

FEMALEGAZE MEETS UNDRRESSMAN Magnus Mörck and Magdalena Petersson

Introduction

While *Dressmann* is a large Norwegian-owned men's wears chain store, highly visible in Swedish malls, *Undressmann* only exists in the imagination of the creators of the *Hunks of Hisingen Island*— a calendar of male pin-ups published in Sweden for 2006. Three women recruited the men, took the photographs, designed the calendar discussed in our paper, they arranged its printing and distribution, including a catwalk event, where the men were put on live display. *Hunks of Hisingen* is an example of women designing a commodity and marketing the product, which is the spectacle of young attractive men posing for a female gaze. The study of this calendar is part of a larger project dealing with consumer products that could have a potential for challenging conventional understandings of gender, thus offering both progressive politics and a marketable product. Cars, DIY-tools, furniture and ads are included in the study. We use an ethnographic approach that combines interviews and visual studies.

As part of a project on gender troubling consumer goods in the sense of Judith Butler's famous idea of "gender trouble" (1989, 1993), disturbing taken for granted notions of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality, we selected this calendar for study. "Calendar girl" is the stereotype of a passive glamorous woman for consumption within a heterosexual gender order. It is one of many symbols of a gender order that is challenged in the name of gender equality. No longer monolithically male, the gaze has been transformed, reversed or extended, that has been differing positions argued in new consumer research (Schroeder and Zwick 2004) that we will elaborate on in this case study. In section 1. we review some of the work on the gaze and gender, how visual culture help constituting individuals in terms of gender and sexuality by assigning proper positions for the desire and display of bodies. We agree with Schroeder and Zweck among others, that the gaze has become extended, more ways of looking has become acceptable. Masculinity is adapting to consumer society and in some ways is becoming less differentiated from femininity. However this move is highly fraught with contradictions. Turning to the early writings of Walters and Dyer some of the safety measures of male nude display are spelled out, examples of this are attributes denying passivity or humour deflecting sexuality. Finally we turn to Smith and Greer who tries to take our topic seriously, that women are denied appearing as subjects in visual sexual discourse. Section 2. offers a descriptive iconography of our objects of study, a male pin-up calendar. In section 3 a group interview with the designers/photographers allows for a better understanding of the intentions of the creators. Their discourse is a mix of pride taken in the achievement of manufacturing the product and bringing out the men on the pages – and the voicing of some serious doubts about the limits of their venture. Power differences where men dominate tend to seep through. Themselves policing the borders of heterosexuality, the creators avoid posing the men in overt feminine positions. Caring for the market means keeping gender ambivalence under control. Finally in section 4, we draw our conclusions.

1. The gaze and the implications of masculine spectacle

The concept of the gaze is variously defined within different research traditions the root meaning implying a power relation, not just the neutral visual display . Gazing takes place in a setting, both being the outcome of power differences and taking part in creating them (Schroeder 2002). Representations of bodies is a recurring theme in the visual culture of consumer society; in advertising, sports, cinema, tv and pornography often idealized human figures help reproduce norms, sell products or serve as objects of enjoyment. Power differences around gender have been seen as created and reinforced by turning women into objects to a male gaze and in classic psychoanalytic film theory cinema was declared to be a male viewing apparatus (Mulvey 1992/1975). Looking meant being active and masculine, while being looked at was considered passive and feminine. This idea works well to explain the prevalence of attractive female bodies in advertising, entertainment and cinema, but it also tends to mask difference and change. For more than a decade critical writings on bodily representation has become sceptic about this very simple view (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, Edwards 2006). The change was brought about both by a feminism turning to post structuralism, becoming more interested in difference and contradictions – and by changes in visual culture. In film theory lesbian and gay experience provided different forms of spectatorship from the simple binarism of male/female (Sturken and Cartwright 2001:93). Studies of black spectatorship also challenged the idea of a gaze solely tuned to gender, the gaze was also constructed through race and class or the exotic positions of the colonial gaze.

