

# “Power Dressing”: Hyper-Feminine Performance and the Professionally Self-Sexualised Female Body

Stephanie Lever\*

Parsons Paris, The New School (France)

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## Abstract

Taking as its inspiration Joanne Entwistle’s understanding of the “power-dressing” phenomenon that took over the United States from the late 1970s as a discourse on the body, sexuality, gender performance, and power, this paper considers the implications of power-dressing when applied to another iteration of gendered performance; one which instead of carefully negotiating between masculine and feminine traits, instead presents a hyper-feminine, hyper-sexualised professional appearance to the ends of power and professional success. However, the professional backdrop of this research is not of the office but of sex-work (defined in the Dictionary as “a person employed in the sex industry, as a prostitute, pornographic film actor, stripper, nude model, or creator of sexually explicit online content”), and celebrity. This paper uses the case studies of two women who employ exaggerated feminine performance, and explicitly harness, rather than “manage” their sexuality, in their professional careers during the 90s and early 2000s — writer, filmmaker and ex sex-worker Virginie Despentes, and media personality (and sex-tape star) Paris Hilton. My aim is to explore how hyper-feminine dress and presentation, synonymous with unacceptable female sexuality, might interact with questions of power and agency, and subvert historic theories on the subject.

**Keywords:** Hyper-Femininity; Fashion; Identity; Power-Dressing; Slut-Chic.

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\* ✉ [leves949@newschool.edu](mailto:leves949@newschool.edu)

## Introduction

There is a deep historical connection between femininity, clothing, and immorality, which can be traced back to Original Sin. When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge they became aware of their nakedness; as Efrat Tseëlon notes: "After the Fall, the celestial clothing which enveloped them disappeared to leave them wearing garments of skin...And since the Fall is blamed on woman, the links between sin, body, woman and clothes are easily forged."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, there has historically existed a pathological patriarchal ambivalence towards femininity where active female sexuality is a source of both disgust and desire. Since the emergence of Judeo-Christian ascetic culture as dominant in the West the female body has been dichotomised, and is always potentially a sexual one, where women must always enact either the virginal 'Madonna' (acceptable femininity related to passive sexuality) or the immoral 'Whore' (active sexuality that both repels and intrigues this construction of Western society). It thus follows that mainstream women's fashion has continuously attempted to negotiate the tenuous line between respectability and sexuality.

This conceptualisation is explored by Joanne Entwistle in her book *The Fashioned Body* through the lens of " 'power-dressing' as a discourse on the dress of the 'professional woman.'"<sup>2</sup> Here, she identifies this fashion trend which took over the United States in the late 1970s as a means by which women could succeed in the workplace<sup>3</sup> as an illustration not only of how gender and sexuality can be conflated — through the concept of power-dressing female bodies are distinguished as both "feminine" and "sexual" — but also of the ways in which fashion and clothing can be used as a tool by which gender can be performed. She states:

Power-dressing emerged...as an explicitly feminine discourse on how to present yourself at work. It addressed the so-called 'career' or 'professional' woman and produced a way of dressing which sought to mark out or gender the female body by rendering it distinctly 'feminine'. The recurring theme of power-dressing is concerned to 'manage' one's sexuality so as to acquire 'authority', respect and power at work. The result is a 'uniform' for work which treads a thin line between 'masculine' dress (i.e the 'suit) and 'feminine decoration aimed at 'softening' the tailored lines of the suit.<sup>4</sup>

Demonstrated in this analysis is the way that gender and its associations can be put on as one puts on clothing. Entwistle suggests that by attempting to strike a balance between masculine and feminine performance through dress a woman is able to simultaneously utilise and negate her own sexuality in order to gain authority and power. In this paper, I take Entwistle's analysis of power-dressing and consider its implications when applied to another iteration of gendered performance through fashion, sexuality and the body; one which instead of carefully negotiating between masculine and feminine traits, instead presents a hyper-feminine, hyper-sexualised professional appearance to the same ends (power, professional success, etc). The difference is, in this case, the professional setting is not of the office but of sex-work (defined in the Dictionary as "a person employed in the sex industry, as a prostitute, pornographic film actor, stripper, nude model, or creator of sexually explicit online content"),<sup>5</sup> and celebrity. As such, this paper uses the case studies of two women who employ exaggerated feminine performance, and explicitly harness, rather than "manage" their sexuality, in their professional careers during the 90s and early 2000s — writer, filmmaker and ex-prostitute Virginie Despentes, and media personality (and sex-tape star) Paris Hilton. Through this research, I hope to answer the question: how may the sartorial and embodied self-sexualisation of the "porn-chic" era, and of the industry that inspired it, interact with theories and ideas of power, specifically in the context of women who professionally profited from this type of hyper-feminine performance? In doing so, I also aim to demonstrate the evolution or diffusion

1. Efrat Tseëlon, *The Masque of Femininity* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1995), 14.

2. Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (2000), (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 185.

