SKIN DEEP

SAM HEYDT


मितेंजल ब्यूटी पार्लर
BEAUTY IS LIFE

SKIN DEEP

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The palimpsestic female body is a site where cultural phenomenology and social perversions have historically been inscribed. Through deconstructing the dialectic between the mainstream media and the pathology of everyday one divulges the unique complexities lacing the experience of middle-class girls coming of age in America today and the role the media plays in their identity construction. The upbringing of this demographic, coined by William Strauss as the millennial generation, laced the pivotal years of socioeconomic transformation that constituted late capitalism and the surge of the omnipresent media apparatus. Their innocent susceptibility to the ideological constructs internalized in their naivety render them naked representations of the cinematic gaze and schizophrenic experience of post-modernity. As the differentiation between capitalism and culture become increasingly blurred, multinational corporations have hijacked the mass media and have used it as a vehicle to promote consumption. Culture has been commodified and transformed into an industry. Desensitized and over-sexualized, this generation emerges as a symptom of the age- extrapolating agency to consumption, hinging self worth on the superficial and constructing identity through brands. Amid this surge, true agency is lost, desire is programmed, the virtual

usurps the real and the mental capacity for memories is compromised by the info-vasion of the present. All that remains is a frailty of subjectivity shaped by the mood of the market and taste of the media. The collective consciousness of this generation is as much a reflection of capitalism, as it is a product of it.

America's consumer society is "fueled by a market that by nature must constantly develop new consumables and new consumers; as such, the body has increasingly become its terrain over the years, and larger and larger segments of women's and girl's bodies have become colonized, commodified, and reshaped by market forces" (Albright 6). The absence of substantiality that is definitive of this generation's collective identity reflects the perversity of the contemporary socioeconomic state. As capitalism cannibalizes the media, the social psyche has become a terrain where ideological constructs are cultivated, artificial needs are planted, notions of beauty are reinforced and gender ideologies are cemented. The entertainment industry acts as a socializing agent manufacturing identities constructed on shifting norms. Through the internalization of narratives, representations and archetypes propagated by the media, the notion of self diminishes into a flickering image, rooted in the complicity of countless narratives and media mimesis. The sea of semiotics inundating the cinematic regime breed the insecurities needed to provoke girls to flood malls and consume out of compensation. In coveting to reach corporal perfection or afford the social signification of a brand, girls of this generation have become hostage to the never-ending cycle of capitalism.

The superficiality characteristic of this generation speaks yet to a larger cultural phenomenon that is of greater consequence than the corrosion of candor in the economic sphere.

The onslaught of media images has accelerated our notion of time rendering an emptiness of experience and deterioration of meaningful social exchanges. The present is "best described as a limbo of continually deferred expectations and anxieties. Everything is about to happen, or perhaps has already happened without our noticing it" (Mitchell 489). Captive to the flickering images on the screen, our understanding of spatial dimensions, temporality and self is mutilated. We live in an era "characterized by an erosion of event…a vertiginous deepening of the relevant past…a peculiar sense of "accelerated stasis" in our sense of history" (Mitchell 487). The mind's capacity to process the explosion of information in the present compromises our ability to internalize the succession of events. Yet, if selfhood is built on an "accumulation of the memory of places and relations" (Bifo 5), what happens when the "mass of present information" occupies "the whole space of attention" (Bifo 5)? Does an identity built on recollections of the past thin out as memories fade? This work aims to articulate how this generation offers a unique reflection of late capitalism and the schizophrenic experience of post modernity.

MIRRORS AND MIMESIS

THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

MIRRORS AND MIMESIS

THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In order to position this analysis, one must establish a history of the present- a '*historicity*'. Historicity, in this case, is neither a representation of the past nor is it framing the present in a historical sense. It can be contextualized rather as a relationship to the present that de-familiarizes it so to yield a distance from immediacy. Nevertheless, in order to understand the present, one must look to the past. Tracing the changing notion of selfhood throughout history allows one to positions this female generation in a way that unveils the specificity and spectral nature of their experience. Furthermore, the very notion of subjectivity is a relatively novel invention conceived by the bourgeoisie at the turn of the seventeenth century. "The subject does not pre-exist history, it does not preexist the social process" (Bifo 1). It is rooted in the élan vital of the sovereign. From its very conception, the question of self was a class-based one. "The rich and powerful have a great deal of control over their self images, unlike historical selves who leave 'only' their actions behind, or the millions of whom we know nothing personal whatsoever" (Phillippy 6). For the marginalized and poor, there are social, material and financial constraints on agency and the fashioning of the self. Thus, I've decided to focus on a demographic

that arguably manifests itself as the present day realization of the bourgeois class- (upper) middle class America.

With selfhood and class tightly intertwined, *mirrors*, which needless to say have enormous implications on identity formation, were a rarity seen only in the homes of the *wealthy* prior to 1630. "It is interesting to speculate as to what significance the availability of actual mirrors has for the class specific applications of Lacanian theories of subjectivity" (Phillippy 4). A woman's identity construction is uniquely informed by her reflection in mirror, which is why my analysis is *gender specific*. More so than their male counterpart, a female's sense of self is largely shaped by her appearance. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger famously articulates the disparity: "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger 45). Thus, women come to define themselves according to how they feel they are perceived. The "relation of the spectator to spectacle is an intricately gendered system" (Pajaczkowska 12). The gaze outside the individual plays a prominent role in the construction of a female's subjectivity and its objectification. "The self/mirror relationship exists in a wider social context, where both objects and aspects of ourselves become commodities" (Pajaczkowska 13). Oscillating between objectification and self, the female psyche negotiates the alienation between the ideal other and the ego, reducing subjectivity to pure exteriority.

