

Film Review

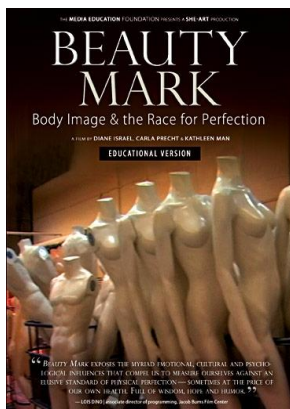
BEAUTY MARK: Body Image & the Race for Perfection

<http://www.beautymarkmovie.com>

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Multimedia Review Editor

Social critics have long criticized popular culture, particularly the media, for its toxic emphasis on women's weight and looks—Beauty Mark treats the subject with uncommon breadth and intimacy.... It's both inspiring and deeply moving.
-Review in Springs Magazine

Diane Israel is a psychotherapist specializing in domestic violence and a professor in transpersonal psychology at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. Her one-hour video saga shares a common struggle with beauty and body shape that many women, especially female athletes, face in American society. When women become athletes, they have to deal with dual stereotypes of contradiction: females are perceived as physically weak and emotionally supportive, and trophy winning athletes as strong, powerful, and physically competitive. The latter stereotype of masculinity is often associated with muscular, rugged, and domineering male athletes. According to Diane, female athletes face the dilemma of assuming the competitive attributes of a sport yet feeling expected to live up to the measure of femininity. Corporate sponsors seek female athletes to promote their products but only if they appear “normal” with a husband, children, and a family pet in tow. Their dress, appearance, and poses must project beauty, on the edge of soft porn, and carefully avoid the issue of being considered a lesbian.



Diane began running obsessively at age 8, and 20 years later her body had deteriorated due to lack of nutrition and thousands of hours of pounding exercise. She competed in marathons with 17 stress fractures, and her bone density was reduced to the level of a 70-year-old woman. She won numerous running events and moved up to competing in triathlons – which demanded proficiency in running, swimming, and biking. Diane said:

I was only 28 years old, and my body had already collapsed. My immune system was totally depleted, and I felt like an empty gas tank. And truthfully my friends were so busy training they did not even notice that I was gone from the sport. I

started therapy for my body and my mind. And I wondered why was I so terrified from being fat. What was driving me to be so thin and at the top?

Diane was chronically unhappy with her body shape and weight and spent most of her youth obsessively exercising while struggling with bulimia, anorexia, and her sexuality. She was raped at age 13 by a stranger on the beach and concealed her victimhood for 17 years and did not menstruate until age 30. Her battle to maintain thinness even when she was chronically malnourished and emaciated was linked to her “race for perfection.” Diane was seeking a body image that department store mannequins have, which she and few women in the world could ever possess. Diane confessed:

I stopped eating when I was 12 years old. I fed my dog my food under the table. I needed to control the chaos in my family. I needed to control my controlling father. I felt scared, lost, and angry. I was afraid of being teased, afraid of not being lovable, of not being good enough. I was afraid of being fat and afraid of being stupid. I really liked feeling empty inside because then I could focus on my hunger and not deal with my emotions. The thing about anorexia and exercise bulimia, which I had no idea I had, is that it keeps you from growing up. Growing up meant to me that I would develop breasts like my mom. I would be this womanly woman, and I didn't want that because my mom represented, to me, mental illness and depression.

Scarsdale, an affluent community in Westchester County, New York, 30 miles north of Manhattan, was Diane's hometown. Her father was a successful academic and her mother a beautiful and talented artist who had three children. Diane had a younger brother, whom she was forced to compete with, and an older brother who was brain damaged and institutionalized for most of his life. The competition for her parents' attention was focused on beating her brother in foot races which her father timed. At age 8, Diane discovered she could get more attention from her parents by becoming the surrogate marathon-running son her older brother could never be and outrunning her younger brother. Once Diane started running, she could not stop until age 30. By her own admission she was on a 20-year exercise binge. Diane began to question her obsession with the race to perfection.



