

## Decoding Cosmetics and Fashion Advertisements in Contemporary Women's Magazines

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### ABSTRACT

*Decoding beauty advertisements in women's magazines as cultural texts reveals the crucial role of the advertising industry in perpetuating traditional notions of femininity. The question that this paper tries to answer is what representational strategies the advertisement industry uses to negotiate between the old feminine roles and identity and the new ones, and what ideology underlies such strategies. My analysis of cosmetics and fashion ads will be focused on two main strategies: the liberation and creativity of the "New Woman" and the modern imperative for self-improvement, which manipulates many women's old feelings of inadequacy. Even a partial decoding of beauty ads in women's magazines shows the extent to which contemporary ads conflate unavoidable change of the images of women and ideological continuity of the concept of the feminine, defined around the axis of beauty.*

**KEY WORDS:** *beauty, creativity, fantasy, inadequacy, liberation, modernity, parody, self-esteem, self-improvement, sexuality.*

### RESUMEN

*La descodificación como textos culturales de anuncios de belleza en las revistas femeninas revela la función crucial de la industria publicitaria en la perpetuación de nociones tradicionales de la feminidad. La pregunta que este artículo intenta contestar es qué estrategias de representación usa la industria publicitaria para negociar entre los viejos papeles e identidad femenina y los nuevos, y qué ideología subyace en tales estrategias. Mi análisis de anuncios de cosméticos y moda se centrará en dos estrategias principales: la liberación y creatividad de la "Mujer Moderna" y el imperativo moderno de la auto-superación, que manipula antiguos sentimientos de ineptitud de muchas mujeres. Incluso una descodificación parcial de los anuncios de belleza en las revistas femeninas muestra hasta qué punto los anuncios contemporáneos combinan el cambio ineludible de las imágenes de las mujeres y la continuidad ideológica del concepto de lo femenino, definido alrededor del eje de la belleza.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *auto-estima, auto-superación, belleza, creatividad, fantasía, ineptitud, liberación, modernidad, parodia, sexualidad.*

Traditionally, critical textual analysis has focused on selected literary works, **privileging a certain** body of texts which **have been termed** high culture, and excluding from serious analysis the **important** artifacts of mass culture. In contrast, with **postmodernism** there has **taken** place a **relaxing** of the **traditionally strict barriers** between the study of high and mass culture. As Ellen MacCracken notes, «**these broader definitions** are especially necessary in an age when technological advances and increased **opportunities** for financial **gain through** the production of **commodified** culture **have** greatly widened the scope and audience of mass culture» (1993:1). In this **postmodern** context of expansion of the objects of critical textual analysis, the notion of **text** itself has **been** expanded to visual as well as verbal **communicative** systems. One of the most familiar and **influential** texts -in this wide sense- of mass culture are advertisements. **The** contemporary texts analysed in this paper are the glossy **ads** for beauty products in women's magazines. As it is well **known, because** women are the main purchasers of consumer goods, women's magazines **contain immense** numbers of ads -**they fill nearly ninety per cent** of the pages of most women's magazines. Under the broader definition of text, the messages of **ads** in women's magazines -as in other media- **deserve the same** serious analysis accorded **literary** texts. Understanding advertisements as cultural texts will **reveal** the crucial role of advertising in perpetuating traditional notions of **femininity**. For, like in any text, the meanings **configured** in advertisements are **value-laden**. Beyond their overt **innocent** role of selling products, ads articulate and enforce ideology.

