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Break the Internet: Gendered Image Manipulation and Political Subject Formation

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Introduction

Image manipulation is ubiquitous: in the twenty-first century, it seems that “everyone knows” that the images presented in the media, from magazine covers to product advertisements, have been edited to seamlessly and effortlessly convey contemporary social norms. The recognition of this image manipulation is evident throughout popular culture: a Google search of “Photoshop fails” will return thousands of articles cataloguing the most outrageous retouching disasters. The supposed authenticity of digitally produced images is hotly contested in mainstream media outlets: is that Kim Kardashian’s real butt? Are those really Britney Spears’s abs? Is Beyonce’s skin truly that light? Frequently, consumers criticize large-scale corporations for uploading botched image manipulations to their websites, pressuring them into issuing public apologies for their wrongdoings.

These phenomena – a small sampling of many – highlight what Mark Andrejevic (2005) terms the “savvy skepticism” of today’s consumers, the suspicions aroused by the acute awareness that everyday life is saturated with manipulated images that often present as ambiguously authentic. Moreover, all of these phenomena are emblematic of the profoundly contentious nature of image manipulation. This leads to an important question: Why, in an era where it is common-knowledge that images are digitally manipulated, does gendered image manipulation remain such a controversial subject?

In order to answer this question, it is worth briefly contextualizing some of the changes that have taken place over the last century or so with regards to the politics of embodiment and consumption. Within capitalist society, the body is valued for its usefulness, although it “becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (Foucault 1975: 25-26). In classical theory, the “productive body” is the body of the laborer, the corporeal deployed in the production of commodities. That said, the concept of productivity has been challenged in post-industrial society, where mechanical reproduction and outsourcing have rapidly reduced the need for

physical labor (Benjamin 1936). This is not to suggest that labor is no longer exploited – it surely is, with an estimated 90 percent of apparel, for example, produced by workers in countries such as China (Consumer Reports 2013; Sherman 2008). Having said that, there has been an enormous cultural shift; because of industrialization and the exportation of labor, the usefulness of post-industrial citizens is derived more so from their role as *consumers* than as laborers (Sontag 1977; Baudrillard 1998).

In tandem with the dominance of consumerism, the political value of the body has increased significantly in post-industrial culture due to the changes instigated by the rise of capitalism (Butler 1988; Bordo 1993; Sontag 1977). One of the most notable changes with regards to the body is its transformation into a visual object. As Baudrillard (1998) explains, the body is “no longer ‘flesh’ as in the religious conception, or labour [sic] power as in industrial logic, but is taken up again in its materiality (or its ‘visible’ ideality) as narcissistic cult object or element of social ritual and tactics” (132). Put differently, in media-laden post-industrial culture, the body is valued for its visual status more so than its ability to produce labor.

This trend is in large part the result of a discursive change that took place during the rise of the culture industry. During this time, an increased emphasis on the narcissistic investment in the body emerged: “the individual has to rediscover his [sic] body and invest it narcissistically—the formal principle of pleasure—for the force of desire to be able to transform itself into a demand for rationally manipulable objects/signs” (Baudrillard 1998: 135). Bordo (1993) similarly suggests that “we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification” (166). Post-industrial culture affords consumers the time to invest in the body as well as the economic capital to do so. But of course, it is not enough simply to encourage narcissistic self-investment; this investment has to be incentivized.

The body, then, as a visual object, has become one of the integral components of capitalism, consumerism, and global culture writ large. As Foucault (1975) describes it, “[t]he body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (25). Within consumer society, likewise, the visual body becomes a locus of power and capital in two interconnected ways. First, the body is presented in media images – the magazine advertisement, the television show, the pornographic website, the news article. Every day, consumers purchase and view the body-as-image.

Second, consumers invest in their own bodies, whether through adornments, such as clothes and makeup, or through modifications, such as plastic surgery, piercings and tattoos, or skin lightening. These two trends are certainly interrelated: the images of the body presented in the media convey powerful notions of embodied status and consumers often adjust their appearance to conform to these ideals (Bordo 1993). Ultimately, through these two trends, the body becomes increasingly defined by its relation to images in the media (Baudrillard 1998).

Technological advancements have complicated image-based culture by introducing the ability to manipulate and disseminate images more easily and readily than ever before. Notably, this image manipulation is highly gendered: women’s bodies are frequently subjected to image manipulation as they are adjusted to conform to the ideals of emphasized femininity. These ideals often change over time, but women’s bodies nonetheless remain a keystone target of digital image manipulation. This complicates the political and social role of media images: in a culture where the body is defined by its relation to media images, what happens when these images are increasingly manipulated?

Many scholars have attempted to answer this question. Feminist theorists, in particular, challenge the descent into a hyperreal image-based culture that seems to have furthered the commodification of women's bodies into a cultural object meant to be bought and sold (Duffy 2013; McLaren 2002; Bordo 1993; Toffoletti 2011). Gendered image manipulation is a contentious subject within academic scholarship as well as among the general public, often criticized as an outcome of patriarchy. Strikingly, despite widespread condemnation of image manipulation and its effects, gendered image manipulation is a thriving cultural phenomenon that shows no signs of decreasing. This brings me back to the paradox that frames my thesis: Why is the supposed authenticity of mediated gendered images a fraught political issue when "everyone knows" that these images are digitally manipulated?

In this thesis, I will attempt to answer this question by turning to literature drawing on feminist and theoretical paradigms. In particular, my research is shaped by the Foucauldian conceptualization of power as a "network" that "operates on the body through discourses, practices, and institutions" (McLaren 2002: 2, 143). Put differently, this understanding of power leads to the conceptualization of embodiment as a subjectivity influenced by the discourses that emerge from complex social structures. Because the body is a political subject inherently related to the operations of power, it makes sense that the manipulation of the body-as-image is similarly understood as deeply political. Here, I focus specifically on how the mediated gendered image is a locus of power that influences and shapes discourses surrounding not only gendered image manipulation, but also larger themes of democratic politics.

In addition to conducting a comprehensive literature review, I identified recent media case studies that feature gendered image manipulation. As I identified these case studies, I became acutely aware that gendered image manipulation, like any social construction, is not static; over time, image

manipulation takes on new forms. Changes in gendered image manipulation are influenced and informed by discourses on the subject, and these changes can also contribute to the creation of new discourses. The interplay of these discourses are an outcome of the complex dialogue between the producers and consumers of this imagery.

Perhaps most interesting, I discovered that the discourses surrounding image manipulation are strikingly similar to four practices of liberal democracy and mass democracy. Such practices include 1) the pervasive valuing of the “real” or “authentic” over the “mediated” or “manipulated,” 2) the association of consumption with political subject formation, 3) the strategic political use of the mass spectacle; and 4) the repeated use of apology as a means of exoneration. Many political theorists have recognized the role that these practices play with regards to democratic engagement, yet few have identified how gendered image manipulation is a part of these practices (Duffy 2013; Cobb 2014). In this thesis, I make the argument that gendered image manipulation is inextricably linked to these democratic practices.

