Sample Written task 2 – Question 1

Outline

Prescribed question: “How could the text be read and interpreted differently by two different readers?”

Title of the text for analysis: La Pieta

Part of the course to which the task refers: Part 1 – Language and cultural context. Language and taboo

My critical response will:

• Sketch a history of the controversy surrounding the Benetton ad by Oliviero Toscani, ‘La Pieta’.
• Look at the ad critically from a Roman Catholic perspective.
• Look at the ad critically from the perspective of an AIDS patient.

Written task 2

In 1991, Oliviero Toscani, world renown art director and campaign designer, published an advertisement for United Colors of Benetton that shocked the world. It was called ‘La Pieta’, which means ‘pity’ in Italian. It depicted David Kirby, a homosexual AIDS activist, dying in the arms of his father, with his mother and niece
at his bedside, weeping and mourning. To this day the ad has a divisive effect on its audience; people either love it or hate it. This critical response will examine how AIDS patients and Christians have read and interpreted the text differently.

To place the text in its context, it is necessary to sketch a brief history of the ad. First of all, it should be noted that Oliviero Toscani is famous for his controversial ads. ‘La Pieta’ is not his first shocking ad for Benetton. In fact, one could argue that ‘La Pieta’ is only part of a greater campaign by Benetton to raise awareness for AIDS and other controversial, social issues, such as capital punishment, poverty and racism. His ads never depict the actual product, namely clothing. Instead he depicts a real convict moments before his death, a nun kissing a priest, or children suffering from heavy labor. The media hype from his shock ads generates brand awareness and ultimately an increase in product sales. Therefore one could argue that ‘La Pieta’ capitalizes on Kirby’s death.

Secondly, we must understand that Toscani did not even take the photograph used for ‘La Pieta’. The photograph of David Kirby on his deathbed, taken by Therese Frare had already received international attention a year earlier for winning the prestigious World Press Photo Award. The Kirby family had given the photographer permission to publish the image and Toscani permission to turn it into an ad. Much of the initial outrage came from people who felt Toscani and Benetton were capitalizing on the photographer’s work and Kirby’s death. The Kirby family, however, did not feel this way, as they explained in a press conference orchestrated by Benetton in New York, “We don’t feel we’ve been used by Benetton, but rather the reverse: David is speaking much louder now that he’s dead, than he did when he was alive.” So one may wonder, with both the family and photographer’s permission, why was there still so much fuss?

The title of the ad ‘La Pieta’ has offended Christians, as it alludes to a sacred moment after the death of Jesus Christ, when Mother Mary held her son and wept. Michael Angelo depicted this moment quite famously in his statue titled, ‘La Pieta’. Christians were even more offended by Toscani’s insensitive explanation of his ad’s title during the New York press conference. “I called the picture of David Kirby and his family “La Pieta” because it is a Pieta which is real. The Michelangelo’s Pieta during the Renaissance might be fake. Jesus Christ may never have existed. But we know this death happened. This is the real thing.” For Christians, however, the death of Jesus Christ is not considered ‘fake’. What’s more, homosexuality is considered a sin. Comparing Christ’s death to Kirby’s death is outrageous for Christians, because it trivializes Jesus’ sacred act of salvation.

Christians were not the only people shocked by the ad, though. To Toscani’s surprise, homosexuals were also deeply disturbed by the Benetton ad. Their complaints were two fold. Not only did homosexuals speak out against the
capitalization of an activist’s death, but also they were upset by the gruesome portrayal of Kirby’s death. The image of Kirby is quite graphic. His wrists are emaciated, his cheeks are hollow and his eyes are glazed over. Kirby’s father’s grief is very visible through his body language, as he leans over his son’s face, helpless and exhausted. The image has frightened many homosexuals for this reason. It seems to say: ‘This could be you if you do not have safe sex.’ What’s more, as one can read on ‘The Inspiration Room’ website, many homosexuals feel vilified by the ad. Oliviero Toscani has responded to these criticisms by claiming that the shocking nature of the ad is necessary in order to generate awareness of AIDS. “In some countries such as Paraguay,” as he explained, “this was the very first campaign to talk about AIDS. And in many countries it was the first campaign to go beyond purely preventative measures and touch upon subjects such as solidarity with AIDS patients.” While it could be argued that Toscani’s intentions are noble, his means are questionable.

In the end, Toscani’s ad received international attention and even appeared in museums around Europe and in New York. His name may be remembered more than the Kirby’s or the photographer’s. What’s more, research by marketing guru Martin Lindstrom suggests that shock advertising is indeed effective. Literally Benetton may have profited the most from this ad. Their profits, however, may have come at the expense of Christians and homosexuals.

Works cited
