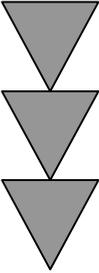


Cultural and Literary Studies

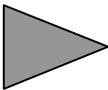
THE BEAUTY MYTH REPRESENTATIONS
OF THE FEMALE BODY IN ADVERTISEMENTS

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Abstract

Although the political and socio-economic aspects of the century that passed and of the one that has just started show us that money is the issue that creates debate and action, beauty remains a major factor capable of influencing attitudes and manners of behaviour within society. 'Beauty' is a word that should be linked to what is good and positive; but when related to gender, it undergoes some kind of curious transformation which turns it into something that is quite the opposite of what it initially denoted or at least something not really flattering. That is why you will find out that beauty is largely seen as a myth, a myth that theorists have tried to 'demystify,' to decompose or, in softer terms, to clarify.

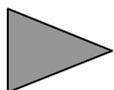


Foreword

After 1989, the Romanian media was gradually enriched with publications whose success first depended on the picture of a beautiful girl on the cover. A few years

later, magazines such as *Unica* or *Avantaj* appeared on the market promoting the female body as object of thorough analysis and preoccupation. Advertisements gained more and more ground and the female body became the best solution for their success. A new type of woman emerged in the Romanian society, meant to resemble the Western prototype found in Western magazines: the cover girl who made and still makes thousands of women dream of the myth of success based on a new type of femininity.

One of the strongest resemblances between the Western and the Romanian prototypes – which struck me as obvious – was the use of the beauty myth as described by Naomi Wolf in her article *Signs of Life* (1997: 431). Beauty has nowadays certain standards which are quite well fixed on the fashion market and implicitly in the media. The Romanian society follows those standards ‘à la lettre’ employing images of ‘normalized femininity’ as a source of inspiration for all the other women. The cover girl becomes a sex symbol and a model of female beauty. But, like in every situation when ‘female’ and ‘femininity’ are stressed, a dilemma occurs. The question of power is re-discussed from the point of view of female beauty understood as autonomy.



Who is in Power? Female Liberation vs. Female Beauty

‘Beauty’ is a cultural myth framed to keep women under control by imprisoning them in their own bodies. Yet, the question of beauty is a more complex one as it refers to female identity directly. There are many who think that being beautiful is equal to being successful but does it also mean being powerful, independent? And what exactly is the relationship between *female liberation* and *female beauty*? Does one suppress the other? Should a woman not be concerned about her physical appearance for fear she might become a prisoner of her own body?

The beauty myth has had several versions over the decades. For example, suffragist Lucy Stone considered, in 1855, that her body represented all her power and that everything else was of a lesser importance. Things that enabled a woman to approach the public sphere could be very easily left aside in favor of her body because, according to Stone, quoted by Wolf (1997: 431), the body represented the most cherished possession of a woman:

'It is very little to me to have the right to vote, to own property, etcetera, if I may not keep my body and its uses, in my absolute right'.

Wolf remarks that the beauty myth won the battleground after the extinction of the feminine mystique of domesticity of the 1950s:

'Feminists, inspired by Betty Friedan, broke the stranglehold on the women's popular press of advertisers for household products, who were promoting the feminine mystique; at once, the diet and skin care industries became the new cultural censors of women's intellectual space, and because of their pressure, the gaunt, youthful model supplanted the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood'. (ibid. 430)

But what is 'being beautiful'? Germaine Greer describes 'the Stereotype' in negative terms: 'to her belongs all that is beautiful, even the very word beauty itself ... she is a doll ... I'm sick of the masquerade.' (ibid. 431)

The story of the beauty myth given by Wolf is that women must embody beauty and men must want to possess women who embody it. This obligation on the part of women is considered biological, sexual and evolutionary; men must fight in order to get the most beautiful woman who is also the most reproductively successful. So, if beauty in a woman is a prize for man and for his self-respect, can one still think of a similitude between female beauty and female liberation? As Wolf remarks:

'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard. (ibid. 431)

And it is a system that keeps male dominance intact.

Beauty is also dangerous because it makes women compete among themselves in order to be acknowledged by men. Moreover, as Wolf puts it, 'beauty is not universal or changeless' (ibid. 431), so different cultures have different standards of beauty, which in their turn vary according to the age in which those women live. Wolf contends that

'The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power'. (ibid. 432)

In her view, beauty has nothing to do with appearance but more with women's behaviour:

'The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance'. (ibid. 432)

In other words, appearance alone does not count when it comes to being beautiful. Without the behaviour component, just appearing or looking in a certain way is meaningless. The former expresses beauty in point of action and reaction: the way a woman (re)acts is important for the label that she might bear – 'beautiful' or 'not beautiful'. It is behaviour that gives worthiness to a woman's appearance whereas appearance alone is just a product to be consumed.

