

# **Consumer magazine covers in the public realm**

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Media and Communications of the  
London School of Economics and Political Science in partial fulfilment for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

London, July 2009

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## Abstract

The thesis aims to contribute to a critique of hegemonic consumerism and explores the ways in which its discourses are mediated through glossy magazine covers as constituted in, and constituting, public retail spaces (newsstands).

The research is theoretically contextualised in two ways. Firstly, by locating the empirical research objects with regard to existing scholarship that addresses the magazine genre. Secondly, by exploring fundamental concepts invoked by those research objects: consumerism, consumption and commodities; publicity, public space and visual culture. Hinging on a theorisation of the public realm as a space of appearance, admiration and display, following Hannah Arendt (1958), a trio of dialectical frameworks are put forward as fundamental to framing an empirical exploration of consumer magazine covers/newsstands. These are: simulation/materiality, manipulation/ empowerment and subject/ object.

Methodologically, the research employs a combination of social and semiotic methods, the former a participant observation and visual survey of nine newsstand sites, the latter an intertextual, multimodal discourse and visual analysis of a corpus of magazine cover texts sourced from those newsstands. A thick description of newsstand spaces roots the thesis in social context and intertextual milieu, provides insight into the shapes of consumerist discourse in public space, and underscores the detailed analysis of the formal elements of the magazine covers.

The thesis makes a contribution to theories of consumerist aesthetics by filling in empirical detail to the theoretical dialectics outlined. As well as this, it provides an account of the material modalities of magazines covers, articulated as the mechanics of gloss, and shows how this contributes to the mediation of celebrity imagery. Further, it argues that consumerism relies upon three core textual strategies that combine to create a powerful form of mediation. The first is commercial heteroglossia, which is achieved through a visual celebration of commodity choice and a multiplicity of voices of sell. The second is a pornographic imagination, which is achieved through the exploitation of the eroticised gaze and commodification of the body, and a language of desire. The third is paper mirroring, which is achieved through the persistent invitation to self-imaging through the appeal of images of faces and verbal, individualising invitations to self-care and management.

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to my supervisors, Lilie Chouliaraki and Shani Orgad, who left nothing wanting in their mentorship of me. Proximity to each of their many shades of brilliance inspired and challenged me to produce the best work of which I am capable. Needless to say, any shortcomings evident in the pages that follow are mine alone.

I gratefully acknowledge funding from the Dan David Prize, the EDS-LSE Research series, Media@LSE studentships, and the LSE In-Course Financial Assistance Fund. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to Robin Mansell and Paolo Dini for providing me with the expansive opportunity to work as a research assistant in the OPAALS Network of Excellence.

I would also like to thank the owners, managers and staff of the nine newsstand sites I visited as part of my participant observation for their kind permission to be present, make observations and take photographs.

Finally, my heartfelt appreciation to the people in my lifeworld: the friends who cheered at every milestone, my parents and brother for their encouragement and belief in me, and DdP for his loving presence, indefatigable good humour, and constant support. I dedicate this thesis to them.

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## Introduction

Before I decided to do a PhD, I worked for five years in media and communications strategy in South Africa, for three of them through my own (co-owned) PR company which developed and implemented media campaigns for a variety of consumer market oriented clients. Our work entailed getting our clients exposure in the media, which we called, like most other PR consultants, “publicity”. We worked for a variety of customers and aimed to get them coverage in all media genres, but the best we could do for any of our clients in the consumer or fashion industries was to get their product on the cover of a magazine. We subscribed to all the major monthly glossies, and displayed them on a specially-built shelf in our small office; their aesthetic reminding us of the intended outcomes of our work as cultural intermediaries. I liked my work, especially the freedom of being self-employed (even though we had to answer to our clients), yet I was never able to completely throw myself into the idea of a life-long career in publicity. In fact, as the months and years wore on and the excitement of setting up a business started to fade, replaced with the day to day pressures of maintaining it, I became increasingly discontent with the fact that I played a role in what I now understand to be the mediation of consumerism. My dissatisfaction with the limits and exclusive discourses of commercial media mounted; I wished to be part of a more independent, creative, less consumption-oriented media economy. So my restlessness surfaced, not in an intellectual project as it has now, but in an applied outlet.

I nurtured an interest in independent magazine publishing, initiating and editing a literature/visual arts publication that aimed to provide a print platform for creative output marginalised by the mainstream media. I managed to raise a little arts council funding, found publishing partners, and worked with them to create a submissions based, non-advertising dependent magazine that produced five paper and ink issues. Not surprisingly (in hindsight), it was financially unsustainable as a print publication, and it has since evolved into an online magazine<sup>1</sup>. The experience of creating a non-commercialised media space was formative, and remains a core interest and something to which I am committed to devoting my personal efforts. But the process of witnessing what I believed to be an important, creative, meaningful and worthwhile publication fail due to the strength of the mainstream, commercial media system continued to trouble

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.itch.co.za](http://www.itch.co.za)

me. Why was the mainstream paradigm so effective? What did *Cosmopolitan* have that my little magazine didn't?

A background in English literature provoked a desire to better understand how mainstream media texts function to attract attention and become hegemonic meaning systems, which led to enrolment in a Master's degree so as to broaden my theoretical understanding of media textuality. By the end of that degree I became determined to further develop the necessary theoretical and empirical skills to make more sense of everything that I had already experienced from a practical perspective. My intellectual motivations for embarking on this research were thus rooted in the hunger that I felt for a deeper, critical, theoretical understanding of the commercial and aesthetic cultures within which I had worked and to which I had contributed. I knew how the commercial communication industry operated (I wrote the press releases, talked to the journalists, came up with the marketing ideas for clients and saw the results on the magazine covers). I also knew from experience that the commercial media system would inevitably force independent media projects like my magazine to either conform or fail (more likely the latter), especially in an emerging economy like post-Apartheid South Africa where the ethics of neo-liberalism and consumerism are rapidly establishing deep roots. Yet I was equally aware that I lacked a deeper understanding of how hegemonic commercial discourses operate, the shape and tensions of the consumerist aesthetic and what was my place therein, as a citizen of the world, a producer/reader of texts and as an aspiring socio-cultural analyst. By better understanding how consumerist texts operate, I felt that not only could I put into perspective my past media practice, but also perhaps contribute new perspectives to the analysis, and thus critique, of hegemonic consumerism and thereby become better equipped to contribute to mediated society (as an analyst, educator or creative media practitioner) in the future.

With my broad intellectual and personal motivations thus coming into focus, it became necessary to select an appropriate empirical object. Along with an existing training in literary analysis and a fascination with how media texts work to create meaning, I recognised that it would also be important to explore how that meaning-making changed or evolved in a situation in which texts were collectively situated in public, such as at the newsstands that I often frequented (each part of my split personality as PR consultant and independent creative magazine editor needed to go to the newsstand, the former to buy new consumer magazines to add to the shelf in our office or to check for coverage for our clients; the latter to look for my own magazine and see

whether it was visible and people were noticing, browsing or buying it). The newsstand as a spectacle in public space was a clear mental image, formed from consistent exposure in my everyday life, but not yet articulated in theoretical and intellectual terms. Knowing as I did how prestigious and important the magazine cover was to publicity attempts, as well as to efforts to define an image for and sell a magazine, it became clear that these two empirical sites, intertwined as they were, required my attention.

### ***Preliminary research questions***

I was fascinated with magazine covers due to recognising that they are a high-status and powerful form of media text and with newsstands due to their at once spectacular and mundane presence in everyday life retail spaces. It seemed that the value (in PR terms) of publicity achieved on magazine covers was doubled by the public display of those magazine covers in newsstand spaces. The possibility for exposure in public space was perhaps the most compelling quality of the media space of the magazine cover. The observations and impressions resulting from my previous occupations manifested in a series of questions relating to the intertwined research objects:

- *What are the fundamental, underlying messages of magazine covers (in other words, what meanings are prioritised by them)?* Although it was clear to me that magazines play an important role in making public the values of consumerism, it seemed necessary to further elucidate the elements of that broader set of values and thereby articulate the core messages that together function to shore up consumerism.
- *What are the similarities in structure, content and form in magazine covers aimed at a variety of different target markets?* Despite the differences in subject matter and intended audience, my initial observations of magazine covers noted a set of parallels which required further articulation and analysis.
- *What textual forms and practices of communication make magazine covers such prestigious media texts?* Again, it was already known from my experience of media practice that magazine covers were incredibly desirable destinations for publicity. But what was not clear and required exploration was why – what were the communicative strategies that created this prestige?
- *How are magazine covers accentuated, framed or constructed by their visibility in newsstand spaces?* I already understood that there was an important relationship between magazine covers and the ways in which they were

displayed in public spaces. But the shape and dimension of this relationship begged more attention, specifically in relation to the previous question of the reasons for their appeal.

- *What are the social and textual characteristics of newsstands, and what practices take place in them?* It seemed necessary to further explore the features of newsstands in order to better understand magazine covers. As well as this, the presence of so many texts in one space begged the question of whether newsstands could be understood as a space, a collection of texts, or both, and described and interpreted as such.

These questions were the first steps towards defining a research question, converging into an intellectual desire to better understand theoretically and empirically the ways in which values of consumerism are communicated and mediated through consumer magazine covers specifically as they are situated in public spaces of consumption. This question can be put simply as follows:

**How do magazine covers and newsstand spaces promote consumerism?**

This research question is rearticulated in theoretical language at the end of Chapter 2, following a detailed literature review of scholarship addressing magazines in Chapter 1 and a variety of theoretical perspectives on consumerism in Chapter 2.

The research emanating from this set of concerns is firmly located in media studies, in particular the hermeneutics of media texts and public spaces of media display and consumption. The detailed description of the mechanics and operations of a particular set of media texts (magazine covers) offered in this thesis draws on a variety of disciplinary perspectives (as is necessary in a field as interdisciplinary as media studies). These include sociological perspectives on consumerism and consumption and theories of discourse, visual analysis and multimodality. It takes a largely interpretive view of the research objects in question, thereby aiming to provide a reading of an element of the contemporary media landscape. In this way, it is influenced by both literary and cultural anthropological hermeneutics. The core contributions of the research are outlined in the thesis overview that follows.

## **Overview of thesis**

This thesis is arranged in nine chapters.

*Chapter 1* provides a literature review of scholarship that addresses magazines, summarising four broad approaches which are characterised by a focus on production, reception, textuality and discourse, respectively. The chapter locates the empirical object of research and highlights how an approach that focuses on consumer magazines as a genre by collectively analysing their covers and their placement in newsstands would contribute to this existing body of knowledge, which in turn serves to coherently contextualise a research project aiming to provide new perspectives to this much-studied medium. *Chapter 2* locates the empirical object of the consumer magazine cover/newsstand in a broader theoretical framework of consumer culture aesthetics. It outlines the debates that characterise consumerism, consumption and the commodity, before discussing the centrality of visualness to consumerism and the role of public space and retail sites in the aestheticisation of everyday life. It argues that the most appropriate way to conceptualise publicity in the context of consumerism is as a space of appearance. The core contribution of the theoretical framework is the identification of three pairs of dialectical oppositions which arguably summarise theories of consumer culture aesthetics and can be employed to make sense of research into consumer magazine covers and newsstands: materiality/simulation, manipulation/empowerment and subject/object. *Chapter 3* outlines the methodologies employed in order to gather data for analysis in this project. The approach taken can be broadly summarised as multimodal and socio-semiotic analysis, with integrated elements of participant observation appropriated from ethnography. The combination of methodologies employed makes a contribution to media hermeneutics and offers an innovative approach to exploring media texts and spaces concurrently. The resulting corpus of data comprised of visual and textual fieldnotes and a set of consumer magazine covers.

Chapters 4 to 8 represent the descriptive and interpretive contributions of the study. They are arranged in two tiers. Chapters 4 and 5 respectively (de)construct the empirical objects of the newsstand and magazine cover from a material perspective, whilst Chapters 6, 7, 8 step into the world of the magazine cover in order to consider and intertextually analyse the modes, discursive strategies and subjects of representation common to the media genre.

*Chapter 4* narrates a thick description of the newsstand, and outlines the structures and practices that characterise this space. Written from the reflexive, subjective perspective of the observer who is at once foreign to, and a participant in, the retail space, the description highlights the semiotic and social structures common to newsstand spaces, and also describes the practices of other consumers therein. It argues that the newsstand can be theorised as a socio-semiotic space, defined by tensions between “site” and “sight”. This interpretation of the newsstand is an important contribution to scholarship on magazines as well as public spaces of consumption, and it sets the scene (from a contextual, intertextual and ideological perspective) for the entirety of the analysis that follows. *Chapter 5* continues the material analysis offered in *Chapter 4* and steps closer to the magazine cover text, in order to understand the stuff from which it is made. This chapter makes a contribution to multimodal discourse analysis by focussing on the meaning-making properties of texture and light (gloss), which culminates in an argument that the material mechanics of gloss are personified in complex ways in the image of the celebrity.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 complete the concentric analytical journey started at the newsstand in *Chapter 4*, which then progressed to the materialities of glossiness in *Chapter 5* by stepping *up* to the magazine cover, by stepping *in* to the texts. The analyses in these chapters are fundamentally framed by the existing understanding of their public placement and accessibility at the newsstand. Each chapter focuses on one important element of the discourse of consumerism, and elaborates the mechanics of meaning making in the context of commodities, bodies and faces, respectively. Each chapter makes a contribution to the hermeneutics of consumerism, as well as to specific fields of research concerned with each analytical focus.

*Chapter 6* takes as its empirical focus the representation of commodities on magazine covers, which is twinned with the material presence of products in the newsstand. It describes the various ways in which commodities and subject-object relationships are mediated in images and words, which culminates in a discourse of a multiplicity of choice and voice. This is theorised in terms of the idea of commercial heteroglossia, in which consumerism’s discourse of freedom of consumption is complicated by the regulation of the choices on offer. *Chapter 7* follows the mediation of the object to the body, and explores the ways in which images of bodies are commodified and subjected to the consumptive gaze through their appearance on the magazine cover. It seeks to reassess and analyse the idea that “sex sells” by arguing that eroticised looking is central to the consumerist project, and is largely hinged on the image of the body. This

culminates in an argument that consumer magazines function through the invocation of a pornographic imagination which leverages sexualised relations of power and imagined consummation as well as ideational sexiness. *Chapter 8* directs its attention to the ways in which the reader (imagined or actually present at the newsstand) is summoned, and the types of action and self-imagination invited by magazine cover texts. In a sense, this chapter represents the culmination of the previous discussions. Taking as its empirical object the image of the face and its twinning with a language of individualistic direct address, the chapter argues that magazine covers function as paper mirrors, which offer ideational role models whilst compelling a practice of self-care and self-management.

The final chapter brings together the arguments made, and situates them in the broader context of magazine scholarship and consumer culture aesthetics. It provides a summary of the thesis and articulates and highlights the core methodological, theoretical and analytical contributions it makes, as well as areas that will require future work.

# 1. Consumer magazines in context

Consumer magazines are everyday media commodities, ubiquitous to retail settings of urban environments around the developed world. Thousands of weekly and monthly magazines are consumed by millions of readers around the world; the genre thus constitutes a powerful media force that arguably makes a profound impact on aesthetic sensibilities and socio-cultural orientations in the mediated societies that constitute the global market. Their format and shape is familiar, their full-colour, glossy visual style instantly recognisable. They are material, concrete and tactile; yet also examples of infinitely iterating visual culture. Magazines are thus at once real and hyperreal. Magazines mediate popular culture and also embody it in the form of a cultural commodity. They are both objects and signs. For these reasons, I find consumer magazines to be evocative and compelling objects of study in the media-saturated culture of the global north<sup>2</sup>. I am interested in examining the meanings of consumer magazines, the operations of their mediation, and their significance within the broader movements of contemporary social life in the urbanised landscapes of the global north.

As well as my core epistemological, intellectual and personal motivations for studying magazines, as outlined in the introduction, my interest in this media object has been framed and underwritten by existing scholarship that has already addressed these and other connected concerns. In this chapter, therefore, I offer an overview of existing research addressing magazines, with a view to contextualising and justifying my particular area of interest, and locating the empirical object that is the focus of my enquiry in order to lead up to a theoretical discussion that elaborates upon broader conceptual themes and introduces the research questions.

## ***Research addressing magazines: An overview***

Scholars have studied consumer magazines from a variety of perspectives, which can be loosely categorised into four broad clusters. It must be noted that this categorisation is for the purposes of review: in practice these approaches typically overlap, are

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<sup>2</sup> In international relations, the “Global North” is defined as westernised, developed, industrialised nations with an annual “GNI per capita of \$11,116 or more” (Kegley and Witkopff, 2008: 138). In this thesis I use the term to refer broadly to these societies, but also to conceptually define, rather than geographically denote, wealthy and developed lifestyles, pockets of which also exist in almost every underdeveloped or developing country.

combined, or operate in explicit dialogue with one another. The first is interested in the broader socio-economic, cultural and discursive contexts within which magazines emerge and exist. The second is concerned with understanding how magazines are produced and the industry that produces them. The third addresses magazines as texts, and aims to decode the messages that they communicate from both structural and content perspectives. The fourth is interested in readers and audiences' receptions, understandings and interpretations of magazines. They can be summarised as the "discourse", "author", "text" and "reader" approaches respectively.

### **The "Discourse" Approach**

In what can be termed the "discourse" approach to studying magazines, scholars address the socio-economic or cultural milieu in which magazines emerge or exist, relating each to the other and showing how broader social and cultural movements and discourses influence magazines, and vice versa. Although all studies are to some degree or another contextual in this way, certain approaches focus almost exclusively on discursive context so as to put magazine phenomena into broader perspective. This has been employed in historical and contemporary studies. In both, there is a strong tradition of addressing magazines from gender discourse perspectives in order to better understand the cultural capital made available for men, women and girls to construct their identities and social lives. For example, McRobbie (1976/2000, 1990, 2009), Beetham (1996), Ballaster et al (1991), Hermes (1995), Winship (1984, 1987, 1991) and McCracken (1993), among others, focus on women's magazines in order to understand social constructions of femininity at different historical moments. Benwell (2001, 2003, 2005), Gill (2003, 2007), Gill et al (2004), Mort (1996), Stevenson et al (2000a, 2000b), Stevenson (2002), Jackson et al (1999, 2000, 2001) and Crewe (2003), among others, turn their attention to men's magazines in order to understand social constructions of masculinity. Others, e.g. Gauntlett (2002) and Gill (2007) critically analyse both men's and women's magazines in order to compare and contrast the mediation of contemporary gender identity issues.

Discursive approaches focussed on contemporary contexts seek to link magazines to the consumerist milieu and commercial cultures within which they exist, as well as to gendered discourses. Mort (1996) and Jackson et al (2000) seek to make sense of men's magazines by placing them squarely within the context of the "commercial cultures" of the 1980s and 1990s, describing how social and economic conditions of

Britain in that era allowed for the representation of men as consumers and their appropriation of the “feminised” practices of shopping and personal grooming. Gill (2003) and Gill et al (2004) define their studies as discursive in the sense in which they address magazines as a social site in which discourses and representations of masculinity are produced and constructed, in turn inextricable from consumerist discourses.

Historical studies aim to contextualise magazines within the emergence of broader social movements. Garvey (1996) addresses the emerging socio-economic landscape of the women’s magazine industry in turn-of-the-century America, showing the roots of the intertwined relationship of advertising and editorial in the rise of (feminised) consumerist culture. She describes how advertising practices and discourses came to shape magazines, “the ways in which advertising-dependent magazines acted in the interests of advertisers in the aggregate, and the ways in which magazines as a group constructed the reader as consumer” (1996: 11). Referencing remnants of consumers’ practices (scrapbooks kept by women) as well as the activities of producers (writers, editors and industry commentators) of the period, Garvey creates a picture of the overall shape of the magazine industry of the turn of the century, many characteristics of which remain relevant to the contemporary market. Other examples of historical discursive research abound. Shevelow (1989) explores the construction of femininity in the early periodical of 18<sup>th</sup> century England; Delhaye (2006) addresses the emergence of fashion discourse in women’s magazines between 1880 and 1920 in the Netherlands, while Beetham (1996) turns her attention to the representation of domesticity and desire in women’s journals of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, aiming specifically to address how “women’s interest” magazines “came to occupy their crucial place in popular reading and contested meanings of … femininity” (1996: viii).

These historical studies are put into focus partially through the lens of feminist scholarship, and partially through the lens of scholarship on the rise of consumer culture. In terms of the former, Ballaster et al (1991) address the rise of women’s magazines from a feminist perspective, showing how the discourses espoused by women’s magazines entrenched patriarchal discourse and how consumption was constructed as a feminine pursuit, while Ouellette (1999) discusses *Cosmopolitan*’s contribution to a superficial post-feminist renaissance in the 1970s, showing how the “working girl” ethos went some way towards naturalising discourses of feminine liberation. In terms of the latter, Ohmann (1996) discusses the close relationship between the rise of magazines and the rise of consumer culture. He shows how the

turn of the century hosted a crucial change in the magazine industry, where publishers started to make more money from advertisements and were thus able to drop their cover prices significantly, which increased circulation and allowed more advertisements to be sold. Garvey describes this as a shift in “the basis of their enterprise from sales to advertising” (1996: 9). Ohmann argues that “national mass culture was first instanced in the United States by magazines” (Ohmann, 1996: vii), suggesting that the economy of mass media was first tried and tested through the medium of magazines. He employs a historical materialist perspective to show that there is a close, complex relationship between magazine publishing and general consumer culture. Rather than assuming that the magazine boom resulted from the rise of industrial commodity production, their own success as commodities and ability to sell audiences as commodities directly influenced and bolstered the consumption and production of other commodities. This discussion will be extended in the next chapter, which discusses consumer culture, consumption and commodities in greater depth.

### **The “Author” Approach**

This approach to consumer magazines seeks to explore how they are produced, and to understand the dynamics of the industry that produces them. Although one might expect this type of research to take a political-economic approach (there are traces of this in some of the ideological “text” approaches reviewed later), scholars interested in researching magazine production have tended towards seeking understandings of how key influential figures within magazine publishing institutions are able to respond to and shape broader cultural movements and representations. Rather than examining how the distribution of resources amongst media owners and producers influences and shapes the resulting media landscape, researchers have examined influential figures in the magazine industry (such as publishers, editors, journalists or commentators). For example, Frank Mort’s (1996) study focuses on figures such as Nick Logan and Neville Brody, founder and designer respectively of iconic 1980s style magazine *The Face*, while Ouellette (1999) focuses on the influence of the personality and ideas of *Cosmopolitan* founding-editor Helen Gurly-Brown on the magazine brand’s “Cosmo girl” attitude.

The booming men’s lifestyle magazine market in the UK in the 1990s earned a great deal of attention in respect of the role of publishers. Sean Nixon’s (1993) study addressed publishing and advertising strategies in the men’s magazine publishing

industry. Frank Mort's (1996) study addressed the emergence of masculine consumption in the 1980s, spearheaded by the emergence of magazines such as *The Face* and *Arena*. Ben Crewe (2003) explored the significant influence that the producers of men's magazines (by then an established part of the British social scene) had over the way that men were culturally represented throughout the 1990s. Nixon (1993), Mort (1996) and Crewe (2003) share an approach that contends "that the cultural resources and identities of certain key practitioners within the men's press need to be taken into account in order to fully understand the formation of individual titles and the sector as a whole" (Crewe, 2003: 9). By interviewing editors and/or journalists in order to understand how editorial decisions are made, and the hierarchies of need and value, inclusion and exclusion, that form part of the production process, researchers have been able to produce detailed descriptions of the nuances of the magazine production process.

Finally, although not qualifying as scholarly research proper, there exists a set of quasi-academic writing that acts more as a "how to" manual for aspiring magazine workers, describing the procedures implemented in the design, printing and production of magazines (e.g., Holmes, 2000), or enthusiastically celebrating the work of magazine producers, such Crowley's (2003) review of magazine cover design over the decades and Renard's (2006) homage to the "style press".

### **The "Text" Approach**

Textual approaches to magazines turn the focus onto the detail of magazine structure and content. Interrelated ideological and semiotic approaches seek to either uncover the ideological underpinnings or the structural symbolism and meaning of texts.

Ideological deconstruction of magazines texts has been most effectively exercised by feminist critics, who decode magazines aimed at women or girls in order to expose and criticise dominant patriarchal discourses, and critically explore the ways in which the female subjectivity and women's bodies are objectified, commodified and exploited in magazine imagery. Feminist scholars using historical approaches (Ballaster et al, 1991; Beetham, 1996) show how patriarchal ideologies have shaped women's magazines since their inception. The focus on more contemporary titles was led by Angela McRobbie's (1976) analysis of teenage girls magazine *Jackie*, which revealed how a discourse of "romantic individualism" taught young girls to conceive of themselves as

competitors for male affection and commitment, thereby turning men into “romantic objects” and cancelling “out the possibility of any relationship other than the romantic one between girl and boy” (McRobbie, 1976: 86). Through the eighties and nineties, McRobbie continued this examination of magazines aimed at teenage girls, discussing how the discourses evolved in magazines of the 1980s such as *Just Seventeen*, which began to allow (in the text) more scope for readers to imagine and create their identities. Other studies have complemented and extended this focus on discursive deconstructions of teenage magazine texts – see for example Firminger (2006), who addresses the ways in which such texts portray the ideal of “boyfriends”; Ballentine and Ogle (2005), who explore the ways in which body problems are narrated in *Seventeen* magazine; and Jackson (2005), who analyses the sexual advice columns of teenage girls’ magazines. Feminist criticism has also explored the representation of women in magazine fashion photography (Rabine, 1994) and criticised claims of female agency and empowerment in the context of the pervasive objectifying male gaze of the camera.

Ideological approaches to consumer magazines can be linked, as will be discussed in the next chapter, with scholarly views on consumption that see it as a limited and limiting set of options imposed in a top-down, manipulative manner on consumers (readers) who have little agency or freedom of interpretation. The links between consumerism and feminist critiques will be noted in more detail in Chapter 2. For the purposes of summarising approaches to researching magazines, it is sufficient to highlight a handful of studies. McCracken (1993) turned her attention to a range of women’s magazines, from *Mademoiselle* to *Ms.*, in order to “decode” their central ideological messages (both advertising and editorial), which she concluded were largely informed by consumerism. In this vein, Winship (1987) likewise undertook an extensive ideological analysis of women’s magazines of the 1980s in order to reveal their deeper structural links to consumerism, focussing elsewhere on the “streetwise discourse” of certain fashion spreads (Winship, 1984), and the discourse of “enterprising domesticity” in *Best!* (Winship, 1991). Williamson (1978) used semiotic analysis to address “meaning and ideology” in the advertisements contained in women’s magazines and to deconstruct the patriarchal discourses informing them.

Linked in with ideological approaches are semiotic approaches, where structural analyses of the ways in which the magazines texts are put together, visually and textually, are undertaken in order to reveal their ideological motivation. McRobbie (1976), McCracken (1993) and Winship (1987) each employed semiotic analyses in order to describe, decode and deconstruct their magazines texts. Certain semiotic

approaches focus on particular linguistic elements of the magazine texts, for example, Benwell's (2001) analysis of language play in the letters' pages of men's magazines. Dávalos et al (2007) undertake an analysis of the subject matter and style of cover lines of women's magazines over three decades in order to ascertain how they have (or not) changed. Machin and Thornborrow (2006) show how sexual aggressiveness and exhibitionism is portrayed visually and linguistically as an empowering feminine trait in *Cosmopolitan*, while Machin and Van Leeuwen (2003, 2007) show how global modes and discourses interact with local content in various international editions of *Cosmopolitan*. Other semiotic approaches are somewhat more structural, employing magazines as illustrations of ways in which the multimodality of image, colour, layout and text are combined in order to communicate complex messages (Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001). A central element of the semiotic approach is visual analysis, which is employed in order to address the overwhelmingly visual nature of magazines (discussed further in a later section of this chapter).

## The “Reader” Approach

Finally, reader centred approaches seek to understand how readers consume and make sense of magazines. Frazer (1987) sought to fill the reader-shaped hole left by McRobbie's (1976) study of *Jackie*, interviewing teenage girls so as to understand how they read the content, and to test whether the ideologies that McRobbie had identified did in fact influence them as severely as argued. “Frazer found that rather than absorbing the stories as if they were valuable lifestyle advice, these readers laughed at the tales and criticised them as unrealistic fictions” (Gauntlett, 2002: 182). Researchers such as Kehily (1999) and Talbot (1995) have sought to further fill some of the gaps left by McRobbie's studies of teenage girls' magazines by speaking to teenage girls in order to understand what the magazines that they consume, such as *More* and *Sugar*, mean in their everyday lives and conceptions of themselves. Joke Hermes' (1995) in-depth interviews with women in the Netherlands who read glossy magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* revealed that readers often consider magazines unimportant parts of their lives, the material flippant and irrelevant, and read them as a form of mild escapism and relaxation. Others, such as Gill (2003), Gill et al (2004), Benwell (2005) and Stevenson et al (2000a, 2000b), have placed a similar emphasis on engaging with men who read the lifestyle magazines aimed at them. Gill (2003) interviewed 140 men with a view to understanding how representations of male bodies in popular media (especially magazine texts) intersected with their perceptions of

themselves and masculinity. Benwell (2005) showed the links between the discourses men speak in focus groups and those espoused in the magazines themselves. Stevenson et al (2000a, 2000b) argue that men remain ambivalent about adopting "feminised" roles of consumption and grooming. Other reader-centred approaches seek to address what kind of influence the texts have on readers' mental and physical wellbeing. Many studies from the social or health psychology perspective seek to measure the effects of viewing media images such as magazine advertisements or fashion spreads on readers' ideas of ideal body image and self-esteem (see for example, Choi et al, 2008; David et al, 2002; DeBraganza and Hausenblas, 2008; Jung, 2006; Jung and Lennon, 2003).

These studies are important in the sense in which they challenge, test or put into perspective the strident claims of ideological studies that argued that readers are influenced, manipulated, or damaged by the discourses espoused by the magazines that they consume. A contrasting emphasis on magazine reader hermeneutics links, as will be shown in the following chapter, with perspectives on consumption as a social practice, which instead theorises it as liberating in the sense it which it offers consumers a huge array of informational and lifestyle options from which to choose in the practice of defining self-identity, as per Giddens (1991).

### ***Different approaches, similar descriptions***

Although in this brief review I have presented the four broad approaches as separate for the purposes of summary, in practice, studies of consumer magazines tend to integrate more than one aspect of each approach. For example, Garvey (1996) fuses a textual and historical perspective, Beetham (1996) works with both discursive and historical motives, Stevenson et al (2000a) fuse reader and text-oriented approaches, McRobbie (1976, 1990, 2009) is motivated by both discursive and ideological views, and Gill (2003) addresses both reader perspectives and discursive constructs. Almost all approaches to magazines as texts require a treatment of their social or historical contexts and particular discursive practices, and almost all approaches to readers of magazines requires some treatment of the texts themselves.

These differences in approach are partly required by the differences in subject matter and imagined audience prioritised by the magazine texts and publishers. There is no denying that within the genre of consumer magazines exist a variety of other "sub-

genres" which require the kind of specific, focused scholarly attention already reviewed. Some of the varieties of magazines mentioned by Frank Mort (1996) include: fashion, lifestyle, general interest, consumer, leisure, women's, hobby, style and men's magazines. Although these are categorised as different and have been researched from divergent epistemological and methodological perspectives (the implication being that all of these "genres" are irreconcilable), I have noticed that across the literature, significant similarities exist in the way various consumer magazines are described and theorised. These are discussed next.

## **Magazines are commodities**

Magazine scholars agree that magazines are commodities. Magazines are manufactured in order to be sold on the free market to consumers. Mort (1996: 18) discusses how a successful lifestyle magazine for men was a "sought-after commodity" in the 1980s while Beetham argues, "one commodity – the magazine – gave [women] entry into a world of commodities" (1996: 8). Furthermore, "As a commodity, the periodical was the first to have its sell-by date stamped on it. This allowed producers to control precisely when their material became obsolete..." (Beetham, 1996: 10). Not only are magazines commodities, but they were the first commodities to exploit newness as a selling point, stamping on their covers their "now" qualities. Dates, barcodes and/or prices are *de riguer* for any magazine cover, from the 1800s until the present.

Magazines are prints artefacts reliant on technologies of paper and ink (Beetham, 1996: 5), typically produced and disseminated on a regular basis (monthly, bi-monthly, quarterly or weekly). Although the "magazine" format (as in a collection of general interest articles, stories or features on various topics) can also be applied to other media genres, such as TV, radio and websites, magazines have a unique type of materiality. Hermes (1995: 6) refers to "high-priced monthlies, often called 'glossies' because of the expensive glossy paper on which they are printed [and many of which are] franchised and appear in different languages". Kress and van Leeuwen (2001: 122) also point out the importance of how the "weight and size of the magazine allow it to be carried to different places [and] the way it is bound and the quality of the paper allow it to be leafed through". This highlights the importance of the materiality and format of the magazine as a physical commodity. Detailed discussions theorising the commodity, and addressing how magazines can be understood as both material *and* immaterial commodities will be taken up in the next chapter.

## Magazines are visual media

Scholars of magazines of the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century comment on how the medium contained a great deal of visual content, both advertising and the illustration of editorial sections. Those who have addressed contemporary magazines also note the centrality of visual modes of communication. Mort's (1996) emphasis on the design of *The Face*, Winship (1987) and McRobbie's (1976, 1990, 2009) focus on fashion spreads and illustrated narratives, and Barthes' (1973) and Williamson's (1987) respective analyses of magazine adverts, highlights the centrality of images to magazines. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 20), in addressing the dominance of visual communication in contemporary mediation in general, point to magazine layouts and texts as specific (and ubiquitous) examples of this. They argue that images are not only expressive and aesthetic, but that they are also social, political and communicative constructs.

Consumer magazines texts exhibit a heavy emphasis on photography, colour, illustration, visuality and a general reliance on the aesthetic. Bignell (2002: 64) notes, "Magazines are glossy and colourful, connoting pleasure and relaxation rather than seriousness.... The smell and feel of the glossy paper connotes luxury...." Mort (1996: 23) also observes this emphasis, describing the following visual qualities as central to the definition of a "style magazine": its "up market" feel, its use of full colour throughout, the use of "art photography", the size and its use of perfect binding. McCracken (1993: 5-6) reports that "on the material level, [magazine readers] pointed to the colourful layout and attractive pictures, the glossy pictures, and even 'the smell of the printed page'". McRobbie (1990: 144) describes girls magazines of the eighties as having "high colour and glossy format" and suggests that an "ecstasy of communication is promised in the garish multi-colour layout ... and the use of different typefaces". With *Jackie*, she notes, "The dominance of the visual level, which is maintained throughout the magazines reinforces this notion of leisure" (McRobbie, 1976: 75 – emphasis added). Extremely iconic, stylised and carefully designed front covers, as well as a heavy emphasis on photography, colour, illustration and sensual tactility throughout the magazine are key characteristics of the medium. The centrality of visual modes of communication to magazines is directly linked with the primacy of visualness in consumer culture – which is taken up in the next chapter.

## Magazines are about leisure and entertainment

Consumer magazines share a paced, non-urgent style that positions the text as removed from the domain of the serious, day-to-day responsibilities of life. Ohmann (1996: 238) comments that “magazine reading was a leisure activity not to be spoiled by reminders of workaday problems”, which is corroborated by Hermes’ (1995) research which finds that magazines are often read as a form of entertainment.

Scholars who research reader attitudes to magazines comment on the ambivalence of reading experiences as both escapist or entertaining, and as aware of the contradictory or ambivalent nature of the messages (Ballaster et al, 1996; Stevenson, et al 2000a). According to Stevenson et al (2000a: 208), “In a world where leisure is commodified, magazines cannot be represented as a simple escape”, but this does not change that this is more or less the intention with which they are constructed and represented by publishers. Stevenson et al (2000a: 207) also make sense of the act of magazine reading within a framework of the hobby: “If hobbies once served to ‘domesticate’ potentially dangerous masculinities, structuring men’s leisure time, assimilating them to the world of consumer goods and maintaining their distance from useful participation in the domestic labour, there are clear analogies with contemporary magazine reading”.

Likewise, it is clear that magazine producers pitch their products as entertainment-centred. When Hugh Hefner launched *Playboy* in the 1950s, its selling point was “Entertainment for Men” (Osgerby, 2003), while *Cosmopolitan*’s well-known byline remains “Fun Fearless Female!” Former *Esquire* editor Peter Howarth says, “...glossy magazines are there to entertain; they have to be something that you pick up instead of a newspaper” (Crewe, 2003: 171). McRobbie (1976: 75) identified a “lightness of tone” in *Jackie*: “a non-urgency, which holds true right through the magazine [which] asks to be read at a leisurely pace indicating that its subject matter is not wholly serious, and is certainly not ‘news’ as well as “language joky in tone, light-hearted and with a tinge of pastiche” in *Just Seventeen* (McRobbie, 1990: 170).

In this sense, magazines tend to iterate their content. In *Jackie*, McRobbie (1976: 76) notes a continual working and re-working of a relatively limited repertoire of themes that saturate the magazine and are consistently reiterated from issue to issue. The same could be said for other magazines. Hermes (1995: 14) points out, “women’s magazines ... are fragmented and circular texts (the same issues and topics return every few issues, years or couple of years)”. This is echoed from a formal perspective, as magazines adhere rigidly to style and layout patterns in order to ensure a familiarity

with its structure (McRobbie, 1976: 75). This shows that magazine reading is meant to be easy and leisurely.

## **Magazines address readers as consuming individuals**

Scholars agree that magazines tend to take as their subject matter issues dealing primarily with readers' personal lives, centring a discourse of the self and addressing readers as individuals rather than an aggregated public. Feminist critiques of historical consumer magazines have shown how they brought "the adman into the parlour" (Garvey, 1996) and entered into a dialogue with women about the ways in which they took care of their homes and bodies (Ballaster et al, 1991; Beetham, 1996). A similar process arguably took place in the 1980s and 1990s with the boom in men's lifestyle magazines (Nixon, 1993; Mort, 1996; Crewe, 2003; Gill, 2003).

Magazine content is centred on the concept of the individual as autonomous and free to define and control his or her private life; the activities within his or her bedroom and bathroom; his or her personal identity (as will be noted in the next chapter, the latter is a key characteristic of consumerism). McRobbie (1976: 76) explains that Jackie "deals primarily with the terrain of the personal". Later she identifies the same trope in *Just Seventeen*, where "self is at the heart" (McRobbie, 1990: xiv). This means that magazines mediate and engage intimate, personal issues, be they concerned with romantic, sexual or emotional topics. These include themes of grooming, personal styling, clothing and hygiene, which are all situated in the space of the individuals' body and mind (or sense of self). Consumer magazines exist within and for the personal lives of their readers, addressing their private experiences of professional and social life. This is not to suggest that the magazines are only consumed in private, on the contrary Stevenson et al (2000a: 207) found that many respondents consumed magazines in public spaces, but to centralise the concept of the personal and individual within the discursive approach of the genre. McCracken (1993: 28) echoes this and points out that the concept of "yourself" anchors the textual and visual discourse of most women's magazines: "your looks," 'your private life,' 'how to make yourself...', 'your job,' 'your hair'" better. Bignell (2000: 66) agrees, saying that the "address to 'you' ... invites the reader to recognise herself as the individual being spoken to".

Furthermore, these unique "selves" are implicitly constructed as consumers. Although the individualising discourse should not be conflated with the projection of consumer

identity, there is a clear link between the implied autonomy and freedom of individuals to define their personal lives through selective consumption and the ways in which magazines address readers as consumers by presenting them with a catalogue of goods to consume (visually and materially). Forced both by the financial reliance on advertising and broader, normative discourses of consumerism (the latter discussed in detail in the next chapter), magazines privilege an implicit construction of their readers as consumers, with needs that can be largely fulfilled by consumption or consumption-like behaviour. A discussion of the tensions between various views on consumption will be extended in the following chapter; for now it leads into the point that magazines operate through an assertion of authority in matters of consumption.

### **Magazines assert an authority on style**

Beetham (1996: 75) quotes an 1861 editor as stating that the purpose of her magazine is "to inform our sisters what is the style and manner of dress in vogue at time of publication, ... and to add in every possible way, by imaginative and serious literature and well executed engravings, to the amusement and instruction of our readers". Contemporary magazines continue to make similar implicit and explicit claims about their authority on matters of style, taste and consumption. Stevenson et al's (2000a: 200) respondents showed a high level of awareness of the consumerism pervading the magazines that they read but they also deferred to the role that magazines played in helping them dress with more style, for example (ibid., 2000a: 196-7). In Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001: 17) analysis of *House Beautiful*, they argue that the magazine "features ... 'ideal homes', 'dream houses' to aspire to – the homes of celebrities and of model couples who have tastefully renovated their 'rustic-style' cottages and 'spacious Georgian houses'", again highlighting the discursive role of the glossy magazine in setting standards of style and mediating good taste.

Consumer magazines act as self-appointed experts on all manners of style, consumption and aesthetic practice, specifically with relation to fashion, dress and grooming. Mort (1996: 22) reports that *The Face* magazine described itself as "the ur text of a set of symbolic rituals, ... a manual of taste which laid down the ceremonial of contemporary metropolitan life"; the significance of which lay in "its special claims to authority on matters of consumption, together with the forms of knowledge which made such claims possible". Mort (1996: 24) quotes Robert Elms of *The Face* explaining their philosophy that "everything is style ... style is our status system, our guide to what is

right in the world." Similarly, a "positive commitment to the world of goods" (Mort, 1996: 25) gives magazines the power of a taste elite centred on the culture of consumption that both pervades and rationalises the existence of the genre, allowing it to provide instruction to individual consumers in their own practices of consumption.

## The genre of consumer magazines

To summarise, therefore, the characteristics shared by the various magazines addressed by the literature, are:

- They are *commodities*, produced in order to be sold to readers, and which make their income through selling the attention of their readers to advertisers,
- They are asymmetrically reliant on *visual* forms of mediation, incorporating image, colour, design, layout and illustration in their formats,
- They are concerned with *entertainment*, creating their content so as to appeal to moments of escapism and relaxation and implying that reading them is as an act of leisure,
- They address readers as consuming *individuals*, highlighting matters related to private life and consumption as a mode of addressing personal development and defining self-identity,
- They assert an authority on *style*, offering education on how best to consume and appropriate commodities available to consumers.

Many of the scholars reviewed here agree that magazines are a type of media genre. As Beetham (1996: 5) argues, "The magazine developed its own generic and linguistic conventions.... Increasingly, also, it developed a set of visual conventions and techniques through use of illustration". This is arguably the case across magazines for men, women, or teenagers, as well as across hobbyist publications that presume a particular (often implicitly gendered) interest in cars, sport, interior décor or fashion, as the indicators discussed above demonstrate. This is not to suggest that all magazines are the same or that their precise differences should not be noted, taken seriously and studied, but that an analysis of their similarities may be equally enlightening. A focus on the similarities exhibited by magazines across genres may allow for a useful, umbrella generalisation – or *genrelisation* – of consumer magazines.

According to Frow (2006: 2) genre is "a universal dimension of textuality" that organises forms of discourse and thus the social structures of meaning (Frow, 2006: 1). In other

words, genres offer “frameworks for constructing meaning and value in one or another medium” (Frow, 2006: 72). Considering the shared characteristics that magazines evidence based on the literature reviewed in this chapter, it can be argued that they constitute a genre at the level of both form and content. Furthermore, Frow acknowledges that genre is often a classificatory system introduced by the culture industry in marketing and merchandising activities. This, and their acceptance by consumers, is evidence that “genre classifications are real. They have an organising force in everyday life. They are embedded in material infrastructures and in the recurrent practices of classifying and differentiating kinds of symbolic action” (Frow, 2006: 13). The fact that magazines are commonly recognised as different to books, comics, and newspapers illustrates their status as genre in everyday life and suggests that the structural commonalities of magazine covers play a role in organising their meanings and presence in the social world. Exactly how this takes place is one thing that this research project seeks to explore and articulate in more detail.

### ***Emergent research opportunities***

Several research opportunities emerge from the literature. For example, “Author” approaches are missing an explicitly institutional political-economic critique, which assesses how the distribution of resources and power held by magazine-publishing multinational companies shape the type, number and content of magazines available on the market and the implications for social representation (although this falls outside of the ambit of this project). It is also significant to note that the vast majority of research into consumer magazines has taken place within a western, developed world context<sup>3</sup>, which opens up opportunities for further exploration of the nuances of globalised consumerist discourses mediated through magazines in developing world contexts (again, regrettably, beyond the scope of this project).

In particular, two lacunae in the literature have underscored my motivation to undertake this research. The first concerns the lack of a deeper understanding of the ways in which consumer magazines exist in social spaces as objects and texts, which is fundamentally linked to broader discourses of contemporary consumerism. The second suggests that there is lack of an extended theorisation of consumer magazines as a

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<sup>3</sup> Some examples of the minority are Laden’s (2003) research into the evolution of consumer magazines aimed at a black bourgeoisie in South Africa, Machin and Van Leeuwen’s (2003, 2005) analyses of the global discourses of *Cosmopolitan*, which include a focus on Indian and Thai versions of the magazine brand, and Chang’s (2004) analysis of the Taiwanese version of *Cosmopolitan*.

genre, which builds upon the common descriptive characteristics that emerge from the literature addressing magazines.

### **The mediation of discourses of consumerism in public space**

An important research opportunity that arises from the literature is a consideration of how magazines exist within social spaces. Garvey (1996) discussed how the layout and structure of magazines at the turn of the century mirrored the layout and display of department stores of the same era. In fact, the very term "magazine" originally meant "store house" or "repository", i.e., a place where commodities and products were stored (Beetham, 1996: 19; Garvey, 1996: 3). The French word for shop, "*magasin*" illustrates this (Garvey, 1996: 3). This link between three-dimensional display of product culture in stores and a two-dimensional representation of the same in the pages of magazines is very suggestive, and requires further exploration in contemporary culture. However, aside from passing references to newsstands as places where magazines are displayed and sold (e.g, Garvey, 1996: 2, 188; Edwards, 2003: 132; Engstrom, 2008: 61), to my awareness there has been no research into the visual and social dynamics of these spaces and their relationships with the texts that they host. Researchers interested in historical magazines found their data in archives. Presumably researchers addressing contemporary magazines sourced their research texts from newsagents, supermarkets or other retail outlets. But what remains lacking is an understanding of how these spaces are related to, or complicate, our existing broad understanding of the media genre. This blind spot about the retail contexts of magazines may conceal some interesting and relevant insights into the role of consumer magazines in contemporary consumer culture. This gap in the literature has provoked a core element of my research project, which takes as an object of research the newsstands at which magazines are displayed, bought and sold, as well as magazines themselves.

A more difficult to address opportunity that arises from the literature relates more broadly to the study of the mediation of contemporary discourses of consumerism. Although consumers were initially gendered as female (Garvey, 1996), the magazine industry has evolved to cater for all kinds of consumers, including teenagers, men and special-interest hobbyists. The one thing that the various audiences addressed by different sub-genres of magazine have in common is an assumption of their status as "consumer". A central theme arising from the literature on magazines is that they are grounded in product culture and celebrate, as Mort (1996) puts it, the world of goods.

These goods, both luxury and fast-moving consumables, are consistently branded, communicated and mediated through advertisements and editorial in all types of magazines. The capitalist productions of goods, consumerism and magazines have an intimate relationship; social histories of both magazines and the advertising industry show a parallel rise and intertwined dependences (Ewen, 1976; Featherstone, 1991; Jameson, 1991; Garvey, 1996; Ohmann, 1996; Mort, 1996). A great deal of research has established that consumer magazines have been linked to consumer culture since the rise of industrial capitalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Some studies have explicitly explored the dynamics of the mediation of consumerism in the context of gendered titles, such as Mort (1996), who addressed the relation between men's magazines and commercial cultures of the 1980s and 1990s, and recent post-feminist criticism (see McRobbie, 2009) which points out the ways in which feminist values have been co-opted and undermined by consumerism. A critical inquiry into the nature of the relationship between contemporary discourses of consumerism and consumer magazines in general could add value to these perspectives. This is an ambitious project, which cannot be addressed in its entirety in this thesis. However, it is crucial to note that an acknowledgement of the need to enrich magazine research with more detailed discussions of the ways in which contemporary discourses of consumerism are mediated has motivated this research.

### **The structural similarities of magazine covers as a genre**

The literature reviewed has shown significant similarities between magazines directed at different (usually gendered) audiences, making it necessary to explore ways of critically analysing consumer magazines from a collective, "genrelised" perspective. Although the literature exhibits a shared view on what consumer magazines are and what they mean, I believe it could be enriched by a grander narrative that seeks to provide an overarching theoretical view on consumer magazines, building upon a description of their commonalities in structure and address. Although this thesis will not claim to provide this grand narrative, it will take as a starting point the idea that consumer magazines constitute a genre, and will argue that the collective and intertextual analysis of covers of a number of different magazines can contribute towards a project of theorising them as such.

In the context of contributing to efforts to research and theorise the entire genre of consumer magazines, the magazine cover can be considered an important structurally

similar element, which is directly connected to the magazine's status as commodity. McCracken (1993) categorises the magazine cover as an advertising rather than editorial element of the magazine text, even though it is created by the editorial team and is not a paid-for placement by an external advertiser. She explains: "The systems of signification on covers do not arise autonomously but are closely connected to the commercial nature of women's magazines. Like many other forms of mass culture, the women's magazine is a commodity bought and sold on the market. The cover helps to establish the brand identity of the magazine commodity" (McCracken, 1993: 14). She further argues that the "combined verbal and visual texts present an image that the magazine wishes to promote about itself – an identity that will cause it to be recognised, differentiated from its competitors, purchased, read, or at least leafed through... its real goal is to sell us the advertisements that fill many of its pages.... The cover... leads the reader into the consumerist ideology that permeates the magazine as a whole" (ibid.: 15). The cover, she explains, is the most crucial part of the magazine: it must entice large groups of readers, it must sell itself to audiences in order to sell its audiences on to advertisers (ibid.: 18).

In the magazine industry, when a visual reference is needed for a magazine, it is the cover that is used<sup>4</sup>. And sometimes, publishers will decide on a cover first, and then decide which features to commission to match it (Holmes, 2000: 163). Industry commentators agree that a magazine loses a significant part of its identity without its cover. Yet a cover on its own can speak volumes about the magazine, even if it is has been detached. Magazine distributors, when returning unsold copies of titles to publishers, will often return only the cover to save shipping costs, and destroy the rest of the magazine in the warehouse (Renard, 2006). A focus on the structural commonalities of the design, content and modes of address of the covers of consumer magazines will therefore enrich existing literature that agrees on some of the other defining features of the genre.

## **Conclusion**

This project is ultimately concerned with mapping out the ways in which discourses of consumerism are mediated in general, and explores this through the specific empirical object of the magazine. As magazine scholars have argued, magazines are material,

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<sup>4</sup> It was common practice, at the *We Love Magazines* conference that I attended in Luxembourg in March 2007, for presenters to illustrate magazines that they were discussing with images of their covers.

visual artefacts that mediate gendered discourses of individualism, leisure, and aesthetic consumption. An updated perspective that further explores the structural similarities of different magazines, specifically their covers, would enrich our understanding of these processes. Coupled with our lack of a deeper understanding of the collective social importance and aesthetic structure of the magazine cover as a genre is a dearth of research about the ways in which magazines exist in retail spaces. One of the most important spaces where magazine covers do their work is at the newsstand, which has been largely ignored in scholarship addressing magazines. Any research into magazine covers necessarily invokes the space of newsstands, and vice versa. This project has therefore taken as its focus *a collective analysis of magazine covers at the newsstand*. The interplay between retail spaces and magazine covers therefore forms a central relationship that defines this project. Due to the lack of attention paid to newsstands, and the potentially fruitful outcome of an extended focus on magazine covers in general, my project has addressed these two items, recognising that they are co-constitutive and inter-dependent. This signals a key distinction and dialectic between magazine covers as a genre and newsstands as a space, which will emerge as a key theme reiterated in different ways throughout the thesis.

This chapter has sought to locate the empirical object that forms the focus of this study – the magazine cover as situated at the newsstand – by providing an overview of existing scholarship concerned with magazines, and making an argument for how the perspectives offered in this thesis can contribute to that body of knowledge. This chapter has also hinted at the fact that a study of magazine covers and newsstands has to do with more than simply scholarship related to magazines. Several broader conceptual and intellectual concerns are invoked by and transcend the empirical object of the magazine. The next chapter seeks to open up the discussion in order to address these, and will argue that consumer magazines should be understood within the broader context of contemporary consumer culture aesthetics. Through an exploration of consumer culture, commodities and consumption, a discussion of visual culture, and an articulation of the public realm as a space of appearance, Chapter 2 theoretically frames the empirical exploration of consumer magazine covers and newsstands, and highlights the larger conceptual concerns explored in this thesis.

## 2. Consumerism, visual culture and the public realm

This chapter will argue that magazine covers and newsstands can be theoretically oriented within scholarly approaches to consumer culture, aesthetics and theories of publicness as visibility. It is divided into three sections. First, a review of research into consumer culture will situate magazines in relation to the aestheticisation of everyday life and debates on the commodity and consumption. Next, a discussion of visual culture, highlighting in specific a definition of the public as a space of appearance, is offered, as well as a discussion of retail sites. Finally, the chapter will present a set of dialectical tensions that operate within consumer culture aesthetics, and which can theoretically frame research into consumer magazines.

### ***Consumer culture***

Of the many features of contemporary westernised society that can be observed and studied, the fact that it is organised around consumerism and consumption, both materially and symbolically, is perhaps most compelling in the context of this project. Authors such as Jean Baudrillard (1970), Colin Campbell (1989), Mike Featherstone (1991), Don Slater (1997), Celia Lury (1999) and Zygmunt Bauman (2007), although divergent in their epistemological outlooks, agree that consumerism is the defining feature of society today, and consumption a defining feature of the everyday practices of social life. Moreover, they share the view that the rise of a consumer society should not be considered a linear outcome of the growth in mass production, but as tied to it in intimate and co-constitutive ways.

It was at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that consumer magazines first emerged as a media phenomenon (Ballaster et al, 1991; Ohmann, 1996; Garvey, 1996; Beetham, 1996; Ouellette, 1999). Adding to and filling out revisionist arguments that state that the industrial revolution was preceded by a consumer revolution, which provided the demand for goods that the industrial revolution then supplied (e.g., Campbell, 1989), Slater (1997: 20) suggests that it is most productive to see the consumer revolution and the industrial revolution as both part of a *commercial* revolution, which took place from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It was characterised by three developments: i) the availability of a new “world of goods” – a sudden wealth of new commodities from imperialist trade

expansion (tea, coffee, new foods, new types of furniture, etc.) and their penetration into the everyday lives of more social classes; ii) the spread of fashion and taste as key elements of consumption no longer confined only to the aristocracy; iii) the development of infrastructures, organizations and practices that targeted new markets (the rise of shopping, advertising and marketing) (Slater, 1997: 17-20). These three developments have culminated in contemporary consumer society, of which the content and form of magazines are a familiar and ubiquitous embodiment.

The expansion of colonial trade and European imperialism, which culminated in the types of exhibition held at London's Crystal Palace in the 1850s, contributed to the transformation of modernity itself into a spectacle. The emergence of private, bourgeois domesticity made consumption respectable and normalised, in part ushered in by the growing institutions of advertising and consumer credit (Slater, 1997: 14). Ewen (1976) argues that automated mass production systems of manufacture culminating in the Fordist production line in the 1920s led to the extension of the corporatist mentality into the private lives of workers and the institutionalised encouragement of market consumption and advertising. By the 1980s, consumerism had accelerated, driven in the UK by a Thatcherist ethic of consumption as a form of work contributing to the economy, culminating in a society "where a good deal of production is targeted at consumption, leisure and services and where there is the increasing salience of the production of symbolic goods, images and information" (Featherstone, 1991: 21).

Consumerism can be defined as a hegemonic culture that characterises everyday life in the global north. Bauman (2007: 28) makes a crucial distinction: while "*consumption* [is] primarily a trait and occupation of individual human beings, *consumerism* is an attribute of society" (emphasis in original). Slater (1997: 24-28) highlights among the key characteristics of consumerism an orientation to consumption and the culture of a market society. This entails a universal, impersonal conceptualisation of consumers as subjects that experience both insatiable need and an unprecedented freedom of choice. This view of consumers as autonomous individuals exercising a freedom of choice is central to the ways in which readers of magazines are addressed, as highlighted in the previous chapter. In essence, consumer culture describes a situation in which the primary way that social and economic life are organised is through acts and discourses of consumption.

## Commodities

As noted in the previous chapter, magazines are both commodities and mediators of other commodities. The existence of a proliferation of commodities is perhaps the most central material characteristic of consumer culture. A long tradition of Marxist thought has theorised the materiality of the socio-economic world, and the ways in which this manifests and organises production, labour and everyday life. According to Daniel Miller (1987, 1997), cultures of consumption are as material as those of production, and are concerned with “the very physicality of the object which makes it appear so immediate, sensual and assimilable” (Miller, 1987: 3). The materiality of consumer culture refers to the tangibility, concreteness, and three-dimensionality of products and spaces; to things that can be touched, held, possessed, purchased and coveted. Consumer culture is made material and concrete through “object form” (Miller, 1987: 3). According to Lash and Urry, however, immaterial objects such as signs can also be commodities: either “informational” with primarily cognitive content or “postmodern” with primarily aesthetic content (Lash and Urry, 1994: 4). Brands are an important type of immaterial object, and have become fundamentally twinned with commodities in late modernity.

Branding is at source a practice of naming objects, located deep within the ultimately unattainable hope of human language, which seeks to close the gap that exists between thing-named and arbitrary linguistic signifier thereof. Douglas and Isherwood (1979: 50) refer to the original task of branding as classifying and differentiating competing commodities. They define branding as the public use of marking aimed at noting orders of value within a shared system of signification. This is an important and fundamental explanation of the practice of branding, which aims to endow products, services or corporations with an identity, personality or some kind of essential value. Following from their argument that goods have meaning, names (or brands) add another layer, at once representing and abstracting meaning at the material level of these goods. Such connotations are not necessarily simple: “brands are complicated bundles of meaning” (McCracken, 2005: 179), which grow in complexity as they are inherited and shaped by new brand managers. In this sense then, it can be argued that the brand is more than a mere label, it is the *text of the commodity*.

Branding practitioners invest great effort into choosing or creating names with the right kinds of symbolism for their products (see for example Shrum and Lowrey, 2007), as well as into investing the “right” kinds of meanings into existing names. And these

meanings, connected to their brand names, become part of popular culture. Although Stuart Ewen (1976: 202-3) refers only once to "brands" in his seminal *Captains of Consciousness* it is in order to recognise how brand names "had inserted themselves into the idiom of daily expression ... [and become] artefact[s] of multidimensional significance within ... culture." In the context of multinational corporations and globalised trade and mediation, the artefact of the brand, and the practice of branding, is so widespread that brand names are a colloquially normative part of everyday life. As Silverstone (1999: 25) puts it, "We discuss the brand, always the brand. The power of the name, the signifier of a global product, the location of the new aura: God, the brand. Brand, the god." Lash and Urry (1994: 113) describe branding as a process of attaching images to goods, terming it an "aesthetic operation" (Lash and Urry, 1994: 15). As is known from everyday life, the words Nike, Louis Vuitton, Coca Cola and Microsoft have meaning well beyond labelling shoes, handbags, soft drinks or computer software. Brands represent the move from material to immaterial commodity, and can be conceived of as commodities themselves.

This shows that it is impossible to take an absolute position on commodities as material or immaterial, cognitive or aesthetic. It is important to conceptualise commodities in a manner that recognises the tensions and relations between these various characteristics. For example, magazines are three-dimensional artefacts made of paper and ink, their materiality and tactility is indisputable, their existence as commodities is widely accepted throughout the relevant literature. Yet they mediate a large variety of information, and their form seeks to exploit aesthetic appeal. This makes them at once material and symbolic, as well as both informational and aesthetic commodities. This im/material tension will be returned to later in this chapter.

Liberal economists might argue that commodities merely represent a response to market demand (the aggregation of individual needs), and that their meaning is only inherent in their monetary value; whilst Marxist analysts might point to the widening gulf between commodities' use-value and exchange-value. Marx's (1867/1990) discussions of the commodity in *Capital* focus on the ways in which money is abstracted into commodities (and back again) via labour, and the chasm between use-value and exchange-value. For Marx, the social meaning of commodities was the alienation of labour and the mutation of the aesthetic potential of the artefact into something abstracted from the intimacy of the human subject's potential to produce and use objects. As Eagleton (1990: 209) explains, Marx viewed the commodity "as the antithesis of the aesthetic object, a kind of artefact gone awry, the commodity's material

being [as] mere random instantiation of the abstract law of exchange". Critical views on the commodity therefore perceive it as a manifestation of manipulative capitalism; as a distortion of a previously pure utilitarian relationship between production and consumption. Liberal and Marxist perceptions of the commodity both suffer from a focus (from opposite poles) on production processes and market value, which excludes a cultural view on the role of commodities in social life.

An anthropological perspective addresses such oversights, highlighting the cultural relevance of commodities. McCracken (1990: 74) argues that objects contribute "to the construction of the culturally constituted world precisely because they are a vital, visible record of cultural meaning that is otherwise intangible... [and] have a performative function". This suggests that commodities not only embody the meaning with which their producers have imbued them, but also give meanings to the social world. Douglas and Isherwood (1979: 38) preface this with the argument that goods are "needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture". Miller (1987: 215) argues that "mass goods represent culture not because they are merely there as the environment within which we operate, but because they are an integral part of that process of objectification by which we create ourselves as an industrial society: our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices". In order to understand the role of goods in social life commodities must be considered a system of meaning, a type of three-dimensional language. This opens up the possibility for the *reading* and *interpretation* of objects beyond their status as the results of industrial production practices.

Commodities give a physical and symbolic shape to culture, and carry within them a variety of significations, ready to transfer these latent meanings to the social world through acts of consumption. McCracken (1990: 72) argues that there are "three locations of meaning: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer, as well as two methods of transfer: world-to-good and good-to-individual". For McCracken, then, the commodity is in some sense in the centre of the matrix of meaning flow within consumer society. Appadurai (1986: 9) argues that because commodities are things "intended for exchange" it is necessary to trace the social life of things in order to access the social and cultural meaning that they embody.

The tension between political-economic views of commodities as alienated/alienating artefacts and anthropological views of commodities as meaning-laden cultural products is important to highlight, and is mirrored in similarly shaped debates about consumption.

## Consumption

Consumption is a human activity, a description of subjective practice within the larger system. It is a social exercise, enacted by individuals who participate (consciously or unconsciously; unavoidably) in consumer society. Baudrillard (1970: 81) argues that it is the consumer society that provides social training in consumption and that has made practices of consumption normative and necessary to social survival. Lury (1999: 2) explains that it is crucial to avoid the tendency to understand consumption as “the completion of a process of production for the market, and thus ...as secondary, responsive or derivative”; rather, it should be considered part of an interlinking cycle of which production is also a part.

Various Marxist critics (such as Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944/1972; Marcuse 1964/2002) viewed mass consumption as evidence that modern consumers have been strategically manipulated: distracted from genuine social and political issues by consumption dressed up as entertainment and leisure (Mackay, 1997: 3). In this narrative, consumers are seduced into consumption, which is represented as empowering, liberating, fulfilling and entertaining, and which displaces possibilities for political action or social awareness. Marxist critics argue that the practices of consumption should be seen as a kind of *labour* rather than leisure. They emphasise that consumption is a fundamental part of the capitalist economic machine (Lee, 1993; Perrotta, 2001). Taking the theorisation of consumption further, Rose (1990: 102) argues that in the context of late modernity, “the primary economic image offered to the modern citizen is not that of the producer but of the consumer”. In this way, consumption and purchasing power is put forward as the way that individuals can shape, manage and make meaningful their own lives. The various models of self-management prioritised through the various social and economic institutions of contemporary life result, argues Rose (1990: 226), in “an individual whose citizenship is ... manifested through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of marketed options”. These arguments are echoed by some contemporary feminist theorists, who argue that an “obsession with consumer culture ... [has played] a vital role in the undoing of feminism” (McRobbie, 2009: 5). Part of the postfeminist agenda has been to construct narcissistic consumption and aesthetic self-management as empowering to women, which feminist critics argue has served to further the neo-liberal patriarchal agenda rather than advance the cause of true equality (Gill, 2007b).

