

# The Meanings of Images Across Cultures

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## Abstract

In this paper we present our videodisc project (a videodisc of multinational print advertisements) asking the question, "Who will be the audience?" In order to answer it we engage in a comparative analysis of the construction of the reader/consumer (audience) in French and American advertisements. Our first comparison takes into consideration the imaging of men and women in perfume and cosmetic ads. Next, we look at Americans and French looking at each other across the ocean: stereotyping constructions by the foreign 'other' help us to destabilize our most cherished notions of ourselves and at the same time allow us to open ourselves to new ways of being in the world.

It might appear redundant, inane, perhaps a bit suicidal, to propose to produce a videodisc that houses some 54,000 advertising images from the print media given the ubiquity of advertising in our world. It is estimated that the average American is subjected to between 1000 and 1500 ads per day. Advertising, moreover, *pays* to make itself seen and heard, or at least pretends to give itself away free. Who, then, especially in a logic of supply and demand, would be a willing and benefiting audience for yet more commercial exposure?

It is precisely the pervasiveness of advertising in today's world that has led us to collect and analyze these quotidian texts of consumer society banality. However much one tries to ignore or avoid advertising, it continually infiltrates deeper and more broadly into almost every facet of communications in the world. It has been said that advertising serves the function of artistic cultural production in the twentieth century: as such, it follows the "making strange" of the familiar that characterizes aesthetic production and consumption. We have found, however, that advertising's "foreignness" operates more on a surface level and that specific social attitudes and practices are meant to be preserved at all costs.

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Our project in general and specifically in this paper is to "read" advertising through comparative lenses. Through the juxtaposition of culturally (here, as functions of the nation-states of France and the United States of America) different commercial presentations of the same products within the same time periods and in publications directed at roughly the same class, we propose to demonstrate some of the most salient features of identity construction in France and the United States.<sup>1</sup> We are surgically targeting the "banal" images of ourselves as consumers.

The first set of products we have chosen are perfumes and cosmetics. These are particularly potent in their construction of the reader as consumer because they almost always have recourse to normative images across which, the advertiser hopes, consumers will foresee a post-purchase mirror image of themselves reflecting off the page or a dream-like but realizable experience or set of possessions. There is an imaginary moment that individualizes the mass reproduction and consumption of both ad and product. At the same time, there is the effect of taking on a social mask that corresponds to a constructed social norm.<sup>2</sup> This norm is that of "buying into" what the advertising industry would have us believe is a culturally acceptable - and culturally self-defined - image of desirability. But, of course, this play of "normative" desires is never articulated by the advertiser nor is it supposed to be recognized in the "mirror" by the consumer. The strategy here makes use of peer pressure, of blind acceptance of the myth of belonging to a community (of consumers): what used to be a "religious" function.<sup>3</sup>

Christian Dior sells well in both France and the United States. Yet the advertising strategies follow significantly different paths. In France it sells on its own coattails: it is an epitome of French cultural production, status, and quality. The name says it all. For the American scene, with a much more diverse population and without the historical and cultural connection to the name, Dior has to plumb other than cultural chauvinism: in fact, it is its foreignness that acts as a prime catalyst in establishing its appeal.

In the American Poison ad from 1987-91 (illus. 1), the model is cold and distant. A call to an exoticism outside Euro-America masks her face in a sort of "oriental" geisha whiteness that is encircled in the coils of a satin snake both on her head and upper torso. The lacy black see-through gloves bespeak, too, the serpent of a Poison. The poison is like that from the Garden of Eden, where the snake has seduced Eve into taking the poison apple of knowledge. Even the model's arm and hand hint at some vaguely oriental-like gesturing. She offers her gift, poison by any other name, to someone off-camera. Her downcast eyes, perhaps they are closed in a trance, neither regard the magic potion she proffers nor the person to whom she extends it. The colors, dark blues, purple, black - especially against her characterless face - reinforce connotations of distance and coldness. This American ad highlights the blue tones of the purple whereas the French versions will tend more toward the red spectrum. She intones her incantation, "Poison is my potion." The sorceress wields her potion that will enchant others: she will seduce them, but without her own excitement. The deep blood red of her printed words steps out of the dark, cool colors of the rest of the ad adding emphasis to their power. Perhaps she epitomizes the woman able to transcend national boundaries: she is not American, French or "Oriental" but then again she is all three.

She is transnational - just what the woman (American) of the 80's and 90's must be with all her power, her charms, her dispassion, her knowledge, and her multicultural and global views.

Though the reader/consumer is not expected to envision herself made-up and garbed as the model is, the idea is for her to picture herself transcending some identifiably everyday American face after having bought and applied the product. The transformation operated by the magic potion (which is both the product and the ad - image as magic mirror and text as spell) is that of normal woman into powerful, charming, supranational being. Beguiled by the spell of the ad, we consumers - like newly inducted vampires - now see ourselves in her image and likeness. We are now ready to promote our potions to the four corners of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

An earlier French version (1986-88, illus. 2) had already launched an exotically oriental, Bali-esque tone. The contrast is striking, however. The French version, while maintaining a distance between reader and image through the camera angle and model's eyes looking skyward, emphasizes human skin. Whereas the American model is swathed completely in mask-like makeup, the voluminous coils of cloth and the black lace gloves, the French model is nude, her sensuously French hands, shoulders and face clearly visible. In fact, even her hair, slicked back and away from her face, does not veil her sheer nudity, nor do her nails seem covered by polish. Only the gesture of her hands suggests a dancer from the South China seas. Equally striking is the verbal difference: the French is a "vous" whereby the woman reader is addressed as "you" ("vous" is both the formal and plural form of address to "you"); in the American, the image speaks her selfdom and individuality, "Poison is my potion" (emphasis added).

Compare, now, the contemporaneous Poison ad from France (1990-91, illus.3) and its American counterpart. The French ad again breathes the sensuousness of the model's body - lots of skin. The shot is much closer than the one taken of her American counterpart. The focus squarely on the face expresses a "jouissance douce," a thoroughly and fluidly sensual pleasure. Her closed eyes are not those of a bewitching or narcotized woman, rather those of a woman fully enjoying her body. The eyelids are softly shut, her full lips curve up only slightly in the suffusing pleasure. The color, a deep rose tending toward violet remains within the warm tones, not the cold blue tones of the American version. Her nostrils breathe in life and let her savour the perfume: the American model doesn't even have nostrils, her nose indistinct against the white mask. The American woman shows no hair: not a wisp slips out of her coiled headress. The French woman's hair does not shine; it even looks stringy (to the American way of viewing hair) - but it is very "natural," "real." American advertising insists on shiny, bouncy hair (though recently the moussed or gelled dull look has become acceptable)--or none at all (a la Breck girl). The French model's chin is dimpled by the cap of a perfume bottle that then casts a violet tint down her neck. In the earlier French version, too, the bottle cast its violet hue on her bare shoulders, accentuating the corporality of her skin.

