

Advertising, Gender and Sex: What's Wrong with a Little Objectification?

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I start this paper with an assumption: Advertising is a very powerful form of social communication in modern society. It offers the most sustained and most concentrated set of images anywhere in the media system. The question that I wish to pose and attempt to give an answer to from this assumption is what lies behind the considerable *power* that advertising seems to have over its audience. Particularly I wish to do this without reverting back to one-dimensional explanations of manipulation and the use of sophisticated techniques by advertisers. I do not want to deny this element (there is of course a huge amount of accumulated knowledge in the advertising industry concerning persuasion) but I wish to probe *culturally* rather than technically.

Erving Goffman in his book *Gender Advertisements* [1979] was concerned with similar types of questions although he did not phrase them in the same way. He instead asked another question: why do most ads not look *strange* to us? Goffman believes that when we look at ads carefully, they are in fact very strange creations, particularly as regards their portrayals of gender relations. He shows us that in advertising the best way to understand the male/female relation is to compare it to the parent/child relation in which men take on the roles of parents while women behave as children normally would be expected to. In advertising *women are treated largely as children*.

Goffman supports his argument by pointing to a number of aspects of gender relations in advertising. For instance, in examining the portrayal of hands, he finds that women's hands usually are shown just caressing an object, or just barely touching it, as though they were not in full control of it, whereas men's hands are shown strongly grasping and manipulating objects. Goffman is concerned with what such social portrayals say about the relative social positions of men and women. Beds and floors, for example, are associated with the less clean parts of a room; also, persons using them will be positioned lower than anyone who is sitting or standing. A recumbent position also leaves people in a poor position to defend themselves and thus puts them at the mercy of others. These positions are of course also a 'conventionalized expression of sexual availability.' Goffman's sample of ads shows that women and children are pictured on beds and floors much more than are men. In addition, women are constantly shown 'drifting away' mentally while under the physical 'protection' of a male, as if his strength and alertness were enough. Women are also shown in the finger-to-mouth pose, directly reminiscent of children's behavior. Further, when men and women are shown in physical contact, invariably the woman is 'snuggling' into the man in the same way that children solicit protection and comfort from their mothers.

If grown women are largely treated as children in ads, why does this not look strange to us? Goffman comments that indeed the most negative statement we could make of advertisements is that *as pictures of reality*, they do not look strange to us. To answer

this question, he reverts back to the vocabulary of social anthropology, particularly the concepts of ceremony, display and ritual. These are actions, or events, that seek to give structure and stability to a shared social life, to communicate the system of meaning within which individuals are located and within which they must be viewed. It is the use of this cultural resource that makes ads resonate with meaning for the audience. Ad maker Tony Schwartz [1973] has given the most eloquent expression of this 'resonance' theory of communication, whereby 'the critical task is to design our package of stimuli [ads] so that it resonates with information already stored within an individual and thereby induces the desired learning or behavioral effect.' Schwartz's concern is not with the message itself as a communicator of meaning, but rather with the use-value of the message for the audience. 'The meaning of our communication is what a listener or viewer *gets out* of his experience with the communicator's stimuli. The listener's or viewer's brain is an indispensable component of the total communication system. His life experiences, as well as his expectations of the stimuli he is receiving, interact with the communicator's output in determining the meaning of the communication.' [p. 25] The job of the advertiser is to understand the world of the segmented audience, so that the stimuli that is created can evoke the stored information: it has to resonate with information that the listener possesses. However, we should not confuse this *resonance* with *reflection*. As adman Jerry Goodis says:

Advertising doesn't always mirror how people are acting,
but how they're dreaming... In a sense, what we're doing is
wrapping up your emotions and selling them back to you.
[In Nelson 1983]

Thus advertising draws its materials from the experiences of the audience, but it reformulates them in a *unique* way. It does not reflect meaning but rather *constitutes* it. Advertisers, according to Schwartz, should be in the business of 'structured recall'. The purpose is to design commercials that create pleasurable emotions that will be triggered when the product is viewed in the marketplace. As Schwartz says: 'I do not care what number of people *remember* or *get* the message. I am concerned with how people are affected by the stimuli.' [p. 69]

