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**Sex &
Money**

Feminism and
Political Economy
in the Media

**Eileen R. Meehan
Ellen Riordan
Editors**

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advertisers and agencies results from telephone surveys that asked for a report of current listening and of listening during the previous fifteen minutes. Greater accuracy combined with a lower cost from expanding the buyer base worked: CEH monopolized broadcast ratings throughout the "golden age" of radio. ACN achieved monopolistic control over network radio and television in the 1950s. It maintains its monopoly over television ratings to the present day and has extended operations into web site ratings.

6. Little if any interest has been expressed in Native Americans or viewers descended from immigrants from Asia or the Pacific Rim.

7. For example, in *Miami Vice*, the melodrama centered on whether Johnson's character would recover from the death of his previous partner, form a bond with his current partner, and sort out his love life. In *Nash Bridges*, the melodrama focuses on the continuing story of one man's family. Johnson's character must deal with the romance between his daughter and one of his subordinates, maintain his relationship with his father, and transform the woman investigating his operations from antagonist to friend and, perhaps, lover.

8. Personal interview with Judy Girard, head of programming, Lifetime, New York, 1995.

9. Personal interview with Douglas McCormack, Chief Executive Officer, Lifetime, New York, 1995.

10. Although the particular dynamics shift as demographic categories shift, I believe that the basic analysis holds for people of color, speakers of languages other than English, people younger or older than the valued age grade, gay men, lesbians, etc. One would look for dynamics rooted in colonialism, ageism, heterosexism, etc., and trace the connections to patriarchy and/or capitalism.

16. The Thrill Is Gone: Advertising, Gender Representation, and the Loss of Desire

Robin Andersen

The designers of commercial culture have long been using sex to make a sale. We are enjoined to buy, on a daily basis, a vast array of products because a connection has been forged between them and sex. That simple proposition, selling sex, is in fact not so simple, however, because it implies a staggering amount of expertise, psychoanalytic theory, research, development, and of course money, all of which have been directed toward attempting to commodify that complicated mix of biology and culture that constitutes human sexuality.

But it is not enough to assess the representations of sexuality, or any connections those social constructions may have to human sexuality, without constantly reminding ourselves that these representations are not designed to provide gratification. Instead, they are motivated by a very different set of commercial demands, and therein lies the key to understanding them. They are created to sell products. Such advertisements are artifacts of market relationships; in essence they are manifestations of the political economy of late consumer capitalism. It might be argued that, precisely because sexual imagery is designed to make the sale, it must, in some way, fulfill the passions it promises. But when one examines contemporary advertisements that depict gender and sexuality, many seem to demonstrate a surprising lack of passion. I have taught advertising criticism for over a decade. Every semester students survey and critique a vast number of ads, with representations of sexuality attracting particular interest. We have noticed recently a trend toward a particular type of ad, increasingly more focused on sexuality, yet done with a tone wholly devoid of affect. Looking at these images one might correctly observe that after almost a hundred years of selling sex, the thrill seems to be gone. After analyzing numerous magazine advertisements targeted to young people of both genders in magazines such as *Details*, *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Glamour*, among others, this paper argues that the representation of sexuality for the purposes of profit has reached, at least for the time being, a dead end. I will argue that there are basically two lines of analysis that will help explain this loss of *desire*, *affect*, *passion* in the

representations of sex, and necessarily, gender, in the advertising of late consumer culture. Textual analysis of several advertisements is interwoven with the theoretical perspectives developed here.

The first point to be made is that advertisements that associate sexuality with commodities, especially ones that contain at least the implied promise that sexual pleasure can be bought along with the product, must always disappoint. With the commodification of sex, the basic proposition is untenable. In terms of human passions, sex ads fail to satisfy because they confuse sexual gratification with the possession of objects. They attempt to substitute a state of *being* with the promise of *having* (Haineault and Roy 1993). Only in rare cases, demonstrated long ago by Freud, is human sexuality literally tied to a fetish, where the libido actually cathects to the object form. Therefore, because of their inability to satisfy, the commodified sexuality of the images exploited in advertising, tied to commodities, designed so obviously for profit, has over the years come to display a more mannered, distanced tone. The hip, cynical style of these contemporary images is at once self-referential and at times self-mocking, yet they cannot break the habit of trying to exploit sexuality for profit.

