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Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising

This article argues that there has been a significant shift in advertising representations of women in recent years, such that rather than being presented as passive objects of the male gaze, young women in adverts are now frequently depicted as active, independent and sexually powerful. This analysis examines contemporary constructions of female sexual agency in advertisements examining three recognizable 'figures': the young, heterosexually desiring 'midriff', the vengeful woman set on punishing her partner or ex-partner for his transgressions, and the 'hot lesbian', almost always entwined with her beautiful Other or double. Using recent examples of adverts, the article asks how this apparent 'agency' and 'empowerment' should be understood.

Drawing on accounts of the incorporation or recuperation of feminist ideas in advertising, the article takes a critical approach to these representations, examining their exclusions, their constructions of gender relations and heteronormativity, and the way power is figured within them. A feminist poststructuralist approach is used to interrogate the way in which 'sexual agency' becomes a form of regulation in these adverts that requires the re-moulding of feminine subjectivity to fit the current postfeminist, neoliberal moment in which young women should not only be beautiful but sexy, sexually knowledgeable/practised and always 'up for it'.

The article makes an original contribution to debates about representations of gender in advertising, to poststructuralist analyses about the contemporary operation of power, and to writing about female 'sexual agency' by suggesting that 'voice' or 'agency' may not be the solution to the 'missing discourse of female desire' but may in fact be a technology of discipline and regulation.

Key Words: *feminism, postfeminism, power, subjectivity*

INTRODUCTION: 'TODAY'S WOMAN LIVES IN AN ALMOST CONSTANT STATE OF EMPOWERMENT . . .'

'Women Now Empowered by Everything a Woman Does' declares a recent headline in the satirical magazine *The Onion* (2003).¹ The article explains how back in the 1970s and 1980s women's liberation struggles were focused 'narrowly' on securing reproductive rights, sexual freedoms and equality in the workplace. Today, the article asserts, empowerment is understood much more broadly. Acts as trivial as purchasing a pair of shoes or eating a particular brand of cereal bar are now recognized as gestures of female empowerment just as surely as participating in a demonstration or pushing for a stronger voice in politics. Indeed, this moment is one of 'true' empowerment because it includes *all* women: 'Not every woman can become a physicist or lobby to stop a foundry from dumping dangerous metals into the creek her children swim in', the article's spoof feminist academic Barbara Klein is quoted as saying.

Although these actions are incredible, they marginalize the majority of women who are unable to, or just don't particularly care to, achieve such things. Fortunately for the less impressive among us, a new strain of feminism has emerged in which mundane activities are championed as proud, bold assertions of independence from oppressive patriarchal hegemony.

These actions include 'lunching with female friends', driving your child to soccer practice, and, above all, buying a range of 'empowering' products such as antacid tablets with added calcium and cleaning implements 'equipped with convenient, throwaway towelettes'.

This hilarious article has two main satirical targets. The first and most obvious is the growing trend within contemporary advertising to promote products targeted at women using a discourse of empowerment, or what Michelle Lazar (Lazar, 2006: 21) has called 'power femininity'. This has become almost ubiquitous in affluent developed societies understood as being in a 'postfeminist' moment, in which women are invited to purchase everything from bras to coffee as signs of their power and independence (from men). The second, and perhaps more muted, target is the confusion or discomfort among feminist academics about how to interpret this shift. In the figure of the spoof feminist academic, feminists' failure to respond adequately to this faux empowerment is mocked:

'From what she eats for breakfast to the way she cleans her home, today's woman lives in a state of near-constant empowerment', said Barbara Klein, professor of women's studies at Oberlin College and director of the study . . . 'Shopping for shoes has emerged as a powerful means by which women assert their autonomy', Klein said. 'Owning and wearing dozens of pairs of shoes is a compelling way for a woman to announce that she is strong and independent, and can shoe herself without the help of a man. She's saying, "Look out, male dominated world, here comes me and my shoes".'

The butt of the joke here is surely the successful TV series *Sex and the City*, with its endless focus on Monolo Blahniks and Jimmy Choos, and also – crucially – the hugely celebratory feminist responses to it, which have seen in it evidence of a new kind of female empowerment (see, for example, Akass and McCabe, 2004). As Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott (2004) have pointed out, we are told nowadays that high-heeled shoes are emblematic of a confident, powerful femininity, a femininity that is ‘out and proud’ – indeed, a daring rejection of what is frequently presented as ‘feminist orthodoxy’ in relation to beauty. Stiletto heels, long imbued with sexual meanings, have acquired a particular symbolic potency in this postfeminist moment. The fact that they are difficult to walk in, even painful, adds to this by drawing attention to the valuing of sexual attractiveness over and above freedom of movement.

Both these themes – advertising discourses of empowerment and feminist responses to them – are the topic of this article. My aim here is to focus on a specific form of ‘empowerment’ – sexual agency – and to examine its construction in contemporary advertising, through careful consideration of three distinctive advertising constructions: the figure of the active, (hetero)sexually desiring ‘midriff’, the sadistic or vengeful woman acting out a revenge fantasy against her (ex-)partner and the ‘hot lesbian’ – almost always entwined with her mirror image. I ask how we should read these figures, all of whom are constructed as powerful and agentic women. Are they feminist icons of empowerment, or is something more complicated going on? In order to address this, I will start by offering briefly a theoretical context located in three bodies of literature: discussions of the ‘missing discourse of female desire’, debates about the response of advertising to feminist critique and poststructuralist feminist analyses of discipline and regulation. I will then introduce the figurative approach I take before moving on to look in detail at the construction of the ‘midriff’, the ‘powerful/vengeful woman’, and the ‘hot lesbian’ in contemporary advertising campaigns.

ADVERTISING, POWER AND FEMALE SEXUAL AGENCY

In the last 20 years, a significant research agenda has developed concerned with the exploration of female sexual agency. A groundbreaking article by Michelle Fine (1988) highlighted what she called the ‘missing discourse of female desire’ in adolescents’ accounts of sexual activity. She drew attention to the multiple ways in which sociocultural forces operate to undermine, erase or de-legitimize girls’ experiences and articulations of sexual agency. Considerable subsequent research has borne out this analysis, with studies spotlighting the minor significance accorded to sexual desire in girls’ and young women’s accounts of why they engage in sexual activity – with pressure from men or friends highlighted much more frequently; and examining heterosexual femininity as a project concerned with making oneself desirable rather than with feeling and expressing sexual desires (Tolman, 2002). Janet Holland and her colleagues (1998) used their

extensive interview data to argue that heterosexuality is constructed from *within masculinity* and that young women have ‘a male in the head’ that prevents them from fully experiencing and enjoying their sexual experiences on their own terms.

