

Men look at women.

Women watch themselves being looked at.

*Men look at women.
Women watch themselves being looked at.*

Analysis of the way women are portrayed in the media.

Fashion Communication Final Project

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*The title of the thesis is a quote from the book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), written by John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb and Richard Hollis. Penguin Books, London.

But the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed.

Women are depicted in a quite different way from men - not because the feminine is different from the masculine - but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him. (John Berger et al. 1972, p. 64)

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Introduction

Research Question:

In the present times, do representations of women in the media still suffer from the male gaze?

Aims:

Throughout my study I intend to:

Evaluate the characterisation of women in literature;

Analyse the way and point of view from which the media portray women's bodies in visual culture;

Investigate the shift in the way women buy and dress nowadays.

Objectives:

In order to achieve my aims, I plan to:

Research the kind of language that has been used in literature, movie scripts and fashion magazines by both men and women, to shape women's characters;

Use visual semiotics in order to study the perception of women in fashion communication, advertising and cinema, discussing the male gaze and the weight that it holds in visual culture;

Examine a fashion brand founded by a woman that wants to celebrate women's bodies and self love from a redefined point of view.

Abstract

First let me briefly discuss the geographical and historical scope of my study. Although aware that my research question deals with an issue that women from all over the world have to face, I decided to focus my research on the West, since touching upon the condition, status and depiction of women in Eastern cultures would have required an in-depth investigation of Eastern religious beliefs and ethics. Thus, given the time I had at my disposal, I decided that my study would exclusively be centered on the portrayal of women in Western written and visual culture. As for the historical context, my thesis will analyse women's bodies in our current society, applying approaches from the third and fourth wave of feminism.

This thesis explores the ways in which women have been portrayed in the media by using two different observation points and fields of study: literature and visual culture. In both cases, the female body is at the centre and core of the discussion. Based on content analyses of books and movie scripts, but also on scrutiny of the persuasive and dangerous lexicon of fashion magazines, the first chapter analyses the degrading descriptions of women, too often limited to physical, especially sexual, depictions aimed at satisfying the fantasies of the more multifaceted male characters of the same story. Although throughout my research I also mention works that date back to the early 1900s (e.g. *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway), I mainly focus on novels and scripts written between 1997 and 2019.

A brief introduction to Brian Moeran's essay on the power of fashion communication, provides a starting point for analysing the consequences of fashion magazines on their female readers' body image and body satisfaction. Lastly, I discuss the controversial Vogue Italy cover of last March, to reflect on the current notion and idea of beauty.

From scripts to movies, from fashion written communication to advertising, the second chapter is structured as a visual translation and extension of the first. It explores Sigmund Freud's notion of scopophilia and Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze", the expression the scholar uses in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* to indicate the depiction of women from the point of view of a heterosexual man. Furthermore, this second part evaluates the portrayal of women in the visual arts and how this influences the way both men and women perceive the female body. In addition to a

general overview of cinematographic female characters, I also specifically discuss in detail two scenes from two different movies: *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), and *Transformers* (2007). These provide clear examples of the aforementioned concepts from two distinct, distant time periods, thus allowing us to reflect on the changes – or lack thereof - in the delivery of the female presence on the big screen.

Such objectification and sexualisation of the female body have been at the centre of the studies conducted by Rachel Calogero, Marian Morry and Sandra Saska, who strongly believe these to be the cause of self-sexual objectification, as well as the reason why fashion magazines are not “*a safe space for readers to celebrate their gender*” (Beaumont, 2017). In fact, fashion photography, with its hyper-sexualizing of the female body and its imposing of idealized and non-relatable standards onto it, further confirms these affirmations. Three problematic pictures which exemplify this are analyzed and dissected, thus furnishing tangible instances of the male gaze in photography.

More importantly, Chapter Two is the springboard for a series of considerations: does the male gaze have a counterpart, the female gaze? If it does, what does that look like? Does the male gaze always come from a male artist? Are the media trying to sell us the male gaze, passing it off as feminism?

Finally, in the last chapter of my dissertation, I analyse the brand Savage X Fenty, the lingerie business founded by Rihanna, to reflect on the values and beliefs behind the label, its impact on body positivity and the importance for women to feel comfortable in their own bodies. Specifically, I examine the choice of the brand name and its adopted marketing strategies in light of the “body positivity” and the “dress for yourself” movements. Selling lingerie, Savage X has the female body as its direct “client”; is the brand’s body the same body we read about and see through the male gaze? Or is it a celebrated body that prioritizes the personal gaze of the owner?

My research relies on both primary and secondary research. My primary research was conducted through surveys and interviews; I contacted writers, editors and journalists for the first chapter, as well as a young entrepreneur that shared her thoughts on beauty and fashion magazines. For the second part of my study, Natalja Safronova, director of photography and videographer, helped me reflect on the portrayal of women in visual culture, wondering with me about the existence of the female gaze and the repercussions of hyper-

sexualisation in photography. Lastly, I interviewed a Savage X consumer, Gerlind Anagho, who also models for the brand, to see the label through the eyes of someone who wears Rihanna’s inclusive lingerie pieces. The main goal of this interview was to understand the real reasons behind her purchases, and to hear her interpretation of Savage X’s message.

I think it is important and necessary to say that although the surveys conducted include both men and women, I only had the opportunity to collaborate with female creatives for my interviews. I did contact writers and photographers of both sexes, but for some reason only women decided to give their contribution to my study. Initially I thought this lack of testosterone could invalidate my study, as I am a firm believer that feminism should concern all genders. I then realized that this thesis wants women to be aware that misrepresentation of their gender still persists nowadays, and how it is helping to perpetuate a patriarchal and sexist way both of seeing and delivering realities. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that the presence of solely female creatives doesn’t compromise my work in any way. With that said, men are more than welcome to read my thesis.

Literary Overview



Ch.1

What makes a good character?

Novelist Elizabeth Sims wrote, in 2011, an article for the *Writer's Digest* to instruct her readers on how to create and shape good characters. According to the writer, there are 8 steps that shouldn't be missed when building a persona for a good storyline. Specifically, once you give them a certain appearance, you should equip them with:

1. Introspection
2. Opinions and flaws
3. A risk-taker attitude
4. Troubled relationships
5. Group dynamics
6. A good dose of ambiguity
7. A small dose of grudge
8. Acquaintanceships

A successful character, moreover, is supposed to be multifaceted and own a rich, complex personality. Arielle Contreras on Reedsy's blog (2018) also suggests that goals and motivations are fundamental, since they establish why the story exists in the first place. Contreras then proceeds to provide a short list of characters that have stood the test of time, thanks to a meticulously crafted characterization; among others, Harry Potter, Bilbo Baggins and Hamlet made it to the list.

The author barely lingered on the construction of the persona's physique, which, yes, is important (there is not a single Harry Potter movie where the wizard doesn't get 'you have your mother's eyes'), but it is superficial in every acceptance, and certainly not crucial for the plot. Unless we are talking about Rapunzel; in that case, her hair plays quite the role.

We readers do not grow fond of the protagonist due to their hair color, or curvy or skinny body, but we do sympathize with their successes, relationships and conflicts, whether they are internal or external. What we crave is sophistication of mind and personality and, more importantly, someone reliable that we can identify with. Moved by curiosity, I selected a group of people and asked them a concise question: *In your opinion, what makes a good, juicy character?*

Multidimensional, introspective and interesting were some of the adjectives

that I got as a response. Moreover, exactly half of the participants used the word 'reliable', thus agreeing with me on the importance of finding a character we can identify with. A boy also added: "[...] *I know it's highly personal, but for me it's important the character has some traits of my personality. I like to feel represented.*" Another man hinted at the same concept, affirming he appreciates a character he can identify with. These two thoughts are intriguing. It is evident that identification and self-embodiment are crucial. We want to be in the stories we read, as well as wanting to be able to relate to the characters. How can a single character be a mirror of a multitude of readers? Every individual is always, also, universal (Zhock, 1998).

It was at this stage of my research that I realized there is not a character I have ever identified with. Probably I haven't read enough books, or probably I haven't read the right ones yet. Those could be contributing factors of my not having a *literary me*. Or maybe this lack is due to the fact I am a woman, which makes it harder to stumble upon a multidimensional, introspective and interesting character. After all, when it comes to female personas, it's all about bodies. Well, bodies with breasts, which is probably a plus, but that doesn't really add anything to the character's personality, does it?

Describe me like one of your female characters

With silky dark hair and full lips, Vincent is a Greek god. He walks and his shoes slap on the floor. His mane of silky black hair and his turtle neck (not turtleneck, that is something different) poke up out of a boxy suit, like a little turtle saying hello, but also like a tiger, a sexy one, in an outfit. (Petri, 2020)

The Grecian deity in this short—and hilarious—paragraph, is a revisited version of our dear Vincent Vega, one of the protagonists of Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction. These three lines come from the article *If male authors described men in literature the way they describe women*, by Alexandra Petri. The writer picked several male characters from literature and film scripts and described them using the words and expressions the authors had used to describe the female characters in the same work.

Here is how she painted a picture of, respectively, Odysseus, R2D2 (from Star Wars: Return of the Jedi) and Ferris Bueller (from Ferris Bueller’s Day Off)

White-thighed Odysseus emerged from the water freshly bathed and glistening with oil

*His skin glowed like the dawn sweeping in on his swiftly sandaled feet
The goddess beheld him with rapture*

R2D2 is short and over 30, but he knows how to work with what he’s been given. A posterior to make onlookers swoon. Numerous well-maintained ports in which the onlooker can insert a data drive or disk.

Ferris isn’t the hottest guy in class, but he’s definitely top five.

The words and images Petri gave life to in her portraits sound risible and should be read repeatedly, so as to analyze the vocabulary that has been used and the tone that exudes from each description. What makes these paragraphs so funny yet so unsettling? They are humorous because there is a switch: what is usually said about women, now is linked to male figures. Their lack of interesting, worth-writing-about features, resulting in weird

descriptions of appearances, also makes them easy to laugh at. They are disturbing because there is an evident misplacement: the reader can instantly tell those descriptions cannot possibly belong to a male character. And why is that? Moreover, why would those portrayals, despite being ridiculous per se, be judged as adequate for a female role, but extremely nonsensical when associated with a male persona?

In order to find a reasonable rejoinder to all these questions, I conducted a survey. I chose some of the descriptions from Petri’s article and changed their pronouns - from *he/his* to *they/their*, so to have genderless narratives. I then asked the survey participants to read them and guess the gender of the described character. In general, what I noticed from the feedback is that the participants who guessed ‘female’, were convinced by the author’s focus on body parts rather than the character’s persona, as well as by ‘societal standards’. The words ‘expectations’, ‘society’ and ‘common adjective’ were some of the most recurring answers.

Here are some of the most thought-inspiring responses I received (the participant’s reaction follows the description provided on the survey):

A. D V could be attractive if they tried, but they have instead settled for menacing. Tall, dressed in all black with a breathing mask affixed to their face — an outfit that screams, “LEAVE ME ALONE.”

“[I think it refers to a girl because] Society doesn’t describe or judge men by what they wear like they do with women” - Matilde, 24-year-old female

B. Possessing a promising body with hard, shapely curves, B dresses older than their age, but manages to pull it off.

*“[I think it refers to a girl because] ‘Shapeley’ would be a common adjective for a female more than a male” - Saffron, 23-year-old female
C. They had a butt that looked good. He grasped the butt with his hands. They were a bit put out but not too much. This was how things went*

between men and women.

“[I think it refers to a girl because] the last sentence is quite explanatory”

- Paolo, 24- year-old male

I wanted to take my investigation further. Now that I knew people perceived two specific and distinct ways of writing about a woman and a man, I wanted a woman to describe herself from two different points of view, so as to see if the tone and style of the two descriptions differed. Thus, I contacted Megan McClelland, contributing writer at *The Psychology of Fashion*. I asked her to pretend she was a character of a novel (I let her choose whether she was the protagonist/antagonist or supporting character of said novel) which had been written twice: one edition was written by a man, the other by a woman. Megan, who chose to be a side character in the story, proceeded to compose two interesting and thoughtful descriptions.

Here is Megan through the pen of a male writer:

So, I think if I was a supporting character in the story written by a man, that I'd likely fall into the “girl next door” trope. Where my entire existence is centered around the proximity to the guy. I would be there as a supporting love interest. I'd also be unaware of my beauty, kind, present, smart and a good listener. I may have issues at home that are brought up, but they're never really fleshed out. My psychology isn't explored, because I'm there to support his growth - not the other way around.

Here is Megan as written by a female author:

If a woman wrote a story about me as a side character, it might be that we are best friends. That we're like in love with one another and know about each other's career/life ambitions. We tell each other everything and support one another. The reader would get to know about my fucked up drama and how it affects me in my life, the same way as the reader would know about hers.

Finally, she also added:

Being written from a CIS straight narrative, I would be described as a “love interest” in the man's whereas I would probably be described as a “bestie” or “life partner” in the woman's.

