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**NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN**

**FACULTY OF DESIGN**

**DEPARTMENT OF FASHION AND TEXTILES**

*The Female Body in the '90s*

by

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## **Introduction**

The subject I choose to examine is the female body including various questions and observations on the phenomenon of changing its shape. I will examine how women change, why they change, what brings about that urge to change with special reference to the 'thin' ideal of the '90s. I will discuss the female body of the '90s and how we try to reach that through our lifestyles and/or how we present ourselves. Fashion is of course the main channel through which we present our bodies. The media, being the main disseminator of notions of the fashionable ideal is highly relevant to the attitudes women have towards their bodies in the '90s.

The degree to which eating disorders are widespread was brought to my attention through personal contact with girls and women suffering themselves. A common link between all the sufferers I met, whether anorexic, bulimic, or compulsive eaters was an obsession with their bodies. Weight and size were areas where their unhappiness about themselves was reflected in their efforts to change them.

Although body size is not always abnormal, never-the-less the sufferer is usually convinced that their bodies are 'wrong' which fuels their disorders. The disruption of their lives can be phenomenal. Sanity, family and their very lives can be put on the line. This observation, without being an expert on the area, makes me angry. I began questioning the facts and myths about women's bodies in an effort to source feelings and thoughts about it towards their bodies. My interest grew towards the areas of beauty, fashion and the media as I discovered astonishing details.

The female thinks about and considers her body as a beauty and fashion vehicle much more than she cares to imagine. Researching the female body in a social context at first established a basis for investigation on the female body of the '90s. Magazine and newspaper articles played a large part in research on the current climate in which the female body lives. Through statistical research and surveys I have tried to relate information about the female body of the '90s.



## CHAPTER 1

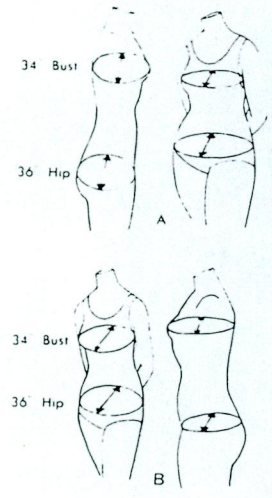
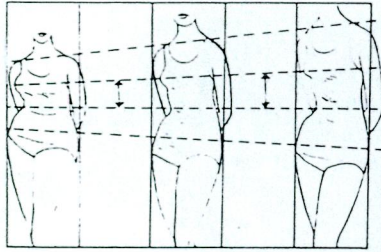
### **Female Dissatisfaction with her body**

The human body is a wonderful thing. Not only does it house organs, protect and work in harmony with them, but its multi-functional nature extends way beyond the biological aspect of life. It is a kaleidoscope of stories, statements and opinions that are communicated through its visual presentation. It tells others what gender we are, our race or nationality by its colour and shade, by its posture what mood we are in, by its actions what our capabilities are... the list goes on. It tells a never ending story. While male and female bodies are equally wonderful, it is the relationship between the female body and the female mind that is the subject I have chosen to discuss. I will be examining the female body's abilities and limitations to adapt her body to her mind's perception of how her body 'should' be. By asking questions like why women feel the need to change their bodies; what urges the female mind to have such strong opinions about how her body 'should' be; what is the ideal female body/bodies of the '90s... I hope to reveal some insight as to the deeply influential role of the mind, both others' and her own, on the female body.

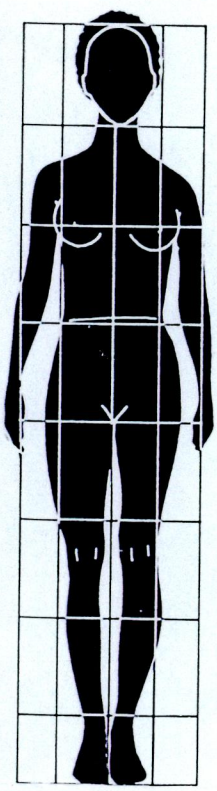
There are so many assets of the female body that are marvels of creation. For instance, nature offers her body the chance to change its form, shape and size by way of conceiving. It is during the nine months of pregnancy that features such as the stomach, breasts, hips and legs almost pulsate with a life of their own. While holding, feeding, nurturing and protecting her baby in her womb, her body shows extraordinary abilities to vary itself. Its ability to expand allows her form to spread to beautiful big proportions.

In its non-pregnant state, variety in the female form is still significant. Proportions can vary from woman to woman. [Illus. 1(a), 1(b), 1(c)]. Likewise distributions of fat vary and by gaining or losing weight these can be exaggerated or minimised. The contrast can be stark, with features varying from wonderfully doubled chins to cleanly formed chin and jaw lines; pot bellies to flat stomachs; cellulite-rippled arms to stick-like arms; rounded lumpy thighs to lean thighs... (Illus. 2). Their bodies achieve a certain shape according to personal metabolism rate, appetite, age and other natural mechanisms within their bodies (or simply according to their genetic blueprint). But one of the most interesting and highly influential deciding factors of all as far as our bodies are concerned, is the mind.





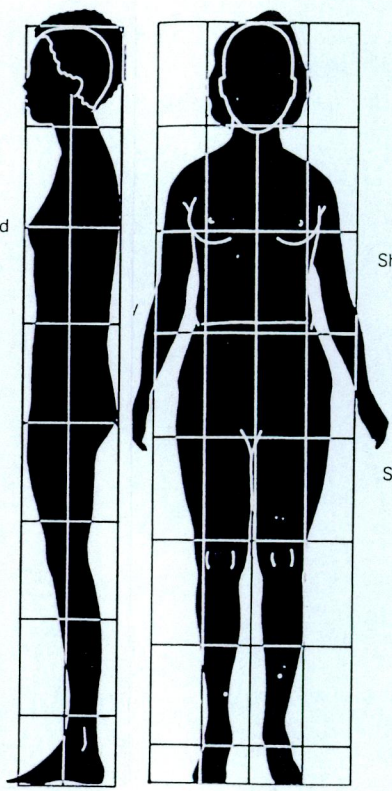
illus 1 (a)



Flat chested  
Long waist  
Long lower leg  
Bowed legs

$+7\frac{3}{4}$  heads

illus 1 (b)



High bust  
Short upper arm  
Protruding abdomen  
Short upper leg

$7\frac{1}{2}$  heads

illus 1 (c)

illus 2







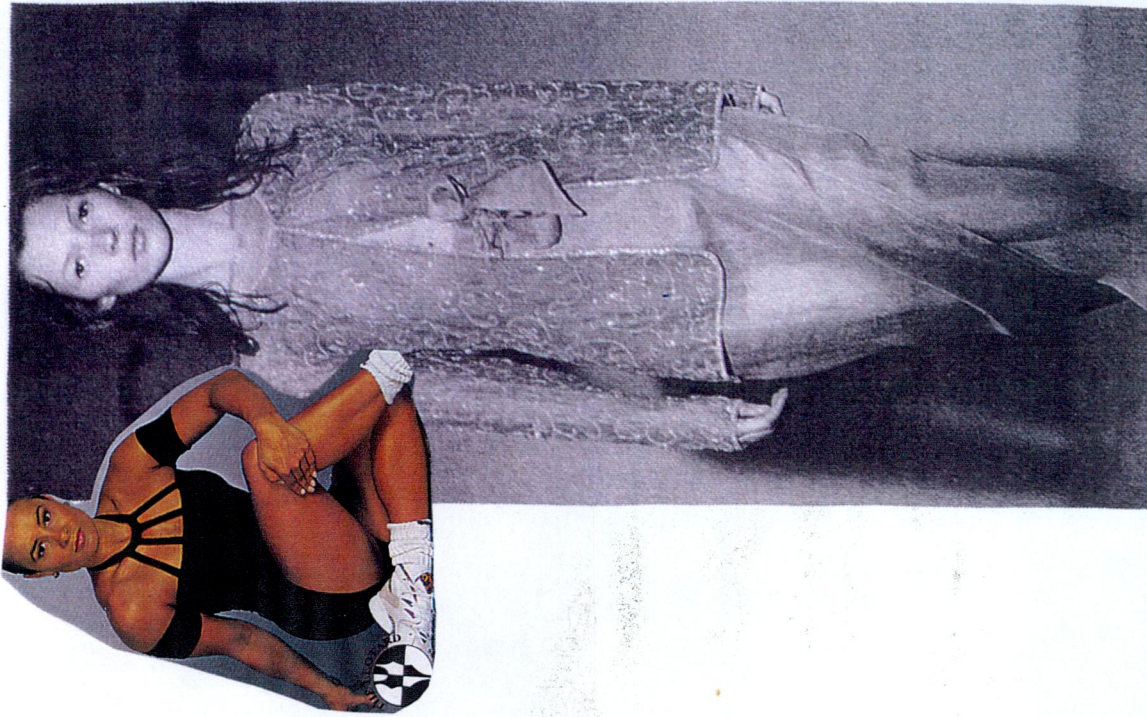
Despite the endless variety of form of the female body, women are rarely satisfied with their bodies. "Although the ideal of feminine beauty varies, certain demands remain the same; in particular to be feminine is to appear weak and docile". (Wolf, '90, P.151). Simple femininity does not seem to be enough to content the female with her body. It seems that it's the very uniquely feminine characteristics of her body that can cause her to be uncomfortable with her body. 'Does my bum look fat?' This is not an uncommon question for women to ask: the 'horrid' vision of big, strong, wide buttocks prompting this insecurity about her body. The curves on women's hips, thighs and buttocks are uniquely feminine. That's where excess weight tends to go. Some women believe it's Mother Nature playing a cruel trick on them, but there actually is a biological reason for it. Fat is an energy reserve women draw on during pregnancy and it's purposely difficult to remove as an added safety precaution. (Looks, Nov. '93, P.82).

