

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF HIGH FASHION ADVERTISING

by Alan Rhodes and Rodrigo Zuloago 12/5/03

Fashion advertising is an excellent example of identity-image producing media. The nature of the product is tied directly to identity—those objects with which we encase our bodies for public display—and fashion is acknowledged as a cultural language of “style”. In the realm of High Fashion advertising—those products and identity-image advertisements at the top of the socio-economic spectrum: products such as Dolce Gabanna, Gucci, Prada, media such as runway shows, *W* Magazine, *Zoom*, *Allure*—the goal of producing an attractive identity product is pursued with an affluence of money and artistic talents drawn internationally to create the most emotive and entrancing imagery possible within their media outlets. Taken as a whole, High Fashion media and advertising describe a spectrum of identity, unified in general types of signifiers—young women, high status, high sexuality—and through the constant repetition and variation of images on these themes serve to create this identity spectrum. This conglomeration of imagery, created by some of the most highly paid artists, designers, models, and photographers, pursues two inter-related ends: to advertise those products on the basis of a manufactured, image-based identity, and to promote these image identities to the general public. This can be seen clearly in High Fashion, where the products are marketed to a select few because of their cost, but the identity images connected to those products are promoted to a wide audience through magazines and product placement. In this way, High Fashion media provides a service to the consumers of their products by promoting to the public the cultural and socio-economic significance of their clothing: who is stylish, who is not, who is rich and powerful, who is not. This provides predictability and control of the moment of encounter for their “clients” who can afford a service that promotes the appearance of a select few; the product—the clothing, makeup, and accessories—act as both the point of consumption of the advertised identities, and as the point of identification with those identities within the public sphere.

Though High Fashion brands are motivated to compete with each other in advertisement of similar products, they are unified in the goal of promoting the set of values and life-style connected with High Fashion. In this way, analyzing High Fashion advertising as a whole, one can deconstruct an identity spectrum that is being promoted. *W* magazine is a print manifestation of this unified promotional effort. Within the boundaries of its pages, there is a consistency to the imagery and

products that outlines an alter-reality of beautiful young women, expensive things, and art. The abundant advertising and scarce editorial content flow together. To take, as an example, the September issue of *W* magazine, 279 of the 544 pages are direct, logoed advertisement; of the remaining pages, more than half are devoted to “spreads”: a series of fashion photographs featuring products from multiple designers, unified by theme, by photographer, or by model (these themes, designers, photographers, and models basically identical to those in the advertisements). These spreads include in inset the name of the brands featured, and frequently their prices, seeming more like advertisements than the advertising spreads by Prada where you have to search the image to find the logo. This is to say that the images produced for advertisement *are* the content of the magazine, brought together into a physically unified (bound) image universe. *W* magazine’s distribution model seems, by the numbers, to be based in both advertisement and promotion. According to a promotional website, *W* magazine targets “those in high society or... readers interested in those in high society,” meaning the consumers of High Fashion products or their audience [Fusich]. The remaining content of the magazine completes the image universe of High Fashion, focusing on the famous consumers of their products, or those that serve as product placement: “In addition to fashion coverage, a large part of the magazine is devoted to the doings of various celebrities. Departments such as ‘Suzy’ and ‘Eye’ describe the openings, dinners, and weddings that these celebrities are attending. In addition, articles on various actors, directors, and artists add some substance to the magazine” [Fusich]. Physically a disposable art book with hundreds of 10" X 13" color photos, *W* magazine sells at the sub-sub-printing-cost price of \$2.50 (subscription) to about half a million readers [www.Wmagazine.com]. The rest of the production cost is funded through advertising space, sold at \$43,830 (for a single color page) on up, meaning the magazine is mainly funded through the purchasing of a relatively small number of expensive products by a select set of high-income consumers. These high-income consumers of High Fashion products pay for some of the most high-production-value print-media promotion in the world.