A conspicuous dissimilarity between the two descriptions is evident. From Megan's words, if we wanted to know more about her as a person, we would have to go to the book shop and buy the novel written by the female writer. Megan wouldn't be the protagonist of the book, as she wished, but we would remember her at the end of the story, since the reader would know about her personality traits as much as they would get to know the protagonist's facets. In other words, Megan's character would have a certain degree of complexity.

If, on the contrary, we were looking for a story about a guy that does guy things, then we would go ahead and buy the story written by the male author. Would we be able to remember Megan, the love interest? Well, maybe. If she ended up marrying the protagonist, I guess we would.

Female character representations in literature are often poor and deficient. They lack details, depth and dimensional views, in favor of a triumph of bodies that are often awkwardly portrayed. As the poet and writer Katha Pollitt once said “*Where are the vivid, realistic and rounded portrayals of women [...]?*” (Willens, 2013). Alice Fishburn, journalist and blogger, in 2018 decided to read only female authors for a whole year. Her challenge led her to a symptomatic consideration: “*Female characters and viewpoints suddenly simply exist: whether flawed or flaming, badly drawn or richly nuanced. There they are without spin. Unexplained. Unfiltered. Understood.*” (Fishburn, 2018)

Does this mean all it takes for writers to deliver a nice, well-constructed portrait of women in their stories is to be women themselves? During an interview for *The Atlantic*, novelist Sally Koslow affirms that women are better than men at describing the opposite sex simply due to the fact that all we have been reading since long ago is literature by men. Hence, women have more material to refer to when describing male characters, while men are quite ill-equipped, making it more challenging for them to explore the female point of view (Willens, 2013).

Eli Gottlieb, male American author, joins in the conversation, commenting: “*I don't necessarily find women difficult to write about in the third person, but to write them in the first person is to make a hubristic leap. It can be done—Madame Bovary comes to mind—but the reader will often begin from a suspicious wariness*” (Willens, 2013). “*I don't necessarily find women difficult to write about in the third person*” might be another “*hubristic leap*”, to say the least. Here are a few descriptions of women written by men in the third person.

Her breasts were enormous and she obviously wasn't wearing a bra. Her nipples raised the silk into softly shadowed peaks, and when she walked the bouncing of each bosom was enough to quieten conversation and have even the few faithful Washington husbands glancing surreptitiously over their wives' shoulders. (Masterton 2017, p. 14)

New guy's a weirdo, huh?" Rachel said out loud, not holding back her rudeness. Staring directly at me, saying it like one of those college girls: I'm hot and cool and don't give a fuck but was probably molested at some point in my teenage years so I'm always in defense mode and attack others before they can attack me first. (Hall 2019, p. 37)

It was paradoxical in that only the female of the species could perform the amazing feat, while perhaps being less psychologically prepared for it than a male would have been. No woman enjoys the sight of sagging breasts and a bulging stomach, no matter how maternal her urge. A woman's good looks are a woman's good looks, and there is little good-looking about a pregnant woman. (Hunter 2017, p. 52)

Last but not least, Gottlieb himself gave his contribution to this parade of burlesque descriptions. His novel *The Boy Who Went Away* is structured as an endless exploration of the protagonist -- Denny's -- sexuality, a boy with a problematic family background. When his friend Derwent shows him a copy of *Playboy*, Denny shares with the reader the revelation he has when he lays his eyes on the magazine's naked bodies.

Good God! Everything I had been told was true! These little coral hoops at the centers of their bodies, these mustachioed pink mouths with the wetness of throats to them—they were for swallowing us! Women swallowed food from above, and men from below! Or was it vice versa? (Gottlieb 1997, p. 21)

Gottlieb's excerpt shouldn't be condemned too harshly. Although the figures of speech he used to describe female genitalia are worthy of a helpless sigh (*mustachioed pink mouths*, just to mention one), the context of the episode and the age of the protagonist, who is an adolescent, mitigate the superficiality of Denny's thoughts. I hope that if Gottlieb was to write a sequel of *The Boy Who Went Away*, where Denny is now a mature, feminist man, he would create the occasion for Denny to redeem himself, so as to show that his consideration of women has come a long, long way.

Here is the issue with women's descriptions written by men in the third person: they always seem to be depicted from the point of view of a man who initially only focuses on their breasts. In the second extract, by Bobby Hall, the protagonist speculates what might have caused Rachell to be so unpleasant to be around: rape. It is incredible how her possibly being molested in the past is so casually and carelessly brought up, and how it is just mentioned to highlight and underscore her bitterness. If Rachel had, indeed, been molested as a child or in her teenage years, Hall should have probably flanked her with a male protagonist that knows compassion and respect, as well as sensitivity.

To answer my question "*Do you have to be a woman to create satisfying women's descriptions?*" I want to hark back to Sally Koslow. Precisely, the lack of material to draw from which she mentions, could, to some extent, make it harder for men to develop relatable and nuanced portraits of female characters, but that does not solve the problem.

Wearing someone else's shoes always comes with high responsibilities and with a view that will always be limited, especially if who you're writing about has been objectified and minimized for centuries. Awareness, sensitivity and a female collaborator could come in handy when writing about women.

Bella Vera

In 1995 students of Mount Holyoke College presented a study about the impact of fashion magazines on women's body image satisfaction at the 20th Annual Feminist Psychologist Conference of the Association for Women in Psychology. According to their data, fashion magazines' readers manifested a common fear of getting fat, together with the desire to have a thin body; on the contrary, the researchers did not observe such apprehensions among news magazines' consumers.

Inspired by this study, I asked two writers to give me their opinions on fashion magazines and to share with me the impact these have on their confidence. One of the interviewees asked to stay anonymous; therefore, she is referred to as A.

Q #1: *As a writer, what do you like the most about fashion magazines and what, on the contrary, would you change?*

What I value most about fashion magazines is that for me they are a source of inspiration and aesthetic pleasure. Although, I would change the lack of inclusivity in terms of the products advertised and the models used in the spreads. - Lauren, writer for Yes Gurl

I like the wide variety of interesting and current topics they cover related to fashion, beauty, health, wellness, arts and so on. I also enjoy that they feature inspiring and extraordinary public figures and/or new faces. If I could change something, it would be the overly photoshopped and edited unrealistic images, as well as stereotypical representations. - A., writer, storyteller, researcher

Q #2: *A study conducted in 1995 showed that women that read fashion magazines would like to weigh less, and are often less satisfied with their bodies than women who read news magazines. Why do you think the survey led to this result? Have you ever felt pressured to look a certain way because of an article you read or a picture you saw on a magazine?*

I believe the survey led to this result because it is often clear that fashion magazines aim to create an idealized depiction of what is considered beautiful and desirable. At the end of the day, fashion

magazines showcase what is considered appealing to the public, and so in order to be desirable women will want to replicate these appearances. I have experienced pressure to look a certain way in the past from looking at images of women in magazines, particularly with face shape and bone structure - I definitely wanted prominent cheekbones at some point! - Lauren

I think the survey might have led to this result because of the fact that back in the 1990s the fashion magazines were, in general, more conventional and there was less representation of different body types. While reading some magazines, I also remember having felt that certain beauty standards were being imposed on us women. - A

From the thoughts expressed by the two writers, it emerges that fashion magazines' diversification of topics and aesthetically pleasing content are valued positively. Conversely, both writers ascertained that fashion magazines lack diversity in favor of photoshopped and unrealistic images, while containing stereotypical representations; Lauren and A also seem to agree that these are the factors that led to the worrying results of the Mount Holyoke students' survey. Are this lack of diversity, on one hand, and the explosion of unrealistic expectations, on the other, only communicated through imagery? Or are they also conveyed by strategically crafted words in the articles and written advertisements?

Brian Moeran, a now-retired scholar, evaluated the way written communication in fashion magazines is highly similar to healing rituals performed in some cultures. According to this professor, "*Magazine and advertising language is imbued with "magical" power*" (Moeran 2010, p. 507). For example, the names that are formulated for beauty products are never just names, but rather entities. Moreover, each entity encourages customers to believe in the properties of the product and to buy it.

Last, there is language, which has an independent existence and the mystical power to influence the reality of beauty. Advertising is a heightened use of language that aims to combine word and deed (the persuasion to purchase and make use of a product) by using spells especially constructed to effect a magical transfer. As in many magical

practices found among tribal peoples around the world, beauty advertisements isolate and enumerate “the various or constituent parts of the recipient of the magic” (a woman’s eyes, hair, lashes, lips, nails, skin, and so on), and then make a magical transfer that enables them to become “dazzling,” “healthy,” “luscious,” “kissable,” “soft,” “natural,” and so on. By building up these parts, we are able to form a realistic picture of the whole — a metonymic technique that lends realism to the rite of makeup, transmits a message about beauty through redundancy, and allows the storing of vital technological knowledge in an oral culture of women’s gossip (Tambiah 1968: 190). (Ivi, p. 502)

A lipgloss, is never just “a lipgloss”; it’s a “Gloss Bomb” (Fenty Beauty) or a “Melody Lipgloss” (Zoeva). Perfumes also have pretentious names: Lancôme’s newest fragrance is called “Idôle”. An ‘idol’ is an ‘*object or an image which is adored and worshipped because thought to be a divinity, or a symbol of it*’ (Treccani 1937, idol entry). This is an example of the analogy “fashion advertisement = magical practice” outlined by Moeran. In Lauren’s words, “*fashion magazines aim to create an idealized depiction of what is considered beautiful and desirable*”; A also added that fashion magazines impose specific beauty standards and expectations on their consumers. Therefore, fashion editors and journalists should pick their words carefully.

Last March, Bella Hadid was on the cover of Vogue Italia, shot by photographer Zoe Ghertner. The picture was not the typical glossy image we are used to seeing in fashion: Bella had no make-up on (or so it seemed), while her hair was short, post-shower looking. Most importantly, at the bottom of the cover, two words stood out: “bella vera”, *true beauty* in Italian. Vogue Italia shared the image on Instagram with the caption “A natural @ Bella Hadid stars in our March Issue”. Due to the heading, people quickly expressed their opinions on “true beauty”. One woman commented, “And we wonder why so many women don’t appreciate themselves natural, this is not « natural ». I hate stupid female magazines, done with them. Bye” (@vogueitalia, Official Instagram account); another girl said ““natural”... and more ways to make women hate themselves..” (@vogueitalia, Official Instagram account); and finally, “Natural? Shame on you”.

During my interviews, I asked Lauren and A to comment on this episode. Do they agree with the public opinions? Do they share Vogue Italia’s audience’s frustration?

I think that if an image is constantly marketed as beautiful and desirable, you will eventually end up believing that it is true and that that is the only way to achieve ‘true beauty’. Especially now since these images are easily accessible to young girls via social media, it can be hard for them at such a young age to distinguish fantasy from reality. I agree that this can be quite damaging. - Lauren

I agree with the public opinions and reflections mentioned in the question, as I also think that true beauty isn’t something that is strategically created or achieved by plastic surgeries and/or makeup, photoshop, Instagram filters etc. It is something that simply is just there. Something that is in the eye of the beholder. That being said, I also don’t support cyberbullying, and think that everyone, including public figures, has a right to their own personal decisions, opinions and actions when it comes to their life and body - which should be respected no matter how radically different than ours. - A

It is not plastic surgery that the two interviewees condemned, but rather a univocal definition of beauty, as well as mystification. It is clear that Vogue wanted to play with the model’s name, which is the Italian translation of the adjective “beautiful”, but it is the correlation with ‘truth’ and ‘naturalness’ that had people irritated.

Bella Hadid’s beauty is a retouched beauty. Yet, she’s still a beauty. Now the question is: what is a “bellezza vera”? Is there a way to define “true beauty”? And if she is a true, natural beauty, what are girls that are not top models and that don’t have access to plastic surgery? On a more general note, in fashion journalism there is lots of beauty, but most of it has nothing to do with truth, nor it is natural beauty that is displayed.

In regards to this topic, I had a conversation with Emma Bell, a young entrepreneur that is building her own beauty brand, The Barre, with the goal to “*challenge standards and expectations on beauty ideals*” (@thebarre. official 2020, Instagram account biography), for I wanted to better understand the impact fashion magazines have on women’s relationship with beauty standards and expectations.

A: So you are an entrepreneur...

E: I am! Just keep telling me that.

A: (laughs) you are indeed! So, I wanted to interview you because you're creating an inclusive brand. I was on your brand's IG page, and I love that every two pictures there's a quote, inspirational quotes. What's the reason behind the choice of including words on an Instagram account?

E: I feel like I had to. Creating a cosmetics label is different than building a jewelry or a fashion brand, where you post a picture of jewelry or a picture of fashion, whatever that is. It's a lot harder to make this kind of changes into people's lives. You kind of have to try to infiltrate different aspects of their lives, whether that's going down, like, the healthy, positivity body movement, or if it's mindfulness, wellbeing, like yoga, there's so many different aspects. You just have to pick different things. And also, everyone loves a good, quality quote, especially now. They can work like a "pick-me-up" of some sort.

