ADVERTISING

Peroni

This Peroni ad manages the paradoxical feat of conveying both simplicity and sophistication, at the same time and with equal resonance. It provides a classic example of just how much meaning—or rather, what a contradictory cocktail of meanings—can be carried purely by a woman’s face. Like the Mona Lisa, this woman has an ever-so-slight smile, which, despite the fact that her gaze is directed outwards, towards the viewer, nevertheless suggests an internality, some thought or feeling just beyond our reach, permanently tantalising because unknowable. Her gaze is, in fact, somewhat dispersed, despite its apparent directness: it is at once seductive and detached.

The capacity of a woman’s face to be perceived as simultaneously full of meaning, and yet with no specific meaning, is a phenomenon that is cultural as much as photographic. Despite advertising’s drive in recent decades towards use of the male image in ways that have traditionally been reserved for images of women, it is still true that a picture of a man’s face, no matter how conventionally attractive, or how ambiguously presented, does not produce the same sense of infinite resonance that a woman’s does. The reasons for this are complex, but a key factor is that for centuries images of women (not to mention actual women) have been the bearers of so many projections, and the objects of such a range of desires, that a sense of ‘projectability’ becomes inseparable from the cultural quality of ‘femininity’. Hence the female face can appear, from the outside, as a bottomless well of significance, whether in a Renaissance painting or a contemporary ad.

The Peroni woman has more specific antecedents in twentieth-century Italian culture: the pale lips and mascara-laden eyes, along with the model’s hairdo, give the look of the early 1960s and there are clear echoes of the young Sophia Loren. There is a liveliness, a playful quality suggested by the way the young woman’s smile gives a hint of shadow under her cheekbones; this, combined with the quizzical tone of her look, places her within a genre of Italian actresses (as they were then known) who managed to make sexiness seem kittenish—at once innocent and sensual. And yet her look is also knowing and self-assured, flirtatious and self-contained. The particular bundle of connotations that radiate from this one look has a retro quality, not only referencing Italian stars and models of the 60s, but the period itself—a period that is seen as fresh, chic, easier and simpler than today.

Peroni’s Nastro Azzurro was launched in 1963, so the brand is mobilising its own heritage as part of the culture of the 60s. Its established quality is underlined by the visual simplicity of the ad, which confidently appears to need no image of the product—bottled lager—not even a hint of the brand’s name on the lifebelt, and the side-tag saying Peroni. Nastro Azzurro is Italian for ‘Blue Ribbon’ and the brand was named for the Blue Riband won by an Italian ocean liner in the 1930s. Both the azure blue, and the themes of ribbon and liner, are woven very precisely into the layout of the ad. Blue and white are the only two colours at play in the main image besides the flesh tones, and dark eyes, hair and backdrop. Not only does the spotted scarf, wound ribbon-like round the woman’s head, pick up the colours of the lifebelt, it also precisely echoes its shape. The blue and white curve of the hairband sits directly above the blue and white curve of the ring latched to the side of the ship. This visual rhyme makes a connection that is tied together, as it were, by the woman’s hands resting on the lifebelt’s ropes.

Whether or not its British audience knows the meaning of ‘Nastro Azzurro’ or the brand’s history, the nautical blue and white say ‘summer’ as clearly as the model’s lightly-freckled arms. These are the colours of seasonal, seaside-themed décor in countless contemporary ads and interior design images, a décor usually involving shells, fishing nets, beach-huts and boot paraphernalia. The white painted board in this ad and the exact shade of blue in its palette are key elements of this ‘summer design’ which, again, has a retro, nostalgic feel.

A further connotation of the blue is suggested by the red tag at the edge of the page, which mimics a jeans label: there is a fabric-like texture to the blue writing on the lifebelt and the ad clearly evokes denim as yet another reference at once fashionable and summery.

The other key colour, which takes up almost half the ad’s surface, is black. The completely blacked-out background gives the rest of the image the quality of an abstraction: this is not really the edge of a ship, there is nothing behind it and the scene-setting props are just that—props. This is, in its scenario, a daytime photograph yet, although light shines on the woman’s face, nothing is visible behind it; there is no pretense that this is an actual place. It is pure image, without a real-life referent: what it references is at once a brand name, and a multitude of other images.

The black background powerfully symbolises, and enhances, the mysteriousness of the woman. The model’s hair, eyebrows and eyes are so dark as to appear black, and as you look into her face, the background echoes these and seems to take the form of her own mystery. The impenetrable backdrop to ‘her’ part of the image becomes the impenetrability of her thoughts.

Her dark curls, falling over her arched eyebrows, also make a symbolic connection to the lower half of the image, as they create a wave-like movement across the top of her face: a subtle suggestion of something sea-like, the picture’s only hint of the surface beneath its supposed ship. The link with the sea evokes Woman as changing yet eternal, adding still more to the mix of meanings endlessly at play around her lightly seductive while coolly inscrutable smile.

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