A CULTURAL HISTORY OF BEAUTY

Volume 6

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A Cultural History of Beauty
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A CULTURAL HISTORY OF BEAUTY

IN THE MODERN AGE

Edited by Paul R. Deslandes

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, 1359 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland, 29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain 2026

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Series design: Raven Design
Cover image: At a beauty contest for men. New York, ca.1950s. © Weegee (Arthur Fellig)/ International Center of Photography/Getty Images

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: Pack: 978-1-3500-7188-9
HB: 978-1-3500-7173-5

Series: The Cultural Histories Series

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain

For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com.

CONTENTS

Illustrations vii

Series Preface xii

Introduction: Beauty and Modern History 1
Paul R. Deslandes

1 Ideas of Beauty 19
Bernadette Wegenstein

2 Art and Beauty: The Promise of Inclusivity and the Changing Face of Beauty 45
Emily L. Newman

3 Beauty, Ugliness, and Ideas of Difference: The Politics of the Personal 69
Suzannah Biernoff

4 Nakedness and Beauty 95
Lela F. Kerley

5 Grooming and Hygiene: Skin and Beauty Between Two Empires 123
Srirupa Prasad

6 Making the Body Beautiful 147
Elizabeth M. Matelski

9781350071735_bookpdf.indb 5 24-12-2025 11:35:46 AM

7 Material Culture, Clothing, and Consumer Practices: From the Fin de Siècle to Instagram 171
Yuniya Kawamura

8 Desire, Sexuality, and Beauty: Mass Culture and Bodies for Others 193
Mark J. McLelland and Paul R. Deslandes

Notes 221
Bibliography 222
Contributors 250
Index 253

9781350071735_bookpdf.indb 6 24-12-2025 11:35:46 AM

CHAPTER 1

Ideas of Beauty

BERNADETTE WEGENSTEIN

> Beauty is truth, truth is beauty.
>
> —John Keats, 1820

The nineteenth-century French novelist Stendhal—who felt dizziness and an accelerated heartbeat in the presence of sublime beauty that he found, in one instance, at the tombs of the Renaissance heroes in Florence—famously interpreted beauty as inciting "a promise for happiness" ([1822] 2009: 32). For Stendhal, beauty promised something other than itself, a transcendence toward another realm, be that religious, spiritual, sensual, or a feeling of belonging. For instance, in his novel *On Love*, the young male character Beyle travels to Milan and finds beauty in his first encounter with a beautiful Italian woman, presenting love now as a synonym for beauty and, beyond that, for home:

> he first visited Italy in 1800, aged seventeen, and swiftly fell in love with his first Italian belle and with Italian opera [. . .]. Although he returned to France many times, Beyle grumbled about the poverty of his country's art and social diversions, and always longed to be back in Italy, which he felt was his true home. (Stendhal [1822] 2009: xiii–xiv)

Similarly, for the English poet William Blake, artistic creation needed to be guided by excessive, transgressive appetites; and yet his reasoning still anchored that ideal in another. As he wrote, "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" ([*c*. 1790] 2011: 66).

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The nineteenth century's notion of *Beauty* as taking over a person's senses and rationality, like a cult-like or religious experience, was deeply rooted in the all-encompassing and absolutist belief in the *ideal of beauty* dating back to antiquity. In this experience, the encounter with Beauty is not just about a personal satisfaction with a perceived beautiful object or idea, but it also carries an ethical implication, in the sense that what is perceived as beautiful becomes a universal good and is often either desired as an individual artwork, including for possession, or becomes a beautiful object of worship. Greek sculpture, to give an example, "sought an ideal Beauty through a synthesis of living bodies [. . .] as an expression of a psychophysical beauty that harmonized body and soul" (Eco 2004: 45). I will return to the marriage of the Greek notion of a *beauty of form* and the *goodness of the soul* in more detail later.

Today's ideas of beauty, however, while still indebted to a universalist and absolutist account of satisfaction through the beautiful experience, are rooted in a personal project that has become the responsibility of the individual agent since the age of Enlightenment (Foucault [1976] 1990: *passim*). Since that period in Western culture, beauty has become more and more influenced by the idea of an individual's choice, and since the twentieth century by an individualistic eclecticism. For instance, the disruption of beauty by the avant-garde decimated connections between appearance, truth, and belonging, asking critical questions about standards of beauty, and lifting ugliness into the realm of aesthetics. As the founder of surrealism André Breton (1896–1966) famously wrote at the end of his 1928 novel *Nadja*, "beauty will be CONVULSIVE or it will not be at all" ([1928] 1960: 159–60). Today's notion of beauty, itself deeply embedded in a techno-makeover culture that, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, is always looking for an improvement of the "true self" (Wegenstein 2012: 109), takes this "mistrust" in a universal sense of beauty even further, asking whether we can attribute authorship, originality, and intention to what we perceive as beautiful *at all*. In many ways, by that move it dissolves a universalist sense of beauty that was God given, leading to one that is entirely woman- or man- or computer-made.

In what follows I approach these complex questions and connections by starting with some important pillars in beauty culture from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thought. As will soon be clear, I believe our current beauty standards and ideals are in many ways still built upon these pillars and are thus anchored in the Ancient Greek Platonic concept of *kalókagatheia*—which states that what is beautiful is good—even as the concept has been transferred from a society of mass media to one of social media (Apprich 2018: xi). What has transpired, however, is that the idea of what exemplifies the beautiful has been fragmented and proliferated, now increasingly individual and less homogenized. In today's beauty economy, the things that count as beautiful can be so different that they appear totally unrelated, which may be

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the reason why today's beauty ideals do not create a sense of "belonging" or "home" in such stably recognizable patterns as the Italian Renaissance did for the young Beyle. Nonetheless, as suggested by the cultural theorist and artist Hito Steyerl (b. 1966), it may be that our age of "computer vision" induces a new Neolithic age of "magical thinking and pattern projections" in which we discern unity and commonality behind the whirling sea of data in which we swim (2018: 15). In other words, despite the proliferation of beauty ideals, an underlying fusion of the beautiful with truth and goodness has perhaps managed to survive the dissolution of the sort of universalism that Immanuel Kant argued was necessary for true aesthetic judgment (Kant [1790] 2000). In other words, beauty, as we know it, might be in decline, but its synonyms of goodness and truth are not.

Ideas of beauty from a given time or culture are pivotal to any examination and understanding of that time or culture because they are often among the first ideas to reflect its essential values. These ideas, which are often formulated and contemplated by artists and writers who create beauty, determine not only what is beautiful but what is meaningful and important to that time or culture. This chapter looks primarily at a Western history of beauty, as the examples discussed are mainly from Europe and the United States. The reason for this Eurocentrism is mainly that, as a European author living in the United States, I am most able to access theoretical texts discussing the meaning of certain beautiful artifacts in the European languages and histories that I have studied. But of course, ideals of beauty exist equally in all cultures, and I would like to highlight an example here that might be of global relevance and is echoed in some of my own examples.

