

# **Lexia: Undergraduate Journal in Writing, Rhetoric & Technical Communication**

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**Art for Consumers' Sake**

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## Section 1: Returning to Art

Since I was a child, I've always had a knack for art. In high school and during summers at home, I was very involved with the Downtown Richmond art scene—volunteering for local galleries, frequenting the Virginia Museum of Fines Arts, and dabbling in my own artistic creations. Since college, however, in the midst of school, work, and extracurricular activities, my involvement with art has dwindled. Because of my background in art, however, I am drawn to publications that focus as much on illustrations as on advertisements—*The New Yorker*, *Oxford American*, and *Modern Art*. The very few pictures in those magazines are images that coincide with the story on the page; not flashy ads to trap consumers. These journals privilege art for art's sake.

A quick glance at *Glamour*, however, yields an experience that is quite different. Most of the magazine is filled with bright, busy, and borderline overwhelming visual stimuli intended to turn readers into consumers. There are so many collages of small pictures amidst even smaller text that full-page ads come as a relief. As I leafed through the popular magazine searching for a visual text on which to focus a class assignment, two ads for Nine West caught my attention immediately—they were artistic and elevated the images to an art form. In my Neo-Aristotelian analysis with a hint of critical art theory, I will explore how effective elements and principles of fine arts are in persuading consumers to buy products.

## Section 2: Not the Mona Lisa

The advertisements were featured in the September 2014 issue of *Glamour*, an American women's magazine geared toward a primarily adult readership. With featured articles under categories *beauty, fashion, celebs, sex & dating, weddings, health & diet, inspired, and living*, the magazine covers a broad swath of territory within the lifespan of a modern woman, thus it caters to quite a broad audience of adult females. Most of the articles contain methods on how to improve a woman's life within each category. The advertisements follow a similar suit. The pages are littered with ads ranging from kitchenware to diet pills, from couture clothing to money saving tips, from nail polish to waxing services. The advertisements compliment the content of the magazine with items the reader can buy to improve her life in each category.

While the artifact I chose for my analysis certainly fit into the *fashion* category, The Nine West advertisement, with its muted colors and minimalist arrangement, contrasted the bright color scheme of the rest of the magazine. The ad occupies two consecutive pages of the magazine, both on the right page. The first image is of a woman's leg wearing black ankle-length slacks and

Figure 1



Figure 2



striking leopard-print heels, lunging across a blue bull's eye as her hand clutches a bundle of arrows (See Figure 1). The text embedded in the image reads, "starter husband hunting." Like a Polaroid picture, there is an inch-wide strip of white lining the bottom of the page where the minimalist logo for Nine West is printed in the right corner. My eye skips over the content on the back of the page, another collage of text and small pictures, and goes immediately to a very similar advertisement for the same company on the next page. Above an identical white strip is an image of a woman of similar build from the waist down, wearing a pink, knee-length coat and black, peep-toe heels that strap around the ankle (See Figure 2). The woman in this image stands with her back leg slightly bent, almost as if her knee is collapsing, and she limply holds a white tissue similar to those scattered around her feet. The text, in the same font as the previous image, reads, "first day of kindergarten." Among the wide variety of adult women reading *Glamour*, the content and sequence of the advertisement catches two different types of women, and then prompts them both to buy Nine West shoes.

### **Section 3: Artistic Aristotelian**

My background in art preconditions me to immediately approach Aristotelian criticism with an artist's eye, looking first at a few basic elements and principles of visual art that, when used properly, create an aesthetically stimulating piece. I analyzed the use of line, color, and movement in my rhetorical analysis.

The color scheme contributes to the overall tone of the work, while largely determining whether or not it is aesthetically pleasing to the viewer. Colors across from each other on the color wheel are compliments. Blue and orange, purple and yellow, and

green and red are the complimentary pairs. When an artist uses such colors that flatter each other in a composition, he creates a visually appealing color scheme.

I also analyzed the implementation of the Rule of Thirds that's often used in art criticism. Theoretically, every work of visual art can be divided into three parts, horizontally and vertically. In order for the composition to be visually appealing, the focal point of the work, or the first place the eye rests upon when viewing, should rest at a point in which the grid lines cross. The focal point is the point from which the movement begins along the lines. Lines, or the path of a point moving through space, can be concrete or implied. Lines lead the viewer around the piece like a navigational tool. I tracked the path of the viewer's eye to track the movement and consequently find the message of the ad.

#### Section 4: A Tale of Two Women

Within the context of the rest of the magazine filled with tiny print and pictures, the

Figure 3



minimalist photograph that takes up an entire page causes the reader to pause.

The arrangement of line and color strategically leads the viewer's eye to Nine West's goal: Nine West. The color scheme of the first image is complimentary. The blue of the target makes the orange tails of the arrows to pop, creating a visually appealing scheme. According to color theory and the rule of thirds, the focal point of the image is the cluster of the orange feathers, not the Nine West shoe. The

focal point in this image is a starting place for the viewer. The black line of the arrow through the focal point leads the eye toward the arrows imbedded in the target. The eye follows the line implied by the other orange feathers that's assisted by the rings of the target, which then intersects with the most domineering line of the composition: the model's pant leg directly in the middle of the page. Ordinarily, this line would lead the eye directly off the page, but here, it leads right to the shoe—the product Nine West is advertising (See Figure 3). The way the shoe wraps back up around the foot successfully keeps the viewer within the context of the image for a moment, then the line from the heel to the ball of the foot leads the eye from the image to the Nine West logo in the margin (See Figure 4).

