A Primer on Analyzing Television Commercials

Here I would like to consider some of the more important aspects of television commercials. We must remember that a television commercial is, as I pointed out earlier, a special kind of work of art-- one which is created to persuade, to shape behavior in specific ways. But it still is a work of art and therefore can be analyzed much the same way a film or television program can be understood: in terms of its various components and the role they play in the production.

A. The Narrative Structure. What happens in the commercial and what significance do the various actions and events have? How might the actions and events affect viewers and what meaning do they have for people? In this area we focus on the story-line of the commercial and its symbolic significance.

B. Dialogue and Language. What do the characters say to one another and, in some cases, what are they saying to us? What devices do they use to gain our attention or affection and to persuade us? What rhetorical techniques, such as alliteration or metaphor or metonymy, are used? What kind of language is used? What use is made of phenomena such as humor, comparisons, associations, exaggeration, praise, and logic.

C. Actors and Actresses. Sometimes we forget that when we watch commercials we are seeing actors and actresses playing their trade. But rather than trying to convince us they are Hamlet or Ophelia, they try to convince us they are housewives who love this or that product or rugged he-men who love this or that brand of light beer. Do we feel attracted to them and empathize with them? What kinds of symbolic figures are used as characters in the commercial? What use do the performers make of facial expression, body language and their voices? What about the clothes they wear? How old are they, and what significance do their ages have? What's interesting about the setting in which they are found?

D. Technical Matters: Lighting, Color, Editing and Music. Here we concern ourselves with how lighting, cutting and shot selection impact upon viewers. For instance, close-ups lead to a different feeling about things than longshots and shots from below convey different attitudes toward power than shots from above. Does the commercial have many quick cuts in it? If so, what impact does this have? How are things lighted and what kind of use is made of color? All of these matters are kinds of "messages" and must be included in any analysis of a television commercial.

E. Sound and Music. We are profoundly affected by sound and music, which seem to have the power to work directly on our psyches. What use is made of sound effects? Is there music used? If so, what kind and for what purposes? How does it affect us?

F. Signs, Symbols and Intertextual Devices. Signs and symbols are phenomena which represent other things: a cross can represent Christianity, the sacred, religion, and so on. Intertextuality refers to the process by which we interpret one text in terms of another. Thus parody, for example, is based upon ridiculing a text (which must be known in order for the
parody to work). The associative power of texts can be used to suggest things or ideas connected with the original text. This means that commercials can take advantage of what people already know--about history, literature, the arts, and popular culture--in getting their messages across.

In short, every aspect of a commercial--from the typefaces used in captioning to the hairstyles of the performers--can be considered as potentially important. Commercials are complex and "rich" works of art that demand a great deal of attention if one is to discover the mechanisms by which they achieve their aims.