The second line of inquiry useful for understanding sexual representation in contemporary advertising is really a combination of the historical legacy of patriarchy together with the economic engine of consumer capitalism. It is the intersection of patriarchal social relationships with, for example, the \$20-billion-a-year cosmetics industry, which has produced the relentless cultural attitude that continues to value women based on their appearance. Regarding women's sexuality, advertisements habitually assert that women are sexy and desirable when they deliberately and self-consciously compete to attract the male gaze (Berger 1972). While it is true in some advertising specifically targeted to female markets, most notably for sports gear, that women are depicted in roles that assert independence, the greater tendency in consumer culture is to portray women as objects designed to attract the gaze, not only of men, but also of other women invited to emulate them. Most ads are a complex mix of the woman of old who lingers just under the contemporary gloss of a more liberated image.

Many sexualized images targeted to a male market segment demonstrate a prominent feature of patriarchal social relations, placing women in subordinated positions. The long historical habit of presenting women as objects of sexual desire for men, when taken to its ultimate conclusion in consumer culture, offers men personal power over

women. Contemporary media marketing targets men and women with different messages (Turow 1997), but as we will see, the promise of sexual power is a feature of the strategies of persuasion targeted to both male and female markets. However, there are important distinctions between the psychocultural dynamics of those different messages. Indeed, the consequences are much more severe in this society when men claim that power over women. I will argue further that these desensitized and, as I hope to show, dehumanized objectifications are part of a culture that celebrates gender wars, the dislocation of erotic desire, and the loss of human compassion. There are social consequences to reducing the human psyche to a commodity for the benefit of profit through persuasive marketing. Such a culture only makes it more difficult for young men and women to find fulfillment through relationships based on mutual respect, equality, and affection. This essay explores these issues and, in general, the relationship between sex and the sell, as it is manifest in contemporary advertising. It offers some formulations as to the complicated ways in which the culturally pervasive representations of sexuality function as one of the dominant features of consumer culture.

Izod and Strip Poker

Let's begin with an ad that ran in the men's magazine *Details* toward the end of 1997, promoting a line of clothing called Extreme Leisure by Izod. A group of young people, three women and three men, are playing strip poker. In contemporary surreal style, the colors are exaggerated and intense. Aquamarine walls are mixed with deep red curtains. Hot pink, purple, and gold splashes of color mark the carpeted floor. Through the windows the sky is bright yellow. Florescent fish are contained in a huge aquarium. The young, perfectly formed people are all in various stages of undress, the women down to their bras and panties. But one woman has lost all her clothes, save her provocative high-heeled gold slippers, and is walking out of the room. As she walks away from the game, she looks alluringly at us, the viewers of the ad, as the other players stare toward her back. Our view of her is only partially obscured by the fish tank.

At one level we might say this ad is a perfect example of the long history of using sex to make a sale. The ad is directed toward men. It features gorgeous women wearing very little—much less than the men. They are placed in an alluring setting, engaged in a provocative activity. The fantasy narrative created by the ad could certainly find its way

to a sexual resolution. And all this is associated with the clothing. A sports jacket and cap hang prominently on a clothes rack in the left foreground. As visual persuasion, the image provokes sexual associations without having to state anything explicitly. The quality of *syntactical indeterminacy* (Messaris 1996) allows the photograph to speak without having to make promises. There is no logical cause-and-effect relationship guaranteed—buy the clothes, get the girl—only the more compelling visual evidence that the clothes are unarguably part of the same setting occupied by beautiful, invitingly naked women.

But this ad is much more than the simple implied promise of sex. More curious than even the strip-poker game and its setting is the gray-haired couple standing outside in the yellow sky peering in, their mouths agape in expressions of shock. More curious still is the small white text on the left that reads, “Did you know? STRIP POKER attracts spectators. Charging them a fee to watch means money for more beer. More beer = more EXTREME LEISURE enjoyment.” The situation depicted invites the male viewers of the ad to think not only of sex and clothing, but of selling the view of the naked woman to spectators in order to finance their leisure activities, as it would appear the young men in the ad are doing. The poker-playing women are being turned into objects of exchange. The view of the female body becomes the commodity. The male consumer, like the ones in the ad, is invited to participate in the sale so they can continue consuming. For Extreme Leisure is an extremely commodified leisure. The young men must get the money to purchase beer, then they can have more Extreme Leisure. The commodity exchange is the more striking aspect of the ad, as it takes the simple sexual association into another, more titillating realm, one of sex in exchange for money—prostitution.

