Dior's designs

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Before the World of Ad, aren't most of us divided between suspicion and desire? On the one hand, we are always already forewarned that ads image forth an ideal world, so as to confer upon the commodity the aura of a totemic object, which becomes a secular fetish with magical transforming powers. We all 'know' that the ad is nothing more than a fabulous construction, a most seductively coordinated artifice of sound, word and image; and yet, in spite of this scepticism, well-cultivated in virtually every child of the Symbolic of advanced capitalism, we are all at times mesmerized into spectatorship before the World of Ad. And few of us, I would venture to say, are left with our desires unmodified by its dazzling flux and reflux of representations. This strange double relationship to advertising – what might be called our 'sceptical engulfment' – might be illuminated by a reading of one remarkable cycle of ads, the print campaign for Christian Dior products that appeared in three phases in the fall of 1982, the spring of 1983, and the fall of 1983.

The Dior campaign seems especially useful for such an investigation. For in one way these ads are entirely typical: they are coupled, as much as any ads, in both their origin and end, to the commodities whose purchase they promote. But the wit and originality of these ads arise from all the ways they aspire to be more and other than ads. By creating three 'characters' known as the Diors, whose antics readers could follow from month to month in *Vogue, The New York Times Magazine* and other periodicals, this campaign represented the series of 'events' in time which the single image could only suggest. By soliciting the context of Noel Coward and *Design for Living* the photographer Richard Avedon and the copywriter Doon Arbus gave the series some of the scope and autonomy of a fully developed scenario. And, in the final phase of the campaign, by participating in a narrative of matrimony, childbirth and death, the 'Diors' became a more ambitious fiction. By thus opening its images to the history of loss, this ad fiction invokes what advertising usually excludes: time, waste, negativity and death.

Although the Dior ad campaign attains remarkable aesthetic complexity, its initial conception is guided by a particular marketing intention. 'The target audience, according to a Lansdowne declaration, is 25-to-49-year-old college-educated men and women who are "able to afford high-quality, fashionable designer clothes and accessories" while at the same time "are perhaps a bit insecure in fashion matters and are not apt to be fashion leaders; they require the reassurance of knowing they are always dressed in perfect taste".'[1] What was Dior's strategy for reaching this profitable combination of education, wealth and insecurity? Since Dior intended to attract such consumers not to the distinctive creations of one designer, but to the products of the 35 US licensees which Dior sells under its name, the campaign was meant to inspire a general fascination with the 'Dior style' and the Dior name. The person they hired to do the ads – Richard Avedon – would do this by forging a connection between the values of the target audience and the commodity: Dior clothes were to be linked with 'friendship and a playful attitude toward life'.[2] After the first two phases of the campaign had run, Dior executive Mary Lee Fletcher explained why 'everyone was happy' with the campaign: 'It did what is set out to do – it unified the licensees; it addressed a younger customer and it brought the name Christian Dior to life.'[3]

I suspect that this campaign brought 'the Christian Dior name to life' through the same strategy by which it extended the ad form beyond its usual limits: by working a remarkable subordination of the commodity to the fictional and aesthetic processes of the ad. The series was scorned by admen reared on more conventional assumptions about the strategies of advertising. Thus *Newsweek* reported that readers may have gotten 'more involved in what's going on than in what's being sold. "It's a noble effort but weird as hell", says adman Jerry Della Femina. "I was glad no one was holding a gun to my head and asking me what product was being advertised"'. While Della Femina's criticism accurately registers the radical subordination of the product to image and situation, it fails to understand that there may be other pathways by which this ad cycle could reach its audience. For, by creating the Diors, Avedon and Arbus produced an alter-ego for those affluent and insecure consumers whom the company had targeted. The ad's inventors hoped that if the consumers would 'buy' the Diors, then, by doing so, and to do so, they would also buy the commodities with which to adorn their bodies. This identification would conceal or make irrelevant the actual diffuseness of the Dior 'line'. The Diors appear to have the 'perfect taste'

which the consumers aspire to. Thus, within the fictional trajectory of the Dior series, even the refusal to promote individual products can now appear like the good taste of the wealthy – those who would scorn a displayed label, or cringe at being asked the cost of a broach. 'Like all good things, one good Dior leads to another' – thus ends the text that accompanies the first portrait of the Diors (figure 1), which appeared in the October 1982 issue of *Vogue*. The words define that trope of spatial and temporal contiguity – metonymy – with which the ad cycle itself will seek to connect the three characters with one another, the commodities of the 35 licensees with one another, and the order of characters with that of commodities. The ad cycle seeks to make a whole out of a heterogeneous group of commodities by developing the fictional premise to be explored in the ad: that the three Dior characters of the portrait are radically inseparable, just like the disparate items which they wear. By thus aligning characters and commodities, the ad cycle reminds us of the strange status of these mediating figures of the ad world – those heroes who guide the consumer spectator to the commodity, and help neutralize the difference between the commodity and the consumer. For viewed from the World of Ad, we, as buyers of commodities, are not just persons but also persons made of matter, turned toward the things we can buy – material persons; but this does not divest us of our spirituality, for things can be inspiringly bought and arranged, so that they acquire a sublime aspect and become 'social things'.[4] This covert premise of all ads becomes explicit in the Dior cycle because of the way the human figures in the ads (the 'Diors') are given a remarkable (fictive) autonomy, a freedom to realize themselves in time, even as they are simultaneously no more than things themselves – images for our delectation.

In order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the Diors' double function – which, in turn, reflects on our own double consciousness of advertising – I will discuss Richard Avedon's photographic style; the campaign's basic allusion to Noel Coward's *Design for Living*; and the campaign's pervasive sexual innuendo.

RICHARD AVEDON AND THE ART OF THE AD IMAGE

In turning to Richard Avedon, Dior hired someone who not only knows how to make a media splash. Avedon is also the contemporary fashion photographer who is best qualified to produce an advertising image with art's autonomy, authority, and conceptual and visual coherence. These help to confer upon that artful trio, the 'Diors', the autonomy, authority and coherence which their sponsor, Christian Dior, wanted for them. We can begin to grasp the type of image which Avedon produced for the Dior campaign if we itemize the general visual qualities of the three ads that followed the opening portrait in the October '82 *Vogue*. In the first, Oliver takes a bath while the Wizard and the Mouth wait for him (figure 2). In the next, while the Wizard reads Lulu in Hollywood, the Mouth looks rakishly off into the distance, and Oliver looks at her (figure 3). In the third, Oliver and the Wizard team up to attack the Mouth with mice, while she squirms and squeals (figure 4).

We can begin by noting what these images lack: there is no suggestion of a 'real' locale or space; there is no 'atmosphere' or diffused light, and thus little sense of mood; finally there is no invocation of an 'outside' of the studio where one might find visible traces of nature or history. Instead, we have the three Diors, posed in relation to one another, on a spare and artificial set, with Dior commodities, as well as a few props – a bottle of Dom Perignon, champagne glasses, toy boat, cigar, book, statue, fish bowl, and mice. By putting all these objects on a plane at a common distance from the camera, and by using a bright and uniform lighting that eliminates most shadows, these images lose any sense of weight or body. Instead, we experience these forms as outlines, silhouettes' and masks, arranged like a tracery screen upon the grid of Oliver's bathroom, before the counter where the Diors linger, or above the chair where the Mouth squirms. Along this plane, heads, hands, arms and legs are arranged in triangles and quadrangles which give the whole a remarkable visual coherence (figure 4).

This kind of Avedon photograph, in its formal coherence and linearity, has affiliations with the religious icon, the Japanese print and the Ingres portrait. By using a predominant black and white, and small splashes of one or two other colors, Avedon not only suggests an elegance to this fashion space, but also further emphasizes the predominance of line over form. Each image is shot in a sharp focus that captures the precise texture of face, commodity and prop; light plays upon a carefully calibrated range of materials – from fine mouse fur to translucent champagne to shimmering gold, silver, diamonds. This equal highlighting of all material detail turns these scenes into an abstract compositional surface. The facial resemblance of the two men, the use of matching gestures by two or more Diors, and (later in the series) the use of mirrors and embedded photographs, all help to make each image seem to close in on itself until it becomes a self-consciously possessed aesthetic moment.

For these images to become more than a succession of single instants and to acquire the larger coherence of a story, they must be framed and shaped by a second formal element – a text. Intersecting with each image, and traversing the black line of its border, is a vertical panel that contains two kinds of text relating to the image. On top is the story line, which describes the current moment in the 'life' of the Diors, while beneath is a listing of the Christian Dior products on display within the picture.

In each case, the image and the bit of narative text do not function as stable complements, with the image illustrating a text that in turn explains the image. Rather, the image exceeds the text, which operates in oblique and sometimes ingenious counterpoint to the image. And this mobile variety helps to account for the spectator/reader's pleasure and surprise in following this ad cycle. No less than the images, the text strives for that surprise which signifies the Diors' all-important uniqueness. Thus we are told, of the scene where Oliver bathes: 'When they were good they were very, very good and when they were bad they were gorgeous.' The unexpected reversal which makes even a 'bad' Dior 'gorgeous' is possible because of the way the Diors reduce ethical categories to aesthetic ones. Here the reign of their taste supervenes over all other values: 'They loved armadillos, the American flag, and they disliked all their friends equally.' By having entirely unexpected tastes, ones that the middle class would not countenance and could hardly imitate, the Diors insure their position apart. In other words, they practice the kind of iconoclastic honesty and vivid independence with which Louise Brooks (the 'Lulu' of the memoir the Wizard is reading) so scandalized Hollywood in the 1920s.

But whence have these Diors sprung? 'The inspiration for this troika', *Newsweek* reports, 'came from a photograph of Noel Coward's 1933 play, *Design for Living*, in which Coward, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne are laughing together on a divan. "From just that photograph you never knew what their relationship was", says Avedon, "but you knew it was wonderful."' (figure 5). The Diors are indeed the translation of Coward's three protagonists into advertising. Thus Avedon does not just make the Diors a threesome because, as he says, 'three is "never boring"', but because he may wish to investigate the possibilities suggested by that one photo of Noel Coward and thereby develop a history for an image that conceals an enigma ('you never knew what their relationship was, but . . .'). By excavating some of the meaning of that image, following it backward into its setting in Noel Coward's art so as to disclose the social values it defines, perhaps we can develop a more precise and carefully inflected matrix for interpreting the Diors.

NOEL COWARD AND MOTHS IN A POOL OF LIGHT

In *Play Parade*, the 1933 collection of his works, Noel Coward ends his introduction with some remarks on the ambiguity of the final laughter that overcomes Otto, Leo and Gilda, as Gilda's too-earnest husband, Ernest, leaves the room in disgust:[5]

> The end of the play is equivocal. The three of them, after various partings and reunions and partings again, after torturing and loving and hating one another, are left together as the curtain falls, laughing. Different minds found different meanings in this laughter. Some considered it to be directed against Ernest, Gilda's husband, and the time-honoured friend of all three. If so, it was certainly cruel, and in the worst possible taste. Some saw in it a lascivious anticipation of a sort of triangular carnal frolic. Others, with less ribald imaginations, regarded it as a meaningless and slightly inept excuse to bring the curtain down. I as author, however, prefer to think that Gilda and Otto and Leo were laughing at themselves.

With these words, Coward does not claim that he can really specify the meaning of this laughter. He only tells us what he as author would 'prefer to think'. But why is there this need to cajole us into accepting the authorial sugestion that this laughter is not hostile? Why is he particularly eager to rule off bounds, as 'in the worst possible taste', the most obvious meaning of triumphant comic laughter – laughter at the expense of the 'straight' character (Ernest), who leaves insisting with a righteous moral disgust that all three are 'unscrupulous, worthless degenerates'? I suspect that Coward is trying to control the most unsettling aspect of his heroes' laughter – which is also an aspect of the laughter and the smiles of the Diors. This laughter before the pieties of the world separates this trio from any would-be spectator. Their laughter is directed not just at Ernest, but at everyone else, and is one sign of the play's 'antisocial' current. Earlier in the introduction, Coward explains how he and two long time friends, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, had long sought an artistic vehicle for their special relationship. Then Coward comments somewhat defensively about the work's reception:[6]

> Since then *Design for Living* has been produced, published and reviewed. It has been liked and disliked, and hated and admired, but never, I think, sufficiently loved by any but its three leading actors. This, perhaps, was only to be expected, as its central theme, from the point of view of the average, must appear to be definitely antisocial. People were certainly interested and entertained and occasionally even moved by it, but it seemed to many of them, 'unpleasant'. This sense of 'unpleasantness' might have been mitigated for them a little if they had realized that the title was ironic rather than dogmatic. I never intended for a moment that the design for living suggested in the play should apply to anyone outside its three principle characters, Gilda, Otto, and Leo. These glib, overarticulate, and amoral creatures force their lives into fantastic shapes and problems because they cannot help themselves. Impelled chiefly by the impact of their personalities each upon the other, they are like moths in a pool of light, unable to tolerate the lonely outer darkness, and equally unable to share the light without colliding constantly and bruising one another's wings.

