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Women, Power, and Photography in *The New York Times Magazine*

This case study is a cultural analysis of The New York Times Magazine 2001 special photography issue on women and power. Drawing from semiotic and feminist theories and critical frameworks, the author analyzes the magazine’s treatment of the topic of gender and power, and compares it to existing concerns about stereotyped portrayals of women in mass media. The author argues that significant factors are prohibiting the magazine’s treatment of the topic from being a significantly new or reconfigured vision: tensions between the magazine’s editorial and advertising content, as well as a recurring emphasis on the importance of physical attractiveness and passivity, even for powerful women. In light of these findings, the author considers existing critical perspectives on how restricted depictions of women might begin to be changed.

**Keywords:** photography; women; New York Times; gender; advertising; visual communication

In the fall of 2001, *The New York Times Magazine* published a special photography issue devoted to the topic of women and power. The issue, titled “Women Looking at Women,” featured the work of twenty-three female photographers, and the inside pages proclaimed that the issue was “shot entirely by women” (p. 39). Among the photographers whose work was commissioned for this issue were documentarists, portraitists, and artists, including the likes of Sally Mann, Mary Ellen Mark, Justine Kurland, Alyson Aliano, Eve Fowler, and Lauren Greenfield. In the table of contents, the introductory title proclaims “Women and Power: An Exploration in Pictures/The Way We Live Now,” and it is followed by a series of articles along with photographs that explore the status and position of women in 2001: an Olympic champion weightlifter, a CEO and her secretary, a prison guard, a model, a first lady, a congresswoman and her daughter, an oil rig worker, a Hampton hostess, pop singers, a social worker, lesbian couples and their children, a school teacher, champion swimmers, vogue editors.
In the first article, “Portrait of the Artists,” author Deborah Solomon (2001) describes this as a “golden age” for female photographers. In the past, women struggled for recognition in the male-dominated profession of photography, but according to Solomon, in 2001, the main problem the editors at *The New York Times Magazine* faced in putting this special issue together was “a glut of first-rate material from which to choose” (p. 39). Indeed, in taking up the topic of women and power in context of the special photography issue, *The New York Times Magazine* did an interesting thing: it put the cameras in the hands of the women. As Margaret Talbot (2001) writes in the article, ”Women and Power in 2001”: “Feminists of the 70’s and 80’s used to talk a lot about the ‘male gaze.’ This issue is dominated by the female gaze: all the photographs were taken by women. If image-making is a form of power, does it make us see women differently? I think so” (p. 94). Talbot’s simplification of the ‘male gaze’ aside, the operating assumption on which this issue is based is clear—put cameras in the hands of women, and you get a power shift, and a different, feminine vision.

But is this the case? And to what degree do we get a new vision from *The New York Times Magazine*? This case study examines such questions. It explores the portrayals of women, power, and photography with the objective of investigating whether and how women may be portrayed differently because women controlled the cameras. First, the analysis of gender, power, and visuals is placed in the context of the existing literature on visual depictions of women and established concerns about their representation. Second, the cultural analysis, which was based on the insights of semiotic and feminist theories and critical frameworks, is presented along with three themes that emerged. Third, the case study is considered along with observations about the role of advertising as the context into which news and editorial content is placed, and suggestions are made for future research into the social organization of production.

Situating the Study of Women, Photography, and Power

In a recent essay, Fiona Carson (2001) argues that the two most significant concerns related to women and visual representation have been the marginalization of women as artists and communicators and the objectification of the female body in visual art (p. 26). In this section, I consider each of these concerns as it relates to this case study. Much has been written about the neglect historically of female artists and writers and the range of attempts, particularly since the 1960s, to recognize the significant contributions of female artists and to bring their works to light. There has been an increased recognition of female artists in mainstream publications and exhibitions. At the same time, a number of female artists working in various visual
media forms have interrogated constructions of the feminine in their work, artists like Judy Chicago, Cindy Sherman, and Barbara Kruger. Artists and professional communicators working in the medium of photography are no exception to this trend. Particularly in the past decade, there have been a number of high profile publications that feature the work of female photographer(s), among them Naomi Rosenblum’s (2000) *A History of Women Photographers*, Cathy Newman’s (2002) *Women Photographers at National Geographic*, and Annie Leibovitz and Susan Sontag’s (1999) *Women*.

