



The WILSON QUARTERLY

SURVEYING THE WORLD OF IDEAS

Looks Do Matter

by Daniel Akst

Everyone knows looks shouldn't matter. Beauty, after all, is only skin deep, and no right-thinking person would admit to taking much account of how someone looks outside the realm of courtship, that romantic free-trade zone traditionally exempted from the usual tariffs of rationality. Even in that tender kingdom, where love at first sight is still readily indulged, it would be impolitic, if not immature, to admit giving too much weight to a factor as shallow as looks. Yet perhaps it's time to say what we all secretly know, which is that looks do matter, maybe even more than most of us think.

We infer a great deal from people's looks—not just when it comes to mating (where looks matter profoundly), but in almost every other aspect of life as well, including careers and social status. It may not be true that blondes have more fun, but it's highly likely that attractive people do, and they start early. Mothers pay more attention to good-looking babies, for example, but, by the same token, babies pay more attention to prettier adults who wander into their field of vision. Attractive people are paid more on the job, marry more desirable spouses, and are likelier to get help from others when in evident need. Nor is this all sheer, baseless prejudice. Human beings appear to be hard-wired to respond to how people and objects look, an adaptation without which the species might not have made it this far. The unpleasant truth is that, far from being only skin deep, our looks reflect all kinds of truths about difference and desire—truths we are, in all likelihood, biologically programmed to detect.

Sensitivity to the signals of human appearances would naturally lead to successful reproductive decisions, and several factors suggest that this sensitivity may be bred in the bone. Beauty may even be addictive. Researchers at London's University College have found that human beauty stimulates a section of the brain called the ventral striatum, the same region activated in drug and gambling addicts when they're about to indulge their habit. Photos of faces rated unattractive had no effect on the volunteers to whom they were shown, but the ventral striatum did show activity if the picture was of an attractive person, especially one looking straight at the viewer. And the responses occurred even when the viewer and the subject of the photo were of the same sex. Good-looking people just do something to us, whether we like it or not.

People's looks speak to us, sometimes in a whisper and sometimes in a shout, of health, reproductive fitness, agreeableness, social standing, and intelligence. Although looks in mating still matter much more to men than to women, the importance of appearance appears to be rising on both sides of the gender divide. In a fascinating cross-generational study of mating preferences, every 10 years different groups of men and women were asked to rank 18 characteristics they might want enhanced in a mate. The importance of good looks rose "dramatically" for both men and women from 1939 to 1989, the period of the study, according to David M. Buss, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Texas. On a scale of 1 to 3, the importance men gave to good looks rose from 1.50 to 2.11. But for women, the importance of good looks in men rose from 0.94 to 1.67. In other words, women in 1989 considered a man's looks even more important than men considered women's looks 50 years earlier. Since the 1930s, Buss writes, "physical appearance has gone up in importance for men and women about equally, corresponding with the rise in television, fashion magazines, advertising, and other media depictions of attractive models."

In all likelihood this trend will continue, driven by social and technological changes that are unlikely to be reversed anytime soon—changes such as the new ubiquity of media images, the growing financial independence of women, and the worldwide weakening of the institution of marriage. For better or worse, we live now in an age of appearances. It looks like looks are here to stay.

The paradox, in such an age, is that the more important appearances become, the worse most of us seem to look—and not just by comparison with the godlike images alternately taunting and bewitching us from every billboard and TV screen. While popular culture is obsessed with fashion and style, and our prevailing psychological infirmity is said to be narcissism, fully two-thirds of American adults have abandoned conventional ideas of attractiveness by becoming overweight. Nearly half of this group is downright obese. Given their obsession with dieting—a \$40 billion-plus industry in the United States—it's not news to these people that they're sending an unhelpful message with their inflated bodies, but it's worth noting here nonetheless.

Social scientists have established what most of us already know in this regard, which is that heavy people are perceived less favorably in a variety of ways. Across cultures—even in places such as Fiji, where fat is the norm—people express a preference for others who are neither too slim nor too heavy. In studies by University of Texas psychologist Devendra Singh, people guessed that the heaviest figures in photos were eight to 10 years older than the slimmer ones, even though the faces were identical. (As the nation's bill for hair dye and facelifts attests, looking older is rarely desirable, unless you happen to be an underage drinker.)

