The Gaze and Rhetorical Conflict in Woman Suffrage Advertising:

A Rhetorical Analysis

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"Meaning…arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing motivations and frames of reference at all three levels of production, text and audience."

--Christine Gledhill[1]

"Struggles over representation contribute to the construction, deconstruction and reforming of the real."

--Christine Gledhill[2]

Throughout the suffrage movement, the group's leaders utilized multiple forms of propaganda to garner support for woman's right to vote. One common practice, advertising, is tightly related to consumerism. The advertisements sought to "sell" woman suffrage ideology to magazine and newspaper consumers, alongside other mass produced products, ranging from corn remover to jewelry (Finnegan 126-132). If we apply feminist film theory, a theory that examines the captured female image offered to the world for public consumption, it becomes evident that suffrage ads simultaneously sold the female image as a sexualized object to be subjected to a controlling patriarchal gaze. This later representation is problematic given the aims of suffrage advertising. This essay will examine the struggle over representation in suffrage marketing and how it contributes to the "construction, deconstruction and reforming of the real" (Gledhill 121).

My examination of this ironic quandary may be broken down into the following four components: I will first give a condensed historical overview of the suffrage movement followed by a brief discussion of the organization's relationship to consumerism. I will then engage in a theoretical discussion on feminist film criticism to ground my critique of suffrage

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[1] Christine Gledhill. "Image and Voice: Approaches to Marxist-Feminist Film Criticism." *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism.* 1998, 120.
[2] Christine Gledhill. "Image and Voice: Approaches to Marxist-Feminist Film Criticism." *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism.* 1998, 121.

advertising before I give my analysis of three advertisements linked to, or published by, members of the suffrage movement.

Brief Overview of the Suffrage Argument

In the early days of the women's movement in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century (presently known as first wave feminism), there were no critical theories in place to help formulate or give structure to feminist ideas; there were no words to define women's emancipation. To organize their critiques, early feminists relied on such texts as the Bible; ancient Roman and Greek mythologies and histories; and accounts of European noble women and queens to support their ideas of women's emancipation (Stanswell 419). Such sources were included in Margaret Fuller's 1845 manifesto which suggests ways women can create agency for themselves.

In 1848, fellow New Englander Elizabeth Cady Stanton put words into action when she organized the First Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Its members drafted a series of motions entitled, "Declaration of Sentiment and Resolutions" in which they protested, amongst other things, (white) women's position as a legal subjects to their fathers and husbands, and consequently their lack of self-ownership of their own bodies—they wanted control over their reproductive rights. They protested the inability of married women to hold their own property, women's taxation without political representation, the economic and social inequality of divorce laws, as well as the inequality of education and job opportunities for women. In short, the convention's participants opposed the treatment of women as second class citizens of the United States. The political climate of the 1850s helped ideas of the woman suffrage movement to be better accepted. "Made possible by the spread of women's reform activism, the demand for woman suffrage was strengthened by the increasing attraction that

popular politics began to have for women, as well as for men, during the 1850s" (DuBois 841). With the inception of the woman suffrage movement, debates on women's rights became central to political debate, a part of "the American political mainstream." The suffragists' early work met with some result; in the 1850s, the legislature gave women rights to their own income and property.

Woman suffrage not only set out to establish equal voting rights for middle-class white men and women, the movement also set out to get men to see women as individuals with equally important public and personal wants and needs. This ran counter to socially accepted norms and beliefs that a woman's identity was her home, her children, and her husband. According to popular belief, a woman was supposed to be a selfless emotional and moral center for her family who presided over the private aspects of daily life. To support their argument for equality, suffragists argued that the Fourteenth Amendment certified their citizenship in 1868 and that by giving black men voting rights in the Fifteenth Amendment passed in 1870, white middle class women were second class citizens with less power than those whom they considered to be social inferiors until they were granted the right to vote.

