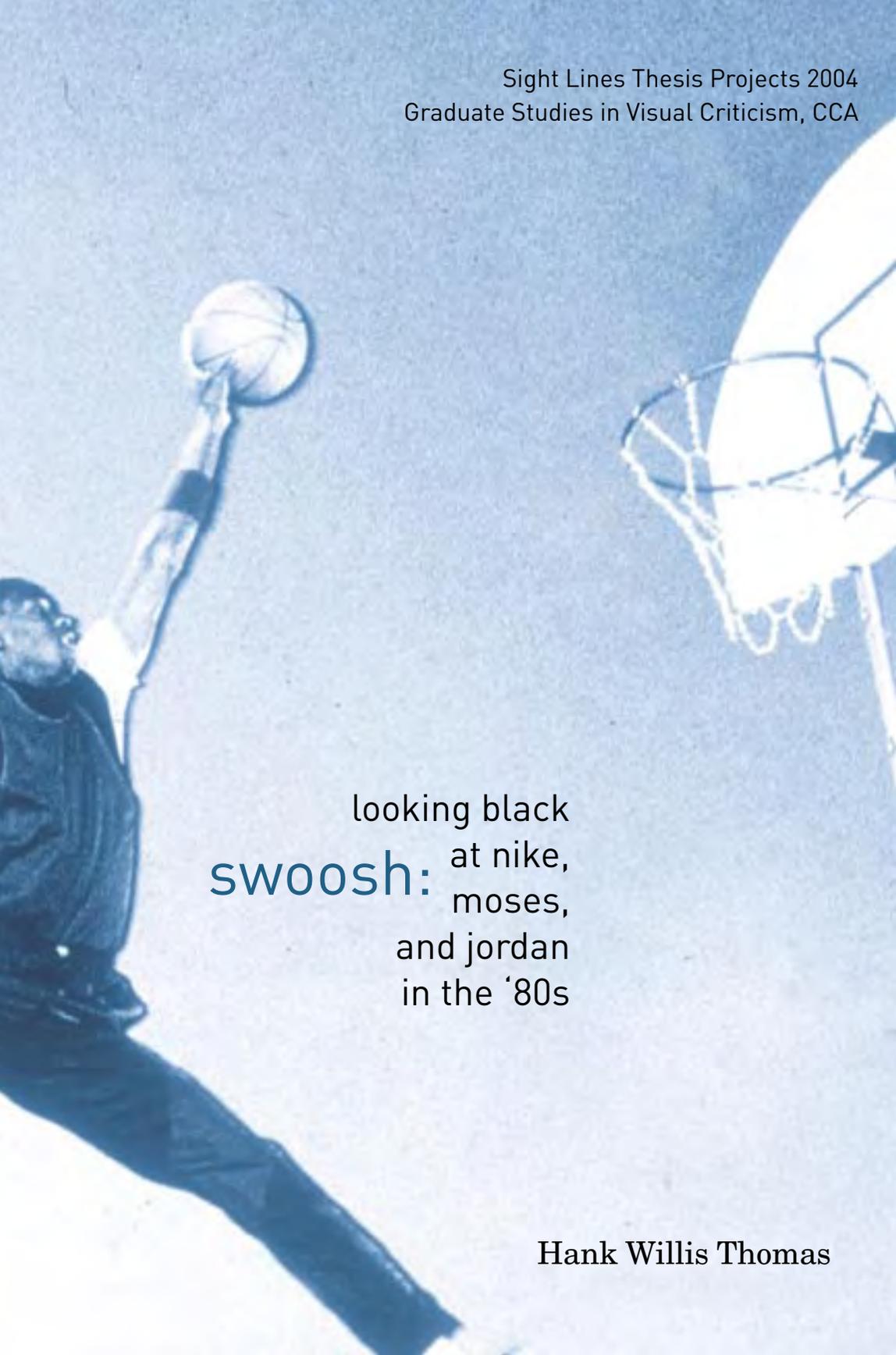


Sight Lines Thesis Projects 2004
Graduate Studies in Visual Criticism, CCA



looking black
swoosh: at nike,
moses,
and jordan
in the '80s

Hank Willis Thomas

JUST

Swoosh: Looking black at Nike, Moses, and Jordan in the '80s

"There is a saying in advertising that if you can sell the product, then sell the product. But if you can't, then sell the package. You sell what since the eighteenth century has been called, the trade dress."¹



Figure 1 Nike Swoosh Logo.

