

Feminine Beauty in the Hyperreal World: A Postmodern Analysis of *Esquire's* Women We Love

Abstract

We attempt to look at the concept of beauty in the hyperreal world of today to assert that beauty has moved from a cultural construct to being a consumerist entity. The article grounds itself in the seminal works of Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco to provide the context for the analysis. We look at Esquire's images of Hollywood divas—over ten years—selected as the most beautiful women of the year as part of its series Women We Love. The textual analysis shows that the present day concept of beauty is no longer a cultural construct but a concept steeped in the postmodern consumer culture that de-culturizes beauty and through stock frames, poses and styling turns it into consumable, desirable—at times erotic—images of beauty.

Keywords: *visual analysis, hyperreality, consumer culture, postmodernism, Baudrillard*

INTRODUCTION

Babies, even when they are just a few days old, prefer attractive faces—deemed attractive by more culturally conditioned college students—to less attractive ones even with nil cultural knowledge as shown in studies by Langlois (1987), Slater (2000), and Quinn et al (2008). When they turn into toddlers they are nudged into pondering the question “who is the fairest of them all” through fairy tales like *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Rapunzel* or a number of prince charming reincarnations. Later years see them being driven by a concept of beauty whereby beauty is “that quality or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it” (Burke 1757, 83). The contours of the issue remain the same when it moves into the higher echelons of philosophy. Aristotle’s aesthetics was a debate on the abstract nature of beauty and the sophists discussed beauty as being useful. Beauty was always linked with the human form. Paris chose Aphrodite because she promised him the most beautiful wife. Current literature on beauty discusses fat-shaming, the psychological issues related to fairness being a mark of beauty and acceptance, fairness from a postcolonial perspective. In the present study we intend to link the postmodern notion of consumer culture with the

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concept of beauty to explore how consumerism has shaped the idea of beauty and aim to analyze Hollywood's model of beauty through the portrayal of American cinema's leading ladies to test the thesis that beauty in the contemporary world is beauty of consumption where beauty is created and sold to people on the same model as any consumer product.

The key significance of the research is that it deculturizes beauty to link it with consumer culture and adds another dimension to the debate on beauty. Thinking of beauty as consumption is significant for it paves the way for exploring corporatization of beauty where beauty will be malleable according to the business interests of the corporations and where the individual's perception of beauty—at both the personal and the cultural levels—will be marginalized. We believe a key aspect of the study is its interdisciplinary nature where it brings together gender studies, visual culture and media to show how these fields are interrelated and how visual culture enriches the experience of the world and contributes to the ideological makeup of societies.

Umberto Eco, Italian academic, literary critic and filmmaker par excellence, wrote *On Beauty* (2004) to trace the concept of beauty as it evolved from ancient Greece to the media-driven world of the new millennium. Eco asserts that beauty had always been a cultural phenomenon in its essence with some African cultures considering scarification to be beautiful (Frith 2006) while others—Korean and Chinese—found beauty in plumpness (Han, 2003) till the postmodern world brought about a change in the concept. Beauty of provocation” is Eco's term for the concept of beauty in the postmodern era where people look towards fashion magazines and celebrities to discern what they must do to be beautiful. That people follow media images to determine what is fashionable is not a unique claim. Eco, we believe, misses out on delinking beauty from fashion or current style and does not see beauty in terms of mediatized, created images imposed on the people through pervasive advertising. This is what we propose to do in the present study by unifying the beauty of provocation and Baudrillard's hyperreality. French sociologist Jean Baudrillard is a well-known postmodern critic who developed the concepts of hyper-reality, simulacrum and consumer culture. *The System of Objects* explores the culture of consumption and probes into the notion of consumerism. Baudrillard presents consumer culture as a significant aspect of postmodernism and defines it as a culture which requires people to consume the objects based on their sign value. When people derive their identity from material goods and consume objects because of the sign value those objects confer they indulge in the process of consumption. Baudrillard (1996) asserts that to “become an object of consumption, an object must first become a sign”. In other words, consumers do not consume an object to fulfil a need but to acquire the sign value of an object.

