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Art or ad? The influence of genre attribution on the interpretation of images.

Charles Forceville

1 Introduction

The interpretation of texts is guided not merely by text-internal context, but also by expectations existing in the minds of the recipients of those texts. An important element of such expectations consists of the genre to which a text belongs. For instance, "when readers know they are reading a literary text, and this is usually the case, they mobilize specific reading strategies and knowledge about literary discourse which guide their reception process" (Steen 1994: 47). Usually, readers are hardly aware of the extent to which their responses toward a text are triggered by genre because in most cases there is no doubt as to what type of text they are reading, so that no conscious decision with regard to genre-classification needs to be made. Some experimental research has been done concerning the effect of manipulating the genre-classification of a text. In a series of tests Steen (1994: chapter 3) investigated whether there is a privileged relationship between metaphor and literature by presenting a metaphor-ridden text to one group as literary, and to another as journalistic. Zwaan (1993) carried out experiments pertaining, among other things, to the perception and recall of stylistic features, the representation of spatial relationships, and the truth-value of facts in literary versus non-literary texts. The elegance of Steen's and Zwaan's experiments consists in the circumstance that they involve (virtually) no manipulation of the textual passages themselves, but depend exclusively upon the different instructions they gave to their subjects. That is, the stimulus material and the questions asked remained constant across groups of subjects; only the genre-attribution differed. Indeed, both Steen and Zwaan found significant differences pertaining to metaphoricity (Steen), reading speed, recall of verbal formulations, details of contents (Zwaan), depending on whether subjects believed they were reading a literary or a non-literary text.

Texts, of course, need not be of a verbal, or exclusively verbal, nature. Contemporary society is flooded with pictorial and semi-pictorial "texts," in the form of newspaper photographs, book illustrations, films, video clips and games, internet home pages, advertisements, and numerous other types. As with verbal texts, there is usually little doubt about the genre to which a (semi)pictorial text belongs. In most situations the text in combination with its text-immanent and situational context will provide sufficient clues for an audience to realize what text genre it is facing, and hence the audience will automatically call upon certain, genre-specific, interpretation strategies. A pictorial text, however, does not always come with unequivocal clues as to its genre-classification. Occasionally confusion may arise, so that an audience may be led to call upon the "wrong" kind of interpretation strategies, namely those
associated with another genre. Some advertisements, for instance, deliberately try to hide their commercial nature. Thus, in so-called advertorials advertisers trick their audience into mistaking an ad for an independent, journalistic analysis of a product (see Myers 1983), thus creating different expectations about the truth claims embodied in the text. Moreover, pictorial texts, like their verbal counterparts,\(^1\) may shift from one genre to another in the course of time. Scholz (1994) is a persuasive case study of how Leonardo da Vinci's famous depiction of the well-proportioned human body ("the figure with the outstretched arms in the square/ circle") changed its meanings in the course of history depending on its various recontextualizations in different types of text genres.

Texts may not only be naturally or deliberately recontextualized from one genre into another, they may also incorporate, text-internally, features associated with other genres, thereby destabilizing the expectations triggered by a text solidly embedded in one specific text-genre. Among the features of postmodernist literature and art are the incorporation of entire non-artistic text-types, the borrowing of stylistic characteristics associated with these text-types, and the blurring between genre boundaries in general. This boundary blurring is a salient feature of what is commonly referred to as the contemporary "crisis of representation": "a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense" (Bertens 1995: 11; see also Hutcheon 1989). This uncertainty is further compounded by the fact that advances in technology are rapidly facilitating the manipulation of pictures, thereby undermining the immutability of their "text"-internal relationships as well as expanding opportunities for the recontextualization of pictures in different genres. In short, pictorial representations in contemporary society are by no means robustly tied to a specific genre, and are increasingly subject to contextualization in another genre than the one in which they originally belonged. It is to be expected, therefore, that "genre" will become an increasingly important variable in the interpretation of pictorial meaning.

In view of such developments, it makes sense to investigate the effects genre-attribution has on the interpretation of pictorial texts. This paper reports a highly exploratory experiment in which a pictorial text is presented under the banner of two different genres, those of art and advertising, to two groups of subjects. While I will attempt to show that the subjects' responses confirm the hypothesis that genre-attribution crucially co-determines interpretation, the experiment's scope and scale does not allow for more than provisional conclusions. In order to facilitate further research, I will therefore amply reflect on methodological matters and make suggestions about issues still awaiting resolution.

### 2 Background

In Forceville (1995) I reported an experiment on the interpretation of the verbo-pictorial metaphors purportedly inhering in three IBM billboards.\(^2\) Each of the billboards featured a picture with a salient blue-and-white object, while underneath it the acronym IBM was depicted in the same blue-and-white pattern, giving rise, it was claimed, to the metaphor IBM IS A BLUE-

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1. John Donne's sermons, for instance, are nowadays read as literature rather than as religious admonishments.

