Maxim Magazine and the Management of Contempt

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This article discusses manifestations of contempt in Maxim magazine. Not the obvious contempt—for women—though that is unavoidable in this magazine. Not the contempt for gay men, or even for what we have recently begun calling the “metrosexual” man, what the British call the “new man”—the fashion-conscious, sensitive aesthete who falsely sets off gaydar and who Maxim readers do not believe even exists. Rather, this article explores the magazine’s contempt for its own readers, who are encouraged by the magazine to indulge in dangerous forms of self-loathing. But en route to this claim, we need to review the British genesis of the magazine and the cultural ecology that is presumed in Britain to neuter its more insidious contributions to constructions of gender in times of change.

The American version of Maxim magazine is unquestionably the most commercially successful of the men’s lifestyle magazines arriving from England during the British invasion of the mid-90s. At a time when the so-called new lad school of British publications was declining in sales and influence in England, Maxim became, in the three years since its arrival in America, what Brandweek called “the biggest and fastest-growing men’s magazine in the U.S.” (Gray). Like its competitor FHM, whose arrival in the States was likened to a “testosterone-charged British sperm . . . swimming across the Atlantic” (Goodwin and Rushe, qtd. in Benwell 25), the American Maxim occasioned triumphant boasting that the British succeeded in creating a young male readership of magazines where American publishers had failed.
A former editor of *Maxim*, Clare McHugh, proclaimed in 2002, "I think it is one of the great mysteries of our time why American publishers didn’t do this first" (Carr C1).

Of course, American magazine publishers had been trying to court young male readers for some time, and not just with “men’s interest” magazines that attend to sports, music, cars, fitness, and babes. But their efforts to create a market for men’s lifestyle magazines failed for nearly two decades. *Playboy* and *Esquire* had established an older, more genteel readership by offering their discernment about consuming the finer things—champagne, literature, tourism, and women. But the image of the pipe-smoking, satin-robed connoisseur and the gently womanizing literati failed to recruit the Gen-X fans of *Animal House*, the eventual viewers of *The Man Show* and *Jackass*. Stung by the early demise of such attempts as *Men’s Life*, *M Inc.*, and *Men’s Perspective*, publishers and advertisers alike enjoyed some success with the fashion spreads of *GQ* and *Details* but not with broader, more aggressively heterosexual magazines about young men’s lifestyles.

The British publishing industry discovered an approach to male readers well before their American counterparts, and it is to the British we also must turn for the most substantive analyses of the new lad phenomenon. There is surprisingly scant attention among American academics to men’s magazines. In fact, apart from corporate America, there is little attention to magazines in general. The 2003 PCA/ACA conference offered only one session about magazines (out of over five hundred sessions), and the inaugural meeting of the Cultural Studies Association in Pittsburgh offered none. None of the readily available anthologies about popular culture includes a section about the popular press, and few university courses in popular culture include a unit on magazines. The best available books about men’s publications are British—Bethan Benwell’s 2003 anthology, *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines*, and Jackson, Stevenson, and Brooks’s 2001 *Making Sense of Men’s Magazines*—but neither of these includes more than passing attention to men’s lifestyle magazines in the United States.

The editorial content of American *Maxim* magazine does not seem to differ in any substantial way from its British forerunner, though conventions of advertising in the United States and editor-sponsor relations probably differ from British practice. A more ambitious study than this could probably also document differences between the young male readers in Britain and their American counterparts. It is therefore a question...
too complex for this project but nonetheless unavoidable to ask how much of what the British sociologists say about Maxim and the influence that it has on ideas of masculinity applies to this side of the ocean.

The British media have been promoting discussion of what they call the new lad magazines ever since the launching of loaded, arguably the first in this undistinguished category of magazines. loaded’s launch team informed the press in 1994 that it would target “the irreverent sensibilities of the new lad” (Crewe 93), and the decade that followed saw a cultural preoccupation with “lads” that rivals the American obsession with the “yuppie” and the “slacker.” When asked about the press given to lad magazines, an editor of the British Maxim, Gill Hudson, expresses her fatigue with the entire idea of laddish culture:

I just get . . . I’m bored by it, I mean I just kind of think “Come on, say something new about it.” They all keep making the same points, the same tedious points about women. Keep calling us a “lad’s mag.” It’s just boring, it makes me depressed about journalism generally. I think when you look at what’s going on underneath that, get off the “new lads” bandwagon. The trouble is the press at the moment are so driven by kind of two-dimensional pen portraits, you know: “new lads,” right let’s find something else. It was yuppies a few years, new men and new lad, and they’re all . . . it’s much more complex than that. (qtd. in Jackson 73)

If the young British men have been reading Maxim in a culture saturated with discourse about “lads,” how might the magazine be read differently when it is imported to a culture without such an ongoing dialogue in the press? Have we imported a species without its natural predators to keep its influence in check?

