# 'Dream Factory' body images are nightmare for most

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In her new book, "Body Shots: Hollywood and the Culture of Eating Disorder," Emily Fox-Kales, an instructor in Northeastern University's cinema studies program, argues that popular culture — especially movies — promotes unhealthy body images that cause an audience to alter their behavior in a way that could become harmful.

## What factors from popular culture affect what you refer to as "distorted eating" and an obsession about body image, particularly among younger Americans?

This doesn't come out of the blue. We get a lot of messages from mainstream culture that are circulated by popular media, like television, the Internet, magazines and certainly through movies. Movies have a particularly potent affect on viewers. It's called circulation theory, where there are these certain values, these certain ideals of beauty that are on the covers of magazines and they make their way into movie stars. You have people like Gwyneth Paltrow and Brad Pitt who represent the ideal, and then you have the spectator — people like you and me — and we see these incredibly larger-than-life beautiful bodies. Because they represent the values that we all want — success, money, being sexy, being desirable — we establish an ideal for our own bodies. And the larger that gap between what we see when we look at them and what we see when we look in the mirror, the more we are at risk for what I call distorted eating, which could mean everything from skipping breakfast or lunch to deciding to work out for four hours every day.

## What impact do today's movies have on viewers and what can someone do to avoid leaving a movie with negative body images?

Not only do movies have an effect on viewers' perceptions of beauty, they actually have an impact on what they think of themselves, which is chilling. This was concerning to me and it's important to anyone who treats eating disorders, so in the book I teach easy ways the viewer can deconstruct a movie. You can figure out what the movie is trying to make you want and then you can figure out how to be savvier about your reaction to it. That way you can still enjoy the movie without that toxic after-effect. You can ask yourself how you felt before the movie started and how you felt afterward, and if you start to feel your body image has gone from a ten to a two, you're more likely to leave that movie with a vow or an action plan that may be self-destructive.

## What needs to change in the entertainment industry so that Hollywood films promote positive body images?

Hollywood has always been a dream factory, where everything is pretty and sexy and glamorous — that's what we've always wanted to consume. You have to look outside the mainstream, to what we call art-house films, to find movies that might have a protagonist who is still depicted as beautiful, but who might be a large woman or a Latino woman who shows she doesn't have to be five-ten, 110 pounds and look like she just stepped out of Vogue magazine. But the economics of Hollywood are such that you want to reach the most people with a uniform image that appeals to a broad audience. You want the movie to have a global appeal. What would have to change would be the way that the entertainment industry does business — moving away from almost cartoonlike

caricatures of strength and beauty — to films with a more diverse look to them. It's happening slowly at the margins, but is not something that has really entered the mainstream.

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