

Colin Loughran
Spring 2018
Visual Culture
Gene Gort

***Vogue* Magazine Cover Photos**

A magazine that covers various topics such as fashion, beauty, culture, and runway, *Vogue* has been regarded as a well-known fashion and lifestyle publication. Founded by Arthur Baldwin, *Vogue* began in 1892 as a weekly newspaper then became a monthly publication since 1973. Throughout the years, *Vogue* has primarily focused on modern day beauty, using models in every cover photo. At times the images were up close, focusing on a model's facial features or consisted of the full body to advertise the latest fashion. One of the biggest impressions seen in the cover photos is fantasy. The targeted audience also changed with the evolving cover images. At the beginning, it was meant to promote a fancy way of life for the upper class. *Vogue* transitioned from styles of wealth and elegance to the latest fashions and sex appeal. This change followed contemporary media culture and an audience whose views have changed on beauty, popular culture, gender, and the current views of style. Sari Rosenberg from Lifetime states:

“As styles and society changed, *Vogue* managed to maintain its role as a fashion authority and trendsetter. For the past 125 years, *Vogue* has been there to document and influence the sartorial and societal vicissitudes in the United States and around the world” (Rosenberg, 2017).

In the early years of *Vogue*, the target audience was primarily the upper class. The first issue hit newsstands on December 17th, 1892 in New York (Morgan, 2017). The very first covers backed in black and white. Then by the early 20th century they were printed in color. The cover photos consisted of illustrations of people who were considered glamorous. There were only white, wealthy- looking women depicted on the covers. The outfits that they were wearing were stylish and elegant. These images were used in full illustration and described as charming storytelling pictures. The very first issue of *Vogue* consisted of a watercolor painting of a woman wearing a fancy dress holding a bouquet of flowers. This figure was the main focus

of the cover photo. The purpose of this cover photo was to showcase the latest style using the term 'in vogue'. "The first cover featured a debutante at her debut- not much of a surprise there" (Lady Constance, 2014). According to its founding publisher Arthur Baldwin, the first issue was released with the aim of attracting. The image reflects the culture of society during the late 19th century by representing what women were into, what fashionable style was, and what beauty was meant to look like.

In a 1919 edition, the cover photo consist of an illustration of a white woman in a fancy dress, holding an umbrella at a sunny day at the beach. The woman is looking stylish and wealthy as usual for *Vogue* at the time. She is looking straight at the viewer. The way she is holding the umbrella look extremely feminine with the way her arms are in position and she has no grip on the umbrella at all. Her hands are positioned very delicate and feminine as well which is not the usual way a woman holds an umbrella. This image gives the impression to other woman of the 1920s what elegant way of living should mostly look like.

During the 1920s, French artist Pierre Mourgue established himself in the fashion world thanks to his contribute to *Vogue*. His illustrations were

"undoubted prettiness tempered by a harder and breezily effective line and from time to time by the gently satirical eye he casts on the pretensions of the fashionable" (William Packer, 188).

One of his July covers alone displays his talents with an image of racegoers on a tropical course, a woman wearing a pink Ascot dress and wide red hat, and a man in a topper and morning coat. Both figures are meant to be studying their horse in the ring. Pierre Mourgue continued naturalistically to create two of his most charming and successful covers in his lifetime.

The year 1930 was the point in time when *Vogue* cover photos were "delicately poised between an established position and development, perhaps decline, in the future" (William Packer, 216). In the cover photos, there was a transition from a romantic statuesque ideal to a seemingly self-parodying linear stylization. Then switched back to a Picasso style dream. In November of that year, the most important single cover of the year appeared. "It is the first *Vogue* cover ever to carry the signature of Carl Erickson, and although it is not absolutely his best, it is entirely typical" (William Packer, 216). Erickson characterized the thirties more than

any other artist. “His loose, economical, sometimes all but idiographic technique becomes the major influence upon fashion illustration for a generation” (William Packer, 216).

