

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and aims of study

It can perhaps be reasoned that much of the shock value of explicit sexual representation has been dissipated. As the body politic in western society becomes more politically correct and visually sophisticated, images must be artful in order to seduce convincingly and appeal to a visually literate audience.¹ Thus the trade in 'obscene' (namely sexualised and objectifying) material circumvents the public stigma and snobbery associated with pornography through the invention of a kind of quasi-porn such as glossy men's magazines.² This seemingly new genre of pornography, echoes the entrance of 'soft' pornographic publications (most notably Hugh Hefner's 1953 'men's entertainment' magazine, *Playboy*) into the western market place - a phenomenon Gail Dines (1995:254) refers to as "bringing pornography out of the closet and onto the coffee table". Glossy men's magazines merely mimic this 'tasteful' or 'soft-core' pornography and softens it further to be acceptable to a wider audience.³ The rising popularity of glossy men's magazines in South Africa is all too clear with the emergence of the South African issues of *Gentlemen's Quarterly (GQ)*, *For Him Magazine (FHM)*, *Men's Health* and *Maxim* in the last few years, at the time of writing.⁴ The elitist gloss and pecuniary, sexualised nature of all three these publications supports the notion that sex sells – not only magazines, and ideology, but also itself.

The aestheticised objectification of women for an elitist male market is not a contemporary phenomenon. Since at least the seventeenth century, sexualised artworks have canonised the objectified female body as an icon of 'acceptable' sexual representation, thus legitimising the display of female nudity for a selected male market. 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, an alliance quintessential of canonical erotic artworks.⁵ For this reason, artworks

¹ GQ, the focus of this study, does not represent explicit sex, rather it employs what Panofsky (1959:22) terms "judicious pruning" in order to hint at sex without fully representing it.

² This term does not include overtly pornographic magazines such as *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* (see list of terms).

³ Although broadly analogous to glossy men's magazines, the widely theorised class of soft core pornography such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* is not the subject of this study (for more on soft-core pornography see Dines 1995; Elshtain; Pritchard 1993). In order to emphasise the commonality of 'soft' and 'hard' core pornography, as well as its relation to glossy men's magazines, the conflation of these genres under the general notion of pornography, is often risked in this study.

⁴ The international trade in glossy men's magazines is wide and varied (apart from *GQ*, *FHM*, *Men's Health* and *Maxim* which have South African editions, there are also magazines such as *Loaded* and *Stuff*).

⁵ The polemics of the term 'erotic' are examined in Chapter 2.

such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Manet's *Olympia*⁶ are compared to *GQ*, in order to demonstrate that in both painting and popular magazines, women are objectified for visual consumption.

As an established and reputable publication that brands itself as a "gentlemen's" (hence elitist and exclusive) quarterly, *GQ* forms an apposite site for the investigation of glossy men's magazines.⁷ In addition, the genre of canonical erotic art that consciously or unconsciously informs the iconography of glossy men's magazines, is a seminal component of this inquiry. The object of this study is, thus, to critically analyse *GQ* and the manner in which it draws inspiration from the canonical erotic art of such artists as Titian and Manet.⁸ The link between glossy men's magazines and canonical erotic art is necessarily a contrived one, except for the fact that in both cases female sexuality is generally constructed for commercial consumption by the male. To the extent that *GQ* and Manet's *Olympia*, for instance, are both commodified entities, aimed at an up-market male audience, and are veiled in the ennobling cloak of high culture, they are thus both believed to constitute 'gentleman's pornography'.

This dissertation furthermore proposes a new taxonomy situated somewhere between pornography and erotic art, which implicitly reveals both the 'pornographic' (objectifying, subordinating) and 'erotic' (stylised, intellectualised, 'artistic') strains of glossy men's magazines.⁹ 'Gentlemen's pornography', as the new taxonomy is called, is introduced into the established parlance of sexual representation, to refer to both canonical erotic paintings of women (such as Manet's *Olympia*) and to contemporary glossy men's magazines (such as *GQ*). The aims of this study are therefore:

- To introduce the taxonomy of gentlemen's pornography and, in so doing, investigate the visual and ideological mythology of canonical erotic art from which *GQ* almost certainly draws inspiration.
- To chronicle the historical construction of 'pornography' as a taxonomy in order to expose the ideological sentiments behind this 'judgement', and to strip the legislative concept of pornography down to its 'essential' meaning (*i.e.*, to arrive at the 1985 United States Civil Rights Ordinance's definition of pornography).

⁶ Artworks from before approximately 1940 are referred to since these are considered to be part of the visual frame of reference of glossy men's magazines.

