

# Contemporary Representations of the Female Body: Consumerism and the Normative Discourse of Beauty\*

Venera Dimulescu

**Abstract:** In the context of the perpetual reproduction of consumerism in contemporary western societies, the varied and often contradictory principles of third wave feminism have been misunderstood or redefined by the dominant economic discourse of the markets. The lack of homogeneity in the theoretical debates of the third wave feminism seems to be a vulnerable point in the appropriation of its emancipatory ideals by the post-modern consumerist narratives. The beauty norm, particularly, brings the most problematic questions forth in the contemporary feminist dialogues. In this paper I will examine the validity of the concept of empowerment through practices of the body, practices that constitute the socially legitimized identity of women in a consumerist western society. My thesis is that the beauty norm is constructed as a socio-political instrument in order to preserve the old, patriarchal regulation of women's bodies. Due to the power of invisibility of the new mechanisms of social control and subjection, the consumerist discourse offers the most effective political tool for gender inequality and a complex discussion about free will and emancipation in third wave feminism debates. This delicate theoretical issues question not only the existent social order, but the very political purposes of contemporary feminism.

**Keywords:** third wave feminism, the beauty myth, consumerism, corporeality, empowerment, gender equality

## Introduction

In the context of our present digital age, new technologies and the widespread of consumerist marketplaces, cultural norms about gender relations have been reconstructed and dispersed through new ways of communication. Mass-media, advertising and popular culture are perpetuating and reinventing gender roles that penetrate every home in this world that is familiar with mass communication devices. The mechanical reproduction of images, videos and words has fastened the diffusion of the dominant discourses and transformed them into implicit symbolic laws.

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\* ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133675.

Gender relations have been a key element in every dominant discourse in human history. The grand narratives of modern thought, as Lyotard (Lyotard 1979) called them, were constructed within hetero-normative principles of identity, principles that were founded in dichotomous patterns of thought that gave birth to the major opposite and hierarchical concepts between mind/body, nature/culture, respectively, masculine/feminine.

The evolution of feminist theories and gender studies has allowed theoreticians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to explore the masculine/feminine opposition and analyze its role in the shaping of social, political and economic structures.

The concept of the body, particularly, of the female body, has been thoroughly discussed and constructed throughout centuries under the authority of philosophy and Christian morality. It is now common knowledge that philosophical tradition devalued corporeality and femininity and denounced the deceptiveness of the senses as obstacles on the path to authentic knowledge (Spelman 2014).

Women's bodies have long been the docile and passive recipients of male's will to knowledge and obsession for order and meaning. Until the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural representations of female corporeality have been reduced to women's role within the domestic contract and the social institution of the family, role that was filled with the duties of reproduction and motherhood. Thus, the body never belonged to women per se, but to diverse forms of male domination that described, coerced and controlled it (King 2004).

However, the rise of feminism and activism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the expansion of capitalism, have created a fertile ground for new gender representations.

Consequently, the right questions to ask are what kind of inscriptions are there to be seen on the female body in contemporary western societies? Whose bodies are those which appear to represent and practice patterns of gender identity in postmodern modes of thought?

In order to answer to these questions, I shall focus my research on the contemporary beauty discourse, as it appears to be significant in the construction of women's identity and cultural representations.

### **Gender Identity, the Beauty Norm and the Practice of Choice Through Consumption**

According to Wolf, the feminine ideal of physical beauty is a relatively new cultural representation of women. Until the 1830s, the physical properties of the female body were not socially perceived as gender norms. Moreover, the traditional gender roles distributed to women were shaped within the domestic space as practices of the physiological heritage where fertility and nurturing skills were considered to be two necessary conditions to be a woman, which consequently meant to be a mother. Virginity and youth were two vital conditions for the social gratification of women as well, and sexual ignorance

was an essential feature of legitimate female representation (Wolf 2008). This way, the universal identity of women was defined as cultural interpretations of biological functions. Social selection and discrimination of women were made according to strict behavior rules that envisaged the hegemonic representation of gender relations. However, during the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women's physical appearance became an object of documentation and admiration:

In the 1840s the first nude photographs of prostitutes were taken; advertisements using images of *beautiful* women first appeared in mid-century. Copies of classical artworks, postcards of society beauties and royal mistresses, Currier and Ives prints and porcelain figurines flooded the separate sphere to which middle-class women were confined (Wolf 2008, 15).

