Powertools: The best way to get into those hard-to-reach visuals

Sally Hollis-McLeod
Manukau School of Visual Arts

Sally Hollis-McLeod (MDes Hons 1, BFA, Dip Adult Tchg, MDINZ) is an illustrator and designer whose work has appeared in a wide range of places including picture books, Education Gazette, and The Listener. Her images have been exhibited in top New Zealand galleries, and she has published articles on design and design education. Sally is Senior Lecturer and Subject Co-ordinator, Design, at Manukau School of Visual Arts. Email: Sally.Hollis-McLeod@manukau.ac.nz Tel: + 64 9 376 6989

Abstract: Acceptance of ideologically charged images in western advertising’s representation of women (notably in fashion, underwear and perfume), demonstrates that woman is still an object, and still regarded with the voyeur’s gaze. However, there has been a shift: no longer is it only the male as voyeur – women have been forced to the keyhole. Since the Feminist protest against woman as objects, beginning in the 1970s, visual constructions have become eroticised in raw ways: sex, violence and death firmly linked in fashion; unlikely details of daily life charged with sexual meanings; and new stereotypes that reinforce sexual division in a visual code.

Where lies the power here? Not with young women, despite what they may believe, as the “standardised visual images” they are shaped by (Bordo, 1989, p. 17) are not recognised as such; nor does it lie with men, bewildered by slippage between fantasy-reality and reality. Does it lie with the producers and their cohorts for whom the ‘sex sells’ mantra allows cynical fantasies with no maturity of contextual understanding? Or with profit-makers desperate for an ‘edge’?

The generation that we observe coping with explicit imagery is one Bordo (1997) signalled as growing up in an image-dominated culture. Is it enough to believe in equality and to have been taught to recognise that there are distorted messages in advertising? In a world of visual production in which there is presupposed a Critical Reader, is it enough to assume constant and effective deployment of critical filters even by 12 year olds?

Everyone is capable of seizing power by identifying transgressive advertising. Analysing, using powerful tools specifically developed to critique visual representations and persuasive devices, is a method that Leitch (2001) defines as a means for resistance, where decoding such messages enables audiences to think resistantly about their lives. Engagement with visual analysis enables the Critical Reader. For this task, the author demonstrates a unique set of analytical tools; drawing from visual rhetoric, feminist critique and social semiotics. A powertool set, revealing methods of visual persuasion.
Research context

This research takes as its context the knowledge of meaning-making, which employs critical frameworks to question how meaning is made in visual works, what meanings are present, and what the implications of these are; constituting a critical practice.

Examining evidence of meaning-making involves the critical analysis of visual texts based on rigorous selection of analytical methods for the specific insights into meaning-making that each yields. Because the intent of advertising’s visual message is complex, critical evaluative skills are necessary in order to reveal persuasive methods and understand embedded meanings or connotations. This research brings together a select range of methods of analysis and shows them in application.

It is important to examine the part the visual communicators and other producers play in reinforcing image-distortions; for example, visual images have been thought to be a motivating factor in anorexia and in antisocial male behaviours. In 2001, the British Government convened a summit to direct the fashion industry to show more representative sizes of models in the fashion media in order to reduce the impact on young women of distorted ideas of self-image, thought to contribute to eating disorders. This was at the request of young consumers, and was discussed in youth media.

The basis of visual communication is the making of meaning and the social and cultural context for this. This lies in knowledge which has arisen from debates in the social sciences, philosophy and linguistics; especially of semiotics.\(^1\) Further, an awareness of critical practice is necessary: an understanding of the way in which analytical tools critique the communication objective by examining content to reveal meanings will enable stronger and more conscious visual communication.

\(^1\) Generating meaning through form is referred to as meanings ‘made’; this can be both conscious construction, and an inevitable outcome of using signs. What is acknowledged, since the post-modern shift, is that the meaning made is not necessarily carried intact to the audience; inevitable, since Roland Barthes’ delineation of denotation and connotation (1977). The modernist cornerstone – the universally understood message – has been demolished.
My analysis is from a feminist position, although feminists are not the sole commentators on the stereotypes and exploitation of women which advertising has promoted. Discourse Analysis, which uses feminist analysis as its base, acknowledges that “all ways of knowing are political”, as Roberts states:

Feminist research practice requires a critical stance towards existing methodology in the social sciences…. The use of feminist methodology implies a commitment to the empowerment of women. (Roberts, 1990. p. 200)

Weedon positions the researcher herself as a dynamic part of feminist analysis (here ‘language’ can include the visual):

The principles of feminist post-structuralism can be applied to all discursive practices in order to analyse how they are structured, what power relations they produce and reproduce. Feminist criticism seeks to privilege feminist interests in the understanding and transformation of patriarchy. How the feminist critic fixes meaning will depend on the framework within which she reads a text. Texts may be read, for example, as expressions of women’s experience already constituted in the world beyond fiction… or as specific examples of the construction of gender in language. (Weedon, 1997. p. 132)

Feminist-based analyses of advertising and narrative are plentiful and include Williamson’s Decoding Advertisements (1995), Mulvey discussing ‘The Gaze’ and ‘scopophilic’ looking—how women have been constituted as object of the male gaze and thus the directed-object of their own gaze—in ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (Munns & Rajan, 1995), and in Visual and Other Pleasures (Mulvey, 1989); also, occasionally, in Fashion Theory Journal—for example, Wallerstein’s (1998) essay ‘Thinness and Other refusals in Contemporary Fashion Advertisements’. The roles of women as depicted in ads include Walsh-Childers’ (1996) ‘Women as Sex Partners’, discussing women as portrayed in the media in terms of sexual messages.

Visual communication also provides a context; a lineage of thought on design’s social responsibility which includes design writers Papanek (1971; 1983; 1995), who established the concept of ethical engagement to create meaningful practice,
and McCoy, who detailed visual communication’s role in this (e.g. 1984; 1978). The re-instatement in 1999 of *First Things First*, the manifesto originally published by Garland in 1964 (*Adbusters*, 1999, p. 57), urged positive social change through responsible and ethical practice. One passage referred to the way visual meaning acts in society through the agency of visual communication:

> A mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse. (*Adbusters*, 1999, p. 57.)

In order to understand how meaning is engaged with, we now take up a position as Critical Reader and ask: how does the producer make meanings and what meanings are these?

