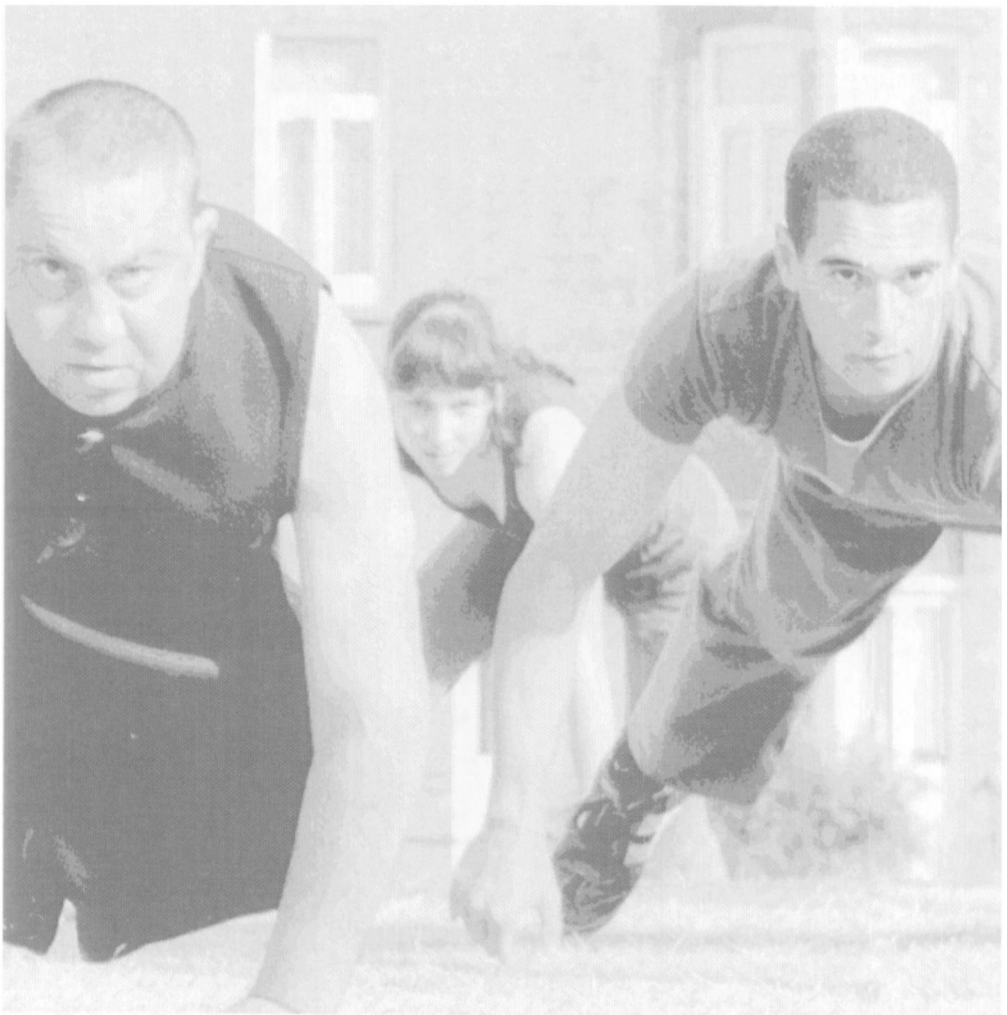
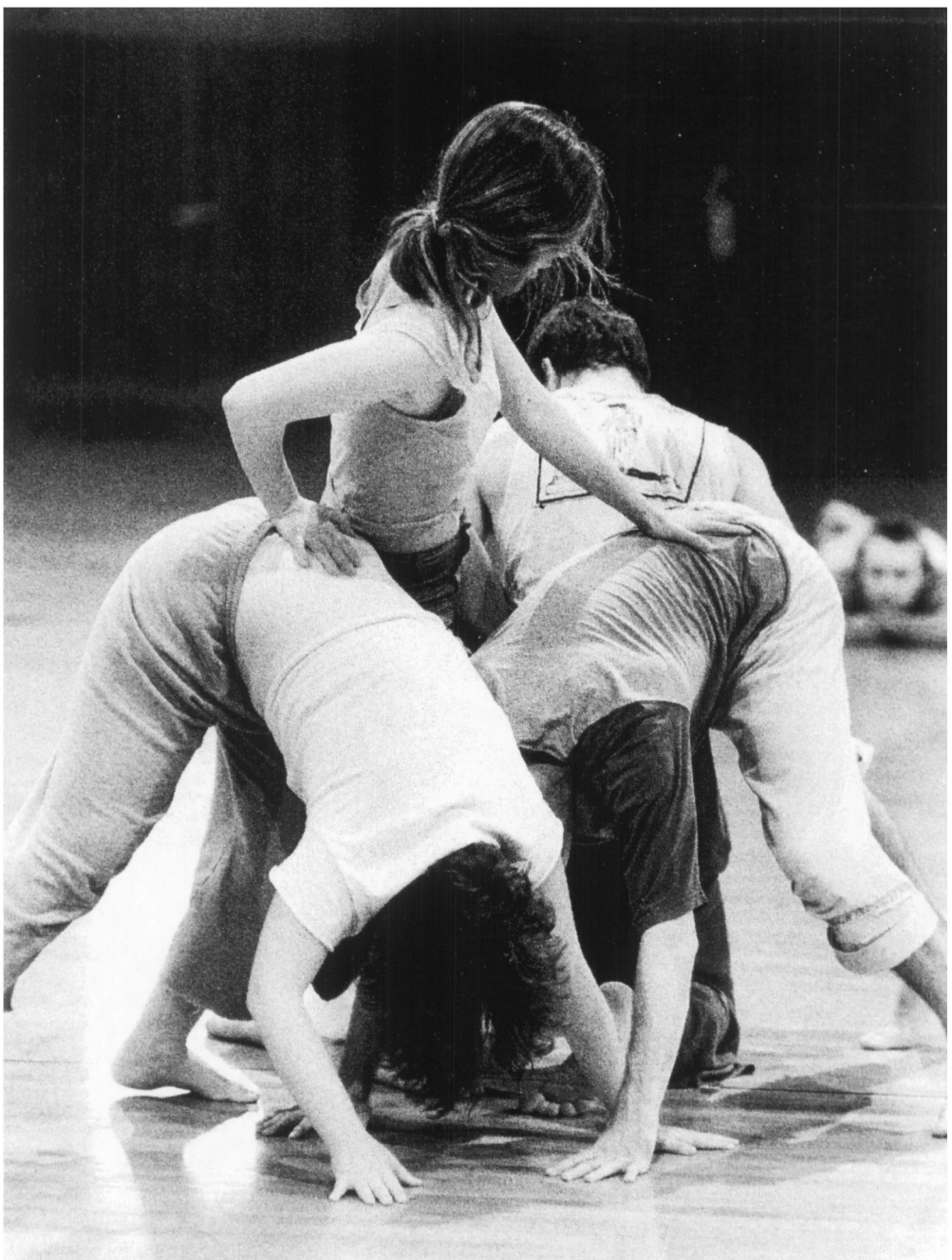
Articles



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Performing the Commodity-Sign: Dancing in the Gap

Colleen Dunagan

Between 1998 and 2000, the Gap clothing company[1] produced three advertising campaigns whose visual images consisted of choreographed movement sequences based on vernacular dance forms, theatrical jazz dance, and the codes and conventions of the Hollywood musical: "khakis," "that's holiday," and "West Side Story."[2] Each campaign produced a series of commercials that employed dance and musical theater in an attempt to bridge the gap between entertainment and advertising, and between popular culture and art. By manipulating standard advertising conventions, the Gap framed these televisual texts as performances or artworks, rather than as advertisements, creating choreographic, performance-oriented commercials that became the sign of Gap clothing. As a result, the commercials have been identifiable, just as the clothes have been, by style alone.