For a century and a half, the concept of beauty has been an instrument in the cultural representations of women as objects of knowledge and the product of three major historical revolutions: industrial, technological and sexual. The industrial revolution belittled the authority of the family as a social institution and gave women the opportunity to join the work force (Wolf 2008, Bordo 1995, Vance in Snitow, Stansell and Thompson 1983). Hence, physical beauty evolved as a substitute for women's maternal status and former exile in the domestic space. It became a new type of discourse in gender identity representations (Wolf 2008). The technological revolution strengthened the female beauty discourse by improving, highlighting and perpetuating cultural representations through photographs, ads, videos, books and TV shows. Ultimately, the sexual revolution regained women's right to sexual expression and sexual knowledge and encouraged a shift in gender relations and identity, one which would advocate for sexual liberation of women beyond marital contracts and social stigmatization. That implied a new definition of female beauty, one that would also incorporate the sexual expression as part of women's identity (Gill and Scharff 2011, Gill 2007, Gill 2008, Wolf 2008).

Contemporary representations of female beauty within western societies are by-products of multiple economic, political and cultural factors. Under the emerging forces of consumerism, female beauty has become an industry and has penetrated all economic areas. In the context of redefining sex as a pleasurable practice and a viable financial resource regardless of gender identity, the beauty industry redefined female corporeality as the main object of discourse and observation. Thus, beauty became what Rosalind Gill named "a bodily property" (Gill 2007, 6). There is a significant cultural shift in the public discourse of gender identity, from the representation of woman as reproductive force and object in the preserving power of the social institution of the family, to the image of woman as a sexually assertive subject for whom physical beauty is a form of empowerment:

Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood being regarded as central to femininity (all of course, highly problematic and exclusionary) in today's media

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it is possession of a *sexy body* that is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity (Gill 2007, 6).

Moreover, the identity of women was not only redefined, but also presented as an available, approachable and desirable model for all female subjects, regardless of class, race or age. It was transformed, in Michelle Lazar's terms, into "the right to be beautiful" (Lazar in Gill and Scharff 2011, 39). The right to be beautiful is conceived in terms of the now traditional practices of body shaping, particularly hair removal and weight loss, and it is represented as the freedom to wear anything, that is, equal access for all women to the universal discourse of female beauty in contemporary western societies. The association between women's personal identity, beauty and style is a contemporary construct within the consumerist hegemonic discourse (Lazar in Gill and Scharff 2011, Wolf 2008, Bordo 1995, McRobbie 2008).

There are several concerns which have to be taken into account when we talk about the intersection of normative beauty and consumerism.

Firstly, in contemporary popular culture and mass-media the act of engaging in the prescriptive beauty norm is constructed as a performed personal choice. It implies that the act of consumption is a practice of empowerment on a personal level (independent lifestyle choices) and on a social one (one's choice contributes to the emancipation of women and the abolition of gender inequalities). Hence, we may ask how can an individual distinguish between personal choice and consumerist commitment and how can it become an improvement in women's lives by reclaiming autonomy over their own bodies?

Secondly, the contemporary concept of female beauty is defined as a human right, as a practice of social equality among all women of what it seems to be an emancipatory lifestyle: a way of being, looking and acting that makes one socially and culturally intelligible as a woman. The accessibility of the right to be beautiful, by involving the eradication of privilege among women and stressing the promise of social recognition, represents more than just another practice of femininity, it becomes the feminine ideal par excellence. If contemporary representations of the female body are articulated solely in terms of physical beauty, then physical beauty is the reference of what a woman not only should look like, but also be like, as one's personal look requires certain acts of behavior to authorize it. Consequently, being a woman implies, according to the present discourse of gender identity, that one *must* be beautiful, and what is defined as an equal right becomes a non-discriminating obligation, regardless of race, class or nationality.

