

# Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing

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## 23 Critical visual analysis

*Jonathan E. Schroeder*

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Marketing often relies on strong visual identity. Products and services are promoted via images, corporate image commands increasing attention and images of identity pulse through marketing communication, consumer households and mass media. Many battles of the brands take place in the visual domain. Furthermore, the Web mandates visualizing almost every aspect of corporate strategy, operations and communication, bringing visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking, and spurring research and thinking about perception and preference of visual displays.

Critical visual analysis offers researchers an interdisciplinary method for understanding and contextualizing images – crucial concerns, given the cultural centrality of vision. If marketing depends upon images, including brand images, corporate images, product images and images of identity, then research methods in marketing must be capable of addressing issues that such images signify. By connecting images to the cultural context of consumption, researchers gain a more thorough (yet never complete) understanding of how images embody and express cultural values and contradictions.

This chapter presents qualitative methods for researching images, including advertising images, websites, film and photographs. I draw on a theory of visual consumption to show how cultural codes and representational conventions inform contemporary marketing images, infusing them with visual, historical and rhetorical presence and power. To illustrate how theory informs critical visual methods, I invoke an analytical concept of *consuming difference* to describe a relational framework of contemporary branding campaigns. I discuss how marketing communication draws upon the *ideology of the group portrait* as a visual technique for representing identity. I treat advertising imagery in much the way an art historian treats pictures as I analyse illustrative examples through the classic art historical techniques of formal analysis, compare and contrast, and interpretation, framed within representation understood as a cultural practice.

Identity, and how it functions within visual consumption, is a key concern in my analysis. In discussing identity issues such as gender, race and sexual orientation, I open up consideration of the ways in which advertising functions as representation within the social contexts of cultural difference (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002). I offer a short tutorial on the basic issues of criticism and then apply these to several iconic images. One such image, a CK One ad, photographed by Steven Meisel for Calvin Klein, that profoundly influenced recent advertising photography, illustrates how CK One draws upon several distinctive visual genres, including group portraiture and fashion photography. For example, group portraits, genealogically linked to the golden era of Dutch art, are a masculine genre: historically, men inhabited most portraits of groups such as guilds, corporate boards and sports teams. In contrast, fashion photography can be considered a feminine genre, more closely associated with images of women than men, although men dominate the scene behind the lens. By juxtaposing and superimposing these two gendered genres – the group portrait and the fashion photograph – the CK One image

creates an androgynous atmosphere, subtly supporting its brand identity of genderless cologne. Thus genre delineation provides a powerful theoretical insight into the way CK One works as an image, a brand strategy and a visual icon.

This interdisciplinary analysis illuminates key tensions within the politics of representation, identity and marketing. Humanities provide theoretical tools to understand image genres, content and narrative, whereas social science affords methods for discussing context, effects and strategic implications (cf. Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004; Stern and Schroeder, 1994).

To be clear, the approach introduced here need not rely on 'structural' understandings of semiotics; rather, critical visual analysis remains open to consumer response and post-structural notions of image production and consumption (see Borgerson and Schroeder, 2005; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). Questions appropriate to critical visual analysis include the following. How do images communicate strategically? How do images circulate in consumer culture? How do consumers understand advertising images? How do images relate to brand meaning? What does the World Wide Web mean for visual consumption? What are some ethical and social implications for the reliance on images in marketing communication?

### **Researching visual consumption**

Visual representations in marketing can be considered sociopolitical artifacts, creating meaning within the circuit of culture beyond strategic intention, invoking a range of issues formerly reserved for the political sphere and widely circulating information about the social world. Cultural codes, ideological discourse, consumers' background knowledge and rhetorical processes have been cited as influences in branding and in consumers' relationships to advertising, brands and mass media. Consumers are seen to construct and perform identities and self-concepts, trying out new roles and creating their identity within, and in collaboration with, brand culture. Largely missing from these insights, however, is an awareness of basic cultural processes that affect contemporary brands, including historical context, ethical concerns and consumer response. In other words, neither managers nor consumers completely control branding processes: cultural codes constrain how brands work to produce meaning (see Holt, 2004; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2005).