To address this question, we need to acknowledge that and other differences in the cultural ecological balance. The popularity of men’s lifestyle magazines is dropping substantially in Britain, but it is accelerating in the United States. Maxim Online is the second most popular men’s Web site in the United States (“Dennis Launches Blender”). The American Maxim has spawned subsidiary projects, and efforts are under way to license the Maxim name to market cell phones, hair care products, furniture, and even vitamin pills for men. A new magazine, Maxim Blender, focuses on music, and Maxim has forged a deal with New Line Cinema to produce films (Lazare). Andy Clerkson, general manager at Maxim, claims, “Maxim’s really become a brand, a lifestyle brand way beyond just ink and paper.”
The British editors of men’s lifestyle magazines discuss the need to keep their magazines from becoming too trashy, a need born of their fears of offending prospective advertisers. The statements quoted in *Making Sense of Men’s Magazines* provide a glimpse into a very different editor-advertiser dynamic than that which characterizes American magazine publishing (Jackson 63 ff.). The editors construe British advertisers as forces that sanitize the editorial content out of fears that the sexual content could “give their products a bad image.” In that model, the editors are bad boys (and girls) with ‘tude that is held in check by a corporate pressure to maintain a standard of decency.

Very generally and roughly speaking, the American model of editor-advertiser relations is somewhat the reverse. In the American model, to the extent that Gloria Steinem’s view is accurate, the editors (even of lifestyle magazines) aspire to something like journalistic integrity but frequently cave to the pressures of sexist advertisers who demand “complementary copy” and “supportive editorial atmosphere” for ad campaigns that lower the level of discourse in the magazines (189). What if hip and rad British editors, accustomed to some restraint at home, meet the hip and rad American advertising culture at a time when it is immersed in shock advertising, slacker-bashing, envelope-pushing rebellion that is anti-PC as it attempts to strike an anti-advertising pose? Again, a case of importing a species to a cultural ecology that offers it no restraint?

The British editors of the new lad magazines posit that there is an additional cultural antidote to the toxins in the magazines in England, namely a sensibility among its readers that enables them to read the magazines *ironically*, as if the magazines are a kind of found satire on hyperbolic manhood. The president of Dennis Publishing, the publisher of *Maxim*, declares in a *Forbes* interview, “The whole key to *Maxim*’s success is humor. We’re kind of parodying guyness” (Colvin 36). The first of the new lad magazines, *loaded*, set this tone with its subtitle: “Men Who Should Know Better.” And irony became a stock feature of the new laddism as it was construed by British media and academic social critics. Some of these studies find solace in the idea of reader agency, the wishful-thinking claim that readers do not simply accept uncreatively the ideas set before them, but experience the profound heteroglossia of these magazines and take from them a mediated but less insidious message than that explicitly endorsed by the magazines. Belinda Wheaton, for example, hopes that “audiences actively
interpret, draw on and create meanings that can vary and do differ from the preferred meaning offered by the texts. Although lifestyle sport magazines re-inscribe traditional hegemonic codes about masculinity, they simultaneously offer at least the potential for changes in gender relations and identities” (218).

British studies of audience reaction to the new lad magazines, however, remain skeptical about how many readers actually view the magazines ironically. In the context of the focus groups, the readers claim to read the magazines because they are funny, and the readers, like the magazine's editors, argue that the magazines have no political significance whatsoever. As Jackson points out, “The insistence by many participants on reading the magazines just for a laugh can be seen as a convenient way of denying their wider political significance” (121). Such a conclusion corroborates Jackson’s analysis of the content of the magazines:

Irony was, in fact, surprisingly rare in our content analysis of the magazines, given the extent to which it is regarded as fundamental to the genre in most media accounts. Contrary to such accounts, laddishness was embraced in an uncritical and unreflective manner in most magazines rather than via an ironic sense of distance. (190)

When the readers resist political analyses of the magazines, they apparently do so to fend off criticism. In effect, they say, “just kidding!” as an unconvincing and feeble attempt to deny the explicit ideas in the magazines and to imply that their critics just don’t get it. Jackson explains, “irony is used as an ideological defence against external attack (only the most humourless do not get the joke) and an internal defence against more ambivalent feelings that render masculine experience less omnipotent and less certain than it is represented here” (104).

