

# *Beauty Matters*

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*Susan Bordo*

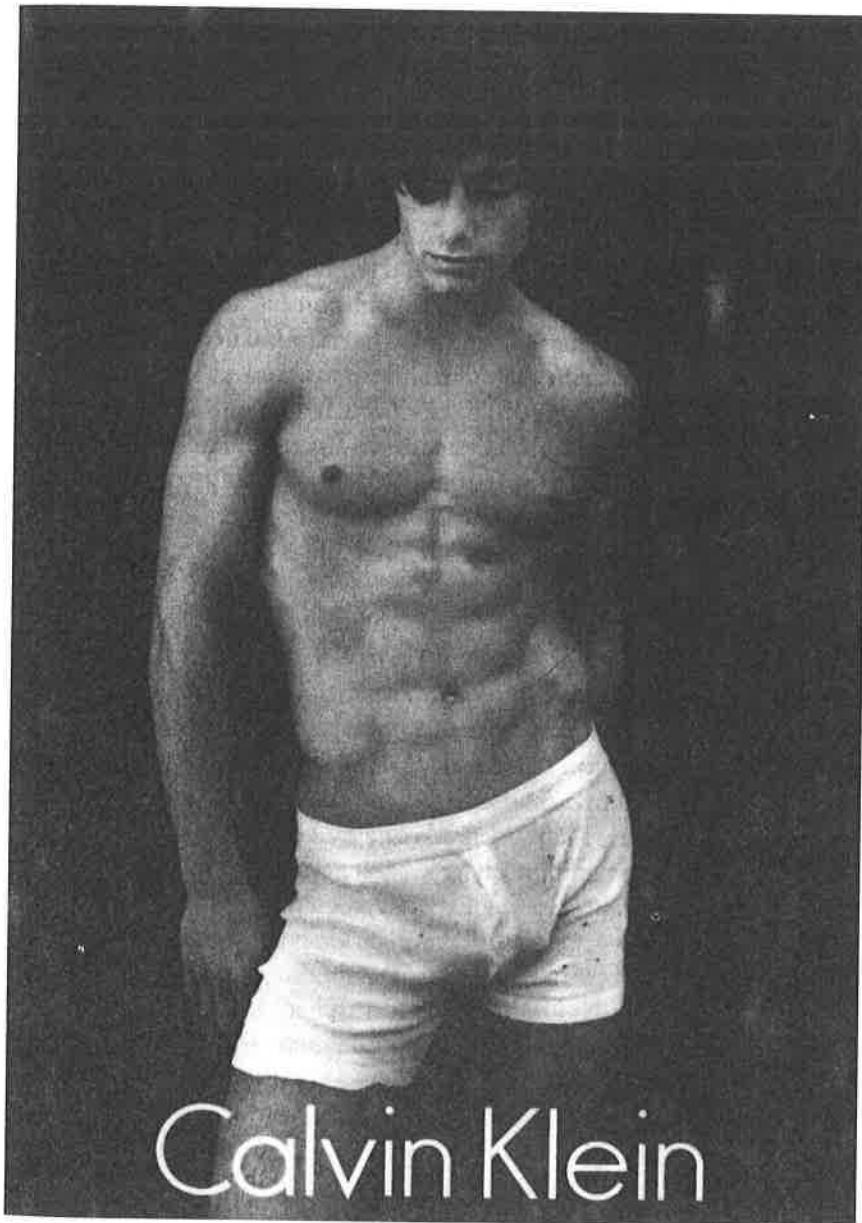
## 6. Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body

### Men on Display

Putting classical art to the side for the moment, the naked and near-naked female body became an object of mainstream consumption first in *Playboy* and its imitators, then in movies, and only then in fashion photographs. With the male body, the trajectory has been different. Fashion has taken the lead, the movies have followed. Hollywood may have been a chest-fest in the fifties, but it was male clothing designers who went south and violated the really powerful taboos—not just against the explicit depiction of penises and male bottoms but against the admission of all sorts of forbidden “feminine” qualities into mainstream conceptions of manliness.

It was the spring of 1995, and I was sipping my first cup of morning coffee, not yet fully awake, flipping through the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, when I had my first real taste of what it's like to inhabit this visual culture as a man. It was both thrilling and disconcerting. It was the first time in my experience that I had encountered a commercial representation of a male body that seemed to deliberately invite me to linger over it. Let me make that stronger—that seemed to reach out to me, interrupting my mundane but peaceful Sunday morning, and provoke me into erotic consciousness, whether or not I wanted it. Women—both straight and gay—have always gazed covertly, of course, squeezing our illicit little titillations out of representations designed for—or pretending to—other purposes than to turn us on. *This ad made no such pretense*. It caused me to knock over my coffee cup, ruining the more cerebral pleasures of the *Book Review*. Later, when I had regained my equilibrium, I made a screen-saver out of him, so I could gaze at my leisure.

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Calvin Klein

*Ad for Calvin Klein underwear.*

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I'm sure that many gay men were as taken as I was, and perhaps some gay women, too. ~~The erotic charge of various sexual styles is not neatly mapped onto sexual orientation (let alone biological sex).~~ Brad Pitt's baby-butch looks are a turn-on to many lesbians, while I—regarded by most of my gay friends as a pretty hard-core heterosexual—have always found Anne Heche irresistible (even before Ellen did). A lesbian friend of mine, reading my reflections on how soft-core S&M in the biblical epics of the fifties had affected my adolescent sexuality, said the same movies influenced her later attraction to butch women. Despite such complications, ~~until recently only heterosexual men have continually been inundated by popular cultural images designed with their sexual responses (or at least, what those sexual responses are imagined to be)~~ in mind. It's not entirely a gift. On the minus side is having one's composure continually challenged by what Timothy Beneke has aptly described as a culture of "intrusive images," eliciting fantasies, emotions, and erections at times and in places where they might not be appropriate. On the plus side is the cultural permission to be a voyeur.

~~Some psychologists say that the circuit from eyes to brain to genitals is a quicker trip for men than for women.~~ "There's some strong evidence," popular science writer Deborah Blum reports, citing studies of men's responses to pictures of naked women, "that testosterone is wired for visual response." Maybe. But who is the electrician here? God? Mother Nature? Or Hugh Hefner? Practice makes perfect. And women have had little practice. The Calvin Klein ad made me feel like an adolescent again, brought me back to that day when I saw Barry Resnick on the basketball court of Weequahic High and realized that men's legs could make me weak in the knees. ~~Men's legs?~~ I knew that ~~women's legs were supposed to be sexy~~. I had learned that from all those hose-straightening scenes in the movies. But men's legs? ~~Who had ever seen a woman gaga over some guy's legs~~ in the movies? Or even read about it in a book? Yet the muscular grace of Barry's legs took my breath away. ~~Maybe something was wrong with me.~~ ~~Maybe my sex drive was too strong, too much like a man's.~~ By the time I came across that Calvin Klein ad, several decades of feminism and life experience had left me a little less worried about my sex drive. Still, the sight of that model's body made me feel that my sexual education was still far from complete.

I brought the ad to classes and lectures, asking women what they thought of him. Most began to sweat the moment I unfolded the picture, then got their bearings and tried to explore the bewitching stew of sexual elements the picture has to offer. The model—a young Jackson Browne

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look-alike—stands there in his form-fitting and rip-speckled Calvin Klein briefs, head lowered, dark hair loosely falling over his eyes. His body projects strength, solidity; he's no male waif. But his finely muscled chest is not so overdeveloped as to suggest a sexuality immobilized by the thick matter of the body. **Gay theorist Ron Long, describing contemporary gay sexual aesthetics**—lean, taut, sinuous muscles rather than Schwarzenegger bulk—points to a “dynamic tension” that the incredible hulks lack. Stiff, engorged Schwarzenegger bodies, he says, seem to *be* surrogate penises—with nowhere to go and nothing to do but stand there looking massive—whereas muscles like this young man's seem designed for movement, for sex. **His body isn't a stand-in phallus; rather, he has a penis—the real thing**, not a symbol, and a fairly breathtaking one, clearly outlined through the soft jersey fabric of the briefs. **It seems slightly erect, or perhaps that's his non-erect size; either way, there's a substantial presence there that's palpable** (it looks so touchable, you want to cup your hand over it) and very, very male.

At the same time, however, my gaze is invited by something “feminine” about the young man. His underwear may be ripped, but ever so slightly, subtly; **unlike the original ripped underwear poster boy Stanley Kowalski**, he's hardly a thug. He doesn't stare at the viewer challengingly, belligerently, as do so many models in other ads for male underwear, facing off like a street tough passing a member of the rival gang on the street. (“Yeah, this is an underwear ad and I'm half-naked. But I'm still the one in charge here. Who's gonna look away first?”). No, this model's languid body posture, his averted look are classic signals, both in the “natural” and the “cultural” world, of **willing subordination**. He offers himself non-aggressively to the gaze of another. Hip cocked in the snaky S-curve usually reserved for depictions of women's bodies, eyes downcast but not closed, he gives off a sultry, moody, subtle but undeniably seductive consciousness of **his erotic allure**. Feast on me, I'm here to be looked at, my body is for your eyes. Oh my.

Such an attitude of male sexual supplication, although it has (as we'll see) classical antecedents, is very new to contemporary mainstream representations. Homophobia is at work in this taboo, but so too are attitudes about gender that cut across sexual orientation. **For many men, both gay and straight, to be so passively dependent on the gaze of another person for one's sense of self-worth is incompatible with being a real man.** As we'll see, such notions about manliness are embedded in Greek culture, in contemporary visual representations, and even (in disguised form) in existentialist philosophy. “For the woman,” as philosopher Simone de Beauvoir writes,

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"...the absence of her lover is always torture, he is an eye, a judge....away from him, she is dispossessed, at once of herself and of the world." For Beauvoir's sometime lover and lifelong soulmate Jean-Paul Sartre, on the other hand, the gaze (or The Look, as he called it) of another person—including the gaze of one's lover—is the "hell" that other people represent. If we were alone in the world, he argues, we would be utterly free—with physical constraints—to be whomever we wanted to be, to be the creatures of our own self-fantasies, to define our behavior however we like. Other people intrude on this solipsism, and have the audacity to see us from their own perspective rather than ours. The result is what Sartre calls primordial Shame under the eyes of The Other, and a fierce desire to re-assert one's freedom. The other person has stolen "the secret" of who I am. I must fight back, resist their attempts to define me.

I understand, of course, what Sartre is talking about here. We've all, male and female alike, felt the shame that another pair of eyes can bring. Sartre's own classic example is of being caught peeking through a keyhole by another person. It isn't until those other eyes are upon you that you truly feel not just the "wrongness" of what you are doing, but—Sartre would argue—the very fact that you are doing it. Until the eyes of another are upon us, "catching us" in the act, we can deceive ourselves, pretend. Getting caught in moments of fantasy or vanity may be especially shameful. When I was an adolescent, I loved to pretend I was a radio personality, and talking into an empty coffee can created just the right sound. One day my mother caught me; speaking in the smooth and slightly sultry tones that radio personalities had even in those days. The way I felt is what Sartre means when he describes the Look of another person as the fulcrum of shame-making. My face got hot, and suddenly I saw how ridiculous I must have seemed, my head in the Chock Full O' Nuts, my narcissistic fantasies on full display. I was caught; I wanted to run.