In 1904 it was possible for an American to go entire weeks without seeing an advertisement.

In 2004 the average adult is exposed to thousands of commercial images in the course of a single day. These ads attempt to allure consumers with statements about the products' powers to enhance consumers' lifestyles. Through ads, marketers create an image with their product that the consumer wants to emulate. The Phillip Morris Company created the Marlboro Man for their cigarette ads. The images in the campaign feature chiseled-faced cowboys looking rugged, sophisticated, and unmistakably "American" as they ride horses through western landscapes. The Marlboro ads play off of America's fascination with myths of the historic "Wild West," an era when men (especially white men) were "Men." The campaign is one of the most successful in history and has run for five decades. Another long-running campaign is that of Wheaties cereal, "The Breakfast of Champions." The front of the cereal box usually features famous, smiling athletes. The celebrated athlete's endorsement of the product implies, "you are what you eat." If you work hard and eat enough wheat bran cereal you just might be like them: a winner.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey suggests that the *image* of a product, as opposed to the product itself, is at the core of today's consumer economy.² In the athletic-wear industry, no corporation has capitalized on this notion of *image* more than Nike. The association of the Nike logo with basketball players such as Charles Barkley, Michael Jordan, Vince Carter, and other prominent athletes through slick photographs and commercials is the quintessential display of Harvey's theory. If you dress like a winner, then maybe...

Figure 2 Hank on swing, circa 1981.



PHOTO BY DEBORAH WILLIS

In the 1990s, Nike spent a half-billion dollars on marketing alone in an attempt to produce a corporate image that would entice consumers. It definitely succeeded; within twenty-five years it grew to be the largest sportswear company in the world and grossed over \$5 billion in 1996 alone.³ Low-cost products and high-cost marketing was the winning combination.

I got my first pair of Nike shoes somewhere around 1981. I was five years old (*Figure 2*). At about the same time, I learned I was black. At that age, I saw no connections between these two revelations. Eventually that would change. My shoes were blue canvas with white leather “Swooshes” on both sides. They had blue suede patches at the toe and heel. I remember examining them one night as my mother and I rode on a graffiti-covered New York subway train. I stared at the shoes with amazement. Something about them was special. I asked my mother what the word “Nike” meant.

It was written on the back of the shoe, and in that early stage of learning, I had never seen the word before. She didn’t know its meaning. I asked her what the white design on the sides of the shoes meant. She didn’t know the answer to that either. I asked a lot of questions in those days, but I never asked my mother to define being ‘black’ for me. Looking back, I doubt she could have.⁴

The majority of the people featured in Nike ads are African American males, creating a relationship between a corporate logo and a specific body type that needs to be investigated further. The fetishization and commodification of black male professional athletes during that decade deserves critical consideration. I want to look at a few famous Nike ads from the 1980s to better understand this relationship between body and sign.

The early 1980s was a watershed period for African Americans. Homicide and the introduction of crack cocaine ravaged our communities; meanwhile, signs that the civil rights era had officially ended were everywhere. Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* became the best-selling album in the world ever, civil rights activist and reverend Jesse Jackson was a viable candidate for president, the *Cosby* show was the most-watched television show in America, Eddie Murphy was one of the most sought after men in Hollywood, blacks were being elected to public office in greater numbers, and there was talk

of making Dr. Martin Luther King’s birthday a national holiday.

In its first ten years of operation (1971–1981), Nike created shoes for all popular sports markets, but focused most of its advertising energy on shoes for tennis, running, and basketball. The company signed popular athletes who defied socially accepted concepts of how athletes should behave on and off the court, track, or field. Socially abrasive tennis pro John McEnroe, who was known for verbally berating referees during matches, and Olympic track star Steve Prefontaine were among the early well-known athletes to sign endorsement contracts with the brand. Nike.com quotes Prefontaine, whose attitude about competition was in line with the company’s brand image: “When people ask me why I run, I tell them a lot of people run races to see who’s fastest. I run races to see who has the most guts.”⁵ The company’s success continued to grow well into the 1980s, but its worth multiplied by twentyfold between 1985 and 1995.⁶ The company’s Swoosh logo became one of the world’s most ubiquitous signs in just two decades.

