Semiotic analysis of a Versace visual myth

William Earl Taylor

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF
A VERSACE VISUAL
MYTH

by

William Earl Taylor

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University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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William Earl Taylor

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Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Examination Committee Member

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

Semiotic Analysis of a Versace Visual Myth

by

William Earl Taylor

Dr. Lawrence Mullen, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Communication
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

This study analyzes the mythical religious imagery of Gianni Versace through a visual semiotic analysis. The image being examined has characteristics of the religious martyrdom of St. Sebastian. Analyzing the St. Sebastian image via semiotics allows the visual message, produced by Gianni Versace, to be examined at multiple levels. Decoding this visual message allows for an understanding of ideologies, cultures, and possibly the maintenance of the status quo.

Semiotics is a method of breaking down the visual sign to understand the visual messages. Semiotics contains three components, which are the signifier, the signified, and the sign. Each component, the signifier, the signified, and the sign, is interdependent thus constructing visual messages. This study addresses the effects of the designer's personal lifestyle, that may have influenced the message of the visual image under examination. Examining the personal lifestyle element attempts to address a limitation of semiotic theory analysis.
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CHAPTER I

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF A VERSACE VISUAL MYTH

In the second half of 1996, Gianni Versace published his fifth book, *Do Not Disturb*. The book, published by Abbeville Press Publishers, New York depicts the designer’s creative universe; a universe that consists of family, art, sexuality, and ultimate luxury. *Do Not Disturb* also depicts the designer’s individual construction of reality. Versace believed that the individual creates his or her own taste, beauty, and harmony, which reflects the individual’s style and personality. The images that Versace presents contain messages about his universe, images that ultimately influence the fashion designs he created. The book is aimed at an audience that is also in tune with his fashion designs. Using the three components of visual semiotic analysis, this study will decode one of Versace’s images.

The purpose of this study is to explore the message(s) communicated by a single Versace image. The photographic image, *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, from Versace’s book *Do Not Disturb* carries religious myth concerning Christianity. Why did Versace reproduce this image in relation to his fashion? This thesis will use the concepts of semiotics-- the signifier, the signified, and the sign-- as an analytical tool to understand Versace’s version of *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*.

Semiotics: A Brief Explanation

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, in the 1900s, founded semiotics. During the 1974 International Semiotic Conference, semiotics was officially recognized as an academic science. Italian semiologist Umberto Eco stated, “We have spoken about semiotics, therefore semiotics exists” (Griffin, 1994, p. 98).
Semiotics concentrates on textual messages:

Language is a system of signs that expresses ideas, and is therefore comparable to the
system of writing, the alphabet, the alphabet of the deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite
formulas, military signals, etc. But it is the most important of all systems (Noth. 1990. p.
57).

Saussure's semiotics dealt with linguistics only. Other semioticians took the theory further.

Umberto Eco looked at everything standing as a sign.

A sign is everything that is taken as significantly substituting for something else. This
something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the
moment in which a sign stands in for it. Thus, semiotics is in principle the discipline
studying everything that can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a
lie, it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all (Eco, 1976. p.
7).

Roland Barthes, Chair of Literary Semiology at the College of France, with other semiologists
built on Saussure's foundation. The foundation consists of three components, the signifier, the signified,
and the sign. Barthes helped define the meaning of each of the components. Thus, semioticians use these
components to examine the meaning of signs.

The first component of semiotics is the signifier. The signifier consists of the three dimensional
material substances of the sign (Barthes, 1967; Morgan and Welton, 1992; Seiter, 1986). Examples of
signifiers are the paper and ink used to print an advertisement. The signifier is essentially lacking in
meaning, yet it is the signifier that directs the reader toward the inferred meaning(s). Identifying the
signifier(s) of a sign is the first step in decoding a sign's meaning via semiotics.

The second component of the semiotics is the signified. The signified consists of the concepts,
emotions, or both, associated with the sign (Barthes, 1967; Morgan and Welton, 1992; Seiter, 1986). The
signified is essentially the connotative meaning(s) of the sign. Examples of the signified are a green traffic
light means go (concept), or red roses equal love (emotion). With an understanding of the signifier and the
signified the final element to define is the sign.

The sign is the combination of the signifier and the signified. The meaning of the visual image
(sign) is a combination of the material substance (the signifier) and the emotional/concept(s) substance (the
signified) (Barthes, 1967; Morgan and Welton, 1992; Seiter, 1986). Interpretation of a sign's meaning is
dependent on the individual decoding the sign. Thus, a sign might have different meanings when decoded by different individuals. Yet some sign meanings may carry a cultural meaning, becoming a myth as described in Barthes' version of semiotics.

Fisk and Hartley (1978) believe that a sign has three levels of a significance. In the first order the sign is self-contained; the photograph means what the image is in the photograph. In the second order the sign carries a cultural meaning rather than merely a representational one [Figure 1]. A general's uniform denotes his rank (first-order sign), but carries the respect we accord with the uniform (second-order sign). The third order is the area of subjective responses that are shared, to a degree by all members of a culture. This is the order to which Versace's image belongs. Thus, Barthes' sign system is appropriately used here.

Current usage takes over the sign of the first order and makes it the signifier (I) of a secondary system. The sign is paired with the mythic content of a signified (II). As the symbol is expropriated to support the myth the sign loses its historical grounding. As a mere signifier of the first system, the sign is no longer rooted in the historical details. The sign ceases to stand for the original meaning, now the sign in the mythic (second) system is empty, timeless, a form without substance. According to Barthes, that does not mean that the meaning of the original system sign is lost:

The essential point is that the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life from which... the myth will draw its nourishment (Griffin, 1994, p. 103-104).

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<tr>
<th>1. Signifier</th>
<th>2. Signified</th>
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<td>3. Sign</td>
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<td>I. Signifier</td>
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<td>III. Sign</td>
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FIGURE 1 (ADAPTED FROM BARTHES MYTH SYSTEM)

An example of Barthes' model is the American flag. Originally, it stood for the thirteen American colonies. Now it stands for freedom, capitalism, and a leading world power. The original meaning is not dead but it is no longer the main meaning of the image.
Gianni Versace: A Brief Examination

Traditionally, semiotic analyses have not examined the life of a message’s creator when analyzing an image. This limitation of semiotic theory, which ignores potential information that may lead to a more complete analysis of the creator's work. Thus, an examination of Gianni Versace’s life has been included.

Michael Gross, a veteran fashion journalist said,

Gianni Versace was playing out a dream of wealth beyond measure. He sold indulgences and indulged himself— in things and people. He is like the Sun King. He reflected light onto those around him and they in turn reflected back upon him (Lambert, 1997, p. 84).

Versace’s light touched and brought beauty to many before his light was sniffed out on July 15, 1997.

Gianni spent his childhood “making puppets out of cloth remnants. As a child he designed his first dress at nine, a black velvet one shoulder gown” (Bellafante, 1997, p. 39). Versace officially started his career in his mother’s Reggio Calabria shop upon his eighteenth birthday. Often traveling to London and Paris on pattern buying missions, Versace was quick to learn the secrets of dressmaking and design (Made In Italy On Line, 1997) http://made-in-italy-.com/fm.htm [1998, January, 23]. Seven years later Versace received a phone call that would change his life forever.

“A Milanese clothing manufacturer who heard about Versace’s work called his mother’s store and asked if he (Versace) would come design up north. Versace took an all-night train and never looked back” (Peyser, 1997, p. 34-35). During the next five years Versace designed under another label. It was March 1978 when Versace presented his first collection under the Versace label. The following September, Versace presented at the Permanent Art Gallery of Milan his Fall/Winter collection. Versace also presented his first men’s wear collection that same year. These first two collections launched Versace’s label into orbit. Now, more than ever, Versace drew inspiration from the universe he created around him.

The world Gianni Versace created around him, the world that he inhabited, was a world of pure luxury. Versace’s style, designs, and life reflected his luxurious world.

