

**DISCURSIVE AMBIGUITIES:
FEMINIST RESPONSES TO THE MASS MEDIA**

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DISCURSIVE AMBIGUITIES: FEMINIST RESPONSES TO THE MASS MEDIA

by

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This dissertation explores how representations of women in the media function as heterodesignations in response to the current socio-economic cultural complex of globalization. In its merger with reality, the media has become the dominant discourse and the means through which prevailing modes of self-understanding are made available in postmodern society, of which the simulacrum is a key feature. Representations of women in the media in general, and in television advertisements in particular, are not, in any way, subversive of hegemonic discourse and, despite the prevalent ambiguity of these images, construct women in conformity with traditional gender stereotypes. Through practices of deconstruction, such as feminist counter-cinema, of which the film *Female Perversions* is an example, feminism has an important role to play in liberating women from the oppressive effects of these representations, even if these efforts are not, in themselves, free from ambiguity.

CONTENTS:

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter One: | |
| Heterodesignating Women: Ambiguities in Advertising | 15 |
| Chapter Two: | |
| <i>Female Perversions</i> : Attempts at Subverting Heterodesignation through Film | 41 |
| Conclusion | 72 |

Introduction

The media is an inescapable and engrossing phenomenon in the western world and a sustained analysis of the social and political import of its imagery remains essential for both men and women. This dissertation will, however, be restricted to the discussion of representations of women in the media and to possible feminist responses to the gender ideologies these representations encapsulate and convey. But, while the discussion will pertain specifically to women, I believe it is possible to connect the insights of feminism to the larger questions facing the west as it begins a new century. The theoretical assumptions underlying my work are based on the deconstructive tendencies of gender theory in general, but the focus of my work will be the development of the Foucauldian idea of heterodesignation¹ and its application as one possible response to the ambiguities of the media. Although it appears an unusual combination because of his insensitivity to gender, Foucault has been yoked with feminism. The compatibility of both systems of thought has been laid out by authors Diamand and Quinby in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (1988). They perceive four striking convergences: first, both feminism and Foucault identify the body as the site of power, that is, as the locus of domination through which docility is accomplished and subjectivity constituted; second, both point to the local and intimate relations of power rather than focusing exclusively on the supreme power of the state; third, both bring to the fore the crucial role of discourse in its capacity to practise and sustain hegemonic power and emphasize the challenges contained within marginalized and/or unrecognized discourses; fourth, both criticize the ways in which Western humanism has privileged the experience of the western masculine

élite as it proclaims universals about truth, freedom and human nature.² All four of these points will necessarily be raised at one point or another during this dissertation in relation to the process of heterodesignation.

Heterodesignation can take many forms, but essentially it refers to the imposition of identity on the individual by the hegemonic discursive structures. My argument (laid out in greater detail in chapter one) is that heterodesignation is practised by the media and that there is a determining dialectical relationship between the latter and the forces of globalization. Globalization constitutes the wider picture of heterodesignation: a homogenized society where individuals are involuntarily and unconsciously situated so as to guarantee the perpetuation of a particular socio-economic complex. The Orwellian implications are perhaps overblown (there are many people and institutions that currently resist globalization) but there are real parallels to be traced, as illustrated by a recent move to alter the definition of higher education by UNESCO. As reported in the newspaper *La Voz del Interior*, (Argentina, 14 July 2003), the alteration of the definition of higher education from a social asset to a global asset at the last world conference on education in Paris, France, 2003, was sternly criticized by all the major universities of Latin America. These institutions perceive the alteration to signal a move towards the transformation of higher education into a money-making commodity. The coalition of Latin American universities suspects UNESCO of catering to the interests of mega-corporations that would dominate the global market on education. As an accredited institutional body, UNESCO is free to push its way into any country, shifting the focus of education from regional interests to global interests. Once the regional focus is

eliminated, the region in question is stripped of its cultural identity and a global identity is imposed. At a subsequent meeting of university rectors from all of Latin America, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the conclusions drawn were disturbing: if UNESCO's definition of higher education should persist into the next decade, higher education will find itself exclusively at the service of megasectors that are interested in appropriating the enormous resources lying therein. The result may be that all courses of study which are not obviously or immediately profitable will be dropped from the curricula, these being the courses that generate and sustain cultural identity, namely the arts and humanities. The homogenization of identity at the geo-political level is paralleled by the heterodesignating forces of the media which work towards similar ends.

The imposition of a global identity, that is, the heterodesignation of a region and, by extension, of the individual, in the above case effected through the superimposition of global interests over regional ones, becomes essential to the "controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of the population to economic processes".³ The homogenization of identity ensures a "parallel increase in usefulness and docility"⁴ – two mutually dependent conditions that secure the prolongation of the status quo.

The UNESCO example illustrates only one form of heterodesignation and, for the purposes of this dissertation, this will not be the form I will focus on. Instead I will be looking at the ways in which heterodesignation is practised by the media. The above

example suffices, however, to demonstrate the importance of heterodesignation as a political issue.

It is my contention that the mass media, and in particular advertising, is responsible for imposing identity according to the needs of globalization and as a way of achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations. Not everyone will be directly affected by privatisation measures, yet no one is immune to the mass media, of which advertising is arguably still the most insidious and widespread form. It is for this reason that I have chosen to focus on advertising as one expression of heterodesignation. It is also an area in which, I believe, the insights of gender theory and feminism are especially relevant. In Portugal (where I currently reside), on public television, advertisements are rife. There is no television tax and therefore all channels are subsidized entirely by advertising. Half an hour to forty-five minute-long segments of adverts are not uncommon. The segment I chose for analysis in chapter one took place in the evening during prime time and was selected randomly. It is important to note that the adverts examined are only representative examples; I am interested in the whole phenomenon of the depiction of women in the mass media and the ways in which these representations constitute instances of heterodesignation and not just in these particular examples. I believe, however, that the insights gleaned from these particular advertisements may be applied to the wider phenomenon of the representation of women in the media.

Some audiences may resist the idea that television images have an ideological content. Many women, although unsettled by what they see, do not want to think critically about

why they can view these images and find pleasure in representations that quite often mock and ridicule them. bell hooks has suggested⁵ that this could be because the anger women feel has no voice in popular terms; there is currently no vocabulary in existence with which to mention or interrogate what most people want to believe is not there, that is, the oppression and objectification of women. The lack of voice, or the heterodesignated status of women, can better be understood when placed against the greater background of discourse. Discourse, as defined by Foucault, is linked to power and desire⁶ and in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures resting on institutionalized support.⁷ The procedures by which discourse is controlled determine what gets put into discourse, that is, what becomes a possible, observable, measurable, classifiable object.⁸ Foucault states that a proposition must fulfil complex and strict requirements to be able to belong to the property of a discipline and before it can be true or false.⁹ Evidently, feminist concerns currently occupy an alien horizon which call for new conceptual instruments and new theoretical foundations.¹⁰ The exclusion of feminist concerns from the current discursive paradigm is made apparent by the general feeling that feminism has lost its hold, or that, at any rate, much of the contemporary theory of feminism is returning full circle to those many isolated and silent women from whom it started.¹¹ Outside of specialized ambits, feminism seems to hold little or no appeal for the majority of men and women, and a strong feminist presence in opposition to heterodesignated and hegemonic representations is virtually absent from popular culture. In western societies people's preoccupations seem to have shifted – sex inequality is popularly considered a closed issue, settled *de jure* if not *de facto*. Whatever real

injustices remain are eclipsed by seemingly larger issues: Europe and the USA, for example, currently face the problems of a recessive economy, illegal immigration and terrorism directly, whilst other western countries are indirectly affected by these problems. In popular terms there is no visible articulation of a possible connection between the public absence of a contemporary, politically active feminism and the state of the world today. Ecological concerns, racial tensions, even economic and social disparity achieve footholds in popular culture, mostly through radical sports advertisements which offer up ecological statements, slogans and symbols as hip fashion accessories: *Billabong* is a successful sporting goods trademark whose internet site attests to their support of an ecological sanctuary in Australia where prehistoric crocodiles have been unearthed and reef pollution is fought against. And *Benetton* is the most obvious example of a controversy over the ethics of advertising: homosexuality, poverty, tribal extinction and AIDS all feature photogenically on billboards. At the *Benetton* website, those responsible for such matters have made a point of explicating the logic behind their controversial use of powerful images of AIDS victims, racism, war and death-row inmates in their advertisements. The company president, Luciano Benetton, is quoted as saying “I cannot offer solutions to these problems, but if I can make people more aware then that is all I offer”. *Benetton* photographer Oliviero Toscani’s views on the matter of advertising are also featured and echo those of his employer. He claims that the advertising industry has corrupted society. It persuades people that they are respected for what they consume, that they are only worth what they possess.¹² Despite these statements and quite predictably, *Benetton* has been criticized for the exploitation of the victims of these disasters as a way to gain brand recognition and to sell more clothes.

While there may be some validity in this criticism, the point, in this case, is that *Benetton*, the self-appointed popular conscientizer on social problems, has issued statements such as “even today, after the civil rights movement, cultural bias and discrimination are major problems and issues for debate”,¹³ but has yet to recognize the discrimination of western women as an equally pressing problem. *Benetton’s* oversight can be read as symptomatic of the wider, perhaps global, tendency within patriarchy to make women invisible and silent. The effect that the representation of these concerns in advertising may eventually have is open to argument. Feminist bell hooks has pointed out how, while the drama of Otherness might find expression in the commercial realm of advertising, this only represents a heightened exploitation of conventional thinking on race and sexual desire; the commodification of Otherness makes it easy for consumers to ignore political messages.¹⁴ The point is debatable. It could be argued that these images, despite their drawbacks, represent an increase in the range of conflicting definitions and therefore facilitate a discursive shift that encourages plurality, thereby undermining hegemonic cultural definitions. What is significant at this juncture is that, even in commodified form, equality between the sexes, that is, political and social equality, does not feature as a preoccupation of western society in popular discourse. The struggle is presented as won and this idea comes across most clearly in the openly sexually provocative images of women that pervade the media, and whose directness is commonly interpreted as a boast of freedom from repression and taboo. There is, however, a degree of complexity surrounding these images which, enmeshed as they are in discourses of sexual liberation, blur the distinction between the progressive and the complicit. Foucault has explored how the deployment of sexuality in society functions to control and regulate as a disciplinary

technique of power, thus playing a greater role in the normalization of the modern individual than in any liberatory process.¹⁵ A closer analysis suggests that the representations of women in the media are characterized by an often confusing ambiguity. A framework is required through which to make sense of these representations and to clarify the connection between sex, discourse and heterodesignation. These are ideas I will pursue in more depth in chapter one and two.

In Foucauldian terms, the media is a “technology of the self” because of the fundamental role it plays in the representation and construction of subjectivity. The images of popular culture have a decisive impact on women’s identity formation and on the underlying politics of domination based on sex, race and class that are reinforced. Women are not only constructed as different and Other within the major categories of knowledge of western regimes, they quite logically come to experience themselves as Other since the whole edifice of discourse in which women are steeped constructs them as Other; they naturally internalize this image of themselves. It is one thing to subject women to a knowledge that constructs them as Other as a matter of imposed will and domination; it is quite another to have that knowledge operate by the power of inner compulsion and subjective compliance to the norm.¹⁶ Women internalize hegemonic values while being largely oblivious to this process and its effects, thereby labouring under a sort of Althusserian¹⁷ false consciousness. It is important to investigate the ways in which the media might influence the interaction between the feminine self and others, how an individual acts upon herself and thus her behaviour in relation to the outside world. It is

for these reasons that a feminist intervention into representations of women in the media is crucial for the development of agency and self-determination.