The suffrage movement was riddled with controversy between middle-class white men and women, and middle class white women and poor black women. First wave feminism sought to reform the U.S. political arena and create access for (white) women in the public domain. However, progress was slow to come for these reformists. In 1878, the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) proposed an amendment modeled after the Fifteenth Amendment which prohibited disfranchisement by sex. However, it would take another forty-two years for Congress to pass this proposal which eventually became the Nineteenth Amendment (Faragher et al. A-8).

Women and commercialism

First wave feminism relied on reason and history to maintain its position that women deserved the right to vote. Supporting this position entailed activism, propaganda, organization, and action; this also required women to make a place for themselves in a seemingly inaccessible public patriarchal society. Nonetheless, they were able to ease into the public sphere with the aid of newly developing modern consumerism. The new consumer culture that began to develop in the 1850s challenged and subverted traditional feminine ideals such as passivity, dependence, moral and sexual purity, and maternal nature (Leach 342). For example, department stores offered to women their first job opportunities outside of the domestic space of the home, or the school room. Department stores helped working class saleswomen and managers stake out their emanicipatory rights: These women earned and kept their own wages; many of them lived alone or with other women from the shop. Many refused to marry because they enjoyed their freedom. Department stores also provided middle-class women a place to usurp patriarchal codes of behavior. As they shopped, they could wander freely and anonymously around the stores; they could socialize with anyone. By shoplifting, they rebelled against their oppression (Lancaster 185). Assisted by this socio-economic and cultural space of commercial culture, women redefined themselves as individuals, claiming the privileges of men, and breaking the patriarchal mold designed to oppress them.

Not only did consumerism assist the enfranchisement of women by offering a space for entry into the sphere, but suffragists also “relied on aesthetic politics of mass spectacle that imitated the practices forged by the urban merchant class. Suffragists used advertising space in the streetcars, where they tacked up ‘vivid yellow, black and white placards.’ With the willing

consent of department stores, they decorated store windows in the “colors of the Suffrage Party’ (Leach 338.) Not only did the party as a whole adopt these sorts of practices, but individual suffragettes also applied such “aesthetic politics” to their own self image. For instance, in 1894, Mary Livermore of Massachusetts urged fellow suffragists to “Show Your Colors!” by wearing yellow, the suffrage color, to their annual festival. Women were encouraged to wear a yellow ribbon on their left shoulder or chest, and male supports were to wear a ribbon on their lapels or in their button holes (Livermore 137). Livermore’s battle cry (so to speak) was indicative of times to come where outfitting one’s self with suffrage gear would be commonplace.

> By the time the Nineteenth Amendment finally passed in 1920, …showing colors—the proclaiming dedication to enfranchisement through the use of woman suffrage merchandise—had become commonplace. Colored ribbons, …had given way to largely inexpensive and mass-produced suffrage commodities, including hats, blouses, badges, pins, valentines, Kewpie dolls, playing cards, drinking cups, luggage tags, fans, hat pins, and much more. Suffragists eagerly purchased these goods, and they used modern methods—including advertising, catalogs, and specialized suffrage shops—to market them (Finnegan 111).

The relationship developed between consumerism and woman’s suffrage established authority for women in a way unlike anything else available to suffragists in the public realm.

Consumerism and commercialism were significant to the movement because they created a site for political discourse that shaped a “conservative vision of women’s citizenship.”(113).

> By embracing a consumerist worldview, suffragists once again blurred the distinction between political and consumer identity and desires; by at least metaphorically equating participation in politics with participation in the marketplace, suffragists helped

> perpetrate a consumer-capitalist ideology that had already begun to privilege access to political power (113).

This metaphorical equation worked well for these feminists, not only politically, but monetarily, too. Funds raised from selling suffrage merchandise went towards supporting the organization so they could maintain their operations and run campaigns. Businesses such as advertisers, manufactures, and, of course, retailers aligned with the suffrage movement greatly benefited financially from their involvement and support for women's enfranchisement (113).