Versace’s style was the antithesis of Armani’s, optic yellow instead of beige, screaming pop-art prints rather than florals. . . . Versace was fashion’s foremost maximalist- a more-is-more kind of guy who never let good taste get in the way of a good time. He was an intriguing mix of high and low culture, a man who could give a party at which Woody Allen and RuPaul could run into each other at the bar” (DeCaro, 1997, p. 40).

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Of all the things that Versace’s world was, boring was not one of those elements.

“How can you be bored? I don’t understand. If something is boring, do something else. Always, there is something else. Being bored is like taking poison. It kills you,” Versace told In Style magazine’s writer Hall Rubenstein (Rubenstein, 1997, p. 200). From the clothes he designed to the homes and art he collected, to his diverse strata of friends, Versace was always looking for the new and the fresh. This included befriending other designers and their creations, and disliking fashion created for fashion’s sake.

When Versace spotted Todd Oldham early in the young Texan’s career, Versace called a handful of European fashion editors and asked them to check it out. “In our industry this is highly unheard of,” says Oldham. ‘He saw my work and told people. I was really flabbergasted because he was such a design hero of mine’ (Bellafante, 1997, p. 44).

Versace once told Frank DeCaro, a fashion writer for The New York Times and Vogue, “It’s no boring my fashion.” DeCaro’s belief was, “Was no boring, his life, either” (DeCaro, 1997).

“I think you have to be part of this culture, of this music, of our time,” said Versace about his life (DeCaro, 1997, p. 40). The role Versace played in “this culture” was revealed by the couture creations he designed for television, operas, ballets and music videos, a culture that ironically was also his influence. Influences change from one fashion season to the next, yet the constant element in Versace’s designs was art.

There are periods when I could stare at a work by Picasso for days without getting tried, Versace says. ‘Other times I feel the urge to look at something more simple and immediate like Van Gogh, or something even more naive like a Rousseau. It’s not possible to choose just one favorite work of art for a whole life- every artist is significant in his own way,’ (ARTnews, 1990, p. 133).

The art element, an influence from childhood, was reinforced by the Roman temple Versace grew up near. “The Medusa motif [Figure 2], which became the symbol of his fashion . . . . was something he took from a mosaic floor by a beach he used to go to as a child” (Alhadeff, 1995, p. 58).

I do not like to copy- just capture the essence of my inspiration in a modern way. So I dissected the painting and used the most evocative parts to make three dresses in metal mesh. When the three models walk together, the painting was recomposed (ARTnews, 1990, p. 133).

Another element that influenced Versace was youth and sexuality. Versace is associated with the era of Italian designers known for producing clothes that were sexual, celebrating the body (Ganem, 1997).
The difference between Versace and his counterparts was his ability to amalgamate the street walker with the aristocracy, always understanding that the clothes he created were just clothes.

A Shirt is a shirt. It has no sex. I can take one of those silk ones and put it under a black suit and all you will see is elegance. And I can take a plain white shirt and put it on Cindy [Crawford] and it will make you crazy. Sex is all about attitude. If my clothes are called sexy, it’s only because they help make people think they are (Rubenstein, 1997, p. 203).

Many consider Versace’s style a mixture of royalty and rock and roll, homoeroticism, luxury, vulgarity, and elegance (Lambert, 1997; DeCaro, 1997; Madonna, 1997; Ganem, 1997; Martin, 1995).

Gianni Versace was an individual who looked for, longed for, and used the beauty of the world around him in his designs (messages). He also understood the beauty of pain within suffering. Having grown up in the Italian working class, dealing with his sexuality, and being an artist Versace would have learned the realities of life at an early age. It is therefore, logical that Versace would use The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian to make a statement about fashion.

Research Questions

Discovering the message is the goal of this thesis. Several questions are addressed throughout this thesis:

1. What messages were produced through Versace’s St. Sebastian image?
2. Did these messages reflect society’s norms, or deviate from said norms?
3. Did Versace’s images challenge the fashion myth, or support the myth?
4. Can one Versace image explain all Versace imagery?
5. Does Versace’s religious myth image explain other modern day religious myth imagery?

Chapter Two comprises the literature review of visual semiotic theory in use. Examining the methods used in previous theoretical analysis shall provide a model for an analysis of Versace visual myth. The literature review will show how previous researchers have applied the theory of visual semiotics to analyze visual images. Thus, the previous analyses lay the groundwork for the method applied to this analysis of Versace’s visual myth.
Chapter Three will examine the historical progression of the St. Sebastian image, to find a connection between Versace’s image and the traditional religious image of St. Sebastian. Thus, it is paramount to have an understanding of the significance of the St. Sebastian image culturally.

Chapter Four will put Versace’s world in perspective. South Beach, Florida (Versace’s home) is believed to have played a significant role as a creative muse. More so and examination of South Beach expands on the personal element in the message development sent by Versace’s St. Sebastian image.

Chapter Five consists of the analysis of Versace’s St. Sebastian image. In this chapter the image is broken down into the signifier, signified, and the sign. Breaking down the image allows for extensive examination, revealing multi-levels of the message(s). With understanding of the parts of the equation greater appreciation for the sum is achievable.

Finally, Chapter Six will draw conclusions and look at the limitations of this study. Fashion, and visual imagery, are influential tools in communication. These tools are not limited by the barriers of spoken or written language. Semiotics also allows for the interpretation of a single image from several culturally different perspectives. Chapter Six, relating to these alternative perspectives, suggest topics for further research in a variety of areas using visual semiotic analysis. It is hoped these future analyses build the body of semiotic literature, legitimizing semiotic analysis theory.
A fundamental element of any visual semiotic analysis lies in a review of literature from previous visual semiotic analyses. These analyses serve as the foundation for future studies. An examination of five areas of visual semiotic analysis builds a framework for interpreting Versace's religious myth image. The literature areas examined belong to the categories of art, design, controversy, advertising, and religion. Each of these areas is believed to be represented in Versace's image.

Art

Since the researcher believes that Versace is creating his own version of *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, an examination of art and semiotics is fundamental. Through a previous writing about art analysis via semiotics, tools for decoding Versace's St. Sebastian image are obtained. The difficulty, as stated in Bal's (1996) article, is when "appreciation" (art history) of art and the "decoding" (semiotic analysis) of art overlap. It is not the intent to argue this issue, but to combine art analysis with semiotics to decode the message(s) sent by Versace's image.

Bal (1996) discusses how visual semiotic theory applies to art interpretation. He explains that "any semiotic study of art is limited to the degree to which and the manner, the moment, and conditions in which an object such as a work of art functions as a sign" (Bal, 1996, p. 65). When a piece of art functions as a sign, that sign also functions as an event. Bal explains that art events take place in the mind, and the event reoccurs in the mind each time the work of art is seen.

Because art can stand as a sign, Bal explains that the art can logically stand as something else. This is where art historians and semioticians disagree on the meaning of art. Semioticians tend to look at art as meaning more than the object and the time period from which it (the art object) comes. Bal also
states that what art historians call 'the ground' on which the art stands semioticians call the code. "this is a kind of rule which subjects apply to connect the sign to a possible meaning" (Bal, 1996, p. 66).

Another area where art historians and semioticians disagree is on the manipulation of the image. An example is air brushing a photograph to enhance the image, which thus enhances the message. Art historians, Bal explains, feel that art interpreted can only take place on the surface level of the art. Semioticians feel "tampering (decoding) with the image (art), which from the semiotic point of view is a way of making a point visually" (Bal, 1996, p. 67).

Versace's image is a modern work of art based on a traditional religious theme in art. By examining semiotics via art history the differences between the two traditions become clearer. Art historians remain on the first level of interpretation where semioticians proceed on to the second level of interpretation.

Design

Shapiro (1996) examines what happens when an artist understanding semiotics creates his or her designs. To assume that artists are not trying to send a message is illogical, thus it is reasonable that an artist may use semiotics. Versace was a well-educated individual, and it is the researcher's belief that he did not create images by happenstance. This thesis, in part, will explore the conscience message construction that Versace displays in his image of St. Sebastian. To discover if it is possible that messages in art can be created via semiotics, proof is needed. Shapiro's (1996) interview with Massimo Vignelli, who states he applies semiotic theory to create his designs (fonts and letterforms) provides some support.

