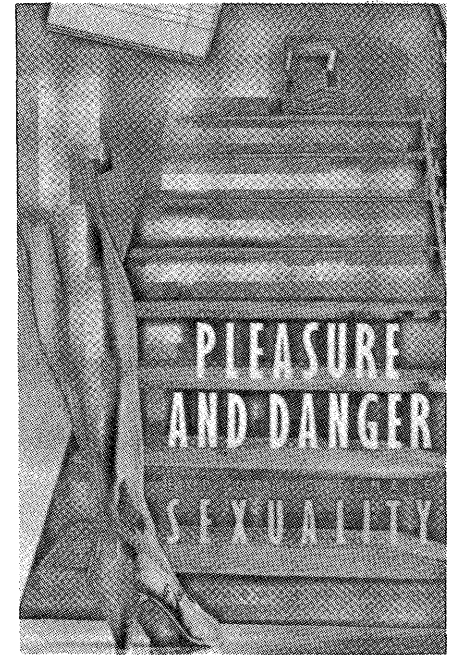
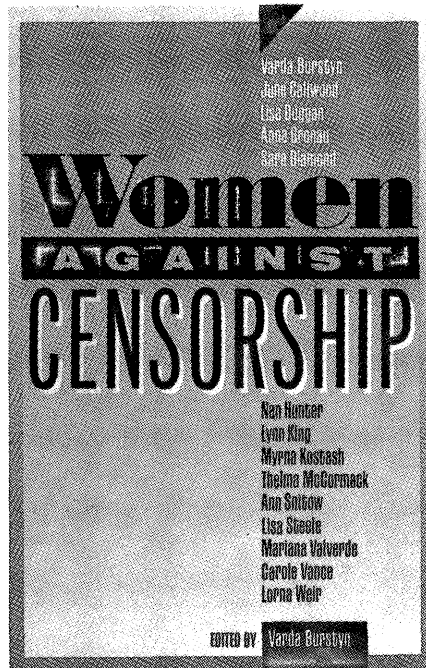
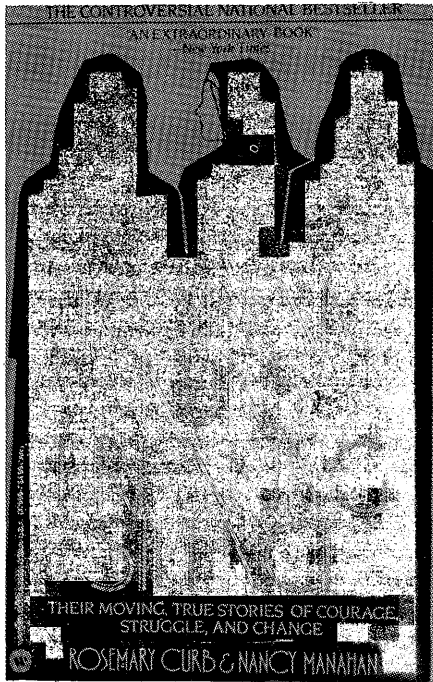


THE COOPTATION OF FEMINISM: THREE MEDIA STRATEGIES



Mariana Valverde

Trois événements controversés se rapportant au féminisme et aux médias de masse ont provoqué des débats dans la communauté féministe concernant un sujet controversé: le degré jusqu'où il nous est possible de nous servir des publications de masse pour transmettre notre message au public. Mariana Valverde analyse ces événements dans leurs contextes respectifs, pour clarifier les questions éthiques et stratégiques impliquées.

The year 1985 saw a series of events that highlighted the problematic relationship between feminism and the mainstream media. In the spring, we had the now notorious decision by lesbian publisher Barbara Grier to let the soft-core mag *Forum* publish excerpts from *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*, a book of first-person accounts by lesbian nuns (unbeknownst to the lesbians themselves).¹ Other 'scandals' include the publication, in a subsequent issue of *Forum*, of an interview with Varda Burstyn, who edited *Women Against Censorship*,² on the topic of the dangers

of censoring pornography, and the less controversial but definitely puzzling publication of a lengthy interview with Carole Vance, editor of the sexual politics anthology *Pleasure and Danger*,³ (also on the topic of porn and censorship) in the fall fashion issue of *Vogue*.

These and other events provoked debates among feminists about the vexed issue of to what extent we can use mainstream (or even porn) publications to get our message across to the public at large. The immediate debates were not free of moralism and dogmatism. For instance, Catherine McKinnon wrote an article in *Broadside* accusing Varda Burstyn of not being a feminist and of having contempt for women, simply because she chose to grant *Forum* an interview.

