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Writing 5- Cultures of Place

1/21/16

Chrysler's Detroit: Defending Place in Regionalist Advertising

In 2011, Chrysler released an advertisement during the halftime show of the Super Bowl. Broadcast across the nation, 111 million people watched "Born of Fire" the 2-minute-long commercial for the new Chrysler 200. Minutes after airing, "Born of Fire" set the social web ablaze, garnering over 17 million hits on YouTube and even winning the 2011 Emmy Award for best commercial. The advertisement and its slogan "Imported from Detroit" gave the brand, the city and many Americans a renewed sense of pride and hope. It offered a gritty defense of the city, its industries and its ways of life, single-handedly bringing some of the old swagger back to Detroit and attacking those who doubted the city's heritage and conviction. It succeeded in doing what it set out to achieve- defending its unique regional place in the nation.

But despite its popularity and influence, the advertisement may not be an entirely authentic representation of the reviving city with a dark past. It paints a simple, perhaps too stereotypical, picture of Detroit's generic imprint of hard work, forged through living under gray industrial skies. With Eminem, a native to Detroit, spearheading the commercial, the advertisement simplifies the diverse city's population and values into stereotypical factory-bred locals and their industrial rigor. In the context of analyzing Detroit's regional value, diverse

Comment [NVK1]: This opening gambit is very successful!

You offer concrete, engaging evidence that serves as shared context for your audience, and, perhaps more importantly, you also use that to lead us into a starting position. It's very well done.

I think you can get away with not citing sources for these details, but they are questionable. Cited sources would have made this gambit even more powerful.

Comment [NVK2]: Some clever embedded metaphors here.

representation in the commercial is a key component because it gives a much more accurate representation of the region's significance. By only illustrating Detroit as an industrial goldmine, the commercial oversimplifies Detroit's diversity into a standard image that misrepresents the region and its values. Placing our prejudices of the ad's presentation aside, however, there is still value in the advertisement if we view it through a different lens- the audience's reaction and interpretation of Detroit. The advertisement succeeds in generating genuine reactions from the audience, and encourages discussion to improve the city. Despite the inauthentic regional presentation of the advertisement, it still serves as a tool for defending its region because ultimately, the audience's discourse and response is the potential vehicle that propels positive social and cultural development.

Chrysler's advertisement strives to highlight the regional qualities of Detroit using critical regionalism, a reactionary process that attempts to surmount the placelessness of modern design while also rejecting the eccentric nature of post-modernism. In particular, Chrysler's message sits in line with critic Keith Eggener's theory of critical regionalism. In his essay "Placing Resistance: A Critique of Critical Regionalism", Eggener asserts that the purpose of critical regionalism is to not only to "foster a sense of place and address issues of personal and cultural identity" (Eggener 230), but also to serve the interests of local constituents. To a degree, Chrysler's commercial accomplishes this by highlighting the key points of local Detroit culture to promote cultural awareness of the region. The advertisement proudly displays Detroit's unique flair, showcasing grand urban venues, towering skyscrapers and hopeful faces of its people. It embraces Detroit's dark past, praises its survival instincts and looks to a new future for its workers. As Eggener acknowledges, critical regionalism helps bring "much-deserved attention to

Comment [NVK3]: You might have done a better job of using the actors/actions formula from Williams and Bizup here.

Comment [NVK4]: OK! You establish a second starting position. One that's more complex than the first and informed by the CR debate.

Comment [NVK5]: OK. Interesting.

The structure of this paragraph is quite clear. You produce a clear motive device and you offer (without actually naming it) a set of ideas that are very much a function of your engagement with critical regionalism.

I suspect your audience might have questions about what it would mean for a conversation about an add to propel positive development. But that's a question that Powell doesn't answer with stunning clarity either.

Comment [NVK6]: OK. This is a fairly convincing way to introduce this critical debate. Given that you didn't do so in the introduction, I think you were obliged to do so here by linking it to the ad in some way explicitly.

Comment [NVK7]: Remember that the key tension for CR is the tension between placeless modernism and nostalgic traditionalism. Post-modern eccentricity is really a competing response to the same tension.

Comment [NVK8]: OK

I think I was expecting you to offer a more robust stand-alone summary of the critical debate before you got into the analysis of your case.

By choosing to pursue both critical summary and case analysis in the same paragraph, you set yourself a very difficult task.

other wise neglected...activity” (Eggerer 230), and indeed, the advertisement brings Detroit to the attention of 17 million people.

