



Celebrity Bodies

Just months after the fatal heart attacks of two Uruguayan fashion models, one of whom collapsed within seconds after stepping off the runway, having eaten nothing but lettuce leaves in the months preceding her death, *Titanic* star Kate Winslet announced that she is suing *Grazia* magazine for slander. The British tabloid accused her of undergoing a crash diet at a fat farm in Santa Monica, a claim that the 5'8", 119-130-pound actress categorically denies, and with good reason, since she is by most estimates, despite her well-founded reputation of having one of the healthier appetites in Hollywood, already between fifteen to twenty pounds underweight. She is famous for banning fashion magazines from her house lest her seven-year-old daughter fall prey to their anorexic aesthetic, a sentiment with which her countryman, the 5'9", 120-pound Mischa Barton, herself anywhere from twenty to forty pounds underweight, heartily agrees, stating that "the unhealthy look should be abandoned" and "it's wrong to try to stifle womanly curves." The rail-thin actress has, however, done a remarkable job in quelling her own and is considered by some to look sickly and malnourished, a charge she dismisses, summing up her philosophy of dieting in the reassuring assertion that "I don't not eat anything."

Others are more candid. Kate Bosworth was recently spotted at an expensive Hollywood restaurant openly dining on cigarettes, bottled water, and—the main course—a wedge of iceberg lettuce, a repast as frugal as former model Cleo Glyde's green grape diet: three for breakfast, two for snacks, and six for binges. The typical American woman is 5'4", weighs 140 pounds, and wears a size 14; the typical fashion model is seven inches taller, twenty-three pounds lighter, and twelve to fourteen sizes smaller. In an MSN photo essay about the fluctuating weights of Hollywood actors, an alarming shot of "Men in Black" star Lara Flynn Boyle is captioned with the snide but accurate comment "the jewelry she was wearing weighed more than she did,"

while a sickly photo of Selma Blair shows the "Legally Blonde" star looking "so slim she could seek cover behind the nearest swizzle stick." Teri Hatcher continues to flaunt the gams of a sub-Saharan famine victim while Calista Flockhart shocked the nation at the 1998 Emmys by wearing a backless gown that turned her spindly frame into a ghoulish anatomy lesson, an annotated diagram of frail scapulae and jutting vertebrae.

Few men are aroused by these stylishly accessorized carcasses, but their lack of sex appeal is what makes the new Hollywood aesthetic unique. It has been almost entirely detached from the biological function of beauty, that of attracting males. It is a man-made aesthetic, or, rather, a woman-made aesthetic, since the desire of men for voluptuous childbearing hips and pendulous breasts seems all but irrelevant to its look. Feminists have long complained that the so-called "beauty myth" consists entirely of male lust, of men looking at women as potential sex objects, subservient to their selfish demands. In fact, however, Hollywood is about women looking at women, not as sex objects, as a means for fulfilling the species's genetic mission, but as clothes hangers, as display mannequins for product lines. Men and their needs are entirely beside the point, which is why the aesthetic is so sterile, so sexless, because it has freed the female body from male desire, liberated it from its biological status as an organ of sex, which has given way to the commercial view of it as a wearer of commodities, a pretty face stuck on a stick. In many respects, the recent marriage of anorexia and glamour represents the final dehumanization of women who were once reduced to their bodies, objectified as tools for propagation, but have now been deprived of their corporeality altogether. A vision of the female body dictated by male desire would be far healthier and more attractive than one dictated by the imperatives of the closet, by manufacturers whose primary concern is showing off their goods to best effect.

