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The Spectacle and the Speculum: Voyeurism and
Women’s Consumption of Magazines

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the gendered meanings of voyeurism in contemporary society and the significance of the male and female gaze as they relate to women’s consumption of magazines.

INTRODUCTION

This study arose from in-depth interviews with women about their consumption of magazines. From these interviews there seemed to be a theme of voyeurism emerging, one that was an integral part of the pleasure that women get from magazines. This voyeurism was multi-faceted. At times it is recognisable as that attributed to the classic model of male voyeurism, namely a pleasure derived from surreptitiously observing the sexual activities of others. At other times, however, it is much closer to the female voyeurism described by Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985). In contrast to male voyeurism, Irigaray argues that women voyeurs often experience a form of self-knowledge that is not available to the male voyeur. This is born of an empathy with other women, an empathy which increases self-awareness and self-understanding: ‘in the speculum of the other woman each woman finds herself.’ Women, so often the object of male voyeur’s gaze, can find themselves, as they engage in viewing other women, empowered and liberated; they can free themselves from seeing themselves as others see them. They can be subjective; and through identification with other women they can connect with themselves. The private world offered by women’s magazines seems to enable women to achieve this connection; it seems to provide a space within which women can, to borrow Irigaray’s phrase, explore ‘the hidden caverns of female self-hood.’ (in Denzin 1995, p. 159).

This, then, is a journey into ‘female self-hood’ seen through the multi-faceted lens of voyeurism, a journey as expressed by women consumers of magazines. On this journey we will encounter traditional voyeurism and we will also encounter a voyeurism which speaks of women’s experience, women’s lives. But before we embark on this journey we begin with a discussion of voyeurism and its gendered meaning in contemporary society. We will then go on to discuss voyeurism in the context of consumption and specifically shopping - the flâneur and the flâneuse - and...
voyeurism as manifested in women’s magazines. Finally we offer the reader the voices of women articulating and exploring their voyeuristic consumption of magazines, and the pleasures and pains this gives them.

**VOYEURISM AND GENDER**

Denzin (1995) writes that ‘the voyeur is the iconic, postmodern self’. Indeed he describes ‘rampant voyeurism’ as symptomatic of the postmodern, contemporary period. This fascination with looking, with spectating, is, he argues, ‘a pornography of the visible’, the visible which ‘is now everywhere. Nothing is any longer hidden.’ (p. 191). One only has to look at the burgeoning of fly-on-the-wall documentaries, docussroes, Jerry Springer-type shows, internet peep shows and through the keyhole internet sites to see the extent to which we have become consumed by other peoples’ ‘private’ lives, no matter how bizarre or indeed banal. According to the Oxford English Dictionary voyeurism is 1 ‘a person who obtains sexual gratification from observing others’ sexual actions and organs. 2 a powerless and passive spectator.’ Denzin (1995) argues that the voyeur ‘takes morbid pleasure in looking at the sordid, private activities of others.’ (p. 5).

Usually this takes the form of men having an obsessive, objectifying, sexual interest in women, often women who are powerless to resist this male gaze. Whether or not voyeurism in women’s magazines is primarily of a sexual nature is something that we will explore in due course. The extent to which the voyeur has power or is powerless has also been the subject of much debate. In her oft-cited study, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) Mulvey argues that in the context of cinema the voyeur is in a position of power over the object of his gaze, maintaining a distance from whilst simultaneously controlling that object and having power over that which is seen. The issue of whether or not the voyeur is intrinsically male and thus precludes women from a spectatorial role continues to be an important issue in feminist analyses of popular culture (see Byars, 1991, for a detailed discussion of this). Generally speaking, voyeuristic looking is characterised by curiosity, enquiry and a demand to know (Ellis, 1982 in Neale, 1997). It maintains and indeed depends upon a separation between the seer and the object seen. Overall the accepted view of voyeurism is one that suggests a lack, an absence, an impoverishment, and a vacuum on the part of the voyeur, a gap which can only be filled by consuming others’ experiences. Voyeurism is also perceived as being the opposite of identification, with the latter gendered as feminine, and the former gendered as masculine (Radner, 1995, p.11). This study will seek to demonstrate that voyeurism, and the gendered assumptions therein, are not quite as clear cut as Radner’s dichotomous observation suggests; that, at the very least, women may manifest a ‘male’ gaze as well as a ‘female’ gaze.

