Hijacking Feminism: Representations of the New Woman in South African Television Advertising Practice

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Summary

This study examines the extent to which feminism has been appropriated by the consumer culture. As the relationship between consumerism and patriarchy continues to dominate global economic and social practices, this appropriation points to a denial of the social and political importance of the feminist movement. An acknowledgement of our own complicity in the perpetuation of a sexist, racist and classist ideology – along with an understanding of the complicity of the media – is crucial in explaining relations of domination within our society (Thompson 1990). A study of television advertising practice allows us to “explore meaning as a social product, enmeshed in webs of power” (Jordan and Wheedon 1995:543). Consumer ‘freedom’ is the compulsory freedom (Slater 1997), as we buy as many symbols as products. This study shows that for all the ‘strides’ feminism has made, media images of women are largely traditional, prescriptive (although an ironic distance is often implied) or overtly sexualised. Feminism is never mentioned, as women’s gains are presented as ahistorical in a ‘post-feminist’ world. Third wave feminism is an attempt to embrace all feminisms and feminists, working to inject some substance and truth behind advertising’s feminist veneer.

Keywords

Third Wave feminism
Advertising
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**Introduction**

The appropriation of feminism by the consumer culture amounts to a denial of the political and social significance of the movement. The relationship between patriarchy and consumerism is one that continues to dominate global economic and social practices. Consumerism, by nature, is focussed on individual acquisition and attendant status. This ownership translates into the permission to dominate, proving one’s superior worth over that of another individual.

Loosely defined patriarchy is “the rule of the father”. As a system, however, what we refer to as patriarchy is far more complicated and subtle than that interpretation would suggest. Suffice to say that patriarchy can be simplistically summarised as the explanation for and the cause of the exploitation and oppression of women. Both consumerism and patriarchy encourage unequal relationships. The concept of a meritocracy blinds us to the very real limiting factors of gender, race and economic means in our present society.

Through this study, my goal is to offer a comprehensive discussion on the position of feminism (in relation to women) in South African advertising and suggest a starting point for change. I am not attempting to solve the riddle as to whether the media act as agents for social change (both positive and negative) or merely reflect the images society casts. I do, however, advocate a step away from the well-worn stereotypes and assumptions that continue to inform South African television advertising practice.

I have chosen this aspect of media because I, like many viewers, have an ambivalent response to television advertising – I support the creativity but resist negative, overly sexualised or traditional images of women that persist into the twenty-first
The current so-called Third Wave feminist movement resists the homogeneity of traditional white middle class feminism that is associated with the humanities in the academy. Third Wave feminists have inherited what is now referred to as a ‘stalled’ revolution – stalled, due to the lack of participation and reciprocation from men in particular and society in general. Third Wave feminism is the next stage in a movement that has matured (even while most ‘members’ are women in their early thirties and younger), in that it is aware of its past failings and limitations. As seminal French feminist Julia Kristeva has pointed out: “The sharpest and most subtle point of feminist subversion brought about by the new generation will henceforth be situated on the terrain of the inseparable conjunction of the sexual and the symbolic, in order to try to discover, first, the specificity of the female, and then, in the end, that of each individual woman” (1997:866). The Third Wave focus on the media is an acknowledgement of both the power and ubiquity of the media. Feminists, aware of the role the media plays in perpetuating dominant ideologies, see the state of the media as indicative of the state of society in general.

Among all its other functions, advertising is about aspirations, enticements to buy life-improving products. The two-way dynamic between the media and society means that the media necessarily feed off of and reflect social mores and expectations, in the same way that society is informed by the media. In this light, we cannot lay the blame for what can be seen as the unfair representation of women and other non-dominant groups solely at the door of the advertising and media industries. Do I expect the advertisement
to change the world? No. Societal change is what is needed to effect a change in the media, while a change in the media may be what is needed to spark a change in society.
Chapter 1: Compulsory freedom

The combined power of consumer capitalism and advertising is the ability to exploit the fact that the symbolic value of a product is greater than the actual use value. Through the study of semiotics we know that objects – the clothes we wear, the products we buy – are endowed with meaning, both denotative and connotative. It is the connotative meaning of images in advertising that most interests me in this study. Through the decades, advertising has been called “the most potent influence in adapting and changing habits and modes of life” (Fox. 1984:97), with “vast power in the shaping of popular standards” (Potter. 1954: 167). The ubiquity of the media and the prevalence of advertising make these statements even more true of today’s society. “The evidence,” write Lazier and Gagnard Kendrick (1993:200), “more and more suggests that society has elevated advertising to an invisible podium from which we learn and by which we are influenced”.

As feminists, we write for what we hope will be a receptive, if not sympathetic, audience. The societal voices, however, are strong, and we are in danger of allowing defensiveness to enter our work as those passing judgement demand justification of our work, thoughts and ideas. “Man hater,” they cry, “Cynic”. We constantly have to justify ourselves, checking our anger. Says Michael Parenti (1986:50):

Opinions that support existing arrangements of economic and political power are more easily treated as facts, while facts that are troublesome to the prevailing distribution of class power are likely to be dismissed as opinionated. And those who censor dissenting views see themselves as protectors of objectivity and keepers of heterodoxy when, in fact, they are the guardians of ideological conformity.

When I use the term ‘woman’ in my writing, I am in no way arguing for the universality of ‘woman’. Advertising and popular culture, however, do. ‘Woman’ has been divided and categorised, hung and quartered, with no room in mainstream
representation for possibilities left of the mark. ‘Man’, however, is as centred – socially, culturally and historically – as ever. ‘Woman’ is continually problematized. She is elusive even to feminist critics, researchers and writers. One of the greatest triumphs, perhaps, of patriarchal domination.

Criticism of media (or rather, of popular culture, of which advertising is a part) brings with it a host of problems for the feminist critic. How does one argue against the impact of popular culture, for instance, without implying passivity on the part of the female gender? How does one escape notions of victimhood as popular modes of representation are forced upon her? Does the feminist critic not run the risk of contributing to the mass of contradictions surrounding those gendered as female? This is not to argue, however, that complaints should not be aired and alternatives not provided. As John B. Thompson states (1990:8): “The analysis of symbolic forms as ideological requires us to analyse these forms in relation to the specific social-historical contexts within which they are employed and take hold”.

While Liesbet van Zoonen describes the conventional view of feminist opinion as one that expects “a univocal, confident and unswerving denunciation of popular culture, both for its sexist and oppressive portrayal of women and for the devastating effect it is supposed to have on women and men” (1994:1), feminism is far from univocal. Indeed, heterogeneity is the hallmark of current feminism. In A Passion for Difference (1994), Henrietta L. Moore writes:

First there is no single, homogenous body of feminist theory; and secondly … the divisions between different groups of women, as well as between practising feminists, make it impossible to assert a commonality based on shared membership in a universal category ‘woman’ (1994:9).
Feminist theory is far from homogenous, as Moore correctly states. However, society treats women as a universal category (despite differences in experience due to class and race) and it is as a universal category that we first have to counter assumptions.

In my opinion, the media present us with the pseudo-feminism of consumer culture, where the ability to buy products is used as a symbol of empowerment, a ‘breaking down’ of the barriers of race and class, and where the language of feminism is appropriated in advertisements to appeal to women.

In what has been referred to as the consumer culture, the role of the advertisement is to promote a product meant for sale and consumption. I argue, however, that it is the image of a product that is promoted above the product itself. When that image appropriates feminism, a feminist veneer replaces the politics. There is ample evidence to suggest that it is the image and the meaning we attach to an image (in this case the image of feminism in advertising) that serves to sustain what Thompson calls “relations of domination” (1990:7).

We learn from the work of de Saussure (1974) that what he refers to as a ‘sign’ is made up of a ‘signifier’ and a ‘signified’ (simply, that which names and that which is named). The signs themselves, however (be they words, items of clothing, uniforms or persons), are entirely arbitrary. The attached meanings are socially, culturally and historically assigned.

In the introduction to Thomas A. Sebeok’s An Introduction to Semiotics, Marcel Danesi writes: “Signs …are the basis for human thought and communication” (xi). He continues: “Semiotics is the term commonly used to refer to the study of the innate capacity of human beings to produce and understand signs of all kinds (from those
belonging to simple physiological signalling systems to those which reveal a highly complex symbolic structure)” (xi). (A blush versus a marriage ceremony, for example). Actions, however, are only meaningful in relation to institutional conventions, and are assigned this meaning through collective (or dominant) consciousness.

While de Saussure’s work referred to linguistics, ‘signs’ are the everyday symbols we use to communicate our position in (and in relation to) society – and the way in which our position is communicated to us and reinforced. Clothing is chosen because it ‘fits’ our notion of ourselves. We surround ourselves with objects – products that project a certain image with which we feel comfortable. Similarly, the body language and spatial positioning of ‘characters’ in an advertisement correspond to our notion of what a represented situation should ‘look’ like, in terms of the dominant ideology. “[I]deology,” writes Jorge Larrain, “is found in the use of language, that is, in the selection and combination of signs, but also in the sense that the material practices which are the basis of ideology are constructed … as systems of signification” (1979: 130).

Larrain goes on to define ideology as “a sort of hidden structure in every discourse which is conveyed and received wrapped up in an external and opaque form. Hence, this ideological structure cannot be consciously noticed by the addressees” (133). So, no ideology can be considered benign. Not even feminism (I must emphasise, the version of feminism ‘popularised’ by anti-feminists). Society has an eternal need to subscribe to some dominant ideology (as even the apparent refusal to subscribe to a particular ideology – or any ideology – is an ideology in itself). The task facing feminists and those concerned with justice and human rights is to challenge a world blindly happy with, or adapting itself to, the patriarchal structure we have inherited and continue to perpetuate.
Society is a knotted bundle of string – feminists free one strand only to find it is held fast by another and entangled with a third, or, as Eagleton describes language, “a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through by everything else” (1983:129). De Saussure refers to “a shift in the relationship between the signified and the signifier” (1974:75). A change in the concept of ‘woman’ in society represents (for many) a frightening shift in paradigm – a rip-the-carpet-out-from-under-you change for society. My question is: Do the advertisements representing feminism or the results of feminism serve to sustain or destabilise relations of domination, the dominating forces being patriarchy and consumerism?

