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Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look

Diana Fuss

Women's fashion photography, and the industries of mass clothing production and commercial advertising it supports, all presume and indeed participate in the construction of a heterosexual viewing subject. This "photographic contract," like the "cinematic contract,"¹ appears to operate as a cultural mechanism for producing and securing a female subject who desires to be desired by men—the ideal, fully oedipalized, heterosexual woman. Playing on the considerable social significance attributed to a woman's value on the heterosexual marketplace, women's fashion photography scopophilically poses its models as sexually irresistible subjects, inviting its female viewers to consume the product by (over)identifying with the image. But this "concealed" ideological project—to fashion female viewers into properly heterosexualized women—stands in direct tension with (and appears to work against) its own surface formalist structure and mode of address, which together present eroticized images of the female body for the explicit appreciation and consumption by a female audience. In fact, the entire fashion industry operates as one of the few institutionalized spaces where women can look at other women with cultural impunity. It provides a socially sanctioned structure in which women are encouraged to *consume*, in voyeuristic if not vampiristic fashion, the images of other women, frequently represented in classically exhibitionist

1. The contractual metaphor is Teresa de Lauretis's; see her *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), p. 105.

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and sexually provocative poses. To look straight *at* women, it appears, straight women must look *as* lesbians.

Sometimes the exhibitionism is coy, as in the ad for “knockout knits” (fig. 1) in which the model playfully clutches the bottom hem of her knitted dress, ostensibly concealing and protecting the triangular zone of the genital area from the viewer’s intrusive gaze, but, in so doing, drawing our attention more irresistibly to it. The genital zone (for Freud, of course, the infamous biologicistic site of women’s talent for “plaiting and weaving”) is not occluded so much as framed, given shape, and magnified by the inverted triangle of the model’s arms, the V-shape of her cleavage, and the curve of her own body. Other typical shots in women’s fashion photography are even more explicitly erotic, presenting to the female spectator an image typically found in straight male pornography: the image of an all too receptive, quite nearly orgasmic woman waiting to be taken by more than a camera (fig. 2). Even the covers of magazines like *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, or in this case *Cosmopolitan*,² could be mistaken for the covers of some skin magazines commercially produced and marketed for consumption by heterosexual men were it not for the teasers running down the side that tell us that the image of this woman is intended to function for its female audience not as an object of desire but rather a point of identification.

2. Since desire and the structures of fantasy, not to mention the very formations of subjectivity, change and transmogrify under the weight of historical pressures, I will further limit the focus of this essay to the fashion codes of late twentieth-century postindustrial capitalism. The photographs that form the basis of the present reading are all culled from recent issues (1989–90) of the currently most widely marketed women’s fashion magazines in the United States: *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Readers interested in analyses of the fashion system based on the history of Western fashion, its role in a consumer culture oriented toward women, or its privileged if problematic status in the debates on post-modernism might wish to consult the following: J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London, 1930); Anne Hollander, *Seeing through Clothes* (New York, 1978); Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (London, 1981); David Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism: A Social History of the Corset, Tight-Lacing, and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture in the West* (Totowa, N.J., 1982); Rosalind Coward, *Female Desires: How They Are Sought, Bought and Packaged* (New York, 1985); Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York, 1985); Kaja Silverman, “Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse,” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington, Ind., 1986), pp. 139–52; *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, ed. Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York, 1990); and Cathy Griggers, “A Certain Tension in the Visual/Cultural Field: Helmut Newton, Deborah Turbeville, and the *VOGUE* Fashion Layout,” *Differences* 2 (Summer 1990): 76–104. My own investigation seeks to redress a symptomatic aporia in all of these important studies, namely, the fashion system’s institutionalization of a homospectatorial look.

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FIG. 1.—Advertisement, *Cosmopolitan* (Aug. 1989). Photo: Barry Hollywood; reproduced through the courtesy of *Cosmopolitan*.

Presumably, the readers of these magazines are to desire to *be* the woman, not to *have* her.

The project of this essay is to begin to decode the complicated operations of identification and desire, of being and having, that are at work in the social production of female spectatorial subjectivity. In an attempt to account psychoanalytically for the enduring fascination that commercial fashion photography holds for its female viewers, I will draw on Freud's theories of primary and secondary identification, Lacan's readings of specularity and subjectivity in relation to the preoedipal mirror stage, and Kristeva's notions of abjection and the "homosexual-maternal facet." Throughout I will be attempting to demonstrate, through a narrowly delimited reading of contemporary signifying codes of fashion photography,³ that "identities" can never be isolated from or adequately understood outside the institutions of identification that work to produce them in the first place. Identity, because it is never in a moment of critical repose, because it resists the forces of suspension or negation, and because it neither begins nor ends at a point of total immobility, draws its very lifeblood from the restless operations of identification, one of the most powerful but least understood mechanisms of cultural self-fashioning.

Fashion Fetishism

The Lacanian subject is a subject fashioned in and by identifications, a subject that comes-into-being [*devenir*] through the agency of a complex network of identificatory processes—narcissism, aggressivity, misrecognition, and objectification—all working variously with and against each other at different moments in the child's psychical development and continuing on into adulthood. The importance Lacanian psychoanalysis attributes to specularity and identification in the formation of the sexed subject suggests several points of entry to the psychical geography traversed and bounded by the arena of women's commercial fashion photography. I will argue that these photographs work as post-mirror phase images that create fascination precisely through a cultural staging of pre-mirror phase fantasies; they, in effect, mirror the pre-mirror stage, directing our gaze solipsistically back to our own specular and fictive origins.

3. The study with which any reading of fashion photography may immediately invite comparison is Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (1967; New York, 1983). Whereas Barthes's structuralist analysis is limited to the decoding of articles about fashion in commercial magazines, my own post-structuralist analysis is largely based on a reading of the photographic images. Both are at best partial and severely circumscribed investigations into the "fashion system."