During the course of *Design for Living*, Leo and Gilda are unfaithful to their best friend, and Gilda's lover, Otto;

Figure 1.

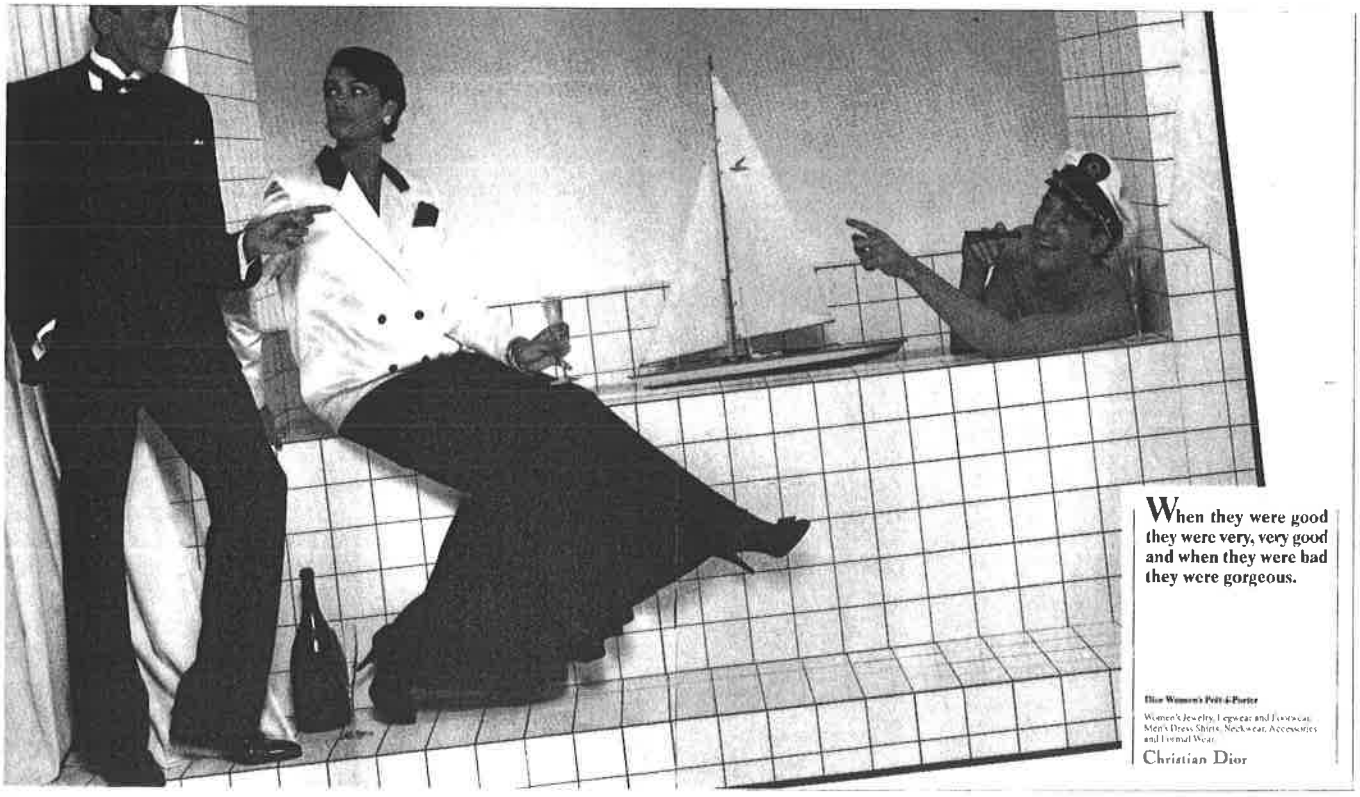

Figure 2.

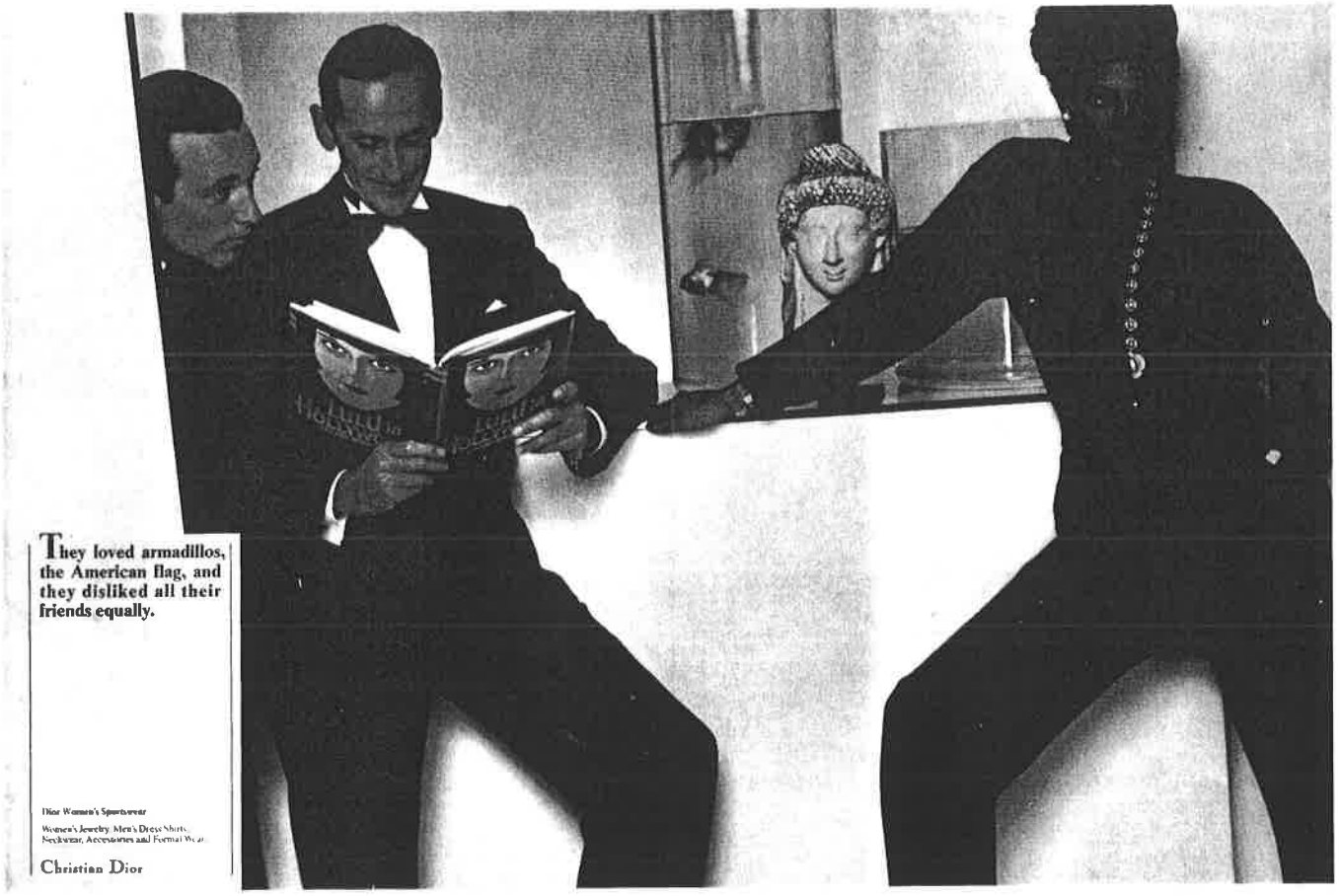

Figure 3.

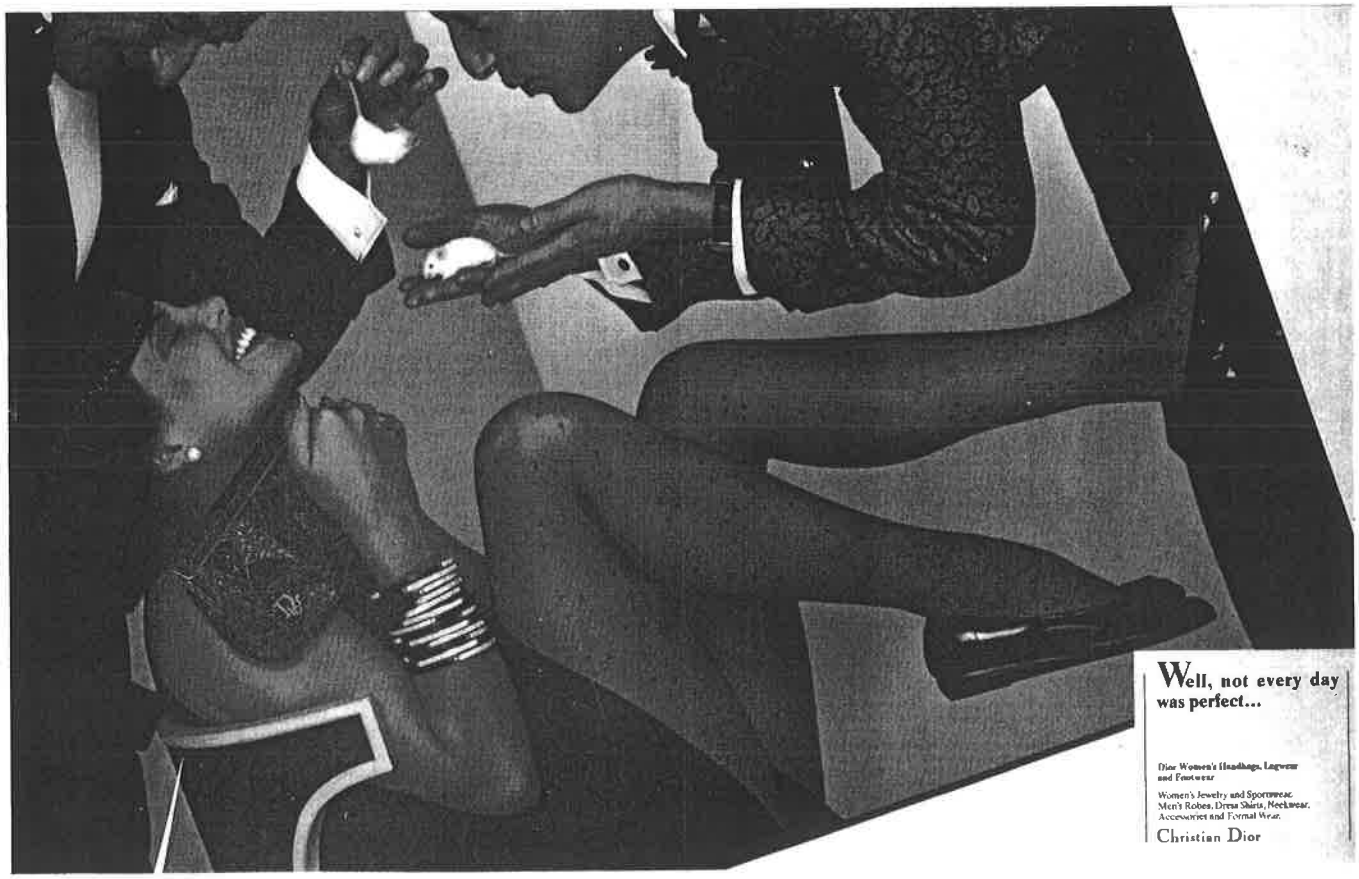

Figure 4.

Figure 5. Noel Coward as Leo, Alfred Lunt as Otto, and Lyn Fontanne as Gilda, in the last act of *Design for Living*, Ethel Barrymore Theater, New York.