The women's movement since the late 1960s has had a great **deal of influence** on women's **self-images**. Nancy Baker **asked Betty Friedan** what **changes** the movement had made in the way women perceived themselves. **Friedan** answered: «**there isn't a single image** of physical beauty any more. There's a lot of individuality ... » (in Baker, 1986: 161). Indeed, **since the 1970s**, Western standards of female beauty **have** broadened. Yet, Friedan's reply to **Baker's** question **unwittingly reflects** the fact that female beauty is still as relevant for women's self-perception as in times of "the **feminine mystique**". The broadening of the standards of beauty has not **altered** the **overwhelming importance** of beauty in women's lives. On the **contrary, for** the last **three** decades, **many** women **have become** more compulsive about their looks than ever before (Baker, 1986: 164; Wolf, 1991: 119). As **Susan Bordo** notes, following **Foucault**, «**women, as study after study shows, are spending** more time on the **management and discipline** of their bodies than we **have in** a long, long times (1992: 14). **Feminist** observers claim that women's contemporary preoccupation with appearance has **functioned** as a "backlash" phenomenon, **undermining** women's **advancement, perpetuating the unequal power-relations** between the sexes (Bordo, 1992: 14; Mattelart, 1982: 66; Wolf, 1991: 21;). Not **surprisingly**, female beauty is a major cultural industry in Western democratic countries. The **market** where women buy the means and **techniques** to attempt to **create** an ideal **feminine image** is enormously **successful**. Psychologist Eileen Berscheid **claims** that women's **increasing** concern with beauty **may in part** be because of the «**larger role** the media play in our lives» (in Baker, 1986: 222). **And** the cosmetics industry spends proportionately more on advertising than any other major industry group. **The** large **number** of ads easily available to a broad **spectrum** of women **have meanings** which are enormously successful in selling the products advertised. **Consequently, because** of publishers' **reluctance to deviate** from techniques that **brought financial success** for decades, **despite** the appearance of **change** and **innovation** in the 1980s and 1990s ads, there is a **strong continuity** in the messages addressed to women. In this sense, women are still objects subjected to the **man-made images** of **femininity** sold to them

in the beauty market through the deployment of standardized visual images. What beauty ads emphatically show is that the cultural definition of women has not changed, even if the reality of their lives has. They successfully sell the concept of the ahistorical "eternal feminine" as a by-product of their advertising campaigns aimed at female consumers, thus helping to control the "excesses" of women's historical liberatory changes. As Chrissy Iley notes, the 1990s backlash is such that the new role models for young girls are precisely top models (1997: 39).

Feminist observers note that if, on the one hand, the cultural industries of mass media as sources of information, including the information about commodities, fulfil the function of helping to produce socio-cultural homogeneity, on the other hand, they experience and reflect socio-cultural changes (Mattelart, 1982: 9; Rowbotham, 1976: 110; Wolf, 1991: 64). In the mass media women are the main axis of consumption. The liberatory changes in women's lifestyles and self-perception brought about by the women's movement has meant that the advertising trade has had to adapt itself to the characteristics of this new female market. Magazines, TV or radio have had to appropriate as central in their production of ads the new feminine profile. The main question for researchers is, then, what representational strategies the advertising trade uses to negotiate between the old feminine roles and identity and the new ones. Even a partial decoding of beauty ads in women's magazines shows the extent to which contemporary ads conflate unavoidable change of the images of women and ideological continuity of the concept of the feminine, which is sold as successfully as the products advertised.

The «ideology of modernity», in Michèle Mattelart's expression (1982: 69), or what Janice Winship calls «the strategy of the "New Woman"» (1987: 45) behind many contemporary ads allows the contextualization of women's progressive changes in a sense compatible with the permanence of the concept of "quintessential" femininity defined around the axis of beauty. The main way this strategy confers a new adequacy to traditional values is by the appropriation for commercial uses of the feminist concept of the liberation of women's creativity and sexuality.

If up to the 1960s the home was presented in ads as the space where women could best use their talents and develop their imagination, since the 1970s their own bodies are presented as the space where they can best "liberate" their creativity. Susan Gubar analyses how woman's use of «her own body in the creation of art», as her main «medium for self-expression» has been a historical necessity, since, till very recently, women's limited options forced them to express themselves within the confines of domesticity and/or their own bodies (1989: 296-7). «Unable to train themselves as painters, unable to obtain the space or income to become sculptors ... women could at least paint their own faces, shape their own bodies» (1989: 297). Since the 1970s, when women have been entering in unprecedented large numbers the public sphere of art and the professions, their choices for self-expression or creativity have not been limited to the confines of domesticity and their own bodies. Yet the compulsion to use the body in a creative way has not dwindled at all. Cultural messages -a&, among others- keep telling women that their femininity depends on turning themselves into art-objects. As Janice Winship points out, in women's magazines' a&, the very careful construction of the model's appearance «covertly acknowledges the creative work involved in producing it» (1987: 12). Female beauty is advertised as creative "work" that requires the «entrepreneurial spirit» of the modern woman (Wolf, 1991: 27). This modern liberating and entrepreneurial creativity is mediated by a market of beauty products and services that are