“In effect, consumer freedom has come to be equated with political freedom” (Miles 1998:10). Consumerism and consumerist culture is, by nature, focussed on individual acquisition and attendant status. This ownership translates into the permission to dominate (or, the illusion of domination – over yourself and others). The appropriation of feminism by consumer culture as a means of reaching audiences and selling to them therefore amounts to a denial of the political and social significance of the movement.

Feminism has been hijacked by advertising. Advertisements using the language of feminism and liberation provide us with nothing but a feminist veneer, the products themselves empty of all meaning but the profit margin. “The media, in effect, marginalize the social through prioritizing spectacle and thus undermine the significance of social problems in general” (Miles 1998:48).

If the consumerist/capitalist paradigm is the dominant paradigm within which we must work, economic freedom becomes the ultimate personal freedom. One of the
arguments under the feminist banner has been the contention that an economically dependent woman is not a liberated woman. The traditional marriage set-up of the husband as the breadwinner and the wife as caregiver and mother was seen as a social and economic contract. With the possibility of economic independence for women, the thinking was that there was no longer the need for the support of a man (economic or otherwise, in terms of radical feminism). Consumer culture and its sales rep, the advertisement, have latched on to this thought as increasingly, the truly independent and liberated woman is economically independent – in fact, well-off and wealthy. Advertisements using feminism to punt their products seem to imply that the more economically free a woman is, the more freedom she can buy.

Campbell writes (1987:89-90):

[T]he spirit of modern consumerism is anything but materialistic. The idea that contemporary consumers have an insatiable desire to acquire objects represents a serious misunderstanding of the mechanism which impels people to want goods. Their basic motivation is the desire to experience in reality the pleasurable drama which they have already enjoyed in imagination, and each ‘new’ product is seen as offering the possibility of realising this ambition.

To put it plainly, we buy as many symbols as products.

As ‘feminist’, or rather ‘aspirant feminist’, becomes yet another market niche, we realise that the active assigning of meanings and ideas to the products we buy serves to mark one group of society off from another. An advertisement is simply an attempt to provide the ‘correct’ symbolic meaning of a product. Feminism, therefore, is for sale. Liberation can be bought – ironically, most often in the guise of beauty products. “With consumerist discourses offering self-discovery, fulfilment and ecstasy, feminist arguments about power and patriarchal domination cut less ice” (Macdonald 1995:168).
Feminists, and those who question (popular) culture and representation, should be careful, however, that they do not merely replace one set of limitations with another.

We cannot for one minute believe that any woman watching an advertisement featuring a ‘liberated’ woman really believes the product in question is the key to her freedom. Instead, we can agree the product projects an image that she herself would like to project. So, in a sense, liberation is bought, or rather a symbol of that liberation she feels entitled to but which her life and present circumstances may not provide.

Miles has suggested that the key question “centres on how far choice, especially consumer choice, becomes a foundation of a new concept of freedom in contemporary society to the extent that the freedom of the individual is actively and primarily constituted in his or her role as a consumer” (1998:28).

While an advertisement’s primary goal is to sell, it must first attract the attention of the consumer in one of the following ways: providing the potential consumer with something to identify with; providing her with something to aspire to; making her laugh through the use of humour; using shock value; playing on her emotions; or providing social commentary. Using one or a number of these tactics, an advertisement can attract the attention of the potential consumer.

The American Swiss “Rock Me” advertisement, for example, uses identification and aspiration to attract the potential consumer. The advertisement encourages the female viewer to identify with one or all of the female roles depicted in the advertisement (from carrying a happy baby to lugging a leather briefcase). If feminism is all about choice and the different paths that women might take, this advertisement shouts it out loud and clear
with the ultimate goal, however, of selling a luxury item, implicating class as a significant strand in the web of discourse in defining the ‘new’ woman.

This is an example of how the idea of liberation and freedom of choice (for women) is used to sell luxury items. Economically free (or even economically powerful), a woman has access to other freedoms. Consumer freedom is equated with political freedom – representing the woman who can afford to buy diamond jewellery as the woman who can afford to make her own choices. Television advertising practice merely reinforces this cultural hegemony.

What makes this “brainwashing” even more insidious is the fact that it is woven into every structural thread of the fabric of our culture. The media … our language patterns, the lyrics to songs, our cultural practices and holidays, and the very assumptions on which our society is built all contribute to the reinforcement of the biased messages and stereotypes we receive (Harro 2000:19).

The illusion of power that economic freedom provides is enticing. Get Real, a reality youth programme on SABC 1, consists of short, filmed inserts featuring teenagers in South Africa airing their thoughts, views, complaints and ideas. Though advertising practice is the focus of this treatise, it is useful to make a brief detour at this juncture and consider a recent programme on a local television channel, for some telling insights into youth culture and consumerism. One particular episode of Get Real contained two inserts that interested me. The first insert starred a group of high-school girls. The girls were upset by the fact that when they entered a certain clothing chain store wearing school uniform they were not offered assistance, as the clerks thought that as schoolgirls, they were just looking at the merchandise, not buying. Armed with their video camera, the girls descended on the store manager demanding that they be treated as well as any other
customer, their ultimate goal to be recognised as legitimate consumers (and therefore, in their minds, as important).

The second insert featured a group of teenage boys complaining that people judged them on the style of the clothes that they wore. The one boy favoured the baggy, low-slung jeans associated with gangsters, the other the long and baggy shorts of the surfing set, while the third preferred a trendier look – up-to-the-minute bowler hat, arm cuffs and eighties-rocker style sleeveless shirts. Opining that people were narrow-minded with one breath, with the next the three admitted that they did not like the conclusions that people drew about them based on their style of dressing, the trendiest of the three complaining that people thought he was a “moffie” just because of the way he dressed.

A crucial question here concerns the values passed down to subsequent generations of the consumer culture. The girls’ adamant argument for better treatment as consumers begs the question of just how much consumer choice is actually linked to our concept of freedom. Obviously, the schoolgirls saw the store clerks’ slight as a personal slight – they were consumers, how could the clerks fail to acknowledge that? This group of girls was unaware of what Miles calls the paradox of consumerism:

[I]t offers a vision of personal freedom through economic means – the opportunity for individuals to take advantage of their own means for extravagant display – and yet maintains the dominant order that potentially constrains personal liberty (1998:32).

Products of the consumer culture, the girls saw consumption and the aspiration to consume as the norm.

The group of teenage boys in the second insert did not like the fact that the products they consume (in this case the clothes they choose to wear) involve the use of signs, symbols and values, “which are used as a means of marking off one social group from
another” (Miles 1998:21-22). The boys were uncomfortable with the associations people made and the conclusions people jumped to when they were seen wearing their choice of clothes. Like any other product, however, clothing has attached connotations.

Advertising, far from being simply a means of informing the public that a particular product is for sale, ensures that 1) the right target market is reached and 2) that people attach the correct meanings to the products (in other words, the associations that the advertisers want you to make).

While consumer culture appears universal because it is depicted as a land of freedom in which everyone can be a consumer, it is also felt to be universal because everyone must be a consumer: this particular freedom is compulsory (Slater 1997:27).

- The freedom to buy

“Emancipation,” writes Susan Faludi in a column for Newsweek (8 January 2001), “is the freedom to buy”. However, she continues, “consumer feminism was never the legitimate heir to the true feminist movement”. In Consumer Culture and Modernity (1997), Don Slater writes that “consumer culture stands judged by its ability to sustain desired ways of life” (3). It is in and through mundane consumption that we are able to build our social identities, as we perceive ourselves to be “people who choose, who are ‘inescapably’ free and self-managing, who make decisions about who we are or want to be and use purchased goods, services and experiences to carry out these identity projects” (5). Slater’s notion of society as “a kind of fancy-dress party” (30) is apt. Consumerism and consumption encourage us to the point where “identities are designed, tried on, worn for the evening and then traded in for the next” (30). Note the woman who stands in front of a well-stocked cupboard trying to decide what to wear – a societal cliché. Stiletto boots
and a mini skirt will scream “slut” to her colleagues, while the more comfortable cargo pants and running shoes are at odds with the professional image she wants to present. Gypsy skirt and beads? Too whimsical. Combat trousers and tank top? Too butch. As she sorts through her clothes she rejects the sending of certain messages about herself to the world, rejects the implication of ideology revealed in particular modes of dress (either inferred by others or deliberately implied by the wearer). While men’s clothing is more functional (as a general rule) than the ‘costumes’ donned by women on a daily basis, ‘image’ and self-representation in the consumerist culture are not confined to clothing alone. Bought objects, with meanings provided via advertising campaigns, hold as much sway in the construction of the identities that we present to the world. These meanings are in no way inherent to the objects, nor are they fixed. The image of a particular product is subject to the whims of the advertiser, based on market research and trends.

The survey conducted in 2004 by the Unilever Institute of Marketing Strategy (www.unileverinstitute.co.za) is a prime example. Conducted to gauge concepts of gender in South Africa the resulting data will be used by marketers and advertisers in South Africa. Reports on the study quote researchers theorizing about “gender mindsets” as opposed to the ‘traditional’ bias of male versus female.

“Everything can become a commodity … this potential for any thing, activity or experience to be commodified or to be replaced by commodities perpetually places the intimate world of the everyday into the impersonal world of the market and its values” (Slater 1997:27). And so we find (tacky) symbols of ‘love’ for sale on Valentine’s day, the Christian Christmas holiday of goodwill sold as the perfect time for expensive gift-giving, and ‘feminism’ – and her sisters ‘liberation’ and ‘independence’ – sold all year
round in pots of face cream. As I stated earlier, the political and social significance of the movement has been subsumed by the marking off of ‘Independent Woman’ as simply one more market niche. “[F]eminism,” writes hooks (2000:28), “is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into”. She continues: “[I]t undermines feminist movement to project the assumption that ‘feminist’ is but another prepackaged role women can now select as they search for identity” (29).

Not only has the language of feminism been appropriated by advertising culture, what Faludi referred to as the “true feminist movement” in her column has been shoved out the door. The movement that (according to Faludi) “sought women’s equality and independence … so they could be responsible public citizens” has been impersonated by a ‘me’ ideology. Buying shoes, however, no matter how ‘independent’ and glamorous the model in the advertisement, is not a feminist act. Paying for said shoes with your own cash or credit card is not a feminist act. Economic independence, however, has always been a condition for female emancipation. This idea has been appropriated by advertisers to mean that it is the act of purchase (of very specifically packaged and ‘imaged’ products) that is emancipatory and not the power of autonomous decision-making itself.