**THE MALE GAZE AND THE FEMALE GAZE**

Traditionally the voyeur is male. Can there be such a thing as a female voyeur? According to Berger in his influential book *Ways of Seeing* (1975), women’s experience of the gaze is dramatically different from that of men. Women are
condemned to continually watch themselves: the surveyor (the male in her) and the surveyed (her self) are a part of her (split?) identity as a woman. She is thus cast in a self-obsessed and passive role as distinct from the more self-possessed and active role of the man: ‘men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.’ (p. 47). Man is thus the spectator/voyeur and the object of his interest is frequently that of a woman. The gaze is then perceived as gendered and male, and that gaze, argues Jenkins (1995, p. 150), has systematically disempowered women because of a ‘gendered imbalance of ocular practice’.

Irigaray (1985) regards men’s gaze as endemic to their natures, a scopophilia (love of looking) in which they see only a reflection of their own subjective desires. They are imprisoned within a palace of mirrors, mirrors which reflect back to them the images they themselves create. Furthermore mirrors are quite unaffected by what is seen in or through them. They are the ‘I’s looking at the ‘other’ but not comprehending the other because they are other. He who gazes most, then, is he who is most likely to be bereft and alone. Irigaray believes that women cannot gaze: ‘Woman has no gaze, no discourse for her specific specularization that would allow her to identify with herself (as same) - to return into the self - or break free of the natural specular process that now holds her - to get out of the self.’ (p. 224).

Irigaray’s vision is of men and women divided, unable to communicate with one another, because man is defined as subject and woman is defined as object. Woman is consigned to that sex which is not one. As such she does not exist in human terms for men. ‘She is never here and now because it is she who sets up that eternal elsewhere from which the “subject” continues to draw his reserves, his re-sources, though without being able to recognise them/her.’ (p. 227). But women may also be voyeurs. Mulvey (1975), Gamman and Marshment (1988), Byars (1991) and others have done much to articulate a female gaze and challenge the orthodoxy of the male gaze. Whilst they acknowledge the gaze is gendered and that gender usually male (which doesn’t, of course, preclude women from adopting a male stance), these writers nevertheless see the importance and potential of the female gaze, a gaze which can challenge the subject/object dichotomy that prevails in popular culture. In so doing, however, they also acknowledge the complexity of the gaze and the dynamics of power endemic to it.

In her discussion of the various debates and positions that have been taken up by feminist researchers on female spectatorship, Byars (1991) observes that most of these debates overlook the pleasure that women get from spectatorship. Indeed she is not alone in identifying spectatorship and pleasure with female experience. Moore (1988), for example, has challenged Irigaray’s view that women cannot gaze and that their pleasure resides in touch. She suggests that women may derive as much pleasure from looking as men and that these ways of seeing are ‘myriad, our pleasures plural’. In these postmodernist, supposedly postfeminist times, few of us would argue that the subject/object, male/female dichotomies are intact. As Moore rightly observes,
popular culture increasingly provides women with an opportunity to turn their gaze on and objectify men. Clearly, then, there are dangers in gendering the gaze as male, as doing so essentialises women (and indeed men) and does not accommodate the diversities, complexities and ambiguities of the female gaze and the female spectator (Stacy 1988, Byars, 1991). In the extracts later we see the female gaze much in evidence. This gaze is manifested within a liberatory space; the privacy and safety of the dream world of women’s magazines.