If art can be interpreted via semiotics the question must be asked, "Can art be created via semiotics?" In Shapiro's (1996) interview artist Massimo Vignelli, he (Vignelli) stated that art can be created via semiotics. Massimo states that his art (fonts and letterforms) is based in semiotics. Massimo continues by explaining that there is no absolute reality, only the reality that comes from the individual's interpretation. Thus, design becomes the sign of the designer, or the art of the artist.
Massimo explains that the style of a designer is “my handwriting, my language, my interpretation” (Shapiro, 1996, p. 300). Massimo continues by saying his designs are neither “good” or “bad,” “look at the designs again and you see what is happening on another level (Shapiro, 1996, p. 302). Understanding that semiotic application goes beyond what is apparent at the first level Massimo’s designs are influenced by his education, culture, and appreciation of art history which are at the second level in semiotics.

Design via semiotics is important due to possible repercussions caused by the creation of messages with in an image. If an image can be created using semiotics, then a message or messages can be directed at the masses. Thus, the maintenance of a particular status quo such as heterosexuality can be maintained.

**Clothing**

Barthes writes,

In clothing as photographed, the language still issues from the fashion group. Because the photograph is related to fashion it must use the language, written form, of fashion but in a visual context. What is given by the fashion photograph is a semi-formalized state of the garment system: the garment, and the model, chosen for her (his) canonic generality, and who consequently represents a ‘speech’ which is now a fixed visual language based on the textual language (1967).

Cullum-Swan and Manning (1998) examined the T-shirt from a semiotic standpoint in relation to communication. Cullum-Swan and Manning combined ethnographic study with semiotic tools to clarify the underlying codes of the surface phenomena order (Cullum-Swan and Manning, 1998).

Essentially, Cullum-Swan and Manning found that the T-shirt as a sign changes when examined in different context such as color, fashion, and technology (Cullum-Swan and Manning, 1998).

Shirts now mark claims and display fantasies about status, honor, and wishes for recognition. The features of T-shirts no longer merely mark differences within the code of clothing; they mark distinctions in the imagined- the fantastic world, and fashion’s simulacra. These shirts publicly transmit messages about one’s self, status, life style, and attitude(s) to life. as well as what wishes to be known (Cullum-Swan and Manning, 1998).

The examination of clothing and semiotics adds legitimacy to the study. Versace is best known for his creation of clothing, Cullum-Swan and Manning’s study shows that clothing does more than protect the
body. It makes a statement about the individual wearing particular garments. This will be more closely examined in the analysis of the cloth in Versace’s image.

Controversy

An examination of controversy adds illumination to the connotations which different individuals have for the same sign. *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* is a historic sign, carrying a historical Christian meaning. Yet, Versace has chosen to recreate this image in his own way. Recreation of such a well-known image may cause an emotional response from some members of Versace’s audience. To gain insight into possible responses to Versace’s image, Hitt and Kraminer’s (1996) article discusses possible repercussions.

Hitt and Kraminer (1996) examine the historical removal of the confederate flag from the South Carolina state capitol. Insight to similar possible emotional responses regarding Versace’s image may be found in the removal of the Confederate flag. The flag had both emotional and historical characteristics, characteristics that the people of South Carolina used in defining themselves.

Thanksgiving 1996, was a historic day for civil rights, when South Carolinas governor David Beasley took down the confederate flag from the state capitol dome. Governor Beasley said,

> You see, the Confederate flag flying above the State House flies in a vacuum. Its meaning and purpose are not defined by law. Because of this any group can give the flag any meaning it chooses. The Klan can misuse it as a raciest tool, as it has, and others can misuse it solely as a symbol for racism, as they have (Hitt and Kraminer, 1997, p. 115).

The governor suggests that the confederate flag attracted these new meanings, contrary to the original meaning, as follows.

> The hopelessness of the hospitals, the despair of defeat, and the short sharp agony of struggle, these South Carolinians who answered the call of their state did so in the consolation of the belief that here at home, they would not be forgotten (Hitt and Kraminer, 1997, p. 116).

This study truly represents how semiotics can take on a mythical second level meaning. It is possible that controversy could erupt in response to Versace’s recreation of a popular religious image. It does not suggest that the original meaning is any less important, it does suggest that the image may have
more than one meaning. This second level meaning is as important as the first level meaning due to the tradition that the second level meaning draws its position from the first level.

**Advertising and Production**

Advertising is all about sending messages to target markets. Thus, looking at the combination of semiotics and advertising is logical. Luck alone did not build Versace’s empire; not with an estimated revenue of $900 million in 1996 (*Time*, 1997). Versace may have understood the importance of advertising more than any other designer of his time.

This leads to the examination of advertising and semiotics. Leo (1997) in his article *Boyz to (Marlboro) Men*, examines how the tobacco industry has used semiotics to sell its products. Many tobacco advertisements carry themes of sexuality, combat, or happy outdoors scenes, all specifically aimed at audiences to suggest that the themes accompany the purchase of the tobacco product:

The most powerful hook so far is the Marlboro man, which the Leo Burnett agency more or less stumbled upon in the ’50s while working on a series of images of men with macho-type jobs. Philip Morris’s research showed that young people in search of an identity were starting to smoke to declare their independence from their parents. The idea was to harness a yearning for freedom and rebellion without making a message too antisocial (Leo, 1997, p. 181).

The tobacco industry defines its image by employing the expertise of psychologists who target the tobacco industries audience, young adults. Today’s youths feel less need to be rugged. They tend to display a need to belong. Thus, as young adult smokers grow up and find their niche in society, now feeling that they belong, they remain addicted to smoking.

Jay C. Houghton (1987) examines the use of semiotics in product development and general advertising. Houghton states that products that actually do what they claim to do depend on semiotics less than those products that do not live up to the claims they make concerning what they do. Importantly, semiotics has not played a large role in advertising until recently (Houghton, 1987).

Houghton describes German car makers who had developed rear lights that consisted of amber, red, and white lenses for better safety. To compete, American car manufactures then advertised that their car’s have “Euro-taillights.” Thus American car manufactures tried to embody the same high quality of
European cars. Houghton continues discussing semiotics use not only in product development but also in advertising:

The construction of advertising requires a specific selection and conscious arrangement of a set of symbols so that the resultant entity, the commercial ad, will communicate what is meant to be communicated. This idea presupposed two things: (1) That all elements of the communications are symbolic. and (2) that the receiver, in this case the target audience, understands the code in which the advertisement speaks (Houghton, 1987, p. 36).

Houghton speculates that the value that a segment of society holds are what advertisers target to sell various products (Houghton, 1987; Harris, 1989; Langan, 1998; Prueitt, 1997). It is important to note that the messages used to sell products do not need to be one-hundred-percent truthful. The product must do what it claims, yet it does not have to supply the purchaser with happiness, allure, or masculinity/femininity, characteristics often associated with a product to sell the product.

Ruth McKeown (1998) used semiotic theory to examine and decode two Persil liquid advertisements. The two advertisements contained an elegantly dressed woman in the first and a nude muscular man in the second. McKeown suggests that the woman represents the ‘well-to-do’ strata of society, whereas the nude muscular man represents naturalness as well as strength (McKeown, 1998). The associated qualities of the woman and the man are the implied qualities of the Persil liquid.

McKeown (1998) relates that selection of these two advertisements for examination was based on her belief that she was part of the target group. McKeown continues by explaining that she feels more aware of how advertisements target certain specific sections of society. Yet, McKeown concludes that “semiotics often tells us things we already know in a language we will never understand” (McKeown, 1998).

