

Body and Justice

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By

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CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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by Maria Borges and Cinara Nahra

This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-3190-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-3190-1

To Zeca and Mimi

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to Professors Paul Guyer, Rolf Peter Horstmann, Tom Sorell and John Harris for all their support and valuable guidance.

A very special thank you to Prof. Alvaro Prata, Rector of the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC).

We would also like to thank the Brazilian funding agencies CAPES and CNPQ, the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC/Brazil), the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN/Brazil), The Humboldt University and The Wellcome Strategic Programme in the Human Body, its Scope, Limits and Future at ISEI/University of Manchester.

INTRODUCTION

Body and Justice above all else is a book about us, Western women, our bodies, our sexuality and where we stand at the beginning of this new millennium. For the entire twentieth century, we have fought for our rights. We have claimed equality of rights with men, and achieved very important conquests varying from quotidian things, such as the right to wear trousers, to the right to vote. In Western countries, we have not only entered in to the labour market, but we are now occupying high-level posts. Women are now the presidents of countries, CEOs of companies and are solving major international conflicts. It seems on the surface that we have a fairer and just world, at least in terms of gender relations.

But how far have we actually progressed in terms of fairness and justice? How fair is a world where women are still mainly only appreciated by men for their beauty rather than their minds, exactly as it was in the eighteenth century? How fair is a world where many women are pressured into extreme diets, plastic surgery, bulimia or anorexia to conform to certain traditional patterns of beauty in order to be loved by men? Are we still submitting to male desire and is this submission still the destiny of women?

These issues of fairness lead us to the issues of morality. Are women better equipped for morality than men? What about the moral issues related to sexuality? Is prostitution morally permissible? Is prostitution intrinsic to patriarchal capitalism, degrading to women, as some feminists think, or it is perfectly admissible if the women involved are adults and give their consent? What about the stigmatization of prostitution and the prohibition of the activity in many countries? Is this an attack on women's sexual freedom? Is sadomasochism wrong? Were the 1980s radical feminists right when they said that this is a practice that involves disrespect for people and violates their integrity, or should we align ourselves with liberal feminism that says that this is just another legitimate form of obtaining pleasure and there is nothing wrong with the practice as it is consensual and safe?

Here we align with the liberal feminists, but show that the sadomasochism debate leaves us wondering about the limits of consent. What kinds of acts are so bad that human beings should not be allowed to practise them, even if they are not causing harm to others? Are there such

acts? Is there a limit?

The issues of fairness, justice, freedom, and autonomy raised in *Body and Justice* culminate with a call for the necessity of profound reflection on the way that we have made moral judgments up to now and the urgent need for the establishment of a morality for the third millennium, a morality that could guide us through the future, helping us to build a world where we free our bodies from all kinds of oppression, reaching the fair and just world that we have always aspired to, for all of us.

In the first part of this book, *Beauty, Body and Autonomy*, we analyse the relationship between body and justice, mainly focusing on the female gender. In the first chapter, *Gender and Desire: Does Intelligence Damage Women?*, we address issues concerning the relationship between gender, body and desire and analyse the idea that intelligence is a male erotic attribute, and that it is only women's beauty that makes them attractive to men. We begin with Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth century philosopher, according to whom an intelligent woman may have the admiration of men, but not their desire. Moreover, an intelligent yet beautiful woman would lose her power over men, because intelligence in a woman is seen as unattractive. We show that this apparently "archaic" view is still alive today. Many of today's authors support the view that what makes a woman attractive to a man is beauty, and that intelligence has no positive effect on attraction. Some even go as far as to assign this idea to a natural essence of man and woman.

In the second chapter, *The Ideal of Beauty*, we challenge this view, showing that beauty has a cultural aspect and that we cannot only appeal to a non-historical essence of humanity. We will analyse also the ideal of beauty and how this ideal is unattainable for the majority of females without cosmetic surgery. We shall discuss the contradiction of the ideal of a slim body in a society that worships food, asking how this contradiction leads to many eating disorders. We also argue that the third millennium ideal of female beauty is harder to achieve in a natural way than ever before.

