Agnolo Bronzino's *Portrait of Eleonora von Toledo with Her Son Giovanni*, painted around 1545, sits at the intersection of idealizations of femininity and political power.

IMAGE: AGNOLO BRONZINO / PUBLIC DOMAIN

THE POWER OF THE FLAWLESS

TEXT: TANJA BEUTHIEN

Many people primarily associate the term “beauty” with matters of taste. Hana Gründler and her research group at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz are investigating how ideals of beauty – from the Renaissance to the AI era – reflect social norms and biases, working at the intersection of those norms, totalitarian propaganda, and digital body imagery.

It's about beauty. And politics. It's about the image of a beautiful woman. And genes. It's about power: Painted around 1545 by Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of Eleonora von Toledo with Her Son Giovanni* shows the wife of Cosimo I de' Medici, the Duke of Florence, with a flawless complexion, wearing sumptuous clothing and magnificent jewelry. Bronzino knew the beauty treatises of his time. For example, Agnolo Firenzuola's *Dialogues on the Beauty of Women* sets down in minute detail the color of the forehead (white), the lips (red), the ears (rosy), and the cheeks (radiant). In this respect, Eleonora von Toledo embodies a Western ideal of femininity – even down to her elongated neck. But that's not all. In his theory of beauty, Firenzuola drew on a number of sources, among them Marsilio Ficino, a fifteenth-century Italian philosopher, translator, and humanist who discerned the divine in the very nature of beauty. He explained how inner beauty is mirrored in outward appearance, invoking, among other things, Christian virtues and the conceptions of beauty in Plato, who sees in outward harmony a reflection of the state of the soul. For her contemporaries, then, the duchess is not merely an attractive woman, but a visible embodiment in her appearance of the true and the good. With her arm around her young son, she also signals the continuity of the dynasty. In other words, power.

"In Bronzino's portrait, the aesthetic category of beauty becomes a moral one," says Hana Gründler. "And ultimately, that makes it political too." At the MPS' Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz , Gründler and her team study the relationship between art, visuality, and ethics. Her research group is called Ethico-Aesthetics of the Visual and engages with Renaissance art and philosophy, the manipulative visual worlds of authoritarian states, and the latter's artistic counterimages in Eastern Europe – extending to AI aesthetics today and the ethical problems they raise. "Even if beauty may at first seem a subjective sensation, it is always historically and culturally conditioned. In that sense, objects – including art objects – and the built environment don't just play a crucial role in shaping an individual's aesthetic perception and attunement," Gründler says. "They invariably also help shape the ethical and political constitution of society." In this respect, it is also important to ask whether, and how, beauty and social norms are misused as propaganda. And how they fuel discrimination and social injustice.

Equating Beauty with Goodness and Truth

The Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (KHI) holds a manuscript of Marsilio Ficino's treatise De Amore, created around 1475; Hana Gründler has only recently worked with it. "Ficino's theory of love holds that beauty is the idea that radiates most strongly. We are drawn to it; that is why we fall in love." It is this that elevates human

PHOTO: ARCHIVE OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IN PRAGUE, CC BY 4.0

The Spartakiad in Prague, 1955: such mass events staged an aestheticized, collective body ideal that also expressed an ideology subordinating the individual to a state-standardized ideal.

perception and aesthetics. "At the same time," Gründler says, "there is an equating of beauty with goodness and truth, which carries normative implications: those who do not conform to these ideals are devalued morally and intellectually." As another example, the image historian and philosopher points to the moral dialogue by the art theorist and humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), *On the Tranquility of the Soul (Profugiorum ab erumna libri tres)*, the first German edition of which she curated, introduced and annotated three years ago with Katharine Stahlbuhk and other members of her research group. This text, written around 1445, likewise addresses the ethical dimension of the aesthetic: three friends – the elderly humanist Agnolo Pandolfini; Niccola, about sixty, a scion of the Medici banking family; and the author's alter ego – set out for a walk through Florence. The harmony of the just-completed cathedral, the orderly cityscape, and the gentle Tuscan landscape lift their spirits. "One can read Alberti as saying that the beauty and well-structured nature of urban space also has an impact on the individual and society – here, aesthetics and ethics are mutually dependent and help shape the political landscape," Gründler says. The cathedral's order of columns, for instance, becomes for him a symbol of community: just as the column supports the architrave, the individual, through an "upright" bearing, upholds society. The dirty and the derelict, the beggars and the poor, who also populate public space, the streets, hospitals, and church porticoes are deliberately deployed by Alberti as a negative counterexample to idealized images of bodies and of the city.

