

Here she comes you better watch your step
She's going to play you for a fool it's true
It's not hard to realise
Just look into her false coloured eyes
She'll build you up to just put you down
What a clown

Cause everybody knows (She's a femme fatale)
The things she does to please (She's a femme fatale)
She's just a little tease (She's a femme fatale)
See the way she walks hear the way she talks
- REM Femme Fatale from the Dead Letter Office album (1987)

FEMME FATALE REVAMPED

Amanda du Preez

The *femme fatale* or the deadly female icon has been a popular theme throughout history. Whether she appeared as Helen of Troy, Circe, Medusa, Medea, Pandora¹ or as the Sirens in Greek mythology; or whether she made her cameo appearance in Judeo-Christian culture in the characters of Eve, Jezebel, Delilah, Judith, Salome or Lilith,² she nevertheless has made her presence felt in most mythological, social and religious systems. Nor has the figure of the *femme fatale* faded on the eve of the twenty-first century. Recently she has made her presence felt in the 'deadly' figures of Madonna, Naomi Campbell, Stella Tennant, Uma Thurman, Courtney Love, Tank Girl, Riot grrrls³ and in the *Sissy Boy Jeans* advertisements which form the focus of discussion in this article.

Fin de Siècle Femmes Fatales

The image of the *femme fatale* usually surfaces in times of social and economic uncertainties. Elaine Showalter (1991: 4) agrees that the *femme fatale* surfaces mostly 'when there are fears of regression and degeneration' and a desperate need 'for strict border controls around the definition of gender'. The late nineteenth century was such a period of uncertainty, especially regarding the role of the genders. The fact that more and more women entered the workplace and competed with men for jobs fuelled the image of the *femme fatale*. Furthermore, women started to lobby for suffrage during this period, which also caused men to expect an apocalyptic degeneration of society and gender roles.

The *femme fatale* became a symbol of women's so-called natural devious nature in *fin de siècle* culture. It seems, however, that the icon of the *femme fatale* had more to do with men and their reactions to women and nature in general, than with 'real' flesh and blood women of the period. Camille Paglia (1990: 13) agrees: 'The more nature is beaten back in the west, the more the *femme fatale* reappears, as a return of the repressed'. Carl Gustav Jung was also convinced that the devouring and almost cannibalistic aspects of the *femme fatale* referred to a 'deadly male anima' (Allen 1983: 9), which reappears with a vengeance whenever repressed. Men could flirt symbolically with their repressed and deadly animas (or rather the icon of the *femme fatale*) without standing a chance of losing anything significant during the interaction.



The *femme fatale* became a fetish, a male projection of fear of femininity and simultaneously a fascination with femininity. As Patrick Bade (1979: 6) puts it: 'This [*femme fatale*] was a male conception. In 19th century art women are seen almost exclusively through the eyes of men'. The *femme fatale*'s beautiful but dangerous face surfaced most frequently in literature and the visual arts. In literature she was evoked profoundly by JK Huysmans in *A Rebours* (1884) and in Stéphane Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* (1867). In the visual arts her presence was ominously depicted in Edvard Munch's and Félicien Rops's work. The *femme fatale* was also eternalised in Gustav Klimt's depictions of Judith and Salome. It is not without reason that Showalter (1991: 149) refers to Salome as the period's favourite phallic woman.

The image of the *femme fatale* was manipulated and controlled with both sadistic and masochistic impulses by male artists and poets. It was also artists and poets who aspired

to the so-called glorious state of being tortured by a beautiful woman. The English poet Swinburne held that a man's highest ambition should be to become the powerless victim of the furious rage of a beautiful woman (Mullins 1985: 46).

However, these warped fantasies of female rule did not find their way into legislation for women's suffrage, nor did they lead to any significant changes in the absurd position of women during this time. If anything, the icon of the *femme fatale* led to women being treated with more suspicion than before.

Fin de Millennium Femmes Fatales

What is left of the *femme fatale* on the eve of the twenty-first century? Are there only fading traces and glimpses left of her once deadly existence? The *femme fatale* is not resting in peace, instead she continually reappears in magazines and on television and silver screens. The *femme fatale* of the late twentieth century has become an apparition that haunts and teases her audience, she has become a 'disappearing body' (Kroker 1992: 23).

