

Cosmopolitan Women: Writing the Female Self on the European Cultural and Geographical North-south Axis

Merja de Mattos-Parreira
Universidade do Algarve

The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave, (...) but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity (...) where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics.

Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture*, p.25

This paper sets out to compare the women's self image presented on the covers and in the contents pages of the "global" magazine *Cosmopolitan* in Portuguese / Spanish ("Catholic" south) and English / Finnish / Swedish ("Protestant" north). The keyword concept of my approach is textual identity construction through a transdisciplinary approach — i.e., culture, society and language; this means that I examine the *theme of identity construction* by combining several disciplinary orientations and establishing relationships between them. My basic theoretical argument on identity construction is that, first of all, it is always a relational concept and it is built upon *the notion of difference* — in this case, the female self in *Cosmopolitan*. Difference is actually central for the existence of all meanings. Binary oppositions are no doubt over-simplified because there is always one who dominates; the dimension of power — and the continuous negotiation of it — is omnipresent in all language activities. Besides, we only construct meanings (remember Bakhtin's dialogism) and ourselves (psychoanalytic stance, for instance) through a dialogue with the other. The female gender experience can also be considered as a search for a difference from the male self, for instance. A synthesis of the

contemporary decentring of essential identities and a commitment to politics, as in the Homi Bhabha quote, may provide the basis for a social theory that overcomes the limitations of the two, giving way to political co-operation and to working and dialoguing across differences.

Secondly and consequently, identities are no collection of inherent qualities possessed by individuals, but rather constructed positions or *interpellations*, as Althusser would say. This means that *places* — not locations!¹ — and *people* are intimately linked. One of the most common representations of *place* in my materials, through textual representations of various kinds, is homogeneization and, more specifically, the Americanization of Europe and its peoples.

Some other keywords in my work are, firstly, *recycling*, because I have noticed that many contemporary concepts and ideas that often seem new and innovative to us are actually part of a larger historical process; I have thus designated my methodology as genealogical. The circularity of my approach, however, is not merely in terms of cultural circuit but rather in terms of cultural recycling and historicity. Concepts such as cultural ambivalence, criticality, and the issue of relevance (or what Foucault calls matters of power) are part of my argumentation. Homi Bhabha, for instance, has expressed this in the following excerpt:

The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the name of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation. And it is the very authority of culture as a knowledge of referential truth which is at issue in the concept and moment of enunciation. (...) The time of liberation is (...) a time of cultural uncertainty, and most crucially, of signifiatory or representational undecidability. Bhabha, 1994: 34-35

The cultural hegemony of the United States-based *Cosmopolitan* is undeniably a manifestation of the process of cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, Schiller), characterized by the so-called macdonaldization (Ritzer) of contemporary mass culture in general².

I chose my research materials from editions of the *Cosmopolitan* published in Northern and Southern Europe, in the "Protestant" North and in the "Catholic" South": that is, British, Finnish and Swedish magazines compared

¹ Place is not the same as location. The difference is that places have meanings for us and thus cannot be equated with their mere geographical location.

² The mother edition of *Cosmopolitan* belongs to the American Hearst Publications Company.

to the Iberian Peninsula Portuguese and Spanish editions. I wanted to see whether there are any culture-specific features between these editions as regards the way these magazines display female identities in different discursive (i.e. cultural) contexts.

Most texts in these magazines are multimodal textual constructions; a combination of a picture and a written text. As expected, *the visual images of female bodies* impose on the written textual mode. *Cosmopolitan's* female bodies are all alike — the only significant difference being hair-colour; in the south, “Cosmo-girls” tend to be blond, in the north they have brown hair — but the thoroughly worked slender (almost anorectic) bodies are clones of each other. Or, as Dana Haraway (1991) designates, it is a *cyborg* body, a half-human, half-machine invention, which embodies and materialises the breaking of traditional distinctions between human and machine, physical and non-physical. It is a metaphor for the social as a process of limiting frontiers, of constructing identities out of available material-semiotic resources, including fundamental biological categories, such as the body and gender, which once were considered the basis for essentialist definitions of identities. The knowledge value, in my view, lies in rethinking contemporary identities as multiple semiotic projects — the *cyborg's* prosthesis, says Haraway, is semiosis, the making of meanings and bodies (1991, *passim*) — which can be constructed, deconstructed and, in the process, related over and over again to itself and to other identities. Haraway's cyborg is a central part of the contemporary post-industrial information society³ — an *ideological apparatus*, to use Althusser's wording, that sees the concept of body simultaneously as a natural and a technological device⁴.

Indeed, the external body (at the cost of the ‘internal’ body) playing the primary role is symptomatic of our cultural age, an era dominated by appearance and representation. In consumer culture, it is a moral failure to display an improperly styled body; it reveals laziness, an attitude of moral *laissez-faire*. Body as a commodity, as an object of representation stands for a set of disciplinary practices, ways of doing the body⁵. And, in the case of these magazines, *doing the body* is to become a “Cosmo-girl”. Thus, identity is also,

³ I think Haraway's position at this point is comparable to Frederic Jameson's (1984, *passim*) view, according to which postmodernism is the cultural facet of a new or purer stage of capitalism rather than its overcoming — and that the primacy of information over production (the post-industrial stage) was predictable in Marxism.