⁷ *GQ* is singled out for both its up-market branding and artistic aesthetic, since both of these attributes are employed to veil the sexualised content of the magazine, thereby deeming it more socially acceptable. (*Men's Health* seems, perhaps misleadingly, too innocuous to demonstrate this connection, while *FHM* seems too lewd.) In this way, *GQ* is akin to many exclusively niched artworks.

⁸ Manet is referred to in the title of this dissertation because of the iconic role of *Olympia* (1863) and *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863) in discourses related to ennobled commodification and sexualised display (see Nochlin 1991; Parker & Pollock 1981). John Berger (1972:63) perceives *Olympia* as a meeting point between the classical tradition of sexualised display (the reclining nude) and the iconoclastic modernity of commercial culture. Manet's *Olympia* is thus emblematic of two primary concerns for this study, namely canonical erotic display and the commodification of sexuality by commercial culture.

- To highlight the commonalities between gentlemen's pornography and 'conventional' pornography (*i.e.*, to suggest that GQ represents sex, subordination and violence, and in so doing causes harm).¹⁰
- To expose and demystify the mechanisms of disguise employed by GQ to ennoble its objectifying practices in the gloss of the artistic; it is suggested that it is precisely this that differentiates its brand identity from that of conventional pornography.

This study rests on the assumption that popular visual culture influences the paradigmatic perceptions, attitudes and ideologies of the society in which it is situated (see, among others, Barthes 1973, 1983; Foucault 1977, 1980 & Berger 1972, 1980). Against the contemporary backdrop of commercially driven visual display, popular culture is experienced more as an omnipotent reality than as an area that needs public control. Social critiques within the powerful arena of sexual representation are particularly tenuous, because of the dialectical role of anti-censorship sentiment versus anti-obscenity discourse. The object of this study is not, however, to plead for more elaborate obscenity legislation, but rather to invoke further critical investigation into glossy men's magazines.¹¹

The author argues in this study that GQ stereotypes and objectifies women, and uncovers the manner in which glossy men's magazines could therefore be considered harmful to society.¹² This study, in other words, aims to demonstrate the manner in which GQ continues to construct and encode the feminine for the recreation and consumption by the male.

1.2 Theoretical framework and methodology of study

The connection between canonical artworks and GQ is the thread that runs throughout the dissertation, thus situating the study within the dual disciplines of art history and (popular) visual culture.¹³ The theoretical framework within which argumentation takes place, is largely related to the discourse surrounding representation, which is a critical concern of both art history and (popular) visual culture. The other theories that could have formed the point of departure for this study –

⁹ The extent to which popular culture and high culture borrow from each other, particularly within a contemporary context, is perceived as largely dependant on the economic incentive motivating such an exchange.

¹⁰ The term 'harm', appropriated from legislative discourse, seems crude in the context of a discussion on GQ and canonical erotic art. Some of the terms used in this study (most notably, 'harm' and 'obscene') may seem out of place because they are appropriated from obscenity legislation. This dissonance, however, serves the purpose of highlighting the 'uncomfortable' nature of comparing visual art, pornography and popular culture.

¹¹ It does not seem like a plausible or constructive goal to prohibit or regulate glossy men's magazines through the law, since this would infringe on the freedom of expression that is generally deemed integral to modern democracy.

¹² This position is not equally evident at all points in the dissertation, since various sides of the discourse must be presented, but is ultimately the goal that validates each idea as it is introduced.

¹³ Figure 1 is a timeline of events, artworks and publications pertaining to this study. Most of the relevant milestones from art history and popular visual culture are noted in this timeline in order to create an impression of the (historical and theoretical) breadth of phenomena integral to the study of gentlemen's pornography.

such as Marxism, formalism, or semiotics – inevitably feature as *leitmotifs* throughout the dissertation, but do not form the primary incentive of the argument. Since the premise of this study is that GQ objectifies and subordinates women, the argumentation is positioned within the anti-pornography politics of radical feminism. This is a fragile, tentative alignment, however, since the tone of this study is not the resolute, decisive one characteristic of radical feminism (marked by figures such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon). The dissertation thus echoes the principles of radical feminism rather than its Dworkinian demeanour.

Specific, key theorists and theories from the relevant disciplines (art history, visual culture, feminist theory, psychology, and to a lesser extent, western legislative discourse) are highlighted in an attempt to form a continuous discursive narrative throughout the argumentation. These theorists have been chosen as much for their seminal status within their fields as for their particular relevance to the study of gentlemen's pornography and GQ. These germinal sources are explicated below.

