



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section(s): *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Visual paradox as a means of visual semantic foregrounding**Hanene Lahiani<sup>1</sup>, Fawzi Alghazali<sup>2</sup>, Moustafa Mohamed Abouelnour<sup>3</sup>, Ahmad Mohammad Al Mahamed<sup>4</sup>, Mohammed A. Abou Adel\*<sup>1</sup>College of Education, English Language and Translation Program Al Ain University, Abu Dhabi, UAE.<sup>2</sup>College of Arts & Languages, MBZUH, Abu Dhabi, UAE<sup>3</sup>College of Arts, Science and Information Technology, Department of Arabic, University of Khorfakkan, Sharjah, UAE<sup>4</sup>Lecturer of Arabic Language at Abu Dhabi University - College of Arts, Education and Social Sciences<sup>5</sup> College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Arabic Language and Literature, UAE University, Al Ain, UAE

Correspondence: mohamad.abouadel@uaeu.ac.ae

**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the role of visual paradox as a stylistic device for achieving semantic foregrounding in advertising imagery, addressing an overlooked gap in research on visual semiotics. It focuses on how paradox shapes meaning and enhances communicative impact within multimodal contexts. The study investigates two selected advertisements—Seiko Lassale and Nestlé Munch Bunch—and adopts a triangulated qualitative approach that integrates semiotic-stylistic analysis, audience reception through a questionnaire involving 30 university students, and expert interviews with specialists in visual communication and cognitive semiotics. The findings demonstrate that paradox, created through techniques such as spatial disruption, role reversal, and unexpected visual juxtapositions, provokes psychological defamiliarization, captures the viewer's attention, and stimulates deeper interpretive engagement. Key visual strategies, including compositional structure, contrasts in lighting, nuanced color blending, and the application of linear perspective via the Ponzo illusion, are shown to be essential in generating paradoxical effects. The study argues that paradox should not be viewed merely as an aesthetic ornament but as an intentional cognitive and persuasive strategy that reinforces the communicative strength of advertising images. It further highlights their stylistic and psychological dimensions, showing how paradox simultaneously activates cognitive processing and emotional response, thereby enhancing both the memorability and persuasive power of advertising discourse. Ultimately, the study offers a fresh contribution to multimodal stylistics and visual semiotics by positioning paradox as a central tool for semantic foregrounding in contemporary advertising.

**KEYWORDS:** Advertising imagery, cognitive visual processing, defamiliarization, multimodal stylistics, semantic foregrounding, visual paradox, visual rhetoric, visual semiotics

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## Introduction

This paper attempts to give insights into some particular ways in which various images used in advertisements are presented to the reader/viewer. It focuses on the use of visual paradoxes as a stylistic feature used for foregrounding purposes. The topic comes under the general heading of semiotics (Adel, 2019), but it calls upon both rhetoric and visual semiotics. The literature review reveals that although language has long been considered the most important sign system worthy of scientific and semiotic study, there is a growing awareness among researchers of the importance of other forms of expression like dance (Maiorani, 2022), music (Blackburn, 2024) and images (Khadka, 2025; Stoicheva, 2025; Mick, 1986; Cook, 1992; Tanaka, 1994; Lacey, 1998). The study at hand is interested in the latter form namely, the pictorial sign. Images are used as part of certain discourses which aim to inform the receivers, to attract their attention, or to persuade them (Li, 2024; Yusuff, 2021). Images are part of the discourses to which they belong, therefore and like their verbal counterparts, are laden with meaning. They are used primarily to attract the viewer's attention and above all to persuade him/her (Alenezi et al., 2026a; Alhourani et al., 2025a; Adel et al., 2025a).

Semioticians, visual rhetoricians and other researchers have addressed the pictorial sign from different perspectives. Among the aspects that have been considered, visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Liang & Meng, 2025; Pan, 2025) and visual rhetoric (Barthes & Heath, 1977; Matsha & Thatelo, 2025; Alim et al., 2024) can be cited. This paper suggests a different and relatively new perspective to be added to the studies on the visual sign, namely the stylistic perspective. The stylistic feature that is under study is foregrounding in visual composition. To further narrow it down, the focus of this paper is the use of visual paradoxes as a means of visual foregrounding (Elhalafawy et al., 2025; Abouelnour et al., 2024; Adel et al., 2025b).

In literature, foregrounding has been defined by various researchers in distinct ways and using different terms. However, they all agree that the concept refers to the situation where one or more parts of a text are highlighted in a way that generates a psychological reaction from the receiver. The foregrounding is both the part highlighted and the psychological effect it has (Short, 1996; van Peer 1986, Ikromovna, 2025).