Baudrillard (1996) asserts that consumer culture only gives an illusion of freedom. In this culture, “There is a profusion of freedom, but this freedom is imaginary” (p. 178). He argues that advertisements fuel the process of consumption as they give meaning to the objects. Consumer culture is not restricted to material objects and extends to abstract notions as well. For this reason, it will be worthwhile to observe beauty in connection with consumer culture. Such an approach will unveil a new aspect of beauty—one that is not limited to culture or nationality but is propagated by popular media and employs simulacra to create a hyperreal

beauty—beauty that is not a cultural or even a Universal construct as Tom asserts but a hyperreal construct where beauty is based on other images of beauty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer culture has attracted a lot of attention in literary circles as it has altered the way people interact with material objects. According to Prasadh Raj Singh (2011), it is a culture “in which mass consumption and production both fuel the economy and shape perceptions, values, desires, and constructions of personal identity” (p. 67). The process of consumption is facilitated by advertisements as they craft a sign value of the goods and induce the desire to consume. Consumption and possession of material goods are central to consumer culture which is facilitated predominantly by advertisements which induce desire and craft a significant relationship between consumers and consumer goods. Grant McCracken (1986) asserts, “Advertising is a conduit through which meaning constantly pours from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods” (p. 75-76). Gray, Amos and Currie (1997) claim that the seductive power of advertisements influences people to adopt habits that are hazardous to their health (p. 507).

The process of consumption has altered the way people interact with various aspects of life including sports, religion and personal identity. John J. Stewart (1987) opines that in sports, “Attention is given to the dramatic, the spectacular, and the theatrical—the thrills and spills, the knockout punch, the winning hit, the brawls in the stands and on the field” (p. 178). In a somewhat removed field of religion too, consumer culture has reduced religion to a commodity and one can project oneself as a follower of religion by purchasing religious accessories. Noor (2016) opines that “religious entrepreneurs” have combined the process of preaching and business. Research has also looked at the concept of beauty over time to discuss its permanence or transience. The idea of beauty has evolved with time which suggests that the concept of beauty lacks permanence. Amber Petty disapproves of the notion of universal beauty and asserts that beauty is “an ephemeral ideal, bound to change and transform.” What was beautiful for the Greeks was not accepted as beautiful by the Romans. The concept of beauty changed from time to time and from place to place. Andrea Uku (2010) shares the same views as Petty and opines that the concept of beauty is ever-evolving. David Robson (2015) says “although our concepts of beauty may seem ethereal and timeless, they may just be the direct product of our immediate circumstances.”

It is not just the concept of beauty that has evolved but also the medium through which beauty is depicted. The previous era relied on sculptures and paintings whereas the postmodern era shapes the idea of beauty through mass media. According to Lindsey Conlin and Kim Bissel (2014), “Mass media can reflect basic beliefs, attitudes, and values toward female beauty, and can even change attitudes and beliefs when people are exposed to images of ideal beauty and attractiveness” (p. 1). Film stars and models gracing the covers of beauty magazines have shaped the idea of female beauty, and women emulate these celebrities. Icons like Audrey Hepburn, and Marilyn Monroe continue to inspire women as shown by (Tanya, 2020), Coan (2020), Warlick, (2020), Nickens and Zeno (2012) which strengthens the study’s stance that the idea of beauty is constructed and promoted through Hollywood.

