



**WOMEN AND MEDIA**  
**CONTENT / CAREERS / CRITICISM**

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# 10

## Criticism

### WOMEN FOR SALE

ANN J. SIMONTON

**Ann Simonton** is a former top model who appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, *Seventeen*, and in dozens of national television commercials before turning her back on this lucrative career to dedicate her life to exposing the media's role in exploiting women. Simonton is an international lecturer on the effects of media images and has been arrested and jailed 11 times for her nonviolent and often humorous protests. She is the founder and director of Media Watch, an educational nonprofit organization working to help people become critical viewers of the media. Simonton was awarded the Feminist Heroine of the Year, is listed in 1993's *Who's Who*, and has garnered national acclaim through her educational videos. The latest, *Don't be a TV: Television Victim*, received the Silver Apple Award from the National Educational Video and Film Festival. Her autobiographical writings have been published by HarperCollins in *I Never Told Anyone* (1983) and *Her Wits About Her* (1986).

According to the United Nations, "The images of women in the media (and its advertising) are among the main obstacles to eliminating discrimination against women" (Wynndham, 1987, p. 52). Creating a world where women's health, human rights, and safety are championed is not feasible in a society where images of women for sale litter every billboard, every street corner, and every newspaper. Eliminating these images won't create social equality overnight. The deleterious effects of transforming real human beings into consumable objects is likely to remain with us for many generations. Lasting social change will involve active, informed participants who take the media's imagery bombardment seriously. It is time for the advertising industry and the corporations they represent to move over so the silenced members of our culture can speak up.

## THE AD ATTACK

There is little doubt that advertising is effective in persuading viewers of all ages to purchase products (Huston, Donnerstein, Fairchild, et al., 1992). A more troubling effect of ads is the difficulty that viewers have when distinguishing ads from television shows, ads from movies, ads from editorial copy, ads from news, or ads from music. The cumulative effects of all these ads, like a constant haze of mental pollution, is desensitizing our culture. Human beings are being used like experimental guinea pigs in the media's ever-expanding marketplace. No known civilization in the history of humankind has previously been subjected to as many as 3,000 marketing messages a day (Collins & Jacobson, 1990).

The job of singling out problems specifically related to sexist advertising is difficult because most advertisers still claim that sexism doesn't exist. Their standard responses are, "It's sexist, but it sells," or dismissal of all complaints, saying they come from a few feminist rabidags who fuss about trivia (Wynndham, 1987, p. 52). Some advertisers are beginning to reshape the way they advertise to women not because they suddenly believe women deserve more dignity but because their economic bottom line is being affected. Women's presence in the work force has changed material realities, and this will eventually force a change in the reality of advertising. While these changes take place, a continual flood of old-guard images still abound.

Imagine the impression a space alien might have upon landing in a major metropolis in front of the following clothing ad that appeared on many bus stops: An angry, unshaven man brutally shoves a woman's face against a wall, yanking back her hair. The ad copy reads, "KIKIT." The alien might easily imagine that all women or, at the very least, *this* woman, had been bad and deserved his angry treatment, as well as public animosity. Why else would this image appear so prominently? Then this same alien could look down the street

to see a giant image of a second female, her breasts and body outlined in lights, her nipples flashing on and off. The adjacent sign reads, "Live Sex Shows, Totally Nude, Girls, Girls, Girls." A group of jovial men try to corral the alien inside. At this point the alien might conclude that females were a sort of unruly sex beast, bred for male entertainment. However, needing to confirm these assumptions, the alien radios a friend who has landed near a highway in an Iowa cornfield. The friend confirms that adjacent to the highway, a billboard displays a nearly nude woman's body and the words "Coors Silver Bullet." Later that day, the alien opens a local newspaper. A full page of headless women in bras is found next to stories of a kidnapped girl, a strangled wife, and a female injured in an auto accident who is then raped by a passing male motorist. The alien concludes that female humans are dangerous, sexual beasts, needing public humiliation and only the most severe violence to make them behave.

Most people would find the alien's conclusions ludicrous because the media have led them to believe that women's fight for equality is nearly won. The fact that women represent 50 percent of the work force, have their own credit cards, have laws that protect them, are part of the space program, watch shows like *Roseanne*, and hold two positions on the U.S. Supreme Court leaves the majority thinking that women have enough social equality. But the alien did not get the wrong impression—the general public has become too calloused to see what is right in front of them. To create images that better reflect the needs and desires of half of humanity, our society must turn a critical eye on women's image in advertising.

Ironically, the daily deluge of advertising messages make the advertiser's job more competitive and difficult. People, unable to recall yesterday's images, aren't as easily shocked or sated. According to Susan Sontag (1973), the more images people are fed, the hungrier they become. The number and variety of ads are increasing. Commercial television has invaded public schools, groceries, waiting rooms, airports, and gas stations. Even orbital billboards that will appear the size of the moon may soon become a reality (Reeves, 1993). The advertisers' job of maintaining a light, happy, consumer-friendly, fantasy world is all the more difficult given today's down market. Out of economic necessity advertisers' tactics rely more heavily on "sure sells." Unfortunately, women's sexuality has a long history of aiding the sale of everything from toothpaste and tools to Virtual Reality computer technology.

From the advertising pulpit spews the worship of consumption. Whether we unwittingly defy products and their companies through brand loyalty, or consider ourselves enlightened, objective shoppers, we increasingly define ourselves through what we consume. Corporate values have replaced American values. The "American Way" has been reduced to the freedom to choose which name brands we pledge our allegiance to.