"She has an irrepressible urge to change her body". (Buckroyd, '89, P.12). Why is this so? If we discuss female body ideals at first we can lead the way into gaining some insight as to the answer of this question. Female body ideals can be as diverse as those with the following traits... toned, muscular and lean, [Illus. 3(a)]; slim and delicate [Illus. 3(b)]; full and voluptuous, [Illus. 3(c)]; skinny and thin, [Illus. 3(d)]... The '90s in the western world allows room for many ideals. In a hurried conclusion, one might say then, that women should be relatively happy with their bodies because they have a wide range of ideals to choose from. However this is not the case.

Each ideal female body type, however, need not necessarily be equally popular. More exposure of a certain ideal than another simultaneously means more popularity. The 'thin' female body profusely exposed in the media today is widely sought after. Its presence in fashion articles, advertising and other facets of the media shows us the *ultimate* female body ideal of the '90s. A lot of women try and reach that ideal.

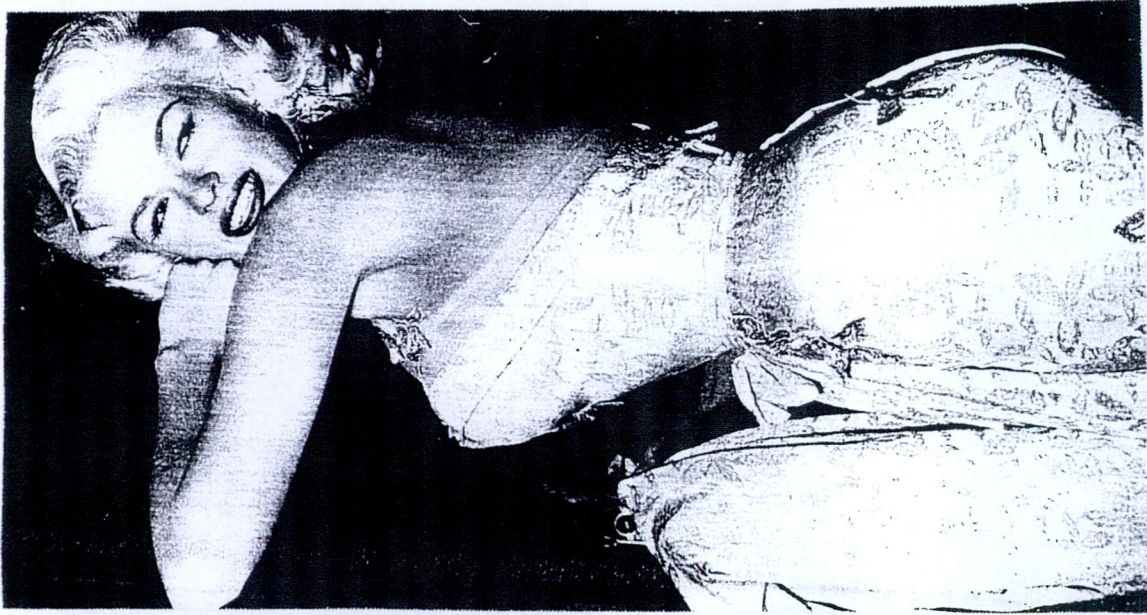
In a case study I conducted with a 21 year old woman, Jenny, an ex-sufferer of Anorexia, I discovered just how very *real* is the threat that the exposed 'ideal' can hold for some women.

"At 5ft. 6" I weighed in at 6 and half stone. I thought I was too fat so I refused to eat normally. I wanted to change my body size to a more 'acceptable' one. I don't think I would have been content with my body even if I was 4 stone. After all, 'the thinner the better', was how I viewed women in magazines."

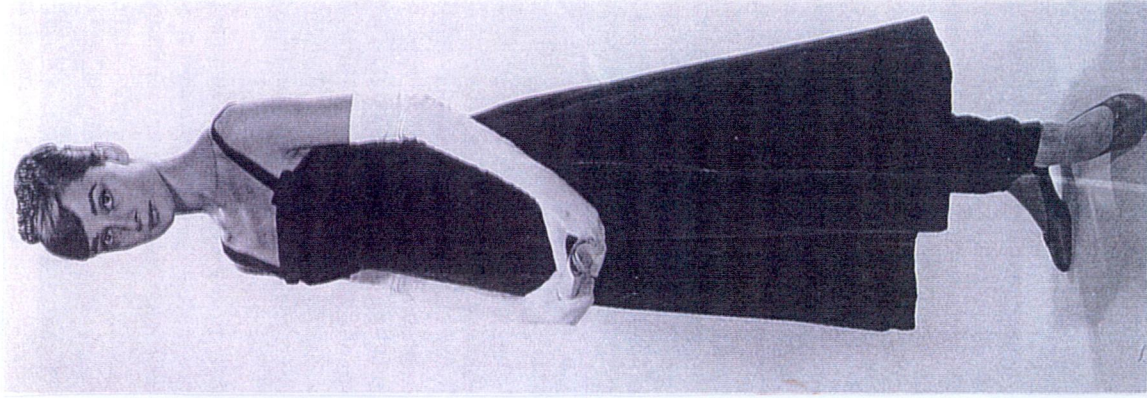


illus 3 (a)

illus 3 (b)



illus 3 (c)



illus 3 (d)



Although a warped vision of her body was really exaggerated by the psychological disease that Jenny suffered from, one of the elements that prompted the disorder in the first place was a longing to have a different body to the one she had. It is in human nature to search for assets we have not got, but when it comes to the body, the female seems particularly unsettled with what she has got and keen on what she has not. It may come down to her basic instinct to attract the opposite sex; to compete for attention from the opposite sex; to seek attention from the female sex; to win admiration for the most idyllic body. Who knows? Speculation is endless. Yes, the male too, can be accused of having similar instincts, but they are embedded in women deeply and poignantly.

This poignancy of women's basic instinct that her body is not good enough is deeply rooted in the mentality that 'she' is not good enough. Down through history, it is thought that her relationship with man has scarred her. "Compulsive eating in women is a response to their social position". (Orbach, '88, P.61). This response is not just confined to compulsive eating, but all that goes with it, like attitudes about the body, self and mind. Even though equality is a bigger issue than before, the scar is as evident as ever. If women rarely think that their bodies are 'right' or as 'beautiful' as they should be, what or who are they comparing them with that gives them such a clear, vivid beauty conscience? The ideal body is the answer. The 'ideal' female body currently being impressed on the public's minds is the slim, toned, lean, almost athletic body that we see on billboards, TV., magazines and newspapers (Illus. 4).

"Although personal, body image is actually a product of social interaction. It arises from the comments about and reactions to our appearance", (Polhemus, '88, P.7). Ideal female bodies abundantly surrounding us are perceived as 'comments' on our own bodies. Ordinary women use these comments not to compare but to contrast their own bodies with those of the models that surround them. Often, women's reaction to today's recurring comment of the thin body is to change their bodies to become thin. Diet, weight loss and exercise have become the tools of that change for many women. They have become synonymous with femininity itself. The importance of changing her form, shape, size and weight is reflected in this survey - "When researchers asked 33,000 American women what they most wanted out of life the majority chose losing 10-15 lbs over success in work or love". (Options, Oct. '91, P.57).



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We must consider the facts about the very real danger of this type of mentality. The gap between the real and the 'ideal' body has never been wider. "Nearly a third of all Americans are obese" (Time, Jan.8, '96, P.27). While the real body is alarmingly heavy, on the other hand the 'ideal' has become increasingly light-weight. "The weight of fashion models and beauty queens plummeted from 8% below that of the average woman, to the current nadir of 23% below in the past 25 years". (Options, Oct.'91, P.56). The scary thing is that women are trying to narrow this gap and it's proving to be more of a problem than the 'problem' itself. In Western countries, the occurrence of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia have recently shot through the roof. (Time, Jan.8, '96 P.28).

The most accessible of all tactics to become thinner is through diet. We can all choose what to eat and what not to eat and when to eat or not. Set-diets in magazines, health sheets and books prove to be popular. Martin Katahn's *Rotation Diet*, Rosemary Conley's *Hip and Thigh Diet*, Audrey Eyton's *F. Plan Diet* and *Easier F. Plan Diet* are all books on how to lose weight. Any new title has a good chance of appearing in the best-seller columns. "At any one time fifty per cent of women are either on a diet, about to start a diet or breaking a diet" (Wolf, '90, P.67). There are diets being produced, written, researched, all the time because the demand for them is there.

No other diet has caused as much a furore as Alan Howard's *Cambridge Diet* and the American *Liquid Protein Diet*. It offers a remarkable 330 calories a day. Associated products are on offer like soups, milk-shakes and desserts; each portion offering a mere 110 calories. Six deaths occurred (not surprisingly) in the early '50s after rigid use of this diet.

Women are serious about decisions to change their bodies. This is backed up by the ever growing nutrition, exercise and fitness industries. *Weight Watchers* has an exercise regime incorporated into women's lifestyles along with diet. "It has enrolled 8 million American women;... It has spread world-wide, with 37 million members entering twenty-four international cells over the past twenty-five years". (Wolf, '90, P.25). Fat has become such a bad word recently.

