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*Ageing in a Youth-Oriented Culture*

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## Introduction

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In western countries people are living longer, especially women. The life expectancy is constantly being increased due to developments in medicine and pharmaceutical fields, as well as to a substantial improvement on food diet.

Nowadays, the consumer culture glorifies youth and slimness; the *body beautiful* is the one who exhibits these signs. In doing so, consumer culture<sup>1</sup> tends to a reinforcement of the stigma of ageing, suggesting ways of remaining young and becoming old without visible signs of ageing. Women (and gradually men) are being convinced that it is possible to extend endlessly and artificially the middle years; “active ageing” is the key for going old. Despite the fact that men<sup>2</sup> are in fact increasingly being subjected and seduced to the miraculous effects of cosmetics, plastic surgery, physical exercise and hormones, it is women - I defend - who still are mostly bombed with visual and written messages, with advices from doctors, of how to stay fit, beautiful and young.

A huge and very profitable market was built and established to help women maintaining and restoring their youth and beauty. Women in their forties are invited to think about the benefits of Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). In the past, around one thousand and fifty years ago, women’s life expectancy coincided with menopause. The association between menopause and ageing and menopause and death, can in part explain the social and cultural negativism that has surrounded menopause. Pharmaceutical industry and medical community created a kind of social death scenery in which women-entering menopause, unless they took hormones, would initiate an increasing process of bodily deterioration. Prevention and life quality are the arguments that doctors use to convince women taking hormones.

So, the biomedical discourse defends that HRT will help women preventing heart attacks, bone dissolution (a good solution for osteoporosis), depression and atrophy and vaginal dryness (hormones will help vaginal lubrication). It seems that the

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<sup>1</sup> For the definition of consumer culture I rely on the words of Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright: «A consumer culture is a commodity culture – that is, a culture in which commodities are central to cultural meaning (...) The concept of commodity culture is intricately allied with the idea that we construct our identities, at least in part, through the consumer products that inhabit our lives» (2001: pp. 198).

<sup>2</sup> But not all men I believe. The previous idea applies mainly to well educated, middle and upper class, urban men.

emphasis in the benefits of HRT<sup>3</sup> in helping women to continue sexually active around the menopausal years and after could be a positive sign to contest the old association between menopause and sexual disinterest.

The massive resource to HRT will only be a reality if doctors throw to women the spectre of infirmity; eliminating the idea that menopause is a normal event in a woman's life. Feminist approaches to menopause defend that menopause is a natural process that finishes reproduction, usually accompanied by physical symptoms as hot flashes; but the symptomatology of menopause should always be understood in the wider context of a women's life. Tension or anxiety in a woman's life could help the sprouting of hot flashes. Anne Fausto-Sterling defends that in mapping the causes for bone dissolution and osteoporosis we have to look for the wider context in which women live, and so biology is intrinsically linked to social environment, they reinforce and inter-influence each other:

But the overwhelming focus on menopause as the period of the life cycle in which women enter the danger zone steers us away from examining how earlier sociocultural events shape our bones. Once menopause enters the picture, the idea that hormones are at the heart of the problem overwhelms other modes of thought. Nor is it clear how hormones affect bone development and loss (...) Most thus assume that declining estrogen causes bone loss. Since estrogen codes in most people's minds as a quintessentially female molecule, it becomes extraordinarily difficult to conceptualise osteoporosis as a disease with many contributors stretching over the entire life cycle. Here, gender constructs combined with the profits derived from selling estrogen replacement have contributed mightily to shaping the course of scientific research in this field. Estrogen, though, is only one of a number of hormones linked to bone physiology. (2005: pp. 1504-1505; pp. 1508).

So, the very profitable market is constituted as soon as women accept the biomedical discourse of menopause. This discourse of women's vulnerability due to their hormones should not be surprising since medicine has, throughout its foundation as a science, conceived and defined normal women's life events - such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause - as pathologies (or endocrine deficiencies) or as "critical" states that if not treated or controlled could result in more serious conditions.

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<sup>3</sup> It is becoming incredibly evident that HRT is not the miraculous treatment that was once believed. Its use should not be massively prescribed; not all women will benefit from it (attention must be paid to ethnicity and personal medical history), and recent developments advise caution in prescribing HRT for a long period of time. For more information about the recent findings in HRT go to: <http://www.time.com/time/health/>

We could say that the history of the female body is a history of continued medicalization<sup>4</sup>.

Bodies are always crossed by, and located in, relations of power that are socially and culturally contingent. Body is not a *tabula rasa*. Bodies are not only socially constructed in abstract terms, but also the way people experience their bodies is mediated by culture and the several discourses that in a given time influence societies. We can read culture through visual and material bodies. Material bodies have indeed a highly political significance. They can be subjected to cultural practices that objectify them and inscribe them with a meaning (like FGM), and they can also be a stage for revolt, insurrection and denounce.