Under those circumstances, another matter would involve the practice of control that cultural representations manifest over its subjected individuals and the question, in this case, would be how can empowerment become a tool for women's social and political awareness and gender equality?

First of all, the intercrossing of consumerism and the concept of personal choice is an effect of the assimilation and re-contextualization of feminist ideas and identity politics within the public discourse.

In a consumerist global economy the assimilation of feminism was possible in the context of privatization, deregulation and the increasing power of corporations over the economic sector of a state. The main factors that facilitated the conjugation of the two discourses are the diminished authority of state apparatuses and the reorientation of neoliberalism to the *politics of recognition*, due to the growing voices of minorities and their political awareness:

The turn to a politics of recognition, women pouring into the labor force replacing expensive male workers, the emphasis on self-determination over state tutelage and the disproportionate attention in international struggles on violence against women at the expense of fighting poverty – all this resonated well with neoliberal prescriptions. Feminism's elective affinity with capitalism including a shared distrust of traditional authority facilitated its co-optation into capitalist projects. The result was an enmeshing of feminist ideas with neoliberal agendas and feminism providing legitimacy to the neoliberal transformation of capitalism. (Prugl 2014, 4-5).

Mainstreaming ideas about gender equality and female emancipation was the key element in the creation of economic projects that would respond to greater markets and carry the promise of economic growth of the companies. The feminist messages which are used in the consumerist discourse belong to the anti-essentialist perspectives of the third wave political discourse that emphasizes women's right to agency and free choice (D'Enbeau and Buzzanell 2011, Lazarus 2010, Klein 1999).

The integration of commodities into specific narratives of gender politics has a major role in the shaping of customers' needs and perceptions. Miller describes the subject-object relation in consumerist societies as the process of objectification, which implies the transformation of the object seen as an external, standardized valuable good, into an internalized value shaped by the needs of the customer. This way, the object can be represented as part of the individual's personal development (Miller 1987).

Through objectification, the very act of consumption becomes an actual life choice, an individual choice that constructs personal identity. The role played by advertisers, for example, resembles the work of storytellers which makes even more confusing to determine agency. Ads do not only sell commodities, they sell fictions, often personal ones, that seduce the customer and invites him to access their realm through the act of consumption.

Thus, the beauty industry has constructed similar commodities and practices that can be incorporated into the private lives of women and satisfy their most urgent needs, such as the need for autonomy and free will. Cosmetics, plastic surgeries, diet medication and other body shaping rituals have been taken over the consumerist markets for decades now:

Culture not only taught women how to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical *improvement*; it also is teaching women (and let us not forget, men as well) how to *see* bodies. As slenderness has consistently been virtually glamourized, and as the ideal has grown thinner and thinner, bodies that a decade ago were considered slender have now come to seem fleshy (Bordo 1995, 57).

Being beautiful, feeling beautiful and looking beautiful are social and cultural practices associated with women's identity and self-worth. By performing them, one is integrated within the social and cultural meaning of gender. Moreover, the beauty ritual is socially instituted as a practice of taking care of one's body and self through acquiring goods, making the distinction between personal choice and consumption more problematic.

The contextualization and objectification of commodities as personal stories is explained by Wolf as women's constant need for models, nourished by diverse mechanisms of lowering self-esteem and public shaming. The entering of women's identity into the public discourse is made through the careful surveillance of media culture. Hence, images of idealized empowered women accompanied by the all too mediatized discourse of the obligation to be beautiful are mechanisms of lowering women's self-esteem and intensify their hunger for social and personal approval.

The ritual of taking care of one's body becomes, as Gill argues, a disciplinary practice of the self, "a narcissistic self-surveillance" controlled by normative representations of what it is prescribed as female and feminine (Gill 2007, 10).