2. An extended version of this article appeared as Chapter 7 in Forceville (1996).
AND-WHITE OBJECT. Among the interpretations volunteered, the most striking came from a Chinese lady, who described one of the billboards, depicting a beacon in a stormy sea (see Figure B for a black and white photograph of the pictorial part of the original billboard), as follows: "It is a sailing boat, it seems to me there is much wind & storm at this moment while the sailing boat is in water," and thought that "the advertiser want[ed] to communicate through this that people should dare to challenge the wild nature" (Forceville 1996: 192). It seems probable that her interpretation, which by Western standards is as bizarre as it is poetic, was due to a misunderstanding of what purpose a billboard is supposed to serve -- namely, commercially promoting a product or service to potential customers. Put differently, she seemed to lack knowledge of the conventions pertaining to the genre of (Western) advertising. Her responses triggered the idea for the follow-up experiment described here. The experiment's aim was to identify tendencies that in turn can lead to more specific hypotheses to be tested under more rigorous conditions. The general expectation to be explored was that instructing two groups of subjects differently about the genre of the pictures they were about to see would influence their interpretations. More specifically, it was expected that subjects who were under the impression that they were going to be exposed to billboards would, consciously or subconsciously, be guided by the awareness that the picture was used to help sell a product, while subjects who thought they would be seeing artistic photographs anticipated something different, let us say, with Horace, to be delighted, instructed, and moved.

This expected difference can be narrowed down in the spirit of Siegfried Schmidt's characterization of the literary system as ruled by two macro-conventions: the "esthetic" and the "polyvalence convention." The aesthetic convention predicts, among other things, that actors in literary systems must be willing and able (a) "to extend their action potential (or the action potential of other participants in the literary system) beyond the usual criteria of true/false or useful/useless, and to orient themselves towards expectations, norms, and criteria which are deemed esthetically relevant in the respective literary system or subsystem" and (b) "to designate communicative actions intended as literary by appropriate signals during production, and to follow such signals during reception" (1991: 416-17). The esthetic convention contrasts with the fact convention. The polyvalence convention predicts, among other things, that actors in a literary system do not feel bound by the monovalence convention. Thus, the polyvalence convention encourages readers to produce plural interpretations of a literary text. Moreover, governed by the polyvalence condition, "text receivers evaluate the different cognitive, emotive, and moral reading results obtained at different levels of reception in terms of their needs, abilities, intentions, and motivations, although the reasons behind these evaluations may differ in function of the participants and situations" (1991: 417-18). Schmidt goes on to argue that "these macro-conventions establish the most basic distinguishing feature (or communication code) of

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3 "Fact convention: It is common knowledge in our society that communicative objects, especially texts, should permit reference to the world model accepted in that society, such that people can decide if the assertions conveyed by the text are true and what their practical relevance is" (Schmidt 1991: 417, note 2).

4 "Monovalence convention: It is common knowledge in our society that (a) text producers are expected to shape their texts in such a way that different people at different times can assign them one and the same reading, and (b) text receivers are expected to strive for the assignment of a single reading to the texts" (Schmidt 1991: 417, note 3).
the literary system in terms of a basic dichotomy between literary and non-literary activities" and adds that "'literary' means whatever actors believe it to mean according to their norms, values, needs, and knowledge" (ibid.: 418).

In the following, I will assume that this basic distinction between literary and non-literary activities can be extended to the more general one between artistic and non-artistic activities. Adapted to the materials at hand, this generates the expectations that subjects in the "art" condition, unlike the subjects in the "billboard" condition, will
-- not be concerned with criteria of usefulness/uselessness, and instead be guided by "expectations, norms, and criteria which are deemed esthetically relevant" (Schmidt 1991: 417);
-- be open to plural readings of the pictorial text;
-- "evaluate the cognitive, emotive, and moral reading results obtained ... in terms of their needs, abilities, intentions, and motivations" (Ibid).

3 Stimulus material and subjects

The ideal stimulus material would have consisted of one or more existing pictorial texts belonging to the genre of "advertising," which would be equally credible as belonging to the genre of "art" -- or the other way round. This ideal, however, could not be achieved. One major problem is that images rarely occur without any accompanying text, and that this accompanying text often plays an important role in co-determining the genre to which the image belongs. While many artistic images (for instance, paintings) are arguably relatively independent of their textual anchoring (usually: their titles -- for the concept of "anchoring," see Barthes 1986/1964; also Franklin 1988; Hoek 1997), it is virtually impossible to find advertising images without any text. At the very minimum, a name or logo normally accompanies the image in order to identify the product and/or brand name the advertisement promotes. And a complete advertisement, that is an image-cum-text, is in most cases immediately recognizable as an advertisement, and would seldom be mistaken for an artistic representation. Hence it proved impossible to find an existing image that could pass with equal credibility as an artistic representation and as an advertisement. Some degree of manipulation of stimulus material was therefore inevitable. In order to minimize the degree of necessary manipulation, the following solution was chosen.

The stimulus material consisted of the same three IBM billboards used for the experiment reported in Forceville (1995, 1996), with one crucial difference: the blue-and-white acronym "IBM" underneath the pictures had been removed. The resulting pictures in each case feature a striking blue-and-white object: a pair of oars, a beacon, and a tuning fork (Figures A, B, and C). Using variants of the materials employed in the earlier experiment had the following reasons. First, the pictures were deemed credible enough to pass as contemporary, "postmodern," artistic photographs. Second, it was easy to remove the IBM logo in a simple and invisible manner, thus stripping the picture of the product's brand name and hence of its self-evident categorization as a billboard. Third, the pictures contained (virtually) no text, so that the resulting interpretations could be said to be triggered by the combination of picture and genre attribution. Fourth, some degree of comparison with the results of my earlier experiment was possible.