Not all advertisements borrowing feminist language even pretend to actively encourage the ‘new’ woman. While an economically independent woman – or at least a woman with money to burn – is gold to the advertiser, very traditional female roles are often encouraged, couched in the language of the feminist. We have only to cast our minds back a few years to an advertisement featuring a career woman who swapped the boardroom for the nursery and triplets, smugly telling people that she’d “been promoted”. A fairly recent advertisement for a well-known washing powder brand is another
example. We see a cute little girl playing at being a makeup artist, applying lipstick, rouge and various other cosmetics to an unseen face. A woman’s voice comes in with a voiceover, proclaiming that you shouldn’t be spending time worrying about stains (Cut to a laughing mom, subjected to her daughter’s clownish makeup skills). “Stains shouldn’t take up your time, your children should”, the voiceover chimes. There’s a triple whammy for you – the grand narrative of looking beautiful, domestic bliss and motherhood all wrapped up in one fluffy pink package. The real irony is that this product is known as Omo Progress.

Any criticism of media in general, and advertising in particular, will be criticised. Is it as minor an issue as some would argue, paling in comparison to vaster problems? By concentrating on arguments that could only occur in consumerist societies (and, by implication, lands of plenty) are we missing the bigger picture? If advertising was an isolated phenomenon, we might reach that conclusion. Yet, as the debate over which entity has the most influence over the other – media or society – continues to rage, we must conclude that discussing and thinking about the media, about advertising, is every bit as important as other problems of gender. Thompson states (1990:9):

For most people, the relations of power and domination which affect them most directly are those characteristic of the social contexts within which they live out their everyday lives: the home, the workplace, the classroom, the peer group.

As he continues, “symbolic forms are contextualized social phenomena and something more: they are symbolic constructions which … are able to, and claim to, represent something, signify something, say something about something” (22). Women would not be targeted in advertisements for household cleaners if women were not the primary
users of such products (and, by inference, the primary cleaners, sweepers, dishwashers and scrubbers in their homes). Women would not be the primary sexual focus in advertisements if, in reality, the female form did not embody sexual desire. Female bodies, in various states of dress and undress, would not be used to sell everything from computers to hair care products if the connection between sex and power was truly understood. “[T]o interpret ideology is to explicate the connection between the meaning mobilised by symbolic forms and the relations of domination which that meaning serves to maintain” (Thompson 1990:23).

“Everything,” write Jordan and Weedon in Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World (1995), “in social and cultural life is fundamentally to do with power”. All cultural practices that have any meaning therefore involve relations of power. Among the privileges of power, Jordan and Weedon name the means to define oneself, the power to represent common sense and the power to create “official versions”.

Broadly speaking, for many women feminism means having the power to define themselves. The traditional definitions of ‘woman’ have never been a comfortable fit for feminists. So diverse and fluid have women – and gender in general – come to be (or been recognised to be), that perhaps we can never finally conclude the label “woman”. But without a stable definition of ‘woman’ or ‘man’ (or at least a framework), there can be no gender politics. Until dominance is no longer an issue and we no longer define ‘man’ as not woman (in his favour), the search for a fair, all-encompassing definition will continue. Does self-definition rest purely on personal experience (me in relation to my world)? Or can we assume shared experiences among women – shared experiences of the effects of power or lack thereof – regardless of context?
In contrast to Moore’s general view, quoted earlier, Macdonald seems to think so – and I would agree – as she writes (1995:38):

Worrying whether we have any right to offer criticism as ‘women’, when ‘woman’ may be an essentialist, patriarchal category that denies difference within it, becomes stultifying rather than helpful… [women] share a collective identity vis-à-vis men … Like the ‘brotherhood’ of the trade union movement in the nineteenth century, the bonding arises out of, rather than predates, the group’s adversarial position. Without a category of ‘women’ (structurally disadvantaged relative to ‘men’) it is hard to see from what position one could argue for the inadequacies of current constructions of femininity.

hooks is critical of this. Her very important point bears thinking about, especially by white South African feminists:

While it is evident that many women suffer from sexist tyranny, there is little indication that this forges a “common bond among women”. There is much evidence substantiating the reality that race and class identity creates differences in quality of life, social status, and lifestyle that tales precedence over the common experience women share – differences that are rarely transcended (2000:4).

However, hooks is also critical of ‘individualistic’ feminism (as displayed in and understood by the popular media of the consumerist culture) as “a despairing gesture expressive of the belief that solidarity among women is not possible” (18).

I was taught that the quickest and easiest way to spot a matter of ideology was to look for ‘common sense’. When something appears to be logical, irrefutable, common sense you can bet ideology is playing a role. The power to represent common sense is an important one – how often haven’t ideas been shot down with a scathing “Use your common sense”? While common sense does have its uses (“Don’t touch that, it’s hot”), it has a more ‘sinister’ side in it that governs our behaviour through unspoken rules, often along gender lines. Think of “A lady never …” followed by the appropriate restriction.
Common sense tells us never to walk alone at night. It tells us which clothing to wear to give others appropriate ideas about us. If we are attacked, raped or sexually assaulted, common sense allows others to think that we must have done something, worn something, said something to attract that attention or deserve the attack. Common sense is what allows judges and juries to accept that a rape survivor’s sexual history is relevant – if she’s gone with one man she’d go with another. Common sense is what tells us women are better at handling babies than men are, mothers are more self-sacrificing, girls more obliging. “The power to represent common sense,” write Jordan and Weedon, “implies the power to embody and articulate ‘our’ basic notions and values … what is right or wrong, good or bad, proper or improper, beautiful or ugly” (13). According to the “official version”, feminists are ‘hairy-legged man-haters’ (we know the popular aversion to female body hair all too well) and a woman in a short skirt is ‘asking for it’.

- **Choices of identity**

“In racist and sexist societies, what counts as authoritative is an ongoing site of struggle” (Jordan and Weedon 1995:13). The debate around the traditional practice of lobola in Africa is a case in point. An advertisement for Rooibos Tea shows various South African scenes, pointing out that which should make us proud to be uniquely South African, and what sets us apart from the rest of the world. One such scene shows a young black woman in wedding attire, sitting in the backseat of a car on a dusty road, surrounded by a herd of cattle. The scene’s commentary (in a woman’s voice) goes as follows: “It’s in the way we value our women in terms of cows”.

The practice of lobola (payment to the woman’s family in the form of cattle or money), at its most unsullied, is a way of ensuring that the children of a marriage are protected and provided for. It is also a symbol of the marriage contract, an alliance between two families and compensation to a woman’s family for the loss of a member (Transformations in African Marriage Parkin, D and Nyamyaya, D. 1987 and Survey of African Marriage and Family Life Phillips, A (ed). 1953).

Another word for lobola, however – bride ‘price’ – has very different connotations, implying the buying of a woman, as with property. As with any tradition, the practice of lobola is open to abuse. While its proponents concentrate on the ideal of lobola, its detractors argue that it is a situation in which the woman is severely disadvantaged. The abuse of such a tradition is a serious matter, as is the fact that even in its most ideal form, the practice seems to imply and expect economic dependence on the part of the woman.

Speaking very broadly and in very general terms, there is as much oppression in the ‘Western’ cultures of South Africa as there is in the ‘African’ cultures of South Africa. With overt traditions, at least, one knows where one stands. In ‘Western’ life, however, even with the focus on individual freedom, sexism and oppression are insidious, a subtle bubbling below the surface, without the lines clearly demarcated until one transgresses.

Under capitalism, patriarchy is structured so that sexism restricts women’s behaviour in some realms even as freedom from limitations is allowed in other spheres. The absence of extreme restrictions leads many women to ignore the areas in which they are exploited or discriminated against; it may even lead them to imagine that no women are oppressed (hooks 2000:5).

Ten years into a democratic South Africa, it may be argued that only lip service is paid to the ending of women’s oppression (note the 16 Days of Activism Against Woman and Child Abuse), as “Action, not Activism will end abuse” (to quote the headline of
Charlene Smith’s article for the Eastern Cape newspaper the *Weekend Post*, 27 November 2004).

The Rooibos advertisement in question reappeared a short while after its first run. The scene depicting the woman in the car was now accompanied only by the words, “It’s in the way we value our women”. That’s what makes us uniquely South African? With one in every three women likely to be raped in her lifetime, what makes us uniquely South African, obviously, is that we don’t “value our women” very much at all. The ‘struggle against women and child abuse’ is only a struggle because men are not willing to change – their attitudes towards and expectations of women, their access to power and their use (and abuse) of that power.

Smith quotes Mamphele Ramphele, the partner of Steve Biko: “White academics [no longer] speak out on issues of national concern because they [fear] they will be labelled racist. Black academics do not criticise government because of misplaced loyalty. A culture of silence is putting South Africa’s democracy at risk”. Smith continues, “the silence has increased and political attacks on those who raise concerns about everything from water supplies for the poor to sexual violence, has intensified. And so, these are the 16 days of hypocrisy, which happen to fall during South Africa’s peak ‘rape month’, December”.

Following Jordan and Weedon (1995), feminist politics can always be read as a response to women’s *actual* position in society. If men really acted as the protectors of and providers for women – if women felt safe, loved, provided for, respected, nurtured and above all free, the more ‘traditional’ gender hierarchy in society would never have
been called into question. A woman, however, has to fit society, and she can expect
derision and outright anger when and if she expects society to fit her.

As Judith Evans writes (1995:4):

Society is ordered according to what men need, or are thought to need, and
that is seen as the normal and rational state of affairs. To order society so
as to cater for women’s needs, too, requires ‘special arrangements’. This is
because those who see the current position as natural think providing for
men is catering for people; providing for women is adding something else.

