

# Beauty and other deep superficial desires

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In our affluent society, we can be said to have everything: our work is not backbreaking. In fact, working conditions are good, and many of us strive to do good work. Technology has advanced so far that we are living longer and better lives. We have come to address many social ills, such as poverty and social forms of oppression, like racism. But more than ever, we Americans seem more and more unhappy and unsatisfied.

What accounts for the disparity between the relative comfort and affluence of our lives, and the inversely proportional pleasure we take in living our lives?

In his essay "The Progress of Paradox," Greg Easterbrook argues that a general discontent and alienation in our culture today come to us because our lives are filled with choices (a glut of choices) but have little meaning. Easterbrook seems to adopt a view of human beings as naturally pessimistic (if left to their own devices), and urges Americans to be more optimistic and to return to seeking more transcendent experiences that are currently offered by the cornucopia of sex and violence that passes for American culture.

Easterbrook is a self-avowed Christian, so talk of pursuing transcendence is code for religious faith, but may be forgiven this given the work that he puts into making his arguments through evidence. Just because, as he puts it, millions of Americans can afford to spend a lot of money on vanity induced plastic surgery, such as "the navel touch-up" (Easterbrook, 402) does not mean that this is how our resources should or could best be spent.

We should instead turn out considerable resources and wealth to trying to make a difference in the world of the less advantaged peoples of the world; this might be worth while and more fulfilling than the choices we seem to be making instead. Where Easterbrook interprets the rise of elective plastic surgery as a superficial and meaningless activity, a sign of our devolution into decadence, Naomi Wolf, on the other hand, sees the beauty industry's practices as full of meaning.

For a woman who considers getting plastic surgery, the question is not a superficial or vacuous one. She writes: “ The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance” (Wolf, 489). Beauty is never skin deep; that is, one reason why a woman might want to be beautiful is because her exterior appearance is taken to be a sign of her worth and of her interior personhood. A beautiful woman is thought to be a good woman, one who is disciplined and whose life is in proportion.

This is evidenced in work that is done with women (and increasingly more and more men) who suffer from eating disorders. These individuals report that, for them, their eating disorders are about control, about showing the world that they have great discipline and are inherently good, disciplined, and virtuous in the particularly American protestant work ethic (See Bordo below, whom I read for another class).

Where Easterbrook fails to see underneath the surface of the plastic surgery craze, Naomi wolf shows us that it is behaviors that are the aim, not simply appearance. The gendered analysis is important because we can begin to question why it is women's preoccupation with image that is taken as the chief example of frivolous vacuity, when surely men's investment is the

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pornography industry can be read as a much more morally objectionable practice.

In any case, all of these practices can be taken together and read as signs, as symbols by which culture communicates a code of acceptability to its members. According to popular semiotics professor and cultural critic Jack Solomon: " America is a nation of fantasizers, often preferring the sign to the substance and easily enthralled by a veritable Fantasy Island of commercial illusions" (Solomon, 413). What Solomon describes is an America closer to that imagined by Easterbrook, but minus the normativity.

That is, Solomon sees meaning in every little sign or symbol in culture. Either all is surface play of meaning without depth, or all these signs point to a depth beyond the immediately apparent. According to this viewpoint, the problem of our culture is not that we have lost touch with some transcendent being (read: God), but that we prefer not to be in communion with anything grander than a pair of Ferragamo shoes or a Ferrari car. We love our status symbols and our wealth, and the dazzling display satisfies us, if only for a short while.

We are a nation of dreamers and we will believe in this dream of prosperity for as long as we possibly can. Bibliography Bordo, Susan. (2004) " Reading the slender body. " Unbearable Weight. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. Easterbrook, Greg. (2003) The Progress Paradox. New York: Random House. Solomon, Jack. (1990) The Sign Of Our Times. New York: HarperCollins. Wolf, Naomi. (2002) The Beauty Myth. New York: Harper Perennial.