

Andrea Stuart on people who are dyeing for a change

Blonde Illusions

Brunettes, in case you didn't know, 'look great depressed'. Not that being depressed is much of a problem for brunettes these days. According to *Tatler*, they have every reason to be cheerful; brunettes, it seems, are beating blondes hands down in the race for celebrity status and desirable mates. One gentleman who used to prefer blondes but is now 'dyeing for a change' is *GQ*'s Richard Rayner, who, having found the 'Perfect Blonde', discovered she was a bit too hot to handle. Mercifully, Tony Rivers, another *GQ* author, was on hand to provide an equally libidinous but apparently more amenable alternative: 'Oriental Girls'.

Yes, the Great Blonde vs Brunette Debate rages on. *Mirabella's* Paul Golding claims that advertisers are discarding the stereotyped blonde bimbo in favour of a 'more intelligent, strong-willed brunette'. While Tony Parsons, in the most controversial article of all (*Arena*: 'Pretty Ethnic', subtitled 'The Death Of The White Woman') declared it no contest. Blondes don't 'fry his onions' and the only brunettes that interest chaps like Tony are 'any Cathay Pacific stewardess (business class)'.

These media musings allude to any number of profound social and cultural shifts, but are they? It seems to me that lurking beneath all the titillating, right-on, pseudo-intellectual references to the 'other', 'the amorality of desire; and the breaking of 'racial and sexual taboos', is simply a reworking of that age-old question, 'What Kind Of Girl Do You Smoke?'

It's no surprise that the most feverish debate over varying brands of girls has taken place in the new men's (or is it New Man's) magazines like *Arena*, *GQ* and *Esquire*. For years, hoping to escape the taint of the dusty top shelf, they have steered clear of the enticing but dicey subject of girls. With the exception of a few hesitant and half-hearted interview with scantily Alaia-clad models/actresses, these mags

have played it safe; relying on a style-glossed melange of other boy topics like cars, records and making money to pull the punters.

On the surface, feminist debates over the last two decades had had their effect. A certain way of talking about and depicting women had become (almost) unacceptable in nice society. And educated aspirational men, eager to distance themselves from sweaty, medallion-wearing troglodytes with very small willies, wouldn't be caught dead describing themselves a la Hugh Hefner as 'breast' or 'leg' men any more.

But something was missing. And that something was girls. Because men talking about women has always been an essential way of expressing masculinity. Remember what's her name in *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid*? Bet you don't. The woman herself might have been incidental, but she told us everything we needed to know about the men and their relationship with each other. Or what about James 'licence to thrill' Bond? Along with his yellow E-type Jag, his Martinis - perfectly shaken never stirred - nothing contributed to his image of sophisticated, daring, urbane perfection like the bevy of international beauties that he wham-bammed thank you-ma'amed across various continents.

Dusky dangerous brunettes, Nordic blondes, dumb blondes, inscrutable ornamental... the world, as depicted in Benetton adverts, is a global supermarket. Along with your Indonesian food, Italian shoes and Guatemalan holidays, in media-land a man's choice of girl can demonstrate social status, modernity. What's more, there is adventure Discovery. Despite the unpleasant ethos of imperialism (we may not be able to run the world, but we sure can fuck it).

None of this is about desire. Or about reality. Or even terribly revealing as to why there seem to be more interracial relationships around. (Which, I think, has as much to do with the totally sub-



Do New Men really prefer brunettes?

versive discovery of similarity as a more predictable celebration of difference.) This is about fantasy marketing: using a language of first selecting then acquiring an object. In media-land all women are other. (Some, of course, are more 'other' than others.) But wherever they fall on the racial continuum from light of darkness; this is woman stripped down to her component parts: hair and skin. A leg here, a breast there. Ever ready. Always available.

It is a debate fuelled by disillusionment. Girls really are so difficult. They will insist on becoming women. And treating us like real people hasn't got men anywhere. In the immortal words of Tony Parsons, all it has served is to turn women (as versus girls) into complaining, big-boned post-ferm ballsy chicks'. But a change of type can provide the weary man-about-town with 'shore leave from those

angry feminist seas'. You know the old saying: if you can't join 'em, beat 'em. Like any astute coloniser, men are in the process of reviving an ideology that arms and justifies their forays into this old enemy territory.

Men are still confused. Women are still other. Still inexplicable. Women's identity, it seems, has always been shifting and elusive. Volatile. So, for the nervous male pundit, appearance is particularly significant now. When it comes to getting a handle on a woman's real self, maybe the old Clairol slogan has finally proved prophetic: 'Only her hairdresser knows for sure'. But whether you travel the world and the seven seas, or just opt for the girl next door, what you see is not always what you get. The truth is that all of the best blondes - Monroe, Jean Harlow, Bardot, Deneuve, Madonna - have been brunettes.