

# Media and Evolution



DOVE "EVOLUTION"



DOVE "ONSLAUGHT"

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the second in a series of articles offering strategies for teaching students to deconstruct various types of media.

If you think we've hit an evolutionary plateau, think again. Recent research has started to explore the ways in which our brains respond to visual cues, notably how images, color, shapes, and movement affect our emotions. While the educational community is deciding how to incorporate these findings into the classroom, the advertising industry has raced ahead, creating fast-moving visuals, such as TV commercials, that target our emotional selves to powerful effect.

Understanding this dynamic, as well as the media techniques used to play to our emotions while overriding our logic and critical thinking, is the focus of this second part in our deconstructing-media series. For our example, we will look at the Dove TV ads "Evolution" and "Onslaught." With a little deconstruction, you may find yourself viewing commercials in a new way.

**Who paid for the ad?** "Evolution," one of the first ads in Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty series, features an average-looking young woman transformed through makeup, hairstyle, props, airbrushing, and Photoshop software into a high-fashion billboard model.

**What is the message and who is being targeted?** The ad illustrates the illusion of beauty and encourages us to question what we see in all ads. When the commercial was first released, Dove achieved a viral-marketing victory as thousands of people—mostly women—e-mailed friends to get them to watch and talk about the ad on YouTube.

**What languages of persuasion are used?** People established an emotional bond with the

brand through Dove's exposure of the Big Lie—a language of persuasion that uses exaggeration to sell a product. This connection with Dove grew with its release of the ad "Onslaught," which shows a barrage of sexualized and objectified women and encourages parents to talk to their children before the beauty industry does. With "Onslaught," Dove uses fear to reach parents who want to protect their children.

## Emotion Versus Manipulation

**Are the messages healthy or unhealthy?**

With any deconstruction, we must recognize that an emotional bond is powerful, then look to see if there's more to the story. We know that Dove sponsored these ads, and that the message is powerful and positive. However, we also can question why a company might criticize the very thing that makes it money, and why Unilever, which owns Dove, promotes Axe, its line of men's toiletry products, using ads that dehumanize women through sexist and sexualized images using the same media techniques featured in the "Evolution" and "Onslaught" ads. Thus, while Unilever aims to build girls' self-esteem with its Dove ads, it undermines that self-esteem with its Axe ads.

Some people have claimed their own viral-marketing counter victory with the video "A Message From Unilever." Available on YouTube, it shows a modified version of the "Onslaught" commercial with nothing but Axe advertisements used to show the onslaught of unhealthy images and messages that our children face.

**What are the untold stories?** With further deconstruction, we can question why many people view a model's lifestyle as glamorous. Dove highlights a piece of the illusion, but is careful to not go too far, so that it still perpetuates the need to purchase Dove products to attain beauty. The underlying, unhealthy

# Deconstruction skills can help students become critical viewers of commercials and other video messaging.

by Alexis Ladd

message is that we still need to be concerned with appearance and strive to be beautiful, as defined by brands like Dove or corporations like Unilever. And while we can't see (or be seen in) the real world using Photoshop, an untold story of these ads is that many people are turning to plastic surgery to achieve the same effect.

Another untold story is the impact of harvesting palm oil, a major ingredient in Dove and many other products. The environmental group Greenpeace highlighted that issue in its counter ad "Dove Onslaught(er)," also available on YouTube. Mimicking the "Onslaught" format, Greenpeace depicts the deforestation of Indonesia and exposes how rapidly growing demand for palm oil products is contributing to this environmental crisis.

## So, How Far Have We Evolved?

Emotions are powerful. Through deconstruction, we can empower ourselves and our students to make connections based on information—instead of on emotion.

Encourage your students to create a counter ad that generates awareness about a problem they have uncovered through their own deconstruction. Working in groups, they can start with a storyboard and a script. Younger students can act it out if filming is too advanced or if you don't have video equipment. Older students can edit the piece by adding music and special effects. ■■

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**NEXT MONTH: Deconstructing websites.**

**To read the first article in this series, go to [www.ciconline.org/cicmagazine-jan09](http://www.ciconline.org/cicmagazine-jan09).**

## RESOURCES

***Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West***, Sheila Jeffreys (Psychology Press, 2005)

### Dove "Evolution"

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=hibyAJ0SW8U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hibyAJ0SW8U)

### Dove "Onslaught"

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ei6JvK0W60I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ei6JvK0W60I)

### Greenpeace: "Dove Onslaught(er)"

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=odI7pQFyjs0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odI7pQFyjs0)

***Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader***, edited by Gail Dines and Jean McMahon Humez (Sage Publications, 2002)

***The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It***, M. Gigi Durham (Overlook Hardcover, 2008)

### "A message from Unilever"

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwDEF-w4rJk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwDEF-w4rJk)

### New Mexico Media Literacy Project

[www.nmmlp.org](http://www.nmmlp.org)

## CONTENT STANDARDS

**McREL** ([www.mcrel.org](http://www.mcrel.org))

### Arts and Communication

Standard 2. Knows and applies appropriate criteria to arts and communication products.

Level IV, Grades 9–12: 3. Knows ways in which to evaluate the sincerity and credibility of various media messages and productions.

### Behavioral Studies

Standard 1. Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior.

Level III, Grades 6–8: 1. Understands that each culture has distinctive patterns of behavior that are usually practiced by most of the people who grow up in it.

## DECONSTRUCTION QUESTIONS

Here are the basic questions to ask when deconstructing any media example.

1. Who paid for the media?
2. Who is being targeted?
3. What messages are being conveyed?
4. Are they healthy or unhealthy messages?
5. What languages of persuasion are being used?
6. What are the untold stories?

These questions are modified from the New Mexico Media Literacy Project. Visit the website for a listing of languages of persuasion and more deconstruction tips.

## Cable Programs and Websites

**Prescribing Beauty**, DSC, February 23, 5am ET/PT, [school.discoveryeducation.com/lessonplans/programs/prescribingbeauty](http://school.discoveryeducation.com/lessonplans/programs/prescribingbeauty)