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CHAPTER THREE

Consuming Faith: Advertising, the Pornographic Gaze and Religious Desire

The whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum ... an uninterrupted circuit without reference.

— Jean Baudrillard

Representation is reality.

— Catherine MacKinnon

Advertising Desire

The model sits recumbent inside a shopping cart in a mall parking lot. Her legs straddle the outside rails of the cart, and a mischievous smile plays on her face. She shares the cart with several bowling balls, one of which lies between her legs. The image seems to elicit two simultaneous responses; she is both consumer and consumed. In another pose she sits in a semi-darkened theater, between her spread legs an impossibly large tub of popcorn; the colors are vibrant primaries; red predominates. She is young, dangerously young. There are other poses, all of which seem to signify without words her availability as commodity. In one she is sitting cross-legged in a round beanbag chair. In another she pushes back her long hair from her face while looking unfocusedly away from the camera. Another pose shows her leaning against a very colorful wall looking down toward the viewer, her hand poised at her jeans' waistband. In yet another pose, she slouches back in a nondescript booth of a nondescript diner and overdramatically applies lipstick with her mouth opened wide. Her face in each of these shots is heavily made up, with distinctive and gaudy blue eyeliner and shadow and bright red lipstick. The combination of bright, primary colors, soft pastels, unsubtle makeup, and playful poses serve to give the model an even more youthful appearance than

she already possesses. In none of these poses are the jeans she is wearing very clearly depicted. Indeed if there is any subtlety in these ads at all, it is in the non-description and non-particularity of the clothes they are advertising. The only text accompanying these images is "GUESS JEANS" written in a bright red, Roman, capitals on a white background.

This series appeared in an ad campaign in the New York City subways in 1999, taking up all of the available ad space of a car, so that no other advertising images were visible. In their ubiquity, they revealed a certain kind of power, a condition that can be seen as a microcosm of the marketplace at large in which the flood of advertising dominates our senses. In themselves, these ads were not that unusual or even interesting. They employed a fairly common structure in advertising, one easily recognized by any member of the culture. What interests us in this particular case is a small sticker attached to some of the posters, which unlike the ads themselves was singularly apparent only against their ubiquity. The sticker implored, "Boycott Guess Jeans. This is child pornography," and was signed Men Against Violence Against Women (MAVAW). What is interesting here has to do with some definitional questions. First, how was MAVAW defining child, pornography, and violence? And what makes it possible for them to read these ads as either pornographic, violent, or as abusive of children and/or women? And more broadly, what is it in our cultural epistemology that makes this kind of advertising simultaneously so effective and so offensive?

The ads, like any other cultural text, call for interpretation; as pieces of advertising they require a series of internal and external cues that will allow most members of the culture to recognize, but overlook, the available sexual tension and focus instead on the product. To interpret this ad as pornographic is to misread the proffered analogous acquisitive desire as strictly sexual and to misunderstand the intention of both pornography and advertising. In this misreading there is a literal interpretation of what is offered only allegorically, an attempt to circumvent, or render unambiguous, that which is always accepted as complex and unavoidable in the culture, the relationship between commercial and sexual desire. One is absolutely essential; the other must be controlled. Because sexual desire and the desire for God's love are inconsistent; this "misreading" sets up a contradiction between American consumerism and its religious mores.

On the one hand, the culture of consumerism readily yields to the pornographic gaze and its power to seduce buyers. On the other hand, the Judeo-Christian tradition negates and attempts to stem sexual desire and redirect it toward a human desire for God. American consumer culture and popular religion coexist in a perpetual tension in which each attempts to keep the other in check. As R. Laurence Moore has shown in *Selling God*, this relationship

is at times problematic and at others symbiotic. Religion often makes use of marketing techniques developed in consumerist culture, while consumerist culture uses religion as a backdrop against which to set its cultural productions. For marketers, religion becomes a delimiter for a transgressive impulse which seeks a boundary against which to push. Beginning early in the nineteenth century, American religious leaders became aware that they would need to compete in the marketplace of ideas in order to draw new converts to the fold and attempt to control and attract the "coarser" elements of social freedom. As popular religious movements began to borrow from new rougher trends of popular culture, as we noted in the previous chapter, the more established churches denounced what they felt were dangerous precedents. Early on, congregational Protestant ministers railed against the "hucksterism" of revival shows and camp meetings of the "Second Great Awakening," as well as the sensationalism of the popular press and the sheer commercialism of the young republic.

