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Com 232 Visual Literacy

Critical Analysis of Success

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Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds; one word “goals”

Blake Lively began her career as one of New York’s elite starring on the hit show *Gossip Girl*. I must have watched that series from beginning to end about five times. Blake Lively is famous for her acting career and was even recently featured as *Martha Stewart’s American Bride*. She was married in the famous South Carolina house featured in the *Notebook*; every girl’s dream. Not to mention she was married there to the ever-so charming actor Ryan Reynolds. The happy couple is soon to be expecting, and even pregnant Blake still remains as my aspiration. Needless to say, to me Blake Lively is that one Hollywood actor I could rave about all day; in short my “girl crush.” She is beautiful, blonde, thin, charismatic, and successful. Successful by which means do you ask? If you asked me I would say success would be defined as having the one you love aside you, while simultaneously stealing the hearts of millions; each of which this picture embodies. This image stands for so much more as well. It defines American culture and the standards in which people such as myself, classify values. This picture was iconic and immediately after the Met Gala, it was circulated through the media with perpetuated ideals that persuaded millions of people just like me that this in fact “goals.” I believe it. However, I also want to examine the other side to this picture; the omitted.

Solely objectifying the photograph, we see a white young heterosexual couple. The female is blonde and dressed in an accentuating, extravagant gold gown that flares out at the end, and highlights her slim figure. The male beside her is dressed formally as well in a black tux and he has dark brown hair, accompanied with nicely constructed facial hair (classified as the “Hollywoodian Style”). The two are posed on the red carpet for the 2014 Met Gala. The woman has her hand around the man and has a face full of color and a big smile pointed in the direction of whomever took the photograph. The man is looking down at the woman with also a deep genuine smile. Behind them is a cluster of paparazzi, or press. The press has many cameras and microphones. All of the attention is on this one couple. Now to add some perspective, the two are in fact married as mentioned before. Blake’s baby bump is also slightly noticeable in her dress, but does not deter attention from the loving couple. Ryan Reynolds does not only have a genuine smile looking down at his wife; he is looking at his wife the way every girl wants to be looked at. The gesture of Blake’s arm around her husband illustrates their close, healthy relationship. Their presence on the red carpet, an iconic symbol in itself, at such a big event supporting art and

fashion indicates their fame, social stature, and success. Now moving away from merely descriptions and observations, I want to focus on why I deem this photograph successful.

This picture embodies and captures my values as an individual. The couple on display appear to give off a healthy, idealistic relationship. In fact, as mentioned before, their expressions seem so genuine and so strong that it is hard to look away from them. This I admire. I, just like many others, aspire to be in this kind of relationship. I want a companion who cannot look away from me even in the midst of paparazzi. Blake's baby bump also highlights another one of my values I hold close to my heart, family. I am very family orientated and have this exact ideology in my head that love and family come above all else; exactly what I see in this picture. Maybe it is this American dream engraved in my head that is to blame, but growing a family alongside a husband that loves me, with success and wealth following close by as support is what I one-day hope to achieve. Perhaps not to the same extent as this famous Hollywood couple, but nonetheless what I dream for. But who is to say that I am wrong for following this ideology. Yes, some say the American dream is fake, but why stop dreaming? Why not strive for success based off your own hard work. In fact, "aspiring for financial success is an important aspect of capitalist culture."ⁱ Blake also comes across as strong and independent in this picture; another quality I admire. She is not looking at Ryan the same way, rather she is looking into the eye of the camera. Sure she still is having a good time as her facial expression is not serious, but I like that this picture is not the other way around. I like that for once the male is fawning over his wife, rather than the women. Blake Lively has made a career for herself through her own hard work and dedication, and with that has become famous and made a fortune. She has also remained wholesome and charismatic through her Hollywood career, as opposed to other actors and actresses that ditch their values. Blake's values still shine through as seen in her love life and her soon to be bigger family; deeming her as a successful woman.