*Figure 1. Two 10 year old girls spontaneously intervene in advertising.*
In Figure 1, at left, a Louis Vuitton shoe advertisement appears alongside a modified ad from the series, graffitied by two girls. The girls knew nothing of shoe-fetishes and Sado-Masochism but recognised as ridiculous the S&M scenario, as they did the dismemberment of the female face and the idea that pimples need constant vigilance.

**Bodies of scholarship: Three key analytical frameworks**

To approach a visual text, an analytical method must be developed. I advise choosing analytical tools or frameworks that reflect your own interests. Because I am interested in meaning-making – in the creative construction of visual texts, the meanings made, and the audiences they are aimed at – I choose a combined method and draw elements from three frameworks: those of the social semioticians Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996), the rhetorician Jacques Durand (1987), and the Feminist theoretician Judith Williamson (1995). No one method gives the complete perspective that I am after, but combined, they complement each-other, and allow depth and breadth to the examination.

Social semiotics, a strand of semiotics I favour due to its connection with socially significant texts, is the first of the set. Social semiotics, as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), assesses visual material by assessing formal visual elements for the social readings that they yield – establishing meaning-making devices and methods. It acknowledges the developments of post-structuralism.²

Durand’s visual rhetoric classification of advertising language is an ideal addition to the theoretical set. Through his assigning of visual equivalents to linguistic rhetorical figures he enables examination of persuasive devices and an understanding of the lengths the creator has gone to, to depart from a ‘simple proposition’. His is a post-structural approach.

The third methodological framework – that of Williamson (1995) – in her highly regarded work *Decoding Advertisements* – identifies formal devices and deals

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² Whereas semiotics is a structuralist concept, visual rhetoric is post-structuralist, but their connection was established by Roland Barthes: when writing about semiotics he suggested a rhetoric of the image, or classification of the connotators of the image, as a natural outcome (Barthes, 1964, p. 1977). In a footnote made at the time of
with implications arising from the relative roles of form and content. Williamson extends to arguments of advertising’s building of ideological structures through use of referent systems, defining ways in which visual meaning creates these ideological narratives. Williamson is a social theorist and her Marxist, Feminist politics sit well with work which draws from Feminist sources.

The frameworks defined: The social semiotic theory of Gunter Kress and Theo van Leeuwen

Social semiotics is founded on the work of M.A.K. Halliday and his belief that language is social rather than linguistic (Halliday, 1978). In social semiotic terms the meanings expressed by speakers and visual makers are social meanings, arising out of society (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 18). The authors talk of process: a process of sign-making, and of “representation as a process”. Thus, social semiotics is very much about the process of sign-making and the use of meaning.

It differs from ‘structuralist semiotics’, as van Leeuwen classifies the work of the linguists concerned with structure and system: rather than ‘signs’, it classifies ‘resources’—Halliday’s (1978) term—used by people to both construct and interpret “communicative artefacts and events” (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. XI). Using ‘resource’ rather than ‘sign’ “avoids the impression that ‘what a sign stands for’ is somehow pre-given, and not affected by its use” (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 3). This is an important concept in my analysis.

Key concepts: modality and production

To put the meanings together, social semiotics uses specific methods of analysis which are clear and powerful. Their concept of ‘modality’ is useful for analysis as it considers ‘truth’ or ‘reality value’. It is the representation of truth that modality deals with. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that:

Truth is a construct of semiosis, and as such the truth of a
particular social group, arising from the values or beliefs of that group. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 159.)

The ‘modality markers’ or ‘cues’ that a social group establishes define its kind of truth and what will and will not represent that, in order to seem a credible statement in that context, they explain. Using this tool it is possible to make assumptions about the sign-maker’s motivation in the construction of the message as ‘true’, and consider on whose terms this truth is constructed.

Production decisions in the making of an advertisement also signify. Roland Barthes argued that connotation can also come about through “… the style of artwork or the technique of photography such as framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed” (Barthes, 1977, quoted in van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 98). In this way social semiotics acknowledges both the wider processes such as production, consumption and audiencing; and the narrower pre-production, where images are constructed through a process of briefing, conceiving and producing.

Social semiotics is also a valuable tool for its centrality of people in the theory. Lister and Wells (2001) state that social semiotic sources are based in the cultural, as “In practice, it is seldom, if ever, possible to separate the cultures of everyday life from practices of representation, visual or otherwise.” (p. 61). Social semiotics is a complementary analytical method to other theoretical frameworks which do not relate as strongly to people and culture.

Cultural criticism. ideology and the referent system theory of Judith Williamson

After Barthes’, Williamson’s rich and complex work Decoding Advertisements (Williamson, 1995) is the foundational work on the examination of visual meaning in advertising. She applies her critique at two levels: the level of the image and the level of power and control.³

³ Williamson’s is essentially a critique of advertising, the system, from a Marxist position. Her discussion also reflects the theories of advertising practices and the constitution of the ‘consumer’ of the cultural critic Raymond Williams.
Williamson’s semiological discussion begins with an examination of the component parts of advertising in an attempt to reclaim analysis which is cohesive and not separated into ‘form’ and ‘content’. She specifies that their semiotic terms be adopted, pointing out that the parts that make up this sign – the signifier (form) and the signified (content) – have been wrongly regarded as separate, with a concentration on, and misunderstanding of, content (p. 17). Williamson considers that, unlike the modernist dictum of the form being an ‘invisible’ carrier of the content’s meaning, form *is* the meaning, form *is* the signifier; what ‘means’ the meaning in an advertisement. The signified – content, what the ad ‘means’ – is then examined, and the circle completed by going back to the sign and questioning the implications of that sign: how the signifier accomplished its task.

**Key concept: the referent system**

Williamson’s main critique of advertising concerns the image as proof of the advertising system’s issues of power and control and her formal analyses are the exposure of these dealings. These are methods which can be applied to reveal narratives and suggest implications; appropriate to an examination of a case study’s workings. Using this critique of the ideology that advertising creates, an ideology behind the particular image can be demonstrated and an interpretative position taken. An ideology is “the system whereby society gives itself a ‘meaning’ other than what it really is”, Williamson states (1995, p. 169). The way ideological systems create and use meanings is by way of referent systems familiar to the audience, Williamson states, becoming “the basis for a connection … unstated by the verbal part of the ad, and sometimes quite – apparently – irrelevant” (p. 20).

