

A MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION PRODUCTION

The Codes of Gender

Identity & Performance in Popular Culture

“The point is that while we are born with a set of different individual physical and biological characteristics, these traits are then made sense of through the categories of culture. In this way, there is nothing natural or biological about gender or our gender identities. We learn to inhabit the gender category that we have been assigned from outside, from the culture.”

- Sut Jhally, Founder and Executive Director of the Media Education Foundation

Running Time: 73 Minutes

Year Released: 2009

To arrange interviews or speaking engagements, please contact:

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FILM SYNOPSIS

Communication scholar Sut Jhally applies the late sociologist Erving Goffman's groundbreaking analysis of advertising to the contemporary commercial landscape in this provocative new film about gender as a ritualized cultural performance. Uncovering a remarkable pattern of gender-specific poses, Jhally explores Goffman's central claim that the way the body is displayed in advertising communicates normative ideas about masculinity and femininity. The film looks beyond advertising as a medium that simply sells products, and beyond analyses of gender that focus on biological difference or issues of surface objectification and beauty, taking us into the two-tiered terrain of identity and power relations. With its sustained focus on the fundamental importance of gender, power, and how our perceptions of what it means to be a man or a woman get reproduced and reinforced on the level of culture in our everyday lives, *The Codes of Gender* is certain to inspire discussion and debate across a range of disciplines.

CREDITS

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SUT JHALLY QUOTATIONS FROM *THE CODES OF GENDER*

“It is only when we start to look at [advertisements] carefully that we begin to see how strange and weird they actually are and begin the process of thinking independently, for ourselves, about what the culture holds up as normal.”

“Because advertising is usually operating in a context where audiences are quite resistant to being exposed to commercial intrusions, as well as being bombarded with messages from other advertisers, they need to communicate in a way that is quick and which is deep at the same time. Using the codes of ‘gender display’ fulfills both those requirements. They reference a deep aspect of individual identity and can be communicated quickly — at a glance — because they’re so familiar.”

“While the gender displays have been around for some time, the fact is that they have been chosen for prominence. This means that the ideas they communicate come from someone’s imagination. Images do not fall from heaven fully formed. They are the creations of human beings.”

BIOGRAPHY

SUT JHALLY | Executive Producer

Sut Jhally is a Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and founder and executive director of the Media Education Foundation (MEF). He first gained national recognition for his film *Dreamworlds: Desire, Sex & Power in Music Video* when MTV threatened him with a lawsuit over copyright infringement. The resulting press storm led to numerous requests for the video, and provided the rationale for MEF’s founding in 1991. In the time since, Jhally has been the executive producer and/or director of more than 45 films produced and distributed by the Media Education Foundation, including the critically acclaimed *Peace, Propaganda & The Promised Land* and *Hijacking Catastrophe*. He is the author of *The Codes of Advertising* and *The Spectacle of Accumulation: Essays in Cultural Politics*, co-author of *Social Communication in Advertising* and *Enlightened Racism*, and the co-editor of *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*. A recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award at UMass (2000) and the UMass Chancellor’s Medal (2005-2006), Jhally is regarded as one of the world’s leading scholars in the areas of advertising, media, and consumption.

The non-profit Media Education Foundation produces and distributes documentary films and other educational resources to inspire critical reflection on the social, political, and cultural impact of American mass media.

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