

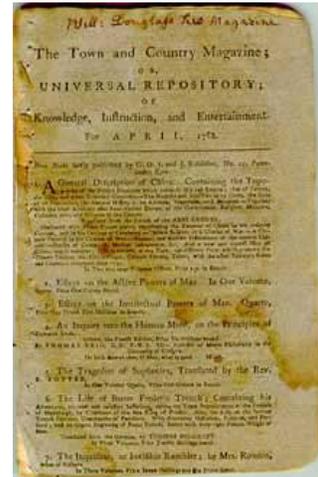
Magazine Covers and Cover Lines: *An Illustrated History*

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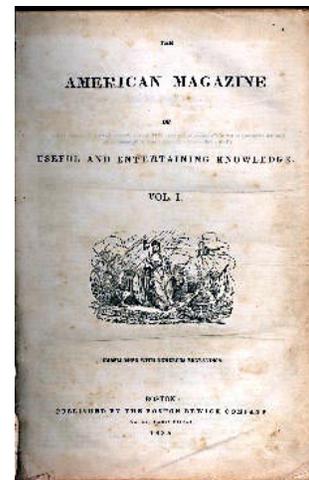
Over time, magazine covers have changed radically, and that change can be observed by following how magazines used cover lines. This article traces the history of magazine cover lines from early, bookish designs, through the emergence of the poster cover and its dominance, through the integration of type with art, to the proliferation of cover lines at the beginning of the 21st century.

In the mid-1700s, the earliest magazines did not always have what we think of as covers. Many dedicated the opening page to a title and table of contents, as in this cover of *The Town and Country Magazine; or Universal Repository; of Knowledge, Instruction, and Entertainment for April, 1788*.



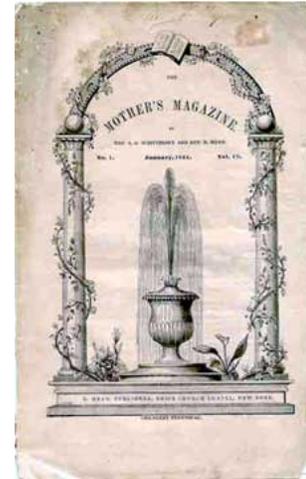
When early magazines used covers, they tended to model them after the covers of books -- providing only a title and publication data. There were no descriptive words indicating what would be found inside the magazine.

The cover of the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* from 1835 shows a centered, formal balance and book-like layout, with a small illustration that appears to have a decorative purpose, rather than to illustrate the contents. The table-of-contents cover and the book-like cover co-existed through the 1700s and 1800s.



Mother's Magazine from 1844 is an example of a third kind of cover that was common in the first two centuries of magazines -- the symbolic cover. It uses a generic illustration in a symbolic manner to evoke the spirit of the publication, without revealing any of this issue's specific contents.

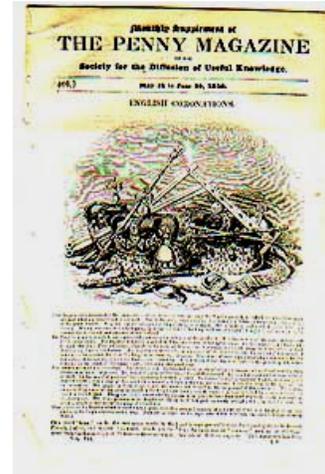
The magazine picture might be seen as telling the readers of Mother's Magazine that they are the foundation, the pillars, the unifying arch, the source and fountain, the life, and the instructor of their families. All of those implications can be reasonably found in its stylized picture, if you remember that earlier generations customarily read the Bible, and pictures, as allegorical messages requiring active interpretation.



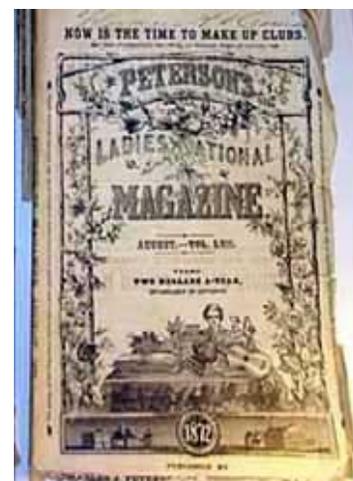
Such generic covers appeared, as in this example, without any cover lines indicating the contents, or, at times, with a line or two unobtrusively tucked under the standard design.

