

**REPRESENTATIONS.**  
the construction of gender in popular culture

Dissertation  
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## Introduction

It is difficult to talk - or write - about gender. One reason is that our gender identity is inseparable from almost every aspect of our lives. Saying something about femininity or masculinity means making a statement about yourself, the person next to you, or this person's partner, parents or children.

Consequently, most people look at the subject from a personal viewpoint (even though pretending to be totally objective); speaking from their personal experience rather than seeing it as a neutral subject that can be analysed and researched. Gender is a factor in interpersonal relations as well as in public life and the working world. As much as it is a personal issue, the positioning of women and men in society also has to do with social and economic structures, and with power relations within these structures. It is both an individual and a public concern. The individual dimension on one hand and the sociological on the other, my project requires two seemingly contradicting viewpoints: a personal perspective based on individual experience, and a rational one backed up by profound research.

Theories analysing gender as a cultural phenomenon originate in movements like the women's liberation, feminism or the gay and lesbian movement. Looking at gender has always had a political dimension.

Gender is a property of individuals, social structures and symbolic systems. Gender relations are also power relations which lead to unequal access to material resources. This is why a study of gender is more than simply an interesting intellectual endeavour; it is also a political activity.<sup>1</sup>

An important concern for feminist artists and critics in the 1970s was that politics cannot be neatly defined as just an issue of parliamentary debate, and that art is not isolated from politics. Therefore they didn't approve of the separation between the personal and the political and voiced their demand for a content to art. In contemporary graphic design, Rick Poyner sees a general reluctance to take up a position. He feels that "creative operatives" such as

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<sup>1</sup> Gill Kirkup, *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader* (Routledge: London, New York, 2000), p.3.

designers, writers, architects and directors should go beyond the power to involve and entertain and give their work a meaningful direction rather than rejecting the responsibility for the effect their work has on their audience. If self-expression is an end in itself, he thinks the denial of objective reality entails that an individual's personal view of the world is held up as the measure of all things.<sup>1</sup>

I appreciate the fact that my project has a theme people can relate to and have personal opinions about. After all, this shows I have chosen a subject of social and cultural relevance. I don't think anybody can ever be truly objective, whether in science or in the arts, and therefore do not consider my findings to be universally true. I do however want to express a standpoint that reflects more than my own subjective perception. This standpoint will still be individual, but it will benefit from both personal perspectives and research taking into account findings in cultural and gender studies, and so doing has broadened my own view. An individual perspective doesn't necessarily exclude an analytical one, and vice versa. They can even be mutually inspiring. Analysing a topic has an effect on one's perception of related situations in everyday life. Consequently, personal experience is seen in a different light, and research might even bring about new, and different experiences. In return, individual preference or interest inspires and influences research, the choice of material and literature, and the process of selecting relevant information. Not only are analysis and subjectivity compatible, the two cannot be separated.

My project explores the correlation of design, culture and society, and the role of visual communication in the creation of gender identities. How are femininity and masculinity portrayed in popular culture? Does design contribute to, maintain, or even create gender stereotypes?

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Poynor, "Where is Here? Here Is Me!", *Graphis* (Graphis Inc.: New York), Volume 55, Issue 320, March/April 1999, p.16.

## Terms and Expressions

I am using the expressions 'female' and 'male' to refer to a person's biological sex as a product of nature as opposed to the expressions 'feminine' and 'masculine' describing a person's gender as a product of culture. My explorations focus on contemporary Western cultures and might not be representative of other cultures.

Using the term 'representation', I am talking about cultural representation in the media and the visual arts. Rather than looking at numerical representations of social groups, I am investigating ideas about social groups represented in popular culture.

## Feminist Theory - Gender Theory

One of the achievements of feminism has been the distinction between sex and gender, and the definition of gender as a role rather than a biological condition. Early feminist theory first recognised gender as "historically viable and socially constructed"<sup>1</sup> and explored its links to other social categories like race and class.

Gender role theory considers women's and men's roles in society different, but equal. However, the idea of complementary gender roles masks the fact that in reality they are relations of domination rather than complementary. Interestingly sociologists do not speak of 'class roles' or 'race roles'.

Socio-biology often uses women's physical capability to give birth as an explanation for gender-specific behaviour: women are emotional, intuitive and communicative because it is their 'natural' function to perform child care, they are more enduring because their bodies are adjusted to the pains and strains of giving birth. They fall for tall, strong men because they're looking for a provider to feed their breed. Men conquer women as their genes tell them

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew Perchuk, Helaine Posner (eds.), *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000), p.21.

they ought to hunt, violence is an evolutionary necessity for outdoing rivals, and rape is a natural means to spread their semen. Such assumptions reduce the complexity of gender to biological functions, and presuppose all social interaction was geared towards reproduction. They also ignore history and culture as a factor in shaping society.

“Broad differences in the character traits and behaviours of women and men” have been presupposed in socio-biology. This has been disproved by a great deal of recent research. “The usual findings on intellect, temperament and other personal traits are that there are no measurable differences at all. Where differences appear, they are small compared to variations within either sex...”<sup>1</sup>.

Naomi Wolf, feminist writer and author of *Misconceptions* thinks biology can influence psychology. During her own pregnancy she experienced emotional states she describes as “loosing my mind” and felt very ‘feminine’ qualities emerging, such as cocooning or not wanting to get engaged in debate. Even though hormones, so called “brain chemistry” might have an effect on the psyche, she thinks that in no way this should be used to determine social positioning. In her view, men are not pushed to deny their biology as much as women are (imagine hearing “You can’t be in that position, your testosterone would get in the way”).<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the key role of pregnancy Judith Butler argues that women are only fertile at a certain age, during a certain period of time. The major part of their lives, women cannot become pregnant, some women never can and many simply choose not to. Yet, social positioning of all women is reduced to the one criterion of pregnancy.

Whereas early feminist theory saw biology as the determining factor for gender difference, Judith Butler defines gender as a mere cultural construction, the effect of which is a stylisation of the body. This stylisation becomes visible in movements, gestures and dress. The body functions as a bearer of meaning and, through its performance, creates the illusion of gender.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Woodward (ed.), *Identity and Difference: Culture, Media and Identities* (Sage: London, 1997), p.229.

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Wolf in a talk at the *Borders* bookshop Glasgow, 12. 9. 2001.

<sup>3</sup> See Perchuk, Posner, *The Masculine Masquerade*.

The expression 'role' suggests a distinction between behaviour and the 'real' person behind. Although Judith Butler describes gender as an artificially constructed identity, "the artifice does not mask some other truth...Our performance of gender is artifice in the sense that it is created by us and not 'natural'"<sup>1</sup>. We create the illusion of gender through our performance, but this does not imply gender can be changed like a dress. Although gender is constructed, it is an internalised role that, as part of our identity, becomes second nature.

Identity is a complex structure rather than a single homogeneous unity, shaped by the influence of childhood, family, age and generation, body, nationality and culture. These different identities are not always in conformity with each other. For example, one's cultural identity can differ from their ethnic identity. Gender is one of many identities, but it is crucial because it relates to most of the others. Gender, childhood and family are linked because members of a family usually take on different gender roles. The appearance of gender in a society varies in relation to religion, culture or ethnic background, and of course our gender identity is closely related to our physical appearance, our body, and the norms and standards it is expected to meet.

Gender identity is heterogeneous in itself. Femininity and masculinity are not single defined categories. They are rather the sum total of their appearances. These appearances vary by "class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age, mental and physical ability"<sup>2</sup>, and other factors. Therefore, it is more appropriate to speak of different masculinities and femininities, all fragile, unfinished and incomplete.