The thrust of this video deals with the manifestations of imposed beauty standards, hence the title *BEAUTY MARK* which merchandisers, advertisers, the media, and even schools overtly and covertly promote. Diane described her experiences as a psychotherapist in Boulder, Colorado, working with clients dealing with body image, extreme weight loss, and obsessive exercise:

Over the last decade, I have worked with a shocking number of men, women, and teenagers with serious body issues. I have had clients who had miscarriages because they starved themselves, clients who lost their hair and teeth from bulimia, clients addicted to cocaine, and women who ate so little that they grew facial hair to keep them warm – all in the name of thinness.

After a visit to Strategy One, a research group for Dove's 2004 Campaign for Real Beauty Worldwide, Diane began a personal and professional inquiry into the reasons females allow themselves to be objectified and measured against beauty standards few possess or will ever attain. Strategy One surveyed 3,000 women in 10 countries, asking them how they felt about their bodies. From a list of positive terms of appearance, only 2 percent chose "beautiful." The remaining 98 percent of the women surveyed felt they were attractive but never reached the apogee of beauty, and 68 percent strongly agreed that the media set unrealistic standards of beauty. The media focuses on defining beauty as youthful thinness, which results in exporting anorexia to other nations, including Bhutan which did not have a word in its national language (Dzongkha) for this Western fashion disease.

Diane interviewed leaders in the fashion industry, especially those who manufacture mannequins. In the world of mannequins 80% are female, which confirms that women are the primary consumers of fashion. Even male mannequins are completely sculpted, toned with chiseled muscular bodies that fewer than 1 percent of the population possesses in America, a nation of chronically overweight people.

The number of obese American adults is greater than that of individuals who are overweight according to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). Data from 2005-2006 indicate 34 percent of Americans are obese, compared to 32.7 percent who are overweight. In May, 2008 the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) reported that 32 percent of US children were overweight, 16 percent obese, and 11 percent extremely obese. Data show racial and ethnic obesity disparities for women but not for men. Non-Hispanic Black and Mexican-American women were more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic White women. According to marketing experts, Diane was told that "fear sells product." Frightened women who believe they can avoid looking older and remain sexy will buy cosmetics and clothes and spend billions on diets, health clubs, and exercise regimens.



At the conclusion of her video saga, Diane interviews high school students of color in New York City who struggle with accepting themselves compared to the super-thin models, mostly White, in the world of fashion and beauty. Diane also joined a family reunion with her divorced parents and two brothers to discuss how the "race for perfection" affected them. Diane's mother believed beauty was inside and outside of each person and it takes both to be beautiful. Diane continues balancing her need to exercise with using workouts as a form of self-discipline, no longer an addiction. She imparted wisdom on healing:

I thought that in this journey of healing, that I would arrive somewhere. And somehow, everything would be okay. Like, enlightenment is this place that you get to and there's all this light and you're so okay. What I've realized in this healing journey is it's so a journey. There's no finish line. Everything's a process. Everything's a moment. Everything's being awake and falling asleep.

Everything's a light and a dark. Everything is just an evolution. There's no finish line. The finish line is the gift of life.

The inspirational life story of Diane Israel, a recovering bulimic, earned a 9.0 on a scale of 10 for meeting or exceeding multicultural educational standards in terms of expressing social issues, engaging dialogue, demonstrating self-reflection, illustrating transformational education, aligning content to the National Health Education Standards (NHES), and applying appropriate mechanics of cinematography, dialogue, pacing, sound, location, and editing.

References and Resources

BEAUTY MARK: Body Image & the Race for Perfection (for purchase)

THE MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

60 Masonic Street, Northampton, MA 01060

TEL 800.897.0089 | info@mediaed.org | www.mediaed.org

BEAUTY MARK: Body Image & the Race for Perfection (website)

<http://www.beautymarkmovie.com>

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention – Obesity and Overweight

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/overwt.htm>

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty – Resources for Teachers

<http://tinyurl.com/yaucx8>

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty Worldwide

<http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/>

The International Journal for Eating Disorders

<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/34698/home>

Minority Women: The Untold Story of Eating Disorders

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/thin/minorities.html>

Minority Women's Health – Overweight and Obesity

<http://www.womenshealth.gov/minority/>

Public Relations Problems and Cases – The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty

<http://tinyurl.com/y9tjuwq>