In both French ads, perfume flasks - always touching the women - proliferate. In the current version, a cascade of bottles repeats the undulating, fluid lines of the glass container

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and the contents. Unlike the shock of angles and curves in American ad, the French bottle layout appears sinuous and flowing. Where the same presentation of product and packaging appears for the earlier French and the recent American - both in the lower right hand corner - the French is far less remarkable, nearly a third the size of the American counterpart. The difference in size of the black border also renders the French product identification far less obtrusive: it is nestled down in the corner under the model's shoulder. In the recent French version, the label for Christian Dior is much larger than the American but not nearly as forceful in spite of its location on the top: its light lavender inch and a half lettering lacks the shock of the white on black, half-inch letters at the bottom of the American. In both French versions the product name is clearly delineated in an additional textual moment. The American shows it only in the caption of *poison* being her potion.<sup>5</sup>

The French reader/consumer is meant to recognize a generic version of the French woman, a group of which she is member. She identifies with the slightly exotic, slightly quixotic, but still thoroughly in-the-flesh model of the first ad, and even more so with the pleasure-filled woman of the second ad. Through product purchase she will simply continue the reality and perhaps benefit from some sensual moments. Perfume in France participates in a cultural *savoir-faire*. In addition to recognizing quality in the Dior mark, all French woman know that perfumes react to individual body chemistries; hence the emphasis on the woman's skin, her "bodiness." The ad is meant to encourage a French woman to sample the perfume to see if it goes with her personal chemistry. In so doing she perpetuates the French culture of perfume.<sup>6</sup>

To reinforce some of the contrasts we noted in the Poison ads, we will juxtapose other French and American perfume and cosmetics ads (illus. 4). The top set is French. The women maintain the "jouissance douce" of the second Poison ad. The Smalto woman on the far right, however, goes somewhat beyond "jouissance" into "ecstase" but we will address that below. All the French emphasize skin. The bottom row is American. There tend to be two strains of American women: the "looking you right in the eyes" type on the left and the narcotized, "out of her right mind" sort seen on the right.<sup>7</sup>

In short, the French ads set up a triangle of desire in which the current reader desires the pleasure incurred by the woman in the photograph such that she imagines the off-camera scenario: a lover - having been lured by the product - does wonderful, sensual things to the model's body. The logical connection desired by the advertisers is that the reader recognize herself and her future pleasure in the ad and hence will offer herself this pleasure promising purchase. By contrast the American woman either seeks control or is beside herself in some sort of puritanically repressed sexuality.<sup>8</sup> In her role as controlling enchantress she uses the product-potion-poison to manipulate others: she, indeed, wields the power of life and particularly, death. On the left, again we find the woman in control. Her eyes looking straight into ours in defiance. We look back at her. . . we *become* her looking at ourselves in post-product purchase and application of assertiveness. We have become strong, individual, defiant. Or, distant like the enchantress, she is removed, in fact, removed even from her own body, like the woman on the right. The pleasure of the Smalto man is not hers to enjoy directly. She appears to be in a drugged state. But we will explore this at greater length

below. The American desire is not obviously triangular and immediately sensual, nor mediated by an off-camera lover; the American desire is veiled and repressed sexuality or it is a challenge.<sup>9</sup>

To reinforce our point, we finish the perfume/cosmetic section with the Smalto ads for men's perfume. "Smalto. You make me weak," intones the American woman in a swoon (illus. 5). As we noted above, someone has either just ravished her or will soon do so. In her condition, the ravishment is secondary to the force of the Smalto experience, i.e., the perfume or raw male sensuality has overwhelmed her already. The period following the word, Smalto, makes it either a statement ("Smalto. Oh, that's what did it to me.") or an address ("Oh, it's you, Smalto, who coming."). Regardless, she is not responsible for what happens to her body and she can remain pure in her thoughts. It is not her fault. So forceful is the perfume that it assumes the man's full identity. She addresses Smalto, or accuses Smalto, for her succumbing. Who is the reader/consumer? Good question. A man who wants to bowl women over with his "essence" or a woman who wants to enjoy sex with a Smalto man but without the guilt?<sup>10</sup>

In the French version, the woman bites her hands in a look between playful fear and enjoyment (illus. 6). She is consciously over-dramatic. It is a game. She looks at the Smalto man. He is the reader of the ad who is either ravishing or going to ravish her. This is evident in the caption where the comma indicates that Smalto is the proper name of the addressee: "Smalto, tu me fais craquer" translated as, "Smalto, you (familiar form of address of a friend or lover) blow me away (more literally but misogynistically, "you make me break apart"). Everyone is enjoying - the perfume, the dramatics, the sex. The real reader/consumer is ambiguous, however. Is it the man who would be Smalto? Or is it the woman who will purchase the Smalto so as to turn her man into Smalto and, thus, herself into this finger-biting, playful beauty?

Other men's ads support the ambiguity of the reader/consumer (illus. 7). We note however that these ads, although appearing in men's and women's magazines, were taken from women's publications (*Elle, Marie-Claire, Vogue*). We also note the continued sensuality and human sexual contact intimated in the French ads in contrast to the sexual titillation-in-repression-and-denial of the American. The French Fendi models are skin to skin, caressing. The American model wears an expensive fur coat between her and the man-turning-marble she examines. He does not acknowledge her presence. It would seem that he is an anti-Pygmalion turning stonier, rather than going from stone to flesh. Whatever the case, she adores him aesthetically and perhaps somewhat sensually. The attraction is in the aesthetic appreciation of the Roman antiquities, in their incalculable worth, wherein one recognizes the operation of an elite knowing true value.

The Xerus ads offer us a different optic on the construction of a reader/consumer in that neither portrays a human being. In the French version, the blood red, stormy sky frames the upward thrusting, virile bottle of Xerus and its craggy, very masculine, granite pedestal. The American version highlights the social relations of the user. He has won a loving cup, he is interested in maps (either old, intriguing ones or new ones to plot his adventures). Where

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the French underscores the solitary strength of the Xerus man, the American emphasizes his winner's sociability. The French is a man's man, the American is a man among men.

For an even more striking comparison of the French and American audiences for advertisements and the logics of cultural marketing, we turn now to the portrayal of the French by Americans and the Americans by the French. For the first, we will note the extent to which Americans exoticize the French in ways contrary to French notions of how they act and see themselves. The same is true for the French notions of Americans: if you are American, you will not recognize yourselves in these images.

