Note from Brigitte Jordan on Monday, August 19, 2013

This paper is from a stack of writings from the period before I routinely documented manuscripts on a computer. It is therefore dated, something that is especially apparent in the examples I cite, e.g. wide-spread cigarette smoking. The general insights, however, I believe hold. It was written together with Jo Ann Goldberg, started while we were still graduate students at UC Irvine studying with Harvey Sacks, and completed during our first assistant professor jobs at Michigan State University and Trinity University, respectively.

We gave a number of presentations on the subject. It appeared in The Proceedings of the International Conference on Alcohol and Addictions that I attended in June of 1977 in Dresden, East Germany.
THE PORTRAYAL OF LIQUOR AND LIQUOR CONSUMPTION IN POPULAR MAGAZINE ADVERTISEMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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The Nature of the Phenomenon

In this paper we propose to give an initial characterization of some systematic properties of liquor advertisements in popular U.S. magazines. We view such advertisements as "folk productions," on a par with television episodes, pre-historic cave paintings, suburban architecture, and the like. By labeling advertisements "folk productions" we mean to remind ourselves that such materials are interestingly analyzable as productions of the common culture. That is to say, they depend for their construction as well as their readability on social and cultural understandings which are shared by their manufacturers and viewers by virtue of the fact that they inhabit a common-sensical social world. We call these shared understandings "typifications." Our work consists of specifying the iconographic devices by which such typifications are portrayed in advertisements.

For instance: the common culture has a typification "married couple" in the sense that competent members of the society can agree on how to recognize a married couple and how to act appropriately vis-à-vis such a couple. The typification is a product of information or knowledge that members have gained by virtue of experience in a social world. If you ask them, they might tell you that a married couple consists of a man and a woman who have a continuing sexual relationship with each other, who live together, who have rights to inheritance from each other, who can speak in the name of the other, who breakfast together, and the like. Note that the couple as we experience it in the real world is not what is represented in ads. For example, we know it is possible for a 20-year-old woman to marry a 50-year-old man or for members of a couple to be mismatched in their dress or facial expression. In the
real world we allow for such discrepancies and variations. In advertisements we read two individuals who are in fact actors as a married couple via iconographic devices which call up for us the common culture's typification "married couple."

The iconographically represented married couple routinely exhibits the following characteristics: 1) they are a cross-sex pair, 2) they are age matched with the male slightly older than the female, 3) they are matched in socio-economic status, 4) they are jointly engaged in an activity, 5) they are positioned in intimate physical co-presence (i.e. either touching, just having touched, or about to touch), 6) they are matched in terms of clothing and facial expression, 7) they exhibit a wedding band (see ads 1 and 2). However, what is most important to realize is that these typifications are recognizable by virtue of their having a real-world correspondence.

Note that the visual nature of the medium in which ads appear constrains how the couple form is to be indicated. The items selected to mark a twosome as a couple are only those which can be iconographically represented such that their relationship can be visually apprehended. Were another medium employed such as radio, a range of other devices would be used such as the intonation of intimacy, one member speaking for the unit, couple-specific terms of address and endearment, and the like, to signal that the people you hear talking to one another form a couple.

It is important to note that advertisements as "folk productions" carry information which we, by virtue of being competent members of this society, are able to "read." What we are witness to in these ads is the common culture's representation of its own configuration and salient distinctions, i.e., normative culture. Our task here as analysts is to specify the components of the "language" of advertising, that is, to identify the iconographic devices by which cultural typifications are portrayed. This task is in some way equivalent to the analysis of spoken language. We are all competent members of a speech community without
being able to cite the rules we follow when we produce talk that is sensible to others and when we make sense of the talk that others produce for us. The intelligible production and competent reading of advertisements depend on a similar set of rules. 1

Our approach is different from, though in some way complementary to, the psychological-perceptual analysis of advertisements. In the latter case, the analyst's interests are politicized, that is to say, they are directed towards the question of exploitation ("subliminal seduction") of the viewer by the advertiser. Our own interests cover a larger domain in which we see advertising as a major genre of visual representation in contemporary culture.

