

Beauty (Re)discovers the Male Body

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Men on Display

POINT TO BE NOTED 1:

Commercialization of Male Body and Male Desire: Men in (Visual Cultural) Market/Industry (i.e., Cultural Economy)

Putting classical art to the side for the moment, the naked and near-naked female body became an object of mainstream consumption first in *Playboy* and its imitators, then in movies, and only then in fashion photographs. With the male body, the trajectory has been different. Fashion has taken the lead, the movies have followed. Hollywood may have been a chest-fest in the fifties, but it was male clothing designers who went south and violated the really powerful taboos-not just against the explicit depiction of penises and male bottoms but against the admission of all sorts of forbidden "feminine" qualities into mainstream conceptions of manliness.

POINT TO BE NOTED 2:

Female Gaze/Voyeur and Socio-cultural Taboos

It was the spring of 1995, and I was sipping my first cup of morning coffee, not yet fully awake, flipping through *The New York Times Magazine*, when I had my first real taste of what it's like to inhabit this visual culture as a man. It was both thrilling and disconcerting. It was the first time in my experience that I had encountered a commercial representation of a male body that seemed to deliberately invite me to linger over it. ... Women-both straight and gay-have always gazed covertly, of course, squeezing our illicit little titillations out of representations designed for-or pretending to-other purposes than to turn us on. *This* ad

made no such pretense. It caused me to knock over my coffee cup, ruining the more cerebral pleasures of the *Book Review*. Later, when I had regained my equilibrium, I made a screen-saver out of him, so I could gaze at my leisure.

POINT TO BE NOTED 3:

What about the (Fe)Male Gaze towards (Fe)Male Body, Beauty, and Desire in Heterosexual Way of the World? Can't you remember the connotations of 'eros' in Eros International Media Ltd?

I'm sure that many gay men were as taken as I was, and perhaps some gay women too. The erotic charge of various sexual styles is not neatly mapped onto sexual orientation (let alone biological sex). Brad Pitt's baby-butth looks are a tum-on to many lesbians, while I — regarded by most of my gay friends as a pretty hard-core heterosexual — have always found Anne Heche irresistible (even before Ellen did). ... Despite such complications, until recently only heterosexual men have continually been inundated by popular cultural images *designed* with their sexual responses (or, at least, what those sexual responses are imagined to be) in mind.

POINT TO BE NOTED 4:

What Science Says about (Fe)Male Emotional Response?

Some psychologists say that the circuit from eyes to brain to genitals is a quicker trip for men than for women. "There's some strong evidence," popular science writer Deborah Blum reports, citing studies of men's responses to pictures of naked women, "that testosterone is wired for visual response." Maybe. But who is the electrician here? God? Mother Nature? Or Hugh Hefner? Practice makes perfect. And women have had little practice.

POINT TO BE NOTED 5:

The Commercialization of Emotion and Desire

The Calvin Klein ad made me feel like an adolescent again, brought me back to that day when I saw Barry Resnick on the basketball court of Weequahic High and realized that men's legs could make me weak in the knees. Men's legs? I knew that *women's* legs were supposed to be sexy. I had learned that from all those hose-straightening scenes in the movies.

POINT TO BE NOTED 6:
Gender-biased Representation of and Taboos about Emotion and Desire in Entertainment Industry
A Feminist Reading of Female Emotional Response

But men's legs? Who had ever seen a woman gaga over some guy's legs in the movies? Or even read about it in a book? Yet the muscular grace of Barry's legs took my breath away. Maybe something was wrong with me. Maybe my sex drive was too strong, too much like a man's. By the time I came across that Calvin Klein ad, several decades of feminism and life experience had left me a little less worried about my sex drive. Still, the sight of that model's body made me feel that my sexual education was still far from complete.

At the same time, however, my gaze is invited by something "feminine" about the young man. ... He doesn't stare at the viewer challengingly, belligerently, as do so many models in other ads for male underwear, facing off like a street tough passing a member of the rival gang on the street. ... No, this model's languid body posture, his averted look are classic signals, both in the "natural" and the "cultural" world of willing subordination. ... Such an attitude of male sexual supplication, although it has (as we'll see) classical antecedents, is very new to contemporary mainstream representations.