Many will be familiar with the neck-elongating rings that certain groups in Asia and Africa, including the Kayan people of Myanmar, have used for centuries as a means of altering women's necks. In this intervention into the bodies of usually very young girls, the rings, which are worn for life, extend the neck so that it resembles that of a dragon, a symbol of motherhood in the Kayan tradition (see Plate 1). Without wanting to cast an objectifying Western gaze onto this unique body ritual and its potential meaning, one thing is clear: the neck rings draw attention to the face, framing it in an important way (National Geographic 2011). If we think of the Renaissance European tradition of the ruff collar, we see a similar visualization of the face and indeed an obscuring of the female neck, which might be interpreted simultaneously as a celebration of a woman's face and a brutal intervention that limited free movement (Figure 1.1). Some of the examples quoted at the end of this chapter, drawn from the Radical Beauty Project or Alexander McQueen's fashion ideas, reveal traces of this very question of the neck: Do we want to read the neck against and in relation to the entirety of the body? Do we want to read it as a beginning, as a transition, as something that extends and celebrates the face? Or as something

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FIGURE 1.1 Portrait of Elizabeth Stafford, Lady Drury, *c*. 1595. Photo: The Picture Art Collection/Alamy Stock Photo.

that hides the female flesh for the purpose of its dignity? Or is it a ritual that is a forceful intervention into the naturality of the female physiognomy? One thing can be said of all beauty ideals: they depend heavily on who is reading them.

THE MARRIAGE OF TRUTH AND BEAUTY

As I have written elsewhere (2006, 2011, 2012), the Western philosophical tradition's revitalization of Greek beauty ideals in the nineteenth century

entailed the moral devaluation of physiognomic traits of certain ethnicities or cultural groups. This devaluation took place in the service of a politics and ideology of colonial mastery and European racial supremacy. Already in the late eighteenth century, an early physiognomist like the immensely popular Swiss doctor Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801) was writing pocket manuals that categorized and ranked people into types that were clearly visible through bodily traits, such as skull size and the shape or setting of the eyes. Lavater was looking for an improvement in faces, a "progress" toward beauty, which is also how he labeled his images. For instance, a sequence from the late eighteenth century in which Lavater shows the progress of beauty from a "Beginning Beauty" (Figure 1.2) of a "forehead that, albeit a bit more covered by hair, is not progressive and the chin and eyebrows aren't pronounced enough" to a "Progress of Beauty" where we can see "a less bent forehead, a less prominent nose, the eyebrows better formed, and the upper lip more 'lieblich,' meaning lovely [which is a word that is not only gendered but even implies a childlike quality] the chin a bit rounder, and the eye showing fewer wrinkles" (1789: 135). In the century that followed, the idea that inner, moral qualities could be read on the surface of the body proliferated and informed powerful and persistent racial and ultimately racist theories, such as those of the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), whose enormously influential work categorized criminals into recognizable and often racialized types and levels of deviance (Knepper and Ystehede 2013: *passim*).

In fact, nineteenth-century Europe was not only obsessed with finding a connection between a person's inner soul and its outer expression or representation but also with beauty culture as such. The idea, still going back to the Greeks, was that only art could express true beauty and among these *beaux arts* (the French term for "beautiful arts") numbered painting, sculpture, architecture, and, of course, music. Friedrich Hegel's (1770–1831) monumental history of artistic thought and expression in his lectures on aesthetics aligned all forms of expression into a progression leading through the sensual stages of experience toward ever purer and ideal forms of knowledge. For Hegel, paradoxically, his own age was a time when that experience of art was no longer possible, as human consciousness had advanced to a more abstract level than could be expressed through sensuous media ([1835] 1976: 49).

In Hegel's immediate wake, German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) would speak of the experience of beauty in music as a fundamental principle of the Romantic period because it is that art form that is most capable of articulating the "innermost nature of the world" ([1818] 1969: 260), a pure expression of will without any mediation of reason or representation. This Romantic notion of music as capable of acting directly on our will, our emotions, our passions, became a prominent idea in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), whose early enthusiasm for the compositions of Richard

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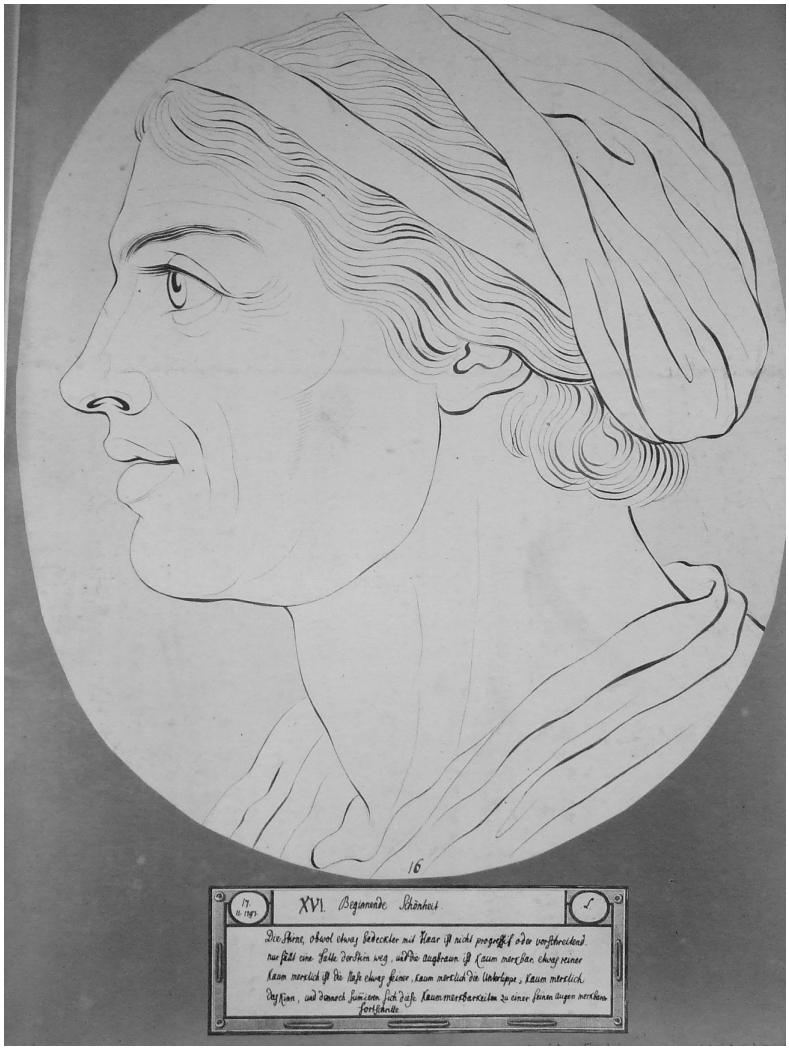


FIGURE 1.2 Johann Kaspar Lavater's depiction of "Beginning Beauty," 1797. Photo: Courtesy of Special Collections, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA.

