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Writing & Rhetoric II

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***My name is Adam Mayer and I was a student this past semester (SP16) in Christine Martin's Writing and Rhetoric II course, 52-1152 (19). I believe my essay, "Filtering Beauty," demonstrates the course's emphasis on true ethnographic research by acknowledging my assumptions and perspective throughout, avoiding bias, and exploring numerous relevant viewpoints. It also shows the effort put into combining primary and secondary sources into a cohesive research essay. I hope my submission possesses the qualities you are looking for.***

### Filtering Beauty

“Had a new shoot come out today and was shocked when I found my 19-year-old hips and torso quite manipulated” (Tuck). These were the words Zendaya shared with her 13.8 million followers on Instagram along with a side-by-side of the original unretouched image regarding the October 2015 issue of *Modeliste*. When one initially glances at the radically modified magazine spread, these edits mentioned by the teen star predominate. However, when one deeply analyzes the differences between the images, a world of body ideals, beauty standards, industry pressures, and socio-cultural influences is revealed. Actress Kerry Washington addressed this world even more recently, posting alongside an obviously Photoshopped *Adweek* cover to her own Instagram account in early April: “In a way, we have become a society of picture adjusters - who doesn't love a filter? It felt strange to look at a picture of myself that is so different from what I look like when I look in the mirror” (Cavassuto). In a culture where it is getting harder to love the way we look without a filter, perhaps it is time to give attention to the voices of those speaking out for natural beauty and questioning the standards set in the industry instead of accepting them for what they are.

As I am getting further into my study of fashion photography at Columbia College Chicago, I have begun to think more about editing practices and the effect they have not only on the subject, but also on society as a whole. This then made me consider the reverse – how society affects the way photographers and retouchers edit images – which led to this exploration of the relationship between culture and retouching. A topic with such far-reaching and often subliminal power deserves to be exposed so we can all be aware of the impact (however big or small) it is having on the way we view ourselves. My perspective is that of a photographer having been newly exposed to industry-standard retouching practices, as well as that of a consumer who has watched commercials and seen print advertisements throughout the past twenty-one years. I have become more active in seeking out knowledge about beauty editing especially since I began pursuing fashion photography one year ago and noticed more stories regarding retouching in the media (such as Zendaya’s overly-slimmed legs and Kerry’s unrecognizable cover). From these past experiences, some of my assumptions include: the people who retouch models in fashion and beauty images are doing so through a lens of cultural influence on what idyllic beauty is; “beauty” is subjective – opinions of what is “beautiful” vary from person to person based on factors such as culture, social influence, and personal experience; viewers of these edited fashion and beauty advertisements make self-comparisons with the models in the pictures and internalize the messages and ideals regarding body image; the traditional view in the industry is that beauty images should aim to appear aspirational, without any obvious flaws or blemishes; and finally that we are currently experiencing a trend toward less/no retouching.

Determined to learn more about current retouching practices, I cautiously walked into Columbia’s Advanced Retouching and Compositing class, instructed by Verser Engelhard. Having shot for clients such as *Playboy*, I anticipated a demanding, intimidating professional. I

was pleasantly surprised to be welcomed with a warm handshake and smile, along with his overall laid-back and matter-of-fact attitude throughout the class. The students lined the edges of the editing lab on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor of the downtown building, fiddling with their mouses in front of their desktop computers or styluses on their Wacom tablets while Verser pulled up this week's Photoshop assignment on the main computer. A Caucasian woman's face appeared projected on the front wall with shiny-pink lips, bright-blue eyes and a white button-up blouse. The same unretouched photograph had been assigned to each student to edit to industry-standard, and as Verser flipped through the images to give critiques, some similarities and differences became apparent. Blemishes and wrinkles were hidden to various extents, but it seemed he was looking for a balance between realistic skin texture/detail and flawless skin. His suggestions for achieving this included leaving some of the natural highlights and shadows under the eyes, using a soft "brush" on low opacity with rapid tapping motions, and "dodging" or "burning" out acne and other blemishes using skin tones taken from other areas of the image (as he demonstrated with a pimple on the chin of the model in the beauty portrait). This portion of the editing process falls under "pixel" and "tonal" work, with pixel work focusing on the fine details and tonal work striving to even out and blend skin tones. From start to finish, the order of the class's workflow (which was modeled after professionals') is as follows: pixel work, tonal work, "liquifying," and sharpening.

