

# Depictions of Consciously Objectified Women in 21st Century Visual Media



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# Table of Contents

**Introduction:** pp. 1-2

**Chapter 1:** Pornography, Benson's Artbook (2000), pp. 2-8

**Chapter 2:** Television, Girls Next Door (2005), pp. 8-13

**Chapter 3:** Film, The Neon Demon (2016), pp. 14-27

**Conclusion:** pp. 27-29

**Bibliography:** pp. 30-31

## Depictions of Consciously Objectified Women in 21st Century Visual Media

In this essay I will be examining the manner in which consciously objectified women have been depicted in 21st century visual media. The ‘*depiction*’ part is crucial, as I am examining how creators acknowledge objectification in their works, and how they imagine the autonomy of the women they objectify. I am separating this process from how female bodies are objectified in advertisements, which serves a different purpose. My focus is on the (western) cultural outlook on female bodies and how it has shifted in the 21st century. The concept of objectification has become more ubiquitous in discussing female labour:

*“All women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water” –*

meaning by this, not only that objectification surrounds women, but also that they have become such that they derive their very nourishment and sustenance from it. (Nussbaum, pp. 250).

Accordingly, my goal here is to examine how the humanity of the subject(s) is portrayed in the face of acknowledged objectification by creators.

In determining a slippery concept such as objectification, I will be using Martha Nussbaum’s ‘*Seven Definitive Ways to Treat a Person as a Thing*’ as outlined in ‘*Objectification, Philosophy & Public Affairs*’, Vol. 24 No. 24, pp. 249-291 (1995) as a structural analytical tool. Upon analysis of five cases of objectification within literary works, Nussbaum concludes that:

*“at least one of the texts shows how objectification of a kind might be quite harmless and even pleasant... we discover that all types of objectification are not equally objectionable; that the evaluation of any of them requires a careful evaluation of context and circumstance; and that,*

*once we have made the requisite distinctions, we will see how at least some of them might be compatible with consent and equality, and even be ‘wonderful’ parts of sexual life.”*

(Nussbaum, Pp. 256).

Nussbaum further discusses the use of the word ‘*objectification*’ as a ‘*pejorative*’ term, and its relativity to the speakers mental context to what they find “*morally or socially objectionable, usually, though not always, in the sexual realm.*”(Nussbaum, pp. 249)

I have chosen three case studies belonging to different and important outlets of visual media: pornography; television and film. Examined in chronological order of creation: I explore Simon Benson’s 2000 illustrated fetish pornography book, ‘Benson’s Artbook 2000’; the 2005 E! Network reality show, ‘The Girls Next Door’, following Hugh Hefner’s three girlfriends at the time; and Nicolas Winding Refn’s 2016 film ‘The Neon Demon’ a drama following the modelling industry. In each case study I examine the cultural context and manner in which it functions as the objectification of female bodies, “*We need to be able to ask how our judgements of the cases are influenced by larger issues of social context and social power.*”

(Nussbaum, pp 252)

## **Chapter 1, Pornography: Bensons Art Book (2000)**

Benson’s Art book 2000 was published in 1999 following eight previous works illustrated by Simon Benson. I have chosen this as a case study of pornography because its depiction of BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, Masochism) and the fact that it was illustrated, and therefore draws on the imagination and insights of the artist. I also would like to acknowledge that is somewhat removed from the landscape of internet pornography, given its publishing by



niche fetish book distributor, Marquis.

At the time of publication, works devoted to fetish and bondage were emerging from the “dark web” towards mainstream interest, but remained separate from glamorous magazines such as Playboy or Hustler. Its publication came at a time where academic appraisals of pornography (particularly BDSM pornography) were growing more common. A documentary produced by feminist theorists, Susan Rosenkrantz and Jane Caputi commented that the realm of pornography leading from the nineties were

*“ceremonies of degradation, aimed at destroying a person or group’s social status and self-esteem.”*

The criticism referenced the concern that pornography would cause men to further devalue female bodies, react violently to them, and that the mere viewing of pornography was an act of violence in its objectification of female bodies,

*“the strongest statement of this position is that perusing the pornographic image or words already constitutes such violence, that the act of reading or looking is intrinsically demeaning and violent in its ‘objectification’ of the women, or, less likely, the men represented.”* (Wicke, pp 62-63)

The views expressed by Rosenkrantz, Caputi, and Wicke are representative of the concept of ‘*Schaulust*’ or ‘*Scopophilia*’, the aesthetic pleasure drawn from looking at an object or person.

*‘In human sexuality, scopophilia describes the sexual pleasure that a person derives from*

*looking at prurient objects of eroticism, such as pornography, the nude body, and fetishes as a substitute for actual participation in a sexual relationship.’ (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, p. 2036)*

Schaulust is defined as a base urge, animalistic and violent toward its subject:

*“Schaulust is not merely a harmless fascination with moving images and colour, but a terrifying lust, as powerful and violent as the deepest passions, It’s the kind of rush that makes the blood boil and the head spin until that baffling potent excitement, common to every passion, races through the flesh...(Wicke, pp. 30)*

The objectification featured in Artbook 2000 is very intentional: objectification is its very context. Schaulust is present within the images, between figures of punishment and the figures of power. It is a direct representation of the violent objectification described by Rosenkrantz, Caputi, and Wicke. Wicke describes the aesthetics of pornographic films as relying on

*“an underlying metaphor of the body as a machine, and the performers’ interchangeability and anonymity functioning as a ‘material correlative to the ideology they express.’ (Wicke, pp. 35)*

Although Artbook 2000 is a series of illustrations, this analysis is relevant as the manipulation and mechanisation of female bodies that are completely and willfully dissociated from any kind of human persona. Benson’s work, emerging at the millennium, have cartoon like qualities that are deliberately open to interpretation by the observer. .

The first image depicts the mechanised rape of a woman by a machine. She has been bound and gagged, her breasts squeezed into cones, and attached to the machine are two fluid sacks of what is presumably semen. Following Nussbaum's '*Seven Definitive Ways to Treat a Person as a Thing*', present in the work are four of the seven markers. '*1. Instrumentality: the objectifier treats the object as a tool for his or her purposes*'. In this case the objectifier is both Benson who has constructed the image, and the in-universe judicial system/manufacturer, as the word 'TEST' is clear in the background.