America's weight problem is one dimension of what seems to be a broader-based national flight from presentability, a flight that manifests itself unmistakably in the relentless casualness of our attire. Contrary to the desperate contentions of some men's clothiers, for example, the suit really is dying. Walk around midtown Manhattan, and these garments are striking by their absence. Consumer spending reflects this. In 2004, according to NPD Group, a marketing information firm, sales of "active sportswear," a category that includes such apparel as warm-up

suits, were \$39 billion, nearly double what was spent on business suits and other tailored clothing. The irony is that the more athletic gear we wear, from plum-colored velour track suits to high-tech sneakers, the less athletic we become.

The overall change in our attire did not happen overnight. America's clothes, like America itself, have been getting more casual for decades, in a trend that predates even Nehru jackets and the "full Cleveland" look of a pastel leisure suit with white shoes and belt, but the phenomenon reaches something like an apotheosis in the vogue for low-riding pajama bottoms and flip-flops outside the home. Visit any shopping mall in summer—or many deep-Sunbelt malls year round—and you'll find people of all sizes, ages, and weights clomping through the climate-controlled spaces in tank tops, T-shirts, and running shorts. Tops—and nowadays often bottoms—emblazoned with the names of companies, schools, and places make many of these shoppers into walking billboards. Bulbous athletic shoes, typically immaculate on adults who go everywhere by car, are the functional equivalent of SUVs for the feet. Anne Hollander, an observant student of clothing whose books include *Sex and Suits* (1994), has complained that we've settled on "a sandbox aesthetic" of sloppy comfort; the new classics—sweats, sneakers, and jeans—persist year after year, transcending fashion altogether.

We've come to this pass despite our seeming obsession with how we look. Consider these 2004 numbers from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons: 9.2 million cosmetic surgeries (up 24 percent from 2000) at a cost of \$8.4 billion, and that doesn't count 7.5 million "minimally invasive" procedures, such as skin peels and Botox injections (collectively up 36 percent). Cosmetic dentistry is also booming, as is weight-loss surgery. Although most of this spending is by women, men are focusing more and more on their appearance as well, which is obvious if you look at the evolution of men's magazines over the years. Further reflecting our concern with both looks and rapid self-transformation is a somewhat grisly new genre of reality TV: the extreme makeover show, which plays on the audience's presumed desire to somehow look a whole lot better fast.

But appearances in this case are deceiving. The evidence suggests that a great many of us do not care nearly enough about how we look, and that even those who care very much indeed still end up looking terrible. In understanding why, it's worth remembering that people look the way they do for two basic reasons—on purpose and by accident—and both can be as revealing as a neon tube top.

Let's start with the purposeful. Extremes in casual clothing have several important functions. A big one nowadays is camouflage. Tent-like T-shirts and sweatsuits cover a lot of sins, and the change in our bodies over time is borne out by the sizes stores find themselves selling. In 1985, for example, the top-selling women's size was eight. Today, when, as a result of size inflation, an eight (and every other size) is larger than it used to be, NPD Group reports that the top-selling women's size is 14. Camouflage may also account for the popularity of black, which is widely perceived as slimming as well as cool.

That brings us to another motive for dressing down—way down—which is status. Dressing to manifest disregard for society—think of the loose, baggy hipsters in American high schools—broadcasts self-determination by flaunting the needlessness of having to impress anybody else. We all like to pretend we're immune to "what people think," but reaching for status on this basis is itself a particularly perverse—and egregious—form of status seeking. For grownups, it's also a way of pretending to be young, or at least youthful, since people know instinctively that looking young often means looking good. Among the truly young, dressing down is a way to avoid any embarrassing lapses in self-defining rebelliousness. And for the young and fit, sexy casual clothing can honestly signal a desire for short-term rather than long-term relationships. Indeed, researchers have shown that men respond more readily to sexy clothing when seeking a short-term relationship, perhaps because more modest attire is a more effective signal of sexual fidelity, a top priority for men in the marriage market, regardless of nation or tribe.

