

## GLOBALIZING BEAUTY: BODY AESTHETICS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Conference at the GHI, October 14–16, 2010. Conveners: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI) and Thomas Kühne (Clark University, Worcester). Participants: Ingrid Banks (University of California, Santa Barbara), Christina Burr (University of Windsor), Paula Diehl (Humboldt University, Berlin), Jennifer Evans (Carleton University, Ottawa), Mila Ganeva (Miami University, Oxford), Erik Jensen (Miami University, Oxford), Geoffrey Jones (Harvard Business School), Karin Klenke *in absentia* (University of Göttingen), Sara Lenehan (Oxford University), Jan Logemann (GHI), Michael Müller *in absentia* (Technical University Dortmund), Henry Navarro (University of Cincinnati), Uta Poiger (University of Washington, Seattle), Véronique Pouillard (Free University of Brussels), Christiane Reichart-Burikuiye (University of Bayreuth), Miriam Rürup (GHI), Anne Sonnenmoser (University of Duisburg-Essen), Uwe Spiekermann (GHI), Mark Stoneman (GHI), Althea Tait (Old Dominion University, Norfolk), Ulrike Thoms (Charité Clinic, Berlin), Paula-Irene Villa (Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich), Kerry Wallach (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia), Richard F. Wetzell (GHI).

Beauty matters. Starting with this assumption, Hartmut Berghoff and Thomas Kühne convened an interdisciplinary and international conference at the GHI that looked at the global development of conceptions of beauty, the rise of the beauty industry, processes of achieving and performing beauty, as well as the contestation of hegemonic beauty ideals. Beauty has mattered in the context of modern consumer societies, in which the pliable body—shaped by fashion, cosmetics, or surgery—has become a major object of consumption and spending. Consumers, the media, and an increasingly globalized beauty industry all interact to shape and negotiate beauty standards. Beauty has mattered politically, as well. Ethnically or racially charged beauty ideals and fashion practices have worked either to uphold and reinforce or to challenge and subvert power structures from the local to the global level. Soliciting the perspectives of business and cultural historians, anthropologists and sociologists, as well as scholars of gender studies, cultural studies, and fashion, the conference engaged a series of questions. In what ways have beauty ideals functioned as instruments of social oppression, on the one hand, or for the empowerment of individuals, on the other? To what degree can we observe a globalization and standardization of beauty ideals and practices? To what extent does local diversity persist? What roles have commercial

actors played in shaping discourses on beauty? What agency have consumers been able to exert in adapting or challenging mediated notions of beauty?

In his keynote lecture, Thomas Kühne opened the conference by tracing the development of beauty as a historical category in the modern era. Suggesting a functional rather than normative understanding of beauty, he suggested viewing “beauty” as “whatever human beings do to, in their own subjective perspective, improve their physical appearance.” Beauty has long served as symbolic capital in a sociological sense, but Kühne detects an increased emphasis in the Western World over the past century on beauty as cultural capital that can be individually achieved. No longer just a product of nature, so to speak, beauty has become increasingly interwoven with the democratic aspirations of emerging consumer societies, in which everyone can supposedly be beautiful. This democratic vision of beauty, however, has always been bounded by gender norms and racial prejudices. Furthermore, heavily mediated beauty ideals have exerted pressures to conform that at times have negated their democratic promise. The contestation of such hegemonic ideals by groups from youth cultures to ethnic minorities is, therefore, another important field in the global history of modern beauty.

The first panel surveyed possible avenues for “explaining beauty,” inquiring into the theoretical groundwork for understanding how perceptions of beauty are socially and culturally constructed. Anne Sonnenmoser offered a sociological view of shifts in modern body aesthetics, which she developed with Michael Müller. Their research emphasizes the increasingly mediated nature of beauty ideals in the twentieth century. Early cinema cosmetics, for example, popularized a stylized language of pictorial aesthetics that helped to promote the standardization of body images. The proliferation of photography and video not only made body images ubiquitous in the media, but challenged consumers to engage in continuous “self-reflexivity,” comparing their own self-images with these mediated ideals seen on television or in print advertising. The differences between mediated ideals and physical reality were often most palpable for minority populations, as Althea Tait emphasized. Focusing on African-American writing in the twentieth century, and Toni Morrison’s, in particular, Tait traced biases in the perception of beauty and efforts to develop “cultural tutorials” for black children to resist and overcome them. Since beauty has always been a learned behavior, its seeming subjectivity

is influenced by wider social discourses. Tait urged participants to uncover biases in constructing beauty and to ask, “Who trained the eye of the beholder?”

