

Susan Sellers

How Long Has This Been Going On?

Harper's Bazaar, Funny Face and the Construction of the Modernist Woman

In this essay, the Hollywood musical *Funny Face* (1956), loosely based on the success of fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar*, serves as a departure for rethinking the incorporation of modern European design in the context of post-war American consumer culture. *Funny Face* offers a prescient glimpse into the ways women understood the fashion magazine and, consequently, modernist form language, as a purveyor of fantasy, cultural capital and a restrictive, mass-mediated femininity. Approaching modern design from this vantage suggests the female body as a primary site of modernist experimentation.

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Suddenly we stopped using the word "bourgeois" ...we were very interested in houses and things: chairs, tables, silverware. We went to the Museum of Modern Art to study furniture and displays of modern architecture, and bought our first possessions — Eames chairs, a blond free-form sculptured Noguchi dining table, and a Herman Miller couch day bed with a plain tweed-covered mattress and bolsters, so modern, so different from the overstuffed tufted davenport at home.¹

Betty Friedan

In 1956, the same year Alexey Brodovitch retired as art director of *Harper's Bazaar*, Hollywood released *Funny Face*, a film musical depicting the intricate machinations of *Quality*, a fictionalized double of *Bazaar*, and its editor, art director, photographer and star model. *Quality* is a magazine, in the words of its strident editor Maggie Prescott, "for the woman who isn't interested in fashion, the fashion magazine for the woman who *thinks*." She imagines a new kind of literary household helpmate, one designed to elevate the woman reader from the drudgery of domestic chores and suburban isolation to the rarified pleasure of high taste and urbane culture.

For the design historian, *Funny Face* sheds an alternate light on a familiar story; the incorporation of Eurocentric modern design in *Harper's Bazaar* and the meaning of that incorporation in the context of a publication produced for women. In addition, *Funny Face* offers a prescient glimpse into the way in which the fashion magazine was understood in the mid-fifties as both a purveyor of fantasy and cultural capital and as a coercive medium, eight years before the release of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. In the opening passage, Friedan implies that in the late '40s the modernization of domestic furnishing seemed to represent a structural reformation of domesticity. In a similar vein, the modernization of the fashion spread suggests a female consumer liberated from the overstuffed constraints of Victorian femininity. In deconstructing fashion images — that is in revealing those seamless images to be constructions —

¹ Friedan, Betty from Ware, Susan. 1989. *Modern Women: A Documentary History*. Chicago: Dorsey Press, 293.

Funny Face seems to overturn those modern utopian ideals, replacing social reform with a more conservative vision of feminine destiny.

The film's thinly veiled caricatures illuminate *Bazaar's* creative troika: editor-in-chief, Mrs. Carmel Snow; photographer, Richard Avedon; and art director, Alexey Brodovitch. *Funny Face* depicts a highly mythicized design process dramatizing the complex negotiations that exist between producers and consumers of the modern fashion magazine focusing on two distinct feminine characters; the hard-boiled, masculinized woman editor and the resistant woman consumer in the form of Audrey Hepburn, "the woman who isn't interested in fashion." In witnessing the transformation of Hepburn at the hands of the *Quality* design team, the film forces us to consider the effects of Brodovitch's visual innovations and the ultimate site of his modernist experimentation, the female body.

All Eyes on Europe

The primary plot of *Funny Face* centers on *Quality* editor-in-chief Maggie Prescott's orchestration of her newest model, Joe Stockton (Audrey Hepburn) and chief photographer, Dick Avery (Fred Astaire as Richard Avedon). Avery discovers Stockton during a chance encounter in her dank workplace, the Embryo Concepts Bookshop in Greenwich Village, center of the Beat universe. An unexpected kiss from the presumptuous photographer draws the androgynous Joe to reveal her embryonic sexual identity in a cloying rendition of Gershwin's "How Long Has This Been Going On?" The scene prefigures Joe's transformation from "a thinker" and "a talker" — sheathed in black turtleneck and slacks, the masculinized uniform of the young beatnik — into Prescott's model of femininity, the *Quality* woman, drifting away in a brilliant white wedding gown in the closing shot.

As a budding intellectual, Joe scorns the fashion magazine as "an unrealistic attitude toward self-impression and economics" yet she is lured to model as the *Quality Woman* with the promise of a trip to Paris and a meeting with her academic

idol, the famed professor Emile Flostre, “father of empathicalism.”² She accepts her compromised role as “a means to an end” although the ultimate result is not what she had anticipated. Though the voyage is invariably madcap, it yields several key revelations: Emile Flostre, the archetypal European aesthete, is a lecherous sham; her unacknowledged femininity has real power; and her own intellectual pretensions mask her intuitive desire for conventional feminine rewards: beauty, love and marriage.

