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AUSTRALIA

celebrity  
set-style

The world's  
hottest  
handbag

key look  
of the season

who cheats  
who doesn't

Nicole Kidman  
transcending life

V 0042-8019



ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

# Fashioning readings, fashioning selves:

a comparative study of the American, Australian and French  
editions of *VOGUE* magazine, 1997-1999.

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Centre for Comparative Literature & Cultural Studies  
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# Abstract

This thesis examines how and why women read *VOGUE* magazine through a comparative analysis of the American, Australian and French editions from 1997-1999. It takes issue with accounts of magazine reading which have suggested that women are duped into finding pleasure in a popular cultural form inherently dangerous and detrimental to them. A model of meaning production that accounts for the interdependence and fluidity of both reader and text is developed and applied to the various social discourses that mediate women's interaction with *VOGUE*. The earlier chapters of the thesis are concerned with the extent to which the text is able to impose its preferred reading agenda on the reader. They explore the dominant discourses of expertise, community, seduction and salvation on which it draws to achieve this. This is followed by an analysis of the economic discourses driving the magazine industry and their impact on the text-reader relationship. In the later chapters, the identificatory possibilities offered by the text and the extent to which these are anchored in discourses of narcissism, masochism and fetishism are explored. Through a discussion of the status of photography as reality, combined with a close reading of a variety of visual images from *VOGUE*, the presumption that women's magazines should present more realistic images of women is challenged. The thesis closes with a discussion of the cultural specificity of feminist accounts of texts that present visual images of women, in particular the question of conforming to dominant social norms of physical attractiveness.

# Declaration of Originality

I declare that this thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university, and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except when due reference is made in the text.

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the author.

Tamara Somers



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12/7/10

A great many people have been instrumental in seeing this project to fruition. Without their time and effort, the work would not be what it is. While I wish to acknowledge here the particular contributions of a number of individuals, I must also thank the very many women who have given of themselves in informal settings in the past five years to share their own views on women's magazines. On aeroplanes, in taxis, at dinners and barbecues, in shops and youth hostels around the world, the revelation that I was writing a thesis about *VOGUE* magazine was almost always greeted with enthusiasm, and a desire from women to tell their own stories about the roles women's magazines played in their lives. This is not an ethnographic study and these stories do not form the basis of my research. However, the many stories related to me over the years have shaped the direction my research has taken and, above all, have convinced me of the need to keep the study of women's magazines on academic and feminist agenda. To all the anonymous women who shared their views, I offer my sincere thanks. I hope many of them will find in this work some answers to the questions they raised.

This PhD project has spanned several academic departments at two universities in two states. At the University of Queensland, Anne Freadman of the then Department of Romance Languages was a superb supervisor for the initial year of my work, and her rigour and creativity shaped much of the theoretical framework of the initial chapters of the thesis. I am indebted to her for suggesting that I explore the potential applications of narrative theory, especially the work of Ross Chambers, to the reading of magazines. To Ross Chambers himself, I am grateful for the encouragement to pursue the application of his own frameworks outside of the domain of French literature in which they had been devised. I very much appreciated his thoughtful comments and willingness to listen to my ideas during his six-month residency as a visiting scholar at the University of Queensland in 1997. Also at the University of Queensland, I am indebted to Frances Bonner of the Department of English for picking up the project with great enthusiasm when asked to do so, and for her invitation to present an early draft of some of the work as part of a panel on magazines at the Australian and New Zealand Communications Association (ANZCA) conference in 1999, where I received a great deal of useful feedback from participants in the session. I must also acknowledge a debt to Peter Cryle, of the then Department of Romance Languages, for his helpful discussions of Michel Foucault's work and his suggestion that I pursue the connection between technologies of the self and women's magazines. The postgraduate students and staff of the same department were a helpful and stimulating community of which to be a part during my time at the University of Queensland. Leslie Colling provided considerable administrative support during my time in the department and has continued to do so since I relocated to Melbourne. I am also grateful to the University of Queensland for an initial grant which covered the substantial cost of purchasing subscriptions to the French, American and Australian editions of *VOGUE* for two years.

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Outside of the academy, a number of individuals and organisations have been very generous with their time and resources. In New York, Gary Hennion at the Magazine Publishers of America was kind enough to accommodate me for several days of research in their library and has continued to provide thoughtful answers to my numerous e-mailed questions about the world magazine industry. He also introduced me to research staff at the Fédération internationale de la Presse périodique / Federation of International Periodical Publishers (FIPP) in London who have been extremely helpful and continued to send me great volumes of information since my return to Australia. Similarly, Helen Kingsmill and her staff at the Magazine Publishers of Australia in North Sydney have been generous with their time in answering questions and willing to send me reports and publications free of charge. Paige Turner and Shannon Burkhart of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC were both extremely helpful in providing information and insights into the *Annie Leibovitz: Women* photographic exhibition during and following my visit to the exhibition in February 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting at this juncture that *VOGUE* and the Condé Nast publishers in the United States, Australia and France were approached on several occasions for comment on this project and invited to participate in it, but declined to do so.

for their thoroughly exhaustive searches for magazine data for France which proved to be virtually non-existent. Their willingness to answer questions via e-mail and to follow up requests for me long-distance is greatly appreciated. I am likewise indebted to the staff at the State Library of New York, the National Library of Congress in Washington DC, and the Princeton University Library for their assistance during my field trip to the United States. At Monash University, I am very grateful to the staff of the Matheson Library, in particular those in the Document Delivery service, who have worked hard to obtain a variety of obscure reference materials for me. The Rare Books Librarian, Richard Overell, and his staff were very helpful in arranging access to, and reproduction of, a number of photographic texts. The acquisition by the University, at my request, of a number of French-language texts for the Matheson Library's permanent collection is also much appreciated.

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While the contributions of all of the abovementioned people and organisations have been extensive, responsibility for the final product and any errors it may contain lies solely with me.

# Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of the late Sydney Jean Webb, my maternal grandmother, who died while I was writing it and who gave me her love of words and her belief in the strength and beauty of women.



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# Introduction

conducting a sociological study. However, the essential suspicion of women's magazines remains in all these works. The 1990s saw the rise of a second approach, which dismisses these ideological arguments and embraces the value of women's magazines as texts that serve to unite, even to empower, women. Approaches as disparate as those of Dutch ethnographer Joke Hermes, and Australian journalist-turned-cultural-studies-scholar, Catharine Lumby, are representative of this trend. This thesis will seek to establish an understanding of women's magazines that takes into account both theoretical positions, yet agrees with neither, seeking to develop a new framework somewhere between these polar extremes.

An essential assumption of much writing on women's magazines is that the ideologies they espouse necessarily have some effect on both social perceptions of women and women's perceptions of themselves. The extent to which this is asserted varies greatly between approaches. Underlying much of the research is a model of communication that assumes a discursive structure in which meaning is encoded in a textual object and decoded by a reading subject. Stuart Hall (1973) is the best known exponent of this theory and his transmission model of communication has served either implicitly or explicitly as a basis for much of the work in the field. In essence, Hall argued for a model in which meaning is produced by both media institutions and audiences in a discursive exchange. Christine Gledhill (1999) describes as 'cultural negotiation'. Gledhill's terminology has become relatively standard to characterise the point in the meeting between reader and text where meaning is produced. Liesbet van Zoonen usefully summarises the process of cultural negotiation as one which involves "the use and interpretation of media texts by audiences producing their own related similar or new meanings" (Zoonen 1994:9). While Hall's initial model insisted on the importance of audience participation in the discursive exchange, in practice, a far less active role has been accorded to audiences in much subsequent work. A pervasive assumption that the meanings encoded in the texts by media producers will, by and large, be those decoded by audiences when they come to interact with the text has come to dominate much popular cultural theory. The most important works on women's magazines that assume such a model of communication are: Ferguson's 1983 study of changes in women's magazines from the post-war period to the early 1980s; McCracken's 1993 'decoding' of magazine messages; Janice Winship's two studies, in 1980 on advertising, and in 1987 on women's magazines as a whole; and McRobbie's seminal 1978 and 1991 studies of teenage girls' magazines. Informing all of these is an assumption that ideologies are encoded in magazine texts and largely decoded by the reader as intended by the publisher. As McRobbie herself argues in her later work: "in the mid-1970s feminist attention to girls' and women's magazines saw the magazines as exemplifying oppression" (1999a:46).

Ferguson investigated what she termed the 'cult of femininity', a cult complete with totems and high priestesses, and she used her background as a journalist to investigate the

Why do women read a magazine like *VOGUE*? For over thirty years, feminists in the English-speaking world have suggested that it is because women have been duped into believing the (empty) promise that self-transformation and happiness are possible, if only an (unattainable) standard of beauty is reached. Women's magazines and other forms of popular culture have been at the centre of feminist debate about the forces that shape feminine identity. Much has been made of their capacity to prescribe appropriate, and by extension normative, feminine behaviours and to make women feel guilty when they do not conform. A number of studies have also examined the pleasure women gain from reading them. But few have addressed the question of the *consciously* double-edged pleasure these magazines provide for their readers. What if women know that the images of femininity in *VOGUE* are not 'real', and that they compromise some of their feminist values, but read them even so because they *enjoy* them? There are profound implications for feminism in acknowledging that women do not always want what is 'good' for them and that they might even actively desire what is 'bad'. Taking advantage of the work of consciousness-raising feminist scholars, who put popular cultural forms such as women's magazines on the academic agenda, this thesis will seek to understand why women read and enjoy *VOGUE*. It will venture into the contentious and volatile territory of what women desire and, in so doing, it will revisit some earlier studies on women's magazines, questioning many of the assumptions that underpinned them. It will examine women's magazines in the context of a readership that is increasingly better informed, more independent, better educated and more demanding of texts. Furthermore, it will focus predominantly on questions of *why* and *how* women engage with fashion magazines, rather than *whether or not* it is good for them to do so. Unusually, it will also seek to ask these questions in the context of a cross-national and cross-linguistic analysis.

Feminist scholarship on the subject of women's magazines has divided into two major theoretical camps. The first consists of those who have sought to validate and emphasise the importance of women's magazines as texts which document women's lives and experiences, while at the same time expressing concern over the prescriptive and proscriptive ideological messages about femininity and womanhood diffused via this mass medium.<sup>2</sup> Until the 1990s, virtually all studies of women's magazines subscribed to this approach. The extent to which the magazines were chastised for their representations of women and femininity vary according to the author, as do the theoretical frameworks of the analysis. Ideological analyses that seek to decode the hidden messages of women's magazines, of which McRobbie's (1978) work is the definitive example, tend to dominate. McRobbie (1978, 1991) and Ellen McCracken (1993) belong loosely to the ideological school of cultural studies and draw heavily on Althusser. In contrast, Marjorie Ferguson (1983) is a former women's magazine journalist

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<sup>2</sup> Dardigna (1978); Ferguson (1983); Hill (1995); Macdonald (1995); McCracken (1993); McRobbie (1991); Millum (1975); Tuchman (1978); White (1970); and Winship (1980, 1987) are examples of this approach to women's magazines.

conducting a sociological study. However, the essential suspicion of women's magazines remains in all these works. The 1990s saw the rise of a second approach, which dismisses these ideological arguments and embraces the value of women's magazines as texts that serve to unite, even to empower, women. Approaches as disparate as those of Dutch ethnographer Joke Hermes, and Australian journalist-turned-cultural-studies-scholar, Catharine Lumby, are representative of this trend. This thesis will seek to establish an understanding of women's magazines that takes into account both theoretical positions, yet agrees with neither, seeking to develop a new framework somewhere between these polar extremes.

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Ferguson investigated what she termed the 'cult of femininity', a cult complete with totems and high priestesses, and she used her background as a journalist to investigate the



extent to which editors (the high priestesses) both consciously and unconsciously set the feminine agenda and so defined femininity. She saw women's magazines as "pervasive in the extent to which they act as agents of socialisation and the remarkable degree to which they deal in and promulgate values and attitudes" (1983:2). Her study focused on the messages of the 'cult' of femininity as espoused by women's magazines and, while she makes some relevant and useful observations about these, she tends to ignore the possibility that women do not necessarily 'negotiate' them in the manner in which they are intended.

Similarly, and perhaps with more cause since her readers were so much younger, McRobbie (1978, 1991) assumed that the strong emphasis on heterosexual romantic love in teenage magazines was more or less swallowed whole, without questioning or negotiation of any sort. Her interviews with young readers do at least go some way to confirming that much of what they read is believed to be true, but her data is inherently problematic insofar as it involves responses to specific, highly directive, questions. McRobbie has subsequently revisited her earlier work on magazines and, as a result, substantially revised her position. Her later work (1994, 1999a & b) acknowledges the problematic nature of ideologically-based analyses:

Ideology suggested that beneath the social construction and the power of interpellative fixing there was the possibility of an eventual and superior truth of womanhood . . . Poststructuralist feminism has argued that there is and can be no truth of womanhood, just as there can be no single or true feminism. (1999a: 48-49).

Accepting that 'false-consciousness' arguments fail to account for the intelligence and interpretative capabilities of women readers, she increasingly rejects these in favour of a recognition of ironic readings. Although she admits that women's magazines have incorporated many positive aspects of femininity into their content, her position on the dominant models of feminine identity represented in magazines remains one of suspicion. Furthermore, her analysis is still located firmly within a loosely Marxist framework that criticises 'cultural feminist' analyses (such as my own) for the fact that they separate the issue of fashion consumption and its impact on women from the question of the exploitative circumstances in which many fashion garments and accessories are produced, circumstances where women are the primary oppressed group (1999a&b).<sup>3</sup> McRobbie is one of very few authors who has addressed the issue of the extent to which feminism has had an impact on women's magazines. She writes that although "the magazines . . . demonstrate an ongoing engagement with many feminist themes and issues", they nonetheless "still have the ability to regenerate polarities and oppositions in feminism" (1999a: 46). Her own work seeks to address some of these polarities and oppositions in its focus on the increasingly positive

<sup>3</sup> I wholeheartedly endorse McRobbie's desire to study in greater detail the difficult and complex question of the fashion industry's exploitative modes of production and distribution and the impact this must necessarily have on feminist analysis. However, I have chosen not to focus on these questions in this thesis because I seek to raise a different, equally difficult, problem for feminism: how to account for women actively seeking pleasure in popular cultural forms which they are well aware can be detrimental, degrading and politically contentious.

messages about sex and sexuality in young women's magazines. This thesis will grapple with another: the possibility that feminists may privately find pleasure in things they would denounce politically and the dangers entailed in such pleasures and politics.

McCracken (1993:1) was quite explicit in her intention to demonstrate that women's magazines are "a multi-million dollar business that presents pleasurable, value-laden semiotic systems to immense numbers of women". Both McCracken and McRobbie (1991, 1999a) examine women's magazines as institutions of capitalism, which seek to exploit women "with messages that conflate desire and consumerism" (McCracken 1993:2) and both assume for the most part that the capitalist system is successful in doing so. Even McRobbie's later work, which admits more agency on the part of the reader, retains its criticisms of the exploitative institutions of the consumerist society, albeit with an altered focus (1998, 1999a & b). McCracken acknowledges her debt to Hall's model and does not question at any stage whether the texts she is studying are ever read in ways other than intended by those who encode them, for example the "reifying image of woman as shopper in order to attract advertisers" (McCracken 1993:4). Her work is laden with assumptions that women are frequently duped by magazines into believing the messages they are fed. Often this is coupled with a 'false-consciousness' contention that women think they enjoy reading them, but that this is simply because they don't really understand what they are doing to them:

the numerous levels of women's attraction to this form of mass culture frequently disguise the fact that the attractive experiences are ideologically weighted and not simply innocent arenas of pleasure. (McCracken 1993:8).

McCracken is not alone in these assumptions, but she is perhaps the most explicit in articulating what has been a predominant trend in the study of women's magazines. Retracting some of her own earlier conclusions, McRobbie has lately come to question this approach, arguing that a focus on the pleasures women gain from reading magazines has allowed feminism a more balanced approach to them:

the fact that many of these [popular cultural] forms were also enjoyed by ordinary women allowed us [as feminists] to at least re-interrogate this terrain rather than to merely understand it as a site of 'false-consciousness' (1999b: 32).

This thesis will examine these pleasures and will question the assumption that they are ever 'innocent' or ought to be. It will demonstrate that it is precisely *VOGUE's* status as 'ideologically weighted' that renders it so attractive to women. In so doing, it will argue that feminism's acceptance of the pleasures women take has not yet gone sufficiently far because it is still underpinned by what McRobbie (1999a) labels an "authoritative" feminist position on appropriate feminine identities.

Winship also produced two extensive studies of women's magazines, both of which focused primarily on the encoded ideologies of the texts. Her 1980 study of advertising in women's magazines examines the ways in which advertisements



constitute a complex and changing articulation of the economic relations of a developing capitalist commodity form within particular ideologies of femininity (to which that capitalist form has also contributed) (Winship, 1980:8)

A Marxist framework is explicit in both studies and provides useful insight into how and why the capitalist system promotes certain stereotypes of femininity and gender role. Winship draws on the work of Juliet Mitchell and Althusser to explore how capitalist discourse, of which women's magazines are an integral part, positions women. It is her contention that, in order to understand and participate in this discourse, women must assume the position allocated to them within the capitalist text, and that this necessarily limits "the possibilities for us to define ourselves as separate from that positioning" (1980:10). Winship thus takes her examination of the role of the reader a step further than McCracken: she not only assumes that women as readers do not resist the dominant ideological representations in these texts, but also argues that they *cannot* do so. Winship suggests that the result of the "contradictory definitions of femininity which we variously and vicariously live" is that women are "interpellated as certain kinds of feminine subjects" (Winship, 1980:10). It is thus impossible for women to be outside of this subject position, hence more or less impossible to negotiate alternative textual understandings.<sup>4</sup> This thesis will challenge this assumption by proposing, in Chapter One, a more flexible model of meaning production.

In spite of the varying theoretical positions adopted by these writers, a shared conception of the audience emerges: the reader is seen as largely passive in her negotiations with the text. It is assumed that there is little or no struggle to overcome the powerful ideological messages to which she is exposed. In her later work McRobbie (1999a) admits the possibility that readers negotiate texts ironically but simultaneously suggests that texts self-consciously use this irony expressly to engage readers. Thus, while she accords readers greater agency than in her earlier work, the reader is still regarded primarily as passive in relation to the text. This conception of the reader remains fundamental to any analysis which seeks to establish the normative effects on women of the messages of women's magazines, or to illustrate the extent to which they 'shape' feminine identity. The majority of studies also follow this pattern, as do a great many of the studies on representations of women in television, romance novels, film and other popular cultural forms. While I take issue with these authors' overly deterministic account of readers' responses, I acknowledge my own debt to the work they have done in revealing the uniformity of the messages in women's magazines about what women should be and how they should achieve this.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Winship argues that it is as a result of such positioning that magazines devoted to women exist at all: "Women have no culture and world out there other than the one which is controlled and mediated by men ... the 'woman's world' which women's magazines represent is created precisely because it does not exist outside their pages." (Winship 1987:6-7). In 1987 it was possible to argue that the absence of men's lifestyle magazines was indicative of the extent to which women required such texts in order to imagine a world where they mattered (although they only mattered when they conformed to the dominant definitions of femininity and womanhood). These days the booming men's magazine market makes such an argument untenable on these grounds.

A major departure from this school of analysis of popular culture emerged during the early 1990s in Amsterdam, where Ien Ang, Liesbet van Zoonen and Joke Hermes all began to question the assumption that audiences simply ingested the information fed them by media producers. Ang's work on *Dallas* and soap opera turned attention away from what women were consuming and began to ask why they were consuming it at all (Ang 1985; 1988; 1994). Following this approach, Hermes undertook the first major reader-response ethnography of magazine readers since McRobbie's. Interestingly, Hermes's work differs substantially from McRobbie in its conception of the text in the process of making meaning. McRobbie's approach is firmly anchored in textual analysis, despite her acknowledgment that the uses prescribed by what she called the textual 'map' were not the only readings of a text. Discussing the need to examine the text rather than the ways in which it might be used, she wrote that: "despite these possible [subversive] uses, the magazine itself has a powerful ideological presence as a *form* and demands analysis carried out *apart from* these uses or readings" (McRobbie 1978:6, emphasis in original). Almost at the other end of the theoretical spectrum, Hermes states that her approach to research is one in which the experiences of women's magazine readers are central. Her 'texts' are not the magazines themselves, but the transcripts of several hundred hours of interviews and discussions with their readers. It is her deliberate mission to remove the "modernist privileging of the text as the place where meaning is produced" (Hermes 1995:13). She measures the social impact of these texts, not on the basis of their ideological messages, but on what readers articulate about their experiences of reading them. This approach has one distinct advantage: that it accords the reader a great deal more intelligence and agency than an approach which assumes her to be a passive 'victim' of the text. Hermes (1995:6) writes that her choice not to undertake a textual analysis was based on a wish to avoid the assumption that "readers 'miss' things in texts, such as their deeper meanings". It is refreshing to read an account that seeks to understand the pleasure of reading women's magazines and to examine where and how these magazines fit into our everyday lives, rather than expressing concern — or even anger — at the messages therein. Her critique of the more traditional 'concerned' feminist approach, evident in the works of Ferguson, Dardigna, Tuchman, Ballaster and others, raises many of the same concerns about the assumed passivity of the reader raised here. However, my admiration for her innovative study is not without reservation: I suspect that her emphasis has moved too far away from textual analysis.

I share Hermes's commitment to understanding women's magazines in the context of what they mean to women in their everyday lives (rather than of what feminist scholars tell us they mean in terms of the construction of our identities). However, it still seems simplistic to assume that the only valid understanding is to be found in the sentiments expressed by readers. This is problematic for a number of reasons: in the first instance, it assumes that, if women do not actually say that the messages in women's magazines have a lasting impact on

their self-perception, then no such impact exists. While wishing to avoid 'false-consciousness' feminism,<sup>5</sup> it still seems reasonable to want to question the messages in these texts and the subtle ways in which they can inform and shape social definitions of femininity through a lifetime of exposure. Secondly, I take issue with her assertion that texts have no meaning of their own and that they are 'made meaningful' only by readers. Postmodern theory has asked us to look at the site of textual negotiation as the site where meaning is produced<sup>6</sup> and this is an approach to which I subscribe as happily as Hermes. However, I differ in my conception of that site and the parties contributing to it: certainly, readers participate in the process of making texts meaningful and Hermes's work is valuable predominantly for forcing the long-overdue admission that this is so; but the reader is not the sole negotiant and I will argue that the text itself is equally important in the process and that to privilege the reader over the text is as undesirable as privileging text over reader.

Hermes is critical of approaches to popular culture research that attempt to steer "a middle course between text-based and text-independent interpretations of how media use is meaningful" (1995:13). This is because these are often genre-based, which means that "meaning production is seen as being held together or incited by texts that share a certain set of literary rules of form and content, rather than by how they are used" (ibid). Her conception of genre (as a "set of literary rules of form and content") is, however, unhelpful. I will argue that to recognise women's magazines as a genre is precisely to understand the ways in which they are used, and the manner in which their meaning is produced. Furthermore, I will show that a more sophisticated understanding of genre permits substantial recognition and validation of the experiences of readers and their input into the process of making meaning. In addition, I will argue that a middle ground, which takes account of the role of both reader and text, is the preferable position from which to understand women's magazines.

On the question of the role of the reader, Australian writer Catharine Lumby's work is unusual in that it declines to follow any of the traditional accounts. Although her work lacks rigour, the position she advocates has gained increasing favour and exposure and must therefore be addressed, despite its limitations. Essentially, Lumby argues that women have grown up and that it is, not only no longer useful, but also counterproductive, for feminists to discuss media texts as something from which women need to be protected. This contention is not without merits, some of which I will take up in greater detail in Chapter Seven. Suffice it to say at this point that the primary cause for concern with Lumby's approach is its sweeping generalisations about the ways women interact with the media. The jacket blurb neatly summarises her position that:

<sup>5</sup> See especially Ballaster (1991); Beetham (1996); Bonvoisin (1986); Dardigna (1978); McCracken (1993); McRobbie (1978, 1991); White (1970); and Winship (1980, 1987) each of whom subscribes to varying degrees to this 'false-consciousness' approach. McRobbie critiques this approach in her later work (1998, 1999a & b).

<sup>6</sup> Barthes (1975); Certeau (1984); Eco (1979); and Foucault (1981) are some of the better known examples of this approach. The question of where meaning is produced is discussed at length in Chapter Two.

Feminist censorship is puritanical and outmoded, not recognising the ease with which today's young women engage with the media or indeed the aplomb with which these women practise feminism and manage their sexuality (Lumby, 1997:back cover).

The spirit is admirable: she takes issue with a persistent stance in feminist media studies which demonises popular cultural texts as bastions of sexist representations of women and vehicles for patriarchal ideology. Her insistence that such texts be examined in the context of a readership more politically aware and more experienced at negotiating media texts than were women of thirty years ago is timely and important. But the 'evidence' she uses to substantiate these claims is based largely on her personal experience of the media (as a university-educated journalist) and on the fact that she is capable of 'empowered' readings of texts other women see as sexist. Her 'analysis' of an advertising campaign featuring sexually provocative photographs by Helmut Newton and of 'feminist' responses to them centres on the fact that she finds it possible to read these texts as erotic. Her efforts to expose the extent to which some feminist critics have blurred the lines between sexist and sexual are laudable: "An act which many women would accept if it occurred in their own lounge room [supposedly] became misogynist when depicted in a photograph" (1997:2). But exposure is the only effect of her work: there is no analysis of the complex interplay between the more informed, more media-savvy reader and the *text*. This question will be examined in detail in Chapters Four, Five and Six, where reading possibilities within a framework inclusive of the reader and the text will be considered. Problematically, Lumby seems to argue that one can read just about anything one likes into a text: the Barthesian notion that the author is dead has been expanded into the notion that the text is irrelevant to the meaning produced by the reader. Once again, while the introduction of an informed, intelligent reader into the process of textual negotiation is to be applauded, I insist on retaining the text as an equally important participant. In addition, one must look at readings beyond the extreme opposites proposed by Lumby, so as to consider the various possibilities and configurations offered by the exchange between reader and text. This thesis will argue that these are many and varied, but nonetheless not infinite.

If one insists, as I do, that textual analysis should play a part in the understanding of women's magazines, then the issue of which texts needs to be addressed. Traditionally, wherever actual magazine texts have been examined, what researchers describe as a 'random sample' is selected.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, it is unusual in such social science or cultural studies research to provide any rationale for the sample selection, or any explanation of exactly how it was devised. For this reason I use the term 'random' in parenthesis, since it is largely unclear whether these samples are random in any meaningful quantitative sense, or whether they are simply selected *ad hoc* by the researcher, or something in between. Technicalities aside, this type of study has been undertaken predominantly either to assess the prevalence of certain messages about femininity across a broad spectrum of magazines, or to

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Ballaster (1991); Beetham (1996); Ferguson (1983); McCracken (1993); White (1970); Winship (1980; 1987); Tuchman (1978).

map changes in these messages across an extended period of time (ten to thirty years, for example). Certainly, the approach is valuable for providing a general picture of the genre and its evolution. However, it is of limited use in understanding magazines as a series of continuing narratives, highly cyclical in nature and largely self-contained. In order to come to terms with the extent to which women's magazines create in their pages a tightly defined, closed environment, one must read them closely and in sequence. This study will, for the first time, look at consecutive issues of a single magazine *VOGUE*, from 1997-1999, as part of a repeating annual cycle.<sup>8</sup> This unusually sharp focus will provide the scope for a meaningful cross-cultural analysis, permitting comparisons between the same issues of the same magazine within the same time periods, but published in different countries and different languages: *VOGUE* published in the United States (hereafter, *VOGUE* (US)), *VOGUE Australia* and *VOGUE Paris*. This is the first such systematically cross-national and cross-linguistic analysis of women's magazines.

Although many men read *VOGUE*, especially in a professional capacity as part of the fashion and beauty industries, the bulk of its readers are women.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the target audience of most of the advertising and editorial in the magazine is also women. Doubtless, there is interesting work to be done on how and why men read women's magazines. However, this study takes as its primary object of inquiry the women who read them because it seeks to determine whether reading women's magazines is as detrimental and dangerous for women as feminist analysis has traditionally suggested. In addressing issues pertaining to the majority of *VOGUE*'s readership – heterosexual women – I am acutely aware that the experiences of a variety of sexual, ethnic and cultural minorities are not represented in this thesis. This is not because they are not valid, but rather because restraints of time and space prevented an analysis that would do justice to the experiences of these other readers and its inclusion would necessarily have compromised the more general analysis. For these reasons, this study focuses on how some women read *VOGUE* and will not seek to generalise beyond this.

Any feminist study must inevitably confront the problem that it can (and, I would argue, should) never claim to speak for all women, yet in order to be politically and strategically useful, it must at least try to make some general observations about women. This thesis does not claim to be representative of the views all, nor even most, women who read *VOGUE*. It is not intended as a universal explanation for the interactions between women and magazines, although the theoretical framework developed in the early chapters might eventually be usefully applied to other types of texts. Instead, the thesis endeavours to examine in detail how and why a particular magazine is read by a specific group of consumers. In so doing, it seeks to broaden feminist discussion of women's magazines to

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<sup>8</sup> McRobbie (1978) is a study of one single text, the British teenage magazine *Jackie* but McRobbie does not discuss how many issues she examined, nor from what period they were selected.

include the possibility of women taking pleasure in reading magazines whose content disturbs, provokes, angers or even disgusts many feminists. To address this pleasure as real, legitimate and potent is to give voice to a group of women who are often silenced or ignored in traditional feminist accounts of women magazine readers.

This project differs from other studies of women's magazines, not only in the sample of texts selected, but also in the type of texts under discussion. Traditionally, researchers have focussed on large-circulation weekly and monthly magazines aimed at women. For example, Winship discussed *Woman's Own*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Family Circle* and *Good Housekeeping* in Britain; McCracken looked at the American editions of *Cosmopolitan*, *Mademoiselle* and *Family Circle*; Ferguson focussed her study on *Woman*, *Woman's Weekly* and *Woman's Own*; and McRobbie examined mass-market teenage titles such as *Jackie*, *Just Seventeen* and *More!*. Quite reasonably, these scholars decided that, if they were to discuss the impact of women's magazines on women's lives, they ought to be discussing the magazines most women read. This study will also seek to understand how women's magazines contribute to personal, societal and national conceptions of womanhood, but will do so through a very different type of text.

Why, then, select a text such as *VOGUE*, whose cover price alone puts it out of reach of most readers, to say nothing of the unattainability of the Rolex watches and Louis Vuitton coordinated luggage which decorate its glossy pages? *VOGUE* is indeed a bastion of exclusivity, but it is for this reason that it is such an important publication. *VOGUE* may have a lower circulation in terms of its sales, but it has a greater secondary readership than any other magazine,<sup>10</sup> which indicates how a magazine's circulation data can belie its influence. *VOGUE* is and always has been an agenda-setter in terms of women's magazines: just as the couture fashions it profiles will be copied by more downmarket stores until the ideas and styles find themselves in home-brand supermarket clothing and cheap market stalls, so too the messages and trends profiled and initiated by *VOGUE* find themselves gradually pedestrianised through the more affordable monthly and eventually weekly women's magazines.

In terms of its own presentation, *VOGUE* has long been a standard-setter in the magazine industry: it attracts top photographers, many of whom use its pages as an important stepping stone in their careers,<sup>11</sup> its cover is seen as the ultimate launching place for a model's career path. *VOGUE* has been described more than once as a vast shop window for the world of *haute couture*, jewellery, art and design. Because it has a reputation in both the fashion and the magazine industries as being at the cutting edge, it often provides the

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter Three for evidence of this fact.

<sup>10</sup> For example Ferguson (1983) writes that on average a copy of *Woman's Own* has 3.9 readers, a copy of *Good Housekeeping* has 7.0 and a copy of *VOGUE* has 16.0 readers.

<sup>11</sup> Irving Penn, Steven Miesel, Mario Testino, Helmut Newton, Deborah Turbeville and Annie Leibovitz, for example, all have *VOGUE* to thank for giving them such international profiles through extensive publication of their photographs.



standard by which other magazines are judged, and indeed judge themselves. Its advertising reflects this: "Before it's in fashion, it's in *VOGUE*" reads the first page of the American *VOGUE* website and the current *VOGUE Australia* advertising campaign claims "there's no such thing as a copy of *VOGUE*".<sup>12</sup> Many designers see current American *VOGUE* editor, Anna Wintour, as the key to the success or failure of their collections.<sup>13</sup> Both for the editors of other magazines, and for the readership, there is an aspirational aspect to reading *VOGUE*. The magazine positions itself quite overtly as the pinnacle of good taste and culture,<sup>14</sup> it promises to deliver to its readers the secrets of rising to or remaining at the level of the *VOGUE* community, and to its advertisers a readership with big dreams and budgets to match. The *VOGUE* brandname has endured and, like the Chanel handbags it features, has become synonymous with quality, prestige and influence. *VOGUE Entertaining and Travel*, an offshoot of Australian *VOGUE*, recently featured a letter in which London restaurateur and style guru, Sir Terence Conran, was reported as exclaiming "I want to see these in *VOGUE Entertaining*", when shown photographs of his restaurant ventures (*VE&T*, June/July 1999: 10).<sup>15</sup> *VOGUE* is an important magazine for these reasons and because it has endured as a 'pure fashion' monthly: there are no sex stories or advice columns. Thus it necessarily plays a different role in the lives of its readers from that of *Cosmopolitan* or *New Woman*. In addition, its secondary readership and status mean that it has an important role in influencing how women are seen, and how women see themselves. A close reading of the sample texts will reveal the extent to which many of the messages about womanhood are much the same in *VOGUE* as in other women's magazines, despite its different positioning: it is largely a question of dressing the messages up in more expensive clothes.

Analysis of the content of women's magazines has traditionally focussed on their (implicitly negative) power to shape and construct feminine identity. This approach is evident in the work of most of the theorists discussed thus far, with the notable exception of Lumby, who offers a virtual celebration of women's magazines, and Hermes, who refuses to analyse them in terms of their content. For the reasons outlined above, it is crucial to an understanding of women's magazines as cultural objects that the content of the magazines themselves be addressed. However, it is also preferable to avoid a replication of analyses that condemn these texts simply on the basis of their underlying ideologies.

As we have seen, McCracken's (1993) work is one of the more obvious examples of this style of content analysis. Her semiotic 'decoding' of women's magazines offers the perspective of a reader who has risen above the pitfalls of the texts, which she nonetheless assumes to have entrapped other, less well-educated readers. Any exercise in decoding starts with the (relatively offensive) assumption that texts contain hidden meanings in their

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>13</sup> See the article "Fashion's New Mistress" which appeared in *The Age*, Melbourne, 3/9/98.

<sup>14</sup> See Chapter Two for a discussion of textual self-positioning in relation to *VOGUE*.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of some of the implications of local format variations, refer to Chapters Two and Three.

sign systems to which readers other than the analyst are oblivious. Such an approach is problematic because the author writes both as an expert on women's magazines who claims to understand them and their readers, and as a scholar, who claims to possess skills of critical analysis so vastly superior to those of the average reader that she is able to uncover meanings others cannot. While academic training will provide some specialist critical skills, these do not necessarily equip her to understand magazines *better* than other readers, nor do they mean she has any greater insight into readers' reasons for enjoying magazines than the readers themselves. Furthermore, the author assumes that, because average readers do not occupy the same privileged insider/outsider position, they are necessarily duped by the messages in the text. No possibility for subversive reading is acknowledged, or where it is acknowledged it is dismissed as a figment of intellectual imagination, the reality being that women read women's magazines just as the publishers intend them to do. Hence the conclusion that the encoded ideologies of the text are effectively diffused through any given society as they are ingested, largely without reflexion, by readers.

Chapter One will challenge this conclusion through an exploration of how meanings are made when readers and texts interact. It will also address in more detail this question of the hierarchy of meanings that can emerge when academic inquiry becomes focussed on popular texts. This is a departure from the critical tradition surrounding women's magazines (Beetham, Ballaster et al., White, Dardigna, Hill, Tuchman), which has focussed primarily on a discussion of the images and messages of texts and on their historical evolution. In these works the material is usually organised in a loosely sociological or social science framework, where specific textual examples are used to make broad general conclusions about magazines and their representations of gender. Very little systematic textual analysis was carried out in any of them and reader response was largely ignored. However, it is important to acknowledge that these early works encouraged debate and spawned the studies that followed, each of which tried to apply some kind of methodology, rather than ideology alone, to the analysis. For all my reservations about some of the conclusions reached by these researchers, I am necessarily indebted to their work in getting women's magazines onto the feminist and academic discussion tables. My debt extends to vast amounts of original data collection and analysis, information which has helped me to formulate my own questions where I have felt certain issues had not been sufficiently addressed. A variety of analytical approaches have been taken to understanding women's magazines, some of which have been more effective than others, but all of which have broadened the scope of the debate.

We have seen that Hermes and Lumby both offer alternatives to the traditional approach, yet neither has acknowledged the magazines' continuing ideological potential. Rather, each has focussed on the reader. They are thus guilty of the same crime, apropos of the magazines, as scholars in the opposing camp allege texts of perpetrating against readers. Their work, too, assumes that texts have no agency. Chapter One will demonstrate this



proposition to be false, showing that it is precisely because readers have agency (and thus the capacity to resist and subvert intended meanings) that texts themselves must have sufficient agency to employ tactics to ensure that their meanings are read as intended. Hence, the struggle between text and reader that is the framework of this thesis. Probably the greatest failing of Lumby's work is the conspicuous absence of any methodology, and hence of any rigour in her analysis. While rigidity is unhelpful in cultural studies analysis, a flexible and innovative methodological approach need not exclude consistency and sustainability of argument. In light of the problems that arise when methodological choices are not made explicit, I shall now outline my own approach to women's magazines.

The model for the theoretical and methodological approach used in this thesis is provided by semiotic and narratological versions of reading theory. Chapter One will develop a model, based on these approaches, which allows for the agency of the reader and the text at the point where meaning is negotiated. Drawing on semiotics and narratology permits an understanding of the fluidity of meaning within sign systems, as well as an awareness of the contest for supremacy that occurs when the text and the reader meet. An analysis focussed on the discourses mediating that negotiation will afford an opportunity to rise above the level of analysis of 'x magazine had y number of images of women in domestic settings' to some meaningful reading of the ideological systems in the text. Within these readings of discourses, close readings of the words and images of the magazines will help to show the ideological sign systems at work in magazine composition. The combination of these approaches, along with an explicit focus on the linguistic, cultural and national idiosyncrasies of the three national editions of *VOGUE* will permit a thorough analysis that allows for the contribution of the reader, the text and the social and economic contexts in which the two meet to negotiate meaning. Various elements in this approach have been applied to previous studies of magazines. Semiotics, in particular, has been a focus of much analysis of popular culture: witness Barthes's own *Mythologies* and *The Fashion System*. McRobbie's reading was both Marxist-Feminist and semiotic, seeking to understand the sign systems in terms of what they revealed about questions of class and gender, McCracken also used semiotic theory quite systematically.

However, both McCracken's analysis and McRobbie's early work (1978, 1991) are systematic to the point of reductionism.<sup>16</sup> Semiotic analysis cannot stop at the identification of certain repeating sign systems and the reduction of the text to the sum of these systems. There is no particular value to our understanding of women's magazines in an assertion that certain patterns of signifiers and signifieds exist therein, that these reveal an ideological agenda and that this necessarily means that women take from their reading the intended ideological message of this system. While some semiotic analyses are overly deterministic of

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<sup>16</sup> McRobbie herself acknowledges this to some extent in her later work (1999a & b).

the recipient or audience of the sign system, this need not always be the case. It is a function of the application of the theory, rather the theory itself, that authors like McRobbie (1978, 1991) and McCracken have used it primarily to support unhelpful 'false-consciousness' arguments about women's consumption of popular culture. Indeed, McRobbie's later applications of semiotic theory (1999a) are evidence of its potential to illuminate debate. Chapter One will demonstrate that it is possible, and useful, to apply semiotic analysis to popular cultural texts, in such a way as to support the argument that meaning is not necessarily first inscribed in a sign system and then ingested by an audience, but rather that it is negotiated by the audience in the context of a continuum of sign systems which constitute a series of fluid narratives.

Chapter Two will attempt to apply this model to a content analysis of *VOGUE* to demonstrate how a variety of powerful discourses operate within the magazine to mediate the negotiation between the reader and the text. This approach will allow for an exploration of the complex reasons *why* women choose to engage with *VOGUE* and *how* this engagement is a source of pleasure for them, while at the same time permitting an acknowledgment of how the text imposes certain conditions on that negotiation. As noted earlier, Hermes's work does not deal with content as such. However, she has devised a useful system of understanding magazine use in terms of 'repertoires', which resembles a more sophisticated version of Winship's understanding in terms of function. While her argument that texts are *only* made meaningful by the repertoires readers employ in order to make use and sense of them is not persuasive, the repertoires she discusses are a useful tool for examining the reasons women give for reading women's magazines. She writes, for example, of a repertoire of practical knowledge -- women discussing the knowledge they collect from magazines, ranging from recipes to knitting patterns to hints about parenting. Others include the repertoire of emotional learning and the repertoire of connected knowing and shared experience, which refer to the sense of emotional support and experience of community articulated by magazine readers. Readers' feelings about magazines are important in understanding both how they relate to the texts and the tools they use to negotiate meaning. In this study, this approach will be extended to incorporate not only the repertoires women use to make magazines meaningful (which are the focus of Chapters Five and Six), but also those used by magazines. The discourses that mediate the interaction between the reader and the text are the focus of Chapter Two: *VOGUE*'s reliance on experts and its appropriation of the discourse of pseudo-scientific expertise; its use of a discourse of conspiracy and belonging, through the promise to reveal secrets; its dependence on the discourse of seduction to attract and maintain readers; and its manipulation of the powerful Judeo-Christian discourses of guilt and salvation.

On the question of discourses of guilt and salvation, Ferguson's work warrants some attention here, since her conceptualisation of women's magazines as a tool of the cult of femininity takes a roughly similar approach. However, the analysis in this thesis can be distinguished from hers on one important ground: she is arguing that women's magazines are

the instrument of a cult that has as its purpose to define and contain women. This thesis does not suggest that women's magazines are part of any such orchestrated master plan or conspiracy to enslave women as the followers of a religion. It seeks merely to reveal the extent to which the traditional guilt and faith discourses of salvation religions have been appropriated by women's magazines as a textual tactic to engage and prolong engagement with the magazine. It is, of course, the object of women's magazines to return a healthy profit and, in order to do so, they must endorse the ideologies of their advertisers, and it is in the interests of some of those advertisers to encourage women to have a certain (undesirable, from the feminist perspective) view of themselves so as to make them purchase their products. However, there is no inevitable progression from this proposition to accepting that women's magazines are part of a conspiracy to oppress women. At worst, they are guilty of failure to promote more positive messages to women. Ironically, of all the works on women's magazines, it was Ferguson's interviews with editors that finally convinced me that the majority of these women (and the occasional man) are not part of any such master plan. They see themselves as balancing their job to make money with their job to service — even care for — their readers, towards whom most of them feel a very real sense of responsibility.

Chapter Three considers money making as the driving force behind the production and continued survival of *VOGUE*. Ferguson and McCracken are two of a very small number of scholars who have examined the economic imperatives of the magazine industry, but their work fails to explain how these economic factors impact on the text-reader negotiation. To discuss women's magazines as separate from the media organisations and commercial interests which produce them seems naïve in the extreme. McRobbie (1999b) has shown how the fashion industry excludes women from a variety of socio-economic, sexual, ethnic and class backgrounds from participating in its consumption. However she has not examined how these economic factors contribute to the ways women — included or excluded — negotiate magazines, other than to point out that those who are under-represented feel excluded from the world the magazines promote. In order to understand the impact of these economic factors on readers, some analysis of circulation and budgetary data is warranted. Furthermore, such data is vital in conducting a comparative analysis across national editions of the magazine, which this thesis will seek to do.

In acknowledging the economic realities that drive the magazine market, Ferguson expresses concern about whether women's magazine editors define and decide what will and will not be included on the feminine agenda at any given time. However, she also acknowledges the power of magazines to create positive messages about women and womanhood and examines, in some detail, the extent to which some editors have been driven by a sense of responsibility to their readers to include stories on issues such as contraception, sexual harassment, equal pay and abortion, even at times when it was commercially risky to do so. McRobbie (1999a: 50-54), too, observes that many editors feel a deep sense of

responsibility to provide information to their (usually very young) readers and that many feminists working in medicine and family planning acknowledge that these promote positive messages about safe sex, birth control and resistance to sexual abuse and sexual violence. Indeed, as McRobbie rightly observes, much academic feminist analysis has failed to understand that "the editors of these magazines might think of themselves as feminists" (1999a: 56). Nonetheless, there is a difference between providing information in such a way as to empower readers to make their own choices and presenting it in the context of a directive to readers to behave in a certain way. Without doubt, most of the editorial in women's magazines and all of the advertising falls into the latter category. Even when its content is positive it is nonetheless highly directive in tone. Hence, any analysis of their content needs to ask how successful the magazines have been in directing their readers and how successful readers are at resisting those directives. Chapter Three addresses these questions. A picture of the composition and form of the different editions will also be required to assess the extent to which national idiosyncrasies can change even a syndicated, tightly controlled publication such as *VOGUE*. These editorial and stylistic variations will be examined in the visual analysis in later chapters.

In order to come to terms with the implications of a visual analysis of *VOGUE*, Chapter Four will examine feminist theories of looking and being looked at. In response to criticisms that women's magazines objectify women, it will ask difficult and, I hope, challenging questions about what it means to be the object of a gaze and whether this might be a position of pleasure and, potentially, of power for some women. Furthermore, it will take issue with the persistent assumption in this field that women's magazines are 'bad' for women and that this is in no small part due to the fact that they promote 'unrealistic' images. Through an examination of the status photography occupies as 'reality', it will argue that women's magazines present unrealistic images of women, but that this is precisely their point: *VOGUE* is intended to be consumed as fantasy. Chapter Four suggests that if this is acknowledged, then we are forced into the uncomfortable territory of examining what lies at the root of feminist rejection of women's magazines, and of images of women more generally.

Chapters Five and Six return to the question of how some readers make *VOGUE* meaningful, within this context of consuming it as fantasy. Chapter Five takes as its starting point Laura Mulvey's (1979) suggestion that the primary way women relate to images of women is through 'masochistic identification'. Through a discussion of the characteristics of masochism, it will seek to show that this is one of the strategies women use in negotiating *VOGUE*, and that it is also potentially empowering. In so doing, it will problematise the traditional practice of rejecting as sexist images that portray women in positions of submission and dominance. The lines between sexy and sexist, and what is and is not acceptable as fantasy for feminists, are increasingly blurred. Chapter Five will also question the ongoing

merit of feminism imposing, from outside the context of the text-reader relationship, a normative agenda of appropriate feminine sexuality.

Continuing the theme of fantasy, Chapter Six will examine the consequences of objects becoming the focus of readers' fantasies through a discussion of fetishism. Here, it will be necessary to evince a theory of fetishism able to account for active female fetishism, which orthodox psychoanalytic accounts have been unable to do. To formulate this theory, I will draw on accounts of both sexual and commodity fetishism, arguing that, commodities have become so sexualised, and sexuality so commodified, that they are ultimately one and the same. My analysis of *VOGUE* will reveal the extent to which shoes, wedding dresses and even the magazine itself have become fetish objects for many readers. The implications for the power balance in the text-reader relationship of an interaction that is founded in something as compulsive and pervasive as fetishism will then be explored. This discussion will raise some potentially troubling questions about the nature of sex and power and whether power obtained through sex is 'real', or illusory, as has often been contended by feminists.

Questions of sex and power are also at the heart of the comparative discussion in Chapter Seven of the approaches taken by French and Anglophone feminists to the notion of the body beautiful. Comparative study has been unusual because there has been a tendency in research on women's magazines to assume that, because many of them form part of syndicated magazine 'families' published in many different countries, one can safely generalise about the messages they send to women all over the world. Hermes, for example, had the opportunity to examine not only English- and Dutch-language magazines, but also English and Dutch readers, yet chose to treat them as one monolithic group, without in any way addressing questions of language and nationality. Similarly, Ferguson and Winship both talk about the *Cosmopolitan* family of magazines and the extent to which a formula is adapted from the American parent edition, with the adaptations themselves seen as insignificant. This study will take issue with this practice of glossing over international differences and will examine three different national issues of *VOGUE* in order to discover whether local inclusions and exclusions, as well as format variations, reveal something about the underlying presumptions of womanhood in each country. It is perhaps surprising in the world of the global village, where English is often assumed (mostly by Anglophones) to be the international language, to come across a study of how culture, language and national identity play a crucial role in shaping women's sense of self and the social standard of womanhood. A study of difference might perhaps be more readily accepted were this a comparison of Japanese or Latin American editions of *VOGUE*, that is, from countries that we in the English-speaking world readily position as 'other'. However, France is a country we think we know. As feminist scholars, we are inclined to think we know precisely what it means to be a woman in France, and we even adapt French feminism to our studies of our own societies and contexts.

Chapter Seven will question that practice, using women's magazines to highlight the fundamentally different conceptions of gender and gender equality in French and Anglophone societies.<sup>17</sup> France is not a country like Australia or America, and the differences between us go much further than that we do not speak French. Nor are Australia and the United States one and the same, although the content and format of the magazines reveals greater similarities between these editions than with the French. At this point, it becomes necessary to provide some rationale for the selection of these three editions of *VOGUE* as the subject of this thesis. The only French-language edition of *VOGUE* is *VOGUE Paris* and, as such, a comparative study of Francophone and Anglophone editions of the magazine must necessarily include it. There are three English-language editions: *VOGUE* (US), *VOGUE* (UK) and *VOGUE Australia*. As an Australian feminist, I initially wanted to explore the cultural and gender differences between only two countries: France and Australia. However, the parent edition of the magazine is the US edition and it defines much of the international fashion magazine agenda, including, to some extent, what appears in the French and Australian editions of the magazine. The US also exerts considerably greater influence on international fashion than Australia. For these reasons, it seemed appropriate to include the US edition. This was also necessary so as to examine the extent to which an Anglophone edition such as *VOGUE Australia* produces its own content or simply imports American content. By contrast, I felt that to include the British edition would be to broaden the study so significantly as to lose sight of its initial aim of a small, tightly focussed analysis. Furthermore, the inclusion of *VOGUE* (UK) would have necessitated a discussion of the cultural heritage of the 'old' world (Britain and France) and the 'new' (Australia and the US) and the impact of that heritage on fashion and magazines; the relationship between Australia and its colonial master, Britain; and an examination of the extent of the impact of phenomena such as the new, unified Europe on the British and French markets. While these additional areas of investigation might have proved fruitful and interesting, they would have detracted from the thesis by requiring that the in-depth visual analysis in Chapters Four, Five and Six be substantially curtailed.

The present study will also examine the glaring absence of discussion about women's magazines in the French academic context, in contrast to the almost obsessive attention of the Anglophone academy (I include my own work here), and what this absence can teach us about French understandings of the feminist project. Chapter Seven will explore the marked differences between gender relations, feminisms and magazines in France, Australia and the United States. Although French studies of women's magazines are notable for their paucity, it is also worth noting that what little commentary does exist follows the model of the 'concerned

<sup>17</sup> The opposition of the terms 'French' (rather than Francophone) and 'Anglophone' is deliberate. This thesis deals with the only French-language edition of *VOGUE*, but the magazine focuses exclusively on metropolitan France, with no mention of any other Francophone countries. There are other English language editions of *VOGUE* apart from the Australian and American editions - notably the British edition. However, in order to avoid the cumbersome repetition of Australian and American, and in order to facilitate later discussion of Australian, British, North American and New Zealand feminists, I use the term Anglophone here to denote these editions of the magazine.



feminist' conducting a study of women's magazines seen as largely detrimental to women. The title of Dardigna's 1978 work *La presse féminine: fonctions idéologiques*<sup>18</sup> suggests her emphasis on women's magazines as an apparatus of the dominant capitalist ideology. As is often the case in Marxist studies, the oppressed party (in this case, women) is seen as crushed by the weight of the ideological machine and therefore incapable of resistance. While a Marxist framework can be extremely useful for understanding women's magazines as product and servant of capitalist society, any framework which cannot accommodate individual interpretation, subversion and appropriation of the ideological messages seems as inflexible and oppressive of women as it claims the magazines to be. Bonvoisin and Maignien's (1986) generic study *La presse féminine*, picks up on similar themes and looks primarily at magazines as a vehicle for disseminating messages harmful to women's sense of self and to society's sense of women. Simplistic in its analysis of anything beyond the obvious (a level of questioning which does not progress much beyond asking "do you really need to show naked women to sell cheese?"), it sets out to prove that women's magazines are bad and finds ample evidence in a variety of texts to support this claim. This is unsurprising: if the aim of a study is to highlight the ideologically unsound nature of much of the content of women's magazines, then scanning a single issue will probably provide more fodder for the feminist can(n)on than almost any other popular cultural object, now as much as at the beginning of the last century. This is as true for French magazines as for any others: for example, Erika Flauhaut's 1999 essay "La triste image de la femme seule" which appeared in *Un siècle d'antiféminisme*,<sup>19</sup> easily demonstrates that women's magazines promote a heterosexual romantic relationship as the norm to which all women ought aspire.

Interestingly, for all the feminist study of women's magazines in the English-speaking world, there has been very little discussion about the changes feminism brought to the magazines. McRobbie's (1999a), McCracken's, Ferguson's and Winship's analyses consider in varying degrees the ways magazines have had to adapt in both tone and content to cater for the changes to women's lives and roles ushered in by the women's movement from the 1960s to 1990s. Ferguson has also examined how some American magazines were used as political tools in campaigns for equal pay and the implementation of the ERA in the 1970s. Along with Winship, she has also documented the rise of feminist women's magazines, such as *Ms*, *Spare Rib* and *Redbook*, as a response to calls for a women's press that would not trivialise women's existence into a discussion of the pros and cons of waterproof mascara or this season's hemlines. But this latter characterisation of 'traditional' (ie. not feminist) women's magazines is not necessarily accurate. While the mascara and skirt-lengths are still there,

<sup>18</sup> "The feminine press: ideological functions". The term *presse féminine* in French denotes newspapers and periodicals directed at women. All translations from French are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>19</sup> The title of Flauhaut's essay is best translated as "The pathetic image of the single woman". The collection in which it appears is Christine Bard's 1999 work; an English translation of the title would be "A century of anti-feminism". For a discussion of the particular meanings attached to the terms 'feminist' and 'antifeminist' in the context of the French women's movement, see Chapter Seven.

there has been a shift in even the most die-hard fashion magazines, such as *VOGUE*, as to how they address their readers, at least in the English-speaking world. I want to ask why a magazine which features fashion should be read as necessarily trivialising women's existence. As McRobbie observes, the low status accorded to women's magazines is reflective of the fact that "fashion journalism does not have the security and confidence of other media worlds" (1994:152). To condemn women's magazines because they are about fashion is to reinforce the already inferior status of an industry largely populated by women.

This thesis also seeks to raise some questions about the 'real' woman these magazines are criticised for not portraying. Magazines have come a long way since Betty Friedan's (1963) early critiques, even in her opinion,<sup>20</sup> and are increasingly promoting images of independent, career-oriented women as the norm. However many of these changes have been largely cosmetic: it is still important to be beautiful, but it is now also important to be professionally successful, emotionally fulfilled and financially independent as well. One cannot help but wonder whether the French edition, more explicit in its promotion of beauty as a necessary weapon in the battle to catch an eligible man, is perhaps also more honest. If there is no intention to change the messages of the magazine at any fundamental level, then should it really be paying lip service to lipstick feminism?

In sum, this study will build on the work of its predecessors, challenging some of their conclusions and methodologies by broadening the ways in which women's magazines and their uses are understood. In the first chapter, a new conception of the interplay between reader and text will be introduced, examining meaning as produced in an ongoing tussle between the two. This tussle is described as playful, for it is the playful aspect of magazine reading that has been most neglected. As I move, in subsequent chapters, to a discussion of the discourses mediating this playful engagement, it will become evident that play can be dangerous: after all, one can play with fire. In examining the ways women play with magazines, this thesis will seek to demonstrate that something need not be 'good' for women in order to provide pleasure, thus challenging the concerned feminist positions outlined in this introduction. The expansion of the analysis into the French context, later in the work, will suggest that what is considered 'good' for women is a culturally specific construct. This thesis will argue that it is time for feminist analysis to move away from proclamations about the content of magazines and towards an understanding of the processes through which women engage with and enjoy them.

For all the criticism I will level at previous feminist analyses, I nonetheless locate this thesis firmly within the feminist project. It is not my desire to represent *VOGUE* as unproblematic. On the contrary, this thesis seeks to problematise the fact that women read it. However, it will also seek to shift the focus of feminist debate about women's magazines away

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<sup>20</sup> See Friedan (1991) "Can a feminist be beautiful?".



from the persistent judgement that there is something wrong with the women who read them. Instead, it will situate the magazine in relation to a discussion of how women enjoy things that are not necessarily in accord with what feminism has traditionally held to be 'good' for women. Rather than accepting the fashionable feminist demand that magazines be refashioned to incorporate more 'realistic' representations of women, the thesis will suggest that feminism refashion itself to incorporate a more 'realistic' understanding of women's relationship with fashion magazines.

chapter one

# Making meanings

Popular cultural objects such as women's magazines have often been viewed by academic commentators as containing stable, fixed meanings, simply waiting to be decoded. My introduction demonstrated the extent to which this approach has prevailed in studies of women's magazines. At much the same time as feminists began their own systematic analysis of popular cultural forms, the ideological messages buried in texts had begun to preoccupy cultural studies scholars. Ideological readings were focussed on revealing the meanings created by the ideological state 'apparatuses', to borrow Althusser's (1971) term. The result was to reinforce the traditional approach of literary studies, which had focussed on the text as the place where meaning resides. Literary criticism had traditionally privileged the text, and in particular the intentions of its author, as the key to unlocking the hidden meanings of texts. While cultural studies remained focussed on the text, it nonetheless shifted attention away from the author towards structures of ideology. In literary criticism, too, there was a concurrent move away from the tradition of privileging the author. Authorial intention was no longer seen as a definitive — nor even a particularly useful — guide to understanding a text. Rather, literary critics increasingly turned to the reader, wondering what the reader could reveal about the ways in which, in Joke Hermes's words, texts are "made meaningful" (1995:10).

In Germany, this took the form of a shift from traditional hermeneutics to reader reception theory, in the work of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, for example. Other theoretical traditions also evolved which, while not focussing specifically on the reader, shifted their focus away from the author. In France and Italy the shift was the result of the rise and fall of structuralist linguistics (from Saussure to the early Barthes and Eco) and its eventual appropriation by postmodern and poststructuralist theorists (later Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva). In the poststructuralist universe, the past thirty years have seen the pendulum swing from Foucault to Eco and back, in the attempt to explain the process of making meanings from texts: critics have looked to the reader, then back to the text, and eventually to the relationship between them. Increasingly sophisticated models of the moments at which text and reader intersect, as well as the contexts that produced them, have been proffered. None of these frameworks offers an entirely adequate explanation of the processes by which meanings are made when women engage with a magazine such as *VOGUE*. Drawing on these models, I hope to make a contribution to understanding the dynamic relationship between the reader and the text, with a model that focuses on the inter-dependent, self-reflexive fluidity of both in the process of making meanings. Only when we comes to terms with the process by which meanings are made can we grapple in earnest with the notion of how the readers of a particular text, such as *VOGUE*, might make that text meaningful.

### 'Dead' authors and 'living' texts

Although the role of authorial intention had already been well and truly challenged outside of France, Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" (1968, English trans. 1977b)<sup>21</sup> was radical in its context precisely because it threw down the semiotic gauntlet, questioning traditional literary humanism's search for intended meaning, in favour of a focus on the reader. However, the reader was never a replacement for the text.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, Barthes makes it clear that he will focus on the reader not to understand the reader, but to come to terms with the text and how it is constituted by the act of reading. He argues that it is through the reader that "the multiplicity [of the text] is focused" and that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology" (1977b:148). Working within a broadly semiotic framework, Barthes creates a notion of text as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" comprised of writings which are "always anterior" (1977b:146), never new, and constantly circulating. His text is open, without a final signified, drawn together only momentarily by the reader in the act of reading. This shift towards an open textuality informed much of the French and Italian scholarship that followed (cf. Eco, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva). A closer examination of Barthes's textual models is warranted at this point so as to anchor my own.

In *s/z* (1970, 1974) Barthes proposes a more detailed textual model and makes the distinction between *textes lisibles* and *textes scriptibles*.<sup>23</sup> *Textes lisibles* for Barthes are contained within themselves, to be consumed by the reader. The reader is discouraged by the text itself from engaging freely with it because it encourages particular (and thus limited) readings. Although Barthes clearly holds that authorial intention is irrelevant to textual understanding and that only the reader can activate the elements of the text, in *s/z* he suggests that these elements are fixed within a closed textual system in the case of a *texte lisible*. The *texte scriptible* is presented as a contrast, as an open textuality into which the reader can enter and leave at different places, in different ways, to produce different meanings. For Barthes,

<sup>21</sup> Henceforth, where I have consulted the French original of a text but there exists a standard English translation of it, the date of publication of the French text will appear in italics, followed by the date of publication and page references to the standard English translation, as listed in the bibliography.

<sup>22</sup> Ethnographers such as Ian Ang, Joke Hermes and Janice Radway have been champions of the privileging of reader response over the text, to the extent that the ethnography replaces the text as a text for analysis. The resistant reader approach to textual analysis, embodied in the work of John Fiske, for example, extends Barthes' theory well beyond what is suggested in this essay to mean that a text has virtually *no* bearing on the meanings made when a reader encounters it.

<sup>23</sup> Although I am relying on Richard Miller's 1974 translation of *s/z* as it is the commonly accepted translation of this work for all other citations, I will retain the original French for the terms *texte lisible* and *texte scriptible*. 'Readerly' for *lisible* and 'writerly' for *scriptible* have gained currency in the Anglophone academy, but these translations effect a problematic transfer of agency from the reader to the text and diminish the sense given by the French terms of texts which are waiting passively to be activated by being read or written by the reader. The term '*lisible*' exists in everyday French and would normally be translated as 'readable'. *Scriptible* does not exist in modern French outside of the context of Barthes's oeuvre. The term *scriptible* conveys the idea of the text as a blank canvas, ready to be activated by the reader. While 'readable' and 'writeable' would be better translations than those offered by Miller, I believe it is preferable to retain the original French terms due to the lack of correspondence between the two languages. I am grateful to Amanda Macdonald and Pippa Lee Dow for their comments which were useful in assisting me to articulate the

*textes lisibles* and *textes scriptibles* are not fixed categories of text, but rather represent end points on a continuum of textuality. He did not believe he had ever encountered a *texte scriptible* per se, but did suggest that modernist texts such as those of James Joyce came close to this dynamic, unstable textuality. In these texts the reader is involved to a high degree in the generative process, the author having provided a number of threads to be gathered together by the reader to constitute the fabric of the text.

While Barthes freed the text from the author, in so doing he highlighted one of the problematic aspects of a structuralist semiotic: if all writing is preceded by language and so all texts comprised of the 'already written', then the text is reduced to a static series of pre-existent linguistic structures which the reader can discover. This is not to suggest that all readers always do (or must) make the same meanings with the structures they discover. Elsewhere (1972 1977d), Barthes elaborates his notion of 'grain', in which the 'grain' of a text – in this particular case a musical text – is the formation in which its structures are most easily discovered and unified by the reader to make meanings. It is possible for readers to discover other formations and make other meanings, thus reading the text against its 'grain'. This is not a mis-reading for Barthes: in his model, language is not a medium in which solid, unified meanings are transmitted: there is no 'truth' to be uncovered in a text, only a process by which meanings are produced through language (signification). Notwithstanding the possibilities Barthes admits for reading against the 'grain', his conception of the text as a unifiable set of structures is restrictive, a problem to which I shall return shortly.

Working within a similar semiotic framework, Umberto Eco analysed "The Role of the Reader" (1979) in a system of signification where the text is conceived as a "semiotic texture". His understanding of texts as sign-systems is helpful in explaining ways of making magazine texts meaningful because it introduces the reader, or addressee, into the process. However, as I will show, it is also problematic because of the value-judgments about readers and texts inherent to his model. Building on his earlier *The Open Work* (1989), he argued that there are two types of texts — open and closed — which involve the addressee in the process of textual generation to differing degrees. An open text, he argues, "is a paramount instance of a syntactic-semantico-pragmatic device whose foreseen interpretation is part of its generative process" (1979:3). In essence, an open text is a text produced by the reading process. His concept of openness is rooted in C.S. Peirce's notion of infinite semiosis — of all signs generating all other signs and all texts generating all other texts.<sup>24</sup> Central to this concept of the open text is the notion of the Model Reader.<sup>25</sup> Eco argues that an author assumes a possible reader, assumed to be able to deal "interpretatively with the expressions [used in the text] in the same way as the author deals generatively with them" (1979:7). When a reader is

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dissatisfaction I — and many others who first met Barthes in the original French — feel with the terms 'readerly' and 'writerly'.

<sup>24</sup> See, in particular, Chapter Seven of *The Role of the Reader* "Peirce and the foundations of openness", as well as Eco (1989) *The Open Work* and (1959) "The Poetics of the Open Work".

able to fulfil this function, a suitable reading is produced. Eco sees readings as unsuitable when a reader fails to engage with a text as a Model Reader would. The Model Reader is not a person, but a set of textual practices that permit a preferred activation of the text. Borrowing from J.L. Austin (1975), Eco writes:

In other words, the Model Reader is a textually established set of felicity conditions . . . to be met in order to have a macro speech act (such as a text is) fully actualized [sic] (1979:11).

Although describing the extent to which the reader is able to come to grips with the structures of a flexible signification system, rather than a 'unified truth', he nonetheless accords to the author/text a significant role in prescribing how meanings are made during the reading process.<sup>25</sup> This distinguishes Eco's open text from Barthes's *texte scriptible*: for Eco, the open text has a relatively narrowly defined set of options for producing suitable meanings through the engagement of the reader, whereas Barthes's *texte scriptible* invites a similar level of reader involvement in the generative process without the prescription of an intended meaning outcome.

In contrast to open texts are those "that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers", but are nonetheless "open to any possible "aberrant" decoding . . . [Texts] so immoderately "open" to every possible interpretation" are closed texts. (1979:8). Eco argues that authors/texts which address an assumed general or average reader fail to understand that the text may be read by readers who do not share the same system of codes as those used by the writer and in failing to do so they 'close' their texts, due to the imprecision of the implied Model Reader. Too general a Model Reader, he argues, will prevent the activation of the textual strategies that would produce a suitable reading of the text. For Eco, his own reading of a Superman comic from the point of view of a "smart semiotician" is not a good reading, not a reading which meets the conditions necessary to actualise the macro speech act that is the text.

There are a number of difficulties inherent in Eco's distinction between open and closed texts, not least that it appears to be a largely semantic distinction, which affords him the convenient excuse to distinguish between literary and popular texts. Not surprisingly, for Eco, popular texts — in the very broadest sense of that word — are closed almost by definition. Equally unsurprising is the fact that 'open texts' are comprised primarily of literary texts, in particular the work of experimental writers such as Joyce and Kafka. Thus:

<sup>25</sup> In *The Implied Reader* (1974) Wolfgang Iser argues a similar case based on his concept of an 'implied reader'.

<sup>26</sup> Eco's choice of the word 'author' here is confusing, for he seems to conflate 'author' and 'text'. He does not understand 'author' in the sense in which Barthes uses it in "The Author is Dead". Authorial 'intention' is as redundant to Eco as it is to Barthes. Eco later gives the following definition of an author: "a textual strategy establishing semantic correlations and activating the Model Reader" (1979:11). Notwithstanding this refinement, his model is still one of a text which prescribes interpretative strategies to arrive at the activation of a preferred reading position. To account for this ambiguity I use the term author/text where Eco uses 'author' unless citing him verbatim.



It is possible to be *smart* enough to interpret the relationship between Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin as the umpteenth variation of the Oedipus myth without destroying Rex Stout's narrative universe. It is possible to be *stupid* enough to read Kafka's *Trial* as a trivial criminal novel, but at this point the text collapses — it has been burned out, just as a 'joint' is burned out to produce a private euphoric state (1979:9, my emphasis).

In Eco's analysis the 'bad' (his terminology) reading of a popular text is the result of the reader being particularly *smart* (a semiotician, for example) and does not adversely affect the capacity to make the text meaningful. Yet the same process applied to a literary text is evidence of manifest *stupidity* on the reader's part. This is simply a value judgement about the complexity of popular texts. Indeed, Eco says later that narrative literary texts are more challenging and worthwhile for the semiotician, and that the study of literary narratives has generated more sophisticated understandings of "textual machinery" than that of fragments of the everyday (1979:13).

Tony Bennett's (1983) critique of Eco's reading of Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* centres on how Eco creates this hierarchy of readings. Bennett argues that the textual codes Eco asserts as fixed are in fact relational — they do not exist in the text itself (a notion which Bennett challenges and to which I shall return in more detail) but are located "in its relations with the 'cultivated' codes supposedly shared by the author and his contemporary critics" (1983:220). Eco sees any readings that take place outside this code as a failure on the part of the reader, a 'filtration' of the essence of the text. Bennett argues that Eco categorises such readings as 'under-readings' or 'distortions' of the text itself. In Eco's textual universe, only the texts of the educated élite are sufficiently rich to require the reader's participation for their activation: only the educated élite are smart enough to activate them. As I shall demonstrate, popular texts, especially non-narrative popular texts such as magazines, contain equally rich and complex textual strategies that are actualised in a variety of ways by their readers.