### **Analytic categories for critical visual analysis**

There are many ways to begin an analysis of a work of art, a photograph or an advertisement, but most critics agree that interpretation begins with description. 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. When working with photographs, for example, relevant descriptive variables include production qualities, the photographer's vantage point, focus and depth of field; each constitutes aesthetic, ideological and strategic choices (Barrett, 2005). The relationship between description and interpretation is intricate but, ideally, interpretations emerge from descriptive details. Researchers may also benefit from one of the many guides to visual methods (e.g., van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001), as well as related chapters in this volume. In the following section, I present key variables for critical visual analysis: description, subject matter, form, medium, style, genre and comparison.

### *Description*

The first step in critical visual analysis is to describe the image, pointing out features contained within it, such as formal properties of composition, color, tone and contrast. This level of analysis will be most uniform among observers, varying in terms of visual knowledge, language and jargon. A basic descriptive technique involves placing the image within a genre, or type, largely dependent upon subject and medium. Genre categories are not wholly separate, and it is often impossible to prevent interpretation from seeping into description (cf. Baxandall, 1987; Roskill, 1989). A key step concerns placing images within context. In this example, this involves a brief case study of the company's marketing communication strategy.

Calvin Klein's marketing campaigns have sparked controversy and comment for over 20 years (e.g., Churcher and Gaines, 1994; Lippert, 1996; Schroeder, 2002). Sensationalized sex appeal usually infuses Klein's ads, creating his company's fame and ensuing brand equity and generating media attention via what I call 'the strategic use of scandal' (Schroeder, 2000). 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 within the fragrance product category that is closely linked with gender identity and sexual allure (see Figures 23.1 and 23.2). CK One is marketed through unusual channels, as well: it is sold in Tower Records music stores, packaged in an aluminium military-type water bottle. The jasmine, papaya and pineapple scented fragrance was a success and its ads became well known among teenagers and 'twenty-somethings'.

As an advertising exemplar, CK One provides a compelling image for critical visual analysis. The CK One ads seem to play on and subvert gender norms, and they have generated much attention and controversy (e.g., Schroeder, 2000). As an influential icon of 1990s visual culture, they have been cited, referenced and parodied by many other brands. The multi-million dollar CK One campaign was the first to garner the Fragrance Foundation's top awards in both men and women's fragrance categories (Campbell, 1995). Examples 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). Dozens of websites feature CK One images, versions of the ad are sold as posters and the original campaign remains a staple point of purchase display items in cosmetics counters (see, for example, Images de Parfum website, 2005). The trend-setting style of the 1990s CK One campaign has been carried throughout the brand's history; the 2005 relaunch mimics the original, casting 40 unknown models in a series of ads reminiscent of the 1994 image discussed here.

Like so many image-based ads, 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 identity of the people in the ad – their image, lifestyle and physical appearance – and the ad's visual style, onto the product. Therefore it is critical to understand how meaning is visually constructed in this ad.

### *Subject matter*

A useful starting point for descriptive analysis is to identify and describe persons, objects, places or events in a photograph (Barrett, 2005). The CK One ad under scrutiny appeared across six pages in the September 1994 *Glamour* magazine. There are many versions of the



*Figure 23.1 CK One advertisement, 1994 (2 covering pages of 6 page spread)*



Figure 23.2 CK One advertisement, 1994 (overleaf foldout)

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.

Kate Moss, the highly recognizable British supermodel, dominates the scene. She ‘hails’ us, the viewer, through 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. She gives viewers a hook into the ad, providing a visual anchor, and guiding its interpretation (Berger, 1972). Moss’s status overwhelms the other figures in the ad, making them supporting players in the icon-driven world of celebrity, glamour and global brand management.

