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Question 5: From the **Lens-Based Image Making** research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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Fig 3. Paramount Pictures, *Transformers*. 25 Feb 2004. <https://www.filminquiry.com/film-theory-basics-laura-mulvey-male-gaze-theory/>

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The Media's Sexualisation and Stereotypes of the Female Body

In this essay I will be discussing how the human body has been sexualised and stereotyped within the media. This essay will primarily focus upon women but will also investigate the effects that the media has upon men. Social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and so many more are used daily and everywhere we look there will always be some form of sexualisation and stereotype about the human body. The women presented within the media tend to be thinner and have perfect skin. They need to be flawless otherwise they are not a woman. Furthermore, men are always stereotyped to be muscular and strong. The media has a way of portraying the human body as something it is not, such as, inhuman beauty, muscles and unrealistic body types. For women, they are continuously used to sell sexualised products such as lingerie, while men are often used to sell sports products such as gym equipment and gym clothes. This is not only sexualising product but also sexualising the individuals and stereotyping each gender to a specific role. I am not saying, nor will I ever say that it is bad for a woman to be thinner, or for a man to have muscles, I believe that everyone should be entitled to their own opinions about their bodies and no one else should have a say in how an individual should look. Bodies are made for living, so why are their stereotypes of how one should look compared to the other and why do we feel the need to sexualise them?

Firstly, I will be looking into how breastfeeding is now considered disgusting and something that should never be done in public. I would like to state that breasts are not a sexual organ, their sole purpose is to provide milk and nutrients to the mother's baby, it is one of the most natural things for a woman to do, and it helps build a bond between mother and child. Although in an article written by Jenn Brennan (2020) titled 'Why do we Need to Normalise Breast Feeding' she discusses a previous article that she produced where a mother started breastfeeding during a photoshoot, "They are beautiful pictures, and I am glad the

mother felt confident enough to share them. But I cringe as I clicked on the comments”
(Brenan, 2020).



fig 1. Mae Burke, Chelsea & Her

Girls. 17 Mar 2017

These comments included that the mother should stop breastfeeding as her child is too old, or that all women should stop boasting about the fact that they breastfeed, it’s disgusting and so much more. Brennan states that “before my daughter was born, I had never seen another woman breastfeed. Nope, never. I was squeamish about it. I couldn’t imagine it myself. I am glad I got over it and went on to have a successful breastfeeding relationship with two children” (Brenan, 2020). She talks about how the normalization of breastfeeding can help mothers and mothers-to-be all over the world. Relating this back to the title of the essay, I feel that one of the main reasons that people are told to cover up is because of how normal it has become to sexualize these parts of a woman which are not sexual. I personally would consider it to be sexual harassment to be told to cover up when nursing. I read another article by Lauren Levy (2017) who also agrees with this statement.

Moving on, I recently came across a video released in 2014 called “If Women’s roles in Ads Were Played by Men”, as gathered from the title, the video is a side-by-side comparison of what a man would look like playing the role of a woman in certain advertisements. This video was released in 2014 which shows how long women’s bodies have been sexualised and I can certainly say that this problem was happening years before

2014. There is one part of the video regarding an advert for a restaurant called Hardees, this role played by a woman is in a bikini and is on the beach and she is spraying herself with sun cream and eating a burger. The comparison of the man doing does not look anything like the woman as the producers made sure to include certain aspects of a woman that a man does not have. This ad does not in any way link to the food restaurant. An article written by Anna Dabrowska (2016) titled 'Photographing Women in a Sexual Manner: Are We All Guilty of Objectifying Women' references the video discussed above. This article also states how women are treated with respect when in contact with someone face-to-face "and yet, when we are editing our last shoot, don't we choose the image of the girl with a slightly open mouth and a lascivious pose to post on social media?" (Dabrowska, 2016). Meaning that women are presented and treated completely different to what they are when in person, this is unfair on women as they are objectified. Although, women are guilty of also choosing the best photo of themselves and posting it on social media for attention on the way they look. An Instagram page called 'saggysara' is ran by an influencer called Sara Puhto, this page is full of side-by-side comparisons of her body, one being a fake social media act where she is posing and the second being her reality. "No one actually stands like this in real life" (Grindell, 2020.)



fig 2. Sara Puhto, Instagram isn't reality. 2 Jul

2018.