Other theorists argue, however, that this “manipulationist” view of consumption

ignores, indeed snubs in a wholly patrician way, the creativity, consciousness and rebelliousness with which people deal with goods, the extent to which the meaning of things are contradictory (not functionally determined by the system or by rationalised commodity aesthetics) and the extent to which human subjects continue to assimilate consumer goods into their everyday life on their own terms (Slater, 1997: 125).

Consumption should not be understood as only the uni-directional flow of meaning, from the producers of goods to the consumers of them. Nor is demand for commodities a uni-directional flow from consumers to producers, where the latter are portrayed as merely responding benevolently to consumers' wishes and needs whilst harnessing the activity of consumption into the production and profit cycle. Appadurai (1986: 40-1) argues that demand is "neither a mechanical response to the structure and level of production nor a bottomless natural appetite. It is a complex social mechanism that mediates between short- and long-term patterns of commodity circulation". Despite these complexities and nuances, the neo-liberal discourses of consumer society privilege the assumption that consumer needs are insatiable and consumption a natural and "ancient" human "need" which industrial production merely serves (Twitchell, 1996: 11). This should be recognised as an ideological position that works to corroborate the system of industrial production and corporate profit.

Baudrillard (1970: 78) sees consumption as part of a semiotic system, "which secures the ordering of signs and the integration of the group: it is therefore both a morality (a system of ideological values) and a communication system, a structure of exchange". Although this view bears traces of the manipulationist position, it is countered by the acknowledgement of the ways in which subjects can use consumption to communicate. Thorsten Veblen (1899/1970) showed how the practice of acquiring and displaying goods can be understood as a communicative practice – where conspicuous consumption allowed class hierarchies to be mediated through displays of good taste. This framing sees the enactment of consumption as leisure as an emancipatory rather than manipulative practice, which allows for social positioning and symbolic communication (Gottdiener, 2000: 9). Bourdieu (1984), in an ethnographic deconstruction of "taste" in middle class France refers to the practice of manipulating cultural capital in order to display one's taste and social positioning as "distinction", which illustrates both the systemic constraints imposed by the consumer system and the subtleties of individual agency. According to Bauman (2007: 30), conspicuous consumption has evolved in the era of liquid modernity to emphasize instead of the

solidity and durability of goods in the modernist sense the “facility with which pleasures can be squeezed out of acquired riches right away and on the spot, promptly using them up and digesting and relishing them in full, or disposing of them and destroying them potlatch-style”. This refers to the pace with which new goods are made available and old ones obsolete, and the rapid flow of goods and information in the age of global capitalism.

Whether in Veblen’s solid (modern) style, or Bauman’s liquid (postmodern) style, ostentatious consumption is widely acknowledged as a tool with which social subjects are able to imbue their practice with significance. The common thread running through these accounts is that “consumption is a meaningful activity … it is assumed that people understand their relation to things in the world – their needs – in terms of projects and goals, social conventions and norms, concepts of what being a human or human society involves” (Slater, 1997: 131). From this perspective, consumption can be considered a practice for the construction and projection of personal and group identities (for example, in the spontaneous formation of “brand communities” – see Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001), and the world of goods can be considered a toolbox of concretised cultural notions for use in the ongoing “cultural project of completing the self” (McCracken, 1990: 88). The result is that “individuals create a personal “world of goods” which reflect their own experience and concepts of self and world” (McCracken, 1990: 86). Lash and Urry (1994: 5) term this process “reflexive consumption”. Furthermore, contrary to some feminist views of consumption as evidence of women’s manipulation and exploitation by a patriarchal society, studies of how women consume media commodities aimed specifically at them (Radway, 1984) or textual analyses that subverted the manipulationist thesis (Modleski, 1982) reveal the pleasurable dimension of consumption, how it can introduce delight, entertainment and escapist fantasy into otherwise dull everyday routines. Similar findings result from research into reader reception of magazines, as summarised in Chapter 1. The pleasurable dimension of consumption should also not be overlooked.

Nevertheless, controversy remains over “whether consumption is a sphere of manipulation or freedom, whether the consumer is sovereign or subject, active or passive, creative or determined…” (Slater, 1997: 32). This controversy between manipulationist and social-constructivist views on the practice of consumption cannot be resolved, it *should not* be resolved, for it is the site of a very fruitful and interesting tension, which can be superimposed onto consumer magazines through a consideration of the “reader” and “text” centred approaches towards researching them.

Defined as a type of consumption, magazine reading can be framed within these critical debates. Whether readers' behaviours are influenced by magazine reading, in the text-based ideological view of, for example, McRobbie's (1976) analysis of *Jackie*, or whether the practice of reading magazines is benign, even emancipatory, in the view of audience approaches to magazines, a central tension exists within magazine scholarship, which reflects broader debates about consumption. On the one hand, it can be framed as escapist leisure and relatively trite, pleasant entertainment. "Reader" approaches are concerned with highlighting the complexity, ambiguity and agency with which readers consume magazines, and with giving voice to the unique interpretations of individuals. This maps on to the anthropological view of consumption as an act of expression and identity construction. On the other hand, magazine reading can be seen as a kind of labour that allows magazine publishers to sell their audiences' attention to advertisers. "Text" centred approaches make assumptions about the manipulative characteristics of magazines, which, it is argued, define, shape and control the reading experience. As both commodities and texts, magazines exist at an interesting interface between the neo-Marxist views on acts of consumption as an indication of capitalist exploitation of consumers, criticisms of postfeminist mediation which conflate consumption with female liberation, and interpretations of magazines as ideologically powerful texts that can shape human experience. I will return to the tensions between these differing viewpoints on consumption and magazine reading, which I summarise as those between manipulation and empowerment, later in this chapter. Before this, however, it is necessary to address the visual nature of consumer culture.

### ***Visual culture and the public***

Consumer culture is flooded with signs and images; it can be argued that it is above all a *visually mediated* society. Featherstone (1991) discusses three senses in which everyday life has been aestheticised, that is, saturated with visual content and mediated by visual forms. The first notes the growth of philosophies and practices of artistic subcultures, such as surrealism and Dadaism, which aimed to efface the boundary between art and everyday life and introduced the assumption that art can be anywhere or anything. The second is related to the development of mass consumption in general and the emergence of discourses and practices that seek to construct distinctive lifestyles that aimed to turn life into a work of art. The third refers to the growth of a "rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life", particularly the "commercial manipulation of images through advertising, the media and

the displays, performances and spectacles of the urbanized fabric of daily life” (Featherstone, 1991: 66-68).

The visualness of consumer society is exemplified by the prominence of images (static, moving, photographic or artistic), colour and graphic design (including typesetting and logos) in contemporary mediation. As Slater (1997: 31) puts it, “Consumer culture is notoriously awash with signs, images, publicity. Most obviously, it involves an aestheticisation of commodities and their environment: packaging, shop display, point of sale material, product design, etc. have a long history within commercial capitalism”. Featherstone (1991: 76) likewise discusses how

the urban landscape has become aestheticized and enchanted through the architecture, billboards, shop displays, advertisements, packages, street signs etc., and through the embodied persons who move through these spaces.

It is almost impossible to imagine consumer society without the presence of visual mediations; technological developments, including the rise of photography, film and the television, can be credited with bringing the image, in full colour, to the centre of both mediation and consumption. The corollary to this supremacy of visual mediation is a normative culture of visual supremacy, a hierarchical preference for the sense of sight and acts of looking, which Jenks (1995: 5) calls “the doctrine of immaculate perception” and which can be rearticulated as the common sense dictum that “seeing is believing”.

As noted in the previous chapter, consumer magazines are a pervasive example of the sovereignty of the visual in popular and media culture. The glossiness of magazines is rooted in an extremely seductive form of aestheticisation that prioritises visual perfection, intense colour, a proliferation of images and an indefatigable invitation to look. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, a central site of analysis in scholarship on magazines focuses on their visual elements (some examples include Machin and Van Leeuwen, 2003; Barthes, 1973, 1984; Williamson, 1978; Hodge and Kress, 1998; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2002; Bignell, 2002; and Benwell, 2003). The question that emerges from the accepted fact of this visual prominence is how it can be theoretically framed in such a way as to allow for a deeper analysis of the operations of the discourse of consumerism. The next sub-section takes this up by framing the visual in terms of theories of the public realm. It argues that a conception of the public as a space of appearance (as opposed to common political concern) allows for a renewed focus not only on the role of the visual in consumer culture, but the innately public nature of the visual itself.

## The space of appearance

Images that are made available for consumption through media forms such as consumer magazine covers are fundamentally *public* texts. All media texts are public: their *raison d'être* is the dissemination of information and ideas to large audiences, in this way, making them collective, outward- rather than inward-facing social phenomena. Arguably, visual mediation has a special kind of publicity, in the sense in which it allows linguistic barriers (of translation or illiteracy, for example) to be overcome. It could even be argued that images have the potential for the most global type of publicity, as they have the potential to be seen and interpreted by the largest possible audiences. It is important, therefore to theorize how the visual is "public" and, further, how this can be harnessed in such a way as to theoretically frame an exploration into the visual mechanics of consumer culture.

As Markham and Couldry (2007: 678) point out, the term "public" is "notoriously difficult, as it has a range of conflicting meanings". They describe the outlines of two broad types of public/private distinctions – a space boundary that "turns on the question of what is publicly accessible" and a political boundary that turns on issues that need to be resolved collectively. In other words, the public is concerned with what is common, both in terms of collective human experience and organisation, and in terms of what is accessible to all. A great deal of scholarly attention has been focused on the political implications of accessibility and collectivity. Habermas' (1992) description of the rise and fall of the public sphere initiated complex and long-running debates about its nature and potential evolutions as media technologies have developed and ushered in new communicative paradigms. Yet, this conceptualization of publicness is entirely political, in that it theorizes only how participation in deliberation about issues of common concern reflects the existence of a space accessible to all citizens. Consumerism emphasizes the individual rather than the collective, and prioritizes an ethic of personal development and fulfillment through consumption. Consumerism is all about I and me, not we. Thus, theories of the public as a space of collective deliberation and political decision-making are inappropriate for framing a project that seeks to explore the mediation of consumerism. Arguably, it is more suitable to explore the ways in which publicness operates as a space of display and appearance – something also more relevant to the hypervisual nature of consumer culture. In order to revisit theories of the public, with a view to finding footholds for an analysis of visual consumer culture, it is necessary to reach beyond Habermas to Hannah Arendt, to whom he is arguably deeply indebted for her conceptualization of the public realm (Benhabib, 1996: 199).

Arendt's notion of the public realm has two aspects, the first is that it is a space of common attention, where things are visible to all, the second is that it is the metaphysical site of collective action on world issues of common concern (Canovan, 1994: 180; Benhabib, 1996: 128; Villa, 1999: 128). It is this second formulation that evolved into the important, but by now familiar, theorisations of the Habermasian public sphere and the many extensions of and challenges to it. There is no doubt that the theorisation of the public sphere as a space of deliberation and collective action on matters of social importance is central to media research that is in some way politically oriented and seeks to explore ideas of citizenship, public connection (see Couldry et al, 2007) or political/communicative action. However, it has recently been argued that media theory would benefit from an expansion of "our view of the public sphere to include the space which delimits what is possible to make visible and stage – the public as a 'space of appearance'" (Chouliaraki, 2006b: 279). This project has already been initiated through Chouliaraki's (2006a, 2006b) examinations of the aestheticisation of suffering in television imagery. I would like to argue that the theorisation of the public as space of appearance can also be extended in the direction of consumerist imagery, which arguably privileges a very narrow view of publicity as visibility, omitting definitions that include the democratic, participatory, political senses of the public as an aggregate of citizenship to which decision-making power must be held accountable.

In Arendt's (1958) discussion of the public realm as "the common", the following key points are notable. The first is the notion of "publicity", which is the state of "being seen and heard by everybody" (Arendt, 1958: 50) – and it is no coincidence that this too is the name given to the results of public relations marketing campaigns aimed at highlighting the profiles of brands or personalities. This type of commonality is, according to Arendt, a "shared world" defined by the "presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear". The emphasis placed on publicity as visibility here is particular, and Arendt (1958: 51) chooses words that highlight a sense of illuminated public exposure: the public realm is defined by a harsh, "implacable, bright light". In contrast, the private realm is described in terms that accentuate its veiled obscurity: it is shadowy, "dark and hidden" (Arendt, 1958: 64). The process of moving from the private to the public realm involves illumination, or making something "shine" (Arendt, 1958: 55). The public is therefore a "brilliantly lit stage on which common attention is focused" (Canovan, 1994: 180) and action on that stage is fundamentally "agonal" (Benhabib, 1996: 125), that is, more akin to performance and display. In this way, the public becomes an ocular space (Villa, 1999: 142). Within theories of political action, this

formulation has generated great debate. Benhabib (1992, 1996) for example, makes the argument that the agonistic model is redundant and should be abandoned in favour of the more deliberative elements of Arendt's theory of the public realm. Because "agonistic action is episodic and rare; only some human actions attain that quality of 'shining forth'..." (Benhabib, 1996: 127) – in other words, it is exclusive and is predicated on an assumption of homogeneity amongst the community of agonistic actors. Villa (1999: 135), on the other hand, argues that there is potential value in the agonistic model, in that it recognises that there exists an innate theatricality in public life as well as political action, and that "theatrical/agonistic action contributes to worldliness" in ways that other forms of political action do not. And, rather than being reducible to an individualist, expressive form of political identity, agonistic action is "shaped by the discipline and depersonalisation that comes from adopting a specific public role or mask" (Villa, 1999: 140). If the debates about the nature of the public in the context of political theory are acknowledged, but put aside in order to focus on Arendt's formulation of the public realm as "the space of the visible" (Thompson, 1995: 245), three important points emerge, which are of particular relevance to consumer society.

Firstly, Arendt (1958: 55) conceptualises the visibility of the public realm as partly a "community of things". This relates to the "world of things" (Arendt, 1958: 52), which exists between those who have it in common. Reminiscent of Mort's (1996: 25) "world of goods", the world of things highlights the role of artefacts in creating a common world relates back to the discussions of the commodity, and highlights the importance of the material dimension in conceiving of the public as a shared space of appearance.

Secondly, Arendt (1958: 56) discusses how in a space of appearance such as the public, *admiration* becomes "something to be used and consumed". Public admiration as status is therefore one of the results of a culture of visibility and agonistic action within that stage of appearance. This can be linked in with the phenomenon of celebrity, where human subjects act within public space as performers who seek fame through wide-ranging visibility. It can also be linked to the ways in which social standing and personality became publicly performed practices in urban life, as influentially articulated by Sennett (1976) in *The Fall of Public Man*. Thirdly, as is apparent throughout the entire chapter in *The Human Condition*, Arendt sees the public realm not as separate from the private, but as fundamentally tied to it. She explains, "these two realms could exist only in the form of coexistence" (Arendt, 1958: 59). The recurring metaphor of the interplay of light and shadow that she uses in articulating the qualities of the public and private realms respectively evokes a clear sense of interdependence and complex interplay between the concepts. Private and public concerns are dialectically tied to one

another, and can migrate across the public/private boundary through a process of illumination and appearance.

To summarise: in analysing consumer culture, the public is most appropriately theorised in terms of display (of object as commodity or subject as aestheticised personality) and being visible to the widest possible audience. This equates to a project of gaining mindshare through an appropriation of the ocular. In this framing, the public is implicitly constructed as an audience first and foremost, thereby privileging the operation of visibility rather than participation. There is no doubt that consumer magazines are public artifacts, put out into common space and, theoretically at least, accessible and visible to all. It is therefore important to carefully delineate the nature of this publicness, as one that prioritizes appearance and display. The strategy of creating a common focus on symbolic messages is central to consumerist communication, while ideas of common action are deemphasised in favour of an individualist, performative view on social life and identity. In this sense, the consumerist view on the public prioritises the value of widely accessible visibility and deemphasizes the value of democratic participation. The latter is characterised in the form of acts of consumption, rather than in the form of participating in dialogue and debate about issues of common interest, in Arendt's world-making sense. This is not to suggest that the aestheticised public realm, characterised as it is by appearance and display, is a depoliticised space devoid of power relations. On the contrary, the ways in which appearance is made possible on that "brightly-lit stage" of consumerist media texts, in terms of the ways in which commodities, subjectivity and consumption are represented, require analysis and theorisation specifically in order to expose and map out those power relations. This will be discussed further in a later subsection of this chapter, which discusses the dialectic of manipulation and empowerment. First, it is necessary to address the importance of theorising public spaces of consumption.

## **Public retail sites**

Closely connected with the public nature of visualness in consumer society is the ways in which its spaces are constructed. Richard Sennett (1991: xii) argues that many of the public spaces in the modern city are "limited to carefully orchestrating consumption", as opposed to other, more fully human experiences of social life. Although, as Slater points out, consumerism is concerned with the private lives of consumers and treats them as liberated personae who enact the power of choice (Slater, 1997: 27),

consumption is often enacted in public places organised so as to embody these values. The most significant of these is the proliferation of retail spaces in the “lived cityscape” (Arvidsson, 2006: 3) of the global north. This subsection will address how retail spaces can be situated in relation to ideas of publicity as visibility and accessibility.

An important application of the consumerist notion of publicity is related to the ways in which it is constructed in a physical and spatial dimension. Both Barnett (2003, 2007) and Thompson (1995) refer to mediated “spaces” which allow for appearance and representation without the requirement of communicative co-location, echoing Meyrowitz’s (1985) argument that a “sense of place” has been lost due to the rise of electronically mediated social spaces. Augé (1995) argues that “supermodernity” requires a new anthropology of “non-places” – the supermarkets, airports, highways and other places of transit and consumption – which acknowledges and explores the ways in which non-places “mediate a whole mass of relations” (Augé, 1995: 94). The study of *location* (including its potential doubling, pluralisation, or subversion) thus remains relevant to media studies (Moores, 2007: 5). Couldry (2000: 24), for example, argues that there is a lack of empirical research into the lived experience of the supposed impact that media have had on territory and place. Some studies have started to address this, for example, McCarthy’s (2001) study of ambient television in public places, and Bull’s (2000, 2007) studies of the use of personal stereos and iPods in urban space. In the context of this project, the notions of both public space and public place are relevant to an understanding of publicity in the context of mediated consumerism. Spaces of mediation (such as magazines) are a crucial site in which commercial messages and images are made public, visible and accessible; likewise, real-world public locations (such as newsstands) function through the practices of visibility, visual display and accessibility. The relationship between the concepts of space (as site of representation) and place (as material location) is central to an understanding of retail sites. Although they are material and localised *places*, they are also spaces in terms of their prioritisation of visibility and the ways in which they host mediation. Publicity as visibility operates on both a material level in terms of the arrangement and accessibility of retail spaces, and a figurative level in terms of the opportunities for symbolic and social representation. Visibility, and “the importance of image and especially of an (aesthetic) reflexivity” is, according to Lash and Urry (1994: 326), one of the most distinctive characteristics of “the contemporary remaking of place” (*ibid.*).

It is important to note, however, that retail spaces are not completely accessible; their visibility is policed and monitored by surveillance procedures (highlighting again the excision of democratic notions of the kinds of accessibility and public action made possible by other public spaces, such as parks<sup>5</sup>, piazzas, town halls, railway stations). Frederiksson (1997) discusses how privately owned, managed and monitored, department stores implement a Panopticon-like system of invisible observation incorporating uniformed security guards, plain clothes detectives, closed-circuit cameras and signs stating that the store is under surveillance. Bolin (2003) similarly highlights surveillance as a central role played by the presence of TV screens in stores. Although retail spaces are public in the sense that they "provide opportunities to be seen" (Barnett, 2007: 6) and offer their displays as accessible to all, they are private in the sense in which they are owned by corporations and individuals (rather than the state and therefore all citizens) and enforce their rights of surveillance and access. Bauman (2007: 126) argues that the urban "underclass" (the homeless, the addicted, the criminal, the terminally unemployed, the otherwise consumption-compromised) are unwelcome in consumer society and its retail spaces, as they are "flawed consumers", either unable or unwilling to be "active and efficient buyers of the goods and services the market offers". Systems of surveillance utilise power structures in retail stores to keep the underclass out, so as to ensure that "good" consumers are not put off their shopping. In this sense, retail sites can be termed quasi-public spaces; a definition that summarises the compromised publicity of consumerism, its selective uptake of the democratic indicators of public space and place. In this sense, retail spaces operate as stages upon which performances of consumption take place, making the ways in which consumption is enabled or constrained central to the discussion. The operations of power are therefore an implicit theoretical concern that underlies questions of consumption and visibility. Power can be said to manifest in public spaces in visual modes – through the very visibility of surveillance technologies as well as the innately regulatory aspects of cultures of visibility and display.

Sociologies of spaces designed for consumption can be said to have started with Baudelaire's figure of the *flâneur*<sup>6</sup>, a bourgeois man of the crowds who strolled the streets and arcades of Paris during the industrial revolution, observing and participating in the flow of the emerging modernity of everyday urban life, increasingly defined and

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell (1995, 2003), for example, focussed on the potential of "People's Park" in Berkeley to act as a kind of mini public sphere for marginalised inhabitants of the city. Although his research concludes that this potential was compromised by the efforts of both public and private authorities to regulate the space and access for "undesirable" people, his argument that truly democratic public spaces should be accessible as well as visible to all is important.

<sup>6</sup> The *flâneur* is discussed from a methodological perspective in Chapter 3.

shaped by retail spaces and consumption. Spaces created for shopping, such as Paris' arcades and department stores "radically modify the individual's relationship to the city and to society" because they abolish "the lines of demarcation distinguishing observer from observed" (Ferguson, 1994: 35). *Flânerie* inserted the subject into the spaces of the object, allowing an observation of consumer culture from the perspective of a detached and disinterested participant. Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* offers a critical perspective on the spaces of consumption within the cityscape as well as a political critique of the figure of the *flâneur* who is "the epitome of the political attitude of the middle classes" (Benjamin, 2002: 420). He argues, "The *flâneur* is the observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult science of industrial fluctuations. He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers" (Benjamin, 2002: 427). The *flâneur*'s political disinterestedness makes him a traitor for Benjamin, who is vindicated by the eventual metamorphosis of the figure of the *flâneur* into that of the everyday consumer, which is partially forced by the growth of consumer culture and the construction of the consumption spaces themselves. The primacy of *flâneurs'* and consumers' acts of looking again highlights the centrality of visibility and visualness in consumerist notions of publicity; their bourgeois identities again reiterate the selective accessibility of these public spaces.

Bauman (1994: 146), echoing Arendt's theatrical metaphors, calls retail spaces "custom-made stages":

The Arcades were the foremost among them. Spaces designed to offer the visitors the pleasure of looking; to attract seekers of pleasure.... These spaces sold pleasurable views to look at. In order to attract the customers, though, the designer and the owners of the space had to buy them first. The right to look gratuitously was to be the *flâneur*'s, tomorrow the customer's reward. Pleasurable display, fascinating view, the enticing game of shapes and colours. Customers bought through the seduction of the *flâneur*, the *flâneur*, through seduction, transformed into the consumer.

Consumer magazines exist in public spaces, like most material commodities, they are arranged in large and sometimes elaborate displays by the retailers that stock them. In this way, they function as both physical and metaphorical spaces of appearance. Their publicity signifies both the dazzling proliferation of commodities available on the free market as well as their own visual and material presence in newsstands, and operate as a space in which not only is visibility highly prized and dominant, but through which the image economy trades.

The next part of this chapter builds upon the preceding discussions of consumerism, consumption, commodities, visual culture and publicity by offering a set of three theoretical dialectics that arguably define the core issues of consumer culture aesthetics.

### ***The dialectics of consumer culture aesthetics***

First, it is necessary to clarify how I use the term “dialectic” in this theoretical framework, and indeed the whole thesis. As Bhaskar (1993: 3) explains in his authoritative work, *Dialectic: The pulse of freedom*,

In its most general sense, dialectic has come to signify any more or less intricate process of conceptual or social (and sometimes even natural) *conflict, interconnection and change*, in which the generation, interpenetration and clash of *oppositions*, leading to their transcendence in a fuller or more adequate mode of thought or form of life (or being), plays a key role (emphasis added).

The term is rooted in Marxist theory, in which it represents a mechanical progression of opposing concepts towards unity or revolution; an emphasis more on the transcendence of the opposition to which Bhaskar refers. However, as also alluded to in the above quote, an equally central concern is the conflict, opposition and *interconnection* of concepts. With a focus on this rather than the tendency towards resolution, as has been the trend in post-Marxist and post-structuralist thought, the term takes on very different, and far more flexible, connotations. What has remained constant to the notion of the dialectic is contradiction, be it between two binary conceptual opposites such as those I will put forward shortly, or in a deeper ontological fashion between fundamental world-views (such as those of capital and labour). What has changed, however, in thinking about the dialectic is that it can “no longer be regarded as the means of resolving contradiction, rather it signals the ineradicable presence of contradiction within systems” (Sim, 2000: 80). Instead of invoking the dialectic as a theoretical tool with which to turn binary tensions into unified wholes, it is summoned instead to demonstrate the fertility of the contradiction itself. In other words, it is an open, rather than a closed, version of the dialectic (Sim, 2000: 156). It is the inherent dynamism of the concept, and the way in which it provides a dynamic way in which to work with contradictory ideas, that makes it so appealing. And it is in this

fashion that I use the dialectic – to highlight the presence of contradiction and to use that contradiction as an invitation to deeper exploration of the shapes of those tensions, rather than as a theoretical attempt to eliminate them.

This section of the chapter seeks to pull together the threads running through the preceding discussions by way of summary, showing how a trio of dialectical relationships evidenced within broader consumer culture aesthetics can take shape as a theoretical framework for research into consumer magazines. These three levels of dialectic are: materiality/simulation; manipulation/empowerment and subject/object. The first two dialectical levels can be understood to operate within the orders of the object and the subject respectively. In this sense, the theoretical tensions outlined give shape to the debates that characterise the two central figures active within consumer culture: commodities and consumers (or, in the specific context of this research, magazines and readers). The third dialectical level addresses the relationship between these two figures, that is, the shape and pattern of consumption as an activity that mediates between (in both directions) subjects (consumers/readers) and objects (commodities/magazines). It is in these senses that the interrelated and overlapping dialectics of consumer culture aesthetics can theoretically frame research into consumer magazines.

### **The commodity tension: Materiality / Simulation**

The material presence of commodities is central to consumerism. But so are mediated, symbolic, representations. There exists, therefore, a relationship (at times difficult) between objects and images, products and signs, commodities and brands. The shape of this relationship can be described as an opposition between materiality and simulation, which is central to what Schroeder (2004) calls the “image economy”.

In terms of simulation, Baudrillard famously argued that the extreme reach of visual mediation in popular culture and everyday life resulted in reality itself becoming consumed by the image world to the extent that models of the real have no origin and signs of the real replace the real itself: “The age of simulation begins with a liquidation of all referentials – worse: by their artificial resurrection in a system of signs” (Baudrillard, 1988: 167). This argument suggests that meaning resides solely in images rather than material reality, which echoes Debord’s (1994) argument that lived experience has become consumed by an accumulation of images, or a “spectacle” that

distracts the masses from “the ages of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence” (Debord, 1994: 19). This formulation asserts a political-economic epistemology against the Kantian view that aesthetics are detached from social reality and require disinterested analysis on their own terms. Some see value in recognising in theories of simulation that “the manipulation of signs in the media and advertising means that signs are able to float free from objects” in the sense in which the value of the cultural and the importance of the visual, neglected for so long by materialist analyses, was highlighted (Featherstone, 1991: 15). Others argue that hyper-reality can be understood as a network of immaterial communicating objects, which “may well have an increasing descriptive purchase on contemporary culture” (Lash and Urry, 1994: 134). And yet others (Chouliaraki, 2006a) argue that this vision is “post-aesthetic”, representing a deeply pessimistic view on the potential of mediation, that is, that it cannot and does not need to connect representation to real world referents.

Simulation offers a model for illustrating the extreme solipsism of visual culture and the calculated disconnectedness of advertising and branding, which are arguably part of a media system that propagates visualness, representation and simulation in a seemingly infinitely self-referential manner. Taken in this way, simulation can be seen as a critique of the superficial nature of postmodern culture (Jameson, 1991). In this sense, the image-world allows signs to stand for objects, leaving no space for any notions of the value that material reality may hold, and subverting viewers’ own abilities to connect signs with meaning:

The overproduction of signs and reproduction of images and simulations leads to a loss of stable meaning, and an aestheticisation of reality in which the masses become fascinated by the endless flow of bizarre juxtapositions which takes the viewer beyond stable sense (Featherstone, 1991: 15).

In terms of materiality, philosophers of the aesthetic with a material bent highlight the ways in which capitalism integrated artistic representation into modes of production. As Benjamin (1936) argued, mechanised industrial production stripped commodities of real aesthetic meaning and connection to its potential consumer. The solution was for the work of art to “come to the rescue of a commodified existence, equipping [it] with everything in which the commodity is so lamentably lacking,” according to Eagleton (1990: 324). This process of giving the commodity a “soul” or “aura”, filling it with meaning, becomes the central concern of commodity aesthetics. The practices of design, advertising and branding merged aesthetic representation with commodity production, making images material in the extreme. In his consideration of “commodity

aesthetics", Haug (1982, 1987) claims that the powers of commerce have achieved an aesthetic domination over individual sensibility. He argues that commercial images "have captured people's sensuality" (1987: 45). He terms this a "technocracy of sensuality" (*ibid.*), which Slater (1997: 113) rephrases as a "science of fetishization". The suggestion here is that consumer culture is an institution that shapes everyday aesthetic life in ways that profoundly influence the deepest moments of individual experience. The ways in which this aestheticisation takes place, through the design of commodities themselves as their packaging, as well as the ways in which they are displayed and marketed, is *material*.

Haug (1987: 123) argues, "the aesthetics of the monopoly commodity creates mythical super-signs which in turn result in a kind of cultural dominance that he calls "the commodity-aesthetic heteronomy" (Haug, 1987: 125). This materialist view echoes Baudrillard's simulationist view, highlighting the fact that the "Marxist left" and the "Semiotic left" (Lash and Urry, 1994: 31) in fact share a dystopic view of consumer culture as all-encompassing and manipulationist. And both leave the dialectical potential of the materialist-simulation opposition undeveloped. Consumer culture invokes immateriality in the form of brands and non-material commodities such as services and symbols, as well as materiality, in the form of concrete objects and commodities. It is reductive to focus on one end of the continuum at the expense of the other. It is necessary to explore the various complex ways in which simulation and materiality coexist in empirical situations. One important example already discussed is the dynamic tension between ideas of place as local and material and space as representative and symbolic.

It is also necessary to explore and theorise the empirical relationships between objects and signs. For example, Willis (1997: 145) points out that "once sign value is consumed, material residue remains" and argues that the object should be conceptualised as operating within an "ecology of the artificial". The corollary is that the sign economy, rather than being conceived of as a realm of dematerialized production (images, the televisual, information networks, etc) can be thought of as *driving* industrial production... and its material effects extend well beyond the human (Willis, 1997: 145).

The inverse of this appears in the argument that brands themselves are *objects* (Lury, 2004), rather than merely symbols of something else. This is in the sense in which brands are immaterial assets, that is, objects of property in

their own right, which are worth billions of dollars (Arvidsson, 2005: 238). These two examples make it clear that it is more helpful to think dialectically with regards to materiality and simulation, the tension between which informs and shapes views on the object, commodity and the consumer magazine.

### **The consumption tension: Manipulation / Empowerment**

As has already been discussed at various points in this chapter, there exists a fundamental difference of opinion about the social effects of consumer culture on individuals, which can be summarised as an opposition between theories of manipulation and empowerment. On the one hand are arguments that consumer culture, commodities and the practices of consumption result in the imposition of capitalist aesthetics and practices on citizen-consumers. On the other hand are arguments related to the ways in which consumption is liberating, and in which commodities form part of a corpus of cultural capital that instigates freedom and allows choice related to pleasure, identity and lifestyle. The former, critical view has been applied to consumer culture aesthetics and magazines from Marxist, feminist and semiotic perspectives. The latter, utopian view has been applied to branding from a management perspective in service of working to make brands more relevant to consumer's lives, and to consumption, commodities and magazines from an anthropological perspective, including feminist audience studies. The manipulation/empowerment dialectic echoes the persistent debate within feminist media studies about whether popular culture media commodities aimed at women represent an opportunity for pleasure and empowerment, or simply rearticulate oppressive ideologies in new ways, which O'Connor and Klaus (2000: 377-8) characterise as a tension between politics and pleasure.

Both manipulationist and empowerment views have significant flaws: the former presumes passivity and a lack of agency on behalf of consumers, the latter ignores the power relations involved in corporate communication structures and can all too easily be harnessed to profit motives. Doubtless, a dialectical approach is preferable. This requires a non-absolutist approach to the ideas that capitalist products alienate consumers and limit their potential, and the idea that the abundance of commodities liberates consumers to a world of free choice. Similarly, acts of consumption need to be viewed as existing somewhere between the poles of pleasurable identity construction and mindless mimicry rather than as reductively one or the other. Schroeder (2004:

238) summarises this succinctly: "Although I agree that consumers generate their own meaning, and that they bring their own cognitive, social, and cultural lenses to whatever they see, this does not mean that the historical and political processes that also generate meaning are eliminated".

Despite its theorisation as a space of appearance, the mediated public realm of consumerism has fundamentally political dimensions, which are illuminated by the debates about the power dynamics of consumption. Fundamental to this debate is a choice about how power is conceptualised in consumer culture. Following the manipulationist argument, power is a hierarchical, top down construct, which is associated with political-economic institutions that impose their aesthetic and cultural decisions upon consumers. The empowerment view sidesteps political issues of power, claiming consumption instead as a liberating cultural resource, which can be employed at will by consumers. But viewing power as simply about either constraint or choice is reductive. It is more useful to conceptualise power in a Foucauldian fashion as a dynamic tension between modes of coercion and consent (Fairclough, 1989: 28), and as a force that makes its impressions on even the smallest interactions and moments of social life (Hyde, 2000: 158), such as looking at a magazine cover. Consumers (with the necessary resources) are able to make consumption choices that empower them, but these choices are in fact constrained by the sets of options offered by the system. Chouliaraki (2008) calls this "a relationship of conditional freedom", where media texts can regulate but not necessarily determine spectators' choice of action. The theory of self-management also illustrates how it is that individual consumers are free to act within a pre-defined set of options. They are "obliged to be free" (Rose, 1990) and to enact freedom in the form of acts of consumption related to lifestyle and identity choice. A relevant example of a site in which a relationship of conditional freedom is operationalised is the quasi-public retail space, where technologies of surveillance constrain the actions of consumers, while the display of commodities and accessibility of the space invite the exercise of choice. How power relationships within the aestheticised public realm are constantly negotiated as operating between concepts of manipulation and empowerment in the specific context of the commodity/consumer (magazine/reader) dynamic is one of the core descriptive goals of this thesis, and is an underlying theoretical concern throughout. It is important to explicitly state that the way in which power is conceptualised in this work follows Foucault, who "saw it in terms of 'micro' operations of power and by means of strategies and technologies of power" (Barrett, 1991: 134) and who recognised that it "produced pleasure and meaning as well as more coercive dimensions" (Barrett, 1991: 135). The specific relevance of

Foucault's formulations of the power of the gaze and its internalisation in the subject will be brought up in later, more appropriately detailed, discussions in this thesis<sup>7</sup>.

Featherstone's approach to consumer culture is instructive in terms of broader conceptualisations of the operations of power, as it seeks to "move beyond the negative evaluation of consumer pleasures inherited from mass culture theory" (Featherstone, 1991: 13) without merely reversing the position. This includes an acknowledgement that capitalist society does not only seek to manipulate consumers, but also produce "images and sites of consumption which endorse the pleasures of excess" (Featherstone, 1991: 22). It is necessary to operationalise power (and the resulting debates about empowerment and manipulation) in a dialectical manner, seeing individuals as both constrained and empowered by the same system:

social life unfolds practically by individuals held together in various shifting power balances with other people ... here we would want to emphasize power-balances and the practical uses of knowledge, because power exists as an aspect of every human relationship from the fact that people, groups of individuals, have the capacity to withhold or monopolize what other people need (Featherstone, 1991: 116).

In a similar vein, but focussing on branding, Arvidsson proposes a dialectical view between consumption as "immaterial labour" and brand management. The former "utilizes a common ability to interact and socialize, and a ... set of shared knowledge and competences, to produce a social relation" (Arvidsson, 2005: 241) while the latter seeks to "allow for a certain mobility of the brand image" whilst keeping it controlled and "within the boundaries of the intended brand identity" (ibid.: 244). It is clear therefore that the dialectic between empowerment and manipulation takes place on a variety of complex levels within consumption and is central to theorising the subject, or citizen-consumer and magazine reader, within the broader social context of consumerism.

### **The consumption-commodity tension: Subject / Object**

There exist dialectics between, as well as within, theories of commodities and consumption. The debate about whether meaning resides in objects or subjects is one of the recurring themes of modern western philosophy (Slater, 1997: 101), as well as contemporary theorisations of consumer culture. The dialectic between subject and object shoots through all matters related to visual mediation, aestheticisation, and

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapters 7 and 8.

practices of consumption. It is related to, and based upon, the observation of the proliferation of commodities and the concern with the meaning of the human practices of engaging with those commodities. The opening lines to Baudrillard's *Consumer Society* illustrates this concern:

There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by *objects* (Baudrillard, 1970: 25, emphasis in original).

Baudrillard seems slightly seduced by the conception of a golden past, where objects were merely utilitarian, their meaning derived from the functional pleasure that they bought to life, and where their importance was secondary to intersubjective relations. Now instead, "objects no longer serve a purpose; first and foremost they serve *you*" (Baudrillard, 1970: 159). Objects have evolved into commodities that exist purely in order to serve subjects; this reformulation into an "ideology of personal service" (ibid.) is definitive of consumerism.

Slater (1997) compares liberal-utilitarian (positivist) approaches to consumption with the Hegelian dialectical approach developed by Miller (1987). The former sees the "I" as a self-defining subject which defines his/her own needs and then goes to nature or the market (the world of things) to satisfy them. Some see this as supposedly representative of the superiority of the modern way, the march to progress; others as the symptom of pathological alienation. A description of the flow of meaning from world to object, and then from object to individual (McCracken, 1990: 80-1) follows this logic. But in dialectical terms, this flow is incomplete without also considering the flow of meaning back along that route, as well as back-and-forth between object and subject, and the cultural world that constitutes them both and is constituted by both. Miller abstracts Hegel's notion of subject-object duality, maintaining that perspectives on the nature of the relationship between people and things is fundamental to reaching an understanding of the "place of goods in society" (Miller, 1987: 4). The Hegelian dialectic is rooted in the argument that the "split between subject and object" (Slater, 1997: 102) needs to be reconciled. The dialectical view is that subjects construct the object world, which in turn constructs and determines them. By rejecting a mechanical and external view, the dialectical approach recognises both how human needs are "objectivated",

take material form, in the objects they produce" (Slater, 1997: 103) and the hermeneutics of how those objects are used, interpreted and consumed.

In [the dialectical] tradition, consumption cannot be reduced to 'subjects using objects', because the two are not independent but integrally linked, whether they are aware of it or not. The world of things is really culture in its objective form, it is the form that humans have given the world through their mental and material practices; at the same time, human needs themselves evolve and take shape through the kinds of things available (Slater, 1997: 103).

Bauman extends this dialectic even further, claiming that "in the society of consumers no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity, and no one can keep his or her subjectness secure without perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity" (Bauman, 2007: 12). The objectification of human subjects (as slaves, prostitutes, fashion models, celebrities) is a familiar trope, but Bauman claims that this now extends even to the most basic of human interactions (such as the creation of profiles on social networking and dating websites).

McCracken (1990: 137) states that empirical investigations into person-object relations in the context of consumer goods are necessary and important. There is more at stake, he claims, than reaching a clearer understanding of the communicative and cultural properties of consumer goods – but concedes that this in itself is "no small academic objective". The dialectic between subject and object, consumer and commodity, is fundamental to the practice of branding, which aims to mediate between the producers of commodities and their consumers, by creating brands as an emotionally and aesthetically charged interface. In this way, the subject-object dialectic is given shape and colour by the tensions between simulated and material views on commodities. It also relates directly back to the debate about whether consumption is manipulative or empowering, that is, how objects can at once constrain and emancipate subjects. Framing the discussion of consumer magazines in terms of the subject-object dialectic, it becomes clear that the relationship between reader and magazine is not simple or unidirectional (as illustrated by debates within existing scholarship discussed in the previous chapter). Rather, the mutually constitutive role of audiences and texts should be acknowledged and explored in a dialectical sense. Although the subject-object dialectic operates at a level more abstract than the previous two, it is important in the sense in which it reconnects empirical research into specific commodities and

consumers with pervasive questions about the location of meaning, agency and structure. In this sense, it can be considered a foundational dialectic, which underlies the discussions of magazines and readers, commodities and consumption, and which can only be tackled through empirical engagement at the other dialectical levels of commodity and consumption.

## **Conclusion**

To summarise, this chapter has built upon the review of research into consumer magazines by addressing theories of consumer culture aesthetics. It was first necessary to define consumerism as a hegemonic culture; then to discuss competing conceptions of consumption and commodities. Implicit in these discussions were the figure of the consumer and the meanings of consuming practices. Next, two central characteristics of consumer culture were introduced: its reliance on visual mediation, and the centrality of an asymmetrical notion of publicity that privileges notions of the visible over other democratic functions. Central to this was a formulation of the public as a space of appearance and visibility, rather than a deliberative space of common political concern. Finally, the theories reviewed were summarised into a three sets of dialectical relationships, which serve as the conceptual framework for the research.

Broadly speaking, this project seeks to understand how consumer magazines in the context of public spaces of display embody and communicate the hegemonic discourse of consumerism that characterises social life in the urbanised global north. An excellent example of the primacy of visual culture, and a media genre clearly imbricated with consumerism, magazines are an appropriate site for a deeper examination of the ways in which discourses of consumerism are mediated. Recall that the specific research opportunities that emerge from existing scholarship on magazines relate to magazine covers and the retail sites in which magazines are sold. With these empirical boundaries in mind, questions arise as to how magazine covers and newsstands (understood to be empirically and theoretically interrelated research objects) function discursively within the broader landscape of hegemonic consumerism. This is both a descriptive and analytical exercise. The mapping of consumer magazine covers as they exist at newsstands resulting from this research will function as a piece of the puzzle, a fragment of the landscape, a contribution to a broader critique of consumer culture and understandings of the implications of its dominance.

In the introduction, it was noted that the preliminary question inspiring this research project was, "How do magazine covers and newsstands promote consumerism?" In the context of the theoretical framework for magazines and newsstands developed in this chapter, this question can be rearticulated as follows:

*What are the aesthetic and discursive operations of consumer magazine covers as constituted in/constituting newsstand spaces? And, what contribution can an understanding of this make to a broader critique of hegemonic consumer culture in the global north?*

This research question can be further operationalised into the following sub-questions that relate to the dialectics of consumer culture aesthetics:

- In what ways do material and simulated aesthetic modes operate within the "sight" of magazine covers, and the "site" of newsstands? And, what are the consequences of this for materialist and simulationist perspectives on commodities?
- In what ways do magazine covers and newsstands operate within the double economy of constraint and freedom implicit in consumer culture? And, what are the consequences of this for the debates about whether consumerism empowers or manipulates consumers?
- In what ways do magazine covers and newsstands negotiate between and/or contribute to aesthetic and social conceptions of "subjects" (practices of consumption) and "objects" (commodities)?

The first question is taken up and explored in Chapters 4 and 5, which both address the empirical object from a material perspective, as well as in Chapter 5's analysis of the ways in which celebrities personify material glossiness and Chapter 6's discussion of representations of commodities on consumer magazine covers respectively. The second question is addressed in Chapter 4's discussions of consumer behaviour at newsstands, as well as in the analysis of the voice of sell, and the explorations in Chapter 6 of the consumption possibilities magazines covers make available to readers. Questions of empowerment and manipulation are also central to the analyses of images of the body and the face in Chapters 7 and 8 respectively. The third question is taken up in Chapter 5's discussion of celebrity and Chapter 6's discussion of images of subject-object relationships. As well as this, Chapter 7 explores the objectification of the body on consumer magazine covers, and Chapter 8 explores representations of the

face and associated invitations to self-identity. Before all of this, however it is necessary to outline the methodologies employed in order to develop those arguments; this is offered in Chapter 3.

### 3. Ways of Looking: Methodology

The methodology that I have designed in order to explore the discursive operations of consumer magazine covers as constituting, and constituted in, public retail spaces is a combination of ethnographic methods, appropriated as a reflexive mode of observation and data collection, and socio-semiotic approaches, employed in order to analyse that data. Both methods are employed in visual ways, in order to match and address the visual (and visible) nature of the research object, and can be summarised as “ways of looking”. It must be stated at the outset that I am aware of the overlap and interplay between ethnographic and semiotic methods. I will address these relationships in this chapter’s concluding sections, but discuss them separately initially, out of the necessity to clearly explain the processes I have followed. First, it is crucial to clearly reiterate the empirical boundaries to this project, in a bid to best address the research question.

#### ***Empirical boundaries***

As the previous chapter argued, two of the primary features of consumer culture are the profoundly visual nature of contemporary mediation and the notion of the public as the space of the visible. With these theoretical imperatives shaping the methodological approach, I selected two clear empirical boundaries for my project. The first is arguably the most important visual element of consumer magazines: the cover. The second is arguably the most visible public space in which those covers are displayed: the newsstand. These match the research opportunities that arise from existing scholarship on magazines discussed in Chapter 1.

#### **Magazine covers**

As bar-coded, branded, consumer commodities that are common to retail spaces, magazines highlight some of the central themes of branding and consumer culture that were explored in Chapter 2. And the thing about the magazine that best represents it is its cover, which is at once the outward looking packaging of the commodity and the window to the media content inside. Magazine covers are the most “public” (i.e., visible) part of the magazine, making their existence especially socially implicated. The covers of magazines are routinely displayed as representative of the entire magazine and the

magazine-brand. Covers function to sell and be sold. They represent magazines; acting as ambassadors to the outside world. In the spirit of synecdoche, the magazine cover is the part that can stand in for the whole, on both a symbolic and material level. The cover is a crucial part of the magazine's economic life. It also provides a compelling and manageable methodological entry point to a project that has identified the need for a research focus that addresses the broader genre of consumer magazines rather than a specific sub-genre.

## Newsstands

The second empirical boundary that I selected is a site that has not, to my knowledge, received much attention in the literature addressing consumer magazines. It is the common-sense destination reached when "following the object" (Marcus, 1995), one of the ubiquitous and familiar retail spaces of the urban landscape, where consumer magazines exist collectively as both commodities and signs: the newsstand. As this research is concerned with understanding the aesthetic dynamics of consumer magazines within contemporary visual and consumer culture it was crucial to engage the empirical sites in which the commodity and symbolic exchange of magazines takes place. As retail sites newsstands must be understood as quasi-public spaces of consumption, where the operations of visibility and visualness dominate. Newsstands are outward facing and open spaces, where anyone can view or buy magazines. The newsstand is the place where the magazine lives and dies; it is the place where it fights for the attention of the viewer.

The site is particularly compelling because it signifies the positioning of the magazine as a *commodity* in retail culture, and also because it reveals the role and importance of the magazine's cover in its life as a cultural commodity. In order to understand the mechanics of consumer magazine covers, it is also necessary to understand the mechanics of the newsstand. As a space that relies on visual display and that it is located in the heart of consumer culture – retail space – newsstands have central significance to my research project. Significantly, it is also the space from which I sourced magazine covers for analysis, making it absolutely necessary to engage with the space on its own terms too. This would allow an exploration of how magazines and newsstands co-constitute one another, and the meaning of the newsstand as a social space.

## **Data collection**

This section describes how I went about collecting the data analysed in this thesis, justifying my approach with reference to existing methodological practice. Because of the centrality of ideas of visualness and visibility in the theoretical framework and the visual nature of the research object, it became clear that my modes of data collection needed to be informed and shaped by various acts of looking, and the reflexive epistemology necessarily connected thereto. Various “ways of looking” have been appropriated from and informed by ethnographic method, and could be summarised as a three-tiered critical observation of newsstands:

- i. A covert *flânerie* of newsstands throughout the flow of my everyday life.
- ii. A series of overt *participant observation* exercises in nine newsstand sites. This involved three visits to each site, the first a pilot, the second the occasion of data collection, the third a follow up. Permission from store owners or managers was gained to be present, to make observations and take notes.
- iii. A *photographic survey* of the same nine newsstand sites took place during the second visit to each site. This also took place with permission, and formed a significant element of the participant observation.

Before discussing the epistemological and methodological approaches to each of the three types of observation undertaken, I would like to outline how I went about choosing the sites in which I collected my data.

## **Process for selection of sites**

### For the flânerie

As the *flânerie* took place throughout the flow of my everyday life, and was largely intended to pre-empt and supplement the other approaches, it unfolded in an organic way. At times, I would make a point of spending an afternoon or morning seeking out newsstands to look at (sometimes in the course of finding an appropriate site for the formal participant observation). Mostly, however, I would stop and look for a few minutes if I happened past a newsstand while I was on the way somewhere else. This was largely unplanned and spontaneous and, unsurprisingly, happened often. I would

simply go in and observe for a few minutes, recording my impressions in my research diary later. The selection of sites for formal participant observation was less simple.

#### For participant observation and photography

Ideally, I would have liked to select magazines from and examine newsstands in large metropolitan cities across the global north, in order to identify the structural similarities between both “points of sale” and glossy magazine covers in the globalised capitalist system. A research design of this scope and breadth was well beyond my financial and temporal resources as well as a pragmatic assessment of the empirical application necessary in order to deal with the research question. I thus decided to limit the time and space of my enquiry to London over three months. London is a particularly relevant place to conduct research into consumer culture. Previously the capital of a colonial empire, now an iconic centre of commercialism, it can be considered one of the capitals of western culture and of the global “financescape” (Appadurai 1996). London is a cosmopolitan microcosm of the global north. Attracting immigrants and migrants alike, it is in some senses a world in one city. It is also huge, stretching over a hundred square miles. I therefore decided to limit the location of sites to within an area that stretches more or less to the limits of the county of London, which corresponds to the London postal code area and (more or less) the boundaries of Zone 3 on the tube map. These existing institutional, spatial and geographical boundaries (the “zones” of the tube map and the codes of the postal system) were useful conceptual reference points for an inevitable need to delimit geographical boundaries.

Newsstands proliferate across London; making almost infinite the number of locations where magazines could be observed and purchased. An awareness of this made it important to carefully think through how I would select the sites that would form a part of my research project. This would have been less crucial if the methodology design was purely semiotic, as the act of buying magazines in order to acquire their covers for analysis would not necessarily have had to be rooted in their social context. However, the theoretical framework requires that consumer magazines and their public constitution are addressed from both a social and semiotic perspective.

There are also many *kinds* of newsstands around London. I have long been aware of the displays of magazines stands in various retail contexts. There are many differences in size, shape, context and location. In selecting the nine sites in which to conduct my

observation, take photographs and buy texts, I wanted to achieve a reasonable cross-section of the various types of newsstands that I have observed from my lay experiences as a consumer. This would make it a valid exercise to analytically describe similarities across those differences, something I explore in Chapter 4. I tried to ensure that the nine sites that I selected were more or less evenly spread across the following factors:

- Zone in which site located: how far from central London (and the London School of Economics, my academic base)?
- Compass area of London in which site located: North, South, West or East?
- Distance of site from main transport nodes: Was it *in* a train or tube station, close by or far away?
- Type of newsstand: Was it a corporate franchise or independently owned and managed?
- Size of retail space: Was it large, medium or small?
- Type of neighbourhood: Was the site located in a high, medium or low-income area; a residential, commercial or business area?
- Location of newsstand: Was it located outdoors, on the street, or indoors? Was it part of a larger store or a specialist retailer?
- Familiarity to researcher: Did I know the area, had I been to or through the site before or was it completely new to me?

These factors emerged as important in the process of selecting sites. For example, I realised that I would not achieve a fair cross section of newsstands if I only chose sites that were (conveniently) located at train and tube stations. Similarly, if I overcompensated for this worry by only choosing sites far from these transport nodes, I would be overlooking the commercial and symbolic importance of the proliferation of newsstands in public transport spaces. I also wanted to be sure to strike a balance between choosing sites in central London (and relatively easy to access from the LSE) and those more remote. This was related to the significance of choosing newsstands both familiar and new to me. In other words, while I felt that it was perfectly acceptable to select sites that I was familiar with from previous informal observations in my everyday life, I would have to be careful to not choose *only* these, and also to venture into spaces I was unfamiliar with so as to find sites I would not have thought of. It would also be important to have a fair representation of stores owned by independent merchants and those owned by large retail corporations, as well as to ensure that I engaged with a large variety of store sizes. Finally, I wanted to ensure that I selected stores that were located within a diversity of area types, serving both wealthy

commercial environments such as the city or “posh” neighbourhoods, and less well-off areas populated by working classes or immigrants. On this point, I recognise that it was impossible to represent every nuance of the immense social diversity and economic hierarchies of a complex metropolis like London. Yet I sought to avoid an unintentional bias in my observational data by only visiting newsstands in highbrow commercial areas such as Covent Garden, for example, and consciously including areas that I knew to be somewhat marginalised, such as Streatham.

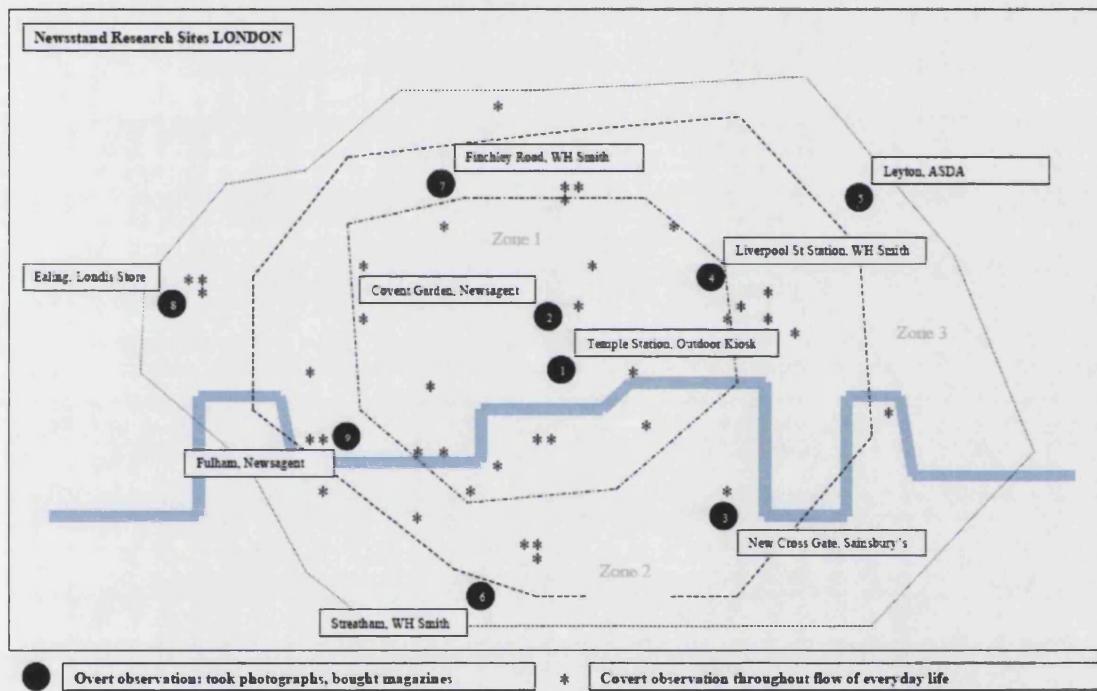


Figure 1: Map of newsstand sites

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of newsstands that I have visited. The dotted lines roughly indicated the boundaries of the zones of the tube map. The large black dots, numbered in the order in which they were visited, indicate that a formal, overt participant observation took place on the site. (The numbers of these dots corresponds to the site numbers in Table 1). Three sites were selected in each zone. Across these three zones, as well as across north, south, west and east London, a reasonably equal distribution of sites was achieved. The asterisks indicate the location of an informal visit as part of the ongoing *flânerie*.

I felt that it would be crucial to ensure that the research visits, although responsive to my other work and life commitments, would not be dictated to by them, resulting in, for

example, all of the visits taking place on a Friday morning, because that happened to be the day of the week that I had free. In this respect, I made a conscious effort to ensure that, when I was given the option, I scheduled visits for different times of the month, days of the week and times of day, so as to have a reasonably “random” set of experiences at each space – and to avoid the possibility of the data being inadvertently shaped by the fact of all having been collected on a Friday morning, for example. At times, however, the timing of the visits did tend to be dictated to by some of the store owners and managers, who preferred me to come at a quieter time so that my presence would not interfere too much with the flow of business and the comfort of their customers. This means that most of the visits did not take place at peak times of business. This limited my ability to observe consumers interacting with the newsstands, a shortcoming that I addressed through the ongoing covert observation (or *flânerie*) of newsstands beyond the nine structured visits.

	Site	Zone	PCode	Area	Date of Visit	Time	Details
1.	Rayden	1	WC2	Kiosk, Temple	Friday 7 September 2007	Afternoon (15h00-17h00)	Small, independently owned, freestanding outdoor kiosk, outside entrance to tube station.
2.	Sainsbury's	2	SE14	Near Train Station, New Cross Gate	Saturday 15 September 2007	Afternoon (13h30-15h30)	Large supermarket, freestanding structure with car park.
3.	JM News	1	WC2	Drury Lane, Covent Garden	Wednesday 19 September 2007	Morning (10h30-12h30)	Small, independently owned newsagent run by proprietor.
4.	WH Smith	1	E1	Liverpool St Station, City/East End	Thursday 4 October 2007	Morning (10h00-12h00)	Large corporate owned newsagent in busy railway station.
5.	ASDA	3	E10	Marshall Rd, Leyton	Friday 19 October 2007	Morning (09h00-11h30)	Very large freestanding “superstore” in “park” of similar sized stores, e.g B&Q
6.	WH Smith	3	SW16	High Road Streatham	Monday 22 October 2007	Morning (10h00-12h00)	Medium corporate owned newsagent on high street, no tube close by, 15 min walk from train.
7.	WH Smith	2	NW3	Tube Station, Finchley Road	Monday 5 November 2007	Morning (10h00-12h00)	Very small, corporate owned newsagent in tube station, close to street exit.
8.	Londis	3	W5	Bond Way, Ealing Broadway	Wednesday 21 November 2007	Evening (18h00-19h30)	24 hour convenience store, small franchise, medium sized store.
9.	Samit	2	SW1	Fulham Rd, Parson's Green	Sunday 2 December 2007	Morning (10h00-12h00)	Independently owned newsagent/key cutting service in residential area.

Table 1: List of newsstand sites visited as part of formal participant observation

Table 1 summarises the sites visited as part of the overt participant observation, which correspond to the various main “types” of newsstands that I have observed to be part of the retail landscape of London, crossing the gambit from large supermarkets to small,

almost temporary-seeming, outdoor kiosks. Three WH Smith stores were chosen in order to reflect how this corporate retail chain dominates the “newsstand market” and the prevalence of this retailer across urban spaces. It should be noted, however, that they are very different types of WH Smith stores; one a very large store in a major railway station in a wealthy area in Zone 1 (the city), another a medium sized store on a high street in a relatively poor and crime-ridden area in Zone 3 of south London (Streatham), the third a small kiosk in a tube station in Zone 2 of a middle class suburb of north west London. In this respect, the three WH Smith stores chosen are roughly representative of the commercial presence of the chain across London.

Next I address the methodological approaches applied in these sites, explaining what I did whilst there, and contextualising these research actions within the broader debates on ethnographic practice.

### **Appropriating ethnography**

My approach towards observing public spaces can be contextualised within the traditions of ethnography, but I cannot present my study as an ethnography in the anthropological sense, because it is not primarily concerned with human actors or communities, and because it will, due to its equal emphasis on semiotic concerns, fall short of many of the necessary elements of this tradition of methodological practice. Nevertheless, I have engaged with the ethnographic body of thought and appreciate that participant observation allows for the most effective methodological tradition of describing the everyday realities of a space – and believe that the approach I have defined in this project may reflect a contribution to broader interpretations of ethnographic practice. I chose a “multi-sited” approach so as to be able to attempt a “mapping of terrain” (Marcus, 1995: 99), by identifying similarities and differences between various sites as well as the common structures that inform them. This was based on a hunch that the newsstand space is a specific locale within consumerist late capitalism that can “stand for wider social types and processes” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 251). The description that results from my observations can be thought of as a cross sectional representation of the archetypal point of sale space within which magazines exist as commodities, and is put forward in Chapter 4. As Pink (2001: 5) points out, ethnographic methods are “rarely the sole means or end of a research project”. The participant observation employed in this project aimed to map and describe the newsstand as a social space but also, importantly, to reflexively and

contextually select magazine texts for semiotic analysis in recognition of the strong connection between texts and the social milieu within which they exist.

### Embodied observation

Kusenbach (2003: 458) argues that “ethnographic methods can roughly be divided into interviewing informants and observing ‘naturally’ occurring social settings, conduct and events”. In the context of my research question, which seeks to address the ways in which texts and spaces mediate discursive meaning in the context of hegemonic consumer culture, the act of observation is central. This is especially so in the situation of visual culture – where the research question concerns visual phenomena, it is necessary to pair it with visual methodologies. The most basic of such visual methodologies is the act of critical observation from close quarters. Enacting this critical observation requires material, embodied engagement; I had to place myself into the spaces, so as to experience them with my own senses, firsthand. At times, this embodied observation was merely one aspect of my everyday life in the city of London, as I took on the mindset of the *flâneur* when I happened upon newsstands. At other times, this embodied observation took on a performative aspect, where I would announce myself as a researcher, and openly take photographs and write down notes. Both however, were filtered by my own embodied subjectivity, and were subject to the abilities and failings of my senses and perceptions.

### The familiar, the strange

The newsstand is a familiar and common space; a part of everyday life in which I participated as a consumer and urban resident before I engaged the mantle of research. Unlike the classic ethnographic “field”, an exotic and faraway place, I did not need to travel further than the high street or tube station to visit it. What was required in order to become involved in this space, instead of a change of country or culture, was a change of mindset about the everyday structures that surround us. The newsstand was a site and sight familiar to me, and it was important that I did not take it for granted as natural but instead call it into question. Simultaneously, its everydayness needed to be acknowledged and explored, rather than exoticised. Anthropologists note that one of the most fundamental aims of ethnography, amongst other objectives, is to make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 6; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 248; Clifford, 1986: 2). Like ethnographies that turn

the gaze upon the researcher's own culture (such as Daniel Miller's (1998) ethnography of shopping), my participant observation of newsstand spaces required a reassessment of ideas of distance and a conscious effort to see its "strangeness" so as to critically map its elements "naturalised" into everyday life. Yet I also recognised that it was crucial to remain cognisant of the fact that newsstands are a part of everyday life; that they exist as part of the fabric of urban retail environments; that they are familiar, "normal", close to home. In this respect, I have found it useful to think of the covert observation, or *flânerie*, as an acknowledgement of the normalcy of the newsstand, and of my own presence in it as camouflaged by my own ordinariness, as an anonymous member of the "crowd". And of the overt participant observation as an exercise in making the newsstand strange, by openly setting myself apart from it, photographing it, making notes on it.

### Flânerie

As noted, one of the modes of participant observation that I employed was "*flânerie*". In some respects, I could say that I was a *flâneur* of newsstands before this research project started and will continue to be one once it is complete. The *flâneur*, Baudelaire's "painter of modern life" (Tester, 1994; Jenks, 1995), was imagined as a disinterested and aloof man of the crowds, consuming the spectacle of urban modernity as it unfolded before him (Mazlish, 1994: 47), slowly strolling and wandering through public sites in a "process of inhabiting and appropriating urban space" (Shields, 1994: 65). Like the *flâneur*, my covert observations were unannounced, part of the flow of my everyday life, and centred on a large metropolis' public retail spaces. Unlike the *flâneur*, however, I was embedded, interested and participating in the social spaces I was observing.