In our study of the language of advertising we are working from a database of about 9,000 advertisements which have appeared in popular U.S. magazines such as Reader's Digest, Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan, Playboy, Newsweek, The New Yorker, Ebony, and the like. Most of them are contemporary. A very few go back twenty years. Approximately 500 of these ads portray liquor and liquor consumption. It is this particular subset that the present analysis is concerned with.

Our choice of liquor advertisements has no particular theoretical basis. For our purposes we could have just as well selected cigarette adds, diamond ads, medical ads, perfume ads, or any other subset adequately represented in our data base. 2 What is not arbitrary, however, is the selection of a product-oriented sample. Clearly, a product is made culturally sensible or marketable by embedding it into a pre-established network of common culture understandings, issues, distinctions, 

1. In a next paper we will specify the relevant analytic distinctions by which our analysis is conducted, the order of social information visual representations both preserve and transmit, and the culturally learned rules by which they are read.

2. We will deal with these others in subsequent papers.
and the like. As we shall see, the nature of the product, and specifically the problems which the product encounters in its social use-environment, powerfully constrain the selection of scenes in which the product is portrayed.

The problematic aspects of the product constitute an issue which all types of advertisements have to confront. Problems may be inherent in the nature of the product, such as insignificant size (which is a trouble for diamonds), or invisibility of product-in-use (which is a problem for perfume). Most significantly, however, this issue emerges for advertisements in cultural notions about the possible interactional, socially visible troubles the product's purchase and use may generate. The task, then, is to disassociate the product from its troubles, so that competent members of the society will not find themselves in a position to read the product's presence diagnostically as indicating dysfunctional social behavior. Our data indicate that advertisements quite generally are sensitive to this issue of product-generated impairment of social competence. This is not the place for an exhaustive treatment of the rule-generating power of this constraint. We merely want to indicate the generality of the phenomenon by citing some examples from non-liquor advertising.

Consider the problems which cigarettes face in their normal use-environment. The smoker's reach for the cigarette is diagnostically readable as indicative of anxiety about a task to be done, such as making an important phone call, taking the floor at a meeting, beginning the day's work, and the like. The necessity to disassociate the cigarette from the tension which occasions its use in the real world, forms a constraint which bars cigarettes from portrayal in such pre-event anxiety scenes. As a matter of fact, the problem has a formal solution: if anxiety states are portrayed at all, the cigarette is placed after the event.

Let us point to just one more of the product-specific problems of cigarettes. In the United States today, in contrast to some years ago, a public, interactionally
available smoker leaves himself open to the charge of irresponsibility because he ignores the well-known health hazards of cigarette smoking. We get two solutions to this problem. First, we find that the cancer-producing agent, the carcinogenic smoke, never appears in advertisements portraying smoking. Second, we find that "the defiant single" appears in ads as the preferred host for the cigarette.

Within a socio-economic system that requires for its proper functioning sobriety, punctuality, stability and dependability, an issue to which advertisements for liquor must be alert are the notions that exist in the common culture about the dangerous aspects of liquor consumption. These notions are epitomized in the typification of the problem drinker. Note that we are here not concerned with the many real troubles of the alcoholic, but only with those which are socially visible and diagnostically readable through an assessment of the drinker's dysfunction within his social environment. Thus, the state of the alcoholic's liver, or brain damage to her future offspring, are not of concern to advertising. The typified problems of the alcoholic which advertising addresses are primarily three: the problem of habituation and addiction, the problem of excess, and the problem of drinking on socially inappropriate occasions, epitomized by the solitary drinker. The major resource available to advertising for dealing with these problems is the Naturalistic Social Scene. We turn now to a consideration of some of its properties.

The Naturalistic Social Scene

By the term Naturalistic Social Scene we refer to representations of totally commonplace, mundane, run-of-the-mill activities in which ordinary people engage in the course of their lives. 3 Commonly, the Natural-

3. There is another large category of advertisements in which no people appear. We exclude those from analysis for the present in so far as they require separate treatment.
istic Social Scene is represented as a "candid" or "unposed" snapshot of people engaged in some quite ordinary activity. Represented are not only everyday scenes but also the routine special occasions which appear in the normal course of ordinary lives. Represented are such common social units, activities and settings as a couple having a picnic in the park or a couple discussing the events of the evening after a dinner party (see ads 1-6).

