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Comm 620

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**An article critique and presentation of Eric King Watts and Mark P. Orbe -
“The Spectacular Consumption of ‘True’ African American Culture:
‘Whassup’ with the Budweiser Guys?” (2002)**

I did not choose to critique this article. It was suggested for me. After examining the article, I had several questions:

- Why is this article, like many others, difficult to read and comprehend?
And why are quotes added around so many words? Whose quotes are these? Are these words to be read literally, passively? If the article’s language is difficult, to what use is the research? Could Watts and Orbe have written in a simpler, efficient, and less pedantic style?
- Where are Watts and Orbe’s definitions of “spectacular”, “authentic”, “universal”, “realism”. What are their initial parameters?
- Why are there no visuals? How can Watts and Orbe adequately discuss verbal discourse within a visual format without visuals for reference?
- Why didn’t Watts and Orbe interview director Charles Stone III, the ad agency, or the Anheuser-Busch people directly about the *Whassup-True* commercials’ intentions? Go to the source.
- Are these ads even about culture, black, or “spectacular”? Can there be alternative conclusions? How can Watts and Orbe jump to such highly charged conclusions when so much stands in question?

- How dependable is Watts and Orbe's qualitative study when stark conclusions are drawn from only one undergraduate communications class focus group of 37 students? Might these control group responses be wee bit skewed?
- Is the reader surprised by Watts and Orbe's conclusions when the authors describes most everyone in terms of skin color or ethnicity? What is authentic blackness-whiteness? Are the authors saying I can't see other truth in these commercials because I'm white. Is this racist?
- Of course issues of consumption, culture, and media are interconnected. It *is* a way of life and should be examined. But could *these* commercials simply be about using forms of media to encourage re-communication via memes? To bond one to all. To build tribes, communities, languages - and not particularly about consuming "otherness"?

My above questions were posed on 4 October when I began to design this examination. I've learned a bit since then. For starters, I contacted Eric Watts at Wake Forest. I wanted to "interview" him, the logical nexus. I feared I was misreading the article, and I clearly did on several elementary levels. It is finally dawning on me that :

Various qualitative methods offer different prisms through which to view the world, different perspectives on reality, and different ways in which to organize chaos. Further, they use different aspects of reality as data, and it is the combination of these different data, different perspectives, and different modes of handling the data that gives us different interpretations of reality. (Morse, Janice., Lyn Richards, *Read Me First*, 2002)

In Watts' words, "I want to focus on race." Simple enough. Let this article stand

as more good research. “The essay isn’t meant to do everything”, Watts continued. Yes, I should *build* on this, and not quickly criticize it for what it lacks. I need to hold my “prism” to more lights. I can only imagine how this critique presentation might differ two months from now!

Also, I purchased the original Stone short film DVD, *true*, to examine the other obvious nexus to this article. The *Whassup-True* commercials are surprising faithful to the original film. But the film further questions Watts and Orbe’s notions of discourse and identities. There is little these collectings that speaks to ethnic pandering and consumption, or to appropriating black authenticity. To advertisers, all demographics are red meat. The actors (commercials) are delivery devices, meaning the meme content would be (and is) just as effective if the actors were East Indians (funny dialect), elderly citizens (“where’s the beef”), the Simpsons (“doh”), valley girls (“for sure, like, totally”), or even Yankee fans (“who’s your daddy”). Charles Stone III speaks to this directly.

And so, in some ways my resolve was strengthened by my email exchange with Watts. Visuals (and audio...all our senses) must be embedded deeply in all research and presentations. It can make our text so much richer. In this regard, I fear the field of Communication is about 12 steps behind the world of communication. Visuals *are* discourse. Excluding them risks omitting vitally relevant data.

I already fulfilled my article critique requirement for Comm620. Unfortunately, I wrote it at the wrong time. So this go-round I want to stretch. I want to focus deeper, and differently, upon some of the questions I’ve outlined above. I’ll provide the heavy lifting the authors didn’t. I’ll find the visuals. I’ll illustrate an innocuousness of the

Whassup-True brands by archiving their sheer delight, topicalness, expressiveness, and communicative power. I will illustrate that there is a new, growing, obvious, undercurrent “discourse” and reality that Watts and Orbe ignore or simply do not understand. Either way, this is a glaring omission.

And lastly, I will make my own silly 3 minute QTmovie to humorously overlay the notion that the *Whassup-True* ads can certainly be interpreted as less about consumption or black discourse, and much more about a *new* meme talk. “We made an argument that seeks to understand the peculiar manner in which race is constructed for people to ‘buy’” says Watts. Maybe so. But the race-identity war is winding down....maybe another generation or two. Demographic statistics illustrate this at every turn. The new wars will center around language. Language of religion-belief, language of class-money. And the spoils will go to those who tells the “best” (sensory) stories. Dr. Cronen, gets it. And so do kids. They see nonstop media and, through seductive repetition, are simply assimilating that same language to speak to each other. It’s an obvious observation. At the very least we can be sure that Hispanic and Asian communities would dearly love to get this kind of “face time” on network TV. (My bearded observations here are no more sensational than Watts and Orbe’s... indeed, they are clearly more positive, forward looking, and socially progressive.)

I want to clearly state that most all my archived visuals were taken freely from the internet, or recorded directly (from broadcast) off a TV screen, with a handheld during the evenings of 2-3 October. I like the fact, and it is important for this study, that the movies are raw and low-fi. Production value within is kept to a minimum. It helps the content to come forward.

As for the presentational text quotes, I essentially used one source:

Wynter, L. (2002). *American Skin: Pop culture, big business, & the end of white America*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers

I have also included interviews of Charles Stone III. (Available from no fewer than six websites found through simple Google searches.) Who better to describe the *Whassup-True* commercials' realities? Various texts from other publications are duly noted.

This unconventional attempt to critique an article may at first be curious, even awkward, but hopefully not numbing by the end. This was an intensely involved experiment for me, and it took a long time. I've never done anything remotely like it before. But I deeply believe one needs to discuss new ideas with new language styles. So why not shut up and actually try it? Please remember, my intention is not to *prove* Watts and Orbe wrong; they certainly are not. But after finishing this critique, I think you will discover they may have missed some obvious points by a mile. (Admittedly, I clearly didn't *get* some points, either.) And then, at the very least, you should ask yourself which examination of *Whassup-True* is most illuminating? Watts and Orbe's....or this one?

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