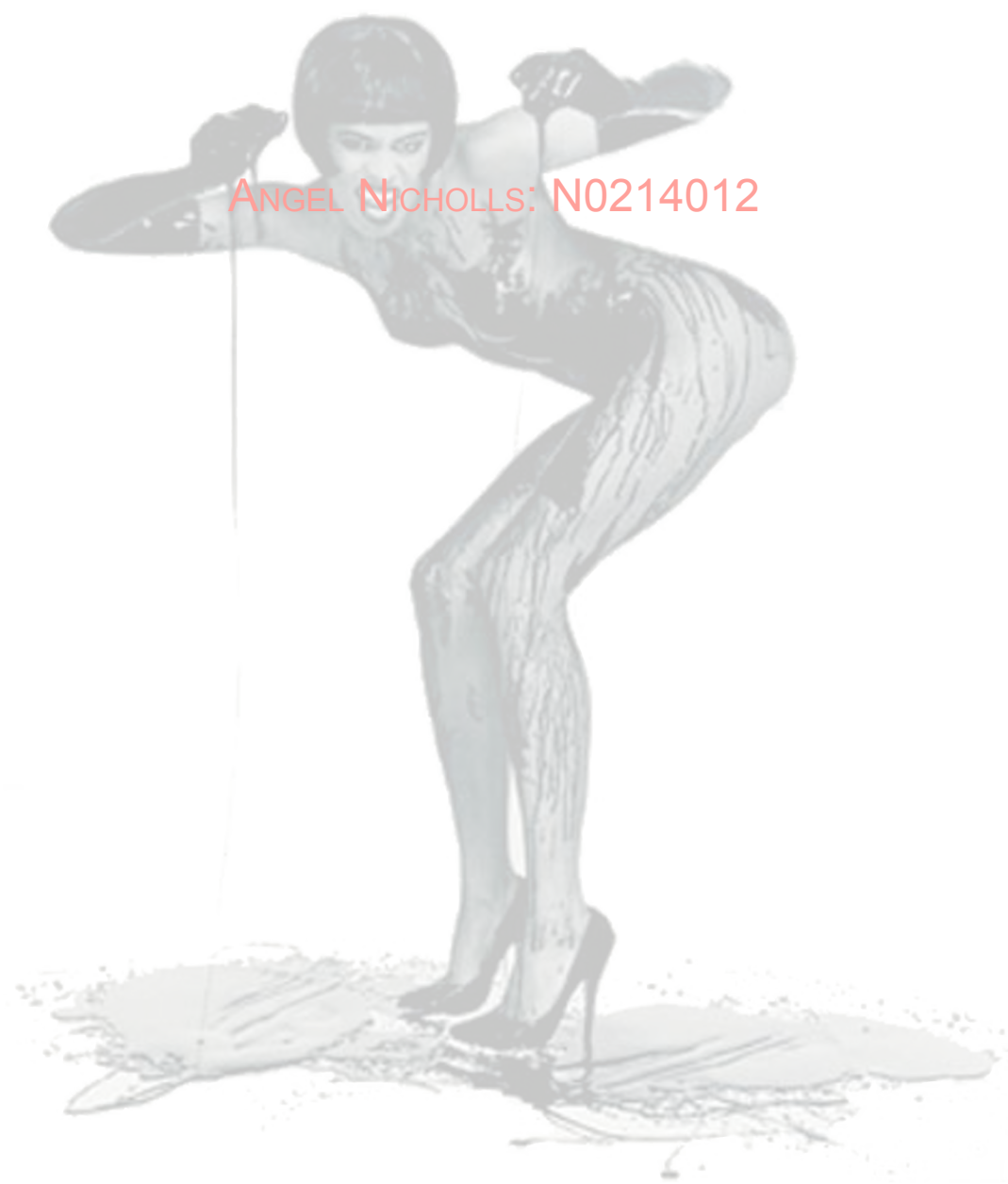


EROTICA IN FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY:

A Postmodern perspective.