In July 1932, the first color photograph from Edward Steichen appeared on the cover of *Vogue* (Laird Borrelli-Persson, 2017). Steichen was one of the most creative individuals in the history of photography. 1932 was the year *Vogue* made a transition from hand drawn images to photographs of models. This cover photo consisted of a woman wearing a swimsuit from the 1930s holding a beach ball over her head. This image was quite significant from other cover photos because there is a lot of shadow used on the model. Her face is unrecognizable because there is more dark areas than light. Although if you look closer at her face the viewer can tell the model is smiling. What is meant to be a summer season advertising image, there is no sun or brightness used in the image. *Vogue* wanted to take a risk and make the image “less conventional” (Audrey Sands, 2014). This image is less conventional because *Vogue* cover photos have used so much shadow on a figure before. After this issue was released, *Vogue* gained the status as serving as a beacon of culture and a pioneer in the publication of modern photography.

Salvador Dali’s 1938 cover is a surreal painting that displays two female bodies with flowers and branches for heads. The light is shining from the right side leaving a trail of shadow going towards the left of the image. This image releases the creative potential of the unconscious mind which makes it surrealistic. This image is meant to captivate elegant lifestyle depicted by the fashion industry. The use of fantasy or dream imagery either reminds the audience of what they don’t have and create desire. Or lets them escape from their lifestyle into a more appealing one. “Fantasy is vital for the human mind because it becomes an important adult coping mechanism” (Beth Webb, 2007).

Throughout the century, the audience for *Vogue* changed slowly. It was not targeted to upper-class society as much anymore. The magazine covers mainly appealed to the youth. At the time covers used sexual appeal to openly discuss sexuality. These cover photos used contemporary fashion as its main theme along with sex appeal and outer beauty to attract viewers. According to William Packer:

“So it is that the magazine itself becomes the image of its time, affecting our retrospective attitudes and expectations, taking on a documentary importance

quite as much in the sphere of social history as in that of the more particular study of the visual arts” (William Packer, 11).

By the mid-20th century, *Vogue* cover photos were becoming digital photographs as society was rapidly changing with new technology. *Vogue* had already released their first photographic issue in 1932. Decades later, 1959 was the first year that all of *Vogue* magazine covers were photographic (Laird Borrelli-Persson, 2017). Since the 1970’s digital photography became an important element for *Vogue*. The cover photos have since consisted of models that are mostly women. *Vogue* focused on real life beauty that also included famous celebrities. These images use the gaze as there is always a desire between the viewer and subject in the cover photo. According to philosopher Michael Foucault, it is a “look” into an “intent” look (Jennifer Reinhardt).

In several issues in later decades, the cover photos were focused up close to the model’s face. Starting since the late 1960s and throughout the 1970’s the model’s face was all there was to be seen. These cover photos were all about the beauty of facial features. During that era, the face of a model was advertising the meanings of beauty and style for its current audience. These covers photos on the front of magazines were the key to lure in a viewer to look into the latest fashion. These images were to inspire women on how to look beautiful and fashionable. For that current culture, beauty was what was on the face that included hair and make-up. In these cover photos the model is looking straight into the camera to make contact with its viewer. The eye contact creates relation with the viewer as well. According to Jacques Lacan’s theory of the gaze, these images enact desire and aspiration. Gaze in Lacan’s later work refers to the: “uncanny sense that the object of our eye’s look or glance is somehow looking back at us of its own will” (Dino Felluga).

The models had layers of make-up applied to them to help make the image visually appealing. The models’ hair is either stylized or wavy as part of the beauty composition. Commonly the focus of the cover photos is the fashion *Vogue* is presenting. The model is being used all dressed up and posing in a specific manner to advertise the latest style. The female model is promoting what beauty looks like for the specific era the issue is released. Using the term interpellation, these cultural images from *Vogue* are addressing their viewer on giving the idea of how to address contemporary beauty.

In the most recent cover photos from *Vogue*, the models enhance the sex appeal to attract viewers. The reason for this is to create voyeurism, to give sexual pleasure to the viewer in these images. Models are always portrayed beautiful. At times celebrities were the main focus of the cover photo because audiences have always looked and paid attention to them daily. The models were of different race and gender in the most recent decades. In August 1974, Beverly Johnson created a historic moment by being the first black woman to appear on the cover of *Vogue* (Janelle Okwodu, 2016). In April 2014, *Vogue* put the first interracial couple on a cover photo. Recently married celebrities, Kim Kardashian and Kanye West both model as they were the most talked about couple. *Vogue* is presenting romantic marriages as a desirable lifestyle. This image presents the ideas of romance and blossoming relationships that creates Lacan's concept of desire. According to Lacan's theory of desire in relationships there is always a demand that is more than an object. It is demanding for love and recognition. Lacan's theory claims "that for each of the partners in the relationship, it is not enough to be subjects of need or objects of love- they must hold the place of the cause of desire" (Owen Hewitson, 2010).