Cover lines were not only rare in early magazines, but many had no covers. Like newspapers, they began an article on the front page, as in this Penny Magazine from 1838.

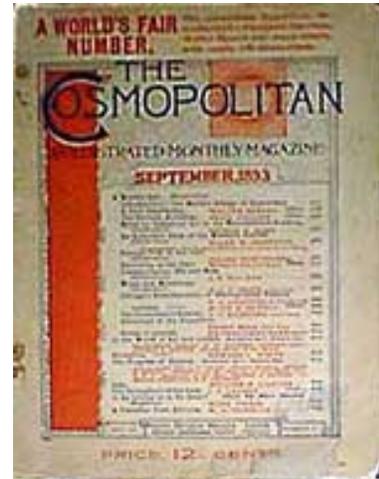
Cover lines began to appear within such generic covers in the later 1800s. The popular Peterson's women's magazine of 1872 uses a completely generic cover richly decorated with the leafy symmetry of Victorian embellishments, with a lovely assemblage of drawings at the bottom symbolizing the various roles of woman in the family.



But in this case, the generic has been infiltrated by the specific: The top of the magazine makes the modestly startling announcement of one of the topics to be found inside: "Now is the time to make up clubs."



Cosmopolitan of 1893 illustrates a common way magazines of that period used the cover to convey the table of contents, a cover line or two (here, at the top), and the magazine's identity (the characteristic large "C" and red band).



Reader's Digest used the table of contents as its cover from 1922 till 1998, and it is still used as a cover design by many journals and literary magazines.

Chaperone from 1896 illustrates the kind of experimentation that was taking place in cover design during the latter 1800s. This issue prints a small generic illustration surrounded by coin-like circles labeled with the name of the departments inside the magazine -- Art, Music, Literature, Science, Outings, Dress, Humor, etc. -- rather than the contents of actual articles.



The end of the 19th century found a wide range of magazine covers at play, many of them beginning to work with two questions that would occupy magazine designers for the next hundred years: Should we use cover lines? If so, how many, and where should we put them?

II. The Poster Cover: Pictures That Need No Words

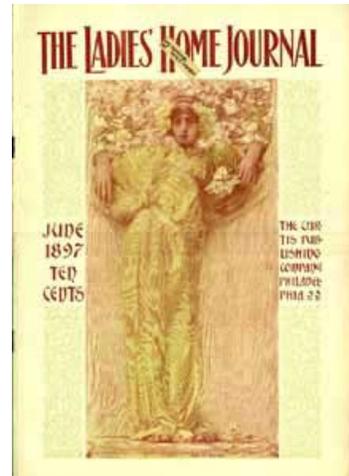
From the 1890s to the 1960s, one type of cover could be said to dominate the magazine field. It was not the only kind of cover to be found, but the poster cover produced so many memorable covers on so many issues of so many magazines that it is sometimes looked upon as the standard against which all other kinds of covers must be measured.

Outstanding professional illustrators emerged in the late 1800s. Many learned their craft from the artistic posters of the Art Nouveau movement (some, like the works of Mucha, have remained standard items in the interior decorator's catalog). Their work -- conveyed onto the page with the aid of a small army of skilled engravers -- dominated graphic design, even though excellent photographs existed at the time.

By the early 1900s, several illustrators, including Charles Dana Gibson and Maxfield Parrish, had become nationally famous; their work not only appeared on many magazine covers, but they received cover billing for work that appeared inside.

The covers of many of these oversized magazines looked as if they were printed to be framed and hung on the wall.

Johnson and Prijatelj define the poster cover as one in which "there are no cover lines, or themes announced, and the image generally is not covered by the logo... Most poster covers between 1890 and 1940 didn't even relate to a story inside the magazine. Rather the poster cover depicted a season or conveyed a general mood" (241).



This article defines the poster cover in a slightly looser way, to include covers on which the logo intrudes upon the art, and covers that, in addition to the cover art, contain a small cover line announcing the theme, or even an unobtrusive group of cover lines that are vastly

overshadowed by the art. And art it is; most of these covers consist of gorgeous illustrations or captivating photographs.

Pictorial news magazines of this period used a variety of illustrated covers, including poster art and etchings made from photographs. Leslie's Weekly, The Munsey, and Harper's Weekly -- which were oversized by today's standards -- regularly ran huge illustrations on their covers, with few if any cover lines.

