Appealing for help: A reflection on interpellation and intertextuality in the visual narrative of an Australian welfare campaign poster

Karen Crinall
Monash University

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Abstract

We know the world, our world, through stories (Turner 1988: 68). Stories in childhood, whether verbal or written, are inevitably accompanied by visual language forms. This might be the storyteller's body or a puppet performing mime and gesture; it may be pictures in storybooks, or the endless hybrid combinations of these in film and the electronic media. Even a single photograph can perform in a narrative way: "A picture of a forest tells implicitly of trees growing from seedlings and shedding leaves; and a picture of a house implies that trees were cut for it and that its roof will soon leak. (Goodman 1981:111)" Within a story–making activity, however, the visual image is not a sole performer; it is a participant in an intertextual web of discursive forms and endless meaning-making exercises. It is a complex, fluid experience (Belova 2006). The aim of this paper is to raise some questions about how narrative processes might operate in and through visual texts designed to communicate social injustice and elicit emotional and moral response, such as social documentary photographs and fundraising campaign posters. Using the example of an Australian Salvation Army Red Shield Appeal poster, the paper reflects on how the engaged viewer might be implicated as both character and author in the resonance between the meta–narratives and personal stories from their own life–world and the meanings arising from the poster's text. In doing so, concepts of interpellation and intertextuality help explain some of the processes which position and compel viewers to respond, and also how they contribute to identifying meanings which reach beyond commonly received readings.

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Visual Appeal

Directly above my computer, attached to the wall with a drawing pin, hangs an A3 poster in portrait format. One of a series of eight posters initially produced for the 2005 Australian Salvation Army Red Shield Appeal, it was used again in 2006 [fig 1]. The poster divides approximately into 2/3 image and 1/3 written text. The central focus is a black and white photograph of a mother and child being comforted by another woman dressed in Salvation Army uniform. The mother and child are bound together under a red blanket printed with white Salvation Army shields. The Salvation Army officer is positioned behind and to the side of the mother and child. Although her hands are placed in a gesture of gentle support, she touches the red cloak–like blanket, rather than directly touching the mother or child. The slogan below the trio, in brilliant white block letters reads: 'Help the Salvos shield those in need.' The Salvation Army shield trademark is centrally positioned underneath these words, and includes the slogan 'Thank God for the Salvos'. The second last line informs the viewer in upper case text