Wagner resonated with the convictions in his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) that the Dionysian impulse that fed the early Greek tragedies should be revived in his time. Nietzsche's insight that truth sometimes departed radically from what a given culture believed was beautiful, however, would lay the groundwork for a twentieth-century culture, the aesthetic ideals of which would come to favor disruption, convulsion, and even outright ugliness, echoing the prophetic words of Nietzsche: "truth is ugly. We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*" ([1901] 1968: §822). Indeed, while Nietzsche defended a notion of art as a buffer from

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truth, many of his contemporaries in European letters were developing the literary practice of realism that would judge the quality of a work according to its truthfulness, no matter how hard the reality it strove to represent.

THE DISRUPTION OF BEAUTY

To summarize: the concept inherited by nineteenth-century thought emphasized the resulting of beauty from an inner disposition of the soul, like the "golden ratio" that was, for the Greeks, divine or God given, and that humanity needed to remember and locate in the past in order to recreate a perfect pattern. Beauty's perfect dimensions and proportions were to be found in *nature*. Such "natural beauty" was the basis of many Renaissance buildings and had been found by the thirteenth-century mathematician Fibonacci in the naturally occurring sequences that determine perfectly beautiful proportionality. While internalizing the culture of classical imitation or "classical beauty ideals" with all its nomenclatures and systems for defining an absolute beauty, Western culture also invents and advances ways of excluding those left out by the cultural canon, those neither seen nor given a voice. Let's not forget that the beauty notion of nineteenth-century physiognomists like Lombroso and the American Samuel Wells (1820–75)—who disqualified certain ethnic body traits, such as the unibrow, as "deviant" and indicative of potentially criminal characteristics—was used as a justification to establish racial laws to persecute and eventually exterminate entire races. Here history remembers anthropologist Eugen Fischer (1874–1967), whose pseudoscience informed the racist Nuremberg Laws of Nazi Germany.

It goes without saying that this political move to exclude a group because of certain physiognomic traits attached to their appearance is not at all a European or American invention, nor is it reserved to Western politics, nor has it stopped working its way into many contemporary cultural practices. Racial profiling is certainly on the rise and heavily discussed in the US media (and elsewhere) due to the many innocent Black people who have died at the hands of white police simply because they were perceived as Black. Without taking this argument too far outside of my historical focus, I do want to point out that any colonization is always and by definition also an intervention into what is allowed to be seen in the public domain and hence *allowed* to be perceived as beautiful. For instance, in a film by Mexican director Lila Aviles, called *La camarista* (*The Maid*; 2018), we experience a luxury hotel culture in Mexico City entirely through the eyes of its indigenous employees who are shown as existing in a situation of apartheid vis-à-vis their hotel guests, who are all white, tall, and thin, while the employees are dark, short, and round. In this juxtaposition of bodies, the colonial ideals of a Hispanic, white beauty clearly demarcate a subjugation and oppression of the working-class Mexicans who are shown as not having the right to be beautiful.

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Significantly, in one pivotal scene, a female hotel guest offers the maid, Eve, a beauty product she no longer needs, but Eve refuses it.

While Lavater, Lombroso, and Wells justified their discrimination on cultural values that were themselves based in essentialist racisms such as "Jews steal" or "Southern Italians are dishonest," a jump somewhat far afield to today sees the current media culture camouflage such essentialisms in algorithms that are detached from a human eye yet equally harsh in their disqualifications of body traits. The US Department of Homeland Security has developed software that supposedly predicts criminal behavior. Not surprisingly, ProPublica, a nonprofit platform for investigative journalism in the United States, found that the algorithmically computed "risk scores" were both remarkably unreliable and racist: "the formula was particularly likely to falsely flag black defendants as future criminals, wrongly labeling them this way at almost twice the rate as white defendants" (Angwin et al. 2016). Florian Cramer's article "Crapularity Hermeneutics: Interpretation as the Blindspot of Analytics, Artificial Intelligence, and Other Algorithmic Producers of the Postapocalyptic Present" opens with John Cayley's observation that "language is easy to capture but difficult to read" (quoted in Cramer 2018: 23). This is exactly the situation as it pertains to the disruption of beauty by the twentieth-century media revolution. The language of beauty had now been optimized, not least in that it has been driven by research into attractiveness.

Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911)—the cousin of Charles Darwin (1809–82), who is notably remembered for his advances in statistics, twin studies, the methods of fingerprinting and composite portraiture, and coining the term *eugenics*—was interested in the human face in ways that closely followed Lavater's work. Instead of drawing faces, Galton turned to the photograph, which he believed was an objective technology in representing the human face. As Nora Ruck and I have argued in our article "Physiognomy, Reality Television, and the Cosmetic Gaze," recent work in these fields has "suggested that beautiful faces are actually average(d) faces." We cite research that "used a digital morphing program explicitly inspired by Galton's composite portraiture to create averaged faces. Several faces were photographed, and then each represented by 512 × 512 numeric gray values. These matrices were arithmetically averaged and on the basis of them a series of achromatic composite facial images was created" (2011: 43). Such research enabled computer programs like that developed and patented by the facial surgeon Stephen Marquardt that can be used to impose a "golden mask of beauty" over any digitized image to create an idealized version of the client. As with Lavater and Lombroso, what is at stake for Marquardt is a kind of apophenic "pattern discrimination," the discernment of a projected ideal of beauty into faces that may in fact not need much "adjustment," as the examples in Figure 1.3 show.

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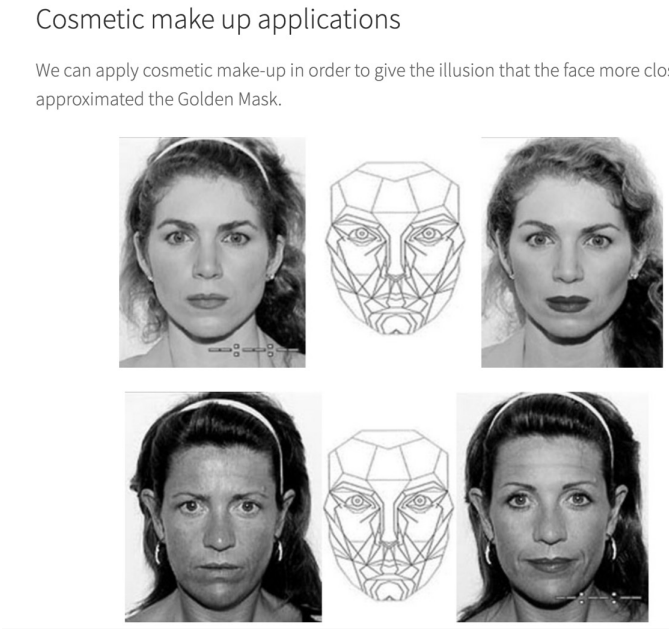


FIGURE 1.3 Image showing applications of the Marquardt Mask. Photo: Stephen Marquardt.