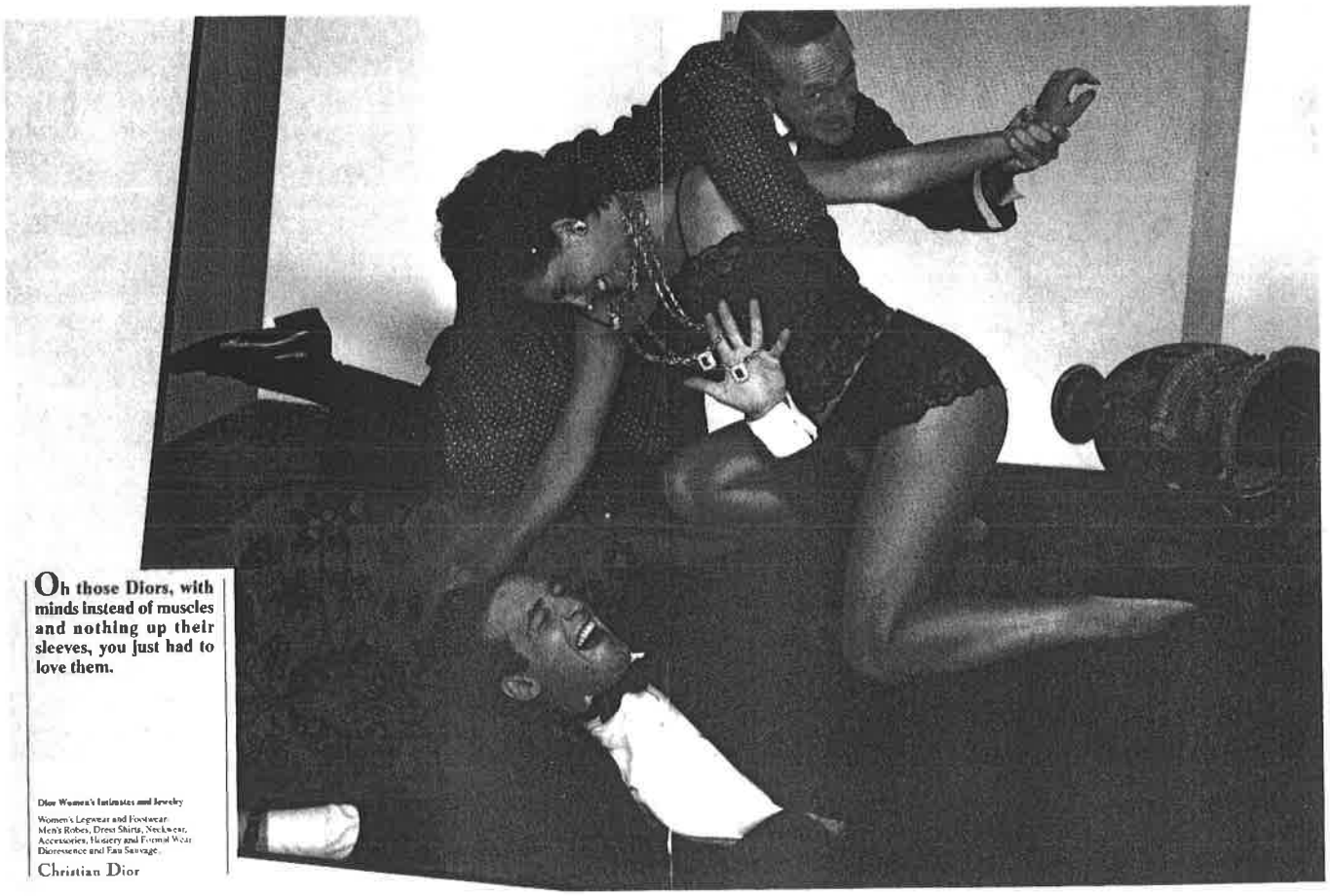

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

then, after Otto's return, Gilda and Otto are unfaithful to Leo, Gilda's new lover, and Otto's oldest friend; and in the final act, Otto and Leo, reunited in friendship, come to reclaim their old love, Gilda, from a conventional marriage with the old friend of all three, Ernest. The collective discovery of this action constitutes the theme which many spectators might have found 'unpleasant': that the conventional social arrangements of love and marriage are entirely inappropriate to these three unique individuals, and to take possession of what happiness they can know, they are fated to devise their own (triangular) design for living, and accept its consequences.

By informing his reader that the title is ironic rather than dogmatic, and that each may thus devise his own 'design for living', Noel Coward seems to be reassuring the spectator who feels threatened, not only by the trio's sustained assault upon the conventional, but by the scathing social satire with which that assault is launched. But Coward's clarification is disingenuous in that it ignores the central premise of the action, and the means by which the Coward troika elaborates its ethos. What separates the trio from the average is the wit and honesty, the style and originality of their life, their special ability for blending art and life, and the corollary assertion that no other can really share their reality. In describing his protagonists as moths colliding around a pool of light, Coward suggests that this trio has found a social order apart, but he excuses this separateness, and its necessary elitism, by insisting that these three 'cannot help themselves', and that after all the 'fantastic shapes' of these lives threaten no one. Ironically, in this same apologia, Coward re-asserts this special separateness at the very moment he is trying to soften its 'unpleasant' asocial tendency. Thus he tells us that *Design for Living*, because it is a vehicle for a real triangular relationship, has 'never' been 'sufficiently loved by any but its three leading actors'. Like the trio within the play, then, the real actors are caught in the contradictory position of inviting others to share what others are declared in advance to be incapable of sharing.

What is it that makes the Noel Coward (and Dior) trio distinct, separate, and superior enough to authorize their special social arrangement? I shall illustrate from Coward's play, the two final images from the October '82 *Vogue* Dior spread, and the four-image spread about the

Diors from the November '82 Vogue. We have noted the way these beings from both Coward's and Avedon's art inhabit a charmed circle where its reign of taste allows life to be impregnated with art. Each of these trios has also discovered that the relations between men and women, although entirely essential, are essentially full of conflict. Thus lovers and friends in Coward's play are always on the edge of argument, and the Diors don't just attack with mice, they wrestle, box, and argue, before making up, (figures 6, 8, 9). Both trios pride themselves on having the honesty to see that this warfare between the sexes makes acquiescence in conventional arrangements both repressive and boring. This realization, which is charged with some of the transgresssive 'honesty' of the libertine, helps to separate them from the drab normals who become the foils for Coward's heroes, and who are rigorously excluded from Avedon's ad images. The originality of Coward's characters is expressed in the wit and mobility of their conversational repartee, and in the scandal of their designs for living. The wit of the Diors is expressed in both Doon Arbus's textual commentary, and in Avedon's carefully posed visual statements. Here, much of the fun is to watch how such aesthetic creatures as the Diors negotiate 'ordinary' human situations.

We get to see this kind of scene in the November '82 issue of Vogue. It is composed of two two-part sequences, organized around a fight and making up. The fight begins with the Mouth reminding a coyly and slowly dressing Oliver what time it is, followed by his accusatory retort, and then, after they have returned from their night out, they sit distractedly on the stairs; Oliver yawns, the Wizard is grim, while the Mouth holds the middle ground with an air of indifference. The final scene has them in the kitchen, with the Wizard drinking milk, as Oliver, under the complete control of the Mouth, looks up at her, just after she has planted a big lip-sticked kiss on his cheek.

'The Diors were made in heaven, but every now and then there was trouble in paradise.' And these are just 'ups and downs, but what else could you expect of three sleepy people, too much in love to say goodnight'. All of this suggests that the Diors, in spite of their beauty and finish, 'are real people like you and me'. Well, sort of. For this theme can turn quickly to the idea that the Diors have a kind of infinite variety, and know human strife the way the Gods do – from above the clouds – sustaining an always aesthetic position above moods and emotions that the rest of us are compelled to dwell within.

Implicit in the design for living pursued by these two trios is an ethos of seizing the moment, not for sensual pleasure, but so that life can be woven into a kind of art. Thus, when Otto returns to find Gilda by herself, with Leo off in Brighton, and they discover their continued desire for each other, Otto reflects on their 'difference' from others, their exemption from ordinary 'conventions'. With an 'ironic chance throwing them together' (i.e., the chance that Otto has returned to London on the very night when Leo is in Brighton), they can take possession of this moment of mutual erotic surrender, and 'enjoy it thoroughly, every rich moment of it, every thrilling second' – 'This is a moment to remember all right. Scribble it onto your heart, a flicker of ecstasy sandwiched between yesterday and tomorrow – something to be recaptured in the future without illusion, perfect in itself! Don't let's forget this – whatever else happens don't let's forget this'. This is not an appeal to the direct and unmediated experience of erotic pleasure. Rather, art is a crucial supplement that will allow this moment – whether captured in play or photograph – to become a valued and arrested moment, 'perfect in itself', and thus a 'flicker of ecstasy'. Coward's whole play seems to function as an act of aesthetic rememoration, which will guard and advocate the kind of experience he and his two friends have managed to invent.

Operating behind this code of honesty is a profound social nihilism, which assumes that value does not inhere in any given social relationships, but must be improvised with the verve and ingenuity of the parties to the social. Thus, the text of one Avedon image – where the Diors dance and snap their fingers up the stairs (figure 10) – reads, 'The Diors knew that in the dark hour of the soul when the music stops it takes three to tango'. Doesn't aestheticism in all its forms confirm the belief that there is nothing of intrinsic value; that we reside on the edge of a great abyss? Then the aesthetic becomes a way of accusing the rest of the world of its banality, and a clinging to the only refuge. The antidote to this grim underlying nihilism is a divine levity. We have noted all that gives Avedon's images a brillant surface of light linearity. We are also told that the Diors 'were made in heaven' and are as light and blithe as angels. Their every pose is wreathed in smiles and enveloped in mirth. The energy of their various activity is a corollary to the incessant mobility and laughter of Noel Coward's conversational agons. Coward's heroes never really conclude, they are just finally interrupted. To conclude would risk assuming a seriously asserted position – something which both Coward and Avedon make seem inevitably 'stupid'.

We have been speaking as if the Diors were fundamentally the same as Coward's protagonists in *Design for Living*. But in the journey from Coward's theatre to the Dior ad cycle, a fundamental change has been worked. In spite of Coward's naughtiness, aestheticism and feigned decadence, it is important not to take *Design for Living* too lightly. In its own ways, it is a contribution to the debate about how men and women might best negotiate their happiness, and honestly confront their anger, a debate that has been going forward in literature (and life) for many a year. In Coward's play, action is motivated by the

Figure 8.

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

oldest of comic motives (who gets the girl), characters confront the most familiar human passions (desire, jealousy, loneliness), and the leading characters finally win their way through to a solution for living, albeit of problematic triangular design. The authority of this solution has been earned by all that these three have said and felt over the life of the play.

By contrast, Avedon has made Coward's fictional conclusion the initial premise of the Dior cycle. As little more than a witty starting point, this *menage à trois* has lost its social force, and become as light, airy and easy to assume as any Dior garment. The effect is to make the Diors seem more heartless, decadent and artificial than Coward's characters. This seems entirely appropriate to the form of advertising, and places the Diors in greater proximity to the commodity. And, thus translated into Avedon's ad art, all the adopted terms of Coward's play continue to operate as attenuated social ideas. But they also become a co-ordinate part of the ethos of the World of Ad. The exclusion of others endowed with less style enables the Diors to become those beings whose life (and dress) will be watched, envied, imitated. (The soul of style is expressed through the choice of the commodity.) Their nihilism reflects a doubt about the reality of anything that cannot be worn on the body. (Only the commodity exists.) To seize the moment of ecstasy has become convolved with the pleasure of putting on a new garment. (The commodity carries its maximum power as fetish at the moment it is unwrapped and touched.) Throughout it all, a mobile levity and mirth comprise the best guarantee against any realities that might impinge from outside the panoply of fashion.

ZAPPED

In its constant reference to a naughty triangular sexuality 'off stage', the Dior campaign seems to function as a fix profferred to the sexual addict by the sexually obsessed. How else can one account for the artfully sustained ambiguity of the sexual aspect of this campaign? It is as if the admakers took a perverse pleasure in striking an exact balance between triggering spectators' voyeuristic fantasy and arresting any too facile certainty as to what's what. As *Newsweek* put it, these ads are 'meant to specify nothing but suggest everything'. We can catch this pandering to sexual curiosity in one of the last images of Phase 1, when we finally see the Diors placed where we might have imagined them – in bed. But, as if to keep us guessing, the image (figure 11) yields an equivocal meaning. Here The Wizard seems to be delivering the punchline of a joke to his responsive friends. Oliver's heroic pose – reminiscent of a Renaissance allegorical figure – and his hand's placement on the shoulder of the Mouth, suggests his greater erotic power. Then too, his foot seems to be touching the Mouth's leg under the

Figure 11.

cover, although we cannot be sure. But this sexual suggestion is countered by the Mouth's hair being up for the night, and the general innocence of this pastel ensemble. And as if to double this innocence, we are playfully directed by the text to imagine the Diors as 'three angels dancing on the head of the pin'. In dealing with media images of sex however it is important not to assume that we know precisely what 'sex' means, or how it is functioning. So let us now try to specify the 'sex' that we have here, and the larger economies of meaning and value within which it functions.