However, critical regionalism is born with the power to not only emphasize, but also to marginalize. In particular, Eggener criticizes people that use one interpretation of a region over all others. He keenly observes that “where one image of a nation’s culture prevails, others have been...suppressed” (231). For example, Eggener cites that Luis Barragan’s artistic style is praised to be the “best and most distinctive” depiction of Mexican architecture but is oftentimes wrongly interpreted as the sole representation of Mexican culture. Similarly, Chrysler’s advertisement interprets Detroit solely through its industrial and hard-working worker image, overlooking other populations that inhabit the city. The narrator of “Born of Fire” asserts that “this isn’t New York City. Or the Windy City. Or Sin City...and we’re certainly no one’s Emerald City” (Chrysler, Born of Fire). The ad’s bold claim implies that those who are from Detroit are from one family and one family only, born and bred out of grit and perseverance. In other words, the advertisement ignorantly categorizes all of Detroit’s inhabitants as a resilient working class with a history of economic suffering. Yet, as critic James Moreland observes in his article “Detroit Is an Example of Everything That Is Wrong with Our Nation”, it’s impossible for everyone in Detroit to have recovered completely from the crisis: many are still unemployed or have left the city altogether. The underlying motive to display Detroit as strong and unique serves as an example of how the advertisement’s critical regionalist lens marginalizes not only people outside of Detroit, but even populations in its own city. By seeking to become the most authentic representation, the advertisement limits its horizons and is unable to illustrate the city’s values and regional significance effectively. Eggener therefore advises that “when one individual’s image is projected onto the nation, it is important to scrutinize the background,

Comment [NVK9]: OK!

This conceptual transition is clear, but you can see that here you seem to be focused just on the debate (when in reality the paragraph is also about the ad).

The confusing shift in focus between the task of describing what the debate tells you and using those ideas to drive your analysis makes the structure of these early paragraphs a bit hard to follow. .

Comment [NVK10]: Here’s your topic sentence, I think.

Comment [NVK11]: While it would have been nice to hear what specific problems Moreland identifies, I think this is an admirable approach to offering support for your claim.

beliefs, and aspirations of that individual and his or her advocates” (232). He proposes listening to more diverse voices and populations in order to gain a better complete understanding of the region. As he notes at the end of his essay, “heeding the voices of those responsible for building particular cultures” is the essential ingredient to representing critical regionalism (235).

Through patriotic images and icons that are so uniquely Detroit, the advertisement without a doubt promotes local regionalism in an Eggener fashion. However, in its quest to prove that Detroit and the automobile industry still have a unique place in the world, Chrysler overemphasizes themes to a degree that breeds *defiant* regionalism. This sole image of resistance, like Barragan’s work, is wrongly interpreted as the only message of Chrysler’s commercial. For example, the narrator aggressively questions the audience’s knowledge of Detroit, particularly from “folks who have never even been here” (“Born of Fire”), and fiercely stands by the city’s underdog story of rebirth. By using edgy rhetorical questions and answering with a matter-of-fact “Well I’ll tell you”, the advertisement advances its belief that Detroit’s distinguishing “hard work and conviction” lead to a life of luxury (“Born of Fire”). The sheer defiance against the rest of the world serves to reclaim the idea that Detroit has made it “to hell and back” with better, more resilient ideas and challenges the ignorant folks who question otherwise (“Born of Fire”). Indeed, in the last scene of the advertisement, Eminem stares defiantly at the camera and points his right index finger for emphasis, finishing with the challenging statement “This is what we do” (“Born of Fire”). This underlying aggression is reflective of certain local populations, but ultimately is alienating to the vast majority of people both inside Detroit and out.

Despite the focus on proudly defiant regionalism, however, the advertisement is not entirely truthful with its status as a local contributor. Ironically, as Kiley points out in his article

Comment [NVK12]: This is a very successful transition. Perhaps the best in your essay.

Comment [NVK13]: OK. Alienation is valid, I think. It also might be problematic because it serves to silence diversity by making the identity narrative that is presented seem more inherently valuable.