"Tonight, be French," is the caption for this American wine ad for Mouton-Cadet (illus. 6). The image represents what is supposed to be a French woman seated in a cafe in front of her wine and dessert. Yet nothing in the image of the woman, however chic her look, the type of clothes and jewelry she wears, nor her behavior appear French to a French person. The criteria for determining the authenticity of this woman as a French woman are difficult to articulate, but with respect to comportment, there is no doubt. Few French women go to a cafe to drink wine, and in France, red wine rarely is taken with sweets. The gap between this image and a realistic representation of French social practices for anyone familiar with the culture is striking. Her look, too, is that of an American, the direct-in-the-other's-eyes we noted in the top left image of illustration 4. She engages the reader either to identify with her in a mirroring image (she is us, a woman peering into a looking glass) or to be enticed by her exotic Frenchness (she is seducing us, a man who wants her for her *savoirs*). In both instances, the sign of her Frenchness is meant to override our American sexual repression - though the taboo on imaging it remains in force. It is hinted at in the gaze and the syntactic emphasis on "Tonight" in the verbal text.

The same type of strangeness arises as the French look "d'outremer" at Americans in Winston commercials. This campaign presented the French viewing "L'Amerique sur le vif" that is, "America, live." In the first image (illus.9) the New York businessman-hero has removed his jacket, even his shoes and socks, to dip his feet in a fountain bordering Rockefeller Center. His back against the cool marble of the fountain, he peruses the *Wall Street Journal*, while dunking his toes. Still, one notices that his attache case is wide open, that he has a phone and a calculator: the proof that this man is not just relaxing, but that he is working. Thus, as he checks the columns of numbers in the newspaper, a smile flits across his face. Here is a man satisfied with himself; he has just realized a juicy stockmarket profit. From the upper left hand corner, the American flag gets repeated in the red and white stripes of his shirt, then along a diagonal into the red and white Winston lighter. For the French the message is clear: Winston is America and therefore success, all the while relaxing.

Another young, dynamic executive has chosen a unique means of transportation: he zips around on roller skates (he is sporty, savvy, cool). He is sure of himself: no fear of falling, he even has one hand in his pocket despite heavy traffic as he glides down the middle of the street. He is so fast that even his dog seems out of breath. He is elegant in his suit, bow tie and pocket handkerchief, and well read with his *New York Times*. Once again American

flags and colors reinforce the American look, the American hook, of the image. It is supposed to elicit the reader's admiration for the handsome, intelligent, sporty, easy-going, assertive Winston man and thereby to arouse desire to be like him: which can be brought about by consuming Winston cigarettes, the magic catalyst of dreams.

Once again caught in traffic jams, but this young man opts to flirt with a young woman. He has his red convertible VW with cellular phone (rich but not ostentatious and most certainly individualistic), while she stands up in her Mustang, also convertible. He cavorts, trying to get her to go ahead and use his phone; she recognizes his charm. For the French reader of this ad, there are all sorts of "Americana" being imaged - like Buster Keaton movies. For the same age, same class, American reader, who generally has a different slice of American "memory," these allusions are lost. Again, the clothes reflect French attitudes toward young executive dress codes and the desire to be easy-going, like an American - coat off but bowtie still on (we loosen our ties before we ever doff the jacket). The importance of the dress code, too, is lost on the average American reader: the French are much more rigid in this etiquette.

Though the American flag is missing in this image, its colors are ubiquitous: the red and white cars, the red and white street sign, the red and white clothing, the white background and red Winston lettering, the red and white packet in the bottom right corner. Bits of blue float around: steering wheels, pedestrian clothes, reflections. Winston is America, America is Winston. Winston people know how to transform disagreeable situations into fun.

The other Winston ads continue this line of thought: Winston men put their bikes into cabs, play chess in classless cafes, play jazz trumpet at work. They triumph over city stress: they make New York theirs, a fun and successful place to be. They don't have to deal with tiny French cars or French taxi chauffeurs who would never allow a bike to damage their cabs. They can rub elbows with bikers and blacks. They can impress co-workers, especially secretaries with legs up on chairs, with musical virtuosity in the workplace. French men can be just like them by buying Winston (note, of course, that the cigarettes are neither pictured nor smoked in any of the ads: it is either the "Winston Way" or Winston lighters being marketed). The major attraction is the active but relaxed lifestyle of the New Yorker - but not in the New York of traffic jams, pollution, racial and class tension, eroding tax bases, crime, stress, fear of AIDS and acquaintance rape, fourteen hour work days, inflated prices, et ainsi de suite. . . .

The audience is located differently in these ads than in the perfume and cosmetic ads. There we were up close, peering into a mirror or part of a sensual experience - close enough to be participating (close-ups). In the Winston series, we are part of a narrative taking place. We are close enough to see all the action, to "read" the young man's life, even be somewhat involved. In the first ad, we are located somewhere in the fountain also cooling our heels or just on the opposite side, maybe dipping our toes, too. As a French person, regardless of the exact location, we are enjoying New York and freedom. We necessarily have taken off our jackets and loosened our ties. The same positioning is operative in the skating ad: We are in the middle of a crowded New York street, on the yellow lines. We might even be skating backwards to look at our buddy. Then again, we might be in a cab

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looking out the rear window. Whichever the case, we are sharing the exciting, freewheeling life of the States - and what is more, he sees us and thus validates our being with him in this reality.

The recognition of our being there is exploited in the convertibles ad. The young man focuses on his shenanigans, but the young woman is looking at us to express her amazement and joy. We share - maybe pedestrians passing in front, maybe fellow jammed up motorists (we may even have caused the jam as our car travels perpendicularly to theirs) - in her fun here in the land of fun and plenty.

In the office ad, too, we participate. Obviously, though, everyone, us included, is paying attention to the jazz recital. We are audience members just like the secretary and the other executive. We are all together here in this skyscraper, closing an important American deal in our outrageous New York style. The taxi-bike ad engages us less. The angle of the cab suggests that we are in a vehicle passing in an opposite direction, going uphill. Here we are a part of the fast lane of NYC, catching just another moment of exhilarating American life. As for the cafe scene, we are standing above the players, though their faces would seem to indicate a more than our passing interest. We are not at the table-game board with them, but they may well invite us to sit down: Jack turning his pointing finger up at me. He will joke about what a silly move Joe just made and we will all laugh. Or maybe I just stood up from the chair in the lower right hand corner. The moment is convivial: I'm in New York, thanks to the Winston way.

In all the Winston ads, there is emphasis on visual and verbal narrative in which we, as readers, are implicated. We have taken the Winston Way, all roads lead to NYC. Or else we are participating in "L'Amérique sur le vif" - where "sur le vif" is an artistic term meaning to capture an image from what one actually is seeing, "live." We are catching these scenes as they happen because Winston makes it happen for us. Even if it is vicarious, mediated by these ads, for a moment, however brief, we get to let our hair down and be "cool" and easy-going like Americans. This is extremely important in a society which by American standards is restricted by traditional etiquettes: dress codes, use of cultural objects (like perfume or wine), public behavior. Importantly, too, we are framed as young executive, probably white, men (the women in the two ads that portray women relate to us as men) despite the fact that cigarette smoking in France, as in the States, is growing faster among lower class, minority and female populations.