Perhaps synonymous with the 'F'-word of the female language, is the equally big, 'bad', 'bod', 'C'-word i.e. cellulite. Cellulite largely seems to be a feminine trait that follows excess fat wherever it goes. The backs and tops of the thighs, the bum and the general hip area seem to be common targets on the female body. It has basically the same





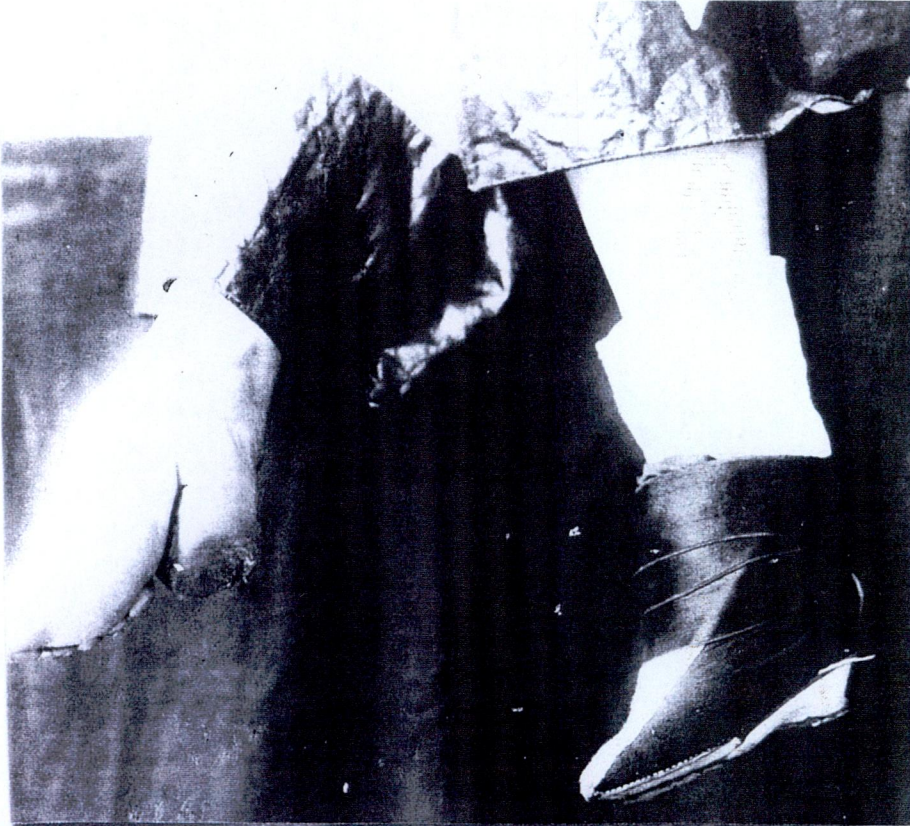
chemical make-up as fat, the only difference being its physical lay-down on the body, thus producing a rippled effect under the skin. Ongoing research is relaying information through magazines. 'Eat more fruit and less junk food' is the type of advice given. Products to 'counteract' cellulite are being recommended by beauty experts. For instance, *The Clairol Cellutherapy* is a hand-held gadget that messages bumpy bits of the body. Creams like *Vichy Contour Refining Cream*, *Elancyl MP24 Specific*, *Dior Svelte*,... are being successfully sold. When Christian Dior launched *Dior Svelte*, it sold an incredible one million units in three months in Britain alone. (Looks, Nov., P.82).

Specific exercises are actively employed to reshape ugly features. For instance persistent 'tummy curls' can tone and tuck one's tummy into a much more desirable flatter form. Leg exercises can reduce the size of the common female failing - large thighs. Some upper body exercises claim to increase the size of the bust while chanting rhythmically, "I must, I must, I must increase my bust"!! Whether we want to increase or (usually) decrease or tone the body there is an abundance of exercises to choose from. The body as a whole can be lightened or toned through exercise like jogging, swimming, walking or sport; whether women like to do these or not, may be irrelevant to those determined to lose weight.

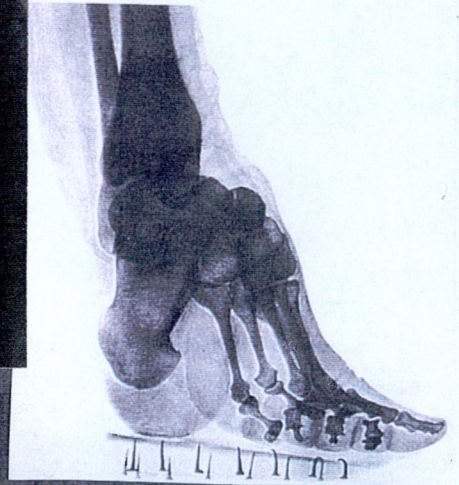
For as long as history can trace, women have put up with discomfort, even pain, to change their bodies. They have attempted, succeeded and failed to change the sizes of their breasts, hips, tummies, bottoms, thighs. Few features have remained untouched. Many of the ways in which they changed their bodies could be described as torture. (Illus. 5). Chinese women bound their feet, despite creating difficulty in walking, partially because the remoulded foot was considered beautiful. Today, although banned in some areas, binding is still practised. Although we have advanced in many ways, we have not got over this crazy pursuit of the perfect body.

Hundreds of young women are prepared to lay down their comfort and happiness in order to have the perfect body of the '90s. Lives are even sacrificed when the ultimately 'ideal' body 'the thin body' is sought after until there is nothing left, which happens in some cases of anorexia. "Catherine Dunbar died in 1988 at 22 from a refusal to eat" (Dunbar, '90). An extraordinary behavioural pattern emerges which proves that human psychology is not as straight-forward as one may think, certainly in the endless race for a 'perfect' body.





illus 5





The battle with our bodies has clearly been waged not simply to enhance our appearance but to transform it quite radically, sometimes beyond recognition. The individual is no longer recognisable as 'her natural self' but as one of many designed bodies. All societies have a tendency "towards the neutralisation of physical differences. We're advancing towards a future age where bodies are cloned to identical, assembly-line perfection". (Polhemus, '88, P.12). Beauty contests illustrate this fact (Illus. 6). Therefore if we ask the question what is the ideal female body? We can eliminate my body and indeed your body; in a sense it is our body- a shared idea of a body but it may hardly belong to any specific woman. This fact makes it increasingly difficult for women who don't have designer bodies to come forward with confidence. It's easier for some women to keep their bodies as something between herself and the bathroom mirror.









## CHAPTER 2

### The urge and effort to create a 'perfect' body

What is beauty? Down through history many theories and solutions have been suggested but still it is not possible to give a clear-cut answer. It was thought variously to have been 'instinctive', 'mathematically perfect', 'a wavy line', 'perfect symmetry', 'slightly imperfect'... It is none or maybe all of these. The fact is, beauty cannot be summed up into a formula. Beauty has many facets in a divided <sup>world.</sup> Its form depends on what country, culture and era one lives in. Ideals of beauty can be so diverse that we conclude that they are largely trained into us by the society in which we live. [Illus. 6(a),6(b)]. Take these illustrations focusing on two women from different cultures and their methods of beautifying themselves. The primitive eastern tribe's beauty ideal is very different to that of the western world.

However one thing that remains constant about beauty is that it has been, is and always will be a positive trait; an asset, if you like. What do we know about assets? They are things after which are widely and intensely sought. 'Beauty' does not escape this characteristic, especially when we refer to our bodies. Within the prevailing definitions in the western world of the '90s, women embark on a journey of beautifying themselves. I will consider the female body and how she tries to enhance, improve or change it. With questions like, what is the 'ideal' female beauty of the '90s? who do women look to for beauty guidelines? why do women beautify themselves? I will shed some light on the illusive, ever fluctuating meaning of beauty within that context.

To be physically beautiful has a dual purpose, one lying in society and the other in ourselves. 'Looking good' is seen as a boost to one's ego and a means of enhancing self-confidence. It also "provides a way of making others feel better, as such, a gesture of politeness. Careless appearance or the unwillingness to take pains to enhance one's appearance was felt to be rude". (Rubinstein, '95, P.164). "We identify objects as being beautiful if they are the focus of admiration and give pleasure to the generality of beholders". (Marwick, '88, P.157). For whatever reasons, it seems that it is of the utmost importance to most women today that they look most beautiful. As Harry C. Bredemeier and Jackson Toby (1960) explained, the existence of socio-cultural standard implies that some people are found wanting. Social standards are internalised even by persons who are





illus 6(a) , 6(b)





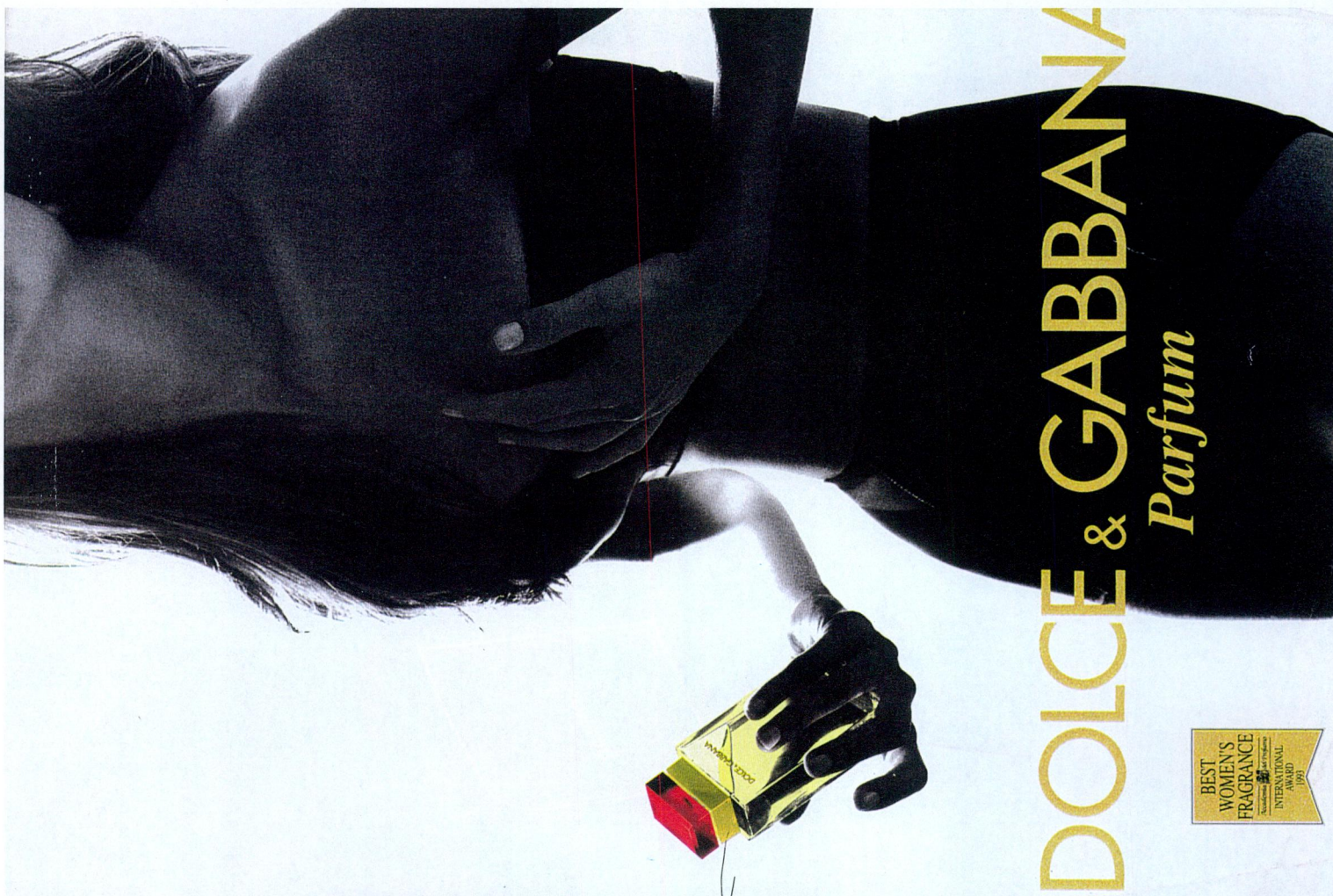
“substandard”. Social rejection goes hand in hand with self-rejection. (Rubinstein, '95, P.165).