Contradicting readers’ assertions that it is all a joke and editors’ claims that the magazines “parody guyness,” the British readers argue that the view of manhood in the magazines is more honest than other images of men in the media. One reader argues, for example, that the lad magazines present men as they really are, and that the “new man” merely pretends to be “emotional and caring,” but actually is a “mythical creation, completely unrealistic and artificial, an attempt to redefine the masculine model if you wish . . . the product of the women’s movement” (Jackson 138). Another reader adds that “The new man went too far . . . [and] didn’t exist except on television” (117).
Jackson concludes that in Britain, “By the late 1990s, then, laddishness had become so taken-for-granted as a form of masculinity that it was widely regarded as ‘natural,’ in contrast to the other versions of masculinity, such as the new man, which were commonly perceived to be a media construction” (119).

We have, then, in Britain, pervasive attention in the popular press to competing portraits of contemporary manhood. The press hails the emergence of the new man, while the lad magazines contest the type as a hypocritical media falsehood. Without such a context, young American men—never famous for their ironical sensibility—are purchasing Maxim in record numbers. What do they find in it?

Ostensibly a celebration of unexamined, untheorized, unself-conscious pleasure in the joys of “natural” manhood, Maxim magazine is a kaleidoscope of omnidirectional contempt and anger.

Of course, the first things we notice are the photo spreads of lingerie-clad celebrity women. Couched as evidence that the editors and readers “adore” women with avid heterosexuality, the collective portrait of financially and professionally successful women demonstrates that, for a buck, they can be stripped down, placed in alluring poses, and purchased by any teen who wishes to own them. It is significant that these are not the girls-next-door of pornographic Web sites, the naughty coeds of Playboy, or the willing biker chicks we might find, for example, in Easyriders magazine. Their status as economically powerful women makes their taming by the photographers an especially valuable commodity, or, as one cover proclaims about Shannon Elizabeth, “Our Gift to You!” (Dec. 2003). Actor Jodi Lyn O’Keefe might be “Smarter Than Us,” as the April 2000 cover admits, but her photo layout promises, “She’s all yours” (148). The interview with O’Keefe is representative of the agenda of these allegedly intimate interviews: the women are made to claim that the image of them as available prey is actually them in their natural, preferred private lives. The text denies the obvious—that they have posed and are performing for male pleasure—with claims that this is how they really are. When asked about her off-screen wardrobe, O’Keefe asserts, “It would have to be some lingerie. I love the whole outfit—you know, thigh-high tights and garters. Send me to Victoria’s Secret and I’m on cloud nine” (154).

Whatever power these women might have, whatever threat they might represent to men’s economic power, is transformed to a merely sexual power, which has been “caught”—snared and packaged—and offered
as a gift to the readers. The celebrity women assert their eagerness to reveal their true natures for the photographers, as if all this other stuff—their work, their having opinions, their wearing clothes—is only a fatiguing kind of posturing.

It is equally important to the gender dynamics of *Maxim* that some of the most astonishing assertions that women desire rough and aggressive men come from prominently by-lined female authors in the magazine’s “She Says” department. Whether couched as a betrayal of their gender or as a peek into “real” women’s psyches, these women lay out the steps required for men to subvert silly and contrived female resistance to their advances. One “Says Her” column, entitled “Her Filthy, Filthy Fantasies,” promises that “For the very first time, real women reveal how you can reap the benefits of their fantasies.” With a pseudofeminist bravado, the author boasts, “Women are as depraved as men.” We want you to “own us in the bedroom.” Don’t believe a woman’s claims to the contrary: “Odds are your politically correct, prim-and-proper girlfriend has a healthy desire to be flipped over your knee and given a good spanking once in a while” (Oct. 2001: 76). Another woman discloses “What Women Want!”—a guide to “total and complete bedroom domination” (Apr. 2002: 141).

