

BOOKS FOR HER: AN ANALYSIS OF BOOK COVERS OF LITERATURE CONSIDERED FEMININE

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ABSTRACT

Though feminine literature is not a recent expression, it tends not to be mentioned directly but as a part of the romance category. However, today, there are bookstores which use this expression to categorize certain literary works. In response to this phenomenon, this article explores the gender construction that is reflected in book covers belonging to the category Novels in the Feminine, created and displayed in Fnac's bookstore website, so as to understand if it is a positive construction or a negative one, and what is the extent of its persuasive power. It was concluded that the idea of feminine which is sold and bought through the book business is one constructed by society and one continuously reproduced. It is also one connected to a consumer society, one which revolves around a romantic and sexual background and one which objectifies women.

KEYWORDS

book covers; feminine literature; woman; cultural industries; objectification.

Introduction

Fnac, which is a case of success in several European countries, including Portugal, is a company created according to one of the cultural industries' assumptions: culture for all, and not just for the elite. Through physical stores and an online platform, the Fnac intends to play the role of intermediary between creators and buyers, by presenting a catalogue containing various cultural products, including books.

In Fnac's online platform, one can perceive a curious phenomenon that is not a reality in physical bookstores. In physical bookstores, fiction books are grouped together according to the visual and intellectual connection they share. This connection, however, is not named, but defined only by the layout of the physical space. At most, the group in which the books are integrated is classified by an alphabetic letter. On the other hand, on online platforms nomination is required, due to their very nature, to the way in which information is presented and to the lack of physical space, which could otherwise subjectively emphasize the connection between books. It was the very fact that a given literary group was displayed in Fnac's online platform as *Novels in the Feminine* that determined the theme of this article.

The notion of books designed for a feminine public is not a new one. However, there has always been a tendency to hide this notion behind subjective clues instead of presenting it clearly, through naming. Because *Novels in the Feminine* is such a broad-ranging designation of a population group, it is also dangerously volatile, in permanent risk of falling into the

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clutches of stereotyping. For this reason, through a qualitative analysis of book covers within the previously mentioned category, this article intends to understand the nature of gender construction reflected in these book covers, so as to comprehend whether it is positive or negative and assess its persuasive power. It should be stressed, however, that the issue of the authors' gender is not going to be discussed in this article, for it was considered to be of no consequence to the ongoing research.

It was hypothesized that after the qualitative analysis a hegemonic and stereotyped vision of feminine would be found. More specifically, it was expected that the book covers analyzed would follow a very particular design, one that reflected the idea that society has of what is feminine, for instance, a design featuring the color pink or decorative elements such as flowers. It was also expected that most of these book covers would portray men, objectified, whether alone or not, as an element of a heterosexual relationship. This was due to comic books. In these books, supposedly created for male readers, women are a common feature and are frequently objectified. For this reason, the reverse was expected for books regarded as books for women.

Nevertheless, we believed that, regardless of the gender of the individuals featuring in the book covers analyzed, they would reflect a unique and well-defined ideal of physical beauty. Bearing in mind the social construction of the female gender, it was also hypothesized that the book covers would reflect romance, as well as romantic and sexual relationships, and would present an image of perfection, mirrored by idyllic landscapes, the characters' socioeconomic situation and even on their physical appearance. Last but not least, it was also anticipated that the design of the book covers analyzed would be a repetitive one, as an echo of the cultural industries' essence and one that, as a result, would exert a substantial power of persuasion.

Literature Considered Feminine – From Drafting to Final Consumer

Literature regarded as feminine falls within the scope of cultural industries, whose ulterior objective is, according to Adorno (2013), to make a profit. Therefore, the value of a cultural production lies on its profitability. As a consequence, instead of taking risks, cultural industries tend to base themselves on the intensive repetition of formulas which have already been successfully tested, since, thereby, profitability is more certain. Though any particular novelty may be announced, it is nothing more than a way of hiding an immutable, underlying structure. This conjecture, which derives from a capitalistic system, leads to conformism, to conformism, to the enforcement of behavior patterns and to the consolidation of the *status quo*, given that the cultural industries simply offer the public what it so desires: a world in order, joyful, from which one can reach a state of well-being. These ideas were reinforced by Santos (2007).