On the most basic level, this neat formula falls in line with Hollywood’s post-war imperatives to restore traditional values of home and hearth. This process turns on the privileging of intuition over rationalism, desire over knowledge. Metaphorically, it suggests the fate of European modernism which accepted the strictures of the nascent mass-media “as a means to an end.” It seemed inevitable that modernist graphic materialism assume its *natural* place in the product world of post-war America. Formal strategies such as surrealist defamiliarization and Bauhaus simplicity, functionalism and constructivist reflexivity — the foundations of graphic materialism — were wedded to industrial capitalism. Modern design found a life-partner in corporate capitalism, the union of commerce and culture.

Coming at the end of the tenure of Carmel Snow and Alexey Brodovitch at *Harper’s Bazaar*, the film’s rejection of European cultural superiority seems to close a curtain on a project thirty years in the making; the domestication of European modernism. Maggie Prescott’s insatiable appetite for novelty apes Carmel Snow’s dedication to the tenets of modernization. Prescott imagines herself a general leading faithful troops of hapless American women through the labyrinths of a necessarily European taste and culture. Snow noted that her readers followed *Bazaar* “...because they are fascinated by the new (in styles, in photography, in art, in writing) because they are eager to train their taste, and because they depend on the editors to present the best in every field.”³ Prescott’s mission — like Snow’s — is to dress the women of the world, to instruct them in the ideology of progress.

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Emile Flostre is an obvious parody of Jean-Paul Sartre while “empathicalism” stands in as depoliticized existentialism.

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Snow, Carmel and Mary Louise Aswell. 1962. *The World of Carmel Snow*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 117.

By the time of her retirement, Carmel Snow was an internationally recognized authority of sorts; a paradigm of the high fashion maven, equally at home in the salons of Paris and New York. *Life* included her image alongside other “Headliners”: Eleanor Roosevelt, Martha Graham, Georgia O’Keefe, Grandma Moses and Claire Booth Luce.⁴ But even as an assistant editor, working her way up the ranks of the fashion industry, she was an early and ardent promoter of the budding aesthetic movements and contradictory avant-garde activities now gathered under the general heading of modernism.

It is important to emphasize many forms of aesthetic modernization were prevalent by the time Carmel Snow adopted the mantle of European modernism in the name of *Harper’s Bazaar* and “the well-dressed woman with the well-dressed mind.” After the Paris *Exhibition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in 1925, the terms “modern,” “modernistic,” and “modernist” were bandied about intermittently in the pages of prescriptive literature and home-furnishing magazines like *House Beautiful* and *House and Garden*.

Modernism often referred to the stylized forms derivative of modern art: i.e., cubism, futurism, etc. Its primary aim was the interpretation of chaotic reality, “lived Nature.”⁵ Startling incongruity was produced through the juxtaposition of heavy, organic forms with wildly angular patterns capturing both angst and laughter. These stylistic attributes were apparent in illustrations by eminent artists like Erté and A.M. Cassandre, window displays by industrial designers Norman Bel Geddes and Raymond Loewy, and the interior decoration of large department stores.⁶

It was suggested by some editors, the modernist impulse was motivated by a surfeit of tradition, an unlikely ailment in the United States, a country with such a short history. The logic followed that a young nation was bound to be conservative, protecting and nurturing what little tradition it possessed. In 1933 *House and Garden* editor, Richardson Wright, noted the foreign nature of the modern movement:

4
Life Magazine (December 1956).

5
Wright, Richardson. “The Modernist Taste.” *House & Garden* (October 1925), 77-79.

6
For a fascinating account of John Wanamaker and the development and uses of modern aesthetics in early department stores see William Leach’s *Land of Desire* as well as Neil Harris’ “Designs on Demand: Art and the Modern Corporation” in *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America*. 1992. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

*For over a decade the modern taste had been creeping into all lines of designing in America. It did not spring up here. It was imported from abroad. It has come from the faubourgs of Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin, Stockholm, and Milan, and gradually like a slow moving mist it has coated the taste of the people.*⁷

Another writer, explicating “The ‘New Simplicity’ in Modern Typography,” warned of the alien nature of modern style: “One of our greatest dangers is in copying too literally European typography,” and went on to promote an American version of the new typography befitting American taste.⁸

The widely variable meanings and styles gathered under the rubric of modernism had, by the thirties, been streamlined to refer to the work of the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier and the International Style. Avant-garde strategies like defamiliarization were replaced by functionalism as the official expression of modernism in American intellectual circles, in part, through the efforts of cultural institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and through the writings of critics such as Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock.⁹

As assistant to the editor at American *Vogue*, Carmel Snow was introduced to the modern aesthetic in graphic design by Russian-born art-director, Mehemed Fehmy Agha and photographer, Edward Steichen. Agha, who emigrated from Berlin in 1928 with an invitation from Condé Nast, “was trained in the new European style of layouts, which was a complete departure from the static, stilted look of all American magazines at the time...” Snow recalled that “Dr. Agha wanted bigger photographs (vigorously supported by me and Steichen), more white space, and modern typography.”¹⁰

