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The USA and Personal Image

The USA has long fascinated me, and I have embarked on a series of reflections on culture in the USA, using American film or television as a prompt. This is the tenth article and considers personal image; how people look and appear to others.

While travelling in the USA on public transport, including long-distance Amtrak trains, I began to notice the difference in dental work or rather lack of dental work among some American citizens. I realised necessary dental work, let alone cosmetic dental work were usually afforded by those with good health plans or independent wealth. I reflected that smiling and bountiful teeth were a prominent symbol of status and image in television and film.

While good dental health is very important, reality TV has much to answer for in relation to what is considered the necessary way to look today.

The list of reality TV shows that centre on image and looks has become never ending, because anyone with a smart phone can make a series, but it is still the glossy high-end production shows that lead the way in making sure the message of the need for outer beauty is promoted. While the shows may have different themes like below, outer beauty and physical looks are at the centre.

Love (that is sex)

Whether this love is on an *Island*, in *Paradise* or centred around *Temptation*, and simply *Too Hot to Handle*, or part of a dating or match-making series with *Bachelors*, *Bachelorettes* and people destined to be MAFS, the pre-screening of the talent ensures that a certain look and style is the base. Is it any wonder that self-esteem has been plummeting over the years when younger people have no wider understanding of love and only experience ‘unreality television’?

I cannot leave this section without mentioning one of the most incongruous and yet popular films of all times, *Pretty Woman* (1990). Here good-looking people and style is the cornerstone of the film, and yet the film is about the exploitation of a woman for money, rather than the theme promoted as ‘girl meets boy, and they fall in love.’

Models

Whether it is the next top, or the last top, or the new teen or the real models themselves, there is one consistent theme, if you don't look like a million dollars then you cannot be paid a million dollars. These shows have a link with previous (and continuing) shows that were single staged pageants, but now have a continuing life of their own, much like *Days of Our Lives*.

One movie that turns these model fixations on their heads is the somewhat irreverent comedy *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), and while about a Little Miss pageant, it manages to highlight and skewer the issues that abound when the focus is on personal image and looks.

Housewives

Whether they are 'desperate', Southern, city based or at the beach, it is stunning to realise that these housewives never want for the latest in style, accessories and looks, and this leads into the most individual category of all:

People famous for being famous

The most outstanding example here would be anything to do with *The Kardashians*. I have written before in this context on **The USA and Reality TV**. Perhaps no more needs to be said?

The Modern Gospel of Self-Love

A feature of all these shows is a focus on oneself. It reinforces the sad idea that the world revolves around us, rather than our love for God and our neighbour. In essence it is a perversion of the meaning of 'love thy neighbour as thyself'. This type of self-love neglects our calling and our eternal hope, portraying a superficial and temporal context as our hope. It focusses on the external when we are told "*Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewellery or fine clothes.*" (1 Peter 3: 3).

Our looks become an idol and we worship ourselves (until our looks fade or our show is dumped for a newer model).

And lastly a Hollywood Movie with a lateral take

Shallow Hall (2001) is an intriguing movie that helps to point to the shallowness of a world based around of looks, where a hypnotised Jack Black is made to see people as beautiful rather than only love 'the beautiful people'. I believe this movie has more relevance today in this online era where one never knows if the image you are sent or looking at on a dating site is the person God created.

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