Advertising images elicit a response from the viewer. Ads attempt to sell a product to a potential consumer using images and words that create a positive social image. Public service announcements (PSA) take the form of advertisements that warn consumers of negative outcomes. They attempt to dissuade product use. I will look closely at print PSA ads created by the Meth Project (MP) that have garnered both criticism and regard. Art historian James Elkins classifies advertisements as emblemata. I want to understand how this classification fits into how viewers perceive these advertisements. How do we perceive the ad images and extrapolate meaning based on formal elements and advertising tactics? Norman Doidge, M.D.’s research comparing the addictive nature of images and drugs helps to see how graphic content and abject imagery may taint viewers’ perception of the MP ads.

Methamphetamines are highly addictive. Ingredients for synthesizing the illicit drug can be found at the local hardware store or Wal-Mart. Meth is a politically fueled topic because it reaches into the pharmaceutical industry and therefore government legislation. Here, at this intersection, there is a lot of capital gain. More importantly lives are greatly affected by whether or not legislation gets passed. Adverse effects arise in the mind and body, as it is a psychostimulant drug. Larissa Mooney in *Medical Effects of Methamphetamine Use*, reveals effects on the body and brain of meth users:
MA [methamphetamine] facilitates the release of newly synthesized norepinephrine and dopamine from nerve terminals and, to some extent, blocks their synaptic reuptake...resulting...[in] acute symptoms and physiological changes...including elevated heart rate...intense euphoria, increased energy and alertness, a sense of heightened physical and mental capacity, and initially decreased anxiety and enhanced libido (Roll 117,119).

These symptoms become evident on those dependent on meth. Psychosis produces hallucinations and paranoia. Abusers imagine there are bugs crawling under their skin and mutilate their body as they try to pick them out. Risky and criminal behavior is associated with meth. People suffering from addictions make compromising choices. With these preoccupations of the mind abusers begin to neglect their personal health. Their environments become tainted. Busted house clandestine meth labs become toxic waste dumps. The outward appearances of the symptoms and settings are used in MP ads to inform and grab attention.

Successful advertising campaigns make use of many channels of dissemination and beef up the amount of exposures for more frequent viewing opportunities (Anon. Interview). I interviewed an advertising professional who worked on such notable campaigns as United Airlines, Green Giant, Nestle, Star Kist, General Motors, and Phillip Morris while at Chicago based ad agency Leo Burnett. My interviewee affirmed those facts and said that the ads could have a greater emphasis on information (Anon. Interview). However, the Meth Project boasts in its ability to use many channels: print, television, radio, marches and community art outreach. In the MP’s fact bulletin they list, “268,000 TV ads, 300,200 radio ads, 9,287,000 print impressions, 10,800 billboards, 695,774,000 online impressions” (Foundation.Methproject.org). The MP website is quite remarkable giving participants interactive experience through mediating Q and A, graphics, data and testimonials. This prolific campaign is largely due to tech guru, billionaire, and philanthropist Thomas Siebel’s efforts. In a 2009...author James Verini does an in-person
interview with Siebel. Siebel reveals personal connections to meth and effects of the drug on the economy. Campaign statistics show, “Since the Meth Project began [in 2005], Montana has gone from having America’s fifth worst per-capita meth-abuse rate to the 39th. And meth use among teens has nearly halved,” says Virini (Virini). Thus Siebel’s just-cause in creating the Meth Project. Statistics point up the effect of and credibility of the MP. Once a privately funded organization, the MP is now funded publically and federally (Erceg-Hurn). The MP has grown into a larger campaign reaching into other prevalent and at-risk meth states (affectionately attaching the “Meth Project” suffix to the state name). MP critics claim the organization misrepresents data and slants the findings to their favor (Erceg-Hurn). Thus sparking controversy aimed at the ethical approach of the MP and the effectiveness of their campaign. While the MP’s representation of data may be in question, we can still look at the ads and see how they work visually and attempt to gauge its effectiveness by viewer perception.