In this article I examine how the visual content of dance connects the "khakis," "that's holiday," and "West Side Story" campaigns and unites the individual commercials within each. This analysis touches on ways in which performance and dance alter the advertising space and identifies overlapping systems of meaning making that arise in these forms of visual culture. The tools I employ include semiotic and choreographic analysis of the commercials, documentation regarding their production, and a synthesis of scholarly texts on advertising, television, dance, and popular culture.

The analysis of advertising that I utilize here owes much to Judith Williamson's seminal work, *Decoding Advertising: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (1978), in which she demystifies advertising's system of meaning making through a mix of Marxist, semiotic, and psychoanalytic theory. Since the publication of her book, scholars working within a diverse array of disciplines have expanded upon her initial mapping of the discourse, so that the field of literature on advertising spans sociology, communication studies, film

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studies, media studies, cultural studies, and advertising/marketing. My research has included reading work by theorists in these fields, which I have synthesized in an effort to identify how a theatrical sense of framing and the visual content of dance both facilitate and transform the structure of these commercial spots. In my analysis I draw extensively on sociologist Robert Goldman's (1992) expansion of Williamson's work, which reflects developments in theory as well as shifts in advertising occurring after the publication of her book. My account of these commercials brings Goldman's work into dialogue with Philip Auslander's (1999) theory of the "live" (performance studies), Andrew Wernick's (1997) analysis of nostalgia in the marketplace (sociology/media studies), and Susan Foster's (1986) account of theatrical dance (dance studies). This merging of perspectives to view the Gap spots as both dance works and commercial forms enables me to value the contribution they make to the fields of dance and media studies.

I argue that these commercial spots are effective because of the ways in which they downplay standard advertising conventions in order to create television advertising that visually resembles dance sequences from Hollywood musicals. Each of these campaigns demonstrates a variation on the alternative positioning strategies employed in television advertising since the mid-1980s, as discussed by Goldman in his text *Reading Ads Socially* (1992). All three campaigns utilize what Goldman refers to as "an avant-garde minimalism" that employs a "post-mortise format" in which the subject (the signifying image) and the product are collapsed into one image (159). He explains the post-mortise, avant-garde format with reference to a 1985 Ralph Lauren television commercial. This sixty-second spot is shot entirely in black and white and depicts a pick-up truck driving down a dirt road to the accompaniment of an acoustic soundtrack. According to Goldman, the commercial creates a sense of realism through the filming, which utilizes a grainy effect to create the appearance of a home movie, and the absence of any narrative or framing devices. In addition, because the name "Ralph Lauren" does not appear until the end of the commercial, the ad is able to remove any clear reference to a product and temporarily evade the designation of advertisement (159). Goldman refers to this type of ad as a "not-ad" or an ad that "has been designed to look as if it is not an ad, as if it has foresworn the agenda of ads" (155–201).

Like the advertisements Goldman points to as examples of not-ads, the Gap spots strive to avoid reproducing the visual appearance of an advertisement; their structure encodes an awareness of the advertisement-consumer relationship, which makes the interpretive act of decoding the ad, rather than the ad's intended meaning, hegemonic. The Gap ads disarm the viewer-consumer by positioning her/him as an audience member. In this way, the television spots attempt to reside in the gap between entertaining and advertising, drawing attention to the ways in which each practice promotes and rely on consumption.

In order to examine how the Gap campaigns subvert common positioning strategies to create competitive marketing for their product, I introduce the basic formatting elements used in advertising and how they contribute to the production of the commodity-sign. In addition, I demonstrate the ways in which the Gap ads relies on dance and choreographed movement to evoke nostalgia for Hollywood musicals, as well as the ways in which the

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music and dance genres carry their own nostalgic sensibilities and cultural associations that generate images of particular social identities. In turn, by drawing connections between the formatting of the commercials and the conventions of theater, I show how the Gap's commercials incorporate music, dance, and Hollywood musicals in order to generate product personality.

Advertising Positioning Strategies

The Gap ads both demonstrate and transform the cultural practice of advertising, which is founded on the construction of commodity-signs in which the structure of signs (signifier/signified) unites with the structure of commodities.[3] In this section I discuss the commonalities among the three Gap commercial campaigns in order to explicate the structure of advertisements and the positioning strategies they deploy to generate meaning. Signs, consisting of a signifying unit (words, images, sounds) and a signified meaning (happiness, motherhood, urban life), are not fixed structures but, instead, are developed and maintained through sociocultural relationships. Like the sign, the commodity has been theorized as consisting of two parts or values: exchange value and use value.[4] Advertising effectively joins the exchange value of commodities with particular signs in order to create commodity-signs (Williamson 1978). Commodity-signs come into being when "images are allied to particular products and the product images are then deployed as signifiers of particular relations or experiences" (Goldman 1992, 18).

In the Gap's "West Side Story" series, the commercial "when you're a jean" detaches the "America" number from the Jerome Robbins/Stephen Sondheim musical and links it to Gap's new line of bright, primary-colored capri jeans and jean jackets. Simultaneously, the ad detaches the musical's concept of Puerto Rican identity from the larger context of Puerto Rican culture, attaching it, like the musical, to the Gap product. As a result, the values associated with both the musical and Puerto Rican ethnicity appear to be accessible through the consumption of the clothing. Bright red and yellow jeans come to signify *West Side Story* and its depiction of New York City Puerto Rican culture, just as *West Side Story* now calls to mind Gap clothing. In this television spot, the Latin-flavored choreography and music (sans lyrics) from the musical instill the clothing with stereotypical connotations such as passion, bodily excess, and hot-headedness.

As this Gap spot demonstrates, advertising and the construction of commodity-signs are built upon attempts to cement arbitrary relationships between consumer goods and cultural values and/or practices. In order to further this process, advertisers have developed standard structures and ways of organizing the content of advertisements that implicitly direct readers to make the appropriate connections between the product and the signifying image, such that the signified meaning is transferred from the signifying image to the product named. To this effect, all advertising utilizes positioning strategies to create associative links between cultural meanings, products, and selling ideas.