The concept of beauty has garnered philosophical, social and even psychological interest but has also materialized as a tool to exercise power. The Western standard of beauty and its stress on fair complexion has instilled a hierarchical concept of feminine beauty. Margaret L. Hunter (2011) contends that the European standard of beauty has a detrimental effect on non-European women. Evelyn Yeung (2015) claims that “the yearning for a pale complexion exists because of nonwhite populations’ desire to physically mimic those who are in power” (p. 40). Naomi Wolf (2002) writes that beauty is a social construct which suppresses women socially, economically and politically. Wolf thinks of beauty as a “belief system that keeps male dominance intact” by keeping women too busy obsessing over clothes and curling their eyelashes to have time for political action (p. 20). The postmodern notion of beauty studied in connection with the consumer culture adds a new dimension to the meaning of beauty. It looks at the idea of beauty like a commodity which is bought and sold like consumable goods. The current study aims to understand a new aspect of beauty and one that has not been much explored.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Gillian Rose (2001) maintains that the acknowledgement of an image is of paramount importance in visual analysis. Rose asserts that in visual analysis, the image must be given precedence over theoretical framework. This means that it is the image itself not the selected framework that determines the contours of the discussion. She claims that an image must be scrutinized as images abound in messages. The visual analysis cannot do justice to an image unless it recognizes the message embedded in it. Rose asserts, “there is no point in researching any aspect of the visual unless the power of the visual is acknowledged” (p. 33). Nigel Whiteley (1999) also advocates that “careful scrutiny of the artwork” (p. 120) should be the first step in visual analysis. The present study treats the image as being of primary importance and looks to the image to provide material for the analysis and look at the elements within the image such as framing, pose, clothes, colors, body type etc to obtain material for its discussion.

To assess the depiction of Hollywood prima donnas in Esquire magazine, the study requires a method of visual analysis. The selected photographs are analyzed using compositional interpretation as the method provides “a detailed vocabulary for expressing the appearance of an image” (Rose, 2001, p. 33). The selected method focuses on the composition and looks carefully at the constituents of an image to understand the importance of the picture. According to Rose, “Compositional interpretation pays most attention to the compositionality of the image itself” (p. 38). The composition refers to the use of color, spatial organization, expressive content and focus. Compositional interpretation looks at the saturation, hue and value of the color in an image. In addition to different attributes of color, it also looks at the way space is used in an image. The method also focuses on the expressive content of an image as images negotiate with readers.

Delimitation

The study of beauty is a vast area, but this study focuses on the photo shoots of Hollywood’s famous faces selected by Esquire. The delimitation helps to concentrate on the presentation of women in the magazine over the years and to understand the role of Hollywood in the

propagation of beauty ideals. The current study analyzes the photo shoots of the following actresses:

1. Emilia Clarke (2015)
2. Penelope Cruz (2014)
3. Scarlett Johansson (2013 and 2006)
4. Mila Kunis (2012)
5. Rihanna Fenty (2011)
6. Minka Kelly (2010)
7. Kate Beckinsale (2009)
8. Halle Berry (2008)
9. Charlize Theron (2007)

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

We have analyzed many of the constituent parts of the images of Women We Love including hair, body type, posture, and setting to critically examine the underlying ideological currents and consolidate the discussion to formulate the essence of feminine beauty in the hyperreal world.

The Hair

Feminine hair has long been panegyricized by writers and eulogized by poets. Hair also entails cultural, social and religious significance. The consumer culture treats feminine hair as an accessory, an embellishment and a consumer product instead of a mark of cultural or ethnic identity. Working in conjunction with consumer culture, Hollywood has conferred a sign value to hair which imparts the desired look of beauty. Hair is one of the most substantial elements of the photographs. Be it Scarlett Johansson, Minka Kelly, Penelope Cruz or Emilia Clarke, the hair is a blend of chocolate brown and raven black strands. The darker shade is a sign of dominance and gives an intense look. Amerley Ollennu (2018) observes that Hollywood cinema portrays dark-maned women as mysterious like Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction* or intimidating like Angelina Jolie in *Maleficent*.

