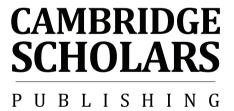# Sexing the Look in Popular Visual Culture

Sexing the Look in Popular Visual Culture

Edited by

Kathy Justice Gentile

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gaze (2) A collage by **gaye gambell-peterson**,
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INTRODUCTION

SEXING THE LOOK

KATHY JUSTICE GENTILE

> The act of looking . . . is loaded—with power, with desire, with guilt, and with hope—and takes place within a complex and dynamic web of social rules and behavior. In particular, the look is embedded in relations of power. (Lau 1993, 193)

> Sexuality itself arose within this universe as one of its objective functions, and now tends to overdetermine all the others, substituting itself as an alternative finality for those that are disappearing or already defunct. Everything is sexualized and thereby acquires something of a terrain for adventure and play. Everywhere the id speaks. Every discourse appears as an eternal commentary on sex and desire. (Baudrillard 1990, 177)

Every day, whether we are out in the world or in the workplace or the privacy of our homes, we enter visual fields that heighten and distort reality, distortions that often emphasize sexuality and erotic promise. At supermarkets or airports we peruse or walk by shelves of magazine and mass market book covers, many of which depict scantily clad women, men with washboard abdomens, and/or steamy love scenes. Celebrities and attractive models dress and pose provocatively to hawk make-up, hair, cars, and beer, as well as financial, exercise, and sexual enhancement products twenty-four hours a day on hundreds of television channels, while trailers for upcoming shows direct our attention to buff, beautiful actors and actresses playing at love or risking their bodies in dangerous situations. Whether we are at home, work, or on our cell phones, internet ads boldly hijack our screen space, promoting dating sites with photos of attractive women or couples, miracle cures for bodily deficiencies (with pictures of the ideal body as inspiration), and endless other products that we never thought we needed in our lives before they claim a space in our visual field. While some viewers have learned how to automatically tune out many of these images because they have become so common and

clichéd, others let their attention be drawn in or eagerly seek out sexualized images.

Human beings have created themselves, their communities, and their civilizations primarily in response to the visual world that surrounds them. We have always lived in a visual world and a visual culture, the difference today being that we have unprecedented access to technological tools and media outlets, and therefore more images are available to more people than ever before. Although the majority of images that constitute our popular culture are not explicitly sexual in content, with dramatic advances in media technology, the availability of explicit and suggestive sexual images has been exponentially increasing. Despite the far-reaching dissemination of pornographic images, pornography is not as publicly visible or as accessible to as many people as are erotic or sexually suggestive images that proliferate in more mainstream visual cultures through readily available popular media, including film, still and moving image advertising, television shows, cell phones, and exploding networks of internet sites. The practice of sexing or erotically enhancing images is an increasingly widespread phenomenon that is highly unlikely to decline in response to calls for legal or public policy constraints. Nor would censorship or more care in dissemination—the "ecology of images" that Susan Sontag once called for[1]—be effective in recalling or counteracting what is now a vast, global, image conveyer system.

Is Everything Visual Sexualized?

For several decades, philosophers and media observers have engaged in hyperbolic and totalizing rhetorical speculations about the significance of contemporary culture's ever-increasing visual and discursive attention to sexuality. Some commentators have decried a contemporary crisis of representation or a "crisis of the visual subject" (Mirzoeff 2002, 11) because of the apparent ubiquity of violent and sexualized images and visual culture's blurring of the boundaries with living culture. Examples of utterances that convey a sense of sexual crisis include Jean Baudrillard's "Everything is sexualized" (1990, 177), and "Pornography states this clearly . . . All femininity will be made visible—woman as emblematic of orgasm, and orgasm as emblematic of sexuality" (Baudrillard 1990, 20), as well as Frederic Jameson's declaration that "[T]he visual is *essentially* pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination" (Jameson 1990, 1). Such absolutist statements seem deliberately provocative, as if to claim visibility and force beyond their originary function as words on a page and thus attain greater cultural

capital and status. Unequivocal assertions on controversial topics may act as memorable images do by tenaciously and indelibly imprinting words in our minds as images. In regard to sexualized images, however, Michel Foucault reminds us that sexuality, with its attendant discourse and image matrix, is a fairly recent historical development:

> [F]or two centuries now, the discourse on sex has been multiplied rather than rarefied; and that if it has carried with it taboos and prohibitions, it has also, in a more fundamental way, ensured the solidification and implantation of an entire sexual mosaic. (1978, 53)

Today, the sexual mosaic has become a fundamental part of image construction in many different arenas and continues to implant itself in our culture as it is promulgated through increasingly interrelated systems of communication.

In the overall context of lived experience, however, the sexual mosaic is not ubiquitous or even visible in most aspects of everyday living and looking. Consider the provocative argument that follows Jameson' audacious quote cited above, where he suggests that "[p]ornographic films are thus only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body" (1990, 1). Certainly popular film often sexualizes its images in order to solicit our attention; yet mainstream film more often sensationalizes moving images to enhance violence and physical action or enhances light and color to create aesthetically beautiful outdoor or indoor scenes. Furthermore, while our looking at the world is surely influenced by the look, or images, of film, it doesn't necessarily follow that because of our temporary immersion in film "reality" we come away from a film primed to view the world as a naked body, exposed, vulnerable, and sexually desirable—or even that we see the people in our line of vision as more sexualized. More often we see, or don't see, the world as visually unmemorable and emotionally neutral in that very little in our field of vision may claim our particular attention at a given moment. When our visual attention is engaged, we may be likely to see the world around us as in need of sensationalizing (perhaps because of the influence of film and other images on our visual expectations) or as wondrous in ways that we had not previously observed. Most of what we see in everyday life does not sexually titillate or arouse, including most of the images that corporations, governments, and other institutions design to solicit our attention.

Baudrillard's suggestion that all the world is now constituted by simulacra, the idea that the virtual world no longer has any relation to the real world and has in effect displaced material reality and become the new

real or hyperreal (See *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1994), is totalizing in the extreme as it sweeps aside material causes and the diverse specificity of particular sites and situations. As W. J. T. Mitchell has noted, "If visual culture is to mean anything, it has to be generalized as the study of all the social practices of human visuality, and not confined to modernity or the West" (2005, 349). Taken as the new face of postmodernity, a simulacrum world could be, in effect, a pre-Columbian, Catholic world—flat, depthless, with no tolerance for discursive dissent or multidimensional heresies. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty reminds us that the "truth" about the visual world is not that it is reality or a substitute for reality, but that the visual is always partial, part of the whole but not the whole: "why is [the world] displayed only gradually and never 'in its entirety'?" (1962, 208).

Image or Anti-Image?

To move from macrocosmic philosophies of the visual to a microcosmic perspective, I would like to return to John Berger's definition of an image as "an appearance detached from the place and time in which it first appeared." Every image "embodies a way of seeing," in that looking at an image is not just about the object of our look but about the "relation between things and ourselves" (1972, 9). As far as the role that images play in our personal epistemologies, Barbara Stafford notes, "pictures constitute the stuff of memory and the way in which the brain internally displays thoughts to itself" (1996, 73). Memory is inhabited by images, while language and the other sensations typically play supporting roles. Mitchell instructs us that a "picture" is "the entire situation in which the image makes its appearance" (2005, xiv), and that contemporary images are more often a mixed media phenomenon, in that they present themselves as part of an assemblage and may interact with words, music, and other media effects (2005, 350). Similar to the memories housed in the brain, an image is typically not a purely visual event. Unlike the linearity conveyed by words in sentences, however, a still image can momentarily fix time and place and thus deny linearity or possibly conjure an imaginary (linear) narrative that may differ from viewer to viewer.

