Visualizing Respect: Visual Media Literacy and Students’ Understanding of Globalization and Technology Issues

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Abstract
This article explores the process and outcome of engaging university students in a popular culture analysis course in visual analysis activities to reveal their assumptions about globalization as created or reinforced by visual representations in the media. Although Tomlinson (1999) urges us to understand globalization as “complex connectivity” (p. 1), visual media portrayals reinforce the culture of capitalism, myths of technology, and simplistic views of globalization. Through visually analyzing a 30-second TV spot called “The Procession,” students surfaced their pre-existing understanding of the term globalization and the role of visual media representations in creating it. Students became more aware of what Kellner (2002) calls the “contradictions and ambiguities” (p. 285) of globalization as they shifted their perspective in this ad from an unquestioning, comfortable Western one to one that problematized this visual media portrayal of globalization, technology, and “others.”

I think of globalization as the equalizing of every part of the world. In the United States, we are very technologically advanced; therefore, globalization would be the technological advances in other countries so they are as advanced as we are. Or having McDonalds in many countries across the world. (Study participant)

“The ad is about the prestige of the Range Rover being recognized anywhere in the world,” says Andrew Polsinelli, general manager of marketing communications for Land Rover North America. “It has authority, and it deserves respect.” (quoted in Rechtin, 2003)
Richard H. Robbins, author of *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* (2002), notes that while the “idea of trade and consumption as the ultimate source of well-being [has begun] to expand to all parts of the globe . . . [m]ost members of this society and culture perceive [the accompanying] problems as distant from themselves . . . “ (p. ix). We too easily assume that our familiar Western cultural narratives that bind the triumvirate of consumption and consumeristic lifestyles, technology-as-progress, and Western cultural domination represent economic and cultural advantages for all citizens all over the globe. Popular culture, and the media in particular, promote and reinforce this concept so that members of our culture tend not to acknowledge or appreciate the differential (rather than supposedly strictly positive) effects of globalization (e.g., Chomsky, 1996; Herman & McChesney, 1997; Waisbord, 1998). This article explores the process and outcome of engaging university students in a popular culture analysis course in visual analysis activities to reveal more vividly their unexamined assumptions about globalization as created or reinforced by visual representations in the media. Although Tomlinson (1999) urges us to understand globalization as “complex connectivity” (p. 1), unfortunately, media portrayals reinforce the culture of capitalism, the myths of technology, and simplistic views of globalization as opposed to acknowledging its “complex contradictions” (Kellner, 2002, p. 13).

What do we mean by globalization? Although it is not easy to arrive at a stable definition, Kellner (1998) says that the term is ubiquitous, because:

> . . . the world has been undergoing the most significant period of technological innovation and global restructuring since the first decades of the twentieth century . . . [This] new stage of technocapitalism has involved a fundamental restructuring and reorganization of the world economy, polity, and culture for which the term globalization serves as a codeword. (p. 1)

Jan Aart Scholte identifies five broad definitions of globalization that are variously what people mean when they use the term: globalization as internationalization, as liberalization, as universalization, as westernization or modernization, and as deterritorialization (in Smith www.infed.org/biblio/globilization.htm). Giddens (1991) emphasizes the last two definitions—globalization as westernization/modernization and as deterritorialization—when he describes globalization as the compression of time and space, the main characteristic of the modern world, and primarily attributable to mediated experience. Technology clearly has played a central role in the rise of this mediated experience, no matter which definition of globalization one subscribes to:
The idea that media technologies make it possible to transcend space has been a fundamental tenet of studies that explore the relations between media and national identities. The globalization of electronic media has fundamentally extended the process of engulfing geographical spaces with the same mediated content (Waisbord, 1998, pp. 378 & 383).

