

Annie Thrasher

Mrs. Holloway-Costa

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Why We Can't Live Without Beauty, and How It's Killing Us.

Why is it that a girl with her ribs sticking out with no curves is considered far more beautiful than a girl in size 16 jeans with a kangaroo pouched stomach? The concept of beauty in American culture is warped, and badly. Is it fair to consider one size perfect but the next up is hideously fat? To be blonde and curvy is to be beyond gorgeous, but to be ginger and short is the picture of someone who should just stay inside. It is expected of women that we will be as beautiful as money can buy, but are men always going to be allowed to look however they please? Throughout history this has been the double standard, and as unfair as it seems, is there anything that can be done to change it? The media expects sexy and youthful women across the face of the planet, anywhere from two years old to twenty-nine years old, because once a woman has passed over the age of 30 she suddenly becomes unsightly. The attempts to overturn the adverse effects of this disturbed idea of beauty could be enough for one or two women, but it is not enough to turn over what has come to be centuries of mistreatment and unfairness over aesthetics that women simply cannot help. Through the history of beauty, the horrors of pop culture, and the endeavor to seek out a solution to this warped sense of beauty, it should be known that if something is not done, and soon, there could be a considerable problem on the hands of Americans over their concept of beauty.

On one hand, it is unfortunate that, aside from what is in fashion at the time, the idea of a

beautiful woman has not changed much since the centuries have passed. However, this is not a new problem, which could be considered fortunate because we know that it is not something started by the most recent generations. “Popular media, have, since World War 2, increasingly held up a thinner and thinner body image as the ideal for women,”(Teen Health in the Media) which, while unfair because of the obvious physical impossibilities for many of the general public, has been upheld since, well, World War 2. However, it wasn’t always like that; “A glance at the paintings and sculptures of the old masters clearly shows that for centuries feminine figures who were once considered appealing, would be regarded today as being too fat” (Gruendl). In a different time, naturally curvaceous women were soft and thus beautiful. Today, women are still curvy, but in the hourglass figure kind of way, which consists of a large bust, tiny waist, and rounded hips and rear end to be considered to have an acceptable body.

Along with this ‘acceptable body’ women are expected to be young, beautiful, and sexually appealing. They are expected to throw aside any ‘extraneous’ concerns such as health or intelligence to ensure their attractiveness to men and media. It is because the few who are the ‘perfect’ type of woman have had the fortune to be televised that women as a whole are given one stereotype to conform to by mass media. That is, of course, “outstanding physical beauty... which offers its possessors sexual opportunity aplenty, and thus hints at promiscuity, lust, and carnal gluttony-indulgences incompatible with any rarified notions of the meaning of beauty” (Marwick). As a whole, women are sexualized by the media. The fact is, “the more time we spend immersed in contemporary media, the more likely we are to obsess about our appearance or develop disordered eating behaviour” (Graydon). Obviously there are huge problems connected with the distorted image of women sent out by the media. The ever increasing availability of things like makeup and plastic surgery are one of the main contenders in the fight to mask women’s natural

beauty to take on a façade of unrealistic, cookie-cutter beauty.

Arguably, one of the most unfair aspects of all beauty concepts is the double standard men, and media, have given women. All girls are expected to look young and beautiful and have perfect bodies from the time they hit the age of sexual maturity, basically until they die. For men, it is, to a certain degree, the opposite. While yes, they are expected to be attractive, “men can get away with having wrinkles on their face and still appear attractive in society,” (Kevitch via Lomax). Women, especially those in the limelight, are expected to have surgery to keep a youthful appearance and never ever be seen with wrinkles or gray hairs. Men are almost encouraged to have gray hair. There are even hair dyes which add a ‘touch of gray’ to a man’s hair if it isn’t gray enough, once he had reached a certain age of course. Because of the media and the contemporary idea of a perfectly beautiful woman, we end up with this awfully sexist ideal that Brad Pitt can look however he wants, but call the press if Angelina Jolie isn’t wearing lipstick on the red carpet.