Consequently, the beauty industry becomes another process of subjection that claims to give women back their property over their own bodies but instead it is selling them images of liberation and gender equality at the cost of starvation, physical mutilation and constant need for approval.

Yet one will ask how does the narrative of the empowered beauty become a form of male domination since the obsession for body surveillance has reached not only femininity but also masculinity?

Chancer argues that the ideology of *look-ism*, as she defines the fetishization of corporeal beauty, is not essentially gender specific. Having transgressed the cultural representation of reproductive force and motherhood, women's identity is now placed within a complex narrative than begins to construct physical beauty as a normative principle of identity that is gender blind. Thus, body shaping and its preservation of youthfulness are manifested as an effect of the human fear of death:

(...) insofar as look-ism manifest itself in the form of attraction to youth, this may reflect human beings' still very immense fear of death, a fear related to biology that, unlike concerns about reproductive survival, there is no reason to think it has or will become less well-founded in the foreseeable future (Chancer 1998, 107).

This paradigm not only changes our perspective on gender inequality but also transforms women's bodies into incidental cultural constructions. The reconstruction of the beauty myth into a gender blind commodity has, however, different social effects on femininity and masculinity. As corporeality is never defined only in terms of aesthetic principles, but also as patterns of behavior linked to sexual expression and gender performativity, the ways in which men and women experience beauty are not identical within contemporary western societies as they are continuously dependent upon patriarchal representations. For example, although female and male sexuality are both represented as forms of empowerment, the former is systematically reproduced as a legitimized consent of the latter: female beauty is not rehearsed as an act of expressing one's sexual desire, but as the act of making oneself desirable (Gill 2008).

Moreover, the problematic discourse of choice in the context of gender representations is discussed within contemporary feminist debates, as an effect of internalized structures of power:

Feminine bodily discipline has this dual character: on the one hand, no one is marched off for electrolysis at the end of a rifle, nor can we fail to appreciate the initiative and ingenuity displayed by countless women in an attempt to master the rituals of beauty. Nevertheless, in so far as the disciplinary practices of femininity produce a *subjected and practiced* and inferiorized body, they must be understood as aspects of a far larger discipline, an inegalitarian system of sexual subordination. This system aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men just as surely as the army aims to turn its raw recruits into soldiers (Bartky 1990).

According to Bartky's statement, female sexual agency is the product of the hetero-normative discourse of gender which becomes, through the active, participative subjects, an indirect form of male domination. The exclusion of direct practices of domination of women's bodies and sexuality from the public discourse has made it difficult to recognize the instances of authority and thus, the process of subjection. There is no imposed figure of authority, no coercive law that sanctions your actions, yet there is a pattern of conformity that can be traced in the unification of the majority of women's choices:

The contemporary backlash is so violent because the ideology of beauty is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women whom second wave feminism would have otherwise made relatively uncontrollable: it has grown stronger to take over the work of social coercion that myths about motherhood, chastity and passivity no longer can manage (Wolf 2008, 10).

What Wolf asserts is that the male gaze, as the regulatory force which describes and monitors women's appearance and behavior has materialized, beginning with 19<sup>th</sup> century, into specific surveillance devices which could replicate, extend and maintain male domination over the social, cultural and political representations of women. The various photographic techniques, the

birth of cinematography and the new technological apparatuses of contemporary mass-media have produced different forms of normative female beauty that were more precise, explicit and thus, more restrictive and essentialist. With their direct and arresting representations, the power of control and authority of such devices located in popular culture and the media are hidden behind the consumerist discourse of choice and empowerment, discourse that borrowed its principles from the non-judgemental policy of third wave feminism repackaged as object of consumption (Chancer 1998, Klein 1999, Gill and Scharff 2011, Snyder-Hall 2010).

