

America The Beautiful Reveals Ugly Truths

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Last night I went to a screening of *America The Beautiful*, Darryl Roberts's documentary about modeling, magazines, plastic surgery, eating disorders, cosmetics, phthalates, and self-image. (There's a trailer, at left.) The film also follows the career of **Gerren**, a **model** who walked runways for Tommy Hilfiger, Marc Jacobs and Richard Tyler when she was 13 but was told she needed to be "more skinny" by Parisian casting agents and had a meltdown before she was 15. While some women — and readers of this site in particular — may not find much of the film ground-breaking, seeing the impact popular culture has on the minds and self-esteem of people young and old was incredibly riveting.

Roberts packed a lot of material into the film (he says he had 900 hours of footage). Some memorable moments: Seeing *Seventeen*, *ElleGirl* and *CosmoGirl* editors explain why they only use thin, pretty models. Grade-schoolers looking at images from magazines, music videos and skin cleanser commercials and proclaiming that the "perfect" women make them feel "ugly." The sequence about dogs getting face lifts. An interview with a perfume producer claiming that phthalates — known carcinogens — do not get absorbed into your body when you spray yourself with fragrance was intercut with a scientist proclaiming, "Bullshit." Eve Ensler saying something about how a woman shouldn't get plastic surgery to "tighten" her vagina (Eve: "Get a bigger dick!"). The news that there are about 600 substances found in cosmetics that are banned in Europe but allowed in U.S. products. Oh, and then there was the part where the filmmaker called the American Board of Plastic Surgery and found out that all three of the doctors from *Dr. 90210* were not board-certified, but had been performing cosmetic procedures anyway.

And then poor Gerren, such a bright beam of light in the beginning of the film, becomes convinced that she is obese and needs breast implants. Part of that was on the *Today* show this morning:

In any case, the reviews are mixed — some of the **complaints** seem to be that "there's nothing new" in the film. But when you compile all of the evidence together in one 105 minute oeuvre, you see that our society is literally *sick*. Roger Ebert **says** the film carries "a persuasive message" and is "filled with astonishments." I only wish that it didn't have an R rating; every teenage girl in America should see it. Roberts says he'll make an "educational" PG version for schools when it comes out on DVD; until then, if there's an under-17-year-old in your life, take her (or him!) to watch it. And start a discussion.