In one more example of the French vision of Americans, we look at the Prisunic "Belle Americaine" (illus.10). Here is a tourist who dares wear shorts and comfortable tennis shoes - which a Parisian woman would never consent to don in-city. Our tan young woman, healthy and enthusiastic, represents one of France's dearest stereotypes of American tourists in Paris, tout de suite off to see the Tour Eiffel and buy and wear, all a-giggle, her souvenirs. Though her legs are too muscular for American fashion models and her stance is a bit too boyish, for the French she is quintessentially the "Junior-year abroad" student. Americans, to the contrary, are more likely to picture themselves in France sopping up cafe life and "real" culture (museums, monuments, left and right banks, romance, couturier clothes) than

the silly, touristy things they really do engage in! A quick glance at advertising material for study abroad programs will verify this.

The consumer/reader in this ad is toe-to-toe with la Belle Americaine. She has sighted us, she recognizes us, and wants to play with us. Indeed, her stance would seem to indicate a tennis match. Here is a sport where Americans and French can compete on even grounds, n'est-ce pas? As a French young woman - the product and the text indicate that we are such - we look forward to "hopping" around with her, brushing up on our English, accruing "chic points" for having an American "friend."<sup>11</sup> As in the Winston ads, brushing elbows with Americans permits us a respite from French cultural confines.

For the French, then, Americans are sold as the epitome of sportiness, fun, fast money and easy-going charm. For Americans, the French are signs of savoir-faire, savoir-vivre, sophisticated chic. These images are ones that each culture recognizes comfortably, ones that in our imaginings we want to "buy into."<sup>12</sup> A New York city that resembles too much a troubled Paris does not sell: fantasies of individualism and wide open spaces do. Homeless people or American intellectuals - an oxymoron for many Europeans - don't sell: cute tourists to reinforce stereotypes do. Our exotic dreams are culturally biased, too.

Even such products as apples and beef are portrayed in culturally determined and determining ways where the relationships between product and consumer, and the representations of these relationships are subject to specific albeit often unarticulated rules. One of these relationships which we have not explored here is the positioning of the ad in the media. Raymond Williams in *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (NY: Schocken Books, 1975), for example, has argued that the placement of programs and ads are functions of rhetorical strategies and cultural forms. His notion of "flow" can be applied to print media as well.<sup>13</sup>

The videodisc we are proposing will allow us to demonstrate even more convincingly these differences. Thanks to the volume of images possible and the ease of manipulation via computer, we can evince cultural differences quickly and easily. We can also track the historical developments of certain notions and images. In particular, we can make the familiar unfamiliar and thereby encourage critical looks at latent cultural biases and open ourselves to the pleasure of other ways of being in the world.

### Notes/References

1 Alain Rey in "From money to dream: a return ticket" in *Marketing and Semiotics*, ed. by Jean Umiker-Sebeok (NY: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987), p.32, has noted how the very notion of marketing, for Americans, is a conceptual field that points to a part of any economic system that directs the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers. Outside the USA, however, the conceptual field is limited to economic theory and research specifically

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related to modern, post-industrial and competitive economic systems. In practice, too, this divergence in conceptual fields is articulated in the American ethos of creating product desire as opposed to the European practice of responding to a perceived consumer need. Here alone cultural difference is manifest in the pretense in Europe to a notion of utilitarian production that recently has been dethroned by the likes of Baudrillard, elsewhere bemoaned as "Americanization" via our commercial media (eg. Michele Mattelart).

2 The dual operations of advertising as concomitantly force of change and force of preservation are noted by many communication theoreticians, from Burke to Williams to MacLuhan to Geertz to Eco to Barthes as noted in John Sherry, "Advertising as a Cultural System" in *Marketing and Semiotics*, op. cit., pp.441-461.

3 Benjamin makes a strong case for the sacred functioning of certain operations in mass reproduction as the modern world reorganizes its values away from cult values toward exhibition value. The value becomes that of reproducibility itself. We have to believe, not in the "stars" and the individuals who have made it rich, but in the myth of capitalism, that everyone has equal access to becoming a star or a member of the five percent elite. (Roger Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn, NY: Schocken Books, 1969. pp.217-251). The marketing strategy behind the construction of this myth is discussed by Philip Kotler in "Semiotics of Person and Nation Marketing" in *Marketing and Semiotics*, op.cit., pp.3-12. Marian Flick ("Advertising Manipulates Women's Lib", *ibid.* pp.533-542) notes the function of ads, the art of capitalism, citing Williamson (*Decoding Advertisements*, London: Marion Boyers, 1978; p.13) based on Williams, that of fulfilling one of the traditional functions of religions and arts:

Advertisements are selling us something else besides consumer goods: In providing us with a structure in which we, and those goods, are interchangeable, they are selling us ourselves. (p.533)

4 Women are the ostensible audience/consumers for these ads. Yet, it has been convincingly demonstrated that the "real" audience is some transcendental father/god or at least the man with capital potential. The missing image is that of the real man behind the scene, perhaps not just Adam, but also He-who-Is. (see Dean MacCannell in *Marketing and Semiotics*, op.cit., pp.521-531) Though a woman (model - selected by an ad agency, usually headed and run by men) is a sign that sells a "feminine" product (also male-driven and owned, Christian Dior is a man) to other women (whose money usually comes from father, husband or male boss), the entire female economy of this product is predicated on getting or keeping a man.

5 Dean Mac Cannell (op. cit., pp. 523-4) marks the extent to which the verbal text functions not just as words, but also as signs of images and how logos sign beyond any lexical, grammatical or syntactic function.

6 American women and the American perfume industry do not have this *savoir*. This is obvious in one of the gimmicks whereby the advertisers include sniff-strips in magazine ads

or billing inserts. For the French woman a perfume odor strip is an abomination. The only way to test the product is by having it sprayed on in a store and then to wait at least an hour before smelling the complete chemical reaction with her body. What is more, recently, bourgeois American women have been blending their own concoctions of famous brands. For the American, it is a mark of individuality and good "scents"; for the French woman, such mixing is a travesty of age-old and time-tested cultural knowledge found in the bottle and label.

There is, however, a much deeper cultural notion operative here. MacCannell notes well that sexuality leading to coitus is never the image proposed in American advertising because actual bio-reproductive sex is *not* the desired outcome (p.527-8). In France, sex for sex is desirable but with a difference: sex in marriage is for reproduction, sex for sexuality lies outside marriage and is a part of the whole art of seduction. Even within marriage, nowadays, sex is sought after for both pleasure and reproduction: the government continues to promote population growth of the French citizenry. The vast difference between cultural notions of sexuality is remarkable in another advertising campaign: in France, AIDS protection ads in magazines include foil-wrapped condoms.