A: I think the best one that you posted is Another's beauty is not the absence of your own beauty

E: Yes, I really liked that one! Because I feel like we're always comparing... she has really nice hair, I don't have that. And it's never something like She has that and I have this, or something like we both have this, it always comes to I don't have that. A negative comparison.

A: I know! I was actually writing about this in my thesis. Last March, Vogue Italy had Bella Hadid on the cover of the magazine, with the two words 'Bella Vera' at the bottom of the picture. And people went crazy.

E: Here's the problem with fashion magazines: you can never see your own beauty in there, you always give a look and all you see is the absence of your own beauty. It just makes me really sad. Why don't we push for women's values and accomplishments more? We are more than just pretty faces and... we are not objects! We have depth to us, we are not just a certain level of beauty. Why don't they ever tell stories about women with substance to it? For example, I love Wired, but it is so male dominated, even when you put a female CEO on the cover, 90% of it is still about male...whatever, and it's frustrating.

A: I totally agree. Another issue is that when the media talk about business women, they often tend to talk about them in such a sexual way. The stereotypical sexy girl in a suit who's bossy.

E: Also, why do we have to label ourselves? Why do we have to call ourselves 'female boss' or 'female CEO'. You're a boss, period. I don't care if you're male or female. It just baffles me. She's a boss, she's absolutely killing it, she doesn't need anything else attached to that.

A: And you wouldn't do that with a man. You would never say, like, a boss...

E: A boss dude! (laughs)

A: (laughs) Exactly! You would never say that. Okay, now going back to your brand. The thing that I love the most about it is that it's all about inclusivity: in the pictures you share you have black women, curvy women, pictures with "flaws". And I think that this is really inspiring, and what true beauty is all about. I don't think it's easy to give a definition to that, but let's try this. Is a true beauty a top model that underwent surgery? And if she is, what are we?

E: I don't know how to define beauty. I tried to do it for one of my reports and it's just...impossible. And when you go look for the different definitions of beauty, you just get confused. I love the one that I did find from about the 1700s, and I think it was one of the most accurate. It was something along the lines of 'whatever or whoever provokes you feelings and beauty within you, then you found something that is beautiful to you'. This definition doesn't belong to a series of features that you are supposed to have to be beautiful. It basically explains that beauty is such a subjective thing, and I really liked that. But then, how do you translate that into today's language, I suppose? I don't know. Bella Hadid, Kendall Jenner are beautiful, But they're not the only kind of beauty out there.

A: Right. I feel like the best thing to do would be to include as many people as you can in the conversation.

E: Exactly, exactly. I don't want this to sound wrong, but I'm always trying not to have too many white people in the content that I post, because we've had our time. I don't mean that in a bad way but we know we exist, so let's bring forward other people. Let's just give them a voice and a platform. But it's hard because some people might still think that I'm doing that to "thick my boxes", you have to try to find a balance. You know when you post a cute picture and then you decide to use a filter, but then you're like "Am I trying to change this picture? But this is a really cute filter"...you know what I mean? Everything...you need to think everything through.

A: It's definitely complicated. Because I feel like you want to make everyone happy, but as you said, at the same time, you don't want to come off as someone who's trying to be inclusive just for the sake of it.

E: You just have to accept that along the way you'll be upsetting people, people that will disagree with what you say. It's just not a one size fits all thing. So then I'm like: how can you fit all the diversities of the world into one thing?

A: Why did you think it was time for the industry to have your inclusive brand now?

E: For me, it came just like a personal thing. This is just what I'm passionate about and what I care about. To be honest, 90% of us have been in a situation where we have been told that we're not this and we're not that. From social media, fashion magazines, whatever that is, we all experienced that to a certain extent. When I used to teach dance, 3/4 years ago, I used to teach to these girls from 2-3 years old up until they were like 16. They were so innocent, and beautiful and sweet. But then they turn 10-11 and they start to say something like "oh my god, I need to buy this make-up", and they use snapchat filters...you know what I mean? They all create their own accounts on social media, and now there's also TikTok. I mean, you're just 10, and you're worrying about how you look on social media. That's not a society I want my kids to grow up in. It scares me almost. They're almost solely driven by the way they look, and they don't understand they are way more than that. I don't care if you have lips like Kylie Jenner, I don't care. The problem is: what are they gonna be like in 10 years time? There always comes a point where you say "wait, but I'm not like that", and that's what scares me.

A: True. Another thing that scares me is this silence behind plastic surgery. People don't talk about that and they just pretend they woke up like that.

E: That's the problem: I don't care if you had your lips done or whatever, just be transparent. Don't lie about that.

A: I also think that if they were open about it, they could start a conversation. "I did this because I felt insecure about this part of my body..." and it can create this kind of community where people can be open and support each other.

E: Exactly! We are all so different, and there's no point in trying to look all

the same. We're never gonna be Kim K, so let's all just stop trying to be like Kim K. For my dissertation I studied how body ideals have changed through time, and how we changed from the Kate Moss body ideal, to nowadays beauty standards. About that time America Vogue released the cover of Serena Williams, so I did a comparative study on how now we are more like 'let's champion strength, let's champion curvier bodies with a thigh gap, with toned bodies and abs', which is great but it also led to girls who instantly went vegan, and are all about clean eating, and that do a 10-mile run in the morning, and do 6 abs work a day...there's no balance. You go from an extreme to another. It's like 'okay, so we have just done the sickly dead thin, so now we're gonna do the super super healthy, amazing human being'. It's such, like a yo-yo. Women are killing themselves by trying to go from a beauty standard to another.

A: It's exhausting.

E: People don't understand that Kate Moss still looks like Kate Moss, not like Kim K...

A: And she's still beautiful!

E: She hasn't tried to be the new ideal of beauty, no matter what fashion magazines say.

A: I guess the core issue is that we have never been taught to be ourselves no matter what, and we have never given that awareness that yes, we would have been exposed to so many options in our lives, but what matters is to accept our beauty and any other kind of beauty that exists, without trying to emulate them.

E: Why don't they teach us in schools how to take care of our mental health or body issues? Why isn't that a thing? I was talking to a friend of mine the other day and she was like 'why have we never been taught about consent?' They teach you how to have safe sex, but they never talk about consent and the importance of being able to say 'yes' or 'no' to people and stand to that. Why are we not equipping our next generation with the tools that they need to manage this turbulent world we're growing up in? With social media, it's way worse than it used to be years ago.

This self-destroying yo-yoing and back-and-forthing that women force themselves into, derives from the media's dangerous highlighting of both

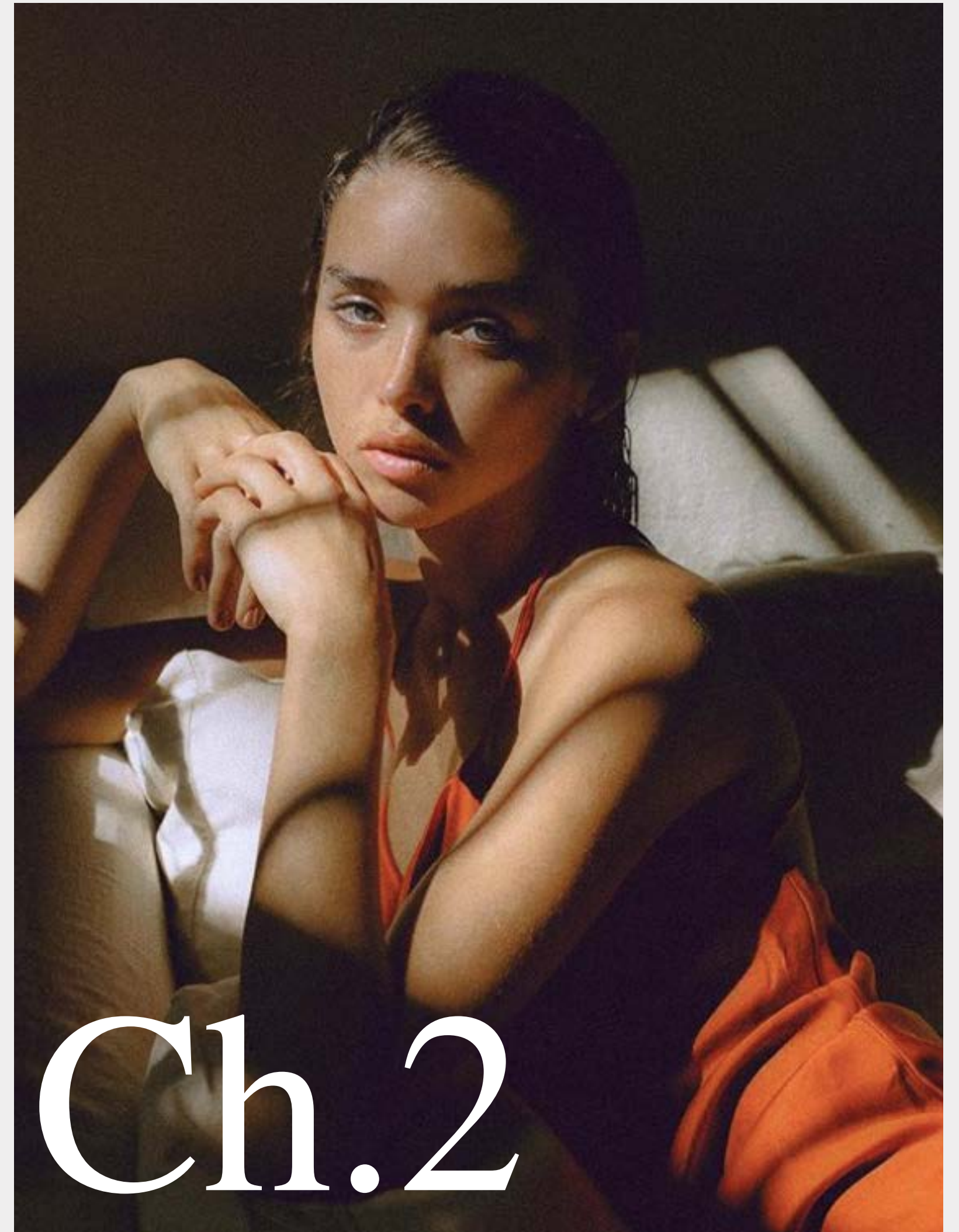
a univocal, as well as a seasonal, “beauty”. The notion of what society, especially our patriarchal society, finds pretty changes constantly, and as women, we feel like we must always stay on track, as Emma and I discussed during our conversation.

Boguslaw Pawlowski, a Polish scholar, in fact, researched this subject, called *Men’s attraction to women’s bodies changes seasonally* (2008). This study showed that men’s assessments of women’s attractiveness change seasonally, just like hormone levels, behaviour and perception do. The abstract of his research reads:

[...] In five seasons (from winter 2004 to winter 2005) 114 heterosexual men were asked to assess the attractiveness of the same stimuli: photos of a female with three different waist-to-hip ratios; photos of female breasts, and photos of average-looking faces of young women. For each season, the scores given to the stimuli of the same category (body shape, breast, and face) were combined. Friedman’s test revealed significant changes for body shape and breast attractiveness assessments across the seasons, but no changes for face ratings. The highest scores for attractiveness were given in winter and the lowest in summer. We suggest that the observed seasonality is related to the well-known ‘contrast effect’. More frequent exposure to women’s bodies in warmer seasons might increase men’s attractiveness criteria for women’s body shape and breasts.

This study bestows importance on what type of features men find attractive in women; in other words, it perpetuates the common belief that women’s beauty relies on men’s tastes. Such studies reinforce the idea that there is only one kind of beauty, and that it perpetually changes, because it is dictated by men’s fantasies. Hence, one of the reasons why defining beauty is so hard. If women focused on what makes them feel beautiful, instead of meeting men’s expectations, then they could free themselves from the instilled need to morph into something they are not.

Visual Culture



Ch.2

Women's bodies in cinema

In his Three Essays on Sexuality, Sigmund Freud explores the notion of scopophilia, that is, the sense of pleasure that derives from watching and looking at someone who, in this erotic process, becomes a sexual object (Mulvey, 1975). Scopophilia can go two different directions: it can be actively performed - voyeurism - or it can be passively granted - exhibitionism (De Mijolla, 2020).

Laura Mulvey unmasks a certain degree of scopophilia in cinema, which she called *The Male Gaze* (1975). Although, at first, it might seem that actors and spectators sign a consent form that allows the viewers to look at the performers - "what is seen on the screen is so manifestly shown" (p. 60), the cinema actually conceals a dimension in which a "surreptitious observation" and an "unknowing and unwilling victim" coexist (*Ibidem*).

Two elements create the ideal conditions for scopophilia to happen. On the one hand, the narrative through which the story unfolds ... On the other, the dichotomy between the darkness and stillness of the auditorium versus the light and action of the screen As Mulvey points out, in this game of gazes there is a tangible sexual imbalance: the narrative is too often told through the scrutinizing eyes of the male character, leaving the female role the job to support his sexual fantasies and desires. Women in movies are developed and constructed to fulfill the man's voyeurism.