I think that HRT should be put and perceived in the wider frame of the consumer culture and its tendency to worship youth. When HRT was first commercialised – first in the USA – one of its alleged benefits was that it helped women maintaining their youth; HRT was the remedy to preserve skin's elasticity, alleviating and preventing the appearance of wrinkles.

In this paper I depart from the idea that older women, usually understood as women after 55 years, are nowadays starting to appear more often in visual culture<sup>5</sup>. I do not deny that in the past older women were not appearing, what I do defend is that in present times their image is being associated with beauty, desire, pleasure, eroticism and sexuality, something that did not happen in previous times. Older women are invading the public sphere and are being prized. In the last Oscar Academy Awards, three actresses in their sixties (Meryl Streep and Helen Mirren) and seventies (Judi Dench) were nominated for the “best actress in a leading role”. Gradually, the earlier negligence is, seems, being surpassed to a more openness about ageing bodies. This is not innocent. Now that the baby-boomers are going older there is an extremely huge market to be explored not only in terms of biomedical products, but also cosmetics and fashion.

It is in this context that I see the recent *Dove* Campaign, totally devoted to older women. Annie Leibovitz shot pictures of gorgeous, I think, and naked old women,

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<sup>4</sup> Medicalization refers to the process, initiated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, through which medicine imposed itself in the social and political field as an institution of social control. Medicalization refers to the process in which the medical competence expanded to integrate in its domain bodily conditions that were not previously considered as a disease. In other words, a condition that was previously defined as normal becomes medicalized through the postulate that it needs medical intervention. We can now see how pregnancy (constant monitoring of pregnancy, etc) and ageing (discourses about HRT, osteoporosis and Alzheimer disease) are being medicalized.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of visual culture will be discussed in the next pages.

exhibiting proudly their wrinkles: “instead of demonizing wrinkles with "antiaging" products, *Dove* celebrates them and calls its new line Pro Age” (Tsiantar, 2007: pp. 39). In fact, *Dove*’s campaigns seem to be devoted to the liberation of women’s bodies to coercive, discriminatory and unrealistically beauty standards; this is the official statement of *Dove* who now stresses that ageing could be a synonym of beauty.

But can we say that western societies are more willing to recognize that older women can be sexually desirable and sexually active? Are western societies more prone to recognize that for older women happiness can be found in sex, fighting the old myth that older people are asexual or that with ageing there is a tendency to become less interested in sex? For women this myth is even sturdier given the historical link between reproduction and sexuality; so, if one ends (with menopause women can no longer have babies) the other should end too. Therefore, in the following pages, and relaying in recent *Dove*’s campaign, as an inspirational empirical raw material, I reflect about bodies, ageing, beauty standards, sexuality, advertisement and the power of images in a consumer and youth-oriented culture.

## **The Female Ageing Body**

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Today women and men have at their disposal a wide range of cultural practices or technologies (diet, exercise, fashion, cosmetics, plastic surgery, etc.) that help them controlling their body. If this is starting to be a reality for men, who are gradually being invoked by the consumer culture to care for their body and appearance, it is undoubtedly more evident for women. If in past women benefited from certain periods of time (pregnancy, old age) where their bodies were not subjected so harshly to comparisons with the images conveyed by the consumer culture, today also pregnant and older women are “invited” to care and control their bodies; they too have become sexually objectified by the male gaze. Ironically, consumer culture recognizes that pregnant and older women can also be desirable and sexually active, but, for that to happen, they should “work for it”. Their bodies are not “naturally” attractive. Therefore, nowadays we witness an omnipresence of the female body, a cultural obsession with the female body; an obsession which is visible throughout a woman life’s span. In all their ages women are culturally called to control their bodies and judge them in function of the images traded in consumer culture.

Old age is starting to become not a question of having a certain age (biological age), but as a question of how you look, what kinds of things your body can still do. Old age is problematic, fearful and distasteful when it is associated with senility and dependency from others. The pervasive consequence of this social and cultural imagery is that going old, being old, starts to become not a natural step in a person's life, but something that only happens to people who do not take proper care of themselves. Thus, in all this discourse there is a strong focus on individuality and guilt, a deep emphasis on issues of morality. To see and to face older people, especially if their bodies exhibit the signs of age, is, for younger people, to see and face their own future (and death). Older people oblige us to confront with our own mortality and life transitoriousness. James Atlas (in Sobchack, 2004: pp. 36) says:

Americans regard old age as a raw deal, not as universal fate. It's a narcissistic injury. That's why we don't want the elderly around: they embarrass us, like cripples or the terminally ill. Banished to the margins, they perpetuate the illusion that our urgent daily lives are permanent, and not just transient things.