THE RESEARCHER’S GAZE

As researchers in consumer behaviour we cannot explore voyeurism without looking at ourselves. Denzin (1995) regards voyeurism as an integral part of contemporary, interpretive, qualitative, ethnographic research. It is about observing and exposing ‘real’ people; it is about controlling and interpreting human emotion and human action for the inspection, approval and delectation of other academic researchers. It is about uncovering and unveiling the secret lives of others, making public their experiences, their suffering, their excesses, their insecurities, their vulnerabilities. Baudrillard (1988, in Denzin, 1995) writes: ‘today there is a pornography of information and communication ... it is no longer the obscenity of the repressed, the obscure, but of the visible ... it is the ... obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret.’ Of course researchers perceive themselves as ‘enlightened’ eyes, connoisseurs who go beyond that which they have seen (p. 196). It behoves us to acknowledge, then, that this study is not a study of lived experience; rather it is a study of lived textuality, given that it is based on transcriptions of taped conversations between one of us and other women. We would also argue, however, that we write as women who belong to the community of women we study. We belong to the interpretive community we study, and as such we believe that what they say has as much value as the words we use to frame their utterances. In this context, then, we locate what follows within a contextualised-consequentualist mode (Denzin 1995), one which we hope is based on respect, non-coercion and non-manipulation. Our research does not deny its moral and ethical responsibilities; indeed it is based on trust and empathy, and it identifies us as researchers working within a feminist ethic (Fonow and Cook 1991). As such we trust our research is not the traditional gaze of the cold, analytic, dispassionate and objectifying voyeur. Rather it is a gaze which aspires to be gentler and compassionate; one which seeks to understand and empathise; which hopes to describe and understand our collective lived experiences as women in a particular context, at a particular time. Denzin writes that ‘our postmodern culture is built upon a structure of visual mirrors: we see, but never feel or hear, the sounds of the other’s mind. Pseudo-understandings are created. Few experiences are shared.’ (p. 211). Our intention is that this study reads as a study of shared experience, of women communicating with other women about their consumption of magazines.
VOYEURISM, THE FLÂNEUR AND CONSUMPTION

‘Just looking’, ‘window shopping’ and ‘shopping around’ are an integral part of the pleasure women get from contemporary consumption (Bowlby 1985; Radner, 1995; Campbell 1997). Two arenas that enable us to indulge in the pleasure of browsing without necessarily buying anything on offer are shopping and women’s magazines. According to Campbell (1997) the modern shopper has much in common with the flâneur/flâneuse of the nineteenth century. The experience of shopping is seen as a recreational excursion, offering freedom and the stimuli of people and things. Nixon (1997) writes that the flâneur as represented by Benjamin offered a new form of consumption, ‘a new spectatorial consumer subjectivity’ (p. 334). The voyeuristic tendency of the postmodern shopper is clearly evident, argues Campbell (1997). Individuals are capable of standing back and getting involved in the shopping experience, oscillating between detachment and attachment, between knowing and feeling. These various positions will become evident later on when we explore voyeurism in the context of women’s magazines.

Benjamin’s flâneur was quintessentially masculine, free to enjoy watching women as he strolled through the city. Indeed Pollock argues that the gaze of the flâneur ‘articulates and produces a masculine sexuality which in the modern sexual economy enjoys the freedom to look, appraise and possess.’ (in Nixon, 1997). Wilson (1992) articulates a vision of the flâneur that is less about mastery of all he surveys and more about the anxiety and malaise which lies at the heart of he who strolls. He is a desperate, lonely figure, lost in a labyrinth. In his wanderings he maintains an irony and a detachment, both of which protect him from feeling other lives too keenly or the impoverishment of his own life too sharply. This interpretation of the flâneur coincides, then, with the notion of powerlessness and passivity, and as the foregoing discussion has demonstrated, as intrinsically male, but an immasculated male (Wilson, 1991).

In postmodern feminist discourse the flâneur has emerged as the embodiment of the male gaze (Wilson, 1992). In her 1985 study Wolff argues that the freedom enjoyed by the flâneur was a freedom not available to women: ‘the possibility of unmolested strolling and observation ... were entirely the experiences of men’. The closest female equivalent to the flâneur in the nineteenth century was the prostitute, one who was at liberty to look and be looked at, who was equally detached and yet cognisant with the city streets (Wilson 1991, 1992). Another group of women that ventured out into the streets was women writers and artists. Both Colette and George Sand did so frequently, dressing as men in order to enjoy the freedom that the city offered: ‘no one knew me, no one looked at me ... I was an atom lost in that immense crowd’ (Sand, in Wilson 1991, p. 52).

