

Human Beauty and Reciprocity in the Market World: A Preliminary Inquiry

Ian Dennis

English Department
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, ON Canada, K1N 6N5
idennis@uottawa.ca

Since Adam Katz's important theorization of originary "firstness," one of the consistent premises of Generative Anthropology (henceforth simply GA) has been that those going first on the human scene are crucial for human flourishing. Every innovation produces a distinction, an asymmetry—a centrality in relation to a periphery—and thus a threat to or violation of the foundational equality of the scene. But from such innovations, on the model of the first emission of a sign, flow any and all forms of common human betterment. Thus "asymmetrical relations," Eric Gans argues, can be seen, at least potentially," as *deferred reciprocity*.^[1] The challenge for human community is to balance moral claims of fundamental equality with the ethically productive centrality of those going first, and to defer or manage resentment of firstness over the crucial interval until their innovations produce a sharable benefit. The prototypical examples of this process are doubtless economic. Especially from the Big Man^[2] onwards, material benefits circulate sufficient to appease those resentful of the centrality conferred upon the innovators. In modern market society, too, the qualitative range as well as the quantitative scale of benefits allows in principle for a distribution of individual centralities or identities sufficient to defer morality-driven resentment. French President Emmanuel Macron is currently one of the few political defenders of this beleaguered model, and in his address to the U.S. Congress in the spring of 2018 he expressed its principles with admirable clarity: "I believe that against ignorance, we have education; against inequality, development; against cynicism, trust and good faith; against fanaticism, culture; against disease and epidemics, medicine; against threats to the planet, science."^[3]

Each of the oppositions Macron lists pairs a centrality with a potentially resentful periphery, with slightly different degrees of explicitness. The centrality of the educated, for example, if permitted to confer its benefits, can raise towards its own position the necessarily, or initially, ignorant periphery. But the summative pairing

is that of inequality and *development*, the production of more and different goods, more widely sharable benefits, and thus richer and more sustainable identities. GA does not, perhaps, “believe” in progress, any more than it believes *in* anything. But if there is or has been progress, this is how it works.

But firstness is of course not always measured economically. Human beings achieve it in other ways, sometimes, as in the example of self-sacrificing behaviour or even religious or secular sainthood, attaining a prominence inversely proportional to its economic benefits. Still, one can easily see how the modelling of a Mother Theresa or a Martin Luther King—examples of what Gans indeed calls the “inverse firstness” of Christianity[4]—also advances human well-being, disarming or at least suppressing resentment sufficiently to allow for beneficent effects to accrue. That the deferral was, as ever, finite, that King was struck down early by violent resentment, only makes the stakes, and the always contingent effects, more clear. Indeed, such effects are arguably indispensable to the survival of market societies, even as they arise not from a curbing of firstness, but as another form of it. Firstnesses, models, may compete, but the viability of the community may finally depend on the degree to which they also complement each other.

But there remain other forms of potential firstness not so easily seen as parts of such processes. “The notion of firstness does not provide a blanket endorsement of social inequality,” Gans notes. “For an asymmetry to exemplify firstness, it must indeed be a *going first* that others can follow.”[5] But at the moment any such asymmetry becomes perceptible, those witnessing and often resenting it do not yet know if they or even their descendants can indeed follow. How, in these “first instances,” does anyone know? Whether or not there are institutional or legal restraints on the impulses of resentment directed toward the asymmetrical human, whether or not there is a reassuring history of eventual reward characteristic of successful open societies, and despite the wide range of personal histories, temperaments and immediate circumstances of those witnessing the asymmetry, it can be imagined that upon every “internal scene” in which the asymmetry is reflected, an oscillation between love and resentment will take place. What factors will precipitate the response into one mode or the other? If some will always resent, what aspects of the cultural, historical and finally anthropological situation will determine the predominant response? In some places at some moments emergent asymmetries have been violently repressed.[6] In others, they have not, as some communities have indulgently or uneasily tolerated such phenomena in often only half-formed expectation of broader benefit. But if this is the response, how indeed will the asymmetry produce reciprocal effects? And when? How will resentment be deferred in the interim?

GA provides a language, a heuristic with which to ask such questions, but answers

are not built into the hypothesis itself.[\[7\]](#) The GA model of the human does, however, show us the insufficiency of merely asserting that people ought not to feel resentment. GA is not a religion, telling humanity that it should accept that, like the poor, those going first will always be with us. If resentment overwhelms loving desire, there will be reasons that need to be understood. And some forms of asymmetry will surely awaken resentment without ever producing a deferred benefit. Those who resent are not less human, or merely atavistic, or in some other way unimportant in the overall community. To ignore them is indefensible morally and unwise pragmatically. These questions are crucial everywhere, but for those of us who use GA they also allow us to test the usefulness of our hypothesis in contemporary cultural contexts, to measure the clarity of the analyses it facilitates.