Through the unconscious internalization, women "knowing and making herself object; believes she really sees herself in the glass"

(Pajaczkowska 13). The illusory recognition of the ego as image is a narcissistic identification, an identity outside itself. This projection of the ideal is governed by modes of aesthetic aspirations shaped by societal expectations. A female's self worth is thus tied more so to her beauty than her intellect. With the intervention of the media and its dissemination of beauty constructs, this proves truer now than in the time of the bourgeoisie. In fact, psychologist Joan Brumberg in "comparing the diaries of young girls in the 1800s and the late 1990s, found that young girls' concerns have moved from "good works" to "good looks," and that the earlier girls' diaries rarely mentioned their bodies in terms of strategies for self-improvement" (Albright 9). Furthermore, identities have taken on a schizophrenic character in the age of post-modernity. It is as if the mirror has been shattered only to be replaced by the flicking media images that splinter identification with the 'ideal other' into countless possibilities. The divergence from the bourgeoisie mentality unveils the trajectory of the evolving notion of subjectivity and the growing influence of the media on the female psyche.

From the bourgeoisie rational came the modernist understanding of identity, which was still very much shaped by Descartes' Cartesian paradigm wherein the self was a certainty: 'I think therefore I am'. However, this slant on subjectivity was an "ideological totalizations of white, male and middle class subject positions" (Gen Doy 8) that neglected the marginalized and denied women the right to define themselves as something other than an extension of another (mother, wife, lover). "For

Descartes, the subject is a subject of certainty. Lacan, however, believes that the subject is not self knowing and self constituting, but rather the result of processes that construct it through language" (Gen Doy 8). With the 'death of the subject' marking the transition from modernity to post-modernity, the Cartesian concept of selfhood was denigrated as an essentialist fallacy. With post-modernity emerged a new understanding of selfhood marked by fragmentation and instability. Unconsciously realized through language, the self was framed as a socially constructed myth. A product of social, religious, economic and political subtext, the self was no longer something to be searched for, but rather endlessly *invented*. This discursive hypothesis represents a historical disjuncture. Woman now had the freedom to supposedly define herself. However, what this work is interested in is the extent to which this perceived agency is manipulated by the media apparatus and its dissemination of ideologically infused images. "Visual codes of classic realism tend to associate female with passive, exhibitionistic objects and male with active, voyeuristic subjects" (Pajaczkowska 14). Has there been a shift from the 'male' gaze to that of the gaze of the media? And furthermore, how does this gaze, which for Lacan: "is the underside of consciousness", function as mechanism of the capitalist power apparatus?

"The most crucial structuring of sexual difference through vision and visible differences in visible culture is through the 'gaze'" (Pajaczkowska 12). The cinematic mode of production is broken down into a hierarchy of three distinct gazes: the film projection, the audience and lastly the

actors within films who serve as paradigms for identity construction. "The cinema spectator...relives a 'mirror moment', the psyche becomes alienated from itself through a perverse act of dividing 'ego ideal' from the ego... projecting onto the screen persona an identification of ego with image…exacerbated through the projection of idealized exhibitionism" (Pajaczkowska 14). Through the transmission of semiotic codes, the media subjugates the American psyche with three distinct role for a female: "(1) wife, mother and housekeeper for men, (2) a sex object used to sell products to men, (3) a person trying to be beautiful for men" (Levine 241). This three-pier paradigm for female identity is perpetuated in advertisements where women are consuming either cosmetics or a product related to the domestic sphere (Van Zoonon 74). Young girls begin to understand themselves as either an object of male desire or an object of domesticity. Conforming to the dominant ethos reinforced through the media apparatus, the process of identity-construction is a site of perceived negotiation between alleged agency and globally defined possibilities. What renders the millennial generation unique from others is the fact that the upbringing of this demographic laced the pivotal years of socioeconomic transformation that constituted late capitalism and the surge of the omnipresent media apparatus. Their innocent susceptibility to the ideological constructs internalized in their naivety render them brazen symptoms of the perverse culture within which they have come in the age.

For the girls of the millennial generation, identity is actively

constructed and negotiated through mimesis, participation, and rejection. Gender, like identity, is a continuous production occurring at a "point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (Butler 23). Thus there is no 'natural' gender. The acts and gestures on the surface of the body is a fabrication based on social norms. The pretence that this external fabrication is an expression of internal essence mistakes the cause for the effect. The female body is a site where value is ascribed. Individuality is a fragile achievement of self amid the weaving together of allegiances and conflicting narratives of a collective memory- a collective memory that, as I mentioned before, is *fading*. The characteristics of 'I' fragment, decompose and reconstruct at a rate that mirrors the accelerating flicker of on-screen images. Through televised narrative accounts of culture and one's place in it, identity is arrived at through a self-identification with media figures and mimesis. This identification erases identity. Infiltrating the realm of subjectivity, the media has transformed life into a theatrical production where different roles are acted out.

SUSCEPTIBILTY & SEMIOTICS

THE CORRODING HABITUS & CANABALIZATION OF THE MEDIA

SUSCEPTIBILTY & SEMIOTICS

THE CORRODING HABITUS & CANABALIZATION OF THE MEDIA

The arbitrary notion of identity manifests as an affect of the spectacle. The media's role in identity construction is undeniable, but what is not always recognized is how "often these identities resonate and perpetuate dominant notions of what it means to be female in American society" (Pajaczkowska 13). "Television constitutes a language with a high ratio of semiotic to symbolic meaning" (Pajaczkowska 16). The "gender encoded in media text" (Van Zoonon73) is intrinsic to the "dynamic process of influence, transformation and coexistence within the totality of the social system" (Lotman 56). Transmission models of communication, such as television and tabloids, use signs to "represent" or rather reconstruct our perception of reality- cementing beauty norms and propagate commodity fetishism. Through the dissemination of prototype identities, manufactured desire and paradigms of corporal perfection, the capitalist apparatus generates consumption. Laced with the agenda of multinational conglomerates, the media broadens the manufacture of "fictitious, artificial, and imaginary needs"(Lefebvre 161). Through the transmission of semiotic codes, the media subjugates the American psyche.