But even in Alberti's day there were artistic counterpoints to highly idealized beauty. Consider Donatello's sculpture *Mary Magdalene*, in which the subject is depicted as an emaciated penitent toothless, ascetic, with a sunken face and a unique, intense gaze. "The sight of such emaciated bodies was probably not unfamiliar to the contemporaries of Alberti and Donatello. But the wooden statue breaks with convention because of the extremity of its portrayal." An overly unvarnished, overly realistic work was considered inappropriate. "At the same time, it brings home to viewers the saint's theological complexity – as a pillar of the Christian faith and as a figure between sin and grace, eroticism and asceticism," says Katharine Stahlbuhk, a scientific collaborator in Gründler's team who is currently researching Mary Magdalene. "Tellingly, the painter and art theorist Giorgio Vasari, who became known in the sixteenth century for his artists' biographies, described Donatello's sculpture as *molto bella* – very beautiful – precisely because of the superb rendering of her abstinence and fasting."

What, then, is beauty? Is it the harmony, balance, and symmetry invoked by the ancient philosopher Plato, whose theories of beauty and love shaped Renaissance philosophers and art theorists such as Ficino and Alberti? Or is it the sculptor Donatello's realism, which lets viewers apprehend Mary Magdalene's "pure soul"? When and at which moments in history has the concept of beauty been standardized, idealized, and used as a political instrument – or abused?

PHOTO: PICTURE ALLIANCE/UNITED ARCHIVES | UNITED ARCHIVES/IFTN

Still from the film *Daisies* by the Czech film director Věra Chytilová. The two protagonists rebel against ideals of femininity and socialist standardization – but they are defeated.

Rulers of totalitarian states – such as Hitler in Nazi Germany and Stalin in the Soviet Union – have always promoted a normative concept of beauty. The perfect, steeled physique stood at the center of visual propaganda, staged by Leni Riefenstahl in films such as *Olympia* (1936) or modeled by Arno Breker. The sculpture *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, created by Vera Mukhina in 1937 for the Soviet Union's pavilion at the Paris World's Fair, presents a similarly heroicized human ideal. The National Socialists also branded anything that ran counter to this ideal of beauty and aesthetics as "degenerate art." "That is a totalitarianism of the perfect, unassailable, militarized body," says Hana Gründler. "Weakness, sensitivity, illness, alleged "otherness " – all of that is eliminated from this vi-

→

sual world, which is also a world of ideas, an ideology. It is about subordinating the individual to an aestheticized, collective, state-standardized body ideal. Ultimately, it always also entails suppressing whatever is not an accepted part of society." This can be seen, for example, in the Spartakiads: state-orchestrated mass sporting events promoted by the Soviet Union and, from 1955, also held in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (ČSSR).

Body, Art, Critique

"Many practitioners of body art in Eastern Europe resisted this propagandistic normativization and ideologization of the body in the 1970s and 1980s," says Gründler. One example is the Czech artist Petr Štembera, who staged a radical, participatory performance in June 1980 that directly referenced the Spartakiad. The artist also pushed his own body to its very limits in many works. In 1974, in his performance *Narcissus*, he experimented with sleep and food deprivation, and even injured himself. "Of course this is not about beauty; it is about driving one's own body and art, as instruments of critique, to their limits. And about rebelling against idealized conceptions of the body."

SUMMARY

The category of beauty has never been neutral. In the Renaissance, it was understood as an expression of the true and the good.

Totalitarian regimes likewise relied on standardized body images to stage power and suppress deviation.

Art has repeatedly confronted these norms and offered counter-images – from Donatello's Mary Magdalene to subversive films in Eastern Europe.

Today, AI systems amplify stereotypical ideals and social norms.

Beauty thus remains a category that is highly charged, culturally and politically.

