

Advertising Wars on Child Abuse

By Danielle Pierce

Casa do Menor is a program that helps protect young children from abuse and maintains their rights to health, freedom, and respect. An ad from their 2009 campaign in Spain titled “Hands” features a nude blonde girl being groped by adult hands as she stares helplessly into the camera. Similarly, an ad published in 2008 for the Child Health Foundation in Germany shows the back of a cowering, shirtless, blonde child with bruises and scars that evoke Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* and the popular *Scream* mask. Both pieces use a young girl as a symbol of innocence in order to shock the audience with the horrors of child abuse. The powerful effect that the images have on their audience results from a combination of persuasive techniques. Some of these techniques are apparent, such as lighting and placement, while others, including props and allusions, strike our subconscious.

Both “Hands” and “The Scream” put a young girl and a face near the center of the composition. In “Hands,” we are drawn to the focal point of the photo: the blonde girl (see fig. 1). The child in “Hands” is being groped by a cloak of masculine fingers as she stands bare in the center of the room. She does not look frightened or as though she is putting up a



fight. Instead, she looks at the camera, numb, as if she has grown accustomed to abuse. It

pulls at viewers' heartstrings that such a young child already has so much knowledge of how cruel the world can be. In "The Scream," the child's face is not in view (see fig. 2), which makes it easier for the viewer to relate her to a daughter, sibling, or other loved one. Viewers supply the identity of the girl, and since they can then empathize, the face of her abuse—the scream formed by her bruises and scars—becomes much more convincing. The Child Health Foundation logo floating nearby assures us that we can still help her, either by donating or by simply becoming more aware of her plight.



Figure 2. "The Scream."

The element of color in the two advertisements sets a wary atmosphere. The background of "The Scream" ad is pure black, connoting evil and a sense of doom. As viewers, we focus on the black backdrop, and we wonder why the advertisers did not fill in this space. Perhaps the lack of light is more striking because it makes us feel empty. In contrast, the color scheme of "Hands" is mostly grey with only neutral colors. The dim lamp in the corner of the room offers little comfort or possibility for a happy ending for the girl. Interestingly, she is surrounded by light that does not come from any source in the room. This light around the child again returns viewers' eyes to the little girl, the ad's focal point,

and again forces the audience to focus on the cape of hands groping her body. The overwhelming numbers of adult hands are much larger than the child's small ones. They seem to be crawling from the floor of the child's home, indicating that her only possible sources of security and happiness are in fact part of the danger; we are witnessing an unthinkable crime happening in a place that is supposed to be sacred and comforting: the child's home. The white font in the upper right corner—the only bright color in the ad—says, “Certain things hang on forever. Set the kids free from violence and abuse.” Subconsciously, we as viewers connect Casa do Menor with the idea of a savior since white is considered “heavenly” and pure. This is also true for “The Scream” advertisement because the color of the text mimics the color of the bruises and scars on the girl's back. We connect the color with the “Child Health Foundation” logo and know that it can help. Both visuals are striking, so the text does not need to be large; viewers feel emotional responses to the photo, and are then forced to look closer to read the text.

The props in “Hands” add significantly to how the audience feels about the advertisement. For instance, the blonde child in the center of the visual is holding an adult, blonde Barbie. This comparison between mature adult and innocent child, clothed doll and naked youngster, only makes the advertisement more twisted. The doll is supposed to symbolize childhood and imagination. Meanwhile the child looks like she is barely holding on to it. In dropping the doll, she loses all purity. As further proof of her loss of innocence, a stuffed animal bear is sprawled out under the couch. The couch is supposed to symbolize comfort and relaxation, but instead it engulfs her toy bear in darkness and leaves her completely alone. This hints at the childhood nightmare of a monster being under the bed. The girl cannot retrieve the animal because she would be tainted and engulfed by the dark evil of the house.

