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ABSTRACT

Everyone sees through advertisements, yet no one is immune from their appeal. In a writing class the students were able to look at ads without being injured or seduced by them, but doubted that others could do the same. It is important to encourage students to discuss what they actually think about writings rather than what they are supposed to think about them, and to teach them to articulate a response before celebrating or criticizing it. Assignments for a basic writing class include asking students to: (1) look at the uses they make of popular texts in forming their own self-images or identities; (2) write about how a certain kind of music, movies or fashion entered into and affected their lives; (3) define the sort of viewer or reader that a certain text seems to address; (4) consider David Marc's argument for the value of watching television "actively"; (5) take the approach of the marxist critic John Berger in reading a current advertisement, drawing on what is already know about how ads work in order to talk back to Berger; and (6) follow the lead of Roland Barthes in looking for the meanings of various objects or "texts" that might often be thought to mean little or nothing at all. If students learn how to use what they know about the media and pop culture to gain a hearing as writers at the university, taking on the languages and methods of the university to say new things about that culture, they will no longer be the sort of "other reader" whose responses critics worry about and speak for, but critics themselves. (PRA)

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CRITICISM AND THE OTHER READER

A paper presented to the
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Session B7: Identification and Opposition in Basic Writing

by

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Let me begin with two readings of advertisements. The first is by a student in a freshman writing course:

The Durosoft's commercial opens with a man's voiceover, similar to the Calvin's voice, which is slightly feminine and artistic sounding. The man is reciting his own prose about the woman of his dreams as she is shown floating down to earth: "... like an angel dropped down from heaven . . . with eyes as brown as . . . bark." Then he pauses, "No, that's not it." The sound of a film rewinding is heard as she re-ascends back up into the clouds, all in a choppy fashion. He then says: "... with eyes as violet as the colors of a child's imagination." The beautiful dream woman then stares directly into the camera with very unnatural, almost glowing blue-violet-colored eyes.

While the overall look and sound of this commercial is very pleasing to the senses, an educated and aware person sees it on a deeper level. The purpose of the Durosoft commercial is to sell colored soft contacts to women. . . The way the commercial achieves this is by making the viewer (read woman) want to be as beautiful and desirable as the dream woman seen and described in the ad.

While this ad is soothing to the eyes and ears, and, to a degree, fires the imagination, it is actually propaganda specifically aimed at impressionable young women and insecure women, who have become that way with the "help" of the same medium. . . At the end of this ad, the man's voice says, "Durosoft Colors Contact Lenses. Gives Brown Eyes a Second Look." How sad that is. According to this ad, those of us not "blessed" with blue eyes must now change our eye color to be considered attractive. And the saddest part of all is that most people aren't even aware of it.

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And here is Leslie Savan writing in the *Voice* on another Durasoft ad, this one targeted at black women:

In one TV spot, three pretty women—two white, one black—frown into mirrors. The black woman is ethnically correct "good hair," looks like Lisa Bonet), but she's as sad as her eyes are deep brown. "There's someone special inside you, and DuraSoft Colors contact lenses can change your eye color to hers," a female voice-over says. Now bejeweled and glowing with emerald eyes, our black lady is oggled by a guy—as she gazes off into the sunset, savoring her (\$200-\$300) secret. . . .

Women of all races seem eager to unleash that special someone imprisoned by their irises. . . . The light ooh-la-la, purchasable fun of henna, fake eyelashes, or dotted nail polish that women can reimagine themselves with has always been a little burst of wildness, a temporary freedom from the physical self. That's fashion and fad. But it's hard to distinguish the difference between remodeling the self out of boredom and remodeling out of desire to become another.

In one sense, there's not much to argue with in either of these readings. As both writers are quick to point out, the aim of advertisements is indeed to sell things, and they usually try to do so by suggesting that you will somehow be happier or prettier if you buy what they have to offer. And both do a good enough job of showing how the DuraSoft ads play on (and add to) the ways women in our culture are made to feel anxious about how they look. (Although I'd argue that this sort of criticism has become so easy and familiar that most of us can do it pretty well without giving it much thought at all.) What troubles me, though, is how each writer seems to describe not her own response to the ad but that of *some other viewer*. And so while my student speaks indignantly in the name of those "impressionable young women and insecure women" who are taken in by the DuraSoft spot, she also hints that she is among those "educated and aware" viewers who see it "on a deeper level." Similarly, Savan notes the eagerness of "women of all races . . . to unleash that special someone imprisoned by their irises," while at the same time implying that there are still a few of us left who can make that hard distinction between "remodeling the self out of boredom and remodeling out of desire to become another." In short, neither is fooled, though both think that others are.

