

Opium: Bottling and Commodifying the East

Marissa Fernholz

Within a shroud of sheer fabric, surrounded by white orchids and golden statues of the Buddha, a model wearing a kimono relaxes on a luxurious bed of pillows. A lone dancer writhes on the floor of a mysterious, exotic temple. A woman's voice provocatively whispers the tagline "I am your obsession." These are the images featured in the print and film advertisements for French fashion house Yves Saint Laurent's *Opium* fragrance line. Originally released in 1977, the scent has sparked controversy repeatedly with its highly sexualized advertisements and perceived endorsement of drug use. The line's concept and ad campaigns are a clear example of the commodification of the Orient, as the sensuality and exoticism of the East are now available for purchase by Western Audiences. *Opium* also serves as a case of commodity fetishism, as perfumes in general are granted transformative powers over the female body, and this particular line is shrouded in sexual fantasy. The trend of Orientalism in perfume development, branding, and advertisement demonstrates a lasting Western attachment to notions of the East as a binary other, a site of sensual indulgence. In addition to a postcolonial analysis, gender, race, and class critiques can and should be applied to the perfume line's advertisements and history of controversial images.

Advertisers describe *Opium* as symbolic of "Yves Saint Laurent's fascination with the Orient and his unique understanding of a woman's hidden emotions and inexplicable passions" (Sephora), and the perfume's history lives up to the grandiosity of this claim. A project that emerged alongside YSL's Chinese-inspired collection of 1977, *Opium* was groundbreaking from its conception: "Rather than following the French tradition of creating the fragrance first and then naming and deciding how to market it, the designer adopted the American technique of devising a name and image and then commissioning the development of a fragrance that would fit" (Amy-Chinn, 170-171). A launch party thrown by YSL was a preview of the decadence that

would come to be associated with *Opium*: banners of red, gold, and purple, alongside a thousand-pound statue of the Buddha, adorned a tall ship called *Peking*, the helm of which was manned by one of Saint Laurent's fellow Studio 54 regulars, Truman Capote (Moran, 170-171). The scent itself set the tone for the "power scents" that emerged during the 1980s (Dyhouse, 141) and is composed of "omnipotent notes of mandarin and bergamot... with middle notes of myrrh and jasmine... [and] a final accord of deep amber laced with Opoponaux" (Yves Saint Laurent). The fragrance is strikingly powerful, rich, and long lasting and has come to be one of the most popular fragrances of the 20th century.

Opium has gained fame for its distinctiveness as a fragrance, but the line's notoriety for its problematic concept and provocative advertisements kept its name in the press for the last 35 years. Since its release *Opium* has come under fire by anti-drug organizations for "both... glamorizing drug addiction and... trivializing the mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars between China and Britain... the [United States] federal Department of Justice tried to have *Opium* outlawed on the grounds that it encouraged a permissive attitude towards drugs" (Amy-Chinn, 171). In 2000, the Peoples' Republic of China banned the scent entirely after 5 years of sales, deeming the fragrance both an offensive reminder of the Opium wars and a "spiritual pollution for the younger generation" (Chu).

Fears that the perfume could inspire drug use and moral degeneration have only been fueled by the ad campaigns that have promoted sales and name-recognition of *Opium* since its release. The first ad featured model Jerry Hall and was shot by Helmut Newton, known for his provocative black-and-white fashion photography. The photograph shows Hall on a luxurious sofa, surrounded by opulent accessories and decorations, while "her head is thrown back in what Susan Irvine has described as '... a blissful stupor, whether on a high of sex, drugs, or scent we

don't know” (Amy-Chinn, 171). The exaggerated luxury and sexuality that are featured in the ad set the precedent for its successors, as the brand maintained the overtly Oriental theme for years.

The *Opium* brand also developed television commercials, often paired with print ads. These advertisements sought to push boundaries as much as everything else associated with the line. A 1992 commercial directed by David Lynch shrouds the fragrance in mystery via filmmaking techniques characteristic of the surrealist director and features a woman seductively caressing her neck, obviously feeling intense pleasure due to using the perfume as though it were a drug (Opium Commercial by David Lynch). In 2000, a Tom Ford-shot print ad featuring a nude Sophie Dahl was banned in the U.K. for being too sexually explicit. Dahl's position on her back with her head thrown back, as in many other *Opium* advertisements, was seen as “‘degrading’ to women and... likely to cause ‘serious or widespread offence’” (BBC News). These advertisements are the means by which the brand is proliferated in the global market and receive a great deal of international attention when accompanied by controversy. An analysis of the messages transmitted by these images and the political implications that follow will allow for a critical examination of Orientalism in advertising and the postcolonial and feminist responses to a revered classic in the fashion world.

