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Beauty: Commons versus Contests



The lecture on 'Beauty in a Globalized World' by professor Thomas Kuehne, Strassler Family Professor in the Study of Holocaust History at Clark University, opened the international workshop on beauty in which 15 senior and junior experts presented their research. In his lecture he gave a historical overview of the evolution of beauty standards and touched

upon many topics that were further developed in the workshop, such as global versus culturally defined beauty trends, beauty and (trans)gender, social control, the influence of the media and psychological disorders.

Co-organiser Henk de Smaele of the department of history of the University of Antwerp, introduced the speaker to an audience of 130 attendees. In his introduction Henk de Smaele indicated how Thomas Kuehne's research developed from an interest in 19th century German intellectual life and the holocaust to the topic of military history and masculinity. In 2010 he published a book on 'Belonging and Genocide. Hitler's Community, 1918-1945' which revealed the link between genocide and body aesthetics. This led to the research project 'Struggling for Beauty' on body, gender and sociality. A volume on 'Globalizing Beauty. Body Aesthetics in the 20th Century, co-edited with Hartmut Berghoff, is to appear in 2013. Henk de Smaele's own research followed a similar course from a focus on national politics towards research on the body and the concept of masculinity.

In his lecture on the history of the establishment of beauty from 1810 until 2005, Kuehne started from the example of the Hottentot Venus, as a first case in globalization of beauty ideals. This unconventional black 'beauty' was put on exhibition in London out of racist motives and moved to Paris where her body parts were preserved after her death. A century later Josephine Baker, another black beauty icon, was venerated as a cosmopolitan ideal. In 2005 fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier took the Hottentot Venus as his inspiration for a new collection. This evolution from racism to cosmopolitanism to globalization illustrates how social meaning on beauty changed. In the meantime the global beauty market expanded from a 9 billion dollar sector in 1950 to 57 billion

dollars in 1976 and 330 billion dollars in 2008. Beauty enhancement techniques made their introduction.

The year 1900 marks a significant turning point, introducing the idea of beauty as a choice instead of a destiny and as such democratizing the beauty ideal (everyone has a chance of becoming beautiful). From a god-given asset confirming a 'natural' social hierarchy, beauty becomes a means for social advancement and personal happiness, in the wake of enlightenment ideals. The flipside of the coin is the resurgence of nationalist social Darwinist eugenic ideas which consider ugliness as an indicator of disease and degeneration leading to 'solutions' of forced sterilization and ultimately genocide. Sports and youth movements promote a classis Greek beauty ideal that reflects the power of the nation. The birth of mass media, cinema and photography at this moment in time contributes to the change in the concept of beauty and imposes the obligation to work on your appearance.

Kuehne then turns to the research literature. Kant introduced the universal nature of aesthetics, which may overcome politics. Bourdieu considers beauty as a form of cultural capital used to establish social distinction and class difference. Franz Fanon and Toni Morrison (in 'The Bluest Eye' of 1970) situate it as an instrument within the racial struggle, where subjugated subjects try to meet the white man's eye. Naomi Wolf attacks 'The Beauty Myth' in her seminal work, following Simone de Beauvoir's crusade against the use of cosmetics. Foucault considers beauty as another means in the self-governance of individuals. Risk sociologist Ulrich Beck recognizes that a fine body is an insurance against risk.

Appearance is central to youth cultures of resistance and opposition, but their critique did not undermine the prevailing beauty culture. Beauty seems to have become a new category of social difference replacing older categories of race, class and gender difference.

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