themselves endlessly and innovatively created. Liberating and creative feminine work is linked to the purchase of the beauty products advertised, which, in the late capitalist context of what Tom Wolfe called «Conspicuous Consumption» (in Lurie, 1992: 117), cost a great deal more than they ever used to. The concept of the New Woman's liberation that underlies much of the contemporary advertising philosophy is a consumption-based model of liberation. Women looking at cosmetics and fashion ads are made to define their liberated femininity through consumption. Paradoxically, woman is presented in beauty ads as both the creator and the consumer of her own image, since that image is offered to her as a package deal. Judith Williamson's conclusion in the section called «The Created Self» of her influential *Decoding Advertisements* is that ads offer us «a Lifestyle Kit»: «In buying products with certain "images" we create ourselves». It is, she asserts, «one of the most alienating aspects of advertising and consumerism ... our lives become our own creations, through buying ... We become the artist who creates the face, the eyes, the life-style». In this way we are both consumer and product (1995: 70). Although Williamson is not referring here exclusively to advertisements for beauty products and services, it is significant and relevant that all the advertisements analysed in «The Created Self» are cosmetics ads.

The main and most powerful allies of the advertising strategy of the "liberated" woman's creativity are the new sophisticated technological and scientific advances. Women without the right skin complexion or in the process of aging are "freed" from nature with scientifically produced and clinically tested creams.

Many beauty ads in women's magazines emphasize the sexual liberation or open sensuality of the modern woman, harnessing the sexual upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s to commercial ends. A clear example is a Calvin Klein ad for *New Woman* (June 1997), which highlights the sophisticated model's look of desirability and availability in her bedroom eyes. As Janice Winship notes, the woman's gaze -the "come-on" look for a male voyeur so often present in cosmetics and fashion ads- marks the complicity between women around the seductive feminine image which a masculine culture has defined, and it shows symbolically «the extent to which we relate to each other as women through absent men: it is "the man" who, in a manner of speaking, occupies the space between model image and woman reader» (1987: 11). The model in this ad, as in many others selling the same type of product, is in a recumbent position, which renders her very dependent and vulnerable; and, of course, «lying on the floor or on a sofa or bed seems also to be a conventionalized expression of sexual availability» (Goffman, 1979: 41). This ad is strategically placed next to a progressive text, a problem page by the well-known feminist Susie Orbach. Some progressive magazines, such as *New Woman* and *Cosmopolitan*, often include feminist articles, in their desire to keep up with the interests of the large number of modern women working outside the home. But these feminist messages are undercut by adjacent ads with women in sexual poses of a rather traditional kind, which creates a contradictory constellation. But, in fact, the juxtaposition of these two contrasting images of women is intended to help to sell the products advertised. The position of ads in the magazine is always a significant factor because of the interaction of ads and features. The continuum between ads and editorial material in women's magazines still works when the editorial message and the ad's message appear to be contradictory. The result is that both messages are linked, integrated, producing new cultural messages. The positioning of an ad for Calvin Klein perfume next to a feminist problem page is more sophisticated and less straightforward than, for example, placing an ad for make-up next to a beauty article. But,

as the *Advertising Age Yearbook* itself notes, since the early 1980s, «magazine people found that requests for specific ad positions were becoming more vocal and more sophisticated» (in MaCracken, 1993: 44). The links between the traditional ad and a progressive editorial matter addressed to the liberated "New Woman" are not direct. Rather, the editorial page functions like an interpretive frame for the ad. The glamorous sensual model in the ad is integrated as part of the image of the modern woman. This impression of sexual liberation in magazines such as *New Woman* and *Cosmopolitan* is more a male stereotype of the desirable woman than it is a female construct. The overall message of this type of constellation is, therefore, ultimately conservative: the modern independent woman wears her "liberated" sexuality in a rather traditional fashion. She still has to learn to construct her image as an object of male desire in order to succeed, like the model in the ad.

