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Dove's "Real Beauty" Backlash

It sounds almost like the Macy's Santa Claus advising shoppers to look for something at Gimbel's in Miracle on 34th Street, but there you have it: Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" is actually telling ordinary girls and women to feel good about themselves. And, for the most part, Jennifer L. Pozner is rather glad it is, even if the Dove ads are still aimed at selling beauty products according to the implicit philosophy that "cellulite is unsightly, women's natural aging process is shameful, and flabby thighs are flawed and must be fixed." No, what angers Pozner are the male media figures who have voiced dismay at Dove's display of women with realistic figures and faces, some of whom dare to be middle-aged. Indeed, for Pozner, it is the commentary of such men that makes the Dove campaign so necessary in the first place. Pozner is executive director of Women In Media & News.

When it comes to Madison Avenue misogyny, usually it's the ad that's objectionable (hello, *Advertising Week!*), rather than the product itself.

The opposite is true in the latest incarnation of Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty," which poses a bevy of full-figured babes in bras and boyshorts on billboards throughout New York, Chicago, DC, LA and other top urban markets . . . just in time for the rollout of their new line of "firming cremes."

If the same smiling size sixes (and eights, and tens) were hawking hair dye or shilling for soap, the campaign would be revolutionary—but despite the company's continued and commendable intent to expand notions of female beauty to include the non-skinny and non-white, Dove's attempts are profoundly limited by a product line that comes with its own underlying philosophy: cellulite is unsightly, women's natural aging process is shameful, and flabby thighs are flawed and must be fixed . . . oh, so conveniently by Dove's newest lotion.

The feel-good "women are ok at whatever size" message is hopelessly hampered by the underlying attempt to get us to spend, spend, spend to "correct" those pesky "problem areas" advertisers have always told us to hate about our bodies. As Salon.com's Rebecca Traister put it, the message is "love your ass but not the fat on it."

Yet even though Dove's "Real Beauty" ads play to and subtly reinforce the stereotypes they claim to be exposing, it's impossible not to feel inspired by the sight of these attractive, healthy women smiling playfully at us from their places of billboard honor, their voluptuous curves all the more luscious alongside the bags-of-bones in competitors' campaigns.



Gina Crisanti was featured in Dove's campaign.

Unless, of course, you're *Chicago Sun Times* columnist Richard Roeper, who reacted to Dove's "chunky women" with the sort of fear and loathing he should reserve for the cheesy Hollywood schlock he regularly "thumbs up" during his Ebert & Roeper film reviews. "I find these Dove ads a little unsettling. If I want to see plump gals baring too much skin, I'll go to Taste of Chicago, OK?," Roeper ranted, saying that while he knows he should probably praise Dove for breaking away from airbrushed, impossible-to-achieve, youth-obsessed ad imagery, he much prefers to bitch and moan. "When we're talking women in their underwear on billboards outside my living room windows, give me the fantasy babes, please. If that makes me sound superficial, shallow and sexist — well yes, I'm a man."

Unsettling? Try Roeper's implication that all men are just naturally sexist — and that a man who wears gender-based bigotry as a badge of pride has some of the most power in the media to determine which films succeed and which fail. (Remember Roeper's admission next time his thumb goes way up for a flick whose humor rarely rises above cheap gags about sperm as hair gel, or when he pans a promising movie centered around strong female characters.)

Dozens of major media outlets jumped on Roeper's comments as an excuse to run insulting headlines such as "Fab or Flab," with stories exploring the "controversy" over whether Dove's ads are, as *People* put it, "the best

thing to happen to advertising since the free sample, or an eyesore of outsize proportions.”

The tone of this debate turned nasty, quickly, with women's self esteem in one camp and men's fragile eyes in another as typified by a second *Sun Times* writer's comments that these “disturbing” and “frightening” women should “put on clothes (please, really)” because “ads should be about the beautiful people. They should include the unrealistic, the ideal or the unattainable look for which so many people strive.” Besides, wrote Lucio Guerrero, “the only time I want to see a thigh that big is in a bucket with bread crumbs on it.”

From there, print and broadcast outlets featured a stream of man-on-the-street interviews begging Madison Avenue to bring back the starvation-saturated, silicone enhanced sweeties they'd come to expect seeing on their commutes to work, echoing Guerrero's mean-spirited musings.

Some masked their aesthetic objections under the guise of health concerns: “At the risk of sounding politically incorrect,” Bill Zwecker, the balding, paunchy, middle-aged anchor of CBS's local newscast in Chicago, weighed in on his CBS blog, “In this day and age, when we are facing a huge obesity problem in this country, we don't need to encourage anyone—women OR men—to think it's okay to be out of shape.” Perhaps this line of attack would have been more convincing if the women in the ads were unhealthily overweight (they're actually smaller-sized than the average American woman), or if Zwecker was a little more *GQ* and a little less *Couch Potato Quarterly*.

Certainly, these men so quick to demonize “the Dove girls” show no understanding that those “fantasy babes” of traditional ads have a profoundly negative impact on the health of girls and women in America. Advertising has never glorified obesity (though that problem is arguably a byproduct of McDonalds, M&Ms and other junk food ads), but the industry has equated starvation and drug addiction with women's beauty and value for decades.

The “real beauty” backlash underscores just how necessary Dove's campaign is—however hypocritical the product they're selling may be. What's “unsettling” is not that Roeper, Guerrero and Zwecker might have to look at empowerment-infused ads targeted to female consumers—it's that men with power positions in the media still think it's acceptable to demand that women be displayed only in the hyper-objectifying images they feel is somehow their due.

READING THE TEXT

1. Why does Pozner believe that Dove's “Real Beauty” ads “reinforce the stereotypes they claim to be exposing” (para. 5)?
2. In Pozner's view, what is the basis of the objections that Richard Roeper and some other male commentators have to the Dove “Campaign for Real Beauty”?
3. Characterize Pozner's tone in this selection, particularly in her comments regarding male critics of Dove's ads. What effect does it have on your response to her essay?