Many studies have also been undertaken that analyze and criticize visual portrayals of women, in still and moving images (Berger 1972; Douglas 1994; Mulvey 1999; Jhally 1995, Ewen 1988; Warner 1994; Kaplan 1992; Kilbourne 2000). All of these works have focused in some way on the content of visual portrayals as well as the form in which they are presented. In particular, Berger (1972), Jhally (1995), and Mulvey (1999) have examined the conventions often used in visual stereotypes of women as sexual objects of a male gaze. These conventions include such visual strategies as framing, camera angle, and juxtaposition of images in space or time to construct a relationship between spectator and image. In addition, these authors have pointed out that the form in which a visual image is shot and presented implies a social relationship where relative power between viewer and subject and between genders is established. For John Berger (1972), who examines conventions in oil painting and in mass media advertising, the idea is summed up in the phrase, “men act and women appear” (p. 47). Berger’s argument is that in such representations, the visual presence of men is significantly different from the visual presence of women. Men are defined by their power or potential for action; women are defined by how they can be treated or acted upon—as sights. Berger explains, “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female” (p. 47).

Laura Mulvey (1999), like Berger, examines the visual conventions that frequently position a male as the ideal spectator. Using the phrase “the male gaze,” Mulvey makes an argument about the film image and spectatorship. She does so by examining the point of view the camera takes—and by implication, that the spectator is asked to take in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. . . . In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote “to-be-looked-at-ness.” (P. 383)
Mulvey describes women’s depiction as visually stylized objects, whose bodies the camera “contemplates” as erotic breaks in the action, mostly from the male character’s subjective point of view. She comments that the visual presence of women is often focused on the body as a desirable landscape, part of the spectacle more than the action.

In essence, Mulvey (1999) and those before her have pointed out that women are often shown as passive objects, their bodies like landscapes, positioned in order to be looked at and acted upon, rather than doing the acting themselves. The question, then, is did The New York Times Magazine’s strategy of putting women behind the camera (as well as in front of it) lead to a significantly different type of representation? This is a question that is particularly relevant to issues of women and media power. It is also a case from which to begin to engage in an evaluation of two major contentions in feminist media studies scholarship. One is the liberal feminist perspective, in which equal opportunity for women working as media producers is promoted as a mechanism through which reformed, improved depictions of women can and should emerge (Steeves 1987). Another is a socialist feminist perspective, in which reforming the structure of social organization and the media industry is presented as a necessary condition before images of women and the status of women will substantially change (Steeves 1987).

Second, the question is important because the New York Times is a widely read, highly regarded and respected, agenda-setting news publication. Many will look on this special photography issue of The New York Times Magazine as a premiere example of what can or should be done in news magazine coverage, and in this case, in news magazine coverage of women and power. It deserves a close scrutiny.

Analyzing Images in Context

In this article, the special issue of The New York Times Magazine is approached as a text that can be analyzed and evaluated for its form, content, and ideology. This type of close textual reading is an established method of analysis in a number of disciplines, including critical and cultural studies, visual communication, media studies, film studies, and literary studies. Some notable examples in the area of visual communication are John Berger’s (1972) Ways of Seeing, and Berger and Mohr’s (1982) Another Way of Telling, Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins’s (1993) Reading National Geographic, Sut Jhally’s work including Dreamworlds II (1995), as well as edited collections of work such as Robert Allen’s (1992) Channels of Discourse, Reassembled and Leslie Devereaux and Roger Hillman’s (1995) Fields of Vision. All of these works combine close readings with visual media criticism, which is the
approach that I employ here. This study can also be considered a cultural analysis. I use interdisciplinary methods to investigate some of the expressive and symbolic dimensions of contemporary media culture, and I suggest that we should take a closer look at the construction of gender identities and the politics of representation.

Similarly, I am considering the visual images in this special issue as a part of our larger visual culture, recognizing that photographs do not appear in isolation, but in a particular context, or situation of exhibition—what Terry Barrett (1990) refers to as the “external context” (pp. 79-83). In this issue of The New York Times Magazine, as in other issues, the photographs that accompany the articles do not stand alone. They stand alongside advertising images and printed words that shape their meanings. All are parts of our current visual culture, and together is the most common way a reader of the magazine will experience them. According to Lister and Wells (2001), this examination of visuals in context is one of the strengths of critical and cultural studies because it allows one to address and consider the complex relationships among visual forms and visual conventions, production, meaning, and issues of power and ideology.