Advertising critic James Twitchell highlights the key to the marketing success of Nike CEO Phil Knight and (advertising agency) Weiden and Kennedy, “...what Nike sells is advertising, the advertising is the brand, and the shoe is the byproduct.”⁷ Through athletes’ endorsements, Nike was able to create

Figure 3 Nike "Moses" poster featuring Moses Malone, circa 1982.



6

an image tantamount to victory, reliability, and dedication. Although Nike began as a shoe manufacturing company that prided itself on the technical advancements of their products, the company's global dominance is related more to its cunning marketing game plan than to its patented "Nike Air" technology. In *Nike Culture*, Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson state, "Phil Knight understood that brand value is not just about the product but about a sign, so that Nike's representations of athletes tied fans to the consumption of its products."⁸ Therefore *image* or "brand identity" is integral to the success of a company in today's commercial market. A company must be aware of and in some way align itself with its consumer base.

Professional athletes are seen by millions of people every week in the

midst of intense drama, displaying courage, sometimes failing and then coming back to win against the odds. Over time the good athletes become heroes. Some become larger-than-life; the best become superheroes and gods. After all, they are consistently depicted (via television, radio, magazines, arenas, and most important, through word of mouth) doing the best among the best in the world. It would only make sense for an athletic-wear company to ask the athlete to endorse their product.

In Twitchell's words, "Weiden and Kennedy taught Knight (who once despised ads) that...you can supercharge the endorsement process if you hype *not* the product, but the endorsing athlete."⁹ That is exactly what Nike has succeeded at doing. They constructed their image around athletes who challenged the way particular sports should be thought of and played. Michael Jordan is the most obvious example, but the company owes its success to a number of people who gave them the personality and character upon which the Nike image is built, including superstar athletes such as aggressive basketball player Charles Barkley in the 1980s, female basketball player Sheryl Swoopes, and the first and only "caublanasian" golf superstar, Tiger Woods in the 1990s to the present. The endorsement ads featuring numerous (mostly black) athletes often focus more on the mythical sports superstar than on the Nike products being sold.

Tom Vanderbilt writes:

The Personality Posters were central to Nike's great Marketing Breakthrough. It was no longer marketing its product-shoes-as-heroes. It was selling heroes as its product. The purchase of athletic shoes served the consumer like the commune ritual, as transubstantiation. In buying Nikes, a man or a woman was literally consuming part of a hero, and taking on elements of his (or later her) character.¹⁰

The image in Figure 3 is from an early 1980s Nike poster featuring basketball legend Moses Malone. In the 1970s, Malone was drafted into the National Basketball Association (NBA) straight from high school and quickly became a dominant player in the league. The image was later made famous by the artist Jeff Koons when he claimed it by putting a frame around it and attaching a price tag of more than a thousand times the poster's worth at a retail store. Koons's use of the poster was more than a postmodern appropriation of a commercial product. In retrospect, it marks an ideological shift in popular culture.

When looking at this ad/art, it is useful to refer to Roland Barthes, who wrote that the point of advertising is to "circulate fashion broadly as meaning."¹¹ Barthes is critical of the way text and image work together in a print ad. "The text *directs* the reader through the signifieds of the image . . . the text and image stand in complementary relationship."¹² He asserts that the text and the image are fragments of a more general idea

and their unification creates meaning on a higher level.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes recalls, "...I resented seeing nature and history confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down in the decorative display of what-goes-without saying, the ideological abuse which in my view was hidden there."¹³ Marketing and branding rely upon various signifiers and symbols to direct the viewer's attention to the intended motive, which can always be reduced to "buy this product (or fantasy)." Barthes connects the power of advertising to the perversion of reality, which then becomes "myth." Though it is professed as truth or reality, the images created and portrayed in advertising are deceptive.

