

# Understanding Popular Culture: The Uses and Abuses of Fashion Advertising

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Today's young people are bombarded by messages. They should be taught to evaluate what they hear, to understand how ideas are clarified or distorted, and to explore how the accuracy and reliability of an oral [visual] message can be tested (Boyer, 1983, p.92).

Students are often manipulated by media messages and they are unaware of the uses and abuses of the media by advertisers. In many ways such manipulation makes students dependent on materialistic rewards, regardless of moral concern. As a remedy, Lanier (1966) advocates developing a critical consciousness, "an informed awareness of the social forces which oppress our lives." (p.23).

In the past art educators have largely stressed the fine arts, mostly ignoring the popular arts, such as television, movies, comics, and advertisements. The fine arts, however, often are far removed from students' everyday lives, while the popular arts are their daily stimulation. Thus, the study of popular art is a logical place to start training students in critical thinking.

Hilsabeck (1984) believes that the study of popular culture is one of the essential tasks of the Carnegie Report (National Association of Secondary Principals, 1983), which advocates the linking of technology to learning and the taking advantage of the information explosion. This task involves understanding the origins, messages, changes, and impact of mass culture on society. Indeed, many false myths and stereotypes are created by the media and advertising.

The purpose of this article is to focus on the uses and abuses of one aspect of popular culture: fashion advertisement. A brief account of its historical evolution is first given and then its current practices and content are analyzed. By focusing on one popular magazine, *Vogue* (November, 1987), fashion advertising's stereotypes and

thematic, expressive, and formal elements are revealed. Next, a series of questions rates the advertisements as the worst, most boring, most honest, most imaginative, and best. Finally, the superlative advertisement in the category, "most intriguing," is critiqued in-depth as a model for students to use.

The research expands the ideas of Synnott (1983) in his visual analysis of gender presentation in the *New York Times* Sunday Magazine. He discovered that "over a quarter (28%) of the female ads display women as somehow not normal: extremely aggressive, crazy, exposing themselves in public or, in a word, "upside-down" (p.56). Through guiding questions, an analytical discussion should help art teachers develop students' critical understanding of fashion images and their role in developing attitudes in contemporary society.

## How Did the Fashion Industry Develop?

In the beginning, fashion advertising was a socially leveling industry, in that it contributed to dissolving class and social distinctions in dress. Ready-made clothing was first designed for the function-

al purposes of mobile working-class people in specialized jobs (Ewen & Ewen, 1982). 'Clothes of this sort were called "slops." In fact, "Brooks Brothers started the first "slopshop" around 1810" (p.164). Such cheap clothing was in demand for Negro slaves and soldiers during the Civil War. New York City's garment industry grew in direct proportion to such demands. With the growth of the printing industry that advertised the new styles, came the proliferation of the concept of image, that is, styled goods designed to keep up with the new social demands. Simultaneously came the exploitation of sweatshop labor, the palaces of consumption, and the sirens of style. "Mass fashion afforded immigrants the possibility to be somebody in a new world, by rejecting the indignities of the past and accomodating them to the world of display in which they sought their future" (p.210). Fashion, where choices are many and rules are few, offered freedom and rebellion, especially to the youth. Fashion also liberated women, but stereotyped them as objects of desire.

### **How Are Women Stereotyped?**

A stereotype is a standardized mental image and an oversimplified idea and feeling about it. The fashion industry exploits beauty by stereotyping women as young and sexy, without any identity, and as predominantly white. To be old and ugly is not acceptable and makes a woman doubtful of her own self worth. In the November, 1987 issue of Vogue, all of the women in advertisements except three are young. Older women appear in smaller ads advertising aging cream or a fitness resort. One ad features the aging Audrey Hepburn as a legend selling Blackglama Mink. All of the models are white except three. One attractive black woman advertises flatware, which is

bizarrely arranged as earrings, inferring that black women wear large (gaudy) dangling appendages. In contrast, men, who appear in four ads, are allowed to look older and more rugged, like the Marlboro cowboy, implying that men are still attractive at older ages.

### **How are Women Portrayed, as Working or Acting?**

Out of 458 pages in this issue of Vogue, approximately 158 are advertisements featuring women's fashions consisting of clothes (36%), perfume (13%), makeup or body lotions (13%), jewelry (10%), and watches (8%), furs (9%), and hair-coloring (6%). (See Table 1.) Women are primarily portrayed as working to advertise clothes and make-up and to act as a decoration or an object of desire, while men are featured as active workers, such as a speedboat racer in an ad for Vantage "high performance" cigarettes. None of the ads depict women performing normal jobs. Most of the women are depicted as standing around (67%), sitting (18%), walking (7%), lying down (4%), and jumping (3%). (See Table 2.)

