

Influencing the Mass: Critiquing Advertisements in the College Curriculum

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Abstract

This manuscript describes the involvement of art criticism as description (media, form, technique, character, subject, objects), analysis (which includes the elements that the artists arranges to allow a sensory experience), interpretation (what were the effects created by the way the advertisement was composed?) and evaluation (How is this advertisement effective based on the intent of the designer of this ad?) within commercial and graphic images. Advertisements are sometimes integrated within our art education curriculum to understand its influences on personal identity and self-esteem. The concept of embedding images inside advertising shows a persistence in the imagination of corporate America's marketing strategy and is a popular way of expressing and understanding the kind of world consumers live in.

Using Feldman's (1985) model of art criticism, college level students can learn to describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate design through advertising. In the art curriculum, understanding how mass arts influences visual culture could be an effective tool in teaching students to reflect upon themselves and their own identity.

Key Words: Art Criticism, Visual Culture, Interpretation, Evaluation, Description

Approaching Advertisements in the Classroom

In the classroom, educators can discuss how advertising is an expression of visual culture. Feldman (1967) described the involvement of art criticism as description (media, form, technique, character, subject, objects), analysis (which includes the elements that the artists arranges to allow a sensory experience), interpretation (what were the effects created by the way the advertisement was composed?) and evaluation (How is this advertisement effective based on the intent of the designer of this ad?) Commercial and graphic images are sometimes integrated within our art education curriculum to understand its influences on personal identity and self-esteem. Klein (1992) describes advertising as a form of socialization and part of our construction knowledge about how individuals see themselves and others. However, how do art educators approach them in an art lesson? How can students reflect upon and see themselves through the mass arts?

Mass Arts Means Mass Influence

Chapman (2003) describes mass arts as the mass production and mass marketing for profit. The concept of embedding images inside advertising shows a persistence in the imagination of corporate America's marketing strategy and is a popular way of expressing and understanding the kind of world consumers live in. The relationship between mass art and visual culture is that there is an understanding of the world through images and what is going on at a particular moment in the course of history and in the world. Mass advertising makes our culture because of the intense images that constantly surround us with billboards, television, technology, internet, advertisements, design, and anything that is visual.

Using Feldman's (1985) model of art criticism, college level students can learn to describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate design through advertising. In the art curriculum, understanding how mass arts influences visual culture could be an effective tool in teaching students to reflect upon themselves and their own identity. Feldman's model of art criticism is particularly suitable for analyzing advertisement images with college students

not only because of the genre of adult nature, but also because they can understand how these images impact their culture with their visual surroundings. They can also learn that advertisements have cultural value even if a student does not agree with its message or aesthetic visuals.

Through Feldman's (1985) model of art criticism the study of mass arts may develop knowledge of personal expression, aesthetic analysis of the techniques and interpretation and help learners understand the synthesis and evaluation of the concepts involved in marketing and visual culture. Also in teaching mass arts, students may analyze how issues of race, class, gender can influence identity and the production of images from mass culture. Discussing these advertisements may be one way to facilitate the development of critical thinking in students.

Some practical suggestions to consider when applying Feldman's model are asking the students how the advertisements make them feel. Other questions include: Do the colors and images provoke a certain emotion or appeal to the viewer? Is the subject matter of the advertisement relevant to the concepts? Was the advertisement effective in conveying a particular message to the target audience? Are there any obvious or indirect symbols in the advertisements that have meaning to the students? How are the space, shapes, colors, and objects arranged in a way that makes your eye travel in a certain direction throughout the advertisement?

Feldman's model can be modified to suit the lesson because judgment can be discussed immediately when a student views the advertisement. By modifying the model, the instructor and students can judge the advertisement first then go into the descriptive, analysis and interpretation or interchange the order of them. The instructor should welcome any feedback or opinion from the students and should encourage multiple interpretations from students because students may reveal elements that others may not have noticed.

Using Feldman's (1985) theory of learning requires that the appreciation of art require that the exchange of dialogue from students and teachers are imperative to the process of art criticism. The educational significance can also promote image-making, aesthetic appeal, artistic visual culture and artistic techniques, art historical reference to images, preferences on race

and how other cultures see beauty, how beauty changes, and how it influences an individual's self-esteem.