that the doorknock appeal will take place in the last week of May and provides the credit card telephone number. The URL web address sits like a signature in the centre at the bottom of the poster.
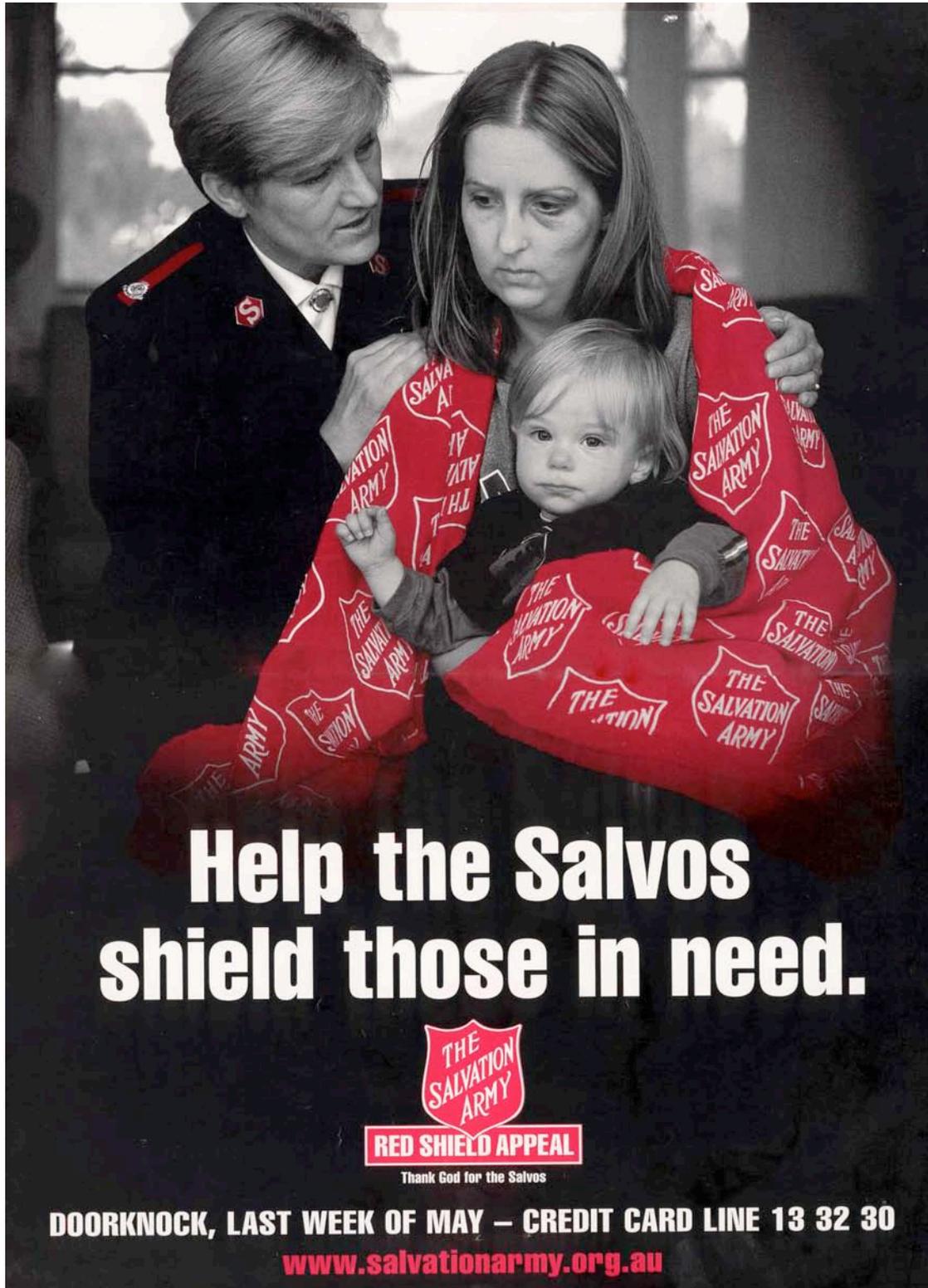

Figure 1. Australian Salvation Army Red Shield Appeal Poster 2005–2006

The figures, all three of anglo–celtic appearance, are in black and white, while the Salvation Army symbols and URL are coloured bright red. The viewer is entreated into the scene through the sad dark eyes of the infant, staring out from a pale, seemingly red–nosed face, unsmiling mouth firmly closed. His upper body is wrapped in the red blanket/cloak, which is also a reference to the annual Salvation Army blanket appeal for the homeless. The clothing suggests the child is male, although it is not possible to be certain. The child's hands direct our gaze upwards towards the Salvation Army officer and downwards to the message appealing for help. The officer looks at the mother, whose blank, downcast eyes indicate the distraction of internal worries. There is no eye contact between any of the characters; they connect instead by touch (even though no skin to skin contact is evident). The mother has a blackened eye and bruised cheek. The child seems unharmed, but is wan and sickly looking. Light from a window frames the heads of the officer and mother. The mother's and child's hair is unkempt and long, while the officer's hair is short and neatly combed, giving her a slightly masculine appearance. She brings a sense of order to the scene, representing the ability to take control; stabilise; comfort; to 'shield those in need'. Is she us?

Aims

My primary interest in this paper is to explore how narrative processes operate in and through single visual texts, such as fundraising campaign posters like this one, which illustrate need and are intended to elicit emotional and moral responses. Using this poster as an example, the paper reflects on intertexuality and interpellation and how these concepts contribute to further understanding the ways that viewers become participants in the narratives generated by visual texts. Patrick Fuery observes that:

> meaning and processes of signification are artifices. It is therefore imperative that we develop methods of analysis in order to see how things come to mean and have signification, rather than merely what they mean and signify (1995:39).

This paper attempts to make some contribution to this endeavour by asking, what narrative processes are in play during an encounter with a visual appeal for donations. It also asks how these processes operate and also how, as viewing subjects, we might be able use textual transpositions to produce alternative readings and thereby position ourselves differently in relation to the visual text.

