

A WESTERN BODY FOR THE RUSSIAN WOMAN: SHAPING GENDER IDENTITY IN MODERN WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

Olga Kalacheva

European University at St. Petersburg

The unified character and image of "the Soviet person" is a thing of the past. Post-Soviet society is characterized by changes both in values and social norms, and in cultural patterns of femininity and masculinity. A comparative analysis of normative gender patterns of Soviet and post-Soviet time has become of special relevance. In my paper I am concerned with a representation of the female body. In the last few years there have been many studies of the phenomenon of sexual difference in popular discourses – in advertisements and in magazines – because it is very important for clarifying the social mechanisms in formation of gender stereotypes and gender identity. My task today is to argue about how Western gender culture is related to the Russian one, illustrating my arguments by examples from women's magazines published in Russia nowadays.

This paper is more a presentation of a research project than a presentation of the results. First, I will consider very briefly the theoretical framework to analyze gender representations in modern mass media. Then I will describe the Soviet woman image and the history of women's magazines in Russia. Further I will suggest some ideas on how magazine ads impact on shaping social identity and why the western magazines have been successful in Russia.

Theoretical frame

The research is made within the framework of a constructivist approach. In this case the formulation of a problem is connected with the ways and mechanisms in which a social reality, identities, and individual experience are constructed in different cultural contexts. It is arguable that the mass media play a significant role in the process.

The significance of mass media in modern society becomes greater as they influence everyday life (i.e., Carey 1989). It is the mass media that create and spread information and ideas on the society as a whole, on principles of its organization and functioning. It is the mass media operators who invent and reproduce standards and

models of behavior and gender images to be appreciated and copied by the readers. The ability of mass media to react immediately to all kinds of contemporary events and processes or trends makes it particularly important for modern society. Transformation at the gender level, establishment of new gender standards – all these find their expressions in new periodical publications oriented at different social groups.

The ads in the mass media play a special role in the representation of social reality. All ideas on commodities and services are presented by mass media in the context of other ideas relevant to the structure of the society, such as contacts and relations within the social structure. Thus, ideas on commodities and services form the primary discourse for the vocabulary and style of advertisements, while the ideas on a society represent the secondary discourse (O'Barr 1994). In other words, the commodities are advertised against the background of certain role situations, and the situations, in turn, can be interpreted as basic social values. Each commodity advertised is meant for one particular group (a goal group), while the situations, roles, and images depicted can be appreciated by every person reading about them and/or looking at the pictures. Images and suggestions involving erotic motifs can be used in order to make the ads more attractive and their impact the stronger. It is possible to conclude that those who use the picture of female body in an advertisement transform the image of women into an instrument of advertising. As a rule, the image of woman in an ad is used to stress/show off male power, although the image of a man need not be present in the same picture; the women's role is more often complementary or secondary. The ads make one think that the man in the ad uses the commodities advertised much more often than a woman does. On this symbolic market the woman is not unlike any other commodity because she is an object of trade policy. Thus, the woman acquires characteristic features of a symbolic commodity.

Women's Images in Soviet Times: Historical Context

As the researchers of ads note (Al'chuk 2000), women's images in mass media were defined by Soviet ideology. In the 1920s and 1930s, the image of the liberated woman in publications was similar to that in the modern ads (films, posters, newspapers and magazines). They were all controlled and censored by the State and the Party. The female images represented the social ideals of the time. It was characteristic of Russian folklore and culture to represent the country in the figures of strong and beautiful women. A classical example of such a figure is the internationally known metal statue made by the sculptor Vera Mukhina for the World Exhibition in Paris before the Second World War; it was properly titled 'The Workerman and the Peasantwoman,' and now stands in Moscow.

During the Second World War and in the decades after 1945, the majority of women of the Soviet Union were employed in agriculture and the industries, as well as in research institutes and educational establishments. At the beginning of the 1960s, the Soviet Union took first place in the world with respect to the percentage of women paid for their labor outside their homes (Levinson 2000: 47).

Interestingly, women were employed in a manner typical of old culture in a patriarchal society. That is, the traditional roles in reproduction and education played by women in traditional families gave rise to typical feminine professions: nurse, instructor, teacher, librarian, etc. In terms of the state structure, these professions were included in the budget of the country as different public services providing medical care, education, pre-school education, various branches of public service (postal, telephone, restaurants, hotels, shops, etc.)

