

Anita Schirm
University of Szeged

Humour in ARC billboards

Summary: The ARC billboard poster exhibition was first organized in Hungary in 2000. The posters use the means of advertising in order to communicate messages of social, political, and philosophical content. Though these posters differ considerably from classic billboard posters, they use the same kind of visual and language games in order to capture the attention of their audience. In this chapter I use the methods of pragmatics and discourse analysis in order to analyze the communicative effect mechanism of ARC posters on the basis of a corpus of data I have collected.

Introduction

In 1999 three Hungarian artists (graphic artists Gábor Bakos and Barna Fatér, and advertising specialist Péter Geszti) founded the company ARC Kft. (*arc* means “face” in Hungarian, and even though the name of the company looks like an acronym, this is the meaning that the name communicates). The purpose of this company was to renew the culture of public advertising. ARC Kft is involved in idea management, event organization, brand establishment and the organization of public exhibitions. The best known of their activities is the billboard poster contest and exhibition first organized in Budapest in 2000, where every year they raise a social issue (e.g. “Where is happiness?”) and invite artists to create billboards that provide an answer. The posters judged best by the audience and a jury are exhibited in the open air ARC billboard exhibition in a city square.

The posters created for the exhibition use the medium of advertising posters in order to communicate messages of social, political, and philosophical content. Even though these posters differ considerably from classic billboard posters in their purpose, message, and reception, they use the same kind of visual and language games in order to capture the attention of their audience. However, one source of significant difference between advertising posters and ARC posters is that while the former use humour primarily to sell a product, the latter use humour primarily to attract attention and make the audience reflect and form an opinion about a certain issue.

This chapter analyzes a collected corpus of ARC posters, examining those communicative mechanism and linguistic characteristics that focus on humour of imagery and language. ARC posters convey topical social messages through making fun of the imagery, language and manipulative strategies of advertising billboard posters. Thus, beyond being surprising and attention-getting, ARC posters also hold up a mirror to the common communicative strategies of our era. I investigated the ARC posters from between 2000 and 2006, available electronically (<http://www.arcmagazin.hu> and <http://kep.tar.hu/arcplakat>). I provide precise data on images discussed in this chapter in the Bibliography.

About ARC posters

According to the main underlying idea of the ARC billboard poster exhibition, “Billboard posters used for advertisement purposes can carry socially meaningful messages in addition to the commercial content” (<http://www.arcmagazin.hu/magunkrol>). The aim of these posters is not to increase consumption, but to inform as well as express and shape opinion.

The ARC posters are billboard posters, but they represent a very different communicative situation than advertising posters. Advertising billboard posters are found in almost all public spaces whereas, in contrast, ARC posters are concentrated in one place, namely, the Square of ’56-ers (56-osok tere) in Budapest. The audience who come to see the posters view them while standing in front of them, rather than while walking past them, as is more usual in an everyday setting, consciously reading and looking through all details of the posters (rather than accidentally glancing at them), which means that the linguistic and non-linguistic signs carried by them do not have to be limited to 7±2 elements (as is the case with traditional billboard posters). Unlike advertising posters, ARC works carry titles that contextualize them. The titles frequently overwrite the first meaning suggested by the poster, or sometimes aid in disambiguating the interpretation process. Often, it is the title that signals that the poster should be interpreted differently from what one would expect upon a cursory first impression, and also suggests that the intention is not necessarily what we would expect in advertising.

In ARC posters, the text is never completely missing, since even if the poster does not contain any written message, the title helps in interpretation. For instance, in the ARC poster in Figure 1, the visual image in itself allows various interpretations (e.g. candy made of garlic, or funny looking bonbons), but the title *Sztereotípiá* – “Stereotype” narrows the scope of interpretation considerably, since it refers to how Hungarians are stereotypically considered to be a “garlic eating” people who eat garlic possibly for dessert as well.



Figure 1. Stereotype.