The disjunction between self-conception and external judgement can be especially harsh when the external definitions carry racial and gender stereotypes with them. Sartre doesn't present such examples—he's interested in capturing the contours of an existential situation shared by all rather than in analyzing the cultural differences that affect that situation—but they are surely relevant to understanding the meaning of The Look of the Other. A black man jogs down the street in sweat clothes, thinking of the class he is going to teach later that day; a white woman passes him, clutches her handbag more tightly, quickens her step; in her eyes, the teacher is a potentially dangerous animal. A Latin American student arrives early the first day of college; an administrator, seeing him in the still-

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deserted hall, asks him if he is the new janitor. The aspiring student has had his emerging identity erased, a stereotype put in its place by another pair of eyes. When women are transformed from professionals to “pussies” by the comments of men on the street, it’s humiliating, not so much because we’re puritans but because we sense the hostility in the hoots, the desire to bring an uppity woman down to size by reminding her that she’s just “the sex” (as Beauvoir put it).

We may all have felt shame, but—as the different attitudes of Beauvoir and Sartre suggest—men and women are socially sanctioned to deal with the gaze of the Other in different ways. Women learn to anticipate, even play to the gaze, trying to become what will please, captivate, turn shame into pride. (In the process, we also learn how sexy being gazed at can feel—perhaps precisely because it walks the fine edge of shame.) Many of us, truth be told, get somewhat addicted to the experience. I’m renting a video, feeling a bit low, a bit tired. The young man at the counter, unsolicited, tells me I’m “looking good.” It alters everything, I feel fine, alive; it seems to go right down to my cells. I leave the store feeling younger, stronger, more awake. When women sense that they are not being assessed sexually—for example, as we age, or if we are disabled—it may feel like we no longer exist.

Women may dread being surveyed harshly—being seen as too old, too fat, too flat-chested—but men are not supposed to enjoy being surveyed *period*. It’s feminine to be on display. Men are thus taught—as my uncle Leon used to say—to be a moving target. Get out of range of those eyes, don’t let them catch you—even as the object of their fantasies (or, as Sartre would put it, don’t let them “possess,” “steal” your freedom). This phobia has even distorted scientific research. Evolutionary theorists have long acknowledged penile display as an important feature of courting behavior among primates—except when it comes to *our* closest ancestors. With descriptions of hominid behavior, male display behavior “suddenly drops out of the primate evolutionary picture” (Sheets-Johnstone, 95) and is replaced by the concept of year-round female sexual receptivity. It seems that it has been intolerable, unthinkable for male evolutionary theorists to imagine the bodies of their male ancestors being on display, sized up, dependent on selection (or rejection) by female hominids.

Scientists and “ordinary guys” are totally in synch here, as is humorously illustrated in Peter Cattaneo’s popular 1997 British film *The Full Monty*. In the film, a group of unemployed metalworkers in Sheffield, England, watch a Chippendale’s show and hatch the money-making scheme of presenting their own male strip show in which they will go right down to

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the "full Monty." At the start of the film, the heroes are hardly pillars of successful manliness (Gaz, their leader, refers to them as "scrap"). Yet even they have been sheltered by their guyhood, as they learn while putting the show together. One gets a penis pump. Another borrows his wife's face cream. They run, they wrap their bellies in plastic, they do jumping jacks, they get artificial tans. The most overweight one among them (temporarily) pulls out of the show. Before, these guys hadn't lived their lives under physical scrutiny but in male action mode, in which men are judged by their accomplishments. Now, anticipating being on display to a roomful of spectators, they suddenly realize how it feels to be judged as women routinely are, sized up by another pair of eyes. "I pray that they'll be a bit more understanding about us" than they've been with women, David (the fat one) murmurs.

They get past their discomfort, in the end, and their show is greeted with wild enthusiasm by the audience. The movie leaves us with this feel-good ending, not raising the question obvious to every woman watching the film: would a troupe of out-of-shape women be received as warmly, as affectionately? The climactic moment when the men throw off their little pouches is demurely shot from the rear, moreover, so we—the audience—don't get "the full Monty." Nonetheless, the film gently and humorously makes an important point: for a heterosexual man to offer himself up to a sexually evaluating gaze is for him to make a large, scary leap—and not just because of the anxieties about penis size (the guy who drops out of the show, remember, is embarrassed by his fat, not his penis). The "full Monty"—the naked penis—is not merely a body part in the movie (hence it doesn't really matter that the film doesn't show it). It's a symbol for male exposure, vulnerability to an evaluation and judgement that women—clothed or naked—experience all the time.

I had to laugh out loud at a 1997 *New York Times Magazine* "Style" column, entitled "Overexposure," which complained of the "contagion" of nudity spreading through celebrity culture. "Stars no longer have private parts," the author observed, and fretted that civilians would soon also be measured by the beauty of their buns. I share this author's concern about our body-obsessed culture. But, pardon me, he's just noticing this now??? Actresses have been baring their breasts, their butts, even their bushes, for some time, and ordinary women have been tromping off to the gym in pursuit of comparably perfect bodies. What's got the author suddenly crying "overkill," it turns out, is Sly Stallone's "surreally fat-free" appearance on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, and Rupert Everett's "dimpled behind" in a Karl Lagerfeld fashion spread. Now that *men* are taking off their clothes,

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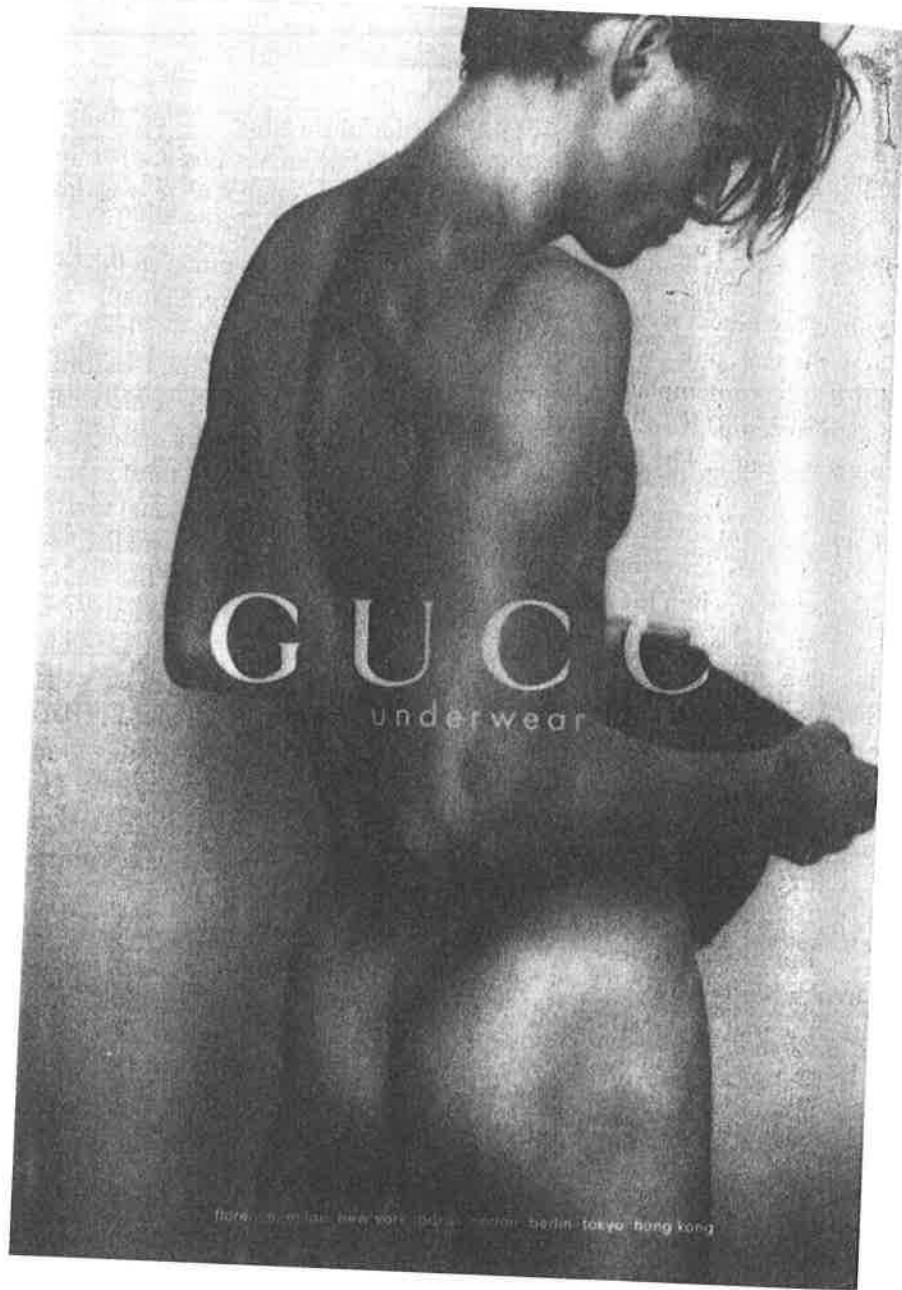
the culture is suddenly going too far. Could it be that the author doesn't even "read" all those naked female bodies as "over-exposed"? Does he protest a bit too much when he declares in the first sentence of the piece that he found it "a yawn" when Dirk Diggler unsheathed his "prosthetic shillelagh" ("penis" is still a word to be avoided whenever possible) at the end of *Boogie Nights*? A yawn? My male companion's palms were sweating profusely, and I was not about to drop off to sleep, either.

As for dimpled behinds, my second choice for male pinup of the decade is the Gucci series of two ads in which a beautiful young man, shot from the rear, puts on a pair of briefs. In the first ad, he's holding them in his hands, contemplating them. Is he checking out the correct washing machine temp? It's odd, surely, to stand there looking at your underwear, but never mind. The point is: his underwear is in his hands, not on his butt. *It*—his bottom, that is—is gorgeously, completely naked—a motif so new to mainstream advertising (but since then catching on rapidly) that several of my friends, knowing I was writing about the male body, E-mailed me immediately when they saw the ad. In the second ad, he's put the underwear on, and is adjusting it to fit. Luckily for us, he hasn't succeeded yet, so his buns are peeking out the bottom of the underwear, looking biteable. For the *Times* writer, those buns may be an indecent exposure of parts that should be kept private (or they're a boring yawn—I'm afraid he can't have it both ways), but for me—and for thousands of gay men across the country—this was a moment of political magnitude, and a delicious one. The body parts that we love to squeeze (those plastic breasts, they're the real yawn for me) had come out of the closet and into mainstream culture, where we can enjoy them without a trip to a specialty store.