The inherent tension between mediated images and physical reality has been evident in politically promoted body ideals as well. Constructing a visual Aryan ideal type, Paula Diehl suggested, was central to the Nazi regime’s broader racial agenda. In particular, the Nazis envisioned the SS as the embodiment of a certain Nordic beauty ideal for men; it ultimately became the regime’s testing ground for bridging image and reality through the selection of members and the implementation of eugenics measures. The potency of mediated images fueled by a combination of political ideology and commercial interests was also apparent in anthropologist Karin Klenke’s otherwise very different study of changing beauty ideals in rural Sumatra in the second half of the twentieth century. The Indonesian government hoped to cast women aspiring to an ideal of “the beautiful modern housewife” as domestic agents of national development. The women Klenke studied, however, were no mere passive objects but rather agents in their own right. They employed new beauty ideals to achieve social mobility, if not always successfully. In the process, they challenged traditional gender roles. The extent to which beauty norms can oscillate between oppressive and empowering qualities was the subject of Paula-Irene Villa’s talk on Western feminist beauty debates, which concluded the panel. Second-wave feminists vehemently rejected hegemonic commercial beauty norms as sexist and repressive. In place of these, they emphasized an idea of natural beauty, claiming that “all women are beautiful.” This discourse of a plurality of natural manifestations of beauty, Villa suggests, and the claims for choice and control over one’s body have now been co-opted by the beauty industry, which promises people that they can achieve “natural” beauty, even if by artificial means. Plastic surgery and make-over “reality” shows present beauty as the work of self-improvement in which social recognition is awarded, if not for the outcome itself, then at least for the effort invested.

A recurring theme of the second panel, which focused on “consuming beauty,” was the relative power and agency of various actors from industry and media to the consumer. The papers explored a variety of settings and arenas in which beauty has been prominently displayed or performed. Bridging business history and design history, Veronique Pouillard explored the phenomenon of trendsetting

and taste formation in the interwar fashion industry. Taking two influential American fashion forecasters and their published trend reports as examples, Pouillard showed how fashion trends emerged out of a complex interplay of transatlantic transfers and a negotiation between expert knowledge and consumer responses. Beauty pageants became a central arena for performing beauty during the 1920s, as Mila Ganeva showed for Germany. The pageants promoted a transnational ideal of the modern age, the empowered “New Woman,” yet simultaneously reinforced conservative notions of gender roles. Like few other institutions, pageants thrived because of the democratic aspirations they elicited as well as their interconnections with a movie industry in search of new talent, advertisers’ appetite for testimonial ads, and the media’s desire for appealing stories.

The interwar years appeared in several papers as a significant turning point, as the performance and consumption of beauty became more public and more important throughout the Western world. Next to cinema and advertising, sport was another arena in which beautiful bodies were increasingly displayed. As Erik Jensen suggested, however, interwar participants in beauty discourses increasingly employed a distinction between a more classical ideal of beauty as perfection and a notion of what Jensen termed “sexiness.” Male athletes such as popular boxers appeared erotically appealing, less for their perfection than for their imperfections—such as a bashed-in nose—and a more visceral appeal that spoke directly to the viewers’ “animal selves.” Social class, Jensen emphasized, heavily informed such perceptions of beauty and sexiness. That class boundaries in beauty ideals and perceptions may have diminished somewhat in recent decades was suggested by the final paper in the panel, which examined the seemingly unlikely boom of rhinoplasty in contemporary Teheran. While predominantly a middle-class phenomenon, anthropologist Sara Lenehan explained, it is not exclusively so, and “back-alley nose-jobs” can be had for little money. The practice spans a surprisingly wide range of ages and is common among men as well as women. Moreover, both secular and religiously conservative Iranians have come to use this form of surgery. While the ideal they aspire to resembles the straight “Western” nose beamed into Iranian living rooms via satellite TV and the first surgeons were trained in Europe and the United States, Lenehan cautioned against a simple narrative of Westernization. Iranians, she argued, see the practice not as foreign but very much as locally grounded.