In this article, the idea of analyzing editorial images and advertising images together—as a unit—is critically important. Although media professionals and academic researchers often treat the two as completely separate, that is not the way a typical reader experiences them. After all, they are printed right next to each other on the page. This cultural analysis considers the ways in which editorial content and advertising content, together, may shape meaning-making.

The analysis was informed by the theoretical insights of semiotics and feminist criticism, as well as by investigations of ideology. The following issues were considered: How are women portrayed in this issue—in words, images, and context? Are there common, repeated descriptors or nonverbal postures used to characterize women? How are powerful women depicted and described? What aspects of powerful women have been highlighted in the images, words, and layout of the magazine? How are female photographers portrayed in words and images? How is their work placed in relation to other images in the magazine’s layout? Does The New York Times Magazine’s treatment of women and power depart significantly from existing criticisms about how women have been stereotypically represented in visual media?

Tension between Editorial and Advertising Content

In this issue of The New York Times Magazine, the work of female photographers is often undercut because of its juxtaposition with advertisements in the layout. Tension exists between editorial content and advertising content. In the
layout, one often subverts the message of the other. Nowhere in the magazine is this more apparent than in the first few pages—specifically, with the cover photograph by Sally Mann and the series of advertising images that follow. Mann’s cover image is a black-and-white photograph in which she poses with her two daughters. The three women are lying in a pool of water. We can see their heads and shoulders, but at different orientations. Mann is in the center and upside down, her face crisply focused. Her two daughters are on the sides and right-side up, with their faces in soft focus. The visual is evocative of the idea of reflection. There is an obvious physical resemblance mother to daughters, which is accentuated by the fact that they appear to be wearing identical black swimsuits. But the photograph is not a pure reflection along a horizontal axis. There is an intersection—the photographer’s face with her daughters’ faces—and a suggestion of agency. In the photograph, it is Mann’s face that has the crispest focus and most detailed visual texture. This image seems to be about Mann’s photographic vision, and about her relationship with her daughters. Because of the orientation in space and the selective use of focus, the implication is that Mann may be seeing the world in a different way than most of us. As viewers, we have to work to make the connection between the very focused but upside down Mann and her two “correctly” oriented daughters. It is a very effective and appropriate opening image for this special New York Times Magazine photography issue featuring the work of female photographers shooting subjects related to women and power.

The subtitle of the issue, “an exploration in pictures of power and its opposite,” is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, in the subtitle, there is a suggestion that the magazine is not going to give us “the answers” about women and power, but investigate and look around the territory and issues. Second, the explanation will include pictures of power “and its opposite.” What is the opposite of power? If we use some of the traditional dichotomies, it could be power and lack of power, or power and powerlessness, or power and weakness. Or maybe “its opposite” is that ‘problem that has no name,’ giving a nod to Betty Friedan. The cover title invites the idea that a consideration of women and power is a complex issue. Within it, there are problems and contradictions.

Certainly, the topic of women and power is a challenging one. The cover includes an intriguing image, a provocative set of words, and an acknowledgment of complexity. But when a reader leaves an examination of the cover and turns the page, she or he encounters a series of advertising images that subvert and undercut the message of the magazine’s cover. In the gateway fold is an advertisement for Ralph Lauren featuring a woman in a reclined position wearing a revealing mesh dress with a bare back, her face turned back toward the camera in invitation. Next is a two-page spread for Prada with three women, two reclined and the other sitting on her knees with bare legs slightly spread, looking at the camera. The third advertisement is a two-page layout for
Estée Lauder with a headshot of an ecstatic female. Fourth is a two-page spread for Calvin Klein furniture showing a room that is bare except for a bed, which is the focus. Fifth is a Liz Claiborne two-page layout in which one page is a head shot of a woman (in lingerie) examining her lips in a mirror; the other page is made up of five smaller body fragment photographs in which parts of the model’s lingerie-clad body are shown as she is touching her lips, hair, and bra.

