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The Devil in High Heels: Drugs, Symbolism and Kate Moss

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Abstract

This paper contributes to critical voices on the issue of organisational responses to drugs and employee drug use. It does so by exploring some of the symbolism residing at the heart of organisations’ relations with drugs and drug taking. Our focus is recent media coverage of, and organisational responses to, the UK tabloid media’s exposé of fashion supermodel Kate Moss’s cocaine use. We use this case to explore symbolic relationships between drugs, sex and femininity, and organisation. Through highlighting these symbolic connections we question further the rationality of organisational responses to the ‘spectre’ of drugs and the issue of employee drug use. We conclude by suggesting that workforce drug testing regimes might be fruitfully seen as mechanisms for scapegoating and sacrifice in order to protect the organizational moral order.
Introduction.
The extent to which workforce drug testing¹ and the wider organisational anti-drug discourse represents a rational response to a real and pressing threat to organisation has previously been questioned (Comer 1994). Critics have highlighted (and some supporters have conceded) that there is very poor evidence of widespread deleterious effects for organisations stemming from employee drug use (Harris 2004) and similarly poor evidence that organisational responses to the actual or perceived threat of drugs have been efficacious in reducing employee drug use (Jardine-Tweedle and Wright 1998) or helping employees (Draper 1998). In the light of such critiques of the evidence for managerial interventions some have questioned whether anti-drug policies and workforce drug testing should actually be understood as a response, rational or not, to drug use at all. Instead, it has been suggested that the reported threat of employees’ drug use may be a cloak behind which attempts to secure greater organisational control may be hidden. For instance critics have argued that workforce drug testing and anti-drug policies represent attempts to shift costs and responsibility for health and safety issues from the employer to the employee (Draper 1998), attempts to assert greater control over the politics of the labour process through rooting-out those employees with a propensity to break bureaucratic order and imposed rules (Gilliom 1994), and as part of a wider movement toward a surveillance society within which each individual employee feels, and eventually internalises, the gaze of officialdom (Hecker and Kaplan 1989). Though undoubtedly important, such control critiques have in turn been criticised. Warren and Wray-Bliss (under review) for instance argue that they tend to overplay the ideological clarity of management’s thinking, neglect the constraining and transforming hand of employee resistance, and fail to properly explore the meanings, experiences and understandings of drug use by the very employees that such anti-drugs discourse is putatively aimed. If, at least in part, we accept that the control critique is overplayed and that management may not be introducing drug testing as a rational response to well evidenced organisational risks then we are left with the question as to why management may, in the absence of pressing evidence of drug-induced organisational crises, wish to intervene in employee’s drug use? A number of explanations have been put forward. Francis, Hanley and Wray (2003), for instance, have argued that the instigation of anti-drug policies represents not a specific desire to control drug using employees, but rather a dramaturgical attempt to drive down potential employer liability for future industrial
accidents found to be influenced by drug use and, more immediately, to drive down the costs of organisational health premiums and insurance premiums. Cavanaugh and Prasad (1994) have taken a rather different tack focusing upon the symbolism of organisation. They argue that the rise in workforce drug testing and the wider anti-drugs discourse represents a response by management that should properly be regarded as non-instrumentally motivated and largely symbolic in character. In particular, they argue that workforce drug testing can be regarded as an attempt to contain the irrationality and immorality that seems to ever threaten to engulf the precarious managerial myth of the rational, ordered, safe and controlled organisational space. Cavanaugh and Prasad suggest that the spectre of employee drug taking threatens this symbolic order because, in a US context at least, it represents the height of hedonistic, deviant, immoral, self-indulgent and excessive behaviour (also (Brewis, J. et al. 2005). For these, largely symbolic reasons, it is outlawed.

It is this symbolic reading that we concern ourselves with in this paper. We explore and extend it be drawing on two of the most ‘symbolic’ of industries, the high fashion industry and the tabloid media. We examine their part in naming, shaming, deselecting and resurrecting fashion supermodel Kate Moss following her much publicised cocaine use. We argue that media and organisational responses towards this subject’s drug use would seem to support the argument that drug use symbolises dangerous excess and irrationality for the organisation. For this reason we are especially interested in the reaction of Swedish retailer H&M who were quick to distance from and dismiss the supermodel. Through this, we extend Cavanaugh and Prasad’s ‘symbolic’ reading by showing how constructions of drug use in this case also intersect (as they have also historically done) with the symbolism of a dangerously seductive, female sexuality.