The following chapters explore the connections between gendered image manipulation and the four aforementioned practices of democracy: authenticity, consumerism, spectacle, and apology. In drawing connections between gendered image manipulation and these four themes, I make the argument that image manipulation, in a culture where it is widely condemned as a patriarchal process, in fact engages producers and consumers alike in a process of political subject formation. While this process takes place within the paradigmatic constraints of capitalist, democratic society, it nonetheless presents an opportunity to grapple with – and perhaps reframe – a discourse on gendered image manipulation during a time where the technological and cultural nuances of this practice are constantly changing form.

Chapter 1: Authenticity

Interwoven throughout mass media is a rhetoric of authenticity (Duffy 2013; Cobb 2014). This fixation on authenticity is a relatively new phenomenon and has been documented across countless different subjects (Cobb 2014). That said, the rise in authentic rhetoric has been especially prevalent in regards to women's bodies and the growing manipulation of images in the mass media (Duffy 2013). In response to consumer criticism of image manipulation, mass media has embraced this rhetoric of authenticity, demonstrating a desire to validate its products and its consumers as natural and real (Duffy 2013).

This rhetoric is bifurcated into two components: First, it emphasizes the authenticity of the products being advertised and the bodies advertising them; second, it places an emphasis on the individual value of authenticity (Duffy 2013). This new trend raises several questions: From where did this fixation on authenticity develop? And why is it that, in an era where it is common knowledge that images are manipulated, have consumers and producers begun to challenge this manipulation?

The answers to these questions can be understood, at least in part, by contextualizing this trend sociohistorically. The value of authenticity – and its attributes, including truth and genuineness – extends as far back as the Enlightenment and the formation of modern thought (McLaren 2002). Inherent to Enlightenment thinking is the value of truth and reason, as well as the belief in an empirical, unbiased reality (Foucault 1984). Enlightenment thought ultimately “[links] the progress of truth and the history of liberty in a bond of direct relation” (Foucault 1984). Put differently, there is no way to understand a fixation on authenticity without acknowledging its fundamental relationship with the value of liberty; to be one's authentic self is to be free from external constraints that seek to govern bodies (Foucault 1984; McLaren 2002).

Of course, this understanding of authenticity, already nuanced, has been complicated by industrialization and the rapid development of new technologies. One of the most noteworthy industrial inventions during this time period was the camera. Invented in 1839, the daguerreotype evolved into the photograph, which became easily producible and reproducible during the early 1900s (Benjamin 1931: 201). Most notable about the photograph is its almost inherent association with objectivity and authenticity: “The photograph has acquired a symbolic value, and its fine grain and evenness of detail have come to imply objectivity; photographic vision has become a primary metaphor for objective truth” (Rosen and Zerner qtd. in Daston and Galison 1992: 120). The relationship between photography and authenticity was reified through the emergence of photojournalism, which offered journalists “a new legitimacy” (Sontag 2003: 28). Photography became a form of testimony and credibility, bearing more authenticity than previous forms of images, such as the painting, which were subject to the artist’s biases.

The mass production of the image is especially contentious. During and following the Industrial Revolution, the role of the image in society expanded beyond photojournalism. Images could soon be reproduced throughout all outlets: newspapers, books, magazines, and later television and the internet. Walter Benjamin (1936) argues that the “presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (3). By this logic, the mass reproduction of imagery is inherently inauthentic.

This artificiality has been complicated by capitalism: as the culture industry arose, facilitating the mass-production of popular culture, imagery became vital to capitalism, transforming it into the main feature of entertainment and advertising (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944; Sontag 1977). In fact, the image has come to proliferate throughout postindustrial culture to the point where many

theorists argue that contemporary culture is entirely image-based, governed by the production and consumption of imagery (Sontag 1977; Baudrillard 1988).

The transforming role of the image is further troubled by new technologies that facilitate image manipulation. Most infamous, of course, is Photoshop. First introduced to the public in 1990, Photoshop has become intrinsically associated with the advertising industry. This relationship is highly gendered; above all else, image manipulation traditionally targets the female body (Jones 2013). But it is also worth pointing out that even prior to the emergence of photo retouching, the female body was understood to be a site of control and manipulation (Jones 2013; McLaren 2002). That said, digital technology has only expedited and reified the manipulation of the female body. With the use of photo retouching, women's bodies can be easily restructured into a "perfect" standardized form, capable of being mass-produced and distributed to consumers (Jones 2013).

The "ideal" body we see in images, in other words, has been crafted artificially with the expectation that it can be humanly attained (though often, it cannot be). Although today it is common knowledge that most media images have been retouched, it can be difficult to identify these alterations visually. This creates a unique paradox: media images are constantly manipulated – and this is well-known. That said, the bodies in these images still *appear* real and they become the standard that women are expected to attain (Jones 2013). It is in this context of ambiguous, questionable authenticity that a cultural embrace of realness has surfaced.

Although I am focusing on manipulations of the body, it is important to reiterate that this rhetoric of authenticity is part of a larger cultural trend: "what has resulted is a paradox in which the democratization of culture as enabled by digitization and globalization has led to a greater desire for authentic cultural products" (Cobb 2014: 4). Baudrillard (1988) similarly writes, "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning...And there is a panic-stricken

production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production.” While the increased focus on “real” bodies highlights these trends, it also sheds light on the complicated relationship between consumers and producers.

The “real body” movement—seemingly a response to the problem of the supposedly inauthentic image—is therefore itself also driven by the contradictory goals of consumers and producers. Consumers of beauty products have, in recent years, attempted to reclaim the body in its natural form and rebuke unattainable beauty standards (McLaren 2002). Likewise, feminist activists have directly challenged the beauty industry and the proliferation of unrealistic beauty standards. Indeed, this activism targets image manipulation in all its forms; not only is digital manipulation challenged, but the dramaturgical nature of photography is as well.

A telling example of image manipulation – and its growing criticism – is Essena O’Neill, an 18-year-old Instagram celebrity. One image on O’Neill’s account is a selfie where she is wearing a lace dress and a necklace, her hair curled. Her makeup appears light, but evident nevertheless. She is smiling at the camera (Appendix A). O’Neill has updated this image to include the following caption:

“Edit real caption ‘Please like this photo, I put on makeup, curled my hair, tight dress, big uncomfortable jewellery [sic]...Took over 50 shots until I got one I thought you might like, then I edited this one selfie for ages on several apps- just so I could feel some social approval from you.’ THERE IS NOTHING REAL ABOUT THIS – [essenaoneill.com](https://www.essenaoneill.com) #celebrityconstruct. (O’Neill 2015)

The updated caption on this image is one of many; O’Neill has rewritten all of her Instagram captions to describe similarly the amount of staging that goes into her images, which frame her life as effortlessly luxurious. She describes heavy makeup use, calorie restrictions, sucking in her stomach, all for the approval of her followers, something she describes as “contrived perfection” (O’Neill qtd. in Hunt 2015). Above all, her emphasis in each of these updated captions is that these images are “not real life” – they are manipulated through staging and photo-editing software.

