

COMPREHENDING ADVERTISEMENTS THROUGH JEAN BAUDRILLARD'S POSTMODERNISM¹

Ekawati Marhaenny Dukut²

Abstract: Nowadays people are living in a postmodern society, which is nihilistic because many things are being simulated that no one actually knows which is real. What people see on television or a magazine, for example, is regarded more real than the reality itself. One of the factors that make a society feel more comfortable in living in a hyper-real world is because of the existence of advertisements or ads. Thus, to understand what is signified by an ad, a reader or consumer needs to take in mind the theory of postmodernism laid out by Jean Baudrillard.

Key words: postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, advertisements

INTRODUCTION

The study of advertisements (ads) connotes the comprehension of ads' existence as a sign as well as a product, which resulted from a postmodern society's lifestyle. This is possible only when ads are analyzed through a semiotic means, because ads are thought to take root from a concrete reality (Noviani 2002:ix). In other words, ads are argued to have a social reference to the society who is trying to comprehend the ads shown on a media such as a television.

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² **Dra. Ekawati Marhaenny Dukut, M.Hum.** is a full-time lecturer at the Faculty of Letters, Soegijapranata Catholic University, Semarang.

Take for example, the television ad of an Indonesian car *Kijang*. It is widely accepted by the general public to mean a car that is appropriately used by the extended family, i.e. the grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, sister, brother, cousin, parent-in-law, and so on. In reality, it is true that an extended family in Indonesia is important and would need a car like the *Kijang* to transport all of the people mentioned, but the ad tend to exaggerate the notion of the 'extended family' terminology because the car cannot carry all of the family, it can merely carry 8 adults.

Using a postmodern perspective theorized by Jean Baudrillard, where ads are regarded to not blindly take root from the social reality yet represent the simulation which mirrored it (Noviani 2002:viii), it becomes understandable for the underlying reason of the ad creator to introduce such a hyper-real phenomenon. Baudrillard believes that ads are created to basically touch the ambition of somebody's desire to be more than what he can own, so the exaggeration of Tora Sudiro (a popular Indonesian TV comedian) in carrying 'all' of his extended family in he *Kijang* car is deliberately done to attract consumers who see the importance of giving his extended family that special transportation attention.

Another sample is the value of luxury, exclusiveness and glamorous life *Lux* beauty soap tries to offer in its television ad. It does so by exposing that almost all popular film stars like Sophia Latjuba, Desi Ratnasari and Dian Sastrowardoyo would frequently use. In reality, it is true that those using *Lux* soap can be bodily clean and have outstanding fragrance. Yet, to have a life like and become a film star like the three mentioned – just by using *Lux* beauty soap everyday – is only a dream. It is interesting, however, to find that most consumers do not mind buying the soap because they are satisfied enough to have that dream.

Why do those shown on ads easily tempt consumers? What does it mean when Baudrillard says that the postmodern society readily accepts the signs and values represented by ads? This article will:

1. define and give some interpretations to what is being conceived as a postmodern society by comparing it with a modern one
2. discuss why ads can be categorized as a popular cultural product, and
3. discuss the influence and relationship of ads as a popular cultural product with the consumer culture theory of Baudrillard's hyper-reality.

MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

A. Modernism

There are a number of definitions offered for the word 'modernism'. First, according to Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane in their book entitled *Modernism 1890-1930*, it is "The movement towards sophistication and mannerism, technical display, internal self-skepticism" (1986:16). They continue to say that "impressionism, post-impressionism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, symbolism, imagism, vorticism, dadaism, surrealism" is included in the era of modernism (Bradbury and McFarlane 1986:23).

Second, T.R. Quigley (2006) believes that modernism is a terminology to show that the aesthetical perspective is often used in Europe and America alongside with the formalism and autonomous principle of analyzing a workmanship. Third, Roger Fowler defines modernism as a way to label the types of art and literature that flowered during the twentieth century. This is similar to how the term neoclassicism is used for the eighteenth century and romanticism for the nineteenth century (1987:151). The kinds of art that modern artists created are usually experimental, complex, elliptic that has an element of decreation in addition to creation. In literature, well-known modern artists include: Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Madame Mallarme.

Fourth, Mary Klages (2006) explain modernism as a movement in 1910-1930 that disagreed with the Victorianism belief of "how art should be made, consumed and what it should mean". Modernism, is a movement which is highly conscious of its aesthetical reflection that allows an analysis of a paradoxical reality, which is ambiguous and open without any certainty and, which disagrees with the idea of an integrated being who suffers from a destructuring and dehumanization (Featherstone 2005:15).