With the benefit of hindsight, I would like to attempt a more strategic contribution to these community debates. By first analyzing two specific events, the Carole Vance and the Varda Burstyn interviews, I hope to show that these two cases exemplify two different strategies of cooptation used by the media: since the interviews were on the

same topic and were very similar in content, the differences in the final result throw light on how different media approach the same ideas. In the last section I will outline a third case, namely the cooptation strategy used by *Cosmopolitan* in its relation to feminism.

My aim is not so much to ask why certain feminists agree to deal with certain mainstream media, but rather to turn the tables and ask: why — and most importantly, *how* — do these media bother with feminism? This is the question that is not being asked in our internal debates about the ethics of speaking to certain interviewers or having excerpts of our books published elsewhere. We have been dealing with our own tactics and ethics, which are important indeed. But we have to probe the tactics and ethics, and the grand strategy, of the media, not just of our own spokespeople.

Feminism, fashion, and guilt

In early October '85 I bought the "fall fashions" issue of *Vogue*. I had not got very far into the luxurious furs of the

season before I noticed that the issue carried a set of three articles headlined "The Porn Debates." These three articles were obviously presented as the "think-pieces" that counterbalanced the hedonism of the rest of the magazine. The layout of this section was very sober, with lots of gray text, a few heavy black lines, and no colour at all. And the articles only began on page 678 of the issue.

The first article, entitled "Violence Against Women? Is Porn to Blame?," was full of very graphic descriptions of violent porn spiced with statistics and quotes from "experts." A well-written argument in favour of censorship, it relied not so much on women's experiences or feminist theories as on the views of "experts" (Neil Malamuth and Ed Donnerstein, who have made quite a career out of speaking instead of women, and Pauline Bart). Another article, by a woman lawyer, argued that anti-pornography ordinances such as those proposed by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon threaten American civil liberties. The third article was an interview with Carole Vance. As one skipped pages and pages of ads in pursuit of the rest of the articles, it was clear that the editors meant the articles to be two sides of a debate: in each page of "serious" text, Vance would be on the bottom half of the page proclaiming the need for more sexual liberation and less censorship, while the horrors of violent porn and rape were discussed on the top half. Nothing was done to address the reader's probable anxiety about this juxtaposition. And even though two out of the three articles were anti-censorship, Carole Vance's articulate feminist views on the social construction of sexuality were subtly undermined.

Implicit politics aside, the very fact that the top-of-the-line female consumer magazine would find it appropriate to seek out socialist feminist theory of sexual representation for their big issue of the year is certainly interesting. *Vogue* is a major site for the constitution of middle-class females as objects of beauty and subjects of consumption. It plays a particular role in sexual representation and in the creation of class-specific gender roles. It is therefore not an innocent bystander in the larger debate within which "porn and censorship" are situated. However, it does not see itself in that way: it sees itself merely as a major "fashion magazine" that needs to legitimize its consumerism by publishing occasional think-pieces. This is clear if one reads

the letters to the editor selected to be printed in this issue: many congratulate the editors for their wisdom in choosing "meaty" articles in previous issues, which suggests that *Vogue* is trying to distinguish itself from low-brow women's mags by more than the price of the goods advertised in it.

The publication of the Vance interview is at the conjunction of very di-

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ARE SERIOUSLY
UNDERFUNDED.

ferent interests. Vance's purpose is to take the message of the anti-censorship feminist current to the women who are not aware of feminist debates except when they covered by the mainstream media. *Vogue's* purpose is to further its marketing strategy of appealing to the career woman who has never seen a feminist collective but does care about childcare, pornography and abortion rights. And since *Vogue* wants to appear as a neutral journalistic forum, it balances off the pro-sex views of Vance with an article that implicitly challenges and undermines the political priorities of Vance and her allies.

If sexual and cultural freedom is *counterposed* to rather than integrated with a concern for physical and emotional violence against women, the former pales beside the latter. I have concluded this from being put in the position of "leading a discussion" after women's groups have watched the moralistic anti-porn film *Not a Love Story*. The women are manipulated by the conversion-and-confession narrative mode of the film and are bludgeoned by the out-of-context voyeuristic glimpses into the "dark" and "seamy" world of the sex trade. After the film, it is impossible to have a coherent political discussion, because women are caught in an emotional response to the contrast of "healthy" middle-class feminism (the

feminist scenes are shot in daylight in "nice" houses) vs. the "sick" night-time world of the sex worker in the seedy joint. When the healthy feminists in shapeless clothes wring their hands about the horrors of the sex trade, middle-class female audiences completely identify with their point of view. This identification often leads to a moralistic rejection of erotic literature, and a firm commitment to personal and social purity. That is the process that thousands of women, both feminists and traditionalists, have gone through in the last ten years or so. In the face of this, it is very difficult to explain all the logical reasons why censorship will not work. There are psychological as well as political reasons why the voice of the "pro-sex", anti-censorship wing of the women's movement is often not heard or misheard.