Coppieters (1995) examined one of the Calvin Klien advertisements that the Moral Majority suggested had the elements of child pornography. Coppieters lists the signifiers of the ad (in reference to pornography): the set is reminiscent of early porn photos, the picture is crude in a technical aspect, an odd collection of clothing is worn by the model (underwear, tennis shoes, black nail polish, sleeveless denim shirt, tattoo).
Coppieters now sets out the signified elements of the advertisement. The model, Coppieters suggests, is portrayed as “underage.” yet the hair on his legs suggests that he is part puberty (Coppieters, 1995). It is the tattoo that indicates that the model is over eighteen, since one can not get a tattoo until this age, legally speaking. This adds to the mystique of the model, as more of a rebel against society.

As personal decoration goes, the tattoo is interesting; so is the black fingernail polish. It, along with the model’s long hair, hairless and underdeveloped body, and delicate facial features, cannnotes an air of androgyny, if not outright effeminacy. In the boy’s expression there is also a slight grin, it is a grin that seems to say he knows exactly what is going on, and is even amused by it (Coppieters, 1995).

Coppieters concludes by saying that the image is pornographic in nature. Yet, the image is child pornography only if the model’s age can be proven to be less than eighteen. Coppieters also suggests that virtually all fashion photography alludes to the element of pornography. More correctly, photography often suggests something more than what is represented in the photograph (Barthes, 1977).

The Baked Lays potato chips advertisement with Miss Piggy has also added light to the implied messages of advertisers. The signifiers in this examination are the super models lounging on the pool chairs. The signified is Miss Piggy. She is the opposite of the idea of a super model, in physical form. Thus, “the sign is, if you eat Baked Lays you can eat like a pig. After all, if super models can eat them and stay fit so can you” (http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~ed231995/edsemiotics.html, 1995).

Yet one cannot presuppose that the maintenance of the status quo is the goal of any visual message (Barthes, 1967). In point of case the destruction of this state may also be the goal of a visual message. The literature examined thus far maintains a status quo for each of their cultures. This culture may be anything from a religious culture to a shopping culture. Often theses are co-cultures found within a larger culture; example would be the American culture. Semiotics looks to see if any particular culture is being supported in a non-direct way, like a visual message. The ability to understand how the concepts of visual images influence the masses is crucial. Thus, understanding that advertisers are trying to influence prevents the masses from becoming the dictates of the target messages.

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Entertainment

Semioticians, concerned with the study of signs and their meanings, function in the entertainment business by analyzing the contents of the text provided to them and the culture in which the entertainment product exists (Seiter, 1987). Then semioticians make connections between the two. Advertisers and marketers then structure their plans and position their products to the readings of semioticians, thereby insuring a positive response from the target audience (Frank and Stark, 1995).

Seiter (1987) analyzed the opening credits to *The Cosby Show* for the 1985-86 season. The sequence lasts a minute in length and is seen repeatedly, characteristics ideal for a semiotic analyses. Seiter found the maintenance of the status quo through the use of color, music, and social interaction between the characters. The maintenance of the status quo will be discussed later in the chapter.

Semiotics has also been applied to popular children’s books. LeBeau (1993) examined Dr. Seuss’s *The Cat in the Hat*. LeBeau suggests that Dr. Seuss draws from Freudian theory to write the book. It appears to be LeBeau’s interpretation that *The Cat in the Hat* represents life as described by Freudian theory. Thus, making Dr. Seuss’s book less for children than for their parents.

Essentially, when semiotics is applied to entertainment the masses may be at their most vulnerable. The ability to influence becomes easier when the masses are will participants, as most of the masses are when they want to be entertained. The conscious ability to screen for influential messages is not as strong making the messages more readily accepted.

Religion

*The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* is a common example of religious (Roman Catholic in this case) iconography. Hence, the study requires an examination of religion and semiotics. Could semiotics explain religious iconography? Is it possible semiotics could help the individual(s) to find religion?

Perrett (1996) examined Buddhist stupas as icons and symbols of Buddhism. These stupas were originally erected to hold the remains of the Buddha. It was in the early days of Buddhism that loyal
practitioners would make offerings to the stupas. Thus, these followers were making offerings to a symbol (sign) of the Buddha.

At first these stupas were constructed and administered by lay-persons and were not affiliated with any of the monastic schools or sects. Soon, however, stupas were also constructed within monastic compounds and monks came to worship at them. Thus the stupas became economically independent institutions (despite monastic counter-arguments that stupa offerings were of little karmatic merit). Subsequently groups of believers began to dwell around the stupas, supporting themselves with the offerings made to the stupas. The building of stupas, the carving of images and the worship and offerings made at stupas all became included within the variety of practices leading to the attainment of the Mahayana ideal of Buddhahood (Perrett, 1996, p. 434).

As Perrett explained that stupas represented the Buddha, thus stupas ultimately became a myth. They (the stupas) take on another order of meaning, the cosmic structure. The practice of worshipping at and walking around the stupas represents “both the sun (center of this solar system) and the Buddha’s life” (Perrett, 1996, p. 435).

For centuries religious images obtained their power form consecration. This act began with the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. It is also an important part of the Christian faith. First, it is important to define consecration. “Consecration is never an empty ceremony. It involves at least one process -- like washing, anointing, crowning, or blessing-- that brings about an intended change in the sacred status of an image (Freedberg, 1989, p. 83).

Freedberg continues by stating that the image allows men and women to grasp the divine, thus imbuing in the image qualities and powers denied to Christians— qualities that would realistically undermine the very basis of the Christian faith (Freedberg, 1998, p. 87). Yet, consecration ceremonies of church altarpieces persist:

The belief in the ability of images to aid memory and to activate the beholder to imitation, something extravagant and often grim, is found from the earliest days of Christianity. But there are even stronger claims for what images can do in the related groups of rites and prayers in many benedictions -at any rate, once they are activated by consecration (Freedberg, 1989, p. 90).

Freedberg claims that consecrations are done to build the relationship between the image and the believer. It also takes the image from being a man made item to being a sacred manifestation with beneficial attributes (Freedberg, 1989).
All images have a signifying and significative function that is prior to institutionalization by means of consecration or any other act or rite. But consecration is a central issue because it so frequently accompanies the activation of images, and in so doing makes abundantly clear the potentiality of all images (Freedberg, 1989, p. 98).

Essentially, Freedberg is saying that although an image may embody characteristics of the divine, it is consecration that gives an image its religious legitimacy.

The examination of Buddhist stupas via semiotics and consecration support the idea of second level interpretation in semiotics. The stupas represent more than just the idea of the Buddhist religion. They represent the life of the Buddha himself. Combined with the power of consecration of an image, the power of religious images becomes clearer. These images represent the spiritual and holy in all life forms. Whether this will apply to Versace's image has yet to be discovered, yet it is a factor that must not be eliminated.

**Status Quo**

Analyzing visual messages via semiotics empowers the individual with the ability to realize whether he or she has been influenced by visual the message. The danger of influence, when unaware, of the masses may aid in the fortification of the status quo. Fortification of the status quo limits individuals to move outside of their birth station in life. Semiotics looks to see if any status quo is being reinforced. Not because semiotics will destroy this fortification but because it can be implemented to create the fortification of a status quo.

An example of the fortification of the status quo is seen in the semiotic analysis of the opening credit sequence of the 1895-86 season of *The Cosby Show*. In the opening credits no graphics, speech, or special effects are used. The characters look directly into the camera lens; connoting different is better. The use of the gray backdrop in the *Cosby* credit sequence produces the connotations wealthy and good looking linking these characteristics to the Huxtable family. *The Cosby Show* is a representation of the ideal family. Money, love, no discipline problems, monogamy, gender equality, and parents and children enjoy stimulating situations at work and in school (Seiter, 1987).

What Seiter explains is that beautiful people have problems that can be solved in a half hour or they have no problems at all. What *The Cosby Show* opener does is maintain the idea that people on television are better than real people, because they are better looking, have better jobs, better marriages.
better children, basically better lives. That is the reason they are on television and the everyday person is not. By seeing images these images on television many of the masses try to emulate television in their day to day lives. Thus, *The Cosby Show* is maintaining the status quo established by television executives. Semiotics shows how the 'All American Family' as portrayed in *The Cosby Show*, image is sent to society. Telling society that they should be just like the Cosbys if they want to be better looking, have better jobs, better marriages, better children, and better lives.