The Oriental settings, objects, and values depicted in *Opium* ads are the product of a Western notion of the East and examples of the Orientalism that cultural critic Edward Said found to be so prominent in an age of Western hegemony. Said held that “the Orient that appears in Orientalism... is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire” (Said, 60). These representations of the East construct a generalized identity for a large geographical area of the earth, setting Eastern cultures up as a binary opposite of the West, namely Europe and the

United States. Said's work notes that "'the Arab' or 'Arabs' have an aura of apartness, definiteness, collective self-consistency such as to wipe out any traces of individual Arabs with narratable life histories" (Said, 64). The defining characteristic of the East is its opposition to the West, represented as the primitive, exotic, sensual, and deviant other to the West's civilization, familiarity, rationality, and virtuosity.

These notions of Eastern inferiority have long been manifest in Western popular culture, and exoticism and eroticism made Oriental representations wildly popular fashion trends. Carol Dyhouse notes that a modern idea of glamour emphasizes "the opulence and display of the theatre and demimonde, in Orientalism and the exotic, and in a conscious espousal of modernity and show of sexual sophistication" (Dyhouse, 9). Fragrance, with its sensually transformative properties and demonstration of ability to pay for luxury products, provides consumers with an opportunity to emulate this glamour and sophistication, and the emergence of oriental scents appealed to the market: "The 1910s and 1920s saw a growing demand for complex oriental compositions that evoked the harem-girl fantasies... Grossmith's four mass-market orientals... were sometimes stigmatized as 'servant girls' scent' but proved immensely popular" (Dyhouse, 19). These appeals maintain a clear level of influence in the *Opium* print ads, which are reminiscent of classic "Odelisque" paintings, giving the sense that the model might be living the life of a 'kept' harem girl, the recipient of lavish gifts who presumably provides sexual services to a mysterious sheik or prince. The reclined position and averted gaze of the models in *Opium*'s print ads have often implied an Eastern sexuality that was not just luxurious, but passive, with both the female model and the consumer transformed into objects of male gaze and desire.

While passive femininity was long associated with the Orient, *Opium* arrived on the fashion and beauty market shortly before some pioneers of Third Wave feminism began to

support a reclamation of female sexual agency through sexual empowerment. The emergence of *Cosmopolitan* in the early 1970s ushered in a revitalized desire for fashion that sought to utilize glamour as an expression of female agency. As Dyhouse recalls,

“the ‘Cosmopolitan Girl’ was defined as interested in men and her appearance, but not exclusively so; with a job and a mind of her own she was said to exhibit a new form of sexual confidence and agency. Consumption was for her pleasure, something earned rather than to be deplored. The tone was liberal-feminist, up-beat, self-improving, and competitive” (Dyhouse, 134).

These are the attitudes that gave rise to the popularity of “power scents” during the 1980s, and Yves Saint Laurent was setting the trends that brought feelings of agency and power to women through fashion. Not only was YSL responsible for the female adaptation of the tuxedo, safari jacket, and flying suit (Bio), but he also launched a scent that grew immensely popular with women who felt in charge of their sexuality and destiny. Now, consciously adopting the sensuality and luxury of the East put women closer to being the master of a harem, rather than one of the passive concubines forced into such a life.

The contrast between *Opium*’s print and video advertisements demonstrates these two competing images of feminine sexual agency, revealing what seem to be contradictions in the brand’s message even today. The 2000 Sophie Dahl print ad certainly suggests a sexuality that, while seemingly pleasurable, is largely passive. Her supine position and diverted gaze insinuate that she is a passive recipient of her pleasure, rather than active, dominant, or in control (Opium Ad-Sophie Dahl). Vivid shades of eye shadow and lipstick, along with the glowing of her flawless, hairless skin, make clear the level of manipulation in both styling and processing this photograph: No body looks quite like that naturally, and thus Dahl is a product of lighting, airbrushing, and makeup artistry rather than a woman in charge of her own body.