Capitalism infiltrates television in a way that perpetuates

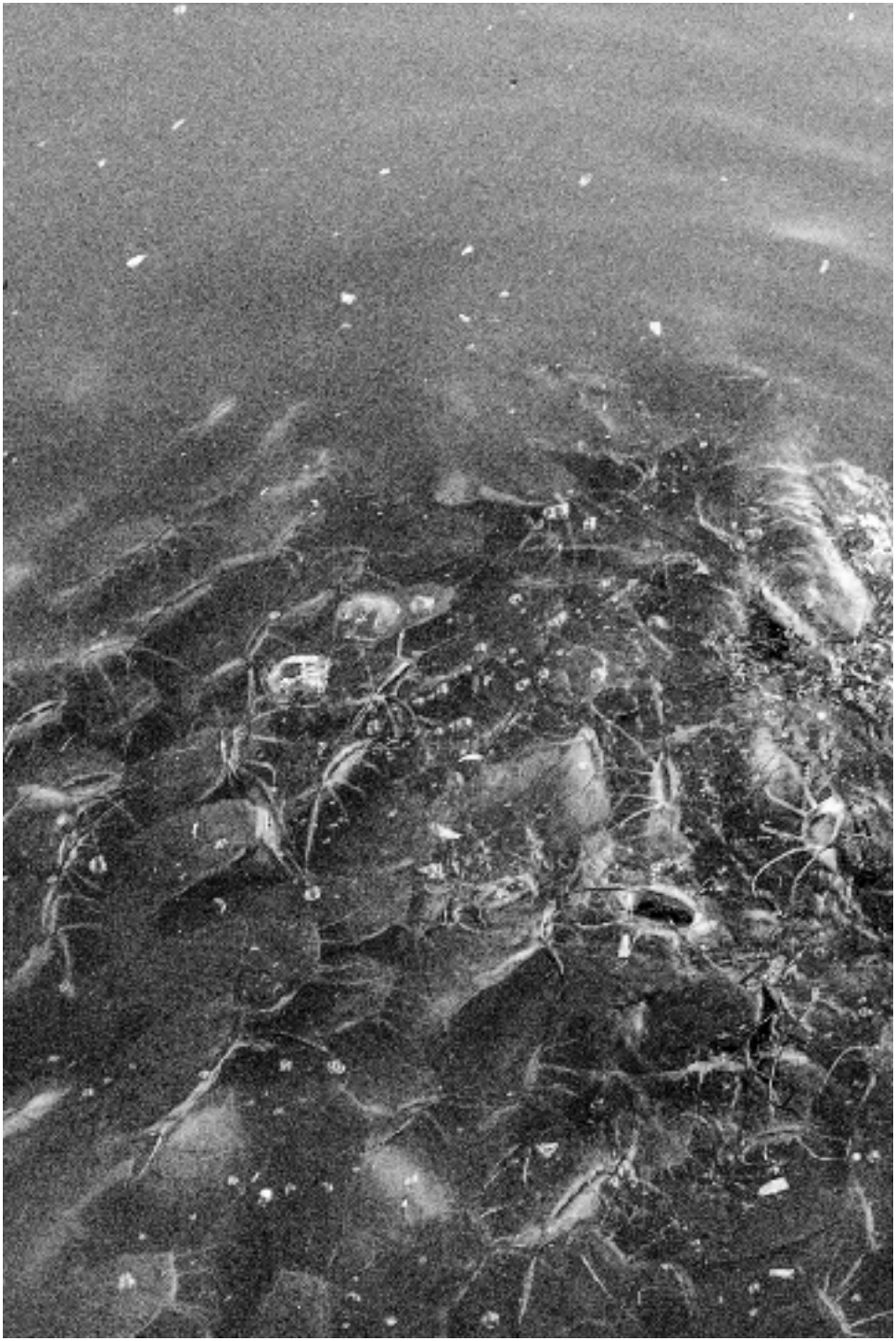
consumption through offering different avenues for identity construction. The media's construction of imaginary landscapes has become the organizing principles of both labor and cultural practices. In a country with only five percent of the world's population and forty percent of the world's advertisments, a child is said to watch an average of twenty thousand 30-second commercials annually (www.csun.edu). America has become an "image saturated society where advertising, entertainment, television, and other culture industries increasingly define and shape everyday life" (Gotham 227). Cannibalizing the collective conscious, the media dictates different modes of experience, providing "powerful images, descriptions, definitions and frames of reference for understanding the world" (Storey 132). "Visual culture is growing in significance precisely because…it has multiplied the avenues of inquiry into the meaning of imagery in our culture and in everyday life" (Pajaczkowska 2). The techno-linguistic production of imaginary, the social construction of value and the aesthetic stimulation of meaning are disseminated by the media apparatus. Infecting the social psyche of the youth with hegemonic ideologies, the culture industries not only cement social norms, but also construct gender roles, beauty norms and propagate commodity fetishism. Entranced by its hypnotic nature, the youth has devolved into passive spectators blindly embracing ideologically infiltrated images.