While advertising posters aim to draw attention to the advertised product or service, to commit the product or service to people’s memory and to encourage them to buy it, ARC posters can be considered a cultural medium which informs, entertains, and expresses an opinion. Beyond conveying topical, socially relevant messages, the ARC posters often parody advertising billboard posters and borrow their imagery, linguistic devices, and strategies of manipulation for their own purposes. So, even though advertising billboard posters and the ARC posters are created with a different purpose, convey different messages, and the circumstances of their reception are different as well (attention is passive with the former and active with the latter), they use the same linguistic means to draw attention to themselves. Thus, through the treatment of ARC posters, we can gain an insight into current strategies of advertising and marketing communication.

There is a difference, however, in whether the poster is dominated by linguistic or visual elements and mechanisms of expression. At the time of their introduction into advertising, billboard posters carried very strong verbal messages, which dominated the entire poster. By today, however, due to the fact that people’s tolerance for advertisements has reached a critical level, the verbal message has weakened, and the emphasis has shifted to novel, surprising techniques (Szekeres, 2009). Thus, communication through advertising posters is becoming an aesthetic issue, and linguistic elements are being replaced by visual elements. In contrast, in the case of the ARC posters, the communication of the message is the important aspect of the poster rather than the means of accomplishing this.

The ARC poster exhibition is not a competition of advertising posters (Sas, 2007b: 279), and the billboard posters leave the medium of advertising and become an independent form of art. According to the artistic creed of the organizers (Sas, 2007b: 279), the goal of ARC is to radically reform contemporary visual culture, to rethink the notion of the public image, and to provide more space for democratic, visual arts in public spaces. By being concise and simple, the ARC poster is understandable to all. Its style combines visual and textual quips on an

equal footing. Its audience is the widest public, socially mobilized in the best sense of the word. Its articulation is in accord with the visual language of contemporary mass culture, often using humour to transmit its message.

Humour is such a widely employed means at the ARC exhibitions that there is virtually no poster that wouldn't make the audience smile. However, in order to really make the audience laugh, they have to be able to decode the intertextual references hidden in the messages, since only then do the posters become a source of humour. Every ARC poster carries a secondary, indirect message beyond the primary one, which the audience have to deduce based on their own knowledge. The direct and implied meanings are most often connected through some kind of visual or linguistic game or through intertextuality by the creators of the posters. In short, in order to attract attention, ARC posters also use play on words and images, but while advertising posters use these for manipulation (Fuertes-Olivera et al., 2001: 1292), in the case of cultural posters, humour is used for persuasion. In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss communicative strategies employed in ARC posters through analyzing various examples.

Discourse strategies of posters

ARC posters use the same communicative strategies as advertising posters to win over audiences. According to Fuertes-Olivera et al. (2001: 1295), the typical discourse strategies of advertisements are as follows:

“(i) use of regular patterns of textual choices; (ii) importance of foregrounding strategies, such as alliteration, repetition of letters, assonance, language mixing and unpredictable spelling; (iii) preference for certain sentence types (especially rhetorical questions and commands), ellipsis, substitution, and shorter clauses; (iv) frequent use of certain semantic relations, (especially homonymy, polysemy, and ambiguity) and semantic associations; (v) choice of language dialects and register, thereby creating direct associations between the product and the target audience; (vi) imitation of informal conversation; (vii) importance of figurative language, especially metaphor, synecdoche and metonymy.” All of these strategies can be traced in the ARC posters as well, as I will demonstrate below through various examples.