Sara Puhto's posts are very refreshing to view as it displays the stereotype of what women should look like and how she is more than fine not looking like that, the images where she is not posing, she looks much happier.

Advertising can be very dangerous. "Sexualisation and objectification cause society to view women as less capable and less intelligent, and it make men more tolerant of sexual harassment and violence" (Shequal, 2021). I believe that some men do not only tolerate sexual harassment and violence, but some also simply just do not care, they see it as a way to insult a women saying that they are doing all this for attention which I personally find disgusting. Within the same article, it says how sex appeal is often used within an ad although people remember the ad but not so much the product that the ad is trying to sell. "Studies show that women don't like ads that sexualise women" (Shequal, 2021), this suggests that these adds are for men only, women do not like to see such advertisements as it shows unrealistic things such as body types and it can also give off a bad image for all women.

Likewise, multiple feminists have argued that the mainstream ideas of the ideal female body remain dominant in modern society, which is a "pervasive and pernicious influence on women's self-perception" (Riley and Pearce, 2018, p. 57). However, when thinking of the role models and celebrities, influencers who are looked up to by young children, the majority edit their images and have had a lot of plastic surgery. Laura Mulvey (2015) in particular promotes 'The Male Gaze Theory' which is how women are represented in the film industry, by men, and also how these women are "represented as passive objects of male desire" (Mulvey, 2015),

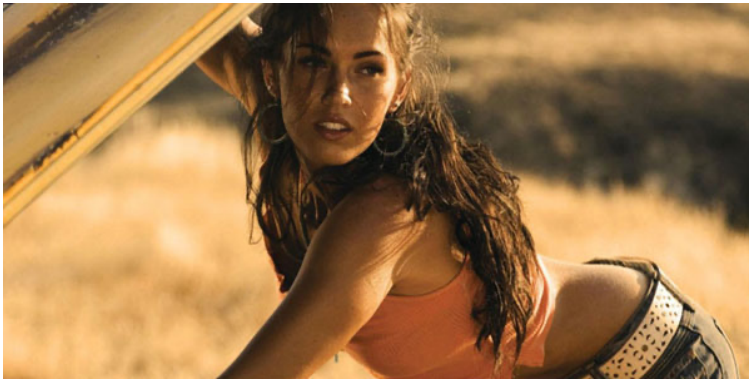


fig 3. Paramount Pictures,

Transformers. 25 Feb 2004.

this not only links to the fact that women have been sexualised, but it also shows how inequality is still a big issue and will be for years to come. For Mulvey, her theory consists of three sections: how men view women, how women view themselves, and how women view other women. The theory is not only significant to cinema, but everyday life, how in certain adverts and campaigns, “representations of sex have nothing to do with the product being advertised” (Mulvey, 2015). This also links to the video I previously spoke about where a woman is dressed in a bikini on a beach which has nothing to do with the fact that she is advertising a restaurant. Certain movies such as Frozen (2013) has done some rightness for Mulvey. Mulvey also talks about Disney and how the princesses have been created in a way to look more appealing to a heterosexual male.



fig 4. The Walt Disney

Company, Disney Princesses

She mentions how one character, Princess Jasmine is in little clothing and how her “waist is almost the same width as her neck” (Mulvey, 2015). This is setting a bad example for the children who are watching said movies who look up to the characters.

It is not only women's bodies that get sexualised and stereotyped in the media, men are victims too, an article I read said that "41% of boys feel that the portrayal of men in the media is unrealistic" (Safeline, 2021) this is because men are stereotyped to always have muscles and be strong etc., from a young age they are stereotyped, teachers will ask for strong boys to help them carry things. Realistically men are not always strong, they should not be stereotypes into believing they are something that they are not, they should not have to look up to something or someone portrayed in the media, photography and film as they should look the way they do for themselves and no one else. Celebrities in the media are also reasons that men and women feel that they must live up to a certain body standard. "Adults and children alike are left vulnerable by the feelings of dissatisfaction and self-loathing that the failure can leave people portrayed body image can induce" (Safeline, 2021), the media and body standard that come along with it can really affect someone's mental health and the way that they look at themselves which is why these ideal body stereotypes really need to stop.

