AUDIENCE AS A CULTURAL CONDITION: USING POPULAR ADVERTISEMENTS IN COLLEGE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Wendy Swyt

I begin by describing my writing conferences with two students about the media analysis essays that they were writing in my introductory composition course. I had asked students to choose two magazine ads for the same product (perfume, shampoo, cigarettes) and then write an analysis of how the different ads target different audiences.

My first conference was with Jim, an eighteen-year-old student athlete who had followed the terms of the assignment to write about two ads for Elizabeth Taylor perfume. He had written a rather flat, vague draft about how the ads' signs of luxury—pearls, velvet, crystal, Elizabeth Taylor—appealed to wealthy women. In the course of the conference, I realized that Jim had no idea who Elizabeth Taylor was, nor did he care. Despite this oversight, he had followed the terms of the assignment, assessing a limited view of audience from the details of the two advertisements. After we struggled through a tedious conference in which I tried to engage him (and myself) in what he had written, I began to imagine a different assignment and an essay in which he might have explored his lack of identification with the wealthy woman in these ads. Why didn't Elizabeth Taylor shape what he saw as luxury or beauty? Who did and why?

My concerns about this assignment were reinforced when another student, Erica, arrived for her conference. Erica wanted to look at the way black families and white families were represented in popular advertising. As an African American

woman, she was curious to see if there was a significant difference in these representations and if such a difference reflected the prejudices that she perceived as directed against black families in the United States. Her request clearly resisted many of the assignment parameters: she had picked out more than two ads, they were not ads for similar products, and her inquiry seemed more focused on the politics of representation than the audience identification that the assignment called for. But because it promised to be the most interesting paper in the class, I encouraged her to pursue it. After this second conference, I really began to question the worth of the assignment if a student had to resist its terms in order to produce an interesting paper.

The assignment in this particular course was designed to address two pedagogical goals. The first goal involves the use of popular media as a vehicle for teaching students an awareness of "audience." Because advertisements use a variety of images and appeals to address a targeted group of consumers, they serve as vivid, familiar examples of the art of persuasion. With this type of "audience-addressed pedagogy," advertisements become a convenient method of giving students a sense of the rhetorical implications of audience and how a writer might meet the needs and desires of intended readers (Vandenberg).[1]

The second of these pedagogical goals has emerged more prominently in discussions of composition studies in the last decade. Not only did I want my students to understand audience and persuasion, I wanted them to examine how media shape our perceptions of identity and experience. In this respect, advertisements can become a vehicle for raising students' cultural consciousness and making them more critical consumers of popular media. As Joseph Harris explains, this approach can offer students insights about how they might "use what they know about the media and pop culture to gain a hearing as writers in the university, and how to take on the languages and methods of the university to say new things about that culture" (9).[2]

But as my conference with Jim revealed, what is usually apparent to those of us who use mass media in our writing courses is that these assignments do not automatically produce the critical consciousness that we might desire. My argument in this essay is that such "failures" can be the result of a disconnection in the pedagogical goals that I described above. What I mean is this: if we present "audience" as a means of

"meeting the needs and desires" of a targeted group of consumers, we risk ignoring the ways that audience is shaped by the *act* of reading, an act situated in dynamic cultural contexts. In what follows, I compare two advertising assignments in order to demonstrate how different approaches to audience radically affect students' critical understanding of popular media texts. As I will show in my comparison and subsequent analysis, we need to present audience in our assignments as a cultural experience — not as merely a static rhetorical gesture.

Audience as Textual Reflection

The first assignment that I examine is the one that I describe at the beginning of this essay. The purpose of the assignment was to get students to practice strategies of close textual reading and to analyze the rhetorical demands of audience, while considering ads as an (un)familiar form of persuasion. Yet there were several problems with this assignment, as my conferences with Jim and Erica revealed. The assignment asked for and got, as I will demonstrate, only one static version of the relationship between the ad and its audience.