Market forces, however, led to an uneasy compromise between religious leaders and the rapidly industrializing nation. In the early twenty-first century, this relationship remains no less complicated or uneasy. The absolute faith in capitalism and the free market supported by most Americans is interrelated to the religious impulse to control and contain social morality. In this relationship, however, faith in the free enterprise system is always anterior to any religious impulse. The danger of privileging the economic as over and against the spiritual is an issue that has been raised again and again by religious leaders. In the post-World War II period, a number of Protestant writers struggled to establish a priority of place for a Protestant identity in the American marketplace. Protestant writer Paul Hutchinson's *The New Leviathan* of 1946 shows the uneasy relationship between religion and the marketplace, "disturbed by the idolatry of free-enterprise economics. [Hutchinson] quoted his friend Halford E. Luccock's satirical dictum: 'thou shalt not upset the applecart'" (Marty 141-142). Luccock and Hutchinson very well understood the position of religious doctrine in its relationship with the marketplace. It is a relationship that highlights a number of contradictions of American culture and religion and also draws our attention to larger questions of representation, reality, presence, and desire. These are questions about who determines the value of speech, what is profane and what is sacred, what is real and what is merely representation.

The pornographic gaze frames these issues in several important ways. While other representations are more easily distinguished from the real, depictions of sexual activity require a more complex assessment. Part of the question has to do with the conflation in the free market between human desire (of various kinds) and its commodification. Paradoxically, these questions of

desire, representation, reality, and commodification can be addressed just as easily in a discussion of American religion and specifically the evangelical movement; for in the interplay between market forces and religious zeal, expressions of desire and meaning often take on similar arrangements.

The desire for a relationship with a clearly identified God whose meaning can only be confirmed through some sort of real presence is analogous to the need for presence that arises out of the consumptive desire created in advertising copy, a desire that can only be fulfilled through actual consumption of product or the redemptive power of a personalized deity. The whole idea of the real gets complicated by the creative force engaged in the very act of desiring, while by definition the pornographic does not yield desire, but satiety.

Desire for the Actual

In this chapter we will explore three themes involving consumerism, advertising and popular religion. First, in order to enable consumers to read through the "pornographic" and establish a desire for a product, advertising takes part in training its target audience by establishing an elaborate allegorical scheme that requires a deep understanding of its hidden messages. While advertising uses allegorical distance, the opposite is true of the truly pornographic. "Hardcore" pornography is always purely mimetic. The whole point of the pornographic image is to be graphic; there should be a one-to-one relationship between that which is desired and that which is perceived. Paradoxically, this one-to-one structure comes closest to the literalist scriptural doctrine of most American fundamentalist Christians, who see scripture as not only inviolable, but also representative of a *literal* truth, and who stress the importance of a personal relationship with their God that is not mediated by institutions, images, or even biblical text. Opponents and viewers of pornography are likewise encouraged to interpret the text for themselves at the same time they see the texts as actual or "real."

Second, the prevalence of consumerist faith overrides all other concerns for community and moral standards, including concerns about defining, mitigating or legislating the obscene, profane, or pornographic. Since much American Christianity has developed a close relationship with the ideas of patriotism and capitalism, this sets up contradicting and competing paradigms.¹ Because of consumerism's overwhelming impetus toward "capitalizing" human desire, efforts to curb, delimit, or otherwise regulate the presumed pornographic in advertising will ultimately fail.

Third, the overarching construct, foundation and economic well-being of an advanced capitalist society depend upon a system of universal belief in

consumerism. Yet the nature of capitalism requires and breeds a culture of acquisitiveness that verges on, perhaps even overshadows, religious fervor. Indeed many of the strategies employed in the selling of products to the public by advertisers are in direct opposition to American religious attitudes. This conflict would seem to set up a critical contradiction that would negate one of these institutions, but they are instead inextricably linked. This link can be seen in the way American capitalism and religion relate to and employ desire. Desire for a product is not entirely unlike desire for God's love, or for a set of guiding principles which will allow us to live better lives. Whether God is seen as literal, metaphorical, or impossible, the god-idea always indicates and generates desire. Whether through the image or the idea, absence or presence — desire always indicates a lack of some sort. Desire desires desire. Religious revivals always take place in the shadow of crisis where there is a perceived lack of spiritual coherence and a desire to return to an Edenic past of purity and innocence.

God exists, as some theologians have stated, primarily or even exclusively in our desire for him.² Pornography and advertising can also produce this construction of meaning through desire. Since American texts of popular culture and popular religion have rescripted how we read and think about the sacred, and if our concept of God is at least partially a desire for God, then both advertising and pornography have also rescripted desire in a process that is partly theological, a process that cultural critic Mark C. Taylor calls "adverteasing":

What makes adverteasing so seductive is the repeated promise yet inevitable denial of fulfillment. Signs evoke real satisfaction only to "reveal" another sign that defers gratification. If the sign is always a sign of a sign and never the real thing, there is no end to the excessive quest for satisfaction. Desire is sacrificed on an altar that figures crucifixion but not resurrection [Notes 207].