Perhaps through a Hegelian kind of "cunning of history," once we push one ideal to its extreme, we see emerge both its counter-ideal along with a resistance to the values originally expressed by it. This process might be shown via a semiotic square, in which the meaning of a content is also defined and characterized by its counter-meaning as well as by its negation, both of which are equally, albeit silently, connoted, implied, or somehow activated. A semiotic square of beauty based on the model of Algirdas Julien Greimas (Schleifer 1983: xxxii) in Figure 1.4 helps to illustrate this point. If we superimpose nineteenth-century beauty ideals on the semiotic square, beauty could be the effect of any truth or of any value that one believes to be a producer of truth. If, for example, we put a classical notion of truth à la Fibonacci's ratio at position S1, the negation and implication chain could eventually produce a notion of convulsive beauty such as that which the movement of avant-garde art and literature embraced in the early twentieth century.

Indeed, in some sense, it is precisely such a contradiction of the harmonious ideal of beauty that the twentieth century produces. If Romanticism had toyed with and ultimately embraced notions of excess in the service of truth in the nineteenth century, and if Nietzsche equated truth with ugliness in his elevation of the art of self-creation in the early twentieth, then the avant-garde would make a project of finding its ideals in the direct contradiction of beauty's

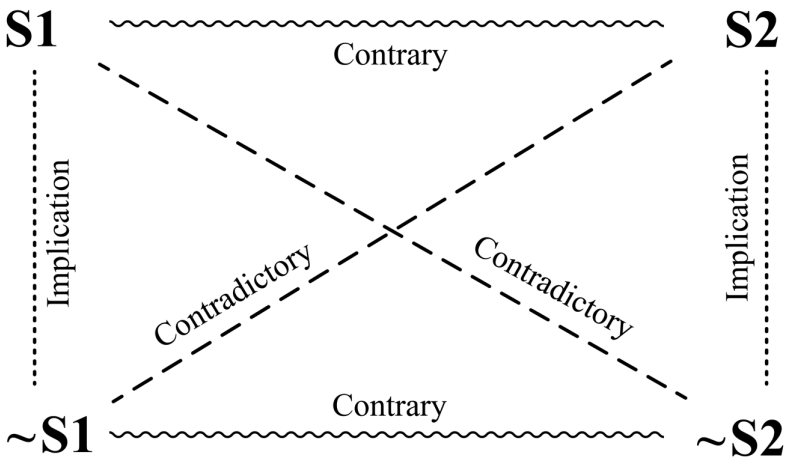


FIGURE 1.4 Greimas' semiotic square. Photo: Author's own.

implicit value. *L'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) was the mantra of a time and movement that sought to detach artistic creation and aesthetic value from any justifying apparatus at all. From music to abstract painting and poetry, the art of the avant-garde becomes intentionally, in the view of José Ortega y Gassett [1925] 2019, "dehumanized," its difficulty and resistance to consumption part and parcel of the beauty ideal of the age becoming more autonomous.

And yet it is precisely this self-contained, self-contented notion of the beautiful that would lead the Marxist cultural critic and theorist Theodor Adorno (1903–69), who had himself fled Nazi Germany as a persecuted Jew to build a new life in New York, to utter that sentiment so often misquoted and misunderstood, that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." As he explains in the passage in which the quotation originally occurred, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation" ([1967] 1981: 34). Adorno's position was that art as well as criticism must release itself from the bonds of reification—of accepting the world as it is, as if it were, as it had to be—to avoid participating in that very reification. In this way, the twentieth century produced both a contrary term to the classical aesthetic ideal of truth as beauty by making it independent of that relationship and then, in a further negation, produced a contradictory notion, subordinating beauty to a duty to truth—in the form of critique—with which it can never entirely reconcile.

In his *Storia della bellezza* (*History of Beauty*; 2004), so widely read that I recently discovered it in Mandarin on the coffee table of my hotel room in Beijing, Umberto Eco (1932–2016) makes an important distinction between this nineteenth-century idea of "beauty" as an experience of transcendence and the idea of a human desire for beauty as a sexual desire or an experience of consumption in general, one that says, "I want to *have* this *because* it is so beautiful." These two experiences, he emphasizes, are completely distinct. What interests Eco, of course, is the first notion of beauty, not the one we can possess or consume, but the one that takes us to a different level of happiness in the Stendhalian sense. Eco (2004) means Beauty with a capital B, a Beauty capable, in the sense of Schopenhauer, of expressing the "inner kernel" of an artwork's Truth. Such beauty is not made for consumption but is an expression of *kalókagatheia*, where the beautiful meets the good to become truth. This Beauty outlasts a singular or even collective human desire and, instead, speaks to us in the language of eternity. Here I am thinking of classic examples examined by Eco such as the Venus of Willendorf (a *c*. 30,000-year-old fertility statue) or actress Anita Ekberg dancing in the Trevi Fountain in Federico Fellini's film *La dolce vita* (1960), examples of an abundant female body that promises the survival of a species through bodily traits that enable successful procreation. Or, alternately, the examination of its male counterparts from Caravaggio's painting *Boy with a Basket of Fruit* to Arnold Schwarzenegger's body in the film *Commando* (1985), to name just a few of the historical beauty arcs quoted in *Storia della bellezza*. As we will see, the concept of beauty that grounds such examples is at the same time a construction of a clearly defined binary gender paradigm that today—thanks to factors ranging from digital modification technology to a rising mainstream culture of difference—is no longer a given for current beauty standards.

I would have been afraid to break the news to Eco—my former beloved teacher at the Università degli Studi di Bologna—who taught me the foundations of semiotics that would profoundly influence my humanistic research paths as well as my future work as a filmmaker—that "Beauty" as he knew and examined it in his magisterial book no longer dominates preoccupations in a zeitgeist of DIY aesthetics informed and even formed by algorithms working their way in the capitalist surveillance culture of the internet. As I will show in what follows, where the twentieth century promoted an oppositional notion to the classical beauty ideal, we are today, for a variety of reasons mostly stemming from the media revolution of the digital age, awash in a multitude of new ideals of beauty, especially female beauty, that concern liberation and self-modification as a form of self-expression and self-formation. Today it is thus appropriate to investigate the idea of beauty from a cultural and aesthetic standpoint that questions the Platonic triad of beauty-good-truth (Plato [*c*. fourth century BCE] 1997) while also asking what has been left of that triad in a day and age of a

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deep *skepticism*—if not downright *resistance*—to the notion that beauty could be or could even want to be universal. As I will show in the several case studies that follow, I believe such skepticism is the effect of a beauty concept that is no longer a vehicle of transcendence but rather a means of self-definition and self-realization.