Women's Magazines in Russia

There were some women's magazines widespread in all parts of the Soviet Union such as the monthly magazines *Rabotnitsa* (it might be translated as *Workwoman*) and *Krestianka* (*Countrywoman*). It was assumed that *Rabotnitsa* was more popular among the city population, whereas rural population preferred *Krestianka*. That is why it is *Rabotnitsa* that has now been chosen as an example to make a comparison with modern Western magazines. *Rabotnitsa* was set up in 1914 and resumed in 1924 after the Revolution of 1917. In the late Soviet time it had

huge editions. Let me give only one example. In 1990, *Rabotnitsa* had a circulation of more than 24 million copies. For referential use, in 1989, the population of the Soviet Union numbered about 286.7 million. The magazine published social and political information covering activities and meetings concerning women's life and work conditions, psychological and educational articles, advice on housekeeping and gardening, letters from the readers, etc. The materials, as a rule, were closely connected to the life of the Soviet woman - her everyday life, her family life and her work - and that explains the popularity of the magazine.

Other magazines were set up in the 1920s, so that by 1930s there were eighteen popular women's magazines with a total number of monthly copies reaching 800,000. However, not all magazines were approved by the authorities. Some were found to lack the proper ideological backbone and were closed, fashion magazines in particular ('Dressmaking at home', 'Fashion plates', 'Fashions of the Season', 'The fashionable world' and many other similar titles - all in Russian, of course) (Dashkova 2001: 186).

The modern western women's magazines - such as *COSMOPOLITAN* and *ELLE* - are a phenomenon of the last decade of the Post-Soviet period. *COSMOPOLITAN* was set up in Russian in 1994, *ELLE* - in 1996. Some features distinguished them from the widespread Soviet prototype. They were very expensive and very different from the former Soviet magazines but they managed to find their own place on the market and their readers very quickly. The new magazines were set up to a high standard of typography and initiated their Russian readers into the elements of consumer culture. There were many colorful advertisements with sexy suggestions and materials about sexuality, to which the Russian reader had not been accustomed, but which, at the time, made the magazines quite attractive. However, the first impression of their strangeness and novelty was smoothed over by the Russian authors' articles adapted to the post-Soviet reality.

To date, the editions of *Rabotnitsa* and *ELLE* are not very different from one another. In 2001, *Rabotnitsa* was printed in 228 thousand copies per month, while the number of copies of *ELLE* was around 1.800. It seems that the earlier women's magazines had to yield some of their readers to the new magazines.

Women's Images in Magazines

The prevailing Soviet image of women was a rather archaic image of the mother and/or the workwoman. That was why her body was strong and far from being erotic or romantic. All Soviet magazines supported 'the rule' of representation. Things changed in the post-Soviet period, when advertisements appeared on TV and in other mass-media outlets. The earlier period of advertising was connected with the ads of Western commodities, which opened the door to smuggling images typical of western representation. In the 1990s, an alteration of visual and conceptual woman's image took place – from an archaic image of the Mother, who was represented by a woman in her middle age, to the young woman with pronounced attractive feminine features.

In the mid-1990s another image of woman appeared in the ads to make an excellent complement to the general idea of the modern woman. It is the image of a businesswoman. She is self-sufficient, for she is quite able to fulfill her own material and psychological needs without any help from others. She herself is the subject of her own actions. In the new ads the woman is not only a person who spends money earned for her by someone else (by her parents, her husband, her boyfriend, etc.); now she makes her own life, she is the creator of her mode of living. It is that type of woman who attracts the ad-makers, because the woman is now the purpose of an ad rather than the means or just an instrument of advertising all kinds of commodities. Accordingly, new gender representations correct traditional cultural stereotypes that show women as passive, "as very feminine, as 'sex object,' as housewives, mothers, homemakers" (Dyer 1982: 97).

It is interesting to note that it is the Western magazines (among women's magazines circulating in Russia) that have been spreading the new image. There are hardly any ads in the modern version of *Rabotnitsa*. What I wish to stress is that only the so-called Western magazines claim the right of image making of the young Russian woman. The following question then arises: What do the Russian women who read women's magazines think about them?

Images as standards

As for interviews incorporated in this paper, I have had six short interviews with young women who are regularly readers of women's magazines currently published in Russia. Every interview took about 20 minutes. As the interviews show,

hardly any young woman has ever read *Rabotnitsa*.