Wilson (1992) and Nava (1997), however, note that in the nineteenth century women increasingly appropriated public spaces, both symbolically and materially, and
ventured out into the city streets. The department store, in particular, offered women a legitimate space within which to look and stroll. Admittedly this is a far cry from the freedom of Benjamin’s flâneur, but nevertheless, within the confines of the department store, at once a public and a private space, women could enjoy the freedoms offered by shopping and ‘just looking’: ‘The department store was an anonymous yet acceptable public space and it opened up for women a range of new opportunities and pleasures - for independence, fantasy, unsupervised social encounters, even transgression ...’ (Nava 1997, p. 69). Significantly it also allowed women to become voyeurs, in a public space, legitimising the desire of women to look as well as be looked at. It enabled them to both be subject and object, voyeur and narcissist. Finally women were able to enjoy a public arena which enabled them to indulge in the pleasure of looking, albeit that they did so under the ever-watchful gaze of men, and within a contained and controlled environment.

WOMEN’S MAGAZINES AND VOYEURISM

Another medium was increasingly providing women with the pleasure of ‘just looking’, namely the medium of women’s magazines. Indeed much of the allure of women’s magazines lies in the pleasure afforded by ‘just looking’. Furthermore magazines enable us to look as much as we please, our looks not regulated by scopic codes (Falk, 1997), nor by fear of the male gaze regulating or indeed intercepting our gaze. Women’s magazines (like other women’s genres such as soap operas (Modleski, 1982) and romance fiction (Radway, 1987)), are increasingly viewed in affirmative terms by feminist theorists, who describe the contemporary reader as empowered, active and selective in terms of how they read. Ang (1996) writes that media representations and narratives offer us a multiplicity of choices ‘which serve as subject positions that spectators might take up in order to enter into a meaningful relationship with the texts concerned.’ (p. 111). Magazines offer women a private space, an opportunity to indulge in the pleasure of looking, the pleasure of textually and visually consuming other lives; of envisioning other lives and other selves for ourselves; and of enriching our understanding of our own lives when seen in the context of other women’s lives. Moore (1986) and others (Nava, 1991, Winship, 1991, Hermes, 1995, Radner, 1995, Ang, 1996) argue that women’s magazines enable us to enter a world that is inherently pleasurable as well as liberatory. Moreover, we ‘can enjoy browsing without necessarily buying everything on offer’ (Moore, 1986, p. 10). Elsewhere Moore (1988) argues for a recognition of the female gaze and the significance of the private and public sphere. Images in advertisements and in magazines can, she suggests ‘be looked at privately because they are always “just an image” and not a real person who requires a response.’

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

The findings are based on six in-depth interviews and four group discussions with women consumers of magazines. The main purpose of these interviews
was to explore women’s experiential consumption of this medium, the sensory and emotional response magazines evoked in women. Most of the women interviewed were in their thirties, as this age group is the focus of the larger research project on which this study was based. The research is also located within the interpretive research paradigm. As previously mentioned, voyeurism emerged as a dominant theme from discussions with women regarding what they enjoyed about magazines; how magazines made them feel; the nature of the pleasure they derived from them.

This voyeurism was multi-faceted, both a confirmation of conventional notions of voyeurism (the male gaze), as well as a surprising, identificatory, empathetic form of voyeurism, engendered by looking at and dipping into other women’s lives, Irigaray’s speculum of the other woman perhaps. The extracts and our interwoven commentary that follow attempt to explore these facets of voyeurism as articulated and described by the women we interviewed.

THE (MALE) VOYEUR

The classic male voyeur takes pleasure from observing the intimate, private activities of others. His gaze feeds off the minutiae of their lives. It is a curiosity, a ‘nosiness’ and ‘fascination’ about other people’s secrets. These aspects are openly acknowledged as providing a considerable amount of pleasure for women, as the following extracts from the interviews reveal. In both these extracts the women acknowledge that their lives bear no resemblance to the lives they enjoy reading about in women’s magazines, indeed that is often the attraction of reading about them in the first place.

‘That is all about something that I feel that I’ve missed. You know these women who have an affair with their boss at work, and you read these stories about, you know, how many men can you gang bang in one night. Well I find that absolutely amazing that there are people out there who do that, you know, it’s another world totally, and it absolutely fascinates me because I would be quite inhibited with myself and to find these women that can do this, and they must do it because there are pages and pages and pages of this. I would read that, and young people today think that is the norm, whereas I’m going do these people really do this!’