While these pixel and tonal edits *did* change the appearance of the model by making her skin unrealistically flawless, the class had not yet gotten to the "liquify" and "warping" stages of the retouching process where most of the dramatic transformations occur. These Photoshop tools allow photographers and editors to accomplish tasks such as straightening a model's nose, changing a model's jawline, slimming down a model's waist and legs, and more. When Tom

Knoll originally developed Display, the precursor to Adobe's Photoshop, in 1987, he only provided users the ability to perform “basic retouching,’ such as digital color editing” (Brown 90). Though his program was revolutionary at the time, the updates that were added through the thirteen following versions of Photoshop allowed the masses access to tools capable of overcoming “any small, less than perfect detail” (91). Before the class advanced to these tools, Verser showed us two videos from Dove’s campaign. The first short film, “Onslaught,” begins with a young girl innocently staring at the camera before facing a montage of advertisements and clips of women on binge diets and getting plastic surgery. The faces of the thin women in the commercials morph into one as they all claim their product will make you thinner, younger, lighter, etc. In the complementary video, “Evolution,” a female model wearing no makeup sits down in a studio, the lights come up on her, and the hair and makeup team cover and contour her face until she is nearly unrecognizable. After taking a series of images, one with a “come-hither” expression is chosen to be edited. Her neck and nose are elongated, jaw slimmed, and eyes enlarged before the final photograph ends up on a billboard as a foundation advertisement.

If the connection was not previously apparent, it was now plastered in front of my face. I thought about when a little girl, like the one from the beginning of “Onslaught,” sees the completely distorted advertisement, like the one from “Evolution.” Will she think those standards of beauty are expected of her and internalize those ideals? These thoughts became increasingly relevant and pressing as I witnessed more and more of my friends posting images to Instagram and Facebook using a new filter from Snapchat. This filter slims the nose and enlarges the eyes, not so different from the way the model in Dove’s “Evolution” was manipulated. One photograph of my friend on Facebook utilizing this filter garnered numerous supportive responses from members of my hometown community, including: “Gorgeous,” and, “A classic

beauty.” I was shocked to see the extent to which this need for self-alteration to reach industry standards had permeated my generation’s culture.

When discussing retouching with a fellow Columbia student, Tabitha Jo, she drew upon her years of experience modeling for Chicago-based photographers and boutiques to reveal yet another striking connection. Specifically, she recalled an image taken of her early in her career by a street-style photographer that had been altered so her eyes dramatically increased in size, her cheekbones became more defined, her chin trimmed down, ears pinned back and neck slimmed. “I understood that the photographer wanted to create the ideal image,” she explained, “but it was off-putting. I think it’s the idea that although I could take a good picture, my proportions were not enough.” This story seemed to support that standards from the fashion and beauty industry, as represented through the media, seep into our own perceptions of ourselves, affecting our body image and resulting in behaviors such as the filtered photographs on Facebook.

Tabitha’s feeling of not measuring up is a shared experience among many who view retouched photographs, and in her book *Coping with the Beauty Myth: A Guide for Real Girls*, Stefanie Weiss connects negative body image to more extreme forms of self-alteration, which she calls “self-torture” (49), such as eating disorders and body mutilation. Weiss explains how advertisements target women to make them feel like they fall short of beauty standards. These advertisements create insecurities about body image, which may lead to excessive stress and desire for control. An increasing number of women are coping with these stresses and exerting control through behaviors like cutting and binge eating (44). While navigating her way through agencies’ expectations, pressures, and rejections, Tabitha herself faced an eating disorder as she struggled to fit into either category of standard or plus size models. “I’m constantly striving to

reach almost unattainable weight goals,” she admitted. “I just don’t think my body was made to be a size 4.”

