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## 'tits and ass and porn and fighting': male heterosexuality in magazines for men

ATTWOOD, F.

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**'tits and ass and porn and fighting'<sup>1</sup>: male heterosexuality in magazines for men**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the presentation of male heterosexuality in British soft core pornographic and men's lifestyle magazines, looking across these formats at the range of conventions and discourses they share. It maps out the key features of male heterosexuality in these publications, focusing on a sample of British magazines collected in June 2003 across both soft core and lifestyle formats, and on the new men's weeklies, *Nuts* and *Zoo Weekly*, launched in January 2004. The depiction of the male body and its relation to sexual pleasure and the presentation and investigation of heterosexual activity are set in the broader historical context of men's print media and the current socio-cultural context of sex and gender representation.

**Key words**

Magazines, masculinity, lifestyle, soft core pornography

This paper examines the presentation of male heterosexuality in British soft core pornographic and men's lifestyle magazines, looking across these formats at the range of conventions and discourses they share. My intention is to map out the key features which emerge in constructing a discourse of male heterosexuality and my discussion will focus on a sample of British magazines collected in June 2003 across both soft core and lifestyle formats<sup>2</sup>, and on the new men's weeklies, *Nuts* and *Zoo Weekly*, launched in January 2004<sup>3</sup>. Particular attention will be paid to the presentation of the male body and its relation to sexual pleasure, and to the ways in which men's magazines present and investigate sex and sexuality. These features will be set in the broader historical context of

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<sup>1</sup> This depiction of men's weekly magazines is from Laura Barton 'It's All Gone Tits Up' in *Weekend Guardian*, Jan 17 2004, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> The sample consisted of *FHM*, *Loaded*, *GQ*, *Men's Health*, *Jack*, *Attitude*, *Bizarre*, *Mayfair*, *Men Only*, *Razzle* and *Playboy*. Although *Playboy* is an American publication it was included as an example of very upmarket porn, a category no longer found on the British 'top-shelf'.

<sup>3</sup> From January to June 2004.

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### **magazines for men**

Existing accounts of magazines for men have tended towards the discussion and analysis of two quite distinct categories of publication. Soft core pornographic magazines have featured as part of a more general discussion about pornography and its representation of women, though it must be said that there has been surprisingly little work in this area (Attwood, 2002). Men's lifestyle magazines have generally been examined in relation to the promotion of consumer lifestyles across a range of media, or in terms of the emergence of contemporary masculinities, particularly in relation to new figures of masculinity such as the 'new man' or the 'new lad'. I would like to argue that it may also be productive to consider these categories in relation to each other. As Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) has argued, early lifestyle magazines such as *Playboy* have advocated sexual hedonism, 'pleasurable consumption' and a refusal of domestication (Ehrenreich 1983: p.42 - 51) - qualities evident in both contemporary soft porn and men's lifestyle titles - since the consumer boom of the 1950s and early 1960s. This combination of sexual content with the promotion of a broader masculine lifestyle focused on youth, consumption and the bachelor life (Osgerby, 2001: p.x, Ehrenreich, 1983: p.45) can be seen as the precursor and template for both subsequent soft core porn and men's lifestyle magazines.

The development of British soft core pornography can be traced within this broad regime of representation. Initially marked by the tame glossiness of the *Playboy* style, British soft core style has begun to merge on the one hand, with a harder porn style, and on the other, with the contemporary lifestyle market. In the 1970s, as the porn industry moved out of sex shops and into the 'respectable market place' (Moye, 1985: p.44), newer, harder and more downmarket porn mags such as *Hustler* appeared in the United States, and as *Playboy's* circulation began to fall in the 1980s, newer porn magazines emerged in Britain too. Brian McNair describes a 'hierarchy of respectability' in British soft core magazine production in which publications drew variously on the glossy aspirational lifestyle personified by *Playboy*, on a British tradition of 'dirty postcards and sexual innuendos', and on the harder conventions of American and European pornography (McNair, 1996: p.110). Upmarket magazines continued to package sex as part of a broader lifestyle for men, while more downmarket publications like *Razzle* promoted a cruder, 'dirtier' and more light-hearted take on sex, with a much heavier reliance on images of highly sexed 'ordinary' women

and the 'everydayness' of sex (McNair 1996). Newer magazines in the 1990s tended to copy this second 'dirty' type of porn, with a minority of new titles such as *Bizarre* focusing more explicitly on sexual deviation (McNair, 1996). However, at the beginning of this century, there has been a certain flattening out of the distinctions between upmarket and downmarket magazines, with a tendency towards a more downmarket style across the board.