These theoretical changes are obviously dependent on highly visible, but somewhat elusive changes in contemporary commercial cultures and the general cultural discourse. In the 1980s there is often claimed to have occurred a change in the visual field of consumer society, with Calvin Klein's male underwear advertising leading the way (Nixon 1997, Bordo 1999, Jobling 1999). There was a new discourse on self improvement, materialized in gyms and fitness activities, both for men and women (Tasker 1993). A kind of gender equality seemed to appear through the markets and consumer desire. Gay men had also become more visible and using a more masculine style derived from workwear the display of physically attractive masculinity became more of an accepted activity also among the straight men. Consumption became more open to heterosexual men, new life-style magazines showing the way, also attracting researchers in the new field of critical men's studies (Crewe 2003). Nixon (1997) argued for a differentiated understanding, pointing to two tendencies in looking, one possessive, and the other more fluid, identifying and becoming similar to the body pictured. The spectacle of male physical beauty seemed to have contradictory implications, opening up areas for enjoyment in consumption, making homoeroticism less taboo, but not necessarily making men and women more equal in terms of power. Patterson and Elliot (2002) sums up the change, making the most of it, calling it a turn from a body for use to a body for display, making acceptable the previously taboo desiring gaze at other men. Arguing more cautiously, Schroeder and Zweck (2004) maintained that rather than being reversed, the gaze had become extended. There seemed to be many more and ambivalent positions to gaze from, but also an affirmation of inequalities in terms of masculinity and femininity, of race and class. Our own contribution is closely linked to this understanding, to point to possible changes, but also to their limits.

Writing in the 70s Barbara Walters (1979) comments on the first male models posing naked in ads, noting that on the whole this worked because it was new, the men used radiated a reassuring masculine image which proved to the spectator that this reversal of the gaze only implied a knowing joke. There has been no lack of pin-ups for women, only they have rarely undressed, Walters wrote, pointing to film stars and the popular music artists from the 50s and on, Elvis and Jagger. Since full male nudity was unacceptable this visual genre would have to depend on fetishes, naming: leather, denim, tattoos, uniforms, motorbikes, all which proclaim masculinity. The first actual frontal nude male pin-up appeared in a feminist paper in 1970, and the idea was picked up by *Cosmopolitan* that ran a centrefold of macho movie actor Burt Reynolds. *Playgirl* was a magazine that printed male-pinups regularly, carefully selecting the props of guns, skis or motorcycles to preserve the masculine aura. To Walter the males marketed to women were a lot less seductive than the homosexual counterparts. They were absorbed in their own activities, not out to serve the spectators. These are thoughts that recur in Richard Dyer's (1982/1992) text on the male pin-up to which we now turn.

Social norms tell us that men look and women are looked at, which means that the objectification of the male is a violation of hegemonic visual codes. Dyer argues that there are techniques that take care of this violation and make the images more acceptable. The man often looks away, his mind visibly preoccupied by more important matters. While the female pin-up may look down to show modesty or smile invitingly, the male counterpart will stare back at the onlooker, trying to deny the subordinate position of being put on display. Dyer argues that the conclusion that being looked at is passive (or that looking is more active) is faulty, since it takes activity to pose and prepare for pictures that are consumed in a moment, without much strain. But that is beside the point because the coding of passive/active in relation to looking tend to be fixed strongly in the reverse direction. If men are to be active, then a docile positioning must be avoided.

The second instability is the relative powerlessness of the posing person which seems to contradict male relative superiority. Passivity is compensated by using props or tense muscles that promise future activity or a readiness to act. In Dyer's argument, even when seemingly relaxed, the male pin-up will show taught muscles to prove readiness for activity. Which leads us to the third and final instability: the revealed penis is inevitably a disappointing attribute of the nude male. To compensate for this lack the male pin-up is searching for an excessive look, typically hardened jaws or clenched fists. Dyer's idea of the three instabilities of the pin-up is still highly persuasive and it will be applied in our iconography (we of course acknowledge that Dyer's "rules" are often overstepped, see Jobling 1999:151).