The billboards had been part of an extensive and long-running IBM campaign in The

5The black-and-white reproductions used here unfortunately diminish the saliency of these objects.
Netherlands. Since the subjects were of course not to know that the pictures were, in fact, billboards promoting IBM, it was necessary to conduct the experiment outside of The Netherlands. The experiment was carried out in April 1994 with two small groups of art students (11 and 13 students respectively) in the Arts Department of Trinity College, Dublin. None of the participating students had seen the pictures before. Most of the students were Irish, in their early twenties, and female, but there were some non-Irish and mature students as well. In each group there were two male participants. Neither age, nor gender, nor nationality were taken into account in the interpretations of the responses.

4 Procedure

The aim of the experiment was to present one group of subjects with the pictures in such a manner as to make them believe that these pictures belonged to the genre of advertising, and present the other group of subjects with the same pictures in such a manner as to make them believe that the pictures belonged to the genre of art, and to extract responses from them in such a manner that it would be possible to draw some conclusions about the extent to which the two groups’ interpretations and responses were influenced by the two different genre-attributions. Both the instructions given to the subjects and the questions the subjects were expected to answer were to meet the following conditions:

1. they should reinforce the genre-categorizations (art and advertising, respectively);
2. they should trigger responses;
3. they should influence the subjects as little as possible beyond the considerations governing (1) and (2).

Hence the following procedure was followed. The 13 subjects in Group I (the "art" subjects) were given a questionnaire in which they were told on the first page that they were about to be shown three slides featuring artistic photographs (labelled "A," "B" and "C") by the young and unknown Dutch artist Peer Zandstra,6. They were informed that they would be shown photograph A and be given two minutes to answer (in writing) question 1; then they would be shown photograph B and be given 2 minutes to answer (the same) question 1; then they would be shown photograph C and be given two minutes to answer, again, question 1. Subsequently they would be shown once more the same three photographs, in the same order, and be given 2 minutes for each photograph to answer question 2. The same procedure would apply to questions 3 and 4. After the subjects had answered question 2 for all three pictures, they were asked to turn back to their answers of question 2 and subdivide their responses by putting brackets around, and prioritizing, specific parts of their answers (the rationale of this latter part will be explained below). The same procedure was followed for question 3. The complete order of questions was thus as follows (the letters A, B, and C referring to the pictures and the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 referring to the questions): A1, B1, C1; A2, B2, C2; bracketing and prioritizing responses to question 2; A3, B3, C3; bracketing and prioritizing responses to question 3; A4, B4, C4. The subjects were informed that they were allowed to return to questions already answered, but

6 The artist-persona Peer Zandstra was invented by me.
should not turn to subsequent questions before being asked to do so. The four questions and the prioritizing tasks were the following:

Question 1: "Describe in your own words photographs A, B, and C."

Question 2: "Ignore what the artist may have wanted to communicate by photographs A, B, and C, and describe the personal feelings and associations each of the photographs evokes in you. Please answer as completely as possible." After having answered question 2 for all three photographs, the subjects were asked to put square brackets around each feeling/association they had mentioned in response to question 2 and prioritize the bracketed associations in terms of importance by giving them a number.

Question 3: "What do you think the artist has wanted to communicate by each of the photographs A, B, and C? Please answer as completely as possible." Again, after having answered question 3 for all three photographs, the subjects were asked to put square brackets around each feeling/association they had mentioned in response to question 3 and prioritize the bracketed associations in terms of importance by giving them a number.

Question 4: "What proof or evidence do you find in each of the photographs A, B, and C to support your ideas about what the artist has wanted to communicate?"

After answering question 4, the subjects were asked to provide, again in writing, personal information relating to gender and age, and they were given the opportunity to write down any other remarks they wished to make.

The 11 subjects in Group II (the "billboard" subjects) were given a questionnaire in which they were told on the first page that they would be shown three slides of Dutch advertising billboards. The rest of the procedure was similar to that for Group I, except that in Group II the word "photograph" was consistently replaced by the word "billboard," and the word "artist" by the word "advertiser." These changes were made to ensure that the subjects in Group II believed that the pictures they saw belonged to the genre of advertising. Recall that while the pictures were indeed, in fact, billboards, the brand name underneath them ("IBM") had been removed, so that the subjects did not know which product was promoted in the billboards.

Subjects' responses were interpreted by the author. Since the questions were open ones, interpreting the responses necessarily involved a degree of subjectivity, and hence some of the interpretations cannot but be speculative. Furthermore, no exhaustive analysis of the written protocols was attempted; the responses to question 4, for instance, were used to support tendencies identified rather than investigated in their own right.

5 Responses to question 1

One notable difference was identified between the two groups' responses to question 1 ("Describe the picture"): the degree to which attention was drawn to the blue-and-white objects in the three pictures. More specifically, whereas in the case of the OARS picture (Figure A) all

7 The questions were slight variants of the ones used in Forceville (1995, 1996), and were ultimately derived from an experiment by Mick and Politi (1989). For other undertakings to elicit associations in response to images see Camargo (1987) and Petterson (1995). *Many testable hypotheses about the ways pictures communicate can be derived from ideas in Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), which is discussed in Forceville (forthcoming).
"billboard" subjects\(^8\) spontaneously mentioned the stripes and/or colours of the oars, only 8 of the 13 "art" subjects did so. The other 5 simply did not use the word "oars" (or one of its equivalents) at all. In the case of the BEACON picture (Figure B), all billboard subjects except one referred to the colours and/or stripes of the beacon; the art subjects, while all mentioning the beacon as such, in only seven cases referred to the colours/stripes of the beacon. Five of the six not mentioning the colours or stripes had also not mentioned the stripes/colours of the oars in Figure A. In the case of the TUNING FORK picture the billboard subjects again all mentioned the colours and/or stripes of the tuning fork. This time, all but one of the art subjects, too, commented upon the patterned tuning fork.

