**Response to Jean Kilbourne: women in advertising**

August 18, 2009

This is my response to a lecture by Jean Kilbourne, made into a video documentary called ‘Killing Us Softly 3’ on the subject of women in advertising. She’s since produced another called ‘Generation M: Misogyny in Media and Culture’ and is a regular speaker at universities on these issues.

The lecture she gave focuses on advertising and the role of women. Everything she says is delivered warmly and with wit, and she generally comes across as very likable. However I found myself shaking my head in disagreement during her lecture; her viewpoint is a very specific one, and I think there’s another way to look at the issue. So, here are some of the main quotes from the lecture and my responses.

KILBOURNE: “The first thing the advertisers do is surround us with the image of ideal female beauty, so we all learn how important it is for a woman to be beautiful, and exactly what it takes.”

RESPONSE: Kilbourne says this sarcastically: what she’s really doing here is objecting to the use of ‘ideal female beauty’ and that it is not as important for a woman to be beautiful as advertisers suggest. But how does Kilbourne know these are ‘ideal’ women? Doesn’t she believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder? Or, as I suspect, does she know that the beauty of the women used by advertisers is in the eyes of a vast majority of beholders, and used by advertisers for that reason? After all, she describes them as possessing ‘ideal female beauty.’ What advertisers are doing, of course, is using models they feel will be attractive to most viewers; that’s all.

In other words, the question of which came first, the ‘ideal female beauty’ in our minds (including Kilbourne’s) or the advertising depicting it, is fairly easy to answer. We all have an innate idea of what is attractive about women in the first place, and advertisers merely exploit it. Researchers know fairly precisely what this ‘ideal woman’ consists of, with measures of attractiveness including hip-to-waist ratio, symmetry, skin complexion, gait, etc. It turns out that these things are mostly objective rather than subjective standards of beauty, and the closer one’s partner approaches perfection, the more attractive they will generally be found.

It is not, therefore, the fault of advertisers that we have this idea, and I find it difficult to criticize them for making use of it. If your hard-earned money or mine were being risked on a business which needed to be successful to make us a living, we would clearly want to appeal to the biggest majority of people with the images chosen, including the human images. Which models will appeal to the widest audience? The women Kilbourne criticizes using would be at the top of our list. (I do, however, accept that they don’t need to be perfect: it seems to me that advertisers would benefit from using more ‘real’ women – rather than Barbie doll types – commercially. Things are improving to this end; advertising is becoming more diverse as media becomes more ‘narrow-band’ and niche-driven.)

KILBOURNE: “Women’s bodies are still turned into objects, into things… [images show a perfume bottle shaped like a female torso].”

RESPONSE: Because we have this innate idea of what is beautiful about women, we create things which celebrate it. A product shaped like a female torso is nothing more or less than a depiction of something beautiful, in the way other ads may use beautiful landscapes and others beautiful homes and others beautiful shapes or objects. People describe objects as ‘sexy’ too (maybe a car or a gadget); is there something wrong with personifying them? Both personification and objectification are done out of an attempt to describe how they make us feel. Of note about the perfume bottle: it’s obviously aimed at women (it’s perfume), not men, and hopes to appeal to a woman’s sense of her own beauty. (By wearing this perfume, they hope she’ll think, I may give off this exquisitely beautiful vibe.) I fail to see what’s so horrible about that.

KILBOURNE: “Turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step towards justifying violence towards that person.”

RESPONSE: My first thought was that this is nonsense, but what Kilbourne is saying here is that women being objectified in general **can** lead to violence toward them. I’m sure that’s true. But that doesn’t make a torso-shaped perfume bottle wrong – not in the slightest – nor any of the other products or art pieces which celebrate or depict the female form.

KILBOURNE: “Most often the focus is on breasts….”

RESPONSE: …because men find breasts attractive, and many (most?) find a fuller bust attractive. If this were not the case, advertising would not have an interest in portraying it. That is why, before advertising ever began to feature the breast, art did the same thing.

KILBOURNE: “Then we’re told to wear uplifting bras … imagine if men were supposed to play this game … Wonder Jock, the strap for the bulge you’ve always wanted!”