### **What Themes Sell Products?**

What themes are utilized to sell products? Twentieth century advertisers now use blatant sexuality, obsession, the bizarre, and snob appeal to sell their products. The practice of exposing the body is common (26%). Seven of the ads feature nude women, such as Stoppers Perfume and Prescriptive skin care. Thirty of the ads feature such things as the plunging neckline, the French-cut thigh, and undergarments. Even a woman's nipple accidentally (but deliberately) slips out of her dress. Fashions are highly provocative; for instance, Cache uses the active sense of the word "provoke" to feature looks for intriguing nights. Just when I wonder if men

would ever be photographed in such a way, along comes Perry Ellis with its ad for men's underwear, in which a man photographed from the rear, three-quarter view, lifting himself up in a typical female pose (Figure 1).

Advertisers are competing to create the most perverse and bizarre advertisements (12%). The intention is to shock. Obsession is a new key theme in advertisement, epitomized in Calvin Klein's new perfume called Obsession. Advertisers attempt to





arouse fantasies and to promote passions in a perfume ad by Fendi, which features a girl kissing a Roman male statue; to provoke incest by posing a young girl among her dolls in Christine Dior undergarments; to suggest murder in a perfume ad for Poison by Christine Dior; to cater to homosexuality with the (double entendre) line "panty-hose for men"; and to feature drugs with the perfume Opium. Advertisers still use subliminal seduction to sell many of their products (Key, 1973). In one of the *Vogue* ads, a woman bends to kiss a (penis-shaped) bottle of L'Air du Temps perfume by Nina Ricci in a most suggestive way (Figure 2). Females are featured as more aggressive in behavior than men, for example, in an ad for Torrids Haircolor by Clairol, a woman is undressing a man, and in an ad for Charlie perfume, a girl has her hand on a man's derriere.

Snob appeal, another theme, is

most evident in ads for furs (28%). A red beaver example catches the eye, begging the question is it real or fake? Leather clothes are also quite popular. Finally, all five watch advertisers feature their watches as status symbols; for example, Movado is depicted as the museum watch, as the esquire (ESQ), and as a "classic" with Roman numerals. (See Table 3).

### What Kind of Facial Expressions are Dominant?

Fifty-two percent of the models' facial expressions in the ads are cold and expressionless. Others are tempting (9%), romantic (8%), and happy (21%). (See Table 4.) The most happy models are ironically in the cigarette ads. Typical is the exuberance they express in the Virginia Slims Ultralight ad. Pouty expressions (8%) are now fashionable for that spoiled, demanding look.

Even the Bizarre (.08%) is highlighted in the death-like face of the model for Poison perfume.

### What Colors Predominate and What Do They Express?

Black is the outstanding color of the issue with 47% of the fashion entries, followed by white (20%), brown (17%), pink (8%), and red (7%). (See Table 5.) Black seems to suggest the sensual, the sophisticated, and the mysterious, while white and brown imply elegance; brown being the natural color of all the furs.

### What Forms or Compositions are Dominant?

The way an advertisement is composed or arranged is very revealing. Forty-six percent of the advertisers position the female figure in the middle of the page

(See Table 6). Only three of these are dynamic; they fill the page. Nineteen percent feature a diagonal arrangement and are often the most exciting ads (Figure 3). The big/little comparison or foreground/background image (17%) produce contrast. Some ads "off-center" a single female image (11%) and others use a symmetrical side-by-side image (3%). Formal analyses suggests that advertisers use size and direction to sensationalize images.

### The Most Intriguing Ad: An In-Depth Analysis

What is the most intriguing ad and why is it so? By using Feldman's (1970) method of art criticism (description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment) as a guide perhaps a judgment can be made. An advertisement for Anne Klein II perfume (Figure 4) will be used as

EXACT SKINCARE

FOR THE BODY



Dieting. Exercise. Good for the body.  
But putting a strain on nature. Unleashing  
loss of firmness. Stretch marks. Dryness.  
Prescriptives Body Care is the new skin care  
for these contemporary concerns. Not just  
another body cream. It's scientific. Sensuous.  
A new way to treat your body sensibly.

PRESCRIPTIVES



## THE FRAGRANCE

an example.

Description: What do you see? What images are represented? The advertisement consists of three components--the product displayed full size, with a black cast shadow in the form of a female, and the words "The Fragrance" at the bottom.

Analysis: What lines, shapes, colors, textures are repeated? Diagonal lines both unify and add excitement to the ad. The glass bottle further refracts the form. Color consists of muted purple-grey shadows and the golden-yellow watch suggesting a subtle complemen-

tary contrast. The texture is smooth and the feeling is mellow.

Interpretation: What meaning or message does this ad suggest to you? What first appears as a simple advertisement later suggests mystery, both in its shadowy form as well as its limited copy. This understatement coaxes one to look further or to wonder about this new fragrance.

Judgment: No sensationalism is necessary here. Good formal design, consisting of diagonal line and color contrast, creates a most

alluring message. The hidden message is that Anne Klein II perfume is "on the cutting edge."