The tension between global strategies of standardization and persistent local diversity was also the central theme of the third panel on “selling beauty” and the business of cosmetic and hygiene products. Geoffrey Jones opened the panel with a broad overview of the development of the modern cosmetics industry since the early nineteenth century. What began with local entrepreneurs such as Elizabeth Arden and Max Factor soon crossed national borders and cosmetics companies became driving forces behind the global homogenization of beauty ideals with Western assumptions and routines as the benchmark. Especially following World War I, multinational companies began to dominate the beauty industry. Still, Jones stressed, distinctive local consumer preferences persisted and, with the partial exception of high-end luxury brands, companies continued to adapt their products to local markets. Taking advertising campaigns for Lux Soap as a case study, Christina Burr also underlined the inherent tension between the local and the global. Lux campaigns pursued a transnational strategy that relied heavily on the appeal of the “Modern Girl Look” and the cosmopolitan flair of movie star testimonials. However, ad agency JWT tailored its messages to national markets by using local celebrities and paying attention to ethnic differences and plurality in their advertising imagery.

This dichotomy between advertisers’ attempts to homogenize markets by appealing to a notion of “One-Worldism”—asserting basic similarities among peoples—and countervailing efforts to emphasize or construct local and national differences played out particularly prominently in Nazi Germany, as Uta Poiger showed. While Nazi propaganda ardently attacked cosmetic products at times, labeling them “French,” “Jewish,” or “Negro” vices, the German beauty industry continued to advertise its products and market them successfully to consumers well into the war years. Ulrike Thom’s paper on the growing importance of drugstores in postwar German cosmetics sales not only brought in retailers as an important branch of the beauty business but also told a peculiarly local story. Barred from selling prescription drugs, West German drugstores found a survival strategy in selling beauty and hygiene products. Weight-loss and hypoallergenic products, especially, appealed to notions of both beauty and physical health, transforming the druggist in boom-era Germany into one of the leading local experts on beauty and physical care.

The final panel on “contested beauty” aimed to complicate narratives of hegemonic commercial and political constructions of beauty by

looking at challenges to the mainstream, as well as subversive adaptations. Ingrid Banks shared results from her fieldwork in African-American hair salons in Baltimore and other cities, where she found white teens adopting racially coded hairstyles such as cornrows and dreadlocks. Such unmistakably African-American hairdos have a long and politically charged history within black communities, signifying resistance to mainstream beauty ideals. The white suburbanites who wore these styles regarded their adoption of them as evidence that society was becoming “post-racial” or colorblind, an interpretation Banks hesitated to embrace. Henry Navarro similarly focused on the politics of race in American fashion. From the New Negro and the zoot-suit look to the Motown style and disco, Navarro showed how African-American fashion trends visibly challenged mainstream practices even as they were successively co-opted by the fashion industry and American commercial culture. Subversive beauty ideals that aimed to enhance a minority group’s visibility and ultimately their acceptance were also the subject of Jennifer Evans’s talk on “queer beauty.” Tracing the development of homoerotic photography in art, fashion advertising, and pornography since the late nineteenth century, Evans identified several stages in which the changing beauty norms of a subculture intersected with and eventually entered the commercial mainstream by the 1980s.

The central importance of achieving visibility for contesting dominant conceptions of beauty was reinforced by Kerry Wallach’s presentation on debates over “Jewish beauty” in the interwar and immediate postwar eras. Taking the example of beauty pageant winners who were Jewish, Wallach examined attempts by the Jewish media to create a sense of community and pride vis-à-vis Jewish body aesthetics. Challenging traditional efforts to “pass” as members of the majority group—also a recurring theme in the papers on African-American beauty standards—Zionist organizations in central Europe and later Palestine, for example, promoted dark hair and olive complexions as the perfect embodiment of the “Jewish racial type.” Such efforts, Wallach remarked, resembled colonization in that they imposed aesthetic norms on women—in this case beauty queens—and made them objects of commodification and ethnic marketing. The negotiation of beauty ideals in colonial contexts was indeed a highly complex and contested process, as the final paper by Christiane Reichart-Burikukuiye showed. Breaking down the dichotomy that posited “European” looks as modern and “African” body ideals as traditional and static, Reichart demonstrated the dynamic nature of body images

within indigenous African communities. Christian missionaries—themselves hesitant to fully embrace Western styles—tried to mold African styles, while African elders resisted what they perceived as a loss of “Africinity.” Beauty ideals on the continent remained subject to highly selective adaptation processes throughout the twentieth century, interweaving the global and local.

In the end, conference participants were hesitant to agree on the value of a single, shared definition of what “beauty” was and is. There was much common ground, however, in understanding beauty as a social, cultural, and economic construction as well as in emphasizing the process of achieving beauty as a means of social distinction rather than just for the aesthetic reasons. Cast in such terms, beauty opens up a wide and fruitful arena for future interdisciplinary and transnational scholarship, as this conference demonstrated.

Jan Logemann (GHI)