The idea of product testing or industrial manufacturing is popular in Benson's work from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it allows for believable environment of sexual exploitation and literal objectification. The second: '*Denial of autonomy: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination*'; third '*3. Inertness: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.*'; and fifth '*5. Violability: the objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that is permissible to break up, smash, break into.*'

are similarly exhibited in this image. In all of Benson's erotic imagery the subject is owned and mechanically abused by a faceless persons/organisations. The woman and the robot are viewed as essentially the same, she is as mechanised in her violability as the machine is in its neutrality.

The second image depicts a waitress resembling a blow up sex doll, whose breasts are filled with Lager, and is essentially a fetishised drink dispenser. In contrast to the first image, instead of installing the body into a foreign device, it installs a foreign device into the body. It is common in pornography of this kind of surrealism to take a piece of the female anatomy and warp it to fit male desire, this is an example of schaulust and the urge the male gaze creates to capitalise on female bodies. The fourth of Nussbaum's objectification markers is relevant, '*Fungibility: the objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with*



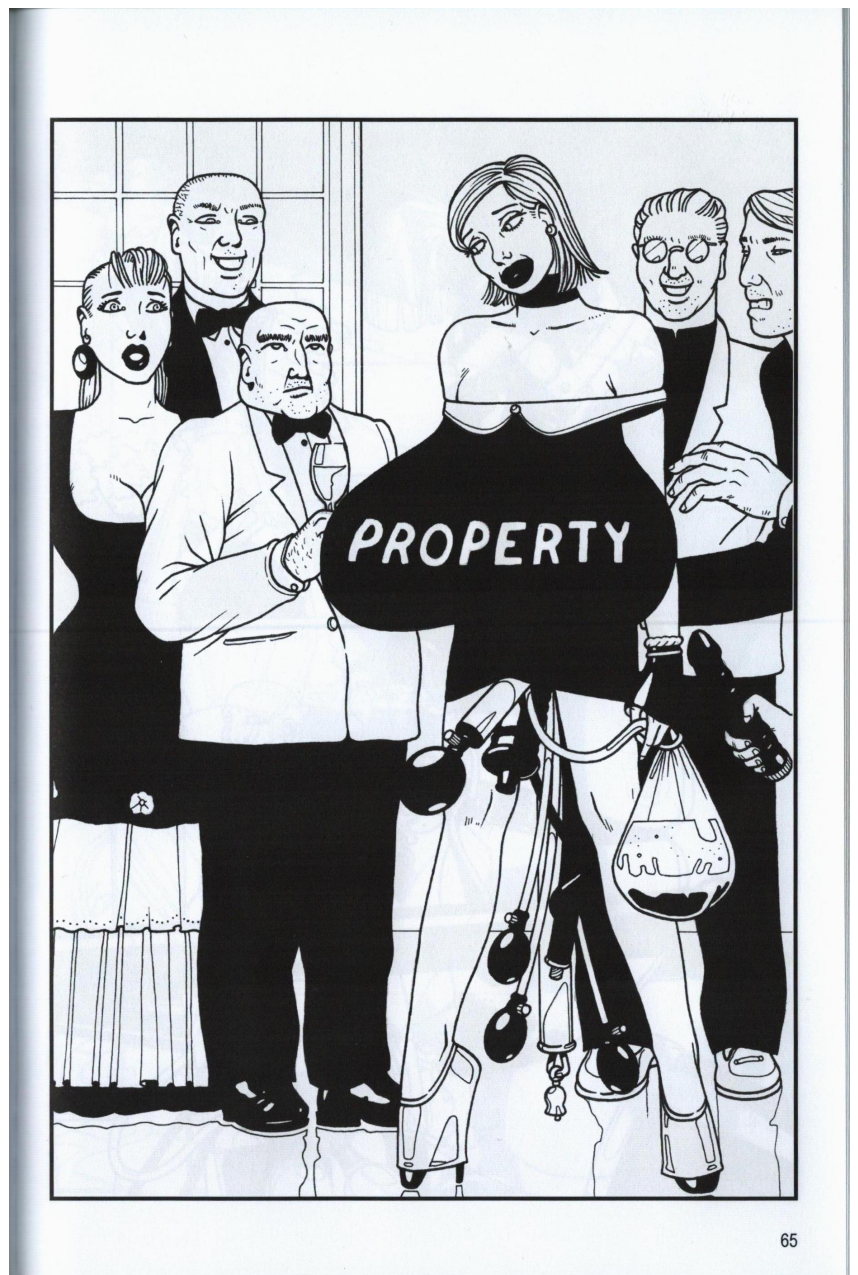
*other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.'* The subject's sexual organs are branded and replaced with lager. It is a fantasy object to fit into a cliched masculine environment, a pub.



*“John Alan Lee calls ‘the social organisation of sexual risk’. One can also call S/M the sexual organisation of social risk, for one of S/M’s characteristics is the eroticising of scenes, symbols, contexts and contradictions which society does not typically recognise as sexual: domestic work, infancy boots, water, money, uniforms and so on.” (McClintock, pp. 224-225)*

The third image is one of few to show several human faces, specifically male. It depicts several men, and one shocked woman, crowded around a distressed looking woman in fetish wear, with several sexual apparatuses peeking out of her dress, with extremely enlarged breasts, with ‘property’ branded across them. It is an example of Nussbaum’s sixth marker of objectification: ‘6.

*Ownership: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.’* It can be read through the book that the women objectified are those that have committed some crime. Benson’s publisher, Peter



W. Czernich describes in the forward, the depiction of female oppression as a reaction to women as

*‘enticing beings, [he] defends himself against their arts of seduction with all kinds of restraints and coercive measures.’*,

and the exploration of male sexual inferiority that subjugates ‘demonic’ female sexuality.