In the 1960s the British model Twiggy was the ideal of beauty with her thin boyish figure. This was followed in the 1970s and 80s by the healthy "California girl" curvaceous supermodels such as Christie Brinkley. Then in the 1990s the "heroin chic waif" look returned, with model Kate Moss all the rage. Now in the third millennium, our ideal is the thin woman with big breasts, like Gisele Bündchen, the Brazilian supermodel. Although all of these models undoubtedly have very beautiful bodies, in essence they are a very rare genetic outcome. For the average woman, achieving these models of beauty is an invitation to

cosmetic surgery. Feminism still seems not to have overcome the heavy burden of beauty. As Naomi Wolf comments: "The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us."¹

The third chapter examines plastic surgery and justice. When a woman submits herself to cosmetic surgery, is she being submissive to male demands? Or is she using her autonomy in order to reshape her own body according to her own values and wishes? Could we consider the reshaping of our own bodies as progress in autonomy? If today we really do have the possibility of choosing the way we look, could this be considered an improvement in our capacity of choice? Here, we also address the idea of integrity of the body as one of the issues we need to be concerned with, when focusing on the integrity of a person. The integrity of the body is currently the reason why we condemn mutilation in some countries. But is it fair to condemn mutilation in African countries and to allow the mutilation of cosmetic surgery in Western countries? Can cosmetic surgery be considered a mutilation? According to recent research in patterns of sexual behaviour,² a beautiful woman will have a very different life than that of a less beautiful one. Youth, facial attractiveness and body mass index have all proved to be highly relevant in having a stable heterosexual relationship, intelligence being irrelevant or negative. Therefore, a beautiful heterosexual woman is more likely to have a better love life than women who are not as attractive. Cosmetic surgery in this sense could be considered as a way to overcome natural injustices. If we apply a Rawlsian veil of ignorance to women, then cosmetic surgery would probably be allowed, as they don't know whether they will be heterosexual or homosexual, ugly or beautiful, fat or thin. Finally, we will discuss what the right perspective is: whether to deny the patterns of beauty with all the high costs of ignoring the codes of male culture (the resistance perspective), or to follow the patterns of beauty and undergo plastic surgery as a way to overcome natural injustice. In this way, can cosmetic surgery be construed as a way of achieving justice and overcoming natural differences?

In the fourth chapter, we analyse the relationship between body, religion and art. We begin by exploring the dress code sense of religions and the role of chador and veils, the aim of which is to protect men from the evil powers

¹ Naomi Wolf, *The beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, 1991), 10.

² John M. Townsend and Gary D. Levy, "Effect of Potential Partner's Physical Attractiveness and Social Economic Status on Sexuality and Partner Selection," *Journal of Sexual Behavior* 19 (1990): 149–164.

of the female body. In contrast to the veiling, we explore the contemporary dance of Sasha Waltz, where the body is exposed as a bare material.

In the fifth chapter, *Love Me Not For My Body*, we explore poems in which females ask not to be loved for their bodies, but for their souls. We compare Elizabeth Barrett Browning (“if thou must love me, let it be for nought except for love’s sake only”) with Yeats (“only God, my dear, could love you for yourself alone and not for your yellow hair”).

In the sixth chapter we explore Hegel’s ideas about women concerning body and justice. Finally, in the seventh chapter we will discuss Kant’s views on women, coming to the conclusion that the Kantian portrait of the fair sex is not depicted with the bold colours of passion and affects.

In the second part of this book, *Sexual Morality and the Limits of the Body*, chapter eight will discuss the subject of prostitution, coming to the conclusion that there is nothing morally wrong with this activity in its standard (consensual and adult) forms. The notion of consent, as well as sex as commodities and the charge that prostitution degrades women, will be discussed. Prejudice and attitudes towards prostitutes will be also examined. In chapter nine we deal with sadomasochism. In this case we argue that there is nothing wrong with light consensual sadomasochism, but a doubt is raised that there is something wrong with extreme forms of this behaviour, particularly those that involve mutilation and even death. We discuss nature and the natural, as well as returning again to the subject of whether or not there should be limits on the view that everything that is consensual should be morally acceptable. In chapter ten, Kant’s views on prostitution, as well as his probable view on sadomasochism, are discussed and it is shown that the application of the Categorical Imperative would establish that these two behaviours, according to Kant, are immoral. In chapter eleven an extensive analysis of Mill’s moral views is conducted, and it is shown that the application of Mill’s Principle of Liberty to these subjects would result in his morally accepting prostitution in its standard forms, but also accepting extreme forms of sadomasochism, even those that involve death or mutilation. In chapter twelve, we come to the conclusion that both Kant’s Categorical Imperative and Mill’s Principle of Liberty, when applied to prostitution and sadomasochism (in order to evaluate whether these behaviours are morally acceptable or not), produce results that are highly questionable. Thus, we reach the final conclusion—that in order to provide a moral theory that rationally and reasonably treats sexual matters, a dialogue between Mill’s and Kant’s theories is advisable, not only on moral questions related to sex but also on moral questions related to life and death.