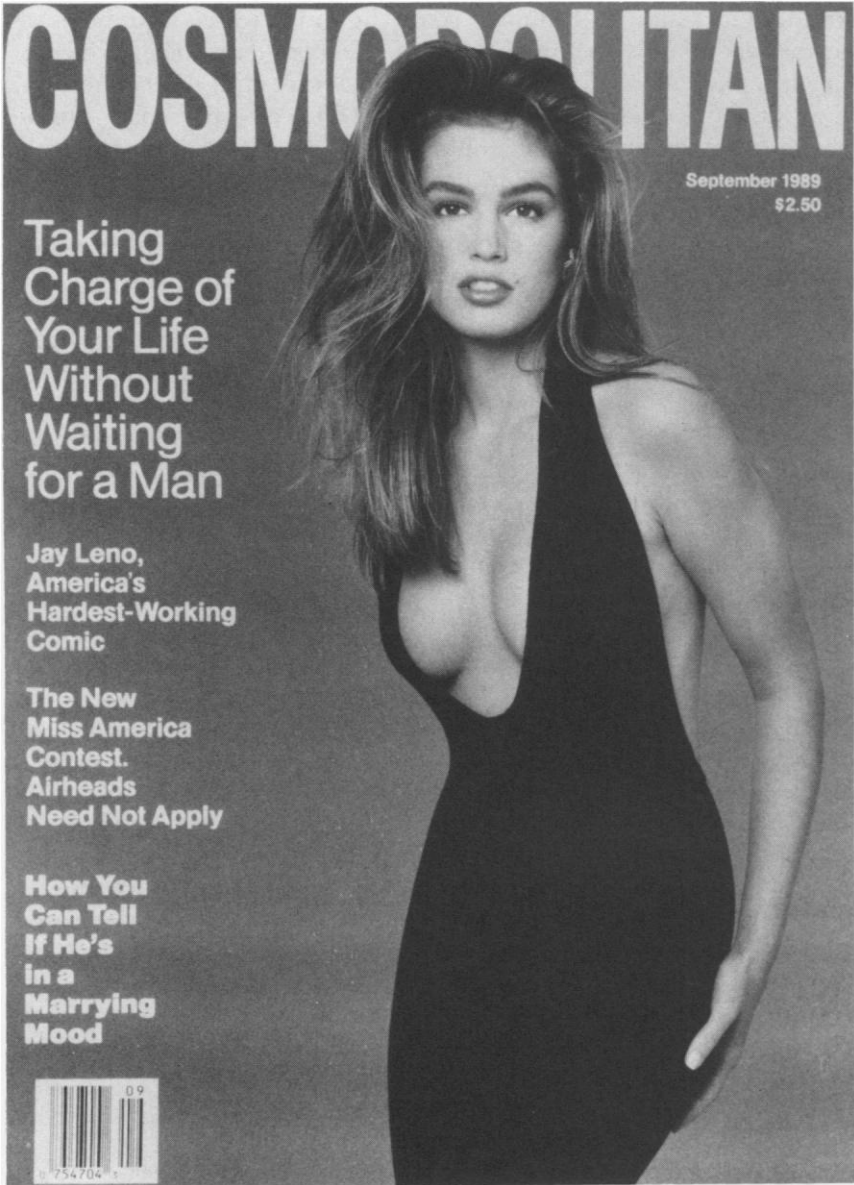


FIG. 2.—Cover, *Cosmopolitan* (Sept. 1989). Photo: Francesco Scavullo; reproduced through the courtesy of *Cosmopolitan*.

Through *secondary* identification(s) with the sequence of images that fashion photography serially displays, the female subject is positioned by the photographic codes of framing, color, lighting, focus, and pose to rehearse repetitiously the introjection of the (m)other's imago, which is itself a complex rehearsal of the infant's primary identification or absorption with the (m)other.⁴ These images of the female body reenact, obsessively, the moment of the female subject's earliest self-awareness, as if to suggest the subject's profound uncertainty over whether her own subjectivity "took." This subject is compelled to verify herself endlessly, to identify all her bodily parts, and to fashion continually from this corporeal and psychical jigsaw puzzle a total picture, an imago of her own body.

The specular image of the body that women's fashion photography constructs is a reimagining of the body in pieces [*le corps morcelé*], the fragmented and dispersed body image that Lacan posits as the infant's pre-mirror experience of its amorphous self. These photographs recall Lacan's identification in "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis" of a group of images categorized as "*imagos of the fragmented body*": "images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body."⁵ Some of the most common and prevalent shots of female bodies in women's fashion photography are those of decapitation and dismemberment—in particular headless torsos and severed heads. In a L'Oréal ad for waterproof makeup (fig. 3), a woman's head floats above the water, her face, framed in medium close-up, detached from any visible body, supported only by her reflection in the water below. This very reflection is an extension of the body: woman as mirror is all face. But more terrifying than an economy of looking that overinvests the woman's face as the primary site of subjectivity is the flip side of this same scopic economy that divests the woman of subjectivity altogether. A Chanel ad, for example, phantasmically constructs an unthinkable body—a body without identity, a body without face or surface to convey any distinctive identifying features beyond the class- and gender-inflected signifiers of the clothes themselves. By "amputating" the model's head and legs, and by rendering invisible any flesh or skin tones, the camera presents to the viewer the fantasy not of a body without organs but a body without a subject. The terror and fascination evoked by the Chanel ad is that of the complete erasure of subjectivity. But then, the

4. *Imago* is a term Lacan borrows from Freud's famous distinction between two different kinds of identifications: primary identification, which signifies the child's preoedipal state of nondifferentiation with the mother, and secondary identification, which signifies the child's oedipal introjection of the imago of the same-sex parent. Freud's primary and secondary identifications correspond roughly to Lacan's pre-mirror and mirror stages, thus predating the subject's oedipal drama and situating the roots of identification and desire firmly in the presubject's imaginary relation to the mother.

5. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977), p. 11.

A DRENCH OF COLOR

Conjure up this watery image the next time you're sweating it out at the office—turns out the cooler you think, the cooler you feel. Another psychological cool—the barest, shiest makeup (waterproof, to boot). All makeup from L'Oréal: Le Grand Kohl in "Café" is smudged on upper lid; on lashes, Miracle Wear Mascara in "Black Brown." Lips shine with "Pink-in/Perle" Glossique High Shine Lip Gloss.

WHAT MEN LOVE ABOUT

the women of

FIG. 3.—Advertisement, *Glamour* (July 1989). Photo: Ken Browar; reproduced through the courtesy of *Glamour*. © 1989 by The Condé Nast Publications, Inc.

floating head and the headless torso offer only apparently different “takes” on the female subject, for overpresence figures a kind of absence, and to be the mirror is simultaneously to be without a self-image of one’s own.