But all this is very new. Women aren't used to seeing naked men frankly portrayed as "objects" of a sexual gaze (and neither are heterosexual men, as that *Times* writer makes clear). So pardon me if I'm skeptical when I read arguments about men's greater "biological" responsiveness to visual stimuli. These "findings," besides being ethnocentric (no one thinks to poll Trobriand islanders), display little awareness of the impact of changes in cultural representations on our capacities for sexual response. Popular science writer Deborah Blum, for example, cites a study from the Kinsey Institute which showed a group of men and women a series of photos and drawings of nudes, both male and female:

Fifty-four percent of the men were erotically aroused versus twelve percent of the women—in other words, more than four times as many men. The same gap exists, on a much larger scale, in the business of pornography, a \$500-million-plus industry in the U.S. which caters almost exclu-

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*Ad for Gucci underwear.*

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sively to men. In the first flush of 1970s feminism, two magazines—*Playgirl* and *Viva*—began publishing male centerfolds. *Viva* dropped the nude photos after surveys showed their readers didn't care for them; the editor herself admitted to finding them slightly disgusting.

Blum presents these findings as suggestive of a hard-wired difference between men and women. I'd be cautious about accepting that conclusion. First of all, there's the question of which physiological responses count as "erotic arousal" and whether they couldn't be evidence of other states. Clearly, too, we can *learn* to have certain physiological responses—and to suppress them—so nothing biologically definitive is proved by the presence or absence of physical arousal.

Studies that rely on viewers' *own* reports need to be carefully interpreted, too. I know, from talking to women students, that they sometimes aren't all that clear about *what* they feel in the presence of erotic stimuli, and even when they are, they may not be all that comfortable admitting what they feel. Hell, not just my students! Once, a lover asked me, as we were about to part for the evening, if there was anything that we hadn't done that I'd really like to do. I knew immediately what that was: I wanted him to undress, very slowly, while I sat on the floor and just watched. But I couldn't tell him. I was too embarrassed. Later, alone in my compartment on the train, I sorely regretted my cowardice. The fact is that I love to watch a man getting undressed, and I especially like it if he is conscious of being looked at. But there is a long legacy of shame to be overcome here, for both sexes, and the cultural models are only now just emerging which might help us move beyond it.

Perhaps, then, we should wait a bit longer, do a few more studies, before we come to any biological conclusions about women's failure to get aroused by naked pictures? A newer (1994) University of Chicago study found that 30 percent of women ages eighteen to forty-four and 19 percent of women ages forty-five to fifty-nine said they found "watching a partner undress" to be "very appealing" ("Not a bad percentage," Nancy Friday comments, "given that Nice Girls didn't look.") There's still a gender gap—the respective figures for men of the same age groups were 50 percent and 40 percent. We're just learning, after all, to be voyeuses. Perhaps, too, heterosexual men could learn to be less uncomfortable offering themselves as "sexual objects" if they realized the pleasure women get from it. Getting what you have been most deprived of is the best gift, the most healing gift, the most potentially transforming gift—because it has the capacity to make one more whole. Women have been deprived not so much of the *sight* of beautiful male bodies as the experience of having the

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male body *offered* to us, handed to us on a silver platter, the way female bodies—in the ads, in the movies—are handed to men. Getting this from her partner is the erotic equivalent of a woman's coming home from work to find a meal prepared and ready for her. Delicious—even if it's just franks and beans.

Thanks, Calvin!

Despite their bisexual appeal, the cultural genealogy of the ads I've been discussing and others like them is to be traced largely through gay male aesthetics, rather than a sudden blossoming of appreciation for the fact that women might enjoy looking at sexy, well-hung young men who don't appear to be about to rape them. Feminists might like to imagine that Madison Avenue heard our pleas for sexual equality, and finally gave us "men as sex objects." But what's really happened is that women have been the beneficiaries of what might be described as a triumph of pure consumerism—and with it, a burgeoning male fitness and beauty culture—over homophobia and the taboos against male vanity, male "femininity," and erotic display of the male body that have gone along with it.

Throughout this century, gay photographers have created a rich, sensuous, and dramatic tradition which is unabashed in eroticizing the male body, male sensuousness, and male potency, including penises. But until recently, such representations have been kept largely in the closet. Mainstream responses to several important exhibits which opened in the seventies—featuring the groundbreaking early work of Wilhelm von Gloeden, George Dureau, and George Platt Lynes, as well as then-contemporary artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Peter Hujar, and Arthur Tress—would today probably embarrass the critics who wrote about them when they opened. John Ashbery, in *New York Magazine*, dismissed the entire genre of male nude photography with the same sexist tautology that covertly underlies that *Times* piece on cultural "overexposure": "Nude women seem to be in their natural state; men, for some reason, merely look undressed. . . . When is a nude not a nude? When it is male." (Substitute "blacks" and "whites" for "women" and "men" and you'll see how offensive the statement is.).

For other reviewers, the naked male, far from seeming "merely undressed," was unnervingly sexual. *New York Times* critic Gene Thompson wrote that "there is something disconcerting about the sight of a man's naked body being presented as a sexual object"; he went on to describe the world of homoerotic photography as one "closed to most of us, fortunately."

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Vicki Goldberg, writing for the *Saturday Review*, was more appreciative of the "beauty and dignity" of the nude male body, but concluded that so long as its depiction was erotic in emphasis, it will "remain half-private, slightly awkward, an art form cast from its traditions and in search of some niche to call its home."

Goldberg needed a course in art history. It's true that in classical art, the naked human body was often presented as a messenger of spiritual themes, and received as such. But the male bodies sculpted by the Greeks and Michelangelo were not exactly non-erotic. It might be more accurate to say that in modernity, with the spiritual interpretation of the nude body no longer a convention, the contemporary homophobic psyche is not screened in the same way from the sexual charge of the nude male body. Goldberg was dead wrong about something else too. Whatever its historical lineage, the frankly sexual representation of the male body was to find, in the next twenty years, a far-from-private "niche to call its home": consumer culture discovered its commercial potency.

Calvin Klein had his epiphany, according to one biography, one night in 1974 in New York's gay Flamingo bar:

As Calvin wandered through the crowd at the Flamingo, the body heat rushed though him like a revelation; this was the cutting edge. . . . [The] men! The men at the Flamingo had less to do about sex for him than the notion of portraying men as gods. He realized that what he was watching was the freedom of a new generation, unashamed, in-the-flesh embodiments of Calvin's ideals: 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.

Klein's genius was that of a cultural Geiger counter; his own bisexuality enabled him to see that the phallic body, as much as any female figure, is an enduring sex object within Western culture. In America in 1974, however, that ideal was still largely closeted. Only gay culture unashamedly sexualized the lean, fit body that virtually everyone, gay and straight, now aspires to. Sex, as Calvin Klein knew, sells. He also knew that gay sex wouldn't sell to straight men. But the rock-hard, athletic gay male bodies that Klein admired at the Flamingo did not advertise their sexual preference through the feminine codes—limp wrists, raised pinkie finger, swishy walk—which the straight world then identified with homosexuality. Rather, they embodied a highly masculine aesthetic that—although definitely

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exciting for gay men—would scream “heterosexual” to (clueless) straights. Klein knew just the kind of clothing to show that body off in, too. As Steven Gaines and Sharon Churcher tell it:

He had watched enough attractive young people with good bodies in tight jeans dancing at the Flamingo and Studio 54 to know that the “basket” and the behind was what gave jeans sex appeal. Calvin sent his assistants out for several pairs of jeans, including the classic five-button Levi’s, and cut them apart to see how they were made. Then he cut the “rise,” or area from the waistband to under the groin, much shorter to accentuate the crotch and pull the seam up between the buttocks, giving the behind more shape and prominence. The result was instant sex appeal—and a look that somehow Calvin just *knew* was going to sell. (*Obsession*, 235)

So we come to the mainstream commercialization of the aesthetic legacy of Stanley Kowalski and those inspired innovations of Brando’s costumer in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Brando as Kowalski had been the first to wear jeans fitted rather than baggy, with a tight T-shirt, shrunk to cling). When I was growing up, jeans were “dungarees”—suitable for little kids, hayseeds, and juvenile delinquents, but not for anyone to wear on a date. Klein transformed jeans from utilitarian garments to erotic second skins. Next, Klein went for underwear. He wasn’t the first, but he was the most daring. In 1981, Jockey International had broken ground by photographing Baltimore Oriole pitcher Jim Palmer in a pair of briefs (airbrushed) in one of its ads—selling \$100 million worth of underwear by year’s end. Inspired by Jockey’s success, in 1983 Calvin Klein put a forty-by-fifty-foot-high Bruce Weber photograph of Olympic pole vaulter Tom Hintinauss in Times Square, Hintinauss’s large penis clearly discernible through his briefs. The Hintinauss ad, unlike the Palmer ad, did not employ any of the usual fictional rationales for a man’s being in his underwear—for example, the pretense that the man is in the process of getting dressed—but blatantly put Hintinauss’s body on display, sunbathing on a rooftop, his skin glistening. The line of shorts “flew off the shelves” at Bloomingdale’s and when Klein papered bus shelters in Manhattan with poster versions of the ad they were all stolen overnight.

Images of masculinity that will do double (or triple or quadruple) duty with a variety of consumers, straight and gay, male and female, are not difficult to create in a culture like ours, in which the muscular, male body has a long and glorious aesthetic history. That’s precisely what Calvin Klein was the first to recognize and exploit—the possibility and profitability of what is known in the trade as a “dual marketing” approach. Since then,

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## Calvin Klein Underwear

*Bronzed and beautiful Tom Hintinauss. A breakthrough ad for Calvin Klein—and the beginning of a new era for the unabashed erotic display of the male body.*

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many advertisers have taken advantage of Klein's insight. A recent Abercrombie & 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 and smudged faces, 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"?

It required a Calvin Klein to give the new vision cultural form. But the fact is that if we've entered a brave new 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. Hollywood producers, never bothering to do any demographics on middle-class and professional African American women—or the issues that they share with women of other races and classes in this culture—were shocked at the tremendous box office success of *Waiting to Exhale*. They won't make that particular mistake again.) It took a survey conducted by *The Advocate* to jolt corporate America awake about gay consumers. The survey, done between 1977 and 1980, showed that 70 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 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."

"Happens to be homosexual": the phrasing—suggesting that sexual identity is peripheral, even accidental—is telling. Because of homophobia, dual marketing used to require a delicate balancing act, as advertisers tried to speak to gays "in a way that the straight consumer will not notice." Often, that's been accomplished through the use of 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. Or take this ad, with its gorgeous, mechanically inept model admitting that he's "known more for my superb bone construction and soft, supple hair than my keen intellect." The playful tone reassures heterosexual consumers that the vanity (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

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"I'm known more for my superb bone construction and soft, supple hair than my keen intellect."

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KENWOOD

CAR STEREO SYSTEMS

*"I'm known more for my superb bone construction and soft, supple hair than my keen intellect."*

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in the ad as an insider wink, which says "This is for you, guys." The joke is further layered by the fact that they know the model in the ad is very likely to be gay.

