

Liz Levy



Photography: Debbie Humphrey

Never mind the qualities
For Men Only

There doesn't seem to be very much time at the moment. I'm sure it's all there in its infinity. But here and now it is proving elusive. This worries me, not because I've spent so much of it reading crappy magazines; but because it lends credence to a highly noxious concept.

Quality Time - the 'qua' to be drawled long and loud - sounds like something you'd pick up at Marks and Spencer. Or not, if you thought a little longer. And indeed, alongside the nasal-hair trimmer and the laser lightshow in your own front room, it is another helpful presentation from adland.

The idea seems to be that as those diminishingly few of us in work - that is to say with spending power - get busier and busier, time will become a 'saleable commodity'. Hence, alert advertisers will be able a) to flog more time-saving gadgets and leisure management tools (microwave breakfasts and filofaxes) and b) to encourage the punters to 'treat' themselves and their loved ones (pay a higher price for

the same product) in what used to be known as free time.

Well, they can keep their hands off mine. Those precious moments our grandparents shared? Drivel. It reminds me of a Gary Larson cartoon headed, 'What people did before television'. It shows a living room with a family's eyes glued to the blank wall in the corner.

Where tv and magazines fit into Quality Time, I'm not entirely sure. But the notion will not be unknown to the marketers behind the flurry of men's magazines launched over the past few months to cater for the 'whole' man of the 90s.

It was not ever thus. Not so long ago, British men's magazines tended to - how shall we say - specialise. A visiting Martian on a mission to reconstruct men from their magazines would have taken back with him a story of coin-collectors, wind-surfers, motorists, hi-fi buffs and - er - wankers.

Men today are allowed to be obsessed with clothes (although for these, read 'suits'),

health, personalities and even relationships. The promotional blurb for the new *Esquire* ventures further; while the 70s were the decade of women, it threatens alarmingly, the 90s will be the decade of men. Men too will be empowered to get paranoid about lumpy buttocks and dry skin.

It is almost a truism to say that the point of view in *GQ* and *Esquire* is firmly 'male'. Fair enough; these are men's mags after all. But this is 'male' as in 'different from female'. Women in these magazines are a foreign country, an opaque species, just as men still seem to be in the domain of women's magazines.

'Girl talk revealed: What they really want' pants the cover of the March edition of *GQ*, doing a spooky impression of *Cosmo* if you replace 'They' with 'You', as Kevin Costner looks knowingly on. The billboard campaign for this issue asks: 'Does anyone really know how to satisfy women?', and scrupulously answers something like: 'Yes, yes, baby, ooh yes'. And this is for men with an IQ?

These magazines have a real problem in how they represent - and therefore attract - their readers. Does the audience want undressed women in provocative poses, or does that trample on 90s sensibilities? Where *Penthouse* attracted flak for exploiting women and *The Face* and *Arena* for exploiting fashion victims, men are vulnerable to being the next victims. In the *Financial Times*, John Lloyd made out recently that the new clutch of magazines are full of photos of male bimbos.

If these are bimbos, then language is surely beggared to describe Cecil Parkinson or Jason Donovan. On the contrary, the men in *GQ* and *Esquire* throb at the temples with their need to look substantial, intelligent and very, very serious. They tend to have little wire specs and receding hairlines and be photographed stroking their chins thoughtfully as though they were wondering where they had seen John Major before. But I take

Lloyd's point. Perhaps we can compromise, call them IQ-ties and include Michael Ignatieff.

In the States, these magazines have been running for some time. *GQ* has evolved to the stage where its articles couldn't, surely, possibly appeal to women. For instance: 'The Nerd, Reconsidered'; 'Baseball Cap-tivation'; 'The Lighter Side Of Prince Of Wales Plaids'.

But on the evidence of the first two issues, *Esquire* is a fair enough read. So what makes it a magazine for men rather than people with £2 to spare? Look a bit closer. In the April edition there are two separate features which describe train-journeys at some length and an article on spaghetti. Not how to cook it *al vongole*, but how to twiddle it up on your fork.

I suppose it is brave enough to launch niched and aspirational glossies into the howling winds of a deepening depression, when everyone else is talking hard sell and the New Realism. Things are pretty chilly, if the launch for *Vanity Fair* is a barometer. Its tv commercial is shot on a set landscaped out of giant stacks of remaindered copies of the magazine.

The magazine landscape is changing. Well over a hundred major titles have gone to the wall over the past year. So what of the new magazines for men? It must be nice to feel someone who's ignored you for years suddenly wants to catch your eye - but won't the conversation begin to flag when all that they say is moulded by the gross targets of the advertisers?

Already close, the relationship between advertisers and editorial on some of the glossies is getting psychotic. *Women's Journal* has just run a competition asking which is the Chinese Year of the Sheep. There isn't one, actually. But that doesn't stop the 'right' answer being 1991 (I rang to check), because the International Wool Secretariat - sponsor of the competition and big advertiser - says so.

And now, as *Esquire* puts it, it's men's turn... •