As we see in the voices of resistance on Instagram's #metoo community and among the followers, for instance, of the Baltimore-based TT The Artist's (b. 1980) #ttsart21 redefinition of a "Black is Beautiful" culture that celebrates the difference of Blackness in music, design, and fashion, beauty in the twenty-first century is beauty-on-demand. It cannot only be digitally created and/or manipulated by any consumer who has access to the necessary tools but also—and more importantly—needs no reference to God or the evaluation of a beauty critic to validate a new, individually created aesthetic. In today's digital consumer society, beauty is produced by *anyone* and anyone can also be watching and tracing our creations on Pinterest or other popular social platforms of "beauty or trend inspirations." Amid this potential chaos, the crucial question is one that Hito Steyerl raises, namely, "how to extract a [reliable] signal from the noise of excessive data?" (2018: 2). In the new digital realm, anything that disturbs the signal and seems irrelevant to it will not be decoded, which means that the new digital environment of disruptive beauty is one of a self-fulfilling prophecy: it creates exactly what it is looking for.

The pressing question I believe is this: whether this "new beauty ideal" that is made up of pixels and algorithms still strives to be *truthful*, *prescriptive*, and *shared* in a community, as its Platonic origin suggests and as Schopenhauer would strive for and, moreover, whether it is still a driving force behind our teleological narratives about who we want to be as humans. In other words, is beauty still a search for "home" in Stendhal's sense? And, finally, do we even still consider an aesthetic experience an experience of "beauty" in a day and age when we can all be beautiful with such apps as Beauty in My Pocket, YouCAM Makeup, FaceTune, or Facial Massage that are just one click away on our cellular phones?

PERSONALIZED BEAUTY IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CONSUMERISM

So where are we now? Have beauty ideals been definitively disrupted by patterns of data projection that are themselves built on pillars of a language that nobody has the semiotic skills to interpret anymore? What would Eco say? Or

to again quote Hito Steyerl, has "the twenty-first-century augur create[d] the image before the event, anticipating its effect and calling forth reality" (2018: 14)? Or perhaps we have not "disrupted" beauty at all but rather "destroyed" its very conceptualization?

In an interesting experiment by Sagmeister (b. 1962) & Walsh (b. 1986) for their 2018 exhibit "Beauty" at the Museum of Applied Art in Vienna, the artists counted the appearance of the word beauty itself since 1800 and concluded that it was found less and less in the books scanned between 1800 and 2000 (Sagmeister & Walsh 2018). While I am not acquainted with Sagmeister & Walsh's methods or the number of books featuring the word "beauty" that had *not* yet been digitized when they executed their search, I am nonetheless inclined to believe that there is truth in this anecdotal research. Today there is no longer the absolute beauty we know from nineteenth-century thought; an encompassing human conception that searches for ultimate meaning and relevance—that Beauty with a capital B that Eco was tracing in his cultural history. The idea of beauty prevalent in today's consumer-based, capitalized culture is one that feeds on personal significance. It is no longer an abstract notion that is somehow there before the fact because it was God-given or inherent to a golden shape or form. No, today's beauty belongs to the "individual." It is the result of a personal search and self-realization. It is "my beauty" or "iBeauty." Later I analyze the notion and status quo of this new beauty in some examples from the contemporary cultural landscape on- and offline.

Before that, I would like to look back at the internalized notions of beauty discussed earlier and the question of whether and how these remain with us. In other words, if accepting the fact that, in the global village, we no longer strive for an absolute Beauty, then whence do we receive our notions of beauty? And how do we communicate them? If the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*; "Beauty, n." 2013) comes up with the two main denotations for the term "beauty" in the following definition, then it seems we are still dealing with a "quality" that is "pleasing" our aesthetic senses:

> noun
> 1. a combination of qualities, such as shape, color, or form, that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight.
> "I was struck by her beauty"
> 2. a beautiful woman.
> "She was considered a great beauty in her youth"
> *synonyms*: beautiful woman, belle, vision, charmer, enchantress, Venus, goddess, beauty queen, English rose, picture, seductress.

But What Are These?

In various other experiments and examples from their accompanying catalogue, Sagmeister & Walsh reiterate that we have always quickly and intuitively known what beauty is because there is a cognitive background to choosing one specific shape and form over another. This process was described by Norbert Schwarz who is interested in the metacognitive experience of finding beauty in truth, be it in science or in art: "when an object is easy to perceive, people evaluate it as more beautiful than when it is difficult to perceive; similarly, when a statement is easy to process, people are more likely to accept it as true than when it is difficult to process. Psychologists refer to the ease or difficulty of information processing as 'processing fluency'" (2018: 25). Sagmeister & Walsh go further to interpret this as an evolutionary choice, as described by Matthew Willcox: "an object is attractive when it is familiar, which means that it might not represent any danger for me such as eating me" (2015: 41).

The notion of a kind of biological utility to beauty was at least implicit in the work of nineteenth-century theorists as well. By that time, Lavater's ideas had already permeated culture, literature, art, medicine, and the emerging social sciences (Percival 2005: 18). If, for Lavater, man's essence lay in his soul and the body was just its mirror, then more and more scientists considered the body itself to be man's essence. In the nineteenth century, Sir Francis Galton provided an especially rich contrast to Lavater. Galton was very impressed with his cousin Charles Darwin's insights and, with his own 1892 book *Hereditary Genius*, he aimed to show that character and intelligence were hereditary. But as it was for Lavater, the key to that character and intelligence was in the face, as recorded by the camera. Galton organized his photographs of faces for this study into groups whose members shared the same hereditary raw material via a visual method called composite portraiture, an averaged figure meant to bring into evidence "all the traits in which there is agreement, and to leave but a ghost of a trace of individual peculiarities" (1883: 10).

The implicit association of the average face among a plurality of specific faces has been transferred to contemporary interests not only in beauty itself but also in the question of how evolution guides cultural norms. In his research on the science of decision-making, Matthew Willcox, for instance, underlines that research reveals the evolutionary biological basis of the "intuitive processes, rather than rational ones" that "drive human choices" (2015: 11). In a parallel vein, the philosopher Denis Dutton has recently upset the establishment of art criticism by arguing against generations of both social constructivist and objectivist aesthetic thought in favor of an idea of aesthetic standards that are considered universal precisely because they are derived from selected traits. Art, writes Dutton, "is tied to human nature" and human nature has evolved under specific circumstances as the result of natural selection (2009: 31). In this sense, our tendencies to find certain forms of expression more beautiful than others, however these tendencies are expressed, will ultimately respond to a

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level of influence that is not individual but, rather, derived from behaviors and choices agglomerated and averaged over multiple generations.

PATTERN EVASION IN AN AGE OF APOPHENIA

Frederic Jameson (1934–2024), an American literary critic known for his critique of cultural trends in literature, architecture, and beyond, famously argued that the postmodern aesthetic was fundamentally indebted to the technique of pastiche and, hence, dependent on a secondary level of creativity that involves making connections between apparently disparate sources. Yet for all its contemporaneity, in subtle and not too subtle ways, the art of pastiche recalls the very processes and techniques that eugenicists like Wells called up to evoke their average standards: disparate particulars are culled for their overlapping, connecting aspects. This strange relation becomes a little clearer if we take seriously Steyerl's contention of the dissemination of "computer vision" and its corresponding age of "apophenia," wherein our associations may be guided by such empathy-free pattern recognition algorithms such as *FaceNet*, a face recognition system developed in 2015 by researchers at Google that achieved what were, at the time, state-of-the-art results on a range of face recognition benchmark datasets (Brownlee 2020).