B. Postmodernism

The movement following after modernism is postmodernism (Ritzer 2003:15). According to Kohler (1977) and Hasan (1985) postmodernism as cited in Mike Featherstone (2005:16) is firstly used by Federico de Onis in the 1930s to show people's reaction towards modernism. Witcombe (2006) informs further that postmodernism became popular in the 1960s when New

York artists, writers and young critics such as Rauchenberg, Cage Burroughs, Barthelme, Fielder, Hassan and Sontag make a reference to a movement that is on the verge of extinction because its “corruptive and oppressive values” are no longer accepted by the academic society. A word like ‘equality’ in an American society, for example, for a number of academia’s is thought inapplicable since the position and salary of a woman lecturer will never be equal to those of her male counterpart. It can be said that, ‘equal’ opportunity for gender difference is a vocabulary that shows an unrealistic condition in the U.S.A.

Actually postmodernism is a movement that is popularly used in the field of architecture (see Krisprantono 2005), painting and drama, as well as music (Featherstone 2005:16, Ritzer 2003:14). Postmodernists’ theorists include Daniel Bell, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Frederick Jameson. In art, post modernism carries the following characteristics: the boundary abolition of art with everyday life, the collapse of hierarchical difference between high and popular culture, a mixing of stylistics, which gives importance to eclectics, parody, pastiche, the shallowness of cultural surface, the sloping down of artists’ creativity and assumption, so that art is merely a repeated representation of life (Featherstone 2005:17). With this regard, Mike Featherstone’s definition is similar to Mary Klages, who believes postmodernism as having

...boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting rigid genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness. Postmodern art (and thought) favors reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the destructured, decentered, dehumanized subject.

C. Differences between modernism and postmodernism

Although both modernism and postmodernism both argue for a self-consciousness of the subject who experiences a destructuralism and dehumanization, there are a number of differences between them. According to George Ritzer (2003:19-20) there is a tendency of a postmodernist to criticize anything in association with postmodernism. Second, there is also a

disagreement with modernism's worldview, metanarrative and totality. Third, postmodernists thinkers tend to exaggerate the pre-modern phenomena of the emotion, feeling, intuition, reflection, speculation, personal experience, habit, metaphysics, tradition, cosmology, religious and mystique experience. Fourth, postmodernists tend to refuse the modern discourse of meticulous and logical academic lifestyle.

Modernism sees the human subjectivity and life history as fragments where the idea of losing something is regarded as a tragical outcome. It is for this reason that modern artists seek to find a unity and coherence, which institutionally may not be possible. As a comparison postmodernists do not cry for the fragmented thinking or incoherence of something but instead celebrate the situation. Does this consequently that living well on earth is no longer important for an individual? For a postmodernist, he will not try to make the world know his condition but rather will play with the unusual circumstances the world has to offer.

Another way to differentiate between modernism and postmodernism is to view it from a capitalistic perspective, like suggested by Frederick Jameson (cited in Kalges 2006) that is supported by Jean Baudrillard (cited in Sarup 1993: 163-164). He says that the first phase is within the development of technology, where motors and steam machinery with their aesthetical beings are created to portray realism. The second phase is at the end of the nineteenth century up to mid twentieth century (WW II), in which the capitalists who founded electricity and the automobile monopolize technology. The last phase is the recent era, where consumer's capitalism has reached the multinational stage of postmodern technology that includes the founding of the nuclear.

D. Postmodernism's deconstruction and construction

In his article "Postmodernism" Klages (2006) explain further that the terminology is also used to refer to the two principles of being anti-modern or agreeing with the task of redefining modernism's premises. What is meant by anti-modernism is the act of deconstructing postmodernism's doctrine of refusing the pre-eminence of reasoning, righteousness, belief in the perfection of mankind, and the premise that a society can be rebuilt with better

circumstances. Postmodern deconstructionists believe that the concept of “equality” and “freedom” cannot be naturally understood or could never be attained because the concepts are only an ideology that are constructed by mankind.

In this case, the requirements to explain about the belief in God, the self, and the postmodernists, usually reject the aim of life and world’s reality. Postmodern thinkers see the world as nihilism, i.e. all normal activities are disregarded and whatever could not be seen can be learnt and communicated. The understanding that life is meaningless becomes the basic belief of the postmodernist philosophers.