Contemporary lifestyle magazines for men are often interpreted in relation to wider shifts in the representation of masculinity, from traditional depictions of the 'masterful, silent, strong' man, through the 'sensitive, nurturing, caring' portrayals of the 1980s, to the 'new lad' of the 1990s as 'larkabout...iconoclast...the rogue' (Hill, 2001: p. 44). It is also possible to link these publications and the figures of masculinity they produce to the broader history I have described. For example, the figure of the 'new man' whose appearance marked the emergence of the first widely successful men's lifestyle magazines in the 1980s drew partly on the model of the 1950s *Playboy* man (McNair, 2002: p.158). In the 1990s, 'new lad' magazines such as *Loaded* and *FHM* incorporated many of the conventions of top-shelf titles, both in terms of their visual style and editorial content, reworking the spirit of *Playboy's* 'bachelor hedonism' for a new, younger audience (McNair, 2002: p.48). This migration of soft porn features into lifestyle magazines has been seen as indicative of a general post-modern trend towards 'porno-chic' in which the codes and conventions of porn become indicators of a sophisticated late-modern sexual sensibility (McNair 2002: p.77). It has also been understood as an anxious response to the 'endlessly homoerotic displays of men's fashion, style and accessories' visible in many men's magazines since the 1980s, and as a way of defining 'lad' magazines in opposition to 'the high-flown narcissism' of the more upmarket titles (Edwards, 1997: pp.78 - 81). Imelda Whelehan has noted the apparent nostalgia in this recirculation of porn features within British lad culture as 'a renaissance of Benny Hill style "naughtiness" and 'schoolboy vulgarity' (Whelehan, 2000: pp.65 - 66). However, by the end of the 1990s there was a blurring of the distinction between upmarket and downmarket titles in this respect (Jackson et al, 2001: p.78). As with soft core porn, there was a discernible drift towards more downmarket styles of presentation (Edwards, 1997: p.81).

Clearly then, soft core porn and men's lifestyle magazines have something of a shared history and trajectory. They draw to varying degrees on explicit sexual content and on hedonistic consumer fantasy. In Britain, the representation of American consumer lifestyles and the

reproduction of American and European pornographic conventions have been modified by a fondness for a vulgar presentation of sex and masculinity derived from a tradition of British bawdiness and machismo. In addition, British lifestyle magazines for men have increasingly incorporated the features of soft core porn magazines, a move which appears, at least temporarily, to have contributed to their success. It has been argued that this appropriation of pornographic conventions, as part of a wider vogue for 'retro-cool' has made soft core pornography and its proponents newly fashionable (Osgerby, 2001: p.201) and allowed for some repositioning of soft core magazines as stylish publications, like their lifestyle counterparts (McNair, 2002: p.48). However, this is likely to be a short-lived development as soft core magazines are squeezed between the increasingly sexualized lifestyle titles and the harder porn now available and easily accessible on the Internet.

Although it is difficult to be precise about trends in men's publishing, there is a perception of irreversible decline in the market for both soft core and men's lifestyle magazines, and in recent years there has been little innovation in either sector. In January 2004, however, the first British men's weekly magazines, *Nuts* and *Zoo Weekly*, were launched. Reasons given for this development have included the need to respond to stagnation in the lifestyle market and to the competition posed by Internet porn. The huge success of women's weeklies, notably *Heat*, the belief that male readers are increasingly alienated from tabloid newspapers which are perceived to be in pursuit of an elusive female audience (Soutar in Magforum, 2004), and reported consumer discomfort with formats dominated by nudity, bad language and 'unsubtle' images of women (Burrell, 2004: p.8) have also been cited. Attempts to distance *Nuts* and *Zoo* from existing titles have been accompanied by efforts to distinguish them from one another - for example, *Nuts* is promoted as having a 'boys own' perspective with more emphasis on 'fighter jets, fast cars and space travel' (Sherwin, 2004: p.15). Nevertheless, both share a similar focus on sport, news, media, sex and 'fun' and many commentators have noted that these publications look a lot like existing magazines belonging to the new lad 'Loaded' culture, 'only with yet more breasts and a greater interest in engineering' (Williams, 2004: p.23). A reasonable indication of the content and tone of the magazines is given by the cover lines in a February issue of *Zoo*: 'Rugby, Alien Porn, Duck Sex, Halle Berry nude, Nail in eye, Dwarves' (14 - 22 February 2004), and by its pledge to 'make you laugh, wince and get wood in equal measure'. The emergence of *Nuts* and *Zoo Weekly* suggest a continuing downmarket drift in men's print media, an increased reliance on British bawdy porn conventions,

and an intensification of lad characteristics, most clearly evidenced by a shift away from a concern with style and grooming and towards more stereotypically masculine interests such as sport, gadgets and machines.

