

BUFFY BIRRITELLA THE FASHION SLAYER: WEAVING CLASS IDENTITY
THROUGH THE POLO RALPH LAUREN BRAND

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Introduction to Research in Context (ADAD5003)

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Keywords from the career of Buffy Birritella show ongoing progress in advertising toward embracing diversity. Representation, identity, and cultural appropriation in Ralph Lauren brands are woven throughout the career of Buffy Birritella. Why is she significant? Because as a woman in leadership in the predominantly male fashion and advertising industries, her professional trajectory parallels the evolution of the notion of branding itself. Starting in 1971, she partnered with the namesake of one of the most recognizable brands in fashion history, Ralph Lauren. Her career spanned the 1970's through to the 2020's and as her career unfolded, so did the power of fashion branding to move the needles toward diversity and inclusion. Buffy Birritella through her fashion career transformed material culture and the power of imagery in advertising and brand experience. She translated a vision for one of the world's most powerful brands using tactics that run the gamut of the pages of Barthes, Klein and Fuad-Luke in "image sound text", "NoLogo" and "Design Activism". Though she retired earlier this year her career paved the way for the birth of the virtual experience of brands manifest by Polo Ralph Lauren creative Director Jack Becht. Specific discussion of brand elements of "Holiday 2021" campaign, "Polo with a purpose" campaign and the "Winter Olympics 2022/Paralympics 2022" campaign address the question When will advertising embrace diversity, gender and race equality and start reflecting on the real world?

A way to focus the proposition of the ethics of representation through an advertising lens of myth is keywords from the career of Buffy Birritella. The Classical Era gave us philosophy, mythology and values to understand representation, ethics and the power of myth. These concepts are infused into the global experience because all cultures have myths and icons; they are central the advertising experience. Like a modern day Athena weaving high above the mortals, Buffy Birritella was a powerful force in the development of Ralph Lauren/ Polo as one of the most iconic brands in the world. Aristotle gave us ways to think about ethics and its intersection with techne. Throughout his philosophy, Aristotle proposed values for civilization including beauty, truth, and techne, his propositions questioned if beauty is good and truth is ethical. He considered whether techne is an ethics of good and reasoned the result of production is not an ethical good in itself. Martin Bush asks “does the challenge of presenting diverse representation sit with the audience as opposed to the advertising industry?” (Bush, 2021). He states “50% of global consumers are not fully represented by the people they see in adverts” and asks if addressing gender diversity and inclusion through representation is a cultural problem.

Described as Ralph Lauren’s “right hand” Buffy Birritella, wove class, multiethnicity and gender representation throughout the brand construction of the luxury empire, she actively engaged in decision making for fashion lines particularly on photo shoots and worked tirelessly imagery in print and other mediums. Because of the role of print advertising in the fashion industry Buffy Birritella was able to create the myth of American Dream lifestyle through glossy print ads composed of images without text

except the POLO/RALPH LAUREN brand. Barthes describes the power of the photography to both connote and denote meanings specifically in cultural contexts.

“This purely ‘denotative’ status of the photograph, the perfection and plentitude of its analogy, in short its ‘objectivity’ has every chance of being mythical (these are the characteristics that common sense attributes to the photograph)” (Barthes, 1977).

Throughout Buffy Birritella’s career the photographic messages in Ralph Lauren/Polo fashion advertisements depict beautiful people dressed as the wealthy at play and leisure. Blonde polo players on greens, NY preps on yachts, or by the fireplace, prosperous traditional Southwestern families bundled in luxurious displays of material security and comfort. Gender and Race are adjacent; representation of women is depicted as independent or adventurous, at home both on the desert or on the coast, wearing skirts or pants, riding horses, motorcycles or luxury cars, women and men enjoy the freedom wealth and luxury provided to people who are elite, the social status now available to all ethnicities through the brand.

Ralph Lauren/Polo starts branding itself in stores before but by 1974 and costuming the cast for the Great Gatsby, a film based on classic fiction about class in America; they were the first to use men’s tailoring on women’s shirts thereby launching the Ralph Lauren womens’ line (Lockwood, 2021). 50 years later Buffy Birritella has woven a strong fabric of CLASS IDENTITY AND EXPANSION with STEREOTYPICAL TROPES OF LUXURY LEISURE AND PRIVILEGE into the brand using imagery and motifs.

While Barthes is starting point for understanding the sociological influence of media that

Buffie Birritella intuitively knows and implements in her position of leadership and power at Ralph Lauren/Polo to expand the brand through print and other media advertising and in store experiences. And the luxury goods? This among other is what Naomi Klein dissects in No Logo.

Klein describes the hollowing out of corporations via globalization and the offshoring of textile production to licensees. These corporate acts are linked, the costs for marketing are offset by unregulated and low labor costs at undisclosed locations. This was ordered to create synergy between brands and buyers in a complex exchange of identity and agency. Whereas Nike chose sports RL/ Polo synergistically created a new order of multiethnic class identity claiming elitist tokens in advertising to build a brand. =Klein summarizes how the class mythology is self-reinforcing.