3. See John T. Molloy, *Women: Dress for Success* (New York: Peter H Whyden, 1980).

4. Entwistle, 187.

5. Dictionary, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/sex-worker>, accessed 5.11.22.

of this style into mainstream culture and begin to evaluate the different relations to discourses of power depending on the women who adopt it.

My research methodology centres around discourse, textual, and image analysis with a focus on a number of primary sources, including Virginie Despentes' and Paris Hilton's autobiographical books: *King Kong Theory* and *Confessions of an Heiress* respectively, as well as magazine and media coverage of the socialite. In comparing the implications of these sources and analysing them through a theoretical lens it is possible to explore how the connotations of this hyper-feminine dress have shifted culturally over the period from signifying sex work to a more generalised "slut-chic,"<sup>6</sup> and shed light on the capabilities of power that this manner of dressing may have, depending on the body that is wearing it. I also engage in a discursive analysis of feminist and sociological books commenting on the porn-chic era in order to situate these figures.

Worth noting here are the definitions and applications of the terms 'sexuality', 'sexualised' or 'sexual', as well as 'sex-work' within the confines of this research. Whilst 'sexuality' connotes a range of meanings this paper utilises the terms in order to depict the various expression (in this case sartorially and through body techniques) of sex, sexual desire, or eroticism either projected by a person or onto a person by others. Additionally, when referring to 'sex work' and the visual or vestimentary signifiers of sex work, this research references the archetype or stereotype of hyper-femininity that has come to indicate sex work in the contemporary cultural imagination, and thus inform the "slut chic" fashion phenomenon of the 2000s, rather than the varied and complex realities of practised sex work. The term itself is also a contentious one, with Despentes herself preferring the description 'prostitution' and 'prostitute.'<sup>7</sup> As such, whilst this paper generally uses the term sex work as it has become widely favoured for its emphasis on the "commonality between work in this industry and other, more conventional occupations,"<sup>8</sup> it will refer to Despentes in relation to prostitution. Additionally, the dynamics of sex work and sex workers' experiences are nuanced, and definitively not 'one-size fits all', especially within the conversation of power and emancipation. It is for this reason that this paper does not by any means endeavour to speak for the potentially empowering conditions of all sex work, but rather focuses on specific examples of women who have harnessed the culturally stereotyped style of sex work in order to explore the possibilities of agency that this type of "power-dressing" might provoke within the framework of self-sexualised femininity for professional profit. As such, this research and its methodology examine Despentes and Hilton, women who have both participated in the sex industry to different degrees, as instances that can illustrate the transformations of "slut chic"<sup>9</sup> style as it bubbled up from Despentes' hyper-feminine performance whilst working as a prostitute to Hilton's feature in *Vanity Fair*, and trickled back down through popular culture. By engaging in a methodology that explores the images of these women through their own mediation (autobiography), as well as the lens of celebrity and media coverage in Hilton's case, the paper can unpick the evolution of this self-fashioning and its relation to power as it was adopted on different bodies, whilst remaining ultimately linked by the fact that both figures harness these tools for the advancement of their professional lives.

On a theoretical level, I predominantly draw from feminist and gender studies, including the psychoanalytical ideas of Joan Riviere, Angela McRobbie's ideas of post-feminism, Judith Butler's work on gender and performance, and Joanne Entwistle's theory of dress as embodied practice. Additionally, whilst not always directly referenced, Michel Foucault's work on power and the body, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and the field, and Marcel Mauss' elaborations on "techniques of the body"<sup>10</sup> provide a useful backdrop for this research's exploration of feminine performance and self-sexualisation through fashion.

6. Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory* (2006), trans. Frank Wynne (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020), 24.

7. Emily Witt, "The Stinging Provocations of Virginie Despentes," *The New Yorker*, May 19, 2021. Accessed 24.04.23.

8. Oxford Reference, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100458943;jsessionid=oA3B1E481DE7536D560492F780D93955>, accessed 24.04.23.

9. Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, 24.

10. Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," *Economy and Society*, 2.1 (1973): 70–89.

Judith Butler analyses gender as a plastic, culturally constructed identity that is socially instituted through the repetition of stylised acts, such as dressing and walking and is iterably performative,<sup>11</sup> which contextualises a concept crucial for this research — Joan Riviere's theory of "womanliness as a masquerade."<sup>12</sup> Riviere claims that "womanliness...could be assumed and worn as a mask" by women who wish to "hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it."<sup>13</sup> In other words, women with jobs or traits perceived to be 'masculine' by contemporary society could hide behind a facade of femininity "in order to avoid retribution by men."<sup>14</sup> These women that Riviere used as case studies in her paper were often successful professionals, who adopted a performance of exaggerated signifiers of femininity which Entwistle explains "allayed some of their anxieties about their femininity and their desire for masculinity."<sup>15</sup> In other words; powerful ('masculine') women attempt to negate their power through the masquerade of femininity in order to make men feel less threatened, or more comfortable. This theory has been highly influential and it is through this lens that theorists, such as Entwistle, have come to understand hyper-feminine performance as it is configured in this paper:

The woman who acts in exaggerated feminine fashion is also sometimes referred to as a 'homoeovestite': a 'manly' woman who covers her tracks with a quintessentially feminine performance... The difference between Butler's and Riviere's ideas is that whereas Butler challenges the very category of sex, Riviere remains at the level of gender in her analysis, leaving intact the binary male/female. However, despite these differences, they both illustrate the way in which body styles and styles of dress work to construct gender which is cultural rather than natural.<sup>16</sup>

It is the goal of this research to take another look at hyper-feminine performance as it has been understood through the concept of womanliness as a masquerade, to re-evaluate this perception as it relates to power and the negation thereof.

This paper builds also off discourses of power as conceptualised by Foucault and Bourdieu. Foucault argues that bodily practices constitute a part of the operations of power that police and regulate bodies. Although he does not specifically mention gender, his is a helpful tool by which to analyse fashion as a "discursive domain"<sup>17</sup> that sets boundaries around the body and its presentation. This can, for instance, be evidenced in the traditional discourse of power dressing and the appropriate presentation of the career woman. However, Foucault fails to recognise the role of embodiment and agency with regard to bodily presentation. Theorists like Lois McNay argue that Bourdieu's ideas of *habitus* and *the field* are useful in filling this lack. The body is configured as the nexus of the individual and the social, where dress is the result of a negotiation between the two. This thus results in a more nuanced approach to dress, power, and the body, whereby the individual holds a degree of autonomy over self-presentation, but one which is always informed by culture and external society.

Furthermore, much of this research is posited at the complex intersections of theories of class, race, and feminism, as an ambivalent topic within the intersectional feminist movement. Firstly, the empowering role of power-dressing within the feminist cause is debated. Whilst publications like *The Atlantic* contest that although putting on a suit doesn't guarantee power, it is a symbolic act that "tells the world its wearer means business,"<sup>18</sup> others like *Varsity* argue that "Power dressing isn't empowering for women,

11. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

12. Riviere, *Womanliness as a Masquerade*.

13. Riviere, 94.

14. Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, 178.

15. Entwistle, 178.

16. Entwistle, 179.

17. Joanne Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleishy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice," *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 4 (2000): 323–348.

18. Angella d'Avignon, "The Power Suits' Subversive Legacy," *The Atlantic*, December 26, 2017.

particularly minorities, because it reinforces social hierarchies that value white maleness above all else."<sup>19</sup> Conceived in a social atmosphere where professionalism meant white masculinity, the continued implications of imitating this style in order to be taken seriously in the workplace on both a gendered and racial level are apparent. Attitudes towards sex work, as well as towards women who adopt a hyper-feminine style and performance influenced by the slut-chic style of the 90s and 2000s are also highly affected by intersectional factors like race and class. Although this paper does to a certain extent explore the discrepancies of empowerment in relation to class, with two white women now both in the public eye to varying degrees as its case studies, it is a limitation of this research that it does not explore the substantial and crucial negotiations of female self-sexualisation, hyper-femininity, and slut-chic on black and non-white bodies.

There also exists a complexly queer aspect to this paper — in its construction of gender as performance, as well as the fact that of course, included in its discussion of womanhood, femininity and the performance thereof, are people of all gender identities who participate in this ultra-gendered self-fashioning, in relation to the profession of sex work as well as in wider discourses of these styles. This paper is also limited in that it will not examine the nuances of the experience of non-gender-conforming bodies within discourses of sex, sexuality, and this mode of presentation of the self, which is undoubtedly varying from that of cis-gendered women. Relatedly, the discussion here of what constitutes femininity or, consequently, hyper-femininity is based on a distinctly and historically heterosexual ideology. It also is relevant to note that this analysis deals with what has been termed 'Western' culture, society, and social perceptions of gender and morality.

The paper begins with an exploration of the evolution of hyper-feminine style in the 90s and 2000s in tandem with the "pornification" of pop culture.<sup>20</sup> It situates Despenes and Hilton within this climate, and analyses how unpicking these two figures can shed light on this trend, its development and its relation to power. It subsequently examines in more detail each case study's interactions with discourses of power and financial or professional success; Despenes and how power relates to identity and its presentation, Hilton and how it relates to fame and perception. In doing so, this research hopes to uncover the similarities and differences between Despenes' and Hilton's hyper-femininity and their connection to agency and empowerment as the trend evolved, as well as how the two cases represent interconnected but nuanced embodiments of what I have referred to as "power-dressing".