Purposeful slovenliness can have its reasons, then, but what about carelessness? One possible justification is that, for many people, paying attention to their own looks is just too expensive. Clothes are cheap, thanks to imports, but looking good can be costly for humans, just as it is for other species. A signal such as beauty, after all, is valuable in reproductive terms only if it has credibility, and it's been suggested that such signals are credible indicators of fitness precisely because in evolutionary terms they're so expensive. The peacock's gaudy tail, for example, attracts mates in part because it signals that the strutting bird is robust enough not only to sustain his fancy plumage but to fend off the predators it also attracts. Modern humans who want to strut their evolutionary stuff have to worry about their tails too: They have to work them off. Since most of us are no longer paid to perform physical labor, getting exercise requires valuable time and energy, to say nothing of a costly gym membership. And then there is the opportunity cost—the pleasure lost by forgoing fried chicken and Devil Dogs. Eating junk food, especially fast food, is probably also cheaper, in terms of time, than preparing a low-calorie vegetarian feast at home.

These costs apparently strike many Americans as too high, which may be why we as a culture have engaged in a kind of aesthetic outsourcing, transferring the job of looking good—of providing the desired supply of physical beauty—to the specialists known as "celebrities," who can afford to devote much more time and energy to the task. Offloading the chore of looking great onto a small, gifted corps of professionals saves the rest of us a lot of trouble and expense, even if it has opened a yawning aesthetic gulf between the average person (who is fat) and the average model or movie star (who is lean and toned within an inch of his or her life).

Although the popularity of Botox and other such innovations suggests that many people do want to look better, it seems fair to conclude that they are not willing to pay any significant price to do so, since the great majority do not in fact have cosmetic surgery, exercise regularly, or maintain anything like their ideal body weight. Like so much in our society, physical attractiveness is produced by those with the greatest comparative advantage, and consumed vicariously by the rest of us—purchased, in a sense, ready made.

Whether our appearance is purposeful or accidental, the outcome is the same, which is that a great many of us look awful most of the time, and as a consequence of actions or inactions that are at least substantially the result of free will.

Men dressed liked boys? Flip-flops at the office? Health care workers who never get near an operating room but nevertheless dress in shapeless green scrubs? These sartorial statements are not just casual. They're also of a piece with the general disrepute into which looking good seems to have fallen. On its face, so to speak, beauty presents some serious ideological problems in the modern world. If beauty were a brand, any focus group that we convened would describe it as shallow and fleeting or perhaps as a kind of eye candy that is at once delicious and bad for you. As a society, we consume an awful lot of it, and we feel darn guilty about it.

Why should this be so? For one thing, beauty strikes most of us as a natural endowment, and as a people we dislike endowments. We tax inheritances, after all, on the premise that they are unearned by their recipients and might produce something like a hereditary aristocracy, not unlike the one produced by the competition to mate with beauty. Money plays a role in that competition; there's no denying that looks and income are traditionally awfully comfortable with each other, and today affluent Americans are the ones least likely to be overweight. By almost any standard, then, looks are a seemingly unfair way of distinguishing oneself, discriminating as they do on the basis of age and generally running afoul of what the late political scientist Aaron Wildavsky called "the rise of radical egalitarianism," which was at the very least suspicious of distinction and advantage, especially a distinction as capricious and as powerful as appearance.

Appearance can be a source of inequality, and achieving some kind of egalitarianism in this arena is a long-standing and probably laudable American concern. The Puritans eschewed fancy garb, after all, and Thoreau warned us to beware of enterprises that require new clothes. Nowadays, at a time of increased income inequality, our clothes paradoxically confer less distinction than ever. Gender distinctions in clothing, for instance, have been blurred in favor of much greater sartorial androgyny, to the extent that nobody would any longer ask who wears the pants in any particular household (because the correct answer would be, "everybody"). The same goes for age distinctions (short pants long ago lost their role as uniform of the young), class distinctions (the rich wear jeans too), and even distinctions between occasions such as school and play, work and leisure, or public and private. Who among us hasn't noticed sneakers, for example, at a wedding, in a courtroom, or at a concert, where you spot them sometimes even on the stage?