Several critics have called attention to an entrenched "aniconicity" (Stafford 1996, 12), or even "iconophobia" (Mitchell 2005, 20-22), in contemporary culture, particularly among media scholars who see the power and prevalence of images as having a negative influence on attitudes towards violence and sexuality, as well as encouraging negative views of the self and rampant consumerism. In her book *Good Looking*,

Stafford calls for us to develop an "intelligence of sight" (4) so that we can properly analyze and evaluate what images can do for us: "They can refine the imagination as well as our emotional and spiritual lives. They can make us intelligent in the body and sympathetic in the mind" (17). While Stafford acknowledges that images are typically associated with some kind of visual trickery, she nevertheless calls for a re-enchantment of images to rescue art and "even epistemology" from "an implacable logic of venality" and so that we can recognize the power of visual culture for discovery and the revelation of new knowledge (1996, 58-59). However, Stafford trumpets the virtues and good looking of art and scientific imagery and does not try to make a case for the virtues of advertisements or other popular images that emphasize sexuality and/or glamour. In *Regarding the Pain of Others,* Susan Sontag expresses wariness of the inarticulate power of images and emphasizes the necessity of thinking about images, "the standing back from the aggressiveness of the world which frees us for observation and for elective attention," rather than simply giving oneself over to the visual power of violent or pornographic photographs or pictures (2003, 118).

The Look of Images

Certainly, designers of images seek to solicit our attention in competing with other images, and an increasingly common technique for soliciting attention is to enhance the erotic appeal of an image. Specific techniques for sexualizing images include designing the spatial environment, foregrounding, lighting, positioning, and exaggeration of bodily features typically linked to sexuality, such as lips, breasts, hips, and legs. Communications scholar Paul Messaris analyzes many of the techniques that advertisers use to transform the view before the camera lens: the image or events can be staged, altered, edited, and digitally enhanced so that the resulting image or series of images conveys an illusion of reality that has little to do with the scene enacted before the camera. As Messaris notes,

> all at stages of the photographic process—choosing and framing the shot, cropping the resulting image, editing images together, presenting the outcome to the viewer—the photograph's value as evidence about reality can be affected dramatically by the simple means of *selection.* (142)

Even so, images share a common reality in that visual composition draws upon its own set of materials and rules involving lines, shapes, colors, juxtapositions, etc. Nevertheless, with continuing technical enhancements

for creating and revising images, the "real" is increasingly likely to be hyperbolized, compressed, remixed, airbrushed, or radically altered into an image entity that bears little resemblance to its original form. The sexuality conveyed in these altered images is the product of a disciplinary regime that weds a product to erotic mystique. Karl Marx's term "commodity fetishism" can be defined as "a system of mystification that empties objects of the meaning of their production" and fills them "with new meanings in ways that both mystify the product and turn it into a fetish object" (Sturken and Cartwright 200). Therefore, stripping or cleansing a product of any association with the material conditions of its creation and then enhancing the product or image by imbuing it with sexual qualities may render it a fetishized object of desire to a viewer who sees only what is presented into his field of vision.

Are Images Feminine?

Several critics across disciplinary fields have suggested that sex is specifically associated with the female body, echoing Baudrillard's claim that "[a]ll femininity will be made visible" as "emblematic of orgasm" and "sexuality" (1990, 20). As advertising media scholars Jacqueline Lambiase and Tom Reichert note, "Among all this visual 'sex noise,' the most common metaphor for sex is a woman's body, although men's bodies are being commodified as well" (2003, 273). Foucault, who was primarily concerned with discourse rather than visual culture, remarks on the twentieth-century "hysterization of women's bodies," whereby the female body was analyzed "as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality" in medical discourse and through associations with domesticity and maternity (104). His observation that "sex is an especially dense transfer point for relations of power" (103) can apply to the complex power dynamics that take place between the viewer and sexualized image. Other observers suggest that the image itself is linked to femininity. Nicholas Mirzoeff claims that the "current moment of globalization is especially enacted on, through, and by the female body" (16), and images of the female body often represent this enactment. Mitchell goes so far as to argue that the "default" position of the visual or the image is feminine (2005, 35).[2] In other words whereas the "natural" or default gender of a human being is man or masculinity, the prototypical gender for the image is generally perceived as feminine. As a consequence, sexuality can be seen as doubly gendered or overdetermined as female through its reification in "feminine" images. To construct an image as masculine, queer, or androgynous entails supplementing, obscuring, and distorting a