In recent years, some research has challenged this idea for offering an overly monolithic and negative account, and has looked at the cracks and fissures where women’s expressions of sexual desire do break through, or for spaces where they may feel freer to articulate their own pleasures and longings. Sue Jackson (2005) argues that, despite a cultural climate that problematizes young women’s sexuality, women’s voices do speak of desire and pleasure – for example, in magazine problem pages – although they struggle to be heard doing so and for those sexual subjectivities to be authorized. Anita Harris (2005) finds that young women’s fanzines, blogs and websites operate as marginal, liminal spaces where women are able to engage in ‘unregulated dialogue’ and generate their own meanings about sexual desire. Moreover, Jane Ussher (2005) and Lisa Diamond (2005a) argue that the stigmatization of same-sex desire may – ironically – operate to equip young lesbian women better to withstand the cultural forces that seek to erase or undermine girls’ articulations and experiences of sexual agency.

In this article, I start not from research with young women but from constructions of female sexual agency in the media, specifically advertising. The use of sex as a means of selling is probably as old as advertising itself and advertising has long been indicted for contributing to the silencing of women’s desire by presenting women primarily as objects for male consumption and pleasure (e.g. Cortese, 1999; Dyer, 1982; Goffman, 1979; Jhally, 1987; Kilbourne, 1999; Myers, 1986; Williamson, 1978). The key term in feminists’ critical vocabulary was ‘objectification’ (Kilbourne, 1999), both to analyse the processes at work and as a slogan of critique: ‘THIS AD OBJECTIFIES WOMEN’ asserted stickers throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. However, in recent years, advertising has begun to move away from depictions of women as straightforward objects of the male gaze, and there is a new emphasis in some adverts upon women’s *sexual agency* (Gill, 2003; Goldman, 1992; Macdonald, 1995; Winship, 2000), particularly in ads for products targeted at young women. Of course, this is not a matter of a clear rupture, and adverts depicting women as (sometimes voracious) sexual subjects did exist in the past (see Williamson, 1978, 1986) just as traditional ‘objectifying’ representations continue to exist today. Nevertheless, a clear pattern or trend can be discerned.² In the UK, it is possible to periodize this shift quite precisely to 1994 and the impact of advertising ‘bad boy’ Trevor Beattie’s campaigns for push-up, cleavage-enhancing bras, which had at their centre sexy models who directly addressed the viewer in a knowing and humorous way. More broadly, the shift was the outcome of the mix of circulating discourses of ‘girl power’, new laddism and the libidinous ‘return’ to sex, after more than a decade of HIV/AIDS.

Such representations have proliferated in the last decade, prompting discussion about the ‘sexualization of culture’ (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; McNair, 2002), the ‘pornographication’

of everyday life (McRobbie, 2004b; Paul, 2005), the rise of 'raunch' (Levy, 2005) and, when the representational practices of 'porno chic' are used on children and teens, 'corporate paedophilia' (Rush and La Nauze, 2006). Increasingly, it would appear that, rather than being repressed, sex has become 'the big story' (Plummer, 1995) and female sexual desire plays a large part in it. Discourses of women's desire, far from being silenced, seem to be everywhere: in magazines promising better, hotter sex, in the proliferation of self-help guides and memoirs such as 'How to Make Love Like a Porn Star' (Jameson, 2003) or 'Girl with a One Track Mind' (Lee, 2006); in the figures of raunchy female pop stars who borrow from the codes of pornography in their self-presentation, e.g. Christina Aguilera's 'Dirrty' and 'Stripped', and at the heart of celebrity culture in which tales of sexy secrets and 'filthy' fantasies are everywhere. Advertising, then, is one of a number of sites in which sexualized representations of (young) women are ubiquitous.

Advertising has changed constantly throughout its history, in response to changes in the economy, technology, fashion and social relations. But the shifts that it has undergone in the last two decades have been particularly significant, as developments in information and communication technologies, the emergence of a new generation raised on computer games and music television, and the growing confidence of increasingly 'media-savvy' consumers forced a radical rethink of previous advertising strategies. Advertisers had to respond to 'sign fatigue', to viewer scepticism, and also to the impact of feminism on lifestyles and attitudes (Goldman, 1992). Women's increasing financial independence meant that they became targets for new products and also forced a reconsideration of earlier modes of representation: showing a woman draped over a car – to take an emblematic image of sexism from the 1970s – may not be the best strategy if the aim is to sell that car to women. Moreover, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, advertisers had begun to recognize the significance of many women's anger at being objectified and bombarded with unattainable, idealized images of femininity. Advertisers started to rethink their engagement with female consumers and their ways of representing women.

One mode of response was through the incorporation or recuperation of feminist ideas, which could be (re)packaged and rendered safe and unthreatening. A number of scholars have discussed this (Douglas, 1994; Heath and Potter, 2005; Lamb and Mikel Brown, 2006; Lazar, 2006; Lury, 1996; Macdonald, 1995; Whelehan, 2000). Goldman (1992) coined the term 'commodity feminism' to capture the ways in which advertisers attempted to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism while simultaneously neutralizing or domesticating the force of its social/political critique. As Susan Douglas put it:

[A]dvertising agencies had figured out how to make feminism – and anti feminism – work for them . . . the appropriation of feminist desires and feminist rhetoric by Revlon, Lancome and other major corporations was nothing short of spectacular. Women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires. (1994: 247–8)

This critique is important. In particular, it highlights the involvement of advertising in what Frederick Jameson (1984) calls the 'cannibalization' of ideas, including radical ones (see also Berger, 2001; Heath and Potter, 2005). It guards against the somewhat naive notion that, in appropriating feminist ideas, advertising has in some sense 'become feminist'. Its more critical interpretation represents a significant point of departure for the analysis presented in this article, but here I am concerned less with the packaging of feminism than with a different response: namely, the construction of a figure that materializes female sexual agency in a novel manner in advertising.

The third literature that is significant for this article is poststructuralist writing about the discipline and regulation of the feminine body and feminine subjectivity (Bartky, 1990; Bhaskaran, 2004; Blackman and Walkerdine, 1996; Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990; Elam, 1994; Sawicki, 1991; Walkerdine et al., 2001; Weedon, 1987) The analysis presented owes much to Foucauldian feminist analyses that understand power not through notions of domination, but as operating through normative regulation and governmentality (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Sawicki, 1991) As Sandra Lee Bartky puts it in her famous formulation:

Feminine bodily discipline has this dual character: on the one hand, no one is marched off for electrolysis at the end of a rifle, nor can we fail to appreciate the initiative and ingenuity displayed by countless women in an attempt to master the rituals of beauty. Nevertheless, in so far as the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a 'subjected and practised', and inferiorized, body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an inegalitarian system of sexual subordination. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers. (1990: 75)

A key challenge in this body of work has been to understand how this disciplinary power works, exploring the complex relation between culture and subjectivity in such a way as to render women neither passive, docile subjects, nor the fictitious autonomous, freely choosing persons of liberal humanism.

