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The Paradox of Commercial Photography: Power and Sexuality in Models**Christina Bell**

Abstract: Commercial photography has a tendency to force upon us a standard template of what the ideal person is or looks like. Unfortunately, the artificial standard is horribly unachievable and detrimental to physical and mental health, which produces sentiments of insufficiency and abjection with the self, especially among young impressionable girls. In a sick - and very modern - twist of evolutionary progress we find ourselves idealizing the depictions of models appearing to be on the verge of starvation. This article examines the power and sexuality in models produced through commercial photography and its effects on society at-large.

Key words, terms, concepts, names: commercial photography, desire, sexuality, power, abject, abjection, Kristeva, Foucault, Mulvey, corps propre

Introduction

For the impressionable viewer, commercial photography has the potential to alter how we view our bodies, influence us to want to change our subjectivities, and lead us into transforming the flesh. Commercial photography constructs society's cannon of what is beautiful or proper. However, if the viewer's body differs from the standardized ideal of beauty--more specifically, what should be desired--the spectator may interpret the subject in a way that generates insufficiency and abjection with the self. In reverse, as models become more and more emaciated, what was abject in the past is now considered commonplace today. Instead of being repulsed by a model on the verge of death, we can be caught up with trying to imitate what seems ideal. Julia Kristeva's concepts of abjection and the deject are present in several commercial images and communicate the paradox between the desired figure and her awful appearance. Shifting from consumer to viewer means that instead of looking at the actual product, we are drawn to the person selling the product or the image as a whole. However, the subject of our wanting can often be portrayed as the culturally abject, the grotesquely thin, the suspiciously airbrushed. Thus a tension exists between our discourse of desire and our disgust, that which breaches homogenized practices.

Discourses of the Commercial Image: Desire

Relying on Michel Foucault's work, several discourses can categorize the characteristics of photography. These discourses can further represent various interpretations of an image, such as viewing through a feminist lens or through a mythological viewpoint. The main discourses within commercial photography are heterosexual desire and power.

Take, for example, a typical lingerie picture from a *Victoria's Secret* catalogue. Typically, we can see a young woman bearing her body to the camera, eyes daringly facing the lens in preparation for whoever stands behind it. The woman's rounded breasts are shaded in to highlight the size, and the room behind her is nearly pitch-black. In these typical images, women can be viewed as charged with sexual energy and seductive in the quest for a mate.

Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze further establishes the omnipresence of female sexuality in modeling. Applying the ideas of Mulvey, the sexualized model has set up "man as bearer of the look" in that the woman is

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the object of man's scopophilic desire; in her words, "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 4-5). The woman has become less of a body and more of a subject to be critiqued by the male gaze; she "has not the slightest importance" on her own; only by aiding the male does she earn any sort of esteem (Boetticher in Mulvey, 5). Therefore, adopting the male gaze is the sole way to derive pleasure from an image[1]. With this impression of pleasure in mind, one can see the discourse of heterosexual desire. The term "heterosexual" is important as a label in relation to the male gaze upon a traditionally female figure, which further lends the frequent generalization of our desires as represented through the media. In clarification, industries have, rather conservatively, denoted attraction as a heterosexual force--even though the image is of sexual promiscuity, a more liberal concept.

Several movements have combated this conservative basis, as seen through *Gurlesque*. Originating in Australia, *Gurlesque* comments on female sexuality in the form of a lesbian strip show. The company's premise is for women to "confront fears and insecurities...challenge taboos, both sexual, social and those to do with the physical body, to explode myths about body structures and what a patriarchal society dictates is sexy or attractive" (www.gurlesque.com/about/about.html in Crowley, 30). In the shows, women of all body types--"be they athletic, balletic, with or without rhythm..."--honor who they are through comedy or other performance. Granted the show is not in direct opposition to commercial photography as an arbiter of conventional desire, *Gurlesque* comments on homogenized practices in two ways: the program advocates a celebration of lesbianism and a realization of the female body as something not just for sexual titillation, but more so for the acceptance of differences in personality and appearance.

Discourses of the Commercial Image: Power

In addition to the discourse of desire, power transcends the physical bounds of the image and has the potential to inculcate a sense of control or more rarely, inferiority. According to Foucault, power "is carried out on individuals by themselves" through "self-surveillance" or "self-government", both of which "operat[e] to extract time and labor from bodies and to produce and constitute social norms" (Foucault in Anderson, Schlunke, 53). Here, Foucault argues that power, although incorporated into the individual's behavior, is a result of an institution impressing expectations for behavior. With a standard commercial photograph, the model may appear upright and looming, as in a recent image of supermodel Tyra Banks, but only lets the viewer bear half of her body in the light. Controlled, the model places one hand on her hip, almost impatient with the lack of action. With the other hand, she clutches her lavender garb, letting some cleavage slip, though not enough to detract from her fiery red hair exploding about the scene. The viewer questions if we are to serve her, or are we to acknowledge her forceful presence. As with the image, several commercial models, like Janice Dickinson, pride themselves on dominating the camera, not with sheer appearance, but with force only the camera can illuminate. We are drawn to the woman of power for her confidence and bravery; however, going back to Foucault, the power can encourage viewers to react to an image as one of inspiration to be as powerful or as a commanding constraint on how we should act[2].