In an attempt to trace the clues left by the *femme fatale*, the work of the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard, analyst of contemporary culture, will hopefully throw some light on the 'disappearing body' of the *femme fatale*. Baudrillard's theory of the disappearing body forms part of his 'resuscitatory ideology of the simulacrum' (Kroker 1992: 23). Central to Baudrillard's theory is the assertion that the real has been replaced by the 'hyper-real' (Andersen 1995: 93). Culture has become little more than a hallucination of the real, a simulational world characterised by an endless series of copies of previous forms. Meaning is lost to the extent that it is no longer possible to make a perceivable distinction between the real and the hyper-real.

According to the ideology of the simulacrum the moment the *femme fatale*, or any other image for that matter appears, whether in a photograph or on a screen, is also the exact moment of her disappearance or symbolic death. The moment of her appearance is when she becomes an empty shell: a commodity - a selling line for a consumer product. The *femme fatale* has attained the status of a pure sign without a referent. As sign she has become senseless, absurd and that is exactly why she still seduces us, according to Baudrillard (1990: 61-63). So although she has become 'meaningless' in the traditional sense of the word, she is still seductive and fascinating.

Because the *femme fatale* as an icon does not refer to anything symbolically anymore, there is no dangerous creature lurking behind her smile. If she looks dangerous, it is only because she is simulating danger. She has escaped the 'terrorism of the referent' and has entered into the surface play of appearances. She has become a 'look' and in this specific case she appears in the world of advertising, where images have become everything, as the 'look' of the Sissy Boy Jeans girl.



In terms of fashion and appearances, what is sought these days is not beauty or attractiveness but the RIGHT LOOK according to Baudrillard (1993: 23). Everyone seeks their own specific look, which has nothing to do with claiming a specific existence or being, but far more with performance. So it is not a case of 'I exist, I am here!' but rather: 'I am visible, I am an image - look at me!' It seems as if everyone

has become the manager of their own appearances, where appearance or the 'look' has come to mean nothing more than a special effect, with no particular significance. However, power is still associated with appearances or looks.

Sissy Boy Femmes Fatales

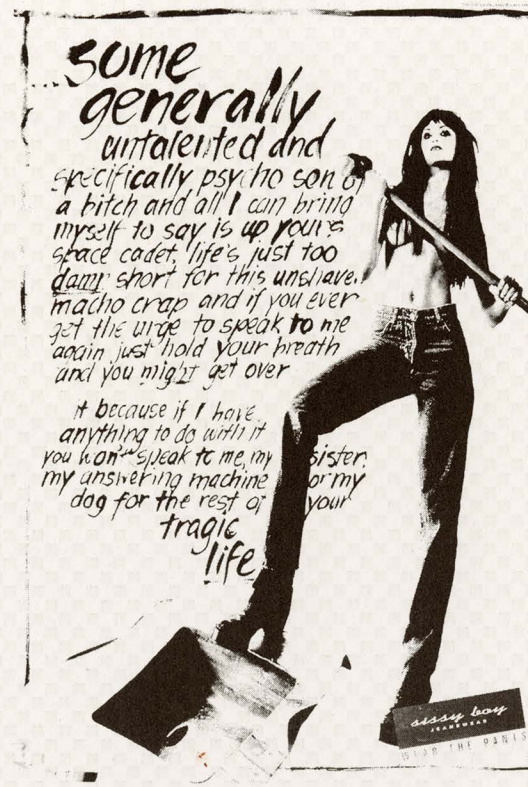
When first confronted with the series of Sissy Boy Jeans advertisements (the brainchild of Cape Town Jupiter Drawing Room advertising agency and winner of a recent advertising award) women are seduced into believing they are truly liberated and empowered. Women are persuaded that this is the face of the 'New Woman', in control of her own destiny and sexuality. Let no man stand in her way, for if he dares he will be cut back to size - literally!