Red Shield Appeal

According to the Salvation Army (2007b), The Red Shield Appeal is the main fundraising drive for the Salvation Army in Australia and the Red Shield logo has a recognition rate of 92% among the Australian public. In 2005 the appeal raised 18% more than the previous year, setting a record of $58,546,500.00[i]. There are undoubtedly a range of reasons for the use of this poster in two consecutive Red Shield Appeals. Contributing factors might include its perceived role in the success of the 2005 campaign and the preference for the Salvation Army in Australia to use images of mothers and children. The significance of its (implied) subject matter – family violence, cannot be overlooked. The 'Salvos' provide refuge to 800 victims of abuse each week (Salvation Army 2005:2). At the time this poster was released in Victoria, state-wide, whole–of–government policy reforms were being implemented, such as the Integrated Family Violence Service System (Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence 2005) and the Police Code of Practice for Responding to Incidents of Family Violence (Victoria Police 2004).

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It is highly probable that the Salvation Army's selection of this image of an abused, Madonna–like woman and frail child related to its capacity to appeal to the viewing public's sense of social justice, moral values and charitable duty. The poster is essentially an advertisement, and in order to fulfil its main purpose – fundraising – it must operate most effectively at the personal level (Berger 2007). This is achieved by delivering an emotive call for help to individual viewers. At the same time, although each viewing can give rise to infinite variations in meaning, the campaign message depends on a common, shared interpretation. This coherence occurs in the drama of the narrative constructed by the visual and textual signs.

Narrative inquiry
We know the world, our world, through stories (Turner 1988: 68). Stories in childhood – verbal and written – are inevitably accompanied by visual language forms. This might be the storyteller's body or a puppet performing mime and gesture; it may be storybook pictures, or the endless combinations of these in film and electronic media. Even single photographs can perform in narrative ways:

> A picture of a forest tells implicitly of trees growing from seedlings and shedding leaves; and a picture of a house implies that trees were cut for it and that its roof will soon leak. (Goodman 1981:111)

As individual viewers and readers of images and texts we actively engage in selecting, interpreting, accepting, resisting and constructing these narratives, which give meaning to our selves and our lives. At the same time, dominant discourses conveyed through narrative meaning–making processes constantly seek to position us with subjective identities by attempting, often successfully, to shape our beliefs and values.

Atkinson and Delmont identify narrative inquiry as a social research approach that is able to offer insight into the plethora of mechanisms which drive and shape our culture at a collective level and contribute to the formation of self identity at the individual level (Atkinson and Delamont 2006). They describe narratives as social (and cultural) phenomena,

> produced and performed in accordance with socially shared conventions … embedded in social encounters … part and parcel of everyday work … amongst the ways in which social organizations and institutions are constituted … productive of individual and collective identities … constituent features of rituals and ceremonies … expressions of authority and expertise [and] displays of rhetorical and other aesthetic skills. (Atkinson and Delamont 2006: xxi)

Atkinson and Delamont observe the difficulty and undesirability of establishing a single definition of narrative. Despite dedicating a whole volume to 'performance and performativity', the considerable discussion and debate about narrative expression in still visual form, which has emerged over recent decades through the fields of visual anthropology and visual sociology, is not singled out for consideration (Goodman 1981; Turner 1988; Krauss 1992; W J T Mitchell 1994).

Schirato and Webb (2004) acknowledge the lack of discussion in academic literature about the meaning of 'narrative picture' and its relationship to narrative more generally

(Schirato & Webb 2004:81). They problematise the notion that 'images convey narrative in a strict sense' due to their polysemic nature, and recognise that 'reading a visual narrative often effectively involves writing it' (Schirato & Webb 2004:104). On the other hand, they cite Rosalind Krauss' claim that despite their multi–layers and obscure stories, in order to be meaningful, pictures are always ordered and structured according to certain principles. Single images, far from offering simple representations, throw up more complex interpretive challenges for the narrative researcher. This is mainly due to the absence, or minimal presence of spoken or written text, and lack of obvious duration and direction. According to Schirato and Webb, the fewer the words accompanying an image, the broader its range of possible meanings:

> If a picture paints a thousand words, it is also true to say that it may be read in a thousand ways, and tell myriad stories, because pictures are always open to personal interpretation, and relatively inaccessible to any who lack very specific literacies. (Schirato & Webb 2004: 98)

Unlike abstract or obtuse artworks, documentary photographs, advertising images and posters are more easily read, because they are coded to deliver an intended message. Even so, as with other forms of narrative inquiry, it is obscured meanings which most often become the focus of inquiry. The capacity of these textual signs and codes to form and connect with narrative patterns across micro and macro levels, from the socio–cultural and political to the individual and personal, offers opportunity for insight into how single image–objects position subjects. This can affect social behaviours, such as inducing viewers to make a donation of money to a welfare organisation.

