

**According to John Berger. 'The purpose of publicity is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life. Not with the way of life of society, but with his own within it. It suggests that if he buys what it is offering, his life will become better. It offers him an improved alternative to what he is.' A discussion of the relationship between desire, commodity culture and photography.**

## **Figures**

Fig. 1 Chanel (2009) 'Coco Mademoiselle' in Cable, S. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/>

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The relationship between desire, commodity culture and photography is a complex one that covers a broad spectrum of categories and sub-categories which can be discussed. It is not a simplistic, linear narrative that can be explained in stages, as one, two and three, but it is instead a complex web of relationships between concepts, ideas, theories, facts, histories, cultures, societies, genders, classes and more. To discuss it here, then, will require a condensing down of the relationship into the key concepts: namely, advertising photography and the issues which it entails. To begin, let us briefly examine the rise of photography and commodity culture.

Firstly, what is commodity culture? It is a term that describes our culture, Western society, today since the industrial revolution, the formation of mass production, and the subsequent development of capitalism. It refers to the way that everything in our culture, even water, has become a commodity, something that is bought and sold (Wells 2009:346).

The development of photography is closely bound with that of commodity culture. Not only is photography a form of mass production, but it is also a commodity in itself. Furthermore, and of great pertinence, is the fact that photography became a tool through which commodity culture itself could be expressed 'through advertisements and other marketing material' (Ramamurthy 2009:207).

Ramamurthy goes on to define this relationship, stating

'As forms of mass production began to develop, the photograph, which constituted one of these forms, was also seen as a medium through which these commodities could be popularised and marketed. In this sense, from the very beginning, photographs were employed to induce desire and promoted the spectacle of commodities'

(Ramamurthy 2009:217).

The development of advertisements during the early to mid-twentieth century saw an important change in the relationship between the production of products and the consumer, determined by the use of the image in advertising and therefore the implementation of desire. 'Given the huge costs involved in producing a new line of goods... the consumer had to be... carefully primed... the element of risk was to be eliminated through the preparation and control of the market' (Hebdige 1988:93). Hebdige continues to state that from then on 'the look and shape of things were to play an important part in aligning two potentially divergent interests: production for profit, and consumption for pleasure' (1988:93), and establishes the important 'economic principle' that 'the circulation of the Image precedes the selling of the Thing' (1988:95).

The invention of the camera, then, was more closely tied with commodity culture than simply being another form of mass production: instead, it changed the way we see; ourselves, our culture, our society. John Berger states 'The invention of the camera changed the way men saw. The visible came to mean something different to them' (Berger 1972:18).

In order to understand the crucial role of the advertising image in the relationship between photography, commodity culture and desire, it is important to be able to 'read' these images. This will help in our understanding of the ways in which adverts work and their important and influential role in capitalist society. To do this we will look at semiotics, and to aid in illustrating this role, we will 'decode' a Chanel perfume advert throughout the duration of this essay.



Fig. 1, 'Coco Mademoiselle'

Semiotics is based on the idea that all 'human communication is founded in an assemblage of signs' (Wells 2009:350). Each sign consists of two parts a signifier, and a signified. The signifier refers to the literal part – what you see or read. The signified is the symbolic, or iconic, part – i.e. the idea or concept that the signifier, the literal aspect, alludes to (Barthes 1977). The signifier is often referred to as what is denoted, whilst the signified speaks of what is connoted (1977:37).

Concerning the advertisement, Barthes suggests that it contains three messages: the first is the

linguistic message, the text in the advert. The second, in the photograph or illustration, is the iconic (or coded, or symbolic) message, which contains the signifieds, the cultural messages. These messages are what formulates desire within the spectator, and are almost subconscious in that we experience them so frequently that we do not even consider them coded. The third message, again related to the image, is the literal message – i.e. what are the objects?

To apply this to the Chanel advert then, the linguistic message is simply the brand name and the name of the product; the perfume. This simply serves as what Barthes calls anchorage; the product is Coco Mademoiselle and it is by Chanel. The images are anchored by this text, so that we as the spectator know what the images are speaking of. The literal message is simply the picture of a semi-naked woman, in this case Keira Knightley, and a bottle of perfume. The coded iconic message, to simplify it, speaks of glamour, beauty, envy, happiness and sexual desirability (amongst other things).

It is important to note at this stage, that the meanings of photographs are not fixed, but are

'polysemic, mutable and contingent on the context' (Bate 2009:43). In other words, the signifieds are never exactly definite, so depending on the context of an advert, the cultural background of the spectator, the spectator's personal preferences and experiences, different images can have vastly different meanings.

