

7. Queer Beauty

Homosexuality is now signified by theatrically “macho” clothing (denim, leather, and the ubiquitous key rings) rather than by feminine style drag; the new “masculine” homosexual is likely to be nonapologetic about his sexuality, self-assertive, highly consumerist and not at all revolutionary, though prepared to demonstrate for gay rights. This one might note, is far removed from the hopes of the early seventies liberationists who believed in a style that was androgynous, non-consumerist and revolutionary.¹

Ideals of particular kinds of beauty, including queer notions of beauty, are subject to permanent flux. The Australian political scientist Dennis Altman encapsulated this neatly, concerning gay, 1970s subculture, with Gay Liberation commencing soon after Stonewall. The Revolution encouraged many queer men to wear openly clothing and other signs of symbolic strength, sexual potency, and recognizable pride. Especially in the urban centers of the US, the myth that a heroic street battle had taken place in Christopher Street in New York became a leitmotif in gay self-understanding. Detached, through anti-solidarity processes, from other queer groups in this revolutionary era, the attractiveness of gay men, which was now in the limelight, was shaped and celebrated largely autonomously. That said, the concept of beauty in question was mapped in ideal terms to an old image of masculinity, and in no way a new one.

1 Dennis Altman, “What Changed in the Seventies,” in: *Homosexuality: Power and Politics*, ed. Gay Left Collective (London, New York: Allison & Busby, 1980), 52.

In ways that were almost grotesque, many gay men began to fit perfectly into old clichés:

Since homosexuality is always defined in terms of effeminacy, the concept of a masculine homosexual is, in the discourses of straight society, an oxymoron. The appropriation of the masculine by the gay community serves to underline the extent of gay exclusion from the dominant. The gay man who claims to be “masculine” instantly violates that masculine identification when he expresses (gay) sexual desire. Masculinity and gay sex can never be equated, trapping the gay man in a paradoxical position: possessing the anatomical sex of a man and identifying with the masculine gender, the macho gay man is at once a part of the masculine dominant and forever excluded from it because of his sexual desires. Every attempt he makes to include himself within the discourses of masculinity leads to his violation of the whole concept of “masculinity” as he becomes a perversion of its very (heterosexual) definition.²

Forms of beauty are subject not only to permanent transitions, but also and concurrently to milieu-specific influences. The forms of beauty in question are categories recognized by a societal majority. Alongside generally applicable cultural forms of male and female beauty, subcultures also provide utterly original forms of alternative beauty models, or nurture modes of representation, which have public effects in varying and sometimes irritating ways. What is considered beautiful, both in aesthetic as in erotic terms, becomes unmistakably political in understandings of queer beauty. Within this framework, variations in imaginations of beauty, including gay-male dominance since the 1970s, are merely one possibility among many. Queer communities have been characterized by their ability to find expressive forms of self-staging gender and sexuality. Alongside the collective and cultural-political process of finding themselves, some of these expressive forms lay a claim to beauty. And this “beauty,” as a performative factor, turns in the process into a general

2 Jamie Russell, *Queer Burroughs* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), 123.

commodity, superficially available to everybody, but actually egalitarian only in a limited sense of that word:

Ideals of beauty are now reaching all groups in society. Party to these transmissions, isolated tendencies are showing that fashion is taking on inspiration from “below,” meaning that it’s now having less influence on higher socioeconomic strata—exceptions to this are when designer elements inside fashion take on a subculture like hip hop or punk, thus introducing these elements into “better society.” Here we see a democratization of imperatives to beauty, which is demonstrated by the fact that beauty standards are rapidly reaching broad sections of the population. But because everybody has become an object of composition and positioning by this stage, corporeality is also a location in which societal hierarchies are reflected to a high degree.³

The preponderant ideals of beauty have been subject to multifarious influences for decades. That said, the public, recognized formation that the body received is not carried out exclusively by elites. The influences on the understanding of who currently counts as beautiful are disparate, and transition rapidly. It’s no surprise to discover that, here too, a queer form of beauty is to be found, which reflects both general trends and specific deliberations. What’s more, queer ideals of beauty are characterized by oppositions in appearance forms, through what are seen as polarities between norms and abnorms, and through visible contrariness. The breadth of queer beauty as a perceptible language directed outward can express a political statement against the establishment, but can also approve the same. And sometimes this happens to a single individual, when several queer standpoints are presented concurrently:

The deregulation of socioeconomic strata is juxtaposed to a stringent, internalized regimentation of personal lifestyles. This rulebook consists of many small parts, which, apparently, we choose out of

3 Waltraud Posch, *Projekt Körper. Wie der Kult um die Schönheit unser Leben prägt* (Frankfurt:, Campus, 2009), 64.

our own free will, and an ample process of selection from what seem like countless possibilities. One of these selectable small parts is the body.⁴

The history of beauty is a history of bodies and fashions, of moral notions, stagings, power, and gender roles. And it's a history of visibility. Whichever shape ideals of beauty currently assume in any given period, that time and culture will perceive them as normality.⁵

Both the democratization of ideals of beauty, and the opportunity to perform these ideals—as a lively part of subcultural life, and/or in the virtual presentation of the same—it is differentiated images that facilitate queer patterns of beauty and their respective recognition: by a few, some, or none at all.

Although androgynous expressive forms of beauty are not new, they're more widely spread than ever before in postmodern, virtually interconnected societies. Classic, optical boundaries in the gender tradition are rendered fluid by such forms, and can be playfully reinterpreted as a provocation. This means, in any case, that aesthetics take a back seat, i.e. the fashionable interpretation of beauty in human guise, extending beyond the borders of biological femininity or masculinity. This also means that androgynous linguistic forms become a component of fashion design, youth cultures, and all kinds of subcultural expressive forms, each with the potential to exert influence within societal majorities:

While the fashion and beauty world's adoration of androgyny has endured for decades, the latest shift isn't about women borrowing from men or vice versa, but a seemingly casual move beyond gender altogether. ... For Canadian designer Rad Hourani—whose campaigns have spotlighted lean, delicately featured guys and slighthipped, makeup-less girls for years—androgyny is all about a freeing ease. It's

4 Posch, *Projekt*, 66n.

5 Posch, *Projekt*, 172.

far from the aggressively theatrical school of “70s androgyny,” defined by a face-painted David Bowie and company. Hourani’s unisex architectural designs are boundary breakers, sure, but he also calls them “modern classics,” “comfortable” and “asexual.” ... In today’s tech-driven age, could the new androgyny be an effort to find an aesthetic sympatico with our avatar-constructed lives? ... In a sign of the times, this year Facebook expanded its list of gender options for users from two (female, male) to 50-plus, including agender, androgyne, gender fluid, gender nonconforming, gender questioning and neutrois.⁶

This playing with gender-based and sexual interpretative patterns in fashion and clothing can represent both the zeitgeist in question, and a practical detachment from political demands since first-wave feminism. What began as claims made by individuals, including, notably, Paul O’Montis or Marlene Dietrich, has been interpreted in an increasingly broad-manner over the decades. Thus, the game of playing with androgynous appearance reveals its true colors to be an expressive form in both historical and cultural ways, whereby the strong queer threads remain evident:

The new sexual freedom that many rock’n’roll songs championed in the 1960’s, for example, was more an assertion of dissent and attitude than it was a reflection of everyday life in youth subculture. Within gay subculture, however, a flaunting of society’s more was, and remains, part of daily life. This unconventional lifestyles, with the emphasis on “style,” was viewed somewhat enviously by popular music’s more stylish performers, who have consistently appropriated gay style and mediated that discourse of fashion for their fans. ... It is well-known, of course, that Bowie, Reed, Iggy Pop and Bryan Ferry and Brian Eno (both of Roxy Music) were all regular visitors to the most fashionable gay haunts on both sides of the Atlantic [Europe and North America]

6 Durga Chew-Bose, “The Androgynous Beauty Mood of the Moment, The blurred lines between feminine and masculine is a blasé bending of expectations,” in: *Flare* on November 27, 2014, <https://www.flare.com/beauty/the-androgynous-beautymood-of-the-moment/>.

and that four of the five—Ferry is the exception—posed for years as bisexual and/or gay at different items.⁷

Both artists and non-conformist thinkers have not only invented themselves out of their own creativity, but have also concurrently articulated a standpoint, which has developed an important, cultural valence for some. Yet, now we've arrived in the twenty-first century, these standpoints appear to have disintegrated into fields that offer a large numbers of people alternative forms of expression, and the possibility of being beautiful. Androgynous representative forms have arrived in our everyday lives, accompanied by the fraught possibility that they might be recognized as beautiful. They function successfully amongst the media's dominant abbreviations of beauty, which continue to mold the great surface for projections on offer here, as long as an artistic valuable attribution appears possible. But as soon as this freedom of art, and, in some cases, of scholarship too, is left behind, entirely different informal rules come into play:

"Contemporary teen film" depiction of LGBT characters generally conforms to the same hegemonically dominant "tendencies" visible in mainstream media: they tend to be white, middle-class, able-bodied; they tend to be gay, or perhaps lesbian, but rarely bisexual or transgender. Their desires tend to be chaste, insinuated more than stated, and they tend to come out and declare recognisable, binary, fixed identities, with well-adjusted, happy, healthy portrayals tending to be out and proud, and deviance related to closet-cases. And yet, these tendencies are also contested within the genre. There are—though few and far between—non-white, non- middle-class characters. There are lesbians, bisexuals, and even a very few transgender characters. While culturally understood as victims, onscreen LGBT youth often face no

7 B. Fergus Foley, "Significant Others: Gay Subcultural Histories and Practices," (PhD diss., Simon Fraser University, 1987), 149n.

onscreen victimisation, and those that do use their own agency to overcome adversity.⁸

Even when white skin color, physical integrity, and fitness influence how current physiognomic standards, in terms of an individual's looks, and many further factors in the media's means of representing queer persons are fulfilled, it's particularly postmodern, virtually interconnected communities that can create alternative forms of performance and images, to subculturally extend the frameworks of beauty. Critical reflections on a dominant, majority-based society and a steering toward a subcultural community are evidently necessary, to give alternatives a chance. But it's the very process of subcultural standards becoming visible, and the connected democratization of which expressive forms count as beautiful, which provided evidence for the increasing importance of queer power in definition. The tenacity and omnipresence of media make it easier to accept and to internalize currently existing standards. However, virtual possibilities also lend wings to newly gained autonomy, and the potential turn to global alternatives:

I do not feel that I fit the traditional definitions of male and female. I am somewhere in the middle. For some reason, this scares some people. People have a hard time accepting what they cannot see or cannot relate to. Not everyone questions their gender. But there is no real rule to androgyny.⁹

Indeed, it is genuinely the lack of rules—or, expressed differently, the freedom—which unsettles people in relation to androgyny. Deprived of the anchoring points of a gender-based assignment perceptible from without, observers are left in a state of irritation, which can only be

8 Andrea Pauline MacRae, "Hegemonic negotiation and LGBT representation in contemporary teen films," (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2018), 157.

9 Jordan McGee, "Confident and Comfortable: The Beauty of Androgyny" in: *Grand Central Magazine*, February 15, 2017, <http://gcmag.org/confident-and-comfortable-the-beauty-of-androgyny/>.

dissipated by an attempt to make contact. Beyond that, although an androgynous appearance form eludes the scope of a general set of rules, it cannot elude aesthetic judgments. That said, while a performance of one's own personality, which cuts across barriers of gender and sex, may proceed from an idea of emancipation, the democratization of ideals concerning beauty also creates subcultural evaluation tendencies. This is because traditional, creative, or even disdainful understandings of beauty will still also prevail in subcultures and their subfields. These understandings, and their codes, identifying characteristics, and forms of expression, continue to exert influence:

Gay men have long experimented with notions of acceptability in behaviour and dress. The twentieth century has seen a movement in the (straight) public's perceptions of gay men and also in the positioning of gay men's self-identity. Codes of behaviour and styles of presentation that were utilised by gay men have developed and been cast aside as social attitudes and legal positions have altered. Stereotypes that were formed have been challenged, broken down and replaced by new ones. ... there has been a breakdown of the gay and non-gay "us and them," fashion and dress choice are still used by many to differentiate themselves, sometimes as individuals, sometimes as members of a group and sometimes as both.