We are constantly being reminded of beauty, especially female beauty, by the increasing exposure of models, pin-up girls, television celebrities, famous people etc. Take for instance the fashion model, the epitome of physical beauty, and her recent rise to celebrity status through media exposure. Corresponding with the decline of fashion illustration (which was still in selective use in the sixties, but by the end of the seventies was phased out) was the development in the photographic techniques and lighting [Illus. 7(a),7(b)]. Unsightly blemishes, hairs, shadows, bumps and other surface irregularities of the human dermas could be smoothed away leaving the subject with an overall matt (or gloss) finish, while light shot from a large surface area blasted every detail from the face (except the luminous mouth and dazzled eyes) and reduced the nose to two delicate apostrophes. (Illus. 8). Not only can photography beautify bodies and features but combined with computer skills ‘ultimate’ ideal beauties can be manipulated into existence. Colour can be enhanced, forms shaven down to perfect size or proportion, blemishes hidden etc. The model has eclipsed the illustration. With this standard of beauty the model recedes from recognisable humanity towards being an artefact or a thing.

The more idyllic a woman is the more she is pushed into the limelight. Increasingly, models are on show. For example Cindy Crawford as interviewer at the M.T.V. Awards, Iman on a mercy mission to her native Ethiopia, Jerry hall as compere at the Royal Society Arts Fair. (H.&Q. International, Nov. '93, P.98). 'Beauty' is the common asset of models and so examining their bodies may help us define beauty in the context of the western world of the '90s. (Illus. 9). Their 'ideal' bodies are tall, well and evenly proportioned, young, slim and toned with pretty or attractive faces (Illus. 10). They are rarely aged, badly proportioned, hairy, rough-skinned; with sagging breasts or fat bottoms, for instance. These are perceived as 'ugly' features. The average female body is hardly ever perfectly proportioned. The saddest thing of all is that the 'freak' bodies of female models are considered by many, as how women's bodies should be. Your body and my body are not considered by society for what they have, but what they do not have. No matter how unattainable, we strive to make our bodies look more like models'.

Has it always being this way? Have there always been body ideals that were held in such high esteem? The answer is no. "In the first decade of the century for example a

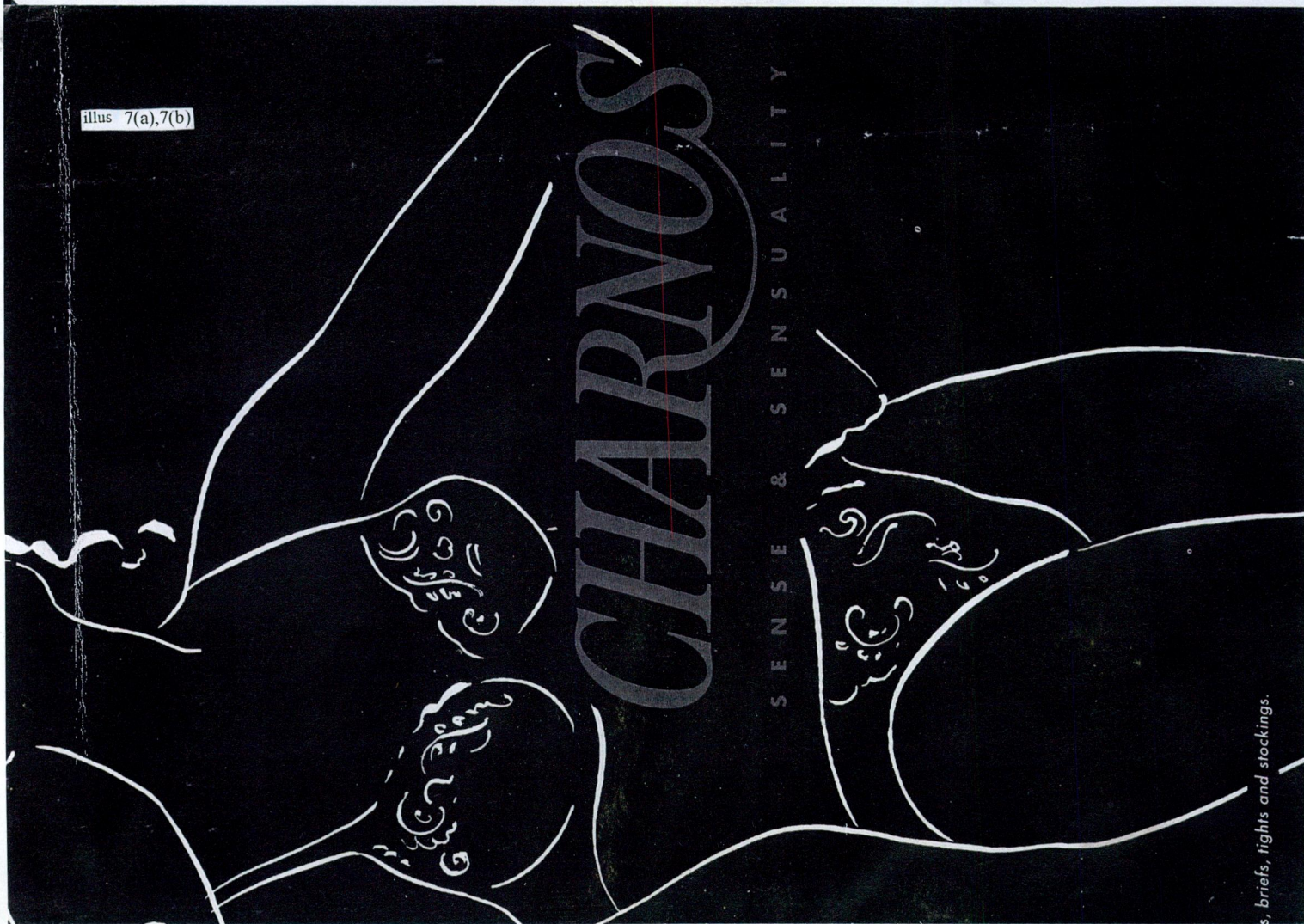




# DOLCE & GABBANA *Parfum*



Distributor EuroItalia U.K. C/O P.A.L. Management Services LTD. Balnath Manor South Chalfey Lewes Sussex BN5 4AP England Photo: Steven Meier



illus 7(a),7(b)

s, briefs, tights and stockings.







Illus. 8

Photo : Pierre Ber  
Maquillage : Thit  
pour Lancôme. M  
Définicils Noir Pr  
à paupières : On  
Sculpture. Fond a  
Maquimat Ivoire,  
majeure Transluci  
lèvres : "Rouge A  
Beige Perle", Styl  
des yeux "Noir N



model was less skilled than a seamstress, but more respectable than a prostitute". (H.&Q. International, Nov.'93, P.97). Before women's emancipation, professional beauties were usually anonymous, low in status, disreputable. (Wolf, '90, P.27). I'm sure we would never have thought that one day we would be "model-worshippers" (H.&Q. International, Nov.'93, P.98), and that we would be pondering whether it is true that we could all look like Cindy Crawford if only we only dieted, exercised and spent enough. Or indeed, that famine, flood and massacre would have been elbowed off the front page, to make room for Linda Evangelista's thrilling new bob! This is only a small indication of how much beauty has to play in society today. The measures women personally take to make themselves beautiful are even more shocking.

If we look at cosmetic surgery we see just how shocking it can be. Zoe Robinson, 32, had rhinoplasty (nose job) in 1988 to remove a rather insignificant bump on the bridge of her nose. "I would be very bruised for 2 to 6 weeks and swollen for up to 6 months". (She, Nov.'95, P.156), [Illus. 11(a)]. Another girl described the recovery period after liposuction on her tummy. "I was very uncomfortable for four days, but the worst part was wearing a corset day and night for 4 weeks, no heavy lifting for 3 months, I was swollen for 8 weeks. It was 6 months before seeing the final result". (She, Nov.'95, P.154), [Illus. 11(b)]. The pain and discomfort of the recovery period combined with the actual graphic knowledge preceding surgery of the details and the risks involved shows just how passionate some women are about changing their bodies. "He would make an incision around my hairline and cut out all the excess baggy skin and fat and pull the remaining skin up before stitching the skin back together". (She, Nov.'95, P.155).

