

# BEAUTY BEYOND MEASURE

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The female body is more than an anatomical form; it has come to represent everything that a woman *is*. Beauty is both a woman's being and her worth. In "Woman's Beauty: Put-Down or Power Source," Susan Sontag explores the contradictions and consequences inherent in modern standards of beauty. According to Sontag, beauty's association with women has caused the depreciation of women, just as women's association with beauty has, in turn, caused the depreciation of beauty. Sontag's essay relies heavily on the idea that beauty is universally recognizable, yet she never explains exactly *how* it can be discerned. Therefore, to fully understand Sontag's essay, we must first answer the question that she withholds from us: *is it possible to objectively measure beauty?*

Beauty, for Sontag, presents a "crude trap" that women can fall prey to: the expectation to be more concerned with their outward appearance than with their inner character (246). Sontag finds this tension between inner and outer beauty particularly pernicious since women are first told to focus on their physical appearances and then blamed for doing so. "How easy it is to start off by defining women as caretakers of their surfaces," Sontag writes, "and then to disparage them (or find them adorable) for being 'superficial'" (246). Sontag illuminates, though, that the modern definition of beauty, the separation of exterior and interior, is a rather recent phenomenon that she hypothesizes came along with Christianity. Replacing the notion of "*whole*" beauty that was recognized by the Greeks, Christianity defined beauty in separated, gendered terms, claiming that a woman must be beautiful, and with beauty she forfeits "her very capacity to be objective, professional, authoritative, thoughtful" (245, 246). This new woman is seen simply as the shell of a human, incapable of thought and without personality. So, then, the measure of her beauty resides solely in her physical appearance.

What is still difficult to discern in Sontag's essay, however, is an explanation of how beauty can be identified. Her opaqueness may be essential to her writing, as she works under the societal assumption that female beauty is concrete and identifiable. When she speaks of the "beautiful woman," she refers to "beauty of the [physical] kind," forcing the reader to infer that beauty is definable, even though Sontag, herself, never attempts to define it (245). According to Sontag, beauty is found "not [in] the power to do but the power to attract" (246). Following this logic, perhaps we can measure a woman's beauty by the group of people showing interest in her.

This group can be referred to as a "public," as Michael Warner defines in his essay "Publics and Counterpublics" (413). Warner claims that there are two types of public: *the* public and *a* public. *The* public consists of the entirety of a population, while *a* public is defined as a more specific group, linked by a common discourse. For instance, his essay generates a public (his readers) but does not include the entire public. *A* public, by his definition, can be generated by any type of discourse, including that centered around a woman's appearance. If a woman is beautiful (that is, if she has the power to attract) then her beauty becomes a kind of discourse that binds her to a public. This particular discourse—at once personal and impersonal—is an integral component of Sontag's conception of beauty as "crude trap." A woman makes herself beautiful for no individual but for her public, just as a public speech, as Warner analogizes, is simultaneously "addressed to [the crowd] and addressed to strangers" (418). Sontag seems to be aware of this paradox—though it is not stated directly in her essay—that women are expected to be beautiful not for themselves or even for individual admirers, but rather for those they should attract.

The actual measurement of beauty, then, comes from the public that a woman attracts. A public "commence[s] with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and cease[s] to exist when attention is no longer predicated"; thus, to attract a language, a woman must be beautiful constantly (Warner 419). So long as she maintains her beauty, a woman will also maintain her public. It is easy to apply this definition to famous archetypes of beauty such as Marilyn Monroe and Megan Fox, women who earned themselves a following primarily based on their looks. But even in a small town, the most beautiful women tend to garner attention from males

and females alike. The size of a woman's public is relative to the amount of people she encounters. The larger this ratio is, the more likely it is that people will regard the woman as beautiful. By the same token, once a woman is no longer receiving attention, she will no longer be regarded as beautiful.

Warner's critique of public polling to a woman's beauty illuminates the difficulty in trying to measure a woman's beauty in the absence of her public. He feels that a poll "tries to tell us what the interests, desires, and demands of the public are, without simply inferring them from public discourse" (416). In the same way, beauty can be measured without being explicitly defined. Instead of analyzing a woman's features, attempting to find the most beautiful dimensions and combinations, one can simply judge a woman's beauty by the public interest she garners. There is no need to create a formula for beauty, in the same sense that a poll is superfluous to understanding the public's opinion.

The problem, however, is that we are creating formulas that force women to adhere to them through artificial means. Modern methods of altering the body beyond the natural physical realm—most notably, Photoshopping—have made it possible for a woman's body to be distorted far more than Sontag could have expected when writing her essay. Sontag had neither anticipated nor considered the invention of computer software that would allow people's images to be "edited" at the ease and frequency which they are today; how could she have foreseen such manipulations of physical beauty? From the results of this invention, we can perhaps extrapolate what Sontag struggled to define in her work: a formulaic process by which female beauty can be measured. Models' features, for example, are altered by "touch up" software to the point that their faces are made nearly identical. It is merely an erasing and retouching of their flaws that leaves these individual women ultimately indistinguishable from one another.