## Power, Dressing, & the "Pornification of Culture"

The term "pornification of culture" is one that has been coined in recent years in order to describe the conditions of contemporary society; however, it is an idea that scholars such as Annette Lynch and Ariel Levy have been analysing and documenting for a while utilising terminology like the rise of "porn chic" and "raunch culture" respectively. Although Lynch contests that the beginnings of this phenomenon can be traced back to the 1960s with the popularisation of *Playboy*,<sup>21</sup> she maintains the significance of the cultural moment at the turn of the millennium whereby pornography was mainstreamed and "porn chic" became the millennium style for young women.<sup>22</sup> The prevalence of this aesthetic and culture within this era is reiterated by Levy in the introduction of her controversial 2005 book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, as she states;

"I first noticed it several years ago...stars, who kept talking about "strong women" and "empowerment", were dressed in alternating soft-porn styles...I'd walk down the street and see teens and young women...wearing jeans cut so low they exposed what came to be known as butt cleavage paired with miniature tops that showed off breast implants and pierced navels

19. Emma Simkin, "Power dressing and the Patriarchy," *Varsity*, January 16, 2017.

20. Bernadette Barton, *The Pornification of America* (New York: NYU Press, 2021).

21. Annette Lynch, *Porn Chic: Exploring the Contours of Raunch Eroticism* (London–New York: Berg, 2012), 44.

22. Lynch, 11.

alike. Sometimes, in case the overall message of the outfit was too subtle, the shirts would be emblazoned with the Playboy bunny or say PORN STAR across the chest."<sup>23</sup>

Whilst, throughout the book, Levy's analysis makes evident her scepticism of the empowering capabilities of this style of self-presentation within feminist discourse, a stance that this paper endeavours to begin to problematise, works like this and that of Lynch are useful in the insight that they provide into the cultural climate of the time, and the pervasive nature of this style and attitude.

What is also made evident in this quotation is the existence of a clear "style" at this time which is overtly associated with the sex industry — an archetype of sex work in the contemporary social imagination. The connections between fashion and sex work are long-standing — in 19th Century France couturiers such as Charles Worth used members of the demimonde to showcase their latest designs as they "could afford to wear the most outrageous styles, to create a sensation; indeed it was in their interest to do so to advertise themselves."<sup>24</sup> As the sex industry evolved, so did its fashions, until items such as very high heels, PVC or leather clothing, miniskirts, and skimpy lingerie became visual signifiers of the culturally perceived stereotype of sex work. These garments tread the line between the eroticisation and the exhibition of the body, denoting an explicit sexuality that relies on not only exposing the body but drawing attention to or emphasising the zones that are typically associated with the feminine and are often erogenous; for example, exaggerating the legs, breasts, midriff, or buttocks.

Also demonstrated is the significance of the adoption of this aesthetic by celebrities and "stars", their simultaneous self-proclaimed relationships with empowerment, and the effect that this had on mainstream culture. What is thus exhibited through the study of the pornification of culture, or the rise of porn or slut chic in this era is the compelling, cyclical social pattern of the fashion system which combines, in turn, representations of a "bubble-up" theory of fashion, coined by Paul Blumberg in the 1970s,<sup>25</sup> and a "trickle down" theory as explored by Georg Simmel or Thorstein Veblen. The mainstreaming of the slut chic style began with the institutionalization of a hyper-feminine look that was harnessed by prostitutes, like Despentees, and which came to denote professional women in the sex industry. Subsequently, in line with bubble-up theory where fashion trends are diffused from lower to upper class, this hyper-feminine style was adopted by celebrities and influential figures of popular culture, like Hilton, which consequently not only normalized slut chic as a prominent aesthetic of the 2000s but imbued it with desirability as it was transformed into a symbol of modern femininity where female sexuality was, to a heavily debated degree, reclaimed. From here, the style trickled down into wider culture. Lynch observes the influence of celebrity on the dissemination of this style as she notes how "attitudes, behaviours, trends, and norms of the porn [and sex] industry have worked their way into the mainstream,"<sup>26</sup> and in Levy's interviews of young women, one of whom emphasises how much she looks up to Hilton, as well as Pamela Anderson who scholars like Entwistle also take as an instance in the rise of this hyper-feminine performance. The high school senior states: "I love their style and I have blue eyes and colour my hair blonde and watch my weight."<sup>27</sup>

Crucial to recognise in the analysis of this phenomenon of the 90s and 2000s, and crucial to this research, are the discrepancies in the positioning of these three different categories of women at the three points of the evolution of the slut-chic style. Specifically for the purposes of this paper is the perception of empowerment and agency (or lack thereof) associated with each; what links the categories of women in the sex industry and celebrities at this time, and sets them apart from the general public who adopted this style, is the fact that both sex workers and celebrities were harnessing it to the ends of professional, and thus financial, advancement. As a result of the professional element of this type of self-sexualisation figures like Despentees and Hilton both are granted enhanced access to this specific form of power through

23. Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 2.

24. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 33.

25. Paul Blumberg, "The Decline and Fall of the Status Symbol: Some Thoughts on Status in a Post-Industrial Society," *Social Problems*, Vol. 21 (1974): 480-498.

