

'OBSESSION' AND DESIRE: FASHION AND THE POSTMODERN SCENE

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The insertion of 'fashion' into the postmodern terrain points to exciting possibilities regarding new ways of problematizing body adornment, visual codes and writing the body textual. The preceding papers allow for (at least) three important directions in feminist scholarship by dislocating previous assumptions about the fashion apparatus and visual imaginaries. First, the point is well argued that fashion as a sign system is not merely reducible to the commodity-form but is an exchange of products, bodies (biological and textual), subjects, meaning, desire, etc. Second, challenges are put to the (implicit and explicit) radical feminist and separatist indictments of the so-called 'counter-insurrectionist' concern with clothes; and, concomitant with that, the construction of a female spectacle. Finally, the three essays subvert representational logic: there *is* no essential, ulterior feminine 'real' to which all representations refer, and thus distinctions between "positive" and "negative" *images* are tenuous, as are antinomies which posit the representation as an alibi for a pure, distilled referent, be it the "feminine" voice, body or essentialist category 'Woman'.

The importance of studying sign systems relating to body adornment is well served here. *Everybody* wears clothes, at varying times in and out of bed, at home, on the street. Clothes invest the body symbolically: surely this has import beyond their functional significance. It is still of interest,

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however, that in the preceding essays the terms "fashion" and "style", and their attendant discourses, are addressed via their encoding/decoding in either the frozen or moving (i.e. TV) visual moment. This perhaps conforms to the postmodern "culture of sensation" (Lash, 1985): the camera, as we know, quotes death. Similarly, television is the self-reflexive medium, having created an "indigenous voice" as its defining characteristic: everything on television is about being on television — "antinarrative... preoccupied with performance over content; fascinated with bourgeois kitsch as a sort of moral principle" — television is concerned with its own performance, its look, its style: "... there are no stories anymore, no tales left to tell, nothing is at stake... Performance is its own content..."¹

Thus fashion here becomes its own performance, imbricated in its specular and spectacular (invoking visual/pleasurable imaginaries) discourses and, I would want to add, other discursive chains as well. The visual displays under discussion (magazine adverts or fashion spreads and television ads for Calvin Klein's 'Obsession') are constructed in highly symbolic ways, dependent on, and implicating, a female spectator. Her subjectivity is gendered around, among other things, enlistment in the pleasurable viewing of these ads with the fantasy (achieved or otherwise) of engaging in various forms of body adornment or costuming for her subjectivity. As noted by Faurschou, fashion and styles of clothing were originally designators of class location; however, the emphasis has gradually shifted to arbitrary gender positions. Thus I would want to highlight questions regarding a gendered Symbolic (in Lacanian terms), women's location within it, and signifying chains which position these ads — and the female spectator — for their meaning. In other words, I'm left wondering about the "institution of the subject in the visible", how we "see" ourselves through the "culturally seen".²

I would also want to invoke 'questions of desire' on a number of levels: after all, the artifacts under discussion were chosen by the authors following, one assumes, their consumption as objects of pleasure (and I agree with Faurschou for the need to theorize "not only power and domination but also desire and play"). And, representations of desire within 'dominant fictions' sustain sexual identity and sexual difference, certainly central to the formal and substantive composition of the photos/ads.

Clothes and the Model Woman

Self-adornment is the inscription of the body into discourses or, as Elizabeth Wilson would say, the linking of the "biological body to aesthetics."³ Perhaps an ad like that of Galliano's (discussed by Emberley), in the words of Angela Carter, "captures the mood of the times almost to the point of parody, as if to say: we are all... refugees in an empty world. (T)he dominant mood of the eighties (is) a way of dressing

that makes you look like the victim of a catastrophe.”⁴ However, an “aesthetic of poverty” or the “recession style” only go so far toward an understanding of *which* bodies are linked to any particular aesthetic. I therefore enjoin the significance of the broken glasses and “woman-as-Afghanistan” motif in the Galliano ad. One could argue that there are other than “adventure narratives” at play which inflate the glasses with meaning. The “visions” Emberley refers to also point to a sexual narrative around a *female* (perhaps not Third World but Other-worldly) appropriation of the *gaze*, although this is occluded by the model looking over the rim of her glasses, and the very fragile state of the glasses themselves: always threatening to destroy her vision. Her subject position lies somewhere between seeing and not-seeing, that discursive no-woman’s land. Is this Lacan’s evocation: “Nothing can be said of woman”?

But, also, the dominant movement of the photograph directs our eyes to hers and the useless glasses (for indeed she is not using them and they have already been rendered near-defunct by their two broken places) and thus the viewer is privy not just to the look of the model but of a model looking. She is not simply the object-of-the-male-gaze (a familiar cliché) but subject of, and subject for, *women* watching, presumably in pleasurable or, at least, contradictory ways. After all, men don’t make passes at girls who wear glasses. Indeed, the semantic use of glasses and metaphors of vision in sexual discourse are demonstrated elsewhere (cf. the 1942 Bette Davis film, “Now Voyageur”).

How then do women encounter desire, the scenario of which is informed by a patriarchal symbolic, and at what cost? Loss of vision? Castration? Desire, like the body, is a script into which we are written. This is not to support the impulse behind “French feminisms” which wants to re-instate “writing the body,” but to argue that the body is written on, and is thus a history of discourses. The point is simply that there are visions and there are visions: women’s vision(s), of themselves, of each other and of men, form a complex of narratives which can be overdetermining, shifting, and part of the signifying operations of culture and the unconscious. There is no unmediated body. But surely one needs to stress how bodies are articulated through their insertion into discourses which privilege, in the first and final instance, sexual difference.