Foregrounding was initially born of literature. Thus, scholars such as van Peer (1986), Short (1996) and others, who have studied the use of foregrounding have been more interested in literary texts. Their main concern has rather been to demonstrate that some parts of a literary text are (mainly for some aesthetic or persuasive purposes) foregrounded in many different ways; grammatically, semantically or phonologically. Hence, they have been interested in classifying foregrounding into different categories (Tevdoradze, 2023; Qutieshat et al., 2026; El-Erian et al., 2026; Al-Rai et al., 2026).

Semantic foregrounding, which is the focus of this paper, is a stylistic device whereby the poets express "meaning relations which are logically inconsistent" (Short, 1996, 43). Semantic foregrounding is important in that it obliges the reader to look for meaning(s) beyond the direct literal one (Tartakovsky, 2019; van Peer, 1986). It refers to the reader's figurative plane of significance (Leech, 1984). Many figures of speech belong to this category like metaphor, transference of meaning, irony and paradox (van Peer, 1986; Short, 1996; Miall and Kuiken, 1994; Leech, 1984).

As dealing with many instances of semantic foregrounding is beyond the scope of this study, we chose to focus on foregrounding through paradox. Paradox is defined by Merriam Webster as "something (such as a situation) that is made up of two opposite things and that seems impossible but is actually true or possible" or "a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true" (See Merriam Webster). Cuddon (1992) also defines paradox as "an apparently self-contradictory (even absurd) statement which, on closer inspection, is found to contain a truth reconciling the conflicting opposites" (1992, 677). In images, it is assumed that paradoxes involve the fact that contradictory pieces of information are iconically represented and put together where the effect is supposed to be attracting the attention to the incongruence of the two. However, the result of the two contradictory items being put together is a true and figurative meaning (Abouelnour et al., 2025; Adel, 2024; Alhourani et al., 2026b).

This study involves two advertisements which use pictorial paradoxes. It attempts to unveil what makes these images paradoxical, what techniques of visual composition are used to construct the meaning of the images and whether paradoxes of visual composition have the capacity to achieve semantic foregrounding (Alenzi et al., 2026b; Qiqieh et al., 2025; Asif et al., 2025).

Central to paradoxes are the ideas of oddity and impossibility (Rocatelli and Rossi 2021). The images used to

test paradoxical relations both show objects oddly related to each other and impossible things seeming possible thus creating a tension and a shock effect (Praszkie, 2025). It is probably worth mentioning, at this level, that the idea of impossibility has been challenged and criticized (Sugihara, 2011).

These images prove that paradoxes are both visual and verbal figures. Following Barrow (1998), the impossibility of the iconic images used to construct visual paradox results from the fact that they cannot be possible in the real world. This evokes the distinction between 2D and 3D images. As the images are given a third-dimension aspect of depth and because, in the real world, these oddities are rather impossible, there arises a clash between what is possible in 2D representations and what is not in 3D representations. In other words, the paradoxes in these images are motivated by the fact that the images have a third dimension, to simulate reality, while they are impossible to realize in the real world (Cavazzana, 2021).

## Literature Review

Various prior studies have delved into visual semiotics, foregrounding, and paradox in a variety of contexts—ranging from theory and academic imagery to ideological interpretations of advertisements. The following review shows how each contributes to our understanding of meaning-making through visual communication. A relevant study by Jamil and Asif (2023) studies various visual rhetorical figures in digital advertising in Google, Facebook and Pinterest. The researchers could identify nine visual figures of speech operating in digital advertising, among which we find visual paradox.

Another study by Lewis, and Smith (2022) addresses how paradox is represented visually in conceptual models and scholarly figures and emphasizes the role of imagery in making abstract tensions semantically more foregrounded. Even though their research discusses theorizing by means of visual metaphors in academic writing, the present study takes a different approach in that it studies ad images as multimodal texts, using semiotic techniques and audience reception to analyze how visual paradox becomes semantically foregrounded. In similar paths, Pradies et al (2023) studies how visualization, the use of figures and images, is central to theorizing in paradox articles. The study thus claims to contribute to the study of paradox.

Githapradana (2024) studies the Application of Paradox Aesthetic Concepts and Values in the Design of Indonesian fashion garment through a Visual Metaphor Approach. The research's aim is to explain the process of incorporating paradoxical aesthetics into fashion designs that line up with global styles.

Semetsky (2023) investigates the role of visual semiotics in abductive thinking, specifically how archetypal images and unconscious processes are engaged in learning through imaginative thinking. Even though her study delves into the theoretical aspect of visual signs in knowledge acquisition, the current study departs from this by investigating the advertising images empirically to understand how visual paradox works as a device for semantic foregrounding in multimodal messages.

Gregoriou (2022) explores the phenomenon of foregrounding at various linguistic levels with respect to its psychological impact and cognitive salience in verbal and visual texts. While her treatment verges on visual foregrounding as part of general stylistic patterns, the current study pushes this argument one step further by finding a particular interest in semantic foregrounding through visual paradox in advertising images. It offers an applied, multimodal perspective that goes beyond textual schema in exploring how paradoxical images generate perceptual salience.