The forms of resistance to heterodesignation at hand for women, in relation to the media, parallel those available to anti-globalization campaigners, but on a smaller scale. The aim, for a possible feminist intervention in the media, would be to promote awareness of and change in the hegemonic discursive paradigm, which is arbitrary to begin with and organized around historical contingencies. In *Fences and Windows*, Naomi Klein describes counter-summits (demonstrations of resistance) as experiments in alternative ways of organizing society that not only serve as criticisms of existing models but also function as political portals, as windows or cracks in history. The protests, generally week-long marathons of intense education on global politics, also feature late-night strategy sessions in six-way simultaneous translation, music festivals and street theatre. The counter-summits are something of a parallel universe or alternative global city where people usurp cars, strangers talk to one another, art is everywhere and the prospect of radical change does not seem odd and anachronistic.¹⁸ The tactics involve a refusal to engage in classic power struggles – an important idea in Foucault's theory of power. The protesters' goal is not to take power for themselves but to challenge power centralization on principle.¹⁹ Foucault speaks of local interventions as a form of resistance to hegemonic structures and it is in the quiet conspiracies to reclaim privatized assets for public use that resistance to globalization takes root. Naomi Klein mentions students kicking advertisements out of classrooms, swapping music online, and setting up independent media centres with free software²⁰ as some examples of local interventions.

Feminists can take recourse to a similar diversity of political strategies in their resistance to hegemonic representations. An ongoing, educational dialectic of analysis and proffered solutions should successfully bypass the traps of dogma and reductionism.²¹ Feminists play a fundamental role in change as they already have access to the necessary critical knowledge and can ensure that feminism is changed from a closed conversation to an active dialogue, with implications reaching beyond the binary man/woman. Putting women into discourse must be seen as essential to the condition of modernity and the valorization of women must become intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking and expression.²² A new discursivity on and about women and gender can be introduced through various means such as magazines, theatre, art, music and film, to name a few. In chapter two, I will explore alternative film as one way in which to create a map of problematic social realities that simultaneously functions as a matrix for the creation of a collective conscience.²³ Alternative film is one way in which to make room for a subversive vision which is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation.

All of these strategies work to confer a capacity of re-vision, a capacity to name the reality reflected in media images. The term “re-vision” recalls Adrienne Rich’s essay “When we dead awaken: writing as re-visioning”. Here she writes: “re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh ideas, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – it is for women more than a chapter of cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we have been drenched we cannot know ourselves”.²⁴ In making the power of naming reality available, feminism becomes a revolutionary force. The capacity to interpret the ambiguities of the media and the

discovery of a voice that feminism can come to represent are potentialities of great social importance and should not be perceived as exclusive to women. In the past, the perception of feminism as having exclusive relevance to women has, I believe, damaged its credibility as a generally pertinent social and political movement. Yet, feminism has given rise to gender studies and everyone, everywhere, is inevitably affected by gender. Even if feminism did not consistently ally itself with other minority movements such as ecological activism and resistance to racism, the concept of gender necessarily makes feminism applicable in a wider context. It is the aim of this mini-dissertation to demonstrate that, in relation to the media, the insights of feminism are relevant to society at large.

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Chapter One

Heterodesignating Women: Ambiguities in Advertising

The extent to which the media plays a determining role in the everyday life of the individual is perhaps most convincingly argued by postmodern theorists such as Habermas and Baudrillard. It is important to note that while I take a view of the media here which is based on critics of a media-driven society, such as Baudrillard, and which – I assume – applies to the average, non-discriminating viewer and user, my argument does not preclude the possibility of a discerning use of the media. Baudrillard refers to the aestheticization of everyday life, an allusion to the rapid flow of signs and images that saturate the fabric of the quotidian in contemporary society.¹ He contends that the build-up, density and seamless, all-encompassing extent of the production of images in contemporary society has pushed us towards a qualitatively new society in which the distinction between reality and the image has become effaced, thereby creating a simulated or postmodern culture.² The overload of information provided by the media and the endless flow of fascinating images and simulations have made television the world.³ In this hyperreality, the real and the imaginary are confused and aesthetic fascination predominates⁴ as a result of “de-differentiation”. This latter operation involves the reversal of the process of cultural differentiation Weber and Habermas refer to, which entails the differentiation of the aesthetic from the real world.⁵ The aestheticization of everyday life through the formal regimes of signification is thought to have its origin in the growth of consumer culture in the nineteenth-century capitalist societies.⁶ We now inhabit a postmodern culture where modernism’s emphasis on

signifiers is replaced by an emphasis on the signified, by a preference for image over narrative, and our experiences of the real are constantly mediated by what Baudrillard denominates as the empire of the signs.

It is possible to extend Baudrillard's theory of simulacra: the media, in its merger with reality, has become the dominant discourse, an episteme or space of confinement, directed at controlling and positing the social body – a control that is instrumental to society's aim of producing normalized subjects that can be inserted in its ideological, social and economic orders.

As an episteme, that is, as a way in which knowledge is acquired, ordered and disseminated in a specific historical period,⁷ media imagery enables the emergence of subjects and objects, and conditions the production of knowledge. Epistemes, as knowledge systems which have gained the status and currency of truth, not only inform thinking during certain periods of history, but they also offer the individual a limited range of modes of subjectivity. The media therefore comes to construct the individual, integrating itself with our lives and bodies. In this way, identity is rendered a fiction or simulation responding to the current strategic imperative of globalization.

The postmodern individual therefore stands in stark contrast to the central figure in Baudrillard's conception of modernity: the "dandy who makes of his body, his behaviour, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art".⁸ Baudrillard's modern "man" is an individual who sets out to invent himself; an ideal that involves a vigorous critical

ontology, an attitude, an ethos or philosophical path, a transgression, but never an acritical compliance with a heterodesignating body of knowledge. In contradistinction, the models of identity imposed by the media discourage critical reflection. The individual is, in fact, demobilized by the simulacra constituting her existence. With the collapse and de-differentiation of signifiers into signifieds comes a loss of meaning, of depth, of interpretation, because there is no longer an interplay between representations of reality (signifiers) and reality itself (signified). In de-differentiating art from politics and politics from art, postmodernism ultimately leads to a preference for aesthetics over ethics, for image over text, not just in art but in all discourse, which leads to a distrust of metanarrative, of depth, of structural processes underlying and tying events together, of anything but the sensation of the present, inducing mass unconsciousness.⁹ Furthermore, the mass media creates increasingly privatized individuals and therefore can be seen as inherently degrading of local community and the possibility of a real democracy emerging.¹⁰ As Matt Hern and Stu Chaulk discuss in “Roadgrading Community Culture – Why the Internet is So Dangerous to a Real Democracy”, genuinely participatory and direct democracies require the sort of social relationships, commitment and love of a place that only face-to-face interaction and cohabitation can grant. In contrast, virtual life can only further insulate the individual from these realities. The simulacra of community that is offered by the Internet bears no semblance and demands none of the skills or responsibilities of the real thing. Instead, it leads to a decline in reciprocity and mutual aid. For these reasons, Hern and Chaulk consider cyberspace a life-denying simulacrum rather than a tool for conviviality. The blurring of boundaries between the private and

public ultimately serves the interests of a greater but less confrontational social control, as spending time on-line effectively removes the individual from the public sphere.¹¹

In direct relation to the depoliticization of the individual, the authors point out that tools and technologies are never neutral but emerge under certain circumstances, that is, under the aegis of capitalism. Technologies that are not perceived as immediately profitable are rarely marketed. In this context, the Internet has the same relationship to communication as globalization does to economics – both partake of the same logic.¹²

Similarly, television has also altered our contacts with each other. Our physical interactions with each other are affected by image-based interactions. Television displays socially constructed images of reality, creating a new and often frightening reality for the participants.¹³ Television images are easily manipulated and, more often than not, subject to hyperbolic distortion so as ensure viewership. The dedicated viewer takes away a view of the world that is based more on what he or she sees on screen than on physical contact with other people. As the boundaries between the public and the private are blurred, television becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; there is what Baudrillard terms the "precession of simulacra", the representation of a form occurs before the form itself.¹⁴ Televised imagery conditions the individual's response to others towards whom a certain resistance is inculcated after prolonged viewing. And while the correlation between televised violence and real violence is debatable, physical contact becomes rarer and more undesirable.¹⁵

An unreal identity is thus imposed on the individual. It is unreal because it is a borrowed code, a simulacrum. This heterodesignation of the individual tends to confine her within the limits of the dominant models of identity that, within a postmodern consumer culture, respond primarily to the strategies of power that control the globalization of the market. While not patently violent, the heterodesignation of the individual as a docile consumer does entail a form of physical subject-creation as it is dependent on body image. The forces of heterodesignation act to divide and exclude – presently, the aberrant individual is she who does not parade the latest commodity, be it a cell-phone, a sports car or any other item that is being sold as indispensable to the production of her identity. The extent to which these consumables are necessary to the production of identity is demonstrated by the social invisibility of those who are deprived of their buying power and are consequently outcast as pariahs. This process is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the machinations of the fashion industry that, in today's society, has become an industry or technology for the creation of compulsory identities.

We can surmise that the system of production derives from the strategic imperative, that is, a global consumer culture, which, in turn, constitutes the *dispositiff*¹⁶ or device of identity. For example, in the industrial era, a masculine identity was constructed by virtue of its relation to the means of production while a feminine identity was defined by a woman's sexual relationships. This division between masculine and feminine was, however, blurred by the onset of the service industry, which now almost dominates the market. Women currently participate in significantly greater numbers in the market, performing tasks that men perform, and, as a result are now also defined by their relation

to the means of production. All that has occurred, however, is that women are subjected to a new form of heterodesignation, the new elements of which come into play in response to the wider strategic imperative of globalization. Similarly, in WWI, women came to occupy for the first time, in significant numbers, sanitary, philanthropic and educational posts. In WWII, women worked in factories, carrying out traditionally masculine tasks. Again, the strategic imperative of the times brought about an amplification of the *dispositiff* "woman". Despite these developments, the definition of women in reference to their sexual relationships remains intact – the *dispositiff* "woman" may expand as new elements are introduced, but it is not revised. This constitutes one possible explanation as to why there is no apparent contradiction between media representations of women as executives and concomitantly as housewives or whores; that is, the nature of the *dispositiff* accounts for the ease with which these representations are simultaneously displayed in the media. The discursive formations link together divergent discursive zones from which subjects and objects emerge who fit neither zone completely.

What could appear as a space won does not, in fact, represent any real shift in the status quo. It becomes obvious from the discussion above that the mechanisms of the media in general, and its representations of women in particular, generate a considerable ambiguity. This ambiguity can be both liberating and enslaving. As I will demonstrate in chapter two, if we accept that there will always be misreadings, ambiguities and resistance within the discourse of gender roles and identities, we can increase the range of conflicting definitions of identity, thereby rebelling against the ways in which women are

already defined, categorized and classified and contributing to a greater freedom.¹⁷ But a prior step is necessary. Firstly, a conceptual framework is required, in order to make sense of the images we are presented with, especially as those images have grown increasingly subtle and complex.