Eco's conception of the reader is also deeply problematic. Although he asserts that both author/text and reader are textual strategies (1979:10), in practice his analysis assumes a reader who is a unified consciousness. This subject position (the reader), contained within itself and constrained by its experiences, is a stable entity that reacts to the fixed, static entity of the text. This model of the reader assumes that the same reader will always read a given text the same way producing, in Eco's view, a constantly suitable or unsuitable reading. If we take up Julia Kristeva's (1974) notion of the subject as a space across which a variety of impulses flow, not fixed and unified but fluid and changing, then the reader as subject position becomes something else altogether. In this account, the reader can intersect with the text at different points and in different ways, including the ways Barthes imagined when he envisaged a *texte scriptible*. Indeed, I would suggest that Barthes's inability to find a *texte scriptible* was a result precisely of his conception of the reader. A more flexible conception of the reader allows for greater participation by him/her in the construction of the text: a process that I will



show is integral to the reading of magazines. For this reason, a brief discussion of the difficulties inherent in assuming a stable reader is necessary.

In *s/z*, Barthes suggested a conception of the subject that is constant in relation to a ceaselessly changing text, thus prohibiting the multiplicity of interactions with it suggested by the *texte scriptible*. However, in his earlier *Elements of Semiology* (1965/1976), he proposed a notion of subject and text as co-participants in a generative process: "lost in this tissue — this texture — the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web" (1976:64). The subject imagined in this account is more fluid than in Barthes's other work, part of a "perpetual interweaving" of text and subject. Such an understanding of the subject liberates us from many of the constraints of Eco's fixed subject. However, Barthes's understanding of the text-reader interface as tissue, with text and reader simultaneously contributing different threads to each other, is still somewhat restrictive. If both text and reader are constantly weaving each other, there is movement between and within them, but they are still in a fixed relationship with each other, dependent only on each other for completion. An extension of Kristeva's model to both text and reader would show us less a picture of threads weaving together, and more an image of malleable, amorphous forms colliding in a variety of random ways. The *texte scriptible* would be at home in such a universe. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Two, such a conception of the reader is particularly useful because it provides a framework in which Barthes's notions of pleasure (*plaisir*) and *jouissance*<sup>27</sup> in reading are more readily applied and understood.

In different ways, both Eco and Barthes assume a model in which a unifiable reader reacts to a unifiable text, assumptions which limit the capacity to describe accurately the process of making meanings. Both reader and text are envisaged as finite entities that meet in an exchange where the reader is reactive. For Eco, the reader may play a role in constituting the text through the act of reading, but only by reacting to a set of codes pre-established in the text. There is no interaction between text and reader in this model, no sense of the ways in which meanings are made when the reader does not identify the preferred code formation. Barthes admits to greater possibilities for interaction, allowing text and reader to generate each other, but only within the scope of a finite interchange which must ultimately come to a conclusion. Moreover, while Barthes allows for the reader to interact with the text, this is necessarily preceded by a reaction to the text, which must therefore exist in some form prior to its generation by the reader. Barthes's later work shows us that he had moved on from Eco's position that texts have been pre-encoded for meaning, but he is unable to offer us an alternative framework for understanding how meanings are made when texts and readers meet. Because this static understanding of the reader and the text is particularly problematic

<sup>27</sup> The generally accepted English translation for *jouissance* is 'bliss'. Increasingly it is also accepted that this translation does not fully render the overtly sexual connotations of the French term. For this reason I shall retain the French *jouissance* except where citing secondary sources which use 'bliss'.

for texts as fluid as magazines, I shall now outline some theoretical frameworks better able to explain the process of making meanings at the moments when the two collide.

### Text, context, intertext

In *Le texte du roman* (1970)<sup>28</sup> Kristeva demonstrates that texts are never self-contained, but always part of a fluid, transformative space which she calls the intertext (1970:176). Drawing on Derrida's (1967, 1976) challenge to the sign as a unifiable presence, she argues that this space within and between texts transforms and modifies signifiers in relation to the presence of other signifiers which move in and out of this space. Thus words, phrases, concepts and works are in a constant state of flux: their meanings are made momentarily by their intersection with and relation to other inhabitants of the intertextual space. Intertextuality allows us to understand that texts are never made concrete, but are ceaselessly constituted and reconstituted in relation to other texts. The intertext is the universe navigated by texts and readers: sometimes colliding, sometimes circling each other, sometimes grating against each other, sometimes avoiding each other all together, but always changing shape and form as a result of each others's presences.

Both Barthes and Eco treat the question of intertextuality in their work. In "From Work to Text" (1971, 1977c) Barthes argues for an understanding of text as tissue "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages . . . antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony" (1977c:160). Here Barthes demonstrates again the instability and dynamism of the text in his model: it has no unified meaning to uncover. He encourages us to read not for meaning but for "a plural meaninglessness" (Fuery 1997: 63), admitting the multiple possibilities contained within a text as result of "the intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text" (Barthes 1977c:160). He nonetheless assumes the intertext to be a fluid space populated and negotiated by 'readers', who remain stable within it.

Eco sees intertextuality less as a property of texts than as a context of readers. He tells us that texts are "immediately endowed with properties that [they do] not manifest and that the reader has been 'programmed' to borrow from the treasury of intertextuality" (1979:21). This concept of intertextuality as something for which the reader is 'programmed' is indicative of his problematic understanding of the reader. Eco conceives of a reader as a self-contained, unified subject with a collection of experiences of other texts that may or may not correspond to those the author/text seeks to activate. Within the intertext, the competent reader will,

<sup>28</sup> I have been unable to locate an English translation of *Le texte du roman*. I offer my own translation of the title as *The Fabric of the Novel*. Although *texte* would usually be translated into English as 'text', 'fabric' seems to me to convey better the idea of the text as 'tissue', to borrow the term from Barthes, especially since the work is concerned with the novel as transformation and its location in the intertext. For a further English-language discussion of intertextuality by Kristeva, see also Margaret Waller's excellent translation of *La révolution du langage poétique* (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

according to Eco, be capable of identifying intertextual frames. The most sophisticated of these frames are frequently those associated with genre rules, which in turn (for Eco, at any rate) prescribe a reading practice and a preferred reading position.<sup>29</sup> Thus, in Eco's model intertextuality becomes another way in which a text is coded in order to activate a 'good' reading of the text. A reader who is sufficiently 'smart' will respond appropriately (that is to say as 'programmed') to the intertextual frames of the text.

Bennett (1983) proposes a departure from this style of analysis, drawing on Foucault's understanding of intertextuality in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). A text, for Foucault, is "a node within a network . . . : its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity it loses its self-evidence: it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse." (1972:23). Unlike Barthes, Eco and to some extent Kristeva<sup>30</sup>, for whom the intertext is one of the textual codes which permits activation, and thereby unification of the text, Foucault sees the text, not as a unifiable entity, but as a 'node' whose form is dependent on the discourse of which it is simultaneously a part and apart from. Bennett suggests that readers, as well as texts, may be discursively constructed, rendering them just as variable and relative as the texts with which they interact. He differs from Barthes because he sees the reader as constructed by a discursive field much broader than just the text.

The key to Bennett's model is its interactivity. He describes the site where meanings are made as a "reading formation", which he describes as "an interaction between the *culturally activated* text and the *culturally activated* reader, an interaction that is structured by the material, social, ideological and institutional relations in which *both* text and readers are inscribed" (1983:222, italics in original). At first glance, Bennett seems more concerned with the context which structures the activation of readers and texts than with intertextuality as generally understood. To some extent, this is true: he is at least as interested in the context in which texts are read and produced as in their intertext. However, his notion of intertextuality also involves texts in the very broadest sense of the term: in many ways the distinction between reader and text is semantic, for a reader is as much a tissue woven of the discursive threads of the intertext as is a text.

The key notion in Bennett is the concept of 'productive activation'. This is, in many ways, a non-hierarchical alternative to Eco's 'suitable' and 'unsuitable' readings. A reading formation is essentially "a set of intersecting discourses which productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way" (1983:216). Here Bennett allows for a multiplicity of possible readings, all of which will result in the actualisation of the text as macro speech act and none of which will necessarily be a preferred reading. He rebuts

<sup>29</sup> For a less prescriptive understanding of the interplay between genre and making meaning see Anne Freadman and Amanda Macdonald (1992) *What is this thing called 'genre'?*

<sup>30</sup> Although she appears to be suggesting that intertextuality is a unifying force in *Le texte du roman*, Kristeva increasingly seems to distance herself from this view in her later work such as (1984) *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

the idea that a meaning is something with which a text can be inscribed, as distinct from something produced by text and reader (understood here as discursive formations) at the point of their intersection. He argues that:

marginalized [sic], subordinate, quirky, fantastic and quixotic . . . [meanings] are just as real, just as ontologically secure, just as much wrapped up in the living social destinies of texts as dominant ones (1983:218).

For Bennett any reading that produces meanings is a 'productive activation', in the sense that it produces both reader and text at the moment where they intersect, as well as being 'productive' in the sense of 'fruitful' or 'worthwhile'. With this formulation he avoids a value-laden analysis of texts and readers. However, one cannot help but wonder whether this model is perhaps *too* egalitarian. While all productive activations may be equally legitimate, surely they are not all equal in terms of what reader and text gain from the encounter? As I shall demonstrate, both texts and readers bring their own agenda to the interchange and each will prefer a reading that permits the supremacy of its agenda. While Bennett's understanding of the moment of reading, as a moment of intersection between the discursive formations of text and reader, is helpful, I am not content to accept that neither texts nor readers seek preferred reading formations. This refinement need not devalue readings outside these preferred reading formations. An acceptance that some reading formations are tactically preferable either to reader or text or both is not the same as a value judgement that certain of the readings are objectively preferable. The idea of an objective preference is fallacious from the outset. As Bennett has shown, what Eco means, when he asserts that a reading is 'suitable', is that it activates the relational codes of the text which form part of the intertext of (his own experience of) the academy. Thus all readings and meanings may be equal in value, but they are not necessarily all equally tactically advantageous in the quest to prevail over the other participant in the encounter and impose an agenda.

### Text as contest

Narratological theory, with its history of the 'grammar' of stories and the 'rhetoric' of storytelling,<sup>31</sup> may seem an unusual place to seek illumination on the point of tactically preferable textual activations. However, the work of Ross Chambers takes up this very point. In *Story and Situation* (1984) he builds a model of the site where meanings are produced which examines how texts and readers interact for their own tactical advantage. Building on his earlier work in *Meaning and Meaningfulness* (1979), Chambers develops a theory of making meaning that has at its essence the 'point' of a text. The texts he analyses are art stories, fictional narratives that have a 'point' to being told. Rejecting earlier divisions of a tale

<sup>31</sup> Within the field of narratology theorists such as Propp, Greimas, Bremond and Todorov have all elaborated theories of the 'grammar' of stories, whereas the work of Booth, Genette and Chatman has focussed more on the 'rhetoric' of the act of narration.

from its telling<sup>32</sup>, he argues that the meaning of a story is intrinsically bound up with the 'point' for which it is told. The 'point' of a reading will vary according to the text and its agenda. In the case of fictional narrative, the 'point' may be to keep the reader in suspense, or to kindle the reader's enthusiasm to keep reading until the dénouement is reached. In other cases, the 'point' may be more obvious: to persuade, to incite, to reprimand or to excite the reader, for example. Whatever the case, if the 'point' of the text is not reached by the reader, then the text has failed to impose its agenda on the reading encounter. While Chambers's analysis does not generalise beyond fictional narrative texts, it seems that this theoretical framework is applicable outside the scope for which it was envisaged.<sup>33</sup> Let us assume for the present moment that this is the case. Once the model has been developed here, I shall return to the question of its applicability to non-fictional and non-narrative texts. While Chambers's model of making meaning is useful from the point of view of tactical textual activation, it is not always in keeping with my understanding of text and reader as discursive formations, as outlined earlier. However, as I shall demonstrate, such an understanding can be felicitously accommodated within his model and I submit that the marriage of these concepts is, in fact, an enhancement of his original position.

Chambers argues that the process by which a text is given its 'point' is "most appropriately described as a transactional phenomenon" (1984:8). Developing Iser's (1978) conception of the act of reading as a relational contract with the text, Chambers argues that participants in the making of meanings have an understanding as to the purpose served by the activation of the text (its 'point') which constitutes a type of contract. The transaction of textual activation takes place on the basis of this contract. The term contract may seem alarmingly prescriptive and restrictive in the light of the above discussion of textual fluidity. However, my own reading of Chambers is that the contract need not be seen as a stable, defined agreement between stable, defined entities. Nor need the 'point' of the textual transaction be fixed, either within or between intersections of reader and text. Nor indeed need the understanding between reader and text be constant or mutual. Evidently, where participants in the textual transaction agree on its 'point' and this agreement is maintained throughout the encounter, the site where meanings are made is without conflict. Chambers demonstrates what happens when this is the case: the text is activated within "quite a strictly channelled form of meaningfulness" (1984:23). Of more interest here are the weapons mustered when this site is contested.

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<sup>32</sup> Seymour Chatman's (1978) *Story and Discourse* was for many years a seminal narratological text. Chatman insists that a story is separable from the act of its telling and ought thus to be analysed as such. Chambers follows Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1980) in her contention that the story and its telling are inextricably linked and ought to be treated as interdependent.

<sup>33</sup> When I was fortunate enough to ask Chambers about this theory he indicated to me that it had been developed in response to a particular problem and that he had not sought to extend it beyond that problem as his research interests had led him elsewhere. I am indebted to him for encouraging my curiosity as to possible extensions of the model, and for his own enthusiastic curiosity at my suggestion that I do so.

In order to comprehend this contest, it must be established what is at stake. A textual transaction is for Chambers necessarily performed in a specific situation. The radical proposal he makes in *Story and Situation* is that this is not simply a question of identifying the situation in which the textual transaction is produced and reading the text within that situation, but of reading "in the texts, the situation that they *produce* as giving them their point" (1984:4). This is a radical notion because it shifts the emphasis away from how authors and/or texts position readers by proposing that for reasons of strategy, texts performatively situate themselves in particular reading situations. It becomes important for texts whose meaningfulness depends on their being read in certain ways to designate particular reading situations as those which give them their 'point', since this is not inherent to the text, but to the situation which allows them to be made meaningful. Chambers takes issue with critical positions that rely on an understanding of the text as stable, or inert<sup>34</sup> and with the assumption underlying much literary criticism that there is such a thing as the individual subject, through which all discourse is mediated and by which that discourse is controlled. He proposes a more fluid and dynamic model of the text, where certain mechanisms of textuality provide for the possibility of multiple engagements with, and readings of, the text so as to render it unstable and indeterminate. He argues that these very instabilities and indeterminacies facilitate the narrative transaction, giving the text its 'point'.

Chambers's central thesis is that "stories produce by textual means their own narrative situation" (1984:22) and that this situation gives them their 'point'. The situation is not imposed on the text, nor is it revealed in the text by uncovering its structure: rather it is produced by the text. As such, texts are "products of . . . a discourse that is constitutive of them" (1984:22). Or, to borrow another of Chambers's own terms, they are "*indistinguishable from discourse itself*" (1984:22, italics in original). This insistence on the discursive location of texts is what puts Chambers most directly in conflict with Barthes and Eco. While Chambers is particularly concerned with stories and narrative situation, I see no reason why this analysis cannot be extended to other types of texts.<sup>35</sup> As Eco (1979:13) has pointed out, 'narrative' and 'nonnarrative' is a redundant distinction since virtually all texts involve the telling of some kind of story, even when structured as 'argument' or 'fact'. Not all texts will have the kind of metanarrative discourse to which Chambers refers, but the vast majority of texts will have a preferred situation that gives them their 'point'.

Chambers's analysis affords a particularly useful conceptualisation of the moment at which text and reader intersect, because it permits both to have an agenda. For the text, if its meaningfulness depends on a particular 'point' and the 'point' is in turn dependent on situation,

<sup>34</sup> For examples of this type of analysis refer note 31, above.

<sup>35</sup> For another example of the application of Chambers's theoretical framework to a different type of text, see Anne Freedman (1995) *... you know, the enunciation ...* (CRCL June 1995: 301-318) in which she looks at autobiography and the autobiographical stories of Marguerite Duras. I am indebted to her for suggesting that I explore the possibility of applying his theories to my own work.

then it becomes important that the text situate itself there. Some texts will require a relatively overt definition of careful and restrictive parameters for the preferred communicational transaction. In so doing, they are able to restrict the avenues by which meaningfulness can be reached. Such texts, Chambers argues, are precisely those covered by the Barthesian category of *textes lisibles*. He suggests that what Barthes is describing are texts which contain within themselves certain mechanisms that ensure compliance with the "conditions of readability" (1984:23), that is to say, conditions which render them *lisible*. Such situational self-reflexivity is the essence of Chambers's understanding of the *texte lisible*. Having identified such strong textual self-positioning mechanisms, he goes on to argue that these mechanisms need not restrict actual reading positions. On the contrary, he suggests that the reader is then in a position to liberate the text from its own limitations by acknowledging and recontextualising these directives in the text as regards reading. Following Chambers, Anne Freedman and Amanda Macdonald (1992) argue that textual self-positioning is one of the important ways in which texts mark themselves as belonging to a genre. They contend that it is *because* of this that readers recognise what sort of text they are dealing with and so "know what to do with it" (1992:47) — whether this be continuing their engagement, ceasing it, or trying to engage with the text in another way. Elsewhere, Freedman has borrowed the terminology of Speech Act Theory to describe this process of what readers do with textual mechanisms as 'uptake' (1995). Readers, she argues, are not restricted by the text's self-positioning mechanisms, rather they are empowered by the fact that these mechanisms provide them with multiple possible 'uptakes'.

How, then, can the contest between reader and text best be characterised? Chambers examines this relationship in terms of power. A text, he argues, needs to engage and involve its reader in order to establish authority. The nature of this authority will depend on the text. It may be the authority to have the reader suspend disbelief and engage with a fictional narrative, or it may be the authority to be believed as an expert in a particular field. If the reader withdraws interest and involvement, then the authority of the text is denied and its 'point' missed. Sometimes, texts will rely on institutional structures to give them authority — for example, the law, the academy, the government — but not all texts have such automatic sources of authority available to them. Fortunately, such lack of pre-existent authority need not necessarily render them powerless in the relationship: the power imbalance can be changed with the right 'tactics'. Here Chambers borrows Michel de Certeau's (1984) terminology for the two mechanisms that can be activated in a power struggle: 'strategies' and 'tactics'. Certeau argues that a 'strategy' is a mechanism employed by subjects in a position of power, in order to 'make do' with the *status quo*, or the 'everyday' as he calls it. It is a notion centred on the delimitation of space owned and controlled by the subject and from which the subject sees everything outside that space as other. Conversely, a 'tactic' is usually employed by a member of this other, that is to say, a subject without power. This concept has at its core the



idea of time, in that tactics are effective primarily because their intervention at a particular time makes them pertinent and permits participation in (and to some extent disruption of) the space of the powerful subject. Chambers cites Certeau as describing a tactic as a mechanism which "boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place and to strike the hearer" (1984:214). Texts, Chambers argues, must employ tactics to participate in the reader's space and to remain there. In simple terms, if the text wishes to engage and maintain the reader's interest (which the reader always has the power to withdraw) then a series of tactics will be necessary to gain the upper hand in the contest between the two.

Chambers is particularly concerned with fictional narratives, where a narrator is "situationally condemned to operate without pre-existent authority" (1984:214). However, I submit that the contention that a text is without authority, without any inherent power in the textual transaction, can be extended well beyond this domain. We are surrounded by examples of the obvious ways in which texts, in particular popular texts, seek to establish their own authority, especially through intertextual referencing to other culturally recognised sites of power, such as reliance on 'experts'. Furthermore, claims by texts about their own influence and importance, claims of authenticity ('the truth') and promises of exclusivity are all common tactics of popular texts to establish their own authority. Chapter Two contains a detailed examination of the role these tactics play in *VOGUE*. Ironically, it is in relying on them that *VOGUE* reveals its own vulnerability to its readers.

This characterisation of the reader/text relationship as one in which the text starts out without power is a significant departure from the bulk of the scholarship in both cultural studies and literary theory.<sup>36</sup> Traditionally, the reader had been assumed to be without power, thereby needing a variety of sophisticated reading tactics (generously furnished by academic critics) in order to combat the power of the text. To invert this power dynamic, by suggesting that the texts are without power, is to open up an exciting range of possibilities for understanding the ways in which meanings are made. In the first instance, it rightly accords to readers a high degree of autonomy to be able to make choices about the ways they will or will not engage with texts. Second, and most fruitfully, it acknowledges that precisely *because* readers have such a high degree of autonomy in the textual transaction, and *because* the transaction becomes null and void without their participation, texts must engage some extremely sophisticated tactics in order to solicit and prolong the reader's involvement. Thus some balance is reached between the roles of text and reader in the making of meanings.

The text is not assumed to be an empty site from which readers can freely take what they will. As Freadman and Macdonald put it: "there is a nexus between the text and the meta-

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<sup>36</sup> While the reader-response and resistant reader theories mentioned earlier have often contended that the text is powerless (in the face of readers who have the power to choose not to engage) these theories have, on the whole, maintained that this power imbalance is both appropriate and permanent.

positions available in relation to it" (1992:52). Nor is there a presumption of a pre-encoded text to which readers react in programmed ways (cf. Eco). Instead, a complex *interaction* is proposed between texts and readers as fluid, dynamic, transformable sites. In the next chapter, I will apply this model to the study of *VOGUE* and examine the 'nexus' to which Freadman and Macdonald refer. A variety of textual tactics employed by the magazine will be explored to demonstrate the established discourses of power and authority on which it draws in its attempt to gain the upper hand in its negotiation with readers.

chapter two

**On the  
battlefield  
of fashion**

Diamond  
on:  
dressed.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that meanings are made through a complex interaction between reader and text. In order to understand how this might work when magazines such as *VOGUE* are the texts under discussion, it is necessary to isolate some of the tactics employed by these texts when they engage with readers. Although this study concentrates on only a small sample of *VOGUE* magazines from the US, France and Australia, the texts themselves are complex and multidimensional. How then can one speak of tactics when dealing with such disparate images, articles, editorials and advertisements on a range of themes, at once discontinuous and repetitious, frivolous and deadly serious?

Understanding how fashion magazines and their readers interact can be facilitated by a distillation of the thematic tactics the magazines employ. The tactics discussed by Chambers tend, predominantly, to be narrative devices, such as embedding and mimesis. These are appropriate to the art stories he studies whose 'point' depends on an intrigue leading to an eventual *dénouement*. If we follow Freedman and Macdonald's (1992) contention that a genre is a set of textual positioning mechanisms which give readers clues as to the ways texts might be read, then it follows that different genres of text will employ different textual tactics to attempt to impose their agenda on readers. In the case of fashion magazines, the 'point' is that readers should read and take notice of the products, practices and lifestyle choices advocated by the magazine, and that they should continue to do this month after month. Simply engaging a reader for a single issue is inadequate: hence, the characters and stories of magazines must be sufficiently compelling to encourage the reader to come back for more. However, unlike in a television serial or soap opera, the lure is missing of a narrative based on characters whose life dramas are stretched from week to week, or episode to episode, with cliff-hanging suspense at the end of each 'chunk' of the story. The tactics of fashion magazines are not traditional devices of plot and storytelling: rather they are the tactics of a campaign, aimed at swaying opinion and converting readers to a cause. I shall demonstrate below that, for all their differences, the three editions of *VOGUE* rely on common textual tactics to engage their readers in an ongoing relationship with the text: the tactic of seduction and the tactic of promising salvation and instilling guilt.

### The seductive text and the pleasure of reading

Flipping through the thick, glossy pages of *VOGUE*, replete with sensuous images in rich, luxurious colours, it is difficult not to be seduced by the sheer hedonistic pleasure of abandonment to this beautiful universe, even if only momentarily. Theorising the way meanings are made when text and reader interact, it is almost impossible to avoid the metaphor of seduction. Reading an issue of *VOGUE* is a sensory indulgence, perhaps even an erotic act. More than one theorist has characterised the reading process per se as a kind of seduction of the reader by the text. Interesting approaches to this question can be found in

Chambers's work on the seductive text in *Story and Situation* and in Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*. Each of them provides useful tools that facilitate an understanding of how seduction operates as a textual tactic in *VOGUE*.

Chambers develops his theory of situational self-positioning in terms of seduction. He argues that the tactics employed by texts are intended to seduce the reader into accepting the authority of the text since the text is without pre-existent authority. In so doing, the text creates a 'crack' in the field of interaction, through which it can manipulate its relationship with the reader to its own advantage. This is not to say that the reader is necessarily accepting of this — I shall return later to the question of resistant readings and demonstrate that there is ample scope for these. Rather, such a tactic levels the playing field a little, affording the text the opportunity to engage the reader by establishing an authority that does not exist at the outset of the encounter.

Chambers focuses on the narrative devices used to seduce the reader into accepting the text's authority. He demonstrates the seductive appeal of withholding information, using the example of Dupin in Poe's "The Purloined Letter". In this instance Dupin's authority is based on the fact that he has information potentially valuable to others. This tactic to establish narrational authority is rooted in the claim to ownership of a secret and the implication that the secret will be revealed, if the reader is prepared to sacrifice enough of him or herself to engage with the text, at the level of intimacy required in order for the reader to be trusted and the information divulged. Being privy to the secrets of the text requires a level of abandonment of the reader to the text, it requires the reader to sacrifice the power held at the outset of the encounter in exchange for the pleasure of discovering the unknown. As I will demonstrate shortly, *VOGUE* employs a similar tactic of revelation in its negotiations with readers.

Chambers also points to intertextual reference as a textual tactic to establish authority. He points to numerous references to other texts or to other types of texts which themselves lend textual authority. Highlighting, for example, the reference by the narrator of Balzac's *Sarrasine* to the romance stories of which Mme de Rochefide is fond, as well as the more subtle reference to the Hoffman-like nature of the tale, Chambers demonstrates how texts draw upon the established authority of other texts to persuade the reader of their value, so seducing them into engagement. Furthermore, he argues that the intertext can serve as an antimodel and, in so doing, boost the authority of the text, positioned as a text that will not fall prey to the pitfalls of other inhabitants of the intertext. Thus, in the context of establishing textual authority, the intertext is employed tactically, as a seductive device, to draw the reader into the meaning transaction and to maintain the validity and credibility of the text. *VOGUE* also employs the intertext tactically, but to different effect. The magazine relies heavily on intertextual authority to compensate for its own lack of inherent authority vis-à-vis its readers, a tactic that will become apparent in the analysis that follows.

In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973 1975), Barthes examines the tactics of seduction texts use in the textual transaction. He distinguishes between texts that seduce readers into an exchange which will provide pleasure for the reader, and texts that perform a dangerous, erotic dance with the reader which will, if the relationship is consummated, result in both exquisite ecstasy (*jouissance*) and capitulative loss. Sufficient volumes of critical discussion have been devoted to the distinction between *jouissance* and pleasure<sup>37</sup> for a brief discussion to suffice here. The text of pleasure is, for Barthes, one that allows the reader to find pleasure in the comfortable (re)affirmation of the known, whereas the text of *jouissance* forces the reader to "abandon social norms and conventional meanings" (Rylance 1994:82), thus permitting the experience of the exquisite agony of loss. Texts of pleasure are seen as immature and "prattling" in "unweaned language" (Barthes 1975:5), whereas texts of *jouissance* are seen as adult, mature and accepting of the inevitable frustration and sacrifice involved in experiencing ecstasy. Seduction is thus a tactic employed by the immature text, for a reader will need more sophisticated tactics to be persuaded to enter into the complete capitulation that occurs at the moment of *jouissance*.

Through reliance on intertextual authority, the promise of revealing secrets and the affirmation of a known and constant set of values, *VOGUE* is able to weave a seductive web around its readers, enticing them to enter its luxuriously sensuous world and to abandon themselves to its pleasures. Further, its very physical presence is seductive: McCracken's survey of women's magazine readers reveals that many see reading them as a highly gratifying sensory experience. Readers expressed pleasure in touching and smelling the thick, smooth pages of a magazine, feeling its bulk between their fingers, inhaling the smells of the print. They delighted in the rich, vibrant images on the glossy pages, loved the colour and movement captured in the images and were captivated by the opulence and fantasy represented in these magazines (1993:7-8). Cosmetic and open-and-sniff fragrance samples further add to the sensuality of the reading experience. In a world where so many sensory indulgences are either forbidden or impossible to fit into a hectic lifestyle, *VOGUE* offers the opportunity to be immersed in a warm pool of colours, smells and tactile sensations.

Strong intertextual referencing is a feature of the seductive campaign of *VOGUE*. One special example of such reference — 'Frenchness' — will be discussed separately below. For the moment, however, I wish to consider the magazine's more general uses of intertextuality. A reliance on 'experts' to establish the authority of the magazine is common. Typically, an edition of American *VOGUE* will feature at least a dozen articles where an 'expert' is consulted for their opinion on a particular product, procedure or trend. These 'experts' range from nutritionists and exercise physiologists to hair colourists and make-up artists. The use of 'experts' is tactically important to reassure readers that they are reading objective discussion,

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Rick Rylance's chapter "Work and texts: poststructuralist Barthes" in *Roland Barthes* (1994) or Mary Bittner Wiseman's chapter "Texts of pleasure, texts of bliss" in *The Ecstasies of Roland Barthes* (1989) for

rather than covert advertising. A realisation that 'experts' can be bought as selectively and as easily as hair shampoos would seriously compromise the authority of the magazine as a source of 'objective' evaluation of products, procedures and trends.

*VOGUE Paris* is equally fond of 'experts', but extends its reach far beyond fashion and beauty.<sup>38</sup> The regular 'philosophy' column features the musings of 'expert' philosophers on a variety of subjects such as "*j'achète donc je jouis*"<sup>39</sup> (November 1998). References to well-known and respected people also abound in the Parisian edition. As I discuss in detail below, the names of writers, politicians, photographers and others whose work connotes quality and authority are frequently featured on the covers of the magazine as a strong intertextual reference seducing the reader into engagement with the text on the basis of borrowed credibility.

*VOGUE Australia* borrows its credibility from the Northern Hemisphere, frequently featuring designers and 'experts' from Europe and America to give weight to its claims. It is also the most inclined of the three editions to feature the names of celebrities on the cover of the magazine. While both the American and Australian editions increasingly replace models with actresses and singers on their covers, the Australian edition is distinctive in its need to name these celebrities as well as featuring their photographs. For example, the January 1998 edition featured Kate Fischer on the cover with the words "Kate Fischer: the party's over" and "The Brains, The Brawn, Ralph Fiennes, Brad Pitt": the August 1999 edition featured Nicole Kidman with "Nicole Kidman: a passionate life" sprawled across the image in large text. The use of the names of celebrities on the cover is a tactic more commonly employed by middle-of-the-range magazines than by top-of-the-range publications such as *VOGUE*. Perhaps the Australian tendency to reject exclusivity in favour of egalitarianism has meant that *VOGUE* has had to pedestrianise itself, at least on some levels, in order to sell in Australia. This tactic combines the use of the authority gained through intertextual associations — successful films, music, books or social events linked to the celebrity — with the promise of revealing exclusive aspects of the life of the celebrity featured, an equally seductive proposition to which we now turn.

The cover of a magazine is essentially a series of promises about the information that will be revealed if the reader enters into both the mercantile transaction of purchase and the textual transaction of reading. American *VOGUE* editor, Anna Wintour, has emphasised the importance of the cover in attracting readers and therefore ensuring sales: they "are designed to appeal to as large a group of potential readers as possible" and variations in the image and coverlines will "dramatically affect . . . newsstand sales" (July 1997:26). To that end, much of

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extensive discussion of this question.

<sup>38</sup> The cultural context for and specificity of the differences between the French and Anglophone editions of the magazine is explored in detail in Chapter Seven.

<sup>39</sup> The French here is difficult to translate "*J'achète donc je jouis*". *Jouir* is the verb from which the noun *jouissance* is obtained, and expresses the idea of experiencing *jouissance*. An approximate translation is "I shop therefore I come".



an editor's success lies in the coverlines chosen for the covers, which in turn will sell magazines and reward advertisers. The cover must promise new, or exclusive, insight or information in order to attract readers. McCracken found that, along with the aesthetic attraction of the cover, the appeal of the stories it promised was paramount to the reader's decision to purchase or read a copy of the magazine (1993:6). Since *VOGUE*'s readership is considerably greater than its sales figures, its reach and potential to influence non-readers to try the products advertised or to purchase the magazine in the future is significant. Its covers will ideally appeal to the readers who fall into the 'I'd never buy them but I'll read them if they're there' category. Of course, the stories must then deliver on their promises: McCracken also found that disappointment with the promised stories was a significant disincentive to reading or purchasing the magazine again (1993:8).

Each edition of *VOGUE* engages in this seduction of the reader by promising to reveal information inside the pages of the magazine. American *VOGUE* is particularly fond of promising on its covers to provide definitive guides to what is good and bad, to assist with those tough decisions about what to wear, where to have one's hair cut and which gyms should be frequented: "the best and worst fashion of '96" (January 1997); "*VOGUE*'s Short List: the 25 Best Up-and-Coming Colorists [sic]" (July 1997); "The Best Parties Ever" (December 1997); and "How to Shop the Spring Collections" (March 1998). It seduces readers with the promise that it will take the work out of decision-making by revealing the 'right' answers to the problems of the season. These are buried among anything up to 750 pages of editorial and advertisement en route to the promised information. The table of contents can be as much as 100 pages into the magazine, making it difficult, if not impossible, to navigate the text and arrive directly at the information one is seeking. Furthermore, the first hundred pages will usually be devoted exclusively to advertising. Thus *VOGUE* is able to seduce its readers into reading, or at least skimming over, several hundred pages of advertising on the basis of a promise that persistence will reward them with information.

*VOGUE Paris* is, in a number of respects, more stylised than either of the Anglophone editions, and its cover images and coverlines reflect this. It tends to favour short, sharp teasers to entice readers and is far more likely to feature the names of prominent individuals who have written, photographed or appeared in articles in the edition. For example, the coverlines "*Mode: le moment de vérité par Bernhard Schlink*" (October 1998); "*Irving Penn: objectif Japon*" (April 1997); "*Le troisième sexe par Philippe Starck*" (September 1997); and "*Tête-à-tête avec Catherine Trautmann*"<sup>40</sup> (November 1997) feature Schlink, a German novelist and professor of law, designer Irving Penn, philosopher and writer Philippe Starck and the then recently appointed Minister for Culture, Catherine Trautmann. This tactical move has the dual purpose of drawing on the intertextual authority provided by credible, important

<sup>40</sup> "Fashion's moment of truth" by Bernhard Schlink; "Irving Penn: Objective Japan"; "The third sex" by Philippe Starck; "Head to head with Catherine Trautmann".

figures writing for the magazine and, at the same time, promising exclusive insights into these personalities in a forum where one would not ordinarily encounter them. Catherine Trautmann, for example, is more usually found in *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro* and the change of setting leads the reader to expect insights one would not find in other contexts. Similarly, for Bernhard Schlink to be writing about fashion, with a coverline telling us he is discussing its 'moment of truth', is startling when it comes only months after the publication of his novel *The Reader* which detailed the 'moment of truth' of a young German lawyer discovering that his first lover was a Nazi war criminal. *VOGUE Paris* enjoys teasing readers with promises of a new angle.

At the same time, the covers' fashion slogans promise something equally new: "*Extrême chic, Couleur choc, Sport couture, 100% mode, les nouveaux tendances*"<sup>41</sup> reads down the left-hand-side of the August 1997 cover. Two or three times a year, *VOGUE Paris* will publish a 'special edition', devoting the entire cover to the title of the edition and a striking image. One of the most memorable was the December 1998/January 1999 special entitled "*Mode et science: les archives de l'avenir*"<sup>42</sup> (Figure 2.1), which featured an androgynous looking model in a space-age white dress with a silver collar, her long, almost-black hair draped down from a severe centre parting to her shoulders, against a digitalised swirl of colour in the background. The whole effect is suggestive of both a nun in traditional habit and the typically clinical look of science-fiction costumes. The cover promised something quite out-of-the-ordinary, an insight into the unusual and the sheer curiosity of the image is seductive. "What kind of fashion magazine has a cover like this?" the reader is encouraged ask. Once again, the text throws out a bait to the reader, who is asked to concede some power and engage with the text on the basis of having been seduced into wanting to know.

*VOGUE Australia* is almost schizophrenic in the tone of its covers and the pitch of the magazine. This may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that it regularly competes for an audience with imported editions of *VOGUE*: Italian or French editions are more common than the local edition on the coffee tables of Australian designers, hair stylists, fashion buyers and advertisers. It is thus unsurprising that *VOGUE Australia* often promises a uniquely Australian perspective on the subjects it treats: "Australia's Most Romantic Getaways" (June 1999); "Natalie Imbruglia: Cool and Confident, Australia's New Siren" and "Toni Collette takes Hollywood" (August 1998); "Melbourne Fashion Festival: Shop 'til you drop" (February 1998); "The Wizards of Oz: 40 pages of Australian Fashion" (March 1999) and "Women on the Edge: The truth about life in the bush" along with "from Broome to Bondi: fashion's easy pieces" (September 1997). The success of Australian designers, actors, musicians and clothes in the overseas market is a frequent theme in the magazine, with jingoistic coverlines designed to seduce the reader away from imported editions, with the promise of something local and

<sup>41</sup> "Extreme chic; Shocking Colour; Designer Sportswear: 100% fashion; The new trends"

<sup>42</sup> "Fashion and Science: Archives of the Future"

PARIS

ECIAL  
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ARCHIVES DE L'AVENIR

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relevant, yet still competitive on the world stage. Simultaneously, the cover of *Australian VOGUE* also offers the promise of exclusive access to the couture collections, designers and trends of Paris, Milan, New York and London, in an attempt to counter the image (and self-image) of Australia as an antipodean wasteland where style is unknown. Coverlines such as "Beauty Bliss: the latest from Paris" (July 1998); "Yves Saint Laurent, Happy 40th Birthday" (April 1998); "Donatella Versace: The reluctant designer" (February 1998); and "Showtime in Milan and Paris : the verdict" (January 1998) are designed to seduce the reader by promising access to another world, the world of European and American haute couture, where standards are set and trends made. *VOGUE Australia* will almost always feature European and American collections before other Australian magazines have even seen them, such is the power of the *VOGUE* brandname and the fact of belonging to a large, internationally-syndicated magazine publishing house. Thus *VOGUE Australia* is able to promise readers access to crucial information about what *will* be in fashion well before its rivals. In the world of fashion, where being ahead of the pack means everything, this promise is irresistibly seductive.

*VOGUE Australia* is not alone in drawing on the credibility lent fashion magazines by references to Paris. The link between fashion and 'Frenchness' is long-established and evident in the tendency of cosmetics and fashion houses to adopt French-sounding names (the American giants Clinique and Estée Lauder, for example) and of the fashion press to retain original French terminology when discussing fashion and beauty: one speaks, for example, of *prêt-à-porter* rather than ready-to-wear, of *haute couture*, *eau de toilette* and *eau de parfum*, even of *cellulite* to describe fat! Contrary to much popular belief, *VOGUE* is an American magazine, launched first in the United States in 1916, but borrowing a French term as its name. This manoeuvre has been largely successful and many readers assume that the magazine has French origins and is thus better placed as an authority on fashion than its competitors. Although the word *VOGUE* is synonymous with being fashionable ('*en vogue*' meaning in fashion, in favour, or flourishing according to the *Robert* dictionary), the term had fallen into disuse when it was selected as the title for a new fashion publication. Indeed, even in France the word is now better known as the title of a fashion magazine than as common parlance.

It is difficult to define with precision the point at which things French became synonymous with things fashionable. In the eighteenth century, French was the language of most European courts and Paris the cultural hub of Europe (Cross and Williams 2000). The 'democratisation' of fashion brought about by department stores and ready-to-wear clothing, along with the blurring of traditional social class divisions after the Revolution in 1789, all contributed to fashion occupying a place in the lives of more French people, in particular Parisians, than elsewhere (Cross and Williams 2000, Schwartz 1998, Crossick and Jaumain 1999). The silk and textile industries in Lyon and the surrounding south-east, and the rapid

expansion of the railways in the nineteenth century (Caron 1983), placed French fashion in a favourable position to exploit the disposable incomes of the nascent middle-class (Bowly 1985, Schwartz 1998). The close links between fashion and ballet, opera, theatre, cabaret, cinema and the plastic arts helped to establish Parisian fashion houses as the definitive standard in design and good taste. Many of the larger fashion houses such as Louis Vuitton and Christian Dior started life as small, specialist stores (travel goods and men's tailoring respectively) (Dior 1994) which took advantage of the burgeoning economic climate to grow and establish themselves as signature brands. The expansionist ambitions of the Napoleonic era served to cement France at the centre of European cultural life and to feed an already-established French sense of self that involved an ostentatious exhibition of wealth and good living through dress (Schwartz 1998).

Whatever the source of the authority 'Frenchness' has come to hold in the fashion world, it is now clearly established. *VOGUE Australia* and its American sister both rely heavily on French connections as a source of textual authority. The cover of *VOGUE Australia*'s July 1998 edition carries the promise of "Beauty Bliss: the latest from Paris". Stephanie Darling's brief article "About Face" (p38) tells the story of "Destination: Paris. The mission: four facials in three days. Yes, please". Darling takes us on a luxurious voyage through all that is indulgently French about a Parisian facial. She mentions several "*instituts de beauté*", preferring the French nomenclature to the drearier English "beauty salons", and chooses to call her beauty therapist an "*esthéticienne*" for good measure. Addresses on the rue du Faubourg-Saint Honoré and the Avenue des Champs Elysées abound, without any need for explanation as to just how exclusive these places are, since *VOGUE* readers are assumed to know Paris like the back of their perfectly manicured hands. Her experience of Lancôme L'institut is recorded as a series of products with names that impress with both their Frenchness and their pseudo-scientific tone: "Gel Clarifiance", "Exfoliance", and "Tonique Douceur". As Darling becomes more enthusiastic, her explanations become less specific and it is unclear exactly what these products are supposed to be doing to her:

Hands and feet also got a work out with Nutri-Source Crème-en-Lait Réhydratant Intense Corps. Next came the revitalising Vitabolic, followed by Primordiale (1998:38). Following this barrage of products which left her "feeling anti-aged and rejuvenated", she was treated to a make-up application which, she remarks "is a very French thing to do as, after your facial, your face looks a little naked". Here Darling draws on the established intertextual mythology of the Frenchwoman as permanently immaculately groomed, beautiful and concerned for her physical appearance. By implication, if the French do it, it must work and therefore everyone outside of France ought to be doing it too. Darling's descriptions of her visits to other cosmetic houses are no less spectacular. She tells us that "the hallowed marble halls screamed style" at Guerlain, where she had the "haute couture of facials"; that the "Haute Fermeté" treatment at the "regal Yves Saint Laurent Institut de Beauté" left her in a

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"hallucinogenic state". Again, a variety of product and technique names abound, although "Vaposkin" and "Actilift" do not draw so heavily on the Frenchness of their names as the Lancôme counterparts. As a cover story, Darling's five hundred or so words deliver very little. This article seeks primarily to reinforce the importance of Paris as a beauty centre, and of *VOGUE* as a means of accessing it, offering a glimpse into the seductively privileged universe of those who have the time and money to spend their days lounging in white robes and having "two frozen azure-blue glass maracas rubbed all over [their] face". And, of course, the maracas are necessary. If the French do it — and at Yves Saint-Laurent, too — then it cannot be as ridiculous as it sounds. Thus *VOGUE Australia* is able to establish its authority by drawing on the established authority of a name like Saint-Laurent and on the fact of having experienced Paris, centre of the beauty world.

The parent US edition of *VOGUE* also draws heavily on the credibility of things French to establish its authority. 'French' can mean many things to Anglophone fashion aficionados: it can represent timeless, classic, elegance or fantasy and excess; it can mean luxurious indulgence or understated beauty. Whatever it represents, however often it changes, the constant theme is one of good taste. If Paris decides that crinolines are practical again in 1998, then the rest of the world agrees, no matter how strongly they have denounced such folly in the past. Steven Meisel's fashion shoot "Portrait of Paris" (*VOGUE* US April 1998:294-301, see Figures 2.2 and 2.3) is typical of this reliance on a French connection to establish authority for something out-of-the-ordinary. Fashion shoots in American *VOGUE* tend towards naturalistic realism: the settings often include real-life environments such as the beach, a garden, the great outdoors or an elegant home. Make-up tends to emphasise a healthful, natural beauty and the focus is often on beautiful, but wearable, clothing (see Figure 2.4). Indeed Nicholas Coleridge observes that the fashion industry recognises this difference by describing photographs as having either an American or a European look:

In fashion photographs, the difference is that 'American' means the model jumping in the air on the sidewalk, grinning energetically from behind a shillelagh of blonde hair. 'European' means more restrained, serious and artistic. (1988:250-251)

Meisel's shoot is of the *haute couture* formal gowns of the season photographed against a sparse, monochromatic grey backdrop that clearly positions it within what Coleridge described as a European aesthetic. It is accompanied by the introduction:

Trumpeting the ultimate defeat of minimalism, couturiers set about creating fantasy fashion with all the trimmings — detailing even the simplest dresses with embroidery, appliqué and yards and yards of luxury fabrics (April 1998:294).

The title "Portrait of Paris" and the unfamiliar visual style allows the magazine to locate the clothing presented in this shoot outside of the familiar and the everyday. By presenting this *haute couture* collection as distinctively French, these fantastic gowns in luxurious fabrics and ostentatious designs are seen as 'other' to the clean, practical styling preferred by the American woman. This 'otherness' is a license to take liberties and to experiment and,





# Portrait of Paris

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couturiers set about  
creating fantasy  
fashion with "all the  
trimmings—  
detailing even the  
simplest dresses  
with embroidery,  
appliqué, and yards  
and yards of  
luxury fabrics.  
Photographed by  
Steven Meisel.*



Harlequin romance  
THIS PAGE: From  
the creative genius  
of John Galiano,  
comes a fanciful  
ball gown in  
diamond-shaped  
swatches of  
embroidered mint  
and cream silk.  
Dress by Christian  
Dior Haute Couture  
by John Galiano.  
OPPOSITE PAGE:  
Christian Lacroix  
conjures up historic  
sex appeal with  
a full-smocked ball  
gown that dips  
provocatively low  
at its ruffled front.  
Dress by Christian  
Lacroix Haute  
Couture. Details,  
see in This Issue.  
Fashion Editor:  
Grace Codrington

Figure 2.3 from "Portrait of Paris"





Gucci on the go, THIS PAGE:  
Expect the unexpected from  
Tom Ford—like a slim  
skirt and coat balanced with a  
burst of plum-colored fox. Silk  
tank, about \$375. Wool skirt,  
about \$525. All at Gucci, NYC,  
Beverly Hills; Saks Fifth Avenue,  
NYC. OPPOSITE PAGE: Etro  
updates the chubby by cropping  
it at the waist. Mongolian  
lamb coat, about \$1,454. Etro,  
NYC. Georgette dress by  
Calvin Klein. Calvin Klein stores.  
Details, see In This Issue.

BEAUTY NOTE  
Get centered: Update long,  
straight hair with a blunt  
shoulder-length cut and a  
dramatic center part. Matrix  
Vavoom Smoothing  
Gel keeps the look sleek.

because the 'other' is French, even the most bizarre and impractical experiments become beautiful and fashionable. Witness the embroidered mint-green and cream silk ball gown by John Galliano for Christian Dior Haute Couture (Fig. 2.3), with skirts so voluminous they swamp the mannequin and are held up with an antiquated hoop. This dress would probably even look out-of-place at a Windsor Royal Wedding. Or the red silk Christian Lacroix Haute Couture ball gown (Fig. 2.2), complete with smocking, ruffles, bustle and plunging décolletage reminiscent of an Elizabethan period drama, married with a large ball of feathers attached to the side of the model's head and a choker made of sufficient precious stones to write off the debt of most of the Third World. These are the gowns one sees in the snapshots of the Paris collections and wonders 'who actually wears that, and where?'. Yet *VOGUE* can comfortably devote eight uninterrupted pages in the centre of the magazine to such images because its readers want to imagine themselves as having their fingers on the pulse of Parisian fashion. *VOGUE* relies on 'Frenchness' as an authority to permit the pushing of boundaries and the exploration of the self: readers are encouraged to imagine another, more daring, self, a more beautiful self, a more French self. Being French becomes synonymous with being stylish, fashionable and beautiful and any criticism of flamboyant experimentation can thus be countered with the statement that 'it's quite the thing in Paris'.

*VOGUE Paris* is happy to perpetuate this stereotypical image of French women as more stylish and beautiful than other women, devoting an entire issue (September 1995) to "*la femme française*", with a feature article by Martine Azouli devoted to asking "*D'où la beauté de la Française?*"<sup>43</sup> (September 1995:107-112). French women, she tells us, have a mysterious allure, a "*je-ne-sais-quoi*" which sets them apart. They also work on their image, devoting considerable time and effort to personal grooming, and yet manage to look as though they never wear make-up and have thrown their clothes casually together. This, it is revealed, is part of the secret to being beautiful *à la française*. Azouli's commentary reaffirms the images of French women and French beauty that dominate the Anglophone fashion press, demonstrating the extent to which the stereotype has become self-fulfilling. At the other end of the spectrum are the annual December / January theme issues: *Mode et musique* (1996-97), *Art et mode* (1997-98), *Science et Mode* (1998-99) and *Mode et amour* (1999-2000).<sup>44</sup> Here, *VOGUE Paris* quite deliberately positions itself as at the cutting-edge, the *avant-garde* in the truest sense, by really pushing the boundaries of what can be considered fashion. Such experimentation is presented as typically French, a bold challenge to the traditions of fashion, which can be launched in the pages of *VOGUE*, a magazine that has come to signify these traditions, precisely because it is produced in Paris, where one need not follow the rules to which everyone else is expected to conform. Indeed, in Paris, one is expected to break them. This sense of the French self as rebellious, unencumbered and innovative correlates with the

<sup>43</sup> "The French woman"; "Whence the beauty of the French woman?"

<sup>44</sup> *Fashion and Music; Art and Fashion; Fashion and Science, Fashion and Love.*

ways in which both the Australian and American editions rely on French connections to give authority to the items they present, authority which challenges their readers to move beyond the boundaries of fashion as understood. Thus 'Frenchness' is a seductive 'other', readers are encouraged to lose something of themselves in abandoning themselves to the pleasures of all things French and, in so doing, to discover ways of being that reside outside the familiar. The unfamiliar thus draws on the two positions with which 'Frenchness' has become synonymous in the Anglophone fashion world: tradition and innovation. Readers are seduced both by the classic style of the Parisian establishment and by the cutting-edge creation of the Parisian *avant-garde*. So 'Frenchness' can be relied upon in *VOGUE* as a source of textual authority at both ends of the spectrum.

For all the novelty promised by *VOGUE*, it comfortably reiterates a fixed set of beliefs, issue after issue, year after year. It is important to be beautiful and fashionable; important that one's surroundings and belongings be beautiful and fashionable; important to know who the beautiful and fashionable people-of-the-moment are, what they are doing and where they are doing it. By providing constant affirmation of these values, *VOGUE* is a source of pleasure to its readers. Those who have succeeded in attaining these goals, for this month, can peruse its pages and take pleasure in the parallels between the magazine and their own existence. Others are seduced by the promises that it will provide them with an easy, step-by-step guide to attaining the pleasurable life. All are seduced by the promise that a beautiful, fashionable life is a happy one. By simultaneously reiterating and promising to actualise this fantasy, *VOGUE* makes the clever tactical move of presenting itself as a source of both actual and potential pleasure.

One might contend that its cutting-edge and often experimental content means that there are also moments of *jouissance* in *VOGUE*, provided by the content featured rather than the messages of the magazine. If, as Barthes argues, *jouissance* is found in the cracks and fissures, in the losses and uncertainties, then certainly some of the art and design featured in *VOGUE* is based in those places. However, such *jouissance* exists for creators and the consumers of their creations; for *VOGUE* readers the experience is more akin to watching someone else's moment of ecstasy through the safety of an anonymous peephole.

### Guilt and salvation in the fashion bible

Another interesting, if less immediately apparent, tactic is the engagement of the reader through reliance on the discourse of salvation. Reading *VOGUE* through Foucault on the technologies of the self, I shall demonstrate how these texts actively position themselves by drawing on a discourse of guilt and salvation. At this point, a brief explanation of the links between Foucault, salvation religions and *VOGUE* clearly becomes necessary.

I will elaborate on the nature of salvation religions shortly. Suffice it to say at this juncture that the deity, or the bearer of truth and knowledge in a salvation religion, needs to establish and re-establish his authority in order to retain followers. One of the most powerful tools employed in this endeavour is the dual system of reward for obedience and punishment for sin. Most salvation religions work on the premise that certain rules must be followed for enlightenment to be reached: their followers are made to feel guilty for failing to follow these rules and are required to repent (usually publicly) for this failure. In much the same way, *VOGUE* establishes textual authority by simultaneously promising happiness as the result of compliance with its teachings, preaching doom about the fall from grace that will occur if its rules are not followed, and feeding on the guilt of the reader, who can, by definition, never follow them quite well enough.

We have seen that the establishment of textual authority is central to the interaction between the reader and the text at the site where meanings are made. In order to establish its own authority, *VOGUE* draws on the pre-existent authority of Judeo-Christian tradition and employs the tactic of promising salvation/threatening damnation. In order to understand the authority of this position in the subconscious of the modern West, it is useful to reflect on the Western philosophical traditions on which it is based. The premise that a text can set out rules that will lead to salvation presupposes a system of thought which assumes that a human being can influence his or her destiny, or state of being, through actions. Since the ancient Greeks, the concepts of self-knowledge and self-improvement through self-mastery have formed part of the Western sense of who we are and who we could be. These concepts of self-mastery inform the belief prevalent in salvation discourse, and also in *VOGUE*, that it is within our power to change both who we are and the course of our journey in life: salvation and damnation are simply questions, we are told, of our own self-discipline. In order to understand the ways in which this discourse of salvation operates as a textual tactic in *VOGUE*, I shall briefly distil some of the distinguishing characteristics of salvation religions, and outline the historical precedents that give them their established authority.

In *The Care of the Self* (1976b, 1986), and in his paper presented at the University of Vermont on *Technologies of the Self* (1988), Foucault documents and discusses the long tradition in Western culture of 'caring for the self' as a means to enlightenment, or an enhanced experience of life. He distils from the practices of the Greco-Roman philosophy of the early Roman Empire onwards, four technologies, that is to say life knowledges and life practices, used by humans to help them understand themselves and their lives. These are the technologies of production, sign systems, power and the self. He describes technologies of the self, in the paper of the same name, as practices that enable individuals to:

transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality . . . [due to their performance] . . . by their own means or with the help of others [of] a certain number of operations on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being (1988:18).

These vary within the ancient societies, just as they do in modern societies. However, certain universal principles can be crystallised as characterising the movement of the care of the self which began with the ancient Greeks and found its way into the Christian monastic asceticism of the fourth and fifth centuries. It was important to know oneself, and self-knowledge could be obtained through contemplation of the divine element. This aspect focussed largely on the care of the soul. The care of the body had taken on increased importance by the time of Marcus Aurelius, and mental training was coupled with physical training, or *gymnasia*, which involved rituals of self mastery such as sexual abstinence, physical privation and self purification.

Susan Bordo describes the physical regimes of the Greek and Christian traditions alike as:

instruments for the development of a 'self' — whether an 'inner' self, for the Christians, or a public self for the Greeks — constructed as an arena in which the deepest possibilities for human excellence may be realised (1993:185).

Foucault shows that the same tradition of the care of the self through physical self-mastery witnessed in aristocratic Greek society came to play an important role in the Christian ascetic tradition of, for example, John Cassius. In ancient Greece mastery of the body and food intake represented a public, corporeal statement that the occupant of the body could be relied upon to be 'moderate' in all aspects of his life, thus connoting civic responsibility and membership of an elite class. While the methods may have been similar in the Christian monastic tradition, here the purpose of fasting was to dominate the body, thereby renouncing the flesh and its pleasures in order to devote oneself to obedience and contemplation. Foucault gives the following description of Christianity:

Christianity belongs to the salvation religions. It's one of those religions which is supposed to lead the individual from one reality to another, from death to life, from time to eternity. In order to achieve that, Christianity imposed a set of conditions and rules of behaviour for a certain transformation of the self . . . Christianity is not only a salvation religion, it's a confessional religion . . . Truth obligations to believe this or that were and still are numerous. The duty to accept a set of obligations, to hold certain books as permanent truth, to accept authoritarian decisions in matters of truth, not only to believe certain things but to show that one believes, and to accept institutional authority are all characteristic of Christianity (1988:40).

These rules can be seen as technologies of the self. Not only did Christians accept these behaviours, and the unquestionable truth of certain writings and teachings, they also accepted that penance, in the form of public displays of penitence, judgement or martyrdom, was the necessary consequence of failing to live up to these rules if one still wanted to remain on the path to salvation. Similarly, *VOGUE* readers are expected to follow the authority of the text without questioning it, to hold it, as Foucault would say, "as permanent truth" (despite the constantly changing content of its proclamations), and to publicly demonstrate their allegiances through attention to all aspects of their lives. They understand from the text that exclusion, and eventually damnation, will result from non-compliance.



A variety of forms of Christianity endure, some based on the Catholic or Orthodox tradition, some on the Reformation. Of these, many of the most extreme are found in the United States, where a strong evangelical tradition, based on a discourse of salvation heavily reliant on the faith of followers, has grown out of the early discourses of the Puritans. It is characterised by promises of healing, rejuvenation and salvation, by testimonials of success, by a preaching of self-sacrifice (physical, spiritual and financial) and self-mastery to its followers. A sense of belonging to a special group, of those who will be saved, is fostered among this faith community. Temptations must be resisted for salvation to be ensured, and guilt is foisted upon those who stray from the path until they repent and rejoin the 'brotherhood'. Self-styled leaders promise access to the secret knowledge necessary for self-mastery and salvation. The majority of these characteristics of salvation evangelism are also present in *VOGUE*. I do not wish to suggest that readers blindly follow the proclamations of *VOGUE* with the devotion of medieval Christian martyrs. On the contrary, because readers are able to resist and reinterpret them, the magazine is constantly having to reinvent itself and repackage its messages to attract them back to the negotiating space. Furthermore, as I demonstrated in Chapter One, the reader starts the negotiation in a position of greater power than the text. In an age where Christianity is reportedly on the decline in most Western countries, one might legitimately wonder whether appealing to readers' desire for salvation is likely to be a particularly successful tactic. However, as the following discussion will make clear, the desire for success through self-mastery continues to be a feature of contemporary society, albeit in different forms from those preached by the salvation religions.

Foucault and self-mastery may seem very far removed from Versace and leg hair removal. However, a number of authors have already begun to see the links between contemporary popular cultural practices and the regimes of self-mastery discussed above. Bordo has written extensively on the normalising role of diet, exercise and cosmetic surgery in popular cultural forms such as magazine and television advertisements. Her excellent essay "Reading the Slender Body" (in *Unbearable Weight* 1993) is a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which the slender body has been morally and culturally coded by our society to represent far more than simply a desirable aesthetic form. Reading these cultural forms through Foucault, she demonstrates the extent to which the slender body is coded as competent, in-control, successful and desirable and links this coding to the above tradition of moral superiority as accessed via physical self-mastery. The essay also highlights the alternative, negative codings of the overweight body as slothful, lacking in discipline and bereft of self-respect. Bordo also explores the gendered nature of this phenomenon by drawing links between the mastery of the female body and the containment of female desire, sexual, political and personal. This theme of female appetite as representative of (potentially uncontrollable) female desire also features in her other work such as "Hunger as Ideology" (ibid), and in both essays she demonstrates the ways in which society has long feared the ravenous female

appetite. By promoting the image of the hungry woman as an ideal, she argues, popular culture reinforces the idea that women should suppress their appetites for food and for equality. However, just as in the Greek and Christian traditions, mastery of the appetite and the body represents far more than an ideal. As Bordo illustrates, such self-discipline permits access to an elite club of those who have succeeded where many have failed, thus giving members a sense that they have, in the words of one anorexic she interviews, "accomplished something that was just about impossible for most people, especially in our society . . . And that meant I was better than everyone else" (1993:203).

The *Accounting for Tastes: Australian everyday cultures* (Bennett et al. 1999) survey clearly demonstrates the extent to which bodily self-mastery, in the particular form of the slender, toned body, has become coded as a symbol of status and success in contemporary Australian society. Here again the authors draw on Foucault's work on the technologies of the self to understand the class-based phenomenon of dieting and exercising the body as a form of moral, as well as physical, discipline. "Diet and exercise" they argue, "are ways of working on the body but also forms of moral exercise, intimately bound up with the shaping of the self" (115). They identify, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, a shift in thinking "towards an understanding of the body as an individual project" (117). Drawing on Schilling<sup>45</sup> they argue that this shift is underpinned by two critical assumptions: "first, that bodies are essentially malleable; and second, that the shaping of the body is essentially a matter of choice of lifestyle" (117). This echoes Bordo's (1993) analysis of an advertisement for Evian water, which proudly proclaimed that with the right diet and exercise, one could have any body shape one wanted. Both Bordo and Bennett et al. argue that this presumption that the body can be shaped at will is central to the fact that increasingly we see our bodies, not as a reflection of who we are, but as the site where our identity is created.

The *Accounting for Tastes* study revealed that the shape into which we 'choose' to mould our physical body (and indeed the extent to which we 'choose' to do so at all) is coded with powerful messages about social class, status, success and self-worth. Supporting Bordo's argument that containment of the female body through dieting is directly connected to the containment of women in a broader sense, Bennett et al. show that in Australia, dieting is a highly gendered practice: three times as many women as men diet for weight-reduction (121). It is also a practice that is concentrated among wealthier socio-economic brackets, with the exception of professionals. Thus while dieting for weight-loss correlates highly with material wealth, there is no significant correlation with education. Similar findings emerged from the investigation of exercise: jogging, weight training and aerobics emerged as middle-class activities, with participation rising with income (126-127). Of these, aerobics is the most clearly classed and gendered: its participants are almost exclusively female, and predominantly professional and white-collar workers. It is seen as a form of exercise whose

primary aim is to change the shape of the body through rigorous, disciplined repetition of movements. Thus a picture emerges of middle-class Australian women as constantly disciplining their bodies through diet and exercise.<sup>45</sup> The authors suggest that "the key explanatory factor here is social mobility (or, more precisely, a desire for social mobility)" (123). Clearly, the slender body has come to signify the attainment of a certain level of social status and is seen as a key to attaining this same status for oneself. For women, it seems, this means subscribing to what Bennett *et al.* have called "an ethos of purification in which the shaping of the body is a means of combating the excesses of the flesh" (128).

As a magazine targeted specifically at middle-class women, *VOGUE* is complicit in sustaining the fantasy that status, success and admiration stem from the mastery of the body. Reading *VOGUE* through Foucault on the *Technologies of the Self*, I shall demonstrate that popular cultural forms go further than simply normalising the slender, toned body: they promise it as achievable and present a step-by-step guide to reaching this goal. The ideal body is presented as the key to salvation and failure to achieve it as a sin so great as to lead to certain damnation. *VOGUE*'s textual tactics and relationship with its readers can very plausibly be characterised as an aesthetic evangelism. Just as Christianity has at its core a notion that we are all sinners, that we can never be 'good enough', so *VOGUE*'s underlying premise is one of inadequacy. In a sense, this inadequacy resembles the Lacanian (1977a) notion of woman as *manque*, or absence. *VOGUE* characterises woman as being without substance and in need of a variety of objects to enhance her and to compensate for her absence (of masculinity). Salvation, in the discourse of aesthetic evangelism, here amounts to eternal youth, beauty and fashionability. Sin is a broad heading encompassing indulgence in anything that will make you 'fat' (I use the term loosely since in *VOGUE* 'fat' is equivalent to not clinically underweight), old (read — over thirty) or unfashionable — be that because you own the wrong car, live in the wrong suburb, eat at the wrong restaurant or wear lime green after it has become passé. A number of specific textual tactics within the metadiscourse of salvation can be identified in the discourse of *VOGUE*: the creation of a community of followers; the revelation of secrets; the advocacy of sensory and physical deprivation as a form of self-mastery; the presumption of personal physical inadequacy and the promotion of reflection on this; the promotion of pain and suffering as a means to admonish inappropriate behaviours. In short, *VOGUE* draws heavily on the discourse of salvation religions for the tactics it employs to attract, expand and maintain a readership base. Let us turn to some specific examples of how this is achieved.

The creation of a community of followers is a pivotal tactic for any salvation religion, since these exist only by way of a group of people willing to suspend disbelief that a deity whose identity cannot be proven will guarantee them salvation in exchange for certain

<sup>45</sup> The reference is to Chris Schilling (1993) *The Body and Social Theory*. London, Sage:129.

<sup>46</sup> Regrettably, I have been unable to locate similar types of study for either France or the USA.

behaviours during their earthly life. The sacrifices these behaviours entail are perceived as a worthwhile trade-off for belonging to an 'elect' group, the chosen few who have seen the Light and know the Truth. Without the people, the Church is a hollow institution. Similarly, without readers, *VOGUE* is nothing. For its success is dependent on attracting and keeping readers. One way to do this is by promising membership of an elite community centred on shared values. The members of this community are, by virtue of their belonging, the chosen few. The allure of belonging to an exclusive group must be balanced against a recruitment drive that welcomes anyone prepared to live by the doctrine. Such is the task of the *VOGUE* editor: to remind the chosen that they are special and at the same time to invite new members to the fold. Marjorie Ferguson (1983), in her discussion of women's magazines as the sacred books of a 'cult' of femininity, has observed that the tactic of creating an exclusive group of followers is integral to the success of the magazines. All three editions of *VOGUE* seek to maintain and expand a community of followers, but each does this in a slightly different way. One of the most direct mechanisms is the address to readers from the Editor. This will bear the Editor's personal stamp and reveals the view of a particular Editor as to how best to ensure readership loyalty.

The US edition invariably features a letter to readers from long-time Editor-in-Chief, Anna Wintour, who uses the opportunity to address her readers on a variety of issues and to dictate the trends of the season. Wintour is considered by the fashion and cosmetics industry to be pretty close to a deity herself: if she likes your product, it sells, but if she doesn't then it probably will not. American designer, Marc Jacobs, says of her influence: "if I design a grey thermal cashmere sweater and Anna's wearing it, and it's also on Stella Tennant on the cover of American *VOGUE* . . . the effect on sales is phenomenal" (Buttolph 1998:21). Angela Buttolph has reported that "Anna Wintour, is so influential, big-name designers fax her sketches of their upcoming collections for approval" (1998:21). Hence, her monthly editorial is awaited eagerly by the fashion glitterati. Wintour is not one to contain her comments to frocks alone, and regularly includes social and political commentary in her letters to readers: for example, her explanation of the cover photograph of the July 1997 edition featuring a black model, which becomes an appeal for racial tolerance, or tolerance of beauty at any rate; or her entry into the debate surrounding the thinness of models in the June 1996 edition, where she is prepared to take on the role of *agent provocateur*, suggesting that models are so thin simply because thin is more attractive; or her August 1997 discussion of then-President Clinton's condemnation of the rise of the 'heroin chic' look in fashion. Wintour clearly understands that she speaks from a position of power, as a person with access to exclusive secrets she may or may not reveal to her readers. Her tone assumes an attentive audience and she writes in a formal, impersonal style, tending to decree, rather than argue, her point. The then-editorial director of Condé Nast, James Truman, has said of her: "Anna demands that people be in love with her. She demands the respect and adulation of the entire industry of fashion" (Buttolph

1998:21). Her editorial style reflects this and she builds her community of followers by instilling into them the fear of being left out should they not heed her advice.

Editor-in-Chief of *VOGUE Paris*, and American expatriate, Joan Juliet Buck, has a less authoritarian approach to readers but nonetheless seeks to retain their loyal following. Interestingly, her editorial address is not a letter to readers, but *Le point de vue de VOGUE*<sup>47</sup> which appears almost halfway into the magazine rather than at the beginning, as in the American and Australian editions. Buck chooses the inclusive "*nous*" (we) over the more commonly used "*on*" (one) in her editorial addresses, consistently using language that cultivates the notion of the magazine and its readers as a group bound together by their impeccable taste. Her language is at once inclusive and exclusive, excluding those foolish enough not to be reading *VOGUE* and taking advantage of its exclusive interviews, insights and offers. The extent to which *VOGUE* seeks to focus on its readers as an extension of the magazine is also evident in the materials it sends to subscribers. For example, a letter offering renewal of a subscription commences with the unusually intimate "*Cher Abonné*".<sup>48</sup> To an Anglophone reader, the opening may seem mundane. In the context of French correspondence, to use "dear", rather than simply addressing the letter "*Madame, Mademoiselle, Monsieur*", the standard opening to a formal letter, is to assume an unusual level of intimacy and connectedness with the addressee. Similarly, the informal closure "*A très bientôt*"<sup>49</sup> is a farewell more often exchanged between friends than in formal correspondence. Thus *VOGUE Paris* builds its community of followers by creating a sort of extended *VOGUE* family, held together, in the words of the subscription material, by their shared "*goût d'élégance*" and need to be up-to-date with "*les tendances les plus importantes de la mode parisienne*".<sup>50</sup>

It is more difficult to generalise about *VOGUE Australia* than about either of its Northern Hemisphere sisters. Over the duration of this study, the magazine has had no less than four Editors-in-Chief and an Acting (Caretaker) Editor: first Nancy Pilcher, then Debbie Coffey as caretaker until Marion Hume arrived from *VOGUE* (UK) in June 1997, then in February 1999 Juliet Ashworth took the reigns and most recently, Kirstie Clements has taken over for the November 1999 issue. Neither Pilcher nor Coffey directly addressed the readers in a column or letter. Hume and her successors each took up the letter from the editor format, with only slight variations in personal style. Generally speaking, they favour inclusive language, emphasising the 'we' and personalising messages to 'you' or 'our readers'. They frequently express their delight or enthusiasm at being able to share privileged secrets and opportunities with readers, for example "our fashion news director . . . lets us in on a few

<sup>47</sup> "*VOGUE's Point of View*"

<sup>48</sup> "*Dear Subscriber*". By contrast the American and Australian editions send readers an 'invitation to renew' subscriptions which commence with the line "As a valued *VOGUE* reader", and do not address the subscriber personally in the way the Parisian edition does.

