A genealogical approach to idealised male body imagery

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Introduction

Over the last two decades there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of images of men in popular culture. Where once images of women dominated advertising and magazines, increasingly men's bodies are taking their place alongside women's on billboards, in fashion shoots, and large circulation magazines. 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: namely an idealised and eroticised aesthetic showing a toned, young body. This, we will argue, is a new phenomenon. We are not suggesting that male bodies have not been presented as desirable before; clearly they have, and heterosexual women and gay men have swooned over the years over representations of Fred Astaire, Cary Grant, James Dean and hundreds of matinee idols. What is new- and culturally and historically specific - however, is the ways in which the male body is being presented: specifically, the coding of this body in ways that give permission for it to be looked at and desired. Men's bodies, it has been argued, are now coded – like women's – 'to be looked at' to use the awkward but insightful phrase current in film studies (Mulvey, Visual Pleasure; Cohan & Hark, Screening the Male; Screen; Jeffords, Hard Bodies)[1]. That is, the ways that men's bodies have begun to be represented over the last twenty years constitutes a disruption of conventional patterns of looking in which, in John

Berger's famous phrase, 'men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at' (Berger, Ways of Seeing, 47)[2].

The aim of this paper is to explore the reasons for the emergence of this new representational practice. It is, we argue, a complex social, economic, political and cultural phenomenon, not reducible to any single cause or determinant, but the outcome of a variety of overlapping and contradictory shifts and changes. Here there is space only to begin the process of 'unpacking' and identifying those multiple determinants, with the aim of producing an outline of a genealogy of this representational practice.

There is a danger in doing this that the specificity of particular kinds of representation may be lost or glossed over -- so, for example, representations of the male body that are constructed to highlight an intense vulnerability may be conflated with more muscular masculinities which owe a clear debt to gay bodybuilding culture. Clearly, more detailed and differentiated analyses are needed which will refine our understandings of the nature of the different ways in which representations idealise and eroticise the male body. However, it is worth highlighting -- as others have done (Edwards, Men in Mirror; Nixon, Hard Looks)[3] the extraordinary similarity of many images of the male body circulating in contemporary mainstream popular culture (e.g. men's health magazines, underwear and fragrance advertising). Moreover, our own study of young men's responses to these representations (Gill et al, Tyranny)[4] suggests that only a minority make significant distinctions between the types of image, and most see them as representing a generic style. Indeed, several

respondents suggested (only half joking) that all the images of young, toned, muscular bodies in contemporary magazines and adverts were in fact photographs of just one man!

The characteristics of this kind of representation may be described as follows: the models are generally white (black models are still largely confined to music and sports imagery, and clear patterns of racialisation are evident); they are young (under 30); they are slim, toned and muscular; they are 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, soft-looking, clear skin (Edwards, Men in Mirror).

Why, then, has this specific way of representing the male body emerged at this particular historical moment? We have identified eight different factors to be explored in this 'history of the present'.

1. Feminism and new social movements

Clearly, one key influence upon the way in which masculinity is regarded and presented is feminism. Feminists' interrogation of conventional assumptions about gender relations and their problematisation of 'traditional masculinity' have had a seismic effect upon popular culture and social relations. Through the influence of feminism many taken for granted aspects of masculinity were

questioned, with forums as diverse as women's magazines and talk shows echoing feminist criticisms of traditional masculinity as distant, uninvolved, unemotional and uncommunicative. Since the 1970s, these critiques gave rise to a great appetite for a new kind of masculinity, which would encompass many traits previously thought of as feminine – emotionality, intimacy, nurturing and caring (Chapman & Rutherford, MO; Seidler, Rediscovering; Connell, Gender and Power; Kimmel, Changing Men; Hearn & Morgan, M,M, and ST)[5].

Additionally, feminism sought to deconstruct some of the binary ways of thinking through which gender was understood -- particularly the elision of women with the nature, and the ways that femininity (but not masculinity) was defined and constrained by the body. Some of feminists' energies have been concerned with overturning the binaries altogether (e.g. Butler, GT)[6], whilst others tried to generate a recognition that we are all embodied subjects -- echoed by a growing men's health movement that recognised the costs to men of ignoring this.

At its most basic, then, feminism has helped to make men's bodies visible to themselves and others, and to begin revisioning gender relations.

The rise of a particular style of humanist psychology within the late 1970s and 1980s reinforced campaigns to 'reinvent' gender. This popular psychology took as its focus the notion of the 'whole person', and was concerned with good communication and with validating different parts of the person and

different styles of interaction to those valued traditionally. Assertiveness was promoted above aggressiveness or passivity and there was an increase in interest in personal therapy, and in a range of alternative or complementary approaches to medicine or healing. Taken together, these movements put the idea of the whole person or the self-actualised person on the cultural agenda. Significantly, the whole person was seen as the androgynous person, as extreme masculinity and extreme femininity came to be seen not simply as socially restricting or damaging, but also as unhealthy (Chapman & Rutherford, MO).

