

ROUTLEDGE INTERPRETIVE MARKETING RESEARCH



VISUAL CONSUMPTION

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6 Marketing identity, consuming difference

Although advertising is largely a visual medium, consumer research, for the most part, has not adopted a visual perspective (for exceptions see McQuarrie and Mick 1999; Meamber 1998; Scott 1994a; Stern and Schroeder 1994; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998). Recently, however, advertising imagery has been analyzed by several art historians to investigate its use of photography (Johnston 1997), the connections between advertising and art (Bogart 1995), and the artist's role in producing advertising (Lears 1994). Greater awareness of the associations between the traditions and conventions of art history and the production and consumption of images leads to enhanced ability to understand how advertising works as a visual representational system.

In the following two chapters, I treat advertising imagery much the way an art historian treats pictures as I proceed to analyze illustrative examples through the classic art historical techniques of formal analysis, compare and contrast, and interpretation – all framed within representation understood as a cultural practice (Summers 1996). By drawing on art historical research, particularly an approach to criticizing photographs, I aim to produce close readings of popular and successful contemporary advertising campaigns. I show how art historical conventions inform consumer imagery, thus infusing it with visual, historical, and rhetorical presence and power.

My overarching framework views meaning, in advertising as well as art, as the result of social practices that are constantly changing. Thus, it is necessary to focus on how images work, that is, the social and cultural antecedents for contemporary visual culture and the ways that each contribute to understanding (cf. McQuarrie and Mick 1999). Images are not merely “nonverbal” information that convey more or less the same message that text might impart (Scott 1994b). Rather, images constitute a system of representations – a visual language that is both engaging and deceptive. Advertising imagery, as a subset within this system, interacts with it, borrowing from and influencing the larger world of visual culture. Art historical approaches generate distinctive ways of understanding consumer imagery. By uncovering an advertisement's art historical antecedents,

art-centered tools open up possibilities for researching contemporary advertising: “[t]here is a literary and historical precedent for most types of ads now used, and analysis of past examples ... helps illuminate the present consumer context” (Stern 1989: 330).

A key concern in my analysis is identity, and how it functions within visual consumption. In discussing issues of gender, race, and sexual orientation, I open up considerations of how advertising functions as representation within the social contexts of cultural difference – including race, sexual orientation, and gender (Schroeder and Borgerson 2002). Specifically, how does advertising represent multicultural identities? By focusing on one well-known advertisement as an exemplar of these issues, we gain understanding and insight into its power as an image, icon, and cultural artifact.

In this chapter I introduce a visual method for advertising research. The analysis presented here starts with a brief description of art criticism as a tool for examining visual materials, drawing on several basic interpretive guides (Barnet 1997; Barrett 1996; Roskill 1989). Criticism – describing, interpreting, evaluating, and theorizing – provides a framework for interpretive advertising research. I first offer a short tutorial on the basic issues of criticism, and then apply these to a well-known CK One advertisement that introduced a visual style into 1990s advertising imagery. The chapter then presents an interpretive framework via the work of contemporary cultural critics to draw out multicultural implications. The concept of *consuming difference* is introduced to theorize how difference is represented in contemporary advertisements such as CK One. Moreover, the consuming difference concept implies that CK One’s alternative-looking images merely reflect mainstream attitudes about multicultural differences. I argue that these insights emerge uniquely from considering the ad as a visual image and subjecting it to a variety of comparisons to other works, photographers, and art historical genres. Finally, the use of art criticism as a method for understanding advertising and visual consumption is discussed.

A visual approach to advertising imagery

Interpretive analysis combines detailed visual description with interpretation and cultural criticism, informed by a growing body of knowledge within “visual culture” studies. Visual culture is the term (not without controversy) used to characterize a growing interest – in and outside academia – in the importance of the visual image and representation (Mirzoeff 1999). As leading visual culture theorist Johanna Drucker states:

Insofar as the visual forms of graphic design inscribe ideological values and cultural attitudes in the very specific modes of their consumption, finish, treatment, and other features of visual rhetoric, they are potent indices of the social conditions in which they are produced.

(Drucker 1999: 42)

Literary scholar Robert Scholes suggests that interpretive reading is a process that we use not only to make sense of the world, but also to construct our life narratives. He underscores the influence of life experience and cultural context in understanding cultural works, and emphasizes critical comparison in seeing as interpretation:

This “seeing” is a reading, a decoding, in which we begin with interpretive gestures so apparently simple and natural that we think of them as “seeing” but we end by becoming more aware of our own share in constructing this visual text, as we bring more and more information from our other reading, from our experience of art, from our lives, to bear upon the process.

(Scholes 1989: 2)

Scholes’s approach to reading is useful to conceptualize the role that interpretation can play in understanding advertising images and placing visual consumption within a broader frame of the interpreted life.

In the next section, art historical tools are described as techniques to analyze advertising. First, I discuss advertising as a cultural representational practice that produces meaning through signification. Next, I present important theoretical tools – representation, criticism, and photography. Then, I outline a method for incorporating art criticism into consumer research which is applied in the following section.

Art-centered methods for consumer research

Advertising is rarely discussed within an art historical paradigm, for it is usually considered a commercial form of low art beneath the purview of art historians. However, this is changing as visual studies expands to incorporate more forms of visual expression. Richard Leppert’s art history textbook focuses extensively on the visual language of advertising:

It is lost on no one that a significant portion of our conscious and unconscious understandings of ourselves and our immediate world is framed by the imagery of advertising, both in the medium of print and on television. This imagery urges what sort of bodies to have and to desire – or to build; it influences our sense of self, our belief systems, our individuality, and our status as social beings; it encourages what clothes to wear or car to drive, which political party to vote for, and so forth.

(Leppert 1997: 3)

An art historical approach enables consumer researchers to look outside of the image or text to ground their analysis in social and cultural contexts. Art historical concepts and methods provide an historical and visual background

to contextualize contemporary advertising imagery and complement more traditional social science derived research. The interpretive process is complex, “and there is no one way critics use to arrive at their understandings of images” (Barrett 1996: 106). In this section, I outline a basic approach to analyzing advertisements within the frame of art criticism.

There are many ways to begin an analysis of a work of art, a photograph, or an advertisement, but most critics agree that description is the starting point for interpretation. Basic descriptive work requires articulation of form, subject matter, genre, medium, color, light, line, and size – the building blocks of images. Some art historical knowledge is helpful for identifying form and genre and making art historical comparisons. For example, I approach the CK One image as a photograph. When working with photographs, relevant issues include production qualities, the photographer’s vantage point, focus, and depth of field (Barrett 1996). The relationship between description and interpretation is intricate, but ideally, interpretations emerge from descriptive details.

Interpretive tools include information both internal and external to the object, such as context, comparisons, denotation, and connotation. In Table 6.1, an overview of basic interpretive techniques is presented, emphasizing the following art historical elements: subject matter, form, medium, style, genre and contextual issues. Internal sources of information include analysis of descriptive elements listed above, as well as photography-specific issues of tone, paper quality, and type of camera and lens used to generate the image. Contextual issues concern matters such as the picture’s purpose – for the photographer, subject, owner, or client – and how it is presented, for example, in a museum, magazine, gallery, or family photo album. That is, contextual issues encompass concerns external to the photograph or advertisement.