Narrative evidence
'Help the Salvos shield those in need' contains narrative elements that can be reasonably assumed to be familiar to the target audience, composed of 'ordinary' Australians, at the various locations where it was displayed. For example, I first saw this poster hanging in the window of the Salvation Army opportunity shop in the regional town where I live. A few weeks later it towered over me on a billboard gracing one of Melbourne's major arterial freeways, four kilometres from the city centre. The same image appeared on Red Shield Appeal donation envelopes. During the Appeals of 2005 and 2006 it could be downloaded and printed from the website. It is not possible to identify all of the narrative associations that this poster deploys, or to anticipate the meanings that viewers might derive from it. Instead I can offer some personal thoughts about the poster's narrative and how certain viewers become participants in that narrative using the elements proposed by Schirato and Webb.

Schirato and Webb identify the six elements most commonly cited as essential to a narrative. These are: 1. Plot (what happened and why); 2. Narrator (the point of view from which it is told); 3. Characters who participate in the story (human or otherwise); 4. Events (everything in the story that happens to, or because of the characters);
5. Time and place in which events take place; and 6. The causal relations that link the events together (Schirato & Webb 2004:83).

At its broadest level, a narrative plot involves a beginning, middle and end. It also frequently follows a sequence beginning with a problem, loss or lack; such as serious illness, death, leaving home, loneliness etc. The story then proceeds through a series of attempted solutions, threats to the solution, finally ending with a resolution – the deficit

established at the beginning is fulfilled. This scaffolding structures duration and sequence, providing the necessary temporal dimension. The main characters often conform to the roles of villain, victim and hero. In contemporary and more complex stories these roles are less polarised and, in order to be plausible, characters usually display all three elements, even though they have a dominant tendency to one of these types.

The Red Shield Appeal poster contains all six narrative elements proposed by Schirato and Webb:

1. **Plot**: a woman and her child need protection and help because she has been physically assaulted. The blackened eye signifies that she is probably a victim of family violence;

2. **Narrator:** The Salvation Army;

3. **Characters**: the Officer, representing the Salvation Army (hero), the mother and child (victims). Invisible characters are: the abuser – (villain), 'those' in need (victims), and the viewer – who may become a hero if they enter the narrative plot by helping;

4. **Events** portrayed are the cause of the need – abuse, homelessness, illness, poverty and the resolution of the need through 'protection' or 'shielding' and the assistance of the viewer/donor;

5. **Time and place** are established by the annual Red Shield Appeal dates – last week of May. The display sites – opportunity shop windows, freeway billboards, the internet, newspapers, etc. locate the events in contemporary Australia. The characters are also pictured in a place – although whether the scene is pictured in the woman's home or a Salvation Army facility is uncertain;

6. **Causal relations** are established by the campaign to overcome the need, its cause and its proposed solution by way of donation.

Overlaying these narrative elements of a contemporary setting is the religious reference and allusion to Madonna iconography, this creates a sense of timelessness and tradition. For obvious reasons this is a very brief, simplified analysis. And, as stated, I am primarily concerned with how the viewer is positioned by, and implicated in, the narrative processes of this poster, rather than the story or stories that it tells. The next section reflects on how viewers are engaged or interpellated as helping subjects.

