

The Representation of Female Bodies

by Madalina Nicolaescu

Cet article jette un coup d'oeil sur la représentation photographique des femmes dans les magazines de femmes roumains. L'auteure soutient que l'invisibilité des femmes

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roumaines est directement liée à la "colonisation" des femmes qui sont soumises exclusivement à des modèles occidentaux de féminité.

Not unlike the women in most former communist countries, Romanian women have experienced a dramatic deterioration of their status in the past five years. Their marginalization has also involved attempts at a gradual redefinition of their identity and sexuality. This article highlights some aspects of this process by focusing on photographic images of women's bodies featured in recent issues of popular magazines such as *Timpul femeii in tara barbatilor* (Women's Time in Men's Land), *As*, *Magazin*, *Femeia* (The Woman), *Doina*. This article will also consider the negotiation that is taking place between images, norms, and values taken over from western media and local gender stereotypes.

Journals such as *Magazin*, *As*, and *Timpul femeii in tara barbatilor* are so full of images of western supermodels that they have "colonized" Romanian popular journals. Pictures of Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell, and Claudia Schiffer can be seen on the front pages of all journals meant for a female public.

Foreign bodies seem to have displaced the local ones. There are hardly any photographs of Romanian women in these journals. If photographs of Romanian women are included, they are at a stark disadvantage as a result of the poor quality of the black and whites, taken by amateurs. *Timpul femeii in tara barbatilor*, a journal published after 1989 with the acknowledged goal of making a clean break with the past, juxtaposes a small-size black and white picture of the leader of a woman's organization with glossy coloured photographs of ten supermodels (see April 1995). The unflattering photograph of the women's organization leader was not meant to be disparaging; the editor, in fact,

went out of his way to advertise the cause of the respective organization which is sponsored by the journal itself. The rare photographs of outstanding Romanian women—opera singers, actresses, the wives of major politicians—published in other journals receive similar treatment.

Is it that women's journals do not deem it necessary to lavish color on images of Romanian women? Or is it rather that they are still indebted to the former ideology according to which women in important positions should not be represented as sexually attractive for fear they might be too threatening to the system. A modest even shabby looking woman poses no real danger to a political regime that is not only patriarchal but also paternalistic. Such modest looks suggest the woman's unconditional acceptance of patriarchal power both the personal and within the public sphere where no resistance is put up against the paternalistic and often tyrannical political regime (Dolling). *Femeia* publishes pictures of President Iliescu, of the President of the opposition party, and of their wives. Unlike the photographs of the two politicians, those of their wives are much smaller, black and white, and so blurred that the faces are hardly distinguishable (see March, April 1995). The message thus conveyed to the readers about the status of women in Romanian society is unambiguous. What is surprising is that women's magazines should thus reinforce the political marginalization of women.

The exclusion of images representing Romanian women goes hand in hand with the exclusion, in particular in journals such as *Timpul femeii in tara barbatilor*, of articles dealing with specific issues and aspects of these women's experiences. Dealing exclusively with western stars and their love affairs, this newspaper offers a means of escape from a dreary world by projecting a fantasy world. Interestingly enough, it is the more conservative papers like *Femeia*—the official women's journal before 1989 and which has stayed more or less faithful to its former "communist" commitment—that address issues related to marital violence, sexual abuse, prostitution, and sex tourism (see March 1995). *Doina*, a journal published in the same spirit, even goes so far as to criticize the government for its neglect in dealing with the increasing professional discrimination against women (April 1995). It is no coincidence that these are the only journals to publish photographs of Romanian girls on the front cover. Unfortunately, the quality of the photographs is very poor even if they are printed on government subsidized glossy paper. The girls look clumsy, their bodies are plump and overdressed, no match for their glamorous western rivals on the front covers of the other magazines.¹

A letter to *Timpul femeii in tara barbatilor* complains about the recent obsession with supermodels, consider-

in Romanian Journals for Women

ing that it has had the negative effect of ignoring Romanian women that have registered outstanding achievements in fields such as politics, economy, the arts, and literature (see March 1995). Punning on the meaning of the word "model," the letter raises questions about the

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kind of "model" women's magazines should be promoting. It insists on the need to advertise images of women that are not mere objects to be looked at but subjects, initiating significant action, on par with men. The editor, however, dismisses these arguments, insisting on advancing the notion that femininity is a representation (should we better call it a spectacle?) of the body. The journal rejects the more egalitarian attitude towards women's position as smacking of the former communist ideology and promotes the construction of female identity as different. Difference, in this case, is tantamount to looking glamorous.

Timpul femeii in tara barbatilor solemnly announces an eleventh commandment which demands that women take care of their looks (see February 1995). The glamorous bodies put on display in the journal do not advertise expensive cosmetics or haute couture, but merely advertise themselves. The fetishized bodies of western supermodels are meant to counteract previous communist discourses on the equality of women which were deeply resented by Romanian women for imposing what was perceived to be an asexualized female identity. Furthermore, they are designed to liberate women from patriarchal stereotypes of the selfless and self-sacrificing, unassuming, modest-looking ideal women. In this respect these images establish an indirect dialogue with depressing stories published in the conservative, "critical" papers like *Femeia*, where abused women are described as embodiments of the "ideal" self-sacrificing woman. The very title of the journal *Timpul femeii in tara barbatilor* can be read as a warning to Romanian women: it's high time you scrapped the old values, gave up toiling for people around you, and started pampering yourself and your body or else you will wind up destitute and battered.

