

## CHAPTER 4

### GQ: OBSCENITY AND ACCEPTABILITY

Thus I learned to battle the canvas, to come to know it as a being resisting my wish (dream) and to bend it forcibly to this wish. At first it stands there like a pure chaste virgin ... and then comes the wilful brush which first here, then there, gradually conquers it with all the energy peculiar to it, like a European colonist.

Wassily Kandinsky (in Doy 1995:55).

What is a playboy? Is he simply a wastrel, ne'er-do-well, a fashionable bum? Far from it. He can be a sharp minded young business executive, a worker in the arts, a university professor, an architect or an engineer. He can be many things, provided he possess a certain kind of view. He must see life not as a vale of tears, but as a happy time; ... he must be an alert man, a man of taste, a man sensitive to pleasure, a man who – without acquiring the stigma of voluptuary or dilettante – can live life to the hilt. This is the sort of man we mean when we use the word playboy.

Hugh Hefner (in Dines 1995:256).

#### 4.1 Introduction

Since GQ is neither completely 'obscene' nor completely 'acceptable', it occupies a polemical space in terms of the critical discourse that surrounds sexualised imagery. It is partly this ambiguous location that renders it so akin to both the secret museum and the 'erotic' art commissioned by genteel society in previous centuries. Although there were always people who objected to sexualised representations, it is argued in this study that the secret museum, sexualised canonical art, and glossy men's magazine's form an acceptable showcase for material that is often 'obscene' (*i.e.*, objectifying or subordinating sexualised representations).<sup>1</sup> This chapter investigates the tension between 'obscenity' and 'acceptability' that is the defining feature of gentlemen's pornography. The problematic concepts obscenity and acceptability are briefly positioned within a historical and, where possible, legal framework in order to grapple with their meaning. The aim is to suggest that GQ consciously creates visual associations with canonical art in order to veil the obscenity in the magazine in a shroud of ennobled acceptability. In this way, GQ may be delineated as gentlemen's pornography, since it is *both* socially acceptable and 'obscene'.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'obscenity' is used in this section to refer to material that represents sex, subordination and violence, as discussed in Chapter 3. The reason the term 'obscene' is used as opposed to 'pornographic', is because of the former's antithetical position in terms of 'acceptability'. The 'obscene' is a harsh, abrasive term that seems too strong for GQ, and thus it is useful in this context as a word that exposes the harmful nature or effect of GQ, in spite of its seeming social acceptability.

Section 4.2 investigates the concept of 'obscenity' in order to trace the background of contemporary western interpretations of this 'judgement'. This serves as an introduction to the discussion of the notions of mainstream versus margin, 'high' culture versus 'low' culture, and obscenity versus acceptability. The process of 'disguise' that is believed to occur in GQ is examined against the backdrop of mid-Victorian mores, ethics and beliefs, since so much of the discourse surrounding art and obscenity seems to return to that point in western history. The next section (4.3) investigates the manner in which GQ veils 'obscene' content in a cloak of acceptability by, firstly, appropriating the aesthetics of canonical artworks and photography, and secondly, using an intellectualised tone (these mechanisms of disguise are analysed under the terms 'aesthetics' and 'cultivation'). Thirdly, by replacing the clichéd female stereotypes associated with conventional pornography (such as the bimbo and dominatrix) with more seemingly progressive types, GQ legitimises (disguises) the objectifying content of the magazine. In so far as GQ imposes its own two-dimensional constructs, it is argued that the magazine is, nevertheless, derogatory and objectifying (this notion is explored under the appropriation of 'empowerment').

The conclusion to this chapter (4.4) confronts the perception that pornography exists 'outside' of mainstream culture. Since gentlemen's pornography is treated as part of popular culture (and is deemed 'acceptable' enough to be sold in supermarkets and stationery shops, for instance), it may subsequently be perceived to be 'safe' from the negative connotations generally associated with pornography. This section examines the way GQ maintains an air of acceptability while, simultaneously, representing women in a potentially harmful (obscene) way. GQ is, thus, presented as an example of mainstream popular culture that sells harmful (subordinating, objectifying and stereotyping) imagery and content.

#### **4.2 'Obscenity': morality, materialism and Victorian mores**

The Victorian fascination with sexuality is marked by two, apparently discrete spaces. The gallery space was seemingly the most public one within which high culture could find expression, and thus by extension, art was a signifier of things lofty or 'high'. The proverbial 'streets' of a city, on the other hand, tend to represent traffic, trade, poverty, the common, and all things plebeian or base. The illicit Victorian trade in obscene materials was fixed in the latter arena, ratifying the perceived polarity between art and obscenity. Nead (1992:25) presents the frame as a metaphor for the 'staging' of art, as opposed to non-art or the obscene. As noted previously, she uses the etymology of the term 'obscene' to cement this tenet – 'obscene', she notes, may derive from the Latin *scene*, literally meaning that which is off, or to one side. Within the Victorian context, the art/obscenity tension signifies that which may be seen, and that which should not be seen. Nead (1992:25) posits that the female nude marks both the internal limit of art and the external limit of

obscenity. The iconographical importance of the nude is, therefore, that it forms the “internal structural link” (Nead 1992:25) that binds art and obscenity and an entire system of meaning together. From a legislative perspective, however, there is little indication of the complex system of intertextual references that may be associated with the obscene.

According to Ginnow and Gordon (1978:29), the authoritative legal definition of obscene material in the United States of America is “material which deals with sex in a manner appealing to prurient interest”. It is furthermore understood that material is obscene if, “considered as a whole, its predominant appeal is to prurient interest, in other words, a shameful or morbid interest in nudity, sex, or excretion, and it goes substantially beyond customary limits of candour in description or representation of matters” (Ginnow & Gordon 1978:29). Various other definitions of obscenity have been rendered by the judicial system (see 2.3), and the term has been used in different contexts, but always with the general sense of meaning “offensive to morality or chastity, indecent, or nasty” (as in *King v Commonwealth*).<sup>2</sup> Obscenity is often seen as synonymous with the terms “indecent and immoral” (*King v Commonwealth*), or “lewd, lascivious, and indecent” (*Connecticut State v Le Witt*).<sup>3</sup> As Ginnow and Gordon (1978:30) point out, however, the concept of obscenity is a fluid one because it depends on the gradual development of generally accepted notions of decency. The definition of obscenity is not designed to embalm the precise morals of an age or place, but rather the understanding of the word ‘obscene’ should mark the contemporary position of that critical point “between candour and shame at which the community has arrived” (*NY-People v Fritch*).

In other words, in much the same way that an understanding of ‘indecent’ requires an understanding of its antithesis, decency, the notion of obscenity is dependant on a shared interpretation of what is acceptable. Gen Doy (1995:72) points out that by the late nineteenth century, “the formulation of medical and psychological bases for bourgeois ‘norms’ of ... sexual behaviour were increasingly developed to extend ‘ideal’ models of sexual behaviour to a wider range of society”. It is possible that a social understanding of what is acceptable behaviour and what is not, is not merely an ideological tool, but in fact a warning against ‘harm’. Whether in ancient Greece, Victorian England or contemporary America, in a democratic climate, where the freedom to do, print or publish what one wants is largely protected, ‘obscenity’ as a taxonomy is often dismissed (or frowned upon) rather than respected as a social protector. A shared understanding of obscenity is, nevertheless, closely related to the notion of ‘harm’, since the classification of material as ‘obscene’ may limit its distribution and, therefore, decrease the amount of harm it causes.

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<sup>2</sup> The various quotes from court cases in this paragraph are taken from Ginnow and Gordon’s 1978 restatement of the entire American law (1978:30).

The more pertinent question, for this section, is at which point pornographic or sexually explicit material became known as 'obscene'. This is a question that evokes varying responses, depending on the partisanship of the respective person or group. Cultural theorists and sociologists like Isabel Tang (1999), following the path delineated by Foucault, assert that the understanding of pornography as material that is lewd and licentious (indecent and obscene or likely to deprave and corrupt), is a construct of Victorian fear and repression. Pornography as a category, it is postulated, has its origins in the inception of the secret museum. Following this logic, any argument that implies that *Pan and the Goat* (figure 2) is not pornography, would probably be based on the premise that within the context in which it was made, this sculpture did not carry the connotations of obscenity. The content of the sculpture - whether or not it represents explicit sex, subordination and violence - would not be relevant to such a position. Thus, according to Tang (1999:23-43), no artefact from Pompeii is pornographic, until it is placed in the secret museum. Whether this is the definitive moment in the historical creation of pornography as a classificatory term (*i.e.*, the creation of the secret museum) is debatable (see 2.2); the relevant idea here is that it was at that point in recent history that pornography went 'underground'.

Elizabeth Anne McCauley's investigation of the archives of the Paris Préfecture offers an enlightening glimpse of the prolific trade in obscene materials that was prevalent in nineteenth century Paris (in Tang 1999:109). According to McCauley's research, the pornography trade was clearly flourishing in spite of (or because of?) Victorian prudery. Perhaps when Chief Justice Cockburn (1868) defined obscene material as that which has a tendency to "deprave and corrupt", he did not succeed in abolishing obscene matter, merely moving it off-scene. Foucault (1980:3) reflects that at the beginning of the seventeenth century a certain frankness regarding sex (and thus 'obscenity') was still common in Europe, since there was little need to cloak sexual practices in secrecy. Similarly, language was not regulated, neither was conduct, whether coarse or otherwise, concealed. Foucault (1980:3) remarks that society had

a tolerant familiarity with the illicit, but twilight soon fell upon this bright day, followed by the monotonous nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule.

Foucault's rather polarised explanation demonstrates the localising, or privatising of Victorian sexuality, taking it off the streets and into the home. From McCauley's findings it is evident that this was not the reality. Perhaps the most damning feature of Victorian bourgeois practice was not the ideal of mystifying sexuality,<sup>4</sup> domesticating it, but believing that this might somehow be achieved if

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<sup>3</sup> The frequent appearance of the word 'indecent' in matters referring to obscenity presumes a common understanding of decency as the antithesis of indecency, further demonstrating the binary positions of obscenity and acceptability in social consciousness.

<sup>4</sup> The mystification of sexuality is an ideal, which critics such as Wendy Shalit (1999) have subsequently suggested has its merits.

sexuality (whether obscene or acceptable) were repressed. For Foucault (1980:4), silence and denial are the characteristic features of repression, and it is these characteristics that distinguish repression from the prohibitions of penal law: “repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of non-existence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know”.<sup>5</sup>

Some years after Justice Cockburn’s pronouncement noted above, Charles Rembar (1969:492), in his examination of obscenity law and literature, observed, “[t]he long refusal to permit honest treatment of sexual subjects has conditioned a nation of voyeurs”. His statement was certainly true of the Victorians, who visited the *Museum Secutum* in Italy. The idea of the secret museum was so popular that it was appropriated by museums all over Europe, who constructed their own restricted collections, from the *l’Enfer* in Paris to the Private Case of the British Library in London. As already noted (see 2.2), Walter Kendrick (1987:6) explains that only “gentlemen with appropriate demeanour (and ready cash for the custodian) would be admitted to the locked chamber where controversial interns lurked; [In other words,] women, children, and the poor of both sexes and all ages were excluded”.

For Foucault (1980) the relationship between sex and power is characterised by Victorian, moralistic repression. Foucault bases this supposition on the emergence of a capitalist, production-orientated, bourgeois society, precisely that sector who would be allowed into a secret museum. The notion of a capitalist incentive for repression is one that Foucault explores throughout his seminal text, *The History of Sexuality* (1980). Two primary points are used to support this line of thinking: firstly, the fact that the chronicle of sex holds new potential when transposed into the production-orientated era, and secondly, Foucault maintains that sex was perceived as incompatible with an intensive work ethic that would, as such, diminish productivity. Thus, from the materialist position, sexual repression was the buttress of the ruling class.

Foucault’s argument provides some justification for the double standards of Victorian repression that have baffled art historians like Edward Lucie-Smith: whereas sex was forbidden in the streets, it seemed to be perfectly permissible in public galleries (in Tang 1999:66). Lucie-Smith comments on the use of religious subject matter or classical mythology as thinly veiled excuses for nudity or even transgressive sexuality (in Tang 1999:65). These were, seemingly, seen as ‘high art’, and part of ‘high culture’, and therefore became “unquestioned conveyors of suitable culture” (Tang 1999:66). Perhaps it was believed that those who frequented museums were too refined to be

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<sup>5</sup> Tang (1999:111) comments on the continuation of repression in the twentieth century. She notes that, although the trade in pornographic photographs was booming in the nineteenth century, written history has allowed the early pornographic photograph to simply drop out of sight. “Numerous books on photography barely touch on it, or perhaps,

negatively influenced or even aroused by the classical display of the 'erotic'. Foucault might argue that those patrons of the museums were not typically part of the work force, and would, thus, not need the 'righteous protection' of paternalism. Nevertheless, the explicit sexuality of many of the paintings in public galleries could not be denied. The nineteenth century author, Mark Twain, remarked of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538, figure 5):

You enter [the Uffizi] and proceed to that most-visited little gallery that exists in the world – the Tribune – and there, against the wall, without obstructing rag or leaf, you may look your fill upon the foulest, the vilest, the obscenest picture the world possesses – Titian's *Venus*. I saw a young girl stealing furtive glances at her; I saw young men gazing long and absorbedly at her; I saw aged infirm men hang upon her charms with a pathetic interest ... Without any question it was painted for a bagnio and it was probably refused because it was a trifle too strong. In truth, it is a trifle too strong for any place but a public art gallery (in Tang 1999:67-68).

DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was similarly canonised as a work of art in the test case of the British Obscene Publications Act of 1959 (see 2.3). Not only did this ruling establish the concept of the pornographic as something likely to deprave and corrupt, but also implied that the erotic was something more refined minds could enjoy without risk (Tang 1999:13). By the time of the trial in 1961, the primary concern was not the content of the novel, but rather the constituency of its audience. During his summary of the proceedings, Judge Griffith-Jones expressed his concern that the book ought not to fall into the *wrong* hands, a possibility exacerbated by cheap printing methods and public libraries: "[O]nce a book goes into circulation it does not spend its time in the rarefied atmosphere of some academic institution ... it finds its way into the bookshops and on to bookstalls at 3s 6d a time, into the public libraries where it is available to all and sundry" (in Nead 1992:489). The emphasis is clearly on those supposedly more morally vulnerable members of society who might have access to the book in the public sphere. Towards the end of the trial, Judge Griffith-Jones requested the jury to ask themselves the following: "Would you approve of your young sons, young daughters – because girls can read as well as boys – reading this book? Is it a book you would have lying around in your own house? Is it a book that you would even want your wife or your servants to read?" (in Nead 1992:489). The judge's concern with the susceptibility of women, children and the poor reads much like the 'list' of individuals prohibited from entering the secret museum. Only gentlemen were allowed to see the array of licentious artefacts, because they were supposedly "incorruptible" (Kendrick 1987:6), while the poor and women were lumped together as the so-called morally weaker populace. Since the only apparent differentiating factor between wealthy men and poor men is money, the implied reasoning is simple: money equals morality, or at least an immunity to corruption or whatever harm may be conveyed by pornography. Perhaps the logic behind such reasoning is that with financial status comes education and that this, in turn, allows intelligent moral discernment and objectivity. This argument too is a flawed

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more accurately, avert their gaze ... They were certainly ... seen and commented upon in the nineteenth century [particularly in countless court cases], yet they have disappeared from view in the twentieth" (Tang 1999:111).

one, since even educated women of high social standing were not admitted to the secret museum, and education hardly equals morality.

Perhaps the opposite logic is also true, namely that if only upper class men may see the obscene, then viewing the obscene may become a rite of passage, separating male from female, and rich from poor. Edward Said (1993:17) places the western male's quest for social status within the discourse of imperialism, and quotes the French advocate of colonialism, Jules Harmand, as saying in 1910:

It is necessary ... to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization, still recognising that, while superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return. The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity. Material power is nothing but a means to that end.

Morality is thus employed as a justification for the procurement and upkeep of cultural, as well as social, hegemony. In this way (and countless others), masculinity and materialism are aligned, in a symbiotic relationship that oddly enough seems to be bolstered by a belief in genteel morality.

The Victorian principle of affiliating morality and integrity with class (and subsequently with gentlemen), is alluded to in GQ, but is likewise a kind of 'empty', aesthetic type. By situating masculinity within a lifestyle of consumption, GQ continues the relational tradition between masculinity and materialism. On the one hand, GQ is filled with articles on testosterone, sexual conquest and extreme sports; on the other, it offers a 'how to' guide to contemporary corporate culture, gendered etiquette, and the desirable accoutrements of the modern man. Subtlety, discretion, and humour create a sense of dignified, 'genteel' responsibility and maturity that seems to recall the Victorian notion of bourgeois masculinity. But the tone of presumed harmlessness in GQ is used to soften the indulgent display of the sexual and the unusual. In this way, GQ functions like a kind of modern-day secret museum, where right of access is restricted to those who can afford it, understand it and enjoy it, without supposedly being corrupted by it. In the secret museum of glossy men's magazines, "the drawers full of phalluses from Pompeii" are replaced with four-page catalogues of breasts of all shapes and sizes (figure 40), and the gaze-inducing, locked glass case is replaced by the restrictive plastic cover, implying that what is inside, is for certain eyes only.

GQ functions on that precarious line between the obscene and the acceptable (and between pornography and popular culture), but maintaining this position in a fast-paced, ever-changing consumer culture involves strategic *trompe l'oeil*. The next section investigates the 'mechanisms of disguise' used in GQ to soften the content and offensive potential of the magazine.

### 4.3 Mechanisms of disguise: aesthetics, cultivation and the appropriation of empowerment

Quite often, it seems, the general western public perceives material that has made it past the loopholes of governmental or constitutional censorship and into the sphere of popular culture to be relatively harmless. Since *GQ* has been accepted by mainstream popular culture, it might be reasoned, and so many people read it, it cannot be too pathogenic. For the ideological game that is consumer culture, presenting a product as part of popular culture usually means presenting it as generally acceptable to or accepted by society in general.<sup>6</sup> In other words, disguising the obscene as acceptable is a commercially profitable endeavour.

There are many ways of building the notion of social acceptability into a brand.<sup>7</sup> In *GQ* this is done in three ways: firstly, by framing the magazine – photography, layout and overall style – in an artistic aesthetic, the explicit sexuality of its tone is softened and veiled. Since art is largely exempt from censorship and social stigmatisation, this association furthers the perception of acceptability. Secondly, appealing to the reader's presumably refined sense of taste – whether in grooming, cooking or choosing a woman – re-emphasises the elitist ideal and aspirational branding of the magazine. Witty word play and erudite intertextuality insinuate a certain amount of sophistication, education, and social status on the part of the magazine's readership. Subtle references to the genteel customs of old (hunting and hand-tailored suits) remind the reader that 'gentlemen' are their target market, and, as the legacy of the secret museum implies, gentlemen are incorruptible.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, *GQ* typically reverses the gendered power roles for which conventional pornography is criticised. As previously noted, one of the primary arguments against pornography is that it belittles, disempowers or subordinates women (see 3.3.2). *GQ* apparently counters this phenomenon by presenting most of the women in the magazine as seemingly empowered. These three 'mechanisms of disguise' are examined under the rubrics of 'aesthetics', 'cultivation' and 'the appropriation of empowerment'.

