
SELLING SEX, SELLING NATURE

by Sarah Kerr

Advertising is a barometer of popular culture. Advertisers depend on the fact that what we choose to buy reflects both how we see ourselves, and how we would *like* to see ourselves. The products that they offer us -- and the implied characteristics of those products -- are intended to appeal to our desire for whatever it is we feel is lacking in our lives: power, security, love or control. In this way, images of nature are often coded to represent our sexual, instinctual, animal sides, and connecting sex to nature in advertising has proven to be a very effective marketing technique.

The increasing use of animal patterned prints in the women's fashion industry and women's attraction to their promise of wildness reflect a discontent with socially imposed boundaries and behavioural codes. Whereas human society is associated with reason, control, and order, nature is seen to offer a more passionate, spontaneous, and unfettered existence. Designers and advertisers would have us believe that wearing animal patterned prints will give us access to that (perceived to be) freer and less oppressive reality.

Just what does wearing leopard and snakeskin patterned clothing promise to do for women's independence, self-esteem and sex lives? The text of a photo article entitled "Law of the Jungle: Fashion's New Animal Magnetism Roars" in the April 1992 issue of *Elle* magazine points out how it is much more exciting to follow the "Law of the Jungle" than the law of society.

Designers are showing a lot of skin lately, but it's not the kind you think. Animal patterned fabrics are stamped out of the hills, making mincemeat of tamer trends and other oh-so-proper ensembles. Forget all that "kill or be

killed" stuff: the only killing going on in the nineties fashion jungle is the "dressed to kill" kind. There are two ways to wear these fabulous fakes: stick to one print, head-to-toe (even accessories are doing the wild thing this season), or mix them with all-out abandon for an utterly undomesticated look, pair a faux rabbit jacket with savage leopard print leggings. Or give a snake print bustier, jacket, and pants a dose of jungle fever by layering them over a tiger-print body suit. Now that's what we call fierce.¹

The text tells us that "animal patterned fabrics are stampeding out of the hills," the implication being that they come from nature, thus they are natural. It is important to remember, however, that these fabrics and clothes are *not* natural. It is not nature, but these many-times-removed images that represent nature to us, and thus are perceived to be natural, that are appealing.

Taking this concept one step further, the text acknowledges that not only are the clothes not natural, they are, in fact, better that way: they are "fabulous fakes." Technology has taken possession of nature, improved upon it, and is now offering it back to us. Judith Williamson discusses this technique in light of Levi-Strauss' work on nature and culture.²

Levi-Strauss argues that the transformation from nature to culture, in many systems of thought, may be represented by the transformation of the raw into the cooked. Nature, in its 'raw' state, is 'cooked' by culture for our consumption. Williamson holds that advertising is the ultimate cooking of nature: the images of nature we see in ads are so far removed from reality,

that they have meaning only in their culturally imposed context.

Advertisements are often successful when they are predicated upon contradictions, and the Elle article manages to offer us both nature *and* culture. Human technology has cooked and thus 'denatured' the nature in the animal patterned prints, and so these clothes can now offer us a safe passage back into the wildness they are perceived to have come from.

A safe passage is what is needed, because the text tells us that the 'natural' phenomena of vicious competition exists even in the city: it's a "fashion jungle" out there, we read, somewhere that we must "forget the 'kill or be killed stuff'" and instead must worry about being "dressed to kill." Survival of the fittest determines the winners and losers both in the corporate board room and in the competition for a mate.

PRACTICE SAFE SUN

Super Sunstop does much more than stop the sun. Sunstop's four moisturizers help leave your skin with a soft lustrous natural glow.



Due to copyright restrictions, we were unable to reproduce the Super Sunstop ad. An artistic rendition is provided.

These clothes are offered to women as a means of obtaining power and control, they are "savage prints" that "make mincemeat" out of "tamer trends" and other "oh-so-proper ensembles" (ie. those which abide by societally imposed guidelines.) The women who wear the clothes are demonstrating their "fiercely independent fashion concept."