Meanwhile, the second principle, which concentrates on the revision of the modern concepts are referred to the constructive postmodernists. The followers, in this case do not reject modernism’s concepts but attempt to make better the premises and other traditional concepts. Similar to the postmodernist deconstructionist, they try to erase everything that stops them to find all means of making a legitimization and logical view of the modernist’s principle. One way to reach it is by offering the ethic’s viewpoint of aestheticism and religious institution.

Postmodernists do not reject the development of science but only the means to understand the world through the modernist’s perspectives. The postmodern constructionist wants to see the reality and norms of the premodern practitioners. Postmodernists want to take over the position of modernism and modernity’s, who are seen to disturb the sustainability of earth’s living creatures.

So, basically both deconstructionist and constructionist try to get rid of constricting themselves and adopt the unknowing and ambiguous concept of defining a world. If a modernist wants to find a closed conclusion, the postmodernist prefers to see the open-ended vision and sees in more detail the process of something that is continually happening.

Therefore, even though a postmodernist knows that his world is full of nihilism, he still has time to reflect on his own. He realizes that he is a man who is involved in the deconstructive process of finding the meaning about his own and society’s existence.



ADVERTISEMENT: POPULAR CULTURE PRODUCT

Advertisement in the American Studies discipline is studied in Popular Culture. Denotatively, a popular culture is one's everyday culture that is widely accepted by the society. For example, behaviors, hobby, how someone acts and not act, what is being eaten and worn, things that are connected with everyday transportation, sport, religion, etc (Wilson 1995:5).

Dominic Strinati (2003), Stan Le Roy Wilson (1995), Michael Petracca and Madeleine Sorapure (1998) say that the study of advertisement or ads is just like television, film, music, sports and cybernet. Not only in America but also in any other country, the lives of mankind are always colored with many kinds of advertisements that are displayed in various texts, illustrations and color. According to Kasiyan (2004:1) the existence of ads are no longer regarded as a phenomenon but an everyday culture of a society. Henceforth, it is this everyday existence that makes ads a popular culture.

Ads is interesting to study by the postmodern society, because the readers and consumers feel they receive a happiness and satisfaction in life from ads that deliver a "*hiper-realistis*" (hyper-realistic) world, which offer a "*kebahagiaan semu*" (pretentious happiness) (Piliang 2003:95)

Nigel Watson further explains that consumers do not really become interested in the use of the products advertised, but they are interested in the symbolization it carries or "the image and the way it appears to others" (2001:57). Of similar belief, Jack Solomon regards postmodern consumers to live on ads for the symbolical status it brings into mankind's lives (1998:48). Therefore, if someone can wear a Rolex watch or drive a BMW, that someone will feel that he has such a high prestige. This is why advertisers want to attract consumers to buy their fashionable clothes (that may not be from expensive cloth), they would make use of pretty, sexy, and alluring woman model who wears a Rolex watch and stand beside a BMW. The really more expensive clothing worn by another model standing beside a Hyundai, however, may not have attracted as many consumers as the other one. It cannot be avoided then that postmodern ads tend to deal more with the cultural representations of a product rather than the quality it carries, and thus is in congruent with the nature of popular culture (Strinati 2003:267). In the eyes of Jean Baudrillard, the postmodernism world is filled with simulations such

as exemplified. As a result, things that are 'real' usually become a 'hyper-reality'. Quigley (2006) gives his support as follows:

The postmodern condition is also characterized ... as a kind of **schizophrenia** or postmodern temporality. This comes out of a Lacanian (structuralist) analysis of language and its role in the experience of time.

There is no unmediated (direct) access to reality. Thus, the referent (object) drops out of the structuralist analysis and we are left with the sign and its two remaining aspects, i.e. signifier and signified.

Meaning (signification) is not a one-to-one relation between a word and its related concept. Meaning emerges from a larger relationship, viz. that of the sentence. This places the signifier in the context of other signifiers. Thus, meaning (the signified) emerges from the signifier/signifier relations.

It can be concluded that living in the hyper-reality of a postmodern world gives legitimacy to schizophrenics because those kinds of people have no direct access to what are supposedly real. This is the same with ads, the world they offer to their readers or consumers are hyper-real and are not long lasting. Advertisers know that the products offered have their own type of consumers and are only popular at a certain frame of time. This is because the popular audience have their own way of making a connection to the texts and illustrations described by the ads, which may create a discursive competition among themselves in order to make decisions about how popularly the ad will still be accepted by them (Barker 2005:50).