Of course the fact that a subject fails to mention the blue-and-white object does not necessarily mean that she/he did not perceive it. A subject may have spotted the blue-and-whiteness of the object, but not have considered it worth drawing attention to in responding to the request to describe the picture. But this in itself would be significant enough. I thus suggest that while, by and large, all billboard subjects immediately realized the importance of the foregrounded blue-and-white object, the importance of this foregrounding is less instantly obvious to the art subjects.

Several explanations, which need not exclude one another, come to mind to account for the fact that the art subjects virtually all comment on the blue-and-white object in Figure C, while considerably fewer do so in Figure A and Figure B: the tuning fork, and its colours, can be said to be more unnatural (and hence more foregrounded) in Figure C than the oars are in Figure A and the beacon in Figure B; or the art subjects have, by the time they are confronted with Figure C, perceived (or realized the importance of) the repeatedly foregrounded blue-and-white object. Finally, given that the subjects are art students, they would perhaps be more inclined to focus on an arts-related object such as a tuning fork than on a pair of oars or a beacon. To obtain more insight into what may account for the difference, the experiment would have to be repeated with the billboards being presented in a different order.

6 Responses to questions 2 and 3: numbers

Counting the number of bracketed passages in the responses to question 2, which pertained to subjects' personal feelings/associations, yields an average of just over 2 associations in the art condition, and almost 3 associations in the billboard condition -- that is, almost 50% more. Question 3, which pertained to the inferred intentions of the maker of the picture, yields a similar result: an average of almost 1.6 associations in the art condition, and an average of precisely 2.6 associations in the billboard condition -- that is, 60% more (See Table 1).\(^9\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oars (A)</th>
<th>Beacon (B)</th>
<th>Tuning fork (C)</th>
<th>AVERAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

\(^8\) One of the 11 billboard participants came in late and hence did not answer question 1. Note that the responses to Figure A/ question 1 may be particularly significant (in both conditions) inasmuch as this constituted the very first exposure to the stimulus material in the experiment.

\(^9\) If no brackets were used at all, a response was counted as containing one association.
Table 1. Average number of associations in the AD and ART conditions triggered by the questions concerning subjects' personal associations (Q2) and the associations presumably intended by the pictures' maker (Q3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>AD (Q2)</th>
<th>ART (Q2)</th>
<th>AD (Q3)</th>
<th>ART (Q3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal ass.</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended ass.</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 Responses to questions 2 and 3: discussion of numbers

The greater number of responses triggered by the "billboards" as opposed to the "artistic photographs" in response to the question concerning the maker's intended associations (question 3) does not seem to corroborate the expectation following from Schmidt's polyvalence convention, which predicts that literary (here: artistic) texts encourage plural readings, while non-literary (here: non-artistic) texts encourage monovalent ones.

A comparison of the responses in the billboard and the art conditions with respect to question 2, which sought to elicit subjects' personal associations, yields the same picture. Here, too, the billboards evoke more associations than the artistic photographs. Again, that is, the non-artistic texts seem to evoke more polyvalence than the artistic ones. This finding strikes me as more surprising than the same finding for question 3. In question 2, after all, subjects were invited to express their personal associations, without needing to worry about the maker's intentions. The only difference between the groups is what they have been told about the genre of the images. If the numbers are meaningful, this would entail that even when people are explicitly asked to ignore the intentions of the maker of an image, and are free to supply their own associations, they cannot help but be influenced by the genre to which an image belongs.

Another angle on the data is to compare the overall responses to questions 2 and 3, irrespective of the condition. One would expect that the complete freedom to associate in question 2 should result in consistently higher numbers than the restriction imposed by question 3, both in the art and the billboard conditions. This indeed turns out to be the case -- with one exception: in the case of the "billboard" BEACON (Figure B), the "intended associations" category as a matter of fact yields a slightly higher number (2.63) than the "personal associations" category (2.54). I have no satisfactory explanation for the fact that the notion of intended meanings associated with this specific billboard apparently "jogs" the subjects' imagination more than the opportunity to associate without any constraint.

About the priorizations requested of subjects after they had answered questions 2 and 3 the following observation can be made. Whenever a subject mentioned more than one association, and moreover graded these associations differently, a subject did not necessarily follow the standard order 1, 2, 3 etc. That is, in retrospectively prioritizing his/her associations, a subject could decide that (an) association(s) s/he had written later was more important than (an) association(s) recorded earlier. If this was the case, this meant that the order in which subjects had recorded their associations -- that is, presumably the order in which these associations had
occurred to them -- did not (completely) match the importance the subjects wanted to attach to these associations after a little reflection.