Riaz et al. (2024) carried out a semiotic study of a Marlboro cigarette advertisement in terms of Barthes' mythology and the Shannon-Weaver model of communication. Their work pointed to the way visual signs express prevailing ideologies—masculinity, liberty, and heroism—through denotation, connotation, and myth. While their work is about unveiling ideological stories within a single frozen image, this paper focuses attention on semantic foregrounding by way of visual paradox in advertising. It examines how paradox functions as a stylistic tool through the use of spatial composition, lighting, and perspective to involve spectators and emphasize meaning.

Mengoni (2021) explains the initial discussions within visual semiotics, particularly the tension between the presumed natural resemblance of images and the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. She argues that visual meaning is not merely iconic but is guided by cultural codes and conventions, and her argument aligns with Eco's (1968) critique of iconism. This perspective justifies the current study's focus on visual paradox in advertisements, wherein unexpected contrasts and contradictions frustrate normal interpretations, thereby

foregrounding meaning through visually encoded cultural tactics.

Güner (2020) cleverly combines visual semiotics and International Relations (IR) theory. He related visual imagination to semiotic interpretation aiming at a better understanding of the Constructivist view of anarchy that characterizes international relations. Similarly, Güner (2025) shows that there is a strong connection between visual semiotic game players' strategies and those of IR theorists. He concludes that Visual Semiotic Games “contribute to the fields of semiotics, IR theories, and game theory” (2025, 26) .

Briefly, previous research has given important foundation to the understanding of visual meaning, semiotic structure, and ideological message. Few have taken into account how visual paradox in particular functions as a vehicle for semantic foregrounding. This study builds and advances previous work through a focus on paradox as a stylistic and cognitive device in multimodal advertising discourse.

## Methods

To investigate how visual paradox functions as a tool for semantic foregrounding in advertising, the researcher adopted a qualitative, interpretive framework shaped by insights from multimodal stylistics and visual semiotics. Rather than relying on a single method, the study was structured in three complementary stages that allowed for both close analysis and empirical grounding. First, the researcher conducted an in-depth visual analysis of two carefully chosen advertisements—Seiko Lassale and Nestlé Munch Bunch—both of which rely heavily on paradox as a central visual strategy. Attention was given to spatial composition, depth perception, lighting contrasts, and symbolic juxtapositions, to uncover how these elements converge to disrupt viewer expectations and highlight meaning. Second, a structured questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 30 university students with varying familiarity with advertising content. Their responses provided valuable insight into how viewers actually perceived the ads, and whether the paradoxical imagery stood out in their memory and interpretation. Finally, to validate the findings and provide expert context, the researcher conducted interviews with four professionals in design and cognitive semiotics. These conversations offered practical reflections that helped bridge theoretical analysis with real-world design perspectives. This layered approach allowed for a more nuanced and credible exploration of the research questions, combining textual scrutiny with human perception and expert insight.

## Results

### I. Visual Paradox as a Foregrounding Strategy in Advertising

#### A. Case 1

The first image comes in a print advertisement for the prestigious Seiko Lassale watches. The image occupies the whole page while only a few words are at its very bottom. They read: “Lassale the art of Seiko. Bracelets, cases, and casebacks finished in 22 karat gold, Macy’s”.

The image shows a chequered ground tilting towards a dark sky adorned with glittering stars. Among the shocking elements of the image is the left-hand human arm that springs out of a picture frame trying to reach a pair of Seiko watches. These latter are hanging between the air and the ground. Their bracelets surrealistically plunge into the ground and bounce out of it. From the frame we can distinguish the naked torso and half the face of a young man while the rest of his body is hidden beneath the ground surface. Another shocking element that, seemingly, does not belong to the context is the presence of a pyramid in the depth of the image. It calls to mind the Egyptian pyramids of Guizze.

The surrealistic atmosphere of the image is made clear to the viewer who is enticed to transfer this surrealism as a quality of the image to the watches themselves and to their achievement. The viewer, thus, would be encouraged to infer that the SEIKO watch is so perfect that it seems to be from a different world. Hence, the pyramid backs the idea of things belonging to a different world, as they symbolically refer to the ancient Egypt of Pharaoh.

The near absence of verbal text (as there are no copy and headline) is also noteworthy. It points to the advertisers' belief in the rhetoric of the image and its ability alone to transmit the intended message. For them, the image says all that has to be said about the advertised product.