ART AND THE BRAND

When scanning the print-media of High Fashion, the qualities that bring it together and set it apart from other media are ones that could be labeled, “artistic”: the range of color, the sense of style and

composition, the “beauty” of the forms. This creates the brand’s identity. There is little difference between the logo of “Gucci” and that of “Gap”—mildly stylized typeface—but the identity of the brand is created by the set of images associated with it: the “style” they have in common, meaning the emotive quality. A discussion of movements in brand identity using still photography in “Pictured”, a bi-monthly presenting “creativity, movements and ideas within commercial photography,” notes, “But logos can’t live in isolation. A marquee, however well crafted, is not enough to get consumers to attach any emotional value to a brand. Still photography, in many cases even more than moving image, is defining the visual language of the strongest brands” [Pictured, p61]. The article goes on to note that “The right image... can actually take over from the other parts of the brand—the much-maligned logo, the carefully crafted copy—becoming the branding itself” [Pictured, p63]. The identity connected with a fashion brand—which, as noted, is the essence of their product—is created through the art-qualities of their imagery. Similar to gallery art, the goal of the images is to create emotion and identification, using similar skills and tools as gallery art. Kellie French at Ogilvy & Mather London comments, “The idea that advertising could only be driven by persuasive language and logic went out decades ago, when people became less inclined to read lengthy copy... The idea that the ‘art’ of an ad could deliver the idea has taken hold” [Pictured, p63]. This ‘art’ is an image creation that shares a select set of goals of gallery art—to agitate the observer creating emotion and identification—while neglecting other motives, such as education and confrontation.

In *W* magazine, there is a consistent attempt to associate the artistic fashion realm with gallery art as part of their pursuit to be seen as what Naomi Klein calls “not just as advertising art but simply as art” [Klein, p43]. The September issue of *W* presents a “portfolio” of Kate Moss with works by Chuck Close, Lucien Freud, and Takeshi Murakami (Fig.1). The first pages of the 30 page spread are given to these artists as if in a gallery walk. Then the works of advertising photographers begin to appear: audacious sexy pictures of the model. Now we can read the name of the clothing and its price, reminding us that we are inside a magazine. What is to be gained by this association with gallery art? In part, it fits the demographic of the elite crowd they market to, but as well, it pursues what Naomi Klein refers to: an image based identity that exists in the minds of the viewers outside of any connection to the advertising economics, on a spiritual plane... not just “advertising art”, but simply “art.”