PART I

BEAUTY, BODY AND AUTONOMY

MARIA BORGES

CHAPTER ONE

BEAUTY AND INTELLIGENCE

1.1 Is intelligence a Masculine Attribute?

Should intelligence be solely a masculine attribute? According to Immanuel Kant, women could have the same intelligence as men, and reach the same achievements; however, they would only get respect from men, not their love. In *Observation on the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant claims:

Laborious learning or painful pondering, even if a woman should greatly succeed in it, destroy the merits that are proper to her sex, and because of their rarity they can make of her an object of cold admiration; but at the same time they will weaken the charms with which she exercises her great power over the other sex.¹

The effort of science is sublime, heavy, and consequently it is masculine; the feminine sex is beautiful, light, it pleases immediately. The effort to understand the equations of Descartes, Leibniz, and the Newton awake the feeling of the sublime. For this reason, it is against feminine nature. They could be intrigued by this difficult enterprise; however, they would lose all that pleases immediately, their beauty and lightness.

Kant mentions women of the eighteenth century who dared to work in fields of knowledge and were considered masculine: Anne Dacier (1654–1720) who translated and commented on the Greek and Roman classics; Gabrielle Emilie (1704–1749), Marquise de Châtelet, related to Voltaire, who translated and analysed Newton's *Principia*:

A woman who has a head full of Greek, like Anne Dacier, or carries on fundamental controversies about mechanics, like the Marquise de Châtelet, might as well have a beard; for perhaps that would express more obviously

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Trans. John Goldthwait, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 78.

the mien of profundity for which she strives.²

Men could not love these intelligent women, because in order to love someone they should feel superior to that person. Equality inspires respect and friendship, but love needs inequalities. Kant is categorical about the impossibility of loving someone who is considered superior to oneself; that is, the impossibility for a man to love a woman who he considers superior to himself:

Sublime attributes stimulate esteem, but beautiful ones, love. ... There is many a person whom one esteems much too highly to be able to love him. He inspires admiration, but is too far above us to dare approach him with the familiarity of love.³

That said, women are related to the beautiful, Kant does not deny their relevant role in society, nor does he reduce them to the domestic sphere—they should attend society meetings and make them lighter with their presence, in order to counterbalance the seriousness of man's subjects. In Kant's view, the feminine beautiful should work as a limit on the masculine sublime. Besides bringing lightness to conversation, women, due to their sensitivity, have the role of being the moral educators of men. Women:

have many sympathetic sensations, good heartedness, and compassion, prefer the beautiful to the useful ... They have very delicate feelings in regard to the least offense, and are exceedingly precise to notice the most trifling lack of attention and respect toward them. In short, they contain the chief cause in human nature for the contrast of the beautiful qualities with the noble, and they refine even the masculine sex.⁴

Even her virtue is not sublime, but beautiful. Therefore, the feminine reprobation of evil does not refer to the idea of justice, but to its aesthetical ugliness.

The lightness of female beauty makes science inappropriate, because it is too arid. We should question if Kant is right. Is it true that, even today, intelligent women could only receive admiration and respect from men and not their love? Could intelligence damage women? Do we have to choose whether we want to be loved or be intelligent?

Power and intelligence are traditional male erotic attributes and youth

² Kant, *Observations*, 78.

³ Kant, *Observations*, 51.

⁴ Kant, *Observations*, 77.

and beauty are female erotic attributes. When Henry Kissinger travelled to China for an historical meeting with Mao Tse Tung, he was asked a surprising question. In order to make the meeting more colloquial, Mao Tse Tung asked Henry Kissinger how he could have so much success with women, and Kissinger replied: "power is the ultimate aphrodisiac."