<sup>49</sup> "*See/speak to you very soon.*"

<sup>50</sup> "*taste for elegance*"; "*the latest trends in Parisian fashion.*"

celebrity secrets about how to travel in comfort and arrive in style" (Juliet Ashworth, August 1999:12). For all their enthusiasm to include the readers, the editors are nonetheless acutely aware of the exclusive nature of their magazine. As Clements puts it: "elitism is nothing to be afraid of — it simply means being the best in your field. It's what it takes to be in vogue [sic]" (November 1999: 18). Thus the editors include in their community the select few who are able to be 'the best of the best', along with those prepared to make the necessary sacrifices to attain this status, drawing them together around the shared aspiration to be in fashion.

We have already seen something of the second tactic: the revelation of secrets. Secrets are integral to the notion of a chosen few. What separates the chosen from everybody else is that they know the Truth, as proclaimed by the deity. The Truth must, therefore, be a secret that can only be revealed to those who demonstrate adherence to the principles and philosophies of the group. Once sufficient devotion has been manifest, the Truth (or at least a part of it or a key to its discovery) may be revealed. Fashion magazines have a head start on salvation religions in this arena: not only is the Truth a secret, it is forever reinventing itself. Thus a regular update as to its current status is necessary if followers are to continue to believe. In Foucault's terms, the only "permanent truth" in fashion is its impermanence and so the books held as "permanent truth" must be those that keep followers abreast of its permutations. For this reason the editors of all three editions of *VOGUE* fill their magazines with promises of 'exclusive' offers, interviews, products and insights. Coverlines such as "Spécial Paris: Tous les nouveaux codes" (*VOGUE Paris* November 1998), "Spécial accessoires et scoops mode" (*VOGUE Paris* October 1998)<sup>51</sup>, "Key looks of the season" (*VOGUE Australia* August 1999), "Handbag Mania : The Best Choices for the Ultimate Status Symbol" (*VOGUE US* February 1998) and "Biological Warfare : the Truth about Botox" (*VOGUE Australia* June 1998) are typical of covers that promise the revelation of inside information. These are usually followed up with reassuring messages from the editors and staff writers that they have 'road-tested' this season's key items and provided you (the reader) with a detailed appraisal; or with promises that 'we show you how to get the look' which are substantiated, to the extent that this is possible, by 'exclusive' inside information from those in the business of creating 'the look': make-up artists, hair cutters and colourists, designers, beauticians, dietitians, personal fitness trainers and a bevy of other image-making professionals. Advice is offered on even the most banal of topics. American *VOGUE* ran a four-page article devoted, for the most part, to brushing hair: "Why is hair such hell? We've all got it. So how come we can't get it right? Vicki Woods asks the experts" (October 1997:396-401). Since 'the look' is akin to the Truth in the world of fashion, such crucial information about staying on the road to salvation is provided by these monthly updates. How, wonder editors and readers alike, do we survive between issues?

<sup>51</sup> "Paris Special: All the new rules."; "Accessories Special and Fashion Scoops."

The third tactic employed to impose an agenda provides us with a direct link to Foucault's research into the historical virtue of physical self-mastery: the magazines often advocate an extraordinarily Spartan existence. Whatever the encouragement to indulge in the wanton hedonism of spending several thousand dollars on a handbag, this indulgence is earned only at considerable physical cost. Food, for example, is seldom discussed as anything other than decoration or a means to attaining the perfect body. Exquisite images of lavish tables and mouth-watering food adorn the food section,<sup>52</sup> but it is clear that the pleasure to be derived is voyeuristic. The function of this gastropornography<sup>53</sup> is to look and to be titillated, but clearly not to eat. When food is pictured being consumed, it is usually a slice of watermelon or a bottle of French mineral water, beneficial to the body and safe for the waistline. The various 'health', 'beauty' and 'fitness' sections of the magazine abound with tips as to ways to deprive your body in order to attain the desired body shape. So *VOGUE Paris*'s promise of a 'revolutionary' and 'exclusive' system of slimming, by eliminating foods according to your blood group: "*Mincir selon votre type de sang*"<sup>54</sup> (October 1998:252-255), whilst American *VOGUE* runs an article entitled "Stop Dieting", which advises against the consumption of a host of foods from avocado to animal proteins for "maintaining health and losing weight" (January 1997:96-98). The latter is typical of the types of discussion about food to appear in American and Australian *VOGUE*: ostensibly devoted to nutrition, they are primarily about weight-loss.<sup>55</sup> Abstinence and privation are described as 'being good' while almost any other relationship with food is 'naughty', an 'indulgence' or something for which 'penance' (usually exercise) must be undertaken. In this way, privation is presented as something that will help the reader to attain the desired goal of salvation from the guilt experienced as a result of over-indulgence and naughtiness. However, humans are acknowledged to be fallible and prone to failure from time to time. To account for this, *VOGUE*, like all salvation religions, provides hope of redemption for even the guiltiest offenders, with promises that this solution will be easier to stick to, more scientifically sound or perfect for those with insufficient willpower to have found success with any of the previous regimes. Thus the magazine serves the dual function of affirming the goodness of those who master their appetites (and hence themselves) whilst encouraging back into the fold those who have fallen by the wayside. Establishing itself as a source of both affirmation and hope, *VOGUE* is able to fulfil yet another important role in the lives of its followers.

<sup>52</sup> In Australia *VOGUE Entertaining & Travel* is a bi-monthly publication in its own right, carrying the *VOGUE* masthead. In the United States The Condé Nast group publishes *Gourmet*, a magazine with a similar philosophy but not marketed with the *VOGUE* brand name. Australia is the only country in which the food and travel magazine is marketed as *VOGUE*. The fact that there exists a supplementary publication devoted to food and cooking explains the comparatively small amount of space devoted to food in the Australian edition. The only other non-fashion magazines in the Condé Nast stable to carry the *VOGUE* masthead are *VOGUE Living* and its bi-annual supplement *VOGUE Apartments* in Australia and *Casa VOGUE* in Brazil.

<sup>53</sup> I was first introduced to the wonderfully evocative term 'gastropornography' by Melbourne artist Mark Loveday.

<sup>54</sup> "*Slimming by blood type*"

<sup>55</sup> *VOGUE Paris* has far fewer qualms than her sisters about the blatant promotion of weight loss for its own sake, a difference to which I shall return in Chapter 7.



The image in Figure 2.5 is of an emaciated woman leaning against a wall: her hip bones protrude from underneath her sheer dress and her angular features are accentuated by the dramatic use of light and shadow in the photograph. As part of a fashion shoot from the American edition of *VOGUE* entitled "New York Story" (February 1998:204), the aim of the image is to communicate to the reader how to achieve the effortless chic of fashionable New York socialites. A thin, bony body is clearly part of the desired aesthetic, with the text serving to underscore how important it is: "Even New Yorkers who indulge in couture and dress up for charity balls maintain a slick, greyhound-like silhouette". The words are suggestive of the grand dames of New York's high society and readers are told that 'even' they, the women who set trends rather than following them, have mastered their bodies to such an extent that they look more like well-bred racing dogs than well-bred socialites. An expensive dress is draped over the model's frame in such a manner as to emphasise her boniness and the words accompanying the image make it clear that her body shape is both desirable and achievable. The choice of the verb 'maintain' reinforces the myth perpetuated in *VOGUE* that possessing such a silhouette is simply a question of hard work. Its juxtaposition with the verb 'indulge' highlights the extent to which achieving this 'look' is viewed as a question of discipline: the message is that 'even New Yorkers who indulge' in spending vast sums on their wardrobe and social life do not 'indulge' in food to such an extent that it interrupts their regime of body maintenance. Through fashion spreads such as this, *VOGUE* is able to lure readers with the promise of fashionability while at the same time imposing the condition that the readers master their bodies — and their appetites — sufficiently to do justice to the clothes pictured. There is, of course, the possibility that women are not taken in by these lures, and subsequent chapters will deal with alternative ways in which women might interact with such images. However, there is also the probability, as demonstrated in detail in the next chapter, that women are affected in the long-term by the values promoted by magazines. In such a context, the constant reiteration of the need for self-restraint, self-maintenance, self-control and self-discipline may be a highly effective tactic for a text to employ because it serves the dual function of promoting a value system and claiming to hold the secret as to how to succeed within it. The latter creates in the consumer a 'need' to continue purchasing the magazine.

The constantly repeated message that privation is a form of self-mastery is underscored by a strong message that the self can be improved upon endlessly. As Foucault has shown, the belief that the self can be improved through discipline has its roots in antiquity and provides the basis for the prescriptions and proscriptions of the salvation religions. One need not accept oneself, one can always make improvements, *VOGUE* tells us, and it shows us how to set about doing so. Unlike many women's magazines, *VOGUE* is not overtly preoccupied with romantic love as quest. Fashion and beauty advice is not delivered as a guide to snaring a desirable mate, rather as a guide to being fashionable and beautiful, seen as ends in themselves. While there can be no doubt that *VOGUE* assumes a predominantly

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and dress up for charity  
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heterosexual female audience, it does not focus on relationships or sex in the way magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Cleo* are inclined to do. Discipline and fashionability are virtues and ought to be prized as such according to the *VOGUE* bible. Underlying the advice *VOGUE* so kindly offers its readers, hand in hand with the cosmetic surgeons, toiletry and make-up manufacturers and health spas essential to its actualisation, is a presumption of the inadequacy of the female form in its natural state. A variety of natural processes — aging, weight gain, varying body shapes and greying hair — are demonised in order to persuade readers that they need products and services that will intervene in these processes to delay or circumvent them. From liposuction and alpha-hydroxy-acid face peels to cremes, lotions, sprays and tablets, *VOGUE* promises that you can look twenty-one for the rest of your life, just as long as you work as hard enough.

"Update your face" (January 1997) demands the cover of American *VOGUE*, which has also featured a "Summer Body Makeover" (July 1997) and "Good News for Bad Legs: How to Improve on Nature" (August 1997). *VOGUE Paris* promises readers "Longevity, Lightness and Thinness" on the cover of its April 1999 edition, having already revealed in August 1997 the sins your "skin can't hide". While in September 1997 *VOGUE Australia* claims to have discovered "Thigh Therapy: Cellulite Treatments that Work". This handful of headlines highlights the presumption by these magazines that the female body is inherently flawed and their readers in constant need of tips as to how to overcome this.

The March 1998 edition of *VOGUE* (US) features an article entitled "Big Night" (128-146) in which the author, Dodie Kazanjian, is on a quest for the perfect evening gown to disguise her "short, dark and Armenian" body. The clear message here is that shortness, dark skin and Armenian ethnicity are obstacles to beauty, which is so frequently defined as tall, fair and of Anglo-Celtic or Northern European ethnicity. Other bodily shapes and forms need to be disguised or made to conform more closely to the ideal.<sup>56</sup> "I want to be noticed in a new way", Kazanjian says, certain that the right frock will do the trick, that she can find "clothes that will make [her] feel not just good but glorious". She tries on a Dolce & Gabbana dress that makes her feel "short and plump and exposed", which she contrasts with another at Badgely Mischka: "the fit is incredible; it does unexpected things for my body and for my morale". She wonders whether another gown might be more appropriate at her age, to which the designer replies: "Never ask that question . . . You should say, 'Is this dress the age I want to look?' ", reinforcing the idea that an ageless beauty is well within the reach of anyone who will spend sufficient time, money and effort on the right gown. Eventually Kazanjian settles on the dress because "if I get this dress I'll never need plastic surgery or a shrink or another ball gown as long as I live". The clear message here, even if made partly in jest, is that the female body is

<sup>56</sup> For an excellent discussion of the ways in which cosmetic surgery and accessories such as coloured contact lenses are used to normalise distinctive ethnic traits, see Bordo (1993) "Material Girl" in *Unbearable Weight*. For a counter-argument, see Kathy Davis (1991) "Re-making the She Devil".

in such need of improvement that some enormous expenditure will be necessary for it to conform to appropriate norms, be it on psychotherapy, plastic surgery or a frock costing several thousand dollars. Kazanjian perpetuates the idea that the body is mutable, a chameleon which can be stitched or analysed into shape, and that, all else failing, an expensive, well-draped piece of fabric will make all the difference and transform an otherwise flawed product into something 'glorious'.

The constant reiteration of a need for improvement is coupled with hundreds of pages of bodies airbrushed to perfection, so as to further exacerbate the readers' feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Just as women committed the Original Sin, and were thus deemed unable ever really to attain the state of purity required to commune with God (with the exception of the occasional nun), so *VOGUE's* women are destined to live in a perpetual quest for the unattainable physical perfection represented by the images of women adorning its glossy pages. As a textual tactic, fostering this insecurity provides a way to ensure an ongoing need for the magazine's advice as to how to overcome it. Readers are encouraged to dwell on the beauty of others and to lament their own flawed genetic makeup, at the same time as being offered a variety of corrective options. I shall return in Chapter Three to an examination of the forces that drive this dynamic.

Readers who fail to muster sufficient willpower to starve and exercise themselves into shape, or sufficient vigilance to exfoliate, cleanse, tone and moisturise themselves into agelessness are offered a variety of forms of penance for their sins. Most of these involve painful, dangerous and invasive surgical and laser procedures. American *VOGUE* takes us through a road-test of the laser technofacial in an article entitled "Feel the Burn" (April 1997:344), in which writer Rebecca Johnson recounts the sensation of the hot, searing laser on her face and the smell of burning as the laser stripped away her top layer of skin, which was then sucked up a plastic tube. Physical pain is represented as something one simply endures in order to reap the benefits of looking younger, but is also frequently described as a way of making up for past sins such as excessive sun exposure, smoking, alcohol, lack of sleep, lack of exercise and poor diet. These stories are accompanied by stylised images of beautiful, made-up, airbrushed models, smiling whilst ten-centimetre collagen-filled needles are injected into their lips, or looking serene as a laser burns away their skin. Liposuction and breast enlargement, the two most commonly performed cosmetic surgical interventions in the world, are presented as torturous, yet gratifying once the results are visible, and about as risky as a pedicure. Like the indulgences and penances of old, these quick-fix solutions can be bought by anyone rich enough and borne by anyone tough enough to tolerate them. *VOGUE* is able to trade on the fallibility and guilt of its followers, since some will never manage to work out every day with a personal trainer and nibble only on salads and seaweeds. For those who have lost their way, all is not lost. Hope is offered, in the form of a thoroughly cleansing dose of self-flagellation and painful cosmetic surgery. Liposuction becomes the modern-day

equivalent of crucifixion: one suffers extraordinarily for the chance to be reborn. Typical of the narcissistic beliefs of the followers is the desire to be reborn as someone beautiful, rather than someone good. *VOGUE* is thus able to position itself as judge and punisher, at least vicariously, by outlining what awaits those who fail to follow its advice and live according to its rules.

So *VOGUE* draws heavily on the tactics of salvation religions to secure and maintain its readership. Using the prospect of beauty, status and success, the magazine promises revelations to its select group of devotees, offers opportunities for confession and penance, draws on feelings of guilt and inadequacy to sell its message and preaches damnation to those who fail to conform. *VOGUE* readers are thus able to flatter themselves that they belong to an exclusive group that knows the Truth, having seen the Light and learnt to follow the proclamations of its deities. Or so the magazine likes to think. In reality, there are many readers of *VOGUE* who escape its evangelistic spell. Subsequent chapters will examine the agenda brought to this exchange by both the reader and the text, and return to the site of contest to examine the ways the battle unfolds. Whatever the *actual* reading formations surrounding *VOGUE*, textual self-positioning through the appropriation of the discourse of guilt and salvation undeniably draws on an established discourse of power, where the power lies with the institution and is maintained by simultaneously promoting self-doubt and faith in a mantra, all of which *VOGUE* is conveniently able to accommodate within its pages. While this tactic may not always be successful, it certainly goes some way to unsettling the reader's monopoly on power in the text-reader encounter. This undermining of the reader's power is necessary if the magazine is to fulfil its commercial aims, an examination of which will be the focus of the next chapter.

chapter three

# **Buying women's attention**

chapter three

# **Buying women's attention**



Having established in Chapter Two that *VOGUE* tactically invokes a variety of powerful discourses in its quest to prevail in negotiations with the reader, it is timely to consider now *why* it needs to do so. The simple answer is evidently that it needs to sell copies to survive. A more sophisticated response is that it needs to sell vast numbers of copies to a particular target demographic in order to attract and retain advertising revenue. This chapter will explore in detail the size and composition of the magazine sector and, in particular, the advertising market within it. To put this discussion in some perspective, in 1997, Australians spent A\$417 million buying magazines (McKenzie 1997). In the same year, the magazine industry represented US\$98.4 billion of the US\$8,110.9 billion in GDP generated in the United States of America (US Census Bureau: 460). 1998 saw increases in per capita expenditure on consumer magazines in Australia (18.08 magazines per capita), the United States (22.04 magazines per capita) and France (33.28 magazines per capita) (FIPP 1999). A steady increase in retail spending on magazines was a feature of the last years of the 1990s in all three markets. Following a worldwide slump in the consumer magazine market in the late 1980s and early 1990s (FIPP 1999, EUROSTAF 1996) spending on magazines is now increasing again (Magazine Publishers of Australia – hereafter MPA (Australia) –1999:3)<sup>57</sup>. Yet surprisingly few discussions of the reading of women's magazines take any account of the multi-billion dollar industry that produces them and thus the commercial imperatives which necessarily underlie the 'preferred readings' of a magazine from the text's point of view. Magazines are not monographs: they cannot be made meaningful if they are divorced from the continuous stream of issues and images that constitute them and the market that exists because of them. The discourses that shape them are necessarily economic as well as cultural, ideological and aesthetic. To better understand these discourses, a close examination of the magazine industry is warranted. If we are to understand why women read women's magazines, we must understand who these readers are and why advertisers want to buy their attention.

Studies of magazine readers (Hermes 1995; McCracken 1993) revealed that many people assert that they seldom read consumer magazines, and purchase them even less frequently. The evidence, both in these studies and elsewhere, belies this assertion. In 1998 net magazine reach per issue was at 89.6% of the Australian adult population, with the figure climbing to 92% for the United States and a staggering 97.2% for France (FIPP 1999). Effectively this means that in Australia, magazines have greater reach than commercial radio (72.4%), newspapers (85.5%), cinema (28.9%) or the Internet (31.5%). Only commercial television, with a net reach of 94.5% of the population, is more prominent in the lives of Australians than magazines (MPA (Australia)1999:4).

<sup>57</sup> This increase can be partially attributed to growth of the sector as a whole through the introduction of new categories of magazine such as 'men's lifestyle', 'computer and technology' and 'career women's' magazines (FIPP 1999).

### Who are the readers?

In the Anglophone countries, men read as many or slightly fewer magazines than women, but French men read slightly more. This discrepancy in readership distribution may be due to several factors. The exceptionally high per capita magazine sale figure for France of 33.28 copies per capita in 1998 (as against 18.08 in Australia and 22.04 in the United States) suggests that magazines are simply more widely purchased and read in France. In addition, reading of any kind has been seen as an inherently valuable pursuit by the French, which renders it less inclined to be seen as a gendered activity than is the case in English-speaking countries. The fact that the number one rating French television show was for over 15 years a book review programme entitled *L'Apostrophe*, screened at 9.30pm on Friday evenings, goes some way to demonstrating the attachment to reading in France across social classes and genders.

By contrast, all the available data for Anglophone countries suggests, in the words of Lyons and Taska that "in any English-speaking country, at any point in the twentieth century, girls read more than boys" (1992: 45, cited in Bennett *et al.* 1999: 148). The *Australian Everyday Cultures* survey confirmed that this gendering of reading continues into adulthood, with 69.7% of women stating that they 'read often' as against 48.9% of men, and 12.8% of men saying that they 'hardly ever read' as compared with only 4% of women. (Bennett *et al.* 1999: 148). The only textual category men read more than women is newspapers (49.9% reading a newspaper daily, compared with 38.1% of women), which forces us to ask why reading has become such a gendered practice in this country. The *Australian Everyday Cultures* survey confirmed that men prefer to read texts that are seen as serious, informative and useful, such as newspapers that deliver information and 'facts', or gardening, travel and historical books. Their only concession to fiction seems to be in the field of thriller and adventure books. Women, on the other hand, are just as likely to read classical authors, poetry and contemporary novels, as romances, cooking books and biographies (*ibid.*). Clearly, women seek a broader range of experiences from their interaction with texts. It appears less important to women than to men that the texts they read are perceived as objectively 'valuable' and serious. Women seem prepared to admit to a variety of reasons for reading magazines, from passing the time and collecting practical information to being part of a wider magazine-reading community (Hermes 1995). The trend seems consistent across the Anglophone world: Hermes (1995:4) found British men equally reluctant to acknowledge that they read magazines or to discuss why they do so. In the Anglophone world, textual genres preferred by women have traditionally been seen as less valuable both by society as a whole and by academia. This is evident in the battle of feminist scholars (see for example Carol Vance 1984, Rosalind Coward 1984, Cora Kaplan 1986) to have women's magazines and other female-gendered popular cultural forms, such as soap-opera and romance, recognised on the

academic agenda as serious subject matter.<sup>58</sup> There is virtually no equivalent feminist popular cultural analysis in the French academy. Chapter Seven carries a full discussion of this disparity and some theories as to how it has arisen. For the present purposes, suffice it to say that magazine reading is demonstrably a gendered practice in the Anglophone world, rather less so in France.

While French men in general read more magazines than French women, women nonetheless read substantially more women's magazines than men in France, Australia and the United States. No doubt this is reassuring for their editors, since they are clearly reaching their target market. For example, in Australia, the average issue net reach of women's magazines in 1996 was 45.3% of the adult population, but 62% of the adult female population and only 28.1% of the adult male population (FIPP 1999) (see Figure 3.1a, or for a comparison by country see Figure 3.1b). In the United States, advertisers can be content in the knowledge that women's magazines have a net issue reach of over 80% of the adult female population. With women's magazines reaching over 50% of the adult female population of Australia, the US and France it is little wonder they are perceived as a valuable, sharply-targeted vehicle for advertising directed at women.

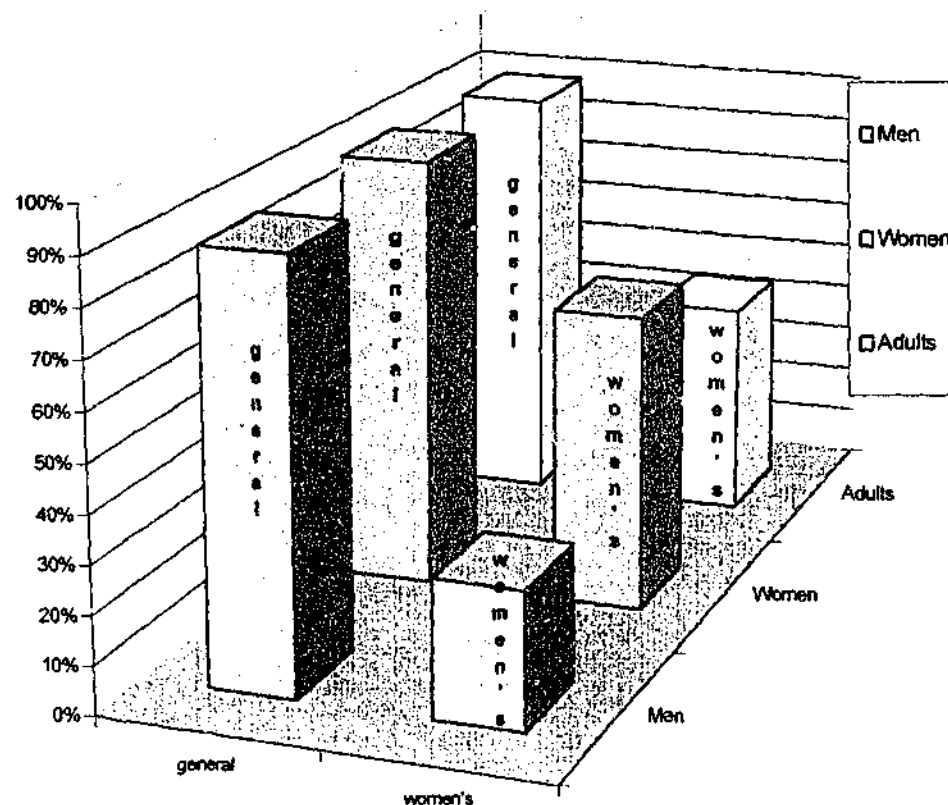


Figure 3.1a: Average net issue reach, women's titles v. general consumer titles, Australia (1996).

<sup>58</sup> It is true that the British Cultural Studies tradition firmly established the legitimacy of popular culture as a subject of academic inquiry in the Anglophone world, following the publication of Richard Hoggart's (1957) *The Uses of Literacy*. However, feminist scholars such as Vance, Coward and Caplan did force Cultural Studies scholars to recognise women's cultural objects and female-gendered culture (such as women's magazines), as legitimate subjects of academic study. Until this point, female forms of popular cultural expression were not examined specifically in terms of the gender of the intended audience and the ideological implications therein.

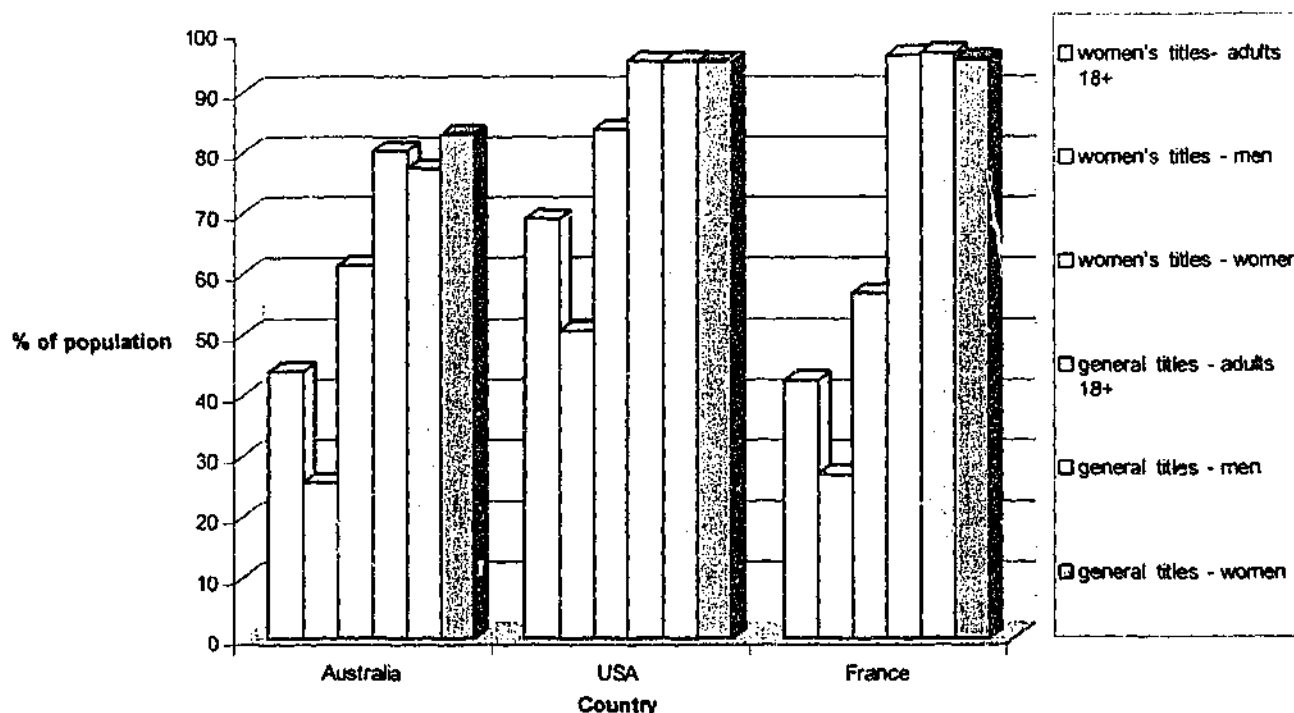


Figure 3.1b: Average net issue reach, women's titles v. general consumer titles. Comparison by country (1998).

Magazine advertising also promises a unique interaction with target audiences, with a level of cost-efficiency no other medium can match. Barrell and Braithwaite (1998:121) demonstrate that magazines have the capacity to deliver a highly targeted market through greater market segmentation than either television or radio. Because a magazine's success is based on its capacity to identify a very defined group of readers and to offer them a product tailored to their needs, magazines can offer advertisers access to tightly defined groups of consumers. Since heavy magazine readers are also traditionally light consumers of television and radio (Barrell and Braithwaite, OJP, MPA, MPA (Australia), FIPP), they are also difficult to reach via other media. Magazine publishers can thus offer advertisers access to a group of consumers likely to gather a substantial amount of product and pre-purchasing information from magazines, since they constitute the primary media source consumed by this group (FIPP, MPA, MPA (Australia), Magazine Dimensions). It is perhaps for these reasons that a number of companies who advertise in women's magazines do not advertise their products elsewhere, many restricting themselves exclusively to one title. For example, Nicolas (1989:80) found that 15% of the advertising that appears in *VOGUE Paris* does not appear anywhere else.

The high proportion of women who read women's magazines and women's relatively limited exposure to other media made magazines a natural target for Anglophone and, to a far lesser extent, French feminist media analysis. If large numbers of women were exposed to the advertising and editorial of these magazines and many of them relied on this information to make spending decisions, then it followed logically that these texts were making an important contribution to women's lives. Early studies of women's magazines (Friedan 1963, Tuchman 1978) tended to see them as a vehicle for ideologies that oppressed women by constantly (re)constructing an idealised image of women as housewives and promoting this as desirable.

This trend continued in the work of Anne-Marie Dardigna (1978) and Marjorie Ferguson (1983). According to such accounts, women are repressively socialised by the ideological messages promoted in women's magazines. Hermes has gone so far as to describe this analytical approach as presuming that women are "'socialised' by magazines and made to see the world according to the magazines' priorities" (1995:4). This style of analysis is flawed for a variety of reasons, not the least of which the assumption it makes about women's capacity to think for themselves. Certainly, magazines contain powerful and, as I shall show, effective messages which can and do affect the spending behaviours of readers. As I shall argue, if actual behaviours are affected in concrete ways, then most probably women's sense of who they are is also affected by constant exposure to the ideals promoted in these magazines. However, these researchers have fallen into the trap of assuming women to be so brainwashed by magazines as to be virtually incapable of independent thought. It falls to academic feminists in such a scenario to act as an intermediary, interpreting the messages of the magazines and explaining their dangers to women readers. Even those works (see, for example, McRobbie 1978 & 1991, Winship 1987 and Ballaster *et al.* 1991) which actually ask readers for their insights into reading women's magazines, still tend to assume that women fall blindly into the traps magazine texts lay for them, a problem acknowledged by McRobbie (1999a) in her more recent work.

One of the major oversights of these feminist scholars has been the failure to examine the composition of the readership about whom such sweeping generalisations are made. From Friedan onwards, researchers assumed that the kind of women who read women's magazines were predominantly housewives, isolated at home, bound to family as a carer, with little formal education to help them see the evils of magazines which their educated, feminist sisters so readily perceived. In the case of weekly women's magazines which exist in both French and English, it *may* be true that the readers come from socio-economic backgrounds that have not afforded them access to a great deal of education (URLs: FIPP, OJD 2000).<sup>59</sup> However, in the case of women's monthlies, the data consistently demonstrate the opposite. In the US, an average of 60% of women's monthly magazine readers are tertiary educated,<sup>60</sup> as compared with an average of around 45% of women's weekly magazine readers (FIPP 1999). Both figures are substantially higher than the national average of 32%. Across all women's magazine categories, the median head-of-household income of women's magazine readers in the United States is US\$10,000 higher than the national average (FIPP 1999). In France, the data clearly show that the bulk of women's magazine readers are professionals, managers, senior public servants or self-employed entrepreneurs, with the majority living and working in either Paris or regional conurbations with populations of greater than 100,000 inhabitants

<sup>59</sup> Be this as it may, it is still extremely problematic to assume that a lack of education renders one immediately susceptible to the ideological messages that these authors presume to be inherent to the text (or that a tertiary education inures one to them). The problem of assuming the messages exist at all has been addressed in Chapter Two.

<sup>60</sup> The obvious exception being teen magazines whose target readership is too young to have finished school or entered tertiary education. These magazines are usually grouped under the sub-category of women's magazines in industry analyses.

(Bledniak 1992). Australian data reveals that magazine readers are likely to be in the highest socio-economic and educational brackets, as compared to consumers of other media:

Readers of magazines are more heavily concentrated among the younger, more affluent segments of the population, in contrast with newspaper readership, which is skewed more to the older groups and commercial TV and radio audiences, which are skewed to the lower socio-economic groups. (MPA (Australia) 1999: 4)

Of all the magazine readers in Australia, those who are heavy, or frequent, readers (one third of the population) have an average age of 39.8 years and an average income greater than \$A70,000 per annum (over twice the national average). They are also more likely to be female than male and likely to be located in the top socio-economic AB quintile. (MPA (Australia) 1999: 6). *VOGUE Australia* tempts advertisers with the information that its target audience, as well as most of its actual audience, comprises women aged 20-49 in the AB quintile (URL *VOGUE Australia*: 2000). In addition, women who read monthly magazines are likely to be higher than average consumers of such products as homewares, cars, fashion, beauty products, travel, alcohol, groceries, leisure goods, electrical and office equipment. While explicit data regarding education are not available, the location of these heavy magazine readers in top income and socio-economic brackets is suggestive of higher-than-average levels of education. Many will be tertiary educated, since tertiary qualifications are mandatory for entry to many of the professions that deliver high incomes at comparatively young ages. Thus a picture emerges which must surely tantalise prospective advertisers: the 50% or more of the adult female population who will be reached by these magazines is likely to be educated, affluent, career-oriented, inclined to spend money and living in an urban area (where the opportunities for spending are greater).

### The business of women

In 1998, the Publisher's Information Bureau in the US recorded that more than 240,000 pages of magazine advertising were sold for the year. This translates to US\$13,813,403,372 in magazine advertising revenue in the United States in 1998. Of this, US\$1,200,505,485 was generated from advertising toiletries and cosmetics and US\$1,043,294,232 for apparel and accessories, along with US\$839,773, for diets, health spas, drugs and remedies. Retail shopping venues and services accounted for another US\$514,831,518 in advertising revenue, with travel adding a further US\$602,748,751. The vast majority of this advertising targets the adult female audience (MPA URL 2000). Compare this to the fact that subscription and newsstand sales of all magazines across all categories in the United States generated only US\$ 9,923,311,967 in the same year and the importance of advertising revenue becomes abundantly clear. In the United States in 1998, 47% of magazine revenue came from advertising, as compared to 53% from copy sales. This was very different from both France and Australia, where the split between advertising revenue and copy sale revenue was closer to 25% to 75% in favour of copy sales:

Revenue from advertising v copy sales				% 1998
Australia	advertising			28
	sales			72
USA	advertising			47
	sales			53
France	advertising			28.1
	sales			71.9

Figure 3.2: Magazine revenue source, advertising v. copy sales. Comparison by country (1998).

This difference helps explain why so much more of the American edition is devoted to advertising, and why advertising in it is extremely expensive, two factors to which I will return shortly. The contribution of advertising to total revenue can be further broken down into different magazine types and periodicities. Figure 3.3 shows how women's monthly titles in France in 1994 were far more dependent on advertising revenue than were either weekly or monthly general mass-market titles. Over 40% of their total revenue was derived from advertising (as opposed to copy sales), a considerable increase on the 1998 national average of 28.1%, as outlined in the table above. Nicolas (1989:80) reports that in 1988, *VOGUE Paris* was one of the most successful titles ever published in France, managing to sustain advertising revenue of six times its sale price and, in doing so, setting an industry record! From their perspective as former magazine publisher and editor of British monthly magazines, Barrell and Braithwaite (1998:134) confirm that monthly magazines ought to assume that at least half their revenue will come from advertising, with the figure climbing to as much as 75% for new monthly titles at the time of their launch.

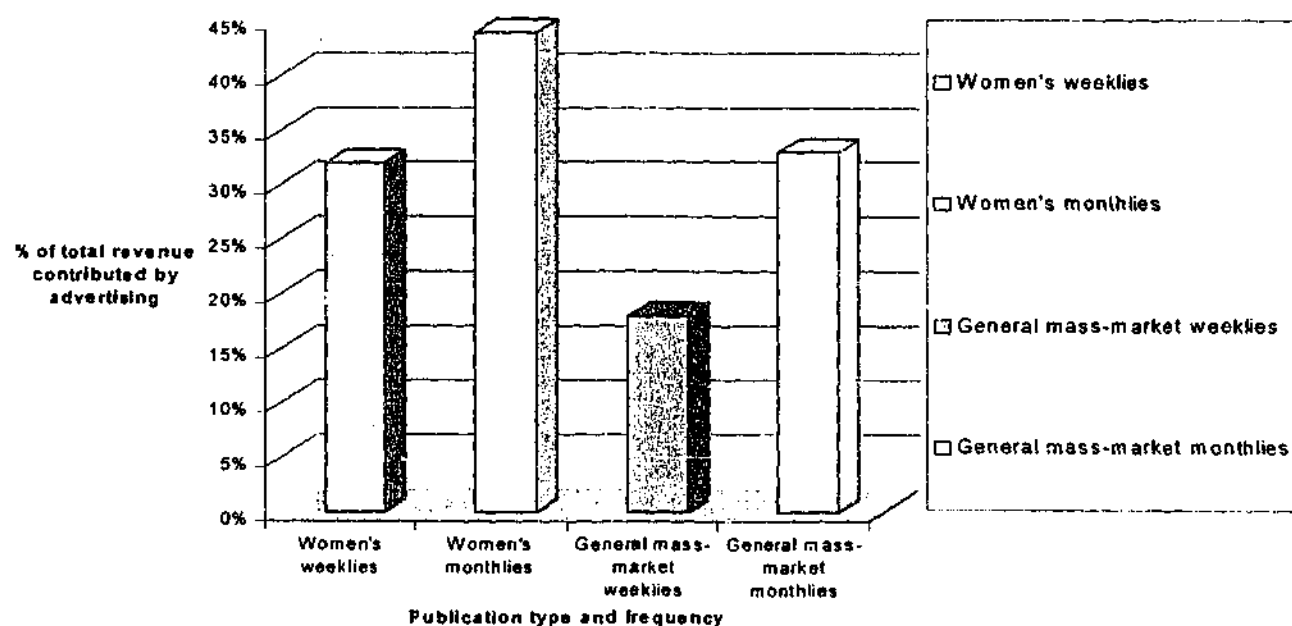


Figure 3.3: Contribution of advertising to total revenue, women's titles v. general consumer titles, France (1994).

The Magazine Publishers of America (MPA) recommend to publishers that a magazine ought to have a mix of approximately 48% paid advertising pages and 52% editorial.



In reality, many American women's magazines exceed this ratio. An average issue of American *VOGUE* contains 70-75% paid advertising. When Anna Wintour released the phenomenally successful September 1998 edition of *VOGUE*, she was lauded by the industry for having persuaded American women to purchase a magazine with over six hundred pages of advertising among its total page count of just over seven hundred and twenty, which translates as 83% paid advertising. Its French and Australian counterparts are more likely to carry 35-40% advertising, which explains why they are both less bulky and less profitable. Thus, the 50% or more of women who are likely to be reached by a women's magazine can expect to be saturated with an advertising content of somewhere between 35 and 75% paid advertising, depending on the publication. Consuming 33.28 magazines per capita per annum, the French read more magazines than any of their Anglophone counterparts, whose average per capita consumption sits closer to 20 magazines per capita per annum (see Figure 3.4). French women are thus the most likely to be exposed to this advertising content. French advertisers also spend more of their advertising dollars on magazine advertising: 23% of total adspend in 1998, as compared to 12% in the United States and 11% in Australia (FIPP 1999). However, this trend is not indicative of a general preference for print media by French advertisers, since they have the lowest newspaper adspend and a television and radio adspend comparable to the US and Australia (see Figure 3.5a, b and c).

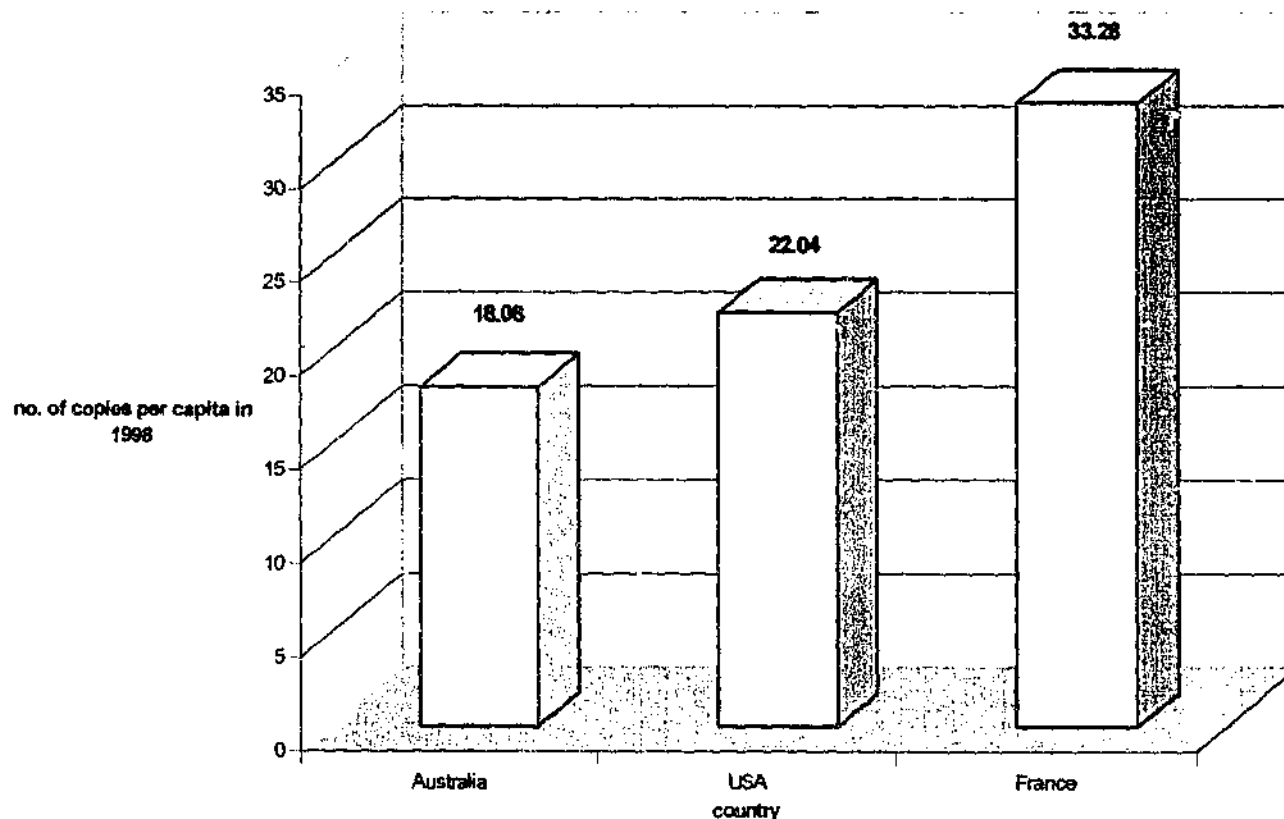


Figure 3.4 Per capita magazine consumption, by country (1998)

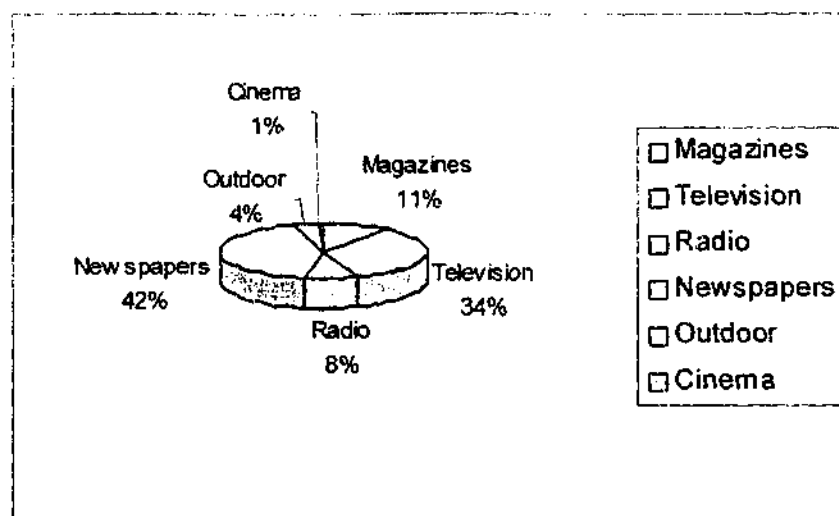


Figure 3.5a: Magazine adspend as a percentage of total adspend, Australia (1998).

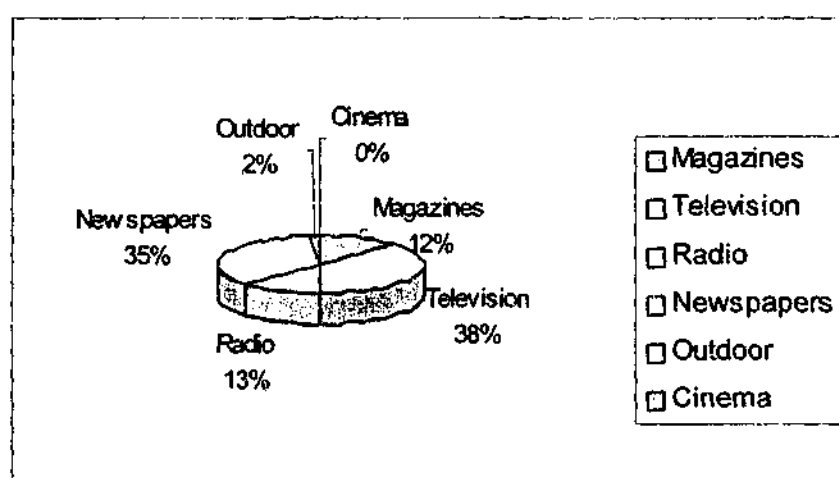


Figure 3.5b: Magazine adspend as a percentage of total adspend, USA (1998).

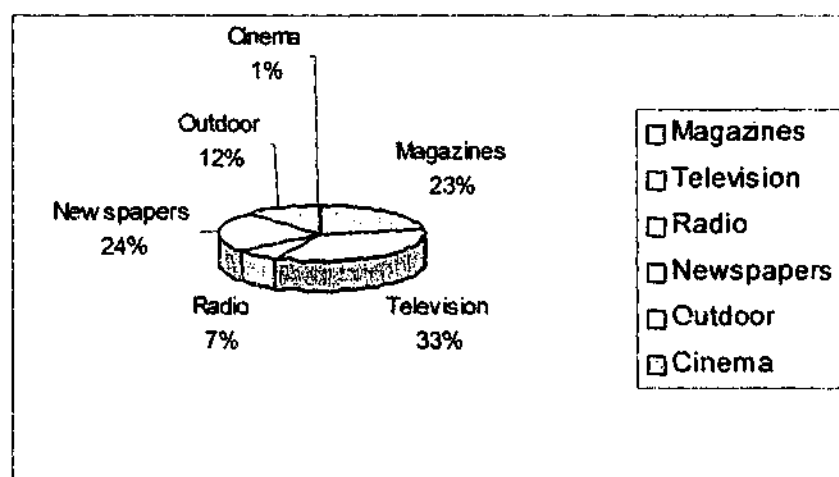


Figure 3.5c: Magazine adspend as a percentage of total adspend, France (1998).

Sitting as it does at the luxury end of the women's magazine spectrum, *VOGUE* sells advertising space at a premium, promising to deliver a highly targeted, affluent audience for its advertisers. In the luxury magazine market in France, *VOGUE Paris* began the 1990s in a position of clear dominance over its rivals, both in terms of paid circulation and advertising revenues. Its advertising revenue was three times that of its closest competitor *L'Officiel*, whose circulation was less than half that of *VOGUE Paris* and contained only half as many pages of advertising per annum (Bledniak 1992: 215). Outside the luxury sub-category,

however, lower circulation than many of its high-volume weekly competitors means that it must demonstrate its capacity to deliver high readership volumes both in net annual readership terms and in the form of readers-per-copy, in order to remain competitive in advertising terms. Figure 3.6a shows that in the Australian market in 1996, *VOGUE Australia* registered less than a quarter as many copies circulated as the market leader *Cleo*, and fewer than almost all other magazines in the table. *VOGUE Australia*'s advertising reach looks healthier when Figures 4.6b and 4.6c are considered: it is able to deliver a total readership of 387,000 adult female readers per annum, and a substantial reader-per-copy (RPC) rate of 5.48, more than twice the RPC of most of its competitors.

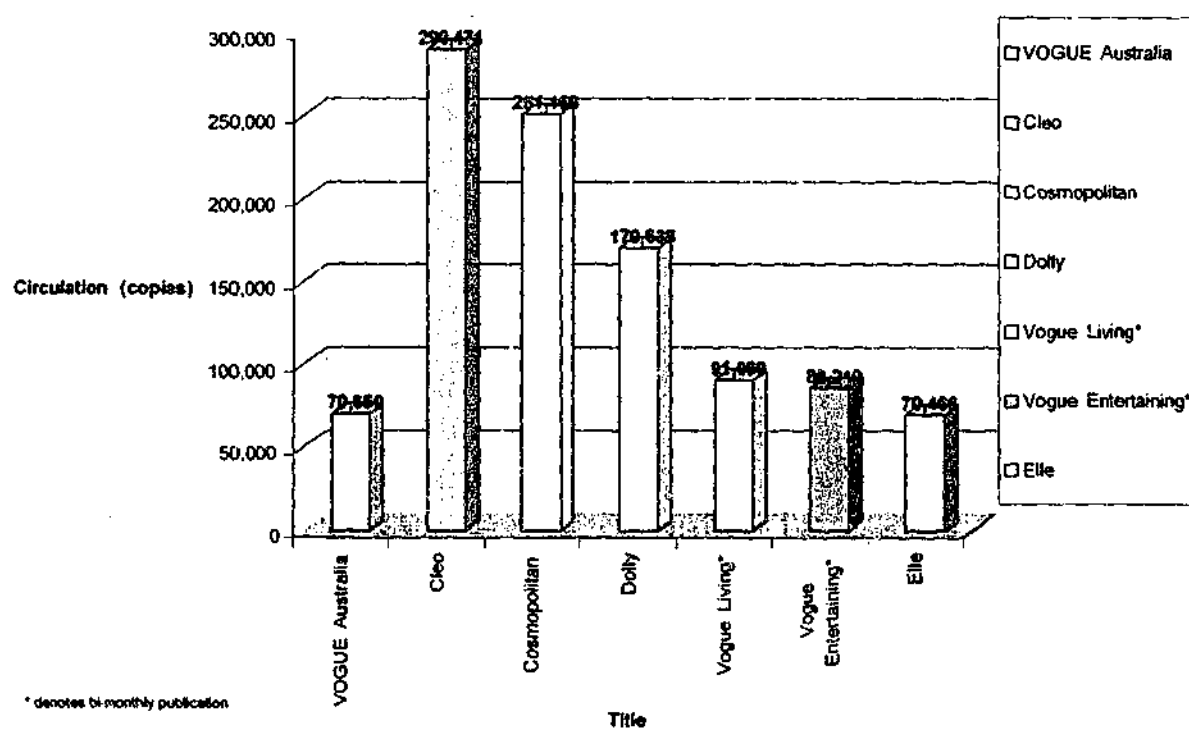


Figure 3.6a: Total paid circulation of selected titles, Australia (1996)

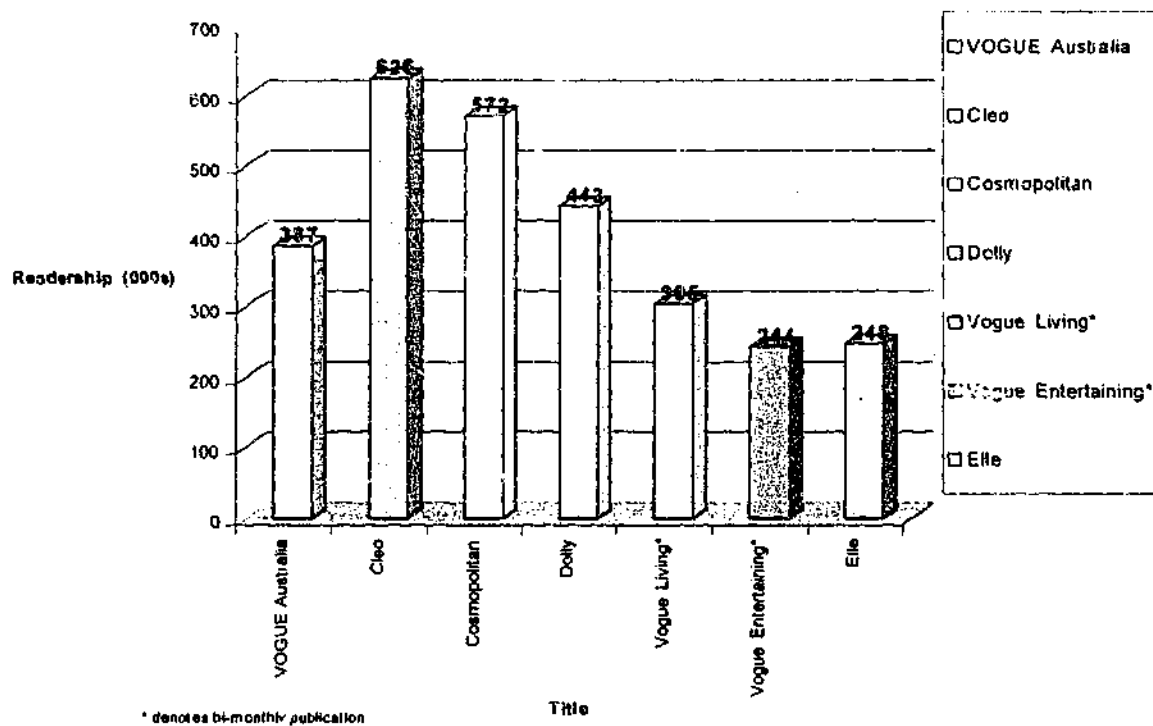


Figure 3.6b: Total female readership of selected titles, Australia (1996).

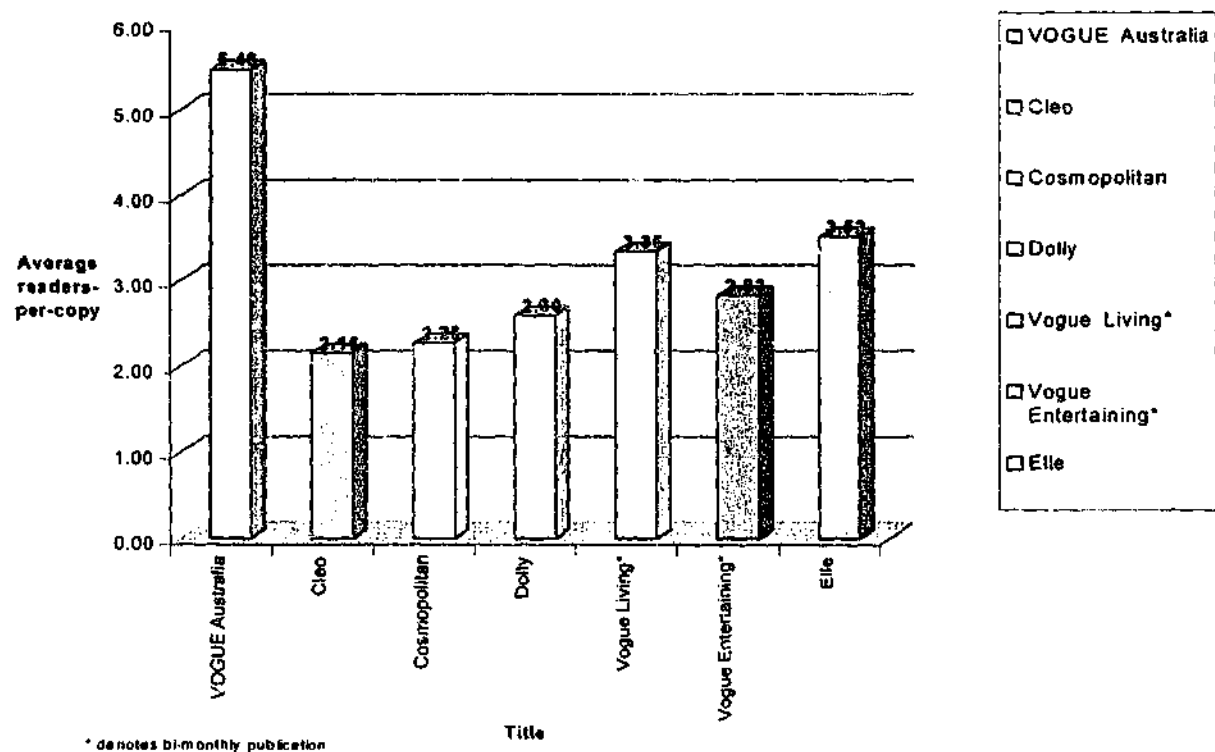


Figure 3.6c: Average readers-per-copy for selected women's titles, Australia (1996)

Figure 3.7a shows that in the United States, *VOGUE* had a RPC rate of 8.61 in 1999, which must be the envy of its competitors. Even in the luxury sub-category, its closest rival, *Glamour*, managed an RPC rate of only 5.56, with *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vanity Fair* lagging well behind at 3.49 and 4.68 respectively. This is despite the relatively low net circulation of *VOGUE* in the United States, when compared to the market leader *Cosmopolitan*, or the luxury sub-category leader *Glamour* (Figure 3.7b). In France, *VOGUE Paris* remains the market

leader in the luxury sub-category, still ahead of *L'Officiel*, but records only one fifth of the circulation of overall market leaders in the women's magazine category, *Madame Figaro* and *Marie Claire* (Figure 3.8).

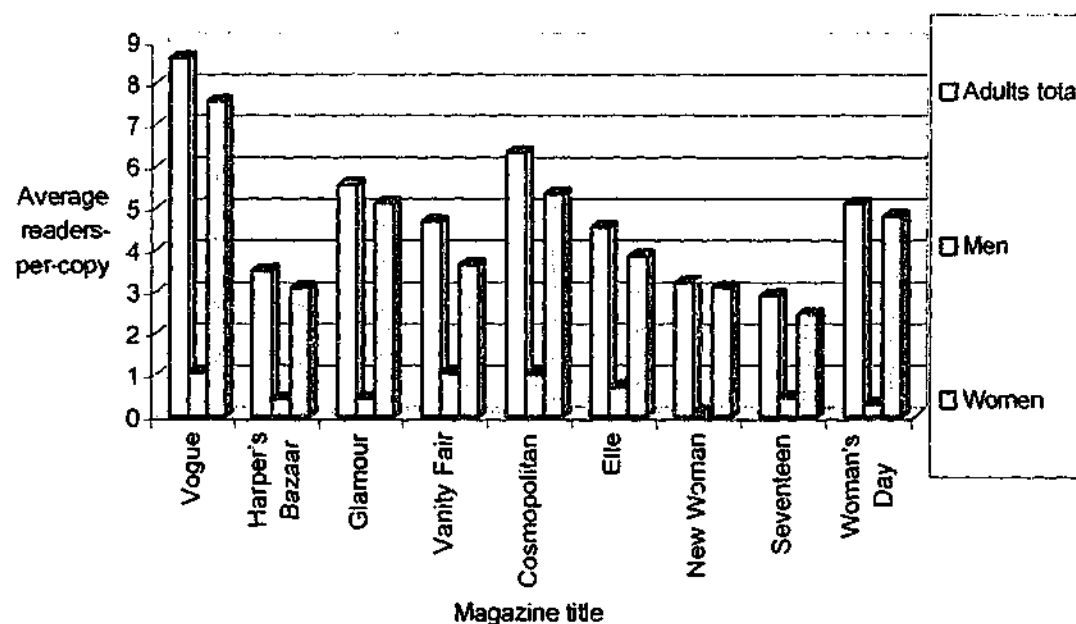


Figure 3.7a: Average readers-per-copy for selected women's titles (by gender), USA, 1998

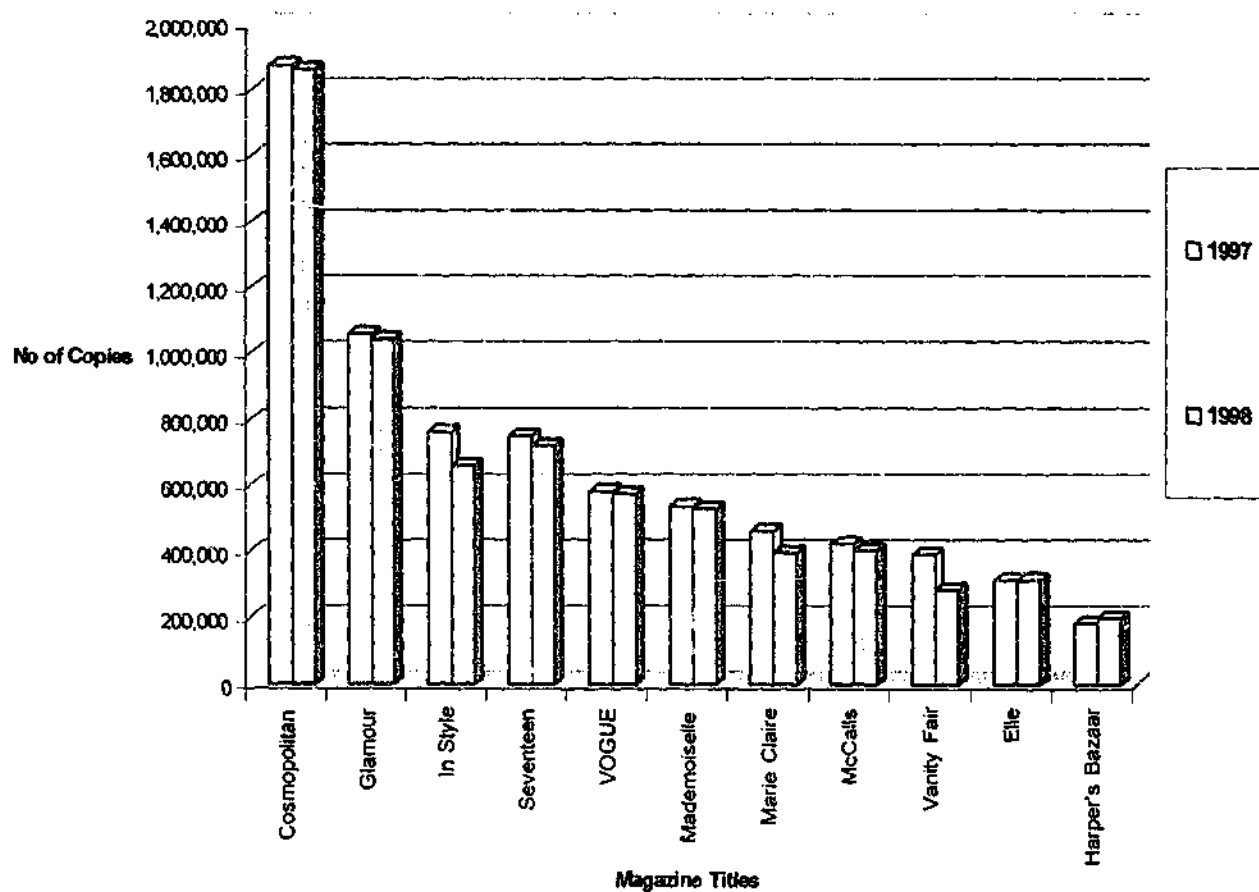


Figure 3.7a: Average paid circulation for selected women's titles, USA (1997-1998)

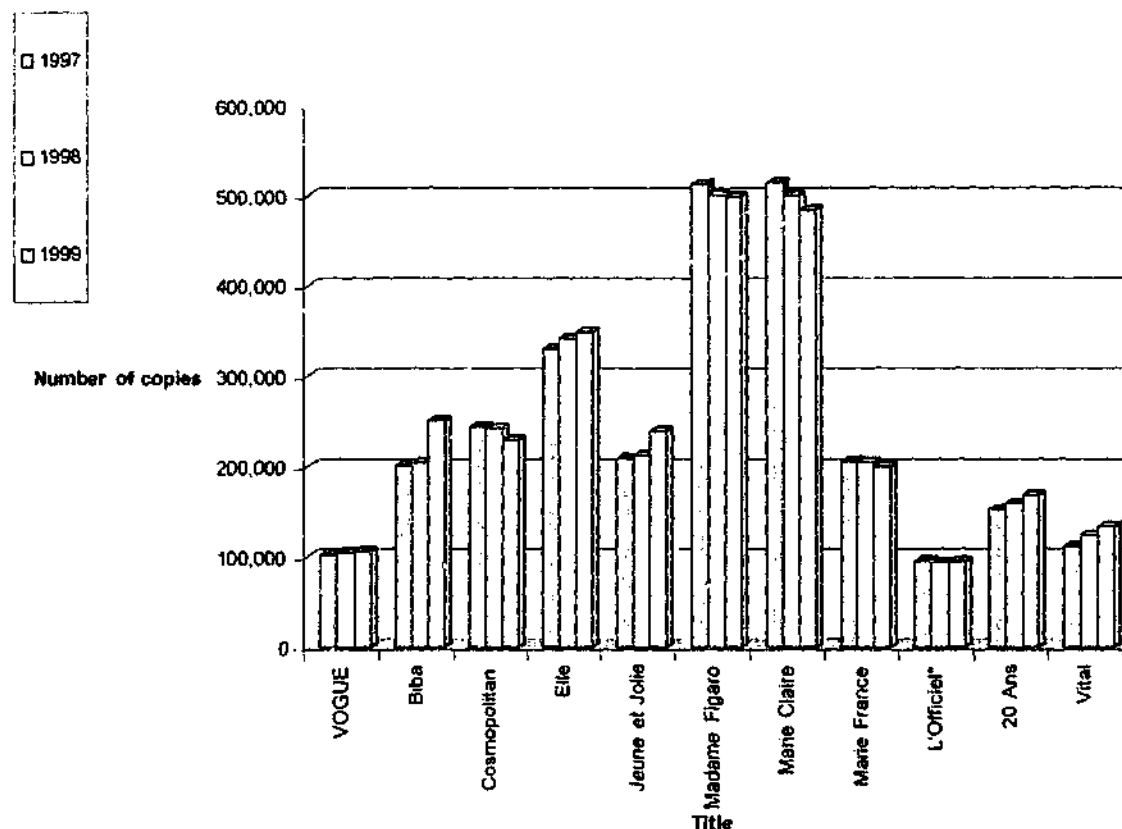


Figure 3.8: Average paid circulation for selected women's titles, France (1997-1999)

A 4-colour advertisement in an issue of *VOGUE Paris* costs FF 102,000, or just under 60% of France's per capita GDP for 1999. In the United States an advertiser can expect to pay US\$ 79,565, which equates to approximately 2.5 times the per capita GDP of the USA for 1999. *VOGUE Australia* charged A\$9,500 for a 4-colour ad page in 2000, approximately 30% of Australia's per capita GDP. Advertisers and magazines use what is known as the CPM (cost per thousand readers) to gauge the efficiency of magazine advertising: "if the cost of a 4-colour advertisement is \$25,000 and it reaches 1,000,000 Women, age 35-44, its CPM for Women 35-44 is:  $\$25,000/1,000,000 = \$25$ " (MPA URL 2000). *VOGUE's* high readership and RPC rates make it an attractive advertising proposition, with strong CPM results across its target demographic. Furthermore, monthly magazines such as *VOGUE* usually have higher reading frequencies than their high volume weekly competitors. In lay terms, this means that along with reaching more readers-per-copy, each of those readers is likely to read the magazine several times. The cumulative effect of repeat reading is that it produces an average advertisement-page exposure level of 91% of the total audience delivered for a monthly magazine, as against 79% for a weekly magazine (Magazine Dimensions: 272).

### Luxury and exclusivity

*VOGUE* also benefits from its market position and its position as part of the large global publishing house Condé Nast. The Condé Nast group publish a variety of top-end luxury titles, including *VOGUE*, *Glamour*, *House & Garden*, *Condé Nast Traveler* [sic], *VOGUE Brides* and, in Australia, *VOGUE Living*, *VOGUE Apartment Living* and *VOGUE Entertaining & Travel*. The

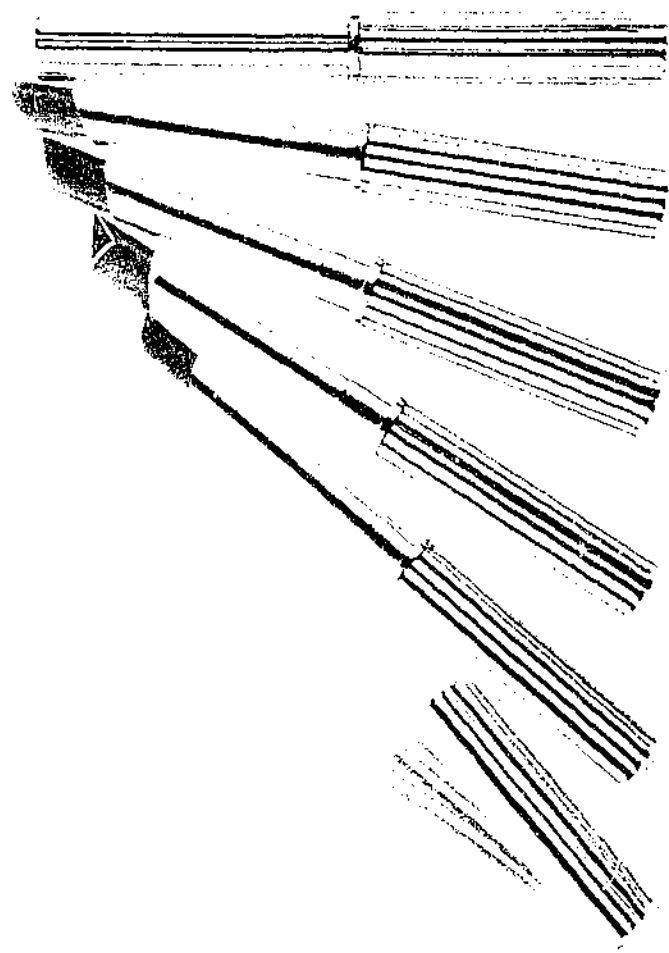


beneficial effects of belonging to this publishing group are twofold. First, it permits greater advertising revenue, since media buyers purchase space in bulk across a variety of the titles in the Condé Nast stable.<sup>61</sup> Second, it permits all the titles in the stable to charge a premium for their advertising, by virtue of their strong association with other luxury titles. In addition, the *VOGUE* brandname has an established connotation of quality and luxury that permits it to be highly selective about the types of advertising it will carry. This is important for products that sell at a premium because they are seen as quality, luxurious items, for example, ready-to-wear and couture collections from *haute couture* fashion houses, fragrances, jewellery, watches, cosmetics and accessories. The exclusivity of the brand name and its advertising content are frequently rewarded with equally exclusive advertising campaigns. Unlike lower-range magazines, advertising in *VOGUE* is not supported to the same degree by television and radio advertising.