Within second wave feminism the scepticism about the possibilities of commodified male nudity delivering anything positive to women has been massive. According to Andrews (2003) a frequent response to pornography for women is that tables are turned and 'gender trouble' caused by men being made into the object of the female gaze: "The purchase of porn magazines by women makes a statement. It affirms their sense of themselves as sexual beings; it dislodges and questions any perception of women as sexual objects, replacing this with a script of women as sexually active. This kind of statement does not really need to be made repeatedly and hence, unfortunately for the publishers, establishing a regular readership for these magazines

was not viable. When the first editions came out, they were a 'novelty', groups of middle-aged housewives handed them around to each other laughing and joking about the images, discussing the relative anatomical merits of various males. The texts lent themselves to this kind of consumption, having a somewhat tongue in-cheek style, although as a polysemic text they were open to a number of readings." Another contributor to this line of writing is Clarissa Smith (2002). According to her, commercial entertainment for women involving male nudity, such as the Chippendales, appear to draw on certain aspects of feminism's claim to equality for women; women can also enjoy looking. It is often argued, says Smith, that this is however just capitalism at work and the male body is subject to the same conditions of commodification as the female body – the desire to maximize profits means that anything goes as long as somebody makes money on it. Smith has noted that many commentators of the Chippendales see the profitability as a problem that detracts from their possibilities as revolutionary texts. Male striptease is seen as something that creates a false belief in its progressive potential. Smith thinks that rather than to dismiss these entertainment forms, we should look at why they are popular and how meaning is generated around them. It is not impossible to think that they offer some women a resisting space, and recognizing that would throw doubt on the more traditional theoretical discussions of capitalism's role in the production of 'commodified' sexualized products which stress the repetitiveness, the sameness and the supposed regressive effects on those products. It is within this theoretical context that we move on to the pictures.

2. The iconography of a male pin-up calendar

We now leaf through the first five months of the calendar *Hunk's of Hisingen*, where the three feminist designers wrestle with the iconography of this genre and its particular expectations. All the pictures are well lit, and without shadows or odd croppings. The cover establishes the area, an aging industrial city, quite possibly an allusion on the Sheffield that figures in the Full Monty. Most of the men, in the age of 20-30 are manual workers, one is a student and a few pose as artists – of the masculine expressive kind, not like intellectuals.

January. A bearded young man with rasta-coiffure is lying on his back in a heap of second hand clothes, Martin is a solidarity worker of a large helping venture. He looks straight into the camera and is posing with his arm lifted, disappearing behind his neck. The armpit is not shaved, a strong and unfashionable statement of spontaneous nudity

February. A young industrial worker is posing with two babies in his arms, beard and long hair give him the look of a religious figure. With a bare chest the round heads of the babies seems to indicate breastfeeding. Erik is a nurturing male, but not meek: behind his foot a can of beer is visible

March. Ludvig is a student, visibly attributed by a lap top and a compendium of photocopies on his knees. He is actually wearing a dress and strikes a feminine pose, legs folded to the side under his body. We are invited to meet his gaze from above, which makes him look submissive and gentle, looking up above the somewhat scholarly glasses.

April. With legs far apart and the torso leaning low, Granath supports himself on boxing gloves, naked except for a suspensor, smiling behind black glasses. The picture is shot against the blue sky, criss-crossed by red-painted iron beams, a pointed pattern that comes back in his facial hair and Rasta hairdo. Boxing marks him as aggressive, but the gloves are kept in a passive position.

May. Micke is lying on the stairs of an old wooden house, whittling away with his carpenter's knife on a piece of wood. He is a round guy, with full beard and long curly hair. The torso is naked, like most of the hunks he is wearing jeans and shoes – that show that he belongs outdoors. Right behind him is a heap of litter, a beer can, a packet of cigarettes and boxes of snuff, which still seems to belong to this guy who looks clean and fresh.

The hunks are individualized and made to look like different personalities. They are more than posing bodies for consumption, all have different qualities and capabilities that are clearly communicated: nursing babies, playing music, boxing or painting. All have carefully selected artefacts to provide clues to their roles or personalities. The working class/bohemian profile of the models makes *The Hunks of Hisingen* a parody of an ongoing marketing campaign by the Swedish fashion house *M Q* that regularly decorates the public space with attractive looking models with clothes for young people in the middle price range, the models often having typical middle class professions. It has already been pointed out that the *Hunks of Hisingen* calendar is no mere reversal of the traditional girl calendar concept: the men are really admired and cherished for being unique individuals, have all kinds of competencies. Still they are being made fun of in a gentle way. Feminine attributes are used sometimes, for instance in gestures like the classic upraised arm and naked armpit of the pin up. There are postural quotes from rock-n-roll photography, nudity is shown, but in most cases with masculinity underlined, for instance tense muscles bring out the message. A guy by the sink, washing dishes holds a brush close to his sex, covered by a feminine apron. Still managing to look masculine and in control, the brush represents a humour that does not denigrate its victims. They are gently made fun of, but not shown anonymized or objectified in any exploiting way. The point here is that women are allowed to enjoy men visually, but strictly on terms where the men determine the conditions of display.

