

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of chapters

Chapter One primarily introduced the background and aims of this study. *GQ* was chosen as the focus of study because it epitomises the core characteristics of glossy men's magazines, namely an aspirational (up-market) brand identity and sexualised content (that objectifies and stereotypes women). The aestheticised veneer of the magazine, furthermore, made it an appropriate example of the manner in which glossy men's magazines appropriate codes of (acceptable) sexualised display from canonical erotic art. The tone of subordination and objectification that typifies glossy men's magazines (thereby rendering them akin to pornography) was sketched as the reason why *GQ* warrants critical interrogation. Chapter One also sketched the theoretical framework of the study as informed by art history and popular visual culture. The methodological framework of the dissertation was delineated as both a literature study and a critical analysis of *GQ* from the year 2000.

Chapter Two traced the ideological genealogy of 'pornography' as a categorical device, in order to demonstrate the extent to which the use of this term is delineated by societal positions on sexuality.¹ This investigation was done so that the essential characteristics of pornography may be identified, regardless of the ideological undercurrents of an era, which were subsequently compared to *GQ* in Chapter Three.² In a similar vein, the polemics of the legislative and feminist grapplings with this term were examined. Chapter Two, furthermore, highlighted three codes typical of canonical erotic art, which have seemingly become synonymous with the fetishistic representation of women in a manner that is deemed to be socially acceptable. The analysis of these codes served to demonstrate the manner in which art mystifies the sexualised representation of women, constituting a lexicon of visual codes used by glossy men's magazines that wish to ennoble their objectifying content. In order to highlight this process of appropriation, this Chapter introduced the term 'gentlemen's pornography' as a taxonomy that includes both canonical erotic artworks and glossy men's magazines. The overall historical delineation of pornography, in conjunction with relevant

¹ The writings of primarily Foucault (1980), Kendrick (1987) and Tang (1999) were relied upon to sketch the history of 'repressive' sexuality within western culture.

² It is difficult to separate the notion of 'pornography' from a context, but the idea was that by demonstrating the various political and social ideologies that inform the changing definitions of pornography, it may become apparent that there are also areas of commonality between all of the definitions. As mentioned in this Chapter, these commonalities would eventually become the basis for the United States Civil Rights Ordinance's (1985) definition of pornography, that formed the point of departure for Chapter Three.

discipline-specific positions, functioned as a point of departure from which both the similarities and differences between GQ, pornography and canonical erotic artworks were investigated.

Chapter Three investigated GQ against the United States Civil Rights Ordinance's (1985) definition of pornography. In this Chapter, four criteria, established by the Civil Rights Ordinance as components of pornography, were examined as they appear in both canonical erotic art and GQ. The discussion of these criteria was modelled on Itzin's (1992) exposition of the Civil Rights Ordinance. The Civil Rights Ordinance's definition of pornography was, in other words, reduced to the notions of 'sex', 'subordination', 'violence' and 'proof of harm', and each of these concepts was dealt with individually. The underlying assumption of this Chapter was that GQ represents 'sex', 'subordination', and 'violence', and is therefore potentially harmful. Although GQ is not explicit in its representation, it might, nonetheless, be described as a kind of pornography.

Chapter Four unravelled the ambiguous position of gentlemen's pornography as being situated somewhere between obscenity and acceptability in western society. The manner in which GQ positions itself as both 'obscene' and 'acceptable' was investigated, as well as the archetypal codes employed by the publication to achieve this brand identity. Towards this end, Chapter Four proposed three 'mechanisms of disguise' whereby GQ masks its sexually objectifying imagery or 'obscenity'. These ennobling devices were examined under the terms: 'aesthetics', 'cultivation' and 'the appropriation of empowerment'. Whereas Chapter Three emphasised the commonalities between GQ and pornography, Chapter Four highlighted their differences in order to demonstrate the manner in which the pornographic may be framed in acceptability in contemporary popular culture.