Figure 4



The bold contrast of colors and straight, angular lines create a strong image. In time when the *Hunger Games* archer Katniss Everdeen often arises in feminist conversations of American youth, the archery theme is appropriate for the magazine's female readership. The highlights on the knuckles and veins show that model's hand is flexed as she firmly grips the weapons. The

image is empowering for women, but it also hints at female sexuality. It appears as though she is straddling the target, which denotes sexuality, but the outer lines of the target and the 90-degree angle of her knee suggests that target is slightly too tall for that to work. I see

it as if the model is lunging in front of the target, but the absence of her other leg leaves the image open for a more sexual interpretation.

The text that reads, “starter husband hunting” in a simple white font, adds a new level of interpretation. A simple analysis reveals that the archery theme and leopard print shoes certainly play with the word “hunting,” but the fact that she’s hunting for a starter husband, a man she can marry only for money, divorce, and reap the alimony checks, adds cultural significance. Incorporation of the text immediately negates my first feminist interpretation. It now seems like the ad is suggesting that women need to buy sexy leopard print shoes from Nine West to bait a rich husband so she can marry him, and then use his money to buy more Nine West shoes, implying that a woman still needs a man for monetary support. However, the model’s chino business pants and, from what we can see from the cuff, an oxford button-down doesn’t seem to support this idea. Business attire isn’t what a woman would choose to wear if she were looking to seduce a rich man. The overall image with the added text purports the smart, manipulative, strong businesswoman and objectifies men.

The first image is controversial. The second feels like somewhat of a safety net with its more traditional composition and message. The muted orange undertones of the model’s skin and coat compliment the blues in the floor and the wall. The color scheme is generally the

Figure 5



same as the first image, but the colors in the second are more muted, which creates a softer aesthetic. The placement of the body in the right third of the page is a very traditional composition. The focal point in the top right third portion is the model's hand limply holding the tissue. The arrangement of the tissue and the placement of the model's back leg lead the eye directly down to the back shoe, where the eye lingers (See Figure 5). The white tissues that surround the feet keep the eye circulating around the shoes. Similar to the first image, there is an implied line from the heels of both shoes that lead directly to the Nine West logo (See Figure 6).

Figure 6



While the first image, with its bold colors and the model's strong stance, is somewhat jarring, the second image has a much calmer tone. The model's hand is limp and relaxed, softly holding a tissue as opposed to tightly gripping a weapon. The first model has her foot situated firmly on the ground, while the second woman's looks a little unsteady. Her front leg is locked and her back rests lightly on the ball of her foot, suggesting an uneven distribution of weight. The perspective of her coat tail, how the side closest to the camera appears higher than the side farthest away, makes it look like the model is almost buckling to the side. The only element of the photograph that suggests strength is the edgy leather shoes with the wide, blocked heels.

The text in this image turns the photo into a narrative. In an identical white sans-serif font, the text reads, "first day of kindergarten." It appropriately coincides with the

somber tone of the photograph. Nine West has certainly channeled a circumstance in which sadness would be felt for their audience and used it in their visual rhetoric. This interworking of text and image suggests that the woman in the photograph just dropped her child off at school for the first time. This image has a *pathos* appeal to mothers in the audience—it evokes feelings of separation anxiety, sorrow, and aging that come with that particular milestone in a mother's life. The text characterizes the model so that the reader assigns these associative emotions to her; however, despite what the model feels about separating from her child, she still looks fabulous in those Nine West shoes.

The two images characterize two very different types of women. The first is an adventurous, possibly mischievous single woman hunting for a man. The second is at a completely different point in her life—she has a child she just left at her first day of school. While these two stages may happen at any age in a woman's life, the advertisements work chronologically. The first advertisement appeals to a younger audience and the second appeals to the older, but they insinuate that Nine West shoes look fabulous at any age. If an older woman didn't feel empowered by the woman in the first ad, Nine West catches her with the second.

Neither model is shown with defining characteristics. The only physical elements we can determine about the models are that they are white and have decent calves. The black chino pants worn by the first model are not very form-fitting and the boxy coat on the second model hides any curves of a woman's thighs and torso. Moreover, neither image shows the model's face. These models may be the epitome of ideal beauty or ugliness, but the audience can't discern that from the arrangement of the photographs. Because of the

ambiguity, any female reader who has ever experienced similar situations as the women in the advertisements can insert herself into the image.

### **Part 5: Put Yourself in Her Shoes**

In the context of a women's magazine with an overload of visual stimulation, these two large, minimalist artifacts work beautifully to capture the audience's attention. Nine West clearly knows their audience well and caters to nearly every age group of *Glamour* readers. The complimentary color scheme is pleasing to the eye and the movement of lines within the image keeps the viewer enthralled. Nine West is sneaky—the ads look like artistic photographs that suggest something enlightening about the human condition, but they literally and figuratively point to the glory of Nine West shoes. Overall, the implementation of principles in critical art theory absolutely translates to visual rhetoric of advertising, and it can be very effective in a consumerist context.

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