Another recent *Opium* photograph has not caused much controversy, but retains some of the “Odelisque-like” characteristics traditional in the print ads. Actress Emily Blunt reclines on a luxurious red and gold sofa similar to those used in the original shoots featuring Jerry Hall, and holds the bottle of perfume over her chest. (Whitworth) At first glance, it appears that Blunt is attempting to gaze seductively at the camera; this look, however, is likely the product of the eye makeup she is wearing. Rather, her relaxed face, along with her lounging pose, suggests an opiate-like high from the luxury of the perfume. While a subtle suggestion of the pleasure shared by both luxury perfumes and drugs, the model is rendered passive in her affected state. The suit Blunt wears in the ad, however, seems to contradict her relaxed state; the garment is one that would normally be worn in business or high fashion settings, a modern version of the 1980s “power suit.” The ad does not indicate whether *Opium* is a secret guilty pleasure for a powerful woman, or a tool that inspires motivation in her professional endeavors, as there is no signal of what the model was doing before reclining on the couch or will do after the captured moment. In the photograph, however, it is clear that *Opium* brings a drug-like pleasure to those who wear it—certainly an effective marketing tactic aimed at consumer groups that are either accustomed to or hope to live in the opulence and luxury associated with the exotic scent.

While these print ads capitalize on *Opium*'s association with oriental luxury by depicting a moment when a model is passive or temporarily incapacitated by the perfume's effects, video advertisements create a very different image of the *Opium* enthusiast. Emily Blunt's campaign for the scent included a television commercial in addition to the print ad, which provides a context for the still photo of her, reclined on a sofa, looking somewhat sedated. Alternating shots of Blunt and a leopard depict both prowling around ornate rooms. While at first it appears that the leopard may be hunting Blunt, they are actually in separate rooms (Opium Emily Blunt).

When Blunt enters the luxurious room with the leopard, she treats it as though it is a housecat, approaching it confidently and stroking it as she walks past toward her real goal, the perfume. Blunt demonstrates, to both the leopard and audiences, that she is in control, walking with purpose. When she reaches the perfume and applies it to her neck, she is shown experiencing the same pleasure as in many *Opium* print ads, but here it is a reward for a woman who is confident enough to tame a leopard. *Opium* is an incredibly strong and long-lasting scent that might overpower many who attempt to wear it, but women like Blunt can enjoy its richness and luxury. At no point is the model depicted as passive, but rather actively and aggressively pursuing her prize; she is reminiscent of the original Cosmopolitan Girl: “she was said to exhibit a new form of sexual confidence and agency. Consumption was for her pleasure, something earned rather than to be deplored” (Dyhouse, 134).

Another recent ad from Yves Saint Laurent can be seen as a demonstration of female sexual agency, rather than passivity. The television ad, for *Opium*'s successor *Belle d'Opium*, features a blonde model dancing in an empty stone temple, while drums beat faster and faster (*Belle d'Opium*). The model often stares into the camera, and her dancing is powerful; she takes great pleasure from her solitary movements and is confident in her seduction of the audience. Viewers are drawn in as the drums beat faster and video editing creates the illusion of movements that would not be physically possible for a dancer to do in just one take. The ad ends with the model in the same position as Sophie Dahl in the controversial ad from 2000: lying on her back with her legs slightly apart, back arched, and head thrown back in ecstasy. As the perfume bottle appears, she whispers, “I am your obsession.” Here again, YSL markets its perfume using images of women who appear confident and in charge of their sexuality, as the perfume aids them in becoming the seductress depicted. This ad, however, was banned in the

United Kingdom in the year of its release for complaints of encouraging drug use; at one point, the model points to the inside of her elbow and runs her index finger down her arm in a manner that could be interpreted as mimicking a heroin injection (Bergin).

Opium relies upon an essentialized vision of the East to sell its product, highlighting an exotic luxury constructed to serve the ends of not just Yves Saint Laurent, but Western corporations and culture more generally. As bell hooks notes in “Eating the Other,” “the commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing or feeling” (hooks, 21). Such is the case with the popularity and success of the *Opium* advertisements. Following a long tradition of Orientalist advertisements and sources of entertainment, the advertisements depict settings that are considered generically Eastern, lacking any cultural specificity; their inaccuracy, however, sells perfume through rich colors, soft fabrics, golden statues, and images of pleasure and luxury. For a post-9/11 American audience, the East portrayed in the advertisements is not only distinct from Western culture, but also the East that is depicted in news media and many popular notions of the Middle East, China, North and South Korea, or Japan (whereas many other Asian nations do not have a place in the minds of Americans). *Opium* sells not just a scent, but also the idea of an East that is not associated with terrorism, communism, technology, or animation.

