

PREFACE

The Phallogentric Mood: "bored but hyper"

What's feminism now in the age of ultracapitalism? What's the relationship of feminist critique to the much-celebrated and perfectly *cachet* world of postmodernism?

Everything is being blasted apart by the mediascape. The violent, advertising machine gives us a whole, schizophrenic world of electric women for a culture whose dominant mode of social cohesion is the shopping mall; whose main psychological type is the electronic individual, and where all the old (patriarchal) signs of cultural authority collapse in the direction of androgyny. What makes, the *Eurythmics*, Cindy Lauper, and Carol Pope with *Rough Trade* so fascinating is that they play just at the edge of power and seduction, just at that zero-point where sex as electric



image is amplified, teased out a bit in a kind of ironic exhibitionism, and then reversed against itself. These are artists in the business of committing sign crimes against the big signifier of Sex. If it's true that we're finally leaving the obsolete world of the modern and entering postmodernism, then the earliest clues to the geography of this new terrain is what happens to images of women in the simulacrum of the media system. And why? Just because images of power and sexuality in the age of ultracapitalism are an early warning system to what's going on as we are processed through the fully realized technological society. *Power and sexual oppression*: that's the electronic junkyard of rock video, from the Sadeian sneer of Billy Idol to the masturbatory visuals of *Duran Duran*. *Power and seduction*: that's the dismembered mediascape of women as objects — women as cigarettes, beer bottles, perfume, cars, even bathtubs and weight machines. The art critic, Craig Owens, might write in *The Anti-Aesthetic* that "there is an apparent crossing of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodern critique of representation", but if that is so, then there's also a dark side to this happy intersection of critiques. And that dark side is the real world of media, power, and sexuality.

The Calvin Klein ad says it best. In an ironic reversal of the sexual stereotypes of the 1950s, it flips the traditional (patriarchal) images of women and men. It's man as a gorgeous hunk of flesh (the model's actually a descendant of Napoleon: that's sweet revenge for a lot of pain); and the woman, well she's ultracapitalism triumphant: a packaged and seductive image of women initiating and dominating sex and, as Bruce Weber (the photographer of the ad says), "it's woman even as protector." Sure, a little staged sex for a little staged communication: electronic woman flashing out of the media pulse with a little humanity. This ad is perfectly

cynical just because it emancipates, by reversing, the big signifiers of sex (woman as a '50s man: so much for an unconfused critique of the representation of gender in the advertising system) to sell commodities (perfume in this case). But it's also a wonderful example of what Andy Warhol in *Interview* has recently nominated as the dominant mood of the times: "BORED BUT HYPER". What's the fate of feminism then in the age of postmodernism? It's *processed* feminism: that's the radical danger, but also the real promise of feminist critique in technological society. The electronic machine eats up images of women: even (*most of all?*) emancipation from the patriarchal world of gender ideology is simultaneously experienced as domination *and* freedom. For feminists in the mediascape: it's no longer "either/or", but "both/and". Feminism is the quantum physics of postmodernism.

"blood from the head"

René Magritte's painting, *Memory*, captures perfectly the paradox, irony and ambivalence of the feminist challenge to an age which is typified by the death of the social and by the triumph of culture. *Memory* is postmodernism *par excellence*: here there is no hint of representational logic. Everything is schizophrenic (the disconnection of objects and meaning), chillingly silent, and bleak to the hyper. It's life on the fast track of schizoid images. But there's also a radical edge to *Memory*, and that's just what makes this painting the mark of a real transgression against the alien landscape of the processed world. In the midst of the real consumer world of object consciousness (Magritte's surreal and dream-like imagination is just a precursor of television *as* culture), blood flows from the head of the woman. It's just this sign of blood (memory) flowing from the head of the woman which is a silent and haunting reminder of just that which has been lost by the triumph of technicism in twentieth-century experience. Everything in *Memory* screams out *our* imprisonment in a disembodied and inhuman landscape of dead images, but the sign of blood from the head also speaks of the possibility of *embodied remembrance*, signifying both the trauma of postmodernism and the wound of memory which refuses to close.

Feminism Now: it's just like Magritte's brilliant depiction of blood from the head as rupture and transgression. *Memory*: that's the radical promise of feminist critique which is, against the global, cultural amnesia of the modern century, the historical remembrance of *temps perdu* and of better possibilities not yet achieved. *Memory*, of both a past yet not written and of a future yet not dreamed, is the truly, and perhaps *only*, radical political terrain in postmodernism. In this age of culture triumphant, when we have TV screens for heads, Sony Walkman's for ears, and when the real (embodied) world is just a poor and disappointing approximation of the (disembodied) hyper-reality of the processed world of high technology, it's "blood from the head" as the cut which marks the promise and peril of feminism now.

The essays on feminist theory and practice in this volume are in the nature of the wound that refuses to close against patriarchalism in postmodernist guise. They represent a calling back to feminism as a universal politics, the rupturing of the silence of the suppressed as "we objects object", and the writing of the text of a new feminist discourse.

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