Just as there is no consensus about what exactly globalization is, there is also disagreement about whether it is generally a positive or negative change in our world. The tension revolves around the issue of whether globalization primarily promotes cultural homogeneity (and whether such homogeneity is desirable) or whether globalization reinforces and even exacerbates differences in a divisive way (as in one culture dominating or colonizing another). Kellner (1998) refers to this difficulty with the term globalization and the public’s attendant understanding of its effects:

“For some, globalization entails the Westernization of the world. While for others it involves a cover for the ascendancy of capitalism. Some see globalization as increasing homogeneity, while others see it producing diversity and heterogeneity” (p. 1)

Like Tomlinson, who urges us past this either/or way of thinking about globalization, Kellner says that our perceptions of it tend to an inaccurate “one-sidedness” (p. 1), which, while affording us the facile intellectual and emotional distance of the false dichotomy, also leave us perennially at the mercy of the media to create, reinforce, or perpetuate a view.

In The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism, Herman and McChesney (1997) see the combination of global media, the internet, and digital technology replacing a great deal of the public sphere with entertainment (thereby reducing the amount of detailed, intellectual information on which serious debate or even individual contemplation can be based), severely limiting our perspective on globalization. They state that, as a:

“major collective source of information and images, [the media] perform many functions. They provide information (or myths and disinformation) about the past and present that helps to create a common culture and system of values, traditions, and ways of looking at the world.” (p. 3, emphasis added)

In fact, however, this “global media system has fundamental structural flaws that limit its service to democracy and even stand as barriers to the development of meaningful self-government” (Herman & McChesney, 1997 p. 189). For instance, in the 1990s the “euphoria of those who saw the internet as providing a qualitatively different and egalitarian type of journalism,
politics, media, and culture . . . faded” (p. 135), as it became more clear that
global media rather easily serve and promote an ideology that “rationaliz[es]
and sanctif[ies] inegalitarian relations . . . [and that] is embraced
enthusiastically by those at the top of the socioeconomic pyramid, as they are
prime beneficiaries of the status quo” (p. 35).

Chomsky, in a 1996 interview, even more pointedly characterizes
globalization as “the extension of transnational, corporate tyranny” and
directly challenges the role of the media in this extension. These transnational
companies (TNCs) he says, “are huge command economies, run from the
top, relatively unaccountable, and interlinked in various ways. Their first
interest is profit—but much broader than that, it’s to construct an audience of
a particular type. One that is addicted to a certain life-style with artificial
wants” (Sainath “Media and Globalization: An Interview with Noam
Chomsky”). Theorists like Herman, McChesney, Waisbord, and Chomsky
are concerned that we overlook or rationalize globalization as the spread of
“global corporate capitalism” (Herman & McChesney, 1997, p. 26). This is
problematic because of the popular tendency to equate capitalism with
inevitable progress and unalloyed benefit to every part of the world. Capitalism
has long been thus:

misrepresented by many historians, sociologists, and anthropologists;
rather than recognizing it as the emergence of a historically unique
culture, they have generally portrayed it as an inevitable historical
or evolutionary development. Capitalist culture was equated with
“civilization,” implying that anything different was “uncivilized.”
Later it was considered part of a process of “modernization,”
implying that anything else was “primitive” or “traditional.”
(Robbins, 2002, pp. 6-7)

This unproblematicized view of globalization as spread of capitalism and
the concomitant equation of that spread with progress and civilization is
exacerbated by essentialized media representations of others—representations
described by Fursich (2002) as “trivial,” “celebratory,” “patronizing,” and
“stereotyping” (pp. 205-209). Rather than “open and complex representations
of otherness, [media representations] often fall back into an us/them dichotomy
. . . highlight[ing] essentialized difference from a privileged position” (p.
206). Thus, media depictions are circulated and accepted that limit our
understanding of the world, its people, and its events in worrisome ways. For
instance, Chomsky connects the popular media representation of globalization
to the “extremely narrow sectors of power” who share a common belief “as
to the way the world should be perceived and as to what kind of people there should be” (Sainath interview with Chomsky). The popular media is highly implicated in providing visual representations of globalization that limit us to a positive and uncomplicated view.