As consumerism emerged as the most profound cultural force to shape urban modernity, it has been argued that the act of *flânerie* deteriorated into the practice of shopping. Ferguson (1994: 35) observes a "radical alteration of *flânerie* that reduces the *flâneur* to a consumer". This is not only in the sense in which a consumer who spends some time window-shopping or wandering aimlessly through retail spaces can be termed a *flâneur*. It is also in the sense in which everyday acts of consumption (of the spectacle or the commodity) can be significant, if used reflexively for poetic or analytical purposes. It was the very specific creative consciousness of the poet that inspired Baudelaire's *flânerie*, and the specific critical consciousness of the Marxist analyst that inspired Benjamin's *flânerie* through the archives (Frisby, 1994) in his

Arcades Project. In both of these senses, I thought of myself as a *flâneur*: an urban consumer like everyone else, flowing through the spaces, and as a critical, poetic observer looking in an objective, reflexive spirit of inquiry. These two states were not mutually exclusive, and at times I found it difficult to distinguish between them.

I would stop and look at newsstands whilst doing my grocery shopping, whilst buying milk and the paper on a Sunday morning, whilst *en route* to meet a friend for a drink after work, whilst walking to appointments, whilst passing through a train station to get to my platform, whilst killing time waiting to board a flight at an airport, whilst going for an aimless walk to get some fresh air, whilst heading home from the library. As a “*flâneur*” of newsstands, I was disguised by my ordinariness as an anonymous member of the public. This allowed me to sneak glances at other people, and the ways that they interacted with the newsstands. I was curious to see if their behaviour was similar or different to mine, how long they browsed before (or without) buying a magazine, the expressions on their faces as they scanned the shelves, the postures of their bodies as they read, what kind of magazines they bought. I was able to observe these things because, as a fellow citizen and consumer, a peer, I was doing the same things; I was part of the same culture. I was able to observe others unnoticed not because I sought to hide myself away, an ivory tower academic “going native” so as to understand the unwashed masses, but because I was, like them, an unremarkable and normal part of the urban scene. As yet another person flowing through urban spaces, I was able to look, absorb and record (after the fact) all that I noticed about the actions of other consumers, about the sights and sounds of the spaces. The anonymity of the crowd provided me camouflage to observe unobserved.

Kusenbach (2003: 461) comments that unobserved participant observation is “often characterized as the most authentic and reliable ethnographic method because it provides access to ‘naturally’ unfolding events”. This is especially so, she argues, for studies of public space, “because here anonymity reigns and the dominant code of conduct is based on categoric as opposed to personal knowing” (Kusenbach, 2003: 466). I found this to be true in my practice. The type of covert observation that the *flânerie* of newsstands offered was a powerful mode of gathering data about that space, particularly, the ways in which people flow through and interact with the space, without needing to trouble them for interviews, film or photograph them, or otherwise interfere with their everyday lives.

## Looking at consumers

Although my methodology did not seek to explicitly engage consumers in talk-interactions such as interviews or go-alongs, this does not mean that human actors are irrelevant to my study. Consumers are central in two ways. Firstly, I am a consumer; no amount of critical distance can override the fact that I am an embedded participant in consumer culture. This reflexivity is central to the methodology of participant observation as well as a dialectical view on consumer culture. Secondly, an observation of the ways other consumers interacted with magazines and newsstands was crucial. Although my research question is not concerned with how audiences interpret, use or understand consumer magazines in their everyday lives, it does relate to the types of non-verbal communication that consumers enact at the newsstand. I chose to watch rather than listen to people, not because I do not respect people's opinions, but because I think that, to quote an old cliché, actions can speak louder than words. Goffman (1967: 133) suggests that there is a great deal of "data" that can be gleaned from observing non-verbal communication. "Unfocused interaction" is "where individuals in one another's visual and aural range go on about their respective business unconnected by a shared focus of attention", such as in public spaces. An examination of the gestures, postures, facial expressions and physical movements of people in such situations can be revealing, says Goffman, in that they "have momentarily let fall the expressive costume that individuals are expected to wear whenever they are in the immediate presence of others" (ibid.). Observing the actions of other consumers is an acknowledgement of the meaning inherent in everyday non-verbal communication.

*The hour we knew nothing of each other*, an evocative experimental play by Peter Handke (1992<sup>8</sup>), illustrates the immense power of non-verbal communication. In the piece, a cast of 27 actors spend almost two hours performing a script that features 450 characters yet contains not one word of dialogue. Set in the square of an unnamed city, the play succeeds in communicating the rush and flow of everyday life in the city, as well as the suggestive nuances of the individual characters that pass through.

During my *flânerie*, therefore, one of the things I looked at was how people interacted with magazines and newsstands. It is crucial to note that I do not conflate such observations with an understanding of their motivations, or interpretations of their behaviour. During the observation, and in analysis, I was careful not to make

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<sup>8</sup> I watched the version directed by James Macdonald and performed at the National Theatre in London during March and April 2008.

assumptions about the huge range of possible interpretations that individuals, with their unique life experiences and hermeneutics, could or do make about magazines or newsstands. Rather, I want to acknowledge the meaning inherent in their spontaneous actions, “unfocused interaction” and non-verbal communication. In his own *flânerie* of the streets of New York City, Richard Sennett (1991) observes people, their actions, gestures and postures, and interprets these in relation to the urban spaces that frame them. He chooses not to interview them about their ideas, opinions and feelings towards their neighbourhoods, but rather observes their everyday lives through the flow of his own everyday life, while walking a well-trodden route to his favourite restaurant. He is “too polite to intrude upon the solitude of a middle-aged woman, or to violate the privacy of another man’s sexual obsessions” (Sennett, 1991: 129). This propriety conceals a deeper methodological decision to engage visually rather than verbally with people. This visual engagement evokes the visual activities in which consumers are engaged at the newsstand, as well as the other visual methodologies (participant observation, photography and textual analysis). It sacrifices the potential intimacy of conversation for the observation of spontaneous, “natural” action. This matches the anonymity of public spaces and reflects a choice to watch consumers from the sidelines, to read their gestures and actions, their engagement with space, rather than listen to their reports about those gestures, actions and interactions. This methodological decision ties in with the theoretical framework that emphasizes the political aspects of appearance and visibility in the public realm, over the notions of collective deliberation and participative decision making. My decision to observe rather than interview consumers seeks to acknowledge and respect the meaningfulness of everyday action and body language, the significance of appearance in public space, and argues for the significance of including awareness of this non-verbal communicative action in participant observation.

In some ways, my *flânerie* involved mimicking the behaviour of other consumers, while adding an internal consciousness and reflexivity. By blending in to the scenery in this way, I was able to note the subtleties of my own action and experience, and compare this to what I observed in others. But this “disguise” had its limits and disadvantages, chief of which was the fact that I could not stay in the spaces for too long, being forced to follow the flow of everyday life and consumerist activity and move on fairly quickly. In order to stay for longer periods of time in retail spaces, a sanctioned presence was required. This took place in the structured series of participant observations of nine sites.

### Participant observation of social spaces

The second kind of participant observation consisted of a series of structured, announced and mandated observations of nine carefully selected retail sites. This consisted of gaining permission from store owners/managers to be present in, observe and photograph nine newsstand spaces around London. With notebook and camera on display, I spent three field visits on each site. The first was a pilot visit, and the last was a follow up visit. The most important, second “research” visit lasted for up to two hours. My objective in these visits was threefold:

- Spend a prolonged period on site, taking notes about my observations,
- Take a series of photographs of the newsstand,
- Buy a set of magazines from the newsstand.

In this situation, instead of being an anonymous member of the crowds, I thought of myself as a conspicuous “foreigner”, who positioned herself transparently and reflexively within a socio-cultural space in order to observe, describe, understand and analyse it. Here, I was an outsider rather than an insider, I took a step back from the familiarity of the space and attempted to look at it with fresh eyes, as though for the first time. I openly displayed the fact that I was looking at it, taking photographs and notes. I recorded the structures and elements of the space, and the ways in which it seemed to operate (also the activities of consumers, where I was able to observe them). This is in line with a classic view of the ethnographer, who participates in a cultural space as a sympathetic visitor in order to understand and represent its operations. In the situation of describing the newsstand, I cannot claim, as some ethnographers do, to speak for or represent others (Clifford, 1986: 7; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 253), only to be able to paint a meaningful picture of the space and what happens there.

Choosing to construct the newsstand as “foreign” was an analytical tool that allowed for the creation of critical distance, perhaps lacking in the *flânerie*. This is in line with the movement in ethnography that reversed the gaze, from other to self, where instead of presupposing a “standpoint outside” (Clifford, 1986: 11), anthropologists choose to study their own culture rather than that of the other, the results serving as “a form of cultural critique for ourselves” (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 1, 38). Comaroff and Comaroff (1992: 6) argue that researchers should “regard our own world as a problem, a proper site for ethnographic inquiry”, and as a part of this world, the newsstand is ripe for such enquiry. In this sense, my study required “a delicate balance of subjectivity and

objectivity" (Clifford, 1986: 13), of objective distance and personal subjectivity, echoing the theoretical subject-object dialectic highlighted in the previous chapter.

I observed and made notes about the following aspects of each newsstand:

- Size, layout and shape of the store: where doors and windows were situated, which section of the store the newsstand was in,
- Size and structure of the newsstand: the dimensions of the newsstand, estimates of how many magazines that it carried, the way they were arranged,
- Other commodities sold in the store: how they were positioned in relation to the magazines,
- Consumer activity: how busy the store was at the time of the visit, acts of browsing, scanning or pacing the newsstand, acts of standing and reading, which magazines were looked at and/or purchased (where observable), the postures, gestures and expressions of consumers,
- Staff activity: what staff did on site, informal conversations with them, the ways in which they arranged the newsstand and the store, the ways in which they arranged marketing material such as posters,
- Aural activity: the sounds of the store and its environment, overheard snippets of conversation, noises caused by human movement,
- Visual information: the colours, textures, shapes and overall visual environment of the newsstand, including text integrated into visual displays, types of lighting, additional elements of advertising.

I wrote my observations in a fieldnote book, which I supplemented with a researcher diary. The latter was intended for more subjective impressions, thoughts and ideas related to my process of research, in the spirit in which Mills (1959: 196) advocates developing "self-reflective habits".

### Photography at newsstand sites

I also implemented a photographic survey of the nine newsstand sites. Visual data gathering techniques were appropriate, considering the intensely visual nature of newsstand spaces. As Murdock and Pink (2005: 151) argue, although anthropologists and social researchers have noted the rise of visual culture, and have focussed upon popular imagery and visual experience, this has "not been matched by a concerted effort to incorporate visual media" into research practice. This has been partially

rectified by developments in visual anthropology, which “aims to develop visually thick and open-ended accounts of everyday visual practices and visual environments” (Murdock and Pink, 2005: 152). Social researchers can employ a variety of visual methods, including film and video (Pink, 2001; Murdock and Pink, 2005; Banks, 2001), drawing (Canal, 2004) and photography (Pink, 2001; Banks, 2001; Harper, 2003) as tools in their ethnographic projects, either to record data or elicit it in creative collaborative ways with their research participants. Indeed, echoing the effect that anthropologists argue ethnography has of negotiating definitions of familiarity and foreignness, Susan Sontag (1979: 167) argues that the camera, too, “makes exotic things near, intimate; and familiar things small, abstract, strange, much farther away”.

Banks (2001) discusses how visual research methods can either involve the making of representations (by the researcher or in collaboration with social actors), or in the examination of pre-existing visual representations. The photographic work that I undertook straddles these two categories. In terms of the latter, magazine covers and newsstands are extremely visual texts and spaces, which require visual methods in their analysis (discussed in detail in the analytical framework of this chapter). In terms of the former, the use of digital photography as a visual recording method (Pink, 2001: 57) served to capture “visual field notes” (Murdock and Pink, 2005: 150) that co-exist with written field notes. Here, the “production of visual materials by the researcher as part of the research process” (Murdock and Pink, 2005: 149), is aimed at producing representations of the social world that can be analysed and used to develop theoretical arguments. Furthermore, these visual records can be used to “represent the results of the research” (*ibid.*). My intention in taking photographs during the overt observation was to collect visual data about newsstands and to visually record my perceptions of the spaces, which in tandem with my extensive fieldnotes, would help me to analytically construct a thick description of the space. The 543 photographs that I took during participant observation can be considered texts that require visual analysis that exist in “dialectic” with other narratives gathered from the field (Canal, 2004). Like my written fieldnotes, these should be considered subjective and reflexive representations of the research experience. I see them as neither superior nor inferior to textual interpretation, but as complementary.

Although there exists a temptation to label photographs “objective” data artefacts, superior to text in the sense that they capture what words cannot, it is crucial to note that they are not “objective visual records, uncontaminated by subjective bias” (Murdock and Pink, 2005: 150). They are constructed and mediated by technology as

well as my subjectivity. Like other forms of visual representation (such as painting), photos are not objective reflections of reality but subjective representations of it (as per Berger, 1972; Sontag, 1979; Penn, 2000; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001; Hall, 1997 and others). Despite that my photographs are records that demonstrate, on one level, that newsstands exist (Sontag, 1979: 165), they need to also be understood as expressive. They are artefacts that have been mediated by the lens of the camera, its "mechanical eye" (Murdock and Pink, 2005: 150), which has its own profound social symbolism, and *my eye*. This is not to suggest that photographs are not "real", they are precisely that, "material realities in their own right" (Sontag, 1979: 180). But they are neither infallible nor impartial. I had particular perceptions of the objects that I photographed, as well as certain aims. I wanted to capture the bigger picture of the newsstand, as well as certain small details, such as light reflecting off glossy paper. My photographs, some of which are included in Chapter 4, therefore speak both of what is included and excluded by the frame.

For the first three research visits, I used a small 4.0 megapixel Casio digital camera which I owned for about three years and used for personal photography. It has a modest 3x optical zoom, and is somewhat inconspicuous – a typical small digital camera that many people in my socio-economic category own as a leisure or lifestyle item, with average technical capacity and image quality. I soon decided that it would be necessary to invest in a better camera with higher quality resolution and a bigger zoom. I purchased a new camera, a 6.0 megapixel Canon Powershot with 12x optical zoom, and started to use it from the fourth visit. It was through the transition from using one tool to another that I became acutely aware of a conspicuous identity as a "photographer", which made the practice of overt observation acutely so. The symbolic presence of the old, small camera was different to that of the new, larger, chunkier, more "professional-looking" camera. The old camera had a hand strap, the new one a neck strap. Using the old camera, I appeared amateurish; with the new camera I gained a more professional or artistic appearance (on one site, a customer who had noticed me taking pictures, stopped me to ask if it was for an art project). This encouraged a more thoughtful and careful approach to taking photographs. As well as this, on a technical level, the powerful optical zoom allowed me to take very high quality close ups, offering a new perspective on the newsstands I was photographing.

I took between 40 and 80 photographs on each site. The number of photographs taken was more or less determined by the size and complexity of the space. I did not put in place an upper limit in terms of how many photographs to take, but continued to take

photographs until I felt I had exhausted the variety of perspectives that I could capture. The kinds of photographs I took ranged from square-on, medium and long range shots of the newsstand in its entirety, to angled shots capturing specific parts of the newsstand from certain perspectives, to closely framed close-ups of specific sections of the newsstand, focussing in on magazines or parts thereof. All of these photographs, however, should be understood as selections of a sight from “an infinity of other possible sights” (Berger, 1972: 10). This highlights the necessity of reflexivity in the process of taking photographs as well as analysing them, which means, according to Pink (2001: 54), that researchers are “aware of the theories that inform their own photographic practice”.

According to Canal (2004: 35), it is the very instantaneity of photographs, “the strong focus on detail and fragmentation of reality” in which their value lies, as it allows the analyst to view more details than can be captured with physiological sight, or even in moving images. This can apply to details that were intentionally or unintentionally captured. The process of taking photographs was not intended to merely complement my participant observation, or to visually record and “prove” the impressions that I noted. It should also be considered an additional layer to the data, a different and equally important way of looking, one of the constitutive processes of constructing a “map of the real” (Sontag, 1979: 158). The photographs captured are subjective research texts, representations of “aspects of a culture” rather than the culture in its entirety (Pink, 2001: 58). I have referred to them throughout the process of analysis, and present them as part of the empirical and analytic discussions in later chapters where appropriate.

### **Strategy for selecting magazines**

One of the main goals of the overt participant observation, aside from taking photographs, was the selection and purchase of magazines for textual analysis. I originally intended to make my decision about which magazines to buy through the process of observing what other consumers bought or browsed during the time that I was on site. The motivation for this approach was to explicitly acknowledge the non-verbal communication of other consumers at the newsstand. At times it was appropriate to follow this process, at others, when consumers were not present, for example, I would observe my own visual processes and act on the cues of the newsstand itself in the selection of texts. Throughout the process of selecting magazines, I kept in mind

those that I already owned, and attempted to flesh out the corpus of texts so that it included examples of various sub-genres of consumer magazines. I aimed to remain reflexive about my role as an agent, shopper and consumer in the purchase of the magazines, aware that my researcher subjectivity was the central deciding factor in the selection of texts. Throughout the visits, I had to balance observations of magazines that other consumers picked up, looked through, put back down, or bought and took away with them, with my own acts of looking. Twice, when it seemed appropriate, I enlisted the assistance of the proprietor of the newsstand in selecting the magazines to purchase, but this did not work out that well<sup>9</sup>, and I had to discard a small number of magazines as unsuitable for the study. I learned that I would have to be decisive about the selection of texts, bowing neither to the advice of the proprietor nor the actions of consumers.

Empirical realities are messy and complex, and I realised that I had to act analytically within the “field” as well as beyond it. I acknowledge that I exercised control over the selection of magazine texts from the newsstands, as I reflexively and carefully made decisions about the texts I was choosing for analysis. As the overt participant observation visits progressed, I became, a better and better analytic “shopper”, more and more familiar with the kinds of products on display and the ways in which they were displayed. In later visits, I tried to reflexively balance issues of presence and absence. For example, if a particular magazine cover caught my eye repeatedly, I would choose it. But I would also try to dig to the “back” of the newsstand now and then to choose something that was less visible, so that not only conspicuous “bestsellers” were selected. As the research progressed, I kept in mind my pile of magazines, and tried to ensure that I got a good spread across the various kinds of consumer subject matters and genres available on the newsstand. The result is a group of seventy consumer magazines. Their covers were removed from the rest of the magazine so as to make them easier to transport and work with, and were digitally archived by scanning. The 70 magazine covers that form the corpus of texts for analysis were arranged in alphabetical order and numbered from one to 70 in that order. When referred to throughout the thesis, they are referred to by these numbers (which are merely for the sake of convenience and carry no significance or value). Appendix 1 (see p. 278) includes a table listing the magazines, with indications of the publication date in the middle column, and the site from which they were sourced in the right hand column, as well as reproductions of each magazine cover image.

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<sup>9</sup> The proprietors would select magazines that they thought I would like, or that matched with their understandings of my explanations of my project, rather than those that they felt “represented” their newsstand.

In order to prepare the magazines for analysis, an index of the following elements was prepared for each magazine cover:

- Size, price and title,
- Content of text (cover lines),
- Type and colour of typeface(s),
- Positioning of text,
- Number, subject and style of photos,
- Expression and posture of model(s),
- Background,
- Texture of cover itself and of materials portrayed in images,
- Objects portrayed on the cover,
- Any other noticeable elements.

## **Summary of data collected**

The data collection processes outlined have resulted in the following material:

- *Written notes*: These include detailed notes made on site during visits, describing the nine formally observed newsstand sites (which I recorded in one notebook), and a researcher diary including further reflections on the nine formally observed sites and detailed notes from over 25 covertly observed newsstand sites (which I recorded in a separate notebook offsite). Although these two notebooks are materially separate, their content overlaps and merges in practice, and together they can be considered an extensive set of research fieldnotes.
- *Visual notes*: 543 photographs of the nine formally observed newsstand sites, which complement the written notes (and vice versa), and which can also be considered empirical texts.
- *Empirical texts*: 70 magazine covers (detached from magazines purchased) from the same nine formally observed newsstand sites,

I produced the written and visual notes in the process of the research, while the empirical texts were sourced “ready-made” from the field. All the data are shaped and pre-empted by the accumulation of my impressions of, experiences in, and ideas about

newsstands, including those that I have seen in other cities and countries, which have not been explicitly included in this research project.

### Access to data

I have made all the visual data that I gathered available on a public photo-sharing website: <http://picasaweb.google.com/MiQ.PhD>. Digital scans of all 70 magazine covers, in alphabetical and numerical order are placed in one album. The photographs from each of the nine newsstands are placed in separate albums, and each photograph has been allocated a unique number reflecting the newsstand site, e.g., 5.22 would be the 22<sup>nd</sup> photograph taken in newsstand number 5. Where photographs are included or referred to in this thesis, their captions refer to the number assigned to them in these albums. The aim of this online repository was to make the data available to other researchers or students interested in my research and the field in general, in the spirit of transparency and accessibility, as well as to create an online appendix to this thesis for the reference purposes of my supervisors and examiners.

### ***Analytical framework***

Guided by semiotic, discursive and multimodal approaches, I constructed a framework for analysing these research texts, which can be summarised as a socio-semiotic approach. This approach addresses various semiotic modes including the linguistic, visual, spatial and textural from contextual, ideological and intertextual perspectives. I understand "texts" to be pieces of communication constructed from various elements, such as words, sounds and images, which are made available for consumption to the public. I use the word "text" in the most inclusive sense, as "a contribution to communicative interaction which is designed... in one context with a view to its uptake in others" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999: 46). A text can be verbal, visual, spatial, aural or a combination thereof, and is something constructed and produced by an "author" in order to be consumed by a "reader". The texts analysed in this project are the data collected as described previously: the written and visual texts produced by me, and the empirical texts (magazine covers) selected from the field. In addition to these data, it is also possible to conceptualise the newsstand spaces themselves as texts.

These texts are interrelated and overlapping. Some of them constitute the content, or highlight specific fragments, of other texts. For example, some of my photographs of

the newsstand show magazines that are in my possession after having been purchased from the sites. Other photographs show only details of magazines. Other relations are also apparent, for example the somewhat tautological photographs of photographs featured on covers of magazines on newsstands. The fieldnotes often refer to words and images noticed, snippets of conversation overheard, as well as to more abstract things such as the arrangement of the spaces and my descriptions of people's actions. The analytical framework therefore needs to allow these diverse texts to be read together, and analysed in such a way as to highlight the relationships between them.

## Approach to text analysis

The metatextual approach to the analysis of these research texts can be framed by addressing the ideology mediated through the texts, their social context and the intertextual connections between them.

### Ideology

As discussed in Chapter 2, I consider consumerism to be the ideology under the microscope in this project. My analytical approach is informed by an understanding of ideology in Thompson's (1990) terms, as located at the interface of symbolic forms and power, and in Fairclough's (1989) terms as enacted discursively. This requires that texts be seen as discursive practices that are inherently ideological. This is not to suggest that all texts are propagandistic, but that they contain traces and flavours of discourses that need to be unearthed and analysed. According to Frow (1986: 64), "the domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Wherever a sign is present, ideology is present too. *Everything ideological possesses semiotic value*" (emphasis in original). In other words, ideological communication, because it seeks to prioritise a certain set of values over others, cannot avoid employing the skills of signification in the aestheticisation of its message. The corollary to this argument is that everything that is semiotic, that has been designed to exist in a certain way textually, must possess ideological value.

Discourse analysis requires reading beyond the explicit surface levels of the text, into the fundamental political motivations and ideologies that inform and shape it. It entails the careful categorisation of the various aspects of each text, and a process of denotative and connotative (Barthes, 1973, 1984) interpretation aimed at identifying

chains of signifiers that lead to deeper social or cultural insight. This practice is necessary in order to deconstruct texts, take apart their constitutive elements in order to understand how they work together in order to function as a whole. It is also necessary in order to expose the ideologies underlying the texts and reveal the particular worldviews that have inspired, informed and shaped them.

### Context

Addressing magazine covers as texts is not an attempt to distance them from their social embeddedness, but rather to address their meaning within, impact upon and dialogue with that context, as well as ways in which that context is intertextual and ideological. Any textual analysis should be rooted in an understanding that meaning is social constructed and contextualised (Halliday, 1978). "The site in which a text occurs typically contains instructions as to how it should be read and what meanings should be found in it.... Settings exert a coercive force on the meanings that can be produced or received within them" (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 68). The material and spatial structures of the newsstand provide clues as to how the consumer magazine cover can be read. Furthermore, the newsstand is in itself a textual space, an example of the "textually mediated nature of contemporary social life" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999: 37). The newsstand as context was thoroughly explored during the participant observation, which also allowed it to be analysed as text, using the framework further outlined below. Thompson points out that studies of ideology should be methodologically operationalised not by reading the ideological character of symbolic phenomena off the phenomena themselves, but rather by situating them in the social-historical contexts within which ...[they] serve to establish and sustain relations of domination" (Thompson, 1990: 56). The social context of the magazine covers as texts is the newsstand, while the broader context of the other research texts gathered is consumer culture, as discussed in Chapter 2.

### Intertextuality

Along with a clear view of consumerism as the ideology that acts to structure consumer magazine covers and newsstands as text, it is necessary to root the textual analysis in an awareness of the intertextual nature of social mediation. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999: 119) explain intertextuality as "the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in and which the text may

assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth". This understanding is rooted in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (Hirschkop, 1999) and Julia Kristeva (1984, 1986).

Intertextuality is an intricate element of both visual and verbal texts, in the former it is often referred to as "intersignification" (Penn, 2000). An intertextual approach insists on identifying the links between texts as well as acknowledging the textualised social milieu from which texts originate. This is illustrated by the social juxtaposition of magazines on the newsstand, where they reference and mirror one another. But other, textual and significatory levels of intertextuality are also relevant and important. For example, in a study of the reception of men's magazines, Benwell (2005) analyses the interview transcripts intertextually with the magazines discussed by the focus group, thereby finding links between the respondents' discourses and the magazines themselves. Part of the analytical approach consisted, therefore, of mapping and tracing the connections, repetitions, contradictions and visual replications that exist between the magazine covers selected from the sites, as well as making further linkages to the photographs and fieldnotes in order to search for deeper, less obvious connections that exist between the data collected and the broader cultural mediascape.

To summarise: the overall approach to the textual data gathered required a consideration of the following items:

- The animating ideology of the texts,
- The social and cultural contexts of the texts,
- The intertextual relationships between the texts themselves as well as between the texts and contexts.

## **The multimodality of text**

Roland Barthes (1984) applies his model of semiotic analysis to "image, music, text". Similarly, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999: 38) argue that discourse analysis must address language, non-verbal communication and visual communication. Appropriating these tri-layered models, I approached my texts by looking at semiotics: the linguistic (or verbal, language-based), the visual (image-based) and other non-verbal or visual abstract modes. Each level of semiotic modality is discussed separately in order to clearly map out the analytical framework. However, I found in practice that each level is part of a matrix of influences and connections, where boundaries are difficult to delineate, and constant overlap and interplay between them takes place: consumer magazines and newsstands are multimodal texts (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001).

## The linguistic mode

Linguistic semiotic elements refer to the use of language in terms of content and style. This requires paying attention primarily to the choice of wording and grammar, and to suggestions of interactional control, ethos, and the use of metaphors where relevant (Phillips and Jorgensen, 2002: 82). Interactional control is typically applied to conversation analysis, but in texts can be applied in order to identify the ways in which the reader is imagined, constructed or “hailed”, including modes of address, and suggestions of relationship and control between various subjects within the text as well as between sender and receiver. Ethos refers to the ways in which identities are constructed, for the texts themselves and the text’s subjects. Metaphor, wording and grammar includes an assessment of use of punctuation and sentence construction, the relevance of verbs and nouns, as well as the use of genres of speech and cultural idioms, etc. The central linguistic elements under analysis in this project are the titles, straplines and catchphrases on the covers of magazines.

The first level of linguistic analysis applied to the magazine covers involved an act of description. Each magazine cover was examined and its verbal features systematically noted. A list of all the words, phrases and sentences featured was compiled; this allowed for an analysis of the words independent from their visual placement, so as to gain a degree of critical distance from the visual situation described above. The analysis of linguistic elements sought to explore common styles and patterns across the set of empirical texts sourced for analysis.

In the assessment of linguistic elements, I addressed typography, or the visual treatment of text (here a cross-over with visual analysis is unavoidable). This required a consideration of size, colour and placement of text. Colour is relevant in texts such as magazines in which words appear in a variety of colours. Text size can convey certain meanings, for example, “very large typeface, like shouting (or lack of consonants), signifies unrestrained energy...” (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 95). The use of computerised type can be compared with the organic and messy appearance of handwriting, as Hodge and Kress (1988: 117-9) discuss in a comparison of a handwritten and published version of Sylvia Plath’s poem *Child*. In published typeface, the main distinction is between serif and sans serif type, the former “has pointed embellishments finishing off the strokes of the letters” while the latter does not (Holmes, 2000: 166). In media texts, the latter is normally used for headlines and short pieces of text, while the former is used for larger blocks of text (*ibid.*). As well as these subtleties, it was also

necessary to consider how text is placed in relation to images and the overall design and how it is aligned and sized.

### The visual mode

The most obvious visual elements of texts are the photographs or images that they contain. As discussed with regards to the practice of taking photographs, epistemological approaches to analysing them should centre the recognition that they are subjective constructions of reality rather than objective artefacts reflecting it.

Canonical semiotic scholarship addressing commercial texts, such as that of Roland Barthes (1973, 1984), Erving Goffman (1976) and Judith Williamson (1978), is useful in order to reconnect the visual with the social and ideological. Penn (2000) for example, analyses a perfume advertisement in order to set out a methodological approach to visual analysis, while Ramamurthy (2000) also addresses a perfume advert as well as a selection of Benetton adverts in order to demonstrate the relationship between photography and commodity culture. Considering McCracken's (1993: 16) view, which I share, that the magazine cover is primarily an advertising text, semiotic analysis is a logical as well as theoretically grounded methodology for approaching it. These studies informed my approach of paying strict attention to the framing of the objects and people represented in images, the ways in which objects and people are lit, the ways in which they are set out in relation to one another, facial expressions and emotions represented, and ways in which images are framed, cropped, fragmented and montaged.

Schroeder (2006) puts forward a set of tools for analysing images which he terms "critical visual analysis". Unlike the structural approach of semiotics, "critical visual analysis remains open to consumer response and post structural notions of image production and consumption" (Schroeder, 2006: 4). He argues that fine art provides a useful set of tools for analysing media images and that the first step in such analysis is description of what can be seen. This "requires articulation of form, subject matter, genre, medium, colour, light, line and size" (ibid.: 5), which provides a useful framework for analysing magazine covers as well as my photographs of newsstands. Visual analysis also requires special attention to be paid to colour, which is a unique mode that is of special significance in consumer magazines, entirely distinct from language (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 27). Because colours are recognised as

meaningful in different ways in different cultures, and their representation on paper is a material technology, in the sense in which various hues, inks and dyes are created and mixed in order to achieve the full-colour results of the pages of consumer magazines, this mode is especially complex. The effects of colour cannot be read in generalised terms, as the experience of seeing colours is different for each individual. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the experience of “hearing the word *blue* is not the same as seeing a deeply saturated *blue*. The meaning-associations capable of being set up visually are simply not those which can be set up verbally” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 27). Colour is a very abstract, and in this sense also very versatile. In magazines, it is habitually used as “a well-articulated mode for the expression of discursive meanings” which “represent a largely unexplored semiotic terrain...” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 29). In photographs, the use of full colour can suggest a more “realistic” and modern vision of the world, as opposed to black and white photographs, which suggest historical, nostalgic or artistic contexts. Hodge and Kress (1988) analyse the various dresses that Princess Diana wore during a royal visit to Australia, as reported in a woman’s magazine. Although also looking at style and texture, the analysis focuses on colour, arguing that its luminosity and depth carry significant meanings related to gender and energy (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 105). More intense colours signify greater energy and power, while more muted, pastel shades signify a demure restraint. Although there is a certain “inherent slipperiness of meaning in use” (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 110) of colour, the framework provided remains useful. Following these examples therefore, it was necessary to analyse choice of colours, their cultural connotations, as well as their luminosity and intensity.

### Other modalities

In addition to the various visual and linguistic elements addressed, it was crucial to include a treatment of other semiotic modes which are not easily categorised as visual or verbal, yet are central to their analysis. As well as noting sounds and body language, as discussed in the description of my participant observation, the most important other semiotic modes apparent in the data that required analysis were *space* and *materiality*.

Space is relevant to an analysis of linguistic elements and images in terms of noting the importance of *spacing* in the composition of the text. Hodge and Kress (1988: 52) discuss the potential for semiotic analysis of bodies in space. Here, they address “the physical relationships of the (bodies of) participants in space” by analysing the

symbolism of the situation of bodies in religious paintings. They argue that there is "a basic equation between the ordering of bodies in physical space and the relationships between persons in social space" (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 52). The key to analysing "spatial codes" (ibid: 53) is to address spatial hierarchies, in terms of "higher than" and "lower than" (the vertical axis) as well proxemic codes, in terms of "closeness" and "remoteness" (the horizontal axis). Closeness can carry either positive significations in terms of intimacy and solidarity or negative connotations in terms of aggressiveness or hostility, while "remoteness" can signify weakness, alienation or indifference (ibid: 52). Addressing these axes allows the analyst to read meaning into posture, placement of persons, as well as empty or open spaces, in order to understand the flow of power within spatial representations. I found this to be relevant for the analysis of space as represented in the magazine covers themselves, their arrangement and placement on the newsstand, and the arrangement of the newsstand space itself. This was also relevant for an analysis of the ways in which bodies situate themselves in relation to the newsstand, as well as the ways that they are situated by it. Related to this are the ways in which bodies are spatially represented on magazine covers, and the dialogue that is assumed to exist between the material bodies navigating the space and the represented or symbolised bodies within the space. Here, readings of body language, gesture and expression (as contained and shaped by space) were central. This applies also to the ways in which photographs spatially situate the viewer (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 63). Spatial codes were analysed in terms of the arrangement of physical or symbolic height (the relationship between low and high) and physical or symbolic proximity (the relationship between far and close).

The other key non-verbal and non-visual mode that required analysis in the context of magazine covers and newsstands is materiality and texture. This refers to the materials from which objects are constructed, and the various meanings that they can carry. Plastic, paper, fabric, steel, glass and other materials all carry denotations and connotations. Sennett (1991: 106) discusses how the use of glass in architecture signalled a profound shift between the binary oppositional sense of inside and outside, in the service of modern ideal of architectural integrity. In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin (2002) discussed how the steel and glass canopies that created the Parisian arcades out of ordinary streets and alleys facilitated a similar modernist objective, a sensation of "protected openness" (Sennett, 1991: 108). In these ways, glass and steel carry meaning, and the choice to create something with them instead of other materials is significant. Glass is used in windows, creating a transparent barrier between inside and outside – and the opportunity for display in retail culture. Shop windows and display

cabinets that are fitted with glass allow an object for sale to be visible without being touched (Sennett, 1991: 109). This relates directly to the issues of space that have been raised, and the way in which the use of a material such as glass can impact upon the access and visibility of objects and also, therefore, meanings.

Other materials carry meaning too. For example, a plastic toothbrush container, although a mundane functional object, embodies a kind of semiotic mystery due to the at once physical and metaphysical status of plastic as a man-made material (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 80). The plastic toothbrush container can be read not only as a functional object that serves a certain purpose in social life, but an example of a postmodern elasticity that allows the creation of an unlimited number of shapes from moulds. Plastic can mimic and imitate a wide variety of natural textures and materialities; this metaphysical ability sets it apart from "natural" materials. Its material form carries meaning, much like glass. And paper can signify too, apart from the words and images printed on it in ink.

The technological form – in this case of the printed magazine – is not only important because it allows the message to be preserved and mass distributed. The paper used, for instance, conveys the almost ineffable but very important message of *gloss*. Compare an advertisement in a glossy magazine to its colour photocopy or computer printout and the difference becomes immediately apparent. A crucial element of the magazine's seductive power is lost (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 122).

The fact that magazines are made from specific kinds of paper, cut to specific sizes, refers to the fact that their material presence carries meaning. Producers of magazines are aware that glossy paper is better suited to carrying visual content, whereas text heavy content is better suited to duller paper (Holmes, 2000: 165). But this can be extrapolated to suggest that glossier paper communicates ideas of visual luxury and leisure, whilst duller paper communicates ideas of information and serious business. The importance of the materiality of paper in the making of media commodities resonates with the discussion of consumer culture as material culture in the previous chapter, as well as with that of consumer magazines as commodities. I therefore found it necessary to consider the materiality of the newsstand and magazines, in the overall analytical matrix. This included an assessment of materiality represented on the magazines covers. This was largely a question of noting texture, whether the substances are smooth or rough, naturally occurring or man-made, and what their historical and social connotations are. It also refers to a reading of how the objects or

spaces in question are touched, something noted as part of my observations of actions within newsstand spaces.

### Summary of analytical framework

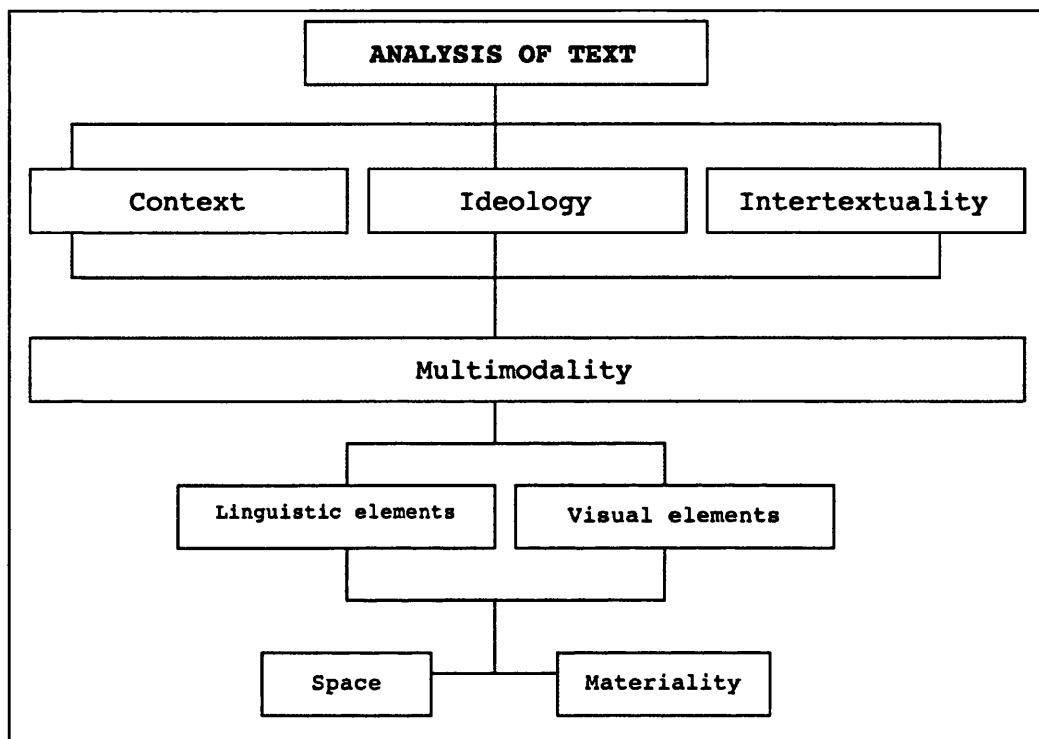


Figure 2: Summary of Analytical Framework

The preceding diagram summarizes the analytical framework used to guide interpretation of the corpus of data, including participant observation-rooted perceptions of the newsstand. As a visual representation of an interrelated and complex set of concerns that should inform socio-semiotic analysis, it is inevitably an oversimplification, and should not be read as a causal or hierarchical representation of which elements are most important. Although considerations of context, ideology and intertextuality feed into textual multimodality, this in turn informs and shapes the former elements. Most importantly, context, ideology and intertextuality should not be considered separate: ideology influences context and is entrenched through intertextuality, context can be intertextual and ideologically shifting, and intertextuality can transcend contexts and function ideologically. These metatextual elements are intermeshed and co-dependent. Furthermore, the multiple semiotic modes outlined are interrelated and shifting, as Van Leeuwen (2008) outlines in a recent article charting the way forward for multimodal text analysis.

## ***The dialectic between social and semiotic research methods***

With reference to the approaches to researching magazines summarised in the introduction to this thesis, I would situate my project as operating within and between the “textual” and “discursive” bodies of work. The methodology designed aimed to uncover the discursive mechanics that drive and make ubiquitous cultures and processes of consumerism by closely examining the structures and discourses of consumer magazines. It aimed to address the materiality and plurality of magazines as commodities, the visual structures and messages that they mediate, as well as the underlying discourses that inform and shape them. It departed from the observation that consumer magazines are everyday media objects that are ubiquitously available throughout consumer spaces, and sought to engage with how this existence is structured and how it operates. Furthermore, it is based upon the recognition that consumer magazines are both social and semiotic objects. Social in the sense that they occupy public spaces, as well as in the sense in which they simultaneously construct and represent certain normative aesthetic and cultural value systems. Semiotic in terms of their visual and textual existence as complex systems of signs that carry various (intended and unintended) meanings that require analysis and interpretation.

Although the terms “social” and “semiotic” refer to the newsstand and magazine, and participant observation and textual analysis respectively, in a way that might suggest I see them as oppositional, I understand them to exist in an overlapping fashion in dynamic tension with one another. I believe that the methods of participant observation and semiotic analysis are linked in significant and fruitful ways. They are united by a discursive approach to social analysis, which considers discourse a social practice, which is manifested in a variety of modes and shapes. As Hodge and Kress (1988: 6) summarise, “Discourse ...is the site where social forms of organization engage with systems of signs in the production of texts, thus reproducing or changing the sets of meanings and values which make up a culture”. Texts take a variety of shapes, and many things that are not classically considered texts can be read textually. Although magazine covers and newsstands are the empirical objects of analysis, they are also the manifestations of discursive practice, and sites where cultures of consumption and branding operate to create social hierarchies of meaning. Both newsstands and magazines have social and semiotic elements and require addressing with social and semiotic methods, according to the elements outlines in the analytical framework.

Furthermore, each methodological approach taken in isolation has its weaknesses. Participant observation, for example, could suffer from being “ruled” by the space and the experience of observing and documenting it, leading to little insight other than a thick description. Furthermore, the immersion in the field that participant observation requires holds the risk of the loss of critical distance. Although textual analysis cannot correct this entirely and effective participant observation requires great reflexivity, the former can add a dimension of distance and an added reflexive tension. Semiotic analysis, on the other hand, could suffer from being too creative, following too many chains of interpretations, and becoming too easily detached from the empirical context of the texts under analysis. Participant observation in the newsstand has helped to ensure that the semiotic analyses of the data are empirically grounded.

As well as this, there are inescapable elements of each method in the other. For example, as a participant observer, I had to note and “read” the textual nature of the newsstand during the process of observation. And, as a textual analyst, I had to engage with the social space of the newsstand in the process of selecting magazines and taking photographs. Once I had collected the participant observation data for analysis, I had to apply visual and semiotic analysis methods to it in my search for meaning. Likewise, in my analysis of the texts, I would have been sorely mistaken if I chose to ignore their social, spatial and contextual elements. I found that the process of choosing texts for analysis from each newsstand was married closely to the experience of the newsstand as a socio-cultural space. The socio-semiotic approach has allowed an analysis to take place from two directions at once and in parallel. In practice, it is difficult to separate these methodologies. It was necessary to work reflexively with both social and semiotic approaches, constantly seeking to balance them out, and engage one with the other at each stage of collecting and analysing the data. Although I have described them separately in this chapter for the purposes of clarity and accountability, in practice I have found them to be intricately intermeshed.

The participant observation played an important role in gathering data that allowed me to articulate in great detail one social context of the consumer magazine cover, but it also facilitated insight into the ideological and intertextual characteristics of the space as a text in its own right as well as magazine covers as a collection of socially located intertextual texts. Considered together, the understandings of the newsstand gleaned from the participant observation framed the analysis of the magazine covers in fundamental ways, and provided a consistent analytical backdrop to the ways in which the individual texts were analysed in detail. The participant observation data should not

be considered separate from the corpus of consumer magazine covers, rather they should be understood as two parts of a larger set of data that represents a fragment of mediated consumerist discourse sourced from a set of public spaces of consumption at a particular moment in time. Although at times the narrative of my analysis will focus on one or the other element of the corpus of data, and detail either participant observations or textual analyses, the newsstand will always provide a specific backdrop to the magazine cover, while the magazine cover will populate the description of the newsstand.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methodologies employed to address the research question, which can be summarised as ways of looking, comprising of appropriated ethnographic methods and an analytical framework defined by a multimodal, social semiotic approach. The following two chapters report on the first, material level of empirical findings resulting from the processes described here. Chapter 4 offers a thick description of the newsstand as a social space, which essentially functions as an analytical reading of it as a “text”. Chapter 5 offers a description of the “mechanics of gloss”, that is, the material qualities and operations of the magazine cover, and culminates in a descriptive analysis of the subject and mode of celebrity on magazine covers.

## 4. Point of Sale: A “thick description” of the newsstand

This chapter focuses on the newsstand and explores the notion of public space in terms of its visual nature. It narrates the first level of empirical findings that have resulted from my participant observation of newsstands. A “thick description”, understood in Geertz’s (1975) sense to be an interpretation, or *reading*, of an element of social life is offered in order to paint a picture of newsstands as they exist in the everyday contexts of consumer culture. My intention is to treat the newsstand as an analytical object (or text) in its own right, in order to offer a detailed social contextualisation for magazine covers as well as to highlight the ways in which the newsstand itself is a locus of the mediation of consumerism which operates in socio-semiotic dialectic with magazine covers. The description is organised into two sections. The first addresses the spatial structures, the second the spatial practices, of the newsstand. The ways in which these structures and practices overlap and interrelate is addressed in the concluding section. A critical focus that runs through the description addresses the consumer magazine as *commodity* and the ways in which it exists in this sense in retail spaces. This is necessary in order to provide an important counterpoint to and contextualisation for the treatment of the consumer magazine as a *text* in other parts of this thesis. Included in this treatment of the magazine as commodity are observations of the various ways in which consumers interact with it at the newsstand, and the newsstand itself. The argument characterises the newsstand as a “socio-semiotic space”, and proposes a dialectic between a pair of homonyms, “site and sight”, as a useful way of engaging and analysing the complexities of that space. The chapter concludes by highlighting a variety of tensions that exist in the description offered and which relate back to the dialectical relationships described in the theoretical chapter.

### ***The Newsstand Project***

James Clifford (1986: 2) argues that ethnography should be seen as the practice of “writing culture”, which involves the fundamental acknowledgement that within the narrative exercise that is a thick description, “the poetic and the political are inseparable”. In other words, rhetorical style, the aesthetic of the textual description, can be separated neither from the modes of narrative authority that allow such representation, nor the empirical power relations that shape the object of narration.

Writing the politics of the newsstand would entail a description of its location in consumer culture as a ubiquitous, “naturalised” part of the retail landscape, as well as a reflexive acknowledgement of the authority (or not) of the researcher to describe it as such. Writing the poetics of the newsstand would entail a literary, expressive, creative – necessarily subjective and reflexive – account of the experience of *being there*. The textual assertion of embodied presence is an “an experience closely linked to interpretation... the reading of culture cannot happen without an intense personal participation, an active at-homeness in a common universe” (Clifford, 1983: 129). The poetic element is apparent throughout my thick description, and represents my interpretation of a (consumer-) cultural space. The political element is central to the motivating force of this piece of research – a desire to critically explore hegemonic consumerism from the locus of the magazine cover/newsstand, and rises to the surface at certain points in the thick description. The interpretive flow in this chapter shifts between the poetic and descriptive and the political and analytical; its narrative in some sense constructs and invents the newsstand as an archetypical space. In this sense it is a fiction not, as Geertz (1975/1994: 221) explains, in that it is false or not based on empirical reality and experience, but in that is “something *made*, something *fashioned*” (emphasis added). My description thus fashioned is neither an objective documentation nor a realist textual snapshot of newsstands in London<sup>10</sup>, but a subjective slice of insight into these recurring everyday spaces, with which I have become extremely familiar over the course of my exposure to them.

My thick description of the newsstand can be contextualised within a broader scholarly engagement with the shape and significance of public retail spaces in the developed urban centres of the global north, linked to the rise of modernity and consumerism. Benjamin’s uncompleted and posthumously published “Arcades Project” (2000) is instructive in the sense in which it provides an account of the retail spaces of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. Although fragmented and unfinished, it operates as a type of “thick description”, communicating the various sensory and spatial experiences of the arcades, fusing together critical analysis and phenomenological narrative, describing the flow of multi-sensory encounters in those spaces. My interpretation of newsstands takes inspiration from Benjamin’s account of the arcades<sup>11</sup> and provides insight into one element of the “new retail geography”... operating through distinctive geographies of

<sup>10</sup> For factual notes on the location and description of the nine formal sites that I visited and photographed, see Table 1 and Figure 1 in Chapter 3. The latter also provides an indication of the London-based sites visited in the *flânerie*.

<sup>11</sup> Hence the sub-title, “The Newsstand Project”.

shopping malls, department stores, supermarkets, discount warehouses, corner shops and so on" (Miller et al, 1998: 9).

My description is constructed from my fieldnotes, textual and photographic<sup>12</sup>, and the accumulation of impressions and experiences gained through the ongoing *flânerie* and the short term structured participant observation described in the previous chapter. It is the result of an analytical exercise that seeks to transform this "raw data" into a narrative (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Clifford, 1986); expressing the subjective experience of looking at, and participating in, newsstands as the first level of analysis necessary in order to address consumer magazines as they exist in public spaces of consumption, and beyond, as they exist as consumer objects in broader social contexts. I have taken the decision to write parts of this chapter in the "ethnographic present"<sup>13</sup> (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979: 10), in order to highlight the sense of immediacy, temporariness, and the strange abstract sense (discussed further in the next sub-section) that all of the visits that I made could be condensed into a series of moments at a single place. Furthermore, it is written in the first person so as to highlight the extreme reflexive awareness required in participant observation methods.

Photographs are inserted into the narrative in order to elaborate upon textual discussion and offer another route into the descriptive experience. They are often relevant to sections additional to the ones in which they are placed. The visual narrative is not intended to simply illustrate the line of argument of the written discussion but rather to share the empirical experience on a level alternative to the verbal. In some ways, images are able to capture things difficult or impossible to communicate in words (the reverse also being true for the ability of written description<sup>14</sup>). Although I acknowledge the difficulties and risks inherent in presenting images together with writing (namely, the reductive suggestions of "evidence" when photographs are presented alongside text, or "explanation" where text is positioned alongside photographs), my intention is simply to offer both visual and written versions of my narrative, the former especially apt considering the visual nature of the research question and methodologies employed. My practice of including visual data in my research report is based on an acknowledgement of "the premise that the purpose of

<sup>12</sup> The complete set of photographs taken of newsstands can be viewed at <http://picasaweb.google.com/MiQ.PhD>

<sup>13</sup> I've indicated these shifts into the "ethnographic present" with the use of italics.

<sup>14</sup> The photographs are mostly unpopulated (aside from self-portraits that feature me). Where people do appear in photographs, their faces are not visible. This is because I believe that it would have been unethical to take photographs of people without their awareness or consent, and that to approach them unannounced was not conducive to receiving informed consent. Furthermore, an awareness of being photographed could have altered the body language in subtle ways. My representations of human practices within the space are therefore limited to the textual level.

analysis is not to translate 'visual evidence' into verbal knowledge" – or vice versa – "but to explore the relationship between visual and other (including verbal) knowledge" (Pink, 2001: 96).

My eyes have been the filters of everything that is described; I recognise that my own subjectivity (personal and epistemological) shapes the description that I offer. I have endeavoured to remain aware of the subject-object dialectics at play in consumer culture aesthetics, made all the more poignant through my own embodied and subjective acts of observing social objects. Despite my reflexive efforts, I recognise that my social and educational status, my cultural, gender and ethnic identities, my life politics and epistemological outlook, my moods, personal anxieties and preoccupations on each occasion of observation, and other factors that I may not be aware of, have surely coloured the account that I provide. For this I take full responsibility.



Figure 3: Self-portrait showing reflection in a surveillance mirror. Detail from *Photograph 8.54*.

### No sense of place

*I've just walked into a newsstand that I've never visited before, but I experience a sense of déjà vu. Maybe it's because I've seen many of the magazine covers on display at other newsstands I've recently visited. But it's more than this. The spatial structures are so similar that every time I enter a "new" newsstand I feel I could be almost anywhere. The door I walked through was on a specific street, but I imagine that walking out again, I could find myself in a different part of London. Hammersmith instead of Hampstead, Bloomsbury instead of Brick Lane, Edgware Road instead of Ealing. For a moment I*

wonder whether all the doors of all the newsagents in London lead, with a few metaphysical twists and turns, to the same surreal place.

Ironically, despite choosing a material, analogue, three-dimensional and tangible research object that is clearly located in specific real world *places* (as opposed to digital, virtual, online media), I experienced what I have come to think of as a vague condition of a lost “sense of place” (Meyrowitz, 1985). Although each newsstand was identifiable, discrete, locally located and to some degree different to others, the enduring similarities of each space (most notably the magazine titles on the shelves) eroded any solid sense of emplacement and social context and highlighted instead the aesthetic and experiential commonalities of the newsstand. Relph (1976: 118) noted that in a “placeless geography” different localities look and feel alike, and that this is particularly characteristic of retailscapes (or as Relph (1976: 93) puts it, “Consumerland”). Despite my careful planning of formal visits and my persistent clarity about the purpose of both formal and informal observations as being to note similarities and differences, it was the former that consistently overpowered the latter. Researchers who have looked into other retail spaces have noted similar structural commonalities. For example, Gregson et al (2002), in a study focussing on the practice of shopping in charity stores, although addressing shoppers, how they shop and talk about their shopping, rather than the structures of the charity shop spaces themselves, infers a broad understanding of charity shops as a genre. And the structural qualities of department stores and shopping malls have been well documented in volumes such as *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices and Spaces* (Jackson et al, 2000), Daniel Miller’s (1998) *A theory of shopping* and *The shopping experience* (Falk and Campbell, 1997). My experiences of the similarities of newsstands can partly be ascribed to corporate branding strategies that seek to ensure all franchises of the same retail chain look alike (I visited three WH Smith stores), it is also a result of a kind of generic geography that characterises retail space in late modernity. Like many other retail sites, newsstands are not places that are related to a particular history or identity, they are experienced in a transient and unattached fashion, they are multiplied and anonymous: they are thus better described as non-places than places (Augé, 1995: 78).

In this way it is the generic, “placeless” newsstand that is my subject. I describe it less as a set of places, but as a “non-place” with recurring characteristics that become manifest in specific places. Newsstands are rather humble places, filled with pathos and mundanity; in my description I attempt to recast it as an archetypal non-place. What I list below, therefore, are the spatial and aesthetic tropes that I have observed to be

common to newsstands as a general rule, both in terms of structure and practice. The spatial structures and practices are interdependent. The newsstand is structured in such a way as to facilitate specific practices of consumption (looking, buying). And the practices that take place in the space corroborate the design and existence of its structure.

## ***Spatial Structures***

### **Quasi-public space**

*A non-uniformed supermarket security officer has just approached me. He wants to know who I am and why I am taking photographs. While I'm explaining, I hastily search through my pockets for the slip of paper that the store manager gave me when I signed in. It identifies me as an authorised visitor and shows that I have permission to do what I am doing. He examines it for a few moments and lets me carry on. I think of this encounter weeks later, in a smaller newsstand, when I read a sign stuck with tape to the newsstand shelf:*



Figure 4: Surveillance is part of the everyday practices of retail spaces. Detail from *Photograph 8.26*.

During each of the "formal" participant observations of the nine sites, I was acutely aware that I was being watched – in principle at least. I noticed surveillance mirrors and/or security cameras in every site. I took self-portraits, using the mirrors to frame a view of myself in "the field", noting the paradox of simultaneously observing and being

observed. I took photographs of the security cameras too, as if to announce that I was aware of being watched.



Figure 5: While I photograph the surveillance technology that is watching me, a store staff member looks on. Detail from *Photograph 7.9*.

The surveillance of retail spaces has been documented as central characteristic of their privatised nature (Miller et al, 1998: 103, Samarajiva, 1998: 132). Surveillance of retail spaces is not a modern phenomenon: Miller et al (1998: 73) argue that the *flâneur's* Paris was also regulated by the gaze of store owners. The Arcades implicitly only welcomed the bourgeoisie while access for other classes was regulated or denied. Surveillance of retail space is aimed at ensuring a degree of control over it: keeping out the underclass (Bauman, 2007), so as to deter theft and make middle class customers comfortable. It is indisputable that newsstands are privately owned, either by large corporations or individual businesspeople, and are therefore monitored and controlled through surveillance, as well as the embodied observation of staff members and security personnel, as a day-to-day part of the business of selling.

Strategies of surveillance would not be necessary if retail spaces were not to some degree *public*. Newsstands are public in the sense in which (almost) anyone can walk into them and engage visually with them. By being open to visitors in this way, newsstands mimic other public spaces such as parks and town squares. But through

the implicit control exerted on the spaces through surveillance (technological and human), the private nature of the newsstand as a retail space is revealed. Newsstands are therefore *both* public and private in compromised senses. They are public in that they are boldly visible and theoretically accessible to visits from all shoppers. But they are not public in the sense in which they are privately owned, and in which their spaces are surveyed and controlled. They perform their visibility and accessibility in a conditional manner, one that is tied to an implicit contract of consumption. In these ways, newsstands, like other retail spaces are *quasi-public* (as discussed in Chapter 2). By operating in both private and public ways – the former manifested in strategies of surveillance and access control, the latter manifested in strategies of display and a discourse of accessibility – newsstands exhibit a tension between strategies of manipulation and empowerment. Through a Panopticon-like system of announced surveillance, newsstands impose a certain norm of behaviour upon visitors. Those who infringe the rules of consumerism (by shoplifting, vandalising stock, or taking photographs without permission, for example) will be disciplined. Those who obey the unspoken rules (by consuming, either visually by looking and browsing, or materially by buying) are welcome to exercise their democratic choice as they wish within the limits of the space. The newsstand can therefore be understood with reference to the relationship between manipulation and empowerment that characterises consumer culture aesthetics. It invites yet patrols human practice.

## **World of (FMC) Goods**

*This is the world of fast-moving consumer goods; money changes hands here. The amounts are not impressive, a few pounds per sale. Consumers with blank or annoyed expressions queue, then pay with coins or small denomination notes. "Next customer, please," says the cashier, taking the payment without making eye contact and delivering the change with a bored, practiced air. Robotic voices summon queuing customers to the next available payment point, "Till Number Five, Please!!" I wonder how much money is changing hands, and how quickly all these small amounts add up to large profits. As well as magazines, I see piles of little chocolates wrapped in colourful foil, shelves of colour-coded bags of crisps, stacks of newspapers. Chewing gum packs, sitting flush with one another in front of the till. Ballpoint pens (when I forget mine at home I needn't worry, I can buy a couple more before I start to write my notes) are full of bathos in their excessive packaging. Greeting cards, lined up like an army of two-dimensional well-wishers. Batteries, behind the till – one must ask for them.*

*Painkillers – several types. Cheap novels, sometimes. Cans of fizzy drinks and bottles of water in the chill of the fridge. Cigarettes, replete with their oft-ignored health warnings. The kinds of objects that we accrue and consume. And then forget. The piles of commodities reiterate that this space is material, yet the plethora of items belies the thesis of commodity fetishism. There is nothing special about these items, nothing that will solve any ill beyond a headache nor transform any life beyond a momentary sweet taste in the mouth. The ways in which the items are piled and displayed undermines any sense of magical potential, perhaps claimed in their adverts. This is echoed in the unremarkable, unaesthetic display structures. The stores and supermarkets in which newsstands exist are not glamorous, high-end luxury retail spaces. They are basic, functional and often a little grubby and worn.*

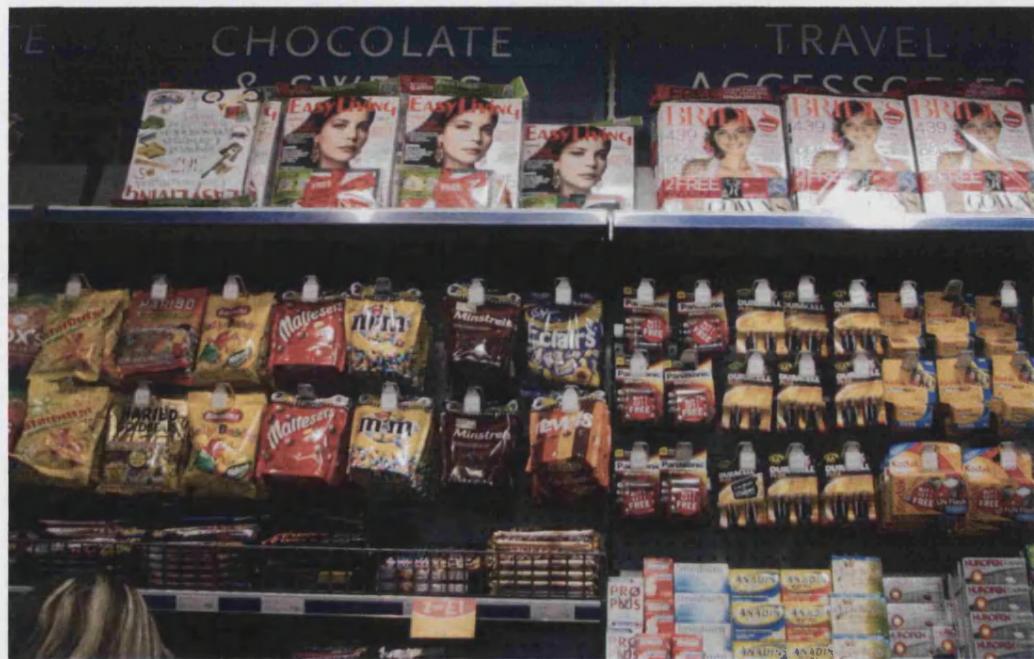


Figure 6: Sweets, chocolates, batteries and headache pills are sold alongside consumer magazines. Detail from *Photograph 7.68*.

Like all the other things that are for sale at convenience stores and supermarkets, magazines are commodities<sup>15</sup>. They are the products of mass manufacturing techniques that require the employment of human expertise, technology and industry. Like other media industries, the magazine economy is based on market logic. Magazines are products that are produced in order to be sold such that the publishers can in turn sell audiences to advertisers. Their presence in the point of sale is the

<sup>15</sup> Many magazines also seek to entice readers with the offer of free gifts. Some of the items I received along with the magazines I bought for this project include a bar of chocolate, a set of hair elastics, an eye pencil and note cards. Such commodities are included with the magazine in a clear plastic encasing and are often advertised on the front cover.

culmination of all this effort. It is an economic imperative that drives the display (one store manager showed me the layout diagram for the shelves, "Bestsellers go in the most eye-catching locations," she explained). On the newsstand, the covers of the magazines fight it out for the attention of the casual browser.

*The magazines are displayed on shelves, against walls or on freestanding aisles, their spines to the left and covers to the front. They seem like a kind of wallpaper, creating a paradoxical visual spectacle. They bring a sense of glossiness, of glamour, of beauty and celebrity into the otherwise grimy confines of the underground station, the otherwise dispiriting aisles of the supermarket. Without its full complement of magazines, the newsstand would be exposed as a drab, empty, skeletal structure. I see telltale magazine-less gaps, where unremarkable chipboard or worn steel shelving shows behind the glut of glossy covers.*



Figure 7: The contrast between the grubby shelving and the glossy magazine covers is striking. Detail from *Photograph 9.64*.

Like the packaging and branding of the other products, the cover works to differentiate each magazine from its competitors. Later, when I detached the covers from the magazines I had bought, I noticed that it was tricky to distinguish between the remaining hunks of paper. The cover is the magazine's moment of glory. When the date indicated on the cover has passed, the magazine is no longer a commodity but a relic. It loses its exchange value. The newsstand thus exists as an up to date library of now-ness, of new-ness. In the same way that the sell-by dates warn of the expiry of chocolates and chewing gum, the magazine's date admits that it will not last forever. I learned from store managers that magazines are delivered every day to some

newsstands, to others every week. Like the consumers that flow in and out of the newsstands, the magazines come and they go, those that are out of date and unsold are piled into corners or on to trolleys, awaiting the collection of the distributor<sup>16</sup>.