Contrast this ad to the ostentatious heterosexual protest of a Perry Ellis ad which appeared in the early 1990s (and no, it's not a parody):

*I hate this job. I'm not just an empty suit who stands in front of a camera, collects the money and flies off to St. Maarten for the weekend.*

*I may model for a living, but I hate being treated like a piece of meat. I once had a loud-mouthed art director say "Stand there and pretend you're a human." I wanted to punch him, but I needed the job.*

*What am I all about? Well, I know I'm very good-looking, and there are days when that is enough. Some nights, when I'm alone, it's not.*

*I like women—all kinds.*

*I like music—all kinds.*

*I like myself so I don't do drugs.*

*Oh yeah, about this fragrance. It's good. Very good.*

*When I posed for this picture, the art director insisted that I wear it while the pictures were being taken. I thought it was silly, but I said "What the hell? It's their money."*

*After a while, I realized I like this fragrance a lot. When the photo shoot was over, I walked right over, picked up the bottle, put it in my pocket and said "If you don't mind, I'd like to take this as a souvenir." Then I smiled my best f—you smile and walked out.*

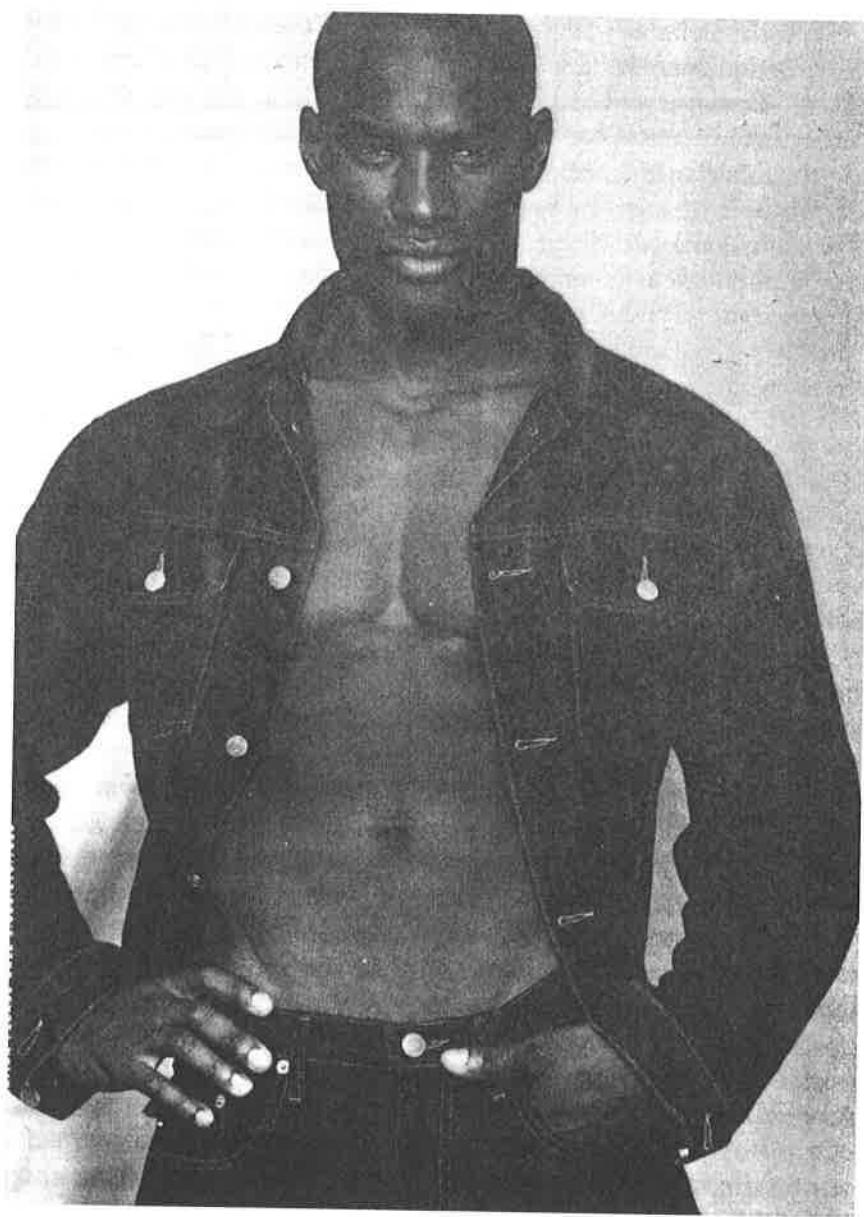
*Next time, I'll pay for it.*

*It's that good.*

Today, good-looking straight guys are flocking to the modeling agencies, much less concerned about any homosexual taint that will cleave to them. It's no longer necessary for an ad to plant its tongue firmly in cheek when lavishing erotic attention on the male body—or to pepper the ad with proofs of heterosexuality. It used to be, if an advertisement aimed at straight men dared to show a man fussing over his looks with seemingly romantic plans in mind, there had better be a woman in the picture, making it clear just *whom* the boy was getting pretty for. To sell a muscle-building product to heterosexuals, of course you had to link it to virility and the ability to attract women on the beach. Today, muscles are openly sold for their 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*. Many ads display the naked male body without shame or plot excuse, and often exploit rather than resolve the sexual ambiguity that is generated.

Today, too, the athletic, muscular male body that Calvin plastered all over buildings, magazines, and subway stops has become an aesthetic

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*Face-off masculinity.*

## Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body

norm, for straights as well as gays. "No pecs, no sex," is how the trendy David Barton gym sells itself: "My motto is not 'Be healthy'; it's 'Look better naked,'" Barton says. The notion has even made its way into that most determinedly heterosexual of contexts, a Rob Reiner film. In *Sleepless in Seattle*, Tom Hanks's character, who hasn't been on a date in fifteen years, asks his friend (played by Rob), what women are looking for nowadays. "Pecs and a cute butt," his friend replied without hesitation. "You can't even turn on the news nowadays without hearing about how some babe thought some guy's butt was cute. Who the first woman was to say this was I don't know, but somehow it caught on." Should we tell Rob that it wasn't a woman who started the craze for men's butts?

### Rocks and Leaners

We "nouvelles voyeuses" thus owe a big measure of thanks to gay male designers and consumers, and to the aesthetic and erotic overlap—not uniform or total, but significant—in what makes our hearts go thump. But although I've been using the term for convenience, I don't think it's correct to say that these ads depict men as "sex objects." Actually, I find that whole notion misleading, whether applied to men or women, because it seems to suggest that what these representations offer is a body that is inert, depersonalized, flat, a mere thing. In fact, advertisers put a huge amount of time, money, and creativity into figuring out how to create images of beautiful bodies that are heavy on attitude, style, associations with pleasure, success, happiness. The most compelling images are suffused with "subjectivity"—they *speak* to us, they seduce us. Unlike other kind of "objects" (chairs and tables, for example) they don't let us use them in any way we like. In fact, they exert considerable power over us—over our psyches, our desires, our self-image.

How do male bodies in the ads speak to us nowadays? In a variety of ways. Sometimes the message is challenging, aggressive. Many models stare coldly at the viewer, defying the observer to view them in any way other than they have chosen to present themselves: as powerful, armored, emotionally impenetrable. "I am a rock," their bodies (and sometimes their genitals) seem to proclaim. Often, as in the Jackson Browne look-alike ad, the penis is prominent, but *unlike* the penis in that ad, its presence is martial rather than sensual. Overall, these ads depict what I would describe as "face-off masculinity," in which victory goes to the dominant contestant in a game of will against will. Who can stare the other man down? Who will avert his eyes first? Whose gaze will be triumphant? Such moments—

### Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body

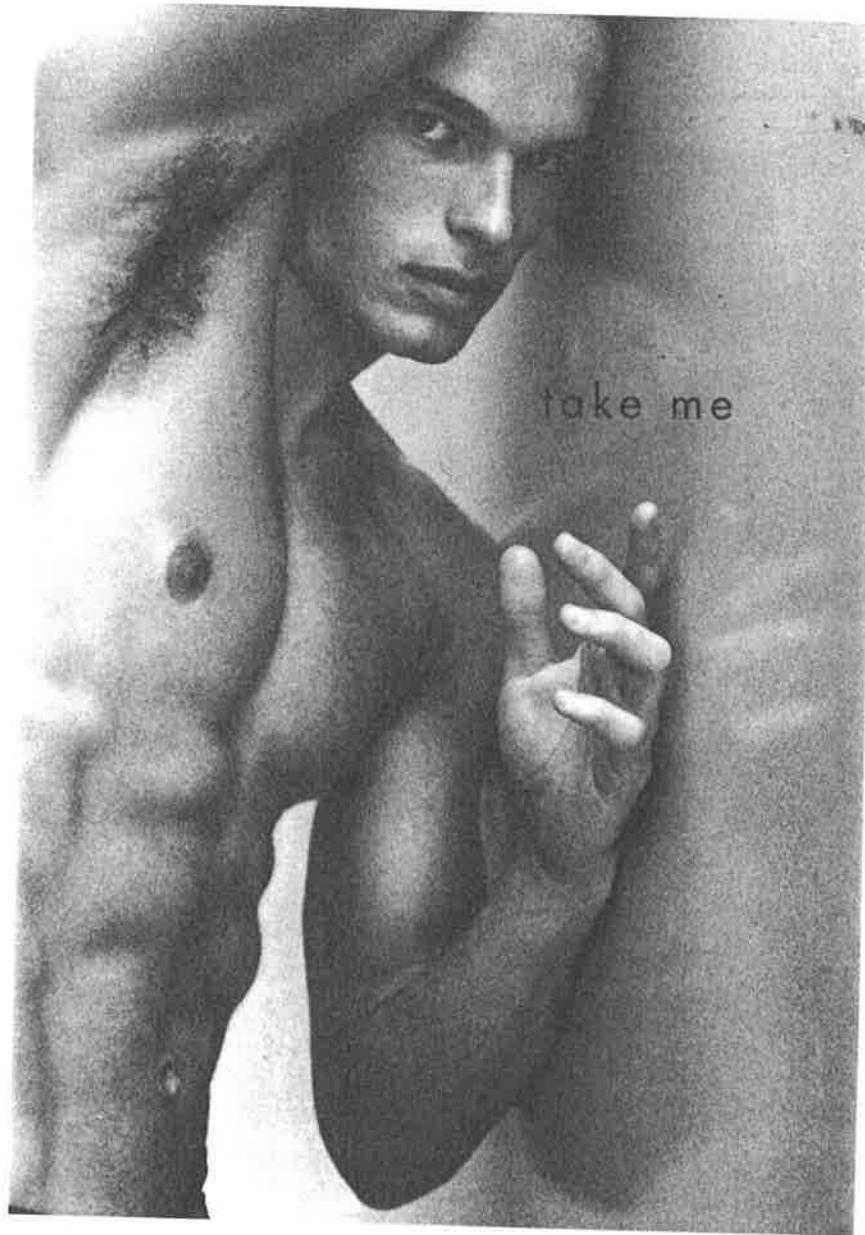
"facing up," "facing off," "staring down"—as anthropologist David Gilmore has documented, are a test of macho in many cultures, including our own. "Don't eyeball me!" barks the sergeant to his cadets-in-training in *An Officer and a Gentleman*; the authority of the stare is a prize to be won only with full manhood. Before then, it is a mark of insolence—or stupidity, failure to understand the codes of masculine rank. In *Get Shorty*, an unsuspecting film director challenges a mob boss to look him in the eye; in return, he is hurled across the room and has his fingers broken.