The way journals like *Timpul Femeii in tara barbatilor* or *Magazin* construct female sexuality is, however, still very much rooted in a patriarchal way of thinking and reinforces the marginalization of women. The reason for the persistence of this blind spot can be found in the absence of a critique of patriarchal values and stereotypes. Apparently suppressed by the egalitarian communist rhetoric, these stereotypes survived in the underground. They were fueled on the one hand by women against the official ideology coupled with a nostalgia for the good, old times. On the other hand, patriarchal rural values were enforced by the previous regime itself, as they were instrumental in the promotion of its pronatalist policy. This was nevertheless obscured by an aggressive egalitarian rhetoric and by the spurious political promotion of a limited number of women.

The glamorous bodies projecting women as objects of desire in Romanian journals have merely replaced the previous representation of women as cost-effective "household objects," employed to fill in the absence of washing machines, dishwashers, and vacuum cleaners whose shortage in the socialist market was notorious. Moreover, the photographs of western supermodels featured in the Romanian journals—despite their exposed bodies—are singularly demure. They do not represent any serious threat to the established values and gender roles.

The question arises how women can derive pleasure from the photographs of scantily dressed models featured in *As*, *Timpul femeii in tara barbatilor*, *Magazin*? One explanation may be that the readers are thus encouraged to adopt a new attitude towards their own bodies, to see themselves as objects of desire. Yet by continuously comparing their bodies with those of the supermodels, the readers' feelings of lack and inadequacy are inevitably reinforced. Romanian women, not used to working hard to "keep fit" must be experiencing a feeling of exclusion rather than pleasure.

The real pay-off is most likely derived by the male, voyeuristic position which the readers adopt. Women readers of such images may be said to adopt the position of male viewers fantasizing over naked female bodies. Women may also enjoy these images without, however, giving up their female position; in this case the desire produced by the glamorous images of supermodels could be described as a kind of utopian desire for perfection and plenitude.

The exhibitionism evidenced in these journals comes as a novelty to a public used to a considering short skirts and low necklines immoral. It is associated with the "liberalization" of sex, a phenomenon which has become endemic in most former communist countries. High-school stu-

dents, in particular, find it liberating as it connotes rebellion against a variety of patriarchal and institutional restrictions. An issue of *Magazin* (February 1995) features a pornographic picture taken of a high-school student in Bucharest. The caption containing the sixteen-year-old's confession about the risks she has incurred in having this picture taken, suggests a transgressive exhilaration: she has defied and outraged parents, teachers, and friends alike. She has even broken off her relationship with her boyfriend; nothing, however, could have kept her from having this photo taken. The girl is intoxicated with a feeling of power that stems from breaking limitations imposed on her. She is in no way aware of her status as object rather than subject of desire.

There may be another reason why the exposed bodies of beautiful women are so successful among the women's magazines. Given the present professional discrimination against women and the high rate of unemployment particularly among women in their twenties (UNDP), these journals do not think it inappropriate to value "looks" as a source of power and of financial improvement. *Magazin* does not hesitate from advertising the material benefits accruing from commodified sex. An issue (February 1995) features an alluring picture of a bare-breasted woman, Jenny, who was a successful mistress for seven years (earning \$5000 a week and being able to go to the USA on holiday). Now she has set up a prosperous business of her own. Jenny is described in terms customarily used by feminists whenever they champion women's decision to become independent and have full control over themselves and their lives.

The image of the bare-breasted Jenny can be juxtaposed to the lurid photographs of women trafficking featured in less "liberated" journals like *Femeia*. The editors of *Femeia* adopt a highly moralizing tone incriminating "the western influence," and even western feminists for that matter, for the present decay of morals and the destitute condition of a large number of Romanian women. The editor-in-chief has a column on women's liberation in which she never fails to accuse feminists of seducing Romanian women away from healthy moral standards (see the February 1995 issue). To give them their due, *Femeia* is the only journal to also publish photographs of women who adopt active subject positions: for example, doctors examining patients. It also publishes stories about successful women managers. Yet there is a catch: the women in their stories have almost invariably made their career abroad, in more "emancipated" countries. The pictures are very little individualized and reminiscent of the ones published formerly in the same magazine to extol "the productive socialist woman."


The conclusion to be drawn should not be depressing. For all the little visibility that feminism has in Romania, for all the obsession with the glamorous bodies of western supermodels, there is an active process of negotiation going on among various representations of women's identity and sexuality.

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¹One remarkable exception is the back cover picture of the March 1995 issue of the *Doina* magazine, featuring the photograph of a typically Romanian beauty—a popular music singer and art student.

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