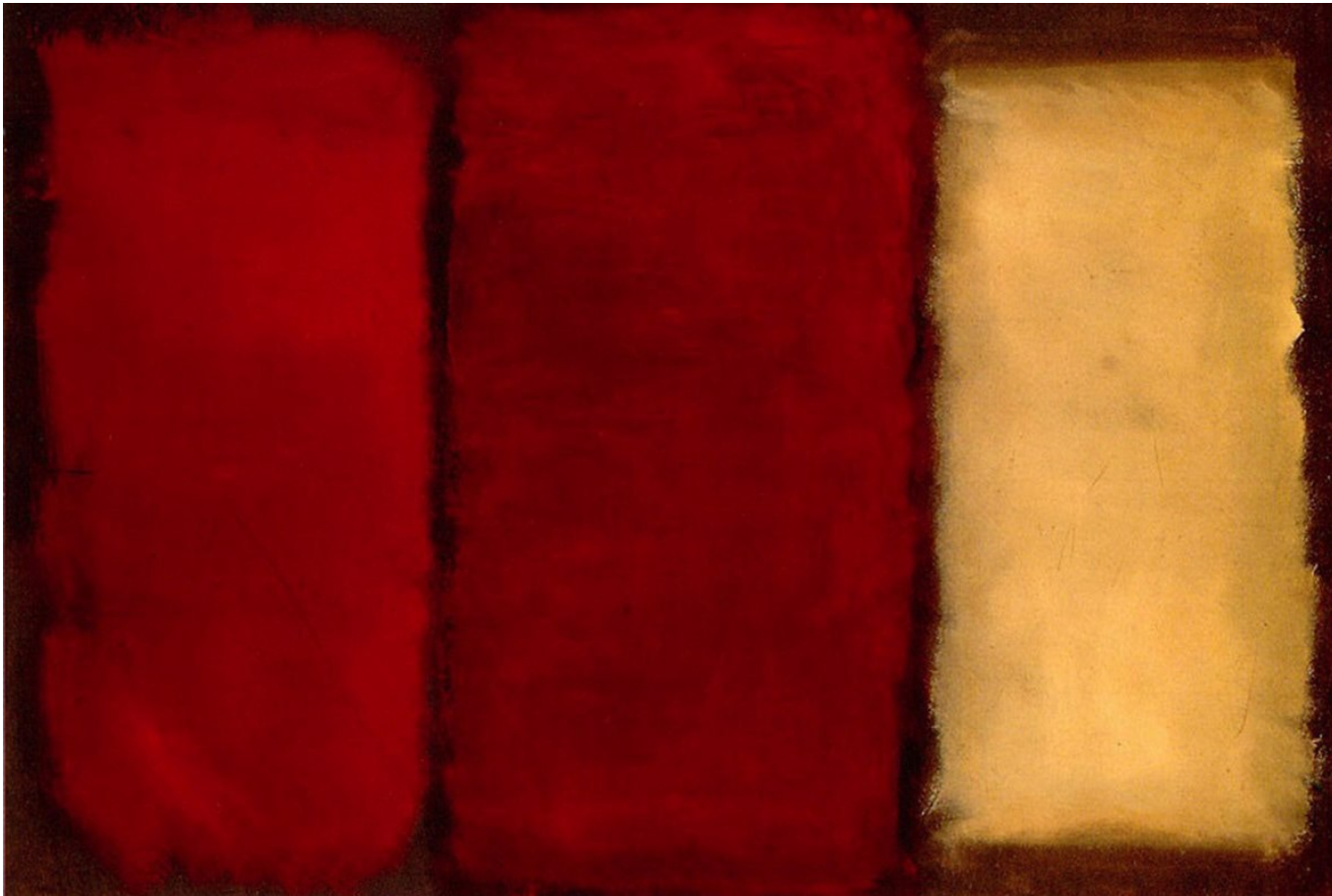
In line with philosopher, Martin Heidegger's interpretation of phenomenology, this means the internally processed conscious (or unconscious) personal experience of the world, and not an external experience that shares a predetermined and agreed meaning. (The Basics of Philosophy:2017).