base-level feminine image so that it displays the characteristics of another gender. Thus if images are implicitly gendered as feminine, they can be altered and explicitly sexed as hyperfeminine or as transgender or butch, and so on.

In constructing an image to solicit attention, particularly to sell a product, designers more often aim for aesthetic appeal, rather than gritty realism or shock effects. In Immanuel Kant's aesthetic system, the viewer typically takes interest and delight in representations of beauty because "the beautiful . . . is that which pleases universally" (60). However, when he considers ideal beauty's relationship to the human form, Kant associates beauty with manliness and not femininity, since "the ideal consists in the expression of the *moral*," and women apparently are not capable of achieving, or embodying, this moral ideal (1952, 19, 79). Edmund Burke (1757), writing over thirty years before Kant (1790), explicitly associated femininity with the beautiful. He argues that men are more attracted to beautiful women and that this attraction has a direct effect on the body: "beauty acts by relaxing the solids of the whole system" and "the passion called love is produced by this relaxation" (1958, 149-51). In effect, Burke suggests that a beautiful woman, whether in the flesh or as a representation, elicits warm feelings of sexual arousal in male viewers. The feminine beautiful produces positive pleasure that excites in the soul a feeling of love (160). Indeed image makers have recognized that femininity is more evocative of beauty, sexuality, and desire, and thus images of persuasion are very often feminized/sexualized. As Baudrillard argues throughout his book *Seduction* (1990), the feminine is more associated with seduction, and designers of images aim at seducing the viewer into responding to the image in emotional, if not physiological ways. As Berger notes, "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (1972, 47). While the male viewer is encouraged to desire and want to possess the image, female viewers may more often want to identify with the image and aspire to attain the model of femininity expressed in the picture so that they, too, can become objects of desire.

The human body that is the basis of an image is constructed and coerced into beauty through elaborate processes of framing, draping, cosmetics, lighting, and other techniques. However, in mainstream media, most image designers are careful not to contrive images that are too sexual or pornographic since they would risk many viewers turning away in discomfort or disapproval. In the popular reality television show *America's Next Top Model* (over forty spin-offs of which are broadcast in other countries as *Finland's Next Top Model*, *Ghana's Next Top Model*,

and even *Afghanistan's Next Top Model*, etc.), aspiring young female models are instructed on how to dress, walk, position their bodies, and express emotions so as to convey the strongest and most attractive and persuasive image to viewers.[3] Models whose body postures or facial expressions come across as too sexually provocative are told to clean it up and not cross the line into porn; others who convey passivity or submissiveness are encouraged to channel their energy into looking "fierce." Female models are generally utilized in three ways to sell a message or product: first—high fashion models who are appealing to a wealthier, status-conscious class more often look "fierce" or challenging to and contemptuous of observers; the object of their look is to present an image that the viewer wants to emulate in order to achieve a more enviable social status. Second are the "catalogue" images in which models convey friendliness and a more easily attainable attractiveness in order to appeal to middle-class consumers who may be more interested in looking good at an affordable price; and third are pornographic images in which women appear to be sexually aroused or on the verge of arousal as they invite the (male) viewer to take advantage of their compliant condition, typically looking out at the viewer, their eyes dilated and beckoning and their mouths plumped, moist and slightly open.