Interpellation

Interpellation is a term applied by Louis Althusser to describe the process through which individuals are recruited into subject positions, thereby creating self-identity (Althusser 1998). The first stage of interpellation is 'calling out' or 'hailing'. A communication is directed towards a particular audience, an individual or group. The target of the communication, or call, then needs to respond with a reply, indicating recognition that they, and not someone else, were hailed. Recognition occurs by the conveyance of signs through language, which indicate who the caller or hailer has identified as the target of their appeal (Fiske 1998: 308). People are hailed according to a range of signifying categories, such as age, gender, physical characteristics and occupation. In responding to the call, the target indicates recognition of the social position that the communication has ascribed to them. If the response is cooperative, the person is considered to have adopted the assigned or assumed subjective position (Fiske 1998: 308). Althusser uses the example of a policeman in the street calling out 'hey you there', and the person who the call is directed towards, even though no names are used, recognising that it was them, and thus accepting subjection to the state. If, on the other

hand, the call is resisted, rejection of the apparent position is communicated, but there is still acknowledgement of the subjective position that was directed at them. The appeal or hail is the 'process by which language identifies and constructs a social position for the addressee' (Fiske 1998: 308). Interpellation is the 'larger process whereby language constructs social relations for both parties in an act of communication and thus locates them in the broader map of social relations in general' (Fiske 1998: 308). Any form of discourse can convey the communication: speech, music, performance, written text, photographs, artworks, etc.

In this poster, the hail or appeal is delivered visually through the child's sad eyes and in written text through the slogan, 'Help the Salvos shield those in need'. We are hailed to 'help', and thereby positioned as able subjects, capable of lending assistance to the battle against need being fought by the Salvation Army. Our participation as voluntary contributors or donors renders us as members of a collective effort to aid those less fortunate than ourselves. We are subjectified and socially located as sufficiently resourced, willing, sympathetic individuals; we are not the needy.

Althusser's primary interest is in how ideology is deployed and imposed through this process, however my concerns sit with the relationship between interpellation and narrative. I am interested in what facilitates the narrative process through which the viewer (already a subject) is hailed, or appealed to, and subsequently interpellated into becoming a donor, and thus helper. The concept of intertextuality is useful here, because it is through intertextuality that interpellation is possible.

Intertexuality

Roland Barthes developed the idea of intertextuality in which the reader's life text is incorporated into the reading of a document (Barthes 1977). In *Camera Lucida* (1993) Barthes demonstrates how the viewer/reader and the image participate together in meaning–making, even if this alliance is contestable, irreducible, idiosyncratic or unconscious. Complementing Barthes' conception of intertextuality, Julia Kristeva drew on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin to apply the term to describe how, every 'text is the absorption and transformation of another' (Kristeva 1986: 37). She suggests that the term 'transposition' better describes the process of intertextuality as the movement between signifying systems, for example, between a carnival scene, poetry and academic writing because the linguistic shift requires articulation in new and productive ways. In this poster we see a transposition between welfare campaign advertising, religious art, and the symbols of a church–based, social welfare organisation. Writing this paper, or presenting it at a conference, transposes the text, yet again.

Applying Barthes' concept of intertextuality as an intimate engagement between viewer and text, and Kristeva's idea of the transposition of one signifying system onto another, this poster can be understood as a complex amalgamation of fact, faith and fiction. While undoubtedly what we see – a distressed woman and child and a call to 'help' surrounded by the iconic Red Shield logo – is imbued with meaningful codes and signifiers, how we interact with this image of need, how we bring our own life–texts, socio–cultural and political contexts, knowledge, values and beliefs to the meaning–making process determines the narrative that it is able to construct and the power it is able to exercise.

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Beyond interpellation and intertextuality

Olga Belova (2006) argues that meaning production in visual communication is complex and fluid, and emerges out of the viewing experience. She adds that because of this, the meaning of images always necessarily lacks completeness, and proposes that we pursue seeing as an active, multi–directional and experiential engagement with the visual world. Rather than understanding context as a generalized macro structure, Belova suggests:

> Visual encounter would perhaps be better described as an event whose meaning is created in *movement* and *dialogue* between the image, author, viewer, and circumstance of perception or a wider discourse. (Belova 2006:47)

In urging us to 'understand visual communication in terms of *becoming* rather than *being* […] as processes rather than unambiguous entities' (Belova 2006:47), Belova alludes to Deleuze and Guattari's contention that identity, rather than pre–determination by our psychic past or our culturally inscribed 'body with organs', needs to be approached as unpredictable and emergent from constantly fluid processes that arise in the interactions of the human entity (or machine) with objects, ideas and other organic and inorganic bodies (Deleuze & Guattari 1984). Thus, if we approach interpellation (subjective positioning) and narrative (meaning–making) processes as forms of organic engagement and connection, narratives which recognize the fusion of body, thought, image, object, subject and context begin to emerge.