5.2 Contribution of study

The main assumption that validated and informed this study was that GQ objectifies and subordinates women and may, therefore, in spite of its aesthetic and intellectualised veneer, be deemed harmful. This study postulated that stereotypes, whether glorifying or degrading, are short-hand devices that reduce and contract (polemical) realities to an easily understood and represented symbol. The extent to which women are stereotyped in GQ, it was argued, is the extent to which GQ reduces woman-ness to various easily understood types. GQ's polished veneer and glamourised tone were stripped away to reveal that beneath these seemingly innocuous mechanisms of disguise, GQ still subordinates women. The prime tenet of the argumentation, in other words, was that GQ is harmful not because of the way it stereotypes women, but because this stereotyping denies the complex texture of women and female sexuality (and, by extension, of male desire).

On a more philosophical note, the need for the critical consideration of visual culture is at the heart of Postmodern thinking, yet is frequently (and appropriately) slowed down by the (political) complexity of this culture. The dialectics between criticism and culture are evident in the many diverse positions on art, pornography and popular culture, indicating that 'theory' has not forgotten the complexity of culture. Nead (1992) observes that "art and pornography are caught in a cycle of reciprocal definition, in which each depends on the other for its meaning, significance and status". This study added popular culture to the 'reciprocal' relationship between art and pornography, and in so doing, hopefully unveiled the manner in which GQ can slip between (dissolve?) the genres of art, pornography and popular culture. The taxonomy of gentlemen's pornography, as the uneasy platform of this study, served to highlight the slippery and overlapping qualities of art, pornography, and popular culture. In this way the author hopes to have sabotaged the easy relegation of sexualised representation to merely one of these categories.

In the literature study, this dissertation examined various theories centred around sexualised representation in order to test the assumptions of this study against the seminal theoretical positions on this subject. The critical analysis of GQ that is the backbone of this study complemented the literature study by demonstrating the manner in which GQ simultaneously appropriates the gloss of canonical erotic art, yet embodies the legislative components of pornography.

One of the foremost contributions of this study is, thus, methodological, since it presents a theoretical model that can be applied to other examples of popular culture. The comparative investigation of GQ and canonical erotic art, against the backdrop of legislative, feminist and art historical delineations of pornography, is a theoretical model that can be used in the investigation of other visual culture (such as women's magazines, fashion or advertising).³ These new models are necessary where old taxonomies such as 'art', 'pornography' and 'popular culture' have become outmoded and insufficient frameworks for investigating visual culture.

Although 'conventional' pornography (*Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Hustler*) has been extensively researched within various fields, glossy men's magazines are still a fairly under theorised area of popular visual culture. This study has opened up the field of glossy men's magazines to further research that draws from diverse areas such as legislative and feminist discourse, art history and popular visual culture.

The relevance and subsequent contribution of this study is therefore twofold:

³ Theorists such as MacRobbie (1996), Pritchard (1993), and Root (1996) have been seminal in articulating this new genre of investigation and the need for further research into the areas where high culture and popular culture meet (specifically with relation to gender and the politics of display).

- Firstly, this study drew attention to the objectifying and subordinating nature of GQ and the elevated, elitist tone it employs to 'disguise' its sexist content.
- Secondly, this study established a theoretical model by which other examples of popular visual culture might be investigated, particularly where the gender ideology of these examples is examined.

The author hopes that this thesis has delineated the need for a critical debate concerning glossy men's magazines in contemporary western culture, and further trusts that this debate would treat the categories, 'art', 'pornography' and 'popular culture' with skepticism, while not shying away from the notion that elements of visual culture need to be treated critically.

5.3 Limitations of study

Since the emphasis of the dissertation falls on GQ, other relevant areas of visual culture, referred to briefly in the argumentation, were not adequately investigated. Only specific examples of canonical erotic art were referred to, for instance, and even these were not always comprehensively analysed. In a similar vein, a number of potentially problematic connotations were risked throughout the text for the sake of brevity. (The worst of these include the conflation of so-called soft and hard-core pornography into the general category of 'conventional pornography', and the conflation of diverse artworks such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, and Manet's *Olympia* as examples of 'canonical erotic art'.)

