

DEVELOPING CRITICAL ANALYSIS

OBJECTIVE

Students will learn how to be critical viewers of presidential television campaign commercials by analyzing the use of images and sounds in a series of ads.

OVERVIEW

Their experiences with film, television, and video games often inspire students to consider how the aesthetic choices made in these media communicate meaning. In this lesson, students will analyze political commercials by focusing on their use of images and sounds.

A careful analysis of a campaign commercial, like that of a film or a television show, uncovers the choices the creators made in pre-production, the choices they made during shooting, and the choices they made during the editing process. During pre-production, ad-makers must decide about lighting, the set, props, and performances. Before starting photography they choose settings and costumes and decide whether to film in color or black-and-white, where they will place the camera in relation to what they are filming, whether or not the camera will move, and how the camera will frame the images.

After filming is complete, material from different sources and locations is edited together, and the soundtrack is created. The soundtrack can include the sound recorded during filming, but can just as well include a voice-over, which the ad-makers are likely to have recorded separately; sound effects; and music. The overlaying of on-screen graphics is also a 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.

PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

Have students brainstorm about images associated with the words “war” and “peace.” Collect these on the board and create a web around each word. Related words should be grouped together.

PROCEDURE

PART 1

May be completed as a stand-alone activity

Explain to students that they will now be watching two ads from the 1968 presidential election, the first for Republican Richard Nixon and the second for Democrat Hubert Humphrey. Both of these ads address the concepts of “war” and “peace” either directly or indirectly. Play “Convention” (Nixon, 1968) and “Mother and Child” (Humphrey, 1968), with no sound. Ask students to pay attention to everything they see.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What images did you see? Ask students to be as descriptive as possible (for example, if they mention the mother, ask about her age, facial expression, etc.).
- Why do you think the ad uses these images?
- Does anything you see remind you of the images you associated with “war” or “peace” in the brainstorming activity? Why or why not?
- What feeling(s) do you get from these images? Why?
- How are the images cut together? Does the ad put images of different people, places, or events next to each other? If so, what effect does that have?
- Is the ad in color or black-and-white? What effect does that have?
- What do you think the ad is about? Why?

In small groups, ask students to reflect on what they think each ad might be about. Students should predict the sounds they expect to go with these images. If they think the ad has a voice-over, students should describe what they expect the voice-over to say. Each group should share its ideas with the class.

PLAY THE ADS WITH THE SOUND ON.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What was the ad about?
- What music did you hear? Describe it.
- Was there a voice-over? If so, what words or phrases did you hear? How was the voice-over of the ad similar to or different from what you expected?
- How did the music and/or voice-over complement the images? What is the relationship between the ad’s images, soundtrack, and subject matter?
- What did you learn about the candidate?
- How important are the sounds and images in making the ad persuasive?

COMPARE THE ADS:

- Which ad did you find more aesthetically appealing? Why?
- Which one do you find more persuasive? Why?
- Does your response depend on an understanding of the candidates' positions?
- How important do you think images and music are in political ads?

PART 2

Tell students that they will now be analyzing “Peace Little Girl (Daisy),” an ad from the 1964 election. Like the 1968 ads, this ad uses some images that we might associate with war and others we might associate with peace. In analyzing this ad, students will consider more subtle aesthetic choices than those they discussed in the previous comparison.

Background: This ad, known as the “daisy girl” ad, is among the most well-known and controversial political ads ever made. The Republican nominee, Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, had famously described the atomic bomb as “just another weapon,” a statement that seemed to demonstrate ignorance of the immense destruction and long-lasting radioactivity that nuclear warfare would produce.

President Lyndon Johnson, the Democratic candidate, attempted to use Goldwater’s statement against him. The ad assumes that viewers are familiar with Goldwater’s statement. It implies that Goldwater is an extremist who could not be trusted with the authority to decide when to use “the bomb.” Though this ad only aired once, network newscasts showed it, enabling it to reach a much wider audience.

Play “Peace Little Girl (Daisy)” (Johnson, 1964) with no sound. Ask students to pay attention to everything they see.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What images did you see? Ask students to be as descriptive as possible (for example, if they mention the girl, ask about her age, costume, facial expression, etc.).
- Why do you think the ad uses these images?
- Does anything you see remind you of the images you associated with “war” and “peace” in the brainstorming activity? (You might ask students to focus on the images of the daisy and the mushroom cloud: How does the ad use these images as symbols?)
- What feeling(s) do you get from these images? Why?
- The ad cuts from a zoom into the girl’s face to an image of a bomb exploding. What feeling do you get from seeing this sequence of images?
- What do you think the ad is about? Why?

Ask students to work in small groups to reflect on the ad as they did with the previous ads. Students should predict the sounds they would expect to go with these images. If they think the ad has a voice-over, students should describe what they expect the voice-over to say. Each group should share its ideas with the class.

PLAY THE AD WITH THE SOUND ON.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What was the ad about?
- What words or phrases did you hear? How was the voiceover of the ad similar to or different from what you expected?
- What was the goal of the ad? Was this ad effective in meeting that goal? Why or why not?
- What did you learn about the candidate?
- What is the relationship between the ad's images, its soundtrack (voice-over, sound effects, and dialogue), and its content?
- How important are the sounds and images in making the ad persuasive?

ASSESSMENT

Students should have gained an understanding of how a political commercial (or any commercial) uses images and sounds to communicate meaning. A political 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. After completing this activity, students should be able to conduct similar analysis on other ads from *The Living Room Candidate*, as well as the ads they see on television every day.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES/HOMEWORK

1. Students write a list of criteria for what makes an effective ad. Students should then choose an ad from the site and analyze it using these criteria; they may also write an essay in which they evaluate the effectiveness of the ad. (You may also wish to consult the "What Makes an Effective Ad?" lesson plan)
2. Students watch an ad from a more recent election that includes multiple characters, color footage, and onscreen text, such as "Surgeon" (Clinton, 1996). They should watch the ad multiple times, first with no sound, and perform the same analysis they did on the three ads in this lesson. While doing so, they should consider how the use of color and text contributes to the overall impact of an ad.
3. Students choose a television commercial for any product, paying attention to its use of images and sounds. How does political persuasion in an advertisement differ from or resemble the techniques and strategies used in ordinary ads?

CURRICULUM STANDARDS ADDRESSED

Common Core English Language Arts: 7

NOTES