According to the findings of a recent study by Sas (2007a: 284), only a small portion, about 15% of the Hungarian population, like advertisements, while the rest evidence rejecting, avoiding or tolerating attitudes towards them. ARC posters, on the other hand, can win over both groups of people, those who like advertisements, and those who do not. They can do so because, even though they use the same basic strategies as advertising posters, ARC posters allow various interpretations. While in the case of an advertising poster the promotion of a product or service

is done directly, ARC posters can represent different messages depending on the perspective of the audience. On the one hand, by mocking strategies of advertising posters and rewriting and parodying existing advertisements, ARC posters can draw attention to the manipulative effect of advertisements. On the other hand, through visual and linguistic humour, they can serve as an example for creators of advertisements who wish to make creative and thoughtful advertisements. Below, I will first discuss the attitudes of ARC posters to advertising, then provide examples of visual and linguistic humour and, finally, analyse from the point of view of advertising posters the effect ARC posters have on their audience.

The strategies of advertising posters according to ARC posters

A recurrent theme of ARC posters is the demonstration of how advertising messages distort the truth. The truth-value of advertisements is evaluated very differently by the audience and the advertisers (Schirm, 2010a: 148). The audience often feel that advertising lies to them. This attitude is captured for instance in the poster with the title *LIES*, which already in its title sends the message that advertisements, including billboards, are messages that carry lies. Advertising experts, on the other hand (Sas, n.d.: 63), are of the opinion that advertisers merely package their message by looking at things from the point of view of the consumer. For their part, critics point out that “the lighter form of manipulation is packaging, or coding, the transformation of raw intent through the means of communication” (Sas, n.d.: 64). Such packaging and bending of the truth is suggested in an expressive way in the poster with the title *Kiscsillag* (“Little asterisk”). In the poster, against a blue background the word *igen* – “yes” – appears in large white letters which are easy to decipher, followed by an asterisk. The asterisk refers to the fact that the message is continued and appended at the bottom of the poster. At the bottom, however, the asterisk is followed by the word *nem* – “no.” On this ARC poster the original message is turned into its opposite thanks to the footnote, and the word *YES* actually means *NO*. Hungarian advertisements often employ the manipulative strategy of using asterisks and footnotes, especially when advertising banking products, expensive electronics, or cars. The offer that sounds very good at first sight turns out to contain details and conditions in barely legible small print.

The intent to sell at whatever cost, presenting the most manipulative elements in the largest letter size and what can be decisive elements in fine print, are all nicely mocked in Figure 2: *FREE... is something very few things are sold for, it's always worth reading the fine print as well.*

The viewer's attention is drawn to the word *INGYEN* – “free (of charge),” which takes up the entire poster, and if the person looking at it is not attentive enough, they can miss the main message. The humour of the poster stems from the



Figure 2. Minuscule.

fact that the poster uses the same strategy of manipulation that it aims to disclose. Omnipresent and excessive advertising is made fun of in the poster presenting the front of the Hungarian Parliament building as advertisement space that can be rented.

In sum, a recurring detail of the ARC posters is the emphasis of the unavoidable, aggressiveness, and deception in advertising, in short, a mocking of its manipulative strategies. The most common means of manipulation in our modern age are stereotypical listing, false promises, misinformation, contradictions in content, faulty reasoning or argumentation unsupported by fact, and the undue appealing to emotions. These means of manipulation and the exaggerations and general word use of posters are graphically illustrated by two ARC posters from 2004. Both bear the title, *Add el magad!* – “Sell yourself!” – and both show a smiling young woman in front of a colourful background, next to a list of contradictory, clichéed statements: *Válassza ön is András Virágot!* – “Vote for Virág András!”, *Rendkívül jó a tisztítóereje* – “Extremely good cleansing power,” *Értékálló* – “Preserves value,” *Élmény vele a borotválkozás* – “You’ll love shaving with it,” *Dús hatást kölcsönöz* – “Adds volume,” *Többrétegű* – “Multilayered,” *Szinte magától kitakarít* – “Cleans almost without help,” *Könnyen mosható* – “Easy to wash,” *A gyermekkor ízeit idézi* – “Reminds you of the tastes of your childhood,” *Kutyája imádni fogja* – “Your dog will love it.” The other poster has the following texts: *Válassza ön is Taba Ágnes!* – “Vote for Ágnes Taba!”, *Jobb, mint a hagyományos* – “Better than the traditional,” *Megéri az árát* – “Worth its price,” *Nem habzik* – “Won’t foam,” *Jó barát a konyhában* – “A good friend in the kitchen,” *Ajándékozni öröm* – “A pleasure to give,” *Megőrzi a színét* – “It is colorfast,” *Rendkívül egészséges és még fogyaszt is** (*nyomokbanogyoródarabkákat tartalmazhat) – “Very healthy and excellent for a diet* (*may contain traces of nuts)”, *Hűtés nélkül is hosszan eltartható* – “Does not require refrigeration,” *Jól bírja a vizet* – “Waterproof,” *Öröm vele az élet* – “It makes life a joy.” The posters also have a pictogram which looks like a stamp with the inscription *Vizual Communismists* and a fictitious internet address (www.hogyanaddelmagad.hu – www.howtosellyourself.hu), both