A further limitation is the fact that GQ is virtually the only glossy men's magazine referred to, a consequence of keeping the study focussed and manageable. Although focused on *GQ South Africa* 2000, the argument is, nonetheless, believed to be representative of the wider genre of glossy men's magazines.

Other theoretical positions (Marxism and semiotics, for instance), might have been employed as a point of departure, in which case different dominant and oppositional positions may have been revealed. A relatively new medium or phenomenon such as glossy men's magazines, nevertheless, warrants the amalgamation of existing strategies of interpretation (as was the case in this study) and, thus, the negotiated reading that underpins this study seems fitting. The assumption that GQ subordinates and stereotypes women would, furthermore, be difficult to circumvent from whatever perspective the magazine is investigated and, thus, the findings of this study are believed to be valid.

5.4 Suggestions for further research

There are three areas, specifically, that are the natural extension of this study: Firstly, the premises of this study might be applicable to other publications or areas within the wider context of popular visual culture. Glossy women's magazines (such as *Cosmopolitan*), for instance, have been the subject of critical gender analysis for some time (see MacRobbie 1996), and might similarly be investigated against the backdrop of canonical erotic art, as well as legislative and feminist delineations of pornography.

Secondly, the South African context may lend a culturally nuanced tone to certain images in *GQ*, thereby warranting a more culturally orientated critique of the power roles within the publication. The inclusion or exclusion of black models in *GQ*, for instance, is an aspect that was not addressed in this dissertation. Whereas the ideological premises of this study are predominantly drawn from radical feminist discourse, an analysis centered on cultural stereotyping might rely more heavily on Post-colonial theory, especially concerning the stereotyping of the 'exotic'.

Thirdly, the sales demographic of glossy men's magazines might increasingly include women. (In the same way that the sales demographic of glossy women's magazines are generally believed to include men.) As mentioned previously, the effects of gender stereotyping in glossy men's magazines on male readership is relatively under theorised, but the implications of this stereotyping on female readers seems to be even more frequently overlooked by theoreticians.⁴ An analysis centered on the female readership of *GQ* seems a natural extension of an analysis of the manner in which *GQ* objectifies and subordinates women, for the one presumably influences the other.⁵

5.5 Concluding remarks

To some, pornography is a means of liberating repressed sexual fantasy and inspiring creative sexual expression; to others, it typecasts sexuality, objectifies the body and perpetuates gendered difference (Slade 1989:957). According to Slade (1989:957), "such polarization not only constantly reshapes the arena of the debate [concerning pornography], but also ensures that no single definition of pornography will satisfy everyone". *Gentlemen's* pornography is an even more difficult genre to classify ethically, because it moves fluidly between the categories of art, pornography and popular culture, without wholly resting in any of these. The study of glossy men's magazines, like-

⁴ The male stereotypes and construction of masculinity in *GQ* were, similarly, not addressed in this study and are an equally relevant aspect of the critique of glossy men's magazines.

⁵ Research on women's responses to pornography may prove helpful to this kind of study (see Shaw 1999; Pickard 1982).

wise, is fraught with ambiguity in terms of both the material being confronted and the position from which it is interpreted.

Such polemical ambiguities as the art/pornography relationship in glossy men's magazines make it easy to forget the object of these magazines. *GQ* is situated in the entertainment industry and, thus, whatever objectifying imagery it contains, forms part of the objective of entertaining. Neil Postman (1982:264) remarks that "American culture is being turned into one long, uninterrupted show business act", a process he terms the Las Vegasizing of America, and indeed, what better description could there be for pornography of any kind than 'show business'. In the show culture of the contemporary West, *GQ* has perfected the art of selling visual display without the association of unsubtle (kitsch, common, obscene) show business.

GQ and glossy men's magazines are but one manifestation of the much wider phenomena in visual culture of sexualised consumerism and commodified sexual display. Glamorised objectification is a larger than life reality in contemporary visual culture and, perhaps because of its ubiquitous presence, frequently prompts the art-imitates-life arguments of those who believe pornography to be the *reflection* of 'obscenity' (female objectification and subordination), not the cause of it. This position is largely convincing but for the fact that it presumes imitation (representation) is innocent, even where it reinforces and naturalises what it depicts. "Evil, mediocrity", observes Kierkegaard, "is never so dangerous as when it is dressed up as 'sincerity'" (1938:363). The fact that commodified sex saturates contemporary visual culture, like the 'harmfulness' of *GQ*, may seem self-evident to the point of triviality, but they possibly "belong to that kind of truth which, just because of [its] triviality, [is] easily forgotten or neglected" (Panofsky 1959:18).