Underscoring the media’s failure to provide useful information for the all-important democratic public sphere is evidence that the media-propelled simple and positive representation of globalization creates “public attitudes [that] are usually quite divorced from the spectrum of educated opinion, often wildly at variance” (Sainath interview with Chomsky). A March 2000 study by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland found, in their research titled Americans on Globalization: A Survey of U.S Public Attitudes, that “[o]verall, Americans see globalization as . . . more positive than negative and appear to be growing . . . more positive about it” (“Findings” Americans on Globalization). Respondents in the large PIPA study were asked what the term globalization meant to them and what emerges from the national survey is the nebulous but positive and comforting idea of a “growing interconnectedness of the world . . . a big merging of everything . . . a single culture, a big openness; the Internet . . . instant communication” (“Findings,” Americans on Globalization). Furthermore, the study found that “Americans reject the idea that U.S. popular culture is a threat to foreign cultures.” Respondents in the national PIPA study “recognize the spread and growth of U.S. cultural dominance. . . [and] do not see it as an overall negative force or threat to other cultures” (“Findings,” Americans on Globalization).

In his work on representation and the media, Stuart Hall (1997) reiterates many of the concerns of the scholars above from a theoretical perspective. Hall reminds us that what we see in the media is constructed and not a natural mirror of reality; that these media constructions have major effects on how we view the world and what we believe about it (“representation is constitutive of meaning”); that representation creates a position for us to occupy in relation to the message; and that there is a strong connection between power and the representations that are circulated, with a prevailing ideology tending to freeze or limit the meanings that are available for us to make of a media representation (Representation and the Media, with Stuart Hall). We consume visual texts in an effortless and naturalized manner; however, “though apparently superficial, visual texts are deeply revealing cultural products” (Foreman & Shumway, 1992, p. 245). For this reason and because of their very ubiquity and influence, analysis of visual texts is integral to current calls for a
“transformation of teaching practices” (p. 244). Visual texts are particularly potent cultural products because their production and presentation render their underlying messages natural and our processing of them tends to occur more rapidly and naively than our processing of written texts. Barry (1997) explores this in detail in her *Visual Intelligence*, in which she shows that our characteristic response to visual texts is to suspend analysis and enter a state very like daydreaming: “we become emotionally but not logically involved in the medium, and images stream into our psyche, accepted without critical analysis” (pp. 172-173). Our students receive and interpret visual texts as “natural, unstructured, transparent replicas of reality . . . ” (Veen, 1998).

By analyzing visual material in a more deliberate and systematic way, students, while not necessarily sharing the same set of assumptions about the world that the teacher does, can become aware of the conflicts and hierarchies that are less evident or even seem natural among the various components of the visual. Thus, we need to encourage our students to see visual texts as “structured expressions . . . perspective-laden purveyors of rational and social meanings” (Veen, emphasis added). Further, because of a media environment that is dominated by interests that have a stake in presenting their view of the world as if it is non-controversial, beneficial to all, and shared by everyone, closer analysis of the kind to be described in the next section not only makes more understandable to students Hall’s dictum that “representation is constitutive of meaning,” it can, by extrapolation, help to fill out an otherwise one-sided view of globalization.

“Respect”: Description of Study

This study asked students to look very closely at media representation as it contributes to a particular understanding of globalization in a television ad with interesting interconnected messages about globalization, technology as indicative of its progress, and “others.” My position and interest in the study is described by Selber (2004) as that of the critical literacy researcher: using the “lenses and methods that help illuminate the production and distribution of ideology as it works to naturalize the interests of certain groups and not others” (p. 82).