Therefore semiotics and affect theory are two distinct approaches in critical theory; a structuralist approach and and phenomenological approach.

The importance of being moved

We are all human. How we feel and what we experience is central to our perception of the world. It is how we make decisions and choose our paths. Therefore, having an internal, emotional response to a piece of work is just as valid as having an intellectual one. It proves we are alive.

Since the mid twentieth century we have accepted an affective approach in the creation and reading of artworks. Consider the paintings of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Francis Bacon.



Untitled
1964
Mark Rothko



“I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions ...the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate these basic human emotions.”



Number One
1950
Jackson Pollock

“I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.”





“It’s an attempt to bring the figurative thing up to the nervous system more violently and more poignantly.”



*Three Studies for
Figures at the Base
of a Crucifixion*
c1944
Francis Bacon

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's critical reflections on Bacon's work are well documented in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. His analysis applies to Bacon's body of work:

'It is like the emergence of another world. For these marks, these traits, are irrational, involuntary, accidental, free, random. They are nonrepresentative, nonillustrative, nonnarrative. They are no longer either significant or signifiers: they are asignifying traits.' (Deleuze, Gilles. 1982: 100)

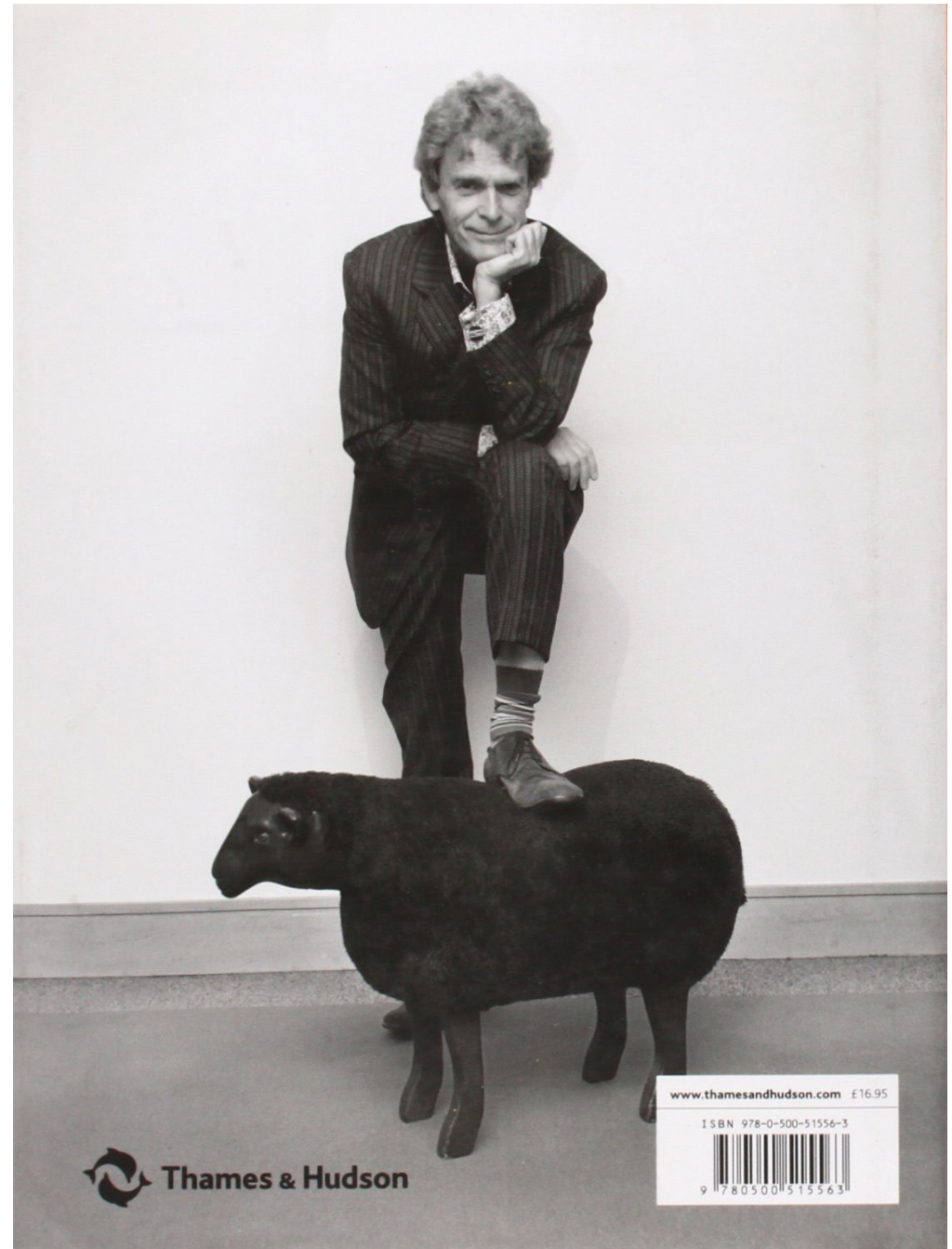
An affective interpretation has been considered a legitimate response to fine art for well over 50 years.