Now, returning to *Vogue*: if one looked at the articles mentioned earlier without reference to the political and psychological context just outlined, one could conclude that sexual and cultural freedom — the 'issues' that most *Vogue* readers would probably identify as 'the meaning' of the Vance interview — are on the surface more compatible with the American consumerist ethic than are 'heavy' issues such as violence against women. One might think that discussions of rape, incest, pornography and the plight of women would cause guilt about consuming fall furs when shelters for women are seriously underfunded. Why would the *Vogue* consumer be at all persuaded by the puritanical ethic and the bleak worldview of the anti-porn movement? But, ironically, it is not the case that sexual and cultural liberation are especially popular "serious" issues among expensively dressed women. It is much more common to see career women donate to a women's shelter and advocate censorship of porn than to see them worrying about the persecution of feminist erotica. In order to understand this we must deepen our analysis of the role of "think-pieces" in consumerist magazines.

Readers make a sharp distinction between the articles explicitly labelled "think-pieces" ("meaty" articles, as one reader put it, invoking an unconscious association between eating meat and seriousness/ masculinity) and the rest of the magazine. The bulk of the magazine is treated as interesting, enticing, pleasurable, but definitely frivolous. Women want the think-pieces to be the moral opposite of the fashion tips. And of course *Vogue* helps by relegating the

think-pieces to a few crowded, gray pages at the back.

Women feel *guilty* about consumerism even when caught up in the middle of it; women always apologize for reading fashion magazines. It is this guilt which the "meaty" articles are supposed to assuage. And if the purpose of such articles is to assure the reader that she is not a mere "fashion slave," but is a serious woman of the 80's concerned about the world, the pro-censorship article is the one that fits that purpose best. Violence against women is a "hard" issue; cultural and sexual freedoms are "soft" issues. To "document" the link between pornography and rape, the author has the support of a whole array of "experts;" and perhaps more importantly she can easily manipulate the vast store of guilt that women feel when spending money on their own pleasures. By contrast, all that Vance has is common sense, logic, and a distrust of the state which most middle-class readers have no reason to share. Psychologically, Vance's ideas run up against the wall of feminine guilt and anxiety about sexual pleasure.

The overwhelming hegemony of hedonism in *Vogue* (examine the ads) means that *any* article on a feminist or otherwise "serious" topic will be constituted not as a theory of women's oppression but as 'fashionable ideas' for the fashionable woman. Consuming furs, in this fall season, is not quite enough: we must also consume a few ideas, preferably on "controversial" topics, in order to be truly up-to-date. But there is a further twist. The "meaty" articles are simultaneously constituted as 'fashionable' ideas *and* as anti-consumerist islands of seriousness and "concern" in a sea of aimless selfish desire.

Vogue presents its readers with "ideas" borrowed from feminist debates and plunked down as gray spots of thought between the luscious colour of the ads. Here we have a piece on violence against women, there a piece on censorship... and the connection between these two is as mysterious as the relations governing the movement of commodities. As commoditized "fashionable ideas" *and* as "serious" ideas with which to allay one's guilt about being overly concerned with fashion, the two-faced character of these articles makes them the perfect commodity for women consumers in the age of "career women" and "concerned" liberal feminism. And as we have seen, articles which create moral panics about male sexual objectification are paradoxically

better commodities than articles which openly discuss women's erotic needs and wants.

The forum is the message? Or, the dangers of contextualization

The case of Varda Burstyn's interview in *Forum* is different from the case of *Vogue*. The publishers of *Penthouse* and its offshoot, *Forum*, are very explicitly involved in the censorship of pornography debate. Their decision to interview Burstyn has nothing to do with presenting women with "ideas," and everything to do with trying to get feminist support for their unambiguously libertarian position on the question of censorship. *Penthouse* and *Forum* have both published full-page ads against censorship which construct pro-censorship feminists as un-American and even as communists. These ads have black-and-white photos of Stalin, Fidel Castro and the Ayatollah Khomeini scowling menacingly; the texts suggest that censorship of pornography will lead to the destruction of American "freedom." This is interesting, given that most socialist feminists are *anti-censorship* and most pro-censorship feminists are, if anything, closer to the right wing than to communism.