“It was about thirstily soaking up cultural ideas and iconography that their brands could reflect by projecting these ideas and images back on the culture as extensions of their brands.” (p. 29)

And the leadership of women was necessary to achieve this. Buffie Birritella has that, though even after a wildly successful career of 50 years, some of her peers still refer to her as Ralph Lauren’s “muse” although as the right hand of Ralph Lauren she worked as an equal partner in techne, and mythos to bring the vision and material into production, through a series of representations of the American Dream.

In No Space chapter Klein (Klein, 2010) provides first person testimony to the hidden realities of the means of production in free trade zones, and the growing awareness of

this by designers and consumers is surveyed throughout the chapter Global-Local tensions. (Fuad-Luke, 2009). Bush suggests the term Woke Capitalism (Bush, 2021) linked to global protests for a variety of life and death issues engineered through social media. Massive gatherings demand economic and racial justice, political and police reform, and climate action brought about massive changes for consumer behavior. Already well established before the COVID pandemic, social media online shopping experiences are reliant on technology, data analytics and digital marketing as much as creative design, cinematic advertising and representation. But representation is not the same as agency and buying things isn't a solution to any of the problems facing the youth of today as Klein hoped for in the 90's. Throughout her 50 years in the business, Buffy Birritella's interpretation of the Ralph Lauren /Polo mythic identity is woven thoroughly into culture using the concepts intellectualized by Barthes, tactics interrogated by Klein and canonized by Fuad-Luke, but all things pass, and 2021 brought change heralded by Buffy Birritella's retirement and the shift to online presence with design activism values in the forefront of campaigns.

Meet Creative Director JACK BECHT who took the reigns as Creative Director for Polo/RL in March 2021, he grew up not only as a wealthy white male with all the privilege that entails, but also in the branded world Klein describes. In his prior roles at luxury brands and now Ralph Lauren/Polo he knows all of the propositions and tactics of Klein and also, clearly represented in current Polo campaigns, the values and concerns in Design Activism. Although Buffy Birritella's vision is firmly in place is Jack Becht the Arachna to Buffy Birritella's Athena?

Responsible for moving forward the shift to virtual customer brand experience and more, In fact 2800 people lost their jobs when Jack, the clearly ageist and privileged white male who boasts on LinkedIn that he is 37 years old, cut marketing jobs to save \$200 million in operating costs. But he is also Creative Director for a few campaigns which shows a wealth of branding experience. The Ralph Lauren Polo 2021 holiday campaign (Palmieri, 2021) shows Polo can borrow elements from design activism to form hybrid applications of experience design to leverage the luxury lifestyle brand Buffy Birritella built from scratch while infusing activist approaches. But is her strong cloth becoming a veil?

“Experience design” defined as designing human experiences foremost and products, processes and services that deliver that experience, goals--economic, cultural, social” (Fuad-Luke, 2009)

The ethic is suggested while the goals are hidden in the following three Ralph Lauren /Polo campaigns: Holiday 2021, Polo with a Purpose and Olympics/Paralympics .Klein describes the tactics of brand building and synergy the 2021 campaigns fulfill: virtual customer experiences, in store gift wrapping, custom jacket ordering and custom skateboard decks (direct applications of Fuad-Luke’s “ways of designing and making), drone light shows, outfitting Team USA for Olympics and Paralympics in 2022 with proceeds supporting the teams and activist cause branded merchandise to gift with purpose.

The Ralph Lauren/Polo HOLIDAY 2021 feature reported on US election day 11/4/21 (WWD) depicts an image from campaign of a Native American or Hispanic mother and

daughter duo clad in cream cable turtlenecks against a black watch tartan background, the mother wears a cream anorak jacket and each wear jewelry with feather motifs and turquoise, a staple in the RL women's wear palette and aesthetic. The image conjures not only the Christmas iconography of mother and child a savior coming from a marginalized mom and humble beginnings, traveling far to save humanity, but it speaks directly to the highly politicized issue of family separation at the SW border between US and Mexico. This child is not separated from her mother, she is united with her and the Polo brand, it's obvious status as globalized brand sourced from hidden supply chains to dresses people removed from their indigenous identities and cultures now signified with a feather on an earring or a bold black necklace. Reminiscent of Oliveira Toscani's subversive Bennetton campaigns (Bush, 2021) which promoted inclusion through imagery that were a first for Benetton, but certainly not the last for brand advertising.

