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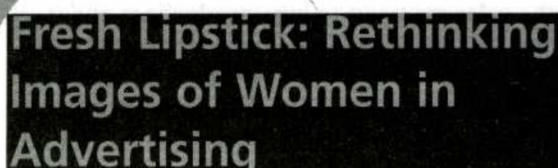

# Fresh Lipstick: Rethinking Images of Women in Advertising

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For more than one hundred years, American feminist thought has held that the pursuit of a fashionably beautiful appearance is a sign of low self-esteem and a symptom of political oppression. One of the longest-standing gestures of defiance among feminist activists, therefore, has been a refusal to conform to the grooming practices that fashion deemed "beautiful" or "feminine."

Yet feminism's political imperative to reject the pursuit of "beauty" has presented an insuperable obstacle to some women, becoming a barrier that often marks a schism in the movement. "An unadorned face became the honorable new look of feminism in the early 1970s, and no one was happier with the freedom not to wear makeup than I," wrote Susan Brownmiller in *Femininity* (1984), musing on the depth of divisiveness that could be caused by so seemingly trivial an issue. "Yet it could hardly escape my attention that more women supported the Equal Rights Amendment and legal abortion than would walk out of the house without their eye shadow."

> "Did I think of them as somewhat pitiable?" Brownmiller asked. "Yes, I did. Did they bitterly resent the righteous pressure put on them to look, in their terms, less attractive? Yes, they did. A more complete breakdown and confusion of aims, goals and values could not have occurred, and of all the movement rifts I have witnessed, this one remains for me the most poignant and the most difficult to resolve." . . .

Let's begin by looking at a recent advertisement, a Nike ad that ran in many American fashion magazines during 1992. The image is a photograph of Marilyn Monroe, but it is not the simpering starlet, the sex symbol playing to the male gaze. Instead, this is one of those pictures of Marilyn Monroe that experience and convention tell us to read as "the real Marilyn," an innocent destroyed by the beauty myth. So when we look at this ad, we do not topple over in our desire to look like Marilyn Monroe, though she is beautiful and blonde. On the contrary, we know to read this image as a poignant combination of beauty and tragedy. That is, we look at this image critically. In fact, the sense of the ad *depends* on viewing the image critically, as is clear from the copy.

"A woman is often measured by the things she cannot control," the copy begins. We know this feeling of being "measured," so we let the ad talk to us some more. The voice goes on about the way a body curves or doesn't, and how the "inches and ages and numbers . . . don't ever add up to who she is on the inside." This, we know, is the moral of

Marilyn. We share this inside/outside paradox with her, whether our bodies curve voluptuously or not. The voice takes on the edge of indignation: "If a woman is to be measured, let her be measured by the things she can control, by who she is and who she is trying to become." We are "with" this voice; it is our own manifesto. The call builds to its climax: "Measurements are only statistics and statistics lie." We laugh, perhaps ruefully.

From the logo of the well-known maker of athletic shoes displayed unconventionally in the upper right corner, we infer that the voice wants us to buy tennis shoes and start some athletic activity. We are now dealing with another ideal, the one that prefers beauty "from within," the one that advocates exercise rather than creams and lipsticks and the over-obvious eyeliner poor Marilyn is wearing. So the ad itself is discursive, representing an argument between one politics of beauty and another. If we have any historical awareness at all (and we must have *some* in order to get the Marilyn reference in the first place), then we know that the "beauty through health and exercise" position is the one long advocated by feminism.

Perhaps we are pleased that an advertiser is on the "right" side, for once. Or, perhaps we are bothered, as some readers of this ad were, that this voice is advocating a path to beauty that many women are already following to destruction. The fight for "control" here has the intonation of the anorexic, who, in a desperate effort to have control over *something*, works with a vengeance to control her body. In this alternative politics of beauty lies the potential to emerge taut, toned and totally twisted. Now shamelessly curvy Marilyn looks downright healthy, her eyeliner notwithstanding. We have arrived at one of the paradoxes that the beauty controversy produces: the ultimately deceptive idea that one way of being beautiful will be, for all times and all places, more healthy, more natural, and less harmful than all others. . . .