While the desire for God in American popular religion includes a desire for containment of an increasingly chaotic social system, the ever expanding, ever insistent, ever voracious cult of consumerism subtends a system that is equivalent to a national, and increasingly global, dogma that surpasses all others in its zeal, creating in its adherents an overwhelming desire to acquire and consume goods and services. Without this overriding desire, Western culture would crumble. The desire-creating systems clash in particularly interesting ways in the commercialization of Christmas, whose religious message is subsumed by and devolves into orgiastic consumption, which has come to be assumed by every sector of the economy, most recently dubbed "the war against Christmas" by Christian groups.

In direct contrast to the explicit message of humility and proscriptions

against vanity of the major religions of Western culture, the constituents of the cult of consumerism are regularly bombarded with the message that it is of vital importance that they acquire material wealth, and, more importantly, that they use that wealth to buy more and more products, which in their turn will become symbols of that wealth. Advertising instills a desire in its viewers/readers through an elaborate system of metaphor in which the desire for the product ultimately becomes conflated with other human desires. The desire for wealth, power, companionship, social status, romance and God's love are all used to sell the consumer goods and services. But, the most commonly used human desire by far is the desire for sex; and yet, sexual desire itself discomfits most religious groups in America.

For many religious groups, there is no metaphor or allegory in the biblical text. Increasingly, however, while many maintain this scriptural truth, the focus of American Christianity is not so much on the book but on the personality of its founder. As we have said before, America has become a "Jesus-centered" country, rather than focusing on scriptural, creedal or doctrinal principles. The commonplace for most fundamentalist and evangelical Christians in the United States has been for a personal relationship with Jesus, a relationship that emphasizes the person of Jesus rather than his divinity or position relative to the other persons of the trinity as we will discuss in our chapter on the God of film. The desire for the divine is fulfilled through a literal interpretation of Jesus as the incarnate word of God. The carnal embodiment of Jesus gives fulfillment to those who seek an unmediated relationship with divine.

The "literal" nature of scripture as read through fundamentalism accords well with the representational "real" of pornography. Rather than the literal truth or an essential verisimilitude, advertising functions strictly in the allegorical mode. While the central dominating dictum for advertising in this culture is that "sex sells," there is an inherent contradiction; while most people believe this truism, they do not believe it applies to them. It seems that sex does sell, but only to other people. Even those who feel that there is too much sex in the media incongruently agree with it. That is, although they themselves see this use of sexual imagery as offensive, they agree that it has certain allure to others.

There seems to be a critical disconnect between the methods employed by advertisers and the fundamental mores of the society to which they advertise. There is a boundary — this is generally accepted — beyond which advertising which attempts to titillate becomes pornographic, but the boundary itself is not in fact agreed upon. The difficulty in distinguishing between the pornographic and the non-pornographic can best be overcome by reconsidering these categories in light of their respective rhetorical strategies. The

pornographic uses mimetic verisimilitude in creating sexual desire in its viewers; the desire in this case remains always sexual, always literal, and creates a simple relationship that necessitates no intermediary step. Seen in this context, pornography, marketing, and religion are not in conflict, but instead work together in a process of defining and framing the borders of acceptable behavior and morality. It is not a coincidence that America's three major obsessions are sex, money, and religion. Howard Stern is popular and Victoria's Secret advertising is successful not despite conservative religious disapproval, but because of it.

Pornography and fundamentalism could be said to be always synesthetic. Like the fundamentalist Christian who wishes to establish an unmediated relationship with the person of Jesus through a written or visual text, the viewer of pornography wishes to experience visually what is usually tactile. By contrast, questionable advertising is always necessarily an allegory or an extended metaphor for sexual activity, in which there is a displacement of sexual desire for consumptive desire, and is therefore always non-pornographic. The images of advertising partake in the paradoxical conjoining of the belief in a literal text and the open interpretation that make up American Christianity's relationship to the Bible. To read the allegory of advertising as pornographic is therefore to read it as a literalist Christian.

