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Rhetorical Analysis

The relationship between semiotics and mythology is a consistent preoccupation for those who study the way that meanings are generated and promulgated within a particular society. In particular, the manner in which images used for the purposes of advertising embed themselves within pre-existing social myths manifests not only key value structures at work within a particular society, but also the specific rhetorical strategies that may be used in order to exploit such structures for the sake of advertising. It is possible to elaborate these methods through a consideration of a visual advertisement for Christian Dior's perfume "Hypnotic Poison," alongside Roland Barthe and Frederic Jameson's writing on the functioning of myth and semiotics within contemporary society.

The image in questions depicts a woman lying on her side and staring straight into the camera, while a large purple snake coils around her. In the bottom left of the image, one sees a container of Dior perfume in and amongst a collection of deep red fruit. The word "Dior" in a clear font appears in the top right of the image, with the words "Hypnotic Poison" appearing in the opposite corner. The image is composed in such a way as to lead the eyes from the woman, to the snake and then finally down to the perfume. The use of deep red and purple generates a sense of sensuality, passion and transgression within the image, something emphasised via the overt sexuality of the woman's gaze.

A key aspect of this image's rhetoric is its capacity to communicate on several levels at once. On the one hand, its overt sensuality works via the pathos of emotional appeal and causes the viewer to associate the image, and therefore the perfume, with a sense of

excitement and transgression. At the same time, however, there is a degree of logical argument to this pathos, as is evident from the association that the image develops with the story of the fall of man and the temptation of Eve by a serpent. According to Roland Barthes, such a duality is typical of semiotics in contemporary society, whereby a “perceptual” image is necessarily combined with the cultural frameworks within which it is represented.

According to Barthes, each time an image such as the one question appears, “The viewer of the image receives at one and the same time the perceptual message and the cultural message” (36). Within the context of this advertisement, both the perceptual and the cultural images make reference to the idea of transgression and of sensual enjoyment, meaning that the pathos of the image heightens and reinforces its cultural logic. Indeed, the image itself appears to be an example of what Jameson understands as the tendency in post-modern culture to present a closed economy of meaning, causing the semiotic structures of late capitalism appear to be in relation only to themselves, with no tangible outside(5). In this sense, the rhetoric of the image consists of a closed loop, whereby the sensuality of the woman, together with the deep colors of the image itself, synchronise with with the image’s mythological context.

In conclusion, therefore, Dior’s “Hypnotic Poison” advertisement is a prime example of an image that functions by embedding itself within a particular cultural and mythological framework. Specifically, the image uses this framework in order to intensify existing rhetorical strategies related to the purely empirical features of the image, such as its color and the sensual position of its female model. In this sense, it is the image’s capacity to effectively combine the pathos of an emotional, sensual reponse, with a logical connection to deep-seated social mythology that constitutes its primary rhetorical achievement.



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