Foucault's stress upon power working through subjects is important here, and my analysis contributes to an understanding of (sexual) agency as deeply implicated in projects of regulation. As in other contemporary poststructuralist feminist writing, I am interested in the neoliberal injunctions to 'be free', and to 'choose' and to render one's life knowable to discourses of autonomous self-determination in a manner that renders constraints invisible/unknowable (Walkerdine et al., 2001). I will argue that to 'compulsory individuality' (Cronin, 2000) we may now have to add *compulsory (sexual) agency* as a required feature of contemporary post-feminist, neoliberal subjectivity. My approach, then, focuses less on *bodily discipline* (cf. Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993) than on new constructions of *gendered subjectivity*.

This article brings these three bodies of scholarship together to examine constructions of female sexual agency in advertising. My 'data' are contemporary

adverts. I draw largely upon adverts seen in the UK (where I live), but also point to examples from the USA, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Hong Kong and Singapore (where I have spent significant periods with a camera and a notebook). My analytic approach is a 'figurative' one. Following Tyler's important work on the figures of the 'chav'³ and the 'asylum seeker' (Tyler, 2006, in press), I use the term 'figure' 'to describe the ways in which at different historical and cultural moments, specific bodies become overdetermined and publicly imagined and represented (figured) in excessive, distorted and/or caricatured ways that are expressive of an underlying crisis or anxiety' (Tyler, in press)

This approach is a material-discursive one that understands representations as not merely representing the world, but as constitutive and generative. It focuses on the repetition of figures across different media sites in such a way that they seem to take on a life of their own. In looking at the figure of the 'chav', for example, Tyler is able to explore the ways in which class identities are mediated, and how 'the affective and emotional qualities attributed to this figure slide into corporeal qualities' (in press) which literally materialize him or her – the ideological-affective made real.

As noted earlier, in this analysis, I examine the figures of the 'midriff', the 'powerful/vengeful woman', and the 'hot lesbian'. Rather than tracking them across different media or genres (which would be an interesting thing to do), I focus on their repetition and materialization in advertising, critically examining them from a feminist poststructuralist perspective.

THE MIDRIFF: FROM SEX OBJECT TO ACTIVE DESIRING (HETERO)SEXUAL SUBJECT

One of the most significant shifts in advertising in the last decade or more has been the construction of a new figure: a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always 'up for it' (that is, sex). This figure has become known in some advertising circles as the 'midriff', named after the fashion for exposing this part of the body (often to reveal pierced belly button and a tattoo on the lower back) that was ubiquitous between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s (Quart, 2003; Rushkoff, n.d.). Elsewhere, she is characterized as the 'fun fearless female' (Machin and Thornborrow, 2003) or simply as a new, more sexually assertive construction of femininity (Macdonald, 1995). The midriffs might be thought of as a generation of girls and young women in their teens and 20s in the 1990s, but midriff also refers to a *sensibility* characterized by a specific constellation of attitudes towards the body, sexual expression and gender relations (see Gill, in press). Midriff advertising has four central themes: an emphasis upon the body, a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification, a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy, and an emphasis upon empowerment.

Perhaps the most striking feature of midriff advertising is the centrality of the

body. If, in the 1950s, it was the home that was the ideal focus for women's labour and attention and from which their 'worth' was judged, in the new millennium it is the body. A sleek, controlled figure is today essential for portraying success (Bordo, 1993), and each part of the body must be suitably toned, conditioned, waxed, moisturized, scented and attired. Today, the body is portrayed in advertising and many other parts of the media as the primary source of women's capital. Indeed, there seems to have been a profound shift in the very definition of femininity such that it is defined as a bodily property rather than a social structural or psychological one. Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood (all of course highly problematic and exclusionary), it is now possession of a 'sexy body' that is presented as women's key source of identity. This is captured vividly in an advert for Wonderbra® that shows a young woman wearing only a black, cleavage-enhancing bra. Situated between the breasts is the following slogan: 'I can't cook. Who cares?' – making the point that her voluptuous body is far more important than any other feminine skills or attributes she may or may not possess.

There has also been a shift in the manner that women's bodies are presented erotically. Where once sexualized representations of women in the media presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today women are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their (implicitly 'liberated') interests to do so. A 1994 advert for Wonderbra pictured model Eva Herzigova's smiling/teasing face and her cleavage, and hailed us with a quotation from Mae West: 'Or are you just pleased to see me?' The first part of the quotation – 'is that a gun in your pocket?' with its implication that the male viewer had an erection – was left out, for us as viewers to fill in. This was no passive, objectified sex object, but a woman who was knowingly playing with her sexual power. Similarly, the confident, assertive tone of a Triumph advert from the same period is quite different from most earlier representations: 'New hair, new look, new bra. And if he doesn't like it, new boyfriend.'

A crucial aspect of both the obsessional preoccupation with the body and the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is that this is framed in advertising through a discourse of playfulness, freedom and, above all, choice. Women are presented as not seeking men's approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in so doing, they 'just happen' to win men's admiration. A South African advert for She-bear lingerie in 1999, for example, featured an attractive young white woman wearing only her lingerie and a nun's habit and rosary. The slogan, 'Wear it for yourself', ties the brand identity to women who dress for themselves rather than for men – even if they are not nuns. 'If he's late you can always start without him', declares another lingerie advert in which the *mise en scène* constructs a picture of seduction, complete with carelessly abandoned underwear, but in which a sexual partner is absent. Is this genuinely celebrating the joys of masturbation for women or inviting us to feel sexy by imagining ourselves, through an internalized male gaze, as desirable (in this underwear)?⁴

Dee Amy-Chinn (2006) eloquently captures this double-edged postfeminist emphasis on women pleasing themselves in the title of her article about lingerie advertising: 'This is just for Me(n)'. Such advertising is at once hailing active heterosexually desiring (young) women, but does so using a photographic grammar directly lifted from heterosexual pornography aimed at men. The success – and what is novel about this – is in connecting 'me' and 'men' and suggesting there is no contradiction – indeed no difference – between what 'I' want and what men might want of 'me'. This is clearly complicated, and I would not want to be understood as saying that there is some kind of essential or necessary contradiction or difference between what women and men want sexually (or in any other way), but, equally, I do not think it can be *assumed* that these desires are identical, given the long history of unequal relations and the missing discourse of female desire that has denied women an autonomous sexual voice.