The art subjects responding to question 2, in 9 out of 39 opportunities (i.e., 13 subjects x 3 artistic photographs) deviated from the standard order; and responding to question 3 they did so in 5 out of 39 opportunities. The billboard subjects responding to question 2 in 17 out of 33 opportunities (i.e., 11 subjects x 3 billboards) deviated from the standard order; and responding to question 3 they did so in 13 out of 33 opportunities. Since far more art subjects recorded only a single association (that is, used either no brackets or only one pair of brackets, thus by definition preventing themselves from deviating from a standard order) than did the billboard subjects, I will not hazard any inter-condition comparisons. I want to make two observations:

(1) question 3 yields more deviations than question 2 in both conditions. This makes sense inasmuch as in question 2 subjects need only worry about their own responses and in question 3 they have to take the maker's intentions into account; the subjects probably realize that their spontaneous responses require, upon reflection, some readjustment in the light of what the makers may have intended; 

(2) it is interesting in itself that there are quite a number of deviations from the standard order. *This is pertinent since it nuances a tenet of Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory. Let me briefly elaborate on this. In order to explain how the addressee of a message manages to select that message's most relevant interpretation from a theoretically infinite number of interpretations, Sperber and Wilson claim that the addressee automatically decides on the basis of the following routine: "it is the first interpretation to occur to the addressee that is the one the communicator intended to convey" (1986: 168-69), a claim reaffirmed in Sperber and Wilson (1995: 257). Now Sperber and Wilson distinguish between "strong" and "weak" communication, which they see as a scalar, not a polar distinction. They elucidate:

   In the case of strong communication, the communicator can have fairly precise expectations about some of the thoughts that the audience will actually entertain. With weaker forms of communication, the communicator can merely expect to stir the thoughts of the audience in a certain direction. Often, in human interaction, weak communication is found sufficient or even preferable to the stronger forms (1986: 60).

As we saw, the prioritizing task yielded usually more than one interpretation, and these tend toward the weak communication pole -- which is consistent with Sperber and Wilson's observation that "non-verbal communication tends to be relatively weak" (ibid.). But while Sperber and Wilson allow for the possibility of an utterance having a "a wide array of weak implicatures," and even provide a label for such an array ("poetic effect") (1986: 222), they are silent about the order in which these poetic effects are processed by the audience. Given how strongly Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory depends on the first interpretation to occur to an addressee, it is striking that the present experiment's prioritizing task so often revealed that "on second thought" subjects found a different aspect most important than the one they had initially indicated (the same had been found in the experiment reported in Forceville 1996). This suggests that the assessment of relevance may work out differently for strong than for weak communication. It is perhaps unsurprising that Sperber and Wilson did not give this aspect much thought, since the vast majority of their examples is from face-to-face conversation, in which
there is little time for processing "poetic effects" anyway, let alone for revising their relative importance. But images -- be they artistic representations or billboards -- typically permit extended and/or repeated consideration and hence invite speculation about both the number of weak implicatures invoked and the order in which they are processed.

8 Responses to question 3: contents

In response to the question concerning the inferred intentions of the maker underlying the OARS picture (question 3), no fewer than 9 of the 11 subjects in the billboard condition mentioned as one of the associations presumably to be communicated by the maker the peaceful, relaxed atmosphere evoked by the billboard. Six subjects explicitly guessed at the product advertised. Some samples:

AD6 "Getting away from it all -- relaxing, maybe the colours refer to a brand of coffee or maybe some drink. It's definitely some product to help relaxation."
AD9 "Feeling of tranquillity and peace and relaxation, the advertiser is associating its product with these feelings."

One subject pointed out that the striped oars are what enable one to row and thus get moving and make progress:

AD1 "Whatever the product is which is signified by the stripes, it is a symbolic means by which one may travel and take advantage of the possibilities the lake has to offer."

Only one of the billboard subjects (AD4) suggested the originality of the contrast between the scene and the strikingly coloured oars, and another subject (AD5) mentioned as a presumably intended meaning of the conspicuously striped oars the evocation of curiosity as to what might be going on in this picture. Next, let us consider the responses of the art subjects. What dominates their responses is a concern with contrasts: they believe that the maker (i.e., the artist) has tried to communicate oppositions, tension. The contrasts identified are of varying kinds. One is, unsurprisingly, that between the scene and the oars:

AR7 "I think he wanted to make a picture in a naturalistic style, but also to introduce a point in the picture where you get stuck when you look at it -- the rowing devices."
AR8 "I don't know! It looks like a traditional landscape picture in nice fading light, except for the oars. He might have been trying to point out that this was not just a nice, chocolate-box type picture by introducing the blue and white stripes of the oars, but I don't know what they mean."

I was not able to identify systematic quantitative differences in the responses in both conditions, except that the art subjects more often expressed dislike of the pictures, commenting on their banality and cliched nature, than the billboard subjects.

The code "AD+number" and "AR+number" refer to a subject in the ad and the art condition, respectively.
Another contrast mentioned is that between nature and human presence:

AR4  "Possibly he wished to communicate the whole idea of how modern man, in developing the countryside, should be very careful that any development should complement rather than detract from natural beauty."

AR6  "The artist has intentionally excluded figures from his photographs. The photo suggests that he is showing the importance of nature, in contrast to any human aspects, such as the boat."

And one subject mentions the opposition between the boat and the oars:

AR9  "The artist has wanted to communicate something 'different' about the oars because it is unusual that such an ordinary boat should have such unusual oars."

In all, with respect to Figure A, 9 of the 13 responses in the art condition feature the theme of tension. Twice, subjects venture that the artist has tried to convey a sense of imperfection.

Subjects in the art condition, then, read some sort of tension in the picture. They believe that the artist tried to be original -- even though they are sometimes disappointed by the result. The sense of peace and tranquillity generally perceived by subjects in the billboard condition was mentioned only once in the art condition:

AR12  "He probably wished to suggest peace & seclusion -- a wish to escape the bustle of the urban area."

It may be significant, moreover, that this person also remarks that "perhaps he wished to sell something with the image -- it seems commercial & very impersonal."