Wolf articulated this idea very clear using the metaphor of the iron maiden (Wolf 2008). At origin, the iron maiden is considered to be a former German medieval instrument of torture used to punish victims by incarcerating them into a vertical vault with the shape of a maiden. The insides of the vault were decorated with metal spikes that would pierce through the naked body of the convicted and induce slow, painful death often by starvation or simply due to the sharp wounds. The two words that describe the instrument, iron and maiden, suggest a relation between two opposites, the strong, immune metal and the fragile, infantile and youthful virgin. Hence, the iron maiden is the innocent and joyous display of the ideal female body that hides a long and hurtful process of compliance, a process that shapes the body by mutilation. The fact that it is recognized as a former medieval instrument of torture is a good reference for both the present and past intention of its usage: punishment and shame. According to the author, like in the medieval ritual, women are being punished for non-conformity through painful procedures, shame and low self-esteem (Wolf 2008, 17).

Wolf's metaphor seems crucial in the context of contemporary practices of beauty. Yet its foundation seems invalid as the iron maiden is just a cultural carcass that imprisons the body, as if the body, its natural state of being, is suffocated and cannot manifest itself. But what does the natural body mean in those circumstances? What sort of natural aesthetics and practices of behavior are violated? If there is a natural body therefore there is a truly free and autonomous choice to be made towards its manifestation. Following Butler, I would argue that cultural norms are not mere uncomfortable masks that we are seduced to wear, but the very invisible actors of our identity formation or what the author calls "restriction in production:"

The prison acts on the prisoner's body, but it does so by forcing the prisoner to approximate an ideal, a norm of behavior, a model of obedience. (...) he becomes the principle of his own subjection. This normative ideal inculcated, as it were, into the prisoner is a kind of psychic identity, or what Foucault would call a *soul*. Because the soul is an imprisoning effect, Foucault claims that the prisoner is subjected in a more fundamental way than by the spatial captivity of prison, which provides the exterior form or regulatory principle of the prisoner's body (Butler 1997, 85).



Consequently, when you are imprisoned and aware of your captivity, you *know* that you are imprisoned. You witness your body's mutilation and pain. That makes the iron maiden visible.

Yet when you don't acknowledge your deprivation of freedom, the iron maiden with metal spikes doesn't exist, hence the illusion of freedom. The assumption that there is a pre-discursive body prior to disciplinary practices of subjection implies that there is an attested and recognizable identity to which we must return, that is, an already established hegemonic order of the body. What makes Butler's argument sustainable is her account about the process of internalizing disciplinary practices that makes the body natural and her insistence upon the fact that we do not have a prior and natural state of the body to return to. The body becomes natural by its submission to the normative symbolic order and so it is forced into becoming real:

(...) what we take to be an internal feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, a hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures (Butler 1990, 15).

Indeed, the beauty myth isn't a capsule in which the body passively dwells, but the very action through which the latter is socially recognized as real.

## Conclusions

Contemporary practices of disciplining the body, their power of invisibility, reside in their wondrous display of agency and free will and their simultaneous discreet force of unconscious determinism. The sexualized female body becomes abstract through rituals of transforming it into an ideal or a fetish, rituals that disconnect it from their right to freedom of expression. Women's right to sexual liberation is thus, jeopardized and their control over their own corporeality is insecure and bashful as their internalized social stigma demands.

However, the concept of women's empowerment should also be discussed as a question of the possibilities of free will. The discourse concerning freedom of choice is deeply complex and problematic due to modern forms of domination and subjection that make personal choice seem intangible.

On the other hand, along all the political achievements of feminism there is one essential goal that third wave feminists have pointed out, a goal that rather became a matter of ethics within contemporary postmodern thought: the promise of non-judgemental feedback (Snyder-Hall 2010). Poststructuralist thought has rendered us the necessary instruments to acknowledge how power and legitimized prescriptions function and in this respect, feminism, as a poststructuralist theory, should show women that they're not mere objects of knowledge, but subjects that can own their meaning. That ownership cannot be prescribed by anyone but the conscious subject, for we must be careful not to create a new symbolic order that would proclaim its own methods of censorship and domination.

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