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# 16

# "But the Pictures Stay the Same . . ." The Image of Women in the Journal *Für Dich* Before and After the "Turning Point"

*Irene Dölling*

If one were to take two issues of the women's magazine *Für Dich,* one from 1989 and another from 1991, and place them side by side, one might say: "They are pictures from two different worlds." One set, mostly poor-quality black-and-white prints, could be summarized as stating: "Women work like men and owe their allegiance to a greater unity, as integral parts of a collective 'We.' " The other pictures, in seductively brilliant color, seem dedicated to a different motto: "I am a very feminine woman who relates to the world primarily through my excellent taste for beauty and harmony."

We seem to be dealing with pictures from extremely different worlds. But are these worlds really so far apart?

Pictures *signify* the world in graphically perceptible forms. They are always structured according to specific cultural patterns of meaning and perception, and thus they transmit normative attitudes toward the world. According to Walter Benjamin, photographs, in their "transitoriness and reproducibility," their constant repetition of similar situations, focus the fleeting gaze of the viewer on a "sense of the universal equality of things in the world."[1] Not least among these are stereotypical concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity," which order and structure the wealth of photographs of changing realities into equivalents. They orient perception, the individual assignment of meaning to reality, as well as the practical actions of the viewer.

Proceeding from these basic assumptions, this research project, completed before the "Wende" (the changes of 1989), analyzed photographs from daily life in the GDR,[2] including pictures that appeared in two weekly mass-market magazines. This article concentrates on stereotypical models of "femininity" read from photographs in *Für Dich,* the only women's magazine in the former GDR.[3] The changes this magazine underwent after fall 1989 are discussed, and the analysis concentrates on photographs characteristic of *Für Dich* in the last phase

of its existence, from spring 1990 to June 1991, after it had been acquired by the West German publisher Gruner & Jahr. The question will be raised whether pictures that at first glance seem so different do not bear a fatal resemblance to one another.

## I. "Our Mommies Work Like Men": A Backward Glance at Images of Women in the Former GDR

The following questions guided the analysis of the magazine photographs in the research project described above:

—How is the double burden of women reflected in the pictures of women and men in their daily relationships?

—What aspects of gender relations are represented in the photographs, and which are not worthy of depiction (and why not)?

—In the photographs of GDR daily life, how are normative models of relationships between men and women and of "femininity" and "masculinity" graphically conveyed?

—Did the previous changes in the life situations of men and women lead to a breakdown in traditional gender stereotypes? Have new stereotypes arisen, or can a largely unbroken effect of traditional models be established?

To anticipate one result of the analysis: No new stereotypes that "molded into a solid form" a qualitatively different relationship of men and women could be found. With a few modifications, hand-me-down, patriarchally formed models of "femininity" and "masculinity" are used to depict graphically actual situations of men and women. Pictures of women, specifically those showing the world of work, illustrate this. Employment was a significant factor in the self-image of women in the GDR, and officially women were recognized primarily as workers. My comments on the image of women in GDR magazines are organized into four thematic aspects.

### 1. Woman As Productive Worker

Employment was a foregone conclusion for women in the GDR.[4] Accordingly, photographs showing women at work are very frequent in *Für Dich,* outnumbered only by pictures of female models. The unquestioned nature of employment is made graphically vivid through completely unspectacular depictions of competent, productive women routinely and skillfully working while radiating a self-evident confidence in their abilities. A weakening of certain stereotypes of "femininity" can be viewed in the many, usually small-format black-and-white photographs showing women engrossed in their work. Common signifiers of "femininity" play a very subordinate role in these photographs: a woman's dress, hair, figure, and makeup all retreat before her concentration on her work.

What could it mean that women appear not as lovely or weak but as the productive sex in such photos of work life? What contradictory aspects of women's current situation or gender relations in the former GDR do they illustrate?

One level of meaning is that women are indispensable in social production. Women do socially necessary and socially recognized work, just like men. As a result, women are presented less as gendered beings than as professionals displaying nongendered attributes. Given the pronounced gender-specific division of labor, however, this level of meaning presumably plays a subordinate role.

The weakening of stereotypes of femininity transmits predominantly other meanings, which orient individual perception and evaluation of a contradictory reality. This weakening signals that areas of employment are divided between the sexes, and the traditional "order," in which men control crucial activities and positions, is not questioned. This is made graphically concrete in the far more frequent depiction of men *or* women than of both sexes working together.