Description of Course

This study took place in a class offered in my English Department called “Popular Culture Analysis.” Open to non-English majors (and indeed, fairly popular with a wide range of majors from across the campus), it is described in our university catalog as focusing on:
[a]nalysis of how information and entertainment forms persuade and manipulate audiences. Study of several forms that may include newspapers, speeches, television, film, advertising, fiction, and magazines. Special attention to verbal and visual devices. (p. 207)

My own more specific iteration of the class is described in the informational material used by students to help them decide what classes to take, and it is repeated in what students receive the first day of class:

This course will examine a range of “texts” from American culture. Analyzing popular culture as a text to be “read” involves studying how and why these texts function and what they can tell us about our lives, our societies, and the forces that shape our lived experiences. This course will challenge you to think about what popular culture is, how it works, and why an intellectual study of it is important. Specifically, your work in this course will help you to uncover the constructed nature of culture and cultural narratives; identify cultural narratives and their attendant values in popular culture; examine how race, class, gender, and other identities are expressed as cultural narratives and appear in popular culture; and explore how cultural narratives shape our lives. (instructor course materials)

In the fall semester of 2003, 29 students were enrolled in the class, comprising a mix of undergraduate levels and majors, although two-thirds of the class were juniors and seniors. Three were first-year students, five were sophomores, nine were juniors, and eleven were seniors. The most heavily represented major was animal ecology with 10 students (taking the class to fulfill a requirement for an advanced writing class). The remaining 18 students represented advertising, finance, journalism, meteorology, philosophy, political science, pre-med, speech communication, and technical communication.

Required texts for the course were Lardner and Lundberg’s (2001) Exchanges: Reading and Writing about Consumer Culture, and Maasik and Solomon’s (2003) Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers. The course plan also included the viewing of several videos, the most relevant for this study being Stuart Hall’s video about representation and how our perceptions are shaped by media texts. The only relevant essays to the issues revealed in the TV ad were two that the students did not read until later in the semester. David Goewey’s, Careful, You May Run Out of Planet: SUVs and the Exploitation of the American Myth and Thomas L. Friedman’s, Revolution is U.S., both from Maasik and Solomon’s Signs of Life, will be discussed, as well as the students’ use of them as lenses to re-view and deepen their analyses, later in the article.
Initial Understandings of the Term Globalization

Most of the time I think about the third world countries catching up to the United States. (study participant)

About a month into the semester, I asked my popular culture students, with no prior class discussion or readings on the matter, what their understanding of the term or concept of globalization was and where they thought that understanding had come from. They worked on these responses individually for about thirty minutes. As the representative excerpts below show, the students’ responses, though vague in this first class broaching of globalization, are strongly dominated by positive perceptions of globalization; indeed, their responses are strikingly like those in the national PIPA survey described earlier. In addition, the students pointed repeatedly to the popular media as the source of their understanding of the concept: about 82 percent of the students who responded to this portion of the question specifically identified the media as a main source for their understanding of globalization, while a few more mentioned classes as a contributing source of their current understanding.

The common denominator of the students’ understanding of globalization was that it means the shrinking of the world, and this shrinkage and its effects are described in positive or at least benign terms. Further, the students attributed this smaller world to technology (they frequently referenced enhanced information and communications technologies), and their beliefs about its effects traced two basic patterns: globalization as the positive exchange and/or blending of cultures and globalization as the spread of American values (technology, ideas, products), which would mean progress for the rest of the world. Therefore, of Scholte’s five identified common usages of the term globalization, the students’ pre-existing notions of the term reflected four of the five (internationalization, universalization, westernization/modernization, and deterritorialization). The definition of globalization as trade liberalization was used considerably less, by only two students.

The shrinking world theme abounded as the most prevalent concept of globalization the students described. That shrinkage was described positively with the repeated terms “connected,” “communication,” and “community:”

[Globalization is] the world being more connected and becoming a smaller place. Ideas and technology spreading.

Globalization is the creation of a world community, the breakdown of barriers to communication. Globalization is the shrinking of distances, when everyone can communicate and visit each other more easily.

Globalization to me is the practice of making the world a small, connected, and communicating community.
These shrinking-planet and increased-community descriptions of globalization indicate the students were subscribing to the view that globalization brings about positive cultural homogeneity, not a divisive clash of interests or traditions. Only one of the 29 students mentioned the possibility of a negative aspect to globalization, and she immediately followed that statement with a parenthetical one in which she said she does not know what globalization means:

My idea of globalization is how people’s actions affect the world both positively and negatively (I don’t really know what globalization is). It is also the idea that cultures mix with other cultures and share traditions. I get this idea from . . . television. I think most of us get our understanding of globalization from the media.