Usually when both genders are together in a cover photo sexual pleasure becomes enhanced. In a 2011 edition, the cover photo consisted of three models, one woman and two men. All three models seen are attractive. The female model is positioned between the two male models. She is wearing a large amount of eye shadow that gives her a lot of attention. The make-up make the woman somewhat more intense and intimidating so is equal with the two male models. Her sleeve is hanging off to expose part of her breast and her arm is wrapped around one of the men's chest. Her other hand is grabbing her genital area suggesting sexual pleasure which is displaying voyeurism to the viewers. The other male model is standing right behind the woman with hands in his pockets and is the only model not looking straight into the camera. All the models' hair style is wavy and almost wild-like, instead of flat and ordinary. That makes the image more visually appealing to look at because it is supporting the arrangement of voyeurism. This composition of the three models gives the viewer beauty and desire because it displays three way sexual encounter and fantasy. According to Lacan's theory "fantasy is the means by which the subject maintains at the level of vanishing desire" (Ecrits, Hewitson, 2010). The inclusion of fantasy and desire in this image is to make women aspire and crave to be in that position of the female model.

Another 2011 edition has similar style with one female and one male model posing together. The female model is posing in front with the male right behind holding her. The woman is standing in a sexy appealing position with a tilted hip and arm over her head. The man has his arms around her waists nearly lifting her skirt up to reveal some of her skin on her upper thighs. Both models are looking straight into the camera thus making eye contact with the viewer. There is seemingly an element of lust as the male model is nearly interacting sexually with the woman. This images enhances the sex appeal between the two different sexes that makes viewers attracted to look upon it.

In a 2012 edition, the female model is wearing a two piece outfit and is looks wet from the display of her hair. The only part that is covered on her upper half is her breast. Meaning a lot of her skin is shown to display a sexual attractiveness. Her upper body is in a curved position and one of her arms is over her head. This relates to Lacan's theory of the gaze in which this image gives of a desire and envious. This image uses scopophilia because there is an impression of sexual pleasure and the model is displayed in an erotic nature. On the model's face there is no expression. Her facial expression is the new modern look in the world of modeling, with the enhanced sex appeal that women are portraying. Her face displays what men would want to see when it comes to seduction and sexual pleasure. In the cover photo are the texts "Turns up the Heat" and "The best of a beautiful season" to go along with the posing model. The texts compliment the beauty and the sex appeal of the female model. These texts also help enhance from what the model is impressing. The words are the signifiers and the model is what is being signified.

Female models have been quite objectified sexually in several cover photos. One recent cover photo in black and white consist of two women sitting together and nearly kissing one another. The element of black and white in a *Vogue* cover photo is quite significant because it's a departure from the decades of color imaging used on the magazines. They are both sitting down on a grass field wearing bras so a majority of their skin is revealed. One of the woman's hands is touching the other woman's arm in a gentle manner. This cover photo appears as a male fantasy with two women together looking sexy and attractive. According to Lacan's concept: "our desire is never properly our own, but is created through fantasies that are caught up in cultural ideologies rather than material sexuality" (Dino Felluga). For women, this can also relate to embracing sexuality. This image seemingly displays lesbianism because it

convinces two women, the same sex, can show affection and love for each other. It convinces two women can love one another sexually regardless if they are straight or gay. This signifies an appeal to homosexuality, bisexuality and even pansexuality. The image demonstrates how women are more affective to one another than men are. Women value friendships with other women more that they share a closer bond to engage in such activity. The viewers then react with the gaze theory as they form a relation to the action in the image.

Another cover photo focuses on a female model at the center angling her neck and hip. Coming from the side are male arms reaching out and gently grabbing her jacket to indicate the sexiness the female model beholds to men. The arms indicate how model's beauty attracts several men. Importantly the woman does not fight back rather just stands there. She doesn't mind the sexual attention the men around are having towards her. Rather she feels admired by male attention and by the occasion of revealing her skin and breasts. This image suggest the woman is indicating seduction. The seduction indicates voyeurism by creating sexual pleasure to look upon. Not only is this female objectification but this image suggests that women embrace their sexuality. *Vogue* uses sexuality as a power for women to use.