of which are supposed to create the appearance of credibility. These posters parody advertising messages that are incapable of differentiating between products. The incongruity of the items listed is what creates the humorous effect, which is further increased by the fact that, due to their stereotypical nature, they could be attributed to any element of a given group of products (washing powder, cleaning tool, food, etc.).

I will illustrate other typical retail strategies of advertising posters through a discussion of thematic ARC posters from 2005. The subject that the creators of the posters had to address was selling tap water. In marketing this “product,” which is available to everyone without having to purchase it, the classical methods of persuasion known from advertising posters were employed. ARC posters can attract attention through the same means as advertising posters, so, paradoxically, it is exactly the strategies that are made fun of that appear in the works of the exhibition: the way the posters address their audience, use slogans and stereotypes (images of dogs, children, or famous people can sell anything), polysemous and humorous messages, questions coercing agreement, differentiation of products from other products, expressions of promise and boasting, superlatives, and addressing nonexistent groups. I will use some tap water advertising posters to illustrate how the ARC posters did this.

The poster entitled *Retróvíz* – “Retro water” evokes advertisements of gone by eras: the image shows an attractive woman in a mini skirt opening the faucet, while the slogan is *Igyon Ön is csapvizet!* – “Drink tap water!” This ARC poster mocks the stereotype according to which the image of a young and attractive woman can sell anything. Furthermore, this poster can be interpreted as an instance of anti-advertisement that campaigns against buying mineral water. Since it is well known that the job of advertising is to promote sales, it is surprising when an advertisement steps out of its traditional role (Sas, 2007a: 40). Another poster draws attention to the importance of packaging. The image shows a bottle with a colourless and transparent liquid inside it and a label saying *Csapvíz – 750 ml – Természetes, szénsavmentes ivóvíz* – “Tap water – 750 ml – Natural, non-carbonated drinking water.” The greater part of the poster is, however, taken up by the following thought provoking question: *Így megkóstolná...?* – “Would you taste it like this...?”. The fact that the question is followed by the three dots suggests that the presupposition of the creator of the poster is that the answer to the question is *no*. That is, if we knew what was inside the packaging, we would often refrain from buying the advertised product. However, as a result of tricky communication and the over-praising of a product, anything can be sold.

A similar strategy is used in the poster entitled *Vízválasztó*, whose title has a dual meaning: the primary meaning, “continental divide,” as well as the literal meaning, “water chooser.” The poster presents an image of a faucet with running

water and it bears the text, *Vezetékes szénsavmentes természetbarát hideg-meleg tiszta csapvíz 100 liter 15 Ft* – “Running non-carbonated nature-friendly hot and cold clean tap water 100 liters for 15 Forints.” The punch line is in the slogan: *bármikor megengedheted magadnak* – “you can afford it any time / you can open it [start running it] any time,” with both meanings of the verb in the slogan being relevant in the case of this poster.