The theory of the referent system is a wonderful tool for analysis, giving the substance to what could otherwise be just an exercise. Once a referent system is identified, the ideology in operation can be identified, and the analysis can be extended to serve the purpose of exposure, or practical strategies can be formulated to counter the ideological workings.
Discourse analysis

Williamson’s examination of the role of form in creating meaning I see as being applied on two levels: a position on the level of the image and a position on the role of the mechanisms of the system ‘advertising’. She is thus undertaking a discourse analysis at the two levels that Rose outlines in *Visual Methodologies* (Tonkiss, 1988, in Rose, 2001, p. 149). This goes beyond an analysis of the structure of the discursive statement to the social context of the statement, examining the rhetorical organisation of the discourse and the institutional and power structures behind it.

Social semiotics shares this approach because, as discussed, it disagrees with the concentration on the sign: its ‘pre-given’ potential and the lack of acknowledgement of its use. This is one of the reasons why Williamson’s analytical methods supplement social semiotics: they share contextual approaches, but from different perspectives and to different degrees.

Strengths, weaknesses and linkages

The issues that are established by social semiotics and by Williamson interlink, which is why I find the combination of frameworks useful for analysis but neither one is solely sufficient for my purposes as an analytical method. Social semiotics has a production interest, allowing assumption of localised issues of decisions made and meanings constructed through the motivations of the producers, whereas Williamson sets out to demonstrate a system: the advertising system’s use of *us*. I believe that making assumptions about the production rationale adds a criticality to a study, but only certain implications of the contexts of production and circulation are opened up by Williamson.

The visual rhetorical classification of Jacques Durand

The introduction of a further theory, that of visual rhetoric, with its aspect of exaggerated construction, supplements the two frameworks used so far by considering the creativity of the producer. This is rhetoric through the visual strand; the creation of meaning in order to depart from the ‘simple proposition’ and establish persuasive figuration. Durand developed his visual rhetoric classification around 1970, utilising a matrix or framework in order to isolate
figures of (spoken) rhetoric which could be demonstrated through the visual. He classified 20 rhetorical figures, with images drawn from thousands of ads of the period.

The mapping of visual rhetoric is a particular application of semiotic theory, which addresses the imaginative leaps often made in dealing with the visual. It has a strength for my purposes in that it deals with ideas in the way that a practitioner creating meaning does – the Critical Reader can see the way they are being led to understand something: there are connections placed for the reader to make, and an awareness of the creation of the meaning is developed.

Representation is at the core of meaning-making and rhetoric’s appeal is in the particular way it represents. Rhetoric is a persuasive device: a way to say something with more impact; to build an argument in order to persuade, using ‘figures’. Gillian Dyer explains that Durand defines rhetoric as “the art of fake speech … [it] brings into play two levels of language, ‘language proper’ and ‘figurative language’. The rhetorical figure is the mechanism that allows passage from one level to the other …” Rhetorical figures, in Durand’s view, should be regarded as mock violations of a norm … against the ‘normal’ use of language or the norms of logic, morality, social rules and physical reality. Advertising frequently breaks ‘rules’ … of physical reality by using the devices of dreaming and fantasy to induce ‘trance-like’ states in the audience, Dyer states (Dyer, 1999, p. 160).

**Key concept: Relation**

The idea of ‘relation’ is central to assigning rhetorical figures in the Durand system. It is through post-structuralism and Foucault that relation and opposition were developed as defining strategies and visual rhetoric is a post-structuralist demonstration as much as a semiotic. Without demonstration of the relation, the visual rhetoric figure could not be assessed. Both form and content may be involved: formal relations must be understood and remain significant as relations, because the relational aspect creates the named figure. For example, the figure ‘allusion’ is the way the relation of ‘similarity’ performs as a figure of substitution (where something similar is substituted), as allusion is a similarity of
form. So the figure of allusion is understood through its relation of ‘similarity’ when the ‘operation’ of substitution is performed (as is metaphor, a figure of substitution with a relation of similarity; however metaphor’s aspect is of content, not form).

Internal relations such as these are important in the process of trying to assign visual rhetoric classification in any case study; it is one thing to choose advertising which is overtly demonstrative, but more difficult when more complex advertising is selected.

**How Visual Rhetoric works**

The strength of visual rhetoric theory lies in its recognition of connotation, and Durand’s classification demonstrates the way advertising can use this method of making a product connect with an idea (a cultural meaning) without necessarily having to state that idea. Something that cannot be *said* can be *shown*, for example. Figure 2 demonstrates that showing the last thing you would use in the kitchen (toilet brush), points up the deficiencies in the thing you normally use (sponge). This is done through association, in order to convince you that a previously unconsidered product (paper towel) is safer than the sponge you formerly thought hygienic. This is not ‘subliminal’ (something not consciously recognised, through use of particular methods) but it does involve the codes of a culture.
Strengths and weaknesses

With the demonstration of visual rhetoric, Durand deals with the ‘how’ in a way that Williamson does not. The drawback is that there is no expanded discussion of the implications of the persuasive methods. Unlike Williamson’s position, there is no outline of ideologies behind the constructs, no linkage to particular referent systems. Although the intention to create meaning is demonstrated, the end result is, after all, just a recognition of a ‘persuasion instant’. For discussion of the connection to motivations within a thesis of advertising’s power and the consumer’s complicity, Williamson is needed.

Towards an analytical toolkit

Equipped now with theoretical methods, a case study can be made. I am choosing to focus on social concern advertising, which is a genre generally believed to be sincere and credible. A particular instance of informative message creation, my specific case study is a particular representation of reality. It is this representation of the truth and reality of a woman’s state and condition that
interests me, and how that representation came to be.

My combined method – of structuralist semiotics, text-centred and code-dependent, and visual rhetoric, post-structuralist and interpretive – is essentially a semiological analysis of visual images which benefits from post-structuralist research.4

As I work from the position that the form of the message carries certain information about the reliability of the message, analysing the way these messages are constructed opens meanings for consideration. Mine may not be the ‘preferred’ reading of the originator, but one that I put forward as the ‘reader’ of the meanings made. This reading will be, of course, one of a number of possible readings.

