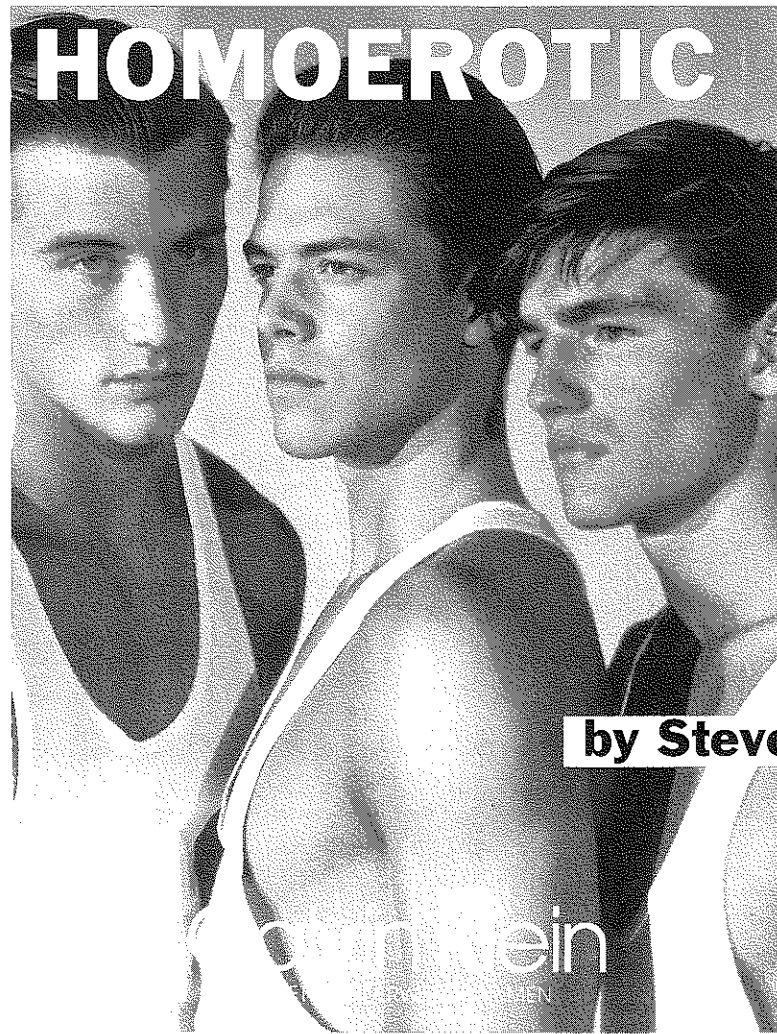


# what colour is your underwear?

## Class, Whiteness & Advertising



by Steven Maynard

figure 1

**“underwear  
goes way back.  
It has a history.  
It has an  
anthropology.”**

*(Drummer Magazine)*

We are at the 1993 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 waistband of his underwear. It was a case of life imitating art. For the alienated teenage boys in Araki's film, whether languishing on a bed or pouting in a corner, the costume of choice is underwear. In the filmmaking world, Araki is not alone in his obsession. 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 a 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 lesbian/gay press — is virtually impossible to avoid. And it is more than a textual 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 homoerotic advertising. I am going to assume that I do not have to convince most people the ads that 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. Even the *New York Times* has commented on the homoerotic context 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 an example of what Diana Fuss has recently called the "homospectatorial look," or the way in which the ads construct a momentary homoerotic glance regardless of the sexual identity of the male viewing subject. At the same time, I find it hard to resist claiming these ads as gay, particularly when I give the slide-show version of this text to audiences that include straight men. To do so confirms the existence of the homospectatorial look 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 desire for the bodies of the men in the ads.

While I am fascinated by the process of identification, desire and sexual subject formation in the pages of men's fashion magazines, that is not my focus here. Rather, I want to look at a few examples of recent homoerotic advertising to briefly raise some issues of class and race within queer studies and queer politics.