POINT TO BE NOTED 7:
Homophobia, a Silent Killer in the Cultural Practices of Male Beauty?

Visual Representation of Wo/Manliness in the Mainstream

Homophobia is at work in this taboo, but so are attitudes about gender that cut across sexual orientation. For many men, both gay and straight, to be so passively dependent on the gaze of another person for one's sense of self-worth is incompatible with being a real man. As we'll see, such notions about manliness are embedded in Greek culture, in contemporary visual representation, and even (in disguised form) in existentialist philosophy.

POINT TO BE NOTED 8: A 'More' Critical Analysis of Gaze, the Look of the Other

"For the woman," as philosopher Simone de Beauvoir writes, "... the absence of her lover is always torture; he is an eye, a judge ... away from him, she is dispossessed, at once of herself and of the world." For Beauvoir's sometime lover and lifelong soul mate Jean-Paul Sartre, on the other hand, the gaze (or the Look, as he called it) of another person — including the gaze of one's lover — is the "hell" that other people represent.

The disjunction between self-conception and external judgment can be especially harsh when the external definitions carry racial and gender stereotypes with them. Sartre doesn't present such examples — he's interested in capturing the contours of an existential situation shared by all rather than in analyzing the cultural differences that affect that situation — but they are surely relevant to understanding the meaning of the Look of the Other.

POINT TO BE NOTED 9: Nudity in Celebrity Culture

I had to laugh out loud at a 1997 *New York Times Magazine* "Style" column, entitled "Overexposure" which complained of the "contagion" of nudity spreading through

celebrity culture. "Stars no longer have private parts," the author observed, and fretted that civilians would soon also be measured by the beauty of their buns. I share this author's concern about our body-obsessed culture. But, pardon me, he's just noticing this now???

POINT TO BE NOTED 10:

What Facts Reveal about (Fe)Male Emotional Response?

Perhaps, then, we should wait a bit longer, do a few more studies, before we come to any biological conclusions about women's failure to get aroused by naked pictures. A newer (1994) University of Chicago study found that 30 percent of women ages eighteen to forty-four and 19 percent of women ages forty-five to fifty-nine said they found "watching a partner undress" to be "very appealing." ("Not a bad percentage," Nancy Friday comments, "given that Nice Girls didn't look.") There's still a gender gap — the respective figures for men of the same age groups were 50 percent and 40 percent. We're just learning, after all, to be voyeuses.

"Honey, What Do I Want to Wear?"

POINT TO BE NOTED 11:

Women's Knowledge and Awareness about Male Fashion (in the Fifties)

Just as fifties masculinity was fought over (metaphorically speaking) by Stanley Kowalski and Stanley Banks, the male fashion scene of the nineties involves a kind of contest for the souls of men too.

The juxtaposition of inept male fashion-conscious female, which with one stroke establishes the masculinity *and* the heterosexuality of the depicted man, is a staple of virtually every Hagar ad. In a Hagar television spot with voice-over by John Goodman (Roseanne's beefy former television husband), a man wakes up, sleepily pulls on a pair of khakis, and goes outside to get the paper: "*I am not what I wear.*" In Hagar's world, real guys don't choose clothing

that will enhance the appearance of their bodies or display a sense of style; real guys just put on some "stuff" to wear because they have to, it's socially required. The less decorative, the better. "We would never do anything with our pants that would frighten anyone away," says Dockers designer Gareth Morris as reported in a 1997 piece in *The New Yorker*.

POINT TO BE NOTED 12:

Men's Fashion and Women's Appreciation in Consumer Culture Industry

The notions about gender that are maintained in this marketing run deeper than a refusal to use the word "perfume" for products designed to make men smell good. In the late seventies, coincident with the development of feminist consciousness about these matters, art historian John Berger discovered what he argued were a set of implicit cultural paradigms of masculinity and femininity, crystallized in a visual "rule" of both classical painting and commercial advertisements: "*men act and women appear.*"

POINT TO BE NOTED 13:

**(Fe)Male Appearance and Look in Business World:
Selling/Objectifying Body and Desire for Money, Name
and Fame**

Women in ads and movies thus require no plot excuse to show off their various body parts in ads, proudly, shyly, or seductively; it's the "business" of *all* of us to be beautiful—whether we are actresses, politicians, homemakers, teachers, or rock stars. This has changed very little since Berger came up with his formula. When *Time* magazine did a story on the new dominance of female stars in the rock world, its cover featured singing star Jewel, not performing, but in a dewy close-up, lips moist and soft eyes smiling from behind curled lashes. This formidable new "force" in the rock world might as well have been modeling Maybelline. True, a beautiful woman today may be depicted puffing away on a cigar, getting "in touch with her masculine side." But in expression she's still a seductress, gazing through long-

lashed lids into the eyes of an imagined viewer. "Do you like what you see?" the expressions of the models seem to ask. Men, according to Berger's formula, must never seem as though they are asking this question, and may display their beauty only if it is an unavoidable side effect of other "business."

Male Decorativeness in Cultural Perspective

Not all heterosexual men are as uptight about the pocket flaps on their pants as the Haggard executive would have us believe. Several weeks after the piece on khakis appeared in *The New Yorker*, a reader wrote in protesting that the idea "that men don't want to look like they're trying to be fashionable or sexy" was rather culture-bound. Maybe, this reader acknowledged, it applies to American, English, and Japanese men. "But are we really to believe that French, Italian, and Spanish men share this concern? And, when we expand the category 'male' beyond human beings, biologists have shown that the demonstration of male splendor is a key element in the vertebrate mating game. Are American males just an anomalous species?"

POINT TO BE NOTED 14: (Fe)Male Fashion in History

First of all, for most of human history, there haven't been radically different "masculine" and "feminine" attitudes toward beauty and decorativeness. On farms, frontiers, and feudal estates, women were needed to work alongside men and beauty was hardly a priority for either. Among aristocrats, it was most important to maintain class privilege (rather than gender difference), and standards of elegance for both sexes (as Anne Hollander's fascinating *Sex and Suits* documents) were largely the same: elaborate headwear, cosmetics, nonutilitarian adornments, and accessories. Attention to beauty was associated not with femininity but with a life that was both privileged and governed by exacting standards. The constrictions, precarious

adornments, elaborate fastenings reminded the elite that they were highly civilized beings, not simple peasant "animals." At the same time, decorativeness was a mode of royal and aristocratic competition, as households and courts would try to out-glam each other with jewels and furs. Hollander describes a sixteenth-century summit meeting between Francis I and Henry VIII, in which everyone wore "silver covered with diamonds, except when they were in cloth of gold and covered with rubies. Everything was lined with ermine and everything was 20 yards long, and there were plumes on everybody." Everybody-male or female-had to be as gorgeous as possible. It was a mode of power competition.

Until roughly the fourteenth century, men and women didn't even dress very differently. (Think of the Greeks and Romans and their unisex robes and togas.) Clear differences started to emerge only in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance: women's breasts began to be exposed and emphasized in tight bodices, while their legs were covered with long skirts. Men's legs-and sometimes their genitals as well-were "fully articulated" and visible through pantaloons (what we call "tights"), with body armor covering the chest. While to our sensibilities, the shapely legs and genitals of men in tights (unless required by a ballet or historical drama) are either to be laughed at or drooled over, Hollander argues that in the Renaissance, to outline the male body was to make it more "real" and "natural," less a template for sexual fantasy (as women's bodies were becoming). This trend continued, with men's clothing getting progressively more unrestrictive, tailored, simple and women's more stiff, tightly fitted, decorative. Still, into the seventeenth century, fashionable gentlemen continued to wear lace and silk, and to don powder and wigs before appearing in public. Hollander regards the nineteenth century as a "great divide," after which not only the styles of men's and women's clothing (trousers for men, increasingly romantic froufrou for women) would become radically different, but ideas about them as well.

POINT TO BE NOTED 15:

My Dress, My Personality: A Myth, or a Fact?

Men's clothing must now be "honest, comfortable, and utilitarian," while women's begins to develop a reputation for being "frivolous" and "deceptive." The script for "men act and women appear" was being written-right onto male and female clothing.