The problem of course is finding those other dumber viewers. Our society is saturated with ads. Everyone sees through them; no one is immune from their appeal. If we want to understand anything about how they work, we need to unravel this paradox. But instead most writing about advertising treats the viewer as either a skeptic or a shill. And so, for instance, John Berger writes that advertising:

is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. (132)

But it's hard to imagine Berger himself falling for such a scam. And, similarly, when Mark Miller writes of a TV spot for Shield soap that its "strategy is not meant to be noticed," we know immediately that here is one viewer who has not been taken in (48). But who has?

I don't mean to side here with advertisers like Hal Riney who argue that since "people today are advise," there's nothing to worry about (quoted in Miller 49). My point is that before we can have a real criticism of advertising, or of any other part of popular culture, we need first to talk about our *own* responses to it—responses that are often at once both pleased and skeptical, amused and doubting, open and resisting. What won't help is speaking in the name of someone who fails to see what we do.

And yet this is often precisely what happens. For instance, in a basic writing class a few years ago, I asked my students to come up with a magazine ad they found interesting and to write a piece that told why. A week or so later we sat in class and talked about two of their responses: One poked fun at the macho Americanism of an ad for Hero cologne; the other mocked the tacky fantasy of a layout for Forever Krystal perfume. The students were happy, this was easy stuff, they felt in the know. To a person, they had decoded my assignment as meaning: Show me how you see through this ad. I looked around the room and counted 18 pairs of jeans and 18 pairs of running shoes. (I was the only exception,

with my proper academic penny loafers and baggy corduroys.) How is it, I asked, that nobody here is taken in by advertising and yet we all dress alike? Can't we find a way of talking about the effects ads have not on others but on ourselves? And then our conversation, which had been going so well, slowed and stalled.

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For we have few models of what such talk or writing might look like. What we have instead is a long tradition of speaking, usually in tones of consternation and dismay, about the effects popular texts might have on other readers. We can trace this discourse of alarm back to the worries of Socrates and Plato that many of the Homeric verses they are able to quote by heart might have a corrupting influence on lesser men, could in fact turn them into cowards and skeptics, and thus that all but the most "austere and less pleasure-giving" poets would need to be banned from their ideal city (*Republic* 398b). From there we might skip to Matthew Arnold's concern with domesticating the tastes of the "bawling, hustling, and smashing" Populace of his day (451), and then move to our own century and the worries of F. R. Leavis about the threats posed to "culture" by "mass civilization." And surely there has been no recent lack of critics—from Theodore Adorno and Dwight MacDonald to Laura Mulvey and Guy Debord—willing to talk about how the mass media continue to fix the spectator (that is, other spectators) in a state of critical apathy and listlessness.

One response to this line of moralizing has been to argue that the actual readers of popular texts are far more active and resistant than they are often presumed to be. While this is in many ways an appealing stance, it still places the critic in the odd position of describing how someone else reads a text—with the result that it is often not clear how the critic reads it herself. My hunch is that the responses of such "other readers," however well and sympathetically described, will almost always turn out to be less complex and interesting than those of the critic herself—so that such an approach is likely to lead to writing like my student's and Savan's, in which the critic warns other readers against the

lures of some popular text. And, even at its best, such criticism seems apt to run into the kind of problem faced by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance*, where after showing how the women in her study see their reading of romance novels as a way of contesting and escaping the demands placed on them as wives and mothers, she still feels compelled to note that:

while the act of reading is used by women as a means of partial protest against the role prescribed for them by the culture, the discourse [of the romance] itself actively insists on the desirability, naturalness, and benefits of that role by portraying it not as the imposed necessity that it is but as a freely designed, personally controlled, individual choice (208).

In other words, they've missed something. And so Radway's stance is really not so different from my student's or Savan's. Like them, she sees dangers lurking in popular texts that the readers she speaks for do not. And so it is no surprise when she ends her study of romance fiction with the pious hope that there will someday be "a world where the vicarious pleasure supplied by its reading would be unnecessary" (222).

In their own texts, each of these writers, from Plato and Arnold to my student and Radway, presents a figure of the critic who can read (and often even enjoy) popular works without being injured or seduced by them. Yet each doubts that others can do the same, and so ends up arguing for a kind of censorship, or at least for a better world where the pleasures such texts offer are no longer needed (like sexless views of heaven). A deep anti-democratic impulse, a kind of fear of the mob, runs through such writings. Other readers can't be trusted. Their responses need to be trained, domesticated, disciplined. And, in the meantime, they need to be guarded against the influence of popular and thus suspect texts—from things like imitative poetry in Plato's time, or serial novels in Arnold's, or television in our own.

The question is how to work against this tradition of speaking for other readers, to move students away from writing about what they think they're *supposed* to think about

popular texts and towards what they actually *do* think about them. You have to articulate a response before you can celebrate or criticize it. The task, then, as I see it, is to set up a classroom where students can talk about their responses to popular texts as mixed rather than simple, where they can write as people who are at once rock fans *and* intellectuals, who watch old sitcoms *and* read criticism, who wear levis *and* look skeptically at advertising.