Looking at this ad, some might argue that the women are willing players and certainly participants in the Extreme Leisure enjoyment. Looking more closely we see that one of the men is holding a bottle of beer, but the naked woman in the gold slippers is sipping through a straw from a purple glass. Since she is not drinking beer she is not the one in control of the exchange relationship, rather she is its object. It is the sight of her being sold that buys more beer for the men. While she may be a willing participant, she is subordinated and dehumanized as the object of exchange. Here we might ask, how is it possible for the ad to be believable? Men looking at the ad are asked to believe that a beautiful young woman would willingly accept the demeaning role of being reduced to an object of sight in a monetary exchange for the

pleasure, not only of the young men, but of the older couple looking in. Setting aside the reading that she aspires to prostitution, what aspects of patriarchal commercial culture make such a seemingly absurd proposition plausible?

First, it is the self-mocking nature of the text and the cartoon style of the visual that turn the ad into a joke. It is therefore not rejected, but accepted as humorous. As a joke or cartoon, the ad can be interpreted as a somewhat silly stereotypic male fantasy, but one that includes women having fun too. It is therefore not rejected either as unbelievable or as too demeaning to women. Thus, the humor works by allowing the basic suppositions of the message to stand unchallenged and reinforced. The hip tone that reinforces conventional values is a strategy commonly used to target Generation X-ers, as Nicholson argues:

The advertiser hopes to win the hearts of Generation X by the use of “the wink.” By employing the blatant use of stereotypes, the advertiser is admitting to relying on this traditional form of advertising. However, because this new audience is so sharp and wise to the ways of advertising, these techniques are reemployed “nostalgically” for the amusement of the reader. The overt function of the stereotype may have been changed, but these tongue-in-cheek representations will serve the purpose of conveying the messages the stereotypes were traditionally meant to express (1997, 189).

For the male, the ad invites him to accept the values of a particular kind of commercialized sexuality, one that is for sale, something to be used for making a profit that can then be turned back into the purchasing of products. The basic supposition about women is that they find worth in their ability to be physically alluring and attract the male gaze. If women object, they will be unhip, unable to take a joke, and relegated to the position of outsider with regard to mainstream culture. In this way the ad simply adds a hip new contemporary gloss to a set of very old traditions.

The Object of the Gaze

To examine the parameters of such old patriarchal conventions, let's look at the ways in which women are addressed by the culture of advertising. The legacy of patriarchy meshes with cosmetics and fashion because they both judge women by virtue of their appearance (Mulvey 1975), not by their success or merit (Coward 1983). Advertisements attempt to persuade would-be female buyers by convincing them that

they will, and should, look better, more like the models featured, if they use the same set of products. Cosmetics and fashion emphasize, by their nature, appearance (Jacobson and Mazur 1995). Patriarchy, too, insists that women must, above all, *look* good. Historically blocked from full participation in the public sphere, women have had to deploy their ability to be attractive as their primary vehicle for acquiring social status (Wollstonecraft 1995). In Victorian times the highest goal was to marry well, and that type of social mobility was based primarily on appearance (Berger 1972). We all know that some things about the bad old days of patriarchy have been transformed. Women's demands for and successes in acquiring equal status in socioeconomic spheres are apparent in the world of images that reflect our lives back to us. But even by the end of the twentieth century, social, economic, and political equality had certainly not been fully achieved, and the legacy of patriarchy lives on. These transitional social forces have led to a complicated mix of imagery with multilayered meanings. Most images of women are complex negotiated constructions of the woman of old and the new "Woman of the 90s"—a phrase that came of age at the end of the century—expressed these contradictions. It came to mean that women must be the best, the brightest, the smartest, the most successful, and still look smashing at all times. Many images of women's sexuality in advertising in general are striking throwbacks to utterly (un)(re)constructed patriarchal representations as the image strategies persist.

