

From sexual objectification to sexual subjectification: The resexualisation of women's bodies in the media

To appear in **Feminist Media Studies, Spring 2003**

Fit Chick Unbelievable Knockers

Earlier this year this T-shirt (Fit Chick Unbelievable Knockers) became one of the best-selling items ever for the British high street fashion store French Connection. It beat sales of French Connection's generic T-shirt '**fcuk me**' and even topped the World Cup inspired bestseller, '**fcuk football**'. It could be seen everywhere, emblazoned across the chests of girls and young women, and competing on the street, in the club and on the tube with other similar T-shirts declaring their wearer a 'babe' or 'porn star' or 'up for it', or giving instructions to 'touch me' or 'squeeze here'. Even my own university, the London School of Economics, got in on the act, producing a T-shirt designed -- I guess - to connote a combination of beauty and brains, sexiness and sophistication: 'LSE BABE'.

What struck me forcibly about the 'fit chick unbelievable knockers' T-shirt was not just what a sexualised self-presentation it offers, but also how alienated and objectified its terms are. A generation ago many women were struggling and fighting not to be portrayed in this objectified manner, not to be reduced to the size of their breasts, or to be consumed only as sexual objects, and yet today young women are actually paying good money (and these T-shirts are not cheap, they cost £20/\$30 a time) to present themselves in this way.

What is going on here? I want to argue that these T-shirts represent just one highly visible example of a shift that has been going on across popular culture for several years – the knowing and deliberate re-sexualisation and re-commodification of women's bodies, and men's too¹ - in the wake of feminist critiques that neutralized at least the most overt examples of objectification of women's bodies. As I travel to work in London by bus and tube every day I am greeted by a 'breast count' that far exceeds that which exercised feminists in the 1970s, and, while they daubed angry graffiti or protest stickers on the offending adverts, today such representations are almost entirely normalized (or, indeed, as I have discussed elsewhere,

¹ One of the biggest shifts in the visual landscape in recent years has been the growing number of idealised and eroticised images of the male body (see Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2000)

potential critiques are 'ironically incorporated' into the advertisements themselves -- Gill, forthcoming).

From sex object to sexual subject

What makes these hyper-sexualised representations of women's bodies different from earlier representations in the 1960s and 1970s is that they are clearly responses to feminism, and, in that sense, I would suggest, are far less 'innocent' than earlier sexualised depictions. Furthermore, this pervasive re-inscription of women as sexual objects is happening at a moment when we are being told that women can 'have it all' and are doing better than ever before -- in school, University and the workplace². Publications by think tanks, articles by journalists, and research by marketing agencies cohere around the notion that there has been a 'genderquake' in contemporary society, that tomorrow's values are 'feminine' and that 'women are winning' (e.g. Wilkinson, 1997; Haymarket publications, *Winning Women*). As Angela McRobbie (2001) has argued, young women have become both metaphors and standard bearers for the 'new meritocracy' in Tony Blair's Britain, charged with delivering social change.

On the one hand, then, we are confronted by a popular culture increasingly saturated by representations of women's bodies as objects, and on the other, a mantra-like repetition and celebration of 'women's success' and 'Girl Power'. One way of reading the re-sexualisation of women's bodies in this strange, contradictory context is as part of a backlash against feminism (cf Faludi, 1991). It may serve as both an attack on women -- putting women back in their place -- and, simultaneously as a reassurance for men threatened by girls' increasingly good performance in public examinations and women's success in the workplace. In an excellent, insightful analysis, Imelda Whelehan (2000) suggests that we have entered an era of 'retrosexism', premised on real fears about the collapse of male hegemony. She explores the nostalgic quality of much contemporary television, which harks back to a time and place peopled by real women and humorous 'cheeky chappies' (p.11). She argues that representations of women, 'from the banal to the downright offensive' are being 'defensively reinvented against cultural changes in women's lives' (p.11)

This argument is a compelling one, and has much to recommend it. But it does not, in my opinion, tell the whole story. In particular, the focus on 'harking back' may miss what is new about contemporary sexualised depictions of women. I want to suggest that what we are seeing is not just a harking back to a safe, bygone or mythical age when 'men were men and

women were women', but rather the construction of a new femininity (or, better, new femininities) organised around sexual confidence and autonomy. Indeed, what is novel and striking about contemporary sexualised representations of women in popular culture is that they do not (as in the past) depict women as passive objects but as knowing, active and desiring sexual subjects. We are witnessing, I want to argue, a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification in constructions of femininity in the media and popular culture.

Nowhere is this clearer than in advertising which has responded to feminist critiques by constructing a new figure to sell to young women: the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is for ever 'up for it'. The exhortations to young women to 'be yourself' and 'please yourself' are emblematic of this shift in which women are presented as knowing and active sexual subjects.