Almost as central to midriff advertising as the notions of choice and 'pleasing one's self', is a discourse of feminine empowerment. This is part of a broader shift in which products are sold to women with the promise of confidence and self-esteem: 'because you're worth it'. Contemporary advertising targeted at the midriffs suggests, above all, that buying the product will empower you. 'I pull the strings' asserts a beautiful woman in a black Wonderbra; 'Empower your eyes', says an advert for Shiseido mascara; 'Discover the power of femininity. Defy conventions and take the lead' reads an advert for Elizabeth Arden beauty products. What is on offer in all these adverts is a specific kind of power – the sexual power to bring men to their knees. Empowerment is tied to possession of a slim and alluring young body, whose power is the ability to attract male attention and sometimes female envy (Goldman, 1992). This is 'power femininity': a 'subject-effect' of 'a global discourse of popular postfeminism that incorporates feminist signifiers of emancipation and empowerment as well as circulating popular postfeminist assumptions that feminist struggles have ended, that full equality for all women has been achieved, and that women of today can 'have it all' (Lazar, 2006: 505).

Midriff as Feminist Icon?

The figure of the midriff, then, is notable for opening up a new vocabulary of representations of women as active, desiring sexual subjects. Midriffs are represented and interpellated as powerful and playful rather than passive or victimized. Yet despite this apparently positive shift, I would argue there are good reasons for avoiding a too easy celebration of the empowered sexual agency constructed in this form of advertising. Here I highlight five.

First, it is worth noting some of the exclusions of midriff advertising. Most obviously this includes anyone living outside the heterosexual norm. Contemporary midriff advertising seems to operate within a resolutely heteronormative economy, in which power, pleasure and subjectivity are all presented in relation to heterosexual relationships. It is also profoundly racialized, and it is striking to

note how white the figure of the midriff is. Black women's bodies are presented sexually in advertising, to be sure, but in ways that differ sharply from the figure of the active, knowing, desiring sexual subject examined here. (See Gill, forthcoming, for a longer discussion of the patterns of racializing and classing that are evident in midriff advertising). Others excluded from the empowering, pleasurable address are older women, disabled women, fat women and any woman who is unable to live up to increasingly narrow standards of female beauty and sex appeal that are normatively required. These women are never accorded sexual subjecthood. Indeed, the figure of the 'unattractive' woman who seeks a sexual partner remains one of the most vilified in popular culture – as evidenced by the repeated circulation and apparent enduring appeal of comedy routines and 'jokes' that take as their object of ridicule sexually 'desperate' 'ugly' women.⁵ Sexual subjectification, then, is a highly specific and exclusionary practice and sexual *pleasure* is actually irrelevant here; it is the power of *sexual attractiveness* that is important.

Midriff advertising is also notable for what it renders invisible: the cost, the labour, the discipline, the shame, the violence, the pain and the anxiety associated with disciplining the female body to approximate to current standards of female beauty (Bartky, 1990). The contemporary 'beauty myth' (Wolf, 1990) requires not simply time-consuming, expensive and sometimes painful labour but, moreover, demands that this work itself must be invisible (or, as I have argued elsewhere [Gill, 2007b], that it must be made knowable in highly specific ways, e.g. through discourses of 'pampering' and 'self-indulgence' that occlude its status as normatively required bodily discipline). The ultimate sleight of hand is necessary: namely, that the unnatural body – the depilated, liposuctioned, Botoxed, silicon-enhanced body – should be presented as 'natural' (Blum, 2003; Braun, 2005; Greer, 1999; Jeffreys, 2005).

The construction of agency in midriff advertising is also problematic. Women's agentic capabilities are, it would seem, confined to be aestheticization of their physical appearances and tied to consumerism. More fundamentally, midriff advertising articulates a thoroughgoing individualism in which women are presented as entirely autonomous agents, no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances. The pendulum swing from a view of power as something both obvious and overbearing that acted upon entirely docile subjects towards a notion of women as completely free agents who just 'please themselves' does not serve feminist or cultural understandings well. It cannot account for why the look that young women seek to achieve is so similar: if it were the outcome of everyone's individual, idiosyncratic preferences, surely there would be greater diversity, rather than growing homogeneity organized around a slim yet curvaceous, toned, hairless, young body. Moreover, the emphasis upon choice simply sidesteps and avoids all the important but difficult questions about how socially constructed ideals of beauty are internalized and made our own.

These questions have long been at the heart of women's liberation movements. Rosalind Coward (1984) argues that women's relationship to cultural ideals and

therefore to their own image could be described as one of narcissistic damage.

Writing even earlier in the second wave of feminist activism, the Radicalesbians contended:

We have internalized the male culture's definition of ourselves. That definition consigns us to sexual and family functions . . . psychic servicing and performing society's non-profit making functions . . . This is called femininity or being a real woman . . . The consequence of internalizing this role is an enormous reservoir of self hate poisoning her existence, keeping her alienated from herself, her own needs and rendering her a stranger to other women . . . As the source of self hate is rooted in our male given identity we must create a new sense of self. (Radicalesbians, c. 1970, quoted in Tyler, 2005: 32)

This analysis, I would argue, is not simply a feminist one, but also a *psychosocial argument*. It seeks to understand and intervene in the relationship between individual and society, between subjectivity and culture, between self and ideology – to think about how what is ‘out there’ also gets to be ‘in here’.

What interests me in particular is the sophisticated ‘higher’ development of ideology and power relations such that the ideological is literally materialized, *made real*, in the form of constructions of femininity that come straight out of the most predictable templates of male sexual fantasy, yet which must also be understood as *authentically owned* by the women who enact them. Part of their force lies precisely in the fact that they are not understood as ideological (and, indeed, are understood as *not ideological*). Writing about the representation of women in lad magazines, Janice Turner has referred to this as the idea that straight porn has ‘come true’:

Once porn and real human sexuality were distinguishable. Not even porn's biggest advocates would suggest a porn flick depicted reality, that women were gagging for sex 24/7 and would drop their clothes and submit to rough, anonymous sex at the slightest invitation. But as porn has seeped into mainstream culture, the line has blurred. To speak to men's magazine editors, it is clear they believe that somehow in recent years, porn has come true. The sexually liberated modern woman turns out to resemble – what do you know! – the pneumatic take-me-now-big-boy fuck-puppet of male fantasy after all. (Turner, 2005)

Finally, then, midriff advertising involves a shift in the way that power operates: it entails a move from an external male-judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic one (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993). In this sense, it represents a more ‘advanced’ or pernicious form of exploitation than the earlier generation of objectifying images to which second-wave feminists objected – because the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime. Midriff advertising adds a further layer of oppression. Not only are women objectified (as they were before), but through sexual subjectification in midriff advertising *they must also now understand their own objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen*. If, in earlier regimes of advertising, women were presented as sexual objects, then this was

understood as something being *done to* women (from the outside) by a sexist advertising industry – something that many people began to realize and critique through the impact of feminist activism. In contemporary midriff advertising, however, (some) women are endowed with the status of active subjecthood so that they can ‘choose’ to become sex objects. One of the implications of this shift is that it renders critique much more difficult, for the mode of power is not external oppression but regulation and discipline that take up residency in the psyche by, quite literally, producing new subjectivities.