This representational body in pieces also functions for the female spectator as a cultural reminder of her fetishization, of the “part” she plays in the disavowal of the mother’s castration. A fetish (typically a woman’s legs, breasts, face, or other body part) is a substitute for the missing maternal phallus, a prop or accessory fashioned to veil its terrifying absence. In a patriarchal Symbolic a fetishist is one who continually strives to deny the “truth” of the mother’s castration by registering the phallus elsewhere, seeking to resecure and to hold in suspense the early imaginary attachment to the phallic mother that was lost with the subject’s entry into the Symbolic and its subjugation to the law of the father.⁶ Photography, which similarly seeks to fix an image in an eternal moment of suspense, comes to function not merely as a technological analog for the psychological workings of fetishism but as one of its internal properties—that is, the fetish itself has “the frozen, arrested quality of a photograph.”⁷ This intimate co-dependency of fashion, fetishism, photography, and femininity suggests that in the dominant regime of fashion photography, femininity is itself an accessory: it operates as a repository for culture’s representational waste. Images of waste and refuse make visible the Symbolic representations of femininity, which Luce Irigaray identifies as the “shards,” the “scraps,” the “uncollected debris,” the “scattered remnants of a violated sexuality.”⁸ While it is the incorporation *and expurgation* of the feminine that constitutes the founding order of subjectivity for both boy and girl, only the girl attains subjectivity by becoming “the negative image of the subject,”⁹ the photographic inversion, the materials of the mirror itself, its scattered shards. Juliet MacCannell’s metaphor of the “trash can” to describe female subjectivity is thus entirely relevant to this discussion of fashion and fetishism. “‘Woman’ as generality,” she writes, “is only seen in pieces (in part-objects, in the ‘trash can’ of overvalued zones of her body—breast, eyebrow, ankle, smile): any part that can be ‘phallicised’ or made, as a single part, into a metaphor for a wholeness that the woman lacks.”¹⁰ All of this is simply to suggest that it is possible to read fashion fetishism in

6. For a particularly precise and detailed reading of fetishism, as contrasted with psychosis, to which my own understanding of these psychological mechanisms is partially indebted, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney, 1989), pp. 56–59.

7. Parveen Adams, “Of Female Bondage,” in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London, 1989), p. 252.

8. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (1977; Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), p. 30.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

10. Juliet Flower MacCannell, *Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1986), p. 108.

photography in the same way that film theorist Kaja Silverman has read commodity fetishism in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*: as "a vain attempt to compensate for the divisions and separations upon which subjectivity is based."¹¹

The Homosexual-Maternal Face(t)

So far, this reading of fashion photography has only suggested the *discomfort* these images may be assumed to provoke for their female viewers—specifically the fear and anxiety generated by (over)exposed fragmented body parts, remnants of an abjected existence prior to the mirror stage formulation of an economy of subjects and objects. It may be helpful here to turn directly to the work of Julia Kristeva, the writer perhaps most often associated with the difficult enterprise of theorizing the mechanisms of primary identification, primary narcissism, and abjection. Buried within a theory of sexuality noted for its persistent heterocentrism and its tendency toward maternalism¹² is a concept nonetheless particularly suggestive for understanding the endless fascination that fashion photography holds for its female spectators—suggestive precisely *because* of its insights into the Symbolic privileging of the maternal in the cultural production of feminine subjectivity. Kristeva's notion of the "homosexual-maternal facet"¹³ posits a fundamental female homosexuality in the daughter's preoedipal identification with the mother, thus posing the larger question of the role that homosexuality plays (its repression and/or its mobilization) in the psychosocial constitution of *any* female subject. This homosexual-maternal facet is for Kristeva a particular modality of the semiotic *chora*, that period and place of indistinction prior to the various splittings (subject/object, self/other, mother/child) initiated by the mirror stage. In the pre-mirror stage, the still to be gendered presubject is "face to face with primary narcissism" (*D*, p. 265), caught in a primary identification with the mother that, for the girl, positions her along with the mother on a homosexual continuum. Importantly, it is the mother's face that functions as a screen providing the child with its first mirror image and facilitating the process of the *child's* identity formation by *effacing* itself: the mother's face becomes a lost object. At the very point

11. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), p. 86.

12. See for example Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), chap. 3; Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, chap. 4; and Jennifer Stone, "The Horrors of Power: A Critique of 'Kristeva,'" in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester, 1983), pp. 38–48.

13. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Roudiez (New York, 1980), p. 239; hereafter abbreviated *D*.

the mother's face reflects the child's image back to him/her, this screen is itself "lost," eclipsed by its own reflective properties. For the girl, such a loss is a double deprivation since the mother's image is, simultaneously, her own.

The prevalence of close-ups of the woman's face in fashion photography would seem to suggest that one possible explanation for the fascination these images hold for women involves the pleasures evoked by the potential restitution of the lost object—specifically the reconstitution of the mother's face. A Revlon ad (fig. 4) for an antiageing moisturizer is surprisingly self-conscious about the psychical processes it so powerfully puts into play; it works its appeal by way of an imperative, commanding the spectator to "recover" the lost object in order to "discover" eternal youth. In its soft-focus lighting and languid radiance, the black-and-white image is strikingly reminiscent of a cinematic close-up of Greta Garbo or Claudette Colbert. The spectatorial appeal of the Revlon ad is much the same as that of a film close-up, perhaps even heightened by the immobility of the photographic image—its unrelenting overexposure to the viewer. Mary Ann Doane's comments on the cinematic close-up may help explain its analogous appeal in fashion photography:

At moments it almost seems as though all the fetishism of the cinema were condensed onto the image of the face, the female face in particular. . . . The face is that bodily part not accessible to the subject's own gaze (or accessible only as a virtual image in a mirror)—hence its overrepresentation as *the* instance of subjectivity.¹⁴

The female subject, whose hold on subjectivity is always a precarious one, may derive a special pleasure from this "face-to-face" encounter with a shimmering, luminous, reconstituted image of the mythic "Mother";¹⁵ the photograph's structure of visualization stages a homosexual-maternal encounter by symbolically imagining for the spectator a fantasized preoedipal relation with the face of the maternal. As one of the earliest planes of psychical organization, the mother's face is refigured by the

14. Mary Ann Doane, "Veiling over Desire: Close-ups of the Woman," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), p. 108. Peter Matthews, in his absorbing reading of Greta Garbo as gay male icon, also reads the face as fetish, arguing that the feminine face is the site where spectators immerse themselves and momentarily relinquish their subjectivity. See Peter Matthews, "Garbo and Phallic Motherhood: A 'Homosexual' Visual Economy," *Screen* 29 (Summer 1988): 27.

15. In figure 5 (see p. 725) we are presented with an image of the "Great White Mother," a racially marked iconography of feminine beauty that betrays a Western nostalgia for the "recovery" of racial "purity." Commercial fashion photography persistently plays out such fantasies of racial purification through its calculated matching of products with models; after surveying thousands of images, I was struck by the overwhelming predominance of *white* women's faces in those advertisements selling specifically skin creams, makeup, facial cleansers, and other skin care products.