On a much more accessible level, the length women go to become beautiful can be just as shocking as cosmetic surgery. Most diets in magazines and health sheets offer women about 1,000 calories a day. Millions of women attempt this type of caloric restriction at some or indeed many stages of life. This is enough energy to barely survive. In India, one of the poorest countries in the world, even the poorest women eat around 1,400 calories a day. Is it logical that women in the Western World should be limiting their food intake to such a degree? At Treblinka, one of the most horrific Nazi death camps, 900 calories was scientifically determined to be the minimum amount necessary to keep a human being alive. This type of self-starvation, if pursued can psychologically disrupt the mind. (Options, Oct.'91, P.58). So we see women of today in a society of plenty become





Illus. 9



Illus. 10

A bump removed from the bridge of the nose (below); a hooked nose straightened (bottom).



Illus. 11(a)



Illus. 11(b)



diet addicts and letting fear of fat actually change the way they live their lives. We are all joining in the beauty/weight mania. Few women can eat a high calorie food and not think twice about it even though it's completely natural.

Why are supermarket shelves overflowing with diet drinks, sugar-free sugar, low-fat dairy products, low-calorie sweets and in recent years fat-free biscuits and snacks of all descriptions? [Illus. 12(a),12(b)]. Many shoppers today are armed with lists of low-fat/calorie foods, that's why. So fruitful is the area of low-fat foods for food producing companies, that recently Procter & Gamble, an American food company, has invested \$200 million in developing, studying and testing a new fat-free fat called "Olestra". (Time, Jan.8,'96, P.27). It was estimated that in '92, £1 billion was spent on slimming products in Britain alone. Dieting was the fifth largest industry in the US - \$50 billion was spent there in '92. (Marie Claire, Sept. '93, P.116). However, these types of products are not the way forward towards fat-free bodies. Lost-out calories are regained when premature hunger strikes - our bodies are not as easily deceived as we think!

Exercising the body helps keep it supple, firm, slim, healthy... and all the characteristics typically associated with beauty. The ultimate beautiful body of the '90s is something on which is worked. This work can be pleasurable or otherwise. It can be exercise in the form of sport, aerobics, dance, swimming, callinetics... To usher us on and help us "shape up", "loose the fat", "tone and tighten those muscles", "shed pounds" (as in advertisements and articles) magazines show us beautiful women doing exercises to make us feel less stupid looking. Media personalities like Cher, Jane Fonda, (Illus. 13), and Cindy Crawford show us how our bodies can be beautiful like theirs if we sacrifice the time to work-out every day repeatedly with their videos. Despite the expense of it all, growing bored and feeling very stupid, we persist at trying achieve a beautiful body.

Why are we so determined to be 'beautiful'? The explanation could lie in the history of women's role in society. "By the 1980's, when women had breached the power structure, beauty was no longer just a symbolic form of currency; it literally became money" (Wolf, '90, P.22-21). From this derived such sayings: "You look like a million dollars"; "She's a first class beauty "; "Her face is a fortune". Money was/is closely related to power. Women realised this, and so by having 'beauty', they *were* rich and powerful. In the '60s large numbers of educated, middle-class, young women began working in cities. "Beauty was being extremely widely institutionalised as a condition for women's hiring







illus 12(a)



illus 12(b)



illus 13



and promotion". (Wolf, '90, P.27). "By '72 'beauty' was ruled to be something that could legally gain or lose women their jobs." (Wolf, '90, P.32). "National Airlines Fired Stewardess, Ingrid Foe, Because She Was 'Too Fat' - 4 Pounds Over The Line." (Wolf, '90, P.33), read a headline in one particular American journal in the late '60s.

The proof was in the headline; a girl had to be beautiful to be a success. Today in '96, that mentality is still with us. The emphasis on female body beauty abounds. Women try to have 'beautiful' bodies to feel 'approved' by society. But one thing we do have to remember is that the basis on which that 'approval' stands is such a temperamental one. Apart from changing from age to age, fashion to fashion, culture to culture; it is based in the mind. We all have the potential to be beautiful or ugly: it depends on the minds' eye. "Beauty is not a quality in things themselves, it exists merely in the mind that contemplates them, and each mind perceives a different beauty". [Scottish Philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776)].

Women can control and manipulate certain aspects of Beauty, but some remain uncontrollable. The Master of Beauty that cannot be touched is "Age". Today, Beauty is youth and youth is beautiful. Women may try to counteract the ageing process and its effects on the body but they can only ever try and not fully succeed. Once youth goes, what is left? An 'unfashionable' body, according to female body standards of the '90s. What is the battle against women's bodies for then, if this master of life itself is guaranteed victory?

"Did Quattrocento finger fashion it  
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind  
And to a mess of shadows for its meat?  
And I though never of Leaden kind  
Had pretty plumage once".

William Butler Yeats (1871-1957)

*Among School Children*



## CHAPTER 3

### Fashion and the Body

Clothing exists for many purposes. (a) It protects us from the weather, (b) it's a form of self-adornment and (c) it fulfils a desire to be socially accepted. Its utilitarian value is obviously important, but more crucial on other levels are the personal and social aspects of clothing. From earliest civilisation, body decoration, not modesty or indeed even protection, was the first priority of dress. Apparel was embellished with feathers, shells, animal horns and skins to make basic clothing appear more attractive. On parts of the body that were not covered, painting, piercing or scarification may have been performed. Aesthetic appreciation and status were the main considerations when cladding the body. So it is today. Fashion and appearance plays a huge part in our dress.

"Ornamental values of clothing that provide aesthetic experiences and sensuous satisfactions in the individual's search for beauty". (Horn & Gural, '84, P.35). As discussed earlier, perceptions of beauty have a large part to play in how women's bodies are. Dress is a more tangible influence on a body's 'look'. It's how we relay perceptions of beauty to society. Not only do we try to control our body's appearance by what goes into it and what we put it through, but also what goes onto it. Broadly it's referred to as fashion. Fashion is an instrument that we can all dabble in. In fact it's part of our socially aware upbringing to adhere to fashion. It makes us feel good when we wear clothing that's 'fashionable' and that makes our bodies 'acceptable'. We consider materials, shapes, colours, ... when we indulge in the aesthetics of fashion. We choose clothes that will make us beautiful to others by the way that they compliment our complexions, body shape or size, hair or eye colour... or to ourselves by the way they compliment our lifestyles and our personal social circles.

Fashion is a form of body design. "For thousands of years, dress has produced myriad of ways of making a woman (or a man) look fatter or thinner, taller or smaller,...what you will". (Binder, '86, P.139). Certain colours, cuts, sizes and accessories can deceive the eye. Black can make a person look slimmer. Skinny people might wear loose clothing since it tends to hide a bony body. (Illus. 14). Layers can give the impression of body bulk. High heels are worn by women to create the illusion of long legs. Sloping shoulders of clothes make the neck look longer. Some bigger bodies tend to wear



scaled up or  
downsized,  
jackets and  
pants acquire a  
new sense of  
proportion



too big/  
too small

Jumbo jeans and a shirt  
balance the finest hour.  
ble-breasted jacket.  
Pants by Tag Flare, \$60.  
Jacket by Pierre Sued by  
Physical Aimer, \$695.  
Shirt by Brooks Brothers,  
\$70. Sneakers by  
Common AS Star, \$65.  
Hut by White & Snow,  
\$120. Shrug by Gimme-  
ter, NYC suspenders.  
Hair, these four pieces  
by Serge Normant for  
Orbis at Elizabeth Ar-  
den; makeup by Bobbi  
Brown for Frederic-  
Fehai at Bergdorf-  
Goodman. For details,  
stores, see SHOP.

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tight clothing visualising the flesh being pressed in thereby giving the impression of a slimmer body. Busts are made look fuller with padded bras. Hips can be hidden by wearing long jumpers or skirts. Whatever the theories are, whether they are true or not, clothes provide us with a chance to practise them. Everybody has access to create illusions to change, enhance or hide certain parts of the body.

"Fashion is an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings". (Barnes & Eicher, '92, P.15). Fashion can make the body talk. Fashion is a statement in itself. We can choose the statement our clothes make, by choosing a certain image or look. Clothing makes statements about gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity and class. In a divided society of all these areas, these statements are a type of evaluation of position in society. Although we all like to be individual in what we wear and in the personality we portray through our fashion statement, we like to 'fit in' as well. It may seem contradictory, but the truth is that we do not like being too different. Despite the tendency to want to be original, we subconsciously feel the need to wear uniforms. A business woman for instance would not be taken so seriously if she were to wear a flowery, 'floaty' mini-dress, for example. Just as scholar who usually has to wear a uniform, might feel that he/she would not make friends if he/she breached the code of dress. There are certain unspoken rules about what's 'right' and what is not. Social acceptability is the human's all, and uniforms, conventional or otherwise, ensure that we 'fit in'.

When we look at women and fashion of today we see that 'fitting in' takes on a whole new meaning. The stereotypically beautiful woman is thin and small-breasted. At least this is what we see when we flick through many fashion/women's magazines. (Illus. 15). Fashionable clothing is draped over the '90's 'ideal' body which allows them to hang as they will without interference from bodily bulges or bulk. Thus, the 'look of the '90s' created. This 'look' has merged the body with clothing. Women who don't have such 'freakishly' thin bodies feel awkward and somehow inadequate when it comes to a lot of fashion in the '90s.

"I adore the neat modest Pradaesque clothes now in fashion: clothes that look heavenly on girls with salt-cellar clavicles, pin-prick breasts and skinny arms. Being broad-shouldered, big-breasted and slim-hipped, I am neither neat nor a modest shape". (Vogue, Nov.'95, P.182).





illus 15



When Bromton (author) bought a "skimpy little top and knee-length skirt", she disappointingly admitted "I looked sad and matronly". She took them back! (Vogue, Nov.'95, P.182).

