

Body, Beauty, Otherness

The aim of this lecture is to explore perceptions of the 'beautiful' body in contemporary culture.

QUESTION: Does the constant representation of the ideal body in contemporary culture result in the alienation of 'other' bodies.



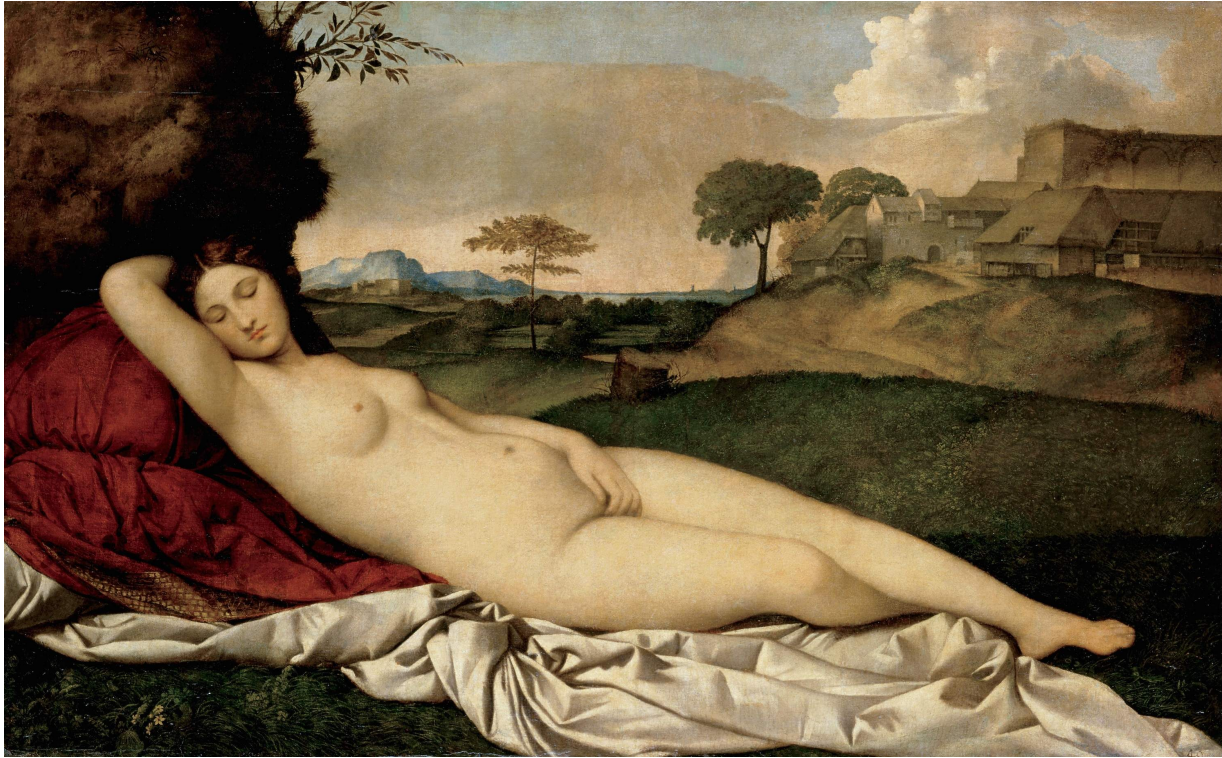
Images of the body have been and continue to be one of the most enduring and fascinating sources for the artist some beyond conscious thought from delight to despair, as an indicator of the normal or abnormal. Images of the body surround us like a fragmented cultural mirror reflecting an infinite variety of representations of the body and self.

(Ewing, W., *The Body*, Thames and Hudson)



All bodies may be described as being inscribed with cultural meaning.

The Renaissance led to a revival in the 'Greek Aesthetic', perpetuating the link between beauty and order (conformity/control).



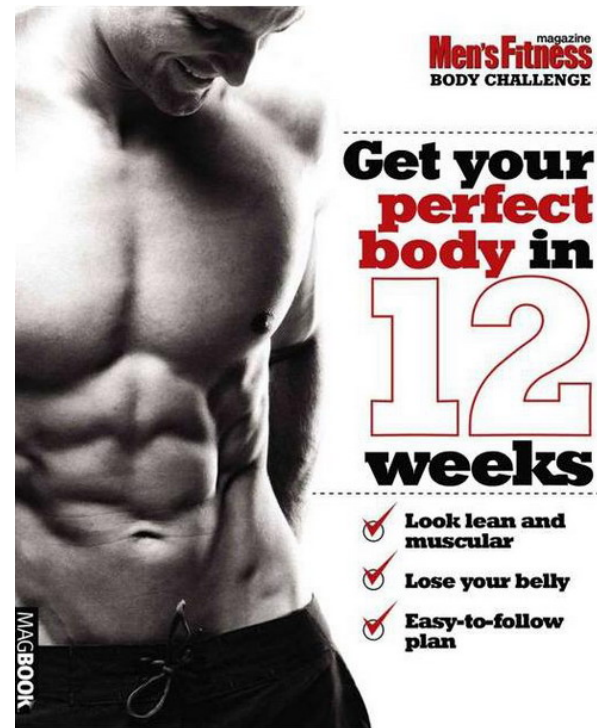
Giorgione, c.1510, *Sleeping Venus*

‘Aesthetics is a domain of philosophy concerned with questions of art and beauty. Traditionally, aesthetic philosophy has sought to provide universal criteria for the definition of Art.’

