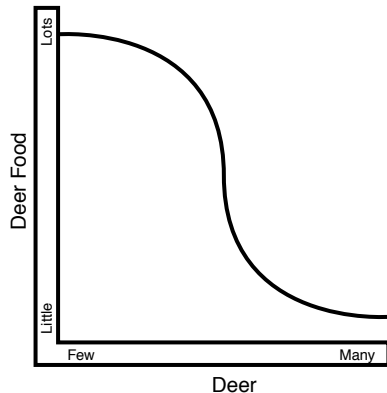


A Closed System: Negative and Positive Feedback

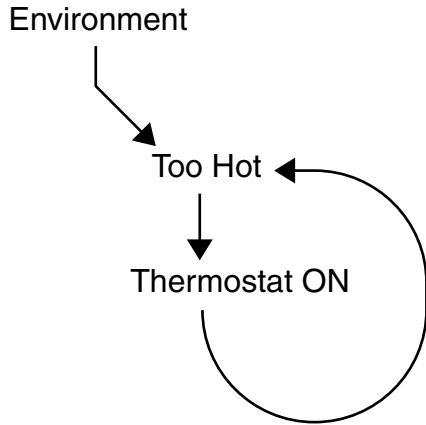
In the natural ecosystem there are complex relationships between animals and plants; predators and prey; bugs and daffodils. When any member of that community becomes too numerous, they'll outstrip their food supply. The population of that species will decrease, and with that decrease, their food supply will become more plentiful. This is a negative feedback system— a system that penalizes an increasing effect.



Negative feedback systems fluctuate, but over time, for a particular ecosystem, the peaks and valleys remain constant.

Man has overcome, to a large extent, this relationship with nature. Civilizations are able to flourish in locations where our numbers far surpass the land's ability to provide. Phoenix is a great example. If the quantity of food and water from farms and the Salt River alone were determining factors in this city's population, there wouldn't be so many people here. Our economic construct of productivity in exchange for food and goods— not just locally, but on a national and international scale allow the population to grow without much impact on our lives (granted: we need people with the foresight and good judgment to sell government trust land, dam the

Colorado, and pave everything). This is an example of a positive feedback system— a system that reinforces an increasing effect. The more people there are, the more money will be generated, and the greater the ability our infrastructure has to support an even greater population.



Positive feedback systems have a perpetual cycle, causing increasing effects to further increase. The example to the left represents what would happen if a thermostat turned the furnace ON when it was above 65° in the house. The temperature would continue to rise, and the thermostat would keep activating the furnace.

I bring this up because it's an apt description of how, as viewers of advertising, consumers, and naturalized capitalists, this is how our culture perpetuates itself— why it hasn't fizzled under the scrutiny of activists, eye-rolling of art critics, or under its own monstrous weight.

Culture-Image Relationship

Dave Hickey has a lot to say about this. So do marketing companies, gallery directors, corporate art directors, artists,

designers, and lots of other people who have to wrestle with this beast on a regular basis. Hickey, writing on the relation of culture to image says, "The fluid nuancing of pleasure, power and beauty is a serious, ongoing business in this culture..." Stone, an international stock image firm has it written in their mission statement, "[We strive] To identify and anticipate emerging creative trends through worldwide industry research. Stone is on a continual quest to represent universal subjects in unusual ways." Galleries, according to Brian O'Doherty deal with the culture-image relationship by, "...subtract[ing] from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art.'" When I'm at work, culture dictates appropriate iconography, aesthetics, and visual nuances that will make a logo or illustration successful. The way someone 30 years ago might have represented the Commission on the Status of Women is very different from how I go about it now. The way a gallery presents a body of work has changed as well. Different kinds of stock images sell now than did in 1970. And Hickey, quite rightly, points out that it's about damn time that artists return to politicizing their work with beauty.

What I'm suggesting is that there's a collusion between culture and image that encompasses aesthetic principles like presentation, iconography, and reifies beauty. It dictates how the model should pose for the cover of Vogue. It says what shapes and colors will communicate.

The culture-image relationship was the Egyptian canon that defined proper proportions, shapes, and body language of man and god. When an image is analyzed with semiotics, the culture-image

relationship was what caused the representation of *those* referents *that* way. When Hicky talks about the power of beauty as political rhetoric, it is because of the culture-image relationship that this is so.

Culture-Viewer Relationship

Judith Butler has to be the most interesting person to read when exploring naturalized cultural behavior. Although primarily interested in subverting gender relations, Butler does much to define human behavior, and by extension personality, as culturally indoctrinated role-playing; behavior as social artifice.