An ad's greatest strength lies in its ability to "naturalize" the myth by erasing or downplaying parts of history, creating the appearance that things have always been this way. In the ad in Figure 3, there is no implication of the very recent history of struggle that allowed black people to be seen as equal to whites, much less people to emulate or copy. Barthes' dissatisfaction with myth is that it turns bias and prejudice into history. He argues that the truth of myth characterizes "what-goes-without saying": "Myth functions to resist the fragmentation of cultural memory by allowing us to take for granted all that is happening around us in everyday life."¹⁴

The greatest accomplishment of Weiden and Kennedy is how many signifiers they were able to embed within the Swoosh through print ads and commercials. One thing that “goes without saying” upon revisiting some of the early ad campaigns is that the Swoosh was a liberator for a generation of black men who would reach financial and cultural success unimaginable as children during the 1950s and 1960s. Superman could not fly without the “S” on his chest. The Swoosh, cleverly named to reference the sound of an athlete in motion, functioned in the exact same way for many black athletes of the time. And for fans who wanted to replicate their talents it was a symbol of empowerment. It not only appeared to enhance their talents, it also helped to redefine the mainstream image of black maleness. “The representation of the athlete (both personality and performance) is attached to a particular product. Each athlete acts as a signifier for a personality or performance trait (the signified) that is joined to a particular shoe.”¹⁵

The actual process by which a myth or image can become attached to a graphic symbol or logo is fascinating, considering today’s technology. For instance, the Nike Swoosh, which was created by a graduate student thirty years ago, has become one of the most recognizable symbols in the world, along with the Christian Cross, which took millennia to reach such ubiquity. What is even more astounding is the value and meaning that has been

placed upon a logo that was primarily created to be associated with a single commercial product (although some argue the same to be true of the Cross). In apparent contrast to the Swoosh, the Cross has historical and religious significance. It is a symbol of both Jesus Christ and Christianity. However, in actuality, these symbols have a lot in common. The Swoosh has become a symbol of something greater also. Not only Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, but the several victories that Nike’s most-promoted athletes have attained. There is a transcendence of their collective triumphs onto consumers and other bearers of the Swoosh. This is implied by the many Nike logo decals people put on their cars, popular fake Nike products, and Nike tattoos on people’s bodies.¹⁶ The cunning of Team Nike in the 1980s is responsible for elevating the logo to a nearly sacred level of appreciation on a global scale.

The text in Figure 3 directs us to read the image with biblical zeal. “Moses”—the echo of cultural authenticity is, as Barthes puts it, “in the origin of the name itself.”¹⁷ The entire story of Moses is consolidated for the readers in one ad. Moses has returned with the new and improved divine message, in which God says, “The path to spiritual enlightenment is through the basketball and Swoosh.” In the 1980s, this ad was defiant and provocative on several levels. First of all, it depicts a black man as a biblical leader. Previously, these types of associations in advertising were

taboo. Second, there can be no doubt that this is an attempt to make an association between the freed Hebrew slaves of Egypt in *Exodus*, and the history of black people in America. The other key element of this ad is the underlying meaning of black Moses’ message from God, which is, “Worship and buy these icons.” The Ten Commandments have been traded in for a ball and a Swoosh. It could also be read that these objects help Moses perform the miracle of parting the Red Sea—in this case, a metaphor for breaking the “color barrier” that would allow for black integration into mainstream American culture.

Barthes recognizes that an image alone can never have a singular or specific reading. As he says, “Image inevitably involves several levels of perception and the reader of images has . . . a freedom in choice” of what meaning to decipher.¹⁸ He implies that text eliminates that freedom. There is “meta-language” that allows the viewer to decode an intended meaning from an ad. This language essentially relies on prejudice to evoke the myth, which becomes truth, from the image.

There are several signs to note in this ad, but the most relevant to this Nike poster is black Moses’ attire. He wears a shepherd’s coat, but underneath, there is a basketball jersey. It is the uniform of the neo-biblical figure. His walking staff, which allows him to perform the miracles that saved his people, is in the shape of a Nike



Figure 4 Nike “Air Jordan” ad featuring Michael Jordan, circa 1985.