Hence there being a non-violated woman pictured, within Benson’s ongoing narratives in his illustrations: there is reason for rape, battery, instrumentation, mechanisation, etc.. Comparing the fetishised woman with the other woman pictured, the aesthetics of fetishised objectification are present: the fetish heels, the enlarged breasts and lips, and the multiple apparatuses showing out of the woman’s dress.

## **Chapter 2, Television: Girls Next Door (2005)**

The Girls Next Door premiered on August 7th, 2005 on the E! Network , reflecting widespread access to cable TV, and the beginning of the demise of publicly funded terrestrial networks. The initial premise of the show, and the plot of the unaired pilot, titled *‘Hef ’s World’*, was concerned more with the building of the mythology of the Playboy brand: focusing on the many people staffed who acknowledge Hefner as the all-encompassing figure-head. The network chose instead to focus the show on Hefner’s three girlfriends at the time: Holly Madison, Bridget Marquardt, and Kendra Wilkinson, who lived with him in the mansion owned by the PLBY Group.

Despite the premise, its conscious endorsement of ‘polyamory’; and blurred nude scenes, the show was an instant daytime television success. It delivered a resurgence of the Playboy brand, and reintroduced Hugh Hefner to a new generation.

Writing in 1995, Nussbaum likened Playboy to a car magazine, only exchanging the exhibition

of the cars with female bodies:

*“it is sexier to use a human being as a thing than simply have a thing, since it manifests greater control, it shows that one can control” what is of such nature as to elude control.”*

She describes the women in it as readily renewable, fungible objects for male readers, enabling them to live in the fantasy of having achieved the level of prestige and success as Hugh Hefner.

The women in the playboy narrative, as depicted in the series, are essentially accessories to Hefner’s lifestyle and reflect Nussbaum’s description of the magazine.

The first episode attempts to justify the premise that the three women are not playmates (the name dubbed to women featured in the magazine). They are depicted as dating Hugh Hefner because they like him. Then Hefner says,

*“I can’t promise it, but I think I’m going to put you in the magazine.”*

In exploring the topic of lamp-shaded objectification, I have chosen the seventh episode of season one, titled ‘*Just Shoot Me*’. This focuses on centrefolds granted to the women by Hefner in episode one. This is important in as it points to the manner in which the Playboy brand was being rehabilitated and exhibits both active and aware objectification, as the network, was cognizant of the reputation Playboy had prior to the show, and of the air of luxury surrounding Hefner in the media.

To examine the multiple ways in which Madison, Marquardt, and Wilkinson were objectified, I have explored the following: the behind-the-scenes content that would be standard in any feature in playboy; nude scenes for the sake of nude scenes; the three women being observed by onlookers; close-ups on the playboy emblem; and very deliberate shots of Hefner interacting with the women, and also acting as ‘editor in chief’ of Playboy,

(further extending his overhanging presence in the series).

In the ‘nude for the sake of being nude’ aspects of the episode, it is through the framing of the TV show that the second degree of objectification occurs. While already acknowledging them as erotic models, the camera also eroticises their bodies and detaches their sexual organs from the rest of their bodies. As Nussbaum equates Playboy to a car magazine in its objectification, the TV show uses the first marker of Nussbaum’s seven ways to treat a person as a thing. Here, the line between pornography and television is blurry, as Rosenkranz noted that pornography’s arousing facets with regard to objectification are stripped by the actobjectification:

*“ it really ends up being about desensitisation and dehumanisation.”* (Rosenkranz, Caputi, 2007).



With zoom-ins of body parts: the show is acting as a proxy for the magazine.

The behind the scenes aspects illuminate a standard playboy photo set, however aside from the creation and choices made for the pictorials themselves: the flagrant nudity is addressed by the



three mains. A strange and wrong-headed approach of female sexual liberation that was touted by Playboy, Madison remarks about the cliché said by many playmates following their first shoot:

*“It’s a bit of a Playboy cliché because every centrefold says it, but they always say ‘When I first came in to do my shoot I was so nervous, and I didn’t want to take off my robe, and by the end of the day I was walking out of the studio naked!’ But that’s the way it is. Because everyone on staff is so professional, they act like they’ve seen it all before, they act like you do have clothes on, so why would you want to put anything back on?”*

Wilkinson also remarks:

*“The staff look away any time they come around and we’re naked... that’s fine with me.”*

As Barthes described in his essay, ‘*Striptease*’, the alluring features of the striptease vanish once the woman is stripped naked

. *“We may therefore say that we are dealing in sense with a spectacle based on fear, or rather on the pretense of fear, as if eroticism went no further than a sort of delicious terror, whose ritual signs have only to be announced to evoke at once the idea of sex and its conjuration.”* (Barthes, pp. 97)

The close up shots of the nude figures and the behind the scenes views are contradictory. They detach the woman from her sexual organs, but then overlay her voice. The notion of ‘*cooked sex*’ is relevant here . As the camera zooms in on the staff, they appear desensitised to the sight of

sexualised nudity. ‘Cooked sex’ is what Williamson describes as a referent system that is never fully shown, only ever eluded to. This is also a larger theme within Playboy. While it shows fully nude shots, it does not deny the spectator his fantasy claim on the woman shown.

*“Thus again the illusion that sex is revealed, while in fact it is concealed behind its own references.”* (Williamson, pp. 120)



The allusions to the Playboy Bunny logo and Hefner’s persona are also tied by the mythologisation of the Playboy brand. Both are fictional creations constructed to represent Playboy. The branding worn by the three mains is relational to Nussbaum’s sixth marker for objectification, ownership. As Danesi explains the concepts of positioning and ‘image creation’, the bunny logo worn by the mains is targeting the young female audience, who are actively encouraged to endorse the premise by purchasing the show’s Playboy merchandise. The fun, blonde, beautiful playmates speak to the individuals who see their own personalities

*“represented in the lifestyle images created by advertisements for certain products.”* (Danesi, 183)



Hefner is partially clad in a robe throughout the episode, despite his role as: as Editor in Chief. The show's cameras often frame him as a father-like figure to the women, despite the multiple references to his sexual relationships with them. The continuous glorification of Hugh Hefner is evident as the centre of control, both in his role as editor -in chief and arbiter of good taste with respect to the womens' sexuality:



*“When someone is trying to be sexy it looks a little stupid.”*

### **Chapter 3, Film: The Neon Demon (2016)**

The Neon Demon (Refn Winding, N., 2016) is the most self-reflective and meta-textual of the case studies I have chosen. Its emphasis on the modelling industry as a vacuous and cannibalistic system, provides self-aware depictions of objectification. It explores the realms of the media’s tendency to fetishise youth, and to recognise a certain ‘*potential*’, or ‘*star quality*’ in preteen and teenage girls.