Strange Bedfellows

When the group Men Against Violence Against Women (not a Christian organization) labels certain advertising campaigns as pornographic, it seems to make a feminist move against the commodification of women, which it sees as damaging. However, labeling this kind of advertising pornographic does not get at the kinds of dangers they see it posing. Critics of the system that allows the use of sexually suggestive images in the service of consumerism apply the term pornography to these images in the hope of discrediting them and thereby stemming a morality gone chaotic. This maneuver, however, establishes a false dichotomy and elasticity for the term pornographic, which renders it less than useful. The discomfort with this kind of advertising lies in its commercialization of sexual desire. Advertising which commodifies and fetishizes sexual desire in the interest of consumerism, however, always creates complex relationships of signs whereby one sign stands in for another until sexual desire is transformed into the acquisitive desire widely sanctioned within the culture. For the religious right in America, the position of women as subservient to men is only symbolic of a proper family relationship. For them, the problem with these kinds of ads lies not with its use of women or its potential harm to them as individuated persons in society, but rather with

the incitement to lust they might ultimately create and the breach to the family unit it may rouse.

What both these sets of critics are concerned with is not the pornographic nature of advertising but the appeal that is made to sexual desire. Like the fundamentalist Christian approach to the biblical text, these critics seem to rely exclusively on the literal mode of interpretation, and they read as mimetic what is meant to be metonymic. In other words, they fail to see past the sexual allure to the consumptive and ultimately capitalist desire. For some feminists, the approach embodies the patriarchal power relationship whereby women are objectified and oppressed. Yet, while "real" pornography may be placed alongside images that sexually objectify women in advertising as a part of the patriarchal hierarchy that places women in a subservient position, it must logically be distinguished from this objectification. For religious conservatives the practice of using sexual desire to sell products represents a moral concern. Since sexual desire, except as constrained by very specific rules, is seen as sinful, the appeal to this desire is equally so.

While some groups have asserted the destructive power of this type of advertising, most of the energy exerted against sexualized images has been directed at "real" pornography because an attack on advertising's use of sexual imagery is in conflict with what we would call the major tenet of capitalism, "the freedom of acquisition." Advertisers must by definition be allowed to appeal to consumers in whatever way possible to get them to buy their products, and consumers, on their part, must be allowed to make their own decisions about acquiring the goods that appeal to them. Faith in the system of a free market protects commercial speech against the claim that it serves a pornographic role. The system relies on the unwritten law that advertisers dare not transgress the moral values of the community, lest the community react by withdrawing its patronage.

While advertising serves a primarily commercial interest, in its execution it exerts a socializing force. As fully socialized individuals in this culture, we all become, even if unwittingly, subjects of the cult of consumerism; the media, including advertising, play a major part in that system of socialization. Advertisers, thus, have a great deal of power in drawing the boundaries between socially acceptable and morally corrupt. The process of becoming a gendered, fully socialized citizen and consumer of the culture requires a level of media savvy which begins early in one's development. Gender markers for females and males are scrupulously instituted from the first days. While the role of the mass media is implicit in this socialization, it is so only because it is a part of the culture; however, every aspect of the culture — family, school, government, church — is engaged in this process.

It is within this total cultural process that children ultimately become

fully mature functional adults. However, the process must begin before children, particularly girls, can be considered apt sexual partners. Since the culture views women's sexuality as inherently tied to male dominance, where women perform submissive gender roles, the sexualization of girls must by definition be conjoined with the social position they are expected to fulfill in adult life. Girls are trained by the society in all its permutations (including the media) to fulfill these roles, including being sexualized objects of a male gaze rather than independent sexual beings. This process is particularly evident in the uncompromising re-inscription of traditional gender roles and resistance of equal rights for women within the religious Right.

In the economy of sexual development and negotiation, girls become potential objects of male desire because they will ultimately take up this role in adult life. Female "beauty" is seen as the epitome of feminine objectives. Young girls are taught to be beautiful submissive receptors to an eventual masculine advance, while boys are trained to be aggressive unfeeling conquerors of female desire. Girls and women often vie in beauty contests for the glory of being crowned as the most desirable by men. Thus, these contests become a site where society's expectations of women and girls can be most closely interrogated. What is most evident in these contests is the relative commercial value of female beauty in contradistinction to any or all other attributes a woman may possess. This feature is most harmful when the contests feature young girls who learn through these competitions that their whole self-worth is tied into how physically desirable they can be in the eyes of the (usually male) judges. This arrangement is repeated in every corner of the culture.

While many laws have been enacted since the 1990s for the protection of children from pornography, Americans support multi-billion-dollar,³ multi-media activities that actually promote the seduction of children and the incitement of pedophiles.

Parents — the very people who should be the most outraged by the sexual exploitation of youngsters — have been the principal supporters of hundreds of media-hyped children's "beauty pageants." These pageants commercially flaunt kids' bodies, often converting preteen and preschool girls into sex puppets adorned with lipstick, mascara, false eyelashes, bleached hair, high heels, and satin-and-rhinestone gowns and professionally coached in showgirl postures and movements [Davidson 62].