26. Lynch, 11.

27. Levy, 145.

their hyper-feminine performance, in line with the conceptualisation of this style as a kind of power dressing, unlike the wider population. Nonetheless, as will be discussed, the two women experience very different processes of accumulating this power, and the discourses around each are specific.

## Virginie Despentes: Identity and Power

### *Hyper-Femininity as a Masquerade*

The eroticism of the style discussed above is elaborated by Beatrice Faust when she notes that; "walking in high heels makes the buttocks undulate about twice as much as walking in flat heels with correspondingly greater sensation transmitted to the vulva."<sup>28</sup> Not only do clothing and accessories, like high heels, draw attention to particular areas of the body but their effect can also be deeply corporal. This corporality and its relation to gender performance are discussed by Marcel Mauss in his understanding of "techniques of the body";<sup>29</sup> culturally embedded ways of training the body in order to reinforce culturally recognisable signifiers of gender. In her explanation of Mauss' theory, Entwistle describes how:

Illustrative of this particular technique in her exaggeration of it is Marilyn Munroe's sashaying gait in *Some Like it Hot*, which was apparently a product of high heels cut diagonally at each side. These lop-sided shoes enabled her to generate the wiggle that constituted part of her performance as the sexually provocative Sugar Cane.<sup>30</sup>

What is clearly demonstrated are the transformational capabilities of dressing, both physically and in its representation of identity.

In her book, Despentes compellingly explores this idea of transformation through clothing, which directly correlates with the idea of masquerade — a show or pretence, pretending to be someone one is not — via the means of fashion and the bodily techniques that it produces. When she first entered the sex industry Despentes swaps a more tom-boyish styling for a hyper-feminine look and documents the physical and mental shift that occurs through this performance. She states that: "up until then, I'd been pretty invisible, short hair and scuffed trainers. Now, suddenly, I was a creature of vice...It made me think of Wonder Woman twirling in her phone booth and stepping out a superhero."<sup>31</sup> What Despentes describes is a clear link between the recognisable trappings of sex work and the empowered identity that she creates for herself by donning this uniform, thus demonstrating the tangible experience of dress not only as a visually distinguishing tool, but also as a means for Despentes to discern her two 'personas' — the "timid, husky, masculine girl", and the "tall slut with legs enhanced by six inch heels."<sup>32</sup> This concept of corporal and sartorial transformation translating into a deeper mental transformation is encapsulated in Despentes' assertion that "The moment I slipped on my hyper-femininity costume, my self-confidence changed — like I'd just done a line of coke."<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the use of the word "costume" here reinforces the masquerade-like nature of this gender performance, which can be taken on and off like in a game of dress-up. This quotation also demonstrates the potency of how this masquerade of confident, assertive femininity (and female sexuality) changed Despentes' self-perception from "a woman that men don't really find attractive" who is "constantly made to feel that [she] shouldn't even exist...a woman unable to attract men's attention, to satisfy men's desires, or be satisfied with a place in the shadows,"<sup>34</sup> to a figure of power and desire.

28. Beatrice Faust, *Women, Sex and Pornography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 49.

29. See Mauss, "Techniques of the Body."

30. Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body," 328.

31. Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, 61.

32. Despentes, 60.

33. Despentes, 61.

34. Despentes, 13–14.

Demonstrable in Despentés' account of her adoption of a hyper-feminine self-sexualised style is the metamorphic quality that this costume has on her own identity, both how she understands herself and how others understand her. Crucially, it allows her to take on a character defined by confidence, power, and assured sexuality — the persona that she embodies through hyper-feminine performance permits her to step out of herself and create an entirely new identity, and way of being in the world, and thus experience success in the industry. She encounters a forceful sense of sexual and emotional agency aided by the costume that she puts on. Hyper-feminine performance can therefore be constructed not simply as an extreme of conventional femininity, but as a transgression away from it.

### *Hyper-Femininity as Transgression*

The relationship between hyper-femininity and its potentially disruptive capacities an ambivalent one, at the heart of which lies the question of the sexualised male gaze (where the object is constructed through the eyes of the imagined masculine, heterosexual viewer or reader), and the extent to which the self-sexualised female body plays the role of object or subject in this gendered dynamic. Whilst some contest that this hyper-sexualised performance of exaggerated femininity is playing into the creation of woman styled as a sexual object, others have argued that the self-aware nature of this manner of fashioning the self "becomes a way of proving and confounding the male gaze."<sup>35</sup> Academics like Simon Reynolds and Joy Press propose that, rather than reinforcing the dichotomy of active masculine subject and passive feminine object, the masquerade of exaggerated femininity brings to light the constructed nature of what is considered 'natural' femininity. They assert that "instead of stripping away layers to reveal an authentic self, it plays with cultural representations of femininity...The traditionally feminine 'trivial pursuit' of fashion and self-adornment is reclaimed as a reinvention of the self."<sup>36</sup> The implication of this masquerade is an act of taking control and consciously harnessing the signifiers of femininity, in Despentés' case, in order to take charge of the way that she is perceived by herself, but also by those around her. It can be effectively argued that it is this very act of self-conscious fashioning that distinguishes Despentés' hyper-feminine performance from 'traditional' femininity, which is frequently characterised as gentle or passive. By crossing the boundary from object to subject through the active sexualisation of the self, this performance is transgressive in its excess and its assertion.

