

Where once images of women's bodies dominated the visual landscape, today the bodies on display in advertisements and magazines are as likely to be male as female. **Rosalind Gill** explains why.

A quiet revolution has been taking place in visual culture. Barely-clothed men stare down at us from hoardings, muscular hunks exhort us to work on our 'six-pack' from the pages of *Men's Health*, *GQ Active* and the like, and even the 'serious' broadsheet newspapers have their own men's fashion pages where male superwaifs model the hottest new styles from Paris or Milan. In just over a decade, men's bodies have gone from near invisibility to hypervisibility.

However, it is not simply that there are now more images of men circulating, but that a specific kind of representational practice has emerged for depicting the male body: an idealised and eroticised aesthetic showing a toned, young body. I am not suggesting that men's bodies have not been depicted as attractive before – clearly they have, and heterosexual women and gay men have swooned over Cary Grant, Humphrey Bogart, James Dean and any number of *matinée* idols. But what makes the current moment different is the way in which the male body is presented – specifically, the coding of the body in ways that explicitly give permission for it to be looked at and desired.

Many of the critiques made by feminists of the depiction of women's bodies now apply to the representation of men's: photographs are cropped to focus on one part of the body; particular body parts or features are fetishised (often the upper torso) and the use of lighting and other techniques serve to objectify the body, rendering it as an eroticised sculpture rather than a thinking, feeling person. In short, the portrayal of men's bodies in recent years constitutes a disruption of conventional gendered patterns of looking in which, to use John Berger's famous expression, 'men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at'. Today, perhaps, young women are looking back and increasingly young men are watching themselves being looked at.

The *locus classicus* of this kind of eroticised representation of the male body in mainstream media was 'Lauderette', an advert for Levi's 501 jeans which was first aired in the UK in 1985. The advert featured Nick Kamen undressing down to his boxer shorts in a late 1950s laundrette, against the soulful soundtrack of Marvin Gaye's 'I heard it through the grapevine'. What was so

striking about this advert when it was first produced was that it represented Nick Kamen's body in an explicitly sexual and highly eroticised way. The camera followed his striptease – intercutting it with looks from the people in the laundrette – and lingered on his smooth muscular torso in a way that had previously been reserved for women's bodies. The advert provoked a huge amount of discussion in the advertising industry, and among journalists and academic commentators, and arguably launched a mode of eroticised representation of the male body that has subsequently become routine and taken for granted.

The catalysts for this decisive shift in visual culture were many and varied – and date from the 1970s and early 1980s. On one hand, a variety of popular movements from feminism to popular psychology to environmentalism were pressing the case for a reinvention of masculinity along more gentle, emotional and communicative lines, and there was a growing appetite for a 'new man'. Feminism challenged many of the binaries at work in Western thought, including the elision of women with nature and the way that femininity, but not masculinity, was seen as defined and constrained by the body. It argued the case for understanding identity or subjectivity as embodied – something that was reinforced by the growing men's health movement and the increasing interest in alternative and complementary therapies which treated the whole person rather than just illness or symptoms. Additionally, the gay liberation movements in Western countries were gaining in confidence. The economic significance of the 'pink economy' was helping to produce an increasing range of representations of the male body in gay magazines and popular culture – and part of the shift can be understood in terms of these 'going mainstream'. Different musical subcultures in the wake of punk in the late 1970s also opened up space for different kinds of representation of masculinity, and for more ambiguous gender presentations (for example, Prince or Boy George).

The shift also had significant economic determinants. Retailing underwent dramatic transformations in the 1980s with a trend towards conglomeration, as well as the massive expansion of out-of-town shopping centres and a growing promotion of shopping and consumerism in general. Indeed, shopping emerges as one of the key leisure pursuits of citizens in many Western countries. Retailers, marketers and magazine publishers were keen to open up new markets and had affluent men in their sights as the biggest untapped market of high spending consumers. Style magazines like *The Face* helped this enterprise by producing a new visual vocabulary for the representation of men's bodies, and this too opened up space for eroticised practices of representation. In his book *Hard Looks*, Sean Nixon explains how *The Face* cultivated a myth that it vetted advertisements on aesthetic grounds ►

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men & their bodies

and had been known to refuse adverts simply because they were not stylish enough! While untrue, this myth had a powerful impact on the development of more chic and eroticised representations of men by advertisers keen to reach the affluent male readership of *The Face*.

