Water Aid audio-visual advert
(2016)

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AS Component 1: Investigating the Media
A Level Component 1: Media Products, Industries and Audiences

Focus areas:
Media language
Representation
Audiences
Media contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT
- The charity Water Aid was established in 1981 as a response to a United Nations campaign for clean water, sanitation and water hygiene education. It now works with organisations in 37 African, Asian and Central American countries plus the Pacific region. Since 1991 its patron has been Prince Charles.
- Created by Atomic London in October 2016, this advert (titled Rain For Good) stars 16 year-old Zambian student Claudia and aims to show how communities benefit from clean water by depicting everyday chores such as farming and laundry.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Cultural context:
Following 1984’s Do They Know It’s Christmas? single for Band Aid, 1985’s Live Aid was the first global charity event aiming to raise funds for relief of the ongoing famine in Ethiopia. The Comic Relief telethon was launched by Richard Curtis and Lenny Henry in 1985 with the same initial famine relief aim, and went on to raise over £1bn for charitable causes across Africa and in the UK. The contemporary audience for this advert could be assumed to be familiar with the codes and conventions of both audio-visual adverts and those for charitable organisations in particular.

Consider genre – and the significance of subverting genre conventions:
- The Water Aid advert reinforces charity advertisement conventions by including key information about the concern, a personalised narrative to which this information is relevant, and a direct appeal to the audience for money.
- However, the fact it lacks a non-diegetic voiceover, melancholic audio codes and black and white visual codes could all be seen as unconventional of this advertising sub-genre.

Consider codes and conventions, and how media language influences meaning:
- The opening medium shot with a pull focus between the digital radio and the rain against the window establishes the advert in a modern, British setting (the audio codes are of an announcer with an English accent). It’s connoted that the scenes that follow (in an unnamed but likely African country) are happening at the same time.
- The visual and audio codes work together to construct the narrative of “sunshine” (in Africa) “on a rainy day” (in Britain) with the associated problems of drought and “lack of access to clean drinking water” that the charity is aiming to relieve.

Consider theoretical perspectives
Semiotics – Roland Barthes
- Suspense is created through the enigmatic use of the slow-motion, medium close-up, low-angle tracking shot of Claudia’s feet and the swinging bucket (Barthes’ Hermeneutic Code) and emphasised by the crescendo of the song in the scene at the water pump over which the informative on-screen graphic appears (Barthes’ Proairetic Code).
- Barthes’ Semantic Code could be applied to the lines from the song used from 00.34 diegetically and then as a sound bridge over the medium
A level only:

Structuralism – Claude Lévi-Strauss

- How texts are constructed through the use of binary oppositions – at 00.47, the song’s title line “sunshine on a rainy day” is used over shots of children running, playing, laughing and the more positive connotations of this section of the advert are emphasised by the high key lighting used.
- A further visual binary opposition is created between the arid, washed-out, primarily beige and brown colour palette of the advert’s first third and the more vibrant colours used at 01.02.
- The on-screen graphic (“650 million people still don’t have access to clean drinking water”) creates a conceptual binary opposition between Claudia’s positive story and that of other, less fortunate people. It’s this opposition that the audience is encouraged to be part of the solution to by giving “£3 today”.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

Social context:
An interesting intertext to consider would be Water Aid’s ‘No Choice’ TV advert from 2013 which is more conventionally constructed and represents the suffering of its main ‘character’ in a more explicit and emotive way (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szT7grQnHRU).

Launching the Rain For Good campaign, Water Aid said that it had “deliberately broken away from the traditional charity ad formula” in response to the public’s desensitisation to traditional fundraising tactics. The stereotypical ‘victim’ needing our help is an archetype with which the audience would be familiar from many other charity adverts. This would perhaps make the more positive representation of Claudia as a healthy, independent and musically talented woman stand out to an audience who might otherwise have become immune to the emotive representations conventionally deployed by this advertising sub-genre.