The present paper will attempt to address such questions in the instance of the obvious asymmetry, and possible firstness, of physical human beauty. We will largely limit ourselves to the current historical context, and to developed or “open” market societies. It is a large and complex issue, however, so what follows can be little more than a preliminary sketch. We will choose to remain, too, on a fairly high level of abstraction, calling up few specific images or instances and making none at all a part of our main text. The very power of the claimed or represented beauty of our fellow humans, attractive and thus divisive, has the potential to distract us from our task. We will not, that is, ask which humans are indeed beautiful. But we will assume that some are, by common experience rather than mere individual preference, a position widely supported amongst those who have studied the matter.[\[8\]](#)

The topic is chosen not only for its intrinsic and perennial interest, or because it will allow us to measure and develop GA’s explanatory capacities. Questions of the role of human beauty, its pursuit, its power, its market value and thus its contributions to inequality have begun to be raised more broadly in recent decades. But these discussions remain at a fairly basic level of sophistication, at least by comparison with the intensive study and debate devoted to issues of economic firstness and its outcomes. There is surely an opportunity here for an heuristic with the flexibility and precision of GA to contribute significantly to our culture’s self-understanding, and part of the purpose of this initial exploration is to suggest some of the potential lines of inquiry.

The GA definition of firstness, to remind ourselves, does not require an action, even if on the originary scene the action of making the first sign constituted it. Firstness is simply “priority as a mimetic model” or the “temporarily exclusive possession of what will in principle benefit everyone.”[\[9\]](#) Still, the everyday sense of the word, along with GA’s frequent coupling of the concept with the idea of “innovation” does make us think of firstness in terms of something a human being does or achieves

through agency. One “goes” first. So our initial question must be, is human beauty indeed a going first, rather than, for example, a mere biological or genetic happenstance that cannot in principle be imitated?

Of course, all firstness, or for that matter secondness or lastness, has some admixture of the fated, the happenstance. GA discussions have recently featured queries about so-called alpha and beta animals and their persistence in the originary scene and into subsequent human development. One could also note the many accidents of intellectual endowment, education or mere historical opportunity attendant upon human destinies. But the crucial point remains that firstness is necessarily mediated, a product of the human scene. Beauty itself, in any form, is likewise a product of that scene, and is best described as an experience or effect, producing an interval of contemplative deferral. Like anything else found beautiful, the beautiful human, designated by the signs that create the scene, is desirable, even sacred, in oscillation with appetitive impulses that pre-existed the scene. In an unfixable combination with the appetitive, human beauty becomes a difference, and desirable as such.

One can imagine some “first” beautiful human thus distinguished without detectable effort on his or more probably her part, generating mimetic or competitive effects in others. The possessor or sexual monopolizer of this beautiful human might be the more plausible agent of firstness and model for rivalrous imitation—likely enough our Big Man again. Indeed, his beautiful human, displayed but not obtainable, centralized but not sharable, protected from appropriation but not strictly herself sacred, might even be considered the first, free-standing object of art, at least from the perspective of the periphery. At any rate, this source of mimetic power can still be considered in the context of a possible firstness of *human* beauty, and was certainly followed at some stage by imitative attempts to replicate physical beauty in one’s own person.

Now, of course, constantly innovating effort to attain beauty in one’s person is a widely distributed feature of modern behaviour, male as well as female, and subject to a familiar range of mimetic effects, denials as well as mimicries, proliferating differences in flight from menaced homogeneities, from putative hegemonies.

The body itself becomes a sign, historically emitted but also received by its possessor, or perhaps one should say in this context, by its inhabitant. Techniques are applied, more or less strenuous efforts made. Beauty is openly acknowledged as, or accused of being, something someone *does*—and indeed attracts resentment proportional to such doing. Human beauty may have an effect, by common testimony, analogous to the unmotivated desirability of nature, its heedless alterity. But it is also continuously, fairly or unfairly, demystified as a detectable attempt to

attract desire, that is, as inauthenticity.[\[10\]](#) We are familiar with this kind of struggle now in many contexts and dimensions. In the language originally supplied by René Girard's mimetic theory: the apparently divine autonomy of the model, the resentful rejections or slavish imitations of the subject.[\[11\]](#) In GA's more familiar terms, beauty has a value established in, traded on, the market.

Markets produce and recycle resentments almost as readily and fluidly as they do desires. In the case of human beauty many of these resentments are diffuse, unfocussed, inchoate, perhaps in part because of the uncertain boundary between the fabricated and the natural just noted above. But one somewhat more fully articulated expression of them is what we will designate as the feminist critique, broadly directed towards a "beauty myth" and the industry supporting it.[\[12\]](#) This critique does vary, however, ranging from persistent diagnoses of a "patriarchal" control of the means of attaining centrality, a kind of putative Big Man instantiated as a cultural system, to claims that the traditional or religious moral order represses and undercuts the power of human beauty, depriving women especially of the "erotic capital" they might otherwise be able to deploy to their profit.[\[13\]](#)

That feminism in its various forms rarely claims to resent the beautiful human herself complicates but does not fundamentally change the thrust of its critique. What is resented is the centrality conferred upon female human beauty, and thus those creating that centrality through their desires—largely, of course, men. At bottom this is a protest—sometimes explicit—against the market itself, and thus finally against the release of human mimetic desire from the sacral constraints of a once and future *ancien régime* of communal control. The central argument is that the crucial resource of choice, the choice to desire and be desired differently—the fundamental promise of a market system—has been monopolized by a singular, totalitarian model.[\[14\]](#) This is felt to be true generally, but a *a fortiori* in the category of standards of human beauty. Women are "forced" to wear makeup and be thin, to put it in the simple form adopted by feminist popularizers.[\[15\]](#) Slightly more sophisticated commentators speak of what is "culturally required"[\[16\]](#) or even of old-fashioned "social pressure."[\[17\]](#) *In toto*, the felt influence, the pull of the gravity of others' desires, is both identifiable, subject to scathing denunciation, and yet still oppressively irresistible.