Women are not only allowed into the high ranks of this consumer religion, they choose most products, including 80 percent of car purchases (Fawcett-Ward, 1993). Modern confessions are commercials in which a woman is shown

repentant over the image of her former fat self, then suddenly reborn through her devotion to the micro-diet. Famous stars offer personal testimony of being "saved" through jars of face grease. Advertising creates a heavenly world where dieters always work and makeup transforms average women into goddesses. Advertisers promise eternal love—while their real goal is to hawk sexual dissatisfaction. They want to keep women forever searching in the supermarket of love for the dress, the perfume, or that pair of breasts that will seduce her dream mate. Products are offered as a panacea for all that ails—while what advertisers are really selling is tickets to addiction. In the ad world, *love* is a gift such as diamonds. *Success* equals a sleek sports car, and *excitement* is the product of liquor. Consumer addicts are soothed with amnesia. The inevitable disillusionment when the product fails to satisfy is soon forgotten and transformed into hunger for another purchase.

Advertising's claims to celebrate woman, to cure her wounded ego, and to improve her sex life are promises more dangerous than the arsenic used in the late 1800s to whiten women's skin. Her negative self-image is magnified by advertised images of models with perfect faces and bodies. John Berger (1972) summed this up by saying, "The publicity-image steals her love for herself as she is, and offers it back to her for the price of the product" (p. 134).

It is appropriate to think of advertisers as corporate pimp. Affluent advertisers eagerly employ our country's best and brightest, in such diverse fields as anthropology, psychology, sociology, ethnography (study of cultures), hermeneutics (the science of interpretation), and semantics (the study of symbols). They do so not to further humanity, but to sell products by preying on human weakness, frailty, and self-doubt. The vice president of J. Walter Thompson's agency admits, "Ads are increasingly being designed to reach consumers at the gut level." Electroencephalograms are used by these agencies to measure people's physical reaction to commercials. Saatchi & Saatchi research director Penelope Queen compares the agency's one-on-one interviews to therapy sessions. "We believe people make choices on a basic primitive level." Queen says, "We use the probe to get down to the unconscious" (Miller & Tiantar, 1989, pp. 46-47).

The advertisers' intent is not only to exploit peoples' thoughts and emotions, but their collective unconscious. Their endless promotion of insecurity, greed, and envy may have helped create a society where children will kill other children for their name-brand sneakers (Collins & Jacobson, 1990). According to Peter Clibbon (1993) U.S. companies spend \$130 billion a year on advertising and are allowed to deduct all ad costs as a business expense. Clibbon estimates that this costs the government \$3.4 billion a year in lost tax revenues.

It is becoming common knowledge that advertisers "run the show" by determining the most favorable context for their ads. Articles and programs are either censored or not considered by editors and producers in favor of material that makes the ads look good. Some television writers work with advertisers to create television characters who need the same products advertised during the

show. A female character on an August 1992 episode of *Northern Exposure* had a severe case of dermatitis. The fact that this character worked as a waitress and had her hands in dishwasher was thought to be related. This scene was followed by a commercial, in bold type: "Amy's Sensitive Skin," selling Palmolive's Sensitive Skin dish soap. On the same show, a nasal dripping disc jockey with allergies was followed by an ad for allergy medicine. It's no coincidence. The current economic climate intensifies penalties for programmers and editors who fail to lure advertisers with "friendly" story lines. "Team players" keep their jobs, whereas journalists and television producers who refuse to play lose theirs.

Women's magazines, known within the trade as Cash-Cow Catalogs, have become one long advertisement catering to the whims of advertisers. According to Gloria Steinem (1990), the old advertisement-based *Ms.* magazine nearly lost its Revlon cosmetics account when the advertiser thought the Soviet women on a potential cover weren't wearing enough makeup. The Soviet women were scrapped, and the Revlon account saved. Gray-haired writer Mary Kay Blakely was told by the gray-haired editor of a leading women's magazine that her article about the glories of gray hair cost the magazine its Clairol account for six months (Steinem, 1990).

Advertisers regularly censor opposing points of view. Articles that might inspire women to think, act, or rebel are increasingly "inappropriate." Articles about the hazards of smoking are censored by editors and their advertisers, even though each year 140,000 American women die from smoking-related causes. A study from the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that "cigarette advertising in magazines is associated with diminished coverage of the hazards of smoking"—particularly in magazines directed at women ("Criticism vanishes," 1992, p. 23). *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown admits the reason she censors articles that criticize smoking is related to the fact that cigarette advertisers paid her magazine \$8.6 million in 1991. She said, "Having come from the advertising world myself, I think, 'Who needs somebody you're paying millions of dollars a year to, to come back and bite you on the ankle?'" (ibid).

According to Jean Kilbourne (1992), America's fastest growing group of new smokers is girls under the age of 11. Rather than warn women of the risks to their health, *Cosmopolitan* and *McCall's* actually promoted smoking as a way to lose weight ("Criticism vanishes," 1992). Cigarette ad copy that is directed to women invariably includes words like, "trim," "thinner," and "slim." It's not surprising that one study found that 39 percent of the women who smoke do so to maintain their weight (Wolf, 1992).

Advertisements profoundly affect human behavior. Betsy Sharkey (1993) wrote, "In 1955, when Clairol first asked the question, 'Does she or doesn't she?' most women didn't. Clairol's ads, which always used wholesome, girl-next-door-types, suddenly made dyeing hair socially acceptable, and the number of women dyeing their hair jumped from 7 percent to 50 percent almost overnight" (p. 92). People want to believe that they aren't influenced by ads. They prefer to think that ads work only for someone else, someone inferior. Yet

the gut-level sales pitches are successfully luring women and men into accepting irrational sales schemes and encouraging mindless and wasteful shopping habits. Spending habits that put designer clothes above rent and heating bills are causing bankruptcy and untold economic hardship. The 1980s slogan was "Shop Till You Drop." In the 1990s, the term is *retail* or "shopping therapy" ("Not & Hot," 1993, p. 46).

## THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING

The advertised woman is a conspicuous, two-dimensional artifice. Her lips are sensually parted. There is a finger in or over her mouth, as if to stop her from speaking. Sometimes her mouth is open wide, sucking and nibbling. She doesn't smile easily. If she does, her grin is her private secret. She appears to be teasing, angry, drugged, or scared.

The advertised woman is male-identified; she often desperately competes with other females for male attention. She schemes and manipulates, forever trying to separate a man from his money, as this Cutex ad warns, "By the time you finish your right hand, your left hand can be up to no good." Long, freshly painted pink nails reach around her man and slip into his pocket to take his wallet. Manipulation and deceit have, throughout history, been techniques used by the less powerful as a means of survival. Promoting this stereotype perpetuates the myth that women are not to be trusted.

The advertised woman is the implied bonus that goes along with the trip to Hawaii, the sofa bed, that six-pack of beer. Her link to products is so common that we fail to notice her or question her purpose. Most children grow up in environments that are filled with images of women as products. Too few parents or educators consider warning children that the young female draped around power tools or stripped in sports magazines portrays a dangerously unrealistic view of women's humanity.

To get an overview, I did a brief content analysis of the fall issue of a typical fashion magazine. *Harper's Bazaar* September 1994 issue contained 314 full-page advertisements, interspersed with 149 full pages of editorial. Fourteen pages contained both editorials and ads. Of the 314 ads, only 16 portrayed active women. Seven ads portrayed a woman or women who were running, working out, or dancing. Six were walking, one sat in a car, one played soccer in heels, and one pedaled a bicycle in high heels. Yet, the majority posed rather than attending to any task. One hundred and ninety-seven of the ads featured a woman or women passively posing for the camera. They stood, leaned, or sat, acutely aware of being watched. Five ads had women appear as body parts, in backs or bellies in the ads, two were nude, one of which was in bondage; three actually exposed their underclothes, and one was baring her arched neck.

Conspicuously absent in women's magazines are ads of working women. Rather than being associated with their work, women are much more likely to be lounging in a supine position—as if their time were unimportant. According to most ads, to obtain sex appeal one must be rich enough to be around all day waiting for her mate. This is Victoria's Secret: class distinction. According to a United Nations report in 1980, women do two-thirds of the world's work for only 10 percent of the world's income (French, 1985, p. 259). Women play a vital role in today's economy, yet advertising still prefers to teach women to prefer their packages rather than create, invent, or discover.

When ads *do* portray women working, the majority are still homemakers and caregivers who are somewhat less pathologically preoccupied with the tyranny of dirt. Ads from the 1980s promoted the supermom as corporate wife who had it all and still cleaned the toilet, took care of the kids, and had a home-cooked meal on the table by 6:00 p.m. In the 1990s ads, "having it all" has made way for the exhausted, but smiling, woman in a Virginia Slims ad, "Maybe I can't have it all, but I can have the best of the bunch." She holds her cigarette slumped over her choice of watermelons. That working women's fatigue has found a niche on Madison Avenue does little to encourage the men to get up and help.

Women in advertising are portrayed as being keenly aware of the fact that they are being watched and judged. This hypothetical and highly critical entourage has become a part of women's life.

From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the **surveyor** and the **surveyed** within her as the two constituting yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. . . . Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision; a sight" (Berger, 1972, pp. 46–47).

She performs a relentless surveillance—is she having a bad hair day; is there a run in her hose, lipstick bleed, oily nose, chipped nail—is she too fat? Transforming ourselves for another's approval is "almost always affected by the dominant culture which is male supremacist, racist, ageist, heterosexist, anti-Semitic, ableist, and class biased" (Morgan, 1991, p. 38).

The animosity between men and women is being heightened with the trend of "in-your-face-ads." A tired woman rejects a neighbor's invitation to join him for supper. Instead, she takes a raincheck and *his* ice cream in a 1994 Blockbuster television ad. Olympic figure skater Nancy Kerrigan, powered by Campbell's soup, shows an ice-hockey thug as his teammates wince. Eddie Van Halen's bylines for a BodySlimmer's ad reads: "While you don't necessarily dress for men, it doesn't hurt, on occasion, to see one drool like the pathetic dog that he is." The copy covers the legs of a headless woman in a bathing suit. Although it

is refreshing to see aggressive, independent women in control, the power gained from turning men into sex objects, calling them dogs, stealing their ice cream, and using unrealistic Popeyesque self-defense against men with clubs isn't the kind of power image many women want. Both sexes are desperately in need of images in which men and women together can work, play, and enjoy life cooperatively and respectfully as equals.

### Sex and Alcohol

Beer, wine, and alcohol commercials have a history of blatantly equating drinking with available female bodies, yet the days of thirsty men popping open inflatable pools and inflatable women bearing a couple of cold ones may soon be a thing of the past. Old Milwaukee's 1991 Swedish bikini team ads hopefully marked the beginning of the end. They featured women with identical bleached-blond hairstyles, bodies, and skimpy swimsuits and were accused of creating an atmosphere conducive to sexual harassment in the workplace. In a suit filed against Stroh Brewery by female employees, subjection to Stroh's sexist advertising became part of a litany of sexual harassment allegations. Stroh did not immediately cancel the Swedish bikini team ads, but they did pull an ad for their Augsburger beer: It featured a simulated television filled with the bottoms of bikini-clad women and the headline, "Why the average beer commercial has more cans than bottles." The copy continued, "Most brewers feature pretty girls and sex in their TV ads, while Augsburger prefers to spend on quality brewing." De Witr Heilm, the president of the Association of National Advertisers, scoffed at the lawsuit's allegations, saying that advertisers are "being wrongly swept into the concerns following the Senate sexual harassment hearing involving Clarence Thomas" (Teinowitz & Geiger, 1991, p. 48).

