

*Struggling for Beauty: Body Aesthetics and Social Conflict in Modern History*

Thomas Kühne

Beauty matters. That it matters can be easily measured by the amount of money and the time people spend on making their bodies beautiful. Since the 1990s, beauty, understood as body aesthetics, has drawn scholarly attention in various disciplines, but has escaped closer examination in social and cultural history. Sociology, psychology, literature, and visual arts have focused on hegemonic discourses; black studies and gender studies have investigated in non-hegemonic body aesthetics. Inspired by these works, *Struggling for Beauty* provides what is missing in current academic and popular discussions: an inquiry in the historical fluidity of rivaling body aesthetics. Which notions of beauty have been constructed by different societies? In a book-length essay focusing on the period from the eighteenth century to the present, I will link issues of self and society, body culture and visual culture, regional particularities and globalization to show how and why modern societies struggle for beauty.

Beauty defines difference on its own—beautiful versus ugly—and has been seen as a marker of virtue, strength, and wealth. In modern societies, it has often been linked to other categories of social difference such as race and gender. I shall examine such linkages as well as how beauty has emerged as a special category of difference. Though racist and gendered notions of beauty always have been powerful, in the late nineteenth century a new conception of beauty emerged—beauty as the visual expression of physical health, to be achieved individually by regular exercise, healthy nutrition and appropriate lifestyle. Since that time, the idea that beauty is available to everyone has been popularized by mass media, consumer goods, mass sports, star cults, beauty pageants, and cosmetic surgery. The message is clear: You can do it! Everyone can get it! Body aesthetics have grown into a defining feature of the self, of individual identity.

In praising the young, slim, athletic, and ‘Aryan’ body, the modern beauty cult has commodified racist ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers. Yet the beauty cult has operated

paradoxically to make race, gender, and class invisible. East Asians seeking plastic surgery to ‘westernize’ their eyelids and to lengthen their children’s leg bones indicate the globalization of the western beauty cult. Western fashion and cosmetics seduce consumers all over the world by merging social, sexual and racial diversity into a vision of cosmopolitan harmony. When did this development start and who supported it? In fact, the praise of the blond, slim, fit and ‘sexy’ body has been opposed by ethnic, religious, youth and regional cultures, by feminist movements, scientific institutions, and different lifestyles. Regional beauty pageants sometimes require that contestants adopt an “authentically” local appearance: their antagonism toward national or global beauty queens is not subtle. Afros, dreadlocks, and “natural” hairstyles may (though they need not) signal a visual protest against whatever is considered oppressive or “unmodern” in dominant culture. What counts in many religious cultures is “inner” beauty or, rather, how close one comes to an idealized image of “goodness” (indicated for example by the earlocks of orthodox Jews). Economic considerations are seldom irrelevant. Peasant societies appreciated corpulence in either sex as beautiful rather than as ugly. Why? In subsistence societies corpulence indicates wealth, health, and, in females, fertility and motherhood.

Different cultures attach different values to beauty; some do not attach any value to it all. *Struggling for Beauty* explores different contents and ‘economies’ of beauty. What is called beauty (including equivalent words in other languages) may refer to different ideologies and to different techniques of perceiving and defining “reality.” In 1952, when Franz Fanon, born on Martinique, “had to meet the white men’s eyes,” he felt his “bodily schema” being decomposed. “Look at the nigger! ... Mama, a Negro,” a white child shouted at Fanon, who later recalled that his body was “given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored ... the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly... I become aware of my uniform. ... It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?” There is no simple answer to Fanon’s question. As Toni Morrison writes in *The Bluest Eye*, the black girl Pecola who wishes nothing more than to have blue eyes “would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people.”

Morrison calls the Western obsession with beauty—and she refers to a particular idea of beauty—one of “the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought.”

*Struggling for Beauty* will shed light on how minorities or non-hegemonic groups responded to the rise of the dominant western beauty ideal. In doing so, the project investigates the means, paths, and limits of transnational flows and exchanges: the importing and exporting of cultural norms and practices. Within this polyphony it also focuses on bilateral contests of cultural power between rural and urban societies, working and middle classes, Jews and Christians, blacks and whites, religious and secular groups, in both Europe and North America and in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. With this broadly interdisciplinary and transnational approach *Struggling for Beauty* will reveal undiscovered and surprising strategies for construing and destroying body aesthetics in global contexts.

*Struggling for Beauty* will be based on a rich but scattered collection of historical and contemporary Anglophone, French and German studies. These have examined aesthetic and bodily aspects of racial conflicts, gender relations, Jewish and Christian cultures, rural societies, and working classes. Some currents of this scholarship are methodologically well developed, in particular those revolving around race and gender. Other works have been more descriptive than analytical, but they can be refracted in new ways through the lens of gender and racial studies. Selected autobiographies, novels, and periodical literature—in particular newspapers and magazines of non-hegemonial cultures—will be used to analyze those aspects which are insufficiently covered by secondary sources.

Neither the material basis nor the final product of my study can claim full comprehensiveness. My goal is to merge the existing scholarship and my own research into an accessible book. On the one hand my study will guide readers through current debates on beauty. On the other hand it will lead them to further exploration of how the increasingly popular categories of identity, distinction, and conflict relate to one another in the modern era.

I have discerned six historically relevant conflict dimensions and plan to devote one chapter of the book to each of them. Each chapter focuses historically on a certain category of

difference (or a set of categories) to show that what is considered beautiful depends on time, space, cultural norms, and social relations. Chapter 1, “*Class, wealth and beauty*,” explores the relation between economic status and beauty conceptions. It shows how the modern slim body cult emerged out of general conflicts between urban classes and peasant societies; for the latter, corpulence in either sex signified beauty, wealth and health, and in women fertility and motherhood. Focusing on relations between Jews and non-Jews and on Black and White Europeans and Americans, Chapter 2, “*Race, ethnic identity and beauty*,” asks how ‘white’ and ‘Aryan’ beauty ideals have been deployed for racist politics, and how ethnic minorities have responded to such power strategies. Chapter 3, “*Gender and beauty*,” deals with the gendered beauty dichotomy of modern middle class societies. It contrasts it first to body aesthetics in pre-modern societies, which put less emphasis on gender contrasts, and second to recent discourses on homo- and heterosexuality that de-gender body ideals. Chapter 4, “*Regional, national and global identity and beauty*,” contrasts current cosmopolitanism to older, yet vivid traditions of regionally or nationally defined body aesthetics, such as beauty pageants and folkloristic costumes. Chapter 5, “*Age, youth and beauty*,” zeroes in on youth cultures that have protested against ‘established’ lifestyles through provocative body styles and examines how these have been absorbed by, or merged into, main-stream beauty discourses. Chapter 6, “*Religiosity, secularity and beauty*,” analyzes the supposedly most powerful brake pad against commodified beauty cults. Many religious cultures, whether Jewish, Christian, or Islamic, have refused to measure beauty by appearance. Beauty, they say, is linked to moral goodness—as in the ancient ideal of *kalokagatia*.

In pursuing this interdisciplinary project, I wish to broaden the scope of cultural history, and, at the same time, to draw attention on the history, contingency and changeability of a major cultural issue of the present, which will be of increasing relevance in the future. As this statement suggests, the questions I address, require and stimulate a communication between various strands of the humanities and social sciences.