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Audience and Revolutionary Writing

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Writing comes in various shapes and forms. It can be colorful and descriptive, or it can be simple and straight to the point. It may use technical or intense subject related vocabulary, or its wording might reflect the author's conversational rhetoric and dialect. However, one aspect remains static in any sort of writing. There exists an objective and a reason that an author writes a particular piece. In so called "revolutionary writing" these intentions are often focused on inciting the audience to act. For example, we may wonder if Marx and Engels wrote *the Communist Manifesto* not only to address the bourgeoisie and take a stand, but also to define and effectively create a united proletariat under the banner of communism. Just as well, we may consider that Hunter S. Thompson's journalistic writing was not only intended as altruistic reports of social movements during the nineteen-sixties and seventies, but also to inspire more change and movement, and to give different groups of people a different perspective. Any piece of revolutionary writing should clearly convey the intended concepts to the audience, although the mode of expression or style may vary. Indeed, we can classify inspirational, journalistic, and anecdotal forms of writing as revolutionary as long as we can see a strong bond between the author and his audience. If we value audience to be the fundamental aspect to a piece of revolutionary writing, it is necessary to break down and examine it in several parts. How does an author utilize style to incite reaction from his readers? Does an author's work speak more specifically to those whose vocabulary, dialect, trade, class, or time period are held in common? Lastly, can an author lose his audience because of cultural misunderstandings?

By looking more closely at the works of Marx, Engels, and Thompson, we can see how style will ultimately incite an audience to act. The vocabulary in *The Communist Manifesto* is vivid, as to evoke a response from the reader. "The 'dangerous class,' the

social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may here and there, be swept into a proletarian revolution" (Marx 30). One can sense the disgust and the ironic tone of this statement. Marx and Engels do not just want to get across an idea to the bourgeoisie, they want to convey it with attitude. At times, they take portions of the capitalist argument and spit it back at their audience, exemplifying how ridiculous the bourgeoisie stance sounds. We may recognize this same pattern in the various works of Hunter S. Thompson, a journalist who writes in an cynical and graphic tone to convey the absurdity of the opposite argument. He has no relation with Marx or Engels, yet his writing also speaks to an audience that is powerful and prides itself of keeping well informed.

Both sides seem convinced that the 'real enemy' is a vicious conspiracy of some kind. The Anglo power structure keeps telling itself that 'the Mexican problem' is really the work of a small organization of well trained Communist agitators, working 25 hours a day to transform East L.A. into a wasteland of constant violence--mobs of drug-crazed Chicanos prowling the streets at all times, terrorizing the merchants, hurling firebombs into banks, looting stores, sacking offices and massing now and then, armed with Chinese sten pistols , for all-out assaults on the local sheriff's fortress (Thompson 254).

During Mexican riots in Los Angeles in the early nineteen-seventies, Thompson was hired to witness and report the facts. However, covering a controversial news event can be done in several manners. Thompson did his best to make sure that the public was outraged at what was going on in order to get correct action to be taken. Thompson's works will not be misinterpreted, because his rhetoric points out flaws in both factions in a dispute. He does not let anyone get away with anything. On the other hand, we find that Marx and Engels could not prevent their works from being misused. A journalistic piece records facts, but a manifesto is mostly based on theory. Both are revolutionary, their styles differ, but they both address an audience that has the power to change things.

Through Raymond Williams' analysis of vocabulary, we may better understand why an author writes to a specific audience. In William's book *Keywords*, we are greeted with the view that writing varies because of vocabulary, especially conceptual words, which take on different meanings when employed in different historical, cultural, or class/trade specific contexts (Williams 22). More precisely, the historical semantics of words, the clash between a word's historical and present use, make the definition of a word almost ever-changing depending on who is using it (Williams 23). Likewise, the use of certain vocabulary by a dominant class or a specific trade will shape definitions to such an extent as to add to a word's structure and history (Williams 24). This means that an author's writing style may be significantly influenced by the way he learned a word, dependent upon the author's trade, class, and experiences. Williams seems to suggest this when he refers to his post-war experience at Cambridge, at a time when he felt he could only truly communicate with a fellow World War II veteran. His five year term in the army brought him to understand and use words that were significant for a soldier, and only to another soldier could he express himself and be understood the way he intended (Williams 11).

What would Williams say about Marx and Engels? Perhaps their target audience had more to do with the fact that their language and vocabulary were the same. We can infer from reading *The Communist Manifesto* that Marx and Engels wrote primarily to the bourgeoisie, the property-owning middle class. We see this in the rhetorical "you" which addresses the class that possesses power. "Do *you* mean the property of the petty artisan and of the small peasant" (Marx 34)? Marx and Engels are not lower class workers, rather, they are educated middle-class men. Their language is dominant, because the class to which they belong holds power. Williams' theory about keywords would suggest that

Engels and Marx wrote to the bourgeoisie not simply to incite action, but instead because these are the people who will understand their argument best. They speak the same bourgeoisie language and live the same bourgeoisie culture. Thus, they can communicate better with one another.

Williams would also agree that an author's works will be misunderstood if the vocabulary is culturally different than that of the target audience. In Mary Louise Pratt's "*Arts of the Contact Zone*", the story of Guaman Poma's *New Chronicle* demonstrates this concept quite well. Poma, an indigenous Andean who received a Christian religious education, rewrote elements of the Bible and his people's history by combining them together with a more favorable view of the native Incans (Pratt 4). The text was written in both Spanish and Quechua, even though Quechua had no written form at that time. Poma drew pictures in a European manner, yet the symbolism is clearly Andean. For example, his depiction of an Andean and a Spaniard side by side shows the Andean on the left side and the Spaniard on the right, which by Andean understanding indicates the figure on the left is more dominant (Pratt 9). Pratt refers to Poma as a product of a "contact zone", a place where cultures converge, creating a bicultural author and requiring a bicultural audience (Pratt 10). Poma was most certainly unhappy with the way the conquistadors treated the Incas, and his education allowed him to transcribe his thoughts into a form that the Spanish might take seriously, writing (Pratt 6). He intended to send his writings in a letter to the royal court in Spain, but unfortunately his audience would not have understood his work even if it had been correctly delivered. The idea of the dominant figure on the left and the subordinate on the right would have been lost on Spaniards in Castile who had no frame of reference for such symbolism. They would not have understood his mixture of Spanish and

Quechua. His message may not have been appreciated by all, but it was certainly intended as a revolutionary piece. In the second half of his letter to Castile, he wrote "Good Government and Justice" which described the atrocities in the Andean colonial society (Pratt 7). He wrote to an audience that had the power to change things, and to make sure that he did not estrange himself from his audience, he found good things to say about Christian habits (Pratt 8). Had his audience grown up in Poma's contact zone, the letter may have been quite influential with the right people at court.

Poma, Thompson, Marx, and Engels all share one thing in common. They wrote in order to change society in one form or another. They wanted their message to be delivered to those who could make such changes. Rhetoric and style differ from author to author, but the audience remains the same. The revolutionary author writes to incite action.

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