The biggest internet economies in the world—Russia, China, and the United States—have been competing to create the most efficient and reliable face recognition algorithm leading to the worrisome ethical and privacy implications that accompany these technologies (Chakrabarti 2019). According to one source (N-Tech.Lab 2015), the Russian N-Tech.Lab became the leader of facial recognition software, along with Google's FaceNet, and used their technology to map the largest number of Russian faces for the state's secret service, even while claiming that it was in fact using them for a dating site. What is of interest here is the question of what happens to "beauty ideals" in an age when the face, the most personal "pattern" of our identities, becomes a data ghost and turns out to be 99 percent like others. At the close of an age in which Jean Epstein (1897–1953), a French filmmaker and film critic active in the first half of the twentieth century, located the magic of cinema in the facial close-up and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), a French philosopher active in the second half of the twentieth century, grounded the fundamental ethical impulse in the face of the other person, what are we to make of a technological revolution that leads us to imagine connections where there are none and to make our individual bodily expressions secondary to algorithmically produced averages?

In his study "Automating Aesthetics: Artificial Intelligence and Image Culture," Lev Manovich calls our attention to the question of what happens when we "automate" beauty in our current apps. For instance, "the [application] *The Roll by EyeEm* automatically rates the aesthetic quality of your photos"

(Manovich 2017: 1). When you go onto eyeem.com, you read self-boasting words about the cognitive and artistic abilities of the app, which "intelligently helps you find the best photos in your phone's camera roll" via "aesthetic scores" applied "to every photo in your camera roll" (EyeEm Team 2022). Another app called Gemini Photos markets itself as a gallery cleaner that tries to attract users by promising to help them separate the bad photographs in their photo libraries from the good, and help them to eliminate those that are blurry, duplicates, or simply screenshots taken in error. In so doing, it promises to help users preserve their best and most cherished memories.

To add to this with a personal anecdote, when I came back from a visit to Shanghai in 2019 and imported one of my favorite photos from my travel, raw and unedited, from my camera, my (at the time) sixteen-year-old daughter immediately put it through a filter on her iPhone and gave it back to me with a different atmosphere that brought out the obscure darkness of this street scene, a photographer, and a mysterious passerby (Figures 1.5 and 1.6). In so doing, she gave the image more narrative, more of a conversation between the three protagonists with one quick click-and-fix. The question that Manovich asks and that is relevant for me is this: "does such automation [lead] to a decrease in cultural diversity over time" and does it make us all create a similar aesthetic? He further asks, "can we use AI methods and large samples of cultural data to measure quantitatively diversity and variability in contemporary culture" (2017: 1)? This last question might be enriched with the question of whether we can do so *ethically*. Can we project patterns without the help of a specifically human intuition, a unique or "original" feeling that evades datafication?



FIGURE 1.5 Shanghai street scene (untouched), 2019. Photo: Bernadette Wegenstein.



FIGURE 1.6 Shanghai street scene (automatically enhanced), 2019. Photo: Bernadette Wegenstein.

Manovich gives a few examples that indicate that we can't. For instance, while *Game of Thrones* was made with the help of AI storytelling, the actual execution of writing the plot was done by humans. An even more interesting example he mentions is the trailer generated by Watson, a technology developed by IBM for the horror AI thriller *Morgan*. A scientist from IBM is shown teaching the computer program to evaluate what is scary, funny, and so on. The outcome is rather convincing, looking and feeling like a Hollywood trailer. But the reason for the success of the automated trailer may not have been Watson's intelligence—in cutting a trailer from a "mood-palette" already delivered in the actual movie, almost "any" decently cohesive combination of images and quotations from the movie could have created a "good trailer." The other reason for this relative success is the fact that the question is not "can computers create?"—because they clearly can—but rather concerns how we interpret what they "say." In the case of the *Morgan* trailer, because it is a trailer and because it is a Hollywood movie, we all know how to understand the format. The music, the intonation of the narrator, all of which we have heard and seen before in so many commercial Hollywood films, let us know the formulaic genre and filmic language that we can expect in *Morgan*. Another experiment would have been to let an editor blindly push the extract button from the movie in AVID and then decide if the outcome wasn't a similarly good trailer. Just like to the idea of "data-apophenia" by Hito Steyerl, by this action a meaningful connection between unrelated things would have been made—typical of the language of the movie trailer.

In the age of generalized apophenia, where identity is as visible, accessible, quantified, and datafied as ever, the question becomes focused on the way in which this culture affects the sense of our identity and—most importantly—on which identity is at hand. In *The Lies that Bind,* Kwame Anthony Appiah derives much of his anthropological and philosophical wisdom from his own identity of being born into a half-Ghanian, half-British identity, culture, and religious practice. In his section on "habitus," for instance, Appiah writes about "how central identity is to the way we deploy our bodies" (2018: 21). Habits, as he says, are deployed and shaped by our identities. We learn to dress as a man or woman in ways that are shaped by clothes that fit these body types and norms. The clothes themselves are chosen on the basis of gender. In our lives, once fully socialized, we end up walking and dressing in ways that reflect our identities, our class, our ethnicity, perhaps our religiosity, and beyond. Identity in this sense, as displayed on our bodies, as part of an aesthetic that we turn outward in the shape of our bodily presentation, then becomes a call for solidarity, of looking for the patterns of similarity in others.

As we delve into new aesthetic tendencies from photography to fashion, we can get a sense that in today's apophenic age we are trending in two opposite directions. On the one hand, we are moving toward a complete datafication and uniformity of ourselves, as, for instance, can be traced on selfiecity.net, where we can witness the rising uniformity of selfies posted on Instagram in five major cities over recent years. Here trends are revealed that are as unsurprising as the AI trailer for *Morgan*: more women are taking selfies than men, and one of the preferred face angles is the result of a picture taken from a supine position. On the other hand, the trend of what I'd like to call apophenic "pattern evasion," in which what we aim for are identities that are new, unspoiled, and raw in a way that we have not seen before: identities, in other words, that resist the gravitational pull of the average.