⁴ I find the term *aerobics* and the practice of bodybuilding clear illustrations of the machine metaphor Haraway writes about.

⁵ There is plenty of literature on *body* in cultural studies. The most common orientations to the body are *having a body* (i.e., some sort of disjunction between the body and identity, such as having cancer), *being the body* (body is unnoticed because it causes no problems to us), and *doing the body* (our socio-cultural contexts determine certain acquired body techniques, such as gestures, ways of moving, non-slenderness, being pale or tanned, and so on).

in terms of the future aspect, fundamentally about the way one constructs *desire*; desire for "recognition, association and protection" (West, 1995:16). Or, as Antonio Gramsci's *The Prison Notebooks* state:

That "human nature" is the "complex of social relations" is the most satisfactory answer, because it includes the idea of becoming (man "becomes", he changes continuously with the changing social relations) and because it denies "man in general". Gramsci, 1971: 355

In fact, we are once again in the presence of the all-encompassing power, which for Foucault is the foundation of all discourses, of all disciplinary technologies. Listen to Haraway's "Cyborg manifesto":

In communications sciences, the translation of the world into a problem in coding can be illustrated by looking at cybernetic (feedback-controlled) systems theories applied to telephone technology, computer design, weapons deployment or data base construction and maintenance. In each case, solution to the key questions rests on a theory of language and control; the key operation is determining the rates, directions, and probabilities of flow of a quantity called information. The world is subdivided by boundaries differentially permeable to information. Information is just that kind of quantifiable element (unit, basis of unity) which allows universal translation, and so unhindered instrumental power (called effective communication). Haraway, 1991: 164

I read in the above quote that Haraway's most basic claim is that cyborg politics is ultimately a politics of language. And her politics of language stands for the struggle against the notion of perfect communication, against THE one perfect meaning, the so-called universalistic stance which denies difference. According to Haraway, only situated knowledge and partial truths⁶ allow for a network of connections based on solidarity in politics and communication.

When comparing *the written mode* components of the Southern and Northern *Cosmopolitan's* cover and contents pages, the most relevant difference is found in the interpersonal and experiential textual metafunctions. In terms of interpersonal features, the romance-language editions favour interrogative and imperative grammatical mood ("Sedução: faça-o comprometer-se", "saiba onde algumas famosas arranjam o cabelo", "espie a mente do seu

⁶ It is to keep in mind that this context-specific epistemological stand does not lead to pure relativism.

parceiro", "tienes tu propio ciclo sexual, lo sabias?", "cuanta agua debemos beber?", etc.), whereas the Northern European editions apply the declarative mood ("Cosmo goes shopping", "Cosmo wants a cool bag", "good sex is about technique, confidence and compatibility", etc.). Also, the Northern editions present a smaller amount of modalizing features. These modal and grammatical mood choices are directly linked to the experiential sphere of language; the agentive participant role of the female entity is more dynamic in the cline of transitivity in the Northern European editions than in the Southern ones. Consequently, the transactional model of verbal processes becomes more salient in the *Cosmopolitans* of the north. Moreover, the more emphatic, hardly negotiable validity of the propositions on the inscribed writer's part contributes to a representation of an active, autonomous female self who makes her own choices.

Could scrutinizing the historical process of the Reformation provide some answers to these differences? I believe so. Martin Luther's main claim against Catholicism was to discard the prevailing gregarious mediated contact with God⁷. The first measure to reach this goal was to make the Bible readable for everyone, thus to promote literacy and national languages⁸. On the other hand, since an individual is in direct contact with God⁹, she also is agentive, and therefore fully responsible (or even guilty¹⁰) for all her actions.

According to the sociologist Max Weber (1992, original 1904), the development of Capitalism was closely linked to inner-worldly Puritan asceticism and self-denial. In his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argued that ascetic Protestantism played a central role in the development of an ethic that led to more production and accumulation as a duty towards God. "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling" (1992: 181), as he writes:

This worldly Protestant asceticism (...) acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries. On the other hand, it had the psychological effect of freeing the acquisition of goods from the traditionalistic ethics. It broke the bonds of the impulse of acquisition in that it not only legalised it, but (in the sense discussed) looked upon it as directly willed by God. Weber, 1992: 170-171

⁷ The Pope's supremacy and the entire hierarchical institution of saints was thus abolished.

⁸ Gutenberg plays an essential role in this Protestant massification of literacy through the invention of print.

⁹ No communicators between God and a human being are needed, such as the institution of Saints.

¹⁰ Catholic cultures are often called shame cultures and the Protestant ones guilt cultures.