In the spring of 1983, Phase 2 of the Dior campaign was run, and it turned more explicitly toward sex. This turn toward sex entails a turn away from Coward as the leading context of the ad cycle toward the broad strokes of travesty and burlesque, and a more pronounced subordination of women. We can trace these shifts in the campaign by considering the only image representing a single Dior, the Mouth alone in partial undress (figure 12). Here she leans wistfully against her dressing table, trying on jewellery, and daydreaming of the only kind of life she can bear – life with Oliver and the Wizard. A full Martini testifies to the difficulty of raising one's spirits alone. The narcissistic enclosure of this moment is emphasized by the mirror, and by the photo of the Dior threesome in joyful togetherness (a photo identical with the closing portrait of the first installment). That the ad is for lingerie and jewellery provides a pretext for presenting the Mouth dressed only in those two items, as well as a white hat. The text offers a comic deflation of the Mouth's sad look, and a reminder that women in our culture are largely excluded from the all-important making of money: 'Once a month when the Wizard and Oliver went out to make money, one little Dior was left alone, all undressed with no place to go'. Undressed and 'little', the Mouth is suddenly a child-like dependant; her loneliness is the woman's fate when the men are away. (Of course, that these two men only have to 'work' once a month is a lame joke at the expense of the leisured rich.)

This ad image seems to be an allusion to Manet's *The Bar of the Folies-Bergère*. (Figure 13.) There too a woman with a mournful gaze stands in front of a mirror that carries the reflection of her back, with arms in a 'V' shape upon a counter, and there too we see a glass by her left hand. Again we have the context of men's and women's experience of desire. But there is an important difference between the woman in Manet's painting and the woman in Avedon's ad photo. Manet's subject is a barmaid who must work for a living, and this economic subordination is both confirmed and expressed by the sad gaze directed at the spectator, who stands in the position of the man reflected in the mirror. *We* as spectator are the person wanted, or at whom the woman looks with regret. But in the Dior ad we look into the dressing room of the rich beauty whose gaze is averted. Here wealth, and the luxury of the jewels that touch her skin, place her in a world apart. In both Manet and Avedon the spectator is coded as male, and dominating the (female) image he beholds. But, strange to say – in comparing these two images – the lonely narcissism of the woman in Avedon's ad somehow appears all the more vulnerable and erotically interesting in her state of lonely undress, all the more insistently delivered to the gaze of the spectator, than Manet's figure of a woman.

Given this alignment of power and gender, it is no surprise that the New York City feminist group, the Women Against Pornography, gave Christan Dior their 'ZAP Award' in the Spring of '83. The purpose of the ZAP award is 'to call public attention to the prevalence of pornographic images and messages in mainstream advertising and to pressure advertisers to stop producing ads that degrade and promote violence against women'. Although in this case, the award was given for one ad image – the wrestling match on the stairs, with the Mouth dressed in black lingerie (see figure 6) – the WAP representative in charge of the awards, Frances Patai, said that the ZAP award could be extended to the whole campaign.

In the WAP press release of 24 February 1983, the Diors wrestling ad was reproduced, and the campaign was described as 'a series of ads that feature two well-dressed men named "Oliver" and "the Wizard" and one scantily-clad woman dubbed "the Mouth"'. Ms Patai stated that 'these ads trivialize women, present a power imbalance between men and women, and celebrate sexual games with sadomasochistic overtones'.[7] Patai expanded her commentary at a later date:

> First the woman has no identity, she's an object, in this case a sexual orifice, 'the Mouth', with the connotations of sexual accessibility implied by such a name. She is an eager participant in some kinky trendy *ménage-à-trois*, just the 'in-thing' we are all behind, which actually ends up being nothing more than the same old pornographic scenarios: two clothed men play with one semi-clothed woman; she is exotic or laughable, powerless and not to be taken seriously, and doing the things they choose for her. In other words she ends up functioning as a sex toy for the men. This finally is what the 'Diors' are teaching us to accept and practice.

That Woman is derogated by the campaign becomes more explicit in another ad (figure 14) from Phase 2. To sell 'eyewear' the Diors play three monkeys, long-standing symbols of 'low sensuality'.[8] The text plays on the proverbial warning, 'hear no evil, speak no evil, and see no evil'. This practical wisdom for containing the career of evil in the world is given a more rigorous and comprehensive expression in the Christian injunction to overcome the pride of the senses, for they can be portals

Figure 12.

Figure 13. Manet, 'Bar aux Folies-Bergère' (Courtauld Institute of Art, London).

Figure 14.

for the entrance of sin into the body. In the Dior revision of this old saw, soliciting Christian virtues is a set-up for putting down the woman, for the Diors parody the three monkeys in a special way. While the men can cover eyes and ears, the Mouth, of course, since she is the Mouth – a notorious talker, and one who can and will use her mouth in other more erotic ways – cannot be stopped: 'The Diors heard no evil and saw no evil, but nothing could stop the Mouth.' Here the Mouth is the one who circulates, is available, who, when alone, is restless and wistful and stands around in front of mirrors with a drink and old photos, and who, when she is with others, has an uncontrollable mouth.

How did the Woman in the ad get named 'the Mouth'? *Newsweek* reported about Avedon's casting of the three Diors in this way:

> To portray the Diors, Avedon considered a number of professional models (Jerry Hall and Marisa Berenson among them) for the woman's part before settling on Kelly Le Brock, 22. He dubbed her the Mouth. When choosing the men, he avoided male models – 'I don't believe men can identify with them' – and cast a friend, New York art dealer Vincent Vallarino, 29, as Oliver. For the Wizard, he picked another close friend, André Gregory, 48, the Avant-garde theatrical director who coauthored and starred in the film *My Dinner With André*.

Here, at the early moments of the encoding of the Dior ad, one finds a remarkably differential treatment of men and (the) woman. For the woman, one wants a model of beauty, and for such perfection a professional model is a requisite. By contrast, for the men one need not, it is even better *not* to, choose a male model, because, Avedon declares, 'men can't identify with them'. In choosing a woman with the right look, the photographer can exercise (divine, prelapsarian, or royal) powers of nomination, naming her for her distinguishing (physical) characteristic. He dubs her 'the Mouth'. While the Avedon quote seems to imply that women's identification with women must be primarily physical, by contrast, identification with men by men need not be based on physical beauty. Men, it seems, can engage identification in many other ways. Thus one can choose an art dealer and a film director, who also happen to be one's friends, and they become 'Oliver' and 'the Wizard'. From the vantage point of this account of Avedon's casting, the whole Dior campaign could be read as showing the way woman and woman's beauty are valued and characterized in representation through her [its] relationship to male 'homosocial' relations, that is, rivalry, love, pleasure and exchanges – whether monetary, aesthetic, or personal – between men.[9]

There is an undeniable cogency and persuasiveness to this feminist critique of the Dior ad cycle; and yet it is partial, in both senses of that word. First, it fails to discriminate between the most banal ad and ads such as the Dior cycle, with its aesthetic and cultural interest. Then, the Women Against Pornography seem to assume that representations, especially those concerning sex and gender and power, are received by the spectator as a single literal string of messages. The wrong kinds of ads will promote violence against women, whereas a better kind of image will presumably, make such violence less likely. (This is why WAP also give out 'Libby' awards for companies which produce enlightened, liberated images of women.) But these 'positive' images of woman seem amusingly co-operative of feminism, and endorse dominant ideologies of the economic and political system as surely as ads which are 'ZAPPED'. Indeed, in the third and last phase of the Dior campaign, the use of the name 'the Mouth' is discreetly dropped, and the woman is given a position of greater power, as the Diors head toward the conventions of marriage. But none of this involves any fundamental change in the way this ad cycle treats issues of sex, gender and representation. Finally, in its hypothesis about the direct casual relationship between negative representations and criminal violence, Women Against Pornography fails to take account of the real power of the ad media, its ability both to endorse and to subvert every possible position – to be everywhere and nowhere. We can get at this aspect of advertising by noting a certain turn in the Dior cycle's treatment of sex.

SPEAK SLEAZY

As the Dior cycle unfolds, sex – as the occasion for personal pleasure, or coital union, or forbidden melodramatic passion – becomes less important than a certain kind of 'talk' about sex. This talk can be very obvious. Thus the text of one ad from Phase 2 echoes an old Cole Porter song by saying, 'Birds do it. Bees do it. When the Diors do it, they do it in beige' (figure 15). The ad presents the Diors striking the mannered position of singing 'with feeling'. The tan of their skin blends beautifully with the silky beige of their clothes, and those subtle colours are offset tastefully by the whiteness of the piano and the background. The low camera angle, and the largeness of the figures, makes them seem almost heroic in scale. In contrast with the glossy finish of this image – it communicates 'class' – the text descends to something like lewd humour. We are told with coy obliqueness that the Diors do what 'birds and bees' do. We are also given the kinky idea that they 'do it' in clothes, purchasable under the Dior label, of a particular colour – beige. This leads to one of the guiding rules for reading the Dior cycle: if you suspect that something is being suggested, it is. No cliché is too obvious, no innuendo too subtle, to go untapped in the Dior ad cycle.Through its coy treatment of sex, the ad can count on an active spectator, positioned in a superior way to the action, and (apparently) linked in fraternal humour with the creator of the ads. In other words, these sexual jokes, however obvious or obscure, give every spectator – even those who laugh at the Diors – the illusion that he or she is in the exclusive position of an insider, of 'one who knows'.

In one of the final ads of the Spring '83 campaign, the mobility of meaning, as a lure of pleasure, is connected most explicitly with sex (figure 16). Here the Diors enjoy trying on shirts and ties and detachable collars, in all the many combinations they can imagine. Oliver seems to be in the position of pivotal erotic power. His body is turned toward the Mouth, who, engaging in a little cross-dressing, has selected the shirt Oliver is wearing, and gazes at him wide-eyed and open-mouthed. But Oliver has selected a similar collar to the Wizard's, has turned laughingly toward the Wizard as that old rascal pulls a tie out of his sleeve with a questioning glance. He seems to be offering it to Oliver; Oliver laughs with delight. The bisexuality suggested here for Oliver becomes explicit in the text: 'How could the Diors possibly make up their minds, when playing the alternatives was so much fun.' Here as elsewhere, the obviousness of the erotic suggestion is part of the fun. No dirty mind is necessary to get in on the sport, although it helps to have one if you are to 'play' the many 'alternatives' that are suggested. The Dior threesome doesn't 'play the field' as the old saying goes. Rather, they explore the vertiginous alternatives afforded – by exchanging parts – within this group of three before the mirror.

I do not think that this proliferation of alternatives refers to the sexual practices the Diors might improvise, nor even to the commodities the Diors can wear. Rather, it refers to the possibilities for variety opened by the sexually coded representational system which the Dior ads manipulate for the spectator. When the Diors give up smoking they come across a formula for this process (figure 17). We are told by the text, 'The day the Diors gave up smoking, they went out in search of a better bad habit'. The three take to playing pin-ball. What 'better bad habit' have they found instead of smoking? It might be gambling, at a pin-ball machine whose name harkens back to the '20s and '30s, or it might be drinking, for they are playing 'Speak Easy'. But a look at the exchange going on in the ad tells us something else: Oliver, with his rakish sidelong smile, sends a look toward The Mouth as he hands her a coin. She, seen in profile, with a punk haircut that connotes erotic excitement, takes the coin with an open hand. Her lowered head, and open gaze suggest engagement with Oliver's come-on. The Wizard, behind his sunglasses, looks on impassively, with hands folded. He plays the presiding voyeur. The pin-ball machine, having received Oliver's coin from the Mouth's hand, will have its balls flying and flippers flapping. Such is the metaphoric substitution – the pin-ball machine as the woman's body – which allows us to watch the three perform one version of their new 'bad habit' together. But is their new bad habit really sex? A close look at the name of their game suggests something else, communicated in a typographical pun inscribed within the image: 'Speak Easy' is written on the pin-ball machine, but because of the giant capital 'S' and the tail of the 'p' connecting with the curling line beneath the 'ea' of easy, it ends up also saying 'Speak Sleasy'. Such is the discursive strategy of the Dior ad cycle, and of many another ad. 'Sleasy' or sleazy speech will suggest every sexual alternative, will make the spectator's mind spin, and make the image seem to be charged with a mobile energy of meaning.

