

Saratoga Billboard: The Façade of Advertising

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Excerpt

“To keep a slender figure, no one can deny...Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet.” The Lucky Strike cigarette company plastered this slogan on a bright and colorful advertisement in 1929, featuring a woman next to a pack of cigarettes.¹ The words “Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet” appear in white lettering against a red circle, while a bright green backdrop occupies the rest of the advertisement. The woman—wearing bold make-up and short curls—leans forward as she blows a kiss, fostering a subtle feeling of physical intimacy with the viewer. Lucky Strike created a character that appears to be inviting and womanly—a positive representation of a tobacco user. However, Ralph Steiner’s *Saratoga Billboard* (1929) offers a different interpretation of the advertisement. *Saratoga Billboard* excludes most of the original poster; it shows only half of the slogan and the woman at a stark angle. What the photograph does display, it alters drastically. As a black and white photograph, the bright colors of the original advertisement are indiscernible in *Saratoga Billboard*. As a result, the photograph omits the cheery and bright nature of the original. In addition, the proportions of the advertisement are warped, physically focusing the camera on the words “Lucky instead of a sweet” while blurring the woman beside the slogan. *Saratoga Billboard* represents the advertisement in a fundamentally different way than it would look on an actual billboard—and the way Lucky Strike intended it to look.

There is little scholarly conversation on Steiner and his work, but especially in regards to *Saratoga Billboard*. The few analyses that have been made seem to agree with each other, both resting on literal interpretations of Steiner’s work. In a retrospective exhibition, Dartmouth College Museum and Galleries claimed that Steiner “was in love with the city and its power to

¹ American Tobacco Company, “Instead of a Sweet” (1930), http://tobacco.stanford.edu/tobacco_main/index.php.

emit messages which, their hurly-burly confusion notwithstanding, can be caught within a formal frame.”² They conclude that Steiner used photography to show his appreciation for manmade and manufactured objects, citing the photographs’ subject matter—posters, buildings, and billboards, as seen in *Saratoga Billboard*—as their evidence. Film historian Joel Stewart Zuker agrees with the notion, stating that:

Steiner did not use his camera to point out social injustice...When he did turn to portraits and to the man-made world of buildings, bridges, billboards and machines, it was not with an eye to the social problems that would be implicit to another photographer, but rather with an eye to the abstract and formal beauty of the object.³

Zuker assumes that Steiner chose not to address societal concerns and, based on this assumption, he claims that Steiner used his work to express fondness for synthetic creations. Although both readings of Steiner’s work compliment each other, they rest on interpretations of subject matter and neglect to mention the way the subject is represented or recreated. Neither mentions Steiner’s artistic process, called “appropriation.” In visual art, appropriation is the reformation of preexisting images. Barbara Kruger explains that appropriation is generally used as commentary to encourage the viewer to question their interpretation of the original piece. Often times, the artist hopes to implicitly critique the work by explicitly reforming the original.⁴ Steiner does show interest in the man-made world, as made clear by the repetition of subject matter, but he specifically photographed advertisements and billboards from unexpected perspectives. Specifically, *Saratoga Billboard* is a visual appropriation, recreating a billboard by photographing it at a stark angle and warping the advertisement’s proportions. Whereas Zuker and Dartmouth only offer literal interpretations of subject matter, I will analyze *Saratoga Billboard* in terms of Steiner’s artistic process, taking into account the implications of his use of appropriation.

² *Ralph Steiner: A Retrospective Exhibition*, Dartmouth College Museum and Galleries, (Hanover, NJ: Jaffe-Friede, Strauss and Barrows Galleries, 1979).

³ Joel Stewart Zuker, *Ralph Steiner: Filmmaker and Still Photographer*, (New York: New York University, 1977), 52.

⁴ Barbara Kruger, “Taking’ Pictures,” in *Appropriation*, ed. David Evans (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 106.