My assignment directed students to find their texts in current issues of popular magazines. In the directions I offered students tips for choosing advertisements that would be appropriate for the audience analysis required in the assignment:

> The easiest way to locate such ads is to browse through magazines which are themselves directed toward segments of the magazine market as different as possible, for advertisers pay careful attention to the demographics of different magazines. Why would one pay for an ad in *Seventeen* which would normally appeal only to consumers aged sixty and above? Indeed, some products are themselves so narrowly defined that the ads for them will only be targeted towards a particularly narrow segment of the population in the first place — acne ads, for example. You'd expect to find such ads in *Seventeen* but not in *Forbes*.

Although my intent was to offer helpful examples for my students, here capitalistic suppositions like "you pay for what you get" shape a view of advertising that promotes simplistic assumptions about reader response. An advertisement for

Elizabeth Taylor's perfume Passion might confirm a white, upper-middle-class woman's notion of quality and, at the same time, appeal to a working-class woman's dreams of luxury. But because my assignment directions presume a "logical" relationship between texts and audiences, they discount the conflicts inherent in audience identification. [3]

In an attempt to get students to look past the overt message to "buy this perfume," I asked students to examine the details of the advertisements in order to uncover the ads' "real agenda." "Include such matters as gender, age, occupation, and income" I told them in the assignment directions, "but concentrate on your sense of the deeper psychological preoccupations your ad speaks to."

This "deeper" perspective that I offer my students is problematic because it limits the ads' "agenda" to a "targeted audience." Patricia Bizzell criticizes cognitive process models for this same shortcoming because they confine the challenges of a writing situation to "problems of audience analysis" (217). In such models, Bizzell argues, readers are directed to identify "personal idiosyncrasies" and "personal preferences" rather than the political and discursive contexts that operate within various interpretive communities (Bizzell 217-8). Within the terms of my assignment, advertisements for Levi's jeans show young people of various races and ethnicities dancing to a Reggae beat on city streets in order to appeal to an audience of young people. But in another, perhaps more interesting sense, the Levi's advertisement suggests white, middle-class anxiety about urban violence and race in the United States. And like giving the world a Coke, Levi's ads imply one of the seductive appeals of melting pot multiculturalism: diversity is a pleasurable commodity like tacos and African print shirts. According to the parameters of the assignment, however, the sociopolitical connotations of the Levi's ads—elements that affect the ways an audience might find pleasure in these ads—are erased from the scene of writing and textual analysis.

The student responses to this assignment reflect a limited approach to cultural analysis, one that links the corporate politics of consumer democracy to cognitive process models of audience and text. For the most part, students followed the directions and dutifully replicated the solipsistic and uncritical response to audience that my assignment set up. In her essay "The Ad Must Fit the Niche," Donna chose to discuss two perfume ads from *Seventeen* and *Elle* magazine. In an introduction that seems more

like a "how to" for advertising than a critical analysis, she reproduced the assignment's contained text-audience relationship:

> In advertising it is important that special care and consideration is taken in presenting a product to a specific target audience. Advertisers must be aware of the personalities of their audiences so they can play upon their needs and wants.

Here Donna's essay illustrates how pedagogy presenting audience as a way of meeting the needs of the reader complements the corporate ideologies associated with advertising. Given my assignment, students are expected to produce the same predictions that a successful advertising agency would.

Donna's description of the perfume ads and their target audiences discounts conflicts in reader response and takes for granted the logical connection that the assignment text set up.

> The advertisement for Guess is found in a *Seventeen* magazine which caters to teens from approximately thirteen to seventeen-year-old girls. The advertisement for Beautiful, on the other hand, is found in the magazine *Elle* which leans to the more sophisticated and modern women. Both ads are obviously selling perfume, but we can look deeper into the psychological preoccupations each ad addresses. The sexual suggestiveness of the Guess ad aims at our desires, while the Beautiful ad aims at human innocence and purity.