In addition, the photographs accompanying a report or article use differently sized photographs to show, for example, the director, the men engaged in installing the latest technology, and the women working at an assembly line. Such workers appear nonthreatening to the established hierarchical gender order. Thus, the beauty and sensual seductiveness of the female sex does not have to be emphasized to reduce a real danger or distract from it through displacement.

At the same time, other aspects of "female gender characteristics" are clearly emphasized in the photographs. A large number of pictures of women performing typical "women's" jobs, such as kindergarten teaching, nursing, or finishing and assembling processes in industrial production, do more than describe a gender-specific division of labor. The frequency of such depictions reproduces and confirms stereotypical patterns of the helping, serving, and caring functions of the female sex. Thus, the new, self-evident, competent, and responsible professional employment of women is presented as something that does not basically challenge accepted gender roles. The weakening of stereotypes of femininity in the photographs has a specific meaning in this context, intimately tied to the ability of graphic language to "make the nonhomogeneous identical." By depicting women as efficient producers who are only secondarily "female," these pictures raise formal equality as well as commonality with employed men to the level of conscious perception. This illustrates a truly important change in gender relations and in the social recognition of women, but it also pushes the gender-specific division of labor into the background. Thus, the fact that women remain in the "second rank" and are practically disadvantaged in their "newly conquered" sphere is minimized.

Still another assertion of identity in photographs of working women is graphically conveyed in the contradictory unity of a common status as producers and a second-rank status as female producers. Thus, many photographs show women performing the same work, one after another in apparently endless rows on assembly lines or at check-out counters, identical in posture and movements and

individually interchangeable. There are no comparable pictures of men. Men have special assignments and abilities, and the photographs seem to say men are not immediately replaceable or interchangeable. They make visibly clear that female productive labor is "different" from male productive labor, that the former is codetermined by pregnancy, childrearing, and housework.

A certain type of picture appears in both magazines unchanged: man instructing woman. These photographs create a gendered division of labor, a relationship of subordination, a social hierarchy physically obvious in the relationship depicted (boss instructs and checks up on secretary). Many photographs do refer to work interactions in which men and women perform the same tasks. Yet these pictures are also characterized by a visual "language" showing men as more competent, with a broad overview and the final word: *he* is optically enlarged by the choice of perspective, his superiority visible in his calm posture, expert gaze, and confident, explanatory gestures, while *she* looks up at him inquiringly, listening to his explanation—often in a strained posture—or eagerly endeavoring to carry out the instructions and perform well under the critical gaze of the man.

In one photograph [*Photo 1*] two young women are in front of a computer, the man in the foreground appearing more as a shadow but still dominating the scene. The expert, alert gaze of the two women expresses competence and self-assurance. They have little in common with women in photographs from the 1960s, who approached the unfamiliar technology with hesitation and insecurity. Still, the scene is shot at the moment when the man is in action. The postures of the women—sitting or leaning forward on both hands—optically enlarge the man, and the activity of the man (speaking, lively gestures) and the passivity of the women (listening, receptive posture) are contrasted; the cooperation between men and women is made graphically perceptible in accordance with traditional gender stereotypes. The viewer notices primarily the "typical" postures and gestures of women and men in a new context (modern technology), conveying in concrete form: men and women are "this way" (and they should stay this way).

Photographs that "underexpose" traditionally understood femininity in the work sphere reflect employment as a self-evident, everyday experience of women, but also as something that does not yet affect their essential "femaleness." But employment is integrated into the "normal" understanding of "femaleness" in another way as well: some pictures [*Photo 2*] show women in the working sphere as seductive. Captions emphasizing "feminine" qualities or physical characteristics (the "slender, delicate person") have their impact on the model of the professionally active woman: women's professional work becomes "different" from men's professional work. "Our mommies," in a widely used contemptuous expression for working GDR women with children, of course "work like a man," but as mommies they are always second-class workers.

Photographs of working women in which a demonstrative emphasis on "femininity" is noticeable are hardly rare. They convey a picture of the contradictory situation of women in the world of work.

*Photo 1*

## 2. The Uses of Beauty

The more highly qualified, responsible, exclusive the woman's professional activity is, the more the picture of an efficient female sex is softened through an emphasis on beauty and a "feminine" body shape.