This combination may be a unique one, but the idea of using a variety of analytical methods is put forward by van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001, p. 8) in discussion of the range of analytical methods available, and their specificity. Of benefit in a combined kit is the flexibility, the alternating roles, where one tool may reveal a lot while another may make a single point only.

**Case study analysis**

The case study is of advertising in the women’s health and welfare field. It is the print advertisement of the Women’s Refuge campaign, by Saatchi & Saatchi, published in 2002. The analytical tools are applied in a sequence of analysis, as follows:

- establish the denotative aspects
- consider the formal visual elements and principles used, extending the analysis through the social semiotic tools of modality and production in order to establish how these elements, principles and methods are suggesting meaning
- identify rhetorical figures used, as a way of identifying to what extent

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4 Adapting rhetoric to the visual has a lineage of classification systems beginning in the nineteen forties: Burke 1945, Maldonado 1956, Barthes 1964, Bonistepe 1965, Durand 1970; and most discussion of visual rhetoric today is based on one of these originators, with differences usually at the level of structure and relations. Dyer has noted that Durand’s is the most extensive and systematic exploration of rhetoric in publicity images (Dyer, 1999, p. 159). Durand’s first publication of his findings (and of his matrix of classification) was ‘Rhetorique et image publicitaire’, in French, in Communications 15, 1970, referencing the title of Barthes’ ‘Rhetorique de l’image’ in
persuasion is being made, what the relationships imply, and what connections are being made through connotation
• fit this into a broader system of meaning by employing cultural criticism; establishing the referent systems in operation to establish the ideology created and to question the nature of the intent.

The denotative elements (considering some visual language elements and principles)

This advertisement is a group: a series of four sequential pages presenting as two double-page spreads (figs 3–4). Each page features a woman; three in their twenties and one in her fifties. A denotative reading of the images reveals the following: filling the left half of the first left-hand page (fig 3) is a young woman in her early twenties, sitting, facing left and out of the frame. Her head is slightly tilted to her right, showing more of the left of her face. Her body is cropped at her drawn-up knees. This brings her face close to the left-hand edge. The unmade bed she sits on is cropped at the bottom and appears as a plane. Her position leaves the page half unoccupied. The image is light in tone, with naturalistic light, and out-of-focus objects beyond the figure. She reflects the pale green environment through her light green, long-sleeved, gauze top and an unidentified undergarment. She is gazing slightly upwards, seemingly pensively.

Opposite the first subject, and facing in the opposite direction, a young woman of similar age stands with her arms folded protectively across her body. She also gazes pensively out of the frame and she occupies a similar environment, apparently an extension of that opposite, without the bed in focus.

the same publication. Durand had studied with Barthes.
Figures 3 and 4

Turning the page we have a different experience within the set: on the left, seated, body in three-quarter view but facing directly towards us, a woman in her fifties with blonded, grey hair looks directly at us (fig 5). Her hands are folded on her lap and although her chest is not protected, as with the previous subjects, she has her legs crossed. The environment matches the pale grey-green of the previous images but there is no bed.
Figures 5 and 6

The older woman is opposed by quite a differently posed young woman. Facing right, she slumps in an armchair with her arms thrown back, holding a book. We see little of her body in this open position as she is cropped severely, body only shown from the armpit up, and she is facing right, out of the page. This young woman does not seek to protect her body. Although also reflective, she is the most detached. The colour palette is consistent with the other three images. Her chair is in front of a glass-shelved niche which holds some ornaments. The severe cropping suggests we are passing by her.

As mentioned, the overall colour palette in clothing and interior is almost monochrome: light green with a greyish bias, broken only by flesh tones and some cream. The tone is muted and the interiors depicted are seemingly naturally lit, with no harsh contrast or saturation of colour. The feeling is soft, calm and introspective. The sequence has the look of an undergarment or casual fashion ad typical of higher-end women’s magazines; the only difference being the scale of the women relative to the viewer (larger-scale and closer up than fashion images usually are).
These have all been descriptive observations, through the elements and principles of formal visual language and composition, with a few possible connections generated by colour, posture, eye-line, and framing and position. The elements form a ‘concatenation’, as van Leeuwen has defined it, and this combination conveys more than elements alone do. That the scale is odd is in itself an analytical statement because it implies that there is a norm and a deviation demonstrated by signifying elements.

The series is unsettling to me. There is obviously something not quite right but it takes a little investigation to see the details, read the captions, check the details again and understand the intent. It is not until the final page that we see, below the young woman and isolated in a darker area of the image, the Women’s Refuge campaign message, in small print, finishing with ‘fight domestic violence’, in small, but bold, red capitals. Williamson has claimed that one of the methods advertising uses to draw us in is by posing ‘puzzles’ to be solved, in order for us to believe we are self-determining in the process. This series seems a case in point, but more than the denotative elements are needed to see what this puzzle is.

**Social Semiotic resources (tools) applied in analysis**

A close reading of the imagery using the social semiotic framework forms the initial analysis as it provides tools which are practical and based on observation. An appropriate point to begin a social semiotic analysis is through the camera’s point of view (a ‘resource’), and the position it places us in as viewers.

**The camera’s point of view, viewing position and framing resources**

In the Women’s Refuge advertisement we directly confront the four women, page by page in a series; although confrontation may not be the right word as there is no acknowledgement of our presence from three of the four subjects. We are observers: there is the feeling that we are approaching the women and are barely at sufficient distance for them to move away from us and this creates some unease as the scale is wrong for the proximity: although we seem to be at eye
level with the older woman, if she were to stand up she would tower above us and we would be very low down or further away than the proximity suggests. And yet we are not: we are very close. This is the case throughout and it begs questions of who we are and why we are so positioned. There is at least some trepidation from one (the oldest) who acknowledges our presence; social semiotics allows us to consider these as meanings; as implications of scale and viewer position. The implication is of a power relationship and had we (the camera) been positioned higher than the seated woman we would have had a position of symbolic power and dominance (the attacker, perhaps, diminishing the woman; inappropriate for the approach of this particular campaign). Acknowledging the production technique – in this case a telescopic type of lens – does not alter the unease of the position differential as we observe it (an interesting feature of social semiotics).