**Summary**

Having built a visual semiotic foundation in terms of *art, design, clothing, controversy, advertising, entertainment, religion, and the status quo*; allows for areas of examination within Versace’s image of St. Sebastian. These elements are important because they build, in the researcher’s opinion key areas represented in the image. Semiotic analysis will help to expose whether these elements are part of Versace’s message and what exactly that message is.

This study must now maneuver towards analyzing Versace’s image of St. Sebastian to see if the discussed elements are present in the image. Opening, logically, with a historical progression of images pertaining to St. Sebastian. This historical examination allows for the possible understanding of how Versace’s version of St. Sebastian came to exist. The historical analysis, in terms of semiotics, builds the first part of a visual semiotic analysis the signifier.
CHAPTER 3

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. SEBASTIAN

Before examining the progression of St. Sebastian image, understanding the circumstances of this saint’s martyrdom is crucial. Sebastian was born at Narbonne in Gaul and educated in Christianity in Milan. He was made an officer in the emperor's guard, yet remained true to his religious background. Although Sebastian was highly praised by his fellow soldiers as well as his superiors, he would be informed against to General Fabian by Toquatus.

Because of Sebastian’s rank only the emperor could order his death. Diocletian charged Sebastian with betraying the gods of the empire and the emperor himself. Sebastian stated that his religion was of good not evil, angering Diocletian. He ordered Sebastian to be taken to Campus Martius and shot full of arrows. When a few Christians came to bury Sebastian’s body they realized that he had not died. The Christians took Sebastian to a secret place and nursed him back to health.

After recovering Sebastian confronted the emperor, he placed himself in the emperor’s path along the way to the temple. Diocletian was naturally startled, but soon realized what must have happened. Again he had Sebastian taken into custody; this time having him executed in a secret place. This was to prevent the Christians from nursing Sebastian back to health or burying him. Although, a woman named Lucina was able to collect Sebastian’s remains and bury them in the catacombs (Foxe, 1963).

Having examined the causes of St. Sebastian’s martyrdom; now an examination of the imagery pertaining to the martyrdom is achievable. Selection of the images examined were drawn due to similarities to Versace’s image, believed to be that of St. Sebastian. Reasoning of this precise selection is to build visual support that Versace’s image is a representation of The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian theme. The first image of St. Sebastian’s martyrdom examined in this study, is the creation of Andrea Mantegna.
Born (probably at Isola di Carturo, between Vicenza and Padua) in 1431, Mantegna became the apprentice and adopted son of the painter Francesco Squarcione of Padua. He (Mantegna) developed a passionate interest in classical antiquity. The influence of both ancient Roman sculpture and the contemporary sculptor Donatello are clearly evident in Mantegna’s rendering of the human figure. His human forms were distinguished for their solidity, expressiveness, and anatomical correctness (Gerten, 1996).

Unlike many of Mantegna’s contemporaries his images were not flat, they carried a realism that was not common in mid 15th century art (Gerten, 1996). Mantegna inscribed his St. Sebastian image in Greek (TO REGON TOÜ ANDREAOU), attempting to evoke the protection of the saint. It is believed that the work was commissioned during a plague (Puppi, 1990, p. 87).

A contemporary of Mantegna, Antonello Da Messina [Figure 5], also depicted the saint’s martyrdom.

Messina is an enigmatic figure about whose background little is known. He was born in Sicily (the only major artist of the fifteenth century to be born south of Rome) and received his early training in Naples, where he must have come in close contact with Flemish painting. The Flemish influence in some of his (Da Messina) works is so strong that it has long been assumed that Antonello actually spent some time in Flanders, a possibility that now seems unlikely (Gardner, 1980, p. 523).

In Da Messina St. Sebastian the combination of architecture and the central figure form a perfect mixture. The placement of the St. Sebastian figure gives the image a larger than life perspective. Da Messina’s use of light plays an important role in the overall image. It causes the central figure to become the main focus with a feeling of domination over the entire image. There are characteristics of Mantegna’s Dead Christ in the figure of the sleeping man. Also the influence of Da Messina’s contemporaries, Ercole Roberts and Piero della Francesca are evident (Bottari, 1955).

Another version of St. Sebastian examined is the creation of Antonio Pollaiuolo. Little is known about the history of Pollaiuolo’s St. Sebastian image. Except for the image was used in religious processions. Pollaiuolo created his image of St. Sebastian in the fifteenth century, and the image was restored in the seventeenth century by Agostino Veracini (Entlinger, 1978).

Pollaiuolo’s St. Sebastian image varies greatly from both Mantegna’s and Da Messina’s images of St. Sebastian. Pollaiuolo depicts St. Sebastian in much smaller form, possibly due to the belief that this was a procession image. Also a significant difference is the arrow men have been depicted. In the two previously discussed images the arrows are depicted already penetrating St. Sebastian’s body. This image
allows the audience to experience St. Sebastian's pain of gaining martyrdom. Pollaiuolo like Mantegna shows more of the natural world. Furthermore, the audience of Pollaiuolo view what was happening at the martyrdom, such as the soldier loading his arrow.

Differences between Mantegna, Da Messina, and Pollaiuolo show a progression of the St. Sebastian image. This progression of the image is believed to be based on the progression of time and purpose. It is understood that Mantegna, Da Messina, and Pollaiuolo's images were all in relation to religious contexts but Versace was an artist of modern times. The constraints for Mantegna, Da Messina, and Pollaiuolo do not apply to Versace. Thus the question arises, what was Versace trying to say by recreating the well-known image of *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*? This question will be the basis of Chapter Five. Prior to examining Versace's image of St. Sebastian, Chapter Four will examine the world in which Versace lived. Understanding his (Versace) world builds semiotic sign analysis from the stand point of personal lifestyle influences of the message sender on the message.
CHAPTER 4

SOUTH BEACH: VERSACE'S WORLD

"... avant-garde, fun, superficial. I love the attitude," Versace said about his Miami home, South Beach (Lambert, 1997, p. 82). From his palace (Casa Casuarina) on Ocean Drive [Figures 3 & 4], Versace ruled over what might be called a spun sugar fantasy land. Versace did not create this fantasy land; merely he added another chapter to its history. Examining Versace's world sheds light on his construction of the reality that surrounded him until his untimely death in 1997.

To understand Versace's South Beach [Figures 5-12], an examination of the area was conducted by the researcher using an ethnographic approach. In April of 1998, the researcher visited the area taking notes, interacting with the local inhabitants, and photographing different aspects of the area. Prior to discussing the South Beach of Versace's time it is important to explain what the area was like briefly before his arrival in 1991 (Bellafante, 1997; Rubenstein, 1997).

The population of the area comprised mostly of Jewish senior citizens immigrants who had come to America from Eastern Europe. Yiddish became the unofficial language of South Beach due to the large Jewish population. Business advertised in Yiddish, and some even made a living translating letters into English for family members who did not speak the old language (Armbruster, 1995).

Despite its poverty, South Beach was thus a vibrant neighborhood, but that was not the perception of the public. Varicose Beach, Senile City, the Elephants' Graveyard, God's Waiting Room, Mausoleum in the Sun, it (South Beach) was variously called. Newness, the Beach's lifeblood, was in short supply. So when there was no more oceanfront property to develop, all eyes turned to South Beach. The drab little beige hotels and chunky apartment buildings clustered there seemed eminently dispensable. By 1980, South Beach was the poorest neighborhood per capita in the state (Armbruster, 1995, p. 178).
South Beach was now tarnished, dirty, and becoming very dangerous. In the '80s a large influx of Cubans came to Miami looking for work, settling in South Beach due to readily available cheap housing.

Yet in 1979 the seeds of change were planted by a writer and an interior decorator.