The Munsey's dashing cover for August 1898 seems typical: It presents a painting of troops on horseback riding to battle in Cuba, in fine romantic realism. The oversized cover with its huge illustration needed only two tiny cover lines at the bottom to show that, for them, one good cover picture was worth a thousand cover lines.



From the 1920s till the 1960s, poster covers appeared prominently on many prominent magazines, at first with no cover lines, gradually with a few, then -- as we will note in the following section -- cover lines became an integral part of cover design.

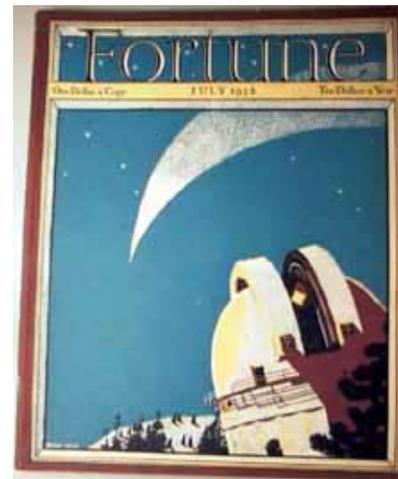
This Vogue of 1917 shows a characteristic poster cover. The stunning illustration dwarfs the rest of the cover, even the magazine's name. In the upper left, tiny type announces "Spring Millinery Number." Another equally small label appears unobtrusively at bottom center. The dazzling illustration (and readers would recognize that it was by the famous cover artist, Dryden) says it all.



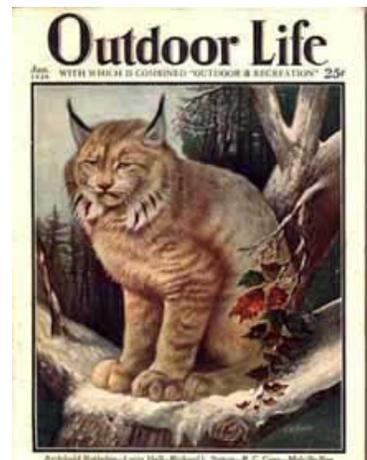
At Vanity Fair under the art direction of M.F. Agha, the magazine produced a succession of framable poster covers throughout the '30s, such as this characteristically wry, political cover from November 1933. During the '30s, Harper's Bazaar published a series of daring paintings as covers under the art direction of Alexy Brodovitch. (See examples in the portfolio accompanying this article.)



When Henry Luce launched Fortune in the depths of the Depression in 1930, its huge size, thick bulk, and dynamic optimism were broadcast through the almost arrogant beauty of its covers -- a succession of confidently modernist paintings celebrating industry and progress -- without a single cover line other than the standard, "One Dollar a Copy, Ten Dollars a Year." The fenestrated cover -- which gives the impression of looking out of a window -- was part of the design concept created for Fortune by T. M. Cleland.



Poster covers appeared on many types of magazines. This Outdoor Life from January 1929 features a vivid, detailed painting of a lynx, with a glimpse of the forest around it. It would be decades before high-quality color photographs of similar subjects became common in magazines. Notice how



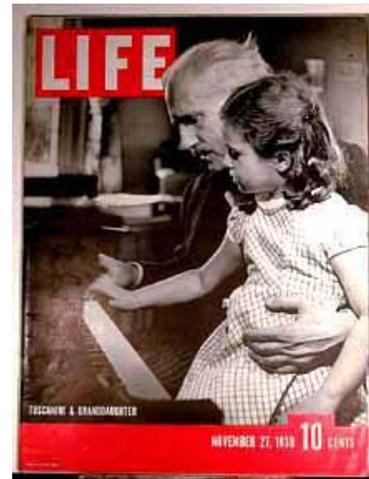
the picture carries the framing characteristic of many poster covers, and how the recessive cover lines have slipped into an unused space at the very bottom of the page.

Asia, a travel magazine, featured stunning poster covers of beautiful illustrations during the '20s and '30s, before Asian travel was stopped by World War II. This cover from April 1933 contains no cover lines and gives no hint of its contents except through the African theme the illustration.



of

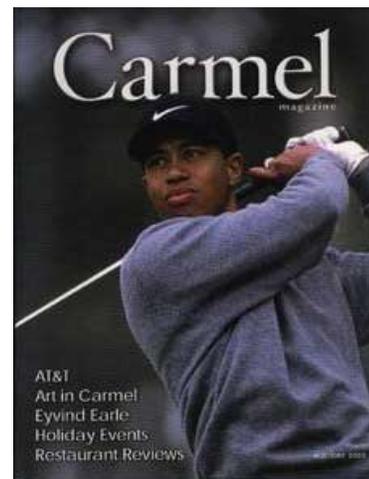
Luce carried the poster concept of Fortune over to the cover design for Life, when that magazine was started in 1936. From the beginning, Life featured a single, huge, bold, powerful black and white picture, framed by Life's stock logo and publication data. On the rare occasions cover lines appeared, they were minuscule, like the caption on this 1939 cover featuring the conductor Arturo Toscanini.