ANGEL NICHOLLS: N0214012



ANGEL NICHOLLS: N0214012



Fig 2 Vivienne Westwood by Anon (2007)

It is believed that postmodernism is a definition rather than any given moment of time in history. It represents a set of ideals that sprung from design movements in the 1960s, departing from modernism (Thompson. Ed. 1996: 782). Postmodernism describes the mixing of different styles and media, use of earlier styles or borrowing from previous conventions and blurring the lines between good-taste and bad-taste. It is a word that defines so many artists and authors alike through the common stance their work takes against limits and authority.

Amongst many meanings this word also stands for anti-fashion. However it is a word

used to describe one of the greatest revolutionising eras in fashion such as the Vivienne Westwood punk phenomenon in collaboration with Michael McLaren of the 1970s (Anon 2001: 494) that 'stuck it' to the institution as well as many fashion houses about the land.



Fig 3 Vivienne Westwood with McLaren and models by Anon (1974)

It defied conventions and gave the supposedly increasingly demure nature of fashion an innovative, never-seen-before edge. Teenagers found a newer sense of freedom and began customising their clothes to give themselves a harder image.

However it was only a matter of time before punk was mainstream. (BBC2 2008). It's post-modern roots began to dilute as the message and the fashion grew big-

ger. It cannot be denied that such a way of dressing was designed to shock which, is an aspect that inhabits the works of many influential figures in fashion, particularly including photographers.

This exploration into postmodernism takes a focus on its links with fashion photography, with particular attention to erotica and sexuality in this creative medium. It further goes to determine its impact on modern media and marketing. I also wish to explore whether erotica in fashion photography will always be branded as postmodern as the times progress. Although, it may seem that the link between fashion photography and postmodernism may not be so obvious it is definitely apparent in the way certain photographers mix high-end fashion, good-taste, with a fetish-like quality that borders on pornography which can be considered as bad taste. This merging of the two is a trait indicative of the word postmodernism.

It has been recorded that the very first erotic photographers were officially created in France in the 1800s (Milivojevic-Jestratijevic, I. : 2). They consisted of nudity and sexual scenarios being performed with heterosexual and homosexual couples featuring in the background. Of the time, photographers remained anonymous as the explicit nature of such photographs were believed to 'exceed moral norms'. Such photographs were so forbidden that those who staked claim to their work were often fined or even imprisoned. However eventually, like the garments in fashion, erotic images witnessed a democratisation too with the rise of the female body being celebrated in photography. Sexuality was also more acceptable as signifiers of lust and desire were openly paraded in fashion photography through the use of garters, stockings, veils, fans, lingerie and high heels (Milivojevic-Jestratijevic, I. : 2). Then with that photographers who longed to experi-

ment with erotica were subject to a form of emancipation, which has continued to mould the world of consumerism and art today.



Fig 4 Female nude by Anon (19th century)

A photographer who received much acclaim for his stylistic and provocative approach was the infamous Helmut Newton who worked in the post-war years. Helmut Newton was an influential photographer that helped take fashion to new levels with his work for, but not limited to, French and American Vogue (Newton, H. 1976: cover). Although much of his work has appeared in the 'fashion bible' that is Vogue, ironically they appear to insult the authority on 'good-taste' and scream taboo which, is definitely a postmodern quality. He, and many of his time began to represent female sexuality and the female body in a more overtly sexual way that connotes this kind of vulgar fetishism that many were shocked by. This style of photography was a product of

