



Axe's "Make Love, Not War" Superbowl Ad

As part of Axe's #kissforpeace campaign, Axe first debuted [this ad](#) for their new product, Axe Peace, on the internet and then revealed a shorter version during the commercial breaks of the Superbowl. The ad's tagline, "Make Love, Not War," initially seems to indicate that this ad will be different from Axe's usual sexist romps. And while the ad does attempt to dismantle stereotypes about race, terrorism, and war, it ends up reinforcing them. In addition, Axe's portrayal of romance on the battlefield is disturbing for the ways it erases violence against women during war and glorifies colonialism.

David Kolbusz, deputy executive director at ad-agency BBH London, said that those creating the ad were concerned about how it would appear to have a brand profiting from images of war, so they decided to give \$250,000 to Peace One Day. While this amount sounds generous, it is less than half of one percent of the more than \$9 billion in profit made by Axe-parent-company Unilever in 2012.

Four storylines play out in the advertisement: the Vietnam War, World War II, some type of military event in North Korea, and a perceived bombing in the Middle East. These stories are cut together with almost no words throughout the commercial or in the non-diegetic music playing over the images. The ad creates nostalgia for wars of past, such as the Vietnam War and World War II. Any atrocities committed by Americans are framed as historical and therefore irrelevant to the contemporary moment. In the overall ad, the soldiers shown in these "historical" storylines are specifically white. However, the ad is careful to show the perceived violence committed by other nations and by people of color, such as North Korea and a nameless Middle-Eastern state, as clearly in the present moment. The ad elides the thousands of civilian casualties in the War in Afghanistan as a result of U.S.-led military actions from 2001 to present.

The Vietnam War storyline begins with military helicopters flying over farmland in a lush landscape, showing the face of a white, male soldier wearing camouflage. From above, the viewer sees a house, with children playing outside and a woman standing wearing a rice hat. While this image could be of anywhere in Southeast Asia, the combination of the military helicopters, white soldiers, and a woman in a stereotypical rice hat triggers the cultural imaginary of the Vietnam War for many Americans, who are the target audience for the commercial. When the helicopter touches down, the soldier jumps out of the helicopter pointing a rifle towards the woman. He approaches her cautiously until he tosses his rifle in the mud, grabs her, and kisses her. The kiss appears to be consensual, and yet it is confusing because a moment before, she was in his direct line of fire.

This portrayal allows a cultural forgetting of the ways Vietnamese women were raped, killed, and mutilated during the war. For example, during the My Lai Massacre on March 16, 1968, Vietnamese women were gang-raped, shot in the back of the head while praying, and mutilated. We're not denying that love can flourish between individuals during wartime, but that doesn't erase the actual cultural and physical violence that occurred. Also, this version of "love" is terrifying, as if colonialism and pointing a rifle at a woman are the ways to win her heart. Love is clearly associated with violence and power in this story.

Another storyline of a war of the past begins with militaristic images of a tank running over rubble and a child's doll, implying that even children have been destroyed through these battles. This imagery appears to evoke memories of WWII, since tanks were rarely used in WWI. The rubble and city walls are gray, adding prominence to the bright red lips and high heels of the blonde, white woman standing in the way of the tank. The confrontation between the woman and tank is reminiscent of the famous image from Tiananmen Square. The woman looks stern, as if she will not move as the tank approaches her. The tank stops and opens its top. A white man appears. She happily exclaims his name and climbs the tank for a hug. The message here is absurd, as it is in the Vietnam War story. Despite the destruction of buildings and homes shown in the ad, the woman is not supposed to fear the tank or the man inside it, because the ad claims that love wins out in times of war.

The Middle-Eastern storyline depicts a brown man with a full beard walking down a hallway with a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist, wearing a bullet-proof vest and surrounded by men in military uniforms. The ad implies that there is a bomb in the briefcase, thus portraying men from the Middle East as terrorists. The man is specifically coded as Muslim, as he sits next to a woman in a hijab in what appears to be a lavish palace with ample gold accents. Depictions such as this help to encourage the rash of hate crimes committed against Muslims in the U.S. Think Progress details spikes in anti-Islam hate crimes which are attributed to increases in "anti-Muslim propagandizing," which Axe's ad promotes. According to the FBI, in 2012 anti-Islam bias accounted for almost 1,000 hate crime offenses.

He opens the briefcase, showing a giant red button and other levers. When he pushes the red button, fireworks explode in the background. The woman smiles, and the guards surrounding them applaud. While the briefcase ultimately was not a bomb, the implication reinforces racist and anti-Islam stereotypes about Muslims, which ultimately help to justify American military force against Arab and Persian nations.

In a similar fashion, the North Korean storyline focused on a young Asian man in a uniform, fashioned to look like Kim Jong Un. He is surrounded by older men in slightly different uniforms, looking down onto a large square filled with soldiers in perfect formation. Large signs with the young man's face on them adorn the square, furthering signaling images of North Korea. The soldiers then lift large placards over their heads which together create a giant image of heart with the young man's face in it and the face of the young woman standing next to him. She looks at him and holds his hand. He smiles.

While this act celebrates young love, like all of the other stories in Axe's "Make Love, Not War" commercial, the men command great power and actual or perceived violence. All of the acts of love performed for the women in the ad are ultimately acts of mercy, where men chose to spare and grant favor to a woman. Power over the women's fates resides with the men.

All of the "love" in the ad is portrayed as heterosexual, and tired, untrue ideas of masculinity and femininity are on display. The men are in pants; the women in skirts. The men have short hair; the women have long hair. Most disappointing is that none of the women have any agency within the ad, minus the woman who briefly seems to confront the military tank. Things are done by men to the women or for the women, but the women themselves do not take an active role in these acts.

Axe didn't really stray from the sexist messages of its old ads, but has simply repackaged them to yet again reinforce a sexist and homophobic culture.

The ad uses the "beautiful people" persuasion technique along with "warm and fuzzy" to help make viewers wanted to be the people in the ad, to feel the love and romance they feel, which then associates love and romance with violence and colonialism.

All of these stories work together to create a tapestry of American military force, of past and present, which is connected to male dominance. Women's roles in the military are completely eliminated from this narrative, as are the atrocities committed against women, children, and civilians during wars. Resistance movements to the violence and rape committed against women during war were removed from the story, such as the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace begun by Leymah Gbowee. Gbowee staged a sit-in at the presidential palace of Charles Taylor which forced peace negotiations. Victims of rape and violence, termed "collateral damage" in military parlance, are not allowed to tell their stories.

Only certain kinds of love are allowed in this narrative, namely heterosexual love. This is not surprising coming from Axe, since almost all of its ads support heterosexual desire and male dominance over women. Axe's "Make Love, Not War" ad could have celebrated love and romance in unexpected places in a variety of consensual hetero and homosexual relationships. Instead, this commercial takes dominance a step further by adding violent force to the equation.

From: Media Literacy Project (n.d.) <http://medialiteracyproject.org/deconstructions/axes-make-love-not-war-superbowl-ad/>