In accordance with their goal of popularizing the political and professional equality of women in the GDR, *Für Dich* profiled successful women in prominent positions or activities relatively frequently. These "model women" were presented with a demonstrative emphasis on traditional "feminine" stereotypes. This is particularly true of the usually large-format, color lead photographs. Just like the title-page photographs of women, who have managed to be successful in their careers with "determination and charm," with "charm and logic," "determined and understanding," the leads present these women superficially as "feminine" creatures: their hair falls soft and lustrous, the flattering silk blouse harmonizes with the color of their shining eyes, the skin of their face is so pink and glowing that the lines are hardly noticeable, the pinks of the blouse and the lipstick are exactly the same. Subject competence and high position are reduced in importance and the (real or potential) threat to a traditional order is mitigated.

One aspect of the traditional image of "femininity" plays a prominent role in these pictures: feminine beauty and power are made equivalent. This actually refers to sexual power; thus, in the context we are examining, power is transposed to another level, in which the real power of competence becomes the power of beauty. In other words, where a real threat to men's status and privilege is involved, women are depicted as the seductive sex, as the embodiment of sexuality.

In pictorial "language" arrangements of this type, a subtle form of devaluation of women's work can be seen. In this kind of photograph common stereotypes of femininity diminish the seriousness of the work, as when a woman delicately tests the temperature of grain in a storage silo with her bare feet ("an old peasant method"), her high-heeled shoes lying next to her. The outfit and presentation of the woman more likely triggers associations of "leisure time" or a "stroll on a Sunday afternoon" than "serious" (masculine) work, and also carries the subliminal message that the work of Ms. Agronomist" is not (cannot be) of the quality of that of "Mr. Agronomist."

### 3. The Double Burden

While the woman is certainly allowed to develop career ambitions, she has to keep things in proportion. Her ambition cannot be allowed to threaten marriage and family. The ever-present stereotypes of motherliness, caring, and selflessness emphasize that women are expected to combine motherhood, housework, and employment. Women with children are far more frequently photographed at caretaking, tending activities than at instructing, teaching, or even playing. Taking care of a husband is also silently conveyed as self-evident. The family appears as the "normal" form of human relationships in the larger context of the photographs.

Yet women's double burden is hardly depicted. In looking through many years of *Für Dich* only one photograph was found that directly—using a photomontage—pointed to the woman performing housework. While photographs criticizing the traditional division of roles in the household by showing men and women engaged in housework appeared in the 1950s and 1960s, such photographs were almost completely absent in the 1980s. Out of the nearly 5400 photographs of men and/or women that appeared in 1986 in the two magazines evaluated, exactly 14 showed women or men engaged in housework. Since housework appears essentially unworthy of depiction, its traditional valuation as nonwork is reproduced.

### 4. The Masculine Gaze

The "masculine gaze" dominates the image of women in the GDR.

Photographs of the daily life of "normal women" are structured according to traditional models, according to which women are the "other, different, lesser sex." Photographs indicating sensuality or sexuality were found extremely rarely in *Für Dich*. The bodies of the women (and men) depicted were working or reproductive bodies; rare exceptions were limited strictly to very young individuals, who were—presumably—not yet married or still childless. There was no pornography, at least not officially. Photographs that directly used the female body as a screen for the projection of male fantasies or as advertising space for

products or ideologies were quite rare in these magazines. Photographs showing marriage as the locus of happiness were also rare, but this says nothing about actual needs or the quality of gender relations. It is an indication of the filtering of reality for reasons of "socialist ideology," according to which women faced neither structural disadvantages nor discrimination, and experienced neither violence nor a sexuality oriented toward individual pleasure rather than propagation.

According to the pictures in *Für Dich,* women are employed and mothers, or, more exactly, employed mothers. Such important areas in the context of their lives as unpaid housework or the relation between sexuality and male violence are filtered out. The context of women's daily lives deemed worthy of portrayal is structured and valued according to traditional gender stereotypes, and the "normality" of social hierarchies, of power and subordination, is casually conveyed as self-evident. These structures were based on the power monopoly of a single party. Like the pater familias in the pre-bourgeois producer-family, the Party assumed for itself the right to act and make decisions in the interest of all, to take responsibility for everything and hold everyone in a tutelary relationship by means of a finely graduated hierarchy. Thus, the patriarchal-paternalistic pattern of differentiation had a directly system-supporting function. In the photographs of working life, therefore, it is not just a matter of the acceptance of a gender-specific division of labor (which is only the result of a momentary situation of economic necessity), structured by traditional gender stereotypes. It simultaneously goes beyond this to involve the acceptance of political, ideological, and cultural structures that anchor the division of the world into the powerful few and the powerless mass, into the responsible and the dependent.