Linked to this trend was the rise of what have been called New Social Movements. Included in this category (as well as feminism) are the peace movement, anti-racist organisations, environmental movements, movements for sexual liberation, and a variety of identity-based political organisations focusing on disability rights, post-colonial struggles, transgender identities,etc.. What this loose categorisation of groups share is both a disillusion with conventional class-based party politics, and a commitment to new forms of organisation and struggle, based less upon representative democracy and more upon direct action. Taken together, the New Social Movements disrupted the very understanding of what politics meant, showing that everyday life was irredeemably political. They also promoted a different model of the individual, as someone connected not simply to a family, but to wider communities and to the environment. In doing so, we would argue, they sowed the seeds for a revisioning of traditional masculinity, and helped to create a cultural milieu in which a ‘new man’ could emerge and flourish. The

nature of that ‘new man’ is highly contested: he represented, for some, a shift to a more emotionally and domestically involved, pro-feminist nurturing man; for others, a more individualistic and narcissistic man whose bathroom shelves groaned under the weight of skincare and fragrance products; and for others still he was the ‘Great pretender’, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a way for men to hold onto their power whilst appearing to have changed (see Chapman & Rutherford, MO; Mort, Cultures; Nixon, Hard Looks, for discussions and comparisons with the rise of the ‘new lad’)[7]. Clearly, though, his emergence is centrally connected to the growth of representations of the male body.

2. The rise of the style press

A different kind of influence came from the rise of the style magazines in the 1980s. For years, people working in the fashion, magazine, advertising and retailing industries had fantasised about the creation of a magazine which could be targeted at affluent male consumers - but it was seen as an impossible dream. The main reason identified for this was that men did not define themselves as men, in the same way that women defined themselves as women. Men lacked self-consciousness about their sex (the ‘male as norm’ problem, identified by feminists), and while they bought magazines about cars or fishing or cameras there was scepticism about whether they would buy a title organised around being a man, rather than a specific hobby. A second problem concerned the tone such a magazine should adopt - women’s magazines had long adopted the formula of treating their readers like friends,

with an intimate tone, but this was seen by people within the industry as potentially threatening to heterosexual men.

In terms of understanding the emergence of new ways of representing masculinity one magazine is key - and that is The Face, launched by Nick Logan in 1982. It promoted itself as a style magazine rather than a men's magazine, although the vast majority of its readers were male, and was organised around fashion and music and any kind of social commentary deemed to be chic enough to fit in its pages. Sean Nixon (Hard Looks)[8] argues that The Face developed a new aesthetic: it was not just about style, but it was emblematic of stylishness itself, creating a new vocabulary for fashion photography – a vocabulary, significantly, that extended the notion of style to include fashion spreads of menswear and advertising for body products targeted at men as well as women.

The style press exercised two key kinds of influence, then- first in being the precursor of fashion/lifestyle magazines aimed at men, and secondly in pioneering radically new ways of representing male (generally clothed) bodies.

3. The rise of retailing: masculinity goes to the mall

The rise of the style magazines can in turn be understood in terms of massive changes in the economy that were taking place in the 1980s. There was a

dramatic decline in manufacturing and a rise in the service sector and retailing – itself producing a 'genderquake' (Wilkinson, No Turning Back)[9]. The employment of increasing numbers of people within the retail sector was, however, just one of a number of factors that were changing the structure and meaning of shopping and consumerism (Mort, Cultures of Consumption)[10]. There was a significant trend towards conglomeration within clothes retailing, with five or six companies controlling the high street by the end of the 1980s; a growth in out of town shopping; and a new sense in which shopping was promoted as a major cultural or leisure activity - with the opening of large themed shopping centres, the provision of creches and restaurants in shopping centres, and the promotion of trips to large out of town stores as a relaxing day out. Indeed, studies consistently find that shopping is the main leisure activity of the British (e.g. Cultural Trends; Miller, Acknowledging Consumption; Miles, CCC)[11].

