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A Socio-Semiotic Perspective**

A (Des)Construção do Ideal Materno:
Uma Perspectiva Sócio Semiótica

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The (De)Construction of the Maternal Ideal: A Socio-Semiotic Perspective

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The following exercise proposes a reflection on the social construction of motherhood using a [commercial of the brand Frida Mom \(2020\) as an object of analysis](#). The ad — rejected from airing at the 92nd Oscar ceremony in 2020 — portrays a woman in the postpartum period. Social semiotics and gender studies are used as theoretical perspectives.

The advertising film features a white woman, in her 30s, in the puerperal period. Unlike the usual narratives, in which women-mothers are portrayed in a state of complete well-being and happiness, we see a postpartum woman dealing with the everyday hardships of that period. An uncommon script when motherhood is the main theme.

In short, the ad starts with a woman awakened at dawn by her baby's cries. When she gets up, with difficulty, she tries to calm her newborn baby and, struggling, walks with pained slow steps towards the bathroom. As she moves, it is possible to see the physical changes in her body caused by pregnancy. In close-up, we can see the postpartum absorbent she is wearing. Once in the bathroom, carefully and groaning with pain, she sits on the toilet, removes the absorbent, tries to wash but realises that the bottle is empty. She gets up again, goes to the sink, fills the bottle with water, and returns to the toilet. She urinates, washes herself and puts on a new absorbent pad. The film ends with the sign "postpartum recovery doesn't have to be this hard", followed by a graphic display of some products and the company's brand.

Founded in 2014, Frida is an American company specialising in products designed to make life easier for mothers and fathers with newborn children. Frida Mom is a specific line for the care and hygiene of mothers in the postpartum period. As the brand defines itself, its communication seeks to show "unfiltered motherhood".

The ad was rejected from airing during the 92nd Academy Awards ceremony in 2020 in the United States. Among the reasons given by the American Broadcasting Company and the Academy Awards for rejecting the film were: too graphic content and partial nudity.

The controversy generated around the censorship of the ad is fertile ground to reflect on: how was the ideal mother socially constructed that, for decades, has reinforced compulsory motherhood and gender inequality? What factors could contribute to the representation and dissemination of this feminine role in a way that is closer to reality?

Ugo Volli (2003/2016) states that advertising texts describe "possible worlds, which differ from the real world" (p. 106) and produce fascination and desire in the receptors. The author considers that the ability to (re)create ideologies, spaces and perspectives of what surrounds us is one of the vectors for the advertising text to succeed.

In the case of Frida Mom's ad, such a possible world, different from the real world, addressed by Volli (2003/2016), is the closest recreation of reality itself. In other words, the advertisement is a clipping of a moment of extreme intimacy commonplace to women soon after giving birth. The traditional archetype of the ideal mother who takes care of her children alone, happy and fulfilled,

has been replaced by a mother recovering from childbirth, tired, sore, and dividing her time between the demands of a newborn and self-care.

The construction of motherhood in the collective imaginary disregards the physical and psychological changes that women experience during and after pregnancy. There seems to be a kind of pact of silence among women about the physical changes and the associated hardships during the postpartum period. "The principle of generational continuity restores the primacy of parenthood and overshadows the real work and social reality of women's efforts in the act of giving birth" (Scott, 1991, p. 77).

During the Middle Ages, no special value was attached to motherhood. The mother's bond with her child was practically non-existent until the child was 8 years old. Women and children were seen as figures with little significance. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, a change in the image of women as mothers began. Taking care of children became the exclusive responsibility of the mother. In this period, women's association with the innate ability to care for the family and the home acquired greater significance in society.

Since then, different profiles have been assigned to women and sustained in the political, social, family and media spheres. The ideal woman would be the one who gave birth, one "capable" of generating a child, giving birth, and caring for it. The feminist philosopher and theologian Ivone Gerbara (2017) points out that the patriarchal world has imposed on women distinct identities laden with stereotypes, prejudices and moral values that reinforce the domination and oppression between genders.

According to Gerbara (2017), in this line of identities are the spinsters who were not able to use their sexuality with a man. The virgins whose dedication to religious life and their "subordination to the laws of the clergy" live under male control. The femmes fatales, the antithesis of family women; mistresses, concubines and prostitutes. The lesbians, who are accused of "appropriating the masculine identity and, somehow, diminishing it" (Gerbara, 2017, p. 19). The single mother who, after being considered promiscuous, acquires a kind of (partial) redemption through motherhood. Being a mother and playing such a role allows her to enjoy a certain privilege in some social classes. Then there is the "normal" woman, the "beautiful sex", "the queen of the home", who fulfils her natural condition of procreation and care (Gerbara, 2017, p. 19).

The significance of motherhood is mainly built around religious, conservative and capitalist discourses, which produce meanings and naturalise the female role of mother. Maternal love is seen as something inherent in the constitution of women. Full happiness and personal achievement are attainable only after a woman becomes a mother. The so-called "sacralisation" of the woman-mother is often internalised and incorporated by women themselves.