7 The "drugged" female in American Guess ads is commented upon in MacCannell (op.cit., p.528).

8 Verba and Camden in "Writing with Flesh: A Semiotic Interpretation of Research Findings on Body Image Attitudes and Behaviors in the U.S." (*Marketing and Semiotics*, op.cit., pp.165-186) have set up a Greimasian semiotic square that relates food consumption, control and social worth which they later relate, via Octavio Paz, to sexuality and Puritanism in American imaging.

9 MacCannell puts this mechanism which operates identically for both the French and American scenes at a deep level as that of the repressed signifier, that "[a]dvertising functions to keep sexual desire alive outside of sex." (pp.528-29) so that the "unseen male" stays in a state of readiness for reproduction in the position of a view (or voyeur) just outside of the cultural frame." (p.530).

10 Stephen M. Verba and Carl Camden (op. cit.) bring to light also the avoidance-attraction of desire and guilt in marketing images.

11 American and French notions of friendship are also cultural barometers here. For the French, friendship is an important, time-tested relationship with very serious responsibilities. For Americans it is as prone to commodity-like "planned obsolescence" as any product that we discard after so many uses or when we make our every-four-year move. The French do not have American mobility, Americans do not have French stability. In France one can never say, "I met a new friend today." There are stages of growing intimacy from meeting to spending some time together to finally coming to one's home and thereafter becoming part of the family.

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12 See Chantal Cornuejols, "The Use of Advertisements from French Magazines in the Teaching of French as a Foreign Language" unpublished dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1990, section 5.5, pp.87-88.

13 The perfume ads we have discussed are found in upscale women's magazines in both countries where they vye to be located as close to the front as possible for the impact of first exposure. The magazines select the ads also for their seductive appeal: women frequently buy these magazines based on a quick skim of the first few pages. If they see images they may want to emulate or new trends to pick up, the magazine is purchased. Cigarette ads in the USA nowadays tend toward a lower profile. We found six cigarette ads in a lower middle class magazine, *Ladies Home Journal* (April 1991), with the preponderance toward the last third of the pages. The first ad, for Kent, is on page 60 of 233 pages after 28 other ads for do-it-yourself haircoloring and haircare products, inexpensive Revlon-like cosmetics, drugstore variety sun and skin care products, feminine hygiene products, home refurbishing articles, some clothing, and health and diet aids. The Kent ad glides in opposite an article on a famous star and curiously, the model of the ad, looks very much like Kevin Costner, the cover model about whom we are asked, "Is he as perfect as he seems?" and whose close-up is just about at the same proportions as the model's. Only very recently has French law restricted cigarette commercials. Winston has gotten around some regulations by advertising the Winston Way and Winston Lighters rather than cigarettes. Hence, they are found more toward the front of publications. The snob appeal of certain cigarettes, Benson and Hedges or foreign ones like Rothman, allow for their being showcased in better magazines and in the opening pages: they are not the dirty, cancerous, ordinary type of cigarettes. With respect to government regulation, it is also interesting to study the placement and phrasing of the surgeon general warnings. There is a series of statements that rarely get repeated in one issue; rather, the varying warnings are interspersed not just verbally but positionally as well, ranging from farthest corner to farthest corner. Hence the weight of the message and the status of the messenger get diluted and dispersed. But all this is another article.