In addition to seeking to illustrate and extend Cavanaugh and Prasad’s (1994) symbolic reading of organisation and drugs we also argue that this particular case causes us to reconsider the ‘symbolic threat’ explanation for the managerial anti-drugs discourse – at least within this industry – given that the employed subject here was a valued organisational commodity precisely because she already symbolised the angelic and seductive, the vulnerable and the dangerous.
In order to develop these arguments, this paper is organised in three sections. In the first section, we explore Kate Moss’s treatment by the fashion house H&M and, drawing upon Cavanaugh and Prasad’s (1994) writing, explore this as a product of threat that drug use presented to this particular organisation in the context of its roots in Swedish society.

In the second section, we raise some questions regarding the above symbolic reading of drugs and organisation by considering a little more closely the specific nature of Kate Moss as a sexualised organisational subject or commodity. Exploring images of the supermodel in the fashion industry we show how these illustrate the organisational valuing of her angelic and seductive, vulnerable and dangerous symbolic status.

The third, concluding, section considers the implications of our questioning of the prevailing symbolic explanation of organisations antipathy to drugs, and suggests a further reading in which the elements of rituals, sacrifice, and scapegoats, may serve as ways of describing Kate Moss’ fall and resurrection.

(1) The symbolic threat of a drug using subject

Following a UK tabloid newspaper’s front page photographs of Kate Moss preparing and snorting lines of cocaine (The Mirror 15/9/05, see left) the Swedish high-street fashion chain H&M responded by expressing concern for Kate Moss’s drug ‘problem’… and cancelling her modelling contract. Stefan Persson, H&M executive chairman said that because apparent photographic evidence of her cocaine abuse was ‘not consistent with the company’s clear policy on drugs’.ii This statement was
apparently supported by the organisational concern with the effects of drug use in society, being this an important topic in their approach of corporate social responsibility (CRS). As one of the main contributors and supporters of drug prevention charity Mentor, Mr. Persson has a very personal opinion about the ‘problem’ of drug use in society, and the role of the organisations in this area.iii

Indeed, this role seems to be linked to the characteristics of their marketing. In their document about advertising, H&M’s policy is clearly stated:

“Our marketing has a major impact. It is therefore essential for us to convey a positive and healthy image… The people we show in our advertising must be healthy and wholesome. H&M deliberately distances itself from drug and alcohol abuse.”iv

In lieu of the absence of evidence that a) the model actually had a drugs ‘problem’ or addiction rather than an occasional or recreational taste for cocaine, or b) that her cocaine use was preventing, or was likely to prevent, Kate Moss from being able to perform her role as a model, then to understand H&M’s punitive response we might need to turn, following Cavanaugh and Prasad (1994), to what this public drug use represented or symbolised for H&M. To remind ourselves, Cavanaugh and Prasad argue that organisational responses to employees drug use cannot be understood solely, perhaps even principally, as narrowly instrumental or utilitarian in origin. Rather organisations respond to employee drug use for largely symbolic reasons.

“By virtue of its associations with high levels of personal hedonism and social deviance (Becker 1963, Roszak 1969), drug use also symbolizes self-absorption and consequently is defined as immoral. ...(A)t the level of meaning, drug use threatens the moral order of organizations. Barnard (1938) sees organizations as deriving their moral purpose from the voluntary consensus and commitment of their members. Habitual drug use threatens to weaken the commitment of individual employees to the organization, their obligation to maintaining its collective well-being, and their belief in the work ethic. Therefore, it also threatens the very moral fabric of the organization above and beyond its functional performance. Drug taking clearly represents a crisis of organizational irrationality and immorality.” (ibid: 269)

From the above, Cavanaugh and Prasad seem to suggest that drug use threatens the principles of advanced organisation per se, i.e. the moral order or rationality underlying the concept of organization (also Bauman 1989). Elsewhere in their
article they also suggest, by focussing upon the US context, that we need to read the symbolic threat that drugs represent to organisation in the context of organisational location within particular national, political or cultural milieu.

