

mental change. A strength of the book is its exposition of this feedback loop.

Other elements are not so solidly established. The author makes a politically correct attempt to dismiss *Bell Curve*-style hereditarianism—which, given that Wills's whole argument rests on the biological bases of cognitive ability, seems rather unconvincing. Elsewhere, Wills gives the still-emerging story of Neanderthals the same billing, and its conjectures (which is what they are) the same weight, as much more secure findings. He waxes lyrical about the recent discovery, in a cave that was probably inhabited by Neanderthals, of a 50,000-year-old fragment of hollowed-out bone in which symmetrical holes appear to have been punched. Like others, he speculates that this object was a flute, hence that the Neanderthals had music, a conclusion that would significantly alter our view of their capacities and history. But of course the object might well *not* have been a flute. The extended chain of guesses that follows, interesting and even plausible as it is, ought to be more clearly identified as such.

Still, this is an authoritative antidote to the witless but trendy calumny that evolution, specifically “Darwinism,” is just a tired 19th-century idea, ripe for overthrowing.

—Paul R. Gross

***SURVIVAL OF THE PRETTIEST:
The Science of Beauty.***

By Nancy Etcoff. Doubleday. 325 pp.
\$23.95

In *The Beauty Myth* (1991), Naomi Wolf blamed our patriarchal culture for inculcating “competitive” and “hierarchical” notions of female attractiveness. If TV networks would hire 60-year-old women as news anchors, if fashion designers would use average-looking models, if actresses would refuse to tone their bodies for nude scenes (“as a gesture to women in the audience”)—then, Wolf maintained, our thinking would change.

Not so, according to Etcoff, a psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School. She contends that humans' conceptions of beauty are genetically hard-wired. Three-month-old infants, uncorrupted by Wolf's cultural cues, stare longer at beautiful faces than at plain ones. Whereas earlier efforts to popularize evolutionary psychology, from

Desmond Morris's *Naked Ape* (1967) to Jared Diamond's *Why Is Sex Fun?* (1997), often erected elaborate analogies between human behavior and animal behavior, Etcoff concentrates on studies of humans' attitudes and mating rituals, with only the occasional animal analogy. Readers, it seems, no longer need to be convinced that evolution has shaped human eros.

In chatty if quote-heavy prose (featuring musings on beauty by Ovid, Baudelaire, Don King, Aaron Spelling, and countless others), the author argues that the ingredients of female beauty are mostly markers for fertility. Women with large and symmetrical breasts are more fertile, as are women with hourglass torsos (Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn, despite their divergent body types, had the same waist-to-hip ratio). Thick hair, large eyes and lips, and small chins signal youth and health, which contribute to fertility. Male attractiveness proves more complicated, perhaps because females are less visually obsessed than men when mate hunting. Whereas males admire hyperfeminized faces featuring larger-than-life lips and eyes, both sexes find hypermasculinized faces off-putting. Department store managers, in fact, sometimes complain that the more manly mannequins look like rapists. A beguiling male face carries a hint of femininity.

For both men and women, appearance carries far-reaching social consequences. We are more likely to come to the aid of the gorgeous, and less likely to trouble them with our own pleas for assistance. We accord them a larger personal space in conversation. We are more likely to give them high grades and good jobs, to acquiesce to them in arguments, and to acquit them in court. The beautiful, in turn, grow serenely accustomed to our kowtowing.

While acknowledging that evolutionary psychology doesn't solve every mystery of beauty, Etcoff says little about its limitations. In particular, she never tries to unravel the interaction between culturally defined markers and evolutionary cues. For instance, women on the higher socioeconomic rungs weigh more than average in developing countries, where ready access to food signals status, but less than average in developed countries, where, with food readily available,



The Judgment of Paris (c. 1632–1635), by Peter Paul Rubens

thinness signals “money and leisure time and obsessive focus.” Elsewhere, Etcoff notes that aggressively unattractive clothing or adornments can signal upper-crust status, for “only high-status individuals can afford the pleasure of not pleasing.” Are such markers amenable to change, perhaps even to *Beauty Myth*-style revolution? Etcoff never

says. She also leaves hanging the provocative and poignant assertion that “the penalty for ugliness might be even greater than the reward for beauty.” Still, she succeeds in engagingly charting the origins and the impacts of our undemocratic aristocracy of beauty.

—Stephen Bates

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