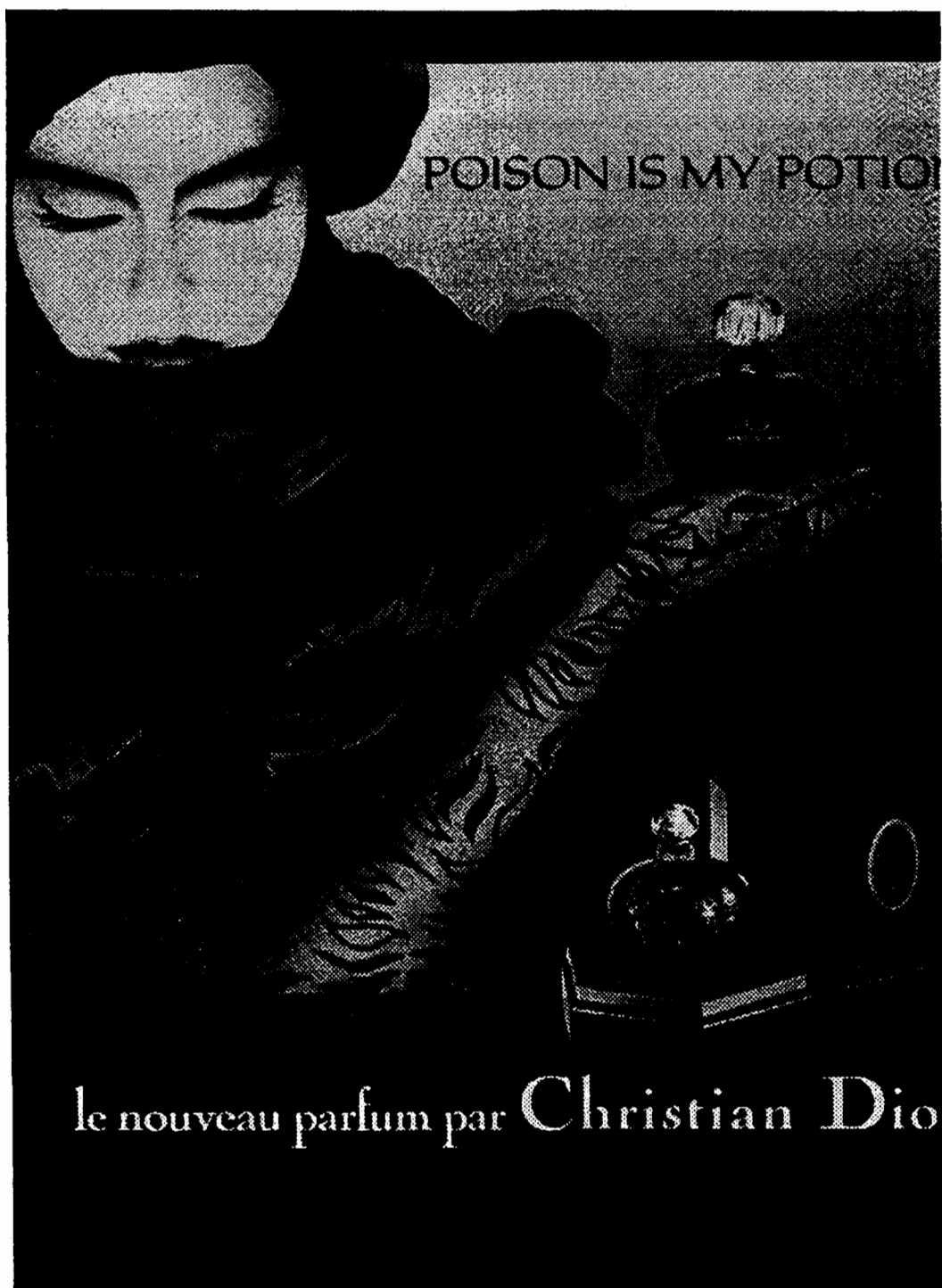


Illustration 1: American Dior Poison

QUELQUE CHOSE EN VOUS EST DIOR

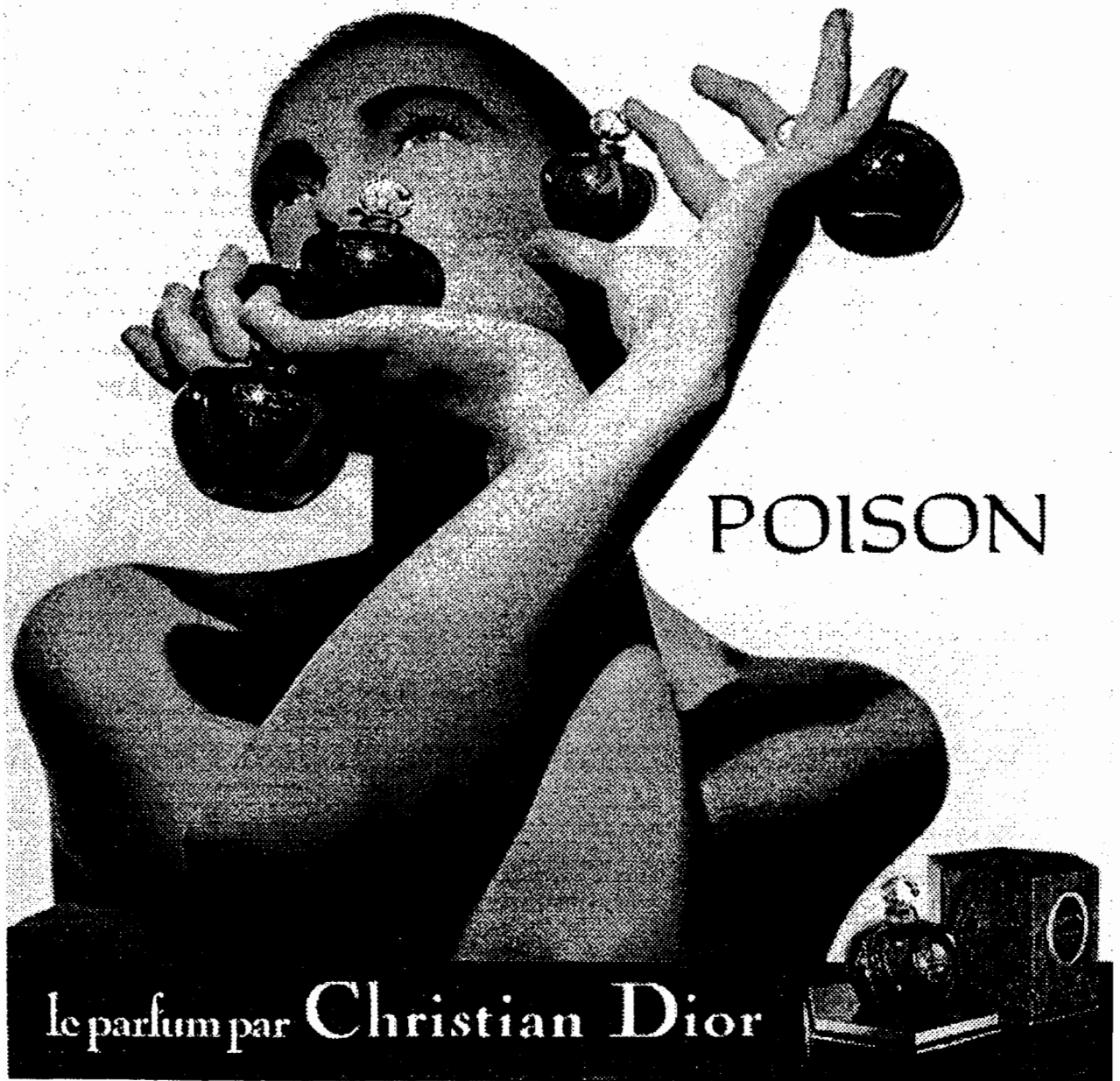




Illustration 3: French Dior Poison (new)

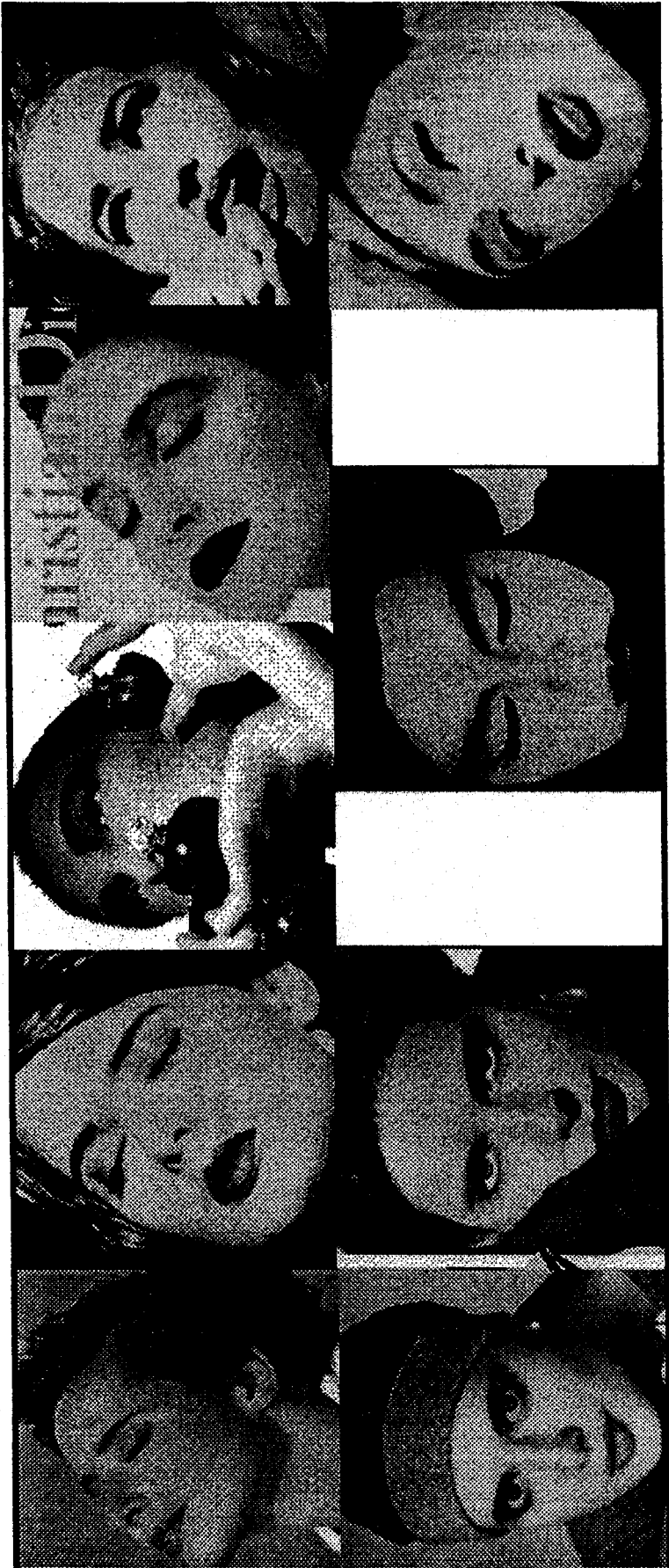


Illustration 4: top French, bottom American; R to L, Lancôme, Lancôme, Dior Poison, Smalto