"Face-off" ads, except for their innovations in the amount of skin exposed, are pretty traditional—one might even say primal—in their conception of masculinity. Many other species use staring to establish dominance, and not only our close primate relatives. It's how my Jack Russell terrier intimidates my male collie, who weighs over four times as much as the little guy but cowers under the authority of the terrier's macho stare. In the doggie world, size doesn't matter; it's the power of the gaze—which indicates the power to stand one's ground—that counts. My little terrier's dominance, in other words, is based on a convincing acting job—and it's one that is very similar, according to William Pollack, to the kind of performance that young boys in our culture must learn to master. Pollack's studies of boys suggest that a set of rules—which he calls "The Boy Code"—govern their behavior with each other. The first imperative of the code—"Be a sturdy oak"—represents the emotional equivalent of "face-off masculinity": Never reveal weakness. Pretend to be confident even though you may be scared. Act like a rock even when you feel shaky. Dare others to challenge your position.

The face-off is not the only available posture for male bodies in ads today. Another possibility is what I call "the lean"—because these bodies are almost always reclining, leaning against, or propped up against something in the fashion typical of women's bodies. James Dean was probably our first pop culture "leaner"; he made it stylish for teenagers to slouch. Dean, however, never posed as languidly or was as openly seductive as some of the high-fashion leaners are today. A recent Calvin Klein "Escape" ad 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.

Languid leaners have actually been around for a long time. Statues of sleeping fauns, their bodies draped languorously, exist in classical art alongside more heroic models of male beauty. I find it interesting, though, that Klein has chosen Mr. Take Me to advertise a perfume called "Escape." Klein's "Eternity" ads usually depict happy, heterosexual couples, often

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take me

"Take me" ad.

### Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body

with a child. "Obsession" has always been cutting-edge, sexually ambiguous erotica. This ad, featuring a man offering himself up seductively, invitingly to the observer, promises "escape." From what? To what? Men have complained, justly, about the burden of always having to be the sexual initiator, the pursuer, the one of whom sexual "performance" is expected. Perhaps the escape is from these burdens, and toward the freedom to indulge in some of the more receptive pleasures traditionally reserved for women. The pleasures, not of staring someone down but of feeling one's body caressed by another's eyes, of being the one who receives the awaited call rather than the one who must build up the nerve to make the call, the one who doesn't have to hump and pump, but is permitted to lie quietly, engrossed in reverie and sensation.

Some people describe these receptive pleasures as "passive"—which gives them bad press with men, and is just plain inaccurate, too: "Passive" hardly describes what's going on when one person offers himself or herself to another. Inviting, receiving, responding—these are active behaviors, too, and rather thrilling ones. It's a macho bias to view the only *real* activity as that which takes, invades, aggresses. It's a bias, however, that's been with us for a long time, in both straight and gay cultures. In many Latin cultures, it's not a disgrace to sleep with other men, so long as one is *activo* (or *machista*)—the penetrator rather than the penetratee. To be a *pasivo*, on the other hand, is to be socially stigmatized. It's that way in prison cultures, too—a good indication of the power hierarchies involved. These hierarchies date back to the ancient Greeks, who believed that passivity, receptivity, penetrability were marks of inferior feminine being. The qualities were inherent in women; it was our nature to be passively controlled by our sexual needs. (Unlike us, the Greeks viewed women—not men—as the animalistic ones.) Real Men who, unlike women, had the necessary rationality and will were expected to be judicious in the exercise of their desires. But being judicious and being "active"—deciding when to pursue, whom to pursue, making advances, pleading one's case—went hand in hand.

Allowing oneself to be pursued, flirting, accepting the advances of another, offering one's body—these behaviors were permitted also (but only on a temporary basis) to still-developing, younger men. These young men—not little boys, as is sometimes incorrectly believed—were the true "sex objects" of elite Greek culture. Full-fledged male citizens, on the other hand, were expected to be "active," initiators, the penetrators not the penetratees, masters of their own desires rather than the objects of another's. Plato's *Symposium* is full of speeches on the different sexual behaviors appropriate to adult men with full beards and established professions

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and glamorous young men still revered more for their beauty than their minds. But even youth could not make it okay for a man to behave *too* much like a woman. The admirable youth was the one who—unlike a woman—was able to remain sexually “cool” and remote, to keep his wits about him. “Letting go” was not seemly.

Where does our culture stand today with respect to these ideas about men’s sexuality? Well, to begin with consider how rarely male actors are shown—on their faces, in their utterances, and not merely in the movements of their bodies—having orgasms. In sex scenes, the moanings and writhings of the female partner have become the conventional cinematic code for heterosexual ecstasy and climax. The male’s participation is largely represented by caressing hands, humping buttocks, and—on rare occasions—a facial expression of intense concentration. She’s transported to another world; he’s the pilot of the ship that takes her there. When men are shown being transported themselves, it’s usually been played for comedy (as in Al Pacino’s shrieks in *Frankie and Johnny*, Eddie Murphy’s moanings in *Boomerang*, Kevin Kline’s contortions in *A Fish Called Wanda*), or it’s coded to suggest that something is not quite normal about the man—he’s sexually enslaved, for example (as with Jeremy Irons in *Damage*). Mostly, men’s bodies are presented like action hero toys—wind them up and watch them perform.

Hollywood—still an overwhelmingly straight male-dominated industry—is clearly not yet ready to show us a man “passively” giving himself over to another, at least not when the actors in question are our cultural icons. Too feminine. Too suggestive, metaphorically speaking, of penetration by another. But perhaps fashion ads are less uptight? I decided to perform an experiment. I grouped ads that I had collected over recent years into a pile of “rocks” and a pile of “leaners” and found, not surprisingly, that both race and age played a role. African American models, whether in *Esquire* or *Vibe*, are almost always posed facing off. And leaners tend to be younger than the rocks. Both in gay publications and straight ones, the more languid, come-hither poses in advertisements are of boys and very young men. Once a certain maturity line is crossed, the challenging stares, the “face-off” postures are the norm. What does one learn from these ads? Well, I wouldn’t want to claim *too* much. It used to be that one could tell a lot about gender and race from looking at ads. Racial stereotypes were transparent, the established formulas for representing men and women were pretty clear (sociologist Erving Goffman even called ads “gender advertisements”), and when the conventions were defied it was usually

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A youthful, androgynous "leaner"—appropriately enough advertising a fragrance "for a man or a woman."

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because advertisers sensed (or discovered in their polls) that social shifts had made consumers ready to receive new images. In this "postmodern" age, it's more of a free-for-all, and images are often more reactive to each other than to social change. It's the viewers' jaded eye, not their social prejudices, that is the prime consideration of every ad campaign, and advertisers are quick to tap into taboos, to defy expectations, simply in order to produce new and arresting images. So it wouldn't surprise me if we soon find languid black men and hairy-chested leaners on the pages of *Gentleman's Quarterly*.

But I haven't seen one yet. At the very least, the current scene suggests that even in this era of postmodern pastiche racial clichés and gender taboos persist; among them, we don't want grown men to appear too much the "passive" objects of another's sexual gaze, another's desires. We appear, still, to have somewhat different rules for boys and men. As in ancient Greece, boys are permitted to be seductive, playful, to flirt with being "taken." Men must still be in command. Leonardo DiCaprio, watch out. Your days may be numbered.

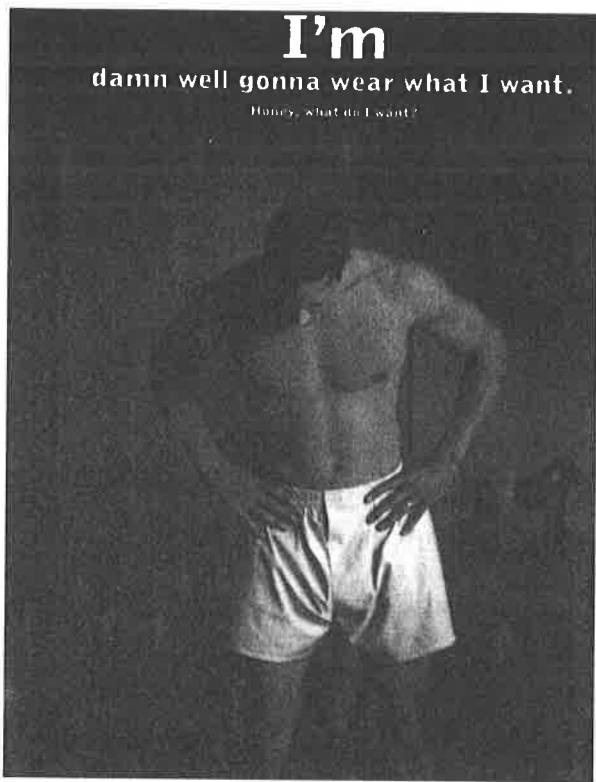
**"Honey, What Do I Want to Wear?"**

The male fashion scene of the nineties involves a kind of contest for the souls of men. Calvin Klein, Versace, Gucci, Abercrombie & Fitch have not only brought naked bottoms and bulging briefs onto the commercial scene, they present underwear, jeans, shirts, and suits as items for enhancing a man's appearance and sexual appeal. They suggest it's fine for a man to care about how he looks, and to cultivate an openly erotic style. In response, aggressively heterosexual Dockers and Haggar ads compete—for the buying dollar of men, but in the process for their gender-consciousness, too—by stressing the no-nonsense utility of khakis. Consider this Haggar casuals advertisement, and what it says about how "real men" are supposed to feel about their clothes:

*"I'm damn well gonna wear what I want. . . . Honey, what do I want?"*

Looked at in one light, the man in the advertisement is being made fun of, as a self-deceived blusterer who asserts his independence "like a man" and in the next breath reveals that he is actually a helpless little boy who needs his mommy to pick out his clothes for him. But fashion incompetence is a species of helplessness that many men feel quite comfortable with, even proud of. Recognizing this, Haggar and Dockers are among those manufacturers who have put a great deal of effort into marketing "non-fashion guy fashion" to a niche of straight men—working-class and

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*"I'm damn well gonna wear what I want. . . Honey, what do I want?"*

yuppie—who, they presume, would be scared off by even a whiff of “feminine” clothes-consciousness. Here’s another one from Haggar:

*“In the female the ability to match colors comes at an early age. In the male it comes when he marries a female.”*

The juxtaposition of inept male/fashion-conscious female, which with one stroke establishes the masculinity *and* the heterosexuality of the depicted man, is a staple of virtually every Haggar ad. In a Haggar television spot with voice-over by John Goodman (Roseanne’s beefy ex-television husband), a man wakes up, sleepily pulls on a pair of khakis, and goes outside to get the paper:

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*"I am not what I wear. I'm not a pair of pants, or a shirt."* (He then walks by his wife, handing her the front section of the paper.) *"I'm not in touch with my inner child. I don't read poetry, and I'm not politically correct."* (He goes down a hall, and his kid snatches the comics from him.) *"I'm just a guy, and I don't have time to think about what I wear, because I've got a lot of important guy things to do."* (Left with only the sports section of the paper, he heads for the bathroom.) *"One-hundred-per-cent cotton wrinkle-free khaki pants that don't require a lot of thought. Haggar. Stuff you can wear."*

Yes, it's a bit of a parody, but that only allows Haggar to double its point that real guys have better things to do than think about what they are going to wear or how they appear to others. The guy who would be so worried about his image that he couldn't poke fun at himself wouldn't be a real guy at all. Real guys don't take themselves so seriously! That's for wimps who favor poetry, self-help psychology, and bleeding-heart politics. That's for girls, and for the men who are pussy-whipped by them.