### **men's bodies**

Given the preoccupation with sexual hedonism in men's print media since the 1950s, it is interesting how infrequently the male body has been a major focus of attention in lifestyle and pornographic magazines. Instead, a dominant discourse of heterosexual hedonism has relied on the female body to represent male sexual pleasure while the male body has remained largely invisible (Coward 1984, Dyer 1985, Easthope 1986). This has been most notable in soft porn texts where the male body is quite literally absent from view. Andy Moyer (1985) has argued that the invisibility of male sexual pleasure, coupled with a focus on products designed to remedy dysfunction and inadequacy, suggests a rather troubled model of male sexuality, a point also made of more mainstream representations of men (Dyer, 1985). Moyer notes that when it can be glimpsed, the male porn body is mechanized as a piece of equipment; there is an obsession with size, quantity, technique and drive. Desire is 'a matter of alienated work' (Moyer, 1985: p.63), and although dominant, the man 'expresses no pleasure or joy in the "act"'. He is silent as he concentrates on the job' (pp.57 - 58). Instead, sexual pleasure is captured in and expressed through the female body. Women keep 'the secret of bodily pleasure' (p.64).

Contemporary British soft core texts reveal a continuing absence of the male body. The taboo on representing the male body as an erotic object of *sight* therefore remains intact, though the body is present in the narratives of the magazines. Although previous studies of soft porn narratives have tended to emphasize men's dominance over women (Hardy, 1998), it is hard to find much evidence of this in contemporary magazines; indeed, there is a rough kind of equality in the way that sex is narrated here. The most striking thing about the presentation of this body is its *equivalence* to its female counterpart. Both crave sex; both are active, hot, wet, eager for more, eager for the same, though female characters continue to be more expressive; to moan, squeal and cry out with pleasure. Within soft core narratives, the real remaining taboo is on male penetration; while women are routinely penetrated in every orifice, male bodies remain intact. Men in contemporary soft core also continue to be portrayed as machine-like; theirs are hard bodies which shoot 'massive jets of come' 'like machineguns'. But ejaculation and its excess - men produce 'fountains' which 'flood' their women with 'hot wet gush' - also functions as the only sign of

male expressiveness. Ejaculate 'says' desire, makes pleasure visible by conflating orgasm with ejaculation. Elsewhere in the magazines there is evidence of continuing anxiety around the male body and its ability to perform. This is particularly noticeable in adverts for improving penis size and sexual technique and performance, as well as in the rather rueful editorial voice often used to draw attention to the unattainability of the featured models even as they are offered to the reader for his pleasure.

A similar instrumentalization of men's bodies is apparent in contemporary lifestyle magazines for men. *Men's Health* in particular focuses on the body as an 'unfinished project' which can be disciplined, thus warding off stress, uncertainty and decline (Jackson et al, 2001: pp.91 - 94). The body is a machine 'governed by experts' and worked on purposefully. In terms of sexuality, the body expresses the machine-like qualities of 'speed and performance', and sex becomes a means to an end (Jackson et al, 2001: pp.98 - 99). The reduction of pleasure to genitals to orgasm to ejaculation, characteristic of pornography, is evident here.

The depiction of men's bodies as machines is associated with an insistence on sexual difference and a refusal of male eroticization evident throughout the modern period. However, the rise of consumer culture has resulted in the emergence of a rather different construction of the male body evident in men's print media, firstly in 1950s and 1960s publications concerned with style, and more recently in the men's lifestyle magazines emerging in the 1980s. Sean Nixon has documented the development of a 1980s 'vocabulary of "style"' used to rework the male body as a commodity and an object of sight (1996: p.164). During this period a new fashion for groomed and sensuous models with 'extravagant expressions', and the use of lighting and cropping to emphasise the 'surface qualities of skin, hair, clothes' (Nixon, 1996: pp.191 - 192) marked the construction of a 'space...for the display of masculine sensuality' (Nixon, 1996: p.202), and the promotion of an 'aspirational and narcissistic masculinity' (Edwards, 1997: p.82). This shift, in which men's bodies have been increasingly objectified and sexualized (Nixon 1996, MacKinnon 1997, Bordo 1999) has been noticeably problematic within men's lifestyle magazines, and appears to have become more so during the 1990s. It has been argued that the appropriation of fashion and beauty codes more commonly associated with women suggests a potentially feminized figure, while the display of the male body as a desirable object to be looked at threatens to homosexualize it (MacKinnon 1997, McNair 2002). In response, men's lifestyle magazines of the 1990s combined their celebration of male sensuality and narcissism with an assertion of 'the

heterosexuality of the readers, often with a near-defensive vengeance' (Edwards, 1997: p.75), and with the depiction of women as 'objects of sexual scrutiny' (Nixon, 1996: p.165). The importing of soft core imagery and tone became an important strategy in the search for an acceptably virile representation of male sexuality. This coincided with the arrival of the new lad figure and with a 'more assertive articulation of the post-permissive masculine heterosexual script' (Nixon, 1996: p.205).

