

Some Notes on Make-up

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* *Foreword.* The following are a series of notes and observations on the theme of make-up. I have been interested in the topic for a long time but have noticed some striking trends and uses of make-up here in Japan that have encouraged me to pursue the subject. In recent years in Europe especially it has become increasingly common for women to wear very little or in many cases no make-up at all. One of the causes of this, it seems fair to say, is the development of critical discourses that actively question problems of gender and its symbols.

In Japan, while women are given more opportunities to redefine their positions in society and their roles as women, the overwhelming (and stifling) culture of make-up persists. Only step onto a train to discover a world divided visibly between made-up faces and bare ones—the latter being of course the property of men. There are very few women who navigate their social environments without make-up. Men do so as a matter of course—and yet there does not seem to be any curiosity as to why this should be. The fact that many (if not most) women are unable to imagine leaving the house with their faces unmade seems to me to present a crisis for Japanese society, wherein women—unlike men—cannot be comfortable with their faces. Women in such a culture of make-up are made to feel as if their bare skin is *not enough* for their interaction with others. This attitude towards one's body necessarily places women at a disadvantage unknown to men, who are free to bare their faces without fear of censure; and this phenomenon in itself deserves critical attention.

These notes are very preliminary in their form, and quite wide in their scope, but I at least hope to highlight some of the aspects of the problem of make-up that interest me and that I plan to pursue in further papers. Unless noted otherwise, I am referring to the obvious trends of modern make-up as they appear in Japan.

* *Make-up as the standard.* Make-up has become the standard and, unless one is a child or a man, one is expected to meet the demands of this standard. If a woman should dare to appear in public with her bare, unmade face showing, she is immediately marked out for censure. The woman is asked if she has been busy recently or whether she has not caught a cold, or perhaps someone comments quite innocently that she looks tired (censure's best disguise is concern and pity for others).

She has deviated from the standard, which is not simply an aesthetic one, but a moral one as well—one that demands a certain dutiful obedience. And so unless one is sick, exhausted or terribly pressed for time, the demands of this standard weigh constantly upon us.

The made-up face is the crystallization of this standard—a state that must be reached at any cost; a zero-state that women must climb to *from beneath*, precisely because their unmade faces are *not enough* and shine forth as a fundamental lack in women. It is only after arriving at this point that women become qualified to appear before others—short of this, their very skin, in its offensive nudity, becomes the site of their disqualification as social beings. (Indeed, for how many women is the thought of leaving the house unmade unthinkable?)

* *Faceless women*. Women, bereft of a penis, are apparently envious of men. Freud locates this fundamental lack as the beginning of feminine sexuality (cf. Freud's *On Narcissism: An Introduction*). In our current context, and through the lenses of the culture of make-up, we might say that *woman has no face*. This lack is of course not a physical one—stemming from some objective deformity, as in Kobo Abe's *The Face of Another*—but one that is forced upon women as a burden they must bear as social beings. When this lack appears is questionable, but female infants and children seem ignorant of it. At some point, however, women are given to understand that their bare face is *not enough*. The woman's face does not represent an absence that can (or should) be tolerated, but represents rather an offensive negativity that must at all costs be remedied. This absence becomes a positive presence in the eyes of the world, which are forced to gaze upon incomplete creation. Burn victims often suffer the most—not because of their own deformity but—because of the discomfort and anxiety that their appearance seems to evoke in others. And so the face becomes a space where duty and guilt are born.

* *The lack of a face*. This lack, of course, is not one that can ever be filled—precisely because (unlike an amputated limb or missing tooth) it can never be said to properly exist. Even the most excellent make-up fades and smudges and must constantly be touched up and reapplied, as if one's face were forever sliding down a vertical scale below zero—above which one can never climb....

* *Men*. Consider the freedom that men are allowed to enjoy by the very fact that they are not obliged to participate in the culture of make-up. Even the act of leaving the house—to take a mundane

example—is one of comparative ease for men, who are not forced to “put on their faces.” The example of taking more time to prepare for an outing may seem trivial, but its significance is anything but. It means that men—because they can bare their naked faces—are that much freer to move between the private and the public realms, making their human interactions that much smoother and condition-free. In nautical terms, women’s ships will always be kept longer at harbor—forced to fulfill an extra and completely superfluous set of conditions for travel at sea—while men’s ships are already striking out towards the horizon....

Of course it is not accurate to say that men are completely free from aesthetic standards and most men will not leave the house in tattered clothes and with unwashed hair. It should be noted, however, that while women fulfill all of the standards that men do—regarding apparel, hair care, cleanliness, etc.—they are also bound to *fulfill more*. These extra duties are of course arbitrary, and there is no reason why only women should be responsible for them—and yet this is how things stand: the duties that the culture of make-up enforces are the exclusive burden of women.

* *The democracy of the face*. There is something basically democratic about the culture of make-up, which tells its subjects that no matter how beauty-impaired they may be, make-up can cure them. Make-up guides and magazines constantly tell their desperate readers that anyone (“even you”) can *become* beautiful with the appropriate cosmetic techniques and products. No one is denied this salvation. But the hidden premise to all of this is that if you can *become beautiful*, then at the outset you are already described as something fundamentally different. Anyone doing less than what these make-up guides suggest is by default *unbeautiful*—in the same way as when citizens in democracies fail to exercise their democratic right to vote they are essentially *undemocratic*.

* *The roadway between persons*. Disguises are antagonistic to communion between people (in fact this is the very function of the disguise) because it puts the undisguised party at a basic disadvantage, namely, that of not knowing the identity and expression of the other. Make-up, on the other hand, purports to facilitate communion with others—insofar as it is the condition for leaving the house at all.