All four women turn their bodies away from the camera into three-quarter profile, and the three young women turn their heads, also; profile is the position of detachment. Although all are pensive, one is atypical: the older woman turns to face us and appears to look directly at, but a fraction above, us (fig 5). As frontal eye contact establishes engagement and creates symbolic equality, the way the woman presents to us ensures our maximum involvement with her; it increases the audience’s identification and involvement with the represented participant, creating a symbolic relationship (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, p. 147).

It is a clever use of the viewing position resource that we are forced into full engagement and drawn into what seems to be a barely concealed distress in this older woman; a tension and a holding-back apparent in her deep-set eyes with the dark pupils. The viewing position advances the isolation of this woman and an assumption of the intention of this can be made: the older woman’s eye contact is a purposeful selection, I contend; one with an emotional edge. To enable that one woman to be so targeted makes that ‘symbolic relationship’ more poignant and establishes her as the woman the ad is really about (the key woman; perhaps the ‘only’ woman), establishing two unique characteristics: that the older woman can also be a victim, and that she and girls of ‘her’ daughter’s age need support as much as women from less affluent social strata.
The framing resource is also very consciously employed: all images are carefully positioned, and two are heavily cropped. The framing forces three of the four women to occupy half-page vertical segments of their area; the exception being the young Asian woman who occupies the central axis, thus setting her slightly apart for special consideration.

The environment

The environment/s the women occupy are hard to understand and certainly not a refuge as we might imagine it to be. Apart from the first two, the women do not appear to be in the same room or aware of each other. In a state of suspension, they inhabit non-domestic spaces with little furniture, the last (fig 6) having the feel of a gallery or a consultant’s waiting room, or perhaps legal chambers. Although the first environment (fig 3) seems to be a bedroom, the green is also the kind of green that hospitals sometimes favour. It may be that analogous colours, a formal device which indicates the ‘tasteful’, through harmony, are employed here to deal with the ‘distasteful’; the hidden violence in the middle and upper social strata.  

Implications of the text

On the first left-hand page, at top left, the text is a small running-head, subtly set in light weight sanserif capitals, reversed out of the low contrast background. This says only AN APPEAL. We have thus been warned but don’t yet make the association with the advertiser and, after all, ‘an appeal’ could be fashion copy. The two right-hand pages carry vertically a very small advertising agency coding (SAATCHI WR08C1), also in reversed-out capitals. The more significant text, though, is the style of caption, first encountered on the initial right-hand page and following on the subsequent right. Partly in capitals, and relatively small, these take the form of fashion captions describing the clothes, for example: ‘WOOL

[footnote: I think it is significant that the advertiser has attempted to communicate that, within the range of women in need of refuge, there is a specific and rarely depicted group, women from wealthier society. I have chosen the term ‘upper-class’ for them, in order to discuss the visual approach as, although not a New Zealand concept, its alternatives are not specific enough. An interesting dilemma is then presented: these are women that we do not usually associate with ‘the sort of women who are beaten’, which, in itself, is an undesirable position for a viewer to take as it implies a judgement on women and on men. So I acknowledge that my use of the term is flawed.]

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SHOE-STRING TOP AND KNIT SKIRT, BOTH FROM WOMEN’S REFUGE’ (the picture is emerging), then: ‘BRUISES, MODEL’S OWN’.

The convention for ‘model’s own’ is that the model is wearing something unique, of her own, which better captures the ‘look’ than accessories the magazine stylist may intend to be worn. Here, though, bruises are the unique accessory. It is at this point that we look for the bruises and so subtly have they been placed that it is not until we search that we see them. From then on they are easily found and quite shocking, the more so because of the gentle and pensive attributes. The first subject (fig 3, 7) has a bruised and swollen top and bottom lip on her right side and a barely discernible bruised eye. Looking to the right and following both hands of the second subject (fig 4, 7), we see bruises on neck and arm. The older woman (fig 5, 7) has bruising to the side of her mouth. She is wearing a wedding ring, the second significant focal point after her face, and this ring draws our eye to the heavy bruising on the semi-concealed lower hand (it is significant as it is the only jewellery and the only symbol of marital status, suggesting who it might be that perpetrated the violence).

Figure 7

The final subject (fig 6, 7) has her face tilted up and her eye bruising is almost lost in natural shadow and contour. What to make of all this bruising? All bruises are upper-torso and near the face, and they dispel the notion (from our anterior ‘knowledge’) that men in this social strata make sure the results of their beating don’t show.

Modality

The use of what appears to be fashion photography places this imagery into the
aesthetic strand (of the sensory modality). That the issue would be aestheticised is odd; for what connection could there be in violence against women and artistically-styled, consumer-culture imagery? Social Concern campaigns have used unusual methods, but a good test of appropriateness is to transfer the ad’s modality to another advertising context: road deaths, for example, would probably never use an aesthetic mode connected to fashion, even if approaching the same demographic. But obesity could. In this way the aestheticisation can be claimed to be a construct for the female audience.

Within the female audience, the ad has established a particular social group and drawn on ‘knowledge’ of it. The group’s ‘truth’ is represented as restrained luxury. In order to make a connection and establish credibility with these women, the styling has used appropriate ‘taste’ or aesthetic to correctly capture values. A cue or marker in this aestheticisation, apart from the fashion connection, is the low saturation, monochrome, colour palette and the restrained interior décor. In this way the values or beliefs of that group are represented as interior and fashion at the moment that they display the results of violence to us. But they display the violence in a restrained way. I thus consider a chief value of the social group to be restraint. This demonstrates how an analytical tool such as modality establishes social behaviours without ever having to state them.

The aesthetic also creates a ‘realism’. There is realism in the depiction of the women, yet we ‘know’ this isn’t ‘reality’ (‘model’s own’, eg.). And, although reality is the opposite of fantasy, we ‘know’, in Williamson’s terms, that this is fantasy. In this way the modality can be seen weaving ‘truth’ tighter and tighter, simultaneous with the audience knowing it is not real or true. Establishing the use of the aesthetic mode allows the Reader to keep firmly in mind that it is aestheticised.