While they are not art historians, Michel Foucault (1980), Walter Kendrick (1987), and Isabel Tang (1999) have proved invaluable sources in tracing the history of so-called obscene art, and the ideologically loaded categorisation of this within western culture. Similarly, Lynn Hunt's (1993) investigations into the "invention of pornography" provide a point of departure from which this study can investigate the contemporary taxonomy of pornography. Art historians Kenneth Clark (1956) and Marcia Pointon (1990) are repeatedly referred to because of their germane investigations into, respectively, nudity and gender in canonical fine art. The gendered conceptualisation of modernity, fundamental to the Modernist movement, is explored by Rozsika Parker (1981) and Griselda Pollock (1981, 1988, 1992), and exerts a considerable influence on this study.

Linda Nochlin's (1978, 1991) research on gender politics and Carol Duncan (1993) and Lynda Nead's (1982, 1992) writings on sexual representation and obscenity, are the principle discourses drawn from feminist art historical quarters. All three of these authors prove helpful in establishing a theoretical link between the art historical perspectives on canonical fine art and contemporary discourses on visual culture, such as Laura Mulvey's (1975, 1989) writings on 'visual pleasure' in film. In a similar vein, John Berger (1972, 1980) and Deborah Root (1996) are useful because of the connections they make between art and popular culture. Since much contemporary commentary on sexualised imagery is rooted in feminist objections to early Modernist art, the primary relevance of art historical criticism to this study is for the feminist critiques of Modernist artworks. These critiques of Modernist art include the critical analyses of Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1986) and Marsha Pointon (1990) of Manet's *Olympia* (1863) and *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863) respectively.

As mentioned previously, radical feminist authors such as Dworkin (1983, 1988) and MacKinnon (1985, 1993) establish much of the ideological premise of the study. The writings of psychologists such as Peter Baker (1992), Alan Soble (1986) and Catherine Itzin (1992) are employed to substantiate the anti-pornography positions of these feminists, by means of clinical evidence of the 'harmfulness' of sexually objectifying practices. As a counterfoil to the radical feminist position, Camille Paglia's (1992, 1995) pro-sex politics is related in places.

Building on the critical principles of authors such as Roland Barthes (1973, 1983) and Michel Foucault (1977, 1980), contemporary theorists are increasingly raising their voices to question the effects of popular culture in shaping society. Towards this end, authors such as John D'Emilio and Estelle B Freedman (1997) and Wendy Shalit (2000) are re-evaluating the role of, for instance, modesty in the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. D'Emilio and Freedman question the presumed sexual freedom of contemporary western women, in a world dominated by prescriptive sexualised imagery, while Shalit questions the impact of the sexual revolution on such concepts as shame, modesty and the erotic. This study, similarly, considers the notion of 'modesty' within the representational sphere, from the hallowed gallery spaces and salons of the past two centuries, to the equally exclusive glossy men's magazines of today.

The methodology of this dissertation is, therefore, essentially an interdisciplinary interrogation of visual and textual representations that fall under the phrase 'gentlemen's pornography'. It thus has two broad methodological incentives: firstly, this study is a literature study that tests the argumentation of the dissertation against relevant theoretical texts¹⁴ and secondly, it is a descriptive critical interpretation of *GQ*¹⁵ and specific canonical erotic artworks. No empirical testing of viewer responses is undertaken, and therefore the study rests on certain assumptions and remains speculative and exploratory in nature. Examples of *GQ South Africa*¹⁶ from the year 2000 are referred to in order to ensure that the reader gains a sense of the magazine as a whole (continuity in tone, style, features, and regular contributors), and to show that the examples chosen represent the norm, rather than the extreme.¹⁷

¹⁴ As a critical component of a literature study, certain texts are problematised and de-naturalised.

¹⁵ Diverse theorists such as Terry Eagleton (1980), Sara Mills (1995) and John Fiske (1987, 1989) form part of the pluralistic methodology employed by this study in the analysis of *GQ*.

¹⁶ Each of the *GQ* publications is named after the country in which it is published, hence the title '*GQ South Africa*' appears as the 'header' on each *GQ* published in South Africa. For the sake of brevity, *GQ South Africa* is henceforth referred to as *GQ*, since no other editions are referred to in this study.

¹⁷ Since this study investigates *GQ* as a whole, and not just the more obviously sexualised imagery within the magazine, it may, in places, seem to invert centre and margin. It re-examines images that are well-known and initiates less familiar ones, moving between those made as art and those made as advertisements or sales tools.

