

# DOUBLE VISION: CALVIN KLEIN AND ARTHUR SULZBERGER

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I saw the woman's eye first, even before the breast, which is the focal point for many observers. She stands almost squarely to the viewer's gaze in the *New York Times Magazine*, only partly contained by the page. The top of her tilted head is lost from the frame as well as the body beneath the crotch. Her hands open a dark jacket, revealing the middle half of the chest above a belt with a shining metal buckle — CK in a circle. The right breast bears a round dark mark.

The model's left eye has been blackened, probably both by makeup and shadow. While the breast mark is ambiguous, for me it signified a wound. For all these reasons, the ad for Calvin Klein belts first troubled, then offended me. It seemed to suggest that one pleasure of owning the striking belt would be to strike a woman with it.

I tore the page out, meaning to object. I rarely notice fashion or advertising, but I believe some boundaries are breached at a society's peril. By seeming to tolerate the battering of women or the sexualization of violence, we damage our culture and countless individuals. I thought the *Times*, a cultural bastion, had crossed a dangerous line.

I might not have written, though, except for a front page story in the *Times* three days later, describing the aftermath in Togo of Fauziya Kassindja's flight to avoid genital mutilation. The story recounts the exile and homelessness Ms. Kassindja's mother endured as a result of aiding the escape, which led her eventually to apologize to the patriarch who ordered her daughter's marriage and mutilation. The contrast between the *Times*' treatment of women in its news coverage and advertising was too great to ignore.

My letter to Joseph Lelyveld, Executive Editor, was, as I recall, only a few sentences. I mentioned an ad for belts depicting a woman with a black eye and a mark on her breast "suggestive of a wound." Then I asked him how the *Times* justified its conflicting stances: concern about violence against women in Togo and glorification of it in the paper's own pages.

I was surprised by a prompt reply from Arthur O. Sulzberger, Jr. He is the *Times*' publisher and, as such, the only name on the masthead above Lelyveld's. The note was brief but highly interesting. Sulzberger explained that Lelyveld had "no responsibility" for advertising decisions. I take this to mean that the *Times*' public affairs agenda is not allowed to influence its financial enterprise

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directly; that only the publisher, if anyone, reconciles the paper's interests in justice and profit, and mediates between the contents of advertising and of news coverage.

Although Sulzberger's assertion answered my question, "what do you tell yourself when you make such disparate statements about violence against women," the answer is disturbing. Possibly the world's greatest newspaper — and doubtless one of the most expensive advertising venues — seems to lack a mechanism to insure that it speaks coherently on some issues. We are asked to picture the executive editor reading *Times*' advertising like anyone else, powerless to affect its content. Are we also to trust that advertising revenue does not influence the *Times*' decision to cover women's fashion so lavishly on the news pages?

Mr. Sulzberger had trouble finding the ad because he saw it so differently. To him the model was merely wearing "too much eye shadow" and had "a birth mark." He apologized for the ad's offending me, however, and ended with this: "Let me assure you that if we had thought, for even an instant, that the picture was of a woman with a black eye or bruise, we would not have accepted it."

His letter elicited various reactions. I certainly appreciated receiving an individualized response from the *Times'* top executive. How a single complaint from an unknown reader garnered such attention I can only speculate. Does Sulzberger do this occasionally to keep in touch with readers? Were others complaining about *Times'* advertising, creating sensitivity among the top officers? Could Lelyveld have sent my letter on to signal his own concerns about advertising policy?

Mostly, I was pleased — though skeptical — about Sulzberger's assurance that he would not have published the ad if he had seen what I did. This was unexpected. I had thought a reply, if I got one, might say that the Sunday magazine is for adults, mention First Amendment values, explain that the *Times* does not scrutinize advertising copy, or point out that a (harmless) fashion fantasy of violence should not be equated with real violence. Instead, the reply could be interpreted, with only a little optimism on my part, as a promise to the contrary. The *Times* deplored violence against women and would not willingly profit from it. If the publisher did, or could be led to, see it in future ads, they would be refused. I considered that a challenge worth taking.

Although I was disappointed and even a little embarrassed that Sulzberger found the ad innocuous, I was nevertheless confident that he was mistaken. An old cartoon shows a worried psychiatrist going over Rorschach results with a patient, who is saying indignantly, "But doctor, you're the one drawing the dirty pictures." The *Times* thought *I* was the one drawing the dirty pictures. I decided to ask others what they saw.

Over the next few weeks twenty-six friends, acquaintances, and co-workers looked at the ad and talked with me privately. For so small a group, they were rather varied — male and female; straight and gay; twenty to sixty years old; black, white, Asian-American; with high school, college and graduate degrees; native-born and immigrant. I asked each, "Tell me what you see in this ad. What do you think it's about? How do you react to it?" — and I did not comment until she or he had finished. Then I said what I saw and why I had asked, and we compared opinions. I took notes on the viewer's first reaction as well as on comments made after hearing mine.

Talking with each of the thirteen men and thirteen women was interesting — whether the respondent saw less to object to in the picture than I, largely the same, or as was sometimes the case, more. Eight people saw violence before I raised the possibility. Sixteen more people heard me out and then agreed. One man and one woman saw no black eye, no "wound" or other suggestion of violence, even after we discussed my perception of the article. Quite a few of the people I talked to, though, went on to point out evidence of violence that I had overlooked but find credible, as well as to note elements in the picture that neither of us fully understood.

Here is a sample of comments from those who immediately perceived violence.

Kristen, in her thirties, is an organizational psychologist and management consultant. Given her sunny personality and Midwestern wholesomeness, I was

a bit startled that she saw the darkness of the picture right away: “Looks like she’s got a black eye. I’m fairly certain she does. A battered woman. The mark on her breast — could it be a cigarette burn? I think the eye is swollen.”

