



Susan Ossman. *Three Faces of Beauty: Casablanca, Paris, Cairo.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002. x + 204 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8223-2881-0.



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The Unbearable Lightness of Beauty: Towards a Dynamic Methodology for Transnational Phenomena

Susan Ossman's book comes as a deep reflection on a subject that is too many times categorized as superficial, even frivolous, in spite of many works existent on related topics. *Three Faces of Beauty* is a book with several levels of lecture. It may be read as pleasurable as a novel, as detailed as a classic ethnography, as concentrated as a lecture that raises fundamental questions about the relations between gendered bodies, places, and ideas of modernity.

This book is of high interest for scholars preoccupied by issues of gender and the Middle East because of its very purpose: the author intends to engage with theorists of modernity--like Habermas--who offer a model of universality centered around spaces of masculinity, unmarked as such. Susan Ossman also intends to engage methodologically with the disciplinary reflex of mapping the world into "relevant" regions that are to be studied separated and in depth--and it may seem at a first glance that one of the three cities in the title

looks unfit in the enumeration. The book is a vivid proof that "[p]rojects of linking can help us to recognize alternatives to standard regions of expertise and study.... Do these divisions help us understand how people live? Their life choices and chances?" (p. 3)

This book is welcome in the larger context of researches centered on trans-regional phenomena that call into question classic methodological choices. From the perspective of methods Susan Ossman's book may be considered close to recent works like those of Al-Ali (2000) or Malti-Douglas (2001).[1] Both authors focus on one central theme (secularism, respective Islam) analyzing it in intersection with gender, and trans-locality. The choice of theme places *Three Faces of Beauty* in line with works on fashion and image like those of Moors (2000) or Eicher (1995).[2]

Conceptions of beauty and ideas about producing it are central to this study. Beauty appears as a total social phenomenon that reveals a variety of relations between bodies and places. The book starts with a description of the desired "enlightened body" and its image, similar and yet dif-

ferent, in Casablanca, Paris, and Cairo. Ossman starts with the intuitive binary "en-lightened"/heavy, traditional/modern, local/global, only to dismantle it along the lecture. Moving across time and space the author proceeds with the history of spaces that create beauty. Those interested in the evolution of hammams and the role they play in the structuring of public/private space and gender relations both in Europe and North Africa will find an interesting account in chapter 2 of the book. The next chapter is of most interest for the debate around the ideas of modernity and the male dominance of public spaces. Taken for granted as spaces of equals (Habermas), salons, cafes as well as scientific circles are shown in fact as reproducing a certain type of universality having as exponent the male rational individual (pp. 72-79). Beauty salons, somehow at the origins of these spaces, come as both contrast and enlightening for the articulation between objects (mirror), organizing principles (shame), and philosophical concepts (ethics). In male discourses, femininity and shame oppose ideals of democracy and fairness (see pp. 77-78, and the references to Abu-Lughud and Gessous).

Chapter 4 constitutes a detailed ethnographic description of three types of beauty salons identified in each of the three locations: the neighborhood salons, the fast salons, and the brand salons. While the first type operate in the logic of proximity and shame, and the second one may be seen as a mirror reflection of the "age of mechanical reproduction," the brand salons make "sense only in terms of networks that spread out from radiant centers of renown" (p. 121). Chapter 5 is in a way resuming the empirical work and clearly places the role of shame, springing from the real or imagined eye of the male dominant figure, in the constructions and uses of beauty in relation with the world, in between the three cities. At the same time the lecturer is prepared for the methodological step of the next, and last, chapter. "Must we admit that noticing three kinds of salons, three worlds, is a matter of thinking about who can see

what when? Bargaining may be very well be a part of these movements.... Moving from one world to another might turn the 'significant' into 'nonsense,' but it could also introduce changes in both. Worlds are constantly in the process of sharing, copying, critiquing, and altering each other's values and meanings" (pp. 138-139).

How will we, as scholars, produce ourselves as beautiful en-lightened bodies able to move in-between the multiple worlds of significance and nonsense that form the web of our world? This seems to be the ultimate question of this book. Marcel Mauss's remarks on body habits crosses the entire text, and becomes relevant in different points, but only to be subtly equated, at the end, with the heavy background bodies: "Hierarchies of worlds and passages among them are part of what makes a city or an individual story unique. But to grasp this uniqueness we must abandon the urge to immediately identify a place with a way of walking" (p. 161).[3]

Three Faces of Beauty is a book that should attract a multidisciplinary public, and it may be particularly interesting for those interested in gender and stereotypes about the Middle East. Fulfilling her promise, the author does not only "dismantle pernicious stereotypes" (p. 7), but methodologically points a different way of looking at the dynamic of the process of creating types. Discreetly but convincingly punctuated with illustrations, this book may be used as a landmark in studies focusing on body, gender, modernity, or social phenomena linked to globalization. In spite of the sometimes hard to follow web of argument, the academic reader may be entirely satisfied by the richness of footnotes and bibliography that reflects the author's theoretic and geographic "parcours." A glossary of terms proves to be handy for those not familiar with Arabic, or with technical terms of the beauty industry.

Notes

[1]. Al-Ali, Nadjé Sadig. 2000. *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian*

Women's Movement. Cambridge Middle East Studies, 14. Cambridge, U.K, and New York: Cambridge University Press; Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. 2001. *Medicines of the Soul: Female Bodies and Sacred Geographies in a Transnational Islam*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

[2]. Moors, Annelies. 2000. "Embodying the Nation: Maha Saca's Post-Intifada Postcards." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, no. 5: 881-87; Eicher, Joanne B., ed. 1995. *Dress and Ethnicity*. Oxford and Washington, D.C.: Berg.

[3]. Mauss, Marcel. 1950. "Body Techniques." *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris: Quadrige, PUF, 1985. Translated by Ben Brewster. Also, *Economy and Society* 2, no.1, 1973.

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