The femininity that Despentés presents within her book is resultingly rendered a transgression from that which is typically expected, which is cyclically both typified by power and a means by which to access this power. The distinction between the excessive, unacceptable femininity in all its forms, and 'natural', socially desirable femininity, is exemplified by Despentés in the introduction to her book:

I write from...the warehouse of unsold women...those dream of being porn stars...who wear red lipstick that's too red, those who'd die to dress like horny sluts but haven't got the body...Because the archetypal white woman, sexy but not slutty, married but not meek, a good job but not so successful she upstages her husband...intelligent but less intelligent than a man, this blissful white woman constantly being waved under our noses, this woman we're supposed to strive to be like — though she seems to slog her guts out for fuck-all in return — is someone I've never encountered, anywhere. I suspect she doesn't exist.<sup>37</sup>

Despentés goes further than rejecting this acceptable brand of womanhood by drawing attention to the artifice of what is considered natural femininity, or the ideal woman. In doing so, she asserts that such a woman is an impossible construction. Despentés' brand of hyper-femininity can be argued to be uniquely powerful through its disruption of hegemonic gender ideals. Specifically, hyper-femininity is defined by excess and exaggeration, transgressing the tightly contained borders of what Despentés outlines as respectable or decent femininity, imbuing it with a degree of subversive power.<sup>38</sup>

35. Simon Reynolds & Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 289.

36. Reynolds & Press, 289.

37. Despentés, *King Kong Theory*, 15–16.

38. See Francesca Granata's work on the Grotesque.

Also interesting is Despentès' analysis in relation to Riviere's theories. Not only does her description of the mythical 'ideal woman' fit into Riviere's conceptualisation of a woman who negates her own intelligence and success in order to not threaten men, but she also discursively places women who do not work in the sex industry but adopt "slut chic" style within this theory. Despentès criticises the way that the hyper-femininity that she adopted as a prostitute seeped into pop-culture, emblemised by figures like Paris Hilton, and what this means in regard to female empowerment.

## Paris Hilton: Fame and Power

### *A New Brand of Hyper-Femininity*

Despentès contests that the reason why empowered young women enthusiastically embrace the traits of women-as-object through their appearance is "a way of apologising, of reassuring men... The over-marketing of femininity seems like an apology to men for the loss of their prerogatives."<sup>39</sup> The rise of the ultra-feminine "slutty bitch look"<sup>40</sup> is analysed as an attempt by powerful women to negate their power and avoid the backlash that female independence provokes. It is thus differentiated from the potent embodied implications of power that this style generates on, for example, Despentès. However, although this distinction is crucial and undeniable, the pop-culture figures that she targets such as Paris Hilton arguably possess an image potentially more aligned with Despentès than immediately meets the eye.

Throughout the 2000s Hilton reached an unprecedented level of notoriety as her wealth, party girl lifestyle and, notably, her distinctly sexual fashion choices and sex tape (*1 Night in Paris*) which was leaked in 2003, catapulted the socialite to global fame. Fairly quickly she became an infamous character in the press as the celebrity everyone loved to hate. What can be traced throughout magazine references to Hilton from around 2000 - 2006 is the way that she is iconised as an emblem of wealth, promiscuity, and poor taste. As Hilton grew into a household name she is frequently referenced in passing, making clear her synonymy with the fashionably self-sexualised body. One *Cosmopolitan* article on "How to Handle a Train Wreck Friend" tells the reader to "read on" if their "BFF makes Paris Hilton look like a friggin' nun,"<sup>41</sup> and a disparaging feature on Hilton written for the *Sunday Mirror* is entitled: "Paris Hilton: Why money can't buy you style; She's led a privileged life, but millionairess — and amateur porn star — Paris Hilton is still the tackiest blonde on the block."<sup>42</sup>

Evidenced is the recurrent paradox of patriarchal oscillation between the fascination with explicit female sexuality and moral contempt of it. This, coupled with the perception of Hilton as "trashy" aligns her and Despentès in the social understanding that explicit female sexuality is classless (implying a lower class or economic bracket). However, it cannot be ignored that whilst Hilton might have been disparaged in the press for being 'New Money' and tasteless, her status and wealth played a significant role in the endurance of her image and likely the amount of attention that she received at the forefront of culture. The bodies of Despentès and Hilton, whilst styled in the same way are not judged on a similar basis, and do not take up a similar space. Whilst Despentès notes that "Sarkozy's legislation drives street girls away from the city stress and forces them to work in outlying woodlands,"<sup>43</sup> Hilton was on every television set and in every magazine in America.