O'Neill's #celebrityconstruct campaign is a striking example of the increasing cultural appreciation of authenticity. Throughout this campaign, O'Neill has received an inundation of comments on her images celebrating her honesty. The continued interaction of "honesty" and "dishonesty" is a testament to the cultural tension between the two.

It is important to acknowledge that the criticism of photo manipulation and praise of "real beauty" is predicated upon a binary that frames "real" and "manipulated" as mutually exclusive concepts. This line of thinking ignores the complexities of the relationship between these two concepts. Some theorists, such as Sontag (2003), challenge the perceived authenticity of photographs by insisting that they are inherently subjective and "tend to transform, whatever their subject...as it is not in real life" (76). Moreover, symbolic interactionists such as Goffman (1959) suggest that "real life" is itself an oversimplification; one's "true self" shifts during dramaturgical performances that vary depending on social contexts. It is clear, then, that "real" is a troubled concept.

The "real body" movement, therefore, rather than confirm that there is an "authentic" self to be reclaimed, ultimately destabilizes the "real" by artificially constructing it. Essena O'Neill's Instagram account demonstrates this. The images from her Instagram have not changed during her #celebrityconstruct campaign; they are the same manipulated images as before. Yet the *discourse* attached to these images has changed; through O'Neill's proclamation that these images are "not real," they suddenly become a testament to O'Neill's newfound honesty and, ultimately, her authenticity. In other words, these same manipulated images are a testament to "the real," despite their inauthenticity. Ultimately, this example demonstrates that the "real body" movement is valuable as a tool of political positioning. Moreover, as I will discuss, this example operates within the same discursive field as advertisements that use photo retouching.

Essena O'Neill is one example among many. This reclamation of authenticity has placed the mass media in a curious predicament; how does an industry built on the manipulation of images respond to the criticism of said manipulation? Interestingly, many companies have adopted the rhetoric of authenticity that has emerged in response to photo manipulation. There are countless examples of this, but one of the most striking is Dove's Real Beauty campaign. This campaign began in 2004, encouraging women to embrace their natural beauty. One video on Dove's YouTube that has gone viral is titled "With some images, all is not what it seems" (Dove 2006). This video depicts a woman coming in for a photo shoot. She sits passively while makeup artists rigorously do her makeup, and then while photographers take photos of her. After the shoot, her image is heavily Photoshopped before the final image, which barely resembles the woman who stepped into the photoshoot, is displayed on a billboard. At the end of the video, the following message is displayed: "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted" (Dove 2006; Appendix B). This video exemplifies Dove's emphasis on "real beauty" and its condemnation of image manipulation. Dove, over the last 11 years, has produced numerous videos with similar themes as part of its Real Beauty campaign.

Dove's Real Beauty campaign has been an enormous success. For example, another video sketch, called "You're more beautiful than you think," has garnered more than 66 million views on YouTube (Dove 2013). Millard (2009) argues that the campaign is successful because it "challenges the dominant beauty script by advancing countercultural images and rules while building its identity as a caring company" (151). This is certainly true; though "real beauty" has been gaining popularity, Dove's campaign was one of the first of its kind. While beauty products are typically sold by calling attention to women's insecurity, Dove has successfully reversed this marketing technique. By calling attention to authenticity in the form of "real beauty," Dove has tapped into the growing cultural criticism of artificiality.

But the success of Dove's campaign, while a reflection of emergent cultural values, is also an outcome of capitalism. The rhetoric of authenticity is lucrative and Dove's success exemplifies this. The company's sales have increased from 2.5 billion in 2006 to 4 billion in 2015 and the campaign has been honored by some as "the best advertising campaign of the 21st century" (Chumsky 2015). This raises vital questions about the rhetoric of authenticity. Feminist critiques of beauty standards challenge the capitalist nature of the beauty industry as much as the standards themselves – the primary goal of beauty standards is, of course, to sell products (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991). Does Dove's reframed messaging matter if its ultimate goal is still to sell beauty products? Is this messaging even valid when Dove is owned by Unilever, which also owns both Axe and Fair and Lovely, companies notorious for their misogyny and whitewashing respectively (Chumsky 2015)? Some argue that Dove's Real Beauty campaign is nothing more than a capitalist exploitation of the cultural value of authenticity, a cultivation of brand loyalty through a disingenuous approach, while others claim that this does not matter since it is inspiring confidence among women, rather than insecurity (Millard 2009).

In spite of the criticisms of Dove's methods, its approach has sparked a series of similar campaigns. Nike, Victoria's Secret, Pantene, and many others have begun to utilize the rhetoric of authenticity to turn a profit (Russell 2014). Even Reese's Peanut Butter Cups has capitalized on this rhetoric. In 2015, its Christmas tree-shaped candies received viral derision for looking nothing like a Christmas tree. Rather than issue an apology or alter the shape of the candy, Reese's responded by creating a campaign called "All Trees Are Beautiful," encouraging consumers to accept Reese's Peanut Butter Cups of all shapes and sizes. This campaign very clearly evokes the rhetoric of "real beauty" campaigns (Appendix C). Although it is satirical, its point is clear: If we aren't supposed to hold human bodies to unattainable standards, why would we apply these same standards to a candy?

Doing so, by this logic, would be hypocritical. Reese's response to criticism has been heralded across social media as witty and clever, evidence of the campaign's success.

What all of these examples demonstrate is the prevailing value of authenticity in the face of the increasing manipulation of images. The specific motives of these agents vary. For consumers, authenticity is a reclamation of agency, of control over one's body. For producers, authenticity is a means of profit, a way to maintain control over consumers. While these goals are fundamentally contradictory, the success of producers' campaigns is the illusion of solidarity, the perceived shared value of authenticity. Ultimately, the rhetoric of authenticity, though originally intended to liberate consumers from beauty standards, has left consumers all the more ensnared in capitalism.

Chapter 2: Consumerism

According to traditional Marxist theory, capitalist culture is inherently market-driven, governed by the production and consumption of commodities. Long prior to the rise of the culture industry, Marx developed his theory of commodity fetishism, wherein “the human labour [sic] required to make [an] object is lost once the object is associated with a monetary value for exchange...[and] the object’s value appears to come from the commodity, rather than the human labor that produced it” (Louie 2013). In other words, consumers are believed to value objects for their monetary commodification rather than the labor required to manufacture them. While some argue that commodity fetishism continues to function similarly today, others argue that the increased value of the image has troubled traditional interpretations of Marx’s theory (Jhally 2014).

