

THE LIVING ROOM CANDIDATE

PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COMMERCIALS 1952–2008 ★★☆☆

Lesson Two

THE POLITICAL AD AS MINI-FILM: DEVELOPING CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Objective

Students will learn how to be critical viewers of presidential television campaign commercials by analyzing the political and stylistic techniques used.

Overview

Through their many interactions with film, television, and video games, students often begin to think on their own about how the aesthetic choices made in these media communicate meaning to an audience. In this lesson, students will learn how to formally analyze a commercial, much as they would any piece of visual art.

“Textual analysis” is a method of studying a film by noting all of the formal elements that make it distinct. A careful textual analysis uncovers what choices were made before the film was photographed; what choices were made when the film was shot; and what choices were made during the editing process after filming was completed.

During pre-production, decisions are made about lighting, the set, props, and performances. What type of film stock will be used—color or black-and-white? Where will the camera be placed in relation to what is being filmed? Is the camera stationary or in movement? How has the image been framed? What settings and costumes are used? Other filming choices concerning the way the image is photographed (type of lens, exposure time) are more difficult to establish, but the difference between, say, a grainy, underexposed image and a sharp image with full, saturated color is readily determined.

The decisions that are made after filming is complete include the editing together of the material, often from many different sources and locations, and the creation of a soundtrack, which can include the sound recorded during filming, but can just as well include a voiceover, which is likely to have been recorded separately. The soundtrack will also typically include sound effects and music. The overlaying of on-screen graphics onto a film is also part of typical post-production activity.

None of these choices is accidental or random, and each one plays a specific role in contributing to the overall effect of the campaign ad, just as in a film.

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Preliminary Discussion

List three things that you might look for if someone asked you to “read” a film.

Procedures

Elicit responses to the topic above. The idea of reading a film may be unfamiliar to some students, so encourage guesses.

Choose one commercial to be used for an in-depth analysis. (A recommendation is Bill Clinton’s 1996 ad “Surgeon.”) Distribute Worksheet 1 to students. In this part of the lesson, they will be acting merely as observers, describing neutrally what they see and hear. It is probably best to show the commercial several times, so that students can focus on different aspects each time.

After recording their observations, students should consider the reasons that various cinematic elements were chosen. The following questions can help them organize their thoughts:

Questions for writing and discussion:

1. What was the candidate’s main purpose in this ad? What did he want you to feel after watching it?
2. Look back at the worksheet. Choose three things that you observed about the commercials. How did these elements or qualities strengthen the candidate’s purpose and message?
3. At whom do you think this commercial was aimed? Support your answer with at least three reasons.

Assessment

Students should understand that a political commercial (or any commercial) is not a neutral or random form of communication. Its purpose is either to change the viewer’s thinking in some way or to reinforce the viewer’s belief in the candidate. The greater the viewer’s awareness of the choices that went into the making of the ad, the better equipped he or she is to separate the image of the candidate from the issues.

Extension Activities/Homework

1. In your opinion, what makes an “effective” presidential campaign commercial? Based on your criteria, was the ad that you viewed effective? Explain why or why not, supporting your opinions with details.

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2. Choose two other campaign commercials and analyze them using the worksheets and follow-up questions from class.
3. Choose a television commercial for any product. Analyze the commercial according to the same principles.

Curriculum Standards Addressed

New York City English Language Arts: E1c, E3b, E3d, E5a, E6a

To View

[“Journey” \(1992, Democratic\)](#)

This biographical ad for Bill Clinton uses many effective cinematic techniques.

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Examine one commercial from *The Living Room Candidate*, paying close attention to the following questions:

1. What is the setting of the ad? Is there one setting or many?
2. What props are featured?
3. How are people dressed?
4. Who are the “performers”—the candidate, or “real” people? What kinds of people are in the ad? Consider age, race, and gender? What are they doing? How do they behave?
5. Where is the camera in relation to what is being filmed?
6. How has the ad been lit? Is it bright? Dark?

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7. What colors are used?

8. What screen text do you see? For how long? Is the text small or large, color or black-and-white?

9. How have the images been edited together?

10. What music (if any) do you hear? What kind of music is it?

11. What other sounds do you hear—e.g. people speaking, sound effects, etc.?

12. Is there an audio voiceover? What type of voice is used? How does the voice sound?
What is actually said?