In *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*, author Naomi Wolf argues that self-hatred propagated by advertisers creates demand for beauty products by women. This self-hatred, which is driven by the “beauty myth,” has been adopted by our culture as acceptable (84). Thinking back to Dove’s “Onslaught” video, the women in the advertisements seem to be convincing the little girl that she needs (or will need) those products to look younger, skinnier, etc. A negative effect of those advertisements could occur if that little girl starts to believe she needs to constantly worry about improving her appearance in order to be beautiful or desirable. This is the idea behind the “beauty myth.” Wolf also emphasizes the impact of women’s magazines on defining women’s positions in society. She argues that in fashion magazines, women are portrayed in roles that are determined by what the economy and advertisers need from them. At the end of World War II (and perhaps since), these three roles have included: mother, homemaker and wife (64). Wolf presents the idea that by focusing attention on physical appearances, men may be controlling and limiting women to these roles and diverting their attention from more important issues, such as equal rights. When women began entering the workforce in masses, a new fear arose in advertisers that they could lose their main consumer. By instilling insecurity in this target audience, advertisers keep the “\$33-billion thinness industry” and “\$20-billion youth industry” going (66). If men are in charge of the media and continue to emphasize the same ideals of beauty, then perhaps women will continue to observe, internalize, and respond to these pressures by feeling the need to change themselves.

In the modeling world, women perpetuate these ideals by adhering to them, and a major source of pressure stems from self-comparisons. Tabitha commented on this as she described the pressures she felt entering the modeling industry.

My weight is absolutely a pressure I have encountered in the industry. It's almost humorous to me because one of my dear friends is a signed model and is constantly talking about her need to lose or gain weight, when to me she is the ideal when I compare her to myself. Here is the second pressure: comparing. I can't do it. There is so much talent in the industry but each model is unique and you must capitalize on that. I had to get over that really quickly especially when dressing. When I'm naked in a room full of girls half my size and I have to have specific clothes pulled for my body type, it's easy to let that get to me. But I have to take a deep breath and shake it off because I cannot let it affect my work.

Self-comparison is not an experience limited to those in the competitive world of modeling. Chiara Rollero, a researcher from the University of Turin in Italy, found that images in the media are laced with beauty ideals, and “the internalization of these messages may guide the perception of one’s body and worth” (Rollero 196). “Internalization” is defined as the process by which one observes the cultural standards regarding appearances and applies them to one’s own body and being (Thompson & Stice, 2001). Could my friends, just like the girl from “Onslaught,” be seeing these manipulated bodies and faces in media images and applying these unrealistic standards to themselves? And if so, could warning them about these manipulations spare them this internalization? According to Rollero’s own study, the prospect is hopeful. When exposing subjects to magazine-quality images of models (some retouched and some unretouched, depending on which group the participant was in), her results showed that “retouching salience”

(informing participants about the digital alterations in the images they were viewing) led to a decrease in internalization and therefore negative effects of viewing such images (Rollero 200). Internalization was determined by “The 9-item Internalization-General subscale of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire-3,” while “The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule” and “The State Self Esteem Scale” were used to determine the effects (198). Those in the retouching salience group demonstrated “lower levels of Internalization” than both those in the retouching group and in the no-retouching group. This in turn increased scores in “Attractiveness,” “Social self-esteem,” and “Performance” (199). However, studies similar to hers, such as the one conducted by Kristen Harrison and Veronica Hefner (2014), had opposite findings, with participants in the retouching salience condition showing greater negative consequences (145).

