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**FROM MANET TO GQ: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF  
'GENTLEMEN'S PORNOGRAPHY'**

by

**ESTELLA VILJOEN**

**submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of**

**MAGISTER ARTIUM**

**in the subject**

**HISTORY OF ART**

**at the**

**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**

**SUPERVISER: PROF J VAN EEDEN**

**CO-SUPERVISER: DR AA DU PREEZ**

**MAY 2003**

I declare that **From Manet to GQ: a critical investigation of 'gentlemen's pornography'** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Ms Stella Viljoen

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30 May 2003

“This is it then. At last, a classy, intelligent magazine for South African men ... [O]nce you're looking great, real style is about how you choose to live. And which magazine you read”.

Daniel Ford, Editor of *GQ South Africa* (*GQ Millennium* 2000:14).

“For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face”.

Corinthians 13:12

## SUMMARY

Title: From Manet to *GQ*: a critical investigation of 'gentlemen's pornography'  
By: Stella Viljoen  
Degree: Magister Artium  
Subject: History of Art  
Promoter: Prof J Van Eeden  
Co-promoter: Dr AA du Preez

### Summary:

This thesis offers a reading of *GQ South Africa* 2000, the first glossy men's magazine to be launched in South Africa (in 2000). It traces the possible iconographical genealogy of glossy men's magazines to canonical erotic artworks and examines the aesthetic conventions used by *GQ* to elevate its contents through an implied association with art. This thesis, furthermore, investigates the commonalities between *GQ*, a 'mainstream' publication, and 'pornography' (as defined by the United States Civil Rights Ordinance 1985). In this way, the fluid impermanence of 'art', 'pornography' and 'popular culture' as typologies is highlighted. The new taxonomy of 'gentlemen's pornography' is introduced in order to counter the notion that material that has the gloss of 'high culture' and is deemed socially acceptable, cannot be pornographic. This thesis submits that a critical reading of glossy men's magazines from an interdisciplinary perspective is imperative in order to reveal their ideological assumptions.

The ideological position that informs this study is the radical feminist belief that pornography objectifies and subordinates women and is, therefore, harmful. The thesis is simultaneously grounded in the theoretical methodologies of visual culture and art history, and as such assumes the intonation of these disciplines. From a Postmodern point-of-view, popular visual culture not only wields power in terms of generalising (capitalist and sexist) western paradigms, but is also skilful at masking its significant influence in doing so. For this reason, this dissertation endeavours to raise a critical dialogue concerning the ideological 'message' of glossy men's magazines.

The sometimes antithetical nature of discourse critically centered on gender representation in visual culture may be attributed to the pervasiveness of familiar (and therefore seemingly harmless) female

objectification in the popular media. This thesis examines the iconography of gendered stereotypes against the erotic/pornographic, high culture/low culture object/subject binaries, and, furthermore, situates these types in the wider dialectic of 'obscene' (off-scene) versus 'acceptable' culture. The glossy men's magazines that form the interest of this study are a trade situated in the alliance of social elitism and representational control over the female body, and, thus, this thesis marks the point of intersection between consumer culture and the politics of display.

**Key terms:**

GQ; gentlemen's pornography; representational discourse; erotic; obscene; subordination; gaze; objectification; fetish; tropes of violence and sex; aspirational branding; mechanisms of disguise; aesthetic experience; cultivation; authorship; female empowerment; simulacra.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation: Social Sciences and Humanities (NRF) and the University of Pretoria towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this thesis and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation or the University of Pretoria.

I wish to extend my deep gratitude to my promoter and mentor, Prof Jeanne Van Eeden of the Department of Visual Arts, for her inspiring patience, support and guidance. I also wish to thank Dr Amanda du Preez for her critical insights and challenging ideas. Their humour was a constant source of encouragement.

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## LIST OF TERMS<sup>1</sup>

**Ben-day:** “In printing, a process using screens of different dot patterns to produce shading effects mechanically, named from its inventor, Benjamin Day (1838 –1916)” (Elspass 1984:17).

**Brand:** The market image of a product (such as GQ magazine) or corporation is known as its ‘brand identity’; “[t]he value-creating capacity of the brand has become the subject of much attention in recent years, a point underlined by the fact that there are many investment trusts today that are limited exclusively to companies with strong brands” (Melin 2002:109). Melin (2002:109) comments that in contemporary western culture, the brand is no longer limited to being one of the tactical aids of the product manager in the context of sales, but has a key strategic role in many companies. “A brand can be said to work, among other things, as an information carrier, a guarantee, a catalyst and an image creator” (Melin 2002:110). Aspirational branding, by extension, is the phrase used to refer to brands that are built on the social and fiscal aspirations of their target market.

**Femme garçon:**<sup>2</sup> This term is used to refer to a recurring female stereotype within contemporary popular culture. The *femme garçon* epitomises the trend within glossy men’s magazines of fetishistically encoding sexualised women with the gloss of tomboyish sexiness. This stereotype aligns the juvenile naivety of the archetypal *femme enfant* stereotype with the veneer of danger and sexuality associated with the *femme fatale* (see 4.3.3.2).