Contemporary monthly lifestyle magazines clearly display the legacy of 1980s portrayals of male narcissism, particularly in advertising and fashion spreads. Features which stress health, grooming and exercise regimes also work to support the notion of the male body as an object to be worked on. However, it is notable that despite the clear relation between these and a preoccupation with body maintenance evident in women's magazines, there is a key difference. Body maintenance is rarely presented as a sensuous or pleasurable practice in itself, nor is its role in fashioning the body as an object of sight emphasized. Just as the male body must not be penetrated sexually, it must remain invulnerable to a sexual gaze or to forms of touching which draw attention to its surface. In a similar way, hedonism is often presented as a form of accumulation rather than sensual pleasure, as in *GQ's* celebration of 'The girls, the cars, the clothes, the money'. In contrast, lad magazines replace a focus on body maintenance with representations of a hedonistic body defined by extrovert and excessive activity, particularly by binge-drinking, drug-taking, promiscuity and 'extreme sports' (Jackson et al, 2001: p.103). *Loaded's* 'The Hedonist's Handbook' section which features a quest to Moscow in search of 'booze and tarts' (2003: p.180) is typical of this kind of presentation.

In the new men's weeklies, this 'laddish' rejection of body maintenance and objectification reaches new heights. There are no fashion spreads, no features on health or exercise and no problem pages. The little advertising carried is mostly for media (record stores, other magazines, DVDs and CDs, mobile phones). Adverts which feature grooming products such as Brylcreem or Lynx focus on their role in securing sexual compliance from women. A preoccupation with sport - particularly football - reinstates a much more traditional representational regime of the male body in action, though this hardly precludes eroticization. An obsession with football and footballers takes a number of forms aside from the straight reporting of football news. There is a concern with the footballer as a prototypical figure of the hedonistic and successful male, manifesting, for example, in a fascination with the sexual exploits and misdemeanours of players, and with



their beautiful partners. Occasionally, this fascination cannot silence its own desire - Zoo asks in its 'Sex Quandaries' section 'If you HAD to be roasted by two current Premiership footballers...who would you choose?' (31 Jan - 6 Feb: p.41)<sup>4</sup>.

Another form of body presentation related to that of the risk-taking hedonist and apparent in men's lifestyle publications relies on elements of grotesquerie. While this is often associated with the carnivalesque porn body of downmarket porn (Kipnis, 1996), it is not a particular feature of British soft core magazines. Grotesquerie is more apparent in monthly magazines such as *Bizarre* which has been described by comedian, Ricky Gervais, as 'irresponsible... gross... mad... mental'. *Bizarre's* focus on 'bizarre sex', disfigured and injured bodies, diseases and death relates to content and style found across a range of genres addressed to men; for example in the kind of 'nasty' porn produced by Max Hardcore, in films by the Farrelly brothers, in 'Jackass' TV and in established lad mags such as *FHM* which display a similar, though more subdued interest in the grotesque and the extreme. This may be related to a particularly British and squeamish view of sex as rather 'grotty' and dirty evident elsewhere in mainstream media (Dyer, 1985), and to an older sadistic tradition of representing male bodies. Angela Carter notes a two thousand year old Western tradition of depicting 'the icon of the naked man in physical torment', the object of 'martyrdoms, executions, dissections' (1982: pp.104 - 105). This tradition underpins a representational regime in which looking at the male body is 'marked...by fear, or hatred, or aggression' (Neale, 1993: p.18) and it is resurrected with enormous energy in the men's weeklies with their endless depictions of accidents and diseases in which the body is torn, split, mutilated and destroyed in a landscape which is characterized by danger as lorries overturn, cars crash, crime soars and sharks attack.

### **embodying sex**

As I have shown, a broad tradition of representing the male body as invisible, invincible or in torment can be traced in the development of pornographic and lifestyle magazines for men. This contrasts quite strikingly with the depiction of women's bodies in magazines for men and women. In an analysis of the sex advice presented in women's magazines (2003), Petra Boynton notes that although ostensibly concerned with bodily pleasure, there is a tendency for these to focus instead on women's appearance. Here, women's bodies are presented primarily as objects of display 'to be shown in the best poses, lighting, and in

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<sup>4</sup> Top choices with readers were Michael Owen and Freddie Ljungberg.

the most flattering lingerie' (p.10). In this respect, they have much in common with the presentations of women's bodies in magazines for men. Women's bodies are the currency used to represent sex, and this is true at the most abstract and general level. A crude hierarchy of female body representation also obtains. The 'fashion body' - angular, 'naturally' beautiful, closed, self possessed - denotes women at the top of this hierarchy, the 'porn body' - curvier, artificially enhanced, open and contorted - is next<sup>5</sup>, and ordinary women - flawed, anxious, in pursuit of the ideal - are located at the bottom<sup>6</sup>. Contemporary magazines for men draw on the conventions associated with each type of body in various different ways.