The basic format of advertising as developed in print ads and then adapted for commercials and the television medium involves four aspects: a photographic signifying image, which is typically the image included for the cultural meaning it carries; a mortise or

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image of the named product that is set off from the rest of the ad's visual content; framing copy, including headlines and slogans or captions that define the relationship between the main signifying image and the product shown; and graphic framing devices, such as lines, colors, or shapes, that both separate and connect the different components of the advertisement (Goldman 1992; Firth 1998; Williamson 1978; Dodds 2001). While this four-part structure was originally developed within print advertising where all the elements are visible simultaneously, television commercials utilize video cuts and editing to achieve this same basic format over the span of thirty to sixty seconds (Goldman 1992, 63–65). The Gap spots, in particular, differ from standard commercials.

I address the four components of the advertising format in relationship to the structure of the Gap's "khakis," "that's holiday," and "West Side Story" campaigns in order to explain the standard advertising positioning strategies and the Gap's variation on them. The photographic signifying image makes up the body of the commercial, and in the Gap spots it consists of images of people dancing or engaged in choreographed movement; they are removed from a social context and appear to be performing for the viewer in a manner similar to that sometimes seen in music videos and film musicals. In the case of "when you're a jean," the signifying image is a restaging of sections of choreography from "America." In each commercial the dancers wear Gap clothing, usually made up largely of new and/or seasonal products. Because the main image is comprised of dancers wearing the advertised product line, the subject (signifying image = dancing bodies) and the product (the specific seasonal or new style of clothing) are collapsed onto each other within the commercials—making the image of the dance, the music, and performers the primary signifier.

The next major component of the advertising structure is the mortise, which in the standard form is an offset image of the product. The Gap spots do not employ a traditional mortise structure, relying solely on the main signifying image to convey both the visual content of the commercial and the product. For example, instead of an offset image of the clothing in "when you're a jean," the viewer sees the dancers wearing the red, blue, and yellow capri jeans and jean jackets that are being marketed as part of that campaign. Thus, in a manner similar to the Ralph Lauren ad discussed by Goldman, the Gap ads eliminate the mortise and, in doing so, appear to sublimate or disguise the advertising agenda.

Within the three Gap campaigns the graphic framing devices include an all-white set and camera shots that both work with the choreography to establish a theatrical perspective and provide alternative angles from which to view the dancing (Enrico 1998; Lezotte 2002).[5] Abstract sets and/or colored lighting, such as the red and yellow spotlighting in "when you're a jean," at times texture the white stage space. At the end of the commercials, the all-white set transforms into a simple white screen upon which the framing copy appears, thus, in retrospect, connecting the Gap logo to the main image and creating the impression that the main image is contained within the logo itself. By functioning as a backdrop for both the movement and the Gap logo, the color white creates the impression that each component of the ad shares the same space and ties the different aspects of the thirty-second commercial together over time. In addition, since all three campaigns

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utilize the same framing devices and basic format, the color white and the use of dance as a signifier unite the spots from all three campaigns, creating a strong visual identity for the Gap, a commodity-sign with "style."

In addition to the main image, the Gap spots include an audio soundtrack that simultaneously functions as part of the main signifying image and a framing device. The soundtracks consist of music borrowed from popular culture genres and musical theater. The music, which sometimes includes lyrics,[6] serves as an accompaniment to the choreography and, in this sense, appears to be part of the main image in the same way that musical accompaniment for a piece of choreography performed live would be read as a part of the dance. An example would be the sections of music from "America" that were used as a soundtrack. As a result, the music also acts as a signifier contributing to the meaning of the main image. The dance appears to be choreographed to the music, so that movements are synchronized with the rhythm and accents of the soundtrack. However, the music also operates as a framing device because it creates a through-line and provides the viewer-consumer with additional coding clues about the choreography (Goldman 1992; Williamson 1978). As I will show, the Gap's musical choices work in conjunction with the dancing to link Gap clothing to popular culture and film musicals.

The last aspect of the commercial format, the framing copy, is typically used in advertising to help lead the viewer-consumer to "correctly" interpret and make the intended connections between the various parts of the ad. In addition, framing copy is often the element that most immediately identifies a television spot as an advertisement. The Gap spots work against being recognized as advertising by withholding all framing copy until the end of the commercials. Following each televisual dance work, an all-white screen containing a slogan/ad copy appears, which is succeeded by an all-white screen containing the Gap logo.

The ad copy for the first campaign contains the name of the product and the name of the dance and/or music genre shown in the commercial such as, "khakis swing" or "khaki country."[7] The copy for these spots could be read as either a description or a command. The second campaign ends each ad with the text, "that's holiday," describing the subject/image of each commercial and the clothing. In the last campaign, "West Side Story," each spot depicts a different scene from the musical, ending with framing copy that connects the gangs from the musical with the different products from the Gap's spring clothing line; for example "when you're a jean" links the Puerto Rican gang (the Sharks) to Gap jeans.[8] Here, the ad copy serves both to describe the people seen dancing and to invite, through the use of the personal pronoun "you," the viewer-consumer to identify with the dancers—to desire to attain the identity offered by purchasing the advertised product (Williamson 1978, 65).[9] The framing copy assists in making this transference of identity from the televisual text to the viewer, but ultimately this connection depends on the viewer's interpretation of the work.

The commodity-sign constructed by the Gap is innovative in its use of signifying images that contain both the cultural meaning of the ad and the named product. As a result, the structure of the ads reinforces the already present advertising agenda of reification. The marginalizing of the mortise and the amplification of the signifying image are part

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of the strength of the Gap ads because these strategies meld the signifying image and its cultural meaning with the product at the most basic level possible inside of the commercial medium. The dancers wear the clothes as they dance; thus, in a very real sense the viewer sees the clothing dancing. In addition, the Gap's use of the all-white set as a frame for the choreography creates unique commercials by engaging performance conventions to subvert the advertising structure and encourage consumers to view the commercials from an aesthetic viewpoint, generating a sense of nostalgia for the values associated with the dances.

Nostalgia and Product Identity

The sense of the theatrical generated by the Gap's framing of their commercials as performances contributes to the construction of the commodity-sign an aura of status and an alluring sense of nostalgia through references to musical theater/film traditions.[10] Previous print ad campaigns by the Gap in the early 1990s adopted the strategy of blending art and nostalgia in advertising as a tool for accessing consumer identity. In their 1993 campaign, "Who Wore Khakis?" the Gap employed "original monochrome photographs" of "American cultural legends such as Chet Baker and Humphrey Bogart" wearing khaki trousers in order to "market its brand language of personal authenticity" (Grainge 2000, 140–41).

Paul Grainge's discussion of the Gap's 1993 campaign reveals nostalgia's function as an effective advertising tool in the construction of product identity and the development of brand names. Drawing on Andrew Wernick's (1997) discussion of the role of memory in consumer culture, Grainge suggests:

> Nostalgia in Wernick's case is set in a cultural moment where the past has developed a particular discursive power. In a time when metanarratives of history and progress have been severely undermined, and when the past has become increasingly subject to cultural mediation, textual reconfiguration and ideological contestation in the present, memory has become a new locus of both cultural identity and commercial style. (2000, 140)

Nostalgia, as a concept, denotes both a sense of absence and a longing for that which is absent; more particularly, it encapsulates a desire for the past—a past imagined as somehow more authentic. However, in contemporary advertising the employment of nostalgia reflects the postmodern affinity for pastiche in that it engages a form of "nostalgia without memory" (Grainge 2000, 137). Through a blending of art and history with advertising, the Gap's 1993 campaign sought to link their basic khakis and jeans with a classic sensibility, creating a sense of retro-chic and hip individuality for their mass-marketed product. The more recent series of television commercials (1998–2000) repeats this move of blending nostalgia and art through the incorporation of dance forms that reference popular culture and film musicals, allowing the ads to promote individualism while grounding the authenticity of identity within the mass media construct of a given community. The sense of nostalgia embodied in the commercials reflects the discursive power of the past identified by Wernick (1997).