Esquire, like other popular magazines, also recreates the platinum blonde look of Jean Harlow and Marilyn Monroe as it is accepted as an image of seduction. Jean Harlow forged a separate identity for herself in Hollywood by bleaching her hair platinum blonde in her film *Bombshell*. The look has long been associated with enamour and its repetitive recreations in magazines and films have further cemented its status as the image of an ideal woman. The look was further popularized by Marilyn Monroe and Yona Zeldis McDonough (2002) opines that Monroe's image is "embalmed in public memory" and Monroe is "immortal on the scale of Napoleon or Cleopatra" (p. 16). McDonough further states "the culture still needs her and has sanctified her" which has led to her status as the embodiment of beauty (p. 13). To deliver a verdict on how beautiful hair should look, actresses flaunt loose curls. The dishevelled hair adds a natural element, making the hair look unstyled. The bedhead hair is repeated in each photo shoot to delude consumers into thinking that natural is beautiful. "No matter how artificial the setting, a fashion photograph must persuade individuals that if they

wear these clothes, use this product, or accessorize in such a way, the reality of the photograph will be theirs” (Duncan). By analyzing the photographs, it is evident that *Esquire* equates beauty with voluminous, glossy, dishevelled hair. Halle Berry and Rihanna, the two dusky beauties also follow the Caucasian standard of beauty by choosing to wear their hair like the other actresses. Ethno-hair profiles show that African hair is flattened and has a slow growth rate which makes it more likely to curl. So in the image the straight hair indicates some treatment to make the hair fit into the norm. Uniformity in the way the actresses wear their hair provides a standard of beautiful hair devoid of cultural associations.

The Body Type

Esquire's photoshoots reveal that physical beauty, though an abstract notion, can be quantified. Skin complexion, symmetrical features and weight are some of the metrics employed to gauge beauty. *Esquire*, like other magazines, adheres to the general “cultural and social system within which femininity and women are defined and constructed into an ideal of female beauty: a young, thin, white, toned, and flawless body” (Albani, 2005). *Esquire* breaks down physical beauty into sellable elements and modifies the features which do not fit the standard such as square shoulders, boxy waist, wrinkles and plump limbs. While *Esquire* may be versatile in body shapes, it does not deviate from the general model of female beauty i.e. a slim, young, white, flawless body. With the rise of Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly as fashion icons, slimness became a condition for an idealized body. Similar to popular media, *Esquire* associates slimness with beauty and has never embraced actresses such as Melissa McCarthy, Demi Lovato or Drew Barrymore. All the actresses featured in *Esquire* flaunt a slender physique as slimness is equivalent to a beautiful female body. Eric J. Bailey (2008) opines that young girls tend to associate beauty with slimness because of media influence. Bailey states that slimness also connotes association with the upper class and also represents “unconventionality, freedom, youthfulness”. The inclination towards slimness in the context of Hollywood started with Lillie Langtry and was cemented with the arrival of divas like Katharine Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, Mae West etc. To fit the beauty standard, the actresses rely on clothes, makeup, camera angle and lightning. Emilia Clarke looks ethereal because the light focuses on her slender upper body whereas the clever camera angle and body posture elongate her legs. Unlike Clarke, the magazine features bull body shots of Penelope Cruz as she has a statuesque physique. Scarlett Johansson's hourglass figure steals the limelight to mask the lack of height. The use of solid colors in the photographs is not accidental but serves a purpose. Charlize Theron and Mila Kunis don solid colors and avoid long flowy gowns which would add width to their physique. The camera captures Theron from a side angle to mask what Theron herself calls broad shoulders (Donnelly, 2015). It is not only the body shape which is modified but facial features are also enhanced or contoured to fit the beauty standard. Each actress flaunts fuller lips colored with soft hues of pink or nude; eyes are shaped like almonds with the help of dark eyeliner and cheekbones are made prominent with the help of highlighter. Such a representation robs the women of their individuality. Moreover, photographs offer a standard of beauty and it is only when one conforms to that standard that one is considered beautiful.