The relationship between suffrage and consumerism was so tightly bound that suffrage leaders at both the local and national levels advised their followers in their newsletters, magazines, and other forms of written media as to where to shop, or what specific products to purchase on the basis of support granted by retailers or manufacturers. "New York women, for example, named Macy's their suffrage supply headquarters. Similarly, the NAWSA recommended Max Kurzrok's 'suffrage blouse,' and entered into a profit-sharing arrangement with the Butler Brothers Jewelry Company" (126). Further still, suffragists provided advertising copy to manufacturers hoping to galvanize their sales and wishing to align itself to the movement.

> Generic "pattern advertisements," provided to local suffragists by the NAWSA, allowed commercial sponsors of these papers to choose from a variety of slogans, including: "The Demand for SUFFRAGE and for (Blank's) Ice Cream may be resisted [.] It cannot be conquered"; and "WOMEN ATTENTION! Do your own voting[,] But Let me do your Building[.] John Blank" (127-128).

As shall soon be seen, not only did suffrage advertising prescribe to a certain formula to further the movement, but the images of women in those advertisements also contributed to constructing an image for, or possibly against, the movement for enfranchisement.

Deconstructing the Gaze: Woman as Spectator

It is appropriate to apply feminist film criticism to advertising because like the women captured on celluloid film, women or feminine images captured in advertising are equally forever bound to that moment, that frame, that construction. The purpose of women's role in film is embedded in their physical being—they bear meaning only in relation to men and the way they look at her. This same idea may be applied to women in advertising: The focus of the scene is the sexualized female body within it.

When one gazes at women locked in space and time in paintings, photographs, film or advertising, there is a certain pleasure associated with that look called scopophilia. Scopophilia, according to Janet Walker is "the pleasure in subjecting others to a curious, controlling gaze" (83). Pleasure, however, is complicated by the gender of the object and the audience. "Scopophilic pleasure in taking another person as a sexualized object is identified as one essential psychic process involved in cinematic spectating… However, these processes of psychosexuality and identity construction are imbalanced across the sexes" (83). The male gaze is active; he is the 'bearer of the look'; he controls the sexual construction of the female image. Conversely, "the female is the passive object of the look" (83); she does not construct meaning, she only bears it for as long as the male needs her.

According to feminist film theorists, women are not taught to view or read images with a matriarchal gaze; instead, they must adopt a patriarchal gaze. In adopting the male gaze, Mary Ann Doane states, "the female spectator is given two options: The masochism of

overidentification or the narcissism entailed in becoming one's own object of desire, in assuming the image in the most radical way" (Doane 87). The female spectator cannot view another female image without adopting one of these two options. When the she views the objectified female narcissistically, she must figuratively castrate herself to compensate for adopting the patriarchal gaze and a metaphoric phallus. This castration debilitates women from adopting a female gaze that could possibly empower them, rather then impair them. Overidentification, Doane suggests, implies a different sort of visual consumption:

> In her desire to bring the things on the screen closer, to approximate the bodily image of the star, and to possess the space in which she dwells, the female spectator experiences the intensity of the image as lure and exemplifies the perception proper to the consumer. The cinematic image for the woman is both shop window and mirror, the one simply a means of access to the other. The mirror/window takes on then the aspect of trap whereby her subjectivity becomes synonymous with her objectification" (Doane 32-33).

Doan's argument here is particularly relevant to deconstructing the images of women in advertising. The relationship between the advertised image and consumerism is even more tightly bound than the relationship between the cinematic image and consumerism. Advertising is generally meant to inspire the consumer to imagine themselves as the idealized image of what could or should be. In the case of suffrage advertising, the images frequently suggest a new, improved, pretty and powerful woman. Thus, she becomes dissatisfied with herself because such images remind her that she is none of these things.

In her analysis of Doane's work, Patrice Petro points out that women become a commodity as both subject and object in the captured scene.

> Doane further suggests how the commodity form collapses traditional distinction between subject and object and restructures spatial and temporal registers of looking and perception. "It is not accidental," she writes. "that the logic of consumerism and mechanical reproduction corresponds to a logic of perception attributed to the female spectator whose nonfetishistic gaze maintains a dangerous intimacy with the image." Proximity rather than distance, a disabling closeness to the image—these are the tropes that link femininity and consumerism and the female spectator (Petro 76).