Following Susan Sontag (1972) and Simone de Beauvoir (1972), I defend that western societies are "ageing phobic", and if we consider the magnitude of advertisements (to fight wrinkles, cellulite, to promote hormone's consumption, etc.), directed to middle-aged women and older women, the pressure on women as they age is stronger than on men.

Susan Sontag (1972: pp. 29-38) alerted to the double discrimination that older women face in western societies due to the prevailing prejudices on the basis of gender (sexism) and on the basis of age (ageism); with "ageism as the last bastion of sexism" (Melamed in Sobchack, 2004: pp. 41). Susan Sontag expresses that the metaphor for happiness is youth: "the most popular metaphor for happiness is youth (...) Youth is a metaphor for energy, restless mobility, appetite: for the state of 'wanting'" (Sontag, 1972: pp. 31). This author considered that, given the traditional social roles attributed to women that valorized them regarding their reproductive function and beauty, women are the ones who are more afraid of going old. Jean Baudrillard also stresses the magnitude and value that beauty still has for women, a *sine qua non* condition for the success in public sphere:

For women, beauty has become an absolute, religious imperative. Being beautiful is no longer an effect of nature or a supplement to moral qualities. It is the basic, imperative quality



of those who take the same care of their faces and figures as they do of their souls. It is a sign, at the level of the body, that one is a member of the elect. (2005: pp. 279)

Of course, that what is qualified as beauty is also a social construction. Beauty standards vary across time and space. In this sense, femininity is also a social construction that has different historical meanings concerning race and class differences.

Susan Sontag argued that, given the identification between sexual attractiveness and youth and the cultural obsession in maintaining the illusion that it is possible to age retaining a youthful look, for the majority of women ageing will be a humiliating process of social and sexual disqualification. In Sontag's point of view, for women, comparatively to men, ageing is more traumatic, because, for men, their social valorisation and recognition does not derive from their appearance, but, instead, from the power that they achieved in the professional field. This idea that, for women, ageing is more stressful, is present when people currently say that nobody should ask a woman her age. In the same sense, Simone de Beauvoir stated that ageing represents for women a mutilation given the cultural definition of women as an erotic object (Beauvoir, 1972: pp. 388-389).

Susan Sontag makes, however, a distinction in the ageing process regarding women's social class. She argued that women with lower incomes age more quickly, but it is the middle class and high-class women that, comparatively to working class ones, suffer from more anxiety as they face the signs of ageing. For Susan Sontag:

Women who keep their youthful appearance the longest – women who lead unstrenuous, physically sheltered lives, who eat balanced meals, who can afford good medical care, who have few or no children – are those who feel the defeat of age most keenly. Aging is much more a social judgment than a biologically eventuality. (Sontag, 1972: pp. 32).

I think that the above statement is not so straightforward. Beauty was and is for many women, who do not have economic and/or cultural/educational capital, their power and their trump. So, we could say that ageing might possible be more problematic for women from lower classes.

As time goes by and becomes scared in bodies, we see how ageing signs are differently interpreted according to sex. For Susan Sontag, in men, white hair, wrinkles or even a scar are signs of character, emotional strength and maturity, while women:

Even in early adolescence, girls are cautioned to protect their faces against wear and tear (...) lines of aging, any scar, even a small birthmark on a woman's face, are always regarded as unfortunate blemishes. (Sontag, 1972: pp. 35).

We also see how interpretations about the reasons underlying women and men's decision to be submitted to plastic surgery evoke (and reinforce) previous notions of sex/gender difference and the assigned roles between sexes. The emphasis in men's decision is on the ability that a better look will have in their work environment and in the aptitude of career competition, promotion and progress. Success in public sphere ("the men's domain") is the justification invoked, often by cosmetic surgeons, to justify men's plastic surgery (in Balsamo, 1998: pp. 691-692). While for women the social justification for doing it will always be connected with questions of narcissism and vanity.

As I previously said, cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries and its advertisement campaigns promote the idea that it is possible to stretch middle age. At the same time, and related with it, women are constantly besieged with images and messages that carry the idea that love and sex can be important dimensions of their lives if people have a youthful look. Therefore, due to physical exercise, cosmetics, plastic surgery, HRT, women can and should, according to consumer culture, to be sexually active. In this sense, the different stages of life become more fluid because of the effects of the development of bioengineering and cosmetic. Women can with HRT have their menstruation until late in live. Men have at their disposal the famous *Viagra*. In this sense, is society recognizing that older people can and should be active sexual beings? Perhaps, but for a very specific and minority population, the ones that have material means to disguise the burden of years with cosmetics and redefinition surgeries. To an immense majority of older women and men, without resources to accomplish those luxuries - it is well-know that a great majority of older women face the effects of poverty-, and with bodies that distance themselves from that beauty standards, facing sometimes disease, society still renegates, restrains and "pathologizes" their body and sexuality (my conviction). Susan Bordo defends that:

These actresses, whose images surround us on television and in videos and films, are changing cultural expectations of what women 'should' look like at forty-five and fifty. This is touted in the popular culture as a liberating development for older women; in the nineties, it is declared, fifty is still sexy. But in fact Cher, Jane Fonda, and others have not made the aging female body sexually more acceptable. They have established a new norm – achievable only through continual cosmetic surgery – in which the surface of the female body ceases to age physically as the body grows chronologically older. (Bordo, 1993: pp. 26).