Advertising posters often use the strategy of asking a question, usually by asking one to which the answer is known in advance. The poster entitled *Csapvíz – Nélküle* – “Tap water – without it” does this when it asks *Bírnád víz nélkül?* – “Could you do without water?” The answer from the audience can only be *nem* – “no.” The suggestion of the negative answer is further strengthened by the fact that the poster depicts a young woman with a tea filter hanging out of her mouth. Thus, the visual image immediately awakens the desire to drink. However, the poster goes further: underneath the question *Bírnád víz nélkül?* – “Could you do without water?” it says *Vezetékes ivóvíz. Bevezetett márka 1881 óta* – “Tap water. A brand introduced in 1881,” in imitation of the trade-mark building customary in advertising.

With recourse to traditional advertising techniques, these ARC posters ostensibly popularizing tap water call delightful attention to the fact that traditional advertising techniques can sell just about anything, including water, one would suppose. Sometimes one slogan is enough, as is shown in the playful variation on the *Gut, Besser, Gösser* beer advertisement *Gut, Besser, Wasser*. Effectiveness is further increased by visual and linguistic humour used both by traditional advertising and ARC posters.

Visual and linguistic humour in ARC posters

Unique in their own right, the ARC posters attract attention by employing visual and language games. They are idiosyncratic and surprising, and always humorous. Though they are limited in means and available space, they make the smallest set of signs yield the most varied kinds of information through compacting and condensing, including linguistic condensation, for example, using figures of speech.

A figure of speech is usually defined as a deviation from the linguistic norm, and a deviation from the usual always produces a considerable stylistic effect. In the case of advertisements, figures of speech are often used to sneak a brand name or product name into the advertising slogan, or as a source of linguistic humour, while in ARC posters figures of speech try to evoke associations far from the original text and picture. That is, both visual and linguistic games play a special role in ARC posters, so I will discuss these in detail with the help of examples.

Language games appearing in billboard posters can be categorized in various ways (cf. Partington, 2009). Depending on how many words are used, wordplay can involve one or more words. Playing with language can also be based, for instance, on repetition (e.g. *A kevesebb több, a kevesebb jobb, a kevesebb zseniálisabb* – “Less is more, less is better, less is best”), although a single word can also constitute wordplay as, for example, in *Hejneke*, which fuses the Heineken beer name and *nekem* – “to/for me,” i.e., “Heineken for me.” The former type is considered horizontal wordplay, the latter vertical (cf. Hausman, 1974, cited in Forgács, 2007). In horizontal games words follow one another in a text, whereas in vertical games one linguistic element has more than one meaning, i.e. horizontal games are explicit, while vertical games are implicit. Billboard posters use vertical games more often, since, due to the limited availability of space and short time for decoding, maximal information is conveyed through the use of a minimal number of signs. Due to the implicitness, however, the decoding of the message requires greater mental effort. In the case of ARC posters this is increasingly so, since the intertextuality of these works compels the audience to think further.

Language games can also be categorized on the basis of whether they contain pure pun or near-pun elements (Partington, 2009: 1795). Billboard poster texts can also be analysed semantically and categorized as containing polysemy, homonymy, paronymy, and antonymy. Language games can be based on various subsystems of language (cf. Lendvai, 1996; Forgács, 2007), i.e. phonemic, grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic games. The humorous effect can be further differentiated by the meaning conveyed by the image in the poster: it either supports the linguistic meaning or completely overwrites and reinterprets it. The various categorizations of language games, however, include overlaps. In this chapter I discuss the most frequent humorous strategies of attracting attention employed in posters by recourse to linguistic subsystem, that is, I overview examples starting with phonemic games, and progressing towards grammatical examples and, finally, pragmatic ones.

Phonetic means of effect creation typically distort lexemes (Forgács, 2007: 49). Phonemic language games use insertion, deletion and exchange of phonemes, as a consequence of which humorous effect is created by its deviation from the norm (Lendvai, 1996: 41).