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact, so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (*Ivi*, p. 62)

Therefore, movies bring to the screen the same deficit in literature and scripts that was scrutinized in chapter one. Female characters are created to be nothing more than their bodies, because male characters need them to be exactly that. As Budd Boetticher once brutally put it:

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance. (Ibidem)

It's a rolling lipstick on the floor of a cafe that introduces Cora Smith to the public in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). The camera borrows the protagonist's eyes to let the spectator follow the dropped and hyper feminine item on the floor until it reaches a close-up of Cora's naked legs. A mawkish melody starts to play and Cora is finally shot in full frame.

As Cora stares at herself in her pocket sized mirror, Frank Chambers proceeds to leave his stool to gather the lipstick from the floor. The climax of scopophilia is reached when the woman extends her hand, waiting for Frank to give her the lipstick back, but he rather decides to lean against the counter and stare at her with challenging and seductive eyes. Moreover, one of Chambers's iconic quotes is "With my brains and your looks, we could go places" (*The Postman Always Rings Twice* 1946). If there is one thing the director absolutely succeeded in portraying, is the astounded look Cora has at Frank Chambers's macho and patronizing attitude.

A more recent example of the male gaze in cinema can be observed in the scene *Eyes on Mikaela* from *Transformers* (2007). Dressed in the shortest denim skirt ever seen, an orange crop top and high heeled sandals, Megan Fox fixes Sam Witwicky's car in what seems to be a pretext to allow the audience to have a nice view of Mikaela's body. The camera directs the sight from two different perspectives that interchange with each other repeatedly: one is Sam's point of view and the other one is the audience's. Both gazes are fixed on Mikaela's figure, and the latter also shares Sam's reaction to such a sight, imbuing the moment with "bruh" reliability and camaraderie.

As regards the male gaze, Janice Loreck, author of the article "Explainer: what does the 'male gaze' mean, and what about a female gaze?" explains that according to some, the male gaze doesn't have a female counterpart, since cinema "doesn't invite women to desire men's bodies. Rather, female viewers are positioned to identify with a heroine who is herself desired by a man" (Loreck, 2016). As a supporting example of this argument, she mentions an excerpt from the TV mini-series *Pride and Prejudice* (1995); when Fitzwilliam Darcy emerges from the lake, the women who look at the scene are not attracted to his wet white shirt, but rather to the fantasy of being in Elizabeth's shoes and, consequently, being in Darcy's thoughts.

So does a female gaze exist? More importantly, should we pervade cinema and literature with a female gaze to balance the male one and thus solve the problem? So far, we have talked about the male gaze as the cinematic practice of filming a movie through the lens of heterosexual men's desires. As a result, female characters are reduced to images and sexual objects, and the men - both the male characters and all the male viewers in the auditorium - become the "bearers of the look" (Mulvey 1975, p. 62).

Following this logic, the female gaze would simply invert the two roles: sexualized, desired male characters looked through the eyes of lascivious, dominant women. Would this actually be the solution? In order to answer these questions, I contacted Natalja Safronova, director of photography, photographer and videographer (for Tatler, ELLE and Vogue CS, among others). Most importantly, I wanted to include her voice and expertise to know if there is any chance for the female gaze to ever blossom in this industry. Although I will comment on her responses in the next chapter, I would like to conclude this paragraph with a few germane, meaningful statements from her. According to Natalja, the male gaze is still undoubtedly part of visual culture, but a female one is dawning:

[the male gaze] is something I am always conscious about when I take on new projects. As a Cinematographer I often work with male directors and quite often I let them know that certain shots are objectifying or portraying a female in a very shallow manner - like the female character is only an object of passion for the main character, but doesn't have a journey of her own. I then ask them to reconsider how they want to portray their characters and perhaps add some more roundedness to them.

[...] I often get quite angry and upset whenever I see another full blown 'male gaze' picture these days, I feel like this is something we should have left in the past long ago.

I feel like we are still in the early days of the 'female gaze', as a lot of work created by females even when trying to portray empowerment and strong women, still abides the same rules as the imagery created by men - it still feels like women are performing in front of the camera for men/ society rather than showing us other aspects of their personalities.

I think the world is moving in the right direction, but it will take us females some time to really write our narrative and stop worrying about what men think about us. I guess it is ultimately down to both photographers/filmmakers and their models/actors to achieve images

that can be described as "female gaze".

Women's bodies in photography

Cinema is not the only visual industry that promotes such empty, poor and sexualized portraits of women. Sophie Beaumont, a graduate student of the Victoria University of Wellington, explored “*the depiction of women in women's magazines, focusing on sexualisation and the portrayal of traditional gender roles*” in her 2017 thesis *Look at her: Analysing the depiction of women on covers of women's magazines from 1975-2015*.

Beaumont observed that traditional gender roles populate women's magazines constantly throughout the analyzed time period, thus giving women this “*sexualized and decorative*” role that only strengthens “*gender inequality, rape culture, and sexual violence against women*” (Beaumont 2017, p. II). The author also added that “*women's magazines may not be a safe space for readers to celebrate their gender*” (*Ibidem*).

Beaumont's study, among others, affirms that girls who are exposed to sexualized and objectified portrayals of women may subconsciously internalize them. Eventually, this whole process triggers self-sexual objectification (Calogero, 2011), which causes women to value and think about their bodies from a third-person perspective, as well as to prioritize body attributes over non-observable traits (Morry & Staska, 2001). Moreover, the study conducted by Morry and Staska (2001) establishes a correlation between self-objectification and “*feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness, and problem eating behaviours*” (*Ibidem*).

During the interview that I conducted with Lauren and A, I asked them to imagine they had their own fashion magazine. My goal was to know how they would structure it and what kind of message they would convey.

If I had my own fashion magazine I would make it less about beauty and more about comfort. I would show ways in which style and comfort go hand-in-hand without the need for compromise so that women find no need to feel insecure about themselves and their appearance. - Lauren

I would focus as much as possible on topics such as sustainable and responsible fashion, minimalism, natural and ethical beauty, mindfulness and self-compassion practices in order to accept and embrace ourselves the way we are, the way our bodies are. I would like to convey and

underline the wisdom that we as humans are all different, yet also all the same - and that's the true beauty. - A

From their responses, they both seemed to agree that women need to detox from beauty standards and expectations, thus displaying awareness of the impacts of fashion imagery and content on women's feelings and self-perception. Lauren prioritised comfort, while A would flag up two crucial notions: mindfulness and self-compassion. As women and writers, they identified women's longing for peace and contentment with their appearance.

Following the approach of Morry and Staska's 2001 study, I conducted a survey myself, involving men and women. The first question that I posed was: “*Do you agree with the statement “Fashion magazines hyper-sexualize women”?*” 75% of the participants answered ‘Yes’, the remaining 25% disagreed; 3/4 of the latter were men. At the question “*Do you think fashion magazines properly portrait women?*”, 100% of the participants agreed that they don't, some of them mentioning “*old beauty standards*”, “*false ideas*”, “*un-relatable pictures*”, as well as “*unrealistic beauty standards*” to support their answer. Finally, I asked “*Has a picture that you saw in a fashion magazine ever made you feel self-conscious?*” All the female participants responded “*yes*”. One girl, who is currently studying fashion, wrote “*Always*”; another one replied “*Victoria's Secret pictures used to make me so upset as I thought that was the only thing guys wanted.*”

This last reply definitely inspires a few considerations. The young woman shared her past fear of not being appreciated and wanted by the other sex. In her brain, looking at fashion images activated two internalized preconceptions:

- 1- Those female models were shot to please a male audience;
- 2- Her feeling “upset” came from the fear of not being perceived as pretty by men, prioritizing their gaze and taste over her own.

This issue was discussed by Emily Hoyle, copywriter and blogger for Zod Culture. In Hoyle's opinion, women are shot through the male gaze also when they are supposed to advertise products that are actually designed to spark interest in a female audience, like lingerie, for example (Hoyle, 2014). At the beginning of the article, the blogger recalls a conversation she had

on this topic with a boy, who blurted “*why do heterosexual women like looking at sexualized women?*” (*Ibidem*).

The article *Hyper Sexualisation in the Fashion Industry* on Fashion Harp shows similar doubts in regards to the contradictions of fashion magazines’ marketing strategies: how comes the fashion industry which, for the most part, sells garments and accessories, so often opts for naked and semi-naked girls for their advertisements? *What’s on sale here? The product or the female body?* (fashionharp.com, 2016).

One of the female participants of my survey said she thinks the core problem of sexualized models lies in the purposes of fashion marketing strategies. Therefore, it would be useless to change the way photographers take pictures of girls if fashion doesn’t change its way of communicating first.

Natasha Walter, an author, journalist and broadcaster, can help us shed light on this issue. In her book “*Living Dolls, The Return of Sexism*”, the writer discusses sexualisation as something that women are buying because it is ideologically disguised as feminism and liberation (Walter, 2011). Since I wanted to explore Natasha Walter’s disguised feminism, I decided to select three hyper-sexualized images of women used for advertisement and fashion and analyze them.



'*Ironic sexism*' is the expression the writer Emma Pitman used to describe this picture. This image is part of the series *Sex and Takeout*, a project that photographer Sarah Bahbah was commissioned to do in 2015 by Matt Pound, founder and director of Varsity Group. The circumstances of the picture are unusual: a girl, the protagonist of the photo, is laying naked on a carpeted and multi-colored floor. Next to her head rests the paper box of a Varsity hamburger which, we assume, is one of the two that are being held by a man's hands on her breasts. We are looking down at her, from the point of view of the man who is holding the two hamburgers atop the girl's chest.

The other pictures from the series are similar: naked/half-naked girls that enjoy their fast food with orgasmic expressions and, most of the time, with parts of their bodies gripped by a man's hands. Sarah Bahbah's creations were hung at Varsity's American-college-themed bar in Nedlands (Law, 2015).

Pitman reflects on the use of food in these pictures and explains how it is always more than just some censorial expedient:

It was being used as a proxy, a deep fried piece of irony that justified the presence of a sexualised picture of a young woman in a public space. [...] These spaces are not problematic in themselves, but because the self-defensive mode of irony thrives in these contexts, they can be fertile soil for the slippery appropriation and reinforcement of the male gaze. (Pitman, 2017)

Not only do we see the girl from the eyes of the man who must be straddling her waist, but we look down at her; therefore the girl is in a condition of submissiveness. Natalja Safronova, the photographer I had queried at the end of section *Women's bodies in cinema*, pointed out how, although this shooting was supposed to advertise the brand's burgers, the picture has very little to do with food.

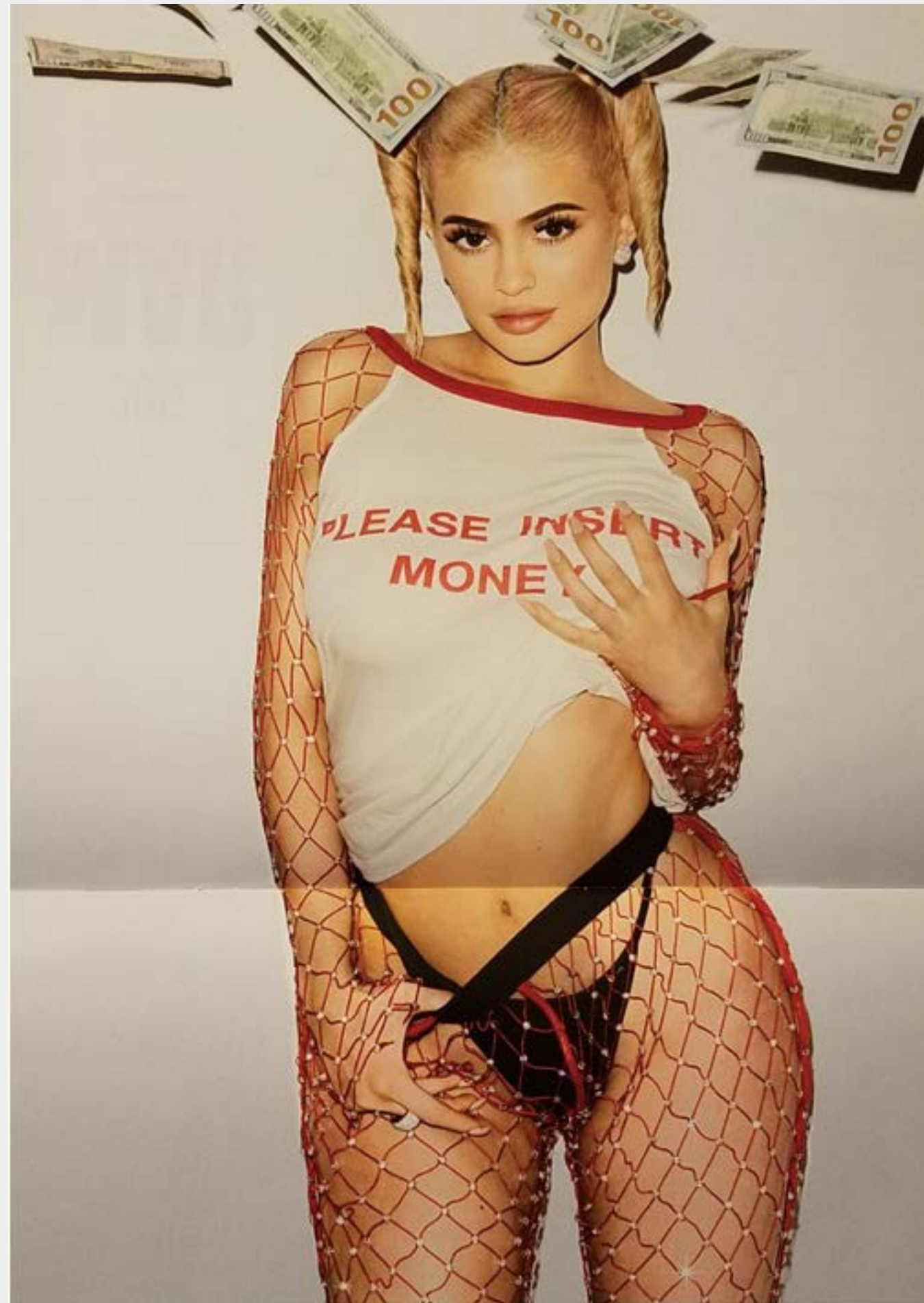
[...] every aspect of it is pure objectification - the angle, the pose, the hands and nakedness - it has very little to do with burgers to start with.

