Article begins on next page.

For proper viewing, please be certain that "Continuous - Facing" is selected under the View menu in Acrobat.
As I See It, #1 in a photographic series by Hugh Kretzschmar.

The Kathryn, lacquer console in Citron. A refreshing lemon that's anything but vanilla.

1-800-4-KOHLER
kohler.com
For 18 years, Kohler’s “As I See It” ad campaign has delivered romanticized and fantasized portraits of high-end kitchen and bath fixtures. Drawing from semiotic and psychoanalytic theories and critical frameworks, this article examines four advertisements created by surrealist photographer Hugh Kretschmer. The visuals embody symbols, metaphors, and mythic allusions as signs of a transformative relationship between female models and products, connoting referents of human commodification, self-alienation, sexual activity, and desire. The study calls for public relations stewardship to act as a gatekeeper for ambiguous or unintended visual messages in corporate advertising.

“Seeing comes before words” (Berger, 1972, p. 33). This simple decree by John Berger provides a fitting introduction to the nature of this study and to human nature itself. We are always looking at the relationship between things and ourselves, in our physical environment and in society, and interpreting what we see through the context of cultural and historical references. In our mediated world, advertising texts are decidedly visual expressions of culture and society. Within the highly visual environment of consumer shelter magazines, advertising pages often outnumber editorial pages and frequently use photographic narratives laden with imagery and meaning. In a rare 18-year campaign, the Kohler Company has delivered some of the most creative and compelling ads in print. Titled “As I See It,” the campaign uses the work of leading artists and photographers to marry art with advertising (Weaver, 1988), resulting in frequently romanticized or fantasized portraits of high-end kitchen and bath fixtures. Messaris (1997) has
suggested that the meticulously composed images in ads often suggest visual claims likely to be unacceptable in verbal form (p. 225). This dynamic is typically found in two specific kinds of ads: images of social status and images of sex and romance. The ads considered in this study offer an opportunity to unpack messages that combine both social status and sexuality.

Drawing from semiotic and psychoanalytic theories and critical frameworks, this qualitative examination of representational images produced by Kohler and directed toward female consumers unveils the production of desire and construction of self within Kohler’s advertising to women. It begins by highlighting how Kohler, through its association with heritage, elite lifestyle, and superior design and materials, publicizes the notion of what constitutes completion of a female homeowner. Then the article engages in a careful psychoanalytic and semiotic reading of Kohler’s representation of women and products found in a recent series of ads created by surrealist photographer Hugh Kretschmer. The analysis emphasizes how the ads’ visuals embody symbols, metaphors, and mythic allusions as signs of a transformative relationship between female models and products, connoting referents of human commodification, self-alienation, sexual activity and desire.1

This essay first provides background on Kohler and the “As I See It” ad campaign. Next, literature on advertising as visual communication is reviewed, revealing a history of advertising’s appropriation of fine art and surrealism allusions. An explication of semiotics as a system of signifiers, signifieds, and signs and a review of psychoanalytic concepts are followed by analysis of four Kohler advertisements that appeared in shelter magazines during 2003 and 2004. Implications for future semiotic analysis of visuals conclude this essay.

Background

Kohler Company, one of the oldest and largest tightly held family-owned corporations in the United States, was founded near Sheboygan, Wisconsin, in 1873 by Austrian immigrant John Michael Kohler. Although the company initially provided implements to farmers and castings to nearby furniture factories, it attributes the launch of its plumbing business in 1883 to an innovative experiment. By applying baked enamel coating to a horse trough/hog scalding, Kohler created the company’s first bathtub (Kohler, n.d.). The company credits its early tradition of excellence to the European craftsmanship of its many immigrant employees. To shepherd its employees towards assimilation, in 1916 Kohler mandated that only employees who were American citizens would be considered for promotions. That same year, the family founded one of the earliest planned communities, a company town named the Village of Kohler, offering housing to employees. The building that initially sheltered single workingmen is now part of the American Club, an elite resort and spa (Shad, n.d.). While the village has grown to accommodate nearly 2,200 residents, and its Kohler location still manufactures faucets, the company now commands global recognition and presence. The Kohler workforce comprises worldwide associates, from potteries in Mexico and China to showrooms in France and Japan (Olson, n.d.). Although Kohler has branched off into related ventures, the company’s bathroom and kitchen products remain most visible. Among competitors, including American Standard, MASCO, and Moen (Hoovers, n.d.), Kohler’s stature with trade and public customers is that of the image leader, offering prestige, artfulness, and excellence. In the company’s own words, Kohler has a “mission of contributing to a higher level of gracious living ... marked by qualities of charm, good taste, and generosity of spirit ... characterized by self-fulfillment and the enhancement of nature” (Kohler, n.d.). One of their highly visible efforts to communicate this mission is the “As I See It” advertising campaign.

Romantic and Surreal Portraits of Plumbing

It has been claimed that advertisements make only one single proposal, to transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more (Berger, 1972, p. 131). This study considers the rhetorical and psychological strategies of four print advertisements for Kohler Company bath and kitchen products.
Part of the 18-year “As I See It” campaign, the four ads are photographed by Hugh Kretschmer, an American photographer known for his surrealistic style. GSD&M of Austin, Texas, directed the creative. The ads appeared in 2003 and 2004 in various home magazines. For this study, the ads were located in issues of Traditional Home, Home, and Better Homes & Gardens’ Bedroom and Bath, magazines with readerships that are no less than 75% female (Better Homes and Gardens, n.d.; Home, n.d.; Traditional Home, n.d.). Other ads in Kohler’s 2003–2004 campaign featured the work of fashion photographer Jean-Claude Maillard, who produced a series evoking Adam and Eve succumbing to the temptations of a bathroom, and magazine photographer David LaChapelle who enlisted a Herculean male to power lift a toilet (Hill, 2002).