When a woman enters a setting in which she is subject to alteration, the space around her exists as a "heterotopia," a concept presented in Michel Foucault's essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (3). According to Foucault, heterotopias are locations that function outside of "ordinary cultural spaces"; "counter-sites" in which symbols and cultural meanings "are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (5, 3). As beauty is a representation of public interest thus reflecting broader cultural meaning, the

attainment of beauty must take place somewhere that both reflects and subverts every aspect of a culture. Cultural values, in relation to female beauty, are reflected, embedded, and formed in the created image. In viewing an altered representation of beauty, the woman is confronted both with her most “ideal” and simultaneously most unattainable self.

Heterotopias seek “to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (8). In a beauty-creating and dictating heterotopia, the body is positioned just right, the arms and legs bent at perfect angles, the flaws concealed. A model undergoes a transformation as her body is manipulated to meet the demands of society. She exists there in real space, yet she is hidden under the unreal guise of her own “beauty.” This contrast, and the cultural claim that these manipulations are in fact necessary, shows the displacement and loss of natural beauty in our society. In an attempt to create this “perfect” space, the “mess” and “jumble” of reality is traded in for a nearly surreal, unattainable standard.

In her rueful claim that it is a woman’s “duty” to be beautiful, Sontag implies that this expectation is true also of older women—the women whose faces and whose bodies have been subject to age (246). Since a woman’s beauty is the product of this heterotopic space that exists both in reality and in the distortions of software and beauty products, it is impossible for a woman to maintain her beauty over the course of a lifetime. The remnants of her beauty may last in the videos and images she leaves behind, yet the very moment of her beauty is fleeting. Each woman will eventually be replaced with a new, younger model. But the images that this woman of the past leaves behind will *still* have their own public. They will be regarded as beautiful relics, despite the contemporary standards by which their worth is measured. The cycle continues. Past representations of beauty will contribute and have a lasting impact on women’s self-perception today.

Women are not only in competition with one another, but also with the images of the women who exist only in advertisements, both past and present. Women are expected to be as beautiful as images created not by nature but by software. A woman standing in her own sort of heterotopia, in front of the mirror as she “makes herself beautiful,” will attempt to match the attraction garnered by famous models. But such a goal is impossible, for an advertise-

ment portrays a space that is “at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (Foucault 4). An image of a modified woman is real in that it captures the actual space which she occupies, yet it is completely fictional as a result of the editing it has undergone. Someone looking at an altered image sees both the real space captured and the fallacy that it has become as a result of its manipulation.

I have seen many videos of women’s bodies being distorted by computer software. Every time, I watch as her torso is pulled longer, her breasts enhanced, her legs lengthened. By making her eyes larger and lashes longer, altering the shape of her nose and airbrushing over her skin, her face is given a false sense of youth. It seems as though a formula has been provided to the creators—a formula based on seeing the “bodies in *parts*, and [evaluating] each part separately. Breasts, feet, hips, waistline, neck, eyes, nose, complexion, hair, and so on” are evaluated and supposedly perfected (Sontag 246). With technology hurtling forward at a startling rate, the beauty industry is staying ahead of the curve, turning individual women into false and sterile versions of themselves. I, as a young adult woman, know that I will be expected to measure myself against these artificial women throughout the next few decades of my life. While it is slightly relieving to know that these women, too, must be altered to reach a societal standard of perfection, it also makes the task seem that much more impossible for the rest of us. Such images exist only in a crafted, false utopia, yet have generated a public much larger than most “real” women will ever attract.

Many women will concede to the fact that their lives are, to a certain extent, consumed by attempts at achieving beauty and generating a public. If, as Sontag states, the way to save beauty “*from* women—and *for* them” is by achieving “critical distance,” this generation has certainly taken a step in the wrong direction (246). Beauty has come to dictate, through beauty-heterotopias, how women lead their daily lives. It has also become easier and regarded as acceptable to consume images of female beauty when we trick ourselves into thinking that this is what women *want* to see. The public interest in these artificial women presents us with a sort of circular logic, considering that such depictions are fueled by a public interest in and a mass consumption of them. Beauty cannot exist without being acknowledged and

recognized, yet how can something be recognized before it is even given a chance to exist? Perhaps systems of measuring beauty, as Warner infers, originated from the notion that certain women were able to attract a public. Now, women seek to embody what they have *learned* to recognize as beauty—a feat as tragically impossible as it is necessary for a woman to be considered successful.

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#### WORKS CITED

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