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Fellow Commentary

Martin Page

Technical yet easy to read, Sewheat’s excerpt provides an excellent example of clear orienting followed by explicit motive. While it is neither possible nor advisable to write a motive without a thesis—Sewheat certainly didn’t, nor do most of us—this analysis of Ralph Steiner’s photograph, *Saratoga Billboard*, has an impressive motive in its own right. We thought excerpting motive without the actual thesis of the paper would emphasize the independent importance of Sewheat’s relationship to the scholarly conversation in addition to allowing us to examine her introduction on a line-by-line basis. Thus, we’ve included the introduction of “Saratoga Billboard: The Façade of Advertising” up to, but not including, the thesis.

Sewheat does an excellent job orienting the reader in the first paragraph, handling the difficult task of explaining clearly the differences between two works of art. She then proceeds to summarize the scholarship on the piece of artwork in question—this can be a challenging task, but Sewheat gets to the heart of both the Dartmouth and Zuker arguments very quickly. Then she makes the big motivating move by telling us that these scholars “assume” and “rest on interpretations of subject matter and neglect to mention the way the subject is represented or recreated.” Here, she clearly points out the problem with the current scholarly conversation. That’s where this paper comes in: it seeks to “analyze *Saratoga Billboard* in terms of Steiner’s artistic process” of appropriation. This, the motive, is how this paper fixes the problem within the existing scholarship on the photograph.

To really frame things correctly, the paper spends almost a half page setting up the motive—from the problems with the scholarly conversation to how this paper fills the gap. This two step approach to scholarly motive—problem with the existing the debate followed by a motive that resolves the issue in a specific way—is a very clear-cut way of thinking about motive, a seemingly abstract concept we often struggle to wrap our heads around. Approaching motive this way allows us to move away from difficult, abstract questions about a paper’s “importance” to more specific questions regarding argumentative relevance in the context of a scholarly discussion.

Author Commentary

Seawheat Haile

I was assigned a research paper where I could interpret any piece of modern American art and ground my interpretation in academic literature from other disciplines. My class took a trip to the Museum of Modern Art, where we explored exhibits for potential paper topics. I was drawn to the photography sections, where I stumbled upon *Saratoga Billboard* by Ralph Steiner. I was intrigued by the photograph—particularly the strange angle that it was taken from. I did not know anything about the photograph or its historical context, but I decided that it would be an interesting research topic.

My entire paper ultimately stems from my original question; why did Steiner choose to photograph that particular billboard at that particular angle? To learn more about the photo and Steiner, I went to Firestone Land searched online for sources pertaining to Steiner and his work. I found that the advertisement featured in *Saratoga Billboard* is one of the most famous

cigarette advertisements of the decade, made by one of the biggest cigarette companies of the time. This seemed fruitful, so I searched for sources relating to advertising and cigarettes in the 1920’s and 30’s, as well as visual appropriation (Steiner’s method in *Saratoga Billboard*).

After reading multiple sources, I learned that Steiner worked in advertising before quitting to pursue art. I found this fascinating, especially given Steiner’s decision to distort the advertisement in *Saratoga Billboard*, and especially because that particular advertisement was so well known. I concluded that Steiner’s decision to warp the advertisement was probably a critique of it. I also noticed that the advertisement itself warps the image of tobacco users, turning a hazardous drug into a pleasant treat. It dawned on me that Steiner and the advertisement used the same techniques to persuade their audiences, namely, distortion of an image (literal in Steiner’s case, figurative in the company’s case).

I was excited with my thesis and motive, but I found little scholarly conversation to compare it to. There were no analyses of Steiner’s work that included historical background or even abstract interpretations. I found the lack of conversation so shocking that I decided to directly incorporate it into my motive. I thought it important to both intervene in the conversation and make a case for why the intervention was necessary.

Keeping all of this in mind, I had drafted my motive. I wanted to make sure that my original question was prominent, but I also wanted to make sure the lack of scholarly conversation was apparent. Thus, my motive had four parts: a description of the photograph (a comparison of the original ad and Steiner’s piece), my original question (why did Steiner choose to photograph that particular billboard at that particular angle?), the scholarly conversation, and my answer to the question posed. It took a while to get the four aspects to blend smoothly, but through multiple days of editing, I was able to produce a motive and thesis that conveyed my investment in *Saratoga Billboard* and the relevance of the piece as a historical document.