What emerges is a flattened comparison/contrast essay that doesn't really indicate how "sexual suggestiveness," thirteen to seventeen year old girls, and "our" desires interact in any meaningful way.

After she identifies the different audiences and appeals, Donna goes on in the body of her essay to describe how the details of the Guess ad suggest certain desires:

> The use of black lace is desirable in that you usually find that these particular outfits are desired by men. Therefore, when a woman sees this ad, she will be aware of these desires, and will be drawn more to the

advertisement. The use of black, again, expands on the mood of desire and mystery. Black also helps develop the character's personality of having a "bad girl" image.

In line with the contained text-audience interaction, the teenage girl will be attracted to the "bad girl" image because the ad's features address her. In this manner, audience identification follows an overdetermined logic that always returns to the text.

Although throughout the paper Donna demonstrates her skill in reading the cultural semiotics of the models' poses and outfits, in the end her juxtaposition of these two ads produces a rather limited conclusion. Because the assignment directions suggest an apolitical, decontextualized discussion of cultural representations, Donna treats the ads and audiences as personal preferences, devoid of any social connotations. The Guess ad aims at the "teens who have bold personalities and wild desires," while the Beautiful ad appeals to "the simple people who know who they are, and know what they want out of life." Rather than leading her to an examination of the contradictory cultural mythologies that surround female sexuality in the United States, the assignment parameters naturalize the signs of "purity" and "promiscuity" as a matter of different target audiences.

Audience as Cultural Condition

As the conferences that I described at the beginning of this essay reveal, analyzing how an ad persuades and dupes its audience is not the most compelling task for many students. Often, they don't bring the same pleasure to textual deconstruction that their English teachers do. In my writing courses, I sometimes feel that students come to resist me, rather than the images constructed by the advertising industry. With assignments designed to focus on popular images that students supposedly "can relate to," it is frustrating to hear complaints from them like "Aren't we reading too much into it?"; "I'm sick of ads"; or "Now I can't enjoy magazines or TV anymore." With their complaints that we read too much into these texts and that we threaten the pleasure they get from popular media, students react to what Richard Miller characterizes as "the opposition of surface and deep reading" in our assignments with their own "opposition of deep reading and pleasure" (6). In other words, to analyze something, to look "deep" for its "real agenda," means

pretending that you don't like it and that you don't get pleasure from it.

As a way to negotiate these perceived oppositions, students produce facile analyses of advertising that describe advertising's effect on "other people." Donna's paper demonstrates how students claim a certain distance from the deception of advertising ploys; advertisements are targeted toward "young girls," "women," "the public" or "society," an anonymous group of people that the student does not belong to.[4] In their article "Teaching Writing as Cultural Criticism" Jay Rosen and Joseph Harris suggest this position reveals more than student apathy: "To the degree that we acquiesce to the roles the media imagines for us, we are all part of the masses" (66). An examination of how we become part of the masses, how we situate ourselves in audience, Rosen and Harris argue, should be a part of the writing class so that students might investigate "both the sorts of claims the media make upon us and the possibilities of resisting them" (66).

To illustrate how an assignment might address these claims and demonstrate how pleasure and engagement are implicated in critical analysis, I now turn to an advertising assignment that responds to the limitations of the assignment I have just described. This second assignment and the student essays that it produced problematize the limited notions of text and audience that the first suggests. Rather than focusing on a predictable exchange between ad and audience, this assignment is explicitly structured to involve students in a consideration of audience as socially, culturally produced phenomena.

The assignment directions began by asking students "to analyze one or two advertisements that you feel distort your self-image." Although the attention to advertisement and self here might seem to replicate the limited scene of analysis that the first assignment suggested, the directions for this assignment went on to complicate the construction of self as more than an isolated interaction with the text. Students were directed to identify themselves "within a particular group, probably along lines of race, class, or gender." With this more complex sense of "self," a self constructed through identification, students were directed to "consider how advertising distorts public perception of your group."