In Haggar's world, real guys don't choose clothing that will enhance the appearance of their bodies or display a sense of style; real guys just put on some "stuff" to wear because they have to, it's socially required. The less decorative, the better. "We would never do anything with our pants that would frighten anyone away," says Dockers designer Gareth Morris, as reported in a 1997 piece in *The New Yorker*, "We'd never do too many belt loops, or an unusual base cloth . . . [or] zips or a lot of pocket flaps and details on the back." Pocket flaps, the ultimate signifier of suspect sexuality! In such ads, male naiveté about the sexual potency of clothes, as agency maven David Altschiller claims, is critical. "In women's advertising," he points out, "self-confidence is sexy. But if a man is self-confident—if he knows he is attractive and is beautifully dressed—then he's not a man anymore. He's a fop. He's effeminate." In Dockers' "Nice Pants" television ads, for example, it's crucial that the guy not know his pants are "nice" until a gorgeous woman points it out to him.

It's no accident that the pants are described via the low-key understatement "nice" (rather than "great," for example, which would suggest that the guy was actually *trying* to look good.) For the real man (according to Dockers), the mirror is a tool, not a captivating pool; if he could, he'd look the other way while he shaves. Many other advertisers capitalize on such notions, encouraging men to take care of their looks, but reassuring them that it's for utilitarian or instrumental purposes. Cosmetic surgeons emphasize the corporate advantage that a face-lift or tummy-tuck will give the aging executive: "A youthful look," as one says, "gives the appearance of a

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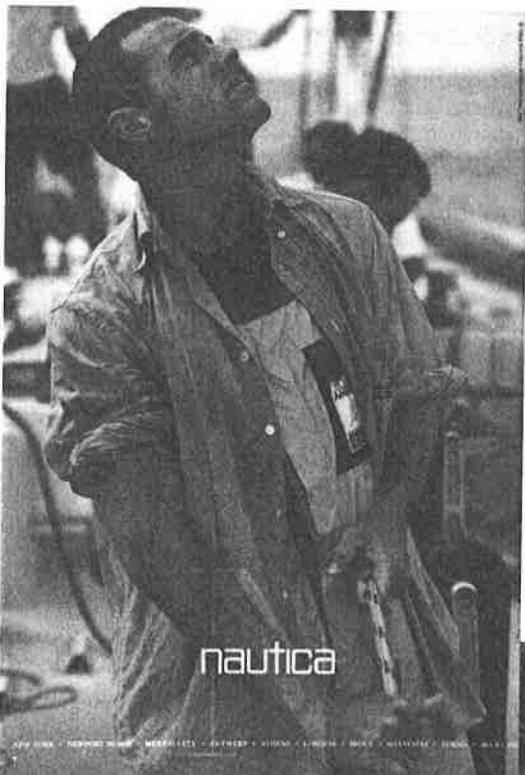
more dynamic, charging individual who will go out and get the business." Male grooming products too are often marketed by way of "action hero" euphemisms which obscure their relation to feminine versions of the same product (a male girdle marketed by BodySlimmers is called the "Double Agent Boxer") and the fact that their function is to enhance a man's appearance: hair spray as "hair control," exfoliating liquid as "scruffing lotion," astringents as "scrubs," moisturizers and fragrances as "after" or "pre"-accompaniments to that most manly of rituals, the shave. They often have names like Safari and Chaps and Lab Series, and come in containers shaped like spaceships and other forms a girl could have some fun with.

The notions about gender that are maintained in this marketing run deeper than a refusal to use the word "perfume" for products designed to make men smell good. In the late seventies, coincident with the development of feminist consciousness about these matters, art historian John Berger discovered what he argued were a set of implicit cultural paradigms of masculinity and femininity, crystallized in a visual "rule" of both classical painting and commercial advertisements: "*men act and women appear.*" Here's a contemporary illustration:

The man in the Nautica ad, rigging his sail, seems oblivious to his appearance; he's too busy checking the prevailing winds. The woman, in contrast, seems well aware and well pleased that her legs have caught the attention of the men gaping at her. A woman's *appearance*, Berger argued, has been socially determined to be "of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life." Even walking on a city street, headed for their high-power executive jobs, 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, asking to be admired for their beauty.

With depictions of men, it's just the opposite. "A man's presence," Berger wrote, "is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies . . . what he is capable of doing to you or for you." Thus, the classic formula for representing men is always to show them in action, immersed in whatever they are doing, seemingly unaware of anyone who might be looking at them. They never fondle their own bodies narcissistically, display themselves purely as "sights," or gaze at themselves in the mirror. In everything from war paintings to jeans and cologne ads, men are portrayed as utterly oblivious to their beauty (or lack of it), intent only on getting the job done—raising the flag, lassoing a steer, busting up concrete. The ability to move heavy things around, tame wild creatures—that's manly business.

SUSAN BORDO



*Men act and women appear.*

nautica



**STRIPES GO EVERY WHICH WAY**

on the dressing front, a theme seems to be... because it's made of cotton. Both jacket and skirt are cropped short. By Charles Chang. Blouse, shorts and shoes (these pages) by Nautica West. Blazer's suit by Oliver by Haris & Cie.

## Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body

Fretting about your love handles, your dry skin, your sagging eyelids? That's for girls.

Women in ads and movies thus require no plot-excuse to show off their various body-parts in ads, proudly, shyly, or seductively; it's the "business" of *all* of us to be beautiful—whether we are actresses, politicians, home-makers, teachers, or rock stars. This has changed very little since Berger came up with his formula. When *Time* magazine did a story on the new dominance of female stars in the rock world, its cover featured singing star Jewel, not performing, but in a dewy close-up, lips moist and soft eyes smiling from behind curled lashes. This formidable new "force" in the rock world might as well have been modeling Maybelline. True, a beautiful woman today may be depicted puffing away on a cigar, getting "in touch with her masculine side." But in expression she's still a seductress, gazing through long lashed lids into the eyes of an imagined viewer. "Do you like what you see?" the expressions of the models seem ask.

Men, according to Berger's formula, must never seem as though they are asking this question, and may display their beauty only if it is an unavoidable side effect of other "business." Thus, a lot of the glistening, naked male chests in the movies of the fifties and sixties were on the bodies of warriors, prisoners, slaves, and prizefighters. No one could claim there was vanity in such nakedness. (No time for preening while nailing spikes on a chain gang or rowing in a slave galley.) So a strong dose of male skin could be sneaked into a movie without disturbing the gender rules. The physical presence of an actor like Richard Gere, who emanates consciousness of his body as the erotic focus of the gaze and invites it, has always annoyed and disconcerted critics. The pomposity of Charlton Heston, on the other hand, his naked (and actually rather gorgeous) chest puffed up in numerous biblical epochs, goes unnoticed, because he's doing it all in a builder-of-the-universe rather than narcissus-in-the-mirror mode.

*Saturday Night Fever* (1977) deserves mention here for openly breaking with this convention. Tony Manero (John Travolta), a disco-dancing dandy who knows how to use his walk, was a man who *really* needed a course in masculinity-according-to-Haggard. He blows all his wages on fancy shirts and shoes. On Saturday night, he prepares his body meticulously, shaving, deodorizing, blow-drying, choosing just the right combination of gold chains and amulets, torso-clinging pants, shiny platforms. Eating dinner with his family, he swaths himself in a sheet like a baby to protect his new floral shirt; when his father boxes his ear roughly, his only thought is for his pompadour: "Just watch the hair! I work on my hair a long time and you hit it. He hits the hair!" Manero spends much of his time in front of the

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mirror, getting himself pretty, posing, anticipating the impression he's going to make when he enters the disco or struts down the street.

Never before *Saturday Night Fever* had a heterosexual male movie hero spent so much time on his toilette. (Even Cary Grant's glamorous looks were never shown as requiring any conscious effort or attention; in *The Awful Truth* he sits under a tanning lamp—but that's to fake a trip to Florida.) Although this was the polyester seventies, and men like Sonny Bono dressed like Tony on television, Bono was very careful (as the Beatles were, too) to treat his flamboyant ruffles as show-biz costumes, while Cher proudly strutted her feathers and finery as a second skin for her body and sexuality. Tony, like Cher, chooses his clothes to highlight his sinuous form.

Manero was, in many ways, the cinema equivalent (reassuringly straight and working-class) of the revolution that Calvin Klein was making in more sexually ambiguous form in the fashion world. As a dancer, Tony is unembarrassed—and the camera isn't embarrassed either—to make his hips, groin, and buttocks the mesmerizing center of attention. Travolta was also the first actor to appear on-screen in form-fitting (if discreetly black) briefs. One scene finds him asleep in his underwear, blanket between his legs, hip jutting upward; the camera moves slowly down the length of his body, watches as Tony rouses, sits up, pulls the blanket from between his legs and puts his hand in his briefs to adjust his penis. (The script originally had called for Travolta to appear naked in a later scene; he balked, suggesting the early morning scene as a compromise.) We then follow him to the mirror (where he compares himself admiringly to a poster of Al Pacino) and into the hall, where he flexes teasingly for his shocked grandmother. This was new stuff, and some people were a bit taken aback by such open male vanity and exhibitionism. (Pauline Kael, for one, seemed to need to convince herself of Tony's sexual orientation. "It's a straight heterosexual film," she wrote, "but with a feeling for the sexiness of young boys who are bursting their britches with energy and desire.")

True, there is the suggestion, in the film, that Tony may grow out of his narcissism once he leaves Brooklyn and the gold-chain crowd. Hollywood, of course, had shown men preening, decorating and oiling themselves before—pimps and homosexuals, usually, but also various unassimilated natives (Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Italians) depicted as living more fully in their bodies, with a taste for flashy clothes that marks them as déclassé. Manero fits those stereotypes—but only up to a point. He may have awful taste in jewelry, but he also has boyish charm and "native" intelligence. Unlike his friends—a pathetic trio of racist, homophobic, sexist home-

boys—Tony has integrity. He is enraged when, at the “2001” dance contest, racism and favoritism land him first prize over a Puerto Rican couple. He’s also the only one of his friends who doesn’t taunt a gay couple as they pass on the street. The movie may poke affectionate fun at him, but it also admires him. A hero-narcissus—a very new image for postwar Hollywood.

Of course, most men, gold chains or not, straight or gay, *do* care how they “appear.” The gender differences described in Berger’s formula and embedded in the Dockers and Haggar advertisements are “fictional,” a distillation of certain *ideas* about men and women, not an empirical generalization about their actual behavior. This doesn’t mean, however, that they have no impact on “real life.” Far from it. As embodied in attractive and sometimes highly manipulative images, “men act and women appear” functions as a visual instruction. Women are supposed to care very much about fashion, “vanity,” looking good, and may be seen as unfeminine, man-hating, or lesbian if they don’t. The reverse goes for men. The man who cares about his looks the way a woman does, self-esteem on the line, ready to be shattered at the slightest insult or increase in weight gain, is unmanly, sexually suspect.