The problem is that, if anything, looks matter even more than we think, not just because we're all hopelessly superficial, but because looks have always told us a great deal of what we want to know. Looks matter for good reason, in other words, and delegating favorable appearances to an affluent elite for reasons of cost or convenience is a mistake, both for the individuals who make it and for the rest of us as well. The slovenliness of our attire is one of the things that impoverish the public sphere, and the stunning rise in our weight (in just 25 years) is one of the things that impoverish our health. Besides, it's not as if we're evolving anytime soon into a species that's immune to appearances. Looks seem to matter to all cultures, not just our image-besotted one, suggesting that efforts to stamp out looksism (which have yet to result in hiring quotas on behalf of the homely) are bucking millions of years of evolutionary development.

The degree of cross-cultural consistency in this whole area is surprising. Contrary to the notion that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or at the very least in the eye of the culture, studies across nations and tribal societies have found that people almost everywhere have similar ideas about what's attractive, especially as regards the face (tastes in bodies seem to vary a bit more, perhaps allowing for differing local evolutionary ecologies). Men everywhere, even those few still beyond the reach of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, are more concerned about women's looks than women are about men's, and their general preference for women who look young and healthy is probably the result of evolutionary adaptation.

The evidence for this comes from the field of evolutionary psychology. Whatever one's view of this burgeoning branch of science, one thing it has produced (besides controversy) is an avalanche of disconcerting research about how we look. Psychologists Michael R. Cunningham, of the University of Louisville, and Stephen R. Shamblen cite evidence that babies as young as two or three months old look longer at more attractive faces. New mothers of less attractive offspring, meanwhile, have been found to pay more attention to other people (say, hospital room visitors) than do new mothers of better-looking babies. This may have some basis in biological necessity, if you bear in mind that the evolutionary environment, free as it was of antibiotics and pediatricians, might have made it worthwhile indeed for mothers to invest themselves most in the offspring likeliest to survive and thrive.

The environment today, of course, is very different, but it may only amplify the seeming ruthlessness of the feelings and judgments we make. "In one study," reports David M. Buss, the evolutionary psychologist who reported on the multi-generational study of mating preferences, "after groups of men looked at photographs of either highly attractive women or women of average attractiveness, they were asked to evaluate their commitment to their current romantic partner. Disturbingly, the men who had viewed pictures of attractive women thereafter judged their actual partners to be less attractive than did the men who had viewed analogous pictures of women who were average in attractiveness. Perhaps more important, the men who had viewed attractive women thereafter rated themselves as less committed, less satisfied, less serious, and less close to their actual partners." In another study, men who viewed attractive nude centerfolds promptly rated themselves as less attracted to their own partners.

Even if a man doesn't personally care much what a woman looks like, he knows that others do. Research suggests that being with an attractive woman raises a man's status significantly, while dating a physically unattractive woman moderately lowers a man's status. (The effect for women is quite different; dating an attractive man raises a woman's status only somewhat, while dating an unattractive man lowers her status only nominally.) And status matters. In the well-known "Whitehall studies" of British civil servants after World War II, for example, occupational grade was strongly correlated with longevity: The higher the bureaucrat's ranking, the longer the life. And it turns out that Academy Award-winning actors and actresses outlive other movie performers by about four years, at least according to a study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 2001. "The results," write authors Donald A. Redelmeier and Sheldon M. Singh, "suggest that success confers a survival advantage." So if an attractive mate raises a man's status, is it really such a wonder that men covet trophy wives?

In fact, people's idea of what's attractive is influenced by the body types that are associated with status in a given time and place (which suggests that culture plays at least some role in ideas of attractiveness). As any museumgoer can tell you, the big variation in male preferences across time and place is in plumpness, and Buss contends that this is a status issue: In places where food is plentiful, such as the United States, high-status people distinguish themselves by being thin.

There are reasons besides sex and status to worry about how we look. For example, economists Daniel S. Hamermesh, of the University of Texas, and Jeff E. Biddle, of Michigan State University, have produced a study suggesting that better-looking people make more money.

“Holding constant demographic and labor-market characteristics,” they wrote in a well-known 1993 paper, “plain people earn less than people of average looks, who earn less than the good-looking. The penalty for plainness is five to 10 percent, slightly larger than the premium for beauty.” A 1998 study of attorneys (by the same duo) found that some lawyers also benefit by looking better. Yet another study found that better-looking college instructors—especially men—receive higher ratings from their students.