Let's begin by sketching the political economy of underwear ads. The appearance of homoerotic advertising is related to the more general and much-heralded emergence in the early 1980s of the male body within advertising. The symbolic birth date of this phenomenon is 1982, the year the famous billboard ad for Calvin Klein briefs appeared in Times Square. The new eroticization of men in advertising was, in part, a product of the shifts in gender

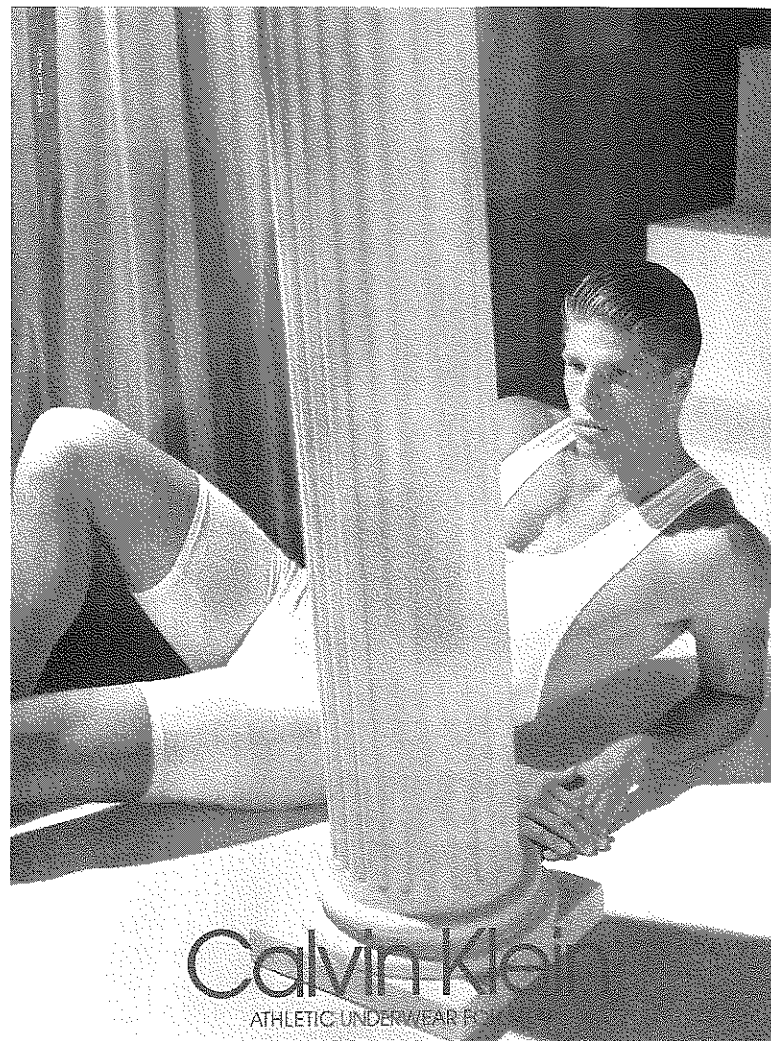


figure 2

relations spurred on over the past several decades by the feminist movement.

Homoerotic advertising also presumes a market for its message. In this regard, capitalism's never-ending ability to construct new markets and expand the range of consumer desires has been crucial. Largely the product of marketing research techniques and journalistic practices, the emergence of the "gay market" is a classic example of this process. Beginning in the mid-1970s, gay men were targeted as a specific consumer group, a decision based on marketing research which revealed that gay men supposedly had high disposable incomes and a high degree of product loyalty. A recent market-

ing survey conducted by the Angus-Reid Group for Toronto's *XTRA!* magazine revealed that 63% of *XTRA!* readers earned more than \$30,000 a year, and 26% took in more than \$50,000 annually. Summing up the results of the survey *XTRA!* boasted that its readers "are educated and affluent, cultured and well travelled." Using data generated by such marketing surveys, the media plays a key role in producing the gay market. A full-page article on gay marketing that appeared in *The Globe and Mail* is only one of the more recent in a long line of newspaper features alerting readers to the existence of the pink economy.

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 men's erotic interest in briefs and boxer shorts. Underwear of various descriptions appeared in gay porn magazines long before they did in *GQ*. What Calvin Klein ads tend to do is merge underwear with conventions of gay porn photography so that gay men can read subtextual meanings in the ads, but in a way that avoids any explicit reference to gayness. In the words of ad executive Karen Stabiner, it is an approach that "speak(s) to the homosexual consumer in a way that the straight consumer will not notice." The success of this marketing strategy can be measured in part by the way in which even traditional underwear companies, such as Stanfield's and Penman's, have homoeroticized their recent ad campaigns.