How much influence does this aesthetic have on the general public? Such well-known personalities as the withered Nicole Richie or the cadaverous Victoria "Posh" Beckham, a.k.a. "Skeletal Spice," are often cited as the chief culprits behind the epidemic of eating disorders among the young but the fact remains that, while as many as one hundred thousand teenage girls suffer from excessive dieting, two out of three Americans are overweight and an estimated sixty

million, or 20 percent of the population, are obese. Are Hollywood and the fashion world responsible for our ever-increasing girth or is the effect of our obsession with what many have dubbed "the rich and famished" as open to debate as the influence of television violence and the Xbox on actual crime statistics? Does Lindsay Lohan's waspish waistline make us skip meals and induce vomiting just as *Mortal Kombat* presumably makes us pick up assault rifles and open fire? How direct is the impact of Hollywood on our bodies, as direct as the *Daily Mirror* recently suggested when it ran a photograph of an emaciated Keira Knightley next to the headline "If Pictures Like This One of Keira Carried a Health Warning, My Darling Daughter Might Have Lived"? If many adolescents seek "thinspiration" from such desiccated waifs as Jessica Alba, who has admitted to being on a diet since age twelve, or Elisa Donovan, who dwindled to a mere 90 pounds after eating nothing but coffee, water, and toast for two years, the majority of Americans seem to be following the lead of reformed foodaholic Tom Arnold who, until he began taking the diet aid Xenical, regularly splurged on McDonald's and then hid his half-dozen Big Macs and Quarter Pounders from his equally gluttonous wife Roseanne, not out of shame, but because he didn't want to share.

What is dangerous about the influence of popular culture on our state of physical health is not how slavishly we imitate the stars, attempting to acquire Hilary Swank's lats, Jennifer Lopez's glutes, and Beyoncé's quads, but how little they affect us at all, how they have turned us into quiescent spectators who worship an unattainable ideal so remote from our daily affairs that its exemplars seem to belong to another species. Celebrities are like athletes, a class of surrogates who live vigorous, aerobic lives while we develop diabetes and arteriosclerosis on our sofas. Hollywood didn't create fat, anxious Americans; fat, anxious Americans created Hollywood, a vision of humanity that bears little resemblance to the typical dissipated physique, sagging from too many processed foods and sedentary hours watching lithe beauties cavort in haute couture. Fantasy worlds, like those inhabited by celebrities, are never fashioned in the image of the dreamer. The dreamer imagines an existence as unlike his own as possible and is content to admire this world from afar, not as a possible destination but as a wonderland all the more enticing the more unapproachable and exclusionary. Our fantasies

engender a paralyzing awe that instills in us despair, a sense of hopelessness about maintaining our bodies, about achieving the buff perfection of stars spoon-fed by studio dieticians who force them to nibble on rice cakes and celery sticks and submit to grueling regimens of Pilates and kickboxing. In fact, we would almost certainly be healthier if we *did* imitate Hollywood, if we *did* work out and diet as compulsively as they do, if, like supermodel Dayle Haddon, we performed leg lifts while washing the dishes, side bends while standing in line at Starbucks, and thigh resistance exercises in the elevators of four-star hotels.

We blame pop culture for turning us into diet-crazed bulimics but how can celebrities be "role models," however derelict, when almost no one seems to imitate them, when we get fatter even as they get skinnier, exercise less even as they train like triathletes? Granted, we are preoccupied with celebrities, follow the evolution of their hair styles, take tours past the gates of their estates, make wild surmises about their sexual preferences, but obsession does not necessarily, or even usually, entail imitation. This does not keep us, however, from penalizing them with an unjust double standard, insisting that, in the name of public hygiene, they maintain scrupulously healthy diets, drink abstemiously, engage in unerringly faithful relations with their spouses, and indignantly turn down film roles in which they are asked to participate in such iniquitous activities as smoking. Never before have we demanded that popular culture be as virtuous as we have in the last forty years, that our stars, in the mistaken belief that they manufacture the moral templates of our lives, beat their breasts in remorse and enroll in rehab every time they fail a breathalyzer test, stumble on the red carpet, or light a cigarette in public. The anti-tobacco Web site Smokingsides.com provides exhaustive documentation of celebrated nicotine abusers; in its lengthy dossier on Nicole Kidman, for example, it cites no less than seventy-eight instances in which the actress was observed puffing away in full view of her fans, in particular at the infamous press conference at Cannes in 2003 in which, in an image broadcast around the world, she bummed a cigarette from a fellow actor, a faux pas that provoked such a vicious international backlash that an Australian senator threatened to slap parental advisories on films that depicted nicotine consumption favorably. We ourselves smoke like chimneys,