Another prop in “Hands” is the toy clown in the foreground. It draws the audience because it is one of the only sources of color in the photo. This symbol is so important because it adds a sense of fear from one’s childhood. Clowns are usually a form of comedy and entertainment, but gradually more people have become afraid of them. It is not abnormal for a young child to have a fear of clowns. The fear comes from the clown’s inability to change its facial expression and show real emotions. These static, unrealistic, “human” breaks every conception a child has of a mankind, verifying the widespread terror that clowns have instilled in society for decades (Durwin). Clown costumes usually amplify human body parts, which can illustrate how the child views her abuser. In the child’s mind, the attacker is most likely mutated and intimidating. Their attacker looks distorted, like the facial features of a clown. Similar to a phobia of clowns, the child pictured will be scarred from sexual abuse.

The mutated face of a clown is similar to the allusion in the bruises of “Scream” on the girl’s back (figure 2). “The Scream” image, originally a painting by Edvard Munch, has many different interpretations. Some say that “The painting has been linked with Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God” (Fineman). This relates because the child may reject the idea of an omnipotent God after experiencing the horrors of abuse. Also, it makes the audience wonder if there can be a God when such terrible things are happening every day. The image of the mask has become an influential figure in pop culture thanks to the infamous *Scream* horror movies. The series of movies consist of a group of murderers who torture and plague their victims, similar to how an abuser taunts a child. The mask on the child’s back represents the monster that left the wounds on her body. The long term trauma of abuse is carried on throughout the victim’s life just like how the main character in *Scream* must live in fear. The movies remain to this day some of the most popular horror films. The

allusion to these terrors makes the audience think about the pain the child is going through. Furthermore, it is interesting that the bruises are on her right shoulder because they symbolize the burden being carried by the girl. The burden is that of the pain and terror of abuse without being able to speak out. The bruises are striking because they look as if the child has been whipped. This connotes slavery and the lack of free will. This extremist advertising is sure to strike the nerves of any audience.

The advertisements' appeal to emotions is particularly important. Both photos provoke our emotions with their bold displays of inhumanity. They go against our moral values and societal norms. When we are faced with images so grotesque and dehumanizing, we are shocked and want to help. The lack of family photos on the wall in "Hands" makes us lament for the child who is raised in an environment that is anything but kid friendly. The empty walls represent that no one is there to help her and society needs to step in. The child cowering and staring into the darkness in "The Scream" makes us wonder why she is still in her situation. Both photos successfully strike a nerve and arouse our emotions.

These two advertisements work to accomplish the same thing: stop child abuse as well as encourage people to report suspicious activity and donate their funds. Many different aspects in the photos help to convince the audience to make a change. Their borderline controversial images work to shock the public, and, as a result, help children like the ones portrayed in the advertisements. Lighting and placement, along with the use of props and allusion, work to make "Hands" and "The Scream" effective in their aims.

Works Cited

"Casa Do Menor: Hands | Ads of the World™." *Ads of the World™* | Creative

Advertising Archive & Community. WebMediaBrands.Inc. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

<http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/casa_do_menor_hands?size=_original>.

"Child Health Foundation: The Scream | Ads of the World™." *Ads of the World™* |

Creative Advertising Archive & Community. WebMediaBrands.Inc. Web. 28 Oct. 2011.

<http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/child_health_foundation_the_scream?size=_original>.

Durwin, Joseph. "Coulrophobia & The Trickster." *Digital Commons @ Trinity*. N.p., 11-15-2004. Web. 01 Nov 2011.

<http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1080&context=trickstersway&seiredir=1&referer=http://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&q=coulrophobia&btnG=Search&as_sdt=0%2C47&as_ylo=&as_vis=1>

Fineman, Mia. "Another Look at Edvard Munch's 'The Scream.' - Slate Magazine."

Homepage - Slate Magazine. The Slate Group. Web. 01 Nov. 2011.

<http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2005/11/existential_supperstar.html>.