

Look at You! Outward appearance and what we make of it.

Beasts Bodybuilders, and Studium Generale, Wageningen

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The human outward appearance is many things. Everything it is can be strengthened or disturbed, and everything between. Since we address the outward we are also concerned with the others—those who see it. I discuss the core values at stake.

Attractiveness is: the outward appearance that arouses the other erotically. Attractiveness is not the same as beauty. The beauty of the human outward appearance has two variants. Someone's beautiful appearance in a picture—as if in large distance—is unlike the beauty of someone one is engaged with: someone who looks at one and whom one is looking at. I see you, you see me (now think of beauty, and ugliness). Exchanged gazes from the foundation of our social lives.

We can strengthen or disturb these aspects of our appearance with interferences that are either permanent, as with cosmetic surgery, or temporary, as with cosmetics or body-building, or something in-between, such as tattoos. Enough to talk about.

From exercising to body-building

What I want to do in my paper today is present you with an overview of the conceptual framework we appeal to in our thoughts and feelings about body-building. There are many aspects of body-building that I have no knowledge of, such as the food regimes, the kinds of exercise needed for building particular muscles, and so on. Some body-builders use anabolic steroids. Olympic recognition for bodybuilding remains controversial since many argue that bodybuilding is not a sport. (I would



(a) *Fit*

(b) *Muscular definition. Obviously photoshopped*

Figure 1: *Body-building*

be most interested to hear the arguments for this thesis, and suggest a few below.) My subject is the aesthetic background of body-building.

For a start, I assume that body-building is done in a gym. Now, I could go to a gym and do some exercises two or three times a week to make sure my physical condition does not deteriorate too much, as it will anyhow because I am getting older. My two sons go to the gym to achieve something similar with their physical condition, but on top they will pick those exercises that will develop certain muscles, their washing board and their shoulders, mostly. And then, there is, I think, a third variety, the body-builder, who may go to the same gym, but will follow complicated schemas to develop particular muscles and to make them grow abundantly, and to make them visible on the surface. The body-builder might be preparing for body-building contests. For this he might also apply a food regime, and perhaps even muscle-building drugs. My first point is: these three varieties of going to the gym seem at first sight only gradually different. I could decide to work more on particular muscles, my washing board and shoulders, and my sons could rev up their exercises and work up to a competition. We all do exercises, with possibly the same machines, but with different amounts of devotion.

From health to attractiveness

Secondly, there are the reasons why we engage in these exercises. For me it is centrally to stay healthy as long as possible, because this enables me “to adapt and follow one’s own directions, in light of the physical, emotional and social challenges of life.”, as Huber defines health.¹⁾ Striving for health may be behind all three varieties of going to the gym. The obvious difference between my exercises and those of my two boys is aesthetic. I have long ago accepted my small shoulders, and have gradually come to accept the amount of fat under my skin, so I am not so much interested in bettering my looks. Then again, I am not in the marriage market anymore, I am long and happily married. But my sons are adolescents, 18 and 21, and they definitely are still in the middle of the marriage market. Well, it does not have to be about marriage, but it is most definitely about finding a partner, someone to have intimate relations, or sex with. I am not immediately clear about the question whether finding a partner is part of what motivates the body-builder. To summarise this “criterion”, let me rephrase it this way: these exercises in all three grades of devotion have something to do with being or becoming attractive. Health and attractiveness, such is the twofold agenda of body-building. Now both beauty and attractiveness are positive aesthetic values, they both point to things or properties that we feel good about seeing. People or things that we would want to be near to. Ugly things do not attract us, beautiful things do. So what is attractiveness?

Attractiveness and beauty

Human attractiveness is not the same as human beauty. Someone may be very beautiful, but not quite attractive; and someone may be highly attractive, but not quite beautiful. Ideally, of course, someone who is beautiful is also attractive. But in reality these two aesthetic aspects of persons do not neatly coincide. In a narrow sense attractiveness is a biological criterion, turned social. The biology behind it is quite simple: if you are attractive you get to pick the best among contenders, and having more choice will allow you to select the best partner, which will provide the right amount of off spring. I am not saying this is how we reason, or how we should reason about our prospective partner, but merely that this is how biology would explain attractiveness. And I know there is a lot more to be said about biology in this area. But I am mapping the conceptual territory, I am not interested in the biology as such. Attractiveness then has something to do with our erotic feelings and our sexual desires.