FIG. 4.—Advertisement, *Cosmopolitan* (Aug. 1989). Reproduced through the courtesy of Revlon, Inc. © 1989.

photographic apparatus as eternally present—fashioned, fetishized, and fixed by the gaze of the desiring subject. These images instill pleasure in the viewer by at once constructing and evoking the memory of a choric union; they bear “the imprint of an archaic moment” (*D*, p. 283)¹⁶ achieved through the technological simulation of a past event. Often in these shots of a severed woman’s head we see the face from the distance and perspective that an infant might see it. For example, in figure 5 the face wells up in front of us, its charged presence almost too large for the frame to hold, while in figure 6 the face is more indistinct, shadowy, blurred, remote. The lighting in both cases (orange-yellow, pink-black) is never quite “natural,” as if these images were always either under- or over-exposed. The closeness of the faces to the viewer and the awkward play of light and shadow in both shots further suggest that no camera produced these particular images, and indeed they belong to a second-order genre in advertising based on the *simulated photograph*: drawings that mimic the immediacy and referentiality of a photographic copy and, in so doing, draw attention to the status of the photograph itself as a product of representation, a cultural simulation.


The reproduction of photographic codes in these imitative drawings function as a reminder of the phantasmic intensity of their subject (the mother’s frozen face), as if the machinery of photographic representation cannot bear such close proximity to the object of desire whose reflective properties it so jealously seeks to capture and to refine. Clearly we are operating fully within the realm of fantasy here, for the choric reunion evoked by these images can only ever have the status of a fantasized memory and can only be purchased, paradoxically, at the price of disabling the very identity this fantasy purportedly seeks to secure in the first place. Any return to the semiotic *chora* and the homosexual-maternal continuum involves a regression to primary narcissism and thus to the moment before the formation of the subject’s identity as subject. Kristeva’s “ravishing maternal jouissance”—which constitutes the powerful lure of the “choric fantasy”¹⁷—is balanced and set against the equally powerful repulsion of its “terrorizing aggressivity” (*D*, p. 263). One of Kristeva’s most important contributions to psychoanalytic theories of subject formation may well be her insistence that the “idyllic” dual relationship Freud identified between mother and child—the “soothing” symbiosis of the imaginary relation—represents in fact Freud’s own defensive negation of the knowledge that the mother-child relation is anything but

16. It should be clear by now that this reading of the woman’s face as maternal icon relies heavily on that body of work in feminist art history that insists that “the body to which representation refers is always, however specific the representation, the maternal body” (Griselda Pollock, “Missing Women: Rethinking Early Thoughts on Images of Women,” in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squiers [Seattle, 1990], p. 211).

17. I take this especially useful term from Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, p. 101.



Aapri gentle cleansing lotion leaves no oily or greasy feeling,
just perfectly fresh, clean skin.



Aapri. A refreshing way to wipe away the day.

New facial cleanser and non alcohol, sting-free freshnet.

FIG. 5.—Advertisement, *Elle* (July 1989).

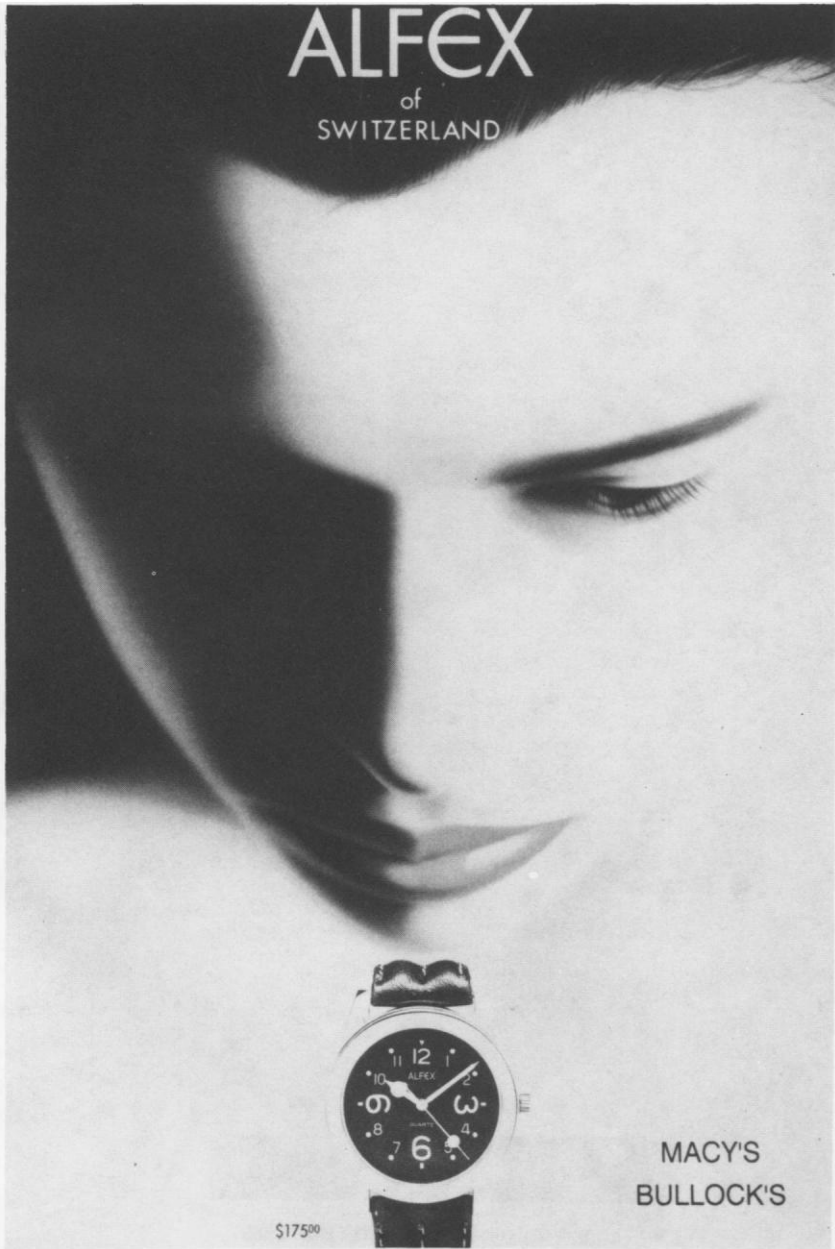


FIG. 6.—Advertisement, *Elle* (Oct. 1989). Reproduced through the courtesy of the Swiss Watch Corporation.

utopic. The primary narcissism implied by the homosexual-maternal facet is weighted with hostility and laden with uncertainty: “the archaic relation to the mother, narcissistic though it may be, is . . . of no solace to the protagonists and even less so to Narcissus.” Primary narcissism, by erasing the borders between subject and object and immersing both mother and child in abjection, “threatens” the ego and “menaces” subjective identity.¹⁸ In opposition then to a psychoanalytic understanding of female film spectatorship, which reads the woman’s fascination with her image as a symptom of her “predisposition” to (primary) narcissism, I am suggesting that the female spectator’s fascination with her etherealized image in fashion photography operates not as an Imaginary *effect* of primary narcissism but as a Symbolic *defense against* it—against all the terrors primary identification with the mother holds for the always imperfectly oedipalized woman. What these angelic images of the mother’s face provide for the female spectator is a *negation* of the uncertainty that disturbs her psychic borders and a *disavowal* of the pain born out of her primary identification with the (m)other—a negation and a disavowal made visible through a representational excess (which is always a kind of waste): namely, the cosmetic beautification and beatification of the mother’s face.