A similar difference emerges from the responses to the BEACON image. Six of the 11 billboard subjects connect the beacon with the product, and mention as the feature attributed to it "safety," "reliability," or a synonym. Twice the product is believed to provide guidance or to be a source of hope. In one case the product is supposed to bestow bravery upon its user, and one person thinks the product advertised might be an aftershave -- which gives its user freshness. Another subject's interpretation is that one might come across this product in unexpected surroundings.

Conversely, in the art condition only three of the subjects mention "safe(ty)," "reliability," or one of its synonyms. Again, I suggest that the subjects apparently expect the maker to have aimed for some sort of contrast or tension. Six of them think the maker has focused, in one way or another, on the opposition between man and nature:

AR4  "Perhaps the futility of man's attempt to tame the seas, the oceans."

AR5  "Is he mocking our existence on this planet by making the only thing in the picture that has any connection with mankind a striped object [which] makes the buoy look ridiculous [and hence] ... makes us look ridiculous?"

Three times a comment is included on the photograph's style -- something that was not mentioned at all by the subjects in the billboard condition, for example:
AR1 "Colour patterns and their texture, not reality."
AR5 "Is he just experimenting in pretty stripes?"

Furthermore, it is danger and insecurity, rather than safety and security, which are alluded to in the art responses.

A few words, finally, on the tuning fork image. The presumed intention of the maker mentioned by the billboard subjects condition can be summarised as "the product helps to achieve or create an atmosphere of perfection/refinement/quality/sophistication." Twice the necessity of the product was seen as crucial. Three times the product was presumed to aim at evoking aesthetic feelings. Once more it is striking that, with one exception (again: the distrustful AR12, who had already commented on the "commercial" flavour of the alleged artistic photographs), in the art-condition nobody uses such words as "refinement" or "sophistication." The contrasts perceived this time pertain to those between reality and artificiality; cultural tradition and materialism; suggested and absent sound.

These results can be interpreted as confirming Schmidt's distinction between the aesthetic and the fact convention. The billboard subjects tend to realize that the picture is supposed to have some sort of practical relevance, namely, to sell a product, and hence they are looking for positive associations they think the maker of the billboard wants to claim for that product. The art subjects, by contrast, are not guided by the fact convention; instead they appear to look for elements that make the picture (aesthetically?) interesting, specifically by finding "contrasts." In addition, the polyvalence convention seems to be adhered to inasmuch as the artistic photographs suggest different kinds of contrast to the various art subjects.

9 Differences between the groups' confidence in their own interpretations and doubts about the genre

Another way to investigate possible differences between the two conditions is to focus on the (lack of) self-assurance with which subjects record their interpretations of the maker's communicative intentions (question 3). That is, it is useful to examine the subjects' use of various modifiers and hedges such as "may," "seem to," "I think," "perhaps," "probably," "suggests," and comments in the form of questions. These words and phrases are all indicators of "epistemic modality," which "is concerned with the speaker's confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of a proposition expressed" (Simpson 1993: 48). A listing of epistemic markers in both conditions yields the following results: in the art condition, hedges and modifiers occur 24 times in 39 comments, i.e., in 61.5% of the cases; in the billboard condition, they occur 14 times in 33 comments, i.e., in 42.5% of the cases. More telling than the bald percentages is what the subjects express

12 Only one modifier (namely, the first-occurring one) was counted per response per billboard, even if more than one was used. The following hedges and modifiers were identified in the art responses: "I think" (5x); "seems to [+ verb]" (3x); probably (3x); possibly (3x); "Is he ...?" (2x); "perhaps/ maybe" (2x); "suggests" (1x); "I have no idea" (1x); "I don't know!" (1x); "may represent" (1x); "It is impossible to tell what the artist wanted to communicate" (1x). In the billboard condition, they were: "I think" (4x); "maybe/perhaps" (4x); "suggest" (2x); "it could make you feel ..." (1x) "I assume" (1x); "or something like that" (1x); "I don't understand" (1x).
uncertainty about. In the art condition, the subjects present cautious interpretations of the presumed communicative intentions of the entire picture, while in the billboard condition there is hardly any hesitation doubt about the intentions of the picture as a whole. In the latter condition, the speculations tend to be restricted to two highly specific issues: guesses as to the identity of the product advertised, and suggestions as to what property of the blue-and-white object is to be attributed to the advertisement's product. Again, this appears to be commensurate with Schmidt's conventions: the "fact convention" which governs the responses of the billboard subjects leaves them in little doubt as to the picture makers' goal to achieve practical relevance in the world.\footnote{And of course in reality, the billboard did contain the IBM logo, so that the first source of uncertainty would not have applied under real-life viewing conditions.} The greater degree of uncertainty among the art subjects fits the aesthetic convention: art tries to proliferate meanings in non-standard ways, requiring viewers to search in various directions, which do not exclude one another, to achieve aesthetic relevance, and this groping about is reflected in a more tentative epistemic modality.