Comparison is a key contextualizing interpretive process (Barnet 1997). Comparisons can be made to other photographers’ work, other work by the same photographer, other images that seem connected, as well as cultural products such as other advertisements, novels or films. Comparison, in particular, demands a visual vocabulary of images, poses, and conventions. In addition, the cultural context of the photograph informs its analysis. For example, one reviewer of photographer Richard Avedon’s work drew comparisons to his previous work, other photographer’s work, writers, and plays. The exhibit “In the American West” comprised large black and white portraits of people who lived in the Western United States. Criticism of this exhibit made comparative references to many famous “storytellers” to support the argument that Avedon’s photographs told stories (Barrett 1996).

In the following sections, an iconic 1990s CK One ad will serve as an promising example of an interpretation of a contemporary advertisement grounded in art history. The ad is first contextualized with information about its purpose and producer, then described. Following the detailed

Table 6.1 Comparative visual analysis of the 1994 CK One advertisement

<i>Art historical element</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Comparison</i>
Subject Matter	Group; Kate Moss; Different-looking models	Warhol's Factory Gang; "A Chorus Line" Icons
Form	Fold-out ad	Polyptych; Renaissance altarpiece
Medium	Several black & white photographs	Cut-up photographs
Style	Realistic, harsh	Richard Avedon; Robert Mapplethorpe
Genre	Group portrait	Dutch art; Cornelius Ketel
Contextual Issues	Difference; Multiculturalism	Cultural criticism: Erving Goffman on gender Susan Bordo on the body bell hooks on race, sex Henry Giroux on cultural history

description that draws from several sources, an interpretation is presented that makes several comparisons to the CK One ad – from the world of art history, cultural studies, and advertising research. The objective is to discuss how advertising imagery produce meaning through an art-centered reading of a provocative and popular advertising campaign. A further goal is to produce knowledge about visual consumption via a close reading of an important case study.

Analytic categories for visual analysis

This section presents basic descriptive categories in drawing out connections and comparisons to the CK One ad. I then move on to interpretation, and discuss the work of cultural theorists Susan Bordo, Henry Giroux, Erving Goffman, and bell hooks to contextualize the analysis of the CK One ad. I advance my argument that the CK One ad's implicit intention is to allow viewers to "consume difference" – that is, experience the feeling of doing something different and defying conventions. By difference, I mean lifestyle, looks, gender identity or racial identity that differs from the mainstream, especially in the relatively homogeneous world of advertising, which, up until recently, represented a very small portion of people as consumers.

The analysis will advance through four stages: description, interpretation, evaluation, and theorization. This detailed reading of an advertisement – informed by a theoretical framework of consuming difference – is intended to demonstrate the possibilities of an art-centered approach to visual consumer research. Although the method and interpretive stance may be separated, in this analysis they are intertwined.

Description

The first step in a visual analysis is to describe the image. This is accomplished by pointing out features contained within it, such as formal properties of composition, color, tone, contrast. This level of analysis will be most uniform among observers, varying mostly in terms of art historical knowledge, language, and jargon. A basic method of describing is to place the image within a genre, or type, in which the crucial variables are subject and medium. These categories are not wholly separate, and frankly, it is often impossible to prevent interpretation from seeping into description (Roskill 1989).

The CK One campaign

Background information: Calvin Klein's advertising campaigns have sparked controversy and comment for over twenty years (e.g., Lippert 1996; Miller 1992; Seo 1998). Sex appeal is usually invoked by Klein's ads and provides much of the equity in his products which cover the gamut from blue jeans to evening wear (see Schroeder 2001). Introduced by Calvin Klein in 1994, CK One is a fragrance marketed to both sexes. "For a man or a woman," reads the ad copy – noteworthy in today's targeted environment, especially in a product category that is closely linked with gender identity and sexual allure. CK One is marketed through unusual channels, as well. For example, it is sold in Tower Records music stores, and its packaging resembles an aluminum military-type water bottle (Sloan 1994). The fragrance is successful and the ad is well known among teenagers and twenty-somethings. Calvin Klein has introduced a second gender-neutral fragrance campaign, CK Be (Sloan 1996). The multi-million dollar CK One campaign, photographed by Steven Meisel, was the first to garner the Fragrance Foundation's top awards in both men and women's fragrance categories (Campbell 1995).

As an advertising exemplar, CK One provides a compelling image to subject to visual analysis. The CK One images seem to play and subvert gender norms, and they have generated much attention and controversy (e.g., Elliot 1994; Sullivan 1995). They were an icon of visual culture in the 1990s, and have been cited, referenced, and parodied by many other campaigns. The CK One ad has caught the attention of many, and has greatly influenced the world of advertising photography (e.g., Seo 1998).

Images from the campaign were displayed in the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York as part of the art exhibition "The Warhol Look" (Francis and King 1997).

Like so many image-based ads, the CK One ads make no mention of the product's physical attributes, but instead promote a highly abstract connection between the photographer's models and the brand (Stern and Schroeder 1994). We are asked to transfer meaning from the look of the people in the ad – their image, lifestyle, physical appearance – onto the product (Goldman 1992; Williamson 1978). Therefore, it is critical to understand how meaning is visually constructed in this ad. An important contributor to meaning is art historical referents that inform and influence the creation and reception of the ad. This not to imply that all viewers see the art historical antecedents in images such as the CK One ad, or that all viewers would make the same connections. However, the traditions of art history inform how we relate to the visual world, profoundly affect advertising imagery, and most advertising photographers have been exposed to the history of art and photography.

Subject matter: A useful starting point for descriptive analysis is to "identify and typify persons, objects, places, or events in a photograph" (Barrett 1996: 20). The CK One ad under scrutiny appeared across six pages in the September 1994 issue of *Glamour* magazine. There are many versions of the basic ad, all consist of a stark black and white image of several people standing, most facing the camera. In certain CK One images, several separate photographs seem to be joined together, resulting in a jarring, disjointed look that resembles a collage.

One focal subject of the ad is Kate Moss, the famous British supermodel, who dominates the scene through her fame. Moss got her start toward supermodel stardom in 1990 after appearing on the cover of *The Face* magazine. She gives the viewer a hook into the ad and guides its interpretation (Berger 1972). Kate Moss "hails" us, the viewer, by her fame, her roles in other Calvin Klein ads, and her image as a white, heterosexual woman informed by her well-publicized romantic liaisons with male stars. Moss's status overwhelms the other figures in the ad, rendering them supporting players in the icon-driven world of celebrity.