I contest that Hilton can be positioned within the realms of what Angela McRobbie terms 'postfeminism', whereby the gains and successes of the second-wave feminist movement are registered, 'implying that 'things have changed', so feminism is now irrelevant.' This is a new kind of sophisticated anti-

39. Despentès, 24–25.

40. Despentès, 24.

41. Beth Whiffen, "How to Handle a Train Wreck Friend: Are You the Train Wreck?," *Cosmopolitan*, n. 238, January 2005, 110.

42. Deirdre O'Brien, "Paris Hilton," *Sunday Mirror* (September 2004), 11.

43. Despentès, *King Kong Theory*, 73.

feminism where the principles of gender equality are upheld, but the figure of the feminist is denigrated. As McRobbie elucidates, in this postfeminist landscape a 'new sexual contract' is formed — "a hegemonic process aiming at what Stuart Hall would call a kind of (gender) settlement regarding the status and identity of young women." They are able to enjoy sex with impunity, dress as they please and engage with their bodies and sexualities without repercussion. However, under the guise of choice, women can only choose certain things and must tread an almost impossible path of complex gender and power dynamics. This is evidenced in the simultaneous acceptance of Hilton and her ostentatious corporality and hyper-feminine fashion, and the public consensus of her condemnation as inappropriately sexual. These theories of postfeminism also find corroboration in their links to the psychoanalysis previously explored — these sartorial and embodied behaviours can be seen as an apology for the new prerogatives supposedly afforded to women until the guise of the postfeminist era.

In her autobiography, *Confessions of an Heiress*, Hilton's relationship between clothing and her body is rendered explicit through her own words. Structured as an insight into the life of an heiress, the book acts as a kind of 'How To' in living like Hilton does and frequently validates the critique of Riviere and Despentès with regard to Hilton's behaviour as a woman of immense influence and capital, both socially and economically. Much of the advice given in the book revolves around men and how to attract them. In the chapter entitled "Wardrobe Dos and Don'ts" Hilton offers guidance like "Show off your navel and belly...Everyone thinks that guys are all about boobs and legs. I think they're really into stomachs", and "Dress supersexy when you don't have a boyfriend, or if you want to make your ex-boyfriend jealous."<sup>44</sup> These hints at Riviere's theory are solidified with Hilton's discussion of the way in which she functions socially, which reveals her exaggerated 'girly girl' persona as construction or masque. She tells the reader to "Always tell everyone what they want to hear. Then do what you want...If anyone confronts you, smile sweetly and act coyly. Particularly with guys. and bosses,"<sup>45</sup> and to "Act ditzzy. Lose things. It throws people off and makes them think you're "adorable" and less together than you really are."<sup>46</sup> It would appear that Hilton is self-consciously enacting Riviere's theory — negating her power through her sexualised dress and actions in order to appease or attract men, in an even more extreme way than Despentès as she adopts this character through her persona as well as dress. As a result, she embodies an exaggeratedly helpless femininity, rather than simply intimidatingly sexual, which significantly changes the tone of her hyper-feminine performance.

These elements of her autobiography also solidify the analysis of a femininity which is constructed by the male gaze as an iterative performance which can be taken on and off, much like the clothing which acts as a visual manifestation of this femininity. In many ways, at first glance Hilton embodies both McRobbie's post-feminist woman and Riviere's masquerade of womanliness; she takes on the appearance of a sexually confident woman, but from her autobiography it would seem as though her performance of sexuality and femininity is for men, to diminish her threat as a powerful woman. In this manner, the example of Hilton also aligns with Michel Foucault's emphasis on the way in which the body is acted upon by power, through the "institutional and discursive practices of dress,"<sup>47</sup> as her fashion choices place her within the contentious power dynamics of a patriarchal society — a role which Hilton seems all too ready to fill — and which she is criticised for. However, as Entwistle notes of Foucault's analysis, and this paper extends to that of McRobbie and Riviere, in this reading of Hilton as a public figure, there is a "failure to acknowledge embodiment and agency."<sup>48</sup> Whilst it assumes that this performance of hyper-femininity and self-sexualisation is symptomatic of perpetuating a pattern of pandering to masculine enforcement of female disempowerment, I argue that it can also be a compelling tool of agency and that Hilton can be seen to be unmaking a discursive formation of power.