Consider how representations are constructed through processes of selection and combination:
- The dress codes of the advert’s main female character include a stereotypical knee-length skirt and pink colour palette in both her top and shoes.
- Her age is similar to the other young women she walks past at 00.30 and those who join her at the water pump at 01.00. This connotes that she has perhaps had to “grow up too quickly” because of the tough environment in which she lives. Her independence is connotated by the wide-angled shot at 00.18 in which she is denoted on her own on a long and empty dust road.
- Close-up shots using handheld cameras (00.16), her open, confident gesture codes (00.51) and her smiling gesture code (01.09) represent her as the advert’s protagonist and a ‘character’ with whom the audience can positively associate.

Consider theoretical perspectives:
- Stuart Hall’s theory of representation – the images of a dry, dusty African environment in which people may be struggling to survive form part of the “shared conceptual road map” that give meaning to the “world” of the advert. The more positive audio codes then work to challenge these stereotypical representations, creating enigmas around why Claudia appears to be so positive. The solution to these enigmas is given to the audience at 01.00 when we first see the water pump.
- David Gauntlett’s theory of identity – Claudia acts as a role model for the type of lifestyle changes that the audience could be responsible for creating if they donate to Water Aid.

A level only:
- Liesbet Van Zoonen’s feminist theory – by assuming the stereotypically male roles of ‘protagonist’ and ‘provider’, Claudia is perhaps contributing to social change by representing women in non-traditional roles. The work involved in collecting the water is physically challenging (non-traditional for female roles) though the advert does reinforce stereotypes of women being associated with care of children.
- Gilroy’s ethnicity and post-colonial theories that media texts reinforce colonial power could
be applied, as Water Aid is encouraging its British audience to ‘help’ those like Claudia who live in ‘less developed’ countries.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

Social/cultural context:
In December 2016, this advert had been viewed about 47,000 times on Water Aid’s YouTube channel and this page also actively encourages the sharing of the advert through social networks. Further evidence that the likely target audience are literate with technology is that donations are encouraged through the imperative “Text SUNNY to 70555” and the use on the YouTube page of a twitter hashtag (#ShareSunshine).

The advert’s cover of Zoe’s 1990 song Sunshine On A Rainy Day could indicate that the target audience are in their 30s–40s as they’re likely to remember the original and get pleasure from the nostalgic value of hearing a song with which they’re familiar.

Consider how industries target audiences, and how audiences interpret and use the media:
• The likely audience demographic is constructed through the advert’s use of a young woman with whom they might personally identify (Uses and Gratifications Theory). Parents might make similar readings, identifying empathetically with the ‘better life’ that Water Aid’s clean water provides for the children represented in the advert.
• Water Aid acts as an Opinion Leader for the target audience who would assume the “650 million people…” statistic (01.14) is true and reliable.
• The unconventionally positive visual codes, audio codes and representations would, the producers hope, give the advert unique selling points compared to other charity appeals and therefore make the audience more likely to donate.

Consider theoretical perspectives:

Reception theory – Stuart Hall
• The use of handheld camera shots and indirect mode of address made by Claudia connote that the audience is following her story, but Water Aid rather than she herself have constructed this narrative for us. This, according to Hall, is the dominant or hegemonic encoding created by Water Aid.
• The fact that she’s named creates the preferred reading that she is a real person and that the audience should invest in her narrative, sharing Water Aid’s ideologies.

Cultivation theory – George Gerbner
• This theory might suggest that audiences have become used to the conventions of this sub-genre of advertising and perhaps somewhat ‘immune’ to pleading, earnest non-diegetic voiceovers by well-known voices and black and white, slow-motion, emotive representations of people suffering.
• The target audience’s likely liberal political perspectives will have been shaped by exposure to previous, generically similar adverts, shaping their world view that the suffering of people less fortunate than themselves can be alleviated by charitable donations.