So how does advertising work? Products are made desirable, or made to incite desire. They are imbued with cultural or social meaning which the product in itself probably has very little relation to. As David Bate states 'In the field of advertising, a product requires social meanings to make it attractive (no matter how bland and uninteresting the object is in itself) – it's 'use-value'. The object is given a human meaning, despite being non-human' (Bate 2009:112-3). Marxists have suggested that advertising is pivotal in what they call the 'fetishisation of commodities' by 'investing products with... false meanings' (Ramamurthy 2009:220).

In the case of the Chanel advert, it consists of two images, the larger of which is vital in capturing the public's attention and imbuing the smaller bottle of Chanel perfume with value. The fact that the photograph of the woman is larger already suggests that she is more significant than the bottle of perfume. Before we recognise anything else, we can see that this woman is beautiful. She is also semi-naked, and is looking directly at us; the public. Our attention is thus captured and we are offered an object of beauty. The brand name and the image of the perfume are now associated with this woman and are now associated with what is beautiful, glamorous, and desirable. The significance of the perfume has changed: it still is a bottle of perfume, it still denotes perfume, but it now produces connotations of irresistible beauty and glamour (the necklace, too, would seem to further anchor connotations of glamour, beauty and pricelessness). The advert offers these characteristics to us; they are yours to take, if you simply buy the perfume.

The next point to consider, which is equally important, is who the woman is: Keira Knightley. Keira Knightley, of course, is an actress, a Hollywood star, a celebrity, and thus an icon. The majority of people seeing this advert will recognize who she is, which in itself will give the

advert greater significance. But furthermore, she is someone who people aspire to be like, a role model for many, which imbues the advert with cultural value. She is associated with fame, with wealth, and therefore with happiness. She is enviable and therefore, according to John Berger, she is glamorous (Berger 1972:131). Not only now does this bottle of perfume have connotations of beauty and glamour, but also cultural connotations of 'the good life' and 'reaching the stars', which in turn connote fame, wealth and happiness.

Adverts often depict 'a fleeting moment in a narrative' (Ramamurthy 2009:221) and this advert has subtly used the narrative too. Although initially still and posed, Keira Knightley in this Chanel advert seems not to be in a still frame, but to be part of a story: from the white garment that is around her arms we can tell that she is getting undressed. This, in combination with her body position and eye contact, encourages you, the spectator, into the frame (if female, to be her, and if male, to be with her) and encourages you to complete the narrative, thus fulfilling your dreams, 'unbridled fantasies' (Jobling 1999, cited in Ramamurthy 2009:236) and satisfying your desires. However, we can never escape from the fact that there is the bottle of perfume in the bottom corner. The perfume would seem here to almost signify a key, a key which unlocks the door to Keira and thus opens the rest of the narrative to us, of which we are currently only tantalisingly offered one frame. Buy the perfume, and it is your story.

In terms of the literal composition of the advert, it is very simple. There are the words; this is what the product is, this is what to buy; there is Keira Knightley, and there is the bottle of perfume. What the advert is fundamentally saying to women is: the only thing stopping you from becoming Keira Knightley (and all that she is associated with) is not having this perfume. Interestingly, the advert works for both sexes too. It says to men: men, your woman could be this (or, you could have Keira), just buy her this perfume. It is almost as if the advert is structured in simple stepping stones. You, the viewer, stand before the advert. In the foreground, at the bottom of the advert is the perfume, and then just behind the perfume is Keira. It works, (as does all advertising) precisely on the premise that 'we never just look at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between

things and ourselves' (Berger 1972:9). The only thing between you and her is the perfume.

When we actually stop and consider the bottle of perfume in itself, the advert becomes slightly absurd. For what actually is it? It is a bottle of scented water, or fragrance. It is almost worthless and really a rather banal object, and yet now it has all these connotations attached to it. It would seem then, that there is a certain amount of deceit in the advertising image, that it makes impossible promises and unrealistic offers for the price of a product. It is precisely this false incitation of desire that has been the cause for much criticism of advertising from various critics. David Bate suggests that 'objects do not fulfil desire, they only temporarily subjugate it' (Bate 2009:116). He also argues that 'Clever advertising knows... how to tap into, even exploit, personal, moral and social anxieties' (2009:116-7). Jacques Lacan spoke of the 'metonymy of desire' (Lacan 1982, cited in Bate 2009:116) and Guy Debord summarised the whole relationship between advertising images and commodity culture as the 'society of the spectacle' (Debord 1967). Berger wrote prolific criticisms on the publicity image, stating that 'the publicity image steals the love of herself [the buyer] as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product' (Berger 1972:134). He went on to argue that 'the purpose of publicity is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life' (1972:142). There are plenty of others, too, who have criticised the deceptive nature of the advertising image, and the way that it capitalizes on desires, fantasies and anxieties (Giebelhausen 1963, Jhally 1990, Sontag 1979, Ward 1990, cited in Ramamurthy 2009).