The publishers' agenda was clearly visible in the interviewer's questions to Varda. The (male) interviewer egged her on to denounce Andrea Dworkin as "having done more harm than good" to

women, which is the sort of conclusion that some feminists have come to but would be unwilling to share with Bob Guccione's hired man, given Guccione's probable use of such a statement. The interviewer also suggested that much of the pro-censorship feeling comes from lesbians who hate to see men having a good time with pornography. Burstyn gave a lengthy critique of heterosexism by way of response (I was surprised they quoted her at such length on this question), but in my view a certain amount of damage was done by the question itself, a damage which was only partly dispelled by her answer. A reader casually glancing through the interview on his/her way to the juicier parts of the magazine could easily nod in agreement with the questioner and leave it at that, without bothering to sort through the details of the answer. In my view, the question was analogous to asking, "is it true that Jews run the world of finance?" There are some questions that ought to be challenged rather than answered.

Finally, *Forum* printed a horrendous cartoon just before the interview, a cartoon depicting a pro-censorship feminist getting in bed with a white male Moral Majority type and then shrieking, "I told you, no erections!" This cartoon sets the context for the Burstyn interview by assimilating her critiques of pro-censorship feminists to *Forum's* misogynist portrayal of 'repressed' feminists who hate porn because they hate sex.

Thus, the actual context of the interview with Varda Burstyn (which includes both the accompanying cartoon and editorial, the porn texts in the rest of the magazine, and the wider political context of Bob Guccione's political agenda) largely determined the "meaning" of the interview. I am not convinced that the possible educational effects of the interview itself compensated for having loaned feminist support to Guccione's agenda.

One conclusion we can draw from the analysis of both interviews — interviews which were remarkably similar in content — is that one should not so much try to draw up a blacklist of magazines that feminists ought never to be seen in, but rather examine carefully the interaction between the magazine's own agenda and that which one is trying to put forward. It is this interaction which gives us the political coordinates of the case in point, and allows us to make a decision based on these specific coordinates. This is further demonstrated by the case of *Cosmopolitan*.

**Cooptation by trivialization:
the case of *Cosmo***

In the October '85 issue of *Cosmo* there was an article by a Toronto feminist psychologist, Paula Caplan, on "the myth of female masochism." The article was educational for the readers and did not suffer too greatly from its theoretical conflict with *Cosmo*, insofar as *Cosmo* does promote a certain kind of self-esteem among its readers. (For instance, *Cosmo* has had many articles against sexual harassment in the workplace).

Even in this case, however, there were problems. The main one was that the author herself was trivialized by being presented as "Paula," not as Dr. Caplan, in an introductory piece in which Helen Gurley Brown shared her privileged view of Paula Caplan's life by gossiping with the reader about Paula's dilemmas as a single mother. In her editorial space, Helen Gurley Brown gushed, "I always want my readers to know about the writers!," as though texts were mere excuses for satisfying the voyeuristic desires of the readership. The presentation of Caplan was in sharp contrast with the presentation of Dr. Appleton, the male psychiatrist who has a regular column in *Cosmo* and uses it to give sexist advice to women who write in to the "Psychiatrist's Couch" (pun intended, no doubt). Dr. Appleton's home life is, needless to say, never subjected to gossip-column treatment — although his own phallogocentric sexual preferences, transparently revealed in his advice to women, would be a perfect topic for female gossip.

The way that Caplan's critique of the male psychiatric establishment was trivialized reminded me of a piece in a *Cosmo* issue a few years ago. Unfortunately I did not keep the article, but I remember it very distinctly. It was a profile of Gloria Steinem. One might think that the purpose of this was to enlighten *Cosmo* girls everywhere and bring them closer at least to liberal feminism. But no. The article was written by a woman who spent a whole day following "Gloria" around to all her appointments, and who diligently wrote down all relevant information. What was considered to be relevant were not the ideas discussed by "Gloria" at the office or during her lunch meeting, but rather the following details: the decor of her apartment; the food she ate or did not eat at lunch; her weight problems; her binges on sweets; her attitude to romantic liaisons with men; the colour of her curtains; the admiring gazes

GLORIA STEINEM
ALLOWED HERSELF TO
BE PHOTOGRAPHED
IN A BLACK BATHING
SUIT FOR THE PURPOSE
OF HAVING HER BODY
SCRUTINIZED BY THE
KNOWING EYES OF
THE COSMO GIRL,
WHO CAN SEE
A WRINKLE OR
A FAT CELL
A MILE AWAY.

bestowed on her by strange men in restaurants; and so on, in no particular order.

