



Three Faces of Beauty: Casablanca, Paris, Cairo

By Susan Ossman

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Three Faces of Beauty offers a unique approach to understanding globalization and cultural change based on a comparative, ethnographic study of a nearly universal institution: the beauty salon. Susan Ossman traces the images and words of the beauty industry as they developed historically between Paris, Cairo, and Casablanca and then vividly demonstrates how such images are embodied today in salons located in each city.

By examining how images from fashion magazines, film, and advertising are enacted in beauty salons, Ossman demonstrates how embodiment is able to display and rework certain hierarchies. While offering the possibility of freedom from the tethers of status, nation, religion, and nature, beauty is created by these very categories and values, Ossman shows. Drawing on hundreds of interviews, she documents the various rituals of welcome, choice-making, pricing practices, and spatial arrangements in multiple salons. She also reveals ways in which patrons in all three cities imagine and co-opt looks they believe are fashionable in the other cities. By observing salons as scenes of instruction, Ossman reveals that beautiful bodies evolve within the intertwining contexts of media, modernity, location, time, postcolonialism, and male expectation.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Ossman, an ethnographer at the American University of Paris, examines here the cultural production of beauty in the salons of Casablanca, Cairo and Paris, seen as a process of the "en-lightenment" of the "heavy" the "heavy" signifying tradition and fatness, "en-lightenment" implying freedom and modernity. Beauty parlors are about "deconstructing and putting the body together again," and visiting one is a "flight from gravity" with significant implications for the "geography of shame," "mimesis" and other postmodernist terms. Buried under the jargon, the careful reader may excavate some interesting detail the juxtaposition on salon walls of phrases from the Koran and movie star pinups, women getting elaborate hairdos and then covering them with the traditional hijab, stylists who stub out their cigarettes to roll out their prayer rugs but Ossman takes such ironies for granted. Unfortunately, she rarely discusses how hair is dressed or how legs are waxed in these different countries; specific details about actual beauty practices, which would have filled out her descriptions, are missing. In the end, Ossman refuses to analyze how salons have developed in the different cities; mapping out such "geographies of taste" would violate the fluidity she celebrates. Still, readers who enjoy playful anthropomorphizing ("the mirror participates in the entire process of elaborating a style"), digressions on the philosophy of optics or the significance of mirrors to the Greeks may find this work "en-lightening." B&w photos.

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Review

"Ossman's trajectory is like the braiding and weaving of hair, like a dance of nimble fingers and scissors. She achieves a rare vividness for which anthropologists often strive but rarely attain."—James Faubion, Rice University

"Susan Ossman lets us hear women's hopes for beauty and difference—out of or under the head shawl—in Casablanca, Cairo, and Paris. What a pleasure to linger in these beauty shops, where talk, the snipping scissors, and Egyptian songs help open the door to modernity. A delightful and insightful read."—Natalie Zemon Davis, Princeton University

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