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<sup>6</sup> This statement is a generalisation, but in so far as something is popular (and therefore a part of popular culture), it seems fair to say that it is supported by or acceptable to society in general.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'brand', as opposed to 'image', is used in this context to imply that the process of constructing *GQ*'s identity in the market place is a strategic and financially motivated process. In an interview with the author, Shaun Couvés (2002), *GQ South Africa's* Marketing Manager at the time of writing, explained that the more socially 'acceptable' *GQ* seems to be in the public perception, the more likely the magazine is to procure up-market advertisers like BMW and Tag Huer. The financial profitability of the magazine, in other words, depends on the gloss of social acceptability inscribed into the brand (see list or terms).

<sup>8</sup> In saying that it is gentlemen who are their target market, this does not mean that they only cater for a certain social sector. Rather, the magazine becomes a 'how to' guide. Today gentility does not depend on birthright, but on personal branding (in other words a person's occupation, possessions, and image). This is touched on further in section 4.3.2.

Barthes (1977:32-51) believes that there are two functions that linguistic text fulfil to 'support' the visual image. He calls these "anchorage" and "relay". Barthes (1977:32-51) describes all images as polysemous, meaning that "they imply, underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others". Anchorage refers to the way in which written language (the caption beneath an image, for instance) directs and limits the reader's interpretation of the image. In a similar, but "lazier" image, written text may be used to *relay* the meaning of the image more clearly. In this case, the text 'supports' images that are already quite limited in terms of their meaning (Barthes uses the example of comic strips to demonstrate the manner in which meaning is relayed). Barthes' theory surrounding anchored and relayed meaning may be extended beyond the image/text symbiosis to include the manner in which stereotypes, codes and myths direct the ideological message communicated by an image (or publication). In GQ the so-called mechanisms of disguise may be seen as "subtle dispatches" that "remote contro[l the reader] towards a meaning chosen in advance", in this case, that of social acceptability (Barthes 1977:40).

Each of the three mechanisms of disguise, employed by GQ, draw from a legacy of already established societal and social codes that anchor and relay the notion of acceptability, while maintaining a sense of the sexually *risqué*. Much like the Orientalist or early Modernist representations of women, GQ relies on persistent visual motifs that occur in visual culture and that carry meaning that is immutable and predictable (*i.e.*, anchored by visual 'tradition'). These motifs may simultaneously synthesise new meaning and relay significations from the past into the present. The manner in which the notions of 'aesthetics', 'cultivation' and 'empowerment' are iconographically supported and manipulated to communicate acceptability, forms the focus of the following section. Each of these concepts is addressed separately in an attempt to uncover some of the 'mechanisms of disguise' that occur in GQ.

#### 4.3.1 Aesthetics

The man in the street, finding no worth in himself which corresponds to the force which built a tower or sculptured a marble god, feels poor when he looks on these. To him a palace, a statue, or a costly book have an alien and forbidding air, much like gay equipage, and seem to say like that, 'who are you, sir?' Yet they are all his, suitors for his notice, petitioners to his faculties that they will come out and take possession. The picture waits for my verdict: it is not to commend me, but I am to settle its claims to praise.

Emerson, *Self-Reliance* (in Dowling 1996:1).

André Brink (1983:37) refers to the territory on which the private and the social meet as a "highly charged magnetic field". In his essay, "Censorship and Literature" (1983), Brink, himself an artist, ponders the relationship between personal expression and public acceptance. In popular culture, public acceptance is both the purpose and means for existence. The techniques that potentially

generate public approval and popularity are, thus, commercially valuable to all forms of popular culture. As mentioned earlier (see 2.3 and 4.3), the obscene may therefore be disguised as art to make it seem acceptable, since the artistic carries connotations of cultural significance and intellectual worth that, it may be argued, fall under the “public good defence” (British Obscene Publications Act 1959, see 2.2). The process of ennobling contemporary ‘obscene’ imagery or publications is, for example, achieved by associating them (by means of visual or textual codes) with canonical visual art. This section firstly investigates the manner in which GQ, as a form of popular culture, masks its ‘obscenity’ through visually associating itself with the ‘artistic’, and examines the role that the photographic plays in this process (4.3.1.1). Secondly, it examines the manner in which GQ attempts to evoke an ‘aesthetic experience’ in its readers by using stylised sexual representation (4.3.1.2). Finally, it questions the role that ‘beauty’ and the trope of sublimity plays in further masking obscenity in GQ (4.3.1.3). As in the previous section (4.2), these discussions are influenced by eighteenth to nineteenth century western viewpoints on obscenity and acceptability.

#### **4.3.1.1 Art by association: from brushstroke to Ben-day dot**

The taxonomy of ‘gentlemen’s pornography’ places GQ in the more socially ‘acceptable’, aestheticised and legitimised domain of erotic art and literature, as opposed to that of conventional pornography, which is popularly associated with a ‘low-budget’ aesthetic and overtly sexualised or ‘base’ subject matter. While GQ brands or positions itself as an ‘aesthetic’ publication (*i.e.*, ‘high’, valuable, complex, abstract and ‘for public good’), conventional pornography is frequently branded by the media as ‘base’ (*i.e.*, low, common, ignoble, crude and abject).<sup>9</sup> In reality, this distinction is a dubious one, since contemporary conventional (soft) pornography such as *Playboy*, is as aestheticised as GQ, and sometimes offers more in the line of ‘service features’ to legitimise its otherwise sexualised content. It is the difference in the public perception of these brands, however, and not the similarity of their content, which fuels GQ’s brand identity, since public acceptability separates it from conventional pornography (and qualifies it as gentlemen’s pornography). Since this distinction between the public personas of GQ and *Playboy* is more related to image than content, one might assume that this distinction is grounded in the contrary historical backgrounds of gentlemen’s pornography and conventional pornography (see 2.2). This section examines the apparently antithetical styles of early conventional pornography and contemporary GQ in order to unveil the historical paradigms that support GQ’s more genteel, socially accepted and sophisticated brand identity.

<sup>9</sup> Hollywood frequently employs pornographic magazines in order to characterise teenage males (to re-emphasise the ignominious status of these magazines, they are generally kept under the character’s bed).

The origins of pornography as a linguistic and substantive category are rooted in the secret rooms of art and science, since in art galleries and natural history museums artefacts of a supposedly obscene nature could be silently observed by a select few.<sup>10</sup> Even before the advent of such clandestine spaces as the secret museum, however, public galleries served as a naturalising context for various kinds of things that may be deemed 'obscene'. In an interview with Tang (1999:69), Lucie-Smith explains that the power of an image to sexually arouse is seen to be more relevant to pornography than to art (at least, since the 1900s): "Art and pornography are seen as mutually exclusive, at opposite ends of the spectrum. One is high, contemplative and transcendent; one is low, designed to arouse and base". From a modern perspective, therefore, the paintings of Titian, Delacroix, or Manet are difficult to perceive as anything other than examples of high art, and are therefore the personification of 'high' culture. Such respected artists and artworks are part of the canon of western culture and are, consequently, unquestioned conveyors of worthy, decent, and suitable social signification.

Lucie-Smith, however, counters the notion of the museum as a place of decency and respectability (in Tang 1999:67). He muses that any close inspection of the history of art reveals that art is, and has always been, an outward expression of the transgressive and the outrageous (in Tang 1999:67). Renaissance Venuses, for example, may be overtly symbolic of the transgressive and erotic, but this has been smoothed over by the perceptual framing of the museum. Lucie-Smith comments: "I think that we have a curious kind of consensus in our society to ignore the pornographic content of images which are considered classics" (in Tang 1999:67). As a specific example he highlights the blatant paedophilia and implied incest in Agnolo Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* (1540-50):

I sometimes wonder what those people who lead school parties around the National Gallery actually have to say about this picture. What do they tell the kids? It's deliberately transgressive. Here you have a female nude, Venus, who is about to be French-kissed by an adolescent who is in fact her son. And Cupid's bottom is struck out in a most provocative way: it's almost as if he's offering himself for a sexual act (in Tang 1999:67).

Within the confines of 'art', the 'obscene' and the 'acceptable' thus become likely bedfellows. Presumably this may be related to the sophisticated aesthetic and intellectual complexity that are perceived to be part of the nature of art, or to the supposed ennobling associations of wealth and power that typically describe the custodians of art. The question is whether these associations would survive the iconoclastic technological advancement of the 1800s.

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault (1980:51-73) refers to the display of "knowledge of the sexual" within the context of natural history museums as *scientia sexualis*.

When Daguerre introduced the daguerreotype to the public in 1839, he inaugurated the egalitarian age of the photograph. Photography employed (albeit somewhat unconvincingly) the codes of 'high culture' to sell aestheticised obscenity to those who otherwise would have no rightful or natural access to it. Art had been that authoritative arena of discernment and taste that permitted the privileged classes to segregate themselves from the 'lower' classes. The camera lens, however, proved less adept at differentiating the patrician from the plebian, since hypothetically anybody could have access to a camera. The camera thus became an instant symbol of the modern age: the medium's associations with modernity and progress serving as the entrance into the modern economic endeavour of mass representation and mass production.<sup>11</sup>

As with the paintbrush and chisel, the camera was from the outset subject to ideological positioning. In much the same way that the traditional artistic media had articulated the male gaze, photography became the primary conveyor of the gendered and erotic body (Pultz 1995:7-11). The affect photographic representations had on the general public, however, seems to indicate that the very 'realness' of the photographic medium struck society as signifying the antithesis of art. The precision and detail of each image seemed to push photography beyond the line of decency. Prior to the 1900s, for instance, paintings of nude women usually omitted pubic hair in favour of supposedly modest representations. Photographic images of naked women, not only included discreet references to pubic hair, but even seemed to glory in the graphic display thereof, thus rendering it fetishistic (as opposed to 'merely real'). The realness and rawness of photography made it so seductive precisely because hidden in the 'ugly' (or 'real') details of this medium was the beauty of modernity. The seemingly unmediated aesthetic of photography lent an air of the progressive and the liberal to early photographic pornography.

In light of the progressive appeal of photography, it is ironic that the photographic construction of the feminine during the late 1800s was manifested largely in images that were created with an apparently artistic, rather than a documentary intent (although the line between these two seemed deliberately vague). The seemingly 'artistic' gloss of these photographs was probably more of a strategic business decision than an attempt at creating art; a fact sorely evident in the theatricality of the images themselves (a theatricality that, significantly, still marks much conventional pornography). The earliest nude images in Paris that were, legally speaking, acceptable were the so-called *académies*. These were designed to be artistic aids from which artists could paint the human figure with anatomical accuracy and without the expense of a model. They could, in other words, be legitimately and respectably sold as an *aide-mémoire*. In reality, however, the *académies* were everything but academic, and functioned rather like a kind of justifiable pornography. As

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<sup>11</sup> Although the daguerreotype was still relatively expensive and could not be mass-produced, it was the first taste of things to come. By the 1850s, the development of the wet plate process made it possible to produce any number of

Abigail Solomon-Godeau comments: "Once you start seeing all these props, the stockings, the garters, the shoes, the jewellery, it's perfectly evident that the body is being coded for its erotic appeal. These are codes that make the viewer aware that this is a body that is intended for erotic consumption" (in Tang 1999:100). By far the majority of photographs that represent naked women employed the symbolic tone of art, presumably to evoke nostalgia in the viewer. This resulted in the often clumsy appropriation of classical visual references such as vases of flowers, pillars and draperies (figure 41). The codes that western art had devised to contain the erotic within the accepted boundaries of art, were now being reproduced at staggering speeds to meet the demand of a growing mass market.<sup>12</sup>

There are two apparent reasons that might be called upon to explain the mimetic stylisation of early sexualised photography. The first is related to the censorship of obscene material. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the primary battles about obscenity were focussed on literature, not photography. The only effective defence, in terms of the law, proved to be the assertion that literary works such as DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* had artistic merit, and were thus for the 'public good'. The implication of this ruling for photography was that in order to avoid being labelled obscene, material needed to be redeemed by the more ennobling associations with art and intellect (Pultz 1995; Nead 1992; Tang 1999).<sup>13</sup>

The second factor that possibly instigated the photographic appropriation of artistic codes was the fact that many of the pioneer photographers were motivated in their choice of style and subject matter by the ideal of establishing photography as a new artistic medium. In order to do so, it may have seemed appropriate to gain the status of art, if only by association. At first this was done by means of pretentious titles that often referred to the style or art of a known artist, such as Thomas Eakins' photograph entitled *Nude in Style of Velazquez* (1880, figure 42). Subsequently, the exact composition and subject matter of artworks were reproduced in the photographic medium (figures 43-44). Conventional thinking during the late 1800s and early 1900s suggested that the distinguishing factor between a documentary work and an artistic one was to be found in the style. John Pultz (1995:37) elaborates:

[P]hotographs made as documents are realistic, transparent, and innocent of style; those made with an explicit intention to be art have style, which is tantamount to saying that they are somehow less truthful, less realistic, less factually accurate. They derive

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prints from one set of negatives (Tang 1999:95-98).

<sup>12</sup> In the early 1850s, photographers such as Eugène Durieu, Auguste Belloc, Félix-Jacques-Antoine Moulin, and Julienn Vallou de Villeneuve, produced countless photographs of unclothed women (Pultz 1995). According to Pultz (1995:38), the sales figures of the time seem to indicate that it was not just art scholars who bought the *académies*.

<sup>13</sup> The manner in which the association of intellectuality and class played a role in justifying potentially obscene material, is discussed under the term 'cultivation' (4.3.2).

their meaning less from their accurate transcription of factual reality than from their expressive, suggestive powers.<sup>14</sup>

Pultz (1995:39) argues that the particular role of photography in the production of visual pornography is inseparable from the arguments about documentation and truthfulness that surrounded nineteenth century photography.<sup>15</sup> What made nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs of sexualised women pornographic, for instance, was, among other things, their apparent realism.<sup>16</sup> In this section the nuanced differences between 'painterly' sexualised representation and 'printed' (technologised) sexualised representation has been emphasised in an attempt to reveal the differences and similarities between these two mediums in the public perception. The apparently shocking 'realness' of nineteenth century sexualised photography in comparison to its painted predecessors, echoes the (false) contemporary perception that pornography crudely 'shows all', while 'art' subtly arranges and conceals.

GQ mimics the stylised, polished aesthetic of *painted* sexualised representations as opposed to the more explicit yet servile effigy associated with early *photographic* (printed) pornography. By aestheticising, arranging and concealing (*i.e.*, controlling what is 'revealed') the sexualised woman, GQ avoids the explicitness and realness that are the tell-tale signs of conventional pornography (*i.e.*, it avoids being visually categorised as pornography), and asserts its own artistry (in so far as art making is a process of aestheticising, arranging, concealing or revealing).

GQ presents the female subject as both 'real' (*i.e.*, sexually aware and not merely 'blank') and constructed or artistically mediated. In the image of Kristy Hinze (GQ November:42, figure 45), for instance, the classical reclining nude becomes the seated nude, while Orientalist props such as the peacock-feather fan in *La Grande Odalisque* and hibiscus flower in *Olympia* are replaced with a more subtle wolf-skin rug, fingered sensually by Hinze. These affected iconographic devices (equally present in conventional pornography) are subdued and revived in GQ to contribute to the general hue of slick or *aestheticised* sexual difference that is the brand identity of glossy men's magazines. Yet the image is more 'real' than a painting because it is a photograph. The photographic imagery in GQ can, in other words, as Barthes (1981:119) argues, be "mad" or "tame". It is tame in that "its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits"; it is "mad [since] this realism is absolute", and thus evokes "photographic *ecstasy*" (Barthes 1981:119). This

<sup>14</sup> Ironically, in an attempt to capture the expression and style of the master artists, these early pictorialist photographers seemed to overlook the unique and perhaps more authentic style inherent in the medium itself.

<sup>15</sup> The same codes that established photographs as evidence of reality, signified 'real-ness' in the context of sexualised photographs; "pornographic photographs did not satisfy through narrative richness, as had written texts, but by their apparent truthfulness" (Pultz 1995:39).

<sup>16</sup> W Gass refers to the camera as a "disconcertingly literal instrument" (in Hudson 1992:149). Nead (1992:52) explains that the "immediacy and accuracy of the photographic image is invested with a pornographic intent; whereas the abstraction and mediation of artistic methods such as painting and drawing are believed to be contrary to the relentless realism of the pornographic project."

experience is perhaps closely related to C Bell's notion of 'aesthetic emotion', TS Eliot's 'aesthetic pleasure' (see Werhane 1984:100), and the conception of sexual arousal as an emotional *and* aesthetic experience.

Furthermore, GQ uses captions, interviews and recognisable personalities (models and photographers) in each photographic spread, to testify to the 'real'-ness of the photographic set-up. The viewer's recognition of the various parties involved in creating each image, at once ratifies the sense of titillating 'real'-ness and artistic constructedness. In this way, GQ draws from the legacies of nineteenth century photographic pornography and canonical (painterly), sexualised art. The next section traces GQ's appropriation from Modernist photography, as the first photographic genre to be accepted in the hallways of high culture, and thus continues the theme of GQ's aesthetic.

#### 4.3.1.2 *Aesthetic experience and stylised sex*

The 'artistic' may offer some cloak of acceptability (or 'taming' quality in the Barthesian sense) to sexualised representations, but clearly it is an elusive trait to capture; in order to 'fabricate' the 'artistic', one should at least have an understanding of what it is. But what precisely qualifies something as 'artistic' or 'aesthetic' is almost impossible to say. What invokes an 'aesthetic experience' in the viewer is, furthermore, an ethereal notion, which is compounded in its complexity by the fact that popular culture frequently attempts to mimic 'great' art in order to capitalise on this association. The industries responsible for sexualised imagery stand to gain from the association with art for a number of different reasons (legal and financial), and therefore, form the most obvious site for the production or re-production of whatever quality is socially perceived to be 'artistic'. As mentioned above, the general interpretation of something as 'artistic', largely resides in the perceived style of that material, since it is *style* that is typically perceived to differentiate art from pornography.

Since the 1800s, pornography has typically been associated with the tawdry and the tasteless, even when it attempts to imitate art.<sup>17</sup> Art, by contrast, is aligned with 'significant form', originality and modernity, the buzzwords of the *avant-garde*. The best illustration of this alignment is the Purist style that elevated photography to the status of the new artistic medium that Daguerre had hoped it would be. Maholy-Nagy, Man Ray, and Brassai achieved the status of 'art' for their photo-

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<sup>17</sup> These associations are not only value judgements, but also material ones, since early pornographic photographs were printed on low-cost (low grade) paper with inexpensive inks that smudged easily. The models and props also had an air of low-cost convenience to them, and indeed police records show that quite often the wives and daughters of pornographers were their models. So ingrained is the association of pornography with the cheap and the dirty, that in the *Chambers Thesaurus* (1992:97) the word pornographic appears as a synonym for the adjective 'dirty' ("dirty – blue, filthy, foul, grimy, grubby, indecent, messy, miry, mucky, muddy, nasty, obscene, polluted, pornographic, scurvy, shabby, smutty, soiled, sordid, squalid, unclean, vulgar, yucky").

graphs by pursuing the Modernist ideals of form, originality and modernity in their celebration of what they termed the 'photographic' (as opposed to the painterly). This new aesthetic involved extreme close-ups that abstracted objects to the point where they served more as embodiments of light, rhythm and form, than of narrative codes. This style soon became encoded with its own semantic ideals of progress, minimalism and the plethora of associations that involve something being interpreted as *avant-garde* (such as artistry and masculine authorship). Nowhere is this style more obvious than in Maholy-Nagy, Man Ray and Brassai's photographs of the female body (figures 46-48). In order to strip the body of its obscene history these artists refused the sexual charge of the mythic gaze and fetishized accessories and, instead, abstracted the body.<sup>18</sup> 'Messy' details (nipples and pubic hair) were mostly omitted, and the intimacy of seeing a naked woman's face was circumvented by cropping or blurring her head. These images were generally perceived to be so tasteful, so effective at communicating style, modernity, and elitism, that the images and aesthetic are still employed in marketing campaigns to communicate precisely these notions.<sup>19</sup> In an ironic twist, even GQ now makes use of the style of Modernist or Purist photography to veil explicit sexuality and convey a tone of sophistication (The GQ 2000 calendar demonstrates this point and is discussed shortly).