THE VENGEFUL WOMAN AND REVENGE ADVERTISING

Closely related to the midriff is the figure of the vengeful sexy woman who has become another standard character in advertising, a novel way for advertisers to move away from representations of women as ‘dumb’ or ‘unintelligent’ to being constructed as powerful, feisty and in control. Revenge adverts put the supposed love–hate relationship between men and women – the ‘battle of the sexes’ – centre stage. At the innocuous end of the continuum, adverts for Volkswagen lamented ‘if only everything in life was as reliable as Volkswagen’, and compared men unfavourably with cars, while Renault adverts cheekily suggested that ‘size matters’. A humorous tone is also found in a television campaign for Fiat Punto. It showed a young, good-looking, heterosexual couple driving through a European city. The woman (who is driving) glances at her boyfriend every so often and notices that he is staring out of the window at every attractive woman he sees in the street. Getting evidently ever more irritated by this, she finally stops the car, winds down the window, and proceeds to passionately kiss a handsome male passer-by. This, the advert tells us, is the ‘spirito di Punto’, a spirit that is perhaps a hybrid of feminism, revenge fantasy and sheer *joie de vivre*.

A key theme of revenge adverts is the representation of a woman gaining the upper hand by punishing a man who has transgressed in some way. Usually the transgression involves misuse of one of the woman’s possessions – frequently this is a car. After a long period in which car advertising produced some of the worst, or at least most iconic, examples of sexism in the media, captured and creatively ‘rewritten’ by feminists in the 1970s (e.g. ‘If this car was a woman she would pinch your bottom’ – rewritten to read ‘If this woman were a car she’d run you down’!), it is perhaps not surprising that companies today have chosen to market cars to women using an advertising vocabulary that dispenses categorically with the old objectifying discourses and puts women at the wheel both literally and metaphorically. Contemporary adverts depict women as independent, powerful and as having profound emotional bonds to their vehicles – bonds, indeed, that may go beyond the ties they have to male partners. A 2007 advert for the Toyota Yaris Zinc, for example, shows the car parked in a driveway next to which we can see a garbage can from which a number of badly misshapen golf clubs protrude. The slogan reads, ‘Two days earlier: boyfriend puts chewing gum

in the ashtray.’ That the revenge in these adverts is always directed at a sexual partner, rather than a friend, colleague or family member, is part of what makes this advertising distinctive, and ties it to the themes of this article, concerned with sexual agency and empowerment.

Often, moreover, the sexual aspects of the revenge are made explicit. A more aggressive version of the revenge advert (for Nissan cars) featured men being subject to violence against their genital regions by women, presumed to be their partners. In one advert, a man is holding his hands to his groin as if to protect his genitalia from being kicked. In another, a newspaper clipping featuring the ‘Bobbitt’ case (in which a woman cut off her unfaithful partner’s penis) is presented. The campaign, with the theme, ‘Ask before you borrow it’ was defended by Nissan’s advertising agency on the grounds that the adverts were not about violence towards men, but about women ‘feeling much stronger than ever before’ and being free to react towards men however they want (quoted in BBC, 2003), implicitly referencing circulating discourses of ‘girl power’ (Winship, 2000).

Another advert (for Lee jeans) that used a distinctly threatening and vicious image was justified in the same manner, as emblematic of the ‘prevailing Girl Power mood’ (quoted in BBC, 2003). This poster advert showed a naked man lying prone, his head just outside the shot, and a woman’s boot pressed against his buttocks, its stiletto heel hovering menacingly close to the man’s anus and testicles. The violence of the imagery is reinforced by the slogan ‘Put the boot in’, designed, the creators of the advert said, to draw attention to the fact that the jeans were ‘bootcut’. The advert created a storm of controversy in the UK where it was seen by millions on prime billboard sites. Newspaper columnists demanded to know whether any company would dream of representing a woman in such a way, and, if not, why it was acceptable for a man (e.g. Callan, 2001). Some even suggested that the pendulum of gender power had swung so far the other way that men now required a dedicated governmental minister to protect their interests from a hostile, man-hating culture (Reeves, 1999).

What, then, are we to make of these constructions of women’s ‘strength’, ‘empowerment’ and even implied sexual violence? I want to argue that these representations do not constitute a hopeful widening or diversification of constructions of femininity. While they may be relatively new in advertising, they reference a long iconography of depictions of vengeful women from the jealous and destructive heroines of classical Hollywood cinema to Glenn Close’s ‘bunny boiler’ in *Fatal Attraction*. Obsessive and slightly unhinged, the figure of the woman set on revenge indexes a tradition that has little or nothing to do with contemporary girl power, but rather with its opposite: powerlessness. She cannot really change things, but simply respond momentarily with an angry, vengeful gesture that may feel cathartic but leaves the status quo of gender relations intact.

The nastiness of these adverts and of the women within them is also disturbing and resonates with what we might understand as the ‘new cruelty’ in popular culture more generally. This is seen, for example, in the makeover shows that dominate contemporary western TV schedules. Angela McRobbie (2004a) and

others (Wood and Skeggs, 2004) have written about the deliberate reinvigoration of class antagonisms in such shows, and the growing acceptability of mocking and insulting people on television. McRobbie recorded the following from her viewing of the appearance-makeover show *What Not To Wear*:

‘What a dreary voice’, ‘look at how she walks’, ‘she shouldn’t put that ketchup on her chips’, ‘she looks like a mousy librarian’, ‘her trousers are far too long’, ‘that jumper looks like something her granny crocheted, it would be better on the table’, ‘she hasn’t washed her clothes’, ‘your hair looks like an overgrown poodle’, ‘your teeth are yellow, have you been eating grass?’ And ‘Oh my God she looks like a German lesbian’. (McRobbie 2004b: 118)