The Meth Project print ads make use of text. The text is used to give clarification to the photo and further explain. Art historian James Elkins explains emblemata and how it is used. He says, “An emblem as I mean it is any image that includes an explanatory text: Without the text, the image would be slightly (or completely) baffling, and the two work together to make sense” and “virtually all advertising” is emblemata (Domain 195). These anti-meth print ads use text to set up a way of thinking about the picture for the viewer. This framing device using text makes use of word meanings, arrangement on the page, the size relationship, and how they are read. I will show the framing in more depth during my analysis of the ads. Formal qualities in the ads such as color, lighting, scale, and compositional arrangements also reveal important information. Let’s take a look at the ads.
Lipstick (methproject.org) – This ad has a horizontal format. Approximately ninety percent of the picture is a close-up of a figure from shoulders upward to just below the eyes. About two-thirds of the picture is focused on the head while the neck and shoulders are out of focus. Some blond hair dangles just beside the face and behind. The head is coming forward from a darker background. A thin necklace is visible. The mouth is located just left of center and is most in-focus. The mouth and lips contain the most color and are the strongest area of contrast in the ad. The skin on the figure is pale and pinkish with darker patchy areas of mottled reds. There are several sores around and on the lips that are dark red and bloody. The lips are mostly a dull desaturated pink. The color of the lips is in contrast with the green-yellow-gray teeth inside the mouth. The teeth are not even. The teeth are misaligned, discolored and chipped. This is a realistic depiction of “meth mouth”, a condition that develops in meth abusers from neglecting proper hygiene and chemical contaminants in methamphetamines. We can see how accurate this advertising photo is by comparing the meth mouth in this ad to a picture of meth mouth used for health and science purposes. The American Dental Association (ADA) website uses meth mouth photos so that dentists are able to recognize and familiarize themselves with the problem and address it safely. Although the teeth in the ADA photos appear whiter this may be due to prior cleaning before photographing.

The bottom third of the Lipstick ad contains text. The text overlaps the picture. Not only is all of the text capitalized, it is white with distressing. The text is formatted in two lines, one above the other. The text reads: “YOU’LL NEVER WORRY ABOUT” (first line) “LIPSTICK ON YOUR TEETH AGAIN.” (second line). The text is bold and without serifs giving it a feel of clarity, firmness, and honesty. Nothing superfluous here. Because
of the distressing of the text we read into it some type of distortion. I will go into some
detail on the logo in the bottom right corner of the ad because of its importance.

How can we interpret the picture in the ad according to the visual clues? Judging
from the long blonde hair, necklace, non-wrinkled skin, adult teeth, and adult facial
muscles we can safely assume this is a female somewhere between 15 and 40 years of age.
With the mouth agape and sores we associate pain or hurting with this person. The veiling
of eyes has been a symbolic gesture of shame. Historically, nude models have concealed
their identity by wearing a blindfold. Corpses’ eyes are closed and their bodies are covered.
We don’t know who the person in the ad is, but it could be any youthful female who has
been physically hurt and neglected. Viewers will associate pain and hurting to the woman.

How do we interpret the text? The text is heavily implying this person is female.
Women who use lipstick make it a point to get it on their lips and not their teeth. Nobody
in this condition is going to care about getting lipstick on their teeth because they don’t
even care enough to use it, let alone take care of their health. The text reveals such an
obvious statement that is a witty juxtaposition next to the image. Witty advertising is
appealing. The demographic targeted is concerned with body image and so it has the
ability of connecting with the viewer. The logo in this ad is vital. Without being familiar
with meth and its effects you may not understand the image and text. The words in the
logo feature all capitals and reads “METH: NOT EVEN ONCE”. The logo is a white
trapezoid. The logo gives the viewer context. We can see Elkins definition of emblemata
clearly in this ad as it relies on text and image for interpretation. The MP has many ads that
contain this type of graphic imagery plus filthy settings. We will see later how people
actually perceive these ads.