(Barker, C., 2004, *The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies*:.3)

Do we have a universal criteria for the beautiful body in a contemporary Western culture?

Idealism; 1. the practice of forming or pursuing ideals, **esp. unrealistically.**
(OERD)



A socially constructed body

‘Ideal beauty is ideal because it does not exist’. (Wolf, N., The Beauty Myth)



‘Beauty 1a. a combination of qualities such as shape, colour, etc., that pleases the aesthetic senses, esp. the sight. b a combination of qualities that pleases the intellect or moral sense 2a an excellent specimen b an attractive feature 3 a beautiful woman.’ (OERD 1995)

‘There are two contradictory conceptions of beauty: one is the conviction that it is a purely private, subjective experience; and the other is the notion that it is always, inevitably socially inscribed.’ (Beech, D., 2009, *Art and the Politics of Beauty*, IN, *Beauty: Documents in Contemporary Art*, page 14)

‘With the current societal standards for beauty inordinately emphasizing desirability throughout the mass media world of advertising today, a mismatch between the ideal body type and an individual’s actual body image has become apparent.’



(Karyn N. Lewis, Self-Discrepancy Theory: A Closer Look IN Theories of Communication 0535-445-01 Fall 20081, Professor T. Worrell, November 2, 2008,)

The notion of the Other is closely linked to those of identity and difference in that identity is understood to be defined in part by its difference from the Other. I am male because I am not female, I am heterosexual because I am not homosexual, I am white because I am not black and so forth. Such binaries of difference usually involve a relationship of power [beautiful/ugly, slim/overweight] , of inclusion and exclusion, in that one of the pair is empowered with a positive identity and the other side of the equation becomes the subordinated Other. (Barker, C., 2002, The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies: 139)

According to Foucauldian theory, the body is the irreducible upon which discourses and disciplinary powers inscribe meaning.



Ann Demeulemeester
Spring-Summer Collection
1997

These docile bodies can be aligned with Foucault's body as a passive 'receptor' of social control.

"The body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1995: 136)

Various contemporary artists have engaged in ‘the confusion and collapse of the distinction between beauty and a vast range of antonyms, such as ugliness, the banal, ideology, chaos, and so on.’

(Beech, D., 2009, *Art and the Politics of Beauty*, IN, *Beauty: Documents in Contemporary Art*, Page 18)

It may be suggested that 'the grotesque' presents the inverse of 'beauty' and rationality. However, does this simply reduce our understanding to a binary model?:

Beautiful/Grotesque, Young/Old, Good/Evil, Self/ Other ...etc...



Beauty /Grotesque are conceptual opposites that have been positioned that way in a system of meaning.

The concept of the grotesque is closely linked to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque.

Bakhtin's 'Carnivalesque Body' references the medieval carnival. Carnival represented a temporary inversion of all accepted categories. Unlike high cultural forms, the carnivalesque celebrated the low, base, and vulgar. The medieval carnival was where the grotesque body was privileged over the bourgeois civilized body. The grotesque body is a body that resisted control. Bakhtin's grotesque body is understood to be 'open', borderless, hybrid, uncivilized and uncontained.



Jenny Saville *Propped* 1992

‘The classical body is transcendent, monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek; it is identified with the ‘high’ or official culture of the Renaissance, and later, with rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official ‘low’ culture, or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation.’

(Mary Russo; *The Female Grotesque*; on the art depictions of the female body, 1995, IN *The Routledge Guide to Feminism and Postfeminism*, p.100)



Why may Saville's '*Closed Contact*' series be considered to transgress the boundaries of the ideal body image?



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwPsuXNC7fE&has_verified=1



Laura Aguilar *Self Portrait* 1991

Because women and men in our society are subjected to the overwhelming 'tyranny of slenderness' any person who openly flaunts their excessive corpulence is a potential political threat (a threat to order and control). The contemporary grotesque body, those who either fail or refuse to conform to the dominant physical ideal, can become an agent of 'social transformation' .

Luce Irigaray suggests that, if we continue to speak in this sameness, we will fail each other again.



John Coplans

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwPsuXNC7fE&has_verified=1

‘The critique of beauty is never a critique of beautiful objects but always of ideas, ideologies, social practices and cultural hierarchies.’

(Beech, D., 2009, *Art and the Politics of Beauty*, IN, *Beauty: Documents in Contemporary Art*: 12)