“In North America, drug taking, for the most part is seen as an irrational act (...) Drug use and all its associations with adolescence, deviance and the counterculture (...) overwhelmingly represent immaturity and irrationality. In contemporary America, drug taking signals chaos, a loss of self-control and disintegration, and consequently symbolises the antithesis of organizational rationality.” (ibid:268)

The argument that the symbolic meaning of drug use for organisations, and therefore organisational responses to drug use, is linked to specific contexts of course finds wider intuitive, and academic, support. The links between organisations and prohibition, for instance, can be traced back in the influence of industrialists in the Temperance Movement in the stigmatisation of alcohol habituation and drunkenness, particularly amongst the working classes (Berridge, V. 1985: ; Rumbarger, J. 1989: ; Stimson, G. V. and Lart, R. 2005), both in America and in England (Mills, J. 2003: ; Musto, D. 1973). At the same time, these Temperance values supported the emergence of ‘a new capitalist individual’ from the 1830s onwards:

“Rather than spending his pittance on drink to wash away the drudgery of labour, the teetotalist campaigners encouraged workers to save, thus investing in capitalism and reinventing themselves as prototypes of the modern consumer (cfr. Walton, S. 2001: 132).”

Similarly, it has been suggested that the ‘discovery’ of alcohol addiction, was influenced by the values of productivity and industrialisation in America toward the nineteenth century (Cohen, P. 1990: ; Levine, H. G. 1978). More recently the extensive use of workforce drug testing in US organisations can be linked back to the Reagan administration’s pathologisation of drug use, its policy of requiring federal organisations to implement drug testing programmes and its explicit attempts to recruit non-federal organisations into a national moral crusade or ‘war’ against the ‘evils’ of drugs (Knudsen et al 2004).

Although the American approach to drugs has, as we would perhaps expect given its superpower status and might, influenced the direction of drug policies around the
world, countries have also made their own interpretations of the drugs problem (Dorn, N. and Jamieson, A. 2000; Mc Allister, W. B. 2000). Hence, some countries in Western Europe have opted for a more tolerant approach to drugs use. The UK, for instance, though draconian in some respects, has moved towards understanding addiction as a medical matter which can be treated and eventually cured (Mac Gregor, S. and Smith, L. 1998). In contrast, some countries have chosen a more prohibitionist approach, based on the idea of drug use as a menace to community and society, hence punishment is seen as a deterrent for illicit drugs use in these societies (Boekhout Van Solinge, T. 2002). Sweden is a case in point. For although its historical relationships to what are now regarded as illegal drugs has been somewhat checkered – for instance the consumption of amphetamines in Sweden soared at the pinnacle of their industrial production during the Second World War (Boekhout Van Solinge, T. 1997) – Sweden now boasts one of the most radical policies against drug use in Europe. This goal of eliminating drug use is enforced by different authorities across diverse institutions and contexts. For example young people are targeted as a major group of influencing present or future drug abuse. Schools, parents, teachers and other authorities join efforts in creating a drug free society in Sweden. The opinion of Swedish representatives in conferences and other international events confirm this assertion. Programs of prevention of drug abuse are directed to children and youngsters, proving useful in the relatively low proportion of young people using illegal drugs in this country.' As Boehhout can Solinge (1997) observes

“Few other countries go as far as Sweden in taking measures to reduce the extent of the drug problem. This has both a financial side, since this policy is very expensive, and an ethical side, in the sense that in the name of a drug-free society the authorities can intervene profoundly in a person’s private life. As a matter of fact, the goal of the drug-free society seems to justify all kinds of means, which are difficult to imagine in many other countries.” (ibid: 11)

From the above, and following Cavanaugh and Prasad (1994), the ‘symbolic threat’ reading of Swedish fashion organisation H&M’s dismissal of Kate Moss becomes apparent. Kate Moss’s drug use could be read to represent a symbolic threat not only to some abstract, generalised and unarticulated notion of ‘organisation’, or organisational rationality or morality, but also a symbolic threat to the explicitly voiced and nationally enforced pathologisation of hedonistic, deviant, immoral, dangerous, and seductive drugs and users of drugs and the cooption or employment of
organisations in support of this national purpose. Thus H&M’s swift distancing from and, one might argue, rather brutal termination of Kate Moss may be understood as a symbolic attempt to reassert order, morality and rationality in a context where organisation and locale intersect to construct drugs and drug use as a particular threat.