But just this once, I'm going to ask you to do something that is seldom done: knock down the screen and take a look at the wizard behind it. In this case, we do not find a snarling group of male capitalists, but two young women with counterculture loyalties. Charlotte Moore, an art director, and Janet Champ, a copywriter, work in a team, as is the tradition in advertising. Also according to tradition, they have been segregated as a "girls' team" and been given responsibility for Nike's "women's campaign."

Moore and Champ's first ads for Nike opened with long lists that evoked futility and harmfulness: "Face lifts, body tucks, liposuction, electrolysis, collagen implants, breast lifts, wrinkle creams, face masks, mud baths, chemical peels, wrinkle fills, liquid diets, cellulite reduction, tweezing, plucking, straightening, waxing, waving, herbal heat wraps." Then you turned the page and saw a young woman in athletic gear sprinting up some stairs, and the headline, "The 60-minute makeover from Nike. Just do it." Champ contends their campaign strategy was to attack the other speakers in the beauty discourse, both commercial and editorial. "I mean, every one of them is how to be beautiful and how to get your man and how to be skinny and how to be—you know—cosmetic surgery and everything else," she told an oral-history interviewer from the Smithsonian's Center for Advertising History. "We wanted to show real women, talk to women one on one, and start debunking all these myths that we have to live with every day." The Marilyn ad was another attempt to go after the same myths.

"We'd always been very, very interested in this whole idea of being held up to be the icon of perfection, of beauty, and what happens to a woman when she starts to believe that, what happens to other women when they're forced to try to *be* that," Champ says. "So we started talking about what kind of ad we could do that talked about being a statistic and being accepted as a false image of yourself, and how, once you present that image to the world, you are never accepted for who you really are."

Instead of being motivated by a desire to manipulate or by a feeling of condescension toward their readers, Champ and Moore felt able to communicate their message to other

women because they had "been there" themselves. This experience increased Champ's political awareness and renewed a sense of activism she thought she had lost. That a feminist would be reclaimed by writing ads may seem an unlikely turn of events; on the contrary, however, the history of the beauty controversy is full of paradoxical characters, contradictory polemics and the struggle of competing interests in surprising places. . . .

Current feminist theorizing generally treats modern corporate capitalism as a uniquely white male phenomenon, but cosmetics companies are an exception that produces a curious contradiction. Lois Banner bemoans the dearth of entrepreneurial women in the history of the garment industry, which resulted in female seamstresses going to work for male-dominated factories. In contrast, with the important exceptions of Charles Revson and Richard Hudnut, nearly all the founders of major cosmetics companies in America were women: Elizabeth Arden, Helena Rubinstein, Estée Lauder, Dorothy Gray and others. Banner criticizes these women precisely *because* they were entrepreneurial and commercial. She, like many other feminists writing today, seems unwilling to let *any* commercial enterprise be acceptable to feminism. While such a view may satisfy doctrinaire Marxism, it seems a crude way to deal with a situation that is hardly absolute. The commercial beauty culture has seen upstart challengers, working-class enterprises and avant-garde expressions. A cultural philosophy that cannot distinguish between The Body Shop and Revlon, or between Benetton and Sears, is insuffıcently calibrated.

Ignoring or dismissing the women of industry allows critics to claim that cosmetics ads are the patriarchy's directives of "how women should look." Here arises another puzzle, though, because cosmetics advertisements have traditionally been written by women. Historically, advertising has employed more women than other industries, and at higher levels and salaries. But women were usually segregated into their own groups and given a carefully circumscribed list of products to work on, usually the ones men were embarrassed about, including cosmetics if the agency had any.