GQ can never wholly imitate art, because then it might lose the scent of obscenity ('real'-ness and 'truth'-fullness) that, paradoxically, seems to be part of its commercial appeal. The intention is hardly to mimic a recognisable artwork, but rather to hint at its mythologized tone<sup>20</sup> or form and thereby appropriate the signification and aesthetic experience of the artwork. Donald Kuspit (2000) describes this play between signification and understandable mythology as the "dialectic of decadence". Decadence, remarks Kuspit (2000:91), is always with us, a consistent inevitable in art and life, and perhaps most insidiously, in the dialectic between them. He explains that decadence "is an expression of narcissism, a form of self-congratulation and self-glorification ... Decadence is ... a deliberate short-sightedness, making one's art seem more significant, original and ultimate than it is" (Kuspit 2000:92).

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<sup>18</sup> Words such as 'aesthetic' or 'stylised' are typically understood to refer to external appearance, thus implying the way in which the artwork or image is *experienced*. The abstraction favoured by the Purist photographers implies a particular aesthetic experience (possibly more reasoned and reticent than the experience evoked by pictorialist photography), which is revisited under 4.3.1.3. It may at this point be noted, however, that, as mentioned previously, abstract art is frequently thought to evoke a more 'abstract' aesthetic experience, while pictorialist art or imagery is thought to evoke a more empathetic aesthetic designed to aid the viewer in "losing [himself]" (Worringer 1967:24). Worringer's notions of 'abstraction' and 'empathy' are helpful in explaining these experiences.

<sup>19</sup> Most notably the Purist or Straight photographic style has been employed in the marketing campaigns of Calvin Klein, BMW and Gucci.

<sup>20</sup> The 'mythologized tone' of canonical art is related to the manner in which this art typically relays traces and codes as part of the visual mythology of 'art'. Not all artists make use of these codes, only those that wish to anchor their work in the iconographic traditions of canonical art. Most of the photographic shoots in GQ relay the mythologized tone of these vague, yet familiar codes. This is particularly evident in the GQ 2000 calendar.

GQ hovers somewhere between the acceptable and the obscene, the modest and the decadent. It discreetly appropriates the classical codes of art and the 'artful' techniques of Modernist photography, and commodifies and sexualises these to engender a precarious balance between sexualised images and their aestheticised veneer. The GQ calendar is an example of this. It is a pin-up style calendar not unlike those of *Pirelli* or *Sports Illustrated* but for its affected 'artistic' flair. For the 2000 calendar, twelve *auteur*<sup>21</sup> photographers photographed a model in their particular signature style. The images in the calendar are very diverse, except for an underlying stylisation. This aestheticised stylistic is perhaps akin to the 'expressive' trope of early attempts at photographic art, when photographers were swayed by the idea that the artistry of an image lay in its expressive style. The element that is, subsequently, most important in terms of communicating *artistic* sexual representation<sup>22</sup> in the calendar, is the ease with which each image draws from the canonical "language of desire" (Mulvey 1975:8).

The January pin-up is Lucy Liu, a popular icon of aggressive sexuality and self-righteous sarcasm inscribed by her role in the 1990s soap opera, *Ally McBeal* (figure 49). Her usually sleek Asian hair is teased out to an unkempt coiffure. The wildness of her hair and eyes ostensibly contradict the modesty with which she covers her breasts. Liu is situated in a landscape and pose reminiscent of a Pre-Raphaelite painting.<sup>23</sup> Despite this setting, she reminds one more of Munch's provocative Madonnas than placid Pre-Raphaelite beauties. (In particular, Liu is positioned much like Munch's lithograph, tellingly entitled, *Sin* (1901), figure 50).<sup>24</sup> Noelle Hoeppe's February photograph (GQ 2000, figure 51) continues the early Modernist tradition (seen in the works of Matisse, Gauguin and Picasso) of raising the woman's arms, presumably for the sake of 'significant form', and obscuring her face (figures 46-48). As in Hoeppe's version, Modernist Purist images of the female body are photographed without hands, feet and distracting backgrounds, so that the body's contours become a pure expression of line and form. In contrast to the simplistic minimalism of the February shoot, the March pin-up is more overtly sexual (figure 52). The model stares directly at the viewer in the classical syntax of sexualised odalisques, simultaneously confident and self-aware.<sup>25</sup> Her pubescent appearance and the modesty with which she covers her genitals are in stark contrast with the loud neon tones projected onto her. The subversive tone of the image – the

<sup>21</sup> The term 'auteur' is used in this context to connote the authorial renown of these photographers. The term is appropriated from the *politique des auteurs* or auteur theory, conceived by Francois Truffaut in relation to film in the 1950s.

<sup>22</sup> Whether the images in the GQ 2000 calendar are art or not is not the point. The images merely need to be perceived as 'artistic' in order for the magazine to differentiate itself from conventional pornography. Imagery that simultaneously represents the sexual and the artistic is typically described as 'erotic'.

<sup>23</sup> The landscape behind Liu associates her with Clark's (1956:115) notion of the *Venus Naturalis* (see list of terms).

<sup>24</sup> These are merely some of the connections that may be 'relayed' through this photograph. The convoluted intertextuality of the images in the GQ calendar could be teased out *ad infinitum*.

<sup>25</sup> Just like Manet's Olympia, Caitlin, the March model "appraise[s] while being appraised" (Hudson 1982:105) (see 3.3.1.1).

model is, after all, represented as both childlike and sexualised – is reminiscent of Munch's *Pu-berty* (1895, figure 53).

The April image of model and actress, Milla Jovovich, seems deliberately nostalgic in its appropriation of the 1920s flapper-style shift and shoes (figure 54). The contrast in light and dark created by her luminous body against the dark background is typical of 1920s experimental photography. The photographer Peter Lindbergh, unlike the Purists, however, accentuates the sexual through the classic codes of the pout and nipple. Her raised arm and draped shift are trademarks of the Greco-Roman nude. Hence Lindbergh succeeds in showing just enough of her body to excite the viewer, while not breaking the semblance of sophistication.

For the June pin-up illustrator Mats Gustafson represents the fine arts (figure 55). In this image the model touches herself and throws back her head in ecstasy. Once more, the emphasis falls on her torso, and not on her face, possibly in order to elevate the image to the status of art. August and October revert to the typically Modernist black and white medium and each makes use of the experimental techniques of pioneer photography. Koto Bolofo's photograph (figure 56) for the August pin-up, refers to the plants and flowers used by early photographers to create a diversity of shapes and shadows, like the photograms of Francis Talbot. Bolofo presents the female body as an expression of nature as feminine; the body thus becomes a landscape, the contemporary extension of the *Venus Naturalis*, in much the same way that Man Ray and Brassai represented it (1933, figure 57).

The most obvious appropriation is photographer Albert Watson's image for December (figure 58). It seems unlikely that Watson was not deliberately paying homage to Man Ray's renowned *Prayer* (1930, figure 59). Watson, however, aptly exchanges the serene nakedness of Man Ray's image for a pair of lacy knickers and stiletto heeled shoes, both black.<sup>26</sup> In each of these aestheticised pin-ups, as in Manet's *Olympia*, the male viewer is reminded of the "traditional boundary between the artistic and the literal world of their everyday appetites and curiosities which they are now in a position to breach" (Hudson 1982:107). The images do not breach it themselves, they merely allude to the possibility (Hudson 1982:107). In the GQ calendar, the assertive stare (January), black pubic hair<sup>27</sup> (February), sexualised innocence (March), representation of the female body as 'significant form' (June and August), and pornographic fetish (December), "resonate on one another, and combine to shift the luckless spectator from a posture of comfortable immunity to one of

<sup>26</sup> Not all of the images in the GQ 2000 calendar are quite so 'artistic', some are quite obviously designed to refer to the codes of conventional pornography (well endowed models and tacky props in full colour). The juxtapositioning of such contrary images is quite typical of the general genre of glossy men's magazines and would, thus, not seem too strange to the viewer. Some of the more overtly 'kitsch' or 'common' pin-ups will be discussed later (see 4.3.3).

<sup>27</sup> Berger (1972:55) writes, "[h]air is associated with sexual power, with passion", and thus it functions fetishistically.

choice and risk” (Hudson 1982:107). In so far as these codes represent the ‘language of desire’, they are both specifically meaningful and well disguised.

In GQ itself, images generally appear to be less overtly ‘staged’ and more ‘naturally’ aesthetic than in the more openly contrived arena of the calendar. The aesthetic of GQ presents a paradoxical pose that pretends to be unaffected, while being artfully composed. The ‘natural’ settings such as the beach (figure 60) and the home (figure 25) contribute to the authenticity of the aesthetic (as opposed to the more contrived backdrops and sets of pornography). Colour is arranged with cohesive integrity, taste is sophisticated and subtle, with occasional witty intertextuality.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, whereas in pornography models often seem to be left ‘as they are’, in GQ models are obviously retouched, improved on, and aesthetised, reminding the viewer that the female has been ‘made’, constructed and artfully authored by a male figure. Much like Ingres’ *La Grande Odalisque* (1814), whose elongated spine testifies of her made-ness, the images (and women) in GQ are constructed to stimulate an aesthetic experience, and in so doing possibly revel in the constructedness of the trope of beauty.

#### 4.3.1.3 *The bold and the beautiful*

It is possible that the western ideas of the beautiful and the ugly are simply an extension of the ideological mechanism of subjection.<sup>29</sup> An obvious consequence of the exactness of early photography, for instance, was its inability to idealise convincingly. In spite of props and gimmicks, the blemishes and imperfections of the represented figure were difficult to disguise. According to Tang (1999:106), “[i]nstead of alabaster skins, there were blemished ones; instead of idealized limbs, there were awkward, foreshortened ones; nymph’s breasts would be replaced by disappointing real ones.” “As ugly as a daguerreotype” reputedly became a common phrase (Tang 1999:106). One writer lamented regarding photographic ‘nudes’: “They seldom or ever include any female who approaches in the remotest degree to a Venus” (in Tang 1999:106). Roman Catholic commentator Louis Veuillot commented in *Les Odeurs de Paris* (1867):

I am talking about the simple offence to the eye. The assemblages that aren’t content to have ugly faces, most to the point of abjection; they are at the same time generally and in diverse ways extremely badly built; knock-kneed, heavy yowled, potbellied, bent over, bony, impudent and gauche, knowing neither how to walk nor stand up (in Tang 1999:106).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> In the beach shoot with supermodel Heide Klum, for instance, horizontal and vertical lines are simply juxtaposed in a beautifully aesthetic composition that celebrates the female form (figure 60). The only vibrant splash of colour is the red triangle of her bikini bottom.

<sup>29</sup> The ‘beauty’, in so far as this is a culturally agreed upon phenomenon, of a GQ image (including the model, milieu and style of the image), for example, seems to play a significant role in determining whether this image may be read as art.

<sup>30</sup> The question is whether Veuillot’s objections were blackened by superciliousness. Photography embodied not only an aesthetic revolution, but also a social one, or as Matthew Arnold (1869:117) expressed, “the assertion of personal liberty”. More than this, photography heralded a shift in societal connections, it heralded the vulgarisation of visual media

Although current conventional pornography may be more polished, the ideological connotations of baseness and ‘ugliness’ (or aesthetic crudeness) persist in the social consciousness (see 4.2). GQ separates itself from these associations through an almost obsessive preoccupation with perfection, evident in the many ‘plastic’, touched up, perfected women that adorn the magazine and might be described as ‘beautiful’ (precisely because they are less ‘real’).

GQ’s reliance on western codes of sensuality and beauty make the magazine seem beautiful in a generally agreed upon, even universal, sense<sup>31</sup> – an assumption that can perhaps be traced to earlier moral and aesthetic theories that claimed that the capacity to respond to beauty is universal (Burke 1990:104). Umberto Eco (1986:57) explains this in the context of the Medieval understanding of Neo-Platonic beauty as ethereal rather than material.<sup>32</sup> The most obvious and pervasive symbolic representation of the kinship between godliness and beauty was thus light. The perception of light as the embodiment of “theophanic harmony, primordial causes, [and] of the Divine Persons”, in Eco’s (1986:57) words, is complemented by the archetypal understanding of evil and subversion as dark.<sup>33</sup> When the first mainstream pornographic magazines came out, the overriding atmosphere of the photographs was dark. This may simply have been the result of unsophisticated technology, but soon dingy lighting became synonymous with the clandestine. By contrast, GQ goes out of its way to create a ‘lightness of being’ so to speak. With the exception of the occasional thematic shoot, most of the photographs are deliberately made light (figure 61).<sup>34</sup> GQ is hardly a conscious attempt at conjuring a Medieval appreciation for light as spiritual, but the images seem to want to create a metaphorical link between beauty, goodness and harmlessness.

The role of the aesthetic is obviously different today in a commercially driven materialist culture, than in Medieval and Victorian times. Beauty in a purely metaphysical or spiritual sense was typically perceived as investing meaning in the beauty of objects, whereas, in contemporary culture, the opposite is true. Nowadays, feeling, sublimity, and emotion are stimulated by objects and images and an ever-ready consumer culture is anxious to invest in whatever product will stimulate, most effectively, the desired

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and, therefore, such representations were tainted with the ‘common’. The notions of class and aesthetic elitism are addressed under the term ‘cultivation’, in the following section (4.3.2).

<sup>31</sup> It is difficult to prove empirically that GQ attempts to be art. But, when paging through an issue of GQ, one cannot help but be struck by its aesthetic: the layout, composition, choice of fonts and colours, and models are all ‘beautiful’. Although beauty is a subjective and relative concept, it seems fair to say that the images being referred to coincide with contemporary western notions of what is tasteful, and therefore may be described as beautiful.

<sup>32</sup> Eco (1986:57) credits John Scotus Eriugena with providing the Middle Ages with a formulation of metaphysical symbolism, and subsequently invoking the belief that God manifests Himself through earthly beauty. Eriugena wrote, “[i]n my judgement there is nothing among visible and corporeal things which does not signify something incorporeal and intelligible” (in Eco 1986:57). The belief that beauty is ethereal is still evident in contemporary popular culture. A typical manifestation of this notion is the ironic beauty pageant mantra, that beauty ‘shines’ from within.

<sup>33</sup> When Lady Macbeth calls on the “forces of darkness” no further association of evil is needed. Nor does the threat of Luke Skywalker turning to ‘the dark side’ need clarification.

<sup>34</sup> In this image lightness is connoted by the studio backdrop and lighting, the mirror-like sculpture and McGregor as an ‘Aryan beauty’.

emotion.<sup>35</sup> In most cases, the more acute and impassioned (and even antithetical) the sensations roused by a product, the more likely it is to sell. For GQ, the challenge is to differentiate itself from the predictable promises of conventional pornographic magazines by offering a layered (subversive, contradictory, complex?) range of exciting and empathetic encounters. From the designed-to-attract cover to the lucrative back page advertisement, the GQ reader may in one issue expect to feel confidence, camaraderie, trust, lust, envy, greed, aggression, and control. The implication of GQ's antithetical emotional charge is that the seeming complexity of the magazine's content further serves to mask its commodification of women. The potentially varied responses that the magazine evokes (lust and insecurity, for instance) may even fool the reader into seeing the magazine as less stereotypical or more truthful. Terry Eagleton (1980:155), however, remarks that "in one interesting sense, literary texts never 'mean what they say' because they are fiction". In the same sense, GQ creates a realistic (trustworthy?) fabrication, while benefiting from the status of being artfully constructed. Like Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863, figure 12), GQ is realistic in style, imaginative in content, and perceived to be aesthetically authored.<sup>36</sup>

Intimately related to the question of reality or truth in aesthetic composition is the gendering of aesthetics, and in particular the notion that woman conventionally signifies abstractions such as Truth and Justice. (Rampley 2000:78).<sup>37</sup> The allegorical significance of the woman as a symbol of Truth has significant bearing on Modernist aesthetic theory that involves a so-called 'masculinisation' of aesthetics, as opposed to the so-called 'feminised' (empathetic or emotionalised) aesthetics of the spectator. In so far as this archetypal 'feminising' of the audience is related to the level of empathy or sensational emotion that the viewer may experience in looking at an art work, the feminine, according to Rampley (2000:78) functions as a metonym of Truth. In other words, the feminine presence (or an aesthetic association therewith) impacts on the viewer's perception of the relationship between art and truth. Pornography, typically, utilises a so-called 'feminised' (loud, hysterical, uncontrolled, messy) aesthetic to heighten the sense of reality (truth), and therefore sensationalism with which the images are received.<sup>38</sup> GQ opts for a so-called

<sup>35</sup> See Root (1996:37-38) for an examination of the trope of sublimity (and exoticism) within contemporary advertising.

<sup>36</sup> In *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, Manet employs a 'realistic' (or naturalistic) style. The 'insertion' of the naked Victorine Merand into the otherwise conventional picnic scene, however, disrupts the suspension of disbelief in the image, thereby reminding the viewer that what they are seeing is 'plastic' (made, authored) art. Through this Brechtian technique, the image gains a kind of Surreal or imaginary tone.

<sup>37</sup> Warner (1985:xix) investigates the female form as an expression of "desiderata and virtues". She theorises the manner in which gendered difference ("aligning the female with carnality, weakness and nature, with 'womanishness', and the male with spirituality, strength, and mind or reason"), is established in the iconography of western visual culture (Warner 1985:63). Warner's articulation of archetypal 'womanishness' may be extended into the notion of aesthetic style. In the context of western representation, hence, a more 'organic', curvilinear style and 'emotionalised', sentimental subject matter has gained the archetypal signification of femininity, whilst a more angular, geometric style and empirical or political subject matter has gained the association of being 'masculine'. There is little justification for this gendering of representational style other than to reinforce hegemonically motivated sexual difference. What follows is the author's application of Rampley and Warner's positions to the particular stylistic found in GQ. The idea of a 'masculine' or 'feminine' aesthetic is not one supported by the author, but is nonetheless helpful in identifying the strategic incentive that might underpin GQ's seemingly superficial (random) stylistic veneer.

<sup>38</sup> So effective is this process that, initially, pornographic daguerreotypes were thought of as too accurate, realistic or 'ugly', as mentioned previously.

masculinised (weighty, controlled, reticent, cognitive) aesthetic that, like *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, places the feminine, as a symbol of truth, within the framework of the masculine.<sup>39</sup>

For Barthes (198:21), photography is about *affect*, “the ‘pathos’ of which, from the first glance, [a photograph] consists.” Spectators explore photography, “not as a question (a theme) but as a wound” (Barthes 1981:21). The man-made image cannot be created independently from man’s desire, repulsion, nostalgia or euphoria, and for this reason it frequently invokes empathy. The varying degrees to which photographs may affect or excite viewers, account for the difference between conventional pornography and GQ. Conventional pornography, according to Barthes (1981:41) is unary: “it emphatically transforms ‘reality’ without doubling it, without making it vacillate”, it is “completely constituted by the presentation of only one thing: sex”. The manner in which pornography simultaneously evokes empathy and restricts the duplicity of that empathy, is tied up in its unary nature. The banality of conventional pornography is related to this, “‘unity’ of composition being the first rule of vulgar ... rhetoric” (Barthes 1981:41). GQ, by contrast, may, because of its elevated aesthetic and cognitive tone, be equated with Wilhelm Worringer’s (1967) notion of ‘abstraction’.<sup>40</sup> The appeal of elitist signification is that it affords the viewer distance from the concerns of pedestrian life. GQ is not, however, without affect; the reader’s responses to the magazine are presumed to be cognitive and reasoned aesthetic experiences, as well as empathetic ones. The glamorous *mise en scène* and canonical aesthetic codes thus serve as the articulation of the vision and desire that define GQ, what Chantal Ackerman calls “*la jouissance du voir*” (the ecstasy of seeing) (in Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis 1992:182).