Since Natalja is a photographer, I asked her how she would retake the picture without using such a blatant male and sexist gaze.

I guess if I were to redo it, I would focus much more on the burger. It is clearly selling the burgers to men rather than women, hence such

sexualised imagery. I guess I would have to change the whole concept entirely to make it not feel like male gaze.

One last reflection on this picture: the photographer of this image is a woman, yet the gaze is the one of a man. Was the photographer following specific instructions from her patron? Or is this photo, and the others in the series, an example of the disguised sexism Natasha Walter hinted at? Is photographer Sarah Bahbah a victim of this deeply-rooted and normalized male gaze which has women perpetuating and reinforcing it without even realizing it?



When Terry Richardson, one of the most controversial photographers in the fashion industry, works with Kylie Jenner, one of the most controversial celebrities, the result is...controversial. The Kardashian descendant collaborated with Richardson for her 2017 calendar, receiving some harsh criticism. Over the years, models and people from show business have publicly accused the photographer of sexual harassment, yet he continues to do his job regularly and undisturbed (Hardy, 2017).

The Goldilocks-like hair tied in two pigtails give Kylie a childish, innocent allure that clashes with the erotic ensemble of her clothing and of the photographic composition. Money rains from the sky, ready to be inserted, as the t-shirt commands, where Kylie's hand suggests: in her fishnet tights, which she is kindly tugging down. This picture is the quintessence of sexual objectification.

With the power Kylie Jenner has, given the magnitude of people that follow and adore her, she has every tool - a voice, a platform, money, privilege, an audience - to be heard and to send resonating messages. It is a pity to see her invest her power in such male-gaze-driven and hyper-sexualized self-advertisement.

Is this what equality of the sexes look like? A consensual portrayal of women as sexual objects? As Natalia Borecka pointed out in her article *Empowered Sexism, How Fashion Killed Feminism* (2018): *I saw objectification dressed up as luxury, sexism passing as empowerment, and materialism masquerading as self-care.*

Safronova seems to agree with this statement:

Unfortunately there are still plenty of examples (of the male gaze) around us made these days, which objectify women, often while hiding behind the word 'empowerment', while propagating the same old male gaze. Being empowered shouldn't mean feeling sexy and wanted - being empowered has many many more meanings that women should discover for themselves.

Here you go again, Calvin Klein! In 2016 the brand gave life to their “I _____ in #mycalvins” campaign, which consisted of images that showed boys and girls doing activities wearing “their calvins”. The picture that caused the most disdain is the one featuring model Klara Kristin in an up-skirt shot.

During the interview with Natalja, I asked her to share her opinion on this picture, and again, I also asked her to imagine she had the chance to retake this photo in her own, female-gazed way.



The Calvins example is clearly coming from the brand’s usual imagery - it has always been very sexualised and even if they are trying to be pushing boundaries, they are still doing it in a very sexualised way. Unfortunately, with a brief like this, it is often hard for a photographer, whether it is a she or he, to produce imagery that represents female gaze. If there was a chance to redo this shot, I would have gone for something much more subtle, like asking a model to flash a touch of the underwear on the bum and have a different facial expression, perhaps something subtle and playful.

The NCOSE, National Center on Sexual Exploitation, also commented the picture, saying:

Once again, Calvin Klein has used a depiction of sexual harassment or assault in its advertisements. The American fashion house has continued to stand by its most recent ad campaign, not-so-subtly entitled Erotica, despite the backlash over its glamorized depiction of an ‘up-skirting’ victim. Up-skirting is a growing trend of sexual harassment where pictures are taken up a woman’s skirt without her knowledge, or without her consent. Not only is this activity a crime in many states like New York, Washington, Florida, and more, but it is also a disturbing breach of privacy and public trust. By normalizing and glamorizing this sexual harassment, Calvin Klein is sending a message that the experiences of real-life victims don’t matter, and that it is okay for men to treat the woman standing next to them on the metro as available pornography whenever they so choose [...]

Just like the picture from the Varsity burgers campaign, this image was shot by Harley Weir, a woman. We are once again witnessing the male gaze of a woman. In front of this kind of imagery, I wonder if female photographers are aware of the way the girl they are portraying will be perceived by whoever will see the final shot/film. Shouldn’t shooting a woman take more

consideration than shooting a man? To conclude, I want to share Natalja's words on her experience with working with women, and how she approaches the whole process.

When photographing and filming women, I do tend to put more effort and consideration about how they look like and how it will be perceived. On the one hand, there is always an expectation for women to look more beautiful - which means in film we tend to light women with softer light, add diffusion filters, so their skin looks more pleasing and pick angles and lenses that are flattering. This is often an expectation in the industry - it may come from clients and actresses themselves, as women tend to be more conscious of how they look on camera (this may have to do with further work opportunities and them feeling strongly about how they want to be portrayed).

On the other hand, while I do try and make women look as flattering as possible, I need to take into consideration what their role in the film is and what's the moment in the story. For example, if a woman is crying, perhaps this is not the time to make her look as beautiful as she can be. Actresses often look really beautiful in films when they are crying - and I do not look like that at all if I am in tears! Which means, cinematographers often overdo flattering techniques in film and beautify moments, which are not necessarily that beautiful and perhaps require a more realistic depiction.

And of course, there is a consideration of how the female characters will be perceived by the audiences. This means picking the right combination of angles/performance/costume/lighting, etc, to make sure they are portraying a full rounded character, rather than just an object that is pleasing to look at. I believe it is a lot easier with portraying men, as they do not have as much pressure from the society to look their best every single second of the day.

Case Study



Ch.3

The Savage x Fenty phenomenon

In 2018 Rihanna, one of the most successful business women of our times, founded her own lingerie brand, Savage X Fenty. After the instant success of Fenty Beauty, Rihanna showed that she intended to expand her empire and that she knows exactly how to do it. Savage X Fenty is not the usual lingerie brand. As the founder herself described it:

Savage X is about respect. Do what you do. Be unapologetically you. Embrace individuality. (savagex.co.uk)

Rihanna disrupted the fashion industry by redefining the common idea of sexiness and self-confidence. The core value of the label is inclusivity, in all its possible meanings. Savage X Fenty is inclusive because their sizes range from 32AA to 44DD in bras and XS to XXXL in underwear (Young, 2019); it is inclusive because their campaigns feature models of any skin complexion and body type; it is inclusive in the kind of lingerie it sells: from the most basic pieces to the most playful, as well as seductive babydoll cami dresses; finally, it is inclusive because it is affordable.

Rihanna - a black, self-made woman - first welcomed dark skinned people, albino ones and everyone in between, with a never-seen-before range of cosmetics, and then she took inclusivity further. What she creates truly is for everyone, and she reiterated this integral inclusivity of her label in 2018, when she put together a show that felt like a breath of fresh air.

After Victoria Secret's white, super skinny angels have haunted the lingerie market for years, it finally felt like every kind of woman existing on earth was getting the right to walk on a stage; white skinny girls, black skinny girls, plus-size ones, even pregnant women joined Rihanna's show with a self-confidence that was almost intimidating to watch.

Just when Victoria's Secret decided to cancel their fashion show, Rihanna amazed the world with everything and anything the angel-filled brand seemed to have failed to provide to this new inclusivity-demanding audience. Over the years, the VS annual spectacle had lost a significant number of viewers, plummeting to an audience of 3.3 million in 2018, down from 6.7 million in 2016 and 9.7 million in 2013 (Low, 2019).

One reason behind this drop could be the brand's well-known lack of

inclusivity. Among the responses I got from the survey I conducted for chapter two, some people complained that fashion tends to perpetually show white, rich, skinny girls, lacking variety both in terms of ethnicity and body shapes. Rihanna is filling that gap. In a conversation with Vogue, the Barbados entrepreneur talked about the empowering goal Savage X was built on. The female body is the direct consumer and end-user of the brand, and it is celebrated unapologetically with a well-thought-out marketing strategy. Rihanna described how Savage X wants to give the woman that chooses to wear its garments the self-confidence and self-love she deserves.

Lingerie is not just about exploiting the female body, it's about celebrating it and that's what Savage X is all about. Savage to me is such a powerful word. Especially for women, you know. Women are usually looked at as weak and needy and Savage is just that different woman. It is the opposite of that, she powerful, she's in charge, and she's taking ownership of all the choices she makes. (Yotka, 2019)

Savage X lingerie pieces demand to be stared at by their female owners first, and then by whoever they allow into their private life, if they do. The female gaze and self-appreciation is what matters and what is prioritized. The Valentine's Day collection of the brand, which launched January 9th of last year, was designed to be worn "whether you're married, single, engaged or 'it's complicated'" (Young, 2019).

Therefore, I believe that the two main strengths of Savage X are having followed the body positivity movement and the "dress for yourself" movement, these being two waves that Victoria's Secret started to address too late, which might have contributed to the end of their shows. Savage X didn't have to include these values in the brand's qualities, since it was created from them.

These two movements are probably the ones that first began to adjust the viewfinder, finally introducing a gaze that is not female, nor male. It is *personal*, and only structurally female, solely because born from the heart of what is referred to as "the fourth wave of feminism". The two are strongly related to each other.

In 2012 the third wave of the body positivity movement started as the hashtag used by the people within the fat acceptance movement (Yeboah, 2020). The latter was based on the celebration of all those body types that society had purposely kept in the dark, because they were considered to be lacking societal beauty canons. The “dress for yourself” wave, on the contrary, is more recent. Although this topic was touched on now and then a few years ago, such as in the 2015 article *Do You Dress to Please Others... Or Yourself?* In Huffpost UK by BritChick Paris, it was only around 2017/2018 that people began to address it more consistently.

As I said, the body positivity and the “dress for yourself” movements share a connection. A woman whose appearance doesn’t follow society beauty standards, yet is self-confident and feels good about herself both internally and externally, will wear whatever she likes, without worrying about what other people might think of her fashion choices. Body positivity is about loving your body the way it is, and getting rid of any kind of comparison; the beauty of someone, as Emma Bell stated during our chat, doesn’t compromise yours. Only this awareness allows a woman, or a man, to wear whatever makes them feel good, regardless of their body shape.

In 2015, a fashion stylist stated that on average only 20% of women’s wardrobe is used, because women are afraid to leave their comfort zone (Paris, 2015). Moreover, women are often disappointed when they get their online-shopped clothes, because they don’t fit them the way they fit the 6-foot-tall and size-4 models they saw on the website (*Ibidem*). Rihanna is telling women not to forget the remaining 80% of their wardrobes, nor the lingerie.

I contacted Gerlind Anagho, certified fitness trainer for Fitness With Femininity, who is not only a Savage X consumer, but also one of the winners of the campaign contest Rihanna launched earlier this summer. During an interview with Vogue, Gerlind was asked *How do you hope other Rihanna and Savage X fans feel when they see you in this campaign?* She brought up the importance of belonging and feeling part of a community, mentioning Savage X’s mission to include every woman in the brand identity and to make each one of them feel beautiful.

I hope other Rihanna and Savage X fans feel proud and that they belong. The pieces I modelled made me feel so beautiful and Savage. We are beautiful in all shapes and sizes. I hope it empowers the fans like it did when I was wearing it. I want to leave by saying dream and put it in

the universe! This all started with a dream of being a part of something bigger. Take that risk, and seize every opportunity.

As I read the interview with Gerlind, I was amazed by the way she talked about the brand and her personal relationship with it. I interviewed her to explore this sense of community and empowerment she mentioned.

A: What is it about Savage that made you say “I need to buy it!”?

G: As mentioned from my Vogue Magazine feature, I gravitated towards Savage X because of its inclusivity and the new changes it brings to the lingerie industry. A lot of women and girls who buy from their favorite lingerie brand at some point dream of modeling for them. However, it is rare to none that they will actually model for that brand. As a certified fitness trainer for FITNESSWITHFEMININITY, a brand focusing just on women’s fitness, I would have never thought I would star in a major lingerie brand campaign. Doubts such as “I am not tall enough or have the model physique” start to set in because of what other brands and the media portray.