Swoosh. And last but not least are the shoes. The crusty old sandals (a.k.a. Air Jesus’ in black vernacular English post-Jordan) that brought him to the top of holy Mount Sinai are replaced with a clean white pair of Nikes that match his uniform. The red Swooshes on his sneakers that point outward reference the waves of the parting Red Sea. This advertisement is one of a few from the early 1980s that ushered in a newer era that redefined the once threatening notion of “black power” in the 1970s. It was still a revolution, but this one was more market-based than pride-based. In *Twenty Ads That Changed The World*, Twitchell describes what he believes to be the tried-and-true way to sensationalize brands over products:



Endorsement depends on a peculiarly human phenomenon called “spontaneous trait transference”... The desire to be close to our “betters” is at the heart of the “by appointment to the crown” trademarks on objects, why movie stars were forever puffing on cigarettes and washing with soap in magazine ads of the 1940s, and why our president spends almost an hour each day being photographed with well wishers. What marks our current crop of endorsers is that they come to us from sporting events, especially those that can be televised.¹⁹

1984. Enter the icon in red and black.

He is not Lenin, Mao, Che, or Huey; he is about as far as you can get from them. As “Rookie of the Year,” Michael Jordan captivated audiences and galvanized the NBA with his stellar abilities. He would continue to do this for almost two decades. But it was through this print ad (*Figure 4*) and the commercial that accompanied it that “MJ” became the first black

athlete to *truly* break advertising’s color barrier. He paved a golden road of lucrative endorsement contracts for the next generation of black athletes. Athletes such as Jim Brown, Julius “Dr. J” Irving, and O. J. Simpson had paved *his* way, but nowhere in mainstream culture had a specific image of a black man been so iconized. In this 1985 ad, Jordan, barely twenty-two years old, single-handedly elevated the image of black manhood. He altered the meaning of “blackness” forever. As he flew through the air toward the skyscraping hoop he raised the bar for black male success while illustrating the zeitgeist of pop culture in the eighties.

Considering all that was happening at the same time, it is easy to read symbolism into the image. The intimidating fist salute of the Black Power Movement, a decade earlier, was simultaneously amplified and commodified by the orange ball in the palm of Jordan’s hand. The basketball in this ad vaguely references a rising (or setting) sun. This was the dawn of a new era of images representing a less aggressive type of racial pride and wider mainstream success for black people in America. It was no longer angry or overtly political. It was a new day. The picture implies that Superman is real . . . and he is black. He doesn’t wear a stupid cape or blue suit with knee-high boots. Instead, his uniform is a typical rayon sweatsuit made popular by urban black youth of the hip-hop generation, and some shoes that no one has ever seen before.

A TV commercial that launched at the same time begins with Jordan lacing the Nikes. In slow motion, Jordan dribbles towards a basketball hoop and leaps in the air to make a dramatic slam dunk. The sound of an airplane preparing to take flight accompanies his movements. The engine sound reaches its high point at the same time Jordan does. It was impossible at the time to know how high and how far he had the ability to soar.

The NBA and Nike’s marketing of Michael Jordan had an especially significant impact on youth in the African American community. On the court and in the media, he was the epitome of black elegance, determination, wealth, strength, and cool. Jordan broke records as a relatively young, unproven professional player. The NBA made an early public relations mistake with the first appearance of the original red and black Air Jordans. “The Association... banned his signature sneaks because, in his words, ‘they didn’t have any white in them.’” He was fined every time he laced them up.²⁰ Each time he wore them was an act of defiance against the system, which gave him instant street credibility. Jordan broke the rules by asserting his individuality in every game.

The NBA was an established institution by the time Jordan entered the league in 1984, but it had struggled for a few years in the late 1970s. Some people complained that the players had become sluggish and

defense was weak. Others believed that the league had become “too black” (75 percent).²¹ Jordan’s team, the Chicago Bulls, was one of the worst in the league, with pitiful game attendance. Jordan was definitely one of the best players in the NBA draft that year, but he was picked third overall. During the next five years, the league and almost everything associated with it would grow into an international phenomenon through the breathtaking abilities and style of his generation (players such as Isaiah Thomas, Dominique Wilkins, Patrick Ewing, Earvin “Magic” Johnson, and so on). But, in the 1980s, satellite television and cable networks, not to mention a plethora of NBA commercials, as well as sponsors highlighting the “magic” of the game and players’ abilities, gave the league a status it had never known before.