For the purposes of this study, Kretschmer’s work was selected for style consistency and because of his surrealist technique. Surrealism, a 20th-century art movement that radically rejected traditional art, shaped photography through the ingenuity of Man Ray. He is attributed with inventing surrealist photography through both processing and composition improvisations and then popularizing it through assignments for fashion and society magazines (J. Paul Getty Museum, 1998). Ray’s pictures of women often exuded veiled eroticism; at times he superimposed elements to objectify the female body. For example, inspired by Ingres’ paintings of classic nudes, Ray photographed the back side of his nude model to make her appear armless and then altered the print by adding two f-holes of a stringed musical instrument onto her back. Its title, Le Violon d’Ingres, a French idiom that means “hobby,” seems to suggest that whereas playing the violin was Ingres’s hobby, toying with his model was a pastime of Man Ray. The picture, in The Getty collection, maintains a tension between objectification and appreciation of the female form (http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=61240).

Surrealism has since greatly influenced luxury product advertising. It has elite appeal and “a characteristic combination of highly realistic style and reality-defying content that is a particularly effective way of attracting the spectator’s eye” (Messeris, 1997, p. 236). The “As I See It” campaign originated in 1988. Grey Advertising used leading artists and photographers to produce stylistic interpretations in a five-ad print series for their client, Kohler. The effort called for different moods and media, and in the following year, Grey’s campaign elevated the print ad to the realm of fine art (Weaver, 1988). Adweek praised the work of one photographer, Joyce Tenneson, and its inspiration, which was taken from Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli and his series of Madonna and Child compositions, including the famous “Virgin With the Child” (http://www.museopoldipezzoli.it/PP_inglese/museo/collezioni/pittura/ Rinascimento.html#botticelli_madonna). The painting features a seated Madonna holding the Child, who is partially draped in a blanket and standing on her lap. Their faces are turned toward each other. A large open window is in the upper right quarter of the painting.

In the examined ads, sex is the referent system, hinted at through innuendo, double entendre, and symbols. …

The resulting ad, titled “Renaissance Redux,” introduced Kohler’s new wood vanities and other bathroom furniture. Framed by a rich brown border, the photograph of a mother and child in a bathroom features a painted canvas background and a painted floor, efforts to enhance the elegance of the ad. The serenely poised mother, draped in white chenille, holds a baby standing on her lap, their cheeks touching. A large rectangular mirror is in the upper right quarter of the photograph. This fine-art style, Adweek suggested, succeeds because Kohler’s consumers were more exposed to various art forms and generally more sensitive to it (Weaver, 1988). The ad copy reads, “You remember the Renaissance, don’t you? That’s when art was art and the living was too.”

Over the years, the gallery of fine art allusions framing Kohler plumbing products has stretched from early Botticelli to the most recent Man Ray-like surrealism. This study features the work of the
internationally known Kretschmer, whose photography has appeared on the editorial and advertising pages of major U.S. magazines.

Kretschmer explained his style influences in an interview with James Cotter at Photo Insider: “I come from a very creative family and was exposed to a lot of art throughout my life. Twentieth-century art, the cubists, the Russian avant-garde, and surrealism really influenced me” (Cotter, 2003, ¶13). He experimented with objects, lighting, airbrushing, and multiple cameras, and upon moving to New York, created the series, “Gastronopolis,” which portrays an alien who eats the city. The philosophy guiding Kretschmer’s photography is the notion that an image should be able to tell a story and convey its message with simplicity and surprise: “When I make a good photograph … you look at it (and) it becomes more layered and more involving. There’s something striking about these juxtapositions” (Cotter, 2003, ¶20). One of the stranger images in Kretschmer’s collection, “Breast Heads,” was created digitally because of the difficulty in achieving realistic-looking and perfectly placed breasts on the backs of two men’s shaven heads (http://www.photoin sider.com/pages/kretschmer/kretschmer.html).

“Gastronopolis” is described by Cotter as “a series of images that explore the relationship between food and identity,” and Kretschmer explained that the idea for the shoot was “What Men Want.” He wanted to make sure the position of the men matched the position of the breasts. He photographed the breasts first so he had an idea of the direction. It was hard to get the heads just right. I don’t think the image would look as real if we tried to attach fake breasts to models’ heads” (Cotter, 2003, ¶19).

The photograph, according to Kretschmer, was commissioned for a special section of a national men’s magazine and remained unused because the editor felt it was “too creepy.” Regarding the Kohler ads, Kretschmer attributes the client with wielding almost complete control over the creative ideas from the very beginning.

Because I have my name attached to the campaign, the headline ‘As I See It’ gives the impression that they were my ideas … but before Kohler decided on me, the ideas were already created and they were adamant about keeping them as they were originally sketched. (Kretschmer, personal communication, March 19, 2004)

This dichotomy exists between editorial and advertising; editorial assignments grant greater creative license, and advertising assignments impose creative control. Thus, the fantasy of the “As I See It” campaign may well extend beyond the resulting creative execution to the posturing of its artist’s vision and the campaign’s very title itself.

