Embodying class and gender
Stars as feminine role models in Marie-Claire

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The cover of the first issue of Marie-Claire, dated 5 March 1937, features a close-up of a woman gazing upwards: her hair is loose, revealing an earring, her eyes and lips are made up, her eyebrows have been carefully plucked and she wears a faint smile (see fig. I). Inside the magazine itself, women are depicted as well-dressed and carefully groomed for seduction. The editorial team even provides readers with tips on how to acquire this new appearance, generically termed “beauty”. Largely achieved by means of beauty products, its purpose is to highlight the readers’ femininity, with the ultimate aim of appealing to the male sex. At the heart of this system, the movie star is hailed as a role model, an example of beauty to emulate, and seen as “accelerating the eroticization of the human face” to quote Edgar Morin.
This imagery marks a striking departure from that of its predecessors in the world of women’s magazines, in which the bodies expressed a remote, hieratic attitude and the facial features were left almost untouched and expressionless, with a striking lack of individuality. In these publications, essentially devoted to fashion and the latest cultural trends, female bodies were simply used as tailor’s dummies to show off a selection of outfits. Wide-angle shots featuring full-length figures made it possible to display the entire garment (see fig. 2) while borrowings from the conventions of bourgeois portraits, such as books, architectural elements and décor, provided clues as to the social status of the protagonists. These magazines allowed middle-class readers to identify with these social pointers and express their “prestige,”² and enabled them to adapt to a variety of social events such as theatre outings, evenings in town and promenades... Fashion journalists saw appearance as ceremony, an “etiquette” as Norbert Elias put it,⁴ a way of denoting class that could be learned like any other cultural code.³

In the Anglo-Saxon world, greater attention was paid to research into women’s magazines in the context of gender studies, more specifically within the realm of feminist rather than media studies. This form of research, which was not so much concerned with the magazine as object as with the representation of women in the media, often started out from the premise of an alienation of female readers through the prevailing images, an approach that was not dissimilar to studies devoted to advertising and its influence.⁶
In France, the research was dated and somewhat sweeping, using women’s magazines either as a source or as a launchpad for other study topics, such as the representation of women in the media, or as an opportunity to reopen the critical debate. In 2009, a group of French-speaking feminist researchers deplored these shortcomings and the “intellectual snobbery” that had prevented feminists from concentrating on women-oriented cultural perspectives. Reception studies by British pioneers such as Janice Radway or contemporary French researcher Sylvie Debras, however, have paved the way for a more nuanced attitude to cultural consumer goods. With her more global approach to the romantic women’s magazine Nous Deux, Sylvette Giet broke away from this hasty summarization, a stance taken up by Claire Blandin and Hélène Eck in 2010, when they launched one of the first French symposiums on women’s magazines, in which speakers were asked to “link several characteristics of women’s magazines that are frequently examined separately: women’s magazines not only provide a medium for advertising but a savoir-faire and lifestyle guide, not to mention a cultural pursuit, often exclusively attributed to the ‘female gender’.”

Taking this one step further by assuming that the audience is a key player in its reception and that a woman’s magazine is a complex object, this seems to call for a more acute observation of the purely media-oriented aspects of women’s magazines, particularly through the use of images and their propagation. Depictions of the female body, frequently considered stereotypical, standardized or unreal, are often observed out of their circulation context and with no diachronic perspective. In order to gain a more acute understanding of these images the observations need to be examined over a long timeframe and the comparisons between their publication contexts must be many and varied. The challenges inherent in the depiction of the female body can then be redefined in the light of this new approach and shown to be exempt from influence.
One of the cornerstones of any study of the changing depictions of the female body, as one observes the manner in which Marie-Claire, throughout its early years, gradually incorporated the figure of the movie star, must be the hypothesis drawn up by Edgar Morin.

**The star as model**

In the nineteenth century, the world of entertainment – opera, theatre and music-hall – sold itself by vaunting its actresses, singers and dancers. From the 1910s, the same recipe was taken up by the Hollywood movie industry, who turned to actresses to launch their new releases. Mary Pickford was one of the first to be celebrated in this way and became seen as a role model in terms of preserving the actress’s individual identity. Their extravagant habits, dramatic love affairs, promiscuous lifestyle, amazing adventures and feisty personalities were recounted in the pages of promotional fanzines, fabricating a dream world for their audience by giving form to the ideal woman. This led movie producers to create the Star System, a world in which actresses could step outside the silver screen and become popular in their own right.

