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Embrace Life, Embrace Rhetoric

You hop into the car, turn the ignition and suddenly you’re on your way. To anywhere; maybe soccer practice, school, the dentist, the grocery store, or even the beach. Life is good and the miles are just flying by. Suddenly another car swerves in front of you and wham! Split second decisions, should you pump the breaks or swerve? Did you put on your seat belt when you got in the car? According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, “in 2008, 5,870 people lost their lives and an estimated 515,000 people were injured” in the United States due to crashes linked to driver distraction (Ascone, pg 1). Driving a car is something that a large percent of the population does, not just nationally, but worldwide. However, an alarming amount of people still do not wear seat belts. Disregarding laws that demand the use of seat belts, and the logic behind the numerous studies conducted, many people forgo the simple safety precaution. The commercial, “Embrace Life; Always Wear Your Seatbelt,” was funded by the Sussex Safer Roads Partnership to address this problem, and promote safer driving practices (Sussex). Since its debut on January 20th, 2010, Embrace Life has reached over 129 countries and has remained one of the “top rated YouTube film[s] of all time in the education category” (Hopkins).

This Gold World Medal New York International Advertising Awards winning commercial (Sussex) starts with a father in his daughters pink play room. He is pretending to drive, and suddenly, he looks scared. His daughter and wife, sitting nearby look at the camera petrified. In slow motion they run towards him, and hold him to the chair as a seatbelt would. Glitter erupts from the room as the man is torn from his chair, but his daughter and wife embrace him as an efficient seatbelt and he survives the sudden crash. Then the screen declares, “Embrace Life, Always Wear Your Seatbelt.” (Cox) The dramatized style of this advertisement and the characters incredible portrayal of emotion and fear evoke memorable pathos and shock within the viewer, making this commercial effective in promoting the usage of seat belts.

In order to fully appreciate the deft usage of this memorable pathos, one must first examine the characters. This family, arguably the most effective form of pathos in the commercial, truly depicts the emotions, fear, shock, and subsequent relief that invokes similar feelings within the viewer. In the textbook, Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students, authors Professors Crowley and Hawhee state, “emotional intensity alters in accordance with the spatial and temporal proximity of the people or situations that arouse them.” (Crowley p. 176) In this case, the loving family is the first situation or commonplace, and is very relatable to any viewer. The second situation is driving, which is involved in many people’s everyday lives. The audience here is anyone who drives, or has a family member or loved one who drives. This wide array of people is automatically drawn to the characters, a father, mother and daughter. The appeal to family and love is stressed even more so by the setting, in a young girls playroom. The pink walls, and comfortable setting of the family on the couch, him pretend driving in a chair, invokes the sense of calm even joy. The scene of a laughing family enjoying each other’s company definitely constitutes as emotionally arousing. This commonplace allows the viewer to relate to the characters, and thus whatever experience they are having seems more real, more legitimate and applicable to their own lives.

The style and delivery of this informational film is full of juxtaposing ideas that shock the viewer. Characters laughing, the camera panned out to see the whole happy family is contrasted by a close up view of the father looking directly into the camera with fear in his eyes. He let his eyes trail from the “road” to look at his daughter, and it seems is now about to crash. The viewers’ heartstrings are tugged by the young daughter and mother’s look, they are genuinely petrified. As the father turns to the side in order to avoid a crash, the young girl, wearing pink wings runs in slow motion towards her father. This is another direct appeal to pathos, as the child is representing an angel of sorts. Perhaps even a guardian angel. Her fingers interlock to become the bottom part of his seatbelt. The wife comes and embraces his torso, completing the human seatbelt. They literally embrace him while his “car crashes.” Time is of the essence here as well. The entire commercial is in slow motion. This dramatization of time is even further halted when the young girl’s fingers lock around her father. It is as if time stops. Here, the director of the advertisement, Sarah Alexander, effectively uses the slow motion filming to even further sensationalize every emotion portrayed by the characters. This was the desired affect from the beginning. “I wanted to give the audience the time to breathe, to absorb our message and using slow motion was the right technique to allow this to happen." (Writer Daniel Cox, as quoted in Hopkins)

The music at this time is a soft piano medley, not really noticeable. However it accelerates to the crescendo, the loudest and fastest part of the song happens right as the father’s car is “hit.” This also represents an emotional crescendo for the viewer, as the realization settles in. The creative delivery of this commercial continues as glitter erupts throughout the room. Anyone who has ever seen, been in, or seen photographs of car accidents will notice the similarities of the glitter to broken glass. This unique contrast shows something so innocent, so wholesome as glitter to broken glass. Something that cuts. Something that kills.