As satellite television and cable helped make the sport more popular, corporate logos were transmitted to living rooms around the world. Jordan had a lot to do with that. His finesse, hard work, and almost balletic gracefulness on the court was reminiscent of (but more witnessed than) Dr. J, who played during the 1970s, an era when there were only three national television networks. In one game early in his career, MJ scored sixty-three points against white superstar Larry Bird and the Boston Celtics. In a postgame interview Bird called his rival “God disguised as Michael Jordan.”²² If he was right, Nike, the NBA, and a host

of other companies were lucky to hitch a ride on Jordan's back. McDonald's featured him eating Big Macs. Videos like *Come fly with Me* and books such as Walter Ios's photography book *Rare Air* illustrated MJ's talent. Many young black athletes were inspired to actually try to "Be Like Mike", as the Gatorade slogan went, and like other stars of the NBA.

About four years after my first purchase

of a pair of Nike shoes my mother and I were at a Footlocker store in a New Jersey mall. I will never forget the first time I saw them: Nike's Air Jordans. All I can remember thinking was, "Wha! How did they invent such a shoe?" They were hi-top sneakers with a drawing of a winged basketball on the back and Nike Swooshes on each side. And as if the style was not cool enough, the display rocked my nine-year-old world with a giant poster of a black man wearing the red shoes frozen in mid air! Just thinking about it now brings back the feeling of utter amazement. I don't think I have ever wanted something more than I wanted those red shoes (read magic slippers). I was heartbroken when my mother told me we couldn't afford them. I could get another pair of cheaper Nike shoes though. I was bitter. There was no picture of anyone flying or even jumping high in any other pair of Nikes. I wasn't stupid though. I figured I would just get a

cheaper pair of Nike's such as *Air Pegasus* (named after the winged horse in Greek mythology), and they could act as training wheels for when I got bigger and really needed shoes that could help me fly.

Every year after 1985, Nike introduced a new model of Air Jordans. The design of the shoes became more hi-tech looking, and through advertising saturation coupled with his domination of the sport of basketball, Jordan became a hero to some, and a god to many. The wings on the original shoe were no doubt a reference to the wing-shoed Greek god Hermes: "God of commerce, protector of traders, herds and thieves. As deity of athletes, he protected gymnasiums and stadiums and was believed to bring good luck and wealth. He conducted souls of death into the Underworld (Hades). He was connected with bringing sleep and dreams to mortals."²³ Not long after the campaign was originally launched, Michael Jordan had been elevated to his own deity status in basketball. The Air Jordans IIIs even got a new logo to prove it. The winged basketball was replaced with a silhouette of MJ from the original Chicago cityscape poster. Nike's trademark Swoosh eventually disappeared from the shoe as well, and Jordan in silhouette, dubbed "Jumpman," became a logo and brand unto himself.



Figure 5 Nike "Is it the shoes?" poster featuring Michael Jordan and Spike Lee, circa 1991.

When the new model of Air Jordans came out each year, every black kid I knew, rich and poor, was trying to get those "sneaks." A crisp, clean pair of brand spanking new Air Jordan sneakers was a supreme status symbol for anyone who wanted to be "down with the streets." It was up there with owning a car or a gold chain. One kid could be heard saying to another, "Yo! Did you see the new Jordans? Them joints is fly yo!" A typical response would be: "Yeah, man I got them on layaway" or "They're fresh, but I still like last year's better!" The latter was code for "my mom can't afford them." But if you walked down the streets of North Philadelphia or almost any poor black neighborhood back then, you were likely to find the "high rollers" sporting those one-hundred-sixty-dollar "kicks."

The average outsider looking around the projects or a dilapidated inner-city neighborhood might not have even imagined that teenagers were wearing shoes that cost nearly the equivalent to an entire month's rent. He or she might have wondered, "Why not trade the shoes in and move to a better neighborhood?" But that would defeat the purpose of buying the shoes. The point was to be in the *hood* and dress like a million bucks. It was one way for poor youth to defy the weight and gravity of their social class.

Of course there were utilitarian uses for the shoes. Nike and other competitors made a point to emphasize the technical benefits of their products on the court, field, and track. Nike Air shoes used patented technology to absorb shock and supposedly help with the vertical





Figure 6 Nike “Wings” poster featuring Michael Jordan, 1989.

jump. Reebok countered with the Reebok Pump shoe that was made with an actual pump inside the shoe to make for a tighter and better fit. But in the end, the competition hinged on who had the most popular endorser for their product.

