8.2. Analysis of a masterpiece: the art of caricature

Objective
This exercise illustrates how to communicate meaning by isolating and amplifying a few significant details. The amplification of an element tends to favour the halo effect, which takes place when we extend our judgment from a particular aspect of a person to other unrelated personality aspects and domains. The main issue with the halo effect is that it works at the unconscious level, so we are blind to its presence when forming our opinion about someone or something.

Background
According to Schopenhauer, an effective strategy to argue against the positions of an opponent is to bring to extreme consequences the reasons he or she is offering.
In his treatise *The Art of Being Right: 38 Ways to Win an Argument* of 1831, he defines this strategy as 'Extension'. Extension consists of carrying an opponent's proposition beyond its natural limits, in giving it a significance as wide as possible, so as to exaggerate it. And he cites the following example:

'I asserted that the English were supreme in drama. My opponent attempted to give an instance to the contrary and replied that it was a well-known fact that in music, and consequently in opera, they could do nothing at all. […] What he had done was to try to generalise my proposition, so that it would apply to all theatrical representations, and, consequently, to opera and then to music, in order to make certain of defeating me.'

Extremizing an argument to express its implications is just one of many applications of the general rhetorical strategy of emphasizing. In rhetoric, this approach is called hyperbole, which is an exaggeration used to create an impression, a feeling or an emotion, such as when we say: 'I have been waiting for you for an eternity', or 'Your suitcase weight a ton!'. By using hyperbole, a speaker makes a statement remarkable and intense.

Since ancient times, the knowledge of rhetoric has been considered an essential discipline to build a persuasive discourse. The rhetorical figures appeal to reason (logos), emotions (pathos), ethics (ethos), and situation (kairos). In the case of hyperbole, emotion is the target.
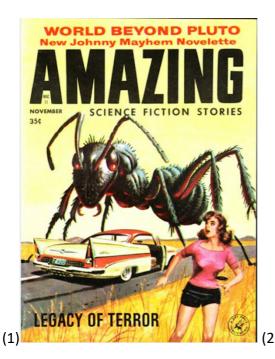
Hyperbole is widely used in visual communication. The hyperbole in advertising is frequent. Depicting images in an excessive way is a common strategy to attract attention and produce an emotional impact, as it is easy to verify in the advertisings of a product
https://retrographik.com/polishing-brillant-liquide-mecano-vintage-advert-poster/
or of a movie
https://www.filmvandaag.nl/film/27256-fantomas-a-lombre-de-la-guillotine?ref=27601.

Vintage science fiction stories and novels' covers in the 50s made abundant use of hyperbolic images to depict evil aliens, as showed in Figure 8.2a.
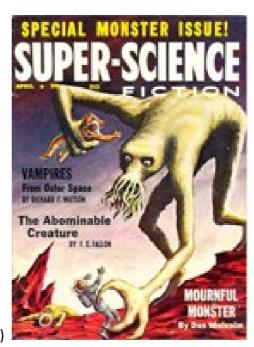
(1)   (2)

Fig. 8.2a - Examples of emphasis in vintage science fiction magazine covers.

It's easy to understand the power of hyperbole in advertising if we refer to caricatures. Ernst Gombrich and Ernst Kris, in their article *The Principles of Caricature* (1938), addressed caricatures as a device to release aggressiveness in a controlled scenario.

In political caricature, the reality is manipulated to emotionally affect the recipient by highlighting evil or ridiculing traits of the enemy, as in the racist representations of Jews by the Nazi regime https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1120754) or as illustrated in this satirical portrait of Napoleon, ridiculed for his height and arrogance (fig. 8.2b).

Fig. 8.2b - Example of emphasis in a caricature of Napoleon.

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The expressive power of hyperbole has seduced many artists. Leonardo da Vinci used to sketch unusual faces and heads (fig. 8.2c).

Fig. 8.2c - Leonardo da Vinci sketched unusual faces and heads.

Giorgio Vasari reports that he was so delighted when he saw curious heads that he would follow anyone who attracted his attention for a whole day.

Claude Monet as a child was very successful for his charcoal caricatures, which he sold for a few francs. It was thanks to these first works that the artist Eugène Boudin noticed Monet's precocious talent. Boudin taught Monet the use of oil colours on the beaches of Normandy and convinced his parents to send him to Paris to start his artistic career.

Fig. 8.2d - Monet's caricature

More sophisticated use of emphasis is by George Grotz (1893–1959). The subject of his work is the moral crisis of post-World War I German society. To express his disgust at the obscene alliance between obtuse militarism, voracious capitalism, and a hypocritical bourgeoisie, he takes emphasis as the guiding criterion of his figurative language. His favourite subjects are stereotypical characters of a society that is the prey of corruption and moral decay. Some of Grotz's ideal-types include fat capitalists with tuba, moved by mechanical gears referring to the amoral nature of capitalist profit, and empty puppets dressing as generals weighed down by pounds of theatrical medals. The background in these paintings is often an anonymous and cold urban landscape, where injured soldiers and ragged unemployed people roam. (fig. 8.2e).

Fig. 8.2e: Automatons, G. Grosz (1920).

Instructions

Hogarth was a keen observer of the vices and hypocrisies of his time. In the engraving 'Gin Lane', he illustrates a set of devastating effects produced by the excessive consumption of gin. To strike the viewer's imagination, he uses emphasis widely. The artist intended to shock the viewer with despair, decay, and squalor images.

Observe the printing of Hogarth (fig. 8.2c), then answer the following questions:

1. How many situations do you recognize?
2. What do the characters in the situations do?
3. What elements are amplified (faces, postures, gestures, actions, etc.)?
4. How is the situation triggering an emotional response from the observer? For example, horror, disgust, pity, etc. Can you recognize these emotions and associate them with the emphasized elements?

Fig. 8.2f - Gin Lane, (W. Hogarth, 1751).

References

Gombrich, E.H (1956), *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, Pantheon Books.

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