In the past, genres such as *film noir* and later, in the eighties and nineties, films such as *Disclosure* (1994) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987) demonized assertive, desiring and dominant women. These narratives chartered a path from rising female independence to female pathology. The power of the dominant woman in these films was contained within the narrative framework which controlled her and/or defined her as evil. The messages transmitted about women by these images were unequivocally antifeminist. Similar resistance to the partial achievements of the women's movement pervaded popular culture in a phenomenon identified and defined by Susan Faludi in her journalistic work *Backlash* (1991). But, it is perhaps inaccurate to label the media as unambiguously misogynist. Positive representations of women in the media, that promote gender equality, might be less numerous than desired, but they do occur in film, and in the field of advertising women are frequently portrayed as executives, adventurers and sensualists in an apparently positive light. It is often unclear what to make of these representations. For the question is not just the separation of sexist adverts from those which explicitly portray women as strong and independent and thereby destabilize the stereotype of women as passive and dependent. Presently, representations of women in the mass media are resistant to dualistic categorizations of "good" and "bad". The methodology of advertising has evolved; it is no longer a question of selling a product but rather a

lifestyle. Invariably, adverts convey an upbeat, positive tone which is intended to be attractive to the viewer.

We are now at a point where what needs deconstructing are these seemingly positive images. We need to ask whether these images are progressive and if these images of sexy and independent womanhood represent a genuine subversion of hegemonic discourse. Do they symbolize an authentic step forward in the struggle for gender equality? Is it sensible to suspect their veracity? These are some of the questions that need posing. In her book *Foucault y La Genealogia de los Sexos (Foucault and the Genealogy of Sex – 1999)*, Rosa Maria Rodriguez Magda attempts to address some of these questions. Drawing on the theories of Foucault, Magda elaborates on the concept of heterodesignation and a subsequent condition she terms “The Double Bind”. These concepts prove to be very useful in deconstructing positive and negative depictions of women in the media.

Heterodesignation describes the process whereby the hegemonic discourse imposes an identity on the individual. Dispossessed of the opportunity to name herself, woman is attributed an identity and inscribed within a delimited space in the prevailing regime of truth or discursive paradigm. Foucault defines discourses as "coherent, self-referential bodies of statements that produce an account of reality by generating knowledge about particular subjects or concepts, and also by shaping the rules of what can be said and known about those entities".¹⁸ Discourse therefore informs and shapes subjectivity and establishes the conditions of possibility for thought, speech and action¹⁹ concerning subjectivity. However, the production of discourse is organized around historical

contingencies, the divisions between true and false are arbitrary and depend on institutional support. Despite its contingent status, the regime of truth at any one time imposes a theoretical horizon which determines the limits of enunciation. In order for a statement to hold currency, it has to remain within the limits of that theoretical horizon which regulates the ways in which knowledge is valued, distributed and attributed.

These theoretical horizons and regimes of truth are inscribed within an economy of power and constitute part of the procedure which allows the effects of power to circulate. In contemporary hegemonic discourse and pertaining expressly to woman as Other, Magda identifies three fields of possible enunciation:

- A) What is common to both men and women.
- B) What is intrinsic in man but lacking in woman.
- C) What defines/constitutes woman in herself.

Woman is inscribed on the theoretical horizon according to these arrangements and it is only at these points of emergence that she enjoys visibility. Point A might be seen to be compatible with representations of women as economically and sexually independent. Point B embraces traditional masculine and feminine stereotypes and point C refers to the vocational pull of the mother/housewife role. In all, these positions exhaust the possibilities of representation made available to women by the hegemonic, patriarchal system of representation.

The critique of the Enlightenment, which is sometimes associated with the more general intellectual movement of postmodernism, resulted in open-minded, indeterminate attitudes.²⁰ These attitudes gave rise to knowledge that was necessarily relative and fallible rather than absolute or certain. Magda proposes that this relaxation of boundaries, this relativized empiricism and critical rationalism, opened the way to a process of appropriation whereby attitudes traditionally thought of as Other are taken up by the hegemonic discourse and included in the theoretical horizon. This inclusion, however, depends on the severance of the attribute from its source of origin and therefore entails a partial limitation on the Other's freedom of (self) representation.

The circulation of these appropriated attributes is seen as taking place in the following ways: first, although value attaches to the appropriated attribute, this does not entail the social promotion of the Other. For example, jobs traditionally reserved for women but now adopted by men enjoy an increase in social value while the reverse is true for "men's work" now carried out by women. Most work areas now dominated by women are underpaid and lacking in social prestige and "seriousness". On the other hand, in relation to the traditionally feminine tasks of cooking, dressmaking and childrearing, male chefs are internationally celebrated, male fashion designers dominate the fashion scene, and in the nineties, the media paid tribute to the "househusband"²¹ whose unassailable masculinity went unaffected by diapers and an innate sensitivity.

Second, the hegemonic appropriation of attributes associated with the Other does not secure the Other's emancipation. Instead, the Other, dispossessed of certain features,

becomes an attenuated identity within a static context of discrimination and inequality. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks discusses this process of appropriation specifically in relation to black culture, but her insights are applicable to all women. She states that "the commodification of difference promoted paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization".²² Similarly, feminist liberationist jargon is commonly used as slogan material for feminine hygiene products, thus decontextualising the entire equal rights movement.

Third, the appropriation of the attribute is not absolute; its privileged status is as likely to be undercut as maintained. The same attribute might be represented either positively or negatively depending on the political and economic requirements of the hegemonic discourse. Accordingly, assertive sexuality in a woman can be alternately valued or demonized. Magda terms this phenomenon "The Double Bind". A double system of stereotypes emerges as a subdivision of "The Double Bind". Woman is alternately labelled as maternal, virginal, virtuous, judicious and modest or as whorish, lascivious and coquettish. This double system of stereotypes gives rise to a schizophrenic feminine subject exposed to the vicissitudes of hegemonic discourse. Furthermore, woman is situated in a network of unfavourable values. A system of double morality demands the cultivation of certain gender-specific traits, such as femininity, that it simultaneously accords a second-class status. The qualities society expects woman to develop, such as sexual attractiveness and a maternal instinct, are identified almost entirely by the social

roles concomitant with her biological destiny.²³ The sexualization of a woman's mind is supposed to affect her intellectual capacities so that, in thrall to her body, woman is naturally less rational than man,²⁴ who achieves a more radical separation from nature. Finally, the feminine subject is inexorably steered towards pathology by the forces of heterodesignation manifested in the forms described above. If a woman resists her socialization, as a woman, she is a failure, an oddity. If she succumbs, it is only to become a second-class citizen.

The mechanisms of heterodesignation that Magda describes preclude the possibility of authentic representations of women within the hegemonic discourse of patriarchy. Even in moments of temporary buoyancy, the privileged attribute entails no practical advantage beyond its symbolic significance. We might ask, for example, what practical advantages accompany the increasing sexualization of women in the media and how this contributes to gender equality. Foucault appears to have anticipated the question in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1990), where he denounces the fallacious interpretation of sexuality as the key to self-understanding and liberation when, in fact, sex is an effective means of social control, which he associates with the rise of the human sciences in the nineteenth-century, when ways of knowing were equated with ways of exercising power over the individual.²⁵ Foucault based his recommendation to desexualise the political domain on his understanding of sexuality as having served more as an ideology of domination than liberation. Furthermore, the positive portrayal of feminine attributes tends to bring more work to women rather than any real benefits, as demonstrated by the effects of the esteem showered on mothers by the media. As a result of women's

real/projected greater experience in this area, the majority of the work involved in childcare falls to them. The universal attribution of mothering and childcare to women is, of course, not due only to the operations of the media which shape and reflect it: it is entrenched in our entire world-view. Equality ultimately remains a disproportionate affair; even when women participate in the masculine domain, it is always on a subordinate basis. Still today, in general, a woman doctor/professor/ scientist/ philosopher is never as socially eminent as a man doctor/ professor/ scientist/ philosopher.

Magda's system allows us to conclude that both positive and negative images of women originate from the same system and that opportunity for both is conceded by the hegemonic discourse. Complicity and subversion occupy the same space. In other words, women either accede to a limited/distorted representation within current discursive logic or they disappear.

Representations of women not only affect the construction of subjectivity but also interconnect with economic and political factors to reproduce the hegemonic structures that have legitimated a series of exclusions and dominations. Genealogical inquiry is invaluable in deconstructing the strategies of heterodesignation and constitutes a vital first step away from determinism through discourse towards agency. Feminists should, therefore, intervene in the ways media imagery is produced and consumed as an important political act.

In order to carry out the practical implications of Magda's Foucauldian thesis, I analysed a series of adverts, constituting a one half-hour publicity interval. The series was screened in the evening, around dinner time, and therefore at family viewing prime time. These adverts are internationally produced and aired on a local television channel in Lisbon, Portugal. There were a number of other advertisements during this time slot that fall into the same categories that I derive from Magda and use to analyse the five advertisements I have selected. Below are brief descriptions of five of the adverts viewed followed by an analysis of these same adverts:

1) *Cell Phone Advert – At the beach:*

A young heterosexual couple lie on the beach. They are lit by the sunset. The girl is blonde and lithe and wears a bikini. The camera pans over her body appreciatively. She lies flat with her eyes closed, oblivious and beautiful. The boy at her side sits handling a cell phone. Groups of young men walk by and stare in the direction of the couple. One of these groups of boys stops at a short distance from the couple and stares openly. The boy with the cell phone eventually gets up, compelled into motion by the invasion. He approaches the group of boys with an expression of irritation. He suddenly whips out a pamphlet on cell phones from behind his back and hands it to the group with a contemptuous attitude. The boys fall on the pamphlet with enormous interest and proceed to walk on without a backwards glance at the girl.

2) *Ambi Pur Air Freshener:*

The opening shot is of a thirty-something blonde woman. She is classically made up in simple, understated good taste. The camera is trained on her profile and her raised open palm which acts as a pedestal to the lilac container of air-freshener. The pose is reminiscent of the great houses of style such as Dior and Yves St Laurent and apparently aims to heighten the status of the air freshener, placing it on the same luxurious level as haute couture. The advertisement closes on a shot of the woman seated on a sofa at the centre of an open space. The living area is all cool colours and minimal chic and there is a strong sense of a parallel being drawn between the art of fashion and the art of housekeeping.

3) *Ajax Floor Liquid:*

Different people walk along the corridor of a block of flats. The people are mostly men and old, grumpy-looking women. They are all drawn to one particular door by a heavenly scent which they sniff at and visibly take relish in. Inside the flat, a young woman in her kitchen cleans her floor with graceful ease. Cartoon flowers festoon the air, conveying an impression of freshness and perfume. In the middle of the night, a man in pajamas somnambulates towards the door with a beatific smile.

4) *Sapo Net Internet Server:*

The camera focuses on a young man's face concentrated on a computer screen. The camera swoops towards his face from various angles in sharp, crisp moves that ease off

into a momentary feel of futuristic time/space suspension. The young man's expression lends him an air of cool self-sufficiency.

5) *Clix Turbo Internet Server:*

A girl sitting in front of her computer phones her friend and proceeds to attach the receiver of the phone to her ear by winding a thick band of sellotape around her head, heedless of its contact with her hair. Her friend does the same. We are shown that this action frees their hands for use on the keyboard while they talk.

The following analyses of the advertisements described above is, of course, only a representative exercise which can be applied to the whole phenomenon of the depiction of women in the mass media – it is not these particular adverts in themselves that are significant, but the phenomenon of depicting gender according to stereotypical roles that they represent.

It is now possible to apply Magda's interpretative framework to these adverts, classifying them according to their correspondence with the three fields of possible enunciation that Magda delimits as:

- A. What is common to both men and women.
- B. What is intrinsic in men but lacking in women.
- C. What defines/constitutes woman in herself.