The name *Sissy Boy* hints at a number of possible meanings. Is she a gender bender? An androgynous cyber babe? She is a boy but also a sissy, as the name indicates. Is she a weak boy? A cry baby? A deformed male? *Sissy Boy* is definitely used ironically. She may very well be a Baudrillardian 'symbolical

transsexual', 'a fatal sign-slide between the genders', who suffers from 'amnesia on the question of the sexual referent', as the meaning of the sexual referent is effaced by the cold light of the 'obscurity of communication' (Kroker 1992: 79). *Sissy Boy* has become indifferent to gender identity.

Could she be a male fantasy? She is awfully slender and elongated, almost phallic in appearance. This slender androgynous form overlaps with the

appearance of the late nineteenth century *femme fatale*. The unnerving boyish-girlish figures of the late nineteenth century echo *Sissy Boy*'s ephebian character. Could *Sissy Boy* be the reincarnation of male obsessions and fears in a late twentieth



century guise? Martha Kingsbury (1972: 183) describes the configuration of the *femme fatale* as:

... a woman seen frontally, her upright and frequently taut posture is combined with a thrown back head and lowered eyelids. The upright carriage projects power and control ... But the thrown-back head and lowered eyes seem to signal both abandon and acquiescence.

One does not need much imagination to recognise that *Sissy Boy* shares all the distinctive features of her nineteenth century sister. Both *Sissy Boy* and the nineteenth century *femme fatale* are a combination of 'hypnotic fascination and total self-forgetting passion' (Kingsbury 1972: 183).

However, this version of the *femme fatale*, or rather this appropriated version, has in fact become a hard selling line

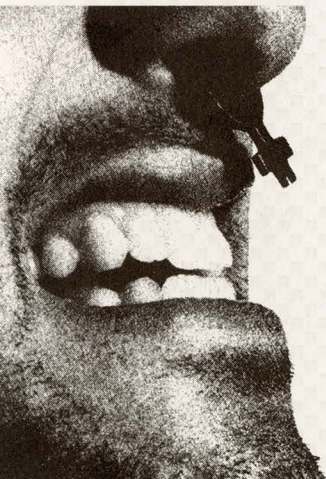
in recent advertising campaigns. The *femme fatale* as portrayed by the *Sissy Boy* advertisements (and recent Edgars jeans advertisements) is instrumentalised and used by late capitalism to sell jeans. The women we see in these advertisements are tough, no-nonsense cyber babes or Riot grrrls with attitudes from hell. Has this *femme fatale* type become a role model for young women? More importantly: what happens to the *femme fatale* in an age of simulations?

In the first advertisement *Sissy Boy* is a demolition babe who has taken the phallic hammer in her own hands and demolished the kitchen sink. Good for her! One is reminded of the lyrics of a Eurhythmics song entitled *You have placed a chill in my heart*. In this song Annie Lennox sings of '... a woman just too tired to think of the dirty old dishes in the kitchen sink.' No more barefoot and pregnant in front of the kitchen sink. One is also reminded of another feminist slogan: 'You start by sinking into his arms and end up with your arms in his sink'. *Sissy Boy* does not sink into suburbia or submission. She is free and in control. She has liberated herself from all repressive systems. Or could this be the inverted face of those old repressions?

The text accompanying the advertisement is witty, aggressive and apparently very woman friendly. It reads as follows:

Some generally untalented and specifically psycho son of a bitch and all I can bring myself to say is up yours space cadet, life's just too damn short for this unshaven macho crap and if you ever get the urge to speak to me again just hold your breath and you might get over it because if I have anything to do with it you won't speak to me, my sister, my answering machine or my dog for the rest of your tragic life

The fact that we see *Sissy* with a metaphorical 'phallic hammer' in her hands is an attractive image by virtue of its androgynous qualities. Here we have a female armed with



(man handle)