If the above discussion may be read as supporting Cavanaugh and Prasad’s thesis, and illustrating its purchase through reference to another national context and specific organisational event, then the next section may be read to both extend its scope but also to raise some questions concerning its explanatory power. In particular, by highlighting the specific nature of the sexual commodification of Kate Moss as valued organisational subject/ fashion model we seek argue that Kate Moss’s value to H&M, and the fashion industry in general, as a seductive symbol of desire resides in her being seen to embody similar qualities of hedonism, seduction, addiction and danger that drugs and drug use have been presented as representing.

(2) The angelic and seductive, the vulnerable and the dangerous:
Fashion modelling is predicated on the need to associate a desirable lifestyle, personality and/ or self-image with the marketed product – so as to appeal to the psychographics of its target market. Moreover, this association happens on a subconscious level and is concerned with an irrational response to the product being advertised (Packard 1981). The choice of fashionable clothing has little to do with functionality and more to do with what the item, style and brand say about the wearer and their (sub)cultural affiliations (Barthes 1990; Baudrillard 1998) – at least to the extent that functionality is solely concerned with the usefulness of the garment in protecting the body from the elements.

Fashion in this regard has been studied predominantly using a semiotic approach
(Barthes 1990) and likewise, the study of advertisements (not just fashion ones) is tackled from a similar stance. In brief, semiotics is concerned with deconstructing an image to discern its meaning for a particular socio-cultural group using a tripartite system of sign-signifier-signified (see Williamson 1978, for a discussion of advertising semiotics in particular.) It is this method we have adopted here, in order to demonstrate how Kate Moss is portrayed as an ‘angelic devil’. The image above exemplifies this. The pose that Kate Moss is striking here is not accidental. Rather it is constructed as reminiscent of the way a shy child might stand when in strange adult company, swaying nervously, fingerling her clothing, peeping out from behind her mother’s skirt. The arrangement of her body, the clothes and her expression are all signs that denote (signify) a pose commonly adopted by young children (especially girls) and therefore connote ‘girlish innocence’ which is the signified. However, we also know that Kate Moss is an adult woman and so the fact that her hands are twisting the fabric of her bra, touching her own breasts beneath it is undeniable erotic. Add to this the sideways ‘coy’ glance straight to camera and the parted lips and the message is clearly sexual. Angel and Devil.

When analysing images in this way it is also important to hold in mind the audience for which the image is intended. In this case this photograph is for Calvin Klein underwear and we might assume that its purpose is to persuade a female viewer to purchase the item of underwear that Kate is wearing, or to buy-into the ‘Calvin Klein’ brand. Given that we note above how advertising it intended to tap into a subconscious strata of fantasy and identity we might also surmise that this image is intended to convey that would-be wearers of Calvin Klein underwear could posses the same effortlessly childlike sexual qualities as the model. However, as Stern (2000: 60) notes a gynocentric (that is to say, female) reading of an advertisement image cannot help but be based on an androcentric view of the world:

“… the empowerment of androcentricity as the norm teaches women to ‘to think as men, to identify with a male point of view and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values’ (Fetterley 1978: x. For female readers, the process of reading as a man, far from being normal, provides evidence of the ‘immasculation’ of the woman reader.”
Thus the sexuality of Kate Moss in this image and hundreds other like it is not constructed as female sexuality but as what it means to be sexy through male eyes. Although not our primary purpose here, this point is worth making because it further highlights the ‘forbidden fruit’ element of Kate Moss’s image: the sexuality of (female) children being taboo in contemporary Western society, for example. Likewise, MacCurdy (1994: 32) notes that images of women have historically served two (male) purposes; when portrayed positively they represent a path to heightened ‘spirituality’ (angel) and when negatively cast images of women stand for dangerous seduction.

This image, drawn from the American publication Newsweek is a more blatant example of Kate as angel and devil. Depicted as a modern-day Eve, complete with apple and serpent, this image signifies the garden of Eden with its connotations of both innocence and the temptation (fall) of mankind as Williamson (1978: 121) reminds us. Once again, we can see that it is the male viewer that she is tempting, since we are told it was Adam who bit into the proffered apple.