14 Due to the increased exposure and success of black athletes, basketball talent was seen as one of the most promising ways to get a good black boy out of the ghetto (because all you needed was a ball and a hoop). Jordan played the Uncle Sam role, recruiting consumers in every market. By the late 1980s, the shoes were worth the price of a young black kid’s life in some neighborhoods. There were reports in various cities of teenagers getting robbed and killed for Air Jordans.²⁴ Although I doubt Nike or Jordan would have ever wished that the commodification of their products would reach such a level of intensity, neither made any overt efforts to counteract the incidents through advertising or public speech. After all, what better street credibility is there than to be the creator of shoes “to die for”?

Nike’s greatest success in elevating its shoes to “larger than life” status came with the pairing of Michael Jordan and Spike Lee in the “It’s gotta’ be the shoes!” television and print ad campaigns of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Figure 5). Lee reprises his ultra-dorky, wannabe Mars Blackmon character from his first feature film *She’s Gotta’ Have It*. Mars is infatuated with Jordan’s superhuman basketball talent and with how everything (even women) seems to come easily to him. Unable to fathom that Jordan himself could achieve so much success on his own, Blackmon makes the deduction for himself: “It’s gotta’ be the shoes!” These commercials garnered street credibility by featuring two prominent and inventive black males from that era. Jordan epitomized all that was virtuous in a young black man while the scrawny, hyperactive, big-square-glasses-wearing Lee is the antithesis of sex appeal, talent, and cool. The ads were extremely popular and played an important role in helping to solidify the belief that the road to success (especially for young blacks) was through physical ability, fashion, and the hoop.

The 1989 “Wings” poster and ad features Jordan wearing a basketball jersey with his arms fully extended at the sides (Figure 6). It became the best-selling Nike poster ever.²⁴ He holds a basketball in his right hand. His position is curiously similar to that of a man getting searched by police and the image of Jesus on the Cross. If the image were cropped to his head and shoulders it would be a mug shot. One has to wonder if any of these references are intentional, but the poster appears to play off of dozens of earlier ads that overemphasize Jordan’s ability to “fly,” which earned him the nickname “His Airness.” The life-size bedroom poster of the 6’ 6” athlete’s wingspan simultaneously accentuates his ability to hold a basketball in the palm of his large hand and the aerodynamic sleekness of his muscles. Although the Nike logo is featured prominently in the center bottom of the poster, no actual Nike product



is featured—unless you include Michael Jordan himself as a Nike-NBA-mass media created mythic hero turned product. The text just below Jordan is a quote from eighteenth-century English poet William Blake. It reads, “No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings.” In this ad the company stamps its Swoosh logo not only on the words of a renowned literary figure but on the body and prowess of Michael Jordan as well.

To reach the level of success it did, Team Nike would have had to depend on more than just what it made off of poor black people in the inner city, and the poor people in sweatshops around the world who make the products. In the late 1980s, Nike’s increasingly ubiquitous Swoosh logo was given its own slogan that consolidated the brand’s message into one sentence, “Just Do It.” The slogan presented Nike, and the athletes who endorsed their products, as fearless and committed to their goals. No questions asked, no complaints, no hesitation. Just do it. The ad campaign gave the corporation a straightforward, no-nonsense appeal

that was attractive to competitive athletes and to those who wanted to emulate them. There was also a subliminal message: “Don’t worry about cost; if you really want to be a part of our movement,

Just buy it.” And many people got the message, as they bought Nike sneakers with fanaticism.

In his book, *Sole Provider: Thirty Years of Nike Basketball*, sportswriter “Scoop” Jackson makes a bold assertion about the marriage of two corporate entities (the NBA and Nike) and the role of the athlete in this:

For thirty years a large part of the game’s life has been vicariously thru not just the sport, but the culture of the sport. Thru the shoes, the players, the commercials. Thru the drama, the icons, the history...A presence unparalleled, unmatched, unheard of and unseen by anyone. Instilled in the minds of millions: nothing can be accomplished, no success earned without the shoes.²⁵

16 He goes on to describe a hypothetical panic scenario in which a potential buyer finds out that the last pair of Air Force 1’s (Nike’s first popular basketball shoe) has been sold. In the scenario, the customer becomes upset and depressed and then is overjoyed when the stock person magically finds one last pair on the back of the shelf. Jackson boldly claims, “The love for the shoes and the athletes attached to them cannot be found anywhere in the world, except for in the game of basketball and in the shoes the game is played in...no questions shall be asked. Just appreciation.”²⁶

Nike managed to transcend racial and class barriers by associating itself with a generation of athletes (mostly black males and later to include females) who came of age on the tail end of the 1960s and 1970s movements representing individuality and emergence from mainstream oppression. Ironically, Nike became absorbed and moved to the center of mainstream popular culture. But the corporation has managed to find new ways to market itself.