It seems that in this kind of beauty discourse, the lived experience and the access to "truth" in the Platonic sense are even more relevant in today's age of a sea of data. If nineteenth-century race theorists and, by implication, their more recent descendants looked for the truth of racial characteristics in generalized composites, the opposing trend also seeks to express truths, precisely by shirking the general and exposing the particular. The new aesthetic that derives from this "pattern-evasive" aesthetic is one that the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has called a "subjectivity of distance" necessary for social analysis and the anthropologist's responsibility of assuming multiplex personal identities for their research (1989: 168). In Rosaldo's ethnography, the "norm" is not about "truth" and also not about "beauty"; rather, beauty and truth are the result of a deviance or distance from the norm that the ethnographer assumes through his or her multiplex personal identities via the empathy and understanding they have created toward the "subordinate" group, which is the object of their

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studies: those who are either surveilled by the larger culture or are identified as criminals as in the essentialist practices of nineteenth-century eugenicists and physiognomists. As an outsider himself—half-Chicano, half-white—Rosaldo talks about the advantage of assuming the point of view of the outsider, an anthropological perspective that for him "problematizes a rigid idea of cultures as closed identities, where each person lives solely within one culture." As he puts it:

> we always live between cultures, and I think it can also be said that a monolingual person always lives between cultures because there are levels of language, different registers, and one can talk as if on the street, or as if in a classroom, or at a more formal level, more ceremonial. These levels always exist, we always live between levels, and we always know how to go from one level to another. (Montezemolo 2008: 28)

Precisely because everyone's identity is constituted at the crossroads of these cultural or ethnic influences, the choice of a certain look or style becomes beautiful insofar as it expresses not merely a shattering of mainstream beauty ideals, as with the avant-garde, but new and more specific cultural patterns. This pattern-evasive identity expression works not only at a cultural and ethnic crossroads but is also powerfully present in current gender identifications. The artist Kandis Williams (b. 1985), for instance, grounds her artistic practice in the strategy of troubling the identity slots the broader culture tries to fit her into. As she puts it:

> there's a kind of weird power or sexual mystique in that, but then it comes from this same degradation, this animalistic treatment. I'm blown away by how easy it is for people to objectify me based on three words about how I look: tall, black, woman. I literally don't even know what people are looking at when they look at me. I feel like they must be like blurry-eyed, goggle visions of Beyoncé to King Kong. It might set someone in any direction, so I really don't know until I've been around a person for a while at this point why the fuck they'd want to be around me. (Williams and Burlison 2019: 17)

Not surprisingly, Williams evades any kind of clear interpretation of shapes, forms, or racial identifications in her composite paintings that could be thought of as the opposite of the "progress" toward Beauty by Lavater. Nothing is clearly in the foreground or background, but every shape is a reflection in the reflection, evading a clear definition. This aesthetic, as it works in Figure 1.7, for instance, is literal superimposition of identities and places. Nothing is a oneness or one place, one identity, one color.

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FIGURE 1.7 Kandis Williams, *Shallow Pool of Bacchanal Freedom*, 2018. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto, Canada.

In "How to be a Genderqueer Feminist," the British feminist Laurie Penny talks about coming out as an individual journey but also a collective weapon, one she is already witnessing as producing a new form of excitement for the in-between, the unknown. As she describes it:

> more than anything, I'm excited. I'm excited to see how life is going to be different for the queer, trans, and even cis kids too, growing up in a world that has more language for gender variance. I'm excited to find out what sort of lives they will lead, from the genderqueer activists in the audience at my last reading to the barista with the orange mohawk who handed me the cup of tea I'm clutching for dear life as I write alone in this café, trying to believe that writing this piece is something other than gross self-indulgence.
>
> The barista is wearing two name badges. One says their name; the other one says, in thick chalk capitals, *I am not a girl. My pronouns are They/Them*. (Penny 2015)

TT The Artist echoes these sentiments in an artistic production and philosophy that embraces ethnic and gender individuality and difference as the very essence of beauty. In fact, reaching that aesthetic objective requires inhabiting the borders of different media as well as peripheral gender or racial identities. As she put it in an interview with me, in reference to her African American pop art series (Figure 1.8), "a lot of my Black pop series will be a more multimedia

experience. I'm going to dive into doing some sculpture, video installation [. . .], multisensory multimedia. That's my ultimate goal with my visual arts: to intersect everything that I'm doing" (Wegenstein 2019).

The Warholian series, *The Emancipation of Mammy*, iterates figures like the Aunt Jemima logo and Hattie McDaniel in the eponymous role from the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, deconstructing mammies from their flat and uncannily cheerful representations and reconstructing them in intersection with swaths of more authentic fabrics, Oscar statuettes, and other evidence



FIGURE 1.8 TT The Artist, *The Emancipation of Mammy*, 2019.

of both their humanity and the extent to which that humanity had been denied them in earlier media. Her series on contemporary women likewise celebrates a Black aesthetic that is not presented as an alternate to established beauty standards but claims its own instant iconicity, as in the immediately recognizable Nicki Minaj (see Plate 2), a rapper who is nonetheless famous for her multiple artistic personalities and evolving public image. TT's rendering of Minaj's exposed thighs and buttocks, hugged by superhuman 5-foot blond hair extensions to further accentuate their thickness relative to her slender corseted waist, interrogates physical beauty according to Black conceptions of the body.

TT The Artist is here consciously building on a political movement from the 1960s, one that finally asserted the beauty of Blackness against the logical opposition entrenched in European aesthetics since at least the medieval period. The writing "white sup-rem-a-cy is an ox-y-mo-ron" on a jumpsuit in the series is a reminder of the fact that being the outsider, the outcast, the oppressed, the not-seen, such as the case with being Black in America, is something to remind the public of. It is as if TT The Artist had rewritten the famous inscription found on the "Black Virgin"—a statue of the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus, purportedly from the ninth century, located in the Cathedral of Tindari on the island of Sicily. In TT The Artist's contemporary vision, the inscription—*NIGRA SUM SED FORMOSA* ("I am Black but beautiful")—is rejected and instead replaced, through the artist's work, by the words, "I am beautiful *because* I am Black." In this case beauty clearly functions as an affirmation of a marginalized identity.

Today's beauty culture revels in exposing the failure of the mean; the deviant-fabulous body is no longer confined to the nightclub but has gone mainstream. In his book *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*, Madison Moore writes a biography of fabulousness: "I'm interested in queer and other people forced to the margins who create themselves for themselves and who don't have access to top celebrity stylists, who aren't on the cover of magazines, but who [. . .] make or improvise their own looks" (2018: 7). Sorry, Marquardt, these new fashion models (see Plate 3) clearly do not fit the beauty standards defined by your insulting Beauty Mask! Among the basic traits of fabulousness listed by Moore are attributes of "dangerous, political, confrontational, risky, and largely (but certainly not only) practiced by queer, trans, and transfeminine people of color and other marginalized groups" (Moore 2018: 8). These deviant-fabulous bodies and looks are thus a way not only to affirm marginality, as in the case of TT The Artist and the Black Madonna of Tindari, but to create a sort of "negative-beautiful." This is a position that is at odds with the traditional sense of beauty producing a sense of serenity, and at times even of comic relief, because the beautiful and the deviant enter in a "reconciliatory relationship with each other" (Rosenkranz 1990: 15).

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It goes without saying that these marginalized deviant beautiful bodies are themselves standing on the pillars of the history of the monster, the outcast, and the forbidden medieval bodies of witches, dwarfs, and pregnant women, and therefore don't simply arise ex nihilo. And the monstrous can sometimes arise out of social circumstances finding itself in the beauty industry. In the late twentieth century, the designer Alexander McQueen's "Savage Beauty," the "Highland Rape" fashion show from 1995 to 1996 brought the "underdog" and the "abused" to the table as the basis for his new fashion line. For McQueen, the Scottish Highlands had been violently deprived of its indigenous aesthetic and, to put it in Rosaldo's terms, this very deprivation became the inspiration for his new model of beauty (see Plate 4 and Figure 1.9), which was convulsive in the sense of Breton and evasive and yet also beautiful.