Barbara Baer and Leonard Horowitz and a group of followers submitted a proposal to the National Register of Historic Places. Although the city of Miami Beach sent three representatives to fight the proposal at a state preservation board hearing in 1979, the designation was unanimously approved. A new young crowd gathered at the cafe on the porch of the Cardozo Hotel, coexisting peacefully with the lawn-chair set. Horowitz began to design color schemes for the buildings and if there was still any debate that Art Deco was a trend to be reckoned with, Miami Vice, broadcast between 1984 and 1988, put it to rest (Armbruster, 1995, p. 181-183).

Of those who came to the revitalized South Beach was Versace's sister Donatella Versace her husband Paul Beck and their two children Allegra and Daniel. Versace was on his way to Cuba with his companion Antonio D'Amico when his sister persuaded them to stop in Miami. Staying at the Fontainebleau Versace hired a driver to show him the area. "I sat in a bar and started to look around at the people. I said to my friend, 'Why do we have to go to Cuba? It's fun here.' It was love at first sight" (Bellafante, 1997, p. 44).

Not surprisingly, Gianni's enthusiasm for the bleached, bronzed wonderland was channeled into his first men's and women's collection he designed after that initial visit to Florida's Gold Coast; baroque kaleidoscopic silk shirts slashed to the navel; skin-tight leather pants and ball gowns; neon-blinding brief bathing suits. It all ensured the upward trajectory of an already successful career (Rubenstein, 1997, p. 200).

Walking through this spun sugar fantasy land (South Beach), the observer is struck by the pretension of the inhabitants, not to be considered 'good' or 'bad.' This attitude, at best, is a naturally occurring phenomenon. The inhabitants of the area do not care if they are stared at by the visiting tourist. South beach is the place to come and be seen. The inhabitants expect to be stared at. This fact seems logical to why Versace would make South Beach his home. Versace himself was quoted saying, "Nobody here cares what you do, who you are, what you have. As long as you feel great and look great, you're a star!" (Rubenstein, 1997, p. 200).

The concept of being a star is a large part of the Versace persona that continues even after his untimely death. In the world in which Versace inhabited star personalities were the rule not the exception. Madonna, Princess Diana, Elton John, Jon Bon Jovi and JFK, Jr. were common names mentioned in the
Versace’s world (Ganem, 1997; Reed, 1997). With friends from such diverse strata’s of society Versace quickly gained the reputation of a “fast-lane party boy.” (DeCaro, 1997, p. 40). His reputation was more for show than reality say friends and fashion insiders (DeCaro, 1997).

This question arises, as Madonna put it, “Who had the courage to live so luxuriously?” (Madonna, 1997, p. 45). The answer may simply lie in Versace’s own statement about his life. “You know, to be a friend of Madonna and Lady Di, to have a friend like Elton who has so much love for me - it’s a kind of gift. To work for ballet, to have such beautiful friends, to have such a beautiful life. It’s a dream. If I’m not thankful, I’m stupid. You know what I mean” (Ganem, 1997, p. 361). Versace lived so luxuriously because he knew no other way to live.

An important part of being thankful for his life was being honest about his life.

Versace lived a gay life far more openly than anyone else of his notoriety. Though others in the business kept quiet about their sexuality, he made a point of mentioning his boyfriend (Antonio D’Amico) in an interview with Vogue. ‘He was not necessarily someone who was leading the gay pride parade, but he was not creating false girlfriends or fake wives,’ says Sahar Pettit, editor in chief of Our magazine (DeCaro, 1997, p. 40).

Part of this honesty may have been due to the possibility that Versace did not care what anyone thought about him (Ganem, 1997).

To see [gay men] always go out with women and leave the boyfriend behind. I think is vulgar. I have nothing to hide. I’m proud of what I am. If I’m born again, I want to be born exactly with the same sexuality that I have. I’m no afraid of -- I’m so happy I chose to be what I am, Versace said when asked about his sexuality (Ganem, 1997, p. 359).

Versace’s personality and natural comfort with his sexuality and celebrity status quickly propelled him to super-stardom in the world of fashion. Thus, the attitude of South Beach, doing your own thing, logically fits with Versace’s characteristics [Figures 13 & 14], possibly, resulting in why South Beach’s characteristics played such an important part in his creations and life.

Proof of this, the importance of South Beach in Versace’s life, is found in his first book South Beach Stories.

The book by Gianni and Donatella Versace, contain short stories by Marco Parma, illustrated with drawings, paintings, and photographs. The first page has a fantasy drawing of palm trees, a cruise ship, dark glasses, and hibiscus flowers, and a quote from Marguerite Yourcenar: ‘Every happiness is a masterpiece.’ Many photos show hunky male models wearing the signature colorful Versace printed silk shirts, other show a luscious Christy Turlington on the beach, It’s all very Versace . . . (Lessona, 1997).
Now having a working understanding of the world in which Versace lived, elements of this world are believed by the researcher to be visible in the image under examination.
CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF VERSACE'S MARTYRDOM OF ST. SEBASTIAN

Prior to starting this analysis of Versace's Martyrdom of St. Sebastian it is important to state that this analysis is based on the researcher's personal interpretation as stated in Chapter One. Thus, the researcher is not implying that what is discovered is Versace's true intentions. The researcher is stating that these discoveries are more possibilities, possibilities that may or may not be part of the message sent via the sign, a photo from the book *Do Not Disturb*. The interpretation of the sign by the researcher are his or her explanations of the message (Barthes, 1967).

Denotative Level

This analysis will begin at the denotative level, first level analysis, and then proceeds to the connotative level, second level analysis (Griffin, 1994). At the denotative level Versace's image is compared to the images of Mantegna, Da Messina, and Pollaiuolo. The denotative level is the construct of the interpretations of Versace's image by the researcher. Again these interpretations are derived from Barthes' (1967) explanation of semiotic analysis.

Versace vs. Mantegna

The similarities between Mantegna's image and Versace's image are consistent with few differences. The differences are due in part to Versace's fashion industry background. The most striking difference is the background of each image. Mantegna depicts sprawling hills, trees, people, and a small city: Versace has only flat walls. Both Mantegna and Versace depict walls, which the saint is shown against, but each image is significantly different. Mantegna’s walls depict heavy decoration ornamental friezes common of his classical influences. Versace's use of wall space presents little more than a sense of
depth of field. It is with the waist cloth around the central figures (St. Sebastian) waist that Versace uses the ornamental decoration similar to those Mantegna depicts on his walls. The two most significant differences between the two images are that Mantegna evokes the saint’s protection thought the Greek text and he (Mantegna) represents the arrow that struck St. Sebastian in the head, Versace does neither.

The differences between Versace’s image and Mantegna’s image, and those of the other artists, is due to the background of each of the artists. Mantegna was a painter of the 15th century and held to different social rules than Versace. It is reasonable to say that Mantegna’s image is a religious image, and had no intended function apart from a religious context. Versace, a Roman Catholic, use of the St. Sebastian image is to send a message that has other implications apart from a religious theme.

The Waist Cloth

Versace is making statements about fashion, for example his use of a minimalist background, and statements about society. Apparently, Versace has updated the St. Sebastian image by changing the color of the waist cloth. Traditionally, white was used, as it shall be seen in each of the following images. Yet, Versace has changed his image’s waist cloth to purple with gold ornamentation. Again it is important to note that Mantegna’s image was a religious sign, thus the use of the Greek text. Versace’s image is not, hence the lack of text such as in Mantegna’s image.

Versace vs. Da Messina and Pollaiuolo

The differences between Da Messina’s image and Versace’s image outweigh the similarities. The foreground in Da Messina’s image is full of activity, where Versace’s image is simplified using well-lit walls only. The number of arrows Da Messina uses (5) compared to Versace (9) is considerably less. The major similarity, though, is that neither placed the arrow through their central figure’s (St. Sebastian) head. Da Messina uses a tree instead of a column to tie his figure to, which is significantly different from Mantegna or Versace. Again, Versace’s figure is wearing a Versace patterned waist cloth where Da Messina and Mantegna both use a plain white cloth. Versace’s use of a patterned waist cloth may imply
this is a 'Versace' image. Deliberately displaying Versace's design to make sure there is no possible confusion with Armani, Lagerfeld, or Dior.