‘There is the nosiness factor - you like reading about other people’s lives, and finding out what people do and the shocking things they do in life, you know, there’s always that gossipy thing. ... I mean if I picked up a magazine ... you look at the front of it. I wouldn’t automatically start at the front of the magazine and read through because you don’t have a lot of time but there might be something that’s very shocking - you know, my life as a gangster’s moll or something ... my life is not like that but isn’t it strange - if you want to be nosy you want to learn the most intimate things about people ... it’s just a curiosity - a curiosity and sometimes amusing because
some of the problems are really so strange that you wonder have they made them up or do people really live like this.’

Whilst they clearly enjoy escaping from one life to another, this life is not necessarily a life that the reader wants for herself. Nevertheless it enables her to forget about her own life for a brief period. ‘Total escapism’ was the way that one woman reader expressed her feelings, and the desire to escape from one’s own life is clearly evident in the following extract:

‘I suppose it’s just finding out about a life that really I would never have or never relate to and you know sometimes you can look at it in horror, sometimes you can look at it and say god, isn’t that really strange or look at the kind of life they have. But it’s not escapism from the point of view of wanting to be like that. I mean I don’t think I’ve ever read an article and sort of said god, I really would like to go out and do that. It’s really just seeing another totally different perspective on life and finding out about it I suppose, which means you’re not having to think about your own life.’

A gratificatory element was often evident, with phrases such as ‘quick fix’, ‘cheap thrill’ and ‘instant gratification’ often used to describe this aspect of their consumption of magazines. Clearly the pleasure to be derived from consuming magazines can have a strong sensual and indeed sexual flavour. This perhaps recalls the ‘emotional arousal’

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) refer to in their work on hedonic consumption. This sexual element is consistent with the essence of voyeurism, namely that sexual gratification is achieved through observing the sexual activities of others:

‘Well that’s why I buy Cosmo. I don’t buy Cosmo for the cookery, you know. I think there is cookery in it somewhere, near the back, but I pay no attention to that. ... that’s why I buy them, you know, things like Cosmo. That is just cheap thrill, you know, I used to buy it years and years ago and then it got too – to my mind at the time it got too over the top, all about sex, you know. I suppose it still is in a way. Maybe I’ve changed, you know? But at the moment it’s cheap thrill!’

‘With magazines it’s just completely in your face, there on the plate and you don’t have to do anything. It is just instant gratification with calories attached and you know, it’s empty, it’s like sugar, it’s empty calories sort of thing. But that’s okay for when you want that, you know, it has a purpose, it fulfils a need sort of thing at that time.’

‘It was just the fantasy of something that I would never have. ... It satisfied an urge - not an urge. It was just a little dream world and I could go into it any time I cared to open the cover.’

Women’s magazines, particularly with the advent of *Cosmopolitan* in the early 1970s, have been at the vanguard of a
perception of women’s liberation conceived almost exclusively in sexual terms, and this preoccupation with sex continues to be reflected on the front covers of women’s magazines today. Unsurprisingly, there were frequent references during the interviews to sex, either explicitly or implicitly, where the reader conveys her curiosity in reading about other peoples’ sex lives and sexual experiences. This seems to parallel the voyeur’s sense of being on the outside looking in, not necessarily wanting to engage in the activity being observed, but enjoying watching others engage in it.

‘They know that sex sells, and sex does sell ... it’s more the curiosity factor. I mean it’s not that you necessarily want to dress up and whip somebody but you’d quite like to find out how somebody does it, and what they do in their lives, and without the shock factor too to an extent. ... It’s the same if I look at the front of a magazine and I was only going to read one article I’d probably read the article about sex. ... if you’re going to be a nosy or curious person that’s the most intimate thing you can be curious and nosy about. It’s such an intimate thing that we normally wouldn’t find out about, so that you tend to - and it may be a product of - I wouldn’t be very forthcoming about that area of my life, even with other women, but yet you can dip in and find out all about this without there being - I suppose any payback - you don’t have to divulge anything about yourself but you can find out about everybody else.’

‘Some magazines yeah I buy for the sex element, but then that’s why I buy some books and yeah, I buy sexy books and you get far more gratification out of a book because your mind is engaged as well and you’re much more involved because you’re creating the pictures for yourself, you know, either from experience or maybe they provide some pictures and you just kind of elaborate on that, but a lot of it - it’s just mind, you know, all in your mind sort of thing.’