Hamermesh and some Chinese researchers also looked into whether primping pays, based on a survey of Shanghai residents. They found that beauty raises women’s earnings (and, to a lesser extent, men’s), but that spending on clothing and cosmetics helps only a little. Several studies have even found associations between appearance preferences and economic cycles. Psychologists Terry F. Pettijohn II, of Ohio State University, and Abraham Tesser, of the University of Georgia, for example, obtained a list of the Hollywood actresses with top box-office appeal in each year from 1932 to 1995. The researchers scanned the actresses’ photos into a computer, did various measurements, and determined that, lo and behold, the ones who were the most popular during social and economic good times had more “neoteny”—more childlike features, including bigger eyes, smaller chins, and rounder cheeks. During economic downturns, stronger and more rectangular female faces—in other words, faces that were more mature—were preferred.

It’s not clear whether this is the case for political candidates as well, but looks matter in this arena too. In a study that appeared recently in *Science*, psychologist Alexander Todorov and colleagues at Princeton University showed photographs of political candidates to more than 800 students, who were asked to say who had won and why based solely on looks. The students chose correctly an amazing 69 percent of the time, consistently picking candidates they judged to look the most competent, meaning those who looked more mature. The losers were more likely to have babyfaces, meaning some combination of a round face, big eyes, small nose, high forehead and small chin. Those candidates apparently have a hard time winning elections.

To scientists, a convenient marker for physical attractiveness in people is symmetry, as measured by taking calipers to body parts as wrists, elbows, and feet to see how closely the pairs match. The findings of this research can be startling. As summarized by biologist Randy Thornhill and psychologist Steven W. Gangestad, both of the University of New Mexico, “In both sexes, relatively low asymmetry seems to be associated with increased genetic, physical, and mental health, including cognitive skill and IQ. Also, symmetric men appear to be more muscular and vigorous, have a lower basal metabolic rate, and may be larger in body size than asymmetric men. . . . Symmetry is a major component of developmental health and overall condition and appears to be heritable.” The researchers add that more symmetrical men have handsomer faces, more sex partners, and their first sexual experience at an earlier age, and they get to sex more quickly with a new romantic partner. “Moreover,” they tell us, “men’s symmetry predicts a relatively high frequency of their sexual partners’ copulatory orgasms.”

Those orgasms are sperm retaining, suggesting that symmetric men may have a greater chance of getting a woman pregnant. It doesn’t hurt that the handsomest men may have the best sperm, at least according to a study at Spain’s University of Valencia, which found that men with the healthiest, fastest sperm were those whose faces were rated most attractive by women. There’s evidence that women care more about men’s looks for short-term relationships than for marriage, and that as women get closer to the most fertile point of the menstrual cycle, their preference for “symmetrical” men grows stronger, according to Thornhill and Gangestad. Ovulating women prefer more rugged, masculinized faces, whereas the rest of the time they prefer less masculinized or even slightly feminized male faces. Perhaps predictably, more-symmetrical men are likelier to be unfaithful and tend to invest less in a relationship.

Asymmetric people may have some idea that they’re behind the eight ball here. William Brown and his then-colleagues at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, looked at 50 people in heterosexual relationships, measuring such features as hands, ears, and feet, and then asked about jealousy. The researchers found a strong correlation between asymmetry and romantic jealousy, suggesting that asymmetrical lovers may suspect they’re somehow less desirable. Brown’s explanation: “If jealousy is a strategy to retain your mate, then the individual more likely to be philandered on is more likely to be jealous.”

In general, how we look communicates something about how healthy we are, how fertile, and probably how useful in the evolutionary environment. This may be why, across a range of cultures, women prefer tall, broad-shouldered men who seem like good reproductive specimens, in addition to offering the possibility of physical protection. Men, meanwhile, like pretty women who appear young. Women’s looks seem to vary depending on where they happen to be in the monthly fertility cycle. The University of Liverpool biologist John Manning measured women’s ears and fingers and had the timing of their ovulation confirmed by pelvic exams. He found a 30 percent decline in asymmetries in the 24 hours before ovulation—perhaps more perceptible to our sexual antennae than to the conscious mind. In general, symmetrical women have more sex partners, suggesting that greater symmetry makes women more attractive to men.