The majority of the adverts – *cell-phone – at the beach*, *Sapo Net Internet Server* and *Clix Turbo Internet Server* – fall into category B, while the remainder fall into category C. There is some slippage between these two categories as the adverts in category C, namely the *Ajax Floor Liquid* and *Ambi-Pur* adverts, also contribute to the reinforcement of feminine stereotypes albeit from what, at first, appears to be a more benign or favourable viewpoint. The absence of any advert that might qualify for category A is an important detail. There were no adverts that subverted the stereotype of women as passive and dependent.

The play of ambiguity, as described by Magda's "Double Bind" thesis, is clearly demonstrated in the *cell phone – at the beach* advert. In this advert the privileged status of women is overturned. Whatever intrinsic/attributed quality for which women are celebrated is capsized and shown to be secondary on a scale of values that prioritize trivialities, consumer goods, such as cell phones. The advert demonstrates how women are situated in a network of unfavourable values. The femininity they are so strongly urged to cultivate through the cult of beauty falls short, in this advert, even of the attractions of telecommunication technology. The *cell phone – at the beach* advert plays on the viewer's received expectations, that is, on the irresistibility and social caché of obvious feminine beauty and of the privileged status of heterosexual relationships respectively. The advert upsets these expectations; resolution is arrived at in the easy relegation of these values of beauty and love to a lower status in relation to cell phones. Neither this inversion nor the values of beauty and heterosexuality are problematized within the advert itself, which appears to epitomize attractive, carefree, adolescent fun,

and it is in this aspect that such adverts are most insidious. The girls are easily exchanged for consumer goods; it is from their objectification that these adverts derive their comic effect. The adverts operate under the guise of "fun", removing all seriousness and social import from the statements made, yet ideologically, politically and socially the implications of this objectification are obvious and varied. The adverts play on and reinforce traditional stereotypes that reduce women to fripperies in a masculine gallery. The visual material of these adverts positions women and their sex appeal as simply another accessory for men, while implicitly sanctioning these attitudes by associating them with ideal lifestyles of youth and economic prosperity.

The adverts falling into category B are quite direct in their play on feminine/ masculine stereotypes. The *Clix Turbo Internet Server* advert plays on the stereotype of women as silly, garrulous creatures of dispersed attention, their capacity for doing various things at once being a synonym for dilettantism. In this particular advert, the girls' extreme compulsion to talkativeness overrides that equally fatuous – from a patriarchal perspective – feminine preoccupation with physical attractiveness.

The *Sapo Net Internet Server* advert extends the stereotype of man as a pioneer and forerunner. The man is strong, silent, independent, focused and in perfect synchrony with modern technology. There are no women in this advert and there is nothing comical about it. The contrast between this advert and those previously mentioned, in which women are present, sets up another dualism between masculine seriousness and feminine irreverence. Further, it implies that men are the sole custodians of science and its

handmaiden, technology, while women do not even enter the picture, presumably because they are not “scientific” enough.

The remaining adverts, which fall into category C, reinforce feminine stereotypes but make use of a different approach. Category C concerns images which constitute woman in herself, that is, images that appeal to popularized notions of "real" femininity or "essential" womanhood. Within the popular imagination, "essential" womanhood is expressed through what is seen as the vocational pull of motherhood and of the housewife role. There is no tension in either the *Ajax Floor Liquid* or *Ambi Pur* adverts, only an implicit valorization of traditional femininity. In the *Ajax Floor Liquid* advert, the homemaker's dividends are embodied by the smitten male individual, drawn even in his sleep towards the heavenly scent. The ideology here can be extrapolated: home is woman's domain and her power in it is compensation for her exclusion from the public sphere. Home is a feminized space and the man's olfactory delight in it is equated with his attraction to the woman who rules it. Of course, her power within the domestic sphere is dependent on her use of the appropriate and feminized commodities.

The *Ambi Pur* advert attempts a modernized slant on the housewife role, although the changes are only superficial and aesthetic. There is an implied competence and sense of style in the advert that would place homemaking on the same creative front as fashion designing. Here, housekeeping is ostensibly upgraded and included in a broadened postmodern view of art that breaks down the boundaries between “high art” and “aesthetic living”.

Both adverts appeal to aesthetics and family values. Both portray femininity in an apparently positive light and both do so without recourse to humorous effect, similarly to those adverts in which masculinity is lauded. In instances where masculine and feminine stereotypes are presented favourably, the masculine and feminine spheres are kept separate, with each accorded its place. This separation reinforces conservative associations of the masculine with the public domain and of the feminine with the private domain. It is evident that, despite the "favourable" perspectives, none of these adverts destabilize the status quo.

The above analysis demonstrates that generally, representations of women in the media are not in any way subversive of hegemonic discourse but, in fact, construct feminine subjectivity in accordance with the needs of the current strategic imperative. Even though the ambiguity of the images works to obfuscate the point, the underlying message of these images is socially, politically and ideologically reactionary and unfavourable to women. Even the apparently positive images of women, such as those in category C are heterodesignations, that is, they do not originate from a genuine analysis of the Other but are rather imposed identities, stereotypes laid out by the hegemonic discourse.

Foucault describes the social field as a myriad of unstable and heterogeneous relations, an open system which contains possibilities of domination as well as resistance.²⁶ The possibility of changing something in the minds of people therefore obtains in a redescription of women's experiences from within local interventions where consciousness-raising may take place. While some feminists place their faith in the

reputedly media-wise younger generations, the extent to which people are generally oblivious to the effects of media imagery is illustrated by an editorial in the *Financial Times* published on the fifth of July of 2003 and entitled "Beyond A Joke". The editorial offers a sardonic comment on the fact and performance of Berlusconi as the current president of the European Union. After a discussion of the many scandals surrounding Berlusconi, the editor ends off by suggesting that a list of permitted jokes or gaffes should be promulgated by the European Union so as to legitimate those moments when the ridiculous predominates. The editor singles out Anna Diamantopoulou, the Social Affairs Commissioner for the European Union, as the ideal person for the job of drawing up such a list because, as the author of recent plans to outlaw gender discrimination in the media, advertising and financial services in the European Union, "anyone who can dream up an idea like that is truly capable of anything". Socialized within patriarchal systems of education and by hegemonic mass media, many people remain convinced that media imagery is not complex and is therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection.²⁷ The editorial underlines the urgency of a genealogical inquiry into representations of women in the media as a first step towards resistance.

In the following chapter, I will be looking at alternative film as one possible form of "liberating ourselves from the oppressive effects of prevailing modes of self-understanding".²⁸ Feminist counter-cinema stands as an alternative mapping, as a refusal to accept hegemonic characterizations of women's practices and desires. It is on the basis of theoretical analysis and consciousness-raising practices, such as feminist counter-cinema, that feminists can make generalizations, identify links in the forms of repression,

locate patterns of domination, and evaluate the relative practical value of tactics of resistance.²⁹

ENDNOTES:

- 1) In Featherstone, M. 1996. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London. Sage Publications, Ltd. p 67.
- 2) In Featherstone, M. 1996. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London. Sage Publications, Ltd. p 68.
- 3) In Featherstone, M. 1996. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London Sage Publications, Ltd. p 68.
- 4) In Featherstone, M. 1996. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London. Sage Publications, Ltd. p 68.
- 5) In Featherstone, M. 1996. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London. Sage Publications, Ltd. p 69.
- 6) In Featherstone, M. 1996. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London. Sage Publications, Ltd. p 70.
- 7) Childers, J. and Hentzi. G. 1995. *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. New York. Columbia University Press. p 97.
- 8) In Featherstone, M. 1996. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London. Sage Publications, Ltd. p 67.
- 9) *The Revolution of Desire: A Politics of Aesthetics* website, visited 2 August 2003.
<http://it.stlawu.edu/~pomo/mike/aesthetic.html>
- 10) Hern, S. and Chaulk, S. *Roadgrading Community Culture – Why the Internet is So Dangerous to a Real Democracy* website, visited 18 October 2003.
www.democracynature.org/dn/rol6/hern-chaulk_internet.htm

- 11) Hern, S. and Chaulk, S. *Roadgrading Community Culture – Why the Internet is So Dangerous to a Real Democracy* website, visited 18 October 2003.
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www.democracynature.org/dn/rol6/hern-chaulk_internet.htm
- 13) *Cyborgs* website, visited 18 October 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan314/seg-cyborgs.html
- 14) *Cyborgs* website, visited 18 October 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan314/seg-cyborgs.html
- 15) *Cyborgs* website, visited 18 October 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan314/seg-cyborgs.html
- 16) *dispositif*. – a French word used by Foucault not having any one direct English equivalent but can be understood as "device".
- 17) Sawiki, J. 1991. *Disciplining Foucault*. New York. Routledge. p 27.
- 18) Childers, J. and Hentzi, G. 1995. *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. New York. Columbia University Press. p 84.
- 19) Childers, J. and Hentzi, G. 1995. *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. New York. Columbia University Press. p 219.
- 20) Tarnas, R. 1996. *The Passion of the Western Mind*. USA. Pimlico. p 395.
- 21) *Househusband – The Evolution of Marriage* website, visited 18 October 2003.
www.weddingworld.co.za/resource/feature_articles/articles/evolution.htm

Househusbands unite website, visited 18 October 2003.

www.businessweek.com/2001/01_04/b3716163.htm

- 22) hooks, b. 1992. *Black Looks*. USA. Routledge. p 24.
- 23) From Smith, S. 1993. *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. USA. Indiana University Press in University of South Africa. Tutorial letter 103 CONTEM-A. 1997. Pretoria. p 157.
- 24) From Smith, S. 1993. *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. USA. Indiana University Press in University of South Africa. Tutorial letter 103 CONTEM-A. 1997. Pretoria. p 158.
- 25) Sawiki, J. 1991. *Disciplining Foucault*. New York. Routledge. p 22.
- 26) Sawiki, J. 1991. *Disciplining Foucault*. New York. Routledge. p 25.
- 27) hooks, b. 1992. *Black Looks*. USA. Routledge. p 2.
- 28) Sawiki, J. 1991. *Disciplining Foucault*. New York. Routledge. p 18.
- 29) Sawiki, J. 1991. *Disciplining Foucault*. New York. Routledge. p 18.

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- 4) Magda, R. 1999. *Foucault y la Genealogia de los Sexos*. Barcelona. Anthropos Editorial.
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Chapter Two

Female Perversions: Attempts at Subverting Heterodesignation Through Film

In the previous chapter, I explored the creation of identity, as a simulacrum, via media discourses. As a simulacrum, identity is subsumed in a field of images that bear no relation to reality.¹ Yet, the recognition of identity as a heterodesignated simulacrum² does not, in any way, detract from its real effects on the individual. Judith Butler's speculations on gender identity as performative, that is, as constituted through a series of reiterative and constitutive acts³ is widely regarded, among feminists, as having provided a positive perspective on ambiguity, sexuality and the body. As Helen McDonald explains in *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art* (2001), the performative approach is "considered enormously useful as a framework for exploring the ongoing, interactive, imitative processes by means of which the self/gender and their illusion of authenticity are constructed".⁴ In this chapter, I will be using Butler's theory of performativity to analyse the representation of female bodies and identities in alternative film. Butler approaches identity linguistically, taking it to represent a subject position within a system of signifiers rather than a natural or biological essence. Through language, social values and ideology, forms of knowledge and relations of power infuse and form the body, thereby prescribing identity, informing boundaries and regulating personality.⁵ It is through language that bodies are made culturally intelligible, relevant and recognizable, and people are identified, articulated and represented.⁶ In order to assume an identity a child must be named, signified and subjected to social meaning.⁷ The imposition of the Law of the Father is indispensable to the individual's entry into

language as a speaking subject. In acquiring an identity, the individual is forced to assume a sex or sexed social position⁸ that is meant to determine how they may behave, with whom they may relate, desire, and even with whom they may engage in sexual relations. Having taken up a sexualized position, the subject identifies with "the attributes socially designated as appropriate for men and women".⁹ Butler describes this process of assuming identity as performative. She defines performativity as "a discursive practice that produces that which it names"¹⁰ and she terms the performance of the law "citation". Butler is speaking here of the "laws" that govern gendered behaviour, such as the Law of the Father. It is through the citation of the law that the law is brought into being and normativity compelled; and through the performance or citation of identity imposed or compelled by the law, the sexed body is brought into being.¹¹ Butler reasons that there is no materiality, no subject prior to subjectification, no regulation prior to the law's citation¹² and therefore no "outside" to discourse.¹³

The possibility for agency resides in the performative basis of Butler's theory – "we are all simulacra, copies without originals, performative identities formed and imposed by the law produced through performance".¹⁴ It is our representation or performance of the norm that forms subjects according to the norm and thereby creates the norm – there is no original, no ontology, only simulacra.¹⁵ If performance affects the norm, it is in performance that the possibility for resistance can be located. From within the system, the performance of the norm may be disrupted through an alternative representation or simulation.

