

America the Beautiful: The Normality of the Hypersexualization of Our Youth

In *From the Medical Gaze to Sublime Mutations: The Ethics of (Re) Viewing*

Non-normative Body Images, T. Benjamin Singer discusses the issues with viewing those with “non-normative” bodies. The author describes the experiences of transgender and transsexual individuals in social and medical aspects, where they are made to feel as if they are outsiders in their own bodies. Though body image may be subjective, Singer explores how body image is influenced by what society deems attractive by their standards. It has become the “norm” to shame those who society feels threatened by or uncomfortable with. However, society will turn a blind eye towards subjects that should receive criticism, such as the child beauty pageant industry. For example, some typically heteronormative parents will sexualize their daughters for the sake of popularity and money by entering their children into such pageants. It is seen as normal for young children to dress and modify themselves to look like an adult, but it is frowned upon for an individual to dress or alter their body to what the opposite gender would typically look like. Singer’s criticism of the inhumane views towards transsexual and transgender individuals by the heteronormative society can be seen through the hypocrisy in the documentary *America the Beautiful 3: The Sexualization of Our Youth*, where the hypersexualization of children’s bodies is viewed as normal.

Singer points out that “...body-image is always subject to the shifting representational politics of sex and gender, and that there are fashions in bodies as much as in clothing and hairstyles.” (Singer 604). The “ideal” body type is ever-changing, especially for cisgender (cis) women. 20 years ago, cis women were told to have bodies that were slender, long, and lean. Currently, the ideal is large breasts and behind, with an overall curvy figure and a flat stomach. Although there is more acceptance for different types of bodies, trans bodies are still not a recognized ideal body type. Even the body of a child has been deemed attractive and is more accepted than the body of someone who is not the conventional standard of beauty. In the documentary *America the Beautiful 3: The Sexualization of Our Youth*, the ideal body type for women is placed on children.



Figure 1. The “ideal body,” and the face revealed to be that of a very young girl (black bar added for security)

Figure 1 displays a young girl doing a swimsuit photoshoot, which Singer would describe as “inviting intimacy.” A bar was added over the eyes of this young girl so that it is clear that these images are not intended to be pornographic, similar to those in the medical texts of Singer. Although the body in the image does “meet the culturally normative standards of ideal physical

beauty that are most typically eroticized” (Singer 604), it does not take away from the fact that this is a child, and should thus be protected as such. Images of these children circulate the internet, never being regarded as child pornography. The faces and bodies of children are seen as sexy rather than cute, while their faces remain uncovered for the rest of their lives.



Figure 2. Anonymous character type/specimen of physical pathology

Singer states that in medical texts, transsexual bodies are plastered against a grid-like background, their faces covered by a depersonalizing dot that creates the effect of an anonymous character type (Singer 604). Transsexual individuals are not typically seen as “whole people” in medical environments, and their faces remain uncovered for more reasons than just privacy. These images have also created a view that is closely associated with a police line-up, showing how objectively, criminality has been linked with deviance. Transsexual individuals are not portrayed in the same way that these children are because of the lack of normalcy that surrounds that. It has been said that “Sex sells. And for some disgusting reason, young sex sells more”

(Roberts, 2014). The sexualization of our youth is solely for profit, while the portrayal of transsexual individuals is used to assert the visibility and viability of this social group.

America the Beautiful 3 presented this statement: "...the message is, you're not good enough as you are" (Roberts, 2014). However, transgender individuals are commonly told that they were better before, and their transition is not accepted. Loren Cameron, a transgender individual, mentions that "Every time I tell someone I am transsexual, I have a turbulent series of emotions. At first, I am afraid that whomever I'm telling will have a negative response, that they will somehow be repelled and become hostile or in some way reject me..." (Singer 609). For children who take part in beauty pageants, they go through numerous modifications and alter their features to "look better." It seems as though there is a double standard when it comes to what trans people should look like compared to cisgender individuals, never mind children. A stark similarity between children in beauty pageants and trans individuals is that, according to former Miss America Kirsten Haglund, "your worth is what you look like." If a person is a conventionally attractive transsexual, they would be more closely accepted in society. If people cannot tell that an individual is transgender at first glance, they would not be treated any differently until they expressed their identity. Everyday life begins to depend specifically on your looks, and for a lot of trans women, many cisgender men fetishize them.

In beauty pageants, young children are taught that their looks are more important than everything else. To them, when you're pretty, you win. It's that simple, and if you don't win, your self-esteem drops. There is a never-ending cycle of pageant moms and their daughters becoming obsessed with this false view of winning and beauty. Recognition is a key factor in why these beauty pageants have become increasingly popular, as seen on the TV show *Toddlers and Tiaras*. However, the recognition of transsexuals has been shown in a different context. For

example, “Visual perceptions of non-normative bodies, in particular, have been shaped through countless structured acts of viewing, in contexts that range from talk show spectacles to case studies of medical pathology” (Singer 607). The word “spectacle” means “a visually striking performance or display.” This is not a word commonly associated with describing a person in a positive aspect. However, when a person with a non-normative body was displayed and asked to come up with their own caption, they said this: “The human body is beautiful. Beauty is a matter of taste and has no norm. Isn’t my body beautiful enough to be shown? Just because there are limbs missing or differently grown... Am I expected to hide myself only because I don’t live up to the ideal of beauty created by society” (Singer 608). Many individuals with non-normative body types don’t see themselves as an outlier until society makes them one. This shows that their lives have notable social contexts, not just medical.

Both the work of T. Benjamin Singer and the viewpoints expressed in *America the Beautiful 3: The Sexualization of Our Youth* reiterates the idea that body image is subjective. According to both sources, there is no one definition of beauty, and traditional standards of beauty continue to change over time. Traditional standards of beauty also have clear evidence of hypocrisy and double standards throughout. Non-normative body types are only called “non-normative” because society expressed what they thought perfection was, and anything that did not fit their mold is not normal. Normality itself is subjective. No one person can be truly normal because everyone has a different view of what normal is. These differing views are what give us life, and what give us beauty. Singer says that “It may be naïve, or even utopian, to think that a paradigm in medical practices can have a profound impact on gendered social relations...” (Singer 618). If the general population as a whole would stop obsessing over fitting the social construct of a social norm, then this view wouldn’t be naïve. It would be truly, blissfully, *life*.

Works Cited

- America The Beautiful 3: The Sexualization of Our Youth*. Directed by Darryl Roberts, performance by Gail Dines, Cali Linstrom, & Liz Securo. Harley Boy Entertainment and PMK*BNC Films, 2014. *Amazon*, www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B00WOGUQMA/ref=atv_yv_hom_c_unkc_1_1.
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