Selective Representation

Esquire has tried to present itself as an all-inclusive platform for women. For this reason, it has included Halle Berry and Rihanna. Both Berry and Rihanna are biracial and are among a few celebrities of color who are featured in beauty magazines. Rihanna, Beyoncé and Halle Berry have been preferred by magazines mainly because of their ability to sell magazines. The present study contends that while Esquire labels both Berry and Rihanna beautiful it makes sure that the representation is not culturally unique and does not bring out the fact that they are culturally or ethnically different from the normative white actress. The culturally distinguishing features including the hair and the facial contours have been made to conform to the white conception of beauty and thus their difference is all but erased. The props and the setting too have been chosen to exclude any notion of their cultural heritage. They are moulded into the normative figure by eliminating traits such as hair that would foreground their ethnicity and also by placing them in settings which have come to be seen as white elitist settings.

The Posture

Emilia Clarke is breathtakingly beautiful but lacks the height of Penelope Cruz, Charlize Theron has well-toned limbs but lacks the curvaceous physique of Scarlett Johansson. Halle Berry's skittle-shaped body is not as photogenic as Kate Beckinsale's. Despite such characteristics, each actress looks perfect and weaves magic on the pages of the magazine. To make up for the short height, Clarke prefers horizontal poses and props up her legs. Similarly, Mila Kunis and Scarlett Johansson stretch their bodies to appear taller. Another trick employed to make the actresses look taller is to eliminate a frame of reference. The actresses can be seen fitting the entire frame to appear taller. The perception of length is also created by crossing one leg over the other or the actresses are captured in motion to mask the lack of height. Fashion photographer Jeff Smith (2010) says, "Posing can do more to hide client's flaws than any other technique-and probably as much as all of the others combined." The appropriate body postures enable the actresses to look flawless in the photographs.

Charlize Theron poses with an arched back and rests one hand on her waist to create angles with her body. By propping one shoulder higher than the other, she adds curves to her body. Kate Beckinsale creates clean lines with her flexed leg and reveals her toned abdomen by arching her back. Each actress poses with her side towards the camera, each poses with one shoulder propped higher than the other and each diva poses with her head tilted to one side. The clichéd postures are recreated year after year as the female body looks ethereal in such postures and the arrangement works well for the actresses.

Esquire is rich in clichéd poses. Jennifer Aniston's photographs for 2007 Esquire look similar to Halle Berry's shoot. Emilia Clarke's photoshoot looks similar to Angelina Jolie's photographs for Maxim. Eva Longoria's 2017 Maxim shoot is similar to that of Kate Beckinsale. The repetition robs the actresses of individuality and offers a standard of beauty. The beauty standard endorsed by Esquire incorporates elements from various mainstream magazines to cultivate an ideal image of feminine beauty and sell a pre-established idea and ideal of beauty.

Photo Manipulation

The current study is aware that the photographs featured in *Esquire* are digitally enhanced. To enhance the aesthetic appeal, the photographs are digitally modified, which is a norm for all mainstream magazines. “Altering digital imagery is now ubiquitous. People have come to expect it in the fashion and entertainment world, where airbrushing blemishes and wrinkles away is routine” (Hany Farid, 2009, p. 42). The photographs do not represent the natural aspects of the actresses but idealize beauty. Rune Pettersson (2002) states that each published beauty shot is subjected to pre and post-modification and “parts of the picture can be deleted, added, altered, moved or changed in shape” (p. 51). Anne-Sophie Brändlin (2015) claims “The ways in which a person's appearance can be changed through Photoshop are endless.” Photoshop serves an important purpose “from lengthening neck and legs to cutting out ribcages, raising cheekbones, filling in hair and changing skin color.”

Beauty magazines edit the photographs to make the models look young, slim and beautiful. Similarly, *Esquire* presents the actresses as flawless women who personify feminine beauty so that the pictures can be consumed. Scarlett Johansson's mole on the right is visible only in some photographs. Charlize Theron and Penelope Cruz also pose as embodiments of physical beauty. Both the actresses defy age as the wrinkles are smoothed out digitally to make them appear younger. Dennis Chamberlin claims that it is not “unusual for a magazine like *Esquire* to have a budget for the cover photo that included up to \$100,000 for photo retouching” (as cited in Diederichs, 2009). The retouched photographs make the actresses look impeccable with dewy skin and perfect proportions to attract the audience.