RESPONSE: This got quite a giggle from the audience. But there are two things to say here. First, ‘supposed’ is the wrong word; women who wear uplifting bras **want** to be attractive by possessing what is widely considered beautiful (such as a fuller bust). Nobody is ‘supposed’ to do anything; advertising exists to try to sell products, making propositions women will accept or reject. Second: men are, in fact, the target of **precisely** the kinds of ads she implies they’re not! ‘Male enhancement’ pills claim to create exactly that: the ‘bulge you’ve always wanted’. Bowflexes and home gyms, for the biceps and pecs as depicted in the ad. Deodorants, cologne, cars, watches and other status symbols are marketed to men for the improvement of their general attractiveness to partners. How is Kilbourne missing this crucial point? And it’s not a minor one. The point extends to the rest of what she’s saying. Her paranoia about advertising to females is grossly ignorant of the myriad advertising which draws upon exactly the same opposite points to males, a fact which destroys her basic premise.

KILBOURNE: “We all learn very early on that our breasts are never okay the way they are.”

RESPONSE: Well then ‘we all’ made the very grave mistake of assuming that advertising was trying to teach us! Advertising is merely a proposal competing for attention, an argument: ‘You lack this; we can provide it.’ A rational individual is free to ignore it completely, consider its premise and reject it, or consider its premise and accept it as something which could benefit them (which is often the result, or else advertisers would not be in business). Fundamentally, advertising exists to sell products and services, and what ‘we all’ need to do is to understand its role rather than imagine that everything it says is automatically true just because it’s on the air or in print. Frankly, if a woman thinks a suggestion that her breasts are not perfect the way they are is true just because a company wrote it in a print ad aimed at selling her something, she has bigger problems than advertising to contend with.

KILBOURNE: “That’s not to say there aren’t stereotypes that harm men, there are plenty of stereotypes that harm men, but they tend to be less intimate, less related to the body.”

RESPONSE: Well I’m glad she admits it. But then she goes on to imply that, because they’re less ‘intimate, less related to the body’, they’re less harmful. Why is a stereotype which relates to the body worse than any other kind of stereotype? Kilbourne fails to defend this basic premise, so her argument fails along with it. What is the equivalent male stereotype to the idea that a woman should be good-looking to be considered desirable? It’s that men should be successful and wealthy to be considered desirable. That strikes me as a stereotype equally capable of harm and hurt. Why is a stereotype of what an attractive woman looks like any worse than that, or any better? Kilbourne doesn’t address this basic question, and – again – I’m afraid this obliterates her entire premise. (Incidentally, both these stereotypes are rooted in reality; the female stereotype in the science of how her body has evolved to attract males – see above – and the male stereotype in the evolution of the male as provider and protector. Signs of wealth and status, and a bigger body, would have made him better at that and therefore more desirable. No amount of Kilbourne-style pseudo-feminism will change these fundamental truths about human sexual attraction.)

KILBOURNE: “This is a body type that basically doesn’t exist, and yet it’s the only one we ever see.”

REPSONSE: Good point. It happens for the reasons I cited above: we enjoy looking at the ‘ideal’ female form in the way we enjoy watching ideal lives on television and reading about fantasy worlds in novels. There’s little wrong with that, fundamentally, and no man I know expects women to look like the women they see on ads. If anything, most men I know are extremely forgiving; it’s the women who are dissatisfied with their bodies. The message for women, then, is that the existence of female forms celebrated in art and used in advertising and media – and even the mere **existence** of ‘hotter’ women than themselves – cannot detract from their own attractiveness and unique virtues.

KILBOURNE: “In this ad, at the top it says, ‘The more you subtract, the more you add.’ What a horrible message. Now this is a fashion ad, they’re talking about simplicity in fashion, but she’s also very thin….”

RESPONSE: I almost fell off my chair when I heard this. Here, Kilbourne admits she knows fully what the ad is saying about simplicity in fashion, yet **still** chooses to mischaracterize it as a ‘horrible message’ about the weight of the model in an unlikely connection that she’s imposed on the ad. I’ve noticed this continual reaching all throughout her lecture.

KILBOURNE: “The obsession with thinness is really, I think, about cutting girls down to size, silencing them…”

RESPONSE: Really? And I suppose the obsession with breasts is about having a rounded personality and the obsession with legs about having a two-pronged approach to life? I would guess, then, that the obsession with red lips is really about socialism, and the obsession with the ass is really about not taking any shit from anyone. This is just utter gibberish, and as Kilbourne begins to read carefully-selected ad copy after carefully-selected ad copy, her seminar begins to sound more and more like that of a raving conspiracy theorist, the kind who imagines all sorts of messages coming from a Borg-like collective.