Goffman is particularly interested in how advertisers use the cultural resource of gender and how they reconstitute what gender means in social terms. While 'sex' refers to the biological distinction between males and females, 'gender' is the culture specific arrangement of this universal relationship. Specific relations between men and women are very different the world over and can be given many different definitions depending upon the specific cultural pattern that exists in any society. As such, of course there is nothing *natural* about gender relations—they are socially defined and constructed. As such, any culture must constantly work to maintain existing gender relations. This is achieved during the course of social life by 'gender displays'—these are conventionalized portrayals of the 'culturally established correlates of sex'. In our daily interactions we are constantly defining for ourselves and other people what it means to be male and female in this society. From the way we dress, the way we behave, and the structure of our interactions, to things such as body

postures and ceremonial activities (opening doors, giving up chairs, etc.) we are communicating ideas about gender using culturally conventionalized routines of behavior. These displays, or *rituals of gender behavior*, help the interpretation of social reality, they are guides to perception. It is from these conventionalized portrayals of gender that advertising borrows so heavily, and that is the reason why, according to Goffman, most ads do not look strange to us, for they are an extremely concentrated reflection of one aspect of our social lives—they are a reflection of the realm of gender displays. Advertisers largely do not *create* the images they depict out of nothing. Advertisers draw upon the same corpus of displays that we all use to make sense of social life. 'If anything, advertisers conventionalize our conventions, stylize what is already a stylization, make frivolous use of what is already something considerably cut off from contextual controls. Their hype is hyper-ritualization.'

This however is not merely a simple reflection of reality—ads are neither false nor are they true. As *representations* they are necessarily abstractions from what they 'reflect'. Indeed, all communication is an abstraction at some level. For too long the debate on gender has been focused on the extent to which advertising images are true or false. Ad images are neither false nor true reflections of social reality because they are in fact *a part of social reality*. Just as gender displays are not true or false representations of real gender relations, neither are ads true or false representation of real gender relations or of ritualized gender displays—they are *hyper-ritualizations* that emphasize some aspects of gender displays and de-emphasize others. As such advertisements are part of the whole context within which we attempt to understand and define our own gender relations. They are part of the process by which we learn about gender.

In as far as our society defines sex as gender through culture (and not through biology or nature), we are not fundamentally different to any other past or present society. All cultures have to define gender for their own purposes and they all have conventionalized forms to accomplish this socialization. Gender relations are social and not natural creations in any setting.

However, I believe that our culture is different in one very important sense. Gender is only one aspect of human individuality; political, occupational, educational, creative, artistic, religious and spiritual aspects etc. are also very important elements of individuals lives. Human existence is potentially very wide and very varied in the experiences it offers. In our culture though, advertising makes the balance between these things very different—indeed, everything else becomes defined through gender. In modern advertising, gender is probably the social resource that is used most by advertisers. Thousands of images surround us everyday of our lives that address us along gender lines. Advertising seems to be *obsessed* with gender.

There are two reasons for this obsession. First, gender is one of our deepest and most important traits as human beings. Our understanding of ourselves as either male or female is the most important aspect of our definition of ourselves as individuals. It reaches deep into the innermost recesses of individual identity. Second, gender can be

communicated at a glance (almost instantly) because of our intimate knowledge and use of the conventionalized codes of gender display. Advertisers are trying to present the world in ways that could be real (Goffman calls ads 'commercial realism'.) and so they are forced to draw upon the repertoires of everyday life and experience. What better place to draw upon than an area of social behavior that can be communicated almost instantly and which reaches into the very core of our definition of ourselves. As Goffman writes: 'one of the most deeply seated traits of man, it is felt, is gender, femininity and masculinity are in a sense the prototypes of essential expression—something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes at the most basic characteristics of the individual.'

While every culture has to work to define for its members what gender relations should be, no other culture in history, I believe, has been this obsessed with explicit portrayals of gender relations. Gender and (because of the way in which gender has been narrowly defined) *sex* have never been as important as they are in our culture. Never in history has the *iconography* of a culture been so obsessed or possessed by questions of sexuality and gender. Through advertising, questions of sex and gender have been elevated to a *privileged* position in our cultural discourse.

The reasons why this should be the case are not mysterious. First, the 'discourse through and about objects' that is a part of the cultural discourse of any society comes to be defined largely through marketplace information in the consumer society. That is, it fills the void that is left when the traditional institutions that provided this meaning decline in influence, [see Jhally 1987] Within the domain of advertising, imagistic modes of communication historically have become more important as has the need for concentrated or instant forms of communication, [see Leiss *et al* 1986] Gender communication meets the needs of advertising very nicely here.