More than a fetishized art object, she has been made a functional adjunct of the product, giving a suggestion of availability.
Figure 2. “Vase,” a Kohler ad for a kitchen faucet photographed by Hugh Kretschmer. Reprinted with permission. Original in color.
The significance of the images, he notes, arises from cultural and historical context invested by the viewer.

Goffman (1974) called this evocative syntax framing. Every advertisement is an exercise in framing. Frames constitute “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation” that organize the social construction of reality (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6). Some ads let culturally recognized frames work for them. Goldman (1992) analyzed a Charles Jourdan ad with signifiers from different cultural worlds. A woman’s smooth white legs wearing red high-heel pumps stick out, oddly distorted, from behind the photographic reproduction of a cracked Michelangelo fresco of a nude male adolescent. Completing the image, a female hand with red nails curls around the male’s back. The disparate cultural references cause viewers to place each in their minds, associating classic art and the male ideal with sexual desire and female pleasure, embodied in new red pumps.

In the selling of such upscale products as Kohler fixtures, advertising frequently includes allusions to works of art that serve as tokens of high culture, superlative skill, and supreme value (Walker, 1983, p. 58). “Art is a sign of affluence,” wrote Berger (1972), “it belongs to the good life; it is a part of the furnishings which the world gives to the rich and the beautiful” (p. 135).

Surrealism is one type of art style whose eye-catching structure supports the investment and transfer of meaning between images. Surrealism is a state of mind; its meanings cannot be translated easily into words (Homer & Kahle, 1986). Viewers associate this visual style with sophistication and superior social status. By juxtaposing seemingly unrelated objects, it becomes a witty puzzle, a quirky connection, a naughty proposal. Kahle and Homer (1988) listed the nonverbal mechanisms in surrealism that work to achieve maximum impact: isolation of an object outside of its known field and expected role; modification of an object to add an abnormal trait or withdraw an obvious trait; hybridization of two familiar objects to create a bewilderling one; incongruous changes in scale, position, or substance; paradox prompted by intellectual antitheses; conceptual bipolarity, in which two situations are observed from a single viewpoint; double images; and the provocation of accidental encounters. Messaris (1997) has called the merging or blending of two objects a violation of reality that attracts attention, giving rise to an emotional response (p. 9). Although the bizarre nature of certain juxtapositions is not concealed, what is concealed is the reason underlying their placement. It is precisely the absence of explicit relationships that makes us assume a link deeper than the obvious, thus drawing in the spectator’s own unconscious (Williamson, 1978/1987, pp. 131–132). Surrealism is existential: Sometimes there is no way out, leaving the featured characters and the reader–spectator trapped in the ad.

Research has shown that surrealist ads work. Homer and Kahle (1986) examined the effects of surrealist design and priming (cues that create expectation) on the effectiveness of print ads. Their experiment found that both factors encouraged product recall and fostered purchase intention. Arias-Bolzmann, Chakraborty, and Mowen (2000) measured consumers’ attitudes toward the presence, and absence, of absurd images—defined as incongruously juxtaposed pictorials—in wine cooler advertisements. Experiments revealed that although people with a prior positive attitude toward wine coolers reacted positively to both types of ads, people with a negative prior attitude toward wine coolers reacted more positively to the absurd ad than to the nonabsurd ad. Absurdity was also found to impact brand name recall as effectively as persuasive elements.
To illustrate the deliberate choice of the unconventional to persuade and enhance recall, we need only turn to Kohler’s creative team. Lynn Born, the associate art director at GSD&M, describes their vision to “achieve images bolder than the typical home magazine fare to emphasize the company’s tagline, ‘The bold look of Kohler.’... Their ads are unpredictable, purposefully going beyond the typical to stimulate positive reception. ... We want the consumer to feel that Kohler is an extraordinary company... so that when it’s time to purchase a product, they’ll remember the bold artistry and sensuousness that sets Kohler apart, even if they don’t remember a particular product” (personal communication, March 26, 2004).

Art influence on advertising is nearly as old as the profession. In The Fine Art of Advertising, Hoffman (2003), reveals how art, as a symbol of high culture, has influenced the history of advertising. Motivated by class lust, excessive appropriations of Michelangelo, the Mona Lisa, and the work of Andy Warhol have all served the singular role to help sell the work of mass production. Television and magazine ads in 2002 for the German automaker Audi use both fine art and surrealism. One TV spot depicts a “garage” that turns out to be the Guggenheim art museum, with the voiceover, “All great works of art belong in a museum.” Another spot blends Da Vinci’s drawings with components of the car’s transmission. Yet another ad, incorporating a field of surreal images, was hailed as the siren song to Audi drivers—those who may not yet even know they are (Coppola, 2002). Hetsonri (2005) cited an ad that juxtaposes Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa with a coffee maker and another ad that presents repeating images of a color copier with the celebrity effect of a Warhol silkscreen print.

Advertising has an erotic history, as well. Reichert (2003) cited the use of erotic images to promote Duke Cigarettes in the 1880s and Woodbury Soap and Listerine mouthwash in early 20th-century ads. Later in the century, an example of both a sexy and surreal television and print campaign revolved around the “Little Red Riding Hood” fable that promoted Chanel No. 5 perfume with the tagline, “Share the Fantasy” (Elliott, 1998). In recent campaigns, Victoria’s Secret lingerie, Abercrombie & Fitch clothing, and Calvin Klein jeans all use sex to sell.

