

# The representation of prostitution in the media

First of all it is important to determine what we mean by media "1) any technical process allowing the distribution, dissemination or communication of ideas through written, voiced or visual means 2) any material or artificial means which enables the expression and communication of thoughts and/or of creativity."<sup>1</sup>

The media have a great responsibility in the shaping of opinions and mentalities. Linked as it is to primal instincts, prostitution is a recurring theme in the media and therefore dealing with this kind of subject sells articles, such as the one headlined enticingly in Paris Match State of affairs and fantasies. Indeed prostitution is a field which awakens fantasies.<sup>2</sup> In this text we shall establish the representation of prostitution found in particular in the written press in order to determine what can be used as a valid source of information.

We can see that a newspaper's page layout is more like a clever set-up than a real treatment of the information. When it comes to prostitution, imagery (especially photos) is just as important as the text. In this way the iconography has to be playful in order to keep the readers attention.

## 1. The Media Coverage of Trafficking

The trafficking of young women from eastern Europe and the rise of mafias has heightened public awareness of this issue. Whether it be the written press, radio or television, all the media have, in recent years, devoted much attention to this question and have played a huge role in providing information about this practice while denouncing it at the same time. For example, Daniel Rigourd's interview in Le Figaro, October 1<sup>st</sup> 2002, 'The law on the presumption of innocence inhibits our action' in which the head of the Anti-Pimping squad describes the current situation with regards to pimping.

Critique:

The issue is still presented in such a way as to catch the readers' attention and to sell copies. The approach is sometimes sensationalist or sordidly realistic; personal real life accounts along with paternalistic news items prevent any in-depth analysis of the causes of prostitution and of those involved. For example Clara Dupont-Monod's article 24 hours in the life of a prostitute published in Marianne 9/15 December 2002 limits itself to an hour by hour account of the everyday life of an Albanian prostitute in Paris.

The customer, one of the pillars of the system, goes unmentioned nine times out of ten : he is the link in the chain which up until now has been ignored<sup>3</sup>. Is this not the expression of a collective subconscious which refuses to allocate a significant share of the responsibility to the 'consumer' for whom the market is actually organized?

A few projects have, however, been put into place such as the 2002 launch of a sociological study on prostitutes' customers in order to then organize a prevention program to be started at high school.

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<sup>1</sup> *Grand Larousse en cinq volumes*, Tome 4, Marburg/recteur, Larousse, Paris, 1987, p. 1997.

<sup>2</sup> *Paris-Match*, N°2807, March 6th-12th 2003, original title États des lieux et des fantasmes

<sup>3</sup> Article written by V. C. from *La Voix du Nord*, April 3th 2003, original title « Un besoin de parler, une demande de tendresse »

## 2. The trivialisation of prostitution

Although the media attention accorded to human trafficking, sex tourism and child prostitution is praiseworthy, it also serves to reinforce the trivialisation of so-called 'traditional' prostitution. Cecile Daumas' article 'On the street, the job's not like it used to be' published on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2002 in Liberation analyses the evolution of poverty in the prostitution sector. The consequence of this media attention is that it legitimizes 'classic' prostitution, considered as commonplace, inevitable and 'chosen'. In the article written by Marcela Lacub, Catherine Millet and Catherine Robbe-Grillet 'Neither guilty, nor victim, free to prostitute oneself' published in Le Monde on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2003 it is written 'As women and feminists we oppose those who claim to tell women what they should do with their bodies and their sexuality. We are determined to oppose people who suppress prostitution.' However we must take into account the form of prostitution which, in addition to organized crime circuits and international human trafficking, exploits young people in difficulty, female students, women forced into prostitution in order to survive, drug addicts etc. In general, television talk shows are fond of prostitutes claiming to be 'free' and 'happy' and, without necessarily meaning to, become party to the oppressive silence which continues to surround the reality and violence of ordinary prostitution by spreading glamorous images of prostitution. Over and over again we see articles such as the *Vrai Papier Journal* from July/August 2002 'Students by day, prostitutes by night' with the sub-title 'Elise sells her body to afford Dior'. However, the article appearing in ELLE n° 2967 from 11 November 2002, 'Exclusive survey: should prostitutes be condemned ? 74% of French people say no' shows the extent to which prostitution is not only an integral part of society but also of the French political scene.