From the 1930s, French magazines such as Cinémonde and Vedettes de cinéma (see fig. 3), modeled themselves on their American counterparts, in both style and content. They were designed in the form of photographic picture books, their female stars epitomizing beauty and sex appeal. Neither the occasional short articles nor the captions tackled current movie news or reviews, focusing instead on the women’s personal lives and beauty. The photographs were provided by Hollywood producers, Paramount in particular, and the information regarding the stars’ private lives also appears to have stemmed from the studios, which were not only behind the launch of some of these magazines but provided the editorial team with ready-to-publish material, thereby saving on the investigation and writing process.
Riding on the success of Hollywood, cosmetics manufacturers also chose stars to promote their beauty products. Max Factor was one of the first to turn their beauty to advantage. Initially a make-up artist for the Moscow Opera, he moved to the United States in 1904, where he created make-up especially for the screen. From 1927, he started marketing his products for the general public, all the while using the images of stars – who applied his make-up on a daily basis – in his advertisements. The actresses received financial reward and increased their celebrity status but the studios also benefited from this media coverage. In the early 1930s, the Hollywood studios started recruiting foreign actresses, confident that this would ensure positive feedback in the stars’ native countries, and this encouraged Max Factor to adapt his creations to a range of new physically diverse features. The ensuing success was borne out by the launch of his London branch in 1935 and the worldwide distribution of Max Factor advertisements.

In France, it was in Votre beauté, the promotional magazine launched by Eugène Schueller, the founder of L’Oréal, that the figure of the artist first emerged, in the late 1920s, in a lotion advert. The young woman was chosen for her beauty, which was encapsulated in her smile. At the time, theater actresses were occasionally featured in women’s magazines, to illustrate current fashions for instance, but it was only in 1932, with L’Oréal’s advertising campaign for ‘platinum blond’ hair dye, that stars were actually presented as models in Votre beauté (see fig. 4). With a nod to the latest movie trends, ‘platinum blonde’ was described as “the new shade for bleached hair and a hit with movie stars”. “Not only was ‘platinum blonde’ ideal in society, it proved fantastically photogenic on screen. It was a great success with many actresses of the day, and put the final touch on the winning charm of the Comédie-Française’s Madeleine Renaud and Françoise Rosay.”
The fact that the photographs of Hollywood actresses were mainly provided by American studios such as Paramount proved that they were relying on the widespread dissemination of these images in the media and abroad to promote their films. Following the initial campaign, stars often found themselves on the front cover (see fig. 5) and were also featured inside the magazine and in advertisements. They even became role models for a variety of topics. Editor Claude Malays, for instance, responded to the question “Eyebrows. Should they be plucked?” by revealing that Marlene Dietrich “removed them completely”. Commenting on two of the photographs provided by Paramount to illustrate the article, she added “These two photos of Carole Lombard and Kathleen Birke prove that you can give your eyebrows the shape and width to suit your type of beauty and achieve the style you’re aiming for.”

Five years on, with the launch of the women’s magazine Marie-Claire, aimed at working-class women, actresses were quite naturally presented as icons of beauty and sex appeal. They were described as enticing emblems of femininity, “as beautiful as goddesses” or like “stars”, although readers were nevertheless reminded that these were “women just like you, and sometimes scarcely more attractive.”
The visual cycle and female sexualization

