Summary by Ellen Vandlik

This week’s speaker, Ms. Sagna, emphasized the objectification of women in the media through advertisements. She showed a video entitled “Killing Us Softly 4” where speaker and former model Jean Kilbourne spoke about what it means to be a woman in American culture today. Jean started collecting ads in the late 1960’s, inspired by her involvement with the feminist movement, her interest in media, and her experiences as a model.

Ads sell us much more than just products. The 91% of information that’s received by the unconscious mind sells us values, concepts of love, sexuality, and what it is to be both normal and successful. In other words, they convey to the viewer who they should be. For women, today’s advertising teaches that most important is how they look. They surround us with images of ideal female beauty being young, thin, happy and flawless. However, this flawlessness cannot actually be achieved. Almost never do we see a photograph of a woman considered beautiful that hasn’t been photoshopped. It’s a look that’s been created through airbrushing, cosmetics, and computer retouching. Women of color are only considered beautiful if their features mimic the white ideal: light skin, straight hair, and Caucasian-like features. Black women are often featured in jungle settings wearing printed skins as if they were exotic animals.

In all kinds of advertising, women’s bodies are often turned into “things” and “objects.” Their bodies are often dismembered and detached. Just one part of the body, often breasts, is focused on. Kilbourne believes this objectification creates a climate in which there is widespread violence against women. The most dangerous images eroticize violence. Many ads today feature women in bondage, battered, or even murdered, thus encouraging sexualized violence in our culture even further.

Over the years, there has been an increase in ads that objectify men. They’re generally shown as bigger, stronger, and more powerful than women. It’s a fact that masculinity is often linked with violence. Boys grow up in a world where men are constantly shown as perpetrators of brutal violence, encouraging toughness and insensitivity. The negative and distorted image of women deeply affects not only how men feel about women, but also how men feel about everything that gets labeled feminine by the culture. Most men are not violent, but many are afraid to speak out against the stereotyping. However, on the contrary, battering is the single greatest cause of injury to women in America and one-third of all the women who are murdered in our country are killed by their male partners. I believe these numbers would decrease if young men didn’t grow up desensitized to this type of violence via the media.

In conclusion, human beings should share the whole range of human qualities and not be told that each sex can have only one set of human qualities. Kilbourne believes we need a lot of citizen activism, education, discussion, and media literacy to work together to change norms and attitudes. We need to think of ourselves first as citizens rather than primarily as consumers in order to slow the harmful effects of eating disorders, obesity, violence and cosmetic surgery rates in America. The media needs to make an effort to diversify gender ideals and create a broader view of acceptance and normalcy in society.