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## Susan Bordo

### *Gay Men's Revenge*

"It's a Face-Lifted, Tummy-Tucked Jungle Out There," *The New York Times* reported not long ago, describing what is available nowadays to the forty-something executive wanting to make his "packaging" more youthful:

He could buy ... Rogaine to thicken his hair. He could invest in Bodyslimmers underwear for men, with built-in support to suck in the waist ... alpha-hydroxy products that slough off dead skin ... belly- and thigh-shrinking creams ... pectoral implants to make the chest appear more muscular, and calf muscle implants to give the leg a bodybuilder shape ... liposuction to counter thickening middles and accumulating breast and fatty tissue in the chest ... [and] a half-dozen surgical methods for tightening skin.<sup>1</sup>

Consumer capitalism knows when it has a good thing going. Why limit the cosmetics, diet, and surgery industries to female markets if you can convince men that their looks need constant improvement too? But while consonant with consumerism, such developments may nonetheless be revolutionary when it comes to the representation of gender difference. Twenty-five years ago, art historian John Berger gave us some insight into the stakes here, by arguing that in classical painting and in commercial advertisements, too, "men act and women appear."<sup>2</sup> Women exist to be seen, and they *know* it—a notion communicated by the constant tropes of female narcissism: women shown preening, looking in mirrors, stroking their own bodies, exhibiting themselves for an assumed spectator. "Do I look good? Do you like me? Am I pretty?" the women in the pictures seem to be saying. Women are *supposed* to care about such things, these images tell us. With depictions of men, it is just the opposite. They never touch themselves languidly, display themselves purely as "sights," or gaze at themselves in mirrors. From war paintings to jeans and cologne ads, men are portrayed as utterly oblivious to how they appear, intent only on getting the job done—raising the flag, rigging a sailboat, lassoing a steer, busting up concrete. The ability to move heavy things around, tame wild creatures—that's manly business. Fretting about your love handles, your dry skin, your sag-

ging eyelids? That's for girls. Or fairies. The gay male's narcissism, in fact, is such a constant trope in Hollywood's depiction of homosexuality that it is startling when it is absent.

Berger's formula is not universal—not globally and not even within a Western context. Fashionable eighteenth-century gentleman wore lace and silk, donned powder and wigs before appearing in public—just as women did—clearly equating attention to beauty not with "femininity" but with a life of leisure and status. Such associations still persist, not only among the rich and famous who summer in the Hamptons, but also in cultures emerging out of poverty. Among many young African-American men, for example, appearing in high style, "cleaned up" and festooned with sparkling jewelry, is a way of signifying that you have made it in this materialist culture.<sup>3</sup> But even these young men require of themselves that they act "cool" while strutting their stuff, and beauty enhancement products aimed at men still depend on translation into "manly" language in order to sell: hair spray as "hair control," astringents as "scrubbing lotion," fragrances and moisturizers as "after-" or "pre-" accompaniments to that most masculine of rituals, the shave. Cosmetic surgeons emphasize the corporate advantage that face-lift or tummy-tuck will give you. "A youthful look," says one, "gives the appearance of a more dynamic, charging individual who will go out and get the business." Such marketing strategies very consciously and deliberately portray attention to appearance as congruous with that middle-class, performance-oriented, no-nonsense version of "masculinity" that has dominated the American ethos since the late nineteenth century. As this notion ascended, more aristocratic versions of manliness became "effete"; words like "dandy" and "sissy" came into vogue, and homosexuality became construed as a disease—of effeminacy.