All the male figures are pictured frontally; no one is showing the back or his bottom, which must be significant in more ways than one. They are not fleeing or turning away but, but open to communication. In contrast to female pin-ups there is no anonymization of the faces by fore shortenings, no faces are distorted by the head leaning backwards, a common pose for female pin-ups which reduces individuality. Heads bent backwards also suggest openness to sexuality: mouth and nostrils, the openings of the faces show better. These are bodies on display, but they are also closed off, not available for penetration. Perhaps this is something that signals that the men are for heterosexual women, not for gays

3. Delivering eye-candy to the consumers

If one of the starting points was to show alternative ways of being successful, the other was to investigate whether it would be possible to photograph men in a nice or sexy way. Would it make a difference that the photographer is a woman? One important aim was to offer women a way of creating female spaces by pinning nude

men up on the wall at work, the way nude calendars with women are associated with certain men's work places. Women in women's work places also should have, as they say, some 'eye candy' during their coffee breaks. This aim, however, turned out to be more complicated than the designers had. Costumers were complainng about the looks of many of the models, they weren't good looking enough, didn't embody the hunky expectations, and above all, weren't 'male enough'. Most likely, a more straight forward calendar, without an inherent critique of male, middle-class ideals in mainstream advertising, would have been more successful. People interested in equality matters are the ones who bought the calendar, says one of the designers, the other two however want to emphasise the 'eye candy' perspective more. Women aren't socially allowed to say straight out that they 'want something nice to look at'; calling it subversion and humour is more accepted, they thought.

Nudity and skin in advertising has often been perceived of as problematic by feminists. The most common approach, and the solution practised by legislation against gender stereotypical advertising, is that nakedness is a problem, when it is overtly sexist or topically uncalled for, and such nakedness shouldn't be allowed. In this case, the approach is contrary to show more male nakedness to balance up, as a way of acknowledging female visual desire. Women are otherwise not called into being as desiring, sexual subjects in the language of advertising, according to such an explanation. The discourse of images, such as Dressmann's, denies women the possibility to enter into subject positions from which they can enjoy the pictures (Hall 1997). From such a perspective, the calendar project makes feminist sense; it is about reinstating women as sexual subjects. But at the same time, as we will discuss, it risks reinstating a heteronormative gaze, it takes heterosexual desire for granted, and risks stereotyping gender identities further (even though Mr. March is wearing a dress).

One comic aspect of the calendar is that it represents popular ads that everyone recognises, though in an incorrect way. It makes fun of the very essence of the *MQ* and *Dressmann* ads, men's clothing as a means for homosociality and smart clothes for successful, beautiful people. It was important to the designers to reverse the *MQ* and *Dressmann* ads in the right way. To show their own models in a disrespectful manner, would have confirmed the success story of the *MQ* doctors and celebrities. Humour is important, they say, it has to be fun to look at, and challenging at the same time. It's very important that the models are happy with what they do, that they are part of the discussion. 'We don't decide for them what to do, we discuss and agree on something they feel represents them and that they like'. The three designers don't completely agree with each other. One of them wants to emphasise the 'eye candy' perspective more. She says that it is important that it's not just fun, they should also be good looking. 'You are supposed to look at them, it's eye candy. It should appeal to women; women want to look at attractive men'. This is important to her, displaying men as body is the political/critical essence of the calendar.

The designers didn't like that some of the models wanted to improve their bodies before they photographed them. They encouraged them not to go weight lifting, because they wanted to show them the way they are, like an unspoiled natural masculinity. Men have a more relaxed relationship to nudity, they believe. Male nudity is not necessarily sexual, it can be understood in a naturalist tradition, uncomplicated and uncultured. Female nudity, on the other hand, is too infected by culture's eroticising representations that it carries with it too many problematic

perceptions to be portrayed in an uncompromising manner. The Calendar Girls, we add here, built on those women being middle aged, a category not usually allowed occupying visual space in erotic calendars, and to show young women would be more difficult while maintaining a critical ambition (see Andrews 2003).

