

Women looking at women, women looking at men



Akane Kanai, an MSc student at the LSE's Gender Institute studying Gender, Media and Culture. Here she muses over differing utilisations and perceptions of masculine and feminine beauty, the diverging experiences of presenting the self and experiencing the presentation of others.

'The female body is a... work of art. The male body is utilitarian, it's for gettin' around, like a Jeep.' – *Elaine, Seinfeld*

Elaine's memorable quote contains a sentiment that one widely hears – women's bodies and curves are beautiful, but men's bodies are not – they cannot be a (beautiful) spectacle in and of themselves. Elaine's comment is funny precisely because, as a heterosexual woman, she is openly disavowing male beauty. Men's bodies are 'functional', even humorous, when revealed.

Beauty is equated with 'curves'; 'lines' with masculine action. Arguably taking a stance on whether men's bodies or women's bodies are inherently more beautiful is problematic and is a question that I will leave to one side (and to which I would somewhat inadequately provide the generic responses of 'it depends on the person' and 'it's subjective'). But if we pause to think about the distinctions between masculine beauty and feminine beauty being simply summed up in lines versus curves, this also should be contestable. Michelangelo's *David* is beautiful in his muscular curves; in movie incarnations of Greco-Roman mythology such as *Immortals* and *300*, variously bulging versions of the male body are spectacularly put on display.

I thought about this the other day when walking through a Tesco Express in the magazine aisle. Women's bodies were displayed everywhere in front of me to sell magazines, not only to men, in publications such as FHM and GQ, but to women. Men were conspicuously absent. Consider magazines like *Cosmo* which sell a certain knowingness about (hetero)sexual activity and will sometimes publish centrefolds of attractive men: there seems to be no ready justification for why men do not appear on covers of mainstream women's magazines.

Rather than simply arguing that women's bodies are just 'more beautiful', perhaps the question of instrumentality should come to the fore. Why can women's bodies and faces be used to sell, and not men's (as often or with as great success)? Common explanations for the lack of men's bodies as spectacles for viewing consumption suggest an anxiety in men toward avoiding homoeroticism when looking at men (hence, scantily clad men in ads are often accompanied by women, to break the tension). But this still doesn't explain why men almost never appear on women's magazine covers as well as raises a host of questions. Is it intimidating or embarrassing for women to look at men, or do they take more pleasure in looking at women? Are men's bodies more off limits? Why does it make sense to discerning magazine editors that heterosexual women feel more comfortable with women's bodies being used for their selling power, and not men's? Do women, rather than men, simply want guides or templates on how they are meant to look, so the women on magazine covers are role models? This last suggestion seems patronising and unsatisfying.

I am not arguing that women's bodies are straightforwardly *used* in a negative way more than those of men. Of course there is some pleasure in being looked at, as well as in looking. Consider Facebook and the numerous profile pictures and photos of self that are constantly being published and uploaded. Beyond the surface explanation of 'sharing one's life', there must surely be some pleasure in cataloguing oneself in a display of carefully chosen (arty/Instagram/fun-loving) photos.

I am suggesting that there appears to be an imbalance here in the pleasure derived from positioning oneself and thinking of oneself as the object of regard, versus the pleasure in looking at others. Blanket statements about women's beauty rather than men's can also have the effect of enforcing an unwanted and unnecessary standard on women. We should be open about (respectful) appreciation of different forms of beauty and question any unthinking acceptance of arbitrary distinctions of who possesses beauty and who looks at it.

Can't women, like men, simply have utilitarian bodies for 'gettin' around'? Can't Jerry Seinfeld not be castigated for walking around nude in front of his girlfriend? And can't his girlfriend be free to reject conventional forms of beautiful nudity? I pose these questions as food for thought.

Akane is an MSc student in Gender, Media and Culture with a background in political science and law. Prior to studying at LSE, she practised law in Melbourne, Australia.

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