We have seen how the text of the ads in Phase 2 of the Dior campaign 'speak sleasy'. But how does one do this visually? A look at the whole range of the Dior cycle indicates that this cycle has utilized many of the techniques developed in the Hollywood film industry, after the imposition of the production codes in the '20s, to suggest what could no longer be simply named and represented. Thus, every ad image with a sometimes blatant directness and a sometimes ingenious indirection refers over and over again to two basic sexual 'events': coitus and castration. Thus in these ad images we have a plethora of objects whose visual context gets them to function as phallic – a champagne bottle and a cigar (figure 2), mice (figure 4), an armadillo tail (figure 8), a

Figure 15.

shoe separated from its foot and dangling fur tails (figure 9), collars and ties (figure 16), and a coin (figure 17). Sometimes these phallic objects seem to imply coitus and male and/or female orgasm, which occasionally is represented indirectly: in the Mouth's spasm and squeal under the mouse assault (figure 4), in the fallen urn at the scene of the wrestling match (figure 6), and in the play about to begin at 'Speak (Sl)easy' (figure 18). But at other times the woman's power over the male, or the male's over the woman, is expressed through an image of castration. Thus, although the men attack together with mice, the 'Mouth' gets in a good kick in the right place against Oliver. Castration is often suggested through some form of decapitation: in two scenes an enigmatic Greek or Etruscan female head is on the counter (figure 3 and figure 8); the Mouth twice holds Oliver's head by the hair, recalling certain religious paintings of Judith (figure 6 and figure 9), and sometimes one figure is 'decapitated' by the composition (Oliver in figure 3, the Wizard in figure 9, and the Mouth in figure 17).

We cannot get beyond the sleazy speech of the Dior cycle simply by describing, and thus necessarily repeating, its repertoire of sexual images. Rather, we must try and discover the larger economy within which those images function, and whose purposes they serve. To do this we need to follow the final and surprising turn taken

Figure 16.

Figure 17.

in the cycle's third phase in the fall of 1983. There the Diors discover the pleasures of that most formidable of all bourgeois citadels – the institutions of marriage and the family.

AS THE DIORS TURN

When the Dior campaign began, it was feared by ad executives that there might be 'adverse reaction from the "hinterlands"', where 'the [Dior] trio might be misunderstood'. Early consumer research showed that at least in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Dallas, 'consumers enjoyed the campaign's soap opera quality', the same formula so popular with the TV audiences captivated by Dynasty and Dallas.[10] Perhaps this helps explain why, with the third and final phase of the Dior campaign, the narrative took a clear turn toward TV melodrama, now invoking love, marriage, adultery, childbirth and even death. The images and texts of Phases 1 and 2 comprise an ensemble rather than a series, snapshots of a static situation rather than a temporal sequence. Phase 3 of the Dior campaign projects the Diors into a fundamentally different temporality. We can see this from the text that accompanies the first image of the series, the Dior's visit to an orphanage [see figure 18]. 'And so it came to pass that suddenly one autumn, the Diors were stirred by unfamiliar longings: for Sunday sermons, simple virtues, for the company of children.' This change of sensibility happens 'suddenly' and 'one autumn' – an event punctual and singular, opening the space for a narrative sequence. By contrast, the text of Phases 1 and 2 implied that whatever the Diors are doing had already been done repeatedly, so that those earlier images suggest not singular events, but exemplary recurrent moments of a past woven seamlessly into the present.[11]

The first image of Phase 3 represents a public social space that strikes a sharp visual contrast with what has gone before. Whereas the Diors have previously dominated the space of the image, here (figure 18) we find them embedded in a cluttered social setting – not at the opera or a gallery opening, but in an orphanage, complete with nun and seventeen children. The Diors have entered a society that is not tailored to their tastes, and have therefore lost their usual privilege and autonomy: Oliver is pushed to the margins (peering through the doorway, with a look of alarm and disbelief); the Wizard is entangled in a bout of horseplay; and the Mouth is the object of fascinated attentions from three little girls. The very different way in which each Dior is related to the mayhem at the orphanage suggests the different roles that each will play in the subsequent action of Phase 3. The Mouth, who is most pleasingly and serenely engaged, wears a sly smile, and casts a knowing sidelong glance; Oliver is outside the door, blocked by the formidable presence of the horrified nun; and the Wizard has accepted the sport of a pillow fight. The threesome is no longer turned in on itself, but is divided by children posed in every kind of childlike activity. And the Diors must accept a final species of subordination: it is not their clothes, but the clothes of the children that Dior is now advertising, two weeks before the school year.

Part of the spectator's interest in this new situation comes from watching how the Diors will negotiate the 'normal' forms of middle-class life. In the 'episodes' that follow we see the Diors do things that assume pre-existent social forms to which they must now accommodate their behaviour: their wedding is announced, they take vows, throw a bouquet at the wedding party, take a (honeymoon) journey, announce a child, worry over its arrival and delight in its birth. Notice that from the very first image, there are notes of menace: a series of 'decapitations', the snake suspended before the nun by the oldest boy, the precarious positions of several of the children, the scissors poised to cut off the Wizard's tie, and the words in the mouth of the crayon drawing of the nun on the wall, with the German tag which looks like 'Kerkerdenpost' (or 'prisonkeeper'). All may suggest the dangers of this new turn into temporality and (personal) history. Not just the

Figure 18.

orphans, but the Diors themselves may be threatened with imprisonment by convention.

The very next image in the series, where the Wizard proposes to the Mouth (see figure 19) dramatizes the extent to which this new fictional trajectory threatens the premises of the *ménage-à-trois* developed from the beginning of the Dior ad campaign. Within the love literature of the West, narrative suspense and psychological interest arise from the conflict implied by the love triangle, where the active male protagonist must overcome the obstacle of a male rival to win the object of desire, the woman. Noel Coward's *Design for Living* begins by assuming this triangular rivalry of two men for one woman, and gradually works through to a love trio which has overcome the necessity of excluding one person to create the conventional couple. We have noted the way in which the Diors start as the 'mature' and stable Coward love trio, with the decadent upper-class values appropriate to such a design for living. But how can such a trio make a baby, without that baby being a bastard – and thus a social outcast? This issue seems to be on the Mouth's mind in visiting the orphanage. And won't this event inevitably exclude Oliver, and reintroduce the very rivalry which their relationship was structured to avoid? Such are the doubts attending the Diors' plunge into married life, and which the subsequent scenes of the series explore.

The conflict between the 'Dior way' and the marriage which the Wizard proposes is figured in the most blatant way by the second image of the series (figure 19). Here the Wizard strikes a highly stylized pose, with one hand at his breast expressive of his 'feeling' for the beloved, and the diamond in his left hand extended as a gift to the Mouth in view of a 'yes' which will make her his possession, his Wife. The Mouth's high state of tension is expressed through her wide-eyed gaze at the Wizard, her electrified hair, and the high kick of her left leg. But the Mouth, although turned toward the Wizard, is still all too deeply involved in the old trio. How is she being supported in this strange position? Hugging the Mouth from behind and looking over her shoulder at the offered ring is Oliver. It is difficult not to wonder precisely what Oliver's body and hands might be doing snuggled so tightly up to the Mouth's body. The text offers a breezy commentary on this moment when Dior's world begins to turn: 'It was time for a change. One Dior popped the question. One Dior weighed the answer. And one Dior knew the honeymoon was over.' In what follows Oliver occupies the most seriously imperilled position. The next shot (figure 20) in the series records another moment of the

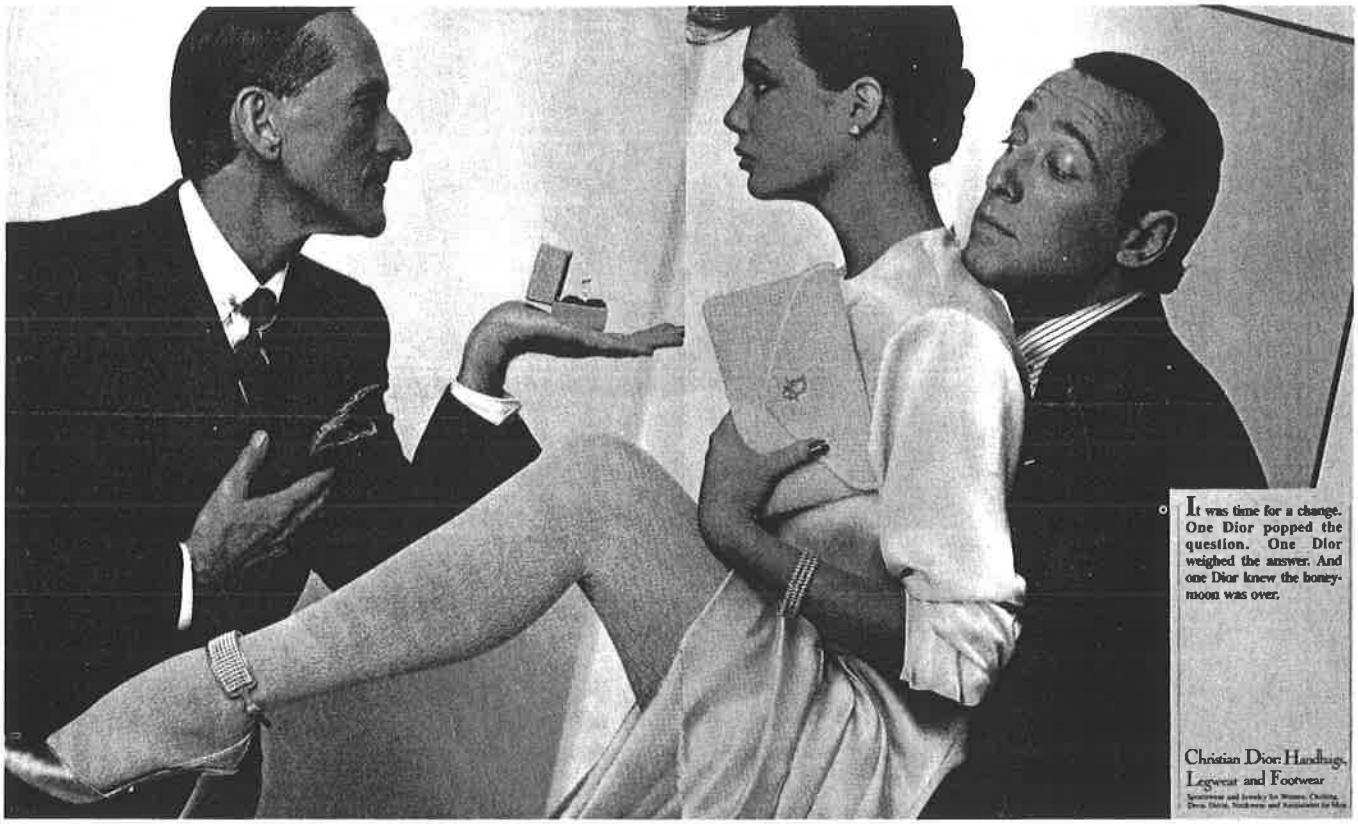

Figure 19.

Figure 20.

same proposal scene. While the Wizard offers a conventional kiss to the beloveds' hand, she glances at the Wizard, and Oliver looks with quizzical wonder at this gesture. The text gives a comic cast to this proposed change in the Diors' life: 'The Diors considered the implications. If they tied the knot, did they have to cut the cord? Could two really live as cheaply as three? When the wedding bell rang, would it be a wrong number?' This is light-hearted in tone, but raises the issues of life in time – separation, waste, failed communication – which have now become real for the Diors. The curiosity with which the spectator awaits the rest of this serial melodrama-in-print pivots on discovering how things 'turn out'for this trio. Things don't look good for Oliver, but there is some hope offered by this ad image. At least the ring, the circular emblem of the union of two forever, is here, by both the jeweller's design and the photographer's art, shaped like a triangle. Perhaps there will be a place for him after all.