In an age when these conceptions of the East might seem outdated, they are effective marketing tools for a luxury fragrance. They come at a political price, however. Through essentialized and generalized depictions of a large portion of the world, cultural distinctions and agency of both groups and individuals are lost. Again, hooks’ insights are clear and relevant: “the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever the difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not

only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of deconstruction" (hooks, 31). Eastern-ness is constructed as the sensual, exotic, and luxurious escape from the rational and business-minded west—perhaps Emily Blunt's video ad depicts the actress' preferred means of relaxation after a stressful day at work. This construction places limits on the action of individuals in and from what can be considered the East, as well as limiting the Western understanding, interest, or even goodwill toward the region as a whole, rather than encouraging understanding and empowering individuals.

While the two types of advertisements employed by Yves Saint Laurent portray two different images of female sexuality, a universal characteristic of *Opium* ads is the use of only white models, thus indicating the 'work' that still must be done on Eastern imagery in order to sell it to Western consumers. Just as the model in the controversial 2000 ad was airbrushed to have flawless, glowing white skin, the image of the Oriental is doctored in a way that makes it an ideal for Western audiences, particularly by placing Western individuals into these "strange" contexts to make them more familiar and safe. While bell hooks writes that "one desires 'a bit of the Other' to enhance the blank landscape of whiteness," (hooks, 29) a total departure from whiteness would be ineffective when attempting to sell *Opium* to white women. The advertisements not only identify with the Western fantasy of the luxurious East, but identify with the "Western woman" herself, showing white models, most often from the U.K. or United States. As communication scholars Raka Shome and Radha Hegde argue, these depictions are indicative of a larger world order and come with political implications:

“Global relations of capital today...produce complex planes of exclusion and inclusion, empowerment and disempowerment, that cannot always be mapped by a clear cut...between center/periphery, metropole/colony, or by a conclusive conviction that the identities and places we have located as dominant are always necessarily so in unchanging ways, and that the identities and planes that we have always located as marginal or subaltern are also necessarily so in unchanging ways.” (Shome & Hegde, 176)

As the Western look is inserted into Eastern imagery, the whiteness of these models is normalized, not only prompting Western or American culture to internalize its representation as normal and ideal, but also promoting the pursuit of such a look by non-white women worldwide. The decision of the Yves Saint Laurent house to use all white models indicates a conscious decision aimed at increasing identification with a certain understanding of the East. YSL was the first major European fashion house to use nonwhite runway models (Bio), making the conspicuous absence of diversity within the *Opium* ads all the more indicative of the Western taming of the East.

The implications do not stop at misunderstanding, however; the feminist critique of the ads, whether they are found to be objectifying or empowering, speaks only of their relationship to white Western women, as they are the group depicted. The special generalizations about the oppression of women by patriarchy are the product of Western feminism and often ignore the bigger picture of a situation in which many women in the postcolonial world find themselves—one that is characterized by marginalization based not just on gender, but also race, class, and the global economic system (Sharp, 116). If *Opium* television ads demonstrate empowered women who own their sexuality, they ignore the privilege to do so that is granted to such models by being white. While using models from Eastern nations would also be problematic objectification

and commodification of Othered cultures to the West, the use of all-white models is significant and demonstrates the privileging of whiteness in Western culture.

Turning a critical eye to the seemingly innocuous advertisements and products that hold a place in the daily lives of many American consumers is important, and an examination of the message within the *Opium* print and television ads reveals deep-seeded trends of Orientalism in Western fashion. Mixed messages about female sexual agency might spark debate among viewers of the advertisements, but the depiction of an East serves as the exotic Other to the West is questioned far less frequently, thus demonstrating the naturalization of the Oriental imagery in Western marketing. Those who stand the most to lose from conversations about these advertisements are women in Eastern nations, as the ads may be read as a demonstration of female empowerment; these advertisements do nothing to empower women who are not white (or not wealthy enough to afford the perfume regardless of race, for that matter). As a challenge that faces feminists in a postcolonial world, it is imperative to recognize the limited scope of Western thinking when examining global or non-Western trends, cultures, or practices. *Opium* demonstrates the power of imagery, not only in selling a product, but also in constructing the world around us.

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