As with Mantegna, Da Messina's background is vastly different from Versace's. This element plays a dominant role in the context of each St. Sebastian sign. Da Messina like Mantegna, uses of background is to depict the natural world. It is plausible that this depiction was to celebrate God's creation of the world, whereas, Versace is more interested in depicting the world he has created. Also an area that is not consistent in each of the four images is the number of arrows represented in each image. It is possible that each picked a random number of arrows for the image each artist was working on. It is unlikely, but not dismissible that Versace was representing something with his use of none arrows. At this time it is unclear to why Versace used nine arrows.

Aesthetics

The significant similarities between Da Messina's and Versace's images are the use of light and the shortened pavement. The light adds depth to both images where the shortened pavement causes the central figures to take on a colossal presence. Again, Pollaiuolo's image also differs greatly from Versace's version of St. Sebastian. Versace did not express in his image of St. Sebastian the natural world, or the actual act of martyrdom. The major similarity between Pollaiuolo's image and Versace's image is that there is no arrow through the central figure's head.

Connotative Level

The comparison of Versace's image to the images of Mantegna, Da Messina, and Pollaiuolo shows that indeed Versace's image is part of the history of The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian theme. This leads to the question, why would a fashion designer recreate The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian?

Religious Ecstasy

Smith offers:

Christian saints provide subject matter that allows artists to reveal tormented bodies wracked by agony and ecstasy -- the latter emotion (ecstasy) apparently being considered

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permissible when it was directed towards the ethereal love of an abstract deity rather than towards the carnal love of another human person. So a virile young St. Sebastian’s nude body was shown pierced by arrows (Smith, 1974, p. 2).

With the constraints that Mantegna, Da Messina, and Pollaiuolo no longer applying Versace explored the ecstasy of Christian subject matter. It is believed that within Versace’s image several elements exist, including homosexuality, sadomasochism, soft-core gay pornography, and fashion.

**Homosexuality**

As discussed in Chapter Four Versace was open about his homosexuality, thus his homosexual lifestyle must be taken into context when examining his St. Sebastian image:

As a result of this enhanced role of sexuality, modern homosexuals may be as different from previous generations engaging in same-gender behavior as contemporary heterosexuals are different from previous generations of individuals engaging in heterosexual acts (Simon, 1996, p. 121).

Versace, as previously discussed, was always looking for the new and the fresh. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that he would also try to further the fresh and the new. It is the researcher’s belief that he did this by not denying his homosexuality (Simon, 1996) in his creations. The idea of homoerotic themes will be explored later in this chapter, mainly in relation to the examination of significance of the glance of the model in Versace’s image. Thus, it is possible Versace challenged the dominant heterosexual status quo culture (Barthes, 1967).

"As a culture we take sex seriously, perhaps too seriously; in its appearance, something emblematic of ‘true’ character is assumed to be revealed" (Simon, 1996, p. 133). Versace’s image is apparently sexual, what is specifically questioned is the “true” character of this sexuality. Since this study builds on the influences of the message sender’s characteristics, it is reasonable to believe that the type of sexuality in question is homosexuality.

Yet, to state the image carries only a homosexual theme limits the message. Versace, then, has not just created a homosexual image. Realistically, he may be making a statement about a specific type of sexuality. A sexuality found in both homosexual and heterosexual cultures. The researcher believes that the image, along with a homosexual theme, carries a sadomasochistic theme:

Erotic images, direct and indirect, conventional and unconventional, are abundantly visible, [i.e. Versace’s Martyrdom of St. Sebastian]. Patterns of behavior have changed.
in numerous ways, and the erotic status of individuals has become a more overt aspect of the reciprocal surveillance that accompanies many aspects of social life. At the risk of dissolving parts of what little we think we may know about sexual behavior, we must begin to address the questions of the changing nature of sexual desires, the changing nature of their uses. We must begin to see sexual behavior as an evolving phenomenon who’s meaning and truths are part of continuing production of social reality, of the continuing production of our current versions of humans (Simon, 1996, p. 135).

Sadomasochism: Pain and Pleasure

The patterns of behaviors in Versace’s image represent fetishes with rope and cloth from a sexual aspect. It should be noted that the items Versace produces have taken on a cultural fetish standing.

If perversion in matters of objects reveals itself most clearly as a form of fetish fixation, then nothing prevents us from seeing throughout the whole system how, in organizing itself according to similar ends and modes, the possession/passion of objects is, let us say, a tempered form of sexual perversion (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 53).

The possession of objects is not limited only to material substances, but includes human beings. Thus, Baudrillard explains that a fetish with a person (i.e. Versace’s St. Sebastian model) equates that individual into an object. Once this transition has occurred the object (person) becomes desired not loved forming a narcissistic subjective/wound (Baudrillard, 1990).

Baudrillard’s concept supports the researcher’s exploration of the relationship between Versace’s image and general sadomasochism. General sadomasochism has three distinctive characteristics: managed guilt, narcissistic wounds, and fragmentation (Simon, 1996). Thus, the narcissistic wound (Baudrillard, 1990) supports the concept of an underlying sadomasochistic theme in Versace’s image. Reasonably, a Saint is above general society, hence fragmentation. More so, those who elevate a Saint to martyrdom possess internal guilt, managed by their own limitations. Versace, it is believed, recognizes these characteristics in all levels of society.

Masochism as we understand it today is both a sexual and social phenomenon. It is a model for articulating discrepancies between the pursuit of sexual pleasure and the abstinence required in social life. But as an erotic practice, it blurs the distinction between pain and pleasure (Noyes, 1997, p. 8).

Gosselin and Wilson (1980) found that homosexual fantasies, being excited by material, being hurt by a partner, and being tied up are all characteristics of those considered to be sadomasochist.
If these characteristics are presumed true, then it is reasonable to say that Versace was a sadomasochist, or had sadomasochist fantasies.

**Homosexual Soft Pornography**

Thus, the image must also be examined from another possible characteristic — homosexual soft pornography:

Gay soft-core pornography shares the generic features of "straight" porn: typically, the model is alone in a series of poses which stimulate both narrative and sexual closure through the use of small shots which lead up to the climax of the centerfold. The popular look of the model is the one which is incisive and challenging: the men acknowledge the reader. This look takes two forms, either the sidelong glance or the look that is "straight on." The sidelong glance is beady, taking aim at the viewer. It accompanies the head tilted slightly downward or, if the body is not positioned for full frontal view, the head inclined sideways. This cockeyed look is oblique. The model doesn't smile but participates in the serious business of sex. This look may recognize the closeted sexual response it incites, the popular homosexual expression still being subordinate to the dominate heterosexual motif, or it may bring the look outside the closet (Kaite, 1995, p. 139).

Versace's image contains many of the characteristics that Kaite (1995) describes: the sidelong glance, the non-smiling model, and the general subordinate feel of the model (Kaite, 1995). What is not clear, yet possible, is that the model in the image may have already climaxed, and this may be the last in the series of poses. Notably, Versace's image does not appear in a gay porn magazine. The image comes from a fashion book.

**Fashion**

Hence, the element of fashion must also be taken into context when trying to decipher Versace's Martyrdom of St. Sebastian. The central element in the image that relates to fashion is the cloth around the model's waist. As discussed earlier in this chapter, traditionally the cloth was white, believed, by the researcher, to represent the purity of Sebastian's soul that elevated him to the standing of saint and then martyr.

Versace has replaced that traditional white waist cloth with a black and gold Baroque cloth typical of his style. In context to religion, clothing generally noted one's affiliation to or membership with a
certain religious group or denomination (Barnard, 1996). In the case of Versace’s image it is doubtful he was advocating his own religion. It is more likely that Versace was being true to his own creativity and stated this by using his own design. Purple has long been associated with nobility; gold has a relationship with the idea of richness. It is possible that Versace is stating that nobility and richness are internal characteristics. That honesty about oneself is paramount to survive all the injustices (pain) of this world:

Undoubtedly, the power of clothing itself to communicate difference in terms of nationality, social status, gender and sexuality has become muddied in such context, and what has increasingly emerged after a decade of journalistic hype and overkill is a deliberate focusing on the creativity of the individuals (Breward, 1995, p. 226-227).