For now, we leave only for mention a very puzzling observation: excluded from representation are scenes of people drinking at bars, excluded from representation are scenes of male companions drinking together on the weekend, excluded from representation are scenes of people drinking alone. The scenes in which drinking occurs in liquor ads transform liquor consumption from its actual occasions of use into constructed and artificial occasions of use. These are occasions that do in fact occur, but they are some of the weakest occasions of occurrence that this society has. The transformation is enormously systematic in liquor ads.

The Naturalistic Social Scene is represented as a photographic report which is, in itself, an agent in producing the appearance of real-life-caught-in-a-glance. In contrast to cartoons and paintings, the pre-existence, the original integrity, the realness of the ads' scenes are never brought into question. Such scenes are standardly read by viewers as representations of life as they know it and could have themselves seen were they but present. The credibility lent to these scenes via this reporting agent is of such great magnitude that, for example, what the viewer's eye may witness as blur is adjusted for so as to preserve what he takes to have been really represented in its original form. So, the medium of the report, the photograph, as well as the subject of the report, the Naturalistic Social Scene, contribute to the credibility of the ad's representation.
A principal fact to know about the Naturalistic Social Scene is that it is not natural. It is not a simple re-presentation of what it purports to be. Consider, for example, the Smirnoff ad showing a post dinner party scene (ad 2). We find a young couple in an intimate moment as they talk over the events of the evening. There is no reason to believe that the photograph was taken late at night which is the time we read for the ad. There is also no reason to believe that there was in fact a dinner party. Furthermore, it is not clear that the living room we see is this couple's living room. What is worse, there is probably no living room at all but merely a collection of artifacts which call up a living room. As a matter of fact, the couple is not a couple, but two actors who have been hired for the day.

To say that the Naturalistic Social Scene is itself not natural is not to mark this genre of representation as deficient. It is not to complain that advertisers don't come to terms with the real world. Rather, our aim is to make most strongly the point that the Naturalistic Social Scene is a construction. Once we apprehend its constructed character we are free to ask: why this construction?

The Portrayal of Liquor and Its Product-Specific Problems

We now turn to a discussion of those features of the Naturalistic Social Scene which address themselves to the problems of the product and their iconographic solutions. Recall that we have identified three product-specific problems for liquor: habituation and addiction, excessive drinking, and drinking on socially inappropriate occasions.

We first address the question of habituation and addiction. Our aim is to suggest some of the ways in which the implication of the problem of habituation is specifically disattended in ads portraying liquor consumption. The way in which this is so turns on consideration of the types of settings in which liquor consumption is routinely depicted in ads.
It is overwhelmingly the case that liquor consumption is portrayed as occurring in three types of settings. First, liquor is most frequently shown as being consumed in the course of a weekend activity, as represented by the following: a couple enjoying the day on their yacht (ad 3), a couple enjoying an outing at the beach (ads 5 and 12), a couple playing golf (ad 8), a couple relaxing in their backyard (ads 7 and 14), and the like. In all these scenes the liquor is presented as an accompaniment to an activity which is marked as occurring on the weekend. Second, liquor is portrayed as a proper consumable for some standardly recognizable special occasion. For example, the liquor is shown as an accompaniment to a dinner party (ad 9), a celebration of a special occasion (ad 18), a gathering at the home of friends (ads 16 and 17), and the like. Third, liquor is portrayed as a proper consumable in culturally marked special occasions. For example, the liquor is presented as a culturally appropriate gift for Christmas and Father's Day (ads 19 and 20).

All of these are occasions that, though quite ordinary, are not those that appear on a daily, routine, patterned basis. Conspicuous by their absence from portrayal are the known occasions of routine consumption. By this we refer to the business man's daily liquid lunch, the routine after-work drink at the neighborhood bar, the housewife's "cooking-sherry," the daily pre-dinner martinis, and the like. Such types of drinking, in contrast to the scenes which liquor ads portray, are marked as being habitual in character by virtue of the daily recurrence of the occasion of consumption. The drink of ads is never positioned in an environment for which our cultural knowledge would produce the prediction that we would expect to find the same individuals there again the next day. That is, the drink is never positioned in an environment which would be culturally recognizable as suggesting the possibility of routine, predictable, inevitable consumption, i.e., habituation and addiction.

