MEDIA'S ROLE ON WOMEN CONCEPT OF BEAUTY

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ABSTRACT*: This thesis aims to study the images of women's ideal through media, in this case American Fashion movies. The study is performed based on these formulated problems: 1) How women and women's appearance are represented in American fashion movies? 2) How do the women's representations in the movies reveal American cultural myth about beauty and what attitude do the movies have toward beauty myth?. The object of study is three box office fashion movies in the US: The Devil Wears Prada, Sex and the City I, and Sex and the City II.. The movies are examined using Barthes' semiological approach in which any materials of speech or communication in media (pictures, written and spoken words) are regarded as signifying certain concept or idea.*

Key words*: media, concept, beauty, fashion movie*

INTRODUCTION

Media has a big contribution in proliferating beauty images is the realm of popular culture. To be more specific, the writer chooses movies for the study. The writer sees that movies are powerful media in delivering any massages, any cultural myth its producers intend to deliver. She also perceives that visual and verbal communications containing in movies are interesting object of study in a way that there is a lot of things can be revealed from them.

The movies taken as the object of study are fashion movies. Beauty and fashion are no doubt closely interrelated. Fashion movies are generally known as those movies featuring fashion of the world brand or labels as the setting, the subject, and/or the theme of the story. Such movies largely display life styles based on fashion and designs of different costumes with particular characteristics of the persons in them. Studying fashion movies is worthwhile considering that "The cinema, with its much larger audience, was correspondingly even more influential in creating new ways for men and women to move, dance, dress, make love, and be (Wilson, p. 169).

Myth about beauty is overtly and covertly represented in fashion movies which utilize visuals and words as the media for transmitting ideas both the ones that are readily seen and the ones that are implied. The visuals and the words are the signs that bring cultural perspectives regarding women's beauty and are influential in directing their viewers' attitude toward beauty images.

RESEARCH METHOD

The movies are examined using Barthes' semiological approach in which any materials of speech or communication in media (pictures, written and spoken words) are regarded as signifying certain concept or idea. The study results in the findings of the forms of overt culture and covert culture that underlie the movies' representations of women and their appearance.

Those findings lead to the conclusion that as a media of popular culture the three fashion movies' attitude towards beauty myth is supportive. They present the overt culture of beauty myth in showing and telling that general standard of ideal beauty in American mass media (white, thin, and fashionable)

Thus, the movies make beauty and fashion entertaining to see. They enhance its desirability and offer the pleasure of following its trend to the audience, particularly female audience seeing that they are about women and reach up to women within the range of 20 to 60 years old. Beauty myth is adopted by the movies as their system of communication and is spread and reinforced in cooperation with other media to make it an ideology that carries the power to influence American people's perspective, attitude and behavior towards women's appearance as the myth is internalized.

DISCUSSION

The discussion in this stage is to recognize the overt forms of culture regarding the images of women's appearance and their inclination as individuals in responding to the

images. Following the discussion of overt forms of culture is the covert forms of culture that underlie the representation of women in the movies in their relation with appearance. This stage of discussion is the analysis of the observed representations based on their socio-cultural significations within the context of beauty myth as American mass culture.

A. Physical Characteristics
1. Fashion's Favoritism for Thin Women

The representations of fashion's favoritism for thin women in the three movies can be seen in the wearers of labeled dresses that are predominantly slim women. The overall picture build by the movies suggests that being slim is preferable when one wants to look her best in pretty and stylish outfit.

Labeled dresses are rarely made for large size. As Kate Betts wrote as a journalist (retold in Bonnie Berry's *Beauty Bias: Discrimination and Social Power*), while she acknowledges that there is a growing demand and market for larger-sized clothes (the plus-size market has surged 18 percent in recent years), Gucci and Prada do not make clothes in that size range; indeed, they make nothing larger than a size 12. (p. 58)

The movie portrays the fact that prominent designers have not so generously made beautiful clothes for large size women. The representations show that fashion labels help setting the standard of physical characteristic particularly in favor of smaller size. Models in fashion show are all thin and it is a rule. There is a convention in fashion industry that fashion products should be put on show by thin girls; the convention that has been going on for years that it has already become tradition. Thus, there is a prevalent cultural code of fashion in American society that sends a message *you look best if you wear labeled dresses and if your body fit in their small size*. It is clearly represented by the movies then, that fashion industry has perpetuated beauty myth among American women.