In a consumer society, the female body and images of it have indeed become mass products meant to be consumed. As Wolf points out,

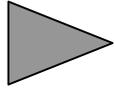
In the 1840s the first nude photographs of prostitutes were taken; advertisements using images of 'beautiful' women first appeared in mid-century. Copies of classical artworks, postcards of society beauties and royal mistresses, Currier and Ives prints, and porcelain figurines flooded the separate sphere to which middle-class women were confined. (ibid. 433)

Wolf reasserts her opinion according to which the beauty myth has nothing to do with women but with things that are not obvious at first sight. As she points out:

The contemporary economy depends right now on representations of women within the beauty myth. (ibid. 436)

In order to sustain her assertion, Wolf quotes economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who offers an 'economic explanation for "the persistence of the view of homemaking as a 'higher calling': the concept of women as naturally trapped within the Feminine Mystique" ... has been forced on us by popular sociology, by magazines, and by fiction to disguise the fact that woman in her role of consumer

has been essential to the development of industrial society ... Behavior that is essential for economic reasons is transformed into a social virtue' (ibid. 436).



The Cover Girl and the Illusion of Power

The cover girl is the very representation of the beauty myth: she is sexy, slim, with wonderful shapes, she is self-confident – in a word everything that an ordinary woman is not, but presumably admires and envies.

Yet, the cover girl is in a relation of power only when compared to the ordinary reader because she still lives in a male-dominated society. Even if her image spells 'I may appear a sex object for men, but I know what I am doing. I have learned that sexuality is power,' her power is limited precisely by what she thinks she masters.

She grows as a person in limited ways, and pleasing, tricking, or manipulating a man must always be on her mind. (Simon, 1999:120)

What she has is an illusion of power as she resorts to subversive gestures and images, but in the end it is her who is possessed and manipulated. In many cases, she even enjoys being possessed through the (male) gaze.

According to the postmodern wave of feminism emphasizing 'intervention', 'contestation', 'subversion', both the 'old' discourse (the 'colonized' female body) and its reconstruction are criticized for overemphasizing such control, for failing to acknowledge adequately the creative and resistant responses that continually challenge and disrupt it (Bordo: 193). 'Resistance' is understood in the postmodern theory as the creative agency of individuals: the relations between women, their bodies, and the image industry of post-industrial capitalism.

Michel Foucault's notion of modern 'power' is re-conceptualized: it is non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and non-orchestrated; yet, it produces and normalizes bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination. In order to understand how modern 'power' operates, we must cease to imagine 'power' as the possession of individuals but as a dynamic or network of non-centralized forces. Furthermore, these forces are not random, but configure to assume particular historical forms. In addition, prevailing forms of selfhood and

subjectivity are maintained not through individual self-surveillance, but through self-correction to norms (ibid.191):

...there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself. (Foucault, cited in Bordo, 1990: 191)

The fact that power is not held by anyone does not entail that it is equally held by all.

Let me give an example of subversive gestures coming from a cover girl: the commercial starts by showing a naked young woman coming out of the pool and walking elegantly and self-assuredly towards a door bearing a sign which denies access to women; she pushes the door open and enters a sauna where several men are relaxing; all of them are wearing white towels around their waists and all are looking intently at the young girl; without paying any attention to their gazes, she goes to one of them and simply takes the towel from him, wraps it around her head and leaves the man completely naked and, of course, feeling vulnerable as he bends all ashamed of his nakedness and trying to hide his intimate parts.

The commercial is for a magazine for women called *Tabu* and the slogan is ‘the magazine of the beautiful and clever sex.’ The commercial is really enjoyable and effective, particularly since the title of the magazine is reflected by the story in the commercial. Yet, the representative of the ‘beautiful and clever sex’ is not in a position of power. Her complete nakedness does not point only to her self-assuredness and courage (resembling the gesture of the cover girl from the October 1984 issue of the *Cosmopolitan* who wears earrings in the shapes of a man dangling upside down and hanging by his testicles) but also the fact that she represents everything a man desires: a daring naked woman who exposes her nakedness without the least embarrassment. Thus, what makes her powerful also makes her powerless. Although beautiful and clever, a woman remains the object of the male gaze and the fact that she deliberately makes herself the object of the gaze does not influence men’s perception of her; she may be ‘clever’, although only for herself, but she definitely is beautiful.

There are also a lot of advertisements that can be found in all magazines for women, ads that stress the female body more than the product. Thus, there is an advertisement for Chanel No.5 which shows the picture of an extremely sexy girl wearing a dress made of a seductive transparent texture, which allows the viewer to see or guess all the girl's shapes. The message behind this ad is one of seduction: this perfume has the power to seduce the potential customers just like the girl seduces the viewer. The image is sold together with the product. The impact of such a picture is great because women are persuaded to buy and use the product, so as to become as seductive as the model in the advertisement, although some women are aware of the differences between them and the model.