Almeida (2007) addressed the issue of soap operas, which are a part of cultural industries and therefore are related to literature considered feminine. They share, for instance, the tendency of cultural industries to employ a formula of intensive and predictable repetition, that does not drive away spectators simply because they are based on the identification and projection principles – spectators recognize the reality they see on screen because it

seems familiar to them, without, nevertheless, being theirs, for the simple reason of being based on living standards above average.

On the other hand, there are common features between the soap operas' plot and that of novels considered feminine which concern the heroine's role (who, nevertheless, is only a heroine in the fields of affections and relationships, becoming, as a consequence, a prototype of the perfect woman). Furthermore, all the obstacles the heroine must face along the way are related to the fields already mentioned, with these being, however, invariably overcome in the end (the end being invariably happy) – this reflects the principle of repetition.

The book, the object to which this paper relates, does not escape the logic of the cultural industries, being the purpose of its publication, in this field, to sell and to make a profit. When it comes to achieving success with the selling of a book, Powers (2006) states that book covers play a fundamental role, since they are extremely cheap and powerful marketing and advertising mediums, for they are integral parts of the book as an object. However, as Costa (2011) pointed out, the purpose of design is to communicate. For this reason, any element of design possesses a given symbolism. According to Eiseman (2000), in Western societies, red stands for passion, while pink, a toned-down version of red, symbolizes innocent romance and gentleness, and black might bring to mind the idea of death and sadness, but also of mystery.

Thus, as in any communication chain, there is an issuer, who possesses clear and established goals. For the achievement of these goals, the issuer uses a combination and layout of pictures, texts, graphics and other elements which compose a message, whose meanings are predetermined by him or herself, even if the receiver is not aware of it, since the message conveyed by the design presents itself to the latter as a representation of the real, given that the message's process of construction is omitted.

However, this great and subtle power of design can be used for good or for bad purposes. When used for good purposes, design may contribute to attractiveness and beauty, to the dissemination of information and to the dissemination of culture. On the other hand, when used for bad purposes, design may become "persuasion design (which tries to convince and to seduce, so that people buy things, vote in people or adhere to certain ideologies, for instance)" (our translation, Costa 2011: 12).⁴

Barnard (2013) also addressed the issue of design being used for negative purposes. He stated that using design for negative purposes may contribute to the construction of stereotypes. This situation becomes even more pungent when elaborated stereotypes are related to the feminine, once they create and convey a generalized and simplified image of women, overruling the complexity and diversity existent in this group. By way of example, he stresses that female-oriented designs frequently include round shapes, traditionally associated with gentleness and naturalness, characteristics assigned to the female gender by society.

Certain dangers may arise from the creation of stereotypes. Mota-Ribeiro (2005), for instance, points out that stereotypes related to a given group may nurture a dominant ideology. Thus, in that which concerns women, stereotypes may build a reductive image of what it is to be a woman, that people assimilate and try to imitate, ending up considering it a norm. In order to explain this theory, the author made use of the analysis of publicity images

⁴ Original citation: "design de persuasão (que tenta convencer e seduzir, para que as pessoas compreem coisas, votem em pessoas ou adiram a certas ideologias, por exemplo)"

found in magazines considered to be for women, in order to understand which image of the feminine was being disseminated.

He concluded, first of all, that all construction of the feminine revolves around the body and beauty. Thus, women figure in publicity images as simply visual objects, for they figure alone, performing no task, nor job and being in no specific place. This way, the purpose is to be seen, to exhibit an attractive appearance and to attract the male gaze, for instance, by presenting an image of mystery and assuming a guarded position, sometimes in a subtly seductive way. The mere fact that in these advertising materials women feature alone, as sexual and visual objects, seems to demonstrate the existence of a relationship with a nonexistent observer. Unconsciously, this nonexistent observer is seen as masculine by women who, however, are the real observers. For this reason, the author considers this representation to be stereotyped and reductive for women, with the potential to bring negative consequences if assimilated as a reflection of reality and potentially imitated.