One aspect of advertising imagery that has been possibly more hotly criticised concerns the objectification of women. According to Michelle Henning, feminists have 'criticized advertising and publicity images... for eroticising the female body in a way which turned women into mere objects for a male gaze' (Henning 2009:178). This has resulted in the increased 'representation of women as both passive and objects of sexual desire' (Ramamurthy 2009:232). John Berger explains the way we look at each other as men and women in *Ways of Seeing*. He suggests that a woman from 'earliest childhood' must survey herself and thus she recognizes the 'surveyor and the surveyed

within her' as 'two separate elements of her identity as a women' (1972:46). He sums up the objectification of women in his well known statement that

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women within herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.

(Berger 1972:47)

Objectification and photography, particularly the advertising image, are closely connected.

Solomon-Godeau suggests that photography 'inadvertently objectifies people by turning them into things to be looked at' (Solomon-Godeau 1991, cited in Henning 2009:178), which in turn implies that photography, by its very nature, 'invites voyeuristic looking' (Henning 2009:179). Berger's description of the European nude oil painting can be applied to the advertising image to explain the voyeuristic gaze. He suggested that in these paintings, the 'chief protagonist' was never painted. 'He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to the result of his being there' (1972:54). Of course, adverts are addressed to both men and women, but this draws our attention to the important fact that everything in advertising is addressed to us, as objects for us to gaze upon. Without us, the viewer, advertising is futile, and that makes us the 'chief protagonist'.

Let us refer again to the Chanel advert. The perfume is the object to be sold, and, as we have discussed, is invested with many (arguably false) values and connotations through the image of Keira Knightley. However, when we look at this image in terms of objectification, it reveals a profound implication. Suddenly, when associated with the product, the brand and the product name, we can see that Kiera in herself becomes an object, a spectacle. Chanel is selling us perfume primarily through selling us Keira. When we realise our position as the 'chief protagonist' we realise that everything about her; her partial nudity, her beauty, her eye contact is there on display for us,

attempting to draw us in, and engage us. Raymond Williams described advertising as 'the official art of modern capitalist society' (Williams 1980, cited in Bate 2009:115) and we can see how this is the case. The presentation of Keira Knightley to us is like an exhibition, on display in the public gallery (i.e. the bill boards), and sponsored by Chanel. Keira has become an object of our voyeuristic gaze, an object of dreams and fantasies, a fetish, all in the name of selling a bottle of perfume, to which, realistically, she has no association beyond this montage.

Finally, it is worth briefly mentioning the relationship between desire, photography and commodity culture in the digital age. Today, with the possibilities made available to us through the digital manipulation of images, it seems that many images of women in advertising are manipulated and enhanced, in order to increase levels of beauty and perfection which can then be associated with the product. Waists can be slimmed, breasts can be enlarged and blemishes can be removed. This, however, poses a problem, almost exclusively for women. As advertising of this nature is supposedly selling you the image of a woman, the fact that it is digitally manipulated means that one could actually never achieve the levels of beauty being portrayed and used to sell us a particular product. Thus, the deceitful nature of the advertising image is pushed one step further. This time, however, the implications are more serious, as Ramamurthy points out 'Such photography sets impossible ideals for both ordinary women and models, encouraging eating disorders such as anorexia' (Ramamurthy 2009:234).

It should come as little surprise then that Keira Knightley has too received digital enhancement in the Chanel advert. An 'airbrushing expert' reporting for the *Daily Mail* stated that 'Her face has definitely been retouched, there are no lines or wrinkles at all... Her breast has had some shading added to it... and it has also been increased in size slightly.' (Bickmore 2009, cited in Cable 2009). Aside from the fact that the bought product does not fulfil the fantasies it offers, we can see from this another way in which the fostered desire is never fulfilled; the beauty it offers is simply unrealistic and impossible to achieve.

In conclusion, then, we can see simplistically how the relationship between photography, commodity culture and desire is illustrated through the advertising image. It is the photograph that primarily incites desire in us, encouraging us to spend money and purchase products, and thus fulfilling our roles as batteries powering a commodity culture. We can also see how this creates controversial issues, such as that of deception, the commodification of sexuality, the objectification of women, and the incitation of impossible dreams.

Despite the many criticisms of advertising, though, it is worth noting that there is very little offered in terms of solutions to the problems that publicity creates. The fact remains that regardless of these issues, the publicity image is very successful. The fact that no one is (arguably) *forced* to heed the advertising image, and yet myriads do, suggests the possibility that the general public may actually *like* it: what if people enjoy the dreams and the fantasies, the idea that buying this or that product will make you in some way special or desirable? Why wouldn't a woman want to be associated with Keira Knightley?

There are no definite answers, but the fact remains that, whether we are aware of it or not, the role of the photograph in inciting desire is crucial, and this relationship is thus vital in fuelling a successful commodity culture.

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