I regularly read *ELLE*. I believe that it is one of the quality magazines. I always buy it when I go shopping for new clothes or cosmetics. There is enough information there about commodities and shops where the cosmetics are sold. *COSMOPOLITAN* I read also. But not so often. I never buy it. I read it only if I can borrow it from a friend. I think I have grown out of *COSMO*.

Interviewer: What about *Rabotnitsa*?

(Laughing) It used to be my favorite magazine when I was a teenager. Yes, it really was. But I haven't seen it for about ten years. I am not sure that it sells now (28, manager).

It is really difficult to buy *Rabotnitsa* now as it is distributed mostly by subscription. It is interesting to note that, although the quality of typography has improved considerably, the columns and their general contents have remained practically unchanged. As interviews show, the Western magazines are gaining popularity. There is another quotation from an interview illustrating my point:

I like women's magazines. It may be silly of me but I do like them. They help me forget my everyday troubles. I feel like the ad women. Immediately, I want to buy a new lotion or a moisturizing cream - or something like that – to be like the beautiful women from the pictures in the magazines. The other day I happened to read *ELLE* for the first time. It is a rather expensive fashion magazine printed on high-quality, glossy paper, with many photographs, colored illustrations and attractive advertisements. Still, I like it (37, university lecturer).

New standards of how to be a true woman manifest themselves in ad images. In their turn, commodities from the ads come to be means to achieve a desired image. As a rule, the commodities become a part of everyday life. However, they are often bought for some special occasions as presents and gifts.

There are many things advertised in the magazines that seem to be used by Western women in order to look perfectly groomed. I mean the magazines do not

advertise abstract western shops and goods but draw the reader's attention to the goods sold in our shops in this country. I will admit they may be on sale in major cities only.

Interviewer: Do you often buy things advertised in the magazines?

I do. But not always for myself. I think I usually buy such things as gifts for close friends or even for myself. If I happen to like something better than the things I used to buy for myself regularly, I may change my habit and start using the new stuff on an everyday basis. Attentive friends usually consult the ads and my tastes when they choose things as gifts for me on some special occasions, for my birthday or New Year, or something like that. I have a friend who earns a very good salary so she can afford buying extravagant things as gifts (33, office manager).

A possibility to break from everyday arrangements and rules is the main characteristic of a holiday. It is a good reason and even an excuse to buy something unusual, luxurious, extravagant, and rather expensive. That is why it is the holiday consumption that creates new standards for everyday consumption replacing the old ones. Understandably, the western magazines – with their festive bright pictures featuring beautiful women, fashionably dressed, perfectly groomed, worth being imitated – play the role of a guide in the world of consumption.

Conclusion

The modern Russian society consists of different social groups and, accordingly, has different life-styles. In its turn, every life-style has its own markers. Many of these are closely connected with the status consumption, such as the dress code, hobbies, and special places to go out. Modern magazines (and other mass media) represent the markers of social identity by/through different ad images and relevant discourses. The ads show what one should wear; how one should look, what one should eat; what perfume one should buy to be successful. Most ads are based on gender stereotypes, body images taking significant place/playing an important role among them.

Every modern magazine represents norms and images aimed at a certain social group. It is the Russian version of western magazines that

distributes new images – erotic and sexy – for the young Russian woman while she continues to be an active person. By opening a new world of new commodities and new life-styles, the magazines appear to be educational in a sense.

In order to reveal the secret of success of the western magazines in Russia we should remember the image of the Soviet woman – the image of an active, strong and self-sufficient woman. The modern western magazines preserve their content; at the same time, they invent new forms for the content, which make them closer to the Russian reader and generally more popular.

References

- A.Al'chuk (ed.)
2000 *Zhenschina i vizual'nye znaki* (Woman and Visual Signs). Moscow: Ideia-Press.
- Carey, J.W.
1989 *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Dashkova, T.
2001 "Rabotnitsu – v massy": Politika sotsial'nogo modelirovaniia v sovetskikh zhenskikh zhurnalakh 1930-h godov In: *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*. 50: 184-192.
- Dyer, G.
1982 *Advertising as Communication*. London: Methuen.
- Levinson, A.
2000 *Zhenschina kak tsel' i kak sredstvo v otechestvennoe reklame* In: A.Al'chuk (ed.) *Zhenschina i vizual'nye znaki*. Moscow: Ideia-Press. P. 43-64.
- O'Barr, W.
1994 *Culture and the Ad: Exploring Otherness in the World of Advertising*. Boulder: Westview Press.