The Graphic Connection between Women and the Non-human

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The Presence of Imagery

Almost every morning I walk down to the subway station and see rows of advertisements featuring women. I get on the train and face an advertisement for vitamins featuring a woman's torso. I board again later on in the day and am greeted by an ad for cinnamon roles featuring a woman's legs. On my walk to the grocery store I pass a truck decorated with a painting of an alluring German woman marketing beer.

I used to live in Florida. There, it seemed that every billboard on the state's long stretches of highway featured either a) wild animals or b) exotic women. Or both, as in the case of the many mermaids that invited tourists to water parks and glass-bottom boat excursions.

Before that, I lived in Atlanta, where I grew up, and where I encountered enough of similar types of imagery for a lifetime. Women in bikinis advertised a local restaurant. A cell phone was strategically slipped into the back pocket of a woman's jeans for a billboard advertisement. And I watched a good five hours of TV a day, subscribed to *Seventeen*, and sat through several screenings of "Pretty Woman".

I think this is a normal background, because these are the pictures that make up the dominant cultural imagery that we are all forced to take in. This essay will be a critical examination of some important aspects of patriarchal cultural imagery. The topic interests me because images seem to hold so much force. To what extent do images indelibly structure our consciousness? I can't respond with scientific specificity, but I do know that they have infiltrated the roots of my self-perception and my vision of the world.

The Structures of Representation

Susanne Kappeler, in her book *The Pornography of Representation*, makes it clear that representation -- imagery that re-presents, through the lens of looking, something that's already familiar – starts with structures. That's where I'll begin with this analysis. Structures of representation are common graphical elements that guide or govern the relationship between the viewer and the image. What are the broad frameworks that configure an image?

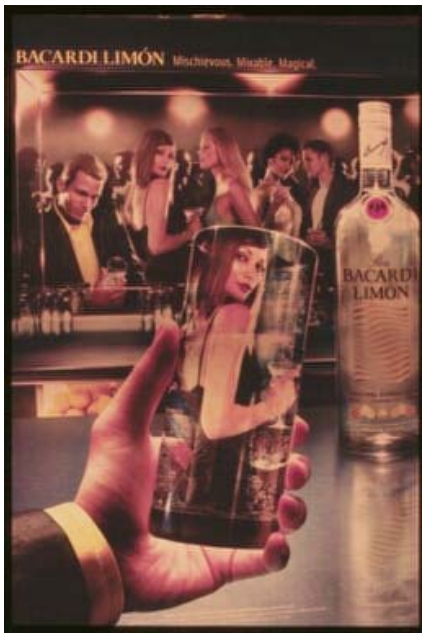
"Representations are not just a matter of mirrors, reflections, key-holes. Somebody is making them, and somebody is looking at them, through a complex array of means and conventions," writes Susanne Kappeler.[1] In this quotation, Kappeler points to two elements of images: the maker and the looker, the author and the audience. "Crucial factors of representation," she writes, "are the author and the perceiver: agents who are not like characters firmly placed within the representation as content."[2] The author of the image designs the encounter between the image and its viewer.

Under a capitalist patriarchy, most images are designed with a male viewer in mind, despite the fact that far more women may be exposed to the image than men. This is true of *capitalist* patriarchal culture because these images seem to occur primarily within the context of advertising, marketing products. In a free-market economy, businesses must continually devise effective advertising schemes

[1] Kappeler, Susanne *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 3.
[2] Ibid.

in order to stay afloat, and so they employ imagery that draws upon and reiterates existing power structures as a way of stimulating sales. This imagery often appeals to Caucasian males by reaffirming their power -- after all, isn't it the powerful who have the economic resources to purchase their products? Moreover, doesn't capitalism thrive on social stratification?: stratification drives the consumption of many products from brand-name clothes to makeup, and ensures that there will be an available pool of affordable labor. It seems to me that there's a certain market logic to exploitative imagery.