Generation Z have started to come to the realisation of how toxic it is for one to compare themselves to another, how it is more than acceptable to have curves or no curves, but that doesn't mean that stereotypes and body shaming has completely gone. With these stereotypes come eating disorders, self-harm, which deteriorates a woman's self-esteem. For instance, twenty-million American women have developed eating disorders compared to a total of thirty-million cases. Likewise, almost one fifth of women develop eating disorders upon entering college, which is double that of their male counterparts (Chong, 2020). Curves are not, nor will they ever be a bad thing, I believe that most of the cases of eating disorders have come from negative comments on one's body and bullying from the opposite or in some cases, the same gender, this is often presented in movies and other media sources. This is absolutely preposterous. Celebrity influences play a huge role in this, they live by their own

make-up brands, promising unrealistic results which leave women not eating what they eat on a regular basis and “falling under social pressure to whether we should be participating in this “self-betterment”” (Chong, 2020). Young girls who use social media often find themselves being exposed to material that encourages them to alter their bodily image.

Looking into artists work, I found a feminist artist called Jodi Bieber, their work with portraiture and take their inspiration from the Dove campaign. This campaign is very famous and something that I have investigated in the past, the Dove campaign shows a comparison between two group photos of women in their underwear, one being for Doves Real Beauty Campaign and the other Victoria Secrets Love My Body Campaign. When comparing both of these images, you can see how one sets a much higher standard than the other, the Victoria Secrets sets a beauty standard for women which is unrealistic and unhealthy, the image shows seven super model’s bodies all of similar proportions which is very slim and petite. Comparing this to the Dove image, it is much more refreshing to look at, this image includes eleven women also in their underwear all of different shapes and sizes, this image shows that we should not live up to societies stereotypes for women and I personally believe that this image could help the younger generation to show how unhealthy social media and advertising really can be.



fig 5. "Dove 'Real Beauty' (2004) vs. Victoria Secret 'Love My Body' (2010)" ("Week Two: Jodi Bieber | tucci photography")

Her work is inspired by this piece for the Dove Beauty Campaign as "these images represent her rebellion against what the media depicts as beautiful" (widewalls, 2016). Looking more into Bieber's work, I have learnt that she is originally from South Africa and her main focus is about the living conditions in her country and how women are treated. She takes images of women and the way they pose is what they want to do, she does not instruct them to pose a certain way. "She strives to show the fact that there is no real perfect body shape, and that beauty depends on individual perception" (widewalls, 2016), I could not agree with this more. This related back to my title as this artist is showing how one does not have to look a certain way to feel beautiful, she shows realistic body types within her work.

"Playing a boss does not stop women being treated as eye candy in films, according to a new study that found "harmful stereotypes" are still dominating the big screen" (Elks, 2021). Women are sexualised in film always; we are more likely to see nudity for women than men in both movies and TV shows. Not only nudity but also sexism. Take the new James Bond movie for instance, the new 007 is a woman and the sexist remarks made towards this woman is astonishing. In superhero movies women's outfits are far more sexualised than what men's are showing more skin in their petite clothing. Not only is their

clothing sexualised, but so are the movements that they are told to make, thinking of Harley Quinn, she is dressed in very small clothing so that the majority of her skin is showing and her movement and words that she has to say lead her character to be largely sexualised and not only her character but also the actress too. This is ridiculous, women in not only the media but in everyday life are stereotyped because of these characters and this is no one's fault but the writer of all these things, who know what they are doing. "Their eroticized combat appearance coupled with their constant flirting with male characters minimize these women to sexual objects rather than thinking beings" (Johnson, 2021). Thinking of every superhero movie that I have watched with women in it, I can see how women are portrayed as something which they are not. Making it harder for other women to accept how they look and for children who look up to said characters have unrealistic goals.

To conclude, women in the media are sexualised so much that men believe that it is how women act on a day-to-day basis, meaning that they believe that the sexualisation that is presented is the identity of all women. Furthermore, women are so used to seeing this, they believe that they must look a certain way to be considered up to societies standards. With this being said, I do believe that women are the only victims of such things, men are also sexualised and stereotyped with phrases such as 'man-up' although we are more likely to see women being used as objects and portrayed in a certain way. TV shows and movies are also portraying certain images and the young malleable minds of today's youths drink in the images and believe that they need to look that way or they will not be accepted, this links with the development of mental health issues such as eating disorders. These stem young people believing that their body needs to change.

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