

The Poster

Volume 1 Number 1

© 2010 Intellect Ltd Editorial. English language. doi: 10.1386/post.1.1.3_2

EDITORIAL

1. *Physis* is a philosophical term describing the physical world. Pseudo-physis is Barthes' term to describe the reframing of the world as naturalized mythic idea.

Welcome to the very first edition of *The Poster*. From the first, this journal was intended to be an internationalist venture; founded to question our global relationship with visual persuasion and those visual elements that sustain our world view. As I write I am listening to the BBC's coverage of ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair's testimony to the Chilcot Enquiry into the British involvement in invading Iraq. The process is accompanied by a deep sense of despondency. As a society we have become so massively sophisticated in our interpretation of media rhetoric and so used to 'spin' that Chilcot on Blair is not an act of interrogation so much an act of textual meta-analysis: the 'truth' is impossible to reach, an informed opinion is impossible to hold, democratic judgement is impossible to make. Far from clarifying the questions of the day, the media lays down a fog of meta-debates that we have to penetrate before we can engage with the debate itself. The operation of the media simultaneously offers us a forensic gaze into the minutia of the world and a landscape of confusion: we know the details but the whole is obscure.

Visual rhetorics have become so embedded in our conception of the world that the viewer no longer questions their existence or their use by external agencies in shaping our relations with the world and replacing the world with a tainted *pseudo-physis*.¹ Visual persuasion has become naturalized, an unspoken, pervasive, everyday event; mere visual muzak that we no longer perceive. And, in our blindness, the public's liberty to choose, to actively form the public sphere, is degraded. Barthes described this state over 53 years ago. He defined politics as existing in contrast to mythologies, as belonging to the sphere of the real and the concerns of the real world, its debates and issues:

myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, ... it organizes a world which is without

contradictions because it is a world without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.

(Barthes 1957: 143)

In contrast this journal believes in the urgent need to study the formation and origin of visual rhetorics; their function, their deployment, their formation and social affect, and, above how, to denaturalize the myths.

Debord captured the sentiments behind the work of this journal in *The Society of the Spectacle*:

The Spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as part of society, and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is the focal point of all vision and all consciousness. ... The Spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images.

(Debord 1968: 1)

If we cannot demarcate 'the spectacle' from our vision of the world we cannot engage with the world in a meaningful way. The spectacle needs to be observed, unpacked, and dissected: to do that we seek contributions from all those whose expertise can expose its operation.

Ideally I would like to make this first editorial a triumphal one, trumpeting the heartening internationalism of contributions to the debate. But in the spirit of Derrida I have to talk about an absence that illuminates our object of study.

In mid-September 2009 John B. Zibluk of Arkansas State University in the US sent out an e-mail to the readers of the AEJMC-VISCOM² LISTSERV. The e-mail contained details of an Iranian site recording a remarkable grass-roots response to the repressive Iranian regime.³ In a brave act of visual rhetorical defiance (and a savvy response to the oppressive cyber enforcement by the Iranian government (figure 1)), Iranian citizens had been 'hacking' the currency with prints and handwritten texts critical of the government.

The Iranian central bank has done the predictable thing and withdrawn the notes from circulation. In January 2010 the world media gave the story a few centimetres of copy,⁴ and in the spirit of solidarity I wanted to include some comment from the site's author about the protest. However, I am sad to say that we have not been able to gain access to the author of the site (despite attempts in September and later): and now the site is gone.⁵ While the paper money protests have gone on to feed blogs and the international news machine – reassuring us that *our* democracy must be sound – the brave acts of civil disobedience have opened their authors up to both 'legal' and extra-legal retribution from the state. The right to free speech has been denied. This story carries a pair of

2. Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication/ Visual Communication Division.
3. Accessed at <http://www.mowjcamp.org/article/id/27060>.
4. For a sample see: http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100113/ap_on_re_mi_ea/ml_iran_cash_for_change.
5. Despite some amateur sleuthing with Traceroute the blog is gone, the site name no longer appears on Whois, and any record of an owner has evaporated. The site is no longer accessible, though an address bar message in Farsi remains as a memento.



Figure 1: Samples, main and inset, of the hacked Iranian bank notes, showing the same type of 10000 Rial note hacked with handwritten slogans (main) and desktop printed imagery (inset).

morals that will be remembered by *The Poster*: speaking against power is always dangerous and repression breeds invention in the repressed.

Not all visual rhetorical devices are as obvious in their function as the Iranian protest and not all governments are as blunt in their response (see Debao Xiang's article in this issue). If *The Poster* has a function, a rationale for its existence, it is to observe and record the rhetorical tricks, operations and intentions of those who use visual culture to mould society around us. Once you accept the proposition that there are forces in the world intent on shaping our daily thoughts, you accept that there is an obligation placed on you to understand these forces. Without this understanding we are powerless to do anything more than react.

As a designer (in a previous life) I was never really aware of the moral obligation imposed on me to act in a way that brought no harm to the world, let alone to promote good. I was dimly aware that in working for the rich and the powerful I was being paid to sway hearts and form opinion: but beyond the limits of my design role I was focused on doing the job and earning a living. In common with those who toil in isolation, fabricating the visual culture, my viewpoint was partial and uninformed. *The Poster* aims to remedy this by offering a parallax view on the visual rhetorical formation of the public sphere.

This is a conspicuously international issue, with each contribution bringing a diverse gaze to bear on the same central point of focus. This issue carries Clive Dilnot's critical assessment of the form of the political poster, which unpacks the promises implicit in the form and offers us a critical dissection of political imagery. This is the first part of Clive's exploration, and we are happy to say that second part will be carried in issue 2. We also have María Martínez Lirola's use of visual analysis⁶ to uncover hidden societal attitudes in magazine covers. Maria Inês Secca Ruivo reminds us that despite industrial design's claim to design for functionality it makes rhetorical statements with every product it makes. The intentional attempt to shape existing social attitudes is examined both in Mofizur Rhaman's review of anti-acid campaigns in Bangladesh and in Debao Xiang's report about the Chinese state's methods of controlling its citizens reproduction through both local and national rhetorical means.

And so with thanks to our authors, our Associate Editors, and Advisory Panel, I would like to offer you this first issue of *The Poster*.

Simon Downs, Lead Editor

References

- Barthes, Roland (1957), *Mythologies*, London: Vintage Classics, p. 143.
 Debord, Guy (1968), *Society of the Spectacle*, London: Rebel Press, p. 1.

6. Using multi-modal text and 'systemic functional grammar'.