In an attempt to guard against this kind of trivialising or forgetting, this study has drawn from discussions concerning art, pornography and popular culture that at one point or another featured on the acceptable/obscene continuum (and therefore pertain to the study of glossy men's magazines). In keeping with this over-the-shoulder revisionism, one might revisit what Charles Rembar (1969:491) in the 1960s termed the *sedutio ad absurdum* of consumer culture: "Books enter the best-seller list distinguished only by the fact that once they would have put their publishers in jail ... [while t]elevision commercials peddle sex with an idiot slyness". The same observation might be made of contemporary glossy magazines that use fashion and features on current affairs to soften the glare of aestheticised sex (and not the other way round, as is often assumed). Similarly, on contemporary television, shockumentaries allow viewers to enjoy sexual display under the guise of objective investigation, and sitcoms, such as *Sex and the City* – probably the best example of a 'show and tell' format – palm in media awards for explicitly grappling with (read: showing) contemporary sexuality.

The 'solution' to the *sedutio ad absurdum* of consumer culture does not seem to lie in expelling the obscene to the periphery of social culture, for here it merely acquires the powerful appeal of subversion. Conversely, where subversive acts and obscene (stereotyping and objectifying) representations are overlooked or accepted, they acquire the association of being exempt from 'plebeian' societal norms. In this vein, Titian's *Venus and the Organ Player* (1548, figure 77), has obtained a kind of iconic status for the flippancy with which the primly dressed organ player directly peers at the naked Venus' genitals.⁶ The obscenity of Titian's artwork, however, is framed by and, to some extent, hidden behind the canonical tone of the painting (reclining Venus, drapes, and cherub).

The complex role of sex in popular culture today is much like its role in the 'high' culture of the past centuries. In both of these cases, sex is both alarmingly public and surprisingly secret. The object of this dissertation, however, was not to side with the Citizens of Decent Literature,⁷ rather the author's objection to the vast majority of sexualised representations in contemporary media is, that like Rembar (1969:491), she considers such representations as ironically anti-sex. By way of explanation, one might postulate that the abundance of sexualised representations, whether subtle or not, in all areas of contemporary culture, indicates a society that is more comfortable with the stereotyped simulacrum of the represented than the (unpredictable) reality of the real.

The recent explosion of films, magazines, and television programmes that question the 'real'-ness of human experience and individual control (*Matrix*, *Fight Club*, *The X-Files*, etc.), testify to a society that senses the simulacral nature of popular culture. Even as a marginal indicator of this phenomenon, *GQ* is a powerful contributor to a culture that prefers the constructed to the real, whether with relation to culture, gender or sex.

Like Titian's painting, *GQ* masks its pornographic nature in the (commodified) artistry of privileged high culture. The harm of *GQ* lies in the prescriptive manner in which it commodifies and sexualises women as a part of the lifestyle of consumption that underpins glossy men's magazines. The manner in which *GQ* straddles obscenity and acceptability implicates the fickle nature of these judgements, whether in the hallowed sanctuaries of high culture or the proverbial streets of mass culture. Perhaps the social or taxonomical situation of *GQ*, however, is less important than the fact that behind the artistry of its design and its 'cultivated' tone, *GQ* reduces women to sexual objects.

⁶ In an interview with Tang (1999), Lucie-Smith adds to the theme of exemption associated with the painting by questioning the motives of Phillip II, who commissioned the painting. Lucie-Smith suggests that the King is flaunting his power by commissioning a painting that situates him above the norms of 'common' decency (in Tang 1999).

⁷ Quoted by Rembar (1969:491) in *The End of Obscenity* as one of many censorship bodies.