Companies advertising in *VOGUE* are also rewarded by the fact that the magazine is extremely selective about the products for which it accepts advertisements. They can be assured that their products will be seen in the company of other, similarly exclusive, items. Figures 4.9a, b and c show the first three pages of the March 1999 edition of *VOGUE Australia*. The first, 4.9a, is an advertisement for the cosmetic brand Estée Lauder who would have paid a premium to secure the inside front cover position in the magazine: in 2000 the cost was A\$24,500 for the double page spread, as against A\$18,500 for a standard double page spread inside the magazine (URL *VOGUE Australia*: 2000)<sup>62</sup>. As the first image the reader sees, the brand is immediately connected with the *VOGUE* brandname on the cover and its connotations of quality and exclusivity. The advertisement is composed of two distinct images: actress Elizabeth Hurley on the left, and the Estée Lauder Indelible Stay-On Lipsticks on the right. Right-hand page placement is preferred by advertisers, since readers are more likely to notice and remember an advertisement if it is located there (Magazine Dimensions: 1999). The simple composition of the right-hand page with its gold lipstick cases arranged like dominoes on a white background is consistent with the Estée Lauder cosmetics image: crisp, clean, fuss-free. The focus on the gold cases, rather than on any specific lipstick colour locates the items as elegant and prestigious. Sharply contrasting black and white pages draw further attention to the only hint of colour in the spread, the product being advertised. The absence of pricing is a hallmark of advertising in top-end luxury magazines, whose readership is supposed to be sufficiently affluent for cost not to be a major factor in purchasing decisions. Furthermore, an absence of purchase locations on the advertisement assumes an audience sufficiently acquainted with the milieu of exclusive fashion to know where to buy them.

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of the comparative financial and branding advantages and disadvantages of bulk buying of advertising space, see Braithwaite and Barrell (1998) pp 117-127. For examples of the 'combination rates' offered to advertisers who buy space in more than one of Condé Nast's magazines, see <http://www.condenast.com/mags>.

<sup>62</sup> In 2000, the same position in *VOGUE* cost US\$95,430; in *VOGUE Paris* FF 273,000.



Stays on. And on. And on.

## Indelible

Stay-On Lipstick

Delivers long-wearing stain-free colour and lip smoothing ingredients, including Jojoba Oil, Vitamin E and Aloe Vera. So, hour after hour, your lipstick looks as fresh, feels as marvelous as the moment it first touched your lips. In 13 shades.

Indelible is a trademark of Estée Lauder Inc.

# ESTÉE LAUDER

Figure 3.9b draws on similar techniques to connote the exclusivity of Polo Sport Ralph Lauren. In the first instance, the reader is assumed to know what Polo Sport Ralph Lauren make: clothing, accessories, fragrance and skincare products for active young men and women. Although the text establishes that these are products for 'explorers, travelers [sic] and adventurers', there is no specific mention of the actual products featured nor of which ones are for sale. Once again, no buying information is included, other than a toll-free number 'for enquiries [sic]'. The plush dogs and expensive luggage as well as the casual manner in which the models wear the Polo Sport Ralph Lauren clothes (each item would retail for between A\$200 and A\$500), signal to the reader that this is a brand for those who appreciate quality even when relaxing. The inclusion of an (obviously foreign) snow scene further cements the exclusivity of the brand: in Australia, snow usually connotes middle-class pastimes such as skiing and snowboarding.

Continuing the theme is the third double-page spread inside the cover, an advertisement for Prada (Figure 3.9c). This is one of a series run over the past two years in which very young-looking girls are photographed so as to look as though they have been caught 'on the run' in their exclusive Prada clothing and accessories, locating the label as young, fearless and rebellious. The blurred colours and bright flash of light appear in all the advertisements and, even without searching for the discretely placed brand name in the bottom left hand corner of the left page, it is easily recognisable to a fashion aficionada as promoting Prada. Here, even less information is included than in the previous two examples: there is nothing at all to indicate what the featured product is nor how to obtain it. This sort of 'image' advertising which sells a brand as having a particular attitude is extremely common in up-market magazines such as *VOGUE*. It is an advertisement that would fail to make its 'point' outside the context of *VOGUE* and without the pre-existent awareness of fashion that the reader is assumed to bring to the negotiation. In running these three double-page advertisements at the start of the magazine, *VOGUE Australia* is setting the tone of the issue: this is for readers who are 'in-the-know'. Furthermore, it carefully presents three products and images that appeal to three different aspects of target readers: the sexy, in-control woman; the outdoor adventure woman; and the desperately hip woman for whom cutting-edge chic is everything. *VOGUE* is thus able to enhance the prestige of each advertiser's product by placing the advertisements on consecutive pages, at the same time ensuring that none is upstaged through a carefully considered mix of products and brands which are not in direct competition with each other. In so doing, the magazine uses its advertisers to reinforce the branding and positioning for which they have paid such a large amount of money. The relationship is thus mutually beneficial: the advertisers are exposed to their target audience, and the advertisements assist the magazine in making explicit that target audience from the first few pages. As such, there is a happy collusion between the magazine and its advertisers in their project to attract and retain a particular audience.



**POLO SPORT**



**RALPH LAUREN**

EXPLORERS, TRAVELERS & ADVENTURERS  
EST. 1967

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

FOR ENQUIRIES CALL 1800 501 201







PRADA

Advertisers spend such vast sums on buying space in *VOGUE* because they believe it works. Burrell and Braithwaite (1988) rightly point out that, since advertisers are spoiled for choice in terms of media (television, radio, cinema, newspapers), they are unlikely to spend money on magazines if they do not believe the investment to deliver results. Early feminist studies of women's magazines were inclined to agree with them, claiming that the constructions of femininity in advertisements further compounded the problem of those fostered in the editorial. This school of thought assumed that women were affected by what they read, to such an extent that the messages in women's magazines were responsible for shaping their sense of who they are. The rise of resistant reader theories led to a questioning of this wisdom. Lumby (1997) argued it was insulting to the intelligence of women readers to suggest them incapable of interpreting texts without the assistance of academic theories. In order to illustrate her theory she presents vast numbers of 'subversive', 'resistant' and 'ironic' readings of advertisements and editorial, clearly demonstrating that academics can read texts creatively, but doing very little to illuminate us as to the likelihood that other women read magazines in these ways.

### Measuring the impact

It was precisely this dilemma which led Hermes to conduct her ethnographic study of women's magazine readers. *Reading Women's Magazines* (1995) is based on over eighty interviews with men and women, in Britain and the Netherlands, who read women's magazines with varying degrees of regularity. Hermes was initially deeply disappointed to find her respondents largely unable to remember or describe what they had read in the magazines. What they could discuss, rather, were the ways they read magazines and the meanings they took on as part of a complex structure of interactions engaged in by readers so as to make meaning. This led her to the conclusion that magazines are made meaningful by readers primarily in the ways in which they connect them to each other, to communities and to bodies of practical knowledge, as well as by serving as reading material which, in her words, is "easily put down". Hermes's respondents described magazines as texts through which they would happily flick when they had little time to read, or when they were likely to be interrupted, or while completing another task simultaneously. Thus the magazines were both easy to put down physically, and easy to put down, or denigrate, in terms of content and quality. Because her respondents did not see magazines as important in any particularly active way, Hermes concludes that readers' involvement with them is minimal. "Women's magazines are read with far less concentration and much more detachment than other popular genres" (1995:14), she writes, and "although many readers have generic knowledge of women's magazines, the practice of reading women's magazines apparently does not call for reflection or involvement of any readily communicable kind" (1995:12). The results of her ethnography are useful in that they help us to understand how women's magazines are read. Regrettably, the assumptions



she then proceeds to make about the magazines are less useful. Hermes assumes that, because women do not expressly articulate the detail of advertisements and articles to which they have been exposed, their recall is negligible. A variety of advertising recall and noting studies conducted in the United States contest this assertion (Magazine Dimensions 1999). In addition, a number of studies of the links between magazine advertising and purchasing behaviour, both American and Australian, clearly demonstrate that exposure to magazine advertising is likely to influence and change consumer purchasing behaviours (AC Nielsen 1999, AC Nielsen/BrandScan 1995, Lenehan Lyton Bloom Blaxland 1995, Magazine Publishers of Australia 1996).

Diverse methods are used to test advertising recall, from visual identification to response to verbal cues some days after reading the magazine. Unsurprisingly, it is when readers have the actual magazine in front of them that their recall of particular advertisements and products is highest: around 45% of the issue's audience will recall a single advertisement under these testing conditions. This can be contrasted with only 14-16% of the issue's audience recalling particular points about the copy of an advertisement they have read up to two days previously, when subsequently asked by telephone to identify aspects of the magazine, without a copy in front of them. Hermes's own study adopted the latter type of testing but was even less directed: her respondents were invited to discuss their magazine reading with limited intervention from her as researcher. Thus, they were not encouraged to focus on recalling specific aspects of the magazines. Taking this into account, it is entirely consistent with findings across the industry that her respondents had limited detailed recall of the specifics of magazines (Magazine Dimensions 1999: 275-6).

The MPA commissioned a number of studies in the late 1990s to gauge the effectiveness of magazine advertising in raising brand and product awareness and directing purchasing. The *Sales Scan* study conducted by AC Nielsen Research found "clear evidence that *magazine advertising effectively generated short-term sales ... for the majority of brands measured*" (1999: 2, emphasis in original). For example, sales of one of the products being tracked, "Grey Poupon mustard", were 22% higher among households exposed to the magazine advertising campaign than among those who were not. For sales of other products being tracked, differences of 19%, 30%, 21% and 8% were recorded, always in favour of the households exposed to the magazine advertising campaign. Dollars spent and volume of purchases were also higher for households exposed to the magazine advertisements for all of the products in the study. Another study, conducted in 1998 by Millward Brown Research for the MPA, found that 61% of the brands they tracked "showed a relationship between a change in advertising awareness and a corresponding change in purchase intent" (9). This study clearly showed that increasing expenditure on magazine advertising delivered greater dollar-for-dollar value than an equivalent increase in expenditure on television advertising, with the most effective strategy being a combination of the two. Nonetheless, each type of advertising showed a clear relationship between an increase in sales, a change in purchasing behaviour,

an increase in brand awareness and the introduction or intensification of magazine advertising, regardless of the product category.

These studies refute many of the assumptions that have underpinned recent theoretical moves towards the position that texts have little or no real persuasive power over readers. Clearly, there is a significant relationship between exposure to magazine advertising and purchasing decisions. This being so, it is necessary to rethink our understandings of the text-reader relationship in order to take account of the commercial imperatives that drive the text's role in its interaction with the reader and the likely effect of these on the reader's interaction with the text. Magazines are serial publications and if exposure to advertising content builds up with repeat reading of a single issue, then the logical extension of this proposition is that it will also build up with repeated exposure to a number of issues, and a number of publications within a particular category. I do not wish to suggest that there is no scope for resistance to the persuasive nature of magazine advertising (in at least 39% of cases, there is no relationship between increased exposure to advertising and a change in purchase intent). However, the effect of a lifetime of exposure to the themes dominating advertising in women's magazines cannot be dismissed. Furthermore, it stands to reason that, if advertising in magazines has a concrete and measurable impact on the purchasing patterns of magazine readers, then they are likely to be affected by what else they read in magazines. Very probably there are also subliminal and less concrete impacts, since the advertising and editorial of a magazine like *VOGUE* promote a specific life-style ideal to which to aspire.

### The 'national' within the international

I have shown that the cost and effectiveness of magazine advertising is in many ways globally uniform. The internationalisation of the industry and the commercial interests that drive it mean that there is very little difference between different countries. It is in the advertising content that the greatest differences emerge. In France, the top magazine advertising expenditure category in 1998 was cosmetics and beauty products, with clothes and accessories in fourth place. In 1999 in Australia<sup>63</sup>, manufacturers of apparel and accessories clearly dominated magazine advertising expenditure, with cosmetics and toiletries a close second, and a separate category for haircare also featuring in the top ten. In the American rankings for 1998, clothes and accessories came in third and toiletries and cosmetics sixth. Australians are almost as well known for their lack of style as the French for their supposedly innate knowledge of it, yet the top two categories for magazine advertising expenditure in Australia relate to the maintenance and presentation of the body. One might suggest, perhaps unkindly, that Australians need all the help they can get in this respect, but the strong

<sup>63</sup> In the Australian report, the rankings are given as percentages thus meaning that there are more than ten categories within the 'top ten advertising categories', as those with equal percentages of advertising expenditure on magazines are ranked at the same number.

representation of these advertising categories in France belies such an assumption. The placement of these categories in the middle of the rankings in the US is much more typical of the advertising focus of an English-speaking<sup>64</sup> country than the Australian results. However, when viewed across the entire advertising sector, rather than magazines alone, the Australian result is more contiguous with the American, and the French ranking remains high for products in these categories. This may be partly explained by the heavy reliance of cosmetic and fashion product manufacturers on the placement of foreign-made magazine advertisements in Australian magazines, which are free of the complex local content restrictions governing Australian television advertising.

Motor vehicles did not feature at all in the Australian top ten in 1999, but in the previous year in the US cars topped the consumer advertising categories. Australians are more likely to see advertisements in their magazines for pharmaceuticals, outdoor and leisure equipment or travel and accommodation than for cars. This finding is surprising since cars seem to occupy a central place in the Australian national consciousness (see Bennett *et al.* 1999), but is probably best explained by the comparative age of cars on the road in Australia. Australians seem less likely to spend money on new cars than their contemporaries in America, although Bennett *et al.*'s research indicates a strong desire among Australians to own new vehicles as status symbols. It may be that Australians are more inclined to spend money on new homes than new cars: in Australia advertisements for the building and construction industry occupied third place in the top ten but did not feature in the top ten for any other country. This is perhaps reflective of the comparatively high rate of home ownership among Australians, even compared to the United States. In terms of magazine advertising expenditure in France cars were not listed separately to other transport, which was in third position.

Food was the last of the top ten categories in the US and Australia, but ranked seventh in France, with a separate category for beverages in tenth position.<sup>65</sup> Non-alcoholic beverages did not rank at all in Australia, but alcoholic beverages ranked at number eight, despite restrictions on their advertising under Australian law. The results in the food and beverage categories support the general Anglophone perception of the French as a nation deeply attached to their cuisine and culinary traditions. Coupled with the strong presence of local companies in the top ten advertisers, this higher ranking of food in France is consistent with the greater importance placed on food, in particular on French food, in France than in either of the English-speaking countries.

<sup>64</sup> Both Australia and the United States are perhaps better described as *predominantly* English speaking countries, given the diversity of their ethno-linguistic composition. However, the bulk of magazines in both these countries are still printed in English. Multilingual media are dominated by television (for example the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) in Australia and the Hispanic Broadcasting Corporation (HBC) in the U.S.) and newspapers, both imported and locally printed, rather than by magazines.

<sup>65</sup> All three editions of *VOGUE* are atypical; not one single advertisement for food appears in any of the two years' worth of editions considered for this study. This may be due to the uneasy relationship the magazine has with food, discussed in Chapter Two.

Australians are more receptive to technology advertisements in consumer magazines than their French and American counterparts: in Australia they occupied fifth place with communications and business equipment in sixth place. In the United States a curious situation exists whereby computer advertising is almost exclusively confined to business-to-business magazines (as opposed to consumer magazines), but in that category all of the top ten advertisers in terms of dollar expenditure are computer and information technology manufacturers. While telecommunications advertising is a strong feature of French magazines, expenditure on advertising for information technology and computer products is minimal, and virtually absent from both consumer and business-to-business magazines.

Interestingly, while advertising expenditure across different product categories differs greatly, actual per household expenditure patterns across the different categories remain relatively constant. In each country, between 5.3% and 5.8% of household income is spent on clothing and footwear, between 16.8% and 18.7% on food, with the exception of the United States where the figure is slightly lower at 14%. France might be expected to have a higher household expenditure on food than other countries, if the stereotypical image of the gastronomic French were to be borne out. However, it may be that within these categories the advertising space is purchased predominantly by stakeholders who are seeking to increase market share, rather than to grow what is perceived as a finite market. The lack of correlation between advertising expenditure and actual household expenditure does not equate to the ineffectiveness of the advertising. Studies clearly show that advertising does change buying habits *within* consumer and product categories. In short, customers may not be buying more food in France, but they may be buying greater quantities of French food as a result of the concentration of magazine advertising expenditure within French grocery retailers and food manufacturers.

The primary differences are in areas that do not feature highly in terms of advertising expenditure. Households in Australia spend around 14% of their income on housing, whereas those in the US and France spend just over 18%. This is consistent with a strong focus in Australia on advertising for the building and construction industry and the focus on home ownership, which means that the average Australian family has a mortgage and eventually owns their home, rather than spending money on rental. It is more difficult to explain the figures for the United States, where home ownership levels are lower than in Australia, but still significantly higher than in Continental Europe, including France. It may be that the disparity in wealth distribution between those who can afford to purchase housing and those who cannot is greater in the United States than in Australia, leading to higher spending on rental properties to meet the shortfall in owner-occupied housing. Within the home, consumer durables and furniture account for 6-7% of all household spending in the Anglophone countries and less than 1% in France. These figures are partly consistent with the argument that home owners are more likely to spend money on creature comforts than tenants, who may be forced to relocate at short notice. We have seen that the French are more inclined to spend money on

books and magazines than are their Anglophone cousins, so this different allocation of spending priorities may provide part of the reason as to why they spend relatively little on consumer durables. It may also go some way to explaining the absence of computer advertising in France. After all, if households are spending less than 1% of their income on all consumer durables and furniture, they are unlikely to have large sums to spend on computer products.

When considering individual advertisers' share of advertising expenditure, it is important to bear in mind the legal restrictions placed on advertising in each country. In the United States there are no restrictions on magazine advertising and thus it is unsurprising that the third biggest advertiser in dollar terms in 1998 was the tobacco company Phillip Morris. Of the top ten advertisers, four were motor vehicle manufacturers, two were consumer and household product manufacturers (Procter & Gamble and Unilever) and two entertainment producers (Sony, Time Warner). In France, the advertising of tobacco and tobacco products is banned under European Union law, and the advertising of alcohol, firearms and prescription medications is restricted by domestic French law. In France, in 1998 two of the top ten advertising spenders were supermarket chains (Carrefour, E Leclerc) and one was a food manufacturer (Nestlé), which is consistent with the greater importance placed on food and beverage advertising in that country. Three of the top ten advertisers were motor vehicle manufacturers, two of these were French companies (Renault, Peugeot). Two cosmetics and toiletries companies featured in the French top ten (L'Oréal, Lancôme) and two telecommunications companies, which probably reflects the recent deregulation the French telecommunications sector. Interestingly, of the top ten advertising spenders in France, eight are French companies, with the two foreign companies (Volkswagen, Nestlé) European-owned. This is consistent with the impression given by the content of French magazines, which tend to promote French goods and services over foreign equivalents. *VOGUE Paris* is, however, not typical of French magazines: the magazine features large numbers of foreign companies ranging from De Beers diamonds from South Africa to Prada accessories from Italy to English Burberry mackintoshes and Tommy Hilfiger sportswear and fragrance, with "the all-American style" emblazoned across the advertisements. In the case of Burberry or Hilfiger the text, of course, is in English. Unusually, around 40% of the advertising in *VOGUE Paris* is of foreign origin, that is, the copy and photographs as well as the product (Nicolas 1989:75).

In Australia, tobacco advertising is banned in the print media. Both State and Commonwealth legislation tightly regulate the advertising of alcohol, firearms, prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications. Given the propensity of the editorial in Australian editions of syndicated magazine titles to be highly parochial (frequently featuring stories of Australians who have found success abroad, or focusing on Australian fashions, musicians, artists and performers), it is perhaps surprising that the top ten magazine advertisers in Australia comprise more foreign companies than in France. Of those which are nominally

Australian, seven are Australian or Australasian subsidiaries of multinational corporations: Nestlé, Cable & Wireless Optus, Mitsubishi, Toyota, L'Oréal, Unifoods and Procter & Gamble. The only two Australian companies in the top ten are both telecommunications companies, and the remaining advertiser, Franklin Mint, is a wholly American-owned company. Its presence in the top ten reflects the more American style of Australian magazines as a direct-marketing vehicle. Franklin Mint, which manufactures limited edition porcelain and glass collectibles, depends almost entirely on magazines for its publicity: 99% of its advertising budget is spent on magazine advertising (MPA (Australia) 1999: 22). Its advertisements most commonly take the form of a picture of the item being promoted, along with a mail-order form to be returned for purchase of the goods.

There are substantial differences between the countries as far as advertising content is concerned, less so editorial material. Sharing of material between international editions of the same magazine seems to be standard practice. Barrell and Braithwaite write that increasingly there is a "vogue for global publishing" [no pun intended], which "Condé Nast have polished ... to a fine art" (1988:150). They argue that the global publishing trend really exploded with *Cosmopolitan*:

the Helen Gurley Brown [original American editor] formula born in 1964 was seen as eminently exportable. When the British version proved so sensationally successful they [Hearst publications] swiftly followed up by selling the license in South America, Japan, The Netherlands, France, Italy, Germany, Australia, South Africa, Greece and Hong Kong. (150).

Rather than selling the licenses, Condé Nast have taken the path of establishing satellite companies in each of the countries where magazines are published under the *VOGUE* or *House & Garden* brandname. While *VOGUE Australia* may appear parochial in the extent to which its editorial focuses on 'home-grown talent', much of its content is seamlessly inserted from the American parent edition. Similar, if not identical, stories and photographs appear in both editions, particularly feature articles. Numerous articles have appeared in the two editions, only months apart. These have included "How to buy your own diamond", "How thin is too thin and are fashion magazines to blame?", "Coping with bad hair days" and tribute articles following the deaths of Gianni Versace and Princess Diana. Fashion spreads are most often locally produced (partly, no doubt, in response to the inversion of seasons in the southern hemisphere) and often feature local designers.

*VOGUE Paris* was launched in 1921 as a typically French creation, but has been increasingly Americanised during its lifetime. Nonetheless, it is still perceived elsewhere as very French. Nicolas writes that while publications such as *VOGUE* and *Harper's Bazaar*

are editions of existing American titles, they are not reproductions of them (with the exception of *Cosmopolitan* when it first started in 1973). These publications have editorial independence, a different content, and are considered outside France as being typically French. They export well (around 50% of the circulation of *VOGUE* and *Harper's Bazaar*) whether this be within Europe, Japan, or even the United States. (1989:76).

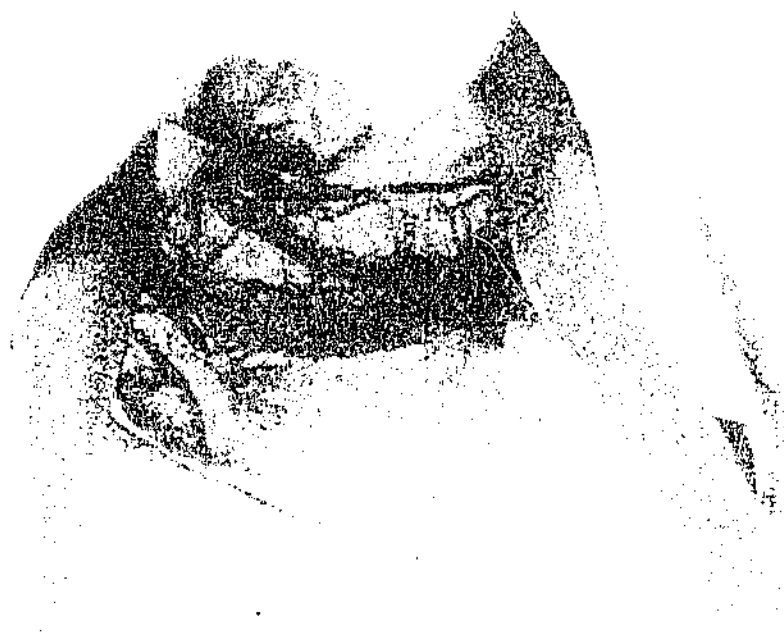


Nicolas notes that, although *VOGUE Paris* is perceived outside France as chic, classy and Parisian, a virtual "shop-window for French *haute couture* and ready-to-wear fashion" (80), all French magazines have undergone an Americanisation since the beginning of the 1980s. She sees this as particularly evident in the area of health and fitness. Along with several specifically health-oriented magazines launched by French and American publishers in the early 1980s (*Santé* and *Vital*, for example), there was a more generalised trend in all French women's magazines to incorporate the American enthusiasm for body maintenance. She writes that: "After having won over millions of participants in the United States, power-walking, jogging, aerobics, body-building and stretching became popular in France, notably through these new publications" (73). The incorporation of current affairs and news reporting in women's magazines, the reworking of covers so that they more closely resembled the busy, glossy American magazine covers and the increased focus on how to spend leisure time were all further changes inspired by the American magazine press. Certainly *VOGUE Paris* has incorporated most of these aspects and now covers much of the same territory as its Anglophone counterparts. Fewer than three percent of journalists working in France are foreign (Nicolas 1989:73), but the editor of *VOGUE Paris*, American Joan Juliet Buck, is one of them. This fact alone explains some of the rapid absorption of American ideas into the magazine. However, it has also retained some unique, and essentially French aspects, such as the philosophy section, which has been discussed elsewhere. The area in which it is perhaps most distinctive is that of layout and visual design and its representations of female sexuality, which will be discussed in depth in the chapters which follow.

In essence, while some aspects of magazines remain unique to domestic markets, the hungry dragon driving the magazine publishing industry also seems to have massive global reach. The industry is dominated by American publishers and titles, who are market-leaders, setting the tone and standard for other titles and this is certainly the case where the various editions of *VOGUE* are concerned. Thus the reach of the messages contained in these magazines extends far beyond domestic frontiers. I have shown that advertisers are confident that their investment in magazines reaps rewards and that independent quantitative studies confirm them to be correct. With so much shared advertising and editorial among the premium brands of magazines like *VOGUE*, the messages communicated in the magazine are globally consistent and reach a great many women. It is naïve in the extreme, then, to assume that there is no preferred reading position for a magazine such as *VOGUE*. The powerful, wealthy and international interests that drive its publication have a vested commercial interest in creating certain reading formations where text and reader interact. The evidence suggests that, at least some of the time, they are successful in imposing this.

chapter four

# Just looking?



throat, buttocks, for example – completely divorced from their context as parts of a whole person. These fragments of woman are the focus of excessive attention as they are appropriated as fetishistic substitutes for the lack (of a phallus) that is the defining feature of woman. Juliet Flower MacCannell contends that:

'Woman' as generality is only seen in pieces (in part-objects, in the 'trash can' of overvalued zones of her body – breast, elbow, ankle, smile): any part that can be 'phallicised' or made up as a single part, into a metaphor for wholeness that woman lacks (1986:108).

Diana Fuss concurs, and in her investigation of fashion photography she highlights the extent to which "the camera presents to the viewer the fantasy not of a body without organs but a body without a subject" (1992:718). Fuss highlights in particular the tendency of fashion photographs to feature decapitated and headless torsos, torsos without arms and legs, and heads without torsos suspended in space, arguing that these implicitly violent images are a constant re-enactment of, in Lacanian terms, the crisis of the female subject over the extent to which she has been able to actualise and inhabit her subjectivity. Woman constructed as a body divested of all subjectivity is a reminder of the need to ceaselessly try to fashion herself from the "corporeal and psychical jigsaw puzzle" to "make a total picture, an imago"<sup>71</sup> of her own body" (op.cit.:718). Thus woman's anxiety over the legitimacy and efficacy of the moment when she believed herself to have assumed her subjectivity is reinforced. Mary Kelly describes the body as subsequently "decentred, radically split, positioned – not simply my body, but his body, her body" (1996:123). This destabilised body is easily viewed by the male spectator as a passive sexual object available for ready consumption. Kelly describes this as a "dangerous and circuitous logic" (op.cit:122), arguing that:

In the matter of women . . . desire is embodied in the image which is equated with the woman who is reduced to the body which in turn is seen as the site of sexuality and the locus of desire . . . a familiar elision. (ibid.)

Kelly has also observed that male fetishism is rooted in a system whereby the male spectator is constantly reassured of his primacy by images of women that convey the need for the phallus, either through the representation of a phallic substitute or by the shape or pose assumed by the woman. Fetishism is an issue I will take up in greater detail in Chapter Six. At this juncture, I wish to focus briefly on the question of desire. Desire for the female on screen or, as Mary Ann Doane has put it, "the woman as screen" (1999:133) is seen as a governing force in structuring spectatorial relationships to narrative cinema. The spectator is thus located as other than the desired object, hence male, and the entire representational system is built around servicing his desire. Doane summarises the dominant critical positions apropos of the cinematic spectator as anchored in a notion of spectatorial desire that is

<sup>71</sup> The term "imago" is originally Jacques Lacan's, from his discussion of the child's development through its recognition of its own specular image during the mirror phase. See Lacan, J. (1971a) *Écrits* / or, for an English translation, (1977a) *Écrits. A Selection*.

"generally delineated as either voyeurism or fetishism, as precisely a pleasure in seeing what is prohibited in relation to the female body" (1999:133). This critical tradition centres on the male spectator looking at and desiring the female object of his gaze in such a way as to reduce her being to a body, and by extension, a body which can, even if only in his fantasies, be possessed and used by him.

The very obvious flaw in this approach, and one that has generated considerable debate, is that it fails to take account of the undeniable fact of the female spectator. Each of these theorists has, in her own way, sought to come to terms with the female spectator and to understand how she might interact with these texts which so clearly display women as sexual objects. These accounts of female spectatorship have been contentious and have, in many cases, simply reinforced the dominant position of the male spectator and shown only how female spectators might temporarily inhabit his position. As Christine Gledhill suggests:

while these arguments have attracted feminists for their power to explain the alternative misogyny and idealization [sic] of cinema's female representations, they offer largely negative accounts of female spectatorship, suggesting colonized [sic], alienated or masochistic positions of identification (1999:168).

Mulvey revisited her earlier analysis to address the question of 'the woman in the audience' (1979:29) and came to the conclusion that women have two possibilities for finding pleasure in a film: either the masochistic-narcissistic pleasure of identification with the female object of the male gaze: or a sort of spectatorial transvestism, in which women assume a masculine persona in order to identify with a male protagonist. This is clearly the type of "colonised, alienated" position to which Gledhill alludes.

Silvia Kolbowski (1990) highlights the inherent contradiction in such a position, in which the inherently active practice of looking is cast as passive due to the gender of the spectator. In her discussion of fashion photography, she contests the traditional position of the female spectator as "a passive, masochistic statistic who attains that status through an identification with images of fashion models in the service of a market construct, through the lures of photographic codes" (1990:140). Following Luce Irigaray's (1974 1985) reading of Freud's *Femininity* (1933 1964 SE Vol XXII *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* No. XXXIII: *Femininity*: 112-135),<sup>72</sup> Kolbowski contends that identification need not be a singular, cohesive, one-way practice: rather, it is possible to understand identification as multi-faceted. The reality of identificatory experience, she argues, is that the subject never identifies exclusively with one of the identities available in a scenario. In Freud's (op.cit.) example of a young girl playing with dolls, he assumes that the girl identifies with the behavioural patterns demonstrated by the mother. Irigaray has suggested that this is not necessarily the case, that

<sup>72</sup> For the sake of clarity and consistency, all references to Freud give the year of first publication in italics, followed by the year of publication of the particular volume of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (as cited in the bibliography) in which they appear, followed by the abbreviation SE (the standard abbreviation for this work), followed by Volume number, name (if any) and page references.

the girl identifies with all or any of the positions of the dolls, the mother or herself. She writes that "a game – even of dolls – is never simply active or passive, but rather frustrates that opposition by the economy of repetition that it puts 'into play' " (1974 1985:77). Thus, Kolbowski argues that there must exist other possibilities for identification and reading of images of women, and asks "whether there is something in the nondichotomous structure of identification that exceeds the parameters of masochism in relation to fashion images" (1990:143).

Kolbowski recommends Doane's (1999) approach to the problems posed by Mulvey's transvestite theory, which develops a theory of female spectatorship as masquerade. Doane suggests that women as spectators are traditionally unable to look at images of women because of the patriarchal "production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself"(138). A lack of distance between the image of the woman and the body of the woman spectator also informs Mulvey's account. Doane argues that Mulvey suggests a woman needs to become a man "in order to attain the necessary distance from the image"(139) to be able to look at it. Doane contends, rather, that in producing "an excess of femininity"(139) a woman acknowledges explicitly the fact that femininity is a persona that can be assumed as readily as masculinity by the female spectator. In showing femininity to be a mask, the female spectator is able to create the "necessary distance from the image" to look at it. Doane argues that each instance of the masquerade permits subversion of

the predominantly masculine structure of the look. By destabilising the image, the masquerade confounds this masculine structure . . . It effects a defamiliarisation of female iconography (139).

Kolbowski also addresses the question of the "necessary distance from the image" and follows Doane in suggesting that "identificatory entry" into an image is achieved through an invocation of masquerade and fantasy. She argues (1990:147) that:

It is perhaps fashion photography's status as a still image, its arrest of narrative, that makes it possible to theorize [sic] a gaze that achieves distance through access to masquerade and fantasy.

In so doing, Kolbowski demonstrates that photography, and in particular fashion photography, is a medium even more suited to the theorisation of spectatorship as masquerade than cinema (Doane's original focus). Christian Metz (1990) has also discussed the peculiar ability of a photograph to freeze a moment in time, thus cutting off everything outside the frame and suspending the image in a timeless, spaceless vacuum. Photographs, then, can be understood as invitations to play with the possibilities of "identificatory entry", offered within what Metz calls the "in-frame", divorced from the narratives of that which exists outside it.

Such an observation begs the question: why do women want to play with the possibilities for "identificatory entry" offered by a magazine such as *VOGUE*? Fuss (1992) makes the point that the images found in women's magazines are often very sexual and provocative, yet its target spectators are female. One might reasonably look at the covers of

these magazines and assume them to be 'skin mags', directed at a heterosexual male audience, "were it not for the teasers running down the side telling us that the image of this woman is intended to function for its female audience not as an object of desire but rather as a point of identification" (1992:713). Here Fuss builds on Mulvey's theory of narcissistic identification, suggesting that fashion photography invites "its female viewers to consume the product by (over)identifying with the image" (ibid). She is thus able to identify the female spectator as the intended, rather than incidental, viewer of these images and to contend that narcissistic (over)identification is the primary response solicited from their viewers. In so doing, she locates the female spectator in the same active role occupied by the male spectator in Mulvey's account. In Fuss's account, the female spectator is not passive in her identification with the image, in the way Mulvey suggests she must be: rather, she is an active consumer of images of the female body. With this manoeuvre, Fuss begins to resolve the tension of the active/passive spectatorial dichotomy highlighted by Kolbowski.

The fact that this phenomenon of woman as an active consumer of images of femininity is in itself remarkable does not escape her attention. She notes that "the entire fashion industry operates as one of the few institutionalised spaces where women can look at other women with cultural impunity" (1992:713). However, according to Fuss, this permission for women to view eroticised images of the female body is in direct tension with what she sees as the magazine industry's " 'concealed' ideological project . . . to fashion female viewers into properly heterosexualized [sic] women" (ibid). She demonstrates that fashion photography encourages a homoerotic gaze, is comprised of serial displays of the female subject posed, lit and arranged in such a way as to "rehearse repetitiously the introjection of the (m)other's imago" (ibid). The obsessive re-enactment of the earliest moments of the female subject's self-awareness through these images provides for a primary identification with and consumption of the (m)other, thus creating a problematic duality of identification with and desire for the other in the images. Fuss resolves this duality by deconstructing it and positing a third viewing possibility, which she describes as a kind of lesbian spectatorial vampirism. Vampirism, she suggests, provides an alternative to scopophilic and narcissistic viewing positions by permitting "a having through becoming . . . becoming the other by feeding off the other" (1992:730). She argues that the desire to be 'like', or the same as, does not exclude the desire to possess, and that her model of vampirism shows how readers of fashion photography desire to be like to such an extent that they resort to a violent possession of the female subject. Fuss positions herself in direct opposition to the traditional psychoanalytical position held by Freud and by scholars such as Lacan and Kristeva, who contend that desire and identification are mutually interdependent but counterdirectional.

Fuss's argument has been criticised by orthodox Freudian scholars as untenable because it is impossible to discuss the importance of identification as a "mechanism of cultural self-fashioning" at the same time as admitting that it is one of the least understood (Rothenberg &



Valente 1996:177), because one cannot assert the importance of something of which one is largely ignorant. In addition, Rothenberg and Valente object to her radical proposition of constructing homosexuality and homospectatorial viewing as the normal viewing position from which heterosexual women deviate. Fuss does indeed suggest that homospectatorial viewing is the norm and that in order to make sense of the images of fashion photography, heterosexual women must return to their essential homosexual nature through the homo-identification with the (m)other.<sup>73</sup> In her own words, "to look straight at women, straight women must look as lesbians" (1992:714). She anchors this argument in Kristeva's (1982:63) proposition that there is a fundamental female homosexuality in the pre-Oedipal phase, evident in the identification of the daughter with the mother. When the female child sees the mother's face, she sees her first mirror image and, in doing so, the (m)other is effaced, becoming a lost object. Fashion photography, particularly close-ups of women's faces, thus attempts to retrieve the lost object of the mother/her face. Fuss consequently argues that identification with female objects in fashion photographs is not "an Imaginary effect of primary narcissism but rather a Symbolic defense [sic] against it" (1992:727).

Fuss has said that her original aim was to "attempt to account psychoanalytically for the enduring fascination that commercial fashion photography holds for its female viewers" (1992:716). Rothenberg and Valente (1996:377) suggest that:

As Fuss sees it, fashion photography both produces homoeroticism, by encoding certain images that solicit women's homoerotic cathexes, and transmutes those cathexes into heterosexual object-choices, by actuating a mysterious process of 'homopathic' identification.

As I see it, Fuss is suggesting a twofold effect for fashion photography: a homoerotic desire to possess the female object, and a heteroerotic desire to become her, in order to be desired by men. In addition, she admits the possibility of narcissistic identification with the image, a question to which I shall return shortly. This twofold position is perhaps not as radical as it first appears, for while it does assume that the dominant viewing position is intended to be homoerotic, it is difficult to see how, in the resultant look, this is markedly different from the suggestion that women simply inhabit the male gaze in order to look at women, and that the male gaze is one which inherently eroticises the viewed (female) object (cf. Mulvey 1979). While the derivation of both positions is different, the outcome is the same: women look at women as erotic objects. It is dangerous to assume (as I believe Fuss does) that when women look from a homospectatorial position, they do not objectify women in the same manner as they do when they assume a transvestite spectatorial position and look as men. This assumption relies on a belief in the inherently female look, unmediated by the male gaze, shaped by an elusive femininity which, it is suggested, would exist outside of the chains of

<sup>73</sup> For a critique of this position as problematic for its essentialism, see Rothenberg & Valente 1996:376-378. For her own discussion of the inherent implication of essentialist argument in a constructivist critical position, see Fuss 1996:384-385.

*Women continue to buy and enjoy fashion magazines although they know about the falsity, exploitation and stereotyping of advertising and fashion features.*

Jennifer Craik (1994:9) *The Face of Fashion*.

Why do women read *VOGUE* and other magazines like it? In particular, why do the women who do read *VOGUE* – predominantly affluent, middle-class, professional women with a tertiary education – choose to do so? The orthodox Marxist feminist line once so prevalent in cultural studies analysis (Ferguson 1983; McRobbie 1978, 1991; Modleski 1982; Myers 1982; Radway 1984; Winship 1987) states that a lack of resistance to cultural hegemony is a result of the construction of a false consciousness. Such an approach assumes that women read magazines because they do not understand the ways in which the magazines are manipulating them. Yet many of these readers are at least as educated as the academic commentators who assume them to be the passive victims of magazine ideology. Traditional feminist analyses are unable to account for the phenomenon of educated women choosing to do things that feminism 'knows' are bad for them. Two criticisms are levelled at educated women readers. First, it is assumed that they should 'know better' than to be duped by the promises of salvation and happiness peddled by *VOGUE*, and that in not resisting the lures of the magazine they are betraying the imagined sisterhood. Second, it is also assumed they are oblivious to the harm these magazines allegedly inflict, despite attestations from these women that they enjoy reading magazines. As Kathy Davis puts it, in such a context, the woman reader's "utterances would have to be heard as signs of ideological mystification: she is 'kidding herself', labouring under the erroneous belief that such an act will give her control over her life" (1991:21-22). However, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, professional, educated women comprise the bulk of *VOGUE*'s readership and they are unlikely to be buying the magazine without some conscious knowledge of the kinds of ideologies it advocates. For feminism to be unable to come to terms with the interaction between women's magazines and the majority of their readers is problematic. How can feminism do justice to these women's experiences of engagement with women's magazines without casting them as either traitors to the cause, or cultural dupes, or both? This chapter, and those which follow, will explore this question in greater detail. It will, as Davis urges it must, "take the ambiguous, contradictory, everyday social practices of women as its starting point" (op.cit: 33).

Much of Marxist feminist analysis has assumed that academic commentators are in possession of a set of critical skills which magazine readers are not, thus placing scholars in the privileged position of being able to understand women's magazines better than their actual readers. However, this presumption is exposed as flawed when it is revealed that a large portion of magazine readers have a similar level of education to those academic commentators, thus equipping them with a similar critical skill-set. Furthermore, analyses based on an assumption of false consciousness of the reader are more generally flawed for

the extent to which they are overly deterministic of magazine readers and their responses to magazines. In Chapter One I developed a more dynamic and sophisticated model of text-reader interaction, showing that texts are not simply ideologically encoded monoliths awaiting decoding by academic commentators and consumed without reflection by their other readers. In that chapter I also demonstrated that a variety of reading positions are negotiated in a complex struggle for power between the reader and the text.

Some authors (Hermes 1995, Lumby 1997) have suggested that women read magazines ironically, consciously subverting the dominant reading positions offered by the text and reappropriating them as part of camp or sub-cultural readings. McRobbie (1999a) also contends that women read magazines ironically, although her focus is on the layout, on the one hand, and the messages about femininity, on the other. She suggests that women's magazines deliberately appropriate the stylistic conventions of the tabloid press: wildly unbelievable stories, headlines designed to shock and scandalise, caricatures of activities and personalities. In so doing, she argues, the magazines intend readers to engage with them ironically and legitimise participation in things that might otherwise be considered too stereotypically feminine to be acceptable to readers. In many ways, she is suggesting a very sophisticated, self-conscious version of the camp readings that Hermes discusses. McRobbie argues that:

This new form of ironic femininity allows readers to participate in all the conventional and stereotypical rituals of femininity without finding themselves trapped into traditional gender-subordinate positions. Irony gives them some room to move. (1999a: 53).

Doubtless, there are some readers of *VOGUE* who fall into this category – and at times I must honestly include myself here. It is true that sometimes what the magazine promotes is so silly that, as a reader, one assumes it to be deliberately sending itself up. It is also true that there is a certain pleasure to be gained in reading against the grain and in peeling back the layers of meaning to reveal the blatantly heterosexist, white, capitalist ideological messages contained in the text. However, I cannot accept that the majority of *VOGUE*'s readers are drawn to the magazine for potentially fruitful ironic readings. I contend quite simply that readers are drawn to *VOGUE* because they find reading it to be a pleasurable experience and that the pleasure they obtain from reading it is not necessarily anchored in anything as sophisticated as what Hermes, Lumby and McRobbie suggest. The nature of this pleasure is complex and challenging and in this chapter I will explore several of its facets including the roles of fantasy and narcissism in making the act of making meaning a pleasurable one. In Chapters Five and Six, I will extend the discussion to ask some difficult and confronting questions about the possibility that women find pleasure in *VOGUE* precisely because they take pleasure in the literal, rather than the ironic, readings of the "conventional and stereotypical rituals of femininity" (McRobbie 1999a:op. cit.) it presents. In so doing, I will demonstrate that, while texts have some success in imposing an agenda, as Chapters Two and Three have shown, women are also able to engage with texts in a variety of highly pleasurable ways.

Of course, women also read *VOGUE* in ways unlike those I describe. My readings are simply possible "productive activations" (Bennett op.cit.) of the potential reading formations offered by the text. A variety of other possible "productive activations" also exist, but it is outside the scope of this thesis (indeed, of any work) to examine *all* of them. I seek to broaden the discussion about these possible "productive activations" beyond the readings offered thus far by 'concerned' feminists. The discussion of "productive activations" will thus be opened up to include activations productive to individual women, but potentially unproductive for feminism as a whole. Through these readings I hope to show that some women read *VOGUE* for pleasure, fully aware of its negative aspects: either unconcerned or, more challenging still, attracted by them.

Some feminists seem to find distasteful the idea that women – especially thinking, intelligent, independent women – choose wilfully and voluntarily to engage in practices that could be seen as counterproductive to the feminist project.<sup>66</sup> In other words, that women will knowingly do things which are not 'good' for them. Reading, and taking pleasure in, magazines that present images of women mediated by commercial interests are just such a practices. Yet women do read *VOGUE* for pleasure. Rather than censuring them outright for doing so, I seek to understand in what they derive pleasure from their interaction with *VOGUE*. Linda Williams (1994b) asks similar questions of an exhibition of sexually explicit photographs of men taken by women photographers, wondering precisely what it is that women find pleasurable about looking at them. As she suggests (1994b:11), and as I shall demonstrate, some of that pleasure seems to stem from the very fact that certain publications — images of naked men, *VOGUE* — have come to occupy the status of a 'forbidden fruit' for the thinking woman: to be consumed guiltily, in secret, and in the knowledge that she is doing something that is not 'good' for her. Like Williams, I take issue with the idea that there can or should be a collective feminist notion of what is 'good' for women and with the assumption that there is something wrong with women engaging in behaviours that may be perceived as politically disadvantageous by other women.

Magazine images of women have long been the subject of Anglophone feminist debate. Since Betty Friedan (1963) put women's magazines on the feminist agenda, they have been scrutinised by feminist scholars, who have done invaluable work in exposing the role they traditionally played in the (re)construction of an inert notion of femininity as domestic, and dependent on masculine love and attention for happiness.<sup>67</sup> Inert, because while magazines moved with the times and incorporated the messages of sexual and reproductive freedom of the 1960s and 1970s, most notably after the launch of *Cosmopolitan* in the United

<sup>66</sup> Perhaps the most extreme example of this distaste can be found in the approaches of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon (1997) and Susanne Kappeler (1986, 1995) towards women who wilfully consume pornography. Dworkin, in (1981) *Pornography: Men possessing women* suggests that women who choose to view pornography are guilty of collaboration with their patriarchal oppressors and, by extension, of committing acts of violence against women.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Ballaster (1991), Beetham (1996), Ferguson (1983), King (1977), McCracken (1993) McRobbie (1978, 1991), Tuchman (1978), White (1970), Winship (1980, 1987).

States in 1971, the basic premise of the magazines remained the same.<sup>68</sup> The point of a woman's existence was still to be feminine, and femininity still entailed a successful home and domestic life (to which external employment may have been added) and the ability to attract and keep a man. As such, the house was essentially the same, even if the furniture and wallpaper had been updated.

In addition, a variety of feminists, from Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* (1970) onwards, raised questions about the representations of the female body in women's magazines.<sup>69</sup> Women were being bombarded with 'unrealistic' images of the female body and of femininity, images the average woman could not emulate. As Bordo (1993) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994a) have demonstrated, woman's principal currency for exchange has long been held to be her body, in contrast to the masculine currency of intellect. Glossy images of slim, beautiful women serve to reinforce the idea that women's primary, possibly only, exchange value in a consumer society is their physical appearance. Several women writers published books on the subject that rapidly popularised the issue, largely because they were read and circulated more widely outside the academy than within, notably Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1984) and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991). This politicisation of women's bodies and, more particularly, images of women's bodies meant that the question of media representations of women became a permanent feature of the women's movement in the English-speaking world<sup>70</sup>.

Much of the criticism of women's magazines has centred on two main issues. The first is that they 'objectify' women, which is a reinforcement of the idea that the sum total of a woman's value is her body. The second is that the images they present of women are not 'realistic' and that they consequently contribute to what Kim Chernin (1981) has called 'the tyranny of slenderness'. In the first part of this Chapter I will examine in detail both these problems. An initial examination of the highly complex political web surrounding the act of looking at women's bodies will be followed by an investigation of the 'unrealistic' images of these bodies presented by women's magazines and the equally problematic call by some feminists for them to be substituted with the 'real' bodies of 'real' women.

### Looked-at and looking

"The act of looking", writes feminist photographer Grace Lau "is loaded – with power, with desire, with guilt and with hope – and takes place within a complex and dynamic web of social rules and behaviour" (1993: 193). Looking, and most especially looking at images of women,

<sup>68</sup> For a detailed discussion of the extent to which the content of women's magazines changed as a reaction to the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, see Barrell and Braithwaite (1988), McCracken (1993), and Friedan (1991).

<sup>69</sup> Chapter Seven contains a detailed discussion of the basis and evolution of a feminist politics of the body beautiful.

<sup>70</sup> I do not wish to suggest that there were not similar movements in other countries. Rather, as a prelude to Chapter Seven, I wish to remind the reader that this trend was not universally present in all international feminist movements.

is a practice fraught with political implications. An image of a woman is far more than a face or a body on a page. It is a statement about real and imagined femininities: about what it is, or what someone else deems it should be, to be a woman. To look at a woman's body is, as Lau suggests, to participate in a power dynamic, a sensual exchange and a moral dilemma. Whether admiring or abhorring the image, how does my looking at it contribute to the constant (re)construction of a normative femininity? This chapter will endeavour to explore the competing tensions present in the act of looking. In order to understand what attracts readers to *VOGUE*, we must come to terms with what it is to be attracted to images of women. *VOGUE* is a text comprised primarily of images of women: indeed, it could be read as a catalogue of contemporary images of femininity. What are the political consequences of engagement with this catalogue? If women can look at images of women in ways that are not harmful to women, is it possible for them to do so through a text whose images of women are produced by commercial interests and largely by male photographers? To answer this question, I shall examine some feminist positions on looking in general, before moving to a discussion of the particular situation of women looking at women.

From whence the power of the look? A variety of theoretical positions have sought to elucidate the critical role of the look in the feminist project. What spectators see when they look at images of women is held to be crucial to shaping their whole sense of what it is to be a woman. Williams (1990) suggests that the prevalence of adherence to Foucault's theory that sexualities, and by extension genders, are socially constructed (1978:177) has led to an increased focus on the tools used to construct them. Images of women – in her particular study, hard-core pornographic images – are seen as tools of the patriarchy in promoting, and in so doing constructing as 'normal' or 'desirable', particular notions of femininity. Feminists attack these images because they degrade and debase women and because they promote the idea that women enjoy coercive and violent sexual encounters. In turn, women are encouraged to believe that they should enjoy these practices. Williams's excellent analysis reveals a major flaw in this line of reasoning: notably, the equally normative construction of feminine sexuality as passive, generous and non-violent. Furthermore, she demonstrates that one of the primary reasons for the level of debate surrounding pornography is that it is a genre designed to arouse in spectators a physical reaction, which locates it within a spectrum of genres that do likewise – 'weepie' and horror films, for example. Beyond the messages it sends about femininity and sexual pleasure, pornography is also perceived as objectionable because it seeks to excite readers and viewers. In so doing, it renders woman the (presumably passive) object of (presumably male) excitement. I shall return later in this chapter to the myth that there exists beyond patriarchal constructions some 'pure' form of the feminine. Presently, I wish to focus on the feminist critique of the 'objectification' of woman.

While women's magazines do not explicitly seek to generate a primary physical reaction such as a quickening of the heart rate in response to fear, or sexual arousal in

response to sexual imagery, they do seek to generate a secondary physical and mercantile reaction (purchasing) as a response to the emotional reaction (guilt/inadequacy/hope of personal betterment) which is their primary target. In the images found in magazines, women function primarily as objects of desire, and as accessories to objects of desire (the merchandise they display). The familiar feminist response to such images is one of condemnation on the grounds that they reduce women to sexual objects. Objectification is not seen as inherently problematic. Rather, it becomes so when understood as part of the complex power relations in which it is embedded (Lau 1993:193). To objectify, one must look, and looking, as Lau argues, is a practice that has historically belonged to men.

The fact that looking has historically been a masculine domain has informed much feminist discussion of women as sexual objects for male spectators. A great deal of this theoretical framework has arisen in the field of cinema studies and subsequently been applied to other visual media. Laura Mulvey's (1976) polemic approaches the problem via the unconscious, seeking to expose the ways in which the unconscious "structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking" (15). Mulvey's seminal article critiques narrative cinema within a psychoanalytic framework, to demonstrate the ways in which it operates as a phallogentric representation system. She defines the spectator as male and woman as the passive object of an active male gaze. The male spectator is seen to derive two distinct types of pleasure from actively looking at women as objects: scopophilia and narcissistic identification. Mulvey (1976:17) usefully summarises the essence of each type of pleasure:

The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as the object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen.

In each of these cases, Mulvey sees the gaze as an oppressive, phallogentric force because it is a male force, being used against a woman. Scopophilia is essentially about gratification through visual stimulation. Here, the woman on screen is a source of sexual pleasure for the male spectator as he is aroused by the images of her fragmented, compartmentalised body objects. In the case of narcissistic identification, the male spectator is seen to identify with the male protagonist on screen, who has access to the flesh of the woman. Thus, in imagining himself in the role of seducer, rescuer or even stalker, the male spectator is aroused by the image he creates of himself as part of the narrative surrounding the woman and his own imagined centrality to her existence.

The uptake of Mulvey's argument was so widespread in feminist film studies as to have rendered the text canonical. Feminist critics in a variety of disciplines involving analysis of the visual seized upon her case that for women to be represented as passive objects of the male gaze, providing pleasure in their capacity as sexual objects, was indeed oppressive. Mulvey usefully highlighted the extent to which cinematic conventions such as the close-up permitted a fetishistic focus on fragmented images of female body parts – breasts, legs,



patriarchy if only women were able to break them. This is a belief I strenuously reject, and to which I shall return shortly.

#### Trying her on for size.

In a subsequent discussion, Fuss confines herself to what is, for my purposes, a more interesting question: that of identification as a means of self-definition. She asks: "how is it that it is only through the other that I can be myself, only in the place of the other that I can arrive at a sense of self?" (1996:388). *VOGUE* is a text that offers readers the seductive promise of a variety of 'others' to try on in order to 'arrive at a sense of self'. While Fuss considers the erotic appeal of female objects in fashion photographs, both as objects women viewers desire, and as objects women viewers desire to be, she does not consider the broader question of why women want to view images of women so completely other as the women in magazines such as *VOGUE*. After all, if it were simply about erotic images of women, would not women simply read the 'skin mags' that Fuss says fashion magazines resemble?

Although the underlying discourse of *VOGUE* is, as I have shown, heterosexual, it does not generally promote the purpose of self-beautification as being to attract male attention,<sup>74</sup> as is very obviously the case for its competitors in the mid-range monthlies category such as *Cleo*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie-Claire* and *Elle*. If women identify with the female objects in the photographs in *VOGUE*, it is not only because they want to become these female objects in order to be desired by men. The processes of identification at work in reading *VOGUE* are more complex. With what do women identify as they look at hundreds of pages of images of other women? Women who are Other; women who represent everything women are supposed to want to be, yet everything most women will never become. These are women who belong to a universe of twenty-thousand dollar dresses and yachts and diamonds, both as highly-paid fashion models who are part of an international jet set and as the roles they take on in the pages of the magazine. The cruel irony of *VOGUE* is that the majority of people who can achieve the lifestyle it espouses do not need the magazine to tell them how to create what they themselves define. *VOGUE* is a publication for the aspirant, or in the term immortalised by exclusive London shoe designer, Patrick Cox, for his most popular women's shoe, the 'wannabe'. Here I wish to explore the pleasure of the 'wannabe' in reading *VOGUE*. For her, the journey into an issue of *VOGUE* is one of fantasy and of longing. Longing to shed her quotidian skin and to slip into the seductively luxurious skins *VOGUE* hangs before her, like frocks lined up on coat-hangers in a wardrobe, waiting for her to choose the one that suits her mood. As I shall show, the 'wannabe' is seduced by the promise of becoming the Other woman, not simply as an object of erotic desire but also as an object of social status. Furthermore, the seduction is a two-way process: a power game played out

<sup>74</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter Seven, this is more true of the American and Australian editions than the French.

between the reader and the text. The reader seduces the text into revealing its secrets and plays with the alternative identities this knowledge affords her: just as the text plays with the fears and fantasies of the reader, seducing her into believing that she really can slip on a different self. All the while the reader plays knowingly with fire, for it is through the process of identification with these others that she comes to understand what she is – and, crucially, what she is not.

To understand the processes of identification active in reading *VOGUE*, it becomes necessary to explicate the nature of narcissistic identification itself. In her helpful discussion of Freud's *On Narcissism*, Teresa Brennan describes his distinction between the anaclitic and narcissistic modes of object choice. An anaclitic attachment is one in which the object choice is based on needs "real enough" at the time of choosing, whereas in a narcissistic attachment "the object chosen is a reflection of one's ego-ideal" (1992:61). Brennan explains that Freud aligned the anaclitic mode with the masculine/activity, describing it as the act of loving, and the narcissistic mode with the feminine/passivity, describing it as the need to be loved (Freud 1914, 1957 SE Vol. XIV:87-90). She further elucidates this point by stating that, when one loves according to the narcissistic mode, "there are three options: one may love an object based on (i) the person one wants to be, (ii) the person one is, (iii) the person one once was" (1992:61). Brennan shows that Freud began to collapse the distinction between the narcissism associated with penis-envy and that with the theory of narcissistic object choice, showing that this object choice is often about the girl identifying with the ideal of the man she had wished to become (Freud 1914, 1957 SE Vol. XIV: 87-90). For the present purpose the most critical of these observations is that which pertains to the three modes of narcissistic desire. To understand the ways in which women desire the female objects represented in the images in *VOGUE*, it must be understood that they desire them because of their potential for any one of these three types of narcissistic identification. The types need not be mutually exclusive, and can indeed be one and the same thing. One may wish, for example, to be the person one once was. This is often the case in *VOGUE* where prized attributes may once have been possessed but are now lost, such as youth, slenderness and beauty.

Freud saw narcissistic individuals as more attractive than their peers, in possession of a certain magnetism arising from their self-confidence and self-absorption. He argued that people envy these individuals "for maintaining a blissful state of mind – an unassailable libidinal position which we ourselves have since abandoned" (1914, 1957 SE Vol. XIV:88-89). Freud's choice of the word 'envy' is significant because it introduces another dimension into the process of narcissistic identification. It suggests that part of what is happening when women look at images of women is an identification based on envy. Brennan (1992) described this as attraction to an image of "the person one wants to be". This is a process of simultaneous longing and resentment, longing to become the woman in the image, and resentment of her for already having attained what the reader feels she cannot. Without

minimising the substantial anguish caused to women who spend their lives in a fruitless pursuit of an unattainable ideal of feminine beauty, it is important to ask whether *some* of the hostility directed towards these images arises out of envy. Do women envy these women because they represent everything many academic feminists (myself included) reject politically and at the same time everything they secretly long to be, but know they are unlikely ever to attain? At the risk of being labelled as deeply false conscious, I feel compelled to raise the possibility that some of the condemnation and rejection the images of women in women's magazines is anchored in a lifetime of frustration at being unable to replicate them.

Victor Burgin, in "Perverse Space" (1991), has suggested that, when looking at sexualised images of women, such as those of Helmut Newton, it is reasonable to "suspect a perverse component of exhibitionism in her [the model] being there to be looked at – an exhibitionism likely to provoke a mixture of desire, envy and hostility in male and female viewers alike" (1991:137). Like Williams in her discussion of pornography, the challenge mounted here by Burgin is a challenge to the critic to question whether part of the objection he or she holds is based on discomfort with the reaction the image solicits. For were we to admit that some models, rather than being victims of what Burgin calls 'sexploitation', actually *enjoy* being looked at, and we identify through one of the narcissistic modes with the model, then we would be forced to admit that the image appeals because we secretly envy the status of looked-at object. German feminist Kristin Sauer's poem, *A Blending of the First Degree*, expresses her feelings of guilty pleasure at seeing her naked body as the object of a photograph, saying that: "The intimacy of the nudity that lies beneath the surface of my photograph might be obscene" because it is "something that both attracts / and repulses me. My 'indecent' craving for it is so strong that I am dazed by it. / For there in the picture in front / of me I see the experience of lust / for my own self" (in André Rival 1995:14).<sup>75</sup> In Chapters Five and Six, I shall examine in more detail the appeal of performing certain perversions, such as passivity and assuming the role of a sexual object. For our present purposes, suffice it to say that there is a very real probability that one of the strategies women use to engage with *VOGUE* is to identify narcissistically and enviously with the models as looked-at objects. While conscious of the of the problematic status of a normative notion of feminine beauty, I also believe that to understand the pleasure women derive from reading magazines, critics must honestly interrogate the sources of our own displeasure at these images. Admittedly, it would be easier and less controversial to dismiss a woman's pleasure in being the object of a narcissistic identification as the result of false consciousness. It is easy to suggest that women find pleasure in such acts because they have been falsely socialised by a patriarchal representation system into the belief that to feel desirable they must be the object of a desiring gaze. But who are feminist academics to censure another woman's pleasure? It is dangerous for feminism to be involved in prescriptive and proscriptive definitions of what women *should*

<sup>75</sup> For the complete text of Sauer's poem, see Appendix 3.

find pleasurable, for it reinforces the idea that there exists a singular appropriate sexual *modus operandi* for women, an idea that has been at the core of the repression of female sexuality for centuries.

Whatever the dangers and problems that accompany the territory of admitting narcissistic identification to be a potentially pleasurable activity, it is not necessarily an oppressive and negative one. Returning to her argument that the identificatory process is multi-faceted and non-linear, Kolbowski, following Sarah Kofman's (1985) reading of Freud, suggests that, when women engage in narcissistic identification with fashion photographs, they are seeing a representation of femininity that overcomes the 'lack' imposed on them by society: the closeness of an identification with a narcissistic object, such as a fashion photograph, could be seen as affording the female spectator the distance of an imaginary self-sufficiency that separates her from a rhetoric of insufficiency (1990:154).

Kolbowski's suggestion that there could be something empowering in a woman identifying with a fashion photograph is a substantial departure from the preceding accounts of identification as passive and masochistic. It radically repositions the female object as a point of identification in which women may imagine a greater self-sufficiency than is generally the case because of what Freud called "the social restrictions imposed upon [women] in their choice of object" (Freud op.cit.). Both Kofman and Kolbowski have used the metaphor of play to describe this identificatory process, drawing on Freud's identification of criminals and humourists as prime examples of individuals whose narcissism renders them untouchable, "unassailable". He suggests in his writings on humour, and Kofman highlights this, that the humourist's appeal lies in his ability to deflect things which may debase him, recasting them as harmless: "Look! Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing more than a game for children - just worth making a jest about" (Freud *Humour* 1927, as cited in Kofman 1985:55). Kolbowski argues that the possibilities for identification presented by fashion photographs are playful, permitting multiple points of identificatory entry, multiple 'selves' to try on. She argues that these images are games, "images 'just worth making a jest about' (albeit images that are serious enough to be played with)" (1990:151).

The advantage of such a conception of the identificatory process is that it avoids the trap of being overly deterministic of the reader and assuming that she necessarily identifies with the image in the way its producers intended. At the same time, the metaphor of play admits some degree of gravity: "images that are serious enough to be played with", "playing with fire". There is no suggestion that these images are innocuous, rather that they are negotiable and that they provide a plurality of identificatory possibilities. A woman reading them may identify with some or all of these possibilities in making sense of the image, she may identify differently depending on the context and the mood in which she approaches them. Such an understanding of identification also avoids conceiving of the female look as a constant and admits the potential for the same woman to read the same image differently on different

occasions. In admitting the plurality of identificatory possibilities, it simultaneously admits a plurality of gazes. Furthermore, understanding identification as a game permits us to step outside the confines of a critical discourse about fashion magazines that has long sought to defend or denounce them. It goes beyond the theory of masquerade to present the possibility of women consciously 'trying on' multiple feminine identities.

I acknowledge that play is a double-edged pleasure: the fact of women playing with images of women to arrive at an understanding of themselves is not unproblematic. The departure point remains a conception of woman as 'lack', to be overcome by 'trying on' excesses of femininity to break outside this "rhetoric of insufficiency". Women may be willing participants in this identification game, and may even sometimes be empowered by it. However, there is still much to be said about the images presented to women as possibilities for identification. I wish to turn now to an examination of what women look at and how they look at it. In particular, I wish to challenge some of the social conventions that have shaped our expectations of what the images with which women identify should look like, and how they should be looked at.

#### How do women look?

To assume that women look differently from men is to assume they possess what Judith Fryer Davidov (1998) has called "the gift of sympathy".<sup>76</sup> In employing the term, she immediately warns against the style of critical discourse it implies: a discourse which constructs the woman looking as inherently inclined to see a body "in terms of capacities and needs or as a source of aliveness", rather than "as parts, shapes, and mechanisms", as it is assumed a man would do (1998:6). While acknowledging that some women are likely to see in this sympathetic way, Davidov cautions that:

Diane Arbus's trying on of alien experience – a kind of "panopticon of the spirit"; Margaret Bourke-White's descriptions of war, the work of killing and maiming, as pageantry and pattern; Cindy Sherman's performance art, a dis-guise of the self, represented as an illusion, a culturally constructed contrivance – all constitute a powerful argument against a "gift of sympathy" when the woman looks (1998:7).<sup>77</sup>

Teresa de Lauretis, in her examination of women's cinema, suggests that women as creators of images might look differently because they address female spectators. She argues that it is more critical to ask whether a film "addresses its spectator as a *woman*, regardless of the gender of the viewers", than whether it contains "formal stylistic, or thematic markers [that] point to a female presence behind the camera" (1987a:133, emphasis in original). Indeed, she

<sup>76</sup> The phrase is originally Willa Cather's, used to describe the American writer Sarah Orne Jewett, in "The Best Short Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett" (1925), in Stephen Tennant (ed.) (1949) *Willa Cather on Writing*. New York: Knopf. Davidov employs the term here to describe the tendency of some feminist critics to assume that women photographers will look differently at female subjects than male photographers and that images of women photographed by women will necessarily be more 'sympathetic' to women, thereby less exploitative of them. Davidov does not endorse this critical position; on the contrary, she disputes it.

<sup>77</sup> For an example of one of Cindy Sherman's more disturbing images, see *Untitled #155* in Appendix 3.

also cautions against the identification of a "look and sound of women's cinema", suggesting that to do so is to presume to universalise women's creative output and in so doing, to accept a normative definition of cinema and to demonstrate that women can comply with this definition. Lauretis opens her discussion with Silvia Bovenschen's (1976) question: "Is there a feminine aesthetic?" Bovenschen, she tells us, was unable to provide a single answer, having instead to answer in both the affirmative and the negative. Bovenschen suggested that feminine "aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception" do exist (as cited in Lauretis 1987a:127), but did not go so far as to define them or to conflate them with the "gift of sympathy". Lauretis's contention that certain films address their spectators as women is slightly further along the definitional trajectory and, at times, she seems to infer that films employing this mode of address are more sympathetic to the lived experiences of women. While she cautions against a normative, universalising female photographic aesthetic, Davidov nonetheless considers women's photography to be sufficiently different as a category to merit an entire book, *Women's Camera Work* (1998), devoted to a discussion of its particularities.

The question of whether women look differently becomes especially problematic when the images women produce are confronting and disturbing. The work of photographers such as Cindy Sherman has been alternatively lauded as an ironic exposé on the female condition and denounced as the product of a woman who has assumed an (implicitly violent) male gaze.<sup>78</sup> When Annie Leibovitz exhibited her photographic portraits in the Women exhibition at the Corcoran Museum in Washington D.C. in 1999-2000, the exhibition curator, Paige Turner, reported that many women viewers were perplexed by Leibovitz's startling image of the Kilgore College Rangerettes (cheerleaders from Texas).<sup>79</sup> In this enormous photograph, occupying an entire wall of the exhibition, four cheerleaders are photographed performing high-kicks, with the focal point of the image their crotches, clad scantily in red briefs. Their white-boot-clad feet obscure their faces, and beyond their splayed legs are expanses of sky, grass and a grandstand, connotative of a football field.<sup>80</sup> It is impossible to look at the image without the eyes being drawn toward the row of crotches. Had a man taken this photograph, it would surely have been deemed obscene for its deliberate focus on the pubic area of these women. Does the fact that it was taken by a woman, as part of an exhibition that celebrated women, render it less problematic? Does a female spectator look differently at this image because a woman created it?

In fact, having Leibovitz as its creator renders it more problematic, even if actual female spectators may feel less uncomfortable because its author is female. A simplistic

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Lisa Phillips (1987), Judith Williamson (1983) and Cathy N. Davidson (1990).

<sup>79</sup> From personal correspondence with Paige Turner and Shannon Burkhart of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., U.S.A.