The material effects of thirty years of feminism may seem negligible before the prevalence of traditional images of femininity in the ads and the cover of women's magazines, even those that subscribe to what Janice Winship calls «aspirational feminism» (1987: 106). As Sheila Rowbotham notes, women's liberation has brought «a sprinkling of adverts with images of female freedom. However, the images of freedom are still completely male-defined. Either girls step out in freedom bras, towards a man, or they simply become male fantasies of freedom» (1976: 110). Yet many readers of women's magazines have a skeptical attitude toward the seeming routes of liberation advertised. They enjoy browsing the magazines without "buying" everything on offer. Indeed, as Winship suggests, women readers' relation to magazines can be selective, separating «pleasure» from the text -and even, to some extent, from the glossy and, sometimes, perfumed, ads- and «commitment» to the ad as consumer and ideological subject (Winship, 1992: 97). This is possible because one's reading of a text is shaped by one's material conditions. Ideally, cultural critics should decode the dominant advertising strategies while at the same time taking into account various modes in which readers might be affected by the ideological views proffered by the ads.

The strategy that appropriates commercially women's liberatory changes has involved a representational shift of the space where the ad is set. David Lee, a photographer, examined men's and women's magazines in the 1960s, for the setting depicted in ads. Out of the 700 ads in women's magazines, 71% had the home as setting (in Heniey, 1977: 60). Twenty years later, women's environment and/or spatial mobility in ads has altered. Unless the magazine or TV ad is marketing a specifically household product, the ad highlights woman's escape from home, her new spatial freedom. In this type of ad there is a strong visual emphasis on the woman's sense of external and internal freedom, which may even be reinforced by a feminist text within the ad, such as «*La vie est plus belle quand on l'écrit soi-même*» (Guerlain ad for *Cosmopolitan*, June 1997).

A major strategy in ads constructed around the "ideology of modernity" consists of the representation of the beauty product as a sign or emblem of status, that is, of success. And, as Wendy Chapkis notes, female beauty/success has «a distinctly white American look» (1988: 39). Naomi Campbell, the world's best known black supermodel, avoiding the word racism, explains in a newspaper interview: «You've got to understand, this business is about selling, and blonde and blue-eyed girls are what sells» (*The Guardian*, April 11 1997). Susan Sontag argued that a woman's face «is an emblem, an icon, a flag» (in Baker, 1986: 240). Her hairstyle, the kind of clothes she wears, the type of make-up and perfume she uses, function as a sign of social status. Beauty ads make an effective use of this social reality.

Another strategy in beauty ads consists of the **representation** of the modern imperative for self-improvement, **exploiting** the reality of women's low **self-esteem**, which, as psychological studies show, has not **changed** much in **spite** of women's other liberatory **changes in self-perception** (1). It has **been** well researched -by **market** researchers as well, no doubt- that among women, feeling fat or ugly causes self-destructive feelings of inadequacy. Therefore, one of the most powerful strategies used in beauty ads is the suggestion that, with the necessary self-improvement, there will come a sense of adequacy and self-esteem. The models' faces and body gestures in many of **the ads** that appeal to women's feelings of inadequacy express **self-contentment** and **self-confidence** (sometimes, of an eerie, **dreamy type**, **unwittingly** suggesting that such **happy** state is quite **unreal**). And, **significantly**, eroticism is often underplayed or even absent. But, in fact, as Elie MacCracken notes, **all the advertisements** that use the photographs of glamorous women rely on readers' personal sense of **inferiority**, especially about their physical appearance. The model sustains our «**feelings** of insecurity, predisposing us to be receptive to the product **advertised**» (1993: 36). Hidden beneath the glamorous ideals in beauty ads there are subtexts that play on women's anxieties and feelings of inadequacy, **while** promising a sense of self-worth.