## World of (luxury) goods

*As well as the material commodities in the store and on the newsstand, the covers of magazines are filled with images of beautiful objects. I see cars, bathed in some kind of celestial light, airbrushed to an infinitude of perfection, placed in that oblique pose of made-for-man machine, angling out at me with the arrogance of the latest model to hit the showroom, bonnets polished and shining. I see "stuff", objets d'art and objects of technology. I see cameras on the covers of the photography magazines. I see the special trainers on the feet of the smiling runners on the running magazines. I recognise the presence of mascara and lipgloss on the faces of the models and celebrities. I note the sparkle of jewellery, and imagine the scent of the invisible products that make the hair shine and flow like that. I see the designer garments, even if only as a fragment of collar or a strap on a shoulder. I see furniture and décor items, special lamps, sofas, dining room tables and table settings.*

*I think about how the idea of a beautiful life is portrayed as both possible and necessary. The good taste that is necessary in order to have a living room like the one on the cover of House Beautiful, to make the kinds of meals on the cover of Delicious. A system of symbols comes at me from this wall of magazines; a one-way highway of thinly coded information about what beauty means and how it is constructed: smoothly, with no rough edges. Professionally. Cleanly and crisply. The good life is made of things, products, commodities: "Stuff". This world of goods is within my reach at the newsstand, only arm's length away. According to it, all I have to do is take my pick of the beautiful life and take it home with me.*

Appadurai (1986: 38) argues that "luxury" should be considered a special register of consumption, which should be defined by several factors: elite access, regulated by law or price, a sense of scarcity, the signally of complex social messages, the regulation by codes of fashion, and "a high degree of linkage of their consumption to body, person and personality". Unlike fast moving consumer goods which can be picked up and

<sup>16</sup> Out of date magazines do have a life beyond the newsstand, and can enter new spaces, such as beauty salons (Black, 2004) or doctor's waiting rooms in which they take on different sets of meanings and are consumed in different ways.

purchased with a few coins, luxury items require a greater investment of time, money and energy in order to acquire them. Be it a brand new car or a designer handbag, the consumer must be able to gather resources (monetary or informational, in terms of which item is the best for him) before making the acquisition. Luxury goods can therefore be defined by their material inaccessibility at the newsstand, and their replacement with an abundance of images.



Figure 8: Thirteen luxury cars to covet. Detail from *Photograph 4.25*.



Figure 9: Fashion hot list: Shoes, bags, dresses, coats. Detail from *Photograph 4.60*.

While the front covers of the magazines are about products implicitly as well as explicitly, the back covers of the magazines are about in-your-face hard sell – that's where the adverts live. Sometimes the wrong side of the magazine faced outwards, the cover hidden, a watch or bottle of perfume or pair of jeans on the back cover getting pride of place instead. For a moment, the magazine would lose its brand identity and its work as a vehicle of sales, its job as a catalogue for the world of goods, was revealed for all to see. Unlike the three-dimensional materiality of the world of fast moving consumer goods that defines the content of the store itself, the world of goods represented on the covers of the magazines is simulated. It is only images of these luxury items that are present, rather than the items themselves. The juxtaposition of the image world of luxury goods and the material world of cheap, throwaway consumables throws each into stark relief. The magazines seem to walk the line, claiming allegiance

to the luxury hyperreal world of celebrities, BMWs and designer brands, yet rubbing shoulders with Kit-Kats and Cokes.

### A world of choice



Figure 10: Mirrors tacked to the edge of this supermarket newsstand suggest that it extends off into infinity. Detail from *Photograph 5.30*.

The newsstand offers a world of variety, a vast array, a multitude of choice, both in the material display of the space and the mediated display of the magazines. It suggests that there exist an immense number of magazines, which could cater to any interest or whim that a customer might experience, however fleetingly. Like the shelves of any store, the newsstand must be weighed down with a surplus of products in order to give that impression of a multitude of choice that capitalism so values. If we were to walk in to any store in London and find the shelves empty, we may think that the Apocalypse had come, or at the very least that the store is closing down. The sense of plenty, profusion, overflow is central to the global north's sense of economic stability and political security<sup>17</sup>. Of the newsstands that I visited, one (an independently owned family business) was sparsely stocked. The owner, who had run his store for over 25 years, said business was slowing down. He reiterated this when I returned for a follow up visit months later.

<sup>17</sup> First world consumers gasp at news reports about the failure of a third-world economy such as that of Zimbabwe, where the empty shelves in stores are a profound symbol not only of poverty and food shortage, but also of political crisis. See for example <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7059476.stm>

*I see magazines about horses, dogs, cats, bodybuilding, boats, hair, fashion, fishkeeping, fishing, flying, women, men, décor, gardening, celebrities, aeroplanes, puzzles, computers, computer games, films, food, art, photography, stockbroking, travel... and more. I cannot but admire the myriad of options available to me. I intend to be a critical social observer, detached and objective, but know that I cannot dissociate myself completely from acts of visual consumption, I cannot help the celebration implicit in the acknowledgement of the freedom of choice displayed before me. According to what I see, I can do anything I wish, I could be anything I want. More realistically, I could at the very least become an aficionado of any activity merely by choosing one of the magazines that share its specialist information. I can browse all my lifestyle options at the newsstand and sample them vicariously through the magazines.*



Figure 11: A marketplace of ideas: Fish or army tanks? Furry or family relations? Reader's choice. Detail from *Photograph 4.32*.

*I overhear a customer ask an employee, "Do you have *Forbes* magazine?" She replies, "Not here, at our branch on the high street". Although the customer is momentarily disappointed, he can easily find the magazine that he wants elsewhere. I think of the metaphysical meta-newsstand, a vast glamorous Babel of paper and ink, offering well-packaged information and advice about everything I could imagine I would ever want to do, be, see, experience... for no matter how short a time... it is almost intoxicating. The sight of so much on offer, so much from which to choose, is indeed seductive. Who would turn down a universe of choice, the chance to be at the centre of it and to gesture benevolently towards any item or pastime and say, "I'll take it." The lavish display of lifestyle and commodity options manifest in retail spaces and magazines iterates the*

*theory that consumer culture sets us free. It confers a sense of empowerment, but it must not be misunderstood as an empirical phenomenon. Despite the fantasy of a world of choice, I remain constrained by my socio-economic circumstances – can I afford to buy all these magazines, never mind the products they push? – as well as the limits of what is made available by the retail institutions that own and shape these newsstands.*

### **The disorder of profusion**

*“Feel free to tidy it up a bit before you take your photographs,” says the supermarket manager, sending me off to his newsstand. “It’s in a bit of a mess at the moment”.*



Figure 12: This newsstand stocks so many magazines that there is not enough space for clear display of covers. Detail from *Photograph 3.18*.

The sense of unlimited options, the profusion on display, takes another shape too: a vague sense of chaos. There are too many magazines to see clearly what is what, where the boundaries between each title are drawn. From far, for a newcomer to the urban landscape, the newsstand might look like a wall of paper and ink, rising several feet from the floor. Could it crash down with devastating force at any moment? A closer look reveals its structure, which is grid-like and structurally secure. Parallel lines, horizontal (the boundaries of the shelves) and vertical (the edges of the magazines), intersect. But the grid is far from exact; it is more like a messy mosaic.

*Magazines are stacked on shelves in an overlapping manner; sometimes so much so that all I can see from the front is the spine and a few inches of the cover. Words are chopped apart, images half concealed and half revealed. How would I find the magazine that I want? How can I differentiate between this massive textual morass? The space is disorderly, messy and non-compliant. This spills over into the way that it is organised. Certain sections of the shelving are signposted with words like "Women's Weeklies" or "Men's Interest" or "Motoring" in some newsstands, in others the sections although not explicitly labelled are more or less obvious. I notice a wildlife magazine in the "Teens" section – it strikes me as appropriate for a moment, and I chuckle. I see a horse magazine in the "Hair" section: its cover model also displays a glossy mane. I pick up an art magazine that looks interesting and leaf through it for a moment. When I reach forward to put it back, I see that all the other magazines on the shelf are food titles. Where does this one belong? I look around for a few seconds, not trying all that hard, then give up, and put it back in the wrong place, again.*

The seemingly helpful signposts that show consumers where to find what kind of magazine are at times misleading or irrelevant. Instead of making the space navigable and empowering, they add to the sense of visual and material chaos: I sometimes observe consumers pacing the newsstand in a slightly disoriented manner. This is perhaps not only the result of a failure of newsstand maintenance (like gardens, they seem to need weeding; like libraries, constant reshelfing) but also of the impossibility of neat and clean categorisation of the social world. Subject matters overlap and reference one another; redundancy is rife. The sense of excess can be anxiety inducing. The space is carnivalesque in Bakhtin's sense, at once celebratory and grotesque, a rebellious spectacle, the gentility of commodity excess gone awry, subverted. The material disorder defies institutional attempts at symbolic ordering, at neat and well-behaved display. This chaos can be seen as either disquieting, in the aesthetic sense, in terms of the refusal of the material to remain ordered and navigable; or liberating in the cultural sense, in which the arbitrary cultural categories imposed by consumerism disintegrate into the wonderful chaos of everyday life.

## **Full-colour multimodality**

The newsstand is made from images (the magazines that populate and structure it). It is a visual space, defined by a "riot of colour" (Baudrillard, 1976: 166) and light reflecting off smooth surfaces, at once simulated and material. From floor to roof, from wall to

wall, the newsstand assaults the eye, its various colours and images, accentuated by artificial fluorescent lighting, compete for attention. In the photographs of the many things on the magazine covers, and the titles and catchphrases emblazoned across them, colour plays an important role. In fact, it is even the substance from which the newsstand is constructed: screaming fuchsia, blinding orange, attention-grabbing red, manic yellow, snatches of purple, shades of blue and green, and metallic, reflective tones of silver and gold. The skin tones of models and celebrities and the colours of their outfits and make up combine into a visual carnival. There is a postmodern sense of visual richness and pastiche, as though a giant child has played a game of arbitrary bricolage with multi-coloured paper, scissors, glitter and glue.



Figure 13: Magazines for girls are packaged in fluorescent pink. Detail from *Photograph 5.38*.

At the newsstand, photographs dominate, combining into a visual montage of many faces and objects, merging into, repeating and referencing one another. Images are literally doubled, tripled or quadrupled when copies of the same magazine are displayed in rows, next to and above replicas of themselves. This visual staccato is emphatic and memorable. The repetition is literal, obvious, unremarkable. But it speaks to the advertising strategy of repeating simple messages often so as to achieve saturation in the minds of the intended audience. Brands are intertextual commodities (Marshall, 2002) relying upon repetition and reference across media to capture market mind-share. In the mini-market economy of the newsstand, visual repetition echoes this sales strategy, and links back also to the ideological properties of capitalist profusion, suggesting a benevolently neverending supply of magazine-commodities: "don't worry folks, there's enough for everybody!"



Figure 14: Images echo one another across different titles, and within the tiled display of the same title. Detail from *Photograph 8.73*.



Figure 15: Plastic and glossy paper reflect the light. Detail from *Photograph 9.22*

Many of the magazines are encased in plastic bags, some translucent, some printed in bright colours. Plastic and paper are both post-modern materials that can assume a variety of forms, colours and textures. But here, they are smooth, shiny, glossy and reflective. They catch the light from many angles, reflecting it, adding a celestial shimmer to otherwise mundane interiors. The reflection is dazzling, materially and figuratively. On exiting the newsstand, into the arches of the train station, the high street or the supermarket parking lot, I have the intense sensation of stepping from a full-colour world into a monochrome one. It is not only that my eyes have to readjust from the bright lights of the store and the bright colours of the magazines, it is also the noticeable contrast of the colours of the real world: London's infamous grey winter

skies, the dark colours of the suits, denim jeans and winter coats that everyone wears, the charcoal of the tarmac and brownish hues of the concrete buildings. Where else in this city, besides the colourful displays of points of sale, the flower sellers, the fruit stalls, the fabric shops – the newsstands – can we find such high saturation colour, in such insistently abundant supply?

### A crowd of paper faces



Figure 16: Eyes everywhere. Detail from Photograph 2.33

The newsstand is peopled with a crowd of beautiful faces, photographs of models and celebrities, more of them female than male. I see rosy cheeks, roguish stubble, an abundance of thighs and cleavage, now and then a male torso. I see hair: glossy, thick and shiny and many pairs of lips, moist and parted. Eyes everywhere. Expressions run the gamut from the seductive to the serious, from the moody to the manic. Many portray a kind of serene happiness suffused with ironic self-confidence. Like the glossy paper on to which these faces are printed, most skin is smooth, flawless, sans blemish. I admire the women's cheekbones, eyebrows, and slender necks; the men's jaw-lines, six-packs and muscles. I compare the faces on the covers to the faces of the people that work in these spaces, to the faces of the people who cycle through, to my own face. We do not look like that. We have pockmarks and blemishes, dark circles under our eyes, wind blown hair, and harassed or blank expressions. We are poor, deprived of the authority of style, the bank balances and appropriate social occasions that would allow us to dress like those models that seem to be perpetually en route to a party or

the beach. We are culturally and racially diverse, of many different ages. We are normal, unremarkable. But the faces on the newsstand are famous, rich, mostly white, youthful and beautiful. Suddenly I feel as though Madonna, Cate Blanchett and Liv Tyler are looking down on me. Their gazes reign over the space like some frigid distant princesses, they cannot actually see me but I think that if they could they would consider me an inferior and unairbrushed member of the aesthetic proletariat.



Figure 17: Self-portrait with back turned to newsstand. Detail from *Photograph 5.56*.

*My own face, my own idea of my face, is lost in this forest of celebrity otherness. I catch a glimpse of myself in the surveillance mirror wedged into the corner of the ceiling. From that absurd angle, I look like a strange little monochrome hobbit in a garish multicoloured universe. The only mirrors with which I can see my self are abstracting mirrors, which distort proportion and distance and the relationships of space and size. Like that most postmodern of objects, the mirror, the magazines reflect ideal faces that will never be mine, but which invite admiration. The paper eyes look at me as I look at them, evoking the image of looking at myself in the bathroom mirror. But I am looking not into a glass but a paper mirror, my face of flesh is reflected by a paper face, not only one, but hundreds.*

*I notice one magazine, which a careless reader must have put back in a hurry. The front cover was mangled and bent out of shape as it was pushed into its Perspex slot. The twisting of the paper has distorted the face on the cover, changing the portrait from that of a serene siren into that of a mildly monstrous mutant. The glossy paper may have a certain advantage in the representation of glamorous photographs, but its material flimsiness guarantees no longevity. For an ironic moment, I feel vindicated.*

*The image of aesthetic perfection has been foiled by the material reality of its representation.*

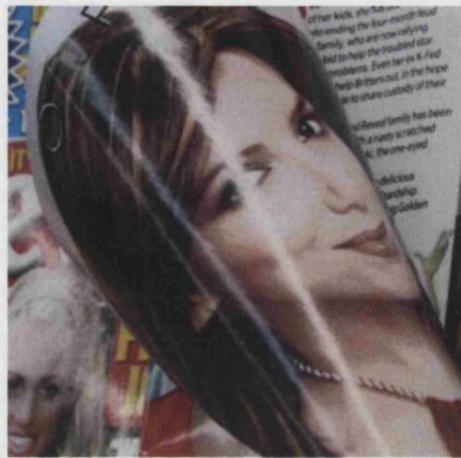


Figure 18a and b: Images of Eva Longoria fall victim to the fragility of the paper on which they are printed. These photographs were taken in separate sites. Details from *Photograph 8.43* and *Photograph 5.49*.

### A textual space

The newsstand can also be conceived of as a structure made of words, literally. Words are used as markers and categorisers, printed in large clear typeface on signs that organise the newsstand into subject groups, that attempt (at times unsuccessfully) to frame and order it:

*Computers, Motorcycling, Motoring, Sport, Hobbies, Local, Women's Weeklies, Specials, Women's Interest, Homes and Gardens, Recommended Reading, Men's Interest, Entertainment*

As well as these "organising words", the names of the magazines themselves make a significant textual impact, jumping out of the cover designs, demanding attention. These names are catchy, memorable and descriptive; the hallmarks of effective brands. They brazenly dominate the design of the magazine cover, noticeable even when they are partially obscured by a model's head. The names are brands, which seek to create a memorable and differentiated relationship with consumers, and to endow their magazines with unique identities.

*Cosmopolitan, Men's Health, RED, Easy Living, Men's Fitness, FHM, Loaded, Classic Motoring, Elle, Elle Decoration, ID, Wallpaper, Grazia, Heat, Glamour, Marie Claire, Company, OK!, Brides, Vogue, Eve, Zest, Good Taste, Diet and Fitness, Homes, House Beautiful, Star, Reveal,*

*First, Esquire, Arena, GQ, Woman's World, Maxim, Look, Mojo, Now, Runner's World, Stuff, More, and more...*

Each magazine is literally constructed from text too, both linguistic and visual texts. The words between the covers are referenced on the covers through the straplines which act as a sales pitch to potential readers. These short sentences or clauses describe, in aggrandising and over-excitatory tones, the features inside the magazine.

*I see the words "free" and "sex" often, sometimes even together ("FREE SEX", says the first part of a strapline on a top-shelf magazine<sup>18</sup>). "I'm sexier than you!" Who can argue with Jennifer Lopez? Real Sex Diaries! Sex myths exploded! SEX ON THE BEACH. Find your sexy weight. And so on. I see other words repeated across different magazine covers too: I read "comp- comp- compu- computer- computer computer"; I see "home" in dozens of different typefaces and colours. Free! Free. FREE... FREE!! FREE!! I read "HeatHeatHeat", "CosmopolitanCosmopolitanCosmo-". This staccato frenzy of repeated words takes place across the covers of different magazines stacked over and under and next to one another. If the newsstand had a voice, it would stutter and repeat itself, its vocabulary limited to a small circuit of excitable nouns, quirky catchphrases, platitudes and entreaties. The repetition of textual elements mirrors the visual staccato described earlier, the two combining into an idea that the newsstand is a manifestation of intertextuality.*



Figure 19: The space as text – literally. Detail from *Photograph 6.48*.

Exclamation points, question marks, italics and numerals summarise and accentuate information, words are exaggerated with curlicue typeface, underlined or italicised.

<sup>18</sup> Pornography magazines were not present in every newsstand that I visited. I noticed that they tended to fill the top shelves of 24-hour convenience stores, or small independently owned newsagents, and were not stocked in large supermarkets or WH Smith stores.

They appear in full colour, in any colour, echoing and adding to the intense visuality of the space, highlighting how text is no longer a black and white affair, how word and colour are fused. Consumer culture takes words and makes them into images – their design and shape and colour making them visual as well as linguistic signifiers. Newsstands are textual as well as visual environments, with both verbal and visual texts referencing, mimicking and contextualising one another. In this sense, the newsstand is an intertextual and hyperreal space, made from the stuff of simulation and textuality, endlessly self-referencing.

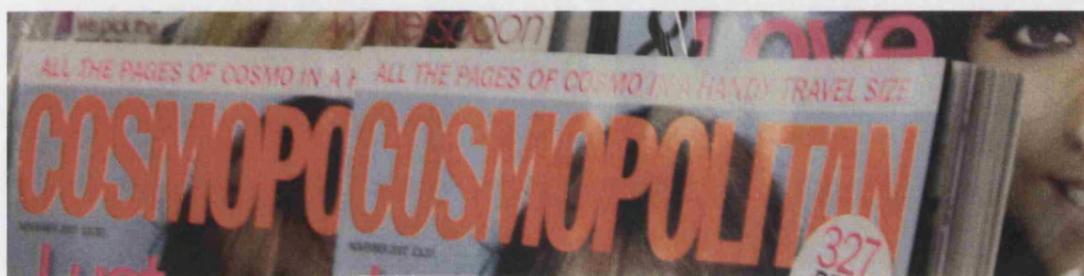


Figure 20: A fragment of the newsstand's staccato. Detail from *Photograph 6.44*.

## Conclusion

To sum up, as a physical as well as visual, textual space, the newsstand exists as a site of both pure mediation and social practice. The meaning of the newsstand's spatial structures navigates within and between two levels of the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter: materiality/simulation and manipulation/empowerment.

The newsstand is a material space that is surveyed and controlled, that participates in the market for fast-moving consumer goods, that is structured from materials such as wood, Perspex, plastic and steel shelving, and which stocks a variety of products ranging from sweets and chocolates to magazines. It is also a visual space that is saturated with a plethora of visual and verbal texts that mediate a huge variety of lifestyle choices, images of celebrities and luxury products: it is the public as a space of appearance made material. There exists a general tension between the material and simulated aspects of the newsstand. This tension was described in terms of a series of minor paradoxes that I noticed and experienced in the spaces: the difference between the glamorous, glossy paper and the mundane, grubby shelves; the difference between my own imperfect, unremarkable face and the airbrushed faces of the celebrities and models on the covers; the difference between the grimy confines of the tube station and the spotlessly clean, luxurious homes and interiors portrayed on the magazines; the

difference between the material presence of cheap, trite, mass manufactured goods and the images of expensive, luxury lifestyle goods; the difference between the items not owned and those that could be. The materiality of the newsstand was accentuated through my own embodied presence there, and my acts of looking at, photographing and touching the magazines. The hyperreal aspects of the newsstand were accentuated by the immense interreferentiality of the texts present, the interplay of light and colour, as well as the hyper-aestheticised style of the magazines papering the walls. So, as both a material and simulated space, the newsstand is at once social and semiotic.

These social and semiotic structural characteristics likewise evoke a series of tensions between the ideas of manipulation and empowerment central to theories of consumption. Most clearly, the reality of the newsstand as a controlled space subject to a variety of forms of surveillance contrasts with the open-door practices of retail spaces, which invite shoppers to enter, browse, and buy. The suggestion of a world of choice is made both materially, in terms of the vast numbers of magazines on display and their various subject matters, and semiotically in terms of the world of goods and the variety of lifestyle options mediated through the magazines themselves. This resonates strongly with the consumerist ethic of individualised freedom of choice and lifestyle identity as self-defined through capable consumption. But the darker side to this plethora of choice is a bewildering proliferation that can suggest anxiety, material chaos and visual meltdown. So, it is a fine line between manipulation and empowerment that is evoked in newsstand spaces. Choice is offered, but it is constrained by the spatial disciplines of the store management, the ways in which the space is arranged, and self-arranges as it is interacted with, and the set of discourses and choices offered by the consumerist system at large.

## ***Spatial Practices***

From the spatial structures thus described, it may seem that the newsstand is a sparsely populated space. It is not, of course. This section describes the human practices observed and enacted in the space. During my participant observations of newsstand spaces, I observed the ways in which fellow consumers engaged with both the newsstand and the magazines upon them. I also reflexively observed the way that I engaged with newsstands and magazines, and compared what I observed of myself with what I observed of others. I do not wish to suggest that I am able to divine what

other consumers thought and experienced simply by observing them. I cannot say what others saw, only the ways in which they looked. In the context of the visual and sensory nature of the newsstand, it made sense to take note of the consumers who passed through – their ways of walking, standing, the positioning of the body in relation to the space, facial expressions, gestures and overheard snippets of conversation.

### Just passing through

*I am standing in a newsagent on the High Street, a convenience store in the tube station, a supermarket in the suburbs. To sit would feel unnatural, wrong: it is the newsstand, after all. An employee offers me a seat. I take it, but soon abandon it; I am too conspicuous and awkward sitting there in front of the chocolates in a swivel chair that is usually hidden behind the till counter. Standing, like the other customers, feels better suited to the space. Like them, I am passing through. I wear my coat and my bag remains on my shoulder. This is a space through which people flow; they come here to look at and/or buy something, and they leave again. It is not a place in which to stay still for too long, unless one is paid to do so. While customers come and go, the employees stay put, behind their counters or moving up and down the aisles keeping their stock in order. There is a clear sense of movement: in and out, to and from, towards and away. In the newsstands that are part of tube and train stations, this sense of flow is more urgent, hurried; it matches the commuter rush. In the more suburban newsstands, the flow matches the pace of a pushed shopping trolley.*



Figure 21: People rush past the door of a newsstand, which faces the entrance/exit of a tube station. Detail from *Photograph 7.43*.

*Am I the only person who has made a special trip to the newsstand? For everyone else, this seems a temporary and convenient space, close to their home, workplace, or a venue at which they are meeting friends, or attending an event, perhaps. Everyone seems to be on their way somewhere else; the fruit and vegetable aisle, the train platform, the check-out queue, the store next door, the office, home. Everyone is on the move. The newsstand allows those with some minutes to spare before their next engagement, or those seeking some diversion from more onerous tasks, to stop by and kill time. Visiting the newsstand seems an arbitrary timefiller in everyday lives, an unlikely element in reports to loved ones about how days were. When I decide to move on too, I feel slightly relieved, reabsorbed into the flow of the city, no longer going against it by stopping for too long in a place that is typically experienced as fleeting.*

The sense in which consumers merely pass through (or by) highlights the temporal aspects of the newsstand. Although it is not a temporary space, those who visit experience it in temporary ways. The newsstand is thus an element of "a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and the ephemeral" (Augé, 1995: 78).

## Visual consumption

As a space with the visual characteristics described in the previous section, it will be no surprise to the reader to learn that the predominant activity that takes place in newsstands is visually defined. Crass though it may sound, the newsstand is of no interest to the blind, it appeals foremost to the sense of vision and is irretrievably biased towards the sighted. The non-seeing paper eyes featured on the covers of the magazines are reflected in the seeing eyes of the consumers who stop to return the gaze, assessing the newsstand in its entirety, pacing it whilst scanning its shelves, or stopping to diligently look for something specific. Looking is integral to all acts of consumption that take place at the newsstand; such visual consumption could be said to be as important as the material act of buying (handing over money, taking the product).



Figure 22: A bias towards the sighted - "immaculate perception" (Jenks 1995). Detail from *Photograph 8.59*.

Most people that I observed passing through newsstands and stopping to look were on their own. Others engaged the newsstand in pairs or trios, at times discussing some piece of content, although in general I observed that people browsed silently. I observed three broad patterns in the ways in which people looked at newsstands and magazines. I summarise these generic figures as loose, descriptive "characters". They are not intended to reduce or homogenise the diversity of human identity, experience and interpretation, which I recognise to be unique to each individual, but merely to paint a picture of some of the recurring practices of looking that I observed in the newsstand<sup>19</sup>. These "characters" are fluid and interchangeable, I noticed many diverse people fitting each of the characterisations below, reading many kinds of magazines, and there was no other factor or pattern, but for the actions and behaviours exhibited, that could link individuals that I observed into any kind of social group. The following consumer figures are aggregated abstractions of many people that I observed.

1). The *drifters*: Ott (2004), working with Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text*, remarks that reading texts in a fragmentary, non-committal, casual manner can be central to pleasurable reading/looking, and can even be interpreted as a form of resistance against the idea of an omnipotent author that controls the structure of a text. Drifters read/look at the newsstand in this way: they do not seem to have a goal in mind. Reminiscent of the practices of the Parisian *flâneur*, they browse casually, sometimes wandering around rather aimlessly, looking at this and that, stopping for a while with one magazine that catches their eye, then moving on to another. They pace up and down the newsstand, scanning the shelves, looking at several things from a distance, at times zooming in to pick up a magazine, only to put it back a few moments later. They might buy something, but usually don't. They have a leisurely air and although not in a rush, don't stay all that long. Drifters engage the newsstand as a pass-the-time space,

<sup>19</sup> I recognise that this may be perceived as an "anonymization" of newsstand practices. However, because my research question requires an observation of practices of looking within socio-semiotic spaces rather than an exploration of consumers' particular identities and experiences, I believe this risk must be taken. Crucially, also, I have been very careful not to suggest that observed behaviours could be reductively categorised in terms of race, gender, age or culture (for example, "teenage girls 'free-read'", or "businessmen 'speed-shop'").

and do not have a focussed interest on the magazine-commodities on display. They treat the latter in a cursory way, with mild interest at times, often seeming undecided about which magazine to buy, if any at all, ignoring them completely at other times. They flick through the magazines as they flit through the spaces. Their practices seemed to evoke an air of entertainment and leisure; their browsing the newsstand was a pleasurable time-filler, suggesting that such forms of consumption can indeed be related back to the theorisation of it as emancipatory, enjoyable and fun.

2). The *speed-shoppers*: They seem to have a clear idea about what they're looking for. They spend no more than a few minutes browsing at the newsstand; locate the desired magazine/s in moments, and plop it in the shopping trolley or head straight to the checkout. They'll ask an employee rather than waste time searching (once or twice, during my longer stays at newsstands, when employees were busy, I stepped in to help a customer find a magazine). Speed-shoppers are at the newsstand because they want to buy something. They consume the products in the most straightforward sense: through the act of purchase. Although they don't look for long whilst on site, their imminent acts of prolonged looking are implicit within the purchase. They often buy more than one magazine. If they don't find what they are looking for, they'll leave immediately.

3). The *free-readers*: They do not seem to have an intention to buy anything, and have come to the newsstand purely to read magazines. They take plenty of time to look through a magazine, reading articles word for word, turning pages occasionally. They stand slightly hunched over, facing the newsstand with their backs to the rest of the space (although, once I saw someone sitting on the floor, back resting against the newsstand), the magazine rested in one hand while the other flicks the pages. They are completely absorbed, often with headphones in their ears, cutting off the outside world entirely. They may furtively glance up from time to time as though to ensure that they are not attracting too much attention from the store authorities. They will leave empty-handed. In some newsstands, free-readers stand almost the whole length of the space (once I counted over 20 individuals), each alone in the crowd, each free-reading a magazine, lost within the text. Free-reading is a common, unremarkable practice – British TV actress Sharon Horgan, in a newspaper interview about her media consumption habits, says, “I don't really buy magazines – I tend to stand in the supermarket and read whatever happens to be in front of me”<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> 24 March 2008, The Guardian, see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/mar/24/>

*Attached to the newsstand at a small convenience store in my neighbourhood is a sign, laser printed on to a standard piece of A4 office paper. It reads: "Please do not handle the magazines without intending to buy". I have just popped in to get some milk and the Sunday paper, and only stopped for a moment to look at the newsstand on the way to the dairy fridge. I looked at them with only my eyes; I'm not guilty of handling the magazines with dishonourable intention. As I pay for my goods and leave, I think about all the other times that I have brazenly read a magazine at a newsstand, getting through several articles, then left it behind without purchasing it. I've seen numerous other free-readers doing this too, most typically at larger and busier newsstands, hardly ever in the smaller, independently owned off-license and convenience stores. For small shop owners, it is an irritation that threatens their livelihood. One shopkeeper, who has worked with her husband in their store for over twenty years, tells me with great dismay how she has seen customers in supermarkets stand for prolonged periods reading magazines without buying them; even ripping pages out and stuffing them in their pockets.*

Away from the watchful gaze of the shopkeeper alert for liberties taken on her stock assets, safe in the broad aisles of supermarkets and the pseudo-public spaces of institutional WH Smith stores, customers are free to look and touch as much as they wish<sup>21</sup>. This does not mean that the practice of free-reading is condoned in these bigger spaces, but that staff turn a blind eye to it. Perhaps it is too widespread to control. In one small WH Smith store, where I was conducting a formal observation with the permission of the store manager, I witnessed an interesting interaction. A construction worker, wearing the unmistakable uniform of workboots, a fluorescent vest and a white hard hat, ambled into the newsstand and picked up a copy of *Loaded*. He leafed through it for a few moments and chuckled loudly. Then, he took it to the door of the store, staying only just within its boundaries, and called to his friend, outside, "Oy, come and have a look at this!" His friend admonished him loudly: "You can't look at the magazine without buying it!" He came over to have a quick look anyway, before taking the moral high ground and leaving again. The first man, still chuckling, put the magazine back on the newsstand and left the store to rejoin the other. The store manager, apparently busy checking some kind of list, ignored them completely.

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<sup>21</sup> Barring those magazines encased in plastic bags, along with free gifts – which perhaps are intended to make up for the fact that the magazines cannot be browsed at the newsstand.

Free-readers consume magazines informationally and aesthetically – without buying them. They do not break the rules of consumption by stealing the magazines, but bend them by reading them without paying for the privilege. In this sense, the newsstand is central to their experiences of magazines, and their preferred ways of interacting with this media genre. They seem to enjoy it, and gain pleasure and value from the act of consuming the magazines in this way; perhaps that half an hour at the newsstand is an oasis of fun and entertainment in an otherwise stressful day. The act of free-reading negotiates the relationship between theories of manipulation and empowerment. It is partially subversive but still respects the limits of the retail institution. It takes what the consumer system offers but refuses to hand over money in return. It buys into consumerism to a degree by showing interest in the magazines, and reading them, but not enough to pay for it. Free-readers want to *use* the media object rather than own it. This highlights the importance of aesthetic consumption that does not consummate the consumer experience through the material act of purchase. The consumers act of free-reading represents the failure of the newsstand to sell, but it does not represent the failure of consumerism. Consumption must be understood as more than simply the act of handing over money in exchange for a (material or immaterial) commodity. It also takes place on a sensory, hegemonic level. By stopping to pick up magazines, and leaf through them at the newsstands, consumers engage the sign economy and enact aesthetic consumption – even if they do not buy.

## **Tactile experiences**

*I run my fingers over the glossy paper of the covers; they are smooth and cool. I pick up a magazine to look at it away from the others, feeling its weight in my hands and the flimsiness of the pages between my fingers.*

As the descriptions of consumer practice suggest, the newsstand does not only invite looking, it lets us touch too. It is therefore a tactile as well as a visual space. Like other commodities, the magazines can be picked up and tested out, weighed in the hand, flipped through, replaced. Consumed with the fingers. The newsstand is a tactile space, material in its three-dimensionality. As free-reading demonstrates, it is also a place in which human subjects engage materially with consumer objects. Consumers must reach up to the top shelves to reach the magazines located there and must crouch down to the bottom shelves to locate the magazines located there. They must walk up to the newsstand; once there, they must crane their necks to look up and across it. The

newsstand is a space that requires embodied engagement. When I chose my set of magazines from the stands, I carried them in a slippery pile in my arms, juggling my notebooks, camera and bag.



Figure 23: The weight of paper. Detail from *Photograph 4.2*.

*I see employees wheeling around stock-trolleys full of old and new magazines; they are too heavy to carry en masse. Although the covers are delicate and fragile, and tear easily, when stacked or strapped together paper becomes a formidably solid presence. When I leave the newsstand, carrying a bag of six to nine magazines that I've purchased for the purposes of this research project, I experience first hand how heavy they actually are when piled together. My shoulders ache when I get home.*

## Conclusion

These spatial practices, as described, link back to the dialectical tensions that exist within theories of consumption, as well as to the co-constitutive relationships that exist between subjects and objects in consumer society.

The impossibility of clearly defining whether consumers are manipulated or empowered by their acts of consumption at the newsstand is illustrated through the ambiguities of interpreting 'free-reading' (is it evidence of subversive savvy, an ironic abuse of consumerist resources, or a wholesale, dreamy buy-in to everything consumerism promises?), and the tensions between the ways in which people participate in and

exploit retail spaces. For 'drifters', the newsstand seems at worst an irrelevant place, and at best a site for the flippant, non-committal pursuance of trite reading pleasure (perhaps in a manner similar to Hermes' (1995) magazine readers). For 'speed-shoppers', the newsstand seems a functional place that serves a certain consumerist needs, while for 'free-readers', the newsstand seems a space in which the strict rules of exchange that govern retail society can be bent and commodities can be openly consumed without being paid for. Nevertheless, all consumers are only able to act within a set of choices defined by the spaces, and the larger hegemonic culture shaping those spaces.

By entering the spaces, and looking, consumers are arguably submitting to a certain consumerist structure; it is only those who walk by altogether who are free from its impositions. The newsstand is not a site of pure manipulation that turns consumers into dupes, choice is exercised there too: what to look at (and not), what to buy (and not). Although I am suspicious of consumerism's claim of empowerment, it cannot be denied that the spaces encourage independent exercise of choice – to a degree. Consumers are permitted to take what they wish from the newsstand including extended periods of time reading the content for free. But they are not free, for example, to take a magazine without paying, walk in off the street and put their own magazines there<sup>22</sup>, or damage the display. In the same way in which citizens are not allowed to amend, remove or deface outdoor advertising (this is considered vandalism of private property), consumers cannot put their own messages on newsstands.<sup>23</sup>

And the newsstand emerges as a site within with interactions take place between conscious human subjects and inanimate material objects. As Miller (1987) has argued, the relationship between subjects and objects is not merely one of production or consumption, but is a mutually constitutive cultural relationship whereby humans make material their culture through an object world, and objects become socially meaningful through subjective interaction. In this framing, then, one of the ways in which

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<sup>22</sup> From my own experiences in editing and publishing an independent creative magazine, I can affirm that one of the most difficult things about the business is getting your magazine on the shelves. Once a distributor has been convinced to take on the product (for a 50% cut of sale price), he must negotiate with commercially minded retailers to assign shelf space. This can take months, and the prospects are generally quite bleak for magazines that do not have a clearly defined track record, "market" or commercial topic – retailers will object that if a magazine does not clearly fit into a shelving "section" it cannot be placed or sold.

<sup>23</sup> Some culture jammers may nevertheless try. An independent art-media project called "Are You Generic?" – see [www.areyougeneric.org/confessions](http://www.areyougeneric.org/confessions) has created a DIY culture jam campaign aimed at mainstream commercial magazines. Users can download and print a sticker that can be stuck to the cover of a magazine on display. It reads: "We loaded this issue with more advertising than content. The content we did publish was edited, censored and manipulated to please our advertisers or as lame filler between the product pushing ads. We got paid quite handsomely to produce this issue and are glad you will pay to read what we already got paid to print".

magazines as material objects take on social meaning is through human practices of reading and consumption at the newsstand. And the inverse holds too: one of the ways in which social subjects engage with the object world is through magazines (both their material reality and the simulated world of goods that they mediate). The human activities that take place in the newsstand are shaped and defined by the spatial structures: consumers must adapt their postures to the display by standing, crouching, or reaching up to access the magazines that they want. The acts of touching reemphasize the material nature of the newsstand. The material weight of the piles of paper contrasts with their glossy feel, the light and airy images that they carry, the flimsiness of their paper, the cool smoothness under the fingers. The literal heaviness of the structure of newsstands reiterates the material and solid nature of magazines and newsstands. The newsstand can be considered both a mediated environment and a structure of commodities within which consumption takes place. It is an example of the subject-object dialectic in action.

### ***The newsstand as a socio-semiotic space***

To sum up both the spatial structures and practices: The newsstand can be described as a space that although materially present, solid and seemingly permanent in its structures, hosts the temporary presence of customers who flow through, staying only for short periods of time. These customers engage in various acts of visual, tactile and material consumption. Offering a multitude of choice and evoking the freedom to choose (the flipside of which is a slightly phantasmagoric sense of chaos), the newsstand hosts monetary exchange as disposable commodities are bought and sold. In this way it functions within the world of fast-moving consumer goods; yet it also mediates a higher order world of luxury commodities through the images on the covers of the magazines. It is an intensely visual space, existing in full colour and featuring a plethora of photographic images, central to which is the symbolism of the face. It is a tactile space that allows touching, prioritising smooth and glossy surfaces which are highlighted by artificial lighting. As well as being textured, it is a textual space that employs words, phrases and sentences as ordering and attention-seeking strategies. The newsstand can therefore be defined as a socio-semiotic space.

Described in these terms, the newsstand is part of Featherstone's (1991) aestheticised landscape of everyday life. As is evident in the thick description, the newsstand is primarily a visual space. It is a clear material example of the saturation of signs and

images in everyday life. It displays not only commodities but also *images*. And these images are highly stylised and aestheticised, clustered together in otherwise ordinary, unaestheticised spaces. The luxurious, glossy world represented in the covers of the magazines is at odds with the dull, everyday world of the convenience store, or the sterile and functional world of the supermarket. A three-dimensional, tactile space is constructed from the images that it contains. By existing in these everyday spaces, the artistic design and aesthetic representations of magazine covers contribute in some way to the effacement of the boundary between art, notions of beauty and everyday life. Finally, the role of newsstands in mass consumption, situated as they are in the (fast-moving consumer goods) retail landscape and mediating a luxury commodity culture, is indicative of the role that they play in mediating the discourse of designer lifestyle choices.

The newsstand is *social* in the sense that it is a quasi-public retail place: visible, open and theoretically accessible to all, yet subject to surveillance and normative cultures of propriety. It is public in the sense it which, as a part of the retail geography, it is a part of everyday life. As a site upon which the mundane practices of consumer culture are played out (commodities displayed and visually and materially consumed), the newsstand is an arena in which the tensions between manipulation and empowerment take specific shape. It is a manifestation of the claim that consumer culture liberates by offering a world of choice; its elaborate visual displays are part of a larger retail landscape of shelves filled with every product imaginable. It is also an example of the ways that consumers ignore, abuse or appropriate such choices through subversive acts such as free-reading. In this sense, although offering itself as a fantastical world of choice, the newsstand suffers a rather mundane fate. It is socio-economic in the sense in which it exists to be consumed both by the eye and the wallet. It is a place in which visual communication and material culture collide in practices of consumption. It is a space in which money changes hands, and in which magazine brands (and profits) are built. The newsstand is an example of the marketplace of ideas, in both Jhally's (2006: 46) literal and figurative senses. In terms of the former, the newsstand is a material space where ideas become informational commodities and are bought and sold, tested out and consumed. In terms of the latter, it operates under the laws of market competitiveness as magazine commodities battle it out for market share and sales.

The newsstand is *semiotic* in the sense in which it is a visual and textual space: its riot of words, colours and images reference and merge into one another as they jostle in juxtaposition to catch the eye of the consumer. Its visualness is a result of an

aggregation of the many separate texts (magazine covers) on display. But the newsstand can be seen as a text in its own right; one created by the spatial configuration of the smaller texts that inhabit it. Reality, according to Baudrillard (1983), has been displaced by hyperreality, where signs, and nothing else, reference one another ad infinitum, like mirrors reflecting one another into infinity. Baudrillard has been criticised for describing the “real” world in purely semiotic terms. Critics suggest that it is deeply solipsistic and problematic to consider social life in such detached and self-referencing terms. The real world is material, embodied, political, economic and social, it is constructed through real human experiences and circumstance, it is not merely an infinite number of symbols co-creating and reflecting one another in the making of a semiotic universe. To regard real human experience and the society that it constructs as a play of mirrors ignores the materiality (and consequent inequality) of the human condition. But what to do when faced with a real, material space that can be touched and seen, like the newsstand, which by any human account exists as a normal and rather mundane feature of everyday life, and yet is constructed almost completely from signs? Yes, the newsstand is a material space, constructed as much from wood and steel and Perspex as by human activity and interpretive experience, but it is also a space of pure image – more so than other retail spaces, which incorporate other promises of sensory satisfaction (the wearing of the clothes, the scent of the perfumes, the utility of the objects). The newsstand is predicated almost entirely on visual consumption, its images are its central constitution. Can the newsstand be considered a materially hyperreal space, infinitely self-referencing, built out of images and colours and words and textures, inviting nothing but the consumption of these elements? Without its semiotics, the newsstand would not exist. Is this a case of the real world disappearing into a sign, or an example of how the real world was always semiotic to begin with?

As a text in its own right, the newsstand can be interpreted in several ways. It can be read as a symbolic shrine to consumerism, a glorification of commodities, celebrities and designer leisure lifestyles. It can be understood as an urtext of branding practice, a manifestation of the at once dialogic and competitive nature of consumer capitalism. It can be treated as a comprehensive directory of all the commodities available for consumers to consume aesthetically (at the newsstand) or materially (later), a “plurality of possible options” (Giddens 1991: 81) from which consumers can select items to add to the catalogue of their desires, their fantasized lifestyles, their ideas about who they are and want to be, what they do and want to do. The newsstand can be read as an aggregated text, an exercise in consumer culture intertextuality, where the threads of

similarity, repetition and reflection common to contemporary mediation knit into a complex and messy textual web, and the flow of intertextual references between the covers on display works to create a sense of visual profusion which harmonises with the material profusion of the commodities on display.

The social and semiotic elements of the newsstand are inseparable from one another, and define one another. It is the semiotic elements that construct the space as social, and the social elements that construct symbolic meanings. Spatial structures can be read as well as experienced phenomenologically. And spatial practices of looking allow images to be experienced sensually and socially as well as interpreted and analysed.

### **The space between sight and site**

Throughout the thick description and the discussion of the socio-semiotic dialectic of the newsstand, I have referenced the productive tensions between manipulation and empowerment, simulation and materiality, subject and object that were raised in Chapter 2. To extend this further, I propose that these three levels of dialectic can be operationalised in the context of the newsstand by a pair of homonyms: "sight" and "site". That these words sound the same on the tongue evokes their profound link in the empirical context of the newsstand. The former refers to the practices of the eye, while the latter refers to the structures of the space.

"Sight" evokes the fertile problematic of the various ways of looking that have been employed and observed in the process of participating in newsstand spaces. My own methods of participant observation and photography were centred on the sense of sight, the ability to see, the desire to look – which was informed by the intensely visual nature of the research object. The description and analyses that I have offered have been mediated by my own sight, the use of which was instrumental in engaging the visual spaces, as well as in observing how others engage them. Observing consumers' practices of looking put my own practices into perspective, and shed light on the ways in which the newsstand itself was structured so as to invite looking. These interrelated webs of looking are further complicated by the presence of surveillance technologies; a constant dull knowledge of being watched humming below awareness of other types of looking. And the blind gaze of the newsstand, the crowd of paper eyes that "look" back at the flesh and blood eyes surveying them, makes consumers aware of their visibility. In all these ways, the idea of sight is fundamental to newsstand spaces.

Sight is a subject-centred phenomenon, but it cannot operate without an *object* of vision. If there is nothing to see or look at, sight is emptied of sensory significance. In this formulation, the newsstand as well as individual magazines can be considered objects of vision. The interplay between seeing subject and seen object in the empirical situations sketched out in this chapter is therefore one that also hinges on sight. The idea of sight also speaks of visibility – the public as a space of appearance. An object must be visible in order to be looked at and seen. In this sense, it must be made public in some way, shared with a wider audience, in order to be seen, placed on a “brilliantly-lit stage” (Canovan, 1994: 180). This raises the importance of the materiality of vision, without some kind of worldly enactment, either in the form of a display or the printing (or digitisation, in other contexts) of photographs, the idea of vision degenerates into a more mystical, subjective experience of dreaming or hallucination. More matter-of-factly, the idea of the noun “sight” (as in, “a sight to behold”) relates directly to the importance of display in retail cultures. Stores construct elaborate displays of their stock and use specific lighting to illuminate the items and spaces, in order to entice customers to look and/or buy. The same process can be said to be true for newsstands, which construct themselves as sights for seeing, using spatial arrangement, lighting and bright colours to attract attention. Magazines are taken out of their packaging and put on show, and consumers come to look. This leads into and constitutes the idea of “site”.

“Site” refers to the material spatiality of a place, its three dimensional design and arrangement, and its accessibility. Newsstands are sites of material mediation; they are real-world places in which media messages are agglomerated (as opposed to locally dispersed yet digitally merged virtual spaces, such as chat rooms and social networking websites). They are forced to exist in empirical space and time, and are built from spatial and physical resources. Their spatial relationship to human consumers is defined by size and access – the consumers must go to it, once there, they must face it and move their bodies in order to access its parts. As a noun, “site” refers to position or location, but as a verb, it means to locate or position something. In this latter sense, the newsstand is a place that displays and situates commodities. It is therefore an objectivated space that takes material form through the objects that make it up. The idea of site also brings into play the notion of the ethnographic field, and the tension between familiar and foreign experiences of it. It also references the broader retail geographies that have characterised studies of various spaces of consumption. As both an archetypal, symbolic space that manifests the values of consumerism, and a set of

physical locations recognisable through their shared generic features, the newsstand is materially and symbolically situated within consumer culture.

In spoken language, “sight” and “site” are indistinguishable; it is only in written representation that their respective denotations can be clarified by virtue of their different spelling. Their homophonic status reveals important conceptual links, in the context of this project. Sight is not static and two-dimensional, it is embodied and moves through space actively. There is a dialectic between the ways in which looking is enacted and physical spatiality. And sites communicate their meaning and purpose through visual display; they are consummated through visual consumption that takes place through embodied presence. This highlights the important relationships between ethnographic modes of observation and the field, and the observing subject and observed objects.

As a space that can be conceptualised as dynamically defined by both site and sight, the empirical description of the newsstand provided in this chapter can be understood to illuminate the theoretical discussion of the public as a space of appearance. The description of the structures of the newsstand revealed that commodities are collectively displayed, arranged and placed so as to be admired, desired and visually consumed, and are brightly illuminated by fluorescent bulbs. In this way, they offer an empirical example of Arendt’s community of things illuminated upon a stage of appearance; the newsstand is a socio-semiotic manifestation of a consumerist public realm. The description of the practices of the newsstand highlighted how the actions of being seen and looking far overwhelmed interaction and discussion; which showed empirically how sight is prioritised in a public world in which appearance trumps deliberation. Thus, as a material, worldly space in which appearance and display are prioritised, the structures of site and the practices of sight illuminate further dimensions of what publicity means in consumer culture.

Furthermore, the relationships between “sight” and “site” can be linked back to the various tensions that serve as a theoretical framework for this research. A “sight” can be either material or simulated, a “site” can cross from material non-place to symbolic space (the way that the various research sites were fashioned into an archetypal meta-newsstand by my narrative). The sense of sight can be interpreted as an empowering tool that allows human subjectivity to navigate the world of options on offer, the sight of newsstands and magazines can be interpreted as a limited and limiting view on the world due to their strict aesthetic forms. Sight operates as an interface between subject

and object, while “sites” form the playing field in which these interactions take place. All of these suggestive threads of analysis have emerged from the description of the newsstand; they will be picked up as the analysis progresses throughout this thesis.

## Conclusion

My description and analysis of the newsstand has sought to set the stage for a more detailed examination of the texts that populate it: magazine covers. These texts warrant close analysis precisely because of the way in which they fill and construct newsstand spaces. The chapters that follow undertake detailed analyses of the elements of magazine cover texts in order to better understand the space/text of the newsstand itself. This chapter has described how magazine cover texts exist in and construct public newsstand spaces, and the ways in which consumers interact with them. What remains to be explored, however, is the operations of the texts themselves – what do they *do* as they are displayed on the newsstand shelves? By this I mean, how do they operate to create meaning and invite certain responses on the part of the viewer through their presence in public space? This can only be answered through a detailed analysis of the texts themselves, which takes place in the four chapters that follow. However, the newsstand itself is present throughout those chapters as a foundation, or shadow. Whenever a magazine cover is analysed, it is the magazine cover *at the newsstand* that is being analysed. By describing the spatial structures that define and shape newsstands across London, as well as the typical practices that are enacted within those spaces, I have endeavoured to paint a detailed picture of the social spaces from which the “research texts” were plucked, so as to ensure that their context, understood to be ideologically shaped and intertextually defined, plays a central part in their analysis. The many observations that have emerged from this chapter will be picked up and reiterated in the chapters that follow, by taking the level of analysis closer to the detailed elements of the texts themselves.

Chapter 5 continues the material level of analysis initiated in this chapter by focussing on the stuff of the magazine cover. It explores the “mechanics of gloss”, which includes a discussion of the technologies of full colour printing, and an analysis of the roles of colour and light in magazine cover texts. These converge into a discussion of the image commodity of the celebrity as a personification of material gloss, which is central to the genre of magazine covers. The following three chapters (6, 7 and 8) seek to re-describe magazine covers as contextualised by the newsstand in terms of their representational

properties. Chapter 6 analyses commodities and the discourse of choice attached thereto, Chapter 7 addresses the representation of bodies and the pornographic imagination that they invite, and Chapter 7 explores the representation of faces and the ethos of individualistic self-identity that they encourage and prioritise.

## 5. The Mechanics and Personification of Gloss

### ***Introduction***

Following on the last chapter's descriptions of the materiality of the newsstand, this chapter turns its attention to the materialities of the magazine cover, and representational power thereby invoked. In Chapter 1, material glossiness was highlighted as a characteristic of magazines. In socio-semiotic terms, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001: 122) argued that this materiality contains a "message of gloss". The aim of this chapter is to explore the various elements that create this message, that is, what the glossy magazine cover is made from, in order to then be able to consider how those materials are related to symbolic modes of meaning making. This chapter therefore addresses the question of form and content by examining both in the context of glossiness as an organising principle. By virtue of its focus on materiality and meaning, this chapter represents an analysis of the non-linguistic or non-visual modes of magazine cover texts, and focuses on ideas of colour, space, texture and lighting and then operationalises these elements into a discussion of the ways in which these are related to the semiotic codes of celebrity.

My concern here is to address the operations of the mechanics of gloss, which arguably operates on both material and symbolic levels. This chapter builds upon the observations regarding the materiality of newsstands spaces and takes as an explicit, linked focus, the materiality of magazine cover texts. The aim is to explore in depth the dialectic between materiality and simulation so as to set up the discussions of the discursive operations of magazine covers and newsstands in the three chapters that will follow. The chapter is arranged in three parts: the first section addresses *texture*, the second *light*, and the third *celebrity* as both object and communicative mode.

### ***Shiny paper, smooth skin: Glossiness as texture***

This section discusses the textures that define the magazine cover, and the levels of symbolic meaning attached thereto. It addresses the material smoothness of the glossy paper that characterises the media genre, then extends this into an examination of the textures portrayed in magazine cover imagery – most notably that of human skin. In

classical aesthetic theory, the texture of smoothness has a very specific set of connotations. In his 1756 exposition on “the sublime and the beautiful”, Edmund Burke (quoted by Eco, 2004: 292) discusses smoothness as

a quality so essential to beauty, that I do not now recollect anything beautiful that is not smooth. In trees and flowers, smooth leaves are beautiful; smooth slopes of earth in gardens; smooth streams in the landscape; smooth coats of birds and beasts in animal beauties; in fine women, smooth skins; and in several sorts of ornamental furniture, smooth and polished surfaces. A very considerable part of the effect of beauty is owing to this quality; indeed the most considerable. For, take any beautiful object, and give it a broken and rugged surface; and however well-formed it may be in other respects; it pleases no longer.

Although in a variety of areas of cultural criticism, anti-aesthetics that do not exclusively privilege smoothness as beauty have evolved in contemporary times, in consumer culture it can be said that Burke’s formulation retains much significance and representative power. In his discussion of the form and shape of the latest Citroen car, Barthes (1973: 88) suggests that smoothness evokes flawlessness in its suggestions of continuity and seamlessness<sup>24</sup>. He argues that material smoothness is an attribute of perfection, “because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling: Christ’s robe was seamless, just as the airships of science-fiction are made of unbroken metal”. Jean Baudrillard (1970: 1331), too, in a discussion of the “latent terrorism” of *Elle* magazine, argues that its discourse suggests that readers should remake their bodies into “smoother, more perfect, more functional” objects. Consumerist smoothness thus mirrors ideological suggestions of perfection, beauty, and even divinity. In both the materiality and the imagery of magazine covers, the smoothness of the surfaces of commodities echoes the smoothness of perfect, healthy skin, unbroken by blemishes, and again echoed by the smooth, glossy surface of the paper on which the images are printed. Each of these elements of consumerism’s aesthetic project of smoothness is discussed in turn.

<sup>24</sup> Artist Patricia Piccinini’s sculptures, “Car Nuggets”, are a wonderful example of the way in which the aesthetic of the car’s bodywork can be manipulated into a non-functional, purely aesthetic object that abstracts the texture of smoothness. The seamless, smooth angles of the sculptures distil the “essence” of the car into a nugget of liquid surfaces. See an essay about the artworks here: <http://www.patriciopiccinini.net/essay.php?id=16> and images of the artworks here: <http://www.redbubble.com/people/skyhorse/art/2685321-3-car-nuggets-by-patricia-piccinini-2006>.

## Glossy paper

It is in glossy paper that the doctrine of smoothness finds microscopic materiality.

According to literature outlining best practices in printing technology, there are two types of paper used in mass printing: coated (glossy) and uncoated (matte). The cheapest, most obviously uncoated type of paper is newsprint; the best quality, and most expensive coated papers are those used for fine art printing (Eves, 1986). Most magazines are printed on relatively cheap lightweight versions of coated paper and their covers are typically printed on slightly heavier, more expensive, glossier paper stock (Wilson, 1998: 97). All papers are derived from wood or plant fibre. Paper is a porous substance comprised of air and wood fibres bonded together by chemical fillers (Eves, 1986: 78). The surface of plain, uncoated paper is uneven, formed of microscopic valleys and hills. In order to achieve flatter, smoother surfaces, various processes are introduced, including "calendaring", which is a mechanical method that smoothens the rough surface, and "coating", which involves bonding the porous paper with chemical resins. There exist various finishes ranging from lightly to heavily-coated papers; some methods coat the base material (the wood fibres), while others coat the finished paper (Eves, 1986: 78).

The resulting product is termed glossy or coated paper; its gloss measured according to its ability to reflect rays of light (Glassman, 1985: 160). According to paper experts, "Coating improves ink holdout and consequently the visual impact of the image. It ... produces a sharper, brighter image, as well as paper opacity" (Eves, 1986: 78). In other words, "the coated surface is smooth and will make closer, more intimate contact with the printing plate" (Glassman, 1985: 240). This results in "a closer register of colour" (ibid.) and the resulting printed image "will show more snap, brilliance, and holdout of ink" than if printed on an uncoated surface (Glassman, 1985: 24). This can be easily observed by contrasting the paper whiteness and ink colour of newspaper print and magazine print. The aim of using coated papers is to ensure that the product of full colour printing exhibits the brightest and best colour reproduction, ink gloss and overall smoothness; that is, "quality" or "true" image reproduction (Wilson, 1998: 79). Glossy paper, therefore, is chosen for technical reasons to achieve a high visual impact in terms of colour and image reproduction. As well as this, it is used in order to "help establish a mood for the reader" (Glassman, 1985: 160); glossy paper creates a sense of luxury and quality that is absent from uncoated papers. Another noticeable consequence of paper gloss is that, due to its enhanced smoothness, it allows less dust to settle, thus keeping the paper cleaner. As well as adding a glossy veneer to the

paper surface, coating improves paper opacity and “whiteness”. A perfectly “white” paper reflects red, green and blue light rays equally (Wilson, 1998: 79), which in turn improves its ability to reflect colour back through the ink film back to the eye of the viewer (Wilson 1998: 79). The overall result of paper whiteness, when combined with transparent inks and bright outside light, is a sharper, brighter image (Eves, 1986: 78).

It is clear from this brief summary of the technological role of glossy paper in the printing process that its materiality contributes directly to the visual impact, and therefore the set of meanings, of the final printed product. Paper is produced through an industrial and technological process that, like most modernist projects, seeks a dynamic of constant improvement; a striving towards the attainment of perfection in mass production. This is evident in the discourse of printing and paper experts, who frame their production goals in terms of constant betterment (of image quality, impact, and colour, for example). In the business of making glossy paper, paper-makers frame their aim for perfection in terms of *smoothness* (of texture and surface), and *whiteness* (in terms of light reflectivity), among other qualities. This is especially highlighted through the descriptions of the many things that can go wrong in the process of paper-making and coating. Some of the technical problems that are associated with printing on coated papers include mottling, streakening, blackening (Eves, 1988: 80). Some of the problems associated with the technical process of coating paper include, surface scratching or mottling (blotchiness), the appearance of “slime holes”, surface bruising or blackening, smearing or smudging, the appearance of “hickies” (dark spots with lighter halos), and paper creasing or wrinkling (Eves, 1988: 96-102). It can be concluded that paper is a fragile material, which can be damaged in many ways. A sense of vulnerability emerges from the technical discourse, and the problem-solving approach implies a prioritisation of the smooth operation of mass production. The material implications of the technological aspects of creating glossy paper is the fundamental exclusion of such defects in the public domain; the mass-produced paper products that are distributed for consumption *must* be free of slime holes, hickies, blisters, wrinkles, etc., and represent success in the technological quest for smoothness, gloss and colour intensity. The metaphorical implications of these technological measurements of paper quality and defects have great significance in terms of understanding the mechanics of gloss in consumer magazine covers (and consumer culture aesthetics more broadly).

## Smooth skin

The obsession of paper-makers and printers with achieving a certain level of perfection in the results of their craft was highlighted in the summary of the various defects that paper can bear: mottles, wrinkles, blotches and the like. This speaks to a broader project of mass manufacture in late modernity, which inspired Benjamin's (1936) disillusionment with the age of mechanical reproduction: the achievement of a flawless conformity in the commodities produced. Manufacturers want each item to be exactly the same as the others and to match a certain standard of flawlessness. This is recognisable in magazines themselves: as commodities they represent the zenith of colour printing practice, and each issue of each title stacked on the newsstand shelves is an exact and perfect imitation of every other. The project of perfection at work in the production background of the texts is equally foregrounded in the representations that adorn those texts. It is well known that post-production touch-ups are a standard practice in the magazine industry, which aims to eliminate and erase any flaws in the image, whether as a result of existing imperfection or an error that has crept into the reproduction process – Eckstein (1991) terms these practices of eliminating flaws or otherwise altering images in Photoshop as "electronic magic"<sup>25</sup>.

The language used by paper-makers to catalogue their anxieties about the potential problems associated with their technology has particular resonances with imagery of human skin. Paper must be white and smooth to best effect the colour imagery required, and as is clearly observable from the corpus of data collected in this project, whiteness and smoothness are two fundamental characteristics of the majority of skin represented. As will be discussed in the next subsection, the connotations of whiteness go beyond the clear racial biases still present in consumer media. Smoothness is related to shininess and luminosity. Smooth skin catches the light and subtly reflects it, suggesting luminosity and radiance that in turn signifies excellent health as well as some kind of divine favour. In this way, smooth skin signals youthfulness. In the same way that wrinkles are not welcome on paper, they are not welcome on the skin represented on the magazine cover: a direct relationship between the material and symbolic modes of meaning-making is apparent. It is well established in scholarship that "the fashion system has also traditionally excluded the 'older woman', preferring to focus on the youthful" (Grove-White, 2001: 9). That smoothness connotes youth and femininity is especially evident when observing the differences in the skin of men and

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the practice of touching up or manipulating photographs has a history as long as that of photography itself, and is not unique to the digital age. See Wheeler (2002: 15-24).

women represented on the magazine covers. The skin of female subjects is depicted as smooth and flawless<sup>26</sup> (e.g. among many, 43, 64, 68, 69) while the skin of male models is rougher, featuring beard stubble or frown-lines (e.g., 45, 48, 54, 57). This portrayal of texture reiterates and entrenches existing gender-based stereotypes, which cast women as soft, smooth, delicate and feminine and men as rough, hardy and masculine. Furthermore, it suggests that the project of smoothness, flawlessness and perfection is a gendered project. The presence and texture of fabric operates in a similar way. Soft, flowing, shiny fabrics are worn by female models, while male models wear denim, or pared-down, minimal suits and shirts. Bearing in mind the fact that representations of women and feminised textures far outnumber the representation of men and masculinised textures, it is easy to conclude that consumption remains a largely feminised discourse<sup>27</sup>, less in the sense that it is only women who practice it, but more that commodities are associated with the feminine. Even the smooth, polished bodywork of sports cars (see 4, 65) echo the smooth polish of female skin. And smoothness is intricately related to light as it functions to reflect it.

## Shininess

Bille and Sorensen (2007: 266) argue that shininess is one of the crucial dimensions of the role of light in social life (along with colour and shadow). Shininess refers to polish, reflectivity, veneer, varnish or gloss – the textures described with relation to paper and skin in the preceding section. Schroeder (2002: 152) points out that shininess is an indication of human handling and mass manufacture, as in the texture of processed leather or rubber garments. A surface that holds such properties reflects light and appears luminous itself, and photography enhances this shine through the use of flash and studio lighting (Schroeder, 2002: 155). In some cultures, luminosity is considered a marker of an object holding “sacred and spiritual dimensions” (Bille and Sorensen, 2007 269). Light can be connected with celestialism, not only because the fundamental human experience of light relates to the sun, located above us in the heavens, but also due to complex cultural and psychosocial relationships to fire (and warmth), illumination

<sup>26</sup> The American magazine *Smooth* illustrates this neatly. It is a lifestyle magazine aimed at African-American men, and which features pin-up photo shoots of women of colour. *Smooth* prides itself catering to the tastes of men of colour, whom they argue, are not “turned on” by “skinny blondes”. Despite *Smooth*’s undermining of the dominant consumerist aesthetic of white culture, their cover models are personifications of the magazine’s title: cellulite, wrinkles and other blemishes are equally abhorred. See [www.nytimes.com/2004/08/31/arts/new-magazines-for-black-men-proudly-redefine-the-pinup.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/31/arts/new-magazines-for-black-men-proudly-redefine-the-pinup.html) and [www.smoothmag.com](http://www.smoothmag.com).