However the physical appearance of the models contributes to the ad’s character. As a group, they appear different, multicultural and not often seen (at the time) in major ad campaigns. In the version of the ad analysed here, the image folds out to reveal further CK One images. Closed, the ad 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 belt loops by the other woman’s fingers. This opens out to reveal the four pages of photographs depicting a small group of people against a white background. Upon unfolding this image, Moss no longer interacts with the other woman, who seems to have disappeared.

The models appear to be posed together, not really displaying characteristics of friends or a familiar group. At first glance, the models seem grungy, unkempt. All, except one woman, are 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* refers to the way 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 advertising’s pantheon of perfect people. Skinheads mingle incongruously with tough-looking black women. Feminine men are posed next to Moss. Long-haired men appear next to a short-haired woman with large tattoos on her arm. The CK One image plays to several audiences, and appears to subvert visual advertising conventions while simultaneously reinforcing stereotypical concepts of identity, sexuality and difference.

An additional formal element is the ‘centerfold’ format of the ad; it swings open to reveal four photographs spread out over four magazine pages. This form resembles 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 the polyptych. These panels open up to reveal an image of Christ, or the Madonna enthroned, and the particular saint associated with the church or parish. This altarpiece aspect gives the ad additional art historical resonance, and may contribute to the ‘worship’ of the CK One icons.

*Medium* 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 slick woman’s magazine reproduction. The use

of black and white film makes this image somewhat gritty in contrast to many of the glossy cosmetics advertisements of the era. The medium also imbues the image with fine art status: most art photographs are black and white. Black and white signifies a step toward signness; that is, it often makes the photograph look more like a photograph than a brilliant color image does. 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 – is sufficient to remind viewers that this image speaks for Calvin Klein cologne.

*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, 2005, pp. 35–6). Well known advertising photographer Steven Meisel, known for singular, artistic portraits and routinely sampling other photographers' work (Daly and Wice, 1995), photographed the CK One ads in the style of photographer Richard Avedon. Like many Avedon photographs, Meisel's CK One image shows a plain white background that serves to decenter the subjects, decontextualize them and help to undefine the portrait. Avedon is arguably the world's most influential modern fashion photographer. Renowned for his stark, icon-making black and white portraits of the famous and not-so-famous, Avedon broke away from fashion poses in favour of more naturalistic shots of people moving about, gesticulating, talking and generally not appearing posed (Solomon, 1994). Moreover, Avedon photographed one of Calvin Klein's groundbreaking images, Brooke Shields breathlessly proclaiming that 'nothing comes between her and her Calvins' (see Schroeder, 2000).

The CK One image emulates Avedon's work, echoing his use of multiple shots of the same group (see Avedon, 2004). Specifically, the CK One ad quotes Avedon's famous 1960s photograph of 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 appears strikingly similar to the CK One ad. Indeed 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, 1997, 2002).

*Genre* refers to a type or category. This step in critical visual analysis requires interdisciplinary sources, and often a good introductory book from a relevant field offers a useful start: for example, Sylvan Barnet's wonderfully informative *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* (2002). A key genre reference for the CK One ad concerns the group portrait, which became an established painting type in the Golden Age painting of Holland, when 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, 2004). 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 private guild commissions who wished to celebrate solidarity and good fortune. The basic requirement of 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, p. 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, producing an odd montage of bodies. One visual theorist offers a clue by arguing that the elements in an ad need to signal something different from 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, p. 86). Thus the CK One ad’s rather weird poses directly contribute to the conceptual meaning: the consumers shown are ‘different’; they use CK One.

From a critical visual analysis perspective, pictures of groups in ads ‘are not random collections of persons but deliberate constructions of the significant relationships among them’ (Brilliant, 1991, pp. 92–3). Group portraits, for all their seeming spontaneity, reflected and inscribed a strict social hierarchy, within the ideology of the group portrait (Schroeder, 2002). 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*, c.1588, which hangs in Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, credited as the earliest known group portrait that depicts its subjects full length, rather than sitting down or in close-up (Rijksmuseum website, 2005) (see Figure 23.3). Comparable to the CK One ad, we see a jumbled group posing for a picture, arrayed in apparent random order, presenting a mixed social tableau. The men, in this case, are portrayed 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). Guild membership unites the subjects: they represent a group linked by common membership in a militia company. As in most portraits, closer inspection reveals a mannered series of poses, calculated and scripted for a particular effect.