The glamorous women of consumer culture with the perfect faces and skinny bodies who wear the clothes and makeup promise results. After all, they use the commodities, and because of them they have been personally transformed into objects of beauty, the cultural ideal able to attract the gaze. (Or, in the case of Izod, they don't wear the clothes but are presented as the object of the desire, the sight that attracts the gaze, the commodity that attracts the buyer.) "Maybe It's Her. Maybe It's Maybelline" is a clever line with plausible deniability that nevertheless implies that the model, though naturally beautiful, has really achieved her ideal appearance through the use of the product. And the product will help the would-be buyer achieve the same appearance. Tapping into the legacy of a patriarchal culture that constantly reminds us that we will be judged on the way we look is imperative for the cosmetics industry, because it sells products that alter appearance.

Along the way we are also told that we do not look as good as we could, we need to be better. Take a Clairol hair color ad that simply

features the face of an attractive woman, with the bold text at the top, "You, Only Better." The unspoken assumption is that you are not good enough the way you are; you need to be better. The words of John Berger (1972) still hold true, that consumer culture steals the love of ourselves from us and sells it back to us for the price of the product. On the one hand, advertising is an inviting world of fantasy where we can all achieve the ideal if we only have the product, but behind that world lies the unspoken threat that we do not measure up. Anxieties and feelings of inadequacy are also powerful motivations for consumption (Andersen 1995). Only by constantly hearing that we are not good enough will we be compelled to keep buying the products. Hoping to acquire the look, measuring ourselves using the models of perfection as the standard, in the words of Stuart Ewen (1988), is always an "invidious comparison." We will never measure up to those perfect representations because photographs are touched up, eliminating eye bags, age lines, and soft jaws. But the commodified desire (Andersen 1995) to emulate such images does propel the engine of consumption. And this is also true with images of the body.

Wasting Away

The standard cultural ideal for women has steadily grown thinner. Images of women are literally wasting away. The bony, pale, gaunt, ill look made fashionable by Calvin Klein's use of Kate Moss is now the norm. The haunting looks of the emaciated waifs at the peak of fashion stare out of magazines, catalogs, billboards, and television. The shrinking standard of thinness for women is an ideal impossible to achieve for the vast majority of females. The average height for a model is 5 feet 11 inches, and she weighs under 120 pounds. The proportions of the Barbie Doll are also extreme and bizarre. If Barbie were a human being she would be 6 feet tall and weigh about 110 pounds.

This impossible standard is propelled by market relations. It is precisely because such "perfection" cannot be achieved that it has become the commodified ideal. An ad for Philips television sets reveals this strategy. Three models in skin-tight clothing accentuating their extreme lankiness are pictured with the new TV set. So narrow is the new set that one of the models can straddle it. The text at the top announces, "A television so thin it will give regular TVs a complex." Just like the other TVs, women not as thin as the models will also have a complex, but one that will keep them striving to achieve the imposed prototype. The scrawny look is nearly impossible, therefore scarce,

and that scarcity is used to fuel demand precisely because it is, for the most part, unattainable. We might say then, that thinness for women is a manifestation of the political economy of patriarchal capitalism.

The most insightful cultural critics have always tied the meanings derived from textual analysis to the hegemonic assumptions that undergird the images. Dyer (1982) and Frith (1997) have offered systematic approaches that incorporate such an analysis into the deconstruction of advertisements. As layers of meaning are peeled away, the ad reveals basic attitudes and assumptions existent in the wider cultural milieu, the "philosophical persuasions" that are "unconsciously qualified" and condensed into advertisements (Dyer 1982). Images of women constitute a body of representation that continually reinforces a set of social assumptions about the way women should look. Throughout the twentieth century, modern industrial society has ratcheted down the acceptable amount of bodily flesh permissible on women (Ewen 1988).

Commercial pressures have also functioned to create a standard for women that grows thinner by the day. As advertising increasingly influences media content (Andersen 1995; McAllister 1996), the female characters on television are also shrinking. One of the more disturbing views of advertising attitudes seeping into TV is the case of Calista Flockhart, known to millions of Fox viewers as Ally McBeal. As we watch her waste away, she illustrates a growing (or diminishing) trend in the size of women on the small screen. The costar of *The Practice*, Lara Flynn Boyle, along with *Mad About You's* Helen Hunt, have also been shrinking. Elizabeth Crow, an editor for *Mademoiselle*, observed, "It was the norm in print but not the norm on TV. Suddenly there's a very skanky look coming in there" (Jacobs 1998). The skeletal look is the consequence of turning actresses into models for the fashion industry, promoting the clothes they wear in the pages of *TV Guide*, in the fashion layouts of magazines. "The gap between actresses and catwalkers has never been narrower," says *Vogue's* Katherine Betts: "People are really judging them by what they're wearing. They feel a lot of pressure to look good" (Jacobs 1998). What looks good to the fashion industry are women who resemble hangers. With the penetration of advertising influences, cultural assumptions informed by market relations become more socially pervasive, and this has been a major factor in women growing thinner. A generation ago "a typical model weighed 8 percent less than the average woman; more recently she weighs 23 percent less. Most models are now thinner than 95 percent of the fe-