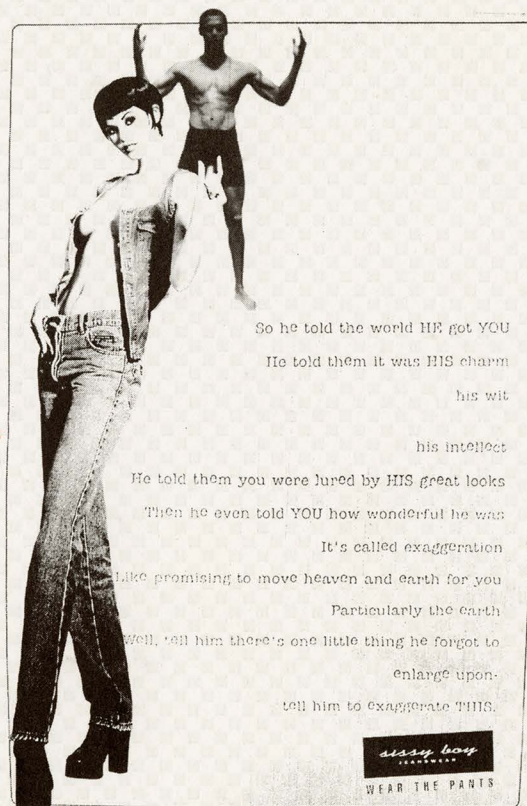
a traditional 'male' weapon. She visually combines both feminine and masculine gender qualities. She is dangerous and armed. When approaching this image from a psychoanalytical perspective two options are open. On the one hand the fact that this woman is armed with a 'phallic' hammer could be soothing to voyeurs and crotch clutched. 'A woman who acts as if she already possessed a penis is, for the watcher, a reassuring spectacle, in that she is less likely to try and rob him of his own' (Lucie-Smith 1991: 203).

By challenging the voyeur with her hammer *Sissy Boy* could be deconstructing the male viewer's privileged position. Laura Mulvey (1989: 14) states that it is the image of the 'castrated woman' that ironically constitutes meaning in patriarchal society, because it is the woman's lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence. What happens when the woman has her own 'penis', as is the case with *Sissy Boy*? Instead of comforting the male viewer regarding his potency, she blatantly challenges his potency. *Sissy Boy* does not play out her role as castrated woman. She rather plays the role of a castrating woman, not contrived and controlled by male psyches, but a phallic woman in her own right.

Sissy's make-up is vampire-like, with black circles around the eyes. In this regard she compares favourably with the *femme fatale* visual type created during the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁴ The identities of the vampire and the *femme fatale* were often confused and conflated during this period. Just as the *femme fatale* was associated with subversive erotic impulses and compensatory anxieties, the vampire also expressed these distorted sexual energies. Furthermore, both the vampire and the *femme fatale* were regarded as energy sapping forces that left their victims for dead after they had finished with them.

Sissy also shares visual characteristics with the mythical figure of Salome as she was portrayed by *fin de siècle* art-

ists. Salome was interpreted by the avant garde artists of the Symbolist movement specifically as the decapitator of men. She seduced and then devoured her victims mercilessly. Salome was sometimes depicted with the head of her victim to demonstrate her deadly masquerade. Gustav Moreau's numerous depictions of Salome with the head of John the Baptist as her victory price are good examples of this phenomenon.



Sissy Boy with the hammer in her hand suggests the same message. *Sissy* differs from her nineteenth century sister though, because she supposedly embodies the liberation of women. Salome was a male fantasy created for men to prove women's devious nature. *Sissy* on the other hand, is created by *fin de millennium* culture to turn woman into a

liberating sign by means of selling a commodity. *Sissy* is a playful symbol that hints at danger, but leaves male potency intact.

We may well ask how liberating can an icon such as the *femme fatale* disguised as *Sissy Boy* be? Perhaps women's liberation from the *femme fatale* type will come through the deconstruction of male fantasies of the *femme fatale* type? Do the *Sissy Boy Jeans* advertisements deconstruct an old patriarchal fantasy about the *femme fatale*? Or do they promote *femme fatale* behaviour as liberating?