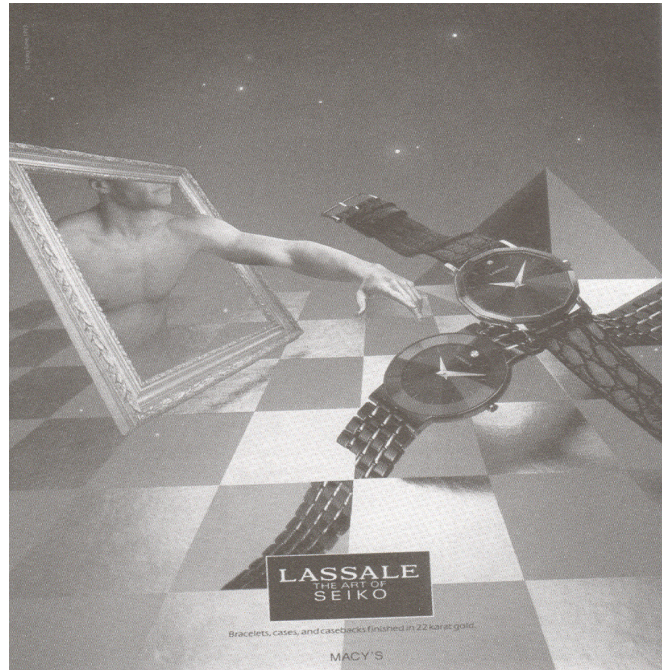


Figure 1: Seiko  
(Taken from: Messaris, (1997, 242))

In this advert the advertiser creates a surrealistic world for the product. For this purpose, he uses some techniques to foreground certain icons and create a paradox. First the advertiser makes part of the human body (torso) appear inside the frame to create the idea of a still image. At the same time, he makes the arm of the same human stretching out of the frame to create the idea of movement. The advertiser is thus achieving defamiliarization by using paradox. The hand stretching out of the picture frame is paradoxical since, evidently, a picture in a frame is characterised by immobility or stillness while a stretching hand is, on the contrary, moving. The tension coming from this contradiction between stillness and movement creates a sense of absurdity to the pictorial content. However, the elements submerging from the ground create additional tension. The torso coming out of the ground and the bracelets getting into and out of the ground create more tension that looks unable to be concealed.

However, following Cuddon (1992), upon “closer inspection,” these conflicting opposites can be reconciled. For example, the fact that the human body is presented in a three-dimensional way (with shadow, texture and familiar size) cancels the effects of the frame. The arm thus belongs to the “person” and not to the picture. It is important to note that the techniques the advertiser uses to reach the visual effect have a three-dimensional aspect and thus add a touch of realism. One of these techniques is the interposition (occlusion) of the frame and the human body. The frame hides part of this body so it appears closer to the viewer, but it is hidden by the arm, which makes the arm closer to the viewer. Thus, the frame which seems closer and at the same time farther from the human body increases the tension created inside the viewer. Similarly, the chequered ground hides the lower part of the human body and part of the watch’s bracelet and is hidden by the watches. This further strengthens the paradox and the tension. The other techniques used to give a third dimension to the image are shadow (human arm, shoulder and neck) texture gradient (left and right bracelets of watches) and height in field (frame/pyramid/watches).

## B. Case 2

The second advert is for Nestlé Munch Bunch. Here we see a full page visual footed by a headline and a short copy. The visual features a trolley in a food section of a supermarket. We can see two shelves behind the trolley and the image of the product as signature at the lower right corner. What is striking in this visual is the fact that by the rear swinging door of the trolley a young man is seated as a shopping child would be. His feet stretching out of the trolley are long enough to reach the floor. His arms and hands pushing against the trolley handle as if he is trying to get out of his seat. His face wears an expression of surprise. The viewer is, seemingly, encouraged to understand that this used to be a child in the shopping trolley who grew up very fast before he could/ tried

to get out of his place in the trolley.

The man in the trolley's age ranges between 20 and 30. He is a white man with dark short hair. He is wearing a grey T-shirt, a pair of blue jeans and a pair of white trainers. He has a good posture which inspires healthiness. The choice of this man/actor is far from being spontaneous or random. This person represents an attractive athletic body who is concerned with his shape and well-being.



Figure 2: Munch Bunch  
(Taken from Woman's Own magazine (March 2006, 65))

The trolley, on the other hand, looks small relative to the young man. It is one of the simplest style trolleys found in supermarkets. It contains a small number of varied fruits and vegetables. It is tilted in opposite direction to the shelves behind. Its green handle is shot against the man's flat stomach. The message of the advertiser is clear. He tickles the viewer's concern for simplicity and health. Most of the background to the visual is occupied by the floor of the supermarket. The tiles borders are hardly seen at the lower part of the visual near the man's feet but disappear as the eyes move upward. The space is much larger at the bottom than the top. The upper part is rather occupied by the shelves on both left and right sides. The large and clear space is another cue for simplicity. Although the upper part of the shelves is blurred, we can still see products like cheese and yogurt. The shot is taken in the dairy section of the store. The advertiser aims to attract the viewer's attention to the healthy food context, surrounded by dairy products (on the shelves) and fresh produce (in the trolley). This is intended to be transferred to the product itself which is marketed as a healthy dairy product.