<sup>80</sup> Readers unfamiliar with the work of Cindy Sherman and Annie Leibovitz will find a selection of the photographs discussed in this chapter in Appendix 3, including a small-scale reproduction of the photograph of the Kilgore College Rangerettes.



explanation for Leibovitz's composition is that her gaze, like all female gazes, has been "colonised" by a preconditioned male gaze. That is, to assert that while she is a woman, she has a male look. This argument, in turn, gives rise to a dual fallacy: in the first instance that there is no possibility of a female gaze since the act of looking has been colonised by patriarchy to such an extent as to render all female gazes "male" by default; secondly, that there *would be* a female gaze which would be endowed with the "gift of sympathy", were it not for the omnipresent constructive forces of patriarchy. To subscribe to this view is to buy into the kind of normative, essentialist discourse of the anti-pornography feminists that Williams has so strongly critiqued:

This argument suggests, erroneously I believe, that if female sexuality were ever to get free of its patriarchal contaminations it would express no violence, have no relations of power, and would produce no transgressive sexual fantasies . . . Here the implication is that a whole truth of sexuality actually exists outside of language, discourse and power (1990:20,22).<sup>81</sup>

Take, for example, Figure 4.1, an image of Australian actress Rachel Griffiths seated on a chair in a state of semi-undress, with a large snake draped around her shoulders and held in her left hand, its head dangerously close to her lap. She is sitting with her legs slightly apart, just enough to leave us wondering whether she is wearing any underpants, her feet are encased in sharp-heeled black shoes, and her clothing consists of a straight black skirt and a low-cut, nude-coloured bra along with a wide-brimmed black hat. The connotations of this image are explicitly sexual. The underwear is both revealed and either hidden or absent. The shot is composed slightly off centre so as to leave the latter question unanswerable (and hence surrendered to the domain of imagination). The prominence of the colour black, with all its associations of the dark continent of woman connotes here the femme fatale. The choice of a business-like skirt which looks incomplete without additional clothing suggests the act of undressing, an unveiling of the body. The sexual overtones of the image are reinforced by the presence of the snake, suggestive of the serpent, of temptation, of woman as sin, with its head poised to strike at her most sinful bodily region. Griffiths has her head turned sharply to one side, as though she is resigned to the impending strike of the serpent. The angularity of her frame, exacerbated by the pose, suggests strength and confidence (especially in the contemporary context of muscular, toned bodies such as Madonna's) and the sweaty gloss on her skin communicates both arousal and exertion: perhaps a (sexual) contest with the snake.

<sup>81</sup> For a particularly confronting rebuttal of the proposition that if women were to define their own sexuality it would be neither transgressive nor violent, I refer the reader to André Rival's (1995) collection of photographs *Self Image: 100 Women*. When Rival asked women to photograph themselves, alone and naked in a white room, in the way that best expressed their own sexuality, the results were startling and included a number of violent, fetishistic and highly transgressive images. Appendix 3 contains two images from the collection.

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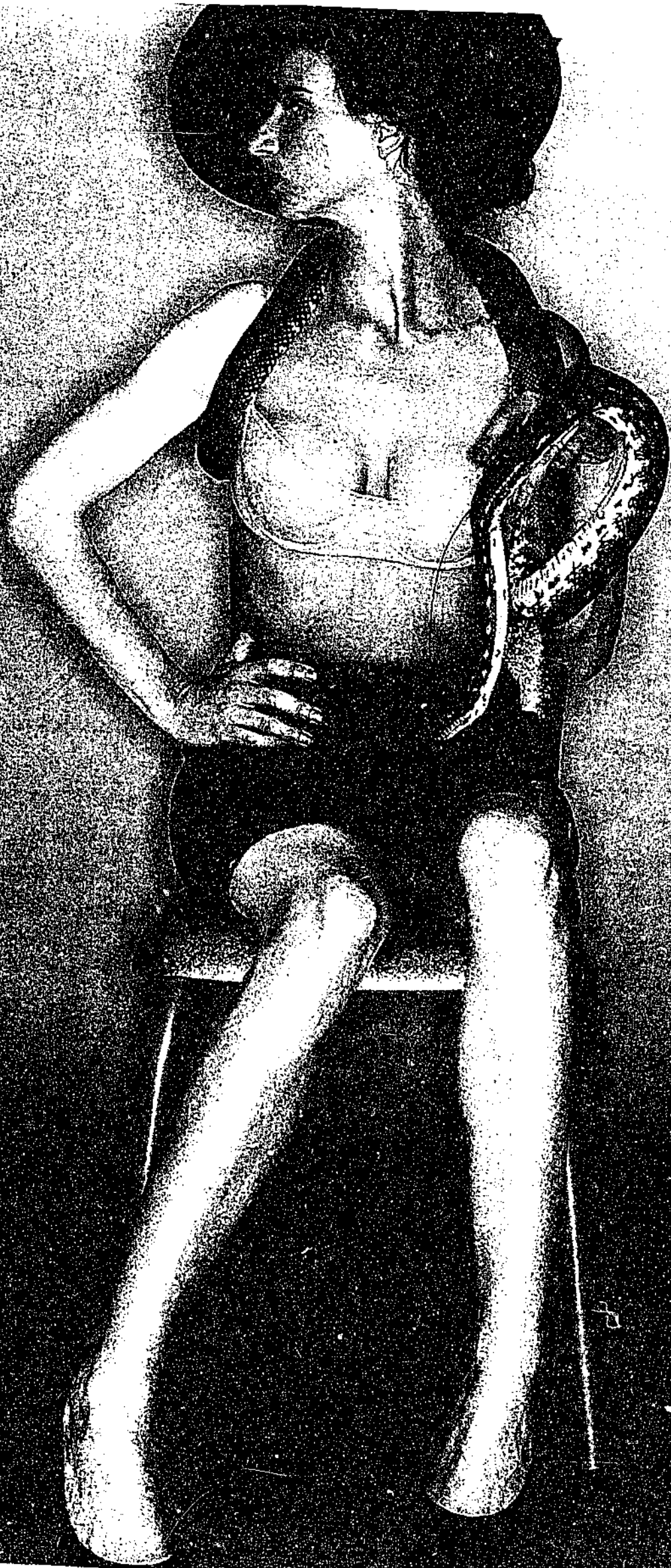


Figure 4.1 from "There's a huntsman in my handbag"

It would be easy to see this image as a typical framing of a woman's body as the object of a male sexual fantasy: casting the woman as sin, as sexual temptation personified. This image was styled by Australian costume designer Lizzy Gardiner (who won an Academy Award for her work on *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*) and photographed by American surrealist photographer Donna Trope. It forms part of a fashion shoot in *VOGUE* Australia June 1997, entitled "There's a huntsman in my handbag". The image has a heavy debt to Annie Leibovitz's (1993) nude portrait of model Cindy Crawford,<sup>82</sup> in which Crawford stands in a lush garden with an archway of heavy arbour above her and an enormous snake draped around her, once again with its head focused on her pubic region. A second image from the "There's a huntsman in my handbag" shoot is that in Figure 4.2, where Griffiths is sprawled on a tiled floor (suggesting a bathroom, perhaps), empty glass in her outstretched hand, looking up with a glazed, unfocussed expression. The immediate connotation of the image is of an overdose, a suicide or a fatal attack by the enormous spider (the 'huntsman') crawling across her breasts. Her face is given a porcelain-doll like makeover, which renders the waxy, death-like appearance even more alarming as it juxtaposes her prettiness with the horror of death invoked. This image could easily be read as sadistic, casting the woman as a helpless but nonetheless erotic victim. There are strong references in this composition to Cindy Sherman's (1977-80) "Untitled Film Stills" series of photographs in which women are represented (by the artist posing herself) in a variety of erotic, passive, victim-like scenarios ranging from an overdose to sitting by a telephone waiting for it to ring (by implication, the caller will be a man).<sup>83</sup> Sherman is also renowned for her self-portraits in which she poses as dead, covered in gravel, grass and earth and staring blankly and without focus into the space beyond the viewer, just as Griffiths does here.

These references to other photographers are important for two reasons: in the first instance, they seek to position the photographs in the domain of 'art photography', distancing them from their actual context as a fashion shoot; and second, they further complicate the question of the nature of the gaze that constructed them. The work of women photographers such as Leibovitz and Sherman has attracted considerable attention from feminist critics. Susan Sontag, in her introduction to the *Women* exhibition's catalogue, applauds Leibovitz's ability to capture many and varied aspects of woman in her photographs, some of whom are very public figures whose photographs we are accustomed to seeing, and others unknown but for their appearance in the exhibition: "Whether well-known or obscure, each of the nearly one hundred and seventy women in this album will be looked at (especially by other women) as models: models of beauty, models of self-esteem, models of strength, models of transgressiveness" (1999:2). Images from Leibovitz's *Women* collection were published in American, Australian and French editions of *VOGUE* to coincide with the publication of the

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<sup>82</sup> See Appendix 3.

<sup>83</sup> See Appendix 3.





catalogue book, and she is regularly commissioned by *VOGUE* (US) to undertake special features. Wanting to be seen as standing at the cutting edge of photography, *VOGUE* encourages both the inclusion of her controversial work and other work in a similar style.

Sherman has been lauded by feminist critics such as Lisa Phillips (1987), Judith Williamson (1983) and Cathy N. Davidson (1990) for pushing the boundaries of photorealism and showing photographs as constructed entities and constructive identity forces. Davidson suggests that Sherman's work forces us to question photorealist practice, by asking "which is real, the embodiment or the body, the reproduced image or the reproductive person? In a commodity culture, in which image *counts* more than self, where does the body end?" (1990:672. emphasis in original). Sherman (the subject), she contends, commodifies herself (the object) to such an extent as to parody commodification and bring into question the whole notion that the body can be anything other than a visual commodity.

What the images by Leibovitz, Sherman and Trope have in common is that they are disturbing representations of women's bodies composed by women artists and, in the case of Trope, intended for women viewers. Davidson argues that Sherman "unsettles and exposes the viewer, not the viewed" (1990:669) because she disrupts and subverts the usual power relations of representation through her photographs. One wonders whether she would say the same thing of Donna Trope's image of Rachel Griffiths? And if controversial erotic photographer Helmut Newton, also a regular at *VOGUE*, had taken the photographs, would they be condemned as blatantly fetishistic and utterly sadistic? In his discussion of Newton, Victor Burgin makes the point that it is common for feminist critiques of the visual to "equate a putative 'masculine gaze' with objectification" (1991:124). That is to say, critics have tended to assume that images that objectify women are the product of a male gaze. Figure 4.3 could easily be Helmut Newton's work. The tanned, oiled thighs, speckled with sand, the rounded buttocks protruding from the swimsuit and the high black heels, with straps criss-crossed bondage-style across the model's calves would look more at home in a *Sports Illustrated* calendar than they do in this fashion shoot, again from *VOGUE Australia* (September 1997:131). This highly sexual image, with the model face down in the sand, cut off at the waist so as to focus attention on her shapely buttocks and legs, is reminiscent of Newton's own advertising and calendar work, but is once again the work of Donna Trope. Had we not seen her Leibovitz- and Sherman- like images, it would be easy to assume that she falls into the category of a female photographer whose gaze has been "colonised" as male. Yet she has also reproduced the style of two respected contemporary women photographers, who have each in their own way been credited with advancing a female aesthetic that subverts the dominant patriarchal photographic paradigm. These observations raise significant issues about our understanding of images in terms of who composes them and for what context they are intended.

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Figure 4.3 from "Bondi Bather"



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POLYURETHANE REMBOURRÉ DE DUVET ET SA JUPE DOUBLÉE  
DE MOUSSE SYNTHÉTIQUE

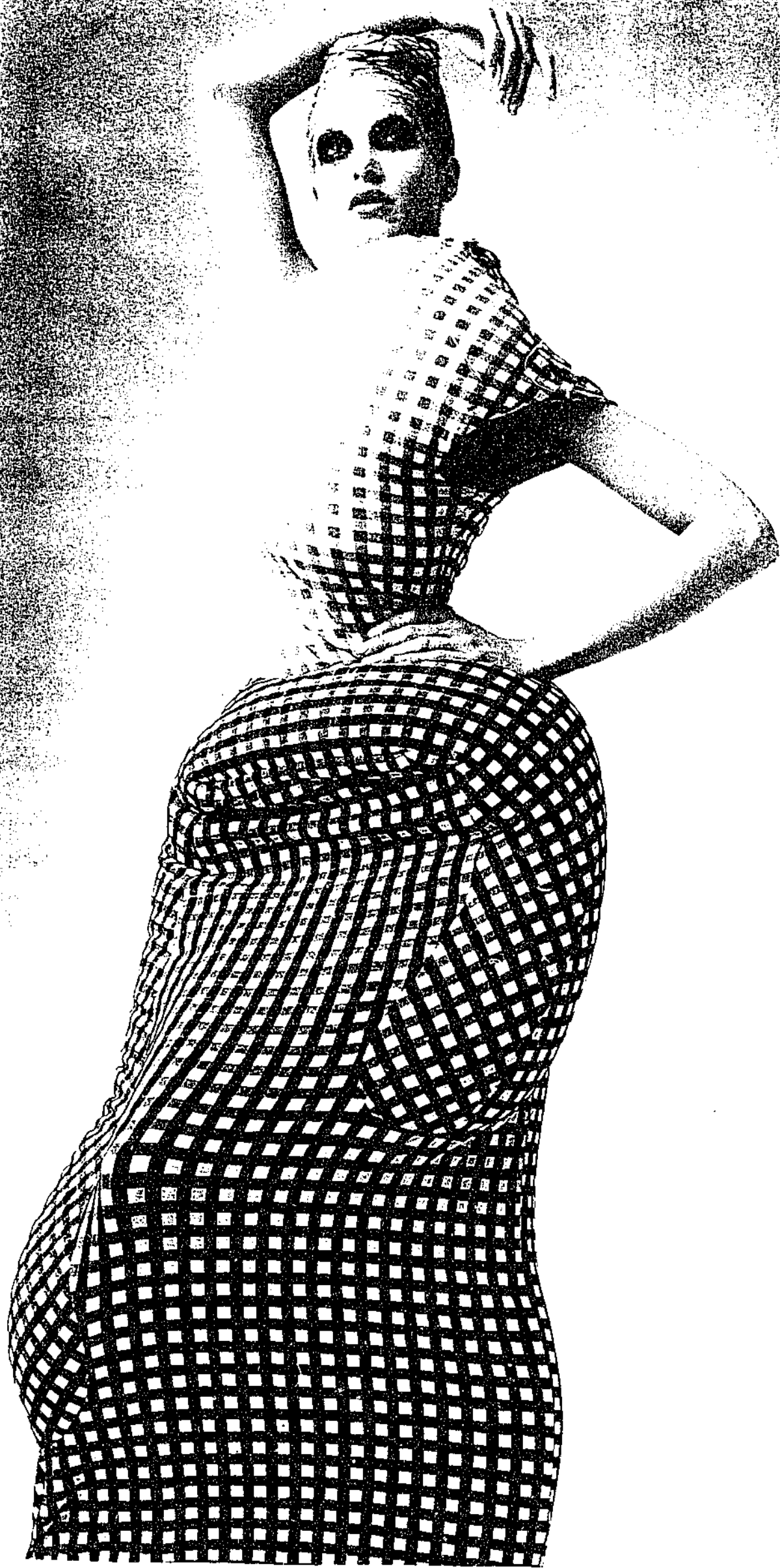


Figure 4.5 from "Coups de Mait

That these images were chosen as representative of "le savoir-faire français" in fashion is significant because it demonstrates the extent to which *VOGUE* Paris is at ease with its position as a catalogue of fantasy. There is no serious suggestion from the magazine that anyone would actually walk down the street in these pieces. Rather, the suggestion is that French designers assume French women to be comfortable enough in their own sense of womanhood to be able to appreciate the playful approach taken by Comme des Garçons to women's shapes and curves. Further, there is an expectation that women reading the magazine will take what they like from these fantastic creations and adapt them to their own everyday wardrobe; perhaps a pared-down version of the full blue skirt paired with a fluffy orange organdie top, minus the brown paper, or perhaps an ensemble in multidirectional checks, with some structure to the garments but without the duvet padding. The magazine addresses the readers as sufficiently intelligent to understand, process and adapt the fantasy images it presents. In addition, the styling of this fashion shoot is consistent with *VOGUE Paris* positioning itself as an art as much as a fashion magazine. The repetition of these bizarre, confronting images on the cover sends a clear message on the newsstand that *VOGUE Paris* sees itself as being at the cutting-edge of fashion and art photography, unafraid to push the limits of what is considered to be fashion or to blur entirely the distinction between fashion and wearable art. Clearly, the reader is to engage with these images as fantasy and as art, rather than as a 'look' to which to aspire. This observation notwithstanding, the models underneath the creations conform to the dominant feminine aesthetic of the industry: tall, slim, fair skinned and fragile-looking Northern-European women. In these images, this aesthetic is presented as awkward and unusual, but this is not always the case.

Part of a fashion shoot featuring holiday and resort wear, entitled "Simply Perfect", in *VOGUE* (US) (November 1997:367) Figure 4.6 is another highly contrived fantasy scenario. The idyllic setting connoted by the lush greenery in the background and the bright, summery light, is of a holiday resort. Cherubic children sit at breakfast as their immaculately groomed mother stands over them, ready to pour milk from a designer jug. Her hair has been styled as damp, her makeup as minimalist, to give the impression that she arrives at the table fresh from the shower, having casually thrown on the Ralph Lauren suit she picked up in New York for just under \$US2,500. The jacket gapes open to reveal a hint of her naked breasts, reminding us that a mother should still be a sexy and provocative woman. Sharply tailored, the suit suggests power and is a strong reference to the city (and by implication career) temporarily left behind to take time out with her family as a "Simply Perfect" mother. The dominance of white and pastel colours, and especially the repositioning of the classic corporate suit in soft, white, silk, gives a clean, fresh feel to the scene and conjures up the vast repository of associations of whiteness in Western iconography: innocence, altruism, purity, luxury. In keeping with the dominant aesthetic of the industry, the whiteness extends to the fair hair and skin of the woman and the children. Despite the gaping jacket, the woman's sexuality





is neutralised somewhat by her being cast in a maternal role. For, while a mother can and should be sexy according to *VOGUE*, her role as mother is paramount. It is interesting that in choosing to reveal a glimpse of naked flesh, the photographer chooses the breast, a part of the body intrinsically linked to nurturing and motherhood. The image serves to reinforce the strong current of puritanical morality, discussed in Chapter Two, that is a dominant discourse of contemporary American society. It is a performance of the normative heterosexual discourse of woman as mother and family-builder, endorsed by the moral majority and now by *VOGUE* as well. In this context, motherhood and self-sacrifice are cast not only as 'good', but also as fashionable.

This image is relatively typical of the styling of fashion spreads in American *VOGUE*. They are far more likely than their French counterparts to involve a scene giving a pretence of the 'real', with many shot on location outdoors or in luxurious homes rather than in the stark, studio style with a monochromatic backdrop, so common in *VOGUE Paris*. *VOGUE* (US) often includes more than one model in its images, and – uniquely – on its covers, and is the only edition of *VOGUE* I have seen which regularly includes images of men and children in its fashion spreads. These details combine to mean that although the image is clearly a constructed fantasy, it is not explicitly positioned as such. Indeed, the scenario presents an uncomfortable tension between what is obviously so "simply perfect" as to be contrived, and a grounding in the everyday that encourages the slippage from identification with the fantasy to believing it to be a 'reality'. This slippage is the essence of fantasy, as Laplanche and Pontalis (1986) have theorised it. They argue that "in fantasy, the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: s/he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images" (1986:25). The purpose of fantasy is for the subject to be able to immerse herself in it sufficiently so as to be able to believe temporarily that it is, or could be, real.

Bordo (1993) observes that for some readers, the evidence that such images are not part of their reality is undeniable: women of colour, women from non-Anglo-European ethnic heritage, poor women, obese women, are unlikely to recognise themselves or their lives in this image. For some women, the chasm between their lived reality and the constructed perfection of the image is so great as to mean that it can only be understood as fantasy. Hermes (1995) found in her ethnographic study of magazine readers that many women read magazines as a form of escapism. Magazines appeal because they are easy to escape into for a brief encounter with one's fantasy self or selves (and the fantasy selves articulated by her readers were many and varied), and can easily be put down when the demands of actuality interrupt the fantasy and call women back to the everyday. The important issue here is whether this engagement with fantasy is something that gives women pleasure, as they escape temporarily into a world they know can never be theirs, or whether it becomes a source of pain and anxiety as they experience feelings of inadequacy that, for whatever reason, they are unable to shape and colour their world to match the fantasy. In all probability,

At the very heart of this dilemma lies a relatively simple question: "What's wrong with images of women?" to borrow Griselda Pollock's (1977) famous words. If one rejects, as I do, the suggestion that these women photographers are simply subconsciously replicating a male gaze into which they have been unknowingly socialised, then it becomes necessary to start to question the whole practice of the representation of women from a different angle. Perhaps the war against 'images of women' has been misdirected in its attacks on the 'objectification' of women. It is difficult to see how any image of any body is not an objectification of that body, even when the artist is imposing that status on herself, as in Sherman's work. Burgin emphasises this point in his discussion of the objectification. He states that Freud defines the object thus: "the object of an instinct is the thing in regard to which or through which the instinct is able to achieve its aim" (1991:132). To denounce a representation of a woman as an 'objectification' is to abhor it on the grounds that it presents a woman's body as an object through which an instinct (usually sexual) is able to be fulfilled. To assume that such a representation is the product of a masculine gaze is to return to the problematic assumption, so elegantly articulated by Williams that an unadulterated, unmediated feminine sexuality (and hence a female gaze) would "express no violence, have no relations of power, and would produce no transgressive sexual fantasies" (op.cit).

The next chapters will explore some of the many ways in which feminine sexuality can be expressed and so demonstrate that it can be very preoccupied with power, violence and transgression. In so doing, it will open up discussion of women's agency in participating in, and taking pleasure in, these sexual acts. The remaining chapters will also argue that a sexual image need not necessarily be sexist, and that an image of female sexuality that disturbs or offends is not necessarily the product of patriarchy. What disturbs readers of these images is perhaps less the image than the manner in which the image asks us to engage with it. The power of such images lies in the way they appeal to very primal drives, asking the reader to expose herself to the risk of loss in order to experience the *jouissance* of engagement. This power resides in the gender neither of the photographer nor the photographed object, but in the complex discourses that have constructed the reader/spectator and the text.

#### Not 'real' women.

*"There are three billion women who don't look like supermodels and eight who do." Advertising campaign for The Body Shop, 1994-2001*

When The Body Shop launched this advertising campaign in 1994, it was tapping into a ground swell of objection to what feminist commentators had described as 'unrealistic' images of women in fashion magazines. To this day, one of the strongest criticisms levelled at fashion magazines is that they do not present images of 'real' women, and that the images they do



present encourage women to aspire to a standard of beauty, youth and slenderness 'unrealistic' for the majority of women. Fashion magazines and photographers, male and female alike, have been castigated for continuing to peddle the idea that thinness equates with beauty.

Volumes have been devoted to the causal relationship between the images in fashion magazine and what Kim Chernin (1981) termed "the tyranny of slenderness". The compelling evidence presented by Chernin in *The Obsession* (1981) and *The Hungry Self* (1985), as well as by Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), can leave little doubt that society has constructed thinness as a positive attribute and that some women will go to life-threatening extremes to attain it. As a woman who has survived the horror of anorexia and bulimia nervosa myself, I do not wish to diminish in any way the considerable suffering these crippling, and predominantly female, conditions impose. Nor do I wish to dispute the undeniable evidence that, for some women, the images presented in fashion magazines become an impossible yardstick that comes to control their lives. What I want to do here is to open up the discussion about 'realistic' images, and ask some difficult, and often avoided, questions about whether magazines could and should present images of 'real' women to their readers. In order to do this, I will first consider the historical and social construction of the relationship between photography and the 'real', and then move on to an exploration of the implications of that relationship for fashion photographs in the context of the identificatory process described above.

In her own revisiting of her 1977 essay "What's wrong with 'images of women'?", Griselda Pollock seriously questions her original thesis when viewed as part of the trajectory along which feminist cultural theories of the image have since moved. These have progressed, she argues, from an initial position where images were denounced for their stereotypical representations of women, through a phase of cultural production during which feminist image-makers sought to redress this imbalance to a point where the focus of studying images is now on the productive and constructivist role of images in shaping subjectivity, femininity and sexuality. However, Pollock contends that in feminist analysis:

images are [still] judged against the world they reflect or reproduce or, as feminists have claimed, distort or falsify. The *real* is always present as the criteria against which images are assessed, a real which is never interrogated as itself a product of representation (1990:203, emphasis in original).

At the very essence of this problem is the social construction of photographs as 'real', to such an extent that their "status as *representation* is occluded" (1990:204, emphasis in original). Pollock argues that this phenomenon is historically grounded. Following John Tagg (1980),<sup>84</sup> she makes the point that realism dominated bourgeois nineteenth century artistic taste and that photography emerged in this context, so that photographs came to be seen as Reality, in

<sup>84</sup> Pollock's reference is to John Tagg (1980) "Power and Photography", *Screen Education*, no.36:53.

contrast to realist portraiture and landscape painting (Pollock 1990:203-04). These other art forms interpreted a reality over a period of sittings, whereas photographs were seen to capture a moment in time exactly, and were thus accorded a status as replicas rather than interpretative works. Christian Metz concurs, arguing that "while the social reception of film is oriented more toward a show-business-like or imaginary referent, the real referent is felt to be dominant in photography" (1990:156). Kolbowski also observes that when photographs display fantasy scenes they are "accorded labels such as art photography or manipulated photography (as though all photographs were not manipulated)" (1990:148-49), demonstrating the extent to which there is a social expectation that photographs are indeed replicas of a 'real' situation. She argues that it is an "accordance of a conventional reality/truth status to fashion photography that prevents us from seeing these images as games" (1990:151). Because fashion magazines are illustrated with photographs, and because photographs have developed historically as connotative of the 'real' in society, there is a belief that fashion photographs should be 'realistic'. The old adage that the camera never lies has been so absorbed into our collective consciousness that a photograph is assumed to be a raw, unconstructed and unmediated image.

Yet Pollock demonstrates that even the 'raw, unconstructed image' is a representation, a construct, which relies on certain referents to invoke authenticity and realism. She discusses a photographic collage made by the 1970s London feminist photography collective, the Hackney Flashers, in which a black-and-white photograph of a middle-aged female machinist in a north London garment factory is juxtaposed with a high-gloss, colour image of a model wearing the kind of clothing the machinist produces, now for sale in expensive department stores. The images are clearly coded, Pollock argues, as 'real' on the one hand, 'unreal' or glamorised on the other. 'Real' is intended to connote a good, positive image and 'unreal' a bad, glamorised and distorted image of women. However, Pollock reads the two images to show that both are constructs, pointing to the deliberate use of a grainy-textured, coarsely lit black-and-white image, supposedly capturing a 'natural' pose, to convey the authority of documentary photography, in particular when viewed against the stylised high-gloss image used in magazine advertisements. What happens in this artificial comparison, she argues, is that "the recognition that both images are densely rhetorical products of material, social and aesthetic practices is suppressed" (1990:204). In other words, neither photograph is a pure replication of an actual situation, each is stylised and coded in its own way.

The understanding that no photographs are real and that all photographic images are, in some way, manipulated to achieve a particular aesthetic effect necessarily changes our understanding of the images in women's magazines that have borne the brunt of feminist attacks. This returns us to the discussion with which this chapter began: the question of whether or not the women who read these magazines are conscious of the ways in which the

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text seeks to seduce them into a temporary lowering of their intellectual guard. I contend that women do read these images as artifice and that, for the most part, they understand that one of the rules of the engagement is that it is a game. In a game of dress-ups, children may pretend that they are fairies or goblins and may even make-believe temporarily that they become what they pretend to be. At the end of the day, however, even children understand that as much as they may long to be fairies and goblins living under the mushrooms at the bottom of the garden, when the wings and wands go back into the dress-up chest, they are expected to behave as human children again.

That the images of women in *VOGUE* are not realistic is undeniable, the fact of which is evidenced in the images I shall shortly discuss. But to attack *VOGUE* because it presents unrealistic images of women is to miss its point entirely. It is not supposed to be real, and its readers understand this. *VOGUE* is the mushroom at the bottom of the garden for grown-up, affluent, educated, working women who still want to imagine from time to time that they are fairy princesses. A more logical criticism of *VOGUE* is that it presents the fairy princess as an attainable goal. For even when one knows one is playing make-believe, sometimes there comes to be so much pretending that it becomes difficult to know where the playing begins and ends. In such a scenario, the artifice of *VOGUE* becomes problematic.

That readers understand that *VOGUE* as fantasy, rather than reality, does not mean the game is free from pitfalls. The images it presents are still highly prescriptive, normative images of femininity: the fairy princess must be slim, she must be light-skinned, she must be Anglo-European, she must be young and she must be wealthy. There is no room for variation on this theme within the rules of the game. However, as Pollock so succinctly explains it:

The case to be made is not that one kind of photograph is more real or more authentic or more positive than another depiction of women. Rather, both are fictions that produce distinct meanings both for the term "woman" and through the inclusion of woman in their semantic field (1990:205).

There can be no question that images such those in *VOGUE* contribute in a broader context to constructing socially acceptable notions of the feminine. Pollock continues, drawing on Elizabeth Cowrie's (1978) definition of woman as sign, and demonstrates that when 'woman' is a sign within a broader signifying system, "what is signified by it has nothing to do with femaleness – lived, imagined, or denounced" (Pollock 1990:209). Pollock recommends vigilance in attending to the ways in which the sign 'woman' is produced and what it comes to signify, while at the same time insisting that images which incorporate the sign 'woman' can only ever be constructs and that critical engagements with these images must recognise this. Pollock rejects, as I do, the idea that there exists a single 'real' signified which is paired naturally with the signifier 'woman'. Since such a signified does not exist, it can never be faithfully replicated in a photograph. Photographs of women must be understood as constructs of a construct: manipulated, selected in-frames of vision of the sign 'woman' within a signifying system that produces and constructs it. The signifying systems of *VOGUE*

position it as fantasy, achievable fantasy, but fantasy nonetheless. It is in the extent to which the different editions of *VOGUE* are explicit in their self-positioning as fantasy that some of the most marked differences emerge between its French, American and Australian editions.

Figures 4.4 and 4.5 are facing pages of a fashion spread entitled "Coups de maître" which appeared in the April 1997 edition of *VOGUE Paris*, featuring haute couture creations by Parisian designers Comme de Garçons. This particular edition's fashion section was part of a special feature focussing on French designers called "Made In France: où en est le savoir-faire français?"<sup>85</sup>. These same words appeared on the cover of the edition with a model dressed in a similarly fantastic ensemble, also by Comme des Garçons. The model in Figure 4.4 is posed in the classic pin-up girl pose, designed to firm and lift the breasts and emphasise her hourglass figure by rounding her buttocks and hips. In this case, it is parodied in the distorted silhouette created by the heavily padded breast, belly, hip and buttock areas. This silhouette is simultaneously an exaggeration of everything woman has come to signify – fecundity, flesh, roundness and sensuality – and a reminder of everything she is not allowed to be, since any woman with curves of any description would further distort the image by putting lumps in all the wrong places. The image suggests that a beautiful, slim woman can playfully slip on this curvaceous persona and imagine what it would be to inhabit it for a day. The somewhat emaciated arms protruding from the top and the pasty complexion with black, smudged eye-makeup are an exaggeration of the 'heroin chic' styling very popular in the 1997 season, particularly in cutting-edge magazines such as *The Face* in the UK, *Rolling Stone* and a variety of 'zines and alternative street press publications. The blackened eyes and tightly bound hair, in combination with the stark multi-directional checked patterns, also summon images of the harlequinade of folklore, a tradition still alive and well in the déguisements [disguise/dressing up] of the French 'carnéval' season and for the 'réveillon' of 31st December. On the facing page, Figure 4.5 continues the harlequin-like theme in the clown-like make-up of the model, whose white face assumes the traditionally forlorn expression of Pierrot and whose hair is sculpted in the shape of the hat he wears. This reference is sharply interrupted by the obviously feminine gesture of clasping what appear to be heavy breasts beneath the striking orange top. Once again, Comme des Garçons focuses on an exaggeratedly round silhouette, wrapping her hips in ordinary brown paper and suspending from it an enormous blue curved balloon skirt. Again, the thin model observes the curve as if it is foreign to her (as indeed it is) and looks uncomfortable with the newfound signs of her womanhood: curves, hips and heavy breasts. The designers have chosen the very fragile fabrics of organdie and organza for the main pieces and interspersed them with crumpled, fragile paper, contrasting the strong shapes of woman with her delicate sensibility.

<sup>85</sup> Title: "Strokes of Mastery" ;Text: "Made in France: how is French know-how faring?"

the answer to this question is that it does both, depending on the particular interaction negotiated between the reader and the text.

It must also be remembered that women do not necessarily wish to actualise their fantasies. Just because a woman may indulge herself in a monthly escape to an alternative reality through a subscription to *VOGUE*, it does not necessarily follow that if she were able to transform her own reality to align with it, she would do so. Returning to Figures 4.1 and 4.2 (from the "There's a huntsman in my handbag" fashion spread in *VOGUE Australia* June 1997:91,95) we see a clear example of such a fantasy. The fashion shoot aims to explore light-heartedly some of the peculiar obstacles Australian women encounter in their quest to be fashionable, such as poisonous snakes, spiders and other crawling creatures. While the reader may derive some thrill from an identification with the sexy image of Rachel Griffiths with a snake draped across her shoulders, while she may experience a frisson of pleasure at imagining herself as a *femme fatale* seductively entangled with a snake, this does not mean she actually wishes to experience the sensation of a snake slithering across her near-naked body. Indeed, much of the pleasure may be derived from the terror this prospect invokes.

Another fashion shoot from *VOGUE Australia*, "Let them wear frocks" (October 1997:128), engages women on a level of fantasy that would be less appealing if it became a reality. Figure 4.7 is of a model laced into a Christian Dior corseted *haute couture* gown. The image is striking in its use of bold reds to suggest a siren underneath the prudish, turn-of-the-(last)-century-style gown. The bright red hair, with its references to both the radical, outspoken French writer Colette and feisty Queen Elizabeth I, speaks of a woman who knows her own mind and her own desires. Fixing the camera defiantly with her smoky eyes and full red lips, the model is a smouldering inferno of sexual energy contained only by the restrictive confines of the garment she wears. The implication is that if she were to be unlaced and set free, she would be a wild and passionate woman. At the same time as she is fiery, she is cool, poised, elegant and detached, with the allure of a woman who is wealthy, well-heeled and well-connected, confident of her own magnetism. The setting — a marquee and scaffolding placed around an ornate balustrade — immediately suggests to those familiar with the fashion industry that a catwalk show is taking place and this woman is about to enter the spotlight of the runway.

As much as some women may fantasise about the life of a prestige catwalk model, and as much as it might be delicious to imagine oneself transformed into a "Cherry Ripe" siren, as the text suggests, very few readers of *VOGUE Australia* would actually enjoy the reality. Most would find the mermaid-line dress as restrictive to walk in as it would actually be to have a mermaid's tail, and few women, even in the excesses of wedding-day indulgence, are prepared to tolerate a corset. Even if they could afford it (the price of couture items is never revealed), most would never have occasion to wear such a gown. Similarly, although many women fantasise about being plucked from obscurity by a talent scout and whisked

## Christian Dior

Christian Dior's pinched and  
puffed mid-line  
and puffy sleeves  
and the mop of  
hair. Prepare to  
have the turn-of-the-  
century strikes back.

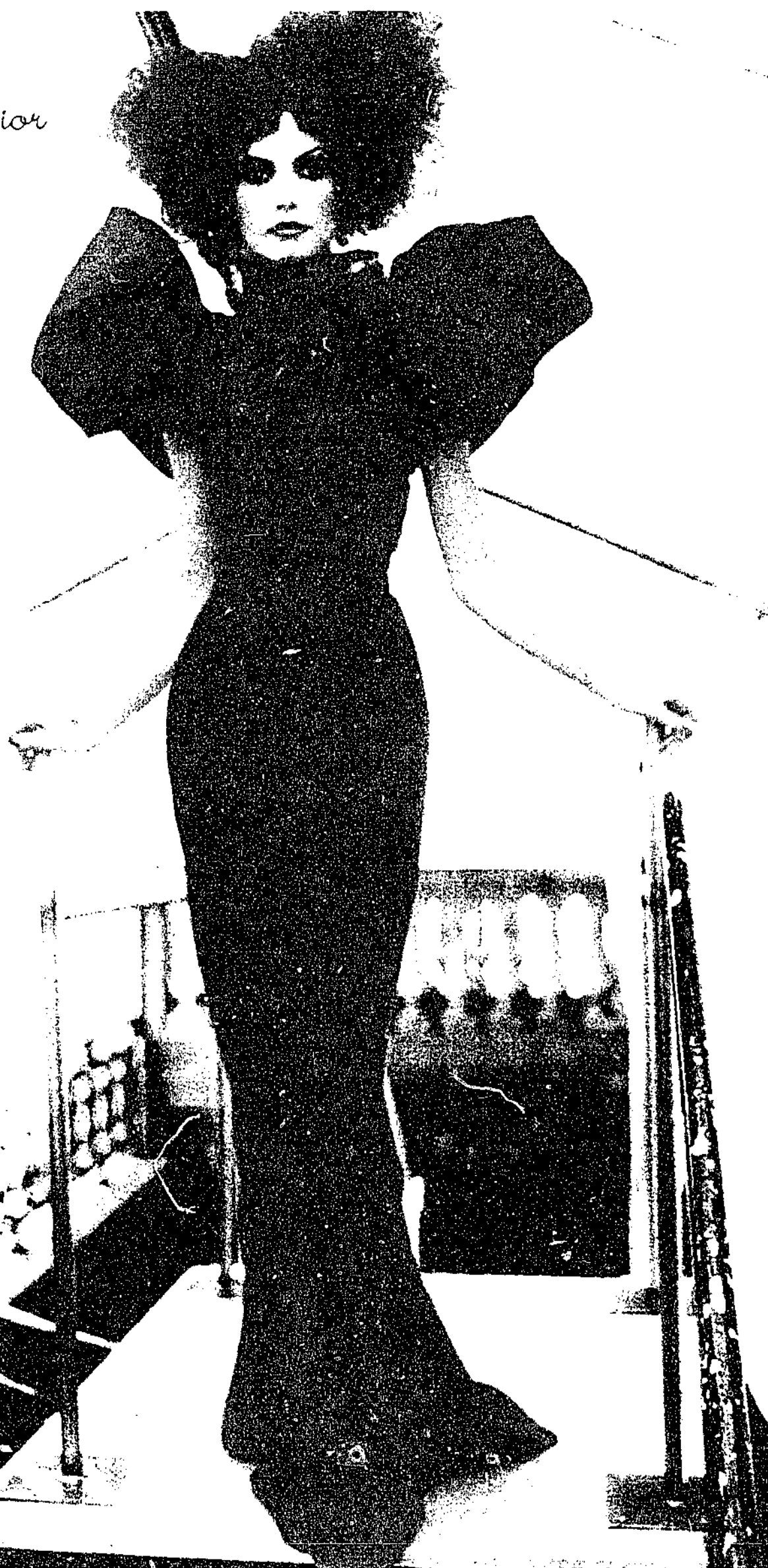


Figure 4.7 from "Let them wear frock



away to the catwalks of Paris, Milan and New York to be worshipped for their beauty, few who fit the demographic of the typical *VOGUE* reader are likely to be satisfied with the life it entails. An existence that demands complete fixation on the maintenance of one's body, so fickle that everything can evaporate overnight just because one's look is no longer in fashion, is hardly fulfilling as a long-term life choice. Many of *VOGUE*'s readers prefer to wear their grey suits to work long hours at grey jobs in grey buildings in grey cities. And if these are their realities, is it really such a surprise that they fantasise from time to time about being transformed into a scarlet siren, transported with the gown to another, more colourful and sensuous existence?

In all of this discussion of the images of women that *VOGUE* presents, I do not wish to suggest that there is nothing politically problematic about the images themselves. Other feminists have read and interpreted, decoded and deconstructed, celebrated and denounced enough of these images for it to be established that they are considered by many feminists to be integral to the construction of feminine identity. What I have tried to do here is to ask how women see these images, and why they might want to look at them. It seems fruitless to me to continue to bombard women with judgements that they ought not to aspire to being like the women in *VOGUE*, that they should not read magazines that present such a narrow definition of the feminine. Rather, what is important is *why* women continue to enjoy reading *VOGUE*, and *in what ways* they engage with it. As I have demonstrated, women do not necessarily read *VOGUE* in search of images of what they are, they are also in search of images of what they like to imagine they could be. And in doing this, they are able to find pleasure in the escape into a world the artifice of which they are most often conscious. Pleasure does not, however, come without a price, and in Chapters Five and Six I shall move on to a discussion of the darker side of reading pleasure, through an examination of fetishism and masochism involved in reading *VOGUE*.

chapter five

# Fine lines: the dark side of pleasure

Somebody invariably seems to think they know what is and is not 'good' for women who read magazines: and that somebody almost invariably seems to be someone who does not read them, probably for the very reasons underpinning the judgement that they are not 'good' for women. As Williams (1994b) has observed, certain types of image seem to provoke a desire to protect women from them. This has certainly been the case where pornographic and erotic images are concerned: Williams shows how the argument that women and children need to be protected from 'dangerous' images such as Robert Mapplethorpe's was used in the US Senate by Jesse Helms (1994b:3-4). Nadine Strossen (1995) expands her analysis of this situation to show how some feminists<sup>86</sup> have similarly argued that women need to be protected from pornography and its effects. As Williams and Strossen observe, in each of these cases, the call to protect them originates in a deeply problematic conception of women as fragile, as victims. As I demonstrated in Chapter Four, the constructs of femininity offered by magazines like *VOGUE* are frequently condemned for a variety of reasons, including their 'unreality' and their 'objectification' of women. This condemnation also assumes a model of women as victims, in need of protection from these 'dangerous' images. There is an underlying assumption that women are unable to negotiate these images productively: that they will not be able to distinguish reality from fantasy, for example. The situation for feminists is further complicated by the fact that these very sources of criticism that would seem to provide at least some of the pleasure women experience from reading *VOGUE*. A difficult question then arises: how is feminism to come to terms with women enjoying things that are not necessarily 'good' for them, either personally or within the broader feminist political project?

Williams has asked, in *Reading and Submission*: "What does it mean for women to be attracted by certain types of writing which may be against their feminist convictions?" (1989:11) To this very pertinent question, I would add another dimension: what does it mean to feminist critics for women (who may or may not identify as feminists) to be attracted by certain types of texts which may be against traditional feminist convictions? In the previous chapter, I touched briefly on this question in my rebuttal of the argument that women finding pleasure in popular cultural objects such as *VOGUE* are the product of patriarchal socialisation into false consciousness about what is pleasurable. In the present chapter, I will explore this question in more depth, through an exploration of one of the darker, more problematic, aspects of female reading pleasure: masochism. In Chapter Six, I will turn my attention to the equally complex problem of fetishism, both of the objects *VOGUE* promotes and the magazine itself. Through a detailed examination of these phenomena, I shall show the powerful ways

<sup>86</sup> Strossen is particularly concerned with Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988) *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality*, Organising Against Pornography: Minneapolis, and Dworkin (1981) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (op. cit).

they operate as textual tactics to engage the reader, and some of the strategies women readers employ to negotiate these. In so doing, I shall demonstrate that it is highly problematic for feminist critics, who may or may not read women's fashion magazines, to de-legitimise a form of women's cultural expression for the reason that it does not accord with their agenda of what is 'good' for women and what women *should* find pleasurable. In essence, I want to acknowledge here the potentially controversial nature of the pleasure some women gain from reading such magazines. Furthermore, I seek to challenge the idea that it matters much whether these magazines, and the enjoyment gained from reading them, is or is not 'good' for women.

As a methodological point, let me state from the outset that what follows is in no way intended as an orthodox psychoanalytic reading of masochism, of fetishism or of *VOGUE*. Necessarily, any discussion of masochism or fetishism must make substantial reference to the psychoanalytic framework in which these terms are commonly employed. Further, in the context of a discussion about negotiating texts, especially visual texts, any reading will owe a substantial debt to the work of the many feminist film and television theorists who have taken up psychoanalysis as a critical tool (Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Diana Fuss, for example). However, it is my view that, in some cases, psychoanalytic theory has been applied too rigidly as a critical tool. It is crucial to be aware of the limitations of such theory when applied outside of its clinical context and in the context of the assessment and explication of texts. A theory anchored in an understanding of subjectivity, which privileges the masculine<sup>87</sup> from the outset, cannot hope to be the sole critical framework through which questions of text, gender and femininity are explored. In the fluid intertextuality of which critical discourse is as much a part as the texts it studies, there are exciting opportunities within an interdisciplinary approach for better understanding the ways women negotiate texts. This discussion of masochism and fetishism will draw on some of these possibilities to re-read, and at times challenge, strictly Freudian accounts. The use of these Freudian frameworks is not intended as an uncritical acceptance of Freud's phallocentric position. Rather, I seek to appropriate his (problematic) understandings of masochism and fetishism and rework them to explain better women's engagement with them and, as a result, with *VOGUE*.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Orthodox Freudian understandings of development assume the male child's experience to be normal and, from this assumption, seek to pathologise the feminine experience as 'other' and deviant. Lacan, however, takes psychoanalysis beyond this already problematic assumption and casts woman as a 'lack'. See Lacan (1977a) *Écrits: A Selection* (op. cit.).

<sup>88</sup> There have been a number of substantial feminist challenges to the phallocentricity of Freud's and Lacan's accounts of femininity and female sexuality, to which I am unable to do justice here. See, for example, Rosi Braidotti (1994) *Nomadic subjects: embodiment and difference in contemporary feminist theory*. New York, Columbia UP; Grosz (1990, 1994a); Irigaray (1970, 1974), Kelly (1996); Klein (1975), Kristeva (1981) *Le langage, cet inconnu - une initiation à la linguistique*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil; MacCannell (1986), Mitchell (1971).

### Pleasure in pain

In the previous chapter, I discussed at length the question of identification in textual negotiation, and explored a variety of identificatory models offered by feminist critics in the quest to come to terms with the ways women read visual texts. One of the recurrent themes in this exploration was that of masochistic identification. Laura Mulvey had argued that the *only* two possibilities existing for the female spectator were either to assume a transvestite 'male' spectatorial position, or to identify masochistically with the female 'object' represented on the screen. Silvia Kolbowski described this as rendering the female spectator a "passive, masochistic statistic" (1990:140), and went on to represent the pleasure gained by female readers of women's fashion magazines as residing in "a masochistic alignment with an unattainable object of perfection that is culturally reinforced" (1990:142). In an attempt to divorce the pleasure women gain from reading fashion magazines from this masochistic position, Kolbowski developed a more heterogeneous understanding of identity. She contends that "pleasure . . . could be said to reside as much in the slippages of [identificatory] positions, the misalignments" (ibid) as in the "masochistic alignment" she has described. In reality, she attempts to dissociate reading pleasure and masochism, arguing that pleasure lies *wholly within* these other places. This is unsurprising: like most feminists, Kolbowski sees masochism as highly problematic for women. For her, as for many of her colleagues, the masochistic identificatory position is categorised as a site of passivity and subjugation, and must thus be rejected since it serves only to reinforce the prevailing patriarchal view of woman as a passive, dominatable commodity.

While understandable, this position is itself problematic, for it fails to consider that the whole point of masochism is pleasure, and that there may be women for whom a masochistic reading position is immensely gratifying. As Williams has noted, the problem with admitting this situation is that it gives rise to "the possibility that a woman might pleurably, actively, but nevertheless masochistically, identify with the representation of woman as spectacle" (1989:10-11). In order to come to terms with this possibility and its ramifications, I shall begin with a discussion of the concept of masochism and the divergent views of the critical corpus surrounding it. From there, I will move into an examination of the form and implications of a masochistic reading position. In so doing, I will demonstrate that this reading position is a very real and potent source of pleasure for readers of *VOGUE*, entirely consistent with the model of textual negotiation developed in the initial chapters of this thesis. Masochism, I will show, is a vital part of the identificatory processes involved in negotiating a text such as *VOGUE*.

In the popular understanding, a masochist is a person who submits to pain for the purpose of sexual arousal. The term masochism brings to mind the whips and chains of bondage and discipline and is often used (inappropriately, I would argue) to denote the passive member of a sadomasochistic partnership. Masochism was allied with femininity and passivity by Freud (1919 1957 SE Vol. XVII: 179-204). Subsequent critical discussion has

conflated it with femininity to such an extent that the terms are often seen as virtually interchangeable. For very legitimate and obvious reasons, feminists have long been critical of any practice which (re)positions women as submissive and passive, especially when the thing to which they are seen to submit is male violence. The unfortunate result has been that masochism has become a loaded term in feminist discourse. It is only recently that a number of feminist scholars (Parveen Adams, Teresa Brennan, Carol Siegel, Kaja Silverman, Linda Williams, among others) have begun to unpack the volatile package that is masochism, to understand what it is, and why its understanding is vital to an understanding of femininity, sexuality and the consumption of texts.

In his landmark essay *Masochism: On Coldness and Cruelty*, Gilles Deleuze encourages us to return to the writings of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (hereafter Masoch), the man whose name was given to the phenomenon, in order better to understand it. Although Masoch's original writings inspired the term, it is to Freud that most scholars owe their 'understanding' of masochism. For Freud (1924 1961 SE Vol. XIX), masochism is characterised by a libidinal relationship between the superego and the ego, manifest in the involution of the death drive upon itself. This not uncomplicated notion warrants brief elaboration here. In his early work, Freud had expounded the pleasure principle, suggesting that our lives are structured by a life instinct (*Eros*), which drives us to avoid everything dangerous, identified by things which are not pleasurable. These threats will easily be recognisable as things causing tension and the resultant sensation when tension is released is pleasure, our ultimate goal. Later, in his essay "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924 1957 SE Vol. XIX:159-172), Freud formulated his theory of the death instinct (*Thanatos*). In this essay he attempts to come to terms with the conflict between these two drives as it arises in the specific context of masochism. It is here that he moves away from the early assumption, outlined in "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905 1953 SE Vol. VII: 157-160), that masochism is simply a secondary reaction to sadism. He posits a theory of primary erotogenic masochism, founded on this turning of the death drive in on itself as a source of pleasure. He argues that there is a primary masochism in all people, which is made possible by a fusion of *Eros* and *Thanatos*. According to Freud, traces of the death drive will remain in the libido, enabling the experience of pleasure in pain, such as in a masochistic situation. Karmen MacKendrick argues very effectively that this tension between the drives is never really adequately resolved by Freud who "attempts to grasp the relation between pleasure (the release of tension) and pain (the increase of tension). The opposition simply will not hold still. Not only may tension-building be pleasurable, it is also the case that tension's release is not always pleasant" (1999:8). The result is that Freud's theories of *how* and *why* masochism arises are inconsistent and, rather than explaining its causes, serve primarily to label it as an affliction inherent in women and present in a few 'perverse' men.



Freud elaborated his notions of masochism as a perversion, most notably in the essay "A Child is Being Beaten" (1919 1957 SE Vol. XVII: 179-204), in which he describes the masochistic and sadistic fantasies of several young boys and girls. The children fantasise that a child is being beaten: in the case of the boys, this is themselves; in the case of the girls, it is another child. What Freud deems significant in the scenarios involving the boys is that these fantasies are representative of a twofold unconscious desire to be beaten by the father *and* to have passive (and therefore feminine) sexual relations with him, hence the masochistic pleasure in the beating. In the case of the girls, the situation is more complex because "the child being beaten is never the one producing the phantasy, but invariably another child". The phantasy that presents itself to consciousness is of *another child* being beaten." (Freud as cited in Brennan 1992:214, emphasis in original). In this case the fantasy becomes sadistic and the masochistic pleasure is thus retroactively inferred on the basis of sadistic pleasure in a sequence in which the girl is deemed to imagine that the father is actually beating her.

As Maria Marcus has noted in *A Taste for Pain* (1981), a long and distinguished list of scholars from Kraft-Ebbing to Freud have labelled masochism as perversion and psychopathy. Parveen Adams suggests that, for Freud, masochism is one of the perversions because it transgresses the Oedipal law governing family and society by representing a moment where the boy identifies as feminine, passive and homosexually attracted to the father (Adams 1989:253-55). In so doing, Adams has remarked, he effects a disavowal of sexual difference, which means that "the Oedipus complex is no longer the moment of sexual difference as is usual" (1989:252-53). She continues this line of argument to show that this transgression and disavowal are at the root of the formation of the fetish, a point to which I shall return in the next chapter. Freud's construction of masochism as a perversion, and of feminine masochism as its extremely passive manifestation, is grounded in a conception of the process by which subjectivity is formed which favours the male and posits the law of the father as supreme and natural. (cf. Freud *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, Part I: The Sexual Aberrations* 1905 1953 SE Vol. VII: 135-171). Although Freud revisited perversions in "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924 1961 SE Vol. XIX:159-172) and decreed that sadism and masochism differed substantially from the other perversions, such as homosexuality, he still maintained that a masochist was abnormal. Indeed, he strongly identified the masochistic position as feminine ("Femininity" 1933 1964 SE Vol. XXII:112-135) and indicative of women's social obligation to turn feelings of aggressiveness inward onto themselves, rather than expressing them outwardly as anger. Feminine masochism, a secondary by-product of primary erotogenic masochism, was the name given by Freud to the practice (largely by men) of assuming a submissive role in a sexual relationship. As Brennan has noted: "feminine masochism is the overtly sexual form of masochism in phantasy, and it parallels masochism in sexual reality. . . . In general, masochistic phantasies 'signify' that the subject is being placed in a 'characteristically female situation'." (1992:196). To the involution of the death drive,

Freud adds the factor of guilt in his understanding of feminine masochism. Thus, his conception of feminine masochism is of the assumption by a man of a submissive position in an attempt to atone for guilt, in particular for guilt associated with an inappropriate narcissistic object choice (the father) (cf. Brennan 1992:196-198). Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the masochistic subject position has been problematised and rejected by women as a desirable position for women.

### Who's on top?

It is my contention that the particular manner in which the term has been appropriated by psychoanalysis is at the root of much feminist objection to masochism. In returning to Masoch's work, as well as to Deleuze's insightful readings of it, I hope to show that a masochistic subject position need not be the terrible place for women it has previously been imagined to be. And even if it is disadvantageous to women, it is nonetheless also a source of pleasure for many women. One of the primary problems for feminists with the concept of masochism is that it puts a woman in a position of subjugation and submission. For this, we have Freud to thank, for it was he who articulated the idea that to assume a masochistic position was to assume what Brennan called a "characteristically female situation" (1992:196). It was also Freud who represented sadism and masochism as a pair of binary opposites, the latter being for him a passive submission to the former (Freud 1905 1953, op.cit., Marcus 1981, Deleuze 1991).

The fact that masochism has come to stand for a feminine, and therefore passive, subject position is curious for two reasons. Firstly, in Masoch's own writing, as Deleuze, Marcus and MacKendrick have all duly remarked, the 'submissive' role was filled by a man. Second, as Deleuze, Marcus, Siegel and Williams have shown, the role of the 'submissive' is an active, not a passive, role. Masoch's novels feature men who have chosen to submit voluntarily to a state of virtual slavery to the women they love. Deleuze remarks that this ideal woman-dominatrix is "summed up in the words cold-maternal-severe, icy-sentimental-cruel" (1991:51) and that it is precisely on account of these qualities that she is adored by the masochist. In Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, for example, Severin submits to beating, humiliation, disregard, infidelity and contempt from his lover Wanda. His infatuation with her increases exponentially with her level of abuse, until he finally reaches a breaking point when she steps beyond the boundary of mistress-to-mentor and into the domain of active sadist, by having him beaten in front of her by her Greek lover and then leaving him. A typical Freudian reading of this fantasy of being beaten by a woman sees the woman as a smokescreen behind which the image of the father is always present.<sup>89</sup> This is consistent with Freud's argument that what the man/boy must atone for in the masochistic act is an inappropriate homoerotic attachment to

<sup>89</sup> For Lacan (1977a), the woman is seen as a veiled phallus in this scenario.

the father. Deleuze challenges this reading, arguing that the masochist's ideal woman is in fact a representation of the oral mother, "the idea of coldness, solicitude and death, between the uterine mother and the Oedipal mother" (1991:55) and that, in being beaten by this ideal woman, he is in fact being beaten by the oral mother *not* the father, as Freud suggests. He argues that the father is *incorporated* in the man and that "what the subject atones for is his resemblance to the father and the father's likeness in him: the formula of masochism is the humiliated father" (1991:60). Thus rather than atoning for the sin of desiring the father, the man being beaten is atoning for the sin of *being like* the father.<sup>90</sup> Deleuze writes:

So, when we are told that the character who does the beating in masochism is [really] the father, we are entitled to ask: who in reality is being beaten? Where is the father hidden? Could it not be in the person who is being beaten? The masochist feels guilty, he asks to be beaten, he expiates, but why and for what crime? Is it not precisely the father image in him that is miniaturized [sic], beaten, ridiculed and humiliated? (1991:60).

Deleuze's radical reconception of the relationship between the man and the woman who beats him is significant particularly because, in arguing that the woman beating is actually the mother and not the father, he signals a transference of paternal function (discipline, order, authority) to the maternal figure. In so doing, the father figure is nullified, so that his reading of the masochistic act disrupts the binary opposition of active-masculine and passive-feminine. Further, in demonstrating that masochism is in fact an exaltation of the mother and not the father, he distinguishes it markedly from sadism which, according to both his own and Freud's reading, "is in every sense an active negation of the mother and an exaltation of the father who is beyond all laws" (ibid). Deleuze believes that Freud perpetuated a fallacious belief in a "sado-masochistic entity" (1991:59) as a result of which masochism has come to be seen as the feminine, passive opposite of the virile, active, masculine practice of sadism. Here, then, Deleuze presents us with the situation of a man choosing voluntarily to submit to a woman, and a refutation of the suggestion that the woman represents the father when the man assumes a 'feminine' position of submission. He argues that the contractual nature of a masochist's relationship with his dominatrix is such that the traditional role of woman as object is reversed, with "the contract in masochism . . . making the woman into the party with whom the contract is entered into" (1991:92). Furthermore, he suggests that "the function of the masochistic contract is to invest the mother-image with the symbolic power of the law" (1991:75), thus completing the transference of authority from the father to the mother. This reading of masochism as a contractual relationship in which man is the object and woman in possession of authority further problematises Freud's account of the masochistic subject position as feminine.

<sup>90</sup> However, as Diana Fuss's (1992) essay *Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look*, discussed in Chapter Four, demonstrates, desiring and being like are not necessarily as mutually exclusive as either Freud or Deleuze hold them to be. I shall return to this point later in this discussion.

The question of the passivity or otherwise of the masochistic subject position remains, regardless of whether it is gendered as masculine or feminine. A number of authors have gone to great lengths to demonstrate the extent to which the masochist is, in fact, an active participant in interactions with a dominatrix-mistress. Deleuze's own work discusses the fact that, in the typical masochistic scenario, the masochist must teach the mistress how to dominate him, and in fact dictates the terms of the contract by which he is bound to her. He argues that in *Venus in Furs* Severin moulds Wanda into the cruel, cold, severe woman he wants her to be, initially against her will, but eventually to the extent that she becomes a complete sadist and says to him "if I now take pleasure in hurting and tormenting you, it is entirely your fault. You have made me what I am" (Masoch 1989:260). Carol Siegel has pointed to the voluntary nature of masochistic submission as a source of power:

if masochism is consciously chosen, it includes access to power. Not only do masochists often manipulate and even control others who act in response to their desires, they also always satisfy their desires in defiance of the law that would coerce or constrain them (1993:143).

The masochist, she argues, has power over the person with whom he or she enters into a relationship, by dictating the terms on which the relationship will take place. Siegel and Deleuze both insist on the separateness of sadism and masochism, demonstrating that what a sadist wants to inflict, a masochist does not necessarily wish to endure, and vice-versa. The masochist has a clearly defined notion of the nature of the pain and humiliation to be received. Marcus (1981) goes further, pointing to the self-centredness of masochism, and the extent to which the masochist is able to *define pleasure*, within the masochistic relationship, by imposing his or her own concept of pleasure on the dominatrix-torturer, quite often against the other person's will (as was certainly the case for Wanda, when Severin first asked her to beat him). Williams's (1989) own analysis of Marcus highlights the extent to which a masochistic woman is able to define pleasure, since it is her desire for 'non-agency' and submission that ultimately dominates the exchange between lovers.

Thus, it becomes clear that, just as masochism is not inherently feminine, nor is it essentially passive. It is a situation in which the masochist actively imposes a desire for submission on a partner not necessarily inclined to dominate. But because the trilogy passive-feminine-masochistic can be broken apart, it does not necessarily follow that masochism is unproblematic for women. Masochism appears to be a potentially disadvantageous situation for women regardless. Women who are dominatrices are effectively the *objects* of an active male fantasy, while those who are actively directing the fantasy are seeking to become the *objects* of male violence and oppression.<sup>91</sup> In real-life, the majority of submissives are men

<sup>91</sup> This situation is necessarily complicated in the case of a homosexual relationship where the power distribution is not related to gender *per se*. For an excellent discussion of the potentially subversive appropriation of S & M practices by lesbians, see Adams (1989) *Of female bondage*.

(who seek dominatrixes),<sup>92</sup> but there are nonetheless politically problematic implications for a woman participating in a masochistic relationship in either capacity. The problematic ramifications of female masochism *per se* have been addressed by a number of writers (Adams 1989; MacKendrick 1999; Marcus 1981; Williams 1989) and remain outside of the scope of this study. In the present context, what I am seeking to understand are the consequences for women readers of reading masochistic texts, and of reading texts masochistically. In order to better understand the problem of masochistic identification with a text, a further brief examination of the nature of masochism is required before moving on to a discussion of the role it might play as both textual tactic and reading strategy.

Following Theodore Reik's important *Masochism in Sex and Society* (1962), Deleuze has outlined the formal characteristics of masochism as: fantasy experienced for its own sake; suspense; demonstration or exhibitionism; and provocation of punishment to resolve anxiety. To this list, Deleuze adds a fifth, his notion of contractual relations, as discussed above. If these definitional boundaries are accepted, then masochism is a very particular kind of pleasure-seeking. The masochist fantasises about domination and, according to Deleuze, this fantasy has come about through a disavowal of reality that has transposed it into fantasy. Insofar as the critical aspect of suspense is concerned, he writes that: "the masochist waits for pleasure as something that is bound to be late, and expects pain as the condition that will finally ensure (both physically and morally) the advent of pleasure. He therefore postpones pleasure in the expectation of the pain which will make gratification possible" (1991:71). As both Deleuze and Adams argue, this combination of disavowal and suspense is a fertile breeding ground for fetishes, and the fetish plays a critical role in the fantasy world of the masochist. The need to solicit punishment to permit a resolution of the tension established and to permit enjoyment of the forbidden fruit, combined with the need to do this publicly and explicitly, either through a formal or informal contractual relationship, make masochism a highly controlled, regulated form of pleasure. Masochism is not about a spontaneous whim to throw oneself at the mercy of a torturer: it is a carefully orchestrated plan in which the roles played by the respective parties are clearly defined, and, as Kathy O'Dell observes, the participants have "the freedom to walk out of their temporarily incarcerating circumstances" (1998:6). Furthermore, as German film-maker Monika Treut remarks, even when masochism involves "moments of actual violence . . . it is in fact fantasy that is its determining factor. Fantasy alone is the birthplace of masochism" (1995:107). Reik had earlier made a similar observation, arguing that: "Those who have a weakly developed fantasy, or none at all, show no tendency toward becoming masochists" (1962:61). Thus, the masochist enters into a consensual, clearly defined and temporary submission, as an active fulfilment of fantasy.

<sup>92</sup> For evidence of this fact, see, for example, Linda Williams (1989) *Hard Core*, Maria Marcus (1981) *A Taste for Pain*, and The Prostitute's Collective of Victoria "Power Tricks" in *Working Girl* 1.0.3 October 2000:5.

### Reading masochism and masochistic reading

An understanding of masochism is important to reading *VOGUE* for two reasons. In the first instance, the magazine – as I will show, a text with a masochistic aesthetic, following many of the structures, thematic and stylistic conventions of literary masochism. Secondly, it is also a text with which many readers identify and engage masochistically. As the following analysis of *VOGUE* will reveal, these masochistic tendencies further reinforce the cultural and linguistic differences in approach to fantasy outlined in the previous chapter. Further, I will demonstrate that a masochistic reading of *VOGUE* is a prime example of the text-reader relationship as precisely the *contest* I described it as being in Chapter One. Returning to the framework of strategies and tactics outlined earlier, I propose to show how the text employs a masochistic aesthetic as textual tactic to impose an agenda, along with the ways in which the reader uses masochism as strategy to extract a preferred reading position from the text.

In her insightful discussion of literary masochism, “The Literary Eroticisation of the Death Drive” (1999), MacKendrick argues that the writings of Masoch are written in a very particular style. Drawing on Deleuze’s analysis of Masoch’s writing, she identifies a number of stylistic elements that contribute to the ‘stifling’ atmosphere of a masochistic text: a florid, literary style of writing; an obsession with ‘arrested movement’ and *tableaux vivants*; a fascination with interior design, women’s clothing and other aesthetic aspects of the fantasy scenarios; and a lack of resolution or climax, the ‘suspense’ and waiting that both Deleuze and Reik identify as central to masochism. MacKendrick clearly distinguishes this discussion of masochism as a narrative structure from masochistic practice, suggesting that many masochists would not, in practice, find Masoch’s work erotic, nor would they find his fantasies satisfying if enacted. Masoch’s work is littered with scenes of paralysed desire, of things which are about to happen but which never do. MacKendrick observes that as pornography (as it is sometimes alleged to be) it is a dismal failure. It does not deliver, or even really titillate: rather, it is like a slide-show of elaborate fantasies in which the erotic is never quite permitted to surface, in which the masochist is a pathetic figure unable to take the final step towards consummating the desire he has so carefully constructed.

In his discussion of Masoch’s doctrine of ‘supersensualism’, Deleuze observes that Masoch creates elaborate fantasy *tableaux vivants* heavily indebted to the paintings he admires. The term ‘supersensualism’, Deleuze suggests, is used “to indicate [a] cultural state of transmuted sensuality; this explains why he finds in works of art the source and inspiration of his loves” (1991:69). He opposes movement, connotative of sensuality, with arrested movement, a hallmark of ‘supersensualism’, and argues that this feature is consistent with the centrality of waiting, suspense and delayed gratification in the masochist’s repertoire of pleasure. MacKendrick adds to this the fact that explicitly erotic description is virtually absent from Masoch’s work, forcing the reader to participate in the same delayed gratification as it depicts: any pleasure gained from the reading must come from the suspense itself.



Masoch's notion of 'supersensualism' may hold the key to understanding how it is that the images of provocatively posed, sometimes scantily dressed women, in the fantasy scenarios of *VOGUE*, are not erotic to many readers. While accepting Fuss's argument that women readers can simultaneously desire and desire to become the women who adorn the pages of *VOGUE*, I do not accept that it is the primary function of the magazine to eroticise female bodies in a way that actively solicits a physical response of desire, as is the case with pornography. By presenting women's bodies (or parts thereof) as suspended in elaborate fantasy scenarios, unable to satisfy the desire these settings connote, *VOGUE* makes the interesting tactical manoeuvre of refusing the reader any immediate gratification in the image. If the image is to provide pleasure, this can only come from the masochist's supersensualist attachment to a frozen possibility. By introducing a tactic (scenarios of suspended erotic dominance) which immediately positions the reader as submissive to the text, *VOGUE* is able to upset the power possessed by the reader at the outset of the textual interaction. The reader is then faced with a difficult choice. She can choose to identify *with* the image by fantasising that she is the erotic dominant object (as I demonstrated earlier, the dominatrix is the *object* of the masochist's fantasy, not the other way around). In so doing, she is participating in a form of *identificatory* masochism. Alternatively, she can choose to identify with the unseen, implied subject of the domination, the submissive. The submissive is not an object in the way that the dominatrix has been constructed, but is nonetheless in an *actual* masochistic scenario. In essence, there are two possible identificatory positions in reading a text of masochism, each with its own incumbent problems for women. In the one, woman is object, in the other she is submissive. I propose to deal with each in turn.

Many of the images in *VOGUE* portray cold, severe looking women who appear lifeless in their photographic perfection. They are presented in highly stylised environments, in artificial scenarios where there is little or no suggestion of continuity or resolution of the situation in which they are posed. One such image is "*et la statue animée*" (Figure 5.1) from a fashion shoot entitled "*Dans l'œil des poètes*"<sup>93</sup> (*VOGUE Paris*, Mai 1998:126). This fashion spread was commissioned by the magazine and photographed by Michael Thompson as homage to both surrealism and the women of the 'age d'or' of French cinema. The model is enveloped in a creation of designer Issey Miyake's that suggests fragility and femininity with its delicate folds of voile-organza. The folds of the fabric enclose her in such a way as to suggest that she is immobile, at least in part as a result of being bound up in this garment, yet they also fall around her feet in the classical folds of the dress of the Virgin Mary. Her plastered hair and dramatically pale makeup, along with the pose into which she has been arranged, are made even more striking by the decision to photograph her in black-and-white (of the ten photographs in the story, only three are in colour). She is a picture of cold, lifeless perfection, frozen mid-movement for the suspended pleasure of the spectator. Her title "*la statue animée*"

<sup>93</sup> "*and the animated statue*"; "*In the eye of the poets*".

re 5 1 from "Dans l'oeil des poètes"

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conveys exactly the mix of live woman and art object she has been designed to represent. Again, the level of comfort with fantasy expressed by *VOGUE Paris* is remarkable. There is no suggestion that the reader ought to want to be a statue *per se*, but there is certainly the opportunity for the reader to identify with her as the sublime, statuesque incarnation of the severe beauty sought by the masochist. Masoch's women, as Deleuze demonstrates at length, are not cruel but cold, not sadistic but severe. This woman is the very epitome of the icy beauty Masoch's heroes desire: she is also the kind of woman many readers may want to be — powerful and adored as a beautiful object.