The plot follows Jesse, a sixteen year old aspiring model who moves to Los Angeles from Georgia to pursue a career after the death of her parents. Her first photoshoot with amateur photographer, Dean, provides the definition of Jesse’s vulnerability and desirability as depicted in a stationary pose. Jesse’s relationship with Dean is innocent and platonic. This is important as the film depicts many types of female sexuality, and describes Jesse’s sexuality from different perspective.

Through Dean, Jesse meets Ruby, a professional makeup artist who also immediately recognises Jesse’s desirability in her vulnerability. While watching Jesse through a mirror, Ruby asks, “*did you just get to LA? You’ve got that look... that whole deer in the headlights thing is exactly what they want.*”, Ruby is shown aligning herself to Jesse as a watchful, parental figure. However, through Ruby’s character, the viewer is slowly introduced to range additional perspectives from maternal and protective, to same sex desire and ultimately to fetishism (necrophilia) .. Throughout the film, various characters express desire towards Jesse, and on all occasions she rebuffs them, as her sexuality is externalised/ objectified. In this regard, Dean represents the least exploitive and objectifying engagement.

The film depicts a scene in a motel, in which a cougar has entered Jesse’s room . This

symbolises predators stalking Jesse without her knowing, including the brooding photographer McArthur, who instructs Jesse to remove her clothes, and he douses her in gold paint. Jesse accepts this as part of the process of objectification that is required to succeed. MacArthur's behaviour is amplified by Ruby who warns,

*"I think he makes a lot of promises to young girls, I don't think you should be alone with him."*

But Ruby is also a predator. She represents the false nurturing, but ultimately destructive aspects of the industry.

Two additional models are introduced : Gigi and Sarah, who along with Ruby emphasise Jesse's beauty and freshness from the objectifying perspective of the industry: Ruby poses the question, *"are you food, or are you sex?"*

Jesse's modelling agent reinforces how the industry operates in commodifying her, emphasising her sexual allure in her extreme youth and vulnerability:

*"When someone asks I want you to say you're 19, always 19, 18 is too on the nose... people believe what they are told."*

Jesse seems to recognise and accept the emptiness expected of her by the industry. But this is coming from a loss of agency. She considers her beauty to be the only asset she has. Under the full moon, Jesse describes the moon as a big eye, watching her.

*"When I was a kid I would sneak out into the roof at night, I thought the moon looked like a big round eye, and I would look up, and I'd say 'do you seeme' and I'd stay out there for hours, sometimes I'd fall asleep, just dreaming "*

The comfort she keeps in being watched is paralleled with her ease in front of a camera.

In an early scene, Gigi and Sarah discuss Jesse's burgeoning success:

*“You have to admit there is something about her.” “Like what, she’s young and she’s thin.” “No it’s more than that, she has that thing.”*

This is confirmed when Sarah, placed in the same casting as Jesse, is completely invisible to the casting agents, and when the fashion designer Robert Sarno is enthralled by Jesse.

Following this casting scene, Jesse encounters Sarah who is distraught, which she expresses by breaking a mirror, symbolising an act of destruction against herself. When Jesse tries to comfort her, Sarah declares:

*“Don’t do that, pretend that you don’t know. People see you, they notice. Do you know how lucky you are? I’m a ghost. What’s it feel like to walk into a room and it’s like in the middle of winter; you’re the sun?”*

Sarah has recognized that while both teenagers offer themselves up to be objectified as a career Jesse has an inherent ‘*wow factor*’ visible to those in the industry. Jesse, in recognizing this, replies honestly,

*“It’s everything,”*

The broken shard of the mirror cuts Jesse as she leans back, again, demonstrating the destructiveness of the objectification of both young women. Sarah does not break her gaze despite the injury, showing that she has acquiesced to the rules of the industry. In doing so, she lunges forward to suck Jesse’s blood, an act that horrifies Jesse, who remains vulnerable and naïve despite her success, and her apparent acceptance of the process of objectification.



The representation of Ruby as a destructive predator is further elucidated by the disclosure that her glamorous life as a professional makeup artist is supplemented by her job as a as a mortuary makeup artist. Her position as an intermediary between the living and dead is contrasted with Jesse as a fresh, bright star: the epitome of life itself, while Ruby's job is to paint corpses to make them to look alive, another form of objectification.

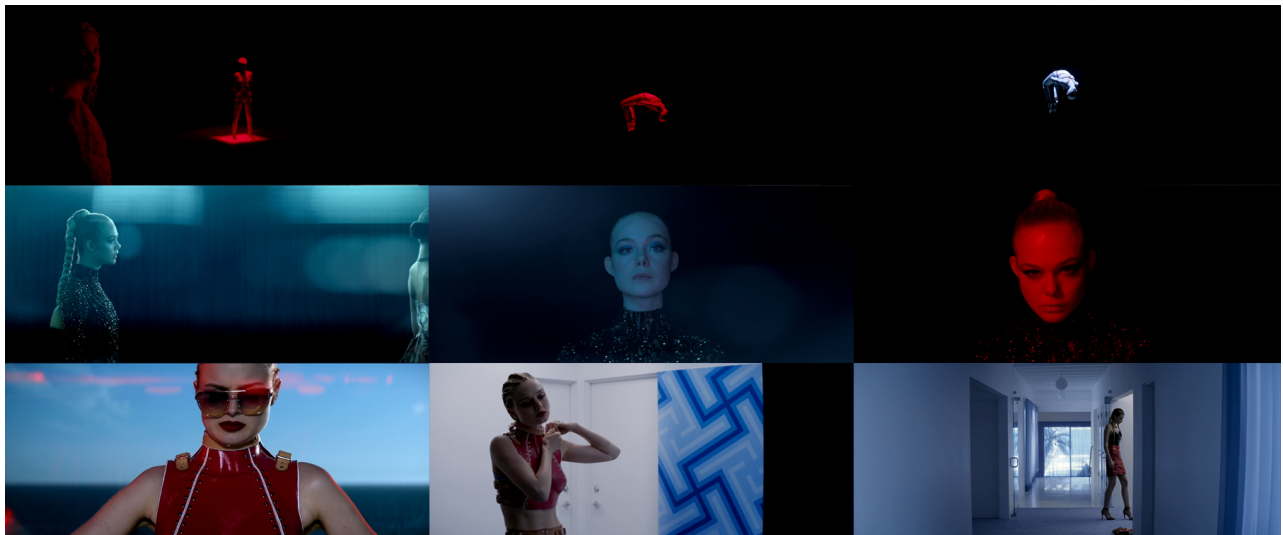
The film continues to symbolise how the industry objectifies women, as Dean (who is presented as a naïve counterpart to Jesse- wishing to break into the industry but without the necessary skills to do so) is advised by the more cynical motel owner:

*“Just wanna make sure you’re getting something out of this deal, cause if you’re not: I got plenty other girls here. Take a peek in room 214 if you get a chance. Rented this week to a girl from Sandusky Ohio, runaway, 13 years old. Real Lolita shit. Room 214 gotta be seen.”*

The “Lolita narrative” is frequently referenced in the film, in an explicit form by Hank, but throughout the film there are many references to the sexualisation of teenage girls. Hank's reference to Lolita here reinforces the prevailing misinterpretation of Lolita as a story of a young girl who seduces an older man. When he refers to a child as ‘*a Lolita*’ he is describing his (and the industry's) affinity with the character of Humbert Humbert, the unreliable narrator who paints Dolores ‘*Lolita*’ as a willing and active participant in his sexualising her.

Hank's image of Dean as Jesse's lover and in this context, his perceived ownership of her, along with the girl in room 214, (simply because they are alone and staying in his motel) reflects his affinity with Humbert's attitudes. The objectification via ownership of both girls by mere existence is also pertinent. Hank portrays his motel as a brothel.

As Jesse's character develops, she is depicted through a three-way mirror resembling a prism. She suddenly sees what others see: particularly Ruby, Gigi, and Sarah. Her sexuality is emblazoned and suddenly narcissistically based, as she kisses her reflection on each side of the mirror. She is wearing a braid. But in the prism, it is evocative of a bondage strobe light show.



Jesse is now complete . She has in effect been reborn, fully objectified, and comfortable, in a world as defined by the industry. She exhibits anewfound sense of control, as she now begins to behave like the other models. As she sits with Dean at an afterparty, she and Gigi are compared to one another by the successful fashion designer Sarno. Sarno alleges that true beauty cannot be made. He is referencing Gigi who has had multiple cosmetic surgeries, and called 'the bionic woman' by her doctor, (a further objectification which resonates with Benson's illustrations described in my first case study).

Dean, who remains naïve and lacking in understanding about how the industry operates, tries to convince Jesse to leave with him. but she cannot. Jesse revels in the knowledge that she is the most beautiful woman in every room she walks into. Dean challenges her as to what she's



becoming,

*“what are you? Is that what you want? You want to be like them?”*

But Jesse has been transformed. Her objectification has been complete. She says

*“I don’t wanna be them, they want to be me”*

Jesse now perceives herself as the full encapsulation of the highest beauty currency. She is brimming with the potential afforded to her by the way people have reacted to her body.

The film further explores this with a dream sequence. Here, Hank, the motel-owner, lets himself into Jesse’s room while she’s sleeping, and slowly pushes a blade into her mouth: waking her. This is clearly a phallic symbol, but it is also deadly. Hank forces her to open her mouth wider as she is gagging on the knife. Jesse awakes from the dream on the floor. This sequence implies that her control has been illusionary.

The climax of the film develops as Jesse returns to Ruby. She is depicted as framed against the wall, as if she’s an infant in the womb. Ruby responds

*“Come here, you’re gonna be safe.”*

Jesse inherently trusts Ruby as a safe maternal figure in an industry that is exploitative and destructive. Ruby has capitalised on Jesse’s naivety. She has used her gender and knowledge of the industry to groom Jesse.

The next scene shows Jesse having moved into a mansion with Ruby. Ruby brushes Jesse’s hair, an act that Jesse interprets as an expression of maternal love, but Ruby sexualizes the act. She begins to get more intimate with her, and tries to kiss her. This scene demonstrates that while Jesse seems to have been engaging with her surroundings as an adult with agency, she is really still a child, and becomes confused and distressed when Ruby changes the terms of engagement from maternal love to a sexualized act. This scene explores the various aspects of female

sexuality, and the exploration of different types of engagement with the teenage girl, ranging from a platonic engagement (Dean), to an apparent parental expression (the early depiction of Ruby) and then to a sexualized but taboo form.

This theme resonates throughout the film

*“I lied before, I’ve never been with anyone, like that” “I don’t care”* . Ruby repeats this phrase.

Jesse’s sexual availability has been both explored and challenged throughout the film, and her profession and beauty leads those around her to believe that she is an object to be dominated. Her portrayal as a vulnerable, Bambi-like, Lolita-esque, etc. creature flags her as an object to exploit because of her perceived naivety. The theme of forbidden /taboo / objectified female sexuality is further explored in the scenes in which Ruby is working at her job in the mortuary. She begins to molest the corpse she’s working on while manifesting mental images of Jesse. But the film does not depict Ruby as apart of the mental images, they consist only Jesse posing sensually: without any overly sexual activity that reveals Jesse’s body. The film references the very first photoshoot, in which Jesse was stationary. And this is what Ruby has found attractive. It is inexperience and passivity. And when Jesse rejects her, she ruins Ruby’s manufactured image of her.

