

Gendered Magazines

Manufacturing a gendered space: Questions of guilt and pleasure

The magazine industry's depictions of femininity are attempts to unify the perceived complexities of young women's lives around coherent, commercially viable, configurations of 'woman' that will appeal to advertisers and readers alike.

Gough-Yates, A. (2003) *Understanding Women's Magazines*. London: Routledge.

1 Introduction

In this chapter I want to take a look at magazines produced for male and female audiences, in terms of how they define themselves as gendered texts, and how that audience may make sense of these texts. Women's magazines especially seem to open doors to a special, even secret, feminized world, in which the state of being a girl or a woman is celebrated. Pleasure is offered and shared.

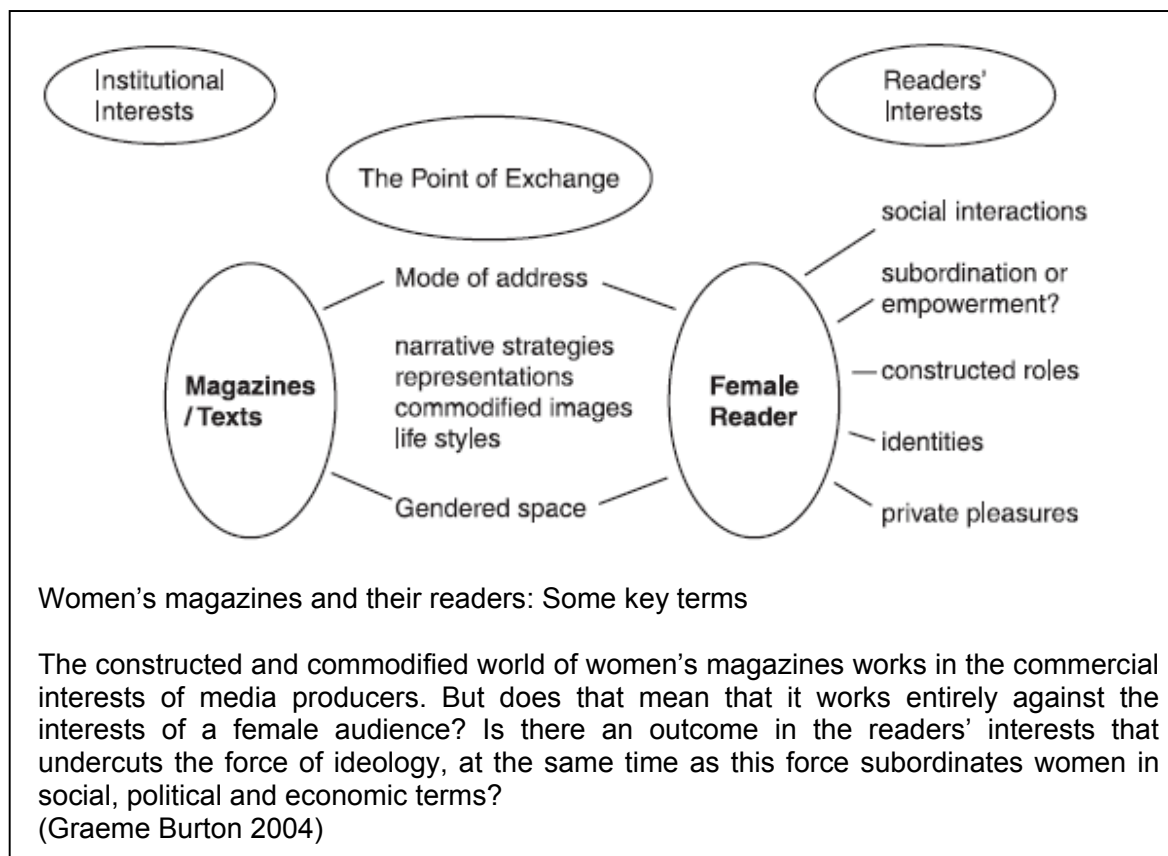
While women's magazines have a long history (see White 1969), there is no parallel with magazines for men. Those magazines that are read predominantly by males – not least those in specialist hobby areas such as computing – are not the same thing. They don't define a clearly gendered male culture. It can also be said that the British 'lads' mags' of the 1990s – *Loaded* or *FHM* – are not an equivalent to women's magazines. I will discuss these in a separate section at the end of this chapter. Men's magazines are different from those for women in respect of their short history (since the 1980s), their content and most of all their cultural position. There is some degree of equivalence in that they carry the messages of the 21st century 'cosmetics-for-males' industry. They have articles on appearance, fitness and so being attractive to women. However, they still contain images and articles that place women as sex objects. They have a small readership among the male population as a whole. They tacitly assume a culture of male dominance and privilege. They are nothing like the world of women's magazines, which females grow up with and which clearly promote billion-pound industries concerned with fashion, cosmetics and domestic and child-care products.

This difference is significant, not least because it can be explained in terms of culture and ideology. Put simply, men's world is 'the world' – it needs no further explanation or definition. But the woman's world is defined in relation to this 'naturally' dominant model. Women's magazines have helped a process of demarcation and distinction – the working of difference. This contrast is underlined by the range of magazines for women, their long history and their selection in terms of the age of the audience. The market recognizes and defines its female readers from the age of 12 upwards (arguably earlier).

Before that, there are comics, or picture mags, doing the work of socialization, defining what it is to be female and what is a female place in the world. In the last ten years or so there has also been a growth in what are termed 'pre-teen mags'. This new niche market is far more celebrity and commodity-oriented than the predecessors for this age group. There is *Girl Talk* (BBC Worldwide), *Go Girl*, *Star Girl* and *High School Musical* (Disney). Pink is a dominant colour. Gifts abound. Make-up is in there. Advertisers refer to the 'tweenage' market, estimating it to be worth £220 billion a year. This is all about building a gendered identity and a new generation of consumers (*Media Guardian* 2 June 2008).

Women's magazines assume that women exist as a coherent readership. They construct women as a largely 'homogenous group': they address them as if they are a 'naturally occurring group' (Ballaster et al.).

Women recognize what is going on in these media products. The expansion of formal education, together with a certain level of public awareness about media production and marketing, has contributed to a much reported tension in female readers between guilt and pleasure. Many women enjoy reading these magazines yet realize that they are being levered into certain roles and into being concerned for their appearance in the eye of the male gaze.



As an aside, and with relation to what will be a critique of the ideological work of women's magazines, it is worth remembering that half of the women in Britain do not read these magazines at all.