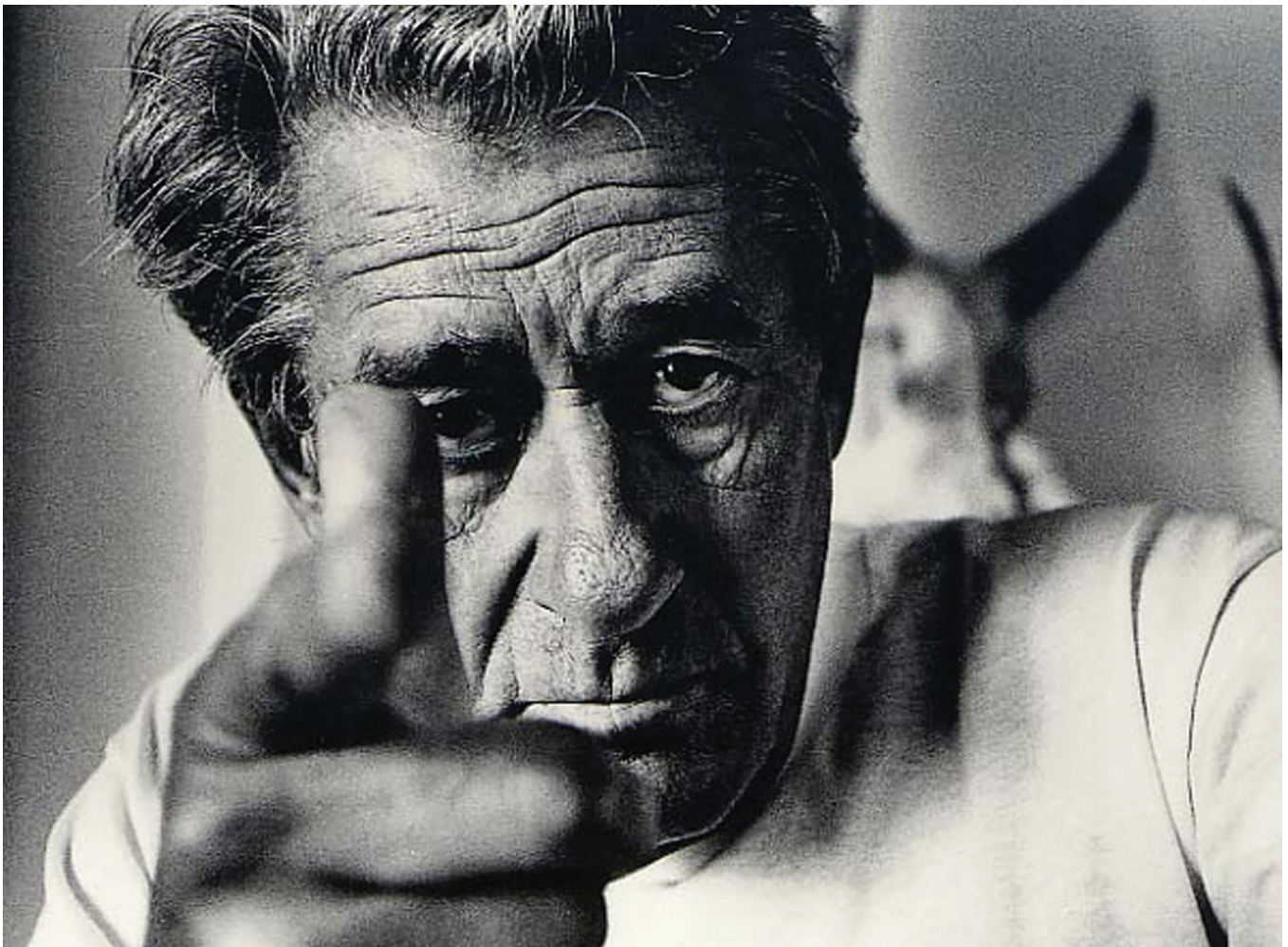


Fig 5 Helmut Newton from artnet.com (2004)

a very postmodern 'anything goes' attitude that liberated and encouraged various artists (Gomez, E M : 146). The vulgarity in his work is best shown through the exemplary photography of this lady on a toilet for a European bathroom brand. The photograph holds a voyeuristic point of view that is a postmodern characteristic (Gomez, E M : 146). This is merely expressed by the subject being sat upon a toilet seat. This is also strengthened when considering the use of a high angled shot, determining the

audience's perspective. This and the indirect mode of address in relation to the lens, usually signifies vulnerability. However, behind the subject's androgynous, thick-rimmed glasses, lies her stare, which, is fixed on a broadsheet newspaper which emphasises her focus and perhaps high-

lights her intelligent business mind. So although she is in a seemingly vulnerable situation, her angled posture, blunt haircut and suit are all signifiers



Manchen Menschen ist Kultur ein Bedürfnis.