The cultural fixation on consumption has only increased in post-industrial society, due in large part to the increased proliferation of images in consumers’ everyday lives. Today, the value of the image attached to the commodity often takes precedence over the value of the commodity itself (Baudrillard 1988). This is emblematic of hyperreality, particularly the third-order simulacrum, in which images “circulate freely, detached from any concrete association with an object in the ‘real world,’ meaning they can only accrue meaning in relation to each other” (Toffoletti 2011: 34). The commodity’s image has gained value over the commodity while at the same time becoming more and more detached from it. Though paradoxical, this is exactly why commodity fetishism today operates differently; commodity fetishism no longer emerges from the value of the commodity, but from the *image* of it. In other words, “[In advanced capitalism], objects lose any real connection with the basis of their practical utility and instead come to be the material correlate (the signifier) of an increasing number of constantly changing, abstract qualities” (Jhally 2014: 11).

The growing value of the commodity’s image is not an arbitrary trend. This form of commodity fetishism has emerged, at least in part, as a result of what journalist Rob Walker (2008)

refers to as the “pretty good problem.” Traditional commodity fetishism began to lose its spark in an era where most products’ functional quality had become uniformly decent; that is, most products had become “pretty good.” Products, losing functionality as a selling point, were suddenly rendered “invisible” and needed to “be made ‘remarkable’...[to] have a chance to succeed” (Walker 2008: 7). Because this remarkability could no longer hinge on a product’s function, it became “important...to create a different kind of value – one that transcends the merely material” (Walker 2008: 8). In other words, the source of a commodity’s “mystical character” could no longer derive from the commodity itself; an alternative had to be sought (Marx 1867: 72).

One of the most successful solutions to the “pretty good problem” has been the inversion of advertising from an internal focus to an external focus; discourse has shifted from substance to surface. Walker (2008) focuses primarily on the role of branding as a means of differentiation, but branding itself is emblematic of the increased cultural value of the sign. The logo, one of the most oft-cited examples, has the power to add significant monetary value to a product compared to a non-branded, but otherwise identical product. Heightened focus on the image, including branding, helps overcome the “pretty good problem” by attaching exchange-value to the commodity that transcends, more and more, its use-value. In other words, it becomes the product’s *image* that sells, rather than its function.

In an image-driven culture, this should come as no surprise. By focusing on the image, producers and advertisers have developed the unyielding ability not only to manipulate the way a commodity looks, but the social meaning attached to it as well. It’s worth noting that a focus on the image is not entirely new; rather, it is from the sudden and rapid iteration and reiteration of new images that a theory of hyperreality emerges (Baudrillard 1988). The more the value of the image increases in the era of the hyperreal, the further removed the manipulated image becomes from the commodity to which it is associated.

Though a much-neglected subject, the manipulated image – particularly as it relates to gender – is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of commodification as it operates in the twenty-first century. Consider a simple example: the razor. Shaving has existed for centuries, though the first safety razors were not popularized until the early 1900s, and it wasn't until over a decade later that shaving became marketed to women in the US (Basow 1991). Appendix D shows a side-by-side of the first Gillette women's safety razor, the 1915 Milady Decollete, next to a Gillette men's safety razor from 1917. Appendix E shows two comparable Gillette men's and women's razors in 2016.

The basic function of the razor – hair removal – is gender-neutral, which is to say that men and women could use identical razors without different outcomes. Gillette's men's and women's razors prove no exception; the 2016 razors, for example, are both basic disposable five-blade razors. Yet the image of the razor has radically changed over the years, and not arbitrarily; indeed, the manipulation of the razor's image rests largely on increased gendered market segmentation, which itself hinges on the social construction of gender differences (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2007). Though the 1915 and 1917 women's and men's razors bear a striking resemblance, over the course of a century, the men's razor has transformed into an image that is sleek, shiny, and cool, while the women's razor has transformed into pastel pinks and purple and blues, soft and flowery. Despite the radical transformation these razors have undergone, their basic function remains the same.

Interestingly, although the razor's function truly has not faltered, the gendered manipulation of the razor's image arguably affects its *perceived* function. Gillette's website articulates this differentiation in the description of each razor:

Gillette Fusion: Our best disposable for skin comfort, guaranteed. Experience the new standard of disposable shaving excellence, and you'll never look back. Product features: 5-blade Technology helps reduce pressure per blade for comfort; Precision Trimmer handles tricky areas, such as sideburns and under the nose.

Venus Embrace: Reveal touchably smooth legs without the razor burn. Our first women's razor created with 5 blades hugs every curve to get virtually every hair—and it even shaves bikini hair. The results are beautiful legs, an ultra-close shave and unsurpassed Venus smoothness.

For men, the function of the 5-blade technology is to “[help] reduce pressure per blade for comfort.” For women, these blades “[hug] every curve to get virtually every hair” – with the end result being “beautiful legs.” The rhetoric in the men's advertisement clearly emphasizes the importance of comfort, while the women's razor advertisement focuses on beauty and appearance. In other words, women get to *look* good, but men get to *feel* good.

There is nothing about these razors that suggests that women cannot have a comfortable shave or that men cannot be left with beautiful skin. This is because the increased gendered dichotomy of the razors' functions has absolutely nothing to do with the razors' designs; to reiterate, they are functionally identical. Rather, it is the social construction of gender differences that promulgates this dichotomy (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2007). Moreover, the discursive differences that have emerged rest on the manipulation of the razor's image: they *look* different, therefore they *are* different. This is a hallmark outcome of the third-order simulacrum: “images are no longer different from reality, but generate our sense of reality...The purpose of this strategy is to hide the fact that there is no true or authentic reality, only the simulation of reality” (Toffoletti 2011: 28). This phenomenon, rather than diminish, tends to intensify; in the case of the razor, the more manipulated the two gendered images become, the further they grow apart and the further reified the product's gendered differentiation becomes. Ultimately, the razor's image is no longer central to its use-value, but its symbolic efficacy as a gendered commodity.

Many companies rely on image manipulation to enforce gendered differentiation as a form of segmented marketing. While there are classic examples, such as the razor, the mediation of gendered imagery has become so pervasive that some examples are so absurd they come across as a

parody. The BIC For Her pen, for example, which emerged in 2012, was so outrageous with its delicate pink and purple packaging that slews of satirical reviews poured in on Amazon, celebrating the product because “Unfortunately I can't write or type (my husband is actually typing for me.) However, I do so love the pretty colors” or criticizing it because “I thought, being a man and all, that since they didn't have any manly Bic for Him pens, I could buy these, as I need pens and can't always wait for the appropriate pens to come out for my underserved gender. What a mistake” (Appendix F).

The cultural response to BIC For Her explicitly recognizes how outrageous and meaningless the product's image is in relation to its function. And indeed, perhaps the absurdity of BIC For Her merits satire. But the overwhelming public repudiation of the gendered pen raises a question: How is a gendered pen so different from gendered razors, which are taken far more seriously? In both examples, the product being sold performs the same basic function regardless of the gendered imagery attached to it. Why should the public rhetoric surrounding the two products be so different?