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<sup>1</sup> See Perchuk, Posner, *The Masculine Masquerade.*, p.18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.15.

## “Images change us as we change them”<sup>1</sup>: Representation

An important stage in the course was the beginning of term two, when I decided to focus on representation. I spent term one researching the theme in breadth and although I was emphasising on popular culture within the whole subject of gender studies, I realised it would probably take a lot longer than a year to cover the entire field. There seemed to be no area where gender wasn't relevant in one or the other way, and every door I opened revealed several others I wanted to look behind. Conscious of the fact that without a focus my work would be lacking depth, I was keen to concentrate on the relevant points. On the other hand, I didn't want to limit myself at this early stage by spreading my investigations too thinly.

Initially I explored different aspects of popular culture such as fashion, films, popular music, toys and other commercial products, and how they are designed in a gender-specific way. I came across posters of muscular Robbies (“the only thing better than shagging two birds at the same time is life itself”<sup>2</sup>) and child-like Britneys<sup>3</sup>, all the football and action stuff for boys and girls' shops full of pink and glitter; or women in night clubs wearing short skirts, tight tops and high heels, whereas most men were dressed rather casually. I found many of the clichés I had been looking for. But once I applied my findings to other age groups or social milieus, they became questionable. Since I was new to the college, the city, and to the country, I was very aware of my environment. The appearance of people I saw at the Art College, for example, was quite different from what I encountered on Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow on a Friday night. The clichés seen in shops, magazines and films are not the mirror image of real life. Although these stereotypes are related to reality in many ways, their appearance is not as simple and predictable as that of pop-icons or cartoon characters. Life is a lot more ambiguous and complex than its representation in the media. I realised it was necessary to discriminate representation from reality.

Nobody believes everything we see on television or read in glossy magazines is realistic. However, if media images lacked any reference to life whatsoever,

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<sup>1</sup>“Images change us as we change them, they are part of the contest that is social change, the contest of differing histories and ideas.”

Sandy Nairne, *State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980s* (Chatto & Windus, 1987), p.20.

<sup>2</sup> Robbie Williams in “Rob by Nature”, TV Channel 4, 23.6.2001.

<sup>3</sup> App.1

we wouldn't be able to relate to them at all. So what is the function of representation? If it doesn't mirror reality, does it just simplify it? Does it merely react to the needs of a market, or does it influence reality by shaping our ideas and thoughts, and by creating powerful images?

In *The Matter of Images*, Richard Dyer describes three main characteristics of contemporary media representation:

- Representation is selective: individuals in the media are often used to replace a group of people. One member of this group then represents the whole social group.
- Representation is culture-specific: representations are presentations. The use of codes and conventions available in a culture shapes and restricts "what can be said ... about any aspect of reality in a given place, in a given society at a given time"<sup>1</sup>.
- Representation is subject to interpretation: although visual codes are restricted by cultural convention, they "do not have single determinate meanings"<sup>2</sup>. To a certain degree, their meaning is a matter of interpretation.

Unlike real life, representation follows the rules of a market and there are makers and consumers who control this market. I think a good example for the selective nature of representation is the reality-TV show "Big Brother". The genre suggests the viewer is going to see real life and real people rather than professional actors; however, the concept "has little to do with 'uncut reality' and much to do with the programme's editing which revealed the participants as one-dimensional panto characters"<sup>3</sup>. TV psychologists, talk shows and even trailers contribute a great deal to the creation of these characters. The viewer is given the impression to actively participate in the process of voting in or evicting people, but in fact the carefully controlled matching of characters starts with the participants being chosen by Channel 4 in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation* (Routledge: New York, London, 1993), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Radcliffe, "Big Bother", *The List* (The List Ltd.: Edinburgh), Issue 426, 7-21 June 2001, p.117.

This year there were motherly Penny, intellectual Elizabeth, bitching Emma and naive Helen, bossy Stuart, introvert Dean, working class Bubble and jolly Brian. The “housemates” seemed to serve as a cross-section of society (or “Big Brother’s” definition thereof), each person representing a social group identified through dress (hairstyle, clothing, makeup, jewellery), language and behaviour. Significantly, Channel 4 chose the clothes the participants wore on their first day in the “Big Brother house”.

The process of linking up cultural codes with ideas is determined by every single element of media representation: adverts, trailers, talk shows and press comments. Helen walking on tiptoes and speaking in a high voice when Josh comes in was interpreted as a conscious attempt to use her sex appeal in order to get male attention. Stuart’s excessive practice of doing press-ups in front of the camera every morning however was seen as part of his ambitious nature. Could it be coincidence that Helen was portrayed as the naive blonde Welsh girl while black Emma was given the image of the brainy bitch?

“Big Brother” is not the only TV programme and there are alternatives for those who don’t identify with the mainstream. Nevertheless, change or subversion always defines itself in relation to the existing framework. Breaking the rules can make you aware of them, but doesn’t necessarily change them.

## Stereotyping

The expression stereotype has acquired a negative meaning, but Walter Lippmann sees stereotyping as a necessary and useful social process. He distinguishes three major functions of stereotyping:<sup>1</sup>

- Ordering process: categorisations, generalisations and typifications are instruments of societies to make sense of themselves. Such orderings are partial, but not always untrue, because “partial knowledge is not false knowledge, it is simply not absolute knowledge”<sup>2</sup>.
- Short cut: stereotypes work like signs, they are simple, striking and easily grasped, but still carry complex information.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dyer, *The Matter of Images*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p.12.

- Reference: as a sign, a stereotype refers to something we know in reality and associate certain ideas with. In referring to 'reality', reality is interpreted. In this sense, stereotyping is a projection of values onto 'the world'. Stereotypes are therefore defined by their social function.<sup>1</sup>

I agree with Walter Lippmann in that stereotyping can be useful in communication as an ordering process or a shortcut. However, even though "partial knowledge is not false knowledge" incomplete information can influence our perception of a person or a social group as a whole and thus create a false impression, although the information given might be true. I do believe stereotypes not only express general agreements about a group in society, but also influence our ideas about this group. "How we are seen determines in part how we are treated, how we treat others is based on how we see them, such seeing comes from representation"<sup>2</sup>.

Dyer points out that the critical focus should not be on the act of stereotyping itself, but on the way stereotypes are defined and controlled. Not the fact that stereotypes represent somebody or something in a simplified manner is crucial, but the values and ideas these stereotypes represent. Not the stereotype as a form, but its content, function and meaning are important.

According to Dyer, the most important function of stereotypes is to maintain boundaries, to define "who belongs" and "who is beyond"<sup>3</sup>. In reality, he argues, it is hard to draw a line between social groups from merely looking at a person. Class or sexual orientation, for example, are not obvious at first sight. Clothing, hairstyle, make-up, jewellery and body language tell us more about a person's biological sex than the actual physicality of their body. The biological difference between women and men is negligible compared to what they have in common. Gender stereotypes make the invisible visible and so create sharp boundaries. Dyer concludes stereotyping maintains and even creates difference in reality where there is similarity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Dyer, *The Matter of Images*, pp.11-13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.15.

<sup>4</sup> See Ibid, pp. 13 – 16.

