

Amaranthus

Volume 1996 | Issue 1

Article 29

1-30-2013

Maintaining the Image

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Recommended Citation

Boogaart, Judith (1996) "Maintaining the Image," *Amaranthus*: Vol. 1996: Iss. 1, Article 29.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1996/iss1/29>

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Judith Boogaart *Maintaining the Image*

What does it take to sell beer in America? Many producers of goods need to "create" the consumers for their products by instilling in their viewers the desire for them. But this does not seem to be the case with beer. The desire and market have always been there. It is more a matter of identifying which segment of the market the company wants to reach. In a recent television ad sequence for Bud Lite, the focus is not only on identifying its audience(s), but also on reinforcing the cultural codes that allow the beer-buying pattern to continue. Budweiser's intentions, however, are not always realized.

The first commercial shows three men sitting and fishing on a dock in a river with a beautiful panorama of nature around them. The sunlight slants across their faces, two of which are obviously covered with several day's growth of beard. The men on either end are fully outfitted for the sport. The older one has a hat full of lures, the younger a fishing vest, and both use rods with sophisticated reel mechanisms. The man in the middle is wearing a flannel shirt and carries a push-button casting rod.

The ad contains denotative signs which become connotative signifiers for a cluster of related meanings. Viewers identify the iconic signs of men, bearded faces, nature, fishing poles; but these signs also become indices pointing to concepts like "vacation," "fishing trip," "backwoods adventure," and the like. We get the picture of a bunch of guys by themselves out in nature, doing "guy things" like fishing, telling stories, and drinking beer. There are no women here forcing them to keep up appearances or making demands on their time. The scene is slow paced and relaxed, right down to the simple accompanying music.

Lynne Joyrich's article on melodrama refers to commercials as "mini-melodramas" placed in juxtaposition against the larger dramas of full-length TV shows (136). The context for this particular Bud Lite ad is almost always a sports program of some sort, which has its own level of drama. But when the dialogue of the ad begins, we sense its narrative form and get caught up in its story. The father, a grizzly-faced old codger, sits on the right, watching his line. He symbolizes the independent, tough outdoorsman, someone who is canny, knows the ropes, someone hard to fool. Johnny, who sits near him, is about 35 years old, with a slightly receding hairline and full body shape. His mannerisms are almost self-effacing, rather embarrassed, when he informs his father that he has something to tell him. The old man turns to him in sympathetic interest, and Johnny blurts out, "You're my dad, and I love you, man!" The father nods to himself, as though coming to some conclusion, grabs his can of beer and says, "You're not getting my Bud Lite, Johnny."

It's interesting to note that this little melodrama includes a musical sign; also, a little disharmonic twang of a chord just before the father's pronouncement marks the end of the soft music that had been playing up to this point. Joyrich points out, "Music orchestrates the emotional ups and downs and underscores a particular rhythm of experience" in melodrama (131). Here it signals the plot reversal for the protagonist.

But Johnny doesn't give up. He looks calculatingly over towards the younger man on the left. This character has been sitting a little apart from the other two, and his clothing looks neater, his appearance a little more groomed than theirs. We speculate that he could be a younger brother who left home and "made it in the city." His air is more sophisticated, cynical,

world-weary. All Johnny has to do is say "Ray . . ." and he immediately responds, "Forget it, Johnny," in a bored voice.

Johnny wants the beer. That is his main purpose in this little drama. And he will use whatever means he can to get it, even an appeal to emotions. But Johnny is the loser with the push-button reel. The tough, independent type and the urban, sophisticated type both reject his appeal, showing a slight revulsion for his sentimentality.