The headline accentuates the same idea of the image. It reads: SOME THINGS ARE MEANT JUST FOR KIDS. The advertiser is comparing "things which are meant for kids only" to things which are meant for adults too. This brings us back to the trolley as seat for kids only and the Munch Bunch product for kids and grown-ups alike. Put differently, the advertiser claims that things which are commonly believed to be reserved for kids can also be for grown-ups. The copy, although short, concisely sums up all the claims made by the visual and the headline. Thus, the product is "healthy" rich with "omega 3" and "probiotics" for "little tummies" and "growing" people.

The visual techniques used in this ad are numerous. The most important is the use of linear perspective as a compositional tool coupled with relative size as cue of depth. In linear perspective, lines appear to get closer together or converge as they recede into the distance. More precisely, the advertiser uses the "Ponzo illusion," the effect of which is commonly attributed to the linear perspective, to make the man icon look larger and thus be more impressive. The dairy shelves are featured as a pair of converging lines. Thus, and according to the Ponzo illusion, objects which are higher and thus closer to the converging point of the lines seem larger than the same objects farther away from the converging point. The man, being closer to the converging point (of the shelves), appears larger than he should be in relation to the size of the trolley (relative size).

### C. The Questionnaire

The first question addressed to the respondents asks about the strikingness of the ad image as a whole. Only 48.4% of the respondents find this ad striking. Among these, only 12.9% find no striking element (question 2). The rest of those who find the ad striking as a whole (87.09%) find a striking element in the image. Cross-tabulation also shows that only 33.3% of those for whom the ad as a whole is not striking see no odd element in the image. In the second part of question 2, the respondents are expected to express what is thought to be a strange element in the image. Their answers are grouped under thematic categories as shown in table 1.

Table 1 : Seiko categories

Category	Number	Percentage
Hand outside frame/ belts	15	44.12
Pyramids	4	11.76
No logic/ arrangement	13	38.24
Diverse	2	5.88
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Table 1 shows that the responses are grouped under four categories (see also Fig. 3 for a visual distribution of these findings). The first category groups the responses which refer to the hand stretching out of the frame and the watch belts torn/hidden by the ground. 15 responses belong to this category, which represents 44.12%. The second category groups those answers which refer to the existence of pyramids in the image. Four responses belong to this category, which represents 11.76%. The third category gathers the respondents who expressed something related to the absence of logic in the arrangement of the different parts of the image such as “the arrangement of the different objects in the image”, “different things strangely scattered with no logical connection between the elements” and “the mess in it”. Under this category 13 responses are grouped, which represents 38.24%. Other responses include “watch wearing is normally last step in grooming » and “a picture coming back to life » two responses belong to this category (5.88%).

As shown in Table 1, most viewers noticed the hand extending beyond the frame and the disordered belt arrangement in the Seiko ad. Figure 3 below provides a visual representation of these findings.

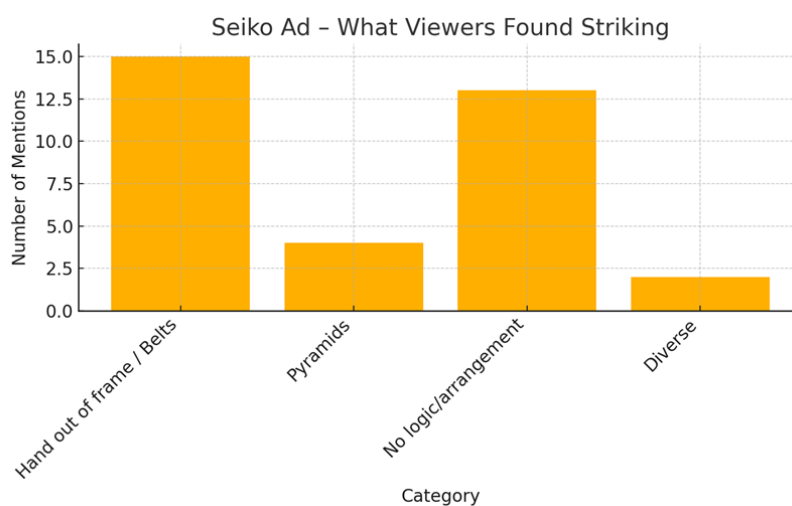


Figure 3: Visual responses to the Seiko advertisement showing distribution across four major thematic categories as reported in the questionnaire.

The last two questions related to the Seiko ad relate to the arrangement of the different parts of the image. 68.8% of the respondents agree on the fact that the arrangement inside the image is odd. While 31.3% do not think so. Also, 60.9% of the respondents say that a different arrangement would make the image less odd and 39.1% say it would make it not odd.