Martha Nussbaum, in a critique of Butler's 1989 book *Gender Trouble* points out, "Before Butler, the psychologist Nancy Chodorow gave a detailed and compelling account of how gender differences replicate themselves across the generations: she argued that the ubiquity of these mechanisms of replication enables us to understand how what is artificial can nonetheless be nearly ubiquitous."

That we are all a part of this doesn't make it any easier to define or to look at objectively. The relationship is both cyclical and reliant on our active participation as naturalized members of our society. Its cyclic nature is implied in the reasons that Nussbaum quotes Chodorow for; we imitate our parent's behavior when young, apply it in a social context from the first words out of our mouths until we die, and pass it along to our children. The relationship is reliant on our active participation because as soon as we stop,

culture ceases to dictate our motives, thus our behaviors. Is it even possible to "stop?" I couldn't even begin to guess what that would mean. Daniel Quinn, in his 1996 book, *The Story of B* speaks of the 30,000 or so non-westernized cultures that exist around the world and tries to conjecture on what a worldview that didn't involve our contemporary consumer (Consumer in the biggest sense of the word: We are consumers of the world— rainforests fall, species go extinct, landfills get bigger, etc.) perspective would be like. He doesn't do a very good job.

Our actions are defined by cultural norms and define cultural norms by acting them out. We are both cause and effect— there is a duality to social interaction that people *way* smarter than me do a better job of getting their heads around.

Image-Viewer Relationship

Since we started painting on cave walls (or perhaps before), images have been an intrinsic part of human culture. Years and years have passed— will continue to do so— and art, advertising, propaganda of all sorts; they don't show signs of stopping any time soon. For the sake of this paper, I'm going to be unreasonable and concentrate only on photography. Roland Barthes, Catherine MacKinnon, Silvia Kolbowski, and Jean Kilbourne all have things to say about our relationship to photos.

Barthes, although he never really seemed to make up his mind about *how* exactly the relationship worked, applied semiotic theory to photography. Attempting to explain our reading of an image

through the vehicle of sign, signifier, and signified; reducing the seemingly literal representation of experiential reality (a photograph) to an academic rendering of meaning isn't easy.

MacKinnon was a bit more pragmatic about the whole business and simply saw that there was, in an image, *something* going on that could empower, influence, or subordinate the viewer. Although her method of convincing the rest of us that this was the case left something to be desired, the implication was clear: Photographs are powerful creatures.

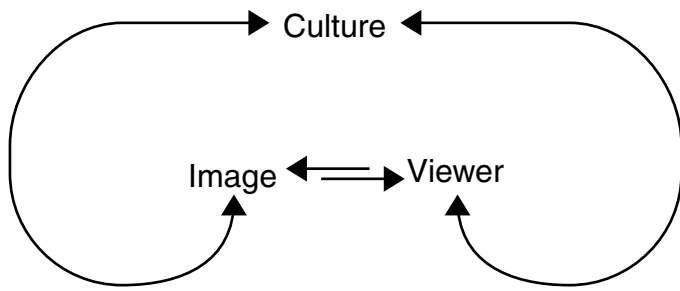
Kolbowski, in writing about the relationship between image and viewer speaks to the inherent schism between (cultural) aesthetic reality presented in photographs and the reality of human social behavior. Earlier, when I mentioned that culture created an aesthetic canon followed by image-makers, I wanted to keep that separate from my exploration of the culture-viewer relationship. As Kolbowski implies when she writes about women looking at fashion magazines, "... the female spectator must gain access to the 'gap' between the visible and the knowable... if she is to participate in the process of her representation, the sublimation from body to 'knowledge.'" The posture, the gaze, the accessories that imply social status in contemporary commercial images are not realized by naturalized cultural behavior. This discrepancy manifests itself in a variety of ways. From eating disorders to depression, sexual abuse of children to teenage pregnancy, the relationship of image to viewer isn't just one of decoding signs and signifiers. It is also one that has profound physical and emotional manifestations.

Jean Kilbourne has spent decades exploring the ramifications of this relationship. Focusing on advertising, she builds a strong case linking a variety of behaviors to the gulf that exists between objectified (culture-image) behavioral representation and experiential reality. In her 1999 book, *Can't Buy My Love*, Kilbourne dissects "unhealthy" marketing tactics: Trivialization of interpersonal relationships, gender, addiction, disconnection (depression), and violence are all themes she picks out again and again, building a case that advertisers get us "where we're weakest."

Those weaknesses are the result of ideals that aren't played out in culturally accepted behavior. We do not, as a rule, find ultimate pleasure in cigarettes (or cancer for that matter), do not find complete freedom in an SUV, don't find tantric sex at the bottom of a rum bottle, nor true love from fabric softener.