This broadly Romantic view doubtless resonates with many far from the academies and for whom the theoretical structure matters little. Life in the market world, if it is safer, healthier, richer, is in certain respects intensely uncomfortable: spiritually or psychologically uncomfortable. In some ways it is the hardest, the most demanding and unsettling of human worlds thus far, a cauldron of constant anxiety and unease. To be at all times pulled and pushed in the nexus of desires, without any certain co-ordinates, to see everything fungible, is to be as acquainted with sorrow and loss as

with the possibility of transcendence or self-creation. And yes, one's very body is in play in these struggles. If human beings once inherited the lives and prospects of their parents and ancestors, they were also simply granted a body, as if by God on the day of creation. No longer, in either case. Within limits—parameters that are maddeningly opaque—we ourselves are called upon to create not just our careers, characters and affective lives, but our very corporeality, and of course its vestments.

The task for those who live in a market society is one way or another to come to terms with the widely demonstrated desires of others, *not* to be enslaved, or entirely flee, but to construct a productive or at least durable life, preserving some degree of autonomy or, to put it in slightly different terms, to create a sustainable identity. Resentful or moral critique is one and not necessarily the least effective tool for managing the situation, especially when it also fosters even through its indignation the creation of alternative centralities: new and equally desirable models to love and follow; above all, to choose between. And such alternatives are indeed being created. Defenders of the beauty industry—perhaps more accurately, of the cultural system it serves—enthusiastically describe the widening range of accepted and desirable forms of beauty.[\[18\]](#) More models mean more freedom, and the mediators are as much the choosing women themselves as the desiring men. Although a result of the overall structure and trajectory of the market, feminism can surely take some of the credit for such outcomes.

A brief digression to glance at one alternative: the *New York Times* recently reported, in its fashion section, on a bride, Laurie Huff, who chose to wear no makeup on her wedding day.[\[19\]](#) This was clearly not a victimary gesture—Huff sought to feel and be beautiful, and the text and a photo clearly suggests she succeeded.[\[20\]](#) This was not a renunciation of the center or of firstness, but a new path to it—doubtless on the day itself but also, later, through coverage in a major newspaper, solidly establishing the originality or interest of her choice. Though she is hardly a Mother Theresa, if others imitate her, as perhaps they will, she might to a degree enrichen the world by modelling a new means to distinction and identity. But, of course, her path would not be free of resentment. Already an attractive person, she could afford this little bit of virtue-signalling, or so it could be said. What about those of us not so fortunate? Her particular vulnerability to such attack points us back to one of the problems with the possible firstness of human beauty. Huff's gesture—brave or arrogant as one may decide—is somewhat less plausibly productive than other kinds of innovation, because less susceptible of imitation. A complication we will return to.

However, resuming our consideration of the feminist critique, to flourish in the market world also requires exactly the tolerance of ambiguity, unease and

uncertainty, of desire and frustration in tandem, that is ever absent from and exasperating to the moralist. It requires, that is, what we might call ethical imagination, the capacity to entertain the possibilities of firstness not just in oneself but in others. And if feminist complaints about the complex of powers and demands surrounding contemporary human beauty are not merely to be dismissed, they do seem notably short on such imagination. Nor, as a consequence, do they seem very likely to lead to imaginable political action, by comparison for example to complaints against the inequality of economic outcomes, which at least have a repertoire of more or less plausible policy prescriptions. Cures proposed for the “beauty myth” are notably vague. Naomi Wolf, who coined the term, looks for the day “when women are granted rock-solid identities,” but leaves unspecified who would grant this boon, or what the implications for female autonomy might be to allow or expect it to be granted by others at all. All will be better, too, she urges “when women’s sexuality is under our own control . . . affirmed as a legitimate passion that arises from within.” [\[21\]](#) Like a rock-solid identity, this would only be possible, of course, in a world without mimetic desire: as we note above, in the imagined pre-market world. But here, too, the contradictions inherent in the ineluctably social, mediated category of “legitimacy” are not confronted. If your passion is legitimate, by your own measure, why do you need further acknowledgement? And what form do you expect that acknowledgement to take? Sheila Jeffrey, though, after scornfully dismissing Wolf as a “liberal” or “choice feminist,” roundly opts for having the United Nations include “Western beauty practices” in their catalogue of harmful cultural practices (such as female genital mutilation), a proposal which has at least the virtue of being specific, however we might judge its proportionality and likely practical impact.[\[22\]](#)