Models are a third group of women involved in the production of the beauty culture's texts. In the 1900s, artists' models were considered one tiny step up from prostitutes. As mass production of images grew, the beautiful woman who could pose for brush or camera was an increasingly valued player. The anti-beauty faction of feminism still tends to treat models as non-persons, referring to them as "flat images" or "mannikins." This characterization is snobbish, demeaning, inaccurate, and unfair. The relationship between a model and a photographer, artist or designer is not passive, but dialogic and creative, much like that between an actress and a director.

The model's social ascent was indicative of a new ethic of beauty emerging. Arthur Marwick, in his *Beauty in History*, argues that in the "modern" concept of beauty, good looks may be exploited for their own sake to the economic benefit of the bearer, without necessarily being tied to the granting of sexual favors. Beautiful persons, male or female, may use their beauty to please audiences, win contests, advertise products, gain employment in various capacities or, as traditionally, make a good marriage. Physical beauty became another attribute, like intelligence, talent, or wealth, that could be used toward the achievement of material and emotional success. Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991) discusses the unconscionable discrimination that has resulted from the "Professional Beauty Qualification." However, her assertion that the "beauty myth" arose in the 1980s as part of a backlash against feminism is quite inaccurate and obscures the economic benefits and social mobility offered by this historical shift.

Over the course of this period, advertisements tell much about the ups and downs, the back and forth of the discourse on beauty. Several notions of "the beautiful" can be seen to compete in any particular period and, over time, the ideals of feminism – athleticism, health, and natural products – make themselves felt in the popular discourse over and over again. Many graphic ideals of beauty followed the Gibson Girl: Maxfield Parrish's

girl on a rock, John Held's flappers, the pinups of World War II, and so on. In each, the themes of "modern" versus "traditional," "proper" versus "unconventional," can be discerned, weaving through various strains of the discourse on what it meant to be "modern," "feminine," and even, "feminist." One must interpret these images in context or, as with the Gibson Girl, risk being tricked by contemporary perceptions. Furthermore, understanding one image often requires knowing how it speaks to other images, other ideals, other speakers.

A famous example is the dialogue between Revlon and Cover Girl. Introduced in the early 1950s, Revlon's "Fire and Ice Girl" had several characteristics of the "modern" woman: she dresses as if she were a little "loose" ("Have you ever wanted to wear an ankle bracelet?"), embraces the controversial ("Do you secretly hope the next man you meet will be a psychiatrist?"), is the object of jealousy ("Do you sometimes feel that other women resent you?"), is independent ("Would you streak your hair with platinum without consulting your husband?") and she is frankly interested in sex ("Do you close your eyes when you're kissed?"). Behind the Revlon girl is the fusion of two opposing class standards of beauty: Charles Revson himself referred to her as a "Park Avenue whore." No matter how endearing her lusty unconventionality may be, though, her life's work seems to be presenting the picture of an oversexed "piece of fluff" to men and engaging in a mutually destructive competition with other women. She is the side of Marilyn Monroe we don't like, gripped by the neurosis of narcissism that Simone de Beauvoir was writing about at this time—always playing to the imagined male gaze. She is Betty Friedan's feminine mystique out for the evening.

When Cover Girl cosmetics were introduced in the late 1950s, the new brand was a nuisance upstart and Revlon was a giant. Cover Girl's chemical base was Noxema with a new postwar wonder added, "hexachlorophene," which allowed the ads to make many truthful health claims: using antiseptic, Cover Girl was actually better for your skin than using no makeup at all. In the ad campaign, a beautiful but unknown young woman told how "natural" and "good for you" Cover Girl was, then her face was framed by a famous magazine masthead—and the viewer "discovered" her as that month's "cover girl." After the removal of hexachlorophene from the market (it had started going into nearly everything, and if a little hexachlorophene was a good thing, too much was not), Cover Girl continued to emphasize its "natural, clean" look and began to show the models sailing, swimming, and riding. Thus, the campaign came to have the desirable attributes of a "feminist" approach to makeup: it looked "natural," it was "good for you" and it was associated with a healthy and athletic lifestyle. Cover Girl was tremendously popular among younger women, stepping in line with the growing idealization of athletic women that begins with the Gibson Girl, produces the cult of the cheerleader, and probably reaches its peak in the fitness craze of the 1980s. Cover Girl's arch rival and alter ego was the sexy, night-clubbing Revlon girl, and all the ads were written with that distinction in mind.