In this increasingly sexualized society, we see many types of clubs and bars aimed towards men with advertisements of beautiful girls. Clubs like Playboy have been around for years, with their adored bunnies being widely publicized, sexualized, and almost expected at any point in daily life. Even with the Playboy empire remaining dominant on the scene, there are newer examples popping up every year. Restaurants such as Hooters, which dramatize the breasts and legs of their waitresses to attract male patrons, are one of the more prominently known examples. According to *I Was A Playboy Bunny*, Hooters is mostly an extension or continuation of the now nearly extinct Playboy clubs. Playboy, whose clubs were originally intended to be “part of the ‘sexual revolution,’ encouraging people to enjoy unmarried sex happily, freely, and without guilt” (*I Was A Playboy Bunny*). While it was good to step away from the conservative morals of the generations before, *I Was A Playboy*

Bunny also says this: “Women were expected to manage their appearance and behavior to please men for purely economic reasons,” (I Was A Playboy Bunny). The obvious problem with this kind of thinking, both from clubs like Playboy and restaurants like Hooters, where you are tipped higher based on the size of your breasts, is that women are reduced to being a piece of meat for use by men for their pleasure alone. However, at least all of these women are adults.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing up and coming trends in American culture is the Toddlers and Tiaras fad. To give a brief explanation, young girls, usually those under seven years old, are put in full makeup, wigs, and thousand dollar dresses to perform provocative dances and show off their walk in ‘glitz pageants’ all around the country. For some, like Mark Sichel, this can almost be considered a form of child abuse. All of their thoughts are something along the line of this: “accentuating their appearance... “Causes the children tremendous confusion, wondering why they are not okay without these things.”” (Sichel via Charlotte). Although it is true that most of these girls adore being in pageants, the televised temper-tantrums could lead some to believe that pageants are something more coveted by mothers than their infantile daughters. In fact, it is often found that the mothers of these girls were pageant girls themselves, and are likely to be living vicariously through their daughters. This is further exemplified when mothers smile for the camera and explain that the screaming and crying occurring behind her is just a temper tantrum that her daughter will get over in a few minutes. However, even aside from all the temper issues, these girls can end up with serious psychological issues, according to *I Was A Playboy Bunny*: “These children may become obsessed with their appearance, putting them at risk for eating disorders or seeking out plastic surgery” (I Was A Playboy Bunny). And that, of course, can only intensify the impression given to the rest of the world that America is obsessed with beauty.

As blatantly stated by Arthur Marwick: “Today, the evidence lies all around us that our

civilisation as it exists now has an intense preoccupation with personal appearance, and gives a very high rating to human beauty” (Marwick). This obsession Americans seem to have with beauty is only fueled by the fire of popular media. As we are bombarded daily, hourly, even minutely with photographs and stories about beautiful people, we see more and more that some simply cannot live without knowing just what color lipstick Emma Stone wore at the Tonys or which revealing outfit Ke\$ha decided to wear to the Grammys this year. Shows on TLC or MTV are prime examples of the desire average people feel for pop culture to expose every bit of the lives of celebrities, or even regular people like themselves, “...some of the most significant aspects of contemporary life: grueling competition, the possibility of extreme social humiliation, and plenty of women in bathing suits” (Psychology Today). The quote, taken from an article entitled “Reality TV Shows About Cosmetic Surgery Reveal America’s Self-Absorption” explains how the television shows and movies are forcing the stereotyped idea of beauty down the throats of every American with cable or Internet access. But, of course, it doesn’t just end there.