In a 1930 issue of *Advertising Arts*, Agha recognized the fracture between the modern qualities in form and content when he queried: “What makes the Magazine Modern?” Agha was disheartened with the American attachment to a nationalist style embodied in Americana, typified by elaborate surfaces of figurative ornamentation drawn from an eclectic array of historical movements: “The change in women’s fashion, in a direction precisely opposite to that which every self-respecting

7
Wright, Richardson. “Will our ancestors shudder at modernist architecture?” *House & Garden* (October 1933), 30.

8
Ecke, Alice Beeson. “The ‘New Simplicity’ in Modern Typography.” *Advertising Arts* and other trade journals instrumental in the promotion of modernism in America see Lorraine Wild. 1989. “Europeans in America.” *Graphic Design in America: A Visual Language History*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 152-169.

9
Davies, Karen. 1983. *At Home in Manhattan*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Art Gallery, 12. For an account of the early institutional promotion of modern design particularly in the decorative arts such as furniture design see “Promoting Modern Design,” 83-101.

10
Grundberg, Andy. 1989. *Bradovitch*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 67.

modernist would advise, is a terrible blow to the faith which was built on the creed of simple clothes — simple interiors — simple art — simple typography — etc.” This disjuncture was apparent in the contradiction of developing a universal grammar of “eternal artistic units out of elementary and ‘timely materials.’”¹¹

Well-known for her competitive spirit — and presumably ready to top *Vogue* at its own game — Carmel Snow sought a new art director for *Bazaar* upon her appointment as editor-in-chief in 1934. After attending an exhibition of advertising art sponsored by the New York Art Director’s Club and curated by Brodovitch, Snow wrote:

*I saw a fresh new concept of layout technique that struck me like a revelation: pages that “bled” beautifully cropped photographs, typography and design that was bold and arresting. Within ten minutes I had asked Brodovitch to have cocktails with me, and that evening I signed him to a provisional contract as art director.*¹²

In hiring Brodovitch, Snow advanced the aesthetic ideals of a European-based modernist movement through the editorial, sartorial, typographic and photographic forms of *Bazaar*. *Bazaar*’s success and distinction in the vast marketplace of women’s magazines were tied to its close association with the European fashion industry. Brodovitch would serve as Snow’s conduit to the European avant-garde facilitating the transformations she envisioned in both the magazine and its audience. For Brodovitch, *Harper’s Bazaar* and models like Dovima — Snow’s paradigmatic *Quality* woman and Avedon’s “real” girl — would serve as the canvas for his formalist vision of the world as a montage of rhythms, sequences, light and color.

The Real Girl as Modern Canvas

Four years before Carmel Snow “discovered” him, Brodovitch had sailed to New York to coordinate a “Design Laboratory” at the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art. Fundamental to the foundation of this program was

11
Agha, M.F. “What Makes a Magazine Modern.” *Advertising Arts* (October 13, 1930), 17.

12
Snow, Carmel and Mary Louise Aswell, 90.

Brodovitch's fascination with new forms and production techniques. He was particularly devoted to photography, which was to become his acknowledged contribution to the profession of graphic design and the development of the fashion magazine. Students report his favorite exhortation was "Astonish me!" — reportedly an affectation borrowed from Diaghilev — which fell in line with an aesthetic ideology more closely aligned with the surrealists than the Bauhaus. His article from the British journal, *Commercial Art* (1930), entitled "What Pleases the Modern Man?" supports this assertion:

*Blinking lights of a city. The surface of the revolving phonograph record, the fantastic reflection of the red tail light and the tread of an automobile tyre on the wet pavement, the heroism and daring in the silhouette of an aeroplane. The rhythm of the biographical or statistical diagram...In the monotony and drudgery of a work-a-day world, there is to be found new beauty and a new aesthetic.*¹³

The tendency toward novelty and the fascination of defamiliarization that drove the modernist movement coincided perfectly with the capitalist need to expand markets. "Admitting it is odd that such a 'radical, eccentric art form should have been embraced by the most conservative element of the American community, i.e., business, the unassailable fact is'" a 1944 *Newsweek* article confirmed, "'Surrealism Pays'... Its very weirdness seems to present a high potentiality for attracting attention."¹⁴ The fashion magazine's devotion to the modernization of the domestic landscape — and the fashion industry's inexhaustible need to invest old products with new meanings — accommodated Brodovitch's fascination with visual innovation. Both functionalism and surrealism were aesthetic devices that could reinvest everyday images with intrigue and the mystique of high culture.

The contrasting nature of surrealism and functionalism would come to be an essential feature of the Brodovitch redesign of *Bazaar*. His typography tended toward the stark and unadorned, setting off vivid, often surprising, photographs. Before his arrival at *Bazaar*, text was paramount, the clothing

13

Brodovitch, Alexey. "What Pleases the Modern Man?" *Commercial Art* (August 1930), 60.