Thus fine art, surrealism, and eroticism are no strangers to advertising. Yet whereas research has documented well the existence of these ads and their influence on consumer product attitudes and actions, this essay considers their ideological nature. If they “work” to sell, what ideology are they selling in the process? This reading suggests the cultural meaning of selected ads and how they might construct their audiences within specific contexts. Although advertising’s primary function is to sell, Williamson’s (1978/1987) seminal study Decoding Advertisements asserts that ads also create structures of meaning in which they are selling us ourselves (p. 13). Acknowledging the patriarchal predominance of our cultural heritage, Goldman (1992) has written that ads work to hegemonically sustain patriarchy by fetishizing the female anatomy and persona (p. 113). To explore what ideologies these four Kohler ads are selling, beyond product, through the potion of fine art, surrealism, and eroticism, I use semiotic and psychoanalytic theories and their critical frameworks.

Semiology and Psychoanalytic Theory

Semiology, the science of sign systems and their social uses, was developed by Saussure in Europe and Peirce in the United States in the early 20th century. To Saussure, a sign consists of signer (image) and signified (concept; Jensen, 1991, p. 27). Moriarty (2005, p. 231) wrote of the later contributions of Stuart Hall and Roland Barthes, who extended signifier and signified to include denotation (direct, specific, or literal meaning) and connotation (the meaning that is evoked on a subjective level). Barthes’ (1957/1972) early work offered guidelines for semiotic analysis from a perspective of inherent meaning—cultural, mythological, or ideological. In Mythologies, he argued that the relationship between texts and ideology, analyzing how the front page of Paris Match, picturing a black soldier saluting the French flag, through socio-historical reading, became a sign for French...
Figure 3. “Moon,” a Kohler ad for a whirlpool bathtub photographed by Hugh Kretschmer. Reprinted with permission. Original in color.
imperialism. Barthes’ (1978) later work used the terms denotation and connotation to refer to the natural and the ideological (respectively) meanings of a text (Larsen, 1991, p. 125). It has become conventional to add the mythical or allegorical into this range of meanings (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 466). For example, a palm tree may denote the tropics but connote vacation; it becomes mythical if taken to mean the essential college spring break. A convertible may denote transportation but connote prestige and becomes mythical if it is seen as an entitlement to mark one’s 50th birthday. When the natural is changed, culture is “cooked,” a term given by Levi-Strauss, 1969) to the process in which products offer safe passages “back” to nature, a nature represented to us in a form where it may be consumed (Williamson, 1978/1987, p.103, 120). In semiotics, the result of the cooking process is termed the referent system, or ideology that transfers to the product. I will use the terms semiology and semiotic in this essay interchangeably, acknowledging that scholars have accepted this usage despite the terms’ differences. While semiotics interprets signs that may be divorced from the contexts in which they are used, semiotics takes contexts and social perspectives into account; both perspectives are considered here.

When ads involve viewers to “solve” their puzzles, the absence of overt meaning requires them to fill in something. When product, people, or words are absent, the viewer feels free to produce a meaning for him- or herself. Writing on the gestalt principle of closure, Allport and Postman (1947) described a search for a “plausible reason for a confused situation” (p. 37) and “the subject’s urge to make his experiences as complete, coherent and meaningful as possible” (p. 97). Yet advertising’s system of creating meaning is more like Freud’s concept of latent intent submerged behind manifested meaning. Williamson (1978/1987, p. 41) argued that advertising is an ideological process in which one is unaware, a process that is “invisible.” Why? Because we are active in it and do not receive it as an independent entity. Meaning construction exists inside our self-image, and we constantly recreate it. We are its host body; it works through us, not at us. We are invited to insert ourselves into the missing space. Something in the ad signifies us. Williamson suggested that as we enter and interpret it, we experience an ideological illusion of freedom: We do not produce genuine meaning but rather accept a predetermined “solution” (p. 74). Through this process we also create ourselves. In fact, a history is being constructed. Althusser has written that if you are called by the ad (“Hey you!”), you must already be. You must feel that you already, naturally, are a part of the group it represents: You naturally belong and therefore are compelled to buy (Williamson, 1978/1987, p. 47). Ideology, then, is the representation of imaginary relationships between real things (p. 74). Products in ads are unarguably physical things (denotation) but they also are referents of feelings (connotation). Ads promise to create the feelings they represent, thus the act of buying represents consuming the referent emotion. In this sense, all ads are signs with an ideology that is transparent.

Barthes’ ideas have continued to profoundly influence contemporary theorists. In her 1998 review of newly published works on visual communication (Burnett, 1995; Forceville, 1996; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Petro, 1995), Stein (1998) found that they ranged from the semiotic approach of pictorial codes and visual literacy to attempts to explore concerns with interpretation, affect, memory, projection, referentiality, and temporality outside any linguistic frame. Most interesting, she found that all of these books, although appearing to have oppositional aspects, were centrally in dialogue with Roland Barthes. This study’s semiotic analysis is guided by the work of Barthes.
Although semiotic criticism is about signs, psychoanalytic criticism is about minds (Holland, 2000). Psychoanalytic criticism is concerned with the minds associated with signs: the author, the audience, and some character represented in or associated with a text. Today the liveliest psychoanalytic criticism addresses works that appeal to repressed wishes and fantasies, questions of gender and personality in the mind of the reader (Holland, 2000).