This section examined the aesthetic code used by GQ to elevate its contents through an implied association with art. GQ’s artistic or stylised *savoir faire*, it was argued, not only obscures the obscenity of the magazine (through its association with art), but also heightens the empathetic experience of the reader, thereby mimicking ‘aesthetic experience’. The cheap paper, make-shift studios, bad lighting, home-made props and ‘street-corner models’ that were initially the repercussions of a commercial endeavour that wanted to cut costs, are now the constituent code of the

<sup>39</sup> Foucault further endorses the relationship between the aesthetic and the ideological (in Pultz 1995:9). For Foucault there is no vantage point from which one can make an objective observation; all perspectives (even those described as ‘truthful’) are affected by power (in Pultz 1995:9). If interpretation and power are indivisible, then the ‘knowledge’ or emotive understanding invoked by a photograph cannot be disinterested, purely cognitive, or neutral. Rather, the knowledge or emotion evoked by an image comprises what Antonio Gramsci calls an “apparatus of ideology” (in Pultz 1995:9). The stylised aesthetic of GQ may, in other words, be perceived as ‘neutral’ by the reader, but is in fact an effective hegemonic tool.

<sup>40</sup> Wilhelm Worringer (1967) theorises the principle of ‘abstract’ or ‘empathetic’ aesthetic experience, phrases he uses to distinguish the Classical/Romantic aesthetic dialectic. Although an unusual connection in terms of this study, Worringer’s binaries are helpful in explicating the manner in which conventional pornography (empathetic) and glossy men’s magazines (abstracted) are thought to employ opposite aesthetic styles. The notion that an ‘abstract’ aesthetic evokes an abstract response in the viewer and an empathetic aesthetic an empathetic response, links with the polarised conception of a masculine and feminine aesthetic. GQ capitalises on the stereotypical assumption that men are more reasoned and spiritual (abstract) and that a masculine aesthetic, therefore, evokes a more abstract response in the viewer. This connection serves to distinguish GQ from conventional pornography, which traditionally employs a more sensational or empathetic (‘feminine’) stylistic. ‘Abstraction’ and ‘empathy’ are used to explain the interpretative strategy of GQ as opposed to that of conventional pornography in the following section (4.3.2.1).

pornographic. On a superficial level, the public seems to determine what is and is not pornographic, based on the aesthetic of the material they are confronted with. The ostensible difference between what is typically deemed to be 'pornography' and what is, for instance, considered to be 'fine art', may in effect be a difference in medium: the distinction between a painting and a mass-printed publication (a difference that might be described as the contrast between the brushstroke and the Ben-day dot).<sup>41</sup>

The sexualised imagery in *GQ*, however, embodies the best of both worlds, for in a sense it assumes the aesthetic language of the arts, while being printed and sold *en masse*. The sophisticated mien of *GQ*, which is the bedrock of its brand identity, serves to disguise the otherwise pornographic content of this magazine. In a sense, *GQ* is the 'high art' of the pornography industry, an area of relative sophistication in a vast landscape of kitsch. The following section examines the way 'knowledge' and the ambitious register of *GQ* function to enhance the aspirational branding of the genre, ultimately leading the reader to perceive *GQ* as 'acceptable'.

### 4.3.2 Cultivation

"I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think"

Barthes (1981:21).

Cultivation, like beauty, is a relative term that is socially constructed and, therefore, varies in meaning, depending on the context and user of the term. In the context of this discussion it is used, in the absence of a better term, to refer to the gloss of 'cultivated', 'reasoned' and 'cultured' intelligence that *GQ* seems to employ in constructing its brand identity. This sense of 'cultivation' encapsulates the notions of class and cultural distinction, and serves a two-fold function in *GQ*: firstly, a cultivated tone is helpful in distinguishing *GQ*'s brand identity from that of pornography, which is generally not perceived to be part of 'high' culture.<sup>42</sup> Secondly, since 'cultivation' (being informed) is an asset in corporate culture, a cultivated brand identity may attract readers to *GQ* who hope to gain cultivation from reading the magazine.

<sup>41</sup> Even today, the distinctions of 'high art' and 'low art' are present. Art in a photographic or printed media rarely fetches the same prices as the canonical mediums such as oil on canvas. In South Africa, galleries are hesitant to book photographic exhibitions because the public is apparently less likely to buy photographic art. Gallery owner and curator Michelle Nigrini (2002), speculates that this might have something to do with the public perception of 'art' being equated with painting and sculpture.

<sup>42</sup> The trope of 'cultivation' is also referred to by (soft-core) conventional pornography magazines to differentiate themselves from so-called hard-core pornography, which does not employ these 'softening' devices. *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, for instance, are not simply made up of sexualised photographs but also include 'service' features on luxury products, interviews with celebrities, film reviews, cartoons, short stories (often by notable authors), and advice columns (Dines 1995:255).

The advantages of being perceived as 'cultivated' are, in other words, considerable, both for the reader, who may be striving for self actualisation and status, and for the magazine, which depends on the perception of cultivated content for its brand identity, as well as a mantle for the 'obscene'.<sup>43</sup> What exactly defines a person or publication as 'cultivated' is perhaps less dependant on how much they actually know, for this is difficult to prove, and more on the societal codes that communicate culture, informed-ness and status. It is, thus, not necessary for GQ to be 'really' cultivated, whatever this may mean, in order for it to reap the benefits of a cultivated brand identity, it can merely appropriate the gloss of cultivation as it exists in high culture. The process by which GQ might be defined as belonging to a cultivated genre is the subject of this section. Since this process is rooted in societal structures and paradigms, it seems a fitting start to examine the modes of communication that are believed to exert a powerful influence on societal paradigms.<sup>44</sup>

It seems a fair claim that every culture tends to be greatly influenced by its dominant forms or modes of communication. Neil Postman (1982:264) builds on this assumption, with his further assertion that such modes of communication will have their greatest impact on the *intellectual* habits and predispositions of a people. In other words, the concepts of knowledge and patterns of thinking most prevalent in a society, are guided by the forms of communication in which that society is immersed. A pertinent example is the intellectual impact of the printing press on the western mind. Following the fall of the Roman Empire, literacy virtually disappeared. With the return of literacy in the sixteenth century, its impetus was so far-reaching that within the span of a hundred years it "helped to break apart the monopoly of the Catholic Church; it enlarged the concept of individualism; and it nurtured the growth of nationalism, capitalism, and inductive science" (Postman 1982:264). As a gateway to enlightenment, literacy itself (and not just literary material) became imbued with the signification of light, truth, and cultivation. This conviction had converse implications too, since it gave rise to the credence that illiteracy is tantamount to immorality. Enlightenment society, in general, had such a high regard for informed-ness (equated with cultivation), that it perhaps perversely imbued knowledge with moral sanctity (Scruton 1998:21-27),<sup>45</sup> a persuasion demonstrated in secret museums all over Europe.

Secret museums catered for wealthy male gentlemen with the understanding that this population was somehow exempt from moral debasement. With the advent of photography and the mass printing of pornographic photographs, the face of pornography changed – it was now a product aimed at the so-called working class male. With the change in its market demographic, the 'obscene' stepped out from under the socially acceptable cover of intellectualised art and cultural

<sup>43</sup> The manner in which 'cultivation' cloaks obscenity is explained in this section.

<sup>44</sup> McLuhan (1964), Murphy (1977), Postman (1982) and Stevenson (1995) reflect on the social impact of modes of communication.

<sup>45</sup> Hence, Kant defines Enlightenment as "mankind's exit from self-incurred immaturity" (1784:58).

heritage. The pornographic was no longer something to be 'appreciated', but rather something to be consumed. This conception of pornography as a general consumable, and of high culture as something to be appreciated by a cultivated few, is still evident in contemporary western culture. In a contemporary context, GQ reinstates the principle of the secret museum by displaying the pornographic to men who are supposedly not susceptible to its corrupting influence. Presumably, this 'immunity' is because the up-market readership of GQ are associated with maturity, knowledge and worldly experience, what might be called the reader's 'cultivation'.

Based on his investigation into language and knowledge, Arthur Bentley (1935:141) comments that "[n]othing is found that can safely be taken as wholly independent of knowledge or of experience or of fact or of language". To show that GQ presents itself as a medium for the *sophisticated* consumption of obscenity is only possible once the strategic communicative systems between the 'writer' and 'reader' are revealed. According to Bentley (1935:143), cultivation (maturity and knowledgeability) is evidenced or made manifest, wherever there is an organising of experience through linguistic means or, as in GQ, it may be evidenced in the visual. There is no set standard of knowledge or cultivation required to purchase GQ, or even to enjoy it. Nor does this imply that only ignorant men buy *Penthouse* or *Hustler*. Rather, the assumption is that in order to assume an air of acceptability, GQ presents itself as a cultivated, knowledgeable text, the thinking man's magazine, or what John Storey (1996:76) calls, "quality press". Quality press is a term coined to represent that sector of published material that sees itself as the antithesis of popular culture and the popular press. In other words, the 'serious' newspapers, magazines<sup>46</sup> and journals that target upper middle-class markets as opposed to the tabloid press that are typically associated with 'blue collar' readers. (Whether this is truly the demographic that they reach, is irrelevant.)

The distinction between so-called quality press and popular press is a vague one that generally serves the populist or 'anti-elitist' (so-called low culture) cause of those who bemoan 'commercialism' and 'vulgarity' (so-called high culture) (Gripsrud in Storey 1996:75). The distinction is, however, a classificatory device that is quite useful in demonstrating the way GQ is marketed toward an 'elitist' audience.<sup>47</sup> Figure 62 is a comparative table that in a simplified manner compares the essential characteristics of 'quality press' and 'popular press'; it is loosely based on the assumptions of Peter Dahlgren (in Storey 1996), John Fiske (1989), and John Storey (1996), although slightly modified to the visual genre of GQ and 'traditional' photography. The obvious assumption is that GQ fits into the category of quality press, while pornography is more likely to be considered

<sup>46</sup> The earliest 'glossy', 'quality' magazines were *Life*, *Time* and *National Geographic*. Today magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, *George*, *De Kat*, and arguably GQ, also form part of this category.

<sup>47</sup> Most glossy magazines, including *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, are marketed towards an upwardly mobile audience, since the disposable income of this group attracts high-paying advertisers.

as popular press.<sup>48</sup> This is, in fact, not entirely true, for in so far as these are actually separate categories, GQ is more likely to fall within the classification of popular press than quality press. In part this is because of the visual and commodified nature of the magazine, but it is also related to the lack of critical articles in GQ. In other words, GQ creates the impression of being quality press (glossy pages, high profile journalists, etc.) so that it can be considered acceptable (and charge more per magazine), but the actual content of the magazine is light-weight and escapist, and never really challenges mainstream ideology (in the manner that quality press is supposed to).

What is of interest here, is simply this process of pretence or mimicry that allows GQ and other such magazines to pass themselves off as 'quality' fare aimed at an informed, elitist (*i.e.*, 'cultivated') male market. The functioning of GQ is dependant on so-called aspirational branding that encourages the reader to feel he is gaining entrance into a privileged social order, a class where artistry and authorship shroud the obscene. In order to do this, GQ appropriates many of the textual, semantic and visual codes of the quality press and, by means of this, quite convincingly coaxes the reader to interpret it as 'quality' and, therefore, secure from the accusation of the obscene. The charge that popular culture impersonates and, subsequently, strips or debases high culture is an expected one, since popular culture has, from its inception, drawn from the canonised catalogues of high culture (usually because of an economic incentive), and as a result has been blamed for bastardising high culture (Gans 1974:27).<sup>49</sup> This process of 'bastardisation', nevertheless, continues in a consumer culture eager to gain the gloss of informed-ness, but not prepared to spend the time becoming informed. It thus makes sense that in an egalitarian free market economy, the new 'aristocracy' would not depend on cultivation passed down from generation to generation, but on cultivation sold over the counter.

Storey's (1996) dissection of quality versus popular press is valuable to this study because of its effectiveness in unveiling the perceived polarity between popular culture and high culture, and the manner in which GQ capitalises on this perception in order to 'disguise' its operations. The following section examines some of the typical differences between quality press and popular press and demonstrates the way GQ appropriates the codes of quality press in order to be perceived as such. Since the distinction is largely dependant on public perception, the first aspect that is considered is the interpretative process that these contrasting texts require.

#### **4.3.2.1        *The interpretative process***

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<sup>48</sup> The secret of *Playboy's* success, however, is thought to be related to Hugh Hefner's insistence that it be marketed as a "quality" magazine (in Dine 1995:255).

<sup>49</sup> Incidentally, the opposite is also true; high culture has been known to turn to popular culture for its inspiration, the most obvious examples being Pop Art, and a great deal of Postmodern culture.

A lucid summation of the interpretive processes of the 'quality' and popular presses possibly resides in Worringer's linguistic devices 'abstraction' and 'empathy'. Whereas the 'quality' press generally aims to present information with an air of objective detachment, a kind of abstraction, the popular press typically hopes to appeal to their readership through a sense of self-identification, personal involvement, and empathy. Peter Dahlgren identifies two "modes of knowing": the analytic mode is marked by "referential information and logic" and is the preferred methodology of the 'quality' press, while the storytelling mode is defined as such because of its narratological configurations, which provide coherence via enplotment (in Storey 1996:75).<sup>50</sup> While all journalism aims to communicate information about the world, there is a stylistic difference between those publications that present information with apparent objectivity and those that encourage subjective involvement. Even when both make use of a "storytelling continuum", the form that these stories might take will differ (Dahlgren in Storey 1996:75). For Colin Sparks the intrinsic discrepancy between popular and so-called 'quality' press resides in the popular press's mobilisation of the 'personal' as an explanatory framework (in Storey 1996:76). In a study of news values, Sparks found that even when the popular press and the 'quality' press report on the same story, the treatment of these narratives is always different:

[Whereas the] 'quality' press presents a fragmented picture of the world in which the construction of coherence and totality is the work of the reader, the popular press embeds a form of immediacy and totality in its handling of public issues. In particular, this immediacy of explanation is achieved by means of a direct appeal to personal experience. The popular conception of the personal becomes the explanatory framework within which the social order is presented as transparent (in Storey 1996:76).

GQ involves its readers personally by addressing them in the first person or including them in a collective 'we' (amongst other things). The style and register of its articles, however, presumes a wide understanding of certain subjects without which the reader would find it difficult to construct meaning. In this way, GQ mimics the deciphered readings of quality press, as opposed to the 'found-truths' implied by the readings of popular press. An article in GQ (Millennium 2000:172-173) on the "virgin father", Richard Branson, opens with a quote from poet Henry Longfellow. Although Branson is undoubtedly an icon of popular culture, the article attempts to locate him "within a framework that contain[s] different kinds of information and knowledge" (Sparks in Storey 1996:76). The reader is invited to interpret Branson within the larger context of capitalist enterprise, commercial adventurism and literary ingenuity. Subsequently, the reader is navigated through the decipherment of a supposedly objective argument, a process typically associated with quality press.

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<sup>50</sup> This section (4.3.2.1) is primarily based on Storey's (1996) discussion of the popular and quality presses. The authors quoted in this section are, therefore, referred to as they appear in Storey in order to avoid the assumption that the connections between these authors (Connell 1992, Fiske 1989, 1992, Dahlgren 1992, and Sparks 1992) were made by the author of this study.

The position that Fiske (in Storey 1996:77) takes towards the popular press is that “popular culture is potentially and often actually progressive”, but not radical. The distinction between progressive and radical, Fiske (in Storey 1996:77) explains as follows: “[p]opular texts may be progressive in that they can encourage the production of meanings that work to change or destabilise the social order, but ... they can never be radical in the sense that they can never oppose head on or overthrow that order”. Fiske differentiates the popular press from what he calls the official press and the alternative press and notes that it is despised by both (in Storey 1996:77). He adds that the popular press operates on that precarious line between public and private, and describes its tone as “sensational, sometimes sceptical, sometimes moralistically earnest; its tone is populist; its modality fluidly denies any stylistic difference between fiction and documentary, between news and entertainment” (Fiske in Storey 1996:77).

Fiske’s examination of the popular press starts from Stuart Hall’s allegation that the central political division in late capitalist societies is the ‘opposition’ (in Storey 1996:77): “[t]he people versus the power-bloc” is apparently a “shifting alliance of the forces of domination” (Storey 1996:77), which finds expression in and through public bodies such as the media, cultural industries, government, and the educational system. The ‘people’ also form a shifting alliance, and are always defined in terms of their historically specific opposition to the ‘power-bloc’ (Storey 1996:77). Fiske’s claim is that the official press or quality press articulate the interests of the power-bloc in a top-down flow of information (in Storey 1996:77). In this manner, he argues, the official press yield the information and knowledge necessary to ensure the maintenance of the prevailing structures of power (in Storey 1996:77). But, more significantly, the official press or ‘quality’ press produces what he calls a “believing subject”, and for Fiske (in Storey 1996:77-78), this is one of the most salient differences between the quality and popular press:

The last thing that tabloid journalism produces is a believing subject. One of its most characteristic tones of voice is that of a sceptical laughter which offers the pleasures of disbelief, the pleasures of not being taken in. This popular pleasure of ‘seeing through’ them (whoever constitutes the powerful *them* of the moment) is the historical result of centuries of subordination which the people have not allowed to develop into subjection.

In the presentation of “the opposition between popular knowledge and power-bloc knowledge”, in other words, “it is the opposition, not the knowledge itself, that matters” (Fiske in Storey 1996:78). For GQ, the incentive is quite different. It may use the language of the popular press, but instead of aligning itself with the ‘people’ by employing a tone that challenges or ‘sees through’ the power-bloc, it avoids this kind of distinguishing characteristic, and in so doing is affiliated with the power-bloc, by default. The popular press, by contrast, impugns the normalising ‘reality’ of the power-bloc, by, for example, the stock-in-trade stories of the rich and famous falling from grace:

Above all what these stories do is mount a populist challenge on privilege ... while these stories articulate neither a coherent political philosophy nor strategy, their splenetic outbursts do have, however, important political impact. What these stories do is bash the 'power-bloc' – or those representatives of it, whose attributes and actions can be most meaningfully represented for their readers (Connell in Storey 1996:80).

GQ incites an entirely different mentality in terms of the rich and famous. Rather than poke holes in the near perfect effigy of celebrity, GQ purports to chronicle the ascendancy of those who epitomise worldly success. In each issue of GQ detailed articles on burgeoning dot commers, millionaire golfers, and the fortune five hundred, function as a veritable manual on how to gain power and privilege. The form and phraseology of GQ is such, that it at once deifies power and privilege, *and* makes it curiously accessible.<sup>51</sup> This is accomplished by including readers in the seemingly trivial aspects of privileged life, thus allowing them to feel 'in the know', or 'cultivated'. The voyeuristic wardrobe details of 'successful' men, frequently noted in GQ are, for instance, symptomatic of the capitalist philosophy that power and privilege are as much about the packaging of a product as the product itself, and therefore require the right know-how in order to construct the right look. A single issue of GQ may include articles on how to make money ("5 Ways to turn R1 000 into 100K", September 2000:104-105 ), Olympic boxers ("Smack it", September 2000:108-113, figure 37), the Mercedes V6 SLK and Springbok Mark Boucher (GQ September 2000), and Tom Cruise ("The Last Tom Cruise Story You'll Ever Need to Read", September 2000:132-137, figure 66).<sup>52</sup> Clearly, this is not a magazine that "bash[es] the power-bloc" (Connell in Storey 1996:80); instead, GQ sexualises it.