Furat and Sönmez (2013) made a similar analysis and came to similar conclusions. Nevertheless, their study focused not only on publicity images, but on all content of magazines considered to be for women. They stress, however, bearing in mind the contents featuring in these publications, that the potential female reader is perceived as someone who considers men to be essential to a woman's life, with their objective being winning them over by resorting to their physical beauty. On the other hand, the idea of beauty that transpires in these magazines is one of beauty built with the help of consumerism, through beauty products, clothes, fashion accessories, weight-loss techniques, and others. In addition, the authors stress that women tend to be represented in everyday situations and, therefore, any mention of inequality problems or oppression that sprout from a patriarchal society is discarded.

Thereby, according to these authors and Milestone and Meyer (2012), the idea of feminine which is thus disseminated is the product of a male-dominated society that asserts itself as superior, reducing women to their body and the role of simply being attractive. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) advocate that from the fact that women are reduced to their body derives the objectification of women, who exist only to be appraised by others. By suffering social pressure in order to replicate this reductive vision, women end up conforming to the existing paradigm and, therefore, falling into what the authors call "self-objectification".

Taking this into account, it may seem surprising that women choose to read this sort of literary works. Radway (1987) attempted to understand this phenomenon. She concluded that women read books considered to be for them because these allow them to escape the patriarchal society they are part of, a society in which they are considered to be subordinated and inferiors, and where their necessities are frequently ignored. Reversely, this sort of literary works presents women with a world where they are the center of attention and where they are treated with seriousness. It is in this literary atmosphere that, as opposed to what happens in reality, the values established by the patriarchal society for the feminine (affections, romance and feelings) prevail upon the values established for the masculine (competitiveness and determination). In the stories divulged in these publications, men do not reveal themselves as cruel, nor indifferent, but affectionate. The problem is not in men's personality, but in the inability of women to understand them. This way, it is in the hands of women to solve the problem, and, for this reason, they are the heroines, confined, however, to the field

of affections. For all this, the books here mentioned are generally books that belong to the romance category.

Radway (1987) also points out the negative role that novels considered to be for women perform when it comes to the maintenance of the patriarchal society's vicious cycle and the inferiorization of women. This is because these novels provide women with a safe harbor, and they do not constitute an instigator of insurgency, which is essential to social change, reconciling women, instead, with the existing paradigm and thus preventing the creation of more egalitarian systems. However, the author stresses the possibility of change, if female readers become aware of their active role in the maintenance of inequalities.

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Methodology

The qualitative research of the material was considered to be the most suitable research method for the elaboration of this article. Denzin and Lincoln (2006) defined the qualitative research as implicating

[...] the study of the use and the collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; texts and cultural productions; observational, historical, interactive and visual texts – which describe moments and routine and problematic meanings in the life of individuals. (Our translation, 17)⁵

The material used for the elaboration of this research comprised book covers contemplated on the category *Novels in the Feminine* used in Fnac's website to organize and to classify literary productions. Firstly, 150 covers of books published between 2012 and 2015, included in the category created by the aforementioned website, were selected randomly between the October 4th and November 12th of 2015.

Afterwards, the design components of these book covers were visually analyzed (text, pictures, and graphics), through the Internet, so as to understand what sort of components these are, what their symbolic meaning is, and, by means of comparison, if they are repeated. In order to complement the book covers' analysis, 73 of these were physically analyzed, using both sight and touch, in a Bertrand bookstore in Aveiro. Only in this way was it possible to examine the book as a package, and to collect data from the copyright page, something that would not have been possible using only the Internet.

Deconstructing the Formula of Literature Considered to Be for Women

Women are present in 110 of the 150 book covers analyzed. In the vast majority of these occurrences – 86 book covers –, the woman features alone. However, in some cases the woman shares the cover with a man, representing a sexual or loving relationship. On the other hand, the man featuring alone in the cover is a rare case. This reflects what Almeida

⁵ Original citation: “[...] o estudo do uso e a coleta de uma variedade de materiais empíricos – estudo de caso; experiência pessoal; introspecção; história de vida; entrevista; artefatos; textos e produções culturais; textos observacionais, históricos, interativos e visuais – que descrevem momentos e significados rotineiros e problemáticos na vida dos indivíduos.”

(2007) asserts for soap operas, which are a product of cultural industries: they are based on the principles of identification and projection. Women appear alone and detached, suggesting that they are the heroines, the main characters. What is more, the woman in the cover and, consequently, in the narrative, is a heroine in the field of affections, who shares the same necessities as female spectators. All this facilitates the process of identification.