The first question that is related to the Munch Bunch ad examines whether the ad image, as a whole, is striking. 76.6% of the respondents find the image striking (49 people) while 23.4% did not. The second

question asks whether the image contains an odd element. 73.4% of the respondents find an odd element whereas 26.6% see no odd element. Cross tabulation shows that out of the 49 respondents answered positively to the first question, 42 also answered positively to question 2. That is to say, 84.7% of those, who found the ad striking as a whole, found a striking element in the image. This means that the ad is striking because it contains a striking element.

The second part of question 2 is about the identification of the strange element in the ad. The responses are grouped under thematic categories as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Munch Bunch categories

Category	Number	Percentage
man’s seat in trolley	21	51.22
size	3	7.32
adult/ child	13	31.71
other	4	9.76
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The table provides a classification of the responses identifying the source of strikingness in the ad (See the visual distribution in Fig. 4). The first category gathers the responses that refer to the man’s position in the trolley. This category comprises 21 responses, representing 51.22% of the total number of respondents. The second category groups responses that are shocked by the man behaving like a child; it comprises 13 responses representing 31.71% of the total. The third category is that of the responses noting the use of size as a striking element. 3 people only see the importance of size in this image representing 7.32% of the total. Some responses cannot be grouped under a theme and are thus put in the ‘other’ section. Examples of the other responses are “the bottle of milk” and “difficult to figure out” because of the small size of the bottle and comment.” 4 respondents fall in this category representing (9.76%) of the total.

Figure 4 illustrates viewers’ responses regarding the Munch Bunch advertisement, where the adult sitting in the trolley was the most striking feature.

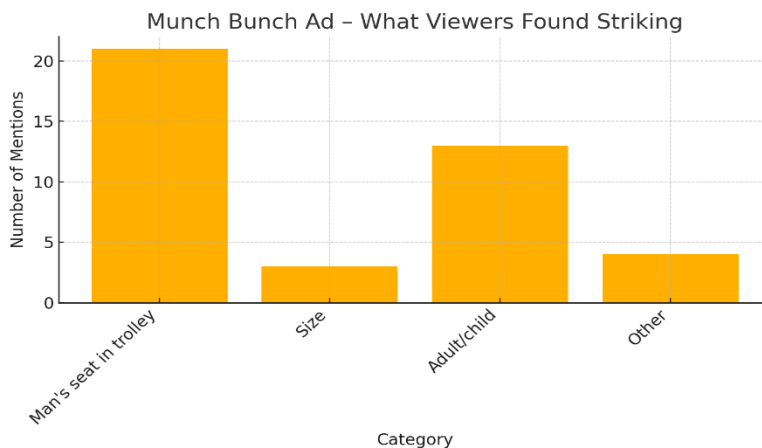


Figure 4: Distribution of participants’ responses to visual elements in the Munch Bunch ad.

The last two questions ask about the importance of the arrangement of the different parts of the image and whether it adds to the strikingness of the image as a whole. 56.3% believe that the arrangement itself is striking and 67.2% believe that a different arrangement would make the image less or not odd.

Cross-tabulation reveals that out of those who found that the arrangement of the image is striking (36 respondents), only 2 think that a different arrangement would make the image less striking. This means that these respondents are not aware of the importance of the place of the trolley in the image (linear perspective). 94.44% of those 36 respondents think that a different arrangement would make the image less odd, hence the of arrangement as a foregrounding technique in this advertisement.

It is also important to note that, among the 28 respondents who do not find the arrangement as the source

of strikingness of the image, 19 think that a different arrangement would not make the image less odd. These respondents represent 29.68% of the sample population.

#### D. The Interviews

Although there are many attractive oddities in the Seiko image, the majority of the interviewees agree that the watches are the most foregrounded. Some of them even see a foregrounded link between the watches and the arm stretching out of the frame. “A portrait in a frame is so fond of the watches that he tries to reach them out” one interviewee believes.

Interestingly, most interviewees fail to see the link between the various elements of the visual like the watches, the pyramids, the frame and the arm. One interviewee declares that what is foregrounded is the fact that space can be (and is) defied. Things in the image are “going beyond the space limits” and this idea is more salient than any physical object seen on the page. And, in fact, it underlies all the oddities in the image.

The interviewees used strange, odd and absurd words to describe the composition. They find the different elements “hard to reconcile.” Most peculiar, though, is the existence of the pyramids. While most interviewees fail to see how the pyramids fit into the whole and relate to the watches, some try to find an explanation. One of them sees that pyramids stand for geometric forms, as much as the chequered ground does, which belong to the Cartesian world (to which time measurement belongs). Another interviewee sees that pyramids stand for hierarchy and thus point to the brand’s upscale history. Yet, another believes that the pyramids are there as icon of relaying different eras.