2. Diet and Food Choice as The Reflection of Women's Concern of Their Size

Diet and food choice is closely related to the myth of thinness. This issue is represented in particular in *The Devil Wears Prada* and in *Sex and the City 1*.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, there is a montage in the beginning of the story showing the contrasting lifestyles between Andrea and the three stylish good looking girls. Besides the contrast in personal maintenance and outfit choices, the montage also shows the contrast in the choice of what they have for breakfast. Andy buys a fast food, an onion bagel, on the way to her destination. The other girls eat breakfast before they leave. One girl seems to have oatmeal. The other girl seems to have a small bowl of almond nuts.

It is implied in the movie that the thin girls do not eat anything that is considered high in fat or carbohydrate. When Andy is picking up meals for lunch, she chooses corn chowder and some baked loaves that are certainly not low in fat and carbohydrate.

In another occasion, there is Emily who wants to be thinner for her coming journey to Paris Fashion Week. Despite her already slim body, she goes on her new diet to get smaller size that she thinks will make her look better. She claims that she eats "nothing" to express how little she consumes food. She shows that she is willing to suffer for her weight goal because less weight will make her happy. She believes that reducing her current size will increase her self-worth in the social interaction where she is expecting to attend (01:01:41 – 01:01:52).

In *Sex and the City 1*, the indication of diet is presented in more subtle way. Food choice and diet for the sake of improving or maintaining physical fitness and beauty are actually the concern of many American women and many other women in the world that believe that smaller size is more beautiful. There are thousands of suggestions or tips in mass media related to what to eat or what diet to apply to achieve desirable body shape.

Diet in particular has become a multi-billion industry in modern world. Diet pills and diet books are often sold in remarkable number. The images of ideal physical characteristics are particularly the cultural force that has effectively persuaded women to go on diet or apply certain eating habit. American mass culture gives so many suggestions that being thinner is being happier and being able to put on pretty clothes designed by famous designers. In this way, food choice and diet are the part of the operating beauty myth in American culture.

3. The Pursuit of Beauty

In American society, there has been a mix between cultural pressure of achieving ideal beauty and the pleasure of indulging in beautifying oneself with beauty products (there are many forum of discussion in the internet related to the pressure vs. the pleasure of looking good). The images of ideal appearance

often put pressure on an individual to follow the standard, but the chance of achieving the images often brings pleasure to an individual. It is in this tension that the culture of desire comes into play. The images of ideal beauty is there to desire, to have fun with but the time, energy, and money for achieving them can be an issue for many people. In this case, the problem is then some people have time, energy, and money to attain beauty but some other don't (the number is probably larger than the former in American society).

The representations pointed reveal the underlying cultural force for an individual's way of thinking and doing. In reality, images of ideal beauty in media are so overwhelming that the society is drawn to approve them in some extent and in turn the individuals within the society feel the urge to improve their look to approach the images as close as they can.

American media promise the pleasure a women can get in having the ideal look. They show how good it would be to wear labeled products and to have thorough beauty maintenance with beauty products. Some women feel that society's expectation for certain level of acceptable look is a pressure. Some other share the same standard of ideal look with their social environment so that they feel as if the force to improve their look comes from within themselves. They want to look good to feel good about themselves. Many women do find pleasure in looking good although in fact what they achieve is the ideal beauty that is generated and developed by their culture and society. The pleasure actually does not come from the good look itself but from the sense of proud or relief for fitting in or gaining approval from the society and attaining the standard imposed on by their culture.

Furthermore, pressure vs. pleasure in attaining ideal beauty is closely related to women's self-esteem regarding their look in the eyes of their society. The pressure makes them experience low self esteem when they are below the prevailing standard of appearance while the fulfillment of the standard makes them gain higher self esteem that potentially gives pleasure to them.

CONCLUSION

Those findings lead to the conclusion that as a media of popular culture the three fashion movies' attitude towards beauty myth is supportive. It is perceived that what is presented by *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Sex and the City 1*, and *Sex and the City 2* is the affirmation of beauty myth disseminated by most of American media. These fashion movies' role in American culture are reinforcing the system of values and beliefs that the images of women's ideal beauty are supposed to be emulated as good as possible using all the available products that promise a better appearance for women.

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