This is after all one of the key points of the Sussex Safer Road Partnership, to advocate safer driving so that no one has to die in a car crash. (Sussex) This is unsettling, seeing the man violently jostled in his chair. If one looks closely, the woman and daughter are grimacing with the effort of keeping him safely attached to the chair. The logos demonstrated here is wear your seatbelt so that you won’t get hurt in a car crash, so that no family has to lose a loved one to distracted driving, or for not wearing a seatbelt. While some people believe that car crashes are a distant evil, something that cannot happen to them, the setting of this commercial cannot be emphasized enough. They are in a playroom, a place where imagination and creativity rule, a place where children are free to play. This is a stark contrast to a car crash, but car crashes can happen to anyone.

I wanted to create a visual metaphor addressing how a single decision in a person's day can greatly influence both their own and their loved ones' lives. Choosing to film the story inside the family living room represents the feelings many people equate with their own car, in that it represents a level of safety and protection from the 'outer' world. So to create the emotion of this dramatic moment, I wanted to tell the story using slow motion to allow the audience the time to be drawn into the film's world and to let them connect with and project their own feelings onto the scenario playing out before them. (Writer Daniel Cox, as quoted in Hopkins)

Producer and director Sarah Alexander worked tirelessly with Cox to ensure this commercial fulfilled the ultimate vision of effecting people. Of creating enough of an emotional plug to urge people to wear their seat belts. (Sussex) “Researchers have also discovered that a persons willingness to change her mind operates on two things: the emotional intensity with which she adheres to an opinion and the degree to which her identity – her sense of self – is wrapped up with that opinion.” (Crowley p. 180) This adequately describes most viewers after watching this. With such appeals to family, love, and safety, and the commonplace of driving, one can assume that people might change their long-standing habit of getting in the car and forgetting to buckle up.

It is at the very end, when the father, safe from the crash lifts his arm to embrace his daughter that the phrase “Embrace Life, Always Wear your Seatbelt,” is emblazoned on the screen. This smart usage of words is definitely a wise theme for the commercial. Embrace evokes images of hugs, and loved ones. The mother and daughter save their loved on by embracing him to the seat, acting as a seatbelt. The father holds the little girl in his arms at the end. These words, “Embrace Life, Always Wear your Seatbelt,” are the only words used throughout the commercial, with the exception of the logo for Sussex Safer Road Partnership. One doesn’t even notice while watching this video that there was no speaking, because the characters and the innovative filming portrays the story so cleverly.

Key to the film's creation was to focus on a message that didn't take a conventional route to shock and scare the audience; rather it was my intention to bring the audience in on the conversation of road safety, specifically seat belts, and the best way to do this was to make a film that could engage the viewer purely visually and could be seen and understood by all, whoever they are and wherever they lived. (Writer Daniel Cox, as quoted in Hopkins)

The music, composed by Sid Barnhoon (Hopkins) is the only audio in this commercial. There are no sirens, no crashing sounds, no people moaning or screaming upon impact. No, there is only the soft piano that crescendos to a chorus. This lack of sound draws the audience in. They become enthralled by this mini-drama, and the memorable qualities it enfolds.

At the beginning of this advertisement, the viewer has no idea what is going to happen. By using commonplaces such as family and driving, the audience is instantly drawn to the characters. It is through these characters, that pathos is passionately portrayed. There are many traditional elements of car crash commercials that are lacking in this commercial, such as rhetoric meant to shock and scare the viewer. Yet, by using such a common setting to showcase such a dramatic event, producer Sarah Alexander was able to create a rhetorically savvy production with appeals to pathos and logos, as well as deft usage of commonplaces and original filming. By purely using visual tools to emotionally grasp the viewers’ attention, this memorable commercial on road safety clearly starts a conversation. A conversation that will hopefully change lives in the unfortunate event of a car crash. A conversation that will continue to spread the message on the importance of car safety and using seat belts. This memorable commercial has the rhetorical power to start a conversation that will save lives.

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