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The eroticized male body in current advertising, far from radicalizing or inverting the equation of power in the dominant discourse, in fact exploits the figure of the feminine body as an object to be possessed and exchanged. Several ads by Bruce Weber for Calvin Klein are analyzed in terms of semiotic codes structuring the inscription of masculinity and femininity in cultural representations. After locating these codes in historical perspective, the author probes deeply into the psycho-semiotic dimensions of spectating and the technico-ideological apparatus of advertising, which engages the consumer in a circuit of desire linking code, capital and culture.

LONG ABSTRACT

In *Structural Anthropology*, Levi-Strauss (1963) examines the structural importance of the incest taboo for organizing male-dominated society. In this primitive law of social organization, the incest taboo defines Woman as a symbol of exchange between men, both sealing the relationship between the men and their groups, and perpetuating the masculine order of kinship. In this interpretation of kinship, men play an active role in the construction and perpetuation of the social order, women play a passive role. “The woman is always that which is given in relations of exchange between men and she is thus the symbol of exchange for a system that functions only to perpetuate itself.” (Phillips, 2004). By extension, representations of women in painting and later photography and cinema both reflect and sanction the reification and commodification of female sexuality – in the imaginary-symbolic realm - as a value to be bought, sold, and exchanged in the realm of reality or economics.

In this paper the author argues that the eroticized male body in current advertising, far from radicalizing or inverting the equation of power in the dominant discourse, in fact exploits the figure of the feminine body as an object to be possessed and exchanged. In the first section, *The Rise of Capitalism and the Commodification of the Feminine*, the author examines the representation of sexual difference as a dialectic of power positing the masculine subject over and against the feminine object of discourse. In the second section, *The Cinematic Apparatus and the Staging of [Sexual] Difference*, the author locates the representation of gender within Christian Metz’s psycho-semiotic theory of spectating. In the third section, *The Eroticized Male Body*, the author compares and contrasts traditional representations of gender in classical painting with representations of masculinity in ads for Calvin Klein, and in the fourth section, *What’s the difference anyway?* the author interprets representations of the “new” masculinities in advertising in terms of the appropriation of the feminine in and by advanced consumer culture.

Since the emergence of bourgeois capitalism in the 17th century, the history of gender representations is a history of men looking at women. Already by the Age of
Reason mid-seventeenth century, classical representations of the feminine muse inspired by Greek mythology - nudes symbolizing beauty, liberty, and love - compete with the eroticized female body being objectified by the voyeuristic gaze of men located either within the tableau or implicated in the point of view of the spectating subject of the painting. Notably, the men referenced in this new tradition are not aristocrats or kings, members of a feudal economy based on inheritance and favor, but a “new man,” the business owner or professional man, whose claims of position and status are tied immediately and urgently to the quality and quantity of his possessions. Thus as early as the seventeenth century, erotic paintings inscribe women in a dialectic of dominance and subjection which can only be described as a relation between a consuming (male) subject and his property. Woman’s body is thus inserted into the circulation of possessions in an emerging culture of consumption based on private property, individual wealth, and masculine authority which continues today.

In advanced consumer culture, advertising contributes to the ‘capitalist apparatus’ of photography and cinema, driving the circulation of desire between consumer/spectators, money, and representation. In advertising, the body is not in and of itself the commodity, but a symbolic currency adding brand value to goods ranging from cars and beer to refrigerators.

For instance, the Calvin Klein brand has leveraged associations with shocking sexual representations since the 1970’s. The television spot where Brooke Shield says “Nothing stands between me and my Calvins” had immediate impact on sales. The introduction of even more scandalous imagery in the 1990s, including nude shots of Kate Moss with and without male partners, and homoerotic imagery, was both a response to current activism among women and gays in the social realm, and marketing a strategy based on exploiting a profitable succès de scandale. In images such as the Calvin Klein jeans advertisements shot by Bruce Weber, the positions of male subject and female object of the gaze are complicated by means of the ambivalent figures of the male/female consumer/spectator and the female/male consumed/spectated of photography. In the Calvin Klein advertising presents the photographer deconstructs the binary opposition between male and female, for example by pairing the feminine with the subjectivity of the voyeur, or representing the male body as a curvy, seductive form reminiscent of a woman.

In these kinds of images, the eroticized male body replaces the female body as the object of the voyeuristic gaze of I/eye of the camera/spectator. This perversion of the traditional dialectic of male/female, subject/object of the gaze raises important questions about the gender identity of the spectating subject addressed by the ads and the appropriation of feminine desire by the dominant male discourse, but they do not radically alter the techno-ideological apparatus of photography and cinema which stages gender identities in a dialectic of male spectator/female object of the gaze.