In reference to the problem of excess consider the following: a standard way of introducing the liquor
into the scene is via a bottle and a glass. Frequently, the bottle is portrayed as emptied by approximately one drink and its adjacent glass is shown as filled by approximately that amount. (See ad 21.) Our understanding of the relationship between the bottle and the glass draws on a rule which is not specific to liquor ads but holds for the reading of ads in general. It says: interpret locally, i.e., by reference to what is portrayed in the ad. The "read locally" rule tells us that this is the bottle from which this particular drink was removed on this particular occasion. Furthermore, since there are no other empty bottles in the scene and the bottle we see is minus only one drink, we read the drink as the single fresh drink to be consumed on the occasion portrayed. The bottle-minus-one drink is a recurrent construction which appears natural in a one-or two-glass ecology.

The relevance of this construction in reference to the implication of excessive drinking is suggested by a curious observation: even in scenes where a battery of filled glasses appear, the amount of liquor removed from the bottle remains equivalent to a single drink. (See ads 22 and 23.) The way in which the construction only-a-single-drink-removed speaks to an avoidance of the implication of excessive drinking becomes very clear when we consider a possible alternative version of the tableau and how it would be interpreted by reference to the "read locally" rule. The appearance of a bottle which is, for example, half filled would become readable as a "during" scene in which half the liquor has already been consumed and in which more will be consumed on this occasion, i.e., the portrayal of ongoing drinking.

We now see the auspices under which the preference for representation of a bottle-minus-one-drink is expressed. The specific and massive dispreference to show the bottle emptied by any sizable quantity turns on the ad producer's avoidance of the implication of excessive drinking and thereby of the known consequent troubles such drinking routinely engenders.
We have left for last consideration one of the most massively apparent empirical findings of our investigation, namely: it is overwhelmingly the case that the social unit portrayed as the liquor consumer is the couple. (See ads 1 thru 15.) As we shall see, it is by placement of the drink in the environment of the couple that one of the major problems of the product is not only elegantly suppressed but specifically transformed into a culturally meaningful asset. We shall refer to this product's asset as the "promise of the drink."

We first indicate the way in which the portrayal of liquor in the environment of the couple provides a major solution to one problem of this product's portrayal. The nature of the problem lies in part in what we know to be the case about drinking as it actually occurs in this culture. That is, much drinking is done in isolation, by the solitary drinker. In so far as the solitary drinker stands as the culturally salient typification of the "problem of alcoholism," i.e., where drinking is readable as an activity in its own right, the positioning of the drink in the environment of the couple transforms the character of the drink into a second order component of an otherwise characterizable social enterprise. That is, in the environment of the couple, the drink is presented as the innocuous accompaniment to a specifically innocent primary activity, such as having a picnic, taking a walk, relaxing together, and the like.

We mention but one example from our data corpus. In the Smirnoff "picnic" (ad 1) we see a happy and amused couple whose attention is directed not to the drinks in their environment but to the preparation of their kite for flying. The scene so constructed informs us that having the drink is only one of a range of activities and consumables over the course of the larger activity, picnicking, in which they will take pleasure. For many such ads, it is not uncommon that one must carefully search the scene to even discover the presence of the drink (ads 2 and 10); often we are presented with scenes in which the drink is totally absent (ads 26, 27, and 29). The incidental
role of the drink in the scene may strike one as odd considering that the job of the ad is to sell the product. However, it is by placement of the drink in such a subsidiary position in the environment of the couple that the scene is read as a normal, unproblematic social enterprise.

Not only is the couple a vehicle for "socializing" the drink but it is as well a deeper order solution to the implication of socially unregulated drinking. That is, the meaning of the drink when consumed in isolation and when consumed in the environment of the couple is transformed and must be understood as one of a range of activities whose meaning is similarly altered. Otherwise put, in the environment of the couple, the presence of each for the other transforms the way in which each behaves and understands the behavior of the other. The transformation is social in origin. Its nature requires elaboration.