Regardless of these conflicting results, several countries have recently attempted to ameliorate these negative effects by advocating for stricter laws surrounding retouching. In 2009, the Liberal Democrats of Britain pushed Parliament to adopt their proposal, which would eliminate retouching in advertisements targeted at children sixteen or younger, and require editorial images and print ads to disclose “the degree of retouching” (Pfanner). Just this past winter, France passed legislation regarding Photoshop that even expanded into models’ overall health, which is predicted to go into effect by January of 2017. According to the new law, which was discussed in an article for *Women’s Wear Daily*, any commercial photograph of a model who has been retouched must be labeled as “retouched photograph.” Additionally, models must present a medical certificate indicating their Body Mass Index and overall health to potential clients. France is not the only nation striving to put healthier models in front of the camera and on the runway – Israel, Spain and Italy were also mentioned in the article for taking steps to ban

underweight models. An ethical charter in Denmark holds “brands, model agencies, magazines and photographers” to their commitment of using healthy models (Guilbault). With studies offering opposing results, it is difficult to predict whether or not these laws will have a positive effect on those who view the images and models. Perhaps further studies are needed for reliability before the U.S. follows in the footsteps of countries like France and implements retouching disclaimer laws.

Feeling as though I had reached an impasse in my research, I reflected upon my time in the Advanced Retouching and Compositing class, when the classroom conversation departed from professional retouching techniques and Verser posed a succinct yet incredibly heavy question: “Do any of you have a problem with what we do?” A tangibly uncomfortable moment followed before a few students raised their hands, responding that they did not really take issue with the work they were performing, primarily citing their clients’ happiness with the final images as a source of affirmation. Verser shared his own feelings on the topic, arguing, “If I don’t do it, someone else will.” In order to be competitive in one’s industry, it makes sense that one’s work must meet their industry’s standards. But this raised another question for me – just because the demand exists, does that mean that it is justified and deserves to be filled?

I thought about my own experiences with photography and retouching. Just earlier this spring I worked with a client who asked me to change his nose and jawline when editing the images of him. I protested, explaining that if he truly wishes to become a model, agencies would need to see the “real him,” but his insecurities and financial offers persisted. Eventually I decided to provide modifications on only a few of the images – enough to appease my client, but not so much that they stood out from the unmodified images in the mix. When I sent him the final images, he did not notice that in some of them the nose and jawline were left unaltered, and he

was overwhelmingly pleased with the result. However, I was left feeling a bit like a kid who just got peer-pressured – once the adrenaline from the cheering crowd dissipates, the aftershocks and regret set in. Editing his images felt like a fight between doing my job the best I could by focusing on pleasing my client, and respecting my values and the responsibility I have to represent them through my work and brand. Looking back over the images, I still felt proud, but there's a part of me that strongly wished I had fought to convince this model of his natural beauty instead of letting the skewed standards of beauty in his mind prevail.

In an article for *Entertainment Weekly*, Melissa Maerz contends that to retouch or not to retouch is an issue of personal freedom that must be decided on an individual basis. Maerz quotes Tina Fey from *Bossypants*: “I feel about Photoshop the way some people feel about abortion. It is appalling and a tragic reflection on the moral decay of our society...unless I need it, in which case, everybody be cool” (qtd. in Maerz). From both Tina and Verser’s responses, it seems they recognize that retouching has a broader negative impact. However, due to the intertwined relationship of pressures from society and the fashion/beauty industry, no one seems to be able to place the blame or break the cycle of demand. While for now it may appear hopeful that the fashion and beauty industry are moving toward using less retouching, it is important to bear in mind that not only is retouching a powerful and perspective-changing force, at its core it is also a marketing tactic. If presenting a model with blemish-free skin and industry-standard proportions appeals the most to buyers, then companies will sway toward heavier retouching. Conversely, if a campaign featuring a more realistic, unretouched model will best sell their product to their target audience (or, as is often the case, attract media attention and public approval), companies will strip back the retouching. With this being the case, I believe that the

demand for retouching is inevitable, and our choices about how we respond to or contribute to this demand are in our hands.

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