Findings suggest that alcohol advertising may predispose young people to drinking. To prevent drinking problems among our youth, attention should be given to countering the potential effects of alcohol advertising (Grube, 1994). Consider the effects of a popular print ad for Tanqueray gin of a woman sunning herself in a green bikini. The gin label literally etched on her stomach erases the line between her body and the product. John Kamp, vice president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, stated, "There's no such thing as an inappropriate idea or image" in American advertising (Williams Walsh, 1991, p. 1). Kamp's quote was in response to Molson Brewery using a woman called "The Rare Long-Haired Fox" to sell beer.

Alcohol consumption is directly related to violence to women. Fifty percent of battered wives reported that their husbands were drinking when they were abusive (Frieze & Noble, 1980). About three-quarters of acquaintance rapes involve alcohol consumption on the part of the victim, the assailant, or both (Norris & Cubbins, 1992). In addition to the direct role alcohol plays in violence against women, many alcohol ads reinforce and trivialize the problem. An ad for Atrakiska vodka portrays a frozen, half-nude woman slumped over and

holding a huge ice block, which seems to be stuck to her naked chest. This torturous image reaffirms the myth that women enjoy abuse. Not all images are this hateful. In fact, a hopeful change in the climate has caused a few advertisers to switch from common beach scenarios to scenes where men and women drink beer together (Teinowitz, 1993).

### Ageism and the Cult of Youth

The typical woman in ads is young. Childlike portrayals play up a woman's innocence, dependence, and powerlessness. Adult women mimic high baby voices. Women strive to be baby soft, to have baby's hair color, to have baby skin, and to baby themselves. For example, an illustrated ad from Cutex features an adult woman's red, painted lips sucking on an adult-sized pacifier. "Lipstick that makes your lips baby soft." Youthful-looking older women have begun to appear more often in ads. Isabella Rossellini, in her 40s, appears in makeup ads behind fuzzy filters to soften the lines. Lauren Hurton, who is in her 50s, appears wrinkle-free and without a hint of gray hair. Women are strongly urged to dye their hair because, as one ad says, "Why be gray when you can be yourself?" Women know men are attracted to women who emulate sweet, wide-eyed, waitlike baby dolls.

Women deny their maturity by shaving their body hair so they appear to be preadolescent—voluminous hair being, of course, restricted to their heads. The most heinous monster to attack the feminist movement is body hair, according to *Time* magazine. "Hairy legs haunt the feminist movement . . ." (Wallis, 1989, p. 81). Although men maintain their option to shave, women don't.

Advertisements sexualize little girls without alluding to the possible consequences of them imitating adult behavior. In one of Revlon's "Most unforgettable women in the world" ads, one of the models, heavily made-up like the adult women, is only seven or eight years old. The same child was used in a perfume editorial in *Harper's Bazaar* three or four years earlier. She was shown heavily made-up with a nude upper torso. Socializing females to be passive and to manipulate with their looks essentially sets them up to be victims. Socializing males to be attracted to this youthful ideal of beauty encourages them to seek the young and powerless to satisfy their sexual appetites. Statistics show that infants are being raped and preschoolers are being diagnosed with gonorrhea and other sexually transmitted diseases of the throat.

That we have all *learned* to worship this youth-crazed beauty standard means we can also *unlearn* it. We can all challenge the beauty ideal that preaches, "You can't be young enough."

### Racism

Racism is an implicit part of the advertised image. When women of color do appear, they are often portrayed as animals, savage beasts, or sexual servants.

Native American women wore skintight, see-through cowhide suits, their bodies branded with Will Rogers's initials, to help advertise New York City's Broadway show, *Will Rogers' Follies*. The players of the video game *General Gaster's Revenge* must traverse a difficult course to get to the Native American woman who is tied to a pole. The player is led by his saber-like penis, which he forces on the woman, who then "fucks up her legs in dubious delight." The motto: "When you score, you score" (Crenshaw, Matsuda, Lawrence, and Delgado, 1993, p. 119).

Women of color are doubly oppressed through advertised images. They are commonly portrayed through stereotypes and rendered invisible through a lack of representation. When advertisements do portray women of color, they are often urged to remove their ethnicity by straightening their hair, using bleaching agents, or wearing blue contacts. These women are shown "freely choosing" to aspire to this racist ideal. Asians westernize their eyes. Jewish women seek surgery to reduce their noses. African-American women reduce their lips, whereas Caucasian women seek to enlarge their lip size.

The fact that women of color are occasionally portrayed as articulate, intelligent, fully clothed humans may say more about the media executive's awareness of the increasing female audiences than any newfound scruples on their part. What is important to notice is that racially diverse images of women are the exception, not the rule.

### Voluntary Slavery

Women voluntarily enslave themselves to dangerous diet regimes in hopes of reaching the advertisers' ideal weight, which is increasingly thin and waiflike. Abnormally tall and thin fashion models exemplify endocrine or genetic abnormalities, not average women. Average women stand approximately 5'4" and weigh 144 pounds (Gilday, 1989). This discrepancy between the "ideal" and the real has increased the diet industry's annual revenue to more than \$30 billion (MarketData Enterprises, 1990). The diet industry's advertising and marketing is based on the creation and perpetuation of fear, biases, and stereotypes. Diet ads are famous for misleading claims regarding their safety and long-term effectiveness. Guilt and fear-based strategies make fat women blame themselves if they regain weight. Studies show that crash diets reduce life span, and that nearly all dieters who lose weight regain it within a year. Fat people are portrayed as unhealthy, unattractive, asexual, weak-willed, lazy, and gluttonous. Many women come to accept and expect rejections, mistreatment, and discrimination because of their weight. These messages lower fat women's self-esteem and foster discontent, self-doubt, and self-hatred.