Applied to suffrage advertising, the sales pitch is two fold; one pitch sells women in commodity form; the other pitch attempts to sell women's enfranchisement. The two are contradictory, and this tension is central to the following analysis of three ads linked to, or published by, members of the suffrage movement.

***Analyzing the View*[3]**

The purpose of suffrage advertising was in part to keep the movement center stage in the public and political realms. It was also intended to encourage support for women's right to vote. However, the codes for deciphering images according to feminist film theory problematize the interpretive outcome. Rather than helping to liberate women, the female object/subject actually corrodes this objective. These images subtly kept women bound to negative stereotypes labeling them as wanton or infantile.

The first advertisement to be examined is for the suffrage blouse. The advertisement was featured in *Woman Citizen* in June 1917. A portion of the caption suggests the blouse pictured is a "ready-to-wear-to-anything-and-not-at-all-expensive suffrage blouse." "Ready-to-wear-to-anything" sounds a bit promiscuous. More than likely, this was not the intention of the

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[3] All images analyzed in this paper were taken from M. Finnegan's *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture & Votes for Women.*

publisher; but, the raciness of the wording is reinforced by the attached image of a young woman wearing the suffrage blouse.

THE SUFFRAGE BLOUSE

It was Miss Agnes Morgenthau, a leader among the "Y. S. S." (Younger Suffrage Set) who recommended that a "ready-to-wear - to - anything - and - not - at - all - expensive suffrage blouse" would meet a long-felt want among suffragists. A manufacturer has acted upon her suggestion and placed the above garment on the market.

FIGURE 4.2 *The suffrage blouse.*
Featured in the 2 June 1917 issue of the *Woman Citizen.*
Reproduced by permission of Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

The woman is staring off to her left of the camera taking in a vision unknown to us. Suffragists would have us believe she is looking into the future to a time when women have the right to vote; by appropriating the male gaze, one could contend she is staring at her lover who watches her as she is photographed.

With her chin held high, she stands almost serenely behind a wooden wicker chair. Her serenity is questionable because her hands suggest otherwise; her hands indicate that she is fidgety or perhaps anxious for something or someone.

She wears a fairly non-descript high-waisted black skirt that contrasts with her white suffrage blouse. The long-sleeved blouse she wears has a peter-pan collar with a medium-deep V neckline. The V is deepened by two buttons left undone which practically leaves the blouse

open down to her navel. This plunging neckline contradicts the smart practicality suggested in the caption. Instead, the undone buttons gives cause to second guess what "ready-to-wear-to-anything" really means, and to wonder further who the model is looking at off to her left. Maybe it really is her lover; furtheremore, maybe rather than staring serenely off into space, her look is more seductive than that: her look is more like a come-hither stare. This plunging neckline and seductive stare highly sexualizes the woman in this image such that she could be labeled wanton. By overidentifying with this image, women take on this wantonness. By purchasing the blouse and wearing it, suffragists invest into two fantasies. In the first fantasy, women are unified and their enfranchisement is viable. By wearing the blouse, women represent a part of a larger network that empowers them. In the second fantasy, women become sexual, lusty beings privy to exposing their bodies in order to get what they want. This ad commodifies three objects: the blouse, suffrage, and the sexual woman. The relationship between the three holds a tension common to marketing that depicts women.

The second advertisement under analysis is for 'GETS-IT' corn, callus, wart and bunion remover. This ad was distributed by the manufacturer and it utilizes suffrage rhetoric to sell the product. The central image of the advertisement is a woman wearing a banner that reads, "Votes for 'GETS-IT.'" The woman appears to be marching for 'GETS-IT' and suffrage. The implication is that "suffrage parade marchers could find relief for sore feet with this corn medication" (Finnegan 129). If the product is good enough for women who frequently march and suffer from sore feet, then the product is ideal for anyone with this ailment.