Furthermore, subjects in the art condition more often voice disappointment or critical comments. About the OARS picture, it is said:

AR7 "One thing makes me curious, the colours on the rowing equipment seem out of place, and that makes me kind of irritated. They make the whole picture untrue and superficial." (Q2)

AR12 "This photograph doesn't appeal to me at all. I feel it is very well executed but highly unoriginal or stimulating." (Q2)

The BEACON inspires the following comment:

AR10 "I really don't like this photograph! (Q3)... Maybe he wants to communicate the qualities of a new soap powder, the swirling waves could be inside a washing machine. The buoy an item of clothing." (Q4)

And the same person says about the TUNING FORK:

AR10 "For me this is quite a disposable image, I would be surprised if told it had some profound meaning. It could be an advertisement for an aperitif." (Q3)

And the ever-sceptical AR12:

AR12 "This image reminds me of the 'Athena' posters of the early 1980s which were always hung in the bedrooms of people with (what I think is) appalling taste. Other such images are girls with cars, cocktails etc., an attempt to be sophisticated + glamorous." (Q1) ... It would seem once again that the image is contrived to sell something else as it is not very interesting or stimulating in itself." (Q3)

This disappointment can perhaps be linked to an aspect of the polyvalence convention: subjects' expected behaviour to relate readings of the text to their "needs, abilities, intentions, and motivations" (Schmidt 1991: 415). Clearly, a number of subjects in the art condition feel cheated
by these alleged artistic photographs; the photo's do not fulfil, for them, any emotional needs, nor do they provoke further reflection.

10 Discussion

We have seen that a number of data seem to corroborate both Schmidt's aesthetic and polyvalence conventions for the texts presented as "artistic" in the experiment. However, the numbers collected in Table 1 point into a markedly different direction. They appear to suggest that the billboards evoke more associations/feelings than the artistic photographs, and that is not commensurate with the polyvalence convention. But perhaps the situation is more complicated, after all. Let me briefly recapitulate: the subjects themselves, when requested to bracket and prioritize their already-given answers to the questions pertaining to their own associations and the associations they believe to have been intended by the maker, bracket considerably less in the art than in the billboard condition. But does this necessarily mean that their readings of the "photographs" are less polyvalent than those of the "billboards"? It is to be noted that the average number of words produced in both conditions in response to the first three questions is about the same (see Table 2), so that text length makes no difference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>Question 2</th>
<th>Question 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ART condition</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BILLBOARD condition</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Average number of words produced per subject in response to questions 1, 2, and 3.

In addition, let us look closer at the bracketing. As indicated a subject scored "one association" either if he or she had used brackets only once or if she or he had used no brackets at all. Now in the billboard condition, question 2, the "one association only" occurs only 4 times out of 33 possibilities, that is a little over 12%, and of these 4 cases only one is unbracketed. In the billboard condition, question 3, the "one association only" occurs 5 times out of 33 possibilities, that is a little over 15%, and of these 4 cases two are unbracketed. By contrast, in the art condition, question 2, the "one association only" occurs 12 times out of 39 possibilities, that is almost 31%, and of these 12 cases 6 are unbracketed. In the billboard condition, question 3, the "one association only" occurs 19 times out of 39 possibilities, that is almost 49%, and of these 19 cases 9 are unbracketed.

What could these bracketing decisions tell us? I suggest the following interpretation deserves consideration: subjects in the art condition tend to find it harder, odder, or simply irrelevant to subdivide their responses to the questions about their own and the maker's intentions than do the subjects in the billboard condition. This reluctance, or even refusal, to do so may well be an echo of the arts subjects' "epistemic uncertainty" about voicing associations, be they their own or the maker's inferred intentions. Perhaps this reluctance or inability to subdivide evoked feelings and associations points towards a desire to produce a somehow unified response to art -- whereas the billboard subjects see no problem at all in identifying more or less separable aspects
of a commercial message. If this interpretation of the data is correct, then it is not warranted to conclude that the billboards were felt to be more polyvalent than the artistic photographs.

However, we must also reckon with the possibility that the numbers should indeed be interpreted as I did in section 6, that is, as suggesting that the "billboards" are more polyvalent than the "artistic photographs." Could this possibly mean that Schmidt's polyvalence convention does not work, or work not so well, for non-verbal texts? Maybe, indeed, pictorial texts are by their very nature more polyvalent than verbal ones. But I suspect that another explanation is more pertinent: the genre of advertising may well not be a suitable genre for representing "non-artistic" texts to be contrasted with "artistic" ones. Unlike, say, schoolbook illustrations, pictograms, or computer icons, advertisements often try to create ambiguity rather than to avoid it (for discussion, see Forceville 1996: Chapters 5-7, passim), since this will both arrest people's attention and increase the number of potential customers, as different aspects of meanings may appeal to different (groups) of customers. If this interpretation of the numbers rather than the one proffered in the preceding paragraph is to be favoured, this entails that advertisements are well-suited to trigger the polyvalence Schmidt reserves for the genre of literature -- at least some aspects of that convention. Indeed that advertisements may fulfil a function beyond, or even instead, selling a product is briefly suggested by Guy Cook:

[Ads] may also amuse, inform, misinform, worry or warn. It can be argued that these other functions are all in the service of a main function which is usually to sell: alternatively, even selling ads perform multiple functions which are more or less autonomous (whatever manufacturers may believe) (Cook 1992: 5).

