

terrains or is denied access to the new territory. Theory in his frame becomes an object which circulates without the intervention of other agents – such as theoreticians and the institutions they belong to. Feminism understood as “critical consciousness” rather than Feminism as Theory may not only avoid such reification, but may also have a chance to overcome the local horror-construction of “Feminism”. Then it can also open the border for feminist ideas with a variety of passports. Hopefully it can prepare soil for creative re-reading of feminist theories and practices, and for the contribution of the local scholars to the established feminist canons.

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## Utopian Desires and Western Representations of Femininity

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Feminine identity and women's bodies in post-communist Romania can be viewed as a site where the clash between various political forces, ideological discourses and cultural practices are acted out. Some of these discourses and practices look backwards to traditions, values, and desires that were repressed during the communist period, while others look forwards, which often means westwards, to capitalist and/or postmodern, feminist views. The wide dissemination of Western mass media in Romania could be viewed as a significant intervention in the ongoing process of refashioning identity – new desires and pleasures, different norms and values compete with the older, local ones to reinscribe the bodies of post-totalitarian women. My essay focuses on the impact of Western representations of femininity in Romanian journals for women and discusses whether one can speak of their “colonization” by Western mass media. The paper insists on the processes of negotiation which these journals carry out between Western and Romanian culture. The approach adopted intends to keep a distance both from nationalistic positions, which bewail the nefarious influence of Western mass media, and from opposing standpoints, which pay too much lip service to Western culture and implicitly dwell on the “backwardness” of Romanian women in comparison with their “more liberated” Western sisters. At the same time, the paper sets out to prove the empowering effect of Western feminist theories upon scholars in Romania assisting their efforts to account for changes in traditional constructions of femininity.

### RECONCILING DIFFERENT THEORETICAL POSITIONS

The theoretical starting point for this essay is provided by Elizabeth Grosz's deconstruction of the time-honored oppositions between subjectivity and the body, and implicitly between sex and gender, highlighting that “the very sense of the self is linked to the subject's sexual and bodily specificity” (Grosz 1994: 144). My essay relies on Grosz's insights into the way a libidinally invested image of the body is constructed out of culturally contingent meanings, desires and fantasies. Her approach foregrounds the process of continuous reconstruction of the sexed body, explicitly denying the existence of a “natural” body or of an original, unrepressed sexuality (Grosz 1994: 142-143). The emphasis on reconstructing and rewriting the body has an iconoclastic ring to a Roma-

nian public who favors a rather essentializing view of "the eternal feminine identity" and of bodily differences as ontologically given.

Grosz's theoretical framework opens up a possibility to reconcile psychoanalytically centered feminist theories with cultural studies analyses. The rapprochement between post-structuralism and cultural studies is particularly useful for a Romanian reader as it enables her to introduce culturally specific determinations into feminist readings of mass media. Combining the two approaches can be instrumental in working out a Romanian perspective and voice in feminist studies.

The combination of the two perspectives in investigating female consumption of mass culture, as carried out by Jackie Stacey and Hilary Radner (Stacey 1994, Radner 1995), promote a sense of female agency. The insistence on female agency, without at the same time falling into the pitfall of a populist, celebratory attitude towards female pleasure and activity, has been especially useful to my own project: it has enabled me to identify processes of negotiation between Western and Romanian meanings and, in particular, to spell out the fascination that representation of Western femininity exert on our readers, without, however, viewing the Romanian public as a mere passive recipient of Western messages.

## UTOPIAN DESIRES

Romanian women's magazines can be roughly divided into three categories: the less "respectable" journals dealing with sex and violence (such as *Infractoarea*, *Magazin international*), journals catering to the tastes of younger women, dwelling on glamor and stardom (such as *Salut*, *Timpul femeii în țara bărbaților*, *Lumea femeii*), and the more "respectable," glossy ones, talking to an affluent, middle-class, married female public (such as *Familia mea*, *Avantaje*, *Femeia modernă*, *Doina*). The first category (*Infractoarea*, etc.) abound in images of naked, fragmented bodies which verge on pornography. Pictures of women with bulging bare breasts, placed in the four quarters of the page, frame stories about prostitutes and criminals. The idea of femininity as represented in these journals is radically devalued and instrumentalized, women being reduced to anatomy, to parts of the body that provide female pleasure. There arises the difficult question as to how these representations can provide pleasure to a female public. It is interesting that in these journals, for all the degradation women and female sexuality is submitted to, there still persists a sense of agency. Though heavily incriminated for their loose morals, the women these journals narrate about are anything but passive victims. The bare-breasted images therefore suggest not only unrestricted male desire and pleasure but also female potency and transgression. A female public can safely enjoy the latter as both images and stories apparently pose no threat to patriarchal views on femininity. Journals dealing with sex and violence are obviously a bottom line case of the crudity which is carefully avoided by the other, more "respectable" magazines. At the same time, however, the latter rely on a similar mechanism for providing pleasure and adopt the same indirect and paradoxical line of empowering their female public without apparently questioning traditional values and roles.