What I defend is that these images of older women in visual culture, including those on *Dove*'s campaign, are not images in which the ageing body is valued; what is valued is the body who strives and succeeds in delaying (old) age.

Western societies are only prompt to recognize older women as sexual agents if they have a certain body, fit and youthful. Which means that if in the past old age could be a more relaxed time, nowadays women are impelled to continue the monitoring and controlling of their bodies until they die; remaining throughout their life as prisoners of their body, with their social acceptance and success in the public sphere still linked to their sexual attractiveness capacity. As Ineke van Wingerden says: "For women in our society ageing has become an issue that deserves serious attention (...) The Change [menopause] or ageing no longer ushers in a relatively relaxed and simple phase in life" (1996: pp. 192). The female ageing body is thus considered grotesque, abject and monstrous. The concept of abject being attributed to Julia Kristeva to assign which that disturbs identity and social and symbolic order, which confounds the boundaries between self and other. Kristeva related this psychoanalytic term to the maternal body, but I think it is also an operative term to be identified with the female ageing (and old) body. So, what I defend is that, with natural ageing, the sexual differences between the sexes tend to be more tone down. Women and men enter the phase of life that is less socially valorized. Presumably, paid work will not be a reality, or an axis of identity, for none of them, but especially for men as for the baby-boomers generation (people born in the 50s and 60s) it was much common for men to work, while women took care of the home. So, as they age, as they are kept from work, women and men tend to be more confined to the domestic sphere.

Campaigns like *Dove*<sup>6</sup> help to reinforce the sexual difference between the sexes. So, if ageing brings the loss of recognized markers of femininity (beauty) and masculinity (a job) society has to create and encourage ways in which those markers are (re)inscribed and (re)invested. Hence, we see how the maintenance of the sex/gender system, of the social order, requires the production of a set of (bodily) practices. Cecilia Åsberg and Jennifer Lum also relate how ageing is being culturally associated to a process of "defeminization":

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<sup>6</sup> *Dove*'s campaign will be discussed with more detail in the next chapter.

It has moreover promoted a Western cultural conception of aging women as being particularly vulnerable to depression, irritability, and a general mental and physical decay, as well as to a kind of “defeminization” that should be managed, if not prevented, by the pharmaceutical powers of contemporary science. (4)

In their daily practices and bodily routines (going to the gym, buying beauty products, etc.) people invest and control their bodies. They do it sometimes without recognizing the way that their acts could serve ultimate purposes of social order maintenance. They might not recognize the extreme political implications of that acts. The cultural and social norms are learned through processes of socialization and institutions like Family and School, but they are also learned outside the boundaries of recognizable institutions and agents. Through, most of the time, subtle and diffuse ways advertisement and the visual imagery also contribute to the management of bodies. All of us are implicated in the construction of (our) docile bodies.

I now rely on John Berger in my claim that women are socially compelled to a much harder, invasive and repetitive processes of “bodily docilization” as they internalise the messages from the wider culture, and so they become complicit with a process of (self-)objectification. Advertisement in magazines, outdoors, TV commercials invoke and sell a paraphernalia of products, ways of, places where bodies can become more beautiful and perfect. For John Berger “the social presence” and appraisal of a woman is related to her figure, whether in its materiality, or in the clothes she chooses to wear. And so, this author defends that:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself (...) From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity has a woman (Berger, 1972: pp. 46).

So, my point is: if we keep Foucault’s understanding that one of the consequence of the “docilization of bodies” is the lack of political resistance<sup>7</sup>, and if women are more than men, in the scope of commodity culture, implicated in much more mechanisms of body control and management, is patriarchal society trying, still and once more, to keep women outside the spheres of power using their bodies as a medium and as a justification? When in western societies women are instigated to waste their

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<sup>7</sup> “Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).” (Foucault, 2005: pp. 104)

money and time in beauty products, fashion, plastic surgery, etc. - and they really do it – helping to support the sex/gender system, where can we find in those practices the empowerment and the agency; the capacity to subvert and change the distribution of economic and political power; the capacity to break social expectations of what a woman should be and behave; demystifying social myths, if women seem to fulfill and conform to social expectations? Are women conniving in turning themselves into an object of vision? A sight? This question will by now remain undiscussed. I will come back to it in the last chapter.