The susceptibility of the youth to these archetypes lies in there naivety. "Social learning theory has shown that children look to role models to learn their appropriate gender roles, including role models

in the media, and that children and teens may model themselves after these images" (Albright 105). Moreover, this generation grew up pacified by the distraction of the TV, Internet and video games. In the past, the development of a child's identity was strongly influenced by the *habitus* of the nuclear family unit which functioned to enculturate and socialize it's young. Over the past three decades the emancipation of women, "which in reality has been the subjection of women to the circuit of capitalist production" (Bifo 3), has led to an increase in the number of working moms, resulting in day care upbringings and the absence of a maternal presence. The disappearance of the mother figure "in the experiential sphere of the first video-electronic generation" along with "the diffusion of the televisual socializer has something to do with the contemporary psycho-political catastrophe" (Bifo 4). As the dynamics of the conventional conjugal family structure have crumbled over recent decades, kids have increasing found refuge in television and video games in the absence of their parents.

Here in America, the average teenager's weekly exposure to media is as follows: Magazine- 3.3 hrs, Internet 7.6 hrs, Television 10.6 hrs, Radio 13.5 hrs (Wolf 43). According to the A.C. Nielsen Co., "the average American watches more than 4 hours of TV each day (or 28 hours/week, or 2 months of nonstop TV-watching per year). "In a 65-year life, that person will have spent 9 years glued to the tube" (www.csun.edu). Even dialogue during dinner had been usurped by the lure of the media, as sixty-six percent of Americans admit to watching TV during it (www.

csun.edu). Furthermore, 75% of daycare centers rely on TV as a means of entertainment; this distraction for children replaces the sort of communal interaction that facilitates social competences later in life (www.csun.edu). The representations infusing the media industry act as socializing agents reinforcing notions of beauty and gender ideologies.



SKIN DEEP SELF WORTH

INSECURITY AS CATALYSIS FOR CONSUMPTION

SKIN DEEP SELF WORTH

INSECURITY AS CATALYSIS FOR CONSUMPTION

Through the means of mass media cultural beliefs, gender roles and societal expectations are cemented. Hinging self worth on the ideological constructs perpetuated by the media, girls come to regard appearance as paramount. Yet, humans are the only species who want to change, improve and take possession of their appearance. This aesthetic aspiration is not innate. Consciousness and one's perception of reality is constructed through language and the connotative power of signs. The semiotic production in the realm of the spectacle accounts for our interest in appropriating our appearance. "Language is this appropriation, which transforms nature into face. This is why appearance becomes a problem for human beings: it becomes the location of a struggle for truth" (Agamben 91). The arbitrariness of language and signs reveals there is no truth behind signification. The fragmentation of identity is an affect of the spectacle, which denudes the ambiguity of language. "It empties out all of forms of identity to the point where we see and experience their inessential nature" (Agamben 95). Contemporary culture celebrates certain virtues of flexible identity that manifest in corporal perfection and identity as performance. The cultural belief deeply engrained in our society propagates beauty as the standard against which all women are measured. Thus, one's sense of identity and self worth becomes skin deep.

The fragility of this generation's collective identity stems from the corrosion of the ego as it is canabalized by low self esteem. Reinforced in Hollywood pictures, advertisements, conversations and commercials, the unattainable ideals of beauty infiltrate every aspect of western culture. Beauty is paramount in the realm of cinematic production. The intercourse between self worth and beauty has been increasingly "woven through popular culture: consumer advertising, media images, and television shows" (Albright 104). Physical appearance that falls outside the media's construct of beauty can mean social ostracization. A grounded sense of self and purpose deteriorates as the influence of the media at large began reinforcing a beauty ideology that weighed a women's worth on her waistline and cheekbones. To dismantle this disillusion and free girls of the burden of unrealistic expectations would mean to completely subvert the socially constructed paradigm of beauty that is now so deeply ingrained in our cultural psyche. Furthermore, the upbringing of this demographic was shaped by television more so than other generations of the past.

The programming specifically directed towards teenagers is ripe with pop cultural constructs of societal expectations- defining what is 'cool' and what is 'beautiful'. The cinematic mode of production essentially "extrapolates beauty to America's national identity" (Black 32). "These images are having an impact: studies have linked body dissatisfaction and a desire for thinness with the consumption of fashion magazines television, soap operas and music videos" (Albright 108). The messages

transmitted through the media text inspire fear and anxiety disguised as desire. Approximately "400-600 advertisements bombard us everyday in magazines, on billboards, on TV, and in newspapers. One in eleven has a direct message about beauty, not even counting the indirect messages" (Cavanaugh 8). Such hinders a teen's identity development through the appeal of mimesis, while also having devastating consequences on the self-image of already insecure adolescents. In a culture of fear, consumption, and idolatry for the superficial, "has the 'American Dream' changed so much that it can only be achieved once we can perfectly emulate the super thin and sexy images of Britney Spears or other pop icons?" (Roberts 2007).

Again the transforming female body serves as a reflection of the capitalist apparatus bleeding into the cultural psyche. The cinematic mode of production is not related to aesthetics but rather ethics, politics and economics. The cultural codes and conventions projected by the media apparatus drive consumption. Advertisements project the unattainable in order to sell products laced with faulty guarantee, their power and validity results from their repetition. "Commercial interests play directly to the body angst of young girls, a marketing strategy that results in enormous revenues for manufacturers of skin and hair products as well as diet foods." (Albright 107). The unprecedented boom of the diet and cosmetic industry occurred in tandem to the growth of the telecommunication and commercial industries. Through semiotic means, images of wealth, sex and romance are extrapolated to youth and beauty. "As a result of

such marketing strategies, in the United States alone, the beauty industry grew from $40 million in sales in 1914, to $17 billion in 1985" (Albright 107). The perverse underbelly of this socioeconomic phenomenon is the mechanism in which these images "used food and weight to strip women of their sense of control" (Wolf 11). Hostage to societal expectations, girls of the millennial generation have become victims of their blind susceptibility-psychologically imprisoned by the paradigms of corporal perfection propagated by the media.