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, McRobbie (2009) argues that consumerism has in fact selectively appropriated feminist values in such a way as to undermine feminism whilst creating the impression that women have achieved equality through neo-liberalist socio-economic systems.

and enlightenment and precious metals and jewels, which are perceived as valuable due to their natural internalisation of radiance and light. Luminosity of object is a material condition, related to texture and polish, which creates an effect of light becoming “contained in the matter” (Bille and Sorensen, 2007: 270). There is a strong presence of gold colours and metallic textures in the corpus of texts. As well as this, magazine covers depict a plethora of shiny objects and surfaces. Light is reflected off many materials portrayed in magazine cover photographs: the smooth shiny fabrics worn by the models (e.g., 8, 9, 10, 13, 16, 17, 46, 55, 60, 70), the reflective sparkle of jewellery (e.g., 1, 16, 39, 63), the smooth, polished, manufactured surfaces of gadgets and household objects (e.g., 63, 14, 22, 32, 34, 38, 49), and the shiny bodywork of cars ((e.g., 4, 65). The visual effect is that the objects somehow *contain* the light – and therefore also what it symbolises.

### ***Light, colour and the construction of meanings***

In Chapter 2, Arendt's (1958) notion of the public as a realm of appearance was put forward as central to the theorisation of consumer culture aesthetics. Central to her arguments of publicity as visibility was a metaphor of brilliance; the public is that which “shines forth” in a dazzling display that all can see. According to Bille and Sorensen (2007: 265) light evokes agency and has a material dimension. In architecture and spatial design, light “is regarded as a building material, like concrete, steel, glass” (Bille and Sorensen, 2007: 272) and is used in order to create ambience and mood. They describe “an anthropology of luminosity”, which aims to examine how “light is used socially to illuminate places, people and things, and hence affect the experiences and materiality of these, in culturally specific ways”. As noted in Chapter 4, lighting is important to the design of newsstands, which ensures that fluorescent light is placed directly over the magazine displays in order to maximize the visual spectacle created by the texts. This practice is true of most retail displays. In the same way that a particular kind of artificial lighting is used in the printing industry in order to maximise colour reproduction and analysis, lighting is strategically used in order to display the print-commodities *in their best light*. In this sense, Bille and Sorensen's argument that light is used to reveal “people, places and things in culturally specific ways” is clearly supported by the evidence gathered in this project. As they continued, “light is shed for – and not just on – the material environment” (Bille and Sorensen, 2007: 267). The way in which light is shed on commodities in the retail environment is aimed at communicating a sense of value and desirability and creating a brightly lit stage for

display. This can be contrasted to the intimate and private mood created by the use of candlelight in the home (Bille and Sorensen, 2007: 276), which is noticeable on the imagery on the cover of home magazines (in the corpus, *House Beautiful* (34), *Homes and Antiques* (32), and *Ideal Home* (36) all feature living rooms with a blazing fire and/or lit candles on the mantelpiece or coffee table<sup>28</sup>. There is thus a dialectic between the ways in which light is used in public spaces such as newsstands and the way it is used in the representation of private, domestic spaces, such as on the cover of interiors magazines. That the latter are displayed and situated on the former provides an interesting empirical example of the tension between public and private luminosity and of the paradox of the public display of fantasised private realms. The brighter the light, the more intense the suggestion of publicity and the brilliance of the stage; the lower and more subtle the light, the stronger the suggestion of the intimacies of the private realm.

Furthermore, lighting plays an important role in the composition of photographs used on magazine covers. All models and objects are well lit before being photographed in order to portray the subjects in the best possible way. Light is reflected in the twinkle of eyes, off moist and glossy lips, on the smooth polish of shoulders and cheeks. An excellent example of the way in which light is used in portrait photography is the cover of *i-D* magazine (35), which features a closely cropped portrait of supermodel Naomi Campbell. She wears no make up and no designer clothing is visible, she is adorned only by the light that falls from the upper left of the frame, casting a dramatic play of illumination and shadow across her face, neck and hands (which are draped around her throat and the back of her head). The light shows the smooth texture of her hair and skin, catching on her nose and lips, reflected in her open eye. The use of lighting in this photograph creates a dramatic and slightly paradoxical mood, at once celestial and stormy. Thus lighting can also be used to create mood and embellish the representation of individuals, as well as spaces.

The material importance of the brightness of lighting in both retail spaces and magazine cover photography is evident – how does this translate into the realm of discourse and meaning? In an interview discussing the Panopticon, Foucault points out that one of its central architectural aims was the creation of a fully *illuminated* space, which created a sense of transparency, allowing for the constant observation of all occupants. He

<sup>28</sup> This is also probably a seasonal trend: all the magazines in the corpus were collected between September 2007 and January 2008, so it is to be expected that many of them would have a winter or Christmas theme represented in images. Despite this, the observation that homes are portrayed as cosy and inviting through the use of low lighting and candlelight, remains pertinent to the discussion of the material effects of lighting on social space.

connects this with the Enlightenment project, and the "Rousseauist dream" of a "transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness" (Foucault, 1980: 152). Bentham's design, according to Foucault, materialises the Enlightenment rhetoric and imagery, and literally enlightens a space such that it is transparent, making all visible to all. The illumination of both newsstand spaces and the images represented on magazine covers can be interpreted in Enlightenment terms too; as an extension of the 18<sup>th</sup> century wish to dispel all shadows in the public domain, and to lay all bare and visible, to illuminate for all to see, to create the public as a space of appearance and to insert aestheticised fantasies of the private domain into the full glare of public illumination. There is no doubt that the media in general operate in this way, but with the clear reliance on lighting and lightness in all of its forms, it can be argued that the magazine cover/newsstand matrix is an especially apt example of this post-enlightenment project. Thus, the use of lighting in spaces and texts is one element of a mechanics of gloss that serves to mediate a very particular notion of publicity as a space of appearance.

There is another fundamental sense in which light is the material from which magazine covers are constructed: light creates colour.

### **The materiality of colour**

The discussion in Chapter 1 argued that consumer magazines are defined by their full colour printing, and from the discussion in Chapter 4 that the newsstand is a full-colour space which derives much of its visual appeal from the riot of colour that exists in an otherwise dull and monochrome urban landscape. Colour plays an important role in the materialities of both the newsstand space and the magazine cover text, indeed, it is largely the presence of magazine covers that make the newsstand a full-colour space. It is therefore crucial to explore not only where the colour of the magazine cover comes from but also what it means as a fundamental element of the mechanics of gloss. This sub-section seeks to preface an analysis of the ideational and interpersonal signification that the modality of colour achieves in the magazine cover text (individually and aggregated at the newsstand) by introducing it from a material perspective. In other words, by describing the processes and technologies that allow colour to be saturated on glossy paper before describing the symbolic power that such colours can have, the dialectic between materiality and simulation is being invoked in the specific instance of the analytics of colour. By describing the ways in colour is made materially manifest on

the cover of the magazine through a summary of industry literature, a contribution is being made to a broader understanding of the magazine as commodity and artefact, as well as the technological processes underlying the representation that is addressed in a later sub-section.

The printing methods used in magazine publishing aim to reproduce the depth, saturation and brilliance of “real life” full-colour images, although the result is arguably more hyperreal than real. It is crucial to understand at the outset that “colour, in and of itself, does not exist. An object’s colour is determined by which wavelengths of light are absorbed and which filter back to the eyes” (Eckstein 1991: 10). In other words, “all colour is light” (Eckstein, 1991: 11). Light occurs in both visible and invisible spectra; the former consists of three wavelengths: red (R), green (G), and blue (B). These are the primary or additive colours, which combine in different ways to produce various colours. RGB light waves are used to create colour in video and digital imaging (Eckstein, 1991: 11). In colour reproduction for print, however, “subtractive” colour inks – cyan (C), magenta (M) and yellow (Y) – are used to create a negative of the RGB light spectrum. “Subtractive colours are created when two wavelengths of light combine in the absence of the third. Printers create colour separations, using a series of filters, to subtract light from one of the primary colours (Eckstein, 1991: 12). In other words, cyan = minus-red; magenta = minus-green; and yellow = minus-blue (ibid.). CMY inks act as filters, which subtract colour from the paper (which, recall, already functions to reflect RGB light rays) by absorbing some portions of colour and reflecting the others back to the human eye (ibid.).

In other words, the most important “material” in the creation of colour reproduction is light. “Light is what brings forth colour, and different types and modes of light create different experiences of colour” (Bille and Sorensen, 2005: 271). All colours appear different in different lighting conditions. For this reason, in the colour reproduction industry, everyone looks at colour objects under the same standardised conditions of artificial lighting in order to minimise difference of perception (Eckstein, 1991: 18) – which provides a clue as to why newsstands are so brightly lit by fluorescent bulbs, and the role that lighting plays in creating that sense of the newsstand as a full-colour space. Nevertheless, colour printing experts emphasize the fact that colour is a subjective and rather slippery phenomenon. Colours are perceived not by the eye but the brain; colour perception is therefore completely subjective and no two people see colour in exactly the same way (Eckstein, 1991: 16). Nevertheless, the technology of colour reproduction in print strives to achieve a highly saturated, rich representation of

colour imagery and to professionalise and standardise colours in print. If light is understood as a material then it can be considered the materiality of colour, the thing that makes it. And colour itself is central to contemporary mediation, specifically in magazines, which favour high intensity coloration and very bright, eye-catching palettes which contribute to a sense of hyperreal consumerism and the aestheticisation of the public spaces of everyday life. Colours can also be considered materials that organise and cohere texts, and which act as signifiers, which is where the discussion turns next.

## Colour and textual cohesion

As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002: 344) point out in their seminal article outlining a grammar of colour, the meaning of colour can seem both “obvious, natural nearly” and “idiosyncratic, unpredictable and anarchic”. Colour is common to consumerist mediation; indeed, Baudrillard (1970: 166) points out how the shop window is intentionally arranged as a “calculated riot of colour” to attract and maintain the attention of the passerby. In attempting to map out the ways in which colour can *mean*, it is important to acknowledge that colour itself does not express or create meaning (this would be akin to some kind of colouristic determinism) but that it is used by human actors in different social settings in order to send certain messages (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2002: 350). The use and meaning of colour is therefore influenced by socio-cultural as well as historical factors. As is common knowledge, white connotes purity in western cultures, but mourning in some south Asian cultures; red can connote danger or warning in the former, and celebration and vibrancy in the latter; to the Dutch, orange is a symbol of patriotism, to Tibetan monks, a sign of piety. In magazine cover design, colour selection is considered an art as well as a business; green, for example, is considered the colour that sells a cover the least effectively (Owen, 1992).

As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002: 352) state:

...colour is a characteristic mode for the age of multimodality. It can combine freely with many other modes, in architecture, typography, product design, document design, etc., but not exist on its own. It can survive only in a multimodal environment.

Magazine covers are multimodal and colourful texts, with colours most often represented in “high sensory modality”, that is, where the “image uses highly saturated colours naturalistically” (Bell and Milic, 2002: 212). The majority of magazine cover

photographs appear in photo-realistic full colour, while typography also utilises colour, with the superimposition of words and other graphic elements such as boxes, bars, frames, circles, arrows and stars typically applied in a wide variety of hues. There are no clear rules or patterns about which colours are used for which types of titles. Certain titles in the corpus appear to favour certain shades for their layout, for example, *Look* (41, 42) uses a bright turquoise and *Glamour* (20, 21) various shades of bright pink. This can be interpreted as attempt at using colour to entrench the magazine's brand identity, and create a kind of intertextual cohesion across various editions of the same title by using colour.

Furthermore, individual magazine cover texts employs colour so as to be internally consistent with the overall design and layout of the image, either matching or contrasting colours with dominant hues in the photographs, and highlighting key messages with coloured shapes. For example, *Ebony* (12) uses red to create unity between the various elements of the magazine cover and link the subject of the photo (Alicia Keyes) with the magazine brand: her red dress and lipstick link directly with the colour of the typeface and the magazine logo. *Harper's Bazaar* (27) matches the typeface of its title with the lips and nails of its cover model in order to achieve similar aims. *House Beautiful* (34) uses gold lettering to link to the decorations on the Christmas tree featured on its cover. And so on. Such use of colour is consistent with Kress and Van Leeuwen's observation that colour coordination is used to promote "textual cohesion" (2002: 350). This is an important operation: in magazine cover texts colour serves to link the various elements of the arrangement to one another and to create a sense of harmony in the text as a whole. Thus, as both a material dimension of textuality and spatiality, colour plays a role in multimodality and is used in a dynamic and ever-shifting fashion to structure and internally link texts. Both of these levels of functioning coalesce in the strong symbolic power of colour, and its role in producing meaning.

## Colour as signifier

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001: 29) argue that colour is a semiotic mode that expresses discursive meaning. Colours are used as signifiers in the construction of the magazine texts and thus operate in the construction of multimodal meaning. In order to categorize the signifieds that can be attached to colours in magazine texts, it is helpful to reach

back to Hallidayan functional linguistics. Two metafunctions of language can be identified: the ideational and the interpersonal.

Ideational meaning is the representation of experience: our experience of the world that lies about us, and also inside us, the world of our imagination. ...

Interpersonal meaning is meaning as a form of action: the speaker or writer doing something to the listener or the reader by means of language (Halliday, 1985: 53).

Koller's (2008) applies this framework to a discursive analysis of colour in her research into the associations and codings of pink as used in various printed materials. She shows that pink is a gendered colour, commonly used to signify and appeal to femininity: "pink is used ideationally to feminize texts and their referents, and interpersonally to attract women's attention" (Koller, 2008: 413) and to code female sexuality (Koller, 2008: 414). As an ideational signifier, pink is employed to discursively represent femininity in multiple ways, while as an interpersonal signifier, it is employed to suggest a relationship of identification between the persons the text represents and those it speaks to. Koller (2008: 419) argues that pink symbolizes an empowered sexuality, a stereotyped femininity, as well as fun and confidence. It is no surprise, therefore, that pink dominate magazines aimed at women. In the next sub-sections, examples from the corpus will be provided of colour operationalised at both the ideational and interpersonal levels. In terms of the former, shades of gold/metallics are employed to signify wealth and luxury, while red/pink are employed to signify sexuality and vibrancy. In terms of the latter, white is employed to engage the reader in relationships of exchange with the subjects and values represented in the text. The aim here is to not to provide an exhaustive cataloguing of all the potential meanings that these colours produce, but to illustrate how magazine covers are one of many type of text that adds to a sense of life lived in full colour, which is central to the consumerist project and fundamental to experiences of public retail spaces in urban landscapes. It is also important to note that the use of full colour is directly linked to discursive suggestions of leisure and entertainment, as discussed in Chapter 1.

#### *Ideational colour*

Gold is present on magazine covers in various ways: in the various shades of blonde and gold hair sported by many of the models and picked up again in metallic shades selected for typefaces and echoed in clothing, objects or jewellery. The appearances of

such elements in the corpus of texts is summarised in Table 2. All of these aspects of goldness are most apparent on the cover of *Essence* (8), where Kim Porter sports sleek blonde hair, gold eye makeup, an elaborate gold bracelet, ring and necklace, wears a gold blouse and leans into a bronze upholstered couch. The title of the magazine is inked in metallic gold. This example illustrates how the employment of this colour range operates – here to visually saturate a sense of luxury, decadence, indulgence and richness through the clear references to precious metals and jewels. This colour range functions ideationally in terms of its exploitation of the fantasy world of wealth.

Colour	Element	Magazine Cover No.
Gold	Blonde/yellow hair	3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 37, 38, 41, 42, 46, 49, 50, 51, 53, 56, 60, 62, 63, 64, 67
	Metallic typeface	8, 12, 16, 17, 34, 55
	Metallic clothing or jewellery	7, 8, 11, 16, 18, 20, 23, 24, 34, 40, 42, 43, 47, 63, 64, 67, 68, 69
Red/Pink	Painted lips	2, 3, 5, 8, 12, 18, 21, 25, 26, 27, 31, 37, 39, 56, 64, 67, 68, 70
	Typeface	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 36, 37, 38, 40, 44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 50, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 60, 61, 63, 64, 66, 68, 69

Table 2: Examples of ideational colour use in corpus of texts

Gold has been considered precious by human beings of many cultures and backgrounds since antiquity. Considered precious commercially by the colonial west, gold is a mineral resource that has built and shaped empires and political economies (consider South Africa (see Meredith, 2007) and Central America (see Quilter and Hoopes, 2003), both built on economies of gold extraction and export. In the west, gold is symbolically central to wealth and power, and is used by monarchies to display both. Douglas and Isherwood (1979: 85), discuss how gilded products represents wealth and rank – as in the residences of the British Queen, for example, where even the towel-rails are gold-plated. In some ancient central-American cultures, gold was prized not for its economic value but for its spiritual significance. Gold and other shiny matter were considered by ancient Amerindians the “concretizations of light and light-laden natural phenomena ... [and] charged with cosmological power” (Saunders, 2003: 16). Wealth and power (be it political or supernatural) are just two of the complex, deeply historical and trans-cultural qualities associated with the colour of gold. Goods that are marked in such a way as to signify quality and luxury can employ metallic sheens or gold or silver hues in printing. The photographed objects on magazine covers work to exploit and cement this long-established symbolism of value and luxury, which is central to the imaginings of consumerism and its aesthetic hierarchy. The prevalence of metallic

shades on magazine covers can be linked back to the discussion of glossy textures and light, and the role of reflective surfaces in signifying luminosity and even divinity.

Reds and pinks can also said to operate in a strongly ideational manner. Red signifies a potent sense of glamour and sexuality. These colours are common on magazine covers in the image of painted lips – a commonly recognised trope for the sexualised woman. Red or pink lips occur in many photographs (see Table 2 for a summary of which texts exhibit this). Often these red or pink lips are mirrored or coordinated with a similar colour chosen for the typeface – for example, Keira Knightly's lips are echoed in the colours chosen for *Vogue*'s straplines (68), Alicia Keyes' entire red ensemble radiates out from her red lips on the cover of *Ebony* (12), the immaculately painted red lips of the *Harper's Bazaar* (27) model are reflected in the deep red of the title (see Table 2 for more examples). The subtle yet persistent twinning of typeface and pink/red lips suggests a subtle textual linking of the mouth as the seat of the voice and the verbal presence and force of the exclamation and words used on the magazine cover. Furthermore, redness connotes sexuality mingled with danger and high alert; its arousing, attention-grabbing properties are exploited in magazine covers from the use of red lips to red lettering in order to attract the attention of the viewer. This could even be extrapolated on to the symbol of the red car of the cover of *Autocar* (4), which could be interpreted as a sexualized commodity symbolizing power, speed and glamour. The ideational function of the use of red is intended to signify sexual pleasure and power, which is a symbolic space also central to consumerism and consumption.

#### *Interpersonal colour*

White is commonly used on the magazine cover in several ways: as a background, for text, in clothing worn by models, of surfaces of commodities, and in the skin colour of the majority of people featured. A minority of cover models are famous black celebrities – 50Cent, Kanye West, Naomi Campbell, Alicia Keyes and Kim Porter – the latter two notably on magazines explicitly aimed at black women, *Ebony* (12) and *Essence* (16). Otherwise, skin belongs to white celebrities or anonymous models. This illustrates the persistent bias in media representation in general (Covert and Dixon, 2008: 237), which has been reinterpreted in contemporary post-feminist mediation as “nostalgia for whiteness” (McRobbie, 2009: 42). This manifests in the glamorous, 1940s-style aesthetic such as that pictured on *Vogue* (68) and *Harper's Bazaar* (27). That magazines overrepresent white subjects reiterates a broader trend in culture production

in which “whiteness” is considered a default position, unremarkable and naturalised as a preferable aesthetic, and which excludes any kind of blackness that does not seek to mimic and accommodate it (see Dyer, 1997; Spencer, 2006; McRobbie, 2009: 70). Furthermore, in the area of lifestyle and consumer mediation in particular, lightness of skin is often idealised as ideal and beautiful, even for other ethnic groups (for example, in Japan, culturally specific discourses of beauty include a preference for “white skin” – see Ashikari, 2005).

An excellent example of the dominance of whiteness in magazine covers is the cover of *Vanity Fair* (67) featuring Nicole Kidman, an example of the iconic white female celebrity. The image portrays her against a bleached white background. She wears a white sailor’s cap, a white shirt tied at the waist and pulled open to reveal her torso and white brassiere. Her skin is milky and smooth. The whiteness of her clothing, skin and pale hair, combined with the white background, creates an ephemeral sense of icy delicacy. Other examples of texts in which whiteness dominates is the cover of *Glamour* (21), where Christina Aguilera’s Marilyn Monroe-esque bleached white hair and pale skin are set off against a snow-white jumper, and *Elle Decoration* (14), where a kitchen scene dominated by shiny white surfaces is portrayed. Bodily whiteness is also emphasised in the whiteness of the whites of eyes and teeth; these unconnected to racial representation, but indicative of idealised representations of human perfection that neatly excise bloodshot eyes or stained teeth.

In western cultures, whiteness connotes purity, heavenliness, innocence and cleanliness, best encapsulated by the imagery of the white wedding dress (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2002: 343). Wedding dresses are represented on three texts in the corpus (see 49, 50, 69), where the colour functions in this traditional way. The pairing of white clothing and imagery with women therefore harks back to conservative notions of women as sexually pure and innocent (a message ironically subverted by Kidman’s provocative stance in the *Vanity Fair* cover). The sense of cleanliness is strongly present in the crisp, fresh whiteness of the various items of clothing worn by cover models – such as Beckham’s white t-shirt on *Arena*, and Aguilera’s jumper on *Glamour* – as well as the spotless surfaces of the *Elle Decoration* floors. Let us for a moment recall the description of the newsstand space, which was unremarkable, and often a little grimy and worn. The material message of whiteness in the imagery on the magazine cover suggests a fundamental triumph over the type of dirtiness that can be found in public, communal, urban spaces such as newsstands. As Roland Barthes argues in his essay on the mythology of soap powder advertisements in the 1950s, the

cleaning powers of the detergents are communicated through a sense of purging and chasing away dirt, "a diminutive enemy, stunted and black, which takes to its heels from the fine immaculate linen at the sole threat of judgement of Omo" (Barthes, 1973: 36). This harks back to one of the functions of glossy paper being to repel dust. The whiteness and cleanliness suggested by the images calls into play, as Barthes puts it, "vanity, a social concern with appearances" and are loaded with "value-bearing statements" about materials and substance (Barthes, 1973: 37). Cleanliness and purity is linked with grooming, beautification and the presentation of a public face and appearance. Where white is used in magazine covers, it can be understood to be calling into operation a complex mix of messages related to purity, good grooming, beauty rituals and cleanliness, which are ultimately based on comparative interpersonal relationships, and thus operate as an invitation for the viewer to consider themselves in relations to the subjects of the images. The interplay between the sanitised private spaces pictured in magazines and the uncontrollably grubby spaces of newsstands is mirrored in the suggestion of the difference between the spotlessly hygienic images of celebrities and the possibly grubby hands that page through the magazine at the newsstand.

## Conclusion

This section has discussed light as a fundamental element in the mechanics of gloss, both in its operations in illumination and reflectivity, and in terms of the mediation of light in colour. It has addressed both the material operations of light in colour printing, and the roles of colour in both ideational and interpersonal signification, and has shown how both must be taken into account in order to analyse the functions of colour in consumerist mediation. The previous section discussed the role of smoothness and shininess in signifying particular senses of beauty, perfection and desirability. The mechanics of gloss can thus be said to be the complex and interrelated socio-semiotic functioning of texture and light. The terms that have emerged in the discussion thus far – whiteness, smoothness, luminosity, radiance and shininess – cannot be underestimated in our ongoing analysis of the mechanics of gloss and the role that it plays in aestheticising consumerist ideology. The next section discusses how these discursive meanings made material in glossiness are personified in the object and mode of the celebrity.

## ***Personifications of gloss: Celebrity as ideational image-object and interpersonal signifier***

Understanding the mechanics of gloss thus, as the social semiotic interplay of texture and light in service of a meta-project of consumerist messaging requires us to locate an appropriate empirical area of enquiry upon which to test how those mechanics play out. Although there are arguably many areas in consumerist mediation that could be identified as operating on principles of glossiness, the most apparent theme that arises from the corpus of texts is that of the celebrity. Celebrities are people who are “well-known for being well-known” and who become present in the public eye through presence in the media (Giles, 2000: 5). Their images function as intertextual signs “informed by the circulation of significant information about the celebrity in newspapers, magazines, interview programs, fanzines, rumours, and so on” (Marshall, 1997: 58). The presence of celebrities on magazine covers is thus an important characterisation of the media genre that plays out beyond the text, in public space too. Magazine covers and newsstands are merely one part of a broader media mosaic saturated by images of celebrity, which form a significant part of mediated popular culture in western societies. The thick description of the newsstand in Chapter 4 highlighted a sensation of being surrounded by a crowd of paper faces, the majority of which belonged to celebrities. The placement of the magazines, often on high shelves, created a further sense that these celebrities were more special and desirable than ordinary consumers (as illustrated by the photograph in Figure 16, which showed me in front of a portion of a magazine cover featuring text that read “I’m sexier than you”). The glossiness that characterises the ways in which images of celebrity are mediated on magazine covers compels a closer analysis of how the symbolic meanings of celebrity, which have been explored in detail by celebrity studies scholars (Marshall, 1997; Giles, 2000; Rojek, 2001) take specific shape in the material locus of the magazine cover at the newsstand. This section will discuss the images of celebrities as they appear on magazine covers, and will argue that the dominant celebrity image is acutely representative of the mechanics of gloss, to the extent that it can be said to personify it.

In Chapter 2, the concept of the public as a space of appearance was put forward. One of the crucial elements of Arendt’s discussion of the public realm was the notion of admiration as “something to be used and consumed” (Arendt, 1958: 56). The magazine cover celebrity portrait offers a telling example of the ways in which an economy of fame and admiration plays out under the spotlight of the public gaze. The posed, performative – agonal – nature of the celebrity portrait highlights the notion of fame as

an extreme form of visibility. By being featured on magazine covers, images of celebrities also appear in public spaces (newsstands) and are thus doubly present in the public realm as space of appearance. It is necessary to analyse the ways in which images of celebrities appear on consumer magazine covers, and to address how this connects back to the project of glossiness, reliant as it is on smoothness of texture and brightness of light. As I will attempt to show in the discussion, celebrity can be understood as a communicative mode, that is, a way of semiotically moulding the representation of human subjects such that they take on the glow of fame, as well as a type of image-object that populates consumer magazine covers.

In the corpus of texts celebrities appear on 43 of the 60 magazine covers featuring people. Often different images of the same celebrities will appear on more than one cover. For example, Victoria Beckham (also known as Posh) appears on several different magazine covers in the corpus. On the cover of *Grazia* (25), she appears in a paparazzi shot, wearing big sunglasses and clutching at the collars of her blue coat. On the cover of *Heat* (30), she appears in an inset, cropped, portrait image. In *Hello* (31), she appears in a studio photograph, posing with a sparkly stiletto shoe held to her ear. On *Look* (42), she appears in a borderline paparazzi/studio image that captures her doing little more than striking a pose. And on *Reveal* (56), in a small inset photograph featuring the Spice Girls, she stands in line with her fellow pop stars, the top of her face cropped out but her skinny figure and pout instantly recognisable. Similarly, Nicole Kidman appears on two magazine covers, one as the studio-shot cover star (67), on the other as an paparazzi-shot inset (25), Kylie Minogue adorns two covers (3, 24), Jennifer Lopez three (18, 20, 61), and 50Cent two (39, 57)<sup>29</sup>, and a host of other celebrities from television, music, fashion and film adorn others, including Brad Pitt, Daniel Craig, Naomi Campbell, Mischa Barton, Alicia Keyes, Jordan, Nigella Lawson, and so on. These recognised celebrity faces and names (generally included textually on the cover in order to entrench their fame) are a kind of currency that consumer magazines trade upon, relying on their fame and desirability (proven through other media such as films, music or television series) to buoy cover sales. Consumer magazine publishers and celebrities are enmeshed in a close symbiotic relationship. Each needs the other to sell, the former magazine commodities featuring the face of the celebrity, the latter any cultural or consumer products to which they are associated (e.g., films, pop songs, perfumes, etc). In a detailed study of the production of celebrity in Australia, Turner et al

<sup>29</sup> It is not by chance that most of these examples feature women: it is clear from the corpus of texts scrutinised that celebrised consumer culture subjects celebrity women to a much more intense gaze and scrutiny, in terms of their appearance, dress, weight, hairstyles, etc., than celebrity men.

(2000) refer often to the role of the magazine in contributing to the construction of celebrity status and image. As well as this, they highlight the role that images of celebrity play in the magazine economy. Put quite simply, images of celebrities sell magazines; “editors track the success of each issue by checking sales figures produced by the chosen celebrity” featured on the cover (Turner et al, 2000: 137). Celebrities are subject to the whims of fashion, and different celebrity faces will sell magazines at different times, for example, there was a time when “you only had to put Posh near a cover ...and the magazine flew off the shelves” and a time when she was no longer effective at selling magazines (Johnson 2004: 54). Yet celebrities and their agents can also leverage a magazine’s content to suit them if they know that their famous face is needed to make cover sales. Gamson (1994: 90) describes, based on interviews with magazine personnel, how celebrity publicists make demands about feature articles written about those celebrities are written.

Nick Couldry (2000, 2001) has made an important distinction between the sacred and the profane in media representation. Basing it on Emile Durkheim’s theory of the social origins of religion, Couldry argues, “the sacred/profane distinction is a useful structural analogue for a different distinction between ‘media world’ and ‘ordinary world’” (Couldry, 2001: 160). Echoing this, scholarship examining the phenomenon of celebrity evidences two broad patterns in the representation of celebrity. The first invokes divinity and distance, the second proximity and mortality. Giles (2000) makes a distinction between the special status of celebrities and the ordinariness of everyday people. Rojek (2001: 74-87) discusses what he terms ceremonies of ascent and descent, which are essentially the mediated processes through which celebrity status is achieved, and then challenged, destroyed or soured. Hermes (1995) discusses the ways in which women’s magazines include both friendly and malicious gossip about celebrities, the former building up their reputations, the latter breaking them down. Marshall (1997) argues that film stars engender a sense of distance and inaccessibility while TV stars encourage a closer identification and sense of proximity to viewers. Informed by and based upon these arguments, I will categorise two types of celebrity image that occur on the consumer magazine cover, and which are linked to the material mechanics of gloss already articulated. The first is hyperreal portraiture, which functions through ideational signification and exploits the seductive sense of divinity, ascension and distance of celebrities from ordinary people. The second is an aesthetic of anti-gloss, which leverages interpersonal modes of signification, and seeks to undermine hyperreal portraiture by exposing celebrities as mortal, seeking to dent their glossy facades and

expose their fallibility (yet by doing so remain dependent on the glossy mode in the first place).

## Hyperreal portraiture

The majority of photographs of celebrities on the covers of consumer magazines reveals them posing in carefully styled studio settings, the images airbrushed and post-produced to eliminate any imperfections. The image of celebrity that the magazine viewer is perhaps most familiar with is the glamour or publicity shot, in which the celebrity is photographed at their most beautiful or handsome, in such a way as to highlight their attractiveness and fame. In his essay "The face of Greta Garbo", Roland Barthes (1973), says that she

belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image as one would in a philtre, when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh, which could neither be reached nor renounced (Barthes, 1973: 56).

In the golden age of cinema, when the general public could lose themselves in visual love-affairs with the sublime images of stylised, beautiful actors and actresses who captured the imagination of the time, celebrities played an aesthetic role reminiscent, perhaps, of that of royalty. Revered and worshipped as princes and princesses, kings and queens, celebrities were/are examples of the pinnacle of human beauty, talent, aesthetic accomplishment and grace – post-Adams and post-Eves working their ways back to the heavens after the indignities of the Fall. As one of the first iconic media celebrities, it is no surprise that one of Greta Garbo's nicknames was "The Divine" (she played the lead in *The Divine Woman*, 1928). Barthes says that this name "aimed to convey less a superlative state of beauty than the essence of her corporeal person, descended from heaven where all things are formed and perfected in the clearest light" (Barthes, 1973: 56-7). Photographs of Garbo reflect this mythologised, aestheticised idea of a woman and are highly stylised, poised, and touched up so as to suggest absolute perfection of person. The connection between the idea of divinity (heavenliness, radiance) is connected with luminosity and light: angels, saints and other holy individuals are represented with haloes or radiating divine light in early Christian imagery (Jensen, 2000: 112). This aura of divinity is still linked to celebrities, and in many ways is enacted and constructed with the use of the materials of glossiness that have already been discussed: lighting that falls from above, smoothness of skin and

fabric, the use of gilded and metallic textures, as well as adornment with jewellery, to represent luxury and status, and an overall sense of flawlessness of person.

Consider the portrait of Nigella Lawson on *Red* (55). Wearing a dramatic burgundy satin gown, sophisticated eye make up and flowing locks of dark hair, Lawson is every bit the picture of a glamorous film star (although she is famous for being a chef). The text reading “Goddess” (referring to her cookbook, *How to be a Domestic Goddess*) entrenches this suggestion of untouchable divinity. Similarly, the portraits of Keira Knightley on *Vogue* (68) and Christina Aguilera on *Glamour* (21) suggest a nostalgic aesthetic reminiscent of the golden age of film. It is such celebrity images that most effectively call up the sense of divinity, in the mode of Garbo’s highly stylised, poised and impeccably retouched publicity portraits. In this way the portraits of celebrities operate as image-objects on magazine covers, where their images are intended to function as ideational signifiers, role models of fame and publicity towards which the ordinary, non-mediated viewer is intended to aspire.

People-featuring magazine covers that do not feature celebrities often host “generic” models. Generic models are individuals not famous for their work in creative industries, as celebrities are, but are simply conventionally attractive people who can represent, in the broadest sense, the celebrity/consumerist values of beauty: youth, fitness and good looks. For example, *Men’s Health* (45), *Runner’s World* (58) and *Men’s Fitness* (44) feature unnamed male models, while *Health and Fitness* (28), *Spirit and Destiny* (62), *Stuff* (63), *PC Format* (51) and *Closer* (5) feature anonymous female models. The models names and identities are irrelevant, all that matters is their “look”, their aesthetic appeal and their symbolisation of the ways in which beauty is defined in consumer culture. Although they are anonymised in this way, their overall aesthetic fits in with celebritised values, which state that only the exceptionally special (be it due to good looks and talent or good looks alone) provide entry to the world of the magazine cover feature. In other words, these anonymous good-looking people fit the mode of celebrity and are photographed and portrayed in the studio style as though they are celebrities, and their portraits are equally hyperreal. This is an example of the way in which celebrity operates as a communicative mode rather than as an image-object.

Images of celebrities and celebritised images of anonymous people can be summarised in terms of their hyperreal aesthetic. On a material level, there is a direct relationship between the glossiness of the paper used in magazine cover printing and the representation of celebrities in the mediated world. There is no doubt that for a celebrity

there is prestige and brand utility contained in being featured in a glamorous photograph on the cover of a consumer magazine. The glossiness of the paper adds to the sense of prestige and value; the sense and mood created by the materiality of the paper is unique to the format. An apparently irony-free lyric in a pop song by The Pussycat Dolls says, "when I grow up/ I wanna be famous/ I wanna be on magazines". There is a direct connection between the concept of fame and celebrity and appearing on and in magazines, which can be considered one of the more prestigious variations of mediation. Indeed, Rojek (2001: 75) notes that "popular, mass-circulation magazines ... largely devoted to glossy photo-journalism" are a primary site for elevation to celebrity status. The glossy paper on which the portraits are printed, in its capacity to capture and reflect light and full colour image, due to its tactile sense of gloss and luxury, is best matched with these dreams and representations of fame so central to celebrity and consumer culture.

It is also common for celebrities to be represented in full colour on the magazine cover, so as to create a sense of dazzling, full-colour, hyperrealistic imagery, as well as to highlight the airbrushed and flawless details of their person, clothing and styling. The materiality of colour as light and in terms of printing processes are directly coupled with that of glossy paper; together, the material technologies creating a hyperreal form of mediation that is particularly apt – and extensively utilised – for the representation (and suggestion) of glamour and celebrity. Similarly, as evident in examples across the corpus of texts, lighting is employed in the photographic set-up of celebrity glamour shots in order to emphasize the suggestion of divinity, radiance and an overall sense of being above the average. Lighting is used in order to highlight physical features, to bring out the tone and texture of skin and clothing, to accentuate the sparkle of jewellery, eyes and teeth, and to bathe the subject of the images in warmth and radiance. In this sense, lighting can be understood as a material technique of display – in the same way in which commodities are shown in their best light in the display cases of retail spaces, celebrities are shown in their best light in the glamour shots on magazine covers. This practice can be understood in the context of the consumerist drive towards publicity as display and visibility; magazine covers are one element of that brilliantly lit stage upon which celebrities are placed as both object of admiration and aesthetic role models; the lights used in the photography studio are analogous with the spotlights of the stage and screen, the other habitats of celebrities.

Furthermore, the hyperreal aesthetic of seamless smoothness is blatantly at play in celebrity portraiture on magazine covers. The glamour shots reiterate the divinity,

untouchability and flawlessness of celebrities, and it is clear that the smoothness of both paper and skin feed into a broader project of perfection that can be traced back to a modernist and enlightenment sentiment that celebrates the notion of zero human defect. The diffuse and variable connotations of colour are operationalised in the representation of celebrities in an interrelated manner. Although it is clear that there are not stable categories of meaning to which colour can be assigned to the analysis of consumer culture in general terms, across the corpus of text it was clear that white, red/pink and gold/metallic hues are coupled with celebrity images in order to send clear, very often gendered, messages about celebrities related to purity/cleanliness, sexuality/femininity and wealth/luxury. Put into multimodal play through the adornment of make-up and clothing, colour as a semiotic mode is one of the resources drawn upon in order to create an aura of celebrity and stylishness; it is part of the aesthetic toolbox of celebrity.

Celebrity portraiture on consumer magazine covers can thus be summarised as operating in hyperreal mode, and leveraging the signifying power of texture, colour and light in order to create image-objects that personify the mechanics of gloss. Next the discussion must turn to an acknowledgement that hyperreal, glamorous, glossy images are not the only form in which celebrities appear on magazine covers.

### **The aesthetic of anti-gloss**

Celebrities are traditionally part of the media world, where their images are aestheticised and mediated to suggest divinity and perfection. Yet they also inhabit the ordinary world, where they do not always have the benefit of careful styling, lighting and airbrushing, and in which they are photographed, without permission, by "paparazzi" who aim to sell images of celebrities going about their private business in ordinary life to the highest media bidder. Paparazzi photography evolved as celebrity culture evolved<sup>30</sup>, fuelled both by an obsessive taste for the glamorous and a drive to strip away the "Hollywood" veneer, and is perhaps operating at its prime in contemporary mediated society. In the corpus of texts, a significant number of celebrity images shows them in the course of their everyday lives, frozen in revealing, unflattering, or casual moments, which provide glimpses into their lifestyles and activities, often highlighting imperfections and flaws in appearance or behaviour. Paparazzi images show celebrities in real world public spaces, such as parks or the street (5, 24, 25, 29, 30). This

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<sup>30</sup> One of the first paparazzi was Ron Galella, who photographed Jackie O, Brigitte Bardot, Marlon Brando and many other celebrities in the 1960s and carries on his trade to this day. See "The Image Bandit" by Emily Nussbaum in The Observer Magazine, 26 October 2008.

suggests to the viewer that celebrities inhabit the same world as them and that they are imminently accessible; while they are browsing magazines at the newsstand, a celebrity might be walking by in the street outside. In this way, the distance between the media world and the ordinary world are suggestively and enticingly, albeit only symbolically, bridged.

Magazine covers represent celebrities with reverence, in terms of the hyperreal, glamorous aesthetic attached to most cover photographs. But celebrities are also treated with irreverence, and their images are exploited for commercial gain without concern for the person behind the fame-commodity. Both paparazzi and studio photographs appear on consumer magazine covers, although it would be fair to generalise that the more expensive monthly magazines rely on studio photographs, while cheaper weekly magazines make use of paparazzi shots. The editor of *Closer*, Jane Johnson (2004: 52) argues:

Readers of the new breed of celeb magazines want to know that their stars – be they A or Z list – have bad hair days, rubbish relationships, embarrassing drunken moments... just like the rest of us. They want to see this in searingly closeup paparazzi pictures and read stories which aren't simply PR spin. It's reassuring to see a celeb making as many mistakes as we do. And knowing they pick their nose/have crooked teeth/dodgy feet also satisfies our innate curiosity.

The reiteration of the visual presence of these individuals, in both hyperreal photographs and exploitative, opportunistic photographs are intricately related in a binary sense (recall the various articulations of sacred/profane, ascent/descent, friendly/malicious, and distance/proximity evident in celebrity studies literature). It is the familiarity of the professionally perfect aesthetic of celebrities that makes representations of their flawed normality all the more compelling, and vice versa. The line between these two styles of photographs is not exclusive; at times one style of photograph can imitate the other. For example, sometimes paparazzi shots will seem closer to studio shots (24, 25), such as when a celebrity is on the red carpet, styled, dressed and made up for the cameras, simply posing for a few moments before carrying on with the glamorous event they are attending. And, studio shots can sometimes imitate paparazzi shots, for example *OK! Magazine*'s wedding photos (49, 50), which have elements of both the voyeurism of a celebrity's private moment and the constructed feel of a studio shoot.

### Celebritising the ordinary

A further example of celebrity as a mode appears on magazine covers that feature “real-life” people who have become famous by participating in a reality TV show. Chanelle and Ziggy (28, 29, 48, 49), the “Big Brother twins” (48, 49), Jade Goody (4) and Charlie (29) are some of the reality TV stars who made it on to the covers of consumer magazines in the corpus. Such “Z-list” celebrities are the mainstay of cheaper weekly consumer magazines (Johnson, 2004). They represent a move in the last decade from a project that follows the movement of celebrities whose fame is established through other activities or status, towards a project that creates fame through mediation. Couldry (2001: 171) argues that “ordinary social life becomes glamorous by virtue of being mediated”. This has been clearly seen in the rise of reality TV, where “normal” people are celebribised through shows like *Big Brother*. A person like Jade Goody was an unremarkable, ordinary Londoner with a “kebab-belly” and a “criminal dad” before she got onto TV and became “the first reality-TV millionairess” (Johnson, 2004: 54). It was exactly her imperfection and ordinariness, argues Johnson, that made her a celebrity, at a time when Posh Beckham had become “too perfect to be interesting” (ibid.). Rojek (2001: 18) calls individuals like Goody who become famous overnight “celetoids”, which refers to “a media-generated, compressed, concentrated form of attributed celebrity”. Celetoid fame is typically fleeting. Although Goody remained famous as she publicly battled and died from cervical cancer, the Big Brother twins, Chanelle and Ziggy and Charlie, all of whom had a significant presence on the newsstand at the time of data collection, have faded from the public realm in the time that this thesis has been written up.

Nevertheless, the tension between sacred and profane media representations highlights how the celebribisation of the ordinary can represent a triumph of the real world over the media world, a crossing of a boundary. Couldry (2001: 171) argues that the boundary between ‘media world’ and ‘ordinary world’ is so absolute that “any crossing of it, or even approach to it, is automatically significant”. And this significance is picked up and exploited by consumer magazines that use the transgression of the formerly impenetrable mode of celebrity by kebab-bellied ordinary folk as a way to continuously renegotiate the idea of celebrity into multi-layered representations. These transgressions of the sacred domain of celebrity by the profane and ordinary does not undermine but in fact reinforce its legitimacy (Couldry, 2001: 172).

As well as the reality TV star, although much more rarely, “real-life” people can appear on magazine covers. A made-over temporary celebrity appears on *WeightWatchers* magazine (70), which features a “real-life cover star” whose success in dropping “a dress size in a month” earned her the reward of momentary fame as a cover girl. She wears a slim-fitting bright green satin dress, elaborate earrings and expertly applied make-up, and smiles with the confidence of a pop singer. In this instance, the mode of celebrity is superimposed onto an ordinary person, in the same way in which it is applied to the generic model. The reader is aware that this young woman is “real” and that her glamour is most likely fleeting – paparazzi photographs of her *en route* to a film premiere are unlike to surface on the cover of *Look* or *Grazia*. Her ordinariness has been repainted with a celebrity brush: she has been “made over”. Even in such a situation where it is not an actual celebrity on the cover, but merely a “real life” person, it is clear that the aesthetic of celebrity is again the mode through which these portraits are framed. Other ordinary folk who appear on the covers of magazine are typically subsidiary thumbnail portraits and are not visually styled to look like celebrities – consider for example the tragic photo of the anorexic boy (5), or the image of the man whose “girlfriend knifed him” (56). These images complement sensationalist “real-life” news-style feature stories, and can be considered diminutive foils to the glossy images of celebrity that dominate consumer magazine covers. In this sense, paparazzi images of celebrities can be summarised as those that do not prioritise a hyperreal, glossy aesthetic, yet which are intimately tied to and cannot exist without it.

Celebrity images, both hyperreal and anti-glossy operate, as Couldry articulates so well, as “the frame through which private worlds face the social” (Couldry, 2001: 159). Although presenting themselves as signs and images, and used in this fashion by magazines, celebrities are also individuals whose private lives apparently hold great interest for the public, and they are used in this fashion too by the magazine industry. As Johnson (2004) notes, her readers want and appreciate insight into the lives of celebrities. In this sense, it is clear that “celebrities not only link their own private lives to the public domain, but also can link the lives of private persons to it” (Goffman, 1976: 11). Celebrities are therefore one way that the boundaries between the public and private are negotiated and redefined, and they function in this way on magazine covers too. As aestheticised objects, images of celebrity personify the mechanics of glossiness and communicate a sense of divinity and sacredness, which appeals to the imagination. Far from undermining this sense of untouchability and divinity, profane images of celebrities serve to reinforce them by acting as an aesthetic and conceptual foil and offering routes through which the viewer can connect celebrity images with their own

lives and experiences. Anti-glossy celebrity images can thus be understood to operate as interpersonal signifiers, which hint to the viewer that the boundary between ordinary and media world can be crossed, thus opening up opportunities for an imagined (or actual, as in the case of the *Weigh-Less* woman) metamorphosis into a celebritised space of appearance. Although it is clear that the sacred, hyperreal project of celebrity imaging has to some degree been deconstructed by a postmodern audience eager for images of celebrities' faults and normalcy, this operates in dialectic with a persistent eagerness for images of their beauty, glamour and airbrushed, aesthetic superiority. And this audience is increasingly aware of, and eager for, the possibilities of access to that aesthetic realm. Thus, the project of perfection is double-edged, swinging from the extremes of the sacred to the profane across the magazine cover genre, but in such a way as to highlight and entrench the former.

### **The dynamic tension of celebrity glossiness**

This discussion has explored two broad sweeps of how celebrity is operationalised through glossiness, both material and symbolic. The first emphasizes it and the second ironically subverts it, but both depend upon it. By building upon the discussion of the mechanics of gloss, this chapter has sought to link material modality with symbolic form by showing how glossiness makes celebrity, and how celebrity depends upon and exploits various types of glossiness and non-glossiness. On the one hand, hyperreal images of celebrity can be said to maximise the project of gloss in such a way as to operate as ideational signifiers. On the other, paparazzi images of celebrity can be said to oppose, and by so doing reinforce, the project of gloss in such a way as to operate as interpersonal signifiers, bringing the ordinary viewer closer to an imagined possibility of relationships with otherwise unattainable and hyper-perfect celebrities.

It is also clear from the corpus of data that many types of celebrity cover-imaging exist, and that the category is constantly being negotiated and redefined, especially with the rise of new media genres such as reality TV. With its roots in the kind of celebrity pioneered by Greta the Divine, a significant chunk of magazine covers continue to rely on glamour shots for their covers, choosing nostalgic, hyperreal images of beautiful and/or famous people to sell their magazines. The classic mode of celebrity is the glossiest, and is most common to consumer magazine covers. The celebritised portrayal of generic models, and even "made-over" real life people, follows this trope of glamorous stylisation. It can be concluded, from the appraisal of celebrity and celebrity-

like images in the corpus of data that consumer magazines continue to favour the aestheticised portrayal of idealised human perfection (an ideal which remains largely unrepresentative of cultural and racial difference). It could even be argued that consumer magazines are one of the primary media sites in which the concept of celebrity is constructed and maintained. Celebrities are consumer brands<sup>31</sup> and require building and marketing like any other. Magazine covers are one of the most powerful mediums for doing so. Consider Jennifer Lopez, who appears on three of the magazine covers in the corpus. Not only is she an actress and musician with films and albums to sell, she owns several perfume and clothing lines, as well as a restaurant, which bear her name. In other words, she is both the owner and face of a multi-million dollar media and consumer goods empire and it serves her brand for her images to appear on magazine covers, be they staged and glamorous or randomly captured.

And yet, despite this clear dominance of glossiness in the mode of celebrity in consumer magazines, across the corpus celebrities are also portrayed in their real, raw, unaestheticised forms, sometimes in unflattering moments (such as while working out and grimacing, or exiting a nightclub inebriated). This can be linked to a project of exposure, illumination and the creation of an ultimate transparency, where merely by being in the public eye, celebrities consent to entering a fishbowl in which their every twitch is scrutinised. This paparazzi mode of representation is less glossy in its mode: flaws and imperfections are highlighted, skin is not always smooth, mouths do not always smile or pout, outfits are not perfect, and lighting is haphazard rather than carefully managed. Furthermore, although still glossy, weekly gossip magazines are printed on obviously cheaper and thinner paper than the high quality fashion magazines that feature studio portraits. Despite this, paparazzi photography too serves the purpose of raising the public profile of celebrities, increasing their visibility and adding to their brand recognisability. As well as this, magazine covers function as a site for the celebritisation of ordinary people, who are turned into celebrities through mediation and aestheticisation ("make-overs"); plucked from real life and accessorized with all the accoutrements of fame and glamour. These many layers of celebrity are operationalised through the many elements of the mechanics of gloss reviewed in this chapter: their material representation on glossy paper, the complex utilisation of colour and smooth, shiny textures to communicate value and luxury, the employment of lighting to suggest divinity, the powerful and complex messages contained in colours, and the strategic coupling of these aestheticised forms with "real" images that work to

<sup>31</sup> See "Celebrity branding" by A. P. Towle in *Hollywood Reporter*, 6 July 2005. Available at [http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/television/feature\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=2030984](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/television/feature_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=2030984)

reiterate the tangibility and human fallibility of celebrity, thereby making their aestheticised images all the more seductive and appealing.

In the concept of celebrity there exists, therefore, a dynamic tension between perfection and imperfection, between ideational and interpersonal signification, and what is considered interesting enough to sell magazines by featuring on the cover varies according to the style and format of the magazine, and whether they seek to exploit the appeal of the voyeurism of glamour or its failure. This continuum of glossiness and the mechanics of the mediation of gloss, as so clearly revealed by an examination of the representation of celebrity in the corpus of texts, is something that is arguably at play in other forms of consumerist mediation – but an exploration of the unique dynamics thereof must wait for future research projects.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter has outlined the mechanics of gloss, which operate on intertwined material and symbolic levels and which extends the dialectic between materiality and simulation outlined in Chapter 2. The discussion of the functions of texture and smoothness, and light, lighting, and colour fed into an examination of the representations of celebrity on consumer magazine covers as a personification of these mechanics. The main contribution of this chapter has been an articulation of how glossiness is mediated on a material level, and how the representations of celebrity depend upon, and exploit, these mechanics. Read together with Chapter 4, this chapter has established a material interpretation and treatment of the data in order to build a foundation for a deeper analysis pitched at the level of discourse. This is not to suggest that Chapters 4 and 5 have had an exclusively material focus, but to point out that the dialectical tensions between materiality and simulation described here have veered towards the material. Chapter 5 has functioned as an interface between the exploration of newsstand spaces in Chapter 4 and the next three chapters, which explore details of magazine cover texts.

The next three chapters build upon the material observations and descriptions recorded in this chapter and the last. Each one offers deeper descriptions of a particular element of the contents of consumer magazine cover texts, their patterns and structures, their messages and themes. Chapter 6 will analyse the representations of commodities and the linguistic strategies of magazine covers, that is, showing the connections between choice and voice in consumerist mediation. Chapter 7 analyses the representations of

bodies on consumer magazine covers, and links this with a broader project of the sexualisation of consumption. Chapter 8 addresses the representations of the face on magazine covers, and links this with the broader projects of reflexivity and self-identity central to consumerism. Together these chapters will explore the ways in which consumer magazines are constructed as social texts through a close reading of certain elements of a selection of these texts.

That magazines are social texts is reflected in the fact of their existence in everyday life; the way in which they form the backdrop for certain social practices and spaces, and the ways in which they are common to urban scenes in (hyper-) developed cities such as London, as described in Chapter 4. This chapter stepped up to magazine covers in order to examine their materiality and substance, and the contribution that this makes to meaning and mediation. Chapter 6 steps even closer to the magazine cover texts, diving into them in order to describe the visual and linguistic objects that populate the glossy world depicted on the texts. It addresses the multitudes of voices and choices contained in the texts and explores the shape of the tension between the ideas of the subject and the object central to consumerist discourse.

## 6. Commercial Heteroglossia in Choice and Voice

### *Introduction*

The previous chapter presented and described the mechanics of gloss, which followed on from (and related back to) the thick description of newsstands in Chapter 4. The discussion of materiality has progressed from the real-world, three-dimensional social spaces of the newsstand to a discussion of the materials and mechanics of glossiness as functioning in magazine texts, particularly with reference to celebrities. This chapter follows on from these treatments of materiality by discussing the representation of material commodities in magazine texts and the accompanying language of sales attached thereto.

The “world of the magazine cover” exists in dialogue with the description of the world of the newsstand described in Chapter 4. In many respects, these two worlds, although joined so intimately in an empirical sense, are contradictory. This was already alluded to in the observation that the glossy, glamorous world depicted in magazine covers is at odds with the often grimy, unremarkable, everyday world of the newsstand. The latter operates as a “real world” frame for a full-colour, high gloss, paper universe of glamour. Magazine covers represent glossy worlds, which are largely (but not exclusively) populated with luxury, beauty, riches and celebrity, as well as idealised notions of health, fitness, homeliness and well-rounded individual happiness. The magazine cover is a public space of display centred on visual communication and which offers accessibility to desirable personae, goods and lifestyles. It is a world of formalised beauty, which relies on a set of aesthetic structures, visual, linguistic and otherwise. This chapter will address two aspects of that world, the representation of choice and the function of voice. Ironically, magazines are most often situated in the ordinary, everyday space of the supermarket aisle or off-liscence store. The division between the simulated, hyperreal and self-referencing world of the magazine cover and the mundane world of the newsstand is not a clear and easy boundary; but much like Couldry’s discussion of the continuously negotiated boundary between the media world and the ordinary world, it is permeable.

This chapter is arranged in three parts. The first section describes the ways in which commodities are visually represented on the covers of magazines, culminating in a sense of a multiplicity of choice. The second describes the linguistic techniques and strategies employed in the texts, culminating in a sense of a multiplicity of voice. The third brings these two discussions together into an interpretation addressing the ways in which the texts create a sense of multiplicity of *choice* and *voice*, both linked directly to a discourse of sales. This culminates in an argument that consumer culture (as mediated through magazine covers/newsstand spaces) employs a strategy of “commercial heteroglossia”. This concept adapts and recontextualises Bakhtin’s notion of “many-voicedness” to the magazine “marketplace of ideas”. This is linked back to the manipulation/empowerment dialectic highlighted in the theoretical framework. Before this, however, it is necessary to highlight that magazine covers signal the commodity status of magazines.

### **Magazine covers signal commodity status**

Magazine covers are texts created for a specific purpose: sales. Of the media commodities themselves, the commodities they promote, and the lifestyles that they prioritise. Recall that McCracken (1993) categorises the magazine cover as an advertising rather than editorial element of the magazine text. The cover must entice large groups of readers, it must sell *itself* to audiences in order to sell its *audiences* on to advertisers (McCracken, 1993: 18). Magazine design experts acknowledge that “nowhere in a magazine is the interaction of words and pictures more important than on the front cover” (Holmes, 2000: 162), which sells both the brand and the content of the magazine. Most critically, Holmes continues, the cover must do this “more or less instantaneously, in an environment where the newsagent’s customers may be milling around and where there are shelves bearing hundreds of titles including all the competing rivals in a given field” (*ibid.*). The magazine cover therefore clearly plays a central role in the life of the magazine as a commodity in public retail space. Furthermore, there is a strong relation between the existence of the magazine as an object that is mass manufactured in order to be sold and its cover as a text of popular culture. In fact, it is the very nature of the magazine cover as a sales text that reiterates the connection between consumerism and textuality, a relationship already well established by analyses of advertisements.

In this sense it is helpful to think of the magazine cover as a metatext – a text about a text (Peterson, 2005: 135). As metatexts, magazine covers seek “to persuade people that the media text they are thinking of consuming will be worth the investment of time, energy, and money they must make in order to experience it” (Peterson, 2005: 135). An appropriate example of this from the corpus of texts is the cover of *House & Leisure* (33) which features a mosaic of past cover designs in celebration of the title’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue. Every element of magazine covers, from the image selected, its framing, the phrasing, punctuation and typography of the straplines, the use of colour and layout elements including straps, bars, circles and other motifs, are geared towards convincing the reader that the magazine content is exciting, interesting and desirable. This is especially the case for magazines sold on the newsstand, which feature slightly different covers to the same editions delivered to subscribers. The latter are much simpler and feature fewer straplines and other sales devices (see an example at Foges, 1999: 24), as the task of convincing a reader to buy the title has already been achieved through subscription. Thus reminded of the crucial role of the magazine cover in establishing the magazine as a commodity, the discussion moves next to an analysis of the representations of commodities in those texts.

### ***A World of Choice: Commodity Images in Magazine Covers***

Chapter 4 described how the newsstand operates as a world of goods, both in the selections of fast moving consumer goods stocked and sold there, and in terms of the luxury or fashion items represented on magazine covers displayed there. This doubling of the world of commodities in space and text created a sense of proliferation and a paradoxical sense of unlimited choice and chaos. This chapter steps closer to the magazine cover in order to analyse the representation of commodities, but it does this in the context of the existing understanding of the newsstand as a commodified and commodity-mediating space. Commodities, which include a wide variety of mass manufactured objects, are represented on magazine covers in both images and words – but images by far predominate. Therefore, the discussion will first address the various images of commodities present across the corpus of data, which can be grouped into three broad types. All three tropes exploit the various dimensions of the mechanics of gloss discussed in the former chapter; and always infer a relationship with a consuming subject. The first features products shots directly depicting the commodities, in a similar manner to product advertisements. The second features images in which the commodities are set in relation to, or interact with, human subjects (often celebrities).

The third features commodities set up in a scene that although absent of any human presence, implies it strongly. These three types of commodity images are discussed in turn; together they culminate in a visual offering of a plethora of consumer choice.

## Product shots

Product photographs of commodities are routinely featured as subsidiary images of magazine cover texts. In terms of the latter, images of items such as boots, bags and clothes (20, 26, 27, 43, 44, 56), and technology items (51, 63) are represented as objects of desire and incorporated into the multi-modal texts in order to add to the overall offerings of the magazine.

Fashion items are typically featured on weekly gossip-style magazines aimed at women, and highlight the “must-have” items of the moment, often making visual links back to a featured celebrity’s outfit. These product shots serve to show how ordinary women can copy the celebrity’s style and “get the look”, for example, *Reveal* (56) features a product shot of a “must-have” trench coat alongside a paparazzi photograph of Peaches Geldof wearing one. Photographs of bags, shoes, bracelets or coats are deep-etched and superimposed onto the background colours, distorting size (so that a shoe, for example appears half the size of a dress – see 24, 41, 42) and often obscuring functionality. These images of products are reminiscent of catalogue photography, which aims to show a product in its best and most flattering light.

Less commonly, product images make up the central image in the magazine cover text. The best example of a commodity taking centre stage as the cover model is the example of the luxury car. Two motoring magazines are part of the corpus, *Autocar* (4) and *Topgear* (65); both covers are dominated by portraits of cars. In his essay “The new Citroen”, Barthes (1973: 88) discusses the aesthetic properties of the automobile, arguing that it “appears at first sight as a superlative object” and in it can be seen “a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter”. Both the *Autocar* and *Topgear* cars are glossy (in all the senses discussed in the last chapter) and gleaming, are angled diagonally across the page such that their bonnets are pointed to the bottom left, communicating a sense of speed and sophistication. They both appear, as Barthes observed of his Citroen, to have “fallen from the sky” (1973: 88) and landed on the road, wheels spinning and bodywork gleaming, superlative commodities indeed, presented for visual consumption and

imagined ownership on the magazine cover. These images of cars highlight the ways in which commodities are portrayed in divine or celestial terms, always bathed in a special light, always suggesting the kind of perfection that comes fresh from the production line. This mode of representation is common to car advertisements too – this is revealed by looking at the other side of the front cover to the inside cover of both magazines. Each one features an advertisement for a new model of car: the Mazda CX-7 on the inside cover of *Autocar* and the Alfa 147 Sport on the cover of *Topgear*. Both advertisements show red cars in motion, the cars angled diagonally across the page, bonnets gleaming and wheels spinning. The photographs of cars used in advertisements and cover designs are so similar as to be almost interchangeable.

Close inspection of the *Topgear* image shows, hidden in the shadows of the interior of the car, a man driving it, his hand gripping the steering wheel. This subtle presence of a person in the dark heart of the glossy commodity introduces the next manner in which commodities are represented: as adorning and interacting with human subjects.

### **Images of subject-object relationships**

The representation of the relationship between people and commodities on the covers of magazines is most pervasive in the manner in which commodities are featured in juxtaposition with human models (often celebrities): clothes, jewellery, sunglasses and make up are worn by the models and celebrities in most portraits. This consists of a second level of visual representation of commodities. These depictions connote the luxury lifestyles of the aesthetic elite, who are able to enjoy the accumulation and social display of lifestyle commodities. In this sense, the desirable luxury commodities symbolise the cultural power wielded by the celebrities, adorned as they are by beautiful things, they can be considered a type of royalty for the proletariat, their power represented not by crowns and ermine-edged cloaks but by the prestige of the brands that they wear. For example, the fold-out cover of *Harper's Bazaar* (27) notes that the cover model "Hilary Rhoda wears Dior Haute Couture". Although the exact brands worn by many cover models or celebrities are not always explicitly noted in this way, it is clear that the dresses worn by most of the cover models on the high-end glossies are designer items. And when clothes are not visible, accessories can be emphasised, such as Kim Porter's elaborate jewellery on *Essence* (16). Models and celebrities are in this way used as frames on which fashion commodities are displayed, in much the same way that mannequins are used in shop windows.

As discussed in Chapter 5, celebrities are a central subject matter of consumer magazines. The image of the commodity-draped celebrity also highlights the way in which these individuals are themselves commodified. Celebrities operate as intertextual image-objects that flow between magazine covers; both studio and paparazzi photographs of celebrities are valuable commodities in their own right, sold to magazines and in turn utilised in order to sell magazines. Celebrities themselves are brands, and need to sell themselves through publicity efforts that often culminate in achieving magazine cover status. Celebrities can also therefore be considered commodities, or to be more precise, *their images are commodities*. Images of celebrities can therefore be understood to negotiate the subject-object dialectic by turning subjects into marketable objects with exchange-value, and which are employed in contracts of sales and brand-building (both of the magazine-commodities and the celebrity-brand-commodities). As commodities to some extent themselves, celebrities are semiotically linked with the use of their persons for the display of other desirable objects, such as clothes, sunglasses and jewellery. The suggestion of value flows both ways; the desirable people add value to the desirable objects, and vice versa. This flow of meaning and value makes sense in light of the kinds of commodities that function to clothe or adorn the body. But representations of subject-object relations also include those objects that are not designed for direct use on the body.

An example of a less direct logical connection between the person depicted and the commodities with which they are depicted appears on the cover of *Stuff* (63). This magazine focuses on “gadgets, gear and technology”. The cover image illustrates something further than an obsession with “stuff”. It shows the way in which the notion of commodity exists somewhere between the human being (subject) and the functional or aesthetic artefact (object). The product photographs on the cover feature several gadgets (watches and i-pods), but the main image is a full-length photo of a blonde woman in a bikini, holding an i-phone. She sits on a block with her left ankle resting on her right knee. She is slender and pretty, her long hair flowing over her shoulders, her blue eyes looking directly at the camera. She is lean, tanned and fit, she wears high heels, jewellery and make up (these commodities function in the same way discussed in the previous paragraph). But as well as these items, in her hands she cradles an i-phone.