Kroker and Cook's analysis of TV and culture mentions two aspects of TV advertising in the postmodern age. One is advertising's use of the language of signification to construct cultural realities ("cars are horses," "beer is friendship"--see 267). Is that why Johnny "needs" the beer so badly--because it means acceptance and friendship? The other aspect Kroker and Cook point out is the "identification of target audiences by 'values and lifestyles'" (278). They identify the target audience of "the fellowship hype of beer commercials" as the "belongers," who nostalgically desire the old social qualities of friendship and community. In the postmodern age, when the traditional understanding of males and male roles is being severely challenged, Budweiser attempts to reinforce the traditional image of the independent, non-domesticated, outdoor, sports-minded male, whose constant appendage is a can of beer.

The maintaining of this image is even stronger in the second ad in this sequence. Here Johnny reappears, this time in a meadow setting, seated on a blanket with a beautiful blond woman, idly twirling a piece of grass. In the background, a dark-haired woman is also sitting in the meadow grass, reading a magazine. Again, sunlight floods the natural, outdoor scene, and smooth music sets the mood. Joyrich discusses how drama is heightened by "the repetition of configurations of actors from one scene to the next" and how melodrama expresses "what are primarily ideological and social conflicts in emotional terms" (131). In this mini-melodrama, the repetition of scenes is obvious, and the role-conflict is definitely played out in emotional terms.

"Emma," Johnny says, "it seems like we've known each other forever."

"Yes," Emma croons back, "two weeks!"

The proposal follows, rushed, with the now familiar "I love you, man!" tacked on the end. Emma is the proverbial dumb blonde, the emotional woman (her face contorts and she bites her lip during his proposal) who just wants to "get married." But that same little discordant twang in the music sets up the reversal. When Emma shows some intelligence in seeing through Johnny's proposal and makes her small stand for independence--"But, Johnny, you're not getting my Bud Lite"--she is immediately rejected, as she has rejected his request. Johnny once again turns to the third person in the scene with that calculating look in his eye, and we immediately see him playing up to dark-haired Joan ("Jean, Joan, whatever"). The ad fades out with the same corny line about their knowing each other forever, while Emma stands in the background, holding out longing, bewildered arms toward this man who has left her for "the other woman."

Hélène Cixous's essay spends much time on this world view of binary oppositions in which the male always has to be preminent. She sees a necessity "to threaten the stability of the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural" (562). She says men "are great in the eyes of men and for each other. But only on the condition that a woman not

Such attacks on the traditional way of seeing the world and the male/female relationships in it are threatening to many people, and these people have a vested interest in seeing that the traditional understandings are maintained. Budweiser has chosen to participate in this maintenance with these ads. The commercials set Johnny up for a fall, and his efforts to play the sensitive male are derided. On the other hand, his obvious insincerity and ulterior motives are something that a young male who wants nothing more than to get drunk with his buddies can understand and identify with, thus turning Johnny into some sort of antihero besides. It seems Budweiser can't lose.

But it's dangerous to introduce images which oppose the stated world-view in an ad like this, even if they are only set up to be brought down again, because the advertiser cannot completely control the chain of meanings the images evoke in the viewers.

Barthes may speak of the linguistic message as a technique "to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs" (39), thus anchoring the visual images to one interpretation. Yet the images may connote other interpretations despite all the advertiser's efforts to fix them linguistically. Budweiser may tout drinking Bud Lite as the way to bond and belong to part of a family or community, but what about the memories many people have of being beaten or molested by a drunken family member? This use of an appealing trip down nature lane may not be so appealing to someone who has lost a friend in a hunting accident caused by a careless drinking buddy. And why does Johnny not get his beer? Because the people he approaches sense his insincerity. This illustrates a very postmodern sense of community: "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality" is evident (Jameson 60). Jameson says that liberation from the ego may mean "not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling." Human feelings may become "free-floating and impersonal" (64). Johnny certainly seems to have a freefloating, superficial kind of feeling, which moves from father to brother, from girlfriend to girlfriend, but is really rooted nowhere, unless it's in a can of beer. Is this flatness, depthlessness, the kind of image that Budweiser really intends to evoke? This ad sequence may be more successful at portraying the image of the postmodern society it rejects than it is at reinforcing the traditional image it is trying to promote.

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