In British soft core magazines, women are on display as sex performers, glamour models and ordinary women - the 'readers wives' convention being a particular feature of the more downmarket titles. A relatively glossy, 'glamour' version of the porn body is apparent in the choice of models and of ordinary women. There is a tendency to type models in quite clichéd ways; the 'new girl', the 'bored housewife', the 'lesbian' and the 'deadly woman' all feature regularly. The particular recurrence of the lesbian and of 'ordinary' women appears to reinforce the notion of women's eagerness for sex and of their 'bisexuality'.

Lifestyle magazines for men draw on the same regime of representation in various ways. Upmarket magazines favour the fashion body - GQ includes a feature on the 'supermodels of the future' (p.152) - and in this context the female body becomes a kind of glossy consumer object. Lad mags increasingly favour a particular type of female ideal, the 'babe', who combines characteristics of the fashion and glamour body. She is embodied by sexy, unthreatening performers; It girls, lingerie and glamour models and famous girlfriends. While upmarket magazines continue to draw on a combination of classy porn and fashion conventions, the downmarket titles import downmarket soft core conventions such as a preoccupation with women as sexual spectacle, both as professional sex performers and as 'reader's wives'. Ordinary-but-glamorous women feature in explicitly sexual contexts; they are quizzed about their sex lives and fantasies and invited to compete as pin-ups, for example in *FHM's* 'High Street Honeys'. At its extreme, this focus on women's appearance takes the form of judging women entirely in terms of their looks. *FHM's* 'Dog or Fox?' invites men to distinguish attractive from unattractive, asking 'can you...tell a hound from a honey?' (p.39) Given that women generally only

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<sup>5</sup> See Myers (1987) for a discussion of fashion and porn bodies.

<sup>6</sup> See Boynton (1999) for a discussion of the ways in which women respond to this hierarchy of bodies.

feature in terms of their sexual appeal, there is a tendency towards the flattening out of distinctions between ordinary and celebrity babes. The new men's weeklies operate a similar set of conventions; emphasizing women's appearance and their sexual availability and activity. Across the spectrum of magazines for men, women are objectified to embody sex; the celebrity and the reader's wife increasingly indistinguishable, the media and everyday life increasingly blurred - a mediascape of sexual display.

If women's bodies signify sex as a form of visual display, they are also, in women's magazines at least, the site of emotional labour expressed through sexual activity. As Petra Boynton notes, sex is addressed to women in terms of self-improvement, romance and relationships (2003: p.2), and its centrality to all of these makes advice and instruction by experts a focal point of many features. Their efforts focus on the heterosexual couple in the bedroom where sex becomes 'a checklist of activities and behaviours to be performed in a certain order to achieve a particular outcome'; that being, in the short term, penetration and male orgasm, and in the long term, a more satisfactory position for the woman within the relationship (2003, p.5). Sex is something women do in order to feel attractive, maintain relationships, express care and control men (2003: p.7). It is part of a post-feminist work of femininity.

Sex is not made to signify in the same way for heterosexual men. Contemporary soft porn and lifestyle magazines for men still operate largely within a 'Playboy' ideology which resists domesticity unless it can be saturated with sex, as the reader's wife and the babe girlfriend suggest. In soft porn, heterosexual relationships are purely sexual and promiscuous; women are sex performers or 'wives' who exist for the purposes of sexual display and sharing. Although some lifestyle magazines now feature relationship advice, intimate relations with women are not a prominent or serious feature of concern. In the sample of men's monthlies and weeklies that I examined, there was very little to suggest that relationships were a legitimate topic of interest. Given this, it is not surprising that expert advice on sex is less heavily featured in magazines for men, though it does exist in the monthlies; *GQ* features sex tips for men, *Men's Health* has a serious sex problem page and *FHM* adopts the downmarket porn convention of advice from a porn star in 'Jenna's Sex Lessons'. However, in the men's weeklies, sex advice is dispensed with entirely<sup>7</sup>, along with other

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<sup>7</sup> It appears in *Zoo* from July 2004 with the employment of Jodie Marsh and Mo Mowlam as 'sexperts'.

'feminine' concerns about grooming, health and relationships.