A: Do you have any other lingerie by other brands? Do they make you feel like Savage does?

G: I own and have owned other lingerie brands, but the feeling I get do not compare to the moment I have on Savage X. Savage X wants to share its customer and their perspective on how their pieces make them feel on their social platforms.

A: Do you think there are other lingerie brands that are as inclusive?

G: From the top of my head, I can’t even think of another brand that visually pushes for body positivity and executes it well. Savage X stands by their mission to embrace every body type.

A: Do you think Savage offers a good balance between price and quality?

G: The garments are not so costly to compare to others. They aim to be affordable for everyday citizens without breaking pockets. For me, I really enjoy their VIP program and the perks that come with it. However, for those who do not have a membership, I promise every dollar is worth spending. The pieces are eye-catching. You can also tell a lot of work goes into each design and the themes are even more perfect. Have you seen the August

release? That is why I think people keep wanting more.

A: What is the woman who wears Savage X like?

G: A woman who wears Savage X is bold, free, and CONFIDENT. Before and after winning the competition, Savage X made me feel like family. Not for once did I feel like a stranger, because they appreciate individuality and uniqueness.

A: What do you think of Savage's marketing strategy to feature not only models but also customers on their social platforms?

G: Their idea of featuring not only models but also customers on their social platform is brilliant. I think that is the best way to engage with society. I am happy to say I am a customer who starred in their SavageXSummer campaign.

A: Why do you think the brand is so successful?

G: There could be other factors that make the brand successful but I would like to attribute it also to their connection with customers. Being the face for the brand SavageXSummer campaign was mind-blowing. I occasionally have to remind myself because I dreamt of all this last year. I am just happy it was Savage X. I hope to do more work with the brand and team in the future.

A: Personally, I love that Savage X is all about what I call the personal gaze, in the sense that it creates pieces that demand to be looked at and appreciated by the owner first, and then by whoever she wants to share some intimacy with, if there's any. What do you think about this shift Rihanna created in the way women purchase lingerie?

G: I 100% agree, because at the end of the day lingerie has a certain level of empowerment to self first. To conclude, I think Rihanna and the team have done a fabulous job letting women embrace themselves first before another person. In the past, this wasn't the case because lingerie is often linked to the idea of pleasing a partner. I am so excited about what is to come next from the brand in general.

It is refreshing to hear a consumer talk about a brand in these terms. Having the insight and point of view of someone who approached the label for its

identity and values, who also got the chance to be part of the brand itself, gives a more detailed idea of what makes Savage X so unique in the market.

This proves that we are witnessing a change in the fashion industry, as well as in what people are looking for in a brand. I believe that if Gerlind mentioned the significance of feeling part of a group - a diverse and inclusive body of people who celebrate individualities - it is because of the sense of alienation that comes with seeing yourself through a gaze that is not yours.

Conclusions

It is time to gather all the research that was conducted and answer the core question of this study: *In the present times, do representations of women in the media still suffer from the male gaze?* I am disheartened to say that yes, they do. And the most worrying aspect of it all is that these representations go beyond the circumscribed reality of books, magazines, movies and pictures, because they have negative reverberations in the real world as well, for they shape the perception boys and girls have of women.

In this thesis, I have shown that novels and scripts tend to deliver female personas that support the male protagonist in his character development, which leaves them with nothing but an attractive, breasted body. I addressed the lack of literature by women as a contributing - not the ultimate - factor of these erratic and superficial portrayals of female roles, as well as the pretentiousness of some male authors who leave on paper these depictions with the conviction of having created something relatable; several of them don't even bother to attempt such thing.

I have also talked about the kind of beauty sold by fashion magazines and discussed the issues that women have with their body image related to that. Having a chat with Emma Bell, an amazing friend and a focused entrepreneur, allowed me to explore the relationship us women have with each other, as well as the insecurities and self-consciousness that come from looking nothing like fashion magazines' narrow range of models.

The one-in-a-million beauty standards respond to attractiveness criteria that are still too linked to men's idea of beauty. This causes, as I said, a depiction of beauty that is not truthful, nor complete or inclusive. Moreover, women are desperate to look a certain way, thus they follow impossible diets and fitness plans, so as to satisfy someone else's tastes and an attraction that, as we saw, seems to change seasonally. The male gaze pervades and influences most women's self-esteem, reinforcing a societal idea of beauty that is patriarchal.

I then moved my focus to visual culture, assessing the presence of the male gaze in movies, photography and advertising. From some of the findings of both the primary and secondary research that I conducted, it emerged that the objectification and sexualization of women is sometimes enacted by

women themselves, as photographers and videographers. Apparently, the media cause women to sexualise and objectify themselves; furthermore, sexism often conceals itself behind illusions of self-styled feminism and empowerment.

Despite this, there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel. Natalja Safronova, director of photography and videographer, expressed her genuine concern for the still-too-strong presence of the male gaze when portraying women, but it was reassuring to hear a creative who is doing her best to speak up when misrepresentation happens, and who is using all her talent and expertise to change things.

Finally, the market itself seems to be just as aware of the beauty mystification we are exposed to on a daily basis, and this is contributing to the rise of movements that are reshaping brands, such as the body positivity and dress for yourself waves. I concluded my study with an investigation into Rihanna's revolutionary lingerie brand, specifically its values and its efforts to celebrate all women's beauty. By putting the woman and her self-confidence, whatever that looks or feels like, at the center of attention, Savage X discards the male gaze, because it prioritizes the personal gaze of the girl who wears and enjoys her lingerie. The overall impression given by the interview that I conducted with Gerlind Anagho, a Savage X consumer and model, is that the label is as inclusive and as empowering as it advertises.

Representation is another key factor that Gerlind mentioned as one of the key points of the brand. Savage X is displaying types of girls that distance themselves from the male-pleasing, mono-looking kind of woman we are continuously sold; therefore, the label is creating a community where women are finally starting to be aware of their worth and beauty. And that has nothing to do with what the male gaze in literature and the visual arts has imposed on society as attractive.

Practical Project

What

Using wix.com, I created a platform with the aim to acknowledge and talk about the lack of female gaze in the media. The name of the platform, *My Gaze*, is simple, yet really meaningful to me. By using the possessive pronoun 'my', I am not referring solely to my personal way of seeing things and creating, but I am also including the point of view of anyone who is aware of the importance of feminist voices in the creative industries. The Gaze of the title is of anyone who wants to be part of this project and subvert the male gaze through their talent and art.

During the research and development of my thesis, I contacted several female creatives that shared their knowledge and thoughts on current ways of communications - writing, photography, videography - that are still imbued with old sexist habits and values.

At the moment, the platform is divided into two sections, which follow the first two chapters of my thesis: one is dedicated to photography, *my project*, and the other one to written content, *blog*. Finally, I also included *your gaze*, where creatives can get in touch with me in case they wanted to share their work on the platform.

My project is also a physical photobook that I have personally designed and composed. In addition to the pictures that are posted on my website, the photobook also features some outtakes of the several shootings my photographer and I have done.

Why

The primary and secondary research that I conducted for this study allowed me to develop conversations that enriched and informed me more than I could ever imagine. A lot of the opinions that I stated and included in this thesis, were shaped and elaborated thanks to the exchange of thoughts that happened between me and the amazing girls that accepted to give their personal contribution to my dissertation.

I felt the urge to share my own experience as well as the need to build a

space I would enjoy and love to be a part of. Most importantly, my goal was to gather people like me who do enjoy fashion or any other creative field, but that are also aware of its limits and deficiencies.

As Natalja Safronova pointed out, it is important to talk about things that need to change and that need to be reformulated in the work field. With this project, I would love to join the discussion, and bring my experience and contribution to the table.

My role

I have been the creative director of this project. My role consisted in researching and selecting controversial pictures: some of them objectify and sexualize the female model, others display distorted portrayals of women. Once I had enough material to work on, I reached out to models in London to collaborate with them and finally shape my project.

I was humbled to see so many girls who were willing to help me and join the project exclusively for its values. I had no budget and I wasn't allowed to use the college studio, therefore, I did my best to look for locations and places for our shootings. I ensured my models were comfortable throughout the whole making of the project, discussing with each one of them and the photographer the images to retake and the vision that I had for the final results.

I also curated the look and layout of my photobook, maintaining the same tone and style I have used for both my thesis and my website, so as to have an organic and cohesive project. Finally, I personally created the website for *My Gaze*, and I also wrote all the posts on its blog. The main goal of my photobook is to show that objectified, sexualized as well as mystified representations of women are never necessary. The main goal of my website is to showcase my work and to collaborate with other feminist creatives.

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Appendix

Survey conducted on Instagram through IG Poll

Total Participants: 32

Female: 19

Male: 13

A) They had a butt that looked good. He grasped the butt with his hands. They were a bit put out but not too much. This was how things went between men and women.

29% (4) BOY

71% (10) GIRL

Because...

Saff (GIRL): I feel some men (not all) are attracted to bottoms

Paolo (GIRL): Because of the last sentence

Matilde (GIRL): "They had a good butt", then "he grabbed it". Then "This is how things went between men and women"

Carlotta (GIRL): A girl would never grasp someone's butt

B) Possessing a promising body with hard, shapely curves, B dresses older than their age, but manages to pull it off.

17% (2) BOY

83% (10) GIRL

Because...

Saff (GIRL): 'Shapely would be a common adjective for a female more than male'

Paolo (BOY): Because of the lack of a "hip" fashion industries for larger men

Matilde (GIRL): Because society only says "dressing older than their age" about girls (fucked up)

Carlotta (GIRL): Because girls always stress on their appearances

C) D V could be attractive if they tried, but they have instead settled for

menacing. Tall, dressed in all black with a breathing mask affixed to their face — an outfit that screams, "LEAVE ME ALONE."

55% (6) BOY

45% (5) GIRL

Because...

Saff (BOY): It being a male. This one nothing screams at me masculine or feminine however I felt a gut instinct to

Paolo (GIRL): Because of the expectations for women to "dress cute"

Matilde (GIRL): Again, society doesn't describe or judge men by what they wear like they do with women

Carlotta (GIRL): Sounds like a girl that doesn't want to get attention

D) I J is in their thirties, but they're dressed like a much younger person in a half-unbuttoned shirt and a hat that they think too much of. They wear glasses, but would look good without them.

75% (9) BOY

25% (3) GIRL

Because...

Saff (BOY): Half unbuttoned shirt...no woman would ever dare

Paolo (BOY): Because of the hat, lmao

Matilde (BOY): Doesn't refer to their body, and also describes the clothing but not negatively necessarily

Carlotta (BOY): Sounds like a guy that feels good about his body

Survey conducted on Instagram through IG Poll

Total Participants: 32

Female: 19

Male: 13

Question:

In your opinion, what makes a good, juicy character of a story?

Answers:

- 1) Interesting, unique story, drama, and definitely being funny - Heather
- 2) Relatable, multidimensional - Chloe
- 3) A normal person that finds creative ways to solve everyday problems - Carlotta
- 4) Relatable, honest and transparent - Matilde
- 5) Introspective, not ordinary and relatable. I know it's highly personal, but for me it's important the character has some traits of my personality. I like to feel represented- Ennio
- 6) Someone that stands out and that is well supported by a good storyline - Paolo
- 7) I like it when I can easily identify with the character - Cosimo

Interview with Danielle Woods, magazine journalism and publishing student at London College of Communications, conducted via email:**1. As a writer and content creator, in your opinion, what makes a good character?**

In my opinion, the making of good character comes from creating the character with as many flaws and 'perfections' that any person in real life would have. I believe that it is important to create characters that readers will find relatable and be able to see themselves or someone they know in that particular character.

2. Do you have a favorite character from a movie or a novel? What makes you like them so much?

As of recently, my favorite character from a novel would have to be Anna Karenina from the self-titled novel by Leo Tolstoy. As the novel delves into the theme of love stories in a way that explores love as many things (both good and complex), Anna Karenina, one of many protagonists, stood out to me as a woman that finds beauty in simple things. For example, literature and art. Not only is this relatable to the many things that I happen to appreciate but allows me as a reader to want to read on as I see myself in the basic traits that the author presents. She is painted as someone who yes, has her flaws but is easy to love as she too believes in and finds love in everything, beyond romance. (e.g. platonic relationships and family).

3. Has there ever been a character you identified with?

Other than the character stated within the second response (solely based on traits), I have not really identified with any characters specifically from a novel or movie. In terms of TV shows, I find myself identifying with quite a few female characters. For example, Jane Villanueva (Jane the Virgin) who is depicted as a hopeless romantic who is on a journey to exploring true love yet still making time for herself and her career. On the other hand, female characters such as Issa Dee (Insecure), who is also navigating romance but doesn't see it as the end goal. For the latter character, she is a very much independent and fearless and I identify with that in the sense of wanting to be more like that in my everyday life.

4. Have you ever created a character for a story? If you have, what kind of process have you followed to give life to him/her?

