

*Vogue Paris'* Fashion Faux Pas



Sowray, B. (2014, March 25). "Controversial child model Thylane Blondeau gets her first 'grown up' cover, aged 12." Retrieved November 12, 2015, from <http://fashion.telegraph.co.uk/news-features/TMG10720861/Controversial-child-model-Thylane-Blondeau-gets-her-first-grown-up-cover-aged-12.html>

Our assignment for this artifact analysis paper was to reflect on how two different communication theories aid in meaning making. My artifact is a photo of Thylane Blondeau, a ten-year-old French supermodel. This image is from a spread in *Vogue Paris*, from December 2010/January 2011. The original purpose of this spread was an editorial satire on Christmas gifts, but Americans saw it differently. The response Americans had in regards to the image was related to the theme of young girls entering the world of high fashion prematurely and *Vogue Paris* sexualizing young girls. Of note in the photo are the possible interpretation of the color gold, the rabbits, and the "cadeaux." From a semiotics standpoint, these signs could mean

the sexualization of young girls in the lavish fashion industry. Examining this photo through the semiotics theory, the cultural studies body of work, and historical and contextual meanings, I can dissect the themes of sexualization and power in the world of haute couture.

### Semiotics

Semiotics theory studies "...the analysis of anything that can stand for something else," (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 327). Barthes recommends looking for signs that appear straightforward but foster a deeper meaning, (Griffin et al., 327). Are the rabbits a cute addition to the background, or a euphemism for sexuality? In order to understand why we think what we think about signs, we have to break them down into three parts: sign, signifier, and signified. These three components combine the physical object (signifier) and the meaning we attach to the object (signified) to create the inseparable combination of the two through the sign (Griffin et al., 327). If the signifier is the image of rabbits, we can attach the archaic meaning associated with rabbits and sexual intentions ("do what bunnies do.") Rabbits and sexuality go back to Greco-Roman mythology, where rabbits were sacred to Aphrodite. Interestingly, white rabbits connote chastity in medieval paintings. This evolution of rabbit's meaning from Greco-Roman tradition to medieval interpretations is an example of a second-order semiological system. Most people today don't know the chastity meaning attached to rabbits and instead recognize the connection between rabbits and sexuality. This meaning is reinforced by using a rabbit as the logo for Playboy. Therefore, this traditional meaning of rabbits and sexuality is a denotative sign system that has changed over time. Denotative sign systems form when the majority of people recognize the second level of a second-order semiological system (rabbits and sexuality) more than the first level (rabbits and chastity) (Griffin et al., 331). The appearance of a white rabbit and a calico

rabbit could indicate that the girl is on the precipice of sexual maturity, between girlhood and womanhood.

Approaching this picture with the mindset that wealth and beauty are naturally every person's goal in life, I can understand the taxonomy of high fashion. Taxonomy identifies and classifies the factors that compose aspects of a certain "world" (Griffin et al., 329). The world of high fashion is wealthy and luxurious. Our signified is wealth, recognized from the signifier of the gold she wears and the historical context of gold and royalty. Therefore, I interpret and this girl as being rich and fancy and to an extent a reflection of *Vogue*. At the top of the picture is the French word for gift, "cadeaux" (signifier). I think of gifts as physical objects bought for loved ones (signified). The symbolic sign of the word in this image implies her degradation to an object. Love is not an object or token that can be bought.

Kyong Kim says that, "...the media's reality is always political," (Griffin et al., 334). Magazines like *Vogue* allow these controversial pictures to cause a stir to make a profit. But, by including designers *Vogue* has close ties with in their photos and directing society's definition of beauty, they secure their place in the world as affluent and influential.

Because this theory is interpretive, multiple perspectives can be drawn from the same sign (Griffin et al., 337). For this reason, it's hard to definitely say if a sign reinforces a dominant societal value.

Hall defines cultural studies as, “the ability to raise [people’s] consciousness of the media’s role in preserving the status quo,” and deemphasizing marginalized people, (Griffin et al., 340). Hall argues that people may, “assimilate the leading ideology in general but oppose its application in specific cases”, (Griffin et al., 346). The girl is beautiful, but the context is inappropriate from an American standpoint.

*Vogue* caters to high society females and sets high standards for our society for attractiveness. The intended audience may be high society females, but the actual audience is average people. *Vogue* sells the American Dream. In the world of *Vogue*, beauty is high; defined cheekbones, pouty lips, low-cut dress, slicked back hair, long legs, and stilettos. *Vogue* keeps supplying these standards of beauty by supporting what people already are trained to think is beautiful. *Vogue* is also convincing people that the average person and high fashion both have roughly the same ideas of what is attractive. This loose connection between haute couture and the average joe is enough to keep the public satisfied so ordinary people won’t radicalize what is beautiful.

It’s also important to examine how this photo reflects the interests of *Vogue* and the fashion world. The stories that are presented to media consumers reflect the beliefs and values of the upper class. The artistic director of this issue of *Vogue*, Tom Ford, was the creative director for Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent (Currin, n.d.). The photographer, Sharif Hamza, has worked on advertising campaigns for Kenneth Cole and Fallon Jeweller, and has shot for Victoria Beckham ("Sharif Hamza").

Simplistically, this young girl and *Vogue* reinforce the ideology that beautiful, rich people are more successful than ordinary, middle-class people. To keep up with the rising pressure of beauty standards, media consumers must conform to *Vogue*’s standards.

Critics say Hall only identifies *Vogue*'s beauty standards and the financial discrepancy between rich supermodels and the average joe. His theory doesn't offer a solution for evening the playing field between the high and middle class and reforming the standards of beauty.

### Conclusion

Dissecting the *Vogue* photo of Thylane Louby Blondeau through semiotics theory and cultural studies body of work led to an interpretation of a few themes. The semiotics theory allows me to interpret the color gold, rabbits, and the word "cadeaux" as the sexualization and objectification of young girls in the lavish fashion industry. Cultural studies body of work permits my interpretation of *Vogue* and the broader fashion world influencing what society thinks is beautiful. As long as the fashion world is persuasive enough, it will stay in power. The media (and more specifically, magazine photos) should never be taken at face-value. Instead, by looking at these artifacts through communication theories, it is possible to interpret deeper meanings and motivations and identify societal problems.

Word Count: 1148

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