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A journey brings us face to face with ourselves.
 Berlin Wall. Returning from a conference.

Mikhail Gorbachev and Louis Vuitton are proud to support Green Cross International.

866-VUITTON and now on www.louisvuitton.com
 Fifth Avenue at 57th Street, Soho, Americana Manhasset, The Westchester.

LOUIS VUITTON

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 Term Paper/Gorbachev in Disneyland

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Gorbachev in Disneyland

Introduction

A kind of unintentional parody hovers over everything, a tactical simulation, a consummate aesthetic enjoyment [jauissance], is attached to the indefinable play of reading and the rules of the game. Traveling signs, media, fashion and models, the blind but brilliant ambience of simulacra.

Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*

I will in this paper analyze a single advertisement produced by the luxury brand Louis Vuitton. The ad's ostensible purpose is to promote the company's luggage line by highlighting a popular bag known as a duffle. The work, like many of its kind, features a celebrity endorsement, but in this case the model is quite unexpected: the aging, former General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and first and last President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. It would be an amusing choice of spokesman if it weren't so troubling.

Celebrity photographer, Annie Leibovitz, herself, a celebrity, shot the ad. It is a curious work and one, I will argue, that we should not dismiss as merely cynical commentary, or as representative of the kind of irony, or black humor so prevalent in contemporary advertising. There's something here, or not here, worthy of our attention, and I will use some of Jean Baudrillard's notions including seduction, simulacra and simulation to try to discover what it is and how to make sense of it.

When Is Seduction Not Seduction?

The intensity of the image is equal to its denial of the real, to the invention of another scene.

Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*

I open a magazine and I am struck by an advertisement. It is an ad for the luggage maker Louis Vuitton, but I find myself describing the piece as *by* Louis Vuitton. This is not a slip of the tongue but some apprehension of a different kind of meaning. Is it an ad? Is it art? Is it something entirely something else? Perhaps even a warning.

I call a few friends in the business, my business, advertising, and ask if they've seen this ad. To a one, they like it. Me, I find myself dismayed by it. I wonder what it is I'm actually seeing. I feel frightened, not seduced, by the image. Aren't I supposed to be seduced?

Baudrillard in his book *Seduction* writes:

Where a linear movement knocks against the wall of consciousness and acquires only meager gains, seduction has the obliquity of a dream element or stroke of wit, and as such traverses the psychic universe and its different levels in a single diagonal, in order to touch, at the far end, the unknown blind spot, the secret that lies sealed, the enigma that constitutes the girl, even to herself.

It is an ad's intention to seduce, to approach obliquity, to slip in, which is why one rarely attempts to portray a thing accurately—slice of life is the term we use, not true to life, just as movies are not true stories but based on true stories. An ad idealizes at best, deceives at worst. Its purpose is to transform an object, an idea, and a state of mind into a desire. But this ad frightens me—there is something in it that I don't want.

Soon after it appeared, Eric Wilson, writing for the *Times*, in an article titled "Gorbachev Made Me Buy It," noted in passing that Mr. Gorbachev is one of a number of celebrities appearing in a campaign conceived to "emphasize [Louis Vuitton's] heritage in luggage and travel accessories." He wrote that Mikhail S. Gorbachev was last President of the Soviet Union and quipped that Mr. Gorbachev is "holding on to the [car] door handle as if the bag contained polonium 210."

For Mr. Wilson, Gorbachev is simply one of a number of celebrity models and that polonium 210, the radioactive substance linked to the gruesome death of the former Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko, is a throwaway joke.

Wilson displayed an embarrassing ignorance of the craft and incredibly bad taste, but that isn't what bothers me. It was his lack of curiosity. He didn't ask, so I will: Why did Louis Vuitton select Gorbachev in the first place? One might say that his presence is counter-intuitive but what is the intuition it counters? If we accept that the purpose of advertising is to seduce, how does this succeed? Baudrillard draws our attention of the role of the eyes in seduction.

"The seduction of eyes. The most immediate, purest form of seduction, one that bypasses words. Once the delightful tension of the gazes gives way to words or loving gestures, the intensity declines."

I look into Gorbachev's eyes and see they are turned away from the camera. The man looks as if he's in pain. He's an old man, more Willy Loman than a figure of global importance. Why is he there? And, where exactly is he? Baudrillard also writes of the fear of being seduced and how we fight against that, which seeks to seduce us.

The End of Signification

The end of the spectacle brings with it the collapse of reality into hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography.
Jean Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange and Death (71)

An ad always represents, however, what it represents, the principal object on display is never the only object on view. Still, we expect the object to be central, and we read into the object both real and symbolic meaning—today prestige is every bit as functional as capacity, if not more so. So while the object for sale is useful, the nature this usefulness grows increasingly open to interpretation.