One answer to these questions is that Bic takes gendered image manipulation a step further than Gillette does with the razor because Bic deliberately genders a traditionally non-gendered product. This is in contrast to the razor, which was gendered even prior to the introduction of women's razors. And in fact, one might argue that Bic's marketing exemplifies how the “pretty good problem” promotes gendered image manipulation; Bic For Her distances image from function to the point where the pen's image becomes a striking example of the simulacrum. In other words, the image of the pen has become virtually meaningless in relation to the pen's function, but it is this utter meaninglessness that drives consumption and makes it culturally relevant, thus solving – however temporarily – the “pretty good problem.” The *image* is what sells the pen, not its function, and gender plays a significant role with regards to the manipulation of the image.

The razor and the Bic For Her pen are two examples of countless. Many traditionally gender-neutral products are becoming increasingly gendered, from dryer sheets for men to pink bottles of “chick” beer – in fact, there are now entire websites dedicated to documenting these products (Chack 2014; Friend 2015). Some of these products become attached to scientific discourses that legitimize gendered differentiation through biology (vitamins, for example), while others are simply legitimized through gendered stereotypes (women will buy something if it’s pink). Regardless, these gendered products almost universally rely on increasing image manipulation to convey a difference that *appears* real, but is by and large a social construct driven by capitalism.

Chapter 3: Spectacle

A discussion of gendered image manipulation would be incomplete without a careful analysis of the spectacle. According to social theorists, the spectacle is not necessarily a feature or quality of an image, but a separate phenomenon born out of the interactions between society and images: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by image” (Debord 1968). Debord (1968) argues that the spectacle governs the mass consumption of imagery and, ultimately, society itself. He explains, “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (Debord 1968). The spectacle, put differently, serves as the descent into the hyperreal “pseudo-reality” wherein the spectacle “appears at once as society itself” (Debord 1968). Images no longer reflect or shape reality; they *create* it.

While a considerable number of theorists have worked with the concept of the spectacle, the perceived role of the spectacle in society varies among them. Early theorists, such as Debord (1968), suggest that “The spectacle's function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation” – it is a dominating force over society that distances consumers from themselves. Other theorists, such as Baudrillard, have challenged this understanding of the spectacle. Toffoletti (2011), in *Baudrillard Reframed*, explains,

Whereas in the society of the spectacle there is a distinction between images and reality (images alienate us from reality), in the era of hyperreality, we consume not only what is represented, but the medium through which it is represented, thus blurring the distinction between the two. As a result, images...no longer mediate between the real and the representational, but become our reality. (92-93)

In other words, at a time where the spectacle *is* reality, how can a consumer become alienated from it?

Despite some disagreement over the exact function of the spectacle, there is almost universal agreement among these theorists that the spectacle serves a restrictive, limiting, or even negative purpose. Debord (1968) views it as alienating; Sontag (1977) similarly describes the spectacle as an anesthetizing distraction from “the injuries of class, race and sex” (92). Baudrillard (1983) writes that the masses vapidly consume spectacular imagery in lieu of meaningful content: “Nonsense: the masses scandalously resist this imperative of rational communication. They are given meaning: they want spectacle... they idolise [sic] any content so long as it resolves itself into a spectacular sequence” (10). In other words, theorists understand the spectacle as not simply a feature of the hyperreal, but a complicated political tool.

Most interestingly, few theorists take into consideration the role of gendered image manipulation with regards to the spectacle. This lack of attention is surprising given how gendered imagery – almost always manipulated – comprises an overwhelming amount of mass media today. It is also surprising given that the spectacle, as it relates to the gendered image, is something that informs consumers’ embodied knowledge. As I will suggest, gendered image manipulation frequently pushes the boundaries of the spectacle by reconfiguring and challenging notions of embodiment. In doing so, “rather than legitimating the erasure of embodied experience through technology, [these] figurations reformulate how the subject is constituted in and by its cultural surrounds” (Toffoletti 2007: 122). Gendered image manipulation as a spectacle ultimately informs a broader discourse of gendered embodiment.

Of course, in the culture of the hyperreal, it can be difficult for an image to stand out among the influx of images that consumers view in a given day; this is not dissimilar to the “pretty good problem” from chapter two, where a product must become distinguished among its counterparts. Gendered image manipulation once again offers a solution to this problem: by altering and

reshaping images, new iterations of the spectacle emerge. The unique and often thought-provoking qualities of these spectacles capture consumers' attention in a way that previous iterations may not. Again, this solves, however temporarily, the "pretty good problem."

Photoshop is an obvious, but nonetheless striking example. Its use within the culture industry allows it to shape and manipulate bodies (often female) into posthuman "reality-hybrids" that embody contemporary standards of perfection (Jones 2013: 31). This is a very common form of spectacle, found in virtually all forms of media. Photoshop has certainly received criticism over the decades, particularly with regards to its perpetuation of unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards. In fact, it still frustrates many consumers today, with examples of "Photoshop gone wrong" often creating pockets of unrest – hence the emergence of a rhetoric of authenticity, as discussed in chapter one (Cardiff 2013; Gerstein 2015). Even so, these criticisms and counter-movements are the exception, rather than the norm. The cultural comfort with Photoshop has settled; for many consumers, it is understood as an accepted facet of mainstream media. Whether or not people are bothered by it, there is a general awareness – and ultimately acceptance – of its presence.

While Photoshop has experienced large success in perpetuating the image of the female body as a spectacle, it has become evident that this iteration of the female body cannot sustain itself as spectacle throughout the mass media. In other words, as cultural comfort surrounding Photoshop steadies, and as images of women's bodies continue to be disseminated throughout the mass media, the female body, as an image, starts to lose its luster as a spectacle. This is not to say that the objectification and proliferation of women's bodies is on the decline – quite the contrary. It is through increasing gendered image manipulation that the female body, as a spectacle, is maintaining its status in the mass media.

Kim Kardashian's winter 2014 cover of *Paper* magazine demonstrates how gendered image manipulation is furthering the distortion of the female body to create, thus, *new forms* of spectacles. A rear-view nude of Kardashian appears on the cover, her famously large butt prominently on display, emphasized by her strikingly (and impossibly) narrow waist as well as her conspicuously oiled skin (Appendix G). An image like this is unapologetically manipulated. In an era where Photoshop has long been criticized, Kardashian is perceived as embracing it. The magazine's headline does not shy away from this; it boldly announces, "Break the Internet Kim Kardashian."

Her cover did not, of course, break the internet, but it did break through the clutter by catching people's attention. It is the unapologetic use of Photoshop in particular that distinguishes Kardashian's cover, among hundreds of thousands of past and present magazine covers, as spectacular. *This* is the power of the spectacle, then: efforts to stand out as spectacular inspire increased manipulations of the gendered image. Much like the rapid changes in the image of the razor, representations of the body are similarly changing to maintain their status as spectacular.