How We Look

All three stereotypical versions of femininity are transmitted via an unrelenting stream of media images, and these sexualized pictures evoke a variety of responses from individual viewers. As images jostle with each other in the media universe and compete for attention, they are variously successful or unsuccessful in soliciting an individual viewer's attention. Berger has noted that most popular images act in service to the recent corporate regime of publicity whereby the demands of capitalism have narrowed down the messages conveyed by images in order to maximize profit for corporate products (1972, 144, 154). Most images sell glamour or a picture of the good life, and successful images in a capitalist system are those that present visions of how the viewer wants to see herself. In his controversial work on the influence of subliminal messages in advertising, Wilson Bryan Key has argued that some advertisers implant or embed sexual messages and images (such as the word "SEX" and images of male and female genitals) in television and print ads so that these embeds are invisible unless the viewer closely scrutinizes the images. By appealing subliminally rather than consciously to viewers, advertisers try to appeal to unconscious desires so that the audience will associate the product with

sexual appeal and buy it (See Key 1976). Messaris has examined a number of studies that have attempted to test Key's claims and concludes that there is some evidence "for supposing that subliminal advertising can work occasionally, although the evidence is by no means unequivocal" (1997, 68-9).[4]

How do images work on and affect viewers? As Mitchell observes, viewers are often prone to magical thinking in granting positive and negative power to images. Images appear to gaze back at us and engage us in some kind of relationship, however cursory or intense (2005, 8). Viewer responses to sexualized images can be ranged on a sliding scale of engagement. While viewers who attend to popular sexualized images may feel some degree of arousal or desire, desire attested to by product sales and pornography consumption, others may experience the "stupefaction" that Baudrillard predicts with the onslaught of simulacrum culture (43)[5]─ or even apathy. Jean Kilbourne cites studies that show that many viewers have become desensitized to the constant bombardment of sexualized images and argues that the ubiquity of such images leads to disconnection, or emotional disengagement, rather than connection, by creating "a climate in which disconnection and dissociation are normalized, even glorified and eroticized" (Lambiase and Reichert 2003, 178-9). The relationship between viewers and visual fields is fluid and evolving. As Mitchell notes, the visual is a social construction, but visual culture also constructs society (2005, 345), and the process of visual and societal reconstruction in which so many are highly invested and engaged is ongoing.

The contributors for this collection look at the sexualization of visual culture from a variety of perspectives and represent a range of disciplinary approaches, including literature, film studies, history, philosophy, art history, and media studies, with gender and sexuality studies providing the encompassing critical framework that binds these essays into a coherent analytical project. Taken as a whole these essays direct our critical attention to increasingly widespread and sometimes insidiously pervasive eroticizing practices, practices which aim to entertain, impress, solicit, threaten, and/or delude targeted audiences, viewers who may be savvy and complicit, delighted and stimulated, or naive and vulnerable.

Part I, "Theorizing the Look," interrogates theories of looking and proposes new syntheses and alternative strategies for apprehending the full "body" of the image and the crucial dynamics of perceiver/perceived interactions. Kathy Justice Gentile's "Encountering the Sexuality of Images: with Debord and Merleau-Ponty" yokes together two French philosophers, the political iconoclast Guy Debord and the phenomenologist

of perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in an unlikely marriage that engenders a possible theoretical approach on how to engage sexualized and other coercive images. The essay examines Debord's indictment of "the society of the spectacle" and his strategies of resistance along with Merleau-Ponty's philosophical delineation of the embodied perceiver in the visible and invisible world and proposes a political phenomenology of seeing that synthesizes key concepts of both thinkers.

In "Arousing Suspicions: The Visual Culture of Contemporary Anti-Pornography Feminism," Brad Houston Lane recognizes that the two sides in the feminist porn debate have remain polarized over the last three decades and that pro-sex, postmodern feminists have mischaracterized and underestimated the strength and value of anti-porn feminists' arguments. According to Lane, while postmodern feminists have charged that radical feminists' critique of pornography is epistemologically naïve because it argues for a causal relationship between images and acts, Lane suggests that we consider the deeper implications of feminist conscious raising which values personal experience as a methodological tool to expose so-called "objective" views of the world as "circular male supremacist" reasoning that maintains gender hierarchies. Catharine MacKinnon's argument that porn is sex and images are, therefore, part of real experience leads Lane to conclude that "representation" is, indeed, the problem, with pornographic representation being the most blatant example of the objectification and subjugation of women. He urges that we reconsider our understanding of representation and the visual by moving away from the "aniconicity," or bias against images, that also characterizes our cultural views of women. Lane calls for a "new feminist visual epistemology" that applies the insights of radical feminism's understanding of pornography as well as bringing other feminist and queer analytical approaches to a re-examination of the heretofore binary politics of representation.