In Life, the pictures were the main attraction, and the covers reflected this by downplaying cover lines.

The history of the poster cover from this point becomes mingled with the history of the rise of cover lines, which we will take up next. But let's round off this presentation with a glimpse at poster covers around the turn of the 21st century.

Although magazines have traveled far from the all-visual art-poster approach so many magazines took toward their covers in the early part of the 20th century,

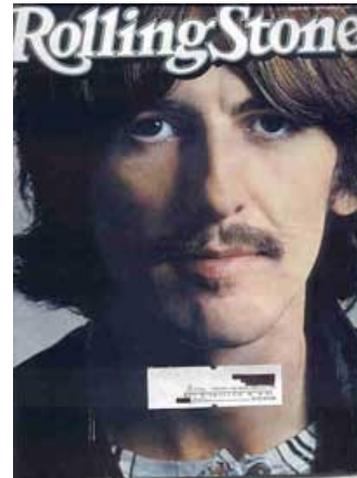


the poster cover did not die. It is alive and well in 2002 -- and it promises to have a long life to come. But the poster cover is today only one option, and far from the dominant one.

Poster covers still appear in magazines that seem to be secure with their readers or on special occasions that can be symbolized to readers by a single, large image.

Carmel (2000) is an example of a kind of contemporary poster cover found on magazines directed to highly upscale readers (in this case, patrons of a golf resort).

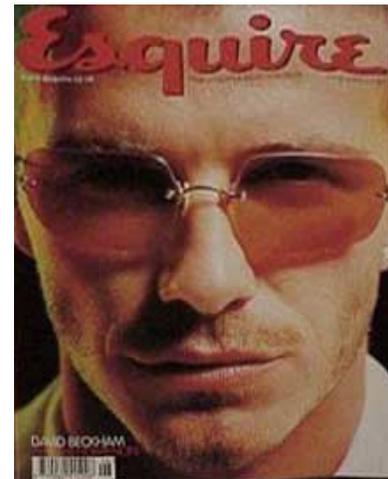
Rolling Stone (January 2001) could count on readers already to be thinking about the recent death of former Beatle George Harrison, and to be looking forward to the magazine's tribute. The result is a rare example of a pure poster cover without a cover line of any kind.



Some newsstand magazines continue occasionally to produce striking poster covers -- as in this British Esquire from June 2000, a magazine that could never be said to lack confidence in itself or its readers.

Such a cover contains, in effect, an invisible cover line saying something like: "We don't need to tell you that there are many other articles inside that you will will read with relish."

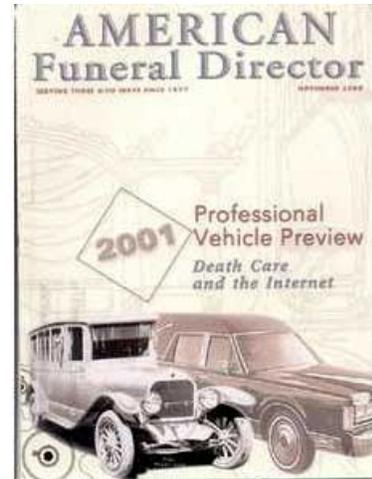
But compare this cover with the American Esquire discussed later, to see the cover lines normally present on such magazines.



"Upscale" is not the only audience that responds to poster covers, as this *American Funeral Director* (2001) shows. Even though the illustration does not occupy all of the cover, the designer's refusal to fill the empty space with cover lines makes this into a poster cover on the hearse.

Perhaps poster covers have been made possible not by an audience interested in visual art, or the design principle of focus, or by the persuasive power of elegance, or by the artistic accomplishments of magazine designers -- but by a lack of competition.

Confident in its audience, each of these magazines can present a cover with a single focus, amplified by minimal cover lines, because a dozen similar covers are not competing for reader attention nearby.



