

Teaching satire to Taiwan's students

April 6, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

Explaining the humor in a masterpiece of western satire to a room full of Taiwan students is approximately as difficult as explaining the frustration some of us feel when we consider the images of women we may find in advertising here in Asia.

Now, that is surely a mouthful to say, and it won't be easy, but let me slap my Don Quixote helmet onto my weary head and dash again after a windmill or two I believe I see over there on the horizon.

To offset confusion (or simply delay it?), let us handle the question of humor first.

To be satirical, a literary work must attack weakness in human nature, but attack it with the bittersweet bite of humor. Satirical writers thus do not pummel their readers with polished rhetoric in an attempt to persuade them about this issue or that. They don't hector their readers, they don't scold, they don't scream. Instead, writers of satire joke about individuals or institutions. They make fun of their targets. They laugh at the fools they create in their fiction, drama or poetry. In so doing, satirists hope to entertain us. More importantly, satirists try to influence us not to take on the attitudes or behavior of their characters.

My students and I are reading Voltaire's great classic "Candide" these days, and we're having a tough time of it. How can I help my young friends "get the humor" in a text that seems so far away from them in time and culture?

May I make a dramatic turn here and consider images of girls and women we sometimes find in advertising in, for example, South Korea and Taiwan? We'll return below to the question of satire.

An article in the China Post on April 4 quoted Professor Marlene Morris Town of Georgetown University, who recently criticized the portrayal of women the giant Korean electronics firm Samsung continues to advance in its advertising (p. 13). She termed the portrayal "troubling." I am interested not only in the treatment of girls and women here, troubling to me as well, but also in the topic of cultural differences.

At a recent exhibit of its latest products in Radio City Music Hall in New York, in its advertising, Samsung asked potential buyers to imagine women

fantasizing about marriage to a doctor, women anxious over the amount of calories in a rich dessert, and women so baffled at high technology that they need a male to show them how to use a smart phone. A year ago Samsung put its foot in its mouth by parading models in bikinis at a trade show in South Africa. The models sang the merits of Samsung's latest refrigerators and washing machines! (I couldn't resist that exclamation point, excuse me.) All this, mind you, at the hands of a company that spends in excess of US \$11 billion a year in advertising.

I don't know if you found the paragraph above humorous. Oh, hmm. That's the type of thing I say in my classes on satire.

Seriously, however, I know I am no better than any one else in the departments of stereotypes and the objectification of women. Beauty is beauty, sexy is sexy, and stereotypes refuse to fade away. We all have eyes, we all can be fools, and we all carry big bags of human frailty.

Nor can we simply wag a finger of caution against our friends at Samsung. A week does not pass here in Taiwan without our local media publishing eye-catching photos of "showgirls" and a bevy of similar models which support the same sexualized and time-worn images of females we find in Samsung.

One of the truly funny things about some of these notions is that they may very well boomerang on us males.

Maybe I'm the only guy with the problem, but I myself frown on calorie-laden desserts. You enjoy 'em! I want to keep what semblance of a figure I've still got.

By the way, you are reading the words of the last person in Taiwan to get a smart phone. I'm too slow for one. I still can't remember how to retrieve messages in the simplest of cell phones, for pity's sake. And I'm not afraid to admit I've just had my second lesson in two weeks on how to operate some dad-burned contraption called an "eye pad," or "sigh-pad" or some such thing. What are they called? Surely one of my women students can tell me.

Don't blame me, please. I can't help it if I was born a man. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. This column focuses on the "use" of girls and women in advertising in two Asian countries - South Korea and Taiwan. Are you very conscious of how companies use girls and women to sell products or services? In other words, is this an old or a new topic for you?
2. Some say cultures are VERY different when it comes to the treatment of girls and women in life, advertising and in other places. Can you compare the treatment of girls and women in the media from one country to another?
3. If you had a teen-age daughter, what would you advise her as far as sexy or "eye-catching" models in advertising are concerned?

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