Another powerful example of how gendered image manipulation goes to heightened extremes to create new forms of spectacle is the Japanese pop girl band AKB48. The band has over 80 members and is currently one of the highest-grossing music acts in the world (Rossini 2015). Eguchi Aimi, a new band member, abruptly appeared in a new AKB48 commercial in 2011 and shortly thereafter was featured in the Japanese magazine *Weekly Playboy* (Rossini 2015; Appendix H). Aimi's abrupt entrance into the spotlight aroused suspicion among fans that was not unwarranted: AKB48's production company announced, shortly after her magazine spread, that Eguchi Aimi does not exist. Aimi is, in fact, a digital composition of the facial features of six AKB48 members. This discovery is what transformed Aimi not only into a spectacle, but into a powerful icon of the

hyperreal. This is an example of digital manipulation transcending traditional expectations of photo retouching. Bodies are not just manipulated; they are *constructed*.

As spectacles, Kardashian and Aimi exemplify the perceived vapidness of capitalist culture. That said, these images are not entirely arbitrary: Kardashian and Aimi are embracing contemporary standards of femininity specifically through image manipulation. Kardashian does not just have a great butt; she has the *perfect* butt. Similarly, Aimi is not just a pretty singer; she is a composite of the *prettiest* singers in order to embody, technologically, the feminine ideal. Put differently, these two examples no doubt validate the fear that the objectification of women as a means of spectacle is only worsened by the use of gendered image manipulation. As Fernbach (2000) explains, “But just because bodily markers are indeterminate in cyberspace or on the internet does not mean that hierarchies and established patterns of oppression pertaining to bodily differences are about to disappear” (248). Hayles (1997) similarly explains that “although technology may be cutting edge, the gender codes they instantiate are all too familiar” (756).

This perspective, while it has its merits, is certainly fatalistic. It also raises important questions about determinism: Is it inevitable that iterations and reiterations of images are destined to reproduce oppressive messages? Or is it possible that, while perhaps still operating within gender norms and boundaries, spectacular images can challenge these hierarchies? In introducing a third and final example, I suggest that even if it cannot completely overturn these hierarchies, spectacular imagery can indeed work to reconfigure them.

Nicki Minaj’s 2014 music video for “Anaconda” instantly shook headlines for its visual display of the female body. Interestingly, the image of the body that Minaj presents in “Anaconda” is not dissimilar to the spectacular nature of Kardashian’s and Aimi’s magazine spreads: Minaj appears in “Anaconda” as the embodiment of contemporary notions of emphasized femininity. In

other words, Minaj does not simply represent today's ideal body; she *is* today's ideal body (Lambert 2014). What is most striking about her video, though, is arguably not her body, but the video's polarized reactions – “Anaconda” is a semiotic spectacle for its ability to polarize viewers. At the same time that some viewers interpret this video as another iteration of patriarchal oppression, of women's bodies-on-display, others interpret it as a subversive manipulation of gendered imagery in the name of social progress (Pineda 2016; Clifton 2014; ABC News 2014).

I do not want to focus on the interpretation of “Anaconda” as a tireless reiteration of the male gaze. While an analysis of this nature has its merits, it neglects to consider how traditionally objective imagery can be manipulated into tools of empowerment (Jones 2013). I therefore want to focus on how “Anaconda” may in fact *subvert* the male gaze. Blogger Molly Lambert (2014) breaks down a feminist analysis of “Anaconda,” which she suggests begins by “parodying the idea of exoticism by opening up on a jungle scene,” which “turns Nicki's butt into a literal force of nature, causing earthquakes in a jungle setting.” Later, Minaj is seen on-screen in a gym, “with comically small weights,” an ironic parody of feminine weakness considering that “Nicki's body is the modern ideal” (Lambert 2014). At the very end of the video, Minaj gives rapper Drake a lap dance, but “[walks] away after presumably giving him a boner” (Lambert 2014; Appendix I). All of these examples are manipulations or inversions of tropes rooted in objectifying gendered imagery. These are images that run rampant within popular culture in general, but especially within the music industry: the fetishization of women of color through the use of exotic imagery; the portrayal of women as physically weak; the use of women as a sexual prop for men (Lambert 2014).

This interpretation of “Anaconda” suggests that the spectacle, by manipulating images of women's bodies into increasingly outrageous iterations of emphasized femininity, may be able to subvert the very norms that it is believed to instantiate. “Anaconda” breaks through the countless

iterations of tireless misogynistic tropes by raising important questions: Does the video allow Minaj to reclaim her agency as a sexual subject? Is Minaj's spectacle still objectifying by relying on contemporary (albeit manipulated) images of sexualized, feminine beauty standards? Or is it possible that "Anaconda" occupies a space that is simultaneously liberating *and* objectifying?

A black and white answer likely does not exist, but regardless, one cannot argue that Minaj's video, as a spectacle, is apolitical. This political quality of the video is a direct challenge to the theorists who maintain that the spectacle simply serves to anesthetize consumers from deeper conversations on race, gender, sexuality, and class. Indeed, "Anaconda's" use of gendered image manipulation has created a spectacle that both breaks through the clutter and raises important questions about whether it is possible to maintain agency in a culture that so readily and willingly objectifies the female body. In fact, Minaj's "Anaconda" video at once echoes and gives power to the words of Toffoletti (2007):

Resisting the tendency to interpret the body as erased or negated by technology, I argue instead that a new kind of subjectivity is created ... The gendered subject (or for that matter, the queer or raced subject) does not exist outside of technology but is forged by its immersion in information networks. (122)

A feminist lens reveals the gendered politics of the spectacle; these examples engage consumers in a conversation on beauty standards and norms. As Toffoletti (2007) points out, "What is at stake here is not the opposition of reality and virtuality, but that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the two. Consequently, this forces us to consider what is at stake for identity politics when the experience of information society remakes our reality" (121). Ultimately, rather than stifle a conversation on politics, the gendered spectacle perhaps opens up a platform that allows consumers to engage with the boundaries of gender and technology.

Chapter 4: Confession and Apology

In 2009, anger flittered online as a blogger commented on a Ralph Lauren advertisement featuring model Filippa Hamilton: “Dude, her head’s bigger than her pelvis” (Shapiro 2009; Appendix J). Several days later, a Ralph Lauren spokesman confessed to the outrageous image retouching, explaining, “For over 42 years, we have built a brand based on quality and integrity... We have addressed the problem and going forward will take every precaution to ensure that the calibre [sic] of our artwork represents our brand appropriately” (qtd. in Shapiro 2009).