I will now focus on my feminist critique of the visual imagery in the recent *Dove's* campaign (*Pro Age*). In this sense, this critique will link feminism and visual culture (term that expresses both the field and the object of study); the aim is to critically think about *Pro Age* visual images through the lens of feminism. Visual culture is a very recent, highly interdisciplinary and transgressive field of study, in the way that aims (in the tradition of cultural studies) to fight the distinctions between “high” art (exhibited in galleries and museums, identified mainly with painting) and “low” art (identified with the popular and the masses), as well as to erode the “separation of models of visual analysis according to disciplines (for example film theory and television studies).” (Jones, 2003: pp. 1). With its emphasis on questions of visibility, “visual culture can be positioned in relation to cultural studies and feminist studies as discursive formations with strong community building tendencies” (Lykke in Äsberg, 5). Feminist and cultural studies<sup>8</sup> could be named the parents of visual culture; however the relation between them is not a hierarchical one, as Roland Barthes says:

In order to do interdisciplinary work, it is not enough to take a ‘subject’ (a theme) and to arrange two or three sciences around it. Interdisciplinary study consists in creating a new object, which belongs to no one. (in Mirzoeff, 1999: pp. 4)

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<sup>8</sup> Also a recent field of study which can be situated in 1950 in Birmingham, England.

## *Dove's Campaign*

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Since its beginning, *Dove* has a strong tradition of trying to liberate, in its campaigns and ads, women (across age and body size) from unrealistic beauty standards, celebrating at the same time women diversity. It is recurrent for *Dove* to show in each campaign (whether in a form of TV commercial or in outdoors) “real” women (not models) from different racial backgrounds. In emphasizing that beauty can be found in women’s bodies independently of their size, color and age, *Dove's* campaigns are different from the campaigns of its direct competitors that exhibit not a discourse of acceptance and celebration but a warlike discourse. In the next pages I will focus my analysis only in the recent *Pro-Age* campaign.

This campaign was thought as a reaction to the invisibility of older women in the media, as Susie Orbach says: “we live in a antiage culture, no question” (Tsiantar, 2007: pp. 40). What is at stake is if those images (of gray, wrinkled women) could be “a liberating development for older women” since the message is: “you can look good but still look your age; Dove is pro-age, not anti-age”. I think that these images are undoubtedly beneficial to, as Kathy O’Brien says, “widen the stereotypical view of beauty” (in Tsiantar, 2007: pp. 40) in the visual imagery of TV, magazines, since they are saturated by images of perfect and homogenous bodies, but I am very suspicious of these subtle moves and strategies in consumer culture.

*Dove* is a brand whose main goal is to sell products. Therefore, there is an element of capitalism that we cannot dismiss. *Pro-Age* campaign is as much astuteness as it is problematic. First of all, *Dove* stresses throughout the campaign that it is different from other brands and respective products. The difference becomes strategy and marketable. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright state:

Companies *differentiate* products from their competition (...) Why is differentiation an important strategy of ads? Precisely because many products actually are quite similar. (2001: pp. 209).

In fact, naming their campaign *Pro-Age* instead of *Age-defying* is a very subtle linguistic turn, but in reality *Dove* is selling the same products, with the same key-ingredient (hydroxy acid) as its competitors.

Another aspect that deserves reflection is the way that *Pro-Age* campaign works (whether in the TV commercial, whether in the photographs in outdoors) with the figures and bodies from women from different racial and ethnic backgrounds giving a sense of womanhood and collective identity. *Dove's* products functioning like the (miraculous) white cream that can be appropriated by all ageing women. At the same time I wonder if the same cream has the same beneficial properties whether it is applied in a white or in a black skin.

My point is that this photographs and the wider campaign might turn invisible the way that the construction of the female body varies along issues of race and ethnicity within and across cultures and across time. Once more, bodies are not “naturally” biological entities, but the result of historical, social and political processes; bodies, whether in their surface, whether in their inside are not presocial or fixed (Birke, 1999: pp. 21). My worry is if *Dove* is not contributing to a false image of “racial harmony” and “equality of power between women” with consequences at the political level. At the same time that celebrates difference, it also erases that difference as it puts all women in the same landing, implying that there are no differences between them, that they have the same power. It can perhaps be useful to stress a parallelism between *Dove* and *Benetton* campaigns, in the way that both use “models”/ “real women” from different ethnicities. About *Benetton* campaigns Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright defend:

Benetton's ads both unmark race and mark it quite consciously (...) This campaign can be said to reduce the concept of racial identity to one simply of skin color as something fashionable, an association that simplifies the complexity of cultural and ethnic identity. In other words, racial difference is an integral part of one's identity and culture, it is not simply a color that one takes on and off. Through its association with the product of Benetton clothing, the idea of racial harmony is reduced to the idea of putting on and taking off different colored clothing. (2001: pp. 222)

Linked to the *Dove's* celebration (and erasure) of women's difference across racial and ethnic lines is the appropriation by *Dove* of a feminist imagery of women's solidarity and language. *Dove* constructs itself as the women's liberator from a stereotypical view of beauty. With this *Pro-Age* campaign *Dove* stresses an attitude of

positivism and proud about the ageing body with the resulting empowerment and strength that that attitude brings to women. With *Dove's* products women do not buy youth, but they do buy joy, proud, energy, praise and, ironically, resistance to “stereotypical beauty standards” (this is what *Dove* defends). They also buy a feeling, not of individuality and uniqueness – so characteristic in ads, but of union and solidarity towards other women. One more time, I invoke the wise words of Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright:

On the one hand, women viewers/consumers might feel good about an ad that speaks to them in the language of feminism and empowerment; on the other hand it raises the question: what does it mean when complicated ideas such as feminism or social awareness become something that can be attached to a product and sold? When a brand name can thus connote feminism, advertisers have succeeded in reducing important political principles to the simple act of selling. (2001: pp. 227)

At this point *Dove* is achieving in consumer culture the label of a feminist brand, *Dove's* products being coded as feminists. But I am not convinced about *Dove's* feminism. In its website *Dove* states that its “mission is to make women feel more beautiful every day by challenging today’s stereotypical view of beauty and inspiring women to take great care of themselves.” I think that this is very explicit, “to take great care of themselves” meaning to buy *Dove's* products, to waste time and money in monitoring the body for others and self eyes. Ultimately, ageing women will experience their bodies as lack or failure. And we are always stuck in the word beauty, even in contexts were it is implicit that the word beauty should be combated and defied!

So far I have been reflecting on the underlying content (the “signified”) of *Dove's Pro-Age* campaign. But there is also a need to reflect on its formal structure, on the formal presentation of the signifier. I wonder if: in the way that exhibits naked women<sup>9</sup>, *Pro-Age* campaign should be put and understood within the tradition of the Nude (patent firstly in oil painting), women represented and produced as fetishes for the male gaze. Thus, one question arises: for who is, after all, the campaign designed? For the women buyers or for men? Where can ageing women, and women in general, find liberation in and through a campaign that uses a so ancient vehicle (representation of naked bodies) for the objectification of women bodies? In the tradition of the Nude the represented woman is aware of being seen by a spectator; since the goal of *Pro Age* campaign is to advertise and sell a product, women who were pictured were well aware

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<sup>9</sup> They do are naked, but we never see their naked bodies totally exposed. Their “sexual zones” (genitalia and breasts) are never uncovered.



of the fact they would be seen by others. We must not forget, however, that a woman photographed these women. But even having this in mind how can this campaign be revolutionary if it uses naked bodies? Consequently, female naked bodies are being perpetually used, represented and objectified in visual culture. *Pro-Age* campaign aims to be revolutionary and liberator because it defends and exhibits naked bodies that usually remain invisible from visual culture. If *Pro-Age* bodies are older than the expected, they are nonetheless beautiful bodies. And here there's an element of repetition, of banality. *Dove's* claim of the liberator power of *Pro-Age* campaign is a capitalist strategy for keeping those bodies exploited. Jean Baudrillard might give us a hint in this discussion, if older women's bodies can be liberated with this kind of campaign:

The body sells products. Beauty sells products. Eroticism sells products. And this is not the least of the reasons which, in the last instance, orientate the entire process of the 'liberation of the body'. It is the same with the body as it is with labour power. It has to be 'liberated, emancipated' to be able to be exploited rationally for productivist ends. (Baudrillard, 2005: pp. 281)

I find really difficult to see in *Pro Age* campaign an element of subversion, not to read it through the lens of system of representation which produce them as fetishistic objects for the male gaze, and also, as ultimate projections of male desires. So, this reading goes along with what John Berger says:

But the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women re depicted in a quite different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him. (Berger, 1972: pp. 64)

Whatever campaign that uses naked female bodies to sell products is always problematic and from my point of view cannot be subversive and liberator when the bodies represented are always aligned with conceptions of stereotypical beauty. There is the danger of continuously identifying women with bodies and beauty and in this sense, with passivity. Susan Bordo exemplifies this argument:

Female bodies have historically been significantly more vulnerable than male bodies to extremes in both forms of cultural manipulation of the body. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact women, besides having bodies, are also associated with the body (...) When we later consider some aspects of the history of medicine and fashion, we will see that the social

manipulation of the female body emerged as an absolutely central strategy in the maintenance of power relations between the sexes over the past hundred years. (Bordo, 1993: pp. 143)

I now open the specter of analysis to defend, once more, that in the scope of visual culture older women are only sexually desirable if they have a certain body; it can be more wrinkled and with more fatness, with no resource to plastic surgery (like Cher), but it is still a cared and spoiled body. What about those women (in fact, the majority of older women) that do not have money to spend in beauty products? What about those women that do not have money for HRT even if they wanted? What about those women that refuse to spend their money in HRT and beauty products? Does society refuse to consider them as sexual and beautiful beings? Why are fatness, cellulite and streaks (the most probable traits in a older woman body) repeatedly away from pictures of older women's bodies? Should they not be considered attractive and sexual? The women that were photographed for recent *Dove's* ad show no signs of them (excepting one that was a more curvaceous).

If in the past images of older women were absent for consumer culture contributing to the myth of older women as asexual, nowadays we are in fact starting to see images of older women. But the women that are being represented are still beautiful and well-treated older women, or whether by plastic surgery, or whether by the use of anti-age (or pro-age, whatever) cosmetic. Through these images, the message is clear: throughout their life women should care and guard their (docile) bodies - old age including.

In the range of visual culture and public sphere it seems that older women or are made invisible, or when they become visible it is because they are looking good for their age. Older women are not "naturally" considered pretty or sexual. To be so considered they have to continue the women's long tradition of "prisoners of their bodies" and with their bodies constantly being self-controlled and medicalized (in issues around THR, prevention of osteoporosis, etc.).

I need at this point to make a separation between the public, cultural and visual discourse(s) that I have been addressing and criticizing which is, from my point of view, *ageist* and *sexist*; and the way women in their middle and older ages can react to this discourse and the images that circulate within and through it in their real life. Vivianne Sobchack pertinently asks: "How does it feel and what does it look like to age and grow old in our youth-oriented and image-conscious culture – particularly if one is a

woman?” (2004: pp. 36). In which ways women embody the “ageist and sexist” speech, in each way they negotiate their lives, their bodies in relation to a youth-oriented culture? I think we could in some way reflect, think and draw parallelisms between the feelings underlying experiences of plastic and cosmetic surgery and the daily-routine of using cosmetics. Maybe it is time to counter-balance speeches around victimization, passiveness and ideology reproduction with speeches around empowerment and agency.

Patriarchy and capitalism can define and reduce women to their bodies making them as sexual objects of desire to the male gaze, but it is necessary to try to perceive how these processes are not passively embodied; in other words, how women’s behaviours, in reproducing patriarchal culture, in reproducing ideals of femininity, can be liberating and result in a form of agency and empowerment, a source of pleasure and happiness. As Susan Bordo suitably says:

Many, if not most, women also are willing (often, enthusiastic) participants in cultural practices that objectify and sexualize us (...) beauty and sexuality can function as a medium of power and control for the otherwise powerless. (Bordo, 1993: pp. 28-29).

So, now I move from the visual public discourse in western societies to *praxis*. This is not an easy task; trying to find elements of subversion and liberation from engaging in practices that are *a priori* identified with the (male) historical construction of femininity.

## Colonization or Liberation?

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Moving from the wider visual imagery social discourse to focus on the experience of women consumers in visualizing images of perfect and beautiful bodies, thinking in the way they relate to those images, make meaning and respond to them is, by the way, the task or tactic of visual culture.

It is undeniable that in the sense that western societies are so saturated with visual images of beautiful bodies, women will have to face and confront themselves probably many times with those images. The question is which meaning do they extract from that visual confrontation.

There is a relatively consensus that in the scope of consumer culture, the emphasis of mass media in images of perfect women contributes to the harmful

relationship of women with their bodies and with themselves. It is widely defended that women judge their (real) bodies through negative comparisons with those images (of ideal bodies), resulting feelings of frustration, inferiority, low self-esteem, etc. This happens because women are socially encouraged to develop their body as an object of perception and gaze to others eyes. In western societies the valorisation of women is still dependent from their sexual attractiveness. Female bodies are defined and judged according to unrealistic beauty standards. The tendency of women's bodies as they age is of gaining weight; this reality is judged around the social valorization of a slender body. Women and men are differently socialized about their bodies and their appearance; they embody different messages concerning beauty ideals. If it is a fact that men are gradually becoming more concerned about their image but this is not a massive reality, and it is strongly marked by social class and education.