If these images are created for males, they imply that males are looking at them. This implication is what is meant by the "male gaze". It constructs the male viewer. The ad for Bacardi Limón is an example:

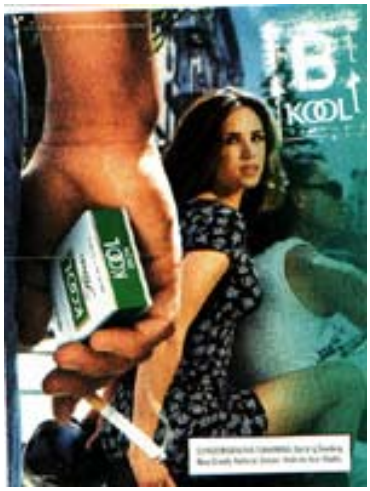


Notice that the hand that's holding the glass in the center of the picture is a man's hand. It's life size, as if it belongs to us, the viewers. The author of this image designates us as male viewers, even if we are not.

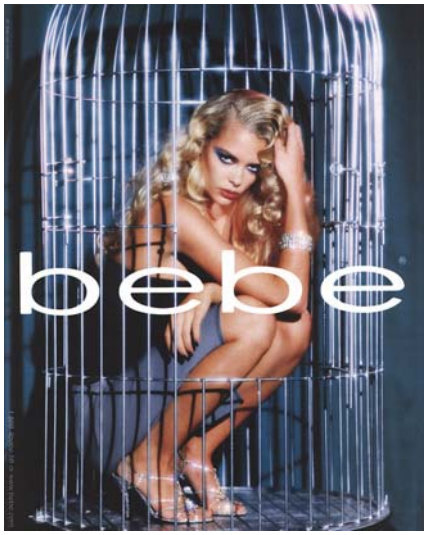
What does this image accomplish? What is its social function? It "subjectifies" men, who can "live from within outward"[3], standing within themselves and looking out. Clearly, the image creates a male subject looking at a female object. So, to paraphrase a statement made by Kappeler, the subjectification of men is accompanied by the simultaneous objectification of women. The woman in the advertisement is obviously the object of the male gaze, she is rendered nothing but an image. The only things that are depicted as real in this advertisment – that are not just reflections – are the man and the bottle of Bacardi. This is the male gaze in capitalist advertising.

The male gaze of the Kool cigarette ads is familiar – they've created a complete ad campaign based on the principle of the male viewer and the female spectacle. Consider this advertisement as well:

[3] This is a phrase Audre Lorde used to describe a state of being that she recommended for women.



A concurrent structure of representation is the "human gaze". Like the male gaze, the human gaze constructs the viewer as human, "subjectifying" the onlooker while simultaneously objectifying the animal or natural world. Zoos, argues John Berger, create an institutional space in which the human gaze can be exercised. He points out that, "A zoo is a place where as many species and varieties of animal as possible are collected in order that they can be seen, observed, studied. In principle, each cage is a frame round the animal inside it."[4] This "frame" is a structure of representation, polarizing the viewer and the viewed. And beyond polarizing, it objectifies the animal, transforming her into an image in the eye of the human, marginalizing and relegating to a lower social status. Consider this image of a woman:



I would argue that the cage frames the woman like zoo cages frame animals and makes it difficult or impossible to avoid polarizing, marginalizing, or objectifying her. I imagine her without the cage, and a significant change in perception occurs. Remarkably, though, she is not entirely caged – we can see her face and eyes through the open door of the cage, unlike zoo animals. She's partially, but not fully, caged. This suggests that women are represented in a way that is similar to, but not the same as, the representation of animals.

Another context of the human gaze is nature photography, as Berger points out. When not in zoos, wild animals can still be captured and framed through the use of the camera, so that "all animals

[4] Berger, John *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. 23.

appear like fish seen through the plate glass of an aquarium,"[5] so that all are framed by the human gaze.

The third structure of representation is the "consumer gaze". As noted above, many authors of images will presume and imply that the viewer is male. Similarly, there is the implication that the viewer has the economic power to buy the product in the advertisement. The advertisement might construct a consumer viewer that is not gendered, but it seems to me that the presumed viewer is generally a male consumer. As a male and a consumer, he has both cultural and economic power: power to gaze at women and power to consume a variety of commodities. This surfaces in advertising especially when women become not only objects but also objects of consumption, commodities. Women are commodified when their imagery is used superfluously in advertising, or when women's imagery fuses with a product's image. Advertiser's appropriation of women's imagery seems to accomplish at least two things. First, it attracts attention to an advertisement. Second, it calls forth extant sexual desires, fuses the object of those desires with a product, and thereby constructs a forceful desire for the product.