Yes, I have. If the name doesn't come naturally at first, I tend to think about what role I want them to have in the story. Do I want them to be the hero from the start or someone who figures everything out along the way? I tend to mind-map attributes that I want the character to have. They don't necessarily have to be detailed, as long as it is something that is able to be presented through the characters initial actions or the text within the story.

A key part of any process, but in particular when writing a story is research. Researching characters that you might want your character to emulate or perhaps basing your characters on people you know or have met in real life. I personally enjoy studying people that I come into contact with and picking parts of their personalities (both positive and negative) that I could add to the life of my character.

5. As a woman, do you feel adequately represented in literature?

Unfortunately, not. Especially as a black woman, it is rare that I find representations of myself within literature.

6. When describing a man or a woman for an article, what do you usually focus on to create a detailed and interesting portrait of that person? Do you have the same criteria for both genders?

If it is someone that I met and had the chance to interview in person, I tend to highlight physical attributes that could easily give the reader an idea of how the subject is in real life. It doesn't have to be anything specific. To exemplify, it would simply be highlighting that this person's eyes tend to

brighten whenever talking about their favorite hobby, as a way of showing their excitement. Other than that, I always try to depict the tone of what they said or even give a short backstory to their life / career to paint a picture before going into the article. I do this for both men and women.

7. If you had to be described - as if you were a character - from a male author and a female one, do you think you would be described the same way by both? If you think there would be some differences in the two descriptions, what kind of differences the reader could notice and why wouldn't the two portraits of your persona be the same?

I feel as though upon observation, I would be described differently by both genders. I feel this way due to personal observations that I have retrieved from both men and women in my personal life. Without being too stereotypical, a lot of men may view me and decide to focus solely on physical aspects and dedicate their whole perception of me on that. In this case, women may also focus on the physical but pay attention to small details that may go unnoticed (e.g. freckles, smile lines etc). This could go either way.

I believe that there is no wrong or right way that each gender could focus on the description of one's appearance. The same goes for personality, the description could really depend on my mood at the time or the questions that are asked.

Please describe yourself as if you were the character of a novel written twice: once by a man and once by a woman...

Responses given by Megan McClelland, contributing writer at The Psychology of Fashion, via Instagram.

Megan's character from a man's perspective

So, I think if I was a supporting character in the story written by a man, that I'd likely fall into the "girl next door" trope. Where my entire existence is centered around the proximity to the guy. I would be there as a supporting love interest. I'd also be unaware of my beauty, kind, present, smart and a good listener. I may have issues at home that are brought up, but they're never really fleshed out. My psychology isn't explored, because I'm there to support his growth - not the other way around.

Megan's character from a woman's perspective

If a woman wrote a story about me as a side character, it might be that we are best friends. That we're like in love with one another and know about each other's career/life ambitions. We tell each other everything and support one another. The reader would get to know about my fucked up drama and how it effects me in my life, the same way as the reader would know about hers.

Megan's note:

Being written from a CIS straight narrative, I would be described as a "love interest" in the man's whereas I would probably be described as a "bestie" or "life partner" in the woman's.

Interview with Lauren N Johnson, writer for Yes Gurl, conducted via email:

1. As a writer, what do you like the most about fashion magazines and what, on the contrary, would you change?

What I value most about fashion magazines is that for me they are a source of inspiration and aesthetic pleasure. Although, I would change the lack of inclusivity in terms of the products advertised and the models used in the spreads.

2. As a woman, do you feel adequately represented in fashion?

I do not feel adequately represented as I have found little to no resemblance of myself in the women I see, as is often the case.

3. A study conducted in 1995 showed that women that read fashion magazines would like to weigh less, and are often less satisfied with their bodies than women who read news magazines. Why do you think the survey led to this result? Have you ever felt pressured to look a certain way because of an article you read or a picture you saw on a magazine?

I believe the survey led to this result because it is often clear that fashion magazines aim to create an idealized depiction of what is considered beautiful and desirable. At the end of the day, fashion magazines showcase what is considered appealing to the public, and so in order to be desirable women will want to replicate these appearances. I have experienced pressure to look a certain way in the past from looking at images of women in magazines, particularly with face shape and bone structure - I definitely wanted prominent cheekbones at some point!

4. Bella Hadid starred in Vogue Italia March issue. Pictures of the model with no make-up on were plastered with the words ‘bella vera’ (true beauty in Italian) and some readers went mad, claiming you’re not “bella vera” if you underwent plastic surgeries and altered your true beauty. Some people also reflected on how such marketing could have a negative impact on young girls and their self-acceptance. Please, share your opinions on this subject.

I think that if an image is constantly marketed as beautiful and desirable, you will eventually end up believing that it is true and that that is the only way to achieve ‘true beauty’. Especially now since these images are easily accessible to young girls via social media, it can be hard for them at such a young age to distinguish fantasy from reality. I agree that this can be quite damaging.

5. During an IG live, a fan asked Gigi Hadid how it was possible for her not to have a tummy, and Gigi simply explained that she couldn’t see it because of the angle and the baggy clothes she was wearing that day. British Vogue had its personal take on that reply, claiming the model was purposely disguising her bump with her fashion choices. That’s how Gigi clapped back. Would you have reacted the same? Does this episode make you reflect on the kind of woman fashion magazines focus on?

The fact that this is an issue in question says a lot about the lengths that fashion publications and models go to in order to hide aspects of their appearance to create illusions. This scenario definitely makes me consider publications’ motivations behind the types of models they want to promote and how much they conceal for the sake of fashion, desirability and marketing.

6. If you could give life to your own fashion magazine, how would you structure it and what kind of message would you like to convey with it?

If I had my own fashion magazine I would make it less about beauty and more about comfort. I would show ways in which style and comfort go hand-in-hand without the need for compromise so that women find no need to feel insecure about themselves and their appearance.

Interview with A, writer, editor and content creator via email:

1. As a writer, what do you like the most about fashion magazines and

what, on the contrary, would you change?

I like the wide variety of interesting and current topics they cover related to fashion, beauty, health, wellness, arts and so on. I also enjoy that they feature inspiring and extraordinary public figures and/or new faces. If I could change something, it would be the overly photoshopped and edited unrealistic images, as well as stereotypical representations.

2. As a woman, do you feel adequately represented in fashion?

Most of the time I personally do feel like I am adequately represented in many ways.

3. A study conducted in 1995 showed that women that read fashion magazines would like to weigh less, and are often less satisfied with their bodies than women who read news magazines. Why do you think the survey led to this result? Have you ever felt pressured to look a certain way because of an article you read or a picture you saw on a magazine?

I think the survey might have led to this result because of the fact that back in the 1990s the fashion magazines were, in general, more conventional and there was less representation of different body types. While reading some magazines, I also remember having felt that certain beauty standards were being imposed on us women.

4. Bella Hadid starred in Vogue Italia March issue. Pictures of the model with no make-up on were plastered with the words ‘bella vera’ (true beauty in Italian) and some readers went mad, claiming you’re not “bella vera” if you underwent plastic surgeries and altered your true beauty. Some people also reflected on how such marketing could have a negative impact on young girls and their self-acceptance. Please, share your opinions on this subject.

I agree with the public opinions and reflections mentioned in the question, as I also think that true beauty isn’t something that is strategically created or achieved by plastic surgeries and/or makeup, photoshop, Instagram filters etc. It is something that simply is just there. Something that is in the eye of the beholder. That being said, I also don’t support cyberbullying, and think that everyone, including public figures, has a right to their own personal decisions, opinions and actions when it comes to their life and body - which should be respected no matter how radically different than ours.

5. During an IG live, a fan asked Gigi Hadid how it was possible for her not to have a tummy, and Gigi simply explained that she couldn't see it because of the angle and the baggy clothes she was wearing that day. British Vogue had its personal take on that reply, claiming the model was purposely disguising her bump with her fashion choices. That's how Gigi clapped back. Would you have reacted the same? Does this episode make you reflect on the kind of woman fashion magazines focus on?

I don't know how to answer this question, since I cannot connect with it.

6. If you could give life to your own fashion magazine, how would you structure it and what kind of message would you like to convey with it?

I would focus as much as possible on topics such as sustainable and responsible fashion, minimalism, natural and ethical beauty, mindfulness and self-compassion practices in order to accept and embrace ourselves the way we are, the way our bodies are. I would like to convey and underline the wisdom that we as humans are all different, yet also all the same - and that's the true beauty.

Zoom conversation with Emma Bell, interpreneur and founder of The Barre:

A: Okay girl! Let's do this. So you are an entrepreneur...

E: I am! Just keep telling me that.

A: (laughs) you are indeed! So, I wanted to interview you because you're creating an inclusive brand. I was on your brand's IG page, and I love that every two pictures there's a quote, inspirational quotes. What's the reason behind the choice of including words on an Instagram account?

E: I feel like I had to. Creating a cosmetics label is different than building a jewelry or a fashion brand, were you post a picture of jewelry or a picture of fashion, whatever that is. It's a lot harder to make this kind of changes into people's lives. You kinda have to try to infiltrate different aspects of their lives, whether that's going down, like, the healthy, positivity body movement, or if it's mindfulness, wellbeing, like yoga, there's so many different aspects. You just have to pick different things. And also, everyone

loves a good, quality quote, especially now. They can work like a "pick-me-up" of some sort.

A: I think the best one that you posted is Another's beauty is not the absence of your own beauty

E: Yes, I really liked that one! Because I feel like we're always comparing... she has really nice hair, I don't have that. And it's never something like She has that and I have this, or something like we both have this, it always comes to I don't have that. A negative comparison.

A: I know! I was actually writing about this in my thesis. Last March, Vogue Italy had Bella Hadid on the cover of the magazine, with the two words 'Bella Vera' at the bottom of the picture. And people went crazy.

E: Here's the problem with fashion magazines: you can never see your own beauty in there, you always give a look and all you see is the absence of your own beauty. It just makes me really sad. Why don't we push for women's values and accomplishments more? We are more than just pretty faces and... we are not objects! We have depth to us, we are not just a certain level of beauty. Why don't they ever tell stories about women with substance to it? For example, I love Wired, but it is so male dominated, even when you put a female CEO in the cover, the 90% of it is still about male...whatever, and it's frustrating.

A: I totally agree. Another issue is that when the media talk about business women, they often tend to talk about them in such a sexual way. The stereotypical sexy girl in a suit who's bossy.

E: Also, why do we have to label ourselves? Why do we have to call ourselves 'female boss' or 'female CEO'. You're a boss, period. I don't care if you're male or female. It just baffles me. She's a boss, she's absolutely killing it, she doesn't need anything else attached to that.

A: And you wouldn't do that with a man. You would never say, like, a boss...

E: A boss dude! (laughs)

A: (laughs) Exactly! You would never say that. Okay, now going back to your brand. The thing that I love the most about it is that it's all about inclusivity: in the pictures you share you have black women, curvy women,

pictures with “flaws”. And I think that this is really inspiring, and what true beauty is all about. I don’t think it’s easy to give a definition to that, but let’s try this. Is a true beauty a top model that underwent surgery? And if she is, what are we?

E: I don’t know how to define beauty. I tried to do it for one of my reports and it’s just...impossible. And when you go look for the different definitions of beauty, you just get confused. I love the one that I did find from about the 1700s, and I think it was one of the most accurate. It was something along the lines of ‘whatever or whoever provokes you feelings and beauty within you, then you found something that is beautiful to you’. This definition doesn’t belong to a series of features that you are supposed to have to be beautiful. It basically explains that beauty is such a subjective thing, and I really liked that. But then, how do you translate that into today language, I suppose? I don’t know. Bella Hadid, Kendall Jenner are beautiful, But they’re not the only kind of beauty out there.

A: Right. I feel like the best thing to do would be to include as many people as you can in the conversation.

E: Exactly, exactly. I don’t want this to sound wrong, but I’m always trying not to have too many white people in the content that I post, because we’ve had our time. I don’t mean that in a bad way but we know we exist, so let’s bring forward other people. Let’s just give them a voice and a platform. But it’s hard because some people might still think that I’m doing that to “thick my boxes”, you have to try to find a balance. You know when you post a cute picture and then you decide to use a filter, but then you’re like “Am I trying to change this picture? But this is a really cute filter”...you know what I mean? Everything...you need to think everything through.

A: It’s definitely complicated. Because I feel like you want to make everyone happy, but as you said, at the same time, you don’t want to come off as someone who’s trying to be inclusive just for the sake of it.

E: You just have to accept that along the way you’ll be upsetting people, people that will disagree with what you say. It’s just not a one size fits all thing. So then I’m like: how can you fit all the diversities of the world into one thing?

A: Why did you think it was time for the industry to have your inclusive brand now?