Let’s look at another ad that also relies on text.
Runaway (methproject.org) - This ad has a horizontal format. This ad also relies on picture and text with logo. First, the picture is a framed photograph that is very realistic in its depiction. In sharp focus in the right foreground just right of center is a framed photograph sitting on a tabletop. The photo takes up nearly thirty percent of the ad. The photo portrays a young woman in red cap and gown with a diploma in hand. The young woman is smiling. The background is out of focus but appears to be a domestic interior with recognizable table legs and possibly a floor plant. We can make out a delineation of the floor plane and wall plane because of white baseboard. The interior seems clean and orderly.

The text is located in the middle of the ad and stretches horizontally nearly to the left and right edges. The text reads, “BEFORE METH I HAD A SISTER”, then steps down a line and reads, “NOW I HAVE A RUNAWAY”. The text is all capitals. The word “runaway” is prominently positioned over the framed photograph of the graduate and appears about twice as large as the other text. The font has a distressed semi-opaque look. Once again the Meth Project logo appears in the bottom right corner of the ad.

How can we understand this ad? In contrast to Lipstick, this ad does not have abject imagery. The young woman is smiling, suggesting a happy moment in time. The orderly interior setting suggests a clean organized life. Without the addition of the text we can interpret this as a nostalgic memory. However, the text gives the viewer context and explains the picture. The speaker is a sibling of the graduate. We can tell that the speaker has good memories of their sister but those memories are being replaced by consequences of her meth use. The use of the word “runaway” is both highlighting the negative effect of
drugs and labeling the graduate as the runaway. The step down of the text represents the
descent in this person’s life because of meth.

There are several other print ads from the MP that picture graphic images like those
seen in Lipstick. Some ads have bloody beaten figures, people left for dead, and young
women prostituting themselves. The purpose of this is to show the depravity of the drug
and the lifestyle choice a meth user is making. These choices are commonly associated
with meth users including the following: theft, violence, prostitution, gay sex, and general
criminal activity. The MP is condemning these acts by featuring them as a warning.
Settings that are common to many of the ads portray dirty settings that are poorly lit. These
features and aesthetic choices in the MP print ads can be seen across a gamut of media that
portray the meth culture. The movie Requiem for a Dream, many MP television ads, and
documentaries on meth all use similar aesthetic choices. Popular culture is full of abject
imagery and suspenseful narratives. Suspenseful primetime television shows lure us along
watching to see what’s going to happen next and after the climactic event we finally can
rest after getting what we’ve waited for. Breaking Bad, A popular television show that is
based on the meth culture can in some instances be seen as glorifying meth. Characters
who use meth will party for days with many friends. Murders occur and are covered up
without consequence. The viewer is getting mixed messages about meth. Can people
become conditioned to images? And does the MP perpetuate that?

I think that the MP ads are a good representation of reality. Unfortunately, mixed
messages coming from different media sources confuse us. Perhaps we can no longer tell
entertainment from a serious warning and the opposite. We can take these ads and compare
them to real life or images used for scientific study like those on the American Dental
Association ADA website and see their accuracy (ADA). Any Google search for meth
effects will show some really gruesome and disturbing images. Despite the realistic
depictions, the MP ads compare to popular culture images and art images that distort
reality in a realistic way. Such are the photographic works of Gregory Crewdson and the
paintings of Francis Bacon and Ian Cumberland. As Umberto Eco says, “Ugliness is
relative to the times and to the cultures, what was unacceptable today may be acceptable
tomorrow” (421). This validates the desensitizing that occurs when we view shocking
images. Young viewers are accustomed to seeing the abject content located in the ads. Eco
says, “You cannot talk only of the degeneration of the mass media, because contemporary
art also deals with and celebrates ugliness” (423). And “In everyday life we are surrounded
by horrifying sights. We see images of children dying of hunger, reduce to skeletons with
swollen bellies; we see countries where women are raped by invading troops, and others
where people are tortured” (Eco 436). We can at least know that the imagery is relevant to
the times. However, we must question if we are becoming too saturated and fail to interpret
images accurately. Anti-meth ads must find and use ways that appeal as much to their
audience as popular culture does. Studies have shown that when we see images, we
process them emotionally before cognitively (Barry 255). James Elkins claims that all
looking is “heated looking” that we are looking for things that have meaning to us (The
Object 21-22). This type of looking works in the MP’s favor for effectually reaching the
viewer. Though teenagers who laugh at the ads cannot be ignored, do these ads have the
shocking effect that the creative producers believe they have? Can the MP rely on other
tactics to carry the message?