For this reason it is worthwhile to consider visual communication in affective terms. By probing the invisible forces that operate, looking outside the confines of representation, we may provoke a greater understanding and appreciation of what we are looking at.

So with a clearer understanding and appreciation of an affective approach to encountering the visual, we can analyse some key advertising examples that support an affective interpretation, rather than applying semiotic analysis.

John Hegarty is an authority on advertising having had a successful career that has spanned decades and he has written many books. Hegarty states:

“...information goes in through the heart. We are emotional creatures. We are not logical ...”



Let's consider some examples of advertising that works on a visceral level, rather than just a semiotic one, in order to convey their message.

Oliviero Toscani's creative work for *Benetton* was also divisive. His campaigns polarised opinion.

His work used challenging visual statements that dealt with issues including racism, religion and human rights:

“I tell a story with images relating to the moment of history I am in”

AIDS Campaign: Benneton



Oliviero Toscani, 1991



David Kirby's Final Moments

Photo © 1990 Therese Frare

On appearance this would seem a biblical reference to the death of Christ. However, it was originally a documentary photograph created to illustrate the life of 'carers'.

It is a picture of AIDS activist, David Kirby, dying of the disease. It was chosen for its' emotional qualities and to highlight the cultural prejudice towards the condition in western society during the 1980s. It was used with the permission of the family:

“We don't feel we've been used by Benetton, but rather the reverse: David is speaking much louder now that he's dead, than he did when he was alive.”

The problem with a semiotic reading of this image was highlighted by Toscani: “I called the picture of David Kirby and his family “*La Pietà*” because it is a Pietà which is real.”

(*La Pietà*: means ‘pity’ or compassion’ and is often represented by the depiction of Mary with the body Jesus in the Christian faith.)

Toscani uses our knowledge and reliance on representation to make the emotional response more powerful.

Transport Accident Commission (Victoria)