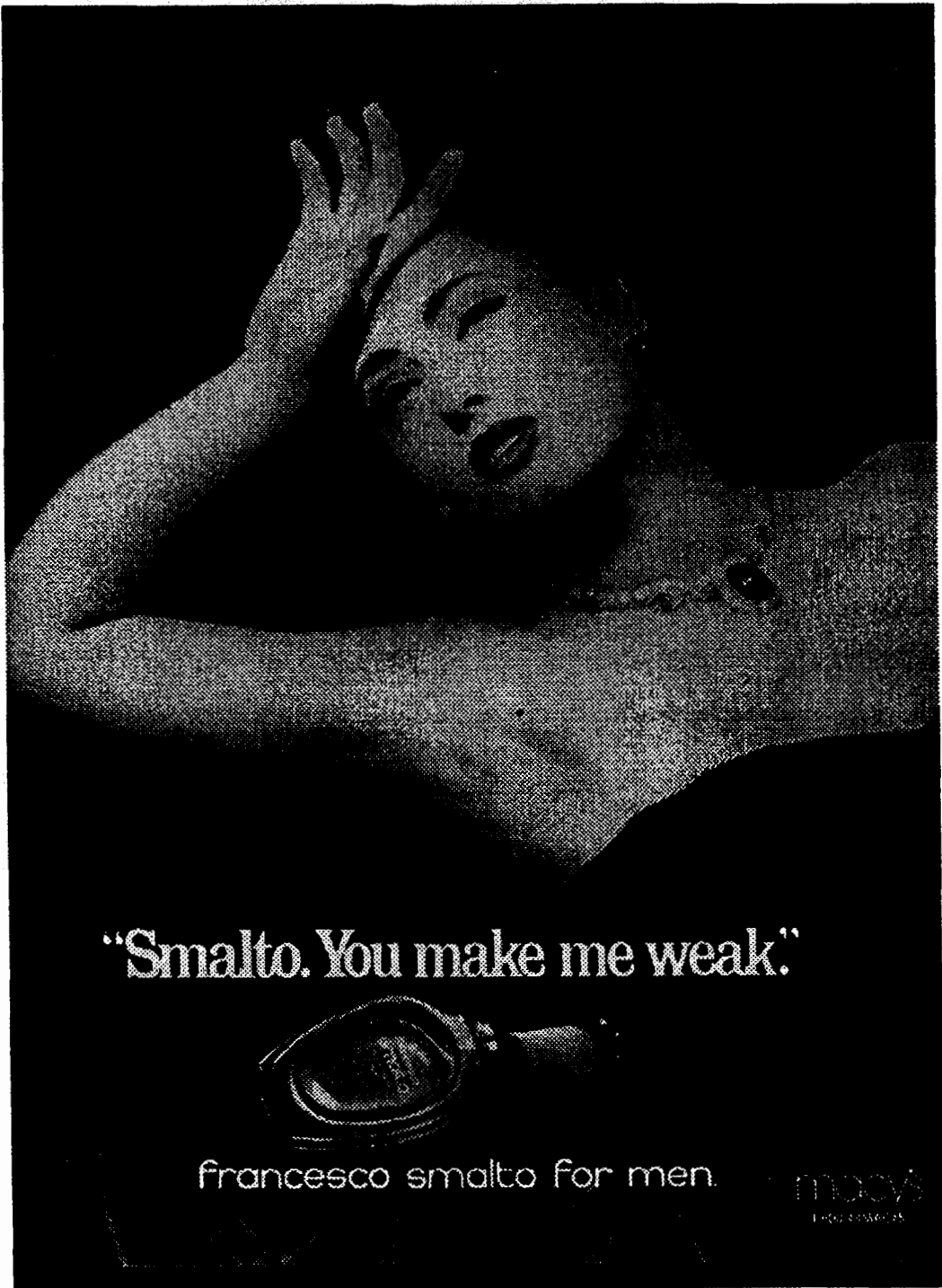


Illustration 5: American Smalto

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Illustration 6: French Smalto