14

"Surrealism Pays" from *Newsweek* 23:56, January 1944.



Figure 1
Harper's Bazaar, October 1934.
 Photographer: Man Ray.

represented through illustration. Words and pictures were not closely allied and the text area was determined by a grid of symmetrical proportions reminiscent of traditional book design. Drawings and photographs were contained within the text area in conventional frames.

In contrast, a spread from the October 1934 issue, the first Brodovitch would design (*figure 1*), foreshadowed the changes ahead. On the left-hand page is a photograph by the surrealist Man Ray. The elongated shape of the model leans dramatically to the right — most likely a distortion performed in the darkroom — its edge bears the trace of the camera aperture which mirrors the tilt of the silhouette. On the right-hand page, two skewed columns of text, a distortion of a traditional typographic grid, are set in a sans-serif font of different weights composed to mirror the photographic composition.

The extreme excess of white page and simple, asymmetric typography are emblematic of the Brodovitch style. By the early fifties he had eliminated almost all ornamentation and depended completely on typographic composition to express values of currency. White space was the key to graphic materialism. Its successful manipulation distinguished clear typo-

graphic hierarchy without the use of rules and bars vestigial of printing technology prior to the introduction of offset lithography. A focus on technical production and qualities inherent in materials purported to liberate the consumer from the deceptive facade of fashion. It was the typographic equivalent of the architectural theory that espoused open-plan design, exposed structure and natural materials that projected a kind of formal “honesty.”¹⁵

Brodovitch employed his powerful white space to counterpoint the full bleed photograph and facilitate a seamless, “cinematic” layout which flowed uninterrupted from page to page. The art director turned away from fashion illustration, long the staple of women’s magazine, and like *Life*, adopted grainy black and white images to signify a kind of visual immediacy. Early photographs not only represented the featured sartorial accoutrement, but also often encapsulated a dream-like narrative in a single frame. Carefully arranged sets and location photography set the stage for fantastic dramas. In later years, Brodovitch applied the same graphic principles to his art direction as his typography; the surrealism of the earlier issues increasingly gave way to a kind of photographic formalism. He reduced his models to formal abstractions. The Brodovitch image was as much about form/counterform, rhythm and contrast as the Dior gown or the Chanel suit (*figure 2*).

Of all his photographers, none captured his vision like Richard Avedon. Brodovitch described Richard Avedon’s photographic panache as a “vacation from life;” which was tremendously appealing to war-weary Americans.¹⁶ Avedon’s father had owned a women’s shop, Avedon’s Fifth Avenue. In his early work, he aimed to capture the carnivalesque glamour of the department store, just as he recreated his childhood world of the women’s shop on his bedroom walls in a haze of clipped photographs by photographers such as Edward Steichen, George Hoyningen-Huene and Martin Munkasci. His interest in capturing the invisible or aberrant has been characterized by historians of fashion photography as realistic in the tradition of Munkasci, a Hungarian sports-photographer who preceded him as chief photographer at *Bazaar*. Avedon

15

Modern designers seemed to overlook that their honest aesthetic might not be read as they intended. For instance, Russell Lynes critiques the excessive white space used in a contemporary DeBeers Diamond advertisement as the hypocritical expression of “understated quality” which was in fact, ostentation, a sign of conspicuous waste. Russell Lynes. 1954. *The Tastemakers*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 294.

16

Hall-Duncan, Nancy. 1979. *The History of Fashion Photography*. New York: International Museum of Photography/ Alpine Book Company, 136.

Figure 3
Harper's Bazaar, October 1950.
 Photographer: Richard Avedon.



Figure 4
 Joe is fixed and developed
 by photographer Dick Avery,
 her "Professor Higgins."



insert herself into the magazine narrative, to become the “Beautiful Individualist” (*figure 3*). Famous for his single-minded attachment to a particular model — Dorian Leigh, Suzy Parker, Dovima — Avedon cast his various fantasies on one woman at a time.²⁰ Each model became the consistent backdrop for a series of successive transformations. As a key consultant to *Funny Face*, it is not surprising that the film focuses on a photographer’s unyielding devotion to the transfiguration of his newest star.

In *Funny Face*, the photographer Avery rewrites Joe’s body. Summoned to *Quality* headquarters by Prescott, Joe is assaulted by a bevy of stylists eager to reconstruct her fashionless facade. Repelled by the swarm of cosmeticians — and pursued by Prescott wielding a mammoth pair of shears — she escapes to Avery’s darkroom where she finds the photographer in the process of enlarging her image, a detail captured in the background of a frame from the bookstore session (*figure 4*). The ensuing sequence commences Joe’s refiguration: from gamine to woman, from obscurity to stardom, from funny to classic, from seeing to seen.