Many gay men no longer feel the need to define their identity through their choice of dress, while others are making conscious efforts to reinforce a communal identity through behaviour and locations for living and working and dress. One fact that does remain is gay men's interest in clothing; but even that is no longer homogenous ...¹⁰

The polymath and semiotician Umberto Eco nailed this development squarely, in his book on the history of beauty, and its historical and aesthetic dimensions:

10 Shaun Cole, *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 189.

For their part, the mass media no longer present any unified model, any single ideal of Beauty. They can retrieve, even for an advertising campaign destined to last only a week, all the experimental work of the avant-garde, and at the same time offer models from the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, even in the outmoded forms of automobiles from the mid-century. The mass media continue to serve up warmed-over versions of nineteenth-century iconography, the Junoesque opulence of Mae West and the anorexic charms of the latest fashion models; the dusky Beauty of Naomi Campbell and the Nordic Beauty of Claudia Schiffer; the grace of traditional tap dancing as in *A Chorus Line* and the chilling futuristic architectures of *Blade Runner*, the femme fatale of dozens of television shows or advertising campaigns and squeaky-clean girls-next-door like Julia Roberts or Cameron Diaz; Rambo and RuPaul; George Clooney with his short hair, and neo-cyborgs who paint their faces in metallic shades and transform their hair into forests of coloured spikes, or shave their heads.

Our explorer from the future will no longer be able to identify the aesthetic ideal diffused by the mass media of the twentieth century and beyond. He will have to surrender before the orgy of tolerance, the total syncretism and the absolute and unstoppable polytheism of Beauty.¹¹

Following Eco's conclusions, will queer beauty soon be unchained and ready to become even more compartmentalized? Are social attributions and societal limitations on the edge of disbanding, as soon as one has arrived in the right sub-community? The democratization of queer forms concerning ideals of beauty and alternatives has become more visible, but obstinate currents of exclusion and inclusion remain nonetheless. Particularly virtual meeting and dating platforms display, in their reductive focus on visual, specific, and broad-based forms of marginalization, and the application of homogeneous ideals of beauty. The representation of one's self through images and only a few words reduces human beings to the merely obligatory; depending on the

11 Umberto Eco, *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea*, ed. Umberto Eco, trans. Alastair McEwen, (London: Seeker & Warburg, 2004), 426-428.

platform, this could be relationship forms, sexuality, and/or sexual preferences. The construction of this kind of apps for cellphones mostly makes this reduction clear, through the design and the functions offered. At the same time, the popularity of these apps proves not only their widespread reach, but also how they've established themselves successfully in postmodern, virtually interconnected societies. Regardless of whether self-description or search functions pre-state ethnic or indeed physical characteristics for selection, it takes only seconds for individual visual judgment schemes to take hold, powered by internalized patterns of social recognition and slumbering ideals of beauty. A single attentive swipe suffices to take a decision, the snippets of information presented being skimmed read, again, in seconds, and scoured for predetermined breaking points. Cultural codes, verifiable educational qualifications, a person's job or even their income can all be identified accurately using familiar symbols—when people use these to deceive deliberately, this already problematic practice becomes even worse. And, assuming users even want to know or communicate this stuff, positions on ideological affiliations and spiritual attitudes to life can be relayed. These abbreviations of one's own identity becomes a billboard, adorned with a typical, presentable smile, whereby some users still shy away intensive use of image optimizing programs. The exaggeration of advantageous facets is intended to foreground what is presented as self-evident, so that users can offer whichever attributes are considered desirable this month: super slim, super-athletic, super-popular, super-rich and super-beautiful:

They'll claim statements like "no fats," "no fems," "no asians," and "no blacks" are nothing more than preferences which they can't be blamed for, despite the fact that dating, attraction, and desire are and have always been political. ... People use the word "preference" when they don't really know what it means. The big question is, since when

is it okay to judge an entire group of people before you meet them? They've got a word for that: prejudice.¹²

This boiling complexity down to just a few—mostly visible—parameters do little more than fuel old clichés. Focusing too narrowly on beauty ideals is often misjudged, and interpreted positively, as clarity about one's own desires, especially when generalized exclusions of entire groups of people are executed in the process. Exposing this so-called clarity brings to light strategies to exclude people from the spectrum of attractiveness based on external, social and cultural markers. These prejudices and attributions are forced onto several groups, in order to optimize, in the eyes of those clicking these options, the action radius of their desire. Knowing what one finds beautiful in the queer community often seems inseparable with greater awareness of what can be understood as unattractive or even ugly:

Those Asian men who are featured as desirable in the gay media are those who have been able to “successfully” assimilate to the dominant Anglo gay culture (e.g., Anglo features, muscular, gay fashions) ... Men from Southeast Asian backgrounds in this study were frequently highly sensitive to their subordinate positioning in the dominant gay culture, in ways that Anglos would have had difficulty even noticing. For instance, in addition to being absent in the media, their experiences of being “invisible” to other participants on the scene, such as being ignored by bar staff and catching disapproving glances from Anglo and other European patrons ...¹³

The mechanisms that kick in on digital platforms are hardly new, but rather virtual continuations: the daily marginalization of a supposed

12 Buffy Flores, “This ‘No Fats, No Fems’ Shirt Is Everything That’s Wrong With the Gay Community,” *Pride* on April 28, 2016, <https://www.pride.com/firstperson/2016/4/28/no-fats-no-fems-shirt-everything-thats-wrong-gay-community>.