I would suggest that most beauty ads in women's magazines rely to **some** extent on the strategy of self-improvement that **promises** a sense of self-worth, at least at the **level** of discourse. The "personal style" characteristic of women's magazines (Stoll, 1997: 3) is reproduced in all beauty ads that offer women the **tools** and practical **competence** to "improve" **themselves**. This sensitively supportive, sympathetic, cozy style, even when using "the slang of modern medicine", manipulates in an **indirect** and subtle way women's feelings of inadequacy (Daly, 1987: 233). Yet, as Susan Bordo points out, through the self-improving disciplines of diet, make-up and dress, «**we** continue to **memorize** on our bodies the **feel** and conviction of lack, **insufficiency**, of never being good **enough**» (1992: 14). The new advertising **imagery** and rhetoric acts on the *New Woman's* old sense of guilt and old **fears**, particularly the fear of **vulnerability** to the other's eyes. **According** to Ellen MacCracken, the promotion of feelings of inadequacy in the **woman** reader is the major strategy to support the consumption of the **products** advertised. Advertising in women's magazines often helps to develop **insecurities** and **anxieties** in women in order to **recommend** a product or service to remedy **the supposed shortcomings** (1993: 42). But, in fact, «**the** problems are often artificially stimulated or magnified». **The** most pervasive **advice** to remedy the reader's problems is on the **subject** of beauty (1993: 57). The exaggerated concern with physical appearance that is the keynote in both advertising and **features** of women's magazines **makes** women aware of problems they **didn't** know they **had**, such as pale eyebrows or thin eyelashes. The **images** of female beauty **and self-confidence** offered by ads are, **MacCracken** notes, subtly **linked** to their opposite, the reader's fear of **being not-beautiful**, her **insecurity**. **This** **oppositional** strategy that **links** beauty ideals to female inadequacy helps to **secure** the **continued purchase** of **commodities**: one product or even **several** will never completely alleviate the reader's sense of inadequacy. She **must** always **return** for more beauty **goods** and **services** (MacCracken, 1993: 136).

**One** powerful way in which the **latest** advertising trade manipulates these **self-destructive feelings** is **through** the equation of beauty and health. As **Naomi Wolf** notes, lack of beauty is **represented** as a «**disease**» with «**a cure**» in the **sophisticated** language of advertising (1991: 108, 226-7). A particularly emblematic example of **this** strategy can be **found** in a

*Guinot* ad for *Cosmopolitan* (June 1997). In this ad, selling the ultimate in skin therapy, the rhetorical use of the slang of modern medicine is juxtaposed to the powerful visual image of the model's face, which shows the salubrious aftereffects of the skin treatment, but she is in a recumbent -comfortable- position, as if still convalescent from her "illness"; and her face wears a look of melancholy, as though she had not fully recovered from the harmful effects of an "unhealthy" skin. As Eileen MacCracken notes, an ad's primary message is encoded with «subtexts or secondary meanings that frequently induce insecurities while simultaneously creating pleasure» and/or overtly purporting to reassure by offering a remedy (1993: 4).

In contemporary advertising for beauty products and services, the representation of the modern woman's femininity is intertwined with the imperative for the natural and the healthy. Following Juliet Mitchell, Etorre notes that «For many women an interest in health and fitness has turned into "the cult of the body"» (1992: 121). This subtle transformation has been exploited and enhanced by the advertising trade, whose «distinct preference for a healthy type of body» implies «a level of alienation» (Etorre, 1992: 122).

Feeling ugly, and, particularly, feeling fat, has been accompanied not only by feelings of lack of self-worth but also by feelings of powerlessness, as studies of anorexia nervosa show (Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1988: 172-3; Caskey, 1986: 179; Bordo, 1992: 26). Indeed, in our culture, a woman's body (its beauty) is the axis around which not only female subjectivity but also female power is defined. As Mayer notes, «figure control is one of the few forms of control most women are allowed to exercise» (in Etorre, 1992: 120), for although anorexia, like other eating disorders, is outside the norm, the «tyranny of slenderness», in Kim Chernin's expression, is not (Bordo, 1990: 83).