What, then, are the characteristics of this representational practice? Rather than a diversity of different representations of the male body, most belong to a specific generic type. In *Men in the Mirror*, Tim Edwards argues that the models are generally white, young, muscular and slim, usually clean-shaven (with perhaps the exception of a little designer stubble), and they have particular facial features which connote a combination of softness and strength – strong jaw, large lips and eyes, and soft looking, clear skin. This combination of muscularity/hardness, and softness in the particular look of the models allows the representations to manage our contemporary contradictory expectations of men and masculinity as strong and powerful but also gentle and tender – they embody, in a sense, a cultural contradiction.

There are strong and persistent patterns of racialisation to be found in the corpus of eroticised images of the male body in popular culture. White bodies are over-represented, but they are frequently not Anglo-American or northern European bodies, but bodies that are coded as 'Latin', with dark hair and olive skin, referencing long histories of sexual 'othering' and exoticism. Black, African-American or Afro-Caribbean bodies are also regularly represented in the highly eroticised manner, but these bodies are usually reserved for products associated with sport, drawing on and reproducing cultural myths about black male sexuality and physical prowess. In contrast, the bodies of South Asian men are rarely represented in this way, in turn reinforcing racialised myths about their supposed asexuality.

This transformation of visual culture has produced a growing number of anxieties about men. There are specific concerns about the impact of these kinds of idealised representations on men's self-esteem and body image, with questions being raised about potential increases in eating disorders, steroid use or body dysmorphia among men. Some commentators, however, cast the net more widely to speculate about whether, in an era when boys are doing less well in school, when the notion of the career is in decline, and when families and intimate relationships are in crisis, the body has become the sole source of stable identity for increasing numbers of young men. Has working on the body and styling the body become one of the 'projects of the self' in late or post-modernity? If so, what does this mean?

These are questions about which journalistic speculation is rife and empirical evidence is hard to come by, so it was against this backdrop that a recent social psychological research project based at LSE set out to investigate young men's embodied identities. The study, conducted by Karen Henwood (now at the University of East Anglia), Carl McLean and myself drew on

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interviews with 140 young men. We talked to rock climbers in North Wales, gay men from Manchester's gay village, heterosexual 'lads' out clubbing in Newcastle's Bigg Market, guys pumping iron in London's gyms, a small group of self-identified travelling gypsies, and, of course, that staple of academic research, students. We wanted our sample to be as diverse as possible in terms of race, ethnicity, class background and sexuality and we also wanted it to include men with a range of different kinds of body awareness – though unfortunately the sample did not include anyone with a serious disability.

One myth the research shattered is the idea that men find it hard to talk about intimate matters. Before conducting the research we were told repeatedly by well-meaning friends and colleagues that we could expect our interviews to be very short: men were not going to talk about their bodies. In fact they did – at length and in fluent and articulate ways. Using as prompts images of the male body taken from current men's magazines, we asked for reflections on the rise of body culture and their sense of their own embodied identity against that backdrop.

The dominant media story that men feel besieged and pressurised – as captured in the expression that 'men are the new women' – found some support, but men also talked about their anger, desire or indifference to these images. In fact, eight different responses or subject positions were identified, many of them inhabited simultaneously or in quick succession by young men. There were occasions on which some men talked about commonalities between their own embodied experiences and those that have previously been culturally associated only with women; where they described themselves as inoculated against the pressures of these representations by secure intimate relationships; where they personally rejected emotional reactions and experiences while projecting them on to other men. Perhaps not surprisingly, gay men and straight men had different relationships to the new representations of men's bodies, but another key axis of difference relating to a rural versus a metropolitan identity was less predictable.

Overall the research showed that the relationship between the transformation in visual culture discussed here and contemporary men's subjectivities is complicated and fluid – not reducible to any one singular experience of pressure or anything else. The cultural, political and psychological implications of the shift are ongoing and incompletely known; this research has begun the task of exploring them. ■



Dr Rosalind Gill

is a lecturer in gender theory and convener of the MSC programme in gender and media at LSE. Read more about this research project at www.fathom.com
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