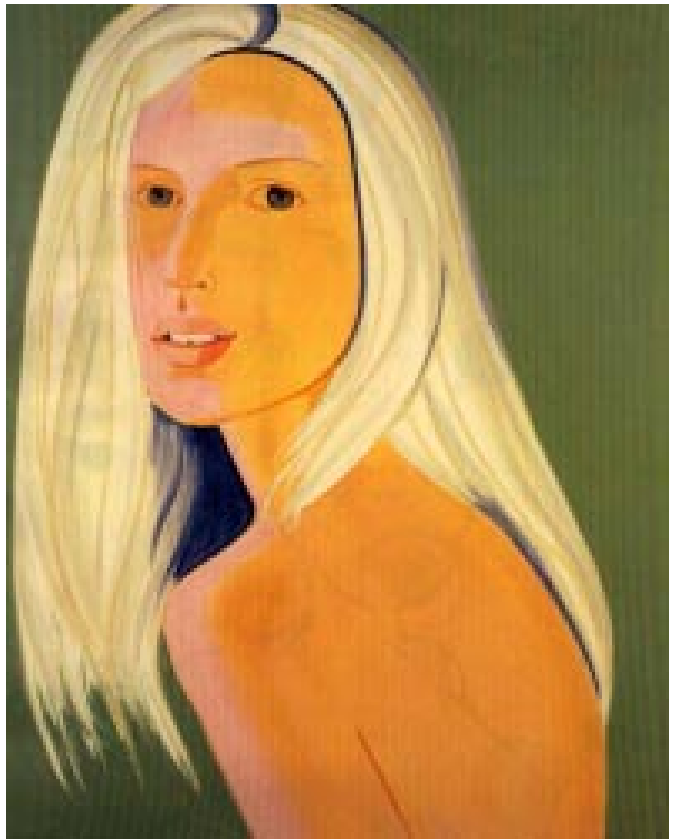


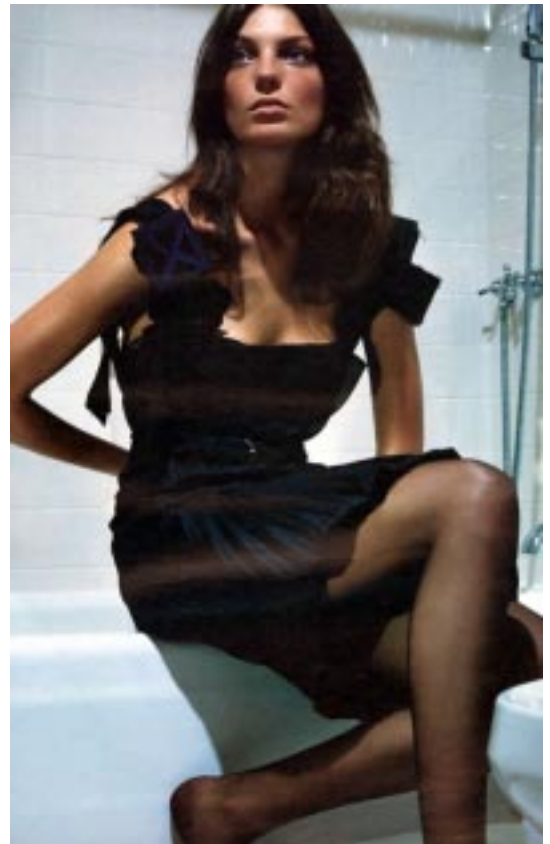
Figure 1 (from W magazine, Sept. 03)

This “art” is used to create an image identity that resonates with the viewer. Considering a set of ads from Gucci and Prada we have an immediate feel for the sort of identity offered (Fig.2). Gucci presents a series of images of impossibly large babies held by stylishly reckless, slightly androgynous/inhuman seeming characters. The identity portrayed is reckless, decadent, an image of an individual free of the cares of motherhood—perhaps free of any human morality cares at all. The Prada images (selected from 1997 and 2003) present a woman in an open-narrative context. There is a tension between what’s within focus and what’s out of focus—what’s within frame and what out of frame. There is the implication of an ongoing situation. The context is ambiguous, but present, and there is a definite emotive quality of vulnerability and isolation... lost. We can imagine these images, and their subtle emotive qualities based in their artistic expression, finding their target psyches. The characters presented are unreal, fictional, story-book characters attempting to resonate emotionally with the viewer. This emotional resonance cannot be described as identification—the identities presented are impossible: the women idealized, the backgrounds obscured—but as an “alter-identification”, an attachment to the image as an Alter-Ego.





Figure 2. Gucci and Prada Ad Campaigns (From W magazine Sept. 2003, and Eye Magazine 1997)



FASHION AND THE ALTER-EGO

The experience of viewing identities within the media—the process of identification with an “Alter-Ego” (Freud’s “Ego-Ideal” or “Ideal-I”) in media—has been compared to Lacan’s Mirror Stage experience in which the child first identifies both the Other and his Identity (his relationship to the Other). It is noted by Christian Metz that in Film—and from this we can infer all image based media—there is another level of abstraction: we are not seeing a reflection of our world, but a totally fictive, removed world of images. “Thus film is like the mirror. But it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point: although, as in the later, everything may come to be projected, there is one thing, and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator’s own body.”[Metz, p410] “But the reflection of the own body has disappeared... Like every other broadly ‘secondary’ activity, the practice of the cinema presupposes that the primitive undifferentiation of the ego and the non-ego has been overcome.”[p411] Metz goes on to explore where the point of identification within cinema lies. He disputes that the cinema could only present an objective image of Other, theorizing that the viewer “certainly has to identify: identification in its primal form has ceased to be a current necessity for him, but—on pain of the film becoming incomprehensible, considerably more incomprehensible than the most incomprehensible films—he continues to depend in the cinema on that permanent play of identification without which there would be no social life”[Metz, p411].