The advertisements (print, radio and television) for 1st For Women Insurance
Brokers punt their products from this angle, focussing on those ‘added extras’ that benefit
women. Words such as “understanding”, “protect”, “unique needs” and “reassurance”
crop up regularly. Also, we are told that the company supports “various women’s causes”
(however, it does not specify which). This advertisement, and by association, the product
that it advertises, seem to have feminist credentials. ‘Women’s needs’ have been taken
into consideration – in fact, this product is exclusively for women. The tone of the
advertisements, however – probably intended to be comforting – strikes me as rather
patronising. The television advertisement features an attractive young woman. She
engages the intended female audience and draws in the potential consumer in the manner
of sharing personal confidences (a common trope in advertisements aimed at women),
calling on a shared sisterhood to make a sale. Ironic then that while the word fraternity
conjures up images of good-natured camaraderie among ‘the guys’, the word sorority
brings only impressions of bitchiness, cat-fights and backstabbing.

The television advertisement compares the relationship a 1st For Women client will
have with her insurance broker to a new relationship with a strong, protective and
understanding man (visually shown in a dark, dapper suit, with an expressionless face and muscular arms).

“Cultural practices such as media … and popular culture,” say Jordan and Weedon, “construct forms of subjectivity which are mostly gendered. This gendering suggests that certain qualities are appropriate to women and others to men” (179-180). Admittedly, life is far simpler when one thinks in binary opposites, good/bad, light/dark, white/black, man/woman and so on. In a construct such as this, one notes that the first term of each pair is endowed with positive associations, while the second term has more negative associations (Cixous 1986). Binary oppositions fail to take into consideration the shades of grey, the complexities of individuals and society. Stereotypes, however, help us to define what is ‘normal’ within the boundaries of our society. So, we therefore ‘know’ that while women are by nature neat and quiet in habits and have an inexhaustible capacity for empathy and caring, we also ‘know’ that they are irrational, emotional, and generally not very independent. By the same token, while we ‘know’ that men can be slobs and they dislike housework (‘boys will be boys!’), they are objective, logical and worldly and have strong leadership qualities.

Advertisements, selling “solutions, not sociology” (Lazier and Gagnard Kendrick. 1993:201), play on stereotypes for various reasons: Stereotypes are recognisable to the largest number of people; stereotypes help to ‘place’ a product in the market (provide a context for the product); recognition of stereotypes can be played for humour (we laugh at ourselves as we recognise the ‘truth’ displayed in the stereotype).

[S]tereotypes short-circuit or block the capacity for objective and analytic judgement in favor (sic) of well-worn, catchall (and possibly outdated) reactions. This could lead to shortchanging. It also leads to the first
connection in gender concerns: Advertising to women has consistently been filled with stereotypes (Lazier and Gagnard Kendrick 1993:201).

Stereotypes are necessarily one-dimensional – too much emotional depth or strength of reason behind an action or behaviour disrupts the model. “From bra-burning feminists to house-proud housewives, from sex-crazed seductresses to neurotic career women, the media regularly serve a menu of female stereotypes that stimulates misogynistic tastebuds” (Macdonald 1995:13).

Stereotypes are at their most dangerous when they are not presented or recognised as such, but are taken as the normal, natural turn of events. This process of reification is the presentation of a state of affairs as normal, permanent and ‘outside of time’, concealing the social and historical aspects.

Note the proliferation of ‘happy families’ in television advertisements. Unlike many sitcoms and family dramas where dysfunctional families appear to be the norm and conflict is played for entertainment, advertisements are eerily populated with ‘shiny, happy people’ – mom in an apron (literally and metaphorically), dad in a suit and tie, kids washed, clean and as good as gold. This discrepancy can be explained, perhaps, by the fact that while television shows are meant to entertain, the main objective of the television advertisement is to sell a product and with it, an image and accompanying ideology. When we see an advertisement depicting a domestic setting, Mom is not in the kitchen with her daughter simply because. We already have an idea of what a woman, a mother, should ideally be – the advertisement simply confirms and comforts us with what we already ‘know’. The depiction simply legitimates society’s idea of appropriate behaviour for a woman and mother. And so, while using ‘feminism’ (but, importantly,
not feminists) and the iconic liberal woman, advertisements show women who are ‘free to choose’ – so free she has chosen the home and minimal power. She has, it is implied, nothing left to fight for. Feminism has done its job. She is (and the audience is expected to be) non-critical of her easy, effortless, ‘post-feminist’ world. As in the McCain’s frozen food advertisement, a woman can achieve liberation (even if only from the chore of food preparation) through consumerism.

So, where is the harm in presenting easily recognisable models of gender roles and behaviour in order to give a product a place in the market? The answer lies in the fact that the relationship between the media and society is a two-way street – each informs the other. The media tend to reflect what is popularly acceptable in a society, with the result that some attitudes are perpetuated while others are entirely absent. Advertisements aimed at or featuring women pretend to offer choice, but really only conceive of a very limited number of roles (both with and without a feminist veneer). The feminist demand for ‘choice’ has been thoroughly appropriated by the consumerist and advertising culture, but the supermarket merely offers us many differently packaged version of the same thing. Advertising treats women in the same way, relying on audience recognition of female essentials.
Chapter 2: A woman’s work …

To quote Shirley Conran (1978), “Life is too short to stuff a mushroom”, and as the McCain’s frozen food ‘lady’ says, “Life’s too short to peel a pea”. The advertisement for the company’s frozen vegetables and convenience meals stars a young, attractive brunette woman. Standing in her home, the screen becomes populated with her clones – or rather, her ‘selves’ – all the different roles she is expected to play as a ‘modern’ woman. The homemaker, mother, career woman and sexpot (dressed appropriately in each case) then morph back into the original woman. The advertisement’s catchphrase: “For all the things you gotta be”.

Women are important in a consumer-based society. Or rather, women with spending power are important to a consumer-based society, primarily in their capacity as consumers (and often, as buyers for the home and family). A 1957 conference hosted by the National Manpower Council in America focussed on the (then) new revolution in the working lives of women. In 2004, as in 1957, the private sphere is thought to be mainly the domain of women, while the public sphere belongs to men. As women precariously straddle the two spheres, Baxter notes that “it is possible … to be positioned as relatively powerful within one discourse but as relatively powerless within another, perhaps competing discourse” (2003:9).

Women have always worked. While the work done has been largely invisible, unacknowledged and vastly undervalued, idleness is not a state one would naturally associate with women (past, present and future). The 1957 conference was an attempt to get to grips with what at the time was a revolution in the workforce of America. “Once the impact of maternal employment upon family living standards and upon the rearing
and development of children was opened up for inspection,” writes Henry David in the conference findings, “the conference participants found that they were *subjecting the very structure and values of society to examination*” (my emphasis). However, the participants insisted, “[w]e don’t know anything about many of the consequences of the ‘revolution’ in women’s employment”. The word “consequence” itself implies a negative impact of an issue still being debated today. Infertility, ‘the man shortage’, stress disorders, mental problems, burnout – Susan Faludi’s *Backlash* (1992) documents the systematic breakdown of women in the workforce who were suffering, according to their naysayers, from too much freedom, “enslaved by their own liberation” (1992:2).

The conference summary continues hopefully:

If it is true that going to work on the part of married women is a matter of choice, it is always possible that more of them might choose not to take employment outside the home. In a free society, it is conceivable that even with a high demand for labor (*sic*) and great needs for manpower, women might still decide to stay at home rather than enter the labor force.

However, they continue:

Whether or not they would exercise this preference would depend upon the strength of the forces drawing them into paid employment and the freedom they felt in responding to them.

Equally “quaint” in her views is Hannah Gavron, in her study *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (1966). Discussing the “young marrieds” of the 1950’s, Gavron places them in a society “where success has come increasingly to be measured in terms of money and consumption” (x). “Increased employment, “writes Gavron, “meant increased wealth. Homes could be pleasanter and the husband would have more incentive to spend his leisure at home. He might therefore be drawn more easily into the general activities of the family” (xi).
Once you have picked yourself up off the floor, it would be interesting to consider that even with more than half the women in America presently working outside the home (US Bureau of the Census, 1991 in Baber, KM and Allen, KR. 1992:176) all this ‘increased wealth’ has not led to a massive increase in men’s participation in home activities and chores, although, according to some reports, the ‘nurturing gap’ is closing. Generally though, studies show a significant difference in the contributions of men and women to housework. Our derision at the attitudes of those researchers in the 1950’s is accorded to us by time, distance and a shift in the dominant attitudes of society – change happens only by degrees, however, as facts and figures show that sweeping change has yet to occur.

That housework is undervalued is indisputable. As Baber and Allen write, “Housework … is generally conceptualised as a necessary evil … This approach negates an important part of family life and devalues the significant social contribution women make through the day-to-day care of the home” (1992:205). Women have the responsibility, men ‘help out’. Why the reluctance on the part of many men to acknowledge the innate unfairness in the distribution of housework in society in general? In a 1989 study, A.R Hochschild attributed this resistance to “men’s fear of losing status, fear of losing control if their wives became economically independent, and fear of losing the male privilege of being cared for by a wife” (in Baber and Allen 1992:207).

I am concentrating on the division of labour within a heterosexual relationship, as lesbian and gay couples do not exist in Advertising Land, except as the subject of humour or parody. Housewives abound and the ‘Family Man’ is king. While women in advertisements are “allowed” to have careers, they are primarily caregivers, wives and
mothers. Advertisements, write Lazier and Gagnard Kendrick (1993: 207), “reflect the ongoing confusion in our culture (by both women and men) of what women are – as we grope with what we’ll let today’s woman do or be, we at least agree on how she will look”. In the ten years since, nothing much has changed.

Thus, discourses are forms of knowledge or powerful sets of assumptions, expectations and explanations, governing mainstream social and cultural practices. They are systematic ways of making sense of the world by inscribing and shaping power relations within all texts (Baxter 2003:7).

L. Lein (1984 in Baber, K.M and Allen, K.R. 1992:208) studied twenty-three families in which the wife was employed at least part time, and named four different models for the distribution of work in the traditional family. Lein’s category, the “add-to” category, is the task model portrayed in the McCain’s advertisement mentioned earlier. This model suggests that paid labour in the workforce is merely another addition to the woman’s responsibilities. So, when McCain’s frozen foods advertises frozen vegetables and convenience meals as the perfect shortcut or cheat for the busy woman, they fail to address the inequalities that led to her situation and instead capitalise on it.

It is interesting (and sad) to note that the female respondents whose families operated on the “add-to” model in Lein’s study felt a sense of overload, yet blamed it on their own lack of organisation or creativity.