What characterizes this ad is the look of the people in it – they appear different, multicultural, and not often seen (at the time) in major ad campaigns. In the version of the ad analyzed here, the image is a fold-out. Closed, the two pages are covered by a picture of Kate Moss and another white woman facing each other, turned profile to the camera, gazing into each other's eyes. In the first image, Moss, hands in her back pocket, head thrown back, dressed in a black bra and black cutoff shorts, is grasped at the beltloops by the other women's fingers. This opens out to reveal four pages of photographs depicting a small group of people standing together against a plain white background. Several of the figures appear in two of the images. They are dressed casually, the men in jeans and T-shirts or bare

chests, the women in jeans or shorts, T-shirts, and high-heeled shoes or sandals. Upon unfolding this image, Moss is no longer interacting with the woman – indeed it is unclear if she is in the group image at all (I will return to this puzzle later). The models appear to be posed together, not really displaying characteristics of friends or a familiar group. Some are engaged in animated conversation, others are looking out at the camera. A few seem to be just standing in place.

The fold-out version of the ad consists of four separate photographs pieced together, with sixteen young people depicted in total. Most look at the camera. A few engage in conversation, or at least interchange. All are thin. At first glance, the models seem grungy, unkempt. All except one woman is wearing jeans, CK's undoubtedly, five of the men are bare-chested, two revealing their (Calvin Klein?) underwear. Excluding Kate Moss, the women are not particularly feminine in the traditional sense of being made-up, petite, and well-groomed. One black woman, in particular, has an angry expression on her face, and a group of two white men and a white woman seem to be engaged in a heated argument.

Form: Form refers to how the subject matter is presented. The CK One ad features stark black and white photographs of people who seemed – at the time – out of place in the advertising pantheon. Skinheads mingle incongruously with tough-looking black women. Feminine men are posed next to Moss. Long-haired men pose next to a short-haired women with large tattoos on her arm. In the first image of the two women looking at each other, there is clearly a sexual element. One analysis described the ad's formal treatment of its subject matter within sexual orientation terms:

In Calvin Klein's latest ad campaign for his unisex fragrance CK One, he attempts to cross gender boundaries with an "androgynous" presentation. In this image, Klein has set up a "butch/femme" scenario in which the two women are about to kiss. The scenario is a perfect example of how the mainstream media suggests queerness; even though it is two women, it still suggests heterosexual role playing. The "butch" is wearing a masculine undershirt, jeans and has her hair slicked back into a pony tail. The "femme" is wearing a bra, short shorts and has long flowing "feminine" hair. Their facial texture is gendered through the "butch's" weathered, muscular look. The "femme" has a smooth, shiny, silky face. Furthermore, in order to allure the "butch," the "femme" exhibits culturally defined feminine, seductive body language.

(Pinkel *et al.* 1995)

The CK One image plays to several audiences, and seems to subvert visual advertising conventions while simultaneously reinforcing stereotypical concepts of identity, sexuality, and difference.

An additional formal element is the fold-out nature of this ad; it swings open to reveal four photographs spread out over four magazine pages. This form is similar to a polyptych, a work of art composed of four or more panels, often hinged together (West 1996). Altarpieces are frequently polyptychs, and commonly open up to reveal hidden images of their sacred subjects. Renaissance altarpieces traditionally showed four saints, one for each panel of a polyptych. The panels open up to reveal an image of Christ, or the Madonna enthroned, and the Saint associated with the church or parish. This aspect gives the ad additional art historical resonance, and may contribute to the “worship” of the CK One icons.

An altarpiece’s images fit the context of the church for which they were produced. For example, the St Anthony Altarpiece by Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca depicts the Saint himself along with figures related to the regional order of nuns who commissioned the altarpiece (Cole 1991). Thus, the images helped represent the local church as well as the Catholic faith. In much the same manner, advertisements create images to fit the advertised product’s concept. Specific icons are often selected for their particular resonance and meaning for the brand’s image. Ad agencies rise and fall on their ability to select and represent the correct images for their clients’ products. This comparison is not meant to be a comment on religious iconographic practices, it is merely to show a connection between similar representational processes of meaning construction.

Medium: This term refers to the material form of object or image – canvas, wood, paper, bronze, and so forth. The medium of the CK One ad is a black and white photograph, specifically an advertising photograph that appears as a glossy woman’s magazine reproduction. The use of black and white film helps to make this image somewhat gritty in contrast to many of the cosmetics advertisements of the era. The medium also signals fine art status – most art photographs are black and white. Black and white signifies a step toward signness, that is, it makes the photograph look more like a photograph than a brilliant color image. Black and white advertising photographs need something else to activate their rhetorical power – graphic devices, graphic signs, or words (Triggs 1995). The ad’s copy – CK One in small type – are all that is necessary to remind viewers that this image is an ad for Calvin Klein cologne.

Photography is both a critical part of the visual world and an important process of representing identity. Historically, photography provided millions with portraits (Tagg 1989). Photographic portraits, in particular, are perhaps the most straightforward representations of identity. Yet the very artificiality of most portraits – smiling, touched up, well lit, posed – demonstrates a gap between image and lived experience. Much of the difficulty in apprehending and interpreting photography lies in the medium’s surface realism. It is useful to remind ourselves that the models in the CK One ad are posed, paid, and pampered – despite its appearance, it does not capture a group of friends hanging out.

To interpret a photograph is to acknowledge its representational power both as artifact and as bearer of meaning, reflecting broad societal, cultural, and ideological codes (Schroeder 1998). Photography, like advertising, has deep ties to fine art:

Much of the formal iconography and symbolic structuring has its roots in painting, but photography substitutes for the painting's presence a veracity and immediacy which, in going beyond questions of aesthetics, involves us in what has been called "the entwined problematic of representation and sexuality".

(Clarke 1997: 123)

As discussed below, photographs of the body – like paintings of the figure – imply a larger politics of power and representation.

Style "indicates a resemblance among diverse art objects from an artist, movement, time period, or geographic location and is recognized by a characteristic handling of subject matter and formal elements" (Barrett 1996: 31–2). The CK One ads were photographed by Steven Meisel in the style of Richard Avedon, arguably the world's most influential modern fashion photographer. Meisel, known for singular, artistic portraits routinely "samples" other photographers' work (Daly and Wice 1995). Avedon is known for his stark, icon-making black and white portraits of the famous and not-so-famous as well as his technique of breaking away from still fashion poses to favor more naturalistic shots of people moving about, gesticulating, talking, and generally not appearing posed (Solomon 1994). Avedon also photographed one of Calvin Klein's most enduring images, Brooke Shields proclaiming that nothing comes between her and her Calvins (Schroeder 2001).

Avedon, known equally for his work in advertising and fine art photography, developed an influential style known for un-retouched, straight-on portraits (Rosenblum 1997). These photographs push our conception of what portraits are and should be, as many of his seem harsh and unflattering (Clarke 1997). Although his portraits often look jumbled and unposed, his style depends on strategically posed elements, and often "make art-historical allusions, even in photographs that are largely the result of studio improvisation" (James 1994: 107). The overall look of the CK One image is reminiscent of Avedon's work, and it echoes his use of multiple shots of the same group.

Specifically, the CK One ad closely resembles Avedon's 1969 photograph of the Andy Warhol's factory crowd (Francis and King 1997). This photograph of Warhol and various friends and assistants comprises four separate images placed together, and is strikingly similar to the CK One ad. Men and women in various states of dress and undress pose for Avedon's camera, staring blankly forward. The background is white, the black and white contrast is harsh, and the subjects look a bit unkempt and tough.