drink like fish, swear like troopers, and copulate like rabbits, but those in Hollywood are expected to behave with unglamorous rectitude lest their misconduct deprave their malleable fans. We have moralized popular culture into one long tedious sermon, created a parallel universe far more chaste, more decorous, more modest and seemly than the one in which most of us live.

In the distant past, actors and artists occupied a seedy if alluring demimonde, a realm of license and nonconformity that flourished on the fringes of respectable society. Far from being role models, they were black sheep, bohemians high on cocaine and drunk on absinthe. Now, by contrast, we expect them to be the pillars of our society, moral leaders who scold us for the errors of our ways, elder statesmen we draft into the roles of goodwill ambassadors for the United Nations, environmentalists, and spokesmen for such causes as gingivitis, erectile dysfunction, and irritable bowel syndrome. A paucity of conventional heroes has led to the invention of an implausible new set of mentors—a NASCAR mom, like race car driver Shawna Robinson, who feels that, behind the wheel of her souped-up Chevrolet Monte Carlo, she is able "to reach a lot of people," or even a golfer, such as Tiger Woods, whom Rolemodel.net singles out as an inspirational figure, a champion who triumphed over racial prejudice on the links and transformed his sport from a senile pastime for retirees in madras pants into "a vehicle . . . to influence people." Celebrities are rapidly filling the roles that priests, politicians, and wealthy philanthropists once served, perhaps because, as the church is rocked by molestation scandals and the government seems less and less capable of addressing the difficulties of our times, we are transferring moral authority to the only public servants that remain: pop singers, Hollywood stars, and the casts of our favorite sitcoms.

We admire them and yet at the same time distrust them. We are always ill at ease with beautiful people who, through no special effort of their own, get better jobs, more friends, and sexier lovers, but it is seldom that we encounter them in groups as large as we do on the idyllic Wisteria Lane in "Desperate Housewives," a latter-day Peyton Place in which the entire cast—gardeners, pharmacists, plumbers, cable repairmen—is gorgeous. Beautiful people in real life are scattered randomly throughout the population and it is statistically impossible that they should ever constitute more than

a tiny, unthreatening minority. And yet with the international dissemination of American popular culture, they have triumphed over the statistical odds and done something they could never have done before the twentieth century: they have overcome their geographic dispersal, gravitated together, and emerged as a power elite, a physical aristocracy whose seat of government is one major U.S. city where they migrate at the invitation of directors, producers, talent scouts, and casting agents who scour the globe in search of the perfect photogenic face. For the first time in history, our daily lives are filled with images of a real live übermensch, a master race that flaunts the unfair privileges accorded to those whose talents are often little more than cheek bones and good genes. There have always been aristocracies, privileged classes whose social prestige derived from their material wealth or pedigree, but there has never been a Brahmin caste whose sole justification for power was its physical appeal. This unelected coalition of the sexually charismatic may not, like an actual government, regulate our daily affairs in any literal sense, but it does exercise autocratic authority over our imaginations, making us capitulate psychologically if not politically.