male population" (Jacobson and Mazur 1995, 77). What is designed to sell is not an image of plump fulfillment. There is no profit motivation in that.

Power

Many times, especially in high fashion, the emaciated look is an anti-female aesthetic in which every reference to the female body is erased, as in the high-fashion photo layouts where the thin, barely covered torso of the model reveals no curves. Like Calista Flockhart, the woman pictured has no breasts, no hips, no thighs, no belly, nothing left really, no physical characteristic of sexuality. Ironically, in this instance, no adult female physical power. But ironically, though the look aesthetically is one of powerlessness, there is power in achieving the look. In fact, it is power that is offered to both the male and female markets. Marketing research demonstrates in numerous ways that people feel powerless in this society. They are not in control of their working environments, their lives, or their emotions (Andersen 1999). Mastery over the world through products is a standard enticement (Williamson 1978). Women are offered control over the germs in their bathrooms and men are promised command over the open road when they drive Sport Utility Vehicles. When it comes to representations of gender, power also plays a key role. When such mastery is offered in this culture, it is often at the expense of the opposite sex.

For women in consumer culture, power is the ability to attract. Because they have been impeded from achieving socioeconomic power equivalent to that of men in patriarchal culture, women have found their realm of achievable power constrained to the domestic, interpersonal, and consumer spheres. While those sociopolitical forces have begun to change, advertising culture is mired in the legacy of patriarchy. When women are offered power in advertising culture, it usually revolves around a product that guarantees attractiveness. Once again, the logic of patriarchy is employed as it mirrors the logic of marketing strategies. Take, for example, an ad for Lovable Bras, which assigns powerful, almost magical attributes to the product. The reader/buyer is assured that the product will "increase his pulse without cutting off your circulation." But the product comes with a warning—"our bras have been known to cause rapid heartbeat and shortness of breath. In the opposite sex, of course." The promise of the product is so profound it can actually stimulate metabolic reactions associated with arousal. As objects of desire able to evoke great passions, women

are then summoned to use that attraction to assert control over men. The appeal is obvious: everyone wants to be in control of their relationships and their sexuality, especially in a culture that tries to control that sexuality. But this is power confined to the realm of emotional control, not real political or economic power, the type of power that might lead to equality in relationships in the long run. While sexual power is often for sale to the female market, it comes at a costly price for women.

Fragmentation and Objectification

As the objects of desire women become just that, objectified, and this is expressed in many ways. Visually, women are frequently represented in parts. They are fragments, not whole beings. Feminists and cultural critics have long understood the consequences of such depictions. As Judith Williamson (1978) noted, selling makeup often involves separating and isolating one part of the face from another. Thus divided, one part of the body can even work against another part. It is easier to objectify a fragment of the body. It is no longer a person able to express humanity. The whole person is lost when she is cropped, chopped, and incomplete and becomes simply an illustration of an objectified physical feature—whatever feature needs to be emphasized to sell the product.

Fragmented Sexuality

One recent advertising image for Bongo shoes illustrates the way fragmentation functions to create highly sexualized images of objectified body parts. Different sets of women's legs intertwine across the page. A man is on the floor, horizontal, perched on one elbow, woven in-between the extremely thin legs adorned by the shoes. Only the body parts associated with male sexual desire need be included. Legs are also featured in a Nine West ad layout, this time only one pair, terminating about mid thigh. They are surrounded by three men enraptured by the skimpy sandals that bedeck the feet. The separated fetishized parts are detached, standing only as objects. As such they exist to fulfill the erotic fantasies of the males who watch and objectify them. The depiction of legs on their own, eliminating the rest of the woman's body, particularly the face and eyes, leaves no humanity to confront the male spectators.