Stripping women of their power, the societal pressure to meet aesthetic expectations in America deteriorates sentiments of self worth and robs many of their sense of control. Advertisements "need, consciously or not, to promote women's hating their bodies enough to go profitably hungry, since the advertising budget for one third of the nation's food bill depends on their doing so by dieting" (Wolf 84). This mass neurosis triggered by the media does turn quite a profit. The weight loss industry brought in 40 billion dollars last year. Their annual revenue reflects the insecurity plaguing women who, needless to say, buy into the false claims of diet products in the vain hope of obtaining "the ideal body". Yet, "is corporate America's bottom line so important that it justifies a nation's psychosis?" (Roberts). Given that seventy-five percent of women have bodies that fall outside that which the media propagates as the norm, (Average American woman 5'4" is 140/ Average American Model 5'11" at 115), it is no wonder that millions succumb to the quick fix appeal of pills and other (often dangerous) products. Thus as the industry spits out ad

upon ad vying to convince us "...if you lose weight, your life will be good", pushed to the edge of sanity many girls succumb to consuming fewer calories a day then those in third world countries.

Low self-esteem, body dimorphic, and eating disorders have grown in tandem to the proliferation of increasingly unattainable images of beauty. "These images are having an impact: studies have linked body dissatisfaction and a desire for thinness with the consumption of fashion magazines, television, soap operas and music videos" (Albright 108). A girl's sense of self deteriorates with their self-worth. Brought on by the intercourse of capitalist greed and media's hold on the minds of the masses, this obsession with weight breeds bulimia, anorexia and compulsive binge eating. With one in five girls affected, eating disorders are the third most common illness afflicting girls in America. Each year, a hundred and fifty thousand women die of anorexia-many of whom are under 18 years of age. In fact, statistics show that the "the annual death rate associated with anorexia is more than 12 times higher than the annual death rate due to all other causes combined for females between 15 and 24 years old" (Cavanaugh 7) and the disease is beginning to affect girls at a younger age with "81% of 10-year-olds admitting to restricting eating (diet) and 46% of 9-year" (Mellin 86). This social neurosis is a response to a culture of idealization, vanity, insecurity and over-sexualization of young girls. Vying for approval from the gaze of the media, the wasting away of this generation reflects how our cultural decay is culpable for the diaphanous identities of these girls.

"Becoming the new feminine ideal requires just the right combination of insecurity, exercise, bulimia and surgery" (Trudeau 65). Weight fixation, cosmetics products and extrapolating self-worth to beauty have become increasingly characteristic of the girls of the millennial generation. It is estimated that ninety-one percent of college woman, sixty percent of high school girl and forty-six percent of pre-teen (9-11) admit to being often on a diet. Furthermore, the socioeconomic pressure to be beautiful has been a catalyst to consumption practices rooted in fetishism rather then necessity. "As a result of such marketing strategies, in the United States alone, the beauty industry grew from $40 million in sales in 1914, to $17 billion in 1985" (Albright 107). In the costly and never-ending quest to attain 'ideals' purported by the media, shopping malls have become "'cathedrals of consumption'" (Storey 150), embraced as escape from the recluse of domesticity. Unconsciously, females understand their geographic constraints: the streets are to be used strictly as a "route between two interior spaces…the social consequence of street loitering is the label 'prostitute'" (Lewis 92). Thus, the lure of malls comes from the intercourse of leisure and consumption in a social space outside their home. This fabrication of need poisons the American female psyche provoking them to inadvertently consume out of aesthetic concern and insecurity- especially that of the more susceptible youth who will do anything to be accepted.

Beauty presents itself as something that can be attained by anyone who is willing to invest the energy and money into acquiring it. The slant that money can buy beauty has been the catalyst behind the rapid growth

of the cosmetic, fashion and diet industry. "Modes of consumption have become marks of social and cultural difference" (McRobbie 39). With this said, the question of class reemerges in regards to beauty and the notion of the 'body as project'. Bourdieu claims that the working class is unaware of the "market value of beauty, and thus are less likely to invest 'time and effort, sacrifices and money in cultivating their bodies" (Bourdieu 820). Thus, theoretically girls of a lower class don't have the economic, and some argue cultural capital, to invest in themselves. However widespread access to the mass media may be changing this notion. After conducting a survey concerning the body image of female college students of different socioeconomic standing in LA and Buffalo NY, Julie Albright discovered that "exposure to media images specific to body image had a stronger influence than class alone, since the lower-socioeconomic-class sample displayed more anxiety about their bodies" (Albright 113).

Albright's research address's how 'body as project' is no longer be class specific, as the masses exposure to the media has generated a wide scale body dissatisfaction that is reconciled with through conspicuous consumption within financial means, as well as a increase in eating disorders nationwide. This is not to say that social class does not play a role, however "exposure to media images may be a stronger influence than class alone" locating media consumption as the "mitigating factor in the impact of class on body image" (Albright 120). Programs reinforcing dominant notions of beauty 'norms' "encourage heightened self-scrutiny among lower-class viewers" (Albright 119). In other words, although girls

of higher socioeconomic status "place a greater emphasis" on their bodies, media exposure has poisoned girls of the lower class to have "more anxiety about their bodies". Reinforcing the notion that money can buy beauty, the glossy pages of magazines are dedicated to projecting unattainable ideals followed by the commercialization of weight loss pills, beauty products and brand names that serve as signifiers of status. The distorted depictions of magazines "convince readers of their own inadequacies while drawing them into the consumer culture with the promise that they could buy their way out of bodily dissatisfactions and low self-esteem" (McRobbie 46). Psychologically imprisoned by a system that indoctrinates girls with a feeling of lack, advertisements along with other forms of media text instill the necessity to buy to feel whole.