We seek to contain the influence of this new master race, to alleviate the sense of belittlement we experience from living in the shadow of its inconceivable affluence and glamour. Western culture affords us many ways of denigrating the beautiful, branding them stupid, egotistic, lonely, and unhappy, and our constant, self-abasing surveillance of their every move, our prurient eavesdropping on their private lives, from their sex tapes to the messages they leave on each other's answering machines, may itself be a method of diminishing their psychological power. Much as Louis XIV used Versailles as a glittering cage to imprison restive nobles, so we have surrounded our idols with an impregnable phalanx of flashbulbs, herding them together in Hollywood, forcing them to live in a kind of internment camp, albeit one with all of the amenities of a spa. The paparazzi, in turn, have become our watch dogs who never let them out of our sight, staking out their gyms, grocery stores, and nightclubs where they are forced to submit to our mean-spirited and yet, at the same time, obsequious espionage. We think of fame as a form of homage, the adulation we lavish on the gifted, but it may contain a large measure of resentment and vengefulness as well. Living in the limelight,

exposed to the scrutiny of anonymous multitudes, may be a method of punishment, a concerted campaign of ostracism, a discriminatory act that forces celebrities to live apart from us, immured in a gulag of tanning salons, acupuncture clinics, and trendy boutiques. Obviously, we are barred from entering their world, but so in many ways are they from ours.

Beauty is not democratic. It is unjust, distributed inequitably according to the luck of the draw. Our obsession with Hollywood celebrates this injustice, the irrationality with which fortune bestows its gifts. People cannot simply crash the gates and appropriate the privileges of the genetically blessed, creating faces different from "the one [they] rode in on," as one blogger said of Nicole Kidman's suspiciously chiseled chin. When someone attempts to gain illegal entrance into the pantheon of the chosen few, manipulating Mother Nature through plastic surgery, we are both outraged and amused, angered that the inequalities we at once adore and fear are in fact phantasmal; and, at the same time, relieved that beauty is really just a con game, something we can control after all, an illusion fabricated through liposuction, collagen injections, and breast augmentations. Actors who submit to the knife are like athletes who inject steroids, fakes who should be disqualified from the race, interlopers who buy their way into the public's heart, who purchase their looks from any of the sixty-eight plastic surgeons in Beverly Hills, a number that translates into one surgeon for every 497 residents and compares astonishingly with the city's thirty-six pediatricians.

We are therefore thrilled when what Joan Rivers calls her "Simonizing," Dolly Parton her "fender work," and Demi Moore her "furniture" rearrangement goes hideously awry, as in the case of Tara Reid's left breast, which, mangled and misshapen, popped out of her dress at P-Diddy's thirty-fifth birthday party ("instead of a circle," Reid said of this scarred and lopsided protuberance, "it turned out to be a large square"); Sharon Osborne's tummy tuck, which chopped off so much loose skin as a result of her gastric bypass that they had to create a new belly button; or Stevie Nick's silicone implants, which caused such pain that, after their removal, she stored them in her freezer to remind herself of "the agony." "Scalpel slaves"—or "polysurgical patients," as they are known to industry insiders—are the butt of scathing Internet mockery: Mary Tyler Moore, whom

'doctors have now placed on "an unofficial plastic surgery blacklist" and whose mouth has been stretched like taffy into a perpetual grin; model Alicia Douvall who, after her silicone implants ruptured, installed valves to pump saline solution in and out so she can vary the size of her breasts as the occasion warrants; or, the poster child of sloppy work, Michael Jackson, who may have had as many as thirty to forty rhinoplasties, including one that grafted cartilage from his ear to keep his nose from sinking back into his nasal cavity, leaving a gaping chasm in the middle of his face. If we are to believe in the beauty elite, to worship its exclusivity, its insuperable remoteness, we must be convinced that our idols acquired their physical assets the old-fashioned way, from Mom and Dad, not from Robert Rey, M.D., a.k.a. "Dr. 90210," perhaps the most famous plastic surgeon in the world. Our admiration of celebrities is much like our belief in God, and when our faith is tested by clear evidence of inauthenticity, by imposters who achieve illegal access to the inner sanctum through procedures we are increasingly able to spot, having become, as one reporter called it, "surgically literate," we are furious and vindictive. We mutiny against such swindlers in our gossip columns and Internet bulletin boards where we laugh hysterically when Britney Spears checks into a hospital for knee surgery and emerges several days later, according to many reports, two cup sizes larger or when Hollywood is stricken with crippling shortages of Botox just before the Academy Awards, which one Beverly Hills surgeon refers to as "tax season."