Psychoanalytic criticism originated in the work of Freud, who pioneered the technique of psychoanalysis and whose theories deal with the nature of the unconscious mind. The purpose of psychoanalytic theory is to describe how the gendered and sexual subject is formed (Klages, 2001). Freud defined what is “masculine” as what is active; what is passive is likewise defined as “feminine.”

Ads promise to create the feelings they represent, thus the act of buying represents consuming the referent emotion. In this sense, all ads are signs with an ideology that is transparent.

Extending these concepts to visual symbols in advertising texts, one could identify fantasies of control, power, and desire with sexual symbols of the assertive male reproductive organ or the receptive female reproductive organ. “Symbolizing serves to disguise all kinds of content in literary works,” wrote Holland (2000) “… omission functions like repression or denial” (p. 15).

McLuhan (1967/2002) demonstrates the artistic power of juxtaposition and contrast—and the implications that arise through withholding syntactical connections and tapping into the unconscious—in his critique of an ad for Berkshire Nylon Stockings. The ad’s narrative thickens quickly through its imagery of a rearing horse (phallus) and a poised young woman (innocence), her body posture connoting both protectiveness and vulnerability. Here, juxtaposition of elements allows the advertiser to “say” what could never pass the censor of consciousness (p. 134), at least not in 1947 when the ad appeared. Decades of art analysis and media criticism have supported the power of the visual to engage and persuade the viewer. Through the mass circulation of the Kohler images, they intensify in power as they are repeatedly viewed, and in viewing these images “we simultaneously modify ourselves in relation to the image as we ‘consume’ it—a misnomer … since images equally, or almost entirely, consume us” (Beller,
2002, p. 77). In other words, through the process of looking at a repetitive depiction of a persuasive image, it produces a value in the beholders (desire, for instance); it transforms our selves.

This article analyzes four advertisements dominated by visuals presented through surrealist photography. The following analysis attempts to make sense of the signification processes operating in the ads. It recognizes the dominant images and how they function as signs to convey meaning and suggests the concepts and values that are communicated.

**Analysis**

Each ad in this “As I See It” series is formatted identically, without much obvious text at first glance. Only the tagline with the logo, “The Bold Look of KOHLER,” reads easily in a lower corner of each ad. In an upper corner, small text identifying the ad reverses out of a black square. The type size is approximately 8-point, requiring a conscientious effort to read it. Each ad has a thick black frame, alluding to a work of art.

The current agency’s art direction takes creative inspiration from unique and special features of the product—for example the long graceful neck of a faucet, or a bright color—with the goal of presenting images so bold that consumers remember Kohler as an extraordinary company with products beyond the typical (Born, personal communication, March 26, 2004). This semiotic reading exposes the nature of “bold” and the roles consumers might play.

All four ads present themselves as fanciful puns on childhood myths and amusements—a dancing snake, a damsel in a tower, a fairy in a forest, the man in the moon, a birthday party game. However, given the large female readership of the magazines carrying these Kohler ads, one acknowledges that they are primarily directed at women. Female models are featured in each ad, thus they are stand-ins for women readers (Goffman, 1979). The models display sensuous behavior toward the camera. That is, they treat the lens as a substitute for the male gaze. Messaris (1997, p. 41), echoing Mulvey (1975/2001), has argued that when women readers look at such ads, they are actually seeing themselves as a man might see them.

As noted earlier, critics have pointed to the presence of sexual symbols in a wide variety of advertising images, including pictures of cars, stallions, lipstick, perfume bottles, cigarettes, pool cues, fruit, containers or hollowed, concave objects (Goldman, 1992; Messaris, 1997, p. 62; McLuhan, 1967/2002). In the examined ads, sex is the referent system, hinted at through innuendo, double entendre, and symbols, but never “raw.” Shapes have traditionally suggested gender types. Here the angular edges of the fixtures, and the tubular shapes of the faucets and piping, suggest a masculine temper and sexuality. Round and concave shapes imply the gentleness and sexuality of a woman. Hollows are the objects of desire: a sink, a vase, a tub. They anticipate the receiving subject. A female human completes the semiotic scheme. Given the sensuality of the ads, one asks where the man is. In Barthes’ (1957/1972) early work, he wrote that women (in media) are “entirely constituted by the gaze of man … man is everywhere around, he presses on all sides, he makes everything exist; he is in all eternity the creative absence” (p. 51). Thirty years after these published words, is the man in these pictures still nowhere and everywhere? This analysis supports the assertion that male presence is both pervasive and persuasive in the Kohler ads.

The ads also contain images of anthropomorphism that transfer human qualities to products: Where the woman is passionate, so is the product (Figure 1, see page 90); where the woman is exotic, the product becomes exotic (Figure 2, see page 95); where the woman is mysterious, there is likewise a mysterious product (Figure 3, see page 98); and where the woman is playful, the products are too (Figure 4, see page 105). Levi-Strauss (1969) used concepts such as “raw” and “cooked” (or “fresh” and “decayed”), to help elaborate abstract ideas that distinguish between nature and culture/socialization (p. 334). Thus, from the perspective of Levi-Strauss, each woman is “cooked”: She is a symbol not of a natural being but of a cultural tool.