Writing the body textual also applies to the association of the female model with the terrain — Afghanistan — and the harmonious twinning or metonymic usage of “Les Coloniales” (the Dior make-up line) and its accompanying photo-advertisement. The unwritten female body, denied access to masculine discourse, is prey to colonization: we are talking of more than a western representation of a Third World subject. The female

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subject/body is colonized through its inscription into patriarchal discourses: there is more to *this* discourse-of-difference than what is masked in the relations of production.

Obsession: A Play on Desire

Calvin Klein's 'Obsession' ads invite discussion of the symbolic legislation of sexual difference and questions of desire.

His television ads are astonishing, alluring and seductive. They operate on a number of levels; some notes from Lacanian problematics of desire may provide entry to their allure and larger questions regarding the anatomy of subjectivity.

Desire, within this framework, emerges when need and demand are not met and coheres around a desire for the mother and to *be everything* for the mother (hence circuits of desire). The primary dyadic relationship between mother and child, constituted around unrepressed longings to be satisfied by and to satisfy the central care-giver, is an Imaginary register disrupted by the "Law of the Father" (signified by the phallus: discursive, not anatomical), the prohibition against incest. Desire is coincident with lack (lack of the phallus or paternal signifier which will satisfy the mother's desire), which also defines sexual narratives based on difference: the most fixed of sexual discourses. Conjointly, desire is fixed around the inauguration of the subject into meaning with the acquisition of language, figurative of the Symbolic order. What Lacan calls "kinship nominations" (the power behind the name 'mother,' 'father,' 'sister,' 'brother,' etc.) are the superimposition of "the kingdom of culture" and it is these linguistic transactions which secure sexed identity.

Calvin Klein's "Obsession" is another man's/woman's "Desire": I want to argue that the ads can be seen as dramatic plays on the workings of desire. The relational nature of desire — it only emerges with meaning, alienation of the self and separation from the first objects of identification — situates it around lack and the impossibility of its (i.e. desire's) realization. The impossibility of desire is structured into one's relationship to two ideal representations "forever beyond the subject's reach": the first being model perfection in its mirror image, the source of its "identity;" the second refers to identifications made in the symbolic order which center further on lack and paternal signification⁵

A Lacanian reading of the text renders the formal qualities of desire — or obsession — as being shared by both narrator and the female subject of the narrative. Indeed, there is no discernible boundary between the narrative of one and the narrative of another: that is, whose obsession/desire is speaking? The individuals', whose lives are briefly incited by the young woman's desire? or *her* story/desire? We return to Lacan's *circuits* of desire. She (the central and recurring character of all four television

and print 'Obsession' ads) is possessed by her desires and the three males (one a young boy) and one female who narrate are possessed with desire of her. The elusive yet pervasive nature of desire is signified by the model's mysterious appearance (she is always there but with no point of origin); and around her just as mystical departure (although she leaves her traces or marks of desire). And the traces of others' desire are left with her as well — the flowers, the chess piece, the child's book... Desires are conflated to the unconditional whim of the Other, "this whim that introduces the phantom of the Omnipotence, not of the subject, but of the Other in which his demand is instilled... and with this phantom the need for it to be checked by the Law."⁶

The "content" of this desire shifts according to its discursive context. This is best exemplified in the ad which dramatizes a young boy's need/demand/desire for his at-once present and absent mother wherein configurations of desire conform to Lacan's emphasis on the first instance of lack: being, with the realization that one cannot have a symbolic unity with the mother. This is consolidated with the child's entry into the Symbolic Order, typified by acquisition of linguistic signifying systems, *this* signified by the boy's book = language.

Within the Lacanian schema the Symbolic is a patriarchal one, represented by the Law of the Father (the "ruler" in the "kingdom of passion," mentioned in one of the ads), a father endowed with phallic power who interferes with the original dyadic unity between mother and child. The unconscious is opened up in encountering the Symbolic and is founded on *repression* of desire for merging with the mother. The father interrupts these "imaginary" desires and constitutes the law which is repressed desire. Thus, in the "kingdom of passion" the "ruler" is Obsession/desire. The most intriguing aspects of the text surround the circuits of desire involving the narrated and the narrator: which is which? Also, it appears that the central female character is saturated with a desire rarely seen so explicitly in television advertising (although one wants to avoid reference to a "feminine" specificity or non-discursive desire). This poly-sexuality, the insatiability of desire, a female-centered discourse in which she is a carrier of far more than the male gaze: these are the representations of desire, a "... description of feminine sexuality.. an exposure of the terms of its definition, the very opposite of a demand as to what that sexuality should be."⁷ This is relief from the dominant fictions into which we are inserted: best rejected by our obsessive/desiring subject who, in knocking the chess pieces off the board, refuses to play by the rules of the game.

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Notes

1. Powers, 1986:40.
2. Lacan, 1981:106; Silverman, 1987.
3. 1983:25.
4. 1983:65.
5. Lacan, 1977; Silverman, 1983.
6. Lacan, 1977:311.
7. Rose, 1982:44.

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