In the partner-market we may not want to distinguish between finding someone beautiful and finding her attractive, and perhaps this resistance to make the difference stays with us all of our lives. But that still does not make the two,

attractiveness and beauty, identical.



Figure 2: *Attractiveness in 1953*

Human beauty and distance

Human beauty comes in kinds, that we can distinguish by reference to the distance between the person looking and the person being watched. Again, this is for the most part a gradual distinction. We can watch a photograph and decide that the person on it is beautiful. We can even agree as a group about this. Whether we find her beautiful may be due to historical and social circumstances but that is not the point here.

For instance, we all loved Catherine Deneuve in the 60s and 70s, but if we see the old pictures made of her in those days, we may now have the feeling to be looking at someone who was beautiful by then standards, but would nowadays be judged less so. It may happen that presently we feel that we can no longer break through the conventional veil of that historical era. I am not saying that this should be the case for all of us, now or then, but that a case like this might prevail.

In the event that we think like this, what we feel is the rise and decay of certain aesthetic values. We might even feel that the aesthetic norms were connected to a style of living that we no longer share—for instance, a hippy person which we then loved to watch, but now, seeing the naive, happy expression in their face that we no

longer believe in, that we no longer like. But, as I said, I am not interested now in pointing to the historical background of our aesthetic evaluations of people. What I am interested in is understanding their nature.



Figure 3: *Catherine Deneuve in Roman Polanski's Repulsion*

What do we mean when we say of someone that she is beautiful? So let us return to the photograph of a beautiful person: why do we find her beautiful? What does it mean to say that she is? Let us compare these questions to what would happen if we were to see her cross the street, say, at a distance of 100 meters. We might recognise her, but we might feel that in real life she is not as beautiful as she was in that particular photograph. The difference would bring out something crucially important about photography: photographs freeze something which in reality is a coherent sequence of events, a process. Looking at the beautiful woman at the other end of the street, we see her talk to someone, we see her facial muscles flex in all sorts of directions, not necessarily producing only a beautiful outward appearance. Perhaps in real life her clothes do not seem as stylish as they were in the photo. In short, in real life, even at a distance, she is becoming more of the person that she is, and less of a fixated, framed, selected, unmoving snap shot. Now imagine her coming towards you and taking a chair next to you and starting to talk with you. Now you see the wrinkles in her face, you see the subtleties in her facial expression, you see the complexity of her skin, the amount of fat here and there and the manner in which she responds to you.

The process that she as a person is, doing the things she does, is now involving you: she responds to how you look at her, and you respond to how she looks at you. I shall say more about the biological part of this, shortly. For now, what is important is these three notions of human beauty: the beauty that we experience up close and which involves our having that feeling that we have a connection with the other person. Looking at her we see her inner mental life expressed in her facial expression and her gestures, and her outward appearance as a whole.²⁾ At the opposite end there is the still photograph, a cut-out from her life, not lively in the same manner as the woman is when she is talking to you. And somewhere in between, there is the beauty of the woman we see moving about in our own surroundings, but not quite as near as when we are talking to her.

We may describe this in different terms: seeing someone's beauty up-close is a case of thick perception, because you relate to her in every possible manner; seeing her in a photograph is a case of thin perception, because you do not relate to her. Seeing her at a relatively large distance would also be a case of thin perception, but one which has the power of becoming thick. Voyeuristic observation can be understood as thin perception, no matter how close-by the voyeur is.

The objective: Finding a partner?

If finding a partner is one's aim, one should aim at being beautiful *eventually*, that is: close-by. But of course, to ever get close-by a potential partner they must somehow allow you to get nearer to them, and in that sense it might be rather effective to look good at a distance. Of course, I am staying neutral to any or all of the other talents you should have to find a serious partner, such as being nice to people, being interested in them, being intelligent in the right manner, being funny perhaps, but not all the time; having the right preferences, and cultural interests, etc. I stick to outward appearance. But outward appearance is not only beauty, or better: beauty is not just what we see in photographs. Human beauty is to do with human interaction.