Butler points out that feminists have rejected the idea of biology as destiny but have then developed an account of patriarchal culture in which, invariably, masculine and feminine genders coincided with masculine and feminine bodies. This argument proves equally limiting and leaves no room for difference and resistance. If gender is a performance, if "woman" is put on, there can be no natural female body. Gender identity is the function of societal representations. Our belief in natural behaviour and stable identity is compelled by the punitive rules of hegemonic heterosexual standards of identity. To underline this point, Butler's work repeatedly draws attention to the artificial, proscribed and performative nature of gender identity.

One of Butler's great philosophical innovations is the deconstruction of the distinction between sex (corporeal facts) and gender (social conventions). She argues that social gender constructions are in no inherent way connected to our bodily sex, yet gender affects us in such material, corporeal ways that even our perception of corporeal sexual difference is dependent on social conventions. Butler's understanding of sex as a cultural norm that governs the materialization of bodies can be situated within the postmodern tendency to conceive of reality as determined by language so that it is ultimately impossible even to think or articulate sex without imposing linguistic norms.¹⁶ There can be no reference to a natural body which is not concomitantly a bringing into existence of that body. Sex is a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access; that is, the sex referred to as prior to gender will itself be a postulation, a construction within language that can never be accessed except by means of its construction. This does not mean that the body is deconstructed into oblivion but rather

that the conditions of its emergence into intelligibility are rethought. Gender is constituted through relations of power, specifically normative constraints that not only produce but regulate various types of bodily being; bodies only appear and endure within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered and regulatory schemas. The conception of the body as always already socially and discursively constituted need not detract from the lived reality of the body – by challenging hegemonic articulations of how meanings and bodies are made, the possibility of living with meanings and bodies that do not traditionally qualify as intelligible is opened up for the future. The task, as Butler sees it, is to "redescribe the possibilities that already exist within cultural domains designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible".¹⁷ Butler therefore locates the political in the very signifying practices that establish, regulate and deregulate identity.¹⁸

Butler proposes an alternative repetition of the terms that impel the production of sexed morphologies so as to expose the performative status of so-called "natural identity". An alternative/different repetition of terms such as sex, so as to supplant their original formative intention, is one form of resistance. But, the rearticulation of hegemonic terms and ideals is a complicated undertaking and the opportunity to use these terms differently, to deploy them in unexpected, more progressive and subversive ways is not immediately or obviously available to most people. Anticipating the question of what constitutes a subversive repetition within the signifying practices of gender, Butler invokes the denaturalization of gender through drag. Unfortunately, the parody of dominant norms is often insufficient as hegemonic discourse is inordinately capable of preventing the revolutionary use of its terms and quite regularly successfully reassimilates those who do

so. The denaturalization of gender does not guarantee liberation from hegemonic constraints and there are cruel and sometimes fatal social penalties to be suffered, as Butler herself admits in chapter four of her book *Bodies that Matter* (1993). There are therefore, very real difficulties involved in revising criteria of intelligibility, entrenched as they are in our social system. Perhaps one way in which to make the practice of denaturalization more widely accessible would be to expand its definition to those times when the individual does something her gender would not usually do, to actions not condoned by society for her gender. Despite the risks and difficulties, the denaturalization of gender, through whatever means deemed suitable and possible, remains central to the project of radical democracy.

Most feminists have endeavoured to deconstruct normative feminine identity because of the ways in which it circumscribes and limits women. In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, Adrienne Rich points out how the dictates of the economic marketplace have needed men and women to play particular roles in production and/or reproduction.¹⁹ Femininity is usually represented by the traits of submission, passivity, gentleness and sensitivity, and women are characterized as givers, wives and mothers. The prevailing sexual organization works against women with covert simulations and overt forces channelling women into marriage and heterosexual romance and restricting female self-fulfillment to marriage and motherhood.²⁰ Under capitalism "women are horizontally segregated by gender and occupy a structurally inferior position in the workplace".²¹ In *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (1991), Jane Ussher extends Rich's argument by looking at what it means to be a woman in patriarchal

society. She claims, as other feminists, such as H el ene Cixous,²² have done, that to be a woman in patriarchal society is often to be mad. Pervasive misogyny, the enforcement of phallogocentric discourse that names woman as "Other", the deprivation of power, privilege and independence all make women mad.²³ Despite the hollowness of identity, the embodied individual, whether or not she is aware of the simulated and heterodesignated status of identity, has no choice but to negotiate the cultural construction of femininity. Feminists work to rearticulate or subvert feminine identity yet do not lose sight of the fact that any rearticulation is always a heterodesignation. The articulation of identity is always achieved through a process of exclusion. As in the case of identity politics,²⁴ for example, where identity is used to secure a platform, "identity always contains the spectre of non-identity with it, the subject is always divided and identity is always purchased at the price of exclusion of the Other, the repression or repudiation of non-identity".²⁵ The only way to counterbalance this exclusion is to open up the category of identity as a site of permanent political contestation.

Feminist counter-cinema is one way in which to explore the risks and gains of identity subversion. There are, of course, many other media that may serve as provisional frameworks for revising gender identity, such as art, drag, literature, theatre, discussion groups, etcetera. Film nevertheless remains an important medium as it determines how men and women are seen and how other groups respond to women, based on their relations to these constructed and consumed images.²⁶ As Laura Mulvey points out in "Virtual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1989), film is an advanced representation system that, by using both sound and visual imagery, masquerades as reality – "cinematic

codes create a gaze, a world, an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire".²⁷ In its mainstream form, film "reflects, reveals and even plays on straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle".²⁸ Within traditional narrative film, a heterosexual division of labour, where the image of women is offered as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of men,²⁹ leaves a binary sex-role system unchallenged. It is this relationship of cinematic codes to formative external structures/practices that must be broken down³⁰ if the gender inequality in film production and consumption is to be challenged, and alternative film provides a space in which to do so. The medium is not, however, without its problems: obscurantism can render a film politically ineffective and the presupposition of a competent viewing audience is an added complication. Alternative film also displaces the "primordial wish for pleasurable looking"³¹ that mainstream cinema is said to satisfy, which accounts for the relatively small number of alternative film devotees. Although it does limit the capacity of film to raise consciousness and change people's views and beliefs, this need not be an insurmountable obstacle – feminist bell hooks claims that visual pleasure can be experienced in a context where looking is about contestation and confrontation, where pleasure is gained from reading against the grain.³² Another risk lies in ambiguity. Art is always ambiguous and thus vulnerable to co-option because "once art enters the public domain, it is open to the production of a multiplicity of meanings – the point at which the meanings are made is a public space where viewers read signs in relation to a wider field of representations and histories, collective as much as individual".³³ Despite this, feminist counter-cinema is one way in which to make space for a transgressive image, and unless we "transform images, our ways of looking and

being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation".³⁴ Teresa de Lauretis calls attention to the power of discourse to do violence to people, a "violence which is material and physical although practised by abstract and scientific discourses of the mass media".³⁵ The importance of the mass media must be recognized and film needs to be acknowledged as a significant tool in the contestation of hegemonic forms and structures.

I have chosen Susan Streitfeld's *Female Perversions* (1996) as an example of feminist counter-cinema because it lends itself almost emblematically to a discussion of ambiguity, performativity and subversion. In the film, feminine gender identity is problematized through an exploration of the inherent ambiguity of women's position in society and of the difficulty involved in any attempt to subvert its compulsory performance. *Female Perversions* proffers an opportunity for asserting agency by claiming and cultivating an awareness of women's position within society as resulting from institutional and individual oppression. In this view, it is society that is sick, not the women who wear the mask of madness.³⁶

Female Perversions traces the events in the life of the female protagonist Evelyn Stevens, a prominent lawyer, over the few days before she is appointed as a judge. On the surface, the sequence of events is easy enough to follow. Eve is economically independent, a high-profile lawyer whose only family are a distant father and a problematic sister. Eve lives apart from both geographically, and ostensibly, emotionally too, although in the course of the film, the contrary proves to be true. She entertains a sexual relationship with

John but there is no indication of a deeper commitment, and later in the narrative, she initiates a parallel sexual relationship with a young female psychiatrist. In the days leading up to the determining interview, Eve is presented with a series of potentially destabilizing circumstances – the law firm she works at begins the recruitment process for her replacement, who turns out to be a confident, charming and very beautiful woman, and when Eve's sister is arrested for shoplifting she is called in to help her. These events together with the strain and uncertainty of the upcoming judgeship generate and put pressure on Eve, which works to destabilize and unravel the confident persona she works so hard to construct (there is evidence of her efforts throughout the film). The film climaxes with the eventual temporary breakdown of this persona and a recognition of fear and uncertainty, as Eve finally admits to the things that disturb her.

Female Perversions conjures a vivid sense of the surreal. It successfully defamiliarizes the quotidian reality of Eve's life by making use of an almost monochrome and minimalist aesthetic which is only relieved when the context is shifted onto the life of Eve's sister Mattie. Mattie's environment is defamiliarized differently through the introduction of hyperreal feminine characters. The use of defamiliarization techniques in the film is intended, in Brechtian fashion, to prevent the spectator from succumbing to the usual illusion of the naturalness or normalcy of feminine gender identity. The viewer's sense of dissociation is heightened throughout the film by a heavy reliance on symbolism and nuance, and by the regular interruption of the linear narrative. The lateral movement into adjacent events causes a layering effect which defies stable identity and contributes to a general complexity. In addition to the pervasive sense of ambiguity which the film

fosters, a psychological element is added by the dream imagery of Eve Stevens. In the film's opening sequence, this is presented as a tableau of softly lit adolescent saints swathed in long strips of raw linen in the fashion of Saint Sebastian. They appear to be arranging these strips of cloth around a nude and unresisting Eve. She is seen walking a tightrope very slowly, with anxious deliberation. The rope is held tight at one end by a person dressed in a white tunic, whose face is concealed by the white mask of a king. Eve is seen from behind while walking the tightrope, the light filtering through the cloth draping her thighs. We are just able to make out her buttocks and what appears to be her pubic hair. The image evokes a sense of vulnerability which derives from the positioning of the viewer as an intruder or voyeur. Eve's body is exposed and probed, setting up a scopophilic relationship of power where the viewer is granted knowledge of her body. Yet, the knowledge granted is only partial as the gaze simultaneously confirms the impossibility of showing the "truth" of female sexuality – some part of the body/sexuality is inevitably, always left hidden and unknowable. As opposed to male sexual excitement which the male is powerless to conceal, female arousal is invisible to the external observer. Further disorientation is effected when Eve's body is next rotated in half-shadow, half-silhouette before the camera, in the same dream sequence. As she is rotated, the viewer is offered a sequential view of first her back and then of her breast in outline, daubed with orange light. Mixed in with such imagery is more plainly religious symbolism: Eve is lifted upwards into the black, hands extended in a pyramid above her head. What appears to be a glass pane is shattered over her outstretched hands as the music, a mystical refrain, builds to a crescendo. We witness an epiphany or blessing, perhaps a moment of redemption. The image dissolves into a hazy pink atmosphere at the

centre of which is a crucifix-shaped pool, an allusion to baptism or salvation. The mix of vocabularies, erotic and religious, and the images which appear recognizable but resist comfortable or certain accommodation, leave Eve's psychology open to interpretation. At this stage, the viewer is unsure that these images are from Eve's subconscious, although the blurring of boundaries between the sexual and the religious, together with the misty lighting, does recall the unconscious' tendency to destroy fixed categories of experience.