Most analyses of men's fashion ads tend to focus on the ads as an example of the process of cultural commodification and/or as representations of changing definitions of masculinity. In as much as these ads move within gay popular culture, and I think they do — how many of us have Marky Mark in his Calvin Kleins pinned up on our walls? — the Soloflex bodies in these ads reflect and reproduce the masculinization of gay men over the past two decades. But an analysis focused exclusively on commodification or gender overlooks that 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 lesbian and 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-specific segment of the lesbian/gay communities. Karen Stabiner claims that advertisers are interested in "the white single, well-educated, well-paid man who happens to be homosexual." Some would argue that a similar process of class differentiation is under way in lesbian communities. In addition to reflecting the recent trend of lesbian as chic within mainstream journalism, the appearance of lesbian imagery in *Vogue* fashion layouts and young women kissing in Banana Republic ads is evidence of an increasing number of professional lesbians who, earning significant incomes, have caught the attention of advertisers. Within lesbian popular culture more generally, the popularity of Victoria's Secret and J. Crew mail-order catalogues further signals the pleasure of consuming images among lesbians. While it is important to acknowledge that as women most lesbians still earn less on average than gay men, ads designed to appeal to well-heeled, white gay men and the Dinah Shore lesbian set are a reminder of the class differences within our communities. Essex Hemphill succinctly makes the link between class and underwear when he writes, "If I Simply Wanted Status, I'd Wear Calvin Klein."

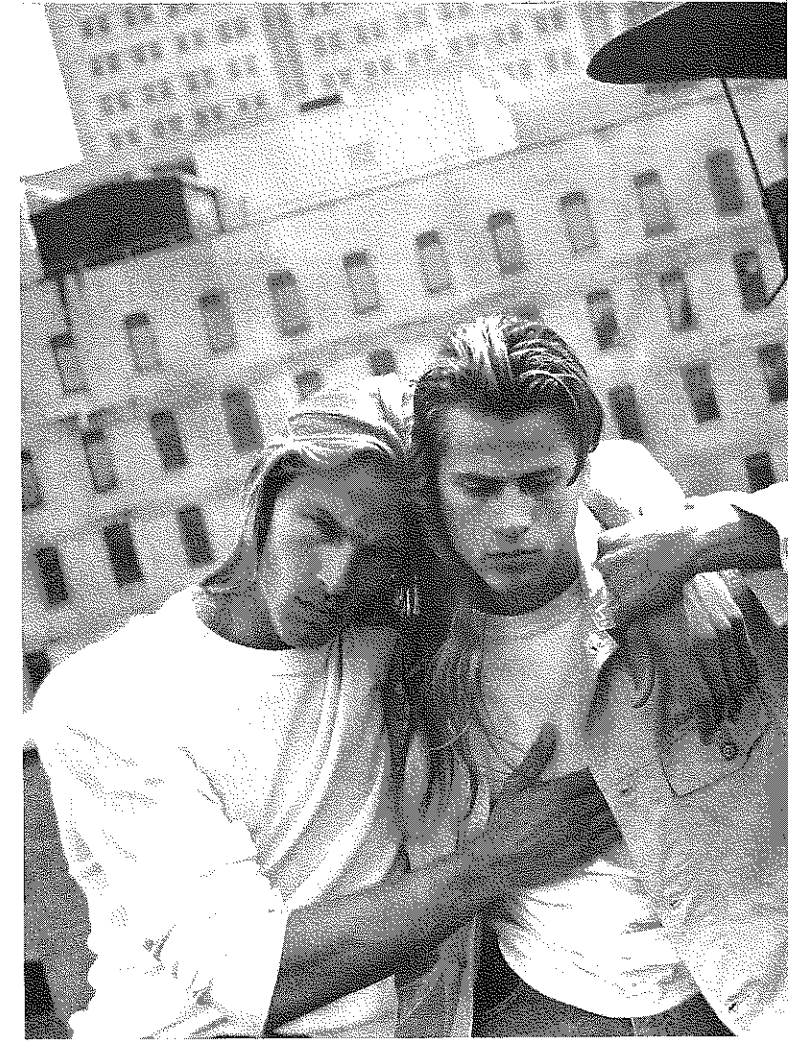


figure 3

The point about class is a simple one, but I think it is important given that so much recent queer work within cultural studies erases class from view. This is particularly ironic because so many of the cultural forms taken as 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 economies and cultures, but they then go on to write about their chosen subjects as if class did not exist or matter.