The 1996 death of JonBenet Ramsey⁴ heightened interest in these child pageants, where female children participate in a process of objectification and promotion of an aesthetic that reinforces cultural ideals of feminine beauty and desirability. According to Mark Davidson, "The *New York Times*, January 12 1997, quotes Camille Paglia, 'These pageants mark a deep sexual

disturbance in the society, a cannibalizing of youth by these vampiric adults'" (61). While the wholesomeness of these contests is continually reaffirmed by the parents of the participants, these children are as sexualized as any image in advertising. The clear message is that there is a normative idea of female beauty and that this is the ultimate goal for all women.

It is remarkable that these pageants take place in some of the most religiously conservative communities in the country, where one might expect resistance from conservative Christians. The religious Right, it seems, objects to sexualization, but agrees with the objectification of girls and women, which is a major precept of patriarchal capitalist culture. Because it subverts the system by allowing the exploration of unsanctioned sexual activity, the regulation of pornography seems necessary to conservative Christians. The conservatives paternalistically seek to protect women and girls from sexuality here, only because it falls out of the conventionally acceptable mode of objectification. However, they never question the social structure of gender roles or the position of women vis-à-vis male aggression or sexual objectification. For the religious Right the question is one of control and containment. They look to regulate the cultural production so that their own view of morality, including a particular sexual objectification of women and girls, is reinforced.

While many Christians and some radical feminists agree in using legislation to curb the distribution of pornography and what they consider pornographic images, they would, however, disagree on the issue of these pageants. The most strident and consistent objections to the pornographic come from two separate camps and are based on entirely different grounds. On one side, are the evangelical Christians, but on the other are radical feminists, like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, who oppose the representation of women in pornography as damaging to women in general and those represented in particular. Evangelicals see these images as damaging to the family structure and ultimately to the established society, and would move to eradicate, while Dworkin, MacKinnon and others have insisted that any penetrative heterosexual intercourse is inherently damaging to women and organized around a violent power relationship in which women always play the role of victims.

Into the 1990s these two groups — the conservative Christians and these radical feminists — engaged in a battle that came to be known as the "sex wars" against civil libertarians and other radical feminists (known as pro-sex feminists). Brian McNair clearly summarizes the Dworkin/MacKinnon position in his book *Mediated Sex*:

The objectification and fetishization of women present in much pornography is a reflection of male dominance, endorsing and reinforcing it. Its explicitness

(however, we may define that term) and its intention to arouse are not neutral characteristics of the text but demonstrations of male power. The images, and their arousals, are produced by and through the physical abuse and exploitation of the women whose bodies they depict. The arousals of pornography, by dehumanizing and objectifying women, induce misogyny, with all this implies for male behaviour (in the sexual and other spheres) [48].

There is no question that this is a serious objection to the effects of pornography. However, the fault lies not with pornography, but with society itself; representations of women in advertising, television shows, movies, literature, etc. necessarily convey the very same kinds of objectification. MacKinnon and Dworkin read pornography as creating these circumstances and not as representing them. If the "arousals" of the pornographic involve "demonstrations of male power" in which women are objectified, it is because this condition is embodied in the culture. Were women considered the absolute equals of men, sexual desire would not be tainted by this power struggle. Advertising and popular religion also are as much responsible for this condition and much more interested in maintaining the position of women relative to the patriarchal structure.

MacKinnon and Dworkin insist that "pornography is ... the subordination of women" (MacKinnon 290). Pornography does not represent the subordination of women, it does not cause it, *it is* subordination. "Pornography is a form of forced sex" (290), MacKinnon writes, "representation is reality" (291). They see the representation of women in pornography as reifying this power structure. They define pornography as "material that explicitly represents or describes degrading or abusive sexual behavior so as to endorse and/or recommend the behavior as described" (Cowrie qtd. in McNair 132). Paradoxically, this definition both over-confines and over-generalizes the term. On the one hand, MacKinnon and Dworkin require a proselytizing role for pornography, "endorsing or recommending" the abusive behavior. On the other, the slipperiness of the term "describe" as used in the definition allows Dworkin and MacKinnon's work itself to be considered pornography by their own definition.

When MacKinnon says that pornography is not a representation of something, but is, in fact, that thing itself, she is restating a view embraced by fundamentalist Christians that what a text represents can *become* real. In the same way that Sallman's *Head of Christ* or Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* appear to viewers and readers as the "real" Christ, the woman's experience in pornography is reality itself—"representation is reality."