Fig 6 Girl on toilet by Helmut Newton



Fig 7 Legs in hotel room by Helmut Newton

that suggest she is a powerful female, that would succeed in a male dominated environment. This is also made further clear within the mise-en-scene as Helmut Newton borrows lighting and shadow conventions from film noir and, goes further to connote strong sexuality as the subject still conforms to Laura Mulvey's male gaze, with her exposed stockings, heels and seductive pout.

Another example of taboo shining through his work lies with his ability to place 'his subjects on the line between pornography and fashion photography'. (Anon 2001: 342). For example, unlike the previous picture, the shot above is taken from a low angle which, immediately suggests and places the females in a position of power, even though the shot

is taken from behind them. The sense of female power is also signified between their secretive gesture of holding hands, which also signifies unity and strength in numbers. There is a more overtly erotic atmosphere in this shot, conforming to the male gaze, through the use of suggesting sadomasochism through leather, bulky jewellery, sexy stockings and PVC in their costume and the ambiguity of whether they are hired prostitutes

in this hotel room or not. The suggestion of prostitution is further enhanced through the binary opposites of the subjects' state of dress, or undress for that matter. For example, the women are scantily clad whilst the male wears a smart black suit and tie. His side parting and domineering stance signifies arrogance and wealth. The fixed gaze from the male towards the two women connotes suspense and sexual tension whilst the presence of the television has strong connotations of its usage being for pornography. However the pictureless state of the television gives an uneasy yet stylised atmosphere. The balance of power between genders within this shot is teetering on the edge. However what is obvious within his work is that Helmut Newton's style is very much based on good taste versus

