

Plan suggested for *Dossier 15* on Representations of women

Intro: *Introduce the docs:* One of Ruskin's lectures dating from 1864 on the precise roles & functions of both sexes, spoken to a Victorian audience (= "you" in lines 29 & 30); the introductory paragraphs of a 1960s novel by feminist writer Carter where a teenager joyfully discovers the geography of her own body; and the series of colorful Marilyns in Andy Warhol's famous pop-art serigraph, also from the 1960s.

Indicate what your angle of approach will be: This dossier stresses how strong & long-lasting stereotypical representations / images of woman have always been in our Western culture.

Indicate the plan you'll follow – slowly, clearly, fully: I'll stress the **omnipresence of sexist clichés** in American & British societies in the 19th & 20th centuries; then I will show that these stereotypes **serve a social purpose** which accounts for their permanence. Finally I'll show how 1960s feminism & women's liberation movements have **opened up new horizons & torn down barriers**.

1) The permanence of clichés in our Western societies.

- One of the ideas that Warhol's pop art tried to convey = our lives & psyches are marked by our **adherence to a limited set of popular myths and beliefs** (not only in America). Among those: M. Monroe, the movie icon, allegedly every man's fantasy. Masks, images projected, & **representations of the self** matter more / have more life than actual substance (analyze the clichés: blond bimbo, red/full lips, welcoming smile, a brain?). Yet when multiplied 25 times, becomes a soulless, dehumanized image which shows how insignificant / senseless these images really are: just part of our mass culture / our consumers' society (compare with the famous **serigraphs** featuring Campbell soup cans).

- Ruskin's stance shows **how diminishing clichés (= typologies) are**: British society in the 19th century was already based on the idea of the "separate characters" (6) of the 2 sexes. List the alleged characteristics of men (active, defensive, trial & error, wounds, rough work, etc.) & women (rule, sweet order, decision, peace, modesty, etc.). In other words Ruskin's lecture is the perfect illustration of the **theory of the 2 spheres** (private = femininity vs. public = masculinity). A nostalgic, **feudal** view of society, redolent of the **Middle Ages & courtly love**: man as a knight-errant wandering in a "weary land" (26) while the lady "judges the crown of contest" (13) as in a Walter Scott novel (tournament). Something in which Ruskin *wants* to believe (29).

- Ruskin's dream world would obviously be **feminist** Carter's worst nightmare. Remnants of Ruskin's viewpoint in the episode of the 15-year-old girl posing as in a **Pre-Raphaelite painting** (explain that Ruskin was this movement's main champion): stress the sedate hairdo, the "knees pressed close together" (13) + possible pun on **ribcage** (middle & upper class women living in a golden cage) + image of the bird ready for freedom but still under the blanket. As in the Ruskin excerpt the girl is introduced in her *bedroom* (= in the private sphere, the home).

2) An unoriginal way of keeping women under control.

- Ruskin's sexist rhetoric hardly hides a **religious / Biblical subtext**: Cf. his talk of temptation, sacred places, vestal temples, the Household Gods, the "pride" (= vanity) of women. He obviously has in mind the episode of **Eve & the forbidden fruit**: "unless she herself has sought it" (17) even if this is qualified by the apparent afterthought of line 22 (shared responsibility). A useful system which allowed Victorians to avoid what they saw as

chaos or anarchy. Their ideal: not equality, but order & the alleged complementary (= separate) natures of men & women (1-5).

- Not much religion in the Carter excerpt. We learn that Melanie was "confirmed" (& was offered cultured pearls for it! 22), but the idea of her **innocence** (not guilt, as with Ruskin's Eve) is proclaimed. What the text loses in religion it gains in **sexuality & sensuality**: analyze the innocent joy ("laughing" 9) associated with the heroine's intimate discovery of her own body + **erotic double entendres** of such phrases as "penetrating the moist richness," "her own mountain ranges," "her secret valleys," etc.

- Placing those 2 texts side by side we understand that what's indirectly / invisibly at stake in Ruskin's system is the control of women's sens-/sexuality. Cf. the **consciously impossible** (30-1) **ideal of purity & wisdom** imposed on women (paragons of virtue): never to be "tempted," "be incapable of error" (31) when men's nature is said to *justifiably* err. Women thus controlled by **guilt**. Also by the power of the media which **impose unattainable aesthetic codes** on women (Cf. the beauty of Marilyn Monroe presented as a model or a standard).

3) Breaking the mould.

- Ruskin's imagination is obviously at fault since Carter's *incipit* proves that a home is not the monolithic place that he has in mind. The bedroom can be the **place of discoveries**—an activity which, Carter shows, can be just as eminently feminine ("new found land," "mysterious cavern or grotto," "she revealed," etc.). True, in Melanie's case, not the discovery of India & Africa, but still the **geography of the female body** is a kind of inner continent (≠ woman supposed to be a "dark continent" to most males).

- Not only have women regained a sense of self but they now **wield power**. Cf. Ruskin's idea of females ruling the home (10, 29) & especially Melanie's **impressive culture** as far as books & paintings (Pre-Raphaelite, Cranach, Titian, Renoir, Blackmore's *Lorna Doon*, Lautrec, D. H. Lawrence's *Chatterley*). Cf. Bacon's "Knowledge is power."

- Also in Warhol's serigraph & Ruskin's system women = dolls, fantasized about & adapted to men's needs ("not for self-development, but for self-renunciation," 32-3). But with Carter it is women's turn to **change men into sex objects**: describe Melanie's (conventional / conditioned) fantasies (16, 18, 31) + the fact that men become **harmless objects that can be dispensed with or maybe replaced**: Toulouse-Lautrec as a pitiful dwarf 18, the "phantom bridegroom" loses her interest 25-6, 31 + the heroine's muscular leg & (male-like) "swarthen" (32), flat chest.

- Finally what the serigraph paradoxically also goes to prove is the **elusive nature of a personality**: not two of those 25 Marilyns are identical (more light or shade, sort of veil placed on the stenciled image in the top left corner, one feature always standing out more than in the next image, change in colors, etc.). The "real" Marilyn is much more than a gaudy representation of her person (Cf. **not her real name**; likewise allude to "Andrew Warhola") just as Melanie can be a demure and a "sluttish" girl. Also 24 images per second is the standard in a movie: here, can this 25th image be a subliminal indication that there is more to any woman? Cf. phrase "there is more than meets the eye."

Conclusion: *Summarize:* The Ruskin excerpt shows that the most capable minds have their own limitations & are products of the period that produces them. It takes a feminist writing to open up new horizons.

Branch out: Yet it would be a mistake to believe in the "march of progress." The pop art serigraph is essentially ambiguous: an "icon" is just another idealized vision of womanhood, however glorious or glamorous it may seem.