On a visual level, it is difficult to distinguish the stars from other women in these early issues of *Marie-Claire*, as all the images of women look like *images of stars (see fig.6)*, beautiful and wreathed in smiles. When one compares the images of stars taken from movie magazines and the cosmetics industry with those featured in *Marie-Claire* one is immediately struck by the flagrant borrowings and similarities.
The phenomenon first manifested itself in the new importance given by Marie-Claire’s journalists to faces, a characteristic already observed in the depiction of stars in movie magazines and promotional cosmetics publications. The very first issues featured portraits of smiling women on the front covers (see fig. 6) but they also cropped up on a number of inside pages, either in close-up or framed in such a way as to emphasize their faces (see fig. 7), positioned to highlight the features, with a radiant smile and carefully groomed hair and make-up (see fig. 8). Both the articles and the adverts were full of beauty tips for the face and its importance was stressed in conveying the right impression. The face took on a key role in terms of appearance, replacing the careful attention to overall elegance advocated in nineteenth-century fashion magazines. Like in the movies, the use of close-ups made it possible to approach faces, distinguish them and perceive emotions more clearly.
These references to the stars’ visual repertoire can also be seen in their way of gazing at themselves in the mirror, an acknowledgment of pride in their own appearance, a certain self-satisfaction and the ability to attract the male gaze. These tips were not limited to Marie-Claire, however, judging from other contemporary publications such as Beauté magazine37 (see fig. 9). In that particular magazine, if a woman was shown in a state of undress, the caption would inevitably mention that she worked in show business, either as a dancer, a singer or an actress, recognizing the tacit right of such women to flaunt their nudity. Despite the fact that women’s fashions at the time were anything but revealing, the stars’ nakedness or semi-nakedness was regarded as part of their genome and no eyebrows were raised. Implicitly, actresses were given special license to be erotic and be looked at and admired for that very reason.38 Their show business status and the fact that they earned a living by trading on their appearance gave them a certain boldness, not unlike that of prostitutes.
Although by this time a certain number of women had already thrown off their sartorial shackles in favor of lighter, more liberating fashions, the stars’ wardrobes, which might nowadays be regarded as provocative, were not the lot of the majority of women and continued to be limited to those in the entertainment business. In the lexicon of Vedettes de cinéma, stars had “all it takes to be seductive”, “a perfect figure, an attractive smile and self-confident elegance”. Such powers of attraction were also hailed by Marie-Claire as prerequisites for getting and keeping one’s man, as corroborated by the visual presence of men in the magazine and the column inches given to their opinions. Women were encouraged to be beautiful for the purpose of attracting men, a principle brilliantly summed up on the front cover of the September 1934 issue of Votre beauté: “Be beautiful, we’ve got our eyes on you” (see fig. 10).

In Marie-Claire, both journalists and admen hailed these must-have qualities and provided readers with instructions on how to acquire them and get results. Love was the ultimate target, symbolized by a return to the “screen kiss” (see fig. 11), as portrayed in movies and magazines. By picking up on Hollywood’s traditional happy end—“She loves him, he loves her and they live happily ever after”—the process had come full circle. Showing off one’s beauty and the advantages of a desirable body was the first step toward seduction and therefore toward love and happiness. Women were now using the guiles of the star, honing their beauty and suggestive appearance to capture men. By letting their voices be heard, men were showing their approval of the new role of women in the mating game and cooperating with the system, which reassured the magazine’s female readership.
In the early 1930s, the cosmetics industry triggered a redefinition of the concept of beauty, built around body and face care. Manufacturers such as Max Factor and Eugène Schueller turned to the booming film industry, calling on the stars and their visual repertoire to boost production. In France, the editorial team on Marie-Claire mirrored the trend by devoting pages to beauty care and information on the latest products. To give shape to this tribute to beauty, they chose to depict women as actresses and in so doing tempered the cinematographic origin of the model – in the 1937 and 1938 issues of Marie-Claire, for instance, stars were only explicitly featured between one and four times per issue (two on average). By removing the models from their established context and expanding the range of media – movie magazines, films, women’s magazines, advertising etc. – they were contributing to the normalization and naturalization of their appearance. To the latter, if all women were depicted according to the same codes, beauty might be within their reach. It therefore became feasible to identify with these images, even more easily than with images of stars.

Throughout the nineteenth century, while aristocrats preened in the company of their voluptuous socialite mistresses, proof that their sex lives were not limited to the marriage bed – the home was the domain of children’s education and the perpetuation of the family name – the bourgeois middle classes were determined to find both love and sex within the confines of marriage, in order to form a more “companionable” and egalitarian relationship. Meanwhile, a number of feminists, in the face of their own disappointing sex lives, were demanding the right to take matters into their own hands. Although this tendency for relationships to revolve around marriage dates back to the nineteenth century, it actually seems to have developed and spread throughout the more modest echelons of society between the 1920s and the onset of World War II. In this context, the paradigm of the female star became that of the modern woman, who by
mastering her appearance and powers of seduction now found herself in control of her sexuality. This shift brought about a change in the relationship between husband and wife by showing women in a positive light.