"Beauty practices are 'vital to the economy'" (Albright 107). The historical evolution of this cultural obsession was a slow than sudden transformation in the American psyche, accelerated by the proliferation of advertisement and growth of the telecommunication industry. "Three minutes of looking at fashion magazine makes 70 percent of woman of all ages feel depressed, guilty and shameful"(Roberts 2007). Kate Winslet, "who was featured recently on a GQ magazine cover, was later quoted as saying that her legs had been digitally reduced by 30 percent. These "enhanced" bodies are increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to attain (since they do not really exist) yet women may be internalizing them as models for their own bodies" (Albright 111). These retouched flawless images invite unrealistic expectations, low self-esteem and the impulse

to purchase more beauty products. The beauty ideal is not hinged on any biological or historical justification; it "is not universal or changeless, though the West pretends that all ideals of female beauty stem from one Platonic Ideal Woman. Its ideals change at a pace far more rapid than that of the evolution of species" (Wolf 12). Beauty standards shift according to the mood of the market and the taste of the media.

CAPITALIST BACKLASH/BRAND FETISHISM

ATTENTION ECONOMY, IDENTITY & SIGN VALUE

CAPITALIST BACKLASH/BRAND FETISHISM

ATTENTION ECONOMY, IDENTITY & SIGN VALUE

Captive to the onslaught of images dictating what to wear and how to look, teenage girls consume as a way of reconciling with perceived lack and as an assertion of individuality. The un-satiable appetite for falsification and consumption in post-industrialized societies is a consequence of the glut of commodities, which has necessitated the production of sign value and the use of ads to instill fallacious lack. The millenial generation occupy the decades shaped by capitalism's last ditch attempt at structural sustainability. Propagating beauty ideals and extrapolating logos with lifestyles, the media stimulate consumer culture by deluding the social psyche to believe that their consumer practices translate as autonomous expressions of the self- a self that can at anytime be redefined, refashioned at the whim of a purchase. Fueled by corporations vying for consumer attention, the capitalist economy has mutated into an *attention* economy. Cinema is to the realm of spectacle as the assembly line is to the realm of production. The vitality of postindustrial consumer society relies on the cinematic mode of production to perpetuate themes of beauty, desire and commodity fetishism throughout its narratives. The industry seductively packages happiness as something that can be purchased. Soliciting products laced with faulty guarantee, brilliant marketing tactics tie money,

sex, joy and love to brand names and images of beauty.

This socioeconomic phenomenon poisoning the social psyche emerged from the demand to promote consumption amid the crisis of over-production underlying late-capitalism. Gramsci's '*regulation theory*' gave rise to a '*regime of accumulation*' engendering the growth of a middle class disillusioned by various media apparatus' propagating agency as consumption, commodity fetishism and the production of beauty norms. Pregnant with contradictions, the undeniable structural flaws of the system rendered the relationship between the socio-economic and the cultural sphere riddled with the potentiality to one-day collapse. Thus, with aspirations to surmount the complexities of this predicament, multinational corporations "exploited forms of advertising to construct symbolic virtues for their products"(Parker 361). In advertisements, among many other forms of media text, Marx's theory of 'use-value' is replaced by what Haug coins as the 'promise of use-value'. "The becoming-image" of capital is nothing more than the commodity's last metamorphosis, in which exchange value has completely eclipsed use value and can now achieve the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over life in its entirety, after having falsified the entire social production" (Rose 75). This structural shift in the mode of regulation can be attributed to "the powerful tension in postwar capitalism between an ascetic ethos of production and a hedonistic ethos of consumption- between the competing demands of work and of leisure" (Latham 7). Although, the "post-war western world has grown up with the association between happiness and consumption"

(Rockler-Gladen 12), "during the phase of industrialization, the last pennyworth of labor power was extorted without compunction. To extract surplus value, it was hardly necessary to prime the pump with needs. Then capital, confronted by its own contradictions (over-production, falling rate of profit) ... unearth[ed] the individual *qua* consumer" (Baudrillard 33).

Late capitalism is characterized by the blurring separation between the system of production and productive relations, the citizen and consumer. The postmodern economy is driven by what Baudrillard coins as '*consummativity*', "an indefinite calculus of growth rooted in the abstraction of human needs'" (Baudrillard 45). Social construction of value and new modes of production are dominated by the "logic of prosthesis", wherein labor translates as the act of consumption rather than that of production. In the decade to follow 1970, the "crisis of over-accumulation" began exhausting the perpetual rhythm of the capitalist system. "Although capitalist technique of mass-production were very good at making identical product in great volume, economies of scale were less efficient at producing unique and therefore desirable goods"(Parker 361). "The first great triumph of the commodity thus takes place under the sign of both transparency and phantasmagoria" (Agamben 75). Technological innovations in the sphere of mechanical labor has gave way to the ethos of mass consumption followed by "a greater emphasis on the 'targeting of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture" (Latham 9).

The glut of commodities intrinsic to post-industrialism necessitated the production of sign value and the use of media text to instill lack where

there is none. The socioeconomic phenonmenon of branding seduces the public to adopt the "lifestyle of a brand over their own, merging individual identity with logo" (Whitbeck 23). As follows, the fashioning of the self has developed an intrinsic relationship with brand names wherein the sign value of the product functions as "social markers to indicate taste, status and style"(Parker 367). The merging of brand names with identity construction demonstrates how sign consumption has imperialized American taste culture. The sign value of an object is rendered through the aura assigned to it by a certain corporate label. The importance of a products utility dissipates; rather it is the symbolic value of an object that determines its worth (exchange value) on the market. One can convey their social status and distinguished taste through the brand names of their clothes, paving way for the emergence of the commodity system of sign value. "Pierre Bourdieu has provided significant analytical tools for considering the body as a vehicle for social class distinctions, and has argued that bodies and the modifications of them become part of the symbolic order through which social class signifies itself, an expression of a particular lifestyle which he terms the "sign carrying, sign-wearing body" (Albright 109). The practice of merging of brand names with identity is increasingly evident in youth culture. Like beauty paradigms, corporate labeling invites the possibility to 'express' your true self through modifying your appearance through consumption.