According to Metz, the experience of media exists in a secondary mirror stage, where instead of the viewer creating the concept of Identity and Other within the mirror, he creates a concept that is neither completely Other nor Self—an Other with which one can identify. This implies that the concepts of Self and Other are “contraries” not “contradictories”, as Rimmon-Kenan describes the basic units (or semes) of Greimas’ Semiotic Square. The negation of both these terms, “Self” and “Other”, can be added in order to construct a semiotic square outlining the general spectrum of identity (Fig.3) [Hypertext]. Here, the combination of “Self” and “Other”—that concept in which Self exists in terms of the Other—is termed “Identity”, which would be that concept developed in Lacan’s mirror stage along with that of the Other. The combination of “No-Self” and “No-Other”—that concept within which we neither find ourselves nor the objective Other—is termed “Alter-Ego”; this would be the secondary experience of identification of which Metz writes: a sort of fantasy that is

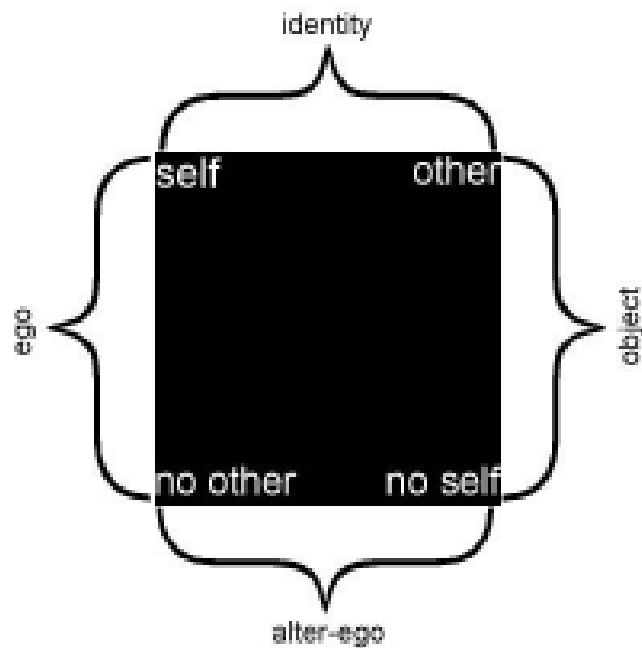


Figure 3, Identity Semiotic Square

also identified with. “In other words, the spectator *identifies with himself*, with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness), as condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, anterior to every *there is*.Very different, because this mirror returns us everything but ourselves, because we are wholly outside it.” [Metz, p413]

Metz notes this experience as essentially *secondary*, only able to occur after the differentiation, or fracturing, of the unified ego and identity in the Mirror Stage. This Mirror Stage fracturing immediately incurs the creation of the Alter-Ego, or Ego-Ideal. What the child does not find in the mirror—in his Identity—but presupposed to be true in his Ego (beauty, strength, status) is immediately cast into a fantasy identity, an Alter-Ego. Thus the Ego—the person’s internal definition of identity, as opposed to social—is made up of both what he perceives as his societal Identity and his fantasized Alter-Ego. Bernadette Wegenstein notes the fracturing of the unified form in the process of Identity creation in the Mirror Stage:

Through the recognition of his or her own *Gestalt*, the child anticipates his or her corporeal unity, which is needed in order to build a proper Ego. This results in the lack of an “original” bodily identity tracing back to *one* origin of a body image, such as the genetic mixture of the parent’s bodies, and hence in the loss of a secure historical representation of the body (such as the presentation of a growing body in a child’s photo-album). The stable concept of identity is replaced by what Lacan calls the “fractal body” (dispersed body), whose identity depends on a process of “inscription”

and semanticization through an outside world. This fractal body, not responsible or even aware of the bodily images that it is producing, gives reason for a profound discussion and repositioning of subjectivity in the twentieth century.”[p6]

This fracturing creates an anxiety based on the difference between Ego, Identity, and Alter-Ego, and the lack that they imply. According to Lacan, this tension between fractured concepts of self is a basis for psychosis.