20 Actresses who had climbed the social ladder even before they became stars, thanks to their beauty, epitomized a form of social mobility that precluded the working-class readership targeted by Marie-Claire. So while middle-class women were still able to find pointers in the pages of the fashion magazines that would enable them to mold their body in accordance with their class, Marie-Claire readers were discovering the codes of a new manifestation of gender that went hand in hand with social success.

21 This study highlights one of the cornerstones of media cultures, to create an attractive model in the collective psyche as a means of promotion. By observing the media characteristics of women’s magazines, it is possible to reconstruct the emergence and development of the female role models offered to readers at any given moment. Once this has been established, one may legitimately question the potentially alienating nature of these models. This must be mitigated, however, by the fact that these images could only become stereotypes because they mirrored the desire by women themselves to change status.
NOTES

3. “Le prestige de la femme, sa force, son rayonnement sur tout ce qui l’entoure est étroitement lié à son apparence extérieure”, Mode et beauté, 1, 1901.


19. See also Gallica, Grands artistes de l’écran, Vedettes de cinéma, Visages et contes du cinéma (http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32890266c/date).

20. Vedettes de cinéma was published for the first time in 1931. There was no masthead and no mention of an editor, journalist or date. According to the BnF index, the available issues, consulted here, date from 1931 and 1932.


24. Votre beauté was actually the supplement of a trade magazine entitled La Coiffure de Paris. It was initially called La Coiffure et les modes, from 1909 to March 1932, then Beauté, coiffure mode from April 1932 to December 1932, before finally adopting the title Votre beauté in January 1933. To avoid confusion, only the title Votre beauté will be used in the course of this article.

25. “En suivant l’exemple des jolies artistes que vous admirez”, Dixor advertisement, La Coiffure et les modes, 15 September 1927, unnumbered.

26. In the section of the seminar “Mythes, images, monstres” entitled “Un sourire de star: la construction d’un stéréotype”, held on 5 May 2011, André Gunthert demonstrated how the very first smiles on camera could be traced back to those of the film stars in the specialized movie magazines.


28. Advertisement for L’Oréal blanc, Beauté, coiffure, mode, 266, April 1932, back cover (fig. 4).


32. “À voir les modes de l’écran, à contempler dans la salle obscure des actrices belles comme des déesses et habillées hors de saison, les couturiers y ont pris plus d’idées, les femmes plus d’audaces” [By dint of seeing fashions on screen and watching actresses as beautiful as goddesses draped in out-of-season garments, designers gleaned more ideas and women more pluck].


34. “Maintenant, pensez que la star n’est qu’une femme, comme vous, parfois à peine plus jolie que vous. Pour mettre ainsi en valeur son visage, pour mettre au point cette perfection, cet équilibre, il a fallu l’effort, le talent de plusieurs spécialistes, maquilleurs, coiffeurs, masseurs” [Now imagine that this star is simply a woman just like you and sometimes scarcely more attractive. To show off her face and achieve such a degree of perfection and balance required the talent of several specialists, make-up artists, hairdressers and masseurs]. “Chevelures d’étoiles”, Marie-Claire, 2, 12 March 1937, pp. 24-25.


37. Beauté magazine was more specialized in that it dealt with beauty in its artistic sense. Its first issue was published in 1929 (BnF collection).


40. Vedettes de cinéma, du théâtre et du music-hall dans l’intimité à l’écran et à la scène, 1931/1932 (according to the BnF index).


42. Ibid.


48. Ibid.


In March 1937, when the first issue of Marie-Claire was published, the images of the female body it presented to its female readers from working-class backgrounds contrasted sharply with those featured in previous magazines. The female bodies are dressed and groomed to seduce and replace the hieratic bodies that presented fashions synonymous with membership in the upper classes. The present essay examines this shift and shows that the visual repertoire employed is borrowed from that of the female star constructed by movie magazines. By depicting women as stars, this iconography alters not only the image of the female body but the paradigm of femininity itself. The codes of this new appearance symbolize the social conquests of those who succeed by dint of their beauty, but they also represent women’s reappropriation of their sexuality in a context where the heterosexual couple was being reconfigured on the basis of love.

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