Many behaviors in which we may engage alone such as yawning noisily or walking about unclothed, to name but two, when done in the presence of another are transformed into socially meaningful events. So, to the ears of the other, the noisy yawn may be heard as a rude gesture or an expression of boredom, and to the eyes of the other the bared body may be perceived as a perhaps immodest or seductive display. The drink when consumed in the presence of the other is similarly transformed such that an other as a potential witness to heavy consumption may engage in negative assessments of the heavy consumer which may have direct and negative consequences for the relationship. That is, heavy drinking may become a source of arguments, tensions, anxieties, and the like. The power of the couple for this product's problem is derived from the presence of the other as a monitor of such socially visible excessive consumption. Portrayal of a single other in the consumption scene may be read as an agent of consumption control, a built-in constraint on a negative reading of the scene.
Given that the minimal requirement for turning the drink into a social enterprise is two, we ask why the pair invoked in such ads is not a random selection from possible pairs but is overwhelmingly the mated or mateable couple. Why the couple, when we know that much drinking in the real world is done in the company of friends, work companions, neighbors, kin relations, and even strangers. The privileged position of the couple is made intelligible by reference to the legitimacy of this unit in this culture, a matter to which we shall now turn.

By legitimacy, we mean that this social unit, in contrast to other possible pairings, can normatively, routinely, regularly occupy the greatest variety of social settings, be it a trip to the woods (ad 6), a romantic moment alone together (ad 13), or a last minute Christmas gift wrapping (ad 10). Clearly, it is through the prominence of the couple as a viable social unit that advertisers may position the drink in the widest range of social environments as well as broaden the cultural domain in which drinking is marked as a legitimate, unproblematic enterprise.

Not only does the couple motif allow the positioning of the drink in the widest range of social environments but it is as well a resource for portrayal of the culturally salient "promise of the drink." That is, advertisers draw on activities and meanings that we in this culture associate with and assign to the intoxicated state. Specifically, in the environment of the couple, the drink is repeatedly represented as the occasion for either intimate co-presence or the erotic experience. (See ads 1 to 15, 24 and 25). Clearly, in this culture, a range of other activities are associated with and assigned to the intoxicated state, so that intoxication stands as the "explanation" for the fistfight or the automobile accident as well as the apologetic excuse for the vicious argument. (We leave only for mention the vastly different meaning assigned to drinking in other cultures where the drink is the vehicle to a religious experience.) Obviously, not all such portrayable scenes are represented in our data corpus. Rather, advertisers select two salient and positive meanings and activities
that we in this culture associate with and assign to the intoxicated state: intimate physical co-presence and the erotic experience.

The saliency of the couple motif is of such magnitude that the few representations of solitary females in the environment of the drink are constructed with reference to this normative form. That is, in such instances the woman is represented as inviting a man into the scene, so as to rectify her condition as the deficient half of the normative couple. (See ads 24 and 25). Here, the drink is proposed as the interactional object through which the couple state is achievable. It is interesting to note that solitary male drinkers are not similarly represented. Where the female requires a complementary male, the male does not, i.e., the male is not seen as part of an incomplete couple but can appear in his own right. Clearly, this non-complementarity of representation speaks to this culture's differential conceptions of males and females. Furthermore, portrayals of solitary male drinkers routinely employ two themes which disallow interpretation of product-related dysfunction: the drink is displayed as the reward either for demonstrated functionality in a sports activity or for success in financial matters. (See ads 26, 27, 28 and 29).

In conclusion, we have presented an initial report of an ongoing investigation into a major genre of visual representation in contemporary culture: advertising in popular magazines. Here, our specific aim has been to show that the product-specific problems of liquor, particularly the problems which the product encounters in its social use-environment, constrain selection and construction of scenes in which liquor is portrayed. Three of this product's problems were isolated: the problem of habituation and addiction, the problem of excessive drinking, and the problem of drinking on socially inappropriate occasions. We have investigated some of the iconographic devices used by advertisers in the construction of consumption scenes, and have indicated how they accomplish their task: the construction is sensitive to the necessity to position the product such that its presence cannot be read diagnostically as indicating drinkers' socially visible dysfunction.