Sole Provider’s author, Scoop Jackson, is obviously a big fan of basketball, Nike, and the players who wear their products. His book uses Black Vernacular English and a lot of hip-hop slang to describe ads, pictures, shoes, shoe designs, and anecdotes about the shoes, their designers, and the athletes who endorse them. With so much content it is remarkable that he does not make one negative observation about the company’s ads or their notoriously foul labor practices in the countries that have been making the shoes since the early 1980s. He also manages to never make a direct reference to race in a book with more than two hundred pages of pictures mostly featuring black athletes. It might just have something to do with the Swoosh on the back of the book’s jacket cover. The book obviously has a dual purpose. One: to historicize an era in advertising history. Two: to advertise every single pair of Nike basketball shoes to date. What better way to advertise a brand than to make a book about the history of its ads and products?

In certain ways, Nike’s self-aggrandizement, with the help of Scoop Jackson, is rich with information about a number of important moments in the history of the company. The author refers to Michael Jordan as ‘\$’. In truth, that is all he represents to a corporation anyway. Surprisingly, Jackson even admits what I would expect to be a company secret: “[the book isn’t really about shoes, but] about the advertising and how the central nucleus in this sub-culture is not solely about the shoes, but about the marketing of them...about how the shoes themselves became larger than life.” His 2002 book ends saying, “and the epic continues...”²⁷ And so it does.



Figure 7 “Revolution” Nike Basketball ad, 2003.

Endnotes

- 1 James B. Twitchell, *20 Ads That Shook the World* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), p. 177.
- 2 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990), p. 302.
- 3 Tom Vanderbilt, *The Sneaker Book* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 27.
- 4 I later found out that the name of my shoes were "Nike: Cortez," named after the conquistador who conquered and colonized the inhabitants of Mexico for Spain in the fifteenth century and "discovered" California. I find irony in the naming of that shoe that was likely made by Mexican sweatshop workers, though at the time those things didn't matter much.
- 18 5 <http://www.nike.com/nikebiz/nikebiz.jhtml?page=5&item=steve>
- 6 Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).
- 7 James B. Twitchell, p. 209.
- 8 Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, *Nike Culture*, (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 57.
- 9 James B. Twitchell, p. 211.
- 10 Tom Vanderbilt, p. 132.
- 11 Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983). p. 216.
- 12 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 40.
- 13 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Jonathan Cape (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 11.
- 14 Peter Pericles Trifones, *Barthes and the Empires of Signs* (Cambridge, U.K.: Icon Books, 2001), p. 14.
- 15 Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, p. 57.
- 16 I recently saw a woman in Costa Rica with the word "Nike" and a Swoosh logo tattooed on her hand.
- 17 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, pp. 40–41.
- 18 Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, pp. 43.
- 19 James B. Twitchell, p. 211.
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DO IT.

swoosh:

looking black at nike, moses,
and jordan in the '80s

About the Thesis Project

My thesis project examines the ways that the African American male body was depicted in popular Nike basketball ads during the 1980s. The essay that follows considers the ads' implications of black male physical prowess, and how the notion of "the cool black" was imaged and exploited in these ads. This essay also raises questions about the role of mythmaking with respect to "blackness" in the marketing of sportswear products, and the impact of marketing tactics on popular culture.



About the Author

Hank Thomas received a BFA in photography and Africana studies from New York University in 1988. As a visual artist and a writer, he is interested in notions of identity perception, commodity culture, and the impact of violence in African American communities. His photographs have

been published in numerous books, including *Reflections in Black: A History of African American Photographers* (W. W. Norton, 2000); *25 Under 225* (Power House, 2003); and *Black: A Celebration of Culture* (Hylas Publishing, 2004), and his work has been exhibited in galleries and museums internationally. Thomas is a candidate for dual degrees at CCA: an MFA in photography and an MA in visual criticism.