Today, Cover Girl is still the biggest seller among women under forty, an honor it owes in no small part to the new aesthetic of beauty espoused by the second wave of feminism. Lynn Giordano was an undergraduate in journalism at the University of Wisconsin during the late 1960s, but by the late 1980s, she was creative director for Cover Girl makeup. Giordano recalls that, with the rise in feminist activity on college campuses, Cover Girl became the makeup you could wear and still hold on to your politics. "No woman, no matter how radical her politics—this is the real truth, I mean, you'll never get women to admit this, but no matter how left of center they stood, they wanted to look good when they were standing there," she told the Smithsonian's advertising historians. "And they would claim they weren't wearing makeup but you'd sneak some stuff in. And one of the reasons Cover Girl went through the roof was that they were selling a no-makeup look

right when it was great to be a no-makeup look."

This is the same moment described by Susan Brownmiller, the ultimate irony: choosing a brand of makeup that will help you look like "a good feminist" when feminism did not allow makeup. It is, again, the complex politics of appearance. Much of the argument against the beauty culture is based on the assumption that the sole purpose for aspiring to beauty is to attract men, despite substantial documentation that cultivating one's appearance has both economic and psychic benefits that may be unrelated to sexual allure. Reducing "beauty" to "sex" ignores other roles played by grooming and fashion, such as the communication of character, the acknowledgment of setting or occasion, the display of rank, the challenge to authority and so forth. In this light, categorically denouncing cosmetics and other beauty tools is an overly simplistic, insensitive response to a complex human practice.

The Cover Girl campaign continued to evolve toward a blonde, blue-eyed ideal of beauty, an athletic, ostensibly "natural" perfection that was airbrushed and retouched into unattainability. By the 1980s, however, other aesthetics began to emerge as challengers: the "Dress for Success" look of new female professionals, the "punk" look of Deborah Harry, Madonna, and Cyndi Lauper, as well as the athletic look epitomized by the aerobics fad. Each of these could make a claim to be more "feminist" than the other. Each had its commercial counterparts in advertising. Each was subject to controversy. Early in the 1980s, for example, feminist students of pop culture buzzed over whether Cyndi Lauper was a better role model for women than Madonna, though both were highly theatrical in their self-presentation. The issue then, as now, was whether Madonna is simply too pretty and too sexy to be a good feminist. We seem to have forgotten (or are now too young to remember) that the same things were once said about Gloria Steinem.

Though feminism has tended to treat beauty as a symbol of oppression, what lurks not far beneath the surface is the reality of beauty as power. In a world in which women have had few legal rights, and even fewer economic ones, beauty has sometimes provided women with some relief and some control over their circumstances. From histories like Lois Banner's *American Beauty* (1983) to contemporary studies like Robin Lakoff and Raquel Scherr's *Face Value: The Politics of Beauty* (1984), we can see that the power of beautiful women is not only over men, but also over other women. "Women cannot join with women in thinking about—much less talking about—looks, without great anguish," Lakoff and Scherr write.

Beauty is extraordinarily difficult for women to talk about with each other, but once they started in interviews with Lakoff and Scherr, the authors felt as if a floodgate had opened. The responses were passionate, poignant, sometimes tearful. Lakoff and Scherr concluded that the intractable position of "official" feminism had made beauty a taboo topic. We are not supposed to care about it, so we don't talk about it (except in so far as the problem can be demonized and externalized). Attempts to rethink the issue are quickly silenced with charges of "antifeminism" or "backlash." As a consequence, what masquerades for criticism on the topic is often closer to superstition than analysis, more dogma than insight, demagoguery rather than revolution.

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