The Fetishism of the Woman’s Image

by Mariana Meloni

“For thousands of years our cultural reflexes and sexual policies were influenced by women’s images: women, such as, mothers, Goddesses, muses or sexual objects (COTTER, 2000: 1).”

The feminine body as a representation object oscillates many times between the sacred and the profane. According to Georges Bataille “the erotic or religious images, introduce essentially for some people a prohibition behavior, and for others contrary behaviors”. (1988:30). Represented as a mother, Goddess and/or prostitute, the woman, divided in two, has always been one of the favorite themes in the image’s production in art history. In ancient times, Greek divinities were portrayed erotically through statues of art, but the following sexuality to these images was veiled by its mythic aspect (Ewing, 1999:26). In the beginning of the XV century the naked in oil paintings in Europe emerged, and by a religious pretext (the original sin), the woman is firstly represented by Eve. In that occasion, the naked body was perfectly acceptable, since it was codified in heroic poses, biblical or mythological causes. Afterwards, when the painting tradition was no more religious, other themes could paint naked women, but the nudity was still a taboo.

In fact, what continues being prohibited is the “real” nudity. To avoid it, and also avoid the look it excites is necessary to make it moral, give it moral and aesthetic intentions, sublimate it and platonic it by the beauty submission (Pessanha, 1991:45).
However, due to a visual conditionament that has existed for centuries, through occidental models of figurative representation it is not possible to neutralize completely the look when we observe images. The nudity paintings can continue exciting the eroticism even when legitimated by a false morality which cannot avoid that the naked body becomes an object of desire. In some paintings the feminine nudity we can many times realize that the author tried to portrait that the model was painted as if it was seen by a spectator (Berger, 1982:53). This act emphasizes the intrinsic character to the image. The woman sees the spectator as if she were inviting him to take part in a scene with her, a seductive dialog.

From 1850, the erotic photographs, and women’s portraits which aimed at stimulating the spectators’ sexual appetite, in general men, got popularized. The post cards, the cheapest way of distributing photos at that time vary between landscapes and fetishist themes: sexual perversion, lesbianism, among other sexual practices considered socially transgressed, at least at that time they were represented and distributed. The erotic photographs were soon found in Paris, and most of them tried to enhance the voyeur character inherent in the photographic center, looking at the obscene (the one out of the scene) through “the lock hole”. Although they were postcards, they were not sent through the post office, they were handed in to friends personally because of the censorship of that time.

The mirrors were also used, and as well as in painting, allowed the voyeur to see the female body in other angles simultaneously. The erotic photographs scenarios at that time were frequently exotic, where the woman used to lie down on a bed or divan adorned by embroidered fabrics. Where all forms of love and desire are concerned, the body is the first significant, naked or dressed. All manifestation of the body in photography, which we call the naked, is definitely the most common and complex (Ewing, 1999:39).

When the female body was covered with clothes, which revealed only the hands and face, men, many times, discovered the woman’s body through the image. Those photos circulated among men. When they consumed the representation of a voluptuous woman, symbolically it indicated that she was his possession, and property. Different from the painting the photography, by its indict character, evidences the kidnapping of a moment that really happened in a definite time and space. The photography presence, at least at that time, was unquestionable because it was in a certain way one vestige, an index. “In photography I can never deny that the thing was there” (Barthes, 1984:115. Perhaps, for that reason, nudity was prohibited in Great Britain during the Victorian Age, declaring the female body as beyond the photographer’s skill to portray. Nudity was associated with prostitution,
bohemia, and the woman in a patriarchal vision, should be at home taking care of the house, behaving as a wife and mother, and not posing to erotic photographs.

The use of the female body to excite the desire was assured by the distribution of images for a vast audience. With the progressive advent of photography, and its reproduction techniques, the image was not treated as a curiosity, it was even more accessible.

The sexual suggestion embedded in the woman’s image was legitimate by the North American society after war with the pin-up calls, becoming extremely popular at the end of the 40’s decade.

A pin-up is an image sexually evoked, reproduced in many copies in which the model’s look and expression invite the spectator to participate or fantasy a personal involvement with her (Gabor, 1996:23).

The pin-ups were used to call, mainly, the male audience’s attention, but they also served as an aesthetic canon to the female public. They were used to sell almost everything, from a refrigerator to a concept, awakening the consume, and the sexual desire from its spectators.

The erotic fantasy is the key to understand the pin-up styles. There are as many as the sexual desire. Its success depends on the ethic image while it stimulates the imagination concerning erotic fantasies. Thus, those images incorporate the use of some clothing because “when a man sees a naked woman, it seems he has seen everything” (Albertoni, 1986:183). The man’s imagination should undress her.

The women portrayed in pin-ups were always partially covered. They frequently posed with make-up, hairdo, and were involved in a scenario with objects strategically placed (telephones, toys, pillows, and etc), in order to cover the forbidden parts of their bodies. Male magazines, such as Playboy, first published in the USA in December, 1953, were consolidated as one of the most declared means of showing women’s erotic images directed to the male mass. In the beginning the pin-up pubic parts could not be exposed without any interference; the pubis’ hair was constantly censored to be published, as up to now in certain Japanese pornography.

The pin-ups were not only found in girlies magazines (magazines which sell women’s images with a sexual appeal aiming at the male’s public consume), but also in calendars, posters, and everything that could be bought. Sex was used to attract the consumer. The pin-ups were responsible
for most of the North American advertising success in the 50’s decade, for example, in car advertisement, they were exposed in bikinis, suggesting the products acquisition as a loving conquest.

The most published calendar in the pin-up history was Marylin Monroe’s when she was an unknown model. Those pictures were taken in 1949, and published in 1951, but were only sold millions some years later, when Marylin got famous as an actress, and social symbol (Gabor, 1996:178).

In fact, we could not find a better example than Marylin Monroe (…) to face the new Alice in Wonderland, pin-up upon plastic – the Puritanism orders- as artificial as untouchable, impenetrable, only voyeours business(Néret,1994:20).

Monroe became an icon of what many men in the North American society expected from a woman, such as, being a representation of beauty, and sexuality, naïve, persuasive, but passive, untouchable and mythic.

Nowadays the women’s images produced in order to awake the spectator’s desire are much more within the public’s reach. The act of photographing is performed by a vast population as an easy visual recorder, where the individual points his lens to his fetches or simply to what he wants to register. Even more the images which explore the woman’s image as a desired object are published in commercial circuits. Many of the materials considered pornographic nowadays, aimed at the heterosexual male public are made of women’s images. Their main goal is to excite them sexually while voyeurs. In the pornographic images, the women are representation objects, especially build to the male public, culminating in an” asymmetry among male characters that could look at the female characters created to be looked (…) between the woman as an image and the man as the bearer’s look” (Aumont:1995:126).

However, some women do not agree that the pornographic material production only aim at the male gender. The north American Candida Royalle, creator of the stamp Femme, fights for a sex democratic market producing pornographic films “not only performed by women, but to women” (Lemos, 1994:6). In the society’s vision, which many times seems to be a macho, and conservative one, the woman who shows herself as independently sexually in the pornographic industry as a model, actress, producer or spectator, has unfortunately her image related as the role of prostitute. She is not considered a “respected” woman. The fetish of the woman’s image is, above all, a learning which comes from a social process that makes the woman even more a passive image to be fetish.