Power may not be as obvious in other images. Referring back to the *Victoria's Secret* piece--initially analyzed for desire--the woman cocks an eyebrow at the viewer with a mischievous half smile, as if she were a queen setting her subject in place. Some viewers may say that it's simply a look of seduction. This is true, to an extent, but it is far from simple. While seduction and desire are in play, power is enmeshed in her stare, which results in the persona of a siren or a dominatrix. Since *The Bible*, women have been seen as the seductress; Eve luring Adam to the forbidden fruit demonstrates, from a misogynistic perspective, that women use their charm to secure control over men, which violates the authority women should have. Connecting to Mulvey, the woman who should be simply an exhibitionist has escaped her bounds, engaging and captivating her audience in posture and in expression. At first glance, this conflicts with the idea of a woman passively accepting the male gaze. However, the paradox exemplifies the power of the model: she seems innocent or naive, but in actuality she is a tempting seductress who invites the audience into the image, then entraps viewers to fall under her power. In the commercial image, we can therefore interpret a discourse of desire and of power, and often combine the two instinctively to form the concept of a seductive overlord.

Abjection: Additional Tension of the Siren

Exploring disgust in the context of semiotics, Julia Kristeva discusses the abject in her essay, "Powers of Horror". According to Kristeva, what the individual cannot name or categorize is abject. What is abject lacks identity or association with what the individual knows or what breaches the Semiotic Order. Abjection "turns [laws] aside, misleads, corrupts...takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (Kristeva, 15). Perverting the rules or laws of established cultural expectations, abjection transcends what one is comfortable with and evokes a reaction of disconcertion, unsettlement with a misplaced identification. If we compare blood donated versus blood in a sink, the blood donated is associated with a benevolent act and accords with charity; on the other hand, blood in the sink is disconnected from any kind of self, lacking in identity and disturbing in its isolation. The blood donated clearly establishes a relationship between an altruistic subjectivity and his flesh. The act is within a system of behavior and cultural practice, and the audience knows what to expect. Regarding the blood in the sink, there is nothing to frame or categorize the blood. We have no way of ordering the loose and free-floating mass. Abjection consequently disrupts system, order, and identity.

Abjection is located in connection with the body. Differing between cultures, what is abject to one group (or culture) can be different to another group. The way we conceive ourselves can also be threatened, and it is through this risk of losing our sense of self that we worry about not being recognized as our subjectivity.

As a link to commercial photography, abjection comes in as a friction to what is desired, what is beautiful. A recent Ralph Lauren advertisement shows a disproportionate woman, her head dominating narrow shoulders and towering over an overly pinched waistline. The Ralph Lauren ad is one of many that employ the use of a dreadfully skinny model. For the sake of classification, or to normalize [\[3\]](#) what is in view, one might say how the body of a model is abject, thereby labeling the unnamed. By linking abjection to models, it is possible to overcome the discomfort in having no classification or designated order.

In a different circumstance, after repeated exposure to images of this sort, each sight grasping more grotesque bodies in control over their surroundings, one may set the initial disgust in a hidden corridor of the mind and consider the images as common, even typical. As the individual continues to suppress abjection, each new image has the possible consequence of causing distaste with the self for not looking a certain way. To look at a mainstream photograph--airbrushed or not--with a suppressed sense of disgust and not have one's own subjectivity recognized may lead to destruction of the flesh. In not being represented, the distorted psyche [\[4\]](#) thinks that the occupied body is inadequate and thus not worthy of representation by commercial media.

Asymptotic Ideals and the Corps Propre

From the aforementioned circumstance, the distorted psyche can either choose to "endure" the shame of not fulfilling a proper representation of the body, or the body may turn to altering the flesh. Kristeva's "Powers of Horror" also introduced the concept of the *corps propre*, one's "own clean and proper body". The idea centered on a pure, clean figure, bordering perfection. Referring to Proust's writing, Kristeva states, "if the object of desire is real it can only rest upon the abject, which is impossible to fulfill. The object of love then becomes unmentionable, a double of the subject, similar to it, but improper, because inseparable from an impossible identity" (Kristeva, 21). Because that which is abject cannot be classified, and desire relies upon the abject, desire cannot be classified and consequently neither can love.