This kind of nastiness has become widespread on television since the advent of reality shows. It marks a rupture in the public service traditions of British broadcasting in which making derogatory remarks – particularly about the vulnerable or less well-off – was regarded as being in poor taste and therefore inappropriate for television. Today, insults and attacks have moved well beyond shows like *Big Brother* and can be heard routinely in talk shows, makeover programmes and comedy (Finding, 2007). As already noted, the nastiness in revenge adverts sometimes takes the form of a reverse sexual violence, in which women are presented as sexual attackers and men are the hapless and helpless victims. The disjuncture between this and the real picture of the incidence of sexual violence is sobering and should raise serious questions about what is going on in this pattern of representation.⁶ But even when direct violence is not suggested, there is a cruelty that characterizes the women depicted that I find very troubling. A psychoanalytic feminist reading might point to the positive or transgressive potential of this kind of expression of female rage and aggression, and certainly there are pleasures associated with acts of revenge (and the viewing of them) – which presumably make images of twisted golf clubs or shirts with their sleeves cut off enjoyable and satisfying for many viewers. Yet when the aggression is dislocated and severed from its cause or context – as, for example, in the Lee jeans advert discussed earlier – it becomes gratuitous cruelty, and even more disturbing because it is eroticized. In recent years, that cruelty has found free rein in attacks on men who are overweight. A recent campaign for Budweiser lite beer, for example, shows a sexy blonde woman saying ‘I don’t chase men who can’t run away’ (i.e. those with beer bellies). Another advert for Puma running shoes poses the question: ‘Why do you run?’ to which the attractive female responds: ‘Because my friends keep setting me up with fat guys.’ A rotund, chubby man is depicted for unkind laughter – he looks eagerly at the woman who has dismissed him, proffering a bunch of flowers. Here he is the figure of fun; she, by contrast, is sexually powerful, being slim and pretty enough to reject him callously. It is an interesting reversal of traditional patterns of looking: she is the active sexual subject, he the object, or, indeed, anti-object/non-subject in a way that is perhaps similar to the hostility meted out to desiring yet ‘undesirable’ women discussed earlier.⁷

Perhaps what is most sobering about these adverts is their implicit message

about gender relations, which is bleak to say the least. It is clear that this mode of representation relies upon a deeply polarized understanding of gender that not only sees men and women as fundamentally different, but also regards the relation between us as characterized by competition and animosity (as well as erotic attraction). What is implicit in all these ads is the idea that the relation between women and men is a *battle*, and the battle lines are already drawn, fixed, determined. The adverts work to animate this sense of conflict by individualizing and personifying more general notions of the 'battle of the sexes'. In this way, rather than opening up possibilities for new ways of living, dreaming or creatively re-imagining relationships between men and women, the myriad possibilities and potentialities are closed down and the only option is cruel attack or simply 'turning the tables'. This was evident in the Fiat Punto advert mentioned earlier: the sole way for the woman to express her dismay and distress at her partner's behaviour was to do the same to him, to 'play him at his own game' – a game, it should be noted, whose rules she had no part in determining and which, in a sexist culture, have the odds stacked against women, particularly as they grow older.

THE 'HOT LESBIAN' IN ADVERTISING

The final figure I want to consider is that of the 'hot lesbian' who is seen increasingly in contemporary advertising. Lesbian women have historically been almost invisible in mainstream visual culture and, when they have appeared, representations have tended to be crude and stereotypical (Creekmur and Doty, 1995; Doty and Gove, 1997; Jenkins, 2005; Wilton, 1995). In this context, a greater visibility may be significant not only in offering new representations of femininity, but also, potentially, in challenging heteronormativity.

The last 10 years have witnessed an increasing number of representations of lesbians in media and culture – in popular TV series, e.g. *Friends*, *Bad Girls*, *Ally McBeal*, *Sex and the City* and, of course, *The L Word*; in mainstream films such as *Wild Things*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *American Pie 2* and *Kissing Jessica Stein*; and in celebrity culture more broadly – from k.d. lang's erotic encounter with Cindy Crawford (for *Vanity Fair* magazine) to Madonna's kisses with Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera at the 2003 MTV awards. Increasingly, as Garrity (2001) has noted, lesbian sexuality is 'hot'.

Advertising is no exception. In June 2007, Commercial Closet, a web-based organization that monitors gay-themed adverts, had no fewer than 3500 adverts from 33 countries in its database. This proliferation is partly the result of flourishing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) creativity in the wake of HIV and AIDS, the growing confidence of queer media and a recognition by companies of the significance of the pink economy (Weeks, 2007). It is also a result of the cultural coolness currently accruing to queer sexualities; 'queering' an advert or deploying lesbian and gay themes seems to be regarded within the

industry as an easy way of adding desirable 'edginess' to a product's image, and instantly giving it a more trendy, contemporary feel.

The figure of the 'luscious lesbian' within advertising is notable for her extraordinarily attractive, conventionally feminine appearance. Women depicted in this way are almost always slim yet curvaceous, with long flowing hair and make-up. While this marks a rupture with earlier negative portrayals of lesbians as manly or ugly, such representations have been criticized for packaging lesbianism within heterosexual norms of female attractiveness (Ciasullo, 2001). Ciasullo argues that such portrayals work to annihilate the butch. Like the midriff, then, the hot lesbian seems to rest on multiple exclusions, and in this case those excluded are precisely those with visibility in establishing lesbianism as a political identity: women who reject a traditionally feminine presentation.

The packaging of 'lesbians' within conventional norms of heterosexual feminine attractiveness is one way in which the figure appears to be constructed primarily for a straight male gaze. The manner in which the hot lesbian is presented also seems designed for male titillation. The figure never appears alone (unlike the midriff, for example) but is almost always depicted kissing, touching or locked in an embrace with another woman. Two main strategies appear to dominate this kind of representation: either each woman will be shown with her 'Other', e.g. a black woman with a blonde light-skinned woman, in ways reminiscent of many soft porn scenarios in which men choose their 'type'. Or, alternatively, they will be shown with another woman whom they resemble closely. This 'doubling' is, of course, another common male sexual fantasy – which is implicitly alluded to in many adverts. A UK commercial for Beefeater restaurants, for example, shows two almost identical attractive young, long-haired, long-legged blonde women together, with the slogan 'Make it a double'. Other scenarios also draw on the codes of heterosexual male porn: in an advert for FCUK clothing, 'Fashion versus Style', two scantily clad women are seen wrestling, until the fight inevitably becomes sexual play and the pair tumble and writhe together erotically. Not only is this notable for being a stock scene from soft porn, but it is also markedly different from the way in which gay *men* are presented in adverts. While lesbian women rarely appear in mainstream adverts *except* in this highly sexualized manner, gay men are rarely portrayed kissing or even touching – and the kind of erotic contact displayed between women in the FCUK advert would be unimaginable between two men, even in cinema advertising, which is often more liberally regulated than that of terrestrial TV. Indeed, notwithstanding Calvin Klein's Guitar Kiss and a few other celebrated adverts in which two men embrace, albeit rather chastely, for the most part, gay men are signified through stylish and attractive appearance rather than intimate conduct. The figure of the hot lesbian is therefore marked out from both representations of heterosexual women and representations of gay men.

One way of reading the proliferation of this kind of eroticized imagery, then, is as a sexualized display designed primarily for the gaze of heterosexual men, frequently drawing on well-established codes from pornography. Yet it might

also be interpreted in a different way: as a means for companies to continue to objectify and sexualize women's bodies but to do so in a manner that evades charges of sexism – for how can it be sexist, they might protest, if it is about women's mutual desire. Just as the feisty sexual agency of the midriff defended against critiques of the advertisements' sexism, for she is no object but an active desiring sexual subject, so, too, the figure of the hot lesbian might be understood as offering a kind of alibi.