I find these two images, one from sixteenth-century Holland, the other from twentieth-century America, 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, certainly knows something about Dutch art. Rather I suggest a resonance between the images (cf. McQuarrie and Mick, 1992) and point to an important antecedent in CK One’s visual genealogy.

Art historical conventions influence contemporary images directly and indirectly: directly through their impact on pictorial conventions, artistic and photographic training, and cultural capital of specific images; indirectly through its power as a cultural process, that, over time, produces a mode of representing and seeing the world. CK One ads build on the visual past, reminding us of a tradition of artistic expression, and re-present images that are celebrated and valued (see Schroeder and Borgerson, 2002). For, in the Netherlands 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, p. xxv).



*Figure 23.3* The Militia Company of Captain Dirck Jacobsz, Roosecrans, c.1588, *Cornelius Ketel*, *Rijksmuseum*, *Amsterdam*

*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, 2002, p. 92). Several comparisons to the CK One ad will be made in the following section. The blank background group portrait motif recurs in Calvin Klein marketing, with the 2005 campaign strikingly similar to the iconic mid-1990s efforts (see Figure 23.4). Furthermore the group theme recurs in many contemporary ads, reminding us of the basic structure of social interaction, brand communities and representational conventions (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2005). For example, the Italian brand Dolce and Gabbana often groups like-minded consumers in their eye-catching campaigns (see Figure 23.5).

### **Interpretation and evaluation**

Gender, race and class have emerged as three crucial contextual issues for interpretive work (e.g., Bloom, 1999; Borgerson and Schroeder, 2005; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2003). To formulate interpretive conclusions about the CK One ad’s meanings, I turn to several cultural critics who write about identity and images, including sociologist Erving Goffman’s brilliant work on gender advertisements, Henry Giroux’s trenchant analyses of the pedagogical role of popular culture and bell hooks’ critical perspective on race and class. I conclude by placing CK One within a frame of consuming difference.

*Gender* is a ‘social concept referring to psychologically, sociologically or culturally rooted traits, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral tendencies. Because gender is a filter through which individuals experience their social world, consumption activities are fundamentally gendered’ (Bristor and Fischer, 1993, p. 519). Gender also marks 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).

Like painted portraits, ads are carefully constructed for rhetorical effects. Goffman argued 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, and how subjects perform gender (Goffman, 1979). Gender critically marks 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, p. 2). Goffman, in analysing 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, p. 207).

Most fragrances and colognes are marketing to either men or women, as an integral part of gender identity and sexual attraction (cf. Stern and Schroeder, 1994). CK One seemed to deconstruct this connection: it is for both a man and a woman, after all. However, Calvin Klein’s other well-known scents, such as Obsession, are still marketed to women *or* men, although a percentage of each is used by the non-target gender, and certainly have not been discontinued in a revelatory wake of recognition that fragrance could be gender-neutral. CK One remains well within the target marketed realm; it represents only one more market segment, which arguably does little to disrupt or question entrenched gender roles and gender segmentation.



Figure 23.4 *CK One advertisement, 2005 (foldout from 4 page spread)*



Figure 23.5 *Dolce & Gabbana advertisement, 2004*

*Race*: a crucial contextual issue concerns how racial identity has been depicted in the history of art as well as advertising. One might argue that CK One breaks down racial barriers via its multicultural milieu. A relevant comparison is Benetton's ads, which have also captured the attention of critics and consumers alike through their use of provocative, racially charged imagery. Indeed one commentator claims that, within the trend of shock advertising, the positioning of CK One resembles Benetton's graphic images of violence and social injustice (Teather, 1995). In one Benetton ad, a black female torso appears, breasts exposed, holding a naked white baby, nursing on the woman's breast. The woman wears only a cardigan, unbuttoned and pulled back, displaying her breasts for the baby as well as the viewer.