In May 1961 Sophia Loren becomes one of the first celebrities to be featured on the cover of *Vogue*. This change open many opportunities for the magazine in years to come. Numerous Hollywood celebrities were used instead of professional models. Our American culture has always admired these kinds of people which gives *Vogue* magazine the advantage. These various Hollywood celebrities were able to pose and create sex appeal just as any model could do. Why else include a famous movie star instead of a lesser known model. A Hollywood star already has the attractive figure and experience working in front of a camera. A famous actor or actress has the sex appeal look that makes audiences give their attention. In the numerous cover photos consisting of celebrities, there is often cleavage that is noticeable to the viewer. This gives *Vogue* an advantage since actors and actresses commonly reveal most of their skin in film or in the press. Similar to how modeling has always worked. Famous women such as Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift, Anne Hathaway, Adele, etc. have been featured at least more than once and were able to pose like a professional model. Using celebrities often makes a *Vogue* cover more exciting and intriguing to audiences. Audiences love to learn more about the life of the celebrity that is being featured from watching them perform in the media. A simple way to understand the culture at a different time was to see who the biggest celebrity in Hollywood

was at one point that would make them the subject of a *Vogue* cover photo. At a one point in time, if they are a rising star or a fan favorite *Vogue* would take advantage of that status and easily attract an audience.

Some cover photos don't embellish any sex appeal. In December 1998, *Vogue* released an issue of the First Lady at the time Hillary Clinton. The first time an American First Lady was featured on the cover of *Vogue*. Released during the Christmas season, there is a holiday theme associated with the image. The text that reads: "*Vogue's* 12 Days of Christmas" signifies the holiday theme associated with this image. Hillary Clinton is sitting up straight on a couch at a bit of a longer distance from the camera than *Vogue* usually does. With her status as a politician, she looks professional and empowering because with this cover photo *Vogue* is displaying her successful career. With having Hillary Clinton just sitting up straight for the camera *Vogue* succeeds in establishing her as a career woman who is strong willed and inspiring. There is a text in this image that reads "The Extraordinary Hillary Clinton" signifying her accomplishment and herself as an inspiring woman.

"Clinton looks extremely well put together at all times. She always looks professional, determined, and powerful, I'm sure with the help of an amazing style and makeup team" (Hayli Goode 2015).

Hillary Clinton proves that in an image, sexuality does not need to be embraced to feel empowerment, and that a strong work reputation can influence viewers. Her smiling straight to the camera indicates inner beauty with her showing high spirit and enthusiasm. This image was suitable at the time of release because Hillary Clinton was working in office at the time. Thus making the image suitable for audiences. In a 2009 edition, First Lady Michelle Obama is the only model appearing on the cover. She is only the second First Lady following Hillary Clinton to make the cover of *Vogue*. She is positioned sitting on a couch looking like a professional politician. She stares straight into the camera, to the viewer and giving a nice smile. She is of no means using any sort of sex appeal and wearing an outfit appropriately. This pose and look gives respect to Michelle Obama as a First Lady and important politician of the country. The text labeled next to her reads "The First Lady the world's been waiting for". This text signifies the newly appointed First Lady making Michelle Obama signified. This cover photo is somewhat a departure from other *Vogue* images, making the image significant in the magazine series. There is a conservatism display of fashion but no attractiveness used in the image. It is

instead advertising an important political and historic subject making Michelle Obama a different case from other celebrities that were used. Unlike most female models that *Vogue* has shown audiences, Michelle Obama still makes an impression that does not consist of sex appeal. It is more of an inspiring impression on viewers in a professional matter. *Vogue* uses Michelle Obama as a role model for audience instead of the common beauty desire. On the other hand, Michelle Obama is still appearing beautiful and pleasurable to look upon as is the case for all *Vogue* cover photos. However if there were any sex appeal displayed in the image, it would lead into a negative effect on the viewer indicating that *Vogue* is wrongly objectifying not only a respected First Lady and politician, but an important figure in history.