Girls Gone Wild

Pornography exists and is effective in its intention of arousal because it explicitly represents desires that are always implicitly present in the society outside of it. Advertising works with the same implicit desires (sex, money, God), but maintains their implicitness in representing them to us. In the American context, the impulse toward these implicit desires is always conflicted by alternating impulses and desires. Religion to some extent operates upon the same system of desire, but also seeks to control or mitigate transgressive human urges while filling some of the space with desire toward the godly. When viewed broadly, U.S. history can be seen as cycles of chaotic freedom alternating with periods of severe restriction and attempts at containment. The connective tissue of these periods is the open marketplace and religious engagement. What makes the United States different from theocracy is that conservative religion has had to compete in the marketplace of ideas almost since the inception of the republic. The outcome of this situation is the inherent commercialization of religion. Religion competes not just against other philosophical positions, but against its own image as commercialized.

From the tent revivals during the Second Great Awakening throughout the nineteenth century to stadiums packed full of "promise keepers," and Billy Graham's last great crusade at Flushing Meadows at the beginning of the twenty-first, American religion has attempted to broaden its appeal through modes that are often indistinguishable from crude commercialism. According to Moore, in the early days of the republic

Americans remained a religious people because religious leaders, and sometimes their opponents, found ways to make religion competitive with other cultural products. Although nineteenth-century Protestant ministers and many entrepreneurs of commercial culture on occasion furiously attacked each other, they had to learn to work the same audiences using a market model that compelled them to adopt techniques of persuasion rather than coercion [38].

On occasion, the churches themselves have been in conflict over the manner in which the "good news" was being spread. "Some [Protestant leaders] warned about the dangers of commercialization and suggested that the only obligation of religious leaders toward the reading public was to ensure that those people who wanted devotional material got the real thing" (Moore 34). Ultimately, the system of religious commercialism becomes tied in with the consumer culture and what develops is a vortex of influence where each affects the other in foundational ways. For example, as Moore notes, "the work of the American Bible and Tract societies as it influenced commercial culture laid the groundwork for mass communications and for mass movements

generally" (76). Commercial culture within the American capitalist system develops side-by-side with religion and with advertising's manipulation of various human desires. As advertising develops, it becomes more and more dependent on the use of women's sexuality to manipulate these desires.

While the "sex wars" relate principally to the distribution of softcore and hardcore pornography, the use of images of women and girls in advertising was largely ignored by both the MacKinnon/Dworkin camp and their religious counterparts. Some "pro-sex" feminists have argued that the real damage done to women and girls is not through pornography but in the mainstream media. Furthermore, Lisa Duggan argues that pornography's existence serves some social functions, which in fact benefit women. "By challenging Judeo-Christian ideals of what sex is for and how it should be organized (i.e. exclusively within marriage and monogamy), pornography subverts the very patriarchy which so disadvantages women" (qtd. in McNair 78). Pornography, these feminists argue, can be liberating to women because it can allow them to rescue their own sexuality from the patriarchy and give back the power that is routinely taken away in mainstream media.

The pervasive use of women as commodified sexual objects in advertising is readily available to the society at large and much more stringently reinscribes patriarchal notions of sexuality. The position of women in American society certainly does not derive exclusively from their representation in pornographic material. Since advertising is a much more "legitimate," much more public medium than pornography, its influence on society at large and the condition of women specifically is significantly greater than that of pornography.

While advertising is adept at exploiting the allegorized sexual desire it has created over the past hundred or so years, it also capitalizes on the concern over how much "sex" is too much. Advertisers make use of the controversy over ads that probe the limits of this allegorical scheme. Concern about child pornography in advertising may have begun with Calvin Klein ads featuring a very young Brooke Shields in her Calvin Klein Jeans, and continued with Kate Moss. In 1993, Calvin Klein bus ads featuring a very young Kate Moss, dressed only in Calvin Klein underwear, inspired a great debate about the propriety of using models that appear to be underage in ads of this kind. Ultimately, the ads were pulled amidst allegations and protests that they were representative of "child pornography." Moss was not in fact underage at the time of the ads, but her body type (slim hips, undeveloped breasts and "waiflike" thinness) made her appear even younger than her actual age of nineteen.

Themes of a sexualized child present in the Klein/Moss ads are explored by John Leo in a *U.S. News and World Report* article:

Here and there, her photos flirt with themes of masturbation (fingering her breasts under her bra), bestiality (posing nude with a large dog), incest (under a towel, apparently nude, being hugged by her brother) and violence (bare-breasted, with blackened or bruised eyes, holding her hand over her mouth and looking upset) 27].

