“Coke Is It!”: Placing Coca-Cola in McCarthy’s THE ROAD

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Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel The Road describes the journey of a father and son through the post-apocalyptic wasteland of what was once the United States of America. Early in the novel, as the pair forage for food in a derelict supermarket, the father makes a remarkable discovery:

By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar. Coins everywhere in the ash. He sat and ran his hand around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola. (22–23)

The find results in a dramatic collision between the worlds of the pre- and post-apocalypse, precipitating a gesture of nostalgic reminiscence while it invites the reader to envisage the post-apocalyptic scenario of a world without the ubiquitous soft drink. The scene is like an advertiser’s dream: a father and son bonding over what has become an obsolete product. This moment offers a reprieve from a narrative dominated by a bitter struggle to survive while avoiding the marauding bands of cannibals that constitute most of what is left of humanity. That a can of Coke would be essential to this reprieve recalls the ideology that the Coca-Cola brand has worked so assiduously to establish since its inception in 1886 (captured, for example, in the 1929 slogan, “The Pause That Refreshes” [“Slogans for Coca-Cola”]). However, the scene also adumbrates, in its delineation of the desolate and defunct supermarket, the gross excesses of consumer culture which the novel as
a whole seems to critique. The “super” market is a corporate cannibal that feeds off those weaker entities of the same species and, through the monopoly of supply and demand, drives specialized, individual traders out of business. In this sense the supermarket epitomizes just the sort of self-consuming society McCarthy sends to its demise in the apocalypse that precedes the narrative of The Road. Cannibalism as a metaphor for consumption is realized in this novel, and, further, it articulates a relationship between consumption and the horrific, uncanny, and abject. The appearance of one of society’s most ubiquitous brands, an iconic, instantly recognizable product, sharpens the focus of this scene, amid the useless coin, dust, and ash of the once super market. The boy’s subsequent ignorance of the famous label provides an opportunity for the ironic introduction of one of the brand’s most identifiable slogans: “What is it?” he asks his father (23). The question is rhetorical, the answer implicit: “Coke Is It!”

“Coke Is It!” came to life in 1982, as part of an ongoing advertising campaign that had begun in 1886 with the words “Drink Coca-Cola.” Subsequently the expanding corporate machine that is Coca-Cola has worked to forge an ideology for its customers, one that promotes the product and its consumers as part of a global family of happy, peaceful, refreshed drinkers. In 1939 the slogan read “Whoever You Are, Whatever You Do, Wherever You May Be, When You Think of Refreshment, Think of Ice Cold Coca-Cola.” Throughout the decades that followed consumers were told: “Where There’s Coke There’s Hospitality” (1948); “It’s the Real Thing” (1969); “Coke Adds Life” (1976); “Coke Is It!” (1982); “You Can’t Beat the Real Thing” (1990); and so on, until the current incarnation, “Live On the Coke Side of Life” (2008) (“Slogans for Coca-Cola”). Perhaps the most famous of the brand’s advertising campaigns came in 1971 with the release of the New Seekers recording, “I’d Like to Buy the World a Coke.” The campaign’s creative director, Bill Backer, describes the moment of his epiphany in the “Coke Lore” section of the company’s Web site:

In that moment [I] began to see the familiar words, ‘Let’s have a Coke,’ as more than an invitation to pause for refreshment. They were actually a subtle way of saying, “Let’s keep each other company for a little while.” And [I] knew they were being said all over the world... a tiny bit of commonality between all peoples, a universally liked formula that would help to keep them company for a few minutes. (“Coke Lore”)

Thus a universe of understanding is based around the idea of the consumption of one product, instantly identifiable, one name with one meaning.
In McCarthy’s novel, in the post-apocalyptic hell through which his protagonists limp, there is very little in the way of names that carry specific meanings, signified by an absence of proper nouns. There are no brand names in this text, no recognizable *disjecta membra* other than this can of Coke. Even the central characters remain nameless. What, then, is the significance of the placement of this product, here, in this text, the only name, the only brand, to survive the apocalypse, “the Real Thing”? Appearing as it does at a very early stage in the novel, the episode foregrounds the discourse of consumption and its implicit claims to a form of authenticity made through Coke’s advertising slogans. In its invitation to the reader to envisage the progressive stages of excess and waste through this narrative vignette, the supermarket scene establishes the tension that the text will continue to exploit, between pre- and post-apocalyptic worlds, between the excessive—yet enjoyable—consumption signaled by the can of Coke and the horrific cannibalistic consumption of the novel’s present. The novel describes the demise of humanity in the same terms as those articulated in the Coke incident: a detrimentally excessive consumption finds both its apotheosis and its apocalypse in cannibalism, the utter and abject dissolution of recognizable society. The Coke scene registers this excessive consumption through the implicit admission of the power of the product and its advertising, with its now hollow promise of a community of humankind, and its placement here acts as a warning against the possible future that the novel portrays.

This is confirmed later in the novel when the protagonists stumble upon an underground bunker whose larder is fully stocked with provisions, including Coca-Cola. The appearance of the product is once again registered in terms of the disjunction it provokes between the worlds of the pre- and post-apocalypse as the boy asks of the treasure trove, “Is it real?” (139) The reader is immediately referred back to the scene in the supermarket and the son’s assessment of the pre-apocalyptic relic: “It’s really good” (23); furthermore, the reader knows that Coke is more than “really good”—“It’s the Real Thing.”

The “Real Thing” here is mythologized to the point of consumer fantasy—what if this were the last coke on earth, ever? What happens to the status and claim of Coke to a kind of reality that the consumer ought to buy into, to be a part of the one world of Coke drinkers everywhere? The father in the novel does not actually name the product itself. Rather, by inverting the most recognizable of Coke’s slogans, the statement that is universally accepted by the consumer, “Coke Is It!” becomes the question, “What is it?” The brand name then no longer carries the denotative immediacy of the sign, it no longer signifies those advertising mantras—at least not in the world of the novel. But in the world of the reader it still carries those connotations. In keeping with the narrative style of the novel, this further identifies the reader with the character of the father, as a product, along with Coke itself, of the pre-apocalyptic world. The boy can read, yet having no
reference within which to categorize the name “Coca-Cola,” he simply accepts the beverage as offered. For the reader unable to divorce this ubiquitous product from the language of its ideology, however, the text swarms with a multiplication of references to “Coke,” and to its place in consumer society. The possible extinction of the product is registered as concomitant with the gross excesses of that society, and the realization of a world where the iconic product is no longer immediately recognized is indicative of the novel’s critique of excessive consumption, signified by the hollow claims of authenticity and fellowship made by Coke’s marketers. Ultimately, in the world of The Road, the characters’ reality lies in their individual struggle for survival, in the everyday processes of domestic routine, which are untouched by the mantra of universality that reverberates through Coke’s advertising campaigns. As the iconic residue of the pre-apocalyptic society, the extinction of Coke marks the text’s endeavor to demonstrate in the severest sense the discrepancy between reality and “the Real Thing,” the last representative of a consumer fantasy that is no longer tenable.

Works Cited