One of the idiosyncrasies of a glossy 'quality' magazine that projects a kind of sexualised materialism is that the distinction between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' (and this is a subtle distinction), is also implicitly a distinction between those who are sexually 'successful' and those who are not. GQ is rarely crude enough to flaunt the private details of a celebrity's romantic history; for the most part, articles on dot com millionaires or champion boxers focus on, for instance, business strategy and personal incentive. It must be said, however, that the glamorous photographs, powerful fonts and sexy use of colour (black and red have virtually become part of the branding), create an unmistakable air of power and masculinity (figures 37, 39, 64, 66). Coupled with the evoca-

<sup>51</sup> There are a number of articles that demonstrate this in the September issue of GQ. The first, a spread called *Kids in the Picture* (GQ September 2000:18-19, figure 63), introduces seven of "Hollywood's Young Guns". The brassy young celebrities are apathetically positioned on black leather loungers in what appears to be a private screening room. In front of them leggy women are arranged with a little less apathy – the reader is never told *their* names. The image is altogether indicative of mounting dominion. Further in the magazine three South African 'dot com' millionaires are interviewed. Stylised photographs and overbearing quotations accompany each interview (September 2000:36-41, figure 64). A few pages on Emmanuel Lediga is spotlighted under the standard feature "GQ Success" (September 2000:56, figure 65). The by-line reads: "He was the first black dealer on the JSE and co-founded its first black-run firm. All before the age of 30. Here's how." Below the rise-to-fame success story is an insert entitled "Status symbols"; these "symbols" seem to evince Lediga's success: "Car: Bottle green BMW 328i; Suits: Only wears Armani, Dash, Versace, and Hugo Boss ..."

<sup>52</sup> The caption to his photograph boasts: "Paid R140 million up front for *Mission: Impossible 2*, Tom Cruise can give anyone the finger and smile" (figure 66).

tive, sexy images of almost naked supermodels that dominate each issue, wealth, power and cultivation are masculinised and included in the trope of sexual difference. In other words, those 'in the know' will be financially *and* sexually powerful.<sup>53</sup>

For every GQ insert and article, experts such as couturiers or sex columnists are consulted to lend authenticity and credibility to a suggested style or action. The affect of this technique, combined with the informal, often funny, and inclusive tone of GQ is a very marketable balance between abstraction and empathy, or between quality and popular press. Ultimately, GQ presents the ideal as attainable, and therefore offers a passage from popular culture to privileged culture. But it is a process that relies heavily on how successfully the sophistication or artistic integrity of the magazine is communicated. As in the arts, the credibility of GQ's style (read: know-how and 'cultivation') is largely conveyed through the notion that aesthetic sensitivity is 'authored', which is discussed in the next section.

#### **4.3.2.2      *Aesthetics and authorship***

In reality, the popular press is not always as 'cheap' looking or tasteless as is often supposed. Quite often, the popular press makes use of high grade paper and full colour photographs that are just as glamorous and contrived, if not more so, than that of the 'quality press'. There is, however, a greater sense of immediacy in much of the rhetoric of the popular press. In order to heighten the sensationalism (and empathy) that the reader experiences, tabloid newspapers and magazines tend to situate stories in as immediate a situation as possible. Therefore, photographic shoots in such publications will rarely create the impression of meticulously constructed settings, rather the preferred aesthetic seems to be one in which props and costumes appear to be assembled at the last minute. The most blatant example of this is the back page spread of most pornographic magazines, which typically feature the 'home-made' pornography of its readers. Occasionally an entry will seem quite professional or even subtle in its aesthetic, but usually the photographs are garishly home-made, particularly in the lack of professional lighting (and models) and the assortment of make-shift props. It is the awkward immediacy of these images that makes them seem so real, so pornographic.

Instead of constructing images that are as 'real' as possible, like those found in conventional pornography, GQ aspires to capture or construct images that are 'ideal'. In much the same way that the 'quality' press relies on general knowledge or awareness in the reader, GQ draws from a leg-

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<sup>53</sup> Even coincidental support for this principle creates a demand for instructional inserts that equip the reader for the acquisition of power and privilege. Hence, 'how-to' inserts range from advice on how to pick a suit (Millennium 2000:38 figure 67), and how to shave (September 2000:69), to advice on how to give a massage that "makes for easy access and friendly intercourse" (September 2000:92-97).

acy of classical art historical codes, that will be more accurately interpreted with prior understanding or knowledge. This does not mean that the images in *GQ* cannot be 'understood' without a *priori* knowledge of high culture; it simply means that the images hint at grand narratives and canonised artworks that in turn lend credibility to *GQ*. These hints and traces may merely be sensed without being consciously understood, but will still sufficiently communicate the message of the artistic. In the *GQ* calendar (2000) one does not, for example, need to know Man Ray's *Prayer* (1930, figure 59) in order to appreciate the combination of abstracted artistry and blatant sex-appeal communicated by the December pin-up (figure 58). Prior knowledge of the original is hardly mandatory, it merely contributes to the amount of pride (and cultivation) that the viewer might experience in appreciating the image.

The manner in which *GQ*'s layout, page design and typography repeatedly allude to famed design trends is another example of its intertextuality. The December "I am a Man" article on testosterone, effectively hints at the iconography of Russian Constructivism in the place of potentially incriminating ('macho') photographs (*GQ* December 2000:156-160, figure 39). Even if the viewer is not familiar with this movement, the readership of *GQ* is presumably visually literate enough to pick up on the connoted sense of strength, power and masculinity implied by the clean, uncomplicated aesthetic of Russian Constructivism. Comparable to this example, an article entitled "100 Ways to be a Gentleman" places the icons of genteel status – a pinstripe suit and leather briefcase – in Mondrianesque blocks adjacent to the text (*GQ* November 2000:128-139, figure 68). Whether every reader would immediately recognise the relevance of employing the aesthetic of the Modernist de Stijl style to 'frame' a 'how to' article on class, is doubtful, and perhaps irrelevant. More important is the fact that most readers would almost certainly recognise the image as a reference to some or other art movement or artist, and would quite possibly make the subconscious connection between appreciating (or even just recognising) art and 'class'.<sup>54</sup>

Analogous to the use of familiar design, 'authorship' is employed to reiterate the credibility of the publication and challenge the range of the reader's knowledge and subsequent cultivation. What in this study is referred to as 'authorship' is not merely the acknowledgement in *GQ* of specific journalists, photographers, interviewers and other contributors (a practice frequently 'forgotten' by the popular press), but the actual featuring of famed authors to such an extent that the emphasis actually falls on authorship itself. The cult of the male 'genius', iconic of Modernism, is in some small way reincarnated by the 'quality' press of the twentieth century. Within this trade the name below the by-line is as *de rigueur* to the understanding of the article as is its closing argument. In every 'quality' publication ideological positioning frames meaning, and therefore understanding. The extent to which this process differs with the popular press (and it is only a matter of degree) depends

on the scope and depth of the reader's understanding, for it is this which dictates how an article or author will be 'read'.

Every issue of *GQ* calls on four new 'contributors' who bring their own renown and credibility to the particular issue. But, just in case their names do not speak for themselves, *GQ* provides a reminder of who they are just below or adjacent to the editorial.<sup>55</sup> The Millennium issue's contributors are Michael O'Neil – New York based photographer for *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Time* and so on; Amanda Gowing – former fashion editor of *GQ United Kingdom*, now fashion director of *GQ South Africa*; Shaun Johnson – Managing Director of *Independent Newspapers Cape*, former editor of, amongst others, *The Sunday Independent*, author of award-winning bestseller *Strange Pays Indeed*; and best-selling author and broadcaster Tony Parsons – the highest paid columnist in Britain (Millennium 2000:15). The various contributors lend an unmistakable air of authenticity, class and authorship to the magazine, making it somehow seem more 'above board' and acceptable. There are no 'nobodies' in *GQ* – every model, stylist, and journalist is credited, and as with most 'quality' publications, the regular contributors gain a familiar persona in the mind of the reader that again emphasises authorship, and thus the 'quality' or acceptability of the magazine. Whereas the popular press makes use of narrators and photographers who are "in touch with the goings-on of the elites, but who are [not] at one with them" (Connell in Storey 1996:81), *GQ* seeks out authors, editors, aesthetes, and photographers who are the embodiment of privilege and power.

Storey's (1996) analysis of 'quality' and popular press is not that far removed from Barthes' notion of what he calls "readerly" and "writerly" texts (and readings) (in Fiske 1989:103). For Barthes, readerly texts are relatively closed texts with fixed meaning that are generally easy to understand and are undemanding of the reader (in Fiske 1989:103). In contrast to this, writerly texts invite readers to engage in the construction of meaning (rewrite meaning), and critically search for wider frameworks within which to locate meaning. The readerly text is the more accessible and popular; the writerly the more complex, *avant-garde* and therefore exclusive in appeal. *GQ* does not wholly fit into either of these categories, but rather seems more suited to a third, appropriately christened by Fiske (1989:103) as the "producerly" text. The category of the producerly, he argues, is needed to describe the popular writerly text, a text whose reading is simple and predictable, yet also open to enlightened negotiation. Fiske (1989:104) further comments: "The producerly text has the accessibility of a readerly one, and can theoretically be read in that easy way by those of its readers who are comfortably accommodated within the dominant ideology ... but also has the openness of the writerly. The difference is that it does not *require* this writerly activity". *GQ* is perhaps most

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<sup>54</sup> See Berger (1972) for more on the relationship between art, advertising and class.

<sup>55</sup> The same technique is employed in *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* (also *Condé Nast* publications).

suited to this 'producerly' category because it both willingly surrenders itself to popular production and by its own admission strives to be a classy, thinking man's magazine (Ford in *GQ Millennium 2000*:14). In this way, *GQ* is the ultimate amalgamation of quality and popular press, writerly and readerly texts, high culture and popular culture. It is the perfect Postmodern medium for disguising the obscene in the perceived respectability of 'enlightened' interpretation (in the Kantian sense), aesthetics, and authorship.

*Gentleman's Quarterly* is not the only magazine that ennobles or disguises pornographic content in a lofty brand identity (*Playboy* was the first magazine to do this), but it is possibly the best example of the producerly text, because of its unabashed attempt at maintaining the social privilege and power of those who deem themselves 'cultivated', while offering instruction in terms of style and etiquette to those who aspire to be considered as such.<sup>56</sup> Through the authoritative 'voice' of *GQ* (discernible in the tone of articles, interviews and photographic shoots), privilege and power become accessible commodities available to all *GQ* readers. Control, authorship and power are, thus, masculinised by structuring the tropes of sex, exoticism and difference within commercial culture. *GQ* may represent women as consumables and its readers as (discerning) consumers, but in so far as consumer culture is considered 'acceptable' (within the western psyche), *GQ* too is perceived as acceptable.

Through the discussion of 'interpretation', aesthetics and authorship, this section has focussed on the manner in which *GQ* markets 'cultivation'<sup>57</sup> as an upper-class value and asserts its own cultural worth as a plea for 'public good defence'. Another mechanism of disguise is the manner in which women in the magazines are markedly represented as being power-full. This pretence of gendered empowerment is intimately related to both the aesthetic of *GQ* (4.3.1) and its claim to 'cultivation' (4.3.2), and is examined more closely in the following section.

### 4.3.3 The appropriation of empowerment

The history of western power relations reads, to some degree, like the history of the representation of the female body. Hunt (1991:2) argues that, in a very literal sense, the exclusive reproductive capacity of women involves the female body in the transmission of power to the extent that its presence in art and literature has, throughout history, been multivalent. In a more metaphoric

<sup>56</sup> Articles such as "100 Ways to be a Gentleman" (November, 2000:128-139), indicate *GQ*'s own awareness of its function as a conveyor of class and social etiquette. The article includes such advice as: "Invest in double-cuff shirts" and "Doors: Push – you go first. Pull – she goes first". In this article too, recognisable figures are called upon to define a gentleman by their standards. Helmut Lang muses, "A gentleman is a man in the best sense: traditional, but modern and unafraid".

<sup>57</sup> The 'cultivation' represented in *GQ* is largely commercial - it tells readers "what to wear, eat, drink, read and drive, how to furnish their homes, and listen to music, which nightclubs, restaurants, plays and films to attend" (Dines 1995:257).

sense, the power of the image of women in art and literature is, thus, in all probability, directly related to women's exclusive reproductive ability and the semblance of control that they appear to exert over consensual sex.<sup>58</sup> Subsequently, the notion that women, by implication, exert some control over male sexual pleasure is a constant theme in western culture from the Classical Greek comedy *Lysistrata* to the 1980s radical feminist mantra, "a woman's body, a woman's right".<sup>59</sup>

GQ enters the contemporary world of Postmodern politics with an acute awareness of the political sensitivity concerning female empowerment. In this climate, obscenity takes on the 'new' meaning of political incorrectness and thus GQ must seem progressive to be 'acceptable'. If GQ is to brand itself towards a 'cultivated' readership (even if only in appearance), then clearly it cannot subordinate women in any obvious or overt way, since the subordination of women would be antithetical to a brand identity that purports progressive idealism as part of its modern, urbane appeal. Added to this concern is the fact that, as has been mentioned previously (see 2.3), the primary complaint against conventional pornography is the manner in which it stereotypes and subordinates women. For all of these reasons (to protect its progressive brand identity, appeal to readers who perceive themselves as 'cultivated', and avoid the taint of being labelled 'pornographic'), GQ, once again, seems to take its cue from canonical erotic art, which in many cases simultaneously 'glorifies', objectifies, and subordinates women in a manner that is frequently deemed acceptable.

In Manet's *Olympia*, for instance, Victorine Meurand is simultaneously represented as a "pagan goddess" (Paglia 1995:59), the flowers and jewellery in the painting serving as the indicators of male adoration, *and*, by her canonical reclining pose and formulaic nudity, is stripped of her 'real' personhood.<sup>60</sup> In this ironic way she is represented as a symbol of abstract meaning, an archetype of sexual 'empowerment', a process that simultaneously 'strips' her of her 'real' qualities and ennobles or disguises the sexualising of her body. In Manet's painting, *Olympia* is, thus, simultaneously 'glorified', objectified and subordinated.

Although GQ imitates the layered and antithetical representation of women expressed in Manet's *Olympia* and other canonical artworks, it also draws from more seemingly simplistic stereotypes such as the *femme fatale* and the *femme enfant*. The mythic iconography of these stereotypes was especially established during the Romantic period, when art and lit-

<sup>58</sup> The notion of sexual 'consent' is deeply related to the empowerment of women throughout western history and is addressed later in this section (4.3.3.2).

<sup>59</sup> It is debatable whether the notion of female control over male sexual pleasure is a fetishistic stereotype or whether it is justifiable (see Dworkin 1983). The point, however, is that it is a recurring theme throughout western visual culture.

<sup>60</sup> The 'real-ness' of a representation is a subjective and problematic interpretation that brings with it a plethora of related concerns. In so far as some representations are more stereotypical than other, however, it seems fair to say that certain representations may be more 'real', meaning less two-dimensional or simplistic. This notion is related to the discussion of GQ's representation of women as artificial or plastic-looking in Chapter Three (3.3.2.3).

erature (in particular the gothic novel) seemed to thrive on the polarised interpretation of femininity presented by these sensational sources. The booming 1950s cine-culture (in Europe and the United States), furthermore, propagated these types, ostensibly knitting them into the fabric of filmic narrative codes, and thereby ratified the *femme fatale* and *femme enfant* in the public psyche.<sup>61</sup>

Panofsky (1959:24) notes that the modern day stereotypes of the “Vamp” and the “Straight Girl”, derivatives of the *femme fatale* and *femme enfant* stereotypes, are in effect the continuation of the medieval personifications of the Vices and Virtues. According to Panofsky (1959:24), the “fixed iconography” of such types results in an uncomplicated ‘reading’, largely “without the complications of individual psychology”. The mythic motifs that Panofsky refers to, in other words, serve as indicators that inform spectators how they should interpret the characters in visual texts, whether they be girl bands or men’s magazines. This deeply encoded history possibly explains the mythic status of such obviously banal personas (as the Vamp and Straight Girl) in an era seemingly of gender sensitivity and political correctness.<sup>62</sup>

Since the sexual revolution (1960s) at least, however, the types of the *femme fatale* and *femme enfant* have been merged, complexified and adapted in order to seem more like ‘real’ (individual) women.<sup>63</sup> In conjunction with this process, the gloss of female empowerment has emerged as a significant trend in popular culture. The last decade, in particular, has seen an increase within popular media in seemingly ‘empowered’ female stereotypes. These characters are, however, mainly two dimensional and represent a polarised perspective on ‘good’ and ‘evil’, a notion compounded by the fact that most of these personas originate from comic book characters.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, images of women in *GQ* are constructed to represent women in an empowered, ‘progressive’ position, since this may be more acceptable to their audience and because, in this way, their objectification (subordination?) is shrouded. Presumably to avoid the tone of female subordination, *GQ* (whether consciously or not), therefore, appropriates the so-called empowerment of women as it appears in the popular media of the past decade. In so doing, *GQ* endorses the idea

<sup>61</sup> This section jumps between art historical, filmic and photographic codes that are all integrated in the network of gender constructs that have contributed to the encoding of the ‘Girl Power’ stereotype. In so-doing this section is guilty of a kind of historical leap-frog.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Mythic’ and ‘banal’ are concepts that do not easily coincide, but to the extent that mythic types are reproduced *ad infinitum*, they become banal.

<sup>63</sup> The representation of ‘real’, less stereotyped women is evident in the ‘art-house’ films of many diverse contemporary directors such as Woody Allen (for example Annie Hall in *Annie Hall*, 1977), James Ivory (Lucy Honeychurch in *A Room With a View*, 1986) and Jane Campion (Ada in *The Piano*, 1993).

<sup>64</sup> These stereotypes seem to be indelibly linked to youth culture, therefore the most graphic examples are from media aimed at a young (often pre-adolescent) audience. Filmic types include *Tank Girl* and *Lara Croft* (originally from a computer game), while television has produced an abundance of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* spin-offs. The music industry has also capitalised on a youth culture apparently desirous of ‘empowered’ women with female acts such as Britney

that female empowerment is ultimately about taking control over female sexuality, and indeed sexual desirability. In supposedly trying to represent women as sexually assertive (and empowered), the magazine represents them as sexually attractive or desirable (to men), two separate notions that are always (confusingly) synonymous in GQ. The problematic conflation of sexual empowerment and sexual desirability informs the general construction of femininity in GQ.

Susan Brownmiller (1984:19) describes the ideal of fetishised femininity as “physical vulnerability that is reassuring (unthreatening) to men”, thereby echoing the sentiments of diverse feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft (first wave feminist), Simone de Beauvoir (second wave) and Laura Mulvey (Postmodern feminist) who have bemoaned the culturalised limitations implied in western notions of femininity (such as restrictive clothing and ‘feminine’ behaviour). GQ, apparently aware of the taboo of representing women as vulnerable or reticent, opts for the more liberal (contemporary and politically correct) stereotype of women as sexually assertive. This precept is examined in this section with regard to two different, yet complementary, gendered ‘types’ that GQ has surely appropriated from popular culture.

