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Major Paper 2

Selling Ourselves: The Effects of Tomorrow's Technologies on Capitalistic Sexism

In 2001, Rachel Gaunt, ex-ad executive of 18 years, made clear what was on her mind —"how women are represented today in our media" (Ellerbrock). "There is a causal relationship," she said, during her speech "Badvertising: Advertising With a Distorted Image of Women", "between the way the media represents women in ads and the way that people think about and treat them". Of course, it takes remarkably little exposition to convince most people today of the evils of advertising. But when we are told, by an insider in the marketing field, that "the typical American model is five inches taller than the average American woman, but 32 pounds lighter", there are times when we can still be taken aback. Of course, when one considers the commonly known issues advertising causes, the question naturally arises: How do we solve these problems? How can we, as a society, diminish the damage which advertising does, especially to young women? Many have looked at this topic, but James Tiptree, Jr.'s "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" and Ted Chiang's "Liking What You See: A Documentary" both provide unique and complex takes on the subject. Both assume one radical change to mediate between advertising and the people, but both come to a sobering conclusion: The social issues both caused by and effecting problematic advertising—especially involving women—are incredibly pernicious and resilient.

The trouble is, advertising, sexism, and the media are much more subtly interconnected and presented to us than one might at first imagine. In her book *Enlightened Sexism*, Professor Susan J. Douglas defines the book's central, eponymous term as "a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime… [which] insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism … so now it's okay … to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women" (Douglas 9). Enlightened sexism is heavily present in the media, from *Seventeen* and *Cosmo* to *Bridezillas* and *Teen Mom*. It is much subtler than out-and-out sexism, which is still largely ostracized in a culture after multiple major feminism movements—rather, it is "feminist in its outward appearance… but sexist in its intent", heavily mired in irony, allowing people to "look as if [they] are absolutely not seduced by the mass media, while then being seduced by the media, while wearing a knowing smirk" (10). And, of course, much of this is driven by the encouragement of consumerism: One of the first pillars of enlightened sexism, *Beverly Hills 90210*, "offer[ed] the fantasy of being able to buy whatever you wanted, yet flatter[ed] viewers that such unrestricted consumerism is corrupting and empty", relying on that irony central to enlightened sexism, while also opening the doors for other, later shows to "inflate the levels and rates of conspicuous consumption" (29).

How, then, can we deal with this consumerist sexism, which refuses to stop its messages "causing many women and girls to have a distorted body image" (Ellerbrock)? Tiptree and Chiang each explore a different possible solution to this problem. In Tiptree's story, all advertising is outright banned: "Since the … Huckster Act, sellers have been restrained to … displays in or on the product itself, visible during its legitimate use or in on-premise sales" (Tiptree 7). However, major companies have found a way around this, by artificially placing celebrities into situations, using products in visible ways. In Chiang's story, the major

development is a product called neurostat, which can cause a condition called “calliagnosia” or “calli” by shutting down a person’s ability to recognize attractiveness in others. This is ostensibly and primarily to reduce “lookism” among individuals, but has the alternate and important consequence of disabling the power of models in advertising—the exact kind of models against which Rachel Gaunt spoke, twelve years ago.

It should not be assumed that simply because these ideas are new, and the worlds in the stories futuristic, then social change will occur. In fact, in one study, a group of young, poor junior high students were introduced to the Internet for the first time. With this new, futuristic technology, it could be postulated that they used their newfound anonymity in ways defiant of their social boundaries in their real lives. The results, however, showed that “the students' agency [on the Internet] was severely constrained, not by the medium itself but by their social locations as users” (Durham). As the students moved to a powerful new medium, they remained ensconced in their old social boundaries. This very well may be replicated in other social groups encountering new technologies.

Despite this, the ideas presented in each story are both certainly compelling for the world of today. In both stories, the worlds the authors present are not different enough to be incomparable to our own: The style of speech in “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” seems almost sixty years outdated, in fact, and that of “Liking What You See” is very current. Further, the latter story seems to be different only in the presence of neurostat and enhanced glasses technology, which are akin to currently under-development Google Glass. And, while the world Tiptree creates is more technologically enhanced than ours, socially, it seems very similar to our own. It has basketball, for instance, and widespread interest in television and celebrity culture.