The scene where the Mouth tries on her veil before the mirror (figure 21) sets the stage for the ensuing rivalry between the men. Her position as the dazzling object they both desire is established by the striking artificiality of her pose. The Wizard plays a doting lover while he holds the mirror that enables her to complete the relays of her narcissism in momentary oblivion of all others. Fading into the background in his white turtle neck, Oliver looks like a schoolboy, peaking tentatively from behind the veil. Before the mirror, the woman seems the all-powerful object of the males' worshipful desire. In this scene which echoes the Velazquez *Venus and Cupid* or the 'Rokeby Venus', (figure 22) the Mouth is now the goddess Venus, with the Wizard as supportive Cupid. Oliver apparently has no role at all. But if we read the fine print of the parody of a society wedding announcement offered below the heading 'Dior Betrothed To Dior', we find that Oliver, as Oliver Winston Dior III, is to assume the role of father at the wedding, and give the Mouth, 'Desirée Dior', away to the Wizard, the Marquis Armand Windisch-Gratz-Dior. Things are always different in the house of Dior. Instead of the woman being exchanged from one family to another, in this parody of the bourgeois wedding, this woman (a Dior) is being exchanged between two males of the Dior family.

At the cutting of the cake (figure 23), Oliver seems decisively excluded. While the wedding couple has struck the confident pose appropriate to an official wedding portrait, Oliver is decapitated in the lower right. His only hope for the future arises from his appearance as the (comically inappropriate) third figure in the miniature statuary atop the cake, and in his addendum to the couple's wedding vows ('And I do too'). But, then again, perhaps the knife wielded by the wedding couple is simply cutting him out of the picture. In the throwing of the bouquet, (figure 24), the message is equivocal. The Wizard has a firm grip on his new wife's left arm, and she is tossing Oliver the bouquet, the emblem of her maidenly availability, as if to say by convention, 'I'm no longer single, it's your turn now'. But with this bouquet she is also shooting a delighted Oliver her most rakish look. Perhaps she is inviting him to share in something of the post-wedding configuration. Also, the text for the wedding party reminds us that things never follow a banal course of events with the Diors. Thus the double entendre at the end of the textual label: this was – and perhaps is still to involve – 'a legendary private affair'.

The next three images in the series define three modalities of Oliver's exclusion from the new marital arrangement (figures 25, 26 and 27). On the wedding night he is simply absent. There is an emblem of the old love trio – the triangle which the Wizard holds and rings at the moment the Mouth beckons him to consummate their marriage. But the triangle is open at one end; Oliver is missing. In the first picture of the honeymoon voyage, the Wizard and the Mouth pose as the perfectly happy 'smart couple'. The Wizard's sexual possession of his wife is marked not only by her serene and distant gaze, and the way his right arm is placed around her shoulder, but by what his authoritatively pointing hand covers – the ship's port-hole. Oliver is the isolated and disconsolate lover. The text attributes his presence to a comic puppy-dog loyalty: 'And so the Diors sailed off into married life with their faithful best man aboard'. But in the next scene, Oliver strikes a pose meant to display his athletic prowess; but this posture also suggests a gesture of muted anger, as he cocks his fist in the direction of the Mouth's head. But the impotence of this gesture is apparent from its broadly stylized character – as if Oliver were the emblem of Mercury on the hood of an old car. By contrast, the Mouth and the Wizard seem at first sight to make a complementary pair, with her elbow deflecting the threat from Oliver. The Wizard, as a strong dark-blue vertical, is an expression of phallic strength, but his is also the position of 'the hanged man' of the tarot cards. Jung explains the 'hanged man' in psychological terms, saying that 'hanging . . . has an unmistakable symbolic value, since swinging (hanging and suffering as one swings) is the symbol of unfulfilled longing or tense expectation'.[12] Following this interpretation of the hanged man, whose longings are unfulfilled? Clearly Oliver's are. Are the Mouth's? Perhaps even the Wizard's for Oliver? The text which accompanies this image seems to indicate that the frustration with this new life is more general, and that the marriage is arriving at a moment of crisis: 'By the third day of their honeymoon, the Diors had tried just about everything to pretend they weren't homesick.' What are they homesick for? Not for a physical 'home' but for their old love trio, where sex and love could be shared by three.

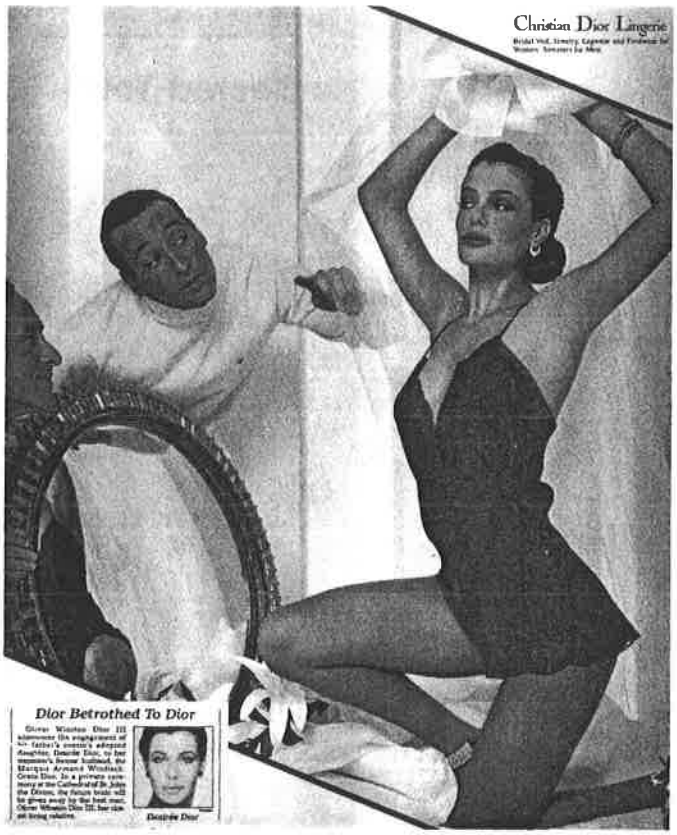

Figure 21.

Figure 22. Velasquez, 'Venus and Cupid' (National Gallery, London).

Figure 23.

Figure 24.

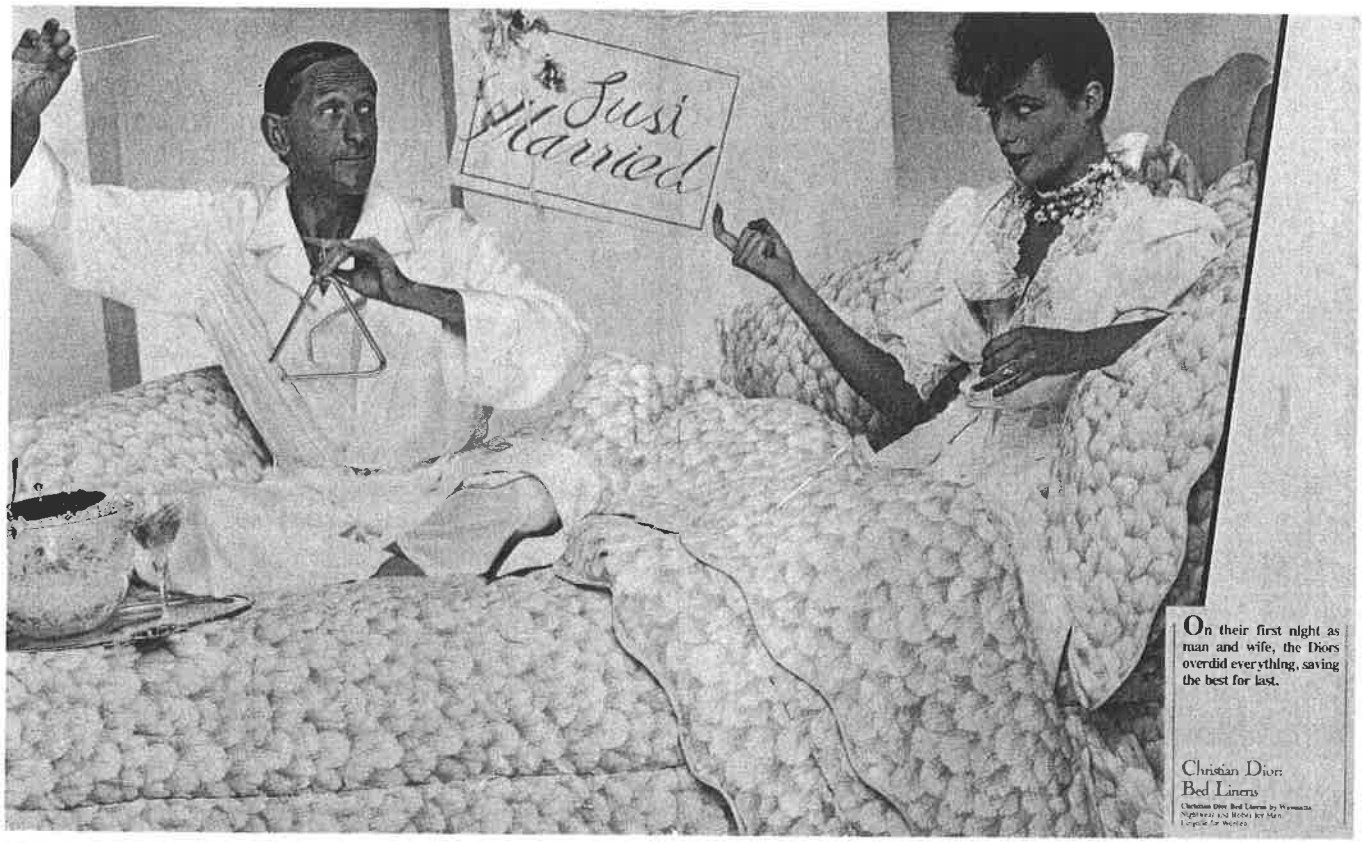

Figure 25.

In the old Hollywood movies, it is often during a storm that passion builds to its crisis, and it is no different with the Diors (figure 28). The textual tag to the image tells us of the impossibility of a honeymoon with one or two Diors, but it also tells us that 'three Diors on a honeymoon was a honeymoon headed for the rocks'. What is the solution? The image gives us a hint that the answer is adultery – a renewed sexual relationship between Oliver and the Mouth. Oliver holds the umbrella which is, visually speaking, cutting off the Wizard's left arm. A phallic scarf goes from Oliver's crotch to the Mouth's neck, and she is in a pose – hands open, arms drawn back, mouth partly open, eyes closed – of unmistakeable erotic surrender. But perhaps Oliver has not just gained erotic acceptance on this honeymoon; perhaps he is needed for another reason. That fertility may be an urgent and problematic issue here gains emphasis from the imagery of the wedding night bed (see figure 25): the couple eat caviar – fish eggs – and recline on a bed decorated with the pattern of sea shells and sea fans. Renewing the old love trio, within the new form of the marriage arrangement, may be necessary not simply for the sake of happiness, but to ensure the conception of what will soon be called the woman's 'divine plan' – a child.

That Oliver has won new leverage in the relationship after 'the storm' on the third day of marriage becomes evident in the next two images (figure 29 and 30). First, Oliver offers the newlyweds some help with the chronic problem of married love and sex – diminished desire. In the best middle-class tradition, he is reading to them from a 'how-to' book, in this case *The Joy of Sex*. Then Oliver exercises the personal freedom that is the corollary of the others' marriage, by going out on a date with a gaudy socialite. Meanwhile the newlyweds find themselves uncomfortably crowded onto an elevator with three dull-eyed conventioneers and an elderly lady whose sole concern appears to be the welfare of her pekinese. The Diors are in danger of sliding into the drabness that is the deadly concomitant of respectability. The loneliness and boredom of being a mere couple are understated in the textual tag: 'On the best man's first night out, the Diors discovered there was something missing in their marriage.'

Renewed sex between Oliver and the Mouth may have overcome the crisis of the Dior marriage, but the old trio is not reunited until a baby is born to the family. Thus the three Diors finally become a visual unit again, when they announce, on the card to friends, 'Guess who's coming for Christmas?' (figure 31). The woman's triumph is regis-

tered in the text: "Whereupon, in accordance with her divine plan, she became great with child and the Diors proclaimed their blessed event.' In contrast with this mock-religious language, which echoes the coming of the Christ child, the ad asserts the triumph of male sexuality, by blazoning the announcement around with male 'accessories' by 'Christian Dior': a belt, a wallet, a tie and a pair of suspenders. This climactic turn of the Dior story – The Mouth's becoming pregnant – realized a wish of Richard Avedon's, enunciated the previous winter to a *Newsweek* reporter before Phase 2 of the campaign had been run, and well before Phase 3 had been conceptualized: 'If I had my way – and fortunately I don't – the Mouth would be pregnant and you'd never know by whom.' And of course the way the Diors get engaged, married and, and honeymooned allows Avedon to realize his wish. The high seriousness of this childbirth is mocked in the next ad (figure 32), where the expectant mother looks worriedly up at the Wizard, who, garbed in doctor's whites, listens to the heartbeat of the little one, while his assistant Oliver, joined to him and her by the same stethoscope, listens too. The high mythic resonance of the moment is underlined by the apppearance through the hospital window of one of the camels of the Magi and an accompanying text that transports us into the realm of serial melodrama. A 'great' family is concerned with extending its power to the next generation: 'And the little stranger, waiting to be born, did not know how profound a part he was to play in the destiny of the Diors.'