## Visual Communication and Gender

In the Argos store catalogue the heading “Business Travel Range – designed to meet the needs of today’s professionals” shows a man in a grey suit carrying his suitcase<sup>1</sup>. Even though the majority of people in higher positions are male, this portrayal of “today’s professionals” does not reflect the real situation, but helps to preserve gender stereotypes. In the toy’s section, we see one boy and seven girls playing with plastic cookers. Toys related to cleaning and childcare are only shown together with girls, whereas the pages advertising tool kits, workbenches and cars only feature boys<sup>2</sup>. Fancy dresses for children promote a defined idea of appropriate roles: girls dress up as nurses, fairies and princesses and boys as racing drivers, astronauts, cowboys or firemen.<sup>3</sup>

The titles of the Little Miss/Mr. Men books sum up the notions of femininity and masculinity expressed in the stories. There are Little Miss Tidy and Mr. Messy, Little Miss Wise and Mr. Clever, Little Miss Tiny and Mr. Small, Little Miss Shy and Mr. Brave<sup>4</sup>. Little Miss Busy and Mr. Busy seemed to be the first equal couple on the bookshelf (not taking into account the difference in marital status). Only at first sight, though: “Little Miss Busy” is “as busy as a bee” cleaning the house “from top to bottom – and then from bottom to top, just to make sure”; “she even dusted the bread and polished the butter”<sup>5</sup>. “Mr. Busy does things ten times faster as ever you or I could” and “he lives in a very busy-looking house which he’d built himself”<sup>6</sup>. Little Miss Busy is diligent and dutiful; Mr. Busy is fast, productive and efficient.

The Somerfield magazine implicitly addresses women in their articles: “...spooky stories can leave your little devils in the need of healthy, warming food. That doesn’t mean you have to slave in the kitchen all night...”<sup>7</sup>. The impression that the person to feed the “little devils” is a woman is enhanced by the images used in the layout, which depict mainly women and children. The Magazine also features beauty and health tips, putting it in line with other

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<sup>1</sup> *Argos Brighter Shopping* (Argos), Spring/Summer 2001, p.74.

<sup>2</sup> *Argos Brighter Shopping* (Argos), Autumn/Winter 2001, pp. 824-835, pp. 870-876.

<sup>3</sup> *Argos Brighter Shopping* (Argos), Autumn/Winter 2000, p.746.

<sup>4</sup> App.2

<sup>5</sup> Roger Hargreaves, *Little Miss Busy* (Price Stern Sloan Inc.: Los Angeles, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Roger Hargreaves, *Mr. Busy* (Price Stern Sloan Inc.: Los Angeles, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> “Hallowe’en & Bonfire Night”, *Somerfield Magazine* (The Mill House: Bristol), October 2001, p.32.

women's magazines. On the one hand, this reflects the fact that in families women mostly do the shopping. The representation of 'reality' however is also a definition thereof. It is impossible to portray reality without interpreting and shaping it. The fact that layout, photography, texts and advertised products do not appeal to men does not just reflect the real situation; it helps preserve traditional gender roles, and furthermore, ignores men who actually do shop for food.

It is not impossible to attract new target groups, though. The market for pre-teen magazines didn't exist a few years ago and is still not saturated. The latest attempt to conquer new markets is a magazine called Mad About Boys, featuring advice on dieting and dating. It is targeted at 8 - 12 year old girls.

In the 1980s, Arena was launched, specifically with the purpose to create a market for men's fashion magazines. It was a new concept at the time, and in fact is still one of the very few fashion magazines with an exclusively male target group. While female models in Arena are photographed in a rather conventional way, the portrayal of men<sup>1</sup> is unusual. They are shown in passive, pensive poses, often unaware of being watched. Their bodies are exposed to the viewer's gaze and thus appear vulnerable. The men are shown as objects of desire, indeed an unusual approach in men's fashion. Arena has "certainly contributed to an atmosphere that confronted both British ambivalence to visual culture and style-led design, and the male phobia of glossy magazines"<sup>2</sup>.

Ikea moves away from traditional images, speaking of a family that "no longer neatly conforms to the statistical 2 + 2.5"<sup>3</sup> and showing photographs of men and children together, thus giving the impression of single fathers (or fathers who stay at home while the mother works). In their stores they provide baby changing facilities in both women's and men's toilets. When will it be normal to see homosexual couples in a furniture catalogue, having breakfast with their children or sitting in front of the fireplace?

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<sup>1</sup> App.3

<sup>2</sup> David Cook, "Redesigning Men: Arena Magazine, Image and Identity" in Teal Triggs (ed.), *Communicating Design: Essays in Visual Communications* (Batsford: London, 1995), p.16.

<sup>3</sup> *Ikea 2002* (Inter Ikea Systems B. V., 2001), p.9.

## Gender in the Visual Arts

Barbara Kruger is probably the most well known graphic designer who addresses the representation of femininity in her work. She superimposes laconic texts on found images and reveals the stereotype as an instrument of power. With captions like “We won’t play nature to your culture”, “I am your reservoir of poses” or “We are being made spectacles of”<sup>1</sup>, she intervenes in stereotyping as a social commentator and political agitator. She examines the capacity of signs to determinate our thoughts, attitudes and desires and investigates representation in this context. Kruger’s juxtapositions of images and texts expose and oppose stereotypes. The instant legibility of graphic design techniques is used to imprint the stereotype directly on the viewer’s imagination.

Although the images don’t need as much decoding and interpretation as, for example, an abstract painting would, I think grasping the full meaning of the texts in correlation to the image requires knowledge of feminist theory. A photograph of a group of men is combined with the caption: “You construct intricate rituals which allow you to touch the skin of other men”<sup>2</sup>. According to feminist theory, in the traditional concept of masculinity male homosexuality is repressed, and ritualised forms of banter are used to justify body contact amongst men that otherwise would be considered effeminate. The same is true for the representation of sports in the media where the male body in action justifies men watching other men’s bodies.<sup>3</sup>

The density of Kruger’s texts is amazing. Still I think they are not fully comprehensible without further explanation. Secondly, I think Kruger’s visual and verbal language is very much rooted in a particular form of political art of the time. The proclamation-like slogans would not be a suitable form of communication in contemporary visual arts.

Cindy Sherman examines the portrayal of femininity in filmic representation and questions the woman as an object of the male gaze. Her Film Stills (1975 - 1980)<sup>4</sup> don’t have an original, they are photographic self-portraits.

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<sup>1</sup> App.4

<sup>2</sup> App.5

<sup>3</sup> See Anthony Easthope, *What a Man’s Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (Paladin: London, 1986), part IV.

<sup>4</sup> App.6

The images give an impression of women's alienation from their bodies; we see "endless repetitions of her vulnerability and his control"<sup>1</sup>. Sherman's *Disgust Pictures* and *Sex Pictures*<sup>2</sup> use arrangements with deformed and mutilated dolls to comment on horror and porn movies. I like the subtleness and captivating mood in Sherman's *Film Stills*. Although they are not taken from existing films, they somehow look familiar, as though seen many times before. The *Disgust Pictures* are disturbing without leaving the viewer feeling patronised.

Unfortunately, I couldn't find any contemporary graphic design work on the topic. Images of femininity and masculinity are to a high degree created in the media and through design, so to me using the visual language of the media is an appropriate way to question these images. I am therefore looking at the subject from a graphic-designer's viewpoint, using design as a communication tool that is familiar, easy to decode and close to reality.

Kruger's and Sherman's works successfully question the depiction of the feminine in representation and society. Yet, masculinity remains largely untouched.

## Masculinity

Over the last 20 years, feminist analysis has focused on women's identity and their role in society. While constructed messages about femininity in the media were questioned, "the depiction of men and masculinity was of interest only in so far as it related to or informed the portrayal of women and the feminine"<sup>3</sup>.

Feminism and gay politics started to make masculinity visible by putting it into question and openly challenging dominant ideas. Yet they mainly treated it as a source of oppression. Doing so allows masculinity to remain "the untouched and untouchable ground against which femininity figures as the repressed"<sup>4</sup>. Concentrating on changing the idea of femininity in media representation,

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *Cindy Sherman 1979 – 1993* (Rizzoli International Publications, 1993), p.52.