One thinks here of Georges Bataille, perhaps the preeminent theorist of waste, refuse, and the violence of refusal, which he sees as the very precondition of desire. To possess the object of desire—to “take” it, like a photograph—would be simultaneously to *take away* the motivation for the desire and thus desire itself. However, for Bataille, woman’s cultural utility as repository of beauty operates to disguise the animal nature of heterosexual intercourse and further to mask what he terms the “ugliness” and crudity of the sexual organs. In Bataille’s “vision of excess,”¹⁹ it is specifically the woman’s face—heavily adorned and meticulously masqueraded—that attracts the male subject’s gaze away from the sex organs and toward a more luminous surface. Bataille’s theoretical figuration of the female face as “beautiful” enacts a slight shift in registers from *reflection* to *deflection*: the fashionable face (the female face on display) has the power to send the look through a circuitous route, from the vertical lips to the horizontal lips, not to effect an eclipse of the genital by the facial but

18. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Roudiez (New York, 1982), p. 63. For an interesting and suggestive discussion of the *mother’s* abjection, and a theory of subject formation based on identification with the desire of the mother rather than with a desire for her, see Cynthia Chase, “Desire and Identification in Lacan and Kristeva,” in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, pp. 65–83, and “Primary Narcissism and the Giving of Figure: Kristeva with Hertz and de Man,” in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (New York, 1990), pp. 124–36.

19. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco, 1986), p. 129–46. In Bataille’s erotics of waste and refuse, “beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled” (p. 144). See also Bataille’s *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. and ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis, 1985).

rather to collapse one bodily site onto the other.²⁰ This is not a new or perhaps even very interesting story: Freud's reading of the terrifying decapitated head of Medusa as a representation of the female genitals (specifically, the mother's genitals)²¹ similarly insists on the symbolic connection between female face and female genitalia. These two cultural readings (Bataille's and Freud's) of the iconic power of a woman's face tell us less about a woman's complex relation to her private body parts than about the parts her privates have been made to play in the history of Western representations of *male* subjectivity. To understand the fear and fascination the mother's face holds for a *female* subject, one needs to turn away from Medusa.

Vampiric Identification

Disavowal, as is its wont, simultaneously involves for the subject in discord both a denial *and* a recognition of the source of its pain. It is, after all, the very immobility of the photographic image of the mother's face that threatens to capture and overwhelm the subject in the archaic confusion of its own libidinous drives. If the high cost of regression to the pre-Symbolic is psychosis, which Kristeva defines in an eloquent turn of phrase as "the panicking at the loss of all reference" (*D*, p. 139), then the photographic apparatus itself comes to function as a paradigm for the workings of psychosis, a loss of reference triggered by the face-to-face encounter with primary narcissism and the possibility of both plenitude and loss reflected in and by the mother's magnified, beatific face. On the one hand, photography, unlike other systems of representation, can never deny the existence of the referent—the "that-has-been" status, as Roland Barthes puts it, of the lost object.²² On the other hand, photography never

20. For an alternative use of Bataille's erotics of waste that is read through the discourse of fashion, see Peter Wollen, "Fashion/Orientalism/The Body," *New Formations*, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 5–33. Wollen accurately points out that for Bataille the general economy of waste, of excess spent without return, is the very domain of the erotic. It is also, I would add, the domain of Irigaray's "feminine."

21. See Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head" (1922), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 18:273–74.

22. Barthes has this to say about the specificity of photography:

Photography's Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. I call "photographic referent" not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often "chimeras." Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. [Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Howard (New York, 1981), p. 76]

ceases in its attempt to restore the lost object, the referent that has been but is no longer.²³ Like the mother's face, the photographic image is the place of both a constitution and a fading of subjectivity: both are "screens" that operate for the subject as sites where identity emerges *and* recedes. Photography simulates and mechanizes the reflective properties of the mother's look, suggesting that if the mother's face operates as the primary "plane" of abjection, photography may represent its most perfect science. Abjection, defined by Kristeva as that boundary where "'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again,"²⁴ is the psychical equivalent of photography's mechanical transformation of subjects into objects. Barthes writes "the Photograph . . . represents that very subtle moment when . . . I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter."²⁵ Photography, the very technology of abjection, functions as a mass producer of corpses, embalming each subject by captivating and fixing its image. Along with vampirism and psychoanalysis, photography can be seen as yet another of the "rival sciences of the undead."²⁶

This idea of the undead, when combined with the spectacle of women "feeding off" the images of other women, points toward a vampiric structure of the look in women's fashion photography. The vampirism of the gaze is directly thematized through the prevalence of neck shots: images of women with their heads thrown back, their eyes closed, their lips slightly parted, their necks extended and exposed (figs. 7 and 8). This is, of course, the classic pose of sexual ecstasy for the woman, a pose that visually demonstrates how a woman's very vulnerability and passivity are culturally eroticized. Only this time it is women themselves who are invited to actively consume the image—female spectators who are constrained to assume the position of lesbian vampires. Laura Mulvey, in her well-known reading of the narrative codes of classical Hollywood cinema, theorizes two possible spectatorial relations to the image on the screen: scopophilia, which implies "a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen," and narcissism, which demands "identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination

23. A reminder of the precise psychoanalytic definition of psychosis might help clarify the relation I am positing here between this psychical mechanism and photographic technology. Psychosis is "a primary disturbance of the libidinal relation to reality"; its "manifest symptoms . . . are accordingly treated as secondary attempts to restore the link with objects" (Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith [1967; New York, 1973], p. 370).

24. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 18.

25. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 14.

26. Laurence A. Rickels, *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts* (Detroit, 1988), p. 318.

with and recognition of his like.”²⁷ Vampirism, I would like to suggest, marks a third possible mode of looking, a position that demands both separation and identification, both a having and a becoming—indeed, a having *through* a becoming. The spectatorial relation of the woman to her image serially displayed across the pages of the fashion magazine is structurally vampiric, involving neither immediate identification nor unmediated desire but rather a complicated and unstable exchange between already mediated forms.

