The Fashioned Self
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Introduction

It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

In the late twentieth century, our tacit understanding of human character seems to be derived from a motley assemblage of contradictory ideas. On the one hand, we hastily read character physiognomically, from the shape of the individual’s nose and chin, or the colour of the eyes and hair; on the other, we create a sense of identity by dressing or behaving after a particular fashion or style. We know, too, that other people, in all likelihood, are doing the same. They may be wearing a hair piece, using hair dye or displaying a sun-tan or have had plastic surgery or a hair transplant. We know that appearances are created and that dressing after a particular fashion is done in order to convey a certain impression. It would seem that the ideas we hold about personal identity, incorporating as they do these divergent views, suggest that our knowledge of human character and our speculations about the nature of our own consciousness and that of others are incoherent and unsystematized narratives, interwoven with contradictory ideas and assumptions. How we arrived at this point and what consequences it has for our contemporary social relations in the societies of the industrialized West is the focus of this book.
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In the consumer culture of modern society, physical appearance has come to be seen as an important means for claiming a degree of social status. High fashion and designer styles in clothing, individualized fitness programmes, exercise equipment for home use, private gymnasiums, diet regimens and cosmetic surgery are readily available as the means for perfecting our physical appearance. The pervasiveness of these goods and services indicates an ethos in which physical appearance is held to be of paramount importance. Indeed, appearance is often conflated with the more spiritual or abstract qualities of character: people are described as having a kind, honest, determined or gentle face as if this expresses their real character.

This conflation of reality with appearance has a long tradition. Sennett’s (1976) historical account of the emergence of the modern sensibility vividly detailed the process by which the enactment or the performance of certain emotions and personality traits became the demonstrable proof of their actual existence. The individual was as s/he appeared to be, the suit of clothes, for example, did reveal character; hence, the stylization of appearance became an important focus of the interpersonal or social encounter. The same conflation of appearance with reality is found in the history of Western painting. The female face has been painted for hundreds of years as if it were artificial and masklike (Ribeiro 1987). The sixteenth-century face had an enamelled look. It was glazed over with an egg-white after being coated with ceruse, a lead base paint which gave a hard white appearance. To contrast with this deadly, harsh whiteness, vivid blobs of red were painted on the cheeks. These cosmetics had a poisonous lead content and their deleterious effects were quite marked; however, the portraiture of the times did not reveal this. The seventeenth-century fashions in appearance continued with these harsh cosmetics while, all the time, representing the fashionable sitters for these paintings as being natural beauties. As fashions changed and the enamelled mask of the female face gave way to a less controlled appearance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the reliance on cosmetics to bring about an attractive appearance did not diminish. In reality, particularly before the nineteenth century, the effects of a deficient diet, infrequent washing and illnesses
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such as smallpox could be seen in the face where the skin was pitted and blemished by eczema, scurvy and so on. A general ignorance of dental hygiene and the widespread consumption of sugar also meant that tooth decay frequently marred a good face. The painted image showed none of these signs.

It has been common practice, especially in the upper classes, to employ a variety of cosmetics and devices to alter appearance. For instance, cloth or silk patches were employed to cover skin blemishes, wigs were used to give the luxuriance of curly hair and plumbers of cork, wax or leather were used to replace a lost tooth and round out the cheeks (Ribeiro 1987). In some instances, these techniques acquired other uses; for example, in the French courts face patches were cut into various shapes such as stars, hearts and moons, and transposed into a code that no longer concealed pustules but spoke of sexual intrigues.

While techniques for styling appearances have radically altered over the centuries, they are, nonetheless, as popular in contemporary society as in any previous time; indeed, the availability of goods and services has meant that the fashioning of appearances is probably greater in the twentieth century. This suggests that the perceptual conspiracy which allows the artificial complexion and body shape to be seen as a natural representation of character, and the fashioned styles of beauty to be accepted as expressions of human sensibility, remains as convincing as ever.

Blurring the distinctions between the image and reality by emphasizing appearances has a substantial influence on how we see one another. When we value physical appearance as a means of increasing our success or effectiveness in social interactions, we risk limiting the social experience to a barter or exchange controlled by prevailing stereotypes. For instance, when the assumption is widely held that character is integral to appearance and appearances determine the manner of conduct, then the stereotypes of the jolly fat person, the thin anxious person, the dark-complexioned, untrustworthy person, the fair-haired, open-faced, frank person become the currency of sociality. On the strength of these stereotypes, if we are able to train ourselves to make more detailed observations of others’
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physical attributes, we can come to believe we are making an astute reading of their personalities. Within this framework, understanding human character becomes a matter of perception: the tell-tale detail, the odd combination of this with that, the daring use of colour, texture, size and so on, would be the signs from which we deduce the other's essential self.

