



## CONTRARY CONVERSATIONS

How a contrary conversation resulted in a magazine that isn't quite what it looks like. By Hazel Graham.

I was having a conversation about my contrary feelings towards feminism, when I realised, I'd been having that conversation with myself for some time. I am an advocate of women's rights, and I am indebted to the women who fought for my privileges, I was moved to tears by a 'Votes For Women' sash at the Bishopsgate Archive (2024). But, I feel like a flaky feminist, a fence sitting feminist and I find too much feminism, well, too feminist. Feminism is so

broad and nuanced, I didn't know where I fitted in. I am not all of these things, I can't stand for all these people, I am white, middle class and have privilege. Then I discovered post structuralist feminism and deconstructing. Exploring how language, power and discourse shape meaning, made me feel more comfortable.

I was also in conversation with magazines and popular culture. I love popular culture and I love magazines. I love the light, entertaining, flippancy of magazines, a smorgasbord of bits

to nibble and digest. Indulgent imagery. A feast for the eyes and a gentle stroke of my brain. Accessible and not demanding. Simultaneously, I am exhausted by the noise, commercialisation, commodification and representation of women. Contrary.

Lately, I feel shortchanged by magazines. I find, maybe one article, I want to read, the rest appears to be

**NOT VOGUE**  
An *other* story of Vogue found lurking in the liminal

the same. The same people, saying the same surface level things, about the same other people.

So, I decided to explore the discursive construction of reality through *Vogue* magazine with a specific interest in what might be lurking in the liminal. By using a wide variety of methods of deconstruction – zooming, decaying, offsetting, categorising, extracting, contexts, collage, absence and stenciling – I explored the discursive construction of *Vogue* magazine and found hidden deep in the text an *other* story of *Vogue*.

I used print and digital as my material and my medium, as well as scale, wood and decay to deepen these explorations. I used the online *Vogue Archive* as it is home to 132 years' worth of American *Vogue* and the physical *Vogue Archive* at Central Saint Martins, that is home to around eighty years of American *Vogue*. The source material is American not British, but I am British, I use it to represent the West.

Turns out I'm not alone in looking for something more. When having a conversation with my friends they felt as I do. In a mini survey of women who are *Vogue*'s target market—female, age 35+ (Statista, 2020), the conversation that emerged was of “regurgitated content” and “too many ads” (Women's Magazines Mini Survey, 2025). Ellen McCracken notes how magazines are a vehicle for delivering audiences to advertisers through semiotics, “In most cases, the meaning systems are intensely successful in selling both copies of the magazine and the products advertised inside” (1993). In the thirty years since this was written, the editorial content itself, has also become commodified. Through deconstructing I found a dominance of commodification woven into picture captions, body copy and imagery. The influence of advertising overtaking the content and al-

ienating the very audience they are trying to connect with.

But... magazines are wonderful constructions and have dedicated teams that make them (I know as I was one of them). Great journalists, great subjects, great photographers... Editorial teams work tirelessly for 'the audience'. Where did the connection get disconnected?

Naomi Wolf argues at length of the negative impact of the 'feminine ideals' women's magazines construct, perpetuate and iterate, “Western beauty standards are the products of a capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal, white supremacist society, contrived to keep

“I'm exhausted with being sold to, sold off and sold out. I don't need sensational headlines to make me read something... I just want something to connect with,”

us consuming and consumed” (1991). Are editorial teams aware of the invisible context they are operating within—a context they are perpetuating, iterating and creating? That the systems and structures they make 'choices' within are constraining and restraining themselves and women? I had no idea the 'choices' I were making were constructing this discursive reality.

*Vogue* has constructed a 'single story' of itself. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of the danger of the single story; to “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become” (2009). In the 1930s the contents page of *Vogue* changed significantly in language and design, with a shift from varied content for women—covering

politics, feminism, capitalism, patriarchy, economics and class—to predominantly fashion. From 1930-2005 this intensified through the use of red text, increased imagery and repetition of the word 'fashion'. A narrowing of *Vogue*'s interests. *Vogue* became consumed by consuming, controlled by money and men. Whose voice is really being heard through *Vogue*? The *Vogue Archive* spans 132 years, from 1892-present day, almost mirroring the four waves of feminism that started in 1810-present day (The New Feminist, 2024). What a rich and vibrant archive of women this could have been, I thought reminiscently.