In the above extracts we can see that this group of women readers maintain a detached enjoyment of other women’s lives and revelations. These are lives they don’t necessarily want for themselves but they can nevertheless enjoy the escapist, fantasy element provided by these features. In a sense they remain disengaged emotionally, maintaining an objectivity that is recognisably related to the male gaze with its emphasis on the vicarious, private pleasure of just looking. A number of women regarded magazines as not really engaging their brain at all. As with the classic voyeur it is the eyes that become the predominant sense, eyes which project images back into our imaginations.

‘It’s soporific reading a magazine. ... It’s just your eyes, and it’s a very shallow part of your brain. Probably part of your brain is involved but it’s not a very important part I shouldn’t
think, but then again it fulfils a need, you know.'

THE (FEMALE) VOYEUSE

As suggested earlier, some women's voyeurism took a very different form, an identificatory form much more akin to that described by Irigaray. This kind of voyeurism has little to do with fiction, fantasy or escapism, with mere curiosity or sexual titillation, or with consuming the intimate details of the lives of the rich and famous, or the merely bizarre. Instead it is very much rooted in real life and women's lived experiences.

'I suppose in a way I would get more from the true life than I would from the fiction really. The fiction is something where you can get lost in a totally different way, you know, just where your mind switches off and you go into this little world of - whatever, you know, and with the other one your mind switches off but goes in another way, you know, this is real. This is not like princes and princesses and dragons and - something made up.'

'Somebody who was raped ... It makes you feel, you know, what other people went through - at our age. Most of them are young people. ... I suppose it's getting in touch with real life ... abortion ... it might not be happening to you directly, but indirectly ...'

As can be seen in the above quotes, feelings and emotions played an important part in these women's consumption of magazines. Sometimes these experiences were related to experiences the reader has also had, and reading these stories may enable her to feel some sense of community with other women:

'There's a part of me enjoys reading about other peoples' lives and their experiences. ... I think often one can relate some of the things in those stories to - or those articles - to oneself and it makes one sometimes feel not so alone, you know, that you're not the only one in the world maybe going through this.'

At other times, reading about other women's often harrowing experiences enabled the reader to get a better sense of perspective on her own life, to help her cope with whatever problems or difficulties she was experiencing, and to count her blessings: 'I suppose if you're feeling really depressed or down and you can read about someone having a harder time than you it makes you feel slightly better', was the way one woman described her feelings, whilst another confessed:

'Sometimes it makes one not feel so self-pitying, you know. You feel really sorry for yourself and you read some of these stories and you think my god, you know, what have I really got to feel sorry about. There's these people who - who've been through heaven and hell and they're still marching on, you know. ... there would be sadness because people have to experience that - and it helps me not to feel self-
indulgent, helps me not to pity myself, you know, or think oh god, my situation is terrible, and then you read about somebody’s else’s situation and you think oh my god, you know, my situation is nothing by comparison with these people. ... I suppose it’s uplifting, uplifting in as much as you get uplifted from somebody else’s misery. I mean it’s a strange way to put it because yes, I suppose there is a certain amount of feeling better because of - somebody else is worse off than you.’

As the above extract shows, reading about other women’s experiences may be accompanied by a sense of relief that they themselves do not have the particular problems they’re reading about. Indeed not having experienced something personally does not in any way inhibit their sense of empathy with other women’s experiences, and reading such things may widen their horizons and broaden their perspective on things. One woman, when asked whether she preferred to read about experiences that were similar to her own or entirely different from anything she’d experienced, replied:

‘It could be either. I mean I suppose that’s how you get to hear - you never, I never believe it’s all together true, but that’s how you get to hear about different things, you know, it’s when you read different peoples’ experiences that have nothing to do with yourself, you know. And it fills a gap sometimes, you know.’

Whereas the previous group (the ‘voyeur’) maintained a detachment by objectifying the subjects and distancing themselves from any personal involvement, this group sought an active personal engagement with their subjects. Irrespective of whether they had been through a particular experience themselves, they sought to put themselves in ‘that person’s shoes’, to imagine themselves in the specific situation. For example, this is illustrated by the following:

‘I do like reading stories - personal - I like the way - it makes you feel lucky that you don’t have whatever they have - ‘I saw my sister die’ - I’d be very interested in reading that ... you know, my nursing background. I’d be interested in that, the emotional side of that.’