The final section of the film references Jesse’s perception of herself, which has been determined both by her dead mother’s hostile attitude towards her beauty and her sexuality, and by the changes that have taken place as she has been influenced by the industry. Jesse puts on makeup and a gown, she is at the peak of narcissism: apparently understanding how much her beauty is worth, and yielding to the various perspectives of her objectification: engaging with it as an active agent.

She goes out to stand on a diving board at an empty swimming pool. She says to Ruby:

*“You know what my mother used to call me, ‘dangerous’ .*

She is depicted in the film as hovering from the angle Ruby is viewing her, as if she is a statue of a god.

Jesse continues *“‘you’re a dangerous girl’, she was right. I am dangerous. I know what I look like, what’s wrong with that anyway. Women would kill to look like this. They carve and stuff and inject themselves. They starve to death. Hoping, praying, that one day they’ll look like a second rate version of me.”*

Jesse’s monologue is directly addressing the discomfort and disappointment that models like Sarah and Gigi face with being constantly looked over. The other models then appear, push Jesse into the empty pool, and saunter into it in single file like a catwalk, as Jesse is struggling like a wounded animal.

The scene then switches to Ruby tending Jesse’s grave surrounded by roses, she is again reaching for Jesse through the passivity of death. Here, Jesse is interchangeable with the corpses that Ruby works on. This is the epitome of sexual objectification. Ruby is reflecting the ephemeral nature of Jesse’s desirability, which can never be fully realised either in life or in death.



Meanwhile, the characters of Sarah and Gigi must continue to engage with the industry. The cycle of cannibalisation continues.

As a new photoshoot takes place, MacArthur notices Sarah through the window, and is entranced. Similarly with how he viewed Jesse, he moves in and asks her to model in the photos.

They are in what is similar to bondage wear, and Sara resembles Frankenstein's monster.

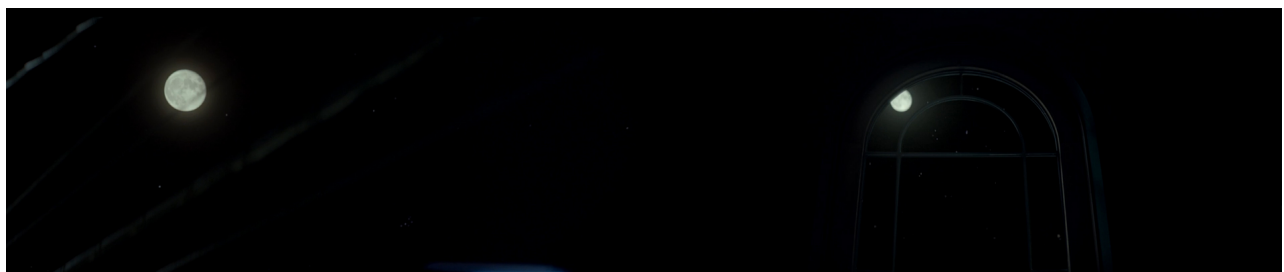
But under the bright red lights, Gigi is clearly disturbed,

*"Gigi, want to tell us what's so interesting? You're staring in the pool. Look in the camera"*

Gigi is constantly reminded of the price that she has been made to pay, as Jesse's perspective is shown again from the bottom of the pool.



Gigi runs back into the house, gagging, she struggles to take off the costume and continues retching. She reaches for a pair of scissors and lacerates her torso. Her slicing into herself is a reference to her previous cosmetic surgery. But here she is being punished by the part of Jesse that lives inside her. Gigi vomits an eye. This is reflected in Sara's glasses *"I need to get her out of me"* Like the moon: in death, Jesse is watching.



Sarah eats what's left of Jesse: her eyeball. She lifts it up to her mouth and is drooling. The film

closes on a view of desert-land, alluding to the idea that nothing grows in the industry depicted because every new crop is harvested immediately.

I have provided a detailed description of the Neon Demon as it is a complex exploration of many aspects of female sexuality. But it is the objectification of this sexuality that provides the main theme of this analysis. The objectification in The Neon Demon displays all seven of Nussbaum's '*Seven Definitive Ways to Treat a Thing*'. It consciously dissects the notions of instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity.

Jesse's reflection is something that is often emphasised. It coincides with her being watched by others, and her watching herself. The image of self is as important as the self in this film, and the "runway show" marks Jesse's change in the way she reacts to her self-image. It is when those around her gauge her newfound autonomy that she is murdered. She is returned to the notion of an item or a tool,





*“and treating an item as autonomous seems to entail treating it as non-instrumental, as not simply inert, as not owned, and as something whose feelings need not be taken into account.”*

(Nussbaum, pp. 260)

She is throughout the film treated with violability, as she is grasped by those who want her.’

