Constructing and Deconstructing the Body: A Review of Recent Body Image Videos

by Nita Mary McKinley


**BODY POLITICS.** 47 mins., 1997. Rental: $75. Sale: $149. Films for the Humanities & Sciences, P.O. Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543-2053; phone: 800-257-5126; email: custserv@films.com; website: www.films.com


**YOUR NAME IN CELLULITE.** 6 mins., 1995. 35mm film or video. Dir.: Gail Noonan. Rental: $40; Sale: $175 (video). Women Make Movies (see Nappy above).

Feminists have been at the forefront in connecting body practices to culture and politics and placing the body, particularly women's bodies, at the center of political power struggles. The videos in this review all fit within this discourse and most clearly connect body issues with issues of personal and political power. They vary in their focus of body experience and in their proposed solutions to women's body problems.

White women such as myself often equate women's body issues with standards of size. For African American women, hair may be as much or more of an issue than size. **Nappy**, a documentary that addresses the racist nature of beauty standards, engages the viewer on several levels, including women narrating their experiences, images of women and girls having their hair done, and a discussion of the historical, political context of women's hair choices.

The narrators reveal the pain of not fitting beauty standards and their reasons, personal and political, for choosing to wear their hair natural. One woman recalls having to hide how she fixed her hair in order to appear professional at missionary training school in 1953. She and her friends, hurt by this, eventually "came out of the closet" and, to the amazement of their White dorm mates, did their hair in public. Another woman, wrapping her head in a towel, demonstrates how, as a child, she would imagine herself with long, swingy hair. Recounting when she decided not to straighten her hair again, another woman describes the horrified reaction of her mother and friends. These women chose to wear their hair natural for practical reasons, personal fulfillment, and to make a political statement. Images of women and girls having their hair done show the intimate interaction of a mother corn-rowing her young daughter's hair as they sing together, and a White mother telling how she had to learn the culture of Black women's hair to tend to her adopted daughter's hair properly.

Between these personal narratives and images, the historical context of the 1960s and the discourse on Black identity is discussed. Within this context, wearing one's hair naturally became a political and cultural statement. Capitalist backlash, however, has virtually removed images of the Afro from the media, especially for women. **Nappy** provides a view of how women's hair choices can be a political statement within both the African American and White communities. It also challenges the idea that body size is the only locus of normalizing body practices for women.

As **Nappy** connects hair choices with historical changes such as the Civil Rights movement, **Beauty and the Beach** draws parallels between historical changes in women's position in dominant Western society and changes in the swimsuit. The Victorian middle-class woman was supposed to be "puritanical and protected" and her swimsuit covered her from head to toe. The 1920s swimsuit became functional when athleticism in women was encouraged. In the 1950s, a large bosom and tiny waist became fashionable in swimsuits as postwar middle-class Westerners emphasized the maternal role of women and the differences between women and men. The modern liberated woman wears a bikini, or the ultimate egalitarian swimwear, the topless suit, presumably a symbol of her freedom. While celebrating this liberation of the female, the video calls attention to the contradictions in the decreasing size of the swimsuit. Does the smaller suit allow women more choices - for example to be athletic - or does it limit women's choices by enforcing ever decreasing standards of body size? Does it represent sexual freedom or sexual objectification?

The movie intersperses interviews with historians and those involved with historical events, such as the daughter of swimsuit designer Rose Marie Reid, and Peggy Moffit, the lead model for the designer of the topless suit, with women narrating their personal experiences of wearing swimsuits. The women include those who connect wearing a swimsuit with self-confidence and the sexual revolution and those who "shudder at the thought" of wearing a suit. The women interviewed seem to reaffirm that swimsuits (and perhaps sexuality) are for the young - older narrators almost always speak about wearing suits in their youth. There is minimal diversity in the narrators and no diversity in the theorizing. The voices of women who do not see the swimsuit as personally liberating are muted. The one fat woman and one fat girl speaking after the closing credits begin say they do not care what people think of their bodies. Although the video acknowledges the extreme requirements for thinness, there is little personal evidence of the pain that the swimsuit issue might cause
The movie ends with the empowering song "Rise up, Rise up" and the hopeful belief that the enlightened woman of the 1980s and 90s will not listen to what the fashion industry tells her to wear. The continuing current emphasis on body perfection and tiny swimsuits, however, seems to bear out my belief that this personal solution is overly optimistic.