<sup>2</sup> App.7

<sup>3</sup> Marj Kibby, "Representing Masculinity", <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/so/represent.htm>

<sup>4</sup> C. Holmlund, cited in Kibby, "Representing Masculinity".

masculinity stayed invisible. "A focus on the depiction of the feminine while seemingly exempting the masculine from visual representation, helps to preserve a cultural fiction that masculinity is not socially constructed."<sup>1</sup> In his book *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture*, Anthony Easthope shows that masculinity has its own particular identity and structure. He explores its construction and effects in culture and society. By describing masculinity as gendered, it loses its invisibility and universal status. Like femininity, it is a performance, a masquerade, with its own particular norms and restrictions.<sup>2</sup>

I do find this standpoint very interesting and in some ways it reflects my own approach. My starting point obviously was my identity and role as a woman. Since most of the restricting norms seemed to apply to women rather than men, I was under the impression that there wasn't much to analyse about masculinity. When I started visualising my thoughts and ideas, I found it easier to deal with femininity than with masculinity, as though certain patterns of criticism, analysis and humour were already established and therefore more obvious. Easthope is right in saying "to be male in a modern society is to benefit from being installed...in a position of power"<sup>3</sup>. This is because the dominant concept of masculinity regards power and maleness as practically synonymous. A new movement called "masculism" considers Western mainstream masculinity an extremely repressive concept. The idea of the white, heterosexual, dominant male was long seen as the universal "against which all others are measured (and found lacking), which permitted men to remain blind to their own subjectivity"<sup>4</sup>.

With this project, I am making a conscious effort to look at masculinity as critically and detailed as I examine femininity. In doing so, I am searching to decentre masculinity from the norm and reveal it as culturally constructed, not natural.

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<sup>1</sup> Kibby, "Representing Masculinity".

<sup>2</sup> See Easthope, *What a Man's Gotta Do*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Perchuk, Posner, *The Masculine Masquerade*, p.22.

## Experiments

I was struggling to produce creative output in term one and two and to translate complex thoughts into visual ideas. I was looking for the ultimate idea and the one piece of work summing up the entire thought process I had gone through, and hoped to make people instantly realise everything I had found out in several months. Of course this idea never came. Instead, I realised something very important: A Masters is not about results, it's about processes. It is not about producing work for the show at the end of the course, but about working with a subject over a long period of time. I decided to focus on the single stages of this process rather than on the end product.

## Stereo Types

Looking at magazines, adverts and catalogues, I explored the relationship between product and design concept. I felt image, language, typography, colours and shapes were consciously applied to create a gender-specific identity for the products. In a booklet, each double page juxtaposes two pieces of graphic design, for example tables of content in women's and men's magazines or the language used to advertise girls' and boys' toys in catalogues<sup>1</sup>. Captions like "pretty pink tea party" and "ballistic light gun and pedal" or "I can say nine cute phrases" and "exploding head!"<sup>2</sup> speak for themselves. Some products are associated with either the female or the male sex and are specifically labelled if they are targeted at the other sex (magazine "Golf Digest Woman", "Lady Shaver"). What would it look like to have a "Gentleman Shaver"?

Inspired by the first experiment, I took a closer look at magazines. The magazines Girl Talk and FBX: For Boys Xclusively are both pre-teen magazines published by the BBC and available at most newsagents and supermarkets.

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<sup>1</sup> App.8

<sup>2</sup> All *Argos Autumn/Winter 2000*.

Major contents in Girl Talk are stars, beauty/health, pets/animals, fashion and TV. Pastel tones of pink, blue and yellow dominate the colour scheme. Type includes upper and lower case; the characters have round, bubbly shapes. Images on the cover and the inside mostly depict girls between 8 and 11 years. Images and cartoons in FBX mainly show adult male figures, often in connection with body-contact sports like football, wrestling or boxing. Topics listed in the table of contents revolve around technology, sports and action: weapons, MP3 players, digital games (game boy, play station), cars and sports. Bright, saturated colours like blue, red and yellow are dominant. Text on the front page is in upper case and uses constructed grotesque-typefaces.

As shown in the first experiment, design and layout play a major role in creating a gender-specific style. My premise in this experiment was; what would happen to this style if the two designs were swapped? FBX became "FGX: For Girls Xclusively -The No1 Magazine for Girls", including a free flip-up torch. Girl Talk was transformed into "Boy Talk: Every Boy's Best Friend" and comes with free glitter stickers. Significantly, I had difficulties finding the right images: Adult, sportive, grim-looking women and cute smiling boys. In the end, "FGX" looked closer to reality. It could be a 'girl power' magazine, although the images of adult women don't really fit in. "Boy Talk" turned out astonishingly strange. It looks like a gay-magazine for young boys.<sup>1</sup>

Typefaces are a key component in a layout. Unlike a magazine layout, a logotype consists of few elements that form the message: type design, composition and verbal message. I looked at the logotypes of two very popular characters on the children's market. "Barbie" is written in upper and lower case in pink handwriting. There are hardly any straight lines or sharp corners, while round shapes are dominant. The logotype has a dynamic, personal touch. The Action Man logo is orange, black and grey and written in slanted upper case only. This brings out the sharp corners in the letters 'A', 'N' and 'M' and the verticals and horizontals in 'T' and 'I'. Straight lines are dominant over curves. The logo looks dynamic, though solid, almost monumental.

Like in the magazines-experiment, I swapped designs, this time focussing on typefaces. Modifying the Barbie logo, I found it hard to fit in the curves of the two 'B's with the design. Writing "Action Man" in upper and lower case and in

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<sup>1</sup> App.9

one word already changed the look of the logotype drastically. Most of the sharp corners were replaced by curves.

The result of the redesigned logotypes<sup>1</sup> is surprising. Both names and logos are well known. If the designs are exchanged, the visual message opposes the verbal message; form and content are contradictory. This experiment is a continuation of the previous magazine cross-designs. Since in the logos only one visual element is modified, the message comes across clearer, and is reduced to the essential. One could say that my own response to the magazine and logotype experiments is influenced by the very stereotypes I am questioning. Why does the 'girl power' style look more real, and maybe more 'right' than "Boy Talk"? Why do we perceive pink and masculine as incompatible?

Images of femininity and masculinity are firmly linked to specific visual patterns. The stereotype "pink and bubbly looks feminine and sharp corners are masculine" entails the consequence "the other way round it doesn't look right". In addition, the "Boy Talk" design has acquired a gay touch through the feminine features, although the images do not suggest any sexual content whatsoever. Why do we perceive effeminate men as homosexual, and male homosexuals as feminine in the first place?

We are used to seeing the colour pink, round shapes or friendly, inviting body language almost only in connection with women or girls. "You know, pink is a colour that girls like"<sup>2</sup>. "Pink is linked with babies and feminine things... because, in Western social norms, it's associated with skin. Someone who wears pink is unconsciously signalling that they want to be touched"<sup>3</sup>. This statement firstly equates women with babies, and secondly defines skin as a connotation exclusive only to women and (female) babies (it probably wouldn't occur to anyone to characterise men in general with the attribute "skin"). Besides, it implies that, since many women and female infants do in fact wear pink, they want to be touched (by whom?). If a man wants to wear pink "without looking like a big girl's blouse", he has to do it the "peacock way" or the "macho way"<sup>4</sup>. By all means it has to be avoided to look feminine – for that

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<sup>1</sup> App.10

<sup>2</sup> Nancie S. Martin (Mattel software development) cited in Justine Cassell, Henry Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Combat: Gender and Computer Games* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1998), p.145.