The Czech film director Věra Chytilová did so as well: in her 1966 film *Daisies*, she shows two women she calls Marie 1 and Marie 2, who rebel against ideals of femininity and the social standardization imposed by socialism. They eat nonstop, stuff food into their mouths with both hands, climb right into the buffet, torch the room, and reduce men to pin-ups. "An incredibly disruptive act," says Gründler. "The film was part of the Czechoslovak New Wave, in which many avant-garde films were made, and it faced an uphill battle from the outset after being denounced as antisocialist. Naturally, after Warsaw Pact troops invaded the ČSSR in 1968, the regime banned it." Nevertheless, the film continued to circulate underground. "From today's perspective, the film is virtually a feminist manifesto." But it ends bitterly: ultimately the two immoderate, excessive women are bound and bundled back up; they are normalized and made to fit society.

"The two Maries in *Daisies* celebrate freedom, nonconformity, and the empowerment of their own bodies. And the power to control their own body images," says Gründler, who is writing *Ästhetiken der Freiheit*, a book on the subculture of the ČSSR. But where do things stand today with self-determination? With disruption and difference? Ours is an era in which the heroic, muscular image of the soldier is back – and not only in Putin's Russia. An era in which the White House published a list of objectionable works in the Smithsonian museums that it wants to remove – among them, *Trans Forming Liberty*, Amy Sherald's portrait of the trans model and performance artist Arewà Basit. Will deviation survive at all, now that AI-based image-generation tools filter ideals of beauty from billions of training data points to produce an apparently perfect model?

"As a scholar of visual culture, you immediately think of the famous ancient legend of the painter Zeuxis, who fashioned Helen – the most beautiful of women – from five young women who posed for him," says Gründler. "He took a different feature from each of them, a different body part. That reflects the notion that beauty can be selected from a multitude of bodies. By a man, tellingly." Today's AI image tools generate something similar when they produce hyperrealistic, "sexy influencer" types, long-haired, large-breasted models who advertise on Insta-

"The power of images is enormous. More and more people are trying to shape their bodies to match their simulated ideal."

HANA GRÜNDLER

PHOTO: PICTURE ALLIANCE / ZUMAPRESS.COM | NANCY KASZERMAN

The painting *Trans Forming Liberty* by the painter Amy Sherald shows the trans model and performance artist Arewà Basit. It appears on a list of objectionable works in the Smithsonian museums published by the White House.

gram. Users can even create these for themselves with the app *AI Beauty*. Together with her colleague Rafael Uriarte, head of the Digital Humanities Lab at the KHI, Gründler organized a workshop in April 2024 that also discussed how AI systems reproduce and reinforce Western beauty norms. "We should not lose sight of the issue of who actually dominates the AI scene," Gründler adds. According to a 2023 study by the United Nations cultural organization Unesco, only about twelve percent of AI researchers worldwide were women.

"Quite apart from this tightly standardized, male-coded gaze and the homogenization of the female body image, we know how strongly AI-generated images influence young women. The power of images is enormous. More and more people are trying to shape their bodies – surgically, even – to match their simulated ideal," says Gründler. Nothing could be further from the utopian, uninhibited vision of *Daisies*, or from the ascetic ideals of Donatello or Petr Štembera.

Even today, as in Bronzino's time, the portrayal of a beautiful woman is always political. And at times it's also about the "right" genes, as the case of a recent ad campaign with the prominent American actress Sydney Sweeney shows. The slogan read: "Sydney Sweeney has great jeans," a pun on jeans and genes. In an accompanying line, Sweeney – blue-eyed, blond, and white – talked about the inheritance of eye and hair color. Left-leaning voices on social media said the message recalled racist stereotypes; the right quickly retaliated that "woke people" were tearing down a good-looking American woman. Trump then affirmed that the actress – who is also a registered Republican voter – had "the HOTTEST ad out there." The jeans brand's stock soared at record pace, while Sweeney's new film flopped. "Beauty is always bound up with body politics and power," says Hana Gründler. "It has always been culturally and historically conditioned and is therefore normatively, ideologically, and politically charged. It is a problematic category in the 20th and in the 21st century – as this example shows. And it always has been."

www.mpg.de/podcasts/schoenheit (in German)