A tension is immediately apparent between the way in which the topic of women, power, and photography is introduced on the cover and the way it is treated in the series of advertising layouts that follow. Sally Mann’s cover photograph may be new and inspired, but it is situated in a context that is easily subject to the same criticisms about how women are all too often represented in photographs. This issue may be devoted in name to “women looking at women,” but the way many of these advertisements are structured calls to mind the idea of men looking at women and women presenting themselves in order to be looked at. The visual presence of the models in the Ralph Lauren, Prada, and Liz Claiborne advertisements harkens back to the ideas of John Berger (1972) and Laura Mulvey (1999). In fact, the images could be used as prime examples to support the continued relevance of their ideas. These are women presented as part of the landscape to be looked at, as women to be acted upon, and as women preparing themselves to be looked at. At one point in this series of advertisements, the concept of women and power is even whittled down to a choice about facial moisturizer, as in “the power of light” by Estée Lauder. This is a pretty direct way to reduce a concern about power and social position down to a matter of no more than consumer choice. The message seems to be: Empower yourself as a woman by choosing the correct beauty product.

This opening section establishes a recurring theme for this issue: There are going to be some interesting photographs, words, and ideas about women and power that are systematically undercut through juxtaposition with other images—especially advertising images—in the layout. It is “systematic” because there is an underlying system that structures the presentation and format of news, the sale and privileging of advertising space-time.

The tensions and contradictions between editorial content and advertising content continue in the table of contents layout (pp. 18-19). The left page is made up of thumbnail images (1” × 3/4”) taken from the featured photographs and articles. The title has been changed from the one on the cover to “Women and Power: an exploration in pictures.” Here there is no mention about power and “its opposite.” On the right side, a full-page Louis Vuitton advertisement prominently presents another visual depiction of women in relation to power. There is a woman in a dark pantsuit holding onto a Louis Vuitton handbag. She is standing in a sleek office or home space, done in grays. The camera is angled
up at her, an orientation that, in certain contexts, can emphasize the subject’s power (Messaris 1994, 9). However, a few other elements of the photograph are working against such an interpretation. The woman has a bit wider stance than normal and is in high heels leaning back, which is not a particularly stable position. Given the camera orientation and her dress, her head looks small and her legs become the focus of attention. Another feature also undercuts any suggestion of power. There is a version of this woman on the flat panel screen near the floor. (Or if it is not the same woman, it is a woman who looks enough like her to be interchangeable.) This woman is at or slightly below the camera’s/the viewer’s eye level. She is wearing no clothes and is shielded only by her Vuitton handbag. All things considered, even a fine leather handbag is a feeble cover or defense in this situation. It seems that the expensive clothes, the stance, and the camera angle are only an illusion of power for the standing woman. The screen version is the vulnerable woman behind the power facade. One reading of this image is that no matter how much stature a woman gains in her real world environment, she will be depowered and exposed within the rectangular frame of the visual, mediated image. Because of the relative positioning in this photograph (the screen is behind the standing woman), it appears that she may not even be aware of what is going on.

A third example of subversion through juxtaposition occurs on pages 52 through 53. In this two-page spread, the left-hand side includes a 4.75″ × 3.75″ photograph taken by Katie Murray, which shows Marianne McGill, a high school teacher, posing along with students in her classroom. The photograph accompanies an article by Sarah Mosley (2001), “Head of the Class: The Female Schoolteacher is Back on Top,” in which the author argues that the power and status of the teacher is like being “CEO of her own Fortune 500 company” (p. 52). On the facing side of the layout there is a full-page (11.5″ × 9.25″) photograph that is an advertisement for Versace. It shows a simultaneously overadorned and overexposed woman—dressed in a denim suit, which is open in front down to her navel, cloaked in a fur coat (even though it appears to be spring and flowers are blooming in the background) and adorned with plenty of gold jewelry. She is positioned next to a statue/sculpture of a male child, so that the child’s face is turned toward her but is buried in the fur of her coat. Her finger is reaching over to touch his. This advertising image presents a very different view than the school teacher photograph does about how a woman should relate to children. It seems to argue that her role should be vamp and seductress—a provocateur who displays herself for others, even children, to look at and interact with in a sexual manner. If a reader turns the page, she or he encounters the article titled “Family Values.” In the context of this layout, the juxtaposition is more than ironic; it is so contradictory that it is deeply troubling. In the two photographs discussed above, the school teacher in her class-
room versus the woman who seduces children, the advertising image speaks louder in a number of ways. It is a significantly larger size, and it has a closer framing of its female subject. In the layout, it carries more weight.