So the next time you see a Dockers or Haggar ad, think of it not only as an advertisement for khakis, but also as an advertisement for a certain notion of what it means to be a man. The ad execs know that’s what’s going on; they’re open about not wanting to frighten men off with touches of feminine decorativeness. What they are less open about is the fact that such ads don’t just cater to male phobias about fashion but also perpetuate them. They have to. Nowadays, the Dockers man is competing against other models of masculinity, laughing at him from both the pages of history and from what was previously the “margin” of contemporary culture. Can you imagine Cary Grant, Rupert Everett, or Michael Jordan as the fashion-incompetent man in a Dockers ad? The stylish man, who began to make a new claim on popular cultural representations with the greater visibility of black and gay men—the men consumer culture once ignored—was chiseling cracks in the rule that “men act and women appear” even as Berger was formulating it.

### My World . . . and Welcome to It?

Despite everything I’ve said thus far, I feel decidedly ambivalent about consumer culture’s inroads into the male body. I *do* find it wonderful that the male form, both clothed and unclothed, is being made so widely available for sexual fantasy and aesthetic admiration. I like the fact that more and more heterosexual white guys are feeling permission to play with fash-

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ion, self-decoration, sensual presentation of the self. Even Dockers has become a little less "me a guy . . . duh!" in its ads and spreads for khakis, which now include spaced-out women as well as men.

But I also know what it's like to be on the other side of the gaze. I know its pleasures, and I know its agonies—intimately. Even in the second half of the twentieth century, beauty remains a prerequisite for female success. In fact, in an era characterized by some as "postfeminist," beauty seems to count more than it ever did before, and the standards for achieving it have become more stringent, more rigorous, than ever. We live in an empire ruled not by kings or even presidents, but by images. The tight buns; the perfect skin; the firm breasts; the long, muscled legs; the bulgeless, sagless bodies are everywhere. Beautiful women, everywhere, telling the rest of us how to stand, how to swing our hair, how slim we must be.

Actually, all this flawless beauty is the product of illusion, generated with body doubles, computers, artful retouching. "Steal this look!" the lifestyles magazines urge women; it's clear from the photo that great new haircut of Sharon Stone's could change a woman's life. But in this era of digital retouching not even Sharon Stone looks like Sharon Stone. (Isabella Rossellini, who used to be the Lancôme girl before she got too old to be beautiful, has said that her photos are so enhanced that when people meet her they tell her "Your sister is so beautiful.") Still, we try to accomplish the impossible, and often get into trouble. Illusions set the standard for real women, and they spawn special disorders and addictions: in trying to become as fat-free and poreless as the ads, one's fleshly body is pushed to achieve the impossible.

I had a student who admitted to me in her journal that she had a makeup addiction. This young woman was unable to leave the house—not even to walk down to the corner mailbox—with a full face and body cover-up that took her over an hour and a half to apply. In her journal, she described having escalated over a year or so from minimal "touching-up" to a virtual mask of foundation, powder, eyebrow pencil, eyeshadow, eyeliner, mascara, lipliner, lipstick—a mask so thorough, so successful in its illusionary reality that her own, naked face now looked grotesque to her, mottled, pasty, featureless. She dreaded having sex with her boyfriend, for fear some of the mask might come off and he would see what she looked like underneath. As soon as they were done, she would race to the bathroom to reapply; when he stayed over, she would make sure to sleep lightly in order to wake up earlier than him. It's funny—and not really funny. My student's disorder may be one generated by a superficial, even insane cul-

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ture, a disorder befitting the Oprah Show rather than a PBS documentary. But a disorder nonetheless. Real. Painful. Deforming of her life.

So, too, for the eating disorders that run rampant among girls and women. In much of my writing on the female body, I've chronicled how these disorders have spread across race, class, and ethnic differences in this culture. Today, serious problems with food, weight, and body image are no longer (if they ever were) the province of pampered, narcissistic, heterosexual white girls. To imagine that they are is to view black, Asian, Latin, lesbian, and working-class women as outside the loop of the dominant culture and untouched by its messages about what is beautiful—a mistake that has left many women feeling abandoned and alone with a disorder they weren't "supposed" to have. Today, eating problems are virtually the norm among high school and college women—and even younger girls. Yes, of course there are far greater tragedies in life than gaining five pounds. But try to reassure a fifteen-year-old girl that her success in life doesn't require a slender body, and she will think you dropped from another planet. *She* knows what's demanded; she's learned it from the movies, the magazines, the soap operas.

There, the "progressive" message conveyed by giving the girls and women depicted great careers or exciting adventures is overpowered, I think, by the more potent example of their perfect bodies. The plots may say: "The world is yours." The bodies caution: "But only if you aren't fat." What counts as "fat" today? Well, Alicia Silverstone was taunted by the press when she appeared at the Academy Awards barely ten pounds heavier than her (extremely) svelte self in *Clueless*. Janeane Garofalo was the "fat one" in *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*. Reviews of *Titanic* described Kate Winslet as plump, overripe, much too hefty for ethereal Leonardo DiCaprio. Any anger you detect here is personal, too. I ironed my hair in the sixties, have dieted all my life, continue to be deeply ashamed of those parts of my body—like my peasant legs and zaftig behind—that our culture has coded as ethnic excess. I suspect it's only an accident of generational timing or a slight warp in the fabric of my cultural environment that prevented me from developing an eating disorder. I'm not a makeup junkie like my student, but I am becoming somewhat addicted nowadays to alpha-hydroxies, skin drenchers, quenchers, and other "age-defying" potions.

No, I don't think the business of beauty is without its pleasures. It offers a daily ritual of transformation, renewal. Of "putting oneself together" and walking out into the world, more confident than you were, anticipating attraction, flirtation, sexual play. I love shopping for makeup with my

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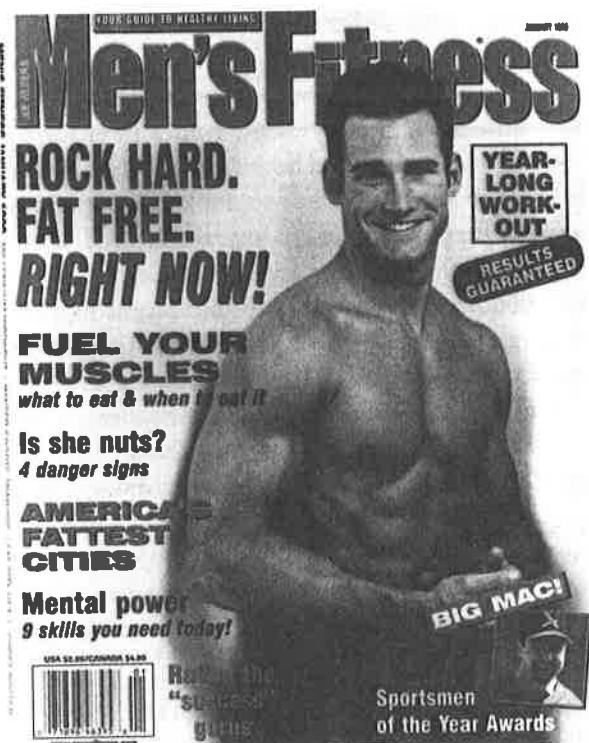
friends. (Despite what Rush Limbaugh tells you, feminism—certainly not feminism in the nineties—is not synonymous with unshaved legs.) Women bond over shared makeup, shared beauty tips. It's fun. Too often, though, our bond is over shared pain—over “bad” skin, “bad” hair, “bad” legs. There's always that constant judgement and evaluation—not only by actual, living men, but by an ever-present, watchful cultural gaze which always has its eye on our thighs—no matter how much else we accomplish. We judge each other that way, too, sometimes much more nastily than men. Some of the bitchiest comments about Marcia Clark's hair and Hillary Clinton's calves have come from women. But if we are sometimes our “own worst enemies,” it's usually because we see in each other not so much competition as a reflection of our fears and anxieties about ourselves. In this culture, all women suffer over our bodies. A demon is loose in our consciousness and can't easily be controlled. We see the devil, fat calves, living on Hillary's body. We point our fingers, like the accusers at Salem. Root him out, kill *her*!

And now men are suddenly finding that devil living in their flesh. If someone had told me in 1977 that in 1997 *men* would comprise over a quarter of cosmetic surgery patients, I would have been astounded. I never dreamed that “equality” would move in the direction of men worrying *more* about their looks rather than women worrying less. I first suspected that something major was going on when the guys in my gender classes stopped yawning and passing snide notes when we discussed body issues, and instead began to protest when the women talked as though they were the only ones “oppressed” by standards of beauty. After my book *Unbearable Weight* appeared, I received several letters from male anorexics, reminding me that the incidence of such disorders among men was on the rise. Today, as many as a million men—and eight million women—have an eating disorder.

Then I began noticing all the new men's “health” magazines on the newsstands, dispensing diet and exercise advice (“A Better Body in Half the Time,” “50 Snacks that Won't Make You Fat”) in the same cheerleaderish mode that Betty Friedan had once chastised the women's magazines for: “It's Chinese New Year, so make a resolution to custom-order your next takeout. Ask that they substitute wonton soup for oil. Try the soba noodles instead of plain noodles. They're richer in nutrients and contain much less fat.” The “real man” is no longer required to shun broccoli in favor of beef (although quiche is much too fattening).

It used to be a truism among those of us familiar with the research on body image problems that most men (that is, most straight men, on whom the studies were based) were largely immune. Women, research showed,

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were chronically dissatisfied with themselves. But men tended, if anything, to see themselves as better-looking than they (perhaps) actually were. Peter Richmond, in a 1987 piece in *Glamour*, describes his "wonderful male trick" for seeing what he wants to see when he looks in the mirror:

I edit out the flaws. Recently, under the influence of too many Heinekens in a strange hotel room, I stood in front of a wraparound full-length mirror and saw, in a moment of nauseous clarity, how unshapely my stomach and butt have become. The next morning, looking again in the same mirror, ready to begin another business day, I simply didn't see these offending areas.

Notice all the codes for male "action" that Richmond has decorated his self-revelation with. "Too many Heinekens," "another business day"—all reassurances that other things matter more to him than his appearance.

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But a decade later, it's no longer so easy for men to perform these little tricks. Getting ready for the business day is apt to exacerbate rather than divert male anxieties about the body, as men compete with fitter, younger men and fitter, more self-sufficient women. In a 1994 survey, 6,000 men ages eighteen to fifty-five were asked how they would like to see themselves. Three of men's top six answers were about looks: attractive to women, sexy, good-looking. Male "action" qualities—assertiveness, decisiveness—trailed at numbers eight and nine.

"Back when bad bodies were the norm," claims *Fortune* writer Alan Farnham (again, operating with the presumption of heterosexuality), "money distinguished male from male. Now muscles have devalued money," and the market for products and procedures "catering to male vanity" (as *Fortune* puts it) is \$9.5 billion or so a year. "It's a Face-Lifted, Tummy-Tucked Jungle Out There," reports the *New York Times*. To compete, a man

could buy Rogaine to thicken his hair. He could invest in BodySlimmers underwear for men, by the designer Nancy Ganz, with built-in support to suck in the waist. Or he could skip the aloe skin cream and go on to a more drastic measure, new to the male market: alpha-hydroxy product that sloughs off dead skin. Or he could rub on some belly- and thigh-shrinking creams. . . . If rubbing cream seems too strenuous, [he] can just don an undershirt from Mountainville House, to "shape up and pull in loose stomachs and sagging chests," with a diamond-shaped insert at the gut for "extra control." . . . Plastic surgery offers pectoral implants to make the chest appear more muscular, and calf muscle implants to give the leg a bodybuilder shape. There is liposuction to counter thickening middles and accumulating breast and fatty tissue in the chest . . . and a half-dozen surgical methods for tightening skin.