But perhaps the objective of body-building is to turn your body into a work of art? That would open a whole new perspective for me here. We might want to discuss this option in the Q and A after my paper. So let us look at human interaction now.

Empathy and expression

Freud said it: "People betray themselves through all their pores". We all betray ourselves. Calling it betrayal sounds rather negative though. I think it is a good thing—I am sure Freud would agree. It is what keeps a social species like ours going.

Self-betrayal, through all our pores, is a biological good. Think of it in this manner: If you meet someone, another member of this species, it is important that you have a means to establish whether he has friendly or aggressive motifs.³⁾

If we would have to *reason* to find out whether the other is about to kill us, we would not survive long. Also, if others would have to *reason* whenever they want to find out about the things we intend for them, we would not be able to establish our territories, would not be able to recognise who shall likely be our friend or our foe. Because we have these capacities of expression and empathy social life runs more or less smoothly.

By the way, our power to subtly express ourselves to other humans has no special value in a confrontation with members of a different species. A tiger will not be interested or capable to recognise our subtle emotional expressions. All he wants probably is eat us alive. The capacities of expression and empathy have evolved in tandem, but they evolved within a single species. Thinking that we understand higher developed primates such as gorillas, for instance, has brought a certain woman into great trouble. I am referring to the Bokito-case in Rotterdam Blijdorp, a couple of years ago. So, expression and empathy evolved in tandem, within our species. Hence, the fact that “People betray themselves through all their pores” is a biological fact, and a social value.

Survival of the fittest

An easy argument in favour of body-building can, I think be easily dismissed. I am referring to the connection between beauty and fitness: we go to the work-out to advance our physical condition. Will this also improve our evolutionary fitness? Not according to Darwin. Survival of the fittest has nothing to do with the individual bodies we know from body-building. The survival Darwin refers to is the survival of the species, not that of individuals. So regarding our survival tactics, the inherited capacities to express our mental lives, and to empathise with another’s are more meaningful than anything an individual can come up with during their short lives.

Enhancing beauty

Natural beauty is a gift of nature. Beautiful creatures and events present themselves to human perception as they are in themselves, they present their own logic. When we perceive natural beauty, we see the otherness of the other. A beautiful human being is in a sense a gift of nature, but she also expresses her inner, her mind in her beautiful outward appearance. Everyone has the capacity to express their inner in their outward appearance—unless you are as ugly as the Elephant man, or comparably so. But not everyone is naturally beautiful at a distance. And she

may have been working at her outward appearance by keeping fit and lean, by dressing well, and by applying cosmetics. Or she may have been working out and body-building, or she may have replaced her outward appearance through cosmetic surgery.

In my view, the latter, and really only the latter, i.e. cosmetic surgery, may have a distorting effect on one's capacity of facial expression (I count botox among these fatal interferences with our faces, even though botox can be reversed—you can stop applying it).⁴⁾ Cosmetic surgery is irreversible; you can only add more surgery but cannot undo what you had done. So not only does it disturb our biological powers of betraying ourselves through our pores, it is also irreversible. Cosmetic surgery works fine for film stars, and fashion models, in as far as they only need to be beautiful in photos and films. Perhaps it will even work fine if all you want is pass-by people. But if you are really striving to find a partner for life, it may tamper with their capacity to see you as a person.

Body-building is something else, though. It too may be viewed as working best at a distance, but in a sense it still works close-by. It does not hide your person. The muscles are not in competition with the standard of facial expression that I am discussing here. As a body-builder you may even express more of your person than you may have intended. Others will not only see you as a fit and attractive person, they may also, and instantly, notice the amount of time you are investing in your physique. This will tell the other something about you as well. This is not dissimilar to over-trained marathon-specialists or other sportspersons. You realise they are busy training a large part of the week. Your attractiveness thus also depends on whether the other appreciates your spending large amounts of your time to one or the other specialty. That in itself is not exceptional.