Advertising images are also given privileged positions in the layout of the article “In the Balance: Women and Power in 2001” (pp. 90-95). In this layout, the words are by Margaret Talbot and the featured photograph is by Sally Mann, but the lead photograph—the one given a privileged position on the full page facing the article’s beginning—is an advertisement for Gucci with a close-up of a watch. To reiterate, we are in the special photography issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, which is about women and power, and which highlights the work of female photographers. We are in the layout for the highlighted article, which purports to tell us where we are in the year 2001 in relation to women and power. We are in the position that would typically be given to the lead photograph—in other words, to the image that would start the visual story or visual consideration of this topic, women and power. And according to the editors, their biggest problem was that they had so much “first-rate material to choose from” in putting together this issue (Solomon 2001, 39). The powerful lead position is not given to any image taken by one the featured female photographers, but is instead given to an advertisement. That layout decision, in itself, is an indication about where we are and how far we still have to go in regards to women, power, and visual culture. And in more general terms, it may also be an indication of a lower priority that is given to editorial content when compared with advertising content.

**Emphasizing Attractiveness**

A second theme that emerged from the analysis was that the codes of traditional femininity seem to be firmly embedded on many levels in the magazine’s treatment of the topic of women and power in 2001. One of those is a persistent and recurring emphasis on physical beauty and attractiveness, or at least on a concerted effort to look good, as a defining feature of the feminine. As Susan Sontag (1999) has explained it: “to be feminine, in one commonly felt definition, is to be attractive, or to do one’s best to be attractive; to attract” (p. 22). In fact, in many instances powerful women who are profiled in the articles are ‘normalized’ by an assurance given to readers that no matter how powerful these individuals are, they still take time out to primp and prepare themselves in order to be looked at and to be appreciated for their beauty.

Two prominent examples can be found in the female athletes who are featured. In the interview with Maria Isabel Urrutia, a champion weight lifter from Colombia, the first string of interview questions are about what it is like to be “freakishly stronger than other girls,” and about her aggressiveness and the times when people find her intimidating (p. 43). These are followed by a
question about her attendance at a beauty pageant and the boost to her self-esteem that came with dressing up in order to be elegantly feminine. In the photograph by Zoe Selsky, Urrutia is not shown in action, training or lifting, but in a staged formal portrait. Similarly, the article on Stanford University swimmers, “Big Women on Campus,” (pp. 148-50) is subtitled “Delts, Quads, Pecs, Mascara, Lipstick.” The excerpts from interviews by Lauren Greenfield that have been selected for publication relate to struggling with a balance between being strong and powerful and looking pretty. The message that comes through, in both the framing and the words, is that in order to be a “whole person,” a strong, competitive, athletic woman must also be concerned with her hairstyle, makeup, and dressing up in order to be feminine.

In an article headed “Parallels” (pp. 44-48) on a female CEO and a female secretary and their working relationship, readers are informed that one is a woman of power and the other is a woman with drive and ambition. We find out that even though the two women are very different, they share a “dread for dress-down Fridays,” and in fact, readers discover in the article that it was that drive to dress up that cinched the job interview for the ambitious secretary and ensured her success.

The emphasis on physical attractiveness recurs again in the article, “In the Balance: Women and Power in 2001.” In the article, Margaret Talbot explores changing conceptions and different forms of power. There are a number of important ideas raised in the text about the contradictions that plague a topic like women and power. But like many other examples that have already been examined in this article, it is the way the ideas are presented that undercuts the argument. In the last paragraph of the article is the last significant idea a reader is left with. It is Talbot’s description of her favorite photograph of her powerful sister Cindy. Cindy is a doctor:

It is an old snapshot of Cindy at work in blue scrubs, helping a patient deliver a baby; for years, I kept it in a frame on my desk. In it, Cindy is an emblem of pure concentration, her hands firmly cupping a baby with the umbilical cord still attached, her arms draped with some sort of plastic tubing, her eyes betraying no interest whatsoever in the camera. Nonetheless, you can’t help but noticing the big silver earrings glinting behind her thick blond hair. She is totally immersed, yet she looks damn good. (P. 94)

Somehow in this piece, even with her acknowledgment of the ambiguity and contradictions surrounding the issue of women and power, in the end, Talbot has circled around to what seems to be the continuing imperative in this issue—a step backwards to refocus on beauty and visual presence. In the end, it still boils down to the woman in the photograph looking “damn good,” whatever else amazing, professionally competent, and powerful she may be doing.
The portrayal—verbal and visual—of female photographers is characterized by a similar emphasis on traditional codes and stereotypes of the feminine. In the words of the article, female photographers are described as women who exert their power through softness, seduction, and a nonconfrontational manner. Deborah Solomon’s portrayal of the featured photographers in “Portrait of the Artists: The Women Behind Photography’s New Golden Age” (pp. 38-40) is blatant in its adherence to these traditional conceptions of the feminine. Solomon puts forward the notion that the most artful female photographers are “attentive, accommodating, catlike, and silent. They don’t assert their presence, except to tell you (much like your mother) to stand up straight and get your hair out of your face” (p. 39). Solomon continues on:

It does not diminish photographers to note their resemblance to the classically self-effacing wife. They allow someone else to be in sharp focus while they remain invisible. They must stay sober and be paragons of patience, even when the world conducts itself like a drunk whose outbursts are frighteningly unpredictable. (P. 40)

Solomon concludes her article by writing, “Susan Sontag insists, ‘There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera,’ but perhaps her dictum should be looked at again in a softer light. Every photograph is an act of seduction. In some ways, photography has been the most womanly of art forms all along” (p. 40). Solomon offers up a definition of womanliness—that it is equal to seductiveness, and is something characterized by softer lighting. It is a description that (1) compares female photographers’ discernible influence to not much more than “stand up straight and get your hair out of your face,” (2) compares their photographic pursuits to victimization in an abusive relationship, and (3) reduces their use of the camera to an act of seduction. In sum, Solomon outlines a definition of feminine power that includes a normative assessment that the power of women is something that should not be called attention to, but should instead be carried on silently and from behind the scenes.

Women As Passive and Landscape-Like

Some of the work of featured female photographers, particularly posed or staged portraits of women, conforms to the stereotypical presentation of women in visual media: women as objects, women as passive parts of the landscape, woman presented to be looked at. Justine Kurland’s photograph, which is featured along with Solomon’s opening article, seems to follow traditions of visually stereotyped portrayals of women as passive parts of a landscape. The people in it are a number of the female photographers whose work we see on the subsequent pages. The women are posed in a coastal dune environment,
and shot from a fair distance away. A couple of aspects of Kurland’s photograph are immediately striking. First, this is not at all a haphazard shot, or a slice of life for that matter. It is not a documentary image, or one in which the photographer went out and captured the visual world she happened to find in front of the camera. The world was set up and posed, and then the photograph was taken. It looks like a painting. It is obviously very consciously stylized and staged. Most of the subjects have dramatic poses and frankly, amazingly good posture. They are not in action; they are part of the landscape. And furthermore, even though they are in the same physical space, most of them do not appear to be interacting with one another even when they are seated very close to one another. The indications are facial expressions and directions of gaze. For the most part, these women are positioned not as actors against the landscape, but more like a static part of the landscape. These are not individuals interacting with other individuals. This is “to-be-looked-at-ness.” The conventions are closer to a still life or a landscape, but the subject matter is women.