Well, there are dreamers. But probably the power is gone forever to enforce a modern equivalent of sumptuary laws—perhaps the last serious effort was the Maoist uniform of the Cultural Revolution era. We are mainly left with angry denunciations of the kind that religion long levelled at luxury or ostentation, and in some quarters of course still does. But in the market world such puritanism, lacking the institutional power to suppress the provoking behaviours of the ambient culture, really only subsists now at the level of individual lifestyle choice. A study suggests that over a third of North American women do not, in fact, choose to wear makeup.[\[23\]](#) (And, by broad medical consensus, the same overall population is almost epidemically overweight. Anorexia, by comparison, afflicts a tiny fraction.)[\[24\]](#)

If we concede, though, that life in the mimetic nexus of the market is generally uncomfortable, we ought also to note that there is a very particular hardship, even pain, involved in the desire for human beauty, either to possess it in one’s own person, or sexually in another’s.[\[25\]](#) All experiences of beauty contain pain, a point

often neglected by theorists of aesthetics, who usually speak of pleasure, but one GA is better positioned to make and explain. Such sorrow is related to loss, the actual physical loss that is anticipated and experienced in the *sparagmos*, but that is ultimately repeated at one pole of every oscillatory cycle, as attention passes away from the sign and the peace it offers and back to the desired object and the enhanced frustration it now stirs. We might in fact deliberately propose “frustration” here, rather than GA’s key term “resentment,” and suggest that even on the originary scene, after there is desire and before there is resentment, there is frustration. Perhaps it’s just a kinder word, more forgiving of the inevitabilities of human experience, and no doubt frustration can and does escalate rapidly enough into resentment. But the particular desire evoked by human beauty may linger longer and more fully in frustration, perhaps because its subsequent and anticipated release doesn’t occur through *sparagmatic* rending, masticating and devouring. Although, of course, we will make no excuse for the undoubted crudities of early human copulation, or even much of it today. Nor can one deny that there is and always has been resentment directed at inaccessible human beauty—misogyny is not the mere product of modern victimary thinking. Nonetheless, the love that GA speaks of as directed toward the center of the human scene seems more imaginable in the instance of this category of object than in that of other, merely edible flesh, even if the latter was more likely at the center of the originary scene itself. (We might suggest, though, that the minimality of the hypothesis precludes a final rejection of the other possibility.)

At any rate, testament to this sorrow is everywhere, if one has eyes to see it. Perhaps this is the moment to note also the incompleteness of feminist theorizations of the oppressive power of the “male gaze,” their remarkable (or willful) blindness to the sufferings of the gazer, who undergoes a particularly acute form of that emptying-out of identity experienced by the subject of desire.[\[26\]](#) Here, again, analysis could much benefit from GA or even just mimetic theory, for some fuller account of the interactions driven by what Girard called internally mediated mimetic desire.[\[27\]](#) Suffice it to say, the centrality produced by human beauty can be expected to awaken as much resentment as economic centrality does, and indeed, when the two are combined, as everyone recognises is statistically common, such resentment is intensely, even exponentially amplified. The rich get richer, and centrality in one mode seemingly produces it in another, to the at times almost unbearable exclusion of the periphery.[\[28\]](#)

Part of the problem is surely the integral quality of physical beauty, the role played, for all the cultural mediations, of facticity, of DNA, by the finally *less* fungible quality of this longed-for benefit, its comparative resistance to deferred transfer or sharing. The beauty that actually attracts desire, let us say, cannot be as variable as the uses to which purchasing power, for example, can be put. Human features and

bodies are not as mouldable as other materials available in the market—properties or experiences, or education, or shaped characters. The old saw about every poor American being a millionaire currently down on his luck has been picked up, in response to feminist critique, by the beauty industry, a prominent example being the Dove soap “real beauty” campaign.[\[29\]](#) But while diversity of styles of beauty may be growing, as we noted above, the claim that everyone is beautiful, or more specifically, that every human body is beautiful, is finally as tendentious as Hughie Long’s slogan song “Every Man a King,” and faces, sadly enough, a perhaps even more impenetrable obstacle in the material world.[\[30\]](#) Every man can’t be a king or a millionaire, but in modern market economies the degree of possible improvement in his power and flourishing may be greater than that of the truly unbeautiful, no matter how the state or culture or economy is reconfigured or policed to facilitate such transformations. One need not be a full-blown biological determinist or evolutionary psychologist to concede this. A greater appreciation of the variety of human appearance does indeed seem to be achievable, as well as desirable, and the vehicle may be our culture, and its art. But reams of evidence of every kind support broadly universal judgements of Paris, for all the much vaunted regional differences.[\[31\]](#) We cannot help recognise certain limits—most especially temporal limits. The affinity is inexorable between the hourglass shape and the literal hourglass that measures the dwindling of its power. A life may be a crescendo in almost every other category of value, of knowledge, wealth, experience, spirituality—but it cannot finally be so in physical beauty, whatever we may say to comfort ourselves or others, because the apprehension of physical beauty does retain ineradicable connections to the biological imperative to reproduce. Human culture can better finesse our relationship to the appetitive, one might say, in virtually every other domain.