All women featuring in the book covers analyzed are supposedly attractive and careful about their physical appearance, reflecting, thus, a well-defined beauty standard: women are slim, young, and they almost always have light eyes, fair skin, and long hair. Curiously, they almost always feature in the covers wearing dresses. These women also all come out as very tidy and elegant, in the way they dress, the way they style their hair and the way they apply makeup. All this put together conveys an ideal of beauty achieved through consumerism, as advocate Mina Furat and Sönmez (2013), which, therefore, indirectly promotes it.

When women feature alone in the covers, they rarely feature in full body. There is always a part of their body that is emphasized in detriment of the rest. Even when women are represented in full body, they are distant and hardly visible, or they appear in a defensive position so as to hide their body from the observer. Therefore, they are frequently depicted with their faces hidden or backs turned.

In many cases, women are portrayed as not having any occupation. That is, they don't perform any task, nor do they seem to have a job of any kind, which gives rise to the assertion that they only feature in the cover to be observed. In certain cases, women even appear to be decontextualized, for the background of the book cover is abstract in such a way that it does not reveal their physical location. Nevertheless, this is a rare case, which can be explained by the fact that the setting, even if not important for the contextualization of women, is important for the construction of the imaginary of the narrative. Thereby, the decontextualization mentioned by Mota-Ribeiro (2005) as a substantial feature in the advertisements of magazines targeted to women doesn't seem to have a fundamental role in what concerns fiction books.

However, the fact that women featuring in the covers of books considered to be for women display a well-defined ideal of beauty, are lessened to certain parts of their bodies, and are depicted with no occupation at all, seems to reflect what Mota-Ribeiro (2005) advocates: that all construction of the feminine is linked to the body and to beauty. Women are, according to the definition conceived by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) and supported by Milestone and Meyer (2012), objectified and represented as a mere decorative object, which is displayed to be seen and to attract gazes. The gaze that these women aim to attract is not that of spectators, but that of the loving partner, that of the man, seeing as it is sought through a seductive manner. Therefore, in the majority of the book covers analyzed, women exist to be beautiful and to please men, an idea advocated by Furat and Sönmez (2013).

Also very often, book covers do not feature women nor men, but objects which are, in a certain way, connected to women and which reflect their objectification, for they are also connected to physical beauty. These objects can, therefore, be, for instance, mirrors, perfume bottles or necklaces. This situation seems to be more frequent when it comes to books that deal with the issue of sexual relationships instead of love relationships, as if they were conveying an idea of mystery.

Despite the fact that they represent less than half of the sample, landscapes are also represented in the book covers analyzed. These landscapes, however, are always idyllic landscapes, pleasant and warm, no matter if they are connected to nature or to industrialization and large cities. When cities are represented in book covers, they are, most of the time, touristic cities, such as Paris, whose cultural value is world-renowned and which represent romance. Mansions and castles are also common features of these book covers. When seen from the outside, these constructions are magnificent, beautiful and rich, and surrounded by large gardens. When seen from the inside, these constructions are represented as elegant and richly decorated. Here is reflected the idea mentioned by Adorno (2013) of a kind of happiness connected with materialism.

As for the colors, there seems to be a tendency for book covers to always feature pink, even if slightly, but also black, blue, red and gold. However, these colors are not used irrespective of book categories within the spectrum of books considered to be for women. It is not surprising that the color pink is extremely frequent, for pink is socially the color generally associated with the female gender and romance. By way of example, pink, used together with light tones, is frequently used in books that deal with romance, giving rise to the idea of innocence and affections. In contrast, stronger colors, mainly red, but also black and dark blue seem to be associated with books of a more erotic nature or more sexually charged, even if implicitly. Thereby, it is possible to understand how these considerations are close to what Eiseman (2000) theorized.

The existence, in 50 book covers, of decorative elements, that is to say, misfit elements that feature in an image but which have no relation of continuity with it, being useful only to adorn, is also relevant. These elements are, in general, flowers or leaves or arabesques, but can also be butterflies, birds or ribbons. The arabesques have round forms which, according to Barnard (2013), represent kindness and naturalness, which are values ascribed to the female gender by society. Nearly half of the book covers analyzed exhibit embossment, or a glossy varnish. The embossed elements of design are frequently the title or the decorative elements. In addition, these books considered to be for women possess customized wrappings: many come inside glittering bags of bright colors, others possess ribbons, and others even come in a format with a distinct way of opening, for instance, an envelop format.