McFee (1998) describes the concept of culture as the values, attitudes and belief systems of a group of people that embodies their human behavior, patterns, and the structure of their environment. The concept of culture in mass arts can also influence the way people think, feel and act and how society determines its aesthetic, ethical, moral, spiritual, cultural and environmental values (Gaudelius, 1997).

Art educators could initiate a class discussion of how mass media influences an individual's identity, who the target audience is, and how the composition and placement of objects could be subliminal through the use of symbolic images. The dialogue and the interpretation of mass media from students may influence human actions when they are shared with others (Bassegy, 1999). Sharing dialogue that involves how mass arts may or may not affect identity will give students the opportunity to develop post-modernist views of art as a creative enterprise. Chapman (2003) describes how the mass arts and its narratives must be marketable.

A lesson that analyzes how issues of race, class, gender can influence identity and the production of these images from mass culture can facilitate the development of critical thinking in students. Students then can understand their power and role and how a majority of these images are idealized beauty and how these images have influenced their own personal lives. Commercial images have issues of representation but through analyzing and discussing these in a classroom, the students will have the ability to act upon their beliefs on self-image and change them.

Also, on a multicultural level, these advertisements can give us broader knowledge of the dominant forms of artistic expression, how we borrow images and ideals from other cultures and their diverse artistic traditions. Each cultural society, sub-culture, and social and economic class has symbols, art, artifacts and environments that identify its social standing in the arts (McFee, 1998). Critically examining subliminal advertising from mass arts may uncover symbols and artifacts that influence an individual's identity.

Analyzing Gender in Visual Culture

For example, I have noticed that a majority of mass arts and visual culture showed images of females that influenced advertised concepts. In the classroom setting, this could be one motivator for discussion. Using art history to identify symbols could be used as a supporting argument. For instance, in the early 20th century, women in America were seen as weak-bodied, submissive, passive, and dependent on males (Heller, 2000). At mid-century, women started to become more independent, carefree, and posed a social and political threat to male superiority (Heller, 2000). Since then, women have redefined their roles in society and have adopted new attitudes to marriage and children and self (Botterill, Jhally, Kline, & Leiss, 2005). Female sexuality has been dominating the images of romance in advertising, and some mimic the sadomasochistic style of fashion as a way to break sexual norms (Botterill, Jhally, Kline, & Leiss, 2005). By discussing social, cultural, and historic information of the subject, students may critically think about how art and photography in mass arts can manipulate the message or concept. Feldman (1985) described *expressivism* as a form of art criticism that “sees excellence as the ability of art to communicate ideas and feelings intensely and vividly.” Here, the quality in expressive criticism involves an acceptance of subjective concerns as legitimate values in the work. Also, when critiquing an advertisement, students may use Feldman’s formalism theory (Feldman, 1985) to see how the ad was constructed in its relationship or composition of the elements. This can be beneficial since a lot of mass arts place symbolic images in the ad that viewers may not register subconsciously when looking at the whole picture. Lastly, Feldman’s theory (1985) of *instrumentalist* criticism is based on social, political, psychological consequences that result from the work. Art educators can facilitate discussion using Feldman’s (1985) critiques and spiral them into other questions that may arise from the discussion.

- 1) Describe: What do you see? Describe how the compositions of the elements are in relationship to each other.

- 2)Analyze: How does the visual placement of artifacts, colors, gender (s), elements and principles, and space influence the concepts and ideas of the ad?
- 3)Interpret: How do you interpret the ad? Could this ad influence or not influence a viewer?
- 4)Evaluate (Judge): How can you compare and contrast your ideas with another person's perspective when viewing the ad? Do you think that this ad is successful or not in conveying its message?

Example Advertisements for Critiques

Involving students in the process of discussion and critical thinking should involve Feldman's model (1985) of description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation (judgment). During the *description*, students should be able to look for the principles and elements of art within the ad: colors, shapes, lines, space, textures and so forth. In the *analysis*, students may realize how these visual elements and principles relate to one another. The *interpretation* stage is when students may identify themes and ideas in the ad to find meanings and emotion. Students may also compare and contrast ideas and symbols that may be subliminal for the viewer. They may examine the work during this stage of criticism and create an explanation and interpretation of the work from their perspective. The process of interpretation can also be appropriate for younger students depending on how appropriate the images are for that grade level.