Commodification is far from a racially-neutral activity. Rebecca Johnson elucidates the issue: "One of the legacies of late twentieth century capitalism is the commodification of every aspect of our [i.e. African Americans'] lives…The first experience of people of color with European imperialism was this nascent commodifying instinct. Black people of African descent and some Native American tribe members were early tools of one of the most effective attempts to commodify human beings."[6] Commodities are objects that contain exchange (market) value. Images translate into market value when they inspire the consumption of products. So, images of women, and perhaps particularly women of color (and non-white, vaguely "exotic" women) are bought and sold because, when slapped on an advertisement, they encourage sales.

The final structure of representation is the male dialogue. Commercial imagery is sometimes accompanied by dialogue contained in text, usually involving disembodied speakers (Please see Slide 7 of the slide show). "Hey, there's a silver one," reads the appended Volkswagen advertisement, a joke spoken by the male author of the ad directed at the male viewer. How unlikely that the male viewer would notice the blurry silver Volkswagen behind this shiny nude woman, or so the author jibes. I notice that this dialogue is taking place between two disembodied men – they are not represented in the picture's content. The viewer is led to identify with the invisible narrators.

These structures of representation trap women and the non-human in the eyes of men, surrounded by male dialogue, available for consumption. Through imagery, women and the non-human are denied the sense of sight and the activity of speech. Sight and speech are "subject functions", meaning that through these functions we come to "know" and then articulate the world. Vision is considered the primary epistemological faculty: to see something is to establish knowledge of it, observation is considered the primary mode of gathering knowledge. Vision is also the sense over which we can exercise the most control – we can shut our eyes, shift our glance, or focus in on things. And it does not necessitate interaction: "It is a sense that operates without necessitating our engagement: We can see without being seen but not touch without at the same time being touched by the object of our perception," notes environmental theorist Yaakov Garb.[7] Speech, too, does not necessitate dialogue: we can speak about, name, designate, and never listen. Sight and speech, in this way, establish the viewer and speaker as a subject. The objects of men's sight and speech in white capitalist patriarchal imagery are unable to look back or talk back.

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[5] Ibid., p. 16.

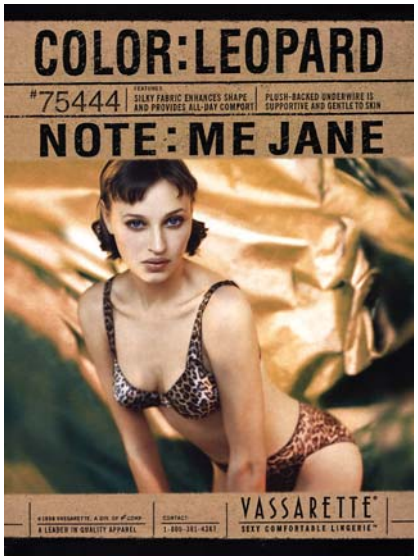
[6] Johnson, Rebecca "New Moon over Roxbury" in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993), pp. 258-259. See also bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

[7] Garb, Yaakov "Musings on Contemporary Earth Imagery" in Orenstein, Gloria and Diamond, Irene Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), p. 267.

The Content of Representation

Women, animals, and the natural world are all frequently represented under the framework of the on-looking white human male consumer. What is the content of these representations? Two basic trends are most apparent: the animalization, domestication, and naturalization of women and the feminization of animals and the earth. These stereotypes make up the content under analysis.

Repeated over and again throughout popular imagery is the animalized woman. Women in animal print lingerie, women prowling on all fours, women hiding in the shadows set to pounce. Consider this image for Vassarette lingerie:



Why is wild animal print often featured on swimsuits, underwear, and cat-eye sunglasses as opposed to, say, socks, turtlenecks, and sneakers? I think it's because wild animals are associated with sexuality. Therefore, animal print lingerie has an emphasized sexual meaning. The woman in this image is not just modeling underwear, she's soliciting sex. The sex she's soliciting is heterosexual sex with the constructed male viewer: she bends forward, suggesting heterosexual sex in a "rear-entry" position.[8] This image renders her little more than a sexual receptacle. The animalized woman may stalk her prey, calculatively choosing her moment, dangerously unpredictable, but in the final analysis she doesn't amount to much more than a sexual object.

