

Research in Context

Question 1: "The good of a book lies in its being read. A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs, which in turn speak of things. Without an eye to read them, a book contains signs that produces no concept; therefore, it is dumb." Umberto Eco quoted in The Book of Informatics Hobbs et al (2011) Using this quotation, critically discuss it in relation to the contemporary media and debate whether you think we, as a society are being taught to not read the signs of modern life.

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This essay will examine the beauty industry, while exploring beauty related brands and deconstructing their advertisements. This subject has a massive impact on our perceptions creating confusing, unrealistic expectations that play a major role in people's lives. Semiotics are signs and symbols, which are found in each advert, this is how visual material is communicated and interpreted. In reference to Umberto Eco's statement within the title it is evident that the reading of signs is being blurred through the amount of visual material that people are bombarded with through different media methods. Through signs we see life and some may not make sense as we are overloaded with new information. Semiotics has been defined by Groden, Kreisworth and Szeman (2012, p.471) as "a domain of investigation that explores the nature and function of signs as well as the systems and processes underlying signification, expression, representation, and communication." These are areas particularly relevant to graphic design and visual communications such as typography, logos, magazines, posters and websites, which use signification throughout. Visual hierarchy is implemented by arranging elements and other techniques with visual signs that engage the viewer.

Classical beauty can be explained as "a term commonly used to characterize a type of elegance and noble appearance that is not subject to trends." (International Journal of Arts Theory & History, 2019). Classical beauty can also be interpreted as being naturally gifted displaying sophisticated manners. The above statement relates to humans, however beauty does not have to revolve around people, it can also be applied to objects and how we see things. Beauty can also be defined as "a combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight" (Oxford Dictionary, 2020). Beauty is considered to be aesthetically pleasing to the eye, symmetry holds a large role towards beauty as symmetrical faces are an aspirational ideal of what a face should look like and are considered to be highly attractive. Another essential point is the golden ratio, which measures the length and width of the face, and that the person's face is to be ideally about 1 1/2 times longer than it is wide. To further explain this relation from The Mathematics of Beauty and the Golden Ratio, Tabora states that

the number (ratio) is found by dividing the object into 2 parts. It must be divided so that the longer part divided by the smaller part is also equal to the whole length divided by the longer part.

(2019)

Equally significant is the rule of thirds which is another important visual component that increases aesthetic balance within artwork and photography. The definition from Spencer Cox is that

The Rule of Thirds is a type of off-centre composition where important elements of a photograph are placed along a 3x3 grid, which equally divides the image into nine parts.

(Cox, 2020)

this technique evidently adds more emphasis on the subject.

From a western perspective beauty is considered to have features such as clear skin, large eyes, full lips, narrow faces, high cheekbones, light skin and a thin body. These western ethics are assimilated into national beauty and magazines like 'Vogue' who have a preference for these features within their advertising campaigns and models. A study by Yan and Bissell (2014) found that

Fashion magazines, including Vogue, had a preference for western ideals over local models. This was especially clear in parts of the world such as Asia and Latin America, however the same counted for Europe.

Furthermore, this study inferred that appearance has an impact on success within the fashion industry and gives an insight in to the beauty standards that are favoured both currently and historically.