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The Gap's use of nostalgia does not require consumers to recognize a literal shared cultural or historical memory because it ultimately creates its own reference to an imaginary, constructed cultural history. Theorists such as Fredric Jameson and John Berger have pointed to this concept of nostalgia at work within postmodern capitalist society (Berger 1972; Jameson 1991). Pragmatically speaking, the successful functioning of nostalgia within contemporary culture can be seen in current clothing trends, which reflect an interest in the retro styles of items like hip-hugger jeans circa 1970 or the recent resurgence of 1980s music and leg warmers. To be hip, to be an individual, frequently implies the ability to blend past and present or past and future. Thus, the obsession with retro style reflects a fascination with the ability to create the new out of a blending of disparate pasts.

Transforming the Commercial Space

In order to access this nostalgia for an idyllic vision of the past in which the authenticity of identity resides in a shared sense of cultural history and community, the Gap transforms the medium of the television commercial into the performance space of the Hollywood musical. The ontology of the television medium works in conjunction with the visual design of the spots to transform the ads. This transformation centers on the use of the white space, an overlap of the theatrical with the quotidian, and the serialization of the commercials within each campaign.

All three Gap campaigns contain choreographed dances performed on all-white sets. The choreography and the point of view constructed by the camera indicate to the at-home viewers that they stand in for the audience in a performance. A typical proscenium or black box theater would tend to consist of an all black space (walls, flooring, wings, etc); however, the use of the all-white stage space creates a similar effect in terms of establishing a neutral background into which the illusion of the performance is projected, seemingly removing the dancers from everyday social existence. While the television spots lack the proscenium arch of classical theater, the camera recreates the perspective of a theatrical performance by means of the commercial's establishing shot and the maintenance of a consistent front, regardless of the variety of camera angles employed in the filming. Ultimately, the clear sense of upstage and downstage created by the camera work and choreography reinforces the sense of watching a performance, rather than that of observing everyday activities.

The sensibility of live performance is simultaneously maintained and transformed by the presentation of the commercials on a flat, two-dimensional screen in the viewer's home; the camera allows the at-home viewer to have the experience of feeling like the dancers are performing directly for him/her, since the only frame separating viewer and performer is that of the television set, which resides in the viewer's home.[11] Television's function as a medium for broadcasting live transmissions has been recognized by media studies scholars as part of what distinguishes it from film. This foundation has informed television's ideological status, which in turn has contributed to a perception of television as a medium that is immediate and intimate. Oddly enough, television, traditionally, has

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been filmed from a proscenium perspective with the cameras placed outside of the stage space and the actors playing to the "fourth wall" of an imaginary proscenium space (Feuer 1983; Auslander 1999). For the audience, the intimacy of the setting (the viewer's home) in combination with replication of a theatrical sense of framing and the association with live broadcasts produces a sense of the Gap ads as personalized, private performances for the at-home viewer.

Because the commercials' directors can film from above and below, the camera is able to evoke a range of theatrical perspectives, to make the editing process more obviously a part of the choreography, and to wear down the separation of the audience/viewer from the performer and the stage space. In addition, the incorporation of these film techniques, borrowed from Hollywood musicals and directors such as Busby Berkeley, allows the directors to create a strong sense of motion that enlivens the televised dance, increasing the sense of "liveness" by producing a visual "feeling" of the physicality of the choreography. These Hollywood-musical camera techniques communicate a form of proximity that is similar to that created by non-proscenium theatrical spaces, thus increasing the sense of intimacy.[12] These filming techniques lend themselves to the perception that the viewer has been granted access to the performance space—that the viewer resides in the same space as the dancers. Thus, the visual presentation of the commercial creates both a sense of the dance as performance and as "happening in a quotidian time and place" (Foster 1986, 60).

These aspects of the visual production of the commercials serve other functions in the realization of the commodity-sign as well: the all-white space operates as a framing device connecting the dancing to the Gap logo and copy appearing at the end of the commercial; the vernacular dance and filming techniques used become a part of the choreographic style of the Gap sign; and the all-white space allows the dancers in their Gap attire to "pop" out of the visual image. As Andrew Wernick (1991) points out, strategies for commodity promotion include "hooking" or "eye-seizing strategies." These strategies typically include devices such as color, design, or powerful imagery. Sherril Dodds suggests that an additional "hooking" device, often seen in video dance, is that of serialization: "By the very nature of the serial form, each episode promotes the following episode; yet each is self-contained" (2001, 137). The Gap uses a theatrical presentation and a sense of performance, serialization, and color as devices that both "hook" viewers and encourage them to perceive the ads as entertainment (or art). This strategy further facilitates the production of the commodity-sign by guiding the viewer to read the ads as abstractions, thereby both universalizing the social relations embodied in the ad and widening the gap between the viewer and the commercials' implicit ideology.

Close Readings: Watching Khakis Dance

The Gap returned to merging nostalgia with their advertising in 1998 with the onset of the "Khakis" campaign in which each commercial featured Gap-clothed dancers performing one of five social dance forms: swing/lindy hop ("khakis swing"), hip hop[13] ("khakis groove"), freestyle[14] ("khaki soul"), sixties go-go[15] ("khaki a-go-go"), and country line

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dancing ("khaki country").[16] A sixth commercial, "khakis rock," targeted children and utilized choreographed sequences performed on in-line skates and skateboards.[17] In each spot, including the children's in-line skating spot, the movement is choreographed and/or staged and filmed in order to resemble a theatrical presentation. Nostalgia comes into play in this campaign through the social dances, each of which has experienced a substantial revival due to renewed interest in their historical periods and an interest in being retro-chic. In many cases, the dance initially became fashionable as part of a subculture but then grew in popularity to exceed this designation (Hebdige 1998; Goulding 2003; Shusterman 2000; McMains and Robinson 2002; Usner 2001–02). The ads enhance feelings of nostalgia by evoking folk and popular culture through their presentation of social dance forms that are often found in contemporary American social practices.[18]

Of the five dance-based ads, only "khaki soul" and "khakis groove" highlight solo and duet performances, while the other three focus on group choreography with brief close-ups on individuals or couples/duets. In each commercial, the dancers' costumes consist of different versions of the Gap's khaki pants or skirts paired with a variety of shirts, all of which the dancers wear with subtle, yet distinct, individual style. The rest of their attire consists of various articles of Gap clothing that have been combined and styled to reflect the personality of the spots' music and dance. The genre of music that accompanies the performance seen in each ad is indicated by the titles of the commercials, and, in each instance, the dancers engage in a choreographed/staged version of the dance form appropriate to the spot's musical style. The entire series of dancing khakis commercials embraces nostalgia as an attribute of the popular music and dance styles of the 1990s in an effort to imbue the clothing with a sense of identity and the particular ideologies that inform it. In addition, the framing of the social dances as performances within the mediated image evokes the heritage of film musicals and the tradition of incorporating popular dance styles into musical theater. In order to illustrate how dance, music, nostalgia, and performance join in the creation of the commodity-sign, I take a closer look at one of the six spots.