There are also *naturally* beautiful people around us; their beauty is gift from nature. The sheer presence of these people may stroke our eyes, so to speak. Clothes, hairdo, and cosmetics, as well as body-building may help us to enhance our beauty. Clothes and hairdo form the package for our body. If they are well-chosen this will make others enjoy looking at us. Cosmetics can be used to underscore certain aspects in one's face, or hide others. Cosmetic surgery is something else. It helps us install beauty where beauty is felt lacking. More often than not, though, when we choose for cosmetic surgery we apply standards taken from photographs and films—not the standards that apply when meeting someone close-by. 1. We risk tampering with our capacities of facial expression. And, 2. in the end, our children will be as “ugly” as we were before the surgery. Think of the life we cause them to live. Like I said above, body-building is not just your regular visit to the work-out. In contrast, for some people it is what the Dutch call “top sport”. (The English language does not seem to make the distinction between sport as an everyday pastime and international competition that we know of the olympic games, and so on). The work-out as an everyday activity may be incorporated in the process of one's life

style, but body-building for the purpose of joining international competition requires a much more concentrated and time-consuming devotion. So it might be viewed as disrupting everyday life, or as determining life's possibilities. Also, competitive body-building results in a product that is somehow autonomous in regard to the life of the body-builder.⁵⁾ Is body-building in any way like cosmetic surgery, or rather like cosmetics? Neither. It is the product of what you *do* with your body.

Our mirror image

The trouble is: we can not see our own person, ever. We can not look at our own facial expression. Try this at home: look in the mirror and study the way you express happiness in your face, of sadness, or anger. What you see in the mirror is a face mimicking happiness, sadness or anger. You know you are faking it, the mirror image will not fool you.

Ovid's "Narcissus" relates of a beautiful boy, loved by all, who sees his reflection in the pond, and immediately falls in love with it. This is the part of the myth that everyone knows, but what happens next is instructive. Narcissus tries to caress his reflection, but touching the water he destroys it. So he cannot touch his other self. He also notices that his reflection does nothing to caress him. His initial fascination for his reflection turns into a devastating frustration. He drowns trying to kiss himself.

In the mirror we see the only human being who can not address us in a gaze, we can not gaze at the mirrored other, it can not look back at us, and address us. Biologically speaking that is not illogical: why would we develop the power to express our inner turbulence to ourselves via our outward appearance if our inner life is already totally available to us, from the inside so to speak. Yet, obviously, we do see our own body in the mirror. Only it is not expressive of our person, of our mental life. The body we see before is is some kind of object to us, a mere body. This, I think, is why we can mistake it for an object. As an object we may come to think that it is flawed, and this may be a cause for us to worry and become uncertain about our outward appearance. We may get to think that others when they see us, see these same flaws. (Do they? And do they even care?)

Body-building contests

Who are the winners of body-building contests, and by what standards are they judged? The muscles should be large, that much is clear, but what else? Is it about the ability to flex your muscles individually? Showing your muscular definition \equiv seeing the details of the muscles shine through the skin? Some use drugs, anabolic steroids, to have the muscles grow; they drier out to dissolve all fat tissue; I also see



(a) *Looking at his torso in the mirror*



(b) *The result*

Figure 4: *Wolverine (Hugh Jackman)*

browned, shining bodies.

The built body is the product, an animated object. Not the *someone* one is, but the thing one wears. This is not an illogical result of the existential shock we encounter looking at ourselves in the mirror, and finding only a body, not a person. But this sport is not about the process, or the skill, as is the case with, say, foot ball or athletics. And you wear the product in everyday life—this is probably part of the motivation behind body-building.

Looking up photos of body-builders I keep distrusting the pictures, thinking they are photoshopped. It is impossible to judge from the photo whether this is the case. (I think my incapacity is due to the fact that the bodies do not look natural, and this means that the normal standards do not apply.) This need not be the case, of course, but it does bring out that many know body-building from such pictures, not from close-by. Perhaps these meetings are meant to change that predicament. And I think it should be changed, because at a distance, or in films or photos, no human being can make the impact they are capable of.