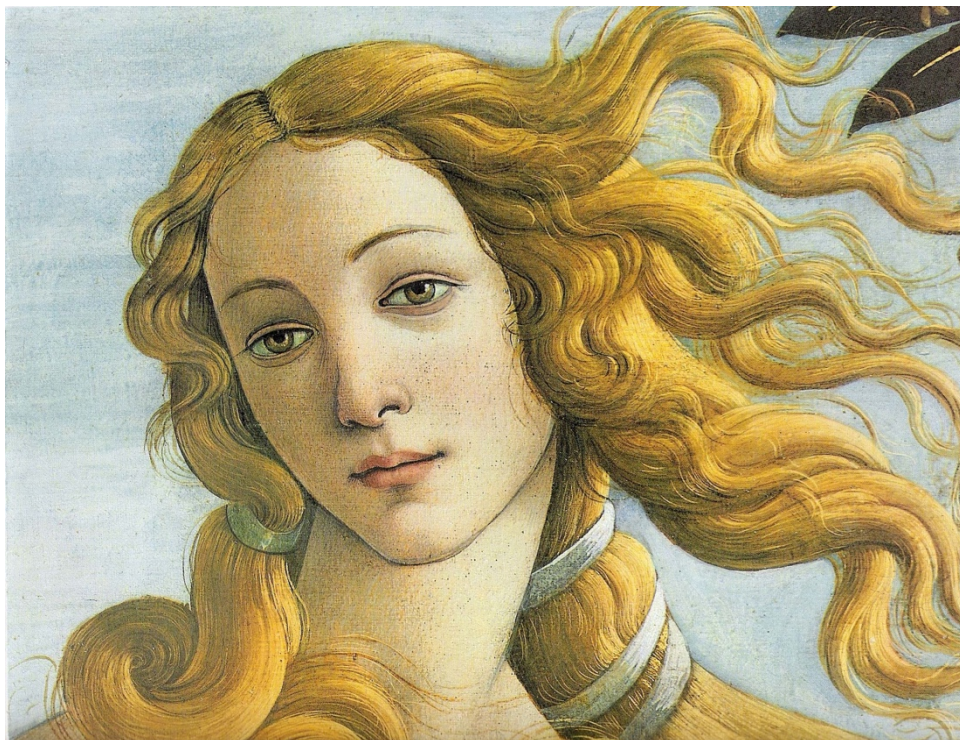


Fig. 1 The Birth of Venus (2004)

The Birth of Venus by Botticelli created in the 1480s has personified aspects of what is perceived as beautiful and,

has since become a standard of beauty. As such, it's also become something to rebel against, a way to call attention to racist and sexist ideas of attractiveness. The image has been used endlessly as a marketing tool, parodied and leveraged to signify quality and culture.

(Cain, 2018)

however, with the continual use and stylisation used in various media products spanning photography, music videos, paintings etc the idealism of the original beauty has been altered.



Fig. 2 Yin Xin, Venus, after Botticelli (2008)

This is further explored in the painting above by Yin Xin, who has taken the visual queues of original and used these to explore beauty and context. This is supported by Stefan Weppelmann's commentary about this artwork in the catalogue for the exhibition 'Botticelli Reimagined'. This painting "in its combination of Western and Far Eastern elements, stresses how much our perception of a cultural artefact is dependent on and determined by the culture that produced it" (Vand A exhibition, 2016). Culture also differentiates beauty as supported by the following study where "Asia has the highest concentration of plastic surgeons" (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, 2016) and "[o]ne out of three women in the age group of 19 to 29 admit to having gone under the knife in South Korea (Hu 2018)." This evidence suggests that where you belong may also have a powerful influence on the pursuit of beauty.

Furthermore, the views surrounding what is seen as beautiful within a contemporary setting have been influenced by social media and advertising. Social media networking platforms like Instagram allows users to share photographs and videos, the visual content allows filters and heavy editing which can display false realities. These elements affect body image and mental health. A new report by the Royal Society for Public Health in the United Kingdom states that "Instagram easily makes girls and women feel as if their bodies aren't good enough as people add filters and edit their pictures in order for them to look 'perfect'. Additionally, within the same study Instagram was noted to have the worst results due to the amount of likes users can receive to feel validated and other social media networking platforms also effect their audience's wellbeing.

According to a recent survey from The Impact of Western Beauty Ideals on the Lives of Women: "3,300 girls and women across 10 countries, 90 per cent of all women aged 15 to

64 worldwide want to change at least one aspect of their physical appearance, with body weight ranking the highest.” (Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, & D’Agostino, 2004). This finding suggests that women are pressured with anxieties of altering their bodies globally. As media is seen globally it seems sensical that advertisements are influential on how people judge and perceive themselves. Evidence suggests that the media and beauty advertisements distort our perceptions. The recent *Girls Attitude Survey* (2016) found that “looking at magazines for just 60 minutes lowers the self-esteem of more than 80% of girls. Additionally, “61% of girls said when women are portrayed as ‘sex objects’ it makes girls feel disempowered.” Brands like Calvin Klein, Tom Ford, Mac and Nike are examples of portraying beauty in diverse ways, but do these brands demonstrate a truthful influence on their audiences.