Word initial vowel insertion, prothesis, can be found in a slogan of a fictional flower delivery company (see Figure 3): *Yoda vagyok magáért* – “I am Yoda for you.” The source of this slogan is a title of a popular Hungarian song from ’30s: *Oda vagyok magáért* (“I am head over heels for you”). Distorting the title, this slogan became a multiple connotated message. A character of Star Wars is used here not only textually but also pictorially.



Figure 3. Yoda.

In order to understand the linguistic game involved here, one has to be able to recognize the intertextual reference. While classic advertising posters employ figures manipulating the level of phonemes (insertion, deletion, or change of phonemes, especially in a trademark name or the name of a product) in their slogans, in order to achieve a surprising or melodious phrase, ARC posters use these same strategies to distort the names of trade brands and products, making *Coca-Cola* into *Kuka-Kola* – “garbage can Coke” or *Vodafone* into *Yodafone*. In ARC posters figures manipulating the phonemic level are very frequent: they usually change one phoneme (letter) in the name of well-known trade marks that are easily recognizable to the audience. Instant recognizability is, of course, a prime concern in all advertising.

Pronouncing words can be a source of humour. The ARC billboard poster in Figure 4 is based on similar phonetic forms when the brand name *Heineken* is distorted to *Hejnekiem* (*hej nekem*, where *hej* is a reference to the cry that merry-makers, especially when drinking, used years ago). The basis of the language game here is the Hungarian folk etymological interpretation through a reinterpretation of the morphological boundary, evoking a wish in the viewer to possess a beer. Attributes of the brand and the caption (red star, green background, white letters) immediately recall the original advertisement.

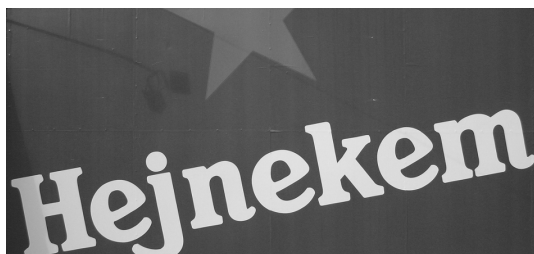


Figure 4. Hejnekiem.



Figure 5. Fisherman's friends.

A frequent strategy is the exploitation of the complex meanings of words in ARC posters. From the point of view of attracting attention, homonyms and polysemous words are highly economical linguistic units, since they are able to recall a number of meanings at the same time without repetition, giving the viewer the joy of discovery in the language game, in the resulting humour or irony. According to Lendvai, homonymy “is one of the strongest means of creating humour” (1996: 57), while polysemy “meets the requirements of creating a comic effect, since in addition to a surface identity, it is characterized by a difference in content” (1996: 53). In the corpus investigated here, cases of homonymy are quite frequent.

Among ARC posters employing homonymy, I wish to specifically discuss a poster that is a direct reflection on the exhibition itself, expressing an opinion about it by exploiting humour hidden in the homonymy. The visual implementation of the poster is very simple: white letters against a black background say *nagy az arc* – “ARC is great.” The poster is titled *Üzenet Geszti Péternek* – “a message for Péter Geszti” (Péter Geszti being one of the founders and main organizers of the exhibition.) Thus, the message has a complex meaning: *arc* as a common noun means “face,” and in Hungarian the phrase *nagy az arc* can mean both that a person has a big face (head) and that they are smart. Thus, in the exhibition context, *nagy az arc* does dual function, praising the ARC posters on the one hand, and Péter Geszti on the other.

In addition to homonymy, ARC posters often use polysemy (i.e., words open to several meanings). The poster in Figure 5, for example, capitalizes on the dual meaning of the word *megúszni*, which means both “to swim across” and “to get away with (something)”. Paired with the striking image of fish washed up on the sand, it creates a striking outcry against global warming, which is all the more effective when paired with the caption at the bottom, the well known slogan *Fisherman's Friend*, here used to full ironic effect.

