A Tribute to Jean Kilbourne

On the Occasion of Her Honorary Degree from Westfield State College
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We could all name a pioneer or two – those who were the first to discover the flu vaccine, fly a plane, break the color barrier in baseball, or reach the South Pole. In academic and intellectual circles, there are pioneers as well, although the development of theories, perspectives, and entire disciplines is really more of a collaborative and dialogical process. While each academic discipline can name a number of “founding” lights and pioneers, there are few individuals who can lay claim to playing a pioneering role in several different fields of study. Jean Kilbourne can.

When she started clipping advertisements in 1968 and putting them on her refrigerator and then developing the patterns she saw into a slide-lecture presentation more than three decades ago, there were only the beginning rumblings of women’s studies, media literacy, cultural studies, feminist communication theory. And, with very few exceptions, almost nobody took advertising seriously as an object of study for its social impact rather than how well a particular ad sold toothpaste. Nor were there prominent voices suggesting media and advertising imagery presented a serious public health problem.

There is virtually no scholar or leader working in any of those very lively arenas of inquiry today who would not acknowledge a tremendous debt of gratitude and respect for the work of Jean Kilbourne. In fact, to quote Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash*, “Jean Kilbourne’s work is pioneering and crucial to the dialogue of one of the most underexplored, yet most powerful, realms of American culture—advertising. We owe her a great debt.”

After years of sounding the wake-up alarm to the ways in which women were being portrayed in the media, especially in advertising, largely through campus lectures (during which she was named top campus lecturer in the country two years running), Jean decided to transfer her slide talk to film. Her first film, *Killing Us Softly*, became one of the top-selling educational videos of all time. Her subsequent videos, *Still Killing Us Softly* and *Killing Us Softly 3*, produced by the Media Education Foundation, have kept her analysis current and remain some of the most widely viewed classroom videos ever.

She also alerted audiences to the relationship between advertising and dangerous addictions. Her early video with MEF, *Pack of Lies*, tackles the tobacco industry and its misleading advertising, especially that aimed at youth and women. In another video and lecture, *Slim Hopes: Advertising & the Obsession with Thinness*, Kilbourne links media images of models, including ones retouched and even constructed through computer graphics, to the growing epidemic of eating disorders among young women. In a later video, *Spin the Bottle: Sex, Lies & Alcohol*, she joins with anti-violence educator Jackson Katz to probe the impact of advertising by the alcohol industry on young people. She also takes on both the alcohol and tobacco industries in her video, *Deadly Persuasion: The Advertising of Alcohol & Tobacco.*

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Pipher also noted that, “Many of us first ‘met’ Kilbourne in her electrifying film *Killing Us Softly*, which changed forever the way we view ads about women.” That is precisely how thousands of students have described the impact of viewing Jean’s videos or seeing her lectures. Because she has been so important to the educational objective of so many teachers to open students’ eyes to new ways of seeing the world around them, Jean is a bit of a legend in their ranks. When she appeared at a National Communication Association conference to premiere the release of *Killing Us Softly 3*, she was greeted as a hero with a standing ovation in a packed ballroom.

When Jean recently gave the commencement address at Westfield State College, she was recognized by the largest standing ovation she may have ever received, and also by a honorary doctorate degree from Westfield. The citation with her degree read in part: “Through research informed by a deep sense of justice, your insights lead us from consumerism to consciousness.”

Her insights have also led to countless student papers, doctoral dissertations, books, scholarly articles, spin-off research projects, courses, indeed entire careers, now for decades. She even inspired a women’s punk rock group in Canada to name their band after her. She has led the way not only in lending a feminist analysis to the examination of images of women, but also to a greater understanding within the communication discipline of representation, of the power of the image, of the social impact of advertising, and of the connections between these important fields of inquiry and major concerns of public health, including eating disorders, alcohol and drug addiction, and violence toward women.

She graduated from Wellesley College, where she is now a visiting scholar, and she received her doctorate in education from Boston University. She has been an adviser to two Surgeons General and has appeared on numerous television programs including “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and “The Today Show.”

Extraordinarily intelligent, attractive, poised, charming, and witty, she has been able to disarm skeptics in her audience and open eyes, even within the advertising industry itself, to the impact of media images on our culture. An industry publication, *AdWeek* editorialized, “After listening to Jean Kilbourne, I would never doubt her intellectual honesty. While she bills herself as a critic of advertising, she is more akin to a prophet calling out in the wilderness for fundamental change in the way we communicate publicly with one another.” Women in the media industry have also appreciated her advocacy. In 1995 she received the WIN (Women’s Image Now) Award from the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). Previous recipients include Ida Lupino, Barbara Walters, and Betty Furness. The presenter of this award said, “No one in the world has done more to improve the image of women in the media than Jean Kilbourne.”

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