When asked about the techniques used to foreground the watches in the Seiko image, all the interviewees agreed on the importance of arrangement where the advertiser used Photoshop, or a similar program, to arrange the whole composition. The rest of the interviewees talked about the advertiser’s choice to bring together elements that are initially incompatible. Most of the interviewees stressed the fact that the composition remained heterogeneous although the advertiser tried to allude to a common point between all the elements used.

Some of the interviewees see the use of other techniques beside arrangement. Light is the most cited among these techniques. For the interviewees the light used here is dim and comes from the front. The next technique is colour, which means the use of harmonious values of white and black and intermediary shades of grey. Distance is identified by one expert only who refers to the fact that the watches are the closest of all the elements to the viewer.

The interviewees are asked an additional question about the rationale behind including such a big number of oddities in the Seiko image. They agree on the fact that the advertiser is relying on the shock effect to attract the viewers and to stand “out of the crowd.” One of the interviewees believes that it is compatible with surrealist arts. Indeed, the image is reminiscent of (and probably inspired by) a painting by Salvador Dali. To sum up, the interviewees find that the watches, which are the advertised product, are the most salient part of the Seiko image. The image is admitted being strange with a big number of oddities which are hard to reconcile. The interviewees justify these numerous oddities included in the image by the advertiser’s reliance on the shock effect. In this advert, arrangement is the most important tool of foregrounding. But also important are the use of light, which is rather dim and frontal, and colour blends of white, different shades of grey and black.

As far as the Munch Bunch image is concerned, all the interviewees find that what is foregrounded is the man. They justify their opinion by the fact that the man is sitting on the trolley and that he occupies the central part of the page.

All the interviewees find the image funny and bizarre. One interviewee says the man’s position is the source of fun. Another interviewee says she wants to read the text to understand how the man ended up in the trolley. She adds that the image does not give clues about this. Yet, another interviewee says that the man wants to “go back to his young age.” A different expert says that the image automatically calls to the fact that the product is for both children and adults. This confirms the use of paradox in this image for Munch Bunch. Some interviewees read into the look and gaze of the man in the trolley. One interviewee says the man looks into the vague. As he is not looking at the viewer nor at the product, the viewer will find himself compelled to look at the product. Another interviewee thinks the man is physically squeezed into the trolley but he is also financially constrained, living on a tight budget, as he has only few things in his trolley. To answer the question about the tools used to foreground the man in the trolley, a number of techniques are mentioned. The most cited of these

techniques is arrangement. By arrangement, the interviewees refer to the centered position of the man. They also refer to the fact that the man is squeezed into the trolley and he shot very close to the shelves of the supermarket which makes the viewer relate to the fresh food shelves (or to the food sector, in general).

The second most important tool of foreground identified by experts is the linear perspective. Many of the interviewees relate the featured rows of shelves to this perception theory cue of depth. They state that the fact that the man in the trolley is close to the converging point of the shelf rows make him look bigger than he really is, which makes him look closer to the viewer. It is worth noting that one interviewee mentioned distance as a foreground tool then she quickly related the closeness effect to linear perspective.

To sum up, in the Nestlé Munch Bunch advertisement, the man sitting in the trolley is foregrounded according to all the experts interviewed. The interviewees find the image both funny and motivating as they quickly want to read the rest of the text. Concerning the tools of foregrounding, most interviewees find that essential arrangement and linear perspective are used in this image. While arrangement refers mainly to the man being squeezed in the trolley and shot in a supermarket, linear perspective is brought down into the Ponzo illusion.

## Discussion

The research question related to Paradox as an aspect of semantic foregrounding focuses on how images are able to foreground visual elements that function in a paradoxical way. To test this type of semantic foreground, two adverts are used. The first advert that tests paradox in visuals is for Seiko, a watch brand. In the image, the viewer sees a torso in a frame with the arm stretching out of the frame. In the forefront there are two watches, the belts of which dive into the chequered ground. Far behind there is a pyramid. The questionnaire respondents find the ad as a whole striking due to a striking element. For most of the respondents the striking element is the hand stretching out of the frame or the belts diving into the ground or the absence of logic in the arrangement of the elements of the image. Respondents to the questionnaire also think that the arrangement of the different elements is responsible for the oddity of the image.

The interviewees confirm that the watches which are the focus of the ad (advertised product) are foregrounded. They also admit that the image is full of oddities which are hard to reconcile. Thus, they confirm that the image contains paradoxes. For them, the paradoxes are used to create a shock effect within the viewers. The experts interviewed also validate the importance of arrangement as a foregrounding technique. They advance that light and colour choices are also important as foregrounding techniques in this image.