44. Paris Hilton with Merle Ginsburg, *Confessions of an Heiress* (New York: Fireside, 2004), 52–53.

45. Hilton, 11.

46. Hilton, 13.

47. Entwistle, "Fashion and the Fleshy Body," 329.

48. Entwistle, 330.

## *The Spectacle of the Self*

*Confessions of an Heiress* reveals the self-conscious nature of Hilton's dress and demeanour, implying an awareness and manipulation of the performance of femininity. I would argue that, far from a renunciation of power, this manipulation functions in much the same manner that Despentès details in her discussion of prostitution. On the one hand, is Hilton's insistence on exaggerated, sexualised femininity as a means to function in a male-dominated society. On the other hand, however, she emphasises that; "This is what being an heiress means to me: being in charge. After all, if you have certain money and certain advantages, no one should be in charge of your life except you."<sup>49</sup> These glimpses of control consolidate the notion that there is more at play in Hilton's construction of her persona than merely a negation of her own independence and act as a precursor to the development of her character in more recent years. Her learnt gender performance exploits masculine society and so whilst the masque identified within psychoanalysis clearly exists, it is much more self-aware and constructed than it is given credit for. There is a strong degree of agency even in the act of writing an autobiography — she is positioning herself not only in the public eye, but as an authority on fashion, lifestyle and, particularly, ways of subtly subverting the gendered power systems and ensuring control of a situation. One way in which Hilton achieves this is through a sartorial self-sexualisation which, on the surface, appears to fall in line with the hyper-sexualisation of the male gaze, transforming woman into erotic object; however, on closer inspection is a utilisation of the societal ambivalence towards female sexuality in order to accomplish her goals.

Recently, particularly with the release of the Youtube documentary "This is Paris", Hilton's intelligence and business acumen have come to light as central to her image. As she states in this film; "...I've always looked to the future — building my own business and creating my brand. I have nineteen product lines, skincare, makeup, every type of product you can imagine. My fragrances have done almost three billion dollars in sales."<sup>50</sup> This documentary focuses on Hilton's untold story of childhood trauma — a compelling facet of her complexity as a famous figure but which this paper does not have the space to explore fully. However, what will be utilised for the purposes of this argument is the exposition of the spectacle and performance of Hilton's persona for the sake of furthering her ambitions. In an interview for Mitchell Sunderland, Hilton says: "You don't get this far and build something like this by being a dumb blonde"<sup>51</sup> and, as Sunderland states in the same article, "Paris knew how to manipulate her femininity for business opportunities,"<sup>52</sup> proving her persona of the 2000s to be a character that she created for sensationalist purposes, to shoot her into the spotlight and create a brand for herself. The idea of spectacle and media as a tool for this persona performance is also emphasised in the documentary as Hilton explains how she feels like "the whole world thinks they know [her] because [she's] been playing this character for so long."<sup>53</sup>

It can therefore be argued that, far from a psychoanalytic symptom of devaluation, Hilton constructs her body and femininity through self-sexualisation in the same way as Despentès — essentially performing the patriarchal confines of feminine objectification for personal profit.

## Conclusion

Both Despentès and Hilton harness hyper-feminine style as a mode of professional power-dressing, to the ends of financial or business success, internal feelings of confidence, and power as it is constructed through discourses of gender and politics by transgressing the social boundaries meant to exert control or police bodies. Despite the fact that the sexualisation of hyper-feminisation of the female body is often

49. Hilton, *Confessions of an Heiress*, 5–6.

50. Paris Hilton, "The Real Story of Paris Hilton: This is Paris Official Documentary," Film, September 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOgoTY1jG3w>.

51. Mitchell Sunderland, "This is How Paris Hilton Fooled the Entire United States of America," *Vice*, 2015.

52. Sunderland.

53. Hilton, "This is Paris Official Documentary."

perceived as contradicting ideals of feminism, these two instances depict the subversive capabilities of self-styling in this manner. Additionally, although this paper specifically highlights the ultimate professional agency associated with the evolution of this style from sex industry to pop-culture, the impact that the porn-chic era had as it trickled down into mainstream culture, touched on in the paper, should not be underestimated. The prevalence of this style as noted by Lynch and Levy illustrates the influence of media personalities, and, although not necessarily professionally, the empowering potential of satorially displaying assertive female sexuality in line with slut chic style with regards to confidence, transformation, and freedom has been emphasised by many academics.<sup>54</sup> The power that this style, and the women who participated in its diffusion into hegemonic culture, hold is still relevant today, with the 'Y2K' aesthetic, complete with low-rise jeans, "teeny tiny t-shirts", and mini-skirts, having just undergone a revival in the cultural imagination.<sup>55</sup>

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54. See Dunja Brill, *Goth Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2008).

55. Christian Allaire, "Like it or not, gaudy Y2K style is roaring back," *Vogue France*, February 25, 2022.

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**Stephanie Lever** – Parsons Paris, The New School (France)

✉ [leves949@newschool.edu](mailto:leves949@newschool.edu)

She is a fashion researcher and theorist who has recently graduated with a Master's degree in Fashion Studies from Parsons Paris/The New School. Her thesis focused on the space of the fashion exhibition as an arena in which different concepts of the gaze encounter one another and explored how theories of the gaze, ways of seeing, psychoanalysis, and reception studies can offer insight into the manner in which museums can most effectively communicate to their public. She is currently conducting research on how womanhood and femininity can be constructed through fashion and art.