The article in the Parisien on the 1<sup>st</sup> October 2002, 'How is Boulogne going to combat prostitution?' shows that certain authorities take a stand when it comes to prostitution. Furthermore, an exhibition on prostitution and sexual slavery at the Colbert High School as well as a questionnaire carried out by a student about prostitution are mentioned again in an article in La Voix Du Nord on the 11<sup>th</sup> April 2003, 'Prostitution, a violence which must be condemned'. However there is still an urgent need to move on from complacent representations of prostitution such as Progres de Lyon's article on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2003, 'Prostitution: Yes, as long as its discreet' in which Jean-Louis Touraine, the first assistant of Gerard Collomb, in charge of public security in Lyons declares: 'As long as its not in my backyard, it doesn't bother me'.

## 3. The representation of women and children in the media.

The media shape representations. However in the absence of large numbers of women in key positions, representations of women and children are still considered from a male viewpoint. Sigrun Stefánsdóttir analyses the extent to which images of men and women broadcast by the media can have an effect on the trafficking of human beings for the purposes of sexual exploitation: 'If we analyse the news broadcast on television in 1988 we see that out of 5 people interviewed only one was a women. This is actually a marked improvement to the situation in the times before my study when only one in ten interviewed was a woman. I have worked out that at this rate it will not be before the year 2032 that women will have an equal place to men in news reports! Still today its rare to hear a female voice commenting on the news.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Council of Europe, Workshop on the « good » and « bad » practices concerning the image in the media : the case of trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation, Palais de l'Europe, Strasbourg, September 28-29<sup>th</sup> 1998, The media and the traffic in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation : what is at stake ? Presentation by Sigrún Stefánsdóttir, p. 3.

In recent decades, advertising has conjured up highly sexualized images of women, children and more and more so of men. On the one hand children are presented as miniature adults while on the other hand women are shown with excessively sexualized bodies whose most important feature is to be available for men and satisfy their desires. François Landon, in his article 'Fruity girls, juicy benefits' of the magazine Capital of February 2003 describes various strip-tease joints in a seductive manner: 'Her name is Amber and she has eyes the shape of almonds right now she's writhing between your knees, naked like the day she was born. You are sprawled out on a brown velvet couch in a little alcove at Pink Paradise, the new strip-club next to the Champs Elysees. Don't you want a bit more?'

Florence Montreynaud, in *Love for Sale* testifies : 'Little by little, I became aware that the vocabulary of prostitution had contaminated everything surrounding it, in particular the field of paid female work'<sup>5</sup>. Florence Montreynaud goes on to mention an advertisement which shows a woman's face with the following words written underneath : I need a quick and regular service. Who will be able to satisfy me? This advert for a photocopier plays on the double meaning of the word 'service' while reinforcing the cliché that all women are sluts. These images leave their mark on the whole of the social representations of women, men and their sexuality.

Thus constantly reduced to sexual objects, women's struggle for social and political equality is not made any easier. Pornography, which has become a product of everyday consumption, henceforth permeates our culture. 'It can be said that today's media presents women as people characterized by their inability to express themselves and by their sexual appeal.'<sup>6</sup>

Pornography promotes sexual inequality and violence as pleasure. This actively encourages exploitation of women and children so therefore the demand for prostitution evolves in accordance with the trivialisation of pornography.

In his article Psycho-porno published in Le Monde on the 26<sup>th</sup> October 2002 Daniel Schneidermann criticizes the television programme by Mireille Dumas, *Private life, Public Life*, showing Justine, a young girl raped at the age of 15, who has since become a porn star: 'You've got to choose: we can see it as just television which has a negligible or insignificant influence on the public in which case we don't give a damn about the televised porno. But if we admit that seeing these images can lead (however indirectly) to imitation then the sight of a young girl on a talk show surrounded by psychiatrists and sociologists talking about how her rape revealed her true nature of a hard core pornstar really is much deadlier than the act itself. Broadcast at a popular time without any explanation, is this hypocritical programme not doing more than one hundred pornos to convince the potential rapist that really, deep down, the victims are asking for it? It is not through their films that hardcore pornstars are today the talk of the playground, it is due to their numerous appearances on chat shows of the likes of Ardisson, or nowadays Tapie and Dumas'.

So given that prostitution in the media is more often than not presented in a way to grab the audience's attention, or else to transform them into voyeurs, working on the relations between men and women requires an in-depth, long-term campaign which is as political as it is educative and cultural. It is essential to heighten the awareness of the media and journalists to the reality of human trafficking and prostitution, so that accurate information about prostitution is available and that the public are no longer unaware of the problems it causes.

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<sup>5</sup> Florence Montreynaud, *Amours à vendre*, Glénat, Grenoble, 1993, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 3

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