The coming of the child has dissipated the crisis precipitated by the marriage. The text reads, 'And they called him Ishmael. And peace and harmony reigned in the House of the Diors'. The special power of this image of the newborn baby comes from the way in which the visible eyes of the three adults are transfered to the child whose eyes seem almost abnormally large. These big wide eyes dramatize the sudden presence of a newly awakened consciousness. The steady focus of the three adults upon the child, the delicate touch of Oliver's hand on the baby, and the Mouth's hand upon the Wizard's shoulder, help create a sense of reverence and tranquillity. Thus the idea of 'peace' enunciated in the text is echoed in the image. But there is one dissonant note here. It is the men who hold and share the baby boy. This cuts the mother off from the baby, and emphasizes the two men's shared and equal interest in the baby, whose paternity is uncertain. It also hints at another erotic economy within which the production of a child, especially a boy child, might be working. Perhaps the woman has just been used so as to produce a boy child for the homoerotic pleasure of the two men.

What has the Dior family romance done to the conventional middle-class family? Usually a father gives a daughter to a young man (who becomes a 'son'), so that daughter and son-in-law can produce a grandchild. But in the story of the Diors, the younger man (a 'son') gives the sister/mother to a 'father', then cuckolds the 'father' to produce a brother/grandchild, who becomes heir to the family and (perhaps) their shared sexual toy. Since none of the positions in this 'family' is stable, the family has become perverse by being polymorphous. This is no longer a family structure so much as a family unstructured by Dior desire.

What is achieved by this subversion of family struture? For one thing, it realizes a certain fantasy of mastery in relation to all the sites of possible loss. Thus the middle-class life which the Diors are unsettling is hedged round with choices: choosing one partner, one loses another; one chooses to be gay or straight; one chooses to be single or married; one has a child or does not. By contrast, the Diors inhabit a world of 'both/and'. They have both the respectability of marriage and the pleasure of a *ménage à trois*, they are both gay and straight, they have a child and yet are free of the anxiety and pain and possible loss of childbirth. The Diors have it all, they reign triumphant, and their position above all the negativity and potential loss of this world is expressed in the final image of the campaign (figure 34). There the new Dior quartet are resting upon a cloud in heaven. The Wizard has become an angel, the Mouth is a recumbent Olympia, and Oliver, complete with white top hat and halo, holds the baby. What does one make of this remarkable secular ascension, perfectly timed by Dior to coincide with the Christmas season?

DIOR CAPITALIZATION

We have considered the Dior ad cycle as the result of four discrete aesthetic fomulations: Avedon's construction of a sophisticated artistic image; the translation into speech of the ethos and fictional ground of Coward's *Design for Living*; a cynical manipulation of the sexual which subordinates woman and engages in ambiguous forms of 'sleasy speech'; and the development of a serial melodrama to tell the story of the Diors' family romance. It could be argued that all four of these aesthetic formulations are reflective of the exchange of commodities within advanced capitalism. Avedon's photography helps to turn the Diors, the objects around them, the products that adorn their bodies as well as every visible part of their bodies into desirable fetish objects – and therefore things that one might buy. But the Diors are not just objects to be 'bought'; they are also heroic and exemplary consumers. This is not because their wealth is fabled and incalculable, but because all their social relations are modelled upon the aesthetic act *par excellence*: the free choice (that is, purchase), based upon purely aesthetic grounds, of an object for its beauty. Even in turning toward the idea of children at the orphanage, the Diors

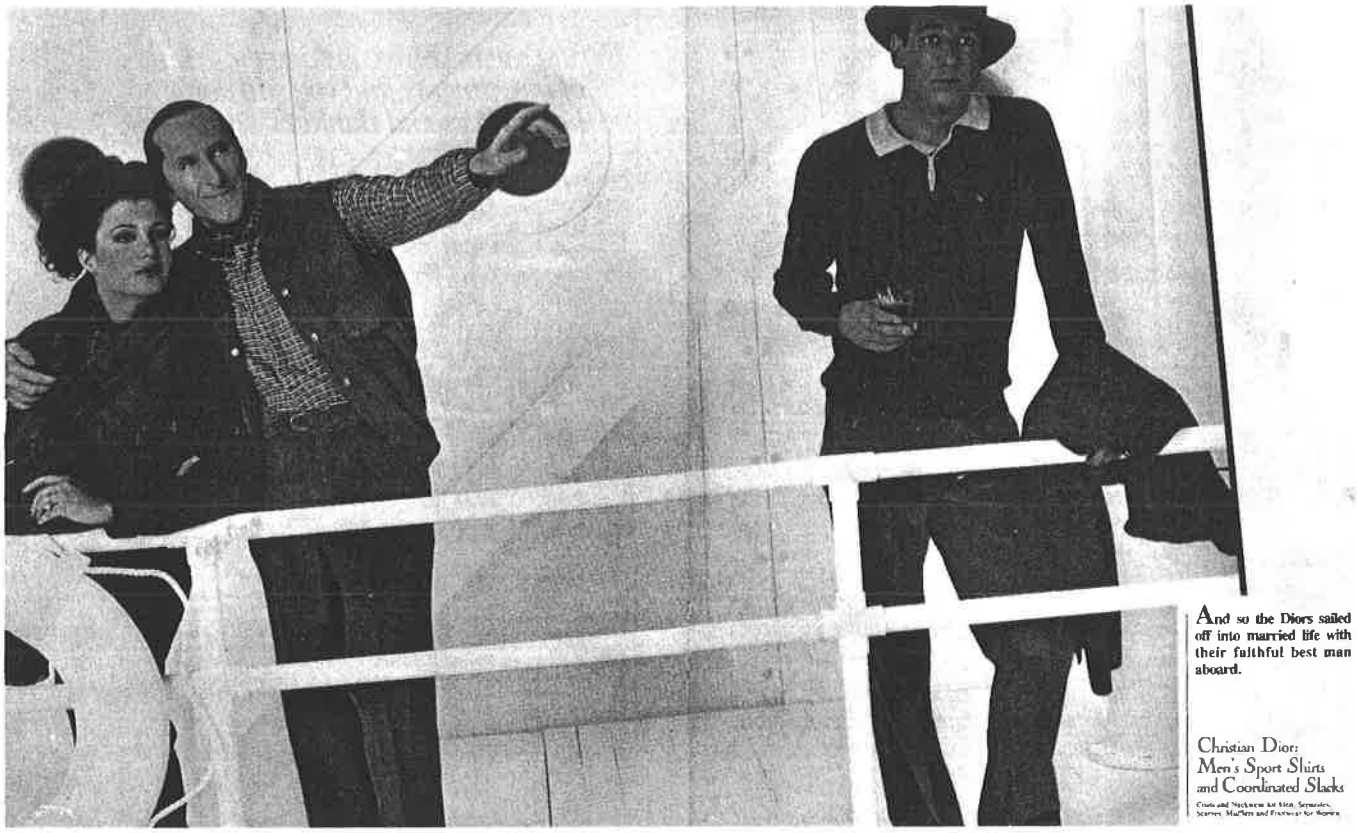

Figure 26.

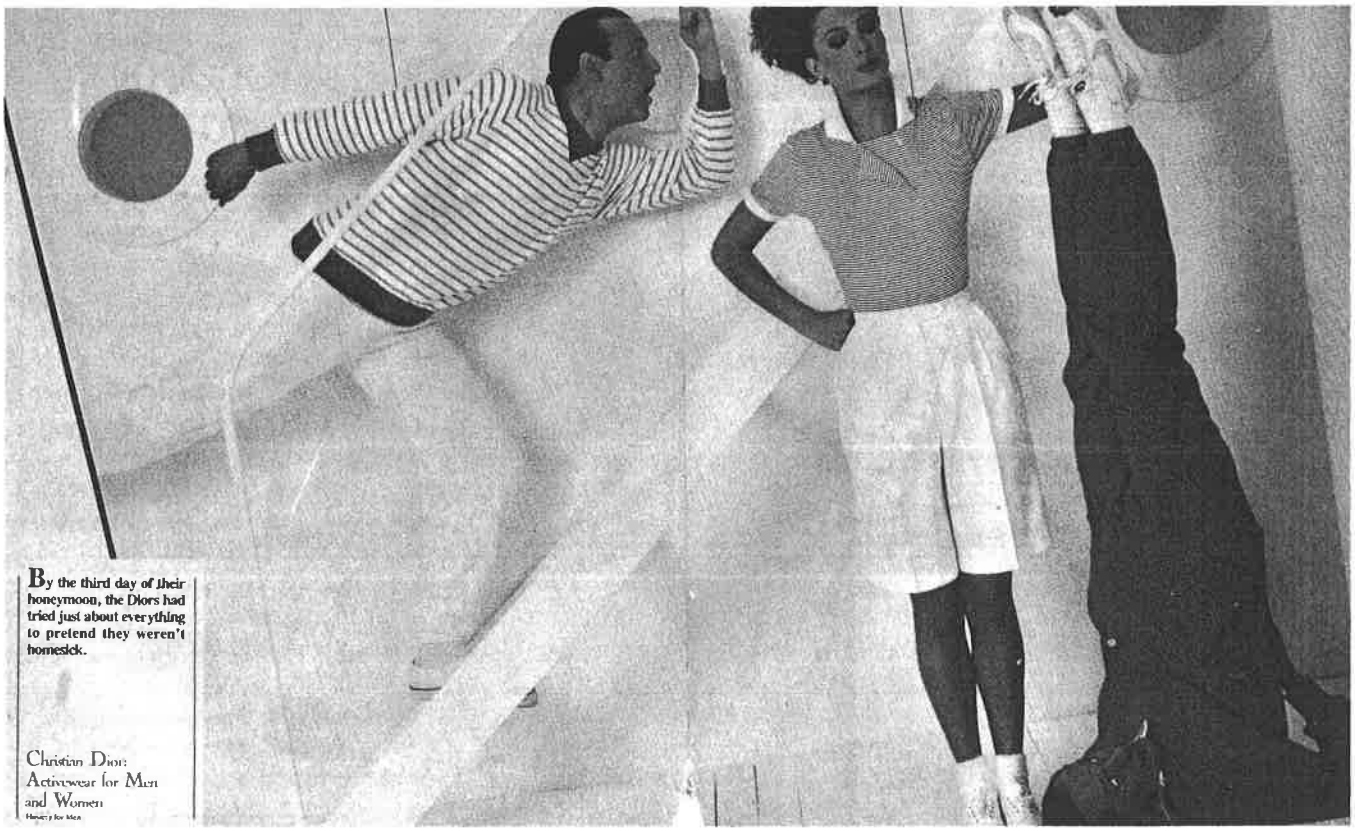

Figure 27.

Figure 28.

suddenly felt 'an unfamiliar longing' for the 'company of children'. Within this frame, the decadent plural sexuality of the Diors is enhanced by an opportunity to multiply the number of (sexual) roles and (sexual) exchanges among themselves. Finally, to give and receive each other in marriage is a risky venture carried on in expectation of particular gains: social respectability, a new aesthetic-erotic arena, and, above all, the birth of a new Dior. In all these phases of their existence, the Diors are repeating the logic of the most fundamental tendencies of the system of capitalist exchange.

What is this covert logic of capitalism that mediates so many forms of the Diors' existence? In part two of Volume One of *Capital*, entitled 'The Transformation of Money into Capital', Marx describes an early type of commercial exchange as the sale of a commodity for money, in order to use that money to buy another commodity, which will have a certain use-value to the person who has embarked upon these two transactions. Money here is a rather simple 'medium of exchange'. By contrast, the capitalist is described as buying a commodity with *his* money, in hope of subsequently selling that commodity for a greater amount of money, his profit. Here the use-value of the commodity is of no importance; nor does the capitalist require a profit from any one transaction. 'The restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what he aims at.' While the miser aims to increase his wealth by hoarding his money, the 'rational' plan of 'the more acute capitalist' prompts him to 'augment the exchange value of his wealth' by 'constantly throwing [his money] afresh into circulation'. What Marx emphasizes is the remarkable way in which the exchange of commodity and money, both of which conceal the value of the worker's labour, appear in capitalist economy as autonomous entities with a (natural) life of their own. (This exchange system also relies, obviously, upon manipulation of language and representations.)