<sup>3</sup> "Can real men wear pink?", *Style* (The Sunday Times), Issue 10, July 22, 2001, pp. 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

means gay - and only then a man wearing pink "could even be interpreted as being aggressive" and getting rid of "those nagging sissy connotations"<sup>1</sup>. It is obvious that not the colour in itself is feminine, but the context it is used in and the connotations it is given.

A male homosexual is the object of another man's desire. This is a passive role we normally expect to see a woman in. So it is not being homosexual that makes men effeminate, it is being a passive object of male desire, something we have learned to consider feminine. This is why a boy or a man in a feminine context looks gay to us. And that is the point of the experiment: if the viewer's response wasn't biased, the images wouldn't work in the first place.

## Barbie

On the Barbie website Mattel identifies their site mission as to "engage, enchant, and empower girls"<sup>2</sup>. The slogan "Today's play, tomorrow's career" introduces the "iCANBE" career service the intention of which is to "encourage young girls to explore a wide variety of career possibilities"<sup>3</sup>. The concept is to create a series of Barbie dolls in different professions. The first Barbie in the series is presented as a children's doctor. In the poll "Barbie is getting a new career. What should it be?" there are three careers to choose from: fire fighter, teacher and fashion designer. The most popular career with both parents and children is fashion designer (parents: 37%, children: 59%). Whereas more than one third of the parents think Barbie should be a fire fighter, only one in nine children like the idea. 31% of the children compared to 28% of the parents want to see Barbie as a teacher.<sup>4</sup>

The motto "today's play, tomorrow's career" reveals the educational purpose behind the concept of Barbie and her designed function as a role model and object of identification for girls: "Ninety-nine percent of the girls in this country have at least one Barbie. Barbie is, for them, a representative of them, a representative of who they might be when they grow up. It's a vehicle for their dreams and their aspirations"<sup>5</sup>. Surely, the idea of giving Barbie a career proves

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<sup>1</sup> "Can real men wear pink?", *Style* (The Sunday Times), Issue 10, July 22, 2001, pp. 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.barbie.com>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Nancie S. Martin (Mattel software development) cited in Cassell, Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Combat*, p.145.

there has been a development taking place in the last few decades. Nursing, childcare, education and fashion however are traditionally female domains, promoting social, communicative and creative qualities that are in keeping with conventional notions of femininity.

After two hours of browsing the Barbie website I had met Rose Princess Barbie, Kitty Fun Barbie, Star Splash Barbie, Wash 'n Wear Barbie, Holiday Celebration Barbie, Birthday Wishes Barbie, Ballet Star Barbie, Dream Wedding Barbie, Starlight Fairy Barbie<sup>1</sup> and countless others of a similar kind. I had read about Barbie army officers and pilots before and was wondering were they were. The most 'unfeminine' Barbies I could find were on the collector's site under the heading "Barbie loves sports": Ferrari Barbie (in a mini skirt), Bowling Champ Barbie and Chicago Club Barbie, a baseball player "as all-American as apple pie - and as sweet"<sup>2</sup>.

Nancie S. Martin, responsible for Mattel's girls' software development and internet activities, makes clear that "one of the things we do here is that we make things that are coded as girls' products, period. We don't make gender-neutral stuff"<sup>3</sup>.

While the article "Your daughter and you" in the parents' section encourages men to intensify the relationship with their daughters, it expresses established ideas about the qualities good mothers and fathers ought to have:

If you're a dad, your daughter has been aware of your deep voice and physical strength since she was an infant. You help her feel protected. Over the years, she has felt safe riding in your arms, nestled against your chest, or viewing the world from high atop your shoulders. She may not feel as calm and soothed with you as she does with her mother, but she does feel daring.<sup>4</sup>

The definition of mothers and fathers as a source of security and shelter is distinct: a father's ability to make his child feel "safe" refers to his "physical strength" whereas a mother making her child feel "calm and soothed" suggests emotional qualities. Dads are advised to establish a "time for two" in the form

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.barbie.com>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.doll-hobby.com>

<sup>3</sup> Cassell, Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Combat*, p.146.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.barbie.com>

of “weekly errands or outings”<sup>1</sup>. It is presupposed the father does not normally spend much time with his child (implying the mother performs the daily routine of childcare), and therefore has to compensate for the lack of shared experience in order to keep up a relationship. A paragraph offering advice for single mothers on what to do “without a dad”<sup>2</sup> lacks the equivalent for single fathers.

The article “What hair means to her” defines hair as part of a girl’s appearance as major in forming her gender identity:

To your daughter, her hair has a kind of power. It helps make her a girl...during pre-school years, her hair helps her identify herself as a girl, not a boy...a girl’s hair represents many things: her power, her ideas, her femininity...hair frames our daughters faces, it crowns their heads.<sup>3</sup>

The article gives the impression girls have to work on their appearance to feel and be recognised as a female - “as a girl, not a boy”. Imagining the reverse, “a boy’s hair represents many things: his power, his ideas, his masculinity” makes clear that appearance is not a major element in a boy’s gender identity.

“We ought not to be surprised it is in pink boxes that girls have learned to package their desire in our culture. But such desires surely have far more to do with the gender-identity developed by adult males than with those of children themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

The ideal of beauty Barbie embodies has been widely discussed and criticised (a woman of her proportions wouldn’t be able to stand upright, she would have to crawl on all fours). Barbie certainly is one of the most popular dolls and indeed the only doll with a woman’s body (imitations like Cindy not included). This body “was modelled on “Lilli”, a cartoon character that was subsequently developed into a German sex toy designed not for children but for adult men.”<sup>5</sup>

The negative implications this ideal has in reality, for example eating disorders, are common amongst girls and young women, and research has shown there is a connection between these illnesses and the images of super slim models

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.barbie.com>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Cassell, Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Combat*, p.251.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

women are exposed to in almost every public space as well as in the mass media. I created the parody “Bulimia Barbie: she vomits when you squeeze her tummy!”<sup>1</sup>. She comes with a selection of food and a toilet. “Bulimia Barbie” makes visible what Barbie’s representation hides: the negative or even dangerous side of perfection. She really lives up to the ideal, at any price.

## Action Man

The male equivalent to Barbie is not Ken. Ken is part of a doll series for girls and therefore is not appropriate to investigate masculinity. Action Man has a similar level of popularity with boys as Barbie has with girls. Unlike Barbie, who is mainly around the house or with friends, Action Man has adventurous missions to fulfil, usually on his own (he doesn’t have friends, only “helpers”<sup>2</sup>, and enemies), in most of which he eventually defeats evil Dr. X and saves the world. “Mission environments” of the last two years were “Tokyo Tech”, “Desert”, “Mountain”, “Ice”, “Space”, “Urban” and “Jungle”<sup>3</sup>.

The cartoons in Action Man annuals and magazines are openly political. The mission “Desert Storm” requires defeating Russian “terrorists” in “northern reaches of the Gobi desert” who speak a “Sub-Mongolian Dialect” and are “trading a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons to a mysterious group of tribesmen”, “led by the ruthless General Zil”<sup>4</sup>. In the next mission called “A View to a Zil” the “mission briefing” explains “Moscow has become a lawless home to a fierce band of criminals known as the Cosa Nostrovya” and “the rise of the Russian crime syndicates is threatening to destabilise the world economy”<sup>5</sup>. Action Man works for the “European Defence Agency” and, to fulfil his mission, asks the reader to help him by answering several multiple choice questions such as: “Help Action Man decide what equipment to use based on what you know about Moscow: ninja kick, camouflage net, ..., machine pistol, ..., 4x4 turbo, ..., stealth jet”<sup>6</sup>. The stories are backed up with “mission data” giving information about population, climate and recent history

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<sup>1</sup> App.11

<sup>2</sup> Gregor Wilson, June 2001, Edinburgh.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.actionman.com>

<sup>4</sup> *Action Man Annual 1999: Arctic Meltdown Polar Xtreme Mission* (Pedigree Books: Exeter, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.34.

of the location<sup>1</sup>. The boundaries between selected facts and constructed stories are blurred; complex political contexts are simplified and interpreted, thus creating a judgmental and biased image.