A woman with a riding crop has equally been transformed from an equestrian icon into an exotic, powerful fantasy in Figure 5.2. This image is taken from a selection produced by *VOGUE Paris* in collaboration with De Beers diamonds, for a special feature on diamonds (Décembre 1997/Janvier 1998: 20 page insert between pp103-104). Again, black and white have been chosen to heighten the contrasts and highlight the sharp lines of the photograph. The model's flexed thumb which bends the riding crop, the end of which is concealed in her (diamond-clad) hand, and the saddle over her arm suggest that for all her cool, aristocratic charm, here is a woman who is ready to beat and mount you. Fixing the camera (and so the reader) front-on with her cold stare and expressionless face, eyebrows concealed by the brim of her helmet, she dares the reader to give her the opportunity to unleash herself. The clean lines and severe, classical styling of her riding outfit, adorned with diamonds and completed by the mandatory long, black, leather boots, convey a message of a woman who is, and who wants to remain, in control. They are also connotative of the European upper classes at play on horseback (fox hunting, or playing polo, for example), adding to the fantasy of power by tapping into social status and wealth as sources of dominance and control. The addition of the diamonds does more than simply promote the product being advertised. Diamonds are a sign of the woman's femininity, precisely the point of the feature, which depicts women in a variety of powerful roles sporting 'feminine' diamonds. The stylist, Franceline Prat, and the photographer, Matthew Donaldson, have made the choice to depict this woman as the object of a masochist's fantasies. They could equally have chosen to show her on a farm in jeans and workboots and a flannelette shirt beside a horse. Instead, the scene has been created to tap into the fantasy of a dominant, yet feminine woman, coolly sophisticated and able to master any beast (even a horse) on her own. She is unafraid to use her wealth, status and beauty to obtain what she wants. The undercurrent of sexual domination is designed to present the advertised products (a brooch, a bracelet and two rings, all with diamonds and platinum) as sexy, desirable and appropriate to the woman who sees herself in control. The choice to dress her in clothing so directly linked to the upper classes is designed to appeal to the social aspirant in her: with a De Beers diamond, she might even pass as one of them. Such an advertising strategy is understandable; *VOGUE's* target demographic world wide is the kind of women who are on an upward social trajectory, can afford to buy their own



diamonds, and who need not wait for the traditional marriage proposal to acquire one. Once again, this woman is poised to act, but her passive expression suggests she is waiting for direction (from her slave?) to tell her what to do next. What both images demonstrate is a masochistic aesthetic clearly at work in *VOGUE Paris*'s constructions of fantasy. Readers are invited to assume a position of either identification with or submission to idealised images of masochistic beauty.

At the other end of the masochistic spectrum are the images of pain and submission that feature prominently in *VOGUE*. The image of a woman's feet with red leather sandals joined at the ankles by her red panties and roasting on a barbecue is a case in point (Figure 5.3, *VOGUE Australia*, September 1997:139). It prompts the question Williams asked: "perhaps we should rather be talking about a sadistic *text* which engenders a masochistic reader?" (1989:11, emphasis in original). While I will follow Deleuze rejecting the assumption that sadism is what a masochist ultimately seeks, it is worth dwelling for a moment on Williams' exploration of the idea of a masochistic reader. She draws on Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* to formulate a theory of masochistic reading pleasure centred on his notion of ecstasy (*jouissance*).<sup>94</sup> She argues that Barthes's understanding of ecstasy in the act of reading, in particular his statement that a text of bliss "imposes a state of loss" (in Williams 1989:12), is at the core of the pleasure gained by reading masochistically. The masochist, Williams contends, is someone who desires to experience a loss of agency. Discussing *A Taste for Pain* (Marcus, op cit.), she observes that for Marcus, "her desire was to be 'done to'; to find a man who would steal her agency" (1989:13), and cites Marcus herself as saying she wanted to be "someone who wasn't anything in herself, who did not deal with

This understanding of submission is particularly useful in the present context, for it allows us to begin to understand *why* women might want to identify with texts masochistically. In a world where women are increasingly expected to shoulder the responsibilities of career, family, finances and relationships (including the sex in their relationships); where they are told that they should be able to negotiate all of these things successfully, is it really any wonder that some fantasise about loss of agency? Of course, one must already have something to be able to fantasise about losing it. As previously established, readers of *VOGUE*, by virtue of their economic, professional and educational status, have a relatively high degree of control over their lives and destinies. Even if they cannot afford the \$20,000 couture dresses adorning the pages of *VOGUE*, anyone who can afford to spend \$7 or more on a magazine is hardly on the bread line. In the context of a cultural object, whose primary function for many readers is one of escapism and fantasy, it is unsurprising that some women choose to indulge their masochistic fantasies by reading such a magazine. Whether they identify with images of

<sup>94</sup> While I have preferred in earlier chapters to retain the original French term *jouissance* when speaking of Barthes's distinction between *plaisir* and *jouissance*, I will use Williams's own terminology 'ecstasy' in this context to facilitate an understanding of her concept of abandonment to textual ecstasy.



Dolce & Gabbana  
swimsuit  
glasses from  
Prada, \$60  
Bjorn Borg  
sneakers  
Donna May  
sneakers, \$180  
Kevin Murphy  
sneakers  
Carroll O'Connor  
sneakers, bare all  
sneakers Sun Care  
sneakers High  
Protection SPF15+



Figure 5.3 from "Bondi Bather"



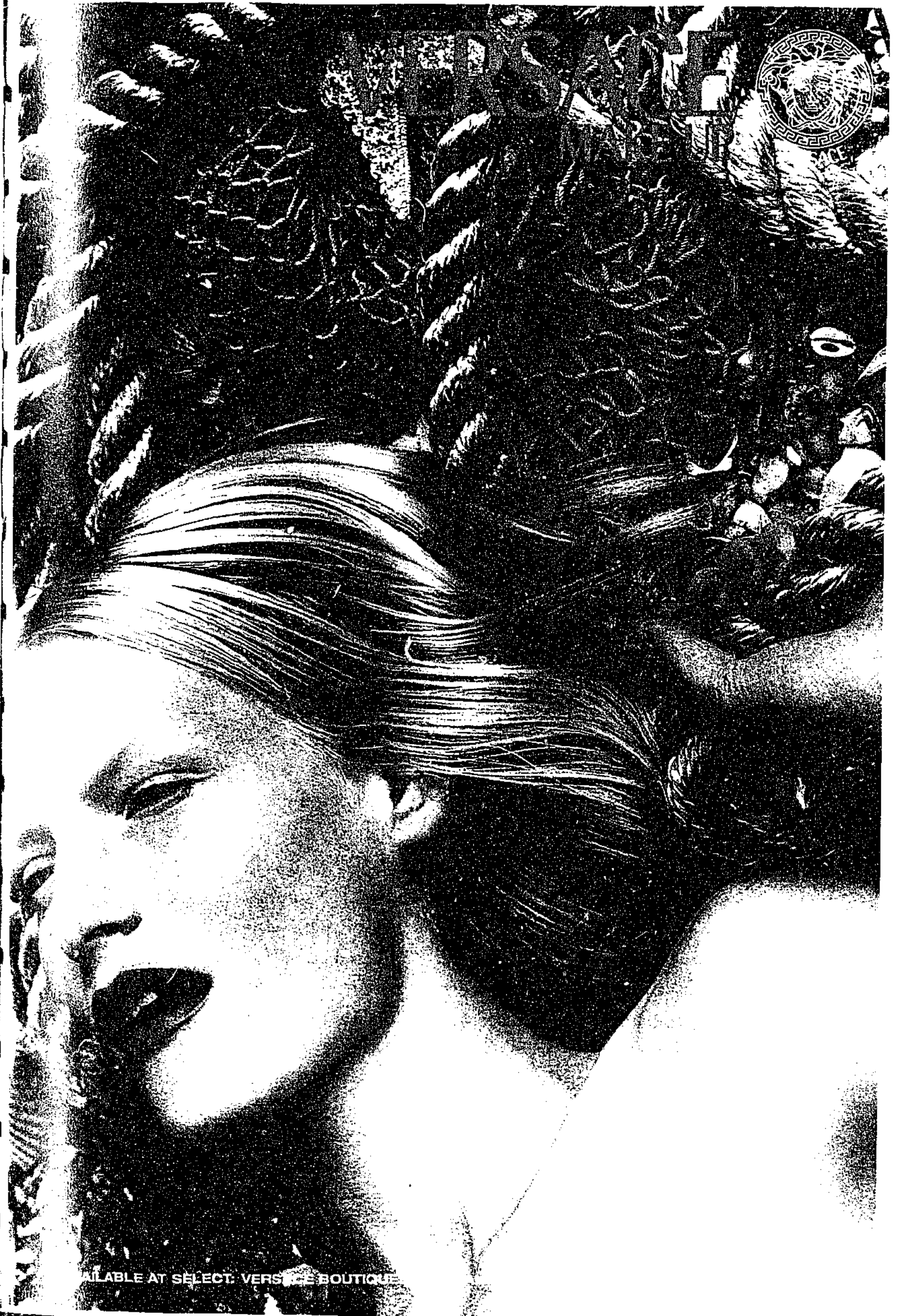
women whose agency has been suspended by being punished, subjected to pain or restrained, or with images of women as objects, devoid of any agency at all, the images can be a powerful source of pleasure for women seeking to escape the burdens and responsibilities of their everyday lives. It is important to bear in mind the voluntary nature of masochism. The masochist's pleasure is derived from being put into a situation she *actively* desires. Who are we, as feminist scholars, to tell her that her active desire to identify masochistically with images of submissive women is illegitimate? Williams has remarked that feminists have long balked at an admission that practices which temporarily compromise a woman's subjectivity could be pleasurable. She calls on feminists to approach this subject from a new angle:

Perhaps the question of masochism for feminists is that of pleasure as danger, of why sexual danger should be pleasurable, rather than one which attempts to secure safe pleasures despite the dangers of the sexual minefield (1989:16).

This returns us to my original contention that the focus of a discussion of women's magazines should be *why* women enjoy reading magazines that portray them as submissive, unachievably perfect, objects. It is time to move beyond an analysis centred on didactic proscription of them because they contain what many feminists perceive to be negative images of women. The following readings of some images from *VOGUE* will, I hope, show that for some readers there is much pleasure in an escape to pain and submission.

Returning to the striking image of the woman's feet and underpants being barbecued (Figure 5.3), there can be no doubt that exposing one's feet to an open flame, even if clad in a pair of \$180 red sandals, is painful. However, what we see in this image is the suggestion of burning, the suspended promise of the pleasure arising from the danger of naked bodies in proximity to a naked flame. The woman's feet are not actually in contact with the flame, but there is certainly the implication that they will be if she does not behave. A disciplinary scorching in the flame is the promise lingering in the scene. Further to the promise of punishment is the threat of unconsensual sex. The image of panties around a woman's ankles is suggestive of the discourse of pornography, where the implication is always that the underpants have been removed against the woman's will for the man's pleasure. It also draws heavily on the recurrence of this image in Japanese manga cartoons, which often involve depictions of extreme sexual violence and gang rapes, the scene usually closing with a beaten, defeated girl in the gutter with her pants slung around her ankles. This motif has been picked up in the world of underground art and music, and is frequently displayed as a kind of calling card of the 'success' of a man, or a group of men (in dominating a woman).<sup>95</sup> The

<sup>95</sup> For examples of the recurrence of the image of the girl with the underpants around her ankles, see, for example the cover and tour poster art of rock group "Guns'n'Roses" for their *Appetite for Destruction* album, or a number of Japanese manga cartoons in which it is commonly referred to as the 'manga hentai panty shot'. Koa Magazines in Japan publish *Hard Series*, which frequently contains this image. For additional examples, see <http://www.japaneserape.com/>, <http://www.cartoonsnude.com/hentai-ef/manga-hentai-ef.html>, <http://www.txexm.com/links/RAPE.htm>. For an excellent discussion of these images, see Matthew Thom (Associate Professor of Cartoon and Comic Art, Kyoto Seika University, Japan) "What Japanese Girls do with Manga and Why", at <http://www.ky.xaxn.ne.jp/~matt/jaws.html>, 10/07/1997.



AVAILABLE AT SELECT VERSACE BOUTIQUE

image of a woman's face. At the most primal level, the image is reminiscent of the swollen, red female labia and of the woman's mouth as she moans with pleasure. Her equally red fingernails tell the viewer that this woman is perhaps not as innocent as first thought: she is a siren, a sexual woman. Maybe she is just playing at being tied up as a helpless mermaid. And maybe the reader would like to escape to her playground for a moment, and imagine herself as a siren of the sea, abandoning herself to a man who will have his way with her. The promise of Versace make-up is far more than simply a promise of physical beauty, it is a promise of an ecstatic fantasy universe where, to paraphrase Williams, identity dissolves and she is transported.

Images of submission are widespread in *VOGUE*, particularly in *VOGUE Paris*. In the Chapter Seven I shall discuss in detail the very different approaches to sexuality, sex and power taken by French and Anglophone feminists in the past thirty years. At this juncture, it suffices to note that images of submission and sexual abandonment are more abundant in *VOGUE Paris* than in either the American or Australian editions of the magazine, probably because French women seem to have fewer concerns about the political implications of assuming a submissive sexual identity. In essence, sexual personae are very much seen as roles to be adopted, and there is little or no suggestion in the French context that, because a woman might enjoy being 'taken' or 'dominated' sexually, she sees herself as submissive to men. On the contrary, her ability to take on the role of sexual submissiveness only reinforces her power to manipulate and control men through her sexual identity. This is a sophisticated kind of masochistic lifestyle choice, which for some women is restricted to the bedroom and for others has a broader scope. Regardless of the circumstances, the woman in question is always directing the masochistic exchange by deliberately playing at submission to further her own personal or political end.

The image of a woman with her head thrown back in rapturous ecstasy, gently caressing her exposed neck and décolletage as she waits for her lover, (assumed, in this context to be a man) to possess and satisfy her, is a common motif in advertising, used to sell a variety of commodities from chocolate to hair shampoo. The advertisement for Baccarat crystal jewellery in Figure 5.5 (*VOGUE Paris*, November 1998) draws on the idea of vampiric possession, which Fuss (1992) has noted, is very common in fashion photography. The exposed neck and cleavage make her appear vulnerable and willing, her clothing slipping from her shoulders as she voluntarily abandons herself to pleasure. The black-and-white photograph has been retouched in colour, giving the appearance of an older image, reminiscent of early sepia and black-and-white portraits where blushing cheeks and lips were coloured in after photofinishing. Here, this technique serves to emphasise the redness of the lips, the blush of her cheeks and the cool blue-grey of her eyelids, closed in ecstasy. It also highlights her artificially red hair. Red-headed women have long been constructed in the



La beauté n'est pas raisonnable.

*Baccarat*

Bague Médicis

En vente dans les boutiques Baccarat à Paris - Lyon - Bordeaux - Nancy - Baccarat.  
et chez les distributeurs agréés : 01 47 70 64 30



iconography of desire as untamed beasts, in possession of a voracious sexual appetite and fiery, passionate nature. The main purpose of the colouring technique (in advertising terms) is surely to focus attention in the image on the large pink crystal in the ring adorning the woman's middle finger. But the caption "la beauté n'est pas raisonnable"<sup>96</sup> reinforces the subtext of abandonment, through its implication that nobody could seriously be expected to resist something as beautiful as this Baccarat crystal ring, or the woman wearing it. License is given the reader to consume the ring and the woman, with a level of passion considered 'unreasonable' in polite society, on account of their extreme beauty. Further, the advertisement can also be read as suggesting that the beauty of the ring is so great that the woman has surrendered herself to it, thus inviting the woman consumer to see her own longing to spend money on this ring as entirely natural, given its exquisite nature. The reader is encouraged to identify with the beautiful, sensual woman on two levels: first, the identification takes place in terms of fantasising that she herself is the beautiful woman who will become irresistible to men once she owns the ring; second, her desire to purchase the (extremely expensive) object is normalised by suggesting that another woman has been seduced by it also. The reader is encouraged to identify with this woman and to believe that her own attraction to the ring is a mark of her sensuous nature.

Another, very provocative image of submission is that of an Asian woman staring into space as a man's hand grabs at her kimono-style gown as if to undress her (Figure 5.6 from *VOGUE Paris*, April 1997:140). In this image, the model appears neither to welcome nor to reject these advances. She is still, like a statue, and the heavy black makeup in the corners of her eyes suggests sleepiness on her part. With hair spread out against the tatami mat on which she appears to be lying, she is styled as ready, available and unlikely to object to the man's advances. The choice of red lipstick, long red fingernails on her one visible hand, and red watch bands, combined with the deep burgundy coloured gown, suggest that while she may present initially as cool and submissive, there is a passion burning inside her. Matthew Donaldson's photograph is very reminiscent of Helmut Newton's style, indeed it resembles a Newton advertisement for Tag Heuer watches, in which a man stood behind a woman with his hand slipped inside her bathrobe, fondling her breast, the watch visible on one wrist<sup>97</sup>. That image met with considerable hostility from feminists. No doubt this shot from *VOGUE Paris* would also. The name of the story, 'Le sexe des montres' plays on the double meaning of the word 'sexe' in French, which can mean both 'sex' and 'genitals', thereby imbuing watches with a kind of immediate phallic power-status. The whole shoot is styled according to a Japanese minimalist aesthetic and features tatami matting, sushi platters, kimonos and rice-paper walls

<sup>96</sup> "Beauty is not reasonable"

<sup>97</sup> In *Bad Girls*, Catherine Lumby discusses the furore which followed the publication of this advertisement in several major Australian daily newspapers, and the pressure from feminist groups which led to the Fairfax media group withdrawing it from publication in subsequent editions.



# LE SEXE DES MONTRES



in other shots. The fact that the model is Asian presents a further complicating factor, as it taps into a trend, especially in pornography, which represents Asian women as sexually exotic and sexually submissive. The hand reaching for her kimono is obviously Caucasian and male (its hairiness in striking opposition to her smooth, porcelain skin), thus seemingly legitimising the possession of exoticised Asian beauty by the Western man.

While the image of a woman in the throes of passion in the Baccarat crystal advertisement is 'sexually 'dangerous', to borrow William's terminology, its appeal residing precisely in the dangerous moment of submission to another, the image of the Asian model is dangerous for a variety of additional reasons. Yes, women may fantasise about being possessed sexually, even against their will — this is the excitement of sexual danger to which Williams alludes. Some Asian readers of the magazine might identify positively with the image in this way. But this image is not simply an image of a beautiful woman who happens to be Asian; rather, it is an image of an Asian woman who happens to be beautiful and, in that context, it entails an exoticisation of her presumed sexual 'cooperativeness' at which many Australian and American readers would balk. It is significant that this image appeared in France, a nation where the myth of a 'French people', descended from centuries-old lineage and unadulterated by immigration, is still alive and well. While it has its own ethnic melting pot, through immigration from its former colonies, including those in Indochina, France is not a multicultural nation, born of immigrants, like United States or Australia. To a large extent, Asians are still an exotic other, rather than an everyday reality, for the average French person. In this context, an image such as this one really is may well be all about fantasy much as the preceding images. If there were letters objecting it, the magazine chose not to publish them in subsequent editions. It is difficult to imagine this image appearing in either American or Australian *VOGUE*, even more difficult to imagine that it would not generate a flood of hostile letters from readers, some of which would be published in later editions. It illustrates the extent to which any kind of fantasy image, masochistic or otherwise, must be considered in the cultural context for which it was intended. This is not to suggest that we cannot be offended or angered by it; rather, that before we judge the women who read it — quite possibly pleurably — we stop to consider whether and how the context in which it was created differs from our own.

This is difficult territory to negotiate. The lines between the pornographic and the erotic, and representation and exploitation, are difficult to draw<sup>98</sup>. Feminism must accept, name and encourage the expression of women's fantasies as part of a political project that forces an acknowledgment of women as *actively* sexual beings, even when individual feminists do not necessarily approve of the content of those fantasies. Yet, at the same time, it is equally important to be mindful of the women — Asian women, women who choose to

<sup>98</sup> For a particularly erudite discussion of the difficulties in drawing these lines in the context of the project to liberate female sexuality, see Williams (1994b) *What do I See? What do I Want?*

wear black leather boots, women who ride horses, red-haired women, all the other women — whose personal integrity and security is compromised as a result of assumptions about their sexual availability promoted by images of this kind. In suggesting that women as readers may employ masochism as a reading strategy, so as to permit them to negotiate the text as *fantasy*, I have no wish to suggest that this strategy is without pitfalls. On the contrary, the pitfalls are many and varied. However, I do submit that these are two separate issues. *What* women read and whether it has potentially negative political consequences is not the same object of inquiry as *why* women enjoy reading it.

I have demonstrated in this reading of masochism, in relation to *VOGUE*, that one of the reasons some women enjoy reading the magazine is precisely because it allows them to imagine themselves assuming a variety of subject- and object-positions that are politically deeply problematic: positions many of them would reject outright in their professional and personal lives, but that they nonetheless fantasise about occupying. While masochistic identification has been shown to be located predominantly in the realm of fantasy, I have acknowledged that the lines between fantasy and reality can become blurred for readers and that this may have disturbing consequences. Doubtless, there are readers for whom the masochistic subject position is too comfortable — not so much a fantasy as a replication of their actual approach to life. At such a point, it may have become oppressive, but I have shown that a masochistic aesthetic need not necessarily oppress women. At the same time, I have also acknowledged that it is difficult for a woman in masochistic interaction with a man not to be perceived as either submissive to him or constructed by him. Moreover, I have demonstrated that a masochistic reading position can provide women with great pleasure, but that the line between pleasure and pain, between consensual submission and nonconsensual abuse, is difficult to negotiate successfully. What happens when women take the next step, and go beyond fantasising about playing the roles depicted in *VOGUE*, to the level of wanting to own the objects it promotes? In the next chapter I will discuss the problem of fetishistic identification, exploring the extent to which such a practice is simultaneously empowering and disempowering, focusing on the capacity of women to fetishise actively different objects such as shoes, wedding dresses and even the magazine itself.

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How to Shop

chapter six

the object

of her

Perfect Evening Locks  
Best Day Dresses

The Newest Shoes

desires

GET LINDA  
FAT  
Dieting  
Post  
Fen/phe

FUNNY  
FAC  
TRIUMPH  
OF THE  
QUIRKY  
MODE



Fantasy in reading *VOGUE* is not restricted to questions of submission and dominance. A variety of other modes of engagement of fantasy exist, one of the most prevalent of which is the fetishisation of objects. This chapter will demonstrate how fetishism is another of the strategies readers employ to productively activate *VOGUE* and gain pleasure from reading it. Fetishism has been the subject of considerable anthropological, cultural, economic and psychoanalytic discussion, so much that an attempt at a comprehensive review would be futile and extraneous to my purpose. However, since there exist a variety of discordant voices in the critical debate surrounding the topic, a brief overview of the concept and its history, along with contemporary critical perspectives, is warranted for the sake of clarity. Cultural studies and literary theorists are often (quite legitimately) accused by more orthodox scholars of failing to define precisely what they mean when they employ the term fetishism.<sup>99</sup> According to this criticism, these theorists often conflate a variety of different 'types' of fetishism into a single entity. To avoid this shortcoming, I will first discuss the concept of the fetish and the contexts in which it has arisen, before moving to an examination of the specific problem of female fetishism, and then to an application of this theoretical position to the reading of *VOGUE*. In so doing, I hope to show that *VOGUE* relies heavily on a variety of fetishistic discourses as textual tactics, and that the magazine itself has become a fetish object for some readers, for whom a productive activation depends on it occupying that status.

Fetishism has a long and complex history. In their thorough investigation, Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen (1994) distil three primary categories of the fetish which, for the sake of simplicity, I shall borrow to present this overview. The first is a type of religious or anthropological fetishism,<sup>100</sup> which will not concern us here. The second is usually described as commodity fetishism, following Marx's use of the term. The notion was explored in great detail in the first volume *Capital* in 1867. For Marx, the capitalist market divorced the commodity from the labour which had produced it and thus from its use-value. In turn, humans accorded to the commodity a variety of 'secret' or 'magical' meanings, unrelated to its origins, thus creating a fetish object (Marx 1961, Vol. 1, Part 1:71-83). Marx writes that:

The mystical character of commodities does not originate . . . in their use-value. A commodity is . . . a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to [people] as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour . . . This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself

<sup>99</sup> Gamman and Makinen, for example, suggest that Naomi Schor, Mary Kelly, Emily Apter, Marjorie Garber and David Kunzle all fail to define adequately their understanding of the term fetishism and that their work suffers as a result of this failure.

<sup>100</sup> This type of fetishism arose in Europe during the Middle Ages, where Christians used the term to describe what they saw as irrational pagan attachments to idols and objects, including those involved in the practices of sorcery and witchcraft. The term eventually became an important part of anthropological discourse and was employed in discussing the 'savage' cultures of the New World, and the religious and spiritual belief of many native tribes in the magical or supernatural powers of particular objects.

to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore unseparable from the production of commodities (1961: 71-72).

This theory of commodity fetishism has been taken up and extended by a number of scholars, most notably Thorstein Veblen, George Lukács and Judith Williamson. Veblen (1899) introduced into the discussion the concept of 'conspicuous consumption' of commodities, which he describes as the "specialised consumption of goods as an evidence of pecuniary strength" (1899, 1934:68). This is a concept to which I shall return in relation to reading *VOGUE*. Veblen's contribution was critical in refining Marx's original idea and applying it to the study of cultural and behavioural phenomena. As Gamman and Makinen observe:

Veblen's analysis of the way that commodities in the nineteenth century come to signify meanings unrelated to utility is linked to Marx's original use of commodity fetishism, but goes beyond it. The way in which the term commodity fetishism is most commonly used in contemporary criticism is closer to Veblen's usage than to that of Marx. Indeed, at the time of writing *Capital*, Marx had no inkling of the sort of 'conspicuous consumption' Veblen was later to describe, nor of the sort of conspicuous consumption that has since characterised twentieth century Western society. (1994:30).

Lukács went further than either Marx or Veblen, suggesting that in fact capitalism "converts people and things into abstractions . . . so that individuals could not begin to imagine or comprehend non-fetishised social relations, outside of capitalist logic" (Gamman and Makinen 1994:op.cit.). The process by which relationships and people become part of a vast commodity system was named 'reification' by Lukács. He generalised his theory to the extent that he saw the capitalist society itself as a system of reification:

Reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange. The separation of the producer from his means of production, the dissolution of all 'natural' production units . . . and all the social and economic conditions necessary for the emergence of modern capitalism tend to replace 'natural' relations which exhibit human relations more plainly by rationally reified relations . . . Consumer articles no longer appear as the products of an organic process within a community . . . They now appear, on the other hand, as abstract members of a species identical by definition with its other members and, on the other hand, as isolated objects the possession or non-possession of which depends on rational calculations (Lukács 1971: 91).<sup>101</sup>

While there is considerable debate within Marxist theory regarding the concept of reification, there is no great contention about either anthropological nor commodity fetishism, in that most theorists appear to agree on the general tenets of the phenomena as described in the corpus

<sup>101</sup> For an exhaustive discussion of the transition of fetishism from Marx, Veblen and eventually Lukács to the present day conspicuous consumption of a packaged, advertised lifestyle, see Gamman and Makinen 1994:30-35. Of particular interest is their observation that Judith Williamson's (1986) *Decoding Advertisements* is remarkable for the way in which it details the linguistic processes at work in transforming an object into a fetishised commodity. Williamson's use of semiotics to explain the symbolism of encoded fetish objects is a framework to which I will return in more detail when I discuss the fetish status of the wedding dress in *VOGUE*. They also discuss Jean Baudrillard's *La société de consommation* and his semiotically anchored notion of commodity fetishism. I do not believe Baudrillard's understanding of fetishism adds anything of great merit to the discussion and have thus chosen to avoid examining it here. For a thorough rebuttal of Baudrillard's conception of the fetish, see Jon Stratton (1996) *The desirable body*.

surrounding them.<sup>102</sup> However, the third type of fetishism isolated by Gamman and Makinen, sexual — or, in Freudian terms, psychiatric or pathological — fetishism, is a highly contested theoretical domain. Kraft-Ebbing (1965), the man who gave us masochism as a criminal pathology, also introduced the idea of fetishism as a pathology, although he was mostly interested in its criminal by-products (such as lingerie fetishists stealing women's underwear). Alfred Binet in "le fétichisme dans l'amour" (1888) turned his attention to the sexual nature of the 'perversion', as Freud would later describe it. In the simplest terms, Freud argued in "Fetishism" (1927a, 1961 SE Vol. XXI:152-158) that a fetish arose as an inadequate resolution of the castration complex in little boys. When a little boy is traumatised by the sight of his mother's 'castrated' genitals, he may be forced into a state of disavowal in which he both understands that the mother does not have a penis and at the same time refuses to accept this. In this 'splitting of the ego', which allows him to maintain two seemingly mutually exclusive propositions, the boy adopts a 'fetish object' to take the place of the mother's absent penis and to facilitate his disavowal of her castration. As Parveen Adams has explained: "this disavowal is the refusal to recognise that the mother does not have a penis . . . The material object that thus consecrates the disavowal is the fetish . . . Thus the fetish is a 'memorial' to castration: is a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it." (1989: 251, 255). This is the orthodox psychoanalytical understanding of the process by which a fetishist becomes what he is (and I use the gendered pronoun deliberately here).

To this basic framework, Paul Gebhard has added the useful understanding of fetishistic behaviour as occupying a continuum of intensity: from Level 1, where the behaviour is really only a slight preference for "certain types of sex partners, sexual stimuli or sexual activity", which should not, in his view, properly be described as fetishistic; through Levels 2 and 3, where the preferences for these stimuli and activities grow stronger or sexual stimulation becomes *dependent* on their presence; to Level 4, where "specific stimuli takes the place of a sex partner", which he describes as high-level fetishism (*Fetishism and Sadoomasochism* as cited in Gamman and Makinen, 1994:38). Gamman and Makinen see Gebhard's Level 4 fetishism as equivalent to what Freud described in terms of disavowal through *displacement*. For this reason, they insist throughout their work that this is the *only* type of behaviour that can legitimately be described as genuine fetishism. This is one of the points at which a rigid, narrowly, clinical definition of the psychopathy of fetishism is restrictive rather than enabling of critical theoretical discourse. Gamman and Makinen give no justification for this restriction, other than an assertion that "it allows us to discuss many sexual practices, involving levels of fetishism, without bringing back in those pathological connotations associated with Freud's 'orthodox' fetishists" (1994:38). I submit that, in practice, their definition does precisely the opposite by normalising as outside fetishism sexual

<sup>102</sup> While I acknowledge that there is some debate within Marxist criticism as to the origins and implications of commodity fetishism, the vast majority of Marxist theorists agree on the fact that the phenomenon exists and where its parameters lie.



behaviours falling into the Level 2 and 3 range, thereby further encouraging the pathologisation of the term and doing little to promote the inclusiveness of diversity for which they strive. For this reason, I reject the limitation of any discussion of fetishism to people who *replace* a sexual partner with an object and broaden it to include those for whom sexual stimulation is partly or wholly reliant on the presence of a fetish object (Gebhard's Levels 2 and 3).

### Women, objects, desire

The most serious critical discord emerges outside the realm of degrees of intensity, however, and inside the area of gender. Orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis holds that women's bodies, or parts thereof, can be fetish objects,<sup>103</sup> but that women cannot *practice* fetishism. In Freud's earliest work, women are passive "clothes fetishists", in that they fetishise the clothes which allow them both to disavow the reality of their naked bodies and to repress their desire to be looked at naked (by men, for whose aesthetic gratification it is assumed they adorn themselves) (Gamman and Makinen 1994:41). In "Fetishism" (op.cit.), Freud specifically outlines the roots of fetishism in the castration complex, thereby seemingly rendering it impossible for women to fetishise actively. Women theorists have struggled in a variety of ways to come to grips with Freud's privileging of the penis/phallus in the developmental process, proposing a variety of models to enable the possibility of active female fetishism. Here, I will focus only on the key theorists who have shaped my own theory of female fetishism, as outlined below.<sup>104</sup>

The exclusion of women from active fetishism is anchored in Freud's understanding of the castration complex. However, a number of studies, including those of Adams, Gamman and Makinen, and Valerie Steele's far-reaching *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, Power* (1996), have demonstrated Freud's failure to take account of the large numbers of women who actually do fetishise. These authors document a variety of forms of active female fetishism in both heterosexual and lesbian women, thus refuting the assumption that women do not fetishise. In order to arrive at a theoretical position able to account for this empirical evidence, each tries to undermine the supremacy of the phallus in the Freudian theory of fetishism. As Steele argues,

<sup>103</sup> In chapter six of their work "Female Fetishism Conflated: Representations of 'Fetishism'", Gamman and Makinen argue that theories of women as objects of the male gaze are invalid, primarily due to a conflation of the idea of a 'fetish object' and an 'eroticised commodity fetish'. I reject this argument, for reasons presented below, when I outline my own case for a more integrated understanding of fetishism than that proposed by Gamman and Makinen.

<sup>104</sup> For a very thorough and detailed discussion of the many diverse approaches taken to this difficult question, see Gamman and Makinen (1994) chapter three "Women and Sexual Fetishism" pp 95-121. The major approaches which I have not discussed here include the work of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and (to a lesser degree) Julia Kristeva who have all challenged 'phallogocentric' psychoanalytic readings of the erotic and posited their own theories of the female erotic, none of which really comes to terms with the question of fetishism *per se*. I have also chosen not to include the work of literary theorists Naomi Schor and Emily Apter, who have looked at fetishism in particular in late nineteenth century France, and have chosen predominantly to seek out examples of female fetishism to disprove Freud's assumption that female fetishism is rare, rather than challenging the basis of Freud's theory. In addition, the complex theoretical manoeuvres of Jacques Lacan's work in terms of language and the pre-Oedipal Imaginary, as well as the

"the fetish may well be a substitute for the mother's penis, but that is not *all* it is. The classical Freudian theory is insufficient because it interprets the castration complex in a narrow sense, as bearing on the perception [by the boy] of the mother's genitals" (1996:18).

Three principal types of challenge have been mounted to this phallogentric understanding of fetishism. The first is an understanding of the fetish as based in a pre-Oedipal anxiety about separation from the mother (based largely on an object-relations model stemming from Melanie Klein's work, and developed by Gamman and Makinen). The second relies on a theory of the memorabilia of the mother as fetish objects (in particular in the work of Mary Kelly). A third approach, developed from an understanding of lesbian fetishism, and lesbian sexuality generally, as residing in an alternative, 'feminine' erotic economy has been discussed in detail by Adams, and by Elizabeth Grosz, who draws on the French 'difference' feminists, in particular Luce Irigaray's readings of Freud and Lacan. Of these, I believe the first offers the greatest scope for a useful and flexible understanding of female fetishism and, for this reason, I shall focus on it in this discussion. While the other accounts offer interesting conceptualisations of the possibility of a female fetishist, neither really assist in understanding the role fetishism might play as a textual strategy in reading *VOGUE*.<sup>105</sup> What I am seeking here is to understand the role of fetishism for the majority of the magazine's readers and, to that end, I shall turn my attention now to the possibilities generated by Klein's work for a theory of female fetishism.

Klein and the school of psychoanalysis founded on her work neither challenge Freud's understanding of the castration complex and penis envy *per se*, nor address the issue of female fetishism. What Klein's work does do, however, by positing the argument that there is a pre-Oedipal (oral), 'feminine' phase during which "both sexes identify with the all powerful mother" (Gamman and Makinen 1994:99), is to suggest that the focus of the development of sexual identity is not the moment when sexual difference is understood via the castration complex, but rather the anxiety that occurs when the child (male or female) *differentiates* him or herself from the mother. This is a substantial departure from Freud's (and later Lacan's) preoccupation with the castration complex, which challenges the privileging of the male experience as the normal (and thereby normative) process of acquiring sexual identity. It also removes the requirement that a fetish object permits the disavowal of the mother's genitals

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directional shift in psychoanalysis brought about by Melanie Klein's work, warrant far more attention than I am able to devote to them here in order to do them justice.

<sup>105</sup> Briefly, the school of thought best represented by Mary Kelly's (1996) approach can be summarised as suggesting that because, according to the Lacanian psychoanalytic position, woman is a lack, she needs her child (and therefore she needs to be a mother) to have an object that symbolises her access to the phallus via the father. The objects that signify the child to her become fetishised as she disavows the separation of the child from herself. The position advocated by theorists such as Adams (1989) and Grosz (1991) is that radical lesbian practice permits the creation of a libidinal economy outside Lacan's phallic order of the erotic, anchored in a new, specifically feminine erotic. For Adams, perversity becomes a powerful position of agency for the lesbian sadomasochist, who, free from the baggage of the phallic order, constructs and substitutes her own female-centred fetishes as an act of gender play and of transgression. For Grosz, the lesbian is able to fetishise because she has what Freud calls a 'masculinity complex' and is therefore disavowing her own, rather than her mother's, castration. While it is no doubt possible to apply both these frameworks to demonstrate radical and transgressive readings of *VOGUE*, this is not my primary object of inquiry.

through ego-splitting, since sexual identity is differentiated prior to the boy's discovery of the mother's 'castration'. Thus there is the possibility for children of both genders to disavow the separation from the mother by taking a fetish object as a substitute, for her and for the phallus she incorporates. This theory of fetishism involves, in Gamman and Makinen's words: "recognition of: 1. underlying anxiety about separation from the mother; 2. an oral component; [and] 3. the need for a new theoretical representation of female desire" (1994:7). Separation anxiety and pre-Oedipal orality are understood in terms of the child's early oral connection to the mother via the breast, and the need for a fetish object once weaning begins, and the child forced to understand that s/he and the mother are not one, but two, distinct beings.<sup>106</sup> This is the process of differentiation, plausibly posited by Gamman and Makinen as sufficiently traumatic for the child to result in the development of fetishism when the child is unable to resolve the trauma. The question of female desire is the final theoretical question to which I shall now turn, before moving on to an application of theories of female fetishism to reading *VOGUE*.

In addressing the question of desire, it is useful to turn briefly to the two principal theorists of desire in psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan. Freud had two main views of erotic desire: as either governed by economy of the libido or by the structure of the wish (1915, 1957 SE Vol. XIV:109-40). Lacan's understanding of desire is more sophisticated and, for the present purposes, more illuminating. Following Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Lacan defines desire as a lack or an absence. Having argued that there are three 'orders' by which life is governed — the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic — Lacan associates each of these with a different form of a 'drive'. These drives are need, in the case of the Real; demand in the case of the Imaginary; and desire in the case of the Symbolic<sup>107</sup>. Because Lacan conceives of desire as a fundamental lack, it can only be satisfied by the desire of another: "it must be posited that, as a fact of an animal at the mercy of language, man's desire is the desire of the Other" (1977a:264). Lacanian desire is a movement, an effect of language and of the unconscious. As Juliet Flower MacCannell has put it:

it is language itself that inflicts the mutilation, the wound, the amputation of desire — desire for the other, not as an indefinitely displaceable, substitutable pseudo-object that can never be an aim, but the other as a means of satisfying desire. It is by means of language that desire for the other is transformed into love of the Other, direction towards its particular enjoyment, its particular desire, the desire to perpetuate itself (1986:46).

<sup>106</sup> Mary Kelly's (1996) argument that the mother fetishises the memorabilia of the child accords a similarly privileged position to the mother-child relationship through the breast. However, her focus is the fetish objects the *mother* takes, in order to disavow the traumatic separation from the child as the child is weaned and grows up, rather than the fetish objects taken by the child to disavow the same process. Her installation and book (1983) *Post Partum Document* are a representation of this process in action.

<sup>107</sup> For a thorough discussion of the way the products of the orders differ from each other, see Juliet Flower MacCannell (1986) ch.6 "The Symbolic Order" pp.121-154 in *Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious*, or Elizabeth Grosz (1990) ch.3, "Sexuality and the Symbolic Order" pp 50-81 in *Jacques Lacan: a feminist introduction*.

It is both insatiable and inexpressible: it is, in Grosz's terms "barred or repressed from articulation" (1990:65) and as a result of this repression its primary effect is at the level of the unconscious. Lacan argues that desire is an element "necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued" (1977b:154). These, then, are the fundamental characteristics of Lacan's understanding of desire: its presence as absence, its unutterability, its dependence on the other for an impossible satiety, and its action on the unconscious.

Returning to fetishism, it is easy to see how Lacan's understanding of desire as lack is helpful to an understanding of the way fetishism works. Grosz suggests that, for Lacan, an object (comprised, in the context of Lacan's linguistically focussed analysis, of a connected signifier and signified) becomes invested "with desire aimed at the very lack it supports" (in this case the phallus) (1990:101). What she is describing is what Lacan sees as the movement of desire, in which an object is substituted for another in "a chain of substitution whereby the first (lost) object of desire generates a potentially infinite chain of (only partially satisfactory) substitutes" (ibid:100). Or, to put it another way, Lacan argues that "the object as the site of infinite substitutability (since it can never be the Real Thing) necessarily carries a negative value . . . the object appears not as a means to satisfaction, but as an obstacle to it" (MacCannell 1986:167). Thus signifiers are invested with signifieds, which allow this chain of displacement and substitution and desire is never satisfied, regardless of the mythical qualities with which humans might imbue the object. Fetishism, too, is a "displacement from one object onto another" (Adams 1989:257), in a similar chain in which the desire to deny the trauma that produced it can never be fulfilled. The only possibility for the fetishist is disavowal through a repeated displacement of signifiers. In the case of the fetishist, the signifiers are concentrated in a particular genre, connecting to a signified to represent the split position of knowing and refusing to know which is the hallmark of disavowal. Fetish objects, then, are the objects of desire: of a lack that can only be filled by the desire of the other. Since the other's desire will never be forthcoming, the substitution of fetish objects invested with the desire for the other will always be necessary. Lacan, like Freud, privileged the phallus and the castration complex in his own understanding of the fetish. Gamman and Makinen's position is that pre-Oedipal separation anxiety triggers the trauma resulting in the fetish. I see no reason why this position cannot be successfully married to an understanding of desire anchored in this Lacanian theorisation.<sup>108</sup>

Gamman and Makinen's model of female sexual fetishism is useful and will form the basis of my own discussion below. However, I have one significant reservation about their approach: that is, their insistence on a division between what they describe as "consumer

<sup>108</sup> I acknowledge that, strictly speaking, an orthodox Lacanian reading cannot coexist with this position since, for Lacan, desire resides in the Symbolic, entered into by language, which is represented by the Name-of-the-Father. In Lacan's analysis, language is the domain of the father - and hence of the boy - and the entry into the Symbolic arises as a result of the castration complex. However, I do not accept this phallogocentric Lacanian understanding of the development of sexual difference, preferring the Kleinian approach of differentiation outlined above. What I wish to take from Lacan is the idea of desire as lack; an idea which, as I have already noted, Lacan has borrowed from the Hegelian tradition.

fetishism of the erotic" and sexual fetishism. They argue that "the fetishism of the erotic often occurs through processes of consumerism designed to make products appear 'sexy' " (1994:183) but that this process is quite distinct from the process of sexual fetishism. There are a number of problems with maintaining an increasingly archaic and essentially semantic distinction between two 'categories' of fetishism. Both commodities and sexualities have changed so much since Marx and Freud's original work that the phenomena they describe are now merging into one entity, retaining aspects of both sources, but differently configured in late twentieth and early twenty-first century tendencies to consume sexuality.

Jon Stratton identified this trend in *The Desirable Body* (1996). His phallocentric understanding of the fetish and exclusively male perspective on fetishism notwithstanding, he develops the sophisticated notion of "cultural fetishism" to explain what has happened to both commodity and sexual fetishism, insisting on locating Freud's and Marx's original works as products of a particular time when sexuality and industrialisation first began to intersect. He suggests that "the nub of this argument [about cultural fetishism] is that commodities become fetishes in the sense that they are experienced as phallic substitutes for the phallus that men do not have" (1996:16). Further, he argues that Lacan's understanding of desire as lack "may be read as theorising the individual's . . . experience of the state" (ibid:14), demonstrating that "the 'lack' which male citizens feel can be correlated with, and, indeed, provides the overdetermining context for, the 'lack' which drove the twentieth-century expansion of consumption" (ibid). Stratton's stated purpose is to examine the impact of these structures of 'overdetermination' on Western males, but his concept of 'cultural fetishism' can easily be adapted to the more inclusive understanding of the sexual fetish outlined by Gamman and Makinen. For if women and men experience themselves as 'lacking' the mother from whom they have been separated, and both have the potential to take fetish objects in order to displace this lack and disavow the separation, then they are both also in a position to experience themselves as 'lack' in the context of a consumer culture which markets commodities as able to satisfy their desire to 'fill' the lack. In reality, the commodities only reinforce the absence they are intended to cover. As MacCannell observes: "the object, no longer a means to an end, never satisfies, becoming instead the source of repeated, futile . . . attempts to satisfy desire" (1986:166).

Indeed, such an understanding of the fetish finally enables us to overcome one of the major inconsistencies between commodity fetishism and sexual fetishism: gender. Although commodity fetishism for Marx was not a gendered phenomenon, it has frequently been studied as a *feminine*. Stratton, for example, argues that "shopping has become a fetishistic experience in the sense that it serves to compensate women for their 'lack' " (1996:17). Rosalind Williams (1982) and Rachel Bowlby (1985) have both demonstrated the ways in which the development of a consumerist society in late nineteenth-century France encouraged

women to fetishise commodities as substitutes for their inherent 'lack'. Even Veblen (1889 1934) had begun to observe that women seemed more obsessed with the objects of their 'conspicuous consumption' than men. And Judith Williamson ably demonstrated in *Decoding Advertisements* (1986) that commodities were metonymically and metaphorically encoded as possessing qualities that would enable women to fill their inherent 'lack' or emptiness. However, despite the fact that women were obviously consuming commodities fetishistically, it has traditionally been held that only men fetishised sexually. The model of 'cultural fetishism' I am proposing here allows this divide to be bridged, permitting an understanding of the process of sexualising commodities and commodifying sexualities. One of the most prominent, and most discussed, contemporary figures in the fetishism debate is Madonna. Cultural fetishism allows an understanding of Madonna as a fetishised commodity, as well as Madonna, the person, as a female fetishist. She has packaged herself as a sexual fetishist, and sold herself as a commodity to be fetishised, and in so doing, she has commodified the sexuality she practices. This same process is at work in *VOGUE*, as I will seek to demonstrate through a reading of its fetishistic presentation of shoes and wedding dresses, and through a discussion of the way *VOGUE* itself has become a fetish object.

#### If the shoe fits

In the September 1997 edition of American *VOGUE*, fifty two of the seven hundred and thirty pages of the magazine are devoted to images of shoes (including boots). These pages feature shoes, with or without feet or legs, but almost all without a torso or face. Clearly, the focus of these pages (all but two were advertisements) is the shoes, not the woman wearing them. In all but one of the images the shoes are high-heeled, most are black or red, and almost all of them are made from high-gloss leather, patent leather, or fake animal skins (crocodile or snake), with the occasional suede. There are shoes being longingly admired, fondled and even kissed. These images could easily have been taken from *High Heels*, one of the major magazines for shoe fetishists, but were expensively styled and photographed (several by well known celebrity photographers such as Steven Miesel, Herb Ritts and Mario Testino) for *VOGUE*, some as part of six or ten page inserts exclusively produced for inclusion in the magazine. Feet and shoes have long held a special position in the erotic imagination of many fetishists, as Steele (1996) documents, and these fetishists have been assumed to be men. In *Fetish: Fashion, Sex, Power*, Steele explores "the appeal for women of clothes that men treat as fetishes" (1996:12-13, emphasis in original), rejecting the argument that women's attachment to fetishistic fashion arises predominantly from a desire to be attractive to men.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> For a thorough discussion of the question of who women seek to please in their dress, see Craik (1994:55-57) where she observes that: "Despite the rhetoric that women dress to please men, other evidence suggests that women primarily dress to please other women". (p.56)



In her fascinating historical survey of why particular types of clothing have been appropriated as fetish objects, Steele makes the following observation about shoes:

The popularity of certain fetish objects is not random. There are cultural and historical reasons why certain clothing items are often chosen as fetishes. High heels are strongly associated in our culture with a certain kind of sexually sophisticated woman, which is why they are favoured by prostitutes and cross dressers. (*ibid*: 111).

Challenging Freud's assertion that shoes become a fetish object because they are the last object the little boy sees before peering up his mother's skirt and discovering the horror of her castration, she documents the historical eroticisation of feet and shoes. She discusses foot binding in China and the fantasy of the 'golden lotus foot', which was said to be only three inches long and perfect for cupping and stimulating the penis in its high arch. Bound feet became a signifier of passivity, compliance and submission, because women with bound feet were largely unable to leave the confines of their home, restricted to hobbling a metre or two at time on the stubs of their deformed toes. Bound feet were also a sign of wealth — women who bound their feet were unable to work and must necessarily be part of a leisured middle or upper class family, which could support them. Above all, bound feet were the perfect size for sucking, frottage and other erotic acts, especially since they were usually veiled in ornate satin slippers and then cloth bandages, so that they had to be 'unwrapped', thereby delaying the pleasure in their discovery. Steele does not suggest, nor do I, that the culturally imposed practice of foot binding, which became a normative standard of beauty, was in any way akin to the foot fetishism of contemporary fashion. Rather, she seeks simply to demonstrate that long before Freud had thought about little boys looking up their mother's skirts, feet and shoes were a part of the erotica of other cultures.

Restricted movement and forms of bondage — from foot binding to corsetry — have played a dominant role in the historical erotic imagination. There are both men and women whose sexual pleasure is significantly heightened by the feeling of being bound, restricted or inhibited by someone or something during the sexual act. For the fetishist, the objects that create this feeling of restriction become eroticised in themselves, and come to play a crucial role in their sexual experiences. I suggest that this is because they need these objects to overcome their experience of themselves as 'lacking' and so gain the confidence required to express themselves sexually. Steele contends that high heels provide a similar sensation of bondage and restricted movement for the feet and that this may explain, in part, why high heeled shoes are so prominent in fetish culture. The magazine *High Heels* suggests that for aficionados "the high heeled shoe . . . has become an object of devotion that borders on passionate worship" (January 1962, as cited in Steele 1996:101). Steele observes that it was only in the nineteenth century that high heeled shoes became associated with women, and that, in previous eras, high heeled shoes and built-up platform-style boots had also been fashionable for men, connoting power and stature, in part because they require the wearer to adjust their posture to make the chest stick out. She also points out that heels have for

centuries been part of the erotic costume of the highly stylised geisha of Japan and that the 'golden lotus foot', when bound, gave the feet and calves a similar look to that achieved by wearing very high heels. Her suggestion is that there is something about the configuration of the muscles in the feet and legs, as well as the resultant posture of more prominent buttocks and breasts, which has long ensured high heels' association with sex (1996:91-101).

While all this explains to a large extent why men might fetishise women's feet, it cannot explain why women have been known to declare that walking down the street in a pair of Manolo Blahnik heels feels better than sex, or why they are prepared to pay a week's salary for a pair of shoes. Nor does it explain why many women liken themselves to Imelda Marcos, infamous for having spent hundreds of thousands of dollars of taxpayer's money on shoes — enough to require a whole floor in their mansion to accommodate them all. What is it about shoes that excites such passion in so many women? Steele suggests that there are two aspects to the appeal of high heels: on the one hand, heels are seen as a sign of power and domination, with all their connotations to the dominatrixes of S&M culture; on the other, they are seen as a form of submission to a type of bondage. Either way, they are a dangerously sexy thing for a woman to wear. In the following analysis, I shall examine four advertisements for shoes, all from the September 1997 edition of *VOGUE* (US), selected as a sample of the fetishisation of shoes through a discourse of sex and power.

Whether the power women feel when they slip on a pair of stilettos is real or imagined is of little import.<sup>110</sup> They are simultaneously compensating for what they perceive as a systematic lack of power in society and an inherent lack of self-worth. Advertisers are well aware of this. Figure 6.1 shows an advertisement for Kenneth Cole leatherwear, in which the image of a seemingly infinite row of black leather boots fading into the distance is combined with a simple statement across the centre of the page: "Reflect on what you stand for". This image formed the front cover of a ten-page feature insert in the magazine, printed on matt card (in contrast to the glossy paper of the magazine), with each page featuring a product and a statement. This particular page sets the tone for the Kenneth Cole mini-catalogue that follows it. Black leather boots immediately bring to mind the image of the dominatrix. As Steele has argued leather, in particular black leather, has long been a signifier of strong, masculine, sexuality. For women to appropriate black leather into their own apparel is to appropriate the traditionally masculine power wardrobe. My earlier explication of the image of the equestrian woman examined some of the associations of boots as belonging to a woman who is in control. Here a fashion designer adapts this theme to the sophisticated urban chic demanded by his clients, by presenting a knee-high black leather boot with refined styling and high-fashion features such as a square toe and a block heel, and variations on the positioning and length of the zipper. The zipper dangles invitingly, encouraging the woman to imagine

<sup>110</sup> For a detailed discussion of the question of what constitutes 'real' power for women, see Chapter Seven.



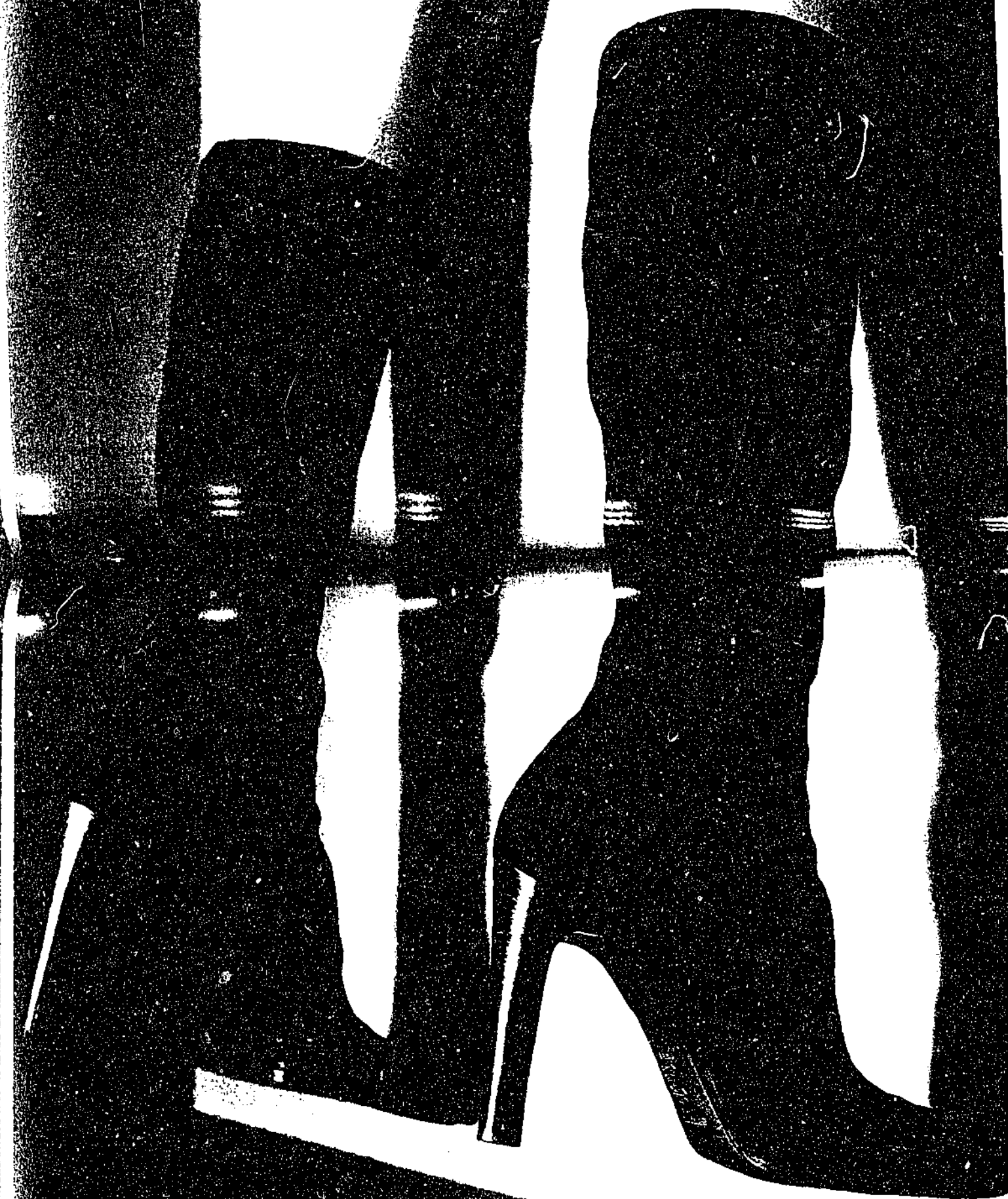
"Reflect on what you stand for." -Kenneth Cole

herself unzipping the boot and in so doing unleashing a part of herself she does not usually express. The colours in the advertisement are also significant. Black, as Steele observes, is a powerful signifier in Western culture, connoting "death, danger, nothingness, evil, perversion, rebellion and sin" (op. cit: 193). The black boots are juxtaposed with a sensuous red fabric, drawn taught under the heel of the boots as an indicator of where passion and power intersect. This, implies the advertisement, is what you *should* stand for: a sophisticated, refined, powerful sexuality.

Sophistication gives way to danger in Figure 6.2, where Sergio Rossi's double-page advertisement for black boots has an erotic edginess that the previous image lacked. This image is spread across a double page so that the boots are viewed horizontally, giving the impression that the model is lying face down on what appears to be a concrete slab. Turned vertically, the model now seems to be precariously perched on a high ledge, her body pressed against a wall. Here, legs are introduced to the image. The legs anchor the image in reality, making the boots seem wearable and accessible. The prominence of the high, polished, thin heels reinforces the image of danger and taps into the fetishist's fantasies of heels as a weapon. The woman reader may fantasise about holding a man under the spike of her heel, controlling him with the threat of the pain it could inflict. The image is lit in such a way as to suggest that something sinister may be occurring outside its frame, with strong light and shadow in the centre, but an ambiguous foggy background. In this image, black is clearly coded as sexual and dangerous, the spiked heels as powerful and erotic. Sergio Rossi promises that his boots will transform you into a powerful, sexually magnetic and deliciously dangerous woman. Perhaps it is the fact of wearing boots like these that enables some women to transgress the boundaries of the erotic economy inside which they feel trapped and to actualise the fantasies they entertain. If so, then this is clearly an example of an object which has become a focus of, and an essential stimulus in, a sexual exchange: in other words, a fetish.

In Chapter Seven, I explore in detail the cultural specificity of responses to suggestions that sexual desirability is a form of power in itself. Suffice it to say here that for women, shoes are locked in a signifying relationship with sex and power. Steele suggests that while "pornography frequently labels the woman in high heels as a slut, thus positioning her as an accessible sexual object . . . the discourse in women's fashion magazines focuses on the fantasy that men will worship at the feet of a beautiful woman" (op cit:113). Fashion taps into the idea that sexuality can be a weapon of combat and fetish objects come to signify the erotic thrill of that combat. Further, as Steele contends, women's bodies have traditionally been controlled and concealed by men, so that the reappropriation of the female body, on their own terms, has been an important demonstration of power for women. She argues that "as women became more independent, they adopted both men's clothes and body-revealing clothes" (1996:185) as a statement that they were in control of their own bodies and the ways in which

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**POLYMER LETTERS**

Figure 6.2 advertisement: Sergio Rossi boots



they would be presented in public. She suggests that "the attraction that many women have to fashion — and fetish fashion, in particular — may be related to their desire to assert themselves as independent sexual beings" (1996:164). 'Independent' does not necessarily mean 'without men', although there are certainly some women who take the political position that the only independent sexuality for women is a lesbian sexuality.<sup>111</sup> Women can also 'assert themselves as independent sexual beings' by taking control of the sexual encounter, and by realising their own fantasies, including the fantasy of being worshipped by adoring sex slaves. Figure 6.3 taps into this vein of fantasy, where photographer Herb Ritts has placed three, Greek-god like young men at the feet of a woman wearing black leather sandals. This is the second of his six-page autumn mini-catalogue for Nine West, all of which is shot in the same warm, golden colour scheme. The colour of the light suggests heat and sensuality, given the high amount of shine reflected off the skin, but also gives the image a timeless sepia-like quality, reinforcing the idea that beautiful feet will always be an object of desire. The leather straps criss-crossing the woman's naked feet and ankles suggest bondage. The positioning of the text across her ankles further draws attention to them as an erotogenic zone. Her bare legs connote a 'naturalness' and raw animality. Their framing at the top by a hint of a lacy black skirt confirms her as a sexually desiring woman by introducing the suggestion of lingerie and undressing. The three Adonises are humbly worshipping at her feet, apparently with no interest at all in what delights the rest of her body may offer. This image could be read as men fetishising shoes, and men fetishising women, were it not for the context in which it appears. As part of a catalogue designed to sell shoes to women (women unlikely to base the bulk of their purchasing decisions on pleasing a man), the image once again encourages women to fetishise the shoe as an object giving sexual power and control. That the woman is in control in this photograph is clearly indicated by the fact that she is standing and the men are kneeling. It is not that she is passively submitting to having her toes sucked for the gratification of a man. Indeed, the men appear aware that they are allowed to look, but that touching is off limits. She is calling the shots, and Nine West tells us that the shoes give her the power to do so.

The final image in this selection, Figure 6.4, is deliberately located within the fetishistic aesthetic. This is an advertisement for Gucci accessories, although there is nothing to indicate that on the page. It is part of a ten-page insert in the magazine, and was featured on page 2, with the front and back pages containing the Gucci name. It is also part of a wider, long-running advertising campaign that Gucci has been running in *VOGUE* (in all three editions) for some time.<sup>112</sup> Any regular reader of the magazine would instantly recognise the grainy texture of the image, the distortion produced by magnification, and the lurid colours reminiscent of a 'blue movie' which had been the hallmark of the campaign. The whole series of images

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, Andrea Dworkin (1987) *Intercourse*.

<sup>112</sup> Figure 7.2, in Chapter Seven, is another image from the same Gucci campaign.





# NINE WEST

1-800-667-3259  
[www.ninewest.com](http://www.ninewest.com)



Figure 6.4 advertisement: Gucci acceso

tapped into the 'dirty, grimy reality' trend, popularised by the release of a number of bleak, raw British films such as *Trainspotting*, *Nil by Mouth*, and *Twenty Four Seven*, and culminating in the 'heroin chic' look made infamous by *The Face* and adopted by fashion magazines around the world during 1996-97. The contrast between the grimy world of narcotics and pornography suggested by the styling of the image, and the reality of the \$500 lush red patent leather Gucci shoe could not be more marked. In an attempt to revitalise the brand name, designer Tom Ford had been determined to give Gucci street 'cred' and to make it sexy. Hence, an advertisement which shows what looks like a still from a B-grade porn film, where a person (of non-specific gender, in keeping with the androgynous models used in the campaign) with red, open lips looks ready to perform oral sex on the foot, the red shoe or both. The reader is positioned as voyeur, illicitly watching an act destined to continue despite the attention. Here, the shoe and/or the foot are clearly the source of sexual arousal for the owner of the red lips. At a very primal level, the woman reader is invited to identify with this shoe as a sexual object, an object that will bring pleasure, not just for the messages it conveys about the wearer, but as a result of its own beauty and sensuality. The shoe is a commodity to be consumed, but the mode of consumption is explicitly sexual, thereby locating it as a fetish object.

### To have and to hold

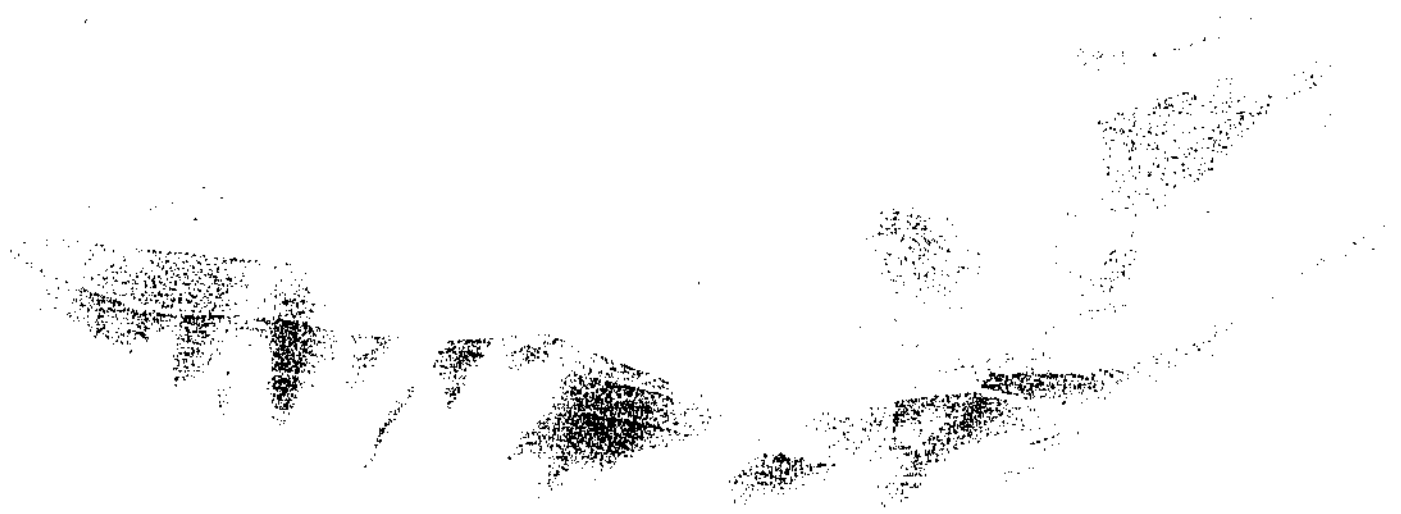
While shoes have a long history of erotic connotation, my next object of inquiry is a little more unusual. Through a reading of bridal supplements in *VOGUE Australia* and *VOGUE (US)*<sup>113</sup>, I propose to demonstrate that women consume wedding dresses in a culturally fetishistic way, investing them with compensatory qualities to overcome their experience of themselves as 'lack', so that the dress becomes the object of their fantasies, over and above the man they are marrying. As Toni Colette demonstrated with bitter hilarity in the film *Muriel's Wedding*, the wedding dress is an object of such intense desire that the drive to possess it, and the level of sensuous engagement with it, supersedes the wedding, the husband and their relationship as the primary source of sensual pleasure for the woman who fetishises it. While there are undoubtedly cases of women who have literally orgasmed over an ivory duchesse satin gown — Gamman and Makinen document women who climax over a variety of clothing items — I am not suggesting that this is the response of the majority of women whose engagement with wedding dresses is fetishistic. I am suggesting, however, that for these women the fantasy of the wedding dress makes the relationship worth pursuing, and that the level of physical pleasure and sensual arousal produced by the sensation of holding, touching, trying on and even looking at, wedding dresses is in many cases unparalleled in the woman's actual erotic experience.

<sup>113</sup> *VOGUE Paris* does not have a bridal supplement, nor does it have a separate bridal publication as is the case in Italy where *VOGUE Sposa* is published.



# princess bride

The American designer Vera Wang waves her magic wand and creates sensual wedding dresses that turn ordinary girls into princesses. By Julia Szabo





The photograph accompanying Julia Szabo's feature article on American bridal couturier Vera Wang (*VOGUE Australia*, Bridal supplement, June 1997) is a prime example of how the magazine taps into the deeply fetishistic relationship many women have to wedding dresses (Figure 6.5). The title "Princess Bride", and the by-line which states that Vera Wang "waves her magic wand and creates sensual wedding dresses that turn ordinary girls into princesses", encapsulate the appeal of the wedding dress. The promise that for one day in her life, a woman (an 'ordinary girl') will be transformed into a princess, is the seemingly irresistible compensation women are offered for the lack that makes them so 'ordinary' the rest of the time.<sup>114</sup> This is coupled with the sensory indulgence permitted by 'sensual wedding dresses', which, like the one in the photograph, combine a variety of possibilities for pleasurable interaction. A great many wedding dresses involve corsetry, as in this photograph and in Figure 6.6. Corsetry is, as Steele has shown, a continuation of the desire to be bound, contained and restricted and features heavily in fetishistic clothing. In the case of wedding dresses, I suggest that in contemporary Western society, the wedding day is virtually the only occasion on which a woman is given complete license to appear 'feminine' without fear of reprobation from her female peers, who otherwise think she should be more savvy, in control and dominant. She is *supposed* to be submissive as she is given away by father to husband, and corsetry is symbolic of submission and restriction. Furthermore, this is her opportunity to be the fairy princess she always wanted to be as a little girl, but has since learned not to be in order to survive in a 'man's world', where qualities such as toughness and impartiality are valued over softness and an obsessive love for pink chiffon. The presentation in Figure 6.5 of the bride as dwarfed by both her dress and the bed on which she sits reinforce the fantasy of her as a small girl, safe in daddy's embrace, but soon to be grown up and married to a man. In a sense, it is a manifestation of her disavowal of her womanhood and of everything she lacks: she is split between knowing she is a grown woman, about to be married, and refusing to know this and so taking refuge in objects that disavow it and allow her to pretend she is still a little girl. The choice of pretty pastel colours, natural makeup and hair piled up in girlish twists all re-emphasise the childish aspects of the princess fantasy.

The theme of "the extravagance of pure romance" is continued in Figure 6.6, where three images of the same model wearing the same dress are interspersed with bright white light to invite the woman to 'imagine' herself in this dream-like sequence. The fantasy is presented as such, but is nonetheless presented as attainable: "your perfect day in a dream of a dress" is only as far away as your cheque book. The kinds of impractical, restrictive garments, which sensible, professional women readers of *VOGUE* would ordinarily abhor, are all promoted as the ticket to your transformation: "vast crinoline skirts, cinched waists and silk

<sup>114</sup> Davis (1991:35) makes the interesting observation that many women experience their 'ordinariness' as a form of injustice and see any opportunity (including cosmetic surgery) to make themselves look better as a quest for justice, an empowering decision to avail themselves of the tools of the fashion and beauty industries to right a longstanding wrong. The wrong being, in this case, the unfairness of having to endure life as a 'plain' woman.



# imagine

floating through your perfect day in a dream of a dress. Vast crinoline skirts, cinched waists and sil bustiers reflect the extravagance of pure romance



bustiers" as well as gloves and more corsetry. The predominance of white, the traditional wedding-dress colour, and ivory in this image reinforce the messages of purity, virginity and goodness these colours have come to signify. Again, this object permits the woman to disavow her own womanhood, to pretend she is still back in a time and space before she was a sexual being. In addition, the repetition of the same image from different angles, with the model's face obscured in two of the shots, encourages a focus on the dress as an object, rather than as something made to look the way it does because she is wearing it. It is an object to be tried on and to be enjoyed for the transformative pleasure it brings to the wearer.