Women's magazines represent women to themselves in certain ways, bringing together social interaction and consumption. They incorporate assumptions about women in terms of their biology, their career aspirations, their role models and their emotional lives. They can be sexist by stealth, ideological in what they do not say, and sometimes racist and ageist by implication. They normalize and so endorse heterosexual definitions of sexuality. Still a range of women enjoy reading them, and this needs to be elucidated, from both post-modernist and hegemonic perspectives.

Apart from looking at these magazines as gendered texts, as vehicles for representations, I also want to pay some attention to their narratives. In a larger sense they tell a story about becoming and being a woman. In a particular sense, they contain narratives – in features, readers' letters or short stories – which incline to certain concerns and certain outcomes. This is what McCracken (1993) refers to as 'the ostensibly authoritative grand narrative of reality developed month after month'.

In fact, now the fastest growing segment of the magazine market is not the monthlies (2 per cent down in 2005-06) but the apparently trashier, more gossipy weeklies (up 2 per cent in the same period). The preference for celebrity gossip is mirrored in the growth of online magazines such as *The Lipster*.

2 Major questions

- 1 What do we understand to be distinctive about the genre defined as 'the women's magazine'?
- 2 What is the nature of the relationship, set up through gendered magazines and through their modes of address, which works on the reader?
- 3 What meanings may be derived from the narratives and the representations in these magazines?
- 4 How may one understand these magazines in the context of debates about the relationship between producer, text and audience?
- 5 In particular, how may one evaluate alternative positions on women's magazines which both justify them as being pleasurable but also condemn them as being trivial and ideological?
- 6 What do women's magazines say about female roles, female space and 'the feminine'?

3 Genre features – convention, expectation and fulfillment

Given that there are more than 80 magazines for women on the news-stands, it is ... surprising how similar groups of them are.

McKay, J. (2000) *The Magazines Handbook*. London: Routledge.

Women's magazines have a consistency of type of content and treatment across their subdivisions and even across a long period of time. This consistency both creates a certain kind of relationship with the reader, based on expectations, and it imposes a certain kind of understanding or interpretation of the text. This consistency and continuity also stands for kinds of ideological verity about women's place in a constructed order of things. These magazines both stand for and help maintain that construction to varying degrees. The features that we anticipate – that have become conventional – focus on appearance, domestic work, relationships and romance. These may be couched in various modes – letters, features, fiction, true-life stories, advertisements and ad features.

They may be framed by various narrative devices: the problem, the autobiography, the call for help, the counsellor's advice. They may have a varying emphasis from age group to age group (and maybe from magazine to magazine). So magazines for young women are strong on forming relationships, on sex information, on leisure adventure. Those for older women place more weight on maintaining relationships, dealing with loss, operating in the domestic sphere, among other topics. This genre world is still largely white and heterosexual. What is not represented or discussed is significant by its absence. Genres, by definition of their mass appeal, are poor at recognizing minority interests. So women's magazines are socially normative or ideologically conservative. They use a repetitive format and a confined range of subjects to please a majority audience, and to satisfy the economic interests of advertisers.

As with all media genres, women's magazines exist on an economic basis that makes profit from the pleasure of their audiences. The circuit of profit and pleasure predicates repetition and reinforcement. Genre features are reinforced, as are the ideological positions endorsed by the text. This reinforcement is adjacent to the process of naturalization through which the world of women's magazines is made to seem 'normal'.

The presence of advertising has become a normal feature of the magazines – as normal as the commercials embedded within TV programmes. What is exceptional is the sheer volume of promotional material. Not only is 50 per cent or more of the page space likely to be occupied by paid-for advertising, but a great deal of other material is also promotional. Feature articles are not always neutral. They may, for example, review or sample products – a device which draws attention to those products. The primacy of promotion has become an unsurprising feature of the genre. On average 39 per cent of magazine revenue comes from advertising (Braithwaite in Briggs and Copley 1998). When *Glamour* magazine was launched in Britain in 1991 (having been a success in the USA, it had an advertising launch budget of £5 million), it had a tie-in promotion deal with L'Oreal cosmetics and an in-store sales agreement with the Dorothy Perkins chain of clothing stores (*Independent on Sunday* 17 June 2001).

So far as one can distinguish sub-genres under the heading of 'women's magazines', the differences are about the goods on offer, the lifestyle with which these goods are

offered and the life position of the reader. It is clear that *J-17* is aimed at free, young females embarking on relationships, whereas *Woman's Own* is speaking to older homemakers and mothers. *Homes & Gardens* refers to class, aspiration and disposable income. *Stitches* refers to a very specific but female/domestic-located interest. I would argue that these are variations on a theme of beauty, fashion, relationships, sex and the home: these are the parameters of the world of women, or so it seems.

The genre features of the magazine are, it may be argued, attractive in the reassurance they give of a consistent world, a way of making sense of life. Indeed, the routine content – horoscopes, letters, features, advice, fashion – becomes a part of everyday life routine for the reader. Of course, it is dangerous to generalize about such routines – many women do not have children, for example. But in any case, media use is both part of and a break from this routine. And the short and varied elements which make up such magazines are good for slotting into routines. They can be picked up and put down without having to lose a narrative thread.

Certainly this is what Hermes (1995) argues for through her research. She takes an ethnographic approach in which she interviews Dutch women across an age range from 20s to 60s, attending to how, when and where they read, as much as to what they read. It appears that her respondents adapted media use to the rhythm of their days. This research also refers to two particular genre elements – things practical and things emotional. Her respondents were positive about what were seen as useful tips for making things, and about advice for coping emotionally with various crises in life. Hermes herself is less convinced about the values of such material.

She sees the magazines (and their producers) as balancing the need to be dispensable yet indispensable: easily slotted into everyday life but diverting enough to be picked up in the first place. Hermes also talks about the 'repertoires' which she suggests that readers use to make sense of material. So, there is the repertoire of 'connected knowing', which 'addresses crisis situations'. This might, for example, relate to a feature about dealing with children on drugs – it becomes a way of securing life against change and threats. Or there is the repertoire of 'melodrama', which 'recognizes the tragic quality of life'. This could also be related to the child/drugs example, which would then become all the more powerful as a text. What Hermes (1995) does not develop, but which seems pretty clear, is that these repertoires 'for making sense of' are equally characteristic genre features. They are in the text as well as in the reader.