Becoming the other by feeding off the other presents a tropological way of understanding identification that is not without precedent in psychoanalysis. In Freud’s understanding of the process of secondary identification, introjection of the imago works specifically through “the oral, cannibalistic incorporation of the other person,”²⁸ an act of consumption that seeks to satisfy the ego’s insatiable desire to become the other by devouring it whole. But as a cultural figure for the psychical process of identification, vampirism differs from cannibalism in that the vampire does more than incorporate the alterity of the other in her erotic feedings; she also creates a shadow or reflection of herself by transforming her “victims” into fellow vampires. Vampirism works more like an inverted form of identification—identification pulled inside out—where the subject, in the act of interiorizing the other, simultaneously reproduces itself externally in that other. Vampirism is both other-incorporating and self-reproducing; it delimits a more ambiguous space where desire and identification appear less opposed than coterminous, where the desire to be the other (identification) draws its very sustenance from the desire to have the other. Vampiric identification operates in the fashion system in the way that the photographic apparatus positions the spectator to identify with the woman precisely so as not to desire her, or to put it another way, to desire to be the woman so as to preclude having her. But in order to eradicate or evacuate the homoerotic desire, the visual field must first *produce* it, thereby permitting, in socially regulated form, the articulation of lesbian desire within the identificatory move itself.

The vampire—and, I would propose, the lesbian vampire specific-

27. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York, 1988), p. 61.

28. Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (1932), *Standard Edition*, 22: 63. See Freud’s discussion of the primal father’s murder and cannibalism by the sons in *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13), *Standard Edition*, 13:vii–162, and his association of identification with the earliest phase of infantile sexuality, the libidinal oral phase, in which the ego incorporates the object by devouring it, a process described both in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), *Standard Edition*, 18:69–143, and in “Mourning and Melancholia” (1915), *Standard Edition*, 14:243–58. On eating as a figure for the interiorization of the other, see also Jacques Derrida, “Subverting the Signature: A Theory of the Parasite,” *Blast* 1 (1990): 16–21, and “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” interviewed by Jean-Luc Nancy, in *Who Comes after the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Nancy (New York, 1990), pp. 96–119.

A black and white fashion advertisement for Flemington Furs. The central image shows a woman with short, styled hair, wearing a dark, double-breasted fur blazer with large buttons. She is also wearing a necklace with large, dark, circular pendants and earrings. She is looking upwards and to the right. The background is a plain, light color. In the bottom right corner of the image area, there is a circular logo with the text 'RUSSIAN KARAKUL' around the perimeter and a stylized 'F' in the center. Below the logo, the text 'Black Bukbara Blazer' is written. At the bottom of the advertisement, the text 'Exclusively at *flemington furs*' is displayed in a serif font, with 'flemington furs' in italics. Below this, it says 'Flemington, New Jersey' and 'One of the World's Largest Specialists in Fine Furs'.

RUSSIAN KARAKUL

Black Bukbara Blazer

Exclusively at *flemington furs*

Flemington, New Jersey
One of the World's Largest Specialists in Fine Furs

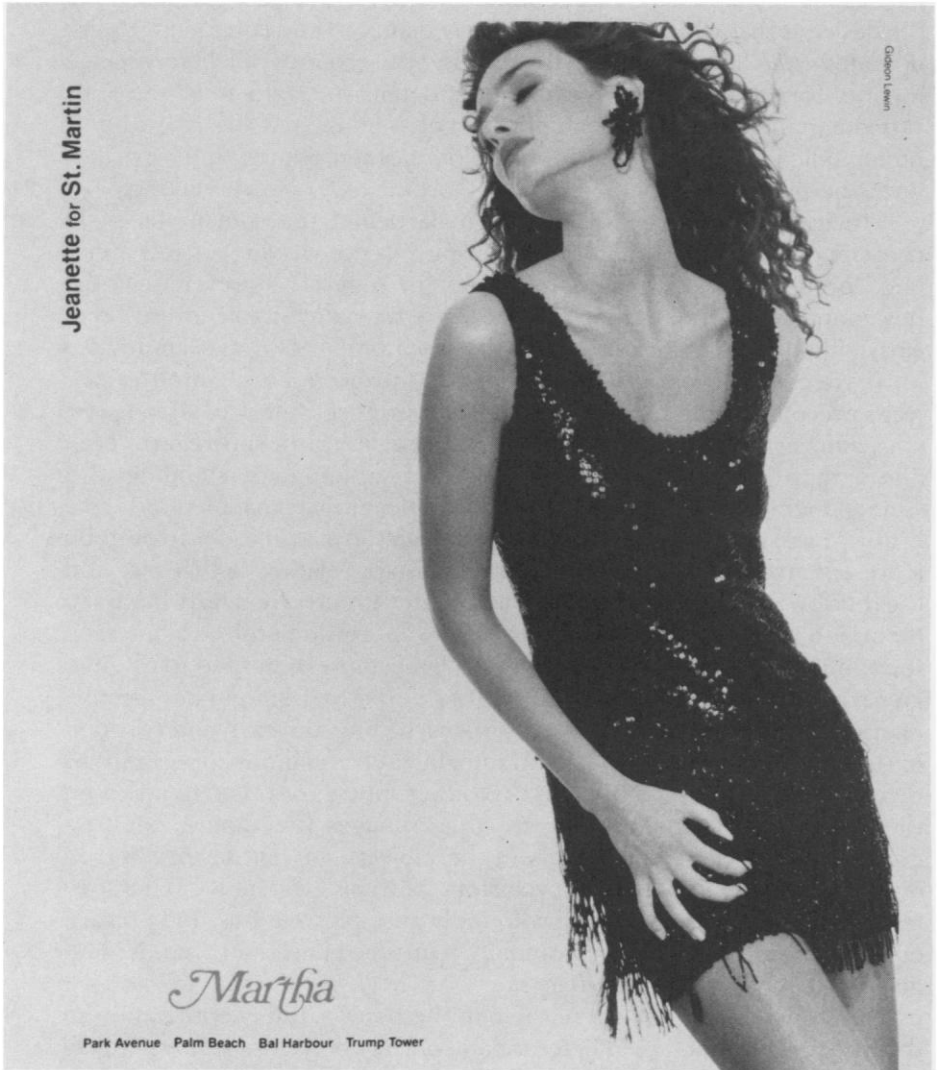
FIG. 7.—Advertisement, *Vogue* (Oct. 1989). Photo: Skrebneski; reproduced through the courtesy of Flemington Furs, Flemington, N.J.

