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AUTHOR Smith, Mark
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ABSTRACT

The proliferation and subsequent devaluation of electronic symbols necessitate a rethinking of classroom discourse. In recent years, "visual literacy" has become an issue among those who feel that the increasingly symbolic orientation of communications compels the writing instructor to address the dynamics of both visual and written discourse. These symbols threaten to produce a new type of unexamined and cliched student writing. If writers are to gain (or regain) a vital, relevant discourse, they must approach electronic images in the spirit of Kathleen Welch's "active decoding" (1990) that seeks to familiarize writers with the manipulation that is inherent in symbols. The advent of the World Wide Web, cable television, and desktop publishing has exacerbated the deluge and ensuing devaluation of symbols. Images are now used primarily as shorthand methods of representing information. This new function is particularly evident in advertising--commercial, political, and otherwise. The role of images in persuasion is clear: to evoke an instantaneous impression, requiring minimal reasoning, drawing from the viewer's social and attitudinal stores. A "successful" image is not only simple, but ambiguous. Educators must continue to advocate the active construction and interpretation of texts, bringing images into the classroom, examining their modes of appeal. The preeminence of electronic symbols has added another dimension to classroom discourse, one that reaffirms the classroom's role as a forum of critical thought and active inquiry. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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Mark Smith

Valdosta State University

Penetrating "Symbolspeak": Reading the Images of Public Discourse

In Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology, Neil Postman reexamines Alvin Toffler's prophecies of an information overload. Many of Postman's most damning indictments of this "information glut" are found in his discussion of "The Great Symbol Drain." Here, he discusses the role played by the advent of computer graphics, arguing that the advancement of graphics technology has devalued national and religious symbols through frequent and repeated reproduction. Postman traces the trivialization of symbols to a nineteenth-century "graphics revolution," described by Daniel Boorstin as allowing

> the easy reproduction of visual images, thus providing the masses with continuous access to the symbols and icons of their culture. Through prints, lithographs, photographs, and, later, movies and television . . . symbols became commonplaces. (166)

The proliferation and subsequent devaluation of electronic symbols necessitate a rethinking of classroom discourse, particularly if we expand Boorstin's observations beyond religious and national symbols to include electronically-generated symbols in general. Just as Postman and Toffler argue that we are overloaded with information, we are likewise deluged with images: product logos, celebrity faces, and familiar landscapes and landmarks are reproduced and disbursed in advertisements and newscasts through both electronic and print media. In recent years, "visual literacy" has become an issue among those who feel that the increasingly

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symbolic orientation of communications compels the writing instructor to address the dynamics of both visual and written discourse (Curtiss, Suhor and Little, Santiago, Notar).

The visual and stimuli surrounding our students lends itself to what Stewart Ewen terms an "aesthetic of abstract value" (176) in which cultural symbols have been rendered meaningless through technical refinement and repetition. These symbols threaten to produce a new type of unexamined and cliched student writing. Certainly, writing teachers have always struggled with aphoristic student texts; however, the nature of the symbol overload presents new concerns in the pursuit of searching, analytic discourse. If writers are to gain (or regain) a vital, relevant discourse, they must approach electronic images in the spirit of Kathleen Welch's "active decoding" that seeks to familiarize writers with the manipulation that is inherent in symbols.

The advent of the World Wide Web, cable television, and desktop publishing has exacerbated the deluge and ensuing devaluation of symbols. As architects of electronic information compete for space within a diminished public attention span, they must resort to bountiful--yet concise--symbols for a shorthand code. Furthermore, these messages must be conveyed in a potent, efficient format that lends itself to immediate impressions. As Toffler observed some time ago, "In an effort to transmit even richer image-producing messages at an even faster rate, communications people, artists, and others consciously work to make each instant of exposure to the mass media carry a heavier informational and emotional freight" (149).

Images are fundamental to communication in both oral and secondarily-oral cultures. Historically, images reinforced the communal social structure of oral cultures, providing the gathering and identification points for communities. (Indeed, the signum, from which we get the word sign, was originally a standard used by the Roman army for identification [Ong, Orality 76].) Because the spoken word is temporary and fluid, a visual image was important in preliterate times for preserving a lineage (coat of arms), a theology (religious icons), or a legend (statue).

In the Information Age, images have reemerged in a sort of neo-oral epistemology in which their functions differ from those of preliterate times. Images are now used primarily as shorthand methods of representing information. This new function is particularly evident in advertising--commercial, political, and otherwise--from which I will glean illustrations for the remainder of this paper. The role of images in persuasion is clear: to evoke an instantaneous impression, requiring minimal reasoning, drawing from the viewer's social and attitudinal stores. According to Roy F. Fox,

> professional image makers milk perception for emotion. They care little about logic, proof, or argument and instead focus exclusively on values, attitudes, feelings, sensations, passions, and sentiments. And the golden key that unlocks each of these chambers is emotion. (77)

Simplicity also enhances an image's ability to transmit information cryptically and efficiently. In rhetorical communities overloaded with stimuli, the image creator seeks to distill the viewer's social and cultural experiences into a simple impression with properties best described

by Roland Barthes: the meaning "postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions" (117). Furthermore, the simplicity of images in advertising fosters a subliminal attraction, utilizing highly ironic or incongruous contexts to sell--not a product--but an attitude or lifestyle.

A successful image is not only simple, but ambiguous. The effective advertiser must attract the viewer with a familiar or attractive scene. Then, however, the image must leave sufficient ambiguity in which the viewer must be able to project him/herself, allowing for a Rogerian persuasive context that constructs a bridge between the sender and receiver of the argument. According to Boorstin, the image must "float somewhere between the imagination and the senses" (Boorstin 193). As demonstrated by Andy Warhol, the mass-produced image lends itself to repetition, searing the impression in the consumer's psyche. However, repetition diminishes the image's immediate context, and it becomes abstract and distant. Of such images, Barthes says, "the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal . . . the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment (118).