Avery develops a large print which he lifts for Joe to behold. She is momentarily transfixed by her own transfiguration. Her face, small and nondescript, is covered by the exaggerated image Avery has fabricated. Through the *magic* of photography her face is transformed from funny to a thing of beauty. The scene concludes with her face framed in the easel under the bright white light of the enlarger. Her positive image has replaced the negative as Avery’s hand steadies her head.

Joe’s face is just a trace of its original. Through the mystery of the photographic process, Avery has stripped the face of specificity. She becomes the raw material of *Woman* on which an excessive femininity will be mapped through the *masquerade* of fashion. As with magazine art direction, it is not through the naturalistic, indexical aspect of photography that the manipulation takes place, but rather in its ability to be distorted, cropped and changed. It is through the perversion of the object that the *Quality* woman is manufactured. Joe had

20

Sargeant, Winthrop. “Profiles: Richard Avedon,” In *The New Yorker* (November 8, 1958), 64.

castigated Avery for promoting superficiality — dismissing his pursuit of a “synthetic beauty at best” — but confronted with her new image, she is seduced by Avery’s vision. In justifying her complicity in the plot as “a means to an end,” Joe adopts the masquerade as a form of positive image, a method to employ the structures of advertising for her own devices.

Emptied of her specificity, Joe is ready to assume the litany of guises that constitute the magazine’s construction of “womanliness.” Joe’s presumed masculinity is not so much erased, as coated with layer upon layer of assumed meanings. “Womanliness” notes film critic Mary Ann Doane:

...could be assumed and worn, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it — much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not stolen goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade.’ My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.²¹

The photoshoot sequence in *Funny Face* is segmented into metonymic melodramas encapsulated in ten brief scenarios on-location for the *Quality Woman* collection. In these segments (figure 5), Joe is transformed time and again into varying images of femininity. Avery’s photo narratives evoke the Avedon women that “...laughed, danced, skated, gamboled among herds of elephants, sang in the rain, ran breathless down the *Champs Elysees*, smiled, and sipped cognac at café tables...”²² Each shot involves Joe’s composition and inclusion in a mythic narrative contained within the film still. The process from real time (24 frames per second) to still photograph to printed page is represented in a rapidly edited montage at the end of each story in which the captured image is frozen, reversed, separated into color plates, cropped and framed.

In each brief segment Joe is *developed* and *fixed* by her photographer (figure 5). Joe’s femininity is formed through the eyes and apparatus of the photographer. Avery’s development of Joe is more than a little self-serving; in classic Pygmalion fashion,

21

Mary Ann Doane.
“Masquerade Reconsidered”
from *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film, Theory, Psychoanalysis*. 1991. New York: Routledge, 34.

22

Saregeant, Winthrop.
“Profiles: Richard Avedon,” 49.

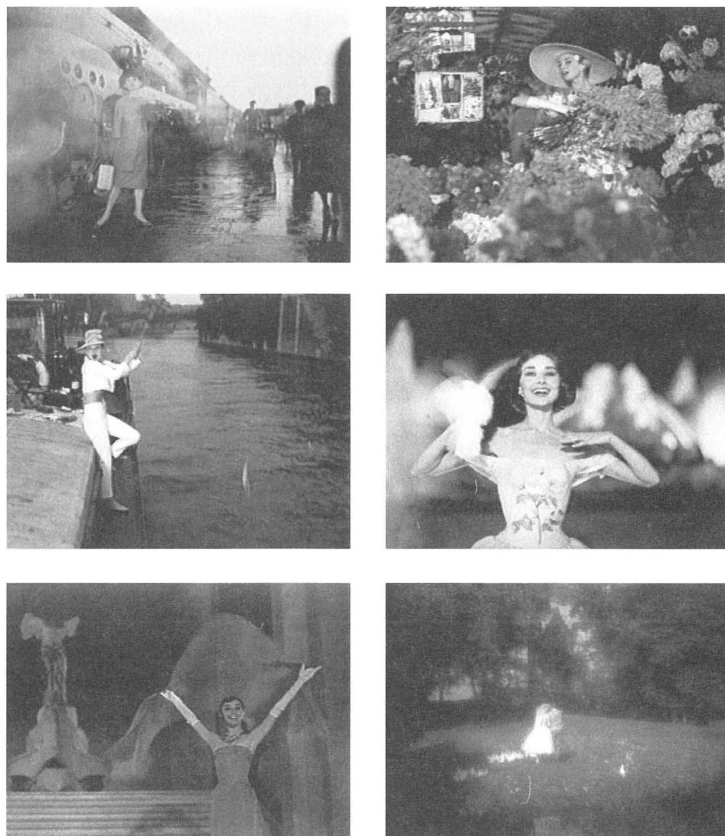


Figure 5

In a series of metonymic melodramas which comprise the *Quality* photoshoot, Joe is transformed time and again into varying images of femininity.

he forms the object of his own desire. (Avery counters Joe's "means to an end" with "Or perhaps a means to a beginning..." implying their impending love affair.) Perhaps his fabrication of an unambiguously feminine Joe Stockton serves to assure the audience of Astaire's masculinity and unoccluded position as her Professor Higgins. This bifurcated structure in which an audience is both constructed and courted is central to the strategy of the fashion magazine that shapes readers to be the kind of women that read fashion magazines.