In "khaki country" the movement evokes the country western lifestyle because the commercial begins and ends as a theatrical presentation of country line dancing choreographed by Jerry Grans.[19] As soon as the commercial appears on the television screen, the viewer hears the opening bars of music and sees the dancers tapping their heels against the ground as they stand in a long, staggered diagonal line that alternates between men and women and consists of approximately twelve dancers. The bulk of the choreography is representative of a typical line dance performed in a large group with sections that alternate between individual steps performed in unison and partnered/couple sequences performed in unison. The performers line dance to Dwight Yoakam's alternative country version of "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" (1999), a song originally recorded by the rock band Queen (1979).

The entirely white stage space is marked off on three sides by a white corral fence. The upstage backdrop includes a giant marquee sign that says "Country" and has light bulbs running through the middle of each letter, which calls to mind bars, the Vegas strip, and musical theater marquees. The dancers mix jeans, cowboy boots, and hats with khakis to

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give the clothing country style. Thus, while the whiteness of the space removes context, a sense of cultural place is inserted into the visual image through the clothing and the abstracted set design. The style of movement, music, set, and clothing—of which the movement and clothing stand out vividly against the whiteness that surrounds them—act as signifiers of an American country western lifestyle and aesthetic.

The country western theme carries with it an assemblage of associations, which it brings to the table in the construction of the commodity-sign. The line dancing evokes a sense of nostalgia for a simpler time and place; images of rural culture and the West call to mind traditional values and a sense of freedom, respectively (Starr and Waterman 2003, 143). Referencing the nostalgic value and ideological power/value of country music, Richard Shusterman describes the lure of the genre in the following way: "By invoking the cowboy image of rebelliously rugged individualism while also recalling its reputed roots in the South (land of the Civil War rebels), country music can project an image that is traditional, white, and all-American, yet also, attractively distinctive and not blandly conformist" (Shusterman 2000, 78). Yoakam, a recognizable representative of alternative country music within American popular culture, accesses a crossover audience that contributes to the ability of country to access American mainstream popular culture (Starr and Waterman 2003, 371–72). The combination of Yoakam's alternative country (rock/pop influenced) music and country line dancing promotes an entire lifestyle (within which lies themes of sentimentality, morality, and patriotism) with longstanding ties to the roots of American culture—even if these roots are often steeped in contradictory social realities (Shusterman 2000, 143).

The use of country music and line dancing is arguably indicative of the Gap's recognition of the growing presence of a country western aesthetic within mass media and popular culture in the late 1990s. Country music has gradually moved from the margins toward the center of the commercial mainstream. The genre's ability to produce crossover artists has allowed it to access newer venues like CMT (a division of MTV Networks), to become a bestselling musical genre, and to bring the country western lifestyle, including fashion and dance forms, to the forefront of popular culture (Shusterman 2000, 77–79, 235).

While country music, clothing, and dance are social forms, their existence within the mediated form of television commercials and the theatrical framing of the dancing aligns the commercial with the tradition of dance on film (Feuer 1993; Auslander 1999). Some aspects of the work that make this line dance an atypical social dance are the consistency of the performance quality, the brief virtuoso barrel turn performed by two men near the end of the performance, and the clear sense of front conveyed through camera shots. While the dancing is actually filmed from several camera angles, the fourth side of the stage is left open as though indicating the downstage area as understood in a proscenium theater. Thus, the use of multiple angles provides the at-home viewer with the experience of simultaneously occupying several seats at once. In addition, the filming and editing techniques employed—rapid cuts between shots (twenty-six total within a thirty-second spot) and zooming/tracking/panning inside of individual shots—place this line dance within the tradition of Hollywood musicals and dance on film.

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In this instance, the situating of the line dance as theatrical links the commercial to the tradition of film musicals, such as *Oklahoma* (1955), and the "folk musical." Rick Altman identifies vernacular dance as an essential component of this subgenre: "With traditional characters living in a small town and seen through the eyes of the popular arts, it seems that the folk musical would have a ready-made dance medium: the folk dance. Indeed, it is the square dance, the line dance, and other group dances that support the folk musical well into the forties" (1987, 282). The folk musical breaks down barriers between performer and audience, creating a sense of community, and adds a nostalgic element to the musical by presenting the audience with an idyllic image of a shared cultural history (Altman 1987, 272; Feuer 1993, 3).

As can be seen in "khaki country," the Gap's first dance-based commercial campaign utilized social dance forms that were familiar in some way to much of the target audience and held a sense of nostalgia for an earlier period, as well as a particular cultural image or social identity. In addition, the removal of the social dance forms from their everyday contexts and the use of clear choreographic structures align the Gap commercials with the tradition of mediated images of live performance, the filmic choreography of Busby Berkeley and Gene Kelly, and the continued development of dance on camera within music videos and other experimental film and video works by directors such as Paul Hunter, Spike Jonze, and Michel Gondry.

Selling Musical Theater

The next Gap dance-based television campaign borrows theatrical codes and choreographic style to an even greater extent. The "that's holiday" commercials really look more like film musical production numbers than commercials. In this campaign director Michel Gondry utilizes musical theater jazz dance, ice skating, and Busby Berkeley choreographic and filmic techniques from the 1930s to capture the spirit of the holidays and a sense of nostalgia for the good, old-fashioned white Christmas. Similar to the first series, the "that's holiday" ads utilize popular music, specifically "Ice Ice Baby" (1990) and "Sleigh Ride" (1949), to accompany the dance, which is performed against a white background and floor with what appear to be cutout figures—think paper snowflakes—of bluish-white mountains or trees set up alongside stage right and left in the manner of wings or flats. Of the three holiday ads, "kids"[20] is directed toward the children's market, while "mountains" and "trees"[21] are directed toward the late-teen to early-thirties market.[22]

A close analysis of Blanca Li's choreography demonstrates the commercials' relationship to Broadway musical theater dance and, more specifically, dance in Hollywood musicals.[23] Like the dance productions in Hollywood musicals, these commercials are choreographed and filmed in a manner that references the live performance of theatrical dance (Altman 1987; Feuer 1993). This link to the tradition of film musicals instills a connection to popular entertainments that were then transferred to the film medium, including the tradition of musical theater in America with its roots in minstrelsy and vaudeville.