In Part II, "The Pornographic Look," three essays consider the power of sexualized images to engage, influence, and arouse viewers by mirroring fantasies, fears, and self-perceptions. In a historical analysis that employs nudist archival materials and A.C.L.U archives, Brian Hoffman examines the production, consumption, and regulation of nudist images from 1933 to 1947 in the American monthly magazine, *The Nudist* (later renamed *Sunshine and Health*) in his essay "Challenging the Look: Nudist Magazines, Sexual Representation, and the Second World War." Hoffman traces the beginnings of the American nudist movement from the German *Nachtcultur* ideology that trumpeted the health benefits of nudity up to the legal battles over censorship after WWII, which led to the proliferation of sexual images in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

In "Arguing with an Orgasm: The Politics and Pedagogy of the Anti-Pornography Slideshow," Jennifer Maher argues with the anti-porn feminists who employ the slide-show model at presentations and conferences such as the Pornography and Popular Culture Conference at Wheelock College in 2007. Because the pile-up of arousing and disturbing images in the slide show evokes mostly negative visceral reactions from its audience, Maher questions the validity of the slide show as a rhetorical tool in promoting anti-porn education and legislation. Instead she calls for a more nuanced critical feminist analysis of the complex dynamics that connect pornography and its audience.

In her essay "Post-Pornography: Visual Obscenity, Female Sexuality and the Woman Artist in Jack O'Connell's *The Skin Palace*," Eleanor Beal tests Baudrillard's theory of "seduction" that posits femininity as a strategy of illusion and subversion in her reading of a contemporary American novel. She examines O'Connell's use of a female protagonist to challenge and expose the masculinist commodification and devaluation of the signs and symbols of femininity as represented in an "image-saturated" post-modern urban landscape whose central site or symbol is the Skin Palace, a lavish movie production and screening arena for pornography and the exploitation of women. Baudrillard's view that the current age is an obscene hyperreality constituted by a homogeneous sign system and therefore, the idea of "woman" has no reality has been condemned as superciliously misogynist by feminists; however, Beal argues that Baudrillard's characterization of femininity as illusory because its symbols are a projection of masculine conceptions of the feminine can be turned around to expose the illusory and corrupt nature of masculine modes of production and control. O'Connell uses the techniques of parody, cliché, repetition, and the double to expose the artifice of masculine production and to enable strategies of resistance, particularly for the protagonist, Sylvia, who resists essentialization by trying on versions of "femininity" while searching for her origins and self-reality behind the images.

In Part III, "Icons of Femininity," three contributors examine controversial issues of constraint, censorship, and idealization in the presentation and promotion of sexualized representations of the female body. In an essay about the film transformation of Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones literary character, Ezra Claverie employs a feminist, Foucauldian approach to critique the audience and reviewers' unironic, disapproving response to Bridget's bodily transgressions. In "Discipline and the Female Grotesque: The Reception and Rejection of Bridget Jones," Claverie finds that the British and U.S. press, in most cases owned by major corporations, ridiculed and bemoaned the size of Bridget's body

in the 2001 Sharon Maguire film version of the novel in a seemingly concerted strategy to punish this female icon for challenging the prevailing regime that prescribes rigid standards for feminine beauty.

