MARK CRISPIN MILLER

Applying his academic training as a Renaissance scholar to contemporary culture, Mark Crispin Miller produces fresh and provocative cultural criticism. He was born in 1949 in Chicago and grew up there and in Boston. He received a B.A. in 1971 from Northwestern University, and an M.A. in 1973 and Ph.D. in 1977 from the Johns Hopkins University. After several years at the University of Pennsylvania, Miller now teaches in the writing seminars at Johns Hopkins. Miller's critical essays on rock music, film, television, and advertising appear frequently in *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, *The New York Review of Books*, and other magazines. Some of the essays are collected in the volume *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* (1987). Miller edited *Seeing Through Movies* (1990), an anthology, and wrote *Spectacle* (1992), an examination of the media and the military during the Gulf War.

Dow Recycles Reality

Published in *Esquire* magazine in September 1990, this essay exemplifies Miller's close readings of contemporary popular culture. Television especially grabs his attention because after the 1970s, he says, "it was no longer a mere spin or imposition on some preexistent cultural environment, but had itself become the environment"; it "was not only 'on the air,' but had become the very air we breathe."

"That's my Dad." In the preteen voice-over there's just the trace of an apologetic chuckle. It's understandable. This "Dad" is an overt dork. Pitching at a (Dow) company softball game, he gives up a base hit, then tries to block it with his foot. Note the look of nitwit concentration, recalling Dagwood Bumstead or Curly Howard hard at work. Dad, too, is a diverting stooge, with that potent Dow logo stamped across his cap, and his togs steeped in the brilliant white and orange of that logo. (In fact, the whole bright ball field is decked out in the same festive colors.)

"Good thing he's got a real job!" jokes Dad's young son, "... at Dow!" As the subject shifts from softball to the corporation, this cherub drops the mild, ironic tone and starts promoting Dow's environmentalism in a kind of earnest kidspeak. Dad is (spoken haltingly) "a... plastics... recycling... engineer!" Dad "figures out
ways" to turn plastic trash "into neat stuff like those picnic tables — and Brad's bat 'n' ball!"

With this last phrase, there appears tiny "Brad," apparently a baby brother, whacking a home run — and then there's Dad again, caishingly striking out: "My Dad may be a lousy ballplayer," his son concludes, "but he's a neat guy!" The boy then grasps Dad's hand and gazes up, with filial pathos, into the engineer's weak, boyish face, sighing, "I'm real proud o' ya, Dad!" "Proud of me?" Dad gasps, and the camera cranes up and back to reveal the father-son communion amid the Dow-sponsored gaiety, as that hearty female voice, so reminiscent of the "the Sixties" (the Seekers), breaks, as usual, into: "Dow . . . lets you do great thiiiiings!"

Devised for Earth Day, this ad, like most "Green ads," tries to dim our awareness of fossil air, mounting garbage, ozone depletion. Implicitly, Dow's sponsorship of this old-fashioned sunny fête assures us that Dow, prolific maker of (among other goodies) Styrofoam, pesticide, and chemical fertilizer, wants us all to live as we did before the rise of agribusiness, freeways, and fast food. The child, too, is reassuring. If this cool young Aryan is so moved by Dad's daily responsibilities, then Dad/Dow must be doing a heroic job indeed, with that "plastics recycling."

Not that plastic poses any danger! Certainly, each and every one of us should go on using tons of it: Dad is there to help Dow make more plastics. And why not? Isn't plastic just as wholesome as whatever grows on trees? Note, among the items displayed on the child's left (fig. 2), that large green apple, placed there as if to blur the crucial difference between nature's bounty and the corporation's goods.

And Dow's TV spots work to sanitize not just its wares but its very image. In this ad Dow seems not huge and lethal, but goofily benign, like that awkward boy/dad in his special hat and corporate colors. By softening "Dad," our usual symbol of authority, Dow appears also to champion the weak and innocent: "Brad" belts a homer while Dad strikes out — just as, in other Dow ads, the effectual one is not some steel-gray CEO, but a slightly rumpled backpacker; a lanky college student grinning on a humble bike; a slim and saintly Ph.D. gone home to save her Grandpa's farm. Dow projects itself as "caring" — yet its power seems all-pervasive. Note, in the final shot, that white-and-orange umbrella, placed protectively above the faulty employee and his adoring son.

What Dow is selling here, then, is not just a profitable myth about plastics but the sense (which will become our sense, if we don't watch out) that certain dissident impulses of the past have been absorbed — by Dow. In its ads, the young are on Dow's side — not like, say, twenty years ago. Back then, one of Dow's products — napalm — made the company notorious, through horrifying images of children burned and screaming.¹ Those who saw, and haven't forgotten, may not feel comforted by Dow's knowing hikers, tykes,

¹During the Vietnam War, napalm was used to destroy forests and villages. — E vos.
and Ph.D.s. Younger viewers, on the other hand, have no way of spotting the lie, since TV, thanks to Dow and others, has no memory.

QUESTIONS ON MEANING
1. What is a “Green ad”?
2. State Miller’s thesis in your own words.
3. How does the boy in the Dow ad characterize his father?
4. What is the purpose of this essay?
5. Why, in Miller’s opinion, does Dow want to project a “family” image?

QUESTIONS ON WRITING STRATEGY
1. What elements does Miller identify in the Dow commercial? How does what he sees in these elements lead him to his conclusion about the commercial?
2. This essay was first published in Esquire, a magazine aimed primarily at men. How might Miller’s audience have influenced his choice of which commercial to analyze?
3. What is the essay’s tone? Support your answer with specific examples.
4. OTHER METHODS. Why does Miller use NARRATION and DESCRIPTION so carefully in relating the Dow commercial? Would his analysis be as effective without the detailed presentation of the ad?

QUESTIONS ON LANGUAGE
1. Be sure you know the meaning of these words: ironic (para. 2); oafishly, filial, pathos (3); implicitly, fete, prolific, agribusiness (4); benign (6); dissident (7).
2. What is the effect of Miller’s juxtaposition of formal and informal language? Look at phrases like “overt dork” and “diverting stooge” (para. 1).
3. What are the connotations of the phrase “cool young Aryan” (para. 4)? What is Miller implying?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING
1. Analyze a TV commercial or magazine ad that you find unusual or interesting. You may, but need not, follow Miller’s example of analyzing the ad as image control. Some other principles of analysis you might consider: What makes an ad effective? Boring? Offensive? Informative? Worthwhile?