LOVE ME
INDIGO
IND'L-COMM'L
REAL ESTATE
LMON DOLGIN 718 388-7700

POLITICS OF MEMORY

HYPER-ACCELERATION, ROTTED ROOTS & DISIPATED IDENITY

POLITICS OF MEMORY

HYPER-ACCELERATION, ROTTED ROOTS & DISIPATED IDENITY

The acceleration in the rate in which people try on new social identities unveils the superficiality lacing the illusion of agency and selfhood. The collective constructs of identities among those of the millennial generation have been swayed and shaped by mass communication technologies, the transnational flow of media and the acceleration of circulating information. It is a generation that knows immediate gratification, but not satisfaction. "Excitation without release replaces pleasure"(Bifo 6). Having to adapt to the schizophrenic nature intrinsic to the age of post-modernity, this generation were pacified from birth with the distraction of the media. They came of age during the socio-cultural phenomenology of "info-invasion, nervous overload, mass psychopharmacology, sedatives, stimulants and euphoric substances, of fractalization of working and existential time"(Bifo 3). The transition "towards the postmodern and hyper-technological dimension was registered by the New Wave of the early eighties, which in its most extreme form defined itself as No Wave. No Wave doesn't mean immobility or constant flow without undulation; on the contrary, it means infinite fragmentation of the wave, it means nano-wave, infinitesimal agitation of the musculature, subliminal, uncontrollable micro-excitation. Nervous breakdown"(Bifo 3).

The rhythm of socioeconomic exchanges has had to adapt to the implications of this omnipresent surge of technological innovation, which has ultimately changed the dynamics of communicability and notion of time. "A new temporality, characterized by an erosion of the event, and a vertiginous deepening of the relevant past, produces a peculiar sense of "accelerated stasis" in our sense of history" (Mitchell 487). The hyper-accelerated rate of circulating images and information necessitate us to decode and internalize data at an unprecedented pace. "The very slowness of emotion is transformed little by little into a commodity, an artificial condition that can be exchanged for money" (Bifo 6). The commodification of experience increasingly comes to define contemporary culture. "We live in a time that is best described as a limbo of continually deferred expectations and anxieties. Everything is about to happen, or perhaps have already happened without our noticing it" (Mitchell 489). "The essential problem is that the rhythms of the technological mutation are a lot faster than those of the mental mutation" (Bifo 5).

The poverty of experience at the hands of hyper-accelerated interface brings into question the politics of memory. "What happens to memory when the flow of information explodes, expands enormously, besieges perception, occupies the whole of available mental time, accelerates and reduces the mind's time of exposure to the single informational impression?" (Bifo 5) Recollections of the past inform who one is in the present insofar as "identity can be defined as a dynamic accumulation of the memory of places and relations" (Bifo 5). Does the

onslaught of information hijack our minds from the ability to process anything outside of the present? Do our memories thin out in tandem? If identity can be extrapolated to the memories of our past that come later to define us, is it than "possible to hypothesize that we are moving towards a progressive dis-identification" (Bifo 5)? Furthermore, a culture without memory is a culture without a collective identity as such is constructed through the shared history of experiences, memory and myth.

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

What we are witnessing is a deracination of the solidified self, a self-rooted in past recollections and memories. The state of the spectacle "empties and nullifies every real identity" (Agamben 86). In its place, the media offers ideologically infused avenues for identity construction manifested in corporate branding fueled by impossible beauty norms and the production of lack and artificial needs. As transnational patterns of communication breed conflicting new forms of identity politics, contemporary culture has become increasingly characterized by chaotic fragmentation. The millennial generation's collective consciousness is shaped by the societal insistence for conformity and convention propagated by the entertainment industry. From the array of media text, gender roles are realized, social norms are cemented and beauty standards are established. Essentially the cinematic mode of production tells an individual 'how to be' and in doing so strips them of their individuality. This generation is void of "any essence, any nature, or any specific destiny, their condition is the most empty and the most insubstantial of all: it is the truth. What remains hidden from them is not something behind appearance, but rather appearing itself, that is, their being nothing other than the face" (Agamben 95).

The youth's behavior lends an honest reflection of the cultural

values that they've internalized in their naivety. Pacified from birth with media, this generation consume as a way of reconciling with a perceived lack and as an assertion of individuality. Unveiling the symptoms of the perverse culture within which they have come in the age, the collective consciousness of this generation mimics the flickering images of a screen. The superficial nature underlying subjectivity fetishism manifests in the ability to try on different social identities at a rate the mirrors seasonal trends. As the onslaught of transnational media cannibalizes cultural idiosyncrasies, contemporary politics "disarticulates and empties, all over the planet, traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities" (Agamben 84). "The proliferation of signs, dedifferentiation of institutional spheres, depthlessness, cultivated nostalgia, and the problematization of authenticity and reality"(Bryman 43) are all intrinsic aspects of the post-modernity. As the capitalist regime enters the social psyche through the cinematic mode of production, false modes of individualism are constructed through consumerism.

