what colour is your underwear?

Class, Whiteness & HOMOEROTIC Advertising

by Steven Maynard

"underwear goes way back. It has a history. It has an anthropology."

(Drummer Magazine)

We are at the 1983 Toronto Festival of Festivals, at the Q & A session following the screening of Greg Araki's new film Totally Fucked Up. As he takes the questions from the audience, Araki casually, but deliberately lifts his black t-shirt several times to flash the underwear of his underwear. It was a case of life imitating art. For the alienated teenage boys in Araki's film, whether lounging on a bed or posing in a corner, the costume of choice is underwear. In the filmmaking world, Araki is not alone in his obsessions. I would not be the first to call attention to the scenes in Tom Kalin's Swoon that looked distinctly like Bruce Weber's commercials for Calvin Klein. More than a signifier in queer cultural aesthetics, underwear is everywhere.

With the emergence of specialty underwear stores, window displays of underwear have become or visible marker on the streetscape of many urban gay ghettos. The textual circulation of underwear — on everything from cards advertising the latest rave or warehouse party, to their ubiquitous presence in the lez/mis/gay press — is virtually impossible to avoid. And it is more than a temporal formation. In the bars, there are underwear parties and wet jockey shorts contests. As anyone who has cruised a phone-sex line or bathhouse will know, underwear plays an organizing role in the sexual scripts and practices of many gay men.
Underwear also figures prominently within homosocial advertising, as I am going to assume that I do not have to convince most people that ads are the focus of my interest here are playing with homoerotic imagery (figure 1). Even in mainstream men’s fashion magazines it is now commonplace to acknowledge that homoerotic imagery abounds in fashion. The New York Times has commented on the homoerotic content of Calvin Klein’s ads.

To say this is not to suggest that the ads are somehow “gay.” Photographs, of course, do not have inherent sexual identities but take on sexual meanings only in the complex relationship between image and spectator. It might be more profitable to look at men’s underwear ads as on camera stories (Powers 1979) has recently called the “homospatial plot,” or the way in which the ads construct a normative homoerotic glance regardless of the sexual identity of the male viewing subject. At the same time, I find it hard to avoid claiming these ads are gay, portions of the slide-show variant of this text in audiences that include straight men. To do so confounds the existence of the homospatial plot as it is easy to observe the straight men in the audience squirm with discomfort as they cross back and forth over that very thin line between identification with and derision for the bodies of the men in the ads.

While I am fascinated by the process of identification, I am not as interested in positioning the pages of men’s fashion magazines, that is not my focus here. Rather, I want to look at some examples of recent homoerotic advertising to illustrate how some images of class and race within queer studies and queer politics.

Let us sketching the political economy of underwear ads. The appearance of homoerotic advertising is related to the stress general and much-discussed emergences in the early 1980s of the male body within advertising. The symbolic birth data of this phenomenon is 1982, the year the famous billboard for Calvin Klein’s briefs appeared in Times Square. The presentation of new technologies of men in advertising was, in part, a product of the shifts in gender relations spurred on over the past several decades by the feminist movement. Homosocial advertising also presumes a market for it, but the focus are more than $5,000 a year, and 25% to 28%3 of gay men in the survey of the survey likely counts on them for income and a high degree of product loyalty. A recent market research conducted by the Angus-Riedel Field Group for the Toronto XTHIAL magazine revealed that 62% of XTHIAL readers earned more than $5,000 a year, and 25% to more than $10,000 annually. Summing up the results of the survey XTHIAL boosted that its readers “are educated and affluent, educated and well-traveled.” Using the same criteria, a recent study of the marketing surveys, the media plays a key role in producing the gay market. A full-page color ad in a specific type of The Globe and Mail is only one of the many ways in a long line of newspapers feature advertising to the existence of the gay community.

The ads themselves depend on recent trends within advertising design, particularly on what the industry calls “gay window advertising.” Ads are created which incorporate elements of the targeted consumer group’s subculture. Calvin Klein did not invent gay pornographic models for his ads. In 1982, when Calvin Klein ads tend to create a homosocial ad, conventions of gay porn photography so that gay men can find substantive meanings in the ad and its imagery will help the gay consumer to find more significant meanings for him. In the words of ad executive Renzo Stahiner, it is an approach that “speaks to the homoerotic consumer.” That is, the more you think about it, the more you will notice. The success of this marketing strategy was measured in part by the way in which variations of traditional underwear companies, such as Siminoff’s and Peacock’s, have homosocialized their recent ad campaigns.

Most analyses of men’s fashion ads tend to focus on the ads as an example of the process of commodification and its oppression. In this case, the normal role of male bodies within gay culture, and I think they do — how many of us have Marv in the Calvin Klein’s on our walls? — the Solax bodies in these ads reflects the masculinization of gay men over the past two decades. But an analysis focused exclusively on commodification or gender looks at the ads are also about class and race.