Today, the ease with which images are developed, altered, and displayed--repeatedly--in multiple contexts bestows the celebrity with transcendental features. Sports celebrities' wisdom now extends to soft drink endorsements, and talk-show hosts, actors, and actresses freely express their "expertise" on social, political, and environmental issues. Much like the Greek and Roman marble likenesses, which represented embodiments of ideals, we are again presented with visual representations of the paragon.

The recent ads for milk, sponsored by the National Fluid Milk Processor Promotion Board, both yield a contemporary example of ethos and also epitomize the afore-mentioned confluence of simplicity and complexity of images. The ads foreground a celebrity sporting a milk mustache. The juxtaposition of the celebrated and the mundane, the incongruity of this presentation--what Roy Fox terms "visual 'binary oppositions'" (89)--catches the eye and draws the viewer into a sphere of unreality that allows for further, subtle manipulation. Within the most abstract interpretation of these ads lies the humanizing of an ideal, rendering accessible a cultural myth. The ads' subtle message is contingent on visual silence: background texture or other details are at a minimum, the little copy they contain is comprised of cryptic phrases.

The ad's persuasive effects are dependent to a great extent on the celebrities' ironic "humiliation." Indeed, the irony in this ad differentiates it from Aristotle's speaker of "good sense" because we are examining the speaker's ethos from a post-literate context. In classical times, the eiron was a generally unattractive character: Aristotle favors an "honest fellow" over a "subtle reasoner" (213). Furthermore, irony demands a distancing possible only through the silence and impersonality of print. However, an electronically-manipulated image juxtaposes the participatory properties of an oral epistemology alongside the distant, disconnected characteristics of typography. For example, the celebrities in the ad are both familiar and aloof: we recognize their faces as cultural icons, images around whom we congregate--in pre-literate fashion--in our living rooms, movie theaters, and public spaces.

Yet, because we only see the image, and never the actual person, we are sufficiently distanced so that the silliness of the picture does not offend but amuses us.

Fortunately, classroom applications of much of this arduous theorizing are fairly accessible. As a general proclamation, we must continue to advocate the active construction and interpretation of texts, as proposed by Donald Lazere, among others. Specifically, we can bring images into the classroom, examining their modes of appeal. I adapt an analytical process proposed by Jacqueline N. Glasgow that critiques advertising images to reveal "consumer vulnerabilities in relation to the values and lifestyles found in our society" (496). Glasgow has students collect and analyze magazine or newspaper advertisements according to a multi-step process, first addressing the ad's literal components such as color, shapes, and typography. The second step entails a "inferential comprehension" ad that addresses the ad's "stories, metaphors, or cultural codes." The student describes these "codes" in terms of "personal needs, cultural values and lifestyles, and advertising appeals." In the final analysis, the writer investigates the ad's implications through an historical, psychological, sociological, or anthropological approach (496). This exercise encourages students to deconstruct images in advertising through a two-step process of identification and analysis. Students select magazine ads with vivid images. They identify the predominant images and detail the image's "look": its placement and color, for instance. Then, they analyze the message, addressing the images' connotations and the cultural codes at play.

As suggested above, the symbols received through electronic media are intended for passive reception in which the mind is not "engaged," as described by Michael C. Flanigan:

"This kind of imitation is passive and does not bring about change in the individual" (212). "We do not simply react to stimuli; we act upon them as they act on us. We transform stimuli, and they transform us" (213). Active reading of electronic texts requires a Friereian reading that reaffirms the active nature of texts. Friere characterizes our historical epoch as defined by a set of "aspirations, concerns, and values in search of fulfillment" and relevant themes (5). These themes are played out through the media--specifically, advertising. If viewers do not develop a critical awareness of these themes, they become submerged in a "leveling anonymity" (5). For a generation now, teachers and theorists have spoken out against writing as a static, product-oriented activity. But, electronically-generated symbols present a particular problem because they can be easily repeated, tiring the viewer and breaking down the critical resistances. The role of composing as a socially-directed activity is weakened when writers are not compelled to look beyond their own world.

Both John Willinsky and Kathleen Welch argue that students should learn to interpret and manipulate the symbols designed for passive reception. Willinsky proposes a New Literacy which posits a more "active voice" through which students might become more eloquent (30). Welch advocates an "active decoding" in which

> the decoder will undergo an activity that leads to reconceptualization. . . . When students are made aware of the varying constraints imposed by each symbol system (for example, the grammar of film as opposed to the grammar of writing in dominant-culture English), they are able to engage the symbol system in active ways.

She goes on to point out how such decoding empowers students:

> (1) It makes them (and us, their teachers) conscious of the technology that will to a large extent determine the result of their decoding (that is, the meaning); and (2) Knowledge of what a medium consists of and where it came from shows students more of the possibilities of all the media and connect students' usually isolated relationships to the media. (155-56)

The preeminence of electronic symbols has added another dimension to classroom discourse, one that reaffirms the classroom's role as a forum of critical thought and active inquiry. Responsible, researched writing instruction has largely freed itself from formulaic, static, topic-driven writing. But, with all its promise to further exacerbate a progressive and user-friendly classroom, technology nevertheless carries a tangential threat to subdue student discourse again through its trivialization of the impetuses for writing. As we reexamine and redefine "good writing" and "literacy" in a technological context, we must seek new ways to present and evaluate electronic texts.

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