However, power is only an aphrodisiac when it is a masculine attribute. In this sense, Kissinger is not against Kant, as power and knowledge can attract women, but these same attributes are not attractive to men when they belong to women. Sometimes female intelligence is a feature considered negative to marriage. According to an experiment referred to by Etcoff, there are indeed a high percentage of very intelligent unmarried women.

One hypothesis to explain this is that power and knowledge are considered a sign of competition and men would take great pleasure in showing off their intellectual capacities. The performance of female intelligence would cause them some repugnance, especially if the spotlight is taken away from themselves. Mostly, what is considered by men as erotic is exactly the opposite of intelligence. For example, the incorrect pronunciation of English phonemes by Latinas, such as the actor Penelope Cruz, is considered sexy.

Nancy Etcoff in 2000 published the book *The Survival of the Prettiest: the Science of Beauty* that soon became a bestseller in USA.⁵ This book has a trivial and a polemic thesis. The trivial thesis is that men prefer the most beautiful women as mate partners, intelligence being indifferent or negative for this choice. Women, on the contrary, would prefer the most powerful or rich men, or the men with greater social status. She shows that the most beautiful girls in High School "marry up," meaning that a beautiful girl will usually marry a man whose social economic status is higher than hers.

Etcoff refers to the experiment conducted by the anthropologists Townsend and Levy.⁶ In this experiment, male and female college students in the United States viewed models who had been pre-rated for physical attractiveness and who were dressed in costumes representing three levels of economic status. From this, the college students reported their

⁵ Nancy Etcoff *Survival of the Prettiest, The Science of Beauty*, (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

⁶ John M. Townsend and Gary D. Levy, "Effect of potential partner's physical attractiveness and social economic status on sexuality and partner selection," *Journal of Sexual Behavior* 19 (1990), 149–164. See also John M. Townsend, "Mate selection criteria. A pilot study," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 10 (1989): 241–253.

willingness to engage with these models in six relationships involving various levels of marital potential and sexual involvement. The experiment reached the conclusion that the physical attractiveness of partners tends to be more important to men than women in actual relationships. Although both sexes are influenced by socio-economic status and physical attractiveness, these components are weighted differently by potential partners. They claim that:

... for men, the sexual desirability of potential partners is primarily determined by their physical attractiveness, and sexual desirability acts as a threshold of acceptability for other relationships requiring more investment. For women, cues to potential partners' socio economic status are a potent determinant of partner's acceptability for relationships that require significant levels of investment; if a man exceeds this threshold of acceptability, then the woman may decide to have sex with him.⁷

The results of Townsend & Levy were in accordance with other researches on beauty and mate selection for human beings.

According to Etcoff, this is one of the experiences which highlight the male preference for beauty, regardless of the socio-economic status and the female preference for the male socio-economic status. This result could explain, for example, why a female CEO of a large firm could feel uncomfortable being attracted to her employee or personal trainer, whilst for a man the inferior status of woman is not an obstacle, and can even be attractive—what a man considers unattractive is a woman whose salary is bigger than his.

Philip Roth illustrated this preference for a woman with a lower socio-economic status in *Human Stain*,⁸ where the powerful Dean of Athena College has an affair with an illiterate cleaner. He not only falls in love with a woman who cannot even read the menu at a restaurant, but he is also very ironic towards the French female professor Delphine Roux, a very ambitious young colleague of his. Delphine went to the *Lycée Henri IV* and to the *École Supérieur de Fontenay*, two of the most prestigious institutions of France, and received a PhD on self-denial in Bataille. Here Roth challenges this ideal of an “intellectual woman” when describing her shock of having to teach young Americans:

By the time she was their age, she'd seen all the Kurosawas, all the Tarkovskys, all the Fellinis, all the Antonionis, all the Fassbinders, all the Wertmüllers, all the René Clairs, all the Win Wenders, all the Truffauts, the

⁷ Townsend and Levy, *The Effect*, 386.

Godards, the Chabrols, the Resnaises, the Rohmers, the Renoirs, and all these kids have seen in Star Wars.⁸

It is the cultivated Delphine Roux who becomes his political enemy and ends up denouncing his affair to the politically correct Athena College.