Figure 6.7, from the *VOGUE* (US) "Wedding Album: Every Bride's Fantasy" supplement (June 1998) also draws on the theme of trying on and dressing up. Here, an enormous gown once again dwarfs an extremely young-looking model. She appears to be holding it together at the back, and looks rather like a little girl dressed up in her mother's clothes. The lace, beading and ruffles on the dress are reminiscent of a bygone era when women were women and nobody expected them to be anything else. The model looks out of the corner of her eye, as if conscious that she must not be caught wearing this illicit dress, and at the same time is unable to keep from caressing her exposed neck and décolletage, such is her sensual pleasure at being enfolded in luxury fabrics. Indeed, the text describes this Christian Lacroix dress as a blend of the "sensual with the pristine", capturing the oscillation between the sensual, adult pleasure in wearing the dress and the attempt to reposition herself as innocent by wearing it. The appeal of this kind of dress surely lies in its perceived capacity to give women license to be 'feminine', in the traditional sense of the word. In a world where women are constantly battling for power and recognition, and for equal rights and equal treatment, a wedding dress carries with it permission to be passive and submissive rather than powerful, to be innocent rather than sexually sophisticated. For some women, a wedding dress is the ultimate love-object: it lets them reveal a side of themselves they feel compelled — politically, and by their peers — to keep hidden, without asking for anything in return. It lets them pretend they are something they are not, while at the same time irreversibly ushering them into the realm of what they are seeking to deny they are.

A different, but nonetheless fetishistic, approach to photographing bridal wear is taken by Helmut Newton in "Veiled Promises", (Figure 6.8) from the same edition of *VOGUE* (US). The work Newton did for *VOGUE*, in particular *VOGUE Paris*, in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, is credited with having changed the relationship between fashion and fetishism irrevocably (Steele 1996:38, Brookes 1992, Griggers 1990). Newton insisted on fashion as a discursive medium, ripe for interrogations about sex and power, and introduced the language of fetishistic subculture into mainstream fashion photography. Steele writes that:

Helmut Newton is said to have 'made fetishism chic' . . . by the 1990s, high fashion had come around to his view of the modern woman. Although Newton cannot be credited with single-handedly bringing fetishism into fashion, his photographs have been extremely influential because of their focus on sex and power (ibid).

[illegible]

Figure 6.7 from "Age of Opulence"



Love is blind. Giving the bride a little mystique, Dolce & Gabbana Spear dresses her in a strapless silk wedding gown complete with crinoline, tulle, and draped mesh sleeves. Soix-Fifth Avenue, NYC. Beverly Hills. Ring: Tiffany & Co. Daisies, see in this issue. Fashion Editor: Phyllis Pando.

In this image, Newton disrupts the contiguity between the three preceding images of wedding dresses. He deliberately sexualises the bride, having her clasp her ample, semi-exposed cleavage to make the breasts appear fuller and to give the impression that her dress is falling loose. Her siren-red lips are the only facial feature distinguishable underneath the veil, worn Arab-style, covering the eyes, to give a touch of the exoticism of the harem to the image. Protruding from underneath the folds of pristine white silk is an aggressively angled foot encased in a sharp, spike-heeled white stiletto with an ankle-strap resembling a kind of restraint. Although Newton locates the bride as sexual, he complicates the image by having her clasp her right breast in the manner of the Madonna. This gesture, reminiscent as it is of a mother offering nurturing milk, interrupts the viewer's consumption of the bride and her gown. The sensuousness of the deliberately eroticised bride and the proffered breast combine to suggest some deeply transgressive possibilities: a sexual mother; a bride who already has a child; a white wedding without a virgin. All these disrupt the aesthetic of the traditional bridal photograph. The drama of the potential transgressions is compounded by the setting (the Port of Monte Carlo in Monaco) and enhanced by the lights of the cityscape reflected in the water, and the enormous yacht. Perhaps she is to be swept away on the yacht, perhaps she is running from it. The tone of the image is ambiguous, but unambiguously erotic. In this case, I would argue that Newton's photograph is an example both of a fetishistic aesthetic, and of a wedding dress which could be a fetish object for a woman whose fantasy is, not to escape from her position of control, but to assert that control, transgressing the traditional definition of the bride.

### Compulsive pleasures

*VOGUE* is a problematic text. Such is the extent of its engagement with the discourse of fetishism that it could be viewed as a fetish object in itself. Christian Metz, in *Photography and Fetish* (1990), suggests that photographs are fetish objects because they represent a loss and a protection against that loss, with the 'in-frame' coming to represent what has been lost. *VOGUE* can be seen as an object which represents the lack that is woman (and everything she needs to buy to overcome it), and a means of disavowing that lack (by providing fantasy scenarios and identificatory positions that may enable women, and fetish objects to displace it). If the magazine is a fetish object for women, a substitute for *actual* sensory indulgence through a kind of *virtual* sensory indulgence and a displacement of desire onto the object, then the relationship between the reader and the text is problematised further. The relationship between fetishist and fetish object is, as Gamman and Makinen have observed, one of compulsion. The fetishist feels compelled to seek gratification from the fetish object and feels a loss of control over the engagement. If reading *VOGUE* becomes a kind of cultural fetishism for women, then their capacity to employ the kinds of discriminatory reading strategies discussed in this and previous chapters must surely be compromised, leaving the text free to



chapter seven

# The politics of pretty

*There's a complex richness to women's culture today that is a beautiful mix of feminism and femininity.*

Betty Friedan (1991) "Can a feminist be beautiful?"

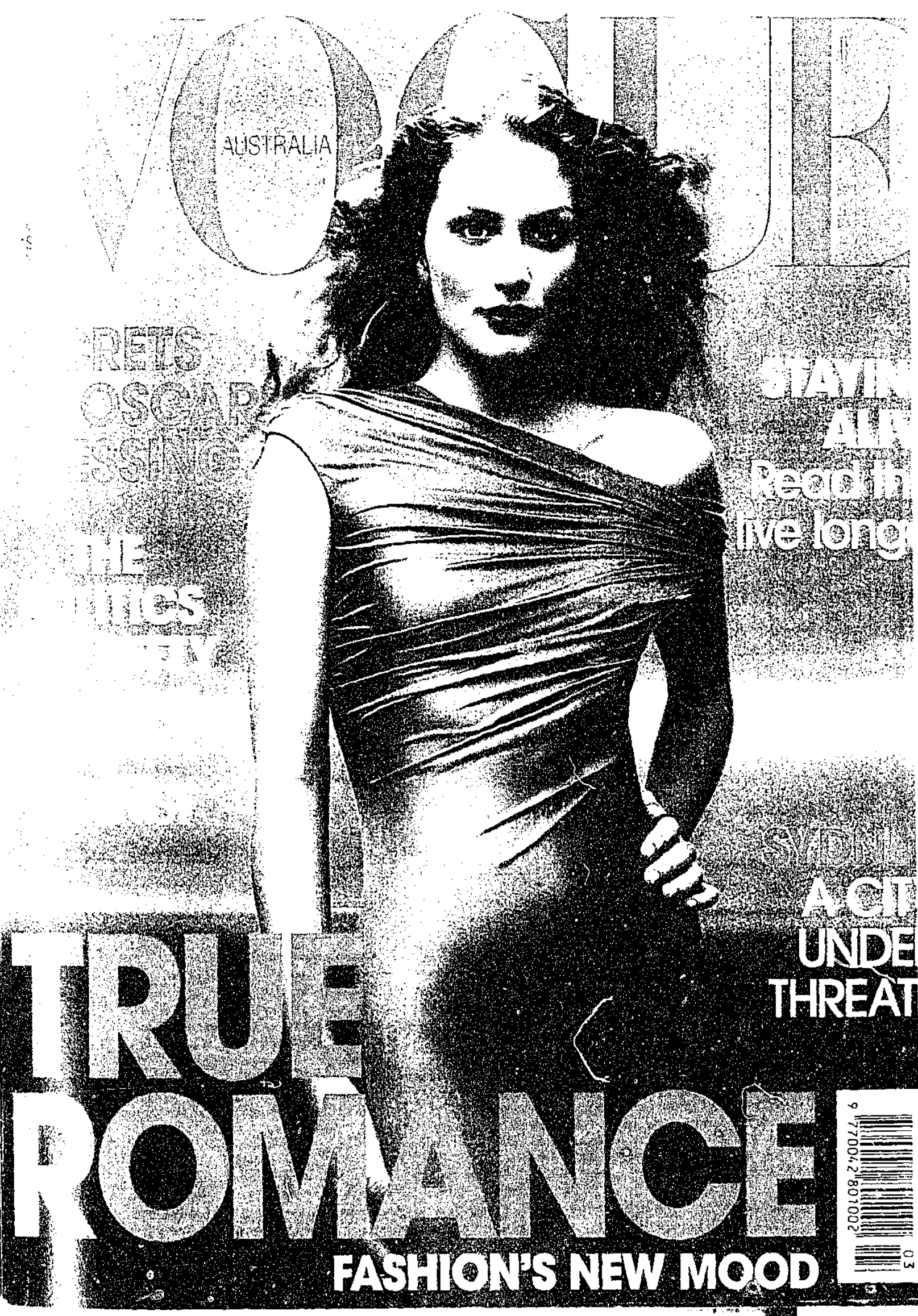
In the previous chapters, a marked difference began to emerge between the way *VOGUE Paris* treats questions of power, sexuality and fantasy, and the treatment of these same questions in the two Anglophone editions of the magazine. In this chapter, I will explore this difference in greater detail, linking it into the questions of beauty and self-transformation raised in earlier chapters. The differences that emerge between the editions of the magazine in terms of their treatment of beauty, sex and power are not accidental. Rather, they are the product of a culturally specific set of gender relations that manifest at all levels, from the most populist women's magazines to the most demanding postmodern, feminist philosophy. I will attempt to demonstrate here that what Wendy Chapkis (1986) described as 'the politics of appearance' is a distinctively Anglophone politics<sup>116</sup>, which is a result of a fundamental difference in approach to questions of power, liberation and autonomy that can be traced back to the origins of the French and Anglophone women's movements.<sup>117</sup> Accepting that my critique is necessarily shaped by my own exposure to both French and Anglophone feminism as a student at Universities in Australia and France, I feel compelled nonetheless to close this thesis with some analysis of the relative merits of the respective positions of the French and Anglophone traditions apropos of the beauty question.

The title of this chapter came, appropriately, from the cover of the March 1998 edition of *VOGUE Australia* (see Figure 7.1), which ran the coverline: "The Politics of Pretty: Feminine v Feminist". The issue at stake for *VOGUE Australia* was the resurgence of interest in the fashion community in women's clothing that could be described as 'pretty', in the traditionally feminine way, for example beaded dresses, pastel colours, frills, twin-sets and floral prints. Women are tired of having to dress like men, argued Maggie Alderson in the

<sup>116</sup> While German, Dutch and Scandinavian feminisms have discussed the gendered nature of specific practices and phenomena such as anorexia nervosa and elective cosmetic surgery, feminists in these countries have not taken criticism of a 'beauty system' as far as Anglophone feminists, who have studied this 'system' as a force oppressing women. Bordo (1993:16) argues persuasively that a "political" understanding of body practice was developed predominantly by American feminists.

<sup>117</sup> The usual terminology employed to describe the women's movement in the English-speaking world is "Anglo-American". As an Australian feminist, I deliberately choose to replace this term with 'Anglophone' in order to incorporate the substantial contribution to the feminist intellectual tradition of a number of important scholars from Australia (as well as New Zealand, Canada and other English-speaking nations). This variation notwithstanding, I endorse Toril Moi's comment that "the terms 'Anglo-American' and 'French' must not be taken to represent purely national demarcations: they do not signal the critics' birthplace but the intellectual tradition within which they work" (1985: xiv).





AUSTRALIA

RETS  
OSCAR  
ESSING

THE  
POLITICS

STAYING  
ALL  
Reading  
live long

SYDNEY  
A CITY  
UNDER  
THREAT

# TRUE ROMANCE

FASHION'S NEW MOOD

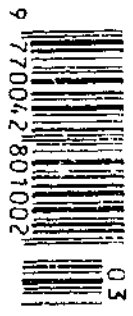


Figure 7.1 "The Politics of Pretty: Feminine v. Feminist"

accompanying article: the power suit is out and pretty pastel prints are in.<sup>118</sup> In this 'post-feminist' world, she continues, it is time to challenge "the misconception that equality is about being the same — the same line of thought that had us in unisex versions of male corporate clobber in the eighties. In fact, the whole point of equality is to be accepted as different, but still equal." (Alderson 1998:38).

An article discussing the politics of frocks and feminism is unlikely to appear in the French edition of *VOGUE*, because their connection is a predominantly Anglophone preoccupation.<sup>119</sup> Such subjects have concerned many Anglophone feminists for the better part of the last thirty years, but they are virtually absent from the French feminist project. Not only is there little or no analysis of sex and power in terms of the culture of beauty in French feminism, but the French version of *VOGUE* is reflective of being produced in a climate where such discussion is virtually absent, and is thus appreciably different in this respect from both the American parent edition and the Australian edition. In order to explore the cultural conditions at the root of these differences, an examination of the evolution of the French and Anglo-Saxon women's movements is warranted. Such examination suggests that 'difference' feminism and 'equality' feminism have arisen, in France and in the English-speaking world respectively, for very specific reasons.<sup>120</sup> This will be followed by a discussion, illustrated by examples from *VOGUE*, of the highly problematic Anglophone assumption that (Anglophone) feminism is both universal and universalising. This assumption leads to the attempt to read French texts through Anglophone feminist theoretical frameworks, a practice that is seriously flawed as both interpretative and political strategy. Finally, I will demonstrate the extent to which a popular, mainstream publication such as *VOGUE* manifests these differences in very tangible ways. In essence, while the feminism it draws on is necessarily pedestrianised, it is nonetheless recognisable and extremely powerful.

<sup>118</sup> True to its eternally fickle nature, the fashion industry has now changed its mind again. The 2000/2001 winter collections featured in *VOGUE* have been full of power suits, with the message that pretty little-girl clothes are out, and sexy, power-woman clothes are in. The 'male corporate clobber' of the 1980s that Alderson so laments is back in force on the catwalks of Milan, Paris, London and New York. Whether or not women will wear it remains to be seen. For an interesting discussion of the role of Italian designer Giorgio Armani in defining masculine tailored suiting as the appropriate attire for corporate women during the 1970s and 1980s, and an argument in favour of more feminine dress for business women, see E. Paulicelli (1994) "Fashion as Text: Talking about Femininity and Feminism" in G. Miceli Jeffries *Feminine Feminism: cultural practices in Italy*: 176-178.

<sup>119</sup> There has been some discussion of this question outside of the Anglophone world. Paulicelli (an Italian feminist now working in North America) observes that feminists in Italy have rejected masculine-style dressing as "another prison" (op.cit:177), saying that militant feminists in the 1970s wrongly believed that "if one was a feminist one could not be feminine, otherwise nobody would take one seriously." (ibid. emphasis in original). While feminists in Italy have examined the links between appearance and liberation, it has predominantly been in order to reject what is seen as the American imposition of the idea that: "One dressed like a man to be considered equal to a man" (ibid). Paulicelli goes on to argue that being considered equal to a man is not necessarily the aim of feminism. French feminism has similarly questioned the goal of equality. However, in France, as I shall demonstrate, the link between appearance and feminism has scarcely been made at all.

<sup>120</sup> Allwood (1998) demonstrates very clearly that the 'French feminism' to which I shall refer in this chapter is a particular brand of French feminism, rendered definitive to the Anglophone academy by Marks and Courtivron's (1980) anthology *New French Feminisms*. I accept wholeheartedly her point that this is simply one strand of a multiplicitous and diverse women's movement in France, and that it has not gone uncriticised by other French feminists. However, what I will demonstrate here is that difference feminism arose in France as a result of a system of gender relations which differs fundamentally from that in the Anglophone world. For that reason, I choose to focus on the difference/equality binary, despite the strong evidence she presents that a number of French feminists are currently working to overcome it. Her pertinent observations regarding the commonalities in the

### Liberation: equality and difference

Liberation from allegedly oppressive and exploitative images of female beauty and the female body has been a battle strategy of the Anglophone feminist movement since the 1960s. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, textual representations of women in both canonical and popular texts have long been a central subject of inquiry for Anglophone feminists. Our preoccupation with the study of 'images of women' is rooted in an intellectual tradition that sees texts as capable of inflicting a kind of ideological harm. American, British and Australian feminists have been preoccupied with texts as ideological vehicles that supported and perpetuated patriarchy through negative representations of women. When Anglophone feminists began to challenge the notion that gender roles and behaviours were biologically determined, roles and behaviours, they argued that they were constructed by social discourses, so focussing attention on the material manifestations of these discourses: texts.

The fundamental assumption that images of women in texts can influence, or even determine, the images women have of themselves and that men have of them remained largely unchallenged in the Anglophone feminist academy until comparatively recently. There has never been an equivalent approach to textual analysis within the French feminist movement. In France, feminists have seldom addressed texts as objects at all: rather, feminists have focussed on the gender of language and the way the world is constituted and experienced as masculine as a result of this. Where textual objects, as opposed to components, have been scrutinised it has been primarily as representative of a philosophical position, which has in turn been attacked for the phallocratic notions that underpin it.<sup>121</sup> In addition, French feminists have largely remained faithful to the literary and philosophical canon, whereas in the Anglophone academy the shift has increasingly been away from canonical texts – since the canon itself is seen as a patriarchal construct – and towards popular cultural forms that address the lived experiences of women<sup>122</sup>. As part of a conscious political project, Anglophone feminists have sought to break down the public-masculine/private-feminine divide, by introducing texts which privilege the world of women (private-feminine) into the traditionally masculine, public domain of academic study. This focus on actual lived experience and on the call for authenticity in the representation of women in texts are indicative of the humanist feminism which prevailed in the Anglophone academy

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work of many Anglophone and French feminists notwithstanding, there are clearly cultural differences between the intellectual traditions and social conventions that produced the authors.

<sup>121</sup> Luce Irigaray (1977) *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, and Hélène Cixous (1974) *Prénoms de personne* are two of the best-known exponents of this approach. (I retain the French titles and publication dates here to give some sense of equivalency between the stages of the Francophone and Anglophone movements: many of these texts were not translated into English for ten years or more after their initial publication in France). Even those feminists who do not subscribe to the difference feminist approach have focused more on theoretical questions of women's oppression than on textual representations of women. See, for example, the work of the doctor Madeleine Pelletier at the turn of the last century, Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) *Deuxième Sexe*, the many articles Christine Delphy has written for *Questions féministes* and *Nouvelles questions féministes*, as well as the writings of Michèle le Doeuff and Françoise Picq.

<sup>122</sup> One notable exception to this is in the area of pornography. For example, Dominique Poggi, whose discussions of the discourses of oppression produced by pornography dates from 1976: "Une apologie des rapports de domination". (see Elissa Gelfand's translation in Marks & Courtivron (1980) *New French Feminisms*, pp.76-78), and a discussion of pornography as an instrument of patriarchal oppression by Benoîte Groult (1975) *Ainsi soit-elle*.

until the early 1980s. Over the past twenty years, many feminists in North America, Britain and Australia have increasingly embraced the work of theoreticians such as Foucault and Derrida, and French Feminists such as Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva who work predominantly from within a poststructuralist framework. Nonetheless, the legacy of a feminism that sought to discredit texts for their lack of authenticity has endured, especially outside academic feminism, where a variety of lobby groups still campaign for the removal of 'unrealistic', 'inauthentic' and 'unrepresentative' images of women<sup>123</sup>.

In an insightful analysis of the scandal that arose at Yale University over the alleged sexism of a French-language textbook, *French in Action*<sup>124</sup>, Carolyn A. Durham makes some astute observations about the kinds of assumption which underpin American, and by extension Anglophone, feminist textual readings. Her discussion warrants some attention here since she is one of the few authors who address the tensions that arise when national culture and gender intersect. Durham highlights the extent to which textual analysis in the American academy tends to favour "the realistic approach typical of both mainstream American media and traditional American feminism" (1998:100). As a result:

Analysis centers [sic] on sexism as conveyed through characteristic gender stereotypes; it includes an equally conventional evaluation of the latter as negative (such as female silence and passivity) or positive (such as an active male voice and gaze); and it further assumes that these stereotypes inflict immediate and unmediated harm. (ibid. my emphasis)

The assumption of a causal nexus between images or other textual representations of women and harm inflicted on women as a group is central to Anglophone feminism's denunciation of these images.<sup>125</sup> This is so because it is assumed that exposure to the "characteristic gender stereotypes" Durham mentions will result in misogynistic behaviour on behalf of men, self-effacing behaviour on behalf of women. As established in Chapter Four, this belief relies heavily on the assumption that representations of women are and are intended to be replications of women's actual lived experience (particularly in the case of photographic images) and that, as such, they are read as endorsements of particular configurations of gender relations. While there has been discussion in the French feminist context of the harm allegedly inflicted by pornographic images of women (Poggi 1976, Groult 1975), the assumption that representations of women are harmful to women has not been taken up by

<sup>123</sup> Examples of this kind of campaigning are provided later in this chapter. For useful summaries of this type of community and government action see Regina Graycar and Jenny Morgan (1990) *The Hidden Gender of Law* and Nadine Strossen (1995) *Defending Pornography*. For discussion of the extent to which this approach still prevails within the Anglophone academy, see Pollock (1990), Corrigan (1992) and Lumby (1997).

<sup>124</sup> A number of students at Yale University complained to University authorities that the *French in Action* textbook, a compulsory text for students of French-language, presented sexist, offensive and oppressive representations of women and that, as such, they were being oppressed by being required to use it. As a result of the subsequent inquiry, the French department at the University was forced to withdraw the text from the course. For full details of the inquiry, refer to Durham's (1998) "At the Franco-American Crossroads of Gender and Culture: Where Feminism and Sexism Intersect" in *French Feminisms*, 91-113.

<sup>125</sup> Indeed, Catharine MacKinnon has managed to persuade a number of American state jurisdictions that in some cases, images of women constitute a legal harm in and of themselves. Statutory offences have been created in these states in response to this argument. See, for example, Catharine A. MacKinnon (1989) *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA: 196-7. In Graycar and Morgan (1990): 375-398, the authors examine applications of MacKinnon's anti-

French feminism generally.<sup>126</sup> This lack of emphasis on representations and images of women helps to explain the absence of popular cultural texts from the French feminist oeuvre. It is also both a product and a continuation of the inherent conservatism of the French academy, which has largely ignored the cultural studies project as a whole. Rather than challenge the notion that the canon is itself a patriarchal concept, French feminists have sought to subvert and appropriate the canon for women. Some important fundamental cultural differences between the French and Anglophone movements are worth noting at this juncture. The French feminist movement has always been more theoretical and abstract in nature than its Anglophone counterpart (until some Anglophone feminists began to appropriate French feminist theory), for a number of reasons.

France has a strong national culture of intellectualism, produced in part by a self-fulfilling myth of national self-perception, and in part by a rigorously canonical secondary and tertiary education system. Many Anglophone feminists find the work of French feminists exclusionist and impenetrable for its sheer density and for the assumption that the reader is conversant with the major figures of the Western philosophical canon. Were it read as widely in France as it is outside,<sup>127</sup> contemporary French feminist work would not be as inaccessible to the French reader as it is to some Anglophone scholars. The average high school graduate in France has at least some understanding of the major trends in Western philosophy from Plato to Sartre. This knowledge, combined with the conservative nature of the French academy, which means that popular culture is largely excluded as a subject of intellectual debate,<sup>128</sup> make it unsurprising that French feminism has become as theoretical as it is, and that the work of feminists such as Irigaray and Cixous has focused largely on the patriarchal canon. Even feminists like Michèle Le Doeuff, Christine Delphy, Françoise Picq, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Collette Guillaumin and Monique Wittig who work outside the psychoanalytic and semiotic traditions which provide the central focus of the French feminism imported into Anglophone academy, tend also to be more interested in abstract theorisation of women's position than are their Anglophone sisters (Duchen 1986:68-9, Allwood 1998:2, 25-44), with the exception of those Anglophone feminists who have taken up the theoretical positions proposed in French feminist work.

Furthermore, at about the same time as many Anglophone feminists embraced the study of popular culture, the strongly intellectual and theoretical part of the French movement, *Psych et Po*, officially rejected it as a manifestation of the trivialisation of women's experience

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pornography ordinance to what they describe as other forms of 'media vilification of women', namely, 'sexist' images and comments.

<sup>126</sup> This despite the widespread translation into French of seminal English language texts advocating such an approach, well before French language texts began to be widely translated into English.

<sup>127</sup> Moi (1987) observes that French feminism is increasingly more widely read outside France than within it. Almost fifteen years later, with the appropriation of French feminist theorists by a number of widely-cited Anglophone feminist scholars including Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, this is even more so.

<sup>128</sup> Barthes's work is the very obvious exception to this general statement. In the field of sociology, French scholars such as Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu have also studied contemporary culture extensively, but without the specifically *textual* focus of the Anglophone academy.



by patriarchy (Duchen 1986:68). Some Anglophone feminists argued along similar lines (cf. Coward 1984), but the women's movement embraced the idea that texts could be harmful to women in such a way that the study of images and representations of women came to dominate both popular and academic feminist discourses in these countries throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s. The marriage of cultural studies, with its focus on ideology and popular culture, and feminism, ensured that in much of the Anglophone academy that considerable time and effort were devoted to demonstrating precisely *why* these popular cultural forms are so oppressive of women. French feminists, regardless of whether or not they subscribed to the doctrine of difference feminism, tended instead to reject outright cultural forms they regarded as simply an attempt to have women play on the patriarchal playing field. There were feminists (Juliet Mitchell, for example) who did engage with theorists such as Freud and Lacan who were perceived by feminists as patriarchal and misogynist. However, until French difference feminism gained currency in the Anglophone academy, the bulk of feminist scholarship focussed on the oppressive nature, rather than the enabling possibilities, of philosophy and psychoanalysis (Mulvey, Doane and Lauretis, for example). Throughout the 1970s, French feminists such as Irigaray and Kristeva had engaged directly with theorists such as Derrida and Lacan. In so doing, they sought to capitalise on the cracks and spaces in their work to show how their ideas, such as deconstruction and the formation of the subject through language, can be used effectively by the feminist project.

While it has been a powerful tool in permitting them to theorise a radical feminine alterity, this use of male poststructuralist theorists by French feminists is not without problems. The same reasons for which Anglophone feminism long rejected such theorists resurface even when appropriated by feminists. Rosi Braidotti (an Italian-Australian feminist now working in the Netherlands) observes that a frequent criticism levelled at French feminist theory is that:

It tends to reinforce the very phallographic structures which it criticizes [sic]. As if the mimetic trap were somewhat inevitable, the French deconstruction of the primacy of phallogentrism ends up in the paradoxical reassertion of the very power it denounces (1991:13).<sup>129</sup>

Such reservations have not prevented Anglophone feminist scholars from embracing the work of the major exponents of this approach: Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray. The work of these three French feminists has had a warm reception in parts of the British, American and Australian feminist academies over the past twenty years. The French feminism adopted with such enthusiasm by the Anglophone academy has been both unrepresentative of the French women's movement as a whole (cf. Allwood), and highly influential in shaping contemporary Anglophone intellectual debate about feminism. Accepting that aspects of French feminism have been incorporated by a number of very prominent Anglophone feminists (Butler, Grosz, Probyn and Spivak, for example), it would nonetheless be fair to say that the movements have

<sup>129</sup> For an excellent exposition of this problem, see Angela Grooten (1991) 'Coming to your senses . . . On the scopoc order and woman's disorder' in J.J. Hermesen and A. v. Lenning *Sharing the difference: Feminist debates in Holland*.



still evolved differently, and that it is only a part of the Anglophone movement<sup>130</sup> which has embraced parts of the translated works of a very small number of French feminists — primarily Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva, with occasional appearances by Catherine Clément and Sarah Kofman. In addition, it is worth noting that these theorists are not usually viewed as feminist, nor even sympathetic to feminism, by most French feminists. Christine Delphy (1985, in Allwood 1998:42) is incredulous that this work is so widely studied by Anglophone feminists, especially given that Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva have all been reluctant to adopt the label 'feminist' at one time or another (Duchen, 1986, 1987). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that there has been considerable criticism of difference feminism from within the French movement, in particular by those such as Delphy, Picq and Wittig who have been receptive to the incorporation of elements of Anglophone feminism into their own work, despite writing from within what Toril Moi (1987: 6) has called "a recognizably [sic] French intellectual tradition".

Questions such as whether or not one calls oneself a feminist are contentious in an Anglophone context, but in France they go beyond debates about whether or not we still need feminism in a supposedly post-feminist world. In the French context, an unwillingness to identify oneself as a feminist is indicative of a belief that women's liberation is *not* synonymous with gender equality, a belief to which many French feminists have been deeply attached for at least the past thirty years<sup>131</sup> (cf. Duchen 1987). The splintering of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (hereafter the MLF) — the 'official' French women's movement — into 'equality' and 'difference' feminisms is suggestive of just how strong the anti-equality feminist movement has been in the French academy, and for how long it has been this way. Because the nomenclature 'feminist' identifies adhesion to or rejection of these radical theoretical positions, the question of naming and of calling oneself feminist has been far more important in the French movement than in the movements in Britain, North America and Australia. Claire Duchen's work on the MLF (1986, 1987) reveals that there has long been a strong current of feminism in France that has rejected the appellation 'feminist' and even called itself

<sup>130</sup> While this work has been highly influential (and also highly contentious) within the Anglophone academy, its influence on the broader women's movement outside Universities has been considerably less. Allwood (1998) makes the valid observation that it is also the case in France that sections of the grass-roots women's movement have not wholly embraced this approach. However, in her discussions of a variety of other French feminist positions, she fails to note that many of the French feminists who do not support the extremes of theoretical 'difference' feminism nonetheless approach feminine liberation from a distinctly 'difference' perspective, a point on which I will elaborate further as this Chapter progresses.

<sup>131</sup> A similar, if more radical, approach has evolved in Italy over the same time period. Following Irigaray's early work on sexual difference, the *affidamento* movement seeks to liberate women through an affirmation of their difference, in particular their biological difference, from men, with a particular focus on women's capacity to bear children. The most influential exponents of this approach have been the Diotima group of feminist philosophers, based in Verona, and the members of the Libreria delle Donne di Milano (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective). For a detailed discussion of this approach, see Renate Holub's (1994) essay in *Feminine Feminists: cultural practices in Italy*, and Teresa de Lauretis's (1987b) introduction to *Sexual Difference* (an English translation of the writings of the Milan Women's Bookstore Committee). For a good example of the writings of the Diotima group translated into English, see Adriana Cavarero (1986 1991:181-185) 'The Need for a Sexed Thought' in Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp's anthology *Italian Feminist Thought: a reader*. Silke Beinssen-Hesse and Kate Rigby (1996:66-67) also observe that the *affidamento* movement has been enthusiastically embraced by certain parts of the German feminist movement. However, they also stress that it has been rebutted with equal zeal by other parts of the feminist movement in Germany, especially those influenced by American feminism.

'anti-feminist'.<sup>132</sup> The members of the *Psych et Po* group, under the leadership of Antoinette Fouque, always refused to call themselves feminists, because they saw feminism as synonymous with a movement that sought to obtain 'parity' for women within the existing structures of the patriarchy. Equality was perceived by Fouque and her supporters "as women striving to be like men, instead of discovering ways to realise their own femininity" (Allwood 1998:36).<sup>133</sup> Indeed, Cixous went so far as to say at a conference in the US that no self-respecting French woman would call herself a feminist (Duchen 1987).<sup>134</sup> In its most extreme forms, such as Annie Leclerc's (1974) *Parole de femme*, difference feminism is synonymous with biological essentialism, which it simultaneously claims both to appropriate as a counter-ideology to liberate women, and to denounce because it is an idea expressed in masculine speech.

In a study of the "movement years" of French feminism, Françoise Picq argues that by definition, women's liberation movements:

distinguish themselves from women's rights groups [because]. . . They do not seek to influence institutions but to defy established powers, rules and dominant values. They want to change the way the individual thinks and acts, to develop a new consciousness of self in women (1993:183-85).

Though more closely aligned with equality than difference feminism, Picq maintains that the aim of feminism was never to win greater access to the system for women, but rather to smash the system and replace it with something specifically feminine. The picture emerges of a very different approach to women's liberation from the 'equality' position that dominated the English-speaking world in the 1960s and 1970s. The French approach is centred on freedom and autonomy achieved through sexual difference. While the French difference approach has become increasingly influential in Anglophone feminist philosophy, the legacy of equality feminism also remains firmly entrenched. Feminist scholars in areas as diverse as theology, law, medicine and education are still deeply attached to equality feminism, as are government agencies and feminist lobby groups. The consequences of this legacy for textual analysis, in particular for the analysis of popular cultural texts such as magazines, are profound, as I shall seek to demonstrate.

<sup>132</sup> Although there is an increasing tendency in the Anglophone world for some women to distance themselves from the appellation 'feminist' (for evidence and discussion of this trend, see Susan Faludi (1992) *Backlash: the Undeclared War against Women*. London, Chatto & Windus, or Naomi Wolf (1997) *Promiscuities: the secret struggle for womanhood*. New York, Random House), this is not anchored in the wholesale theoretical rejection of the concept of 'feminism' and the preference for the term 'anti-feminism' as has been the case in France.

<sup>133</sup> One of the many problematic aspects of the appropriation of theories of sexual difference by the Anglophone academy is that of time lag. Many Anglophone scholars are working with texts, which, for reasons of delayed translation, are very dated. Since they were originally written, many of their authors have shifted their positions considerably. Indeed, Fouque herself now rejects difference feminism as a political strategy, conceding that the position she adopted in the 1970s was born of ignorance (Allwood 1998:36). The Anglophone intellectual enthusiasm for difference feminism appears, to date, not to have taken into account the subsequent revisions of the position by its original exponents.

<sup>134</sup> Grosz rightly argues that the refusal of Kristeva and Cixous to identify themselves as feminists does not in itself mean that their work cannot usefully be incorporated into a feminist political project, inside or outside France (1990: 234).

Difference feminism is at odds with what I refer to as equality feminism<sup>135</sup> over the strategies it advocates to bring about an end to women's oppression. Equality feminism seeks to increase women's participation in structures and institutions that have traditionally been the domain of men, so as to materially improve women's participation in and enjoyment of life. In short, it seeks to redress women's oppression by giving them the *same* access to the *same* structures and institutions as men; and assumes that such a course will result in women enjoying the *same* quality of life and status as men. In contrast to the 'equality' approach, difference feminism seeks to create *different* spaces and *different* opportunities for women, with the expected outcome that they will be liberated by being able to express their *difference* in such a way as to have it respected and validated in wider society. Taking account of the concessions made earlier regarding the inter-cultural reception of national works, it remains true that the strongest current in mid-late twentieth century Anglophone feminism has been equality feminism, the strongest in France, varying degrees of difference feminism, albeit in a variety of manifestations.<sup>136</sup>

### Beauty politicised

Insofar as some Anglophone feminists have sought parity between men and women, many have focused on body maintenance, an area where women were — and to a large extent still are — required to direct a great deal more of their energies than men. Men, it was argued, were not subject to the same oppressive forces that defined norms of physical attractiveness, nor were they valued more as objects of beauty than forces of intellect. In her historical overview of the politics of appearance, Annette Corrigan discusses the way standards of feminine beauty came to be seen as oppressive manifestations of "the patriarchal construction of femininity" (1992:107) and reports that "many feminists self-consciously eschewed the trappings of femininity and pointed to the connections between female beauty, female objectification, rape, violence, pornography and other forms of female subordination" (ibid.).

<sup>135</sup> Allwood argues that a more correct term would be 'sameness' feminism, since she submits that both types of feminism do seek equality for women but differ in their methods for achieving this. I am not convinced that difference feminism does actually seek what is commonly understood as 'equality' for women, and believe that equality feminism goes beyond calling for 'sameness' with men. I will therefore retain the term 'equality' feminism in this discussion (although I acknowledge the validity of the point made by Finnish feminist Tuija Parvikko (1992) that the term 'equality' does not necessarily mean the same thing in each country, nor has its meaning remained constant since the beginning of the women's movement). Joke J. Hermesen and Alkeline van Lenning (1991:22) propose the terms traditionally used by Dutch feminists: 'Equal-rights feminism' which, they write, "tends to deny and minimize [sic] sexual differences because it considers differences between the sexes as an obstacle to social and economic equality", and 'ethical feminism' which "stresses sexual differences based on the argument that they cannot and should not be denied in the battle for equality". While their definitions of the two approaches are succinct and useful, I cannot but be concerned that to describe 'difference' feminism as 'ethical' feminism is to imbue it with an implied moral superiority.

<sup>136</sup> I accept that the differences are far more subtle than a chapter of this length is fully able to illustrate them as being. For a thorough comparative discussion of the two movements, and prevalence of the different currents of feminist thinking in each, I refer the reader to Allwood. She observes that:

there are dangers involved in talking of national feminisms. There is a constant fear of falling into a trap of stereotyping and xenophobia. There is also a danger of representing each national feminism as homogeneous, hiding its internal debates and divisions. However, there is also a danger in *not* recognising the differences between, and the specificities of, national feminisms (1998:10, emphasis in original).

For this reason, I believe it important to pursue this line of inquiry in spite of the limited scope of this work to do it proper justice.

She traces the evolution of this debate from the consciousness-raising of the anti-Miss America campaigners (1968) and Germaine Greer (1970); through the publication in the 1980s of a large number of texts discussing femininity, beauty and — a new addition — slimness<sup>137</sup>; to the more sophisticated theoretical analyses of the question in terms of the discursive construction of the self and of femininity in the work of Sandra Lee Bartky (1988) and Susan Bordo (1993). Common to all is an underlying assumption of what Corrigan calls "the insidious and destructive nature of fashion and beauty practices in Western culture" (1992:121) and the need for vigilance in counteracting these on the part of feminists.

Davis (1991) notes that there has been a shift in discussion of the relationship between beauty, femininity and power from an 'oppression model', in which women are seen as subjugated by what Bartky (1988) called the 'fashion-beauty system', to a discursive model, in which theorists like Bartky and Bordo seek to understand how femininity is constructed by that system. This thesis has tackled the question from within a similarly discursive model. The fashion-beauty system, Davis argues, is "one of the central ways that femininity is constructed, whereby woman as sex is idealized [sic] as the incarnation of physical beauty" (1991:25). She goes on to contend that it is because of "its intimate connection with power. . . [that] the subject of beauty has disturbed feminists" (ibid). In her discussion of elective cosmetic surgery, Davis wrestles with the reality, largely ignored by Anglophone feminist debate on the issue, that a physical transformation through cosmetic surgery can be an incredibly empowering choice for a woman to make for herself. While not denying the deeply problematic fact that such decision "reproduces a complex of power structures that construct the female body as inferior and in need of change" (1991:33), Davis argues for a more sophisticated understanding of the factors which motivate women to choose cosmetic surgery. To dismiss them as cultural dupes, she argues, is to delegitimise the substantial sense of empowerment gained from taking their lives into their own hands and availing themselves of the economic and technological advancements that have permitted this. While her argument is unusual amongst Anglophone feminists for its insistence on the possible positive aspects of engaging with the 'fashion-beauty system', it nonetheless presupposes the system to be inherently oppressive. I suggest that another approach exists, one which sees the 'fashion-beauty system' as a locus of power for women, and that this approach is a direct relation of difference feminism.

Allwood (1998:39-40) touches briefly on the question of power through seduction in her discussions of the French women's movement. Feminism, she argues, is perceived by some

<sup>137</sup> There are too many works from this period to name them all. Among the feminists to whose work Corrigan refers, some of the better known authors are: Wendy Chapkis (1986) *Beauty Secrets*; Rita Freedman (1988) *Beauty Bound*; Susie Orbach (1984) *Fat is a Feminist Issue*; Kim Chernin (1981) *The Obsession* and (1985) *The Hungry Self*; and Naomi Wolf (1991) *The Beauty Myth*. In Germany, a similar theoretical approach emerged at the same time. Two of its better-known exponents are Barbara Sichtermann (1986) *Femininity: The politics of the personal*, trans. J. Whillans, ed. H. Geyer-Ryan, Cambridge, Polity Press; and Christina von Braun (1990) *Nicht ich: [Logik, Lüge, Libido]*, Frankfurt, Neue Kritik (no English translation currently exists).

French men and women — including women whom Anglophone commentators would readily identify as feminist on account of their politics — as:

something which was indulged in briefly by some French women in the 1970s, but is essentially American . . . [and fails to account for the fact that] men and women relate to each other differently in France; that there is a complementarity between the sexes and a different attitude to seduction and sexuality (1998:39).<sup>138</sup>

Her comment highlights the French self-perception that there is a peculiarly French way of being a woman, and that this entails an equally unique way of relating to men. Thus, resistance to the idea that women should give up their seductiveness is founded as much in a desire to reject American cultural imperialist ideals of appropriate behaviour (including political correctness) as in a belief that seduction is a source of power for women. Various commentators (Lisa Appignanesi 1994, Durham 1998, Allwood 1998) have observed a seemingly unquantifiable difference in the way women and men relate to each other in France. While acknowledging as both simplistic and dangerous the suggestion that there is a universal experience of womanhood in France which involves experiencing sexuality and seduction as sites of power, all three scholars try to describe this distinctive set of gender relations. Allwood remarks that "[French] feminists are concerned not only with changing gender relations on a societal level, but also within the couple, which occupies a far more important place in French than in Anglo-American feminist thought" (1998:40). Durham makes the astute observation that:

The tendency evident here [in the Yale *French in Action* scandal] — to equate sexism with the portrayal of *sexuality*, at best, and, at worst, with any and all depiction of the female body — reflects one of the most consistent ideological positions in American feminism . . . such a view also enjoys wider cultural support — a deeply ingrained association of the body with privacy, often identified by the French, in particular, as American 'puritanism'. (1998:112)

Allwood (1998:40) also remarks that women in positions of power in France tend to go to great lengths to demonstrate that, in acceding to power, they have not renounced their commitment to femininity and attractiveness. Appignanesi (1994) suggests that women are treated differently in public places in France and in Britain, especially with regard to the way men look at them and they interact with those looks. In short, a trend emerges that suggests many French women — including French feminists — see no inherent tension between being sexual seductresses and liberated feminists. Furthermore, an attractive female body is not necessarily seen as a testament to women's oppression. On the contrary, in this cultural context, it may be a site of power.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>138</sup> In including this observation I do not wish to suggest (nor, in my view, does Allwood) that the construction of feminism as the antithesis of seductiveness is an appropriate one. Rather, I seek to demonstrate the extent to which 'feminism' has, in some cases, been coded as 'other', 'American' and 'not-French' within the French context. I suggest that this is at least partly due to the alienness of the 'anti-beauty' aspects of some Anglophone feminism in the French context.

<sup>139</sup> A similar experience of 'femininity' can be observed among some Italian women. Maurizio Viano (1994:141) writes that: "Objectification is not all that takes place when a woman invests time in her appearance. Many Italian women I talked to are aware of the risks of objectification and play with it without feeling that they are obeying a master code. In fact, much of the current interest in *femme fatale* femininity is pervaded by an ironic distance, a sense of masquerade that may indeed leave room for strong, gender-bending subjectivity."

Anglophone feminists might object that it is also a site of power in our own context, but that access to it is restricted to those women who conform to a normalised, idealised notion of what it is to be 'attractive'.<sup>140</sup> Objections such as these are grounded in an assumption that this standard of attractiveness is not defined by women themselves and that, as such, it is necessarily oppressive if they are unable to attain it. What if 'attractiveness' were to be understood as something women negotiate from a position of power, rather than of oppression? In this case, the normalised image of 'attractiveness' becomes less a recipe to be followed slavishly than a set of suggestions to try at home with whatever ingredients one has at one's disposal. There will be some women for whom following the recipe to the letter becomes both imperative and impossible. Yet such an observation raises the possibility that there are women who actively seek such an obsessive engagement with the text for a variety of reasons that are extraneous to it. Doubtless, there are some women who would seek such prescriptive and directive presentations of femininity and 'attractiveness' elsewhere, were they not so readily available in magazines.

Such reasoning can be difficult for Anglophone feminists to accept: we are born of a feminist tradition that insists that women's power *cannot* be linked to women's bodies as sexualised objects. This is because sexualised women's bodies are understood as contested sites and the contest is perceived as relating to who shapes social understandings of what sexualised women's bodies come to represent. Underpinning this reasoning is the assumption that the forces that code women's bodies as sexual are both patriarchal and, by extension, negative. Much second-wave Anglophone feminism has sought to liberate women from the constraints of our bodies. While some Anglophone feminists, such as Grosz (1994a), for example, are now exploring the potential of a more 'corporeal feminism', this does not translate as an embrace of the 'sex equals power' philosophy. It is possible – as the French experience so clearly demonstrates – to understand the sexualisation of women's bodies as a process and a practice that women have come to define for themselves. This does not mean that it is no longer normative: rather, it means that the norms are no longer specifically patriarchal. To accept such an argument is unsettling, not the least because it forces an acceptance that Anglophone feminisms are not always right.

Durham (1998:101), herself an American scholar of French, suggests that Americans have a tendency to believe that "a cultural experience clearly foreign to that of the United States . . . can nonetheless be read as 'American'; indeed that 'reality' itself is American". Her argument is pertinent for the present purposes: how are French texts such as *VOGUE Paris* to be understood if the (foreign) reader starts from a position of assuming that the context in which they are produced is, or should be, identical to her own? In such a case, critical

<sup>140</sup> McRobbie (1999b) has also made the valid observation that access to this site is restricted on grounds of class, ethnicity, disposable income and sexuality. A discussion that does justice to the far-reaching implications of such an observation is beyond the scope of this thesis and the reader is referred to McRobbie (1999b) for a detailed treatment of this question.



academic readings of the text become very challenging. To accept that it is empowering for women to conform to dominant societal norms of what it is to be beautiful and sexual is unsettling to everything Anglophone feminist critiques of popular culture have sought to expose and change. But to read *VOGUE Paris* insensible to the gender relations which inform its production, judging it by Anglophone standards of what it is to be a liberated woman, is to impose on it — and thereby on French women — Anglophone ideas about what kind of gender relations are liberating for women. Moreover, to assume that American or Australian *VOGUE*, produced in diverse and heterogeneous societies, can be read through a singular Anglophone feminist definition of 'liberated' gender relations is to impose yet another academic agenda inappropriate to the context in which the text is productively activated.

At this point, I wish to make it clear that I do not seek to argue that *all* aspects of women's liberation are culturally relative. Doubtless, there are a variety of aspects of women's experience — violence, lack of access to education or health care, obstacles to political participation, for example — that are oppressive regardless of relativist justification. However, I do wish to refute the suggestion that, if the French women's movement has not taken up the cause of politicising the body beautiful, then this is so because French women are necessarily somehow more oppressed than their Anglophone sisters.<sup>141</sup> Throughout this thesis, I have rejected such 'false-consciousness' arguments on the grounds that they are overly deterministic of the subjects of their inquiry, and this is no exception. If French women experience sexual seductiveness as power, then care must be taken not to assume that this is the product of gender relations subject to less critical investigation than in Anglophone societies.

Gender relations, and the study of the ways in which gender is constructed, have been as much a focus of feminist inquiry in France as in the US, Britain and Australia. French feminists such as Mathieu (1977), Guillaumin (1979, 1992) and Delphy (1981, 1984) developed sophisticated understandings of the social construction of gender quite independently of any Anglophone research on the issue.<sup>142</sup> Interestingly, in France, it is the theorists who reject difference feminism who have developed these conceptions of the construction of gender, whereas in many parts of the Anglophone feminist academy, gender construction and difference are becoming increasingly inseparable. Thus, it is certainly not the case that French feminists have ignored the question of female beauty because they lack an interest in how gender is constructed as a social and linguistic category. However, as Allwood shows in her review of French theories of gender, the debate in France has existed on a more

<sup>141</sup> After this chapter was presented as a paper at Monash University in 1999, Jacqueline Lesage, Nadie Bucher (both of French Studies) and Antonella Refatto (Linguistics) corresponded with me regarding the difficulties they faced as French and Italian women at Australian Universities, finding that their work was either dismissed by feminists on the grounds that they were from countries where women were perceived as being less liberated than is the case in Australia, or encouraged from a 'concerned' feminist viewpoint that sought to assist them in their navigation of the path to liberation.

<sup>142</sup> For a thorough discussion of their work, and that of other French gender theorists, I once again refer the reader to Allwood 1998: 77-98.

theoretical and philosophical plane. The result is that, while the construction of gender has been a feature of French feminist discourse, what Teresa de Lauretis (1987a) described as the "technologies of gender" have not.

In the essay mentioned earlier, Davis confidently asserted that the fashion-beauty system is "one of the central ways that femininity is constructed, whereby woman as sex is idealized [sic] as the incarnation of physical beauty" (1991:25) and that her investigation of it was therefore necessary and important. Her French sisters would most probably be inclined to disagree, suggesting that the desire to be physically and sexually attractive to the opposite sex is not necessarily gendered. Underlying Anglophone feminist objections to the fashion-beauty system is the assumption that this system (re)positions women as aesthetically pleasing objects for men's consumption and that the reverse is not true. It should be noted at this point that even those French feminists who follow a similar, equality feminist, line of reasoning — that equality is a state where demands are not made of one gender if they are not also made of the other — would not see the question of bodily adornment as a high priority. Personal grooming is, and has long been, a far less gendered issue in France than in most Anglophone countries, especially Australia.<sup>143</sup> Indeed, any visitor from an Anglophone country to a French shopping mall is likely to be taken aback by the proliferation of men's clothing, accessories, toiletries, cosmetics and personal grooming services available. The French are the leading consumers of beauty and toiletry products<sup>144</sup> in the European Union and, while the average French consumer spends as much per capita on such products as the average American consumer (CTPA 2000), the average French male spends almost three times as much as the average American male, and twice as much as the average British male (Marketsearch 1995). Which must mean that American women are spending more on beauty products and toiletries than French women. From even this small amount of data, a picture begins to emerge of France as a country where body maintenance is less a burden imposed solely on women than in North America, Britain and Australia. In such a context, the lack of debate regarding body maintenance as an integral factor in the construction of gender becomes more comprehensible. Furthermore, discussions by French feminists of the construction of gender tend to focus on systemic and institutional factors such as marriage, patriarchy and biological essentialism.

While there are still battles to be fought and gains to be made for French women, social reality belies the suggestion that they are living in a state of greater oppression than their sisters elsewhere. While they spend more of their money on beauty products and toiletries than any other women in the European Union, this might well be because more of

<sup>143</sup> Interestingly, the same could be said of Italy, the other country where difference feminism has gained a strong following.

<sup>144</sup> This category includes cosmetics, products such as cleansers, moisturisers, toners and anti-ageing preparations, fragrances, hair colourants, treatments and styling aids, self-tanning products, depilatory products, nail-care products and nail varnishes, cellulite and wrinkle-removing preparations and exfoliating agents, consumed in professional salons and purchased for home use. It does not include prescription medications used for cosmetic purposes or cosmetic surgery, nor does it include

them have their own money: there are more women in paid employment in France than in any other European Union country, with 44% of French women holding a job (Ciotexte URL: 2000).<sup>145</sup> Clearly, the reality of gender relations in France is more complex than the arrogant Anglophone assumption that French women just need to have their consciousness raised about how they are oppressed by the fashion-beauty system would allow. Dispelling the myth that women who invest in their own appearance are cultural dupes, Davis suggests that: "women who willingly undergo cosmetic surgery presumably know better than anyone just how oppressive the norms for feminine beauty are" (1991:38). Indeed, she criticises the predominant Anglophone approach to the fashion-beauty system on the grounds that it is unable to account for "women's active and knowledgeable involvement in practices that are also detrimental and/or degrading to them" (1991:29). Although she focuses on the drastic procedure of cosmetic surgery, her central thesis — that the decision to undergo such intervention can be a source of empowerment — can be extended to less invasive processes of body transformation such as slimming, working out, making oneself up and dressing in particular ways. Davis argues persuasively that, in a society where the way one looks makes a difference to how much power one has, self-adornment and self-modification are signs of women appropriating tools traditionally associated with patriarchal oppression, and using them for their own empowerment. The counterargument often mounted by Anglophone feminists is best expressed in Audre Lorde's well-known statement that "the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house" (1984: title). Many French women seem determined to prove that these tools never belonged to the master in the first place: they have always been at women's disposal for the purposes of their own advancement.

If we accept that this approach to sexuality and beauty is not the result of French women being unenlightened about their own situation, then it is possible to try to understand its origin. Although not all French feminists agree with difference feminism, this is an approach to women's liberation whose credibility is distinctively French. Even in Italy, where *affidamento* feminism is increasingly popular, the movement began with the translation of Irigaray's work into Italian (Bono and Kemp 1991). It was in France that the idea of feminine specificity as empowering really gained credence within the academy, and was developed beyond simplistic statements of biological essentialism into something much more sophisticated.<sup>146</sup> Even where the link is not seen as biological, a call for 'new values' — to be thought out by women, and hence in some way constitutive of an alternative discourse to the

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items such as soap, shampoo, talcum powder, toothpaste and deodorant which constitute the separate category of personal hygiene products.

<sup>145</sup> In comparison, 60.1% of American women, and 53.9% of Australian women were in paid employment in the last quarter of 2000. (Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics and Australian Bureau of Statistics, respectively). In comparing these statistics, it must be remembered that the French government offers considerably greater financial assistance to mothers who choose not to work outside the home while they have young children than do the governments of the United States and Australia.

<sup>146</sup> I do not wish to become embroiled in the long-standing theoretical debate over whether or not Cixous and Irigaray are essentialists (For a thorough discussion of that question, see Grosz (1994b) "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism"). What I am suggesting here is that regardless of whether their work is essentialist or not, it has been developed to a level of theoretical sophistication that surpasses the 'men are men and women are women' approach to feminism (and anti-feminism).

masculine — is present in the work of sexual difference feminists. In her essay "Sexual Difference", Irigaray wonders whether "by not building foundations different to those on which the world of men rests, will not all the concessions gained by the women's struggle be lost again?" (in Moi 1987 :119). In this same essay, she turns her attention briefly to the question of women's bodies, when she addresses the question of *nudity* and *perversity*, saying that clothes, make-up and jewellery are artificial envelopes which woman is forced to use because she "cannot use the envelope that she *is* since she cannot be located, cannot remain in her place". (122). However, Irigaray is not concerned with these trappings of femininity as oppressive *in and of themselves*, but with what they reveal about our (masculine, patriarchal) conceptions of time and place. Her project is to see feminine difference manifest itself as an alternative conception of time and place. Irigaray's lack of attention to the question of whether women are oppressed by the culture of the body beautiful is indicative of the approach of French difference feminism more generally. Femininity and feminine specificity are seen as sources of power for these feminists. Cixous is well known for her theory of *écriture féminine* (female/women's/feminine writing), which suggests that words can be assembled in specifically and innately feminine ways, although she does not restrict this to being produced by women. If the things that make us feminine can make us strong, then it follows that the ways in which we express our femininity — including physically — can also be sources of strength and empowerment. Some schools of Anglophone feminism in the 1960s and 1970s saw the physical manifestations of femininity — from lipstick to high heels to waif-like silhouettes — as imposed by the patriarchy. While difference feminism has gained currency in academia, many feminists today still maintain that the trappings of femininity are oppressive of women. French feminism seems to offer two predominant refutations of this position. For some, it is accepted that these norms are imposed from without, but the power dynamic is reversed by the fact that a woman who masters the art of seduction can bring even the most powerful of men to his knees (cf. Allwood 1998:40). For others, the female body is a beautiful and sacred thing, to be adorned, pleased and celebrated for all its womanliness and this includes highlighting the points of difference that make it so, such as breasts, hips, lips, belly and buttocks.<sup>147</sup> If women chose to celebrate the difference of their bodies by wearing skimpy clothing and red lipstick with high heels, then so be it. Many French women are deeply attached to the notion that feminine sexuality is a primary source of feminine power. In its more pedestrian manifestations, this is expressed as women having power over men precisely because their sexuality and physicality give them a unique tool for manipulation. On a theoretical level it emerges in theory based on psychoanalysis, such as Irigaray's contention

<sup>147</sup> The Italian *affidamento* approach is also particularly concerned to emphasise the value of anything about a woman's body that makes her 'womanly': breasts for nurturing, hips for child bearing etc. Although feminists such as the Diotima group treat the question more as a theoretical one than something which can be applied to images of women's bodies, Paulicelli (1994) observes that Italian feminists — herself included — are beginning to extend this mode of analysis to other domains such as fashion. It is interesting to note that the majority of them are feminists who, like Paulicelli, are now living and working in the United States.

that "if one deprives women, who are one of the poles of sexual difference, of a third person, then this makes them dangerously all-powerful in relation to men" (in Moi 1987:123).

For some Anglophone feminists a large part of the objection to the culture of the body beautiful seems to lie in the fact that it concerns the body at all. Having fought hard for the past forty years to separate women's opportunities for social participation from their biology, we have in fact reinforced the tradition Grosz (1994a) has discussed at length of a feminist belief that female liberation can only come about if women are separated from their bodies. This approach holds that it is only through such separation that women are able to demonstrate that their intellectual capacities are not governed by their bodies. Thus, the mind/body division so prevalent in the Western philosophical canon since Plato, and so often used to oppress women by associating the mind with the masculine, the body with the feminine, has in fact been perpetuated by Anglophone feminists. What we needed to do, it was argued by many Anglophone feminists, was to show that the mind is not a masculine domain, and so appropriate it for women.

It is therefore understandable that so much Anglophone feminist wrath has been directed at the ways in which women have been reduced to 'bodies', especially when the bodies presented to women as 'normal' and 'desirable' enslave them further by demanding they achieve an unattainable norm of beauty. Some Anglophone feminisms also rejected motherhood and child-bearing as forms of biological slavery, saw any form of personal beautification as a form of compliance with oppressive patriarchal norms and were outraged by any representation of the female body as a beautiful object. Those who adhered to the bra-burning, overall-wearing, short-haired school of feminism of the sixties and seventies undertook a deliberate, political rejection of the trappings of a physical femininity as prescribed by the patriarchy. The ideal of beauty, it was argued from Greer (1970) to Wolf (1991), and by many others, is something men have invented to prevent women from reaching their full potential, by making them feel that their self-worth is intrinsically linked to the question of their physical desirability to men. To this was added women's marriageability and, hence, their participation in normal, heterosexual relations and society. Susan Sontag has remarked that:

To be feminine, in one commonly felt definition, is to be attractive, or to do one's best to be attractive; to attract. (As being masculine is being strong.) While it is perfectly possible to defy this imperative, it is not possible for any woman to be unaware of it. As it is thought a weakness in a man to care a great deal about how he looks, it is a moral fault in a woman not to care "enough". Women are judged by their appearance as men are not, and women are punished more than men are by the changes brought about by aging. Ideals of appearance such as youthfulness and slimness are in large part now created and enforced by photographic images (1999:4-5).

Sontag summarises the major aspects of the beauty system to which many Anglophone feminists have objected: that it is gendered, that it is morally coded, and that it is based on norms defined by artificially created images. In the same essay she suggests that: "Anxiety about personal attractiveness could never be thought defining of a man: a man can always be

seen. Women are looked at." (1999:5). Here, Sontag touches on the objections to images of women, discussed at length in Chapter Four. Her comment, in the 1999 essay introducing Annie Leibovitz's photographs, reflects the extent to which concerns about women and beauty and images of either, remain deeply ingrained in many parts of the Anglophone feminist consciousness. During the 1980s, this mistrust of the beauty industry expanded further beyond a rejection of the representation of women as objects. Feminists in Britain, Australia and, in particular, North America, began to seize on the question of thinness. Since Orbach declared that *Fat is a feminist issue*, many women have argued that the equivalence of thinness and beauty is directly (and, in the case of some scholars, intentionally) linked to the poor self-esteem, eating disorders and body self-hatred which paralyse many women and prevent them from full social participation.<sup>148</sup>

From this difference of approach there emerges a tension between the many Anglophone feminists who see most media images of women as oppressive and exploitative, and many French feminists, who seem to think their Anglophone sisters simply *pudiques* (prudish, embarrassed by their bodies and sexualities). Because there is no consensus regarding the question of what an image of a sexually desirable woman represents, there can be no suggestion that it is appropriate for Anglophone feminists to approach French texts armed only with the usual critical arsenal. Furthermore, a singular critical approach that rejects media images of women is increasingly inappropriate to Anglophone texts, as the readings of *VOGUE* in this thesis have demonstrated. A culturally sensitive reading will take into account the context in which the texts were produced and the audience for whom they are intended. And cultural sensitivity should extend beyond tolerance of difference in other national cultures; it should include sensitivity to the many and diverse women's cultures that exist within national borders. This is not to say that feminists ought not to critique texts for which they are not the intended audience. On the contrary, a reading which takes into account these ambiguities is likely to produce a more sophisticated critique than one which simply assumes the framework of raging against sexual, conventionally "beautiful" bodies to be universally applicable.

### Sexy or sexist?

As we have seen, *VOGUE Paris* is demonstrably different in several respects from the American and Australian editions of the magazine when it comes to the question of beautiful bodies. In the first instance, there is far less emphasis on a realistic aesthetic in the French magazine: images are self-consciously contrived and the role of fantasy in engaging with them is made explicit by the magazine. Second, in the Paris edition there is virtually none of the

<sup>148</sup> See, for example, Chernin (1981, 1985) and Bordo (1993). Wolf (1991) argues that the 'beauty myth' is a conspiracy of sorts against women that is intended to effect the levels of social, intellectual and economic paralysis that Chernin and Bordo also observe in women with eating disorders.



self-reflexive discourse regarding the appropriateness or otherwise of the content of the magazine which is found in the American and Australian editions. Third, the focus on dieting, undergoing cosmetic surgery and making other changes to one's appearance, for the purposes of being attractive to men, is far greater in the French edition of the magazine; the Anglophone editions at least pay lip service to the demands of feminism. In the Australian and American editions, editors dress up these practices as examples of what Davis (1991:38) described as "taking one's life into one's own hands". Because these kinds of practice have never been critiqued by French feminists in the way that has occurred in the Anglophone world, there is no need for *VOGUE Paris* to represent them as anything other than what they are: tactics for using sex as a weapon. Fourth, while French feminism has been more preoccupied with issues of class than its Anglophone equivalent, issues of race and ethnicity are conspicuously absent from French feminist debate. As Allwood (1998:39) observes:

Political correctness is ridiculed in France not only on the right, as is the case in Britain and the United States, but also on the left. . . . The debate around political correctness, which in the United States is highly politicized [sic] and deeply rooted in a specific cultural and historical context, has been removed from this context to become nothing more than a joke and an example of American extremism. Ridicule is used to undermine the recognition of difference, which is at the base of political correctness.

One of the results of this marginalisation of the recognition of difference (which in turn further marginalises difference itself) is that French feminism has been generally content to ignore questions of race and ethnicity.<sup>149</sup> Thus, images of non-European women that exoticise their sexuality are critiqued neither for their sexism nor for their racism.

Figure 7.1, an advertisement for Cartier jewellery that appeared in the November 1998 edition of *VOGUE Paris*, is a good illustration of the type of image that is received differently in these different cultural contexts. It is likely that this image would be condemned in Anglophone countries, particularly in the United States, on the grounds that it is both sexist and racist. It is equally likely that it would be celebrated in France as a representation of an exotically beautiful — and so incredibly powerful — woman. This image of an attractive, naked, black woman can be criticised for a number of reasons. Female nudity is often viewed as inherently oppressive by Anglophone feminists. This woman is being 'reduced' to a naked body and her nakedness is entirely extraneous to the product being advertised. There is no logical reason why an advertisement for a gold ring ought to feature an image of a naked woman, so it is assumed that the nudity is purely for titillation. In advertising language, this translates as: the woman is nude because 'sex sells' and a naked woman is sexy. Her colour is also problematic: one could argue that it is unacceptable that, on the rare occasions when mainstream publications do feature images of women of colour, they are more often than not naked. Naked, black skin is used to invoke images of wild, animal sensuality, suggesting that

<sup>149</sup> This even in the face of rising domestic ethnic tension centred around the large numbers of immigrants from the Maghreb, a group in which the often uneducated and illiterate women who lack access to contraception, money and education, are surely some of the most oppressed women in France

a coloured woman is somehow more raw, more natural, in her expression of lust than her more contained, fair-skinned sisters. Thus women of colour are coded as desiring and passionate, an exotically available alternative to prudish white women.<sup>150</sup> In this equation, the woman of colour is cast as the mistress/whore and the (implied) white woman is, in contrast, the woman men want to marry and respect. Furthermore, the woman's dark skin is a focal point of the image: she has not been chosen because she is beautiful and happens also to be black; rather because she is black and happens also to be beautiful. Nonetheless, she also has more 'Caucasian' features and lighter skin than many women of colour. The choice of model reinforces the idea that black can be beautiful only when it is not too different from white. The use of black and white photography highlights her differentness as black, and also draws attention to the coloured gold rings encircling her. These oversized rings around her hips and pubic areas in three colours of gold are reminiscent of bondage, containment, even of a chastity belt. In addition, rings necessarily invoke marriage (although, curiously, she is also wearing one on her *right hand* ring finger). This is particularly so with this style of ring — the three-banded Russian wedding ring. This exotically beautiful woman is contained and bound within a set of three rings, which in turn symbolises her bondage and containment through the contract of marriage; and, if this photograph is to be believed, she is loving every minute of it. Furthermore, the suggestion of marriage also reinforces a presumption of heterosexuality.

Alternatively, one could read this as an image of a woman rejoicing in her own body and her nudity. The female nude has long been celebrated in the Western artistic tradition (Suleiman 1989) and here she is immortalised as being as beautiful as the ring she advertises. She is sensual, powerful and in control, bold enough to know that the only adornment she requires to seduce her man is the Cartier ring, a ring so beautiful, the advertisement tells us, that one need not wear anything else. Her angled head and wide smile could be read as cheeky and flirtatious and her coyness in covering her breasts with her hands as evidence of her willingness to engage in playful seduction. We all know that she is not *really* bound up in those rings and that the image only exists as a result of imaging technology, which permits the superimposition of one image onto another. Her manner of suspending the rings is reminiscent of a spinning hula hoop, and indulges us in the fantasy that a Cartier Russian wedding ring is as accessible to the reader as a toy.

Also from *VOGUE Paris* (February 1998) but syndicated internationally to most of the editions of the magazine, including both the American and Australian editions, is the image in Figure 7.2. This is another<sup>151</sup> of the images from Gucci's campaign to 'sex up' their label, after

<sup>150</sup> For a discussion of the practice of coding women of colour and Asian/'oriental' women as sexually exotic and available in Western European literature, see Reina Lewis (1995) *Gendering Orientalism: race, femininity and representation*. New York, Routledge, or for a treatment of the same question in relation to popular cultural texts, see Marina Heung (1995) 'The family romance of orientalism: from *Madame Butterfly* to *Indochine*' in Carol Siegel and Ann Kibbey (eds) *Forming and reforming identity*. New York, New York University Press.

<sup>151</sup> See also Figure 6.4 in Chapter Six.



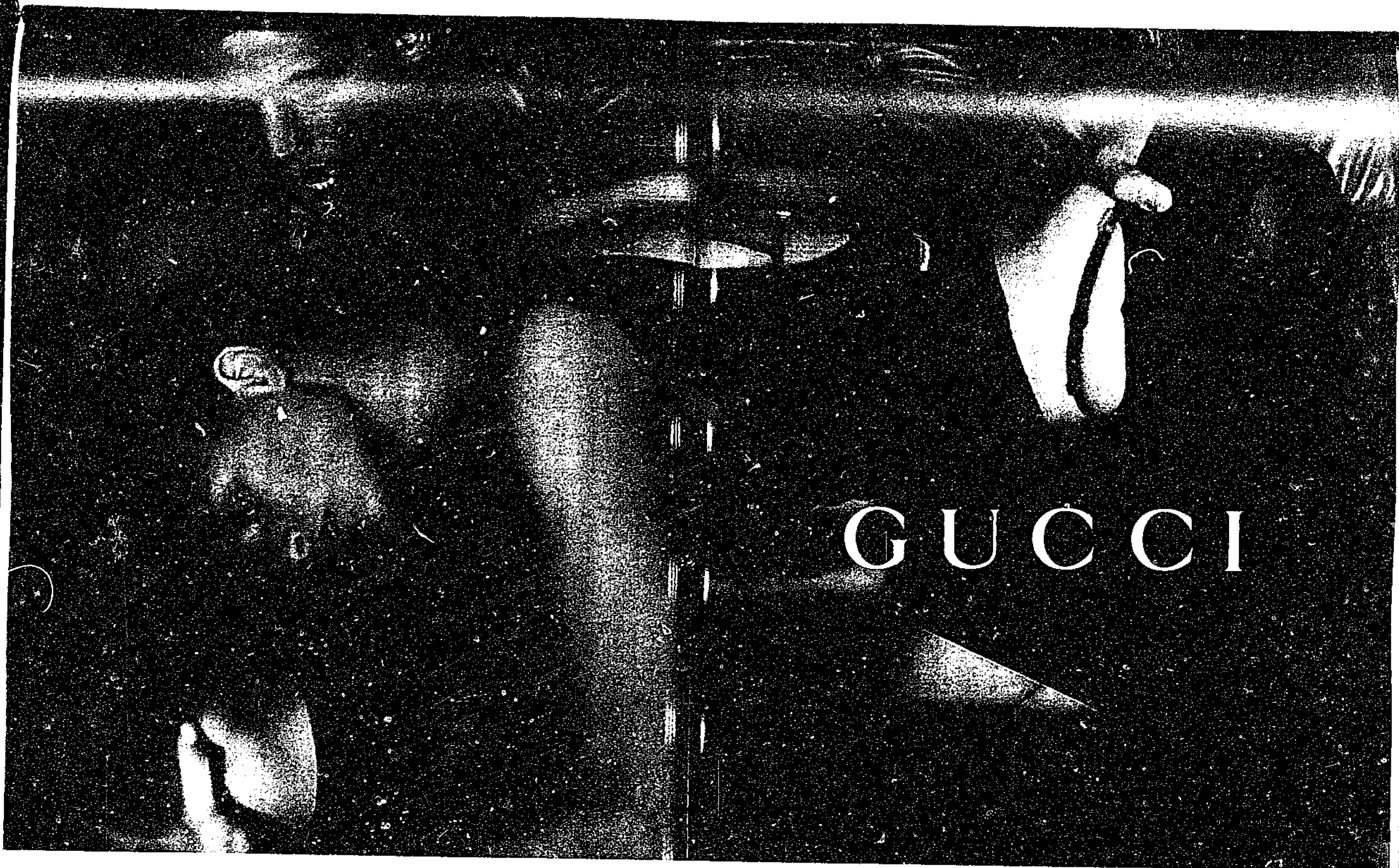


Figure 7.3 advertisement: Gucci

American designer Tom Ford took over as head designer at the company. Featuring an attractive young woman with her head poised at the crotch of a man clad only in (presumably Gucci) black underpants, the advertisement is typical of the campaign. It is explicitly sexual: there can be no question that the expression of part-rapture, part-fear on the man's face is due to the prospect of impending fellatio from the attractive blonde. For his part, he is busily fondling her buttocks and slipping off her expensive black Gucci skirt for better access. The grey leather seats of an expensive European car form the backdrop and, along with the dim lighting, give an air of urgency and transgression to the image: these two are living on the edge, about to make love in the back seat of a car, limousine or taxi. This image rehearses a classic 'sex equals power' narrative. The woman is clearly in the position of power, able to decide whether to give pleasure or withhold it, or even to inflict pain if she chooses. She is almost fully dressed, while she has reduced him to the vulnerability of near nakedness. It is true that the woman is presented as a conventionally beautiful, sexual body. It is possible to argue that she has been 'reduced' to a sexual pleasure-giver, neglecting her own needs. Furthermore, the image taps into a widespread male fantasy of the idealistically beautiful woman prepared to give selfless sexual gratification without a thought for her own needs, a fantasy most often expressed in pornography through the image of the kneeling woman performing fellatio on a grateful man, selfishly uninterested in anything other than the pleasure she gives him. So what does the reader make of this image? Is it an image of an oppressed woman, reduced to a sexual object in order to 'sell' clothing and to promote the idea that Gucci is a brand of sophisticated intelligence? Or is it an image of a powerful woman, able to reduce a man to putty in her hands as she teases him with her seductive charms, all the while conscious that she can leave him in his underpants in the back of the car?