In the agony columns of women's magazines questions like: "Can I wear hipsters even if my legs are not of Nadja proportions" are common. This particular question from a reader was answered: "the more extreme versions can make your body appear longer and your legs seem shorter. The trick is not to go too low on the hips and then you can get away with it". (Vogue, Nov.'95, P.14). From this, one can gather lots of information about the fashionable female body of the '90s. For instance, the longer the legs and the smaller the waist is, the easier it is to get away with current high fashion which, on the whole, seeks to reveal the body as much as social convention will allow.

Why do women go to great lengths to be in fashion?. Women dress fashionably to impress. Who are women out to 'get away with it' from or to impress? This impression is targeted towards many people and things.

"Every woman in the world dresses, first and foremost for the fat police. Neither fashion nor social convention nor the desire to get a leg over are as ingrained in the female psyche as the fear of fat. Everyone has days, when that jacket in the wardrobe looks like a badly upholstered sofa. Then there's a desperate rummage through the closet for anything that looked reasonable". (Vogue, Nov.'95, P.181).

So we see that fashion is strongly connected with beauty, at least one's perception of beauty. It's pointless considering one without the other because they're symbiotic. "Fashion in beauty are only arbitrary signs in the language of fashion: taken together they signify change and progress; but on their own they are as empty of meaning as are individual letters of the alphabet". (Polhemus,'88, P.19). Doob (1961) took this a step further. He identified dress as both direct body changes and items added to the body. He considered changes in appearance as changes *of* the body and changes *on* the body. (Barnes & Eicher,'92, P.18).

We can clearly see their symbiotic relationship when we observe fashion since the introduction of lycra. Body-clinging clothes became the height of fashion. Evening wear became, not only slinky but, skin-tight. (Illus. 16). With nowhere to hide bulges, women's



illus 16







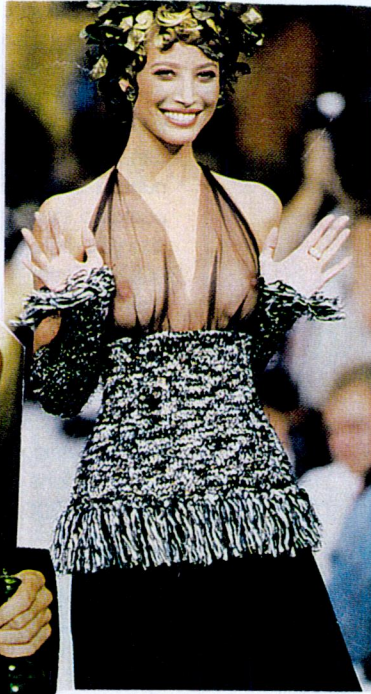
bodies became fashion. Designers pushed this theme even more by incorporating transparent materials such as nylon and polyester into their clothes. [Illus. 17(a), 17(b)]. Now in the '90s, the 'clingier' and tighter the better as far as high-fashion goes. Simultaneously with the rise in popularity of aerobics and 'working-out', came the introduction of these new stretch-fabrics into comfortable styles like the leotard, unitard, bra-top and cycling shorts. "The attire encourages restraint in the consumption of food. It makes long, well-toned legs, a current fitness ideal, highly visible". (Rubenstein, '95, P.101). The way these clothes hug the body permits critical views of all muscles of the body. [Illus. 17(c)].

If we take the ideal beauty in the '90s as the skinny, 'waiflike' shape of models, we can automatically eliminate 'ideal beauty' from ordinary women's bodies i.e. the 'imperfect' bodies with more flesh than 'allowed'. Does this mean that the larger females cannot dress fashionably in the '90s and feel as 'good' as any model-like figure might? It may if fashion designers of the '90s only design with the smaller figure <sup>in mind</sup>. Calvin Klein was once quoted as saying "I don't want women bigger than size 12 wearing my clothes". (Ligget, '89).

However there are a number of designers who design with real female bodies in mind. Eric Bergère is one of those. A Parisian designer he is said to have "women's interests at heart" and to be "the kindest and most considerate designer around". "Girls suffer if they are bigger, so I decided to base the collection around the trapeze - it's a no-problem silhouette". (Illus. 18). The idea being that the slim design just beneath the bust flares out covering a multiple of 'sins'. (Vogue, Jan. '96, P.59).

Of course there should be no reason why fat bodies 'should' be covered but the 'ideal' female body has a stronger hold on fashion than we think. A compromise is called for. Rather than letting fashion dictate what sort of bodies women 'should' have, why not let the bodies themselves dictate fashion. Hence we see that everyone can be fashionable, whatever the size. Fashion can be real bodies' 'friend' not 'foe'. The more pages like (Illus. 19), the friendlier fashion will be for everyone.



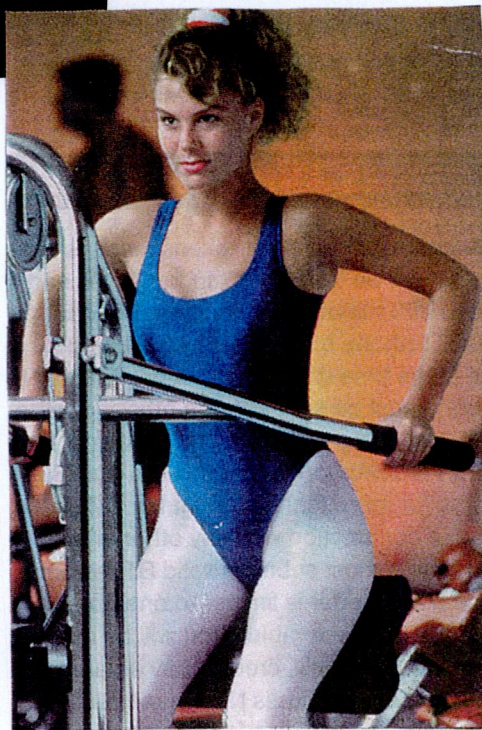


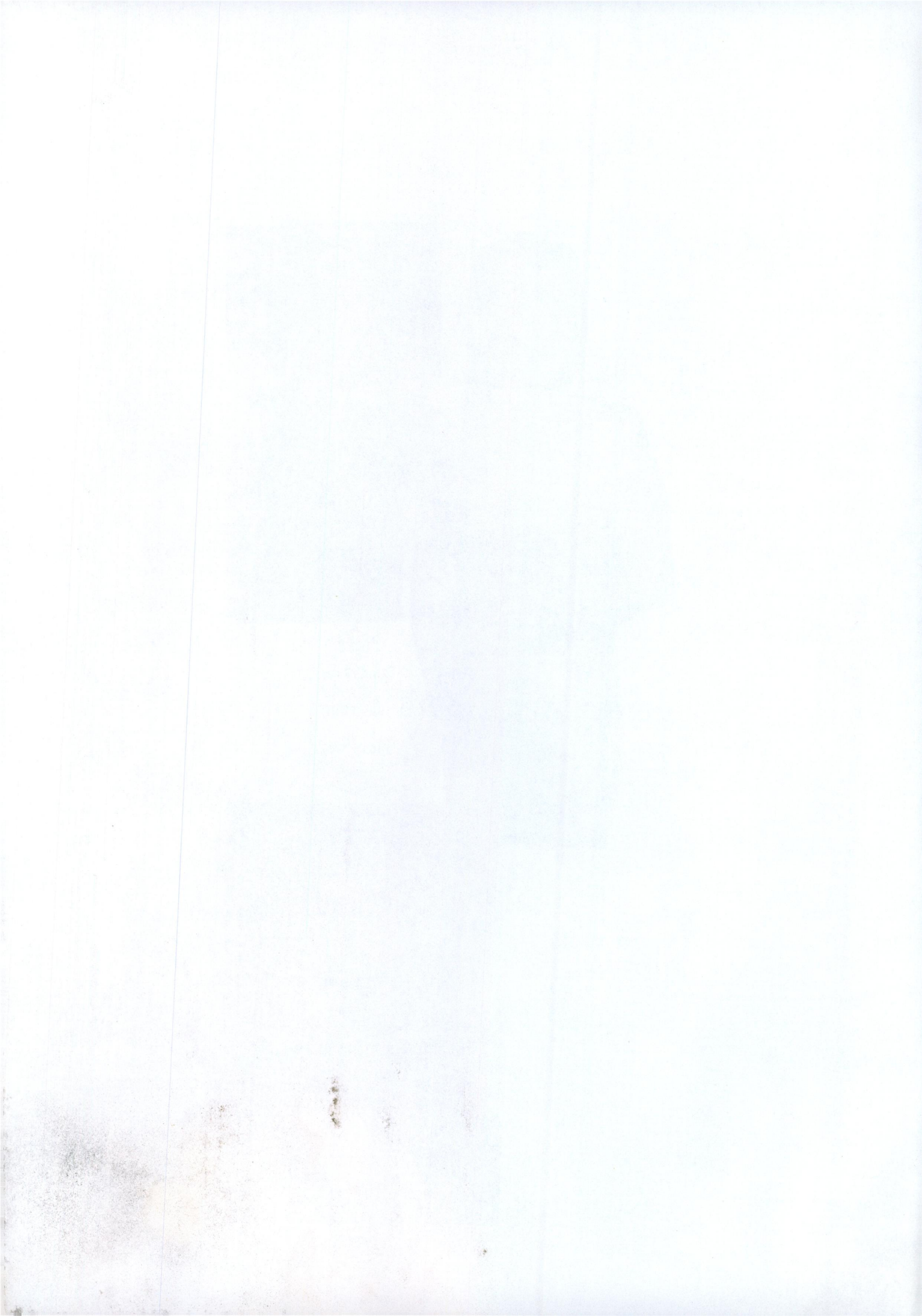
illus 17 (a)



illus 17 (b)

illus 17 (c)

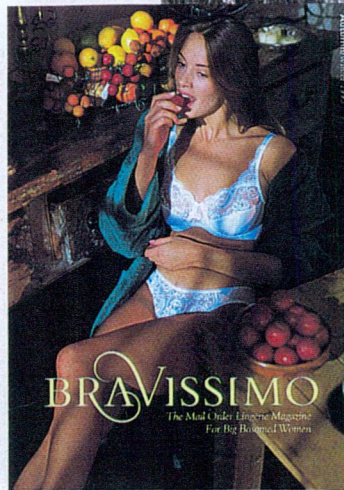




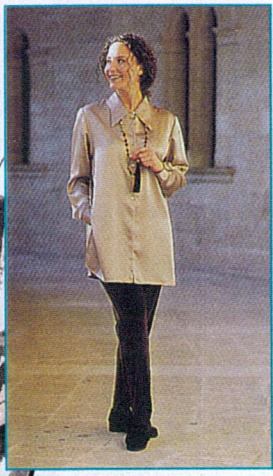
# Big IDEAS

## Beautiful bodies

"Bravissimo" - the mail-order magazine for those with big breasts - offers a comprehensive range of bras, undergarments and bodies - some in H cups - from leading manufacturers. Clear instructions are given, and you can also order personalised gift vouchers. Tel: 0181-741 2277 for your copy.