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The opening sequence from "trees" provides a clear example of borrowing from Busby Berkeley's musical film style and the dance genre of musical theater jazz. The commercial opens with a shot of a white male in black pants and a green pullover standing beside a paper cutout of a white tree with bluish highlights. As he crosses his right foot over his left to turn around himself, he and the tree seem to multiply, as if in a kaleidoscope, till there is a whole line of men in identical clothing standing beside identical trees. Women, wearing black pants and blue pullovers with striped scarves, walk out from between each tree to stand in front of their male partners. Moments later, the men and women step away from each other and into deep lunges. From here both halves of each couple turn toward each other and cinematically blend together to become one person. This new person wears yet another color of pullover, so that the two lines of men and women in blue and green become one multi-colored line of men and women.

This opening sequence demonstrates a mixture of relatively pedestrian movement and basic dance vocabulary. In addition, the unison choreography and rows of dancers produce the visual aesthetic of a chorus line. The effect of multiplying a solo performer to create a chorus line and the collapsing of one performer into another via editing and digital effects evoke the visual style of Berkeley musicals, which were known for their incorporation of the camera into the choreography. In addition, both "trees" and "mountains" employ geometric formations and the classic Berkeley overhead crane shot to create kaleidoscopic effects (Fordham 2002; Dodds 2001; Altman 1987; Billman 1997). The commercial builds off of nostalgia for an earlier time in American history, and it does so through the evocation of the popular culture form of the film musical. The film musicals of the 1930s embodied idealized concepts of romantic love, community values, and an escape from the turmoil of daily life through the construct of the backstage musical and its reference to earlier forms of live entertainment (Feuer 1993, 95).

In addition to summoning forth images of Berkeley musicals, the commercials generate a feeling of nostalgia for the middle-class American ideal of a white Christmas, a vision shared through the media, as seen in holiday shows and Hollywood films by families of all socioeconomic backgrounds across the country, regardless of geographical location and/or the actual presence of snow as a meteorological phenomenon.[24] Evidence of the power of this form of nostalgia can readily be seen in the healthy market for winter coats, hats, and scarves that is present even in sunny southern California. The Gap reminds its viewers/consumers that the spirit of Christmas is something we produce and also consume—we can buy Christmas and with it the idyllic family holiday.

Just as the commercial reaches back to the 1930s film musicals of Busby Berkeley in order to create a nostalgia for the idyllic white Christmas, "trees" and its sister "that's holiday" ads generate a social identity for the consumer of this winter wonderland. Rather than achieving Berkeley's proliferation of female body parts, the Gap creates a proliferation of fetishized clothes. The Berkeley aesthetic of collapsing two or three figures into one person, or the inverse of having one person blossom into a chorus in a kaleidoscopic effect in "trees" and "mountains," creates a filmic and theatrical spectacle while revealing the multitude of clothing and the variety of colors and/or styles offered by the Gap.

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Taking the Gap's Musical Further

The Gap's "West Side Story" campaign, directed by Mike Mills, premiered during the 2000 Academy Awards ceremony and is the first campaign to so directly reference a well-known musical. Interspersing the spots throughout the ceremony lent an air of authenticity to them and used the television "flow" to effectively place the commercials within the historical tradition of dance on film. The film musical *West Side Story* (1961) is recognizably present in the commercials through aspects of camera work and, of course, the choreography and music. Choreographer and dancer Alan Johnson[25] staged the musical numbers, and the Gap paid the Jerome Robbins Trust a one-time fee for use of the choreography. Using the musical *West Side Story* as a source for its "West Side Story" jean/khaki campaign, the Gap builds upon the positioning strategies employed in the "khakis" and "that's holiday" spots. This third campaign marks the culmination of the clothing company's development of a commodity-sign built upon the blending of entertainment/art and advertising. In these commercials the Gap appropriates not only the theatrical and artistic codes of film musicals; it lays claim to the very authenticity of the Jerome Robbins/Peter Gennaro choreography.[26]

While the musical is clearly recognizable inside of the Gap's dance-commercial trilogy, looking more closely one notices how the Gap's trio of ads both reproduces and alters the "original" musical in ideologically powerful ways through its restaging of the work as an advertising campaign. In order to fully articulate the dynamic at work within the commodity-sign construction, it is necessary to look at Robbins's initial concept for the Broadway musical. His initial inspiration was to create a modern American version of Romeo and Juliet, moving the setting to 1950s New York, converting the family feud of the Montagues and Capulets into a turf war between the Jets and the Sharks, and replacing Romeo and Juliet with the characters of Tony and Maria. In the musical the Jets consist of the descendents of working-class European immigrants (such as the Polish American Tony), and Puerto Rican immigrants make up the gang known as the Sharks. For both gangs race, ethnicity, and class are conveyed through the signifiers of clothing, skin/hair colors, dialogue, lyrics, and choreography.

The Gap captures the narrative of the musical but adds its own twist by revising and restaging three central dance numbers as a vehicle for marketing their spring line of khakis and capri jeans for women. The male Jets wear traditional khakis and white t-shirts or pastel button-downs, while their female companions wear pastel capri-length khakis and pastel t-shirts. In contrast, the male Sharks wear jeans and black or primary colored t-shirts, while their female companions wear black t-shirts with bright, primary-colored jeans and jean jackets. The commercials focus on the presentation of the pastel, lighter colors and fabrics of the khakis as a representation of whiteness, and the brilliant, brash primary colors and heavy fabric of the jeans as a representation of the racially marked Other.

The "West Side Story" campaign utilizes the Gap's signature white background by creating all-white set designs depicting the rooftop sanctuary of the Sharks, the playground

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turf of the Jets, and the New York City streets, a maze of alleys and fire escapes, as seen in the opening shots of the film. These commercials differ from the previous campaigns in their increased use of theatrical lighting. Warm reds and oranges light the backdrops and sets of "America" and "Dance at the Gym"; cool blues and white spotlights add texture and intensity to the mood of the Jets' "Cool" number.

The commercials evoke the narrative of the musical in so much as they reproduce the gang conflict, with the exception that this time the Jets and the Sharks are identifiable solely by what they wear rather than their bodies' apparent racial or ethnic affiliations. In addition, the commercial spot employs elements of Robbins's original choreography from the numbers "America" and "Cool" to establish the identity of the Jets and the Sharks, as well as elements from "Dance at the Gym" to show an opposition of identities.[27] However, these dance numbers are simultaneously reconstructed with the goal of capturing the "original" and restaged with an eye to effectively manipulating the musical to create product personality. A brief description of "Cool" demonstrates the dichotomous agenda inherent in the ads.

The Gap's "Cool" opens with quick shots of the dancers posed throughout the space in small groups. Three men stalk across the screen in a low crouch as they snap their fingers; quick edits reveal the dancers thrusting arms out from the body as they half stand and half crouch, shouting the opening lyrics of "Go," "Cool," and "Crazy." These dramatic postures reference the original choreography; however, in the film this section of the choreography occurs about halfway through the number. Next, the dancers regroup upstage, facing the viewer/camera in two rows as they run forward in a low, crouched posture, jump, land, pivot, and return upstage. This traveling sequence echoes that of the musical with the exception that this group of dancers includes men and women, whereas only the male Jets performed this sequence in the film musical.