Because the assignment begins with a recognition of audience as a culturally situated phenomenon instead of as a "deeper" psychological reaction that ignores social differences, it

moves beyond the isolation of audience and text that the inner-directed theories assume. As Diane Shoos and Diana George argue, "To understand that popular art forms emerge partially from cultural conditions is to acknowledge that these forms constitute a mediated reality—a reality that depends upon the interaction of culture, material conditions, and subjectivity" (202). If our experience of popular media is *mediated* in this way by who we are and where we are, audience becomes a cultural condition, not a static rhetorical gesture or the shadow of a solitary text.

Rather than trite references to the "other people" that are fooled by the ads, student responses to this assignment tested the various identifications that the ads called upon. One student, Sue, responded to the assignment with an analysis of an advertisement for Gentildonna stockings that she found in a Japanese magazine. As Sue explains in her introduction, "The first thing that caught my attention is the fact that a Caucasian woman is modeling the Italian stockings in a Japanese magazine." The ad interested her, she writes, because she is "an eighteen year old Japanese-American woman with a complex about having awkwardly shaped legs." The ad and the way an audience might respond to it are constituted here within a culturally situated scene of analysis. Sue translates the advertisement's slogan, "Legs are a woman's face," and discusses the layering of sexist messages in this phrase:

> . . . I assume that it is implying that "If you buy our stockings for 12,000 yen, you will have beautiful legs, and the stockings also give you a beautiful face." . . . The slogan also gives me the idea that it is using women once again as sex objects, judging a woman by her legs.

Although Sue's interpretation suggests that this ad might be a message about women in general, she goes beyond the blanket condemnation of sexism (or the blanket acceptance of it) that we might have seen with the other assignment. Because she begins with her own cultural identification and how this identification interpolates her as an audience for the ad, Sue's essay shows that the sexist message in this ad is not used to fool a generic group of "other women":

> Most Asian women envy the long, lean legs of the Caucasian women, and they refer to their own as

"Daikon Ashi" comparing their legs to Japanese Radishes, which are very short, chunky, and pale. Seeing this young woman look so striking in these stockings gave me an image of hope.

Here Sue situates an interpretation of the cultural implications of race, gender and appearance along side of *and* in resistance to the pleasure that she experiences with the ad's promise. With this explanation of *audience* as a complex identification, Sue then chooses to sarcastically rewrite the advertisement's persuasive message in her own terms: "Amazing, these Gentildonna stockings not only make you look like you workout when you don't, they make your legs look as attractive as a Caucasian woman too."

Audience Analysis and Cultural Studies

The use of print advertisements as a neat pedagogical trick for teaching audience exposes what I see as larger theoretical questions that we can and should bring into our classrooms when we ask students to analyze mass media. Here I can't help but return to the challenges that my students raise when we talk about advertising: "Aren't we reading too much into these ads? Ads don't really affect people in this way, do they?" When the female students in my classes tell me, "I read *Mademoiselle*, and I don't see beauty as only white and skinny," how might we respond to this resistance? Although we might dismiss such comments with a brand of teacherly superiority — "Ah, the fools, they just don't realize that ideology is shaping them at every moment!" — I don't think that students' responses necessarily represent a naive reaction to mass media and audience identification. Instead, I believe that it is more likely that students are actively resisting the construction of "audience as duped by advertising ploys" that the first assignment suggests.