This may also offer an answer as to where the power of advertising derives from. The representations of advertising are part of the context within which we define our understand of gender. Advertising draws us into *our* reality. As Judith Williamson [1978] writes on this point:

Advertising seems to have a life of its own; it exists in and out of other media, and speaks to us in a language we can recognize but a voice we can never identify. This is because advertising has no 'subject'. Obviously people invent and produce adverts, but apart from the fact that they are unknown and faceless, the ad in any case does not claim to speak from them, it is not their speech. Thus there is a space, a gap left where the speaker should be; and one of the peculiar features of advertising is that we are drawn in to fill that gap, so that we become both listener and speaker, subject and object. [Williamson 1978 p. 13-14]

We do not *receive* meaning from above, we constantly re-create it. It works through us, not at us. We have to do the work that is not done by the ad, 'but which is only

made possible by its form'. We are drawn 'into the transformational space between the units of the ad. Its meaning only exists in this space; the field of transaction; and it is here that we operate—*we are this space*. [1978 p. 44] This crucial mediation by the audience is the basis of what Schwartz calls 'participation' whereby the ad does not manipulate the audience but invites their participation in the construction of meaning. It is also behind Marshall McLuhan's notion that the audience 'works- in the consumption of the television image. These systems of meaning from which we draw the tools to complete the transfer are referred to by Williamson as *referent systems*. They constitute the body of knowledge from which *both* advertisers and audiences draw their materials As such mass media advertising literally plays the role of a mediator. For the audience to properly 'decode' the message (transfer meaning), advertisers have to draw their materials from the social knowledge of the audience then transform this material into messages ('encode'), developing appropriate formats and shaping the content in order that the process of communication from *audience-to-audience* be completed. [Hall 1980]

The question is, what gets changed in this process for clearly advertising does not and cannot *reflect* social reality. As hyper-ritualistic images, commercials offer an extremely concentrated form of communication about sex and gender. The *essence* of gender is represented in ads. That is the reason why advertising is relatively immune from criticism about its portrayals of gender. The existing feminist critiques (those based on the content analysis of occupational roles in ads and those that focus on the forms of the Objectification of women) are pitched at an intellectual level that does not recognize the emotional attraction of the images. We cannot deny the messages of advertising; we cannot say they are false because they bear some resemblance to ritualized gender relations. Further we cannot deny them because we define ourselves at our deepest level *through the reality of advertising*. We *have* to reach a socially accepted understanding of gender identity in some way. It is not an option one can refuse. If we do not cope at this level then the evidence suggests that it is very difficult to cope at any level. Gender confusions cloud the entire domain of social identity for individuals. To completely deny the messages of advertising is to deny our definition of ourselves in gender and sexual terms – it is to deny ourselves as socially recognizable individuals in this culture. As Wendy Chapkis writes in her book *Beauty Secrets* [1986], 'The most important function of gendered appearance is to unambiguously distinguish men from women'. [p 129] If the dominant definitions of gender are not accepted, 'deviant' individuals are relegated to the perverted section of our culture (e.g., transsexuals, transvestites). I believe that is the reason why the feminist critiques concerning regressive representations in advertising have not been very successful; they have not recognized the basis of its *attraction*. The attraction for both men and women is important to recognize, although it is of course varied in its specific focus: in terms of the representation of women, men want possession of what they see while women identify with it.

If the critique does not recognize this attraction then the attack on advertising becomes an attack on *people*. People thus feel guilty about being attracted to the

images of advertising while being told that they should not find them attractive. Much of the best feminist writing on sexual imagery has of course been directed at pornography rather than advertising (or the two have simply been equated as the same). Ellen Willis writes of this for pornography:

Over the years I've enjoyed various pieces of pornography—some of the sleazy Forty-second Street paperback sort—and so have most women I know. Fantasy, after all, is more flexible than reality, and women have learned, as a matter of survival, to be adept at shaping male fantasies to their own purposes. If feminists define pornography, per se, as the enemy, the result will be to make a lot of women ashamed of their sexual feelings and afraid to be honest about them. And the last thing women need is more sexual shame, guilt and hypocrisy—this time served up as feminism. [1983, p. 462]

Similarly film theorist Annette Kuhn in her book *The Power of the Image* [1985] comments on the pleasures of 'reading' the film text:

Politics is often thought of as one of life's more serious undertakings, allowing little room for pleasure. At the same time, feminists may feel secretly guilty about their enjoyment of images they are convinced ought to be rejected as politically unsound. In analyzing such images, though, it is possible, indeed necessary, to acknowledge their pleasurable qualities, precisely because pleasure is an area of analysis in its own right. 'Naive' pleasure then, becomes admissible. And the acts of analysis, of deconstruction and of reading 'against the grain' offer an additional pleasure—the pleasure of resistance, of saying 'no': not to 'unsophisticated' enjoyment, by ourselves and others, of culturally dominant images, but to the structures of power which ask us to consume them uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways. [p. 8]

A critique of advertising has to start by giving people permission to recognize the pleasure, the strength, of the images of advertising, of where that power rests. From that, we can start to unfold the exact role that advertising plays in our culture from a critical perspective. There is of course a great danger involved in this move, for the recognition of pleasure becomes a distorted conception if it is not simultaneously contextualized within the context of (in this case, patriarchal) power relations. Pleasure can be used against people under the guise of freedom.

Now, the definition of gender and sexual identity is a difficult activity at the best of times; in modern consumer society this difficulty is compounded by individuals being 'bombarded' by extremely concentrated images of what gender is about. Advertising it seems has a privileged place in the discourse on gender in consumer societies due to

its prominence in our daily lives. As a result *what* advertising says about gender is a very important issue to understand. Gender could be defined in many ways (achievement, control of our lives, independence, family, creativity, etc). It is a multi-dimensional aspect of human individuality. In advertising however gender is equated almost exclusively with sexuality. Women especially are defined primarily in sexual terms. What is important about women is their sexual behavior. As the debate on pornography has indicated, viewing women from this narrow and restricted perspective can result in treating women as less than truly human. The concentration on one aspect of behavior detracts from seeing people as people. Rather they are seen as standing for something or being associated with one thing. As Judith Williamson notes on this point:

If meaning is abstracted from something, from what 'means' it, this is nearly always a danger signal because it is only in material circumstances that it is possible to 'know' anything, and looking away from people or social phenomenon to their supposed abstract 'significance' can be at worst an excuse for human and social atrocities, at best, a turning of reality into apparent unreality, almost unlivable while social dreams and myths seem so real. [1978, p. 169]

This is the basis of the feminist critique of objectification of course. When subjectivity is denied then one need not worry about people as people but only as how they may further your ends. Objects have no interest, no feelings, no desires other than the way they effect yours. Women become defined as an object for the other. Within advertising this is reflected in four basic ways in terms of the *representations* of women: 1) as *symbols* for an object and thus exchangeable with it; 2) as a *fragmented* object made up of separate component parts that are not bound together in any coherent way to create a personality; 3) as an object to be *viewed*; and 4) as an object to be *used*.

I want to stress that gender identity is constructed in part through social representations of which the most pervasive and powerful form in the consumer society are those associated with advertising (for women especially, much more powerful than those of pornography). The social construction of gender identity is not an option, it is a necessity. Judith Williamson writes more broadly on this:

Advertising may appropriate, not only real areas of time and space, and give them a false content, but real needs and desires in people, which are given a false fulfillment. We need a way of looking at ourselves: which ads give us falsely. . . we need to make sense of the world: which ads make us feel we are doing in making sense of *them* [1978 p. 169]

The radical feminist literature has drawn a conclusion from this analysis of contemporary patriarchy and its representations. Feminism requires the articulation of new types of gender relations and new types of sexuality. In rejecting standard

notions of beauty and sexuality (vital in a patriarchal culture for the construction of female identity) others have to be provided. Within the debate on pornography this has led to calls for 'erotica' vs. pornography or a sexuality that focuses on 'relationships'. Again Ellen Willis has commented insightfully on these issues in relation to pornography and the women's movement:

In the movement's rhetoric pornography is a code word for vicious male lust. To the objection that some women get off on porn the standard reply is that this shows how thoroughly women have been brain-washed by male values... And the view of sex that most often emerges from talk about 'erotica' is as sentimental and euphemistic as the word itself: lovemaking should be beautiful, romantic, soft, nice, and devoid of messiness, vulgarity, impulses to power, or indeed aggression of any sort. Above all, the emphasis should be on *relationships*, not (yuck) *organs*. This goody-goody concept of eroticism is not feminist but feminine. [1983, p. 464]