In this way, the film is ultimately self-reflexive. *Funny Face* is one media's explication of another, employing the magazine as a metaphor for its own formal structure. Thus the key characters of the fashion magazine — the art director, the editor, the photographer and model — illuminate the popular roles of the director, writer, cinematographer and star. The film demonstrates the manner in which the magazine fantasy is constructed and Hepburn is the canvas on which each narrative is painted.²³ Although masquerade is proffered as a form of resistance or “a means to an end,” it is ultimately bound by the larger strictures of a mass-mediated femininity. Joe's transformation from obscurity to celebrity, which parallels the alchemic metamorphoses of the undiscovered actress into a movie star, is in effect, the development of her exchange value.

The Organization Woman

While *Funny Face* foregrounds the more traditional love story developing between Avery and Stockton, it is Maggie Prescott that serves as the true sexual foil to the reluctant Joe Stockton. Prescott presents another image of femininity selected from the roster of masquerades available to women in the white collar world of the 1950s. She is representative of a distinct caste of highly-paid, hard-working women that emerged in the nascent mass-market fashion industry in the early century who were ridiculed as “the Brahmins of the ready-to-wear store world,” and “Lady Buyers.” “She laughs too much, she argues too readily. She's used to getting her way. She is Success.”²⁴ In *Funny Face*, Prescott is clearly masculinized, linked to the sterile modernist office of the managerial landscape; a cool white, minimalist stage ringed with a series of identical doors marked by color (*figure 6*). Her entrance is underscored by a drum tattoo. Her mission: to clothe the American Woman. Over an intercom she calls — with a bellowing “Now hear this!” — the *Quality* magazine staff, a brigade of homogeneous, nameless women, to order.

The troops emerge from the colored doors — which come to signify a myriad of packaged tropes manufactured at *Quality*

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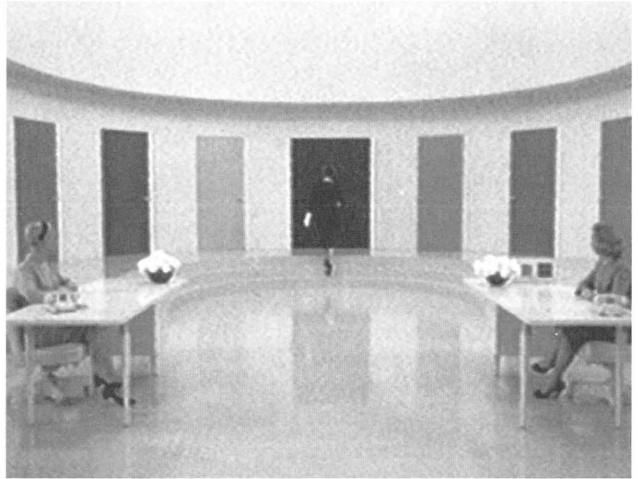
“[T]he face of Audrey Hepburn...” remarked Roland Barthes in 1957, “is individualized, not only because of its peculiar thematics (woman as child, woman as kitten) but also because of her person, of an almost unique specification of the face...” Barthes, Roland. 1957. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 57.

24

Leach, William R. 1993. *Land of Desire from the Department Store to the Department of Congress: the Rise of America's Commercial Culture*. New York: Pantheon Books, 312.

Figure 6

Prescott, the organizational woman, marches through *Quality* headquarters, a sterile modernist office emblematic of the white-collar landscape.



magazine — to the tune of the *Light Calvary Overture*; a succession of commodified fantasies, each a stereotype of the fashionable individual completely undistinguished from her workmates. The women speak in unison: “Oh no, Miss Prescott, you musn’t say that...” just as the consumers of her magazine are expected to respond to her nationwide directives on the appropriate behavior for the fashionable set.

In a musical number, “Think Pink” performed by Prescott and a chorus of troopers, the narrative is frozen in a series of still photomontages evoking magazine spread layouts (*figure 7*); advertisements for clothes, shoes, toothpaste, cars, modern art, film. The frozen images reflect the American graphic designers’ fascination with mechanical techniques of the historical avant-garde,²⁵ such as montage and the stylistic applications of surrealism and modernism. It is the manifestation of Prescott’s power disseminated through products and the artificial construction of difference. Prescott urges her readers to “Try pink shampoo.” Her original idea (“to turn the whole world pink”) is transformed into a commercial attraction.

Essentially, the location photoshoots, the darkroom scene (in which Avery makes Joe’s face into the image of *Quality*) and the “Think Pink” number clarify the central question of the

25

Bürger, Peter. 1984. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press. The “historical avant-garde” specifies the term “avant-garde” as a moment and movement in the history of art rather than as an attribute connoting stylistic innovation.

