11.6.02
critical methods 01, mid term response :: nazarian

‘modern luxury’
We are looking at an advertisement for the Westin Hotel chain. We are presented with a poolside scene under a pristinely blue sky in which a family of four takes their leisure. Closer inspection leads us to believe that this particular pool may be located on the deck of a cruise ship, indicated by the presence of a low, nautical-style railing in the background that spans the width of our view. The family consists of a young boy, in motion, next to a smiling, bronzed and physically fit father at the pool’s edge, in the background. The mother and daughter float together in the center of the pool, smiling also, in the foreground. The viewer’s point of view is from in the pool itself at eye-level with the mother and daughter. Framing this scene of sunny respite are three distinct blocks of type - two are framed within their own black rectangle and one is interposed directly onto the scene. Directly below this arrangement we are presented with four equally proportioned graphical blocks, three of which contain photography of exotic destinations with the last showcasing the Westin logotype. We’ll begin our ‘close reading’ of the composition, denotatively, at the top left of the page.

The advertisement poses the question, in small white text in the upper left-hand corner of the composition, ‘What is Modern Luxury?’ The text is framed within a solid black rectangle. This rectangle reveals the top-most portion of a cascading grid of rectangles that will deliver our eye, eventually, to the lower right-hand portion of the page (and the (connotative) suggestion that Westin Hotels is indeed a purveyor of said ‘modern luxury’). In the meantime, the question is answered in block type, interposed on the image: ‘A place that doesn’t require photographs to remember it.’ The remaining text briefly outlines the ideal family vacation scenario and the contact information needed to realize it.

Just beneath the veneer of implicit narrative, there is a bold, modernist grid structure at work. The largest segment of the grid is the rectangle encompassing the question and answer text, the son and his father, as well as the deck railing. Breaking the lower border of this shape ever so slightly, the figures of the mother and daughter are primarily enclosed by
the second largest rectangle in the grid that is described, approximately, by the water of the pool. Moving downward, again, a rectangle half the height of the last frames the proposition text. Finally, the bottom-most rectangle in this grid is partitioned into four equally proportioned rectangles (not quite squares), arranged horizontally, which acts as a foundation to the organic structure. This grid can be described as ‘modern’ because it espouses an attention to uncluttered spatial volume, its contents stripped away but for the human figures. The gradual halving of rectangular grid space, moving compositionally from top to bottom, creates a definite visual compression which serves to focus the viewer’s eye, finally, on the Westin logotype at lower right.

Additionally, there are, contained within the overt grid structure, several instances of curious figural proportion: The height of the father figure can be repeated approximately four times against the vertical height of the composition. The jumping figure of the child is half the height of the father and also fits rather neatly within any of the rectangles at the bottom of the grid. The head and shoulders grouping (essentially, above the waterline) of the mother and child also fits, though somewhat less neatly, within this arrangement. Finally, the widths of both mother and daughter’s head are equal to the width of the widest portion of the father’s body as well as the distance from outstretched elbow to ear in the child figure. When combined, such denotative spatial conditions (see FIG. 01) will prove connotatively useful to the overall intended effect of the advertisement.

The last denotative observation we shall make is disclosed in the process of digitization. The scanned image, in allowing for intense magnification, reveals the composition of the scene to be a fraud - each of the figures has been silhouetted and manually arranged within the grid. This assumption of contrivance is plausible to the trained production eye; there is no question that the poolside scene was created on the drafting table and not from within the camera lens. Of course, then, the question of imagistic veracity is raised by the presence of this contrivance, a question we shall address in our discussion of the connotative nature
of the composition.

The first thing that comes to the viewer’s attention is the minimalist setting into which our prototypical vacation family has been inserted. Except perhaps for the repeating verticals of the deck railing, there is a distinct absence of pattern here. The composition is following a kind of doctrine of decorum in which nothing extraneous to the message (of ‘modern luxury’) has been included. Free of such distractions, the human figure performs all semiotic functions within the formal environment. The motivation behind each character is a portrayal of some idea of ‘modern luxury’ or its opposite.