Billboard posters often contain metaphors, symbols, similes, examples of metonymy, allegory, synesthesia, and personification, since just like images, these can communicate a lot of meaning in condensed form. Transfer based on similar-



Figure 6. Mutti.

ity occurs in an ARC poster from 2006: *Birka vagy? Pörkölt lesz belőled!* – “Are you a sheep? You’ll be made into stew!” The poster depicts a sheep on the left and a plate of mutton stew on the right, but the intended secondary meaning is that the poster talks about sheepishness as a characteristic of humans and intends to provoke.

Personification is also a frequently used element in billboard posters, usually of the kind where human characteristics are attributed to a nonhuman. This is the case in the poster shown in Figure 6, where an animal, a rabbit, is given a human role in a new context signalled also by the inscription *Reformkonyha* – “New trends in cuisine.” The humorous nature of this work is due to the fact that in Hungarian the word *reformkonyha* – “reformed cuisine” originally refers to modern and healthy cuisine, while the visual image of the poster evokes yet another meaning of the word “reform,” with a rabbit appearing in the role of the butcher.

On advertising billboards a striking slogan can also attract attention. A good slogan carries a simple, brief, rhythmical, condensed and fitting message, has a transferable meaning and a wide associative range, and is easy to remember (Sas, 2007a: 150). The corpus I investigated showed that ARC billboards tend to play with well-known advertising slogans. For example, the slogan of a furniture store (*Kika, hova máshova* – “Kika, wherever else”) was rewritten as follows: *Kaki, hova máshova* – “Poop, wherever else”. Humour in this example becomes clear if the viewers can recall the original advertising billboard. Once again, an ARC billboard features incongruous elements together. Incongruity can be regarded as a general source of humour, which makes the audience laugh thanks to the element of surprise.

Well-known emblems and trademark logos used on posters have such strong recall impact that they often replace the text entirely, as the example below (Figure 7) shows. According to Sas (2007a: 70), these emblems do not function as icons any more, but become a part of collective thinking patterns as memes. For instance, the golden arches of McDonald’s are recognized even when turned upside down. The humorous twist in the poster is that the abbreviation achieved by



Figure 7. Donald.

rotating the letters MC produces a quite different meaning from the original, since it becomes the abbreviation for a water closet (WC), and the new slogan now reads, *Water closet – every time a best time*, with a slight alteration of the McDonalds slogan, “Every time a good time.”

In the case of well-known logos, forms and colours become dominant to such an extent that linguistic accompaniment such as the name of the product may actually become superfluous. The creators of the advertisements take full advantage of such dominant forms and colours – after all, in their presence, the viewers tend to ignore the linguistic information on the posters.

Many posters from the ARC exhibition use this effect of the psychology of forms, as the following examples illustrate (Schirm, 2009: 177–178). Both posters use elements from Coca-Cola ads. For instance, the shape of the lettering immediately reminds the audience of the product. In Figure 8 the brand name and the slogan are changed in the following way: *Melan-Cola – enjoy the real Hungarian taste*. The humour of the poster is in the distortion of the name *Coca-Cola* into *Melan-Cola* and in the rewriting of the slogan, thus, suggesting that a melancholic worldview is characteristic of Hungarians. In Figure 9, the classic lettering of Coca-Cola appears against an unusual, blue background, advertising the “brand” *Csapvíz*, or tap water. In this instance, the source of humour lies in the promotion



Figure 8. Melancola.



Figure 9. Tap water is the best.

of a freely available “product” to the status of a brand, which is further accentuated by the trademark sign after the name in the poster.

As the above examples illustrate, one of the main strategies of ARC posters is intertextuality, that is, the creative use of other works. Jokes on and distortions of brand names often capitalize on a strong gestalt effect (Sas, 2007a: 117), namely, that posters and brands are perceived holistically. Whether the reference is visual or textual, it nevertheless provides extra meaning and a wider possibility for associations.