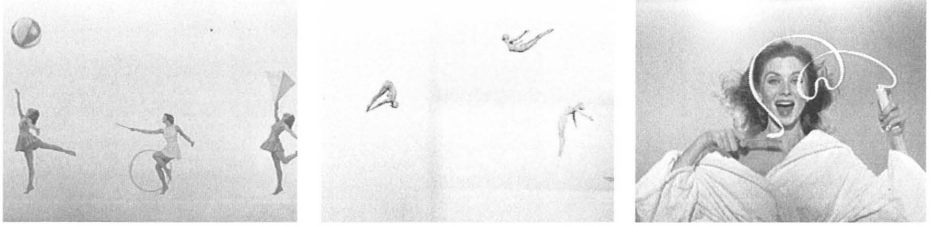


Figure 7

A chorus of pink-collar workers appear in a succession of commodified fantasies, each immortalized in a still photomontage evoking a magazine spread layout.

movie: "How is femininity constructed through aesthetic device, in this case, modernist design?" As Prescott elaborates this master narrative, she hands a small fetish of pink crinoline to each of the women circling her, each donning "the New Look" at *Quality*, the little pink suit. Prescott, on the other hand, prefers gray flannel. She is not subject to the vagaries of fashion; she creates them. She fabricates the spectacle of femininity turning everything pink from the *Quality* magazine TWA jet to her troopers' uniforms. When art director Dovitch — the film double of Brodovitch — questions: "But what about you?" she retorts, "I wouldn't be caught dead." Prescott is director of production; pink bags, pink toothpaste, pink shampoo are the indices of her cultural control. The proliferation of *pink* — an obvious signifier for mass-mediated femininity — through everything from shoes to shampoo exposes the acculturation of an advertising campaign that markets that particular brand of femininity.

Avedon believed Carmel Snow unconsciously imagined herself "a dictator over women — a general, maybe."²⁶ Snow was frequently characterized as hard and uncompromising, a stickler for detail for which she was loved, mocked and despised. Perhaps the most frequent word used to describe Snow was "uncompromising" and yet the masculinization of Prescott reveals the sacrifices women like Snow made for a life outside the femininity they helped to manufacture. Avedon elaborated on Snow's tendency to view herself outside her sex:

26

Snow, Carmel and Mary Louise Aswell. *The World of Carmel Snow, 207-208.*

*She made a strange slip of the tongue at the last collection we went to together. She talked through the collections, always out of the corner of her mouth, and sometimes she'd say, "now if I were a society woman, I'd choose that dress, or "If I were a secretary, I'd take that." This time she said, "If I were a woman..."*²⁷

27

Snow, Carmel and Mary Louise Aswell. *The World of Carmel Snow*, 207-208.

28

Lynes, Russell. *The Tastemakers*, 247.

Maggie Prescott is an exception, as was Snow presumably, in that as a woman, she controlled the production around her; "She was Success." She had authority in spheres that routinely excluded women; the office, the boardroom, the corporate headquarters.

Modernism was a man's game for the most part, reserved for the space of the city center, the factory floor, the efficient office. As corporations grew increasingly diversified and multinational, abstract modernism, the International Style, was adopted as the official corporate language. Writing in 1954, Russell Lynes attributes the spread of the modern in the corporate landscape to the failure of the program at the domestic level. Suburban men, he contends, did not take to the idea of their homes mimicking their offices:

*The modern house was unrelenting in its demands for an orderly life...It seemed an unlikely place for a man to come home to, throw himself down, put his feet up and shut out the world of work and neighbors...He insisted it was not for him and never would be. Modern was damned nonsense and he wanted no part of it, and neither (except in the kitchen) did his wife.*²⁸

Men preferred the solace of tradition after a hard day in the world of corporate modernism and the wives were expected to play along.

But perhaps Lynes misread the wife's rejection of modernism and, in turn, this accounts for the success of Brodovitch's redesign of *Harper's Bazaar*. The wife, isolated in the suburbs, surrounded by the modernistic efficiency of her hygienic kitchen could not have such access to the cold rationality of the corporate office. *Bazaar* brought the visual language of museum and the boardroom into women's homes. Elegantly spare, white space shaped by sedate columns of Didot type and

the svelte arms of an Eames chair, *Bazaar* bore the mark of “good design,” showcasing modern products amidst the models. In relegating all advertising to the front and back sections of the magazine, Carmel Snow afforded women the luxury of negotiating their path through the magazine — their path to art and culture — without passing through the kitchen, the home, the suburb or the representational worlds portrayed in the unrelenting advertising which had assailed readers in earlier decades.