Like the ads relying on women's feelings of inadequacy, the type of ad which draws its appeal from the reality of women's lack of a sense of power and competence, addresses women assuming that they have a problem that needs to be solved. The representation of women having problems means that, as Clara Calvo notes, «the image of women becomes one of "there to be advised". Throughout women's magazines, even in the less traditional ones, there is a tone of advice which pervades all of the information which is given, from cookery to cosmetics» (1997: 4). In this way ads often convey -subliminally at least- the promise of women's power and control over their lives by controlling their bodies with the help of beauty products.

Linked to the various strategies in ads that promise the "New Woman" success, self-esteem or power we find the advertising strategy that relies on what psychoanalyst Eugenie L  moine-Luccioni calls the «fantasy of totality» (1987: 46), the culturally enforced fantasy that, through beauty, woman will magically appropriate all the rights -fortune, glory, voluptuousness (de Beauvoir, 1981: 744). As Wendy Chapkis notes, «the purchase of a new cosmetic, the decision to change the colour or style of one's hair, the start of a new diet are the female equivalent of buying a lottery ticket. Maybe you will be the one whose life is transformed» (1988: 93). Through this strategy, the ad sells the fantasy that, with the right eye shadow or face cream, its female consumer will be successful and have a glamorous life, like the models in the ads. The type of ad that relies strongly on the «fantasy of totality» does not give any real information about the product, but about its magical properties, drawn from desires outside the ad's world. As Judith Williamson puts it, «Advertisements are constantly translating between systems of meaning, and therefore constitute a vast meta-system where values from different areas of our lives are made interchangeable» (1995: 25). Thus the need that leads to

purchase a cleansing milk, for example, is translated into the desire for success, glamour, love. Williamson defines this type of ad as that which «generates a connection between a product and a second "product", love, happiness, etc. which it will buy. "Money can't buy you love" -but cleansing milk can» (1995: 38).

Beauty ads sell «The fantasy of totality» at fantastic prices. Psychologist Erika Freeman explains this pricing mechanism: «An item that promises a fantasy by definition must be priced fantastically ... If a cream begins to sell at 50 cents it will not sell as well nor will it be considered as miraculous as a cream that sells for \$ 30.» (in Chapkis, 1988: 92). In Raymond Williams's study of the historical origins of advertising in England, he analysed the paradox that advertising in our materialist society is in fact not materialist enough. The material object that advertising tries to sell is never sufficient in itself: it must be validated, often only in fantasy, by additional «magic» meanings: «a highly organized and professional system of magical inducements and satisfactions» (in MacCracken, 1993: 67). The examples that Ellen MacCracken uses to illustrate William's concept of the magic of advertising are, not by chance, a cosmetic and a fashion ad in women's magazines. The magic of advertising applies, of course, to all advertised commodities, for as Judith Williamson notes, magic is «the production of results disproportionate to the effort put in», and in this sense, «all consumer products offer magic, and all advertisements are spells» (1995: 141), but many beauty ads appeal specifically to our sense of magic, to the "Cinderella" syndrome: the magic of personal transformation that is part of the imaginative life of most women.

Personal experience encourages women to believe in the advertised fantasy, since the individual beautiful woman does enjoy an amount of respect and attention not generally bestowed on women in general. Approximating the ideal of beauty with which women are endlessly confronted in contemporary ads is often felt as essential to a woman's chances for attention, power and self-respect. Her make-up and other beautifying items give her the mask of power and confidence in a culture where women in general are invisible. As Laura Mulvey argues, a woman's «look of femininity» is «the guarantee of visibility for each individual woman in a male-dominated world where the diverse and complex nature of real women is invisible» (1989: 54). Beauty ads are so commercially successful because their rhetoric and imagery are supported by a socio-cultural reality that gives them the "authority of experience" in women's consumer eyes. However simplified, fictionalized or glamorized their imagery and rhetoric is, the referent of the information is reality. Although the pleasure many women derive from ads has an utopian nature, the key to their attractive power is their ability to join the real and the imaginary, to combine fantasy with elements of everyday reality. In Judith Williamson's words: «this is the essence of all advertising: components of "real" life, our life, are used to speak in a new language, the advertisement's. Its language, its terms ... are the myth» (1995: 23). Even many feminist women are consumers of beauty products, sometimes feeling ideologically guilty of complicity with the sexist commercialization of the female body, but accepting that to some extent we are forced to play along with the system in order to make life tolerable at all» (Rowbotham, 1976: 101).