“How Chrysler Chief Olivier Francois Is Selling Detroit”, it took a merger with Fiat, a European car company, to help tackle Chrysler’s bankruptcy problems during the 2008 economic crisis. And yet, there is no recognition of Fiat in the advertisement at all. This is potentially misleading because the company’s shares are now in part owned by its European partner, taking power away from the American people. Furthermore, as Paul Waldman notes in his article “The Unpopular, Successful Auto Bailout” in *The American Prospect*, \$9 million of the \$7.5 billion bailout of U.S. loans (about 12%) was used on Chrysler’s two-minute ad. However, rather than a heavy promotion to buy the car, the advertisement pays more attention to reminding the audience of their patriotic duty to keep a regional company alive. For a company that boasts of unique regionalism, it seems to be trying extra hard to claim a spot in the hearts of Americans. In addition, as Detroit Free Press critic Mark Phelan points out, Chrysler’s local status is undermined by the fact “two of the brand’s three vehicles...are built in Canada”, causing outsourcing of American jobs and opportunities (“What’s Wrong with America’s Import”). From this evidence, it can be inferred that Chrysler’s use of defiant regionalism generates a questionable byproduct- it veils the global status of the company in favor of promoting local regional spirit.

In contrast to Keith Eggener’s analysis, Reichert Powell provides an alternative lens to interpreting the advertisement in his book “Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape”. Powell justifies retaining critical regionalism as a tool for advancing regional culture because of its lasting influence on a larger audience. He argues that critical regionalism is “not necessarily parochialism”, as Chrysler’s ad may indicate (Powell 7). Rather, the key for Chrysler to apply critical regionalism effectively is to be “aware of the fact that one’s own work participates in [that] broader constellation of discourse about the region”

Comment [NVK14]: A masterful paragraph!

Comment [NVK15]: The fact that you shift between topic sentences that seem to be about the debate and those that are about the ad make the overall logical direction of the essay occasionally opaque.

(Powell 7). In other words, critical regionalism is about knowing that one's own work adds significant value to the definition and discussion of a region, an entity that is always changing. Powell remains optimistic of critical regionalism as a social invention, a set of rules for interpreting and advancing culture. He recognizes that conflict arises when considering many diverse perspectives as Eggener suggests. However, this distinction is essential for change. After all, Powell suggests, the value of critical regionalism lies in the audience's reactionary response to this tension.

Interpreting Chrysler's commercial through Powell's analysis, Powell thus encourages the audience to value critical regionalism as a tool for change through the cultural response it fosters rather than the document's qualities itself. Instead of shying away from disagreements, embracing conflicting discourse generates a potential channel for people's values to evolve. As the Muller articulates in his 2012 Forbes article "Do Chrysler's TV Sermons Really Sell Any Cars", Chrysler's CEO Olivier Francois is not just proud of the fact that Chrysler's brand sales jumped up 12 percent in 2011. Rather Francois is most proud of the fact that Chrysler's ad has resonated within the hearts of the American people. In his words, his company is not just selling cars, but "selling into people's values" (Muller, "Do Chrysler's TV Sermons Really Sell Any Cars"). As Aaron Morrison of Mason City, Iowa states in a NBC interview, the advertisement served as an "anthem or rallying cry for Detroit...It makes me want to by my next car made in America" (Karoub, "Chrysler Ad Has People Talking About Detroit"). This is parallel to Powell's argument that critical regionalism is a tool that "self-consciously shapes an understanding" of the cultural, political and social values of the people (Powell 8). The promotion of Chrysler's image has reshaped the culture and character of Detroit into a better and

stronger version, drawing its local communities into the “complex, shifting relationships” with the nation (Powell 6).

As Powell and Eggener affirm, critical regionalism is a dynamic construct built upon conflicting perspectives. Chrysler’s advertisement depicting Detroit’s revival certainly hits the spot on affirming the resilience and fluidity of critical regionalism; however, its tendency to rely only on distinctive representation is a hidden loophole in its system. Although the patriotic advertisement highlights Detroit at its finest, it walks a thin line between representing an underdog city’s return to an oversimplified version that points to an ideal future without considering social, political and economic consequences. Built long on a conflict between race, class and cultures, Detroit’s regional comeback cannot be manifested as easily with just sheer willpower. Rather, as Powell observes, the challenge of local residents to overcome conflicting tensions and embrace their diversity serves as a starting point towards generating change that will embrace the richness and complexity of the city.

Comment [NVK16]: OK! This is pretty convincing, I'd say.

I do wonder if you've found a way to prove that this promotes diversity and dialogue (which seem to be a part of Powell's understanding of what CR does).