Contrasting with the ending song in Beauty and the Beach, Slim Hopes begins with Annie Lennox singing "Keep young and beautiful if you want to be loved." In this video of a lecture and slide show, Jean Kilbourne, whose videos Killing Us Softly and Still Killing Us Softly are standards on the images of women in advertising, turns her attention to advertising's obsession with women's thinness.

According to Kilbourne, advertising portrays an impossible beauty - even impossible for the models in the photos. Computer generation, using body parts from different women to form one image, and other techniques allow advertisers to produce a woman who does not exist. When I show this video in classes, this is what students remember most - that the models may not even be real. Another memorable moment in the video is the ad for "Wonder jock, for the bulge you've always wanted," which Kilbourne uses to illustrate the absurdity of the Wonderbra™. According to Kilbourne, advertisements shame women for having appetites and encourage them to exercise control by controlling their diets. The thin girl is today's equivalent of the virgin. Kilbourne also explores the connections between these images and consumer industry, explaining how magazines in effect sell their readership to the diet industry. Women who obsess about their bodies are likely to buy more products, so magazines are not likely to print images that counter messages of body hatred.

Unfortunately, Kilbourne explores primarily images of White women in the media. The video's strength is that it changes what we see when we view media images. I also like Kilbourne's suggestions for change, which include both personal behaviors, such as focusing on wellness instead of body size, and political action, such as boycotting products that use these types of images. She argues we should approach the obsession with thinness as a public health problem endangering the lives of young girls, just like we approach other problems such as alcohol and tobacco.

Body Politics is part of a series called Women: A True Story. It chronicles the alteration of women's bodies to fit cultural ideals, from the corset of the nineteenth century to the internalized corset of the present, but at the same time presents the rich context in which these body experiences take place. For example, the brain size controversy demonstrates how science has adjusted "truth" to fit prevailing stereotypes of women as being primarily "body." While exploiting the bodies of lower-class women, the nineteenth-century industrial world encouraged middle-class women to adopt a cult of invalidism to fit the image of purity and passivity. Like Beauty and the Beach, this video connects women's changing position in society with body ideals, but in a less celebratory way. For example, the video connects women being squeezed into girdles with women being squeezed out of the workplace after World War II. The "good girl" of this era did what men told her to do. Contrast that with the internal corset of the young woman with anorexia who says, "Tell me who you want me to be and I can be her."

One of the strengths of this video is the breadth of topics it addresses. Body Politics also examines positive ways in which women have challenged the boundaries of cultural ideals. For example, Patricia Swartz celebrates large women's bodies with her photography, and film director Julie Dash speaks of portraying images of African American women that are different from the Hollywood stereotype. Although the video lacks diversity in its theory, it does not lack for diversity in its images of women. It is useful as an overview to culture and women's bodies, but I was less happy with its conclusions. Although the point of the video is the cultural context in which women are controlled through their bodies, the solution proposed is individual. Women, it says, must not allow others to shape who they are. As narrator Susan Sarandon says, "The choice is ours but the potential benefits belong to everyone."

Your Name in Cellulite is different from the other videos in that it is not a documentary and provides no explicit sociocultural context for the beauty rituals that are satirized. Still, this short (six-minute) humorous animation would be useful for initiating discussion of women's beauty rituals. To the background sounds of heavy machinery, the heroine completely reconstructs her appearance - pumping up her breasts, jockeying her derriere into a taut shape, "clear cutting" the hair on her legs. Remade, she poses to the sound of cameras flashing. The only problem is, she cannot snap her fingers with those long nails. Then, her construction begins to fall apart - but the video does have a joyous ending. Walking the tightrope of showing the absurdity of women's beauty rituals without making the woman herself look ridiculous can be difficult, but this video accomplishes such a feat.

Most of these videos provide a context for women's body experience, and the differences in their perspectives highlight the complex nature of this experience. All of the videos would be useful for teaching as well as for initiating discussion on this topic.

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rates). Please send a check made payable to University of Wisconsin-Madison to Women’s Studies Librarian's Office, 430 Memorial Library, 728 State Street, Madison, WI 53706