What, then, if anything, does the beauty of some contribute to those who have less of it? Or, rather, does human beauty add to the sum total of the misery of those less successful in navigating market society? Does human beauty help defer violence, and promote love, in total? Are the billions of dollars and countless hours, the sweat and tears, and even some blood spilled in its pursuit paying off? The spectre of a zero-sum exchange—resentment’s *bête noire*—looms over these questions. My centrality, your peripherality, now and forever. Winner. Loser.

It would seem that the only substantial discussion of such questions thus far in GA has been Eric Gans’s remarkable series of *Chronicles*, and book, on the Hollywood actress Carole Landis.[\[32\]](#) The beauty of Landis, he writes, “radiates forth as a gift to the world . . . a beauty that transcends desire as love transcends desire.”[\[33\]](#) It “gives proof that the world is a wondrous place whose reality outstrips our desiring imagination.” “We can conceive in the presence of her image an idea of desire fulfilled . . . In Carole, sexiness itself becomes sacred, with the worldly correlative

that desirability takes on the quality of agency."[\[34\]](#)

Here, emphatically, is the firstness of human beauty as redemptive. It is indeed a moving expression of faith in such an outcome, as the final sentence quoted makes explicit. It is firstness as a doing, an agency for human betterment.

Even so, for Gans, “public beauty” of the “centralizing” kind presented by Landis, is nonetheless now “obsolete.”[\[35\]](#) There is no longer a “unanimous desiring community,” in which “desire is transformed into a joyful assent, to a sharing no longer burdened with sexuality” and thus with rivalry and violence. The redemptive power, even in mid-20th-century America, is also connected to the tragic or sacrificial fate of this possessor of the attribute, her own inverse firstness indeed. Landis was unhappy in her personal relations, intensely aware of the finitude of her beauty, and a suicide at 29.[\[36\]](#) Hers was a fragile power intrinsic to a vanished moment in cultural and social history. It is not merely that such beauty has been stripped now of the protections offered by the singularity of early Hollywood or the remoteness of the medium, or indeed of mortality itself. In fact, beauty now, as we have noted, leads more commonly and reliably to other and more durable forms of worldly success. Beauty now is more tradable, and traded, a value in a world more fully structured by the operations of internally mediated desire and the market. Hollywood’s capacity to create a sacred center has gone the way of American domination of the world economy in the same era. Much of Landis’s career and the activities which endeared her to the public were also in wartime, in America and amongst her allies a time of remarkable unanimity, now lost. Power of course remains, as does sacrality—we cannot simply go without either, as Gans has frequently noted. But it is imbricated more finely with localized processes, individual identities, the capillary motion of desires across that wider and wider field of distribution, indeed, that same diversifying range of models we have referred to above.

Can the firstness of human beauty continue to be redemptive in this new configuration? Or is the display, the flaunting even of superior personal beauty—locally superior or more broadly recognised—merely something our system is able to tolerate, parasitical even on the structure and the freedoms that are the ground for collective betterment in other ways? If it does contribute to that betterment, how?

We must limit ourselves to a few tentative observations.

We have noted that the beautiful human is herself a consumer of that beauty, a witness to its sacrality. We might call to mind the moment in Alexander Pope’s “Rape of the Lock” when the beauteous Belinda worships the “heavenly image” in

her own mirror.[\[37\]](#) This kind of gaze has been defended in some recent commentary as an emancipatory activity, creative of confidence, of identity. One can see this, perhaps, even if GA's understanding of identity—as ineluctably mediated, a “local monopoly of attention”—makes such a view of things seem a bit naïve. [\[38\]](#) Belinda, as Girard too would have been quick to point out, worships the center that the imagined desires of others have created. All mirror scenes are triangular: the self, the image, and the imagined other(s) who also witness and valorize it. But, yes, still, for some, the imitative pursuit of those going first in beauty can presumably contribute to such contingent but still meaningful approximations of distinct selfhoods. Perhaps not the “infinite possibilities for self-invention” claimed by the early fashion industry,[\[39\]](#) but a steadily innovative pursuit of distinction that, if not classically “meritocratic,” does help some of us solve the perennial problems of communal life in a market world. The “cosmetic pow’rs,” as Pope memorably called them,[\[40\]](#) may have a serious enough role to play. In this process, resentment is deferred partly because, as Belinda and her rivals both recognise, this beauty is not really hers—and their resentment will only be proportional to the impression she may give that she has forgotten that. She and they know where it came from, and both regard it with a degree of wonder, as well, of course, as pragmatic interest. How is it to be produced? Still, this peace is precarious because, again, this beauty also really *is* hers—the benefits are to be seen—and is not just a shared and sacred meaning that the signs of her person point towards. To what extent *has* she really aborted the gesture of appropriation, the rivals can’t help wondering?