* *The space of the body*. The space of the body is not of equal weight, as if each gram of flesh corresponded exactly to its significance to the subject. Indeed, our legs or backsides rarely receive

the attention we give to our faces, which seem to possess a specific gravity much higher than the other regions of our body. Much of our being is focused into our faces and it is for this reason that wearing make-up and wearing accessories (such as earrings, bracelets and necklaces) cannot be understood as identical phenomena. The face is the primary locus of communication between bodies and it is where the gaze usually settles. Altering the aspect of the face, for example, is fundamentally different than altering the aspect of the hands.

The area in which cosmetics are put to work attests to this phenomenal fact. Modern make-up occupies the face and usually spreads no further than the neck, and certainly not beneath the clothing of the individual. Why make-up confines itself to these limits and does not occupy hands or ears is perhaps a question worth asking. The solution, it seems to me, can be found in the fact that make-up already assumes the gaze of the other as well as what this gaze will concern itself with—namely, the face. The gaze does not penetrate beyond the fabric of our clothing, and neither does it linger on the extremities, and so this skin remains *unmade*. Make-up anticipates that the face will command the attention of the other—and indeed it preemptively insists upon this. ...

* *Women and beauty*. Recently there has been a flux of neon-clad students entreating passersby to donate money to help a young girl who has suffered severe burns all over her body. As with most charities, a certain aesthetic is already at work in their campaign (just as those starving in Africa are *always* young, bloated children who stare pleadingly into the camera; middle-aged men and women—equally hungry, one assumes—are rarely shown). The slogan they cry is something to the effect of “Save the young girl’s life!” The assumption behind this is of course that it is somehow more serious when a girl’s skin is injured than when a boy’s skin is. Indeed, one often hears people talk about how awful it is for girls to be marked with scars—and all the more terrible if those scars should veil an entire body. We are expected to understand that injuries—especially to the face—are of more significance when the victim is a woman, the idea being that women, bereft of their beauty, have little else to offer. This seems to be another one of the effective forces behind the culture of make-up.

* *Masks and make-up*. The mask is known as a mask and announces itself as such. The implication is that there is also a face beneath it (one of the conditions for any mask). In this sense, the mask’s function is straightforward, for while it covers the face it does not pretend to *be the face*. Make-up,

on the other hand, operates in a much more complex fashion, incorporating both the art of concealment and deception. The made-up face posits itself *as the face*. So while masks act as promissory notes for something other, something more fundamental beneath (i.e. the face); make-up pretends to be the subject's face (i.e. *the real thing*). And thus while it is acceptable to ask about someone's mask, the same is not true for someone's make-up. One of the primary goals of make-up is to conceal itself, but it can only accomplish this through its very presence. Conversely, make-up is most noticeable when it is absent.

* "Make-up—making a face—is a denial of the real face, but a gallant effort to get a little closer to others by transforming the expression. But when a woman's make-up obtains the desired effect, is she jealous of it? Women do not particularly seem to be. It is a very curious thing." (Kobo Abe, *The Face of Another*, p.216)

It is indeed a strange fact that most women do not seem jealous of their made-up faces. Perhaps it is because they themselves are the artists and thus would feel no aversion to their works being praised. The difference between the artist and the woman, however, seems to be that while the artist produces something to be viewed and praised *as a creation* (and not as something natural), the woman, on the other hand, creates her face with the intention to *efface* every trace of creation, as if the made-up face were her natural possession. And when we effectively cover the path by which we arrive at a place, we can make as if we had always been there. Make-up does not announce itself as a creation *precisely* because it attempts to show itself as the real face. And thus for the woman, this face *is* her face. It is not as if she experiences her made-up face as a mask, underneath which another, more real surface is hidden. On the contrary, her relationship to her made-up face is one of identification—"This is me"—and since it is foolish to be jealous of oneself, the made-up face does not become an object of jealousy or envy for the subject.

Nevertheless, if we focus on the fact that fundamentally, the made-up face *is not* the real face, and is rather a denial of that face—then the relationship between the two becomes problematic. Indeed, when a woman is praised for her beauty, does the fact that this beauty is an artificial one—i.e. one made through artifice—affect how she feels about said praise? Does the fact that her bare face is concealed by this artifice present a problem? What exactly is being praised? Does the woman feel that it is she—and no other artificial one—be praised? And how does made-up woman's experience of such a compliment differ from a man's?

* *The problem.* There is of course nothing in make-up itself that warrants criticism—understood in its banal routine, make-up is little more than the application of paints and powders to the skin, and no more remarkable than bowling or making coffee. What is problematic is the significance that cosmetics have come to possess in modern (Japanese) culture. The culture of cosmetics does not just address women aesthetically. It speaks to women also as moral subjects bound up in the discourse of manners and duties. And so it not merely a problem for the individual should she refuse to wear make-up to the workplace, it is more significantly a problem for those around her, as if the naked flesh of her skin were itself an insult directed at her coworkers and clients. The woman who refuses to wear make-up is thus, ipso facto, found guilty for her noncompliance in the culture of cosmetics. She has, in other words, failed in her duty to those around her by the very state of skin. In dress code manuals for the service industry, there are sections devoted to the impression one's make-up ought to create (warm, friendly, not harsh, etc.) but not one syllable addressed to the possibility of wearing *no make-up at all*.

References

Kobo, A. Saunders, E. (trans) (1966). *The Face of Another*, Vintage International, New York.

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