Furthermore, as this student’s comments show, the class as a whole thought of globalization as not just more contact between cultures, but the blending of cultures, an outcome seen to be positive by their choice of words like “encompassing,” “united/unified,” and “meshing:”

. . . the world becoming smaller (largely through technology) and the emergence of a society that encompasses all countries/cultures/etc.

Globalization is the meshing of all the cultures of the world, at least the main ones.

Globalization is referring to everything being unified and compatible everywhere.

Globalization means that peoples of all different races, cultures, etc, can all mesh together and those walls between them come down.

These responses show that to the students, as we began this inquiry into how their attitudes about technology, globalization, and other-ness are affected by media representations, globalization was a vague, even amorphous concept, as Kellner (1998) indicates when he calls it a “buzzword” used popularly to “signify that something profound is happening, that the world is changing” (p. 1). The students’ pre-existing understanding of this significant change to the world (attributable to the media, according to them) was of a “meshing” or a leveling of differences as the “entire world’s society is adapting socially together in one direction” (study participant). That direction, or “something profound,” was clearly seen by the students as dictated by technology and as positive:
The concept of globalization encompasses the idea of a greater interconnection among all the nations of the world . . . the help of the internet increases communication all over the globe.

It basically means having each country being unified into one lump of technology-using people, who use the same products, same technology, everywhere.

The Visual Text: Land Rover’s “Respect” (“The Procession”) Commercial

After sharing their understandings of the concept globalization, we next viewed an ad that I chose because it represents images and concepts related to globalization, technology, and “others.” The ad, Ranger Rover’s “The Procession,” began appearing on TV in the evenings for about six months or so beginning in summer of 2003, and only one student said as this study began that he had seen the ad before. At the time of this writing, it is still viewable on the Land Rover web site, though I have not seen it on TV since the end of 2003 and don’t know how long it will remain accessible on the Land Rover site.

In the “Best Spots” article in the July 14, 2003, issue of Adweek, a synopsis of the ad (described on the Land Rover web site as “an engaging new 30-second film” of which the “Range Rover is the star”) appears:

With a cast of thousands, this interesting commercial, filmed in Thailand, follows a princely procession through the streets of an exotic locale. But when the shrouded prince, carried on the shoulders of his loyal subjects, and a Range Rover reach an intersection at the same time, everything stops. Who will blink first? As the locals wait with bated breath, a hand slowly reveals itself. The prince is waving on the vehicle. Graphic: “Respect.” Tagline: “Range Rover. The most well-traveled vehicles on earth.” (http://www/adweek.com/aw/creative/best_spots_03/030714_16.jsp)

A piece in the “Parlor Talk” column of the September 2003 Swarthmore College Bulletin provides a similarly dramatic, narrative description of this TV ad:
The wordless 30-second commercial opens with a view over the tiled roofs of an Asian village. At street level, traditionally dressed villagers bow as a curtained sedan chair [palanquin] passes in a procession. A religious figure, perhaps, is seated behind its translucent white curtains. Then, a large SUV enters a crossroads ahead of the procession, and puzzled villagers turn to stare. Next, we see the religious figure parting the curtains for a better look at the gleaming white automobile. A brocaded sleeve extends through the curtain, revealing a hand that gestures quickly twice, signaling the SUV driver to cross ahead . . . The SUV crosses the unpaved street, raising a small cloud of dust. The sedan chair—curtains closed, its occupant’s identity never revealed—starts to move. As the screen fades to black, these words appear in quick succession: “RESPECT”; “Range Rover”; and the Land Rover slogan, “The most well-traveled vehicles on earth.” (Lott)

When asked to record their initial *gestalt* reactions, the students focused on the fact that this car (the technology) was able to command more respect from the villagers than their leader. They also focused in the early viewings on the obvious contrast between, “a setting where it seems a lot of technology has not reached yet” (study participant) and the technological advance represented by the Range Rover, and seemed to see the contrast shown in the commercial as a simple reflection of reality—as fact:

It [The commercial] juxtaposes Western technology and Eastern lack thereof.