Although some men's magazines do include advice which links sex to relationships and the home, a variety of other forms of sexual presentation in magazines for men work to set it firmly outside domesticity and the heterosexual bedroom. An emphasis on sex as a 'mission' is prevalent in lad mags such as *Loaded* and *FHM* as well as in the porn magazine, *Men Only*. For example, *Loaded*'s 'Sex Hunter' is employed 'to investigate - nay, probe - all sexual activities known to man'. This form of presentation employs the squeamish comic tone noted by Dyer (1985) in British mainstream representations of sex; the June 'missions' include testing out a sex toy which is 'like trying to shag a giant wine gum', while a sexual encounter with a rubber fetishist couple results in 'a violent, spurting orgasm that makes my ears hurt' (p.57). Other forms of 'mission' are focused around sexual tourism. Sex is thus directed out of the home, rather than within it. Also notable across the range of men's magazines is a fascination with sexual representation itself. In the sample, *Loaded*, *FHM* and *Bizarre* all carried reviews of 'amusingly' outdated porn. *Mayfair* and *Men Only* reproduced 'classic' photoshoots from earlier editions. *GQ* featured an exhibition of photographs of female genitalia (p.47), and *Jack* focused on photographer, Juan Carlos Rivas, famous for his soft-focus nudes (p.128). This fascination with sexual representation is also evident in *Loaded*'s 'Pornalikes' section (p.20), featuring porn stars who 'look just like celebs', and in *Mayfair*'s 'Celebrity Sizzlers', revealing the stars of the *Charlie's Angels* film in various states of undress (pp.36 - 37). This last kind of feature has been taken up in the men's weekly *Zoo*, its 'Rude Archives' focusing on a different female celebrity semi-clothed or naked each week. The weeklies also draw on the conventions of 'tabloid' sex; news about porn stars and sex scandals, blue jokes, survey results and so on - this itself a legacy of the bawdy tradition which informs the production of British magazines for men.

The representation of sex emerges in quite different ways in magazines for women and magazines for men. Although women's magazines now claim sexual pleasure as a right, women's bodies are often made to signify as objects of display and sexual practices double as ways of maintaining heterosexual relationships. Magazines for men put a similar emphasis on women's bodies as objects of display, with soft porn narratives providing perhaps the only instance where both male and female bodies become instruments of pleasure. For the most part, women *embody* sex, a position further emphasized in the women's magazine formulation of sex as a caring performance within relationships, the home, the

bedroom. For men though, sex is made to saturate domesticity, or more commonly presented as something beyond the home where it exists as part of a spectacle, a mediascape, as 'eye candy'. While sex is presented to women as something to *be* and something to *do*, for men it becomes somewhere to *go* and something to *have*; a holiday, a sport, entertainment, exercise, imagery, a laugh.

### **constructing male sexuality**

Recent theoretical accounts of masculinity have had relatively little to say about soft core pornography, but they have focused quite heavily on lifestyle publications for men and on the kinds of discourses, figures and subjects that are constructed there. Particular attention has been paid to the development of 'laddism' which is evident in the most popular monthly magazines, *Loaded* and *FHM*, which permeates the new weekly magazines, and which has also impacted on most other magazines for men, displacing 'softer versions' of masculinity with an emphasis on 'drinking to excess, adopting a predatory attitude towards women and obsessive forms of independence' (Jackson et al, 2001: p.78). Although some monthly magazines now feature articles on relationships, sex, health and lifestyle in the tradition of women's media, their ironic and bantering address has been seen as a way of maintaining a safe distance between the reader and these issues (Jackson et al, 2001). More generally, a playboy lifestyle is advocated and 'authentic' maleness is represented as hedonistic, commitment-phobic, and autonomous. This trend in magazine publishing is also evident in a range of other media texts addressed to men.

The shift towards laddism has been explained in a variety of ways. The notion of masculinity 'in crisis' has regularly been called on to explain the 'regressive and adolescent tendencies' of this form of presentation, its 'nostalgic retreat to infantile forms of behaviour...an obsession with 70s and 80s culture...and a kind of rebellious posturing against "adult" authority (or possibly feminism)' (Benwell, 2003: p.14). The extent to which this represents a deliberate refusal to engage with changing relations of gender, or to which it can be understood as an incoherent expression of insecurity and confusion, is disputed. David Gauntlett argues that the tone employed by the magazines is merely a 'kind of defensive shield' or 'protective layer' (Gauntlett, 2002: p.167 - 168), whereas Jackson et al claim that this defense amounts to a 'kind of counter-modernity' (Jackson et al, 2001: p.86). For Imelda Whelehan it is all too successful in 'abdicating any sense of responsibility' and promoting a 'boyish, incompetent model of masculinity' (Whelehan, 2000: p.117 - 118), a

hostile response to changes in gender relations and to women's self-determination (Whelehan, 2000).

