

**MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE**

Beauty Mark

Body Image & the Race for Perfection

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NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and to guide their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In this courageous, deeply personal film, Diane Israel examines American culture's toxic love affair with thinness and physical perfection. Israel, a Boulder-based psychotherapist and former champion triathlete, tells the harrowing story of her struggles with eating disorders and obsessive exercising, and examines how her competitive drive and our ideals of beauty almost killed her. The film lends context to Israel's personal odyssey with insights from athletes, body builders, fashion models, and inner-city teens, as well as prominent cultural critics and authors such as Eve Ensler, Paul Campos, and Naomi Wolf.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What factors in our lives influence our relationship with our own bodies? *How* do they influence us? How do you think our families, in particular, might influence our relationship with our own bodies?
2. According to American pop culture, what is “beauty”? How do these standards of beauty get inside our hearts and heads? What’s your own definition of beauty?
3. In what ways can sport and the drive for fitness actually make us sick rather than healthy? What are some of the reasons for this?

KEY POINTS

Introduction

- Diane Israel has been a psychotherapist for 15 years in Boulder, Colorado – which she describes as one of the thinnest towns in the United States.
- Israel says she decided to make a film about how beauty is portrayed in our society because of her work with men, women, and teenagers with serious body issues.

Racing Her Heart Out

- Israel began running when she was eight years old. She started training to be a roadrunner at 14.
- Burnt out as a marathon runner, she turned to triathlons – swimming, biking, and running all in the same race. While finishing college, she won the first triathlon she participated in.
- At only 28 years old, her body began failing her because she didn't eat enough – partly because she was terrified of being fat, but also because of her drive to be a champion.

A Distorted Mindset

- Anorexia is an eating disorder characterized by a refusal to maintain a healthy weight, and constant fear of being fat.
- Bulimia is an eating disorder characterized by eating first and then purging – either by vomiting, diuretic and laxative abuse, or excessive exercising.
- Israel would work out three times a day and eat only a PowerBar and a salad. On days when she couldn't work out, due to sickness or injury, she feared her inactivity would make her fat and ugly.
- Israel describes growing up with a father who was controlling, ambitious, and committed to making her one of the best athletes in the world – and a mother who was stunningly beautiful, admired the beauty in others, but did not see the beauty in herself.

Mayhem

- Israel stopped eating when she was 12 years old.
- Her mother battled mental illness and depression her entire life, without a lot of support. One time, when her mother went to the hospital, her grandmother said to Diane: “At least your mom is beautiful.”
- One summer, Israel gained a lot of weight because she was sad her mother was in the hospital. The kids in the fourth grade called her “tomato on toothpicks” because she had skinny legs and a fat stomach.
- Her older brother, Johnny, was put in a special home when he was five years old. He had brain damage that Diane's father hid from her mother for a year-and-a-half.

- Because of the influences around her, Israel grew up disappointed she was not a boy. She says she spent the first 30 years of her life trying to change that – strapping her chest, and not getting her period.
- Growing up, Israel was also extremely competitive with her younger brother, Rob.
- Israel talks about how both she and her mother were sexually assaulted. When her mother was a young girl, she was raped by some boys she knew. Diane was also raped – on a family vacation at the beach when she was 13. She never told anybody.
- Her mother began sculpting and painting when her marriage began to fail.
- She describes her childhood as “love and hate, and destruction and kindness, and depression and sadness and anger.” She says she maintained a sense of sanity and control through athletics and food.

Searching For Beauty

- When she was 28 years old, Israel went to graduate school for psychology, and for the first time in her life, she fell in love – and it happened to be with a woman. She became infatuated with fashion and looking sexy. But, having always been a tomboy, she was confused about our culture’s limited view of beauty.
- She left Boulder and traveled to New York City to begin working on this film.
- Strategy One, the research group for Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign, asked 3,000 women in ten countries what word they would use to describe themselves. Only 2% chose the word “beautiful.”
- Israel argues that the media plays an incredibly significant role in shaping our attitudes about beauty, youth, aging, and health.
- As she explores the fashion world, Israel discovers that 80% of all mannequins are female. She also finds that male mannequins are regularly designed with muscles found in less than 1% of the total male population.
- Cindi Andrews and her three-year-old-son, Zach, were severely burned in a fire that nearly took their lives. Before the fire, Cindi thought she was living the American Dream – she had the right car, home, and clothes – but she felt empty on the inside. After the fire, she came to realize that consumption and material possessions had little to do with authentic happiness.
- Israel explores how society puts immense amounts of pressure on women to look perfect, and how young women often feel they are not allowed to be sexual unless they look like centerfolds.
- She examines how this pornographic aesthetic has entered the mainstream of fashion iconography, influencing even the youngest of girls.
- She also examines how, beyond being sexualized, images of beauty are commodified. And she explores how marketers use fear tactics to sell their products – especially in the cosmetics industry.
- In addition to how these cultural dynamics affect girls and women, Israel notes that anorexia, bulimia, and steroid abuse are on the rise among men.