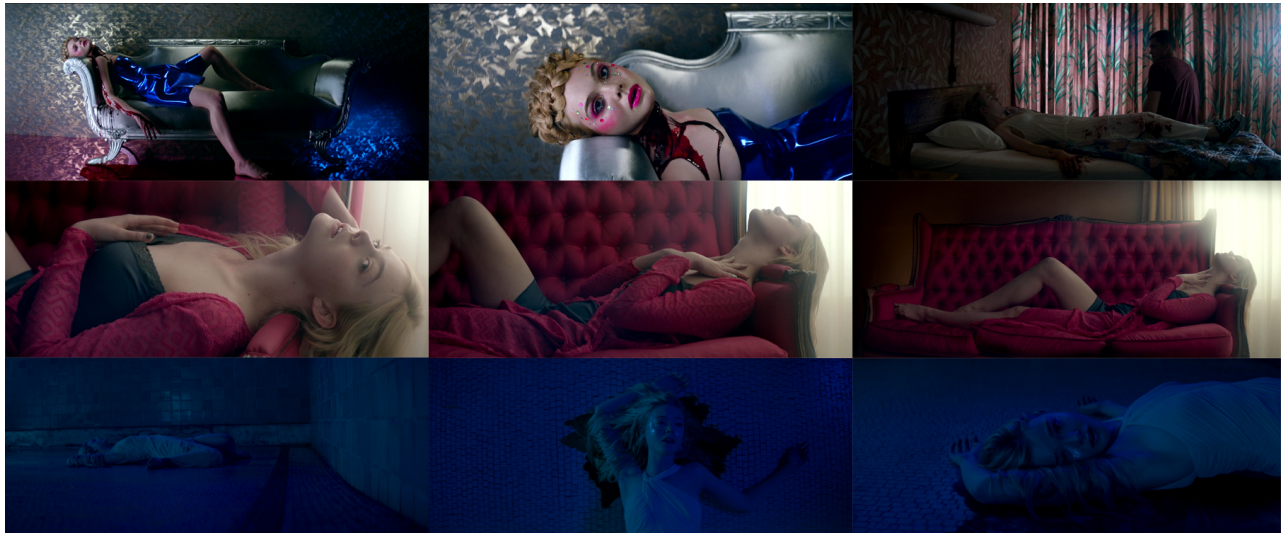


Ruby’s infatuation stems from her objectification of Jesse, she to Ruby is a blank slate: Despite Jesse’s protests Ruby continues trying to have sex with her. Jesse’s rejection to Ruby’s advances leads Ruby to an act of necrophilia. Jesse’s fungibility is shown as she is replaced by a literal inanimate corpse,



*“To both a denial of autonomy - one wishes to dictate how the other person will behave, so as to secure one’s own satisfaction - and also to a denial of subjectivity - one stops asking how the other person is thinking or feeling, bent on securing one’s own satisfaction.” (Nussbaum, pp. 266)*

It is linked with Jesse being posed as stationary, and favourably so.



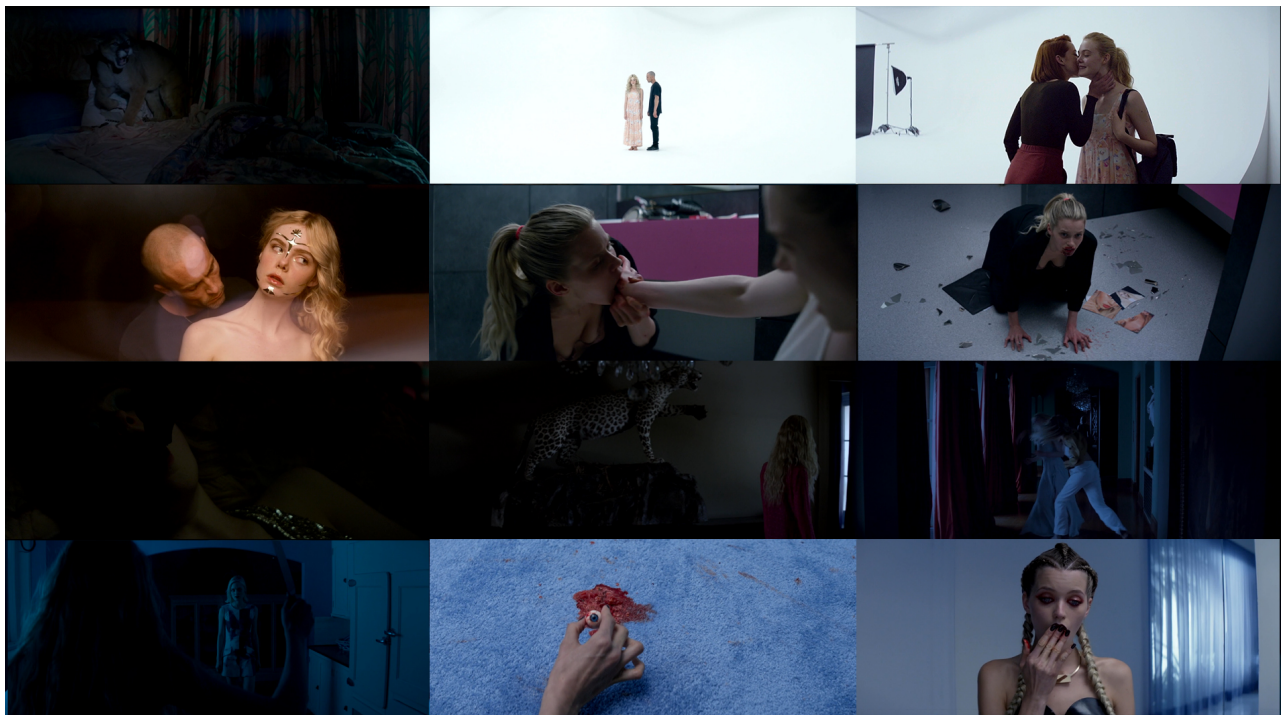
The overall predatory themes recur throughout the film., Jesse is framed multiple times as having a Bambi-like innocence that inspires blood-lust. Her objectification as flesh promotes her assumed inertness,

*“The fact that most objects are inert should not conceal from us, for our later purposes, the fact that inertness is not a necessary condition of either lack of autonomy or instrumentality.”*