Take a tip from Anita Ekberg in *La Dolce Vita* and flaunt that cleavage!



Illus. 19

## Suits you!

The nipped-in waist skirt suit is the biggest look this season, but don't underestimate the fashion power of trouser suit. Long-line jackets and wide-leg trousers are the flattering choice for fuller figure. Jacket £99.99, trouser £59.99, Anne Harvey (01582 2313)



## Big on style

Successful Welsh designer Ceri Williams (standing) is the creative force behind a new mail-order fashion collection, Scarlet Direct, which she describes as "stylish and contemporary with a high fashion content - for sizes 16-26." The brochure is the brainchild of Sue Maddix (sitting) and features beautifully simple and well-cut pieces in gorgeous fabrics. Call 0181-741 2277 for a free copy.

By Pam Williams



## CHAPTER 4

### **Media Message: Thin is Beautiful and Successful**

Endless visual images, show us women whose sexual success, attractiveness, wealth, leisure, youth and fame seem to be associated with being 'thin'. 'Thin' is not just a physical state of the female body of the '90s, it seems to be a state of mind, being, esteem and success. The media is largely responsible for this current mentality. Singers, dancers, actresses, models, supermodels, nobility and those stereotypically associated with thin bodies are being exposed more and more by television, newspapers, magazines and billboards. The successful women who look good, prove themselves to be very popular with the press. We're swallowing this whole, and unfortunately 'looking good' and 'success' in the '90s is largely synonymous with a sleek body.

Take for instance, actresses. How many successful large female actresses spring to mind? Few if any. Our screens and magazines are filled with long-legged blondes; Kim Basinger, Michelle Pfeiffer, [Illus. 20(a)], Melaine Griffith, Sharon Stone; slim, tall brunettes like Nicole Kidman and Julia Roberts, [Illus. 20(b)] and elegant, dark-haired women like Demi Moore, Andie Mc Dowell to name but a few. In a recent survey, "Six actresses on the up", (RTE Guide, Jan.13-19 '96, P.60), all have common characteristics of being attractive and slim: Kate Winslet, (Sense and Sensibility), Alicia Silverstone, (Clueless), Julia Ormond, (Legends of the Fall), Thandie Newton, (Flirting), Gwyneth Paltrow (Seven) and Minnie Driver (Circle of Friends), [Illus. 21(a),(b),(c),(d),(e),(f)].

Many models whether capable of acting or not, "usually the latter", enter the movie world. Despite "the many untraversable differences between acting and modelling", (H.&Q., Nov.'93, P.98), models are increasingly becoming actresses e.g. Grace Jones, (Illus.22), Andie Mc Dowell, Cindi Crawford, Naomi Campbell and others. It seems that acting is becoming more of a beauty business rather than a talent area.

Like actresses, it is unusual for successful, famous, female personalities to be overweight. If they are they tend to get bad publicity about their size. Take this cartoon of the Duchess of York (Fergie), [Illus. 23(a)], which appeared in a magazine shortly after the scandalous "toe-sucking" affair. It clearly degrades her once-royal public image to that of a page three girl, by using a cartoon of her scantily-clad, curvaceous body. This is the type of pressure that the media exerted on the Duchess to lose weight, by making a



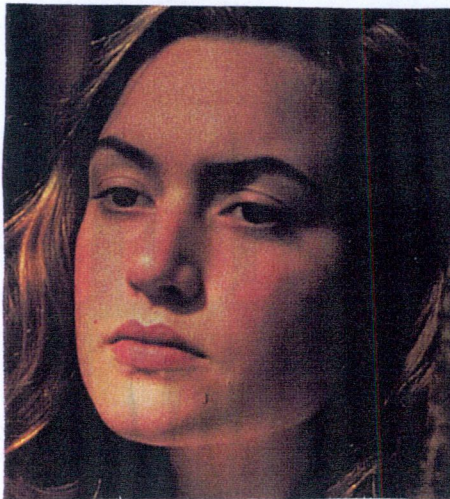




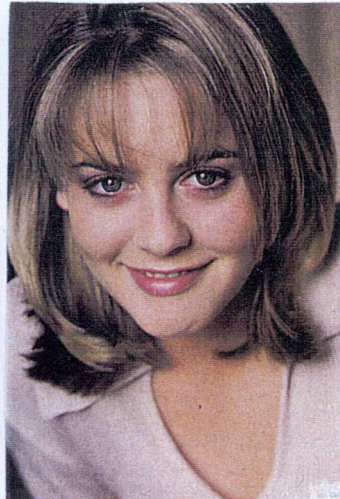
↑  
illus. 20 (a)



→  
illus. 20 (b)



illus. 21 (a)



illus. 21 (b)



illus. 21 (c)



illus. 21 (d)

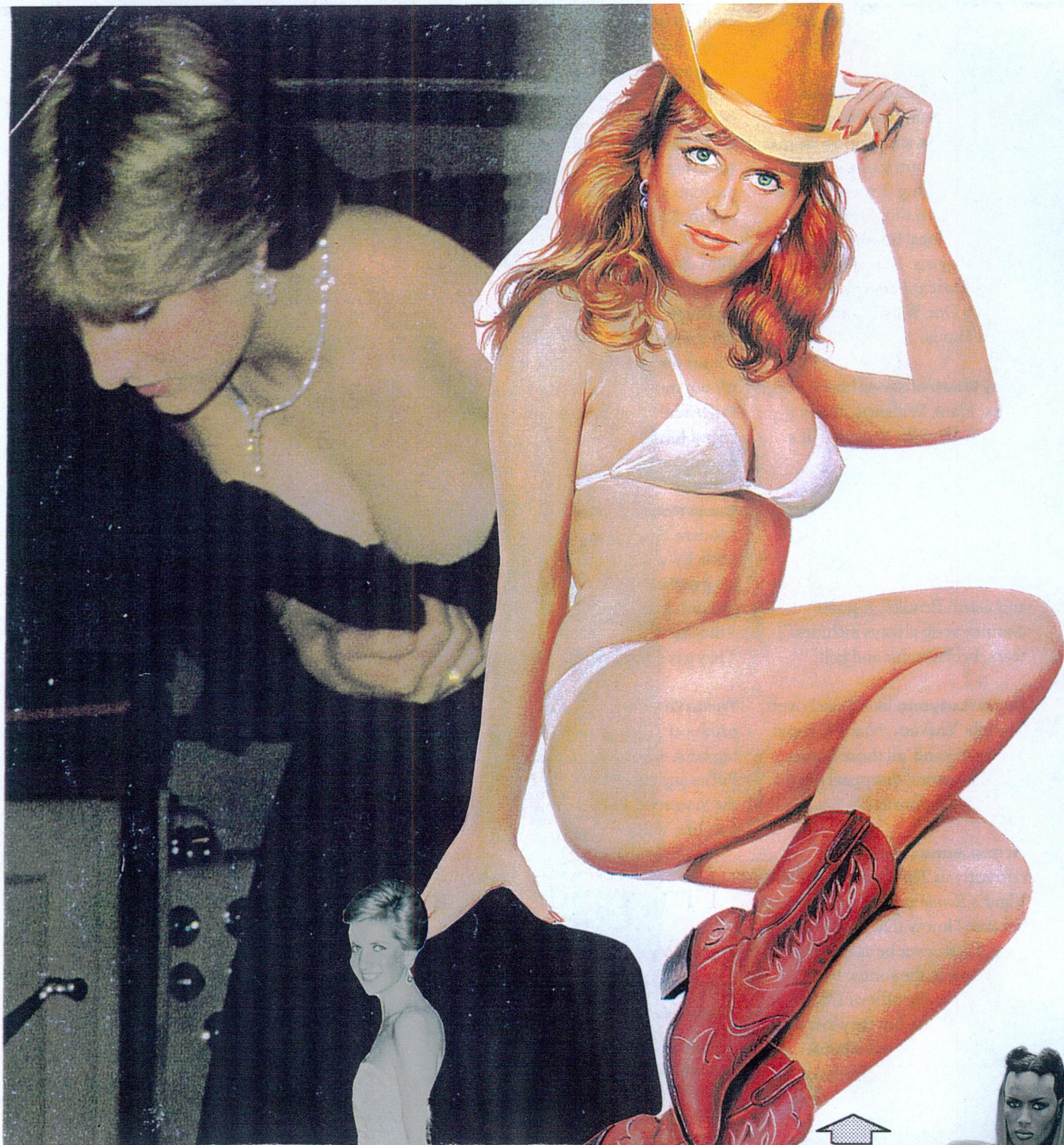


illus. 21 (e)



illus. 21 (f)