Clemenger BBDO Melbourne, 2017

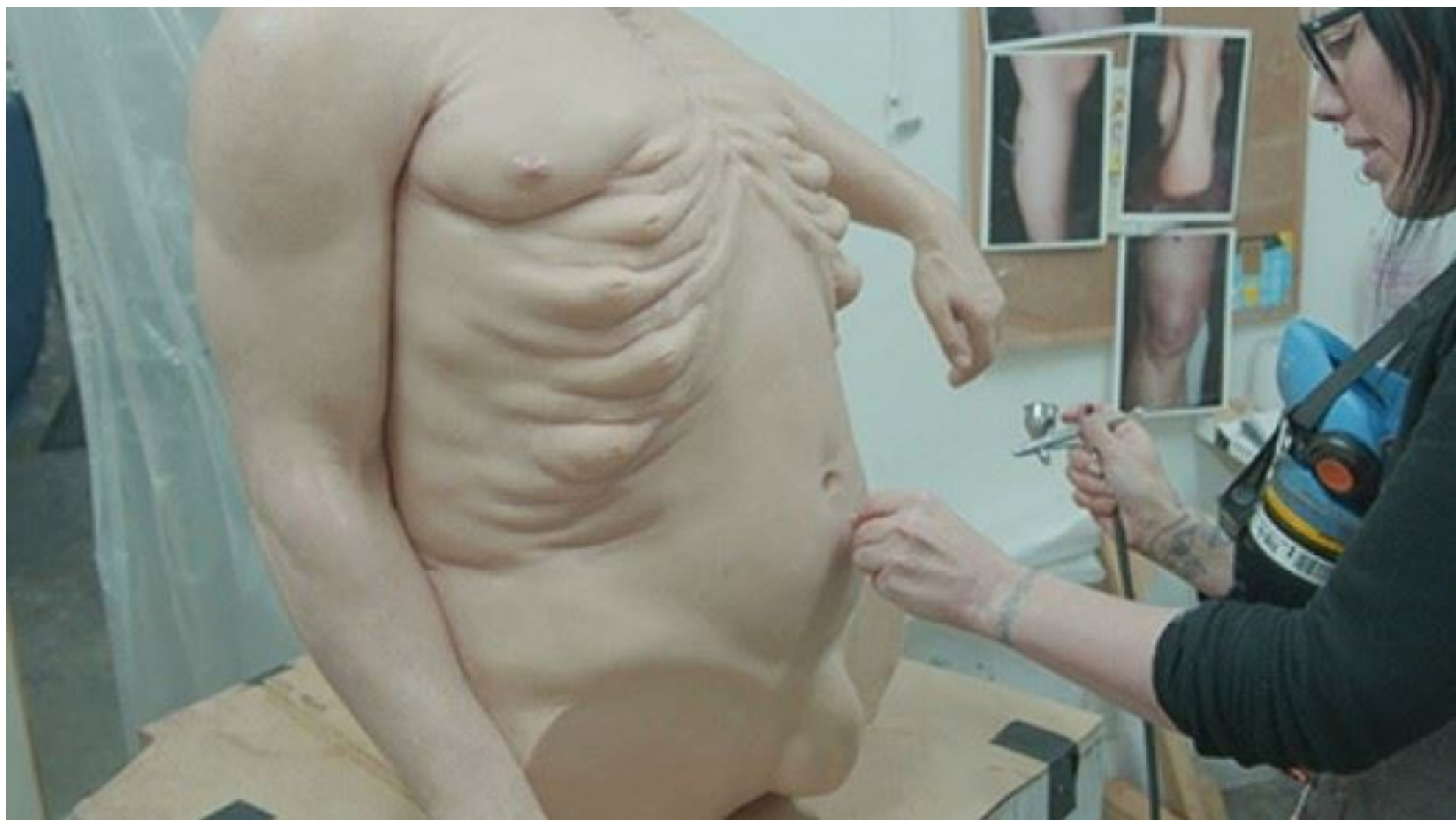
<http://www.meetgraham.com.au/>

In the face of a rising road accidents,
how do you make people stop and
consider their own vulnerability?

'Meet Graham', the only person
designed to survive a road accident.
Part interactive sculpture, part
educational tool and ultimately a
catalyst for conversation. Graham
shows us how the human body would
need to evolve in order to survive a
car crash.



Graham's effectiveness lies with the 'grotesque'. It is the affective quality of 'his' visual appearance that is central to the audience encounter. It is the other-worldliness of his appearance that makes the campaign memorable. It also emphasises the fragility of the human form. Our response is involuntarily internal, not analytic.



The mutant, appearance is unnerving. A biological spectre that apprehends the viewers senses. It is an unfamiliar life form that we do not aspire to, for the human race.

It is this other-worldly confrontation that will motivate us into action, that is to drive more carefully, which is the ultimate point of the campaign.