These images are striking throwbacks to the legs on a pedestal noted by Marshall McLuhan in 1951. McLuhan (1967, 99) referred to them as "commercially sponsored glamour." Such ads, he argued, en-

courage a "strange dissociation of sex not only from the human person but even from the unity of the body."¹ The persistence of such imagery over the years raises questions about the consequences for male and female sexuality. Why is it easier to represent male passions by presenting women as desecrated objects of sexual pleasure for them, not as whole beings who have their own passions to be shared?

Advertising imagery must be immediate and summon instant desire. Such representations have a long history, tied to pornography, in which men find pleasure in viewing two-dimensional images of women. Objectified body parts are the blunt instrument of persuasion. When such visual captivation is used to make the sale, the result is often a complex and pernicious scenario that raises a variety of disturbing attitudes toward women.

And what of women readers/buyers? Do the ads convince female consumers to buy the shoes and become dehumanized? For women, the ads make a powerful promise in return. They pledge to the would-be buyer that her legs too, thus embellished, can be the objects of desire. Her gratification is highly constrained, however. It comes through being desired, through controlling the passions of the male gaze. But what of her own passions? Is she really fulfilled just by being the object of desire? Has the female consumer so internalized the male gaze that she finds satisfaction by looking through the eyes of the man, fulfilled by his desire for her, which is now also her desire? Or do consumer representations promise her future gratification once she successfully becomes the object of desire? Then will her passions be fulfilled? These questions of culture and sexuality intersect in complicated ways in advertising representations, but they do not usually result in challenging dominant conceptions of female sexuality. Power and pleasure are so closely fused in advertising that pleasure is assumed from the promise of power and control, not allusions to sexual gratification. And as Savan (1994, 226) points out, ads that promise power "let women vent steam while clamping them into traditional stances toward men."

Those traditional stances often have negative consequences for female consumers. First, as noted, it is extremely difficult to achieve the standard look of ornamental beauty promoted in advertising imagery. The look that affords psychocultural sexual power is almost impossible to achieve without destroying one's health. Problems with body image abound, and appearance anxiety sends women far in their quest to fix the problem. The diet and exercise industry is a \$75 billion annual financial windfall. On any given day 25 percent of American women are dieting, and another 50 percent are finishing, breaking, or starting

diets. One survey found that 50 percent of respondents used diet pills, 27 percent used liquid-formula diets, 18 percent used diuretics, 45 percent fasted, 18 percent used laxatives, and 15 percent engaged in self-induced vomiting (Jacobson and Mazur 1995, 78). Numerous surveys of young women demonstrate their displeasure with the way they look. A survey of 494 school girls found more than half thought they were fat, yet only 15 percent were medically overweight (Jacobson and Mazur 1995, 78). Almost 40 percent of women who smoke say they do so to keep from gaining weight (Jacobson and Mazur 1995, 77). Women who internalize a cultural standard are never able to measure up, to satisfy the gaze, leaving them no way to find psychic well-being, emotional fulfillment, or cultural belonging.

In addition, women's sexuality is in flux and is constantly being negotiated in our culture. Positive expressions of a woman's sexuality asserted for her own pleasure are rare in consumer culture. (On occasion, sexual pleasure is offered, sublimated through a shampoo, a gourmet coffee product, or a chocolate snack.) But sexuality not immediately satisfied through a product is rarely affirmed. Drawing out the implications of two advertisements will illustrate these points.

The first is an advertisement for Diesel Jeans that appeared in *Rolling Stone* magazine, in which an old woman grabs the crotch of her elderly partner while he is snoozing. She has been looking at a pornographic magazine positioned on the side table, her tongue between her teeth in a lusty gesture. In addition to the way the characters are portrayed, the dark setting suggests a seediness that evokes shock and embarrassment. The text reads, "Only the finest quality 12½ oz. denim is good enough for Diesel. This is overdyed, then washed, and finally distressed. The result is antique dirty denim which has an aged, vintage appearance. A bit like your grandmother." This self-mocking Gen X-style ad is another image at once hip, humorous, and dehumanizing. Because of the setting and sexuality, the dirty old woman is like the dirty old denim. The representation must be understood within a culture that relegates women who express pleasure in sex to immoral status, after much name calling and condemnation. The message of this philosophical persuasion condemns the expression of female sexuality by associating it with "a dirty old woman."