Tim Edwards has argued that we need to put the development of this form of masculine presentation into a broader historical context. The success of laddism, he claims, has depended precisely on its ability to sell consumer culture to men; a success 'predicated upon a wider understanding of masculine identity and "lifestyle" ' and drawing on an older 'legacy of a sharp dressing, heterosexually promiscuous and equally highly consumerist masculinity' (Edwards, 2003: p.142 - 3). This history is evident in the development of the playboy ethos celebrated in soft core pornographic and lifestyle publications in the US and the UK since the 1950s. In Britain, it can be related more specifically to a celebration of 'working class machismo in the form of football, the pub and masturbation' (Edwards, 2003: p.144), and to a sexual sensibility associated with the peculiarly British elements of bawdy. The current success of this particular blend also lies in its reconstruction of a consumerist masculinity which focuses on leisure pursuits and eschews aspiration and careers; a particularly important move given the context of late twentieth century economic recession. This ability to manage uncertainties about work has been complemented by a facility for appearing to disentangle consumption from feminization or homosexualization, allowing men to 'use moisturiser, dress up and go shopping without appearing middle-class, effeminate or homosexual' (Edwards, 2003: p.144). That these forms of consumption and sexualization remain dangerous in this respect is indicated by their erasure from the new men's weeklies, and by the more general trend towards an emphasis on the visceral, 'natural' elements of men's sexuality. This emphasis is reinforced stylistically by a more recent move away from the 'ironic' stance of earlier new lad portrayals to a 'post-ironic' celebration of all things male.

As I have shown, it is possible to distinguish the presentation of sex and sexuality in magazines for men from the corresponding portrayals in women's magazine culture. I have also shown that there are a number of ways in which constructions of male heterosexuality are intertwined across the formats of soft core pornography and lifestyle magazines. Within this there are a variety of ways of representing men's bodies, desires and sexual relationships, but broadly speaking it is possible to identify a series of key characteristics and developments. A concern with hedonism is evident across soft core and lifestyle magazines, though the focus on the pleasures of sex and the pleasures of commodity consumption are emphasized to varying degrees. Although a late twentieth century concern with the male body as an erotic object and

with a more emotional and relationship-focused portrayal of masculinity is still apparent in some magazines for men, this form of presentation has been supplanted to some extent by a return to a more traditional set of masculine signifiers embodied by the new lad, but drawing on older forms of signification from earlier 'playboy' portrayals, from a British bawdy tradition and from late twentieth century soft core porn. 'Dirtier' and more explicit portrayals of sex and women prevail across the board. A form of porn-chic allows upmarket, glossy, lifestyle concerns to be successfully combined with an earthier and more narrowly focused preoccupation with sexual pleasure. Although this has meant that pornography now signifies slightly differently as a 'cool' form of representation, the particularity of the soft core magazine is starting to disappear as the distinctions between lifestyle and pornography become less marked than the distinctions between upmarket and downmarket conventions across both sectors. These developments are in need of interpretation and contextualization.

In order to understand the shifting development of constructions of masculinity in magazines for men, a broad understanding of the post-modern context of their production is necessary. In this context, sexuality is divorced from reproduction, becoming primarily an expression of individuality, a form of recreation and a means of constructing intimate, though not necessarily long-lasting relationships. Anthony Giddens has argued that there has been a historical drift towards an 'episodic' sexuality associated with a masculine avoidance of intimacy, and towards a 'pure' couple relationship in which romantic love and sexual pleasure are combined and in which democratic mutual self-interest prevails (Giddens, 1992). Although elements of the 'pure' relationship are recognizable in those aspects of men's media which deal with relationships, emotional articulacy and sexual communication, it is an episodic and hedonistic recreational sexuality which is more evident in soft core pornography and lifestyle magazines for men. A shift away from the notion of the enduring intimate relationship and a corresponding emphasis on the individual as the prime component of the contemporary world has also worked to reconstruct sexual experiences as forms of commodity (Bauman, 2003). The corresponding depiction of sex as a form of recreation or 'play' is particularly evident in the focus on sexual hedonism across these publications, and even more dramatically so in the rather infantile figure of the new lad for whom 'masturbation' and the 'drunken one-night stand' are the emblematic sexual encounters (Edwards, 2003: p.139).