The effigy was created by contemporary visual artist, Patricia Piccinini, rather than an advertising creative. Patricia was chosen for the evocative and unsettling anthropomorphic mutations she creates as part of her artistic practice.

The talisman for the campaign 'Graham' is equally at home in a gallery as 'he' is on the road safety website.

UK Department of Health: Hooked



The average smoker needs over five thousand cigarettes a year.

Get unhooked. Call 0800 169 0 169 or visit getunhooked.co.uk


SMOKEFREE

Miles Calcraft Briginshaw Duffy, 2007

The UK Department of Health said the ads were designed to “confront smokers with the controlling nature of their addiction” to smoking.

The shock created by the ads aimed to activate a basic human mechanism - disease avoidance. It is this evolutionary mechanism that stops us coming into contact with toxic elements.

(Oaten, Stevenson & Case.2009)

The TV commercial was taken off air and posters were removed.

‘The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the UK said the posters showed the faces of addicted smokers who looked “distressed and in pain”.’
(BBC Online)

The aim was to create an emotional response to inspire smokers to stop.

UK Department of Health: Hooked



Miles Calcraft Briginshaw Duffy, 2007

What does the taste of chocolate 'feel' like?

Remember this piece of postmodernist advertising?

Cadbury's: Gorilla



Fallon London, 2008

The response to the *Cadbury's chocolate advertising* brief was that the communications should feel as good as eating the product itself.

This shifted the focus from a formulaic, to an altogether more emotional one. The concept repositioned *Cadbury's* as 'producers of happiness'.

How was the leap made to a gorilla playing drums to the sounds of Phil Collins?

It's not easy to explain. Chris Willingham of the advertising agency *Fallon* said:

“There's only so much method in the process and you then hand it on to fantastic creative minds ... It was an idea that, at script stage, you felt rather than thought – but you just couldn't help but listen to the feeling.”

“The intention of the brand was to not tell people that it made you feel good – but to elicit that feeling. It was a challenge, ... [and] while it didn’t make much sense, it certainly elicited the feeling ...”

Voted as the most popular ad of all time by *Marketing* magazine, this commercial marked a change from the convenient advertising clichés, stereotypes and formulaic narratives.

“A brand needs to go to the heart and not to the brain. *Gorilla* is – in those 90 seconds – trying to take you somewhere.”

Juan Cabral,
Advertising Commercial Director
(www.dandad.org)

In terms of global branding we can also consider the universally recognised Nike logo and strapline: 'Just do it'.

It has successfully become a metonym (expression) for activity



JUST DO IT.®

The nike 'tick' is textbook semiotics.

Colour

passionate, powerful, proud.

Shape

speed, progression, approval.

However:

Nike doesn't ask us to train harder.

Nike doesn't infer that their clothing will improve performance.

Nike doesn't tell us that wearing it will make us look good.

They just tell us to 'just do it'.

It's attitudinal.

It's spiritual.

The strapline is not so much a call to action, but an evocation.

Dan Wieden, founder of Wieden+Kennedy
says the strapline:

“...[it] just touched people in ways that
had nothing to do with athletics even. It
was just a sense of taking on your life,
taking it head on. Whatever is coming.”

To conclude

In considering visual and written communication in the 21st century, the methodology of our interpretation may be in need of reappraisal.

semiotics or affect?

Contemporary advertising illustrates that we are at a turning point in the critical analysis of visual communication. Affect theory derives from the 60s and 70s yet only in recent years that this type of textual analysis been given any credance.

This altered point of view is symptomatic of contemporary culture. In a world saturated with images, messages, data, alerts and notifications, perhaps we now seek a more visceral, empirical or phenomenological experience with the information we encounter.

If this is true then the process of analysing advertising solely through semiotics has to now be brought into question.

In order to better understand contemporary advertising, the process of investigation should include consideration of how it moves us independently, rather than just interpreting what it means to us collectively.

Any questions?

Next lecture:

(Wednesday 5th May is cancelled)

Friday 7th May
Creative Briefing