For further study: Because poster covers are uncommon today, the author has assembled and annotated a collection of some three dozen examples, in *An Annotated Portfolio of Poster Covers, 1920s to 1990s*.

III. Pictures Married to Type

The Quest for the Perfect Relationship

We have traced the history of the poster cover over the 20th century -- magazines whose stunning covers left a lasting imprint on the aesthetic sensibilities of an era.

But there was a second, parallel history at work. While many magazines boasted artful poster covers, others relied heavily on cover lines to draw readers inside in a more definite way than the cover art could accomplish.

It is not clear when cover lines first appeared, but it was early in the history of the magazine cover. By the late 1800s,



cover lines were common, and in the early 1900s, magazine cover lines started the ongoing dialogue that they have been carrying on ever since with cover art.

Two issues of McClure's suggest the change we are tracing. The issue of June 1898 is a poster cover: grand, symbolic, traditional imagery related to the issue only by the July 4th theme. There is not a trace of a cover line anywhere.

The McClure's of July 1916, already exemplifies what I call an "integrated" cover -- one in which art and type have achieved a symbiotic, mutually supportive relationship.

By this 1916 cover, the designer has utilized many of the methods that will be re-invented throughout the 20th century for integrating cover lines with cover art:

- a large title with the model's face overlapping it
- a model in a (nearly) full body pose
- a model in an unusual and expressive posture (rotated somewhat, spiraling down to the bottom cover line)
- cover lines on all sides of her, carefully positioned in relation to the model and the background ("The Amazing Fraud" is written across the beam of the sailboat, other lines appear against the sail)



There is in this cover a combination of activity and repose, a restful confidence combined with outdoor recreation.

There is a primary and a secondary set of cover lines. The primary set consists of the list starting with Robert Hichens (and including, incidentally, famous magazine illustrator James Montgomery Flagg, who created Uncle Sam -- featured the way Richard Avedon might be featured on a cover in the 1990s), and the large, effective secondary cover line appears at the bottom of the picture, in contrasting type and color.

Placement of type on the picture contributes to the sense of depth obtained by the layering of planes, as we will often see again in covers 80 years later. In this case the most distant plane is the ocean, the second is the pulley. The third is the sail, the fourth the magazine title, the fifth the model, the sixth the cover lines to the right, the seventh the edge of the boat, and the eighth plane of depth is the bottom cover line -- which is pushed forward even more by her arm and hand, which are the parts of the model's body closest to the viewer.

The boom of the sail crosses two or more planes as it comes forward to the right of the picture, pushing the cover lines forward with it. The model leans back with her head and forward with her arms, adding even more to the sense that the right edge of the cover is about to rise, be lifted, the page turned, and the magazine entered by the reader. The placement of cover lines is crucial to the layering effect.

Notice that most of the cover lines identify the names of the contributors, not the topics of their articles. Even the name of the cover illustrator appears on a prominent place. This cover is about the celebrity of the magazine's authors and illustrators. (The placement of the illustrator's name exemplifies Steven Heller's observation that illustrators of this period often placed their names in a part of the picture that could not be cropped out.)

As early, then, as 1916, all the elements were present that would still go into the creation of the magazine cover of the 1990s -- a dynamic picture integrated with the magazine logo and with a ladder of solid, effective cover lines. This type of cover, however, took a back seat to the poster cover, which deliberately avoided cover lines, and did not rise to prominence again until the 1970s and 1980s.

This *Cosmopolitan* from July 1932 illustrates the high degree of technical skill illustrators could bring to bear on integrated covers.

The "C" of the logo is echoed by the circle around the price, the circle around the beach scene, the hat, the umbrella, the woman's arm and curved leg, and even by the curve of the large "G" in the bottom cover line. The model spirals from the distant beach into the foreground in front of the cover, creating a dancing sense of depth and movement, as if she has just flung herself down, and, although in completely happy, giggling repose, might fling herself right up again.



A column of cover lines marches down the red background, an army of contributors culminating in one of the most popular Western writers of the day, Zane Grey. It is a lively well-made, dynamic cover that pulls you right into the summertime promise of the space of the magazine. This cover shows what a magazine could do in 1932 with a cover that consciously integrates illustration, typography, and color.

In the following decades, many kinds of covers appeared, making numerous experiments in the placement of type. (See sidebar, "Where Do You Put the Cover Lines?")