A close reading has revealed a shift between conventions; of what we expect to see and what is actually seen. This creates the unsettling effect which my interpretation has revealed but not yet explained. I see that these women all belong together through more than just the compositional relativity of bodies in space: colour-wise a connection has been made, suggesting that they are not
comfortably at home but are away from home. I know that refuges cannot be this luxurious but the connection with luxury seems consciously intended. I can see that this is a ‘different class of woman’, and I ‘know’ that this campaign in this sort of magazine is aimed at middle-class women. Modality markers have confirmed these assumptions and shown an aestheticisation, constructing a social group which strongly demonstrates restraint. That restraint has social implications beyond signalling appropriate style to the intended audience. Modality analysis has also established a realism from the unreal and truths from the untrue. But I cannot know more than that.

A clever ad, it effectively brings the concept of Women’s Refuge to our awareness. However it raises some important questions: why would violence against women be linked with fashion? Why link it with anything other than the violence it arises from? Would it not also be fair to say that linking violence with a domain women seek out for escapism (the fashion magazine) is a rather insidious proposal? It is here that this analytical position shows the limits of its range. I am interpreting but I cannot know why the product I am interpreting might have been fashioned and to what end.

**Visual rhetoric identified**

The artfulness is apparent in this ad: this is not an informative advertisement, nor a depiction of how women needing help or leaving home might elicit aid; nor is it the realistic representation of domestic violence (although Women’s Refuge doesn’t dwell on the results of violence). Analysing the artfulness will allow consideration of the use of persuasive devices described in Durand’s system of visual rhetoric. The rhetorical figure, with its agenda of ‘artful persuasion’, introduces some implications of the creative meaning-making onto the stage set by social semiotic analysis.

**Rhetorical figures and relations**

Viewed as a sequence (fig 8) the ad primarily uses the visual rhetorical additive operation termed ‘figures of addition’. There is addition to the basic proposition
of a battered woman through the use of four women. It is then necessary to understand the internal relations within the additive operation. The choice here can centre on identity or similarity: identity might have been considered the most appropriate, but although it is found in the shared state (bruising and evidence of beating) and in their being essentially the same (product of experience), there is the important matter of the symbolic difference of types of women.

Figure 8

The four seem to have been consciously chosen as different women to symbolise difference within the shared state: older Pakeha, younger Pakeha, younger maybe Maori, younger Asian. Similarity, rather than identity, is thus the chosen relation – through comparison of content (not form) – and homology is the actual figure; as Durand defines it “different persons, in the same attitude, show the different varieties of the product” (Durand, 1987, p. 298). The idea that this figure “expresses the unity of the product through the diversity of its varieties” seems oddly appropriate – if shocking – in this case, where the people presenting (the results of violence) are diverse in variety but share the beaten state and the bruises (there are many ways to inflict physical damage, but the state of being a woman and thus an ‘easy target’ is a shared one). Unanimity and accumulation are other figures under this operation; their names oddly suggestive in this context.

On the other hand, difference relation has some appropriateness – it would
indicate a variety of experiences of violence from a variety of sources. But
sundering the shared state would tinker with what I assume is the advertiser’s
intended meaning. A similarity/difference duality does exist in a number of
aspects image by image: there are different effects from the beatings, for
example, but they are essentially similar in that all are on the face or upper torso.
Internally there is a similarity of form (form is termed ‘abstract style’ by
Durand), described through visual principles, but externally the ad is a sequence,
which constitutes a ‘difference’ in its departure from the advertising norm
(especially for a charity).

Durand states that there is often more than one figure present, so the operation of
suppression could also be considered (‘figures of suppression’). In this category
opposition relation allows for the figures reticence and antithesis and this is
certainly present: antithesis, for example, in the linkage to clothing and fashion,
and this is at once logical, given the market, and illogical, given that fashion is
the last consideration of a person moving out of a violent situation. Reticence,
also, in the masking of physical violence in a magazine world of daily doings.
There might also be an element of paradox, a figure under ‘false homology
relation’.

This analysis has proved that persuasive devices have been used and has added
the awareness that the construction of the image – through planning, production
and subsequent creative choices – was consciously and carefully directed. The
application of both social semiotic and visual rhetoric tools showed the crafting
of meaning-making and revealed some disquieting elements, but neither has
shown why – beyond their actual employment – these are unsettling. To establish
what motivation might inform the choices, and whether that is ‘appropriate’, a
stronger tool is necessary.

Establishing the use of a referent system
The Women’s Refuge ad may be visually arresting in the context of a women’s
magazine, cleverly mimicking the usual fashion content, but this has implications
beyond those of the ‘legitimate’ fashion feature. The ad’s use of fashion reveals a
dichotomy; the need now is to supplement the results of previous analysis with
tools which examine implications and reveal what underpins this instance. It is necessary to move from semiotic approach to discursive approach, where Williamson’s theory of how ideological systems create meaning will complete the analytical process (Williamson, 1995).  

The content, the product Women’s Refuge, should first be established. Women’s Refuge is what is denoted; this is important to establish as on initial viewing the connotations create confusion. This confusion arises because the fashion system has been taken into the ad as a referent system (signified through, for example, style and sequence of layout; posing; colouring methods; and captioning). Fashion thus becomes a signified but is in turn a signifier of ‘upper-classness’, which is important in this ad as it is used for two purposes: in order to draw on our knowledge, as viewers, and in order to connect with ‘women like these’.

Because of the anterior knowledge we bring to its reading, we ‘know’ that the sort of women depicted here live in fashionable environments and present fashionably; we also ‘know’ that in a magazine context, fashion is on the minds of middle and upper-class women; or this is confirmed by the fashion connotation. The ‘fashion signified’ thus establishes a connection between this sort of woman and fashion, an area of interest and reassurance and, as readers, our shared world. A connection of this to the idea of refuge may seem impossible, but is made through the clothing: although referred to as provided by the refuge, it still looks fashionable.

For the first-time viewer, it is a gradual realisation that ‘this sort of woman’ has been physically abused and it is then that the examination of the fashion connotation reveals complexities. In the ‘naturalness’ of a fashion-style series in a women’s magazine – if it is at all natural to link the two – we find that the

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6 Williamson’s position is considered problematic by some, as Kenney & Scott argue: “Cultural criticism that posits either some unseen ‘system’ through which advertisers ‘manipulate’ consumers or that argues for the consistent power of a particular type of appeal (like sex in advertising) is… misguided.” (Kenney & Scott, 2003, p. 22). However, I believe that an interpretative space can be opened by considering Barthes as the bridge and using Williamson to expose meanings through referent systems rather than concentrating on her over-arching theory of advertising, the system.