In the works of Freud and Rank, paranoia had become an important means for understanding the power of the image. Lacan points out that paranoid psychosis goes back to a broken genesis or development in the phase of a pre-imaginary reality, the stage that precedes mirror identification. Due to the possible threat of losing the unified body image and returning to a fragmented bodily experience, the psychological process of formatting an “Ego-Ideal” is accompanied by a feeling of anxiety (*angoisse*). This feeling can come back at any time during a paranoid psychotic experience, and in fact does come back in many different appearances. For instance, anorexia, hysteria, and other (often female) illnesses can be seen as mournings for the loss of a unified body image. [Wegenstein, p8]

These psychotic reactions to the loss of a unified self can be seen as a forced collapsing of the divisions represented in the semiotic square. Through extreme action, the individual tries to reconcile the Alter-Ego and Identity, such that they correspond to the Ego: not finding the model-like thinness in the mirror Identity, which exists in their fashion magazine Alter-Egos, and exists as a desired reality within the Ego, they attempt to force this image into the mirror.

Media, especially High Fashion advertising, has been frequently cited as a potential cause of anorexia in women. Viewing images of fictive morphotypes, the anorexic pushes their real body to match them. This can be considered in terms of Fashion Advertising as Alter-Ego creation. We can theorize a sort of feedback loop between Alter-Ego, Ego, and Identity. Presented with the fetishized repetition of Alter-Ego images in the media, these images become a desired part of the individual’s character, thereby becoming part of the Ego. In the mirror, these characteristics are not found within their Identity, so the only recourse to again experience and satisfy this image is to return to the Alter-Ego content creation machine, where again, a new image is found. In sort of Faustian terms, this is the danger of making fantasy carnate. Able to fixate upon this fantasy world—this Alter-Reality of images—the Alter-Ego grows and diverges making more acute the fragmentation and difference (and lack) of the Identity and that desired.

High Fashion media expands and fetishizes the Alter-Ego by moving along the axis between self and no-self, toying with identification, and presenting as real that which is essentially illusionary. If we consider again the set of ads from Gucci and Prada what could be the goal of these representations except for a type of psycho-emotional alter-identification? The range of identities portrayed are too narrow for direct identification of a large audience. All contain identities of young female sexuality, and all exist at a level of class, leisure, and beatific abstraction available in complete to almost no one. The image of the young, rich, idealized woman acts as a symbol of human attractiveness—not to sell to very young, skinny, unusually tall women, but to create an Alter-World of ideal Alter-Egos. If we consider the nature of the Alter-Ego—that fantasy in which the Self and Other are both negated and combined—the prevalence of sexual identity is logical: sex as the point of entrance of Self to Other and objectification of Self. The prevalence of sexual identity within High Fashion advertising is an area of endless analysis. For our purposes here, it will suffice to just look briefly at a semiotic analysis of the spectrum of identity presented and the possibilities of hysteria in the varying repeated themes.