In the 1940s and 1950s, leading national magazines were daring in many ways, but rarely daring in the use of cover



from Eckerd Drugs: Logo, picture, cover lines, and color scheme all "sell" the advertising supplement and its contents.

Starting around this time, the images on the covers of many magazines began to yield significant space to cover lines, often approaching the point of being overwhelmed in a forest of resourceful typography powered by vivid or seductive colors. On magazine covers, poster art gave way -- first to journalism, then to persuasion. Cover lines began to change from being just announcements of the magazine's theme or major articles, to vivid, engaging advertisements for the issue's contents. A typical Vogue of April 1976 contains ad-like cover lines that sell articles on "beauty -- the works" and "instant charm."

From the mid-1970s on, magazine cover lines no longer whisper like unobtrusive captions on huge posters, accommodate themselves quietly to leftover spaces in the illustrations, or wait patiently in a segregated space at the bottom of the page, as they had for decades.

From this point on, magazines cover lines invaded the cover where they could speak authoritatively, shout in anger, whoop with glee, broadcast great news, announce incredible discoveries, whisper across huge rooms with sophisticated stillness, rise off layers upon layers of cover depth and take readers by the elbow to dance, and proclaim how urgent it is that readers recognize how much promise awaits those who slip between these covers.

In late 1972, before discovering how to use the full strength of new fonts, Vogue even underlined some of its cover lines on each issue, in three different colors, to highlight the urgency of the emphasis.



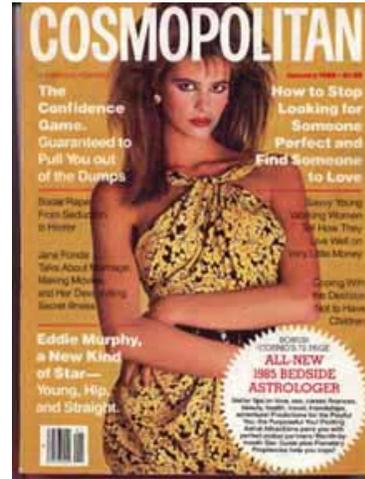
During the 1980s, it seemed that many magazines were trying to list their entire contents on the cover, as in this New Woman of Jan. 1987.

Cover lines became more daring with each innovation in technology -- press-on type, phototypesetting, desktop publishing, font creation software, new software for manipulating text and for combining text with type, and the full revolution of digital type that matured in the '90s.



The power of cover lines may also have been influenced by typographic innovations brought about by young designers whose magazines were too poor to afford expensive photographers (such as Neville Brody and David Carson, who even made many of their own fonts). Not always having powerful photographs, they implicitly followed the advice of Alexy Brodovitch, art director of Harper's Bazaar during the 1930s: "A layout man should be simple with good photographs. He should perform acrobatics when the pictures are bad" (Remington & Hodik, 52).

In the 1980s and 1990s, magazine designers added design acrobatics and good photographs together to make a combination where excitement totters on the verge of exhaustion. In the highly competitive magazine racks of the late 20th century, even the most famous models shot by the most famous photographers found themselves overlaid by and out-shouted by type.



This model on a 1985 Cosmopolitan seems boxed in by the weight of the words that intrude upon her space -- and resentful of it. Two full columns of cover lines, containing seven large blocks of text -- surround her, while a starburst bigger than her chest covers her hip and hand, to hawk the "All-New 1985 Bedside Astrologer." She may as well be wearing a sandwich board with an advertisement painted on it.

Cover model had long been posed with empty space next to them for cover lines to go on. By the mid-1980s, their bodies were often carefully posed so that cover lines can be placed on top of the model herself.

The exuberant music of cover lines could soon then be heard all around the world, as on this 1992 Japanese Emag (Exciting Magazine About Gals).

Similar examples of magazine covers where loud, colorful cover lines crowd the picture have been identified during this time from Australia, Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Mexico, Sweden, Canada, and India.

Cover lines -- strong, large, loud, colorful cover lines that compete with powerful photographs -- became a worldwide phenomenon in the magazines of the millennium.



IV. In the Forest of Words

The argument thus far has been summarized in a sidebar in a brief history of the covers of a single magazine, *Mademoiselle*, with examples starting in 1937 and ending with the final issue of the magazine in 2001. Though the path is irregular, with many creative byways, there has been a general movement of magazine covers away from the artistic poster cover and toward covers that integrate intense photography with an amazingly large number of vivid cover lines.