Roland Barthes used 'mythology' to uncover the meaning created within texts. Through a mythological lens I found layers of context constructed within every feature of *Vogue*. Almost every-single-thing was contextualised within celebrity, wealth, luxury or exclusivity. The danger of this single story is that the context naturalises and normalises it. The design of newsstand magazines is formulaic and homogenous. The danger is that it becomes invisible. The formal properties of design (paraded as the 'right way' in Cath Caldwell's practical guide to Editorial Design, 2000) are expected and accepted, which goes unseen and deepens the myth.

But, by looking beyond the surface of what I was presented with, I deconstructed *Vogue* and found hidden deep within the text an *other* story. Moments of meaningful content that I clung to, that offered a widening of interests, rather than the analogue algorithm that *Vogue* has become. McCracken notes this passing contribution as further evidence of creating a discursive reality—that, “In addition, printing one or two of the responses from feminists gives the magazine the image of a fair, evenhanded treatment of the issues, as well as the appearance of the incorporation of pro-feminism into its editorial pages. The publishers perhaps hope that both feminists and non-feminists will find something to their

liking on the pages of *Vogue*" (1993).

I see her point (fence), but I disagree. I like to think of this as the real voice, trying to be heard amongst all the noise, both visually and textually.

I'm exhausted with being sold to, sold off and sold out. I don't need sensational headlines to make me read something, I don't need nearly naked images to entice me to read on. I just want something to connect with, that makes me think, that challenges my view, that gives me another view, an insight, a light and accessible package, but a "different way to see" (Wolf, 1991).

I had a conversation with Elinor and Richard from *Four Corners Book*, where we discussed using a context to tell another story. The series *Familiars* take classic novels and retells them through an artist's eyes, but still in the form of a book. Recognisable, readable, understandable, but different. Bringing a new way of seeing something familiar. Films are doing the same. Hollywood formats are used to make a statement about race (*American Fiction*), class (*Triangle of Sadness*), society (*Don't Worry Darling*) and expected beauty standards of women (*The Substance*). Having tried to break the design of magazines through deconstructing, what if I used the design of magazines to tell an *other* story. The marginalised, *second* story of *Vogue*?

**O**n the surface it looks like *Vogue*, but when you look beyond the surface you find it is *Not Vogue*. It is a smorgasbord of diverse voices, from the past, present and future. In conversation with one another, in conversation with time, in conversation with *Vogue* and in conversation with you.

It's layout, fonts, size, shape, pagination, material, function and form is of *Vogue*. It has large indulgent imagery, sourced from its own archive, pic-

ture libraries and utilises publicity imagery, as magazines do. But the picture captions offer a contrary reading, a provocation, not a commodification. Headlines and standfirsts entice the reader in, without misleading them. The footer contextualises the content. Where it's from, when it's from, adding to the conversation, asking questions. Divided into three sections, the past regurgitates literal articles from *Vogue's* history that offer conversation on what's changed and what hasn't changed—language, aesthetics and attitude have, but themes, not so much. The present takes online audio

*“Not Vogue is... An evolving archive of everybody. An ephemeral object that is both of its time and place, but also an archive of the present for the future”*

transcriptions as text to allow the actual voice to come through and to remove the editorial voice. The future takes inspiration from digital content creators, with the audience contributing features, sharing their interests, passions and knowledge, in their voice.

*Not Vogue* challenges the constructions of women's magazines and the discursive reality created not only by *Vogue*, but by all women's magazines on the newsstand, within publishing. It shows women as more than consumers and surfaces. I hope that it will engage with women who read magazines, women who have stopped reading magazines and editorial designers interested in who they are really designing for. It challenges the wider systems and structures that magazines

are created within by embodying feminist principles but looking like a capitalist product. Whilst *Not Vogue* is not a reality, I believe in the ethos and values of this project and will look for a commercial setting where this could become a reality. *Not Vogue* has changed the way I approach design, given me more confidence to design from my values, to use capitalist structures to my own advantage and to try and change the industry in a small way, for those to come.

There is an open invitation to join the conversation by writing your own thoughts and comments on the pages, making a magazine a tool for conversation, an object to pass on, to share. An evolving archive of everybody. Challenging the context of how magazines are read, shared and preserved. An ephemeral object that is both of its time and place, but also an archive of the present for the future.

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