Audience involvement

In advertising posters, relation with viewers is getting more and more important, hence simple advertising is being increasingly replaced by advertising with entertainment value. In cultural posters it is exactly the opposite: entertainment is just the surface, with serious information being communicated behind it. However, here, too, the audience is invited to actively participate in the interpretation rather than to just passively perceive. This change in perspective is reflected in the current tendency to replace explicit, direct, rationally based advertising messages with implicit and emotional billboard posters that require thinking and employ linguistic play (for more details on this, see Schirm, 2010b). ARC posters are all like this: the audience have to work to get at the real message, with their thinking and interpretation often aided by the title of the poster. In the case of these messages, manipulation happens peripherally, and while interpretation on the part of the audience requires a greater operational effort, the poster’s influence lasts longer due to the *aha*-effect.

The active participation of the audience was expected in the case of those ARC posters which left large blank spaces for the audience to express their opinions by scribbling on those spaces. A case in point is a poster from 2006, campaigning for bringing the Olympic games to Budapest with the following text: *BOM – Fogjunk össze a budapesti olimpiáért! Ha te is támogatod a budapesti olimpia gondolatát, ird alá a plakátot!* – “Budapest Olympic Movement – Let’s join forces for

the Budapest Olympics! Sign the poster if you are for it.” The signatures and opinions added to the poster illustrated nicely that, with audience participation, even billboard posters can become interactive despite their size and stationary position.

In an unexpected twist, even to the creators of posters, some works received uninvited feedback from the audience or fellow poster creators. In the last days of the 2008 ARC exhibition, mysterious emoticons appeared on some posters after an unknown artist added smileys to them. The theme of the exhibition was the pursuit of happiness, and emoticons made posters with sad messages happy, and happy posters sad, becoming perfect sources of humour, since they connected incompatible and irreconcilable emotions. The accepted and well-known meaning and emotional content of the emoticons added something extra to the message of the given poster. By using and rewriting existing works, ARC posters provide feedback to and influence advertising posters and the image of the mocked product or brand. Thanks to the ARC exhibition, the audience can also become creators by making their own posters and shaping classic brands according to their own ideas, mocking them or praising them, as they prefer.

From the standpoint of advertising posters, ARC posters can be regarded as distracting and hijacking brands. In marketing communication (Wipperfurth, 2005: 20), these notions are synonymous with consumers’ taking over power, meaning that by rewriting and distorting brand names (e.g. *Milka* → *Miska*, *Heineken* → *Hejneken*) consumers unwittingly take control over the brand and shape it according to their own attitudes. In marketing philosophy, according to Wipperfurth, this produces phenomena of crisis: a surfeit of media products, consumer awareness, and a devaluation and loss of faith in marketing based on image (2005: 16). By a reshaping of advertising posters, the creators of ARC posters, thus, can contribute to the strengthening or weakening of the original advertising effect.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to provide an overview of the linguistic and visual characteristics of ARC posters. This cultural poster-type represents a communicative situation which is very different from that of advertising posters – their aims and messages are different, and the circumstances of their reception are different, too. Despite this, they use the same rhetorical, stylistic and visual means for drawing audience attention as traditional advertising posters.

As the analysed examples have hopefully shown, the primary aim of the ARC poster is not to provide entertainment. Since the poster is a community-based genre, it is also able to give way to the expression of the collective unconscious. In the posters there is a strong current of commentary on society and advertising

which, beyond wanting to surprise and provoke, can also prompt the viewers to reflect on basic issues of concern to them. Poster creators express their opinions through visual and language games as well as intertextual references. By solving the puzzles involved in these, the audience will have a stronger imprinting of the message. And while ARC posters express opinions about, mock, rewrite and parody advertising posters, they also influence them. And by surveying ARC posters we can also get a comprehensive picture of the current strategies of advertising and marketing communication.

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- Figure 9. *Csapvíz az igazi* (“*Tap water is the best*”) – created by Evu Szabó, ARC 2009, <http://www.arcmagazin.hu/content/images/gallery/56>.