From a Marxist perspective, the distinctive strategy of the Dior campaign, i.e., the marginalization of the commodity, takes on a new meaning. Nothing would be more dangerous to capitalist economy than 'customer satisfaction' or contentment with commodities purchased last year or yesterday. So advertising uses its artifice to 'trash' our last purchase, making it seem grey while it lures us to make a new one. Thus the perfect commodity would be abstract, and therefore invisible – as with the Dior campaign's subordination of product to ambience and narrative. Advertising is the process that produces desire for a commodity which, in the package, seems to be everything; but which, 'consumed' or unwrapped, turns out to be as if nothing at all. Thus the Diors' fast life, their

Figure 29.

Figure 30.

Figure 31.

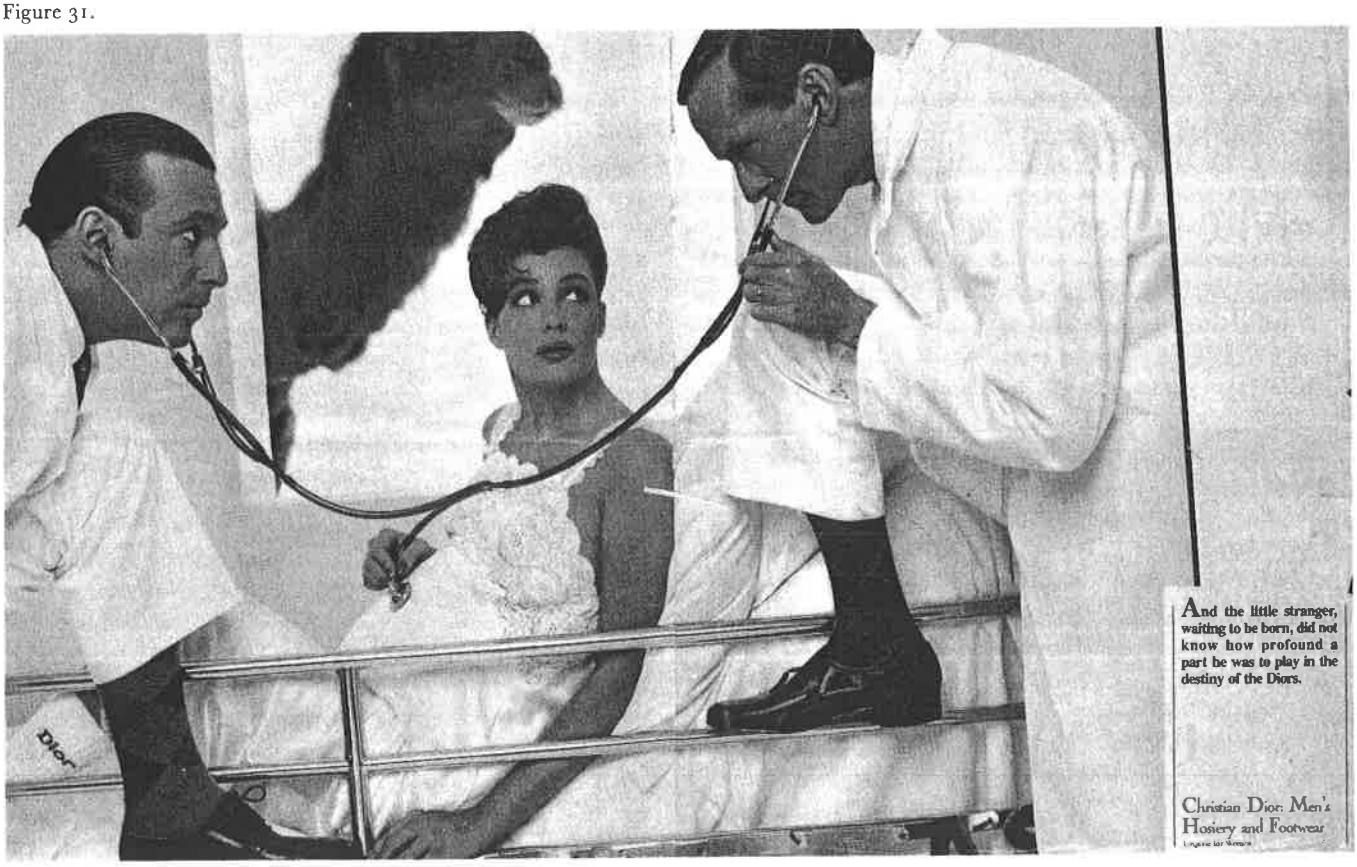

Figure 32.

Figure 33.

fast and various sex, and the quickness of their engagement, marriage, pregnancy and birthing are all a corollary to and an allegory of the basic process of capitalist economy. The Dior cycle works to increase the number, cost and speed of commodity exchange and commodity representation so that wealth may be spent, accumulated, acquired and wasted.

This impulse toward abstraction entails a compulsive effort to transcend the body. While the Dior ad cycle is unusual for its implications of negativity and death, it – like all other advertising – avoids the depiction of dirt, wrinkles or any gross reminders of mortality. At least one Dior ad was changed for this reason. The copy for a swimsuit ad first read, 'When the Diors got away from it all, they brought with them nothing except *The Decline of the West* and one toothbrush'. Upon further consideration the notion of a shared toothbrush was abandoned.[13] What is being censored here is not so much the sexual resonance of one slim toothbrush going in and out of 3 Dior mouths, but the hygienic scandal. This toothbrush might contaminate the aura of absolute cleanliness and purity essential to the fetishizing of the commodity through advertising. Thus purified and renewed by the world of ad, the Diors' perverse practices lose all distressing bodily associations.

Perched upon their cloud the Diors of the final image seem triumphant as well as spotless. They have overcome the problem of the love triangle, the limits of family life, and the threats of time, waste and death. Their ascension to 'heaven' marks their transcendence, and is a wonderfully apt narrative and theological analogue to that process of idealization which has shaped the Diors from their conception as the protagonists of the ad campaign. Perhaps even sex is still a possibility for them. But though the text intones a 'fond farewell to the Diors' in the grand rhythms of great narrative closings, here adopted from the end of Dickens' *Hard Times*, there is something disturbing about this final image. More than any other image in the cycle, here the Diors are completely out of sync with one another. The Wizard has become an angel, with harp and wings, and assumes a conventional pose of piety and resignation. The Mouth is recumbent in the position of an odalisque, but the sensual pleasure which that pose signifies is now impossible to imagine. Oliver, separated to the right on his own end of the cloud, holds the baby with the expression of a self-satisfied uncle. Gone is the moment of the Diors in active relation to one another. And then there is something disturbing about the symbolism of these two colours: the swimsuit is blood-red, while the white of cloud and clothing is white

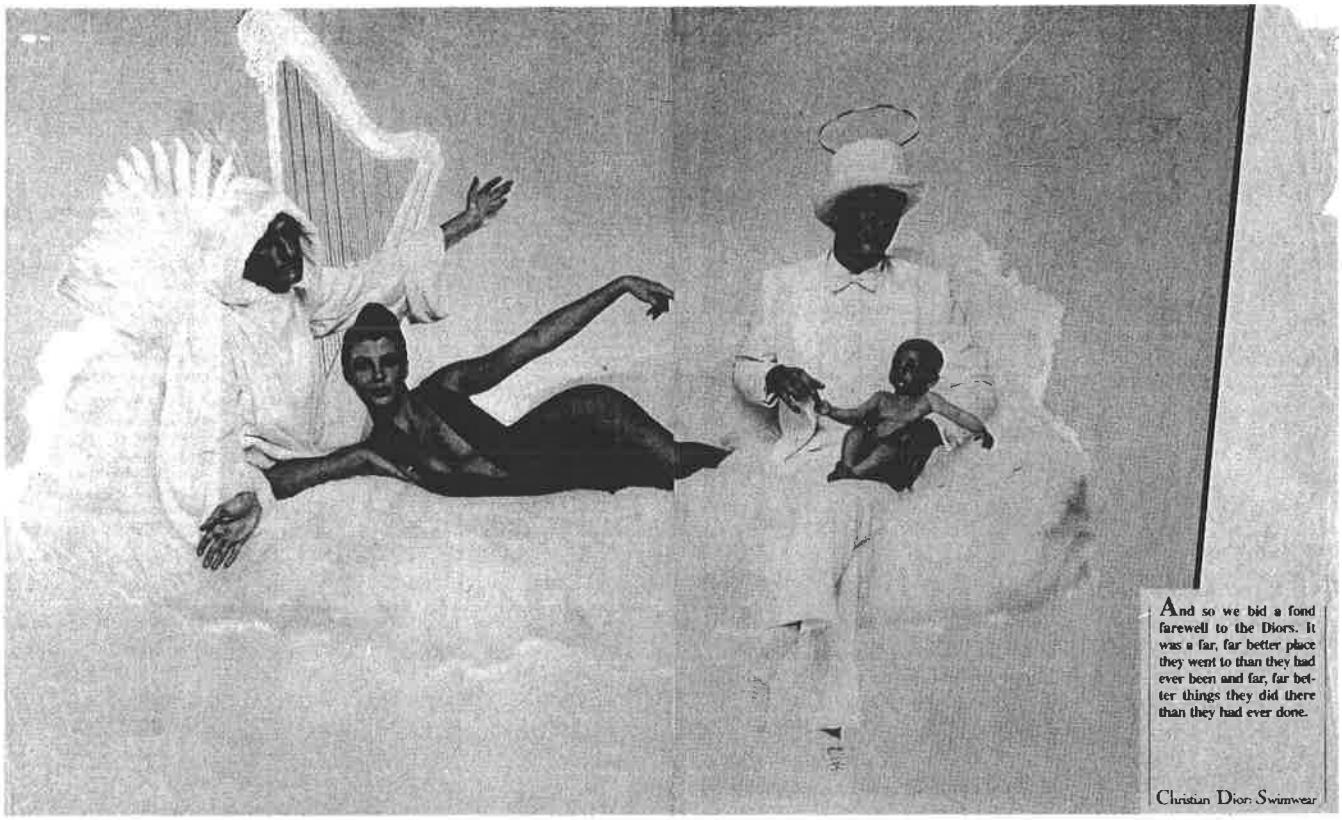

Figure 34.

as a death shroud. How does one explain the negativity of this position above the hectic flux and reflux of the civilization they have left below? I offer this hypothesis. If, as is often said, a person who knows he has a terminal disease responds by accelerating the speed of his life; and if the Diors are produced as the fast exemplars of capitalist exchange, precisely so as to accelerate the speed of purchase and exchange of commodities; then is it not appropriate that the Diors come to their final resting place on a cloud, a cloud that figures the nuclear mushroom cloud, that endlessly suppressed but never completely forgotten emblem of the terminal disease which menaces our culture? In the closing scene of this ad campaign, the Diors seem to be represented as the only 'survivors' of our civilization.

NOTES

1 – 'Advertising', *The New York Times*, 11 July 1983.
2 – *Newsweek*, 10 January 1983, p. 58. All subsequent citations of *Newsweek* refer to this article.
3 – Advertising Age, 19 September 1983, p. 36.
4 – I allude here to Marx's famous passage on the commodity fetish: 'To the [producer], therefore, the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things.' *Capital*, I, 4.
5 – Noel Coward, *Play Parade* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1933), p. xvii.
6 – Ibid., pp. xvi–xvii.
7 – Quoted from a WAP press release of 24 February 1983. My thanks to Frances Patai for granting the two telephone interviews from which her analysis has been extracted for this extended quote.
8 – J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), pp. 9–13.
9 – Upon this question, see Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985)
10 – See *Advertising Age*, 54 (19 September 1983), p. 36.
11 – Such a temporality approximates the Proustean preterite, which seems to be explicitly parodied in the text which accompanies an image where the Wizard is shown ordering a painting from Andy Warhol: 'When the Mouth was a litle girl she had asthma. She had to stay in bed and smoke long, black asthma cigarettes that the Wizard gave her. Oliver would race over after school to watch.'
12 – Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 132.
13 – *Newsweek*.

The advertisements reproduced in this essay originally appeared in the following publications;
Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 17: *Vogue*
Figures 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34: *New York Times Magazine*.