These readings are not mutually exclusive and the representations are polysemic. There may also be several other ways in which the figure of the luscious lesbian could be understood. What does seem clear, however, is that this figure is invariably constructed *in relation to heterosexuality* – not as an autonomous or independent sexual identity. Two examples should make this critique clear. In the first, 'Kiss Cool', a chewing gum is shown having electric and erotic effects. A young woman chews the gum and suddenly zooms to a haystack where she is kissing a man. The man then cuts to a car where he is kissing a different woman. After this kiss, the new lover is suddenly transported onto a sofa and is kissing a different man. And so it goes on until finally the young woman is in a nightclub kissing another man, before proceeding to kiss a woman – to the man's intense surprise and then apparent indulgent amusement.

It would be hard to sustain the idea that the woman featured in this advert is a lesbian or even that she is bisexual. Her kiss with another woman is clearly marked as transgressive in a way that the other kisses were not, and the camera's focus on her boyfriend's shock and then amusement reinforces the heteronormative economy of gazes within this advert. We as (presumed heterosexual) viewers are invited to look to him to provide a guide to how to react to this kiss: it is sexy, to be sure, has produced a frisson, but is ultimately not to be taken seriously as a challenge to her heterosexuality.

This is an example of what Diamond (2005b) has called 'hetero flexibility' to denote heterosexual women 'experimenting' sexually with other women – the notion of experimentation itself signalling its essentially trivial, temporary and non-serious nature. It presents girl-on-girl action as exciting, fun, but, crucially, as entirely unthreatening to heterosexuality (see also Wilkinson, 1996). Arguably, one of the pernicious aspects of this is that it allows advertisers to buy into the 'hot', 'now' social currency of queer while erasing lesbianism as such. In a truly queer world in which sexual identities no longer mattered, this might be welcomed, but, in a context in which heteronormativity remains powerful and non-normative sexualities are marginalized, it appears entirely cynical. Indeed, a key facet of many constructions of the hot lesbian is precisely the stress on her inauthenticity – something that young audiences in a study by Tamsin Gilbertson and Sue Jackson (forthcoming) articulated clearly. To them, such figures were not real but performances designed to titillate men or to annoy or punish a boyfriend. Such readings resonate strongly with adverts such as 'Kiss Cool'. In this sense, lesbian identity is obliterated even before it is created. Only a beautiful, eroticized simulacrum remains for the pleasure of heterosexual men.

The second example is an advert for Boisvert lingerie, created by the Saatchis and screened in cinemas. An attractive, naked woman is shown stepping into her bedroom and slowly putting on her sexy black underwear. Later, dressed in a black suit, she enters a restaurant, and shots of her earlier dressing routine are intercut with appreciative looks from men in the restaurant. She then joins her shorthaired companion, of whom we see only a back shot, and they exchange a passionate kiss. Only then is it revealed that the woman's companion is another woman. The question 'Do men deserve this?' is then flashed up on the screen, followed by the answer: 'No'. The advert is, according to its creative director, aimed at women who 'please themselves and who do not necessarily want to please men' (quoted in Lee, 1996). However, while this explicit message is that Boisvert lingerie is too good for men (they don't deserve it), it is scarcely credible that the advertiser's only target audience is affluent lesbian women. Instead, it is referencing/reproducing a well-known male fantasy (repeatedly reworked in pornography) while implying that the purchase of this underwear is actually all about women pleasing themselves and each other.

This advert, again, is constructed from *within heteronormativity*: its entire construction is framed in relation to men. Moreover, it draws on some of the problematic themes identified in relation to revenge advertising: the notion of making oneself into a commodity to be rationed, and the idea of punishing men – in this case through withholding sexual 'favours', because men do not deserve them. Meanwhile, it offers up the spectacle of sexual intimacy between women, with a knowing wink.

CONCLUSION

This article has been concerned with the ways in which empowerment – and specifically female sexual agency – is packaged in contemporary advertising. Three new constructions have been considered: the figure of the active heterosexually desiring 'midriff', the 'vengeful, sexy woman' set on punishing her male partner for his transgressions, and the 'hot lesbian', almost always depicted kissing or holding another woman. These three figures are notable in opening up a new mode of representing women. Instead of passive, 'dumb' or unintelligent sex objects, these women are shown as active, beautiful, smart, powerful sexual subjects.

In some respects, this shift is a positive one, offering modernized representations of femininity that allow women power and agency, and do not define women exclusively as heterosexual. In particular, it is striking that in all three constructions women's sexual agency is flaunted and celebrated, rather than condemned or punished. This marks a significant disruption to older more established patterns of visual culture in which no such active sexuality was permitted to women without grave consequences (Kaplan, 1998; Mulvey, 1975) The fact that lesbian desire can be depicted without apology in mainstream culture might be seen as particularly significant.

To enable a full assessment of the meaning of this shift, research with female viewers/audiences is necessary to ascertain the kind of sense that different women make of these various depictions. Perhaps the active, desiring voice of the midriff is experienced as pleasurable and empowering for some women – an acknowledgement of sexual subjecthood which disrupts or responds to the missing discourses of female desire. My students often champion this reading when I discuss such representations with them. Alternatively, midriff advertising might be experienced as a new kind of tyranny, an obligation to be sexual in a highly specific kind of way. Likewise, revenge adverts might represent for some viewers sexy, powerful women who are not going to put up with poor treatment from men, yet may appear to others as part of a negative pattern of portraying women as ‘ball breakers’. The proliferation of images of woman–woman sexual action, too, might be welcomed by some as giving visibility to non-heterosexual forms of desire, or those same images may be regarded as pernicious for their framing of lesbianism within a male, heteronormative gaze.

In this article, I have cautioned against too celebratory a reading of these figures. I have pointed to some of the silences and exclusions of these constructions of ‘power femininity’ (Lazar, 2006), highlighted the harshness – even cruelty – of some of the representations, and drawn attention to the ways in which they are embedded in other – sometimes problematic – traditions in mainstream film or pornography.