### **Conclusion**

Advertising as a popular art form had been used to promote the good, to educate the masses, and to criticize bad ideas and practices. For years, the fashion industry served practical functions with its ready-made clothes. As a deregulator of styles, it transformed psychological and social ideas and contributed to a new lifestyle: consumerism. At the same time, advertising has also exploited the bad and the ugly in the forms of the sexual, the fantastic, the romantic, the perverse, and the stereotypic. The image of women has been principally distorted, their being depicted as decorative, sexual, bizarre, and desirable: an "object." "The pursuit of beauty through consumption is considered among the modern skills of survival for women" (Ewen, 1976, p.181).

While compared to Synnott's (1983) finding that 28% of the ads in The New York Times presented women as not normal, my findings suggest worse: none of the women are portrayed at normal jobs; they predominantly stand around doing little or nothing (67%); they still expose themselves; their facial expressions are cold and expressionless (52%); and they are getting blatantly more aggressive. Sensational images, full of naked women, gaudy jewelry, and camera tricks cheapen the art of advertising. Women are led to believe that their first duty is to attract attention and that the cold and demanding look is proper behavior. Consumerism is shaping what to buy, how to act, how to dream, and how to understand the world. Henry (1963/65) calls this kind of thinking "pecuniary philosophy based on pseudo-truth" a false statement made as if it were truth,

but not intended to be believed. No proof is offered, "...and no one looks for it" (p.47). Lynes (1949/1980) further warns that:

Taste is like conscience; all have it, but they may blunt it; drown its voice, and finally so deaden themselves to its power as to prevent its warnings and warp its influence...(p.80).

### **Implications for Art Teaching**

The American public, including schoolchildren, must be educated to critically differentiate between the counter-productive and the socially constructive messages of our times. Art teachers can help students discriminate manipulative techniques in magazine and video ads through guided questions, such as: What is the worst advertisement? What is the most boring one? What is the most honest advertisement? Which one is the most exotic? These ads can be evaluated for style as well as content.

Examples of award-winning and uplifting advertising can also be photographed or videotaped and discussed. For instance, Wheatena's ad "Toast to Women's Eternal Sex Appeal" represented a far more respectable image of femininity (in old age) in comparison to the more seductive kinds (Lois, 1977). Realism has been found to be the most effective advertising technique for many products. One of the most ironic examples of critical advertising was an award-winning commercial protesting the killing of animals for their furs and skins, sponsored by The Citizens Coalition (Cannes Goods, 1984). This ironic film clip featured fur-clad women being clubbed and dragged across the ice, with the message, "Fur, You Deserve It!"

Art teachers can even guide students to evaluate one advertise-

ment in depth using Feldman's (1970) descriptive, analytical, interpretive, and judgmental stages, as in my evaluation of the ad for Anne Klein II perfume. Finally, students can then be encouraged to find examples of unethical advertising and to make their own advertisements criticizing a product, like cigarettes, soaps, and fashions. Art education must make the study of art more relevant to young people by helping them become more critical of the uses and abuses of art in society.

**Table 1**  
**Types of Fashion Advertisements in Vogue (November 1987)**

Clothes	(57)	36 %
Perfume	(20)	13 %
Makeup	(20)	13 %
Jewelry	(16)	10 %
Furs	(15)	9 %
Watches	(12)	8 %
Haircoloring	(10)	6 %
Other	(8)	5 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>(158)</b>	<b>100 %</b>

**Table 2**  
**Advertisements Portraying Women Working or Acting**

Standing Around	(94)	67 %
Sitting	(25)	18 %
Walking	(10)	7 %
Lying Down	(6)	4 %
Jumping	(4)	3 %
Other	(1)	0.5%
Normal Jobs	(0)	0 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>(140)</b>	<b>100 %</b>

**Table 3**  
**Themes That Sell Products**

The Perverse and the Bizarre	(17)	12 %
Total/Partial Nudity	(7)/(30)	26 %
Snob Appeal	(40)	28 %
Other	(46)	33 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>(140)</b>	<b>100 %</b>

**Table 4**  
**Dominant Face Expressions**

Cold & Expressionless	(64)	52 %
Happy	(26)	21 %
Tempting	(11)	9 %
Romantic	(10)	8 %
Pouty	(10)	8 %
Bizarre	(1)	.08 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>(122)</b>	<b>100 %</b>

**Table 5**  
**Dominant Clothes Colors and Their Expression**

Black	(40)	47 %
White	(17)	20 %
Brown	(15)	17 %
Pink	(7)	8 %
Red	(6)	7 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>(85)</b>	<b>100 %</b>

(includes clothes, leathers, furs)

**Table 6**  
**Dominant Form or Composition**

Middle-of-the-Page	(64)	46 %
Diagonal	(26)	19 %
Big/Little Contrast	(24)	17 %
Off-Center	(15)	11 %
Other	(7)	5 %
Side-by-Side	(4)	3 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>(140)</b>	<b>100 %</b>

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