Our relationship with celebrities is so pathological in part because they are an absent presence in our lives: while they are physically absent and rarely seen in person, we are nonetheless nearer to their bodies, through close-ups, nude scenes, and simulated sex, than we are to anyone outside of our immediate families. We rarely examine even our lovers as meticulously as the website TMZ.com did in a recent exposé entitled "Heinous Extremities," an unsparing collection of photographs of celebrities' gnarly hands and stunted feet, appalling shots of Iman's twisted toes spilling painfully out of her stilettos and Jenna Jameson's arthritic claws clutching a soft drink can. In "Basic Instinct," Sharon Stone uncrosses her legs during a notorious police interrogation scene and gives us a clear shot of her pantyless crotch, bringing us closer to her genitalia than many men venture to those of their wives and girlfriends. The psychological

mechanism of our obsession with celebrities lies in this deceptive intimacy, in the paradox that they are both present and absent, within reach and hidden behind wrought-iron gates, flashing their crotches at us in our living rooms and cowering behind ballistic-grade steel doors and closed-circuit surveillance systems. The camera is a tease, simulating an intimacy we do not have, a familiarity that incites us to narrow the physical distance that divides us from the stars, to eliminate the mediation of the lens, and press ourselves against them, flesh to flesh. Those who stalk celebrities, like the woman who left cookies in David Letterman's foyer and camped out on his tennis courts, or the man who slashed his wrists outside of the ABC studios where Andrea Evans was filming an episode of "One Life to Live," are really just our ambassadors, envoys we send to do our investigative work for us, berserk enthusiasts whose actions are psychotic manifestations of a very normal impulse to ascertain the physical reality of bodies we know almost as well as our own, if only secondhand.

Not only do celebrities occupy a different space than their fans, they occupy a different, nonconsecutive time. They do not change as we do, gradually, imperceptibly. They exist only in photographs and films, outside of the passage of time, the chronology of their bodies scrambled by random encounters with images from various periods in their lives, one from the zenith of their careers, proudly cradling their Oscars, another decades later, unemployed has-beens, as in the notorious pair of photographs that many newspapers published side by side when Greta Garbo died in 1990—on the left, the young starlet in her twenties, untouchably beautiful; on the right, an aged crone with straggly white hair hobbling out of a health clinic just weeks before her death at the age of eighty-four. The descent of celebrities into infirmity, obesity, or even the terminal stages of an illness is telescoped by the very medium that at once celebrates their youth and beauty and, over time, renders them grotesque. Unlike the bodies of our friends and family, whom we see every day and who therefore do not age in any measurable way, stars seem to change in fits and starts. One minute, 5'4", 120-pound Janet Jackson has a six-pack and buns of steel, and the next she's 180 pounds wearing sweatpants and a baseball cap, a wardrobe malfunction far more troubling than that which occurred during so-called "Titgate" at the 2004 Super Bowl.

Similarly, a famous photograph of her brother shows him when he is ten years old, sporting a huge Afro and an infectious smile, while his mug shot, taken some thirty-five years later after his arrest for child molestation, features the unforgettable image of a bleached mask, a macabre caricature of Caucasian features, a heartbreaking disavowal of his own blackness. Reruns and DVDs fast-forward the careers of the stars, allowing us to see them starting out fresh, exhilarated by their success, and then, with one flick of the remote control, sinking into the decrepitude of old age. We are shocked by the essay film and photography inadvertently write on physical dissolution, by the way they document the remorseless changes, the ebbing vitality, that celebrities take such unavailing pains to arrest. Art is long, life short, but in the case of Hollywood celebrities, art—their careers, their beauty—is short and life long—for most, too long.

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