Some writers blame all this on sexual equality in the workplace. Anthropologist Lionel Tiger offers this explanation. "Once," he says, "men could fairly well control their destiny through providing resources to women, but now that the female is obliged to earn a living, he himself becomes a resource. He becomes his own product: Is he good-looking? Does he smell good? Before, when he had to provide for the female, he could have a potbelly. Now he has to appear attractive in the way the female had to be." Some evidence does support this. A *Psychology Today* survey found that the more financially secure the woman, the more important a man's looks were to her.

I, however, tend to see consumer capitalism rather than women's expectations or proclivities as the true motor driving male concern with appearance. Calvin gave us those muscled men in underwear. Then, the cosmetics, diet, exercise, and surgery industries elbowed in, providing the

means for everyone to develop that great Soloflex body. After all, why should they restrict themselves to female markets if they can convince men that their looks need constant improvement too? The management and enhancement of the body is a gold mine for consumerism; one whose treasures are inexhaustible, as women know. Dieting and staving off aging are never-ending processes. Ideals of beauty can be endlessly tinkered with by fashion designers and cosmetic manufacturers, remaining continually elusive, requiring constant new purchases, new kinds of work on the body.

Thomas Berger's opposition of "acting" and "appearing," this body-work reveals, is something of a false duality—and always has been. "Feminine" attention to appearance is hardly the absence of activity, as men are learning. It takes time, energy, creativity, dedication. It can *hurt*. Nowadays, the "act/appear" 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." When I was growing up in the sixties, a muscular male body meant beefy but dumb jock; a middle-class girl could drool over him but probably wouldn't want to marry him. Today, with a booming "gymnasium culture" existing (as in ancient Greece) for professional men, and with it a revival of the Greek idea that a good mind and a good body are not mutually exclusive, even Jeff Goldblum has muscles, and the only type of jock he plays is a computer jock.

All of this, as physicians have begun to note, is landing more and more men straight into the formerly female territory of body image dysfunction, eating disorders, and exercise compulsions. Last year, I read a survey that reported that 90 percent of male undergraduates believe that they are not muscular enough. That sent warning bells clanging in my mind, and sure enough, there's now a medical category for "muscle dysmorphia" (or "bigorexia," as it's actually sometimes called!) a kind of reverse anorexia in which the sufferer sees his muscles as never massive enough. Researchers are "explaining" bigorexia in the same dumb way they've tended to approach women's disorders—as a combination of bad biochemistry and "triggering events," such as being picked on. They just don't seem to fully appreciate the fact that "bigorexia"—like anorexia—only blooms in a very particular cultural soil. Not even the ancient Greeks—who revered athletic bodies and scorned weaklings, but also advised moderation in all things—produced "muscle dysmorphics." (Or at least, none of the available medical texts mention anything like it.) Anorexia and bigorexia, like so many contemporary disorders, are diseases of a culture that doesn't know when to stop.

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Those beautiful bodies of Greek statues may be the historical inspiration for the muscled men in underwear of the Calvin Klein ads. But the fact is that studying the ancient Greeks reveals a different set of attitudes toward beauty and the body than our contemporary ideals. As is well known by now (although undiscussed when I studied philosophy as an undergraduate), Plato was not above appreciating a beautiful young body. In the *Symposium*, he describes the beauty of the body as evidence of the presence of the divine on earth and the original spur to all "higher" human endeavors (as well as earthly, sexual love). We see someone dazzling, and he or she awakens the soul to its natural hunger to be lifted above the mundane, transitory, mortal world. Some people seek that transcendence through ordinary human intercourse and achieve the only immortality they will know through the begetting of human offspring and the continuation of the human race. For others, the beautiful body of another becomes the inspiration for a lifelong search for beauty in all its forms, the creation of beautiful art, beautiful words, beautiful ideals, beautiful cities. They will achieve their immortality through communion with something beyond the body—the idea of Beauty itself.

So human beauty is a pretty far-ranging and powerful thing for Plato, capable of evoking worlds beyond itself, even recalling a previous life when we dwelt among timeless, perfect forms. But human beauty, significantly (in fact, all earthly beauty), can only offer a glimpse of heavenly perfection. It's our nature to be imperfect, after all, and anyone who tries to overcome that limitation on earth is guilty of hubris—according to the Greeks. Our own culture, in contrast, is one without "limits" (a frequent theme of advertisements and commercials) and seemingly without any fear of hubris. Not only do we expect perfection in the bodies of others (just take a gander at some personal ads), we are constantly encouraged to achieve it ourselves, with the help of science and technology and the products and services they make available to us. "This body could be yours," the chiseled Greek statue in the Soloflex commercial tells us (and for only twenty minutes three times a week—give me a break!) "Timeless Beauty Is Within Your Reach," reads an ad for cosmetic surgery. Plato is rolling over in his grave.

For Plato (unlike Descartes) there are no "mere" physical bodies; bodies are lit with meaning, with memory. Our culture is more Cartesian; we like to think of our bodies as so much stuff, which can be tinkered with without any consequences for our soul. We bob our "family noses," lift our aging faces, suction extra fat, remove minor "flaws" with seemingly little concern for any "deep" meaning that our bodies might have, as repositories

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of our histories, our ethnic and racial and family lineage, our personalities. Actually, much of the time our intentions are to deliberately shed those meanings: to get rid of that Jewish nose, to erase the years from our faces. Unlike the Platonic philosopher, we aren't content to experience timelessness in philosophy, art, or even the beautiful bodies of others; we want to stop time on our own bodies, too. In the process, we substitute individualized beauty—the distinctive faces of the generation of beautiful actresses of my own age, for example—for generic, very often racialized, conventionalized, reproducible codes of youth.

The fact is that we're not only Cartesian but Puritan in our attitudes toward the body. The Greeks went for muscles, sure, but they would have regarded our exercise compulsions as evidence of a system out of control. They thought it unseemly—and a failure of will—to get too self-obsessed with anything. They were into the judicious "management" of the body (as French philosopher Michel Foucault has put it), not its utter subjugation. We, on the other hand, can become what our culture regards as sexually alluring only if we're willing to regard our flesh as recalcitrant metal, to be pummeled, burned, and tempered into steel, day in and day out. No pain, no gain. Obsessively pursuing these ideals has deprived both men *and* women of the playful eros of beauty, turned it all into constant, hard work. I love gay and black body-cultures for their flirtatiousness, their tongue-in-cheekness, their irony, their let's-dress-up-and-have-some-fun attitudes. Consumer culture, unfortunately, can even grind playfulness into a commodity, a required item for this year's wardrobe.

For all its idealization of the beauty of the body, Greek culture also understood that beauty could be "inner." In the *Symposium*, a group of elite Greeks discourse on the nature of love. Everyone except for Socrates and Aristophanes is in love with someone else at the party, and they're madly flirting, advancing their own romantic agendas through their speeches. Among the participants are the most beautiful young men of their crowd. Socrates himself is over fifty at the time, and not a pretty man to look at (to put it generously). Yet as we're told at the beginning (and this seems to have been historically true), nearly everyone has at one time or another been "obsessed" with him, "transported, completely possessed"—by his cleverness, his irony, his ability to weave a spell with words and ideas. Even the most dazzling Athenian of them all—soldier superhero Alcibiades, generally regarded as one of the sexiest, handsomest men in town, who joins the party late (and drunk) with a beautiful wreath of violets and ivy and ribbons in his hair—is totally, madly smitten with Socrates.

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Alcibiades's love for Socrates is *not* "Platonic" in the sense in which we have come to understand that term. In fact, Alcibiades is insulted because Socrates has refused to have sex with him. "The moment he starts to speak," he tells the crowd of his feelings for Socrates, "I am beside myself: my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face." This is not the way it usually goes. In the more normal Greek scheme of things, it's the beautiful young man—like Alcibiades—who is supposed to start the heart of the older man thumping, and who flirtatiously withholding his favors while the older lover does his best to win him. Alcibiades is in a state about this role reversal, but he understands why it has happened. He compares Socrates to a popular kind of satyr statue, which (like the little lacquered Russian dolls we're more familiar with) could be opened to reveal another figure within. Socrates may be ugly as a satyr on the outside, but "once I had a glimpse of the figures within—they were so godlike, so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing—that I no longer had a choice—I just had to do whatever he told me."

We pay constant lip service to beauty that is more than skin-deep. The talk shows frequently parade extreme May-December matings for our ogling, too. But the fact is that the idea of a glamorous young man being romantically, sexually obsessed with someone old and "ugly"—same-sex or other-sex, and no matter what other sterling qualities he or she may have—is pretty much beyond us. Historically, men have benefited from a double standard which culturally codes their gray hair, middle-aged paunches, and facial lines as signs of wisdom and experience rather than advancing decrepitude. My older gay male friends lament that those days are over for them. And if those new polls about women's attitudes are to be believed, the clock is ticking on that double standard for heterosexual men too—no matter how hard Hollywood tries to preserve it. With more and more expectation that men be as physically well-tended as women, those celluloid pairings of Woody Allen and women half as old and forty-six times as good-looking are becoming more of a hoot every day.

There is something anti-sensual to me about current aesthetics. There's so much that my younger friends go "uggh" over. Fat—yecch! Wrinkles—yuck! They live in a constant state of squeamishness about the flesh. I find that finely muscled, young Calvin Klein model beautiful and sexy, sure. But I also was moved by Clint Eastwood's aging chest in *Bridges of Madison County*. Deflated, skin loose around the waistband of his pants, not a washboard ridge in sight—for me, they signaled that Eastwood (at least for this role) had put Dirty Harry away for good, become a real, warm, penetrable, vulnerable human being instead of a make-my-day machine. Call me old-

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fashioned, but I find that very sexy. For a culture obsessed with youth and fitness, in contrast, sagging flesh is almost the ultimate signifier of decay and disorder. We prefer the clean machine—and are given it, in spades. Purified of “flaws,” all loose skin tightened, armored with implants, digitally enhanced, the bodies of most movie stars and models are fully dressed even when naked.

In *Saturday Night Fever*, John Travolta was trim, but (by contemporary standards) a bit “soft.” Six years later, Travolta recreated Tony Manero in the sequel, *Staying Alive*. This time, however, the film was directed by Sylvester Stallone, who showed Travolta a statue of a discus thrower and asked: “How would you like to look like that?” “Terrific,” replied Travolta, and embarked on a seven-month program of fitness training that literally redesigned his body into a carbon copy of Sly’s. In the film, his body was “perfect”: gleaming and muscular, without an ounce of fat. He was nice to look at. But if I had to choose between the Tony Manero of *Fever* and the Tony Manero of *Staying Alive*, it’d be no contest. I’d rather spend time (and have sex) with a dancing man with love handles than with a Greek statue who gets in a nasty mood if he misses a workout.

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