For the real man, the mirror is a tool, not a captivating pool; if he could, he would look the other way while he shaves. This is the notion of masculinity that increasingly dominated mass-media representations of the male body from the 1950s until quite recently, an historical path that took us from the elegant and "classy" Cary Grant to Sylvester Stallone and the testosterone-driven "action hero." Even in the polyester seventies, men like Sonny Bono took care to treat their flamboyant ruffles as show-biz costumes, while Cher

proudly strutted her feathers and finery as a second skin for her body and sexuality. Hollywood had shown pimps and homosexuals preening, decorating, and oiling themselves, of course, along with Italians, Puerto Ricans, and Blacks. But these scenes were coded with distaste, shot from the superior, disdainful perspective of straight, white masculinity. Tony Manero's ritual in front of the mirror (*Saturday Night Fever*, 1977)—in which Manero (played by John Travolta) prepares his body meticulously, shaving, deodorizing, blow-drying, choosing just the right combination of gold chains and amulets, torso-clinging pants, and shiny platforms, all to disco rhythm—is a striking example. Manero was the protagonist of the movie, not a marginal side-show. Even so, his preening was presented as excessive, a sign of his immersion in a “native” subculture that he must outgrow in order to succeed in life. (The very behaviors that may signify “class” and success in working-class or ethnic communities thus get re-coded, within the dominant culture, as *classless*, ostentatious.) Tony's narcissism drew his sexual status into question, too, for many viewers; he seemed to care less about getting laid than stepping out. Even Pauline Kael, who could usually be counted on to appreciate transgressive moments in popular films, seemed to need to reassure herself of Tony's sexual orientation. “It's a straight heterosexual film,” Kael wrote, “but with a feeling for the sexiness of young boys who are bursting their britches with energy and desire.”<sup>4</sup>

Where do we stand today with regard to these attitudes? I will return to Hollywood later, but clearly things have changed dramatically in the world of advertising. There, a whiff of “feminine” body-consciousness is no longer cause for defensive assertion of heterosexual status. It used to be that to sell a muscle-building product to heterosexuals, you had to link it to virility and attracting women on the beach. Today, muscles are often sold for looks; Chroma Lean nutritional supplement unabashedly compares the well-sculpted male body to a work of art (and a gay male icon, to boot): Michelangelo's *David*. Not so long ago, if you showed a sexy, naked, male body exhibiting itself without a sweaty, manly job to justify its shirtlessness, you had better make sure to include a woman in the image, making it clear just *whom* the boy is looking so pretty for. Many advertisements today, in con-

trast, display the naked male body without shame or plot excuse, and often exploit rather than resolve the sexual ambiguity that is generated. These bodies, too, are often shown in seductive, languid, supine, “feminine” poses, depictions I have labeled “leaners”: that jokey label captures for me the contrast with more traditional representations, which pose the male body heroically, upright, fully conscious, looking out bravely onto the world, ready for action. Today, we are seeing more and more male bodies that do not assert themselves aggressively, but ask to be admired, loved, or sexually dominated. A recent Calvin Klein “Escape” advertisement depicts a young, sensuous-looking man leaning against a wall, arm raised, dark underarm hair exposed. His eyes seek out the imagined viewer, soberly but flirtatiously. “*Take Me,*” the copy reads.

Feminists may see these changes as a function of changing gender politics, which now allow women to be possessors of “the gaze” rather than solely its object. Remember the cultural stir caused by that Diet Coke commercial in which a hunky construction worker takes off his shirt and guzzles a can of soda, all the while being ogled from their windows by an officeful of salivating women? The commercial made many heterosexual women cheer. A male body being offered up to *us*! And presented on a silver platter, not caught via a stolen moment in the movies, as some actor streaked across the screen on his way to jumping in the lake. But looking to the Diet Coke commercial for insight into the cultural impetus behind the new depiction of male bodies is misleading. Most of the new advertisements have not been created for women's eyes only—or even predominantly. Rather, increasingly, advertisers are employing what is called a “dual marketing” approach. Dual marketing advertisements attempt to appeal simultaneously to both gay and straight consumers, by employing images that captivate different sexual “gazes.” A recent Abercrombie and Fitch ad, for example, depicts a locker room full of young, half-clothed football players getting a postmortem from their coach after a game. Beautiful, undressed, male bodies doing what real men are “supposed to do.” Dirty uniforms, wounded players, helmets. What could be more straight? But as iconography depicting a culture of exclusively male bodies, young, gorgeous, and well hung, what could be more “gay”?