In *The Humain Stain*, Roth seems to criticise the excessive intellectualisation of women, which will end up drowning their beauty, for through Roth's eyes, intelligence seems to be a perversion of femininity. The opposition between the two main female characters (the cleaner Faunia and the Professor Delphine Roux), does not reproduce the stereotype of a beautiful and uncultivated woman on one side, and the cultivated and unattractive woman on the other. Instead, Roth ironically shows that Delphine is beautiful, but she diminishes her beauty with her culture. He describes the day Delphine entered the Dean's office:

She winds up in her mini kilt and boots across the desk from Dean Silk ... for nearly an hour Dean Silk listens to her ... the internal contradictions of the work of art. Rousseau hides himself and then his rhetoric gives him away ... the critic's voice is as legitimate as the voice of Herodotus. Narratology. The diegetic. The difference between diegesis and mimesis. The bracketed experience. The proleptic quality of the texts. ... He thinks: why does someone so beautiful want to hide from the human dimension of her experience behind these words? Perhaps just because she is so beautiful.⁹

Roth agrees with the Kantian verdict: Intellectual women lose their charm and attractiveness.

1.2. Beauty, Partner Selection and Mate-Market Value

Throughout the eighteenth century, the pattern for being an "interesting woman" was beauty. It is surprising, however, Townsend & Levy have suggested, that even after the feminist movement of the twentieth century and the entrance of women into the job market, the pattern is still the same. Many others have reached the same conclusion as the Townsend & Levy experiment. One of these experiments aimed at showing the relationship between beauty and BMI and having or not having a stable relationship. According to research conducted in an American High School, overweight girls have a lesser possibility of a stable relationship. It was also found that the most beautiful girls are more likely to have a stable

⁸ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 189.

⁹ Roth, *The Human Stain*, 190.

relationship, beauty being synonymous with having a slimmer body.¹⁰ This research considered relationships between the attractiveness and body image variables and current relationship status, and the sample was dichotomized into those not currently involved in an exclusive relationship and those currently dating one person exclusively, either living with a partner, engaged, or married. Comparisons between those respondents involved in a relationship, and those not involved are presented in Table 1.1 below. Statistically significant differences and small to medium effect sizes were demonstrated with regard to BMI, experimenter-rated facial attractiveness, and self-rated bodily attractiveness. Compared to peers who were not currently in a relationship, those respondents in a relationship were relatively slimmer and objectively more attractive, and perceived their bodies to be more attractive.

Table 1.1. Attractiveness, body image and current relationship

Variable	In a relationship	not in a relationship	F	d
	Mean	Mean		
Body Mass Index	24.08 (4.54)	26.39 (6.81)	7.62(F N**)	.39
Experimenter-Rated Attractiveness	4.14 (.76)	3.88 (.71)	5.86(F N*)	.35
Self-Rated Facial Attractiveness	4.89 (1.32)	4.69 (1.00)	1.86	.20
Self-Rated Bodily Attractiveness	4.19 (1.32)	3.64 (1.33)	8.19(F N**)	.41
Body Dissatisfaction (EDI)	39.04 (10.77)	40.42 (9.47)	.89	.14
Appearance Orientation	45.62 (8.20)	43.41 (7.84)	3.64	.27
Social Avoidance due to Concerns About Appearance	6.83 (3.81)	6.6 (3.44)	.11	.05

¹⁰ Michael W. Wiederman and Shannon R. Hurst, "Body Size, Physical Attractiveness, and Body Image Among Young Adult Women," *The Journal of Sex Research* 35 (1998): 272–81.

Beauty has been proven to be an important mate preference for human males according to research conducted by David Buss entitled “Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences: Evolutionary Hypotheses Tested in 37 cultures.”¹¹ This was a cross-cultural study, aimed at testing evolution based hypotheses that explain species-typical or sex-typical mate preferences. According to Buss, mate preferences are important because they can affect the current direction of sexual selection by influencing who is differentially excluded from and included in mating. He wanted to test some predictions that had already been made in previous studies. One of these predictions was that a woman’s mate value should be determined more by her reproductive capacity, with youth and physical appearance being powerful clues to this capacity. Thus, these qualities are more highly valued by men. On the other hand, a man’s mate value is determined by the external resources he can provide. Consequently, female mate preferences have more emphasis on characteristics indicative of one’s potential to provide resources, such as ambition, industriousness and earning capacity.