On the one hundred anniversary of *Vogue* in a 1992 edition, the cover photo consisted of a group of women wearing white, posing for the camera. There is a total of ten women, nine of them are Caucasian and one colored. *Vogue* has never used this number of models for a cover photo. They all are dressed in the same white pants and shirt exposing their stomach looking straight into the camera. Why would *Vogue* bring almost a dozen female models into one image? Where cover photos have never consisted that many in the past. Using several women in one cover photo indicates the number of years that *Vogue* has been around for. Each model represents a decade, and ten models together would then be equivalent to one hundred years. Having nine of the models Caucasian shows how in the past, models were primarily white woman. Meaning that the one woman of color in the group implies the fact that there has been few models of color used in cover photos up to this point in time. This analysis explains the lack of diversity *Vogue* has had. Along with the text that reads “100th Anniversary Special” this cover photo creates a celebration and excitement for women and *Vogue*. This image represents the success it has endured in the fashion world. As well as its century long history of advertising the latest beauty and lifestyle. This image uses Michel Foucault’s term biopower. All the bodies of the models hold particular kinds of meanings and knowledge. Just like in Foucault’s term, the bodies are all constructed through a couple techniques. Foucault claims “They force the body to emit signs” in an image similar to this (Cartwright 110). This image became an iconic *Vogue* cover photo and one of their highest selling issues.

Vogue has what a woman desires in life, from the latest, hottest fashions to the perfect lifestyle. It satisfies the desire to be fully feminine, beautiful, and very attractive. *Vogue* was always able to change with the current culture at any era in order to stay contemporary, for the

viewers' satisfaction. Each issue released in the past century perfectly demonstrates the culture and society of each specific era. Sari Rosenberg of Lifetime states:

“To this day, *Vogue* continues to set new trends, while chronicling our ever-changing culture and style. With 22 print editions from *Vogue Japan* to *Vogue Saudi Arabia*, the magazine reaches over 24 million readers around the globe” (Rosenberg, 2017).

If there were not captivating and charming female personalities to display, *Vogue* would not be as successful as it has become. The female models and celebrities are vital in filling the images with creativity and vision. From the beginning *Vogue* has always depended on artistic imagery to attract and lure viewers. It was vital that *Vogue* cover photos appear visually appealing in every image. Even when the emergence of digital imaging came about, models were crucial to the subject matters of modern artistic beauty. “*Vogue* has been there all the while, both documenting and influencing our fashion sense” (Rosenberg, 2017). *Vogue* is regarded as a source of inspiration for women everywhere, claiming women can be unique and successful.

Works Cited

How well do you know *Vogue*? Philippa Morgan, November 23, 2017

<https://en.vogue.me/culture/living/15-vogue-magazine-facts/>

Salvador Dali Vogue Covers, Lomography, December 12, 2011

<https://www.lomography.com/magazine/132303-salvador-dali-vogue-covers>

The Real Purpose of Fantasy, Beth Webb, April 23rd, 2007

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/apr/23/bridgingthegapswhyweneed>

Gaze, The Chicago School of Media Theory, Jennifer Reinhardt, 2018

<https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/gaze/>

Modules on Lacan: On the Gaze, *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*, Dino Felluga,

<https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/lacangaze.html>

How Beverly Johnson Broke Fashion's Glass Ceiling, Janelle Okwodu, August 2016

<https://www.vogue.com/article/beverly-johnson-vogue-cover-changed-fashion>

19 Hillary Clinton Magazine Covers..., Hayli Goode, April 12, 2015, Bustle

<https://www.bustle.com/articles/75475-19-hillary-clinton-magazine-covers-from-time-to-vogue-that-illustrate-her-accomplished-political-history>

Practice of Looking; An Introduction to Visual Culture Second Edition, Cartwright, Sturken, 2009, Oxford University Press, New York

December 17, 1892: the First Issue of Vogue Magazine, Lady Constance, December 17, 2014, Threading Through Time

<https://threadingthroughtime.wordpress.com/2014/12/17/december-17-1892-the-first-issue-of-vogue-magazine/>

#SheDidThat, Sari Rosenberg, December 17, 2017, Lifetime

<https://www.mylifetime.com/she-did-that/december-17-1892-the-first-issue-of-vogue-was-published>

About the Publication, Audrey Sands, 2014 Object Photo

<https://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/publications/788.html>

Packer, William, "The Art of Vogue Covers" Harmony Books, New York, 1980

Pages 11-216