Warhol was well known for his entourage of “downtown” models, artists, and hangers-on, and the Factory came to represent a way of life outside the mainstream uptown world of established art galleries and museums. By photographing the CK One ad in the style of Avedon’s Warhol gang photograph, Meisel superimposed one icon – Andy Warhol – onto another, CK One (see Schroeder 1997a).

Like many of Avedon’s photographs, Meisel’s CK One image is photographed against a plain white background that serves to de-center the subjects, de-contextualize them, and help to undefine the portrait. That is, it is unclear where this group is or where they might come together. As one critique of the Avedon style commented “the blank surround is puritanical; the unframed white represses any interest in the sitter’s relation to the outside” (Sennett 1990: 217). Kate Moss’s presence serves to ground us, and her vacant bored expression serves as a signifier – instructing us how to make sense of the image.

Genre refers to a type or category of art. A key genre reference to the CK One ad is the group portrait. Group portraits were an established genre type in the Golden Age painting of Holland. Dutch painters moved beyond pure description to idealize their subjects and to portray a glimpse of their personalities. Group portraiture of guild members was a particularly Dutch forte (Stokstad 1995). A well-known example is the “Dutch Masters” portrait that appears in packages and advertisements for a popular brand of cigars. The Dutch group portrait genre usually represented commissions by private guilds who wished to celebrate solidarity and good fortune. The basic pose in group portraiture

was to organize a number of portraits of equal individual distinction into a coherent whole. One solution was to portray the group in one single row, unevenly spaced and further differentiated by agitated gesticulation and a variety of different and occasionally *rather weird poses*.

(Fuchs 1978: 95, my emphasis)

The poses in the CK One ad are also oddly spaced. The group is lined up in a row; several pictures are placed together, the result is an odd montage of bodies. One visual theorist offers a clue by arguing that the elements in an ad need to signal something different than a mere photograph – “the disposition of each sign-value on the page must not be normal, rather, the positions must be other than ordinary, and be such that an interaction of their visual and conceptual aspect occurs” (Triggs 1995: 86). Thus the CK One ad’s rather weird poses directly contribute to the conceptual meaning.

Group portraits, for all their seeming spontaneity, reflected and inscribed a strict social hierarchy. Dutch art is art of the here and now, anchored in daily activities of the middle class, preserving and recording the manners and mores of an entire society (Schama 1988). For our purposes, a particularly relevant example of Dutch group portraiture is Cornelius Ketel’s dramatic group composition *The Militia Company of Captain Dirck Jacobsz*,

Roosecrans ca. 1588, which hangs in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum. In a grouping comparable to the CK One ad, we see a jumble of people posing for a picture, arrayed in apparent random order, presenting a mixed social tableaux. The men, in this case, are posed at odd angles, lacking uniformity, and bring a dynamic composition to what is largely a static image. Each man has an assigned place within the portrait, based on rank, favor, and, often, payment to the artist (Schama 1988). What unites the subjects is their guild membership, they represent a group linked by a common activity. As in most portraits, what is revealed upon closer inspection is a mannered series of poses, calculated and scripted for a particular effect.

Another more subtle connection to Dutch art resides more in the cultural milieu of the Golden Age, where religious freedom flourished, and class systems were being broken down. As English Ambassador William Temple contemporaneously observed about seventeenth-century Holland, "men live together like Citizens of the World, associated by the common ties of Humanity, and by the bonds of Peace, Under the impartial protection of indifferent laws" (quoted in Herbert 1991: 19–20). One of the implicit messages of the CK One ad is that different-looking people can live together, and that to be different is acceptable, a message further underscored in the CK Be campaign. This message has visual antecedents within Dutch art.

I find these two images to be strikingly similar, disparate as they are in time, place, and purpose. Each represents group identity through visual conventions. In the Dutch example, production constitutes membership – the guild produces something in common. In the CK One ad, consumption implies membership – we assume that the group shares use of the promoted fragrance. This is not to suggest that Calvin Klein consciously or unconsciously set out to imitate Ketel's painting, although CRK, their in-house ad agency, is certainly aware of Dutch art. Rather, I point to a resonance that one can build between the images, and identify an important visual antecedent of the CK One image.

I claim that this is one of the reasons that ads like CK One are so meaningful – they build on the visual past, remind us of the tradition of artistic expression, and re-present images that are celebrated and valued. For, in the Holland of the past, like today, "the visual culture was central to the life of society. One might say that the eye was a central means of self-representation and visual experience a central mode of self-consciousness" (Alpers 1984: xxv). Art historical traditions influence contemporary images directly and indirectly: directly through their impact on pictorial conventions, artistic and photographic training, and cultural capital of specific images. Furthermore, art history indirectly influences the current visual scene through its power as a cultural process, that, over time, produces a mode of representing and seeing the world.

Comparison: The rationale for comparison "is to call attention to the unique features of something by holding it up against something similar

but significantly different” (Barnet 1997: 92). Several comparisons to the CK One ad will be made in the following section. Here I will discuss another photographer whose work is both important and relevant to the analysis. Robert Mapplethorpe, whose pictures included portraits of his friends and lovers informed by domination, leather, and sadomasochistic themes, is one of the most famous – and notorious – photographers of the twentieth century. Mapplethorpe’s images, perhaps more than any other photographer, have come to represent a subculture’s – the gay underground – way of life. His photographs explored the contexts of race, gender, unconventional sexuality, and the conventions of portraiture and often rejected the codes “through which identity, private as much as public, is assumed, determined, and declared (Clarke 1997: 117). The CK One ad shares a blank background, brightly lit subjects, and a way of representing the Other with Mapplethorpe’s infamous X portfolio, which thrust Mapplethorpe into the political arena when its images of S & M and gay lifestyles were attacked as pornographic and obscene.

In this section, a thick description was presented to lay out art historical categories of analysis. In the following section, these descriptive insights will be used to develop a rich contextual interpretation of the CK One ad’s many meanings to demonstrate its representational power – its poetics. Consuming difference provides an interpretive and evaluative framework for understanding the representational politics of ads like CK One.

Interpretation and evaluation

Race, class, and gender have emerged as three crucial contextual issues for interpretive work (e.g., Heller 1997). Although class is certainly invoked in these status-symbol ads, I focus mostly on gender and race, acknowledging that these facets interact within identity and culture (see Schroeder and Borgerson 2002). To formulate interpretive conclusions about the CK One ad’s meanings, I draw on several cultural critics who write about identity and images. First, I briefly describe Goffman’s brilliant work on gender advertisements. I utilize philosopher Susan Bordo’s analyses of cultural images to complicate our thinking about issues of the body, gender, and race in advertising. Finally, I draw on the writings of Henry Giroux and bell hooks, two contemporary cultural critics who analyze race, gender, class, and sexuality in popular culture. Calling upon other critical interpretive work helps contextualize images within a cultural system of visual representation (Hall 1997). I conclude by placing CK One within a frame of consuming difference.

Gender

Gender refers to a “social concept referring to psychologically, sociologically, or culturally rooted traits, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies.

