

12-1-2017

Review: 'Body Aesthetics'

Aili W. Bresnahan

University of Dayton, abresnahan1@udayton.edu

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Bresnahan, Aili W., "Review: 'Body Aesthetics'" (2017). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 176.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/176

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Body Aesthetics

Edited by Sherri Irvin

Oxford University Press. 2016. Pp. £40.00 (HBK).

This unique and sprawling collection of sixteen essays explores a wide range of perspectives on the human body and how it is embodied, lived, viewed, perceived, and constructed by ourselves and by others in both positive and harmful ways. The book's contributors include philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and artists, as well as scholars who focus on law, culture, and on Africana, race, gender, sexuality, and disability studies. In addition, the authors represent a diverse group of scholars whose personal and societal experiences are also part of the discussion. Centered in philosophical aesthetics (both Eastern and Western), this book moves into and explores fields of everyday and somatic experience, evolutionary psychology, art, ethics, personal identity, and socio-political status and treatment. It shows how bodies are packaged and displayed for public consumption in various art forms and in advertising. It also demonstrates the ways that the judgment that we are beautiful or un-beautiful because of our bodily look and appearance affects our treatment and responses to others in social and political arenas. Finally, it considers the aesthetic, ethical, and somatic value of eating, watching sports, and choice of sexual partners.

The theories in this book are supported by repeated and illustrative application to the world outside of theoretical abstraction, relying on a liberal use of images, case studies, examples, and personal testimonies, both historical and contemporary. As such it is well suited for a course at the advanced undergraduate or graduate level that is designed to show the social, political, and experiential relevance of aesthetic theory. Throughout the human body is treated as a rich site for cognitive, sensory, kinesthetic, somatic, proprioceptive (in a qualitative rather than merely neurological way), and other types of aesthetic responses and judgments, both positive and negative. While many of the essays address and explore how the human body has served as a target for social oppression and injustice, the overwhelming thrust of this anthology demonstrates the extent to which we can educate ourselves to retrain our conceptual and experiential responses along both ethical and aesthetic pathways. Thus the book provides not just a diagnosis but the suggestion of a cure.

The book's essays are divided into four parts: I. Representation, II. Look, III. Performance, and IV. Practice, but there is overlap between sections. The Representation section, for example, includes an essay by Maria del Guadalupe Davidson on Kara Walker's use of 'didactic' (by which she means intentionally instructional) pornographic images of black women, such as *A Subtlety* (2014), which is a giant sculpture of a nude slave woman in Aunt Jemima head scarf, positioned like a sphinx on knees and forearms, and made entirely out of sugar (15). Davidson shows how the piece is intended as a subtle homage to underpaid and overworked women in the U.S. and the Dominican Republic who have worked for others in sugar cane fields and kitchens. It is meant to shed light on and cause us to question our own racialized and sexualized responses to the piece (32-33). C. Winter Han, however, in the third essay in Part I, shows how the Asian male body is treated in media outlets as small and infantilized, feminized, queer, or de-sexualized in contrast with black or white male bodies, and suggests that this goes unrecognized by most of the viewing public.

These essays in Part I on different ways that racialized bodies are treated representationally thus overlap with Shirley Anne Tate's chapter 5 in Part II ('Look') that focuses on the ways that Black women's athletic bodies are branded and sexualized. She uses the case study of Olympians Jessica Ennis and Jeannette Kwakye to show how a lighter-skinned athlete like Ennis is 'racially ambiguous' (102), making her better suited for use in Great Britain's non-permanent marketing of itself as a forward-thinking, post-racial country (95-96). Chapter 11 in Part II ('Performance'), by Peg Brand Weiser and Edward B. Weiser, provides an account of how misleading aesthetic norms of Beauty based on gender identity harm the way that elite women athletes are perceived and treated, contributing to a cognitive bias the authors call 'perceptual sexism' (193).

A.W. Eaton's essay, 'Taste in Bodies and Fat Oppression', also in Part I ('Representation'), shows how our attitudes towards bodies is often couched as a matter of belief about the health dangers of being overweight but is more accurately described as collective habits and dispositions that are formed from 'misguided sentiments' as well as false beliefs (40). Eaton then uses contemporary examples from popular culture (such as the late Leonard Nimoy's *Full Body Project* in photography and Meghan Trainor's song, 'All About That Bass') to show how we might retrain our collective tastes and habits along Aristotelian lines (54-46). This piece aligns well with Deborah L. Rhode's chapter 4, in Part II ('Look'), on 'Appearance as a Feminist Issue', which critiques prevailing beauty practices, defends beauty as a concept, and concludes that while appearance can have a positive value as a source of pleasure it ought not to be used to oppress women in employment, educational, and other contexts.

These views of Beauty, as perceived at the site of the human body, contrast with Glenn Parsons' piece, 'The Merrickites' (chapter 6 in Part II). Parsons considers the traditional idea of Beauty as 'a pleasing perfection' (111), and the conflicting idea (presumably from 'The Merrickites', so-named for Joseph Merrick, the 'Elephant Man') that Beauty is 'the *natural* expression of the soul in the body' (117), before ultimately concluding that human beings cannot avoid the desire to perfect the body (123-124). Tobin Siebers' piece, 'In/Visible: Disability on the Stage', chapter 8 in Part III ('Performance') then offers a nice rebuttal to Parsons, noting that theatre and performance art, such as Mary Duffy's *Venus de Milo*, can change how we perceive Beauty, in fact altering our sense that Beauty and perfection must be linked. *Venus* is a 1990s performance piece where Duffy, a woman born without arms, portrays the famous Greek statue of *Venus*, preserved from antiquity without arms. This piece shows how both Venuses are no less beautiful due to their missing limbs (see 149-150), thereby changing how the audience sees both Beauty and disabled bodies and causing disability to 'emerge as an aesthetic value in itself' (151).

