1999 Third Place Critical Analysis

Emphasizing Order

The 1950's: this era brings to mind vivid pictures of black and white TVs, Donna Reed, dishwashers, the Jitterbug, baby-boomers, and toasters. After the turmoil of World War II followed by the difficult adjustment to a post-war economy, the 1950s are recognized as the decade when America finally decided to settle down into an orderly, well-structured lifestyle. While this trend can be seen in many different areas, it is especially noticeable in the advertisements of this unique decade. A coffee advertisement taken from Life Magazine in 1950 clearly illustrates this emphasis on order through its portrayal of the ideal family, fun, form, symmetry, and education.

Appeal to the happy family is the most obvious form of propaganda in this ad. The audience's eyes are immediately drawn to the center illustration picturing a handsome father light-heartedly playing football with his son. Lying flat on the ground as if he had truly been tackled by a boy half of his size, the reader makes the assumption that the father is a good sport. This impression is reinforced by his relaxed grip on the football as well as the pleasant, almost impish, grin on his face. The father appears to be very responsible, primarily because of his shaven face, well-trimmed hair, and clean fingernails. His neat pullover, collared shirt and gray trousers add to this impression. Even his nose and chin are straight and powerfully set, reflecting order. The impression of responsibility is accentuated by the fact that the boy is wearing a protective helmet; any reliable parent would assure that their child is safe. The slight silver tinge to his hair, receding hairline, laugh wrinkles around his eyes, heavy-set eyebrows, and slight furrow on his brow make the father seem mature. Finally, the red color of his sweater adds bit of sex appeal to the advertisement. However, the father's conservative dress and conventional haircut keep him from seeming brusque or inappropriate. In essence, he is the ideal family man and husband.

As the father is the main subject of the advertisement, the mother is only pictured in profile in a small aside drawing. She is primarily associated as the homemaker of the family, caring for them by making coffee. Her black dress is very conservative, yet gives a stylish impression when coupled with the pearl necklace, earrings, bright red lipstick, and matching nail polish. Her attire is obviously inappropriate for housework, but does add another element of sex appeal to the advertisement. Gazing directly into the eyes of her husband, her presence coupled with the delicious coffee causes him to smile. Obviously she gains much satisfaction in fulfilling the needs of her husband and family. This image of the perfect wife and stay-home mother was very much glamorized and emphasized in the 1950's.

Finally the son, Johnny, typifies the model American boy who loves playing football with his father. His sun-bleached auburn hair, freckled face, and smile revealing two pearly white teeth make him appear both gentle and healthy. His countenance displays his friendly, happy spirit. His boyish haircut complimented by a cowlick shows his childhood spirit, yet his posture at the table shows extreme obedience. Sitting completely straight with his hand in his lap, Johnny has a pleasant smile on his face as he quietly watches his parents enjoying their coffee. Dressed in a V-neck sweater and white collared shirt just like his Dad, the son is the ideal image of the perfect son trying to grow up to be like his father.
Form is also significant in conveying the advertisement's message of order. While the advertisement in general is not very linear, several horizontal lines can be found. The forearms of the father and son create the main horizontal line of the advertisement. The list of countries in the Pan-American Coffee Bureau create an additional horizontal line extending across the entire advertisement. These horizontal lines create the atmosphere of stability and order which was so highly valued during the 1950s.

A few curves and diagonal lines, created by the swirl of the coffee steam, curvature of the coffee cup, and upper arms of the football players add an element of fun to the advertisement. This appeal to the entertaining is emphasized by the use of yellow in the coffee cup, football helmet, lawn, and in the mother's hair. Yellow is often associated with enjoyment. Finally, the happy smiles and on the faces of the family members show how much fun they are having. Obviously the coffee industry is sending a message, "Look how happy coffee has made this family. It can make your family happy too."

Symmetry and balance are extremely important in the advertisement. The whole ad is built very geometrically, emphasizing orderliness, harmony and security. The father and son form a triangle with their bodies. Notice how the father is the base of this triangle just as he is expected to be the foundation of the family. The one head leaning towards the right is balanced by the other tilting left. Two even white triangles formed by the collared shirt break the red background. Everything in the illustration is perfectly balanced and paired. Since human bodies are naturally symmetric, both hands and all facial features of the father and son are shown in the main illustration. Even the patterns on the boy's sweater and helmet are geometric and symmetrical. The first smaller illustration is also balanced as the father's taller body is offset by the large tree opposite him. Even the line of his body parallels the curvature of the railing on the steps. Nowhere is the use of geometry, balance and symmetry more visible than in the final small color illustration where the mother and father are both shown in profile with one arm extended. They form an exact frame for the son who is positioned directly forward and center. Even the back of the chair adds to the orderly balance.

The square boxes formed by the combination of text and illustrations compliment the sense of total order and structure. With their four straight edges and right angles, squares are naturally associated with order and completeness. However, this order is enhanced as the two smaller color illustrations and the coffee cup constitute a row of three. The number three has also long been known as a symbol for unity and completeness. This emphasis on three is punctuated by the text which makes three major assertions: nothing smells as good as coffee, nothing tastes as good as coffee, and nothing satisfies like coffee. It is interesting to note how there are also three square drawings in the orderly row which completes the bottom section of the advertisement. Not surprisingly, this unified family consists of three family members.

Finally, the emphasis on education in the advertisement reflects the accentuation on structure prevalent during the 1950's. Education is a responsible decision, leading to a more orderly and informed society. As a result, the advertisement goes to extra lengths to include a section detailing the facts about the production of coffee. Marked by a bright red question mark, the section is introduced by capital letters stating "DO YOU KNOW," dramatizing the importance of knowledge and education. The included facts relate many statistics about how many years it takes for a coffee tree to mature, the yield of a coffee tree, and the number of beans needed per pound of ground coffee. The use of numbers gives a sense of logic to the advertisement, especially as the producers try to logically reason that Americans should by coffee since it "costs just a few pennies a cup." Even the alphabetical listing of the countries producing coffee maintains the sense of order.

Obviously structure, responsibility, stability and order were of the upmost importance during the 1950s. This coffee advertisement clearly reflects this popular trend, as have ads throughout history. Through its appeal to the happy family, fun, form, symmetry, and education, this coffee advertisement is effectively able to portray its message of stability.