It is telling, too, that the animals these women choose to dress up as -- lions, tigers, leopards, and snakes-- are not only coded as fierce and powerful, but their images are also heavily loaded with sexual connotations. Again, however, note the ability of advertising to appeal to us through contradictions: cats scratch, but they are also cute and cuddly. Either way, the "animal magnetism" of these outfits will not only draw men to the women who wear them, it will also keep them under control.

The message of the images and the accompanying text is clear: 'dress like a lion, the King of the Jungle, and not only will you gain power and respect in a society that does not respect women, but your sex life will improve too.' You will have more sex, and it will be better: wilder and more exciting. These clothes promise to be "utterly undomesticated," if you wear them, your sex life will no longer have to conform to societal rules, and you will be able to realize even your wildest fantasies just by "mixing them with all-out abandon" for a "dose of jungle fever."

The **Super Sunstop** ad on the previous page, building on our perceptions that nature is our link to our bodies, makes the connection between sex and nature in a more subtle but no less effective way than does the **Elle** article. The ad delivers both an explicit and an implicit message and it is the combination of the two that is designed to persuade us to buy **Super Sunstop** sunscreen.

To connect to the **Super Sunstop** ad on more than a literal level, the reader must bring an understanding of a particular social reality. In telling us to "Practice Safe Sun," the ad is attempting to trigger our minds to substitute in the phrase 'practice safe sex.' This will only be successful, however, in a context where 'practice safe sex' is a phrase whose implications are understood.

The ad is aimed at a culturally specific group which has a certain common area of knowledge: in this case the knowledge that the phrase 'practice safe sex' refers to the severity of the AIDS crisis and the fact that the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases can be prevented by using condoms. 'Sex' is never actually mentioned in the ad, but it does not need to be, for the readers will insert the word themselves.

Throughout the ad, there is a parallelism of sex and nature (represented by the sun). The explicit message is that the sun, if we are not protected from it,

can give us skin cancer. Implicit in the image and text, however, is also the notion that sex, if not practised with protection can give us sexually transmitted diseases. Because nature and sex are so closely linked in our minds, and using **Super Sunstop** will protect you from skin cancer and let you have a positive and healthy relationship with nature, the inference is that it will somehow also protect you from sexually transmitted diseases and let you have a positive and healthy relationship with your lover.

The **Super Sunstop**/condom connection is evident not only in the text, but in the image as well: if the woman were not lying on the towel, and another one with the same pattern was laid beside it, the resulting image would look just like a condom package. The similar prophylactic capabilities of sunscreen and condoms is stressed throughout the ad. The way the woman is lying on the towel presents an implicit offer of sex that is *protected* (because it is assumed that she is wearing **Super Sunstop**) and *natural* (because it would take place in the sun, on the beach.) Her swimsuit and pose make her appear to be part of the towel, implying that the model would offer no resistance to being used (by another person) for sex, in the same way that a towel would offer no resistance to being used by a wet body. Indeed, **Super Sunstop's** moisturisers promise to leave you with a "soft, lustrous, natural glow" in the same way as can good sex (which the ad has already defined as protected.)

The ad implies that technology (ie. **Super Sunstop**) can improve on or cook nature. The 'scientific' endorsement of the product by the Canadian Dermatology Association emphasizes the importance of this technological human intervention in mediating the 'damaging' effect of 'long-term exposure' to nature. **Super Sunstop** is even waterproof: finally science has created a barrier protecting us from nature that even natural processes cannot remove.

Notes:

1. "Law of the Jungle: Fashion's New Animal Magnetism Roars," *Elle Magazine*, April 1992.
2. Williamson, Judith, *Decoding Advertising: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (New York & London: Marion Boyers Publishing, 1978).

Sarah Kerr is a graduate student in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University and an avid wilderness canoeist. She is exploring bioregionalism, ecofeminism and the links between them, and is looking for a recipe for ecologically sustainable, peaceful, egalitarian communities in a pre-feminist age.