This semiotic square (Fig.4) outlines a spectrum of young female sexuality. The term “sex”, meaning a quality of sexual experience, is set in opposition to “innocence” against their negations. From this we derive the four identities: “wife” and “virgin”, both socially positive terms, and “slut” and “pervert”—the most cryptic of the four, including a host of sub-identities: sexual deviance, homosexuality, frigidity, and abstinence—both socially negative. Fashion advertising as a whole—including teen magazines, bridal magazines, homemaker magazines, etc—could be said to travel this spectrum and outline its socially acceptable boundaries. Within High Fashion advertising, the identities of “wife” and “virgin” are fairly absent—or only exist as limiting elements of the other two identities. Instead, the images seem to navigate the spectrum between “slut” and “pervert”, but only in the sense of defining the envelope of what is acceptable, meaning what is the farthest stretch of the center of the square, after which the “slut” becomes the true slut, the “pervert” becomes the true pervert, and thereby no longer socially acceptable. Again, because of the feedback loop between the reader searching for Alter-Ego and the image producing machine, the advertisers are in a position of constant expansion of this envelope. In order to shock the reader into alter-identification, they must always one-up themselves from their last presented images. This can be seen in the spreads and advertisements of smaller, less distributed High Fashion magazines, which strive to position

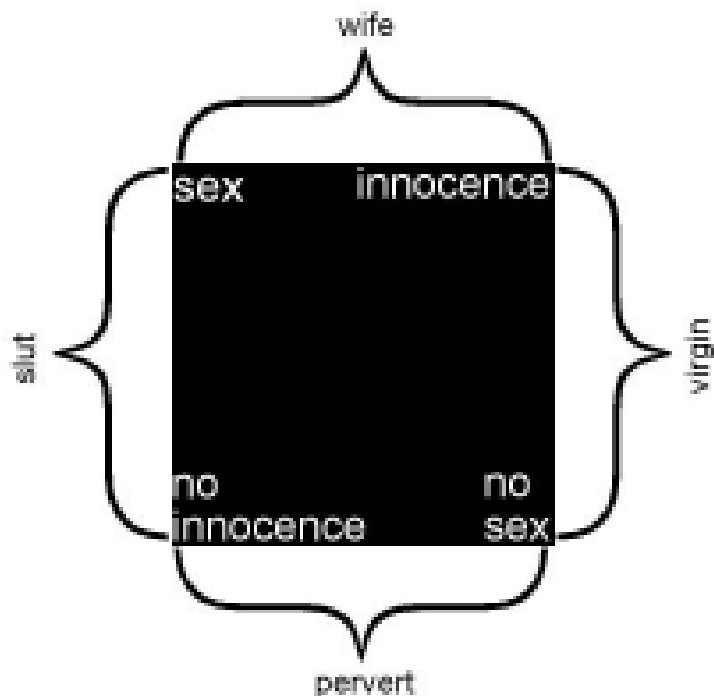


Figure 4. Young Female Sexual Identity

themselves on the very fringe of what is acceptable, in comparison to their larger versions, such as W magazine. Considering a set of spread images from W magazine (Fig.5) and Zinc magazine (Fig.6), we see the sexual identity of “pervert” pushed to its socially acceptable extreme in the form of images of necrophilia, cannibalism, and homosexuality, where W stays within the safer bounds of implied masturbation and “slut” imagery. This constant striving for “shock” within the alter-identification experience causes a sort of hysteria, constantly bombarding the reader with new images of what is acceptable and what is not.

Again, we can see that High Fashion media serves a promotional function for its consumers in the arena of sexual identity. Types or cuts of clothing that would be identified with “slut” or “pervert” are put within the socially acceptable realm when associated with High Fashion—think of the dresses worn at the academy awards, versus those worn outside by the prostitutes on the strip. The emotive shock value presented in artistic imagery is translated to the product. In this way, the High Fashion imagery has a very real effect on culture. As new shocks become accepted and passé, the image-producing machine must invent new areas or push boundaries farther, toying with taboo and hysterical contradictions of identity: the virgin slut, the perverted wife. This is to say that the advertising has both a quantitative and qualitative effect on the social Alter-Ego.