So identifying with other women’s stories at a very personal level and being moved by their plight was very common amongst this group of readers. Several confessed to outward shows of emotion when reading distressing stories. Indeed one woman said that she was often moved to tears when reading about other women’s personal stories or tragedies:

‘If there was an emotional story I would probably cry quite a bit ... a true life story, you know, say about ... children or something like that, I can be quite quickly moved to tears; I think I’m probably softer emotionally actually now than I was before. Yes I think probably I would cry quite a bit actually when I’m reading. ... I think it’s satisfying
if you feel - especially when
you’re feeling depressed as well
... they tell their story but also
you’re glad that isn’t happening
in your life, but you do get a
feeling of I’m glad I’ve got what
I’ve got and actually I am quite
happy. You know you can
control your life. ... It’s related
to feelings isn’t it, things that are
bottled up. People say you
always feel better after a good
cry. I think that’s right.’

DISCUSSION

Women’s magazines offer women a
private world within which they can
metaphorically stroll, flicking through
pages, dipping into one thing after
another, luxuriating in the visual feast
offered to them, engaging and
disengaging with the text, with people
and things. Magazines also enable
women to shop around, to window shop,
to just look, pleasures we can recognise
as those enjoyed by the voyeur and by
the flâneur. So women too can enjoy the
gaze, and they can gaze in the tradition
of the male voyeur (spectacle) or in the
more identificatory way of the female
voyeuse (Irigaray’s speculum). The
extracts, we believe, demonstrate that
voyeurism in the context of women’s
magazines is indeed multi-faceted, and
comprises a whole range of human
traits: from curiosity and nosiness to
despair and relief; from titillation and
prurience to empathy and emotional
involvement; from hedonistic delight to
deep sadness; from amused disbelief to
intense belief. Women can be as
engaged or as disengaged as they want to
be, and they are at liberty to close the
magazine whenever they want to. As one
woman expressed it, magazines are ‘just
a little dream world and I could go into
it any time I cared to open the cover’.
Of course as the above extracts show,
sometimes women want to find reality,
however distressing, rather than fantasy,
within the covers of a magazine.

From the evidence of the interviews, the
classic model of ‘male’ voyeurism is
clearly apparent. This is hardly
surprising, given that magazines are a
medium which invites us to look, to
spectate, to open the cover and partake
of the secret world of pleasures and
pains on offer within. Whilst our gaze
may be dispassionate, the foregoing
analysis has also demonstrated that our
gaze may be the opposite; it may be a
gaze which connects us to other women
and moves us. The question remains
whether or not playing the voyeur or the
voyeuse in women’s magazines
empowers us or enslaves us. There can
be little doubt that magazines frequently
compensate for perceived shortcomings
in our day to day lives, but the women
interviewed were aware that women’s
magazines were an artificial and in many
respects a superficial construct. They did
not replace real life but merely provided
them with a welcome respite from it,
and opened a window on a different
world to them, a myriad world which
they could gaze on and consume for a
time and then close the cover and
resume their own lives. Sometimes,
however, magazines did much more than
this. Reading about other women’s
experiences could comfort them and
even inspire them. They experienced a
sense of community, understanding and
often identification with other women.
Within the liberatory space of women’s
magazines a woman can pass through
what Irigaray describes as ‘the tain of the mirror to the other side of self-imagery’. She burns away ‘the fetishized woman-as-object seen in [and created] by the [masculine] glass ... the “gilded eyes” of [male] mirror-mindedness [are] replaced by eyes that search deeply into the hidden caverns of female self hood.’ (in Denzin, 1995, p. 159).

Voyeurism, then, as revealed through the medium of women’s magazines, may be as much about identification as objectification. It also seems to transcend gender boundaries and be beyond gender specifics. Having said that, this study has only explored women consumers of magazines. A future area of research may be to explore whether or not men also engage and disengage in similar ways to women in their consumption of magazines, and whether or not they also manifest the relational, empathetic, ‘private’ gaze of the voyeuse as well as the detached and dispassionate ‘public’ gaze of the voyeur.

REFERENCES