In both historical and contemporary terms, one can see generic features in relation to the wider debate about media and society. For example, one might argue from a liberal pluralist view that the genre has developed in response to women's needs and as a reflection of the changing conditions of women's lives. From a neo-Marxist view, the genre has developed as an expression of the class system and recognizes mainly those women with disposable time and income. Also, it expresses the interest of capital and the process of commodification – much of the material is about selling goods. From one feminist view, the genre expresses indirectly the interests of patriarchy – from the male-dominated, multi-national owners of the magazines, to the implicit male in the text whose interest is in woman as beauty object and domestic labourer.

My own position is not to be trapped by labels, but is one which asserts that ideology

is alive and kicking. So, although this chapter refers mainly to text and audience, one should also see the genre in the context of the political economy. There is room for allowing degrees of audience autonomy, while also asserting that the genre and its salient features work against the interests of women (and their autonomy).

In talking about girls' magazines in the early half of the twentieth century, Tinkler (1995) observes that 'the form and content of magazines represented the articulation of capital's concern to exploit girls as consumers, with patriarchal interests in the heterosexual development and orientation of girls as a necessary precondition of their acceptance of unequal gender relations and a subordinate position within marriage.' One needs to question how far this situation has fundamentally changed in the meantime. In other words, the genre has developed in response to economic and ideological forces, not as a kind of mirror for the 'natural interests' of females.

4 Mode of address – positioning the reader

Magazines for females employ a familiar mode of address through which they establish a relationship with the reader. The tone and effect of this address assumes a complicity in a 'woman's world', in which the priority of certain interests is assumed – affairs of the body and affairs of the heart predominating. This mode of address contrives to gloss over the industrial and economic base that manufactures pleasurable words and images. It helps to make the pleasures and the meanings seem unproblematic. It depends on its own history and on the related network of discourses about gender that are out there, being lived day to day. It is this history which has constructed the idea of 'a woman's world', that has made who these magazines are for self-evident.

There is a degree of difference between magazines for various ages and interest groups. Publications aimed at the younger teenager, such as *Bliss* or *Sugar*, have more intimacy than detachment. They use argot and idiom of a supposedly cool nature – youth not adult. The graphics are full of fun/action and pink hues. The general tone and role position of the editorial or the features is that of big sister. Sexuality is acknowledged – intelligently in some cases. But this is a world in which girls have fun, boys are for fun, and domestic and economic responsibility does not figure much.

Publications aimed at the older woman address them as friends and equals, and never in that rather authoritative manner adopted by magazines of fifty years ago and more, which had more than a touch of 'mother knows best'. Still the woman is hailed as a partner in a gendered universe whose prison bars are out of focus, whose landscape of domestic activity, social performance and cultural improvement is very much in focus. Some magazines – say, the high fashion-oriented *Vogue* – are not even on the same planet so far as most women are concerned. However, mainstream examples, such as *Woman's Own* or *Cosmopolitan*, have that largely conversational mode of address, which seeks to place the magazine as a woman's friend.

The editor of *Marie Claire* talks about the difficulty of sustaining a glossy and entertaining product (form), which also has content with which the readership can

empathize (*Media Guardian* 28 April 2008). She is competing with weeklies such as *Grazia*. She is second guessing the female zeitgeist with a present tendency to lead on eco-orientated articles. She is playing that difficult media game of trying to follow and lead audience interest, both at the same time. It is about finding a voice to which the readership can warm.

The address, whether verbal or visual, positions the reader within a kind of role. That role position is partly measured against the role of the narrator/writer – whatever element of the magazine one is talking about. It is also a position that predicates a kind of relationship – one that doesn't really exist, but which may become real in the mind of the reader. So dipping into a women's magazine becomes rather like having conversations, it becomes a social experience – to this extent it becomes attractive and possibly addictive. It is an entirely false relationship. Most of all the reader is positioned in terms of reading the material – making meanings from the text. One may argue that the female reader feels well disposed towards pronouncements on ageing or advice on kinds of domestic improvement because she has been drawn into the position of listening to a friend who understands her life and its predicaments. The idea that this kind of media text may be partly responsible for weaving the threads of her life and of her gender understanding in the first place is suppressed by the warmth and familiarity set up by this mode of address, and by the fact that magazine reading becomes part of her life's patterns.

The skill, the pleasure, even the addictiveness generated by the mode of address, is that the female reader feels addressed both individually and as part of a female community. She feels validated as an individual – she has a friend; she is 'understood'. However, she also is led to feel that her problems, concerns and needs are shared by a larger female community which is kept in touch through the pages of the magazine. What is so seductive and suspect about this address is that it is both an artifice and yet relates to social experience. It is acknowledged that many women do network, share problems and give priority to issues surrounding relationships. Magazines did not create this nuance of gendered social behaviour. On the other hand, the 'address' of these magazines is something constructed by commercial organizations with commercial ends in mind.

Hermes argues that media use, including magazine reading, does not have to be particularly meaningful. But then, nothing is meaningless. Humans are meaning-makers. So one has to deal with a debate in which, on the one hand, there is an argument against placing too much weight on the significance of popular media texts, but, on the other hand, meaning may be created even from what is deemed trivial and transitory. Again, there is the issue of who determines what is more or less meaningful. Who is the media critic to tell the female reader that what she reads is lacking in influence because it appears to be 'insignificant'?

Critics have commented on the history of this mode of address and of generic patterns in terms of their consistency over three hundred years. In this context it is hard not to see address as fulfilling an ideological function – 'the pleasures of the magazine for its women readers cannot be understood as "innocent", nor separated from their ideological function in women's lives' (Ballaster et al. 1991). The women's magazine may sometimes recognize female subjectivity as a problem – one which it purports to solve. In fact the magazines are reproducing the very contradictions that they appear to sort out.

Any number of articles on assertiveness do not deal with the dominant meanings of advertising material, which ‘teach’ subordination, passivity and objectification. The inherent contradictions of material that, like soaps, contains elements of social realism alongside the fantasy and unrealistic aspirations, remain unresolved.

5 Representations

The very phrase ‘women’s magazines’ incorporates an assumption about the coherence of a group of people labeled ‘women’, who can be represented collectively and spoken for as a recognizable group. This coherence shuts down, if not actually eliminates, the possibility of variation in conceptualizing categories of women and their different needs and interests. It is a coherence that both informs the representations and is manufactured by them. It is a coherence that has been manufactured by decades of publications holding on to and constructing an audience. This representation of women may in part be inspired by cultural assumptions and attitudes – stereotypes are rarely simply invented by the media. But it is also in part a creature of market forces. Familiar and understood representations, invoking common sets of values, help sell magazines.