One way I've tried to do so is through having basic writers look at the uses they make of popular texts in forming their own self-images or identities. (And here I need to thank my colleagues at Pitt who have taught this course with me and helped shape my thinking about it—most especially Rashmi Bhatnagar, Gary Calpas, Bianca Falbo, Angie Farkas, and Constance Mayer.) The idea driving the course is that identity rises out of identification, that we define who we are by whom we choose to stand with and against—and thus that in an electronic culture much of our sense of self is shaped by (or set against) the voices and images of television, radio, movies, pop music, fashion, advertising, and the like. For the course to work, then, it is vital that students don't get the sense that there is some sort of party line to be either mimicked or resisted, and especially that they don't feel required to take on an adversarial stance towards their own culture, to side somehow with the university and against the media, but rather that they can write of the pleasures as well as problems they find in popular texts.

And so we begin the term by reading Dave Marsh's account of how rock music first became important to him and why he continues to write about it now. I then ask students to do some writing of their own in which they show how a certain kind of music (or movies or fashion or whatever) entered into and affected their own lives. A second assignment asks them to define the sort of viewer or reader that a certain text—a magazine, a TV show, a rock song—seems to address, using Barbara Ehrenreich's critique of *Playboy* as a model for such work. We next consider David Marc's argument for the value

of watching television "actively," and in their own writings students then try to show exactly what it might mean to look at a particular program in such a way. Assignment four requires them both to take on the approach of the marxist critic John Berger in reading a current advertisement, and to draw on what they already know about how ads work in order to talk back to Berger. And a final assignment has them follow the lead of Roland Barthes in looking for the meanings of various objects or "texts"—like compact discs, walkmen, microwaves, buildings, clothes, and the like—that might often be thought to mean little or nothing at all. The course does not offer students a particular critical method or vocabulary to use in reading their culture. But it does allow them a number of chances both to identify with and resist some of the voices and images in that culture—and thus to begin to define their own places in it.

This is hard and ambitious work for writers at any level. Certainly, it takes most of my students a lot of talk and writing to even begin to form a working sense of a critic's "method," much less to then use it for their own ends. Each piece they write, then, gets revised in response to comments at least once, and often many times more. And so, too, most of our day-to-day work in class centers less on issues in popular culture than on problems in reading and writing. It is often unclear, for instance, how the stories students tell in response to the first assignment relate back to the one told by Dave Marsh, or how their readings of ads in assignment four either build on or differ from the analysis offered by John Berger. In our talk in class and in my comments on their papers, then, I ask them to make those connections, to show how they are using their reading in their writing, to define the stance they are taking towards the work of other writers.

None of this is talk about writing in the abstract. Rather, almost all the work we do in class centers on the writings of the students in it. (And here I am of course working within an approach to teaching started at Pitt by Bill Coles and continued, along with many others, by Dave Bartholomae, Tony Petrosky, Paul Kameen, and Mariolina Salvatori.) A class on

Dave Marsh, for instance, usually involves looking at the uses one or two students have made of his ideas and phrasings in their own writings. Or a class on revising will center on the differences between the first and second drafts of a student piece. And so a typical class meeting might go something like this: The students and I sit around a seminar table or in a circle. Each of us has a dittoed copy of an essay written by a student in the class, though the name of its writer has been blacked out, and the custom is that she stay anonymous during our talk. All of us have read and made notes on this piece the night before. Somebody reads it aloud once again, and we begin to talk about it, asking questions like: How does this writer add to our talk about this subject? What moves does she make to lend authority and interest to what she has to say? What's here that we can use in our own writings as critics? And, finally, what kinds of advice can we give her as she continues to work on this piece?

The point of such talk is to give students some sense of what it is like to be part of a collective and ongoing inquiry into a subject—which is what I take work at a university to be all about. Everybody has one of their writings discussed by the class at least once in the term, and everybody gets to see how other students have dealt with the same issues and problems they are working on. In revising their work, then, they can not only draw on my comments on their paper but also on the talk and writing of their classmates. This means that I spend a lot of time at the ditto machine, running off copies of the papers I want us to talk about in class. But it also means that students learn what it feels like to have their own writing read seriously and attentively—and not just by a teacher: but by their peers. They find out, that is, what it is like to be treated as somebody with something to say, and not just somebody who makes a lot of mistakes in grammar.

They also learn something about the sorts of power and insight that study at a university can offer them. At the start of the term, students are thrown in a position where they both hold a kind of expertise and authority (as people who know a lot about popular

culture) and lack it (as people placed in a basic writing class). Over the course of the semester, then, they need to learn two things: How to use what they know about the media and pop culture to gain a hearing as writers at the university, and how to take on the languages and methods of the university to say new things about that culture. When they do, something extraordinary has happened, for it means they are no longer the sort of "other reader" whose responses critics worry about and speak for, but critics themselves.

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