The length of the dissertation prevents the author from investigating other areas of popular visual culture that may demonstrate the same characteristics as those of *GQ* (i.e., that objectify and subordinate women under the aestheticised veneer of 'high culture'). Although this is not articulated in the study, the argument may, however, be applied to the broader context of glossy men's magazines, glossy women's magazines, music videos, films and various other examples of popular visual culture. The author, thus wishes to demonstrate how the disciplines of art history and the politics of representation enunciated by (visual) cultural studies can be applied to the investigation of popular culture.

The South African context is not the prime focus of this dissertation. Although issues of race and gender may take on a slightly different sociological slant within different countries (such as the use of black models in South Africa), *GQ* is an international magazine that repeatedly asserts its position in the global village. As such, the content and format of its various editions tends to be fairly standardised.¹⁸ *GQ* is referred to as the primary source concerning glossy men's magazines, but the argument is believed to be a universal one.

1.3 Outline of Chapters

Chapter One has introduced the main aim of the study, namely to critically investigate *GQ* against the backdrop of similar investigations into canonical erotic fine art and legislative definitions of pornography, and has positioned the study within the relevant theoretical frameworks that underpin the investigation. This chapter has articulated the position of the author as being critical of gentlemen's pornography, holding the belief that *GQ* objectifies and subordinates women and is thus potentially harmful to women.

Chapter Two focuses on the politicised process of *defining* pornography, since when sex is being sold, the attention of both legal and academic worlds is implicated. For both legal and academic discourse the interest lies in the term 'pornography', for in order to write about, talk about, prohibit or defend pornography, there must be a definition or a common understanding of what it is. This chapter first traces the historical developments in defining pornography and then the legal problems associated with this process. Some feminist and art historical perspectives concerning pornography or 'obscene' representation are briefly sketched in order to later situate *GQ* within the broader discourse on sexualised representation.

¹⁸ Typically, articles on international figures, such as Richard Branson or Ernie Els, are shared between different editions in different countries, but a more customised local flavour does filter through from time to time.

Chapter Three introduces and explains the concept of gentlemen's pornography as a new taxonomy in sexualised representation. Since the United States Civil Rights Ordinance (1985) is generally thought to have made the first (and most influential) breakthrough in defining pornography legally, its conceptualisation of pornography is used as a platform from which to examine GQ. Four of the key criteria set by the United States Civil Rights Ordinance's definition of pornography – sex, subordination, violence, and harm – are explored within the context of gentlemen's pornography and GQ. In so doing, the author postulates that GQ does, to some degree, fit the requirements of the term pornography.

Chapter Four focuses on the fine line between what is publicly perceived to be 'obscene' or 'acceptable'. It also investigates some of the commercial customs and consequences that these nuances imply. Whether intentionally or not, sexualised imagery is often disguised through the use of various tasteful techniques such as the use of text, which softens the impact of the material. By analysing these softening devices, one might arrive at the conclusion that GQ nonetheless objectifies and subordinates women.¹⁹ This chapter investigates these so-called mechanisms of disguise in so far as they are relevant to the consumption of GQ and its acceptability within contemporary society.

The concluding chapter summarises the preceding chapters. It considers the contributions of this study as well as its limitations. Chapter five, furthermore, posits suggestions for further research that have become apparent during the course of this study.

1.4 In conclusion

With the increasing awareness of the ways in which power is lodged and synthesised in dominant forms of discourse, criticism has frequently "caught its own hands in the till and been forced to convict itself of participation in the same or similar conjunctures of knowledge, power and language as it investigates" (Bourdieu 1984:203). There is no neutral ground in the study of pornography. The acts of studying it, collecting it, writing about it, or even condemning it, are not free from the "act of looking that implicates the student, collector, writer, or critic" (Tang 1999:101). The author can only "view culture from within it" (Harris 1971:31), and therefore whatever generalisations are risked for the benefit of lucid and expedient explanation, are made with an awareness of the author's cultural relativity and personal bias. In this vein, for instance, it is difficult to argue the harm of gentlemen's pornography to someone who has never, even in a small way, been seduced by it.

¹⁹ For this reason it is not the intention of this study to examine the role of pornography within culture so much as to uncover its presence, even where it is denied.

The following chapter sketches the broad discourse that informs all discussions on pornography, and forms the framework of this study on gentlemen's pornography. In a sense, this study has failed before it has even started, for by investigating *GQ* and then capturing this process in writing, one is removing the magazine from the very real context in which it is made and distributed (the studio, factory, newsagent, home, and so on). Language, nevertheless, plays a critical role in invoking public awareness and responsibility (in terms of the content of popular culture). In order to stress this role, the emphasis of Chapter Two is on the process of defining pornography that has burdened legislative, feminist and art historical theory during the past century.