While Barbie's role has changed, presenting her in a profession, as a baseball player or a racing driver, we still haven't seen Action Man as a daddy, nurse or in a pyjama-party outfit. These roles seem very trivial in contrast to his usual "missions". Barbie taking on traditionally masculine roles, but Action Man not adopting feminine roles reflects the real situation: women claim space in 'male' domains, but men do not question their own role, or identify with feminine roles to such an extent.

Because I was a girl some years ago, playing with girl's toys (no Barbies, though), I was instantly aware of the 'missing' information in Action Man's presentation: Where does he live? Who are his family or friends? Is he married? What does he have for tea? Does he have pets? What hobbies does he have? I was wondering if boys had these questions, too. When I asked, the sober answer was: "He lives in his machines, and anyway, Action Man isn't real, and you don't get to see him eating and stuff, that'd be boring!"<sup>2</sup>.

I decided to give Action Man a private life. In a storyboard for an interactive animation<sup>3</sup> I show him after work, when he returns to his empty flat in Brockham, Surrey, where the only one awaiting him is his goldfish. As he's not 'in action' anymore, he's got a lot of time to toss and turn at night and think about wrinkles, his age and how long he will still be able to do the job.

The depiction of a private life that is rather prosaic compared to the usual "missions" and "operations" deconstructs the 'hard as steel' image of Action Man. I was wondering why it destroys a hero to have a pet, a home and a private life. The reason is that the body of a human being with emotional needs and the occasional urge to eat, sleep, or go to the toilet cannot remain the invulnerable, perfect combat machine Action Man is presented as.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Action Man Annual 1999*.

<sup>2</sup> Gregor Wilson, June 2001, Edinburgh.

<sup>3</sup> App.12

## Body Language

This experiment deals with the way body language and posture together with clothing, hairstyle and make-up help to create a gendered appearance. Photographing mannequins at the Buchanan Shopping Centre in Glasgow and looking at models posing in clothing catalogues, I was wondering what would happen if these figures all wore the same clothes, had the same haircut and no jewellery or make-up on. Would it be easy to tell the difference between women and men? Would it be possible at all?

Whereas dress, accessories and make-up are obviously external attachments to our body and therefore not 'natural', body language and facial expression are internalised and hard to separate from the actual physicality of a body. They are therefore more likely to be performed unconsciously and considered 'natural', not being recognised as an expression of gender identity.

Looking at models and mannequins from shops like Gap, Next, H&M or fcuK, the impression clothing, hair and face gave was so dominant that posture and bearing almost became invisible, they all seemed to merge and it was hard to look at one aspect independently. Searching for a way to isolate body language, I started blanking out clothing and faces. I had chosen figures with similar clothes on, for example Jeans and T-shirt and took away obvious indicators such as long hair and jewellery. Eventually, I replaced the figures by outlines<sup>1</sup>. The outlined body shapes weren't very different from each other at all. Waists, forearms and shoulders were about the same size. Once I had taken all the external attachments away, the actual body-shapes did not suggest female or male sex. However, body language did. Almost every person I showed the outlines to could instantly tell females from males.

Seeing body language in isolation, I was now able to analyse it. Women's arms and hands are often close to their bodies, sometimes touching clothes or hair. Men mostly have crossed arms, hands in pockets, or elbows and hands held away from the body. In so doing, the whole body takes up more space and is well protected, whereas the feminine bearing suggests insecurity.

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<sup>1</sup> App.13

While women tend to have their weight on one leg, feet pointing forward, men often have their weight on both legs, sometimes the legs are further apart, feet pointing outward. This position again is much more stable than the feminine posture. The heads of women are often bent to the side with the head lowered. Men's heads are mostly in a straight position, chin up. Bending the head to the side exposes the vulnerable neck. The female of the two sitting figures exposes the mid-section where the vital organs are, whereas the male figure has the arms positioned in front of the body, legs ready to get up.

The outlines clearly show that of all the factors that create a gendered appearance, biological sex characteristics are probably the least influential ones. Furthermore, gestures are not free of meaning. They can express insecurity or confidence, inferiority or dominance. Since gender can be separated from sex, body language can be separated from the physical body and revealed as a style that is part of our gender performance.

## Language

In my research, I came across graffiti in underpaths and public toilets and became interested in how graffiti, as a form of self-expression, represents gender notions of young people. I was very surprised by some of the graffiti in "Ladies' Rooms" which were openly sexual, such as "How many fingers can you stick up your pussy?"<sup>1</sup> or "Lick my clit and suck it right!"<sup>2</sup>. Sentences like "David is a poof" and "Jane is a slut"<sup>3</sup> were what I found more often, though. How do obscenity and swearing express general notions of gender in a culture?

"There is little empirical evidence on female/male use of swear words. What there is, is research to show the strong stereotype we have of men swearing more"<sup>4</sup>. Male cartoon characters are found to swear far more than female characters. Students being shown isolated speech bubbles therefore associated swearing mostly with male characters.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Costa Café*, Princess Street, Edinburgh.

<sup>2</sup> Glasgow pub.

<sup>3</sup> Telfer subway, Edinburgh.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Lowe, Ben Graham, *English Language for Beginners* (Writers and Readers: New York, London, 1998), p.93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

The Big Book of Being Rude: 7000 Slang Insults doesn't treat gender as a factor in the use of language, but still gives us some useful information about who the listed insults are addressed to. A fat woman is a "bargain bucket" whereas fat men are "Mr Double Tripes" or "Jack Weight". There are over sixty words for ugly women and seven for ugly men listed. In the chapter "Sexually Depraved", we find four pages of "Women as Sex Objects" and seven pages of "Women of Easy Virtue" without any male equivalents, but 16 pages of "Effeminate and Pretty Boys". The heading "Homosexuals" (meaning only male homosexuals) includes so many expressions that it requires additional sub headlines: "Nancy boys", "Macho Homosexuals", "Younger Gay Men", "Older Gay Men", "Ugly Older Gay Men", "Bum Boys", "Brown Dirt Cowboys", "Blow Boys and Sperm Burpers" and "Passive Homosexuals", just to mention a few. Under the headline "Lesbians" we find 20 single expressions.<sup>1</sup>

The book takes historical and cultural origin of the expressions into account, however it ignores class and gender. Many of the words are probably not applicable to certain age groups and are only used in certain social milieus. As a popular book, The Big Book of Being Rude presents itself as a cross-section of commonly used slang insults. Therefore, we can look at it as a part of popular culture representing reality in its own selective way.

Easthope considers the social function of swearing to be expressing what is repressed or considered most unacceptable in a culture<sup>2</sup>. For example, the fact that the number of English terms for a promiscuous woman is drastically higher than that for a promiscuous man (220:20) suggests that it is more acceptable for a man to have many sexual partners than it is for a woman.<sup>3</sup>

Comparing 'Mistress' with 'Master', 'Queen' with 'King', 'Madam' with 'Sir', 'Dame' with 'Earl' or 'Lady' with 'Lord', it becomes clear that almost all terms for women acquire negative connotations (often sexual) over time, while most terms for men retain their original meanings.<sup>4</sup> One could interpret this in a sense that in our culture it is generally more acceptable to be a man than to be a woman.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Green, *The Big Book of Being Rude: 7000 Slang Insults* (Cassell&Co.: London, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See Easthope, *What a Man's Gotta Do*, part III.