On the whole, the design of these book covers seems to reflect what Adorno (2013) and Santos (2007) think about cultural industries' products: these give the public what it wants. They present the public with an idyllic picture, reflected in landscapes, in colors, in decorative elements and even in beauty, which conveys happiness, something that potential female readers long for, once it is something they have been denied in real life, according to Janice Radway (1987).

Colors are often altered in order to look surreal and more vivid, even if the book in question is not a fantasy novel. This, together with the fact that women are often decontextualized and displayed without any sort of occupation, seems to be important to move the story and the protagonist away from real life. This is of the utmost importance, for, according to Radway (1987), books considered to be for women constitute a way to escape reality and its problems.

It seems to be of the utmost importance to display in these book covers the high number of copies sold, or even the fact that the book in question is a bestseller, for it draws the attention of the potential female reader to the books read by other women. This feature is,

therefore, critical when time comes for the female customer to make the decision of buying a book or not, for she will tend to buy what other women read as a result of social pressure. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) mention social pressure as being related to objectification; however, regardless of the nature of the social pressure, it leads to something stressed by the authors: conformism. A potential female reader, when buying a book considered to be for women that mentions the number of copies or the status of bestseller, will be doing what she thinks society expects of her as a woman, experiencing a feeling of belonging, of being safe within the system by doing what many other women do. This feeling of belonging is seen as comforting.

Even if the book covers analyzed are different from each other, it was already concluded that there is an aesthetic structure that is common to all of them. This way, despite the fact that the research conducted revealed that the majority of designers of the analyzed book covers are women, this number does not seem to be relevant. What can be taken from this analysis is that it is not important if it is a man or a woman who is responsible for the design of the book covers, for, when doing their work, both seem to follow the same aesthetic pattern, a repetition of a vision of the female gender constructed by society, which according to Adorno (2013) and Almeida (2007) is a feature of the products of cultural industries. Adding all the considerations presented so far, it is possible to understand the way in which all the elements of design featuring in the book covers analyzed conglomerate so as to create a simple and subtle, though undoubtedly effective, form of advertising, corroborating the ideas theorized by Powers (2006).

Conclusion

The idea of feminine brought to light after the analyses of the covers of books considered to be for women is a hegemonic and restrictive one, for women are reduced to a certain part of their being – the body – as the others are neglected. The image of women that these book covers depict is, above all, a stereotyped one, since it is used to define a certain group of individuals in a simplified and generalized manner, highlighting the assumptions of Bernard (2013) and Mota-Ribeiro (2005).

Some of the assumptions initially stated were attested, namely the fact that the idea reflected in the analyzed book covers is a stereotyped, reductive and repetitive one, and the fact that the individuals featuring in these book covers represent a well-defined ideal of physical beauty. However, contrary to what was initially believed, it is the objectified woman, and not the objectified man, who is mostly represented in the book covers. It was also resolutely attested that the book covers in question depict an idyllic atmosphere for the reasons previously mentioned. Nevertheless, it was not expected that this idyllic atmosphere would be connected to consumerism and would eventually promote it.

What is more worrying, however, is the fact that these books are often bestsellers and that they continue to be a safe bet, in what concerns profit, to cultural industries. What Radway (1987) verified for the textual and visual contents of this sort of literature is still a reality today. But if these conclusions seem to be dramatic and fatalistic, let us not forget what Costa (2011) asserts about design: that it can be used for good and for evil. The repetitive self-objectification of women, which leads to the maintenance of these ideals, is an automatic pro-

cess, yet not a conscious. If women were able to see this type of literature in a conscious and critical way, they would feel encouraged to fight for changes in reality.

Despite the fact that the analysis carried out in this study revealed important conclusions, it is, nonetheless, incomplete. There is still much more to explore in this field of literature considered to be for women, not only in what concerns cover design, but also in what concerns the very nature of the text. This paper does not clarify, for instance, if there is a significant difference between book covers' designs of different publishing houses. It also does not clarify the authors' nationality, so that it would be possible to understand if the book covers analyzed are mere reproductions of the foreign covers or not, and what this says about our society's values as opposed to the values of other countries.

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