The question is that maybe the power of visual images is not so obtrusive. Maybe women do not judge or mistreat their bodies through unrealistic comparisons. Maybe they are conscious that those bodies are not real bodies, but are manipulated by digital and computerized technology. So, although I believe that cultural forms always inform subjective experience; the way people relate and act upon those cultural forms is deeply subjective and open to processes of negotiation. John Berger says that the way people see things is always affected by their previous experiences, by what they know, what they believe and what they desire (in Jones, 2003: pp. 3). Also, Slavoj Žižek

Explains that consumers of popular media are not dupes of the media industry; they know they are participating in systems of ideology that work against their interests, but they participate all the same – and they enjoy this participation. (in Sturken, 2001: pp. 296)

To put things neatly, we need to consider the fact that in the confrontation of women to visual images of “perfect bodies” they may not feel identified, pressured, anxious or frustrated. Different women can interpret images differently. Also because we compare our bodies not only with the visual bodies present in mass media, but with other real bodies, with the people that we encounter in our daily routines. And if women do decide to buy beauty products, like *Dove*'s products, should we think that they are impelled by a feeling of anxiety and sadness about their bodies or they just buy it because they want to nourish their bodies, without “bad” feelings, trying just to get a sense of self-control over the passage of time, but conscious that those beauty products will not operate miracles and also aware (but not concurring along) of the widely

propagated beauty-standards. If women buy beauty products, go to the gym, and decide to go on plastic surgery should we label them victims of sexist standards of beauty in positively responding to cultural norms of beauty and helping the production of the gendered (female) body? Feminism is always debating itself around these issues. Where is the resistance? Can it be found in the refuse to consume or in the act of consumption, in the pleasure achieved through consumption? Also, if women's body has been throughout time and space a highly oppressed and repressed site, maybe women's body could be the site for resistance.

Anne Balsamo (1998) and Kathy Davis (1997) have shown how plastic surgery can be understood not as a form of ideological manipulation and of victimization but instead as a knowledgeable form of self-empowerment, enhancement of self-esteem and control over life; in this sense, women are not victims, but agents. Both authors agree that plastic surgery is always a practice by which women consciously act on their bodies in an attempt to make them meaningful primarily to themselves (Balsamo, 1998: pp. 694; Davis, 1997: pp. 175). In this sense, and obviously recognizing that deciding for plastic surgery and using cosmetics in their daily lives are decisions with different levels of reflection, money waste, uncertainty and risk, I think that we could also try to perceive the consumption of beauty products like *Pro-Age* products as a conscious attempt women do to make their bodies meaningful to them, and not exclusively to the others gaze. As they age, often people make a dissociation between how they feel inside themselves and how they see themselves, between an (younger) inner-feeling and an (older) outer-feeling. Vivian Sobchack, a woman in her sixties, exemplifies this situation:

“I still despair of ever being able to reconcile my overall sense of well-being, self-confidence, achievement, and pleasure in the richness of my present with the problematic and often distressing image I see in my mirror (2004: pp. 38).

It could happen that in the consumption of beauty products ageing women can lessen this dissociation. Let us also think on the enormous pleasure that can be achieved by women when they put cream on their bodies. These can be moments of extreme sexual eroticism. This is something that has never been portrayed in the accounts of cosmetic consumption! Maybe, after all, commodity culture demands on women to buy massively beauty products can be transformed in a feminist individual practice in the sense that might impel women to be more connected to their nudity and sexuality without the physical presence of another person. Women engaging with the erotic by

themselves and to themselves. And let us also think about the possibilities of women using beauty products to feel more confident about themselves in the workplace. In other words, women can engage in practices that can be perceived as gendered dominated to combat gender oppression. These contradictions claim for a more detailed feminist interpretation.

To conclude, along this work it was discussed how social definitions construct what is perceived by beauty and ageing. Through the mass media and visual culture rules for femininity are transmitted; visual images inform women how should they present and manage themselves. In the case of ageing women, and using the most recent *Dove* campaign, I reflected on the ways an ageist and sexist visual discourse is insidiously still present and reinventing itself. Thus, bodies are a symbol and a medium of culture where socio-political hierarchies are inscribed. Through the concept of “docile bodies” becomes visible how social control is operated through diffuse mechanisms not linked to specific institutions but performed by people themselves. In their daily rituals women engage in a process of self-surveillance and normalization of their bodies, in practices of femininity, which can be understood as a medium by which the gender system inscribes itself, with women being the ones who help and perpetrate that (gender) inscription. But it was also shown how instead of seeing in these practices of femininity, that necessarily vary along the axes of race, class and sexual orientation, a discourse of passivity and victimization it is also possible to see a discourse of resistance. And so feminist analyses need not only to address and reflect upon the wider discourse spread in consumer and visual culture but also to perceive how women make meaning of that discourse. As a site of gender oppression, women’s bodies can also be a site for resistance and re-invention away from gender binaries. In any case, our bodies are always a site of struggle.

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