The "real-life" narrative is regularly interspersed with images from Eve's dream-life. With time, it becomes evident that real-life memories of an incident concerning her parents, a failed seduction of her father by her mother, are worked into her dream sequences, which develop in complexity as the narrative advances. The dream sequences appear to bear some relation to the turn of events in Eve's waking life. The dream sequence of the Grecian, cloth-swabbed youths, Eve in similar vestment, the tightrope walking, the upward propulsion and breaking glass, the crucifix pool and the celestial song, opens onto a scene where Eve is in bed with John. The juxtaposition of these images implies that this is the place Eve inhabits psychologically during sex. The composition of elements drives her to orgasm. It is unclear exactly why these images excite Eve. There are allusions to bondage and exhibitionism. Both are still considered subversive sexual practices and in the dream sequence Eve experiments with both in view of the "king" – a symbol of repressive patriarchal power. It is possible that the fantasy of indulging in the forbidden and getting away with doing so (Eve is ultimately "saved" in the dream sequence) lends an added erotic charge to her sex life.

The second time this type of dream sequence occurs is when Eve is making love to the woman psychiatrist. The sequence now includes ropes being tightened around Eve's body. The sequence ends when the person clothed in the white tunic and bearing a king's head, stands between Eve's legs and opens the tunic to reveal a pair of breasts. Again, the sequence is entertained as complex sex-fantasy. The mixing of genders represented by the figure of the king with breasts introduces the idea of a polymorphous sexuality which constitutes a comment on the socialization of the individual into an artificial sex-role system that is both binary and exclusive. The image subverts the idea of women as having an innate sexual orientation towards men and can be seen as a reference to heterosexuality as a political institution. The dream sequence might be understood as an outlet for Eve's powerlessness to escape the hegemonic binary system in her daily life and therefore her desire to corrupt it in pleasurable way, through sex. Eve's recourse to sex as an act of perversion of the heterosexual matrix alludes to the inherent practical difficulties in transposing Butler's theory of performativity to the public sphere. There is no definite indication that Eve's sexual practices are politically motivated. Yet, Eve's sexual relationships appear to be very cold emotionally: they do not contain any form of commitment or love. This could be because, as a public figure, as a lawyer/aspirant judge, Eve is required by the "social contract" to be heterosexual. We can surmise that she must feel the pressure to conform sexually, at least, publically. Her private sexual practices may represent an outlet for this pressure. Whether or not this is the case, what is certain is that the public exposure of these practices would mean the end of her career. Whatever eventual subversive impact these practices could have on normative social culture is diminished by the necessary limitation of these practices to the private realm.

To do otherwise would exact too high a price and ironically cancel out the socially transgressive, if token, presence of a (covertly) bisexual woman judge. The alternative subversion of hegemonic terms, such as sex, meant to denaturalize gender, must then, most of the time, take place privately.

Eve's dream sequence sees a further development the night before she is to meet with the governor to interview for the judgeship – a decisive career moment. The dream sequences heighten in tension and complexity in relation to the heightened events in Eve's waking life. The young female psychiatrist has broken off with her and Eve is unable to respond to this event, and her exchanges with her sister are coming to a head. In the dream, Eve, dressed as a judge but spectral in appearance – very pale with a cloud of dark hair – sentences a teary Emma (Mattie's friend). This scene cuts to another where Eve frantically tries to make her way through a house of horrors. Endless strips of cloth hang from the ceiling and in between them are Emma and Ed's Aunt – the hyperreal feminine characters of Mattie's acquaintance – frozen in stereotyped, campy, mannequin poses. Eve runs to a mirror, from behind which emerges a grotesquely obese naked old woman. She appears to be covered in mud and her breasts sag disproportionately, hugely towards the folds of her belly. The figure is resonant of the Venus of Willendorf, a tiny statuette from the Old Stone Age found in Austria. Overflowing and protuberant, the Venus is "buried in the bulging mass of her own fecund body".³⁷ A female hand (Eve's?) reaches from the dark, disembodied, and cuts at the woman's breast with a hidden object (perhaps a razor blade). The woman recoils into the darkness and Eve awakens gasping and drenched in sweat. Eve's deep-seated fear of growing old, fat and ugly – embodied by the

obese, mud-covered figure – derives directly from her perception that in patriarchal society, the sexualization of women is part of the job. Adrienne Rich writes:

Central and intrinsic to the economic realities of women's lives is the requirement that women will market sexual attractiveness to men who tend to hold the economic power and position to enforce their predilections. Economically disadvantaged women learn to behave in a complaisantly and ingratiatingly heterosexual manner because they discover this is the true qualification for employment, whatever the job description.³⁸

Although Eve is not economically disadvantaged, her job depends on her "pretending to be not merely heterosexual but a heterosexual woman, in terms of dressing and playing the deferential role required of real women".³⁹ Society demands that she perform in a manner suited to her gender. That Eve's beauty and style are determining factors in her success is demonstrated not only by her inexhaustible efforts to comply with culturally specific criteria of beauty, evidence of which is present throughout the film, but also by a series of comments made by Eve's boss and Eve herself. The day before her interview with the governor, Eve's male boss tells her to go home and get her "beauty sleep" – something a male candidate for a judgeship would never be told to do – and later in the day, in conversation with the woman psychiatrist, Eve excuses her need for rest with the statement "God forbid I look haggard for the governor". The comments seem harmless but in fact function as a social reflex. As Naomi Wolf explains in *The Beauty Myth* (1990), beauty is a political weapon used to prescribe behaviour, not appearance.⁴⁰ Tracing the relationship between female liberation and female beauty, Wolf explains how self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of ageing and dread of lost control⁴¹ underlie the will to beauty. Not only are women debilitated by the promotion of such mass neurosis,

competition has also been made part of the myth so that women are divided from one another.⁴² The cutting at the breast of the obese, naked woman, in Eve's dream sequence, is a form of self-mutilation – a gesture Eve mimics in real-life – after her first meeting with her possible successor at the law firm. Feeling threatened by Langley's beauty and seemingly effortless composure, Eve curses and in frustration streaks her white blouse with lipstick, desecrating the carefully-put-together façade of the successful woman lawyer. Her act of "self-mutilation" can be interpreted as her way of exposing her sense of "ugliness" and failure to comply with the social standards of beauty. But she *does* comply with these standards. Eve's supposed "ugliness" is unreal; it is one of her pervasive fears – amongst others – and underlies her compulsive work on her appearance. The implication (which Naomi Wolf supports) is that the ideal of feminine beauty that is propounded by the media, among other forces, is unattainable and even a very beautiful woman such as Eve will fall short of it. The inevitable result is self-blame, as women tend not to blame the ideals and standards themselves.

The possible connection between the two acts of self-mutilation provides one channel of interpretation. The tightrope Eve walks in her dreams might be considered a metaphor for the balancing act she performs daily, carefully walking the line between gender stereotypes. To succeed in her career, Eve's outward presentation needs to be carefully constructed, the masculine aggression she demonstrates in the courtroom (she is told the governor wants to appoint someone with the reputation of a "killer" in the courtroom – she has just won an important criminal case) needs to be tempered by feminine outfits.

Her suits are superbly cut and tailored so as to complement the ideal of femininity that is constructed, mainly, by the male-dominated beauty industry.

The kind of excesses incarnated by Emma and Ed's aunt are to be avoided. Neither version of excessive femininity would be acceptable in the world of law (primarily a masculine world) and had Eve misguidedly adopted one of these versions of femininity instead of the artfully crafted version she embodies, she quite possibly would not have been so successful. Emma, with her floral patterns, blonde bangs, curly hair and affected feminine softness, represents the stereotype of the romantic woman. She works from home (she is a dressmaker of wedding gowns), but spends most of her time either daydreaming about her boyfriend or getting ready to meet him. When he fails to propose, she is crushed and proceeds to denigrate herself, saying she'll amount to nothing as she is lost without him. Her daughter Ed, who is thirteen, functions in reaction to this cloying femininity. She is entirely heedless of her mother's comments on her abandoned and purposefully androgynous appearance. In contrast, Ed greatly admires Mattie's doctoral study on a tribe of South American women who are tough and warrior-like. She also frequently performs minor acts of self-mutilation, flirting with abjection, such as cutting her hair, removing her cuticles with a knife, and etching words onto her thighs with a razor blade. Ed's behaviour and Eve's self-mutilations can be placed on the same continuum. Although Ed, as a teenager, is allowed, by society, to externalize her revolt more openly than Eve, both mutilate themselves in reaction to constructed feminine stereotypes which oppress and denigrate them.

Ed's aunt represents another stereotype, a hardened, jaded, street-wise woman. She has lived through life's knocks, has learned from them and carries no expectations. She uses femininity as a tool to obtain what she wants from men and encourages others to do the same. She deconstructs femininity through her speech while performing it through her dance in the living room. "This is what men really care about ... you've got to make them believe you have everything they desire... you gotta erase yourself, become generic..." she says. The reference to "erasing oneself" is telling here as it implies that women's "selves" – as defined by women – have no authentic space under patriarchy.

The pressures of performing the perfect balance of femininity – an impossible ideal created and regulated by patriarchy – evolve into a private reality that colonizes Eve's consciousness. She is haunted by the possibility that people are able to see through the façade and that the delicate balancing act that she performs is unconvincing. This would explain her waking dream sequences. Early in the narrative, the night immediately following her win in court against a major criminal, Eve finds herself working late into the night at the office. Her attention seems scattered. She rings John and leaves a message on his machine, half-rebuking him for not calling. She eats M&M's and simultaneously completes a quiz entitled "What's your fight style" in a glossy magazine – presumably a mix between fashion and office strategy – once again underlining the centrality of beauty to the success of women. She calls her father to tell him of the possible judgeship but he is disinterested and irritated by her call and he denies her the opportunity to share the news. It is obvious that Eve phones her father because she needs approval from a male authority-figure in order to "make it" in a man's world. She responds nonchalantly but

she is hurt by his reaction. She doodles crucifix-like figures and practices her signature as judge. Suddenly, she hears laughter – it is late and she is apparently alone in the building. She stands up alarmed but then hears the vacuum cleaner. Realizing it is the cleaning lady, she relaxes. At this point, she is grabbed from behind by the criminal she prosecuted that morning – an older man, a mafioso type despite his grooming. He holds her head firmly and with his other hand presses at her thighs and slowly moves his hand upwards as he taunts her, "Flabby ass and thighs, rank, rubbery cunt, droopy tiny tits, insatiable, lascivious beast, devious, stupid, a fraud, everyone knows there is nothing genuine about you...". It is no coincidence that it is a felon to whom Eve's unconscious grants the ability to see through her façade, as this entire incident is a hallucination or waking nightmare and does not "really" take place. On the other hand, the realistic filming techniques used in this sequence imply that the nightmare is as real to Eve and has as much impact on her as so-called "real-life". Here Eve is projecting her own sense of being an outsider or outlaw onto the criminal. The waking nightmare plays on two of Eve's principal insecurities – her fear of being discovered as an imposter, and her insecurity regarding her sexual appeal. It is quite logical that the criminal should expose Eve by denigrating her body because women are assigned value in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard⁴³ – their beauty correlates with their worth. The criminal's focus on Eve's female sexual characteristics in his attack, his depiction of them as repulsive, is possibly a symptom of Eve's sense of her sex as unruly, deficient or diseased as a result of her transgressive sexual practices, in contrast to the acceptably monogamous, heterosexual female norm.