But, as the cultural studies theorists have shown us, both production and consumption are only two of the five moments of a single cultural circuit¹¹, and one does not exist without the other, they go hand in hand. Without consumption, there would be no production. Therefore, to the productive self-denying activity we may add the consuming self-gratificatory action. Thus, once again cultural ambivalence is at stake here; inclining towards the concept of *homo faber*, the Puritan ethic simultaneously paved the way for the pleasure-seeking activities of consumption, for *homo ludens*.

I establish a certain parallel between Thorstein Veblen's classic notion of leisure culture (i.e., "the non-productive consumption of time") in *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1992, original 1899) and the *homo ludens* female reader of *Cosmopolitan*.

However, in our contemporary societies, almost everybody is obliged to work for a living, and a leisure class in Veblen's sense has become apparently non-existent¹². Consumption as a manifestation of one's monetary power has come to replace the previously honourable leisure. This shift of emphasis from leisure to consumption, Veblen explains, stems from underlying societal changes; there has been a change from smaller societies of non-strangers to larger communities of strangers, from upper class feudalism to middle- and lower-class (economic) capitalism, and from unproductive consumption of time to unproductive consumption of goods. In other words, the cosy and friendly *Gemeinschaft* has been taken over by the impersonal and often alienating *Gesellschaft*.

Moreover, one should know *how* to consume in a proper manner; the longer one has been attending educational institutions, the greater is one's *cultural capital*, in Bourdieu's terminology. Therefore, wealth and time are part of cultural capital, too. This is how Hugh Mackay sees the matter:

Consumption is the articulation of a sense of identity. Our identity is made up by our consumption of goods — and their consumption and display constitutes our expression of taste. So display — to ourselves and to others — is largely for symbolic significance, indicating our membership of a particular culture. As Bourdieu puts it, taste classifies the classifier. Mackay, 1997: 4

How then to characterise the identities of these contemporary "post-feminists"? Guy Debord, one of the intellectuals of May 1968, in *La Societé*

¹¹ In the Birmingham School theory of cultural articulation, a cultural circuit consists of the moments of representation, regulation, identification, production and consumption.

¹² This, I believe, is a temporary phenomenon because the gulf between the super-rich and the extremely poor is widening all the time.

du Spectacle (1967), musing on the concept of fetishism developed by Karl Marx, displays a commodified world-view that takes us to equate the categories of existing, possessing things and being present in a location with meaning. In sum, "I" is the world. When I own things, I exist and I have a place and significance, I mean. That is what I am.

Whereas the "post-feminist Cosmo-girl's" main concern is a search for signs¹³, the "anti-Cosmo-girl" looks for authenticity. She rejects the values represented by the "Cosmo-girl". She is an eco-woman, a green woman, culturally alternative. Her romantic reaction to commodification, however, is also sustained by high economic and cultural capital. Thus her capital in irony¹⁴ could be described as low.

Both the "anti-Cosmo-girl" and the "Cosmo-girl", then, share a fundamental feature, that of possessing the material and cultural resources needed for reacting, either positively or through rejection, to the "Cosmo-girl". Consequently, both the postmodern and the environmental woman aspire to belong to the category of elites, in opposition to national varieties of the Portuguese *Maria*, for instance, which is targeted at social groups that have access to fewer resources of various capitals.

Works cited:

- BHABHA, Homi, *The location of culture*, London, Blackwell, 1994.
- EAGLETON, Terry, *The idea of culture. Blackwell manifestos*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000.
- DEBORD, Guy, *La Société du Spectacle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967.
- GRAMSCI, Antonio, *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.
- HALL, S., *Identiteetti*, translated and organised by Mikko Lehtonen and Juha Herkman, Tampere, Vastapaino, 1999.
- HALL, Stuart (ed.), *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, Culture, media and identities series, London, Sage and the Open University, 1997.

¹³ According to Volosinov's (1973, *passim*) perspective, the ideological sphere coincides with the sphere of signs, all signs are ideological, they possess semiotic value.

¹⁴ Remember Terry Eagleton's (2000: 98) distinction between humans and animals, between culture and nature. Humans are more dangerous than tigers, for instance, because "our symbolic powers of abstraction allow us to override sensuous inhibitions on intra-specific killing." Strangling another human being with one's bare hands would be uncomfortable but unlikely to be lethal, while language is a destructive weapon at long range. Thus, there is an immense abyss between ironic and other animals. Creatures whose symbolic life is rich enough to allow them to be ironic are in perpetual danger."

- HARAWAY, Dana, *Simians, cyborgs, and women. The reinvention of nature*, London, Free Association Books, 1991.
- JAMESON, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*, London, Duke University Press, 1991.
- MACKAY, Hugh (ed.), *Consumption and everyday life. Culture, media and identities series*, London, Sage and the Open University, 1997.
- VEBLEN, Thorstein 1899, *The theory of the leisure class*, London, Transaction Publishers, 1992.
- VOLOSINOV, V. N., *Marxism and the philosophy of language*, translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunuk, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1973.
- WEBER, Max 1904, *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons, London, Routledge, 1992.
- WEST, Cornel, "A matter of life and death" in John Rajchman (ed.), *The identity in question*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 15-32.