Because gender is a pervasive filter through which individuals experience their social world, consumption activities are fundamentally gendered” (Bristor and Fischer 1993: 519). Gender is also a critical issue in art history and art criticism (e.g., Davis 1996). Goffman turned to advertising to demonstrate how gender roles are inscribed in what appear to be natural expressions, situations, and poses (Goffman 1979; Lemert and Branaman 1997). Several advertising studies have employed Goffman’s work to investigate gender in ads (e.g., Kolbe and Albanese 1996; Schroeder and Borgerson 1998).

Like painted portraits, ads are carefully constructed for rhetorical effects. Goffman pointed out that ads are part of the real world and a powerful influence on our self-concepts, how we view right and wrong, and how we conceive of living a good life. Most importantly for this analysis, ads influence how we think about sex roles, male and female, what is sexy, and what will be seen as sexy and be desired by others. Goffman was interested in how gender is displayed – how male and female identities are represented in social interaction as well as visual images. However, a closer look provides insight into how advertisements represent and construct gender (see Schroeder 1998).

Gender is a critical marker of difference:

Gender ... means knowledge about sexual difference. I use knowledge, following Foucault, to mean the understanding produced by cultures and societies of human relationships, in the case of those between men and women. Such knowledge is not absolute or true, but always relative.

(Scott 1988: 2)

Goffman, in analyzing advertisements as well as social interaction, showed that “every physical surround, every box for social gatherings, necessarily provides materials than can be used in the display of gender and the affirmation of gender identity” (Goffman, in Lemert and Branaman 1997: 207).

What makes gender such an important issue in the CK One context is the clear gender identity of most American colognes. That is, colognes are marketed as an integral part of gender identity and sexual attraction – most fragrances are for a man *or* for a woman (cf. Stern and Schroeder 1994). Gender plays an important part in how consumers relate to products, advertising, and consumption. In the marketplace, scent is a critical marker for gender. One noticeable feature of the CK One campaign is that it seemed to deconstruct this connection – it’s for a man or a woman, after all. However, Calvin Klein’s other well-known scents, such as Obsession, are still marketed to specific genders – although a percentage of each is used by the non-targeted gender – and certainly not discontinued. CK One remains well within the target marketed realm – it is only one more market

segment, that arguably does little to disrupt or question entrenched gender roles and gender segmentation.

Susan Bordo adds an important contextual issue to the interpretation. Bordo briefly discusses the CK One ad under consideration here as an example of a false diversity. She claims that it “seems to be making the visual point that whether you are male or female, young or old, gay or straight, black or white, you are required to have the same toned, adolescent-looking body” (Bordo 1997: 5). She argues that ideals of beauty reinforced by advertising and popular culture are damaging, particularly to women, a claim marketing scholars echo:

Beauty not only divides women from men but also women from other women. While a man's looks embellish his worldly successes, a woman's defines her. Cosmetics do not merely state, “I am an attractive woman.” Instead, they make women want to be attractive to men.

(Joy and Venkatesh 1994: 351)

This stands in sharp contrast to the calculated indifference that models project with statements like: “I've never even thought about my body, never weighed myself” (Kate Moss in White 1994: 95). Bordo's approach moves away from a strict focus on the ad alone toward a culturally connected analysis informed by feminist scholarship and philosophical analysis:

Once we recognize that we never respond only to particular body parts or their configuration but always to the meanings they carry for us, the old feminist charge of “objectification” seems inadequate to describe what is going on when women's bodies are depicted in sexualized or aestheticized ways. The notion of women-as-objects suggests the reduction of women to “mere” bodies, when actually what's going on is often far more disturbing than that, involving the depiction of regressive ideals of feminine behavior and attitude that go much deeper than appearance.

(Bordo 1997: 124)

Race

An important contextual issue concerns how racial identity has been depicted in the history of art as well as advertising. CK One appears to break down racial barriers via its multicultural milieu. A relevant comparison is Benetton's ads, which also have captured the attention of critics and consumers alike through their use of provocative imagery. One commentator claims that within the trend of shock advertising, the positioning of CK One is similar to Benetton's graphic images of violence and social injustice (Teather 1995).

Social historian and prolific cultural critic Henry Giroux analyzed the Italian multinational Benetton's long-running "United Colors of Benetton" campaign and scrutinized how culturally loaded images of race, class, and gender work in a commercial context. In one Benetton ad, a black female torso, breasts exposed, is shown holding a naked white baby, nursing on the woman's breast. The woman is wearing only a cardigan, which is unbuttoned and pulled back, thus displaying her breasts for the baby as well as the viewer.

Giroux brings to bear a cultural analytic technique to underscore the racist, colonialist meanings pulsing through this image (Giroux 1994). Benetton claims to be promoting racial harmony and world peace, but if so, why would they choose this loaded image? Perhaps the CK One images are not quite so alarming as the Benetton campaigns, but I believe that by including images of marginalized segments of society some of the same stereotyping processes are at work (Schroeder and Borgerson 1999; Ramamurthy 1997).

A critical essay about other work by CK One photographer Meisel provides a contextual comparison to discuss racial and sexual stereotyping. bell hooks discusses the pop superstar Madonna's provocative book *Sex* which features photographs by Meisel (1994). The photographs that accompanied writing about various sexual scenarios – ostensibly directly from Madonna's imagination – share several features in common with CK One images. In many of the scenes, Madonna is shown interacting with black men and women in images reminiscent of the CK One ad – although far more sexually explicit. The photographs are reproduced in crisp black and white, and many have a plain background. Comparison to Meisel's other work provides more context for the CK One images, and hooks' analysis of how his images work in the *Sex* book show how consideration of matters beyond what is shown in the photograph contributes to an interpretive stance. hooks' discussion of the sexual and racial context of Meisel's photographs contribute to a reading of the CK One image that shares several features with the *Sex* photographs.

Class

Madonna – white, affluent, "beautiful" – experiences various sexual encounters, emerging unchanged, still Madonna. hooks writes:

increasingly, Madonna occupies the space of the white cultural imperialist, talking on the mantle of the white colonial adventurer moving into the wilderness of black culture (gay and straight), of white gay subculture. Within these new and different realms of experience she never divests herself of white privilege. She maintains both the purity of her representation and her dominance.

(1994: 20)

Thus, she serves as a kind of tour guide through a Disneyland of difference, assuring us that our own gender identities are not at risk. I believe Kate Moss serves the same tour guide function in the CK One series. Madonna consumes race in her *Sex* pictures – she experiences black lovers, uses them, but remains unaffected by the experience, contends hooks. She does not become black, or lose white status, rather, she serves as a guide for us, the viewer, to experience the stereotyped exotic erotic pleasures of a ethnic culture. Madonna's pictures exploit many clichés about blacks – oversexed, sexual experts, animal-like – and do nothing to assess, counter, or interrogate these notions. After reading – or at least looking at Madonna's book – the average consumer will only have stereotypes confirmed, not liberated. These images work to reproduce cultural differences:

Though *Sex* appears to be culturally diverse, people of color are strategically located, always and only in a subordinate position. Our images and culture appear always in a context that mirrors racist hierarchies. We are always present to white desire.