13 Damien Ridge, Amos Hee, and Victor Minichiello, “Asian Men on the Scene,” in: *Journal of Homosexuality* 36, no. 3–4 (1999), 47, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J082v36n03_03.

Other, ad infinitum. The building of hierarchical systems, the forms in which they're applied, and their heedless but apparently expedient use, all utilize well-known labelling and stigmatization strategies: and these are grounded in socially constructed—and queer—beauty formulas:

It is also interesting to note that while ten ethnic labels are offered by Grindr, these categories are centred on western civilisations, offering labels for major groups such as "White" and "Black," as well as subcontinental groups such as "Native American" and "Latino." Middle Eastern ethnicity are represented by "Middle Eastern," while Asia is represented by "Asian" and "South Asian," despite being the largest, most ethnically diverse and populous continent. All other individuals are simply accounted for in "Other." In contrast, we see more general options offered by Jack'd¹⁴—"Asian," "Black," "Caucasian," "Latino," "Middle Eastern," "Mixed," "Pacific Islander" and "Other." As many interviewees expressed, underrepresentation of accurate ethnicities and/or cultural identities result in the selection of "Blank," "Prefer not to say" or other equivalent options offered. While ethnic filtering may facilitate prejudice against certain ethnic groups, many users describe these exclusions as non-racially motivated and simply a matter of personal taste. Researchers have argued that tastes and interests of individuals are ultimately shaped through socio-economic, as well as locational factors, and not necessarily a matter of taste, but an issue relating to cultural and political differences ...¹⁵

As unifying as queerness may appear, because of shared "transgressions" in the eyes of mainstream society, and because of subcultural intersections, the cracks of heteronormativity can still be found, nonetheless, in the antechamber of power's exterior facade.¹⁶ Increasingly, the innovative power of queer beauty is gaining visibility and recognition, but much

14 Jack'd is an app-based chat and dating platform for a queer public: <https://www.jackd.com/>.

15 Wei-Hong Tseng, "NO ASIANS PLEASE; 'ONLY FOR ASIANS': Experiences of East-Asian Gay Newcomers on Grindr and Jack'd in London," (PhD diss., Goldsmiths University of London, 2017), 50n.

16 See: Martin J. Gössl, *Schöne, queere Zeiten?*, 22.

everyday culture is enduringly chained to old traditions of masculinity and femininity. Even when viscous streams of change of change begin to flow, and are celebrated frantically by some as emancipation from old patterns, they not only flow slowly, but are also always dangerous, as progress could turn out simply to be a new form of regression. Utterly apolitically and inconspicuous, beauty patterns serve as a roadworthy vehicle in these outpourings, which shape both lifestyles and ideological standpoints. The experience of attractiveness, the approximation to standards of contemporary beauty, and the desire for flawlessness all impact actors' behavior, subtly but substantially, in both holistic and sub-cultural ways.

Queer creativity, conceptualized as the power to arrive at new ideas for forms of beauty, offers both the revolutionary potential to defy established traditions, and aids normative processes of efficacy. Thus, queer-ness inherent in beauty leaves room for alternative interpretations of its appearance forms, and provides freedom in desire and creativity for the interpretation of attractiveness. It limits itself to neither old traditions nor perceptible facets, but allows discovery, which should be cognized in personal terms, but also collectively, and with reference to the real and the virtual. This freedom may seem exhausting for many, as it disposes of comfortable forms of beauty concepts—which ideally also include certain forms of recognition. Shedding the imaginary checklists of what makes people and things more beautiful, and what we should better give a miss, inevitably impacts back onto one's own appearance. With the result that perceived and experienced concepts of beauty must now be critically scrutinized and adapted. Although they go hand in hand with this new thinking, neither aesthetics nor desire are up for negotiation—both are allowed to, and indeed must continue to have a personal rightness, as a sensibility. However, the social automatisms of exclusion based on preconceived notions of beauty should now be recognized as what they are: labels, stigma, and prejudices.