Many young men have asked the designers to try and have a 'chubby' model, men who themselves have been above average weight, and the model that came closest to fulfilling this was very popular. The image hence reflects the wish to portray men 'the way they really are', with an appreciative, loving, heteronormative gaze, building on representations of men as natural, honest, yet comforting, and of course of large men, as teddy bears. A compromise concerns manipulation of pictures. This is associated with mainstream advertising and believed to create false worlds. In two of the pictures they did however manipulate a bit, they erased some chest hair and 'bits sticking out in the wrong places'. This was motivated as respectful and moralistic and as part of displaying the models in a more dignified way. Even a straight forward technical thing, like visual manipulation, commonly associated with mainstream anorectic models, and non-progressive values, could hence not be reduced into an absolute division of good or bad.

The different images awaken different values. Older men like the dad image, says one of the designers. To them it represents something important in their lives. They identify with the image of the dad, they who took a greater part in their children's lives compared to what their own fathers did. The design team also have experienced, they say, that women prefer men with a firm male identity, and the images with a slightly more androgynous content, have not been very popular. For the designers, this has its explanation in gender structures and is problematic from a commercial perspective, to be able to sell one has to balance between critical, and... not too critical.

The designers believe that giving men compliments about their looks also is a way of making gender trouble. Men have a need to be appreciated for their bodies, a need that doesn't get satisfied because of conventional gendering, where men are mind, and women body. It's a way of acknowledging men as bodies, and the female gaze, as sexual. One of the designers exemplifies this by saying 'when I said to Micke, oh God, your hair is beautiful, you're,... you're Goldilocks, he just said, 'okay', and after a while he said, 'no one ever said that to me before'. 'But he really does, Micke Carpenter, he looks like an angel'. Golden locks and an angel face are normally feminised, but here it isn't at all used to question his masculinity, on the contrary. She also likes the image of him, where there is a space where one could come and cuddle up beside him, he is so cute. The designers have detailed conversations about body parts of the models, like when they erased hair on one's chest. This can be made sense out of in terms of a nurturing female role/version, the woman nurse/mother can have access to men's bodies, as carers which then is non-sexual, give intricate advice on bodily performances etc. without erotic connotations. In the designers' talk about the models, such a nurturing gaze can be traced. However sexual this gaze may be, through reference to caring, it becomes socially acceptable.

The calendar questions why female desire in mass culture should be directed to men with glamorous occupations. By bringing forth manual occupational positions the designers resist, but this simultaneously reinstates the idea

of men being identified with their work, a common stereotype in advertising. In mainstream advertising men commonly meet us through their positions, women on the other hand are portrayed as their bodies. Even though many women are film/popstars, mothers or even dentists, and men's bodies have been shown in more erotic compositions in the past twenty years, it is still not too simplistic to claim that in general women's bodies are sexual/good looking and men are professionals. The idea that a man's identity is his occupation is a firm one. The calendar both uses and breaks with this and the team calls it a good concept.

4. Conclusions

Our case study brought forth many ambivalences in this gender troubling commodity. Discussions of gender and commercial products can't be reduced to simple dualisms as good/bad, progressive/conventional, commercial/non-commercial, product/art, or stabilising/destabilising (Smith 2002). The designers themselves express how they started out from the straight forward questions about gender representations that are common in second wave feminism, of who stands behind the camera and whose gaze is reproduced in the image. What happens when someone else, someone who isn't tied up by the same gender conventions, like a woman looking voyeuristically through the lense, replaces the man photographer? It's a way of trying to break with gender conventions when it comes to who is looking at whom, and who receives visual pleasure and desire from gazing upon other's bodies. The designers also experienced that the field was far more complicated than they first had imagined and that other questions were raised, such as how far you can take the reversal, whether it reproduces a heteronormative gaze, and how reversal works when it comes to objectification. They had a clear intent to politicise vision.