Scientific research shows a linkage between images and drugs. The linkage is
important to highlight because it reveals how people can become desensitized to certain
types of images. Even though the studies examine pornographic images I correlate how we
become conditioned to abject imagery in general. Some of the anti-meth ads easily fall into this category. Because of our conditioning to abject imagery we may not see the ads with the full impact that the MP intends. Psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and researcher Peter Doidge M.D. discusses the plasticity of the brain to condition itself to stimuli including pornographic images and drugs. In his book *The Brain that Changes Itself*, Doidge says, “By hijacking our dopamine system, addictive substances give us pleasure without our having to work for it. … Dopamine… is also involved in plastic change. … An important link with porn is that dopamine is also released in sexual excitement… activating the brain’s pleasure sensors” (106,107). The American public is accustomed to seeing disturbing images all over television including the news and prime-time programing. People are glued to TV for hours on end. They are developing a “tolerance” and “wiring together” images. Doidge says, “Not all addictions are to drugs or alcohol. … All addicts show a loss of control of the activity…develop tolerance so that they need higher and higher levels of stimulation for satisfaction” (106). According to Doidge “neurons that fire together wire together, these men [viewing porn] got massive amounts of practice wiring these images to pleasure center of the brain” (108,109). It is the “practice of wiring” graphic images that I suggest desensitizes us to more types of graphic. In addition to popular culture, television shows, and even video gaming, the contemporary art scene is replete with artists working with graphic abject imagery. And now one more media channel is offering this type of imagery.

I have shown how the MP presents the ads to the viewer. On the production end of the ads we understand that certain tactics are necessary in order to appeal to audience. Not only do they want the images to be attention grabbing but they must also be relatable. Author and Associate Professor of Communication at Boston College Ann Barry notices
the importance of the imagery in ads. “Personal and social image have become the stuff of
which advertising is made, and advertising’s visual language has come to play an integral
role in the way our culture is defined and in how people interact with one another in it,”
Barry says. Her claim is ads have become less reliant on the product information than the
ability to relate with the consumer. In Barry’s book, Visual Intelligence, she explains the
social psychology behind advertisements, “In both print and television advertising, this
means that the advertisement functions as the metaphor. The consumer identifies with the
advertising image, and the product within that image becomes intimately linked with the
satisfactions inherent in the scenario” (254). Barry does a great job of explaining how
cigarette ads have given smokers a social image. Other research shows that the age
represented in the ad should be close to the target audience. Scholarly publication titled
Anti-Smoking Campaigns Targeting Youth, reveals factors such as age, sex, race, and
lifestyle as influential in reaching the target audience (Pechmann ii20). Teens are looking
for images of “independence, adventure seeking, social approval, and sophistication”
(Pechmann ii21). So what we can see the MP doing is creating social images of meth users
that the viewer is to associate negative feelings and outcomes with and therefore not do
meth. Many of the people in the MP ads are young adults and teens, not just the users but
also implied friends or siblings. The ads parallel popular suspense fictions. The ads feature
things that this demographic can relate to like body image and graduating. In recent MP
television ads we see actors who are placed in the center of the screen looking directly at
the viewer telling us how they responded to the pressure to use meth (Methproject.org).
This gives the viewer another person to relate to and an example of how they can respond
to the pressure of using meth.
What are people saying? How do they respond to the anti-meth ads? In the 2008 documentary style film *American Meth*, director Justin Hunt interviews a group of teenage males on the street to ask what they think of the billboard ads. Their response while laughing: “Sick. Just making people laugh. This one had shit all over their face.” And then Hunt asked a female teenager if it is effective and does it affect her. Her response was “No. I think it’s gross that people actually get like that. Because I personally haven’t seen someone get that bad. So I don’t know. I’m just thinking, is that for real?” (American Meth). Then director of MP, Peg Shea, says she gets calls from people complaining about the ads but that “it is still a dialogue about methamphetamine” (American Meth). And for those who feel the images in the campaign are too much, MP founder Thomas Siebel says, “If you think this is over the top, if you think this is too graphic, if you think it’s over the edge…that’s because you’re not 16” (Virini). And finally my interviewee:

I did find myself feeling like they would be more effective if they were a bit more informational along with the sensational. People in general are moving so much more toward the touchy-feely and away from the rational. So from this perspective maybe they are more effective for the generation at which they are aimed….I think that for the target, they are probably good. But I also think that they need to speak to kids BEFORE they use. They will likely be ineffective after. (Interview)

Scientific research points out the brains plasticity in adapting to different stimuli. Umberto Eco certainly believes that people adapt to different levels of abject imagery. I think that the Meth Project has taken a cue from popular culture to determine what is trending (ie. Suspenseful fiction and Art that features abjection). While the MP makes good intentioned use of the imagery it may be that the target audience is too accustomed to the morbid and grotesque in different contexts to take them seriously. They have a hard time seeing the depravity in real life because they are bombarded with it in other contexts. I am in agreement with Peg Shea that at least it gets the discussion about
methamphetamine moving. The MP does more than ads in their campaign against meth to get a positive social dialogue going. The Meth Project is doing a good job of getting their brand visible so that people can engage and see the important information available to help.


A Brief Survey of the Visuality of Methamphetamine
Ma Huang – Ephedra Sinica
Comparison of Molecular Structures
Pseudoephedrine, Ephedrine, Methamphetamine

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Ball and stick
CPK Spacefill

PSEUDOEPHEDRINE  EPHEDRINE  METHAMPHETAMINE
Phenylephrine
Phenylephrine
Ball and stick model
Readily available Ingredients

Propane tank  Camping fuel
Funnels  Rock salt
Clear tubing  Red phosphorus
5-Gal. buckets  Toluene
2-L soda bottles  Muriatic acid
Jars  Battery acid
Acetone  Lithium strips
Beakers  Ephedrine
Lye, drain opener  Pseudoephedrine
Ammonia  Iodine
Hollowed out light bulbs  Bronchodilators
Syringes  Coffee filters
Ether  Imodium fertilizer
Paint thinner
Shopping for the cooks
CVS Pharmacy shelves display various sinus and cold relief medications, including:

- **SINUS SENOS NASALES**
  - Non-Drowsy 12 Hour Cold Relief
  - 10 Caplets of 120 Grams

- **SUDAFED 12 HOUR**
  - 24 Tablets
  - 0.72 Grams

- **NASAL DECONGESTANT MAXIMUM STRENGTH**
  - Non-Drowsy
  - 24 Tablets
  - 30 mg each

- **Advil**
  - 20 Tablets
  - 400 mg each

- **Maximum Strength**
  - Nasal & Sinus Congestion
  - Sinus Pressure
METH PROJECT.ORG

Television Ads

• Tony Kaye 2005-06 Director first 8 Ads
  • http://methproject.org/ads/tv/bathtub.html

• Darren Aronofsky 2007&2011 Director 8 Ads
  • http://methproject.org/ads/tv/mother.html

• Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu 2008 Director 3 Ads
  • http://methproject.org/ads/tv/family.html

• Wally Pfister 2010 Director 4 Ads
  • http://methproject.org/ads/tv/tracy.html
  • http://methproject.org/ads/tv/ben.html

Print, Radio, and Online Ads

http://methproject.org/ads/print/lipstick.html
• Effectiveness of MethProject/MontanaMeth?
  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06dtB3Dmpqc&sns=em

• Teen Interview

• Government Funding Controversial
FACES OF METH
Multnomah County Sheriffs Dept. Oregon
2005

2005© "Faces of Meth"

2.5 Years Later
END