In 2010, a glitch occurred on Ann Taylor’s website, displaying an un-retouched image of a model while the “correct,” retouched image loaded (Huffington Post 2010; Appendix K). When this glitch made headlines, Ann Taylor issued an apology: “We want to support and celebrate the natural beauty of women, and we apologize if in the process of retouching that was lost” (qtd. in Huffington Post 2010).

In 2014, Target advertised a junior’s swimsuit on their website using an image that displayed a prominent – and obviously Photoshopped – thigh gap (Feldman 2014; Appendix L). Shortly after the image made it into mainstream media, Target confessed to the image manipulation, explaining, “In response to your query about the swimsuit image on Target.com, this was an unfortunate error on our part and we apologize. We have removed the image from our Web site...It was the result of a photo editing error on our part” (qtd. in Feldman 2014).

These are not isolated incidences – there is a clear pattern that has emerged with regards to image manipulation. As I have described throughout this thesis, consumers expect images to be manipulated – there is an acute recognition of the use of photo retouching throughout all realms of consumer culture. That said, cultural comfort with image retouching shifts when images, almost always of women, are excessively manipulated in a way that makes the photo retouching strikingly evident. By and large, there is an expectation that media-bodies should look imperceptibly authentic:

“any mediating technology is obliged to erase itself to the highest degree possible in the name of unfettered communication” (Jones 2013: 30). When image manipulation deviates from the cultural tolerance threshold, it is “easier for people to see that ‘real’ bodies are profoundly different to those represented in mass media” (Jones 2013: 28). Consumers’ dissident voices emerge, placing companies in a precarious situation: ignore public outcry, implicitly sanctioning the outrageous retouching, or apologize, implicitly confessing to the wrongdoing?

Indeed, it is the apology that has become a trademark practice of companies who, despite public unrest with poorly retouched images, continue to publish images periodically that cross the boundary of what is considered acceptable. Rather than cease to retouch images to such a degree, the apologetic confession has become bundled into a formulaic approach to these mishaps. Why is this the case? Why, rather than cease crudely to manipulate images, has the apology become perfected into a rhetorical response to public backlash? Put differently: Why do these companies take an approach of retraction, rather than reform?

To answer these questions, it helps to contextualize the role of the confession more broadly, as it is neither a new phenomenon nor a phenomenon exclusive to mass media. The confession has become, according to Foucault (1976), “one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth” (59). In fact, the confession has transformed into a vital component of political subject formation. As the examples discussed earlier demonstrate, the confession rarely takes place without prompting: “one does not confess without the presence... of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (Foucault 1976: 61-62).

The presence of both a “confessor” (in this case, the company “guilty” of retouching images) and an “authority” requiring the confession (in this case, consumers) signifies an inherent “power relationship” between the two – the confessor becomes subjected through submission to

authority (Foucault 1976: 61). Of course, this does not render the confessor powerless. In fact, the “[c]onfession is at least in part about the subject’s participation in [their] own self-construction” (McLaren 2002: 146). At the same time that the confession is coerced, it becomes a freeing act. McLaren (2002) elaborates on this paradox: “The confession positions the subject ambivalently, both as producer of and as produced through [their] discourse. The subject is both subjected by the dominant discourse that compels [them] to confess, yet also becomes a subject through this process of speaking” (149). In short, the confession, through the interplay of authoritative coercion and subjective discourse, shapes the confessor into a political subject.

Moreover, the confession is almost strictly discursive, meaning that it is the *act* of confession that carries more value than the *content* of the confession. Foucault (1976) explains, “[the] expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation” (61-62). This is perhaps one reason why the apologetic confession works so effectively for companies that retouch images poorly: the discourse of confession, though coerced, is almost inherently liberating.

Agamben (1999) similarly explains that the “gesture of assuming responsibility is therefore genuinely juridical and not ethical. It expresses nothing noble or luminous, but rather simply obligation” (33). This is most evident when considering that these apologies and confessions only emerge amidst public outcry. If companies truly felt remorse, this trend of outrageous image manipulation would dissolve – and photo retouching would likely cease altogether. Because the confession, as a discursive tool, is so readily liberating, it is far easier to produce the occasional apology than cease to use photo retouching in a media culture that fervently embraces it.

In order to emphasize how pliable the confession is as a tool of political subject formation, I want to turn to a recent case study that sheds light on this phenomenon. In contemporary media, it

is becoming increasingly common for celebrities to call out companies for retouching images of them (this is likely related to the emergent rhetoric of authenticity that I discussed in chapter one). Zendaya, Jaime Lee Curtis, Kate Winslet, and Lady Gaga are all celebrities who have recently challenged magazines for retouching images of them (Dockterman 2014). *Girls* creator, producer, writer, and actress Lena Dunham joined the protest in 2016 when she posted her *Tentaciones* magazine cover to Instagram with a caption that explicitly criticized the magazine for retouching her:

Oh hello El Pais! I am genuinely honored to be on your cover and so happy you licensed a pic by @ruvenafanador, who always makes me feel gorgeous. BUT this is NOT what my body has ever looked like or will ever look like- the magazine has done more than the average photoshop. So if you're into what I do, why not be honest with your readers? Much love, Lena.

The caption reads like many criticisms of Photoshop, urging the Spanish magazine to be more “honest” with its readers. While Dunham likely anticipated this to play out following the traditional apology discourse (the magazine would issue an apologetic confession for retouching the image), the magazine instead issued the following statement: “We do not use Photoshop nor other digital tools to change the physical appearance of our cover stars, nor in the features to be found inside. On this occasion, the only thing we did was to crop the image to adapt it to the format of our front page” (*Tentaciones* 2016). The magazine also published the original, uncropped image (Appendix M).

This statement challenges the traditional confessional narrative, putting Dunham in a position where *she*, rather than the magazine, had to choose whether or not to issue an apology for mistakenly calling out the magazine for retouching. Dunham responded by uploading the uncropped image to her Instagram, with a lengthy caption. An excerpt of the caption reads, “[I]t's a weird feeling to see a photo and not know if it's your own body ... I'm not blaming anyone (y'know, except society at large.)...But I want something different now. Thanks for helping me figure that out and sorry to make you the problem, you cool Spanish magazine you” (Dunham 2016). It is evident that Dunham is using her apology as an opportunity for political subject formation. Already a vocal

feminist, Dunham has framed her apology in a way that emphasizes how troubling it is to no longer recognize whether or not an image of her has been retouched. It is a striking point, one that has certainly resonated with many consumers.

Even more interesting, though, is how Dunham has used the political narrative shaped by her apology to *retract* said apology. She published a blog post several days later, in which she once again suggests her cover image was manipulated:

So was the image Photoshopped somewhere between raw digital file and Spanish glory? I think so, but who knows and really, who cares. But seeing the photo got me thinking about the real issue, which is that I don't recognize my own fucking body anymore. And that's a problem....If any magazines want to guarantee they'll let my stomach roll show and my reddened cheek make an appearance, I am your girl Friday. Anything that will let me be honest with you. But moreover, I want to be honest with me.