Bazaar sold women “upward mobility” through the pleasure of knowledge rather than pecuniary advantage; it produced a kind of high cultural consumerism. Thus “the New Look” was interleaved with the words, images and portraits of renowned novelists, painters, photographers, architects, dancers and actors. “Carmel Snow’s Paris Report” sat neatly between a short story by Carson McCullers and a photographic journey to José Luis Sert’s modernist Piazza. The Little Black Dress was admirably ensconced between an essay by Aldous Huxley and an interview with curator of the Museum of Modern Art, René d’Harnoncourt, not coincidentally the architect of its “good design” agenda.

As fashion and marketing turn on the construction of difference, the shift from the suburban landscape to the environment of culture and art democratically advanced through the mass-cultural form of the magazine forged a devoted constituency. In 1933, *Bazaar’s* advertisers had ranged from Budweiser (beer) to Heinz (tomato paste), Canon (towels) to Hachmacher (suits). By the early fifties, new advertisers were almost exclusively department stores and fashion accessories with the exception of few discrete beauty items. *Bazaar* delivered a new consumer market forged from the “Career or Would-Be Career Woman,”²⁹ the emerging class of women disinterested in traditional notions of domesticity, who, like Betty Friedan, were suddenly “...very interested in houses and things: chairs, tables, silverware.”

In contrast to the scientific homemakers in streamlined kitchens of the 1910s and '20s, *Bazaar’s* women were abstract, cool,

29

Freidan, Betty. 1963. *The Feminist Mystique*. New York: Norton, 206-230.

formal. The happy homemakers and the smiling wives were conspicuously absent in the pages of the magazine. Modernism represented women as connotative of elegance and cultural sophistication, outside the messy realities of everyday life. The modernist style was another representational layer laid over the framework of femininity. Industrial designer Raymond Loewy had defended the superficial quality of streamlining asserting that the external shield “accomplishes something, and it becomes functional, the specific function being to eliminate confusion.”³⁰ In this respect abstract modernism, or functionalism, shared that role. Just as streamlining had served to hide complex machinery inside its sleek casings, the rational, ordered surface of modernism smoothed over the confusing workings of a socially constructed femininity.

30

Loewy, Raymond. *Never Leave Well Enough Alone*. 1951. New York: Simon and Schuster, 219.

How Long Has This Been Going On?

The complex machinery of Joe Stockton’s masculinized intellectual identity is neatly occluded under the abstract order of the New Look. But Joe’s initial rejection of Prescott’s and Avery’s advances gives us a hint of at least one form of resistance, that of the enlightened beat, savvy to the manipulation of the fashion machine. Prescott offers another vision of the masquerade; the woman resistant to the proffered models of womanhood in the 1950s, one who conquers the man’s world of management and power.

Joe Stockton is not without motives when she finally gives way to Avery’s proposal. The false consciousness of the *Quality Woman* is not entirely forced upon her; her acquiescence is more aptly an exchange. A trip to Paris seems a fair trade for “a few silly pictures.” Tellingly, Joe is lured to femininity with the *promise* of authentic — European, masculine, intellectual — culture. As a caricatured young beat from the Village, she is drawn to the realm of *authentic* intellectual thought, necessarily European, and into the schemes of both Prescott (as sales tool) and Avery (as sexual object). Joe accepts the formulaic image of womanhood proffered through *Quality* in order to gain access to high culture, “the best that has been

thought and said.”³¹ Ironically the film turns that notion on its head by exposing the intellectual culture of Joe’s dreams as a sham and lionizing the commonsensical, folk truth associated with the spheres of marriage and unambiguous femininity.

Through her Faustian deal with *Quality* magazine, Joe penetrates the elite circles of Dior and Noguchi, but perhaps, more importantly, she comes to have insight into the aesthetic production of the fashion magazine and, so follows, the social production of femininity. In her complicity with *Quality*, one might argue, Joe attains a perspective on culture not so much in Matthew Arnold’s sense but rather more in line with Raymond Williams’s definition as a “particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in *institutions* and *ordinary behavior* [my italics].”³²

This new perspective, however, does not save Joe from the wedding dress at the end of the film. She is unable to link her intimate knowledge of the fashion industry with her own gendered role. The film suggests a deep fulfillment at the level of traditional femininity; Joe gets the man in the end, not to mention a lovely new wardrobe. *Funny Face* suggests the complex relationship that existed between women and media in the mid-fifties, a wary standoff that belies typical images of suburban bliss. As Joe was making her peace with American capitalism — throwing off the vaguely socialist ideals of her youth — the idealistic proponents of modernism were completing a similar pact. The intellectual and socially-engaged utopianism of European modernism quietly disappeared as modernism and American capitalism marched down the aisle and set off on a honeymoon that would last the next thirty years.

31

Matthew Arnold quoted from
Hebdige, Dick. 1979.
*Subculture: The Meaning of
Style*. London: Methuen, 7.

32

Williams, Raymond. 1965.
The Long Revolution. London:
Penguin, 8.