To understand the message of an ad, thus, needs a relational process between the signified and the signifier. Consequently, a research on ads as a product of popular culture needs to employ a semiotic analysis. Semiotics according to Strinati can explain why a real material can never be judged real, because of the many connotations it may have (2003:123). For a semiotician, the reality is always constructed and understood in multi-layered meanings, which may never be wrong as it usually has a certain aim behind the creation and with which the meanings can never be expressed the same by its analysts.

Like what is written by Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* (1972) meaning is never the same as meaning is created from a system of codes and rules that have been agreed upon a society with a certain cultural understanding. So, the analysis of an ad must take into consideration the consumer culture theory of the postmodern era. Jean Baudrillard's theory of nihilism in consumer culture (cited in Sarup 1993:121) becomes the most appropriate method in analyzing ads.

According to George Ritzer (2004), the young Baudrillard was raised in structuralists and semioticians' surroundings. Hence, Baudrillard sees consumer's object and communicative system behind ads as grounding for a code of significations (Ritzer 2004:137) of the individuals living inside a community.

Roland Barthes believes that an object is a sign, whose values are decided by the codes carried out by the postmodern society. Ironically, when man consumes the object that consists of those signs, the man feels unique. But in reality, that man becomes a mirror of his societal group that consumes that object. Thus, 'unique' needs to be understood as being indifferent but at the same time 'the same'.

BAUDRILLARD AND POSTMODERNISM'S CONSUMER CULTURE

A. Hyper-reality and simulacra

Jean Baudrillard is a valued member of the postmodernist thinkers because his ideas are useful for the general community (Ritzer 2003:132). Baudrillard regards society as being dispersed or exploded into the public mass. The social key factor such as the existence of social class and ethnic differences have dissolved with the creation of a mass that cannot be differentiated from one another. The world for Baudrillard is one where a chain of modern differences have fallen apart because the real condition is no longer real, it becomes the ownership of the public mass and no longer owned by the private individual. Of similar concept is Chris Barker's statement of the "art and reality" that has been totally sucked into "the black hole". In other words, what has been regarded a unique reality is no longer appropriate as things occur from a simulation of hyper-realities.

Chris Barker defines the word 'hyper' to show something as "more real than the real" (2005:6), whereby the reality in this case, is produced according to a model that is not yet set beforehand but artificially produced as a discursive of retouchable realities that may be similar to the self-hallucinations made by mankind. Barker (2005:162) continues to explain that man could not place himself in certain situations well because he is manifested by the following factors:

1. the cannibalization of the past style to the future time
2. the loss of authentic artistic style that is caused by what is being imitated
3. the representation transformation that becomes a mimicry and demonstration
4. the downfall of the clear cut difference between the low and the high culture
5. the establishment of a simulacra or duplicative culture (so nothing is original anymore)

Another way to explain the occurrence of manifestation such as described above is whatever happens in society is no longer regarded as real, but is only a replica or simulacra, since there is a concept that reality exists in the process of unreal simulations (Klages 2006). With regards to this concept, Baudrillard also sees that the postmodern society is a mimic of simulacra (cited in Sarup 1993:164) comparisons. The following paragraphs exemplify the phenomena.

When the soccer match between Real Madrid and Naples, who fought for the European championship, happened in 1987, it was done at night without any real supporters. Even though supporters were not allowed to enter the stadium because officials were afraid the Madrid supporters would make a dispute over the game, many television viewers were entertained to see the simulation match on television. This is clearly an example of how the postmodern society enjoys a simulacra as much as what may have been a reality.

Another example is when trying to appreciate the value of Van Gogh's classical paintings. People acknowledge that there is only one real true painting that deserves a high valuable price. Yet, it is with conscience that the same people would prefer to buy the imitation for the sake that it has the same

image of showing to others how much they appreciate Van Gogh's masterpiece. The high-class status symbol the people received for owning a Van Gogh painting – although only an imitation – is reason enough to buy the copy.

It is even absurd in the example of the flowering of pirated CDs. No one is able to find out which of the CD is the real copy because mass production is so simple to do. It is a usual phenomenon in the postmodern society that no one ever wants to know which CD is the first replica of the real CD. This is absurd, but it is what the postmodern society wants.

The above example shows why the postmodern society does not trouble with whatever is real or not. The practice of media has changed the original view of the world into a world of simulacrum. What is real is no longer related with the real world but with whatever is presented in the media of the radio, newspaper or television. In other words, what is seen on television is today's real world. What is presented on television has entered the human life and the human life has entered in television. Sarup (1993:165) believes that what may be fiction has become a reality and what is real has become a fiction. This is the reason that postmodernism is referred to a world of simulacrum.