Images of masculinity that will do sexual double duty (or triple duty) are not difficult to create in a culture such as ours, in which the muscular, male body has a long and glorious aesthetic history. It was Calvin Klein who first recognized and had the chutzpah to exploit this. He had his epiphany, according to one biography, one night in 1974 in New York's Flamingo bar:

As Calvin wandered through the crowd at the Flamingo, the body heat rushed through him like a revelation; this was the cutting edge ... straight-looking, masculine men, with chiseled bodies, young Greek gods come to life. The vision of shirtless young men with hardened torsos, all in blue jeans, top button opened, a whisper of hair from the belly button disappearing into the denim pants, would inspire and inform the next ten years of Calvin Klein's print and television advertisements.<sup>5</sup>

Klein's genius was that of a cultural Geiger counter whose own bisexuality enabled him to see that it is arguably the phallic body—not any female version of beauty—that is the true, enduring sex object of Western culture. But if we have entered a new, post-Bergerian world of male bodies it is largely because of a more “material” kind of epiphany—a dawning recognition among advertisers of the buying power of gay men. For a long time prejudice had triumphed over the profit motive, blinding marketers to just how sizable—and well heeled—a consumer group gay men represent. (This has been the case with other “minorities,” too. Remember how shocked Hollywood was at the tremendous success of *Waiting to Exhale*?) It took a survey conducted by *The Advocate* to jolt corporate America awake. The survey, done between 1977 and 1980, showed that seventy percent of its readers aged twenty to forty earned incomes well above the national median. Soon, articles were appearing on the business pages of newspapers, like one that appeared in 1982 in *The New York Times Magazine*, which described advertisers as newly interested in “wooing ... the white, single, well-educated, well-paid man who happens to be homosexual.”<sup>6</sup>

“Happens to be homosexual”: the phrasing—suggesting that sexual identity is a peripheral, accidental thing—is telling. Because of homophobia, dual marketing has often required a delicate balancing act, as advertisers try to “speak

to the homosexual consumer in a way that the straight consumer will not notice.”<sup>7</sup> Sometimes, this is done through “gay window dressing”—touches that will appeal to gay men, but are not so obvious as to put heterosexuals off. Sometimes, it is done with postmodern play and parody, as in Versace's droll portraits of men being groomed and tended by male servants, and Diesel's overtly narcissistic, gay posers. “Thanks Diesel, for making us so very beautiful,” they gush. Another ad, for stereos, has its gorgeous young model admitting that “I'm known more for my superb bone construction and soft, supple hair than my keen intellect ... but even I can hook up this sound system.” The playful tone reassures heterosexual consumers that the narcissism (and mechanical incompetence) of the man selling the product is “just a joke.” For gay consumers, on the other hand, this reassurance is *itself* the “joke”; they read the humor in the ad as an insider wink, which says “This one is for *you*, guys” (a reading buttressed by the fact that they know the model in the ad is very likely to be gay).

Sexy male bodies are indeed everywhere. But it is worth noting that not all those bodies speak the same language. Consider the kinds of mass-market magazines that the “leaners” are most likely to appear in. *Details*. *Interview*. Publications aimed at young, urbane, upwardly mobile but not-yet-settled-down men, men who can afford to “play” with their gender a bit, experiment with different styles. Publications (and movies and television shows) that do not wish to offend or alienate a more traditional middle-class audience still stay pretty solidly within the parameters of the Berger formula. Anyone who doubts this only need rent *Braveheart* or *Independence Day*, two of the most lucrative films of the last five years, and unabashed homages to masculine grit. (Does William Wallace, in *Braveheart*, spend any time primping in front of the mirror? What a thought. I am sure Mel Gibson would claim it is realism—*Braveheart*'s filthy, matted hair and mud-encrusted skin is because they did not have soap in those days. So how come his girlfriend in the film looks like a Breck commercial?) These films depict worlds in which “men act”—with a vengeance. The same goes for the macho worlds of hard rock and rapper magazines, publications whose advertisements—in striking contrast to those in *GQ* and the like—rarely depict men standing still, let alone lying down.