In the next shot, three men turn in parallel with one foot flexed at the ankle and suspend a pose before falling to the ground, roll lengthwise upstage, and rise up to pirouette on one knee as the other leg trails behind them on the ground. This choreographic excerpt exactly replicates a section from the film musical that originally occurred prior to the punctuated poses and accompanied the shouts of "Go," "Crazy," and "Cool." Thus, "authentic" choreography appears with modifications in sequence and casting. Obviously, there is not sufficient time within the thirty-second commercial to perform the entire dance number, which lasts approximately six minutes; however, the effort to include reconstructions of Robbins's choreography affirms the "authenticity" of the commercials, even as they diverge from the original.

Despite the apparent authenticity of the choreography, the Gap spots differ from the musical in essential ways. When the commercials premiered, they were shown in the following order: "America," "Cool," and "Dance at the Gym." In the "original" musical they occur as follows: "Dance at the Gym," "America," and "Cool." This change in sequence is the direct result of a change in concept. The order of these numbers in the musical reflects the development of the plot. After witnessing the danced confrontation between the Jets and the Sharks at the gym, and the beginning of Tony and Maria's love, the audience gains insight into each gang's internal dynamic through "America" and "Cool." Thus, the

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musical establishes and then builds upon the gang conflict, finding resolution only after the deaths of Riff, Bernardo, and Tony.

The Gap ads invert this progression, first introducing the personality of each gang and then ending with the confrontation between the two. However, the Gap's "Dance at the Gym" quickly shifts the focus of each group away from each other and toward the audience, so that the final image is that of both groups dancing together in unison, as though facing off with the television audience and potential consumers instead of each other. The variation in facing is subtle, but it has a distinctly different effect in this medium than the effect created by the staging of the musical in a proscenium space. In the staged version[28] the Jets and the Sharks trade moves, much like a challenge dance, before dancing simultaneously as a large group. As each group claims the space to show off their moves, they face downstage center on a shallow diagonal, so that they both appear to "face-off" with the other gang and to present the dance to the audience. In contrast, by having the dancers in the commercial "face-off" directly with the audience/viewer instead of the rival gang, the choreography acts as a direct form of appellation. Thus, the movement hails the viewer and implicates her in the construction of the commodity-sign, asking her to identify with either the jeans/Sharks or the khakis/Jets well before arriving at the commercial's conclusion and its verbal hailing of the viewer with the ad copy/slogan, "are you a jean or a khaki?" This campaign creates a sense of nostalgia through the obvious restaging of a popular and well-known film musical. In addition, the commercials rely on a nostalgic vision of romantic love and its ability to overcome social boundaries. In a more complex way, the campaign evokes a nostalgic sense of racial and cultural identity and an idyllic vision of authentic, rich cultural heritages.

Conclusion: The Gap and the Dance-Commercial Genre

These advertising campaigns are not the only ones to use dance as a focal point in television commercials; however, what I have tried to show is how they are particularly effective at demonstrating the gaps in which dance-commercials thrive. The white nothingness of the stage space functions as an inversion of the framed, three-walled black box of the proscenium stage, thus framing these commercials as performances even as they work to produce a commodity-sign. As I hope I have shown, the Gap has been particularly effective in creating a recognizable visual style that carries over from one commercial to the next, despite the fact that different directors and choreographers worked on each campaign.[29] The success of this effort is evident in the ease with which one can identify a Gap commercial within the first couple seconds of its airing. This concern with the "look" of the ads has value in terms of product recognition; however, I am particularly interested in how it speaks to an aesthetic vision in much the same way that a work by George Balanchine or a film by Busby Berkeley has a recognizable style and artistic vision. In addition, the choice of vernacular dances performed in small or large groups in the "khakis" ads and the use of musical theater numbers in the "that's holiday" and "West Side Story" ads allude to the history of dance on film and nostalgia for earlier, "simpler" communal forms of entertainment. Thus, these commercials straddle the gap between

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the theatrical and the everyday, simultaneously drawing the viewer's attention to dance as performance and dance as social practice.

Additionally, the Gap ads maximize the commercial form's potential to exceed its role as an advertisement while extending its ability to generate product personality. As I have demonstrated over the course of this article, the Gap's use of the post-mortise format "disguises" the commercial's address to the viewer, allowing its audience to identify with the dancers in a manner more typical of watching televised performances or shows. In turn, these commercials demonstrate the ways in which dance conveys cultural value and the power of movement to express social values and identity. The "West Side Story" commercials, jumping the gap between past and present, bring the musical to life in a wedding of commodities—here musical and Gap clothing join to create the commodity-sign in a manner that mirrors the way Tony and Maria's love strives to narrow the gap that exists between the Sharks and the Jets. Dance becomes the vehicle of this merger and sets the example for the merger of product and consumer.

And finally, I suggest that the white backdrop becomes a metaphor for the body of the consumer, signifying that the consumer exists as a tabula rasa, an empty space or absence, until the individual/body dons the Gap apparel and assumes an identity. This metaphoric role played by the white set design points toward larger issues surrounding the performance of race, ethnicity, gender, and class in the construction of identity. The Gap ads' reliance on dance and music to create and convey product personality highlights the role of the dancing body in this construction and speaks to ways in which identity is performative on a bodily level. A similar effect can be seen in the iPod television spots with their dancing silhouettes; the features of the individual dancers are erased, leaving the viewer-consumer to read the dancing body and project their own image onto the appropriate silhouette. These campaigns are merely the tip of a larger body of work, dance-commercials, that offers itself as fruitful medium for the study of dance in United States popular culture. Their presence in mass media and their role as advertisements assert the need for greater analysis of the political economy of dance in all of its various performances.

Notes

1. The Gap's in-house advertising team under the guidance of creative director Lisa Prisco created these commercial campaigns.

2. For clarity the title of the commercial campaign has been placed in double quotations, "West Side Story," and the title of the Broadway and Hollywood musical has been placed in italics, *West Side Story*.

3. For the purposes of this analysis, commodities are understood primarily from a Marxist perspective informed by a fundamental premise: "Political economy conceals the estrangement in the nature of labour by ignoring the direct relationship between the worker (labour) and production" (Marx 1975, 325). Goldman, following Marx, suggests the commodity system "redefines social relations as transactions, severs personal contacts from their social context and offers back to workers, in the form of the consumption of images, what has been denied them in the wage contract, namely status, individuality, freedom and sensuality" (1992, 17).

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4. For a more in-depth discussion of commodity structure and its relationship to sign structure, see Jean Baudrillard's *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981).

5. There are minor variations in the all-white backdrop and filming of the commercials in each of the campaigns, which I discuss in more detail later in the article. In addition, these graphic framing devices appear in several later campaigns. While recent campaigns have been filmed against more elaborate sets or on location, the "look" of the all-white backdrop has been retained and transformed in various ways. For example, spots are frequently formatted to resemble the appearance of wide-screen versions of films in which the image runs across the center of the screen and is bordered on the top and bottom by strips of all-white backdrop. This "look" is also used in the "West Side Story" commercials.

6. The commercials that include lyrics throughout the spot are "khakis country," "khakis rock," "khakis swing," and "khaki soul." The remaining commercials from these three campaigns incorporate vocals or excerpts of lyrics but have soundtracks that are largely instrumental.