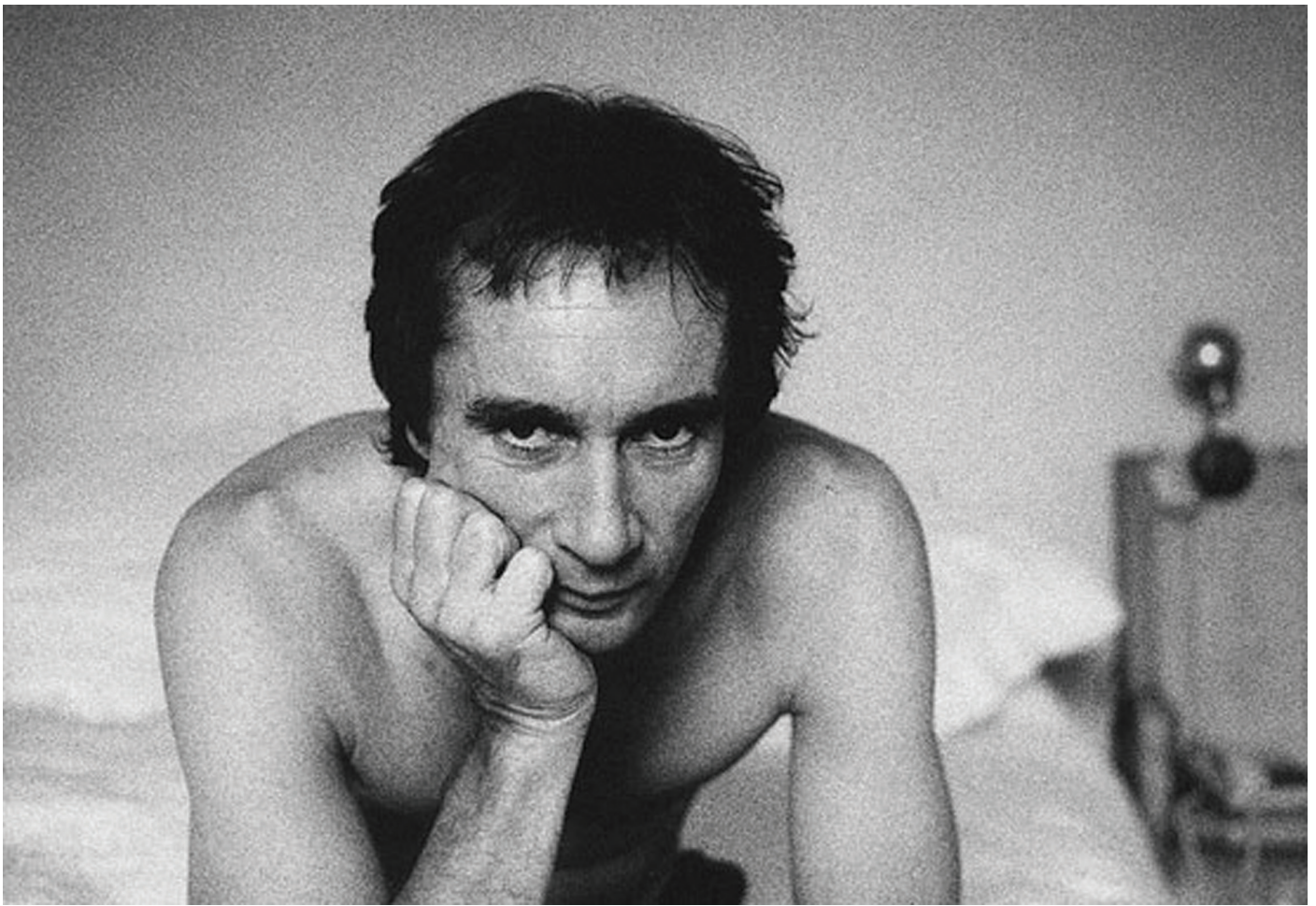


Fig 8 Bob Carlos Clarke by Scarlett Clarke (2005)

bad taste, the borrowing of conventions and defying rules by reintroducing the world to erotica in fashion.

Robert, better known as Bob Carlos Clarke is also another photographer who was notorious for the shock value and highly charged sexuality that he conjured up in his work. His

career spanned from the 1950s till when he tragically took his life in 2006, leaving his wife and daughter behind (Barry, E 2009). He used postmodern ideals of 'rejecting the boundaries between high and low forms of art' (Klages, M. 2007) and he is known to take the demonstration of postmodernism ideals that little bit further. This is shown through the



Fig 9 Woman peering into sea for Wallis by Bob Carlos Clarke

juxtaposition of humour, sado-masochism, irony and playfulness in his projects which, are all characteristics that postmodern art relies on. (Gomez, E M : 146-147). He has been described as 'Ireland's answer to Helmut Newton', (Barry, E 2009) and like him, his work has also featured in Vogue magazine. It was there that I first stumbled across him when I was much younger however even then I recognised the strong sexuality and humoured representation of death shown in his photography.

The saying 'If looks could kill', in my belief, defines this series of work. At the time his modern recreation of the femme-fatal in fashion also borrowed conventions from other early eras of cinema like film noir, used as a vital ingredient, along with the ironic simplification of the male gender, to portray the powerful woman. There are also strong references to earlier eras of slap-stick comedy and dark satire in cinema, the type of which would most likely appear in films starring Charlie Chaplin. Clarke's work showed a successful merging of humour and conformity to the male gaze.

Yet it was questionable whether it was tasteful as these examples openly mocked death and ridiculed the male gender.