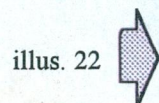
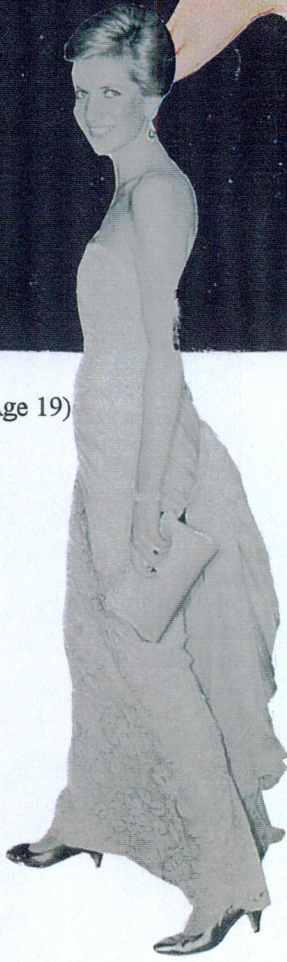


illus. 23 (b)  
(Lady Diana Spencer Age 19)

illus.23 (c)  
(Princess Diana)



illus. 23(a)



illus. 22





mockery of her body. Another national model, the Princess of Wales felt under pressure to get 'thin' on her marriage to the Prince, but more significantly, as it transpired, her marriage to the media (after all, royal life is very much so a public life). The Princess became rapidly and visible thinner after the match. [Illus. 23(b), 23(c)]. Later it was revealed by herself that she suffered from bulimia nervosa - her recent exposure on "Panorama" backing up this fact.

Wherever there is media exposure, problems concerning the body seem to rear their ugly heads. Oprah Winfrey came forward with painful facts about her size and her compulsive eating. Several times she has shot from being normal size to being substantially overweight. She appeared in "The Colour Purple" in the early eighties as a 'huge mama'. Her role as a fat, jealous, common woman was the source of endless laughs and jokes to her audience. When she began her more serious career as a chat-show host, she began to lose weight. She went to great lengths to maintain the 'more acceptable' weight she is today, in order to higher her esteem, career success and screen stardom. She employed a chef to cook her meals that would not make her 'fat' and incorporated an exercise regime into her lifestyle.

"In turning to dieting all the compulsiveness evident in over-eating is now channelled into a new obsession-to staying on the diet". (Orbach, '88, P.12). Maria Callas, a famous soprano opera singer in the '50s and '60s, suffered from a compulsive eating disorder similar to that of Oprah's. She was deeply conscious about hefty figure and she felt it was the only deterrent to a great career. She began reducing her weight in the spring of '53 and one year later she had lost nearly 62 lbs. [Illus. 24(a),24(b)]. The only secret that she revealed was - "I had a tapeworm and I no longer have it". (Bond,'92, P.14). Elizabeth Taylor had similar painful experiences with food and her body. She wrote her own story in "Elizabeth Takes Off" '88. The whole second half is given over to a diet with interesting comments on the psychological strain of losing weight.

From these examples we can see clearly that success and good publicity, whatever the career, has been associated with being 'thin'. These women have found the pressure to get 'thin' so great that they have done so, on the terms of the media. We see nothing but praise in the media for how they have changed their bodies. The fear that this reaction of the media embeds in ordinary women is not a fear of eating disorders but a fear of fat.



illus. 24 (a)



illus. 24 (b)





Thinness has become such a prominent, almost compulsory requirement for success in exposed careers that even a large percentage of models have severe eating disorders.

“No-one admits it, but lots of models have some kind of eating problem - we’re all obsessed with calories, fat and the way we look... Most of the models I know hardly eat anything because they’re so worried about putting on weight... Lots of models I work with now are practically bulimic”.

Diet pills, appetite suppressants, laxatives, even heroin are common prescriptions. Vomiting is a regular purging exercise for some models. (Looks, Nov. '93, P.25).

Kate Moss (Illus. 25) and Jody Kidd are models whose childishly thin body won them fame in the modelling and media world. Aged 17, at 6 ft. 1" Kidd was a slight size 6/8 and weighed under 9 stone. She appeared in all the popular magazines modelling top designers' clothes for women and teenagers. She became so thin in '95 that she was removed from the catwalk by her agency “to fatten her up”.

One of the top agencies claimed - “We never tell our models to be thin. Many girls want the ‘waif look’ as it’s in fashion, but any pressure comes from the media, not us”. Elite, another agency in London, agreed. “They want to be thin, so they smoke and drink to shrink their appetites, which is bad for their health and dangerous as it makes them pass out”. Sarah Doukas, head of *Storm*, the agency which represents the original ‘waif’, Kate Moss, says; “We don’t believe there is tremendous pressure to be thin. We have lots of curvy girls on our books, like Rachel Hunter and Elle Macpherson, who are just as successful as Kate Moss”. (Looks, Nov. '93, P.25). So where does the pressure to be thin come from? If it’s not the agencies then, is it solely the media? Everyone who’s involved in fashion holds some blame. The agency, the fashion editors and the photographers mostly want their models to be thin.

The exposure of such thin models to young girls, who can be the most fragile creatures on the earth, is a massive area of concern. Kate Moss and models of her type are role models of anorexia. A deeply impressionable section of the public, teenage girls, take this message of thinness very literally and seriously. Their passion and stubborn decision to be 'thin' may be so intense that dieting to the degree of sacrificing life itself can occur in sufferers of anorexia.

In an interview with an x-sufferer, Jenny, she revealed;





**Kate Moss: role model for  
many teenagers**

illus. 25



"I was 5 ft. 7" and at the age of 16, at the peak of my anorexia, I weighted 6 and a half stone. I could not stand for very long. I was carried by car in and out to school, my concentration span didn't go beyond half an hour, sleeping was disturbed and I got seriously ill every month or more (certainly more often than I got a period since I suffered with ammenoria for one and a half years). Even then, I didn't believe I was thin enough".

She revealed how she would look through magazines with little or no interest in reading, but a massive appetite for observing female models' bodies.

"Almost 15% of all women suffer from anorexia". (Wolf, '90, P.161). "Some 90% of all females suffer from one or other eating disorders". (Buckroyd, '89, P.37). Bombarded with chilling facts like these, the issue can hardly be overlooked. It would be wrong to say that the media is entirely responsible for these types of statistics or indeed for existing attitudes of women about their bodies; personal situations obviously come into play. However it is important to note that the media does play a significant role.

These facts are certainly fired by the seemingly crucial contrast of the female by herself with the 'ideal' beauty she is exposed to in the media. "Eating disorders are a response to crises in an environment where body shape and size is focused on". (Orbach, '88, P.119). The media is largely responsible for edging women into this current crisis, therefore, they should have the capacity to help women out.

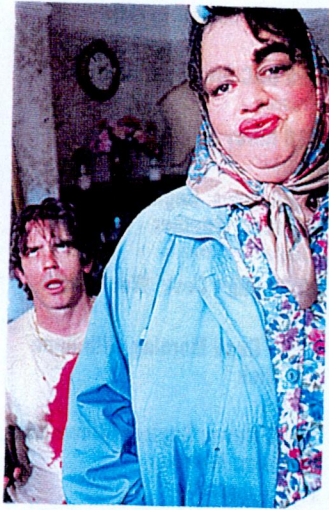
"If one is not thin, one perceives herself as a lesser being".(Bordo, '93, P.21). Of course this is a totally false assumption that unfortunately many women have. The few who don't think this and who are fat, famous and successful can be publicised to turn this statement inside out. The comedy industry employs fat people as some of their best comedians. If we consider some famous names like Dawn French, [Illus. 26(a)], Joe Brand, [Illus. 26(b)], Rosanne Barr and Victoria Wood. [Illus. 26(c)]. What do all these comedians have in common? Humour, flesh and success. These people are admired by everyone for their talent and for being different. To them, fat does not imply failure, its popularly perceived meaning, but success.

The dangerously sharp edge is blunted off the popular '90s slogan "thin women are beautiful". By increasing these larger females' type of exposure, the media can positively influence the female public for a change! There is hope for a greater acceptance of fat women's bodies when we see comedians rivalling light-weight models in the





illus. 26 (a)



illus. 26 (b)



illus. 26 (b)





popularity columns of magazines and newspapers. Negative associations of 'fat' with words like 'ugly', "useless", "restricted", "unsuccessful" fade in the face of humour. "Fat and happy" may become tomorrow's slogan.



## CONCLUSION

“Beauty, fashion and cosmetics have been used to force women into a secondary place of the ‘other’”.(Wolf, ‘90, P.151). If the media shows the female not as a passive object, but as an active subject in these areas of publication more often, her appearance will become less crucial in the face of activity. She will not 'have' to look good, but by her mere actions we will be drawn to the desired message. Even more desirable, a more positive message for the female will be there for the taking.

Of course it will take time for the female to stop comparing herself to the 'attractive', 'well-shaped' girl that will always be popular to some degree in the media. But by changing our approach in the media, a more solid footing can be gained for all types of bodies to be more equally accepted. However the ideal beauty will always be with us and it evolves just as fashion does. We cannot pin-point exactly what triggers this section of evolution, but we do know that it involves a mixture of environmental, social, cultural and political reasons. It is quite difficult , if not impossible, to change the ideal beauty, but we can however make women more aware of what the media and it's presentation of the ideal beauty and body is doing to the female public.

Education is the answer, well at least, one of them. We must educate ourselves and our children about the media -it's selling/promotional tactic's and their meaning(s). We must try to look at the media with a detached eye not a comparative one. If women are comfortable with themselves as beings and bodies, we will be able to do this. If women are educated about their bodies and its size and shape, they will be comfortable to live with themselves as in "all-shapes and sizes" race. They will be less self-critical or critical of others if body size should veer from the norm. A greater acceptance is called for and certainly this will ease the dangerous atmosphere we live in today for ourselves ,children and grandchildren.



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