(hooks 1994: 21)

Thus, the rich, white pop star Madonna consumes race and alternative sexuality, according to hooks.

Theoretical issues: consuming difference

In the CK One ad, Kate Moss serves as a visual anchor. She is well known, non-threatening (especially when compared to others in the ad), her image is that of a famous supermodel. In other words, she represents the world of cosmetics, fashion, and glamour. As Calvin Klein said of his famous model: "there's an air of reality about Kate that sets her apart. She represents the generation that is now coming along, and she appeals to them – her attitude, her look and her style is very easy, natural and unaffected" (quoted in White 1994: 90). She can fit in anywhere. She has entered this world of difference for a mainstream audience, and is able to maintain her identity in the midst of difference. Thus, those normally outside the "different" segment are unchanged by the experience of this ad. They do not risk actually becoming different, racially or sexually. It is unclear why white skinheads – who are associated with intolerance in popular discourse – are lumped in with others, especially black women. What are they were doing in this group, and why are they so angry? The lesbian image from the fold-out disappears, along with the promise (threat) of homosexual activity, much as gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have historically disappeared. In the mainstream world of major brand advertising, gay and lesbian consumers are largely absent, reflecting a culture of homophobia and heterosexism (Frye 1983).

CK One ads give mainstream viewers an opportunity to consume difference without risk to their own identity. Goffman and Bordo's analytic perspectives help frame broader cultural issues derived from Giroux and hooks. By representing these "different" characters in one ad, I believe Calvin Klein is lumping them together, equating stereotypes of difference – black, lesbian, tattooed, androgynous – and playing them off the image of Moss. This lumping, or designating as "different" or "other" deprives the group represented of individual expression (Gordon 1995). That is, difference – multiculturalism – is represented as a commodity that superficially corresponds to differences in lived experience. As Goldman argues, advertising "continuously reproduces the appearance of difference" within the fashion system (1992: 152).

In comparison to most advertisements the world of CK One appears to be an unhappy place, populated by dissatisfied, angry people. In the words of one of my students "it looks like a freak show, as if the only thing these people have in common is that they look strange." This echoes an art historian's claim about representations of difference in fine art:

The rhetorical traditions of Western painting have long traded in the coin of social class and racial difference as a means of marking human value. Thus there is a radical distinction between portraits ... and scenes from everyday life, especially those involving the lower social orders, representing not individuals, but types – simply "people" defined en masse.

(Leppert 1997: 173)

The CK One imagery signaled a shift in advertising representation toward grungy looking models – a short-lived trend, but one that paved the way for shock advertising.

The CK One ad is like a casting call – it visually rounds up different-looking people, removes them from any context (except the ad) and presents them for consumption. The popular musical "A Chorus Line" comes to mind, with its drama about performance, casting, and playing parts. The drama metaphor is an important one in advertising (cf. Stern 1994; Stern and Schroeder 1994), and seems apt for an ad that plays with gender. Contemporary gender theorists have described gender as performative, focusing on the social construction of gender as an embodied identity (Butler 1990). Gender is also called a role, as in gender roles. In one sense, we might view this ad as what happened when Calvin Klein put out a request for different-looking models. Kate Moss was hired to play Kate Moss. She stands alone – enacting a persona that has helped elevate her to superstardom (White 1994). Someone else showed up to portray an angry black woman. Another aspiring model practiced being fashionable, yet aloof.

Kate Moss's expression indicates that she does not belong in this world of difference, she seems bored and unaffected by the others in the ad. She is

with them but not of them, she emerges as a voyeur, she looks and asks that we look at her looking (hooks 1994). She is present in an image that encourages consuming the exotic other (Borgerson and Schroeder 1997; Lalvani 1995). She is merely more well paid than most painters' models ever were. In this analysis, I do not mean to imply that Kate Moss herself is somehow responsible for the ad's effects, the ad scenario, or the cosmetics industry's practices. Men, largely, still retain control of the image-producing industries (Ohmann 1996). However, as a spokesperson and icon of fashion, her image contributes to much of the meaning construction.

In the CK One ad, homosexuality is also sublimated to heterosexual pleasure, and becomes merely an exploration for Moss's (heterosexual) experience. Her image usurps the others through her fame, her sexual identity – inscribed by her presence in Calvin Klein's more heterosexual-appearing advertisements – and her feminine demeanor, diminutive, thin, and submissive. The image teases with a potential lesbian encounter, then retreats, leaving us unsatisfied, discontent. Moss's control over her body – demonstrated here in her aloof pose – is of paramount importance to her fame and success. Her statements about her body and eating, such as the one quoted above, are standard model fare, calculated to create an aura of naturalness for their valuable image; these calculated claims are not particularly surprising nor illuminating about her lived experience.

CK One is not marketed as a specifically gay, lesbian, or bisexual scent (although a substantial percentage of CK One consumers certainly represent these groups) – perhaps that might be too small or risky a target market for a national advertising campaign. Moss's image in the media – the only way most of us will ever know her – is fueled by her appearances in fashion shows, other advertisements, and magazine covers. All of these point to her heterosexuality, her whiteness, and her thinness – an identity of a desired female. Her flirtation with a lesbian encounter notwithstanding, she remains Kate Moss – aloof, white, “normal.” Drawing upon their thick description of the ad's visual elements, Pinkel and her colleagues conclude that its presentation of gender images does nothing more than perpetuate and reinforce gender stereotypes (Pinkel *et al.* 1995).

By using stereotyped models, CK One draws on codes of appearance influenced by social relations, the media, and prejudice (cf. Jhally 1987). In one variation of the CK One ad, we see a big, burly white guy with a shaved head – coded “skinhead” – talking to a black woman. Given no other information to contradict cultural representations, we may assume that they are not having a lively conversation about a mutual friend. Within the media, skinhead is a codeword for racist, neo-Nazi, and intolerance – iconographic functions rooted in representational practice. This is not to say that all white men with shaved heads are in fact racist, only that the overpowering image of skinhead is associated with violent fanaticism. In the absence of disrupting information within the ad, the reading of this image is overdetermined (Goldman 1992). In addition, until

recently, advertising showed very few individuals who looked like this. This fact accentuates his difference – he is pitted against traditional male models that populate fragrance ads. In showing these two figures engaged in what appears to be a heated discussion, the ad further draws on stereotyped conventions of race and gender. Imagine these two as lovers, smiling, arms draped around one another. Or perhaps both laughing together, bodies engaged in mutual pleasure. These images *might* serve to disrupt stereotypical notions of gender, race, and ideology. But this is not what is represented. Instead, we see a white man arguing with a black woman, physically engaging with her space, using his mass to make his point. They are portrayed as natural antagonists, playing into cultural stereotypes of racial and gender relations (see Davis 1981). Given the skinhead's large size, and aggressive in-your-face gesture grounded to the social reality of the historical and current oppression of black women, it is not difficult to interpret this image as racial oppression. Given the history of white men's exploitation of black women, for slave labor, for sex, for wet nurse, for nannies, the meaning of this image – contextualized within a racist world – must be read as reflecting, not challenging, the *status quo* (cf. Gordon 1997).