Conversely, there is the image of the domesticated woman. This is a woman who is cast as a domesticated animal rather than a wild animal. These are typically images of women as farmed animals. The treatment of women as farmed animals has deep historical roots, particularly for African American women who were treated like reproductive resources under slavery. Delores Williams writes, "Just as strip-mining exhausts the earth's body, so did the practice of breeding female slaves exhaust black women's bodies. One slave woman tells of her aunt, who was a breeder woman during slavery and 'brought in chillum ev'y twelve mont's jes lak a cow bringing in a calf.'"[9] Cows' reproductivity is also "exhausted" -- instrumentalized, commodified and abused – as they are forced to

[8] The connection between heterosexism and the subjugation of women, animals, and the earth has been examined in the past few years by a few groundbreaking theorists such as Greta Gaard and Catriona Sandilands. For information on queer ecofeminism, see Gaard, Greta "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" in Hypatia, Volume 12, Number 1 (Winter, 1997), Sandilands, Catriona "Mother Earth, the Cyborg, and the Queer: Ecofeminism and (More) Questions of Identity" in National Women's Studies Association Journal, Volume 9, Number 3, 1997, or Lee, Wendy and Dow, Laura "Queering Ecological Feminism: Toward a Lesbian Philosophy of Ecology" in Ethics and Environment, Volume 6, Number 2 (Fall, 2001).

[9] Williams, Delores S. "Sin, Nature, and Black Women's Bodies" in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993), p. 25.

constantly carry pregnancies in order to achieve a state of continual lactation for the milk industry while producing more bodies for meat consumption. How does the image of the "mammy" resemble the breeding cow? The cow, like the mammy, is assigned a singularly nurturing, care-taking role, and it is with this stereotype in mind that they are treated and represented.

The analogous graphic association of women with the earth is similarly dichotomous: women-as-threatening-wild-nature in contradistinction to women-as-passive-submissive-nature. "Mother Earth" may be either hostile or subdued. The shift in imagery from wild Mother Earth to passive Mother Earth seems to follow shifting awareness of the degradation of the planet: the Mother Earth image transforms from an overwhelming power to an innocent and wholesome pacifist. Consider this image from an Earth Day 2000 poster as an example of the latter:

The feminized animal and natural world is another common theme of patriarchal cultural imagery. An interesting example of this is Borden Diary's icon, Elsie the Cow. There is no doubt that

this animal is female: her necklace, dark and long eyelashes, and accommodating smile declare her gender.

What is the function of the association of women with the non-human? The association accomplishes a few things. First, it stereotypes both women and the non-human. For women, stereotypes constrain from seeing the huge variety of possibilities of who we might become. How many women confronted by this type of imagery every day will be inspired to become a community organizer, a sidewalk muralist, an anarchist mathematician, or a lesbian feminist street corner

breakdancer? Animals and the natural world may not directly witness or directly experience these images, but stereotyping imagery delimits who humans will allow them to become. Second, it legitimizes the instrumentalization of women, the earth, and animals in the minds of their oppressors by comparing each with a marginalized group of low social status: If women are "just animals", why not command, abuse, or dismiss them? If the earth is feminine, why pay attention to its needs?

Degradation by association is dependent upon the preexisting devaluation of the group that is the point of reference for the association. So, the extremely low status of animals and the earth in patriarchal culture means that comparisons to animals and nature in popular culture are intended to be derogatory. Likewise, the degraded status of women means that likening to women – "feminization" – is intended to be derogatory when it occurs in the context of popular culture. The low status of each becomes a foundation for the metaphorical degradation of the other.

Afterthoughts

A perspicacious analysis is the groundwork for action. I hope that these images don't remain unconfronted: can I rise against these objectifying and stereotyping pictures while articulating a new vision for women's, animals', and earth's liberation? Instead of passively bearing their weight, could I engage with these images upon each encounter, exposing the power structures that motivate them? In my mind, resisting the graphic connection between women and the non-human is a vital part of confronting patriarchy. How should I resist? I imagine a number of possibilities, from artful, collaborative guerrilla image reclamation to "culture jamming" interference, but for now I'm just an ecofeminist who will never again walk down to the subway without a marker.