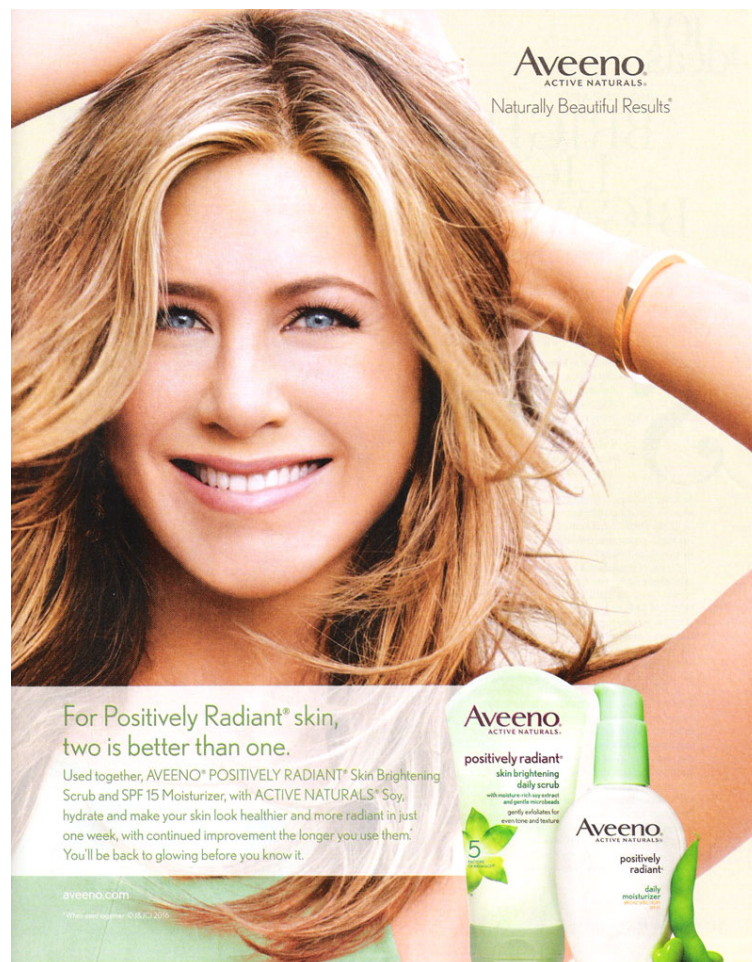


Fig. 3 Aveeno Lotion ad with Jennifer Aniston (2016).

The premise of Fig. 3 states that this moisturizer will make your skin look healthier and more radiant in just one week. Celebrity Jennifer Aniston is the main endorsement supporting this campaign as her skin is luminous and clear which is the apparent result from this product. Conversely, Aniston admits to receiving Botox and other plastic surgery as she claims there is an enormous pressure from the industry to be ageless. This has connotations of misleading expectations and contributes to false advertising. The concept also implies too the cosmetic industry which is continuously growing. Katie Teehan writer for Glamour online magazine states that “16-24-year-olds are the age group with the highest beauty spend, using an average of 16 beauty products a day, worth £153 in total” (2018). This

suggests a high level of success from the realms of business and their use of advertising methods.

French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard's early semiotic study claims that

In the media and consumer society, people are caught up in the play of images, spectacles, and simulacra, that have less and less relationship to an outside, to an external "reality," to such an extent that the very concepts of the social, political, or even "reality" no longer seem to have any meaning.

(Kellner, 2005)

this depicts that we are connecting more deeply towards hyperrealism and simulation, than realism. Therefore, the distinction between what is real, and a simulation, is becoming an inability to distinguish.