Many of the faces on the covers smile at us in close-up. This is the look that engages our attention, which is close and familiar. The reader attends to this face as a role model in appearance – both friendly and flawless of skin. Inside the magazines, women are presented as camera conscious (gaze aware), posing to show off the clothes. They are represented as people for whom appearance is of prime importance. The space in the magazines is dominated by such images, not by articles on economic management. The material representation (words and images) is bound up with attractiveness and idealization, the beauty myth. Connotatively, these representations still speak predominantly of passivity, social performance and domestic activity, and not of power.

One also notices – speaking of women’s magazines in general and in terms of circulation figures – that some women are not represented. Those who look old are largely absent. Those who do not fit implied definitions of attractiveness are absent. Those who belong to minorities, such as the disabled or ethnic groups, are (largely) absent, as are those belonging to sexual minorities such as homosexual or trans-gendered groups. So the representations which purport to speak to and about all women actually do not. In so far as they do speak about women, they are extremely partial.

McCracken (1993) talks about the importance of the cover of women’s magazines, as an advertisement in itself, as a genre identifier, as a semiotic system: ‘the interplay of the photographic, verbal and chromatic texts on each cover creates a series of value-laden cultural significations, but is primarily intended to attract revenue from advertisers and increase circulation’. She sees the cover as window to a future self, which the woman aspires to attain but which is never quite attainable. McCracken discusses the representation of women on covers in terms borrowed from Irving Goffman. They may be signalling emotional display (the bright smile of delight and engagement), signs of subordination (lowered gaze or head) or appeasement, inner states (the distant gaze), or

‘licensed withdrawal’ (hands over face or mouth).

Ballaster et al. refer to ‘a set of images and representations which construct an imaginary world and an imaginary reader’. This world is circumscribed by the generic elements already referred to. The reader is also assumed within this generic text. This reader construction is simultaneously generalized and differentiated. ‘Woman’ is represented as being universally concerned with things like attractiveness and social behaviour yet is to a degree separated into domestic woman, career woman, young single woman and the like. Both the generalization and the differentiation fail to deal with the genuine diversity of the readers. Images from ethnic minorities, where they exist, are westernized. Class is ignored. Ageing is suppressed, resisted and denied.



Men's and women's magazine covers (Graeme Burton, 2000)

6 Narrative strategies

To some extent the devices used in these magazines to narrate a story about ‘woman-ness’ may be conflated with what has been said under mode of address. The narration is also about positioning the reader.

But in this case, I am talking about two areas. One is narration within the generic parts of a magazine. The other is about narration in the larger sense of discourse and meaning – the story that is told through the magazines in general – the story that is actually the constructed meaning of gender – the gendered world as the magazine sees it.

An ideologically informed approach to this narrative construction must take account of the ubiquitous ads and ad features that are common in women’s magazines. The ‘story’ of what it is to be female and to behave as a woman depends on consumption. Many of the pleasures that are promised – to be an object of affection and approval – depend on consumption. Many commodities are to do with the body, skin, adornment and tactile experiences. They may also be concerned with manufacturing a female environment in the “woman’s spaces” of bedroom and kitchen – though not always. There is also the performance of being a woman in public spaces – perhaps other places given over to bodily pleasures such as the restaurant or the gym. In any event, the story is that something has to be bought. It is a never-ending story because the narrative can never be resolved. It is about living. It is about ageing. It is about the arrival and departure of others in one’s life, in the story. McCracken talks about a ‘double narrative strategy’ in which the reading experience offers one level of narrative and pleasure (perhaps the story about the improved kitchen). But on another level the reader has to ‘re-enact the narrative in the public sphere by purchasing goods and services’. The story is never ending because ‘the commodity resolutions can only offer temporary pleasures’. What she does not point out is that there are problems in the stories, underlying the pleasures, which themselves can only be resolved through commodities. The problems are ideological constructions. One’s appearance, ageing, kitchen, state of health, or even one’s relationships, are not a problem unless one believes they are. So the narratives of women’s magazines are as much about raising problems as resolving them, as much about making pleasure a problem that requires further action, as of being an end in itself.

7 Roles

There is a strong strand of feminist criticism which argues that by their very nature magazines aimed at women do acquire roles as shapers and definers of what women are and how they are perceived (Ferguson, 1983; Greer, 1999; Macdonald, 1995 and many others). If that’s so then it does matter what images of women are provided by these publications and what social roles women and girls are seen to play in them.

McKay, J. (2000)

In terms of models for social performance and cultural positioning, women’s

magazines offer their readers a suite of roles to occupy. These roles are part of the representations. I have already pointed to the place of role in terms of reader positioning – the female reader as confidante. But it is the social models that help to define a woman's place in the ideological order of things. Dominant models in the history of women's magazines are the roles of wife and mother. The woman is seen as a nurturer and carer, of children and of men. She is a manager and a purchaser within the domestic sphere.

Tinkler (1995) examines magazines of the 1930s in which stories about married relations positioned the young wife in a maternal role vis-à-vis her husband – no sex, but she could pull his troubled head to her bosom. Tinkler mainly explores roles within girls' magazines – as friend, daughter and schoolgirl – with a demarcation between the middle-class and working-class girls who would leave home to work and had some money to spend. She observes that the distinction between social roles of the audience continues to be in evidence in the later twentieth century (shown through McRobbie's analysis of adolescent female readers of the magazine *Jackie* in the 1970s). Tinkler refers to this class difference in terms of the emphasis on fiction (entertainment) for working-class girls and wider range of educational information for the middle-class audience.

Class roles in terms of magazine content and implied audience are now much less explicit, as is the identification of marriage as major life goal. But romance, fun and being in a long-term heterosexual relationship remain the staple fare.

Magazines became more explicit about romance and the heart (in relation to the goal of marriage). Then, as the teenaged girls' magazine market opened up from the 1960s, and adulthood defined only by work and marriage was further deferred, catching a man was transcribed into dating a boy. The role of fiancée was for more formal times and preparation for the more inevitable and dominant role of wife. Increasingly the young female was allowed to be girlfriend, and her sexuality was acknowledged. Either way, one is looking at another set of roles which are fundamentally defined in relation to males. As a critic, one is in a superficially difficult position, appearing to deny fun – the glum face at the party. The point here is not to diminish the emotional value of romance and its place in a pleasurable social fabric. The criticism is about the subordinated nature of the female in such roles. It is about the commodification of romance when it is contextualized within the material trappings of the date or (still, sometimes) the wedding. This commodification may be connoted not just by any references within an article but within advertising in the magazine that speaks of a lifestyle, a story of romance, and that relies on spending and giving material objects.