These new constructions of male sexuality can be understood more precisely in the context of a return to 'libidinous heterosexuality'; as a reaction against the narcissism, sexual puritanism, asexuality and inauthenticity associated with the new man, political correctness, feminism, HIV and AIDS (Gill, 2003: p.53). This is presented as a return to a more 'natural' state of affairs, a move which also underpins a number of other shifts towards essentialist thinking in science, therapy and popular culture (Gill, 2003: p.50 - 51). Despite its apparent naturalness, the performative nature of this masculine stance is clear. Estella Tincknell et al argue that a discourse of 'coolness' (Pountain & Robins, 2000 in Tincknell et al, 2003) achieved through strategies of narcissism, irony, emotional detachment or hedonism works as 'a crucial formulation in the production of contemporary post-modern models of identity and personal relations' (Tincknell et al, 2003: p.55). In the case of British lad magazines, they note, this translates as 'a self-consciously narcissistic and emotionally shallow celebration of "sexual liberation"', of hedonism and male grotesquerie. In this reading, a preoccupation with pornography, women's bodies and the mechanics of sex, alongside a disengagement from the emotional and ethical aspects of sexual relationships works to contain 'woman as image' and to allow men to distance themselves from the need to interact with women as social and sexual subjects (Tincknell et al, 2003: pp. 59 - 60). This distancing strategy appears to extend across the range of magazines for men I have discussed; indeed, it marks the history of men's magazine culture, from *Playboy's* initial rebellion against domesticity to the more recent scriptings of a highly consumerist, individualist and hedonistic sexuality.

It should be noted that this shift is one that characterizes many late modern representations of masculinity and femininity. Many media texts now construct gender as a matter of sophisticated consumption and the self-sufficient individual - male or female - has replaced the couple or family as the most significant social unit. There is also a generalized movement towards sexualization across men's and women's media within which female sexuality is represented as 'active, recreational, material, independent, consumerist and consumed' (Evans, 1993:41). Although I have focused on representations of male sexuality here, there is a real need for further work which looks at the ways in which discourses of heterosexuality are developing, and which is capable of evaluating these in terms of the way they construct post-modern sexuality and reconfigure gender. A tendency towards representing male and female heterosexuality in terms of recreation, narcissism, hedonism and auto-eroticism can be noted here in general terms. A contradictory emphasis on



sexuality as a site of knowing and sophisticated expression, most obviously apparent in the current fashion for the retro appreciation of older sexual forms of representation, in the development of a hybrid porn-chic style, and in the foregrounding of sexually explicit representation itself as a key site for sexual discourse on the one hand, and a renewed essentialist focus on the naturalness of sexuality on the other, can also be seen as indicative of this general trend in representing heterosexuality.

However, within this broad shift towards the construction of post-modern sexuality there are some key gender differences as I have indicated. There is a much greater emphasis on sex as 'wholesome' in women's magazine culture; indeed sexual practices are reconfigured here as part of a whole set of activities focused on health, therapy, sexuality, fashion and beauty that are currently emerging as a site for women's self-fashioning. Here, sex becomes part of a very self-conscious process of identity construction and of a more diffuse understanding of bodily pleasure and self-indulgence. Although some men's magazines have appropriated this kind of concern where they focus on grooming, exercise and relationships, there is far less emphasis on this set of practices and on the general notion of self-care and self-development found in women's media. In particular, and despite the cultural shift towards representing women as active and desiring subjects, there is still a tendency to depict male sexuality as physical, raw and earthy, while female sexuality is constructed as more diffuse and sensuous. Another key difference can be noted in the construction of sexuality as a matter of 'class' and in relation to what might be termed 'upmarket' and 'downmarket' sensibilities. Although the general shift towards the sexualization of women's media might be seen as part of a downward drift in popular media, women are most frequently addressed as sexual consumers in terms that elevate and dignify an interest in sex. Sexually explicit texts for women often make a claim to aesthetic value (Juffer, 1998), and the marketing of sex to women generally emphasizes the *quality* of sexual goods and the women who consume them. In contrast, men's magazines are currently dominated by a fascination with 'low' forms of sexuality and there is a downmarket shift across the sector. Finally, although sex is increasingly represented to women as a form of recreation, the significance of sex as a relational activity is still stressed to a far greater extent than in magazines for men. While it is evident that new forms of sexual construction in print media are offered to both women and men in the context of pure relationships *and* episodic encounters, relational *and* recreational pursuits, there is a particular skewing of these so that the pure

relationship is linked to women and episodic, hedonistic forms of sexual play are foregrounded for men.

One of the most interesting things about the ways in which representations of heterosexuality are changing is an uncertainty about the extent to which they seem to be new and the extent to which they simultaneously appear to stay the same. As this discussion has suggested there are clear indications of new figures of masculinity, of emerging sexual styles and sensibilities, and of increasing variety in the forms of presentation used to construct male heterosexuality. Yet, as with contemporary representations of female sexuality, a recycling of traditional notions of sexual difference is evident. While it is clear that existing elements within the formats of lifestyle and soft pornography are reworked to reconstruct a very contemporary form of masculinity, this is, oddly, at the same time a bricolage of those familiar and rather old-fashioned signifiers of masculinity, 'tits and ass and porn and fighting'. Although it is tempting to rush into a reading of these elements as evidence of a whole new regime of masculine representation or, on the other hand, as evidence of no change at all, there is a need to develop far more situated and careful analyses in order to interpret and contextualize contemporary constructions of male heterosexuality.

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