That is, in the political battle with the standard forms of patriarchal sexuality (and of course representations) there has to be an *alternate*, a different option, defined. This cannot be left to talk about the future and not basing our present actions on utopian possibilities. In the battle over gender we have to have that alternative vision *now*. The problem for feminists who reject the standard notions is to build a positive one that will *attract* people (both men and women). It is to recognize that culture is a battlefield, a site of contestation of visions and definitions of social relations (both 'real' and imagined). I think that up to now that alternative has simply not been one around which to rally people. The cultural battle has been lost. Even a radical feminist such as Susan Brownmiller can recognize the problem. She says:

On bad days, I mourn my old dresses, I miss the graceful flow of fabric. . . and pretty colors. Sensible shoes announce an unfeminine sensibility. . . Sensible shoes aren't fun. . . Sensible shoes aren't sexy... They are crisply efficient. As a matter of principle I stopped shaving my legs and underarms several years ago, but I have yet to accept the unesthetic results... I look at my legs and know they are no longer attractive, not even to me. They are simply legs, upright and honest and that ought to be good enough, but it isn't. [In Chapkis 1986, p 131]

Wendy Chapkis also asks how women's liberation ended up on the sensible side over the sexual, the 'efficient, upright and honest' over the colorful and fun . Ultimately of how the choice came down to one *between* principle and pleasure.

What a grim post-revolutionary world is envisioned. Artifice-free functional clothing is genderless and often comfortable. It

is also unquestionably sensible attire for many activities. But what would functional clothing look like if our intended activity is sex. Mightn't a lacy bra or sheer stocking have erotic appeal less because they are symbols of female *powerlessness* and more because they are familiar symbols of female sexuality. [1986, p. 133]

If gender symbols have a legitimate erotic role, then the challenge seems to be to find a way to allow for gender play without gender privilege. As Wendy Chapkis' 8 year old sister says about this in relation to her future life: 'My sister is a feminist. I am going to just like her when I grow up. Except I'm going to dress better'.

Judith Williamson referred before to advertising providing a false way of looking at ourselves, a false fulfillment of real needs and desires. I also want to argue that ads give us a false way to look at ourselves but I wish to establish *where* precisely falsity lies. It does *not* lie in the individual advertisement. There is nothing necessarily 'false' about the consumption of individual messages. That is what draws us in. Individually each message communicates a certain meaning. Each individual ad is produced for a certain strategic purpose in terms of communication. Conventionalized sexual imagery (i.e., high heels slit skirts, nudity) draws us in and makes an ad attractive for us. It is very difficult to criticize a single ad in isolation unless it is blatantly sexist or violent. Even the ones that explicitly objectify women become attractive or draw us in because objectification is a *pleasurable part* of sexuality. More and more of the feminist literature is starting to recognize this quite fundamental point that we all objectify men and women in some way at some time, that it can fulfill a socially positive function. As Ann Snitow [1985] notes in commenting upon Objectification and pornography:

The danger of objectification and fragmentation depend on context. Not even in my most utopian dreams can I imagine a state in which one recognizes all others as fully as one recognizes oneself. . . The antipornography campaign introduces misleading goals into our struggle when it intimates that in a feminist world we will never objectify anyone, never take the part for the whole, never abandon ourselves to the mindlessness or the intensities of feeling that link sex with childhood, death, the terrors and pleasures of the oceanic. Using people as extensions of one's own hungry will is hardly an activity restrained within the boundaries of pornography, [p. 116]

Wendy Chapkis recognizes that 'there is something impossibly earnest about the demand that we feel sexual attraction only in a non-objectified, ungendered fashion It may be impossible not to objectify an attractive stranger. Until one learns enough to fill in the blanks, the attraction can't help but be built on the image s/he chooses to project and the fantasy which the observer then creates.' [p. 134] Recognizing that

gender play and variation is difficult in a mainstream heterosexual world, Chapkis gives some pertinent examples from her lesbian experiences of how 'objectification' may be used in creative and pleasurable ways (for both, not just one side) where power is not so rigidly exercised. 'I slowly press myself against the fading pretense of butch restraint And then withdraw. She wants feminine, I'll give her feminine: promising but deliberately delaying her release. Now I lead this subtle dance. My painted nails flash a message that has nothing to do with passivity. Those fingers dipped in blood and red lacquer can penetrate her depths... These are symbols of control and surrender. But they are fluid; mouth and fingers, sheer underwear and leather ties, teasing out a woman's desire.' [p 136]