In the CK One campaign difference is presented as a consumable entity. The CK One image includes stereotypes of difference – the angry black woman, exotic black men, brawny skinheads, emaciated model – that stand in contrast to the usual representations of white, heterosexual consumers that have dominated advertising imagery (see Bristor *et al.* 1995; Pinkel *et al.* 1995). Goldman refers to this phenomenon as “commodity difference” in describing how advertising “continuously reproduces the appearance of difference” (1992). Furthermore, close visual attention to the models in the image reveals that several are repeated within the ad. It seems as if the group depicted is indeed a small one – they had to use several members twice to fill out their numbers. In any case, this ad seems to reinforce the notion that representing difference is a viable advertising strategy. Might these types of ads make multicultural identities more visible via mass media representation? I cannot resolve this important question here, but I can point to the majority of Calvin Klein's imagery that in no way disrupts sex, race, and gender stereotypes.

Consuming difference through images, cologne, clothing, is not equivalent to standing up for difference. To consume CK One and its advertising imagery does nothing to challenge heterosexism and homophobia, racism, and sexism. It is unclear what position Calvin Klein, man and company, takes on these highly charged issues – what is clear is Calvin Klein's consistent success in generating media attention via what I call the *strategic use of scandal* (Schroeder 2001). For all its multicultural appearance, the CK One ads portrays difference in contrast to the idealized imagery of advertising. CK One voyeuristically presents those people that society does accept. By taking those stereotypes out of context, the ad trivializes their

true or at least possible difference. Lumping them together, the ad makes it seem as if they belong to one category – other. The CK One image works much like Western art's representation of racial and cultural difference that until recently provided “no hint of paradox, problem, or criticism. Indeed, it celebrates a system that operates to keep the racist linkages intact ...” (Leppert 1997: 209).

Methodological synthesis

Techniques drawn from art history, particularly photographic criticism, were applied to an exemplar to demonstrate a rich analytic framework to analyze advertising. Connections were made from the CK One ad to art historical traditions of group portraiture, altarpieces, iconography, and fine art photography. Further comparisons were made to discuss identity and representation through the work of contemporary cultural theorists. This approach assumes four things about advertising images. First, ads can be considered as aesthetic objects. This is not to claim that advertisements are necessarily art, nor that they are not primarily marketing tools. Rather, it acknowledges the creativity and thought that goes into the production of most national advertising campaigns. Second, I situate advertising within a system of visual representation that creates meaning – often beyond what may be intended by the photographer and advertising agency. Third, a visual analysis informed by art history does not compete for authority with other approaches. Rather it represents an useful, distinct level of analysis, particularly suited to sort out meaning construction in visual images. Interpretive work *requires* personal engagement, quirks, biases, and most of all, passionate interest. Fourth, ads not only are aesthetic objects, they can also be considered socio-political artifacts. These categories – aesthetic and political – are often constituted as mutually exclusive (Solomon-Godeau 1991). My analysis attempts to locate advertisements within a complex signifying system.

In this chapter, I tried to demonstrate some basic building blocks for a method of apprehending visual imagery. These include description, interpretation, evaluation, and theorization. Description requires sustained attention to the visual image to capture what it depicts. Interpretation is more subjective, but ought to emerge from descriptive details. For example, the careful description of Kate Moss's appearance led Pinkel *et al.* (1995) to interpret the image in sexually coded terms. Evaluation often focuses on issues of value and quality. In this analysis, I have instead stressed an evaluation of the ad's social psychological meanings. Theory construction may develop from the previous three activities. In this analysis, I presented a theory about how the CK One ad contributes to a discourse about consuming difference which guided the interpretation.

Many insights emerge from this analysis that would be difficult to generate with other approaches. The link to the Dutch art tradition serves

to remind us that advertisements have a visual and historical genealogy. For example, the CK One ad can be understood within the art genre of the portrait, particularly guild portraits associated with the “Dutch masters” – largely a male tradition. The form of the ad is, of course, situated within the world of fashion, specifically fashion photography, that is largely a feminine realm, that is, women’s fashion dominates the fashion scene. I propose that the juxtaposition of these gendered genres contribute to the representation – and commingling – of gender within the CK One ad. Quoting or mimicking an art historical tradition helps ground it for the viewer, drawing associations to the visual tradition. Furthermore, although advertisements often strive to present a new fashion, they still must establish some link to the past, some sense of familiarity between the consumer and the product (Lears 1994). By linking a new image to an old tradition, CK One establishes itself through visual representations that transcend the here and now.

The fold-out format of the CK One ad is used often in fashion magazines. An interesting comparison can be made to the form of a religious altarpiece, which also opens to reveal other images within. Once again, I am not claiming that all CK One viewers exclaimed “a polyptych!” upon first seeing the ad, but I do find the connections useful in understanding the formal context of the ad. Furthermore, Kate Moss and other fashion models are certainly worshipped in our culture where fame is highly valued and rewarded. We see some of the same meaning-production processes at work in the formal properties of the CK One ad and a Renaissance altarpiece – covering, revealing, and isolating individual figures. We also see similar social processes of image construction, worship, and icon making (for a more detailed analysis of connections between Renaissance art and contemporary images, see Schroeder and Borgerson 2001).

Is CK One a resistant image?

My students consistently see Calvin Klein as taboo breaking, encouraging gender experimentation, and norm questioning; the press generally labeled the CK One campaign transgressive. Is it? Can advertising really afford to subvert gender roles by creating gender-neutral products and campaigns? Does it help things to have images of difference within the mainstream media? Can Calvin Klein be a force for change? Some would contend that any portrayal that is not explicitly stereotyped helps break down negative cultural assumptions about marginalized groups. Certainly, it makes for more interesting and provocative advertisements. However, the cosmetics industry, which flourishes on sexual stereotypes, sexual dualism, and insecurity about appearance seems unsuited to break down stereotypes about gender roles, racial identity, and sexual orientation.

Consumer resistance is another critical matter for interpreting advertisements and consumer culture within the consuming difference concept. In

one recent study, students claimed to resist and often reject the “meanings” of particular fashions and brand names. Overall, however, the authors claim that “consumers appropriate fashion discourses in ways that ‘reinscribe the culturally conventional meanings of garments, styles, and fashionable brands’ within gender stereotypes, but leave room for individual resistance” (Thompson and Haytko 1997: 16). At issue here is how purchasing and using CK One may or may not lead to “resistance” – of gender roles, of media influence, of corporate control of consumer desire (cf. Thompson and Hirschman 1995). At the level of the individual, resistance is difficult to quibble with, but at a broader social level, campaigns such as CK One co-opt consumer resistance and turn it back on itself. In this way “corporations cleverly use the images and words, style and look of rebellion to market their products through buying mass-produced goods that somehow symbolize nonconformity” (Frank 1997: 19).

Paradoxically, consumers visually proclaim their difference by wearing mass-produced scents, shoes, and global brand names. Consumption is a major process of constructing a self-concept, and cologne is closely linked to sexual identity, self-image, and gender roles (Schroeder 1998). Like a novel or movie, advertisements let us feel as if we are participating or at least experiencing a different reality – it is much easier to buy cologne than it is to change one’s appearance or lifestyle. Furthermore, these images work against political values, constructing, reflecting, and reinforcing a consumer lifestyle-based world in which “social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consumer a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself” (Sontag 1977: 179).