<sup>3</sup> See Lowe, Graham, *English Language for Beginners*, p.106.

<sup>4</sup> See Ibid, p.107.

In order to visualise the gender-specific use of vocabulary and to emphasise on the use of language rather than the words themselves, I made a flipbook that allows the user to match female and male communicators and combine names with a range of adjectives<sup>1</sup>: “Sweet cheap motherfucker”, “evil hot bird” or “beautiful big man” are amusing combinations because words we usually don’t see together are matched. Vocabulary can be gender specific in its meaning (“motherfucker”) or in its use (“bird” usually means a female person). Some words change their meaning if the sex of speaker or addressee is changed. “Pretty”, for example, can be used for both women and men; “pretty girl” however implies other qualities than “pretty boy” in the addressee. Using Macromedia Flash5, I later developed the flipbook into a digital piece<sup>2</sup>. The interactive application incorporates the aspects of meaning, use, speaker and addressee. However, the message is very complex and possibly unclear. While it is entertaining to play with words, I felt the statement about the bias of language I wanted to make was trivialised.

## Products

Barbie and Action Man logos can be found on watches, umbrellas, bicycles and even on chocolate bars and Heinz soup tins. I was very curious to find out what the “pasta shapes in tomato sauce” looked like. The packaging promises shapes of a “shoe”, a “bow” and even a “bouquet” in the Barbie pasta<sup>3</sup>; and a “jeep”, the face of “Dr. X”, a “stealth jet” and an AM-“tattoo” in the Action Man tin<sup>4</sup>. The contents were disappointing: there are similar lumps of pasta in each can that only vaguely reminded of what they were meant to represent. The Barbie and Action Man chocolate bars have word puzzle cards in them. Words for girls to fill in include “fun”, “party”, “sparkle” and “makeup”<sup>5</sup>. The boys are asked to help Action Man to solve the puzzle by putting in the words “extreme”, “deepsea” and “stealth”<sup>6</sup>.

Emphasising on the fact that two practically identical products are marketed for two gendered target-groups, I took two photographs of each product. One

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<sup>1</sup> App.14

<sup>2</sup> App.15

<sup>3</sup> Heinz *Barbie Pasta Shapes in Tomato Sauce*, H.J. Heinz Co. Ltd., Uxbridge, England.

<sup>4</sup> Heinz *Action Man Pasta Shapes in Tomato Sauce*, H.J. Heinz Co. Ltd., Uxbridge, England.

<sup>5</sup> *Barbie says “Let’s play a game”*, Card 3, Mattel Inc., 1999.

<sup>6</sup> *Can you help Action Man to solve the word puzzle below*, Card 3, Hasbro International Inc., 2000.

shows two similar products, for example open soup tins with pasta in tomato sauce or black and white boxes in a crossword puzzle; the other photograph shows the distinctive presentation: Barbie and Action Man -style packaging or different words to fill in the boxes<sup>1</sup>. The gendered marketing-concept here is a mere style that is not related to the function or purpose of the product. In this case, the artificially created gender-identity lacks its basis in the product itself.

## Role-play

My project focuses on images and ideas in representation rather than on audiences or the impacts representation has on them, for final assumptions cannot be made any without profound sociological and psychological knowledge. Yet, I wanted to get an impression of how children perceive products on the market and images in the media. I recorded and interviewed two girls; aged 7 and 9, and three boys aged 6, 9 and 10.

Although my recordings do not meet the requirements of a representative survey, they interestingly reflect general findings on gender in socio-linguistics:

- Vocabulary: due to different areas of interest, women and men have different topics of conversation, using different vocabulary. Robin Lakoff suggests adjectives of approval like 'sweet' and 'lovely' are 'women only' adjectives and for a man to use them would be considered unmanly. It's however not the adjectives themselves that make them inappropriate for men to use, but the fact they are used by women. Also, "Women are more likely to use correct (standard) pronunciation than men of the same class"<sup>2</sup>.
- Phonology: despite the biological basis for women's voices being high pitched and men's being lower, the contrast is too great to be explained only by physical difference. Interestingly, the voices of some men who are born deaf don't break. This suggests women and men modify the pitch of their voices according to what is considered normal for their sex. Men also use a smaller pitch range (three levels of intonation) than women (four levels).

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<sup>1</sup> App.16

<sup>2</sup> See Lowe, Graham, *English Language for Beginners*, p.93.

- Grammar: regarding the use of tag questions, research has produced controversial results. Janet Holmes distinguished two varieties of tag: Modal Tags are speaker orientated because they seek information (“the bus is at 11.20, isn’t it?”). Affective or Facilitative Tags are addressee orientated because they show concern for the addressee, either through softening a negative comment (“that was pretty silly, wasn’t it?”) or drawing the addressee into the conversation (“I prefer that colour, don’t you?”). Holmes found that out of all Modal tags men used Modal tags 61% of the time, while Affective/Facilitative tags were used by women 75% of the time. While Lakoff interprets the use of tags as a sign of uncertainty Holmes suggests women tend to use tags to keep a conversation running smoothly, not to show uncertainty. Women use more hedges (‘you know’, ‘kind of’, ‘sort of’, ‘maybe’, ‘perhaps’, ‘I mean’ etc.) than men. Again, the use of hedges is not directly linked with uncertainty and unassertiveness, but is another indicator of women doing the conversational work. Dale Spender argues that intensifiers (‘so’, ‘such’) and qualifiers (‘perhaps’, ‘maybe’) are interpreted as evidence of uncertainty when women use them and of authority when used by men (“perhaps you have misinterpreted me”, “maybe you should do it again”).<sup>1</sup>

This shows the use of words can’t be examined in isolation, because the same feature serves different functions depending on the context. Men in powerless positions (e.g. in court) tend to use ‘women’s’ language and women in positions of power adopt masculine use of language. Approaches that are more recent describe the difference between women’s and men’s conversational styles with the terms ‘co-operative’ and ‘competitive’. In co-operative conversations, hedges and tag questions are used to help statements to become negotiable and respect the face needs of others. Well-placed minimal response (‘yeah’, ‘uh-huh’) and interjecting questions or comments without interrupting the speaker are used to show interest in the conversation and encourage the speaker to go on. In competitive conversation, speakers vie for turns and are more likely to contradict each other than to build on each other’s contributions. In a study of Zimmerman and West (1975) 98% of the interruptions and 100% of the overlaps in mixed sex conversation were by men.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Lowe, Graham, *English Language for Beginners*, chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The girls I recorded were playing with their dolls most of which were Barbies. It was interesting to see how they created plots and settings. Popular themes were family, visiting friends, meals/tea, weddings and parties. The girls spoke very 'lady-like', politely and in a high voice. I did not interfere in the play except once when the girls asked me to play the bride when Barbie (alias Emily) and Action Man (alias Grant) were getting married. Despite the rather 'feminine' settings and plots, it was surprising how inventive the girls were using the dolls for their own purposes and ideas, for example when Action Man was used as a groom for Barbie. There was a Ken, but he didn't have any legs. Would the girls have preferred Ken as a groom if his body had been intact?

The experience with the three boys was contrary. The language they used contained swearing, their voices were deeper and the intonation more homogeneous. They also frequently interrupted each other or competed for attention. The subjects the boys talked about were racing cars, wrestling, superheroes and their gang.

All in all the girls seemed to be more interested in personal relationships and communication, whereas the boys focused on detailed explanations about technical features, weapons or wrestling techniques. They were interested in skills, strength and power. To hear the voices in isolation on tape made this discrepancy particularly clear.