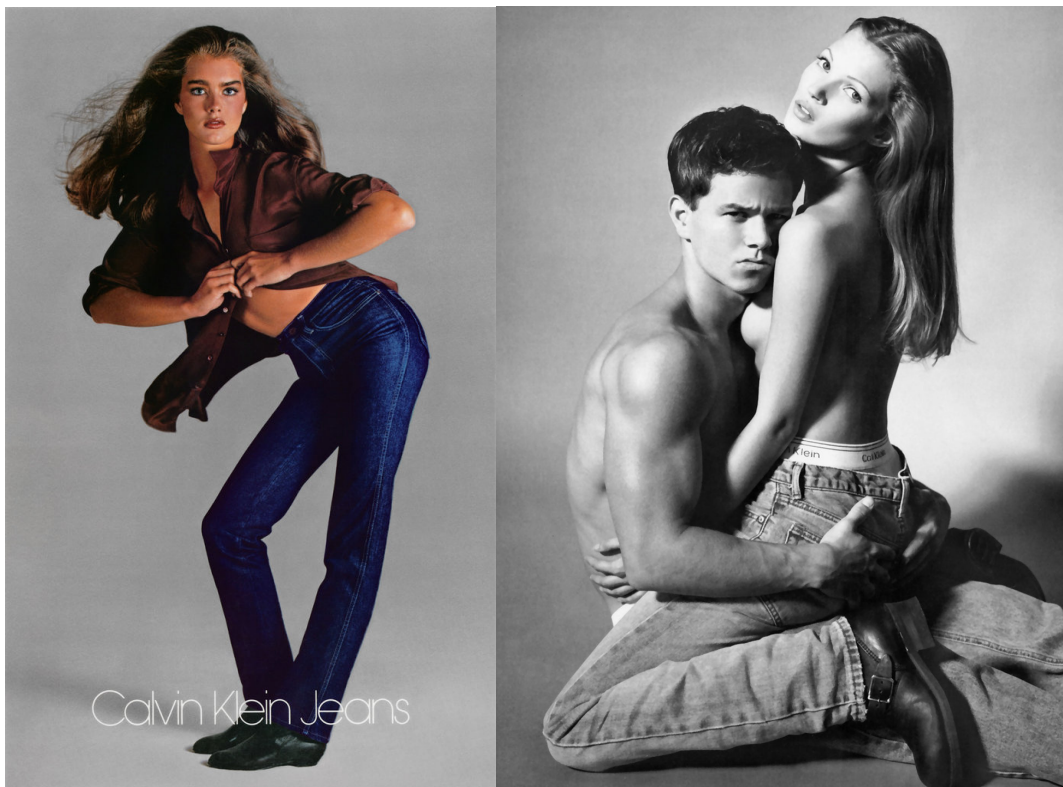


Fig. 4 Brooke Shields's Famous Calvin Klein Jeans (1981)
& Fig. 5 Mark Wahlberg and model Kate Moss in a Calvin Klein underwear advertisement in Times Square (1992)

The images Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 of the brand Calvin Klein illustrate the relationship of possession. In the photograph of Fig. 4 shows actress and model Brooke Shields who is at the age of 15-years-old in this Calvin Klein Jeans ad campaign, captured in 1981. In relation to this imagery, Shields was quoted "You want to know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing." this implies that Shields is not wearing underwear. This quotation can be associated with being provocative as it provoked a controversial reaction as to whether this

imagery and the campaign was appropriate for someone of a young age to display a manner that may be seen sexually, this evidence has been found in multiple articles including Famous Daily written by Shefalee Nandwana who stated that

the controversial TV ad for Calvin Klein with Brooke Shields was banned. The question arose of whether the ad had crossed the line between fashion and pornography as well as whether the company was exploiting children.

(no date)

many supported this ban due to the allegations.

The image itself presents young Brooke Shield in an open, clean space where the typography is easy to read due to its simplicity and basic colouring. The body position shows the lower part of the body purposely sticking out, thus making the viewers eye directly see her full body and particularly her bottom area, while wearing a pair of tight jeans. Shield is unbuttoning her loose shirt while staring directly at the camera, her makeup is bold and her hair is flowing smoothly, but slightly messy. In view of this, her body language and actions may be described as seductive and sexual. Shields facial expression portrays innocence, but also confidence as her eye contact is powerful and engaging. Overall exploring these concepts, these subjects are daring and contradict what is right and wrong, has Calvin Klein exploited a 15-year-old girl sexually for an increase in sales and publicity using her beauty and youth in mature methods, or does Klein promote femininity and power among young women?