Compared to the typical 80s male pin-up described by Richard Dyer the *Hunks of Hisingen* proved to be both similar and different in some significant ways. As predicted there are many props and artefacts in the images that suggest masculinity in terms of activity, labour and strength. This way the feminisation that is suggested by passivity and the state of being looked is made acceptable. They can still fulfil their role as heterosexual men, attractive opposites of the implied feminine onlooker. Most of the pictures can be described as nice and sexy by combining a warm attitude that is clearly expressed in smiles and eyes that are looking straight out from the picture. Few of them seem to signal that their real interest is some place else. Here is a clear difference in comparison with Dyer. Perhaps it is possible to conclude that the attention and warmth is the product of the cooperative effort of the female designer team. By making men do service to women in terms of display and attention we can detect an effort to define a situation that is both sexy and equal – coding a more equal situation than the images Dyer studied.

In terms of gender the calendar may count as subversive by making men pay attention to women, but it is also a manifestation of – of course – heterosexuality. Since society is dominated by heterosexual discourse and heterosexual institutions the calendar from that point of view is not the least subversive, it is part of the iteration of the given order. This is the same conclusion drawn by Merl Storr (2003) in her study of shopping for pleasure of sexy underwear at Ann Summers homeparties. Finally, the answer to the question if there can be male pin-ups must be yes, but their appearance is under very different codes than the feminine original. In our case there was also a complicating mission staked out by the designers; in men's studies terms, to re-work

hegemony away from affluent middle class models towards bohemia and working class. But it should be noted, they also represent a form of hegemonic masculinity. Discarding cultured middle class masculinity and opting for the natural stance of the worker clearly plays into the hands of affirming masculinity as over all dominant in relation to feminine positions. That working class men are the “natural sex”, defined in opposition to women or the middle class men that are “too cultured”, is after all one of the most viable of stereotypes. Turning the calendar into a show of queer masculinities would have made it less vulnerable on this point, but then, of course, its appeal to heterosexual female consumers would have been even more limited.

The Calendar builds on stereotyping, identification and desire. It is in intertextual communication with representations in fashion magazines, photography and films (Hall 1997). By using stereotypes it brings attention to gender or masculinity as a performance or masquerade. The reversal of stereotypes and displays of new forms of masculinities is a way of questioning taken for granted notions of gender, gazes and desire. It states that if stereotypes can be reversed, then the original version might also just be a parody. That images of eroticised women are nothing but iterated imitations of gender that we accept because of their conventions. Reversal shows the conventions for what they are, it can be a way of queering the gaze. The calendar combines the second wave feminist approach - advertising is reductive, and the male stereotypes are confining - with a more postmodern attempt to use the language of advertising to subvert its power from within.

Clarissa Smith is critical of the fact that discussions of male striptease focus on the impossibility of role-reversal of who looks at whom as well as what she calls the tendency to rank cultural forms like the male stripper against a measure of good/bad, progressive/conservative. She takes issue with accounts that see the eroticized male body as an aberration, a transgression or a commodification of female sexuality. According to Smith, traditional sociology has examined male stripping as a reversal of traditional gender roles and ignored other aspects, like the experience of participating in a show or performance as a member of a female audience. Smith wants to emphasise that the women she spoke with at a ‘Night out with the Chippendales’ all *did* feel sexual desire for the men they had seen on stage. They didn’t go to the show just for a laugh or a night out with the girls. They enjoyed and liked what they saw and thought that the men were ‘hot’. Smith identifies a lack in theory when it comes to explaining the female gaze. Explanations return to psychoanalytic accounts of the male/female gaze and fail to explain how individual women discriminate between different objects of pleasure and desire and the explanations don’t offer any means of understanding how a particular instance of the eroticised male body is offered to female viewers under conditions that enable those women to enjoy looking.

For Smith, the Chippendales show is not just a strip show. Strip is an element within the show but its conventions and modes of performance are not simply the removal of clothing. Its conventions are not entirely borrowed from female striptease and hence not simply a role reversal of subject/object, male/female or looker/looked-at. The Chippendales show, like the catwalk event launched by the designers of the *Hunk* calendar, is a performance made possible by and contributing to developments within other textual form. On one level the Chippendales show sets itself up as a striptease – clothes come off and body is revealed. Yet it never seems to work in that way – if to work in that way is to encourage members of the audience to stare or gaze upon a

sexual object. Reversing the gaze in the *Hunks* then doesn't quite work either, the fact that it is interpreted as an equality project by most people is one evidence of this; another is the shy respect shown for the models posing for the project.

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