The strategy of «the fantasy of totality» is most effective in the magazine's front cover, its most important advertisement. Although few women readers identify with the cover girl, we do respond to her as an image, a look. For we too can create this look», as *Cosmopolitan* puts it, a look that promises the fantastic success of the cover girl, if we follow carefully the instructions: «On the cover ... Hair by John Chapman at Stuart Watts, London,



using Kiehl's products. Make-up by Chase Aston ... Recreate this look using Chanel cosmetics» (Cosmopolitan, June 1977, p. 3).

In the late 1980s and the 1990s there **have been some** progressive changes at the level of representation in advertising strategies, although they are not very evident, partly **because** they are **riddled** with contradictions, like the pseudo-progressive magazines where they **appear**. **One** of these progressive changes is the eroticisation of men's bodies in **some** beauty ads addressed to women. As Janice Winship notes, the eroticisation of men's bodies -or fragments of it- **allows** women «to look at and "consume" men's bodies in ways hitherto more covertly done or culturally **tabooed**» (1993: 43). Yet the overall message is but very mildly transgressive. A clear example is a *L'Oreal* ad for Cosmopolitan (April 1997). In this ad there is the **construction** of a **feminised masculinity**: in a small frame on the left, the focus of sexual interest is a man -he is the passive **object** of a woman's **kiss**- although the visual **emphasis** is on the woman's bright kissing lips and sensual expression which **fills** most of the page. His male erotic **gaze is erased** by the woman's own hand which covers his eyes: he would seem "trapped" by her "blinding" **gesture**. But, on the other hand, the overall, most obvious effect of the ad is quite conventional: what Erving Goffman calls the effect of «**feminine touch**» (1979: 29). She is **barely** kissing the man. Goffman notes that, when the effect is a «**just barely touching**», the **touching** is to be **distinguished** from the **masculine/masterful kind** that «**grasps**» or «**holds**» (1979: 29). The female model is **kissing** the man in a soft, **feminine** way where «**nothing** very prehensible is **involved**» (Goffman, 1979: 31). **Besides**, the male model's faint smile **suggests** that her act is approved and appreciated, **as** though he was granting the gracious consent of a superior to his naughty subordinate. **And** the apparently transgressive covering of the **man's eyes has** one other -rather conventional-reading: it has the effect of **avoiding** the **scrutiny** of the female voyeur.

A forceful but rare progressive representational shift in the late 1980s and the 1990s is the adoption of the **strategy** of parody. **There** are a **variety** of parodies. One of them consists of **exaggerating** a **certain stereotyped** image of **femininity**, which puts the image «into quotation marks» (Winship, 1993: 44). An obvious example of this type of parody is a *Lewis* ad for Cosmopolitan (April 1997), a parody of the stereotyped image of woman as **dangerous** seductress, particularly a parody of **Allen Jones' sixties** pop art, which reconstructed sexy **images** of women in popular culture. **Through** parody, the sexy woman's "come-on" look is **not erased** or replaced but it is, at least, **undermined**.

The most **powerful** progressive strategy consists of parodying not a **certain** type of femininity but **only** the "**disease**" that needs a "cure", as in a Salon Selectives ad for Cosmopolitan (June 97), where the **disease** is greasy hair, emphasized as a particularly nasty **kind** of complaint by parodying **through kitsch** a **common working** class situation: the fish-and-chips shop. **The** use of a wide-angle lense **distorts** the whole **scenario** to the point of harmless (**non-chauvinistic**) **surrealism**: the focus is **not**, then, on female beauty but on the parodied situation. **In** fact, the female model in this ad is not beautiful, which is itself a transgressive strategy. Advertisements **usually** present the woman reader with an ideal mirror image of herself, **supposedly attainable** for the **price** of the product. As Judith Williamson points out, in many ads «the woman's eyeline is matched with **yours -she stares straight back at you like your own reflection**» (1995: 68). A few transgressive ads use a negative mirror image, **as** a parody of the **magical** mirror that reflects women's **fantasies** of **totality**, induced by a culture that **equals** female beauty to **self-worth**, power and success.

