



Introduction

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There are a variety of images on display in the context of ‘European culture’ promoted by the mass media. Some of these are advertising images from television breaks and magazine illustrations, which use a stereotypical representation of the human body. One of the basic issues to be discussed is the comparison we enter, consciously or unconsciously, between our ‘real’ body and the image promoted in adverts. Most of us believe that we can resist this influence. Can we?

Television broadcasts 24 frames per second while the human brain can roughly process only 8 of them and as a result we watch some of them in a limited way. Does the media influence our understanding of the human body as a modern “*Trojan Horse*”? We have to learn how to critically watch those images. When we say the word body simultaneously an image comes to our mind. The images vary across centuries and cultures. What is this representation promoted by the media?

Representation of the human-body by the media

Researchers have shown that women are increasingly portrayed as objects of sexual desire and they are also attractive, thin and young (Lambiase et al, 1999). Often bodies are dismembered – just one part of the body is focused on - and as a result bodies are constantly turned into advertising objects in order to sell products. The images portrayed in lifestyle and health publications reinforce prevailing stereotypes of men and women and support unrealistic body ideals. Twenty years ago the average model weighed 8% less than the average woman. Today the average model weighs 23% less than the average woman. Only 5% of women have the body type (tall, genetically thin, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, long-legged) seen in almost all advertising.

Consequences for adolescents, myths and reality

So women and men are sold the myth that they can, and should, achieve physical perfection to have value in our culture. Here are some consequences of this ideal (unreal) representation of the human body for the adolescents. "There's a widespread crisis among today's boys and men - a crisis that few people have noticed. Men of all ages, in

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unprecedented numbers, are preoccupied with the appearance of their bodies." The secrecy around male body-image woes and their symptoms, including excessive workouts, steroid abuse, eating disorders and distorted body perception known as "bigorexia nervosa," has only made things worse for males (H. Pope Jr., K. Phillips & R. Olivardia, 2000).

Further research has been generated into the impact of these images on individuals' self-esteem and self-image, particularly amongst adolescent females (Cattarin et al, 2000; Lerner, Orlos, & Knapp, 1976; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Martin & Gentry, 1997). These images largely set the standard to which an individual should aspire and, as a result, we see an alarming number of young women and children on the dieting merry-go-round (Stephens, Hill & Hanson, 1994). Even women who fall within the normal weight range perceive themselves as too heavy and continue to pursue this ideal (Stephens, Hill & Hanson, 1994). There is also a lot of discussion about the fact that many people are misrepresented or totally invisible in the media. We do not normally see many disabled people represented in the media. When this does happen there is a stereotypical representation, as a victim, a super-hero or a threat. This has a specific effect on the self-esteem of disabled people.

Media images of female beauty also influence many people. They influence women's vision of themselves, and they affect how men feel about the women in their lives.

Media Literacy is a solution!

As a conclusion I think it is crucial for the curriculum to include critical reading of these iconic texts. Media literacy, also, can help students understand how the media work and become more critical viewers. Kosmidou-Hardy Chrysoula (1996), suggests a **Model of Critical Education**. *"One of its aims is the uncovering of the transmitter's intentions and the supporting of the critical reader to develop the knowledge and skills needed so that s/he is not influenced by the transmitter and avoids an uncritical conforming to her/his will.* (Kosmidou-Hardy Chr., 1995, 1996, 1999).



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