The first is a patronising stereotype, which is the personification of the ‘Girl Power’ phenomenon. Although a pro-active, seemingly ‘empowered’ persona, ‘Girl Power’ is dressed in the mythic regalia of the *femme enfant* to neutralise the threat of ‘castration’ that she might otherwise pose. In terms of an archetypal underpinning, this stereotype, in other words, leans towards the notions of goodness and virtue as embodied in the *femme enfant*. The second type seems to be the contemporary reincarnation of the *femme fatale*<sup>65</sup> and is repeatedly portrayed as GQ’s ‘ideal woman’ (or ‘feminine ideal’). The *femme garçon*, as this type is termed in this study, is the embodiment of popular culture’s fetishised fascination with ‘tomboyishly’ sexy women. The *femme garçon*, in other words, is a hybrid (or mutant) form of the *femme fatale* and *femme enfant* stereotypes since she is both a fatal seductress (*i.e.*, sexually assertive), and emotionally child-like (impetuous, spoilt, boyish).

Each of these ‘types’ is examined with relation to their historic construction in the broader context of visual culture, and in their current form within GQ. (Stereotypical connotations such as vanity and consent are frequently implied in the images and articles in GQ and are therefore briefly explained where relevant.) Visual examples are used to justify the presence of these stereotypes in GQ. For the sake of brevity, these female types are encapsulated by the terms ‘Girl Power’ and ‘*femme garçon*’. Thereafter, the question of a ‘real’ female presence in GQ is addressed. The last

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Spears, Christina Aguilera and Pink. Some of these are less artificial than others, but most are ‘packaged’ in a haze of sexual fetish.

section attempts to analyse the presence of gendered stereotypes in *GQ* and the resultant absence of 'real' women in this context, in order to better understand the way *GQ*'s readers may be led to interpret the female and participate in her objectification.

#### 4.3.3.1 *Girl Power*

She knows exactly what to do with men like you,  
 Inside out in her mind there's no doubt where you're coming from  
 mystery will turn you on. This child has fallen from grace  
 Naked  
 Don't be afraid to stare she is only naked<sup>66</sup>

Lyrics from 'Naked' by the *Spice Girls* (2000).

'Girl Power' is a phrase (oxymoron) coined in the 1990s to encapsulate the proliferation of young women who seemed to suddenly dominate popular visual culture in the latter part of the twentieth century. What made these women different from many of the female stars before them is related to the manner in which the Girl Power 'girls' appropriated the 'tone' of female empowerment (and post-feminism) without the critical potential implied by this pursuit.

The British Pop group, *Spice Girls*, is probably the most iconic of the Girl Power bands, not least because of the effective way that the group commercialised Girl Power. The relevance of the female stereotyping embodied by the *Spice Girls* is the manner in which these two-dimensional character types were constructed and supported by visual codes from popular culture.<sup>67</sup> In every music video and concert, for example, Posh appears in black Gucci-esque attire and high heels, while Baby wears pigtails and bobby socks, the instantly recognisable markers respectively of the 'bad girl' and the 'good girl' (or *femme fatale* and *femme enfant*). In this way, the Spice Girls not only commodify the notion of female empowerment, but in effect reduce this process to an aesthetic gloss, ironically that of seemingly out-dated sexist stereotypes.<sup>68</sup> The relevance of the Girl

<sup>65</sup> Although the 'Girl Power' stereotype frequently mimics the mythic codes of the *femme enfant*, and the *femme garçon* hints at many of the characteristic traits of the *femme fatale*, *GQ* treats these stereotypes (the *femme enfant* and *femme fatale*) as overlapping (see 4.3.3.1).

<sup>66</sup> The lyrics of this song, like the 'Girl Power' the band epitomises, represent a woman who is both a seductress and a child.

<sup>67</sup> Their endurance on the global 'top ten' charts alone, does not account for the *Spice Girls* frenzy that followed their first hit, since there had been other girl groups before them with perhaps more musical integrity, but not nearly as much popular appeal. The iconic success of the *Spice Girls* is probably due to the strategic inception of the group. The *Spice Girls* (like other 'boy' and 'girl' bands) are essentially a commercial product, founded and marketed by a record label to capitalise on the tweenie market. The differentiation of the *Spice Girls*, however, lay in the fact that each member of the group was marketed separately as a generic type. By 1996 Posh, Baby, Sporty, Scary and Ginger Spice had come to represent the various faces of the female prevalent in popular culture.

<sup>68</sup> Lisa Soccio (1999:7) argues that, unlike mainstream groups such as the *Spice Girls*, sub-cultural groups like *Riot Grrrl*, *Bikini Kill* and *L7* are progressive, feminist phenomena because their sub-cultural status generates "concrete opportunities for engagement and empowerment". Soccio (1999:7) argues that, conversely, the *Spice Girls* are "regressive [rather] than transgressive". Although not the concern of this study, the fissures in the 'empowerment' that is the ostensible goal of so-called contemporary girl culture are evident in the glossy men's magazines that fetishise this phenomenon.

Power phenomenon for GQ is that it presents the magazine with the convenient look of 'empowerment' without leaving room for the resistant readings that might result from actual empowerment. In much the same way that the *femme enfant* is a powerless signifier of the to-be-looked-at-ness of women (Mulvey 1975:7), the Girl Power stereotype in GQ ratifies the idea of woman-as-image.

The connection between the Girl Power stereotype and the *femme enfant* is a complex and layered one that is semiotically valorised by the many literary and filmic variations on these themes. One of these variations is the Lolita character, who arose out of Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel of the same name. Nabokov's novel chronicles, in scopophilic detail, the relationship between the young Lolita and her much older guardian, Humbert Humbert. Martin Amis (1992:sp) observes that "Lolita herself is such an anthology piece by now that even non-readers of the novel can close their eyes and see her on the tennis court or in the swimming pool or curled up in the car seat or the motel twin bed with her 'ridiculous' comics." The Lolita persona, as appropriated by popular culture, is, in other words, not unlike the *femme enfant* and Girl Power stereotype, both a sexualised woman and a naive child. Lolita has subsequently become a stereotype, appropriated by contemporary popular visual culture to represent the sexualised child/woman. The complexity and individuality afforded Lolita as a literary character is stripped from her in popular culture, where she is reduced to an emblematic nymphet. In this vein, Villanueva (2003:sp) refers to Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera as "media Lolita's" who capitalise on their fetishised (sexualised) 'innocence'. This seeming contradiction is the driving force behind the powerlessness of the Lolita stereotype, as well as the *femme enfant*, *femme fatale* and Girl Power stereotypes, because it seems to represent the women, shrouded in these personas, as complex and 'real', when they are in fact formulaic types.<sup>69</sup>

In GQ, the complexity of individual personhood is mimicked by intergrating and overlapping the various stereotypes related to male visual pleasure mentioned above (Lolita, *femme enfant*, *femme fatale*, Girl Power). The sexual empowerment of women is, in other words, reduced to a combination of stereotypical codes, that all connote a false sense of female empowerment. As in the contemporary popular media, seemingly distinct types such as the *femme enfant* and *femme fatale* are conflated and cloaked in GQ in the haze of 'Girl Power'. The November pin-up for the GQ 2000 calendar, for example, is a blonde model, Andrea Nemcova, photographed paradoxically in a 'seductive' silk gown with fur trim and 'virginal' white, cotton underwear (figure 69). The paradox is further ratified by the fact that she, on the one hand, projects the sexual ascendancy of an assertive *femme fatale* – fixed gaze,<sup>70</sup> legs splayed open, her right hand invitingly touching herself

<sup>69</sup> The (child/woman) 'contradiction' in this stereotype is, in other words, not 'real', but contrived as part of her fetishistic value.

<sup>70</sup> Nemcova's stare mimics what Dyer (1998) refers to as "self-reflexive" pornography (*i.e.*, pornography that draws attention to its own artificiality and acknowledges the presence of the viewer (see Dyer 1988 and Mirzoeff 1988:483).

– and, on the other, that of a reticent *femme enfant*, in the way she clutches a big white bear under her arm.<sup>71</sup> The visual encoding of the image, thus, implies a narrative of infantile sexuality framed. The belittling iconography of child-like innocence is, however, disguised by the sense of girl ‘power’ Nemcova projects. In querying the intention of such an obviously constructed visual message, one might arrive at the conclusion that it is arranged with the explicit intention of conveying a popular visual fetish, that of the sexualised child/woman. The visual pleasure inherent in the photograph of Nemcova is contained within its function as a pin-up, but elsewhere in *GQ* the signifiers of destabilising power are conveyed more subtly.

In certain features in *GQ*, the images connote a sense of visual empowerment (recalling the ‘Girl Power’ movement), but the articles or captions that accompany them, are patronising or belittling. Added to this, the style of a photographic shoot that accompanies a ‘Girl Power’ type feature frequently bears an undermining tone through the use of a ‘kitsch’ aesthetic.<sup>72</sup> A subtle example of the undermining effect that the style and text of a feature may have in contrast to ‘empowering’ photographs is the November interview with World Wrestling Federation star, Rena Mero (*GQ* November 2000:140-145). It is a smug article that chronicles the “trash to cash” (in author Martin Deeson’s words) life of this “blonde wrestling babe”. The style of the photographs may perhaps be described as Trechikovian (figures 70-71), and in general seem to position the wrestler as vulnerable and exposed.<sup>73</sup> In figure 70 she is voyeuristically photographed looking away from the camera and ‘modestly’ covering her breasts, and in figure 71 her frame seems slight and ‘feminine’ because of the size and strength of the horse beneath her. In each case, portions of the interview are quoted that seem to belie her womanly exterior and make her seem awkwardly naive and child-like. “Why did you have implants?” asks Deeson (*GQ* November 2000:141); her reply, “Duh! Because I wanted to have fuller breasts.” The child-like is thus aligned with the ‘kitsch’ (or common), distancing the reader from the threat of her being sexually empowered since the woman is presented as ridiculous.<sup>74</sup> This ‘distance’ from fear, theorised by Mulvey (1987) as the male fear of emotional ‘castration’ (see 3.3.2), is clearly obtained by creating a sense of supercilious detach-

<sup>71</sup> The coupling of seemingly contradictory (child/woman) codes in the Nemcova pin-up is similar to the codes used to position Lolita (lolly-pops and seductive pouts) and Britney Spears (pigtailed and cleavage) as sexualised icons of child sexuality or nymphets. These ‘women’ are, thus, presented as ‘empowered’ because of their sexual desirability and seductive charm.

<sup>72</sup> As complex and problematic as the notion of ‘kitsch’ may be, it seems the only term capable of denoting both the referred to stylistic and its implied social connotation. The use of a kitsch aesthetic in *GQ* ties in with the magazine’s appropriation of ‘Girl Power’ from popular culture, where public sentiment dictates what is ‘kitsch’. It should be noted that in the ‘cultivated’ context of *GQ*, the appropriation of a kitsch or Girl Power aesthetic is done with a sense of ironic self-awareness that mimics the tone of ‘high’ art that borrows from popular culture. (The association between ‘kitsch’ and the notion of ‘feminine taste’ is also an interesting one, but is not addressed in this study.)

<sup>73</sup> As will be mentioned shortly, the photographs also represent Mero as sexually brazen, thereby forming a typical example of the paradoxical (and clichéd) attempt at stereotypical ‘complexity’.

<sup>74</sup> This connection between the sexualised child and a kitsch (or ‘vulgar’) aesthetic is also apparent in *Lolita*. While watching Lolita hoola-hoop in the first screen version of *Lolita* (Kubrik 1962), Humbert observes in his journal (voice-over): “what drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet, of every nymphet perhaps, this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eager vulgarity”.

ment on the part of the reader, as he perceives the woman through the eyes of the objectifying camera and the belittling interviewer.

In the feature on Sable (Rena Mero's stage name), for instance, Deeson's frequent comments on her lack of wit (he even says she should not be too worried about taking a few blows to the head, since she does not have that much to lose) are 'complemented' by the style of the photographs that accompany the article, as well as Deeson's detailed description of her home milieu: "The white shag pile is so deep you could ski through it, the picture frames are all gilt and over by the fireplace there's a life-sized china panther with gold detailing" (GQ November 2000:141). The patronising and demeaning (albeit occasionally funny) tone of this article is not to be found in blatantly subordinating or violent visuals, but in the combined effect of her naive responses and garish taste. With regard to both of these, Mero is sketched as a child in a magazine for adults. This is not, however, the impression that one gets from the opening page of the article. In this first photograph (figure 72), it is wrestling champion Sable and not 'bimbo' Reno Mero who is clearly depicted, as she poses with her trademark bow and arrow.<sup>75</sup> In spite of the obviously objectifying nature of the image, Sable's confident glare at the reader conveys nothing of the clumsy *femme enfant* Deeson describes in the article. Rather, instead of shy modesty or discomfort, the image projects a sense of willing display, seductive challenge, and even vanity.

Vanity is a theme that appears in most pornographic displays of the female body, perhaps as a consequence of the self-aware gaze that typifies the sexualised model. The confident, sexual self-awareness so powerful in the eyes of Manet's *Olympia*, for instance, could easily be read as vain display.<sup>76</sup> In a similar vein, Goya's naked Maya (1798-1800, figures 11, 14) seems somehow more self-absorbed than his clothed one. The notion that sensual self-absorption is somehow a female trait is perhaps appropriated from canonical erotic paintings such as *The Toilet of Venus* by Velazquez, in which mirrors, cherubs or adoring spectators are employed to draw attention to the woman's sexual(ised) vanity.<sup>77</sup> In GQ, the mental connection between sexualised representations of the body and vanity are less predictably implied than, for instance, the presence of a mirror. The Kerry McGregor shoot for the September issue is a case in point (GQ 2000:126-131, figure 61). McGregor is expressly posed on a metallic sculpture that mirrors the contours of her figure. The apparent ease with which she reclines against this reflective surface enfolds the reader's percep-

<sup>75</sup> Sable's bow and arrow, like Posh Spice's high heels are codes relayed (in the Barthesian sense) from the established mythology of western gender construction. The bow and arrow, for instance, may draw from the visual iconography of Artemis, the Greek goddess of hunting and fertility or Cupid, the Greek god of love.

<sup>76</sup> Alternately, *Olympia's* glare might be read as defiance.

<sup>77</sup> Early photography, similarly, defines the female body with relation to vanity. The images of nineteenth century photographer Lady Hawarden, for instance, used light and mirrors to connote 'feminine' sexuality (Pultz 1995:41). It is probably because of the iconic role of the coupling of the sexualised woman and mirrors, that early pictorialist photography, in an attempt to be seen as art, frequently represented 'nude' women with mirrors (like Edward Steichen's *In Memoriam*, 1904). Pultz (1995:41) reasons that the reflective quality of a mirror also suggests the role played in sexual fulfilment by vision and visuality, points at which photography and the body intersect.

tion of her femininity as veiled in vanity. (The image is, nevertheless, an empty one, void of any 'real'-ness, precisely because of its formulaic constructedness.) McGregor is represented as the *femme enfant*, at once empowered by the sexuality of her reflection, and chastised for the gaze of the camera.<sup>78</sup> And since she is "our girl" (GQ September:128-129) 'we', the viewers, are unavoidably included in a patriarchal point-of-view.<sup>79</sup>

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey (1975:6) argues that "the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured" visual form to the extent that the "socially established interpretation of sexual difference ... controls images, erotic ways of looking, and spectacle". Mulvey presents an interpretative use of psychoanalysis that will "reveal the ways in which every [visual] operation (and particularly those processes associated with the gaze – identification, voyeurism and fetishism) re-inscribes the subjective structures of patriarchy" (Stam, Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis 1992:182). In GQ, similarly, the patriarchal camera objectifies and belittles, since it is the enforcer of the object/subject relationship, and therefore the 'power' of the women in GQ is undermined by the very medium that pretends to realise it. Within the psychoanalytic framework suggested by Mulvey, however, the signified woman also poses the threat of castration, potentially evoking a defensive response from the male viewer. As mentioned earlier in this section, GQ relies on two textual 'decoys' to avert the anxiety that may result from the woman's supposedly empowered image. The first is the 'Girl Power' stereotype, as broached above; the second is the sexualised 'tom boy' that is examined shortly. In both cases, the 'three looks' of cinema (the camera, the characters and the spectator) are employed to produce a specific, eroticised image of the woman, thereby naturalising the 'masculine' perspective of the viewer and the pleasure that results. Modes of photographic looking and identification, like modes of cinematic looking, thus automatically prescribe an objectifying point-of-view for the viewer, while the powerful sexual encoding of the woman's context, connotes "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 1975:7).

The fact that GQ's representation of female sexuality is *always* accompanied by the nuance of childlike-ness undermines any claim the magazine might have to representing women as empowered. From the financial success and pervasive presence of the Spice Girls, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, one might conclude that contemporary society 'buys into' the presumed 'em-

<sup>78</sup> Earlier in this section it was argued that the *femme enfant* is sexually powerless or 'harmless'. In keeping with this tenet, the 'empowerment' connoted by the sexuality of McGregor's reflection is undermined by the fact that it is a reflection (*i.e.*, the 'copy' and not the 'real').

<sup>79</sup> The patronising tone of the shoot is easier to discern in the random whimsy of the questions. The anonymous interviewer asks a number of arbitrary questions that seem more intent on emphasising McGregor's naivety than on the actual answers to the questions. These range from: "Tell us about an item of clothing that shaped your identity" to "Tell us five facts about Muhammad Ali". Amis (1992:sp) makes the point that Humbert Humbert's cruelty towards Lolita is partly related to the supercilious tone that he assumes in speaking to her. The link between Humbert's tone and GQ's is a forced one, but both position the woman as child-like, and the man as adult.

powerment' in Girl Power or finds comfort in the notion of female sexuality as type-cast.<sup>80</sup> Girl Power may be an attempt at popularising female empowerment but within the context of GQ, it functions like a gendered/sexual pacifier. The 'girl' in 'Girl Power', like the 'girl' in 'girlie magazine' is a telling indicator of who, in the carefully constructed domain of popular visual culture, is empowered.

#### 4.3.3.2 The 'femme garçon'

"I've always loved getting dirty with the boys, then putting on a ball gown and earrings"

Charlize Theron (GQ November 2000:126).

*Femme garçon* is a phrase introduced in this section to relate GQ's depiction of their apparent feminine ideal. This character or phenomenon, a kind of variation on the 'Girl Power' theme, has become a favourite of contemporary popular media.<sup>81</sup> In essence, this stereotype combines the sexual voracity of the *femme fatale* and the naïveté of the *femme enfant* with fetishistic boyishness. The 'insertion' of typically boyish or tom-boyish character traits into the already established popular mythology of female sexuality seems to be connected to the 'transgressive' appeal of this combination.<sup>82</sup>

Soccio (1999:7) posits that Girl Power as a phenomenon can only be empowering as a sub-cultural manifestation, since this affiliation typically affords women the possibility of transgression. Although a loaded assumption, Soccio's position highlights the societal belief that empowered female 'types' are in some way transgressive.<sup>83</sup> GQ's *femme garçon*, through her masculinised persona, co-opts the transgressive nature of so-called hard-core (sub-cultural) girl culture, but commercialises and fetishises this, thereby undermining any transgressive potential that this type might have.<sup>84</sup> This section investigates the presence of the

<sup>80</sup> Although these performers target a youth market, the trend of Lolita-ing female sexuality is evident in 'adult' culture too.

<sup>81</sup> The *femme garçon*'s genealogy may, however, be traced back to include older predecessors such as *la femme Nikita*, who represent both womanly sexuality and 'tomboyish' adventurism.