Of course one has to qualify these generally valid statements. Some articles in some magazines for young women do talk about ideas about being in control. They do not always promote the goal of marriage. Nor do they see the date as a prelude to engagement. There has been some kind of change in the way that women's magazines handle sex and romance, but there has not been an absolute ideological shift. And one does have to consider not only women's magazines in general, but also the related cultural and media context. I am referring, for example, to the wedding supplements in papers and magazines, to wedding exhibitions, to the romantic novel and to the discourse of fictions in other media. All these provide a context to the reading of women's

magazines and provide fuel for the discourse in general.

Returning to kinds of role, another kind of qualification needs to take account of those magazines of the past 20 years that have come to recognize the changing social roles and positions of women. There are more women at work than ever before. Women marry later in life. Women juggle careers and families. So to an extent magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and revamped, traditional magazines do present women in the role of worker or single achiever. However, these magazines or articles also often qualify this role in terms of discussion of appearance, lifestyle or cultural development. There is still this pull back into issues of appearance, not achievement, of the domestic sphere, not the public sphere, of self-improvement. The roles in this modern woman's world are still tied to dressing up, leisure activities and domestic work.

The over-arching role constructed through women's magazines is that of the feminine. This construction (as Ballaster and others have pointed out) happens because of a history in which the women's magazine has itself developed a role as 'friend, adviser, narrator'. The magazines define what it is to be feminine in appearance and behaviour, in a domestic or a public sphere, in relation to family or men, sexually or romantically. Most of all, in their own commercialized interests, the magazines imply that readers are still learning and developing their role, that they lack something – that is, femininity. The magazines' advice, and their products in particular, can satisfy this lack. But, of course, it is never quite satisfied – one can always read more, become just that bit more feminine and complete. 'Femininity, therefore, becomes both a source of anxiety and a source of pleasure because it can never be fully achieved' (Ballaster et al. 1991).

Magazines can be bound up with a woman's changing life role as well as with her sense of identity – Ballaster et al. write, 'your self-identity as a married or a single woman is tied up with your choice of magazines ... identity is achieved through consumption' (Ballaster et al. 1991).

So the magazine both reflects changing roles, yet also contrives to shape and define them. It becomes a lifestyle accoutrement. It is part of living, of the woman's very reality. Pictures of women become kinds of recipes for femininity.

Ferguson (1983) sees the acquisition of a feminine role as being a kind of religious initiation ceremony. Through magazines (and other cultural sources) females learn how to anoint their skin, perform nightly and morning rituals of cleansing, don the right robes in the right way, and learn the secrets of menstruation, sexuality and birth.

8 Social interactions

The interactions represented in women's magazines are circumscribed, obviously with relation to roles. Interactions are referred to within the home and in leisure situations, in relation to children and loved males, in relation to friends, and in relation to professionals helping them with health and other issues, such as divorce.

The interactions have significant emotional dimensions. They may be expressed in terms of how the woman is regarded by others. They have a lot to do with the woman

achieving the approval of others and in terms of her own self-esteem.

Articles which refer to women in the public sphere still often drag the agenda back into line. The woman concerned is talked of, or talks for herself, in terms of coping with family and work, dressing up for work, leisure in contrast to work or dealing with people at work. That which is highlighted is given value. Certain kinds of interaction are placed within the woman's sphere. What is not dealt with is unimportant by omission – public performance, public achievement, economic competence or the exercise of power in the public sphere.

Equally, there is a cutting double-edge to this argument. To deplore the relative lack of material for and about women in powerful public roles risks appearing to denigrate the interactions and domestic roles just referred to. This is not valid either. One is caught between condoning the commodification of women's lives, the equation of material and emotional living, and recognizing the value of 'women's talk'. So often this talk – not least in magazines, sections of newspapers and even in broadcast programmes – is categorized as gossip (men never gossip, of course!). However, there is a deal of difference between an article which leads on the dating patterns and home decor of some TV personality, and a feature (or short story) which leads on the negotiation of relationships. Emotional intelligence is valuable. It is the scope and context of interaction in women's magazines which is perhaps the issue.

9 The ever-present male

The point has already been made about ways in which role, interaction and representation in women's magazines contains a male dimension. I want to further draw out the point that this apparently self-contained world, which is both *of* women and *for* women, is in fact, like the female discourse, defined to a fair extent in relation to a male world.

This is most obvious in respect of images. The stylized poses of fashion pictures in particular expect the gaze of a female reader, but covertly assume that the gaze posed for is that of a male. This is the female who expects to be the object of attention. This is the female who learns to perform for the male gaze. Some advertising images even explicitly contain the gazing male. In any case, it is the camera position which gives away the male gaze. If the lens centre is directed at the model's body, or the camera was placed in some voyeuristic location (behind an object, or to one side of the model), then the range and history of visual forms makes it clear that this is masculine looking.

The male figure also 'watches' from other margins of the magazine. My argument about appearance, performance and gaze clearly relates to all other materials about clothes and cosmetics. The male also lurks as the significant other who is boyfriend, partner, husband, or even celebrity.

'Men are a constant reference point ... women's activity (in magazines) is directed towards ... responding suitably to men's anti-social behaviour' (Ballaster et al.). These authors also comment that 'the work of maintaining healthy personal relationships is women's work'. They point out that even when referring to magazines aimed at the

young single market, ‘the “single” state (without a man) is a temporary condition. In the more traditional magazines, being single is usually understood to be a problem.’ So the woman’s space is always defined by having a male in it, or one waiting on the sidelines.

10 Contradictions

Drawing from the previous section, one of the many contradictions in women’s magazines is the pretence that this is a self-contained woman’s space, when in fact it is defined to a fair extent by the male. It is what the male world is not. It is preoccupied, to a fair extent, with the implied male, who provides the motive for many of the activities drawn out through features, letters, fictions and life dramas which are a staple of magazine content.

Here are a few more contradictions inherent in women’s magazines:

- Women’s magazines purport to speak for the needs and situation of women, yet their connotations work against the interests of women.
- Generally speaking, they articulate opposing discourses of male and female, yet appear to speak of cohesion, harmony and satisfactory relationships. This is not a world in which men and women appear on equal terms. Yet the magazines will refer to equal opportunities and the status of women. It is a world of conflicting appearance and reality.
- The reader is identified as a woman but is addressed as though she were still learning to be a woman; so the reader is not yet in fact the woman identified.
- There are wider contradictions between elements of magazines that talk up stable relationships and the domestic sphere, and those that allude to sexual autonomy and erotic affairs. In this respect, the very nature of the romantic genre is in itself contradictory – immediate gratification vies with deferred pleasures.
- There is a contradiction between the appearance of entertainment in domestic activities (often with relation to food) and the reality of routine domestic labour.
- There is a contradiction between the largely middle-class labour represented (when work in the public sphere is mentioned at all) and the actuality of repetitive part-time jobs, which is the real experience of many women.
- Beauty is framed in terms of the natural, but in fact it is constructed and an artifice.
- The home is represented as a place of leisure (perhaps a place to be beautified), yet it is the location of labour.
- The oldest contradiction of all is that women are simultaneously sexual and on display, yet are also represented as being chaste and loyal.