The McCain’s advertisement is pseudo-feminist in the following ways. Firstly, a product is endorsed as a solution to a problem. This advertisement shows a woman – and expects an audience – aware of the “Superwoman” myth. The advertisement does not destabilise the myth (despite suggesting that a woman may need help in living up to it), nor does it question the validity and fairness of such expectations on women. All the advertisement does is take a feminist tenet out of context (the fight against the assigning
of all household ‘drudgery’ to women) and turn it into a reason for women not to dislike the domestic sphere and the kitchen in particular, without disrupting the status quo.

The different roles women are expected to play are still largely irreconcilable unless there is money, if not wealth. So, feminism’s political motivations are set on the backburner, to be replaced by economic ones. It is impossible to dispute the fact that economic means are important for the furthering of women’s cause for equality. More divides, however, are created as freedom, choice and equality can apparently be bought. Fundamental changes, however, are not made. Through the possession of wealth, women become artificially ‘like men’, able to transfer domestic and child-rearing tasks to paid help. Men can conveniently sidestep the issues of shared responsibility for children and home through the hiring of (generally) a woman to take on those responsibilities for pay (something a wife and mother, working in her own home, does not get). Once again, the standard is male and a woman’s position a burden.

The United States Bureau of Labor (sic) Statistics released the findings of a time-use survey conducted in 2003 - 2004 (see www.bls.gov). The purpose of the survey was to find out how work fits into people’s lives, and how time use varies across the demographics. The latest findings show, through the interviewing of some twenty-one thousand people, that while employed adult men work for an hour longer per day than working women, employed women spent an hour longer on average per day in child care. The survey asked respondents to detail twenty-four hours in their lives, accounting for every minute and activity.

The results showed that 84% of female respondents, and 63% of male respondents, spent time performing household activities. Only 20% of men did laundry in the specified
twenty-four hour period, compared with 55% of women. Again, food preparation and cleanup was taken on more by women (66%) than by men (35%). There were discrepancies in the amount of time spent with childcare as the primary activity – adult, employed women with children under the age of eighteen spent 1.7 hours in childcare, compared with 0.8 hours for men. Adult, employed women with children under the age of six spent 2.7 hours in childcare, as opposed to 1.2 hours on average for adult, employed men.

It is not surprising then that one can turn on a television at any time and see any number of advertisements for household cleaners aimed solely at women. Talk shows still feature ‘the battle of the sexes’ as a topic, and that topic still creates debate. Reruns of Ricki Lake show men attempting piles of ironing with bravado and a roll of their eyes. Wives write to the often conservative ‘Dr Phil’ McGraw, begging him to help them when their husbands will not. All this despite theories that the more equal the division of work in a marriage the better a couple’s chances are for happiness and intimacy. But, we run the risk of stepping on the toes of that ugly thing called power, lying – in a traditional, socially–sanctioned marriage – in the hands of the husband.

We should be critical of a system that allows, and encourages, an unequal distribution of work, privileges and liberties and excuses individual men (and women) who support and perpetuate so unfair a system. I fail to understand how a powerful man’s sexism and misogyny can be dismissed, in a way that his racism, for example, cannot.

We tend to think of the ‘big picture’ when we hear the word ‘movement’. What is happening to a country? What has befallen a people? Unless the unfairness, the sexism and misogyny is overt, it doesn’t exist – or, at least, it’s not that important.
In an article for Leadership magazine (August 2004), Quentin Wray spoke to three of only four female editors of the South African news media. “This is shocking,” writes Wray, “for an industry that prides itself as being democratic and representative and which claims to embody openness, robustness and freedom”. Interviewed by Wray, Ms Pippa Green (editor of SABC Radio News) says that the women running news organisations are there “more by accident” than design. Wray lists the reasons for this as “a deeply held sexism on the part of some managers, to the lack of institutional support for working mothers”. In South Africa at least, racial equality continues to dominate the agenda, not gender equality.

With the legacy of apartheid, the emphasis on racial equality as opposed to gender equality is understandable – a focus on racial equality to the exclusion of gender equality is, however, unacceptable. The liberation of all those oppressed and exploited is necessarily of concern to feminists as racism and sexism are elements of the same gesture.

White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people… As long as these two groups, or any group, defines liberation as gaining social equality with ruling-class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of others (hooks 2000:16).

- **...is never done**

Germaine Greer introduces the chapter ‘work’ in The Whole Woman (1991) thus:

As women do all the work in human reproduction, so they have always done most of the work required for human survival… The universal
‘division of labour’ between the sexes was in act the apportioning of daily
drudgery to the female, so that the male could indulge his appetite for
sport, play, dreaming, ritual, religion and artistic expression (151).

If leisure time is the most masculine of privileges, it is no wonder that household
cleaners and convenience products are marketed almost solely to women. And, as the
world seems hell bent on understanding feminism only as ‘women trying to be like men’,
the advertisements are given a ‘feminist’ spin, with products advertised as a cheat or
shortcut for busy women.

Greer relates how when she was a child, “little girls were kept in to do the
housework while little boys were sent out to play” (1991:155). ‘Characters’ in the
advertisements for domestic products are overwhelmingly female. A home shopping
infomercial explains that a new home sweeper can be ‘used by all’ as the advertisers
show a girl toddler, barley out of nappies, and an elderly woman, using the sweeper. So
rare are males in such advertisements, wracking my brain I could come up with only one
advertisement that featured a man actually performing a household task. As his pregnant
wife lies waiting for an ultrasound test on an examination bed in her gynaecologist’s
rooms, the young father-to-be starts fooling around with the doctor’s equipment, only to
be scolded. He is suitably chastised as the doctor walks in and begins the ultrasound test.
He tells the happy couple, “It’s a boy”. Pause. “And another boy”. Pause. “And a sister”.
The advertisement cuts to the kitchen of the couple’s house, showing the husband
standing in front of the washing machine clad only in a shirt and underpants. The
advertisement is for a washing powder with “three times the cleaning power”. With his
wife so busy looking after her triplets (two boys and “a sister”), he now has to take care
of the laundry, poor man.
Housework is made out to be an integral part of the female psyche, her greatest obsession. Two advertisements currently running on television play on this idea, with the advertisements “playing to an audience assumed to be aware of well-worn and even threadbare feminine mythologies. By replaying [the mythologies], however, it also helps to keep them alive, even if this is achieved with a knowing nod and a wink” (Macdonald. 1995:114). The first advertisement, with all the implied ironic distance of a media product playing to a stereotype-savvy audience, is styled to resemble ‘wholesome’ television life of that golden age of domesticity, the 1950’s. A woman in the ‘traditional’ homemaker’s garb, hair pulled severely back from her perfectly and conspicuously made-up face, polishes an already spotless bathroom. The exaggerated sound effects that accompany her controlled but zealous cleaning are complemented by her facial expression – one of single-minded, almost mad, determination. While this Stepford Wife slash psychopath remains perfectly beautiful throughout her domestic exertions, the woman in the second advertisement is her opposite. The second advertisement opens like a ‘woman’s drama’, complete with sweeping string orchestra. We see a bedraggled woman’s tear-stained face behind glass. Her young daughter stands on the other side of the glass, tearfully asking her orange overall-clad mother when she is “getting out”. As the camera allows us to see more of the surroundings, we realise that what has at first seemed to be a prison’s visiting room is in fact a glass-enclosed shower that the woman is cleaning. “Soon baby,” the woman cries, “I’d better get back”. Both advertisements offer a range of cleaning products promising to cut down on the time spent cleaning.

Are these advertisements feminist? After a diet of happy Omo housewives I can certainly appreciate the humour and the different approach the makers of these
advertisements took. Humour is an effective way of highlighting social problems and airing truths. (Cynically, it is also a good way to encourage people to associate only good things with a particular product). In the world of the advertiser, as with the potential suitor, if you can make her laugh you’re halfway there.

My opinion of the second advertisement – for Handy Andy – is quite favourable. Using easily identifiable markers, the advertisement is set up as a melodrama or soap opera – often seen as quintessential “women’s” viewing. The makers of this advertisement have parodied this much-maligned genre of television entertainment. In Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps (1991), Christine Geraghty describes the term ‘soap opera’ as “a term of derision, an expression which implied an over-dramatic, under-rehearsed presentation of trivial drama blown up out of all proportion to their importance” (1).

The Handy Andy advertisement plays on this theme brilliantly. While one encounters a certain amount of shyness (and embarrassment!) when people admit that they watch and enjoy soap operas, the traditions of that genre are recognisable enough that we can laugh at both the satire and at our own recognition.

According to Geraghty, soap operas provide viewers with detailed character histories, the motivation for the actions and attitude of that character. However, she explains, “there is a space for the reader at key moments to provide an explanation for the excesses of the melodramatic aesthetics which are inadequately explained by the cause and effect process of the narrative. What is the reason for the welling up of music, the exchange of glances … the close-up on a character after a dramatic confrontation” (31). The advertisement mocks this as medium close-ups of both the mother’s and daughter’s
emotional faces leave the viewer wondering about the dramatic situation portrayed, before the ‘shower as prison’ set-up is revealed. The humour lies both in our recognition of the soap opera satire and in the absurdity of the ‘dramatic’ situation. The advertisement works on another level, however. Prison as a metaphor for women’s housework is one many women would recognise and (wryly) agree with. But the advertisement in no way exhorts the sexes to share the burden of housework. On the contrary, this is definitely women’s work – only easier.

Geraghty writes that soap operas “establish utopias in which emotional needs are imaginatively fulfilled” (108). Like soap operas, many advertisements aimed at women offer the viewer a utopian view of the world. Products are touted as solutions to problems without really offering any kind of solution at all (no matter what miracle products she uses, showers still have to be cleaned). And in South Africa, domestic work has historically (and into the present day) been preformed by black women in white homes. The “diversity of women’s social and political reality” (hooks 2000:27) is not acknowledged in advertising practice. Instead, we are presented with a generic everywoman who doesn’t really represent any women at all. hooks continues: “When we cease to focus on the simplistic stance ‘men are the enemy’, we are compelled to examine systems of domination and our role in the maintenance and perpetuation” (27).

Advertisements aimed at women are fantasies, offering her worlds that are as unrealistic as the assumption that the products advertised can really buy her freedom. These neatly packaged fantasies offer her freedom from domestic chores, social responsibility and the pressure to be beautiful (“Buy this product to escape the pressure to beautiful”).
Chapter 3: Something for the ladies

Gender role reversal, a common trope for humour in the media, does little to destabilise the power play of gender relations. In fact, the ‘naturalness’ of gender difference – and the suitableness of certain tasks or modes of behaviour and dress to a particular gender – is entrenched.