E: For me, it came just like a personal thing. This is just what I’m passionate about and what I care about. To be honest, 90% of us have been in a situation where we have been told that we’re not this and we’re not that. From social media, fashion magazines, whatever that is, we all experienced that to a certain extent. When I used to teach dance, 3/4 years ago, I used to teach to these girls from 2-3 years old up until they were like 16. They were so innocent, and beautiful and sweet. But then they turn 10-11 and they start to say something like “oh my god, I need to buy this make-up”, and they use snapchat filters...you know what I mean? They all create their own accounts on social media, and now there’s also TikTok. I mean, you’re just 10, and you’re worrying about how you look on social media. That’s not a society I want my kids to grow up in. It scares me almost. They’re almost solely driven by the way they look, and they don’t understand they are way more than that. I don’t care if you have lips like Kylie Jenner, I don’t care. The problem is: what are they gonna be like in 10 years time? There always comes a point where you say “wait, but I’m not like that”, and that’s what scares me.

A: True. Another thing that scares me is this silence behind plastic surgery. People don’t talk about that and they just pretend they woke up like that.

E: That’s the problem: I don’t care if you had your lips done or whatever, just be transparent. Don’t lie about that.

A: I also think that if they were open about it, they could start a conversation. “I did this because I felt insecure about this part of my body...” and it can create this kind of community where people can be open and support each other.

E: Exactly! We are all so different, and there’s no point in trying to look all the same. We’re never gonna be Kim K, so let’s all just stop trying to be like Kim K. For my dissertation I studied how body ideals have changed through time, and how we changed from the Kate Moss body ideal, to nowadays beauty standards. About that time America Vogue released the cover of Serena Williams, so I did a comparative study on how now we are more like ‘let’s champion strength, let’s champion curvier bodies with a thigh gap, with toned bodies and abs’, which is great but it also led to girls who instantly went vegan, and are all about clean eating, and that do a 10 miles run in the morning, and do 6 abs work a day...there’s no balance. You go from an extreme to another. It’s like ‘okay, so we have just done the sickly dead thin, so now we’re gonna do the super super healthy, amazing human

being'. It's such like a yo-yo. Women are killing themselves by trying to go from a beauty standard to another.

A: It's exhausting.

E: People don't understand that Kate Moss still looks like Kate Moss, not like Kim K...

A: And she's still beautiful!

E: She hasn't tried to be the new ideal of beauty, no matter what fashion magazines say.

A: I guess the core issue is that we have never been taught to be ourselves no matter what, and we have never given that awareness that yes, we would have been exposed to so many options in our lives, but what matters is to accept our beauty and any other kind of beauty that exists, without trying to emulate them.

E: Why don't they teach us in schools how to take care of our mental health or body issues? Why isn't that a thing? I was talking to a friend of mine the other day and she was like 'why have we never been taught about consent?' They teach you how to have safe sex, but they never talk about consent and the importance of being able to say 'yes' or 'no' to people and stand to that. Why are we not equipping our next generation with the tools that they need to manage this turbulent world we're growing up in? With social media, it's way worse than it used to be years ago.

A: It definitely is. Well, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with me. It was really helpful.

E: Do you have anymore questions?

A: No, I think I have everything I need.

E: Alright, thank you for the interview!

A: Thank you! I hope yo see you soon

Interview with Natalja Safronova, director of photography (worked published in VICE, Tatler, ELLE, Vogue CS and Campaign magazine),

conducted via email:

1. Laura Mulvey, feminist film theorist, coined the expression “the male gaze” to indicate that cinematic way of shooting movies through the eyes of a heterosexual man. By adopting this point of view, female personas are always portrayed as supporting characters that do not enrich the plot in any way. They are just there to satisfy the male protagonist’s sexual fantasies and desires first, and then the ones of the men who are watching the movie. Have you ever watched a movie or looked at a photo that was shot through the male gaze? How did that make you feel?

I am familiar with 'the male gaze' both in theory and have noticed it many times in practice. It is something I am always conscious about when I take on new projects. As a Cinematographer I often work with male directors and quite often I let them know that certain shots are objectifying or portraying a female in a very shallow manner - like the female character is only an object of passion for the main character, but doesn't have a journey of her own. I then ask them to reconsider how they want to portray their characters and perhaps add some more roundedness to them.

Unfortunately there are still plenty of examples around us made these days, which objectify women, often while hiding behind the word 'empowerment', while propagating same old male gaze. Being empowered shouldn't mean feeling sexy and wanted - being empowered has many many more meanings that women should discover for themselves.

I often get quite angry and upset whenever I see another full blown 'male gaze' picture these days, I feel like this is something we should have left in the past long ago.

2. Does a female gaze exist? And if it does, what does it look like in photography and videography?

I feel like we are still in the early days of the 'female gaze', as a lot of work created by females even when trying to portray empowerment and strong women, still abides the same rules as the imagery created by men - it still feels like women are performing in front of the camera for men/society rather than showing us other aspects of their personalities.

I think the world is moving in the right direction, but it will take us females some time to really write our narrative and stop worrying about what men

think about us. I guess it is ultimately down to both photographers/filmmakers and their models/actors to achieve images that can be described as female gaze.

A few examples of visual artists who I feel understand female gaze very well are Laia Abril, Lalla Essaydi.

here is an example of something I have shot, which I believe to be shot with a female gaze - <https://vimeo.com/380874320> (it's not my best work, but I believe it is an example of female gaze)

3. These two pictures (Kilye Jenner x Terry Richardson; Klara Kristen x Harley Weir) were both shot by two female photographers, yet the point of view seems the one of a man. The gender of the photographer then, can contribute but it is not decisive for the creation of the male gaze in visual culture. Why do you think some women would still go for the male perspective when portraying a woman? Do you believe it happens consciously or unconsciously? If you had to retake the same two pictures from a female gaze, how would you take them?

The Calvin's example is clearly coming from the brand's usual imagery - it has always been very sexualised and even if they are trying to be pushing boundaries, they are still doing it in a very sexualised way. Unfortunately, with a brief like this, it is often hard for a photographer, whether it is a she or he, to produce imagery that represents female gaze. If there was a chance to redo this shot, I would have gone for something much more subtle, like asking a model to flash a touch of the underwear on the bum and have a different facial expression, perhaps something subtle and playful.

The burger image is much more problematic - basically every aspect of it is pure objectification - the angle, the pose, the hands and nakedness - it has very little to do with burgers to start with. I guess if I were to redo it, I would focus much more on the burger. It is clearly selling the burgers to men rather than women, hence such sexualised imagery. I guess I would have to change the whole concept entirely to make it not feel like male gaze.

4. When taking a picture or a video of a woman, do you usually think of how she can be perceived once the picture/video is ready to be watched by an audience? Do you think it takes more considerations than shooting a man?

When photographing and filming women I do tend to put more effort and consideration about how they look like and how it will be perceived. On the one hand, there is always an expectation for women to look more beautiful - which means in film we tend to light women with softer light, add diffusion filters, so their skin looks more pleasing and pick angles and lenses that are flattering. This is often an expectation in the industry - it may come from clients and actresses themselves, as women tend to be more conscious of how they look on camera (this may have to do with further work opportunities and them feeling strongly about how they want to be portrayed).

On the other hand, while I do try and make women look as flattering as possible, I need to take into consideration what their role in the film is and what's the moment in the story. For example, if a woman is crying, perhaps this is not the time to make her look as beautiful as she can be. Actresses often look really beautiful in films when they are crying - and I do not look like that at all if I am in tears! Which means, cinematographers often overdo flattering techniques in film and beautify moments, which are not necessarily that beautiful and perhaps require a more realistic depiction.

And of course, there is a consideration of how the female characters will be perceived by the audiences. This means picking the right combination of angles/performance/costume/lighting, etc, to make sure they are portraying a full rounded character, rather than just an object that is pleasing to look at.

I believe it is a lot easier with portraying men, as they do not have as much pressure from the society to look their best every single second of the day.

Survey conducted on Instagram using IG Polls

Total participants: 26

Female: 15

Male: 11

1) Do you agree with the statement "Fashion magazines hyper-sexualize women"?

75% - 'Yes' (all female)

25% - 'No' (3/4 male and 1/4 female)

2) Do you think fashion magazines properly portrait women?

100% - 'No'

Because...

“Most of them portray rich, young, thin, white women and the same old beauty standards”

Chloe Fabbri, 22 year-old female

“They portray only one kind of woman and body type. They aren’t inclusive enough”

Elena Monti, 23 year-old female

“Women aren’t all the same and there is a need for a diverse representation”

Paolo Sbaraglia, 22 year-old male

“They never look like the “normal” girl and set unrealistic beauty standards”

Matilde Fariah, 24 year-old female

“They give false ideas of them as something that the majority of us are not!”

Saffron Earls, 23 year-old female

“They create an idealized idea of women”

Carlotta Dattilo, 24 year-old female

“They try to make them unrealistically perfect for their brand image”

Heather Texter, 27 year-old female

“They show a filtered version of women and men through the magazine’s lens rather than reality”

Emma Bell, 20 year-old female

“They are not real because they’re not supposed to in fashion, so fashion should change its media purposes”

Lucilla Pasini, 23 year-old female

3) Has a picture that you have seen on a fashion magazine ever made you feel self-conscious?

99% - ‘Yes’ (all female)

1% - ‘No’ (male)

Additional notes:

“Victoria’s Secret pictures used to make me so upset as I thought that was

the only thing guys wanted.”

Saffron Earls, 23 year-old female

“Of course, seeing touched up photos where women have no blemishes, stretches marks etc.”

Heather Texter, 27 year-old female

“Yep. Usually every pic makes me feel ashamed of my body”

Marta De Angelis, 24 year-old female

“Yes, especially when I was a teenager, because they depict unreal standards as relatable, but they are definitely not relatable at all. That’s why I would focus on changing fashion communication purposes which, again, are NOT delivering us relatable standards, but rather ‘dreamy’ worlds”

Lucilla Pasini, 23 year-old female

Interview with Savage X consumer and model Garlind Anagho conducted via email:

A: What is about Savage that made you say “I need to buy it!”?

G: As mentioned from my Vogue Magazine feature, I gravitated towards Savage X because of its inclusivity and the new changes it brings to the lingerie industry. A lot of women and girls who buy from their favorite lingerie brand at some point dream of modeling for them. However, it is rare to none that they will actually model for that brand. As a certified fitness trainer for FITNESSWITHFEMININITY a brand focusing just on women’s fitness, would have never thought I would star in a major lingerie brand campaign. Doubts such as I am not tall enough or have the model physique starts to set in because of what other brands and the media portray.

A: Do you have any other lingerie by other brands? Do they make you feel like Savage does?

G: I own and have owned other lingerie brands but the feeling I get do not compare to the moment I have on Savage X. Savage X wants to share its customer and their perspective on how their pieces make them feel on their social platforms.

A: Do you think there are other lingerie brands that are as inclusive?

G: From the top of my head, I can’t even think of another brand that visually

pushes for body positivity and executes it well. Savage X stand by their mission to embrace everybody type.

A: Do you think Savage offers a good balance between price and quality?

G: The garments are not so costly to compare to others. They aim to be affordable for everyday citizens without breaking pockets. For me, I really enjoy their VIP program and the perks that come with it. However, for those who do not have a membership, I promise every dollar is worth spending. The pieces are eye-catching. You can also tell a lot of work goes into each design and the themes are even more perfect. Have you seen the August release? That is why I think people keep wanting more.

A: What is the woman who wears Savage X like?

G: A woman who wears Savage X is bold, free, and CONFIDENT. Before and after winning the competition, Savage X made me feel like family. Not for once did I feel like a stranger because they appreciate individuality and uniqueness.

A: What do you think of Savage marketing strategy to feature not only models but also customers on their social platforms?

G: Their idea of featuring not only models but also customers on their social platform is brilliant. I think that is the best way to engage with society. I am happy to say I am a customer who starred in their SavageXSummer campaign.

A: Why do you think the brand is so successful?

G: There could be other factors that make the brand successful but I would like to attribute it also to their connection with customers. Being the face for the brand SavageXSummer campaign was mind-blowing. I occasionally have to remind myself because I dreamt of all this last year. I am just happy it was Savage X. I hope to do more work with the brand and team in the future.

A: Personally, I love that Savage X is all about what I call the personal gaze, in the sense that it creates pieces that demand to be looked at and appreciated by the owner first, and then by whoever she wants to share some intimacy with, if there's any. What do you think about this shift Rihanna created in

the way women purchase lingerie?

G: I 100% agree, because at the end of the day lingerie has a certain level of empowerment to self first. To conclude, I think Rihanna and the team have done a fabulous job letting women embrace themselves first before another person. In the past, this wasn't the case because lingerie is often linked to the idea of pleasing a partner. I am so excited about what is to come next from the brand in general.

All the signed Consent Forms for the interviews that I have conducted can be found by clicking on the link below. The interviewee who asked to remain anonymous, only signed the document with her initials.

<https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1iAYZZ2EIHOTM5jgVatElzHhlt95pyxbq>

List of pictures

Image on page 7: Martindale, Dean (2020) Taylor Lashae;

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Image on page 40: Richardson, Terry (2017) Kylie Jenner for her 2017 calendar;

*Image on page 42: Weir, Harley (2016) Klara Kristen for Calvin Klein *I__#inmycalvins* campaign;*

Image on page 47: Sorrenti, Mario (2020) Rihanna for i-D Magazine;