Those were my impressions of this image, so it struck me as odd when in the article author Deborah Solomon referred to this picture as an “inadvertent portrait of female power as it has evolved over the decades” (p. 40). Inadvertent is a word that suggests something that was unintentional. This image, however, was scripted, staged, and set up on almost every level. First, The New York Times Magazine selected the people they consider to be some of the premiere women photographers—a select group. These people were brought to this predetermined location to be photographed by Justine Kurland (an artist who has been specializing in photographs of groups of girls.) They were arranged very consciously in space and in particular postures on the dunes. And Kurland probably had to work very hard to get them to not interact with one another, not to be involved in some kind of visual interaction, engagement, conversation, exchange, reaction. It would be especially challenging for the people sitting very close but whose sight lines do not intersect. On a number of levels, “inadvertent” seems an inaccurate, misleading descriptor for this image. One way to read this image is as a metaphor for the condition of women—alienated, posed in a landscape, a feeling that given that they are in the same situation, there should be a community or bonding or a unified focus of attention, but there is not. One reading could be a metaphor for lack of social power because there is a lack of social cohesion, unity, and even involvement in the situation.

It is interesting that in this special issue there are no visual depictions of female photographers on-the-shoot or shown in the act of making photographs—in other words, as active imagemakers at work. In fact, the only visual depiction of a photographer on-the-job in this special issue on women photographers is in a Merrill Lynch advertisement (p. 45), and the photographer is male. The image shows a man examining photographic prints on the floor of
his home studio, his view camera in the right foreground. In the background, there is a woman standing in a doorway. In the image, the man is the actor in the foreground (and the one with the money concerns), and we can see enough of his work to know that he shoots female subjects, some of which look like images of the woman who is pictured in the back of the room. If there is any confusion about her position, she is small and out of focus in the background. The depth of field is strange in this photograph; it looks different on one side of the image than on the other. Subjects at a certain distance on one side of the frame are in focus—the photographs on the wall—while subjects that appear to be at the same distance from the camera on the other side of the frame are out of focus—the woman standing in the doorway. Because the depth of field in this image does not follow the optical restrictions of traditional, lens-based photography, it is likely that the change was made digitally—that is, that there was an after-the-lens decision to de-emphasize and de-power the woman by putting her out of focus. Or perhaps the alternative, an after-the-lens decision was made to place relative emphasis on the man and his work by keeping him in focus and de-powering the rest of the subject matter.

The depiction of women as passive rather than active is continued, quite strikingly, in the feature on “Driven: The American Woman’s Most Powerful Accessory,” her car, photographs by Alyson Aliano (pp. 159-64). The word choice driven is curiously mixed in its meaning in this layout. It can mean ambitious or striving hard to succeed, but it can also signify that someone else is doing the driving—not the woman. It is interesting that the women in the photographs are pictured predominantly as passengers or posers, not as drivers. And notably, the word accessory in the title is significant. The car is like another type of “accessory”—jewelry, handbags, earrings—in that women are mostly shown looking good next to cars or riding as passengers. The car is something that adds to their attractiveness. Women are posed more like product shots than as people who are actively steering toward their own destinies. Wendy Eberle of Pennsylvania and Claudia Sherrill of Arizona are seated as passengers. Jessie Fay Thayer of Tennessee and Deborah Leshon of California are posed next to their cars. Cale Smith of Tennessee is placed on the back end of her motorcycle, sitting sidesaddle. Erin Golightly of California is leaning against the side of her car, engrossed in talking on her cell phone. In fact, out of the seven photographs selected for this article, only one shows a female who is securely in the power position of driver, Susan Martinez of New Mexico.

Discussion

One of the operating assumptions behind this special photography issue of The New York Times Magazine was that if women controlled the cameras, we would get a different point of view about women and power (Talbot 2001). My
conclusion is that this different message did not materialize. In fact, there seems to be a persistent and recurring message that women who are powerful should not call attention to it—that is, unless the source of their “power” happens to be physical beauty and attractiveness. In this special issue of *The New York Times Magazine*, it appears that not much has changed since Berger’s 1973 analysis. His statements on the visual presence of females in media representations still apply: “She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life” (p. 46).

In our visual culture, there are conventionalized poses for females that are different than for males. This different “visual presence” has been documented, analyzed, theorized, and criticized in the published works of a number of scholars—among them John Berger (1972), Jean Kilbourne (2000), and Sut Jhally (1995). This case study of *The New York Times Magazine* special issue on women, power, and photography suggests that even when women control the cameras and write the articles, this stereotyped visual presence largely persists in the magazine’s overall impact. This conclusion points to the idea that the liberal feminist notion of empowerment and change through equal opportunities, equal employment, and equal voice—but within the existing social structures and media systems—may not provide everything that is needed for a reformed, different vision of women. The conclusion seems to provide more support for the social feminist idea that in order for a new vision to grow, more substantial, systemic change may need to occur at many levels in society.