Color is an important factor in all four ads. Color associations are always motivated by the sym-
bolic message associated with the given color (Nemcsics, 1993, p. 176). Nemcsics also noted that women prefer yellow and violet, and men prefer blue and green—the major colors found in three of these ads. In the 20th century, color theorists have determined the following significations: Yellow suggests hope, self-revelation, joy, and expectation of happiness; greenish blue conveys mystery, depth, eternity, and thought; and violet connotes the sublime, fantasy, silence, and satisfaction (Brink, 1991; Milite, 1995). Just as color is more suggestive than specific, the ads make no strong effort to be realistic; their images function as narrative symbols of myth, legend, alienation, and sexual submission. One might not be familiar with the prototype image but might understand the basic intent of the reference (Perlmutter, 1998, pp. 14–15).

The Kathryn

This first ad (see Figure 1, page 90) appeared on the outside back cover of the November 2003 issue of Home. This isolated position allowed the ad to be seen without a preceding or succeeding ad to influence context. The reader immediately sees a young, blond, White woman wearing a white off-the-shoulder gown, standing alone in a room whose walls and floor are constructed from white cylindrical gallon tubs of vanilla ice cream stacked and arranged perhaps to suggest tiles. On the left is a rectangular lemon yellow bathroom sink standing on silver chrome legs without a cabinet. On the right, the woman stands with her back to the reader, but we see her partially turned face as it gazes at her left hand stretched out and resting on the sink. Her fingertips gracefully touch its surface. Typically a view from the back is likely to acquire a sexual dimension. A rear view denies the reader a full look and thus attracts the eye through the power of suggestion. It also helps direct interest to the product, as her gaze invests it with importance. Her face is turned away from her right hand, which holds up a cone stacked with three scoops of vanilla ice cream. It is dripping down over her hand, drips almost reaching her elbow. She has ignored it long enough for it to soften and drip. A Freudian lens sees the dripping ice cream cone as phallic.

One’s eye then focuses on the small copy to help make sense. It reads, “The Kathryn™ lavastone console in Citrone. A refreshing lemon that’s anything but vanilla.” However, the ad is more than merely a visual pun. In Freudian theory, puns carry repressed sexual tensions. The pattern of the walls and floor could also suggest the thick cinder-block construction of an institution or castle tower. There are no windows or doors. The solitary female, with long yellow hair and floor-length white dress, seems oddly confined in this fortress. The setting evokes a folktale narrative of the dominated, trapped female needing rescue. However, rather than appearing distraught or emboldened to escape, she is mesmerized by the only object in color, the color of her hair: the yellow sink. The woman as signifier transfers meaning to the sink. Yet her touch is not a determined grasp, but a ritual-like feminine touch that connotes care and treasuring. The sink is a treasure worthy of capturing and keeping for oneself in a private hideaway. The sink is also signifier for her self. She has forgotten her interest in the ice cream cone, an obvious male symbol now melting over her hand, possibly signifying tension between male and female.

A psychoanalytic explanation for this drama suggests sexual lust and release. The plumbing pipes exposed under the sink hang as a drooping, expended male member. The woman wears a white dress, yet a sexy one. She is relaxed and accepting of her confinement and appears to be experiencing a guilty pleasure: Her free hand approaches the concave sink, a Freudian symbol of the female. The vanilla ice cream drips on the other hand. The touching unites these two signs of male and female sex. Yet she is not only involved with the sink; it is irresistible. She is surrounded by sexual imagery that dominates the full-page ad. The cylindrical shapes in the walls and floor connote male sex, according to Freud. And although her preferential gaze for the sink is a favoring of virtue and the feminine, she is trapped in a male world. Within this sexualized environment, what she is lusting for is her own identity, located in the Kohler sink. The ad instructs that woman has to rely on a greater power to create her self, and Kohler presents the supernatural ability to bestow it.
The Vinnata

This second ad (see page 95) appeared on the outside back cover of the June/July 2003 issue of *Traditional Home*. Hidden in a black-type box in the upper right-hand corner are the words, “The Vinnata™ kitchen sink faucet in Vibrant Brushed Bronze. A pull-down spray. A lifetime finish. Reaching new heights of elegance.” An African American woman appears naked as a tribal “other” to sell this faucet. She is exoticized: her hair a short natural Afro, large hoops hang on her ears and bracelet both her upper arms; her neck appears unnaturally elongated and is encircled with twenty brass chokers stacked from shoulders to chin. A large urn with tall narrow neck sits in front of her, becoming her torso. Her body morphs into this receptacle. She appears more as human piping than as a woman. As representative of the “commodity self” (Ewen, 1976), her body is composed of product-mediated parts—she is a decorative accessory for the home. More than a fetishized art object, she has been made a functional adjunct of the product, giving a suggestion of availability.

Male sexual images include a thick, arched faucet with a snake-like black hose pulled out. The woman holds the end of the hose, spraying wide streams of water down into her bronze body/container. The woman herself is being filled up. As spectator, we fill in the gaps. We may potentially receive the magic if we buy the faucet. It assumes we understand, that the items are “known.” “Magic” helps explain any unusual or inexplicable transformation. This ad involves the classic formula for a spell: there is a special gold vessel, sparkling liquid, and an act of consumption (Williamson, 1978/1987, p. 148), a ritual of sharing and incorporation.