Above all, I want to highlight three critical points. The first relates to the new forms of power expressed or configured through these constructions. Power operates here not by silencing or suppressing female sexual agency, but by constructing it in highly specific ways. Power works in and through subjects, less by modes of domination than through discipline and regulation. A number of scholars have discussed this in relation to female embodiment (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Sawicki, 1991), but here I have argued that sexual agency as it is constructed through these three figures also becomes a regulatory project (Butler, 1990), and mode of governmentality (Gill, 2003; Harris, 2005; Rose, 1989). Thus, rather than agency or ‘voice’ being the solution to the silencing of women’s desire identified by Fine and others, it becomes itself part of the apparatus that disciplines and regulates feminine conduct, that gets ‘inside’ and reconstructs our notions of what it is to be a sexual subject. Writing about the ‘modernization’ of romance narratives, Hilary Radner has argued that, whereas the classical romantic heroine offered ‘virtue’, innocence and goodness as the commodities she brought to the sexual/marriage marketplace, contemporary romances demand a ‘technology of sexiness’ (Radner, 1993, 1999). In the post-*Cosmopolitan* (magazine) west, heroines must no longer embody virginity but are required to be skilled in a variety of sexual behaviours and practices. The performance of confident sexual agency, I would suggest, is central to this new disciplinary technology of sexiness.

Second, adverts built around these three figures are interesting for the ways in which they depict contemporary gender relations. There are some stark differ-

ences between the constructions. In adverts featuring hot lesbians, men are presented as irrelevant or undeserving of women's attention – in such a way, as noted earlier, that serves paradoxically to *recentre* their desires and interests. This is underscored by the visual images that seem designed for heterosexual male pleasure. In midriff advertising, by contrast, men are explicitly ('Hello boys!') or implicitly hailed by the young attractive models who feature, and the relations between women and men are depicted as egalitarian and playful. Any sense of inequality, of a power imbalance, is erased in the vocabulary of midriff advertising. Violence too seems literally to have been conjured away. In one ad, an attractive young woman is depicted wearing just a bra, her arm stretched high in the internationally recognized gesture for hailing a taxi. 'I bet I can get a cab on New Year's Eve 1999' she declares, laughing. Here, again, the exposed breasts are a source of male-attention-grabbing power, a way to defeat notorious concerns about taxi queues (which were particularly acute – and much talked about – on the Millennium Eve.) But the representation is entirely shorn of any suggestion of the very real and serious violence that might threaten any woman so scantily attired, late at night, in the midst of large numbers of men who are drinking heavily.

In revenge adverts, violence *is* given space, but here it is *female violence* against men. We must wonder what ideological work is effected by such adverts, which systematically erase male violence against women while implying that the reverse is common. In its political significance it is like having a genre of depictions of racism that only feature white people being attacked by black people! More broadly, I have sought to demonstrate what a bleak and hostile vision of gender relations is presented in these adverts, which suggest that the 'solution' to male 'bad behaviour' is simply to 'turn the tables', to invert the relationship. Thus women in revenge adverts mock, humiliate and attack men, yet we are invited to see this as in some way empowering for women – in a distortion of feminism that somehow seems to suggest that, if women are doing well, then men must be disadvantaged.

Finally, I want to emphasize the ways in which all three of these new figures operate within a profoundly heteronormative framework. The midriff's feisty, up-for-it sexuality is framed exclusively in relation to men; the target of female revenge adverts is always a male (ex-)partner, and even the figure of the hot lesbian may, as we have seen, be read as a construction designed primarily for the heterosexual male gaze (though, of course, it may be pleasurable for lesbian women too).⁸ Commodity lesbians (Clark, 1993), as we have seen, are always young, always beautiful and always seductively entwined with another sexually appealing young woman. They do not reject men as sexual partners so much as beckon to them, offering a heady mix of the coolness of queer, alongside the sexual objectification of women's bodies, and the soft-porn-sexiness of seeing two attractive women engaging in intimate sexual conduct.

What is striking is the way in which advertisers have managed in these three figures to recuperate and commodify a particular kind of feminist consciousness and offer it back to women shorn of its political critique of gender relations and

heteronormativity. A new version of female sexual agency is on offer that breaks in important ways with the sexual objectification and silencing of female desire of earlier advertising. Yet in refiguring female sexual agency in these particular ways, it raises new problems and challenges. If this is empowerment, we might ask, then what does sexism look like? And if second-wave slogans such as ‘THIS AD OBJECTIFIES WOMEN’ are no longer effective in a mediascape populated by active sexual subjects, what kind of cultural politics is equal to the task of resisting contemporary representations?

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NOTES

1. I am grateful to Dave Harper for drawing my attention to this article.
2. Elsewhere (Gill, 2007a) I have discussed whether the term ‘objectification’ – so long the central term in feminists’ critical lexicon for analysing adverts (Kilbourne, 1999) – remains pertinent given the shift away from depictions of women as mute, passive objects.
3. A term of class hatred, used in the UK as a form of attack on working-class people.
4. How to read this? There are real difficulties in analysing it. On one hand, it might be thought of as celebrating women’s masturbation and self-pleasuring (at last an advert that acknowledges that women masturbate, that men are not ‘necessary’ even to heterosexual women’s pleasure), yet, on the other, it appears that the promised arousal comes partly from the woman addressed having imagined herself as sexy (in this underwear) through the internalization of a male gaze – a traditional scenario in which she turns herself into a desirable, sexy object for him. And yet doesn’t all sex involve both feelings of desire and desirability? Isn’t the internalization of the Other simply a part of sex’s inherently relational character? Is the promised arousal necessarily politically retrogressive from a feminist perspective? Difficult questions.
5. I do not want to reproduce any of these here, so am relying on readers’ familiarity with this kind of offensive material from their own context in order to make this point.
6. The British Crime Survey estimates that there were 47,000 rapes and 190,000 serious sexual assaults against females in 2002. The incidence (reporting) of rape has been increasing year on year in Home Office statistics, while conviction rates have been decreasing over the same period. The conviction rate for rape is now between 5 percent and 6 percent – the lowest for any serious crime. A UK Home Office report published in July 2007 (set up to look at appalling low conviction rates) found that more than two-thirds of cases were dropped at the police stage and did not even make it to the courts (Nicholas et al., 2007). A culture of scepticism and woman-blaming contributes to this, and an Amnesty International survey in 2005 found that up to one-third of members of

the British public believed that a woman was in part responsible for rape if she had been drinking, was dressed provocatively or had had a number of sexual partners (see Amnesty International, 2005).

7. I am grateful to Ginny Braun for this point. However, these representations are not equivalent in any straightforward way, not least because of the significance of the long cultural history of the beauty myth, and the evaluation of women by their appearance.
8. At a recent event on 'The Future of Gender Theory' held at Goldsmiths College, London, in July 2007, queer activists responded angrily to a feminist paper that explored the ways in which heterosexual audiences interpreted representations of 'hot lesbians' on TV. Rather than pointing out the heteronormative framing, and the refraction through an implied male gaze, they argued, why was the author not looking at lesbian viewing pleasures instead. My argument here is that these options are not mutually exclusive. It is important to locate the potential lesbian pleasures to be derived from viewing such representations, but it is also important to examine how they remain framed in highly problematic – sexist and heteronormative – ways.

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