Whether the girl's play and the boy's statements were induced by their own (gendered) backgrounds and experiences or inspired by media representation and product design (or most likely both), the recordings reflect two separate worlds of ideas.

Doing these experiments was very beneficial in the sense that it enabled me to cover a major part of the subject and to focus on the relevant aspects. It also gave me a broad basis of creative approaches I could now look at and either pursue further, or abandon.

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## The Show

Based on the experiments, I revised each approach individually and selected the ideas I wanted to develop into pieces for the show.

### Language<sup>1</sup>

Although the subject of gender and socio-linguistics is very interesting theoretically, I felt its depth did not fully come across in the visuals and the message was trivialised through the playful character of the interactive piece. Since aspects of language are incorporated in many of the other pieces, I decided to abandon this approach.

### Body Language<sup>2</sup>

Both the “Language” idea and the “Body Language” experiment tackle the area of verbal and non-verbal communication. Although the “Body Language” experiment worked as an individual piece, I felt that as a subject on its own it was not directly linked to visual communication. In order to keep a consistency throughout the show; I didn't pursue this idea further.

### Role Play

The recordings reflect a major part of what I had found out about gender and language. Furthermore, they give an impression of girls' and boys' perception of toys and media, and the impact they might have. I was planning to use the recordings for a sound installation, knowing they needed severe editing. Cutting 90 minutes down to 12, I produced 21 short sound clips, each one less than a minute long. These clips sum up the girls' and boys' ideas, fantasies, thoughts and attitudes in relation to different topics. Two miniature interiors that can be seen through a peephole in a box visualise their two distinct worlds of ideas. I used dollhouse furniture, plastic action figures and atmospheric light to built the sets. The sets are shrines of the children's imagination, displaying

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<sup>1</sup> See App. 15.

<sup>2</sup> See App. 13.

icons of their thoughts and beliefs. The accompanying sound clips are played on headphones. I think people will find it easy to relate to and engage with this piece. It therefore works well as an introduction to my exhibition.

### Cross Designs

I like the striking simplicity of the modified Barbie and Action Man logos<sup>1</sup> and therefore decided to use this concept in the show. Apart from colours, shapes and typography; language, product names and imagery are major elements that give a product a gendered appearance. Incorporating these elements, I made two additional 'cross-designs': a birthday card and a magazine cover. Since I use common design patterns, the visuals look almost normal at first sight. If one takes a closer look, contradictions in visual and verbal message become obvious. Through the alienating effect the 'cross-design' has, I intend to make the viewer aware of the stereotyped imagery that is often used in visual communication.

### Barbie

Based on the Barbie<sup>2</sup> and Action Man<sup>3</sup> experiments I was planning to produce a range of parody characters that would be presented with accessory and packaging. I worked on concepts for "Porn Director Action Man", "Bulimia Barbie", "Plastic Surgery Barbie" and "Single Mum Barbie"<sup>4</sup>. When I was photographing the dolls<sup>5</sup>, I had problems adapting their postures to my ideas. Barbie can't possibly sit inelegantly, her back is always upright and her arms are at a certain angle that can't be changed. Aerobic Barbie with her flexible body was the best doll to work with. Action Man's elbows are always held away from his body, his head can't be lowered or bent to the side, only turned. I experienced that dolls can inspire, determine and limit play.

During the course of my project and through my research, I became aware of the overuse of Barbie in the visual arts. I realised that using her would take away originality from my ideas. Considering her popularity, commercial success and cultural significance as a cult-object and icon, I did not want to

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<sup>1</sup> See App. 10.

<sup>2</sup> See App.11.

<sup>3</sup> See App.12.

<sup>4</sup> App.17

<sup>5</sup> App.18

ignore the phenomenon “Barbie” in my investigations and experiments. Yet, for my show, I chose to abandon this approach.

### Mission Migraine Xtreme

Since it was my purpose to direct my attention specifically to masculinity and its representation, I decided to concentrate on Action Man instead. Inspired by the storyboard about Action Man’s private life; I developed a concept for a photo story called “Mission Migraine Xtreme”. The language I use is similar to the one used in the Action Man annuals and magazines: “Can you help Action Man to identify his symptoms and find the right remedy? Based on what you know about alternative medicine, use the boxes below to tick the remedies you have selected...Bach’s flowers, Yogi tea, meditation, fresh air, relaxation, aromatherapy... ”.

The photographs of Action Man replace action with passivity, aggression with contemplation, invincibility with vulnerability, technology with nature, and the invading of public spaces with introversion. Instead of being a superhero, Action Man is portrayed as a human being. I owe great thanks to Sarah Lynch, a second year Masters student, who produced my photography.

“Mission Migraine Xtreme” is not intended to serve as a real alternative to existing concepts, but to question these concepts and their implications. Migraine is something men experience in reality. However, there is no room for weaknesses in the presentation of action figures. Gender is an identity, and a doll is an object of identification. As such it visualises and embodies gender identities. The story about Action Man’s psychosomatic condition deconstructs the perfection of the idea of masculinity he represents.

### Products

I felt the concept “one product – two product identities” was a strong idea and could be developed into easy-to-grasp, striking images. Considering a range of products, I eventually chose disposable razors, socks, Pepsi cans and a

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bicycle. Bic women's and men's razors are packaged distinctively, even though they are made of the same elements, only plastic caps and handles vary in colour. Although the socks are identical in size, shape, colour and material, they are labelled separately for girls and boys. Diet Pepsi and Pepsi Max consist of the same ingredients, but have different logos and package designs. One Raleigh unisex bicycle is represented through two different texts in the men's and the women's catalogue that each emphasise on different qualities of the bike.

I photographed the products in the studio using a medium format Hasselblad camera. Again, thanks go to Sarah Lynch for working long hours with me. The images contrast the objects' essential similarities in function and make with the gendered product identities and reveal these identities as merely stylistic. They create difference where there is similarity. The gendered style does not have a basis in the product's nature. In this case, the design concept does not only respond to the consumers' needs, but creates the need for gendered products, and the need to be distinct.

How far could the idea of gendered objects be taken? In the context of an ever increasing variety of products and product identities, visions of "Ladies" and "Gents" sections in the supermarket, offering gender specific GMS food; or of cloned pets that grow pink glitter fur or camouflage fur might not be that far away.

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## Conclusion

With my project I was striving to keep the balance between doing the interpretational work for the viewer – and running the risk of being judgmental and too obvious, and leaving the interpretation of my work entirely up to the viewer's individual perception, thus not expressing my standpoint, and not communicating. I feel the pieces in the show approach the theme of gender, identity and representation from different points of view and pose questions without providing finished answers and defining the viewer's response beforehand.

The sound installation refers to reality in the sense that it reflects girls' and boys' distinct environments and upbringing. In response, the photo story "Mission Migraine Xtreme" questions the confined definition of masculinity in the presentation of Action Man. While the cross-designs examine links between form and meaning, the product-images focus on the artificiality of gendered product identities.

My work comments on the role of visual communication, and that of visual communicators such as graphic designers, illustrators, photographers, animators and filmmakers in culture and society. Design is not merely a formal issue, because form is not free of meaning. Form does not necessarily follow function; form can even determine function. As a major part of public communication, visual communication reflects, but also shapes and restricts our ideas of gender. People in the creative industries constantly produce meaning through their work, thus creating notions of femininity and masculinity.

Visual communication cannot be neutral, as representation and interpretation are inseparable. It has the potential to either maintain or question, and possibly help to overcome gender stereotypes that produce difference and inequality in reality.

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