**Gentlemen’s pornography:** A term used, within the context of this study, to refer to the manner in which glossy men’s magazines, such as GQ, draw from the visual mythology of canonical erotic artworks in order to legitimise their sexualised content. This phrase includes canonical erotic artworks and contemporary glossy men’s magazines. This problematic conflation is an experimental taxonomy, designed to draw attention to the similarities between these genres, even at the expense of understating their obvious differences. Although the use of the word ‘pornography’ seems to imply that the canonical erotic artworks (such as Manet’s *Olympia*) are pornographic, this is not necessarily the intention of the phrase. Gentlemen’s pornography does not comply with the United States Civil Rights Ordinance’s (1985) definition of pornography and, thus, the term is rather meant to couple elitist ideals

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<sup>1</sup> The following definitions represent the manner in which each term is used in this study, and are not necessarily the most accurate denotative descriptions. The definitions represented here are the summation of both acknowledged theoretical positions, as well as the author’s own interpretations. They may, therefore, be nuanced in a convenient manner for this study.

<sup>2</sup> The terms *femme garçon* and ‘Gentlemen’s pornography’ are coined by the author for the purposes of this study.

and sexualised representation in an ironic manner. The term is not intended to be functional outside the context of this study.

**Glossy men's magazines:** This is Andrea Dworkin and Catherine A MacKinnon's (1988:138) term for expensive (therefore 'glossy'), up-market magazines aimed at a male readership, in which the content is sexually focussed. It does not include overtly pornographic magazines such as *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler*.

**Obscene:** *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* refers to Chief Justice Cockburn's 1868 delineation of 'obscenity' in order to define 'obscene', namely as "tending to deprave and corrupt" (in Sykes 1976:753). In addition, this term may imply the indecent, lewd, generally offensive or immoral (see Chambers 1992:262; Rembar 1969; Williams 1979:12).

**Phallogentric:** "[T]he practice of describing things associated with women as if they were deviant from a male norm" (Mills 1995:45).

**Pornography:** A "practice of sex discrimination which sexualises the subordination of women and which eroticises violence against women" (The United States Civil Rights Ordinance of 1985, in Itzin 1992:435)

**Prurient:** The word 'prurient', in its application to obscenity legislation, means "tending to excite lasciviousness" (Ginnow & Gordon 1978:29). The words 'prurient' and 'shameful' are coupled in the United States obscenity statute since the 1960s "to focus on material which exploits or caters to unhealthy, anti-social attitudes towards nudity, sex or excretion" (Ginnow & Gordon 1978:29). When this term is employed in this study it is meant to reflect this legislative concern for the general health of society and, thus, also the moralistic tone of most obscenity legislation.

**Significant form:** The phrase coined by Modernist theorist, Clive Bell in the early twentieth century to refer to the formal characteristics that distinguish works of art and trigger the experience of aesthetic emotion in the viewer (see Werhane 1984:99).

**Simulacrum:** According to Michael Camille (1996:31), 'simulacrum' as a concept, subverts the dichotomy of model and copy, original and reproduction, image and likeness. Within theories of representation, Camille (1996:31) describes simulacrum as more than "just a useless image, it is a deviation and perversion of imitation itself – a false likeness." The notion of simulacrum, often applied

to Postmodern artistic practises, is useful, within the context of this study, in examining the *leitmotifs* common to canonical erotic artworks and GQ.

**Soft-core pornography:** In popular terminology 'soft-core' is the term used to describe pornographic magazines that include 'lifestyle' features and are less sexually explicit; the oldest and most successful of these being *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. (Because of their iconic status, *Playboy* and *Penthouse* are occasionally referred to in this study as representative of the soft-core genre. There are, however, many other examples of soft-core pornography magazines). Gail Dines (1995:254) reflects that hard-core pornography magazines "advertise the woman (via the codes and conventions of pornographic representation) as the commodity on offer, whereas [soft-core pornography magazines] offer a 'lifestyle' that involves the consumption of numerous upmarket commodities as a way of capturing the ultimate prized commodity; lots and lots of attractive, young, big-breasted women". Soft-core magazines also tend to represent less sexual violence (and are cheaper) than those referred to as hard-core (such as *Hustler XXX* and *Barely Legal*).

**Trope:** Deborah Root (1996) uses the term 'trope' (for example, 'tropes of difference' and 'tropes of exoticism') in her discussion of the western consumption of the Other. Root (1996:34) borrows the term from literary theory to indicate a "conceptual mechanism that ... binds together or organizes diverse concepts, symbols, and associations into one idea".

**Venus Naturalis:** This phrase is used by Kenneth Clark (1956) to encapsulate the practice of representing the nude woman as the personification of nature, thereby justifying her nakedness as 'natural'. Clark (1956:115) cites Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre* as the "first great celebration of Natural Venus in Venice" and Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* as one of the last depictions of this type.