

Absolut Structuralism

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Texts are political. Political in the sense that they produce messages that carry specific ideas and beliefs targeted toward a certain thinking body of people. A familiar phrase in America is, “art imitates life.” It defines life as essential to art, but can we say the reverse? Could life imitate art? The semantics of the phrase seem too ambiguous for such a statement. What is the definition of art, of life? The phrase suggests that art reinforces cultural and social beliefs by using the verb imitate. If art imitates life, then life imitates art. The verb is reflexive and positioned in the middle of the two words it is reflecting. It is true then, the language speaks for itself, and this political statement can be used as a tool to find the underlying cultural belief within a text.



How is this theory that art imitates life, and life imitates art, applicable? Having this theory in mind while reading a text creates awareness that the art is imitating a larger cultural belief. It is easy to be fooled by many texts because the cultural and social myths they promote are not conveyed on the surface. Media advertising is a good example to use with this theory for two reasons: first, media art caters to a broad diverse audience; and second, it is easily accessible and we see it everywhere: on television, in magazines, posters, and on billboards. When only one concept is produced by a text, usually a surface idea, it provides the reader with what has been termed a “confusion of consciousness.”[1] This is defined as a reader clearly not receiving the entire directive of the text and instead accepting a limited subjective message. Texts are political because they exemplify cultural and social ideas, and therefore it is important to reveal the different messages within them.

The Absolut Vodka advertising campaign is a strong media example that caters to an extensive audience and is very accessible. The campaign has been in progress for about twenty years, and has been called the most successful ad campaign in American history. [2] The standard image of the Absolut bottle is recognizable by many people, and has purposely been reproduced in every ad establishing it as a social symbol in America. Each advertisement includes a culturally significant person, place, object, or idea along side the

standard bottle. Absolut Vodka ads reveal mixed messages about culture to their audience masked on the surface by a culturally significant artifact.

The most successful ad campaign in American history is characterized by an overwhelming number of individual ads that are separated into genres. When looking at a series of ads, we have a better idea of the cultural significance attached to the images. The text exists in relation to others. The image of the Absolut bottle has become a cultural icon, and the advertising aim is to make it recognizable as a distinct symbol of class to everyone who sees it. In order to make sense of the ad, the reader must identify the vodka bottle within the text. This expectation relies on the network of ads that have preceded it. Instant identification of the symbol makes the reader of an Absolut ad a member of an exclusive club. The Absolut Vodka ad campaign aims to enroll everyone as a member of this club by stating that their “art” form, the vodka bottle, carries significant cultural reflections of society associated with the upper class that are relevant to all members regardless of their real class status.

The different genres of Absolut ads carry distinct cultural messages, and contain a universal class claim that is associated with the image of the vodka bottle. Absolut Vodka ads reinforce the cultural myth that American culture is defined in terms of class structure. However, it offers a mixed message about class that is defined and liquid: class can be bought. The Absolut campaign contains the idea that American culture is defined in terms of class by way of the object, setting, audience, and camera angle in the advertisement. The promotion challenges this idea by publicizing in a variety of magazines that reach people in all class structures. In effect, they are bridging a cultural class gap, by allowing such a diverse audience membership into an exclusive ad campaign. Not only is the advertisement selling the reader vodka, it is also selling the illusion of an earned societal position associated with the upper class.

The class theme within the Absolut Vodka advertising campaign is exemplified in one of the most recent published Absolut ads entitled, “Absolut Voted-Off.” This ad was published in *Entertainment* magazine the week of October 19, 2001. The ad is very basic and shows four bottles of flavored Absolut Vodka grouped together on the left side of the page. The bottles are characterized by bright, warm colors such as yellow, orange, and purple. On the far right side of the page, not facing the audience, is the original Absolut Vodka bottle that is only revealing half of its cold, blue label. The text, “Absolut Voted-Off” appears at the

bottom of the page. What does this ad reveal on the surface? At first glance it seems to be selling the new flavored vodkas, representing them as important and associated with a distinguished category. However, this advertisement is characteristic of the mixed messages portrayed by the Absolut advertising campaign.

When looking deeper we must ask ourselves as readers, relating to the theory art imitates life and life imitates art, what is the advertisement imitating here? The advertisement is imitating the American act of voting. This cultural activity is political at best. The objects, setting, audience, and camera angle of the ad all reinforce the belief that American culture is defined in terms of class structure, and that class can be bought. In this case, the four flavored vodkas are in a distinct class that the “Voted-Off” original vodka is not a part of. However, the original vodka is related to the others: it shares the same bottle, the same vodka, and the same text. The advertisement suggests that the original Absolut vodka bottle could gain acceptance into the distinct class by becoming flavored.

The setting of the advertisement builds upon the cultural belief that America is class defined, but that movement within class structure is possible. The spotlight in the middle of the page is not highlighting either group specifically, but leaves a void that needs to be filled. But filled by whom? This ad suggests that the original vodka bottle can have a place next to the rest by leaving a space that is the appropriate size for such a transaction. However, the gap in the middle of the page can also hold a spot for the reader to fill. This involves audience participation by buying the product.

The audience of the advertisement plays a specific role in the ad, and supports a mixed message of class definition and mobility. The reader of the ad associates himself/herself as a member of the Absolut “club” by recognizing the image of the bottle within the ad. In the case of “Absolut Voted-Off,” the reader must choose which party to support, the flavored group or the lone original bottle. If the reader fills the gap in the ad he/she will be joining the class specific group that is associated with wealth: bright colors, strength in numbers, and security. The reader will also become a part of the majority that has voted off the minority. This raises issues that the American two party system debates, like minority representation in politics. Currently, due to living in a class-defined society, minorities do not share the same life opportunities as the majority. The ad is revealing a message about how our culture is defined by class and is suggesting that as voters and consumers we have a direct say in which class we want to be associated with.

The camera that captured this specific image is as much involved in the reinforcement of the cultural belief that class defines America as is the audience. The image is captured at a direct angle that shows the power differentials between the objects. The view is directed toward the majority, leaving only half of the original bottle's label exposed. This perspective shows the power of class, and the importance of being a part of a distinct group so as not to be excluded. It reinforces the idea that the upper class holds the most power, especially in politics, specifically in voting.

Yet the belief that American culture is class specific yet accessible to anyone is challenged by the Absolut campaign that creates a sort of exclusionary club because it markets membership to everyone. The ads are published in a diverse range of magazines including: *Art Forum*, *Golf*, *Money*, *Penthouse*, *Time*, *Vibe*, *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Scientific American*, *National Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, and *Black Enterprises*. Although the ads promote a distinguished class, they market to all people regardless of social status. In saying that one can essentially buy class status, the ad is challenging the entire notion of class structures.

"Absolut-Voted Off" is a political advertisement that sells readers a product as well as a socially important idea. The theory art imitates life and life imitates art reveals important connections between literary structures and cultural beliefs. Media literature is mirroring important parts of American life and selling the images back with a product attached. However, the cultural and social myths that are being promoted are not always evident on the surface of the text. A new movement to read media literature critically has begun. As the emerging way to view texts is reading them deconstructively, we must promote other critical approaches that allow a more open translation of literature and provide balance to the political act of reading.