To look at these images and the broader industries of which they are a part focuses our attention on the process of class formation within gay communities. It is clear, for example, that while advertisers talk about the gay market, they are not actually talking about lesbians and gays in general, but about a particular class, race, and gender, a particular segment of the gay community. Renee Stahiner, claims that advertisers are interested in “the white single, well-educated, well-dressed woman who happens to be homosexual.” Stahiner would argue that a similar process of class differentiation is under way in lesbian communities. In addition to reflecting the racial trend of lesbians as chic within mainstream communities, the appearance of lesbian imagery in Vogue fashion layouts is your reading. Increasingly, in the 1980s, the popularity of Victoria’s Secret and J.Crew mail-order catalogues further signals the pleasures of consuming tronics among lesbians. While it is important to acknowledge that women who are lesbians still earn less on average than gay men, ads designed to appeal to well-dressed, white gay man and the Ditch Shore lesbian set are a reflection of these differences within our communities. Some have speculated that the link between class and underwear when he writes. “If I Simply Wanted Status, I’d Wear Calvin Klein.”

The point about class is a simple one, but it is important to recognize that so much recent queer work within cultural studies explores class from within. This is particularly ironic because so many of the cultural studies, even those on objects of study by queer theorists are the products of late capitalism. This contradiction is usually handled by authors by acknowledging at the outset of their articles that they are dealing with features of western, capitalist economics and cultures, but they then go on to write about their chosen subjects if class did not exist or matter.

The case of underwear ads makes this kind of analytical manoeuvre problematic for so many reasons. First, many of the factors that are important in analyzing class within the gay community are the same factors that are important in analyzing class within the heterosexual community. To discuss the politics of underwear ads, one must be aware of the politics of class, race, and gender. The case of underwear ads is a case in point. When I say material I mean this quite literally. All of the underwear in these ads are made from 100% cotton. Cotton manufacture is not only important in men’s fashion, but also important in the conventions of fashion photography in their ads. As ads for cotton, for example, might display a handsome man wearing a white, torly-cloth bathrobe, draped open to reveal his underwear, the only test is in the ad the clothing industry and not for cotton. By virtue of the color or brand or label, but on the cotton itself, the ad triggers in my mind the history of cotton production and slave labour even though the ad itself could all such references. In a more contemporary sense, I can look inside my own underwear and read the label to discover that the Calvin Klein ads reuse the exploitation of labour in Hong Kong and other developing countries. What I am suggesting here is that while we look at these ads as representing a simple political economy, to keep in mind the relations of exploitation embedded in the production of the actual material objects.

In addition to class I think there are also about race or, more precisely, about whiteness. They, therefore, provide an opportunity to begin the kind of work suggested by many lesbians and gays of colour. This analysis involves white lesbians and gays making our own visible and visible in new ways. In addition, it is possible to bring it under critical scrutiny. The Calvin Klein underwear ads require more scrutiny. The advertisements were photographed by Bruce Weber. In addition to being well...
While the ads tease us with homophobic looks and meanings, few rarely go so far as actually representing us as inherently threatening. Our sexuality is reduced to a commodity, with the over-increasing visibility of queer culture and capitalism's need for queer money, this appears to be changing.

Thus we call for a range of campaigns, such as the Novo Republic, to turn the homosocial heat in their ads (figure 5). The presence of this type of ad in mainstream magazines is a good sign, as it indicates that homosocial commodification is not the only processes at work. We need to recognize that these ads, by representing a queer claim on some significant spaces in the realm of popular culture. So in addition to exalting the ads' tinge of class, whitesness and power, we must also be alive to the many visual pleasures homosocial advertising may bestow for the queer spectator.

In terms of the gay market, even though it is directed at a specific and narrow segment of the gay community, we all live with the way in which it identifies us as consumers and promotes a popular understanding of being lesbian or gay as a lifestyle. There is a reason that during Queer Nation's direct action against the non-transparency we realized that the ads can look like "we're here, we're queer, and we're not going shopping." Alongside the increasing numbers of mainstream companies openly willing to court the queer consumer, specifically lesbian and gay marketing firms like Black Cat Grey and H.M.L. continue to proliferate. They sell declarative lesbianism and gay in terms of what we buy. Such a view of our sexualities may define us as consumers, but not necessarily as people with political rights.

The realm of advertising and consumption also becomes a contradictory arena for our political energies. Traditionally, this has most often been taken as the form of the boycott. We have used our power as consumers to force companies into particular directions. Some argue that our much-vaulted product loyalty plays off in the end. Was it not, after all, gay men's preference for 301 button-fly Levi's that lengthened the day? Corporations to pass non-discrimination policies, extend benefits to lesbian/gay employees, and to support a gay boycott of the Boycott?

Sometimes the ads themselves become the focus of political action. A Kenwood ad that decries the late "THAT," set on a red table is only the most recent of several ads by Benetton that has angered AIDS activists. There was of course the famous Toyota ad which pictured two white gay men, their dalmation dog, a plastic blanket and of course a Toyota with the caption "The Family Car." The ad impressed fundamentalists, but even after much pressure, Toyota refused to pull the ad. It was not that Toyota had suddenly taken up the cause of protecting lesbians and gays from right-wing attacks, but as one commentator noted: "fundamentalists tend to have low disposable incomes, but there's no one more important than gays anyway!"

The Globe and Mail summed up the connection between consumption and politics this way: "wearing gold credit cards at restaurant commodities may allude to homosexuals and gays what years of wandering in the streets failed to accomplish."

All of this raises important political questions. I think we need to ask ourselves if we are satisfied with the displacement of politics from the streets to the marketplace.