In each of these cases, the themes require some allegorical interpretation in order to be read as sexual or violent. One has to read what is absent through what is present in order to arrive at a definition of the ads as child-pornography: why is posing with a dog necessarily bestiality? How do we know through visual representation that it is her brother she poses "apparently nude" with, and how does posing imply incest? The subjective nature these assumptions can be easily discerned in the language used to describe the ads as pornographic:

In her ads, Moss often *looks like* a vulnerable and compliant child, stripped for sexual use. "The message of these pictures is that she is very young and very available," says Linnea Smith, a North Carolina psychiatrist and anti-porn crusader. Other commentators have noted the theme of Moss as a slightly soiled and exploitable street urchin. Harper's Bazaar says she *looks "like a kid from a latter-day Fagin's gang."* The naked child, staring vacantly and helplessly at the camera, is a staple of child pornography. One of Moss's photos shows her cringing nude in the corner of a huge sofa, with legs locked and arms pressed to her breasts, *as if* bracing for an impending sexual assault [Leo 27, emphasis added].

These descriptions, brimming with merely suggestive, subjective and figurative language, such as "as if," and "looks like," reveal some of the problems of interpretation. None of the poses or situations described can be literally read as either pornographic or involving a child. And yet, these commentators can read through implied symbolism to the absent presence of sexual desire. The commentators here are not privy to some ultra-critical eye, which allows them to read through the meanings of the ads, but rather are individuals socialized to do precisely what the ads require them to do, though perhaps a bit too well.

The ads spark a debate that opens up two lines of questioning. If a major part of "society" deemed these ads as "child pornography" (which appears to be the case), why was Klein not prosecuted according to the law? And if a significant portion of the culture saw the ads as offensive, pornographic or obscene, why did Klein's sales increase? Klein's technique is effective because it pits a number of market forces against each other at several levels of the culture. On one side, are those who are offended by the advertising, this includes a large percentage of conservative religious groups. Once they react to the ads in the ways Klein anticipates, the advertising becomes a news story and as a news story it draws attention from civil libertarians who read the issue as

involving censorship and first amendment rights. The controversial nature of these political disputes attracts the attention of Klein's young consumers who may or may not have been attracted to the fashion, but are attracted to the transgressive nature of the advertising. Once the controversy reaches a peak, Klein pulls the ads and makes a contrite apology. This assures that more liberal critics see the transgression as an honest mistake and forgive him.

Although Klein was forced to pull the ads by consumer groups, and apologize for them, and while a judicial investigation was launched into the nature of the ads, he never faced criminal charges. What, then, is the difference between these ads and "real" child pornography (i.e. the kind that is criminally punishable by law)? And what definition of pornography is being used to determine that these ads are or are not indeed pornographic?

Let us propose for a moment a different set of circumstances that might even further problematize the definition. If Klein had used a model who was sixteen but, rather than Moss's prepubescent body, revealed fully-formed breasts and hips — if she appeared to be older rather than younger — would the ads have attracted the same amount of controversy? Would her appearance have had an effect on the cultural definition of "child" or "pornography?" By legal definition, a sixteen-year-old is legally and, in most cases, culturally a "child." But in this case, the portrayal is not of a child but of an adult; so that, although she legally and even culturally may be a child, the model comes to represent a simulacrum of an adult. For all intents and purposes, the child in this case becomes the signifier of a mature woman and thus would elicit no significant response in terms of the sexualized nature of the ads. What is represented becomes real; like MacKinnon's definition of pornography and fundamentalist Christian readings of the Bible, what is presented to us is what is there, appearance is everything.

We should note that it is the representation of the child in an "adult situation" that so mobilized the protesters of Klein's ads, so that a representation of an adult in the same situation would not elicit the same response. Advertising in all media makes use of scantily dressed mature women in more provocative poses than those used by Klein. Yet, these are rarely called into question as pornographic. We can safely assume that the cause of the problem in the Moss case was not the nudity, whether assumed to be pornographic or not, nor the actual age of the model, but rather Moss's particularly child-like appearance, in other words, representation. In this case it seems there is some leakage or slippage between the terms "pornography" and "child." There is something in the definition of the term "child" that seems to have an effect on whether or not the ad can be considered pornographic by the public. If the "child," posed in a particular way, appears to be a child, the ad may be considered pornographic, but if the ad features an older looking child or an

actual adult, the definition of pornographic seems to disintegrate. That is, material that in no way would be considered pornographic when featuring apparent adults becomes pornographic when the participants are, or rather can be identified as, children.

The definition of "child pornography" within a cultural context is not related to the simple addition of the two terms, but rather to the shift of the second term by virtue of its connection with the first. In the legal sense there is not as much room for slippage between the two terms. To show how the law resolves this conflict in a manner diametrically opposed to public opinion, let us use an example from the world of real pornography. At about the same time as the Klein/Moss ads appeared, an "adult actress" using the name Traci Lords was discovered to have been only fifteen years old when she began making pornographic films. When this fact was discovered, she had already made over 80 films and was one of the most popular performers in the industry. This discovery leads us to two separate and rather intriguing discussions. Does authorial intention affect a change in definition for child-pornography? And what agency, if any, does the "child" in such a case actually have?