Comment [NVK17]: OK. You are pointing to a future action here; that serves to open the conclusion into slightly broader territory and ask the audience to think about where they go from here.

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WRITING 05.028 (w16) Project 1 Feedback and Evaluation

Dear Karen,

Formative Response:

This project demonstrates really significant growth from the early draft. While there are still some confusing features, you've found ways to address many of the concerns we raised about matching claims to evidence. You've added quite a bit of evidence, sharpened transitions and topic sentences, and pursued a more powerful and motivated argument. While there's still room for improvement, you've made strides in just about every area of the document. Nice work.

For future projects, there are a few things you should focus on:

- **Style:** The essay is pretty clean and fairly clear stylistically, but you could do a lot more to make use of the actors/actions formula from Williams and Bizup. For projects 2 and 3, you might make a point of making a pass using those ways of thinking, focusing especially on the moments where you are talking about complex or abstract ideas.

- Evidence. You expanded your evidence significantly here, drawing on more sources to support your claims. That shows greater attention to detail. In project 2, you'll want to hold yourself to a higher standard for evidence. You'll want to ensure that your local claims are precisely limited by the limits of the evidence you have available to you.
- Method: In project 2, you'll be asked to separate your account of your interpretive approach (conceptual lens) into a stand-alone section. That will be a very different approach than the one you follow here. I think it should prove a useful model in future projects as well.
- Transitions: while I think your transitions are strong, I had some confusion because of the shifting between lens-based and archive-based transitions. You'll want to aim for consistently archive-based transitions whenever you're doing something like a case analysis moving forward (including it the results for Project 2).

I want to encourage you to focus on this feedback (and the marginal notes in the essay itself) at least as much as you do on that forthcoming evaluation and grade. Those latter features of my response are important only if you are able to use them to motivate and structure your learning process moving forward. They can be disruptive to learning if they end up silencing your own self-evaluation and undermining your engagement and self-regulation.

If you'd like to talk to me about any feature of Project 1 or about any element of this response, please don't hesitate to contact me.

-Nick

Evaluative Response:

In class, we agreed on six categories for evaluation, and the rubric—[posted here](#) and included at the end of this document—establishes benchmarks for three tiers of quality within each category. Below, you'll find my description of the document within each of the five categories.

See marginal notes throughout the document for details. The chart below offers an overall judgement of the document's success.

Document Feature	Description of project quality	Tier
Style; mechanics; formatting	In style and mechanics, I think the essay is very successful. It is clear and accessible throughout. You balance complex sentence structures with simple nouns and verbs. You also offer some subtle plays on words early on. While there are a few instances where the W & B formula, actors and actions, might have been better employed, it's a well crafted document.	Excellent
Audience (excluding other rubric elements)	I think you make very good decisions about offering shared context both about the case and about the critical debate. There are very few instances where you seem to lose a sense of your audience's needs.	Excellent

Argument; Thesis	You offer a clear claim with a clear motive mechanism in the introduction. That claim structures the document as a whole and appears vividly in the conclusion. In the introduction, you might have done a bit more to expose the overall significance of your claim and to unpack what it means to develop a culture by talking about an advertisement. But you do begin to address those issues by the end of the paper.	Excellent (low)
Evidence; Archive	Usually, you offer clear and convincing evidence for your claims. I do think that you could have done more in places to either track down and source more compelling evidence or revise your claims to be in line with the evidence you did engage. Those were episodic, rather than pervasive, concerns, though.	Excellent/ Good
Logical Structure; Arrangement	<p>There were times (as my marginal notes reveal) where I thought your decision to integrate your summary of the debate with your analysis of the case, caused some significant problems. Early paragraphs were difficult to follow (despite clear claims emerging in places within them).</p> <p>In places, you offer really exceptional paragraphing, though, including powerful and robust transitions, paragraph focus, and clear topic sentences. The project also uses the idea of motive to establish a complex and dynamic document arrangement. That makes the motive more accessible and memorable for your audience. I think it also makes for a more engaging reading experience.</p> <p>I think, had you offered a brief methods section, you could have produced a more clearly logical document structure.</p>	Good (high)
Application of Debate; Use of Critical Lens(es)	You have a solid understanding of the debate, and you do a good job of summarizing the key ideas for your audience (including unpacking complex quotations). As my marginal notes suggest, I think the document was hampered by the decision to integrate summary and deployment within most paragraphs, though.	Good (high)