CRITICAL APPROACHES to FEMINISM

Feminist approaches to media and society pivot on an interest in how gender is represented through the media, in the connections between these representations and gender difference as it is lived in our society. But such approaches may be allied to different critical traditions. For example, a Marxist tradition would see gender inequality as further evidence of ideology in action, of the oppression by the powerful of the powerless – in much the same way that Marx conceived of class oppression. Another strand draws on psychoanalysis and critiques texts through Freudian or Lacanian readings, for instance. In the first case, comment might be made about patriarchal dominance or about fear of female sexuality on the part of males – many Hollywood action films may be read in this way. In the second case, comment might be made about 'the mirror self', about women seeing themselves in media images as being looked at by men. This is still about the subordination of women in society. Radical feminism would see this subordination in terms of sexual oppression and the manipulation of women's sexuality. As Gunter (1995) puts it, with reference to gender representation,

For feminist media theorists, the media are seen as principal instruments in conveying stereotypical, patriarchal and hegemonic values about women and femininity. The mass media are instruments of (male-dominated) social control. According to liberal feminists, the media transmit deeply sexist values and beliefs down from one generation to the next (Tuchman 1978). Radical feminists perceive an even more sinister role of the media, which engender and serve the needs of an essentially patriarchal society, in which women's experiences and views of the world are suppressed (Mattelart 1986). Socialist feminists align sexism with the economic domination of men in society, and perceive the media as perpetrating and maintaining a value system in which men control the key centres of capitalism ... The media – especially television – can contribute to children's gender-role socialization by providing models for observation.

Feminism would also relate media representations to social practices, arguing that just as social structures, behaviours and attitudes still support the idea of patriarchy, so also media narratives tell a story which often supports the idea of patriarchy. In terms of social practice, for example, it is acknowledged that in many industries there is still a 'glass ceiling', which makes it difficult for women to obtain senior management positions. The statistics speak for themselves. The underlying unspoken beliefs are that it is 'normal' for men to run things. An interesting example of media representation is in the British TV series *Playing the Field* (2000-01) about a team of women footballers. The drama steered an interesting ideological course with a male coach, who is not a powerful patriarchal figure, and sub-plots about female success. One might contrast this with the overtly conservative and patriarchal patterns in the Hollywood movie, *Charlie's Angels* (2001).

Feminism is having to take on issues and representations which do not simply pivot on gender. It is clear that what the media 'say' about being a women, or how

media industries employ women, is complicated by other issues such as religion and race. To be black and female and brought up in the US state of Alabama may raise critical issues different from those for a woman brought up in, say, London, UK. This recognition of complexity in making a feminist critique is sometimes referred to as **Third Wave Feminism**, or postmodern feminism. It accepts that identity may have dimensions beyond that of being female.

Feminism employs critical methods such as discourse analysis to support a perspective which prioritizes the female experience and which accounts for the cultural subordination of women. It is bound up with the development of cultural studies. Feminist analysis might work through ideas about identity and difference. There are interesting questions about how far difference is something to be asserted and celebrated, or challenged and undermined because the feminist project should be to achieve equality. Similarly, varying feminist approaches might or might not find the concept of binary oppositions as being helpful towards understanding the notion of 'female'. Is it an opposition to the concept of 'male'? Or is the concept too crude to help describe any distinctiveness about female identity and experience which is perhaps to be celebrated, and which perhaps has nothing to do with men?

Karen Boyle asks questions about where the 'feminist project' is going. She points out that analyses of media representations of performers such as Madonna may not have much relevance to the experience of ordinary women. Deconstruction of gender has to have a purpose. She suggests the danger of focusing on, for example, the feminist identity of female protagonists such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer is that it allows 'the more difficult challenges posed by feminism – challenges to male privilege and power – to slip from view' (Boyle 2005: 42).

11 Pleasure and a woman's space

Discussion of text and reader in this case has to take account of huge sales figures and the well-evidenced pleasures gained from reading these magazines. One cannot talk simply in terms of hegemony at work, of women as a mass being hoodwinked by the machinations of capitalist institutions. Clearly women's magazines, after all the critiques are made, offer kinds of reward and satisfaction in the reading.

Whatever the forces that create the particular social environment for women, their magazines deal with that environment as it is. The process of reading offers a leisure space. The structure of the magazines offers the chance to dive into the pool for a quick dip. The process of reading is undemanding, and it offers a chance to engage with material that women have already learned is part of 'their province'. So there is the pleasure of entering a special place that is integrated with one's female identity, that gives one distinction and satisfaction, and that somehow sets one apart.

Many critics address the 'problem' of guilt and pleasure (as they see it), in which the pleasure of reading vies with guilt at involving themselves with material that is

sometimes trivial and certainly ideological. A post-modernist view might try to settle the problem by arguing for reader power – one takes what one wants, and one uses rather than being used.

Hermes (1995) certainly concludes from her research that this is the case, according to 80 readers interviewed. They say that the material is forgettable, the pleasure is transitory, and that there are no profound meanings. But then one has to ask how far these readers can be aware of the internal processes through which meanings may be accrued. One has to relate their responses to those other comments about guilt in reading such material – they would say that it doesn't mean much or influence them, wouldn't they? One has to account for the reasons why those loyal female readers keep coming back for more of their favourite magazines.

A political economy analysis, or indeed audience analysis that still acknowledges ideology and hegemony, would be asking questions about how far the 'woman's space' is simply a gender trap, a gilded cage at least partly constructed by the material of women's magazines.

McCracken invokes different critics in an attempt to explain the seductive pleasures of mass media texts. She refers to Jameson in terms of a compensatory exchange in which the pleasures and gratifications of mass culture become a kind of pay-off for passive consent behaviour in political terms. She refers to Modleski in relation to romance fiction and soap operas – the idea that these forms help women manage the real problems and injustices of their own lives, so that the pleasure is bittersweet and purposeful. She refers to Radway in relation to readers of romantic fiction – the idea that the pleasure is about identification, self-recognition and developing a sense of self-worth through reading. She refers to findings from her own research, which indicates that some readers enhance their own identity simply by being the reader of a certain magazine that speaks of a certain kind of woman with a certain kind of lifestyle.