A long tradition also speaks of the redemptive, civilizing or otherwise beneficial effects of a pursuit of the ideal, in any one of a number of different forms.[\[41\]](#) Resentment of course retorts with the exclusions any such pursuit produces, and protests that the “shaming” of the less-than-ideal is particularly to be deplored in the context of the physical body.[\[42\]](#) The presence of an ideal, by which we must mean a generalized focus of mimetic desires, an abstract centrality, is denounced as another oppression of market society, against which, once again, its victims are powerless. “As the beauty ideal becomes more dominant, the ethical pressure to conform increases,” darkly warns Heather Widdows. “Not conforming is ‘not an option’.”[\[43\]](#) Still, against this attitude one can sense forming a degree of counter-argument that probably draws on that traditional model of aspiration. Health benefits can be spoken of, for example, especially as the ideals of physical beauty have trended towards the active and athletic. Some may even come to concede that the gaze of others, the operation of mimetic desire, social approval or opprobrium—that we are willing to engage in other contexts, such as the largely successful campaigns against smoking, drunken driving or sexual harassment—may be vastly more potent as agents of improvement than mere rationality backed up with sage advice from the Center for Disease Control or the American Medical

Association.[\[44\]](#) “Will power” to put it another way, comes from others as well as from ourselves. Ideals of personal beauty may still produce such effects, although they will doubtless be understood and expressed on a more individual basis than previously. I can be my own beautiful, even if, well, yes, my body mass index will need to fall within certain parameters, not of my own choosing.[\[45\]](#) Here one might mention the curious claim made in several quarters that we, collectively, the human race, are getting more beautiful, by standards of common measurement.[\[46\]](#) This, if true, seems unlikely to be due to relative reproductive success, as the reward now for sexual attractiveness is more probably fewer children rather than more. Perhaps, though, in a thousand subtle ways our desires really can and do reconfigure our very persons upon mimetic models.

But even as this may be unfolding, what at the same time does clearly seem to dwindle is explicit competition in human beauty. Why is the beauty competition, the pageant with crowned victors and brilliantly smiling runners-up, fading from view?[\[47\]](#) Cinema, photography, have given us back the face, the body, after the long reign of the novel with its prioritization of inner character and chosen behaviour, or lyric poetry and its celebration of spirit and emotion. Despite the feminist critique—which, as we have said, proposes little practical challenge—the beauty industry rises to ever higher levels of prosperity. A deluge of easily available visual pornography desacralizes and commercializes the body, particularly the female body. Frank assessment of physical qualities, shameless exploitation thereof in a thousand contexts, has never been less restrained, less confined to the shadows. Why does our society increasingly turn its back on the beauty contest?

Eric Gans has written recently of the contemporary code of politeness wherein that which one would not say directly to another person becomes the measure of moral correctness. He even gives the specific example of “a polite conversation where one would not point out . . . that one woman is more attractive than another,” and references current attitudes towards beauty pageants.[\[48\]](#) Such phenomena he connects to a contemporary “victimary fundamentalism” which seeks to recover the social unity and moral egalitarianism of the originary scene. Perhaps such a code is indeed operative here, making it rude in many contexts to call one person less beautiful than another, and most particularly to his or her face. But context is all, and it is certainly not problematic for certain kinds of conversations, such as the assessment of the attractiveness of movie stars, politicians, or last night’s date, when such persons are not in the room. And if it is considered improper in, for example, the context of a hiring committee making its decision in private, where criteria unrelated to bodily appearance are those the job in question requires, this surely is a function of both a desire for fairness and of the relative efficiency of modern economic processes.[\[49\]](#) That comparisons of any kind were famously “odious”[\[50\]](#) long before the victimary age also signals a perennial human

caution—our society, in fact, clearly still does tolerate the risk of far more of them than any previous one, whatever the recent inroads of “PC”. But the most notable incongruity here remains the co-existence of such niceties with the vast tide of explicit imagery and the norms and practices carried along with it. No doubt this enormous area of our culture is to some extent also partitioned into its own contexts—we have techniques for making certain internet sites unavailable to our children—but imagery, attitudes, and behaviour constantly slop over any and all our boundaries. We do not by any plausible measure live in a polite or puritan age, even if some contemporary postures can be so denominated.

The paradox of this uneasy co-existence, what we might call these contending ethics, is worth pondering in the context of our present inquiry. Genuine love of female or for that matter male beauty, indeed of women and men themselves, let us suggest, rejects pornographic representations, the excess of the appetitive in the oscillation of aesthetic experience, because love lives in deferral, not in consumption, literal or onanistic as the case may be. If high and popular art may be imagined along a spectrum, pornography occupies one end.[\[51\]](#) High art, at the other, is characterized by a longer and more significance-generating interval of deferral, and this, in the aesthetic dimension, is congruent with certain modern ethics, with respect for the person, the Kantian categorical imperative even. Both are offended by porn, but also for related reasons by the beauty contest, whose victories and defeats in their less brutal way also terminate contemplation of the sign, or of the body as sign. This sort of premature and motivated termination, we may even call it an ungenerous impatience, is perhaps how GA might re-articulate the familiar sin of “objectification,” without at the same time refusing the loving gaze directed at human beauty. Much of market life—as our analysis above has doubtless implied—is already a beauty contest, and perhaps the pageant too obviously, too crudely reflects this. *It is* rude, now. We do not say to our neighbours or friends or even lovers, I judge you less or more beautiful than her, than him. To do so would be hurtful, even a form of emotional violence, because we know how important beauty is, and how mediated our sense of ourselves necessarily and increasingly is. That the women on the pageant stage have chosen to be there of course influences our tolerance, but the act of ranking, judging, still awakens more unease than it does in other kinds of contests. We must eat, have sex. Desire will have its way and its specificities, as pornography in its insensate triumphalism endlessly crows and as our culture more quietly concedes. We do not try to banish pornography. To do so would be to grant too many of its premises, to offer it too much power, the dark glamour of the exiled or occluded. The beauty contest more meekly echoes such reductions of human desire—winners, losers, the one we want, the others we reject, established in an act of furtively transgressive judgment, the kind we will not own up to when face to face with another human being. But we don’t banish the beauty pageant either—we ignore it, at least many of us do.[\[52\]](#) (It