## II. The Transformation of *Für Dich* and Its World of Images from Fall 1989 to Its Demise in June 1991

During the short, euphoric phase of rebellion in which everything seemed possible, *Für Dich* changed too. It had been directly administered by the propaganda wing of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party. Now a few of its women editors pushed for change under the pressure of current events. They wanted a magazine that really recognized the interests of women and articulated them as consciously political demands in these times of radical change. For a few months, GDR women could read realistic reports on the actual results of the long propagandized realization of equality in *Für Dich.* They read for the first time about sexual violence in the family, about women in prison, about sexual abuse of children, or the arguments for and against pornography. The magazine gave the Independent Women's Association (UFV) two pages in each issue and thus actively engaged in the construction of a network of women's initiatives throughout the entire GDR. There was no unified editorial concept for the magazine; opinion among the editors was distinctly divided. One lobby within the editorial

staff pushed for a more "feminine" orientation, in order to be able to survive the new competition of the media market.

The Volkskammer (GDR Parliament) elections in March 1990 represented a turning point for the magazine. Negotiations were under way with several West German or foreign publishers, and in the end the Hamburg publishing house Gruner & Jahr acquired *Für Dich* along with other newspapers and magazines. The resulting editorial orientation, which only a very few of the members of the old editorial staff refused to accept,[5] was taken from West German women's magazines like *Constanze,* which had failed, and *Tina,* which had become widely read in the East. It went as follows: as little analysis of current politics or women's problems as possible; instead, short, snappy informational reports and aids to action in very concrete matters (writing a job letter or applying for unemployment or child support payments), but above all lots of fashion, recipes, travel tips, cosmetics, and advertising. There was practically no advertising of *Für Dich* in West Germany. Distribution in the New Federal States (ex-GDR) was extremely poorly organized. The sales figures sank rapidly (to 90,000).

The editorial staff took leave of its readers in issue number 24, after forty-five years of uninterrupted publication. The issue was already at press when it became known that this would be the last issue. The "feminist" phase of *Für Dich* was an intermezzo—supported by only a few editors, in any case. The majority of the editorial staff remained faithful to the attitude they had acquired in GDR times: to produce a women's magazine without a critical consciousness of the structural disadvantage of the female sex or the ideological function of the cultural constructions of "femininity" and "masculinity." Thus, the abrupt change in the graphic world after March 1990 was not as decisive as it appeared at first glance. Functionally, it should be seen more as a continuity in the transmission of traditional gender stereotypes during a simultaneous disruption of the reality depicted.

However, in the last phase of *Für Dich* the photographs of working women shown in their daily work lives, which had previously been so numerous on the pages of *Für Dich,* became rare. The reports about the existential suffering of a single mother with three children who had lost her job and was living on welfare were accompanied by photographs that definitely conveyed the hopelessness of her situation.

Photographs depicting women in daily life were in the minority in every issue compared to photographs that—like fashion photography—explicitly presented common images of "femininity" or "masculinity." In this photography, women's bodies represented gender stereotypes more directly than in photographs of daily life. Their normative force was thus also significantly greater. This bright picture world preached to women in the former GDR: to be a woman means to be beautiful. Whether a woman is employed or is a housewife, whether she is professionally highly qualified or has only learned the absolute minimum, whether she has developed more or less successful strategies for the combination of work

and motherhood, whether she was interested in things beyond her private horizon or not—all this was peripheral to the central issue, that a woman must be "feminine." Accordingly, there were no longer any "real" or "normal" women to be found on the title pages, but only young models embodying seductive, feminine beauty.

The many fashion pages offered not only an overview of the previously unaccustomed broad array of goods for every size pocketbook; they also hammered in the message: "Clothes make the woman." If working women were depicted, it was not to show them using their abilities, but to aim at their cosmetic beautification. If a woman was mousy to begin with, after cosmetic efforts she was guaranteed to gain personality, self-confidence, and aura, the requirements necessary to win in the competition for the increasingly short supply of jobs. The "before" and "after" was also to be interpreted as before and after the "turning point." The many colorfully pictured ideas for gifts (and their aesthetic packaging), for brightening up the apartment, and for culinary treats for the family made clear what the well-dressed and made-up woman was there for: to consume.