In the 1980s the 'new man' became a new target for fashion companies - men were the new market (Edwards, MM; Hession, Men's Grooming)[12]. This was heralded as a quiet revolution in fashion companies - as men had been considered a market that was difficult to crack, and shopping had always been seen as traditionally female. The move was associated with the meteoric rise of a few companies - most notably Next and the Burton group. Next, in particular, launched in1986, traded images of the city and of share dealing and city gents in its clothes - striped shirts, brogues, double breasted suits. As such it was trading on images that were circulating elsewhere through the privatisation campaigns, the Big Bang, as well as in major 'zeitgeist' films like

Wall Street. Frank Mort[13] argues that Next allowed people to play with these images without commitment. Where once clothes had been a powerful and stable signifiers of social location, increasingly they were worn in more flexible and playful ways, such that men could 'try on' new identities through their apparel- perhaps working as a labourer throughout the week, but dressing like a share-room dealer to go out in the evening, and wearing the apparel of a 'country gentlemen' (corduroy trousers and a Barbour jacket) to visit the garden centre at weekends.

4. New musical trends

Frank Mort[14] argues that this new playful relationship between clothes and identity was the result of a series of changes provoked by punk music and style. With its emphasis on bricolage – the putting together of things that are normally kept apart - for example, Doc Martens and ballet dresses – punk created a space for men and women to be able to play with different self-presentations, and broke down stable chains of signification- such that it was no longer straightforwardly possible to read off social location from particular ways of dressing.

Surprisingly, punk is the only musical movement to have been seriously discussed in relation to questions about masculinity and identity (but see also Hebdige, Subculture; Thornton, Club Cultures)[15]. Yet, it would seem obvious that musical styles have had a profound effect upon masculinity and upon the ways in which men live and experience what it means to be male.

The kind of codification of masculinity in heavy metal, for example, is a world away from the gender meanings encoded in glam rock, which itself differs from the masculinities on offer in reggae, techno, Britpop or ska, to name just a few. Since the early 1980s music videos have facilitated the circulation of multiple images of male stars' bodies- eroticised in markedly different ways, eg. The soft romanticism of Spandau Ballet, the gender ambiguity of Boy George or Prince, the muscularity of NWA, etc… The growing significance of dance culture- both as a live/lived club-based phenomenon – and in its classical and contemporary form is also significant. The impact of musical cultures and subcultures upon men's experience and upon the mainstreaming of sexualised images of the male body is seriously under-researched and would repay detailed study.

5. The rise of the gay movement

Another factor that is central to our understanding of the emergence of new representational practices for depicting masculinities is the growth of the gay liberation movement from the late 1960s onwards. In the UK, there has recently been a proliferation of magazines aimed at gay men, which are no longer only targeted at a gay activist audience. These offer new and explicitly pleasurable representations, not simply those deemed politically sound. This reflects the rising confidence of the gay community – at least in metropolitan areas – as well as increasing corporate recognition of the power of the 'pink pound'. These magazines, together with gay pornography, pin-ups, and particular subcultural styles within the club scene, have had a profound effect

upon representations of masculinity, through a routing that has gone from gay porn through art house photography to advertising (Parsi, Don't Worry Sam)[16]. Notably, they have served to cleave apart the association of masculinity with heterosexuality, and the elision of masculinity with activity, by showing men not simply as active sexual subjects, but also as objects of desire (Mercer & Julien, Race; Creekmuir & Doty, Out in Culture; Simpson, Male Impersonators)[17]. In other words, it is within the gay media that representations of men as erotic objects to be looked at were first produced, and, arguably, what has happened over the two last decades, is that this genre has gone mainstream.

6. The marketing of women's desire

If indeed gay images of men have gone mainstream then this is partly because of the increasing confidence of gay media, but also partly a result of a realisation that representations of men previously confined to gay subcultures are enormously desirable to some heterosexual women. Suzanne Moore[18] has argued that it was precisely the growing visibility of eroticised representations of men outside the gay media that facilitated, or gave permission for, a new kind of gaze among women. She suggests that this constituted a major disruption to the scopic order – the politics of looking - in which old assumptions about subject /object, active/passive were challenged. Rather than simply being objects of the gaze, women have become active subjects who can look as well as being looked at. An important literature in film and photography studies deals with the ways in which

representations of masculinity are designed to disavow homoeroticism: using the 'reassuring' presence of a woman as love interest, excessive violence or humour as their main means (e.g. Neale, Masculinity as Spectacle; Cohan & Hark, SM; Tasker, Spectacular Bodies)[19]. It also details the punishment meted out to women in film whose sexuality is deemed too active or independent. Moore's argument is that this shift makes both the disavowal and the punishment redundant.