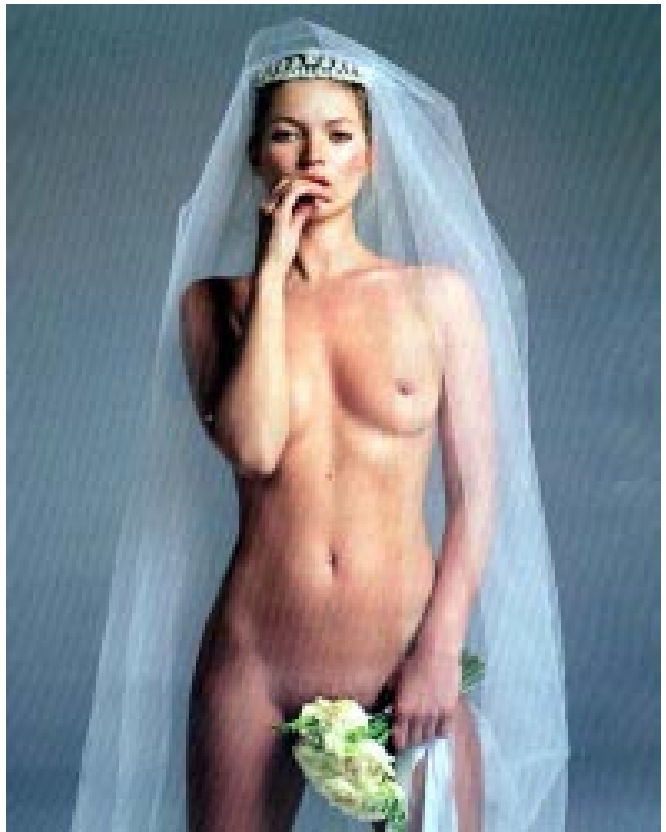


Figure 5, Sexual Identity Images from W and Zinc magazines.

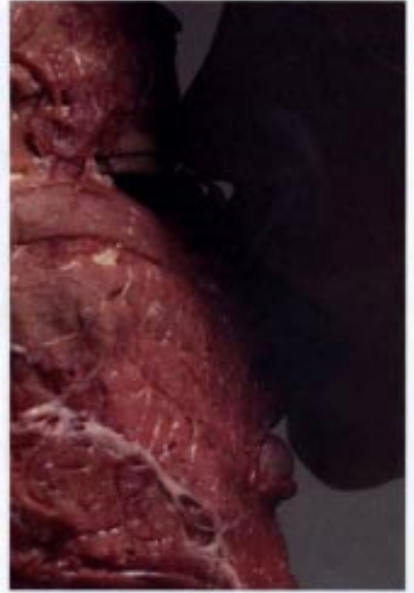
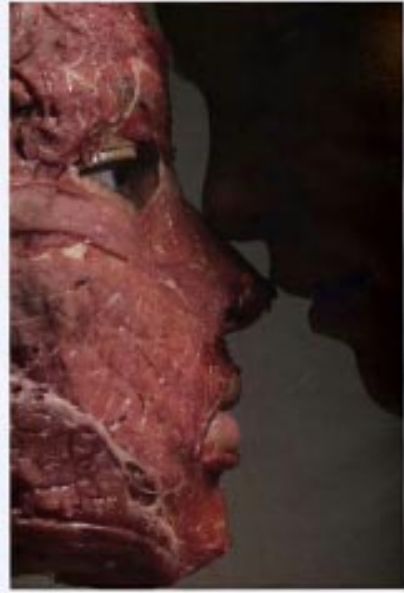


Figure 5, Sexual Identity
Images from W and Zinc
magazines.

It is only the select few that can pay for their share of this vast image creation machine, employing some of the most talented artists in the world. Few of us can afford such a fetishized, specialized promotional organization. At best, we can buy into more mass marketed brands and a more common identity. Most of us are the audience: those that are promoted to for the benefit of those that can afford the \$1,000 dress. Yet the conglomeration of “art” that is the imagery of High Fashion advertising functions within society to describe and homogenize the identity of the Alter-Ego. It functions in this secular manifestation of ideal imagery in much the way the mid-evil cathedral promoted the awe-inspiring imagery of the divine ideal. These massive conglomerates of artistic skill depicting ideal forms are publicized to the masses, but refer directly to only a select few: the clergy in the case of the cathedral, the elite in the case of High Fashion.

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