Social historian and prolific cultural critic Henry Giroux exposed potential racist and colonialist meanings pulsing through this image (Giroux, 1994). Giroux argues that, whereas Benetton claims to be promoting racial harmony and world peace, by deploying this loaded image it ends up reinforcing racial prejudice. Perhaps the CK One images are not quite as alarming as the Benetton campaigns, but it may be that, by including images of marginalized segments of society, some of the same stereotyping processes are at work (see Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002; Ramamurthy, 2000).

A critical essay by cultural theorist bell hooks about CK One photographer Meisel's work provides a contextual comparison to illuminate CK One's racial and sexual stereotyping (hooks, 1994). hooks discusses the pop superstar Madonna's sensational book *Sex* (1992), which features photographs by Meisel. The photographs that accompanied writing about various eroticized scenarios – ostensibly directly from Madonna's imagination – have several features in common with CK One images. In many of the scenes, Madonna interacts with black men and women in images reminiscent of the CK One ad's racial mixing, although far more sexually explicit. The photographs are reproduced in crisp black and white, and many have a plain background. hooks' analysis of how Meisel's images work in the *Sex* book shows how consideration of matters beyond what photographs show contributes to an interpretive stance.

*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, p. 20). Thus Madonna serves as a kind of tour guide through a Disneyland of difference, assuring mainstream viewers that their own identities are not at risk.

I believe Kate Moss serves the same tour guide function in the CK One series. Madonna consumes difference 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 an ethnic subculture. Steven Meisel's Madonna pictures inevitably exploit many clichés about blacks – oversexed, sexual experts, animal-like – and do nothing to assess, counter or interrogate these notions. These images may 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, p. 21). Thus the rich white pop star Madonna consumes race and alternative sexuality, according to hooks.

### **Theoretical insights: consuming difference**

In the CK One ad, Kate Moss serves as a visual anchor. Well-known, non-threatening (especially when compared to others in the ad), a famous supermodel, she represents the world of cosmetics, fashion and celebrity. 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. 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 alternative fashion, her image contributes to much of CK One's meaning construction.

Moss, as supermodel, 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 given access to a world suggested by this ad, yet can feel safe and unchanged by the experience. They do not risk actually becoming different, racially, sexually or in a class hierarchy. It is unclear why white skin-heads, who are associated with intolerance in popular discourse, are lumped in with others, especially black women. What are they doing in this group, and why are they so angry? The lesbian-tinged image from the foldout disappears, along with the promise (threat) of homosexual activity. In the world of major brand advertising, gay and lesbian consumers are largely absent (until fairly recently), reflecting a culture of homophobia and heterosexism (see Borgerson, Isla, Schroeder and Thorssén, 2006; Frye, 1983). In the CK One ad, homosexuality is also sublimated to heterosexual pleasure, and becomes merely an exploration for Moss's (assumed 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 demeanour, diminutive, thin and submissive. The image teases with a potential lesbian encounter, then retreats, leaving us unsatisfied, discontented. Moss's control over her body – demonstrated here in her aloof pose – is paramount to her fame and success.

In comparison to most advertisements of the mid-1990s, 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, pp. 173). The CK One imagery signalled a shift in advertising representation toward grungy looking models – a short-lived trend, but one that paved the way for shock advertising and provides a visual vocabulary for contemporary brand repositioning campaigns such as Burberry's highly successful move into a hip market segment, via the use of Kate Moss and group portraits reminiscent of CK One images (see Figure 23.6).



Figure 23.6 Burberry advertisement, 2002

By using stereotyped models, CK One draws on cultural codes of appearance influenced by social relations, the media and prejudice (cf. Jhally, 1987). In a 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 the skinhead is associated with violent fanaticism. In the absence of disrupting information within the ad, the reading of this image may be 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 skinhead 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 in 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).