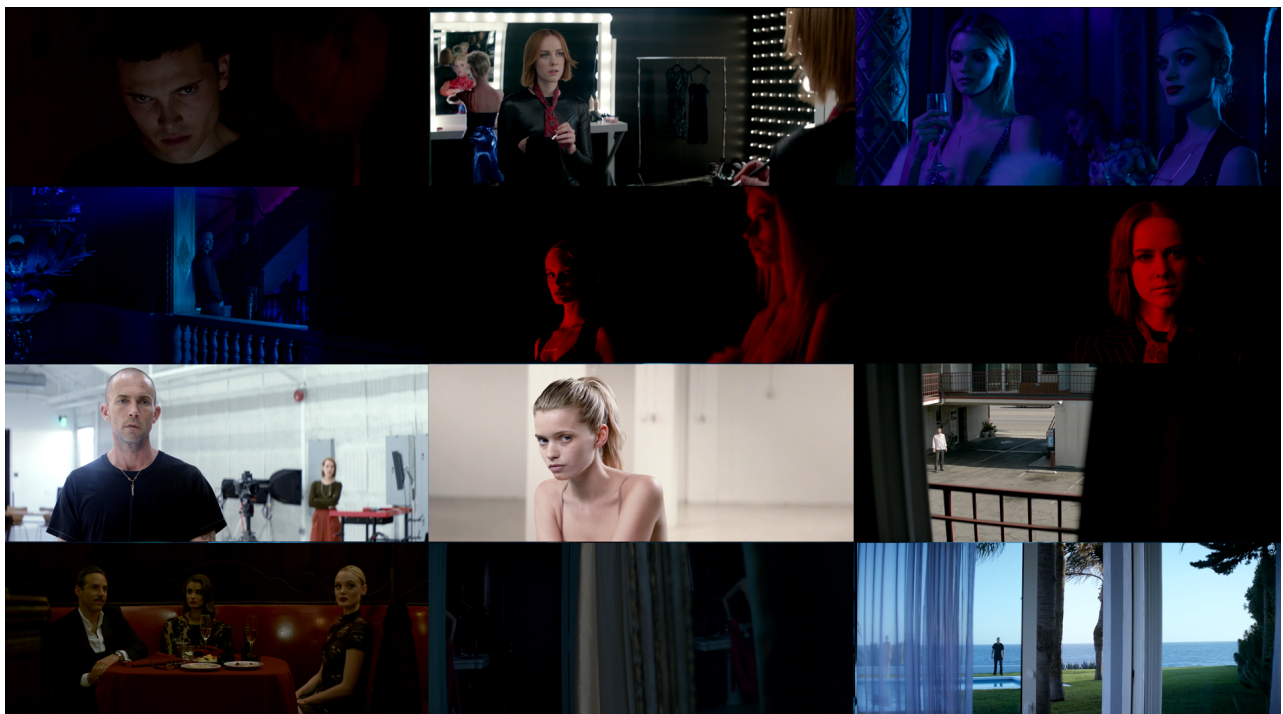
(Nussbaum, pp.260)

Ruby, MacArthur, Gigi and Sarah display animal-like responses to Jesse’s presence. Her interactions with the cougar, and the several taxidermied animals in Ruby’s mansion frame her as prey.





Even aside from those who view Jesse like a ‘meal to be had’, she is watched by everyone who comes into contact with her. Her comfort with being watched is breached with her conversation with Dean about the moon.



It is important to note in Neon Demon, that the men controlling the production of fashion and photography wholly removes themselves from the women they deliberately pit against each other. It is an exercise in keeping legitimacy so as to not disrupt the machine they operate, as Mark Fisher examines Slavoj Žižek’s dissection of Jacques Lacan’s concept of the Other, in



‘Capitalist Realism’ (2009):

*“The Big Other is collective fiction, the symbolic structure, presupposed by any social field... One important dimension of the big Other is that it does not know everything. It is this constitutive ignorance of the big Other that allows public relations to function.”* (pg 49)

It is not a mistake that Jesse is murdered solely by other women. Her cannibalisation speaks to the falsity of the ‘*wow factor*’, and the objectifying eye necessary to find a ‘*spark*’, the ‘*it*’, in a crowd of women who are expected to look like carbon copies of one another.

## **Conclusion:**

I have explored objectification in three forms of visual mass media of the 21st century.

Nussbaum’s assessment on the term ‘objectification’ is that it is a loose cluster-term, and that enacted: it has several different intentions and outcomes. Her judgement that objectification is relative to what an individual finds morally problematic dictates her seven ‘signposts’ (Nussbaum, pp. 258). The three case studies I have discussed approach objectification in what can be viewed as morally objectionable ways. All three sexualise their female subjects with varying degrees of meta-textual analysis.

While the parameters of each media form are different and to some extent reflective of the epochs in which they are generated, common themes can be discerned: which can be analysed in the context of Nussbaum, Fisher, and others.

In my descriptive analysis of the three case studies, the following common themes have emerged: violent objectification; presence of faceless persons/organisations that apply

objectification; denial of personal autonomy; the detachment of female body parts as an expression of fungibility; the incorporation of fetishes and use of taboos; the references to sadomasochism; and the demonisation of female sexuality. Central to the theme in all of these cases is the concept of control.

Even though the themes are common, each case study is also different example of conscious depictions of objectification. Benson's work is overtly sexual in nature and explores the concept of male domination and female punishment as a response to demonic female sexuality. It is all encompassing. The argument posited by theorists such as Rosenkranz and Caputi is that depicting female bodies in such an extreme and objectified way is inherently violent. However it is my view that the device of illustration used by Benson leaves the option for the observer to draw their own conclusions. The cartoonish aspects of the work can be perceived as both shocking and violent, or ironic and humorous. Its origin from the realm of pornography allows many interpretations. It could be perceived, as articulated by Nussbaum, as a non-harmful form of objection.

My second example, *The Girls Next Door*, to my mind: is a far more insidious form of objectification, as it normalises many of the aspects of destructive or potentially violent objectification. The format is presented as normative and leaves no other option for its subjects. It is self-consciously ironic while in reality, its purpose is to rehabilitate and normalise the premise of female objectification that defines Playboy. Its deliberate use of lamp-shading reinforces the male gaze, and objectification of the female form. It is a validation of a patriarchal perspective of society, because of its normalisation and amplification of uncritical female sexual objectification. Compared to the other two case studies, it is both the least interesting artistically, and yet most accessible to the general observer. Rather than being cartoonish or grotesque, it presents itself as a fantasy, and its attending merchandising is designed to attract rather than

repel.

The third case study, *The Neon Demon*, is most overt in its use of violence and exploration of taboo subjects. Like Benson's, its grotesque nature gives it a cartoon-like quality, but unlike Benson there is no potential for humorous or ironic interpretation. In this context, it is the most self-aware. One could interpret the violence depicted in *The Neon Demon* as morally problematic. However, my interpretation is that by its gruesomeness it achieves its meta-textual construct. The viewer is left with an uncomfortable feeling that renders female objectification unacceptable.

The analysis that I have undertaken of these case studies is of course contextualised by my own perspective as a 21st century cisgender female visual artist. The first and third of my case studies are open to many interpretations because they are effectively works of art. And in this context, the analysis provided by Marshall McLuhan is pertinent:

*“All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered... Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.”* (pp. 17, McLuhan),

But this does not apply to *The Girls Next Door*, which is perhaps the most dangerous in its unconscious acceptance of objectification.

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