7 ‘Anterior knowledge’ is a term Williamson uses to demonstrate the pre-existing ‘knowledge’ we already have that allows us to make the required ‘exchange’ in an ad. This is a cyclic process whereby ideas are used because of being referred to and referred to because of being used, she states, referring to it as “the constant re-production of
referent system fashion has within it a more disturbing connotation: ‘heroin chic’. This was a signified or ‘style’ displayed in fashion magazines from the mid 1990s8; ‘fashionable violence’—a fashion strategy for reaching an audience of excess. The reference to heroin abuse emerged from a fashion photography culture, which set out to depict its own ‘reality’; that of drug abuse and overdose; of drugged and passive bodies; of signs of violence (bruising and blood); climaxing in death and decay late in the 1990s.

In appropriating this other form of violence, as a ‘sub-referent’, the Women’s Refuge ad unfortunately widens the connotations of violence; from victims of physical abuse, to linking to self-inflicted abuse, sado-masochism, voyeurism and nihilism. The violence is no longer only an act which ‘happened’ to these women just before we viewed the ad, but also speaks of a violence which is ‘fashionable’ and ‘created for the camera’.

**Slippage**

This slippage between the structures of fashion advertising and consumption in the fashion genre and a campaign to help women who have been beaten by violent men is important to note.9 The implication of inappropriate style is disturbing. Connecting domestic violence with celebratory violence, sexism and sadism proves Williamson’s point that “admakers exploit systems of knowledge that are woven into society” (Williamson, 1995, p. 154). Although on the one hand fetishising the body (the bruise aligning with codes of dominance and passivity), on the other hand ‘heroin chic’ fetishised the submissive nature of the ideas” (Williamson, 1995, p. 99). Commonly understood referent systems ensure this knowledge and allow reference to take the place of description. It is not ‘truth’, but, “it endows the ad with such status” (p. 100).

8 ‘Heroin chic’ is a term coined by journalists. According to Arnold (1999), this was a rejection of the conspicuous consumption of the 1980s, producing the ‘fascination with darkness’ of the 1990s. “The ‘deviant’ behaviour of the junkie had been brought into the confined world of fashion, its change in context disturbing readers”. The brutalism has been connected to the influence of documentary journalism (Smedley, 2000, p. 146), and the ‘brutal realism’ of photographers Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton (Crail, 1994, p. 108). Arnold discusses Bourdin “slipping from eroticism to violence” (Arnold, 1999, p. 496). The nature of the analysis is very interesting when connected with the Women’s Refuge ad. For example: (as quoted) “… our voyeurism is made uncomfortable… we seem to be witnessing private scenes that are themselves ambiguous”, and “The ambiguity of the image is confrontational; meaning is sought from the collection of signifiers but never satisfactorily found” (Arnold, 2001, p. 53).

9 Slippage is a term “used in deconstructionist and postmodernist criticism to describe subtle shifts in meaning between different uses of a word or phrase, or within a single use as analysis probes deeper levels of meaning.” Accessed from www.pfmb.uni-mb.si/eng/dept/eng/text/glos2.htm
female body for a fashion agenda. In the Women’s Refuge ad the fetishisation process is similar; staged, but the agenda differs. It should be asked if the fetishisation process is valid in the context of these readers and donors.

Williamson says, of surreal structures, that we engage with the puzzle in the belief that “the less sense it makes, the more sense it must really make and the deeper this sense must lie” (Williamson, 1995, p. 141). There are deeper motivations possible for the ‘heroin chic’ connotation, but as used in the campaign, it is probably just a conceit; a ‘style’ used to make the ad contemporary; the signified becoming ‘heroin chic style’, which demonstrates Williamson’s point: advertising’s method of ‘hollowing-out’ ideas in order to appropriate them; highlighting the emptiness of advertising methods.

*The uncomfortable voyeur*

There is difficulty for the viewer in such images, as Arnold states:

> The viewer is denied the satisfaction of spectatorship: the comfort of being outside the image looking anonymously in is challenged, voyeurism is made uncomfortable. (Arnold, 2001, p. 53)

My position, vis-à-vis these women, is also difficult. I find it disturbing that these bruised women are waiting so passively in minimal interiors and I feel that it is important to establish where exactly they are. If each is at home, why is she waiting in this way? To be beaten again? Because she was told that she shouldn’t tell a soul? Or waiting for my help? As well as wondering where each is and why she is waiting so passively; that she is waiting is, itself, troubling to me. That they are in a barren (albeit luxurious) environment with no potential for action, I find disturbing. The inference I draw is that for the middle/upper-class woman there is no making a fuss; there is no rebellion (this connects to the ‘restraint’ noted by the social semiotic tools, and the ‘reticence’ mentioned under visual rhetoric); there is no power to make independent decisions.
The interior referent

Interior design has been used as an additional referent system, very important in this ad, and used in a similar way to fashion, as our anterior knowledge easily connects these women and this sort of interior. I suggest that the point of this use is to establish an environment of some status, and possibly to connect to professional help. Although there are signifiers of the home environment, some signifiers in the ad suggest that each is already at a place where she will be ‘seen’ by someone. The private hospital or consulting rooms would be appropriate, given the passivity, but in the final image the shelving suggests a professional’s office, such as a barrister’s. An implicit passiveness is connoted through both signifieds: through fashion and its posing and isolation of figure from figure, and through interior design and the nature of a ‘set’; empty of action and reality. ‘Reality’ is only touched upon twice: in the slightly rumpled bed, where the fashion signifier (posed on bed) becomes an interior signifier (bed in room; monochrome palette), and in the book held by one of the women.