Not only does Dunham retract her initial apology, once again suggesting that her *Tentaciones* cover was indeed retouched; she uses this situation to take a powerful political standpoint by refusing to allow magazines to retouch her. Once again, her statement maintains a feminist standpoint, attempting to reclaim an “honest” self.

In many ways, this example emphasizes that the confession is nothing more than a discursive tool of political subject formation. Dunham’s apology comes across as a formality following her wrongful accusation; she maintains a defensive tone as she expresses her concern over *why* she misinterpreted the image as being retouched. The formulaic nature of her apology is compounded, in fact, by her retraction, which suggests that her apology was never actually sincere. This analysis is not meant to criticize Dunham’s vocal frustration or her decision to not allow magazines to retouch her. Instead, it is meant to call attention to how, regardless of her stance on the subject, her participation in the discourse serves as a mode of political subject formation, reaffirming her identity as a vocal feminist. Echoing the words of McLaren (2002), “while [the] confession apparently gives the individual greater freedom through the articulation of the truth

about herself, it in fact contributes to the process of subjectification because it takes place within relations of power and ties one to one's identity" (58).

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to unpack the nuances of gendered image manipulation that make it a divisive political problem despite its ubiquitous presence within mass media. The intimate connection between image manipulation and the four key democratic ideals and practices of authenticity, consumption, spectacle, and apology exemplifies the contemporary relevance of this analysis. Moreover, the ability of image manipulation to shape and perhaps even define consumers' embodied experiences makes it a critical topic for discussion.

Countless so-called “paranoid readings” of image manipulation exist, condemnations of its anti-feminist semiotics (Sedgwick 2003). These readings of gendered image manipulation, while no doubt grounded in valid concerns, often fail to acknowledge the deeply-rooted presence that it has in consumers' daily lives. That is to say, despite public unrest with it, in an era of hyperreality, digital image manipulation is not going to cease. Recognizing that image manipulation is a keystone of the operation of democratic practices, I believe this thesis contributes to the beginning of a “reparative reading” of image manipulation—an analysis that acknowledges the patriarchal structures within which gendered image manipulation operates, but nonetheless seeks to identify how consumers react to and interact with this practice (Sedgwick 2003). These interactions, due to their political nature, shape consumers as political subjects while informing a larger discourse of representation. The pliability of image manipulation (evidenced by new rhetorics and discourses on the subject, as well as new iterations of gendered imagery) demonstrates that, though it may be an inevitable feature of culture, image manipulation is a practice that consumers can readily influence.

This perspective reframes the traditional top-down approach to the cultural analysis of digital image manipulation without denying the structural paradigms within which this mediation operates. Notably, this perspective challenges traditional feminist conceptualizations of gender as a construction shaped by intangible higher forces. As Butler (1993) explains, “[Defenders and critics

of construction] often claim that there are structures that construct the subject, impersonal forces, such as Culture or Discourse or Power, where these terms occupy the grammatical site of the subject after the ‘human’ has been dislodged from its place” (9).

Butler (1993) challenges this argument by embracing a reading of Foucault that suggests that it is through human agency that such concepts as culture, discourse, and power emerge. These forces can – and often do – become oppressive in nature, “a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability” (Butler 1993: 9). That said, it is through

this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of norm. This instability is the Reconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which ‘sex’ is stabilized (Butler 1993: 10).

In other words, while culture, discourse, and power are often referenced as the metaphysical forces constructing social norms, these very concepts are human-constructed. Both oppression and resistance, in short, operate within a matrix of human agency.

Thus, the democratic practices I have identified have become “a reiterated acting,” evidenced by the intense proliferation of manipulated gendered imagery in the mass media (Butler 1993: 9). Even so, the case studies I have provided demonstrate the ways in which consumers and producers alike open up the “gaps and fissures” that call gendered image manipulation into question, allowing them to engage with it as a means of political subject formation. It is clear that gendered image manipulation is not on the decline. Rather, it is constantly changing form in a way that conforms to democratic practices, while simultaneously, through consumer and producer interactions, insidiously challenges them.

Appendix:

Appendix A



15.6k likes

90w

[essenaoneill](#) Edit: "Please like this photo, I put on makeup, curled my hair, tight dress, big uncomfortable jewellery... Took over 50 shots until I got one I thought you might like, then I edited this one selfie for ages on several apps- just so I could feel some social approval from you." THERE IS NOTHING REAL ABOUT THIS. [#celebrityconstruct](#)

[view all 597 comments](#)

Appendix B



Appendix C



Faith
@FaithKTrewhella

What kind of tree is this? 🌲 @ReesesPBCups
9:39 PM · 10 Nov 2015

🔄 3 ❤️ 17



Appendix D



Appendix E



Appendix F



Appendix G



Appendix H



Appendix I



Appendix J



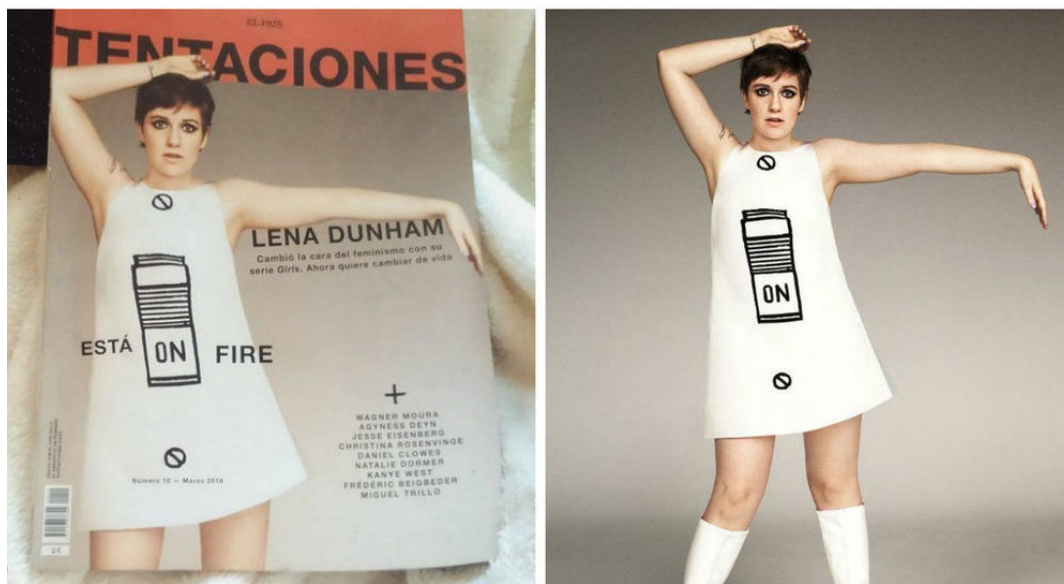
Appendix K



Appendix L



Appendix M



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