The uncomfortable and yet liberating truth that this new aesthetic explores is that the averaged beauty standards passed down to us never referred to the truths they purported to—Anita Ekberg and the Venus of Willendorf would no more fit the Marquardt mask than these other seemingly shocking examples. These ideals, in other words, were always apophenic, producing or imagining the patterns we sought to find there. As we are discovering today with the advent and dissemination of facial recognition technology, the infinite plurality of our faces doesn't map all that well. The interdisciplinary artist Leonardo Selvaggio (b. 1984) found this out by means of a project he conducted in Chicago. Knowing these programs are "often best at identifying white and male faces, because they have been trained on data sets that include disproportionate numbers of them, and particularly bad at identifying black faces" (Wollan 2019), he disseminated a 3D mask of his own features on Facebook, which then went on to fool the service's face recognition software each and every time it was used.

Whether in Plato's time or with data mining today, all research and philosophy always include the subjective or "intuitive" factor, in addition to ostensibly objective measurable variants for object traits such as simplicity, symmetry, clarity, contrast, or proportion. Attractiveness research, throughout various political and historical periods, has shown us that *clarity of interpretation* is one defining factor for beauty. This is where Cramer comes in with his question: who will interpret all the data that we have put out there? A quick answer would be the surveillance capitalists. But while all these experiments are fascinating, perhaps it is the case that even the seemingly overarching standard of clarity is a concept that is ultimately based on the identity of oneness, implicitly tagging one gender or one race. Let's recall the *OED* entry's second denotation: "an attractive woman" ("Beauty, n." 2013). Can there be any doubt that the implied image is not only a binary, heterosexual female, but a white European one as well? But what was true when that entry was originally penned might not be the case for the ideals that have come to dominate the technological consumer

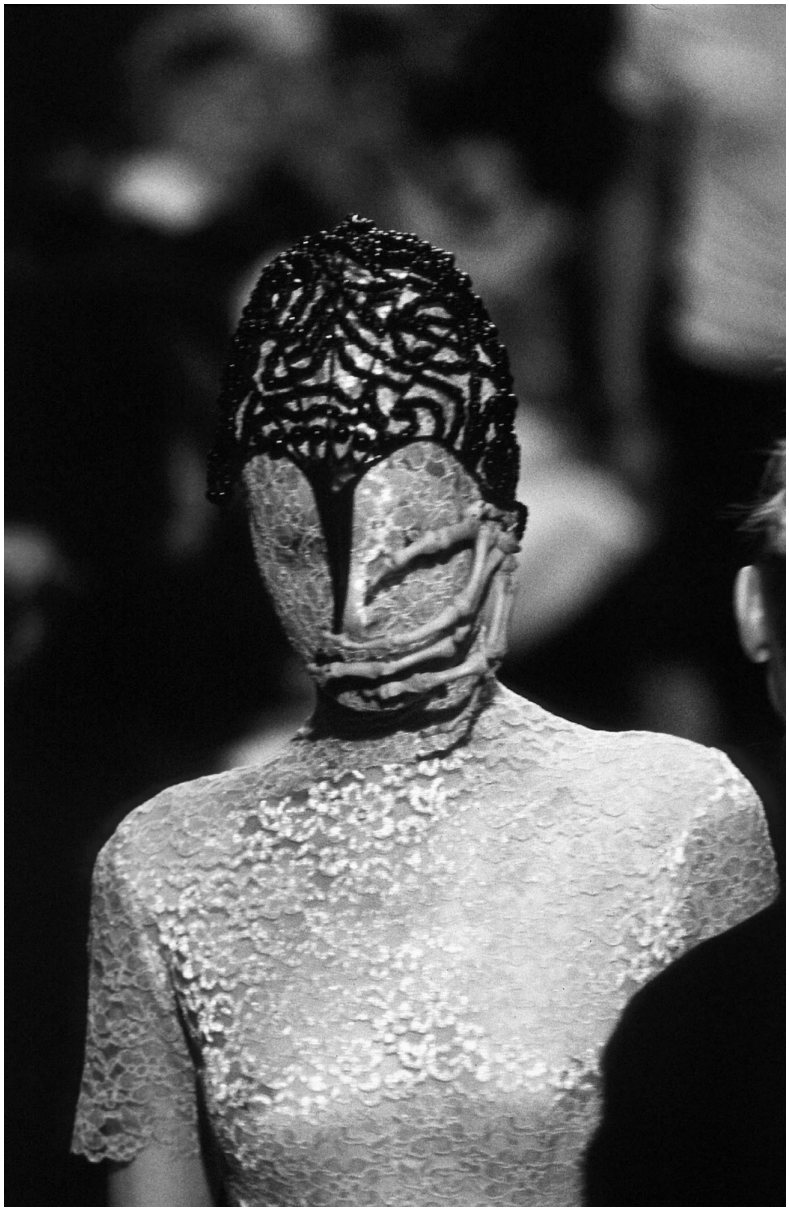


FIGURE 1.9 Alexander McQueen's convulsive beauty. Photo: firstVIEW.

society of the twenty-first century, where hybridity and mixed identity have taken a lead. Maybe Eco's biggest nightmare has come true, that in the digital age of social media beauty has become something we not only want to possess but also a driving force behind our consumer choices. But the good news is that

it has allowed other voices such as TT The Artist to present a notion of beauty of being "outside," one that before the digital day would most likely have not been commercially viable enough to survive.

The snake might be biting its tail in the new Neolithic age (Steyerl 2018) of data miners and pattern extractors under the management of informational biopolitics. Once thought of as a triad of icon, index, and symbol, exemplified in the thought of Charles Sanders Peirce, the sign has been reduced to a pure "symbol" with no connotations and no history. It is user-generated, as Jessica Baldwin-Philippi has argued, a self-reinforcing mechanism impacting social habits, and has been extracted entirely out of its surrounding "noise" in a move redolent of the kind of totalitarian environment described in *The Handmaid's Tale* (both the Margaret Atwood novel and the recent television series). In this new Neolithic age, an aesthetic has arisen that aims at escaping the apophenic pattern and all its forms of discrimination, aesthetic and political. It is unpredictable. It lives "in between" genders, sexualities, and normalities; it is "pure noise" with very little pattern. It may well be that, as Steyerl has put it, "every spot of our cities is mapped out as a probable crime site, fully decked with gender- and age-based targeted advertising, and surveilled by animated commodities, divinatory cellphone cameras, and aerial views from tapped drones" (2018: 14). And yet, in our surveilled and digitized age, diversity has taken its place by being one way to escape the pattern; and marginal identities have in part claimed their space by elevating such evasions to an aesthetic standard of their own.

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