

WESTERN EYES

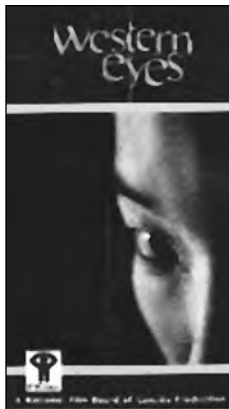
DIRECTED BY ANN SHIN

PRODUCED BY GERRY FLAHIVE

A NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA PRODUCTION

2000. VHS. COLOR. 40 MINUTES

DISTRIBUTED BY FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS, WWW.FRIF.COM



Why are eyes an important symbol of who we are? Are they really “windows to the soul?” Maybe not, but eyes ‘frame’ our face and betray our ethnic origins; they tell us nothing about our upbringing nor where we feel we belong.

Western Eyes examines the search for beauty and self-acceptance through the experiences of Maria and Sharon, young women contemplating cosmetic surgery to make their eyes “more Western.” Both of Asian descent—Maria is Filipina and Sharon is Korean—they believe their appearance, especially their eyes, affects the way they are seen by others.

Troubled by their Asian ancestry, their physical appearance, and their relationships with their mothers, both Maria and Sharon feel somewhat uneasy in Western society, despite being brought up in it. However, in the age of technology, science appears to provide an easy answer: the knife. “I am recreating myself; I am balancing East and West. I’m getting it done because I want to feel better,” explains Sharon of her decision to go ahead with the surgery.

This short video shows Sharon before and after surgery, while Maria contemplates it as she watches a tape of Sharon’s operation. Sharon, to use her own words, is “empowered” and “clear-headed” once the surgery is over and she is the possessor of a double lid. To herself she is a new phoenix-like creature who now “fits” into her surroundings—or does she? The key point of the video is mirrored by Sharon’s comment: “My Korean heritage has little to do with the way I look. I want to look in the mirror and see what I really am.” One wonders if the psychological effect of the surgery will be long-lasting.

Narrated entirely by Maria, Sharon, their friends, and mothers, the filmmaker Ann Shin takes us on a real-time journey as the young women justify their decision to themselves and their friends and prepare for oncoming cosmetic surgery. With references to supermodels and other “standards” of beauty, often occidental, Shin deftly uses a variety of cinematic methods, from infrared light to optical microscopic lenses, to change (and challenge) our ideas of beauty. Shifting angles, the use of drapery and textures, and close-ups of faces without the eyes, helps us rethink the usual physical appearances.

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Despite this seeming emphasis on the desire to “fit in” to the norm, there is an implicit subtext: that the strength of our individual self-image is often instilled in us by those close to us, as one of the girl’s particularly overbearing mother makes clear.

This documentary necessitates a skillful and sensitive teacher to handle it as a classroom tool; otherwise it may create the impression that all or most minorities want to fit into the mainstream. Therefore it’s chiefly recommended for college-level students with the proviso that any discussion/activities not focus on a particular ethnic group but on the fact that everyone feels pressure to look a certain way, particularly in adolescence.

Some discussion points that can be the basis of classroom activities:

- Discuss and investigate the changing standards of beauty—look at old movies and fashion magazines. Given that the “ideal” of beauty shifts so much, what’s wrong with concentrating on one’s own personal style, both inside and out? Look at positive role models of successful people of any ethnic group.
- Discuss “the perfect body” and why so many want it. Look at the obsession with body image, which drives teens to diet, use steroids, develop dangerous eating disorders, and create lifelong cycles of low self-esteem. Look at how the body has appeared in Asian and Western art.
- Adolescence is a time when key aspects of our self-image are forged. Look how adolescence is marked in different Asian cultures. Do these rites of passage (or rituals) foster a positive self-image? What is happening to these in our globalized world?
- How can one’s self-esteem be built up? Suggest ways that the girls in the video can build their self-esteem without resorting to surgery. ■

JENNIFER EAGLETON is a Hong Kong-based writer and editor involved in writing educational materials on Asia. Her current project is compiling a book about modern Chinese history for secondary school students using fiction in translation.