However his other efforts arguably took a step further into a higher realm of sadomasochism, even more so than Helmut Newton. For example, in this picture he subtly references science-fiction, signified through the robotic look of the woman. He also literally objectifies women and brandishes them as fantasy figures, signified through the on/off



Fig 10 Barbers chair for Wallis by Bob Carlos Clarke

switch on her left arm. The PVC material used in her costume further signified fetishism and sex. The facial beauty and ample bosom of

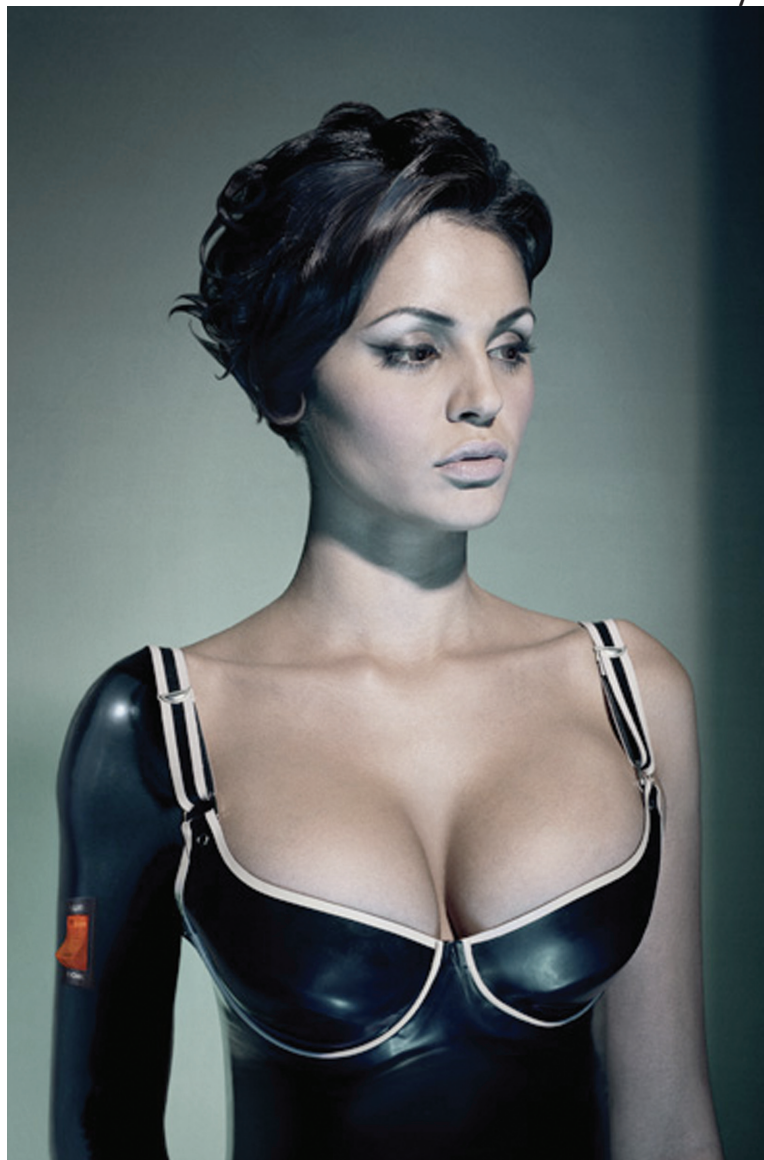


Fig 11 Robotic woman by Bob Carlos Clarke

the woman also adheres to the male gaze. However a difference between Newton's work and Clarke's is shown through how powerful the women are portrayed in a majority of cases. For instance, in this picture, and many of Clarke's photographs, women are so objectified that they lose that liberating sense of power. He depicts them as mere fantasy that could only be born out of a perverted corner of the male psyche, or an object just to amuse, entertain and titillate the male audience.



Fig 12 Urban Stone ad by Bob Carlos Clarke (2000)

This theme of objectified women feature in his other work of women being depicted as dolls, wind-up toys, electronic gadgets or household objects, that may feel more at home in an ultimate fantastical bachelor pad.