Other advertisements are designed to promote underwear or 'feminine lingerie.' In this case, some of them employ well-known supermodels or celebrities (e.g. Naomi Campbell poses for *Skiny* in her underwear; Mihaela Rădulescu, the Romanian TV producer, did the same for *I.D.Sarrieri*). Others use the picture of an unknown but equally beautiful model (e.g. *Triumph*). The advertisement for Triumph, has the slogan 'For the body, for the soul', underlining the idea that that if your body is satisfied and you are satisfied with your body, then your soul is satisfied as well.

The few examples mentioned above have at their centre a sexy and almost naked female body, which clearly points to the representation of woman as a sexual object for the male gaze. Yet, there is another situation in which the woman is dressed (but still looks very sexy) and represents not quite the sexual object but the wild animal which the hunter (man) is challenged to catch. In this sense, I will supply an illustrative advertisement. The ad is for a mobile phone : *Nokia 8310*. At the centre, there is a sexy woman wearing a dress whose texture resembles the skin of a wild animal; she stands between two mobile phones resting her hands confidently on them, as if listening to a pleasant conversation. The interpretation is that, although the phones (read 'technology', read 'men') are not too big, they are 'designed to make a big impression.' The woman's role is diminished again, as her body is stressed not for her own sake, but for the benefit of the object, which is no longer a mere object: it has been transformed into a man. In other words, the woman has been used as an object of comparison, as it is a well-known fact that the size of mobile phones does not really count.

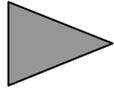
Yet, another problem arises: is power associated with the gorgeous body of a super model and therefore with (this type of) femininity? There seems to be no clearcut answer to this question, as a definite position is quite hard to be adopted.

I can provide the example of an advertisement that combines the idea of power with the female body and with masculine clothes. *Hugo Boss*, a trademark for perfume, has as a slogan the imperative 'Expect everything!' and uses the image of a young woman dressed in a white coat, cut in a masculine line, but with a deep cleavage revealing not too much of her skin, but enough as to realize that she is wearing nothing underneath. Also, she barely wears any make-up, as you can see the freckles on her face. Her posture is that of a self-confident woman, who although dressed in male-like clothes (the idea of power), is still very sexy; the way she turns her head towards the potential viewers proves it completely. The message behind the advertisement is that 'you deserve everything because you are yourself and because you are daring.'

In order to better understand that advertisements promoting sexy young women do not emphasize the idea of power on the part of the woman, I will draw a short comparison with a few ads promoting perfumes for men. In the June, 2001 issue of *Vanity Fair* I found a series of advertisements that were in discrepancy with all the other ads in the magazine. Although the ads were for men's perfumes, they contained no images of men. Instead, one could admire the huge bottles of perfume that were situated (artificially, of course) beside sky-scrapers (*Chanel Allure*, *Chanel Antaeus*) or beside older buildings which were at least twice shorter than the bottles (*Chanel Platinum Egoiste*, *Chanel Pour Monsieur*). The four types of perfume are different, each being meant for another type of man: 'individual', 'irrepressible', 'modern', 'classic'.

One may easily notice the difference between the advertisement for *Chanel No.5* and the ads for men's perfume. Products for men represent men themselves without the need to use images of men - the bottle of perfume is tall and as strong as a building - this is the real idea of power. Like buildings, men are tough, resistant, reliable, and unbreakable. The hugeness of the bottles points to the idea of power; they are tall enough to survey everything around them. Let me also quote a few bits of explanations that accompany the pictures: 'a self-assured choice for the contemporary man,' 'in the world of real men, you are what you wear', 'allure for men was created for the complex and charismatic man ... a formula embraced by

men who dare to break the rules’, ‘masculine power meets sensuality in a fragrance for the true man of action’; *Pour Monsieur* addresses the ‘traditionalist with impeccable taste; coolly understated, it is the perfect match for the refined man’. It is only simple to notice that these ads put the stress on the image of the *product* (not on a man’s body) as well as on the explanations which set the idea of masculinity next to the idea of power and of refinement.



Conclusive remarks

Power and the female body are in the end in a complex relationship which is not quite favourable for women, as the gaze has the chance of situating the body, however subversive it may look, in the position of an object. It is important for women to feel that they are in power when they assert it through subversive gestures and postures but this is not strong enough to annihilate the counter-response of the male gaze. The beauty myth imposes not only certain standards of female beauty but also an attitude that ‘beautiful’ women adopt as a sign of their new femininity. Women who are beautiful and self-assured because of their looks act subversively with respect to the values inherited from a male-dominated society.

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