The case of underwear ads makes this kind of analytical manoeuvre problematic for there are so many material factors

to consider. When I say material here I mean this quite literally. All of the underwear in these ads are made from 100% cotton. Cotton manufacturers regularly advertise in men's fashion magazines, often employing the conventions of fashion photography in their ads. An ad for cotton, for example, might display a handsome man wearing a white, terry-cloth bathrobe, draped open to reveal his white underwear, the only text in the ad being the clothing industry symbol for cotton. By virtue of its focus, not on a specific 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 avoids 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 empire rests on 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 representations, we need to keep in mind the relations of exploitation embedded in the production of the actual material objects.

In addition to class I think these ads are also about race or, more precisely, about whiteness. They, therefore, provide an opportunity to begin the kind of analysis suggested by many lesbians and gays of colour. This analysis involves white lesbians and gays making our own often invisible and taken-for-granted whiteness visible, in order 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-

known for the creation of homoerotic imagery, Weber's commercial photography has also been described by critic Anne Russell as the "invention of a world of super Wasps." On the obvious level, we can note well that the models are all white and that, even though Klein dyes his garments several different colours, the product chosen for advertisement — be it a t-shirt, boxer shorts, briefs, or athletic underwear — is always white. Weber's characteristic black and white photography functions to emphasize, sometimes to almost illuminate, the whiteness of the fabric.

But these images work with whiteness in other ways as well. Note the often neo-classic allusions of the image (figure 2). This plays upon a long tradition of association between classical Greek society and homoeroticism. It is the same tradition that was taken up by many German photographers in the early twentieth century who were involved with the physical culture movement that emphasized the cult of the body. One of these photographers, Herbert List, is someone Bruce Weber credits as a major influence. We also know that the Weimar Republic gave way to Hitler and the rise of the Nazi Party. It is well documented that the Nazis incorporated the classical impulse within their art and culture, and that the cult of the body became associated with the physical perfection of the white body and the strength and superiority of the Aryan race. All this is not to say that Bruce Weber is a fascist. It is to suggest that in Weber's photography and in Calvin Klein ads I think a number of historical references coalesce in ways which produce a not so subtle slippage between homoeroticism and whiteness: homoeroticism comes to be defined as white.

Homoeroticism is not simply associated with whiteness in these images. It is wrapped up in notions of white racial dominance. This occurs partly through historical allusion, but also through the internal composition of the photograph. There is a focus in these images on the youthful, muscular, powerful body. It is not, however, a direct emphasis on the body as we only see the body through the product. If we take the underwear to be a marker of whiteness, then we are seeing through whiteness to power. All of these ads are implicated in racism through acts of exclusion, by the fact that men of colour do not appear, but they also do this through a definition of power as white.

Having gone over this ground, I want to turn briefly to the politics of underwear ads. As already mentioned, the ads bring into view a process described by cultural theorists in which elements of distinctive subcultures are commodified. To take one example, consider how "Gray Liberation: Once the Colour of Conformity" — the title of a fashion layout in *Details* magazine — harnesses gay politics to sell gray clothes in a mainstream magazine. Much of what Danae Clark says about style and commodification can also be said about politics: "Because style is a cultural construction, it is easily appropriated, reconstructed and divested of its original political or subcultural signification. Style as resistance becomes commodifiable as chic when it leaves the political realm and enters the fashion world." As one more example, Aldo shoes has recently taken to advertising its products alongside a red ribbon, although it's entirely unclear whether the "Also for Life" campaign involves AIDS fundraising or not.

While the ads tease us with homoerotic looks and meanings, few rarely go so far as actually representing something or someone as recognizably lesbian or gay. But with the ever-increasing visibility of queer culture and capitalism's need for queer money, this appears to be changing as some companies, such as Banana Republic, turn up the homoerotic heat in their ads (figure 3). The presence of this type of ad in mainstream magazines is a good reminder that commodification and appropriation are not the only processes at work. We need to recognize that these ads also represent an important queer claim on some significant spaces in the realm of popular culture. So in addition to analyzing the ads' tangled mix of class, whiteness and power, we must also be alive to the many visual pleasures homoerotic advertising may hold 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 was a reason that during Queer Nation actions we felt the necessity to remind lookers-on that "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 Shocking Gray and H.I.M. continue to proliferate. They all define being lesbian 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 taken the form of the boycott. We have used our power as consumers to force companies in particular directions. Some would argue that our much-vaunted product loyalty pays off in the end. Was it not, after all, gay men's preference for 501 button-fly Levis that convinced the Levi Strauss Corporation to pass non-discrimination policies, extend benefits to lesbian/gay employees, and to support a gay boycott of the Boy Scouts?