In this ad, the color palette includes dominant tones of bronze, with pale greens, cream, and black. Yet on three off-white flowers placed on the tile countertop, pink phallic-like centers poke up into the air, only to be matched in color by her lips, creating a sexual suggestion. There is no environmental context beyond the above components, yet the reader knows that the kitchen is where a kitchen sink belongs; the kitchen is typically the center of home life. The fixture places the woman in her kitchen, yet she is overtly sexual and, ironically, “cooked.” The representation is so remote from the ambiance of the kitchen that the viewer is forced to question, to enter, and then to identify with the promise of sexual pleasure and service. The woman as signifier transfers meaning to the faucet: exotic, gratifying, self-constituting. The male correlatives are the faucet, hose and penile flowers, all of which will enter her body/vase. This ad’s brazen placement on the back cover—a position as enduring as the front—amplifies its rhetoric. When juxtaposed with the placid tones of *Traditional Home*, one wonders if the reader is more compelled to enter and experience it, or more likely to resist its bold vulgarity.

The Stillness

This third ad (see page 98) appeared on the outside back cover of the Winter 2003 issue of *Better Homes & Gardens, Bedroom & Bath*. Again, small type reverses out of black in the upper right-hand corner: “The Stillness™ laminar faucet. Water that flows without splash. Still waters run deep.” Here Kohler uses obvious folklore imagery in a predominantly blue–green, violet, and black color palette. A large blue bathtub dominates the lower half of the ad; above it is the context of a nighttime forest. Thus, the tub alludes to an outdoor pond. A diminutive female fairy sits in the forest gazing at the tub, its faucet pouring in a stream of water. As the others, this ad mixes cultural cues to deliberately engage the reader in the construction of meaning.
The female figure, as in the other ads, leads the female viewer into experiencing the ad. In this case, the female figure is a fairy—fanciful, wishful, and submissive. One might think of Peter Pan’s coquettish Tinkerbell. The camera looks slightly down at her, helping to diminish her stature. Goffman (1976) interpreted these minimizing portrayals as a reflection of the subservient or dependent role that women have traditionally had to play in society vis-à-vis men.

Although it is a simulated starry night and the moon is full, the ad’s overall darkness suggests the archetypal allusions to weakness, sins of the flesh, and a dash of evil. In contrast to the petite fairy, the large full moon reflected in the tub bears a broad, grinning male face: It is the man in the moon—not evident in the sky, only lurking underneath and waiting for the fairy to enter his waters. Silver tree trunks fill the forest with their long cylindrical (phallic) shapes.

Because the bath is filling with water, and the fairy gazes at it longingly, she must always be about to run to it. She is always pulled by temptation, as the consumer is tempted to buy the tub. We are led to desire an imaginary unity with the product to experience the romantic image of nature. The tub has magical properties, made almost supernatural, as it promises to transport us away from the real world. The forest must be enchanted: A fairy lives in it. Its exotic quality gives it a sense of something strange and mystical. It provides a condensed image that connotes fantasy, property, and “the natural.”

There are two presences: the fairy and the moon-man, thus the promise of what happens after (or even during) the bath is established as sexual—the man awaits the woman in the bath. As in many magical myths, fairy tales and legends, Williamson (1978/1987) wrote that an object is the means of reaching a mystical place, one not in this world. This aspect of magic thus relates to the fetishism of products, their supposed ability to create auras and effects (p.150). The central point of myth is the story of the future that we supply. Here the enchanted forest is signifier, transferring meaning to the tub: magical, fanciful, “natural.” A secondary sign is the relationship between the “unnatural” and the products, connoting a mythical experience through consumption. Within this fantasized environment, consumerism raises its large moon head, promising fulfillment, an offer as ethereal as a mere reflection.

The Iron/Tones

The final ad (see page 104) appeared on the outside back cover of the February 2004 issue of Home. Small type reverses out of black in the upper left-hand corner: “The Iron/Tones™ under-counter kitchen sinks. Mix shapes and match colors. Right foot—Cobalt Blue. Left hand—Roussillon™ Red.” The cultural reference here is to the children’s party game Twister, immediately suggesting lighthearted innocence. The game’s main component is a large vinyl sheet with multiple squares in various colors, to be spread out on one’s floor. Each player spins the dial to land on a color that specifies placement of either the left or right foot, or left or right hand, on a square of that color. Eventually, it becomes a tangle of bodies.

Framed in a black border, the ad prominently features a simulated Twister mat with four rows of Iron/Tones sinks (20 total) in the Twister colors of solid red, yellow, green, and blue. Beyond the Twister primary colors, the ad is primarily black, white, and gray. Two adults are playing the game: a man wearing a dark gray sweater and slacks, and a woman wearing a light gray sleeveless top and slacks. A record player appears at the top of the ad, the dial spinner from the game appears at the bottom of the ad—with actual miniature Kohler sinks placed in a circle around the dial, replacing the real game’s colored squares. To the right of the couple, two drinks with stir sticks sit on a cocktail table. To their left, a vacant gray leather sofa can be partially seen.

The couple’s bodies are contorted across the mat; the man faces down and is mostly underneath the woman. Only his right arm stretches over hers; both his feet are in the vertical blue row. The woman, on top and facing up, spreads her legs wide with feet placed in the two opposing outer rows. Her shirt stretches in ripples across her breasts, her taut arms push her body up toward the...
<Figure 4. “Twister,” the last ad in photographer Hugh Kretschmer’s Kohler series, features kitchen sinks and plays off the game by Hasbro. Reprinted with permission. Original in color.
camera. These adults are smiling. All four hands and feet are in the concave sinks. Their straining heads are turned toward each other as they look into each other’s eyes.