No one who saw the movies before the discovery was made could have imagined that Lords was underage. Given her appearance, one would have assumed that she was a young but mature woman. So we have here something like the hypothetical case we alluded to above. The representation in these movies was not of an immature girl, but of a fully developed woman. Lords comes to mimetically signify a fully sexualized adult female; as such, she is symbolically tied to "normal" adult sexual desire. Once her real age is discovered, however, her image becomes tainted with pedophilic lust, and the symbolic arrangement, by which she represented an adult, is broken. In fact, one of the outcomes of this revelation was that to certain men her videos became even more hotly desired, now as pseudo-legal child pornography. For these men, the real becomes the unseen present. Lords's films become more sexually desirable although nothing within them has changed and what has changed is absent from the films.

What is interesting in both of these cases — the model in advertising and Traci Lords in film — is the ambiguous and contradictory nature of the response. In the case of advertising it is the *apparent* age of the model that becomes *real* — as signifier the 19-year-old becomes underage. On the other hand, in the case of Traci Lords, the opposite seems to be true. When her actual age becomes known her films are legally defined as child pornography, despite her appearance. They become illegal to sell, increase in value, and even apparently increase their power to elicit sexual arousal. What is significant here is that in both cases there are contradictory forces at work within the creation of meaning and the representation of the real.

To conclude, let us return to the Guess Jeans ads. As would be expected in a predominantly Christian, capitalist society, the modes of interpretation are determined through the interaction of these very strong forces. The reaction to the pornographic depends upon the pre-established Christian context against which it defines itself. Any reading of cultural artifacts from this culture must necessarily incorporate the reaction to America's Christian context. Pornography defines itself against this backdrop. What is sinful or transgressive is *so* because of its relation to a Christian ethic. When pitted against the consumerist drive and its creation in the culture, however, this ethic cannot stand.

The contradictory responses to these portrayals of women in many ways reflect the American public's relationship to religion and the Bible. In each case we have the assumption of a literal truth—a dissolution between the borders of representation and reality—while, at the same time a freedom exists to choose not only one's response or interpretation to a text, but to actually create an alternate reality that replaces or changes that text. Like the relationship between popular culture and popular religion, what appears to be contradictory is often just as easily seen as symbiotic and creative. This paradoxical sense of reading an image is perhaps most dramatically indicated in religious popular culture by the numerous instances where Christ has been seen embedded in the images of billboards, an event that simultaneously contains elements of religion, advertising, and desire. We see what we want to see, what we need to see, in images designed to inflame our desires. Mark C. Taylor writes about this phenomenon, whereby the "real disappears in the image and image becomes reality.... God, it seems, has become a sign; or, perhaps more precisely, the (advertising) sign has become God" (*Notes* 170). Ultimately "in the culture of simulacrum, God becomes a sign, and conversely, the sign becomes God" (183). This circularity whereby the real and the virtual become indistinguishable, where God and desire become signs for each other, is always at work in the American marketplace, the American popular religion, and the American imagination.

CHAPTER FOUR

Absolute Contradictions: Perceptions of the Spiritual and the Religious in Popular Music

If religion functions both to explain the world—providing models for how we live, tenets of faith and empowerment, and comfort for when they don't work—and to offer a sense of contact with something greater than one-self, then heavy metal surely qualifies as a religious phenomenon.

—Robert Walser in *Running With the Devil*

It's like here comes the Catholic Church saying "Sex goes here and spirituality goes there," ... but I say, No, they go together.

—Madonna (from *Truth or Dare*)

Absolutely Abstract

Victorian author Walter Pater famously claimed that all art aspires towards the condition of music; many religious thinkers have also used music's abstract nature as an ideal model for comparisons to the indescribable character of religious experiences. Yet music's textless text creates possibilities for subversion as well as creation as it indicates an ultimate contradiction of absence and presence. More than any other art form, music inspires an insistence of presence, while its abstract nature guarantees an open meaning, and thus, in its undecidability music approaches the contradictory nature of divinity that we have been locating in the texts of popular culture. Music can inspire or accompany worship; it can replace traditional religious experiences; it can challenge or protest religious roles; it can complicate and problematize the relationship to the divine and itself become a sacred text. Because the popular normally exists within a clear linguistic frame, the meaning of which music itself cannot escape, popular music participates in the discourse and practice of popular religion in ways that both reaffirm and deny its spiritual qualities.