All women's magazines share one more feature: they almost exclusively disseminate images of Western women. This feature is not unrelated to the oblique strategy of pro-

ducing pleasure and empowering the public. What is striking is that these representations have largely supplanted images of Romanian women, suggesting that a process of colonization by Western media might be taking place. The replacement should be understood against the background of a concurrent devaluation of the significance attached to Romanian constructions of femininity. As a result of the loss in status and prestige that Romanian women have experienced in the past six years, images representing them are no longer perceived as valid projections of ideal femininity, and have by and large been excluded from Romanian journals. These have tried to fill the void with "imported" Western images. The very foreignness of the images, rather than alienating the public, has great legitimacy and persuasive power.

Journals and magazines for young women, for example, are, not surprisingly, packed with images of Western film stars and top models. What is interesting about their fascination for young people in Romania is that they feed *utopian desires*. The attitude of star worshipping that the magazines encourage thus evinces locally inflected features. Images of Claudia Schiffer, Cindy Crawford and Naomi Campbell stand for the ideal of unattainable female desirability and at the same time reflect an image of the glamour and abundance of the West, viewed as a utopian world.<sup>1</sup> Much of the pleasure in looking at these images derives from an imaginary identification with the stars, which, as Jackie Stacey has argued, involves the viewer's vicarious participation in the glamorous world of the stars (Stacey 1994: 117). Magazines, not unlike soap operas such as *Dynasty* or *Beverly Hills 90210*, offer Romanian women an escape into a fantasy world where the painful differences between their own depressing reality and the Western dream world can be ignored.

The selection of images to be printed in the journals, as well as the texts attending them, indicate a process of negotiation that journal editors carry out. They do not simply take Western significances along with the pictures they cull from the Western press, but process these significances and gear them to the specific expectations and values of a Romanian female public. The visual representations of the female body carry, simultaneously, Western significances about ideal femininity and Romanian perceptions of this Western ideal. The very images, the bodies themselves, seem to have been re-written from a Romanian perspective.

To take one example: magazines designed for young women generally offer their public oversexed, excessive femininity as instances of successful femininity. Movie stars or top models are often shown heavily made up, flaunting their sexuality in an assertive way. More often than not, Sharon Stone, Pamela Anderson, Cindy Crawford and Claudia Schiffer are shown revealing voluminous naked breasts, buttocks or thighs. The question does arise whether the pleasure female readers derive from these pictures is that of the voyeur, identifying with a male position (Mulvey 1991), or whether these readers can also experience different types of pleasure. Leaving aside the unacknowledged homoerotic desires such images could fuel, they do meet specific needs experienced by Romanian, post-socialist female viewers. An American visiting scholar was shocked to see a picture of Cindy Crawford showing her buttocks and told me she had never known

<sup>1</sup> See Jackie Stacey's discussion of the utopian desire elicited by Hollywood stars to postwar British women (Stacey 1994: 92-124, 152).

her to display that much flesh. I understood that what the journal was offering us was a Cindy Crawford refashioned for Romania. Her image suggested a "utopian" abundance which was literally one of flesh, yet which signified a woman's ultimate social and financial success and, last but not least, power.

Images of Western stars as employed by Romanian magazines reveal a striking over-emphasis on sexual difference. This is once again designed to meet a particular need generated among the Romanian public by a sense of lack and/or loss. Romanian women have not as yet got over the anxiety over definitions of femininity imposed by the previous regime, which threatened to erase sexual difference. In the homogenized and puritanical world imposed by Ceaușescu, cosmetics, make up, clothes, indeed any stress on female physical beauty was either prohibited or inaccessible. To Romanian young women, excessive make-up and rich clothes, for example, have come to signify a desirable femininity and are associated with power, sexual pleasure, and material wealth. Indulging in make-up can often be a way of shoring up one's self-confidence and self-esteem.