We are consumers of products but also consumers of advertisements. Each helps us fulfill our role. Increasingly ads impart less pure information, substituting signs that no longer signify anything. Gorbachev in this ad leads nowhere and yet we'll learn he's on a journey, but to no place. As we'll see, anything that can act as a reference in this ad has, in a very real sense, stalled. Which is to say they have lost their link to any original referent and the real and imaginary have, as Baudrillard observed, combined into "the same operational totality, [where] aesthetic fascination reigns supreme; with subliminal perceptions (a sort of sixth sense) of special effects editing and script."

The object for sale here is ostensibly a travel bag. The ad was placed in magazines where the brand name is recognized and prized and where the presence of these products confirms for the reader the importance of the magazine. But as we saw earlier what makes this ad stand out is the image of Mikhail Gorbachev—a historic figure. But nowhere in the ad can this fact be seen. The great reformer, whose reforms—perestroika and glasnost—ironically brought down the "house," appears in the ad as someone's tottering grandfather.

The ad's photographer, Annie Leibovitz, is well known for her meticulous pre-production—the care she takes to set the *mise-en-scène*. For all her effort, we see a very weary looking Mikhail Gorbachev in the back seat of what appears to be a Soviet-era sedan. It is late fall or winter, the man wears a heavy coat and scarf. The great man, this hero, is pushed aside by a Louis Vuitton duffle bag. Out the back and side window we see what we are led to believe is the Berlin Wall, and what may even be the remaining stretch of the Wall near Ostbahnhof in Friedrichshain. It is a memorial grim enough to triggers memories of the late Ronald Regan challenging Mr. Gorbachev to "Tear down this wall."

The use of political figures in advertising is no longer as rare or as unseemly as it once was and it's likely we'll only see more politicians lending their images and voices to products, goods and services. It is already part of our visual landscape; consider the impossibility of ignoring Bill Clinton selling Bill Clinton or Al Gore shilling Al Gore. Baudrillard remarked that advertising, "no longer has a territory," an observation I've taken to mean that it no longer has an obligation to stop.

Words Without Meaning for Readers Who Won't Read

The copy in the ad reads hierarchically:

*A journey brings us face to face with ourselves.
Berlin Wall. Returning from a conference.*

A trite truism, followed by a false caption, still it leaves me wanting to know more. What journey is referred to here, what has Mr. Gorbachev seen along the way that has left him as stiff as Madame Tussaud's wax version of him?

The copy continues in increasingly smaller type, to signify that reading is beside the point. There's no meaning here, just words on page: "Mikhail Gorbachev and Louis Vuitton are proud to support Green Cross International." We are not told what Green Cross International is because we are not expected to read this far down the page. (I Googled Green Cross and discovered that it is an organization like the Clinton Foundation, one that exists solely to enhance the prestige, influence and financial well being of its founders.) However, it is pointless to critique the copy. Although Baudrillard made the following observation apropos of graffiti, I think it's applicable to advertising copy: "[Words] with neither connotations nor denotations, they escape the principle of signification. They refer back to nothing." In another place he writes:

"It is useless to analyze advertising as language, because something else is happening there: a doubling of language (and also of images), to which neither linguistics nor Semiology correspond, because they function on the veritable operation of meaning, without the slightest suspicion of this caricatural exorbitance of all the functions of language, this opening onto an immense field of the mockery of signs.

In this ad only the address and a company logo, elements that formerly complete the ad, combine to form a genuine communication. This information alone is unambiguous—you can find Louis Vuitton products here.

What Is Real in This Ad?

So what is real here? And, by real I mean, what is actually communicated? I suspect it is only the promise that this duffle bag exists and can be bought. Only the bag, stacked on a store shelf, stored in a warehouse, is true, has substance. I think we may also say that certain underlying emotions suggested by the ad can also be interpreted as true. For example, perhaps the choice of Gorbachev reflects a nostalgia for old cold-war certainties. Perhaps the odd setting, the grim and curiously intact Berlin Wall, suggesting a Berlin circa 1989 retains some charm for the jet-setting consumers of Vuitton products.

What should also be clear is that an ad can be appreciated as a hyperreal object that occupies a hyperreal space. What fascinating is the ad's representation of a man who is no longer a leader, who is no longer relevant, and who sits in a car that isn't going any place. The narrative this ad constructs for us is a familiar one but not a true story. We might even describe it as its own pure simulacrum.