The real action, where ethical considerations rest, according to Aristotle, is at the southwest border, where drone technology, the same that will perform holiday light displays in the experiential Holiday 2021 campaign in La Jolla conduct surveillance over bodies moving across militarized zone to control migrants. Is the image subversive like Toscanini's? Or the opposite? Does it foster compassion or further gender stereotypes of single mothers? Is Native American culture reduced to a small feather charm on a necklace while the real lives of Native women is one of exploitation and erasure? Or can the motif and imagery signal activism. Yet it's clear that Ralph Lauren/Polo and certainly Buffy Birritella loves and cherishes these American symbols as only the superrich can, they aren't even aware of how their privilege makes them oblivious to the lives and identities that are otherwise exploited through appropriation.

Bush asks if brands support communities and should they?(Bush, 2021). Not that the chosen causes of Polo are impoverished and need the support of the brand with consumer purchases, because the benefit to Ralph Lauren/Polo from supporting Olympians or activist causes with brand synergy far outweighs the revenue share they gift to the cause- focused charities. Linked to the Holiday Campaign the “Gifts that Give Back” directs website visitors to a range of options to gift and gift again by shopping for purposeful gifts. Now these choices are required components for any modern brand seeking to attract and serve a diverse client base through an (enhanced) buyer experience and real support for social causes, if they fall short of activism. Select “**Polo with a Purpose**” Ralph Lauren/Polo products support causes ranging from cancer research to literacy, human rights, and more. All of the products for sale are heavily branded with the pony logo in a synergy that fuses the familiar icons of the causes with Polo. The “Pink Pony” purchase sports breast cancer research, the “Pin of Solidarity” supports UNCF to address systemic racism, “The Pride Collection” purchases provides funding to the Stonewall Community Foundation which supports LGBTQ+ organizations the “Earth Polo” is made from materials derived from 12 recycled plastic bottles and the “Give me the tap” water reusable water jug provides funds for water access projects in Africa. Polo with a Purpose manifests strategies from design activism’s discussion of targeting over consumers (Fuad-Luke, 2009) most notably the water initiatives. But the matrix in chapter one shows where these products fit neatly. (Fuad-Luke, 2009). And brand support synergized with cobranding Ralph Lauren/Polo and the 2022 Olympics.

2022 Winter Olympics. The sales of Team USA products support the Olympic and Paralympic teams is the icing on the cake that extends before and beyond the Holiday

campaign of 2021. Representation and imagery of athletes of many races, ethnicities and hair textures are displayed throughout product displays and the video trailer which opens with the pony logo. Set on a breathtaking snowy mountain range with vignettes Team USA members dressed in branded gear, iconic american flags, black and red and blue woolens, plenty of olympic rings. Various athletes speak their excitement about representation, the video finishes with the tag “I get to represent people who look just like me”(2021). It doesn’t get more direct than that. And the sport vibe goes virtual as well and deeper into the virtual experience through the Roblox (Lee, 2021). You can feel the spirit of Buffy Birritella there, she is a self-proclaimed avid skier.

CONCLUSION

The temporary shutdown of the global economy and supply chain interruptions caused by COVID affected everyone including Buffy Birritella. After 50 years at the side of Ralph Lauren interpreting culture to create a class conscious brand, she chose to retire at age 77 leaving her position of power and influence to enjoy skiing, riding horses and relaxing in fabulous vacation homes with huge sums of perpetual wealth while the “youth” Naomi Klein has bestowed the responsibility for resistance encounter militarized police forces, surveillance of movement, expression and communication through their phones and even walking the streets. Is the irony of the end game of massive inequality that Polo must now provide “luxury” ready to wear goods to working class folks made by youth in free trade zone factories who assemble the plaids, checks, turquoise and pueblo weaving, even ponies and bears fused onto every possible product a lifestyle brand could sell. Klein’s argument (Klein, 2010) is that eventually there is a push back

by youth for reclaiming corporatized spaces. But the sword she wields is single edged, and reality is double edged, as are the tools from design activism in the digital age. In 2021 the focus on technology subsuming the ethics of identity via representation in advertising makes agency mythical. Klein's emphasis on 20th century notions of cool and hip driving social change doesn't quite capture the massive shift toward surveillance capitalism that is the end game of a highly exploitive deregulated global production chains which created system of inequality. Everyone now must counter identity based divisive politics, modern day wage slavery (and actual slavery), disease, climate change and a life of debt. Klein hinted at the natural inclination youth have to question current conditions, but ask anyone teargassed at a protest if their consumer behavior helps create a fair and open culture of civility in which to debate ethics or ideas of representation.

And Jack? Now that Buffy Birritella is gone Ralph Lauren/Polo adventures into the virtual reality of surveillance capitalism while making sure lived experiences of licensees and the supply chain remain invisible and unquestioned. Fully immersed in branding the virtual experience, Ralph Lauren Winter Escape (Lee, 2021) launches an all -digital Roblox exclusive, where avatars wear branded gear inspired by the Polo Sport line from the 90's. But for as much as Ralph Lauren/Polo promotes a "lifestyle" it leaves important questions unanswered. One can buy coffee cups, but never ask where the coffee comes from.

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