The Empire of Images in Our World of Bodies

By Susan Berde

IN OUR SUNDAY NEWS, WITH OUR MORNING COFFEE, ON THE BUS, IN THE AIRPORT, AT THE CHECKOUT LINE, IT MAY BE A 5 A.M. ADDICTION TO THE GLAMOROUS PROMISES OF THE IMFERNATIONAL; THE LATER IN FASHIONING PILLS, MIRACLE HAIR RESTORATION, MAKEUP SECRETS OF THE STARS. OR A GLAMOROUS RELATIONSHIP WHILE WAITING AT THE SHINK, TRYING TO DISTRACT OURSELVES FROM THE IMPENDING ROOT COLOR. A TEEN MAGAZINE TIPS ON HOW TO DRESS, HOW TO WEAR YOUR HAIR, HOW TO MAKE HIM WANT YOU. THE ENDLESS COMMERCIALS AND ADS THAT WE BELIEVE WE PAY NO ATTENTION TO.

CONSTANT, EVERYWHERE, NO BIG DEAL. LIKE WATER IN A GOING BOWL, HARDLY NOTICE IT IN ITS INHABITANTS. OR NOTICED, BUT DISMISSED: "EYE CANDY"—A HARMLESS INDULGENCE. THEY GO DOWN SO COMFORTABLY, IN AND OUT, DIGESTED AND FORGOTTEN.

JUST PICTURES.

OR PERHAPS, MORE ACCURATELY, PERCEPTUAL PEDAGOGY: "HOW TO INTERPRET YOUR BODY ART." IT'S BECOME A GLOBAL REQUIREMENT; EVENTUALLY, EVERYONE MUST CONFORM. PIKI IS JUST ONE EXAMPLE. UNTIL TELEVISION WAS INTRODUCED IN 1995, THE ISLANDS HAD NO REPORTED CASES OF SUICIDE DISORDERS. IN 1998, THREE YEARS AFTER PROGRAMS FROM THE UNITED STATES AND PERSIA BEGAN BROADCASTING THEIRS, 53 PERCENT OF THE GIRLS SURVEYED REPORTED SUICIDE. THE AMERICAN TAXI DRIVER WAS SURPRISED BY THE CHANGE; SHE HAD THOUGHT THAT JAPANESE AESTHETICS, WHICH FAVOR RELIGIOUS BOHEMIA, WOULD "WITNESS" THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA IMAGES. POESIA HADN'T YET UNDERSTOOD THAT WE LIVE IN AN EMPIRE OF IMAGES AND THAT THERE ARE NO PROTECTIVE BORDERS.

I AM NOT PROTECTED EITHER. I WAS CARVED UNTIL I WAS 25. EVEN WHEN I WAS 45, PEOPLE WERE SHOCKED TO LEARN MY AGE. YOUNG MEN FLIRTED WITH ME EVEN WHEN I WAS 50. HAVING HAD MY APPARENCE AS A CHILD—FEETLIKE, SKEWISH NOSE, BUSHY RED HAIR—I WAS SURPRISED TO FIND MYSELF FAIRLY PLEASANT WITH IT AS AN ADULT. THEN, SUDDENLY, IT ALL CHANGED. WOMEN AT THE MAKEUP COUNTER NO LONGER COMPLIMENT ME ON MY SKIN. MEN DON'T TALK MY EYE WITH PLAYFUL PROMISES IN THEM.

I'M 56. THE MAGAZINES TELL ME THAT AT THIS AGE, A WOMAN CAN STILL BE BEAUTIFUL. BUT THEY DON'T MEAN ME.
They mean Cher, Goldie, Faye, Candace. Women whose jaws have disappeared as they’re aged, whose eyes have become less droopy, lips grown plumper, foreheads smoothed. In 1994, Susan Sarandon, who looked older in 1993’s “Thieves” and “Louisie” than she does in her movies today, said, “Aging shouldn’t be like a disease. It’s like wearing clothes. You change style, confidence, and vitality. Today, it means not appearing to age at all. And—like breath—that defies gravity.”

In my 1995 book Unbearable Weight, I described the postmodern body, increasingly fed on fantasies of reassurance, transformation, and correction, limitless improvement and change, defying the history of the mortality and, indeed, the very materiality of the body. In place of that materiality, we saw have civilized producers. When I wrote those words, the most recent statistic, from 1989, listed 681,000 surgical procedures performed. In 2001, 8.5 million procedures were performed. They are scarier than ever, safer than ever, and increasingly used not for correcting major defects but for “outscouting” the face and body. Plastic surgery seems to have no ethical problem with this.”I’m not here to play philosopher king,” said Dr. Kendall Hayworth in a Vogue interview, “I don’t have a problem with women who already look good who want to look perfect.” Perfect. When did “perfectibility” become applicable to a human body? The word suggests a Platonic form of timeless beauty—appropriation for maria, perhaps, but not for living flesh.