Consumer goods also serve as a stabilizing object-code, disarming innovations and diminishing their potential for change (McCracken 1988). When marginalized groups, such as lesbians, gays, bikers, or skateboarders, use consumer goods to declare their difference, they use a representational system that is easily recognizable by society (cf. Ritson and Elliot 1999). Thus:

The act of protest is finally an act of participation in a set of shared symbols and meanings. Embraced by culture and its media of communication, the “act” of protest becomes an act of rhetorical conformity. The use of the object-code by radical social groups has the unintended effect of finding them a place in the larger cultural system.

(McCracken 1988: 133–4)

Consuming brand names to differentiate oneself – one of CK One’s messages – is an interesting paradox of consumer culture.

Consumers *are* active in the meaning constructive process, creating meanings that are sensible to them in particular life circumstances (Scott 1994b). Many people are unaware of the history and iconology of images,

and often interpret advertising for their own uses: "the media – particularly the new media – are accessible to and used frequently by less powerful members of society – children, ethnic minorities, and marginal members of society – to create realities that more satisfactorily fulfill their needs" (Edelstein 1997: 3). Thus, it may be that CK One is a positive force in representing people and images that have been absent from advertising imagery. My reading does not preclude images like CK One to serve identity-affirming functions for individual consumers, and I do not mean to suggest that CK One has not shaken up the iconography of contemporary advertising.

This analysis is centered around Anglo-American culture. Calvin Klein is a United States company with virtual worldwide recognition; Kate Moss is British. The image, with its absence of text, cultural scenarios, or country-specific markers, is readily transportable within the global marketplace. Further analysis is required to situate this reading for other cultures, particularly in light of the rise of global capitalism, which makes it important to study how identity and aesthetics are transported cross-culturally (Joy and Venkatesh 1994).

Gender identity remains central to the world of advertising. It is difficult to conceive of most products without male and female target markets. Furthermore, many consumers do respond negatively to the way specific groups are portrayed in advertisements (e.g., Beatty 1995). Many consumers resist gender stereotypes, and gender roles themselves may be changing:

However, we do not yet live in a post-gender age. Avant-garde magazines may offer images that unsettle and challenge ideas about masculinity and femininity and that ultimately may alter them. But most of us live in social contexts that exact stiff penalties for resisting or failing to conform to existing conventions, and that offer significant social and material rewards (in jobs, sexual desirability, and the like) for those who successfully obey them.

(Bordo 1997: 150)

An important issue to consider is how the art historical antecedents and connections discussed affect consumers' perceptions. Most consumers are not necessarily visually literate, and art historical references and conventions may not consciously inform their viewing of an ad. However, even if the target market for CK One has no experience of Dutch group portraiture, for example, the art directors and photographers responsible for producing the ad certainly were aware of art historical referents discussed here. The CK One ad is one example of a spectacular combination of old and new representational systems, or what has been called "complicated contemporaneity" (Polan 1986). I believe that interdisciplinary readings are critical for explicating particular advertising campaigns.

But that is not enough. In addition, two other analytic processes are necessary for the study of the culture of visual representation (Polan 1986). We need to understand the cultural and visual context of ads such as this within the flow of mass culture. We also must realize the role advertising plays in both the political economy and in the constitution of consuming subjects.

Philosopher Margaret Urban Walker developed the concept of “stereo-graphy” to refer to the interrelationship of representation to ethical issues. Stereo-graphy refers to ways of representing groups of people in particular ways that “school us in perceiving certain patterns of human expression and comportment in particular ways or not at all” (Walker 1998: 313). Walker discusses how images of those in minority groups by majority groups are often governed by “practices of representing certain people in certain ways, where these ways are consistently different from the ways *other* people are represented” (ibid.: 309). She takes pains not to suggest that these representational practices “are the sole or even primary causes of moral mis-recognition or mis-treatments [and] might be symptomatic or expressive of prejudices propagated and sustained by other means” (ibid.: 313). Walker’s theory is an important component of an interpretive project that takes the signifying power of images seriously.

Visual representation of cultural groups is fraught with difficult issues. Many argue that by making marginalized groups visible, ad campaigns like CK One help create awareness and respect for cultural differences. Others point out that often representation leads to stereotyping and offensive images, particularly when those images are used to sell products. Advertising is a powerful player in these debates. Firms and ad agencies have gained an increased awareness of the politics of representation, and the world that advertising portrays is changing. Art historical studies such as this can help place these issues in a broader cultural and historical context – for the history of art is replete with examples of exclusion and misrepresentation. Acknowledging the visual past of advertising is one path to greater understanding about advertising as a representational and communicative system.

Embedded in this analysis is my contention that CK One offers viewers a chance to consume difference. This concept was utilized to point to insights that each element of the visual approach can reveal, and to argue that CK One does not disrupt categories of difference. In other words, the CK One ad presents a multicultural world from a dominant cultural point of view. The representation of gender, race, and identity in the campaign is an emblem of consuming difference. Given the iconic form of the CK One ad, the way it functions as an altarpiece, and the way that the models are portrayed in a group portrait; and given the connections drawn to Avedon, Mapplethorpe, and the cultural identity issues discussed – it is clear the CK One ad’s meanings as a visual representation are powerful and multi-layered.

Visual consumption, identity, and interpretation

The CK One image struck a responsive chord among consumers. The ad appears in posters, postcards, and is now referred to obliquely in current ad campaigns (e.g., Kinoshian 1997). To fully understand why ads like this leave such a mark, it is crucial to bring diverse tools to bear on the problem. In particular, art historical theories of identity construction and representation seem particularly relevant for understanding how brands and products fit into consumer identity.

Art-centered visual approaches to consumer research offer a means of developing unique insights into advertising imagery's prominence within visual culture. Art historical techniques help articulate a grammar of visual representation that producers and consumers use to decode consumer messages. Regardless of intention, ads often invoke art historical themes, settings, and references that contribute to their meaning – as an advertisement for a particular product as well as a cultural artifact. As discussed here, meaning in ads is not wholly contained within the image itself. Furthermore, advertising's success has depended on a way of seeing ads as connected to the larger worlds of art museums, movies, and lived experience (Lears 1994). Increased sensitivity to visual elements and their social, historical, and cultural contexts is critical to appreciating the power of advertising imagery.

This analysis provides a look at the possibilities of a visual approach to consumer research. The CK One ads appeared on television, but this analysis did not consider these images. Film was not discussed here, nor television and video as art forms. Film theory shares a concern for visual representation with art history and photographic criticism. Furthermore, film has often been excluded from fine art canons and considerations, much like advertising. Although photography is the most pervasive form of communication in the world, most of us have had little formal training in the historical background of photography, the processes of photographic production, or the function of pictorial conventions. Advertising, like photography, seems to present a world that just is, even though photographic images are cropped, selected, and edited for consumption. A fully developed art-centered research program will include issues of film theory and criticism, graphic design, prints, and artistic production, to name a few.