To evolutionary biologists, it makes sense that men should care more about the way women look than vice versa, because youth and fitness matter so much more in female fertility. And while male preferences do vary with time and place there’s also some remarkable underlying consistency. Devendra Singh, for instance, found that the waist-to-hip ratio was the most important factor in women’s attractiveness to men in 18 cultures he studied. Regardless of whether lean or voluptuous women happen to be in fashion, the favored shape involves a waist/hip ratio of about 0.7. “Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe represented two very different images of beauty to filmgoers in the 1950s,” writes Nancy Etcoff, who is a psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital. “Yet the 36-24-34 Marilyn and the 31.5-22-31 Audrey both had versions of the hourglass shape and waist-to-hip ratios of 0.7.” Even Twiggy, in her 92-pound heyday, had a waist/hip ratio of 0.73.

Is it cause for despair that looks are so important? The bloom of youth is fleeting, after all, and the bad news that our appearance will inevitably broadcast about us cannot be kept under wraps forever. Besides, who could live up to the impossible standards propagated by our powerful aesthetic-industrial complex? It's possible that the images of models and actresses and even TV newscasters, most of them preternaturally youthful and all selected for physical fitness, have driven most Americans to quit the game, insisting that they still care about how they look even as they retire from the playing field to console themselves with knife and fork.

If the pressure of all these images has caused us to opt out of caring about how we look, that's a shame, because we're slaves of neither genes nor fashion in this matter. By losing weight and exercising, simply by making ourselves healthier, we can change the underlying data our looks report. The advantages are almost too obvious to mention, including lower medical costs, greater confidence, and a better quality of life in virtually every way.

There's no need to look like Brad Pitt or Jennifer Lopez, and no reason for women to pursue Olive Oyl thinness (a body type men do not especially prefer). Researchers, in fact, have found that people of both sexes tend to prefer averageness in members of the opposite sex: The greater the number of faces poured (by computer) into a composite, the higher it's scored in attractiveness by viewers. That's in part because "bad" features tend to be averaged out. But the implication is clear: You don't need to look like a movie star to benefit from a favorable appearance, unless, of course, you're planning a career in movies.

To a bizarre extent, looking good in America has become the province of an appearance aristocracy—an elect we revere for their seemingly unattainable endowment of good looks. Physical attractiveness has become too much associated with affluence and privilege for a country as democratically inclined as ours. We can be proud at least that these lucky lookers no longer have to be white or even young. Etcoff notes that, in tracking cosmetic surgery since the 1950s, the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery reports a change in styles toward wider, fuller-tipped noses and narrower eyelids, while makeup styles have tended toward fuller lips and less pale skin shades. She attributes these changes to the recalibration of beauty norms as the result of the presence of more Asian, African, and Hispanic features in society.

But what's needed is a much more radical democratization of physical beauty, a democratization we can achieve not by changing the definition of beauty but by changing ourselves. Looking nice is something we need to take back from the elites and make once again a broadly shared, everyday attribute, as it once was when people were much less likely to be fat and much more likely to dress decently in public. Good looks are not just an endowment, and the un-American attitude that looks are immune to self-improvement only breeds the kind of fatalism that is blessedly out of character in America.

As a first step, maybe we can stop pretending that our appearance doesn't—or shouldn't—matter. A little more looksism, if it gets people to shape up, would probably save some lives, to say nothing of some marriages. Let's face it. To a greater extent than most of us are comfortable with, looks tell us something, and right now what they say about our health, our discipline, and our mutual regard isn't pretty.

Daniel Akst is a writer in New York's Hudson Valley. He writes a monthly business column for *The New York Times* and is the author of several novels, including *The Webster Chronicle* (2001) and *St. Burl's Obituary* (1996).

Reprinted from Summer 2005 Wilson Quarterly

This article may not be resold, reprinted, or redistributed for compensation of any kind without prior written permission from the author. For further reprint information, please contact Permissions, The Wilson Quarterly, One Woodrow Wilson Plaza, 1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C.

Phone: 202/691-4200

E-mail: wq@wilsoncenter.org