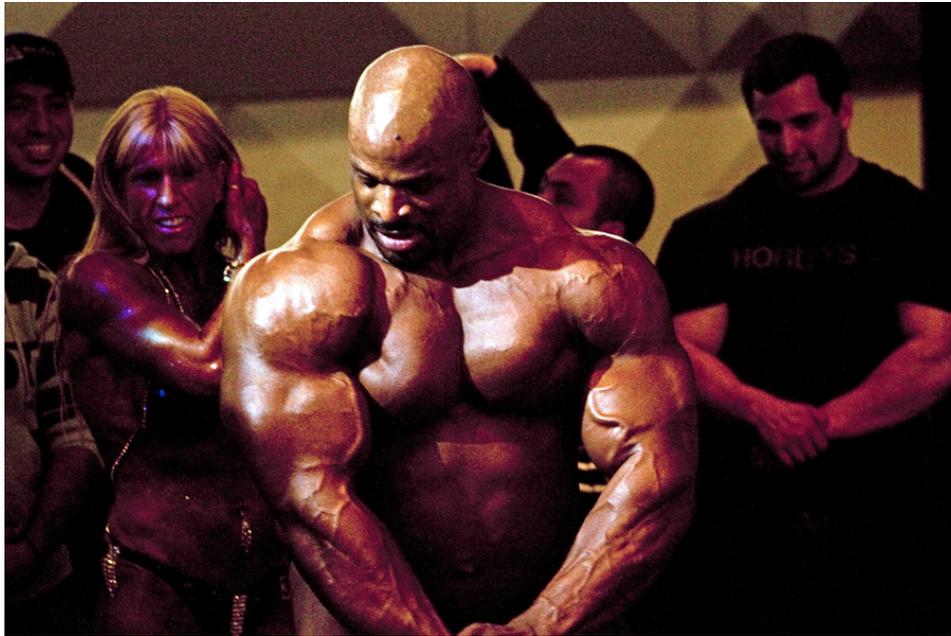


Figure 5: *2008 Mr. Olympia Dexter Jackson, posing*

Afterword

I concentrated in this paper on the aesthetics of body-building, but in the Q and A another approach came up, and it leads me to think that body-building can best be approached from three angles: the aesthetics, the socio-cultural and the psychological. The socio-cultural approach may teach that we are bombarded with pictures of beautiful people, and get to forget that real beauty is the beauty that we experience from close-by. We measure our own image, or how we see it in the mirror, against pictures. There is no way an individual can win that battle. Not even the one in the beautiful picture.

Someone said she did body-building to feel stronger and to no longer have to rely on the strength of the boys. She also felt it was a case of looking for a balance, between who you are and what you want to change to. She ventilated some sort of complaint about body-builders who go to the extremes and loose sight of that balance.

We also discussed the possibility that the body-building that you may have started with for really good reasons—as a means to achieve some personal or social goal—may in the act of exercising turn into a goal in and for itself. You may be exercising, and feel that you look good enough and should better go out in the woods and be social, but, for fear of that, decide to go on training, also because it simply feels good (endorphins). In short, body-building may turn into an addiction that

tampers with the rest of your life. And the change may go unnoticed.

Notes

¹⁾ Huber, quoted in NRC, 20-11-2013 by Marcel Olde Rikkert, Radboud UMC. Growing old is not a disease, as Andrea Maier has it, in NRC, 15 november.

²⁾ Alkibiades argues in *The Symposium* (Plato 1951), that Socrates whom all know is as ugly as a sater is beautiful on account of his inner moral beauty. Kant 1987 argued in § 17 that our ideal of beauty applies only to human beauty because human beauty is the only type of beauty that has its nature determined from within, indeed from the moral of the beautiful person.

³⁾ Frijda and Tcherkassof 1997 and Fridlund 1997.

⁴⁾ See also Gerwen 2011 (“Faces address. A philosophical approach to facial expression and cosmetic surgery”).

⁵⁾ Body-building is not for the many.

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