Stephen Davies, in chapter 7 (Part II), 'And Everything Nice', considers and then rejects empirical literature from evolutionary psychology on sexual attraction, ultimately upholding a view of sexual attraction that includes qualities of character as well as perceived fitness for reproduction as relevant features. This chapter shares some connections with Ann J. Cahill's chapter 15 in Part IV, ('Practice'), which makes the claim that sexual desires can reflect and promote social and political inequality (281). Here Cahill defends the claim that sexual desires are an appropriate subject for ethical analysis and posits that a sexual subject can choose to construct their own sexual agency in a way that transforms their desires along ethical lines. Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin's chapter 16, 'Sex Objects and Sexy Subjects: A Feminist Reclamation of Sexiness', also suggests that expanding the ways in which we can be sexually

attracted to others can be both respectful and honoring of another person's full humanity, including their sexuality.

Some of the chapters *Body Aesthetics* stand apart from identity-based socio-political concerns, although these chapters are in the minority overall. Barbara Montero's chapter 10 on aesthetic effortlessness in Part II ('Performance'), for example, addresses the aesthetic value of different kinds of effortlessness, defined as objective, apparent, and intentional ease. When perceived in bodily movements such as those in dance, or attached to intellectual insights, literature, or paintings, she says that 'effortlessness' can be beautiful in how it is felt, perceived, and in the sense of providing 'a superfluity of fitness' (190). Richard Shusterman's 'Somaesthetics and the Fine Art of Eating', chapter 14 in Part III ('Practice'), treats *ingestion*, as distinct from *digestion*, as a practice that can reshape us in mindful aesthetic ways that increase our pleasure as well as provide us with a number of other personal and social benefits.

In 'Body Aesthetics in the Cultivation of Moral Virtues', chapter 12 in Part IV ('Practice'), Yuriko Saito discusses etiquette, manners, and care of others in social settings as essentially ethical in the sense that they entail positive duties towards others and demonstrate respect for others and concern for their feelings and perceptions. She shows how 'beautiful manners', for example, can demonstrate ethical sensitive and awareness in an active and often bodily way when a person attempts to '*gently* draw out the shy stranger, or *quietly* close the window against the cold draft, or *tactfully* change the dangerous topic, or *subtly* reorganize the seating so that the slightly deaf person is able to hear better' (228, quoting Lucinda Holdforth). George Yancy notes how bodily and negative aesthetic reactions to others, such as visceral nausea or other physical feelings of revulsion or disgust, can also arise in social arenas, even when we know in our conscious minds that such feelings are unwarranted. In his 'White Embodied Gazing, the Black Body as Disgust, and the Aesthetics of Un-Suturing', chapter 13 under Part IV ('Performance'), Yancy shows how our bodily schemas of engaging with others socially might be 'sutured' to racialized and false ideas (which he calls the 'white imaginary') (249). He then uses examples of deadly reactions to black persons based on nothing but fear, revulsion, and gut instincts to show the deep harm and injustice that such aesthetic responses can cause. In the end he suggests that the remedy for well-meaning persons who want to be free of these irrational and harmful bodily reactions is to actively undertake 'un-suturing', in which a person opens up bodily and emotionally to vulnerability and instability in order to re-orient and re-make his or her reactions to others (259).

Yancy's chapter shares some commonality with Jill Sigman's piece on the significance of live, body-based performance, appearing earlier in chapter 9 in Part II ('Look'). Sigman's chapter shows how live, body-based performance, in which a moving performer shares the same space with a moving and interacting audience, creates an opportunity for an open and vulnerable sort of community and humanity. In her case study of Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic Tension* (2007), for example, she notes that one viewer was no longer willing to shoot at him via a video interface once he recognized Bilal's existence as a live person (see 156-158). Thus she both demonstrates something essential to the nature of live performance art, that it functions in a different way from its simulacra (such as a video image), but also that a spectator's experience of an artist as a real person can create what she calls 'a *gestalt* shift' in both the space and in the viewer's mode of viewing (158). Thus Sigman suggests one way that the arts might emphasize the aesthetic

condition of the un-sutured and thoroughly human and ethically responsive self to which Yancy referred.

In sum, *Body Aesthetics* contains an overriding theme of how aesthetic connections to the human body form one basis of our understanding and treatment of ourselves and others. And yet each chapter stands on its own as a discrete unit, making it well-suited for teaching either in whole or in part. Taken as a whole, the reader is left with the overall impression that in areas of social, political, and ethical value, as well as in connection with aesthetic value, our bodies and their responses are not at all separate from our thoughts and reflections. This overcomes both the Cartesian legacy of mind-body dualism and the Platonic notion that the beautiful and the good are separable from our cultures, histories, choices, lives, and bodies. Thus the book shows how a richer and more fulfilling aesthetic and ethical life is within reach for anyone who is willing to do the work to retrain how we see, feel, perceive, respond, and behave. And it does so *beautifully*.

Aili Bresnahan
University of Dayton, Department of Philosophy
abresnahan1@udayton.edu