The meaning of a garment in its purest form comes from the designer. The garment itself is the designers interpretations, thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires about the world (Barnard, 1996).

It is believed, by the researcher, that Versace was not trying to make a direct statement on religion due to the lack of consecration.

... the relationship between scarcity and decorativeness is a little too simplistically, it is clear that consecration marks a conscious elevation in the sacred status of the image, in the amount of sacredness, as it were. Some Christian images may work miracles without being consecrated but their installation, say in churches, is always preceded by a consecration ritual, as in the transfer of a miracle-working image from grubby street corner to glittering enshrinement in a specially built church or chapel. Consecration either turns the image into a receptacle for the sacred or confirms the sacredness already present by public heightening it (Freedberg, 1989, p. 85).

Remember, Versace resided in South Beach, a community very much a model of individuality.

So, it is possible that the image’s patterns represent as much about the individuality of South Beach and gay culture as it does about Versace:

There is also the psychoanalytic argument that the designer is not, and cannot be, in total, conscious control of his/her intentions. Psychoanalysis will argue that there are unconscious wishes and desires, which the designer does not know about and over which s/he has no control, that somehow find expression in the designer’s garments and other works (Barnard, 1996, p. 72).

Barnard’s explanation allows for further analysis of Versace the person via other semiotic studies. Also, Bernard’s (1996) explanation does not limit other possible interpretations of Versace’s image. Thus, the image is communicating a message to many individuals with unknown sub-messages, with each individual interpreting these messages for themselves (Barthes, 1967).

Individual design choices are the culmination of our culture, advertisements, and entertainment influences. Individual choices concerning fashion help establish the
designers as a personality and establish the individual as a trend-setter in his or her circle of influence (Breward, 1996).

This examination of Versace's *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, denotative level (second level), has shown that the attitude Versace kept, "why not" (Ganem, 1997, p. 357). It is suggested that the source of influence for Versace's image comes from his Roman Catholic background and the previous images of the saint's martyrdom. It is also suggested that possible themes of sadomasochism, fetishes, homosexuality, and soft-core gay pornography are present in the image. Chapter Six will conclude this study briefly discussing the limitations of this thesis and suggestions for possible venues of further research.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This semiotic analysis consists of the deconstruction of Versace’s *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* image. The analysis was undertaken to a) examine the messages sent by Versace, b) to expand semiotics by examining the message sender’s influence, and c) to discover if maintenance of a status quo was an agenda. The analysis was realized by breaking down the image into the components of signifier, signified, and sign (Barthes, 1964).

So what exactly was Versace trying to say with his image of St. Sebastian? It is the researcher’s belief that Versace was commenting on human nature. Versace recognized that people are all different from one another; that these differences are neither ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ They are (human differences), essentially, naturally occurring elements that keeps the world *fresh* and *new*. Versace was always on the look out for the fresh and the new (Ruoenstein, 1997).

On this same point, it is not the researcher’s belief that Versace was totally advocating sadomasochism, fetishes, homosexuality, or soft-core gay pornography (Barnard, 1996). Versace, as discussed in Chapters One and Four, was drawing from his surroundings to create his fashion. He understood the balance between pain and pleasure, beauty and ugliness, desire and obsession. Thus, nothing was sacred and the use of everything was *fair game* to Versace. Or as Versace put it “why not” (Ganem, 1997, p. 357).
The Research Questions

What messages were produced through Versace's St. Sebastian image? Versace commented on sadomasochism, homoeroticism, soft gay porn, as well as the status quo. Each of these topics are messages he is sending out with this image. It is believed by the researcher that Versace was saying to the audience of this image, "why not?"

Did these messages reflect society's norms, or deviate from said norms? It is the researcher's belief that the messages produced in this image do reflect societies' norms. What may be argued is, for whom are these acts normal. To suggest that all of society participates in said acts is making too general an assumption. Yet, it cannot be pre-supposed that because these acts are not openly discussed they do not exist in society.

Did Versace's images challenge the fashion myth, or support the myth? It is the researcher's belief that the image does challenge the fashion myth. Versace's image looks at the dark side of beauty. It is reasonable to believe that you cannot have beauty without ugliness. What Versace has done is challenged society's idea of beauty. The image shows the ugliness of human vanity and sexuality.

Can one Versace image explain all Versace imagery? No, Versace was always experimenting with the "new" and the "fresh." Thus, as he created new images new messages were created, many independent of this message. Judging all Versace images by only looking at one Versace image does injustice to other Versace images.

Does Versace's religious myth image explain other modern day religious myth imagery? No. Versace's image can only be judged in the context of which it was found. It can be included in an examination of modern day religious imagery but it is limited to this classification.

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<td>3. The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian</td>
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<td>I. Versace Image</td>
<td>II. Fashion, Pain and Pleasure, Homosexuality, Sadomasochism</td>
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<td>III. Versace's Image of St. Sebastian</td>
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FIGURE 15 (ADAPTED FROM BARTHES MYTH SYSTEM)
Limitations

The three major limitations of this study are (1) the lack of input from Gianni Versace, (2) the lack of literature on the message senders influence, and (3) the bias that comes from the interpretation of the image by the researcher. A critical limitation, this of traditional semiotic analysis, is the lack of examining the influences the message sender's personality has on the creation of the message. The cause and effects of this element, the message sender's personality, are imperative to understanding Versace's messages.

The other limitation of this study is related to the interpretation and perceptions from the individual examining the message.

Semiotics runs the risk of being about everything and hence nothing. At best a loose and inchoate discipline, semiotics is presently in such disarray that all sorts of people call themselves semioticians and come at the subject from six different directions (Griffin, 1994, p. 105).

The derivation of internal validity of this study comes from published views on semiotics (the literature review) that relate to what has been observed by the researcher. Also published writings about how semiotic theory usage on influencing cultural understanding has helped to establish validity of the science.

Further Areas for Research

This study only examines the first few layers of Versace's St. Sebastian image. Dissection of the entire image would take more time than has been provided in a thesis study. This though allows for other areas of research on this same image as well as others.

- An examination of other fashion designers.
- An examination of other cultural themes in fashion.
- An examination of the influence of homosexuality versus heterosexuality on fashion.
- An examination of societies perceptions of Versace's fashion and culture.
- An examination of whether a sadomasochistic relationship exists between message sender (Versace) and message receiver (audience).

These topics are important due to the impact the messages have on humanity. Semiotics allows the individual to examine messages sent through advertising, PR campaigns, and speeches. Messages that may
greatly effect decisions that the individual makes concerning purchasing, social awareness, and voting. With the broadening of semiotic analysis, examining the message sender's personal lifestyle, a more in-depth analysis is possible. Thus, semiotic analysis will rely less on the researcher's personal bias and more on attainable information regarding the message sender.

**Final Thoughts**

The murder of Gianni Versace brought the loss of one of the most successful fashion designers of the twentieth century. It is important to understand what Versace was saying about fashion, sexuality, and human existence. For with understanding his messages, a greater understanding of ourselves and the messages we create is obtainable.

The irony may be in the similarity Versace and St. Sebastian share. First, both were strongly devoted ultimately dying for what they represented. Second, both were shot in the head, Versace with a bullet and St. Sebastian with an arrow. Finally, both became martyrs of their affiliations. Ironically, the world is left with the question: Did Versace foreshadow his own fate?
Figure 6
Figure 11
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VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

William Earl Taylor

Local Address:
5093 Royal Drive #71
Las Vegas, Nevada 89103

Home Address:
5093 Royal Drive #71
Las Vegas, Nevada 89103

Degree:
Bachelor of Science, Communication 1996
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Thesis Title:
Semiotic Analysis of a Versace Visual Myth

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Dr. Lawrence Mullen, Ph. D.
Committee Member: Dr. Anthony Ferri, Ph. D.
Committee Member: Dr. Erika Engstrom, Ph. D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Katheron Hausbeck, Ph. D.