Paglia, controversial assassin of the feminist establishment, supports the theme of *femme fatale* behaviour. She suspects all women of being born devious and dangerous, in other words of being born as *femmes fatales*. Paglia (1990: 13) asserts that

The femme fatale is one of the most mesmerising of sexual personae. She is not a fiction but an extrapolation of biologic realities in women that remain constant.

and

Feminism has tried to dismiss the femme fatale as a misogynist libel, a hoary cliché. But the femme fatale expresses woman's ancient and eternal control of the sexual realm. The spectre of the femme fatale stalks all of men's relations with women (Paglia 1992: 15).

Although one might agree with Paglia that women are not born as victims, it could be argued that neither are they born as vixens. If anything they are born androgynous - nothing more and nothing less, even though societal and debilitating gender roles have made them less for a long time. Elizabeth Badinter (1992: 111) asserts woman's androgynous nature: 'We are born androgynous, then we assert our gender. And then if we are secure in our identities, we become androgynous again.' Although the *femme fatale* type may have liberating moments, it may just be the other side of the victim coin.

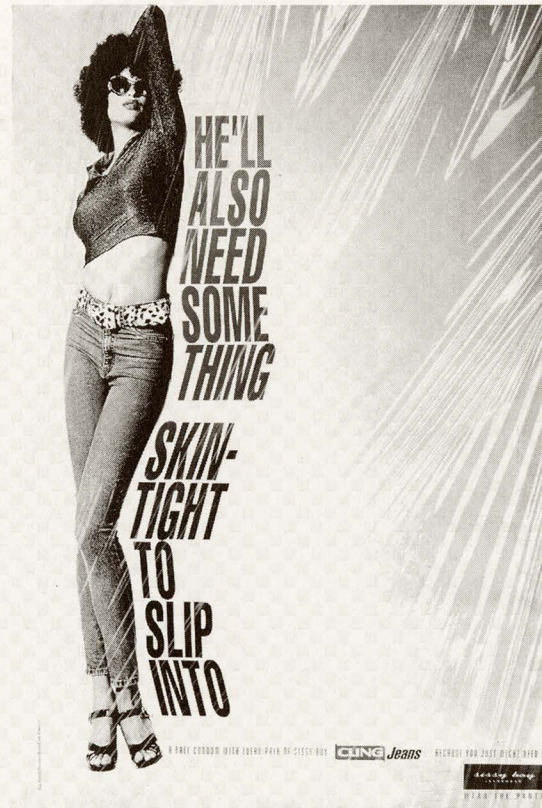
The second Sissy Boy advertisement under discussion plays with the 'size issue'. The text reads:

So he told the world HE got YOU. He told them it was HIS charm, his wit, his intellect. He told them you were lured by HIS great looks. Then he even told YOU how wonderful he was. It's called exaggeration. Like promising to move heaven and earth for you. Particularly the earth. Well, tell him there's one little thing he forgot to enlarge upon - tell him to exaggerate THIS.

'Exaggerate this!' shows a very seductive and scantily clad Sissy Boy. She indicates a smallish size between her thumb and forefinger. The man in the background indicates a much larger size stretching from one hand to the other. A small penis subtly airbrushed on the man's pants falls exactly between the woman's fingers, suggesting that Sissy Boy has the man in her hand, so to speak. Could this be a Bobbit thing?

The Freudian overtones are obvious - men are lacking in size and in any case they stand to lose whatever they have. Once again Sissy Boy does not play the role of the mere female bearer of a masculine meaning, she becomes the maker of her own meaning. By upsetting the conventional roles of active male viewer and passive female image (Mulvey 1989: 19) this advertisement deconstructs the theories of castration anxiety and penis envy.

In the Sissy Boy Jeans advertisements, as well as in a recent Edgars television commercial for jeans, the castration anxiety theory is mocked. The Edgars commercial shows a man and woman sharing a train compartment. The woman is reading while the man falls asleep. While he sleeps she takes out a pair of scissors and cuts off the button of his pants. We see her devious face behind the scissors before she takes her souvenir and disembarks at the next station. The man awakes, grasps his pants (his potency?) and catches sight of the woman through the window. As she turns, viewers observe her whole bag covered with buttons from previous



victims. This advertisement is a wonderful example of 'symbolic displacement' (Lucie-Smith 1991: 227) - the sexual organ of the man is not threatened directly, but instead the button of his pants is cut off. We are reminded of Delilah who cut off Samson's hair while he was sleeping, symbolising the cropping of the penis. Although these advertisements hint at danger they are presented in a tongue-in-cheek manner, causing a sigh of relief rather than anxiety.