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GETTYS VFX SUSTAIN: former CNN legal ana-
lyst, 47 years old. When she was 28, a fatal stroke, it was a real escalation in the stakes for ordinary women. She had a signature look—dry blond, a down-to-earth vibe, no procrastinate. During the O.J. trial, she was the only white reporter many black Americans trusted. Always sty-
lisically leaned and outfitted, she wasn’t really pretty. No one could argue that her career was built on her looks. Perhaps quite the opposite. She sent out a sub-
version, a message. Rudolph and personality still count, even on television.

When Gettys had her face lifted, another source of ins-
piration and hope bit the dust. The story was on the cover of People, and folks tuned in to her new show on Fox just to see the change—which was significant. But at least she was open about it. The beauty industry admit-
they’ve had work.” Or do they, it’s vague, non-specif-
ically, minimizing of the extent. Cher: “If I’d had as much plastic surgery as people say, there’d be another whole person left over!” Or, how much have you had? The interviewers accept the silences and evasions. They even embellish the lies, just as the industry seems to have known. That began: “She came into the restaurant looking at least 20 years younger than her real, fresh and relaxed, without...”

This conclusion, this myth, that Cher or Goldie or Faye Dunaway, subtracted is, what 50-something looks like today has already been absorbed by the media, the culture. Surgery By comparison with thinness, it has become much older than it is.

My expression now appears more serious, too (just what a feministic need), thanks to the widespread use of Botox. “It’s now rare in certain social circles to see a woman over the age of 35 with the ability to look angry,” a New York Times reporter observed recently. That has frustated some film directors, like Bar Lohrman, who directed Moulin Rouge. “Their faces can’t really move properly,” Lohrman complained. Lest I saw a sign to the beauty parlor where I get my hair cut, “Botox Party! Sign Up!” So say 56-year-old foreheads will now be judged against my neighbor’s, not just Goldie’s Cher, and Faye’s. On television, a com-

mentary describes the product (which really is a toxin, a diffusion of botulism) as “Botox cosmetic.” No difference from mascara and blush, it’s just stuck in with a needle, and it makes your forehead numb.

To add insult to injury, the rhetoric of feminism has been adopted to help advance and justify the industries in anti-aging and body modification. Puffy, implants, implants, and lipoectomy are advertised as empowerment, “taking charge” of one’s life. “I’m doing it for more” goes the mantra of the talk shows. “Defy your age!” says Melanie Griffith, for Revlon. We’re making a revolution, girls. Step right up and get your injections.

Am I insane? Of course not. My bathroom shelves are cluttered with the noticeably expensive age-defy-
ning lotions and potions that beckon to me at the Lancome and Dior counters. I want my lines, bags, and sag to disappear, and so do the women who can only afford to buy their alaplhathories at Korent. There’s a limit, though, to what fruit acids one does. As surgeons de-
velop more extensive and fine-tuned procedures to correct gravity and erase history from the faces of their patients, the difference between the cosmetically al-
tended and the rest of us grows more and more dramatic.

“The rest of us” includes not only those who resist or are afraid of surgery but also the many people who cannot afford basic health care, let alone cosmetic tinkering. As celeb...lities faces become increasingly more surreal in their wide-eyed, over-bright appearances, as Time and Newsweek (and Discover and Psychology Today) proclaim that we can now all “stay young forever,” the poor continue to say and wilt and lose their touch. But in the empire of image, where even people in the news for stock scandals or producing sephorists are given im-

The secret celebrities, the advertisements, the beauty column, all participate in the fiction that the required time, money, and technologies are available to all.

I’ve been looking about media images, eating prob-
lem, and our culture of body “enhancement” for nearly 20 years now. Undergraduates frequently make up a large share of my audience, and they are the ones mostly likely to “get it.” My generation (and older) still refuse to “ear breathing.” Many still believe it is possible to “just turn off the television.” They are scarier, distasteful, evil of their own immunity to the world I talk about. No one really believes the ads, do they? Don’t we all know those are just images, designed to sell products? Scholars in the audience may test out theory about cultural resistance and “agency.” Men may insist that they love fluffy women.

Fifteen years ago, I felt very alone when my own gen-
eration and those things it seemed that they were being talked about in a different world from the one I was tracking and that there was little hope of bridging the gap. Now, I can catch the ends of the 20-years-in-the-ex-
citement. They know. They understand that you can be cynical as you want about the ads—and many of them are—and still feel powerless to resist their messages. They are aware that virtually every advertisement, every magazine cover, has been digitally modified and that very little of what they see is “real.” That doesn’t stop them from hating their own bodies for failing to live up to computer-generated standards. They know, no matter what their parents, teachers, and doctors are telling them, that “inner beauty” is a big laugh in this culture. If they come from a community that traditionally have cele-
brated voluptuous bodies and within which food repre-
sents love, safety, and home, they may feel isolation and guilt over the widening gap between the values they’ve grown up with and those tugging at them now.