Is it an accident that Calvin Klein chose the “Take Me” image to advertise a perfume called “Escape”? “Eternity” ads usually depict happy, heterosexual couples, often with a child; “Obsession” has always been cutting-edge, sexually ambiguous erotica, the perfume with which Calvin pushes the envelope on who sleeps with whom. Klein’s underwear ads are for the well-endowed Greek Gods. But “Escape” ads are the ones that feature the men who transcend, elide, or confound “masculinity.” Offering such an “escape” valve is nothing revolutionary, according to Abigail Solomon-Godeau—who has argued that receptive, languorous, “feminized” images of masculinity have historically always been around, existing alongside more virile or macho icons, and representing no real threat to heroic ideals. Masculinity, Solomon-Godeau argues, has always been remarkably “elastic,” and one of the ways that it has insured that it will bend but not break is by—as she puts it—“colonizing femininity” within images that serve as a realm of “phantasmatic play” free from the demands of virile masculinity.<sup>8</sup>

Thinking about Solomon-Godeau’s thesis, I grouped my advertisements and fashion photos into two piles. I discovered that, as in ancient Greece, we appear to have different rules for boys and men. Whether the pictures were taken from a gay publication or a straight one, the more languid, narcissistic, come-hither poses are of boys and very young men. Once a certain age-line is crossed—if the ad is depicting (and addressing) a full-fledged male citizen, a developed subject rather than a developing one—phallic mastery becomes a requirement. In *these* poses, the naked male body is martial, confronting, challenging, not at all “passive.” “Yeah, I’m in underwear,” the bodies seem to be saying, “Wanna make something of it?” The model stares defiantly, “facing off” with an imagined viewer, asserting his subjectivity against any attempt to objectify or define. Consider the current cover stories of *Men’s Health* and *Men’s Fitness*: “The Hard-Body Diet,” “Amazing Abs,” “Killer Quads in Three Quick Moves,” “Ten Fastest Workouts,” “Train for Great Sex.” *Train* for great sex? What happened to “Take Me”? Only boys, it seems, are permitted to be seductive, playful, “passive,” to flirt with being “taken.” *Men* must still be in command, the master of their own desires rather than the object of another’s.

Where do we stand today, then, with respect to Berger’s formula? Not surprisingly, the situation is postmodern pastiche. The old world in which “men act and women appear” has become a cartoon. The macho man of the glowering underwear ads and the action hero movies are comic book creations, virtual self-parodies. Our culture’s icons of feminine “appearance,” the movie stars and models, are now cyborgs, perfected by plastic; the way they “appear” to us is always retouched, often computer altered. The daring “reversals” suggested by contemporary images of power-babes and languid young men, while they may *seem* revolutionary, finally have something familiar, even cartoon-like about *them*, depending as they do on such literal and highly dualistic notions about activity and passivity, power and vulnerability, who asserts and who “receives.” “Acting” and “appearing” themselves, of course, have always been something of a false duality. All that attention to appearance women have engaged in is hardly passive preening; it is hard work. At the same time, the man who tries to be as tough as the Marlboro man is, of course, attempting to “appear” a certain way. Nowadays, the duality is even less meaningful, as the cultivation of the suitably fit “appearance” has become not just a matter of sexual allure but also a demonstration that one has the “right stuff”: will, discipline, the ability to stop whining and “just do it.” Image making is the main industry of our culture, and when it comes to one’s own body, it is a full-time job.<sup>9</sup>