Goffman (1976: 29) argues that in product advertising, the “feminine touch” is exploited in order to suggest value: “Women, more than men, are pictured using their fingers and

hands to trace the outlines of an object or to cradle it or to caress its surface." Our i-phone model does exactly this, holding the object with such delicacy and sensuality that it is eroticised and rendered deeply desirable. Although she does not look at it or even appear to be using it in the moment in which she is photographed, her entire presence and posture focuses in on the i-phone. From her face, which makes eye contact with the viewer, the lines of her straightened arms pull the gaze directly down towards the i-phone. She is an elaborate back-drop for the i-phone; in this way, the commodity is represented as the pinnacle of her consumptive ability. Her femininity and hypersexualised appearance reiterate that it is not only her body but the i-phone that is offered up to the consumptive gaze. A two-way flow of value suggestion takes place: her value is defined by the gadget in her hand, which in turn is defined by being held by this ideal type of human. She does not use the i-phone: she displays her possession of it. In turn, it displays her, and the way in which it has captured her affections. She is no more objectified than is the commodity subjectified.

Consider another example of the representation of a subject-object relationship. On the cover of *Hello* (31), Victoria Beckham is pictured holding a sparkly stiletto shoe to ear as though it is a telephone receiver. At first glance the image comes across as a piece of nonsensical visual banter, suggesting a light-hearted, tongue in cheek, glamorised take on the gossipy title and subject matter of the magazine. This message is certainly dominant, and it reiterates the entertaining, playful tone of many consumer magazines. Yet, by being held in this manner, the shoe also mimics a mobile phone, in this way representing two sets of desirable commodities. Functionality is not at issue in this image. In a similar way to the *Stuff* girl, who does not appear to be using her i-phone, Victoria is not wearing her shoe. She is displaying it. The colour coordination between the model and the shoe (the red soles picking up on the red lips, the sparkly texture of the shoe echoing the diamante appliqué on her sleeve) suggests that the two make up a complementary unit. Subject and object are paired; they match.

### **Lifestyle scenes**

Commodified worlds are also represented in images that depict aesthetically perfect lifestyle scenes populated with desirable objects, such as the interiors of homes, the classic subject matter of magazines about homes and interior decoration (see 14, 22, 32, 34, 36), or in the depiction of a delicious meal served and ready to eat (9, 59).

The most common commodified world depicted on the magazine cover appears in the trope of home/interiors magazines, which on their covers often depicts curiously unpopulated domestic scenes. In the kitchen depicted on *Elle Decoration* (14), a glass of water stands on the table, and a chair is pulled out as though someone has just left. In the living room of *Good Homes* (22), the fire crackles, the coffee is served, and a scrabble game appears in mid-play, but no coffee-drinking scrabble players warm their toes. On the antique desk of the *Homes & Antiques* (32) scene, notebooks, pen and coffee cup are poised; in front of it a chair is pulled up, replete with a shawl draped on its arm, but no writer scribes her thoughts. And so on. These scenes suggest a familiar human presence, a lived-in-ness, but they are not cluttered with actual bodies living out the actions and practices that they suggest. These scenes are created by expert interior stylists, who construct them entirely out of commodities available on the open market, and which have been expertly assembled in order to create specific atmospheres and suggest specific moods and lifestyles (minimalist and modern in *Elle Decoration*, cosy and quaint in *Homes & Antiques*). The depopulation of the scene works to draw the viewer in, to suggest that the space is unpopulated and therefore available for mental colonisation, or even real life actualisation.

The depiction of food also reveals a particular type of commodification. Decades ago, Barthes observed that each week, *Elle* would publish "a fine colour photograph of a prepared dish" (Barthes, 1973: 78). He describes the stylised ornamentation of the meals, complete with "glacé fruit designs" and more, as intended only for consumption by the eyes. Images of food in magazines therefore represent "an openly dream-like cookery... which never show the dishes except from a high angle, as objects once near and inaccessible, whose consumption can perfectly well be accomplished simply by looking" (Barthes, 1973: 79). As simulations of food rather than real food, it is clear that the two very similar images of exotic Thai dishes shown on *Delicious* (9) and *Sainsbury's Magazine* (59) can only be eaten by the eyes. The intimate relationship between food and the face, visually enjoyed by the eyes, smelled by the nostrils, and ingested through the mouth, once again implies a human presence that is not explicitly depicted in the images. As well as this, food magazine covers imply certain lifestyles that revolve around a cosmopolitan consumption of food and cooking (linking in to the cultures of cookbooks, high-tech cooking utensils and speciality ingredients).

All of these modes of depicting commodities can be summarised in terms of their hyperreal aesthetic. Although also drawing on a type of "commercial realism" (Goffman, 1976: 15), which is also employed in advertising photography, so as to illustrate scenes

that provide “a simulated slice of life” (ibid.), it is exactly this simulation, and the employment of glossy modes of mediation which removes the links to lived reality and instead offer perfect ideal types, similar to the ways in which the hyperreal portraiture of celebrities offers perfect ideal types of people. The “realism” of the scene is simulated and aestheticised so as to function most effectively as a commercial message; in this sense the realness of the scene is compromised by the commercial intentions of the image. The presence of commodities, worn or used by celebrities, iconified in celestially-lit product shots, or contextualised as part of a successful consumer lifestyle centred around food or interior décor, are portrayed as perfect, imaginary images of how ideal types are constituted, be it a perfectly made up and impeccably dressed celebrity in designer clothes, or a perfectly arranged and decorated interior scene. These hyperreal lifestyle images converge into a visual mosaic offering a wide variety of scenes which operate both as images offered for visual consumption, and as ideas offered for appropriation and incorporation into individual lifestyles. This mosaic is materially manifested in the site of the newsstand, where scenes depicted on magazine covers are displayed side by side, and compete for the attention of the consumer. But the mosaic is also metaphorically manifested in the idea of the magazine cover as a generic text, which follows certain stylistic conventions and materiality. In other words, magazine cover lifestyle scenes do not exist independently, but always in an intertextual dialogue and juxtaposition with others. One text from the corpus illustrates this perfectly. The *House & Leisure* (33) cover shows a mosaic of past covers as a visual celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the magazine. The past covers are miniaturised and arranged in a grid, and include designs from the past 60 years, thereby operating as a microcosm of the magazine’s cover since its inception. As a title focussed on interior décor, each historical cover shows a unique lifestyle scene, and the mosaic cover therefore juxtaposes dozens of such scenes, which include frozen moments (of a woman bathing, a garden in full bloom, a chic '70s style interior, a romantic bedroom, etc.). In this way, the *House & Leisure* cover usefully illustrates the concept of a mosaic of hyperreal lifestyle scenes represented on magazine covers, and in this way shows how the multiplicity of magazine cover texts echoes the grid-like formation of the newsstand (the latter albeit much messier) and likewise offers up a plethora of choice for visual consumption.

## Conclusion

This section has explored in detail the various modes in which commodities are visually represented on consumer magazine covers. It has shown the central role that images of objects, in relation to absent or present subjects or as floating signifiers, plays in the world of the magazine cover. All of these commodity images converge into a grander narrative that underlies the text genre: the celebration of the wide range of choices made available by consumer culture. The ways in which these choices are positioned, described and characterised are addressed next, through an analysis of the linguistic techniques (or voices) of the texts.

## ***The Voice(s) of Magazine Covers***

Any analysis of the linguistic elements of magazine cover texts needs to be firmly situated within three contextual layers (outlined in the analytical framework in Chapter 3). The first is the multimodal text of the magazine cover itself, and intertextuality in the material and visual elements that make it up. The second is the social context of the newsstand in which it is displayed. The third is the broader context of the ideology of consumerism that informs and constructs the two former (and is informed and constructed by them). Furthermore, the analysis needs be rooted in a clear understanding of the functions that the language is employed to fulfil in the texts. As Halliday (1985: xvii) puts it:

The relation between the meaning and the wording is not ... an arbitrary one; the form of the grammar relates naturally to the meanings that are being encoded. A functional grammar is designed to bring this out; it is a study of wording, but one that interprets wording by reference to what it means.

Chapter 4 has provided a detailed discussion of the social context within which magazine covers do their most important work (as well as highlighting the ideological and intertextual elements of the space). It was observed that the multiplicity of texts on display led to a jumble of words that competed for the attention of the viewer, and created a sense of a chorus of voices shouting simultaneously. In the newsstands, verbal signs are used to organise and categorise genres of magazines; on magazine covers, phrases and words are employed to catch the eye of the viewer and to convince them to look at and ultimately buy the title. Taking this cue, the analysis that follows will look closely at individual magazine texts and highlight the intertextually

evident grammatical elements of the language employed on magazine covers in order to make a connection with the function of sales. This will highlight its contribution to the multimodal meanings of the texts and the mediation of the ideology of consumerism. As already discussed, magazine covers are closest to advertising texts in their use of imagery and language, and like adverts, therefore, their primary function is to *sell*: themselves, the commodities they feature, the lifestyles they promote, and finally the overall ideology of consumerism that these lifestyles converge into.

It is no surprise therefore that all magazine cover texts have in common the punchy, self-confident and rather flashy language of sales, which saturates all of the linguistic elements of the texts. Magazine cover language is competitive and self-aggrandising. Claims about being “the best men’s magazine in the world” (1), “the UK’s No.1 celeb mag!” (5), “the ultimate football magazine” (19), “Britain’s No. 1 women’s magazine” (20, 21), “Britain’s No. 1 glossy” (24, 25), “The UK’s biggest selling hair magazine” (26), “Britain’s best-selling home magazine” (36), “The world’s finest parenting magazine” (38), and so on, abound. The function of such superlative self-description is an attempt to create a perceived competitive edge and to highlight each title as superior to its competitors. This reiterates the fact that magazine texts are commodities that operate within a commercial marketplace, and are fiercely competitive with regards to cover sales. The verbal statements on magazine covers (cover lines) function to highlight a feature story or article inside the magazine, selling its value and interest (in the same way that the newspaper article headline functions). Turner et al (2000: 133) note that the appearance of the word “exclusive” works directly to boost sales by claiming that the content within the magazine is unique, special and cannot be found elsewhere. 23 of the magazines in the corpus use the word “exclusive” somewhere on the cover<sup>32</sup>. Cover lines are structured as short phrases or clauses, which would be incomplete in spoken language or prose, but which form a logical whole within the context of magazine covers if understood to function as exclamations rather than statements. The analysis that follows does not take up the individual exclamations in order to analyse their structure in linguistic detail, but instead aims to describe the patterns of word usage that occur across the corpus of texts, specifically, in the context of this chapter, of the representation of commodities and ways in which they are vocalised as belonging to specific subjectivities and lifestyles. Rather than discussing the exact nuances of language use on each of the 70 magazine covers (something that space does not allow in any case), the discussion shows how the wording shares similar

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<sup>32</sup> See 3, 4, 5, 7, 18, 19, 20, 21, 28, 30, 39, 40, 42, 43, 48, 49, 51, 52, 54, 58, 65, 69

structures and tropes, and how this in turn feeds back into the visual representation of commodities discussed in the previous section. The discussion addresses the ways that nouns, verbs and describing words are operationalised in the service of the representation of commodified lifestyles. In the service of offering choice, and giving it voice, the linguistic elements of the texts prioritise these grammatical elements differently, as will become clear from the discussion that follows.

## Objects in words

The objects of the magazine cover's selling discourse are the magazine itself, as well as a wide variety of commodities which are referred to by name, either generic or proper (names of people or brands). As already noted, objects are visually present throughout the corpus of texts. They are also linguistically present in words, at times freestanding in a strapline, for example, "sofas, microwaves, teapots, juicers, steamers, woks" (22), at others coupled to visual representation. For example, the word "boots" is coupled with images of boots (25), the word "bag" with an image of a bag (24). These generic nouns often require cultural capital in order to properly understand the references – particularly with reference to fashion discourse. "It" or "wag" bags (43, 56), the "clutch" (44) and "wedges" (43) have a specific meaning in the domain of fashion, and fashion magazines assume and promote a good knowledge of these terms in their employment of them in cover lines. Specialised knowledge is also assumed through reference to the types of products required by special interest groups such as pregnant women or runners – the new mother's interest in "car-seats", "breast pumps" and "baby monitors" (54) and the runner's interest in "heart-rate monitors" (60) are taken for granted and highlighted through the verbal inclusion of such generic nouns on magazine covers. At times, direct references to the price of items accentuates their commodity status: "Wag bags for £5, £20 must-have heels" (56). The presence of objects in words therefore mirrors and reiterates the presence of objects in images, in this way adding to the sense of their prolific availability. In the "mosaic" of lifestyle images that include commodities in their scenes, words add a descriptive element, twinning common and proper nouns with the objects in a function of labelling. In this sense the lists of nouns that fly about the intertextual spaces of magazines covers constituted collectively either as a genre or a newsstand functions to act as a cognitive interface for the viewer, helping to attach meaning to otherwise abstract images, and vice versa. Together, an image of a "clutch" and the word itself help to contextualise and even explain one another. The presence of nouns as labels extends beyond the

use of common nouns and into proper nouns too, which take the form of the names of either well-known brands or celebrities (at times these two categories are conflated).

Well-known brands names that appear in the corpus range from the names of football clubs (19) to consumer brands such as Marc Jacobs (24), Schwarzkopf (26), and i-Pod (63), to the names of everyday branded consumables such as "Whopper vs. Big Mac" (41) or "KFC" (37). The use of these brand names at once assumes a kind of specialised interest in commodities and insider knowledge (or desire for insider knowledge) about them, and also functions as an effective marketing strategy (the presence of a commodity brand name on the magazine cover highlights it in the same way in which an image of a celebrity entrenches their brand). The presence of particular brand names indicates which particular niche of popular culture the magazine professes expertise in, be it football, high street fashion, hair care or food, and the entire text assumes a certain familiarity with that niche on the part of the reader. The use of brand names in this way is at once aspirational and conspiratorial: the reader is situated as either an expert who also knows as much as the magazine style authorities about the commodity landscape, or a layperson who could soon be an expert too.

A similar process is enacted through the very common inclusion of the names of celebrities. The use of first names or nicknames to reference celebrities – "Posh" (25, 30, 31, 42, 56), "Chanelle and Ziggy" (29, 30, 49, 50), J-Lo (61), Jordan (5, 49, 56) – assumes that readership is familiar with these personalities (or will become so quickly). Here, names are directly linked with visual representations, thereby creating an illusion of intimacy, inside information and personal detail – this trope is particularly common to weekly gossip magazines. However, the covers will also at times simply list the names of the various celebrities or role models featured behind the cover, for example, as on Q (54), *Rolling Stone* (57) and *GQ* (23), in this way distancing them and making them less accessible and knowable. Nouns are also used to collectively refer to groups of people that are in some way desirable or aspirational: *Loaded*'s "girls" (39) or *Company*'s "women who've made a million" (6). The same can be said for *desirable* groups: *Loaded*'s "ladyboys" (39) or *Glamour*'s "speed freaks, bad kissers and the totally clueless" (21). This tension between desirable and *desirable* naming practices can again be linked to the theme of sacred/profane, friendly/malicious, special/ordinary previously discussed.

The ubiquitous use of nouns throughout the corpus of texts can be interpreted in terms of sentence or clause subjects. Although the cover lines do always not constitute full sentences or even clauses, but are often short phrases that come across as exclamations or newsy summaries, there can be no doubt that the subjects function in a thematic way, in Halliday's (1985: 35) sense. He argues that when the subject is placed at the front of the clause, it sets the theme for it. In magazine cover lines, a common strategy is to highlight the name of a celebrity in such a way as to make their personality define the theme of the entire action or characteristic highlighted. For example, "Charlotte: Why I feel sexy when I'm big" (7) and "Liv Tyler: The world's most down to earth rock chick" (11) both function to introduce the celebrity name as the theme of the statement, quite simply, because they are placed first. The placement of the celebrity name often coincides with its typographic size (enlarged) as well as the visual presence of the celebrity as the cover star. This pattern pervades the corpus of texts, creating a generic trope of themes defined by the names of celebrities.

Halliday (1985: 68) argues that every grammatical exchange, or speech interact, contains an "exchange commodity". This relates to the goods or services (in the form of information) being requested or provided by the speaker or listener in a language interaction. In the context of consumer magazine covers, name words of commodities and celebrities are offered to the reader for metaphorical or delayed-actual consumption. On both the grammatical level, and the material and symbolic levels, therefore, the function of words in labelling objects and subjects operates in the texts as a multi-layered type of commodity exchange.

### **Consuming-Action words**

Verbs are present throughout the corpus of data. The call to action implicit in the use of action words on magazine covers is central to the dynamic, even manic, energy that they invite. All verbs are normative, they propose and thereby prioritise a certain course of action as desirable, valuable, preferable or unavoidable. These processes can invite either material or mental process (Halliday, 1985: 111), the former related to real life activities such as walking, shopping, looking and eating (or contemplation thereof), the latter related to more abstract emotional and cognitive processes. This sub-section will discuss two of three classes of action identified in the corpus of texts. The first is material/mental, and is summarised as "instructive action". The second is mental and is summarised as "intuitive action" (discussed here in the context of commodities and

taken up again in Chapter 8 in the context of self-identity). A third class of action, also mental, summarised as “corrective”, will be discussed in depth in Chapter 8 (and not here due to its minimal ties to the choice/voice framework).

### Instructive action

Halliday describes “behavioural processes” as those that entail both “physiological and psychological behaviours” and which are “grammatically intermediate between material and mental processes” (1985: 128). These can be linked to his terminology of perception verbs as related to seeing, hearing, etc. (Eggins, 2004: 226). In the context of consumer culture the activities related to perception should arguably be extended to include the day-to-day human practices enacted through the senses as well as the body, in this way making them equally material and mental: behavioural. For example, it is possible to see the common act of simply thinking about doing something as a mental dimension of action. The ways in which such processes are framed on magazine covers are as either declarative or imperative clauses (Halliday, 1985: 44). The former type of clause states something, or makes a declaration about existence. In declarative clauses, verbs function to “naturalise” practices of consumption, and declare a certain status quo about the senses and actions described. The latter type of clause incorporates a message of demand or command, holding implicit within it a silent “I want you to... / you must...” In imperative clauses, verbs therefore function to propose and prioritise certain actions over implied others. Taken together, verbs of perception, extended to include behavioural processes, and that incorporate a naturalised sense of the declarative and/or imperative tone, can be summarised as “instructive verbs”. These verbs function to outline the shape of the relationship that exists between subjectivity and objects; between consumers’ ideas of themselves as consumers and the images of commodities that are made available to them. Instructive verbs include actions such as seeing and hearing, but also include actions such as looking, eating and other practices undertaken using the body such as running, dancing, carrying, shopping, etc. Here are some examples from the corpus of texts:

Be, bring, buy, collect, do, dress, don't, eat, email, give, go, have, look, make, own, party, run, shop, shout, stay, take, wear.
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Instructive verbs are common to magazine cover texts and occur often. Readers are consistently addressed as active members of the consuming classes, who spend their

days involved in normative actions such as getting dressed, giving, getting and making things, running and shouting. As well as these, actions unique to late modernity are naturalised in actions such as shopping, emailing and partying. Instructive verbs are most common to magazines that revolve around the idea of display – the observation of celebrities, fashion, or women, where the viewer is invited to “look” (even where that word is not explicitly included) and by implication, consume, desire, shop, dress, party, etc. The functions achieved by those verbs linked to material processes can be framed in terms of their relation to the representation of commodities, and their situation within imperative clauses that invite/command the reader to “wear”, “eat”, “collect”, “own”, “give” and “look at” a large variety of commodities. In this sense, the usage of verbs function to draw attention to the commodities, and to paint a picture of everyday action around them. Significantly, certain of these verbs related directly to the actions that take place at the newsstand: “buy”, “take”, “look”, “shop” and “stay”. Chapter 4 showed how consumers did all of these things with the magazine-commodities before them, and thus it is clear that their physical acts are doubled in the words emblazoned on the magazine covers in front of them.

### Intuitive action

As well as instructive verbs, a different class of action related to consumption is invited by the texts. This type of action is mental in that it takes place within the mind and imagination of the viewer and is linked with ideas and understanding; in this sense I term it intuitive action. Intuitive verbs can be linked with Halliday’s notion of verbs of cognition as one type of mental process (Eggins, 2004: 226). Cognitive verbs relate to thinking, knowing and understanding. Cognitive verbs are those that invite the enlargement of the individual psyche in terms of understanding and imagining, where the actions invited or implied relate in some way to the acquisition of experience or knowledge on the part of the individual actor. This can relate both to the understanding and experience of the external, material world, and the understanding and experience of the interior, mental world. Both types of cognition can be re-phrased as intuitive action, which involves a deeper understanding of the various complexities present in mediated everyday life. I shall set aside the latter type of understanding for now and return to discuss it in Chapter 8. Here, I would like to focus on how intuitive action words related to the world of commodities are represented on consumer magazine covers, and by their presence shape the world of choice on offer. Here are some

examples of intuitive verbs linked to commodity representation that appear in the corpus of texts:

Choose, consult, create, dare, follow (trends), make sense of, personalise, steal (ideas).

Verbs such as this relate directly to the world of goods so consistently and iteratively mediated through the genre of consumer magazines. Recognising that there are a great number of options from which to choose in the project of buying a car, a pair of boots or jeans, a dress for a party, or a new outfit for the autumn<sup>33</sup>, these verbs invite the kind of intuitive action that will allow the consumer to hack their own pathway through the jungle of commodities on offer. Once again this language runs parallel to the actions of consumption in the social context of the newsstand, where the consumer is indeed possibly involved in the project of trying to choose a magazine to buy or browse for free, and may find the chaotic sense of choice overwhelming or exasperating (as is often my own feeling when confronted with too many choices in a retail space). At once celebrating the complexity of the plethora of commodity types in existence, and recognising that this might cause confusion or anxiety in the reader's everyday life, magazines sound a call for action that aims to demystify the world of goods, and allow readers to make the most of it. Readers are invited, commanded and reminded to choose from the many options available to them, to consult with experts, to be daring about their choices, to follow trends so as to keep up with the latest styles, to personalise those styles and to steal ideas from other places in order to find the perfect combination of commodities for their lifestyle and personality and thereby gain a deeper understanding of the world of goods that surround them. Intuitive verbs invite cognitive action that allows consumers to "make sense of" the potentially confusing and intimidating world of goods around them, to understand it and manage it in an imaginative and meaningful manner.

In this way, intuitive verbs contribute to a vocabulary that reiterates magazines' "authority on style", which is often framed within the magazine's claim to authoritative quantitative knowledge of all the options available. Consider for example *Hair's* invitation to explore "739 ways to have fabulous hair" (26), *Grazia's* "93 new 'it' boots" (25) and "423 hot autumn buys" (24) from which readers can choose their favourite, *House Beautiful's* "850 ideas for timeless style" (34) which readers can appropriate,

<sup>33</sup> Or even a cup of coffee. Walking past a Starbucks store in London recently, I noticed a sign which invited me to come in and choose from one of "37,000 drink combinations".

*Marie Claire's* "193 perfect presents" (43) to inspire gift-givers, *Men's Health's* "76 gut-free indulgences" (45) and *Runner's World's* "437 great autumn events" (58) from which runners can find the best for them to enter. The language of magazine covers asserts an ability to control the otherwise chaotic world of choice that consumer society offers us. This is present not only in the pages of magazines but also in the landscape of urban life. Chapter 4 described how the newsstand itself functions as a meta-level of mediated choice, where hundreds of titles present themselves as one option among many. The organisation of the newsstand according to genre and subject matter also suggests an authority on and ability to manage the selections of products on offer (although this was subverted by the actions of consumers who would put magazines back in the wrong place). In the magazine cover texts themselves, a similar tension exists between the invitation to choose from a wide variety of options and the clear limits of choice imposed on those options by editors – as overwhelming as this number may appear to some, there are *only* 739 ways to have fabulous hair, no more. *Hair* magazine implies that it is aware of every option and has selected the 739 best. In this way intuitive action words usher in a way of managing the chaos and complexity of the commodity world, and tailoring the wide-angled consumerist promise of "something for everyone, plenty for all" to an individual's lived experience, whilst at the same time reiterating magazines' expertise.

Intuitive action words are thus common to magazines that deal with a specific niche subject matter, such as cars. In the situation of a niche car magazine, the reader is invited to gain a deeper understanding of the nuances and complexities of cars – what's on the market, how the various models compare, options for different budgets and more. The same processes are at play in other specialist magazines – such as those devoted to running, pregnancy, weddings or hairstyling. Each niche magazine offers tailored advice that will help the reader to better understand (and therefore practice) the hobby, selectively harvest ideas and information that is relevant to them, and deepen their knowledge about the subject matter, and internalise and personalise this information to best suit their unique self.

## Commodity-describing words

Like the discourse of advertising, the discourse of magazine covers has a heavy reliance on descriptive words, which relate to directly to commodities and consuming-actions. Adjectives and adverbs most commonly affirm desirable qualities, although

negative connotations are also present in the context of sensationalising stories (“shocking real-life” (5), “shocking discovery” (8)) or ridiculing undesirable behaviour (“bad kissers” (21)). They occur in positive, comparative and superlative forms. Table 3 offers a few examples of the adverbs and adjectives present in the corpus of texts. As is evident, comparative adverbs and adjectives appear least frequently, with positive and superlative adverbs and adjectives most often. Words that are linguistically positive yet connote a superlative state are included in the latter category.

These adverbs and adjectives function in an argumentative sense, in order to convince the reader that the person, object or action that they are describing is valuable. As already noted, a significant thrust of the language of magazine covers positions objects as commodities and actions as related to acquiring or understanding those commodities. The clearly asymmetrical nature of these describing words, which tend almost always towards positive implications, highlights the project of perfectionism discussed in Chapter 5. There is little to say about the adjectives in terms of their functionality besides their role in the project of sales. In grammatical terms, this can be expressed as a way of communicating relationality. The function of describing words on magazine covers can be framed in Halliday's (1985: 112) terms as “intensive” – in terms of the relation being framed in terms of “x is a” (where x is the noun or verb, and a is the describing word). This process can occur in two modes, the attributive, where ‘a is an attribute of x’ and the identifying, where ‘a is the identity of x’ (*ibid.*). I will take up the role of the identifying mode in Chapter 8, and briefly address the attributive mode here. In the case of all of the describing words noted in the table, the function is to frame the commodities and actions notes in terms of the qualities suggested by the description, so as to convince the reader that the latter is an characteristic of the former. “Food” is therefore defined by the fact that it is “yummy”, celebrities by the fact that they are “A-list”, “wag-bags” by the fact that they are “must-have”. The rather transparent aim of the relation between positive descriptors and commodities is to entrench their appeal and desirability.

Positive	Comparative	Superlative
Amazing, brilliant, clever, colourful, fast, fabulous, free, good, great, hot, luxurious, nice, real, sexy, sharp, simple, stunning, stylish, yummy.	Better, deeper, faster, firmer, longer, sharper, thinner.	A-list, best ( <i>-dressed, -selling</i> ), biggest, bloodiest, brand new, drop-dead, expert, hottest, instant, first, foolproof, guilt-free, maddest, most ( <i>powerful, confident, down to earth</i> ), must-have, perfect, red-hot, sensational, sexiest, top, ultimate.

Table 3: Commodity describing words

## Conclusion

This subsection has discussed the functions of the linguistic patterns that are evident across the corpus of texts in the context of the visual representation of a commodity-centred universe. Language is used within the multi-modal texts in such a way as to emphasise and contextualise the existence of commodities as well as to encourage action related to commodities and the lifestyles that they represent. In both visual and linguistic terms, magazine cover texts function to offer choice to their readers: information about the wealth of commodities available on the open market, and advice about how best to choose between them. And through both visual and verbal means, magazine covers contain within them a proliferation of voices that speak about the commodities and lifestyles that they feature. Each area of consumer interest has its own voice, promoting and describing the goods and lifestyles associated with it. The voices of the magazine cover as a genre are therefore plural. This plurality of voices within the media genre is mirrored in the plurality of voices present in the newsstand space. The latter can be considered a material, spatial manifestation of the former, and the former can be considered an intertextual and ideological representation of the latter. Indeed, the many actions and objects that are voiced through the magazine cover/newsstand contributes fundamentally to the sense of choice established by the visual proliferation of commodity images. The next section will explore this dynamic between voice and choice, and cast it in the terms of "heteroglossia".

## ***Commercial Heteroglossia***

In Chapter 4, it was observed that the newsstand evoked the sense of an inharmonious chorus of voices shouting out from the competitive and self-aggrandizing cover lines positioned on the covers of the magazines displayed resulted in the sense of a world of choice, at once potentially anxiety-inducing and liberating. There is a direct link between the function of magazine covers to sell and the discourse of sales that shapes the content of those texts. There is also a link between the sense of voice and choice in magazine covers and newsstands; it operates on both a social and semiotic level. The link between text and context in social/semiotic analysis stretches back to critical linguistics and informs contemporary CDA practice too. As Halliday (1978: 139) argues, there is a "constantly shifting relationship between the text and its environment" – and this is illustrated in the relationship between the space of the newsstand and the magazine cover.

The detailed discussion of the many visual and linguistic elements related to the representation of commodities on magazine covers has highlighted the multiplicity of techniques employed in the texts for attracting the attention of the viewer and encouraging an engagement with the text behind the text (the magazine behind the cover) as well as the commodities featured on both. This chapter has argued that magazine covers exploit and celebrate the sense of choice implicit to consumerism, and also that these choices are vocalised and directed towards the reader. This makes it necessary to theorise the multiplicity of voices and choices present in the text. I do this with recourse to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia", reformulating it in the context of consumer culture as a useful strategy for understanding the operations of magazine texts (and newsstand spaces) in celebrating, mediating and vocalising "worlds of choice".

Heteroglossia is a term of literary analysis, coined by Mikhail Bakhtin in order to describe the "many-languagedness" of the novel. According to Nancy Glazener (2001: 155):

Bakhtin derives the heteroglossia of literary discourses – their multiplicity and their tendentious interaction – ultimately from the stratification of social life, in which different social groups create distinctive discourses from their common language; as a result, the meaning of a word is always a function of its torque, of its being turned to incommensurate purposes by speakers who use it in different discourses.

In other words, heteroglossia refers to "the internal stratification of a unified national language into a multiplicity of linguistic styles, jargons and dialects differentiated by various social pressures and contexts" (Hirschkop, 1999: 22). Heteroglossia as Bakhtin formulated it is first and foremost "natural to society: it arises spontaneously from social diversity" (Todorov, 1984: 56-7) – and only then, because of this, literary. It is clear, therefore, that the application of the concept to social texts such as magazines is not only appropriate but also very helpful. Furthermore, Bakhtin argues that the literary object, as well containing its own internal contradictions, is interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it:

...the object is a condensation of heterological voices among which his own voice must also resound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice, without which his literary nuances would not be perceived, and without which they 'do not sound' (Bakhtin quoted in Todorov, 1984: 72).

Thus, a multiplicity of voices can be understood to operate within each text, and well as around each text. And the many voices around each text are partially made up of the voices of those other texts, as well as the other flows and nuances of social life. In the context of consumer magazine covers, the different social groups in question are the target markets of each magazine sub-genre – expectant mothers, fashion-slaves, runners, football fans, “lads”, “Cosmo girls” and lay interior decorators each have a distinctive expert “language” and sets of jargon that their magazines speak to them. Yet this multiplicity of languages takes place within a visual and linguistic discourse that is common to all consumer magazines covers: that of sales. The visual and linguistic styles employed by the texts are analogous in many ways to advertisements. The commercial is a specific version of the social that is geared towards consumption, buying and selling. It is in this sense that I append the adjective “commercial” to the literary concept of “heteroglossia” in order to tailor it to the analysis of magazine covers. Each magazine’s sub-language contributes to the complex, multi-layered, heteroglossic language of magazine covers collectively, which in turn forms the backdrop to each voice within each magazine text. Both newsstands and magazine covers function through a sense of commercial heteroglossia, and are comprised of a variety of voices offering a variety of choices to the reader, and which combine into a crowd of voices speaking at the same time.

Furthermore, commercial heteroglossia can be said to function at three levels: the textual, the ideational (or the level of the mediation of lifestyle choices) and the interpersonal (at the level of the invitation to the reader to interact with commodities as an imagined or actual shopper).

At the textual level, the multiple voices can be connected with the diverse genres of magazines, and the variety of subject matters that they address. The expert niche voices of runners, fitness enthusiasts, hairstylists, proud black women, music-lovers, film-buffs, foodies, antique enthusiasts, interior decorators, fashionistas, celebrity-watchers and new mothers are textually present. As well as this, the suggestive individual voices connected with personalities in the public eye, both iconic celebrities, anonymous models, and ordinary people crossing over into celebrity, are also present in the (inter)textual mix.

At the ideational level, the voices of the lifestyles suggested by the magazine texts in their entirety are present. These voices suggest the existence of ultimate sublime identities that subsume all other aspects of the social self: the ultimate Runner,

Slimmer, Mother, Woman, Man, Computer Expert, Homemaker, Cook, Musician or Celebrity. The voices themselves become something from which the consumer is invited to choose, themselves options for consumption: lifestyle commodities. In other words, the proliferation of voices present in consumer magazine covers as a genre are made available as a set of options from which the consumer can select the one to which they most relate and wish to listen. At this level of analysis, commercial heteroglossia describes the multiplicity of voices promoting particular lifestyles within consumer culture, *and* the multiplicity of the very lifestyles themselves on offer. In late modernity, argues Giddens (1991: 81), individuals follow lifestyles because they "have no choice but to choose", and for the utilitarian necessity to "give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity." On the ideational level then, the commodified world of choice vocalised in commercial heteroglossia, links in directly with a plethora of lifestyle options and is central to the consumerist project.

At an interpersonal level, commercial heteroglossia serves to do something to the reader, that is, situate him or her specifically as a consumer of commodities: a shopper. The clear linkage of lifestyles with consumption and commodities compels action. As Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999: 44) point out, in magazine-commodities, "the lifestyles on offer are generally dependent upon all other sorts of commodities". By presenting a multiplicity of commodity options, and suggestions about what to do with those options, commercial heteroglossia functions to centre the action of consumption within the lifestyles imagined at the ideational level, and to construct the reader with the terms of actions that revolve around shopping. The implications of these three levels of commercial heteroglossia for the dialectic of manipulation and empowerment is considered next.

### **Possibilities for agency: choice and empowerment**

The previous chapter argued that the primary mode through which the consumerist hegemony is mediated is a "mechanics of gloss" – without fail, commodities are represented in a glossy, seductive visual and verbal language that celebrates mass-produced perfection and seeks to encourage human interaction with this world of goods. In this way, the representation and vocalisation of commodities also operates within the subject-object dialectic. Commercial heteroglossia requires the presence of both object and subjects in order to enact choice and voice as a mediating process between commodities and consumers. The question of what possibilities for agency the

texts make available within their discourses is thus central to an analysis of the role of consumers in the world of the newsstand/magazine cover.

The multiplicity of voices addressed at the same time to the consumer result in what Giddens (1991: 3) describes as “a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities”. There is no doubt that each magazine cover crams in as much diverse information as possible, all of these mediated in many modes and often referring to different subjects and inviting different practices: each choice offered to the reader is analogous to a voice within the text. By being grouped together in the magazine cover text these voices/choices offer a mini world of opportunity and choice. This is then multiplied by their collective presence at the newsstand, where each mini world of choice converges and merges into a massive world of choice, reiterated over two levels: the textual and the spatial. The glut of textual voices invokes and offers a corollary glut of consumption choices. This is the result of the visual and textual montage/mosaic of the magazine cover and newsstand, and this is how heteroglossia can be seen to operate in the corpus of data, and consumer culture more broadly. Whether or not this noisy chorus of voices and chaotic world of choices functions to manipulate or empower the consumer is less at question than is the observation that both perspectives could have relevance to an individual's reading/viewing experience. A textual analysis cannot ascertain those experiences, but it can highlight that both are possible.

There is potential for both manipulation and empowerment within the surfeit of choice and voice present in consumer magazine covers, and indeed consumerist mediation writ large. Manipulation could be encoded into the imperative voice urging constant consumption (visual or material) of commodities; yet empowerment could be achieved by the potential mastery over that chaos in the guise of finding and selecting the right commodities for the self, and the ability to calmly turn a blind eye to the rest of the noise. Although, as Giddens says, the diversity of options could be confusing and stressful, the navigation of those options could in turn provide moments of pleasure and a satisfying sense of purpose. In this sense, it could be argued that the function of the voice is to temper the choice, to channel, mediate and manage it, to vocalise how it can be worked with, to illustrate the possibilities of choice from among “a variety of products in response to a repertoire of wants” (Rose, 1990: 227). This may be a perfectly valid observation in the context of the single magazine cover, but when taken in the context of the genre as a whole and the newsstand as a site of consumption, which constantly re-mediates and reiterates the presence of choice and how to actualise it on a personal level, the potentially empowering aspects of the voice ring hollow. For once those

voices are multiplied across the media genre and newsstand structure, as well as across time as new issues of each magazine are produced, they lose meaning, and melt back into a discourse that seeks to promote consumption in any form, as often as possible, and in such a way as to suggest that approaches to consumption should be consistently practiced, improved and updated. This relates to the constant velocity of fashion that dictates which kinds of commodities are most desirable at any particular moment in time, and thus how consumption is “regulated by high-turnover criteria of ‘appropriateness’” (Appadurai, 1986: 32). Articulating the nuances of a system of choice that functions so as to condition and regulate the behaviour of the individual, Rose (1990: 227) argues: “the self is not merely enabled to choose, but *obliged* to construe a life in terms of its choices, its powers, its values” (emphasis added). Consumerism does not include within its catalogue of commodity choices the option to not choose.

Barry Schwartz (2004) argues that the proliferation of choice plays a central function within neo-liberal ideology. This ideological assumption is concisely summarised by Zygmunt Bauman (2007: 61) as “the final triumph of the individual’s right to self-assertion, understood primarily as the indivisible sovereignty of the unencumbered subject; a sovereignty which tends in turn to be interpreted as the individual’s right to free choice.” Schwartz argues that the discourse of unlimited choice operates to rationalise the proliferation of goods and services that, although framed as allowing self-determination and the freedom of choice, do not necessarily contribute to individual happiness and empowerment. He argues that too much freedom from constraint can be a bad thing, and terms this the “tyranny of choice”, which can result in the loss of a sense of control over life and decision-making and even clinical depression (in fact, he argues that there is a link between the rise in cases of clinical depression in the US and the unprecedented levels of freedom of choice in contemporary US society). It is inadvisable to argue that the freedom of choice promoted by consumer magazine covers could lead to clinical depression – textual analysis alone is ill-equipped to come to such conclusions. But the role that these media texts play in promoting such cultures of choice is important to note. Schwartz’s argument throws light on the relationship between choice and empowerment (happiness), suggesting that the two are not necessarily unproblematically linked as suggested by normative consumerist discourse.

Although there may appear to be invitations to resist the dominant consumerist hegemony within magazine covers, particularly within the invitations to individualise one’s consumption, this cancels itself out due to the absence of an option to not consume. Even those individuals who choose to free-read at newsstands instead of

actually buying the magazines are engaging in a profound form of visual consumption, even if this is cast as some kind of resistance to the consumerist system, or a subversion thereof. The displacement of actual, material consumption (buying) with simulated consumption through images (looking) may be liberating and resistant on one level, but it also evidences a continued choice to engage in consumerism and thus maintains the dominance of the commodity in its many guises and proliferations.

Neither can it be doubted that the multiplicity of voices and language styles present within the magazine cover genre is to some extent liberating and challenging of centralised power; instead of one, totalitarian voice commanding the consumption, in only one fashion, of a preordained and prescribed type of commodity, a grand multiplicity of options of commodities and modes of consumption issue from every corner of social life and cultural interest. It is well known that the concept of heteroglossia contains within it some implications of liberation and empowerment.

Bakhtin argues that the novel epitomises the concept and points out that when the novel and its many voices flourish, central power weakens (Todorov, 1984: 58). But this cannot be said to be the case for the consumer magazine as a genre, if the central power of our times is considered to be late capitalism and its ubiquitous drive towards consumption. By clearly delineating the commercial functions of the type of heteroglossia employed by consumer magazine covers, its liberating potential is shown to be somewhat undermined. Following Fairclough, the framework of "commercial heteroglossia"

combines the concepts of 'heteroglossia' and hegemony: it stresses the diversity and proliferation of discursive practices and generative processes in which they are creatively articulated; but it sees these processes as limited by hegemonic relations and structures, and as a terrain of hegemonic struggles" (Fairclough, 1998: 145).

In other words, although there is potential for empowerment within voice and choice, it needs be concluded that the operations of commercial heteroglossia tend to err on the side of manipulation. The choice and voice present within consumer magazine covers operates within the domain of "conditional freedom" (Chouliaraki, 2008), which defines the tensions within consumerist aesthetics and mediation. This is relevant not only to consumers who are constantly confronted with commodified lifestyles and choices, but the reflexive academic researcher who must also live in a society that is relentlessly commodified: "you may resent commodification, but you can't argue with it, and you can't help practicing it, short of heroic abstentions of retreats" (Ohmann, 1995: 348).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a detailed discussion of the objects and strategies, visual and linguistic, that define the role that commodities play in the consumer magazine cover text. It has explored the various visual strategies used to represent commodities, which culminate in a sense of the freedom of choice. Then, it explored the linguistic techniques which give voice to the many ways of engaging with or consuming those commodities. Together, the ideas of choice and voice as related to commodities culminated in an argument that magazine covers as a genre, and by implication newsstands, embody a type of heteroglossia defined by its commercial intentions and undertones. The significance of this in the context of the tensions between manipulation and empowerment present throughout consumerist discourses was then explored with specific reference to the operations of choice and voice.

The next two chapters take up analyses of two other central themes present on consumer magazine covers: the presence of bodies and faces respectively. Chapter 7 builds upon the strong notion of “object” implicit throughout this chapter in the discussion of commodities and choice in order to explore the ways in which bodies are commodified on magazine covers, and the implications of this for both visual cultures and the subject-object relationship. Chapter 8 picks up on the notion of “voice” and follows it to the face, exploring the ways in which the faces featured on magazine covers operate as mirrors to invite self-identity construction and consumerist reflexivity.

## 7. The eye: Consumerism's pornographic imagination

This chapter takes as its empirical reference point the representation of bodies on the covers of consumer magazines. Images of bodies are one of the items that consumerism places upon the brilliantly lit stage of the public realm, and are thus present in everyday life both textually (on magazine covers) and spatially (in newsstands). These images are presented purely for visual consumption, represent the commodification of the body and invite escape into a world of sexualised fantasy, which this chapter will describe as a "pornographic imagination". This involves not necessarily only direct fantasies about the acts of sex, but also fantasies about the aesthetic potential and beauty of the body, and the pleasure to be obtained in consuming the body as an object. This chapter seeks to explore the relationship between images of the body on consumer magazine covers and the practices of visual culture. It offers a discussion of the operations of the representation of bodies as visual commodities in consumer culture, and then a discussion of the operations of the eye upon those bodies.

In order to do this, it is necessary to discuss in detail the priorities assigned to visual representations, as well as practices of looking, in order to understand how it is that the eye and images of the body interact. It is argued that the body is commodified as a sexual object, which is aimed at the eye and to titillate visual pleasure: a central operation of consumer culture aesthetics. It is images of beautiful bodies and insistent and consistent sexualisation of those bodies across the continuum of glossiness that contributes to the seductive appeal of consumer culture. This is nothing new. This is known: sex sells. What this chapter seeks to add to this existing knowledge, is a discussion of how that sexualisation can contribute to a type of pornographic imagination – a space of sexualised fantasy – which provides grist to the mill of commercial culture, itself defined by the visual. "The eye" in this chapter title refers to the love of looking and the erotics of visual culture.

### The power of the public gaze

The influence on social and media theory of Foucault's (1979) theory of the disciplinary power of the gaze, as illustrated by Bentham's Panopticon, is hard to overestimate (Barrett, 1991: 137). A key element of this theory that needs highlighting in the context

of this study is the public nature of the Panoptical gaze: it is the visibility and transparency of technologies or discourses of surveillance, or practices of looking, that imbue the structure with the power to influence the behaviour of those who internalise that gaze upon themselves. Speaking in the context of relating Bentham's design to the Enlightenment project, Foucault (1980: 154) explains that it refuses to tolerate areas of darkness, that it

represents a mode of operation through which power will be exercised by virtue of the mere fact of things being known and people seen in a sort of immediate, collective and anonymous gaze. ... If Bentham's project aroused interest, this was because it provided a formula applicable to many domains, the formula of 'power through transparency', subjection by 'illumination'.

The newsstand and consumer magazine cover can be defined as spaces of appearance: in Arendt's terms, an agonal space of display, illumination and visibility. In Foucauldian terms, then, perhaps the public realm can be conceptualised as manifest in magazine covers/newsstands as an instantiation of "power through transparency, subjection by illumination". In material terms, explicitly present technologies of surveillance in retail spaces could be understood to operate to regulate the behaviour of people who pass through, as described in Chapter 4. More importantly however, the discourse of visibility, that is, the primacy of the acts of looking and being looked at which are central to the arrangement of both newsstand spaces and magazine cover texts, highlight the ways in which the power relationships of consumer culture are organised around the idea of the gaze: who is looking, who is being looked at. What Foucault's conception of power as a shifting set of diffuse and multipunctual relations (Deleuze, 1988: 32) highlights in the context of a definition of the public realm as a space of appearance is the necessity to interrogate how a multiplicity of gazes define and shape the terrain of the subject-object relationship; that is, how the image-object is gazed upon and invites desire and visual consumption, as well as how subjects are objectified as images, and in turn how the practice of looking can regulate ideas of subjectivity. The politics and operation of the gaze has been theorised and explored by feminist critics, most notably Mulvey (1989), who in the context of film studies, articulated the way in which the spectatorial gaze upon the female body on the screen is masculinised, leading to scopophilic pleasure in "using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (Mulvey, 1989: 18). This model was appropriated and extended by feminist media theorists, who showed how a similar set of visual relations were set in place by the glossy magazine as a genre (McRobbie, 2009: 99) and which invited, exploited and then sublimated in order to regulate a

homospectatorial woman on woman practice of looking (Fuss, 1994). McRobbie (2009: 54) describes how Foucault's power relations defined by a Panoptical omnipresence of looking has evolved in postfeminist culture into a type of Deleuzian "luminosity", in which selective spaces of attention are "put under a spotlight" for visual consumption in everyday life. This chapter argues that one of the areas upon which the spotlight of attention (or the power of a multiplied, eroticised gaze) falls in the media genre of the consumer magazine cover, is the body, which is employed to stimulate sexual fantasy attached to the project of consumption. The attention paid to the power of the gaze by feminist theory and analysis will emerge as a key framework for the analysis of the ways in which the body is represented in mass media, and an awareness of the inherent gender politics of the representation of bodies will underlie the analysis offered in this chapter.

In Chapter 2, visibility or the culture of display was highlighted as a central operation of consumer culture aesthetics. This chapter focuses on the implications of the ways in which bodies are made visible in the public realm of the consumer magazine cover, particularly the eroticised beautiful body which, as the description to follow will show, forms the dominant trope of consumer magazine covers. In particular, I want to explore what kinds of possibilities for visual interaction are made possible by the images. In other words, I want to analyse the ways in which images of sexualised bodies operate with respect to the action of looking (and ultimately connect that to questions of the power of consumerist mediation in terms of the consequences of looking for visibility, and vice versa). Looking is different from seeing, it implies agency and the direction of the gaze. To look at the body is to actively engage with it visually, rather than simply allow it to pass through the field of vision. It is stating the obvious that many consumer magazine covers invite the viewer to look at the body by virtue of a practice of display and illumination of a plethora body-images. Before analysing images of bodies, it is therefore helpful to deconstruct the meaning of the word "look" in the context of its usage on consumer magazine covers.

## **Looking sexy, Sexy looks**

The word "look" holds a particular currency in magazine discourse. This word occurs as a noun: "A-list looks" (49), "sexy up your look" (7), the title of a magazine (41, 42); as well as a verb: "Look hot" (6), "look and feel like the most confident woman in the room" (11), "look gorgeous" (16), "look and feel amazing" (28), and so on. According to my

dictionary, to look means to do one of several things: (i) to use the eyes, (ii) to search for, (iii) to pay attention to, (iv) to appear or seem, or (v) to face. It is a slippery word, adaptable to subtle uses in a variety of situations on magazine covers. Let us address each of the dictionary definitions in turn in the context of magazine covers. Firstly, the texts are visual, and require the sense of sight to be consumed; the reader must *look at* them. Secondly, as argued in the previous chapter, magazine cover discourse encourages the search for a personalised experience of the world of commodities that they mediate. Thirdly, as was discussed in Chapter 5, appearances are of central importance to the visual structure of magazine covers, which are designed in order to be glossy, appealing and attractive. Fourthly, as was clear from the discussion of newsstands, magazine covers both vie for the attention of the consumer and profess to pay attention to the unique personal needs of each reader. This message is also incorporated into the discourses aimed at readers, who are unfailingly encouraged to achieve the same attractiveness in their appearance. Finally, it is also clear that magazine covers are the outward facing brand of the magazine, which operates to address the viewer directly. This, as well as the role of the images of faces prevalent to the genre, will be taken up and discussed in depth in Chapter 8.

Overall, it is clear that the multilayered meanings of the noun "look" or the verb "to look" are knitted into a complex textual economy in the consumer magazine cover. The various looks presented are interwoven with a variety of invitations to look, adding up to a set of visual relations which can be formulated in Foucauldian terms. The primacy of appearance, and the act of looking in consumer magazine discourse refers also to a broader appeal to, and reliance on, visual consumption where the reader is invited to use the eyes to consume a variety of images of commodities, celebrities, and so on. Here the emphasis is on magazines being the *subject* of the eyes. At the same time, however, the act of looking (good) emphasises the importance of appearance, of seeming "gorgeous, amazing" to other lookers. Here the emphasis is on being the *object* of others' eyes. This tension between the subjective and objective acts of looking is important, and I will return to it in more depth in the next chapter which addresses Foucault's theories of the "care of the self" in the context of the possibilities for self-identity exploration created by magazine cover texts. Here, however, I would like to focus on the other meanings of the word: the act of looking at the objects within the magazine cover, the appeal for attention and the emphasis on appearance as a form of value-identification. Especially, I would like to address the meaning of the phrase, "to look hot/gorgeous/sexy", which recurs in various forms, explicit or implicit, across the corpus. Looking good in these ways is very often framed in sexual terms.

One set of adverbs and adjectives that is often appended (explicitly or implicitly) to the word “look” requires special attention: sexy/sexier/sexiest. These are related to a larger linguistic programme of discussing sex (how to get and improve it) and love (how to find and manage romantic relationships). The describer “sexy” or “sexiest” is used to describe people: “Australia’s sexiest woman” (1), or a feeling (7). It is also used to describe appearances, be it of hairstyles (6), or clothes (6, 13). Sexy people are those that invoke a desire to have sex with them, but the meaning of sexy objects is somewhat less clear. A hairstyle or a coat can be described as “sexy” both because they make the wearer/owner feel more attractive, and because the objects make them more attractive to others. I don’t want to overemphasise the prominence of the “sex” describing words, in fact, these occurred much less frequently in the corpus than I expected, despite the fact that sexiness saturates the visual elements of the magazine covers. It is this saturation of sexiness that is contained within the visual representation of bodies, and this may be one of the reasons that in verbal terms, the word “sexy” is employed rarely, but when it is, it is writ large.

Despite the low occurrence of the words “sex” (7, 8) and “sexy” (5, 13) across the corpus, when they are used they are featured in eye-catching, dominant, large typeface that takes up a great deal of space in the design of the cover. This could be considered a literal manifestation of the “sex sells” strategy: using a word that never fails to attract attention in contemporary culture, its inclusion is largely intended to make the magazine as a whole a more appealing commodity to consumers scanning the newsstand for a title that they would like to buy. In this sense, the word “sex(y)” is used in a visual manner, typographically treated in order to function as a sign that is at once linguistic and ocular. Furthermore, it should be noted that the lettering of the word “sex” has an “eye” (which itself has two). An eye, typographically, is that semi-circular part of the “e” that forms a closed slit similar to the eye of a needle. Other parts of letters are also analogous to body parts – “f” and “t” have arms, “a” has an ear, “r” has a shoulder, and so on (Carter, 2002). But this visual link (typography, after all, is the art of making text *look good*, and of creating further levels of meaning through its visual treatment) between sex and the eye is something that is worth further exploration. Without overemphasizing the meaning of an “eye” being central to the word “sex”, this typographical observation leads into a discussion of the role of visual culture and the centrality of practices of looking to our ideas about sexiness as mediated through consumer magazines.

This section has touched upon the linguistic role of the describing word “sexy”, which is often linked to the appearance of people or commodities – their “looks”. Furthermore, although not always explicitly present in linguistic terms as an adjective, it can be argued that the visual message of sexiness often does the work of an adjective. Although sex is linguistically diffident in the multimodal texts, it saturates the visual elements of magazine covers. This linguistic understatement might indicate the last traces of prudishness, an unwillingness to verbally admit to the pervasive exploitation of sex in order to sell (coats and hair products), or the fact that “sexiness” has become so naturalised as a consumerist value that it no longer bears explicit explanation. Nevertheless, the visual presence of a message of sexiness is central to the genre of consumer magazine covers. This message is largely encoded in the images of bodies, which form a central motif and subject of cover designs.

### ***Images of the Body***

Framed and cropped in a variety of ways, the bodies of men and women are often the explicit focus point of magazine cover photographs. Foucault's various studies relating to “discourses of micro-power” highlight how the body can be conceptualised as “the place where diminutive and locally limited social practices meet and connect with power on a large scale” (Franckenstein, 1996: 2). In other words, the ways in which the body is touched, dressed, marked, and represented as a sign, are related to broader social power relations (ibid.) This means that the specific ways in which bodies are represented on magazine covers, their shape, size, adornment, and posture encode meaning about the types of bodies that are valued and promoted by the political-economy that produces consumer magazines. The results of these power relations with the body have profound implications for consumer culture, which has evolved into aesthetic practices centred on a project of perfection related to the body. This project is clearly a central theme in consumer magazine covers, and is plainly obvious through the visual representation of male and female bodies thereon.

### **Aspirational physiques**

It was observed in the thick description of the newsstand that, surrounded by images of famous and beautiful people, the ordinariness of the consumers passing through the space was laid bare. In contrast to the normal, usually modestly attired bodies of the

people who pass through newsstand spaces, the majority of bodies represented on magazine covers are lean, fit, youthful, slim and well-toned and garbed in revealing clothing. In male bodies, this translates into a “tyranny of the six-pack” (Gill et al., 2004) (visible on *Men’s Fitness* (44)); in female bodies this translates into a tyranny of slenderness (Chernin, 1981) ample cleavage, flat midriffs and firm thighs, which occurs across a variety of other titles. A great deal of scholarship has addressed the representation of bodies in the media, and the consensus is that in western culture, lean strong and physically fit bodies are visually valued (Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) quoted in Franckenstein 1996: 2-3). Ideal male bodies are “lithe, slim and mesomorphic, ... lean, muscular” (Boni 2002: 470). Ideal female bodies are slim, curvaceous and buxom. Both women and men are invited to view ideal type fit and healthy bodies, including the famous *Men’s Health* style torso (44), on the covers of magazines devoted to health or fitness (see 28, 44, 45, 68). Furthermore, according to two studies quoted by Gleeson and Frith (2001: 4):

Content analyses of the size and shape of men and women represented in the media consistently show that representations of women have become thinner (Silverstein, Purdue, Peterson and Kelly 1986) and representations of men have become more muscular (Leit, Pope and Grey 2001).

This well-established pattern of bodily representation in the media adds up to what Skeggs (2001: 303) terms a “scopic economy of body capital” in which some bodies are more highly valued than others”. The enduring power dynamics of the ways in which bodies are represented in consumer culture aesthetics are aptly summarised by Gill (2009: 139) as “a visual economy that remains profoundly ageist and heteronormative.” This is certainly not unique to contemporary culture; Foucault outlines, for example, how classic Greek sculpture celebrated the beauty of the young, fit, male body (Foucault, 1986: 200). The body as image is a fundamental part of human aesthetics, consciousness and reflexivity, and is manifested in a variety of forms across various cultures. That it is an image central to the designs of magazine cover texts is not something that is in itself inherently wrong. But the particular and eliminating definition of what type of body is beautiful, and the extreme value placed on beautiful bodies in contemporary western culture is particularly notable, and is illustrated not only by asymmetrical media representation such as that on magazine covers, but also the normalisation of cosmetic surgery. Franckenstein (1996) provides a detailed and compelling analysis of German media representations of Cher, the iconic cosmetically enhanced female body of the 1990s, and argues that she represents both an object of

veneration and discomfort for the viewer. In the current corpus of data under analysis, cosmetic surgery is not an explicit emphasis (except on the cover of *Brand New You* (47), a magazine about cosmetic surgery). But it can be acknowledged as implicitly present throughout the representation of perfect bodies, and in the images of celebrities well known for their procedures, such as Jordan (see 56, 5), whose obviously enhanced breasts leave little doubt as to their origin. Beautiful bodies are valued more highly by, and therefore dominate, magazine covers. The uncritical acceptance of cosmetic surgery implicit across the representation of bodies can also be understood as part of the operations of the project of perfection discussed in Chapter 5.

In this sense, the majority of images of bodies are mediated in the hyperreal, glossy aesthetic, and that they are subjected to a celebribised mode of representation, which offers an idealised aesthetic of the human body. There is no doubt that hyperreal bodies, both male and female, are both exploited and celebrated on the magazine cover (depending on whether the reading is situated in the manipulation or empowerment paradigm). This section will discuss in more detail the ways in which these young and beautiful bodies are sexualised in such a way that compliments and extends the celebribised, hyperreal aesthetic. First, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that images of bodies that do not fit the stereotypes of attractiveness also appear in the corpus of texts, and to discuss the significance of these, admittedly minimal and marginalised, representations.

### **The marginalisation of excessive bodies**

In contrast to the idealised bodies common to magazine covers, excessive bodies (those that are anorexic or obese) (Ferris, 2003: 258) are either altogether absent from, or are literally or discursively marginalised on the magazine cover. When not conspicuously absent, they are represented as anomalies and included as small thumbnail images dominated by images of more acceptable bodies<sup>34</sup>. On *Closer* (5) an image of an anorexic boy is literally pushed to the edges of the cover. Next to it is a paparazzi photograph displaying Jade Goody's bulges after a "booze binge", the image also pushed into the corner. On this same cover, a headline proclaims: "New mum's drastic weight loss!" and illustrates two celebrity mothers who recently gave birth.

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<sup>34</sup> An interesting exception occurs on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* (7), which features a portrait of Charlotte Church, and a strapline that reads "Charlotte: Why I feel sexy when I'm big". In contrast to the *Cosmopolitan* norm of featuring a photograph of a very slim model cropped mid thigh and at the forehead, Church's voluptuous curves are noticeable even though her portrait has been cropped at the midriff.

“Before” pictures featuring post-pregnancy figures are contrasted with “after” pictures showing them trimmed down and flat-tummied three and five weeks later respectively. This illustrates how another type of body is considered abject by consumer culture: the pregnant and post-pregnant form, both connotatively related to obesity. Although pregnant bodies are celebrated in one sense – when the media try to guess if a celebrity is pregnant<sup>35</sup>, for example (see 25), or on the cover of magazines devoted to pregnancy (see 52), these pregnant bodies are represented in a way that deaccentuates and minimises the pregnant belly, and celebrates the woman’s retention of beauty and sex appeal *despite* her pregnancy. Note, for example, the cover of *Reveal* (56), which shows images of a pregnant and post-delivery Jordan, the former displaying the pregnant belly in all of its glory (but once again marginalised to the bottom edge of the page), the latter displaying a “good as new” flat stomach. But once again, the emphasis is on the way in which the abject body was erased as soon as possible after the delivery, with Jordan’s “bikini body” praised as an example, and an “amazing diet” promising to help other women achieve the same. As Dworkin and Wachs (2004: 612) summarise, in media representations, “the pregnant form is presented as maternally successful yet aesthetically problematic, in need of ‘getting your body back.’” This highlights how the discourse of beauty is in itself disciplinary,

The anorexic body<sup>36</sup>, the obese body, the pregnant body, and the pregnancy-damaged body can be understood as marginalised and excessive bodies, *real* bodies, which are continuously compared to and dominated by hyperreal, glossy, fantasised beautiful bodies on magazine covers. Adelman and Ruggi (2008: 557), exploring what they term beautiful and abject bodies in the Brazilian context, argue that these notions are established as “particular classificatory notions”, which could in turn be considered discursive forms that discipline the social self. The tensions between hyperreal beauty and realistic, or abject appearances can be linked back to the tensions between the glossy portraiture of celebrities and the anti-aesthetic, undermining role of paparazzi photography. The ugly or extreme body is marginalised on the magazine cover so as to

<sup>35</sup> Or when a celebrity is pregnant, and agrees to do a nude photo shoot. The famous *Vanity Fair* (August, 1991) cover depicting a nude, pregnant Demi Moore is another example of the celebration of the pregnant form – again, conditional upon the glow of fame and celebrity and a hyperreal mode of portraiture, and an exception to the rule of body depiction on the magazine cover, despite several copycat poses by other celebrities, such as Britney Spears.

<sup>36</sup> Some feminist scholars have argued that an anorexic aesthetic has been mainstreamed in fashion imagery (McRobbie, 2009: 95-6), and indeed it is true that the majority of women pictured in the corpus of texts are much thinner than average. Nevertheless, this thinness tends to suggest fitness and glowing health, rather than eating disorders. This points to a refusal, on the part of magazine producers, to acknowledge the discursive connections between the aesthetic of slimness and the actual picture of extreme, skeletal eating disorder, as evidenced by the juxtaposition of the anorexic boy and the frenzy of weight loss stories on *Closer* (5). It also suggests that magazine producers are very careful about the kinds of women they picture on magazine covers, and avoid excessively thin girls so as to avoid the public outrage and censure that may arise.

function as a foil and emphasis for the celebrated perfect body and in turn to normalise and naturalise the latter in the world of the magazine cover, even though magazine readers and newsstand visitors are bound to know that such ideals do not reflect reality. The image-traces of abject bodies that exist in consumer magazine covers serve to remind the viewer of the health and vitality of the beautiful bodies, which, as will be argued next, are framed as such through constant visual suggestion of their sex appeal.

### **The objectification of hyperreal bodies**

The idea of sexuality and bodily presence are inseparable. There can be no doubt that the beautiful bodies represented on the covers of magazines, by mere fact of their aesthetics, are sexualised and are thereby subjected to eroticized gazes. In this way, the images operate textually to objectify perfect bodies, thus rearticulating them as commodities made available for visual consumption. The visual presence of both hyperreal male and female bodies exist within a visual economy of power relations: the power of an image to invoke and hold the gaze, as well as the power of the gaze to alight upon, or flick away from, a particular image of a body.

### **Sexualised body-commodities**

There can be no doubt that female bodies are subjected to objectifying gazes to a much greater degree than male bodies:

Feminists working in media and cultural studies have sought to chart the ways in which the female body has been commodified, regulated and produced within media representations and media-related practices (Thornham, 2003: 77).

This important body of work has shown how images of women are used in media representations such that “man can live out his fantasies and obsessions … by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey, 1989: 15). The visual objectification of women in this sense is clearly prevalent across the corpus of texts, especially on those magazines aimed at a heterosexual male readership. These feature liberally the trope of “girl in bikini and high heels” (see 40, 51, 63) or wearing sexy outfits such as hot pants (2) or a tight mini-dress (17), striking poses functioning for pure, provocative display, such as with the arms raised above the heads, or hands resting on the upper thighs or hips. This

feminine touch, described by Goffman (1976) as often utilised in the representation of women interacting with commodities, symbolises the suggestion of value. In touching themselves in this way, gently and without a clear purpose connected with the gesture, with the hands resting on the hips or thighs, or draped over the head, the feminine touch operates here to suggest a special kind of value, analogous perhaps to that of commodities waiting to be bought up or consumed. But their brand of commodification is fleshly – it is not only consumption but also consummation that they promise. These images of women that use them as objects contain a message of sex appeal and fantasized flattery to the male eyes that consume them. Their sexiness is where their value as human beings lies; it is hard not to draw a comparison with images of women in top-shelf porn magazines<sup>37</sup>. Although the lad mag genre is softer, less explicit and avoids the graphic detail that typifies top-shelf magazines, there is no doubt that the former imitate a few of the visual strategies of the latter. Such sexy images of female bodies are objectified and commodified, utilised in order to sell magazines and the commodity lifestyles that they promote. An example of clear commodification of the female body in the service of selling commodities is the cover of *Stuff* (63), which includes a scantily-clad female model on its cover even though the magazine is about gadgets and technology. Similarly, the cover of *PC Format* (51) although a magazine about computer technology, includes an image of a woman in a bikini, even though this has no relation to the subject matter included in the issue. Both of these images also reveal another way in which women are often represented for the male gaze: in long shot, with the entire body visible from top to toe. The excess of skin is an erotic strategy: bared sections of the body imply nakedness, which is a sexualised state bereft of innocence since Eve's fall.