For most magazines at the turn of the 21st century, cover lines were as important as cover art. In some cases, cover lines and cover art improvised a new, vigorous, almost shocking dance with one other. In *Guitar World* from August 1992, cover lines attain a prominence that competes with the nameplate of the magazine itself.

Some covers of this period contain cover lines that are actually larger than the name of the magazine.



A powerful picture is rarely enough for magazine covers of this period. Even among magazines that display photographs of nakedly-exposed models (like this June 2001 *Maxim*), cover lines often intrude upon the nakedness.

On today's covers, fashion models and celebrities practically rent space on their own bodies on which the magazine can advertise its contents.

For a detailed analysis of a magazine cover from this period that synthesizes the approach of this article, see the sidebar, "An Integrated Magazine Cover from the



1990s."

Though poster covers (with no cover lines, or just a few quiet ones) can still be found, they have become rare on newsstands. In December 2001, the author surveyed the magazines in a large Border's bookstore. Out of approximately 1,200 titles on display, only 92 had poster covers of the kind discussed earlier in this article -- bold graphic covers with no more than a modest cover line or very modest group of small cover lines. That is about 8 percent.

Poster covers appeared mainly on music magazines (The Fader, Dazed), art and photo magazines (BlindSpot, B&W, Photographer's Forum, Eye), travel (Montana, New Mexico), and specials (9-11, George Harrison).

The other 92 percent of the covers used vivid, large, prominent cover lines. The most intense resembled the following examples from 2001 magazines.

In these examples, cover lines have flooded the cover space, forcing the model to withdraw to a smaller image, to interleave with the words, to fold up to make room for the announcement of contents, or to become a billboard.

In all of these examples, the image and the cover lines overlap. The models strike poses that seem to be purposively designed to allow room for multiple cover lines. The "folded" look of the Woman's Day cover model seems representative of many contemporary poses. You rarely see large shots of faces on such covers, probably because it is difficult to put many cover lines around a face. The November 1998 BBC Music Magazine shows what a magazine designer must do to combine a facial close-up with the numerous cover lines required by most magazines today.

The images are no longer in the foreground. Cover lines appear in front of the cover models, covering significant parts of their images. We see these beautiful people through the cover lines that surround them, as if they were in the bushes and the bushes were made of



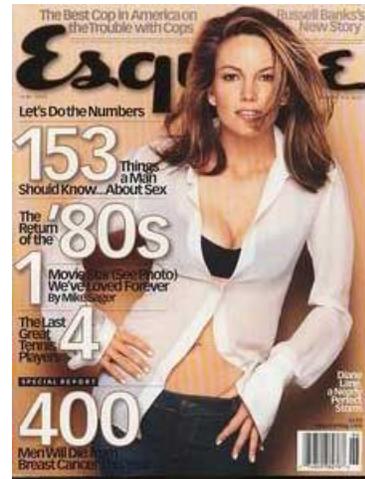
words. These are pictures of people who are immersed; at this instant, they are immersed in the topics of the magazine's articles, in the form of cover lines.

It is tempting to speculate that these covers reflect the larger culture. Such covers do not merely use words in vivid typography, they are perhaps in some sense about a world where people live surrounded by the incessant throbbing of powerful categories projected through words -- and these covers celebrate that power, even as they squirm beneath it.

We all look at the world through a culture that filters our experience through its language and symbols -- just as these cover models look at us through a forest of words. Like the cover models, we live inside the alphabet, and inside a technological culture made possible by the power of literacy.

We might ponder how magazine covers today reflect our ambivalent dance with language, categorical thought, global media, the ubiquity of advertising and spin, the colonization of our thinking by culture, and the supermarket of proliferating but limiting choices brought to us by multinational corporations. More simply, the models on magazine covers look at us through the listed contents of those magazines, which they practically wear like a garment, or stand in, like an aura. And we look back at them through the aura of our own ongoing narratives, our individual tables of contents, our personal cover lines.

The early 2000s are so immersed in commercial typography, channel-hopping, web-surfing, consumer culture, competing values, and objects clamoring for attention that the picture of a cover model cheerfully or seductively immersed in a forest of words may seem to us a mere depiction of daily normality -- a normality both



reflected by and fueled by the words on the covers of magazines.

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Picture credits

Most illustrations were taken from the author's compilation of more than 2,500 pictures of the covers of magazines -- from every decade since the mid-1700s -- being offered for sale on the internet. Others were scanned from the author's collection.