Perhaps the most obvious and readily available example of the obsession many Americans feel with beauty is plastic surgery. Women, and even sometimes men, who do not feel beautiful enough turn to surgeons to remake their bodies, and “the fixes now on offer include liposuction, stomach stapling, anti-cellulite creams, breast, butt, cheek, and chin implants, Botox and collagen injections, chemical peels, face-lifts, and labia surgery” (Graydon). All of the options that are now available to remake bodies can only add to the feeling of inadequacy that people who are not extraordinarily beautiful feel every day, which leads them to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on these surgeries. Returning to what is becoming the reality of a double standard, the pressure to look young is also a major ground on which women justify plastic surgery. According to Lomax, these pressures have increased tenfold the

amount of plastic surgeries performed on women alone. This is for the very same reason as the double standard explained, that women are simply not allowed to look old. Or, once they reach a certain age when they are no longer considered beautiful, they are expected to fade into the background. Rather unfairly, these 'unattractive' women must not be seen, or really even heard from. It is for this reason that many turn to plastic surgery to maintain a youthful face and body. Therefore, it is through all of this that we can find that America and perhaps Western culture may put too much stock in a young looking woman, thereby forcing perfectly fine looking women into spending exorbitant amounts of money for a face that simply won't last. And that temporary face can mask a whole host of internal issues associated with the tunnel vision women and media have concerning their bodies.

Inadequacy, mental health issues, and even death can and have arisen from the distorted image the narcissistic society we live in has created of beauty. The unrealistic expectations, including the idea that "they must possess some moral or spiritual qualities beyond being 'merely beautiful'" (Marwick), and Lomax's take on the worrisome desire to look like celebrities can often spiral out of control for some people, especially women, and lead to extraneous problems that may be even harder to eradicate. While women have been unequal with men since the beginning of time, it seems to be even more apparent in the world of beauty, especially when already 'inadequate' women are compared to *other women* and made to feel even more worthless. The net can be cast even further than just 'other women' and include any form of media influence, ever, according to Harry Reis via Brunelland: "I don't think the media care about the science of [beauty] one bit, but certainly the media have a preference and a strong bias toward attractive people"" (Brunelland). And therein lies the problem. In a world so full of media influence and hate toward anyone who is not immensely beautiful, what can be done except to fix

your face or diet until you're sent to the hospital?

Because of this intense feeling of inadequacy, women especially are left feeling like they have done something wrong and therefore must fix it. A great deal of the problem with the beauty concept is the financial concern. The amount of money women spend on makeup, clothing, and plastic surgery can skyrocket year by year as new trends are always coming and one simply must stay up to date on the fashions of the season. And, yes, it can cost a lot of money. But that is a miniscule worry compared to the mental and physical problems correlated with beauty.

These mental health issues are worrisome to any person with any kind of idea of what is beautiful. Even the thinnest and most fashionable cheerleader probably has some kind of eating disorder or mental health problem associated with the perception *other people* have of how she looks. Girls in the age of constant Internet access and information flow are constantly exposed to beautiful women who are often photoshopped, and, exemplified by Cunningham in the article *Is Beauty More than Thin Deep?* when he states: "Now the average voluptuous five-foot-four woman may feel inadequate," he said, especially when she compares herself to the celebrities on screen and in beauty magazines" (Brunelland). Of course, since they are comparing themselves to unrealistic ideas of women, women become insecure and fall into the proverbial deep end of eating disorders and financial pits as they attempt to make themselves artificially beautiful, to no avail.

Along with constant Internet access comes the constant availability of pornography. Naturally, with the excess of forms porn can now take, the issue of the sexualization of the average woman comes into light. This is a problem, more for men than women, because they come to expect a kind of sexual attitude from women, and when they don't get it, they are confused. Not only do they become confused as to why women aren't acting in this scripted way, but sometimes they can become downright vicious:

“‘[S]exualized portrayals of women have been found to legitimize or exacerbate violence against women and girls, as well as sexual harassment and anti-women attitudes among men and boys,’” Hatton says (Women in Media Increasingly Sexualized). All of these things can lead to the worst problem of all.