Eve panics and, in breaking free of his hold, breaks free from the waking nightmare. She pauses, breathing heavily, and then reaches over to her desk, rips the paper on which she had been practising her signature, muttering in near hysteria, "I have nothing, nothing at all". Eve's panic derives from her sense of her identity as a failed reality and from her fear that her value only derives from others, instead of being inherent in herself. Her identity, like all identity, is a simulacrum, a contingent mechanism with no objective essence, which in the case of women serves to maintain institutional power. On a less metaphysical note, Eve's position is doubly precarious because as a woman in a powerful post, she cannot escape the reality that she is a token presence in a predominantly male environment. Her continued success in this context is almost entirely determined by the prevailing goodwill of her male peers and superiors. As her boss points out, her chances of being chosen for the judgeship are greatly improved by the fact that the system requires a woman. This reference to "affirmative action" removes the possibility that Eve might possess the merit to become a judge, again devaluing her.

A similar incident occurs when, after receiving a call from Emma requesting that she come to Mattie's aid, Eve makes her way to a rural town called Fillmore, where Mattie is imprisoned for shoplifting. At the police station, a party is on the go. Eve is refused permission to see her sister despite her requests to see the policewoman's superior. While the party increases in hilarity, Eve talks on the phone, presumably to a police official, attempting to get permission to see her sister. The person at the other end appears immovable. Eve, losing her composure, shouts abuse into the phone, "...fucking idiot...see if you have a job...". At this point she is grabbed from behind, immobilized by

the policewoman who had first attended her. The woman talks slowly and menacingly into her ear, "Hysterical, loudmouthed bitch, ball-buster, battle-ax, strident, grotesque, out of control, unfeminine – you, a judge? Never!". Just as suddenly, Eve breaks loose from the waking nightmare. She holds the phone loosely in one hand. Trembling, she repeats, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." She leaves the police station, the frolickers oblivious to her. Eve is caught between two contradictory demands – the demand that she be feminine, as defined by social standards, so as to succeed as a woman, and the demand to be assertive, forceful and aggressive – traditionally masculine traits – to succeed as a lawyer. Both currents pull in opposite directions and the possibility of a balance between the two remains elusive.

The disequilibrium or schizophrenia induced by having to negotiate femininity and masculinity – neither of which are essential categories or attributes but contingent social constructions – unsettles Eve's self-confidence. She knows, or has a relatively clear idea of what sort of persona she is to perform: self-assured, competent, appealing, attractive, but she is at times unable to bring it off, either ostensibly, or as a knowledge she keeps to herself and torments herself with. There are two scenes in particular where Eve is clearly, visibly unsure of what is expected of her. The first occurs after an argument with Mattie when she drives to a petrol station. On her arrival, she is greeted flirtatiously by the male attendant. He opens her door and greets her with "Hello, beautiful". Eve is immediately on the defensive, asking him if this is the only way he can get women. The attendant persists in his flirtatious demeanour, telling her he is just playing but that he's going to give her the full service because she's so cute. Eve responds that she doesn't want it –

this is a barely disguised play on women “asking” to be raped by wearing provocative/seductive clothing; there is a definite and ubiquitous correlation between gender-power and cars. When he insists, she slams the car door and stares at him. The attendant, suddenly aware that she is serious, replaces the petrol pump and moves back into the doorway, telling her sarcastically that she’s safe with him. Eve tells him to fuck off, to which he replies that he’s now really scared. Eve’s behaviour could be seen as an overreaction if this exchange were an isolated incident. But incidents where men force themselves on women to a lesser or greater degree are almost standard practice in patriarchal society. Women’s subordination under patriarchy is reified through violence, as exemplified by rape. As Jane Ussher discusses in *Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?*(1991),⁴⁴ the fear of rape acts to control all women. Women confine their activities to protect themselves from this ever-present threat. There is not a single woman who moves freely in our society, who proceeds with a sense of impunity, because a woman who makes herself generally known and felt is deemed fair game because she is understood to be providing sexual provocation for men. Legion manifestations of male violence threaten women’s authority and undermine their self-esteem and freedom of action. The attendant’s banter in *Female Perversions* is situated on this continuum - not unintentionally his exchange with Eve parallels the pervasive, vulgar perception of a woman’s "no" meaning "yes":

Gas Attendant: I’m going to give you the full service cause
you’re so cute.

Eve: I don’t want it!

Gas Attendant: Oh yes, you do!

In this particular case the threat of violence is not played out. The gas attendant does not physically assault Eve but his restraint is self-induced. Had Eve responded to his flirtations instead of growing aggressive, the outcome would most likely have been the same. When men are decided on doing violence to a woman, neither stridency nor flirtatious pandering will deter them. Given the unpredictability of what may trigger a violent reaction, women are often unsure of which posture to adopt so as to secure their personal safety. Eve displays a similar uncertainty on her way to drop off her suit at the cleaners for her interview with the governor. A black male beggar attempts to talk to her. She ignores him, running past him. On her way out he is still there. When he calls out to her again, Eve very stiffly comes to a halt and turns round to face him. She is perfectly made up, her hairdo a work of sculpture. He asks if she'd do him a favour, to stay as beautiful as she is. Eve is unsettled and unsure of how to behave and which role to perform, in direct contrast to the male passerby who unproblematically hands over change to the beggar just prior to her arrival. The male passerby acts independently, in his right as an individual, whereas Eve is immobilized by the ambiguities of feminine-gender behaviour. She turns away, hesitantly. Again, she is confused as to what attitude she should adopt – the feminine deferential role of a "real" woman or masculine impatience or irritability. She is unable to locate the middle ground because there is no middle ground for women in patriarchal society.

The undercurrent of violence extends from the public to the private realm and Eve's relationship with John is no exception. Eve visits John the day after having cancelled a dinner with him. When she tries to seduce him, he has an outburst of fury in which he

throws furniture about. John is furious because Eve had chosen to work instead of dining with him, thereby placing her needs before his in direct defiance of hegemonic heterosexual criteria. Eve is frightened by the outburst although she pretends nonchalance and placates John by conceding that she "shouldn't be able to change the rules". By "rules", Eve refers to the power arrangement wherein women are subordinated to men. On John's rude departure, Eve has a flashback, an image of her mother being rejected and thrown to the ground by her father. Evidently, the "rules" invade not only the present but also extend from the past. Eve is haunted by an identification with her mother's rejection and vulnerability. Although she resists it, the image resurfaces like a repressed memory whenever she is feeling particularly insecure. After having seen herself interviewed on television with a piece of dark chocolate between her front teeth, Eve dashes into an expensive lingerie store. Popular psychology encourages clothes shopping as a form of therapy for women with the mantra "If I look good I feel good". In accordance, Eve attempts to exorcise her insecurity and to ratify her social standing by reaffirming her physical attractiveness. She stops before a mirror to admire herself. As she does so, there is a voice-over, a spectral taunt of her thighs. Eve turns around quickly but she finds no one as the taunting is in her head. This is clearly the internalized voice of self-criticism for her failure to come up to impossible beauty ideals. Furiously she picks up a piece of almost non-existent lingerie from the rack and goes into the changing room. Eve's choice of garment is significant – lingerie are accoutrements of the objectification of women as sex objects, since they are not designed to be worn, but rather to accentuate women's sexual characteristics for the male gaze. She emerges in a transparent slip that is entirely revealing and walks brashly over to the saleswoman to express her doubts over its size.

The saleswoman interrupts her conversation with a seated, older man and goes off to fetch Eve a bigger size. Eve makes her way over to the mirror, apparently oblivious to the man's presence (there is a certain defiance in her exposition, an establishment of hierarchy, a dare). He watches her discreetly. She makes her way back to the dressing room, pausing to adjust the slip around her bottom. At this juncture, there is once again a flashback to the parental scene, the mother displaying a thigh. The resurgence of the image belies the success of Eve's attempt to boost her confidence through audacious display. No amount of labour will ever be adequately compensated as insecurity is built into social conceptions of beauty and heterosexual attractiveness for women. The promulgated ideal is elusive, ever-changing and impossible to achieve so that women are kept trying.

It is only later in the film, after an emotionally charged row with Mattie, that Eve recalls how she had reacted upon witnessing her father's brutal rejection of her mother – she had run to her father's side and not to her mother's. The young girl's reaction, probably motivated by a vigorous Oedipus Complex, is best understood within a context of power. The father represents that other pole of human existence, the world of thought, of man-made things, of law, order, discipline, travel and adventure.⁴⁵ Neither girls nor boys want to be stuck with the lousy limited lives of women.⁴⁶ Children instinctively reject the powerlessness associated with women. In order to fit into the order of the world, however, women necessarily confine themselves to some stereotype of normal femininity. At the beginning of the film, a quote by feminist Louise. J. Kaplan describes normative femininity as a perversion because in conforming to the stereotype, women are

denied the opportunity to explore and express the fullness of their sexual, emotional and intellectual capacities. But subverting the norm exacts a very high price. The contradiction highlights the complexity of women's role in the world. Kaplan's comment is a criticism of the social order which she sees as perverse and unnatural. Of course, this flies in the face of the ideology of gender, which presents the whole hierarchy as "natural". Opening the film with this quotation implies that the director also sees it as "perverse and unnatural".

The double bind that femininity represents for women is played out in the climax of the film during Eve's interview with the governor for the judgeship. The governor inquires after Eve's family relationships and expresses his confusion as to how such a beautiful woman has never been married. The idea of an unmarried, childless woman saddens the governor, whose own wife has borne him five daughters. Eve explains her single status by way of her dedication to her career. If she had been a man she wouldn't have had to justify her single status and her dedication would have worked in her favour but, as a woman, ironically, it has the opposite effect. Once again, Eve is left disorientated and later, back in her car, she rebukes herself for not having lied about being engaged. Putting the blame for the system's perversity on herself, Eve attributes the failure of the interview to her stupidity and insufficient presentation. She drives off to confront Mattie for having taken her lucky suit on the day of the interview.

Female Perversions demonstrates how the implicit threat of loss of career, of public and private violence, and of impending physical ugliness work to discourage alternative

representations of normative femininity by women. The punitive rules of hegemonic heterosexual standards enforce the continued performance of compulsory gender identities. The difficulty for women is thus two-fold: that of being compelled by society to perform a feminine ideal they can never approximate, and that of creating conditions for local, subversive interventions. As an example of a local intervention, the film *Female Perversions* serves to cultivate an awareness of the constructed and heterodesignated status of gender identity and this constitutes an important step in the practice of resistance.

ENDNOTES:

- 1) McDonald, H. 2001. *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*. London. Routledge.
p 4.
- 2) Heterodesignation – a term coined by feminist Rosa Magda in her book *Foucault y la Genealogia de los Sexos* (1999), which refers to the imposition of identity on the individual by hegemonic discursive structures such as the mass media.