Other storylines?

As a rather open–ended conclusion, I would like to offer some alternative narrative reflections or analyses on this poster, which do not seek to undo the evident meaning, but rather represent an effort to explore what might become from shifting the narrative form, and extending the subjective position of the viewer to include creativity and authorial voice. Although part of me wants to challenge the poster's efforts to interpellate, or subjectivise me as a helper, or donor, I have been far too effectively defined as an 'ethical' viewer to completely reject this subjective position. I do however wish to explore other ways of engaging with the narrative processes generated by this poster's appeal. Three possible readings follow. The first conforms with an interpretive approach and the second draws on Kristeva's appeal for the creative and the poetic, now becoming more popular amongst qualitative and narrative researchers. The third also draws on the creative and engages with meta–narrative and the imagery of fairy tales.

Interpretive approach

The mother and the child are objects of sympathy; their presence establishes injustice, the need for action on the part of the viewer; to 'Help those who shield those in need'. Denied the status of individual identity, the mother is simultaneously cast as representative of a cause; victim of family violence, and through a confluence of the image's visual codes and my own life–text, which incorporates a knowledge of Catholicism and religious art, her representation transposes with the narrative of the Virgin Mary – a mother, who after being turned away numerous times, was given crude shelter in a stable, where she gave birth to the Christ child. For Christians, in particular Catholics, Mary subsequently became the ultimate symbol of humility, selfless love, compassion and forgiveness. The poster's visual text merges a violated, needy mother with the image of the compassionate Madonna; symbol of selfless love. The sight of the Virgin Mary violated in this way incites paternalistic action.

The poetic approach
Coloured ink congeals over a thin paper plane.
Signs of virtuous, human/holy beings.
Flat non–colours acquire humanness; skin, hair, faces, hands, bodies.
Physical sense becomes possible
the child sees
me?

Enfolded in a blanket,
                          protected by shields.
The comforting cloak
                          is a mantle.
Becoming the Salvation Army officer, protecting, supporting encouraging, saving,
shielding the needy.
Being an abused woman,
        and a hungry sad child.
The fragile paper surface screen bleeds.
Grey sorrow shadows confusion, fear, concern, care, endurance.
Mothering memories
impossible selfless love fantasies.
Miracles (don't) happen.
Is sight knowledge?
Visual rays cause tiny skin surface sensations
        propagate molecules of sympathy,
        p(r)ick at that conscience,
test integrity.

Fearful and secure
feeling brave hero
        insecure
wanting safety, resolution,
disruption and disturbance.

Spectator, consumer, giver, purchaser
caught
positioned as
ethical
caring ?
Who's a donor ?
Who knows
but
responding to this appeal
is not the end of the story.

The visual meta–narrative approach

"Who are you?"
Acrylic on cotton duck
© Karen Preston Crinall, 2008

The visual meta–narrative approach

Some closing comments
In this paper I have attempted to identify some of the ways in which, through processes of interpellation and intertextuality, we might be engaged by, and engage with, visual texts. My aim was to explore different ways of interacting with narrative. Incorporating creativity shifted the analytical approach and gave rise to alternative representational genres and meanings, the focus turned to what the text might become, rather than what it was.

I proposed three alternative textual devices: interpretive analysis; poetry and; visual meta–narrative. None of these meaning–making responses is more accurate or more correct than the other; fixing truth is not my pursuit. I wanted to challenge the taken for granted meaning of a Salvation Army Red Shield Appeal poster, which, at the broadest level, is a narrative of good overcoming evil. I wanted to demonstrate that, while intertexuality facilitates our interpellation into a particular subject position, such as the hero/helper/donor, we, as viewing–authoring subjects are also able to creatively employ intertexuality to foster emergent, rather than extant meanings. My use of poetry and visual art pay homage to the poster's immediate meaning, while at the same time seeking to challenge, enhance, extend and unfix that meaning. Such creative engagement contains the potential to propel narrative form into less predictable territories, into spaces where new knowledges and actions are explored and realised; perhaps where the means to 'help those who shield those in need' might extend beyond a paternalistic response.

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[i] For further details go to: http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/media/2005/050726_RSA_results.asp.