Marjorie, in her thirties, a family lawyer: “Looks like she’s been beat up. Like she’s got a black eye. She looks bad; I mean, like she’s been hit.”

Lynn, in her twenties, interested in women’s issues and in advertising: “Could have something wrong with her eye. A black eye or something. Makes me think of violence. Chapped lips. It’s a weird thing with the sex and violence, because the mole’s like a nipple but it’s in the wrong place. So it could be a mark, maybe a cigarette burn.”

David, in his forties, lawyer and musician: “She reminds me of the cover on the Rolling Stones’ *Black & Blue* album. Suggestion there was that the woman had been beaten. Here’s an awful thought. What if the subliminal message here is ‘use the belt to beat the woman?’ ”

The comments of those who at either point perceived the model as battered are summarized below. They spoke about:

- The belt — It was seen as a general reference to violence (“A brand. She’s been branded.” “Reminiscent of the heavyweight championship belt.”); as standing in for another, unknown product (“The least important item in the ad.” “Your focus *clearly* doesn’t go to the belt.” “Women’s belts? Why this ad?”); and also as a specific allusion to hitting (“The ad’s a pun. The copy could almost say, ‘Belt her one.’ ”).
- The eye — All but two viewers agreed that the model’s left eye, and *not* the right eye, is black. Although several said at first that it might be merely, perhaps accidentally, in shadow, they later agreed that for a full page ad in the *New York Times Magazine* Calvin Klein would surely reject proof showing an unplanned, unwanted shadow.
- The breast mark — To nearly all, it was the focus of attention on the page, drawing them in. Many found it threatening: “Scary mole. Should be checked.” “Skin cancer.” “The dot is really bothering me.” “Cigarette burn.” (several) “You never see a model with any blemish, so this is different.” To just as many, it was a nipple, but not a nipple. About sex, but not sexy.
- The lips — “Chapped.” “Cracked.” “A cut on the bottom lip, under the black eye.” “Swelling from a blow.”
- The model’s stance — “Pugilistic.” “Been in a fight, but offensive or defensive?” “A biker. Tough chick.” “Submissive but seductive.”
- Her expression — “Sneering.” “Depleted, lethargic.” “Ugly.” “Deadened.”
- Confusion over what’s being advertised, and to whom — “I’m not sure who he’s appealing to. The kids — my kids’ age — wouldn’t buy it. Maybe to moneyed thirty-year-olds.” “I don’t understand the sales appeal.” “I don’t know whether they’re aiming toward men or what.” “I do think it’s degrading to women.” “She’s a very attractive woman. Klein’s appealing to the younger twenties crowd. Glamour.”
- Androgyny — Six viewers identified the model as deliberately sexually ambiguous. “Macho. Like a prizefighter.” “This could be a guy with long

hair and makeup.” “The nipple’s the wrong size and in the wrong place for a woman, but much closer to accurate for a man.” “Very androgynous — even the belt’s for either gender.”

- Awareness of similar advertising, Calvin Klein’s in particular — “Don’t ask any more twenty-year-olds how they react; we’re used to this kind of ad.” “I’ve seen much worse, with this same model too.” “Verging on porno, but that’s what you see these days.” “Like other Calvin Klein ads, it can conjure. Am I seeing what I’m seeing? For people who don’t want to see it, they don’t have to.”
- The ad’s success — I asked no one whether the ad appealed to him or her. Every woman volunteered that it did not. A few women wondered aloud whether the ad was aimed at women. A number of men assumed women were the intended audience; several said women probably would not like it, but three predicted it would appeal, either as a rape fantasy or a promise of glamour and enhanced sexual attractiveness. Most men, though, assumed the sexual appeal was being made to them, and they were about evenly divided as to its success.

These talks revealed a variety, yet at the same time, a convergence of views about the advertisement. Arthur Sulzberger, if added to my informal survey, would be one of only three people who do not see (I would say, who miss) the ad’s strong suggestions of violence. Admittedly, my expectations may have influenced some to see the photo as I do. That leaves, however, those who mentioned violence before I spoke. Moreover, while I may be mistaken, nearly all who said they were convinced by my interpretation seemed sincere.

Obviously, no generalizations are appropriate about responses from a group so small and randomly chosen. It interested me, though, that the five under thirty years of age all spoke of the ubiquity of this type of advertising. Although they didn’t think it good, they seemed to expect no better. I noticed too that six of the eight who identified violence right away were women. Could it be that the men I talked with were more aroused by the image? (One said, laughing, “there’s a problem with her eye . . . but it took me a long time to get there.”) If so, perhaps their reactions bolster a fear often voiced — that men are so conditioned, by advertising among other things, to see sex and violence as intertwined that the combination is less remarkable to them than to women.

Where might these conversations lead? My title, *Double Vision*, tries to capture several aspects of this experience with the *Times* that are important to me: the blurring of useful boundaries brought about by aggressive advertisers and acquiescent publishers; the inability or unwillingness to see what is not in one’s interest to see; contemporary advertising’s dual — indeed multi-leveled — appeal to viewers; the separate, often gender-influenced, realities people perceive; the hope that despite these divisions we can unite in redoubled efforts to reduce violence.

Here then is my challenge to Arthur Sulzberger. Show this ad to twenty-five or so women and men you encounter, choosing a diverse sample. Ask them simply to tell you what they see. If it’s only too much eye shadow and a birth

mark, your judgment will have been vindicated. But if a significant number see what nearly all my sample did, and if you are true to your word, I'll expect to see no more ads like this one in the *Times*.