This trend in contemporary culture is evident in the new confident tone of women's magazines and models in advertisements (McRobbie, Feminism & Youth Culture)[20] who now look and talk back, rather than simply being passive objects (Gill, G, MR & CP)[21]. It is humorously depicted in adverts like that for Diet Coke in which women queue up for an '11 o'clock appointment' in order to gaze at the toned body of the labourer outside the window as he takes his morning break to drink a coke. The choice of the labourer is interesting because it highlights the reversal that has taken place: where once building contractors ogled and whistled at women, now (it is suggested) women ogle them! (Obviously, we would not want to overstate this point, and it should be noted that the politics of looking still take their traditional form in many advertisements and many situations)

7.Reactions to HIV and AIDS

As we have already shown, the emergence of a new representational practice for depicting the male body is complexly and multiply determined. One other

significant influence must be the impact of HIV and AIDS. Clearly this has had profound effects on the gay community -- and many individuals -- at an experiential level, but it has also been an important factor in generating new representations of masculinity and sexuality that have entered the mainstream. One new representation -- seen best in theatre productions and in the flourishing artistic and cultural activity to which HIV and AIDS gave birth -- is of masculinity as loving, caring and nurturing, exemplified by the many men who have cared for their partners while they are living or dying with HIV. The other important representational shift brought about by responses to HIV and AIDS has been the production of more explicitly sexualised and eroticised imagery. This was partly a response to the inadequacy of early government campaigns (such as Britain's 'Don't die of ignorance' promotion, dominated by large icebergs), and partly as a reaction against the sexual puritanism that HIV and AIDS seemed to threaten -- captured in Billy Bragg's song *Sexuality* by the lines

'safe sex doesn't mean no sex
it just means use your imagination'.

It was also partly a libidinous, life-affirming refusal to equate sex with death, and a celebration of the pleasures of looking at and enjoying the bodies of others.

8. The new cultural intermediaries

Finally, the emergence of new ways of representing masculinity in the mainstream is partly attributable to the rise of the 'new cultural intermediaries'

(Featherstone, PM & CC)[22], in advanced capitalist societies, devoted to discovering, measuring, interpreting and mediating a nexus of psychological and cultural questions about who we are, how we live and what we want. Journalists, researchers, think tanks, marketing people, futurologists or trend spotters, and even academics, increasingly generate knowledge and discourses that come to produce -- or at least become part of -- the phenomenon that they are trying to explain. This can be seen very clearly in relation to contemporary debates about masculinity (as explained below).

Marketing companies (working for a particular client, or attempting to produce information that will be of commercial value to a number of potential clients) produce a report about 'young men today' based -- usually -- upon a small number of focus groups. This is picked up by newspapers who announce the findings as a news story, and then, hungry for copy to fill their increasingly large lifestyle sections, produce detailed commentaries and think pieces on the topic. The debates are then pushed through the 'media echo chamber' (Faludi, Backlash)[23] and the observations about contemporary masculinity take on the status of self-evident truths. In another twist, these truths may then be imported into academic research -- either as 'evidence' that a project should be funded (e.g ‘we are witnessing an epidemic of body dysmorphia among young men that requires examination’), or -- more critically -- to challenge a received wisdom. Meanwhile, more significantly, retailing companies and magazines have digested the findings and are already tailoring their products to take account of the new information about how contemporary young men are changing (softer lines appear in car designs,

fragrances that pick up on the 'new sensuality' are marketed, clothes that cling to toned male bodies 'in all the right places' reach the shops, and so on).

This is a brief and oversimplified account, certainly, but it captures in essence the process by which various forms of knowledge are involved not just in describing the world, but also in producing it. While writing this paper I came across a typical example. Under the headline 'Young men reject old image' an article in The Observer (26 August 2001) reports on a trend survey by Informer which documents a shift away from the 'new lad' to a new form of masculinity described as 'nice bloke' (in brief: happy with equality, serious about work, juggling different commitments). This new incarnation of the young male follows many earlier shifts from 'new man' to 'new lad' to 'soft lad' and so on. In response to the new findings the editor of the 'lad mag' Loaded announces his intention to 'feminise' his publication. The cycle continues...

Conclusion

This paper has pointed briefly to some of the factors that have combined over the last two decades to produce an important shift in the ways that the male body is presented in mainstream popular culture. Obviously, it only focuses on one broad genre of representational practice -- centred on idealising and eroticising parts or the whole of male bodies. Men's bodies are presented in a whole range of other ways -- in sports imagery, in music videos, in action films, in news discourse, and so on -- which lie outside the scope of this

discussion. The paper has also not considered how this shift may be understood -- either by young men themselves (see Gill et al, Tyranny)[24] or by others concerned with democratising the scopic order (e.g. to what extent does this new practice represent a transgression of normative masculinity?) (but see Henwood et al, The Changing Man). What it hopes to have done, however, is to have highlighted the complexity of this cultural shift, and to have begun to outline genealogically the elements that have produced it.

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