However, for this article I used three examples of advertisements that were used for critiques in the Computers and Art class at the University of North Texas in 2008. These examples describe the descriptions, analysis, interpretations and evaluations from college level art education students. The first advertisement was taken from a woman's fashion magazine (Figure 1):



Figure 1. *Gucci* ad showing a black panther prowling in the background of the female where her head meets the panther's body. Copyright 2007 Gucci.

Feldman's Model: Description, Analysis, Interpret and Evaluation

What is the description? A blond Caucasian female is sitting facing the right side but her head is turned to the left side. She is wearing a tight black outfit and holding a colored handbag with an intricate design. In the background there is a painting of a black panther. The head of the panther does not show because her head is covering it up. The brightest colors of this ad are the red (lipstick and on her handbag) and the dominant color of the ad is black. The panther is walking upward almost in a prowl. The eyes of the woman look almost seductive yet determined.

Analysis: How does the background pictures relate to the photo of the woman? How do the shapes and contrast and direction of the elements relate to one another? Does this ad target upper class younger women (ages 25+)? What elements and principles are used in this ad?

Interpretation: The ad characterizes the woman as the panther. Her head is placed exactly in the spot where the panther's head is supposed to be. Her head is level with the proportion of the panther's body suggesting that she is like the panther. She is wearing black which blends her in better. The seductive look makes her look like she is on the 'prowl'. Her new role

is an independent, dominant woman who is in control and knows what she wants. She can pick and choose any male that she wants because she is slick and determined just like the panther. She could be seductive and sensual; yet fierce like a “man-eater”.

Evaluation: Overall, this is a successful ad that brings the idea that if you buy any like Gucci then you will be an independent, dominant woman who is in control too.

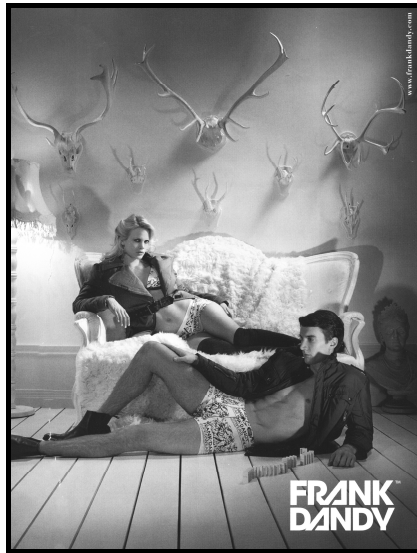


Figure 2. *Frank Dandy* ad showing a man and woman in their underwear.

In the same way the Gucci ad targets women, the company Frank Dandy uses a lot of symbolism in their ad to influence the consumer, male and female (Figure 2).

Description: There is a female in a bra and panties wearing a jacket lying on a couch on top of a fleece covering and below her is a male in his underwear wearing a jacket. The male is lying on a white hardwood floor next to a pile of standing dominoes. He is below her and looking towards the left. She is looking at whoever is reading the ad. Her eyes look seductive. The most interesting part of this ad is that on the wall are eight mounts of deer antlers and deer skulls. They are in various sizes, with the largest antler in the middle of the composition. The lighting in the scene

has various colors that blend from blue to orange. Behind the couch on the left hand side, is a bust of a queen figure wearing a crown? This bust is blended in the dark shadows and is barely noticeable in the background. The room has antlers on the wall and a hidden bust of a queen on the right in the shadows.

Analysis:How does the placement of the elements in the picture have appeal to the consumer? Does this ad cater to younger males and females from age 18 and over to sell their underwear? What significance do the antlers on the wall and a hidden bust of a queen on the right in the shadows have? What elements and principles are used in this ad?

Interpretation:This message is for a generation of youth that defies the traditional aspect of being proper. Below is the caption "Rebuilding Underwear Culture". What is different about this underwear is that the word "Superwear" is printed on them. The word "Superwear" has association with the word "Superman". Superman is a character of strength in American culture. This subliminal message is trying to say that if a male or female buys Frank Dandy underwear he or she will feel special and above and beyond the norm. If the consumer just bought any other underwear, then he or she won't feel "super". The bust of the queen wearing a crown represents traditional culture and royalty, and this supports the message to the consumer that if they buy this underwear they will feel superior. The young woman and male wearing underwear represent youth and a new culture of sexuality. In ancient Mesopotamian culture, antlers symbolize masculine aggression strength, sacrifice, and a symbol of divine power. In this ad, it seems that the antlers symbolize protest and rebellion as the attitudes of youth being edgy and chic. This is why the bust of queen is in the shadows; it signifies that old is out and new is in and traditional virtue is out and new ways of alternative lifestyles are in. The ad wants young people to buy the underwear so they can feel comfortable and confident in their own skin, while sensual, cool and in control when they break old rules. The dominoes in the picture are in the foreground next to the male and are positioned in such a way that they are leading towards the consumer viewing the ad. If the dominoes were to fall, it would be as if they were trying to reach out and connect with the consumer to feel emotions in the ad.