Similarly, Cynthia Peters and Karen Struening [1988] write in Zeta magazine:

Although there are important insights in the work of those theorists who challenge and repudiate men's objectification of women, there is a moment in the objectification process that must be saved. We are all sexual objects, and it is a good thing that we are. Sexual interactions require that we be able to see the other as a source of pleasure and sexual gratification... We must ask ourselves, do we want a world where the gaze is always evaded, in which words are never used to tease and flirt, in which the body is never seen as an object of sensual desire? Must sexuality be barred from the theater of public spaces? [p. 79]

Parts of daily life do have to do with sexuality and thus there is nothing wrong with individual messages that focus on sex and gender. (That is, unless one took a moralistic stance on advertising in which some messages are inherently unacceptable for public or private, viewing. Groups on the political right criticize advertising from this perspective Similarly some radical feminist theorists would argue against these images on the basis that all representations of heterosexual sex are representations of patriarchal domination.) Some parts of sexuality have to do with objectification, so that individual ads in that sense are not false. The falsity arises from the *system of images*, from the ads as a totality and from their cumulative effect. All (or at least many) messages are about gender and sexuality. It seems that for women it is the *only* thing that is important about them. The falsity then arises from the message *system*, rather than individual ads. It arises from the institutional context within which ads are produced and suggests that attempts to modify its regressive features should be concentrated at this level.

The argument I have made depends wholly on an understanding of the context of social phenomenon. While there is nothing wrong with a *little* objectification, there is a great deal wrong and dangerous with a *lot* of objectification—that is when one is viewed as *nothing other than an object*. Peters and Struening again write:

Many women walk through public spaces fearing the gazes, gestures and words directed at them. Although many women bring sexuality into the streets with fashion and body language, they do not think of the street as an entirely safe place for sexual play. They can (and do) seek the gaze of the other, but most women are aware of the attendant dangers. They know they cannot be objects of sexual attention with impunity. Many women have ambivalent responses to being addressed as sexual objects. While some women experience the gratification and pleasure. . . many others recount feelings of humiliation, anger, out-rage, and diminished self-esteem, [p. 79]

Commentating from a lesbian perspective, Wendy Chapkis recognizes not only the pleasure but the danger of sexual play in a world of male violence, 'where sexually provocative means asking to be attacked'. It is little wonder that many women simply withdraw from the standard conceptions of beauty, especially in public spaces.

Escapes from this situation are difficult to imagine but imagined they must be because, despite all I have said about pleasure and objectification, we cannot forget that the advertising system offers us the most negative and dangerous set of images of sexuality and gender anywhere in our culture. Battles can take place on all kinds of individual levels over definitions concerned with definitions of gender and the body. But they will be relatively meaningless unless one can effect the overall context of their interpretation. The 'discourse through and about objects' (of which advertising sexuality is a part) is at the present time a profoundly *undemocratic* discourse. It is controlled only by advertisers and media. What is needed is not monitoring of individual images but a restructuring of the total system of images so that sexuality can be separated from objectification and objectification can be separated from patriarchal power. We need to take *back* the erotic, not construct a new eroticism using none of the symbols of the past. To redefine, for example, silk stockings as symbols of female sexuality rather than to expel them from the lexicon of a new female sexuality. Wendy Chapkis writes: 'Sex, like its sister appearance, should be made more fun not more of a burden. Playing with the way we look, creating a personally or sexually provocative image has pleasures of its own. Denying ourselves those pleasures because they have been used against us in the past is understandable but hardly the final word in liberation'. [p. 146]

Within Marxist social theory it has been recognized that whatever comes after capitalism will depend on the development of productive forces under capitalism, that there are progressive tendencies and movements within the belly of the beast. Could a similar case be made with regard to the cultural realm? Can the progressive elements of contemporary culture be rescued and recontextualized in the transition to a more egalitarian society? Can we base a cultural politics on some of the products and outcomes of the contemporary cultural marketplace? Or will a future society involve a total overthrowing of capitalist social and cultural relations.

Some objects, phrases, and images have a deep connotative meaning that makes them incredibly powerful symbols of identification. We cannot simply give them away to the forces of reaction. One way to accomplish this would be to force new voices of liberation, new erotic images of the diversity of female beauty, into the present totalitarian discourse, to intervene at the level of the system of images, 'to dissolve the commercial monopoly on sex appeal'. [Chapkis 1986 p. 146]

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