Center Acquires Papers of Feminist Advertising Critic Jean Kilbourne

Jean Kilbourne is a renowned author, speaker and filmmaker whose critique of advertising and its impact on society has brought her international acclaim. Known for promoting media literacy as a way to prevent problems originating from mass media advertising campaigns, she argues that the advertising industry sells more than products or services. It sells values, gender roles, success, self-worth, sexuality, normalcy and addiction. Dr. Kilbourne’s papers are now a part of the Rubenstein Library through a joint collecting initiative undertaken by the Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History and the Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture.

Disturbed by ads she saw in magazines, she started clipping advertisements in 1968 and putting them on her refrigerator. Gradually she developed the emerging patterns into a slide-lecture presentation that she presented to her students and as a public lecturer, speaking out about media literacy and advertising. She was a pioneer, perhaps the first person to focus on advertising as an object of study for its social impact rather than for how well a particular ad sold toothpaste. She also suggested that media and advertising imagery presented a serious public health problem and promoted addiction. Her lectures quickly gained popularity and notoriety and she was named by The New York Times Magazine as one of the three most popular speakers on college campuses. Now nearly 38 years after her first public lecture, she has appeared at nearly all of the most popular universities in the United States and all of the major universities in Canada, as well as scores of private and public schools. Earlier in 2014 she even delivered a TEDx talk.

Kilbourne’s films, lectures and television appearances have been seen by millions of people throughout the world. She is perhaps best known for her films that are based on her lectures, including, “Killing Us Softly,” which chronicles how advertising depicts women over a 20-year span. Her other films include, “Slim Hopes: Advertising and the Obsession with Thinness,” and “Pack of Lies: The Advertising of Tobacco.” Kilbourne has also written many articles and editorials, has been interviewed by many newspapers and magazines, and has been a guest on hundreds of television and radio programs.

Kilbourne authored the book, Can’t Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel, in which she analyzes advertising’s effects on gender roles, alcohol and substance addiction, relationships, violence, and the objectification of women and men. Publishers Weekly called it “a profound work that is required reading for informed consumers.”

She also co-authored, So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids.

Dr. Kilbourne’s papers includes her notable collection of clipped and categorized print advertising, book manuscripts and other writings, her films, recorded interviews, research files, slides of the ads found in her presentations, teaching files, and other materials related to her research, writings, and film projects. Arrangement and description of this collection will begin in early 2015 with hopes that the collection can be opened for research by late spring.