KILBOURNE: “The image of girls and women is usually passive, vulnerable, and very different from the body language of boys and men. Women typically pose like this, and men like this…”

RESPONSE: Finally an interesting observation, which speaks more to the traditional roles of man as the strong protector and woman as the vulnerable protected than it does any intentional degrading of women. But she’s right: contemporary sexism unfortunately takes the form of expecting women to be passive and expecting men to be active, women to be submissive and men to be dominant. We ought to try to be rid of such views as soon as possible.

Kilbourne goes on to read her version of things into the body language of the models in several other ads, every time interpreting for the audience as she went, lest they ‘miss it’ (in the manner of a psychic or medium who must keep talking to guide the minds of their audience to the desired conclusion; in the manner of advertisers, in fact, who must sell their product to a gullible pack). For every one of her examples I could find another which refutes her damning commentary, but Kilbourne has the button on the projector.

KILBOURNE: “The ultimate message that women and girls get…”

RESPONSE: Sorry to nitpick, but there is no ultimate message, because there is no ultimate authority on this. The message depends on who you pay attention to. Pay attention to an ad, you get the message they’re selling. Pay attention to Kilbourne, you get the message she’s selling: the idea that women are too stupid to differentiate between advertising and reality. (No, I’m not suggesting there can’t be compound problems associated with living this life together where we often celebrate human attributes that only the few possess. But Kilbourne must meet me halfway and agree that this is largely inevitable, and that our focus should be on limiting the harm done by it.)

KILBOURNE: “Sex is both more important and less important than our culture makes it out to be.”

RESPONSE: What she really means by ‘our culture’ is ‘advertising’. And I agree. Sex is both more important and less important than its portrayal in advertising… and I like the way she says it here. But advertising itself is less important than Kilbourne thinks it is, and it certainly isn’t the sum total of ‘our culture’ as her choice of words implies. In reality, rather than people’s view of sex being shaped most significantly by advertising, on the contrary, advertising is most significantly shaped by our views of sex.

KILBOURNE: “Advertising always implies that women need men in order to be happy…”

RESPONSE: …and that men need women (Calvin Klein, Axe, and a hundred thousand others). So what?

KILBOURNE: “And in all this …. there’s no emphasis on relationships or on intimacy…”

RESPONSE: What is she missing about the ad she just played showing a man and a woman rolling around on a bed? What could be more intimate? And how **else** does one portray a relationship in 30 seconds? Is she really claiming not to have seen attempts to portray relationships in advertising?

KILBOURNE: “No wonder we have the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the developed world.”

RESPONSE: I hope she isn’t trying to claim that advertising is to blame for the high rate of teen pregnancy in America. She would need to show a positive correlation between advertising of this nature in places with high rates of teen pregnancies compared with places with lower rates. She can’t, because there is no such correlation. (The high teen pregnancy rate in America is more highly correlated with conservative ‘family values’, ironically, which emphasise sexual abstinence instead of sex education.)

KILBOURNE: “When bondage is used to sell [various products], we can say that pornography has become mainstream.”

RESPONSE: Bondage = pornography? I’m not sure about that. It’s sexually suggestive only because bondage has become part of the American sexual repertoire. And let’s suppose it’s true that pornography is becoming (or ‘has become’) mainstream. Must we immediately agree with Kilbourne’s implication that pornography becoming mainstream is to be lamented? Is she going to give us some moral arguments against pornography, or ethical arguments against it? (This is, interestingly, an area which unites old-school feminists like Kilbourne and her traditional foes in conservative circles.)

KILBOURNE: “[We need a society] that sees itself primarily as citizens rather than as consumers. … What’s at stake for all of us … is our ability to have authentic and freely-chosen lives, nothing less.”

RESPONSE: Who could agree more with that last statement than I, a spirited libertarian, to whom freedom is the defining value? And yet I couldn’t agree less with the thrust of Kilbourne’s message here, which sometimes seems more degrading to women than many of the ads she criticizes. If women are free, as she suggests, then they are free to reject the proposals of advertisements and think for themselves. And I believe that’s often exactly what they’re doing. There’s nothing wrong with portraying an ideal; it’s believing that anything less is unacceptable that is so damaging. The lesson is for the audience, therefore, rather than for the advertisers.

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