Re-imagining Beauty

- Israel visits schools across the country and uses her experiences to help others. At one school, students define beauty this way:
 - “Not only the outer, the inner, you know? How I feel inside.”
 - “I think beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”
 - “Being myself, being yourself, not putting on a front for nobody, that makes you beautiful.”
- Israel argues that women and men all over the world are beginning to question narrow messages about physical beauty.
- As active citizens, she says, we should choose what we consume intelligently. We should take control of the cultural messages that influence our lives, opinions, and decisions. We should stop being self-absorbed and spend that energy, money, and time changing the world instead.
- Israel concludes the section with this: “In the beginning, I wanted to blame the media for my clients’ and my own hateful body image. I know it’s a lot more complex than that. There are biological, psychological, and social reasons that shape who I am. I now see that no single factor or person is to blame.”

Going Home

- Israel reunites with her family at her mother’s house in New York.
- Her mother answers Diane’s question about the meaning of beauty this way: “I think it’s the inside of a person and the outside – not one without the other. It takes both.”
- Over the past ten years, Israel has begun to feel increasingly comfortable with both her body and her workout discipline.
- When she asks her mother if she feels beautiful, herself, now, she answers: “Yes. I feel more beautiful now that I gave up perfection.”
- These onscreen notes close the film:
 - Eating disorders can arise from a variety of physical, emotional, social, and familial issues.
 - The peak onset of eating disorders occurs during puberty and the late teen or early adult years.
 - Four out of ten Americans have either suffered or known someone who has suffered from an eating disorder.
 - There is help available and recovery is possible.

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What does it mean to have an eating disorder? What types of eating disorders are there? What type(s) of eating disorder(s) did Diane Israel have? Be sure to give specific examples from the film.
2. What psychological and social factors do you think may have led to Diane's disordered eating? Be as specific as possible, and don't forget to explore how Diane justified her own disordered eating as a child.
3. What does Diane mean when she says, "I was totally supposed to be a boy"? Other than biological characteristics, what does it mean to be a boy in American culture? What does it mean to be a girl? In what ways did Diane fail to fit within the confinement of these gender roles? Explain.
4. What messages do the media send about beauty, youth, aging, and health? How do you think media culture might help shape these cultural attitudes? Be specific in your media examples.
5. Why do you think that 80% of mannequins are female? How might female and male mannequins influence the body images of real women and men?
6. Do you agree with Israel that the aesthetics and conventions of pornography have made their way into the mainstream? If so, give as many specific examples as you can. How does this make you feel? What effect(s) could this trend have on the sexual development of boys and girls?
7. How do marketers use fear to sell their products? Give some examples.
8. Has viewing the film changed your definition of beauty? Why or why not?
9. How can we, as a society, fight the culture's narrow messages about physical beauty? What can you do personally?
10. What does the film's title, "Beauty Mark," mean to you?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. With all this talk about exercise, nutrition, and disordered eating, it's easy to get confused about exactly how we can maintain our physical health. Read through Michael Pollan's "Food Rules" to get an idea about what to eat: <http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/FoodRules.pdf>. Then, write a paper comparing his vision of nutrition to your own eating patterns.
2. Find a media example – from a movie, television show, magazine, the Internet, etc. – that sends a message about beauty. Write an analysis of the example, including what the media is, the message that it's sending, how it fits with Israel's overall analysis of cultural ideals of beauty, and how it makes you feel.
3. Research Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty on the Internet. Write a paper describing the campaign, with special focus on how it has been criticized. Explain why some people have found it problematic. Then lay out your own thoughts as well.
4. Research anorexia, bulimia, and steroid abuse among men and women. Write a paper detailing your findings, and explain why you think these disorders are typically gendered.
5. Read Israel's article, "Eating Disorders and Body Image: What Do Gender and Sexuality Have to Do With It": http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/DianeIsrael_EatingDisorders.pdf. Then do additional research of your own on this topic, and write a paper about body image within the LGBTQ community. Be sure to connect your own analysis to Israel's overall analysis in the film.