Although the lightness could make the interiors seem spacious, the monochrome interior palette makes it confining, revealing another dimension of the life of an abused upper-class woman when seen in the light of Williamson’s discussion of space as signifier:

> A basic idea of space and extension has been made to operate through the picture in a way that really ‘means’ quite the opposite: enclosure. (Williamson, 1995, p. 21)

This technique of connection between product and referent signifies – in this case the confinement you would recognise if you were in the same position as these women; dangerously ‘cocooned in luxury’. Use of colour can also be one of the signifiers of ‘quality’; the implications of which could not be stated in words. The advertiser can’t say “even wealthy people like you get beaten by their partners”, so it is ‘said’ through signifiers such as the sophisticated grey-green palette. The passive colour and the passive women share a timeless and surreal quality.
Summary of findings

Through using the analytical toolkit, the Women’s Refuge advertisement has been found to use semiotic devices for the purposes of making meanings, and rhetorical figures for persuasion. Use of tools associated with analysis of discursive methods has revealed an attempt, through employing referent systems, to create links which suggest to middle or upper-class women in violent relationships that they will be able to seek help at a level that maintains their social status. However the advertisement has been a departure from the expected, in both content (giving money to a refuge for women escaping domestic violence) and visual representation (which might have been supposed to be information-rich, with some illustration). The social semiotic tools demonstrated a significant departure from an expected modality: from naturalistic representation of women to the aesthetic.

Visual rhetoric tools established departure from the simple proposition and showed the implications of the additive operations and their relations. The preferred (intended) meaning has been recognised; but through using these analytical tools, an ‘unintended’ meaning has been revealed and critical discussion of this developed. The paradoxical meaning has been created through conscious use of devices and methods used to connote or link to meanings not apparent to the uncritical reader. Some of the techniques and devices used were revealed as intentionally used and I contend that women are being pacified and objectified through the stylisation process. The ad, it is argued, demonstrates unsettling features, which hold problematic power-related messages; which in turn connect to a dangerous stereotyping of women (in this case, vulnerable women) as ‘victim’ in more senses of the word than the domestic. The aesthetic creates isolation, passivity and submission: thus action might be discounted.

There is a voyeuristic, ‘filmic’ quality established in these ‘stills’; through monochrome ‘sets’ and the feeling of a camera panning across a scene, temporarily isolating a character before moving on. This much was established through social semiotic analysis. In Williamson’s terms, this shows referent systems in operation. The strongest of these linkages is demonstrated as the
fashion system referent ‘heroin chic’, which connects with death. Through connection to two referents that assign to women (to a greater or lesser degree) the part of victim, disturbing connotations arise. Not necessarily articulated, but taken in.

Such meanings may work in favour of the advertiser and engender pity, or they may not, and this is part of the paradox of the ‘unintended’ meaning: responses to the referent system’s ideology (if even understood by the producers) cannot be known. In particular, the use of a misogynist referent may turn women away from the service.

Passivity is a problematic concept when associated with women who need to be motivated to make change in their lives. The women in the study are introspective, which does not suggest moving forward with any intent; to get out, they will have to be stronger than this. Surely a donor would want them to be active on their own behalf so the money they give would assist positive action? Why would the women not be shown as angry or evaluative, as in a previous Women’s Refuge campaign? Why not pointing out the bruises; telling us they want our help NOW? I conclude that ‘passive’ is a choice made in the mode of production, and this choice needs explanation that isn’t offered by the ad.

There is also a suggested level of luxury – given that a simple proposition for financial support could be made, why would the ad’s presentation be taken to such extremes? Does the ad address woman as donor or woman as user? It would seem both. While it asks for donations from women ‘like these’ (charitable donors), and the construction aims to elicit empathy, the luxury is one clue that charitable donors are not the sole target. Another clue is that no information of any substance is given; tying the charity to empty (fashion) desires rather than promotion of a valuable and capable service. As an uncritical reader I might never know this range of meanings could be present, but I would still experience unease: I may want to engage with their need, but due to the stylisation, I cannot be sure what the real fears of these women are, and due to lack of information, I cannot see any alternative proposition for them.
It seems that more than passivity is connoted. I have already identified the older woman as the key figure to break our stereotype of a domestic violence victim. Her strength here is that she remains so hurt, even after we have closed the magazine. But this suggests that what is being activated is our anterior knowledge of resignation and shame. Shame is culturally specific and in her culture there are particular financial and strategic difficulties connected with leaving the home. The question of shame is an interesting one. Barthes bases our ideologies on myths and it is possible that ‘shame’ could form an underlying myth in this case. Perhaps the advertiser identifies that both victim and viewer will feel ‘ashamed’, and targets this? And the suggestion of shame may extend to our anterior knowledge from the recent past of attitudes towards women: of women ‘attracting’ violence, and ‘asking for it’.

It is enough to analyse the visual meaning-making as it presents without corroboration from the producers, however this puzzle cannot be solved without some recourse to the site of production.\textsuperscript{10} I made a move to discover why the client chose to position the ad this way. I found that the Women’s Refuge Association had a problem: women from this culture were more reluctant to leave homes where there was violence.\textsuperscript{11} There was trepidation about what sort of place they would go to.

From this I can form assumptions: that by showing them that they might have time to reflect in an environment which felt safe and of the standard they were used to (not a refuge but a private home), it would become a practical proposition to leave the violent home. From this advertisement their ‘anterior knowledge’ of the interiors (more acute in this instance than the casual viewer’s) would allow them to deduce that they could be placed in an acceptable environment; that there would be professionals to assist them. The clothes they might need were clothes they could understand. They could maintain dignity (there being a lot more than money to lose in their sort of society). Incorporation of a young Asian woman would be consciously made, to extend into this client group without undue

\textsuperscript{10} In the British magazine Design Michael Johnson (Johnson, 1998, p. 50) stated that due to donor fatigue, one of two newer strategies of charitable marketing was harder-hitting pitches which used “emotive imagery of broken dolls and children’s cots”.

\textsuperscript{11} Conversation in 2004 with a former Women’s Refuge director from the 1990s.
attention. Whether this middle or upper-class audience was younger or older victim, parents of daughters, or potential donors; the message spoke to them directly.

Engagement with the tools enabled me as a Reader. Strangely, for me the result of my analysis became a subjective response: a certain sadness emerged. I felt, more clearly than before my reading, that these women’s dependence in the world is being reinforced (through passivity). It remains a clever ad (it certainly intrigued me on first viewing); it attracts attention through slippage between fashion and advertisement, and the resolving of this, on the surface, ensures it is compelling and memorable. If we asked nothing more of our advertisements than that they engage, intrigue and entertain us, this would be successful. But if we ask for society to put aside stereotyping and codes of dominance, and reflect strengths rather than culturally-assigned weaknesses; then I would argue that this ad stands as a failure.

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Routledge.


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