

VISUALISING IN STILLS... ... WORKS FOR CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY.

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“The ability to experience the *jouissance*-like loss of the self is interrelated with the *plaisirs* of identity and meaning”

John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 1989

The thing that leads us to enjoy reading a photo romance, as a text typical of the genre of melodrama, is in itself paradoxical: it enables us to escape from ourselves but must begin with the prior recognition of ourselves in the text. We need to be anchored in order later to fly.

The *jouissance* of evading the rules and norms, and the brief respite from the oppressive ideology, at the same time as enjoying the *plaisir* of recognising oneself in this social order that seems to confirm our own identity is unquestionably paradoxical. It is a clouding of the mirror in which we look for our own image.

Equally paradoxical is the ability to feel the almost orgasmic pleasure, the *jouissance* of fantasising about being someone else, the woman in the photo or on screen, while at the same time reconstructing oneself in one's everyday life, the one that these selfsame images reflect.

Every frame in the TV soap, slowed down into a printed still as if frozen, as if it were a unique moment to contemplate the performance of our multiple identity: the woman we are; the woman we long to be; the woman we hate to recognise in our gestures and expressions; and the one who achieves what is now an impossibility in our everyday life.

Every visual frame triggers a construction of the discourse based on pieces of an opposed yet complementary nature, those of real experiences and those of vicarious experiences. The narrative contained in stills is nothing but the structure, the delineated outlines of a thousand and one tales, whose incompleteness is remedied in the delight of the person following it with her own gaze, giving the implied voids form and colour.

Forms and colours of fantasy and reality, of dreams and recollections, in which fiction is an experience projected towards a timeless reality that draws together the emotional and sensual aspects of our most private desires, and at the same time restrains us in the immediate identification that we experience upon recognising ourselves as a party involved in the narrative.

The image of the woman *paralysed in motion*, an image of tension by antonomasia, is restored to life in the same way that the fictional character articulated by our subjectivity springs forth once again from our being. The still is transformed into a gateway that leads towards a deeper reading, a reading that crosses the image and goes from its furthest reaches to our most secret imaginary realities.

The image is, then, an instrument for the symbolic realisations of numerous and contradictory positions of our female *I*. It is the possibility of experiencing the *jouissance* of these positions and identities that we can only fantasise about.

The photo romance as a story is the space in which it is possible to construct oneself in the potential modes of femaleness, in which it is possible, if only briefly, to be the woman passionately kissing her lover under the gaze of the authoritarian man who restricts her, the woman who asserts herself over the power that subjugates her, the woman who struggles tenaciously to free herself from the forces that have condemned her to a miserable life, the woman who possesses and is possessed, the woman who is the object of desire and a goddess of sensuality, the woman who devises ingenious plans to avenge herself on this man who ignores or scorns her, on that oppressive and hegemonic power that devalues her being and which clings against her like a latent trace of the patriarchy that has fashioned itself over the course of our history.

Each and every one of the stereotypes, each and every one of these simplified portrayals that turn people into mere exaggerated character traits in the manner of grotesque caricatures, are today being overturned. The sketchy lines of these clichés can no longer contain people's complexity, the womanhood that is now realising itself at all times and in all places, and which is no longer subject to any rules. A womanhood that is not apprehensible, a womanhood that is brought up to date with each gesture, each thought, every

new experience and every new pleasure taken in reading these photo romance stories.

Clichéd tales, archetypal models, stereotypes repeated over and over that have lost their power to define, a situation that benefits a new consideration of *possible reflections*. In the context of postmodernity, women are constructing themselves in a constant enjoyment of the portrayals of them given in photo romances, magazines, fashion displays, etc. Women are expressing their own being, free of stereotypes and classifications, on the basis of these portrayals.

Nothing is taken for granted, no definition of women can now be taken as ingrained or impervious to change, no classification is valid when the differences and boundaries between the 'ideal' and the 'rebellious' are constantly in the process of construction.

The stereotypes that are part of the melodramatic exaggeration of this kind of story are nothing other than the basis of an immediate decoding, an almost instantaneous identification with these pure traits of the female and the male, an essential element if one is to enjoy dressing up, of supplanting one's identity or transgressing in carnival style our own realisation or usual performance.

All identities are fictions. That is what Butler, at one extreme, claims, recognising the subversive role of the figure of the transvestite, who upsets the stable and standard. The transvestite fractures the line that delimits and defines ideals to do with gender, the female and the male as opposites. What the transvestite destroys with his performances that shatter age-old preconceptions, any human would seek to demolish. They are nothing more than ideals which all humans, whether as a last resort or not, long to question.

From the fiction *experienced* in the photo romance story, the supplanting or 'performativity' that Butler advocates becomes the motivation for reading, which in turn becomes a protective shield. Safe from the social image we construct of ourselves, the *plaisir* lies in questioning this selfsame image by projecting new positions and new subjects.