Diet industry ads help fuel anorexic women's hallucinatory belief that they are obese, even as they literally starve themselves to death. According to the Association for Anorexia and Bulimics, 150,000 American women die yearly from anorexia. This is many more deaths than those who die from AIDS (Wolf, 1992).

Cosmetic surgery, like the diet industry, is another lucrative market. The average cosmetic surgeon makes \$1 million a year (Wolf, 1992). In a shopping mall in Santa Monica, California, after shopping for shoes you can go next door for a new nose. Cosmetic surgery, which is increasingly accessible, is the fastest growing medical specialty. Elective cosmetic surgery takes healthy women and transforms them into potential victims of side effects. Liposuction, the most popular form of cosmetic surgery, entails full anesthesia while a suctioning device is shoved under the skin and the fat—hopefully just the fat—is vacuumed out. Women trim their ears, lift their faces, enlarge their breasts, reduce their noses, break their jaws, shoot collagen into wrinkles and lips, and remove their ribs. One doctor offered to saw off a patient's bones to reduce her height. The physical dangers are minimized through the use of innocuous terminology. "Snip it, tuck it, exercise it—or learn to love it" (Newman, 1993, p. 364). These serious surgical interventions can result in infection, hemorrhage, numbness, embolism, pulmonary edema, facial nerve injury, unfavorable scar formation, skin loss, blindness, crippling, and death. These "minor complications" are rarely mentioned. Instead, the dissatisfied woman is encouraged to carve herself into the person *she* wants to be. Many women deeply believe that their only access to social and economic success is through surgery. As they see it, their survival depends on it. Already, the social deviants tend to be women who refuse cosmetic surgery. The question is no longer whether women will have "elective" cosmetic surgery, but when.

For virtually all women, success is defined in terms of interlocking patterns of compulsory attractiveness, compulsory motherhood, and compulsory heterosexuality. Patterns that determine the legitimate limits of attraction and motherhood. Rather than aspiring to self-determined and woman-centered ideals of health or integrity, women's attractiveness is defined as attractive-to-men; women's eroticism is defined as either nonexistent, pathological, or peripheral when it is not directed to phallic goals; and motherhood is defined in terms of legally sanctioned and constrained reproductive service to particular men and to institutions such as the nation, the race, the owner and the class—institutions that are, more often than not, male-dominated. Biotechnology is now making beauty, fertility, the appearance of heterosexuality through surgery, and the appearance of youthfulness, accessible to virtually all women who can afford that technology—and growing numbers of women are making sacrifices in their lives in order to buy access to the technical expertise (Morgan, 1991, p. 32).

Serious contenders in the beauty game turn to professionals for expert advice on their makeovers. In 1989, GuyRex Associates, the manager duo famous for creating Miss USA queens, helped groom the fifth Miss Texas, Gretchen Polennus, to win the Miss USA title. Gretchen underwent breast implants, hair weaving, dental work, and had her lower ribs removed to win the crown. "There are no more queens," explains GuyRex partner Richard Guy. "Momma doesn't make apple pie anymore, it's all frozen, all corporate-owned" (Chauna-Eoan, 1989, p. 85).

Beautiful women are often both envied and hated. Women are judged and judge one another, rather than acknowledging one another as allies in an oppressed position. Beauty contests are an institutionalized form of judging women and girls. The Miss America "Scholarship" program is one of the most dangerous, given that it is the largest educational scholarship available for women. Women are required to hobble on high heels and parade their bodies in order to earn an education. These contests might be less bothersome if they crowned their queens Miss Chevrolet, Miss Fruit of the Loom, or Miss Procter & Gamble. One needs only to watch a few minutes of these shows to understand they are just another advertiser's gimmick to sell products.

### Women in Pieces

Women are dismembered in ads: their bodies are reduced to a pair of breasts, a leg, an object, a rear-end, a crotch. A 1994 television ad for L'eggs flashed headless women "putting on their legs" in cars and on couches that merged with close-ups of their miniskirted rear ends. One of the most menacing results is that most women automatically view themselves in pieces. They may run through their checklist asking, "What do my thighs look like, my rear end, my legs, breasts, hands, ankles, toes and knees?" Women rarely think of themselves as whole and complete human beings. Men partake in this segmented view of women through such compliments as, "Nice legs," or "Nice breasts." Convicted rapists have been known to justify their rapes because their victims didn't seem human to them—they were just objects. Viewing women in pieces creates the objectification. Pieces of women's anatomy are literally strewn throughout our daily environment. A billboard for Epi-products featured a blow-up of a woman's thigh with the slogan, "Treat cellulite like dirt."

### Violence to Women

Advertisements help legitimize and normalize violence against women. According to the National Institute for Mental Health (1982), violent images of women in the media reinforce violent behavior toward women. In a Hanes ad, a frightened-looking woman wearing a cocktail dress and heels crouches against a wall, her hands over her ears. She seems to be avoiding a shrill noise or someone who is about to hit her. The copy surrounds her: "The shape you want to be in." In an ad for Kenar clothing, a model lies belly down on a tile floor. Her head is lifted, as if to avoid placing her face on the floor. Her pensive stare suggests she might be asking to get up.

Advertised women look hurt, frightened, dirty, or attacked. They are victimized, running away, humiliated, and slapped. Many women and girls believe that being sexy and feminine means imitating victims. Ads help teach them that their sexuality is enhanced by being powerless, subordinated victims, and that inequality is alluring.

Men not only don't have to take responsibility for their sexually deviant behavior, they can actively blame it all on women. A London Fog ad, for example, showed the back of a man opening his trench coat in flasher fashion with the caption, "London Fog wants to show you something you've never seen before." This blame-the-victim attitude is reinforced by advertisements of women flaunting their sexuality—appearing to invite, if not deserve, male aggression. The women in Guess ads look young, poor, and sexually available. Their legs are open wide, or they wear lacy teddies, unzipped jeans, and unbuttoned blouses in public. In one image the model's hair is dirty and her black bra is held together with safety pins.