<sup>82</sup> In the context of this section, the term 'transgressive' is used to refer to representations, stereotypes or codes that 'go beyond' or transgress the norms of contemporary western popular culture. In GQ the subtly transgressive nature of the *femme garçon* as a supposedly 'empowered' woman, thus, links with the notion of deviance as delineated in 3.3.3.1.

<sup>83</sup> Soccio's (1999:7) position, further, highlights the transgressive nature of all representations of woman that are 'truly' empowered (represented as individual persons) in masculinised media and through the 'male' lens of the camera. The Spice Girls are a powerful example of the fake 'transgressive' appeal of "unfeminine behaviour" such as picking their noses 'on camera' (Soccio 1999:7). Soccio (1999) argues that outside the context of political contestation, the Spice Girls' behaviour constitutes commercialised gimmickry, not transgressive protest.

<sup>84</sup> The ambiguities of Girl Power versus hard-core girl culture are not the subject of this study. The point is that GQ uses the tom-boyish fetish of the *femme garçon* to create a sense of 'transgression' in this stereotype, and thereby, 'add' the connotation of empowerment (and political acceptability) to the *femme garçon*. The link between the transgressiveness of a stereotype and its political correctness or acceptability may seem like a far-fetched one, but is in fact quite easy to make given the often 'transgressive' (anti-patriarchal) nature of feminism. The transgressive potential of girl culture may be related to Dworkin's (1983:61) premise that "[s]exual intelligence in women, that rarest intelligence in a male-supremacist world, is necessarily a *revolutionary* intelligence, the opposite of the pornographic (which simply reiterates

femme *garçon* in GQ as a disenfranchising stereotype of female sexuality. This section, furthermore, examines the manner in which GQ paradoxically presents this stereotype as both (consenting) adult and child-like, thereby undermining whatever 'power' she might have.<sup>85</sup>

'Consent' is at the heart of the 'empowered' representation of women, since this presumably vitiates the accusation of masculine 'force' frequently aimed at violent sexualised representation (see 3.3.3.2). As mentioned earlier, in *Vamps and Tramps*, Camille Paglia (1995:65) articulates the now common belief that pornographic publications are 'harmless' or even empowering because the women in them are represented as 'steamily consensual':

Idiotic statements like 'pornography degrades women' or 'pornography is the subordination of women' are only credible if you never look at pornography. Preachers, senators, and Feminist zealots carry on about materials they have no direct contact with ... Most pornography shows women in as many dominant as subordinate postures, with the latter usually steamily consensual (see 2.3).

In order for GQ to represent women as empowered it would, in other words, have to first represent them as consenting adults. Sexualised imagery (both canonical art and contemporary pornography) typically presents 'consent' as antithetical to 'force', and genders force as masculine. GQ subverts the 'force' traditionally embodied by the male, by representing the female as force-full herself and desirous of being treated forcefully. This is argued in this section in two ways: firstly, by demonstrating the manner in which consent functions in sexualised art, and secondly, by examining the way 'consent' is built into the GQ stereotype of the 'tomboy'.

Paglia (1995:65) apparently takes the position that where there is 'consent', rape is not possible. By this reasoning, 'consent' is misleadingly represented as a very finite phenomenon, something which arguably is not the case.<sup>86</sup> It is important that the recurring themes of consent, invitation and force, remain ambiguous in pornography. Without the thin veil of ambiguity, pornography would probably not be quite as popular as it is, or, arguably, not have made it into quite so many main-

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the world as it is for women), the opposite of the will to be used, the opposite of masochism and self-hatred, the opposite of 'good woman' and 'bad woman' both" [emphasis added]. The 'transgressiveness' of the *femme garçon* is not, however, the focal point of this section, it merely forms an introduction to the discussion of the *femme garçon* as an extension of the Girl Power phenomenon.

<sup>85</sup> In addition to raising the notion of consent, the paradoxical placement of the *femme garçon* between the status of goddess and child (boy), also falsely presents her as a complex and layered woman. The overriding tone of child-like ('boyish') impetuosity that defines this 'woman', however, clearly marks her as a powerless type that is only afforded the gloss of 'masculine' drive for its fetishistic value. In appropriating the *femme garçon* as its ideal women, GQ, in other words, perpetuates the sexist idea that women must be masculinised to be represented as 'empowered'.

<sup>86</sup> Consider for instance, an often overlooked sex scene in the film *Basic Instinct* (1991). The protagonist's prime suspect is a *femme fatale* author, played by Sharon Stone. After a frustrating day in which the main character (Michael Douglas) is reprimanded for his unorthodox detective skills and humiliated by the seductive charms of his prime suspect, he flees to the house of his psychiatrist ex-wife. Here he vents his anger and frustration by sexually attacking (he rips open her shirt and slams her against a wall) and sodomising her. Although she reciprocates his sexual gestures, she simultaneously protests by saying 'no' several times throughout the scene. The insignificance of the scene in terms of the narrative of the film naturalises and justifies this violent sexual act. It is, nevertheless, debatable whether his actions are really violent (in the sense of exerting force) since he possibly knows his ex-wife well enough to know when she

stream museums. In this sense, consent is positioned as antithetical to ‘force’, with the traditional gendering of force as masculine. Susanne Kappeler (1988) examines the relationship between art and literature, and pornography. She highlights an academic analysis of Titian’s *Tarquin and Lucretia*, which ‘interprets’ the rape of Lucretia as a “scenario of invitation and seduction, consensual sex and pleasure (hers as well as his, as she is supposedly smiling)” (in Itzin 1992:451). Kappeler then juxtaposes this analysis, which positions rape as belonging to “the sphere of discourses, not events”, with her own description of the painting:

Lucretia, half-sitting, half-lying on her bed, is naked bar a veil across her thigh and the jewellery around her neck and wrists. Tarquin, fully dressed, looms over her, his right knee thrust between her legs, his left arm holding off Lucretia’s arm, while his right arm holds a dagger about a yard from her face and chest, extended to strike with full swing. Lucretia’s face is focussed with an expression of fear on her attacker. Threat and intimidation are compounded and visually supplied out of the image’s internal resources, its means of visualizing the referential in power: the woman is faced by a man; she is naked while he is dressed, unarmed while he is armed; she is half-lying on her back, having lost her balance, while he is towering over her, knee firmly lodged on the edge of the bed; her one arm is made defenceless by his grip, her other cannot reach the arm that holds a knife over her, ready to strike. It is an unambiguous exhibition of force and defencelessness, of intimidation and fear, of violation of the woman’s privacy, integrity, selfhood and will. We are told we are seeing her consent (Kappeler in Itzin 1992:451).

Kappeler concludes that academic sophistry, just like the pornography industry, can deny rape by affirming the pornographic convention of the smile as indicative of pleasure and willing participation (in Itzin 1992:451). Her description further exposes the extent to which art can subordinate women by representing them as “enjoying pain, humiliation, and rape” (in Itzin 1992:451).<sup>87</sup> One of the most graphic examples of this combined representation of pain and pleasure is Fuseli’s *Nightmare* (1791, figure 30), as discussed in Chapter Three. The question with regard to this painting is whether Fuseli’s heroine, represented as ‘steamily consensual’, implies sexual empowerment or whether it fits into the trope of violent visual subordination?<sup>88</sup>

Consent is perhaps a convenient justification for violent sexualised representations, because, theoretically, where there is mutual consent there should be no need for force or violence. Images can, nevertheless, be undeniably violent, in spite of the visual representation of consent. Moreover, when images are obviously constructed (as in artworks and all popular media), consent becomes a slippery and ambiguous issue. GQ seldom (if ever) represents violent sexuality, but it does build on the pornographic assumption that the representation of female consent, whether in a smile or a wink, negates any claim to female subordination. In a bid to cater for a more ‘enlight-

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‘means’ to give her consent and when not. In view of her protestations throughout, however, ‘rape’ becomes a more plausible accusation. Clearly, ‘consent’ can be a polemical issue.

<sup>87</sup> See Kappeler’s *The Pornography of Representation* (1986) and *No Matter How Unreasonable* (1988).

ened' or progressive readership, magazines such as GQ no longer represent women merely as consenting adults, but instead as initiators and aggressors of sex.<sup>89</sup> In spite of these empowering representations, however, each article or photograph in which they appear ultimately undermines and subverts this female 'power' in one way or another. The message of female 'empowerment', that is the focus of this section, is commonly articulated by GQ in four ways:

- The representation of the sexualised woman as exotic and wild, tapping into the mythic western notion of exotic women being sexually voracious.
- The use of confessional-style narratives that implicate the woman as a 'tenacious tomboy' through 'masculine' language.
- The use of an 'expert' female to represent the female population, thereby simultaneously reducing women to the GQ stereotype and validating this construction.
- Typcasting the desirable woman as tomboyishly sexy, and therefore fetishizing these 'tomboyish' traits.

Each of these mechanisms demonstrates the manner in which visual and linguistic codes are used to construct GQ's ideal female type, identified by the author as a *femme garçon*. These mechanisms are discussed below.

The first technique is the appropriation and manipulation of the conventionalised fetishistic props and visual codes evident in artworks that teetered on the pornographic. The references to exotic animals, prevalent in the works of such artists as Ingres (peacock feathers in *La Grand Odalisque*) and Delacroix (the Amazonian parrot in *Woman with a Parrot*), for example, are cleverly continued in the lycra leopard print and exotic furs of many GQ shoots (figures 32, 45, 73).<sup>90</sup> The associations of the exotic, the wild and the untamed (dangerous) are as conspicuous to a contemporary reader as they might have been to their original audiences. And as with these art works, the aesthetic authorship of each GQ image (such as the photograph of Brenda Schad taken by Markus Klinko, figure 73) is but a thin veil for the 'wild' sexuality apparent in each model.<sup>91</sup> Such mimicry can, however, steal from the credibility of an image, since it is often too obviously constructed and clichéd to have any real claim to truthfulness.

<sup>88</sup> The woman in Fuseli's painting, seems strangely willing to surrender herself to demonic penetration. The 'pleasure' of the experience, evident from the woman's facial expression, serves to undermine any reading of the image that does not tie in with the idea of consensual sex, thereby anchoring this interpretation in a more 'acceptable' tone.

<sup>89</sup> The idea of women as initiators of sex is neither unrealistic nor problematic, however, the extent to which GQ fetishizes this notion is. In GQ even the reticent *femme enfant* is a sexual aggressor, fostering the idea that all women respond to sex in the same way.

<sup>90</sup> Not only 'exotic' animals were represented in these artworks, domestic pets (such as the lap dog in Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and the small cat in Manet's *Olympia*) were occasionally used to undermine the independence of such sexualised women and remind the viewer that they are, after all, 'kept' women.

<sup>91</sup> The visual codes are supported by the captions beneath each image. Beneath figure 73, Brenda Schad is described as a "sloe-eyed, tousle-haired ... Native American beauty" (again a reminder of the exotic), while the caption below a photograph of Susan Ward in leopard print satin reads, "The best thing about sex? I can totally let go of all my inhibitions" (GQ Millennium, 2000:42-43).

More convincing, is the second type of representation – that of the literary or textual construction of such stereotypes. In *Feminist Stylistics*, Sara Mills (1995:45) investigates gendered language. She refers to the research of feminists such as Robin Lakoff (1975) and Dale Spender (1980), who attempted to show that women and men speak differently, owing to the power differences between males and females in western society. According to Mills (1995:45), Spender and Lakoff characterise the female genderlect or women's speech as: more hesitant, less fluent, less logical, less assertive than men's speech. Women, in their view, are more silent, interrupt less frequently than men, use tag questions and modal verbs more than men, use co-operative strategies in conversations rather than competitive ones, and so on. Although the idea of 'women's speech' seems contrived and even sexist, it is perhaps valid in a constructed and sexualised framework such as GQ.<sup>92</sup> The isolated female writers who are included in GQ, seem to appropriate what Lakoff and Spender categorise as typically 'male' speech (in Mills 1995:45). This is probably intended to add to the sense of empowerment and assertiveness with which these 'women' are read, but, in fact, becomes fetishistic and predictable in the broader scope of the publication. The problem of 'real' female presence in GQ is therefore compounded by the artificial attempt, on the part of the magazine, to represent women as empowered because they are sexually (or linguistically) assertive.

GQ frequently makes use of narrative accounts to lend some authenticity to the representation of female sexual assertiveness. In much the same way that early pornography was the writing about prostitutes (the documenting of their occupational activities), GQ frequently publishes the kind of articles that offer a voyeuristic glimpse into 'actual' examples of female sexual appetite, and as the final stamp of authenticity, these are mostly authored by the women themselves. "Rough rider" is an article that chronicles the writer's first motorbike sex (GQ March 2000:108-109). The article (in part) reads:

As sex is all to do with power, clutch and having something throbbing manfully between your thighs, it's surprising more people don't choose to do it on a motorbike ... David told me how everything was possible on a motorcycle; how a girl had once perched herself on his erection as they came to a standstill at traffic lights ... Breathless with anticipation, I followed David into a heavily secured basement park ... 'That's it,' he said ... I looked down at a tiny red thing which didn't look capable of getting up anything, let alone speed. Did he seriously think I wanted to mount Jane Mansfield?

The writer's register seems quaintly reminiscent of the rhetoric of *Mills and Boon*-style novels, where phrases such as 'breathless anticipation' and 'hard, throbbing machine' construct the 'heroine' in relation to the male.<sup>93</sup> Her reliance on 'action' words (grinding, throbbing, cornering,

<sup>92</sup> Although not pertinent to this study, Warner (1985:66) questions the effect of masculine and feminine gendering in language (for example in French and German) on the societal conceptualisation of male and female.

<sup>93</sup> In other words, the female protagonist is characterised through her interactions with or manner of relating to the men in the narrative. Monique Wittig (in Mills 1995:45) posits that "[t]here are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine; the masculine not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general."

dragging) and dogged preoccupation with size, however, seem more typical of masculine literary characterisation than the average paperback heroine. 'Honda's' speech is assertive and competitive and as such not only presents her as empowered, but also as 'masculine'. While her willing consent, adventurism and appetite support this association of empowerment, one is, ultimately, left with the sense that it was 'David' who decided the size, speed and style of their encounter, and thus seems to be in control. In addition to this situational control residing with the male, 'Honda's' objectifying tone is countered by the photograph that accompanies the article.<sup>94</sup> Despite appearances to the contrary, it is still the woman, and not the man, who is objectified and even mechanised in the manner of Fritz Lang's *femme fatale*, robot Maria. Honda's story is inevitably dominated by the Willy Camden photograph of a rather 'plastic' looking woman draped over a 996 demo Quattro motorcycle (figure 29). Beneath her the caption reads: "The ergonomics of a bike demands that a *girl* spread her legs ..." [emphasis added].

Probably the most convincing of the representative techniques is the third, that of the 'authoritative voice'. Most forms of media call on an 'expert' professional to represent the 'authoritative voice' of a particular field; glossy men's magazines generally make use of a doctor or sex therapist to discuss sexual trends, issues or problems. GQ has Kate Taylor as its sex columnist. She writes a torrid fiction serial for a United States magazine, features for *Wallpaper*, and makes regular appearances on television and radio; thus, she is a familiar persona, not only because of her continuity in the magazine, but also because of her outside status. As the only continuous female voice in the magazine, she supposedly represents the 'female population' and in each issue articulates how "we" feel about a particular topic. In one issue she reveals why "she holds a torch for torch-like tools" (GQ Millennium 2000:83). In another issue she writes an instructional guide to office sex entitled "Working Your Way Up" (GQ March 2000:81). The article sketches the corporate environment as a primal hunting ground for men, where "hordes of women go every morning ... scented, suited and heeled." Taylor includes a six step plan to ensure male 'success' – these include such banal suggestions as: "Clear your desk of all pictures of women immediately". As the only consistent female 'voice' in GQ, Taylor's generalisations acquire a ring of ambassadorial authenticity. In the absence of diverse female opinions, statements such as "Women love power - a successful man is a sexy man" (GQ March 2000:81) seem misleadingly trite.

In the November issue Taylor explores professional love – the by-line reads: "unfulfilled by all the amateur enthusiasts our oversexed scribe Kate Taylor decides to order an escort" (GQ November 2000:55). At first their interaction seems to be guided by *her* needs and desires ("Sod him! I was paying"), but soon the dynamic changes as Jason, her "sexual saviour" takes over. After they have

<sup>94</sup> As Berger (1972:7) points out, "[s]eeing comes before words", in other words visual images easily dominate textual narratives.

had sex, Taylor's persona and relation to her escort changes from aggressive customer to insecure child: "He'd give up his sordid life and become my slave. He'd love me. Marry me. Devote the rest of his life to me ... Which was where I was when he ... got his credit card machine out" (GQ March 2000:55). Whereas initially she had been the symbol of capitalist endeavour, he was now the one pulling out the credit card machine, while she was left dreaming about marriage. The language Taylor uses reflect a similar transition. The first half of the article is dominated by words such as "erection", "sucked", "clits" and "cock", arguably more 'masculine'-type words, while the second half is filled with words such as "beautiful", "loved", "devote" and "kissed", possibly indicative of the "more hesitant ... less assertive" (Mills 1995:45) feminine genderlect.

A superficial reading of Taylor's exploits, in other words, renders her care-free, daring and game for everything, but this perception only lasts until they have sex, thereafter David is the empowered one.<sup>95</sup> If one approaches Taylor as an example of the *femme fatale* in *film noir* – simultaneously devastating the lives of men and victim of her own lust for enjoyment, she seems more naïve than threatening. Slavoj Žižek (2000:535) explains that the aura of mystery that surrounds this kind of character is that she cannot be clearly located in the binary of master and slave: "When she seems permeated with intense pleasure, it suddenly becomes apparent that she suffers immensely ... Thus the deeply ambiguous character of those moments in *film noir* ... when the *femme fatale* breaks down and becomes the victim of her own game". The powerful/powerless dichotomy of the Kate Taylor persona in GQ is further emphasised by the antithetical relationship between her confident textual tone or 'male' voice and the objectifying photographs that appear above each of her articles (figure 74).

This simultaneously tenacious and timid person is a familiar one in GQ; in fact, after reading a few issues, the '*femme garçon*' or sexualised tomboy becomes embedded in the brand identity of GQ, since every woman in the magazine is sketched with the same sense of powerful/powerless-ness. Tempestuous, adventurous and dangerously sexy, GQ presents the prototype for the perfect woman, a twentieth-first century alignment of the *femme enfant* and the *femme fatale*. All the women in GQ are represented as having an inner tomboy. This is perhaps not the most accurate term for this contradictory character, but it is used here, because GQ itself frequently relies on this notion to support its construction of the 'empowered' woman. Occasionally this image of mischievous sexual assertiveness is only visually implied (a 'naughty' smile or a 'kinky' outfit), but most of the time it is supported by the accompanying text, as with the December shoot of Teresa de Klerk (GQ December 2000:150-155). Not only is de Klerk represented as boyishly sexy (short, tousled hair; a challenging glint in her eye, 'wildly' sexy snake skin bikini, and adventurous position), but

the caption reads: “I was a naughty girl. I got others up to no real good” (figure 75). In a similar vein, the November issue features Charlize Theron in a spread on “Men of the Year”, apparently because of her “services to mankind” (GQ November 2000:124-127). Adrian Deevoy, the interviewer, introduces her virile charms by articulating his mock dismay at her bawdiness. The article starts,

stubbing out her fifth Marlboro Red of the evening, Charlize Theron drains her vodka and shunts back her chair. ‘I hope this isn’t going to be too revolting for you’, she grins mischievously, then continues regardless. ‘Okay, this girl walks into a bar ...’ It’s not a joke one would expect from an ascending star, although the fags and booze came as a bit of a shock too (GQ November 2000:125).