Consider the father/son pair: these two figures play out a dramatic cycle of tension and release with both their positioning and their stature. The father, classically bronzed and proportioned, is the epitome of cool order and authority. His son, on the other hand, is chaos personified. The child is rendered as a kinetic blur about to plunge feet first into the serenely blue surface of the pool, possibly disrupting the mother/daughter reverie at work in the foreground. The very threat of this action stirs in the viewer a dread nostalgia for workaday cares and chaos. Within the context of the grid and under the leavening, pivotal visual presence of the father figure, however, we are led to believe that even this little hellion cannot disrupt the supremely assured space of ‘modern luxury’. Indeed, proportionally speaking, the grid itself seems prepared to subsume the boy into any one of its most compact ‘cells’, thereby promoting the idea that Westin Hotels is capable of transmuting ‘enervation’ into ‘relaxation’. The fact that the mother and daughter grouping also fit to this proportional scale suggests that the chain has ‘something for everybody’. Of course, this begs the question, ‘Well, just who IS everybody?’

This particular system of connotations seems to be aimed at the upper classes or, at the very least, the upper-middle class. - just the sort of folks who live in Manhattan and read the quarterly Travel and Leisure glossy from the Sunday Times, from which this advertisement was lifted. This particular segment of society is wont to be seen as connoisseurs of
‘experience’ rather than collectors of material goods - thus the somewhat sarcastic diction of the copy ‘A place that doesn’t require photographs to remember it’ and the supporting modernist visual composition. It’s as if to say, ‘Look, of course we’re going to deliver on this sublimely impressive environment to which you think you aspire’.

The quasi-Olympian beauty and physical stature of the mother and father, the mischievous son and the contrite daughter suggest an idealized order, a state of mind reflected in the visual hierarchies of this composition. The value system espoused by the representational family and simulated environment herein is in fact the obvious ‘reward = order’; in other words, your reward for slavish consumption and disorientingly extended working hours is approximately two weeks of evacuated living, unstructured yet conspicuously free of your everyday. The implicit narrative here describes a standard formula for ‘luxury’ which is, ‘Go on a vacation with your family to someplace warm and sunny, far from the constrained dynamics of urban life, your job and your mother-in-law, relax and return refreshed and enagorated’.

However, the idea of ‘modern’ is inferred by the formal structure of the composition itself. The impression that we have of the ‘modern’ is one of uncomplicated grace and transitory elegance, where no vacation is ever sullied by lost baggage, hijackings or rude, tip-mongering bellhops. It is the suggestion that Westin Hotels can somehow imbue the luxury you take for granted with the deck-clearing tonic of modernism and all of the perceived definition this brings which gives this composition its ‘aura’.

We must ask, at some point, whether or not we feel that the truth is being told here. In the case of advertising it can be said that ‘believability’ matters little but that the audience ‘buys’ the put-on. So it is here, where even the contrivance of figural placement leads us to a believable situation - and this is a kind of truth. Readers on the Upper West Side of Manhattan will no doubt recognize the signifiers of ‘the good life’, encoded within the smiles of this sim family. However, a good many denizens above 125th Street would immediately and, quite possibly, bitterly out this ad as a form of cruel economic propaganda. Regardless
of race, it would seem that ‘modernism’ is in fact a ‘luxury’ that few can afford to indulge, even for a meager two weeks out of the year. So it’s really no surprise that we find this ad placed where it is within the fancy travel glossy (is anyone even reading the Times above 125th Street...?) in a newspaper spawned from one of the richest cities in the world. Ultimately, ‘Modern luxury’ is a construction, a fragile juxtaposition of ideals for people of means who don’t know what to desire anymore, the most economical visual expression of which is through the minimal beauty of pristine space and classical proportion.
WHAT IS MODERN LUXURY?

A PLACE THAT DOESN’T REQUIRE PHOTOGRAPHS TO REMEMBER IT.

A pool that is the perfect temperature. A moment when your family is completely content. All over the world, thirty Westin resorts are waiting for you. Welcome to the age of modern luxury.


MEMBER OF
STARWOOD
PREFERRED
GUEST

WESTIN
HOTELS & RESORTS
modern luxury™