Thirty-seven samples, from a total of 10,047, were obtained from thirty-seven cultures, located on six continents and five islands. The instrument used by David Buss was composed of biographical data, the preferred age difference between self and partner, and a third section in which the subjects were asked to rate eighteen characteristics on how important or desirable they would be in choosing a mate. Among these characteristics were dependable character, sociability, chastity, intelligence, a good financial prospect, good looks, ambition and industriousness. A four-point scale was used, ranging from 3 (indispensable) to 0 (irrelevant or unimportant).

Thirty-six females valued a “good financial prospect” in a potential mate more highly than males did. Thirty-four expressed a higher valuation than males for “ambition and industriousness.” The average age difference preferred between males and females is 2.66 years and the preferred age to marry is 27.49. When one subtracts the main age difference preferred from the age males want to marry, we find that men prefer to marry females who are approximately 24.83 years old.

All thirty-seven samples showed sex differences, but males valued the characteristic “good looks” higher than women. For Buss, “the hypothesis that male’s value physical attractiveness in potential mates more than females do is strongly supported by the cross-cultural data.”¹²

¹¹ David Buss, “Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences: Evolutionary Hypothesis Tested in 37 Cultures,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 12 (1989): 1–14.

¹² Buss, *Sex Differences*, 1989.

The importance of physical attractiveness remains even after marriage. In a research paper called “The Continuing Role of Physical Attractiveness in Marriage,” Margolin and White¹³ showed that decreases of physical appearance normally associated with ageing affect husbands’ behaviour towards their wives more than wives towards their husbands. Men who believe that their spouse has declined in physical appearance but that they have not are more likely than other men to report sexual problems in their marriage. They found that twenty-three percent of men are unhappy when their spouse gained weight, against eight percent when the spouse and husband have equally gained weight and five percent when it was only the husband who had gained weight. For women, seven percent are unhappy when their husband only had gained weight, six percent when spouse and husband had gained weight and seven percent when the woman only gained weight.

What the above research confirms is that feminine beauty and youth are the main female assets in the mate market, and that social-economic status is the main asset for men.

Today the additional problem of this equation is that, contrary to the women of the past, whose only value as a woman was their beauty and youth, women are also valued by what were once masculine assets. Intelligence, culture, education, and professional achievements are socially valued for women in the public world. Unfortunately, these are not the most valuable assets for women in the mate market. Beauty is still more important for men than for women, not only as the initial attraction between partners, but also in a long-term relationship.

In the USA, on a scale from 3 (indispensable) to 0 (irrelevant), men rated good looks in a long term partner at 2.11 and women at 1.47.¹⁴ But is this still the case in marriage, or is the masculine search for beauty replaced by other feminine assets?

In 1939, a research showed that in marriage, on a 0–3 scale, men ranked beauty at 1.5, while women rated it at 0.94. In 1989, men and women were asked the same question. Men rated beauty at 2.1, while women rated it at 1.67.¹⁵ Although beauty rose in importance for both sexes, it was still more important for men.

¹³ Leslie Margolin and Lynn White, “The continuing role of physical attractiveness in Marriage,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 49 (1987): 21–27.

¹⁴ Etcoff, *Survival*, 63.

¹⁵ Etcoff, *Survival*, 61.

1.3 Is Beauty the Only Thing that Matters?

Although we have to consider that beauty is more highly regarded as an asset for females than males, we should ask if this is what is more valued in a relationship. As shown above in the research on thirty-seven cultures, Buss requested subjects to rate eighteen characteristics. We have seen that feminine beauty was more valued by men than male beauty by women. In the study, Buss mentioned that these eighteen characteristics were drawn from a previously developed instrument used widely over the past fifty years. One of the authors referred to is McGinnis, who conducted a research on campus values in mate selection. In Mc Cormick's study, women and men were asked about which characteristics were important for having both a sexual relationship and a meaningful relationship. Although beauty was considered number one for a sexual relationship, and more valued by men than by women, the characteristics rated top by both sexes as the most important in a meaningful relationship were those dependent on character and honesty.