In analysing the trope of woman as visual object and commodity on the covers of magazines aimed at the male market, let us focus on the example of *Loaded* (39), a well known "lad-mag", which features hip hop star 50Cent flanked by two women who wear metallic bikinis and high heel shoes. 50Cent however is fully clothed, wearing jeans, a shirt and a jacket. Franckenstein (1997: 12) comments that a common trope in media representation of men and women is that the former more often appear "dressed" and the latter are more often "undressed before the public eye" – nowhere is this more graphically illustrated than the *Loaded* cover and the lad mag genre more broadly. It is also illustrated by the two *Arena* covers (1, 2), one of which features a fully-clothed man, the other a woman in hot pants. There is no doubt that more female

<sup>37</sup> See the following photographs, which depict the front covers of top-shelf magazines at one of the newsstand sites: 9.5, 9.38, 9.48, 9.50, 9.71. They can be viewed at <http://picasaweb.google.com/MiQ.PhD/NewsstandNo9>

than male flesh is exposed across the corpus of data, and that it is by no means surprising to notice that women are very often dressed in revealing garments. Both *Loaded* women strike stylised, “sexy” poses, seeming to ignore 50Cent and directing their attention to the viewer. The woman on his right faces forward, displaying her voluptuous breasts, flat stomach and firm thighs, her hands hooked into and pulling down her bikini bottoms, drawing attention to her crotch. The woman on his left faces the camera from a turned body, emphasising her waist, buttocks, thighs and shapely legs. In these kinds of representations of women, where they are portrayed as merely the accessory to the male presence, and the sexualised, objectified version of that moreover, it is clear that the central message about the female body is that it exists for the titillation and visual and sexual pleasure of some men, and as the objectified sex-ornaments of others. Feminist media critics argue (justifiably, I believe) that the message of such images

to girls (as eventual women) is they should always be sexually available, always have sex on their minds, be willing to be dominated and even sexually aggressed against, and they will be gazed on as sexual objects (Merskin, 2004: 120).

Furthermore, these sex-object images of women are becoming increasingly prolific across mainstream media. Gill (2007b: 151) argues that today, sexualisation works somewhat differently: “women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so”. Examples of this kind of attitude are notable in the *Loaded* girls, as well as in the provocative stance of Nicole Kidman on *Vanity Fair* (67).

Male bodies are far less frequently featured on the consumer magazine cover, and even though there is undoubtedly less male flesh on offer than there is female, male bodies are also eroticised, aimed at the sexually consuming gaze of the heterosexual woman and the admiring, homoerotic (repressed or expressed) gaze of the man. Take, for example, the much discussed (Gill et al, 2004) *Men's Health* style torso featured on men's fitness magazines. *Men's Fitness* magazine (44) features a man with a naked torso, turned towards the viewer and smiling invitingly – he is the equivalent to the sexually available girl-in-bikini. Alexander (2003: 541) describes this framing of masculinity as “wholesome”, where “these are men to be trusted—as husband, partner, or friend”. The sexual invitation implicit in the expression of the *Men's Fitness* model is accentuated by his bare torso. The copy of *Men's Health* (45) in the corpus, on the

other hand, features a man in a muscle-hugging t-shirt, which outlines his bulk. His face wears a frown and thereby ambiguates the message of sexual invitation, suggesting that he is in control and invulnerable. Bordo (2000: 186) argues that such images represent a “face-off masculinity”, where the male models “present themselves as powerful, armoured, emotionally impenetrable”. Despite their expressions, both these types of men are sexualized ideal types, fit, muscular and conventionally goodlooking. Images of the sexually appealing, strong and fit man – a latter day Adonis – appeal to both the heterosexual female gaze and the male homo/metrosexual gaze, and are sexualised as body-commodities much like the blonde-woman-in-bikini trope.

### Sexy bodies as ideational image-objects

Objectification is not the only part of the story about how the body is sexualised on the magazine cover. The female body is not only exploited for the benefit of heterosexual male readers. Women readers are constantly faced with images of other women, beautiful, well-dressed, glamorous, often famous – always “sexy”, even if they’re “big” like Charlotte Church (7) – on the covers of magazines aimed at a female readership. Here women are less often represented in long shot with the whole body visible, and are generally fully clothed, yet maintain sexualised postures and expressions, the suggestion being that a significant degree of their confidence and self-love comes from “feeling sexy”. Images on magazine covers aimed at women also highlight sexualised elements of the female anatomy: breastbones and cleavage are commonly accentuated (see 42, 43, 52, 60, 67, 69). The textual function of these images is, quite simply, to prioritise sexy woman as ideal types in the ideational mode. As Gill (2007b: 149) argues, “in today’s media, possession of a ‘sexy body’ is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity”.

Writing about television and film, Thornham (2003: 90) argues, “the female spectator has been invited to identify with her screen self as object, not as active subject”. In this sense, the image of the female body becomes a spectacle addressed to the woman viewer, object of the feminine gaze too. As well as on the screen, the female body is represented as the object of “desire, looking and fantasy” in women’s magazines, as feminist scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s showed (McRobbie, 2009: 99). In these images, it is argued, a homoerotic gaze is sublimated into a gaze that is instead eroticised in terms of consumption and identity, where desire is displaced onto the clothes, accessories, looks and lifestyles worn by the women represented. Discussing

the “psychic turbulence” of fashion photography, McRobbie (2009: 109) argues that the images not only “engage with and tap into feminine desire” but produce it in order to encourage consumption, which in turn maintains masculine hegemony. Despite the obviously homoerotic nature of a woman looking at a provocatively postured, sensualised female body (Fuss, 1994)<sup>38</sup>, this desire is sublimated and regulated by a hegemonic consumerist discourse. The viewer is invited to want to *be* the sexy woman on the magazine cover, rather than to imagine having sex with her, as is the central message in the soft-porn style images of women on magazines like *Loaded*. In a historical discourse analysis of *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* from the 1930s to the 1950s in order to ascertain how women's bodies and social roles were constructed therein, Hyde (2000: 159), argues that the magazines acted as “sites for the negotiation of constructions of women's bodies and social roles, in which women actively create and recreate their understandings of what it means to be a woman from the discourses of others” (Hyde, 2000: 159) – in other words, magazines are one of the social institutions that mediate a discourse of self-management. This function of the images of women can be said to operate in contemporary magazines too: sexiness is represented as one kind of success that is central to contemporary consumer culture. To look good, to be attractive and sexually appealing to others is an important quality attributed to the successful post-modern woman, something that is well documented in Machin and Van Leewen's (2007) studies of the global discourses of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Those on the covers, showing off their sexy, well-dressed bodies are quite simply put forward as role models in the pursuit of these goals.

Similar images of men are also present in the corpus. Consider for example the representation of David Beckham on the cover of *Arena* (1). The medium length photograph is cropped at the upper thigh and crown. Beckham wears jeans, a white t-shirt and sunglasses; his head is lowered avoiding eye contact, which is anyway rendered impossible by his dark glasses. His thumbs are hooked into the front pockets of his jeans, his fingers splayed out and framing his crotch. The lines of the image converge in a series of Vs – his hairline, nose, chin, the pronounced V of the t-shirt collar. The slightly diagonal lines of his braces, wider at the top, are doubled in the lines of his shirt sleeves and his tattooed arms, both of which reiterate the downward flow instigated by the arrows of the pointed tips of the Vs, all of this re-emphasized by the downward tilt of his head. Thus, the entire image converges on Beckham's groin,

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<sup>38</sup> Fuss (1994: 211) argues that it is exactly the often explicitly erotic photographs of women on magazine covers and advert that engages a “homospectatorial look” which appropriate the erotic male gaze and relocate it in the female viewers, thus suggesting that “to look straight at women, straight women must look as lesbians”.

emphasising a strong sense of male potency and sexuality centred on the not visible, yet prevailing, phallus. Thus his body is eroticised as an ideational object of desire, once again as role model or fantasy partner. Whether this is the result of his existing status as a sex symbol or the semantics of the image is debatable – most likely both his reputation and the saturation of his name and image in consumer media and the careful, subtle sexualisation of the image work together in order to instil the portrait with latent, understated sexual energy.

### **Sexualised relations of power and imagined consummation**

The images of sexualised bodies, both male and female, fulfil a double textual role, on the one hand as ideational fantasy objects, and on the other as interpersonal fantasy subjects. As sexualised objects the images serve to seduce and inspire lust, to present the individual in the photograph as a imagined sex partner. As sexualised subjects, the images serve to offer role models of sexiness, what the viewer should aspire towards in their own attractiveness, and visual commands as to how to imagine the self as potentially as sexy as that, able to create similar levels of desire in others. These operations of sexiness are tied together: fantasies of being sex subjects and with sex objects are intricately related and dependant on one another for their definitions of value. Sexiness in both senses can be understood as a set of interpersonal power relations: to attract others to one is to be so desirable as to eclipse thoughts of the self except in the context of the attractive other.

Foucault argued that it was the proliferation of discourses about sexuality that controlled it, through stimulation more than repression. In late modernity this stimulation took the form of “an economic exploitation of eroticisation” (Foucault, 1980: 57), largely mediated through the images, messages and products of consumer culture (from suntan lotion to porn). Erotic imagery became the staple mode through which the supposedly desirable benefits of consumer products were advertised, both in order to sell them, and in order to distract erotic attention away from taboo practices such as masturbation or homosexuality and on to the normalised, sanitised and profitable plane of consumption (MacDonald, 2003: 35). The presence of sexualised imagery in consumer culture could therefore be read in a Foucauldian fashion as operating in the service of broader cultural powers that shape and inform, in dynamic fashion, the types of sexuality and sexiness that are permissible in and valued by the hegemonic system. The message with regards to sexuality is: “Get undressed – but be slim, good-looking,

tanned!" (Foucault, 1980: 57). The repressive element is hidden within the permissiveness, one should not get undressed unless one meets the high standards required in order to enter the space of public bodily display. Hyperreal body imagery in consumer magazine covers therefore entrenches heteronormative and stereotyped sexuality, whereby only those who are slim, good-looking and tanned may expose their bodies and be sexually admired. Terry Eagleton sums up the relationship between aesthetics and ideology thus:

The aesthetic is in this sense no more than a name for the political unconscious: it is simply the way social harmony registers itself on our senses, imprints itself on our sensibilities. The beautiful is just political order lived out on the body, the way it strikes the eye and stirs the heart" (Eagleton, 1990: 37).

What is considered beautiful in a society, therefore, reveals a great deal about the orders of value, inescapably political-economic, of that society. Specifically, the ways in which these notions of value are "lived out on the body" reveals the political unconscious: where power lies and how it is operationalised. In consumer society, it is clear that there is a significant degree of conflation between power and beauty. It is particularly evident in the primacy of celebrity and how famous/beautiful people have largely replaced the antiquated notions of royalty and act as role models for the general population, as was discussed in Chapter 5.

## Conclusion

The discussion thus far has showed that there is an apparent and normative tendency towards the hyperreal representation of beautiful bodies on consumer magazine covers. Although real or excessive bodies are present, they are marginalised and minimised, and act as a foil to the representation of the beautiful; a reminder of how things should not be in the "sacred" media world. The next question, then, that follows on from this descriptive analysis of the role of images of bodies, is: what are we expected to do with these images? The obvious response is: *look* at them. Unlike commodities, these beautiful bodies of others cannot be owned through purchase and material consumption, but only consumed through visual processes. It is necessary, therefore, to engage with the kinds of processes of looking that these bodies invite: which can be summed up in the name of the organ central to our experiences of looking: the eye.

## ***The practices of the eye***

Eyes are common to many everyday idioms used in the English language, and often refer to personal qualities or inter-personal relationships. If something has been lacking from the visual experience, and has been missed, once it returns we say it is “a sight for sore eyes”. If something is precious to someone, they will call it the “apple of their eye”. If we wish to ignore an error or mistake, we “turn a blind eye” to it. We recognise eye contact to be an indication of intimacy, in moments of emotion our eyes well up, in moments of humour or wit a twinkle in the eye might be noted. A wink is a signal of irony, friendly complicity or an inside joke. When we try to understand the perspective of another person, we attempt to see the issue “through their eyes”. Something hideous to behold is an “eyesore”, something noticeable and intriguing is “eye-catching”. If something needs to be watched and monitored, we “keep an eye on it”. If someone has a knack for visual arrangements, style, colour coordination or picking out good artistic qualities, we will say that they have “an eye for” their art. Our eyes are said to be the windows to our souls, and show our innermost feelings. Individuals with well-developed intuition and insight could be described as having a “third eye”; in some cultures, an “evil eye” charm is used to ward off negativity. In short, the eyes are linguistically knitted into our ideas of what it means to be human on an intuitive, emotional and interpersonal level. Images that include eyes can therefore be said to appeal to some of these deep-seated, at times even mystical, connotations. Perhaps in the same way that the heart has accumulated such dense multi-layered symbolism in everyday discourse, the eyes – simply a bundle of cells and nerve endings that have evolved so as to transmit light to receptors in the brain – are organs that have much greater meaning in human understanding than their anatomical functionality suggests.

One thing that can be ascertained by even a cursory observation of the representations of bodies, is that eye contact is a central strategy employed to suggest a direct relationship between the cover model and the viewer. Chapter 8 will discuss in depth the representation of the face, including this crucial role of eye contact in creating the suggestion of an interaction and interface between the (paper) face on the magazine, and the (flesh and blood) face looking at it. In this chapter, however, I would like to preface that discussion, and more importantly for the present purposes, build upon and interpret the preceding discussion of images of the body, with some notes about the eye as a symbol, image or icon that is central to the sexual suggestiveness of many of the images. In other words, I would like to suggest that visual practices of looking and seeing are inextricably twinned with the central theme of bodily display central to the

visual strategies of magazine cover texts. The eye is not only a part of the body but the audience that the body addresses. In order to explore and name this relationship, it is first necessary to break down the various aspects of visualness that constitute the eye.

## Visual consumption

The most important operation of the eye is its function as the organ that facilitates sight. The ability to see is so central to our biological and social experience as humans that it is often considered the primary sense – Jenks (2005) terms this a doctrine of “immaculate perception”. In the positivist scientific tradition, the sense of sight was employed as scientific observation, and in this way linked to a belief that the truth could be uncovered through careful, close and systematic observation of phenomena. Scientific technology developed so as to extend, magnify and increase the capacity of sight – magnifying glasses, telescopes, and microscopes all aimed, in different ways to enlarge the human sense of sight and connect the ability to see the minute or faraway details of our surrounding world, thereby uncovering the truth about its operations. In this way, cognition itself is physiologically linked to sight – we develop our understanding of the world around us through our senses, largely that of sight. Chapter 2 argued that visualness is a central quality of consumer culture: we are constantly invited to look at things (adverts, product displays, shop windows, media texts). And in Chapter 4, it was noted that the newsstand was a place designed to appeal to the sighted, such is its visual impact and purpose.

And it is the sense of sight to which the images of bodies appeals. The visual spectacle of beautiful bodies is intended to be consumed only by the eyes. Umberto Eco (2004: 418) terms the model of beauty offered by the mass media, including notably glossy magazines, “the beauty of consumption”. Its aesthetic appeal lies in the suggestions of accessibility and postmodern diversity and variety (or to put it another way, its cosmopolitanism). Mass media are, Eco (2004: 425) continues, “totally democratic, offering a model of beauty for those already naturally endowed with aristocratic grace, as well as for the voluptuous working class girl”. Chapter 6 showed how consumer discourse as mediated through magazine covers operates through the promotion of a commercial heteroglossia, a multiplicity of choices and voices offered to the reader/viewer/consumer to tailor make to suit their own unique lifestyle and situation. A similar catalogue of (systemically limited) options is made available through the many bodies represented on the magazine cover.

The most important thing to note about these bodies is that by virtue of being mediated and present on the covers of magazines and on newsstands, they are in the *public eye* and thus part of the power relations of a society defined by visibility. Unsurprisingly, many of these publicly displayed bodies belong to celebrities, who make a living through their public profiles and celebrated fame and beauty. Their images, be they adoring glamour shots or irreverent paparazzi shots, are made available to the public through photographs. The camera has been described as a “mechanical eye” (Murdock and Pink, 2005: 150), which captures a reproduction of the image that it looks at. The public display of bodies through the culture of celebrity feeds into a sense of spectacle, where instead of commodities heaped one upon the other in the display units of retail space, images of bodies are accumulated together on the covers of magazines at the newsstand, which invite particular practices of looking by their display.

### **The gaze upon the body**

I’d like to particularly focus on the notion of the (consumer) gaze upon the (mediated) body, and how it is invited at many opportunities in magazine covers/newsstands. The act of looking at images of bodies is underpinned by traces of consumption of the image-object as utilitarian and titillating. In the representation of bodies on consumer magazine covers, the most essential appendage is not the arm, bent at the elbow and raised behind the head, nor the six-pack or pectoral muscle of Mr. Men’s Health, nor the cleavage and thighs of Ms. Loaded, nor even the smooth round shoulders of Ms. Marie Claire: it is the *eye of the consumer*. Frozen in the posture assumed before the camera, for the body represented on the magazine cover its field of action is encompassed by the field of vision (Ferguson, 1994: 27). Analogous to the Parisian flâneur who would pass by shop windows, “tasting” their delights without ‘really’ consuming them in what Balzac calls a ‘gastronomy of the eye’ (ibid.: 35), the magazine consumer is invited to visually ‘feel’ the bodies on display without the opportunity to ever actually touch them in what could perhaps be termed an “sensuality of the eye”.

The eye as an image is powerfully symbolic. The images of eyes on the covers mirror the eyes of the consumer; in this sense they initiate/return the consumptive gaze and signal the invitation to look and return the gaze at the same time. In his analysis of Velazquez’s painting, *Las Meninas* (1656), Foucault (1970: 5) says that “no gaze is

stable, or rather, in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity". In other words, the inherent instability of the gaze – actual (that is, emanating from an individual) or simulated (that is, represented by an image of eyes) – evokes a dynamism that defines it. The gaze is never still, it contains within it various shades of longing that navigate between the subject of the gaze and the object thereof, back and forth, interminably. The eye, in this sense is "a 'strange crossroads' where objective processes become subjective responses" (Saunders, 2003: 17, quoting Perkowitz, 1998: 21). Images in the form of shapes, colour and light hit the retina, when this happens, the "visual cortex of the brain is stimulated, and thought and perception are affected" (Saunders, 2003: 17). So, in the situation in which the images that are intersecting with the subjective processes of cognition are a plethora of beautiful bodies, toned, lean, muscular, voluptuous and unashamedly displayed such as to encourage the visual enjoyment thereof, what are the subjective responses that might result? This question cannot be answered in any ultimate fashion, for it is certain that each individual that looks will have unique sensual responses and psychological experiences linked to the images, and in any case, this kind of discussion is not an appropriate route to take from the data gathered and analysis made in this project. Nevertheless, Chapter 4 described how the majority of consumers observed at the newsstand browsed it alone and silently. There is an evocative link between the solitude and privacy of these act of looking and their public setting, especially when it can be surmised that the consumer's gaze will often fall upon images of the body. It is therefore important to explore what kinds of responses, and therefore psycho-cognitive experiences, the images of bodies invite, make space for and appear to prefer. Arguably, the images of bodies as represented on consumer magazines are largely designed to engender a sense of titillation, arousal, admiration and silent fantasy.

## **Looking as a sexual act**

In *The History of Sexuality Vol. 2*, Foucault footnotes: "One should, however, note the importance attributed by many Greek texts to the gaze and to the eyes in the genesis of desire or love; but it is not that the pleasure of the gaze is self-indulgent; rather it is thought to make an opening through which the soul is reached" (Foucault, 1986: 40-1n). Echoing this is the argument that "two persons looking at each other are not engaged in an innocent process", as passion is caused by eye contact (Ten Bos and Kaulingfrauks, 2002: 139). Freud too, "isolated scopophilia as one of the component

instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones" (Mulvey, 1989: 16). He associated an erotics of looking both with the active gaze – the taking of other people as objects, subjected to a "controlling and curious gaze" as well as to auto-eroticism, wherein "the pleasure of the look is transferred to others by analogy" and the self is posited as the object gazed upon (Mulvey, 1989: 17). The acts of looking and being looked at are therefore intrinsically eroticised; there is a direct connection between the eyes and amorous feelings. To gaze upon a body opens up a channel through which desire can be shaped and experienced. In the context of analysing fashion photography, Rabine (1994: 65) argues that the gaze provides the "framing device of the photograph that invests it with desire and provides the erotic charge in which the image is bathed." Gazing upon a body is the fuel that allows the spark of desire to be ignited; it infers some deeper trace of a longing for such desire to be sparked. Arguably, the display of the body, in turn, invites and expects desire to be sparked within the person that chooses to gaze upon it. The gaze can be scopophilic; it takes "pleasure in looking" and is fascinated "with the human form" (Mulvey, 1989: 16). In the context of magazines, voyeurism and scopophilia emerge as traces which can be extrapolated to be present within the visual mechanics of the texts, which celebrate the visual intrusion of paparazzi into the lives of celebrities, and are shamelessly in love with the idea of looking in general. The reference here is less to the full blown psychological disorders implied by these terms and more to the sensualised subtleties of the gaze, the soft and silent messages contained within the moment of looking upon a beautiful body.

In his 1928 novella, *The Story of the Eye*, Georges Bataille recounts the adventures of two sexual miscreants; teenaged lovers with a twisted taste for the sexually excessive. Flowering into their own version of sexuality as a frivolous yet dark art, the young man and woman develop a penchant for shocking their elders with pornographic displays of their ever more imaginative games, which are ultimately visual games. They have no shock-value without the presence of an audience, whether it is the unfortunate mother checking in to see whether the children need more refreshments, or the reader himself, who observes the action like a fly on the wall at all times. Eventually self-banished from the boring mediocrity of their respective households and escaped from the asylum to which the girl has been committed, the two protagonists meet up with a third miscreant – a middle-aged man who gets his kicks from merely watching the other two go about their frenzied profanities. The novella's denouement comes when the trio hijack a small church in the Spanish countryside, and hold its priest hostage, subjecting him to humiliating acts that defile his vows before murdering him, and then removing an eye

from his corpse to serve as an obscene sex toy. Throughout this narration, the reader is complicit as a viewer: every betrayal of propriety or trust is witnessed in the mind's eye, forced through the explicit details of Bataille's narrative. So what, then, is the story of the eye – the story of the celebration of sexual corruption of, as well as the characters, the reader as an aroused onlooker to the narrative of pornography? Or is it the story of the materiality of the organ itself as something that can be graphically put to use in the service of sexual pleasure? The eye is at once the silent voyeurism of the reader, who watches the transgressions that unfold and feels a fluttering in the gut, and an object, a thing that can be used, both materially as a tool in masochistic games, and metaphorically to transcend propriety. It is the story of both watching and the thing(s) watched.

Barthes (1972) argues that in Bataille's account, the eroticism of the eye is doubled aesthetically in both the terms of the subject and the object. In magazine covers too, the eye is doubled aesthetically: it implies both the act of watching and the thing watched. An excellent example of an image that exploits the eroticised gaze through an aesthetic of voyeurism is *Heat* (29), which shows Big Brother celebrities Charley and Ziggy seemingly caught by the camera mid-foreplay. The eye can be considered to be operating in a sexualised way; the titillation of the visual representation of bodies encourages a sexualisation of the gaze, and reifies the bodies being gazed upon as objects. The operations of the eye in this context therefore function in tension between the ideas of visual consumption and visual consummation.

## Conclusion

This section has explored the operations of the eye in relation to the representation of bodies on consumer magazine covers. It has discussed private visual consumption framed in the public space of the newsstand, the operations of the gaze and the sexual nature of looking (that is, the eye as a sex organ). The story of the eye, in relation to the mediated magazine cover body, is one that swings between the idea of the subject and the object. The body itself is both subject and object, belonging to a unique individual on the one hand and commodified for visual, eroticised consumption on the other. And the eye, it appears, operates both subjectively and objectively: in terms of the former, the interface between the seeing of objects and their unique, personalised cognition, and in terms of the latter, as a object (organ) that symbolises the breadth and primacy of visual culture and bodily display. I would like to draw together the discussions of the

body as image and the eye as the intersection between the gaze and visual culture into an analysis that aims to interpret the functions played by sexualised visual discourses on consumer magazine covers as a pornographic imagination.

### ***The pornographic imagination***

There are many levels of bodily objectification that take place in the texts under analysis: bodies are visually cast as examples of ideal physiques, sexually commodified objects of desire, ideational role models of sexiness, and marginalised outliers that normalise all the former. There is a direct connection between commodified beauty and explicit (or implicit) sexuality (Merskin, 2004: 122). It has been argued and established in scholarship that sexuality is constructed through “the controlled production of cultural images”, and that society therefore shapes sexual desire (Merskin, 2004: 123). This has often been considered a manipulative tendency, that allows for inappropriate targets of desire (for e.g., young girls – *ibid.*) to be normalised through media imagery. Arguments about the “sexualisation of culture” also highlight the proliferation of sexually explicit images in contemporary mediation, advertising specifically (Gill, 2009). But it would be unfair and mistaken to assume that all images that exploit sexuality are in some way oppressive. It could also be argued that the sexualised imagery of bodies is emancipatory both in terms of the pleasures associated with display of the body, and in terms of the pleasures possible through the escapist fantasies associated with the visual consumption thereof. I would like to argue that consumer magazine covers derive much of their seductive appeal from the interplay between the images of aestheticised bodies that they feature and the invitations to visually gaze upon them. Images of sexy bodies can be understood to operate as an interface between the subject and object, where the latter is conceived of in terms of commodified bodies. The operations of this interaction can be phrased in terms of the “pornographic imagination”.

The term is Susan Sontag's (1969), who in a well-known essay from which the title of this sub-section is borrowed, discusses how the genre of literary pornography operates, like science-fiction, in the realm of pure fantasy by treating sexuality as “an extreme situation”. In a later interview discussing art and consciousness, she explains:

What pornography depicts is, in one obvious sense, quite unrealistic. Sexual energy is not endlessly renewable; sexual acts cannot be tirelessly repeated. But in another sense pornography is rudely accurate about important realities of desire (Sontag, 1995: 72).

In both senses, consumer magazine covers can be said to exploit a pornographic imagination: through their suggestions of an endlessly renewable sexual energy which is embodied in the lithe and beautiful figures that seem to tirelessly invite sexual fantasy, and in the recognition of the important everyday realities of sexual desire as a part of the human condition, and worthy of acknowledgement, celebration or even exploitation for the pursuit of commerce. The hyperreal, fantastical quality of bodies as depicted in the world of magazine covers is often linked, either explicitly and directly, or subtly and indirectly, to sensuality and some kind of idea of consummation (the possessing or owning of the products or the lifestyle, an emulation of the attractiveness, or the direct sexual fantasy involving the beautiful person depicted). The imagination of consumption/consummation is an end-point of the subject-object relationship, where the two are, however momentarily, united as one. I'm not suggesting that all magazines are pornographic, although some, of course, are<sup>39</sup>. I'm suggesting that they function through the employment of a pornographic imagination, in the complex sense in which Sontag explains its function as existing within the tension between extreme fantasy and the everyday ordinariness and omnipresence of sexual desire in human nature.

It is on the magazine cover and in the newsstand that the pornographic imagination enters the public realm, and is thus commodified. It is on the visual level that the pornographic imagination as persistent fantasy does most of its work. In the representation of idealised and perfect bodies, this is most clearly obvious. Recall the *Loaded* girls, the *Men's Fitness* Adonis, Beckham in his phallocentric pose, and the countless examples of cleavage and parted lips. These images are connected to language. I experienced the degree to which sexually suggestive images and words are co-constitutive as I worked through the task of describing the composition and contents of each magazine's cover image. Even though I tried to employ neutral, objective language in cataloguing the presence of various objects, subjects and words on the magazine cover texts, I found that my own words were moulded by the images into a language loaded with seduction, sensuality and bodily description. To note, for example, that a photograph shows "a lot of soft, smooth skin", or "moist and parted lips", or "hard and firm torso muscles", employs a quasi-pornographic vocabulary that reiterates the visual forms and is difficult to escape or render objective. It is impossible to translate a carefully mediated image shaped to inspire sex into objective language, instead, the description of the sexualised image becomes solipsistic, trapped in the

<sup>39</sup> Top-shelf pornography magazines were available in many of the newsstands I visited; I chose not to include any of them in my corpus.

pornographic imagination, compromised by it. Aside from the sexualisation of the representation of bodies, the visual representation of commodities is similarly sexualised, at times overtly (recall the *Stuff* model with her i-phone), at times subtly. Visual representation often merely needs to hint at a smooth surface suggestive of skin (such as the bodywork of a car) or feature a romanticised image (such as an intimate rug in front of a fireplace) to evoke a neutered and tamed erotic imagination. The platitude "sex sells" regains some of its meaning in this formulation: it is known that sex is used in commercial communication to sell most things, sexiness is sold to us as a lifestyle, an interpersonal aspiration, a set of ideational signifiers and an aesthetic trope that saturates the many levels of textuality common to consumer society, and which illustrates the dialectic between subject-ness and object-ness. The interpersonal function of the pornographic imagination, in terms of the ways in which it invites and shapes possibilities for agencies, is to encourage the reader to think of themselves as a lover who acts out of desire for commodities and bodies, and is motivated by the prestige and delight of sensuality and sexiness.

Linguistic representations of the pornographic imagination speak more to the yearnings of desire than the fleshly capers invited by visual representations. The desire for romance, sexual and emotional, is a central trope in the subject matters of women's magazines, where finding, managing and perfecting love-relationships are a common theme. As McRobbie (1976) noted about *Jackie* over three decades ago, the magazine's discourse constructed men as "romantic objects", knights in shining armour who would appear on the scene of a girl's life to sweep her off her feet. Although less clichéd, a similar obsession with consummating perfect love relationships is evident in much of the subject matter advertised on the covers of the women's magazines in the corpus. Unequivocally, the representation of women as sex objects persists in imagery used to sell magazines aimed at men. It should be noted, however, that this erotic discourse is overwhelmingly hetero-normative (only three references to gay sexuality and love occur across the corpus, one of which is derogatory – see 3, 39, 64), and tends to reiterate traditional male-female sexual roles as sex-oriented (the *Loaded* style "hunt for sex") and love-oriented (the *Marie Claire* style search for "Mr Right") respectively. The pornographic imagination of magazine covers is therefore a carefully managed discursive operation, which encourages conformity with the traditional man-woman sexual/romantic fantasy. The empirical findings outlined in this chapter emphasize the importance of ongoing feminist scholarship (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009) that seeks to call into question and challenge these ways in which gender is mediated.

It is the insertion of explicitly erotic discourses related to love, relationships and sexuality into almost all aspects of mediation, coupled with a pervasive sensual aesthetic that presents bodies as sexualised and commodities as sexually fetishised that saturates the discourse of consumer magazine covers with a normalised and routinised pornographic. And it is in this pornographic mood that the centrality and importance of the act of looking to consumer culture is highlighted, for without visual consumption and the presence of the eye, pornography (and consumerism) is impotent. In contemporary culture, pornography is a visual affair – as Schroeder and McDonagh (2006: 224) write, “pornography implies pictures”. There is a reason that pornography is found not on the radio but on the top shelves of newsstands, behind the darkened windows of adult stores and in the scrambled channels of pay-per-view television. Censorship seeks to curtail its visibility. Pornography is a visual medium that exploits the gaze upon the body, and complicates the distinction between what is public and what is private. The private intimacies of sexual desire are in some way undermined by the public display and consumption of sexualised materials, exactly because pornography is asymmetrically dependant upon sight. It could even be argued that pornographic narratives that appear in literature (or even in audio format) rely on the mind’s eye to paint a picture of the scenes described. Bataille’s novella functions in this way: the narrative is visual in that it invites the reader to become a spectator of the action, to make publicly visible their practice of visually consuming sex-text-commodities. In this sense, pornography is always a story of the eye. A spectatorship of the consumption of the body. Even in romance fiction aimed at women, cover designs exploit a visual bias and echo soft-porn genres, featuring the hard bodies and curvaceous figures common to the covers of magazines<sup>40</sup>. Pornography is a visual genre because it operates through looking; the titillation of the visual is its very explicitness. The kind of literary pornography that Sontag writes about, and that Bataille wrote, has long since been surpassed by the mode of the visual, gaining ever more explicitness as the postmodern era wears on. The visual nature of pornography is knit into its fabric – from the overaestheticisation of primped, preened, waxed and shaved genitalia to the close-frame money shot (MacDonald, 2003: 84, 89) that pays the male porn star’s way – without visual mediation it is probably safe to say that the pornography industry would not be as successful a money spinner as it is. It is as a visual medium, therefore that pornography can rate its economic success, and it is also visually that the pornographic imagination operates throughout consumerist mediation.

<sup>40</sup> See for example the covers featured on the e-store website of Harlequin Romance, the biggest publisher of romance novels in the world: [www.harlequin.com](http://www.harlequin.com).

I am not suggesting that theories of pornography as a literary trope can simply be cut and pasted to describe the operations of consumer magazine covers. Instead I am suggesting that there are some flavours and nuances of the pornographic mode at play in the texts, and that they invite an imagination that is stoked and fired by visual consumption and erotic fantasy, and which is hinged on images of the body. Although these bodies are not engaged in explicit sexual acts, they suggest and imply sexuality, even in the most subtle of ways. I do not wish to appear to suggest that magazine covers are obscene, only that they purposefully pick up on the notion of sexiness as one of their central value-apportioning criteria. Eye contact is one of the most pervasive forms of sexual suggestiveness that appears on the magazine cover. In everyday life, eye contact is a rare and special thing, and is often interpreted as a sign of sexual attraction and flirtation. The eyes on the covers of magazines literally flirt with and attempt to seduce the viewer. From the explicitly sexualised images of women on the covers of lad mags, to the more latent and implied sexuality of downplayed male cover stars, the visual and linguistic language of sex saturates the medium. The people on the covers are almost always sex symbols; their value partly defined by the levels of appeal deemed to reside in their physical person. The fact that many readers engage with browsing or free-reading at the newsstand alone and in silence, as described in Chapter 4, evokes a sense of privacy in consumption which can be connected with the pornographic imagination and the idea of looking as sexual act, yet pornography is also inherently public in that always exists for display (Schroeder and McDonagh, 2006: 224). The thick description of the newsstand has been implicitly present throughout this chapter, simmering below the discussion at several points, explicitly referenced at others. The newsstand is the social, publicly visible and accessible space in which the display of body-images, and the consequent visual consumption, takes place. It is thus worth revisiting the dialectic of site/sight that characterises the newsstand. A new perspective into the dynamics of sight (as embodied action and visual consumption) and its sited nature are illuminated through the argument of the pornographic imagination. As the site of sexualised practices of display and looking, the newsstand suddenly complicates the boundary between public and private, playing host as it can to erotic fantasy, scopophilia and a highly charged, libidinous gaze. And as a (tamed and slightly neutered) pornographic sight that is employed in order to attract the attention of consumers and move products, the mechanics of seduction that define the structures of the newsstand are exposed.

All three levels of theoretical dialectic that were identified as central to consumerist aesthetics in Chapter 2 can be said to operate within this process that I have described as the pornographic imagination. First: manipulation/empowerment. The sexualised portrayal of both men and women can be seen as exploitative in the sense in which those individuals photographed are sexually stylised, objectified and commodified, and the sense in which their images are normalised into social discourse such that they exert great pressure on non-mediated individuals to conform or aspire to those aesthetic standards. These manipulative traits can be linked with what Schroeder and McDonagh (2006: 237) call the “logic of pornography”, which entails the interaction of the ideals of pornography with advertising and consumer culture. Yet the representations of bodies can also be considered empowering and liberating to some degree: they provide unmitigated access to images of people that society at large has branded desirable and beautiful. In this sense, it could be argued that pornographic imagination sets free the possibilities of pleasurable sexual fantasy, part of the human condition that is either repressed or conditionally stimulated, which is often disallowed in the course of day-to-day responsibilities. Second: subject/object. Images of bodies de-personalise and anonymize them, in this way commodifying and objectifying them. The display of images of bodies on newsstands further entrenches the transformation of a subjective persona into a mediated body-object. The operations of the eye, in the sense of sight, are linked to cognition and subjective interpretation of sensed object-images, in this way negotiating the boundary between subject and object. Third: simulation/ materiality. The tension between the marginalised, “real” bodies and the dominant aesthetic of “hyperreal” highlights the fact that in the representation of bodies, consumer magazines rely heavily upon simulation. And, although I have not explicitly addressed the relations between the materiality of the bodies being represented and the simulation that is the images thereof, it is notable that the genre of pornography itself negotiates these boundaries in profound ways. The explicit flesh and blood operations of the sexual body, and its many fluids and modes of movement are exactly the material currency that pornography exploits in order to create an aesthetic commodity that functions in an almost entirely visual manner. Pornography is materiality simulated – and so too, the pornographic imagination exploits material, physical desires and fleshly yearnings through the visual s(t)imulation of aestheticised imagery.

Overall it is crucial to consider the pornographic imagination as operating within the Foucauldian power dynamics captured by the concept of the publicised gaze. The centrality of the image and visual consumption to the pornographic imagination

highlights the relations of power that intersect in the image of the sexualised body: the consumer's gaze upon it, and its mediated gaze back to the consumer. It is the very transparency and illumination of both sexualised imagery and sexualised practices of looking that highlight how body commodities are enmeshed in complex sets of power relations between consumer-subjects and commodified body-objects; private pornographic imaginations played out in public spaces/texts. In this way, the notions of the constantly shifting power dynamics of the gaze, and practices of looking as sexual acts, complicates Sontag's notion of the pornographic imagination as a space of pure fantasy and metaphor – there are material consequences. This may be particularly the case for notions of subjectivity and identity, which are explored in the next chapter.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the representations of bodies on consumer magazines covers, and hooked this on to a discussion of the operations of the "eye". In addressing the former, the chapter explored the currency of "looking good" as well as the operations of the acts of looking, before moving on to a discussion of the various ways in which images of bodies are commodified and objectified. Then it discussed the various nuances of "the eye", exploring the symbolisms of the eye in contemporary culture, and the two-way gaze that is instigated by the eyes featured, then exploring looking as a sexual act. These discussions of the eroticisation of consumption through the representations of bodies and the invitation to visually consume them culminated in an argument that consumer magazine covers utilise and exploit a strategy of inciting a "pornographic imagination", which mediates both the dialectic of subject and object, as well as tensions between public display and private fantasy, and thus can also be framed in terms of the power relations of the gaze.

Throughout this chapter, I have hinted at issues concerned with the individual and cognition, psychology and ideas of self. It is clearly an omission in this chapter's discussion to not have delved into what the pornographic imagination means for the ways in which texts allow for an imagination of self, through them. This will be corrected in the following chapter, through a detailed discussion of the representation of faces on consumer magazine covers, and the ways in which this links into an overall project of inviting the reader to imagine a sense and manage a project of "I". The ways in which the body and the eye of this chapter fits into the face and the I of the next chapter, as

**well as the commodities, commercial heteroglossia and mechanics of gloss of the previous chapters, will be taken up in the conclusion.**

## 8. The I: Paper mirrors and self-image

The previous chapter discussed “the eye”: the conceptual intersection between the scopophilia of consumer culture, the power of the gaze and images of bodies on consumer magazine covers. This chapter is titled “the I”, and explores the intersection between the discourse of individualism and the internalized power dynamics of self-care and self-management. By doing so, it takes as its focus the figure of the consumer at the newsstand who stands and looks, however fleetingly, at the wall of magazine texts before him or her. Although the discussion in this chapter does not necessarily draw directly upon the rich data portrayed in the thick description, it is fundamentally framed by it. The discussion of self-image invited by the magazine cover is framed by the operations of its display in public space. The discussion that follows is organized through analyses of the direct address of magazine covers to individual readers and of images of faces, which together culminate in invitations to self-identity exploration and the prioritization of a project of self-improvement. In other words, this chapter seeks to explore the ways in which magazine covers negotiate and construct specific aesthetic and social conceptions of subjectivity. Before offering detailed analyses of the language of direct address and images of faces, which culminate into an argument that magazine covers operate as “paper mirrors”, it is necessary to foreground a discussion of power as an subjectively internalized and managed system of self-care.

### The care of the self

In Chapter 2, the public nature of consumer culture was defined as operating as primarily a space of appearance rather than participation. This relied upon Arendt’s formulation of social action as performative, agonial and taking place upon the brightly lit stage of the public realm. Magazines covers and newsstands constitute this kind of space of appearance, where celebrities, commodities and bodies are displayed, celebrated and aestheticised – made visible to mass audiences and constructed into spectacles that dominate public retail sites. This chapter will argue that the individual consumer can also access and appear upon that stage, albeit in a more limited, less visible degree, through heeding the invitation to direct attention to the care of the self<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in the turn towards “reality television”, many ordinary people cross over into the media world through a performance of the care of the self, such as in extreme makeover shows which offer people plastic surgery to improve their appearance, as discussed by Mark Poster (2007).

In this way, a dialectic between private concerns and public image come to the fore. Foucault articulated the operations of the care of the self, arguing that in the Greek philosophy and culture of the first centuries an “insistence on the attention that should be brought to bear on oneself” (Foucault, 1990: 41) emerged. This movement was centred on self-respect and self-development at all existential levels, the mental, the spiritual, the physical, and ultimately the social and sexual. Every element of lifestyle was to be subjected to reflexive scrutiny. Foucault (1990: 42) highlights three key areas requiring distinguishing in this respect: the rise of an “individualistic attitude”; the “positive valuation of private life”; and the “intensity of relations to the self”. Taken together, these imperatives evolved into a careful practice of self-regulation and self-improvement, which was more than a mere sum total of a variety of preoccupations, but a centralized and daily set of occupations (Foucault, 1990: 50). Extending this argument, Rose (1990: 4) demonstrates how the stimulation of subjectivity has become the core of the system of power relations, in which self-consciousness, self-inspection are prioritized. In this system, individual interests enter into an alliance with systemic power (in the context of this thesis, the socio-economic power structures that underlie consumerism). Thus, in advanced industrial economies, “individualism rules” (Rose, 1990: 216). Through the subjectification and internalization of various modes of self-regulation, power dynamics turn reflexive and self-imposed. Instead of external structures and discursive dynamics inspiring certain behaviours on the individual, as evident in Foucault’s descriptions of the operations of the Panoptical gaze, an internally flourishing culture of self-scrutinisation and observation emerges instead – a relocation of the eye to within, its power operating in a centrifugal rather than centripetal movement. This results in a continuous exercise of both self-constraint and self-elaboration in terms of bodily care, personality development and spiritual growth. This ancient theme finds much resonance and familiarity in contemporary times. In the context of this project, the discourse of the care of the self is most notable in the language of magazine cover straplines, which invite a very clear conceptualization of the self as a project to be worked upon, perfected and ultimately resolved into its best possible version. The next section revisits the linguistic elements of magazine covers so as to discuss how they work to imagine an individualized reader involved in the care of the self. This takes place through calls to action, both intuitive and corrective, as well as to the implicit acknowledgement that readers have a mental image of themselves, which is the locus of actions associated with self-care and improvement. This discussion builds upon the discussion of the world of choice offered by the consuming-action words discussed in Chapter 6. Here, however, the locus of action is the material self (the body) and the mental self (the I).

## ***I contact: The language of direct address***

It is on verbs that the entire operation of the direct address to readers hinges; this is present with the pervasive and explicit use of the word “you” or “your”, although the implied “you” exists in every injunctive. Halliday (1985: 53) explains that language, when employed in the service of interpersonal meaning, is a “form of action” that *does something* to the reader through its statements, questions, offers and commands. In this way, the reader becomes a “you” that is consistently spoken to, the recipient of a unidirectional monologue consisting of suggestions and ideas about the kinds of mental and/or material action in which they should engage.

### **Calls to self-appraisal**

In texts such as magazine covers, verbs primarily invite mental processes<sup>42</sup> (Halliday, 1985). In other words, the plethora of actions invited by verbs correlate to the imagined mental world of the reader. “Halliday divides mental process verbs into three classes: cognition (verbs of thinking, knowing and understanding), affection (verbs of liking, fearing, enjoying, etc.) and perception (verbs of seeing, hearing, tasting, etc.)” (Eggins, 2004: 226). In Chapter 6, the role of verbs of perception (rearticulated as “instructive” verbs) and cognition (rearticulated as “intuitive” verbs) were discussed in the context of commercial heteroglossia, where readers were invited to take material and mental action with relations to the world of goods that surrounds them. This echoed the description of the newsstand, where consumers found themselves in an environment that at once invited and constrained choice. Now, I would like to turn to the presence and role of “intuitive” (particularly those related to the internal mental world) and “corrective” verbs in magazine cover texts, both of which operate in terms of their invitations to consider the self a site of action, management and appraisal.

### **Intuitive action and the self**

Chapter 6 showed how magazine covers invite intuitive action in relation to the consumption of commodities. Now it is necessary to explore how these types of consumption-actions are related to a project of self-identity. According to magazine

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<sup>42</sup> The relation between the mental processes invited and prioritised by the texts and the actual mental and physical processes experienced and enacted by readers in their lives is not something deducible from this project’s data and is best left to a detailed reception study. Various “reader” based studies of magazine readers as reviewed in Chapter 1 already provide some insights to such research questions.

cover discourse, successful consumers are those who are able to tailor their commodity-choices to their personalities and who educate themselves about their lifestyle options, such that they are able to remain fashionable and up to date yet true to their own tastes and preferences. Thus, readers are instructed to “choose, consult, follow trends, steal ideas, etc” about commodities and consumption, which in turn, is implicitly linked to the ways in which the individual will see him or herself. The deeper implication of these actions is that when a man buys the perfect pair of jeans with the advice of *Arena*, or a woman has secured for herself the right pair of “it boots” with the assistance of *Grazia*, he and she is expected to *feel good* about him/herself. This message is implicit to all calls to action related to consumption: it is not only the product itself, but your ability to choose it as right for you, that will make you good-looking, sexier, better-dressed, more desirable and successful. The relationship of intuitive action to the care of the self is located in the compulsion to personalise the world of commodities to suit uniquely individual tastes and needs – and this world requires comprehension and mastery in the first place.

Chapter 6 also argued that there is a danger of chaos, confusion and disempowerment implicit with the freedom of choice that commodity culture celebrates. Grove-White (2001), in a study interviewing women who elected to have a “professional colour consultation” with a fashion expert in order to determine which colours suit them best, so as to help them to make the right choices when shopping for clothes, determines that the consultation was made due to feelings of being overwhelmed or confused by the huge variety of options available to them in the fashion system. The respondents explained that they felt that they needed direct guidance from some kind of authority on style in order to help them navigate the choices successfully and rediscover a sense of empowerment rather than impotence in the face of the many choices on offer. Rather than feeling free to “adopt a new lifestyle or identity simply by changing their consumption patterns” (Grove-White, 2001: 17), the women found being responsible for consumption choices stressful and needed counsel to counter this. The need for advice in the project of the self is not new to consumer culture: Foucault (1990: 52) describes how in ancient Rome private consultants would be contracted to families or groups as life counselors, a role that combined confidant, advisor, guide and teacher. The advice provided was tailored to helping individuals better achieve their projects of cultivating the self in all areas of life, from the social to the romantic and spiritual. In contemporary times, magazines have taken on such advisory roles, dispensing advice and wisdom about how to live the most fulfilling life, or offering to allay the kind of stress associated with making the correct consumption choices.

Intuitive action words encourage making the correct choices in the project of understanding the self's individual needs and desires. Magazine discourse promises the reader the mental support needed in order to make informed decisions about their consumption choices and lifestyle identities. The connection between these two things – consumption choices and lifestyle identities – is not questioned in the slightest by the magazine cover texts. The fundamental underlying reason that readers are invited to take charge of their understanding and interpretation of the world of commodities represented in magazines is so that they can reinterpret those mental successes into self-image. In other words, the cognitive processes that invite the enlargement of the individual psyche in terms of understanding and imagining, are looped back to the individual, in such a way that the actions invited or implied relate in some way to self-development and improvement, and the maintenance of a successful lifestyle. But, as will be argued next, there exists also an assumption that deficiencies exist in every self, which require correction.

### Corrective action and the self

A significant proportion of the actions invited by the linguistic elements of magazine cover texts relate to improving, protecting or in some way advancing the individual self and its behaviours. These are mental processes in that they are encapsulated within the mind of the individual, but they have material implications: they are therefore best described as *behavioural* (Halliday, 1985: 128). Behavioural processes involve the enlargement of emotional experience through accomplishment in the material (bodily) or mental domain. In magazine cover texts this generally plays out as a strategy to avoid or defeat negative experiences and outcomes, with the verbs implying transformation and change, and arranged around the acknowledgement of existing insufficiencies, problems, or gaps that require fixing and solving. In this sense I re-articulate behavioural processes as "corrective action".

Corrective action words are most common in women's lifestyle magazines and other explicitly self-improvement titles, such as fitness magazines. Here the assumption is that the reader experiences a cornucopia of deficiencies and problems with regards to their bodies and selves, and that they wish to engage in a programme of improvement and change: losing weight, gaining muscle, having better sex, and protecting the body from disease and injury. These desirable outcomes form a set of ideal characteristics of

a life well lived in late modernity – an indication of a successful aestheticised lifestyle centring on an attractive physical appearance and the success of avoiding the lifestyle diseases associated with over-consumption. Corrective action words implicitly recognise the dangers inherent in consumerism and its excesses. It is acknowledged that poor diet can lead to obesity, skin problems or heart disease, too much shopping can lead to financial stress or ruin, and so on. A sub-set of corrective actions operates within the context of achieving a healthier body and mind and becoming more healthy or less stressed. For example, men are urged to “attack-proof” their hearts (45) and “injury-proof” their muscles and ligaments (44), women are told to “cleanse” their bodies and spirits (62), “lose” weight (20, 45, 45, 70) and “detox” their living environments (22). As summarised by Franckenstein (1996: 2-3),

health in Western culture is increasingly viewed as an achieved rather than ascribed status, and each individual is expected to ‘work hard’ at being strong, fit and healthy.

Once again, this can be linked back to ancient Greece, where one of the many occupations to which an individual was expected to devote himself was practical exercise regimens aimed at taking care of the body and keeping it strong (Foucault, 1990: 51). Part of this preoccupation is a medical imperative that compels the individual to avoid exposure to disease caused by vice (Foucault, 1990: 54). The corollary, therefore, to the healthy bodies promoted by magazine discourse to result from hard work is an “uncertain body” (Boni, 2002: 470) that needs to be protected from a variety of risks, including illness, disease and ultimately death. This uncertain body is constantly at risk, and is beyond the control of the self, no matter how much care is taken. The healthy body represents a successful modern life and means that consumption activities will not be compromised.

Another sub-set of corrective actions relate to lifestyle behaviour and include imperatives such as dressing with more style, i.e., “knowing what to wear” (57), or learning how to avoid “embarrassing your children” (61) and taking action aimed at “saving your marriage” (62). These actions are framed in terms of defeating lifestyle or relationship problems and challenges and rely upon verbs such as “beat”, “blitz”, “change”, “cure” and “transform”. The implication of these words is that modern life is fraught with difficulty, complexity and risk to the individual, and that corrective action will be required when things go (stylistically) wrong. A further subset of corrective actions extends beyond the mental and material self and into the immediate world and personal environment of the individual, including home or work spaces and relationships. Here

the emphasis is on “seeking” words, such as “find, get, help”, which imply that improvements in one’s life and relationship are merely a matter of the application of effort and volition. One is able to “dejunk” one’s home if one needs to, “escape” from stressful situations, and “find” good sex or true love if one applies oneself to the task at hand.

In total, these corrective actions add up to a vast project of *work* on the self and personal life, which is rooted in a presumed deeper dissatisfaction with these things; and awareness of the possibilities of betterment. In other words, at a fundamental level, once all of the variations of the theme have been deconstructed and stripped down, what remains as the central concern of the varied subject matters explored and discussed in the language of consumer magazine covers is “the I”. This I is presumed to be active and engaged in a project of self-perfection and improvement, in many areas of life; a social and philosophical project that stretches back to antiquity. This section has discussed how this project of care of the self is located in the body and the immediate, material environment of the person. The next section turns to a discussion of the I as it exists within the mind’s eye.

### **The mind’s eye**

According to Gleeson and Frith (2006), from a health psychology perspective, body image – that is, how an individual imagines him/herself in terms of how they appear to others – is seated in the mind’s eye. There is debate within the field of media and communications research, particularly in the sub field of audience studies, about whether media images of beautiful people distort viewer’s self-image and impact upon self-esteem, particularly of women. In particular, a great deal of work has been done from the feminist perspective, so as to assess the health psychology claim that there is a direct and causal link between viewing media images of slim and attractive women and poor self-esteem among young girls. Frazer (1987) for example argued, “women are aware of media’s unrealistic way of representing female bodies and consequently show resistance toward the images” (quoted in Choi et al 2008: 149; Gleeson and Frith 2006: 9).

In a study measuring women’s body image and self-esteem scores before and after viewing “attractive media images”, Jung and Lennon (2003: 19) find that there were no significant effects “for exposure to media images on body image, self-esteem and

mood". Instead, what the study did discover to be significant was the level of cognitive importance that respondents placed on appearance in general. Where this was higher, the media images appeared to have a greater detrimental effect on mood and self-image. In other words, although it was not possible to make broad-based claims about images of beautiful women in the media making ordinary women feel worse about themselves, the study was able to illustrate how existing levels of considering appearance important could contribute to media images doing so. Translated into the current discussion of how the language of magazine covers invokes self-examination and improvement, in all aspects of life including one's appearance, the idea of self-image, seated as it is within the mind's eye, is very helpful. The process of looking at oneself critically and reflexively is invited by the suggestion that the self is being continuously and critically assessed by society at large, as well as the constantly reiterated commands to consider, modify and improve one's appearance and behaviours. In other words, despite research that shows that no causation between self-image and media-image can be proven, there can be no doubt that the media images are constructed so as to encourage a practice of "self-gazing" (Hyde, 2000: 158), where readers are "increasingly encouraged to critique the self" from a wide variety of lifestyle perspectives. It has been argued that this is particularly the case in magazines aimed at women, which evidence a post-feminist prioritisation of "self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline" and in which "bodily shape, size, muscle tone, attire, sexual practice, career, home, finances, etc are rendered into 'problems' that necessitate ongoing and constant monitoring and labour" (Gill, 2007: 155).

Gleeson and Frith (2006: 10) argue that analysts should pay more attention to the "dialogic nature of individual's engagement with the body and the social contexts in which the body is understood". One of those social contexts – or social texts, rather – is the magazine cover. Alongside the plethora of beautiful bodies represented on magazine covers exists a language that invites a socio-psychological process of body-imaging. This in turn is linked to "complex and dynamic identity projects" (Gleeson and Frith, 2006: 10), which can be summarized as a presumed commitment to the management and care of the self through its constant betterment. This can be linked to the linguistic use of adjectives, which as discussed in Chapter 6, function to communicate relationality. When used in the identifying mode, adjectives suggest that "a is an identity of x". So, for example, when the adjective "sexy" is emblazoned across the chest of Paris Hilton on *Elle* (13), the message is not that sexiness is an attribute of her person but that it defines her identity. And in turn, the reader is invited to internalize

and work towards embodying such qualities as part of their own self-identity.

## Conclusion

This section has discussed how the language of magazine covers appeals to the consumer as an individual. The "I" that is implicit within each magazine cover text and present in newsstand space is constructed through the invitations to reflexivity and self-improvement implicit within the use of action words related to intuition and correction. These related functions contribute to a society in which constant self-inspection, self-improvement, self-management, self-imaging (and imagining) are normalised. This is accentuated by the breathless, energy-charged, manic tone with which descriptions take place on magazine covers. They point to the fact that nothing is ever good enough – the use of super-superlatives such as "best-ever" (41), "super-useful" (19), "totally clueless" (23), and "biggest ever" (26) suggest that the improvement project will never know any rest. This is contradictory: if a project cannot be ultimately fulfilled or completed, there is little point in relentlessly pursuing it. At the same time, however, if the project was to be ultimately fulfilled at some point, the advice of consumer magazines would become unnecessary and they would effectively put themselves out of business. The imperfection of the I, its fundamentally flawed nature, inescapably human and mortal, is so central to the consumer magazine project that were it to miraculously reach perfection, it would equal the undoing of the discourse.

The next section addresses the presence of images of faces, which are twinned with the "I contact" of linguistic direct address. It could be argued that the face is the seat of identity and therefore the symbol of the uniqueness of self. Images of faces are powerful in terms of their communication of both shared humanity and distinctive individuality. In order to better understand the discourse of individualism and self-care, it is necessary to address this dominant visual trope in more detail.

## ***Images of the Ideal I: The Aestheticised Face***

This section explores the other side of the I – the personalities represented on the covers of magazines through portraits that centre and emphasise the face. The argument is based on an observation of the central importance of images of faces making eye contact to magazine cover design. It was observed in the thick description

of the newsstand that a “crowd of paper faces” surrounded the consumer. These faces are typically beautiful and represented in a hyperreal, aestheticised (glossy) mode. As ideal types, they therefore operate as role models for the reader, and the dominance of face-images operates as a visual invitation to admiration and emulation. This section provides an analysis of the presence of these images, and theoretically contextualises it with reference to Levinas’ articulation of the face as both image and address. Thereafter, it addresses the operations of eye contact, relating this to an invitation to imagine the self in the face making the address, in this way complementing the linguistic operations of the texts with strong visual elements.

### **Face value: Ideal types as role models**

As Goffman (1976: 16) explains in his seminal analysis of advertisements in magazines, a portrait is a picture that does not contain a narrative or show a scene in progress, and where action is incidental or absent. Portraits are “frankly posed” with subjects taking up positions and postures purely “in order to be photographed” (Goffman, 1976: 17). The portrait is a form of address, largely contained in the eyes of the subject, as well in the image of a human face, where “keying …, a ritualisation of the human form” (Goffman, 1976: 18), takes place. As both image and address (Levinas, 1998), as symbolic form and mode of communication through facial expression and attention-giving, the face is situated somewhere between subjectivity and objectivity. This is not unique to the age of consumer culture; portraiture is recognisable through the history of visual and artistic representation. The face is a fundamental symbol of humanity; it contains both familiarity and otherness. But the face is also the marker of unique identity, the site of interpersonal recognition through which we groom familiarity and relationship<sup>43</sup>. In this way, the face is the ultimate symbol of selfhood.

Three types of faces can be noted on magazine cover texts. The first are the famous faces of well-known public figures: celebrities (discussed as hyperreal portraits in Chapter 5). The second are the generic, blank-canvas faces of professional models that are not necessarily well-known but confirm to specific notions of beauty and attractiveness. The third are the faces of “real” people, either crossing the line into celebritised representation through a “makeover” or featured due to an exceptional

<sup>43</sup> According to Robert Axelrod (1984), the biological ability to recognize individuals is extremely well developed in humans, and “is largely based on the recognition of faces” (p. 102), to the extent that a special part of the human brain has been specialised for the recognition of faces (p.140).

personal story featured in the magazine. The first two types of faces dominate magazine covers, depend upon the mechanics of gloss for their aestheticisation, and are all beautiful, admirable or desirable faces, operating in the mode of visibility and display as images. The third kind of face comprises of rare interventions or de-emphasised, secondary inset pictures, and are in the minority, and operate in terms of an appeal to interaction and ethical response, in Levinas' (1998) sense (see also Butler, 2004). Even a cursory observation of the corpus of texts reveals that faces operate more in the mode of the visible than the ethical. What then, is the specific value of this clear hierarchy of importance – the prioritisation of face as image over the face as address?

Chapter 5 argued that celebrity faces constitute a unique type of currency in consumer culture. The face of Greta Garbo could be considered the prototypical celebrity face, where her image is revered as a manifestation of divinity, human beauty idealised and celebrated as the closest possible thing to celestialism and godliness. The golden age of celebrity is over, and although the corpus shows that there remains a strong tradition of glossy, over-aestheticised glamour photography attached to celebritydom, it also reveals how celebrities are laid bare and exposed in paparazzi photography that highlights their imperfections. The productive tension between the "sacred" and "profane" images of celebrities serves to highlight the value that is placed on the celebrity face, and the way in which paparazzi photography serves to make studio photography appear even more glossy and desirable, and in turn, how studio photography gives the impression that paparazzi photographs offer insight into "real lives" and unmediated portraiture. Together, these two modes of photographing celebrities combine to create a situation in which famous faces, often instantly recognisable in consumer culture, become the central and intertextual subject matter of a large majority of magazine covers. These faces are not only beautiful, they are also powerful in that their fame is connected to the products of the culture industry and therefore economic success and wealth.

So, these beautiful faces that belong to celebrities and models constitute the majority of faces displayed on magazine covers. The pervasive presence of such faces in the highly mediated societies of the global north, on outdoor advertisements on busses and billboards, in television shows and on the covers of magazines, is no accident. These beautiful faces represent a particular kind of currency in consumer culture. The recognizable and attractive features of Brad Pitt, Liv Tyler or Jennifer Lopez are used on magazine covers in order to attract attention from non-mediated individuals whom,

the structures of the texts seems to suggest, admire and aspire towards the mediated state of celebritydom. There is, therefore, a special kind of value attached to these faces. And this face value is more than the simple surface appeal of the glossy textures of the magazine cover. When something is said to be beautiful there is an implicit allocation of value to that thing – it is therefore good, wonderful, and perhaps even perfect. It is clear that upon the magazine cover, facial beauty has been commodified into a glossy mass media aesthetic that is endlessly reiterated by the parade of celebrities and models that strut across the covers of magazines. These celebrities and anonymous models are beautiful and attractive in the banal and rather shallow, generic way that is favoured by consumer culture. Their faces have value only in so far as they are able to sell certain products by suggesting that the admiration that they have earned through their visibility and fame can somehow be transferred to the consumer products (magazines or other commodities) with which they are juxtaposed. It is profoundly telling that the same celebrities and models grace the advertisements inside the consumer magazines as well as their covers. The viewer is literally invited to take the images on face value, in terms of the commercial value that the face represents. The value of the beautiful faces on magazine covers is both commercial and ideational. It is commercial in the sense in which it is used to sell. And it is ideational in the sense in which it operates as a role model for the viewer.

Faces are very often portrayed face-on, closely cropped as the only image dominating the page – for example, *Q* (54), *Harpers Bazaar* (27), *Psychologies* (53) and *Shout* (61). In these examples, the faces are close to life-size, sometimes larger than, and the portraits show close and intimate detail of the models: stubble, pores of the skin, traces of make-up powder, the texture of lips and eyelashes, the intricate colours of eyes. Studies have shown that readers assign greater prominence or significance to images of faces that are reproduced in large formats in the media (see Schroeder and Borgersen, 2005: 589-591). Such images invite close scrutiny and emphasize human qualities of intellect, personality, identity, and character (*ibid.*) while suggesting a connection with the viewer through both proximity and eye contact. It cannot be denied that there is a strong and simple element of humanity present in these faces: the glimpses of intimate contact with otherwise remote and inaccessible celebrities, the chance to scrutinise the detail of their faces, a privilege usually reserved for lovers. It is clear that the faces on magazine covers operate as examples of aspirational role models, ideal type human beings that the reader is invited to emulate and admire in the process of imagining themselves as better. In this way, the presence of the almost life-

size famous and/or beautiful face appeals to some notion of fundamentally shared human experience and imagination.

