

SIMULATED REALITY: A STUDY OF ADVERTISEMENTS AS IMAGES REPLACING REALITY

Parvathy P.

Research Scholar, Department of English, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Ernakulam, Kerala, India

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ABSTRACT

The revolutions in the sphere of communication led to the development of the mass culture—a culture developed and perpetuated by the mass media for the masses. Advertisements, being a part of the mass media, are involved in the generation of mass culture. Advertisements were initially viewed as an efficient method of mass promotion of products in that a single message could be disseminated to a large, heterogeneous and widely dispersed audience. It is precisely this very character of advertisements that makes its role significant in shaping the consciousness of a society. The paper analyses select advertisements as simulations using insights from Jean Baudrillard to discover how they help the postmodern society live with the trauma of a slipping reality.

KEYWORDS: *Advertisements, Simulation, Post Modern*

INTRODUCTION

Advertisements are major contributors to the storehouse of images instrumental in furnishing and shaping the pseudo-environment of the postmodern era. Advertisements function as simulacra in the postmodern fragmented world, denying the very existence of a reality outside. Blurring the distinction between the real and the unreal, advertisements manufacture images that are the simulacra of the real. In a tortuous manner they perpetuate reality principle, saving postmodernism from the charge of breaking reality.

Most advertisements today are packed with images of men and women of supernormal perfection. Advertisements of beauty products create a cult of unrealizable beauty. The models imploring the viewer to buy the products appear to have fallen directly from an ideal world—a celestial glow emanating from the shiny hair and the perfect body. The viewer is presented with images that offer themselves in the place of reality. Through these idealized images of men and women, advertisements refine and redefine the concepts of reality in the mind of the viewer.

Thus reality has been replaced by what Baudrillard has called the “hyper real”, a condition in which the distinction between the real and the fantastic has been rendered so convoluted as to make it irrelevant. Signs do not replace reality anymore, but stand instead of other equally unreal signs, obscuring the real under a mass of simulation. What Baudrillard writes at the beginning of his seminal essay “Simulacra and Simulations” is worth quoting at length:

No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensively: it is genetic miniaturization that is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control - and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to

be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (166)

The real is no longer discernible because of the proliferation of images that invest in the hyperreal. As simulation has replaced representation, the distinction between real and imaginary, which is a precondition for all representation, has also blurred: there is no real that the image represents, instead, it is a long procession of simulation, of sheer dissembling, only simulacra. These images are a threat because they negate the real. Baudrillard notices how the Byzantine iconoclasts realised how that the icon posed a threat by pointing towards the fact that they disguised the absence of a god:

If they could have believed that these images only obfuscated or masked the Platonic Idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the image didn't conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination. Thus this death of the divine referential must be exorcised at all costs. (*Simulacra*)

According to Baudrillard, the iconolaters were more modern, more like us in the postmodern world, because they were able to digest the “death of the divine referential” and continue to worship the icon that did no longer disguise a real present, but the absence of the real itself. Simulacrum thus protects the real by hiding the fact that there is nothing real. Reading Disneyland as miniaturized America, Baudrillard notices that its most important function is to preserve the myth of the reality of the other America:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (170)

Simulations, thus, offer to continue to console a world that is threatened by the utter breakdown of the real, a world that is swept away by the flooding of images, of simulacra. Advertisements now function as simulacra and continue to protect an already deceased reality. The advertisement under study is an advertisement introducing a new product: Indulekha White Soap. The first frame of the commercial introduces the product to be advertised. The shot has the product, Indulekha soap, white in colour, the cover of the soap, that too white in colour, with the name Indulekha White Soap printed on it in black. The scene then goes blank for a moment and opens into an apartment. A man, a famous celebrity, opens the door and enters the apartment. A little boy is seen sitting in the living room engrossed in playing with a tablet. The man, his father comes in and asks the boy where his mother is, to which the boy replies “she is taking a bath”. The frame then cuts into another shot showing a lady, in the bathroom, taking out the soap off its cover. The frame shifts back to the living room where the man is seen making a cup of coffee. The scene shifts between the living room and the bathroom for a few seconds. The man is about to have a sip of the coffee when he is baffled at the light that falls on his face. He looks up from the cup of coffee and stands stunned. The next shot shows a lady walking through a doorway. Spot light falls on her from all sides and a white glow surrounds the lady. A close up shot follows, focusing on the face of the lady. The man, her husband stands baffled at the sight. He goes and sits beside his son and says “she might have finished off my soap” to which the wife frowns. He offers her the cup of coffee and she says “don't try to buy me”. He offers her it

once again and she accepts it. The narrative ends there and an image of the profile of the lady is shown, with the soap, half out of the cover, placed to the left of the frame. The voice over says “Indulekha White. Beauty will now come after you”.