The Range Rover is the best SUV on the planet. You will get respect from every class of people.

The commercial shows people in some sort of other country, probably poor, who are all staring at the vehicle as if they all wish they could have it.

These early comments also suggest that the idea of respect extends to something more like worship in this commercial. While this was not initially expressed as a concern, the students were certainly noticing this part of the ad’s message:

The Range Rover (technology) is more respected than their sacred person.

. . . technology is more revered than the important people in the culture.
That Western consumeristic way of life has so much potential sway in other parts of the world is an issue for scholars who see traditional ways of life losing out:

One concern, common to many people both in and out of the West, is that consumer goods and values will be presented and perceived as so eminently desirable that they will not only alter or displace traditional cultural and religious values, but become an object of worship in themselves (Classen & Howes, 1996, p. 2).

However, the students’ initial comments show that they were willing to accept this ad’s message simply as a “fact” of the world and not that they saw this particular visual presentation of “facts” as a problematic portrayal of these two cultures’ relationship to each other and of the role of technology in shaping the world’s views and desires. For instance, initial student comments about the technology in this ad focused on its depiction in the Range Rover narrative: two forms of technology (transportation) are visually juxtaposed, with the modern one winning all the way around and the palanquin looking quaint and ethnic to our tourist gaze and being left, literally, in a cloud of dust. This stark visual contrast, and the message it is supposed to convey, was described by the students early on no doubt precisely as the ad-makers intended it to be:

- The vehicle is technology and perhaps very new and exciting to the villagers who may lack automobiles.
- It [Technology] puts the driver at the top of the heap. All those people stop what they are doing and let the Rover pass.
- The Range Rover is the ultimate piece of technology, awing the crowd in this distant country.
- [This] technology seems superior, overpowering, and important.

Over a series of viewings separated by several weeks, however, students began to pull this visual text apart, to move beneath its appearance as an “unstructured, transparent replica of reality” and think about what this particular “structured expression” is doing and saying (Veen, 1998). Following this early consideration of the idea of globalization and introduction to the Range Rover ad, the class worked intensively with analysis of pop culture artifacts for what they reveal about the nature of our culture and how they shape us in the ways described by Chomsky and Hall above. In particular, the students looked at how, for artifacts from each of several broad categories (entertainment, fast food, fashion, sports, etc.), the filtering of that artifact
through the interconnected systems of capitalism and advertising promotes
certain hegemonic messages about ourselves and our world (messages about
race, class, gender roles, success, happiness, patriotism, technology,
environment, consumer behavior, etc), helping to create what Herman and
McChesney (1997) describe as the “common culture and system of values,
traditions, and ways of looking at the world” (p. 3).

For instance, students viewed The Merchants of Cool, a PBS Dateline
Production (1999) that shows in detail how large advertising firms
appropriate and simultaneously manufacture the culture and desires of
teenagers in order to create and market products that will be profitable. Another
example of the kind of analytical videos the pop culture class viewed is Tough
Guise (1999), a straightforward look at how boys, young men, and men in
this culture have fairly constraining roles they believe they must play in order
to be thought of as masculine. Again, the role of the media in visually
promoting this notion and identity is examined. It is important to note,
however, that none of the readings, videos, or discussions dealt explicitly
with the topic of globalization until one essay very late in the semester,
assigned before their third and final class analysis of the Range Rover ad,
three months after their initial exposure to it (see below). The focus throughout
the semester was on pop culture artifacts/texts, what they say about us and
how they affect us, and the media’s role in promoting these mythologized
messages.

Thus, through a recursive and cumulative process of continued reading
and writing of analyses and periodic re-viewing of the ad (after the initial
viewing, viewings followed two and three months later), the students became
considerably less sanguine and more perspicacious about the Range Rover’s
particular representation of “the way the world should be perceived and . . .
what kind of people there should be” (Sainath interview with Chomsky, 1996),
as the remaining two sections show.