Moreover, the technological advances between now and then do seem to do good. As an example, one study on using idealized or non-idealized models in advertising found that "participants with a lower self-esteem reported a more negative attitude and a lower purchase intention of the brand after exposure to an idealized model", while "participants with a higher self-esteem reported a more positive attitude and a higher purchase intention of the brand" (Antioco 24). This would mean that in the case of Chiang's story, people would be potentially protected from harmful influence on their self-image after seeing advertising. Indeed, regarding the interference of being attracted to idealized models, one of Chiang's characters recounts, "[w]ith calli, I don't feel that pull. Calli freed me from that distraction, it gave me that energy back" (Chiang).

Unfortunately, limitations and workarounds mitigate the positive effects of these new initiatives. The same way commercial sexism managed to return after the feminist movement of the 1970s in the form of enlightened sexism, the problems being reacted against in both authors' stories arise again. For one thing, advertisement, at least in some form, is still happening. But what's more, based on descriptions of Delphi, the focus in this society on femininity and beauty has not fallen proportionately with formal advertising. Plus, considering Delphi is only fifteen years old, potentially harmful sexualization of minors has not decreased either—in fact, it may have increased. So when seventeen-year-old P. Burke attempts suicide due to her appearance, it is naturally a consequence of this sexualization and, to use Chiang's term, "lookism". Additionally, the culture of media, spectacle and consumption, the same one that has contributed to the mindless television and enlightened sexism of *Beverly Hills 90210* today, is equally strong and socially coercive after the Huckster Act has been passed.

In the same way, methods of circumventing the artificial treatment in “Liking What You See” are already appearing, in the form of “software capable of fine-tuning paralinguistic cues in order to maximize the emotional response evoked in viewers”—that is, audio manipulation. This is completely ignored by the treatment, which is visual in nature, and works to be just as persuasive as a beautiful person’s face. As one character notes, “once this software gets into widespread use, we’re going to be facing extraordinarily persuasive pitches from all sides: commercials, press releases, evangelists”, as ubiquitous and pervasive as modeling is now.

Another issue arises, as brought up by a character: “You might be able to create a pure calli society in an artificial setting, but in the real world, you’re never going to get a hundred percent compliance…. [It] works if everybody has it, but if even one person doesn’t, that person will take advantage of everyone else.” Looks-based discrimination will still exist if anyone does not get the treatment, and if many people do have calli, they will only be unable to notice the problem. The issue is somewhat comparable to affirmative action in school admissions. Philosopher James Rachels, in his essay “What People Deserve”, writes, “Some white … [applicants] have better qualifications … only because they have not had to contend with the obstacles faced by their African-American competitors” (Rachels 162). As a consequence, without the balancing force of affirmative action, these white people would continue to have better qualifications. In the same way, ignoring the effects of “lookism” would be damaging, as well—if those effects did exist, which they nearly inevitably would, given someone wouldn’t opt to have the treatment—then ignoring that difference, in the same way as forgoing affirmative action, would be unfair to the person without the advantage.

So, then, the results of attempts at fixing the damaging effects of sexist advertising in the media are much more complex than were first imagined by the fixers. Sexism and

commercialism slip through the ideology, in the same way that enlightened sexism does in our world today. Then, in a real sense, what is to be done? Perhaps a multi-faceted approach at these issues—where only using one tool fails, using multiple may work better. Perhaps not, though. One major advantage the characters in Chiang's story had over those in Tiptree's is that they are engaged, and thoughtful, about the issue. This may be the most important thing of all: Keeping focused and aware on the things which serve to endanger us.

In the meantime though, Gaunt gives us her list of things to do to keep people, as individuals, strong. These items "include voicing one's opinions to agencies, cutting the word 'fat' out of one's vocabulary, 'voting with the dollar,' and making a photo gallery of real women. She also recommended that women should make a list of women whom they admire." While major, widespread change may be overly complex, dangerous, or impossible, each of us can play our own part in maintaining our collective sanity.

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