The advertisement can be seen as a typical example of modern culture, where reality is replaced by codes of signification. The advertisement tries to make reality coincide with the simulated model. The setting of the advertisement is very normal- a well furnished modern apartment. The father apparently returns home after work, he is in his formal attire with a bag. The son is seen playing with his tablet. The father asks him about his mother and learns that she is taking a bath. The father decides to make a cup of coffee. All these appear very natural, a slice out of a normal family life. The narrative takes a turn with the appearance of the lady. The lady is presented as an out of the world beauty and red carpet kind of introduction is set for the woman. She is walking down what looks like a ramp, thus reminding us more of a fashion model’s catwalk than a housewife’s entry into the sitting room of her own house. In the shower of intense lighting, the woman is seen radiating a heavenly glow, arguably after using Indulekha White soap; her hair shines like a halo around her head accentuating the divine diva image and the husband stands stunned at her beauty.

The advertisement’s tortuous mixing of the real and the fantastic, its sudden transformation of the expected housewife into a fashion model renders the whole scene suddenly devoid of reality, and thus self-consciously constructs it as a simulacrum. The self parody has transformed the husband and the son into what they are: models without any corresponding reality—signs that represent themselves rather than a referential reality elsewhere. But this does not cancel the reality of brown skin in an outside world. In a way, the fantastic nature of the fair skin (almost named ‘white’ by the ad, barely concealing the racial inferiority it taps by the way) is in itself an assurance of the reality of the brown skin and thus a perpetuation of the illusion of a racial reality.

The whole mise-en-scene is designed to foreground this simulation. The woman appears in a shower of white light, as if she is hardly out of her bath. Her whole reality is the reality of this bathing, of this whiteness that she attains in a supreme moment of unreality. Her appearance is the invisibility of the real—a real that has already been negated anyway. The whole scene thus narrates the tragic drama of the real that has been in the perilous hyperspace of invisible capital.

The advertisement presents an unrealistic simulated model for women than is the norm. She is seen giving off an unnatural radiance. But the setting is so realistic that the simulated image, juxtaposed with the narrative, leads the viewer into believing that everything shown in the narrative is real. Moreover, in the narrative the male model who is a famous film actor (Mammooty) hints that it is his soap that the lady is bathing with. So by association the viewer links the handsome looks of the actor with the product advertised. The central message that the advertisement conveys is that beauty is not something that comes naturally to human beings, that it is something of the order of the unnatural and that it requires the use of products like the one advertised.

The advertisement of Nakshatra diamond can also be seen as an example of this kind of simulation. The advertisement which directly addresses the female viewer while trying to be revolutionary in its message is also contributing to the shaping of the pseudo environment in the viewer’s mind. The model is presented as an unnatural beauty giving off a celestial glow. The sparkle of the product, diamonds, is transferred to the model. The viewer is made to associate the sparkle of the product with the owner, thus made to believe in the simulated image. That the diamond’s sparkle is a reflection of the woman’s celestial glow places the whole image in the world of hyperreality, an imaginary that does not correspond to a reality elsewhere in another world. The reality of the diamond and the unreality of the woman are

so interminably merged that, together, they create the composite image of a hyperreal that challenges the very binary determination and establishes another simulacrum. As Baudrillard writes:

The imaginary was a pretext of the real in a world dominated by the reality principle. Today, it is the real which has become the pretext of the model in a world governed by the principle of simulation. And, paradoxically, it is the real which has become our true utopia—but a utopia that is no longer a possibility, a utopia we can do no more than dream about, like a lost object. (180)

CONCLUSIONS

Advertisements, in other words, open up a discursive field which on close scrutiny proves to be rich in potential as they reveal ways in which the postmodern determinations of social desire continue to distend themselves on capitalist lines of force. Being the images by which the contemporary world lives, advertisement images replace reality, minimise the pain of the disintegration the postmodern subject suffers in the plethora of signification, and extenuate the disjunction from reality by negating reality itself.

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