I

IF THE WORLD in which our children are growing up, there is a time zero, and it’s a status symbol. The chicks are already here in their six-month, the same frequency with which they run over stories about “starts” that the “new” Hollywood one can be “easy at any time.” They are too long. It is the world of the image; they pay close attention to the pounds com-
ing and going—Jo Lo, Rosee Thye, Chrissy Agui-
ella, Beyond. They know that Kate Winslet, whom the director James Cameron called “Kate Watts-a-lot” on the set of Titanic, was described by the tabloids as “push-

ing on,” “ballooning to,” “swelling up,” “shooing off” to “tip the scales at” a “swelling,” “teaganing” weight—of 150 pounds. That slender Courtney Thorne-

Ike, who played Carla Blackbird's friend and rival on Aly McHey, quit the show because she could no longer keep up with the pressure to remain as thin as this, the series's creator, David E. Kelley, wanted them to be. That Missy Elliot and Queen Latifah are not on diets just for reasons of health or appearance.

I track the culture of young kids today with particular

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concerns, because I’m a mother now. My 4-year-old daughter is a super sport with supreme confidence in her body, who prides herself on being able to do any- thing that boys can—do—better. We go on regular shopping trips without girls— uninterruptedly. And I’m so happy about this.

The difference between the cosmetically altered and the rest of us is growing more and more dramatic.

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representations; racist codes and aesthetics die hard. The Jeevahas and gharials are still with us; and, although black female models and designers are allowed to have looks and "natural," straight hair—straighter nowadays than I ever thought it was possible for anyone's hair to be—seems almost mandatorily for young black women. It's easy, too, to be cynical. Today's fashionable divers- ity is brought to us, by all the same people who brought us the hegemony of the blue-eyed blonde and who've made whites and cellulite diseases. It's easy to dismiss fashion's current love affair with full lips and bicornal children as a shameless attempt to exploit ethnic markets while providing ethnic chic for white bore tourists. Having a child, however, has given me another perspective, so I try to imagine how the models look through her eyes. Cassius knows nothing about the motives of Jay-z and beyoncé, but what she's produced: the image. At her age, she can only take them at face value. And at face value, they present a world that includes and celeb- rizes her, or at the very least grows up in and does not include and celebrate me. For all my anger, quickness, and frustra- tion with our entire image, I cannot help but be grateful for that.

And sometimes, surveying the plastic, sanitized world of bodies that are the norm now, I'm convinced that our present state of enchantment is just a moment away from revulsion, or perhaps simply boredom. I see a 20-something woman dancing at a local outdoor swing party, her tummy softly protruding over the thick leather belt of her low-rise jeans. Not neat, not taut, not angrily camouflaged into some unathletic deformity, but proudly, uncommonly displayed, reminding me of Madonna in the days before she became the snivel distractive. Is it possible that we are beginning to rebel against the image of the sanitized, overly thin body, begin- ning to be repelled by their armored perfection? Such hopeful moments, I have to admit, are fleeting.

Twenty-year-olds know, no matter what others are telling them, that 'inner beauty' is a big laugh in this culture.

 Usually, I feel horrified. I am sharply aware that ex- pressing my horror openly nowadays invites being thought of as a prudish pooh, a relic of an outdated feminism. As talks to young audiences, I try to lighten my touch, celebrate the positive, make sure that my criti- cisms of our culture are not confused with being anti- beauty, anti-dresses, or anti-sex. But I also know that when parents and teachers become fully one with the culture, children are abandoned to it. I don't talk to them to love their bodies or turn off the television—unless adv- entures today, and ones I cannot obey myself—but I do try to disrupt, if only temporarily, their everyday is- sues. In our culture. For just an hour or so, I won't let it pass itself off simply as "normal." The lights go down, the slides go up. For just a moment, we confront how bizarre, how impossi- ble, how unoriginal the images are. We laugh, and see, together, over Oprah's head digitallyrafted to another woman's body, at the ad for breast im- plants in which the breasts stick straight up in the air. We gape together as the before and after photos of Jennifer Lopez are plumed side by side. We cheer for Marion Jones's shoulders, but the fact that WNBA Rookie is just the same Barbie, but with a basketball in her hand. For just a moment, we are in charge of the impact the filmed im- ages of "perfect" bodies have on us.

We look at them together and share—just for a mo- ment—courage.

Swam Barda is a professor of English and woman's studies at the University of Kentucky. This article is excerpted from her new preface to the 10th-anniversary edition of her book Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, to be published next month by the University of California Press. Copyright © 2004 by the Regents of the University of California.

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