Mota-Ribeiro (2000) identifies two feminine paradigms that have remained over time and have shaped the social perception of women and contributed to their models of self-representation. Eve and Mary, traditional characters of Catholicism with antagonistic characteristics, represent the sin and the divine, respectively. Mary is associated with care, obedience, and purity as an unattainable model. Eve evokes the origins of sin and the misuse of human freedom.

In recent years, the image of pregnant women and mothers as attractive and sexy women has emerged in the popular imagination. The term "mother I'd like to fuck" (MILF) has become jargon for desirable mothers. Eroticising the female body during the gestation period or of a middle-aged mother (within the aesthetic standards imposed by society) has become a fetish mainly among teenagers.

From an imaginary construction related to Mary, the woman-mother became closer to Eve as a MILF. The conservative and restrained demeanour required of women when becoming mothers created a sacred and asexual image. Demystifying this stigma has brought an erotic scenario to this

maternal image. Both contexts refer to female sexuality, which has always been on the agenda of advertising campaigns, labour relations, social life and women's rights and duties.

Whether it is Mary or Eve, the female body is often artificially and unrealistically represented, emphasising the appearance and sexuality of the body. According to Mota-Ribeiro (2005), "advertising images might be 'attached' to an ideology prevalent in our culture, succeeding in showing women not necessarily as they actually are or how they behave, but as society has learned to think they do" (pp. 664-665).

In Bourdieu's (1998/2012) viewpoint, the body is constructed as a sexed reality holding sexualising principles of vision and division. In the social world, the biological difference between the male and female bodies can be seen as a natural justification of the socially constructed difference between genders.

Frida Mom's advertisement spotlights a female body beyond the standards of beauty. It displays a woman's body shapes in her puerperal state with partial nudity and no sexual connotation. It intends to portray a woman who feels pain, tiredness, loneliness, demystifying the full happiness and well-being commonly depicted in motherhood advertisements.

The female body is a recurring domain in advertising and a relevant factor in the construction of femininity. Used as an important driver of consumption, it accentuates a standard of beauty and gender asymmetries. Standardising images that expose nudity and sensuality means that the perfect body is confused with a symbol of happiness. This female body objectification is often coupled with a strong sexual connotation.

The gender perspective has highlighted countless possibilities for interpreting motherhood. Being a mother could be either an ideal of female accomplishment, a mechanism of female oppression or a symbol of women's power (Scavone, 2001).

Communication plays an active and fundamental role in the construction of gender-related discourses. Connell (2000) classifies the relationships illustrated in communication processes, reinforcing the hierarchical structure in gender relations as symbolic relationships. The symbolism being intrinsic in the communication processes and the media one broad and influential route able to establish interpretations and meanings that legitimise or accentuate the gender dichotomy.

The symbolic structures embedded in syntactic and grammatical rules and visual and sound vocabularies are important vehicles of gender practices. The media can be considered a broad and influential outlet within the symbolic dimension, establishing interpretations and meanings that legitimise or accentuate the gender dichotomy.

"Gendered social life and relationships can be 'read' and interpreted in the same way that we read and interpret written texts. In order to read society as a text, linguistic structuralism reveals the hidden structures of meaning" (Holmes, 2007, p. 68).

In advertising, narratives with emotional appeal seek to portray motherhood as the fruit of a subjective desire and not a trajectory to be followed automatically. On the other hand, they continue to covertly emphasise such previously established social roles by communicating with images, ideas, values, world views from one or more social groups to others.

Social factors entail different "participation" and "production" patterns in any social group. Differences between generations, genders, education, class, regions and cultures have telling effects on meaning-making capacity (Kress, 2010). However, despite the new family configurations, adoptive mothers, stepmothers and other genders with reproductive capacity are commonly ignored in campaigns regarding motherhood.

The media reinforces and sustains the representation of a subject endowed with intrinsic and specific qualities to manage, give birth and care for an individual compulsorily. That is supported through a discourse emphasising happiness as a consequence, a mixture of personal accomplishment and "duty fulfilled".

As much as the Frida Mom ad seeks to demystify stereotypes, it adheres to the white, young, middle-class mother standard, which are common traits in most advertisements portraying mothers. The differential tries to emphasise the woman's physical and emotional state. Even if partial nudity is a resource used, by disregarding erotic and sensual appeals, it does not portray the woman as an object.

Although the ad analysed contains some typical elements of motherhood-related advertising, it highlights and invokes a scenario closer to reality. Through the resources used, the aim was to deconstruct the social imaginary of the perfect mother-woman and create a new social perspective by exposing situations considered taboo.

The myth of the maternal instinct (re)produces certain values and beliefs and thus influences attitudes and opinions. The advancement of reproductive technologies and the new family configurations foster the development of new motherhood possibilities, establishing new types of bonds (not only biological ones) and questioning gender roles in childcare.

Feminism in advertising has grown in prominence as the concern and need for brands to break patterns and impact women to deconstruct beauty ideals and take a stand on cultural issues has increased. Denaturalising the historically built motherhood ideals disseminated by communication processes still provokes resistance. Reconstructing the role and image assigned to women-mothers is a pending chapter yet to be written, and the media play a key role in this process of producing meaning.

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Biographic Note

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