B. Consumer culture and its entrapment

Baudrillard's point of view about simulacra or hyper-reality is published in his book *The System of Objects* (1968). It argues that the basic principle of an ordered structure organization is through understanding the works of a consumer culture. Baudrillard continues to explain that consumer products have a classification system and effect towards the formation of a certain behavior (2004 : 6).

Ads produce codes for their product through symbols that makes it different from other products. If the product becomes an object and later consumed, it will transfer the meaning of codes. The unlimited symbols have become one of the factors to regulate the society even though the same sign can make a consumer feel free to express the ownership of the product. So, consumers here do not mean consuming values only but consuming many of the symbols offered (Sarup 1993:162). Someone is said to be searching for his class or existence in a society through an object or product offered. So,

the function of a commodity is not only in fulfilling the needs of an individual but also the needs of the individual's social class. Consumption is not the end of an economic chain that starts with the activity of production but is an exchange system, i.e. a language to show that commodity is something that can be semiotically analyzed by an individual. Baudrillard (2004) thinks no one is actually complete on his own, but he exists because there are other people, things, and objects that results a range of relations to build the unique characteristics of the individual.

Looking from history's perspective, consumer culture as a product of postmodern culture has been a focused attention since the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s. In 1970 consumer culture has become the objective of cultural studies because of the discussion that analyses commodity, which "produce alternative and oppositional meanings" (cited in Storey 1996:113). Because of this, ads can fulfill mankind's needs of a simulacra world. Baudrillard says that

...adverts generate false needs – for example, the desire to be a certain kind of person, wearing a particular type of clothes, eating a particular type of food, drinking particular drinks, using particular items, etc (cited in Storey 1996: 114).

Thus, if someone buys a Big Mac in McDonald's restaurant, he is not only buying it to have his stomach full, but he gives himself a sign or image that he is part of a busy and active community who has no time to cook for himself that he had to buy a fast food product, which is more practical and suitable for his middle class budget.

Consumer culture's ideology is said to be a strategy of a "displacement process" (Storey 1996:115) because of its characteristics of always wanting to continually find something new. The hope that what he'll receive from consuming something (like 'love') has become a metonymy movement towards the limits of one's needs. Consumption is believed to make someone whole and continually exist in his hyper-real world:

...consumption will make us whole again; consumption will make us full again; consumption will make us complete again" consumption will return us to the blissful state of the 'imaginary' (Storey 1996:117).

This is the reason why John Fiske (cited in Storey 1996:115) believes that the following text :

Live to Love, and Love to Shop, so you see... if I can buy enough things, I'll never have to work at love again!

found in an ad is interesting to study as it makes readers want to know what kind of product is being offered.

Consumer culture's concept has made shopping consuming an endless activity. This is because consumer culture is not only an economic activity, i.e. buy a product and use the commodity advertised to satisfy someone's' material needs but it is also an actualization of a dream, a deep want, an identity and a way for better communication. Henceforth, as clever as one tries to not be interested and attracted by a product advertised in television, newspaper, magazine, brochure or banner posted along a street – man's character of always having a new hope to better himself, to be loved, to feel complete – be a main reason of trapping people in a postmodern consumer culture.

CONCLUSION

Baudrillard's postmodern theory explains that man is now satisfied in consuming his hyper-real world through the daily products offered in ads. Things that cannot be attained in reality can be reached through the simulacra signified in ads posted in the radio, television, newspaper, magazines, banners, and the like. To be evaluated someone from a high class, that person need not to really buy a BMW, but she only needs to wear a dress which she often sees a model wear in a BMW, like how she remembers in an ad she saw. Or to make someone feel she is a famous super star, she can just buy herself beauty soap, *Lux*, to become Sophia Saxtuba or Sophia Loren at anytime she wants to.

Baudrillard defines postmodernism as a world of simulations filled with multi-layered meanings. The meanings and symbols offered in ads are also multi-layered; consequently, the analysis of a product will be different from one individual to another. This, however, may produce a person who is very similar to another. For example, Britney Spear's popularity has made almost all teenagers to go out from the same salon or boutique that make them all look like her. Where is the real Britney Spears? The answer for the

postmodern society is not considered important. What is important is that ads helped to form a nihilistic world – a world that makes almost everyone to be at another place, doing something else, wear another kind of clothing, eat and drink something else, be somebody else – without going anywhere or do something crazy because everything can be simulated at their fingertips!

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