“Respect”

I think technology is being presented in a good way but it isn’t right
the way the villagers are shown. But then again the ad is meant to
sell a product and not to represent people fairly. I think globalization
is shown here implicitly. Obviously this American is traveling the
entire world without even getting dusty. I think the ad makes the
world seem small and conquerable. (study participant)

The students next viewed the videotape of the Range Rover ad about
two months after their initial encounter with it. Although one additional student
said he had seen it on TV in the interim, the majority of them still had seen it
no place other than in our class. Before the second time I brought the video to
class, I asked students to read David Gowey’s “‘Careful, You May Run Out of Planet’: SUVs and the Exploitation of the American Myth” from their Signs of Life (2003) text. Gowey’s piece is an exploration of how the “American culture’s faddish preoccupation with the SUV may be seen as deeply embedded in a national identity . . . As a cultural signifier, the SUV both reveals and reflects the principal components of America’s popular mythology” (p. 113). After viewing the Range Rover ad two or three more times, students were asked this question about the above quotation from Gowey’s text:

Does this ad seem to do what Goewey describes above—reveal and reinforce American myths? What elements of American thinking, behavior, and beliefs about ourselves seem to come through in this ad? What does the Range Rover seem to be a sign for in this ad?

Some students continued to fairly passively accept the basic message of the ad, and its one-sided visual message about globalization, technology, and the role of the West (Americans, in particular) in the world, seeing the reaction of the “others” in this ad and the fact of the car’s presence in the foreign country as self-evidently true:

We are indestructible, and we can go anywhere we want. In the Range Rover ad, we see people of other countries supporting these beliefs about the things we have and ultimately us, respecting the Range Rover. The Range Rover seems to be a sign of due reverence and respect for the ingenuity of American culture and ultimately America itself.

I think the ad speaks to the quiet exploration of the globe, in total control, keeping track to make sure that all is well and good. We assume the passengers are Americans and that if anything were wrong, they would do something about it. The respect that is shown by the people can be taken as acknowledgement of this being America’s role and the idea that we fulfill that role well. . . Therefore, technology is for authority and Americans are the authority and everyone else is just trying to follow behind.

However, many more students were beginning to interrogate the ad in ways they had not done earlier. Specifically, they began moving past an initial uncritical response to an exotically attractive ad—simply reflecting the facts of America’s role as a positive, almost messianic leader in globalization and technology—to seeing it as a deliberately structured expression of someone’s interests (Range Rover’s and its target customers’), and to questioning whether
those interests may not, in fact, be in conflict with those of the “others” in this ad:

This advertisement shows very well the attitude of American arrogance and self-righteousness.

I believe the Range Rover ad is sending the message that the advancement of technology is linked to the superiority of western culture and technology should become the all-encompassing deity of a world that as it becomes smaller should move towards a westernized view of how life is to be lived. It is, therefore, suggesting that cultures not currently possessing the technological advancements of western cultures are inferior . . . .

One student’s comment revealed indignation at this cultural text’s portrayal of our contact with another culture:

The globalization of the technology in this ad is portrayed as good, when in my opinion, it is not. The people’s custom is totally interrupted by a foreign object, which most likely, none of the natives have the faintest idea of how to operate. However, we portray this overpriced environment-ruining gas hog as some kind of gift from God . . . . Basically, since there is nothing really left for us to “conquer,” we should drive our SUV through some sort of important foreign ceremony, so that the king or queen or whoever has to yield to our stupid Land Rover on their own soil! (I really hate this commercial!!)