Within this cultural context, well-toned and slickly packaged naked male bodies—much as I enjoy them as a consumer of images—are not particularly “transgressive,” and neither is the fact that straight men are being drawn more deeply into the “feminine” sphere of appearance. You might think that the latter would give women and gay men a sense of poetic justice, even long-awaited revenge. You have derided our “vanity” for years; who has the last laugh now? I am not laughing; I find it depressing. Our norms of beauty are increasingly puritanical, not only in their demands on us (no pain, no gain), but also aesthetically. Purified of “flaws,” all loose flesh tightened, armored with implants, the bodies of movie stars and models are fully dressed even when naked. Obsessively pursuing these ideals has deprived both men *and* women of the playful *eros* of dressing-up and looking

good, turned it all into constant, hard work. A culture in which both men and women could take pleasure and pride in beautifying themselves as part of such an *eros* (rather than a discipline of self-normalization) would be a wonderful thing. Unfortunately—as the statistics on “corrective” surgeries suggest—we seem to be moving in the opposite direction.

But there are some other paradigms lurking about, in the shadows of straight, white culture. Gay men, and to some extent black men, have held onto a sense of pleasure and play in self-beautification, and have much to teach straight, white men about them. That cannot happen, of course, as long as popular culture represents those qualities as narcissistic, effeminate, or embarrassingly unassimilated. Until recently, such caricatures were all one could expect from the mass media. But as the old representations of straight, white masculinity have become self-parodies, increasingly gutted of all vitality and believability, some fresh images have emerged. Here, I have the space to briefly mention only one. Rupert Everett—the openly gay actor who appears as Julianne’s (Julia Roberts) gay editor and mentor, George, in *My Best Friend’s Wedding*—arguably does more to “queer” representations of masculinity than any Versace ad ever has, and in that most seemingly conventional of contexts, a Hollywood movie (and a “date movie,” to boot.)

Confounding the expectations of the heterosexual audience, the character of George mixes it up. As urbane as a Gary Grant character but as morally centered as Gramma Walton, a goofy cut-up but also a serious intellectual, George is “sleek, stylish, radiant with charisma, and devastatingly handsome” (as he drolly—and accurately—describes himself), not a man who is oblivious to how he looks. But the movie never plays his stylishness as a trope for effeminacy and fluttery insecurity, as in so many other Hollywood portraits of gay men. Rather, it is played for sex appeal—as it was for Cary Grant (to whom Everett is frequently compared.) Unlike Grant’s characters, however, George also exhibits all those “caring” virtues usually reserved for female characters: sympathy, wisdom about interpersonal relationships, willingness to drop

everything and run to the side of a girlfriend in need. And, of course, he’s “gay”—in more ways than one. “Maybe there won’t be marriage, maybe there won’t be sex,” he exaggerates a grimace as he describes what Julianne’s relationship with him offers her, “But by God, there will be dancing!” (And singing: George’s rendition of “Say a Little Prayer for You” infects an entire restaurant with girl-group camp.) George’s exuberance and playfulness capture aspects of (actual) gay life that truly *do* offer masculinity something beyond Berger and the “reversals” of Berger. In an era when the action hero has become a joke and the only antidote Calvin Klein can only offer is “Take Me,” George is an unexpected gift: a glamorous new image of manliness, from the “margins” of masculinity.

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1. Amy Spindler, “It’s a Face-Lifted, Tummy-Tucked Jungle Out There,” *The New York Times*, Sunday, June 9, 1996, sec. 3, pp. 1, 8.

2. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972).

3. African-American notions of style, like those of other racial and ethnic groups in this country, have also been profoundly affected by aesthetic and other values from their countries of origin. Limitations on space prevent me from discussing these and many other fascinating complications of the “men act, women appear” formula.

4. Pauline Kael, “Nirvana,” in *For Keeps* (New York: Dutton, 1994), p. 764. Originally published in *The New Yorker*, December 26, 1977.

5. Steven Gaines and Sharon Churcher, *Obsession: The Lives and Times of Calvin Klein* (New York: Avon, 1994), p. 174.

6. Reported in Danae Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” in *Free Spirits*, eds. Kate Meheron and Gary Persecute (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), p. 82.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

8. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Male Trouble,” in *Constructing Masculinity*, eds. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 69–76.

9. See my *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O. J.* (University of California Press, 1997) for more on our image-driven culture.