The third advertisement presents Sissy Boy issuing a sexual invitation. She is dressed to kill, or rather she kills to dress. Her pose is inviting and her mouth simulates a Marilyn Monroe pout. The text affirms the message: 'He'll also need something skin-tight to slip into.' We are informed that a free condom accompanies every pair of jeans purchased. By the

looks of Sissy she will definitely need the condom. The implication is that the purchaser will also need one. Is this the face of the liberated female who takes control of her own destiny and, very importantly, of her own sexuality?

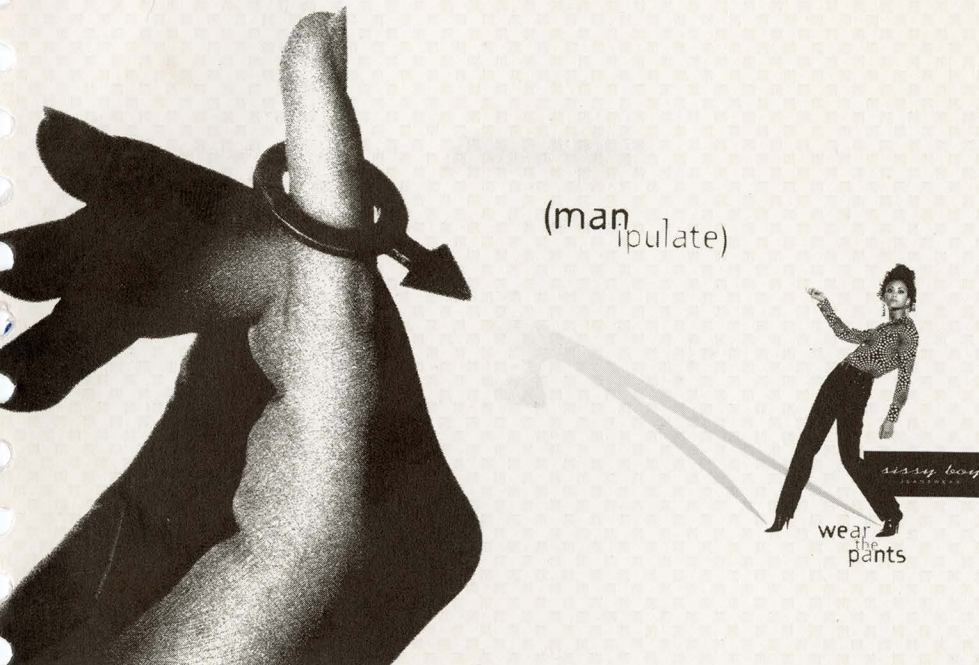
Sissy Boy seems to be in absolute control. She uses condoms and advocates safe sex. In this regard Sissy Boy also harks back to the *femme fatale* of the late nineteenth century. 'The *femme fatale* no matter how amorous, does not conceive' (Allen 1983: 4). In other words the *femme fatale* controls her own sexuality by remaining sterile during any sexual interaction, denying the man an offspring. The late nineteenth century *femme fatale* remains barren, while she seduces men and drains them of their vital powers. It is interesting to note that the *femme fatale* rejects maternity and that the years during which she came to maturity were marked by the first significant birth control campaigns as well as the female emancipation movements mentioned earlier (Allen 1983: 193-194).

In the final example of the Sissy Boy Jeans advertisements⁵ under discussion we see a female hand with the symbol for masculinity swinging around her little finger. The copy reads: **(man)-i-pulate.**⁶ To the right of the picture frame we see the small dancing figure of Sissy Boy celebrating her victory like a joyous Salome. She explicitly encourages women to manipulate, exactly that quality women have been suspected of for centuries. Urban legend has it that women manipulate when they want their way. Men are warned against lustful women, because they seduce and play games to get what they want, and now Sissy Boy encourages women at the dawn of the twenty-first century, to do exactly that, namely to manipulate.