These Guess ads were shot by fashion photographer Wayne Maser, who shared his thoughts with writer Susan Faludi:

The trouble with advertising today is everyone's afraid to take a stand on women. Everything's done to please the feminists because the feminists dominate these advertising positions. They've made women bland. My work is a reaction against feminist blandness," he says. But, he wants to make clear, he isn't trying to restrict women, just endorse their new options. "It's a post-feminist period," he explains. "Women can be women again. All my girls have a choice."

Jeffrey Trunher, Maser's assistant photographer, explains to Faludi why so many models are reluctant to work with Maser. "I've seen Wayne take a model who isn't cooperating, just standing there not showing any emotion, and push her face against the wall. Or he'll tell her, 'Get undressed—in front of him—and if she doesn't, he'll say, 'Get the fuck out of here. He plays with their minds'" (Faludi, 1992, p. 199).

Restriction, according to these fellows, looks great on females. The women appear to adore the restriction, smiling as they are tied in bondage in *Harper's Bazaar* or *Vogue*. The implication is that women are out of control, needing to be held down, held back. The media rarely shows the general populace the horrifying results of domestic violence. Instead we are fed a diet of glamorous beauties in lovely outfits, who cope well with being bruised, unconscious, or dead.

Sadomasochistic or S&M fashions help costume a society where pain and violence have become synonymous with love and being sexy. Chains and bondage themes appear in ads, in department store windows, and in major movie releases. What was big in the 1980s is growing even bigger in the 1990s. Helmut Newton's layout in the September 1992 issue of *Vogue* is filled with anorexic women in chains, dirtied, next to anorexic women dressed like men. The controversial S&M styles challenge women to be rebellious. Being different is in style as long as everyone imitates one another. The rebel S&M look is just another marketing ploy being peddled to women. Be liberated—wear chains. Be avant garde—pierce your clitoris. Primitive rituals performed for only \$39.95—just sign this waiver. Self-mutilation is touted as self-control. Permanent scarring, brands, and tattoos are temporarily in vogue. S&M trends are sold to women as their chance to rebel, to shock, and even to gain control over their bodies. Some women imagine adornments and restrictive accessories will



help them recover what has been taken away (Kauffman, 1993). And they believe it. After all, no two piercings are alike, no two tattoos identical. Is this choosing your own image, or another advertising ploy to preoccupy women with their looks, another angle to brand women with the willing-victim look as beauty theme?

The ad world claims they merely give society what it wants, or that ads are pure fantasy—they aren't real. The reality for women is that domestic violence is the leading cause of injury for women ages 15–44, and every 6 minutes 40 women are beaten badly enough to seek emergency medical attention (Smolowe, 1992). In 1990, 102,555 rapes were reported to the police in the United States. Of those, 18,024—fewer than one in five—resulted in convictions. The average time served was less than three years (Vachss, 1993). Fear of attack is understandably far greater in women than in men. Many women, who jump at every sound, have come to accept large doses of adrenaline continually coursing through their veins. The physiological effects of attack and the fear of attack make women more vulnerable to heart attacks, high blood pressure, and all diseases that stem from compromised immune systems (Kushner-Resnick, 1992). Yet women are continually portrayed as victims, hunted and preyed on as if it were all just an adventure. Gloria Vanderbilt ran a series of ads with women being stalked by ominous male shadows, with the caption, "Let the adventure begin."

### Mainstreaming Pornography

The line between what is pornographic and what isn't has become indistinguishable. Pornographic values pervade our lives so completely that they have become normalized, accepted, and anticipated. Pornographic films, which outnumber other films by three to one, gross an average of \$1 million a day. Film, television, and magazines are having to compete with the \$10-billion-a-year pornography industry (Russell, 1993).

Mainstream advertising imitates many of the values, images, plots, stereo-types, and even the costumes of pornography. *Playboy*' pinball machines groan and moan like a woman supposedly having an orgasm each time the ball hits the target. The nationwide Hooters chain of "breastaurants" have their all-female wait-staff wearing denim cut-offs and half-top T-shirts that read, "More than a Mouthful." There has been a sharp increase in the popularity of "sophisticated" topless bars and strip clubs. In some strip clubs, men can purchase topless women to give them a shoeshine. In the past few years, topless donut shops, topless car washes, topless hot dog stands, and topless housecleaning services have been made available (Cirriello, Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth, 1993). *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* recently touted topless dancing as a good way for female students to put themselves through college. After all, dancers don't have sex with their customers (Silverman, 1993; Hayes, 1993). A Neutrogena ad in the same *Cosmopolitan* issue asks, "Why not spend more time in the nude?" Another

ad in the same issue, for Club Carnell's active wear, shows a nude woman's bare back. She hides her breasts and glances over her shoulder. The caption: "We can't wait to show you what we have." An ad in a railway station in Tokyo portrays a young Caucasian teenager naked from the waist up. The caption reads: "Get to know a real live high school girl." It is difficult to know what is for sale until you spot a small can of juice on the right. The word for *know* in Japanese, *shirui*, also has the meaning "to have sex." Here a poster associates the taste of fresh juice with the "taste" of a virgin.

"Even such innocuous products as Liquid Drano and Hebrew National salami are being sold," the *New Republic* recently declared, "with a sexual explicitness once reserved for pay customers of soft-core pornography" (Murto, 1989, p. 77). *Harper's Bazaar* highlights the mainstreaming of pornography in an article touting the wonders of pornography for women (Darling, 1994).