ally—represents the perfect trope for allegorizing the activity of fashion photography's voracious female spectators. A rare, explicit acknowledgment of how the fashion system works through vampiric identifications is presented by a striking ad for Italian clothing designer Moschino (fig. 9). Assuming the form of a rough sketch rather than a glossy photograph, this antifashion fashion statement crosses out not simply any woman's face but a vampire's face. Red splotches connote both the red paint of the X and the red blood dripping from the vampire's fangs. Eyes, nose, and mouth are all blocked out: this woman sees red, but, as a vampire, she also smells it and tastes it. The violence of the image lies in its refusal of what I have argued is the spectatorial position that the fashion system constructs for its female viewers, namely, lesbian vampirism. Female spectatorial subjectivity is precisely what is denied by the injunction to "**STOP THE FASHION SYSTEM!**" Yet the subtle play with spacing and typography in the visual presentation of "**STOP THE FASHION SYSTEM!**" suggests a possible counter-reading: if we place the emphasis on the imperative—**STOP**—as the word's size and placement on the page encourage us to do, we can then gloss the line as a different kind of command: a bid for our attention, an alert to **STOP** and to take notice of **THE FASHION SYSTEM**. The connotative ambiguity encoded by the text permits a second order of meaning that significantly complicates the first, suggesting perhaps that the point we really should register here is the fashion system's ability to renew and to perpetuate itself by continually invoking the specter of its death or obsolescence—in much the same way, it could be argued, that heterosexuality secures its identity by at once disavowing and perpetually calling attention to its abject, interiorized, and ghostly other, homosexuality.²⁹

A psychoanalytic reading of heterosexuality needs to look beyond the standard repression hypothesis of sexuality in order to fully account for the way in which heterosexuality, far from constituting itself through the simple sublimation of homosexuality, works through and by the dialectic of its continual activation and disavowal. Homosexuality is "repressed" to the degree that the structure it provides for the formation of the heterosexual subject is so apparent that it becomes transparent; the very obviousness of the lesbian eroticism evoked by women's fashion photography simultaneously produces and occludes the homoerotic structure of the look.³⁰ Fashion photography works to ensure the formation of a subject's heterosexual object-choices through the stimulation and control of its "homopathic" identifications; the same-sex desire one might imagine to

29. Another aspect of the vampire trope that seems relevant here is the absence of the vampire's reflection in the mirror. The vacant mirror names the subjectless subject discussed earlier in this essay, specifically in regard to the eclipsing of the mother's face.

30. Or, as Butler incisively phrases the problem, "homosexuality emerges as a desire which must be produced in order to remain repressed" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 77).



Jeanette for St. Martin

Gideon Lewin

Martha

Park Avenue Palm Beach Bal Harbour Trump Tower

FIG. 8.—Advertisement, *Elle* (Sept. 1989). Photo: Gideon Lewin for Martha International.

be triggered by the erotically charged images of women's bodies is sublimated into the camera's insistence on same-sex identification (being rather than having the woman). Yet these structural identifications, while harnessing the tabooed desire, nonetheless give it a certain play, licensing the desire as that which must be routinely managed and contained. Desire operates *within* identification, destabilizing the grounds of a heterosexual identity formation and undermining its defensive claims to a "pure" or "uncontaminated" sexuality. This play of homosexual desire within a homophilic identification may explain the fashion photograph's greatest lure: the pull of a forbidden desire, there (if only) for the taking.

Images of the female form—and, in particular, the woman's face—in contemporary fashion photography inspire in the viewing subject a certain "preoedipal nostalgia." That is not to suggest, however, that the power and attraction of these images derive from any simple evocation of early childhood memories. Rather, the "memory" these ads seem to "tap into" are contemporary fictional constructs projected back into the subject's preconscious to function as screens to protect against an all too present pain: the cultural repression of same-sex desire. In this regard, each photograph achieves the status of Freud's earliest understanding of a "screen memory"—a "memory" (for example, of maternal plenitude, the beatific face) manufactured and mapped onto the past in order to disguise a present anxiety (the subject's painfully distant relation to that face and the disavowal of homosexual desire). Actually, Freud offers us two ways to theorize a screen memory: first, as an early impression utilized as a screen for a much later event, and second, as a later impression used to disguise an early childhood event.³¹ The images offered by fashion photography operate both ways: as defenses (or screens) against the early interruption of the homosexual-maternal continuum, but also and more importantly as defenses against the pain that this psychical rupture continues to inflict on the adult subject. In other words, these images function as counter-memories that tell us as much about the subject's current history as they do about her already shadowy prehistory, perhaps even more. What they tell us is that heterosexuality is profoundly unstable, tenuous, and precarious, and therefore must be continually reinforced and resecured. Nostalgia for the preoedipal, *itself a construction of the oedipal*, works as a psychical mechanism for strengthening the homopathic identification so that the socially sanctioned heterosexual object-choice can be perpetually sustained. In constant threat of dissolution, female heterosexuality must

31. Freud develops the first of these theories in "Screen Memories" (1899), *Standard Edition*, 3: 299–322, and the second, more common understanding in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), *Standard Edition*, vol. 6. In "Screen Memories" Freud provides a further reason for casting suspicion on the efficacy of reading representational images simply as evocations of early childhood memories: "It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood: memories *relating to* our childhood may be all that we possess" (3:322).