When students make the types of comments that I have described, they pose questions that are critical in the academic debates associated with mass communication theory and cultural studies: is theorizing audience from a textual representation valid? How can we know how a given audience will read and be affected by a media text? In communications theory, audiences are often theorized as "imagined communities," a theoretical projection that bypasses the actual relationship between media

forms and audiences (Anderson). In cultural studies, the focus on representations creates a similar theoretical detour into semiotics that, according to Rosaline Brunt, has inhibited concrete engagement with audience:

> The sheer productivity of textual analysis often rendered any reference to actual audiences redundant as the audience-text relationship became unproblematically inferred from a particular "reading" of the by now extremely problematized text. Interpreted only as "textual subjects," audiences became primarily positioned, produced by, and inscribed in, the text. (Brunt 70)

Brunt criticizes many of the audience analyses that occur in cultural studies research for following an "encoding-decoding" model in which the critic pulls "preferred readings" out of the details of the text and then checks these readings with an actual audience for textual verification. As Brunt contends, these readings always require a return to the privileged text (76).

Brunt argues that we need to ask more complex questions of audience: "By not asking merely, What do they do with the text?. . . but, What do they do with the text in the real world?, a way is offered for 'audience' to mean more than merely a receiver or reader of others' encodings" (76). Brunt cites Jacqueline Bobo's analysis of African American women as an audience for the film version of *The Color Purple* as one study that successfully negotiates these questions. Despite denunciations of the movie by black male critics, Bobo contends that black female viewers saw the film in an affirmative light with regard to its promotion of black male and female actors in a largely white industry. In studies like Bobo's, the definition of *audience* moves beyond the modernist "decoder" to a postmodern configuration that engages texts in complex and often unpredictable ways.

So how might this apply to mass media texts and their audiences in our composition classrooms? First, we need to recognize that the questions students bring to assignments about audience identification are valid. With this recognition, we can introduce students to an active, relevant academic debate: how do media texts affect audiences? How do audiences use media in ways that are not predicted by a semiotic analysis of the text? This approach is not too different from the initial goals that we claim to have with our cultural analysis assignments. In other

words, if we want our pedagogies to speak to students' experiences in nonacademic settings, we might pay more attention to how students use texts in their "everyday lives." Too often we make these texts into static artifacts when we pull them into our writing assignments, without foregrounding for ourselves and for our students how this maneuver alters a consideration of the text in question.

The second assignment that I described addresses these concerns because it begins with students and their complex reading of media texts rather than an abstract matching of text to audience. Given the cultural studies research about how communities of people use mass media, we might also engage students in more collaborative writing assignments about audience. In groups, students might examine and discuss the ways that they read and use different media texts like ads and commercials. How do they gain pleasure from them? In what ways is this pleasure limiting? In what ways do different audiences claim agency through or resistance to these texts? From this discussion, students might generate questions for an interview and/or observation of communities as they engage with media texts: a group of students at the student union watching a soap opera, a family watching a weekly sitcom, or soap opera fans discussing recent episodes on an Internet chatline.

I am currently planning a media analysis assignment that will address questions about violent television images and song lyrics and their effects on audiences. As many have asked, do these texts promote violence? This assignment would not only use media texts, but also legal arguments about censorship, psychological and sociological studies about violence, and popular political rhetoric about the current cultural "crisis." Last year, former senator Bob Dole castigated the Times Warner Corporation, the Oliver Stone film *Natural Born Killers*, and the rap group 2 Live Crew for promoting a "degradation" of American culture through representations of violence and immorality. Rather than searching print advertisements for "deeper meanings," our students might enter a debate relevant in social, political, and academic contexts with a more complex understanding of popular culture texts and mass media audiences.

NOTES

1 See Brickman and Pacheco's "Using Print and Electronic Ads in the Writing Classroom" and Bush's "Using Television Commercials to Help Students Discover Their Audience" for variations of these assignments.

2 See Harris and Rosen, Blair, Foreman and Shumway, George and Shoos for excellent discussions of such courses.

3 As Vandenberg argues, this kind of "real audience" analysis in composition assignments often elicits "stereotypical characterizations" about readers that are logically flawed (87).

4 As Joseph Harris notes in "Criticism and the Other Reader," (referring to Janice Radway and other cultural critics) we have "a long tradition of speaking, usually in tones of consternation and dismay, about the effects popular texts might have on other readers" (4).

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