In many contemporary fashion ads the female body is presented in what Erving Goffman calls a «**puckish styling**», defined as «a playful gesticulative device, a sort of body clowning» (1979: 48-50). Playful poses in ads are numerous, especially in the fashion pages. The theme of women's playful nature often begins on the magazine cover itself. It might be argued that this posing -whereby the model seems to mock her own appearance- would appear to be a progressive parodic strategy. But it is not so. As Ellen MacCracken notes, these ads allow readers «a taste of transgression but within the dominant moral order» (1993: 126). For a puckishly styled ad to have a real transgressive effect, it would have to be clearly and emphatically a parody, which is extremely unusual even in the 1990s' ads. What is rather more common is, as Goffman observed in the 1970s' ads, the suggestion of a situation styled in a manner to which one isn't deeply committed: «the sense is that one may as well try out various possibilities to see what comes of it ... It is a common view that women spend much more of their time and concern in shopping for clothes and preparing for appearances than do men ... But, of course, so does an actor» (1979: 50-1). In other words, this type of ad suggests, without any critical intent, that femininity is a question of appearance, acting or masquerading, and that women do not necessarily identify with their own styling of their selves. The beauty advertising trade has made use of the fact that «the necessary artifice and self-control of femininity has helped create among women a greater awareness that our "natural" gender role is more or less an elaborate disguise» (Chapkis, 1988: 130). This type of clowning fashion ad -the most common in women's magazines- also reflects the fact that, since the 1970s, women are expected to be not one, but several images, fulfilling what can be conflicting roles: the traditional all-giving mother, the modern cool professional woman and the sexy mistress. Fashion ads sell the idea that, through different styles of clothes, we are able to act out the different selves required for the "New Woman".

To conclude, the advertising industry has made representational changes of the image of women that are, for the most part, minor. Its strength and success rests on its ability to adapt to social change, trying to reach new consumers, the large number of women who have entered the paid workforce. But this adaptation is only superficial. In fact, Ellen MacCracken notes, several characteristics of early twentieth century advertising continue to underlie advertising in women's magazines in the 1990s, such as playing on women's sense of inadequacy (1993: 67). Beneath the veneer of modernity of many beauty ads in women's magazines, we find traditional messages. Thus many contemporary beauty ads play on the rhetoric field of women's emancipation of the liberal Betty Friedan type: women's self-perception has changed, the standards of beauty have broadened, but their relevance for a woman's life has not dwindled at all -rather the opposite. As Michele Mattelart, following Henri Lefrèbvre, argues, the liberal mass media accept various ways of conceiving women's image, but demanding one type of femininity (1982: 63), based on the possession of an attractive, seductive image, however that image is constructed. The advertising industry exerts a cultural leadership to achieve a consensus about what constitute the feminine. By achieving this consensus about the feminine, the advertising industry achieves its commercial goal: to guarantee a large number of consumers of beauty products and services.

NOTE

1. Some feminist psychoanalysts, such as Emilce Dio Bleichmar in *El feminismo espontáneo de la histeria: estudio de los trastornos narcisistas de la personalidad* and Linda Leonard in *The Wounded Daughter: Healing the Father/Daughter relationship*, analyse the psychocultural fact that most women suffer from insufficient self-esteem. In *Women and Self-Esteem*, Linda Tschrhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan have concluded that nearly all women have trouble with self-esteem (in Caplan: 216). Judith Bardwick reported, of studies done at the university of Michigan, that lack of self-esteem is the most important psychological variable that repeatedly differentiates women from men (in Dowling, 1985: 36).

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