Simulacrum - the primacy of signs leads on to the development of simulation, the process whereby the representation of things comes to replace the things being represented.
- 3) McDonald, H. 2001. *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*. London. Routledge.
p 99.
- 4) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited 26 August 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan/chap4.htm
- 5) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited 26 August 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan/chap4.htm
- 6) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited. 26 August 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan/chap4.htm
- 7) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited 26 August 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan/chap4.htm
- 8) Butler deconstructs the distinction between sex (corporeal facts) and gender (social conventions) so that, in this context, a sexed social position can be considered equivalent to a gendered social position. Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies that Matter*. New York. Routledge. p 1-23.

- 9) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited 26 August 2003.
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- 10) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited 26 August 2003.
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- 12) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited 26 August 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan/chap4.htm
- 13) This can be considered a direct allusion to Derrida's "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" which literally means "there is no outside to text". This can also be translated as "there is nothing outside the text".
- 14) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited 26 August 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan/chap4.htm
- 15) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited 26 August 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan/chap4.htm
- 16) *You and I forced to Identity* website, visited 26 August 2003.
www.lclark.edu/~soan/chap4.htm
- 17) Eagleton, M. 1996. *Feminist Literary Theory*. UK. Blackwell Publishers Inc. p 373.
- 18) Eagleton, M. 1996. *Feminist Literary Theory*. UK. Blackwell Publishers Inc. p 372.
- 19) Rich, A. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". *Signs Periodical*. Vol 5. N° 4. 1980. p 633.
- 20) Rich, A. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". *Signs Periodical*. Vol 5. N° 4. 1980. p 639.

- 21) Rich, A. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". *Signs Periodical*. Vol 5. N° 4. 1980. p 641.
- 22) Cixous, H. Sorties: "Out and Out:Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" from *New French Feminisms*. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.) 1975 in University of South Africa. Tutorial letter 103 CONTEM-A. 1997. Pretoria.
- 23) Ussher, J. 1991. *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* Great Britain. Harvester Wheatsheaf. p 14.
- 24) Fuss, D. 1989. *Essentially Speaking*. Great Britain. Routledge. p 103.
- 25) Fuss, D. 1989. *Essentially Speaking*. Great Britain. Routledge. p 103
- 26) hooks,b. 1992. *Black Looks*.USA. Routledge. p 5.
- 27) Mulvey, L. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. USA. Indiana University Press. p 15.
- 28) Mulvey, L. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. USA. Indiana University Press. p 8.
- 29) Mulvey, L. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. USA. Indiana University Press. p 15.
- 30) Mulvey, L. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. USA. Indiana University Press. p 15.
- 31) Mulvey, L. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. USA. Indiana University Press. p 10.
- 32) hooks, b. 1992. *Black Looks*. Routledge. USA. p 117.
- 33) McDonald, H. 2001. *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*. London. Routledge. p 136.
- 34) hooks, b. 1992. *Black Looks*.USA. Routledge. p 7.
- 35) hooks, b. 1992. *Black Looks*. USA. Routledge. p 118.
- 36) Ussher, J. 1991. *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?*Great Britain. Harvester Wheatsheaf. p 20.
- 37) Paglia, C. 1990. *Sexual Personae*. London. Penguin Books. p 54.

- 38) Rich, A. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". *Signs Periodical*.
Vol 5. N° 4. 1980. p 642.
- 39) Rich, A. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". *Signs Periodical*.
Vol 5. N° 4. 1980. p 642.
- 40) Wolf, N. 1990. *The Beauty Myth*. London. Vintage. p 14.
- 41) Wolf, N. 1990. *The Beauty Myth*. London. Vintage. p 10.
- 42) Wolf, N. 1990. *The Beauty Myth*. London. Vintage. p 14.
- 43) Wolf, N. 1990. *The Beauty Myth*. London. Vintage. p 12.
- 44) Ussher, J. 1991. *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* Great Britain.
Harvester Wheatsheaf. p 32.
- 45) Firestone, S. 1972. *The Dialectic of Sex*. New York. Bantam Books. p 51.
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www.lclark.edu/~soan/chap4.htm

Conclusion

The means and ends of heterodesignation closely parallel those of imperialism. The colonized subject is produced as Other through discourses that allege the naturalness and dominance of the colonizing culture and world-view, with the result that the relation of the colonized to the world is absolutely dependent on the values and language the colonizer has given him/her. Within such a context of racism, ethnic conflict and neo-colonial domination,¹ the deconstruction of identity assumes a fresh urgency as the frame of reference of imperialism allows for a more explicit demonstration of the ways in which culture is inescapably tied up with one's common identity. Imperialism therefore implies not only the exploitation of cheap labour, raw materials and easy markets, but also the uprooting of languages and customs and the imposition of alien ways of experiencing.²

Heterodesignation, as currently effected through a globalized mass media, through forms such as advertising, implies a similar homogenization of viewpoint and identity and can be considered an extension of colonizing practices into the twenty-first century (the ways in which heterodesignation is linked to globalization processes to which developing countries are most vulnerable has already been discussed in the introduction to this dissertation). As with colonized identities, the masculine and feminine heterodesignations of gender identity, imposed by the media in response to the current strategic imperative of globalization, hold no inherent truth in themselves; they are fictions linked to fantasies deeply embedded in the social world, which take on the status of fact when inscribed within the powerful cultural discourses and practices through which individuals are regulated.³ Feminist theorists, such as Judith Butler, responded to this cultural imperative

by developing a politics of the body that acknowledges how discourse invades the body and ultimately controls its forces, operations and movements. What is now at stake is the problematization of culture itself, the constitutive effects of global cultural conditions. In "moving beyond the isolated work of art into areas of language, lifestyle, social value and group identity, culture now invariably intersects with questions of global power".⁴ As I discussed in chapter one, the media culture of the twenty-first century is aimed at producing normalized subjects that can be inserted unresistingly into the current ideological, social and economic orders in response to the strategic imperative of globalization. Discourses, sign-systems and signifying practices of all kinds, from film and television to the Internet and outdoor advertising, exert an influence, moulding consciousness, and have a direct bearing on the maintenance and transformation of existing systems of power and on what it means to be a person.⁵

Although both men and women are subject to heterodesignation, they are moulded differently – this is a point I make in my analysis of *Female Perversions* in chapter two. The heterodesignation of women in phallogocentric societies can be considered partly as an analysis of what it is to exist as Other, whereas men are seen as depicting the universal human condition. Universalism is another feature held in common by heterodesignation and imperialism; in the latter case universalism was a critical component because of its determined negation of cultural difference. The overlap occurs because in both imperialism and heterodesignation, the privileged group represents itself as “universal” and thereby negates the existence of any Other/s. Positioned as Other, deprived of power, privilege and independence, women are often driven to madness and thus effectively

regulated, kept from grasping their actual condition and from organizing politically against it. I believe the disorientation experienced by most women in this regard is eloquently played out by the character of Eve Stevens, who struggles with the inherent ambiguity of feminine identity, in *Female Perversions*. The importance of deconstruction derives, therefore, from the ways in which it enables us to see how discursive regimes/epistemes determine what we know, what we think and what we do. Deconstruction exposes how our perceptions about ourselves depend on the prevailing discourses. This knowledge is liberating because, rather than conceiving of gender identity as an immutable destiny, it permits gender identity to be understood as a set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours and social relations by the deployment of a complex discursive political technology.⁶

The possibility of undoing the epistemic violence that is wrought by the dominant discourses that lay down the very base and structure of cultural awareness, lies in recognizing socialization as an always unfinished discursive project. Feminist Teresa de Lauretis theorizes that, if gender is a cultural representation, then the possibility obtains that the representation of gender is its construction. Interventions into the representation of gender therefore constitute vital political acts. As state power has proved too strong to dismantle, the terms of a different representation of gender can be found in the margins of hegemonic discourse, inscribed in marginal practices such as consciousness-raising groups and alternative artistic practices, such as feminist counter-cinema. Although feminist counter-cinema may be limited in what it can achieve in terms of creating a radically new identity for women, as demonstrated by my analysis of *Female Perversions*

in chapter two, practices such as this are nonetheless essential because, not only do they promote an awareness of the constructed and heterodesignated nature of identity, they represent ongoing efforts to create new discursive spaces from which to revise cultural narratives, to define the terms of another perspective and to make visible the unseen. Such practices could, eventually, potentially lead to the disruption of the social fabric and of white male privilege if the feminist critique of gender as an ideologico-technological practice were to become widespread.⁷

Aiding the potential disruption of the dominant cultural discourses is the character of power itself. According to Foucault, power is comprehensive, leaving nothing outside of it.⁸ Because it is both restrictive and productive, it becomes a matrix of possibility, ambiguous in its effects. Within such a matrix, local resistances and counter-practices deconstruct the dualisms of struggle that feed eternally on the opposition between state and revolution, thus opening up a wider field of conflicts. Micro-practices have provided a space in which vital political issues can be nurtured in an otherwise inhospitable environment.⁹ The results of these disturbances in meaning, while not without their contradictions and ambiguities, signify a shift in power.

Whatever counter-practices feminists work on, it must not be as "a unified and indivisible area but rather as groundwork for certain modes of anti-patriarchal work".¹⁰ Feminist discourse can be neither singular nor homogeneous in its goals, interests and analysis¹¹ if it hopes to avoid reproducing heterodesignations of its own. Judith Butler has described the process whereby domains of political representation set out in advance the criteria by

which subjects are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the feminist subject is discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation.¹² The preservation of difference has grown into a central preoccupation of several feminist theorists and new ways in which to discover and utilize differences as sources for creative change are being explored. Despite the determination not to allow the differences and potential separations between women to disable effective political action and the possibility of theory, ambiguity remains a condition of any attempt at constituting identity. For example, it can be difficult to identify the subject of struggle as one's allegiances and interests will shift according to where one is at any one particular time; the same class or element that was dominant in one area could be among the dominated in another – this can and does create many ambiguities and contradictions.¹³ The attempt to represent women as a whole and to develop universal categories for analyzing women's oppression has, in the past, led to the suppression of heterogeneity of the women in question. Instead of basing alliance on some abstract principle of unity, feminists have found that historical and contextual analyses of struggle permit the mobilization of individuals from diverse sites in the social field, which in turn enables the use of difference as a resource.¹⁴ When women rally around a particular struggle instead of an identity, the differentials of class, race and nationality are subsumed to the cause at hand and therefore can no longer function as obstacles to allegiance.

We live in a world where difference is fabricated in the interests of social control and commodity innovation,¹⁵ and whose depiction relies on stereotypes rather than basing itself on a radical questioning of those stereotypes, as demonstrated by the selection of advertisements analyzed in chapter one, which, despite presenting an array of apparently different feminine identities, such as that of young, carefree adolescence in the *cell phone* advert or of fashionable homemaker in the *Ambi Pur* advert, ultimately draw on and perpetuate gender stereotypes. The importance of preserving heterogeneity goes beyond the desire to distract ourselves from the monotony of sameness. Within white supremacist patriarchy, difference is currently exploited in ways that serve only to reinscribe the status quo. Learning to live and grappling with difference may be one form of disarming the power of white middle-class norms which we have all internalized to varying degrees.¹⁶ Fostering difference may lead towards the discovery of new ways of understanding ourselves: as Foucault states, “freedom does not basically lie in discovering or being able to determine who we are but in rebelling against those ways in which we are already defined, categorized and classified”.¹⁷ Through deconstruction and micro-politics, feminism has an active role to play in this process of liberation.

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- 11) Ashcroft, A., Griffiths, G. & Tiffin, H. 1995. *The Post-Colonial Reader*. London. Routledge. p 259.
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