Sometimes the ads themselves become the focus of political action. A Benetton ad that depicts the letters "H.I.V." tattooed on a naked torso is only the most recent of several ads by Benetton that has angered AIDS activists. There was also the famous Toyota ad which pictured two white gay men, their dalmatian dog, a picnic basket and of course a Toyota with the caption "The Family Car." The ad angered 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, so they are less important than gays anyway." *The Globe and Mail* summed up the connection between consumption and politics this way: "waving gold credit cards at recalcitrant companies...may achieve for (lesbians and gays) what years of waving placards in the street 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.

How does a politics rooted in consumption speak to the many lesbians and gays who are excluded from the world of queer consumption in the first place? Or, how does a politics of the marketplace tackle such institutions as the police or the legal system?

One of Banana Republic's recent queer ad campaigns, entitled "My Chosen Family," a series of photos of mixed-race, lesbian, gay and bisexual "families," captures the contradictions of homoerotic advertising (figure 4). (It should be noted that Banana Republic has run this and other campaigns in the lesbian/gay press, particularly in the stylish pages of *Out* magazine. Against the dominance of the heterosexual family form, the ads are a powerful affirmation of the right to choose a variety of family arrangements. Against the ascendancy of genetic explanations of queerness, the slippage within the ads between families and sexualities suggests that erotic preferences are also chosen. But on the question of how to change the world to look like the one represented in the photographs, the ads remain silent. Choosing one's family and living one's erotic life freely will not be achieved by buying a Banana Republic shirt or pair of boxer shorts.

For myself, I want real choice. I want underwear, style and popular culture in a way that recognizes their limitations and revels in their pleasures and sometimes subversive effects. And I also want my politics in the street. All of this is what I mean when I ask "what colour is your underwear?"

Steven Maynard is a gay social historian. He is completing a PhD thesis on urban space, policing and the making of homosexual subcultures in turn-of-the-century Ontario.

#### Works Consulted

- "Underwear Fetish Feature," *Drummer*, #114 (1988), p. 40.
- Richard Martin, "The Gay Factor in Fashion," *Esquire Gentleman* (Spring 1993), p. 138.
- Helen Eisenbach, "Selling Out: The Invisible Gay Dollar," *NYQ*, 17 (November 1991), p. 27.
- Diana Fuss, "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992), pp. 713-737.
- XTRA!*, 25 June 1993, p. 25. Unlike most similar surveys, *XTRA!* did not breakdown the average household income by gender in reporting the results of its survey.
- "Gay Marketing Is In the Pink," *The Globe and Mail*, (15 August 1992), section D4.
- Karen Stabiner, "Tapping the Homosexual Market," *The New York Times Magazine*, (2 May 1982), p. 80. Cited in Danae Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism," *Camera Obscura: a journal of feminism and film theory* 25/26 (Jan/May 1991), p. 183.
- Frank Mort, "Boy's Own?: Masculinity, Style and Popular Culture," in R. Chapman and J. Rutherford, eds., *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: 1980), pp. 193-224.
- Teal Triggs, "Framing Masculinity: Herb Ritts, Bruce Weber & the Body Perfect," in J. Ash and E. Wilson, eds., *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader* (London: 1992), pp. 25-29.
- Tom Kalin, "Flesh Histories," in A. Klusacek and K. Morrison, eds., *A Leap in the Dark: Art and Contemporary Cultures* (Montreal: 1992), pp. 120-135.
- Jamie Gough, "Theories of Sexual Identity and the Masculinization of the Gay Man," in S. Shepherd and M. Wallis, eds., *Coming On Strong: Gay Politics and Culture* (London: 1988), pp. 119-136.
- Essex Hemphill, "If I Simply Wanted Status, I'd Wear Calvin Klein," in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (New York, 1992) pp. 109-110.
- Anne M. Russell, "The Advertising Game," *American Photo*, p. 79. *Details*, (September 1992), p. 120.

figure 4