In former Yugoslavia, the rape of women is being filmed for use as anti-Muslim and anti-Croatian propaganda and for profit. Serbian soldiers forced Muslim women to pretend to be Serbian for these rape films. "These materials become a potent advertisement for war, a perfect motivator for torturers, who then do what they are ordered to do and enjoy it. Yes, it actually improves their morale," says Catharine Mackinnon, of the University of Michigan (1993, p. 28). There have been reports that a Serbian tank that rolled in to "cleanse" a village was plastered with images from pornography.

In a stark, black-and-white ad for DKNY, from September 1993's *Glamour*, two women appear harried, poor, and hungry. One holds her head in her hand, the other looks wary, bracing for an attack. The two figures seem to lean together for comfort in the harsh light. The women look Slavic, and the image of Bosnian rape survivors is brought to mind.

### POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The media play a powerful role in depoliticizing violence to women. Advertisements that threaten violence and overt acts of violence to women help maintain male domination. Whenever advertisers reduce women to objects or dehumanize them, they engage in the act of publicly celebrating violence against women. Women's health and dignity have become expendable, secondary to a free market where women are peddled as products.

Many women who have been victims of male violence don't comprehend the political context in which they have been violated. Rather than seeing male terrorism within the context of the millions of women violated, it is viewed as a private problem. This is partly due to the fact that globally, many acts of violence to women aren't criminal; they are entrenched in social custom, and what isn't criminal is blamed on the victims themselves. Advertisers do their part by

isolating women and teaching them that *they* are the ones in need of therapeutic help—retail, surgical, or otherwise.

Many women learn early on to vacate their bodies. Learning the let's-get-it-over-with trick helps women endure catcalls, obscene phone calls, the application of makeup, cosmetic surgery and piercing, incest, rape, and the act of prostitution.

Women are taught to be willing to perform anonymous sex—for a price. "A wife. After all, it wouldn't mean anything. It's just my body. It's not my mind. It's not my heart. It's not my soul." This is an excerpt from the ad copy for the movie *Indecent Proposal*. The poster displayed the lower torso of a woman in underwear lying on a bed of money. Brides are for sale and prostitutes are rented (Clarke, 1993). The wholesaling of women in today's marketplace is far from being a victimless crime. Every woman is hurt when women as a class or group are for sale.

Depression is a predictable reaction to being tortured, denigrated, and undervalued. At least 7 million women have diagnosable depression (Avenoso, 1993). One study out of Duke University found that much of women's depression is the product of physical and social oppression. Up to 37 percent of U.S. women have suffered significant physical or sexual abuse before the age of 21, and 25 to 50 percent have been battered by a partner. Up to 71 percent of working women have experienced sexual harassment at work. Women receive inadequate child support, and women are usually the ones who care for aged parents. Women abuse weight-loss drugs, laxatives, amphetamines, and Valium disproportionately. Women make up 70 percent of the lucrative market for antidepressant drugs worldwide (Avenoso, 1993). According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, American women face the worst gender-based pay gap in the developed world, with more than 80 percent of full-time working women making less than \$20,000 a year (Rix, 1989). The pressures on women are tremendous. No wonder they are depressed.

The following ad shows a woman sitting on a bed in her push-up bra, looking into a mirror that reflects an open door. The woman looks slightly startled, as if anticipating someone about to enter. The copy litters the page,

I'm his night light. I'm his healer. I'm his favorite channel. I'm his umbrella. I'm his blanket.

I'm his weapon. I'm his little voice. I'm his painkiller.

I'm his savior. I'm his pillow.

**Which I guess could also make me his worst nightmare.**

Lilyette Bras and Panties Your underwear.

The advertisers' fantasy of creating the perfect female consumer may quickly be turning into a nightmare. While advertisers encourage women's sense of worthlessness, how will they stop their plummeting self-esteem? Drug abuse and death are not ingredients for ideal shoppers. Of course, advertisers are relentless—women who suffer from immobilizing depression can always tune into the home shopping network.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The promotion of sexist imagery, debasing language, and anti-woman biases found in advertising is clearly helping to promote major mental and physical health problems for women. Making the elimination of sexism a priority will entail enormous education. Americans deserve to know every possible risk associated with consuming our daily tonnage of sexist advertising. In-depth studies should be dedicated to understanding the consequences of consuming thousands of "sexy women" commercials. Individuals are also entitled to judge for themselves whether or not they are offended by advertising. A National Advisory Board should provide a consumer hotline with an 800 number that viewers can call to register their complaints. This number should be aired every hour or two on TV and on commercial radio, and should be a mandatory part of magazines and newspapers.

**Commercial-Free Zones** should be established, starting with schools, books, and museums. Zoning boards can be urged to curb or remove billboards. Congress could be encouraged to investigate the harmful effects of advertising in our society and to eliminate advertisers' tax deductibility of advertising and alcohol. Sales tax could be placed on advertising. The FTC should be pressured to regulate advertisers' influence of editorial or program content. The government should be pressured to label all ads, including product placements, advertorials and infomercials, as paid advertisements (Collins & Jacobson, 1990).

Ads don't have to draw from sexism and violence to work. Espirit's "What would you do if you could change the world?" ads gave young women a chance to espouse their political views on the world and were both innovative and powerful. This campaign initiated a new portrayal of women standing on their own two feet, fully clothed and speaking out about vitally important issues. Women's groups and other silenced groups can use marketing strategies to their own ends. One billboard from the women's group, Labrys, proclaimed, "Murdering and Raping Women is unacceptable. We will Fight Back!" (*off our backs*, 1991). Independently created Public Service Announcements can also be effective. Unfortunately, two independent groups, *Direct Effect* and Canada's Media Foundation, have had their spots—on topics such as sexual harassment, sexism, and media addiction—rejected by the three major networks and a number of cable channels.