7. The remaining khakis commercials end with the following slogans: "khaki a-go-go," "khaki soul," "khakis groove," and "khakis rock."

8. The second commercial in this campaign ends with "when you're a khaki," and the final commercial ends with the question "are you a jean or a khaki?"

9. Judith Williamson describes this dynamic of advertising through the metaphor of Lacan's "mirror-phase": "It is precisely here that ideology, as a system of representations which also invites *identification,* can and does intervene. . . . I prefer to use the idea of 'mirror phase' as a metaphor, a shorthand for all social and external reflection of the self" (1978, 63).

10. Paul Grainge points to a tradition of nostalgic themes in advertising and other theorists who have addressed these themes: "John Berger suggests that: 'publicity is, in essence, nostalgic. It has to sell the past to the future. It cannot itself supply the standards of its own claims. And so all references to quality are bound to be retrospective and traditional' (1972, 139). The nostalgic past has shaped commercial imagery at various points in the history of American advertising . . . The appeal to an authentic past in corporate promotion is nothing new. Within recent consumer literature, however, several theories have been used to explain the proliferation of nostalgic themes within contemporary advertising" (2000, 140). I am suggesting here that the Gap's use of dance alludes to the musical theater tradition as the harbor of an authentic past and, in doing so, builds nostalgia into the brand identity.

11. For a discussion of the ways in which a performance context has been created both with and without the proscenium arch as a visible element in Hollywood musicals, see Feuer (1993, 23–26). For a discussion of possible viewpoints on the relationship between live performance and televised performance, as well as mediatization more generally, see Auslander (1999).

12. For a brief discussion of differences in performance venues and how they function in creating a "frame" for live dance, see Foster (1986, 60–62). She explores differences in framing that occur between proscenium theaters, theaters-in-the-round, thrust stages, and loft/studio spaces. For a more in-depth reading of specific examples, see pages 99–167.

13. I am using the term *hip hop* here to reference popular dance styles that emerged out of African American and Latino communities in relation to popular music during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. These dance forms include lockin', poppin', electric boogie, break dancing, house, and the current form of hip hop dancing seen in music videos.

14. I am using the term *freestyle* to refer to individualized forms of popular or club dancing, some of which might be considered to be styles of dance associated with techno music and raves; however, the dance seen in this spot overlaps stylistically with that seen in "khakis groove."

15. The use of this term refers to dances such as the Frug and the Pony. In recent conversations with a colleague, I discovered that there is an ongoing subculture club scene centered on sixties go-go dancing. In addition, Bob Fosse employed this dance style in his Broadway show and film *Sweet Charity* (1969).

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16. At this time, I have been unable to gather complete bibliographic information for all of the "khakis" commercials. The Gap, thus far, has been somewhat less than helpful. Some of the information included here was pulled from various online Web sites and articles. "Khakis swing" (1998) is directed by Matthew Rolston with choreography by Travis Page and accompanied by Brian Setzer's cover of Louis Prima's "Jump, Jive, & Wail" (1998). "Khaki a-go-go" (1999) is choreographed by Marguerite Derricks and accompanied by James Clarke's "Wild Elephants" (1999). "Khaki soul" (1999) includes choreography by the dancers and Fatima Robinson, is accompanied by Bill Withers's "Lovely Day" (1970) and is directed by Hype Williams. "Khakis country" (1999) is choreographed by Jerry Grans, accompanied by Dwight Yoakam's cover of Queen's "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" (1999), and directed by Lisa Prisco. "Khakis groove" (1999) was directed by Roman Coppola with choreography by Tony Basil and the dancers, and accompanied by music from Bill Mason (Elia 1999; Starr and Waterman 2003).

17. "Khakis rock" was directed by Jonas and Josh Pate. The choreography was accompanied by Crystal Method's "Busy Child" (Fordham 2002).

18. Jane Feuer points to the use of "folk" dance in her discussion of Hollywood musicals as a way of breaking down the barrier between performer and audience. She states:

> Choreographers such as Eugene Loring (*Billy the Kid*), Agnes de Mille (*Rodeo*), and Jerome Robbins (*Fancy Free*) made what the dance critic Edwin Denby calls 'local colour' ballet out of American folk material—cowboys and sailors. . . . With Agnes de Milles' dances for *Oklahoma!* on Broadway in 1943, the new choreography began to penetrate the musical comedy, soon finding its way to the sound stages of MGM. (Feuer 1993, 8)

19. At this time I have been unable to locate additional information regarding Grans and his background as a dancer.

20. This spot is accompanied by the Kinks's "You Really Got Me Going" and is filmed on a white set and half-pipe (a kind of skateboard ramp) (Fordham 2002).

21. Both "trees" and "mountains" were accompanied by excerpts from "Ice Ice Baby" and "Sleigh Ride," which were spliced together throughout the spot. These commercials were filmed on a white set and an ice surface (Fordham 2002).

22. This distinction is made apparent through the age of the performers and the fact that, while the adults combine dance and ice-skating, the children in "kids" combine ice-skating with movement structures that resemble both playing games and Berkeley-style geometric choreography. In addition, press materials supplied online by the Gap to journalists indicate that one of the Gap's core target markets is eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds (McCarthy 2000).

23. Blanca Li is a Spanish-born dancer and choreographer active in the French modern dance scene. Her training and choreography is eclectic. She is trained in gymnastics, flamenco, hip hop, and modern dance (Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey). Her work has been known to have a Broadway sense of spectacle at times.

24. One classic example of this phenomenon is, of course, the film *White Christmas* (1954).

25. Alan Johnson began his dance career in musicals; *West Side Story* was his first Broadway show. He has since continued to dance and choreograph, and he is authorized by the Robbins Trust to stage Jerome Robbins's choreography. Since his musical career, he has choreographed for television and film.

26. Peter Gennaro has been credited as Robbins's co-choreographer on the original 1957 Broadway production of *West Side Story*. When the musical was transferred to film in 1961, Robbins restaged the choreography with the assistance of Tommy Abbott, Maggie Banks, Howard Jeffrey, and Tony Mordente. However, it is my understanding that it was Robbins who received the special Academy Award "for his brilliant achievements in the art of choreography on film," and it is the Jerome Robbins Trust that currently holds the copyright to said choreography (Billman 1997).

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27. I have researched the original musical by reading reviews, watching footage from television appearances where sections of the choreography were shown, and watching clips from *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* (1989). My analysis of the commercial's choreography is based on Robbins's "original" choreography from the 1961 film. However, there is footage of "Cool" from the *Ed Sullivan Show* (1958) that suggests that there is not much variation between the stage and film versions in terms of movement vocabulary and sequence, though there tend to be staging differences designed to create the same effect in both versions while taking into account the possibilities inherent in each medium.

28. My analysis of the staged version is based on video footage of the restaging of the "Dance at the Gym" number done by Robbins for his retrospective musical, *Jerome Robbins' Broadway* (1989).

29. However, in some cases, such as the "khakis" ads, the directors and choreographers varied from one commercial to the next. Despite this variation the television spots are clearly identifiable as belonging to a series.

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