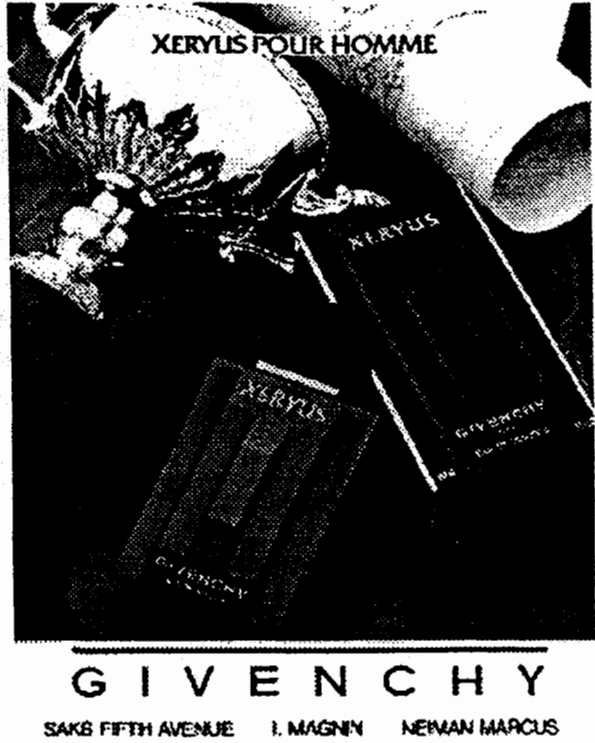
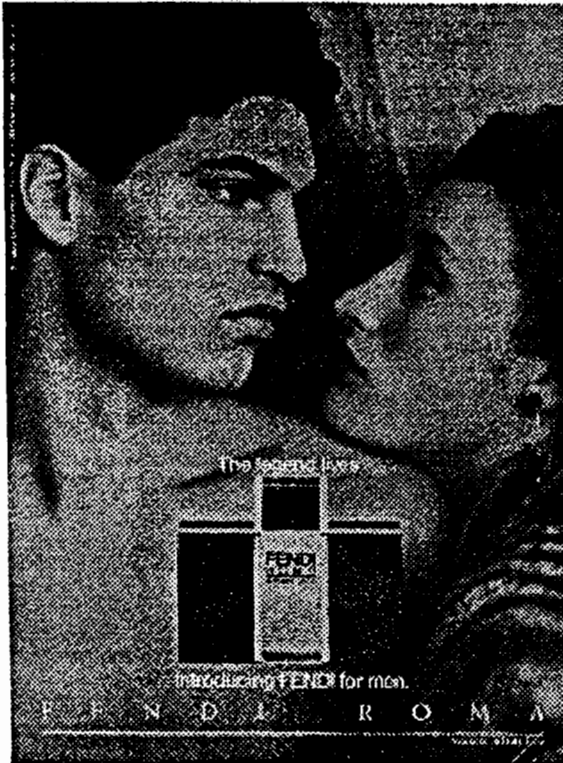
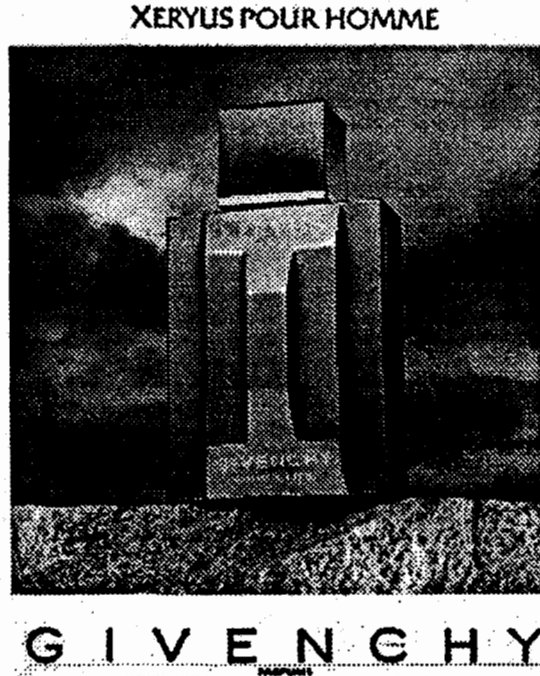


Illustration 7: French & American Men's Perfume

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Illustration 8: Tonight Be French

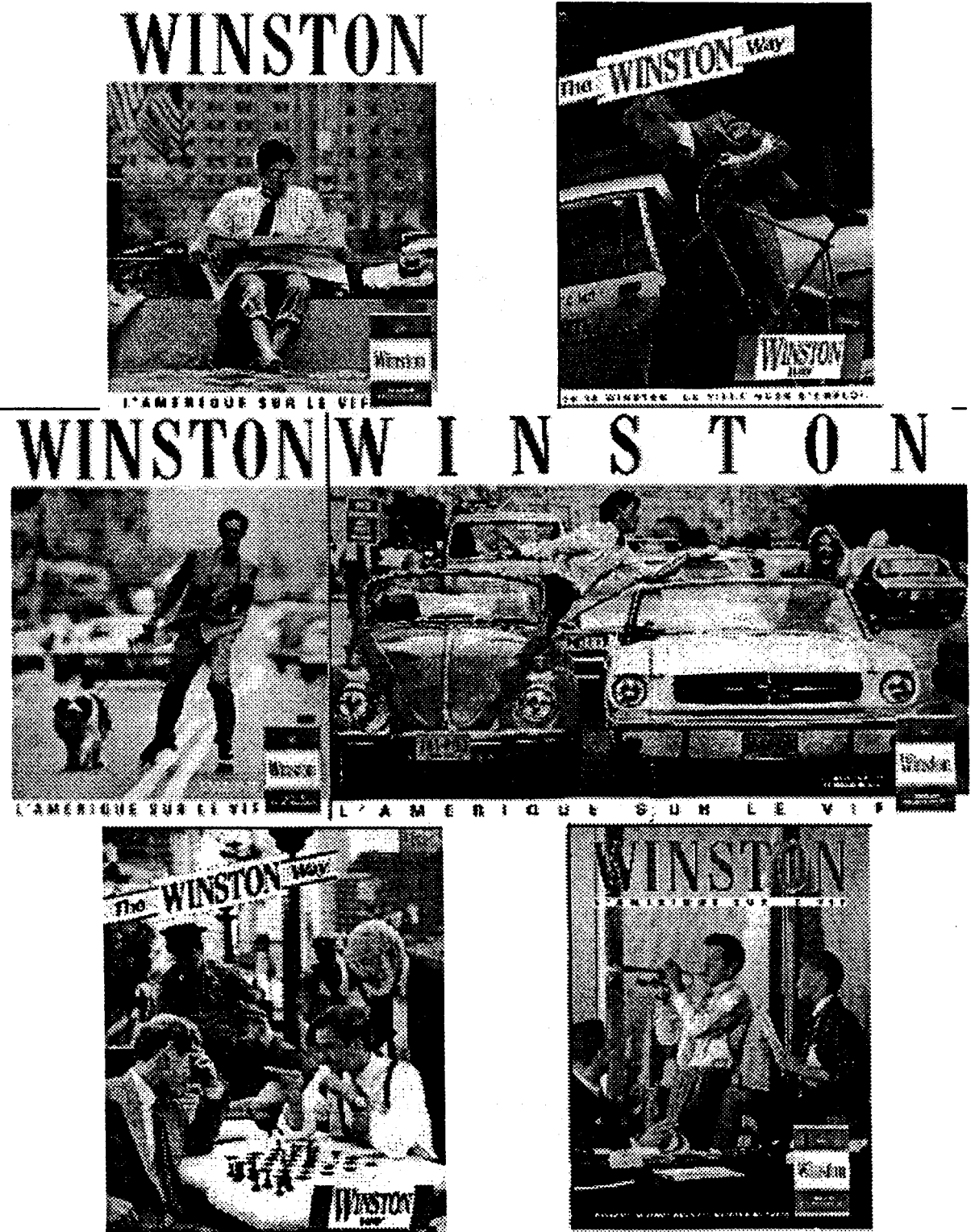


Illustration 9: Winston

# 170 F et hop! Belle Américaine



Et hop Prizunic!  
Touriste in Paris,  
Prizunic me le joue  
verain fromboise  
des villes:  
Paf! tannique  
extra-large;  
2 poches plaquées;  
secrets bien gardés;  
du pur lambowool!  
Parlez plus lentement  
je ne suis pas d'ici:  
tout ça pour 170 F!  
Oh schooding!  
Vous voulez rire?  
A Prizunic  
du 21/10 au 28/10.

**et hop! prizunic!**

Illustration 10: la Belle Américaine