Contrary to Margaret Talbot’s (2001) simplification of the term in the introductory article in *The New York Times Magazine*, the male gaze has been discussed as a dominant and persistent, socially ingrained way of seeing and way of looking in our culture—one that has historical roots and one that both men and women are socialized into as they grow up in our visual culture, and so may well participate in reinforcing. Strikingly, in this special issue, it is the posed images that more often contribute to the persistent visual stereotyping. Apparently, when professional imagemakers, female and male, pose women for a photograph, or when some female subjects pose themselves, they call upon this persistent, dominant way of seeing and of looking at women. This is more frequently seen in posed formal portraits, and in advertising images that are highly staged. Although there are female photographers whose work in this issue does include posed women but does not conform to the visual presence stereotype, their images are de-powered in the layout because of the juxtaposition with advertising images of women that do reiterate and reinforce the woman-as-object theme.

In fact, the magazine’s self-description—that this issue was “shot entirely by women” (Solomon 2001, 39) actually tells only part of the story. Solomon’s
statement is true only if your vision of “the issue” includes only the photographs accompanying the articles. That is what she is referring to. It is a conception that ignores and overlooks the presence of advertisements, and given the topic under consideration—women, power, and images—it is a particularly short-sighted vision.

Admittedly, the discussion of news photographs as separate from advertising photographs is typical, both among media professionals and among scholars. It is a strange way to proceed, however, if we get right down to the space of the layout; the two are placed right next to each other on the page. Or even if we consider the idea that news is the stuff that fits in the “hole” left after the ads have been placed. In other words, advertisements are the media environment in which we place news and editorial content. It is an oversight to ignore them and the impact they may have in shaping meaning-making. An analysis of visual culture should acknowledge the third effect that results from all image juxtapositions, rather than pretend that the effect only counts if we happen to be talking about two images in a photographic essay and not a news photograph next to an advertisement. In terms of future research and scholarship, I see a need for a theoretical revision of the concept of the third effect to include an acknowledgment and a consideration of the role of advertising photographs together with editorial images.

Another area for future investigation is the editorial decision-making process that went into the creating of this special photography issue on women and power in 2001. Interviews conducted with editors at The New York Times Magazine could explore whether a tension was perceived in the content or form of the editorial-to-advertising juxtapositions in the layout, particularly those described in this case study. Was a tension or contradiction detected, or is the stereotyped visual presence of females perceived as so “natural” that no contradiction was noticed? Was a contradiction perceived, but it was deemed not significant enough to merit change? Answering such questions would be significant because it could shed light upon decision-makers’ views related to the topic of women and power and visual portrayal. It could also illumine the editorial-to-advertising interactions during the production process and which side is accorded more power and independence. It would also be a noteworthy direction of investigation because on at least one prior documented occasion, editors at The New York Times Magazine have perceived a contradiction in the cover-to-gateway-fold layout. In that case, which also involved the objectification of women (in the gateway fold advertisement) concessions were made in favor of the advertisers and at the expense of the planned framing of editorial content, which related to pornography and free speech issues (Cerio and Howard 1994).

It may be that to develop a genuinely alternative set of strategies for depicting women, there needs to be a change in the underlying social and economic
structure of media production. Without a reformed system or context, the potential for new voices will be undermined. This case study suggests that concerns about the status of women and their visual representation cannot be addressed by focusing on gender alone. As Eric Michaels (1986) expresses it, visual media conventions arise through the particular “social organisation of production" (p. 64). If that is the case, then it is that social organization that future investigations should explore.

Notes

1. For other works on the value and practice of close reading of visual images, see Lester (2000, 93-98), and Sturken and Cartwright (2001).

2. The cover photograph is a new image Sally Mann created for this special issue. Mann’s best-known works are portraits of her children taken in Rockbridge County, Virginia. Mann’s work is part of the permanent collection at the Whitney Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Some of her portraits have raised controversy because of the use of nudity and sexual postures.

References

Cerio, Gregory, and Lucy Howard. 1994. Sorry, one of you had to go. Newsweek, 21 March, 14.


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