tries to reform itself.^[53]) Instead we hunger, proportionately as we acknowledge the truths of appetite, for a privileged position above the mimetic fervour, the Romantic high ground in that same market. Even as pornography burgeons, explicit sex and nudity in mainstream film recedes. Might it be because our less violent, more prosperous world supports more love?

Finally, also, what all aesthetic experience does, the apprehension of human beauty surely does too, despite the difficulties outlined above. Beauty soothes the savage breast, induces contemplation, defers rivalry. The well-known “halo effect” around beautiful human beings certainly suggests this for individual relations.^[54] Although it can and has been asked, in the name of morality, how that effect benefits the many who are not as beautiful or not beautiful at all. But the capacity for deferral itself, lengthened attention span, remains a benefit for anyone who apprehends any kind of beauty. The beautiful human participates in creating that extension, that deepening of experience, and in helping to preserve the sense of the sacred which enables it. Where art and beauty are proscribed—we can gesture again to Mao and his evil programs—the spirit is crushed. Human bodies may be made beautiful for the same reason our houses, our parks and cities, our dinnerware and glasses are made beautiful, and we must surely be glad that this is so. If the human body is an art work, it is admittedly an art work which bestows upon the “artist” a more direct and resentable prestige. We might think here of Lord Byron, who was beautiful but also a great poet, and could therefore in some measure be forgiven—although he was indeed much resented. But if the human beauties amongst us give us nothing of added value like poetry, or for that matter even the milk of human kindness, they may still enrichen our lives as do other works of art. As with all such interactions, however, the benefit, the reciprocity, depends upon our ever-contingent and evanescent capacity to put aside our frustrations or resentments—general, personal, theoretical—and at least for an interval, gaze with a compassionate and disinterested love upon this “gift of god,”^[55] this “beauty that must die.”^[56]

Notes

[1] “On Firstness,” in *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry*, edited by Adam Katz, Davies Group, 2007, p. 50.

[2] The term, now quite widely deployed in GA, derives from Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, De Gruyter, 1972.

[3]

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/emmanuel-macron-trump/558941/>

[4] <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw435/>

[5] "On Firstness," p. 51.

[6] Girardians treat of this response in great detail as they trace the many forms of "scapegoating." One may begin, of course, with René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

[7] "The originary hypothesis is in the first place a heuristic." Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*, Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 9.

[8] The literature is extensive, but one reasonable place to start is the following meta-review of research: <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2000-15386-005?doi=1>

[9] <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw435/>

[10] The present author has argued elsewhere that "authentic" is the term which we use to refer to that which we cannot detect attempting to attract our desires, and "inauthentic" to that which we can, or think we can. See, most recently, <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2301/2301dennis/>

[11] The most complete account is Book III of Girard's *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer, Stanford University Press, 1978, pp. 283-431.

[12] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, Random House, 1990.

[13] For the latter idea, see Catherine Hakim, *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*, Penguin, 2011. Amongst this writer's prescriptions is the legalization and legitimization of prostitution, by female students for example to pay their way through university. For a more measured version of roughly the same perspective, Nancy Etcoff: "Being beautiful and being prized for it is not a social evil.... Rather than denigrate one source of women's power, it would seem far more useful for feminists to attempt to elevate all sources of women's power." *Survival of the Prettiest*, Doubleday, 1999, p. 244.

[14] That the question of choice is crucial to all such arguments is clear from many instances. Most recently, see Heather Widdows, *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*, Princeton University Press, 2018, which devotes many pages to the issue. It is not really necessary for our purposes here to judge these arguments, but it is admittedly hard to dispel the whiff of what Jean-Paul Sartre called bad faith from so many efforts to claim both that the influences are detectable and subject to furious critique, and yet completely irresistible, especially when a biological imperative is also strenuously denied. And, as we note, there is much evidence to suggest many

women do exercise choice.

[15] Wolf, p. 273.

[16] Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2015, p. xi.

[17] Widdows, *Perfect Me*, p. 47.

[18] See, for example, Julia Savacool, *The World Has Curves: The Global Quest for the Perfect Body*, Rodale, 2009.

