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A Rhetorical Analysis of the Influence of Women on US Foreign Policy in Print Advertising

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One can only expect that a high profile clothing brand such as Kenneth Cole would make a great effort to promote their clothing and products during their company’s 20th anniversary. In September 2003, Kenneth Cole did just that. A large advertising and PR campaign was rolled out in conjunction with in-store merchandising events across the nation to celebrate their 20th birthday (Thompson, 2003). The main part of this campaign was a series of print ads showcasing some of their new products. One ad in particular stood out from the rest; the others seemed to look like the typical ads you would find in clothing magazines. The peculiar atmosphere of this ad when compared to the rest suggested that there was more to it than meets the eye. Why did this ad for a clothing brand choose to use the word “prisoners” and feature the use of handcuffs on a woman? This critique will explore the aesthetics of the ad and the background and situation going on behind it at the time. Then, looking at the ad through different rhetorical perspectives, a connection will be made with the context that surrounds it, revealing that there is a critical link between the ad and a specific social issue.

The Kenneth Cole ad in question is a magazine advertisement that was part of a larger advertising campaign celebrating the clothing company’s 20th year anniversary during the fall of 2003. The advertisements for this campaign were similarly designed and consisted of the following: black and white photographs of models wearing designer clothing with text that makes references to Kenneth Cole’s 20th birthday, all placed over a completely white background. The ads were made to be printed in popular clothing and style magazines such as *Vogue*, *GQ*, *Lucky* and *Men’s Health*, as well as some newspapers such as the *New York Times*. The prints ran during the months of September and October, 2003 (Thompson, 2003). The print ad of interest here, however, seemed to stand out from the others. Unlike the other ads that had either men or a combination of men and women in various poses, this ad only had one woman,
and she was in handcuffs. On the left side of this ad are large tally marks--adding up to twenty--that look to have been etched into a cement wall. Each tally mark is uniquely drawn and is different from the last. Below the tallies are the words “Prisoners of Fashion for 20 years. – Kenneth Cole.” On the opposite side of the ad, taking up the whole right side from top to bottom, is a young, attractive woman standing straight (starting from the knees up), wearing a simple but elegant black dress. She is maintaining a neutral, slightly aggravated face at the camera, and looking down at her wrists, her hands are restrained with handcuffs. She has her arms up at her waist, presenting her cuffed wrists with her palms open and facing the audience. Besides the small text in the bottom corner providing retail information, there is nothing else in the ad but white, empty space.

It is important to understand some of the context surrounding this ad. Around this time, there were very significant events happening in the world. The 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center were still fresh on American minds, and during March of 2003, several months before the launch of Kenneth Cole’s ad campaign, the Bush Administration launched a campaign of their own with their invasion of Iraq as a response to the attacks on September 11th (Santos, 2013). During this time period, there was much discussion of women’s rights and how that idea related to US foreign policy. Charlotte Bunch (2002), founder of the Center for Women’s Global Leadership at the State University of New Jersey, stated that she was concerned with the influence of US feminists; US foreign policy was military and corporate-driven, and women were not able to do much about it. Before the 9/11 attacks, women and feminists were actually leading the idea of “human security,” replacing the older concept of “national security.” Human security meant, among other things, equality for women and safety from violence. However, this progress was set back after the attacks, with male authorities dictating what was important in the
media regarding the war, putting women back on the sidelines once again (Bunch, 2002). In the decade leading up to the war, critical research showed that women were vital to economic development, active civil society, and good governance (Coleman, 2004). However, women’s rights were considered “too controversial” for mainstream foreign policy for much before that (Coleman, 2004). By the time the war came around, American women and US female advocates were facing enormous obstacles with having their voices being heard on US relations and the nation’s actions overseas. The masculinity and machismo approach to combating terrorism by their male counterparts overtook women from both a political and media standpoint. This was the world into which the Kenneth Cole ad was born.

The lens that was chosen for the critique of this artifact reflects the minimalistic design of the ad, as well as the fact that it is a printed magazine advertisement. The ad will be examined for its style, its visual imagery and delivery, its irony, and the metaphors it communicates. It is critical to note that Kenneth Cole has always been known for his use of advertising as a medium for political and social messages, as well as activism (Broverman, 2008). The word style in this context refers to the aesthetic qualities of the ad. It follows the same stylistic qualities of past Kenneth Cole ads: simple, modern, and relevant. One or more elements were included to stand out to the audience. In this case, the attention grabbers include the tally marks, the word “prisoners,” and the handcuffs. Visual imagery and delivery were combined for this artifact because it is, after all, a visual advertisement. Striking images were designed and placed in a certain way for a reason by the designer, echoing the designer’s choices of delivery for the ad’s message. The irony in this ad lies in the contrasting ideas of “prisoners” and “fashion”. Fashion is usually associated with spontaneity, creativity, brightness, and freedom (Auty, 1998). Lady Gaga’s fashion exemplifies this today, for example. The word “prisoners” implies the opposite
connotation such as: darkness, order, structure, and conformity (Loader, 1997). This same irony is also found in the image of the model in handcuffs. The young woman is seen wearing a beautiful and most likely expensive dress. Handcuffs, on the other hand, are usually seen with graphic images of people being angry, embarrassed, sad, and sometimes foolish, such as in the current television series, COPS. Finally, the metaphor in this message compares those who work in the fashion industry to actual prisoners. The working, uninhibited, and creative personnel of the fashion industry are set equal to those doing time in prison. In the combination of these various parts of the ad, the artifact’s possible message can be analyzed and understood.

