ABSTRACT

WOMEN AND ADVERTISING REVISITED: OBJECTIFICATION, ANIMATION, AND THE TAXONOMIES OF CAPITALISM

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This paper revisits Marx's understanding of the dynamic tensions between the objectification of persons and the animation of commodities in capitalism and offers an alternative to standard understandings of advertising's objectification of women.

Foucault has argued that power is not a property of individuals and groups, nor are those groups static units; rather, the coalescence of power-knowledge forms groupings that are 'matrices of transformation'. I argue that classifications such as gender and race can be usefully seen as such matrices or taxonomic ordering devices. They are formed by power-knowledge but are also active in reconfiguring modes of classification. Drawing on an analysis of specific advertisements, I argue that images of women in advertising operate, amongst other things, as transformative matrices through which social relations are made and remade, hierarchies constituted and reconstituted.

Developing this analysis, I argue that in the era of consumer capitalism, advertising itself is primarily taxonomic in function, ordering not only brands and product types, but also the politically-charged conceptual distinctions between persons and things, consumers and commodities: advertising itself functions as a transformative matrix which orders our understandings of the vexed relations between people and the material world and conditions the ways in which these interconnections constitute social relations. I argue that an analysis of women in advertisements requires an approach which addresses issues of objectification and commodity fetishism, and the complex dynamics of animation and objectification, in nuanced ways.