

VINTAGE FILM AND MEDIA LITERACY

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A married couple eats breakfast in an idyllic domestic setting. The wife discerns that her husband is not pleased with the coffee she's prepared; "Bad taste!" he exclaims. At her wits' end, the wife confides in a friend who turns her on to Folgers coffee. All is well again at the homestead.¹

Next, a woman finds herself in a threatening situation: One of her tires has blown out in a rainy, dark and menacing setting. Superimposed words appear: "When there's no man around. . . ." If only she had been provided Goodyear tires by the man in her life, this crisis could have been averted.²

Finally, we see a suburban housewife who is the consummate multitasker. She manages the family budget, shops thriftily, and takes an active role in the upbringing and education of her children. She clearly keeps the workings of the household together.³

The two television commercials and the film described above illustrate societal attitudes from the past that to the modern audience may be obvious – but are they?

It's probably safe to say that most of us are not moonlighting as K-12 classroom teachers, but we do supply many of them with the stuff of study: primary source material that harkens to our past. And beyond the clear historical value of these unique documents are nuances of cultural and societal motifs that are just as relevant today. This relevance, with the history lesson thrown in, makes some vintage films prime sources for teaching *media literacy*, a feature woven into the fabric of most states' K-12 educational standards.⁴

What is media literacy? Here is one definition, from the National Council of Teachers of English:

Media literacy is the capacity to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms. This expanded conceptualization of literacy responds to the demands of cultural participation in the 21st century. . . . Like literacy in general, media literacy is applied in a wide variety of contexts -- when watching television or reading newspapers, for example, or when posting commentary to a blog. Indeed, media literacy is implicated everywhere one encounters information and entertainment content. And like literacy in general, media literacy can be taught and learned.⁵

Media literacy asks these questions:

- Who created or paid for the message?
- What is the message's purpose?
- Who is the target audience?
- What values and points of view does it convey?
- What techniques are used to get attention, to make it believable?
- Who or what is omitted, and why?
- Who benefits?

Suffice it to say, these are all important questions. Why was a bit of media made in the first place? To address a perceived need? But what need, perceived by whom, and why? Is there bias, a hidden agenda? These inquiries are not unlike analysis of any historic document—vintage films can be subjected to the same kind of scrutiny.

While any type of film (theatrical films and home movies included) can be the object of such inquiry, the *sponsored film* genre arguably fits the bill the best. They are all pretty much advertisements by nature, and include the TV commercials referenced above as well as any film that was made for a persuasive purpose—some subtle, some not so much. Included in this genre are promotional films, social training films and propaganda films. They are revealing about our culture and its evolution, resonate with students raised on television and YouTube, are more often than not rather kitschy in the context of our modern sensibilities (read: *wildly entertaining*), and are getting increased attention as valuable historical documents.⁶

The subject matter of sponsored films runs the gamut: Gender roles (a strong and recurring theme), lifestyle choices, health-related issues, popularity, measures of success in society, political affiliation, careers, workplace behavior, family life, personal hygiene, sexual orientation and much more are all fodder for both text and subtext in the sponsored film.

So, what of our three examples?

In the Folgers commercial, the woman's purpose is to please her husband. Yet she is portrayed as weak and unimaginative. The husband, too, is rather clueless; while he insists on certain standards he is powerless to even suggest a course of action. Both come across as befuddled, the real hero of the piece being the acquaintance, and, by extension, the coffee.

In contrast, the Goodyear tire advertisement shows the woman ostensibly dealing with her threatening environment—something we couldn't imagine of the Folgers wife. However, even this self-reliance has its limits, as a tire blows and the woman reverts to helplessness. Even though no men are shown, they are unmistakably portrayed as powerful and resourceful, even to the point of providing the tires in the first place, a function portrayed squarely within a man's realm of responsibility.

The third example shows the man taking a backseat to his wife's authority and dominance over the household and family. She is portrayed as the lynchpin of the American suburban family, while he shrugs in ignorance and reads the newspaper.

Besides all the value vintage sponsored films have as tools for mastering media literacy, they also provide a basis for context and comparison. They give us a look at issues still relevant today through a very specific lens to the past.

Where can you find vintage sponsored films? If not in your own collections, the Internet is your best bet. Here are a few of the top sites:

- Internet Archive (www.archive.org). Perhaps the premiere site for vintage sponsored films, this is also a good place for sound recordings, documents and more contemporary video.

- YouTube (www.youtube.com). More famous for modern video clips, YouTube is a source for some good vintage stuff too. Some archives are using YouTube as a site for mounting their own cache of vintage films.
- Library of Congress' American Memory site (memory.loc.gov/ammem). A great source for vintage film, especially from the late 19th century and the early part of the 20th. The Library's general collections, filtered for moving images, can also be searched from their home page, www.loc.gov.
- National Archives (www.archives.gov). Through NARA's advanced search engine, queries can be restricted to moving images and searched by key words.

¹ "Folgers coffee commercial," c.1962, www.archive.org/details/FolgersCoffe (1 May 2012).

² "Goodyear tire commercial," c.1965, www.archive.org/details/Televisi1960 (1 May 2012).

³ *American Thrift*, 1962, www.archive.org/details/American1962 (1 May 2012).

⁴ Most of the MAC-region states include media literacy in their standards for English, Communication Arts, Social Studies, History, Civics, Health, Consumer Skills, and Media. Details can be found at the Web site: Frank Baker, "State Teaching Standards," updated 2000, www.frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm (1 May 2012).

⁵ National Council of Teachers of English, "Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Media Literacy Education," 2008, ed.sc.gov/agency/pr/standards-and-curriculum/documents/CodeofBestPracticesinFairUseforMediaLiteracyEducation.pdf (1 May 2012). This document was the result of a collaboration of the National Association for Media Literacy Education, the Student Television Network, the Media Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English, the Action Coalition for Media Education, and the Visual Communication Division of the International Communication Association.

⁶ Rick Prelinger. *A Field Guide to Sponsored Films* (National Film Preservation Foundation, San Francisco, CA. 2006). The book is available for purchase or for download at www.filmpreservation.org/dvds-and-books/the-field-guide-to-sponsored-film.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Still from Folgers coffee commercial, c.1962



Figure 2: Still from Goodyear tire commercial, c.1965



Figure 3: Still from *American Thrift*, 1962