Previously the concept of sexuality has been explored, this leads to the construct of possession. Fig. 5 presents a black and white photograph of a Calvin Klein ad campaign featuring Kate Moss and Mark Wahlberg in 1981. The topless male model Wahlberg has his hands gripped onto the female teenage model Moss' lower body as she sits wrapped on top of him with only Calvin Klein underwear and jeans. The male model Wahlberg has a strong physique and stern facial expression, and his body language and hand placement can indicate signs of possession. Furthermore, the female model Moss looks ethereal and her facial expression that holds passion and innocence, subsequently Moss' body language appears to be gentle and enchanting as she softly places her hands onto Wahlberg's body. In comparison these concepts demonstrate a duality by showing mixed messages from each model and the idea of masculinity. Western beauty is depicted due to Moss' having the majority of the key elements, such as clear skin, a thin body and facial symmetry, this in turn represents an unattainable role model for the women this campaign was targeting. In summary, this image manifests seductive qualities that are captivating and can encourage their clients to buy their products, thinking they will be rewarded with sexual activity. Calvin Klein semiotically gives different meanings to different images and allows you to have a vagueness so the audience can easily recognise the brand.



Fig. 6 Tom Ford Summer Beauty Ad with Model Alexandra Martynova (2014).

Previously power was explored, this advertisement examines semiotics. Tom Ford is an eponymous luxury brand that sells cosmetics, fragrances and fashion aimed at a mixed audience. The Tom Ford Beauty Summer 2014 ad campaign features a young, female model named Alexandra Martynova who is wearing minimal nude clothing that matches with her warm, silky skin tone that presents a translucent glow. Martynova is laying down whilst using her arms to balance her upper body so she can look at her appearance in the mirror with one hand, while holding lipstick in the other. In view of this, it seems the main importance and priority within this advertisement is to use their product and perfect their look. Extravagantly Martynova's full face of makeup and smooth, gel hair style is neatly presented, and her facial and body features holds similarities to western aesthetics. The bold typography that entitles the brand name is in a capital format that are defined and easily read with a clear background, this illustrates your focus to be directed on the main subject. Additionally, this image can be described as sultry and luscious, in contrast, the elements described are also unrealistic and abnormal towards regular females, which conveys false expectations to their clients in a pretentious hope to become more luminous and desirable. The mirror being used to reflect her face may indicate confidence, or opposed to this, a sign of insecurity, perhaps looking for reassurance from oneself that she does look attractive.



Fig. 7 Tom Ford for Men (2007).

This men's cologne ad from Tom Ford features a naked woman lying down on a bed sheet covered in sweat, or oil. Firstly, the female model is exposing her torso with a bottle of cologne that is placed tightly between her breasts, and in the second image the cologne is used to conceal her genitals placed in-between her open legs. One of the many themes can be identified as explicit content that are conveyed to send an indubitable message. Furthermore, this will lead to a positive or negative reaction from both men and women due to its controversial content. This can be exemplified by the overly sexual exploitation displayed in this advertisement that is used as a tactic for commodification. In summary, this ad is trying to proclaim that women will be aroused and attracted to men who use this cologne. In view of this, obscenity and pornography could be interpreted that objectifies women in a negative concept.

In conclusion to Umberto Eco's statement, the general analysis depicts that we are not being taught to read the signs of modern life. Key elements such as hyperrealism, simulacrum and simulations precede our lives, therefore applying false narratives and perceptions. If reading signs depended on knowledge, various people will have a greater advantage and disadvantage, specifically those who are well-educated or from an ethical and social background. Additionally, people may interpret signs naturally by relating them to similar contexts that they have experienced throughout life. Multiple brands apply similar techniques and strategies in their advertisements to establish superiority, however, they abuse their power among society, causing a significant negative impact towards mental health.

Another factor is cross pollination of styles which reduces meaning, thus diminishing the original concept, which is demonstrated in "Yin Xin, Venus, after Botticelli". Components like parodies and marketing can also reduce signification and definitions, therefore portraying confusion and miscommunicated ideologies.

The word beauty comes with multiple denotations and connotation's. During this essay I have explored a multitude of different routes of where 'beauty' stands and discussed the significations behind it. In summary, the elements of beauty can range from being a result of objectification, exemplified by beauty campaigns. Moreover, it can be inferred as an achievement towards self-esteem granting a false hope of confidence using plastic surgery, or even manifests a detachment from reality due to its delusional and unrealistic qualities.

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