Going back to the discourse of desire, if the object of desire cannot live independently from the abject, it is unable to exist, for the sacred feeling can no longer be recognized as a separate entity from that which lacks an identity in the cultural order. So, not only can we not *feel* desire, we cannot attain what we once believed was the *object* of our desire. The models in the images, riddled with the paradox of what is longing and what is revulsion, are impossible to acquire for the male.

Now, for the female who once believed that to be desired was to embody the discourses in commercial photography, the *corps propre* has devastating implications. To begin with, the female must come to terms with

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knowing that she can never attain the unattainable. If she does not, and continues to try to alter her flesh, hoping to change her subjectivity to a beautiful object of longing, she will fail. Worse than sheer failure, she has the potential to develop body dysmorphic disorder^[5]--an obsession with trying to fix perceived flaws--or an eating disorder (Mayo Clinic, 2010). The body, furthermore, can come to represent Foucault's utopian body. Facing the reality of one's appearance, even in circumstances of good health, the body may be seen as an "ugly shell of [a] head", possessed within a "cage", forced to "reveal" oneself and "walk around" (Foucault, 1966).

Even without abjection, I'd like to emphasize that the *corps propre* implies that one cannot attain the perfectly pure, clean body, for if we idolize an airbrushed, technologically enhanced form as ideal, our expectations are not only too high but also grossly miscalculated. Sadly, however, this has become truth. According to recent results posted from ABC News, "nearly half of all three- to six-year-old girls worry about being fat" (Bloom, 2011). Though there may not be a direct cause-effect relationship between the standards of commercial modeling and self esteem in women, there may be some correlation between how we socialize young girls and how they interpret their bodies. From a personal approach, children may hear their mothers discuss diet fads, while their older sisters could be posting up cutouts from magazines for motivation for their exercise regimen. The consequence of the repeated desire to change the flesh could be internalized by the child as something to strive for, to always strive for perfection. In the same article, Lisa Bloom warns that "teaching girls that their appearance is the first thing you notice tells them that looks are more important than anything."

On the other hand, the "deject" may come about instead--one that "strays instead of getting his bearings" in a situation of abjection. The deject "includes himself among [abjections], thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separation" (Kristeva, 8). For Kristeva, the deject refuses, in a sense, to be a victim of abjection. As an alternative, the deject is a "deviser of territories" that "never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines...constantly question his solidity..." (Kristeva, 8) The deject, therefore, exists in tension to his surroundings and seeks to separate himself from the cultural order. By pulling himself out rather than getting situated, the deject displaces the discomfort that comes with abjection, for "the more he strays, the more he is saved."

Closing Remarks

Connecting to the deject, the critics of photographer Diane Arbus argued that she took pictures of freaks, when they were really just ordinary people. Arbus' images prove that we have been using a canon that is unrealistic and confront the viewer of their socialized preferences for beauty. In many ways, the people in her photographs are more normal than advertisements, but viewers have unfortunately applied the frame of the freak. Taking pictures of those never represented or photographed, Arbus--inadvertently or intentionally--gave representation to the subjectivity of the many, thereby combating commercial photography's use of few body types.

Dove's True Beauty Campaign additionally contests the idea of beauty or desire. The premise of the campaign is both a celebration of the unenhanced body and a realization of the ideals imposed on viewers through airbrushing and other photographic technologies using in the modeling industry. When we see a picture in a magazine, we tend to adopt this image as part of our canon because we are confronted with it so often, but if we just think about what it is to be desirable, we can avoid this. Since there is nothing in and of the image that can control us, we have the ability to change how we see what is attractive, what should be desired, what is perfect. Similar Diane Arbus, the campaign thus introduces viewers to the truth of our irrational view of beauty, and rightfully addresses the individual's need for self-acceptance.

^[1] Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze was intended for cinema only; in this paper I will apply her ideas to commercial photography because the idea of the female image as the exhibitionist connects to the concept of female sexuality.

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[2] Regarding "how we should act", I don't mean how we are to treat the image or if we are enslaved to it. I believe that images, when analyzed for power, can cause us to question how we behave. Should we be shy, while the true power is reserved for women given control by the media? Should we try to embody this power? Should we try to escape the model's blazing look for overthrowing our sense of control?

[3] In this context, I use the term "normalize" as to familiarize oneself with something. The viewer doesn't necessarily try to make sense of the photograph as normal, but tries, in a sense, to make the image less abstract so that he or she won't feel abject towards what cannot be classified or rationalized.

[4] Here, I'd like to point out that this situation is far from universal; nonetheless, I believe (from personal experience) that in repressing the effect of abject images, one might replace the feeling with inadequacy or resentment with one's own body.

[5] Interestingly enough, Mayo Clinic listed risk factors for body dysmorphic disorder, one of which being "Societal pressure or expectations of beauty."