But there are women worse than those who simply like sex. There are those who use their sexuality to frustrate men. In a two-page ad for Sauza tequila, a line of seductive beautiful women, all with blonde hair, all dressed in red, stand in a variety of enticing positions. Some

show the smooth tan skin of their stomachs, some lick their lips, some cross their legs at the knees and throw their heads back. These sexy women are attention grabbers, but a truly retrogressive logic is summoned to connect that excitement to consumption. Across the middle of both pages, printed along the midsections of the women, a small line of text reads, "We can say with 99.9% accuracy that there is no possible way whatsoever in this lifetime that you will ever get a date with one of these women. Life is harsh. Your Tequila shouldn't be." This ad depicts the antithesis of the male fantasy; it is a man's worst nightmare. Here, evoking then denying sex is used as emotional manipulation to sell alcohol, substituting the product to ease the pain of lost gratification. The ad features the highly unethical sales strategy of using the substance as an escape, one associated with substance abuse. The pitch blames women for the need to escape, releasing the ad from the responsibility of the manipulation. In this cultural context, what could be worse than women enticing, then denying, men sexual pleasure? And these women are so clearly enticing. The ad reflects the attitudes of a culture obsessed with controlling women's sexuality and claiming that it exists only to satisfy men. In doing so, it taps into and encourages hostility toward women by claiming their use of sexual power against men.

Violence

But the consequences of this type of imagery—and for women who attempt to control their own sexuality or use sexual power to control men—are dire in patriarchal culture. Women are reminded of this habitually, through commercial representation. An ad for the men's cologne Smalto pictures a woman falling back with her elbow raised in a protective gesture. The text reads, "You make me weak." The confused expression can be read as passion and/or fear. This ambiguous image conflates passion with terror, "no" with "yes." The image offers men sexual power, just as other images offer women sexual power. However, it is a grisly affair in a culture where the use of violence against women persists, as does the legacy of patriarchy. In fashion layouts women are easily reminded of the threats of violence against them, and those threats are often glamorized, as, for example, in the depiction of a doll thrown against the wall in an ad in the *New York Times Magazine's* fashion issue. Or, in another ad for expensive Italian shoes, where the model appears to have been sexually assaulted and abandoned. She crouches on all fours, behind some bushes, covered

only by her bra, panties, and expensive high-heeled Italian slippers. In another ad the model is choreographed to look like a corpse, the eyes vacant as in a police-style photograph, legs twisted to the side, and a limp arm stretched out to the symbolic white lilies of a funeral. The studded black leather around her neck suggests strangulation. The variety of dehumanizing, commodified representations of sexuality have nowhere to go but into ever more shocking and titillating views trying to stimulate consumption. Robbed of the humanity that sparks emotional compassion and emulation, this style of imagery invites violence.

The Thrill Is Gone

The path of commercial imagery of sexuality has led to a dead end. Recent Gucci advertisements demonstrate the result of such trends. One is a portrayal of a sexual dalliance between atomized, alienated, confused, and fragmented people. The woman stands in front of a bed, facing away from a young man. Her body is cropped at the neck, a simple black dress covers her torso. The young man tugs at his zipper in a daze. Neither one of them appears to be having any fun. Another ad in this dark series is particularly disturbing. It is an explicit portrayal of oral sex, probably in the back of a car. The woman, on all fours, leans down, encouraged by the man's hand on her hip, but she is utterly disinterested. The young man, though possibly aroused, is emasculated in the photograph, as his crotch is a blank void covered by the black underwear, erased by the commodity.

In another fashion ad for Massimo, a young couple sits intertwined, possibly in a bar, or in a car after a night of drinking. His tie is loosened and she is in what looks like underwear. Her shoulder, turned away from him, indicates her disinterest, even as her leg is positioned across his. His vacant look completes the despondent tone.