The very structure of a women's magazine makes for a kind of pleasure and at least the illusion of control of the text. The reader chooses to buy it. It can be dipped into or explored at greater length. It offers tips as well as cultural gossip, so it may afford the moral satisfaction (and justification) of providing useful ideas for creating meals for the family, for 'improving' one's environment or one's public image.

Yet pleasure, like the magazine itself, is a constructed thing. The very notion of 'natural' pleasures is itself ideological. It relates especially to ideas about 'nature' and the female discourse. In different ways, various elements of magazines encourage women to be 'natural' (and free), to express their 'natural femininity' and to enjoy the pleasures of 'being natural'. But this pleasure, naturalness or freedom is often constructed (and purchased) through commodities such as skin products, tampons, shampoos, detergents and clothing. Similarly, beauty is also a myth and a construction. It too is often equated with the natural – that which pre-exists and is revealed through the beauty product, but it does not exist at all. As an idea it is defined and constructed by the commodities sold through the magazines.

So the experience of reading women's magazines may well be a pleasure, but the reader may or may not recognize those mechanisms which construct the illusion of a valid, gendered social world.

12 Magazines for Men

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, magazine reading for men is still dominated by specialist and practical publications, although there is now a small number of magazines in what might be called the general lifestyle market. You can gauge the comparison between the size and nature of the gendered markets simply by looking at the shelves in your nearest newsagent. Until the 1980s it would have been possible to deny that men's magazines existed, or indeed, as industry wisdom would have it, that they were likely to exist.

I would argue that both categories of magazine have in common the capitalist impulse to identify and reify a market that can become the object of advertising. Women's magazines are rooted in the reinforcement of an ideological status quo and the formation of gender identity in the context of economic submission. Whereas one may argue that men's magazines have their impulse in the need to re-assert that status quo, and to re-assess the nature of male identity. In conjunction with this, you need to look back at what I have said about the degree of change in the feature articles and positions taken in at least some women's magazines. There are reasons why magazines like *Cosmopolitan* appeared when they did.

The reasons for changes in the gendered magazine market would seem to be rooted in an interlocking amalgam of changes in culture, economics and social values. These would relate to the effects of second wave feminism and changing social attitudes towards gender, reinforced by economic changes (the collapse of male manufacturing employment), and by the law (the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975). Commentators refer to the 'crisis of masculinity' argument, in which males have to re-appraise their identities and assumptions about their social roles. Masculinity is no longer founded in the nature of physically demanding employment. It no longer owns privileged spaces – the pub or the football stands. It may no longer be expressed through a distinguishing set of leisure activities in which women have no part at all.

These changes are of course also ideological in impulse. One can not overstate a case and ignore the fact that we still have sexist phenomena such as 'the glass ceiling' in employment, or that women still perform the greater part of domestic labour. Still, there has been a shift in power relations between men and women. More women have more money of their own to spend as they like – witness the changes in car ads. Men have had to take on jobs in the service industries, where 'soft' skills to do with evaluating and interacting with people are at a premium. Although I would argue in another place that the emotional intelligence of females has been disproportionately talked up, still it is true that the social spaces in which women are nurtured and relate to one another have valued this kind of sensitivity. Women's magazines (and other literature) have responded to this and so maintained it. Now men have a need to develop and exercise soft skills. They have a greater need to negotiate relationships and power, not to simply assume ideological superiority.

Within limits, it may be said that men's magazines represent this ideological shift, as well as a struggle between progressive and conservative ideological positions. Benwell writes, 'Men's lifestyle magazines are both a representative site and a mobilizing force of crucial cultural shifts on masculinity' (2003: 7).

Other cultural changes have both made possible the existence of men's lifestyle magazines and have interacted with the other kinds of shift described above. For example, the music and fashion industries have offered men a variety of identities, leisure pursuits and lifestyles. As I write this, I have been reading in a newspaper supplement (*Independent on Sunday* 3 February 2008) of a male financial accounts manager who also plays in a band, but who figures in the magazine because of his fashion style. Music, clothes and identities have always been intertwined.

When the style magazine *Blitz* appeared in 1980, it was the period of Glam Rock. It was rapidly followed by magazines such as *ID* and *The Face*. The latter was targeted at young males and developed from music into fashion, while also keeping an eye on the interests of advertisers who enabled this niche market magazine to survive. *The Face* 'was seen to have educated a generation of young men into reading a general interest magazine' (Nixon 1996: 136).

The still running *GQ* magazine appeared in 1988. It may have been rather middle class and not very cutting edge in its take on popular culture, but it has been successful. It was a magazine for the older male, had no music coverage and was very much a metropolitan production for the urban, successful 'man's man'. The gradual appearance of a range of magazines for men, however limited, mirrors the considerable range of women's magazines, which are differentiated by the lifestyle, interests and ages of the target audiences.

The Face, on the other hand, was conscious of being at the cultural cutting edge. It was a high quality production whose feature articles included social comment and political sensibility. Its editor (Nick Logan) went on to launch *Arena* in 1986, in which the look of the magazine, its design and photographs, was important. Nixon (1996: 155) also comments that it 'explored specifically masculine anxieties and reflected on the shared experience of maleness among its particular readership'.

The function of such magazines (including contemporary ones) in articulating shifting ideologies and cultural sensibilities is pretty clear. Most interesting – and in contrast with women's magazines – is the attitude of male magazine content towards women. Apart from a celebration of masculine interests (e.g., gadgets), another kind of ideological 'holding the line' was to be seen in 'women functioning as objects of sexual scrutiny' (Nixon 1996: 165). This is what Benwell (2003: 17) talks about as a kind of biological essentialism, in which women are referred to in ways which support certitude about masculine superiority vis a vis gender politics. The magazines of the 1980s did not represent much visual sexualisation of women, but neither did they talk much about the nature of relationships with women. Things changed with the 1990s and the arrival of magazines such as *FHM* and *Loaded* (both 1994), the so-called 'lads mags'.

These magazines reacted against the 'new man' of the 1980s and tried to tell it like it is for a new generation of young males. These magazines celebrated masculinity – hedonism, sex, 'footie', while actually betraying anxiety about masculine identities

within their textual detail. ‘The magazines, then, are caught between an attempt to construct masculinity as a form of fundamentalist certitude, while simultaneously responding to a world where gender relations are rapidly changing’ (Jackson et al. 2001: 79).