I suppose there are some, or a lot of things that are not included in this picture. It just seems "too perfect," to some. I do agree with this, on behalf of what is omitted. To the eye of the public, we are not aware in this picture of some deeper things. Flaws, that are not pictured. The fights that her husband and her have had are not depicted. Blake's stretch marks from her pregnancy are not portrayed. The couple is not photographed in their lazy day pajamas. They are put out to the public at their best, so by default we are not seeing them at their worst; generating this unattainable definition of perfection. This image was photographed and circulated by *Buzzfeed*, "a news and entertainment web site that covers a large number of topics,"ⁱⁱ geared towards young millennials like myself. *Buzzfeed* has millions of viewers across their website and extending to their *Snapchat* platform as well. It was defined by *Buzzfeed* as "goals" within their article, "27 Times Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds Gave Us Intense Relationship Goals." People like me who read *Buzzfeed* would also say this photo is in fact idealistic. This picture might also be classified as just another Hollywood fallacy. It capitalizes on our consumerist and materialist centered culture. It puts forth what some might say an unachievable body image. Idols

can play a prominent role in body image, by altering our perspectives of what is “normal.” The large emphasis on body image and psychological development is explained further as:

“It is often assumed in consumer culture that people attend to their body image in an instrumental manner, as status and social acceptability depend on how a person looks. This view is based on popular physiognomic assumptions that the body, especially the face, is a reflection of the self: that a person’s inner character or personality will shine through the outer appearance.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The photograph also disregards America’s mixed culture, by only putting forth a white couple to the media. Or that it instills fame and fortune as a desire above all else in their viewers’ minds. These omissions make viewers and readers now question their own morality. It made me personally reevaluate this American dream. For what I thought as personal self-driven success, could just merely be what is promoted by the media; not actually due to Blake’s talents at all. Her fame is based on consumerism and what the media persuades us to believe and then is capitalized on in the roles she plays across the Hollywood board. Her “perfect” family could also just be another fallacy, another ploy by the media. Because of what is omitted, there is no truth.

Let’s take a step back from all of this mistrust purposed by the media. It is not my individual fault nor the public’s that Hollywood has this overbearing power. In fact, it is a natural part of life. Even way back in the 1700’s it was assumed this is just a part of human nature. Samuel Johnson an English writer once said:

“I have often thought that there has rarely passes a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. We are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by dangers, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.”^{iv}

Hollywood provides us and simply really does “seduce” us with these pleasures. I, just like the rest of America, buy into these pleasures. Films, movie stars, fortune, and fame; all things that may deemed either bad or good depending on the perspective. However nonetheless they provide entertainment and an escape from reality to the public. Movie stars may make me compare myself to them, but I think this is good. It makes me strive for better as a person. It helps me formulate my identity as an individual, as I align myself to her image as opposed to some other celebrity such as Miley Cyrus. Idols play an important part in character development of young adults and was concluded in a study done:

“Idols can play an important place in adolescent life. The phenomenon of idolization, the sometimes excessive admiration of or devotion to something or someone, is especially characteristic of adolescents and their transition to adulthood.”^v

By relating ourselves to others we find what we do and do not value; and for me even if Blake's relationship and financial security is all a hoax, I still aspire to have these things and will work hard to try to attain them because they are my personal definition of success.

Word Count: 1601

ⁱ Kasser, Tim, and Richard M. Ryan. "A dark side of the American dream: correlates of financial success as a central life aspiration." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 65.2 (1993): 410.

ⁱⁱ "BuzzFeed Dictionary Definition | BuzzFeed Defined." *BuzzFeed Dictionary Definition | BuzzFeed Defined*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Sept. 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Featherstone, Mike. "Body, image and affect in consumer culture." *Body & Society* 16.1 (2010): 193-221.

^{iv} France, Peter, and William St Clair. *Mapping lives: the uses of biography*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

^v Levesque, Roger JR. "Idols and idolization." *Encyclopedia of adolescence*. Springer New York, 2011. 1377-1379.

https://www.buzzfeed.com/elliewoodward/times-blake-lively-and-ryan-reynolds-relationship-goals?utm_term=.fgQyx0kk0#.ssElqLnnL