The negotiated terrain of women's sexuality and patriarchal relations together with the necessities of commodity persuasions have led to a type of representation that is no longer satisfying to either men or women. The promise of being transformed by the product into the cultural object of desire rings false and unattainable. Many representations of sexuality no longer even attempt to portray physical or emotional gratification. At its worst, the imagery turns dangerous and violent. Susan Faludi's (1999) recent study of masculinity underscores these trends. She illustrates the cultural dynamic between commodity relations, the loss of sexual desire, and objectification of women when she

discovers the attitudes of young male gang members. Members of the Spur Posse acquired status through their sexual exploits with young girls. They earned one point for each encounter; the more sex, the more points, the higher the status. In a few notable cases such sexual aggression resulted in members being prosecuted on sexual assault charges. But gang members admitted to Faludi that having sex was often "boring." When she asks one boy why he had sex with a girl who bored him, he responds, "For the points. I was developing my reputation. I was developing my name" (110-11). Another member of the Spur Posse told her, "These girls are no-names. We've got a name. That's why you're talking to us. It's all about brand names" (110). Relegated to the role of acquisition for brand-name status, sex was no longer "a turn on." Such is the loss of desire when sexuality is urged not for pleasure but tied to a system of exchange. Considered only as commodities in a system of status acquisition, the girls, as young as ten years old, were little more than interchangeable currency. But when the Spurs decided to make a porn videotape, they were excited by watching themselves. As Faludi notes, "there was a strange affectlessness to the way he and other Spurs told their sex stories, a boredom that seemed to drop away only with the introduction of a video camera" (111). When they watched themselves, they felt as if they were "in the movies," and this they found exciting. She observes, "Their sexual exploits evidently had less to do with the act itself than with being themselves, an act" (111). Their satisfaction came not from sex, but from seeing themselves reflected back in culturally mediated forms that conferred status, giving them "brand-name" recognition.

For women the disease of anorexia nervosa is the extreme expression of dysfunction. It nevertheless reveals much about the culture that gives the dysfunction its particular form. The commodity system and loss of desire of the Spur Posse, like anorexia, exist within a set of socio-cultural and economic relations that direct such maladies into particular psychocultural expressions. The case also illustrates the ways in which young men in consumer culture now view and evaluate themselves through the eyes of ornamental culture, commodifying their own desire in much the same way that patriarchy has traditionally directed young women to view themselves, through the desire of the observer. Many contemporary ads have adopted the same objectifying visual, and persuasive conventions to depict men that were once consigned only to female representation.

Conclusion

Contemporary advertising images illustrate the mannered posing of disturbing scenarios, done with little affect and less satisfaction. The result is a hip emotional cynicism that I believe stems from a history of representation within a complex of consumption, profit, and patriarchy. Even though focus-group research must certainly reveal authentic longings for intimacy and psychological well-being, the legacy of patriarchy and the need for emotional manipulation is pervasive in advertising and has led to a set of images that cannot reflect fulfillment. Conservative critics who condemn Calvin Klein for abandoning repressive sexual conventions by pushing the envelope toward more sexuality explicit content have missed the point. In place of defying social conventions with erotic images, we see the vacant dispassionate stares of the women who have been or are about to be abused, or of the men who should be getting aroused, but are not. The images openly admit that the world of consumption is not a world of erotic pleasure but a bankrupt manipulation of emotional anxiety.

The lack of affirmative portrayals of women's sexual passions leaves representations of female fulfillment impossible. The commodified, fragmented, often victimized image offered as the epitome of male desire is so far from being able to represent intimate fulfillment that it has become a joke, or a dispassionate cynicism. As one of my male students put it, "I'm insulted that they think I would want a woman like that." At worst, these images reinforce a patriarchal predisposition to disrespect women and do violence against them.

In thinking about the relationship between sex and advertising, and the ways in which that relationship is expressed in end-of-the-century capitalism, it seems that advertising is so constrained by the twin taskmasters of patriarchy and profit that its representation of sexuality is now far removed from human pleasure—it reflects and promotes a new form of emotional cynicism that is extremely reactionary and ultimately debilitating, for both men and women. It is also a complete turnoff. But that jaded attitude now defines the very essence of hip. This is a hard culture to negotiate, especially for young men and women trying to establish the bounds of intimacy. As at least one of the cultural influences on interpersonal relationships, these images must be the focus of media literacy discussions that deconstruct and expose their persuasions and articulate alternative conceptions, enabling emotional fulfillment and more authentic and equitable gender practices.

Note

1. While McLuhan made note of the practices of objectification and fragmentation in the depiction of women's bodies, he did not place his analysis within the context of patriarchal social relations. His analysis, at times, assigns blame to women for such depictions. For a more detailed discussion of McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride*, and its influence on advertising criticism, see Andersen (2001).