These magazines might have talked about ways of pleasing women, but in effect they were all about pleasing themselves. ‘You didn’t have to be ashamed of being a bloke any more,’ said Tim Southwell, one of the founders of *Loaded*. The tone of the magazines, characterized by a kind of self-protective irony, should be heard in the context of comparable material on television – *Men Behaving Badly*, *They Think It’s All Over*, *Top Gear* – not to mention novels such as Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity*, or the new Britpop of Oasis. It feels like a period of post modernism, or ‘after feminism’, but the soft porn photos of *FHM* are no more acceptably ironic than the continuing page 3 body display of *The Sun*. It looks like an ideological backlash, in which young women have themselves been complicit – placing half-naked pictures of themselves on *Nuts* website, or playing out the sub-cultural nuances of being a ladette who gets as sick drunk as the lads.

Andrew O’Hagan refers to the misuse of irony and the evidence of unreconstructed masculinity when he describes the 2004 anniversary cover of *Loaded* as ‘showing a large-breasted girl with the words “Loaded: Ten Years Fighting for Feminism” printed across her skimpy top’ (*Guardian* 16 June 2004).

At the same time, one should recognize that such magazines would not have happened without feminism. *Loaded* was the top selling men’s magazine of 1995. Ben Crewe (2003) comments on the fact that the then editor, James Brown, took on some of the language of feminism, while also celebrating entrepreneurialism, classlessness and even anti-intellectualism. There is a kind of contradiction in trying to assert a version of masculinity labelled as laddishness, while implicitly recognizing a cultural milieu in which it looks out of date and defensive.

Tim Edwards (2003) talks about the magazines in general as being ‘a retreat from the real world’. He talks about them ‘slithering between the sexual ambivalence of the narcissistic and the sexual potency of the playboy’. He refers to their promotion of life style accessories, being driven by the logic of commodification. He argues that they live in a false world of masculine representation, driven by the media, and as being ‘more “hyper-real” than they are “real”’.

It is also the case that while a few magazines blazed an independent cultural trail, they and the newcomers such as *Maxim* (1995), have never been as independent and alternative as their editorial liked to pretend. They are mostly published by the big players in the magazine industry. They were, and are, all in thrall to the advertisers. There was the salutary example of *Blitz*, which folded because it printed perfume street tests critical of the products. The advertisers pulled their financial support. And there is indeed a history of attempts to launch competing or niche magazines for men over the last two decades, a number of which attempts has ended in failure. Even that iconic style magazine *The Face* finally closed for lack of circulation in 2004. Formerly dominant magazines such as *FHM* and *Loaded* have seen their sales halve in the period 2004 to 2007 (ABC), though in 1999, together with *Maxim*, they accounted for three quarters of the sales value of the men’s magazine market (Magforum.com).

At the same time, it is interesting to see that over the last 25 years the advertising content of men's magazines also maps a cultural change in which men, like women, are being drawn in to the world of the cosmetics industry. There is a greater consciousness of body image, of style, the function of these in respect of relationships, than there was a generation previously. They let 'young working class men use moisturiser, dress up and go shopping, without appearing middle class, effeminate or homosexual' (Edwards 2003: 144). However, as MacKinnon (2003) puts it, 'it would be a mistake to believe that the more feminized male ... turns his back on physical and social power, a component so crucial to hegemonic masculinity'.

What these laddish magazines do have, like women's magazines, is a certain intimacy of tone, of mode of address, which talks to the reader conspiratorially – 'you know what I'm talking about, don't you?'. They talk about football, cars, drinking, music, clothes and image. They address self-indulgence with a kind of knowing irony. However, it is this irony which 'gives permission' to talk selfishly about how men may deal with women, how they may be 'allowed' a self-indulgent lifestyle – an 'ideological defence against external attack' (Jackson et al. 2001: 104). They praise the merits of independence and do not talk about commitment. Cynically, one might say that they are party to that phenomenon of 'kidulthood' – adults who want to go on playing games, clubbing and behaving as if they were still 17. 'Masculinity is constructed as "naturally" child-like, about play rather than words.' Men are 'represented as grown up only in the sense of their entry into the consumer economy' (Brooks 2008: 200/2003).

The arrival of competitors (such as *Nuts* and *Zoo*, 2004) to established magazines has demonstrated that there is still a 21st century younger market for this defensive version of masculinity. Indeed, there is also an email-distributed, digital only magazine, *Monkey*, set up in 2006. At the same time, magazines such as *GQ* and *Esquire* sell well to an older and more middle class audience. They don't celebrate football and drinking exploits so much as talk about style, consumption and sometimes indeed relationships with women. Their masculinity is more self aware, socially aware and culturally conscious.

Jackson et al. (1995) refer to the body consciousness of magazines (e.g., *Men's Health*) in which anxieties about employment are displaced into the body, which must be maintained and fit (forever young). In a metaphorical sense, one could also see this as being about maintaining resistance to changing gender relations and sustaining ideological myths about male power. They refer to ways in which men and women are talked of in terms of self-evident binary oppositions, of naturalized difference.

From this point of view, contemporary men's magazines are not a place where men are entirely comfortable. They are maintaining a position in the face of change, where women's magazines (for all the subordination they may also represent) sustain a position of known identity. They sustain the right to pleasures of emotion and relationship, as well as proposing the pleasure of consumption. They are inclusive of men, where men's magazines are exclusive of women, except on certain terms. Andrew O'Hagan (ibid.) comments that 'it may be time to consider whether these men's magazines aren't just the latest enlargement of the old fantasy of men having everything they want to have and finding a way to call it destiny'.

Perhaps the world of men's magazines overall is not quite so simple or quite so regressive. Feature articles have talked about female sexuality and pleasuring women. They have talked about single living, divorce and social behaviour. There is, I suggest, an interesting contrast with women's magazines in which the male audience is addressed more as a collection of individuals with some common experience – whereas the female readership is assumed to have experience in common, to be more coherent, simply by virtue of being female. Ironically, changing and diversifying social conditions for women run against this assumption. There is no more continuity of experience for women (apart from difference related to class, gender, ethnicity and the like) than there is for the young male readers who often do not inhabit the same occupational or cultural world as their fathers. Attempts to 'hold the line' via celebrations of football and sex may be seen as masking the kinds of change that have seen young women also celebrate such experiences. Females are moving on to hitherto masculine territories. But these territories, as mapped out via a variety of men's magazines, are themselves becoming more diverse, more socially and culturally conscious. This is why general interest magazines for men have arrived and found a market over the last twenty years.

12 Further reading

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