Minsoo Kang's "Sexing the Female Robot" exposes the masculine ambition to create the perfect artificial woman, or female robot, as misogynistic and ultimately self-subverting. Kang argues that rather than being a rigid, dehumanizing figure of femininity, the fictional female robot has proven to be a shape-shifting model of feminine potential when we consider the literary and film tradition. In early fiction, such as E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman," and in the two film versions of *The Stepford Wives,* the mechanized woman functions as a representative of masculine fantasies of domination over female beauty. However, in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* the female robot becomes a destructive counter version of the feminine ideal, and stories by two female science-fiction writers demonstrate the robot's potential for positive transformation and gender reversal.

In "The Predator and the Poptart: Framed," Kathleen Butterly Nigro examines the virtual world of advertising, entertainment, communication, and coercion that dominates the cultural milieu of girls growing up in the U.S. today and considers the predatory implications of many of these virtual images. By considering on-line sites, news stories, and other popular media sources, along with feminist criticism, the essay makes a compelling case that the relatively new discipline of Girls' Studies, which focuses on girls' development of and responses to their own cultures, can provide vital insights into the disquieting phenomenon of eroticizing teen and pre-teen girls.

In Part IV, "Looking like a Man," two essays explore images of men and masculinity in past and present-day visual culture. In Victorian-era Britain, gendered attitudes toward fashion were in transition as Christopher Kent observes in "The Victorian Gentleman and the Pleasures of Dress." Looking like a man meant dressing like a gentleman; however, a man who was secure about his masculinity could not appear to take his appearance too seriously. Cartoons in *Punch* played upon middle-class anxieties about dress and regularly satirized "gentlemen's" concerns with looking like a proper man. Kent examines the role of the tailor in "decontaminating, demystifying and regendering fashion" for gentlemen and considers how Edward, Prince of Wales, became a fashion leader while establishing trends toward comfort and stylistic variation in men's clothing.

The final essay, "Can 'Men' Stop Rape: Gender Ideologies in the My Strength is Not for Hurting Media Campaign," examines the mixed

messages conveyed by the visually striking posters disseminated in an international rape-prevention media campaign. While applauding the goals of the Men Can Stop Rape organization to raise awareness of and prevent sexual assault, Michael J. Murphy finds that the campaign's appropriation of the "visual aesthetics and rhetorical strategies" of commercial advertising unintentionally reinforce persistent heterosexist misconceptions about rape, including dehumanizing perceptions about race and sexual orientation. In his conclusion, Murphy calls for greater awareness of entrenched gender and sexual ideologies and proposes guidelines for the use of visual media in rape-prevention education.

As the visual artist Grace Lau has commented, "The act of looking . . . is loaded—with power, with desire, with guilt, and with hope—and takes place within a complex and dynamic web of social rules and behaviors. In particular the look is embedded in relations of power" (1993, 193). The eroticized "look," as both noun and verb, the thing or image that draws our look and the look that we bestow on images that elicit our visual, physiological, and emotional attention, is the focus of the essays in this volume.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag departs from her view previously expressed in *On Photography* that we work toward a "conservationist remedy" in making and consuming images (1990, 180): "There isn't going to be an 'ecology of images.' No Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock. And the horrors themselves are not going to abate" (108). Although Sontag was primarily concerned with images of war and atrocities, her acknowledgement that we don't live in Plato's Republic and the Guardians aren't going to protect us from offensive images certainly applies to sexualized images as well.

2. Mitchell argues that the viewer, who traditionally views the image from a superior masculine position of power, is acted on or spoken to by the subordinated feminine image so as to "transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture in what might be called 'the Medusa effect'" (2005, 35-36). Potentially, then, the feminine objects of the male gaze may gaze back by soliciting and capturing a viewer's attention and desire and thus reversing the power dynamic.

3. See website—www.cstv.com/shows/Americas-next-top-model. In 2010, the show was broadcast in over 170 countries, suggesting the near-global appeal for girls and women of being made over into an image of glamour and beauty.