What does manipulation mean in an age of simulated appearances and images? In an age of indifference and scepticism, manipulation can only be simulated. Women are seduced to believe that they can still manipulate, when in actual fact all that is being manipulated are signs without

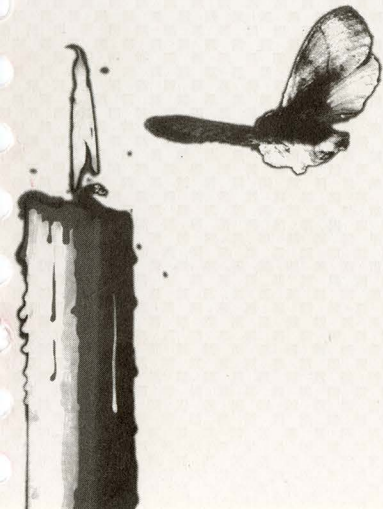


symbolic reference. *Sissy Boy* does not refer to a hidden symbolic temptress. What you see is exactly what you get. She is an image, a look, an appearance. However, this does not imply that appearances are not associated with power.



Le plus ça change...

The cultural construct of the *femme fatale* assigns women the power to control men, even to destroy them, by using their beauty and ability to compel men's attraction. Yet this form of power always remains within the bounds of patriarchy. A woman who chooses to exercise this power is confined to the given categories of attraction and appearance. Hopefully non-patriarchal forms of womanly power would look very different.



Even if the *Sissy Boy Jeans* advertisements appeal to women's desire for success and power, the commodity cannot and will not satisfy these yearnings. A woman will not become independent, successful or powerful by wearing *Sissy Boy Jeans*. Social and economic power cannot be bought within the realm of consumption - they will have to come through political, social and economic change.

The *Sissy Boy Jeans* advertisements create the image of the androgynous vixen in the late twentieth century. The sign-slide androgyne in these advertisements is presented intelligently and wittily. The liberating moments of the masculinised female have been coopted by late capitalistic strategies to sell a product, but it still remains to be debated whether becoming masculinised is truly liberating for all women. Should women embrace the coy *Sissy Boy* type or should they remain sceptical about what is being sold to them? Wear these pants BUT do not expect instant liberation, because the *femme fatale* is dead - long live the image of the *femme fatale*.

Notes

- 1 In Greek mythology Pandora is the first woman. She is described as a bitter gift from the gods. She cannot help but do harm, because she is a 'lovely curse' and a 'beautiful bad thing' (Warner 1985: 213-5).
- 2 Lilith was the first wife of Adam according to Jewish folklore. She was later transformed into a demon who haunted men.
- 3 The Riot grrrl movement was established in 1991 as a loose-knit affiliation of feminist punk in Olympia, Washington. They subscribe to rallying cries such as 'Revolution Girl Style Now!' Their activities include a few 'zines' such as *Girl Germs*, *Satan Wears A Bra* and *Quit Whining* and they have formed punk bands such as *Bikini Kill* and *Bratmobile*.
- 4 The vampire look also surfaced in early films as the vamp archetype, for instance with Theda Bara, who was referred to as 'the handmaiden of the devil', and later Mae West.

- 5 The four advertisements discussed in this article are not the complete series. Others in the series, like the one with the black widow spider, explicitly confirm the link between the *Sissy Boy Jeans* advertisements and the icon of the *femme fatale*. The text for the black widow advertisement reads:

The black widow spider lies in wait for her partner to come to her. She will barely tolerate his courtship ritual. If she finds it irritating, she'll simply eat him up. Should his overtures succeed and he is allowed to mate with her, she'll eat him anyway. Wear the pants.

Another advertisement in the series shows a reclining nude man with the caption 'Well two can play at that game', while another shows scenes from the *Kama Sutra*, hinting at sexual emancipation and control.

- 6 Two similar advertisements in the series play on the words *management* and *manhandle*.

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Illustrations

All images are from print advertisements for *Sissy Boy Jeanswear* by The Jupiter Drawing Room, Cape Town