"The intersection of the body and culture; the way in which the body produces culture at the same time as culture produces the body…prefigured the way American film and media today exult the media fabrication of selfhood" (Suarez 38). Bleeding into the collective unconscious, it dictates modes of experience. Subjectivity has become a shifting experience, schizophrenic and skin deep. The notion of identity as simulated is closely tied to the societal shift marked by post-modernity and shaped by the decline of capitalism as it confronts its eminent

contradictions. It is for this reason that the upbringing the millennial generation is unique from others, as they have no point reference outside this point in time to juxtapose the condition of the present. In postmodernity, "time is scarce, time can be exchanged for money. Time, an indispensable dimension of pleasure, is cut into fragments that can no longer be enjoyed" (Bifo 5). The onslaught of mass media denies the formation of memories, and thus denies a rooted sense of self. Agency is exercised through consumption and identity formation is constructed through mimesis of media figures and brand consumption. If the tide of capitalism recedes from the profane cathedrals of consumption, where there is neither faith nor roots, will all that remains of this generation be a dissipated collective consciousness and a heap of skin shed from social fads worn as identities?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Agamben, Giorgio. *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*. Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

2. Albright, Julie M. "Impossible Bodies: TV Viewing Habits, Body Image, and Plastic Surgery Attitudes among College Students in Los Angeles and Buffalo, New York". *Configurations*. Volume 15, Number 2, Spring 2007: 103-123. Print.

3. Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity At Large - Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 27

4. Baudrillard, Jean. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981. Print.

5. Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972. Print.

6. Berzins, Lisa. *Dying to be thin: the prevention of eating disorders and the role of federal policy*. APA co-sponsored congressional briefing. 110th Cong., 1st sess. Washington: GPO, 1997. Print.

7. Berardi, Franco (aka Bifo). "Biopolitics and Connective Mutation". Trans. Tiziana Terranova. *Culture Machine*, Vol 7. Open Humanities Press, 2005.

8. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Nice: Richard, 1984. Print.

9. Bryman, A. "The Disneyization of Society", *The Sociological Review*, Volume 47, no 1. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999. Print.

10. Cavanaugh, Carolyn. "What we know about eating disorders: Facts and Statistics". *Eating Disorders: A reference sourcebook*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 1999. Print.

11. Doy, Gen. *Picturing the Self: Changing Views of the Subject in Visual Culture*. New York: Doubleday. 2005. Print.

12. Dresage, E. T. *Radical change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age*. New York: The H. T. Wilson Company, 1999. Print.

13. Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print

14. Greene, B. "The new stardom that doesn't require paying any dues." Jewish World Review. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000. Print.

15. Guattari, Félix. *Thought, Friendship, and Visionary Cartography*. London: Palgrave, 2008. Print

16. Harmanci, Reyhan. *Sex Innuendo under the Tree, over the Punch Bowl: Younger Girls, More Focused on Fashion, Drawn to Barbie, Bratz Dolls*. New York: Allworth Press, 2006. Print.

17. Iida, Y. "Between the technique of living an endless routine and the madness of absolute degree zero: Japanese identity and the crisis of modernity in the 1990s". *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*. Mar. 2000: 423-464. Print.

18. Karlgaard, Rich. "Our Healh Care Crisis: Age Obesity and Lawyers", *Forbes Magazine* Nov. 2009: 19-25. Print

19. Latham, Rob. Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture

of Consumption. Chicago and London: U Chicago Press, 2002.

20. Lefebvre, H. "Theorizing urban spectacles: festivals, tourism and the transformation of urban space." *Critique of Everyday Life in the Modern World*. New York: Harper & Gotham, 2005: 225-246. Print

21. Lewis, Lisa A. "Consumer Girl Culture: How Music Video Appeals to Girls" *Television and Women's Culture. The Politics of the Popular.* London: Newbury Park, 1990. Print.

22. Martin, J. "Hegemony and the legitimation of the state", *Gramsci's Political Analysis*, *A critical introduction*. Houndmills: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998: 114-138. Print.

23. Marx, K. *Zur Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie*. Berlin: Dover,1959: 3-8. Print.

24. McRobbie, Angela. "Art, Fashion and Popular Music" *In the Culture Society*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.

25. McRobbie, Angela. *Bridging the Gap: Feminism, Fashion and Consumption.* London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

26. Rockler-Gladen, N. "Me against the Media: Notes from the Trenches of a media literacy class" *Adbusters Media Foundation*, Vol 70. Vancouver, Canada, March/April 2007: 5-13.

27. Roberts, Darryl. *America the Beautiful*. Sensory Overload Releasing, 2007. Film.

28. Rose, Nikolas. *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton UP, 2007.

29. Storey, J. "Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: An introduction" *Cultural Studies and the Study of popular Culture*, 2nd Ed. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2003:1-7. Print.

30. Suarez, J. 'Artist as Advertiser' *Bike Boys, Drag Queens and Superstars*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996: 36-38.

31. Pajaczkowska, C. *Feminist visual culture*. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.

32. Parker, K.W. "Sign consumption in the 19th century department store. An examination of visual merchandising in the grand emporiums (1846-1900)" *Journal of Sociology*, Volume 39, 2003: 353-371. Print.

33. Phillippy, P. *Painting Women: Cosmetics, canvases, and early modern culture*. New York: Dover, 2006. Print.

34. Wasko, J. 'Understanding the Disney Universe' *Mass Media and Society*, 2nd Ed. London: Arnold, 1996: 348-368. Print.

35. Whitneck, E. "Living Outside the Matrix" *Adbusters Media Foundation*, Vol 70. Vancouver, Canada, March/April 2007: 20-28. Print.

36. Wolf, Naomi *The Beauty Myth. How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991.

37. Zukin "Urban lifestyle: diversity and standardization in spaces of consumption" *Urban Studies*, 35, no 5, 1998: 825 839. Print.