It would appear that Steinem has serious eating problems. She worries so much about being "tempted" that she does not keep any food in her house. She usually eats salads and such, but of course occasionally she has to "indulge herself" (*Cosmo* lingo for women eating) and so she "pigs out" (*Cosmo* lingo for women eating sugar and starch). The icing on the cake, so to speak, was that Steinem allowed herself to be photographed in a black bathing suit for the purpose of having her body scrutinized by the knowing eyes of the *Cosmo* girl, who can see a wrinkle or a fat cell a mile away. The photos were small (about 2" by 2") and more reminiscent of Miss Universe contests than of pornography: but there was something pathetic about a famous feminist exhibiting herself in that way.

Now, the Steinem piece was clearly a masterful example of pretending to provide feminist content while in fact undermining feminist thought and practice. What could be more effective than portraying the best-known American feminist as just another *Cosmo* girl, worrying about her weight and about whether the living room should be done in peach or pink? And the irony is that Steinem lent herself to this ghastly enterprise, at least to the extent of letting herself be photographed as a *Cosmo* girl. (She might not have had any control over the text).

So how does *Cosmo* construct feminism? Again we see a dual and contradictory construction. Feminism is first of all an interest or hobby or job which some *Cosmo* girls happen to have. This job or hobby or set of ideas does not really threaten the existence of the anxiety-ridden, men-crazy *Cosmo* girl,

for, *Cosmo* tells us, if you scratch a feminist you will find another girl just like us underneath. "Paula" is described by Helen Gurley Brown as just another harried single mother coping with overwork and children; while Steinem is revealed as a *Cosmo* girl with all the obsessions that characterize that particular identity. And what *Cosmo* girls have in common, it would appear, is not so much a common set of pleasures — sexual adventures, shopping, etc. — as a common set of guilts. Guilt about eating too much (a guilt which, as I have argued in my book *Sex, Power and Pleasure* is, among other things, a displaced sexual guilt); guilt about wanting commodities which one cannot afford; guilt about pursuing sexual adventures which more often than not lead to unhappiness and which are portrayed (and even experienced) as non-ethical or even anti-ethical. But the reader of *Cosmo* can rest assured that she is not alone in her guilt. "Paula" worries about not being home enough, "Gloria" worries about the size of her hunger; and the more we read about them the more we are justified in continuing the repetition/compulsion pattern of consuming and then feeling guilty about it, a pattern which one could describe as "economic bulimia." This is where the second and opposite role of feminism comes in. As constructed in "serious" articles about not letting the boss get away with sexual harassment, feminism is the antithesis of frivolous femininity. This construction of feminism, which is subordinated to the first, is useful to counteract the guilt women have about being *Cosmo* girls. Feeling morally uplifted by having read a gray article at the back dealing with women's rights, the female consumer is temporarily restored to emotional health and is able to plunge into the seductive sea of life-size pictures of nail polish bottles.

It is much more effective, from the point of view of patriarchal capitalism, to use feminism than to ignore it. If it were ignored, it might at some point claim the interest of the *Cosmo* girl, and the girl in question might look to a feminist publication for enlightenment. As it is, the reader will feel that the topic has been covered — and indeed, it has: it has been used to uphold the consumerist system. As both a fashionable commodity and purgative to cure the problems caused by fashionable commodities, feminism is invaluable.

Debates about feminist tactics and ethics are well and good, but these debates need to be informed by analyses

so that they do not take the abstract and judgemental form that so much internal feminist debate has taken.

¹ Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan, eds., *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* (Tallahassee, Florida: Naiad Press, 1985).

² Varda Burstyn, ed., *Women Against Censorship* (Vancouver & Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1985).

³ Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

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AFTER WE FIRST MADE LOVE

Hours of rooted desire
 lush delight
miraculous in the yearning
between arrivals, the urge
to touch. Your mouth breathing
next to mine, the cool
sheen of fresh sweat,
blood racing, I felt
connected in the bone
during recurrent walks
through the still heat of your words.
Above all
a rich affection in
that passion: savage,
lively, and the winds of
volatile hope. In the
penumbra beside me
you talked shop when we
first made love: eight women
before me, and beyond me
a beautiful American redolent
of my hair. You
composed a monograph
of sex when I tried to read
music in your eyes.
I thought of that young blond
firm flesh, the breathless
toss of her desire
and next to you my hands
drifted toward poems, a
sigh, heavy as hate.

Liliane Welch
Sackville, New Brunswick

LANDSCAPE OF HOUSE AT NIGHT

Listen:

sleeping lungs

swell the air

suck it back

like tides in

a bay monotonous

waves within walls

the house expands with

water breathing

lifts toward night upon

a crest of sighs

that sweeps through

my ears till I

want deafness

till I am deaf

and hate the moon

for watching me

drown in their

Breathing

Sylvia Maultash Warsh
Willowdale, Ontario