Many things are connected in these photographs: the real, very justified need for improvement in material living conditions, the extolling of a wealth of products, the premise of a "modern," Western lifestyle, the traditional cultural stereotypes of "femininity," and the devaluation of everything that had previously belonged to the daily lives of GDR women, including their external appearance. The lovely, bright pictures were not to be understood as a "return" to traditional stereotypes of "femininity"; they were ever-present in the photographs from the GDR period, too. They were also not merely compensation and escape from a real world of increasing insecurity. With their invitation to become a "new, completely different" woman, they functioned in a larger context to erase the memory of everything which—within the frame of the political-ideological and thereby always virulent patriarchal structures of state socialism—belonged to the experiences of women in the GDR: the pursuit of a (more or less) qualified career, the ability to combine career and motherhood, and the ability to be at least in principle economically independent.

## III. The Pictures from the Old and New Worlds: Extremely Different or Astonishingly Similar?

The photographs of women in the world of work or the public political sphere were displaced by photographs in which the bodies of real women became idealized projection screens for traditional stereotypes of "femininity," "feminine beauty and sexual seductiveness." The industrious woman, tirelessly working to fulfill socialist goals, was replaced by a consumer concerned with herself and her appearance. Besides decoding the ideological content of photographs in which the individual professional abilities of women were used for other purposes, the new pictures reveal all too clearly what amount of room to maneuver, what areas

of activity are granted to women uncontested. The discrepancy between these photographs and the experiences of women is significantly greater and more obvious than in the daily-life photographs of the working world. The transition from the not consciously registered patriarchy of GDR society to the patriarchy in the new society, which among other things appeared in the form of official recognition of a previously hardly noticed "femininity," is more likely to be seamless. But the similarities in both the "before" and "after" 1989 photographs remain:

—The filtering out of important aspects of female life as unworthy of depiction. Just as in the *Für Dich* of the old days, although the housewife had a significantly higher status within the new image of woman than in the GDR, there were no photographs in the new picture world of women doing housework, shopping, or taking care of children. Unpaid reproductive labor remains invisible in both cases.

—The polar assignment of human characteristics and activities to the male or female sex is confirmed and carried forward in both graphic worlds, and with it the more or less "natural character" of the existing division of labor between the sexes and the second-class status of women. The individual perception of contradictory experience or conflicts between changed conditions and traditional roles are squeezed into the traditional stereotypes.

—Both graphic worlds level out differences, reducing diversity to abstract generalities of gender stereotypes. This triumph of the general over the particular reveals the ideological character of both the old and the new pictures: to use the real experiences and needs of women expressed in this generalized form for the ends of power.

Taking all this into consideration, one can hardly regret the fact that *Für Dich* ceased publication after forty-five years. But with it the only mass-market periodical that provided information to women about the situation of women in the new states (of the former GDR)—even if only in a very limited way—disappeared.

Translated from the German by Dorothy Rosenberg

## Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction), in *Walter Benjamin Allegorien kultureller Erfahrung. Ausgewählte Schriften 1920–1940* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1984), p. 413.
2. *Der Mensch und sein Weib: Aktuelle Frauen—und Männerbilder: Geschichtliche Ursprünge und Perspektiven* (Contemporary Images of Men and Women: Historical Origins and Perspectives) (Berlin: Dietz, 1991).
3. *Für Dich* began publication in 1946 under the title "Frau von Heute," which it carried

until 1963. It had a print run of over one million copies at times. In fall 1990 it still printed 950,000 copies.

4. In age cohorts up to forty years, the level of training or starting qualification had reached parity between men and women. In 1988, 87 percent of employed women had completed training and certification. *Sozialreport 1990,* ed. Gunnar Winkler (Berlin: Die Wirtschaft, 1991).
5. Not the least because they were very well paid for GDR or East German conditions and because they received a three-year no-layoff protection agreement, which following the closure of the magazine has been transformed into settlement amounting to two years' salary. Compared with the vast majority of East Germans, who are now losing their jobs, they are in a comparably advantageous position.