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Attack Ads: More than "Child's Play"

At a time when the presidential election is perhaps more important than it has ever been before, attack ads created to persuade voters one way or another are flooding the airways. Someone who watches only a few hours of television a day is bound to see a commercial stating that John Kerry is not a war hero, but rather is dishonest and lacks character. Do these ads make a difference in the eyes and ears of voters across the United States? If they do, to what extent do these ads sway a voter's choice? Whether or not Democrats and Republicans can be persuaded is still unknown to me, but how about those voters who are neither Democrats nor Republicans, the undecided voters? If these undecided voters can be influenced by such ads then we must look into what makes a "bad ad" and what criteria exist for "good ads." An effective attack ad must include some appeal to the audience's pathos. Another important, but not necessarily imperative element for these kinds of ads is that it be clever enough to catch the viewer's attention and stay in his or her memory. Adding comic relief usually doesn't hurt either. In short, an effective attack ad has to be smart and they have to make some impression on the viewer.

These are the main parts that will make an effective ad, but to create a great ad requires that all of the little points, the smallest details, are used to great effect. Looking specifically at two ads running on the liberal website MoveOn.org, a group whose stated goal is to oust George W. Bush from the White House, we can see how an undecided voter may be persuaded to not vote for President Bush. The ad "Child's Play" by Charlie Fisher was a winning entry in MoveOn.org's contest for the best anti-Bush ad, and a close analysis shows that they are indeed persuasive.

Perhaps the most important criterion for an attack ad is that it appeals to the viewer's pathos. If the audience reacts with some kind of emotion, whether it is hatred, sadness or even fear, then the creator has accomplished the most important job. Often times people react immediately based on their emotions, and thus the ad should evoke a feeling, one that makes viewers not want to vote for President Bush. "Child's Play" is a powerful ad that does this beautifully because it is the kind of ad that sends chills through your body. The ad begins with a young boy, about eight or nine years old cleaning plates in a kitchen. It then proceeds to show little boys and girls of the same age participating in other jobs, including a girl mopping a floor as a custodian, a girl watching bottles pass by in what appears to be some kind of factory, a boy as a garbage man, a girl fixing tires, and finally a girl working at some kind of restaurant. Notice that these aren't young boys and girls working as doctors and lawyers, but instead they

are working as low wage workers with jobs that most young people don't dream about. Such surprising images have the power to make viewers angry and perhaps even frightened.

This ad suggests that you can change life for your children and it tells you how. Who's to blame for your kids working as custodians and garbage men? As the ad so slyly claims none other than our current President George W. Bush. Right before the last clip of the young girl cleaning at a restaurant, a black screen appears, with white words clearly visible that start small and begin to grow larger: "Guess who's going to pay off President Bush's \$1 trillion deficit?" Nobody has to read it out loud to you. Instead the words just sit there for you to go over in your mind. The words grow larger, as if you are being forced to look at them. This is a great job of appealing to pathos. How could a person not look at those words and not feel horrible.

Charlie Fisher uses one other clever tactic, and that's music. Throughout the entire ad not one word is said. All you hear is chilling, almost sad music that rises and falls, and as the words are shown on the screen there is a crash made by symbols and you can almost feel your heart drop a few kilometers. You can also hear a loud crash when the young boy throws the garbage on to his truck. Music is used in almost all of the movies we watch simply because it evokes feelings. There is music that makes us happy and music that makes us want to dance. There's music that is loud and makes us feel excited, and then there's music that's dark. Dark music

makes us a little bit angry, but more than anger we feel sadness a lot of the time. That is exactly what the music in this ad does. It makes us feel a sad, and the loud crash of an eight year old child throwing garbage into a trash bin makes us angry! This doesn't mean that an effective ad should not have a narrator or any words, but it's a great example of how less is more.

As I mentioned above, I do not know if attack ads can actually be effective to all voters, and I am certainly not convinced that they take an ethical approach to educating the electorate. But if such ads are to sway undecided voters, they must be done with intelligence and they must appeal to viewers' emotions. "Child's Play" does this by using visuals of young children participating in low wage, physical labor. The music only adds to the thirty second ad. Right or wrong this ad is extremely powerful. I do not like considering the prospect of children bearing the weight of our out of control deficit, and if I didn't already have a strong opinion about our president, this ad could help me develop one.

Works Cited

Fink, Christopher. "If Parents Acted Like Bush." Bush in 30 Seconds.

<http://www.bushin30seconds.org/view/1024_small.shtml>

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