If there is irony or humor in these guides, it is not the kind that depicts hyperbolic sexual aggression for purposes of urging, by contrast, that the reader engage in kinder and gentler conduct. Instead, it is a “just we boys” delight in how long the metaphors of conquest can be prolonged. One woman sustains a conceit of military invasion for six pages in an essay called “War and Piece: Operation Pink Thunder.” Recalling the brand-naming of the many Bush-led military campaigns, this article marshals every weapon in a man’s arsenal to enable him to convince his enemy girlfriend to “defoliate” her pubic hair, to “enliven the halftime show by arranging some oral submarine action for your li’l soldier,” to “lure your girlfriend into monitoring advanced genital docking videos (a.k.a. watching porn),” and to pose for nude photographs that you may “fire at will” (Sept. 2002: 184–92). Another woman discusses “Foreplay Speed Trials,” a NASCAR-inspired directive to “Take your girl from zero to Big O in no time flat” (June 2002: 60). The June 2002 issue declares “open season on the chickadees” in its hunting-inspired “Maxim’s Guide to North American Girls” (144–52). Lounging in trees and strutting about in jungles, the various species of women have one thing in common: they, of course, are
“natural” women as they really are, not those phony feminist posers with their sick desires for girly guys. The cover of the October 2002 issue compares the conquest to nuclear annihilation of the enemy. “Atomic Sex!” urges the reader to “Drop the big one on her tonight! This is not a test. . . .”

Of course, neither is it a subtly nuanced, ironical interrogation of gender identities. The contempt for feminists is absolute. The contempt for women is explicit. The contempt for “sensitive” men is pervasive, the hostility toward gays transparently anxious. Equally clear is that such brazen whooping-it-up constructs the reader as profoundly insecure, neurotically in need of step-by-step guidance in how to be a man. Advertising Age notes the “‘ego gap’ between old-fashioned and modern men, who are having difficulty coming to terms with their masculinity” and are “very unsure of themselves” (Brody 22).

Beyond merely nervous and insecure, however, the Maxim reader, according to both editors and advertisers, is a loathsome, unhygienic, congenitally dishonest, opportunistic, disorderly, selfish creature of unrestrained animal appetites—a throw-back to more “natural” times of Iron John hunting and gathering. Maxim, to these readers, offers a healthy relief from media-constructed fantasies of new men. Does it really offer a “parody of guyness” when it claims that recent breakthroughs in “scientific research” confirm that “boorishness” is a “fundamental part of being male” (Sept. 1997)? Or that “recent behavioral studies indicate” that “Men Are Pigs” (Oct. 1998)? Such pieces normalize predatory behavior as hardwired instincts, “scientifically” validating male psychopathy. “In the wild,” we are told, lions demand “to be the first served. And with no organized feminist movement to oppose them, the bastards actually get away with it” (Oct. 1998).

As workers, the constructed Maxim readers are incompetent and need the “Official Maxim Sabotage Kit” to rid the office of more talented coworkers (Oct. 2002: 132–36). They are as proud of their stupidity as Bart Simpson and need to learn how to “Win any argument—no matter how wrong you are!” (Dec. 2003: 62). Maxim calls its readers “poor shlubs” and “slobs” (Apr. 2002: 123, 68), and it regularly offers a self-help quiz called “Are you as dumb as you look?” Regarding sexual matters, one issue of Maxim recommends that a man conceal a dog treat in his pocket to arouse the excitement of his target woman’s pet. Another urges its readers to “Fake Your Way into Her Bed” (May 2001). The December 2003 issue ups the ante with its call
to “get more holiday sex than you deserve!” When a reader writes in seeking advice about how to seduce his girlfriend’s best friend, the editor suggests finding out where she lives, taping and then breaking her window, and getting in bed with her: “Just tell the cops Stuff sent you” (28). In a magazine that purports to authenticate and scientifically validate a more “natural” and “honest” masculinity, we find advice about how to perform, to masquerade as a man worth making love to. *Maxim* casts its readers as men who are so infantile, self-absorbed, and inadequate that no woman would possibly find them attractive unless they employ every available form of deceit—and even force.

When American advertisers think we are not looking, when they advise other advertisers about how to subvert ad-resistance, their contempt for their “target” consumers becomes surprisingly explicit. Jonathan Bond and Richard Kirshenbaum, whose work in advertising has earned more accolades than I can name and who are compared to David Ogilvy in their prominence among advertisers, write, “Consumers are like roaches. We spray them with marketing and, for a time it works. Then, inevitably they develop an immunity, a resistance. And the old formulas stop working. So what we need to do is keep breaking the rules to stay ahead of consumers’ ever evolving defenses” (92). What happens when both editors and advertisers target insecure readers whom they conceive as subhuman roaches? A marketing bonanza?

On my campus, a subgroup of young men carry their copies of *Maxim* to class and to the student union, and they leave them proudly strewn in their dorm rooms. They may think that they are saying, “I’m not gay! See these photos?” They may think that they are waving a banner proclaiming their hypermasculine immunity to political correctness. Maybe they are doing the women on campus a colossal favor, letting women know with just a glance what they think of themselves and of their prey.

**Works Cited**


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