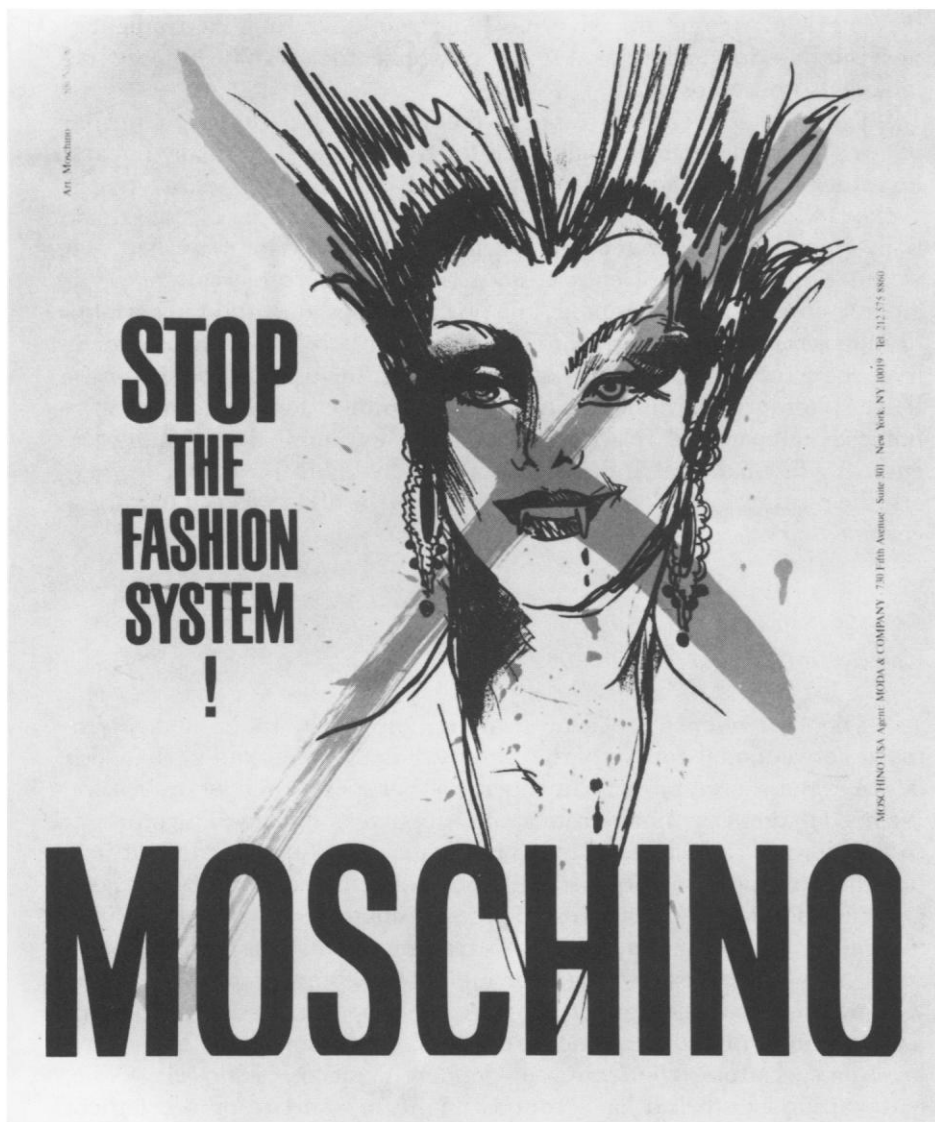


FIG. 9.—Advertisement, *Elle* (Mar. 1990). Reproduced through the courtesy of Moda and Company.

be critically maintained through the cultural institutionalization of the homosexual look. This strategic deployment of a homospectatorial look may partially account for what has long been a puzzling contradiction: how is it that, in the dominant sexual Symbolic, there can be homosexual looks but no homosexuals?

Even Freud eventually came to recognize that a daughter's unconscious preoedipal homosexual desire for the mother continually impacts upon her conscious adult life; it is precisely this same-sex desire that is evoked, which is to say *provoked*, by photographic images of the female body—powerfully activated, mobilized, and channeled (or *Chanelled*, as it were). The problem, of course, is that any female subject *as subject* is already situated in the Symbolic, and no matter how uncertain this symbolization is for the woman, the mother's face as lost object is fundamentally irrecoverable. Still, the *fantasy* of repossessing the lost object, the *promise* these photographic images hold of reconnecting (re-fusing?) the homosexual-maternal relation, goes a long way toward explaining the enduring fascination that fashion photography holds for its female viewers, the pleasures it seeks to provide, as well as the discomforts it may inadvertently summon.

Conclusion

The lesbian-looks coded by fashion photography radically de-essentialize conventional notions of the identity of the viewing subject that posit desire in the viewer, prior to any operations of spectatorial identification. We need to theorize “homoerotic looks” not in terms of anything inherent to the viewing subject but in terms of a visual structuring and identification that participates in organizing the sexual identity of *any* social subject. One question I have not addressed is how lesbian viewers might consume these images.³² What is at issue in this reading, however, is not “homosexual” versus “heterosexual” spectatorship but the homosexualization of the viewing position itself as created by the contemporary codes of women's fashion photography. This is not to deny that more work needs to be done on how spectators from different gendered, racial, ethnic, economic, national, and historical backgrounds might appropriate or resist these images,³³ but only to insist that if subjects look differently, it is the

32. One recent attempt to do just this is Danae Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” *Camera Obscura* 25–26 (Jan.–May 1991): 181–201.

33. I have in mind the kind of work showcased by a recent collection of essays on “The Spectatrix,” ed. Janet Bergstrom and Doane, *Camera Obscura*, nos. 20–21 (May–Sept. 1990). See also “The Last ‘Special Issue’ on Race?” ed. Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, *Screen* 29 (Autumn 1988), and a collection on “(Un)Naming Cultures,” ed. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Discourse* 11 (Spring–Summer 1989).

enculturating mechanisms of the look that instantiate and regulate these differences in the first place.

A second implication of a study like this one, which draws heavily on recent film theory, is a recognition nonetheless of the limited uses to which this theory can be put in the critical analyses of photography. Photography differs from film in its organization of both spatial and temporal orders and in its relation to referentiality and alterity.³⁴ In its frozen time and circumscribed space, the photograph constitutes another frame of reference, a different structure of visualization, an alternative field of vision. And, especially important for this particular investigation of photography, the photograph constructs an entirely other identificatory structure from that described by Mulvey, for whom the spectatorial look produced by the classical film apparatus is masculine, heterosexual, and oedipal. I have suggested in this essay that the spectatorial position mapped by contemporary commercial fashion photography can be read, by contrast, as feminine, homosexual, and preoedipal.

Finally, we need to rethink the always-complicated relation between desire and identification in the formation of the subject's identity. For Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, desire and identification are mutually interdependent but counterdirectional trajectories in which identifying with one sex is the necessary condition for desiring the other. To identify with *and* to desire a person of the same sex is, in this logic, a structural impossibility. But such a symmetrical, rigid, chiasmatic relation between terms may disguise the ways in which any identification *with* an other is secured through a simultaneous and continuing desire *for* that other. In Freud's only case study of a female paranoiac, he insists that the analysand can "free" herself of her homosexual "dependence" on her mother only by becoming her mother through renewed secondary identifications.³⁵ This becoming is presumed to erase all desire, or rather to reroute the desire toward a wholly different love object. But the desire to be *like* can itself be motivated and sustained by the desire to *possess*: being can be the most radical form of having. Identification may well operate in the end not as a foreclosure of desire but as its most perfect, and most *ruthless*, fulfillment.

34. For a lengthier discussion of the differences between cinema and photography, see Derrida, afterword in Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regards* (Paris, 1985).

35. See Freud, "A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psychoanalytic Theory of the Disease" (1915), *Standard Edition*, 14: 263–72.