For some readers, the image may find the image erotically arousing, some may find it sexually repulsive. For some feminists might object that even if it is an image of a powerful woman, the power is not *real* power because it reduces women to sexual objects in order to achieve their goals.

These are difficult questions, because their answers will necessarily reveal more about the feminist background of the reader than about the images and stories criticised. I will deal below with the more general issue of power through sex. The particular criticisms levelled at the images the magazine carries — that they objectify women as sexual objects — return us to our earlier discussions about whether something sexual is necessarily sexist. As I have demonstrated, sexism is a term that can only be defined within a specific set of cultural and historical circumstances. What is offensive and degrading to one reader may be sexually exciting to the next: indeed, as we observed in Chapter Five, it may be the degradation which is itself the source of sexual excitement. I submit that the most useful analysis to apply to such images is the one outlined in the early chapters of this work. Returning to Bennett's conception of the 'productive activation' of texts, discussed at length in Chapter Two, it



becomes apparent that this model is particularly helpful when trying to understand how a text like *VOGUE* becomes meaningful within a reading formation. Bennett's notion of reading formations centres on the idea of "an interaction between the *culturally activated* text and the *culturally activated* reader" (1983:222, italics in original). Texts, for Bennett, are productively activated when meanings are produced at the point where they intersect with readers. These meanings are produced within a complex intertext of conflicting social, political and material discourses. In my earlier examination of Bennett's work, I suggested that, while his model was useful in that it freed texts from the notion of having a pre-inscribed meaning, it was also limited because it allowed that all activations were equally productive. In refining his model, I argued that there were reading formations that would necessarily be preferred by either text or reader for tactical or strategic reasons.

In the case of the kinds of images under discussion here, this is certainly so. These are advertisements, their primary aim to engage readers in such a way as to stimulate desire for their products. While there will always be readers of a magazine who do not respond to advertisements in this way, Chapter Three demonstrated that there are sufficient who do so on a sufficiently regular basis to warrant the investment of substantial sums on magazine advertising. Some advertisers may seek to shock readers into awareness of their product,<sup>152</sup> but the majority will seek to appeal to their sensibilities and values. Understood in this context, the advertisements for Cartier and Gucci favour particular readings. If the demographic base of *VOGUE Paris* is, as demonstrated in Chapter Four, professional, affluent, educated women who hold positions of responsibility, then the magazine is unlikely to present them with images of women they will find insulting or degrading. It is not too great a logical leap to assume that, if the bulk of the target audience was offended by the magazine, then they would cease to buy it. Furthermore, this cultural context is one in which, as I have shown, female beauty and sexuality are not necessarily experienced by women as oppressive, because they are not perceived as being defined by the patriarchy. In this particularly French context, images of idealised, beautiful, sexual women can serve to remind women of their innately 'feminine' power. A '*culturally activated*' text in this context is likely either to validate and reaffirm women as powerful and in control, or to offer an alternative to their usual value-system by providing opportunities for escape from power and control. Each of these are tactical manoeuvres likely to produce a positive reading formation for the text, in which the woman will form a positive opinion of the product advertised. In response, a '*culturally activated*' reader in such a reading formation may see herself as powerful and in control, capable either of a thoughtful, intelligent and discriminating approach to reading texts, or of 'switching off' and indulging herself in the light entertainment of reading a magazine. This is not to say that there are no other social influences that impact on this reading formation: on the contrary, there are many. Women

<sup>152</sup> The best example of the use of this tactic in the fashion industry is the shock campaign run by *Bennetton* from 1990-1999 that was highly effective in increasing brand awareness and establishing *Bennetton* as a quirky, cutting-edge brand. For examples of the advertisements, see <http://www.bennetton.com/press>.



readers have grown up in a society that tells them they can and should control a great many aspects of their lives, including their physical appearance. It is in the interest of the manufacturers of the advertised products that they continue to place considerable importance on spending money on personal grooming products, clothing and jewellery.

The point I make here is simple enough: within the context of this particular reading formation, female sexuality, nudity and beauty are presented as positive in order to capture the widest possible target audience (of women). In such a context, it is difficult to sustain an argument that these images are somehow oppressive of women *on the basis of their gender*. The image is intended to make women feel empowered (and lead them to purchase) and the bulk of the readers of the image presumably experience it as empowering — or at the very least, inoffensive — or else they would desist from buying the magazine and the products advertised. Furthermore, in the context of the previous discussion regarding the markedly different French approach to images of beautiful or naked women, they are likely to be experienced as sexy, rather than sexist. These images show women as sexual, but within the context for which they are intended — a French magazine — it is close to impossible to mount a case against them on grounds of sexism. Moreover, it is possible that some Anglophone readers have a similar experience of *VOGUE*. To condemn these images as promoting an undesirable capitalist mindset — as creating false desires for useless commodities, as suggesting that a gold ring will bring happiness and physical attractiveness — all of these are legitimate criticisms. Elizabeth Wilson highlights the intersection of class, economics and gender in critiques of fashion magazines when she observes that:

many feminists reject fashion because of the way in which it reinforces the sexual objectification of women; for its associations with conspicuous consumption and the positioning of women as economic chattels, as property, and because it [fashion] is held to be uncomfortable and to render women helpless . . . It is alleged that it has an association with privilege and wealth and hence unacceptable class and race connotations (1992:5).

But the criticism levelled at the fashion industry in this comment are not necessarily gender-specific,<sup>153</sup> nor are they exclusive to that industry. McRobbie suggests that:

Fashion is . . . an almost wholly feminized [sic] industry. Apart from a few men at the top, including manufacturers and retailers, celebrity designers and magazine publishers, it is and has been a female sphere of production and consumption. For this reason alone, fashion is a feminist issue (1999b: 41).

While her analysis of the production aspects of the fashion industry is accurate, her assumption that the consumption of fashion is gendered is reflective of her Anglophone perspective.<sup>154</sup> I would argue that the criticisms levelled at the fashion industry are actually objections to a wider social phenomenon. The alleged vices of fashion are symptomatic of a society that promotes conspicuous consumption as the cure for a variety of social ills. It is no

<sup>153</sup> The increasing popularity of men's lifestyle magazines shows that men are becoming just as enthusiastic about magazines that promise them a better and happier life if they, too, will follow the rules of fashion.

<sup>154</sup> In fairness, McRobbie's work focuses specifically and intentionally on the situation in Britain.

longer the case, as perhaps it was in the fashion magazines of the 1950s and 1960s, that women are represented as 'economic chattels' by the fashion industry. Today, the target audience of a magazine such as *VOGUE* is assumed to be in possession of significant personal disposable income, usually generated through paid employment. Women are courted as consumers, rather than consumables, by fashion magazines and their advertisers. To criticise *VOGUE* because it promotes consumerism to women is reasonable. To suggest that it is inherently sexist, to overlay it with the kinds of critiques described above, is to ignore the factors that contribute to its productive activation by affluent, independent women readers.

Once again, let me state that it is not my wish to defend magazines such as *VOGUE* from criticism. Rather, I hope to have illuminated the debate by suggesting that, if an image is not intended to be sexist, and thereby oppressive, and not experienced by consumers as such, then there is very little point in academic feminism insisting, from outside its culturally activated context, that it is necessarily and objectively sexist. This is not to say that feminism ought not to critique such images. On the contrary, it is a challenge to feminism to find more sophisticated approaches to criticism and to ensure that such criticism validates and acknowledges the experiences of women who bring a different set of culturally activating practices to their textual encounters. There will still be women who experience such images as offensive or oppressive, for a variety of reasons, and it is important that their voices are heard. However, it is equally important that the many women who experience *VOGUE* as pleasurable, empowering, sexy or escapist are not silenced by the assumption that sexual images of women are necessarily and universally sexist.

### **Dangerously different**

This thesis has demonstrated that the insistence by many Anglophone feminists that magazines such as *VOGUE* are detrimental to their readers delegitimises a variety of productive activations of the text which occur in the interaction between readers and texts. While these reading formations have consistently been defended as legitimate and worthy of more sophisticated inquiry than simple dismissal, it has not been suggested that they are politically unproblematic. *VOGUE Paris* is a magazine clearly produced within a cultural context where female beauty is seen as an invaluable strategic weapon in the battle for female power. The sex-is-power current runs through editorial as well as advertising in *VOGUE Paris*. Beauty features are frequently presented as means to become more seductive and appealing to the opposite sex. In the February 1998 edition, a story about skin care was run with the title "Être sexe: question de lumière", and the following opening paragraph:

Les temps changent . . . Être super sexy aujourd'hui, c'est avoir une peau qui irradie . . . Hiver comme été, on porte les mêmes matières urbaines, ultralégères, collantes ou transparentes. D'un coup, on montre sa peau nue qui devient l'atout no.1 de

séduction. Comme d'un tissu doux et brillant, il doit en émaner une lumière qui attire irrésistiblement.<sup>155</sup>

The key message here is that physical beauty can and should be used as a battle strategy: seduction is a war in which men and women fight for control. Examples of such writing abound in the French edition of the magazine. Also about skin, the September 1998 edition carries the headline "Jamais trop chair" and follows it up with a story entitled "matière à séduction".<sup>156</sup> The text of the story contains tips as to how to maintain one's top seduction tool: naked skin. In August 1998, readers were urged to have sex more often to make them more beautiful and seductive in "L'amour physique embellit-il?" and reader Justine Verret of Lyon was so grateful for this advice that she wrote a letter in appreciation of the story, published in the October 1998 edition.<sup>157</sup> Anglophone feminists may once again be tempted to assert that the power readers such as Verret feel when seducing a man is merely illusory. However, the women who read *VOGUE Paris* do not experience it as such.

By contrast, the American edition of the magazine is filled with articles such as "Calf Master" (March 1998) in which a reporter investigates how to tone and slim one's calves in order to look more attractive in pedal pushers. Not once is there a mention of for whom one is seeking to look attractive, or why: it is assumed that the modern women who read *VOGUE* want to be fashionable and beautiful because being fashionable and beautiful is objectively important. Fashionability and beauty are perceived as equally important for one's career advancement and social mobility as for the purposes of attracting the opposite sex. Similarly, the May 1998 edition of *VOGUE Australia* ran a fashion story with the title "Home Alone: Life beyond the picket fence" (100-109), promoting the chic urbanity of the modern, single, in-control *VOGUE* woman. In the same issue, "Small Pleasures" (38) explored the joys of wearing sexy slips and camisoles as outerwear — not for the titillation and seduction of potential suitors, but for the sheer pleasure of wearing "slithery siren sheaths" that are "too juicy to languish in the bedroom or underneath outfits". Clearly, *VOGUE Paris* is catering to different women from those who read the American or Australian editions. The latter have been raised in a society where feminist consciousness-raising has taught them to demand more from life than to be a beautiful object for the consumption of men. If she must be beautiful, then let it ostensibly be for herself. The Anglophone editions have responded by mellowing their message somewhat, and by addressing their readers as sophisticated, intelligent and independent. Friedan (1991:66) comments that:

Actually, the world depicted in women's magazines today is much more progressive than it was 25 years ago . . . the very advice they give out implies autonomy, independence and a lack of complete credulity or passivity on the reader's part.

<sup>155</sup> Title: *Being sexy. A question of light.* Text: *Times are changing . . . being really sexy today is about having beautiful, radiant skin . . . In winter as in summer, we wear the same urban, ultralight, clinging or transparent fabrics. All of a sudden, we reveal our bare skin that becomes our no.1 weapon of seduction. Just as would be the case from a soft, sparkling fabric, it must emanate an irresistibly attractive light.*

<sup>156</sup> "Never too much flesh". "Seduction material."

<sup>157</sup> "Does lovemaking make you more beautiful?"

One of the earliest and strongest critics of the images of femininity depicted in women's magazines, Friedan here acknowledges the shift to which I have been alluding. In the Anglophone women's magazine market, at least, there have been substantial changes to the messages.<sup>158</sup> Nevertheless, many Anglophone feminists still criticise the magazine simply for its focus on the female body. It is argued that women should not want to be beautiful, because beauty is inherently oppressive. While I do not share this wholesale rejection of beauty and fashion, I can acknowledge that this is the area in which magazines have been least affected by the changes Friedan mentions. *VOGUE* may now tell us that it is empowering to be beautiful and that we ought to discipline our bodies for the sake of our own good health, but the essential virtue of being beautiful and slim remains unquestioned.

There is something to be gained from the contrasting French approach, which refuses to categorise women's bodies as passive simply because they are viewed as sexual objects by men. A decision to demarcate the space of women's beauty as *feminine* and, by extension, powerful and positive, could be viewed as a more constructive political manoeuvre than the attempt to convince women that to want to be beautiful is to want to be oppressed. This is especially so in France, where perfume and cosmetics are second only to wine and cheese as export earners (Jura University URL: 2000) and the industries surrounding personal grooming are entrenched as an essential feature of the national character. As Allwood (1998:39) remarks, according to the myth of Frenchness, to be a French woman *is* to be beautiful and sexual.<sup>159</sup> To be otherwise would be unthinkable; it would be a sacrifice of national, cultural and gender identity. This would be perceived as a deeply foolish act, when it is the precisely the uniqueness of the *je ne sais quoi* of Frenchness that gives it its value. Pragmatically, French feminists are likely to be more successful in suggesting that women claim their personal grooming rituals as a statement of their feminine specificity, continue to use their sexuality as a source of power, and get on with addressing issues such as violence against women and political representation.

Politically, this approach is not without potential pitfalls. One of the most problematic aspects of any position that seeks to celebrate feminine difference is the fine line one necessarily treads between liberation and bondage. For every argument that women are different and therefore special, there are as many counter-arguments that seek to restrict women's participation in life on the grounds of that difference.<sup>160</sup> Although French women

<sup>158</sup> For a detailed discussion of some of these changes see McRobbie (1999a) and Friedan (1991).

<sup>159</sup> So much is this the case that the French national symbol of republican freedom is a beautiful woman, known as *la Marianne* (*la gauleoise républicaine*), a bust of whom sits permanently in Paris. Since 1969, a well-known (and beautiful) French woman has been chosen periodically to be the model for the bust of *la Marianne*. This honour – and it is considered to be an honour – has become so important that in 2000 it was decided upon by a vote by all the mayors of France. The current *Marianne* is Corsican model and actress Laeticia Casta, whose predecessors include such notable French 'beauties' as Catherine Deneuve and the original model in 1969: Brigitte Bardot.

<sup>160</sup> Another interesting approach to the difference and equality feminist positions comes from Scandinavia. Swedish feminist Christina Carlsson Wetterberg (1998) in her essay 'Equality or difference?: that's not the question', contrasts (what she sees as) the American tendency to see feminism as divided along an equality/difference binary with a Scandinavian position best summarised as ignoring such theoretical irrelevancies and getting on with the job of liberating women. She traces this back to the turn of the last century, citing Frida Steénhoff, who wrote in 1903 that: 'on the special nature of women – I no longer occupy

seem at present to be managing to obtain significant material gains, while also maintaining a level of power over men anchored in their willingness to use sex as a weapon, I cannot help but worry that this may not continue indefinitely. Any theoretical position based on feminine difference seems extraordinarily risky because of the ease with which it is manipulated into a justification for the oppression of women on biological grounds. In her analysis of Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme*, Delphy sums up this concern:

I would not deny that this [approach] affords great satisfaction to certain women and certain satisfaction to many women. It is always amusing to show an enemy that you can turn his way of seeing things back on him. But there is a big difference between amusing yourself and thinking you have got hold of the ultimate weapon; and it is dangerous to confuse the two. For just as you turn the weapon on him, so the enemy can turn it back again. (in Moi 1987:88).

I find myself agreeing with Delphy that such confusion is indeed dangerous. The great problem with the assertion that feminine difference is the key to women's liberation is that it reinforces the idea that women are primarily — or even only — useful in spheres not traditionally the domain of men. I support the French idea that women ought to be free to play with their sexual identities, to enjoy their bodies and to exploit their own sexuality. However, at the same time, I support the Anglophone rebuttal that the problem with such an approach is that women come to be valued *only* for their bodies.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than when difference feminism becomes reduced to what John Gray termed the '*Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*' syndrome: that men are men and women are women and never the twain shall meet. Such populist appropriations of difference feminism purport to show that women's specificity can be empowering, but instead serve largely to affirm long-standing gender stereotypes. In so doing, they legitimise not only the sexual manipulation of men by women, but the many other kinds of manipulation — physical, sexual, financial — and oppression that have been perpetrated against women under the pretext that this is normal, masculine behaviour. From *VOGUE* to the Spice Girls and their "Girl Power", this reductionist version of difference feminism is gaining increasing currency outside France. The article from which this chapter takes its title appeared in *VOGUE Australia*, and is a prime example of a popular manifestation of difference feminism. Alderson (*VOGUE Australia* March 1998:38) writes that the reason

women want to return to these visual signifiers of the traditional trappings of femininity [is that] by being a little more woman, we can free men to be a little more man . . . these pretty frocks could be the start of something big — a semiotic tool to help re-define the roles which have become so disastrously mixed up between men and women.

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myself with that point. I am less interested in describing the nature of woman than I am with ensuring a place for her nature" (33). Carlsson Wetterberg effectively argues that to focus on questions of difference and equality is to sideline important debate about the material oppression of women, better resolved by a focus on systems of oppression than on systems of gender. This is similar to the approach advocated by earlier French feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949), who saw gender oppression as intrinsically linked to questions of class.

The implication is that feminism has confused gender roles to such an extent that both men and women are miserable. It may well be that political correctness and sexual harassment cases have taken some of the fun out of flirting in bars, and many women do like to indulge in being 'girly' by painting their toenails pink and wearing strappy shoes and floral frocks. On this level, there is nothing wrong with an approach that allows women to play with their own sexuality and appearance.<sup>161</sup> However, Alderson's statement that men need to be allowed to be "free to be a little more man" is cause for concern. Feminism's gains have been hard won and many of them have involved convincing both men and women that masculinity is not an acceptable justification for acts of oppression such as physical and sexual violence. While there are some valuable aspects of womanhood that difference feminism encourages women to celebrate, there is also the potential for the enemy to redirect the weapon at women in some very alarming ways.

As discussed earlier, the dominant Anglophone approach to the beauty question has been one of suspicion and condemnation of a system believed to oppress women. Wilson (1992:9) argues that in the Anglophone world "discussions of body shape continue to be dominated by moralistic concerns regarding health and women's oppression"; and Jennifer Craik (1994:1) observes that fashion is often criticised for being "a kind of mask disguising the 'true' nature" of women", encouraging them to see themselves as in constant need of transformation. Davis (1991:27) makes the pertinent comment that "the major strength of the oppression model . . . resides in placing a hitherto privatized [sic] phenomenon like beauty on the political agenda". It is certainly the case that the issue has come to occupy an important place on even the most conservative of political agenda in Australia and the United States. The Commonwealth Government of Australia, through the Office for the Status of Women, has commissioned at least ten reports on issues concerning the portrayal of women in advertising and the media since 1983. A variety of State governments have followed suit: at the time of writing the Office of Women's Policy in the State of Victoria is undertaking a major review of media guidelines in relation to images of women, and the Minister for Women's Policy, Sheryl Garbutt, has been leading a campaign to have a variety of 'offensive' and 'sexist' outdoor advertisements removed from billboards and trams in Melbourne. As Nadine Strossen (1995) documents, the proliferation of such reports in the United States has been even greater and, in many cases, their recommendations have been implemented with considerable zeal.

In *Defending Pornography*, Strossen also discusses at length the problems that arise when the conservative right and the moral majority join forces with feminists to censor sexist images of women. Her research shows that feminist calls to remove explicitly sexual images of women are frequently picked up by paternalistic, anti-feminist organisations seeking to suppress any expression of female sexuality. However, through their alliance with feminist

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<sup>161</sup> However, I accept, as I have done throughout this thesis, that the possibilities for playful identification are not necessarily positive and are exclusive of women who are not white, affluent and heterosexual.



groups, these organisations are able to disguise their aims as being to protect women and children from harmful and degrading images. Aside from the grey area of deciding what is sexist, one of the very real problems with the calls from Anglophone feminists to ban 'sexist' images of women is that they can often be counterproductive. It has taken women many years to earn the right to freedom of sexual expression: any campaign to suppress sexual images of women runs the risk of ultimately calling for the suppression of female sexuality. Furthermore, a continued focus on the 'wrongness' of images of women promotes the idea that women are the unsuspecting victims of these images. Davis (1991:29) identifies three serious problems with approaches casting women as victims of the fashion-beauty industry. First, such an assumption rests on a notion of power devoid of agency, making active choices by women impossible, and reinforcing the idea that women cannot and do not think for themselves. Second, it further reinforces the pre-existent conception of the female body as an object, failing to admit the potential for women to experience their own bodies as empowering. Third, it restricts possibilities for feminist interrogation as to why women might actively choose to view such images, or to be involved with such an industry, because it assumes that they do so only as a result of false-consciousness. Given the potential pitfalls of an approach that decries fashion magazines as oppressive of women, Anglophone feminists surely have something to learn from their French sisters' refusal to be cast as victims. Neither approach is without problems. To find a better way of understanding the relationship between women and beauty, feminists need to begin by acknowledging the problems inherent in each approach and by encouraging dialogue between the two schools of thought. A recognition on the part of Anglophone feminism that the pendulum may have swung too far in one direction could be a first, positive step.

# Conclusion

1. The first part of the document discusses the importance of the conclusion in a research paper.

Is feminism able to accommodate the multiplicity of approaches to representations of women this thesis has proposed and still manage to wage war on sexism more generally? I believe the answer is not only that it can, but also that it must. If feminist media analysis is, in Hermes's words, to "respect women and women's genres, and to demand respect for them from the world at large" (1995: 151), then it must respect *all* the ways women read magazines, including those with which it does not agree. Moreover, if it is to remain relevant as a political force, then it must be sufficiently self-reflexive to interrogate some of the principles that have long underscored it: it must ask why it does not agree with them. As McRobbie has argued compellingly, feminism must recognise that it has had some success in changing the messages that prevail in women's genres and must ask itself: "how do we [as feminists] now stand in relation to the outside world of 'ordinary women' and commercial culture?" (1999a: 47). In the English-speaking world, this means asking difficult questions about precisely why popular images of women upset and offend many feminists and whether the pursuit of an anti-beauty and, to some extent, anti-sex agenda continues to be useful. At the same time, it also means respecting and validating the experiences of women for whom these images continue to be a source of anguish and, too often, a motivation for engaging in destructive regimes of body discipline and punishment.

Although Hermes might not agree that we have a common purpose, I share her desire to respect and validate readers' experiences. However, I also believe that these are directly related to the possibilities provided by the text. She argues that "a critical feminist view should start from respect and the knowledge that everyday media use is a highly complex phenomenon, made up of routines and constraints, of wishes and fantasies" (op. cit.:152). In this thesis I have suggested that these 'routines and constraints', these 'wishes and fantasies', might extend into domains not previously considered, domains that necessarily impact on the type of reader-response approach she favours. Perhaps women do not often articulate a relationship with magazines that includes the kind of transgressive, disturbing and problematic forms of identification I have discussed. It is possible, even probable, that this is due in no small part to the fact that many of them would see it as compromising the identity of strength, intelligence and independence they project to the outside world. It is equally possible that it is because they are afraid, in this context, to admit these kinds of fantasies even to themselves. These kinds of unspoken constraints on the acknowledgment of transgressive fantasy will necessarily have an impact on the way readers describe their relationship with magazines, particularly when those descriptions are sought in a group environment. This is not to suggest that Hermes's respondents did not provide very real and honest accounts of their own experiences. Nor that what they say is not what they really experience, nor that they are not conscious of the *real* nature of the reading relationship. To suggest the latter is to return to the 'false-consciousness' approach I have rejected throughout. Rather, it raises the possibility that

the critical history of feminism's relationship with women's magazines has led women to self-censorship of their own reading experiences.

Many of the women who read *VOGUE* will be well aware that, according to much traditional feminist thinking, they *should not* be reading it. As McRobbie suggests, the fact that "the academic left including feminists often felt the need to disavow their own participation in some of the pleasures of the consumer culture . . . produced a culture of puritanism giving rise only to guilty pleasures" (1999b: 32). Hermes concludes that when readers say the magazines they read are unimportant, superficial and insignificant, they are telling her that they have no impact on their lives. I suggest that the same statements could equally be understood as readers providing justifications for doing something about which they feel guilty. In the years I have been researching this topic, the single most common response I have received from women in relation to reading magazines is that "I never buy them, but I'll read them if they are there". This statement allows women to dissociate themselves from any active part in procuring a magazine and, hence, any responsibility for engaging with it. The data in Chapter Three were consistent with this statement, showing that *VOGUE*'s readership in all three countries studied is considerably greater than its paid circulation. The places women say they read magazines – in the hairdresser, at the doctor or dentist, on aeroplanes and long journeys – are all consistent with Hermes's observation that magazines are "easily put down" (1995:29). That is, they require minimal active engagement from the reader and are easier to interrupt than a book or a television programme, for example. However, the advertising effectiveness data, also in Chapter Three, tends to refute the suggestion that this lack of concentrated attention on magazines correlates with a lack of impact. On the contrary, magazine advertising has been shown to be highly effective. I suggest, therefore, that women are potentially deeply affected by the magazines they read. In addition, it is likely that one of the reasons they may not articulate this is that feminist consciousness-raising about the perils of magazine reading has been highly effective. Women know these magazines contain negative messages but enjoy reading them in spite, or because, of this. They also know they ought not to and are reluctant to admit to it for fear of being cast as 'oppressed' or 'unenlightened' by other women. Chapkis has documented the extent to which women who understand the oppressive nature of aspects of the fashion-beauty system nonetheless feel caught up in it but are ashamed to admit that they are, for fear of judgement (1986:2). I suggest that many women have a similar relationship with *VOGUE*.

How, then, is feminism to account for what Davis has called "women's active and knowledgeable involvement in practices that are also detrimental and/or degrading to them"? (1991:29). Moreover, given the cultural specificity of such judgements, how is feminism to establish whether or not practices are detrimental or degrading? Even within national borders, there is little consensus as to what is and is not 'good for' women to read. McRobbie (1999a) suggests that, having had some impact on the content and tone of magazines, feminism must

begin to question what form the positive messages and role models it has so long demanded might take. She asks: "in the ideal feminist world of feminist magazines, what would go and what would stay?" (1999a: 56). This thesis has demonstrated that *VOGUE* contains both highly prescriptive and normative messages regarding body maintenance and physical appearance and extremely fluid possibilities for identification that are potentially a site of power and pleasure. There can be little doubt that most feminists would wish to eliminate the moralistic directives regarding the management of the 'problematic' aspects of the female body observed in Chapter Two. Many would also remove the seductive messages of happiness-in-a-bottle and the conspiratorial, élitist sense of a 'club' of beautiful people that dominates the magazine. But, in so doing, are they censoring women's pleasure in the same way that a wholesale rejection of beauty, masochism and narcissism have been shown to do? McRobbie cautions against the "sense of political complacency [that arises when] consumer culture is . . . an area of female participation and enjoyment" (1999b: 31). While it is true that there are potentially negative implications for women in reading and adopting the kinds of philosophies espoused by *VOGUE*, to suggest that they ought not to do so for fear of falling prey to its lures is for feminism to become precisely the "field of power and regulation" (1999a: 56) McRobbie warns it should not be.

I suggest that it is time for feminism to accept that different women will experience the same image in different ways and that this is not necessarily because some are more 'enlightened' than others. The model of textual negotiation proposed in the first chapter of this thesis is able to account for this, because it assumes neither the text nor the reader to be fixed entities. Constantly reinventing themselves in relation to each other, both the reader and the text are constituted by the process of making meanings. Thus a woman reading *VOGUE* might identify with sexy images of women; she might feel worthless because she is unable to replicate them; she might be angry at a society where how women look seems too important; she might be aroused by the images; she might fantasise about being in the scenes they depict; she might get a new idea about how to update an old suit; she might hunger for the shoes she sees there; or she might just flip past the page because it holds little interest for her. Each of these possibilities is inherent in the text, with the tactics it employs designed to seduce her, or make her feel sufficiently guilty or inadequate, into surrendering herself to it completely. Depending on her mood, her environment and the context in which she reads, the woman will bring to this encounter different strategies to counter the tactics used by the text.

I do not suggest that none of these possible engagements is negative for the reader. On the contrary, for many women engagement with *VOGUE* reinforces the already negative image of themselves into which they have been conditioned by a society in which the dominant construction of the ideal woman is unattainable. What I do suggest is that feminism should practise a policy of 'constructive engagement' with magazines, rather than advocating a cessation of relations. Women are not going to stop wanting to be dominated or worshipped

or stop wearing black knee-high leather boots simply because feminism tells them they ought to: they are just going to feel guilty about doing it and possibly reject feminism as a result. As a result of her interviews with young magazine readers, McRobbie concludes that: "young women want to prove that they can do without feminism as a movement while enjoying the rewards of its success in culture and everyday life" (1999a: 56). Feminism fought for women to be allowed to wear knee-high leather boots and short skirts in public, with their female friends, and not to be judged (by patriarchal standards) as sexually available in consequence. Yet it has also criticised women for *wanting* to dress in such a way and for wanting to present themselves as sexual beings. Is it any wonder that so many young women do not identify as feminists when so much feminist writing is still anchored in the (prescriptive) myth of a "superior truth of womanhood" (McRobbie 1999a: 48)? I argue that feminism must relinquish this myth and embrace a diversity of 'womanhoods', including those that do not accord with feminist views of what it is to be a liberated woman.

Having argued that feminism must accept the many things that women might want, I have also suggested here that women do not necessarily wish to actualise some of what they 'want'. This thesis has demonstrated that when women engage with *VOGUE*, they do so in a variety of ways anchored in fantasy and the exploration of other possible 'selves'. It has also shown that *VOGUE* mobilises a variety of powerful social discourses in order to impose its own view of what these fantasy selves should be, and to reiterate the idea that women need other, 'better' selves because what they are is never good enough on its own. I have suggested that this relationship is playful and that, by and large, women understand the rules of the game and play it in such a way as to bring themselves pleasure. Furthermore, I have also argued that women are sufficiently adept at playing with media texts to understand that they are playing at trying on fantasy selves and that, in many cases, they have no desire whatsoever to actualise those fantasies. Hermes has suggested that 'playfulness' is an inappropriate characterisation reading fashion magazines:

'playfulness' of readers . . . is more typical of genres that engage readers' imaginations directly (for example, fiction genres or nonfiction [sic] genres that tread the thin line between the believable and the unbelievable, such as tabloid or gossip magazines) than of such women's magazine genres as domestic weeklies (op. cit.:150).

Her view on playful reading of magazines like *VOGUE* follows from her conclusion that such magazines are meaningless to their readers. This thesis has shown that *VOGUE* does "engage readers' imaginations directly" by providing a myriad of possibilities for fantasy and escapism. It has also demonstrated that there are many ways in which it might be made meaningful that would not have emerged in a study such as Hermes's. She is also critical of playful readings because she sees them as implying resistance. In the case of *VOGUE*, I have demonstrated that playful readings are not necessarily resistant. In many instances, they involve a surrender to textual tactics which, in turn, involves conforming to the ideologies and



'femininities' proposed by the magazine. At times this renders them transgressive, but transgression and resistance are not the same.

This raises the most difficult issue to arise from this thesis: the question of playing with things that are potentially detrimental, either on a personal or political level. In my discussion of the culturally specific foundations of a politics that consistently rejects images of beautiful women, I have suggested that Anglophone feminism has gone too far in its condemnation of physical manifestations of gender difference: beauty, sexually provocative and explicit imagery, body maintenance and dress. Following the French approach, I have proposed a more 'liberal' attitude to these issues from feminists and a repositioning of the practices they entail as sites of pleasure and potential power. At the same time, I remain mindful of the fact that textual tactics can be so successful, in convincing a woman of her essential, inherent 'lack', that they engender a pathological obsession with the replication of the ideals they present. When the surrender is so complete as to preclude turning back, then clearly the reader has become disempowered to a dangerous degree. At this point, the game ceases to be a fair contest and playful pleasure has given way to painful pathology. Although I have argued for a position that acknowledges the skill of the reader in playing these games, I have also acknowledged the immense, enshrined power of the discourses that mediate them. As Davis has observed: "taking agency [of the reader] seriously does not mean that a critique of the oppressive features of femininity and the fashion-beauty system must be abandoned" (op. cit.: 35). What I advocate here is an approach that validates the pleasure women gain from reading magazines playfully, combined with an understanding that even the most skilful players are always in danger of becoming so absorbed in the game as to lose touch with its status as play. Furthermore, I have suggested that feminism desist from criticising images of sexual and beautiful bodies simply for being what they are: representations of fantasy bodies. A more appropriate critique would be one that locates the problem of the tactics employed by *VOGUE* within the broader issue of a consumerist society that promotes the idea of the body as able to be controlled and of products that promise to 'control' as vehicles to happiness and fulfilment. Moreover, I have rejected the argument that sexual images of women are necessarily sexist and oppressive because this line of reasoning is reflective of a puritanical (and ultimately misogynist) belief in the sanctity and passivity of female sexuality.

The fact that women read and enjoy *VOGUE* is what Davis has described as "an irrevocably dilemmatic situation: problem and solution, oppression and liberation, all in one" (op. cit.:32). This thesis has demonstrated that many women make *VOGUE* meaningful through a complex negotiation involving seduction and fantasy, guilt and indulgence, compulsion and control. Whether women read it to escape from a colourless, passionless existence, to seek guidance on the path to the fashion nirvana, or to fantasise about alternative identities they might slip on, the tussle between text and reader is never-ending and the outcome never predictable. If feminist analysis of popular cultural forms is to admit the

agency of both the reader and the text, then it must come to terms with the resultant ambiguity inherent in such a position. There is no way of knowing or predicting how certain types of images and messages will impact upon particular readers. The way texts are culturally activated will depend on the context in which they intersect with the reader, a context as fluid and dynamic as the texts and readers themselves. In such an environment, condemnation of *VOGUE* for its unrealistic, 'sexist', oppressive and archaic presentation of femininity becomes a nonsense. Instead of telling women they ought not to engage with it, it is time for feminism to focus its attention on acknowledging the engagement as a game and on teaching women how to play it successfully, rather than on leveling the playing field.



# Appendix One

Advertisement for *VOGUE Australia*.

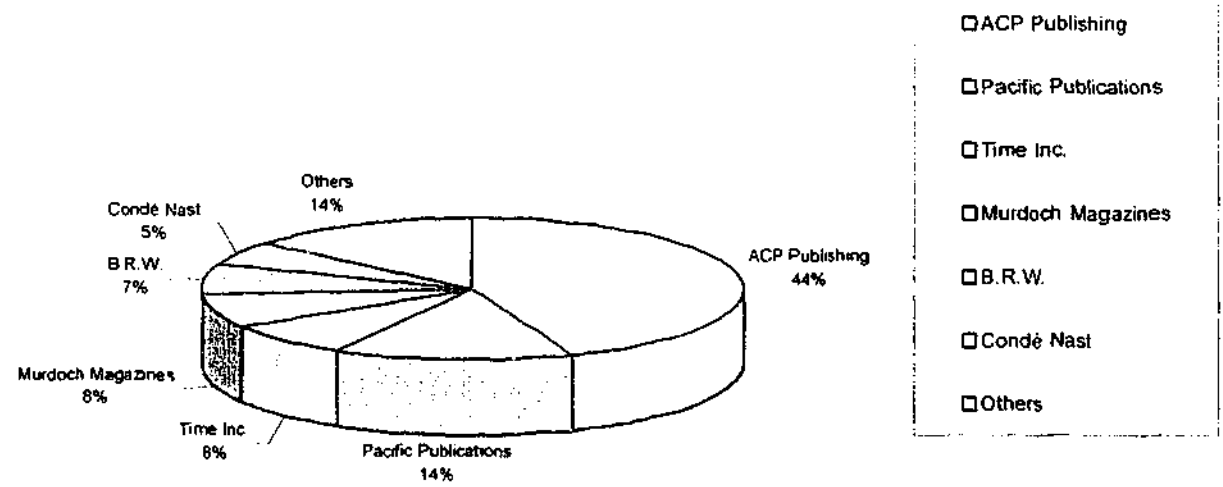
There's  
No Such Thing  
as a Copy of  
**VOGUE**

# Appendix Two

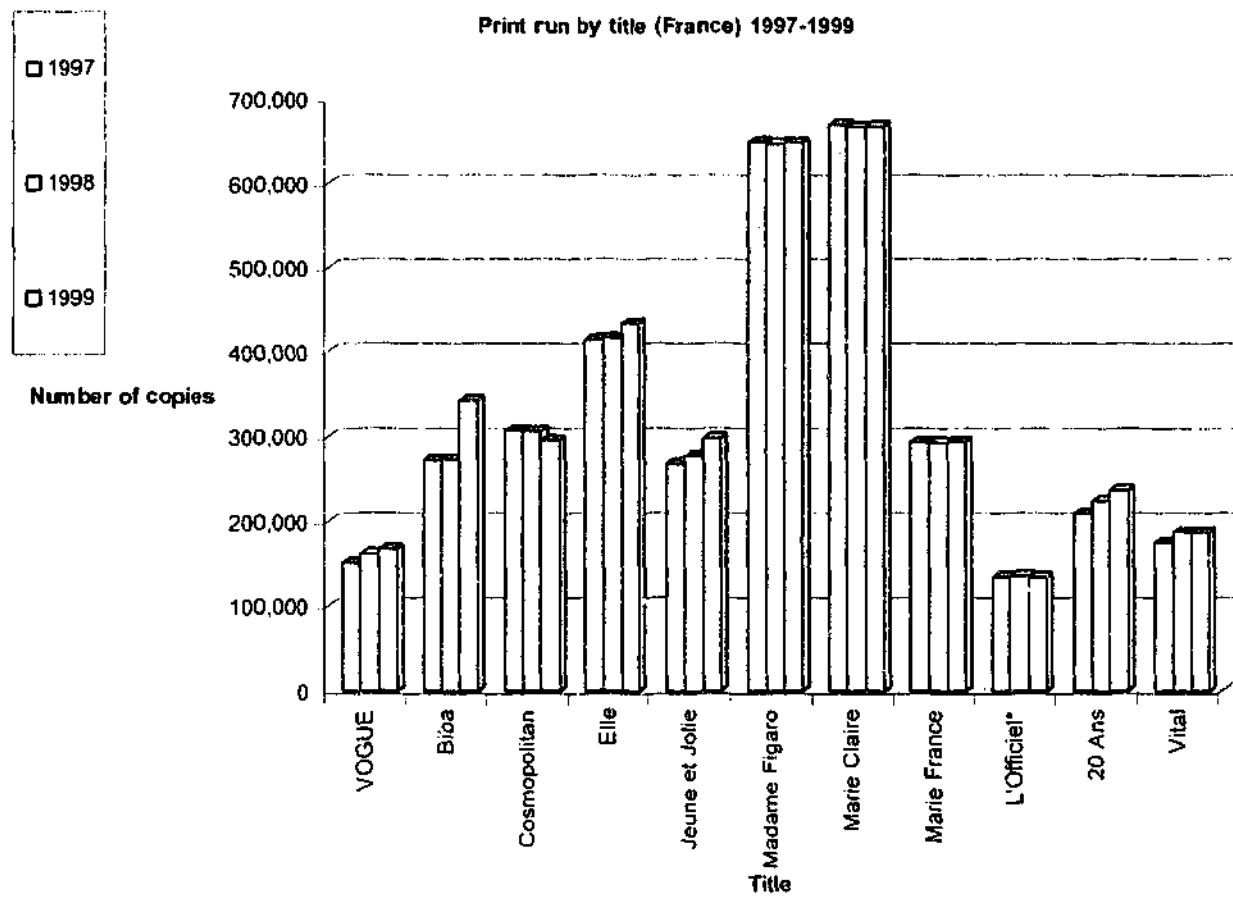
**Additional data regarding magazine circulation, readership, demographics and advertising expenditure.**



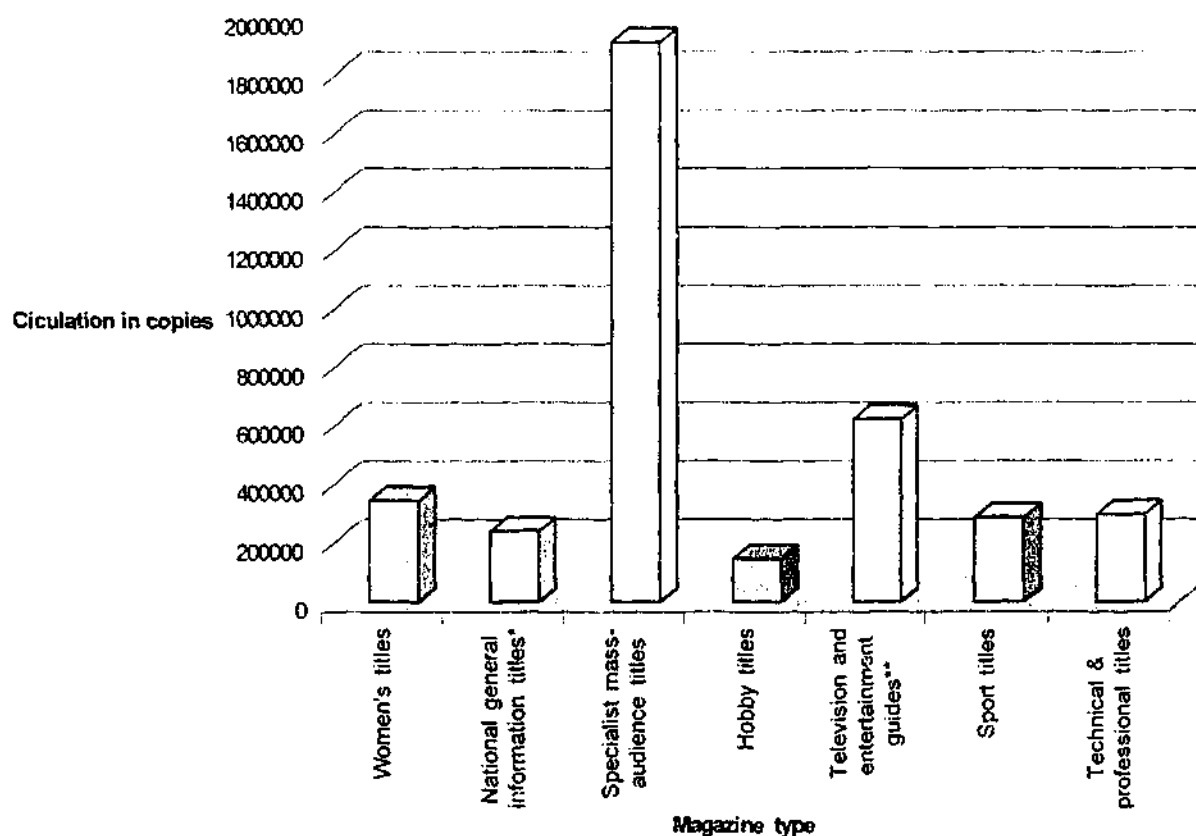
Major Magazine Publishers (Australia) : share of total advertising expenditure



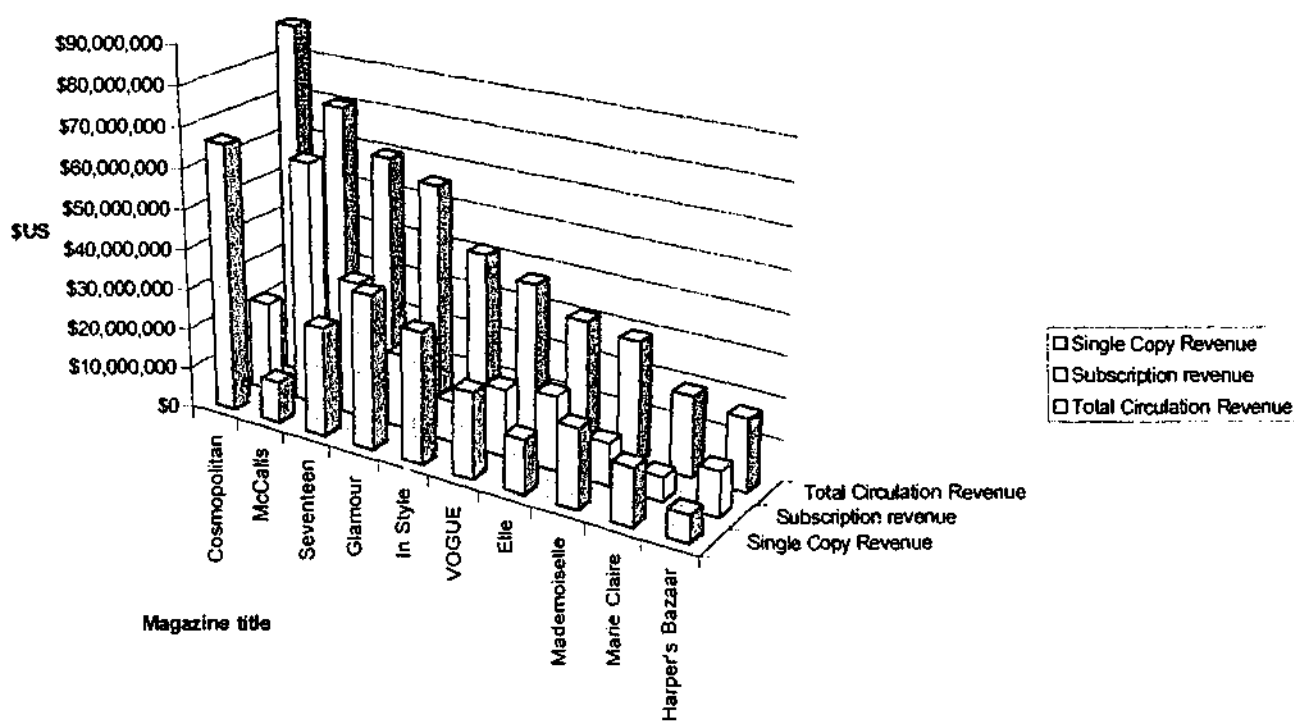
Print run by title (France) 1997-1999



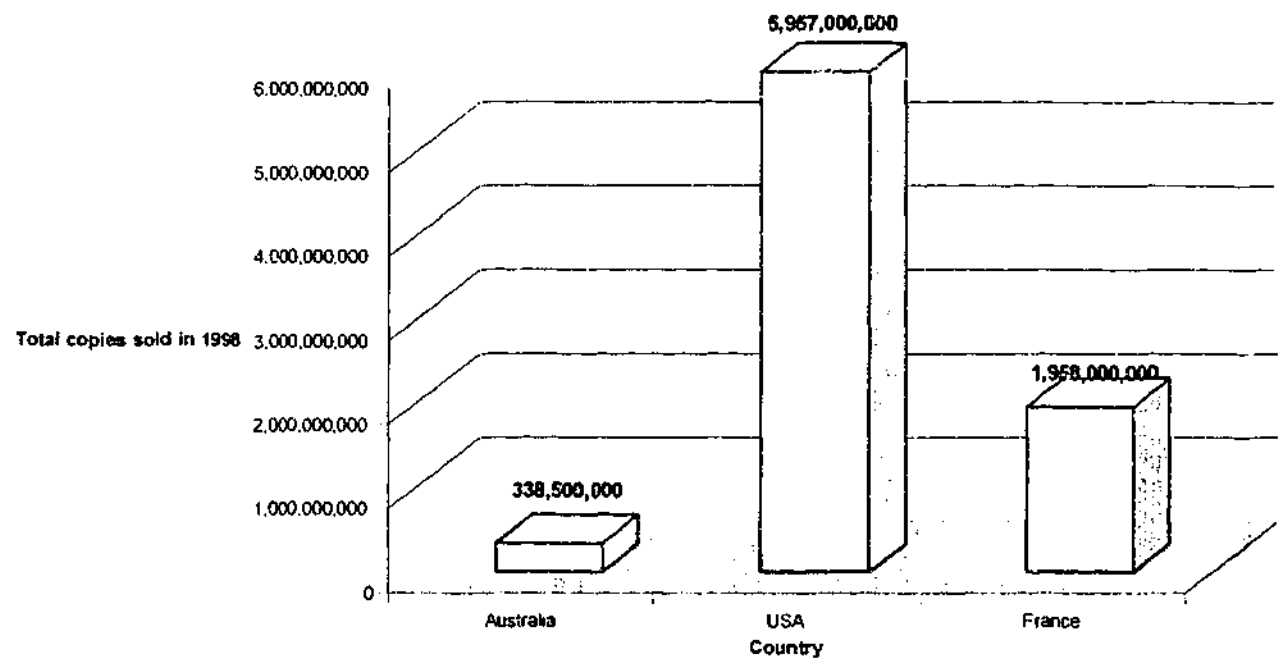
Total circulation by magazine type (France) 1994



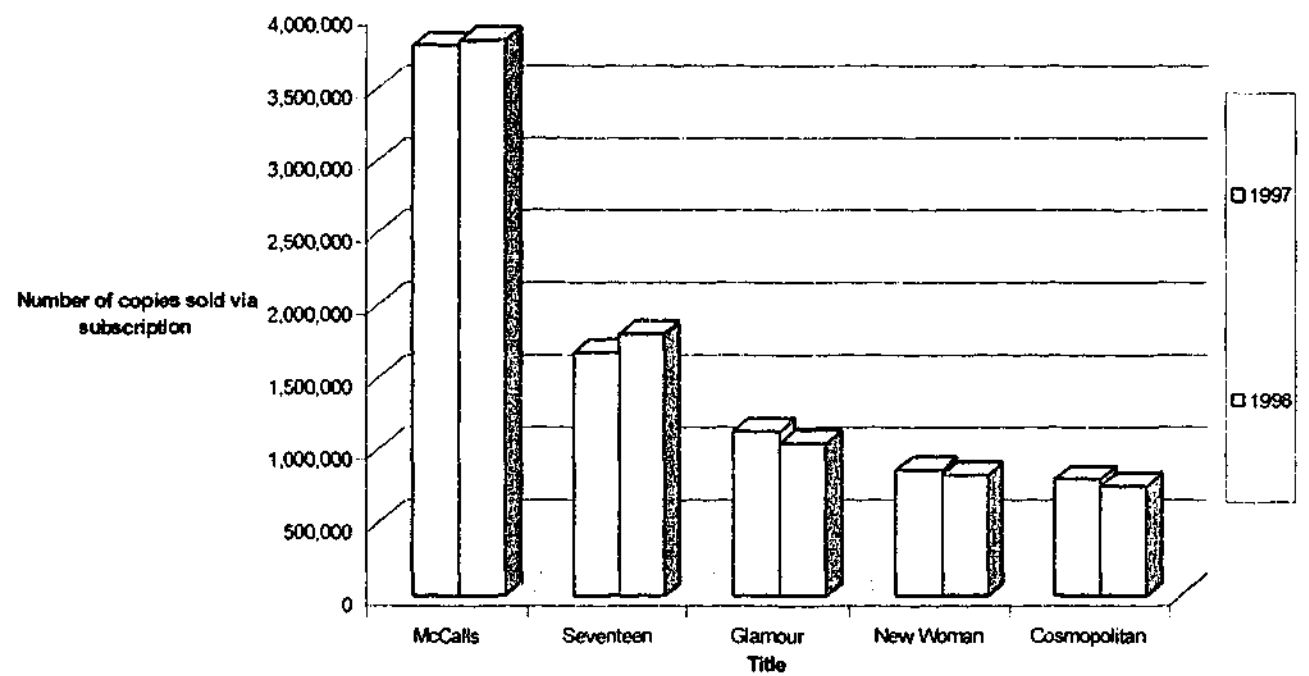
Circulation revenue for ABC audited magazines (USA) 1998



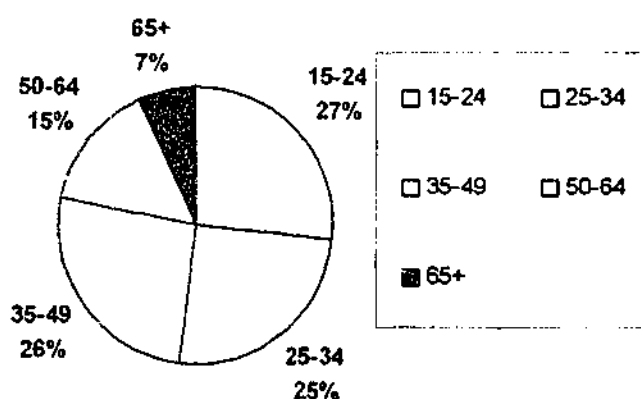
Total no. of copies sold (consumer magazines) by country 1998



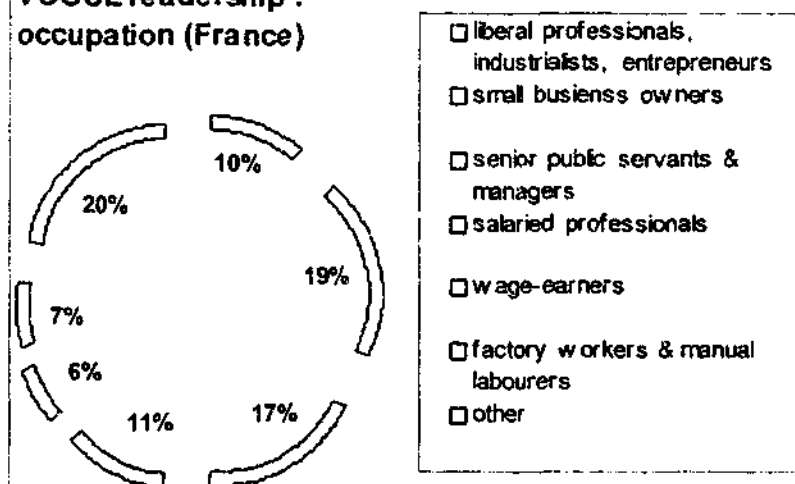
Average Subscription Circulation for ABC audited magazines (USA) 1997-1998



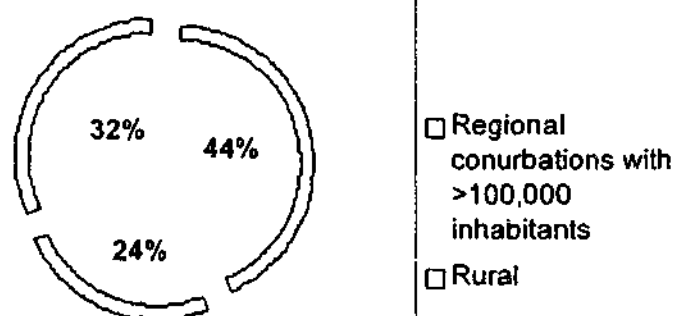
**VOGUE readership : age (France)**



**VOGUE readership : occupation (France)**



**VOGUE readership : residence (France)**



# Appendix Three

**Additional visual reference material. Photographs by:**

- **Cindy Sherman**
- **Annie Leibovitz**

**And self-portraits from André Rival's *Self-Image: 100 Women***



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #96*, 1981

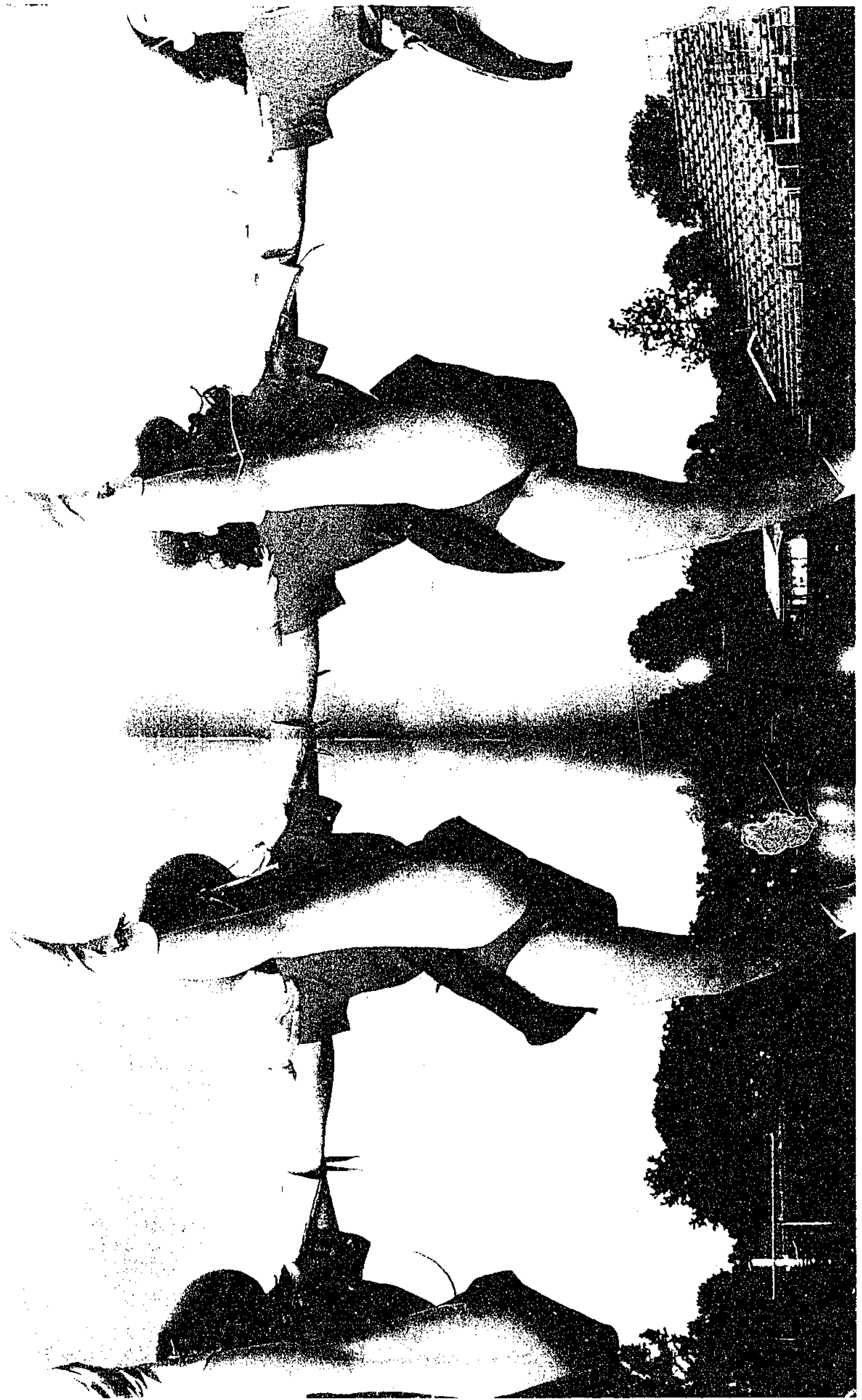




Cindy Sherman. *Untitled #92*, 1981



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #155*, 1985



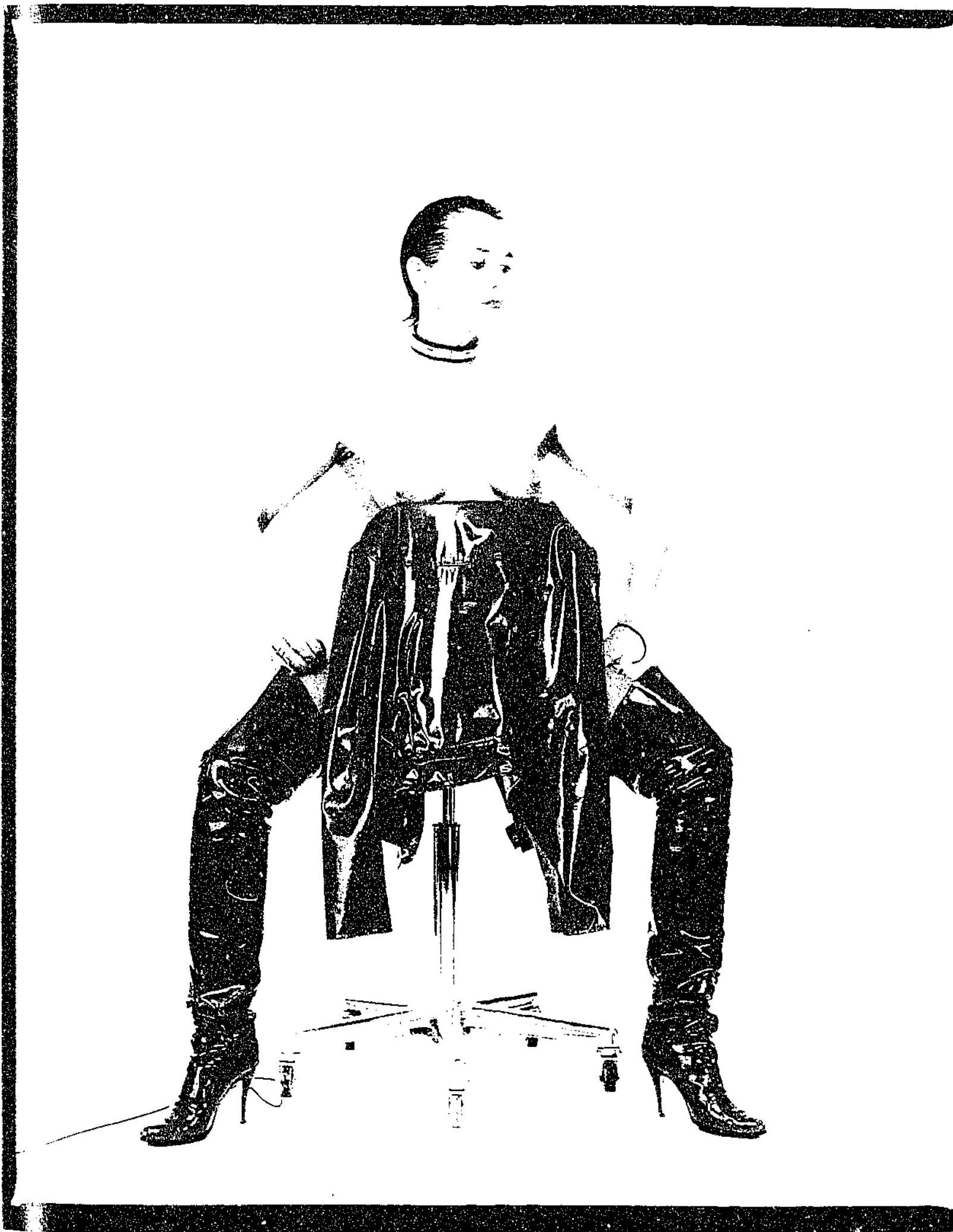


Annie Leibovitz, *Cindy Crawford, model*, 1993

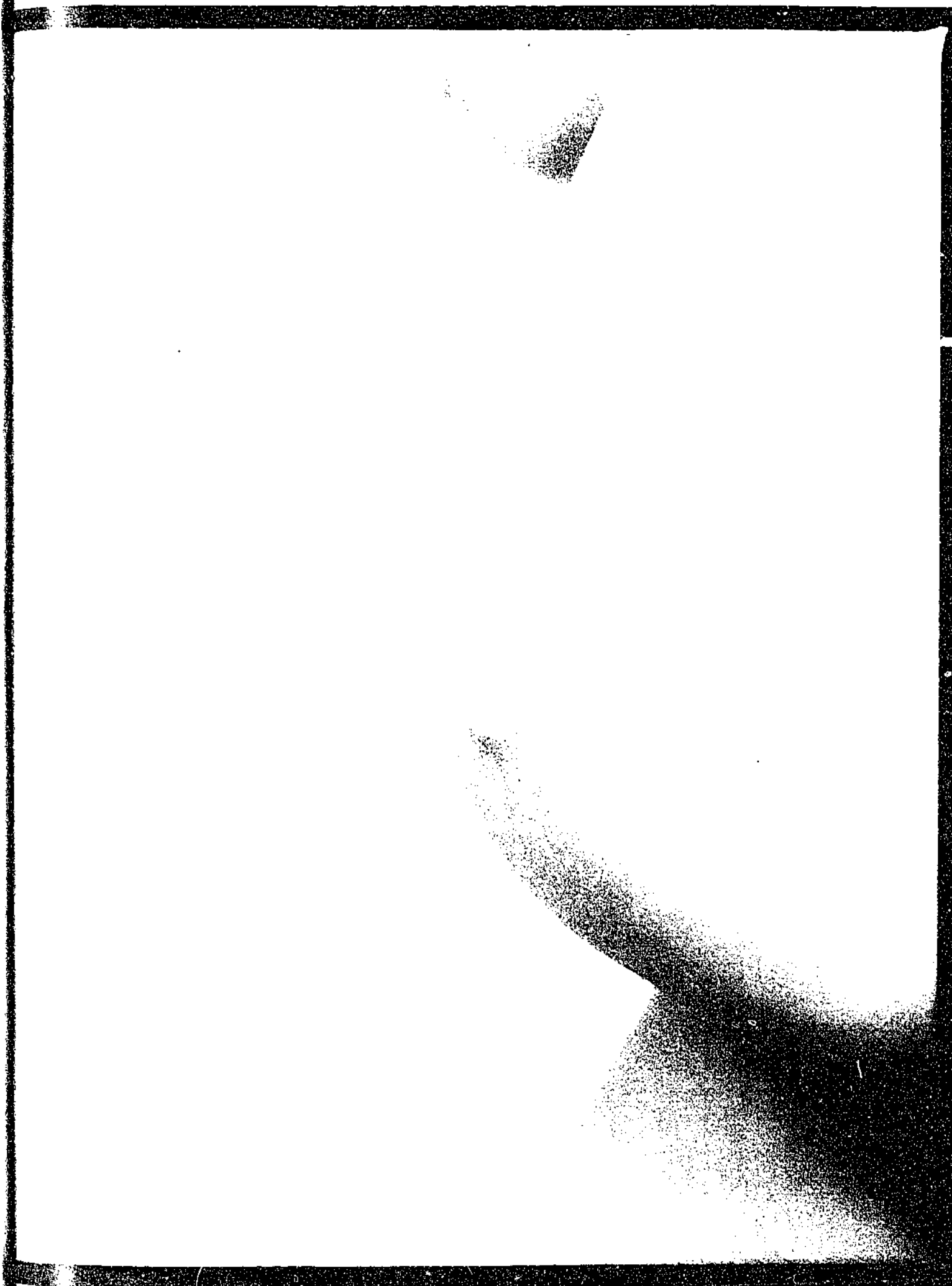


Annie Leibovitz, *Donna Karan, fashion designer*, 1993









KATHARINA

# **A Blending of the First Degree**

Kristin Sauer, from A. Rival (1995) *Self Image: 100 Women: 14.*

<i>The intimacy that lies beneath the surface</i>	<i>When I reveal my most intimate nakedness,</i>
<i>of my photograph might be obscene.</i>	<i>I am separated from myself.</i>
<i>Not because of the nudity, or because phantasms</i>	<i>And only then can I lose myself in it again.</i>
<i>and phantasies come to light,</i>	<i>I long for that moment.</i>
<i>but because what is visible in the photo goes beyond me</i>	<i>To me it seems an absolute excess and suddenly ...</i>
<i>to expose something else.</i>	<i>speechless.</i>
<i>Something that I collide with that is beyond</i>	
<i>the confines of my body. Something that both attracts</i>	<i>I press the same button. My image fixed.</i>
<i>and repulses me. My "indecent" craving for it is so</i>	<i>I now belong to the viewer. Now he can see what lies</i>
<i>strong that I am dazed by it.</i>	<i>seductively there waiting.</i>
<i>For there in the picture in front</i>	
<i>of me I see the experience of lust</i>	<i>The experience of being viewer, subject and object</i>
<i>for my own self.</i>	<i>at the same time, and yet alone,</i>
<i>The body my eyes observe is not exactly my perfection.</i>	<i>produces a wild confusion of whirling ideas.</i>
<i>It is the representation</i>	<i>It is simply wonderful to be so close to the impossible –</i>
<i>of the bewitching frailty of my fear</i>	<i>s sublime feeling.</i>
<i>of abandoning myself.</i>	

# Bibliography

Speed  
Printer's

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