The analysis of this ad goes far beyond the inclusion of the idea of prisoners and handcuffs. Had this ad featured a man instead of a woman, there probably would not have been as much to analyze. The woman in handcuffs, along with the allusions to prison and doing time, indicate that the advertisement seems to function in more ways than a simple clothing advertisement. After looking past my initial, glandular reactions of this just being a simple ad, I uncovered much more than I expected. I immediately suspected that this ad was most likely related to ideas of gender equality, so I started there. The timing of this ad also indicated that Bush’s invasion of Iraq must have been prominent in the creator’s choices. The launch of the invasion was a major deal for the majority of Americans, seeing that the attacks and the subsequent invasion of Iraq demonstrated the collective beliefs and principles of our country (Santos, 2013). It was shown in the year that followed the launch, the majority of the people in the US supported keeping troops overseas despite the rising death toll at the time (Kaplan, 2003). With this combination of gender equality and the then-loom ing Iraq War, my research pointed to the equality of women in US foreign relations. Handcuffs in our society symbolize and are usually associated with ideas of restraint, both in a sense of crime as well as bondage (Loader,
In 2003, female advocates were ideologically bound and restrained from making an impact in Washington and the media by their male counterparts. Officials felt they had compromised on women’s issues in Iraq already (Coleman, 2004). For example, Congress initially put women’s rights high up on their list of areas in need of reconstruction, putting in millions of dollars to local women’s groups (Coleman, 2004). However, most of their effort was undermined due to the pressure from Shia leaders who opposed the idea of appointing female judges, which eventually led to keeping the number of women in the Iraqi Governing Council and the Constitutional Committee to a minimum (Coleman, 2004). Also, women continued to be the targets of fundamentalist terrorism. Though the events of September 11, 2001 should have brought about a resurgence of support for women’s rights groups, the focus instead fell back on militarization, with men still dominating the media. The US foreign policy at the time (although this can be even true today) made it challenging to build the international solidarity of women (Bunch, 2002).

Kenneth Cole himself has a history of consistent inclusion of social and political messages into his products (Orecklin, 2004). Having a background in law and political science, his name and his brand has become known for being connected to a variety of causes (Orecklin, 2004). Often, those causes have been feminist and liberal in nature (Orecklin, 2004). Having built a politically-conscious following, many of his consumers would have already been searching for an ulterior motive in these particular set of ads, especially in a time when much of the airwaves were focused on a US invasion on the other side of the globe (Bunch, 2002). The liberal, feminist message in this ad campaign was already expected, and it was just a matter of making the connection to the issues of the time of the ad’s release. This time, Kenneth Cole was set out to make a statement about the role of women in international affairs.
The tally marks in the ad represent another factor for women and human rights, and that is the passage of time. Starting with the women’s suffrage movement in the 1920s, one can see the uphill battle women had to face. The status of women in the United States has fluctuated over the years since then, spawning countless women’s advocacy groups (Twenge, 2012). As mentioned earlier, women’s rights have been seen as too controversial for mainstream foreign policy. For decades leading up to the war, international development agencies avoided issues of gender constantly (Coleman, 2004). Women have long experienced oppression and obstacles to the ability to stand up for their rights. Feminists and women’s advocacy groups have existed for a long time in the US, yet still receive little support from a male-dominated society. This can be seen in the ad with the tally marks. It can be safe to say that women have been waiting for a long time to stop being prisoners and to become free from their masculine restraints. Each tally mark has been gruelingly carved into the cement wall, eagerly counting the years until women can become free and have their voices be heard. The “20 years” portion of the ad can also be considered in this respect. Although women’s rights have been an issue for much longer than 20 years, 20 years can still be seen as a “long time” for many individuals.

The model’s open palms in the ad were almost easily missed. Open palms or hands in the western world represent humility, generosity, honesty, confession, thanksgiving, sincerity, openness, and innocence, to name a few (Becker, 2014). In the ad, it seems that the woman in handcuffs is trying to communicate all of these things. In many cultures, mainly in the US, placing value on affection and compassion is seen as a feminine trait, unlike masculine values such as competition and assertiveness (Tubbs, 2010). These values are outlined in the real world during the time of the Iraq invasion. It was mostly feminists who brought about a focus on the nurturing, all-encompassing idea of human rights and human security that would replace the
masculine concept of national security, which was based around military and defense (Bunch, 2002). However the events of 9/11 cut that progress short and the US was again brought back to the frame of mind of nationalistic security. As Bunch (2002) states, “the erosion of the US commitment to human rights helps legitimize the abuses of governments that have never fully accepted or claimed these standards” (p. 38). The woman in the ad can be seen as these women’s rights advocates. Her professional appearance shows that she is ready to make professional decisions and take professional action. Her palms represent what she wants to advocate--the support and respect for the people living in other countries. Rather than maintaining security through the use of force, promoting understanding between nations can bring about peace in a much less bloody way. She is longingly waiting for the key to be set free by her male possessor. The visual imagery and irony in this ad, although somewhat concealed, expresses these ideas through metaphor.

It can be concluded that this advertisement was used to make a statement about women’s political influence. The ad was a testimonial to women’s status in America and their relationship with men in regard to positions of prominent influence in the early 2000s. The ad, then, is making an indirect statement that women have little to no influence on US foreign policy abroad because of the domination of men in both the government and the media. This lack of balance was very true of the time period, and continues to be a problem today. Kenneth Cole has always been known for his regular use of advertising to push social and political rhetoric (Broverman, 2008). Cole was a feminist and a liberal, and his advertising and crafting of company image reflects this (Orecklin, 2004). He believed that women did not have the same say as men in our nation’s government and world affairs, so in usual Kenneth Cole fashion, an ad was created to address this. The ad brings to attention a very real issue that has become prevalent in recent

times. Whether it is 2003 or 2014, gender equality and the rights of women to have an impact in today’s international connected world must always be a part of the conversation.