Evaluation: Overall, this is a successful ad that brings the idea that if you buy Frank Dandy underwear you will be as youthful and chic as the people in the picture.

The last ad reaches out and connects with the consumer to feel in control by showing a female robot built to serve (Figure 3).

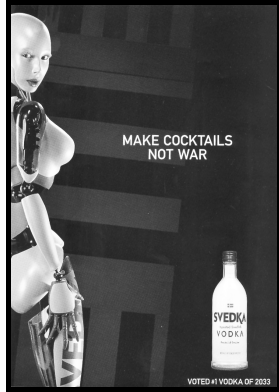


Figure 3. *Svedka Vodka* ad. Copyright 2007 Svedka Vodka.

Description: This ad selling vodka uses a female robot showing a seductively posed female robot with exaggerated female anatomy body parts. She does not have the boxy machine look a traditional robot has; she has curves, large breasts, rounded buttocks, and facial features that include seductive eyes with eyelashes and red, moist, thick lips. The female robot's body is not frontal and has her back turned, yet she is turning her head to look at the viewer of this ad.

Analysis: Is the target audience younger or older males, or both? What elements and principles are used in this ad? How does the placement of the robot in the picture have appeal to the consumer? How space and contrast of the elements relate to one another? What is the significance of using a robot with exaggerated female parts?

Interpretation: This female robot is a symbol of male fantasy. The ad's headline, "Make Cocktails Not War" is referencing the slogan, "Make Love Not War". The advertisers simply replaced the word "love" with the word "cocktails" so that the consumer can remember the association with Svedka vodka since the original slogan is a memorable yet common phrase in American society dating back from the 1960's era.

It is also common knowledge that robots can be programmed and it's the fantasy of most males to choose a submissive female that they can control. The concept of programming a female is associated with the feeling of sexual gratification. Men that buy this vodka will feel that control over women. The ad basically conveys the message that if you drink Svedka vodka, the "Voted #1 Vodka of 2033" it is a reflection that this vodka will be popular for years to come. The fantasy is that the female robot will serve the males drinks and be "eye candy" for them while serving cocktails to them. Because this robot is so sexual looking, it's trying to be seductive. It seems that Svedka may be the robot's name because it is written on her thigh. The stereotypical image of a seductive woman usually portrays her body positioned from behind and turning her head back so that she will attract the opposite sex to view her rear end. This is probably the reason why the robot is being seen from behind as opposed to a frontal position. The background showing geometric shapes support the futuristic look. The blue colors of the background match the letters of "Svedka" on her thigh and the black colors match the inside frame of the robot. The consumer will have an unconscious association with the color blue of the "Svedka" letters in correlation to the image of the female robot.

Evaluation: Overall, this is a successful ad that brings the idea that you drinking Sveda Vodka will give you the sense of satisfaction and control over women.

Conclusion

From the above examples, art educators and students can have many different interpretations how the elements and principles of art within an ad can allow various judgments of the concepts and images. From these three examples, it is clear that these examples of mass arts have a marketing strategy that appeals to the viewer aesthetically and psychologically. Feldman's (1985) model for critiques will give students the opportunity to reflect upon themselves and see how mass arts influences their identity, behavior, and esteem. Images are so saturated within visual culture, and most people do not recognize it when they see it because the symbolism is subtle. Subliminal stimuli are main stream in mass arts.

Using these examples however, allows the students to promote higher levels of critical thinking within the artistic, psychological, social, cultural, and historical context. For commercial advertisements that look like public service ones, students can evaluate these advertisements for the structure, style, similarities and differences of the elements, and the strengths and weaknesses of the advertisement.

Art education in advertising engages the students to think about the images, shapes, feelings, concepts and symbols within the composition that may influence identity and esteem.

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