The ad’s primary colors and the parody of a children’s game suggests the innocent and wonderful world of childhood (Landles, 2001). Yet, the situation of adults playing a child’s game allows us to penetrate the surface of the ad and treat all components with suspicion. As in the E.E. Cummings’s (1923/1994) poem in Just-, this playful world of “eddyandisbel” is soon to be visited by that little lame balloon man from the dark world of lechery and sexuality. They are on the “dirty” floor. The innocent surface is undermined by the shadow—literally the grayness of the adults’ clothing and the surrounding room—of sexual practice and adult relationships. Of all the Kretschmer ads discussed here, this one is the most overtly sexual. The male and female models are evidently alone, relaxed by a couple of highballs. Each figure is contorted into a position suggesting sexual intercourse, yet his prone body is underneath, whereas hers fully addresses the camera’s eye. They do not appear to be touching each other; they are touching the sinks, dipping their toes and pressing their palms into them. Here again sexual pleasure is located in the product. The tension we are left with, as in the previous bathtub ad, is anticipating their next move. As the couple remains forever pulled by sexual temptation, the consumer desires the sink as symbol of the imaginary union of the couple.

Conclusions

Through a semiotic and psychoanalytic perspective, this critical analysis of visual rhetoric demonstrates the ways in which advertisements ask viewers to identify sexuality with products. The ads use the female body as an agent of publicity for these messages, as a conduit for commodity desire, and as a spectacle of ecstasy; evidence of our culture’s sustained patriarchal ideology, which fetishizes the female anatomy and persona. When examined, the ads offer an entry into the rhetoric of repressed sexuality, self-alienation, and the commodity self.

It is far easier to say things in visuals that would be unacceptable in words. My visual readings found that these ads, for the most part, objectify women: Their most important sign is the transformative relationship between the models and the products, connoting referents of human commodification. Yet although the ads emit an ideology of women as sexual commodities, they alternatively insinuate consumption as self-constituting. The ads ask female viewers to share a worldview that implants feelings of alienation and offer the process of consuming as an essential and natural activity for them to fulfill their roles as women, sexual partners, and self-satisfied beings.

This analysis contributes to visual criticism that questions the hard-to-fix ambiguity of images as opposed to words. It demonstrates how advertising’s visual rhetoric directs meaning through cultural, historical, and literary contexts that involve viewers in the construction of this meaning, much as McLuhan (1964/2001) suggested.

This study also provides a glimpse into how surrealism influences advertising’s command in ways that carry the most impact: isolation of an object outside of its known field, hybridization of two familiar objects to create a bewildering “one,” and incongruity, mechanisms noted earlier by Kahle and Homer (1988).

A note of concern: An important question is raised about the ads’ production. Advertisements begin with a manufacturer’s product and a creative concept conceived by its advertising agency. Whereas the creative is closely shepherded by the agency, to what extent is the client lucidly embracing the ads’ visual messages? Even though experiments have found that consumers react positively to absurdity in ads, the ads examined here extend beyond absurdity. Rather than delivering the “bold” look of Kohler, the incongruous juxtapositions of visual elements create quite troubling propositions. Because of the hegemony, or ideological dominance, of patriarchy in our culture, we find ourselves socialized to reproduce forms of patriarchal oppression without questioning or opposing it. A critical interface in this process calls for an ethical barometer on the client side, most likely public relations counsel, to evaluate the proposed visual
messages against the medium for delivery and the company’s targeted publics. This stewardship is critical with visual communications because any organization risks being associated with ambiguous or unintended messages that miscommunicate its brand.

Further analysis of these ads should extend beyond the text to consider audience reception through in-depth interviews with readers. For future consideration, scholars have noted the need for increased research in visual communication using various methodologies, including analysis of visual metaphor (El Refaie, 2003), semantics (Barnhurst, Vari, & Rodriguez, 2004) and semiotics (Moriarty, 2005). Because of the importance of visual media in our contemporary society and the advent of hypermedia, scholars are beginning to analyze new forms of visual interactions. One of these forms, multimodality, traces how semiotics translates from one mode to another and encourages ad analysis that considers contexts over time, space, and multiple media. Although this analysis focuses solely on four print advertisements, it points to a need for critics to probe the potency of semiosis in hypermedia. The continued interrogation of visual communications, by both professionals and scholars, is more critical now than ever.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this article was awarded Top Student Paper, Visual Communication Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 2004.

I thank the Kohler Company, GSD&M, Hugh Kretschmer, and Hasbro for permissions to reproduce the advertisements in conjunction with this article.

Notes

1My interest in the analysis of advertising evolved from my 20-year career in the magazine industry as a marketing and creative director. In this article, I express criticism of the advertisements’ mythical messages, with no intention of either devaluing the photographer’s skills and sensibilities as an artist or the integrity of Kohler Company and its products. The criticism is based on my observations of the meanings that the ads suggest as they appear in the context of women’s home magazines. My recommendations appear in the final discussion section of this essay.

2More information on Kohler Company and visuals from other 2003–2004 ads in the “As I See It” series can be found at http://www.kohlerco.com

References


racing passions, surreal imagery surface in new work. *Adweek Southeast*, 23(8), 3.


McLuhan, J. (2001). The medium is the message. In M. G. Durham & D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Key works* (pp. 127–138). Malden, MA: Blackwell. (Original work published 1964)


Janis Teruggi Page is an assistant professor of public relations at the College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida.

Correspondence should be addressed to
Janis T. Page, 3065 Weimer, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.
E-mail: jpage@jou.ufl.edu