The body has historically been much more integral to the formation of identity for women than for men. If women had defined for themselves the ideals of their bodily shape or decoration this would not be problematic. It is the denial of this right in the history of cultural representation … and in the multi-billion dollar pornography, fashion and cosmetic industries, that has granted women only squatters’ rights to their own bodies (Macdonald 1995:193).

In contrast, “male bodies connote masculinity through associations of bodily functioning and performance (sporting or sexual) and of powerful and energetic activity” (194). This holds true even in the Archer’s Aqua advertisement parodies of ‘sensitive men’, as the alcoholic cooler is punted as “Something for the ladies”.

Framed as a magazine shoot, the first advertisement features a muscular ‘Scandinavian’ man dressed as a barman, standing at a bar. As the photo shoot proceeds he assumes various poses, in various states of dress (and undress). Dressed as a Viking, then as a fireman cuddling a puppy, then prone – shirtless and wearing white boxer shorts – on the bar, holding an Archer’s Aqua, prompted all the while by the voice of the female photographer from whose point of view we watch the ‘photo shoot’. Writes van Zoonen (1994:104): “[V]oyeurism of the male body is prevented by visual and narrative codes that signify activity and control by the male pin-up. It shows that within patriarchy a simple reversal of the masculine structure of looking which is based on identification and voyeurism does not produce an equivalent female voyeurism”.


The second advertisement is an ‘action sequence’ in which the hero just happens to use the only tools at his disposal – his clothing – to accomplish certain daring feats. (Removing his denim jeans and tying them around an about-to-explode fire hydrant, for example). He rescues a kitten from a tree, saves a lamb from being run over by an Archer’s Aqua truck, and ends up reclining on the street among bottles of the cooler, smiling at the camera with the kitten in his arms, clad in the ubiquitous white boxers. His ‘nudity’, however, had a purpose – unlike female nudity, which is often overtly sexual and gratuitous.

Macdonald writes (1995:169): “Under pressure from the feminist lobby to pay more attention to women’s changing roles and aspirations, one of the advertisers’ favourite tactics was to take ‘desire’ [I will add, both sexual and ‘aspirational’] and depoliticize it, transforming a complex concept into a harmless signifier of lifestyle aspirations”. Living in the society that we do, and having to work within the patriarchal paradigm that has coloured every aspect of our lives and perceptions, it is difficult to think of sexuality (in view of ‘desire’) in terms different to what we know. While the advertisements mentioned may seem to acknowledge the needs of ‘sexually liberated’ women, they are merely using a concept of feminism to produce “new versions of heterosexual romance” (1995:167).

It is rare to see male bodies on display and the advertisements stand out for that reason alone. Yet, the advertisements do nothing to destabilise the power relations between the genders. “In a society which has defined masculinity as strong, active, in possession of the gaze … it is of course utterly problematic if not impossible for the male body to submit itself to the control of the gaze” (van Zoonen 1994:98). The men in the
Archer’s Aqua advertisements (especially the first) are very conscious of a viewer, as they ‘perform’ a role in the “fantasy of heterosexual romance, rather than of female heterosexual desire” (1994:102). The man in the second advertisement embodies the “man who just happens to be looked at” (1994:101) until the close of the advertisement suggests he has been aware of the viewer – ostensibly female. The first advertisement is far more of a parody than the second, yet his objectification in the mode usually reserved for females does nothing to destabilise relations of domination. He is not left more vulnerable than before. On the contrary, the advertisement appears merely to underscore the fact that men cannot be seriously objectified and sexualised, as women can. We see humour in a situation that places a man in a position usually reserved for women. In this light, the advertisement provides no serious titillation for women as it is exposed as a joke only – “Something for the ladies”, but within the confines of patriarchy only.

And what of the term ‘ladies’? I played the word association game and came up with *aloof, unattainable, refined, dignified, crossed legs, high heels, makeup, well-groomed, serene, attractive, coy and sexy*. Lakoff (1975) is particularly scathing – and probably rightly so – of the term.

[L]ady carries with it overtones recalling the age of chivalry: the exalted stature of the person so referred to, her existence above the common sphere … but we must also remember that these implications are perilous: they suggest that a “lady” is helpless and cannot do things for herself. In this respect the use of a word like *lady* is parallel to the act of opening doors for women – or ladies. At first blush it is flattering: the object of the flattery feels honoured, cherished, and so forth; but by the same token, she is also considered helpless and not in control of her own destiny (1975:25).

Society and the popular media alike have seized on this argument, as the struggle of feminism has been reduced (both seriously and in jest) to a debate about so-called basic
courtesies and opening doors. The word ‘lady’, with all its prim and proper connotations, has none of the reminders of female sexuality and reproductive ability that the word ‘woman’ does. Indeed, its use in the Archer’s Aqua advertisements is significant. In this advertisement it is the *man* that is sexualised – unsuccessfully, I must add, as the advertisements actually counteract their own implied assertions.

Equally revealing is the continuing imbalance in both the extent and quality of male and female stereotyping in media constructions. Stereotypes of men (e.g. ‘macho man’) may elicit negative emotions but they do little to dent male authority. Even the ‘new man’ stereotype, far from weakening male power, has been cynically viewed ... as an attempt to shore up masculinity’s defences against the erosion of feminism (Macdonald 1995:14).

The display of the female body, however, is a far more serious matter. In her paper “Pornography: The Question of the Subordination of Women and the Need for State Intervention” (1995), Andrea Hurst discusses the subordination of women present in pornography as an *act*. The liberal state, says Hurst, supports the idea of individual freedom, as “[t]he greater the extent of state interference the more difficult for all individuals to achieve maximum autonomy” (18). However, she emphatically states that “the treatment of any fully rational person as a moral subordinate limits the capacity of such a person to choose her own ends and in doing so violates a basic human right to autonomy”. Hurst makes it clear that “maximum individual autonomy cannot be achieved if some people are left entirely free to treat others as moral subordinates, especially if this treatment in turn engenders an intolerable environment in which the subordinated are made vulnerable to further violation simply because they are who they are” (18-19). Hurst concludes that pornography can be viewed not only as a *depiction* of
subordination but as “conduct which contributes to the creation of a subordinated class, then production and dissemination of pornographic material will be an inherently unjust action” (21-22).

While Hurst’s observations refer specifically to pornography and its manifestation as an actual act, these observations can in fact be applied to the general media’s depiction of women as well. Catherine Redfern, editor and founder of the British online feminist magazine The F Word (www.thefword.co.uk) is very vocal on the status of women in British and European advertising. In an article for The Guardian newspaper (31 July 2003), Redfern discussed a particular advertisement that had caused widespread offence. The advertisement in question, for British travel company Easyjet, showed a close-up of a pair of female breasts. The advertisement’s pay-off line was, “Discover weapons of mass distraction”. Redfern found that the Advertising Standards Authority in Britain received 186 objections to the advertisement, making it the second most complained about advertisement in Britain in 2003 at the time the article was written. The British ASA’s adjudication was this: The body felt that this advertisement was unlikely to cause widespread offence (despite the high number of complaints), adding that it was in the tradition of the best British humour, such as the “Carry On” series of films. Redfern was incensed. “What this boils down to,” she writes, “is that anything using the female body to sell products – even in the most tasteless and insensitive way – can be justified as ‘a British tradition’”. According to Redfern, the British ASA has a dismal record of upholding complaints against even the most sexist and offensive advertisements. She experiences the same problem that many feminists encounter when lodging complaints
against sexually explicit or suggestive material – the accusation of being a prude or humourless.

An advertisement such as the one described above can only be viewed as humorous in a patriarchal culture. The power imbalances entrenched in patriarchal culture contribute to – and indeed encourage – the prevalence of such images and the attitudes revealed within them.

- **Signposts to the scrapheap**

If the ultimate goal of feminism was to make women more visible (in the media and otherwise) it has succeeded. Women are everywhere in media representation. Or rather, women’s bodies are everywhere, specifically in a sexual sense. Visibility women have, and in abundance, although many visuals left a bad taste in my mouth, often for reasons I was unable to articulate. Judith Evans writes (1995:87):

> As women have been insulted, degraded and wrongly depicted by men, so the cultural feminist will redress this. Not only into the balance but outweighing male thought comes the cultural feminist view: [construing] woman’s passivity as her peacefulness, her sentimentality as her proclivity to nurture, her subjectiveness as her advanced self-awareness.

Speaking in the context of research, Pamela J. Creedon writes (1993:10):

> The accommodation response can involve acknowledging the existence of feminist scholarship in one’s research, but not incorporating it in any substantive way in the construction of meaning. This approach is found in studies where the fact that social changes have occurred is acknowledged, but the interpretation of the study’s findings is based on traditional, dominant values. Seen from another angle, accommodation also means cutting and splicing the feminist perspective so that it fits within the traditional research framework.

The concept of ‘accommodation’ is found both in societal attitudes and in advertising practice. This watered-down (and often perverse) version of ‘feminism’ is
rampant, primarily in advertising aimed at women. The language of feminism is often used to bring women back to a startlingly traditional way of life. And so, we find accounts of women exercising their ‘right to choose’ subservience to their husbands and anti-wrinkle creams sold as the ultimate in liberation, as feminism is ‘cut and spliced’ to fit society’s dominant mores and a consumerist agenda.

While advertising in particular (and society in general) may pretend to acknowledge diversity among women on many levels, bodily diversity among women portrayed in advertisements is sorely lacking. The website www.about-face.com (About-Face) focuses on what is for many women the impossibly thin ideal of the advertising and media industries. The infantilization and implied vulnerability of women / girls in advertising – through the styling of clothes and body posture, facial expression and the body itself – particularly concerns this group. The website allows users to browse through a “Gallery of Offenders” – advertising images from companies that repeatedly use degrading images (sexually or otherwise) of women in their campaigns – send petitions and letters to offending companies, as well as submit images they find derogatory along with their own explanations and comments. The site also focuses on positive images of women in the media, applauding companies that at least attempt to show alternative and diverse images of women, and allow for different contexts in the portrayal of women’s lives and experiences.