Throughout the article, Deevoy proffers insightful compliments and articulate questions while Theron stuns and teases with her frank wit and uncouth language. It is not so much *Lady and the Tramp* as gentleman and the vamp, but the principle is the same – the chemistry of contrasting gender and class. Yet, it is a precarious balance – being a GQ goddess is not all about boorish bedside manners (adventurism?); as with Theron’s screen roles, one needs to “do tomboy, calculating crim[inial] and simmering sex-siren” (GQ November 2000:126)<sup>96</sup> simultaneously. According to Deeson (GQ November 2000:126), Theron clearly qualifies: “Charlize combines adolescent coltishness with the delicate sophistication of womanhood”.

In spite of the charismatic appeal of the typecast GQ female, there is something sadly formulaic about these representations. When paging through the many examples of vampish, vulnerable, tomboyish-sexy women, one cannot help but question the power positioning of each of these images. Does an airbrushed female body, draped provocatively over a motorcycle, no matter how ‘steamily consensual’, really represent an empowered woman? To look at GQ one might deduce that women exist in set stereotypes, and that ideal women are a mere combination of these. Female personas such as Jane Honda and Kate Taylor indicate that, evidently, even women buy into these stereotypes.

The ‘obscenity’ of GQ in the context of this discussion, thus resides in the representation of women as power-less and simplistic. In so far as the representational disenfranchisement of women is political discrimination and subordination, it is a kind of obscenity. The ‘disguise’ of this obscenity is as problematic as the obscenity itself, since it hides the problem of female stereotyping in further types that merely *seem* more progressive. The notion that female empowerment may be contained in stereotypes is typical of the reductionist logic of popular culture. The practice

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<sup>95</sup> In both ‘Honda’s’ “Rough Rider” article and Taylor’s account of professional love, the ‘power’ of each woman seems to reside not only in her sexual appetite, but also in her ability to withhold sex from her partner. Once they have had sex, in other words, she becomes ‘power’-less.

<sup>96</sup> Theron’s ‘power’ in GQ clearly resides in her sexuality, as Deeson (GQ November 2000:126) coos, “she’s got lips you could lie on and a smile that makes proud men weep softly”.

whereby GQ reduces and simplifies female sexuality should not, however, be mistaken for mere coincidence. Since all of the women in GQ, without exception, are represented as sexualised, it seems a fair assumption that there is strategy behind the seamless synergy of the magazine's ideology. What makes the stereotypes in GQ misrepresentational, or even harmful, in other words, is that that they appear to be the only female 'voices' in GQ.

#### 4.3.3.3 *The absence of presence*

In "Catastrophic Utopia: The Feminine as Allegory of the Modern", Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1986) highlights different forms of 'modernity'. The one, she postulates, "rests not on the fullness of a meaning; of a unified, perfectly intelligible history, but on a loss, an emptiness, a lack: the power of an absence" (Buci-Glucksmann 1986:223). This "loss of love" as she calls it, is expressed in the new status of the 'feminine' and its modern allegories that arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The feminine, within this context, is embodied "with all its violence and ambivalence" (Buci-Glucksmann 1986:223) in the figure of the sexualised woman, the prostitute.

A critical concern for feminist film criticism over the past fifty years has been the fact that 'women as women' are seldom represented in cinema. Subsequently, women have not had much of a voice, and the female point of view, in its diversity and complexity, has seldom been heard.<sup>97</sup> Although an increase in female directors (such as Jane Campion) and realist directors (such as Mike Leigh) in the past decade, has greatly contributed to the amount of believable, three-dimensional female screen characters, glossy men's magazines still seem largely dismissive of such candid representations. In GQ, the *femme enfant*, *femme fatale* and *femme garçon* own the sole rights to femininity. In themselves these stereotypes are only mildly problematic, but in the absence of all other female presence, these representations pretend to exemplify the totality of womanhood. Charlize Theron as a 'man of the year', and Kate Taylor as an 'expert' woman, represent, within the context of a supposedly enlightened and progressive magazine, what should be a moderate, fairly reliable representation of the female norm. Yet it is probable that many women do not identify with Theron's ribald celebrity, or Taylor's predatory suggestions to men in the workplace (nor with the patronising Girl Power of).

Stereotypes, short-cuts, two-dimensionality, and binary opposites are all ennobled by the glamorous 'power' of GQ representations. The naturalising effects of a sophisticated aesthetic and a bold

<sup>97</sup> Maria Marcus writes that in pornographic photography "the women are presented as nothing" (in Soble 1986:156). Susan Griffin elaborates: "She spreads apart her thighs and stares into the camera. Her tongue licks her lips. Her eyes reflect back nothing: she is not human ... at each turn of her body, at each face or curvature exposed, we see nothing. For there is no person there" (in Soble 1986:156). Although the women represented in film and in GQ are more subtly objectified, it is still true that as deliberate sexualised constructs, these iconic representations lack the particular 'realness' that each woman (model) might have brought to them.

sexually assertive quote from the model (often out of context), can ironically be more misleading about woman-ness than the frank objectification of traditional pornography. Ultimately, even if an image is constructed in such a way that it allows the female to seem sexually empowered, the very nature and purpose of the medium undermines this. Since a magazine feature presents a 'pseudo-world' specially constructed to stimulate the reader; there are no autonomous meanings to the words and images, they are organised according to strategies of coherence (Hedges 1991:78). One such strategy is that of a controlling point of view. The French novelist, Alain Robbe-Gillet remarks that the film shot always implies a point of view: it must always be taken *from* somewhere (in Hedges 1991:78). Therefore, one might argue that GQ's point of view is relayed and anchored by the camera (Barthes 1977:51-73). Laura Mulvey (1975:17) supports this argument by examining the 'object' on which the camera is typically fixed. As mentioned earlier, Mulvey (1975:17) argues that women in film, and one might add GQ, "are signs which signify to-be-looked-at-ness".

An example of the overt use of the male gaze in the construction of GQ features, is the travel feature in the September issue of GQ magazine. Sixty prime travel destinations are listed next to glossy photographs of women in bathing suits (figure 76). While the women seem confident and in control of their own sexuality – certainly, one would not use words such as 'subordinate' or 'vulnerable' to describe them – the arbitrariness of their presence (much like the awkward positioning of Teresa de Klerk in figure 75) indicate that the women are present as objects of display and visual pleasure. Thus, in spite of the thin veil of narrative justification, the viewer cannot avoid participating in the male gaze of the camera, and thus in the objectification and subordination of these women.<sup>98</sup>

Foucault (in Pultz 1995:9) unveils instruments of control in society, and suggests that photography is one such tool. Instead of a photographer exercising control over the medium of photography, Foucault (in Pultz 1995:9) suggests that photography controls the photographer, and by extension society. Furthermore, since everyone is subject to social control, all knowledge is the product of power, and not the other way around. In other words, for Foucault (in Pultz 1995:9), there is no viewpoint from which to make objective observations, all vantages are affected by power. Andrea Dworkin (1993:237) lends a gendered bias to Foucault's assertions on power, and argues, "we live in a system of power that is male-supremacist. This means that society is organized on the assumption that men are superior to women and that women are inferior to men". Dworkin's unbending avowal seems less *passé* against the backdrop of a booming pornography trade that still almost exclusively caters for a male market. In an interview with Isabel Tang (1999:117), Mark

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<sup>98</sup> Since no men are represented in a similar vein anywhere in the magazine, the visual subordination extends to the female gender, and is not just applicable to these specific images, or these particular women.

Gabor, author of *The Pin Up: A Modest History*, explains the role that power plays in pornographic magazines:

Whether it's just for looking or for something like masturbation, the man has total control of the magazine. He can switch from pose to pose or model to model by the mere flipping of a page. He gets his control over the image, which is basically over the woman, which is what his fantasy is all about, which is manipulation and objectification of the woman.

The question is, to what extent the market for sexualised subordination is fuelled by the ideological positioning of a culture? One such connection, explored by Lynn Hunt (1991:3), is the connection between the origins of pornography and concern about the role of women in public life.

In 1769 Rétif de la Bretonne published a novel cum tract called *Le Pornographe*, which was tellingly subtitled *Idées d'un honnête homme sur un projet de règlement pour les prostituées, propre à prévenir les malheurs qu'occasionne le publicisme des femmes, avec des notes historiques et justificatives* (in Hunt 1991:3).<sup>99</sup> Rétif's subtitle reveals the now-hidden connection between the origins of a modern understanding of pornography and the eighteenth century's concern about women's participation in public life (Hunt 1991:3). Kendrick (1987:57) traces the development of a modern notion of pornography to the ideological concerns of eighteenth century society. Kendrick (1987:57) attributes the creation of a secret museum, as already noted, to the long-term societal concern with the prudent regulation of the consumption of the obscene so as to debar the lower classes and women. The eighteenth century era of egalitarian ideals brought with it the increase in education, and the rise in literacy engendered a 'need' for the expurgation of the classics. This custom, which was particularly prevalent in the Anglo-Saxon world, started in the early eighteenth century, climaxed in the nineteenth, and started to dissipate with the advent of World War I (Hunt 1991:3). Thus, reasons Kendrick (1987:57), the prospect of the careless and indiscriminate proliferation of representation of the obscene – "when it began to seem possible that anything at all might be shown to anybody" – generated the desire for barriers, catalogues, classifications, and hygienic censoring (Hunt 1991:3). Hunt (1991:3) concludes that the establishment of pornography as a category was in response to the perceived threat of the democratisation of culture, which included the participation of women in the consumption of culture.<sup>100</sup>

It is possible that the barriers, catalogues, and hygienic censoring of the nineteenth century did more, in effect, to protect the equality of the woman – by chiding her objectification – than to undermine her role in public culture. Whether this was the case or not, Hunt's argument clearly demonstrates the fact that pornography in its entirety – its production, consumption *and* classification –

<sup>99</sup> "Ideas of an honest man on a project of regulations for prostitutes, suited to preventing the misfortunes caused by the publicising of women, with historical and justificatory notes" (free translation by Bronwyn Michler 2003).

is wholly related to power. The way in which GQ continues this theme is in its assertion of this power, the power of male exclusivity<sup>101</sup> and sexualised construction and the unashamed acknowledgement of the male gaze. In this way it is no different from mainstream pornography (such as *Playboy* and *Hustler*), or from the sexualised representations of women in art.

As in the works of DH Lawrence, Titian and Manet, GQ is simultaneously obscene and socially acceptable. Since the notion of acceptability is dependant on popular sentiment, harmful components of popular culture may be perceived as 'acceptable' and therefore harmless, merely because of their popularity. The following section sketches the way in which GQ fits into popular culture, whilst representing an ambience of 'high' culture.

#### 4.4 GQ: pornography or popular culture?

Nead (1992:100) contends that social control over obscenity in western culture takes the form of the regulation of the sites of cultural consumption: "[t]he pornographic oscillation between visibility and invisibility is reenacted in the social organization of its consumption." This section questions the binary positions that 'pornography' and 'popular culture' seem to occupy in contemporary western culture. It investigates the notion that 'art' is perceived by contemporary western culture to be a separate category of visual representation, discrete from the associations of 'pornography' or 'popular culture'. This section indicates the complex interaction between the seemingly self-enclosed categories of 'art', 'pornography' and 'popular culture'. The aim of this brief discussion is to demonstrate that GQ does not conclusively fall into one of these categories, but oscillates between all three, thereby deeming it both 'obscene' and 'acceptable'.

Art and pornography are constantly defined in terms of quality, ownership and access. Art supposedly avoids the vulgar necessity of being sold, since it is reserved for the pensive gaze of its sole owner. Pornography, on the other hand, is mostly seen as an "undifferentiated mass of impurity, bought and sold and wreaking havoc in the public domain" (Nead 1992:100). One might revisit Lord Campbell's assurances to British Parliament, at the passing of the Obscene Publications Act in 1857, that sexually explicit art in private collections, would not be affected by the Act: "The pictures in such collections were not intended for sale, but were kept for the owner's contemplation ... It was not against the master pieces of Correggio that the Bill was levelled, but against the mass of

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<sup>100</sup> See Andreas Huyssen's (1986) *After the Great Divide* (in particular Chapter Three, entitled 'Mass culture as woman: Modernism's other').

<sup>101</sup> Pornography as a category, whether as the secret museum or GQ, is largely aimed at a male audience and thus proudly aims to exclude women. (The 2001 *For Him Magazine* marketing campaign includes postcards in each issue, that boast: "FHM, now with no tampon ads.")

impure publications, which was poured forth on London, to the great injury of the youth of the country.”<sup>102</sup>

Lord Campbell’s attempt to differentiate art from pornography led him to emphasise their differing natures in terms of quality, ownership and access. Adding to this notion, Nead (1992:100) observes that Campbell’s choice of words re-invoke the boundaries of the body: “Art is based on a model of continence, it is kept, held within the body, unlike pornography, which pours out beyond the body and into the city streets”. Whereas art appears to be controlled, pornography has the guise of being more chaotic and unbridled, at least in terms of nineteenth century sexual constructs. More specifically, this is a distinction between things sophisticated and things base, between the civilised and the uncivilised, between high culture and popular culture,<sup>103</sup> or between the expensive and the cheap. There are many cases in which art and pornography are not that different, since both are commercial endeavours, they merely fetch different prices (and even this is changing, with new trends in collector’s pornography). Hence the difference between art and pornography may be deemed largely superficial because this caters to public perception, which almost always favours binary opposites.

The anomaly of contemporary pornography is that it has remained obscene, while progressively being incorporated into popular culture. During the Victorian period pornography was taboo and was therefore perceived to be ‘off-scene’. Until at least the 1950s, pornography was hardly believed to be part of popular culture, since it was barely acknowledged or openly admitted to – it maintained the air of being secret, prurient and even deviant. With the advent of the sexual revolution, however, pornography slowly moved into the spotlight – sales soared, *Playboy* and *Penthouse* became household names, and even someone who had never opened a *Hustler*, knew the name was synonymous with the commercialisation of sex.<sup>104</sup> It is possible that American society’s interest in particular in social equality and sexual liberty in the 1960s was echoed in an interest in pornography. Today, in a post-millennium society, teenagers wear t-shirts that say ‘porn star’, and Hugh Hefner appears in family situation comedies on prime time television.<sup>105</sup> But while pornography may be sanitised by popular culture, it still maintains an air of the shameful. A person who uses pornography excessively is still frequently perceived as lacking in the social skills needed to engage in ‘real’ sexual relations (involving two people), and a taste for pornography is still per-

<sup>102</sup> From the *Hansard Parliamentary Debates* of 1857.

<sup>103</sup> Note that ‘popular culture’, in this case, is not interchangeable with the term ‘consumer culture’ which would here be a misnomer, since both art and pornography are mostly products for sale.

<sup>104</sup> The first issue of *Playboy* was published in 1953. *Penthouse* started in 1969, while *Hustler*, targeting a more hard-core market, started a few years later (Dine 1995:260).

<sup>105</sup> Gail Dines (1995:255) notes that while most corporations avoid advertising in (‘hard-core’) magazines such as *Hustler* or *Tit Torture*, the more ‘soft-core’ magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* carry advertisements from companies such as Seagrams, Benson and Hedges, Mercedes and Sony. These advertisers are not only a sign of the “upscale readership and mainstream status” (Dines 1995:255) of these magazines, but also make them seem more socially acceptable to their readers.

ceived as something to be discouraged in one's children (Williams 1979:51). This is true in a wider social context too, as Bernard Williams (1979:51), the Chairman of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship in the United Kingdom notes: a society that is "extensively given to the consumption of pornography would tell one something about it, and something discouraging".<sup>106</sup>

Pornography's move from margin to mainstream has mostly been an aesthetic one. The shaggy carpets, seedy lighting, and polished wood backdrops synonymous with 1970s pornography films may be popular with Calvin Klein and Fiona Apple,<sup>107</sup> but the association does not seem to go much further than the aesthetic appearance. When challenged about the message of his CK campaigns in 2000, Klein decided to withdraw the more *risqué* images, so as not to offend the public. Clearly, for Klein, the campaigns were about a 'look' more than a political or social statement (such as child sexuality or freedom from censorship). The 'look' is, nevertheless, appropriated from the pornographic genre and as such still carried connotations that seemed counter-cultural (presumably a positive connotation for Klein's street-wear brand). This 'porno' aesthetic is, in other words, desirable in some mainstream contexts and odious in others. Whether deemed acceptable or obscene, however, popular culture's primary interest in the 'pornographic' (whether in films, music videos or modelling shoots), seems to be aesthetic.

GQ enters the realm of fickle public perception with the commercial advantage of being perceived as both acceptable and obscene. It strives for the public acceptance afforded most popular culture (by 'disguising' the 'obscenity' in the magazine), while maintaining the air of obscenity that is the driving force behind pornography. GQ presents itself as innocent, subtle, and intelligent enough to be seen as harmless, and aesthetic enough to be seen as artistic rather than explicit. GQ is, furthermore, aimed largely at men in the above-average income group, who are perhaps perceived to be incorruptible. While it is generally accepted by the public, GQ remains exclusive enough to maintain the secrecy and 'off-sceneness' of pornography. In other words, it is both an obvious and accepted part of popular culture, and a natural subsidiary of 'obscene', or 'hidden' sexual culture (for instance, through the sealed plastic packet in which it is often sold). The axis on which this acceptable/obscene dialectic balances is money and the scent of acceptability which it buys. Aspirational branding is the driving force behind GQ since it sells to the reader a life of aesthetic refinement, corporate success, luxury brands and super models, 'arranged' for maximum visual pleasure.

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<sup>106</sup> The South African pornography mogul and founder of *Loslyf*, Joe Theron is quick to note that his interest in pornography is solely financial (in du Toit 1998:98). In an interview in *Huisgenoot*, Theron comments that pornography has never appealed to him personally (in du Toit 1998:98). This statement seems to be related to the social perception that enjoying pornography is indicative of prurient behaviour (a car manufacturer or the editor of a newspaper would probably not distance themselves from their products in this manner).

<sup>107</sup> This is a style that has been pastiched by Klein in the marketing of his fashion label and Apple in her music videos.

Through the socially elevating mechanisms of an 'artistic' aesthetic, 'cultivated' rhetoric and the pretence of female empowerment, what has been called 'aesthetics', 'cultivation' and 'the appropriation of empowerment' in this study, GQ effectively turns the 'obscene' into the socially 'acceptable'. Moreover, within the context of GQ, the 'obscene' becomes a rite of passage into a higher social order, which is presumably as incorruptible as the gentlemen allowed into the nineteenth century secret museum. The fact that GQ appropriates the codes of sexualised display from canonical erotic art, and yet, as popular press, is anchored in popular culture, corrodes seemingly finite categorisations such as 'art', 'pornography' and 'popular culture', or equally 'acceptable' and 'obscene'. GQ's superficial appropriation of canonical erotic art probably unveils some pornographic qualities in this art, thereby demonstrating that art and pornography are not mutually exclusive categories, but slippery rhetorical devices, easily coaxed into one corner or another.

This Chapter has demonstrated the manner in which GQ differentiates itself from what GQ sales manager, Shaun Couves (2002) calls "smutty magazines". Whereas Chapter Three demonstrated the *similarities* between GQ and conventional pornography, Chapter Four emphasised their differences. The point, however, is that in spite of GQ being dressed up in a lofty brand identity, like conventional pornography, it objectifies and subordinates women, and in this way may be considered obscene.