Contrast this with the everyday paparazzi ‘snapshots’ of Kate taken by fans and the paparazzi (below) and we argue the organizational requirement and endorsement for Kate Moss to act as an angelic temptress becomes even clearer.
In these images, Kate appears as other women; as a mother carrying her child, in deep conversation, smoking a cigarette. Such homely images however do not make the high-profile and valuable fashion model. On the contrary her specific value as organisational commodity rests on her image of being (as the tag line to the above front page suggests) “gorgeous” but also quite “naughty”.

“(Kate Moss’s) breakthrough Vogue shoot in 1993 with ‘grunge’ photographer Corinne Day (had) images – which had a virtually naked Moss prone on the bed of an unglamorous flat (Kate’s flat at the time) and surrounded by fairy lights, proved quite controversial. Susie Orbach denounced them as ‘paedophilic and almost like a junkie’, and Moss was instantly established as the leading light of a whole new kind of modelling movement, referred to as ‘heroin chic’.” (Vernon 2006:44)

Her value lies in her being able to be cast in the angel/ devil role; to be seductive and dangerous, to represent beauty and hedonism, self-indulgence and irrationality, and encourage this in others (particularly in their purchase of whatever product she is advertising), to seduce us away from morality, or at least away from asceticism towards aestheticism.

“She now officially embodies all kinds of newsworthy qualities: danger, sleaze-edged glamour, decadence, sex, corrupted youth and ineffable beauty, addiction, money and fashion.” (Vernon 2006: 45)
It is here that we see our work raising questions concerning the adequacy of the present symbolic reading of organisation’s responses to drugs and drug using subjects. For in the preceding discussion, the values that Kate Moss embodied as organisational commodity would seem to clearly parallel the values that drugs and drug use is said to symbolise, and be so threatening for, organisation. Thus Kate Moss the model symbolises hedonism, desire, seduction, danger, irrationality, indulgence and immorality and was highly valued by organisation as a result. Whereas Kate Moss drug user symbolised... the same qualities and, according to the preceding thesis, would have been deemed a dangerous threat to organisation accordingly, a threat that warranted and explained her dismissal.

(3) A Devil in High Heels: scapegoats and drugs

So, where does this leave a consideration of the symbolism of drugs for organisation? Where we don’t want to take this discussion is to a place that argues for a turn away from symbolic readings to a more traditional view that management and organisation are responding to the issue of drugs in a narrowly instrumental, rational, or indeed consciously ideological, way. As we highlighted in our introduction, we are simply not persuaded that management are operating in such way when it comes to the ever emotive subject of drugs (see Warren and Wray-Bliss, under review), if indeed to (m)any matters.

If we are to retain a symbolic reading then, what directions might we pursue? One possibility we offer here is to explore the connections between drugs, sacrifice and scapegoats in human history.

Firstly, it is interesting to note the ambiguity in the denomination of the term pharmakon, in relation to the historical meaning of ‘drugs’. Following Derrida deconstruction of this term, in his analysis of Plato’s Pharmacy, we see how the term means both ‘remedy’ and ‘poison’:

“This pharmakon, this ‘medicine’, this philtre, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be –alternately or simultaneously- beneficent of maleficent.
The *pharmakon* would be a substance –with all that that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy—. (Derrida, J. 1981: 70)

Secondly, Eschohotado (1998) has found that that the noun ‘*pharmakon*’, also defines certain type of religious rituals in which ecstatic stages were induced (by psychoactive plants). In a further exploration of the etymology of this term, he found the word ‘*pharmakos*’, used to indicate rituals involving scapegoats sacrifices. For him, the coincidence is not a fortuity, since scapegoats were used as a ‘cleaning vehicle’ offered to the deities in return of peace, prosperity, or just as a present to alleviate an ill situation:

“...The phonetic proximity between ‘scapegoat’ (*pharmakos*) and ‘drugs’ (*pharmakon*), is not a coincidence. The therapeutical substances known by the ancient man could have been intermingled with shamanic rituals responding to common ‘fears’. To remedy an evil (potential or real) and clean an impurity are the same thing...”