The *jouissance* of the *plaisir* of being the machiavellian, plotting harpy, the curvaceous and sensual siren, the protective, understanding mother, the victim of her subjugation and servility, the judged yet envied bitch or the dominating and mysterious vamp. Reincarnating in each of these women that live within the bounds and beyond the pale, the women classified as ideal or as deviants from the norm. And being able to live as both at one and the same time.

The line that divides the norm from transgression shifts as time flows by. In the 1950s, women's magazines advocated an ideal women dedicated to her man who ruled the home, contrasting her with the transgressor who puts her own ambitions first and her role as a mother and wife second. Today, however, there would seem to be a reversal, at least in part, in the direction marked by these opposed poles.

Winship describes today's concept of the ideal woman through advertising: cosmetics that can give you lips sprinkled with gemstones or full lips with a watery texture; gleaming dyes for hair or other products that create impossible curls; sunglasses; pendants and watches that match metallic pink things sold as a set of swimming accessories; completely effective treatments against cellulite that have to be combined with tanning products in summer in order to make your skin golden and shining while regenerating it, keeping it fresh and young.

These adverts do more than attempt to make us buy products, as they sell the interpersonal relationship in which we are feminine: as we are/ought to be/can be a certain feminine woman, as Winship remarks. Women reconstruct themselves in these portrayals along the lines of the age-old concept of women: the woman who does not neglect the absolute happiness to which she should aspire in her home; the woman who continues to play her part as seductress, even though she is a mother, without apparent complications; the woman who not only has professional aspirations but also has the added challenge of being beautiful, slim and sexually attractive. The prevailing model of women socially constructed today based on all these portrayals is independent, attractive and aware of her own capabilities and her rediscovered needs. Her fantasies become more varied: in addition to motherhood, she wants to be successful in work and above all in her sentimental relations, which have now been remodelled on the sexual plane.

Women no longer pursue just happiness and true love: apparently masculinised and intruding into the territory that was formerly the private preserve of the other, she now seeks her own sexual satisfaction. Women's magazines today contain advice and queries on issues other than simply the emotions, the kitchen and beauty. They make *public*, shared and legitimate the discourses on *sexual enjoyment*. There is no fudging in these discourses, no euphemism or false dilemma as the essential connection to this almost enslaving idea of romantic love.

In the magma of the media discourse, we find the demands of the woman as the active agent in the sexual sphere, as the person

seeking out her own pleasure and discovering her own sexuality. That which was once an underlying element in the reading of so many love stories has now been made explicit.

The constant intensity of the pornographic gaze of the man looking for sexual satisfaction, which has generated so many words in the Hollywood film discourse and literary criticism, has been turned into a pornography of feelings and eroticism aimed at women who devour photo romances. A woman keen to recognise herself in these private lives shared in snapshots that struggle between capturing ecstasy and restrained suspense. These snapshots barely catch the reader's eyes as she longs for the *plaisir* of identification and the *jouissance* of the exaggerated detail that conceals that which is not shown: her own imagination, her own *I*.

The love in photo romances that is charged with eroticism in the private pleasures of readers is now part of these texts and of this common pose of the shared public realm. Fantasy is no longer restricted to the private sphere but is gradually invading the social and legitimate arena. All the while, it is establishing new possible positions for the postmodern woman who has to act as the main character in the new and recycled formulae for photo romances and stories aimed at women readers.

Someone once said that there are no portrayals of women; instead, each of these discourses *by* them, *for* them and *on* them are nothing other than their own constructs, pieces of a prism with numerous facets of ephemeral crystallisations. Identities and realisations of women who resemble each other and yet who are different; almost novelesque and routine and sombre as well; imbued with fantasy and frankly true to life... identities of the woman that are constructed and deconstructed as if she were a prism of living, organic matter without form.

The woman who recreates herself in her stories—as an author and as a reader—sidesteps the *definition of a woman*, just as the kaleidoscopic prism takes shape in time and space by creating forms, colours, explosions of light and reflections that are impossible to retain.

In the manner of a fractal image, it thus becomes possible to see the tangled complexity of relationships between people, the unrestrained expression of emotion, the verbalisation of feelings and desires that are part of some of these modes of womanhood that have been immortalised in the snapshots in the melodramatic tale, in the stills in photo romances and similar stories.

Public discourses on women could strengthen the entrenching of the male voyeuristic way of seeing women as objects and the hegemony of the patriarchal values that many believe support them. Nevertheless, the portrayals that form the basis of the definition of gender identity are open to readings by women themselves, who continually have to construct themselves as such.

The narratives contained in the melodrama that pervades photo romances, magazines, serials and women's conversations can be seen as a field open to the female gaze and to the female and male construct we all carry within us. And above all as an immersion in the intimacy that occupies the private sphere, an immersion that does not appeal to the pleasure of exhibitionism but to the *jouissance* of the exploration of oneself.