

Gunter
882 Midterm

Drive-by Panoptical Terrorism

[As I go back and write and rewrite this I find myself getting angrier and angrier. Sorry if this starts to read as an incoherent rant.]

In January 2012, the nonprofit organization Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) sponsored two billboards that were displayed in Albany, NY: one of a woman's thigh and one of a man's stomach. **[Billboards. The medium is the message...so who are they targeting here? People who spend time in their cars, participants of a "fast food nation." They are trying to intervene into every day life and change the consumption practices of people who would drive by. We are taught to read billboards as advertisements—I think an argument could be made for public service announcements (or whatever the hell this actually is) as pushing a product: shame]** In a time when bodies are under scrutiny (especially white female bodies¹, although this is arguable) and the US is experiencing an "obesity epidemic" (sometimes called a "war on fat," which is also rich for rhetorical analysis) these billboards are meant to shame people into being hyper-aware of their physical bodies as well as what they are putting in to them in an effort to keep them regulated. **[Srsly. This scares the shit out of me. Internal panopticon, anyone?]** Since this response is supposed to be relatively short, I'm going to concentrate on the female image:



So what do we see? The text is immediately striking—the contrast between bright yellow and black makes the words catch our attention. The yellow color of the text is reminiscent of the food the billboards are condemning, but I would argue that it's not really about the cheese. In fact, cheese as a material object really has very little to do with this. What the billboards are playing off of is the (misinformed) idea that overweight people simply have no self-control when it comes to foods that are rich in fat. If moderation is key, then clearly people whose bodies aren't the "ideal"² are clearly not practicing moderation—and the problem (and therefore solution) is on them.

It somewhat ironic that they are explicitly targeting one type of food in the billboard

¹ I think this because I see the discourse around white female bodies in relation to size as something that is often portrayed as cosmetic—we [I am a part of this group] are like the teenagers of fat—we supposedly have the extra time and money and also have the responsibility to make our bodies "right." This is definitely becoming more typical for men, though (the Adonis Complex)

² I refuse to use the word "norm," since most ads that tout something as "normal" are way off, and immediately alienate the majority—the actual norm—of participants/viewers usually for the purpose of encouraging them to spend money to be "better".

instead of the culture that has indoctrinated people into believing that they can do whatever they want, providing the least nutritionally valuable foods at the most affordable prices, condemning bodies for not being perfect and then creating a version of perfect that is airbrushed—even the models and celebrities aren't good enough. /rant

The idea of “Your X on X” calls back to the anti-drug campaigns of the 1990s (e.g. “this is your brain on drugs,” with the image of an egg being cracked open and fried in a pan). This reinterpretation asks the viewer to liken cheese to a highly addictive (illegal) drug. Illegal drugs are regulated by the government; people's body fat is not. **[RSAs and ISAs, baby. It's only a matter of time before our bodies are regulated by the government...unless it would take profits away from too many people. Gross, gross, gross].** These billboards are trying to get people to further internalize the panoptical gaze and self regulate their bodies.

In addition to the text, we also see a white body that is basically dismembered—there is no head, no face, nothing that displays this person's emotion/age/gender/etc. We are meant to only see the thigh and the cellulite³ highlighted by the disembodied hands as representative of the entire person. I think we are supposed to read this billboard as a woman because of the underwear—and the emphasis on the thigh. If the billboard had shown the woman's stomach instead, would we have been able to tell? If the one with the man had emphasized his thigh would it have changed the message? **[Gender is performed and socially constructed. It doesn't matter what gender these actual people are—the goal of the billboards is to have us identify with the images and scare and shame us into...what? Change? Self loathing? What makes the most money? Gross].** Statistics show (as much as they can be trusted) that men typically carry their weight around their abdomen while women carry excess weight in their thighs. This could be why the billboards were portrayed this way, but it's still interesting to note that the image of the woman's thigh isn't enough by itself—we need to see her squeezing it and bringing the cellulite (as a stand in symbol for fat). **[These billboards are meant to invoke a particular kind of horror where the viewer, for a moment, sees herself in the image and can't separate. If the viewer is thin, she fears becoming this way (all bodies have the possibility of change, which gives the diet industry an endless supply of potential consumers) and if she is not thin, she is supposed to feel like this billboard IS her]. [My first reaction to seeing this: personal shame. If I squeeze my upper thighs, I can see cellulite].** This body isn't a sex symbol⁴; because of its size it's safe to show to the public on a billboard. If this were a “skinny” white woman, would this be too racy? Probably. But take any size body and pinch the skin around the thighs, and you will see cellulite. By showing someone who is not the “ideal”⁵ we are

³ This is really kind of ironic, because cellulite isn't actually fat—it can be caused by excess body fat, but there are also many other reasons (age, activity level, etc.) cellulite itself is a symptom of many things—and, I think, should be seen as value-neutral.

⁴ In the 19th century, fat was “in.” It was a sign of social prestige because only the rich could afford excess food. Billboards (or whatever the equivalent would be) would have condemned a too thin body as aberrant. These billboards and the fat shaming approach to creating change is indicative of a different culture

supposed to identify this as something bad—something that needs to be corrected.

But why? What the fuck are we really afraid of? The cellulite in my thighs and abdomen isn't going to crush anyone to death. I am not a bad person because I carry it. I am not a bad person because I indulge in behaviors that create it. I think, personally, that we are afraid of tolerance. If people stopped being obsessed with their bodies cosmetically (which is what this billboard is really after—if it were really about health it should show a clogged artery instead of a woman in lacy panties), a multi billion dollar industry would collapse—and that's what's really scary.

Now I'm off to eat a deep fried sushi roll filled with cream cheese and avocado. I will then spend the rest of the day feeling mildly guilty and contemplating running 5 miles, which I ultimately will not do. I am a participant in the culture I critique.