His work has always been controversial by nature but when taken out of the context of art and catapulted into the realm of mainstream advertising his work conducted an even greater controversial impact. This bred fury, teeming with excitement from the media, on behalf of the consumer. In 2000, The Daily Telegraph dubbed his campaign for Urban Stone jeans as “the rudest ad ever printed”. (Daily Telegraph (2000) in Barry, E. 2009). They definitely flew in the face of what was socially acceptable in modern media and marketing. Many were outraged by the images but Bob Carlos Clarke welcomed all of the negative opinion as it merely proved that they had accomplished what they deliberately intended to do; shock. These were not incredibly stylized images, unlike his others, and they did not seem to borrow from any other conven-

tions other than pornography. However they are still branded as a postmodern example of advertisement that earned the Urban Stone brand recognition.

The use of strong sexual images in advertisements that both Newton, Clarke, and others had achieved has undoubtedly helped or shaped marketing today. In a world where we are constantly being bombarded with sex through every kind of visual media accessible, namely: the internet, video games, television and magazines we are seeing more daring advertisement campaigns that directly or indirectly reference sex to achieve that postmodern shock value. For example, Diesel released an advert that appeared in the Sunday Times Style Magazine which received numerous complaints. It was later banned by the ASA (Advertising Standards Agency) who, stated that they:

‘noted the surreal and stylized nature of the image but considered the nudity and the position of the women in relation to the man’s

body was a clear allusion to sexual behaviour and unsuitable for a newspaper supplement with a broad readership. We considered, however, that the use of a male model with dark skin was intended to create contrast with the light skin of the women's legs and was unlikely to be seen as racist. We concluded that the sexual image was likely to cause serious or widespread offence and was unsuitable in



DIESEL

Fig 13 Diesel scorpion ad from adland.tv

a magazine that could be seen by children.' (ASA in adland 2006).

Another brand that has received negative media coverage due to sexual content in their advertising campaigns is Dolce and Gabbana. This advertisement, in particular, fea-



Fig 14 Dolce & Gabbana ad

tured in Esquire and numerous European publications but was taken out of circulation due to protests and accusation of it representing the rape of a woman. According to Domenico Dolce, one half of the creative duo, the image is artistic and was meant to "recall an erotic dream, a sexual game." (Dolce, D in Anon: Hammeruncut 2007) However the sexual content that has featured in many Dolce and Gabbana campaigns have been scrutinized as the sexually suggestive images include of everything from 'necrophilia' to 'homoerotica' (Barlow, T 2008) has shocked consumers. But all of these adds have an extremely stylized quality and include conventions from many periods in history or themes from film such as the 18th century or mafia scenes. These type of high-end advertisements appear in top magazines such as Vogue, Esquire and Vanity Fair as they are considered to be more artistic and deserving of decoding. Nevertheless, it also reflects the growing popularity of sex in mainstream media filtering upwards or trickling downwards.

However, regardless of the emerging of sex entering popular culture through low culture magazines like Nuts, Loaded and FHM or television like Big Brother and Sexcetera it seems to still defy the media theory of desensitisation, for the average consumer, because no matter how liberal or more tolerant we be-

lieve ourselves to be we are still shocked by what we see in the mirror everyday; nudity. It is the taking it out of a private context

and placing it in areas of high culture that many are uncomfortable with. However, the hunger for erotica in high fashion is growing, as it perhaps has more direct links with high culture photography as an art-form. What's more is that we see recent advertising campaigns for noted fashion designers and brands drawing on erotica for inspiration. Such as the

tisement. It is said that porn also represents postmodernism as it says no to limits, restraint and upholds taboo. This bricolage of fashion and porn is very postmodern in itself. However, if that is true and erotica continues to find itself entering the mainstream, like Vivienne Westwood's punk revolution, then when does it stop reflecting its main asset of taboo



Fig 15 Tom Ford ad from creativeclub.com

aforementioned Dolce and Gabbana or Tom Ford's menswear and fragrance advertisements, which features a extrovert, sexy woman grabbing the private parts of a young, well dressed man. There is an interesting binary opposition with the signifiers of abundance like jewellery and costume with the vulgarity through sex, booze and cigarettes yet still appeal to the aspirational consumer.