The Setting

Esquire makes the actresses the nucleus of the photographs. The wardrobe, the makeup, the props and the setting make the divas look glamorous and add to the appeal of the actress. The charm, aesthetic quality, and even the opulence of the setting reflect on the actresses and contribute to adding to their appeal. Although a new face graces the cover each year the setting remains similar year after year. The background in most of the photographs is impassive and is dull in color. A darker shade enables the actresses to shine and is a fashion-forward choice as well-known brands such as Prada and Gucci often opt for dull shades. Moreover, a blank background does not distract the onlooker and neither does it fight for attention.

There is a change in the setting from the dull background to luxuriant living space as the frame changes from beauty shots to full-length shots. The opulent setting draws a connection between wealth and beauty. Helga Dittmar (2008) claims that mainstream magazines retail two types of images; an ideal body type and a “good life” to correlate happiness with expensive consumer goods (p. 14). The photographs endorse a life of affluence and the identity of the actresses is derived from the material objects in the shoot. The minute material details in each photograph convey a message. Comfortable beds covered with white sheets and fluffy pillows are a uniform feature in the shoots because they represent an image of comfort. The deluxe interior, leather sofas, indoor pools and ornate rugs all depict a rich lifestyle. The exuberant setting has an aesthetic appeal and pleases the eyes and is therefore repeated in the photoshoots. The photographs provide a pleasurable visual experience. The

pleasure that the consumers get from these pictures is that of voyeurism. The indoor setting, including the bedroom and the living room, is a private space which is invaded through the photographs. Esquire presents consumption as voyeurism through such a setting. Moreover, by depicting the women in an indoor space it reinforces the gender roles.

CONCLUSION

We have attempted through the visual analysis of photographs of Hollywood prima donnas, to present a discussion of how the idea of beauty is created and propagated as a commodity in the media. Esquire constructs the ideal form of female beauty through stereotypical postures, setting and makeup in the photographs. The photographs delink beauty from the culture and turn it into a consumable commodity packaged this way to boost consumption. Our study also shows that Esquire does not adhere to or promote a universal or globalized ideal of beauty—something that Yan and Kim (2014) argue drives the media's selection of beautiful women—but a commodification that can present anything as beautiful, through its power of representation.

The visual analysis reveals that feminine beauty is broken down into consumable chunks such as slender physique, intense eyes, dewy complexion, voluminous hair and flawless skin. The use of similar makeup, similar hairstyle provides a mechanism to gauge beauty and also set a standard of beauty. The setting, clothes and makeup work in combination to mask the flaws and draw attention to the desired features. The feminine beauty is packaged to attract the audience, to please the palate and thereby to allow the process of consumption. To present the beauty ideal as a consumer product, the actresses are presented as airbrushed objects who are wrapped in eye-catching clothes. Furthermore, Esquire labels the women as beautiful thus seals the deal as each year the magazine comes up with a new face and consumers accept the verdict of the magazine. This highlights that the media shapes the perception of the audience. The idea of beauty endorsed by Esquire has a sign value as the declaration comes from a popular magazine.

The study further reveals that as beauty is a consumer product, it gives an illusion of freedom. It makes the women believe that they can emulate the actress with their body type to be beautiful without realizing that the image of beauty is deceptive. Upon close inspection, it can be observed that the makeup and camera angles allow only a slight difference among the actresses as all the faces look similar with similar features. The image of beauty lacks variety and reduces it to certain elements such as luscious hair, flawless skin and contoured features. Moreover, the image is illusory as Goodman and Cohen claim that consumerism prohibits “personal style” and the apparent choice of objects “makes the expression of individuality especially difficult” (94). This happens because “the availability of an item in a consumer product invariably means that many others are purchasing the same item” (94). The idea of beauty is as paradoxical as consumer culture itself. It allows one to be more beautiful and distinct from others by advocating the beauty ideal but at the cost of individuality.

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