However, as with the suffrage blouse, this ad is selling more than a simple product; it is selling the illustrated woman as a sexualized object for consumption. The woman's suggestive pose reinforces her sexualization. Her right arm is extended above her head, and her left hand

seductively tilts her head back while her face bears a look of ecstasy. Her body is stretched out as she leans back thrusting her breasts into the air. Her waist is corseted which adds emphasis to both her breasts and derriere. Her buttocks are further emphasized by the way her jacket hangs to enlarge it. The actual size of it is made apparent by the dark etching of the skirt she wears, while the jacket appears transparent when it covers and enlarges the size of her rear. The woman's skirt is inappropriately short for the time period and the movement. Nonetheless, this does opportune the looker a chance to see her long curvy legs that end in a pair of pointed, feminine high heels. (Practical for marching? Of course!) If we were to tilt her picture forty-five degrees to the right, she would appear to be lying down, and her marching legs would be spread into a most promiscuous position.

FIGURE 4.3 *"Corns Quit."*
According to this advertisement, suffrage parade marchers could find relief for sore feet with this corn medication.
Reproduced by permission of the Susan B. Anthony Ephemera Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

The patriarchal gaze undermines the intent of this advertisement. As a result, rather than simply selling 'GETS-IT' and supporting woman suffrage, the ad commodifies the movement and the

bodily female image. The image betrays the written copy. While the words take up more space in the ad, individually they are smaller, and are not the viewer's focus. They are literally the small print that should only receive marginal notice. As such, the image prevails and decides what is really being sold.

FIGURE 4.7 *Suffrage valentine.*
Reproduced by permission of the Susan B. Anthony Ephemera Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

The final marketing image is a suffrage valentine asking men, "Do I get your vote?" I find this one particularly interesting because it can be interpreted in a couple of ways. To begin with, the seemingly simple written rhetoric is actually fairly sophisticated. 'Suffrage' or what we can see of it, on the cherub's sash appears to be incorrectly spelled with an 'e' before the 'r' such that what is visible reads 'women suffer' which encodes a double entendre of sorts. 'Suffer' has two meanings: 1.) "to feel or

undergo pain" 2.) "to allow, permit, or tolerate" (Morehead 656). Given the context in which this phrase is issued, the first definition suggests that women endure pain because they cannot vote. The second suggests a meaning closer to suffrage—men should permit women to vote. The sash, while small, is the most empowering aspect of the valentine. However, it is also the smallest and its power is trifling in comparison to the prevailing message, "Do I get your vote?" This phrase, written in the largest font on the page, remind the recipient and other anticipated interpreters of the valentine that the intended audience is male and it is he, and others of his sex who have power and control over women's right to vote.

Graphically, the advertisement's focus is on a rosy-cheeked cherub wearing a sash and short frilly apron who carries a placard demanding "EQUALITY" and "VOTES for WOMEN." The half-naked cherub represents women and woman suffrage. Women are constructed by this equation to be sexual and infantile. The cherub is walking on a cloud, which implies she is not steeped in reality; her head is in the clouds dreaming. The vaporous cloud supporting her is stamped with the question, "Do I get your vote?" She is reliant on her male audience to answer in the affirmative in order to negate falling from the cloud, or to prevent the cloud from disappearing from beneath her feet. She relies on men, and what they will allow her to keep her afloat. Once again, suffrage marketing is undercut by visual implications understood through the male gaze. Certainly these mixed messages were not the intention of the suffragists who distributed this media, but nonetheless they exist and are worthy of deeper examination than a simple passing glance.

Feminist film critic Christine Gledhill states, "Meaning…arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing motivations and frames of reference at all three levels of production, text and audience" (120). Suffrage advertising was intrinsic to making

women's right to vote a reality. They formulated their ads to sell the American public suffrage ideology; they wanted the public to consume the ideology so that woman's suffrage would come to fruition. However, it is apparent after reading some of their ads through the eyes of the dominating male gaze that the advertisements sold more than woman's enfranchisement and commercial goods. They sold women's bodies as sexualized objects to be subjected to and controlled by a patriarchal ethos. Fortunately, these problematic representations of women did not prevent women from obtaining the right to vote.

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