The media creates, rather than reflects, a society’s values.

Mirroring our own personal development, the creation of culture experiences something of a nature-nurture debate. Does our media—art, writing, music, film—shape our values, or do our values shape our social expressions?

Art has a long history of leading the charge for counter-culture movements. Punk, rock’n’roll, even the move from Baroque composers (Bach) to Classical ones (Beethoven), herald the birth of new ideals. In the transition from Renaissance to Impressionist art, the rationalism of the Enlightenment, shown through perspective and ultra-realism, gave way to Romanticism and focus on evoking emotion through colour and movement. While these movements are often mocked by critics and the masses alike in their adolescence, the cycle inevitably begins anew, where the once-underground movements become widely adapted and a new norm is established, ready to be overturned.

Media of other forms can also change our values—in particular, regarding current events. Studies in the field of political agenda-setting show significant correlations between reporting on current issues discussed in the media and their salience in the public eye. Media outlets use ‘framing’—covering an issue from multiple perspectives (individual, social, global) and time frames (past, present, future)—to prolong public interest. However, a steady decline of interest in a social issue correlates to its disappearance from the news cycle in favour of newer, more shocking, and more profitable coverage. Using these techniques, news outlets can control which issues we view as important, and how we feel about them.

The use of photo editing software and competitive industry standards have been linked with dramatic increases in the occurrence of eating disorders, but there exists another layer of indirect influence from media images on standards of beauty. The effects of images in the media are found to be amplified through our perceptions of media influence on those around us. “Trending” body types are conceived at industry levels and propagated through popular culture. These new standards of beauty are then adopted at large, even when they are at odds with biologically desirable secondary sex characteristics, such as the androgynous silhouettes of the 1920’s.

These three cases are just a few of many examples where values that run counter to the status quo, and their mainstream adoption after widespread media exposure. They are a testament to our power to affect change through exposure and awareness, but also a cautionary tale that bids us to examine what we believe and why.
Works Cited