Also involved in star-worshipping is imitating the stars. The journals teach their readers how to apply make up like Cindy Crawford; how to exercise their legs to make them as beautiful as Claudia Schiffer's; what to eat and what to do to keep as fit as Jane Fonda does. The Romanian public is given details about the beauty technology that goes into the making of the stars' irresistible bodies. The readers can therefore participate in the very cultural practices that have fashioned these famous bodies. There is a promise that the gap between the two worlds, which is inscribed on female bodies, could be bridged by making Romanian bodies look similar to the Western ones. Disciplining their bodies according to Western norms further implies an apparently liberating break from the drab and ungainly bodies associated with the socialist period. If the very perfection of stars' bodies is read as an inscription of the more advanced economic and cultural practices of the Western system, the unkempt bodies of Romanian women are perceived to be an epitome of whatever we dislike about both the former and the present regime. These bodies are perceived as having poverty, squalor, inefficiency and disorganization inscribed upon them and are consequently abject.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MASQUERADE

The importance attached to self-fashioning in these journals cannot be emphasized enough. A "woman is most feminine when she is not herself, when she enacts an elaborate masquerade" is one of the conclusions Hilary Radner draws discussing American mass media (Radner 1995: 52-65). It is interesting that the same attitude towards self-fashioning and masquerade is what Romanian women's magazines preach. Romanian women practicing aerobics, who go by these new "moral imperatives," define themselves as "modern" and "independent" an identity they associate with the "American woman" (Svendsen 1996: 12-14). What distinguishes the model of the "modern" (read "Western") woman from the "traditional" (read old-fashioned Romanian) one is the desire to invest time and money in the fashioning of her body. This involves a transgressive position: she becomes the subject, rather than the mere object, of her own fashioning. In Hilary Radner's words, these women are "the producers rather than the products" of this process (Radner 1995: 149-150).

The masquerade, the possibility of reconstructing their "look" creates a sense of freedom and autonomy that Romanian married women, who comply with the traditional model, cannot experience. Besides the pleasure derived from narcissistic involvement with their own body, the women willing to devote part of their time and money to the care of their body experience a sense of freedom and autonomy. The decision to dedicate themselves to themselves and ignore the needy voice of the others, be that only for brief periods of time, is an act of "independence" which increases the women's "self-respect" and self-esteem (Svendsen 1996: 9).

Thus, this masquerade produces resistance to traditional, patriarchal roles and norms which demand of married women the total sacrifice of their energies for the welfare of the family. Women feel empowered as desiring subjects, capable of their own re-creation, and in control not only of their bodies but also of their lives. Journals have been quick to tap on these feelings: "Another Appearance, Another You" is the editorial of the October 1995 issue of the journal *Avantaj*. The new self, the new identity created by means of refashioning one's body ensures personal happiness as well as success in one's job and social life.

There is an urgent tone in the comments on seductive images of Western stars which presses the readers to imitate the stars and refashion themselves to be just as attractive, just as sexy – all the time assuring them that "they can do it." Reading these journals, one has the sense of a break neck competition for limited resources in which the women whose looks are found wanting drop out of the race for good. Good looks seem vital for a woman not only to succeed in business but even to be acknowledged as a subject within public space. What both the journals and their readers fully acknowledge is that for a woman to take care of her appearance, to employ a "masquerade" – make-up, fashionable clothes, aerobics – is a moral duty (Svendsen 1996: 14). This duty can be spelled out as part of a discipline imposed on women who pass from the private to the public space. In Ceaușescu's time, this discipline did reshape their physical appearance, but as a way of suppressing any trace of attractive femininity or self-indulgence. The new insistence on "good looks" has as much to do with the impact of Western images of successful femininity as with older Romanian meanings attaches to well-groomed looks. The latter were associated with an aristocratic "ladylike" appearance, that is, with marks and symbols of a privileged social position which alone could make access to the public space possible.

## LIMITS AND FRUSTRATIONS

The creativity and the liberating thrust of the self-fashioning masquerade is, however, undermined by a series of factors. First of all, it reinforces traditional, patriarchal definitions of femininity, conceived of exclusively in terms of desirable physical appearance and viewed from the perspective of the male gaze. No matter how much women may enjoy their subject position as producers of their looks, the goal pursued reinscribes them in traditional roles as objects of desire. Secondly, the self-fashioning creativity gives in to normalizing pressures exerted by mass media representations. Romanian women are compelled to reshape their looks after a given pattern, following a given beauty technology. They may be said to have swapped the former socialist type of uniformity for the

more glamorous Western kind of uniformity. With the development of a market system, refashioning further involves increased consumerism on behalf of women. Journals are increasingly filled with advertisements of Western products which are coupled with the glamorized images of the top models. Last but not least Western representations of femininity inevitably create in the readers a sense of lack: they look at themselves in the mirror, and the image they perceive there shows a certain deficiency in comparison with other spectacular images, their idealized alter egos – the stars. No matter how much they/I may have invested in self-fashioning, I am still painfully aware of this lack, that is, of the gap between me and Cindy Crawford, between a glamorized, utopian America and my own world. The sense of lack does not, however, prevent me or other readers of women's magazines from further consuming Western images of ideal femininity. Even if our pleasures and desires are partially reappropriated within patriarchal scripts, the messages these images convey are still seductively subversive, covertly transgressive, and pave the way for more radical feminist positions.

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## EXCHANGES