Three months after the students’ initial focus on their first viewing of Range Rover’s “The Procession,” I brought it to class on videotape one last time, and also asked them to read Thomas L. Friedman’s essay, Revolution is U.S. for that day. Friedman’s claim in this essay (an excerpt from his book, The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization, 1999) is that, even “though America is not the sole player in this new global system”—described as a consumer-driven, political-economic dynamic—America’s “domination of the world’s consumer and entertainment markets” is often perceived by the rest of the world as a desire on our part to “dominate, or Americanize, the world itself” (in Massik & Solomon, 2003, pp. 132-133). Students were asked for their comments on what picture or message about America as a “player in this new global system” is represented in this cultural text. These responses show a struggling and a shifting as students realized a disconnect between their early concept of globalization as a harmonious
blending of cultures and creation of community and globalization’s depiction in *The Procession*. Several were motivated to reexamine what “respect” really means in a global community, as opposed to how it is represented in the ad:

I mean, the Land Rover does stop first as it approaches the procession and it waits. For a while, I thought the word “Respect” at the end of the commercial meant that the Land Rover respects the lands/people that it encounters. But the more I think about it . . . if I were one of those villagers, I would be insulted.

The ad doesn’t portray American as respectful.

With respect comes a superior view of yourself. America has capitalized on this story for quite some time. “If you don’t like it, you can just stand on the sidelines,” much like the village people in the Range Rover ad. If you own this vehicle you can pass by all the people who don’t have as much money as you, and look damn good doing it . . . I think this message is kind of harsh. I think of it as quite a snooty approach to things . . .

One student turned the situation around to show that the notion of respect and its role in the cultural homogeneity view of globalization might be a fairly one-way proposition, at least as visually portrayed in this ad:

The crowd is shown as they respect the Range Rover, which represents America. The Range Rover is not shown respecting the crowd or the person in the palanquin. Think of it this way: what if the vehicle in the ad was from England or France and in the ad Americans are the ones who yield and show respect or admiration, would that ad make Americans want to buy that vehicle? I doubt it.

The other people in the ad see them [the car and its driver] with surprise, but that does not necessarily mean that they respect them.

This ad spreads the message that America is powerful and shouldn’t be crossed. This isn’t exactly the right message to believe in. What the U.S. values as important traits might not be important to an indigenous tribe . . . It makes it seem that our way is the right way, and this is not always true.

These comments show that many of the students had shifted their perspective and their concern from that of the passive westerner looking at how the world just naturally “is,” to thinking about this message from different
perspectives, most notably, from that of the “others” in the ad. Their comments also show that, while this is indeed “just an ad,” they believe that the message it sends (the meaning its representation constitutes) is troubling given. Recalling that these students tended to define globalization as the sharing or blending of cultures, they then clearly see that this ad does not show any sharing or blending and that the cultural respect is all going one way.

The ad makes us seem very cocky to the rest of the world because they think we feel we can do whatever we want.

It is slightly disturbing the way everyone celebrates the triumph of the new [the Range Rover]. There are merits to tradition as well.

I feel that this message is wrong . . . I think it makes us compare ourselves to the rest of the world on a material level. It gives the impression that our wealth exceeds even the royalty of other nations . . . I don’t believe this is a good message to send.

**Conclusion**

This approach, here represented as a visual analysis of Range Rover’s, *The Procession*, shows a way in which inquiring into visual media texts can lead to greater student appreciation for the complicatedness of what may otherwise be perceived in a one-sided, limited, and strongly ethnocentric way. Students’ media-generated, highly visually dictated understanding of globalization led them initially to relatively uncritically accept this ad’s message about Western dominance, worship of technology, and displacement of local tradition. However, as a result of work with material that developed the idea that what we see in the media are constructed, not transparent, views of reality, students began to reject the tempting and easy inclination to dismiss the media and much of pop culture as having no real consequence or shaping influence on attitudes and worldviews.

Most exciting to me, several students in this pop culture analysis class made the dramatic and transformative move from thinking of “others” and the potential negative effects of globalization and thoughtlessly used technology as “distant from themselves” (Robbins, 2002, p. ix) to placing themselves in these “others’” positions and imagining the event visually presented to them from a perspective other than the familiar American one! If globalization is to have beneficial and humane effects, surely this kind of imaginative analysis is an essential and hopeful component of our thinking about it.
Notes

References