In this line of argumentation, Szasz (1974) has argued that ‘dangerous drugs’, addicts, and pushers have become the scapegoats of our modern, secular, therapeutically imbued societies (p. xi). He suggested that social ceremonies involving scapegoats, magical or medical, serve to unite individual in groups by identifying a common menace linked to a deviant practice.

Thirdly, it is important to note how certain groups have been identified as menacing for the social order. Witches, madmen, or ethnic and religious communities have occupied the role of the scapegoat in different times and contexts (see Plant 1998). Indeed, women have been a traditionally target for persecution. Accused of witchcraft, prostitution, or moral weakness, the link between women and drugs has profited a continuous stigmatisation. Several examples in history show how drug reformers defined certain drugs as leading ‘white moral women’ into addiction, immorality and sexual slavery at the hands of oriental or black evil men (Boyd, 2004; see also Conrad, P. and Schneider, J. 1980; Kohn, M. 1992; Musto, D. 1973). In recent crimes, the increasing participation of females in illicit drug use has encouraged agencies and institutions to target this group in relation to the potential
risks in fertility, sexuality and reproduction for the overall society. As argued by Boyd (2004):

Drug laws are supported by myths and ideologies that intensify the regulation of women. Ideology is significant in relation to understanding the thinking that is involved in the formal regulation and disciplining of women who use illegal drugs (p.7).

This connection can also be used for our analysis of the organisational reaction regarding illicit drug use. In this tale, Kate Moss can be understood to represent both the scapegoat and the drug (pharmakon and pharmakos) which must be sacrificed to restore the apparent order. This theme has also been noted by Kaulingfreks and ten Bos (forthcoming). They note how Kate Moss’s face was sacrificed in order for H&M to save their corporate ‘face’, thereby calling into question the ethics of this company’s social responsibility agenda. Tabloid media and other authorities lead the ritual, and her dismissal represents this sacrifice. By means of a predictable sequence, her image is sacrificed, and she must pass by the ritual of purification. Indeed, by retreating herself in a ‘therapeutical’ environment, she emerges two months later, ‘rehabilitated’, ‘cured’ or ‘saved’, ready to continue her escalating career as an icon of modern times. Of course what this scapegoat explanation doesn’t still quite address is why this drug using subject must be scapegoated when, as we have suggested, the basis of the symbolic ‘threat’ they arguably represent for organisation are the same qualities that make particular subjects attractive to organisation.

Could an explanation, we wonder, really be something as simple as the fact that the dangerous, the seductive, the irrational and immoral are all quite acceptable when embodied in an organisational commodity or turned to organisationally sanctioned and organisationally profiting ends, and unacceptable merely when they are not?

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Kaulingfreks & ten Bos ‘On faces and defacement: The case of Kate Moss’ forthcoming in C. Jones (ed.) Levinas and Business Ethics


Endnotes

i Workforce drug testing refers to the organizational arrangement of testing employees’ bodily fluids or hair for evidence of traces of past drug use.

ii Reported in The Observer, September 25, 2005: Anti-drug billioner who ended Moss’s £1.2 m deal. Reporters: Alex Duval, Nick Mathiasion and David Smith. 

iii Reported in Mentor website, Mr. Persson asserts that: "Companies are part of society and therefore companies must take an interest in social matters and take on social responsibility. Today's companies often serve as social models and are, furthermore, moulders of public opinion. A problem in today's society is the growing use of drug.”
http://www.mentorfoundation.org/people.php?id=34

www.eyemag.se/core/items/200604/826/HM_CSR_2005.pdf. In the same document, they refer to the situation related to Kate Moss, as an example of how this policy affects their marketing and advertising campaigns.p.59


vi O’Donohoe (2000) problematises the andro- vs gyno- centric dichotomy in advertising readership by remarking how ‘female’ (and we would argue ‘male’) are not homogenous and mutually exclusive categories. They can further be fragmentated into black, disabled, gay, working class and so on and not all women act in a ‘female’ way, just as not all men exhibit ‘male’ traits. Nonetheless, we find Stern’s (2000) argument helpful here in establishing that there are differences in the way audiences experience an advertisement – what Williamson (1978) refers to as the ‘appellation’ of the image: working out who’s attention the image is ‘shouting the loudest’ to attract.