“It is not the body, but the codifying of the body into structures of appearance that culturally shapes and moulds what it means to be ‘feminine’” (Macdonald 1995:194). The celebration of women’s bodies as they are is an important part of the struggle against expected and idealised perfection, and that ‘celebration’ can be found in any women’s
magazine (alongside advertisements for alpha-hydroxy acid-rich creams and anti-cellulite capsules). I acknowledge that self-acceptance can indeed be subversive in the face of pressure to conform to a certain body shape. True acceptance, however (as opposed to that pushed in “women’s” media), does not involve acceptance of ‘flaws’ – flaws imply a standard that cannot be applied to every woman. A line of advertisements for no-fat yoghurt brand, Vitalinea, is indicative of this. The first advertisement features a model-like blonde and an ‘average’, older, brunette at the pool of a holiday resort. A waiter walks up to the ‘large’ woman (large only by media standards), offering her a Vitalinea yoghurt pot on a tray with a deferential, “Your Vitalinea, madam”. The brunette is put out, as she stammers “I didn’t order that” and “Do you think I need it?” “I ordered it,” says a seductive female voice off-camera, and the camera turns to pan the body of the attractive, bikini-clad blonde eating the Vitalinea yoghurt. The brunette, completely overshadowed as the waiter leers at the blonde and ignores her, asks timidly if she can “try one of those”.

The second advertisement features another blonde woman. Shopping for a bikini, a prudish sales assistant suggests sourly that a fuller costume might be more suitable. The woman arches an incredulous eyebrow at the camera. The advertisement then cuts to a poolside scene as the blonde woman, eating Vitalinea yoghurt, asks a dark-haired (fully-clothed) man, “What do you think?” The camera pans her bikini-clad form before he answers, “Tasty, very tasty”. How witty. He could be talking about the woman or the yoghurt.

“By associating sexual feelings with bodily perfection, “writes Macdonald, “the point of view remains firmly masculine” (1995:194). While the advertisements employ
feminist rhetoric in the notion of ‘looking after your own needs’ as a woman (in this case, the perceived healthiness of Vitalinea yoghurt), the ultimate prize, it is implied, will always be openly-desired male attention. Without male approval to legitimate her worth, why else would a woman subscribe to the cult of the body beautiful?

MacDonald states (1995:3):

Advertisements, magazines or films are clearly, and with varying degrees of persuasiveness, engaging our desires and creating fantasy environments … when women complain about the lack of realism in the media’s representations of themselves, they are criticising lack of diversity in portraying and defining women’s lives and desires, not asking for a hall of mirrors. Realism, especially for non-dominant groups, may amount to no more than a depressing reproduction of how things currently are.

She continues (196):

In the economic and cultural context of a society that devalues older women … advertising discourses that imply that grey hair and wrinkles are signposts towards the scrapheap acquire additional power.

And so, we buy L’Oreal’s ‘time defence’ skin care (“Because you’re worth it”) and Garnier’s hair colouring products (“Trust them, they’re experts”) as a way of ‘taking care of ourselves’, to escape the loss of social value that women are taught to fear and avoid. An entire industry built on women’s culturally-formed fears has no such equivalent for men – “ageing” for a man focuses on virility and the correct functioning of his body, not his appearance, as we ‘understand’ that “men age better than women do”.

If the chief function of advertising is to provide people with something to aspire to – achieved through the purchase of a product – then, purchase notwithstanding, perhaps the chief complaint of women (feminist and non-feminist alike) is that the aspirations provided for women in advertising practice seem too narrow and limited. “Is that all you believe me capable of achieving?” we ask. Even advertisements depicting a woman
overcoming difficulty – giving the camera a triumphant smile when she ‘beats the system’ – serve only to reinforce women’s notion that there are indeed deficiencies within ourselves that can (and need to be) overcome. Should we be expecting advertisements to show what could be? If, as I suspect, the media (including advertising) have a material effect on the expectations of society, why not? However, Macdonald cautions (1995: 6):

In an era that multiplies forms of representation, but leaves balances of power fundamentally unaltered, we need to explore responses more carefully before leaping to the conclusion that contradictions in the representation of women … will necessarily be a catalyst for social change.

- (Changing) gender roles

The UCT Unilever Institute of Marketing Strategy (www.unileverinstitute.co.za) recently ran a study investigating the concept of gender and the (changing) roles of men and women in South Africa. Conducted through surveys and interviews with a sample of 3500 South Africans, the results are both positive and negative from a feminist point of view. While 69% of respondents felt that the accepted norms of gender in South Africa should be challenged, as many as 41% of respondents felt that it is acceptable that society favours men. According to the study, 61% of interviewees saw men and women as equals, 66% supported equal pay for equal work, yet 32% believed that a woman’s ‘place’ is in the home with men as the primary breadwinners (64%) and heads of households (73%).

Primarily intended to be useful to marketers as a barometer of public opinion in South Africa, the study uncovered some frightening statistics regarding the abuse and
rape of women in this country. The Cape Times newspaper’s report (15 November 2004) chose to focus on this reality – one in every four women is beaten by her partner, one third of South African women will be raped in their lifetimes. The Sunday Times newspaper’s business section report, on the other hand, sunnily claimed, “We’ve come a long way, sisters” (headline, 21 November 2004). Showing her ignorance of what feminism really set out to achieve, the author of the piece writes: “[C]ontrary to what most staunch feminists would like to think, researchers on the project, entitled ‘Gender: The New Struggle’ believe the new wave in gender definition in South Africa has little to do with rushing back to work to prove something to men”. My own understanding of feminism has never been one of “proving something to men”. The ‘battle of the sexes’ and ‘bra-burning’ feminists are (according to Greer) media creations – ‘popularised’ and sensationalised images of feminism, the ‘us versus them’ mentality. I have never been a fan of what David Lodge’s character Robyn Penrose titled “vulgar feminism” (1988:322).

The “positive spirit of women’s new self-confidence in sexual relations” and other spheres of life, is echoed in advertisements, television shows and magazine articles. However, continues Macdonald, what is ignored is that “the new rules will work only if men as well as women decide that they want to play by them” (1995:170).

When speaking of discourse, Jordan and Weedon discuss the implications of “forms of social organisation and social practices which structure institutions and constitute individuals as thinking, feeling and acting subjects”. Discourse “signifies forms of knowledge, ways of constituting the meaning of the world” (14). So, the discourse of capitalism points towards ‘hard work’ and ‘determination’ as the only factors of any
influence on a ‘level’ playing field, while consumerism is built on the expendability and the replace-ability of the very objects we are convinced fulfil our needs.

Sites of resistance, competing and alternative discourses are, however, possible. “Resistance to racism, sexism and class hegemony,” Jordan and Weedon point out, “has often taken the form of denying difference, whilst emphasizing shared humanity” (1995:17). We see this most often when women’s rights are subsumed by human rights. The general public is loath to stand behind a cause benefiting women only. A cause is far more palatable under the banner of human rights. Women’s fear and anger at sexual violence and violations visited upon them is lobbied for as the general human right to safety, with the gentle reminder – lest the hoary feminists forget – that small numbers of men are subjected to sexual violence too. Feminists do not forget. In fact, feminism’s fights are often so inclusive as to be in danger of excluding the main objective – that of securing women equality and peace of mind.

In a column discussing the worldwide ’16 Days of Activism’ against the abuse of women and children for the Eastern Cape newspaper the Weekend Post (27 November 2004), Charlene Smith points out: “I don’t know why women’s groups devote so much energy to these 16 days. It should be our husbands, fathers, lovers, sons and friends marching and speaking out. This isn’t a women’s campaign at all – it’s a men’s campaign. So where are the men?” A woman’s feeling of responsibility in the event of rape or sexual assault is another of the great impacts patriarchal thought has had.
Chapter 4: Riding the (third) wave

In the editorial preface to the fiftieth edition of Agenda (November 2001) a South African women’s literary and academic journal, the following is written:

We are well aware that feminism holds contested meaning for not only African women, but also for women of the North and South. The usage of feminism is employed here [as a term in the journal] to encompass women’s activism against gender oppression in the generic sense in order to further stimulate conversation, analysis and debate. African women have already [made] and continue to make a very significant contribution to the theory and understanding of women’s social, economic and political oppression (Full editorial at www.agenda.org.za/editorial50.pdf).

‘Third Wave feminism’ is the popular term for the feminism of the now. At first glance, this attempt at distinction from the two previous ‘waves’ of feminism may simply be a question of age and generation. Women coming of age in this and the previous decade grew up with feminism ‘in the air’, feminist thinking and the existence of a movement for women’s liberation always known to them. The creators of ‘The 3rd Wave’ website (www.io.com/~wwwave - “Feminism for the new millennium”) describe themselves and their “target market” as twenty and thirty-something women, and younger, as they bring feminism “back to the lives of real women who juggle jobs, kids, money and personal freedom in a frenzied world” (This statement could be taken as a response to the accusation and perception of a split between the ‘academics’ of feminism and the material problems and challenges of ordinary women).

About feminism, the website has this to say:

- Enough with the guys who refuse to change their roles to match the changes women have made.
- Enough with the old notion that women are permanent victims who will never succeed against sexism.

- Enough with women who think feminism is over because a few laws protect us and “we’re all equal now”.

- Enough with the male standard that puts women at a disadvantage in everyday life (“level playing field” – hah!).

They continue: “Feminism was never monolithic, and it never will be … We hope our voices will help you find your own”.

Feminism has been divided into categories to describe the broad ‘focus’ of various groups within the movement, but many will find that their views – their feminism(s) – overlap (for example, the marrying of ecological concerns and an anti-capitalist view within a feminist framework).