The second advert that is used to test the use of paradoxes in images is for Munch Bunch, a Nestlé product. In this image the viewer sees a young man sitting in a trolley where children usually sit. The trolley with the man is shot in a supermarket corridor very close to food shelves. The man is wearing a perplexed gaze. In the trolley there are few food items. At the bottom there is an iconic representation of the product (milk bottle), a headline and a short copy.

The questionnaire respondents find that the ad contains a striking element which makes the ad as a whole striking. The respondents report that what is striking is first the man stuck in the trolley and second the man/child relationship. Also, most of the respondents find that arrangement is used to make the man in the child's seat of the trolley striking. And that a different arrangement would make the image less or even not striking.

The experts interviewed agreed on the fact that the man in the trolley is foregrounded. They find the image funny and inviting for second order interpretations. The man in the trolley is bizarre and paradoxical. When asked about the foregrounding techniques, the experts pointed to arrangement. However, with their expert eye, the interviewees also found the use of the Ponzo illusion as cue for linear perspective important in the Munch Bunch image.

To answer the research question related to semantic foregrounding through the use of paradoxes, it is clear images have the capacity to use paradox as a semantic device for foregrounding. To communicate the concept of space defiance or going beyond space limits, the advertiser in Seiko includes within the frame of the image several oddities, which create paradoxical relations. The watches, which are modern commodities are in paradoxical relation to the pyramids which are historical buildings. The naked body, which is a sign of spontaneity is in paradoxical relation with the chequered ground, sign of sophistication. The portrait, a sign

of a captured moment, is in paradoxical relation to the arm stretching out of the frame, a sign of movement and emancipation. The second advert used paradoxes as a means of foregrounding in advertising for Nestlé Munch Bunch Drinky yogurt product. Although the Munch Bunch image presents a less shocking oddity, there is nevertheless a paradoxical relation between the young man's age (and size) and his seat in the trolley.

Visual paradoxes have the capacity to attract the viewer. Although arrangement is the most important technique used to express paradoxical relations between the visual elements in both adverts, other techniques like linear perspective, light and colour can be used to add more value and help make these paradoxical elements salient. Also important as a sign of paradoxes is the idea of impossibility (Barrow, 1998). The Seiko image expresses the impossible through two main iconic representations. First, the icon of arm stretching out of the frame is impossible in the real world. Second, the icon of watch belts diving into the ground is also impossible in reality. In the Munch Bunch image, the impossibility resides in the conflicting impressions the viewer gets about the young man's age. While his face and body give the impression that he is no less than twenty years old, his position in the trolley gives the impression that he is less than five years old.

Following Barrow (1998), the impossibility of the iconic images used to construct visual paradox results from the fact that they cannot be possible in the real world. This evokes the distinction between 2D and 3D images. Because the images are given a third-dimension aspect of depth and because in the real world these oddities are rather impossible, there arises a clash between what is possible in 2D representations and what is not in 3D representations. In other words, the paradoxes in these images are motivated by the fact that the images have a third dimension, to simulate reality, while they are impossible to realize in the real world. This is attractive and causes the foreground to take place because, according to Barrow (1998):

Perhaps we like imaginary worlds that are impossible because their very impossibility reinforces the appeal of artistic representations of strange environments and circumstances which we can experience safely. They allow us to enter environments which are dangerous, in the sense that they could not possibly be part of our (or anyone's) experience, but without real risk. They are an extension of the phobophilia that attracts us to the ghost train or the horror film. (p. 17)

## Conclusion

This study set out with a central concern: to understand how visual paradox can serve as a mechanism for semantic foregrounding in advertising imagery. Through a close examination of two contrasting advertisements and a combination of audience responses and expert interviews, the research has uncovered how paradox, when embedded within a cohesive visual structure, does more than merely attract attention—it actively shapes meaning, evokes reflection, and deepens viewer engagement. The goals outlined at the outset have been met with clarity. The findings affirm that paradox is not just a decorative element but deliberate compositional strategy capable of generating interpretive salience. Viewers consistently identified the paradoxical feature as the element that made the advertisement memorable and emotionally resonant, confirming the initial hypotheses about its semiotic potency. This research contributes a fresh angle to the interdisciplinary conversation around visual communication. While much of the previous work has centered on metaphor or symbolic representation, this study positions paradox as a more cognitively stimulating and affectively powerful device. In doing so, it opens a path for a more nuanced understanding of how images “speak” in the absence—or in the subtle presence—of words. Naturally, the study has its limitations. It was deliberately restricted to two case studies to allow for depth of analysis, but this also narrows the scope of generalization. Future research should consider a broader visual corpus, deploy eye-tracking tools to measure perceptual salience, and explore how cultural contexts mediate the reading of visual contradiction. In sum, this paper argues that paradox is not merely a stylistic flourish in visual media—it is a communicative strategy with the power to unsettle, provoke, and persuade in equal measure.

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