Death by beauty, which is often from suicide by the woman herself, is quickly becoming an epidemic a result of feelings of inadequacy in the world of beauty. Most women do not feel up to the beauty standards, and a large percent of those women can’t find solace in Shari Graydon’s words, “The French have always claimed one must suffer to be beautiful, but you’re forgiven for believing that obscenely premature death may actually defeat the purpose” (Graydon). While they are most likely intended as a comic relief, Graydon’s words do ring with truth. A woman does not need to die attempting to become more beautiful, even though, as all women know, beauty can be painful at times. However, that does not mean that a woman needs to undergo an admittedly dangerous procedure just so that her nose can be straight. The most disturbing cause of death, however, as noted before, is violence from men. The idea that women ‘like’ or ‘deserve’ to be taken forcefully or killed is a considerable bone of contention many people have with the media. The reasoning behind this, of course, is that men are receiving the aforementioned idea from mass media and pornification of women by the media, which should not have begun in the first place. Overall, death by beauty may not make the headlines, but it occurs more than many may like to think.

Even though it may seem like the media is the aggressor in this situation, it would not be wrong to say that one of women’s greatest adversaries is herself. Self-objectification can be an immense problem because we are our own harshest critics. “Sexualization and objectification undermin[ing] confidence in and comfort with one’s own body, leading to a host of negative emotional consequences”

(Erstein), which leads back to the problems arising from the beauty concept, obviously because we see ourselves in such a negative light that we beat ourselves up until we feel we are beautiful enough to move on, which can often land us in the hospital or even the morgue. A study by Dove concluded that: “among girls, only 11% felt comfortable using the word beautiful to describe themselves, but 72% of those surveyed said they feel tremendous pressure to be beautiful” (Dove backs campaign for real beauty). There are hundreds of other studies related to this statistic, such as that performed by the Renfrew Center’s Barefaced and Beautiful Campaign, but this is one of the most alarming simply because there are less than a third of all girls in the world (if using this statistic) who feel that they are comfortable enough to say that they are beautiful. While this almost certainly comes from the media’s portrayal of beauty and other influences on body image, one of the worst contenders that girls have to deal with really is simply their own mind.

Even though there are an excess of reasons as to why women in contemporary culture should feel badly about themselves, there are several companies that are doing what they can to lessen the strain on women in America. One campaign, which shows images of ‘real women’ to sell their deodorant and other hygienic supplies, does just that. Launched in 2004, the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty was “based on the theme of creating a world where beauty is a source of confidence, not anxiety” (Dove backs campaign for real beauty). This campaign came about because of the fact that, according to Austen of the BBC, “increasing numbers of women are fed up with the unattainable images of beauty they have been sold by the cosmetic giants.” As a result, women are beginning to see that they can be as beautiful as a model, while still being themselves, because if these women they are seeing on the screen can do it, why not them? Another real beauty campaign is the Renfrew Center’s Barefaced and Beautiful Campaign. The idea behind this particular campaign is to use social media in a positive

way, rather than the destructive course we usually see it taking. Women are encouraged to take one day off from makeup and post pictures to popular sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, to support National Eating Disorders Week.

The problem is that girls are introduced to makeup too early and that "...makeup is a doorway to the negative body image feelings that are correlated with eating disorders... according to the Renfrew Center Foundation's recent Harris Interactive survey" (Churmin). Following Churmin's thoughts, models and beauty pageant contestants only add to the feeling that girls have about their insecurities. To cover up your face with a layer of makeup is to take away some of these insecurities, and that can lead to a habit which will eventually lead to addictions or eating disorders as these girls grow older. Thanks to programs like these, women and girls can feel less insecure about themselves. Obviously this does not entirely solve the problem, but it can take the weight off one or two of the young girls' shoulders, and relieve the pressure to be made up and beautiful all the time.

A quote from *The Culture of Beauty* in the section by Arthur Marwick asks, "Would you really prefer there to be fewer (perhaps even no) beautiful people in the world, or more of them?" (Marwick). Some may find this to be an unfair question considering the fact that every person is beautiful in their own right. It may not be just in their face or in their body, but personalities can be just as beautiful as and model or celebrity. The media-enforced stereotype of what today's beautiful is can only be described by the overall majority as being entirely unrealistic and unreachable. For this reason, the concept of beauty that American's and Western culture has must be changed. It can only be for the good of every woman to have not one universally beautiful person, but to be given the idea that every size, shape, and color of woman is perfectly beautiful.

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