Exploring this Structure as Critical Dialog on Advertising

The relationships I've outlined are a rather wonderful example of a positive feedback system. Culture and (culturally indoctrinated)



viewers define each other. Culture and image define an aesthetic canon that describes cultural behaviors and ideals that are divorced from experiential reality, but have a

profound effect when image and viewer attempt to relate. It all feeds a power structure that addicts more and more people every day to a value system that has brought us to new cultural pinnacles like *Moesia*, *Survivor*, and *Jerry Springer*.

The image found on the last page of this paper came from Nylon magazine, and caught my attention. A victim of some sort of abuse, a girl averts her gaze from me. She is touching the cuff of her sweater to her lips. Clearly it's a wealth of sociopolitical issues—Jean Kilbourne would have a field day with this one. I want to explore this image now from several perspectives.

1. As a member of the same culture that produced the image.
2. As an image-maker, looking at how the iconography and psychology of our culture influence and normalize its thematic and aesthetic presentation.
3. From a critical standpoint of what this image communicates to the reader.

And as fair warning, I don't think that anyone can do each of these things independently of the others. Elements of each perspective can be found in any of the others.

Several things go through my head while looking at this image. One is pathos for the girl. She's looking vulnerable, in danger, and is remarkably pretty; her posture and facial expression don't lead one to imagine that she's *trying* to sell us clothing. She's appealing to a male audience, encouraging them to invent a story of rescue and protection (riding in on their white horses in shining armor), "Save me— buy green sweaters."

She's appealing to a female audience, though, by a different vehicle— that of identification. She encourages a story to be built around her. Why does she look like this? Why is she so vulnerable? What's going to happen to her? Women will buy green sweaters to create dramatic stories of and for themselves. (Not of being raped or beaten themselves, of course. However, surfing sex-advice columns for five minutes on the internet pulled up two rape-fantasy columns discussing two womens' desire to be overcome. Not to jump headlong into feminist issues pertaining to subordination, objectification, and misogyny, but the playing out of gender-based power struggles in imagery and sexual behavior is more common than not. This image, to a female audience, plays on that phenomenon.)

The large bruise on the girl's face is obviously make-up, it's clear that she's not really been abused: she's a well paid model doing her job. Understanding both the role and the reality of this image gives it the power of a narrative that sells sweaters to women,

but doesn't also convey the message, "If you wear our green sweater you'll get the snot kicked out of you." I sincerely doubt that *that* message would sell much of anything.)

The power structure perpetuates itself: the advertisers who used this image are encouraged by dollar sales to produce more ads and more effective ads. What defines effective is influenced each time a new ad is introduced and affects viewer (consumer) behavior. Viewer behavior affects the culture which marketing research is inevitably based on. But the face behind advertising: the board of directors for companies, the art directors, the product designers, the graphic designers, the layout artists, the copywriters; they're all consumers as well. Each level: Advertiser (and their images), culture (and its normalizing behavioral construct), and consumer are all tied up in this mess.

Conclusion

Martha Nussbaum, in criticizing Butler, makes a lucid statement, "The new feminism, moreover, instructs its members that there is little room for large-scale social change, and maybe no room at all. We are all, more or less, prisoners of the structures of power that have defined our identity... All that we can hope to do is to find spaces within the structures of power in which to parody them, to poke fun at them, to transgress them in speech. And so symbolic verbal politics, in addition to being offered as a type of real politics, is held to be the only politics that is really possible." Now, granted, Nussbaum was condemning Butler for being a

pretentious, out of touch with real people with real problems, democratic process unbeliever, but this quote gets to the essence of it all.

What the hell does this all mean? Trapped by a rock and a hard place; culturally dictated behavior and unrealizable transcendence through capitalism, are we really "prisoners of the structures of power that have defined our identity"? Well, I think, yes. I don't think that there's a whole lot anyone can do that challenges this power structure that will lead to fruition.

I do disagree with Nussbaum's rather back-of-hand to forehead "Ahl we cahn do..." dismissal of the potential that Butler asserts can have a subverting effect on the way culture behaves (and in turn the way we behave). In art as well as writing, it is possible to reveal where culture intersects image; where image interacts with viewer; where viewer naturalizes behavior into culture— these intersections, if they can be exposed in one small way or another will have all the weight and authority that they do now— but for the purpose of subverting that very structure, or at least changing it a little bit.

Artists like Cindy Sherman are already tapping into this potential. When Cindy acts out cultural expectations of behavior through art, she uses this positive feedback system and her images get stronger the more you look. Each point that intersects: Cindy as someone else... as a photograph... that you're looking at, builds on every other point.

Things can change, despite what Nussbaum implies when she attacks Butler, despite the commercial exploitation of ourselves, despite the problems it causes: We can still do good.

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