### **Visual genealogy, critical analysis and research insights**

Many insights emerge from critical visual analysis that would be difficult to generate with traditional social science approaches. Links to the tradition of fine art serve 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', mainly a masculine tradition. The form of the ad is, of course, situated within the world of fashion, specifically fashion photography, which is largely a feminine realm; that is, women's fashion dominates the fashion scene. I argue that recognizing and analysing the juxtaposition of these gendered genres affords new insights to the representation – and commingling – of gender within the CK One ad.

Genre analysis produces generalizable insights into contemporary marketing images. Quoting or mimicking an art historical tradition helps ground it for the viewer, drawing associations to the visual tradition. By noting and investigating the links between a new image with an old tradition, we generate clues into the way CK One establishes itself through visual representations that transcend the here and now.

Drawing upon aspects of the group portrait contributed to understanding the perceptual categorization of people pictured within a frame as *belonging to a group*, or having something in common, what I call the ideology of the group portrait. In other words, there is nothing 'natural' that tells us that people who appear together in a frame share some essential identity characteristic. Rather we have built up this cultural association to

the point where it now underlies perceptual and cognitive processes of group attribution: when we see people together in a picture, we assume that they belong to some group. So, in the CK One image, this perceptual effect contributes to the underlying assumption that the models pictured share something, their use of CK One. Once again, as sophisticated ad viewers, we should realize that they may or may not actually use the endorsed product, and that their group membership lasted only a day or two for the shoot. Thus engaging critical visual analysis reminds the viewer and researcher alike that the CK One group is constituted via their appearance in the image, and the group did not exist prior to or after the photographic session. In contrast, we assume that the Militia companies and guilds in Dutch portraits constituted a group before, during and after the portrait making. The CK One group is identified by *consumption*, the Dutch group by *production*, visually expressing a complex cultural transformation of the past several centuries.

Finally, critical visual analysis points out limitations in an information-processing model of consumption, one in which culture, history and style are attenuated. For example, the 'white space' of the CK One images – the studio backdrop – does not neatly fit into cognitive models; from a strictly 'decision making' or 'persuasion' perspective, this white space carries no 'information', it is 'lost' amidst persuasive or rhetorical devices. In contrast, critical visual analysis points out how white space imbues images with meaning. In other words, white space is not 'nothing', it helps to situate subjects within images, and its use links images to a broader cultural world of aesthetics, luxury and value.

Critical visual analysis points to the cultural and visual context of ads within the flow of mass culture, underscoring the powerful role marketing plays both in the political economy and in the constitution of consuming subjects. A key element of critical visual analysis often entails constructing a visual genealogy of contemporary images, to contextualize and historicize them, and point to the cultural domain of contemporary visual consumption (see Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). I have argued that CK One ads exemplify a spectacular combination of old and new representational systems. An important issue to consider is how the art historical antecedents and connections discussed affect viewers' perceptions. Most consumers are not necessarily visually literate, and art historical references and conventions may not consciously inform their viewing of an ad. Likewise, most language speakers have a limited awareness of the linguistic horizon that shapes their use of vocabulary, grammar and syntax; nor do they have a well developed sense of how language developed over time. However historical conventions shape communication. In this way, even if the target market for CK One has no experience of Dutch group portraiture, the representational conventions of portraiture, fashion and advertising photography impart influence on contemporary visual expression, and the art directors and photographers responsible for producing the ad certainly were aware of art historical referents discussed here. Furthermore the renewed popularity of Dutch Art, spurred by the success of books, exhibitions and films such as of *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, demonstrate how Dutch images recirculate through culture.

## Conclusion

The interactions of identity, consumption and image represent one of the critical imperatives of contemporary consumer culture. Critical visual analysis affords new perspectives for investigating specific cultural and historical references in contemporary images. Researchers can take advantage of useful tools developed in art history and cultural studies

to investigate the poetics and politics of images as a representational system. Constructing a visual genealogy of contemporary images helps illuminate how marketing acts as a representational system that produces meaning beyond the realm of the advertised product, service or brand, connecting images to broader cultural codes that help create meaning.

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