Although the line that separates them seems thinner and fainter every day, this is an ad, not photojournalism. Mr. Gorbachev is not really returning from a conference, despite what the copy claims. (Although it's very likely the man is damned to attend and return from conferences until he dies, this is not a record of his life.) However the notion of conference itself is worth examining, because like this ad, it is a medium that really doesn't exist. A conference is a simulacrum of a place where men and women (including supernumerary politicians) meet to meet, often only to agree to meet again, to discuss some issue of important to those who attend conferences. Increasingly conferences exist only to confer status on those who organize them and on those who attend them—think Aspen and Davos and the recent Clinton Global Initiative, scheduled to compete with the opening session of the General Assembly of the United Nations. These conferences also exist to provide news organizations with content—stories, perspectives, documentary footage and interviews. Which is to say they produce simulation of news for organizations that act as purveyors of news.

The truth is, everything is false in the ad, including such close attention to detail as the unzipped bag with a brochure or pamphlet and rolled newspaper conspicuously on top. If Gorbachev had reading material it would be stored in his attaché and not a duffle, which is designed for clothing and accessories. What more, today it's increasingly less likely that a man reads in the car than talks on his phone or returns emails on his BlackBerry.

The world portrayed in this ad is a simulation of a world that owes its logic and sensibility more to cinema—*The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* or *The Bourne Identity*—than historic or current events and places. It is all surface and refers to no real event we can refer to; although we can collectively pretend it portrays a kind of reality. Apropos of simulation of this nature, Baudrillard wrote “The very definition of the real is *that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction*. At the end of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*: the hyperreal.” (Italics contained in the original quote.)

Vuitton gives us a hyperreal Berlin, one seemingly indistinguishable from Berlin. But not the Berlin from actual memory but from the idea of the City. All that’s required is something real, the wall or the unremitting gray of a Berlin winter, and you have the city. As Baudrillard wrote in “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media”: “It’s useless to ask which is the first term, there is none, it is a circular process—that of simulation, that of the hyperreal. The hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished.”

What is also worth noting is that the photographer, Annie Leibovitz, is today more important than her subject. Ms. Leibovitz became famous for shooting rock stars and celebrities for *Rolling Stone* magazine. After ten years there she traded up to *Vanity Fair* and American Express Advertising. She made a career of not portraiture but of making idealized images that reinforced existing perceptions of her subjects. Oddly, Leibovitz, who famously creates animated and even extravagant beings, has given us a waxwork Gobachev. His fleshy face waxy in complexion. His body stiff as if frozen in death.

Death and the Statesman

Death remains the ultimate risk in every symbolic pact, be it that supposed by a challenge a secret, a seduction or a perversion. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*

Examining and reexamining this ad has led me to believe it is a meditation on death. On the death of luxury as it becomes a commodity. On the death of memory and meaning. The ad offers instructions on how to accessorize the dead. How do dress dead. It is a joyless ad and was perhaps anticipated by Baudrillard when he wrote: “Advertising has been spoken of as a ‘festival,’” since without it, the urban environment would be dismal. But in fact it is only a cold bustle, a simulacrum of appeal and warmth; it makes no contacts, it cannot be revived by an autonomous or collective reading, and it does not create a symbolic network.” Perhaps this is the source of the uncanny feelings I experienced when I first saw this ad.

People who question whether or not men of Gorbachev's stature should appear in advertising, even if, as the ad suggests, any money he earns will go to a charity, miss the point. (The line in the copy is ambiguous, it appears that like Bill Clinton, Gorbachev doesn't donate money to his charity but encourages other people to donate to it.) The point is that leaders must now appear in ads to lead us to our deaths, wherever it will occur, whenever it will happen.

The bleak aspect of the ad, the pessimistic tone of the collage-like surface has a funereal-like fascination. I have no doubt this image is a PhotoShop construction—the better to simulate reality. While it would be tempting to call the image false and purposely deceiving, in fact the image is an excellent image and has all the aesthetic integrity it requires. Which is to say that in this hyperreal image the signs of reality are an excellent substitute for reality.

In closing, I'd like to suggest that the "Berlin" setting brings to mind Baudrillard's observations on Disneyland. Like Disneyland, this Berlin is "a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation." It too is a "play of illusions and phantasm," but not with pirates, or frontiers, but with a burly historic figure, a Soviet-era automobile, a notorious concrete wall decorated with graffiti that isn't really graffiti—graffiti on the Berlin wall is not vandalism, the wall is vandalism.

As Baudrillard saw in Disneyland a third-order simulation, there to "conceal the fact that what we think of as real is no longer real but of the order of the hyperreal and simulation," so sophisticated ads of this nature exist to persuade the affluent to believe that their worlds are real and intact even if the intimations of its impending death are everywhere—seen and not seen.

In the end, Gorbachev does not drive off. He is not on his way to a 5-star hotel, where someone will help him off with his coat and hand him a drink. The man is condemned to sit. He is in purgatory, waiting for judgment day.

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