[19]

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/18/fashion/weddings/no-makeup-on-my-wedding-day.html>

[20] Despite the predictions of, for example, Etcoff and the evolutionary psychologists: according to whom, people of either sex exposed to women wearing makeup experienced less stress than those who were surrounded by “bare-faced” women (p. 65) and makeup reinforces sexual dimorphism (p. 68). This, though, may say more about the methodology that discovered such “facts” than about an eternal human response. If Huff caused stress in 2018, perhaps her daughter won’t in 2048 (if she, like her mother, marries “bare-faced at 29”).

[21] *The Beauty Myth*, p. 273.

[22] *Beauty and Misogyny*, p. 24.

[23] Autumn Whitefield-Madrano, *Face Value: The Hidden Ways Beauty Shapes Women’s Lives*, Simon and Schuster, 2016, p. 61.

[24] <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/adult/index.html>;
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3409365/> .

[25] ““I’ve seen beautiful women and had to look away because it practically hurt to look at them. I’ve seen beautiful men and felt something physically altered within me... literally felt my knees go weak.” Etcoff, p. 58.

[26] See, however, Hakim, on the “male sex deficit” and the frustrations it produces. The point, of course, is not made in sympathy, but in order to identify an opportunity for (vengeful) exploitation. *Honey Money*, pp. 39ff. This writer’s bona fides as a feminist, though, are disputed:

<https://madamjmo.blogspot.com/2011/09/looking-good-some-thoughts-on-catherine.html?m=0>

[27] See Girard's discussion of "metaphysical desire" in Book III of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.

[28] A word is perhaps needed, however, on the common notion of the "trophy wife" as a reward for highly successful men. While there are certainly instances, and while, for example, the current president of the United States was willing to reinforce his own prominence through attacks on the appearance of a political rival's wife

(<https://people.com/celebrity/donald-trump-posts-unflattering-photo-of-heidi-cruz/>), the trophy wife seems more myth than reality. Most successful men marry successful women, with whom they have things in common, which is why most people marry anyone. But successful men and successful women both tend to be more beautiful. In the domain of evolutionary psychology this obvious tendency goes by the ungainly title of "assortative mating." A couple of the many sources that support these observations: Etcoff, pp. 147ff.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assortative_mating

[29] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dove_Campaign_for_Real_Beauty

[30] The song was memorably recorded by Randy Newman in 1974.

<https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/2821585/Randy+Newman/Every+Man+a+King>

[31] Wolf: "... the Maori admire a fat vulva, and the Padung, droopy breasts..." Etc. But this rather facile argument has been qualified, or roundly debunked, from various angles, including many that can be found by pursuing the links available through note 8 above. *The Beauty Myth*, p. 12.

[32] See *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* numbers 280, 285, 288 and 364, and *Carole Landis: A Most Beautiful Girl*, University Press of Mississippi, 2008.

[33] <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw285/>

[34] <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw364/>

[35] <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw364/>

[36] *Carole Landis*, pp. 197-201

[37] Canto 1, line 125

[38] Gans, *Originary Thinking*, p. 128.

[39] Holly Grout, *The Force of Beauty: Transforming French Ideas of Femininity in the Third Republic*, Louisiana State University Press, 2015, p. 4.

[40] *The Rape of the Lock*, Canto 1, line 124.

[41] Kenneth Clark's classic *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* is a useful point of reference with direct relation to our topic: "the civilising influence of beauty" is the function we want to assess here. In another suggestive phrasing, human beauty is "the word made flesh." Princeton University Press, 1956/1972/1984, pp. 25, 28.

[42] For a good, recent example, Widdows, pp. 31 ff.

[43] *Perfect Me*, p. 4.

[44] https://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/healthy_eating/index.html;
<https://www.ama-assn.org/content/ama-supports-newest-dietary-guidelines-america-nss-improve-public-health>

[45] There will of course be resistance. Another of Wolf's solutions to the beauty myth: "Let's be shameless. Be greedy. Pursue pleasure. Avoid pain. Wear and touch and eat and drink what we feel like." The obesity and overweight data referenced above would tend to suggest that this sort of emancipation from restraint, naturally allied with what might gently be called certain human tendencies, has largely been winning out over the strictures of the beauty ideal. *The Beauty Myth*, p. 291. Savacool is one relatively rare commentator willing to mention this contradiction to the view of women as helplessly forced into dieting: *The World Has Curves*, p. 8.

[46] Hakim, p. 4.

[47]

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/11731114/Are-the-days-of-the-traditional-beauty-pageant-numbered.html>

[48] <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw588/>,
<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw586/>

[49] It is necessary to inform the losing candidates, and decent employers almost always do so with an apology. It is rarely necessary to tell someone they are less beautiful than someone else.

[50] Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* attributes it to John Fortesque in 1471, but notes its frequent repetition in the centuries following. Little, Brown, 1980, p. 149.

[51] See also the present author's fuller development of this idea:
<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2001/2001dennis/>

[52] Although, it continues to be reasonably popular, especially in developing

nations. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_beauty_pageants

[53] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/business/miss-america-swimsuit.html>

[54] The tendency to assume moral or other virtues in beautiful people, without other evidence. See Etcoff, 49.

[55] Aristotle, Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, bk V, sec. 19.

[56] John Keats, “Ode on Melancholy,” line 21.