Although we will never really know if people actually chose partners based on this criteria, the fact that men do not put physical beauty as the most relevant criteria for a meaningful relationship reveals that just maybe we can still hope to be loved not only for our bodies.

1.4. Does Female Beauty always Mean Youth?

In 2006, a famous cosmetics company placed a huge advertisement in the centre of one of the most important cities of Europe which read: "Beauty has no age." In this advertisement, men could see three mature women, all with grey hair but with beautiful faces. Is it possible to change the patterns of beauty? Or does female beauty always mean youth?

According to Etcoff, beauty is related to reproductive status and the possibility of producing healthy offspring: "Beautiful human features are a language, devoted to the adaptive problem of how to visually signal one's own value as a potential mate and how to assess the mate value of others through their visuals."¹⁶ This is the reason why female beauty is related to youth, as mature women cannot generate offspring. Etcoff claims it may seem preposterous to see human beauty solely as a potential for producing offspring, for in our world we have dissociated sex from reproduction. Her thesis is that we still have the same biological response to bodies and faces that indicates a good capacity for producing healthy offspring:

¹⁶ Etcoff, *Survival*, 70.

But our minds are products of a world that was tribal, not global, where birth was not controlled, where the average number of years was forty, not seventy, and where infants and children often died before reaching maturity. A biological system that automatically scanned everyone for sexual viability was adaptive. Today, we're left with sneaky feelings for strangers and sexual reactions to faces and bodies we may wish we could evaluate more neutrally.¹⁷

Etcoff maintains that men are excited by signs of a fertile woman, who has never been pregnant. But why would a man care about a woman's nulliparous status? One reason is that a man's natural instinct is to pass on his genes and guarantee that he is the father of his babies. The second is that when birth control was not available, women were pregnant more frequently. The only way to be sure that the woman could have a baby was age. She concludes: "perhaps this is why men often prefer the physical signs of a woman below peak fertility (under age twenty). It's like signing the contract a year before you want to start the job."¹⁸

Today, women can have babies late into their forties, and have the opportunity to freeze their ovaries. Even their hormone activity can be artificially changed. At the same time, reproduction is no longer the main or most important guide to sexual attraction. Why, then, do signs of fertility still play an important role in sexual attraction and partner selection? According to Etcoff, "we are products of evolution and cannot change instincts as quickly as we can change our tastes or update our information."¹⁹

According to Etcoff's biological explanation, when women try to look younger and fitter, they are not only following the imposed trends of our world, but they are trying to mimic the appearance of our female ancestors in their late teens, trying to fool human nature. Although a man that is no longer interested in procreation could be intellectually interested in a mature woman, his ancestral mate detectors will probably lead him to avoid her as a sexual mate. At the same time, he can be sexually and emotionally motivated by someone younger exhibiting all the features that his ancestral genes are looking for.

But what are the signs of youth we are trying to mimic through cosmetics, fitness and plastic surgery? These are slim bodies, glossy hair, large eyes, small noses and full lips. Cover girls from magazines such as *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan* have these traits in a more accentuated fashion than the average woman. Etcoff describes research carried out by Douglas

¹⁷ Etcoff, *Survival*, 71.

¹⁸ Etcoff, *Survival*, 72.

¹⁹ Etcoff, *Survival*, 74.

Jones in which the face proportions of cover girls were fed into a computer and the computer estimated their age from between six and seven.²⁰ On analysing these results she claimed that this does not mean that the models actually look like seven-year-old heads attached to adult bodies, but it does mean that the geometry of their facial features is so youthful that the computer attributes to them the age of a child.

Supposing a woman knows she is not highly valued in the mate market, because she is neither young nor beautiful anymore, but she is well educated and has a very well paid, highly successful career. Why couldn't she be chosen by a male partner as equally successful as her? Here lies the problem. Successful men are highly evaluated in the mate market and are likely to prefer the most wanted and valued women, which are the younger ones.

So why don't older women seek out men who are not as successful and as highly paid as her, perhaps younger men? Here, Mother Nature also influences women: their biological impulse is to find men who are successful enough to provide the necessary resources for her possible offspring.

²⁰ Etcoff, *Survival*, 151.