A step forward for media representations of women?

How then should we understand this shift? Is it a positive change, a move away from passive objectification, an embrace of the autonomous feminist subject -- the assertive liberated subject of the feminist imaginary? I don't think so. My reading is more pessimistic.

First, there is the problem of the exclusions of this representational practice. It is clear from looking at media representations that only some women are constructed as active desiring sexual subjects. Only women who desire sex with men -- except when lesbian women 'perform' for men - but, equally crucially, only young, slim and beautiful women. As Myra MacDonald (1997) has pointed out, older women, bigger women, women with wrinkles, etc are never accorded sexual subjecthood and are still subject to offensive and sometimes vicious representations. Indeed the figure of the unattractive woman who wants a sexual partner remains one of the most vilified in a range of popular cultural forms.

Secondly, it is interesting for what it renders invisible. The new representational practice conceals what Robert Goldman (1992) calls 'the diverse forms of terror experienced by women who objectify themselves'.

'There is the mundane psychic terror associated with not receiving "looks" of admiration - ie. of not having others validate one's appearance. A similar sense of terror involves the fear of

² As Walkerdine et al (2001) point out, in practice this success is extremely unevenly distributed across class. In fact an alternative way of reading the mix of excitement and alarm that greeted girls'

'losing one's looks' - the quite reasonable fear that ageing will deplete one's value and social power. A related source of anxiety involves fears about "losing control" over body weight and appearance... And there is the very real physical terror which may accompany presentation of self as an object of desire - the fear of rape and violence by misogynous males' (Goldman, 1992 p.123)

This argument fits well with Naomi Wolf's study of the divisiveness of 'beauty oppression' - a secret 'underlife' , a 'vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of ageing, and dread of lost control' which is poisoning and undermining women (1992, p.2). Wolf argues that the beauty myth attacks women physically and psychologically and leads them to willingly submit to regimes akin to torture (eg self-starvation and cosmetic surgery.)

The third key problem with the shift is the notion that women are pleasing themselves and are freely choosing. Women in these adverts are endowed with agency so that they can actively choose to objectify themselves. This notion that it's freely chosen fits very well with broader postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances, who can somehow choose to 'use beauty' to make themselves feel good. Fay Weldon -- the writer -- puts this position succinctly:

'Young girls seem to be getting prettier all the time. There is a return to femininity, but it seems to me that most girls don't give two hoots about men. It is about being fit and healthy for themselves not for men' (quoted in *The Observer*, 25th August 1996 - emphasis in original)

Of course the idea that in the past women dressed in a particular way purely to please men is ridiculous: it suggests a view of power as something both overbearing and obvious which acted upon entirely docile subjects (as well as implying that all women are heterosexual). But this pendulum shift to the notion that women just 'please themselves' will not do as a substitute - it presents women as completely free agents, and cannot account for why, if we are just pleasing ourselves, the resulting valued 'look' is so similar - hairless body, slim waist, firm buttocks, etc. Moreover it simply avoids all the interesting and difficult questions about how socially constructed ideals of beauty are internalised and made our own. There are resonances here with Valerie Walkerdine et al's (2001) analysis of the demands neoliberalism places upon the psychological subject – and in particular the contemporary injunction to render one's life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and radical autonomy- however constrained one might actually be.

outperformance of boys in exams is a shift in the gender composition of (enduring) middle class success.

Finally, I would argue that what this shift entails is a move from an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze. I would argue that it represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification -- one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime (cf Bordo, 1993; Bartky,1990). This representational practice offers women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire. It endows women with the status of active subjecthood so that they can then 'choose' to become sex objects because this suits their 'liberated' interests. In this way, sexual objectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects. One of the most disturbing aspects of this profound shift is that it makes critique much more difficult.

Conclusion

So where does this leave 'fit chick unbelievable knockers'? I haven't directly addressed why so many young women choose to represent themselves in this way. This would require detailed empirical research. But it is clear that there are many ways of reading this which do not stress young women's 'false consciousness' but emphasise instead the T-shirt's playfulness or irony, its assertion of sexual maturity, its 'fingers up' to parents, its libidinous celebration of sex in a post-HIV/AIDS world, and so on. Like other texts these T shirts are polysemic.

What I've tried to argue, however, is that the popularity of such self-presentations should be understood in the context of a broader shift in media and popular cultural representations of young women. The figure of the autonomous, active, desiring subject has become -- I suggest -- the dominant figure for representing young women, part of the construction of the neo-liberal feminine subject. But sexual subjectification, I would argue, has turned out to be objectification in new and even more pernicious guise.

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