Third Wave feminism is, I feel, a natural progression from the concerns and challenges faced by the Second Wave, with the added ability to recognise difference in and among the various feminisms and, indeed, individual women. Third Wave feminism is, ideally, all encompassing – ecofeminists, radical feminists, Christian feminists, Muslim feminists, transgendered individuals – all may find a place within the current movement. Third Wave feminism is perhaps characterised by an unwillingness to subscribe only to one school of feminist thought and a distrust of labels in general – an awareness that labels limit recognition to only one facet of a woman’s (or man’s) feminist ‘personality’. It is about dealing both with material problems and theories, and taking to task the very notion of gender and the limits implied therein. Third Wave feminism recognises that women all over the world are not in the same position, socially, politically
or economically. While women in the so-called ‘Third World’ countries battle constitutionalised bias in favour of men, women in developed countries face institutionalised sexism and sexist representation that leave women the world over with little agency and men with little responsibility. As Third Wave feminists, we need to find ways of defining ‘family’ beyond the woman as nurturer, caretaker and homemaker and the man as breadwinner. We need to find wide acceptance of the high value of women’s work and contribution to the home and family life as well as to the market economy. We need new definitions of ‘sexy’ beyond female passivity and availability, beyond the virgin/whore dichotomy. We need recognition that context is one of the most important influences on meaning, and an understanding that meaning can change – that someone, a woman, can be one thing, or all things, at the same time. Identity, gender, is fluid. With new definitions for ‘woman’, so new definitions will have to be found for ‘man’. He has for so long been defined as not her, when the ‘she’ of his imagination is no longer there he will have to forge a new identity in relation to – not superior to – the ‘new’ woman.

But, any social change needs co-operation from women and men. Personally, I could never understand the poster campaigns warning women about the dangers of rape. Women and girls know all too well the threat of rape – do men and boys know not to rape?

“Feminism has been painted as anti-man, but it is really pro-woman” (3rd Wave website). An advertisement commissioned by POWA (People Opposing Woman Abuse) and Femina magazine was meant to be pro-woman, yet its critics refused to believe that it was not anti-man. The advertisement, highlighting the problem of rape and woman abuse in this country, featured South African actress and now Oscar winner, Charlize Theron.
Looking directly at the camera, Theron spoke about people in America asking her what the men in South Africa were like. Her answer to them, she said, was that it was difficult to know what the *real* men in South Africa were like, considering how many women were raped every day in her country. The pay-off line of the advertisement was “Real men don’t rape”. The advertisement was taken off the air after twenty-seven men and one woman complained to the Advertising Standards Authority on the grounds that the campaign was discriminatory towards men. As an aside, it must be noted that extremism (whether of religious or political persuasion) is the media’s darling, and radical feminism has been given a place in the ‘mainstream’ as the *only* form of feminism the powers-that-be will admit exists when mentioning feminism by name. Feminism has become a dirty word and is rarely used unless as an attack on the more radical forms of feminism. Otherwise, women’s gains (in terms of economic, social and political rights) are mentioned ahistorically, disconnected from “filthy” feminism. Complaints and even rational assertions on gender grounds are attributed to an unhealthy – and threatening – association with the more radical types of feminist thought.

After an appeal, the advertisement was again approved for broadcast. A column by South African film and social critic Barry Ronge defended Theron and slammed the ASA’s first decision to ban the advertisement: “The whole issue, however, is about much more than that single ad. It is about the way the old South Africa, with all its sexist, puritanical prohibitions simply will not go away. They keep popping up, these goblins of ignorance and intolerance…” (www.btimes.co.za/99/1024/columns/columns6.htm).

Theron herself is the child of an abusive marriage. Her mother shot and killed her husband after years of abuse. Ronge continues: “Her presence in the ad says something
brave and personal about facing up to a private demon as well as a public social evil. She did not speak just as a movie star but as a woman who has a clear understanding of the kind of sexist violence that leads to rape. That lent credibility and power to the ad”. Of the complainants, Ronge has this to say: “A couple of men felt their manhood was being ‘discriminated against’. The ad made them feel uncomfortable. Instead of doing something to show they did not endorse rape … they whinged … mistook their bruised egos for damaged human rights”. Feminism was never mentioned by name in the advertisement (and it is highly unlikely that it ever will be). The call, however, was a feminist one: demand for recognition of the basic human rights of women, an appeal for bodily integrity and a life free from fear.
Conclusion

I reiterate: The appropriation of feminism by advertising practice amounts to a denial of the political and social significance of the movement, rendering ‘women’s emancipation’ a mere marketing tool.

We turn to the media as a mirror for – and a creator of – society. The ubiquity of the media, however, allows us to “identify thousands of examples to illustrate the oppressive messages that bombard us daily from various institutions and aspects of our culture, reinforcing divisions and ‘justifying’ discrimination and prejudice” (Harro 2000:19). Writes Creedon: “Assumptions about gender and gender values, which are institutionalised within mass communication, are not easily seen and, when made visible, are assiduously defended as essential, natural” (1993:4).

Advertisements in South Africa in general perpetuate an ideology “that does not accommodate gender transformation and hence offers no alternative ways of looking at human beings” (Overland 2003:279). The housewife has merely been transplanted into the boardroom, her only means of survival and recognition mimicking her male predecessor.

Feminist and consumerist ideologies are sparring partners and uncomfortable bedmates. The ‘me’ ideology of consumerism has transferred itself to the idea of women’s liberation where it sits, limpet-like, in view of the popular media. This ‘compulsory freedom’ has co-opted feminism (or rather, the results of feminism) for its own ends, a feminist veneer glossing over perceived female essentials. Feminism is accommodated, but not reinforced.
“Struggle is out: sexiness and power are in … [the ‘new’ woman can] handle all interpersonal and work relations with self-confidence and panache … relying on a paradigm of independence based on economic self-sufficiency and individualism” (Creedon 1993:172). In South Africa, that “sexiness and power” have the added edge of erasing all difference between women – race and class are not addressed, nor are they constructively alluded to.

Given the fact that nonsexism and nonracism stand side by side in the South African constitution, it is regrettable that critical voices are not able to theorise and argue race in relation to issues such as gender and sexuality. However, current South African advertisements that portray mostly white people, and more half-naked women than fully dressed women, do not seem to take notice of the constitution anyway (Overland 2003:267).

Overland continues:

Consumers … have become so accustomed to the stereotypical representations in advertising that hardly question that contemporary relations of dominance are sustained by allowing the advertising industry to tell people what and how they can be (273).

Completely passive receivers of media messages we are not. Yet, even if there is an active (and interactive) interpretation of media messages, that interpretation is performed within a particular framework – a framework that only allows for a few (non-radical) interpretations.

The feminist or social critic of media is assured many times over that advertising is merely a vehicle for selling a product, at best, entertainment and simple wish fulfilment. Yet, even ‘entertainment’ belies one ideology or another. Harmless it is not. Why else is society willing to fight tooth and nail to keep things – images, constructions of gender and especially of women – the way they are? And when the fight is not to keep things that way they are, society wants things the way they were. Advertisements and images
depicting a domestic golden age of familial harmony and wifely obedience (however “ironic” the depiction) betray a dissatisfaction, distrust and dislike of the gains women have made (and will continue to make, despite resistance), a wish to keep the relations of domination intact and unchanged.

Feminists today often know the futility – in the face of media assertions to the contrary – in attempting to correct people who define ‘feminism’ as women “doing what men do”. We know the difficulty in trying to convince them otherwise and explaining why this is not enough.

Token gestures of role reversals – men as sex objects; women with traditionally male power – get dished up sporadically in advertising practice to placate us. But ‘something for the ladies’ is simply not enough. A ‘real’ lady is a fake woman, and while the new feminism attempts to embrace and endorse all the choices women make (when those choices are as free from societal coercion as possible), a magnified ‘lady’ seems a hollow celebration of womanhood, as “genuine femaleness remains grotesque to the point of obscenity” (Greer 2000:2).

The advertising industry encourages us to “[congratulate] ourselves on largely imaginary victories” (Greer 2000:29). Consumerism calls it autonomous decision making, all the while seeking “not informed choice but compliance” (Greer 2000:11). Ironic distance is implied as the ‘cool kids’ “respond to coercive techniques that acknowledge their ironic detachment… but they fall for the wink wink nudge nudge plea of the modern advertiser or salesperson who appeals to their media savvy wit” (Rushkoff 1999:22-23).
Distinctions are made between the ‘emancipated woman’ (who, not attributing her success or happiness to feminism, is accepted) and the ‘feminist’ (who is not). The emancipated woman is consumerism’s darling – she is the loving wife and mother who ‘cheats’ (with a smile) suing frozen or convenience foods (McCain’s’ advertisement), or the ‘superwoman’ who juggles every role with aplomb. The feminist, on the other hand, is the ball-breaker in the business suit without a hint of sex appeal, the sour-faced swimsuit saleslady in the Vitalinea advertisement, tying to ruin the fun of the younger, more attractive (and she knows it) woman.

The media, and advertising in particular, need to acknowledge the diversity of experience among women and men, and especially the diversity of experience among women alone. But, we face the problem that any representation – however ‘liberal’ or diverse – has limitations. “[W]omen – and men – must take responsibility for the meanings they create and for those they omit” (Creedon 1993:20).

As long as girls and women are “encouraged to take liberties rather than fight for them” (Greer 2000:402), “[t]he language of independence [will conceal] utter dependence upon male attention” (Greer 2000:407). An environment where unfairness is tolerated, and sexism and racism are encouraged, fosters far worse.

To emphasize the engagement with feminist struggle as political commitment, we could avoid using the phrase “I am a feminist” (a linguistic structure designed to refer to some personal aspect of identity and self-definition) and could state, “I advocate feminism”. Because there has been undue emphasis placed on feminism as an identity or lifestyle, people usually resort to stereotyped perspectives on feminism. Deflecting attention away from stereotypes is necessary if we are to revise our strategy and direction… A phrase like “I advocate” does not imply the kind of absolutism that is suggested by “I am”. It does not engage us in the either/or dualistic thinking that is the central ideological component of all systems of domination in Western society. It implies that a choice has
been made, that commitment to feminism is an act of will (hooks 2000:31).

The discomfort a (white), seemingly liberal feminist experiences when reading the work of a writer like bell hooks is not negative at all – it is an engagement with the intersection of power and meaning. Though we join the feminist struggle as women, acknowledgement of privilege – whether of class, race or gender – is important and inescapable. It is my wish that a person reading my text, or any other feminist text, experiences the same discomfort, which is not pain, only a realisation of your own complicity in an ideological system you perpetuate, though you intend to fight against it.

Images and rhetoric – in the media, advertising, politics and society – do not force material change. Until ways are found to make substantive changes in society’s perception of gender, race and class, until these three elements no longer intersect at oppression, the relations of domination will continue unchallenged and unchanged, and the feminist veneer will continue to crack.
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