It cannot be denied that what both of these fashion photographers have done by blurring lines between good and bad taste, low and high forms of art, has helped make erotica or pornography cool and perhaps more acceptable. Thus leading to the proliferation of strong sexual references in fashion adver-

and therefore stops being postmodern? I do not believe that it does or ever will because even looking at these images in today's world of risqué media, they still shock, spark debate and entertain. Therefore, fashion chains will still continue to use sex within their marketing strategy to uphold an industry that is predominantly based on looks and aesthetic.

In conclusion, the postmodern artists of the past have changed and influenced how fashion is marketed. And as long as the match between photography and fashion remains unbreakable, the same will stand for sex and sales.

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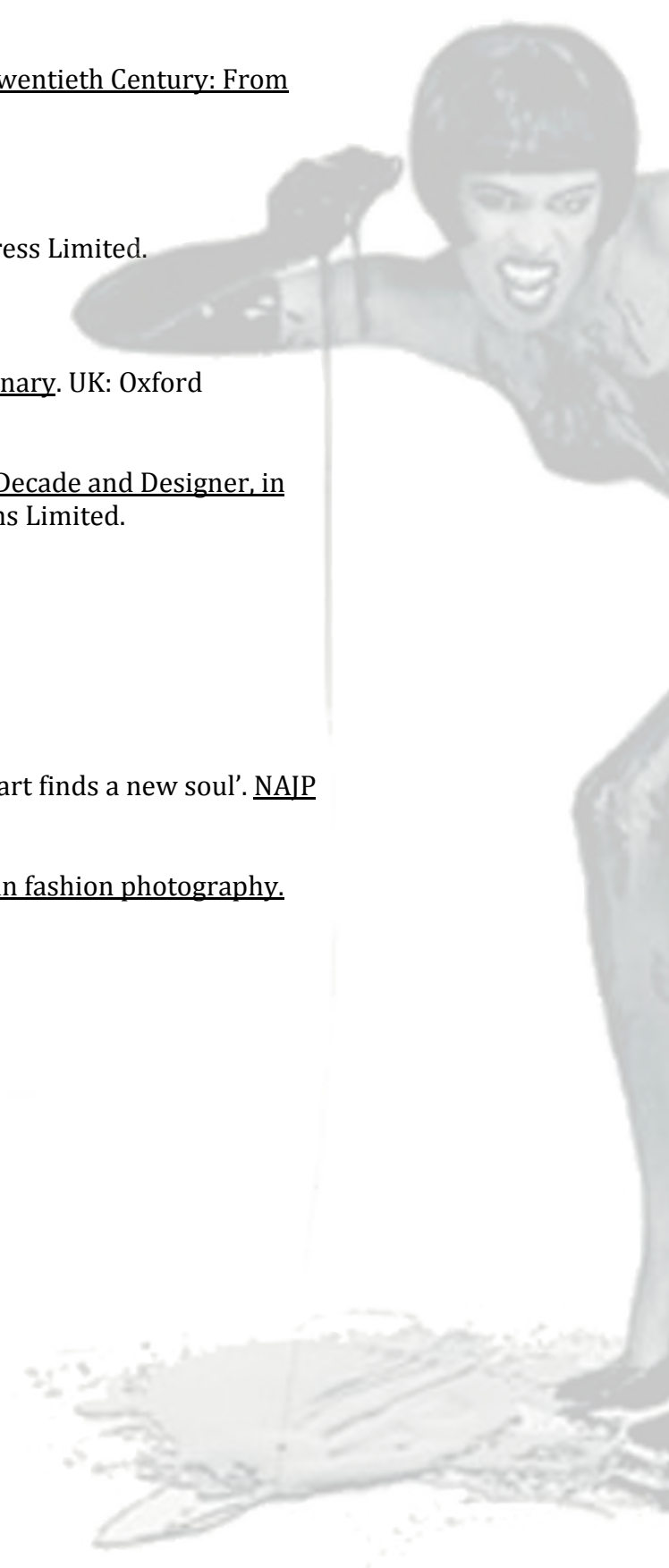
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