The latter, incidentally, can also be read as a facet of advertising that reflects Schmidt's aesthetic convention, since such an "autonomous" reading of advertising is as little concerned about literal truth or usefulness as is a reading of a literary text. At the same time, the disappointment and irritation various art subjects voiced testify that at least one important aspect of the polyvalence convention is not borne out by the data: clearly, quite a few subjects in the art condition found the so-called artistic photographs uninspiring, cliched, or boring, and they did thus not relate to the subjects' "needs, abilities, intentions, and motivations." The latter squares with Cook's observations that while literary texts and advertising texts may make use of the same "poetic" devices and cannot therefore be a priori distinguished on the basis of their linguistic form, it is only the former that are capable of questioning readers' morals, values or goals in life (Cook 1994: 121). The disappointment voiced by the art subjects at what is presented to them as a specimen of "art" also appears to confirm the following remark:

\[\text{The question remains whether the polyvalent readings of billboards necessitate a reconsideration of Schmidt's polyvalence convention \textit{tout court}, or do they rather suggest that pictures are simply more polyvalent than language? In the former case, the findings have implications for Schmidt's binary division between genres (literature/art versus non-literature/non-art), in the latter for the medium used to convey information (language versus pictures).}\]
My claim is that the primary function of certain discourses [i.e., literary discourses, ChF] is to effect a change in the schemata of their readers. Sensations of pleasure, escape, profundity, and elevation are conceivably offshoots of this function. So too is the high social esteem afforded to discourse with no other apparent social or practical function. Conversely, it seems that discourses attempting this function but failing (for a given individual) are not simply ignored, but often violently attacked by those individuals and dismissed as boring or even harmful (Ibid.: 191-92).

Finally, the specific nature of the groups of subjects -- art students -- participating in the experiment is such that one should be cautious with generalizations. It is likely that art students look differently both at art and advertisements than would subjects not trained in an arts department (see also Forceville 1996: 190, 198). But then, generalizations by definition hide that what is idiosyncratic, or group specific, in the interpretation of texts. "Meaning," Mark Johnson warns, "is always meaning to someone" (Johnson 1987: 177), while Sperber and Wilson make a very similar point when they state that "relevance is always relevance to an individual" (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 142). It is quite possible that different groups (different in terms of profession, cultural background, educational level, etc.) come up with systematically different interpretations and/or appreciations than these art students.

11 Summarizing observations

Bearing in mind the limitations of the experiment's scope and methodology, I present the following conclusions as suggestive tendencies:

1. The subjects in the billboard condition always volunteered positive associations. The features mentioned most often were "tranquillity" and "progress" (OARS); "reliability/ safety" (BEACON) and "sophistication, refinement" (TUNING FORK). These features also surfaced in the earlier experiment (Forceville 1995): in particular the attributes mentioned for the OARS and the BEACON pictures here are similar to those in the first experiment. Since the earlier experiment featured the billboards in their entirety, i.e., including the blue-and-white acronym "IBM" underneath the pictures, the similarity in the results is remarkable. Apparently the subjects in the present experiment did not need to know either the product's name or even the type of product advertised to come up with (positive) properties that were to be transferred from the blue-and-white object to the (unknown) product -- as long as they were aware that the picture was part of an advertisement. Another way of putting this is that the genre-conventions in advertising are so strong that cuing only the source-domain of a metaphor that takes the form PRODUCT X IS A BLUE-AND-WHITE OBJECT is sufficient for most viewers to identify the property to be transferred from source domain (here: BLUE-AND-WHITE OBJECT) to target domain (here: (UNKNOWN) PRODUCT)). The genre conventions of art, on the other hand, are less equivocal. Nonetheless, a regularity in the responses of the art subjects could be detected: they focused on tension and contrasts, emphasizing the maker's attempts at originality and exploring new artistic forms.

2. More people in the art condition seemed critical and disappointed about the picture than in the billboard condition. In one case, an art subject even explicitly indicated that the
alleged artistic photograph could as well have been a commercial. This suggests that at least for some subjects in the art condition, the pictures carried enough "text-internal" clues either to incur doubt as to their status as art or to consider them "bad art." These latter subjects apparently have a clear if largely implicit view of "standards" to which a work of art should conform.

3. Subjects in the billboard condition come up with more associations, both their own associations and the ones they think were aimed at by the maker, than subjects in the art-condition. Particularly in response to the question soliciting subjects' personal associations, this is striking, since the only variable was the genre-attribution. It is not quite clear, however, what the status of these numbers is. One explanation is that the "billboards" allowed for more plural readings than the "artistic photographs" and hence were, at least in mere quantitative terms, more polyvalent. Such a conclusion would problematize the clear dichotomy between artistic and advertisement texts that I derived from Schmidt's twofold division between literary and non-literary texts. Alternatively, the numbers can be interpreted as suggesting that people find it easier to formulate clear-cut, countable, and separable associations in response to advertisements than to artistic photographs, the latter rather inviting undividable, holistic interpretations. In the latter case, the numbers do not say anything about the perceived richness or complexity of the two types of texts; but they still suggest different ways of interpreting them.

4. Corroboration of the influence exercised by genre can be found in the use subjects in both conditions make of various epistemic hedges and modifiers ("I think that ..."); "Perhaps ..."; "Probably ..."); "The maker might want to convey that ...."). Art subjects use more of these uncertainty-conveying modifiers when asked after the maker's intentions than billboard subjects do but, more importantly, while the former voice uncertainties about intentions in a manner that suggests they think that artistic pictures were not supposed to convey straightforward, unambiguous meanings in the first place, the latters' uncertainties generally centre on two specific questions, namely on the type of product advertised, and on the precise attribute or quality claimed for it. The latter focus corroborates Schmidt's "fact convention," which states that in non-literary (here: non-artistic) texts, people look for practical relevance.

Theorizing about the impact of genre-attribution of images upon cognition is still in its infancy. In view of the vast increase in contemporary society not only of pictures but also of recontextualizations of pictures in different genres, it is crucial to find ways of charting and measuring this influence, whereby the identities of (groups of) addressees should be taken into account as well. Indeed, I propose that researching if and how the interpretations of pictures in various genres by different groups vary systematically is one of the most challenging and rewarding strategies for empirical scholarship in the new millenium.

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