4. Messaris comments that few of these studies are reliable because of "the difficulty of manipulating such images for experimental purposes" (68). In studies by Kelly (1976) and Gable, Wilkens, Harris, and Feinberg (1987), "sexual embeds did not produce any notable effect on attitudes toward the photographs" used in the study. However, a 1985 study by Kilbourne, Painton, and Ridley suggested that an embedded nude woman in a Chivas Regal whiskey ad increased rates of arousal in male viewers (1997, 69).

5. In his essay "What are you doing after the orgy?" Baudrillard comments:
"For a long time now our mediated spectacles have been crossing the border into the realm of stupefaction. This stupefaction is what is obscene, it is the glazed extreme of the body, the glazed extreme of sex, it is an empty scene where nothing happens and yet one that fills the viewfinder . . . Nothing happens and yet we are saturated with it" (43).

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PART I:

THEORIZING THE LOOK

CHAPTER ONE

ENCOUNTERING THE SEXUALITY OF IMAGES: WITH DEBORD AND MERLEAU-PONTY

KATHY JUSTICE GENTILE

36 Here we have the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by things whose qualities are "at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses." This principle is absolutely fulfilled in the spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as *eminently* perceptible. (Debord 1994, 26)

Sexuality is neither transcended in human life nor shown up at its centre by unconscious representations. It is at all times present there like an atmosphere. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 168)

The look, we said, envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things . . . he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 133-34)

Throughout the developed and developing world, visual media fields have become saturated with images, most of which function, directly or indirectly, as representations of products or lifestyles. Images do not appear on their own; they are inserted into visual space by individuals or groups for specific purposes. Viewers who are drawn to an image because of its surface appeal often do not see or interrogate the intent behind the image. More and more images available to the general public represent sex or sexuality, although in mainstream media, sexuality is usually not promoted directly but as an inevitable byproduct for viewers who embrace the promise that the image seems to offer.

How does a viewer encounter sexualized images and how do images communicate sexuality to a viewer? Influential media and feminist critics who analyze the power differential between viewers and advertising images, mainstream film, and pornographic images suggest that these

images appeal to conscious and unconscious desires and fears as image makers manipulate these affects so that they find "embodiment" in popular visual representations. Advertisers, filmmakers, and pornographers "frame" their images so that the naïve, passive spectator will respond appropriately to the vision that he encounters and will be inclined to buy a product, vicariously give himself over to the narrative, and/or become physically aroused. The assumption behind these critiques is that the spectator is at the mercy of his visual perceptions. The pressure of the unreality of representations impinges upon and alters the reality of the spectator's everyday living. The mere individual has few resources or defenses against an onslaught of corporate-generated, alluring life-scenes that seem to offer him a chance to partake in a life so visibly superior to his own.

According to the French political philosopher Guy Debord, our "faculty of encounter," our ability to engage reality and unreality and to distinguish between the real and the artificial, has deteriorated because our encounters with both representations and reality are contained within a totalitarian regime of global capitalism. Society has become transformed into spectacle by corporate culture's alienation of individuals from the products of their labor, communal life, and meaningful relationships. "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles.* All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (1994, 12). Thus "commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity" (29). In Debord's epigraph above, he lifts a phrase from Karl Marx's *Capital* in declaring that commodities are "at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses."[1] As Marx explains in the passage from which the phrase was taken, the value-relation of commodities has everything to do with the social relations of exchange and nothing to do with the value of labor or the utility of the object. The value society projects onto a commodity has no essential connection to the object itself. In other words, we project value based on standards arbitrarily constructed by a social system of exchange, analogous to the insubstantial projections of religious belief (Marx 1967a, 72). In the encompassing spectacle driven by commodity fetishism, objects of labor have been replaced by a system of images that are divorced from actual material conditions of the product and its production.

Debord's move to globalize capitalist modernity is mitigated in part by Susan Sontag's critique of spectacle theory as "a breathtaking provincialism" in that it assumes an elite, Westernized model for the viewing practices of the rest of the world. She further takes Debord and Jean Baudrillard to task