Levinas says that his "Face" is "definitely not a plastic form like a portrait" (1998: 104) and that it signifies from "beyond the plastic forms which do not cease covering it like a mask with their presence in perception" (Levinas, 1998: 145). What he is saying, I believe, is that the humanness and mortality of the face shows through even the plasticity of the "masks" worn in public and social life. At the same time, he acknowledges the presence of "plastic forms" of the face, which can be interpreted as various ways of deflecting or reframing the ethical imperative "naturally" located in the other's face. These plastic forms could be understood to be certain "posed" expressions, forms of embellishment such as make-up, practices such as plastic surgery which change the natural face, and post-production processes that "airbrush" and "photoshop" the image of the face. Magazine faces are usually carefully styled "glamour shots", with the models wearing carefully applied make up which masks imperfections and accentuates a particular notion of beauty. And the faces are metaphorically plastic in their expressions, often rehashing clichéd smiles and pouts that have been present in the consumerist visual lexicon since the beginning of sexed-up advertising. A plastic face is therefore a face that seeks to hide its vulnerability, weakness, and claims immortality rather than admitting to mortality. It is a glossy face, in the many senses in which glossiness was discussed in Chapter 5. Arguably, the majority of faces present on magazine covers are closer to plastic faces, to masks, than to the naked and unembellished plea of the face of the other. From a material point of view, the faces are literally partly plastic – different types of chemical resins are bonded with paper in order to make it glossy. In these senses, the face on the magazine is a plastic face, where "plastic" connotes the many levels of glossiness and idealised perfection discussed in Chapter 5. Such faces are better understood as masked versions of humanity, rather than as the site of the ethical address of the other. Plastic faces displace the notion of flesh-and-blood otherness and replace it with the notion of mediated human perfection. And these plastic faces are visually prioritised as role models in the project of self-improvement and care. In this sense, they operate in the mode of idealization (Schroeder and Borgersen, 2005: 592), in that they "influence how we think about the ideal or good life, what is sexy, and what will be seen as attractive by desired others".

## The unaestheticised face as foil

It cannot be denied that the majority of faces on magazine covers are not real flesh and blood faces of (sub-altern) others calling out for an ethical response, but instead the mediated, paper and ink faces of others positioned as aspirational role models – better selves – inviting admiration, respect and emulation. Nevertheless, a small number of face-images in the corpus of texts are indeed naked and unembellished; and it is in these faces that the sense of the face as the human, vulnerable, mortal and weak are most evident in the Levinasian sense. For example, *Closer* (5) shows an image of former Spice Girl Mel B working out in a park. Her face wears a grimace, testament to the tough physical regime of exercise in which she is engaged. In this mode, her face draws attention to human mortality and physical pain in the (itself ideologically loaded, as noted in Chapter 7) project of re-shaping the body after pregnancy, and even to vulnerability to the political-economy of personal image that shapes celebrity life. She is an example of the hard work required to stay attractive. Mel B's face can be compared to the image of the running man on *Runner's World* (58), where the act of exercise is represented as enjoyable in the sublime, pain-free, as evidenced by the beatific smile on the runner's face. He is an example of an idealised state of exercise. Juxtaposed, these images reveal the profane and sacred, the realistic and the glossy, versions of exercise as part of a regimen of self-care.

On *Closer* (5), at the top right, is a small thumbnail portrait inset to illustrate a story about a boy with anorexia. The portrait shows the boy from the ribs up, his painfully emaciated little body bearing testament to his illness and suffering. His face is the face of the other in the true sense meant by Levinas. The boy's eyes avert the camera and his face illustrates mortality in an extremely pitiful sense, invoking and demanding an ethical response on the viewer's part. Another example is evident on the cover of *Heat* (30), which shows a portrait of a *Big Brother* celebrity, Charley, who was attacked outside a London nightclub. The portrait shows her after her attack, which is captured in inset photographs to her left. Her face, unembellished and unsmiling, betrays victimhood and suffering at the hands of her attacker, it demands responsibility and empathy on the part of the viewer – “do people hate me this much?” the cover line asks. Such naked faces of real, suffering individuals are, however, in the minority on magazine covers. Outnumbering them by far are faces carefully styled and aestheticised, made-up and post-produced so as to resemble more plastic masks simulating human perfection and less the universal condition of human frailty, vulnerability, pain, and mortality.

It is clear that the significance of the face looms large. All faces contain, as Levinas so convincingly argues, a fundamental appeal to and reflection of humanity and mortality. However, the corpus of texts shows a range of faces that are skewed towards “plastic”, idealised, glossy, hyperreal representations and that attempt to mask that fundamental humanity and mortality; the world of the magazine cover is populated by close-up photographs of beautiful and flawless faces. These faces make eye contact with the viewer, inviting a certain type of face-to-face encounter that is very different from the exchange of ethical responsibility that Levinas theorises. It could be argued that the face-to-face exchange between the flesh and blood face of the viewer (the self, the I, the consumer, the reader) and the paper and ink face of the aestheticised cover-model is most often a recognition of the superiority of the other in the image. As a public image, although fragile in its paperness, the plastic face is powerful in its discourse and symbolisation of perfection. Although my analysis cannot speak for the viewer of the image, and the ways in which they perceive themselves to be addressed, it can and must highlight the ways in which the image structures its address and what potential responses might be encouraged. Vulnerable “naked” faces are clearly deprioritised and marginalised, in this way, their functions in addressing the reader and compelling an ethical response is also minimised. These faces appear literally smaller, de-emphasised as role models and instead utilised as a foil to the dominant mode of plastic faces. A different kind of face-ism to that described by Archer et al (1983)<sup>44</sup> can be said to operate on consumer magazine covers – where the plastic face is maximised, and in this way prioritised as most valuable and important.

The discussion thus far has addressed the ways in which the direct address to readers centres the project of self-care and improvement in the discourse of magazine covers, and secondly how the dominant images of beautiful, idealised and celebritised faces function as role models for the former. Next, it is necessary to consider the modes of interaction between the two.

### **Eye contact: The face-to-face space**

The faces represented on the covers of magazines most often belong to celebrities and are attached to eroticised beautiful bodies. The discussion that follows, therefore,

<sup>44</sup> Where an analysis of the portrayal of male and female faces in news photographs revealed that the former were almost always more prominent than the latter, and that as a consequence viewers attributed more positive characteristics to the men (Schroeder and Borgersen, 2005: 591).

cannot be seen in isolation but links in to and builds upon the discussions of celebrities and the mechanics of gloss put forward in Chapter 5, and the representations of bodies and the pornographic imagination put forward in Chapter 7, as well as the discussions of the representations of commodities put forward in Chapter 6. In some way, the images of these other objects/subjects culminate and feed into images of faces, for there is always a face present in the space of a magazine cover, even if there is not one pictured upon it: the face of the reader standing at the newsstand and looking into the world framed by the rectangular edges of the glossy paper.

The presence of a face making eye contact with this viewer is understood to be one of the most effective selling points of magazine covers and is exploited as such by designers and publishers. According to magazine art directors, “Conventional wisdom from publishers about cover design is that it should feature a life-size face making eye contact and smiling. The face must have personality, be unthreatening and a mirror image of the reader (or more accurately, the reader’s physical and social aspirations); it is therefore often a famous face” (Owen, 1992: 186), and, “Portraits are a central theme, and are all about humanity” (Moser, 2003: 60). Industry reliance on this design convention can be clearly seen in the corpus of texts, most of which feature famous (or beautiful) faces making eye contact with the viewer: “the evocative power of the face is strongest when it makes eye contact with the reader” (Moser, 2003: 60). This eye contact is not “real” but simulated, it is not a real pair of eyes connecting with those of the magazine reader or newsstand viewer but an image of a pair of eyes. A pair of eyes that looked into the mechanical eye of the camera, the image captured then displayed to a broader mass of anonymous eyes looking back. The camera is thus an interface between the two sets of eyes, it is the field in which the eye contact is simulated, mediated and constructed.

In Chapter 7’s discussion of the pornographic imagination, it was argued that the relationship between the observing eye and the photographed body was an erotic one, central to the scopophilic operations of consumerism. Ten Bos and Kaulingfreks (2002: 140) argue that faces “do something to each other” and “engage in infectious relationships”. The space between four eyes, they continue, “is never an empty field or a vacuum but is permeated by turbulent radiation”. The suggestion here is that eye contact is a productive and dynamic space, where a difficult-to-verbalise form of interpersonal suggestiveness takes place, the promise of intimacy, perhaps – which cannot fail to be couched in even the most subtle of sexual terms, considering our understanding of the eroticised operations of magazine cover imagery. The close

cropped frames of many of the portraits also utilize the dynamics of space to suggest intimacy and solidarity (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 52). Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 122-3) argue that the images featuring eye contact make active demands of viewers, inviting them to imagine a relationship with the person portrayed, which is defined by the facial expression of the represented participant. A smile asks the viewer to "enter into a relation of social affinity". This is evident in many of the texts in the corpus, for example, on *Runner's World* (58) where the runner's smile invites viewers to imagine themselves on the same social terms: as a happy, fit, healthy and athletic individual. Another example is *i-D* magazine (35), which features a winking eye on every cover (a well-known formula used by the magazine brand as differentiating factor, and to reference the typography of the title). This wink engages eye contact in a clever and ironic fashion, inviting the reader to self-identify as the kind of fashion-conscious, independent-thinking and fun-loving trend-setter that *i-D* features and celebrates. Eye contact framed by a seductive pout asks the viewer to desire them (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996: 122), and think of them in erotic terms. This invitation to sexual desire, signposted by the stereotyped pout common to consumerist imagery, is skewed in gender terms towards a desire invited towards women subjects. The faces of men making eye contact are more commonly serious, aggressive and less sexually inviting. A study of advertising images by Bell and Millic (2002: 17) showed that females gazed directly at the viewer more often than males, and that in this way, the former were "more frequently depicted in image-acts which demand a relationship with the viewer rather than 'offering' something to the viewer". Their conclusion is that in advertising imagery, images of women interact with viewers more than men. This gendered pattern of eye contact and invitation to action have relevance too to the ways in which eye contact is gendered in magazine cover images: men portrayed as in control and "giving" orders, women as willing to be dominated, as "offering" themselves as partners, objects or role models.

In the situation of faces featuring eye contact and expressions of "cold disdain", Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 123) argue that the viewer is asked to relate to them as an "inferior to a superior". Eye contact is not only about an invitation to desire the person represented, it is a tool for inviting an imagined relationship, which can take many forms, and implies various types of distance, ranging from the intimate imaginings of desire to the detached remoteness of unattainable superiority, and including complex combinations of these eye-contact messages. Consider for example the face of Paris Hilton on the cover of *Elle* (13). Her lowered lashes and pouting lips (as well as the word "sexy" emblazoned across her chest) invite a relationship of desire, yet her cold

expression simultaneously suggests that she be regarded as the viewer's superior. This type of expression is typical of models, which Adelman and Ruggi (2008: 564) following Berger (1972) summarise as "a distanced way of looking out on/over others – exactly the way models gaze out over their audience during the parade [which] communicates indifference and superiority". Rearticulating the eye contact of magazine cover models as a distanced gaze that looks past or over the viewer, "at an imaginary point ahead", rather than at them, reveals that instead of a type of social affinity and intimacy, magazine cover eyes communicate "an autonomous disdain". In these terms, it becomes clear that the eye contact suggested by these images of faces is blind, it is a distant gaze that in fact ignores the viewer, literally looks over and metaphorically overlooks them, and enjoys "an enviable self-sufficiency". In these terms, the promise of eye contact is false and futile, revealed as nothing but a simulated sales pitch, a thinly disguised, disposable piece of paper featuring unseeing eyes that, if they were there in flesh and blood rather than on a photograph, would also ignore the "real life" viewer.

Nevertheless, there exists some degree of an appeal to shared humanity present in the face-images and exploited by magazine cover designers in order to create a sense of relationship between the viewer and the cover model. "It is the face that makes us human and human encounters typically take place in interfacial space" (Ten Bos and Kaulingfreks, 2002: 143). In the corpus of texts under study images of bodies that are cropped and visually dismembered<sup>45</sup>, separated from the face and therefore the human identity of the owner of that body, are absent. The presence of faces endows an inescapable and unique humanness to the otherwise reified bodies represented on magazine covers. The humanness introduced to the commodified, eroticised world of the magazine cover is entirely due to the space of the face, which is turned interfacial through the persistently present presumed reader/viewer and the hoped-for buyer at the newsstand. The interfacial space in this context is mediated and asymmetrical. One of the faces is more visible and dominates the interaction: it is on the magazine cover. The other face is implied, invisible and transient: it is the face of the viewer at the newsstand, passing through or browsing, and the face of the reader, slightly more committed through the act of purchase and reading. The face-to-face exchange that is invited points to another nuance of the sense of face value: and the difference between that of the face portrayed and the face observing. McCracken (1993: 14) argues that the models portrayed on the covers of women's magazines operate as "windows to the future self" as well as "selective frames" that colour perceptions of ideal femininity.

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<sup>45</sup> This is a characteristic of some fashion advertisements. See for example Rabine (1994).

Cover models are therefore role models as well as ideal types. Their faces, smiling and welcoming or seductive and enticing, are therefore positioned as belonging to a higher order of value than those faces, not printed in full colour and glossed, that look in on them from the non-mediated world. The face can thus operate as both an inclusive and exclusive image. The next section considers the relationship between the images of perfect faces and the implicit dependence on the imperfect I, by returning to the notion of paper mirrors first introduced in Chapter 4.

## ***Paper Mirrors***

It was observed in the thick description of the newsstand in Chapter 4, that the magazine covers on display seemed to me like paper mirrors, reflecting back an aestheticised face instead of my own when I looked at them. This reflexive observation, which was made more poignant by the glimpses of myself that I would notice in surveillance or decorative mirrors in newsstands, highlighted the evocative, and slightly deprecating, sense of the difference between ordinary people like me and the glamorous celebrities that inhabited the mediated world of magazine covers. And alongside this sense of the difference, inevitably hierarchical, between the way that I looked and the way that the people on the magazine covers looked, was an unmistakeable shred of desire that simply could not be ignored – to look like that too. Despite the clear intellectual understanding of the false and “glossy” aesthetic mode of the images of the other faces, there was no escaping my innately human tendency to relate every perception of other people back to my own self. This is particularly true in the case of images of other faces.

In psychoanalysis, mirroring is seen as an important part of a child's development. It describes the point at which children start to recognise themselves in the faces of their parents who look lovingly at them. This process can be described as “basic primary transference” which influences “the child's sense of self-worth. His attitude can be paraphrased as, ‘I am reflected – therefore I exist’” (Weinberg and Toder, 2004: 494). Fuss (1994: 218) argues that the close-up, soft-focus portraits of women in fashion and beauty advertisements work by appealing to the female viewer as “an encounter with a shimmering, luminous, reconstituted image of the mythic ‘Mother’”. On a fundamentally human level then, feelings of self-worth are formed through the interaction with attentive others, an awareness of being seen, and a sense that one's existence is confirmed by reflection in the presence of others. Mirroring can therefore be understood both as a

situation in which two faces address one another, and find their humanity reflected back, and a process through which individuals are able to recognise themselves as such, through the looks from and interactions with others. It is in this sense that human beings are fundamentally social creatures, who rely upon the presence and attention of others in order to develop self-esteem and to grapple with existentialist questions that underlie our lives, no matter how subconsciously. From a psychological perspective, then, human mirrors are either therapists or other members of a group therapy, who are able to reflect certain experiences and understandings back to the patient, in order to help him or her gain perspective on their personal challenges. I would like to relate this to the Foucauldian framework of the care of the self by highlighting its fundamentally social nature; the care of the self is not located merely within the core mental experience of each individual, but is discursively formed and shaped. Although the art of living was fundamentally personal, it also came to constitute a "social practice, giving rise to relationship between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times, even institutions" (Foucault, 1990: 45). Rose (1990: 218) echoes this, saying that 'the self' "does not pre-exist the forms of its social recognition". Thus, the way in which individuals measure the success of the project of self-identity is against others', within the framework of the social, through the mirroring offered by other social actors and institutions. And in contemporary culture, magazines can be argued to operate as a primary media space – an institution even – in which the social practice of the care of the self is prioritised and communicated through the twinned operations of direct address and face-image.

In the context of magazine covers, the metaphor of the mirror can be argued to play a slightly different role to the socio-psychological process of mirroring. In the latter, the face is fundamentally linked to the other and the self's relation with that other. However, the development of technology that allowed the manufacture of a piece of glass so polished as to be able to reflect images led to a fundamental alteration of the connotations and relations of the face. According to Ten Bos and Kaulingfreks (2002: 145), it is exactly western culture's fascination with mirrors that allowed the idea to develop that the "face is also something that might be related to the self rather than to the other". This shift from other to self in the meaning of the face, due to the emergence of the mirror is fundamental. In the shared psychological past, before individuals were able to see their own faces, it was associated only with the other – in Levinas' pure sense, perhaps. Now, due to material mirrors, the face is also strongly associated with the self. In other words, due to the increased presence of mirrors in our everyday lives, and our familiarity with our own faces, the images of faces of others evokes an

immediate and narcissistic connection to the image of self. The images of faces on magazine covers work to evoke this connection, which is bolstered by the use of language that invites the reader to focus upon their individual experiences, lifestyles and images, at a deeper, arguably psychological, level.

Anthony Giddens (1991: 172), in his discussion of self-identity in late modernity, argues:

Consumer capitalism, with its efforts to standardise consumption and to shape tastes through advertising, plays a basic role in furthering narcissism. The idea of generating an educated and discerning public has long since succumbed to the pervasiveness of consumerism, which is a 'society dominated by appearances'. Consumption addresses the alienated qualities of modern social life and claims to be their solution: it promises the very things the narcissist desires – attractiveness, beauty and personal popularity – through the consumption of the 'right' kinds of goods and services. Hence all of us, in modern social conditions, live as though surrounded by mirrors; in these we search for the appearance of an unblemished, socially valued self.

In other words, social institutions, such as the media, are metaphorical mirrors that stimulate a narcissistic focus on the self, and simulate the possibility of an "unblemished self". Such mirrors operate through the representation of images of selfhood that converge into cultural capital that defines what it means to be a fully-functioning consumerist "self". Images of faces on consumer magazine covers are more often than not unblemished and beautiful, wearing confident, aloof or seductive expressions, suggesting the possibility of attaining such looks whilst at the same time creating a sense of hierarchy and distance between themselves and the reader. The overall invitation to admire can be translated into an order to emulate: to turn the attention on to the self and to work on it until the I becomes as beautiful to the eye as the magazine cover model. With all of the messages of the consumer magazine cover converging on the individual and his sense of self, her project of selfhood, it can be argued that the texts certainly operate in the sense described by Giddens. They are mirrors, which metaphorically reflect ideal selves to the viewer, which provide the raw material for a reconstruction of self in the image of the face on the cover. But magazines are not purely representative, simulative objects, they are also material objects made from paper and ink. As was discussed in Chapter 5, magazine covers are commodities characterised by the smooth and glossy texture of the paper on which they are printed, a texture analogous to the smooth and reflective surface of mirrors. In this sense, therefore, magazine covers can be described as *paper mirrors*.

Magazine covers offer idealised portraits of social selves, figuratively but also *literally*. Showing often close to life-size head and shoulder portraits of celebrities and models, the photograph format literally echoes the framing of what is seen when looking in the bathroom mirror. This framing is far from accidental – magazine cover designers wish to evoke the opportunity for the viewer to identify with the cover model. Hence readers of lifestyle magazines that focus on personal aesthetics and style will show an image cropped at the hip or bust, allowing the face to take centre stage and mimicking the view that readers get on themselves in mirrors. In the “mirror” of the magazine cover, however, the everyday self is replaced by an abstracted, airbrushed, tooth-whitened, coiffed, sunkissed and buffed self. Magazine covers do not reflect in the same way as polished glass, despite their glossy veneer, but they reflect powerful symbols of ideal beauty or lifestyle success which form part of the cultural capital that ordinary consumers are invited to use to construct their identities, to imagine their aspired-to selves, and judge their actual selves. Visually, this takes place through the pervasive presence of images of faces of celebrities and models, as well as through the aestheticised lifestyles and practices discussed in Chapter 6. Linguistically this takes place through the constant insistence on activity related to self-improvement and self-evaluation. The paper format of the magazine cover, and its ubiquitous presence in various public spaces of everyday life, seems to me to *materially* entrench its status as a metaphorical mirror for the self. A paper mirror is therefore an abstracted form of reflection that privileges a hierarchy of representation deemphasising yet invoking everyday individuality at the expense of aestheticised consumerist icons. In terms of the possibilities for agency made available by the magazine cover as a mirror, it can be observed that the interpersonal level of meaning is absorbed into the ideational. The sense of I becomes absolute, and the options for interpersonal exchange are only made meaningful in terms of what they can offer to the formation of the ideal self, which exists only in the vortex of the mind’s eye, the deepest psychological imagination in which the I is as perfect as the individual on the magazine cover. The question then arises as to whether these paper mirrors function in a way that is manipulative of or empowering to the individual faced with them.

Psychotherapy again offers a useful paradigm: the presence of a sympathetic other can be considered a form of “benevolent mirroring” in which constructive reflections of the patient result, while the presence of an other who does not necessarily have the best interests of the patient at heart can result in “malignant mirroring” (Zinkin, 1983: 113 quoted in Weinberg and Toder, 2004: 498), where destructive and damaging reflections

of the patient result. In tune with the dialectical tensions identified throughout this thesis, it is prudent to assume that a similar tension exists between benevolent and malignant paper mirroring. The paper faces reflecting flesh and blood faces could be considered at least benign and at most sympathetic in terms of the invitations to self-reflexivity and personal development that they contain. The focus on the I implied in the paper mirror could be considered a space of self-construction and a celebration of the creation of space for individuals to indulge in self-understanding and improvement. On the other hand, paper mirroring could be considered dangerous in that its invitations to self-reflexivity can be too extremely narcissistic and solipsistic and lead to self-obsession and the loss of a broader social conscience, or to a chronic lack of self-esteem and healthy self-worth, in the face of the unattainable aesthetic privileged. From this perspective, it could be argued that although elements of benevolent mirroring are certainly present and conceivable to some degree, paper mirrors are fundamentally skewed towards a more malignant function. The invitations to self-identity construction prioritised throughout consumer culture are manifested in the portraits of celebrities on the covers of magazines in a kind of grotesque reductionism. Instead of symbolically looking at ourselves in the mirror, reflexively constructing our self-identities and relations with others, or focussing upon self-development and care in a multi-faceted and complex manner, we look at ourselves through the distorted reflections of reified aesthetic role models, widely displayed as ideal types. The paper mirror is therefore a misleading invitation to subject-construction and self care, which instead of providing an unmediated space of clarity in which to regard and improve the self<sup>46</sup>, provides a glossy, aestheticised and mediated space through which to do so. The paper mirror at once insists upon the doctrine of self-perfection and manipulatively reiterates its inaccessibility and impossibility.

Finally, it may be worth noting that if the magazine cover is a paper mirror, then the newsstand could be framed as a hall of paper mirrors. Returning for the last time to the psychoanalytical metaphor, group therapy has been described in similar terms. In the context of group discussions about common problems, the patient of psychotherapy is enabled to explore, compare and observe herself through the different mirrors provided by the other members of the group (Weinberg and Toder, 2004: 492). Transplanting this metaphor to the newsstand, it could be argued that the consumer who stops to

<sup>46</sup> Although at least once, this has in fact occurred. In December 2006, *Time* magazine placed a silver reflective surface on its "Person of the Year" cover, so that any viewer looking at it would see their own face reflected back as the cover image. This gimmick was intended to highlight the rise of user generated content and reader participation in the changing media landscape, a topical issue in media at the time due to the rise of YouTube. See <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570743,00.html>

browse or free-read is confronted with a wide variety of perspectives on himself. Each paper mirror reflects an aspect of the self that may or may not have been acknowledged or explored by the individual; that may or may not be welcomed or aspired to, that may or may not stimulate a pornographic imagination. In this way, the newsstand could be understood to operate as a catalogue of possible selves, which are projected through images of others framed in the glossy, lifestyle terms of ideal types. This could be understood to be both manipulative and empowering in the same manner in which the commercial heteroglossia of the proliferation of commodities functions: at once promising in terms of supplying a great number of options for self-identity development, and chaotic and confusing due to the stress associated with making choices from a huge variety of options and the work required to achieve the desired results.

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter was made up of three parts. The first section explored the operation of direct address towards the reader, which, using the language of intuitive and corrective action, invites and prioritises an individualist project of self-care and improvement. The second addressed the face as it operates on consumer magazine covers as both image and address, arguing that it invokes a sense of both individuality and unique personal identity, and a more universal and fundamental sense of humanity. The face on the cover of the magazine is argued to be primarily a “plastic” face, a portrait of human superiority in the glossy mode, which invites a type of self-critique on the part of the viewer. The face to face relationship that results, that of the flesh and blood consumer and the more often than not celebrity image, is often a distorted relationship that insists upon a recognition not of the vulnerability of the other face but its aesthetic superiority. The third section drew together these two discussions into an argument that elaborated how it is that magazine cover texts command a very particular type of self-identity exploration on the part of the reader. It reintroduced the notion of the “paper mirror” as way of describing the asymmetrical flow of ideas of personal worth and value directed at the viewer, which persistently invite them to work on their image and lifestyle in a never-ending, implicitly unattainable project of self-identity.

These discussions can be summarised as the “operations of the I” in magazine covers. Although implicit in all of the chapters that have preceded, the I was the last thing I wished to address in this thesis because it is in many ways the culmination of the entire

project. For what other reason could a detailed analysis such as this of the structures of mediation in operation in texts as ubiquitous and common as consumer magazine covers be useful except in that it provides some insight into the ways in which human beings are invited to imagine themselves in the context of consumerist society? I must reiterate that I have not been able, through this analysis, to describe how human beings imagine themselves as individuals in the context of consumerism – this requires an audience focussed study and was beyond my remit. What I have been able to explore, I hope, is the discourse from which consumer magazine covers are formed, and how the individual is conceptualised in that discourse. The preceding analysis argues that the “ordinary” non-mediated individual bears a heavy burden of work on the self, in terms of personal aesthetics, bodily health, lifestyle practice and emotional experience. Yet this project is conditional upon using as benchmarks the very high aesthetic and lifestyle standards represented by the famous/beautiful individuals who make it on to the magazine covers, which exploit deep-seated psychological connections between the sense of self and images of others. How this operation of consumerist aesthetics ties in with the others identified in preceding chapters is taken up in the conclusion.

# Conclusion

This thesis has focused on the role of magazine covers in visual culture. It has described how magazine cover texts and newsstands operate collectively and discursively in social space and everyday life in London so as to contribute to a broader critique of consumer culture and its aesthetic modes. It has identified and articulated the ways in which consumerist discourses are mediated through magazine covers situated on newsstands. Responding to a fundamentally “how” research question, it has offered a close and detailed examination of an output of consumerist mediation in order to understand the strategies behind the effectiveness of their messages. Magazine covers were identified as an appropriate site for the exploration of consumerist aesthetics due to their intense visuality, their transparent role as sales texts, their unique status as commodity-mediating commodities, and their ubiquity and proliferation in the public spaces of London’s retail landscape. These research objects were theoretically framed with reference to scholarship on magazines and theories of visual and consumer culture. The methodological focus of the thesis entailed an ethnographically contextualised, intertextual, social semiotic analysis of magazine covers at newsstands.

This conclusion offers an overview of the main contributions of the thesis and synthesises the key analytical insights achieved in the study. Limitations and future avenues for research are highlighted where relevant in each section.

## ***Contributions of the study***

As noted in Chapter 1, magazines have been studied from a number of perspectives – the discursive, the textual, the reception and the production. The decision to focus on magazines covers and newsstands is an important contribution to the body of scholarship relating to magazines, which although considerable, has to date neglected to examine this particular empirical framing. The detailed articulation of the multimodal semiotic resources employed collectively by magazine covers contributes to viewpoints on the media genre. Furthermore, the focus on newsstands that this study has provided offers a new perspective from which magazines can be researched and theorised: as objects (commodities) that populate social spaces.

Furthermore, this thesis makes contributions to the methodologies of both ethnography and multimodal textual analysis. These are discussed next, along with reference to the limitations of the methodology employed.

## Methodological innovations

From a methodological perspective, the thesis has made a contribution to both ethnographic approaches to researching everyday life retail spaces, and to the multimodal analysis of media texts. The innovative combination of overt and covert participant observation in newsstand spaces with the multimodal discourse analysis of a set of texts sourced from those spaces allowed for a detailed social contextualisation of media texts as well as a textual interpretation of a social space. In this sense, the methodological approach of the study resulted in a “textualisation” of participant observation, and an “ethnographisation” of textual analysis. The methodological decision to engage with the newsstand as a mediated space and a text in its own right led to a rich corpus of visual data, which was rewritten into a thick description of the archetypal newsstand. This thick description was provided in Chapter 4, which discussed the social structures and practices of the newsstand and makes a contribution to the broader picture of the retail landscape of late modernity in cities of the global north, scholarship that addresses mediation in public space, and sociologies of consumption. The chapter offered a fundamental link to social context and intertextuality and insight into how media texts inhabit and co-construct public space, thus contributing to an emerging area of research. The chapter implied that the broader question of how the aesthetic forms of media in public space are meaningful requires further research and theorisation, specifically in terms of the increasingly hegemonic discourses of consumerism. The social-semiotic methodology applied could prove particularly useful in future studies that seek to analyse the presence of media texts in social space.

The methodological approach chosen for this study contains two limitations, which require acknowledgement. The first relates to the impossibility of objectivity, the second to the decision to engage at the level of text and space rather than reception.

Firstly, the fact that it was my subjective experiences of looking that were centre-stage within the narrative that unfolded throughout the thesis may be regarded as a weakness. This subjectivity was perhaps most evident in the “thick description” of the

newsstand, but is also a central thread that runs through the analyses which emphasise interpretations of the formal elements of magazine covers. I acknowledge that methodologically and analytically it is *my* eyes that have done the looking and the seeing; the mediating of data into description. To this effect, my commitment to reflexivity in my research bears reiteration. The I that writes here has a unique gender and social identity, set of educational, cultural and economic experiences, as well as particular experiences in media practice. These have influenced my view on magazines which, as is likely evident from the discussions that precede this chapter, verges slightly more towards the critical than celebratory perspective on consumerism. This is not to suggest that I have a completely dystopian view on consumerist aesthetics – the slightest jot of intellectual honesty forces an acknowledgement of my own participation in consumer culture and of the pleasure and value it brings to my life, as well as the areas in which it frustrates and offends me. As well as this, it is important to acknowledge and respect the fact that other consumers, who are not committed to an academic paradigm or the socio-semiotic interpretation of the world around them, gain pleasure from consuming things like magazines, which is evidenced by the consumption practices observed to take place at newsstands as well as audience studies proper. It is the tension between these pleasures and the fact that a hegemony exists – consumerist mediation crowds out many other types of mediation – that has been at once fascinating and problematic for me as a social researcher. The deeper understanding of the operations of the consumerist aesthetic gained through this study has encouraged me to continue to imagine and contribute to a world in which mediation is not aesthetically defined only by the modalities of commodification, sexiness and individualism. This said, it should be noted that it is inevitable that the use of a combination of methodologies such as participant observation and textual analysis will require a great deal of reflexivity. There can be no doubt that another researcher using the same methods and exploring the same research question will have produced a very different analysis to that provided in this thesis. I also acknowledge that there may be many things that have escaped my own gaze as a researcher. The discovery of these I must entrust to future research, as well as to the reinterpretations, challenges and confrontations that this study may provoke from my peers.

Secondly, as the methodology and thick description argued, the ways in which the newsstand is assembled and magazines displayed require embodied engagement from consumers, a direct and tactile relationship between commodity and subjectivity, even in the situation in which the magazines are only “touched” with the sense of sight. What may be considered by some to be a limit of this project is its decision to not explore the

verbally articulated experiences and ideas of consumers who engage with the texts and spaces explored discursively. I believe, however, that the decision to explore the mechanics of mediation required a close focus on texts and spaces rather than consumer hermeneutics, and it was proper to delimit the research in this way. Nevertheless, I do acknowledge that a crucial and potentially very enlightening future area of research that could build upon this study would involve an exploration of what people see and think when they look at newsstands and magazine covers, and a comparison of their patterns of interpretation and association with the findings in this project.

## **Theoretical insights**

From a theoretical perspective, the thesis makes two central contributions to the study of the mediation of consumerism. The first refers to the fruitful decision to centre in the analysis of consumerism a theory of the public as a space of appearance rather than participation. The second involves the identification of three sets of dialectical tensions within theories of consumer culture aesthetics.

### The public as a space of appearance

The thesis provides an empirical illustration of the ways in which, in the exploration of consumer culture, a theorisation of public spaces and texts are best understood as *arenas of appearance in which visibility is prioritised* and highly prized, rather than as sites of collective action, communicative rationality or dialogic deliberation. Through this conceptual prioritisation, the thesis makes a contribution to the ways in which consumer culture and mediation are theorised. Hannah Arendt's notion that the public realm is an illuminated space of appearance provided a fundamental framework through which the performative, agonistic nature of consumerist display can be theorised and understood. This is the case both for public retail sites which hinge on a sense of illumination and spectacle, and for magazine cover texts, which are framed in the visual language of admiration and the practice of literally and symbolically placing subjects and objects under spotlights and making them visible to mass audiences and in public spaces.

Shadows are also formed by the very public nature of magazine covers and newsstands, and the bright light that they throw. The question of the private or personal is not completely excised from the dynamic of the public as a space of appearance.

Through the analysis of the ways in which magazine cover texts seek to individualise their readers, and appeal to their unique sense of personal identity, the project has further highlighted how spaces and texts of appearance complicate the relationship between the public (visible) and private (personal). The fact that the large majority of consumers interact with the newsstand in silence and solitude shows that there is a clear element of private, personal experience occurring in the very public newsstand space. What has become clear through the analysis offered in this thesis is that consumerism in fact seeks to discourage and marginalise collective action. This is not stated explicitly, but is achieved through a manic emphasis on sexed-up individualism and appearance that effectively works to exclude any alternatives. There is no "we" in consumerist mediation, only an illuminated I, which seeks entry into a space of appearance where visibility is power. Thus, the consumerist public realm is also a space of *appearances* (images): participation is only possible in terms of consumption and the personalised display of successful self-management.

This thesis has attempted to show the necessity of theorising the public, in the context of consumerism, from the perspective of individualised appearance rather than collectivised deliberation. It does not have the scope to return to the latter, indeed dominant, theorisation of the public sphere in media studies in order to conceptualise how consumption in broad terms can constitute or enable participation in public life, and what are the implications of appearance for deliberation. The analysis across the chapters has demonstrated how consumerism frames individualised consumption and appearance/appearances as a sufficient and fulfilling mode of participation in public life. How this discourse can be related back to the possibilities for participation theorised by the public sphere, or how it challenges or informs individuals' actual perceptions of public connection is beyond my remit in this thesis. What it can highlight, however, is that an important future avenue of work must entail exploring the consequences for theories of the public sphere and public participation that result from consumerism's rearticulation of the public as appearance only. And it has shown how, in the context of the empirical locus of the visual and actual consumption of magazine covers in public space, individualism, appearance and visibility seem to reign supreme.

### The theoretical dialectics of consumerism

Furthermore, this thesis has contributed a categorisation of theories of consumerism into three sets of dialectical tensions between simulation and materiality, manipulation

and empowerment, and subject and object. These are related to the orders of the commodity, consumption and the interaction between the two, respectively. Emerging from a review of literature relating to consumerism, commodities, consumption and visual culture, these theoretical dialectics function as a useful summary of the key tensions that characterise debates in the field. Although they were employed in this thesis in order to serve a specific empirical focus, they may also prove useful for future research in the broader area of consumerist mediation.

The theoretical approach adopted in this thesis preferred a post-Marxist interpretation of the dialectic, which instead of seeking to resolve oppositional tension, highlights those complexities in order to point to the unavoidable and fertile presence of contradiction within both systems of thought and social reality. This research project has filled in these dialectical tensions with empirical detail from the specific sight/site of consumer magazine covers/newsstands, in this way exploring and emphasizing the contradictions and complexities in finer detail. Through the exercise of mapping the core theoretical dialectical tensions and articulating the key conceptual findings through which consumerist texts construct, deliver and maintain their messages, a number of insights into the broader field of the critical analysis of consumerist mediation were achieved. Overall, these feed into broader understandings of what publicity means in consumerism, its semiotic modalities, its power dynamics – the fundamental concerns of this thesis. These are discussed in the conceptual synthesis that follows.

### ***Synthesis of key concepts emerging from the study***

A number of key concepts emerge from the thesis: the newsstand as sight/site (Chapter 4), the mechanics of gloss (Chapter 5), commercial heteroglossia (Chapter 6), the pornographic imagination (Chapter 7) and the paper mirror (Chapter 8). The interactions between these concepts are discussed next in terms of two key synthetic themes: the mediation of consumerism, and the power dynamics of the consumerist aesthetic. The former addresses the ways in which the material characteristics of newsstand spaces and magazine cover texts interact to produce meaning, specifically in terms of glossiness, as well as the ways in which the three discursive strategies outlined in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 illuminate the theoretical dialectics identified in Chapter 2. The latter addresses the relations between the power dynamics of the gaze and the self-gaze summarised in terms of the eye and the I in chapters 7 and 8.

## The mediation of consumerism

This thesis has mapped out the discursive dimensions and aesthetic mechanics of magazine covers and newsstands. By so doing, it provides significant insight into the values of consumerism, and how they are mediated in such a way as to make those values tremendously appealing to human subjectivity: by employing discourses of choice, sexiness and individuality. The suggestions of a plethora of choice, the freedom to individualise a complex world, the mediation of sexually commodified bodies and objects for visual consumption and pleasure, and the powerful presence of faces mirroring imagined ideal selves, combine into a very powerful set of techniques which add up to an aesthetic hegemony. Why are consumer culture aesthetics so effective? Why have they triumphed in so many spheres of mediated life (including, now, the branding of NGOs, the celebritisation of humanitarian aid, and the slick delivery of political campaigns)?

This thesis argues that it is because they exploit a very clever and calculated form of mediation that combines fantasy and accessibility and that provides the glossy material for escapist beauty and pleasure without making it so fantastical that it is out of reach. The paradox between the largely inaccessible, glamorous worlds represented on the magazine cover and their social appearance in the accessible, mundane and common world of the newsstand highlights the ways in which the fantasy is at once brought within and held out of reach. Before going on to discuss the ways in which the three discursive strategies of consumerism identified in this project related to the theoretical dialectics identified, it is necessary to highlight the importance of glossiness. One of the most important insights of this thesis has been that material modalities such as texture and light play an important role in the production of meaning.

### Glossiness

Chapter 5 articulated the mechanics of gloss from a material perspective in order to show its role in creating symbolic meaning. By focussing on the mode/image of the celebrity as a personification of gloss, the analysis contributed both to perspectives on multimodal, socio-semiotic analysis, and the role of material modes of mediation in analysing the representation of celebrities. The emphasis on glossiness was especially relevant to a study focussing on magazine covers due to the literal centrality of glossy paper to their form of mediation. In magazine related scholarship more broadly, a great

deal of textual and discourse analysis of magazine texts has focused on the ways in which meaning is constructed through textuality and image, that is, through the ways in which reality is simulated or represented. This project has shown that discourses of consumerism are also mediated, however, on levels beyond the image and text. The discussion of the newsstand and glossiness showed how space (both three-dimensional and represented), texture, light and colour are equally important elements of the multimodal discourse of consumerism.

This project has thus contributed to the kind of “integrated multimodal approach” highlighted as necessary by Van Leeuwen (2008). The message of glossiness is constructed through a mechanics of gloss, which exploits the powerful subtleties of texture and light to create sense of luxury, seductive sensuality and desirability. The glossy aesthetic mediates between the material and simulated; indeed depends and thrives upon both formulations. Furthermore, as Van Leeuwen (2008: 130) argues, it is crucial to “integrate the study of semiotic modes with the study of the normative discourses that regulate their use”. This has been achieved in part by the analysis in this thesis, which has linked glossiness to the discourse of consumerism and shown how it operates on both an ideational and interpersonal level. However, a great deal more work needs to be done in order to understand how the multimodal mechanics of gloss are used in different forms of mediation, how that use is defined and reshaped by differing normative discourses, and how they are manifested in different socio-cultural media contexts. Future avenues of research could delve deeper into the tensions and relationships between glossy and anti-glossy modes of representing celebrities, as well as the ways in which glossiness is mediated in other consumerist media forms. This will include an exploration of the relationship of glossiness as described in this thesis with other articulations of the role of light and texture in creating meaning, such as Schroeder’s (2002) important discussion of the shininess of rubber and smoothness of leather and skin in advertisements that exploit the imagery of sexual subcultures.

### Three interrelated discursive strategies

As well as the role of glossiness in mediating consumerism, three important elements of the discourse of consumerism were identified in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Chapter 6 analysed in detail the visual and linguistic techniques in which commodities are mediated and argued that consumerism employs “commercial heteroglossia”, a recontextualisation of Bakhtin’s notion of “many-voicedness” within the magazine

“marketplace of ideas”. This contributes to our understandings of the complex dialectic between materiality and simulation that characterises the commodity, as well as the debates on whether consumption as defined by the discourse of choice is empowering or manipulative. Chapter 7 analysed the presence of images of bodies and the way they invite particular practices of looking. Appropriating Sontag’s term, it argued that consumerism exploits a “pornographic imagination” that invokes sex/love fantasy and naturalises this as fundamental to both consumption and self-identity. This contributes to our understanding of how sex sells, as well as the ways in which the (eroticised) gaze has been appropriated by consumerism in wide-ranging ways. Chapter 8 analysed the presence of images of faces in the context of the individualist project of the care of the self, arguing that consumerist texts function as “paper mirrors”, which draws on psychoanalytical mirroring and Giddens’ notions of self-reflexivity in late modernity. This contributes to an understanding of how the discourse of individualism is mediated through magazines, as well as the scope of the subject-object relationship, and the power of the pervasive systems of self-management that characterise late modernity (and thus the shape of consumerism’s claims to individualised empowerment).

The detailed discussion of ideational and interpersonal signification on a variety of levels explored the dynamics of simulation and hyperreality in consumerist mediation, while the detailed discussion of the material realities of the newsstand, the mediation of commodities, and the paper-and-ink mechanics of gloss supplemented existing understandings of the material dimensions of commodity culture. The thesis has also added empirical insights into the broader debates about the nature and shape of the subject and object in consumerist aesthetics, and their relationships with the dialectic between materiality and simulation. In particular, the ways in which subjects are commodified, either as celebrity images or body-objects on the covers of magazines, raises further questions about the ways in which material cultures invite objectivation through imagery. Celebrity (or celebritised) images are perhaps the best example of the ways in which individuals have to turn themselves into commodities, as Bauman (2007) argues, through material modes of glossiness in order to participate fruitfully in the visual economy. The celebrity as the personification of gloss is a subject/object that is central to the mediation of consumerism through magazine covers. The perspectives offered in this thesis on celebrity, as a material mode of communication as well as ideational signifier, both defined by glossiness, underscores the complexity of a form of mediation that is at once material and simulated. Furthermore, the strategy of commercial heteroglossia, which mediates a proliferation of choices (of commodities

and the lifestyles associated with them) entrenches a view on social life as one that is defined as meaningful and fulfilling by the presence of objects as well as images of objects. In turn this constructs agency in terms of consumption (both visual and actual), which means that the textual strategy of commercial heteroglossia defines the reader as a consumer or shopper (of products and lifestyles), which complicates any claims to liberation. In turn, the textual strategy of the pornographic imagination entrenches a view of social life as one defined by desire, and which constructs the individual as a lover, yet displaces that desire by creating ideational sex symbols that operate to at once distance and seduce the viewer. Finally, the centring of the self in the individualist practices of self-management invited by paper mirroring culminate into a construction of the consumer as pure I, narcissistic, self-absorbed and solipsistic. These various combinations of ideational and interpersonal signification illustrate the complex ways in which consumerist discourse is mediated, in terms of how possibilities for agency are constructed. Thus, the theorisation of subjectivity in the context of consumerism cannot take place outside of the context of the object-world defined both in material and simulated terms. And all of the processes described here take place within the broader framework of the public – both material as place (the newsstand) and symbolic (as a textual space of appearance) and are shaped by the power dynamics of consumer culture aesthetics .

### **The power dynamics of the space between I and Eye**

The discussion of the findings, contributions and avenues of future enquiry emerging from this thesis which have been described thus far all feed into the need to consider the politics of aestheticisation in consumer culture. This can be done by exploring the relationship *between the I and eye*. This final synthetic discussion section seeks to sketch out the ways in which this study has contributed to conceptualisations of subjectivity and objectivity in consumer culture within the context of the persistent debate about its potential for manipulation and empowerment.

The fundamental underlying aim of the analyses that have been presented in this thesis has been to locate and deconstruct the textual location of the power of consumerist mediation. The concepts that have emerged as central to a description of these power relations – the practices of the eye as articulated in terms of the pornographic imagination and the practices of the I as articulated in terms of paper mirroring – can be summed up in the eliminating words of Foucault (1980: 154):

We are talking about two things here: the gaze and interiorisation.

It is important to note that the two central movements of power that Foucault identifies in his earlier and later writings – the gaze and its internalisation – are not historically chronological. These patterns and structures of power as described and discovered by Foucault took place at different points in history – the former around the 18th century, in parallel with discourses of the enlightenment and the development of Bentham's Panopticon, the latter much earlier in antiquity, during the flowering of Greek philosophy and practice at the height of the Roman empire. So, it is not that one leads into the other, or that the gaze can somehow be construed as being causative of the care and management of the self, or vice versa. Rather, these two approaches to conceptualising power should be seen as causatively independent, yet operating in tandem and in constant dialectical tension. In other words, the space between eye and I has always existed – Foucault provided the language to conceptualise each in turn. The analysis in this project has elaborated on one fragment of contemporary social life in which the shape of those tensions is illustrated. The threads that are tangled in-between each make a texture of connection that can be described as a set of power relations that exist between the eye and the I. These words were selected as the titles of Chapters 7 and 8 because their homophonic resonance implies a deeper connection between the concepts and all that they connote.

The analysis of the role of the pornographic imagination in the practices of the eye, and of paper mirroring in the practices of the I, are two sides to the same conceptual coin: relations of power in the aesthetic matrix comprised of the multimodal texts that are newsstands and magazine covers. Power is doubled in the external, centrifugal movement of the gaze and the internal, centripetal movement of the interiorisation of the care of the self. So, in terms of exploring the question of how magazine covers and newsstands operate within the double economy of constraint and freedom implicit in consumer culture, aside from stating the obvious that they do, a more detailed mapping of *how they do* has been provided in the discussion of the process of the eye and the I, respectively. The implications of this for the debates about whether consumerism empowers or manipulates consumers are perhaps best framed in terms of the possibilities for appearance created by consumer magazine covers and newsstands. Who gets to appear on these texts, and to have their identities illuminated by the glare of the public gaze? And who gets to observe that stage, and what choices do they have about how to observe that stage? The arguments in this thesis have shown that in the

context of the magazine cover, it is a world of commodities, the sacred/profane world of the celebrity, and a hyperreal world of aestheticised body-objects and ideational face-images that is made visible and prioritised. The choices that consumers have, although articulated in the language of free choice, unlimited option and exciting empowerment, are constrained by the structures that define what there is to choose from, and from a pervasive normalisation of consumption as a natural and preferable default position from which to engage with the social world and self-identity.

There is no doubt that the magazine cover is the domain of the celebrity (or the celebritised ordinary person), and the commodity, but it is also, conversely, the domain of the reader in terms of how it is constructed and mediated purely for the pleasurable consumption of his/her eye and individualised identity construction experience rooted in consumption. Yet, as Eagleton (1990: 40-1) argues, "If ideology is to work efficiently, it must be pleasurable, intuitive, self-ratifying: in a word, aesthetic". The ways in which magazine covers and newsstands depend upon the gaze of consumers yet at the same time impose a disciplinary gaze upon those consumers, inviting them to be the best consumer that they can be, inviting them to improve their image and appearance to the extent that they emulate or resemble the ideal types on the magazine cover, is a complex, dialectical process that is at once manipulating and empowering.

The question of what happens when an "I" stands at a newsstand and looks at the collection of magazine covers that it contains is something that this thesis has been able to answer not from the perspective of individual experience but from the perspective of textual action. This has been provided in great depth from both the perspective of material modalities and textual meaning. According to Foucault, power operates at the "prosaic and seemingly inconsequential activities of everyday existence" (Hyde, 2000: 158). One of those moments is encapsulated in the act of visual engagement, albeit fleeting and perhaps considered meaningless by those who pass through the newsstand and look at or buy magazines, with the space/text of the newsstand/magazine cover. This thesis has argued that three invitations take place in that moment, directed from the space/text to the viewer: to engage with a world of choice through the process of commercial heteroglossia, to engage with a sexualised process of visual consumption through the provocation of the pornographic imagination, and to engage in a project of self-care and aspirational action through the process of paper mirroring. These processes are intertwined and interdependent. For example, it is not only bodies that are framed in the visual language of the pornographic imagination. The smooth surfaces and shapes of commodities, as well as the eye contact implicit

within the face to face encounter, also bear traces of sexualisation. And, faces and bodies are commodified and added to the metaphorical shelves of that limitless world of goods from which the consumer is invited to shop. Furthermore, commodities and bodies also arguably provide spaces in which ideas about individual self-worth and identity are reflected and mirrored. The eye does not fall only upon images of the body, and the I is not constructed only through interactions with images of the face.

Nevertheless, the core argument revealed through the careful and deliberate focus on representations of the body in Chapter 7 and representations of the face in Chapter 8 has highlighted how the politics of the space between visual culture/practices of looking and representation of ideal selves/individualisation is one that can be defined by the tensions between objectivity (the Eye) and subjectivity (the I). This thesis has shown that this "space between the eye and the I" is fraught with power dynamics that ultimately serve the neoliberal project of which consumerism is a key component. The analytical possibilities of the "space between the eye and the I" may have great relevance to the ongoing critical study of the mediation of consumerism. How it may inform, or be challenged and complicated by, other empirical objects and temporal or spatial contexts, however, is a question that must be left open to future research.

## **Future research directions**

Silverstone (1999: 15) argues that "mediated meanings move between texts, certainly, and across time. But they also move across space, and across spaces. They move from the public to the private, from the institutional to the individual, from the globalizing to the local and personal, and back again". This project has analysed one moment of the mediation of consumerism, in one time and place and one genre of public media text. One of the most compelling potential future areas of research that might be inspired by the work done in this study could be comparative studies of the ways in which consumerism is mediated in other times and spaces, of magazine covers and newsstands (or indeed, any other framing of commodity-mediating commodities and public spaces of consumption) in other parts of the world so as to map the terrain of consumer culture aesthetics at a more global level. What role in consumer culture and everyday life do the aggregations of glossy magazine cover texts play in places like South Africa, Vietnam, Nigeria, India or Brazil, as compared with the Anglo-American discourse of consumerism and the structures of the British newsstand? Are consumer culture aesthetics mediated through magazine covers in those places in very different

ways, are they less or more reliant upon the mechanics of gloss of the magazine cover? How do emerging markets engage, challenge, appropriate, reconstruct, or redefine the consumerist aesthetic in the context of the globally mediated western aesthetic values described in this thesis? Where does glossiness stand, as an interface between the eye and the I, in other socio-cultural and economic contexts? Will it rise in other parts of the globally mediated world as it might decline in wealthy, consumerist nations, and in what ways might the mechanics of consumerist discourse reshape themselves in different media systems, and different visual cultures?

In terms of the ways in which mediation moves across time, I feel compelled to explicitly recognise the specific and unique temporal influences upon the analysis in this thesis. Between the time that I commenced my research and the time of writing this conclusion, the global north has entered into a “recession”. The corpus of texts was assembled before official government announcements of economic doom and gloom (accompanied by media reports of high street retail closure and drops in consumer spending). I recognise that it is very likely that changes to the consumerist discourse, perhaps subtle, perhaps fundamental, may have occurred since the set of 70 magazine covers was collected and analysed. Perhaps the texts under analysis represent a high point of consumerist discourse, untainted by the public exposure of neo-liberalism's failures. The question of the extent to which the current recession (and recessions in general) impact on the mediation and discourses of uber-consumerist style magazines may thus form an important area of future research. As well as this, the probability that the material manifestation of paper and ink magazines is likely to evolve or decline as new media and online forms of the magazine genre gain in strength and audience numbers, makes it very possible that the magazine as we know it materially, and as it has been explored in so much detail in this project, will change dramatically within the next few decades.

It will be crucial for researchers such as I, interested in the mediation of consumerism and the integrated multimodal forms in which it appears, to pay close attention to, observe and track these new forms. I am very aware that this project is destined to be dated in these senses, and in retrospect will stand very clearly as an exploration of a particular historical moment in the study of the aestheticisation of everyday life and the mediation of consumer culture aesthetics.

## **Concluding comments**

In this chapter, the core contributions of this research project have been rearticulated and summarised. The thesis has highlighted and deconstructed the mechanics of the mediation of consumerism in one specific space and time: magazine covers at newsstands in London, circa 2007-8.

It has shown that the newsstand can be understood as both a text in its own right and as an important site of consumption making up the retail landscape. It has shown how magazine covers are intertextual and multimodal media spaces fundamentally shaped by and constructing a discourse of consumerism that ties in with contemporary neoliberal values. The thesis has emphasised the visual nature of consumption and the central role that appearance and appearances play in contemporary media culture. It has articulated the dynamics of glossiness, thereby identifying an important surface of meaning making in consumerism. It has shown how magazine covers and newsstands rely on the proliferation of commodities and commodity-images central to consumer culture and also contribute to this very proliferation. The thesis has highlighted the ways in which the erotic gaze is a central and normative element of commercial communication, which saturates even the most mundane of public spaces, and how a pornographic imagination is invited and exploited in consumer magazine imagery. And it has demonstrated how the ethic of individualisation is prioritised in the images and languages of magazine covers.

The argument in this thesis was carefully constructed to discuss first the materiality of the newsstand space and the glossy magazine cover respectively, then the matrix of "commodities-choice-voice", then that of "bodies-the eye" and finally that of "faces-the I" in order to highlight the most pervasive manner in which the elements of the consumerist discourse are mediated, and not to suggest that further interactions between these various layers of meaning making are impossible. It is exactly the intriguing complexities of these further possible interactions that invite an ongoing research agenda concerned with identifying, exploring and theorising the relationship between the deeper social discourse of consumerism and its manifestation on media surfaces.

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## Appendix: Magazine Covers

No.	Magazine Title	Publ. Date	Site
1	Arena	Dec-07	8
2	Arena	Jan-08	9
3	Attitude	Nov-07	8
4	Autocar	12-Sep-07	2
5	Closer	8-14-Sept-07	1
6	Company	Nov-07	4
7	Cosmopolitan	Oct-07	3
8	Cosmopolitan	Dec-07	9
9	Delicious	Oct-07	2
10	Easy Living	Nov-07	5
11	Easy Living	Dec-07	7
12	Ebony	Nov-07	6
13	Elle	Oct-07	2
14	Elle Decoration	Oct-07	3
15	Esquire	Oct-07	3
16	Essence	Oct-07	6
17	FHM	Oct-07	3
18	First	26-Nov-07	8
19	Four Four Two	Nov-07	6
20	Glamour	Oct-07	1
21	Glamour	Dec-07	7
22	Good Homes	Jan-08	9
23	GQ	Dec-07	7
24	Grazia	10-Sep-07	6
25	Grazia	22-Oct-07	1
26	Hair	Nov-07	5
27	Harper's Bazaar	Dec-07	9
28	Health and Fitness	Oct-07	6
29	Heat	15-21-Sept-07	2
30	Heat	3-9-Nov-07	7
31	Hello!	25-Sep-07	3
32	Homes and Antiques	Nov-07	6
33	House and Garden	Nov-07	4
34	House Beautiful	Dec-07/Jan-08	8
35	i-D	Oct-07	3

36	Ideal Home	Nov-07	5
37	InStyle	Nov-07	4
38	Junior	Dec-07	9
39	Loaded	Oct-07	2
40	Loaded	Dec-07	7
41	Look	17-Sep-07	2
42	Look	5-Nov-07	7
43	Marie Claire	Dec-07	7
44	Men's Fitness	Nov-07	4
45	Men's Health	Dec-07	7
46	New Woman	Dec-07	8
47	New You	Nov-07	5
48	NME	22-Sep-07	3
49	OK!	11-Sep-07	2
50	OK!	18-Sep-07	1
51	PC Format	Nov-07	4
52	Pregnancy	Nov-07	6
53	Psychologies	Nov-07	5
54	Q	Nov-07	6
55	Red	Dec-07	7
56	Reveal	15-21-Sept-07	4
57	Rolling Stone	20-Sep-07	4
58	Runner's World	Nov-07	6
59	Sainsbury's Magazine	Oct-07	2
60	She	Dec-07	8
61	Shout	11-24-Oct-07	5
62	Spirit and Destiny	Jan-08	9
63	Stuff	Nov-07	5
64	Tatler	Oct-07	3
65	Top Gear	Nov-07	4
66	Total Film	Nov-07	5
67	Vanity Fair	Oct-07	3
68	Vogue	Oct-07	1
69	Wedding	Oct/Nov-07	4
70	Weight Watchers	Nov-07	5

THE BEST MEN'S MAGAZINE  
IN THE WORLD IS BACK!

# ARNA

DECEMBER 2007/08

**HOT DOWN UNDER**  
AUSTRALIA'S SEXIEST WOMAN UNBOUND

**BECKHAM**  
ON SOCCER, SCIENTOLOGY AND BINGE DRINKING

**WORLD EXCLUSIVE**  
THE 30 OTHER MOST POWERFUL MEN IN BRITAIN

**WINTER COATS**  
FROM £100 FASHION INS AN AWESOME

**1**

SHARP LOOKS, SHARPER OPINIONS. THE CUTTING-EDGE READ FOR MEN

# ARNA

DECEMBER 2007/08

**AMERICA, YOU SUCK**  
WHY WE'RE SICK, THE COUNTRY ACTUALLY QUITE BORED OF THE USA

**WINTER STYLE SPECIAL**  
ULTIMATE SKI WEAR  
HOW TO DO BLACK TIE AND ACCESSORY  
EVERY MAN SHOULD AVOID

**FINANCIAL SLIMES**  
SINCE THE YUPPIE IS BACK IN BUSINESS

**PLUS**  
**DAWKINS DELUSION**  
WHAT DOG IS GREAT (and Richard Dawkins isn't)

**DO YOU HAVE AN OFFICE WHORE?**

**MISCHA BARTON**  
GOOD GIRL GONE BAD

**MURDER ON THE DANCEFLOOR**  
ARENA TRIES CLUBLAND'S NEW KILLER DRUG

**NIL BY NOVEMBER**  
WHY NO ONE IS HAVING CRAL SEX IN LONDON

**ESSENTIAL READING**  
FAR-SEEING SON  
DAVE ALAN GORDON & JOHN CORNWELL  
NIRAL DHALIWAL

**2**

# attitude

DECEMBER 2007

**Exclusive!**  
**Kylie**

**PLUS**  
Bear Art Attack  
Helen Mirren  
Brigitte Bardot  
Escorts in Love  
and much more

**3**

**AUTOCAR**  
THE ORIGINAL CAR WEEKLY

First pics, full details

## NEW BMW X6

World's first coupe 4x4  
It's a hybrid. Yes, they're serious

**WHAT A WEEK FOR NEW CARS...**

**VW'S E50 iPod**  
It's the four-wheeled iPod

**LAMBOR VENTON**  
Terrible name, terrific car

**MORE INSIDE...**

**4**

**£1**

**Closer**

**EXCLUSIVE**  
**NEW MUMS' DRASIC WEIGHT LOSS**

**MEL'S PUNISHING WORKOUTS**

**JORDAN JUICE DIES**

**5**

**COMPANY**  
magazine

**£2**

**LOOK HOT**  
SEXY HAIR IN SECONDS

**WOW! THE NEW IT BAGS**  
FROM £2 (yes, really)

**'From PA to pole dancer'**  
My raunchy second life

**GET BODY POSITIVE**  
DROP A DRESS SIZE IN A WEEK  
and eat chips!

**FABULOUS, UNDER 30 & LOADED**  
The women who've made a million

**6**

**COSMOPOLITAN**

**99 sex facts**  
to change your life!  
what makes a plus men fall in LOVE

**"WHY I BEFRIENDED A RAPIST ON DEATH ROW"**

**CONFIDENCE FOREVER!**  
You'll never feel not good enough again

**Charlotte**  
Why I feel sexy when I'm big

**80 best-ever beauty buys**  
including the things you can't live without

**265 fab FASHION FINDS**  
SEX UP YOUR LOOK FROM JUST £4

**7**

**COSMOPOLITAN**

**Sex secrets**  
Men confess what makes a woman brilliant in bed

**Tess & Vern**  
Our red-hot rules of love and lust

**304 PARTY PERFECT FASHION BUYS**

**SHOOTING BIZARRE**  
So that's why my dad didn't love me

**COSMO'S CHRISTMAS GIFTS TO YOU**  
SAVE UP TO 20% at Warehouse • Nine West • John Lewis  
Plus discounts on haircuts, undies and 2 for 1

**8**

**delicious.**

**BILL GRANGER'S**  
creamed fish for friends

**RECIPES TO COOK FOR TWO**

**PAUL WAKINS'**  
Baked fish and chips

**MOUSAKA**

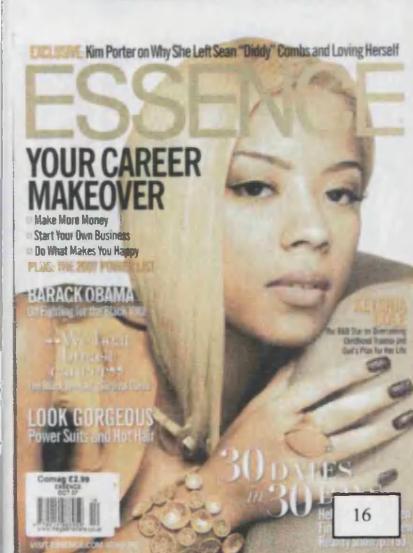
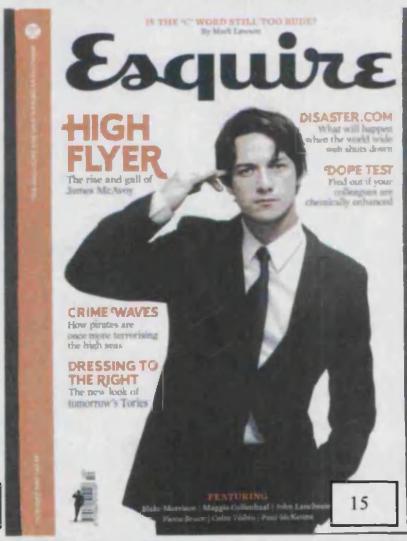
**JILL OLDFIELD**  
Orange and lime sorbet

**STYLISH SEASONAL FRUIT DESSERTS**

**A feast of autumn flavours**

**I can cook!**

**9**





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12 PAGES OF EXPERT ADVICE AND INSTRUCTION

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What your clutter says about you

Give your job an MOT

28

**KERRY & MARK'S WEDDING BASH!**  
THE PARTY! THE FOOD! LOADS OF GOSSIP!

This week's hottest celebrity news  
10-21 November 2007

**heat**

**Ziggy:** "I'm very proud to call her my girlfriend!"

**Chanelle:** "We are really into each other"

**WORLD EXCLUSIVE!**

**Ziggy & Chanel**

29

**IS ZIGGY CHEATING ON CHANELLE?**  
Full shocking story

This week's hottest celebrity news  
10-21 November 2007

**heat**

**Charley**

"I was shouting for help. Do people hate me THIS much?"

**CHARLEY ATTACKED**

30

**HELLO!**

HOT ON THE HEELS OF N.Y. FASHION WEEK  
**VICTORIA BECKHAM** SHOWS OFF HER STUNNING NEW IMAGE

'Life is crazy but so exciting. We're really happy'

LIFE'S ONE LONG HONEYMOON FOR STATUS QUO'S RICK PARFITT AND NEW WIFE LYNDSEY

SPECIAL REPORT THE McCANN FAMILY FIGHT BACK

31

BBC WHERE CLASSIC MEETS CONTEMPORARY

**HOMES & ANTIQUES**

Get cosy

Mellow autumn tones  
Luxurious wools  
Stylish fireplaces

Antiques on the internet  
Buying and selling online

ANTIQUES IN PARIS  
THE BEST OF GLASSWARE EAST

32

**HOUSE & GARDEN**

SPECIAL 60TH BIRTHDAY ISSUE

33

**House Beautiful**  
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decorating hints  
advice for a gleaming home

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34

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Trends

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CREATE ROOMS WITH WOW! Designing for a Luxurious living room  
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