The Fairness Doctrine, which stipulated that broadcasters should air opposing views on controversial issues, was scuttled by the FCC's deregulatory campaign during the Reagan administration. Media moguls claimed the rule—rarely enforced since its inception in 1959—constituted undue government meddling and had a chilling effect on free speech. This was essentially the same objection raised by the tobacco industry when cigarette commercials were banned from the airwaves. Whenever television is criticized, broadcasters cry foul and plead

that their First Amendment right of free expression is threatened (Lee & Solomon, 1990). Many media industries make money at the expense of public welfare by hiding behind these protections. Supporting free speech is imperative, yet free speech remains an ideal that is not equally available to every citizen. Women who are silenced daily through rape, incest, and battery don't have the same access to free speech that advertisers, pimps, and pornographers do.

For the American consumer, freedom of speech is now the freedom to be manipulated by corporate voices. Yet, if the only voices the American consumer hears are corporate voices, how free is speech? It's time people asked, "Free for whom?" Meanwhile, advertisers stand by with their First Amendment lawyers, determined to keep commercial speech free.

The FCC must initiate a mandatory allotment of time for citizens to voice their concerns on television. Imagine exposing racial prejudice in a 30-second commercial showing how Guns 'n Roses, Madonna, and Howard Stern become rich and famous by being as nasty as they want to. Yet when African-American rappers like 2 Live Crew are *equally* nasty, they land in jail. It isn't a lack of airtime that keeps controversial messages from reaching the airwaves. Free airtime is clearly available. Groups like the Ad Council, a corporate-sponsored consortium that creates nonprofit commercials, received more than \$1 billion worth of free airtime and ad space in 1989 alone. The Media Foundation, working to help people receive their rightful access to the airwaves, established both a petition to the FCC asking for this mandatory airtime and a hotline, at 800-663-1243. The success of their campaign will take the involvement of people like you.

Making sexist images socially reprehensible through public education is not impossible. The Harvard Alcohol Project, in cooperation with dozens of television producers and writers, spearheaded 95 televised episodes delivering negative messages about drunk driving. Messages about the negative effects of sexism could also be similarly conveyed to the viewing public.

Governmental regulation is a possibility, yet in countries like Canada and Australia, drafting and enforcing codes for advertising has proved difficult. Self-regulation is obviously the preferred first step, but self-regulatory systems need a great deal of consumer input. Penalties levied against advertisers must be made public, and the guidelines for advertisers need to be clear and easily understood. In the United States, self-regulation and governmental regulation policies lag far behind other developed countries. According to William Johnson, deputy chief of the Federal Communications Commission, "Basically, there's no federal regulation at all regarding sex in TV ads" (Muro, 1989, p. 77).

Consumers to Stop Sexist Alcohol Advertising, a U.S.-based group that began with members of the medical community and administrators of a battered women's shelter, has initiated The Dangerous Promises Campaign. It proposes that the beer and distilled spirits industry associations amend their advertising guidelines to read: "Alcohol advertising and promotion should not reinforce or trivialize the problem of violence against women. Alcohol advertising and promotion shall not (1) degrade, demean, or objectify the form, image or status of

women or any ethnic or minority group; (2) associate alcohol with adversarial, abusive, or violent relationships or situations; or (3) suggest sex as an expected result of or reward for drinking alcohol" (The Trauma Foundation, 1992). The Wine Institute adopted the guidelines in September 1993.

The best defense is public action, consumer awareness, and an understanding that advertisers desperately need the public's money to survive. Products that use sexist, racist, or violent advertising should not be purchased. Boycotts are *very* effective since most corporations respond only when their profit margin is threatened. The *National Boycott News*, *Boycott Action News*, and *Media Watch* will mail you their boycott lists on request.

The Media Foundation has initiated an annual, international Buy Nothing Day, September 24, for a 24-hour, continent-wide moratorium on consumer spending. Buy Nothing Day is designed to remind both the consumer and retailer of the true power of the buying public.

Letters to advertisers are also effective. They should be clear and concise, and should offer a return address for a response. Letters should be addressed to the president of a corporation or advertising company, rather than the public relations officer. Library reference desks are helpful sources of addresses, phone numbers, and names.

## CONCLUSION

The biggest barrier to social equality may be that many women have become unwittingly attached to the woman who is on sale and on display. Without understanding their options, women have become a part of the daily beauty contest vying for the prize look, the winning smile, the ephemeral crown. Unfortunately, most women don't comprehend their power to change the rules to the beauty game, especially if they are in a position in their work where they are both marginally respected and decently paid. Some women, understandably, want to paint their nails in peace. They want to pluck their eyebrows without someone trying to convince them that it hurts. They *know* it hurts. Women often lose their jobs, their identities, and their loves if they don't play the game. They make the most of their price tags, conspicuous as they are.

The beauty game can't be won. No one wins when women are raped and then blame themselves, rather than a political system that openly degrades their humanity. Women's lowered status allows the dominant male community to neglect their health and their financial status, and to neglect to study why they continue to be so neglected. Women are so actively hated that the hatred itself can't be acknowledged publicly.

Each year 150,000 women die from anorexia. Four die each day at the hands of their male sexual partners and an untold number die from complications related to cosmetic surgery (no one knows because accurate medical

records are not being kept). If White men were dying at this rate, a medical emergency would be announced, funds would be allotted, research initiated, sweeping changes would be made to national policy—and a possible monument might be erected in their honor. When women die, the stench from their bodies is ignored. They aren't allowed to pile up together. They are shipped out one by one. The enormity of pain, death, abuse, and hate being heaped on females is judged as unfortunate—but generally considered women's fault.

The advertising industry has done more than its share in reinforcing the idea that females are trivial, vile commodities and can, as a group, be easily trashed. Clearly, advertisers didn't invent woman-hating, rape, domestic violence or child abuse, but consumers must hold them accountable each and every time they promote it.

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