How we interpret these signs of character is culturally contingent. What we find aesthetic and attractive about the human body and physical appearance is not determined by nature or any overarching biological principle; our views are not emanations of a universal nature. Rather, our reading of the body is subject to the influences of circumstances; thus the body itself is a contingency which can be made aesthetic or fashioned in accord with prevailing customs. As our evaluations of the body are refracted through the social order, what constitutes the normal physical body — what is physical beauty, what is abhorrent and not acceptable, what immediately repulses us or, conversely, ignites our passions — are ideas and attitudes which are historically and culturally contingent. Régnier-Bohler (1988: 359) has described the medieval individual with a clear complexion as being attributed with a sanguine personality and the dark-skinned individual as saturnine and melancholic. Realizing the cultural and historical contingency of these interpretations should determine that any insight into an essential self which we derive from reading the outward signs is better understood as a reading of a cultural moment than it is an analysis of personality. Yet, this is not often the case.

In industrialized, high technology societies, we have become confident that most of our imagined needs and desires can be translated into material form. We are accustomed to exercising power over our environment and manufacturing all manner of objects to meet our desires. In such a society, the human body, as if no different from other manufactured objects, can be used as a commodity to display power, prestige and status. Like the purchased object, the body can be made a sign of the individual's accomplishments, talents, capacities and character. The early social theorists, Veblen (1899) and Simmel (1904), both recognized how the characteristics of a burgeoning consumer-
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oriented culture could be promulgated through attitudes toward the human body. The manner of adornment and the use of the body as a means for conspicuous consumption, say, in the pursuit of leisure activities, or in the display of exclusive and exotic goods, established the practices of conspicuous consumption as effective ways of widely displaying personal characteristics. Thus, the shaping and adorning of the body has become a way for the individual to present his or her desired self-image to others.

In a culture where the possession and control of goods and services are highly valued, transforming the body into a commodity which can be used for the display of coveted items becomes a social goal in itself. In the modern era we treat the body as malleable and have developed the tools by which it can be continuously altered in appearance. Clothes, diet, exercise, pharmaceuticals, drug therapy, micro-surgery, body implants and so on, are the means of producing the modern fashioned body. As long as physical appearance remains of singular importance to our social activities, the cosmetic, health and therapeutic industries are assured of retaining their lucrative businesses.

What does it say of our understanding of identity or human character that we have fused together the capacity for conspicuous consumption with the presentation of personality? What does it say of us that we readily accept appearances and habits of conduct as revelations of the private self? What does it say of our social relations that we frequently employ a fashioned self-image and a style of acting in order to create a certain impression through which we hope to influence the opinions others have of us or how they will act toward us?

The nineteenth century was a period in which appearance and the reading of character from physical features was immensely popular. A physiognomist of the day, Samuel Wells, described the process of how to read character.

We instinctively, as it were, judge the qualities of things by their outward forms. ‘Appearances’ are said to be ‘often deceitful’. They are sometimes seemingly so; but in most cases, if not in all, it is our observation that is in fault. We have but to look
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again, and more closely and carefully, to pierce the disguise, when the thing will appear to be just what it is. Appearances do not often deceive the intelligent observer.

A strong association between human character and physical appearance would mean that personality was available to us from the details and displays of personal affectations. It is as if the interior qualities of the individual, the essential self, were being exhibited through the contours of appearance. So, to accept that character is immanent in appearance is tantamount to saying we need only observe certain features in the other and we will know his or her character. This assumes, in effect, that there is a subterranean psychology of human character which is capable of being embodied in the material – either in objects or patterns of generic conduct. But, reading character from outward signs reduces the need to ruminate over our impressions or to review their accuracy. If we accept that human character is immanent in appearance, the need to think about the dynamics of social life becomes superfluous.

Intuitively, we, in the modern consumer-oriented culture, respond to this viewpoint that character is immanent in appearance with scepticism. After all, it is commonly the case that we change our opinions of others, we puzzle over their conduct and then reject our first impressions. Furthermore, too much emphasis is placed on our social skills and knowledge of interaction rituals for us to think them unimportant in our human affairs. In the light of these emphases, it cannot be said that appearances are ultimately so important. But even with this in mind, it is apparent that we are inclined to read character from physical appearances, although, not always to admit to doing so. Certainly, the belief in the power of appearance to reveal character gives the pastime credence, and it would be foolish as Oscar Wilde has stated above to ignore the signs before us. Physical features such as colouring, height, weight, agility and prowess have been translated into a modern parlance which defines attractiveness, sex appeal, emotionality, sobriety, virtue and so on. Being in possession of distinct physical qualities is frequently interpreted as a sign of an archetypical character or disposition, and when such attributes
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go against the grain of convention, then one risks becoming a social pariah.

In our everyday commerce it would seem that we moderns accept that appearances matter without probing into why they should. The physiognomists, in particular, regarded physical appearance as the key to understanding human character, and over the centuries, they mapped human physical features; they systematically typified which nose shape, what angle of the jaw, size of eyes and colour of hair, were indicative of specific human characteristics. To read the physiognomists in the late twentieth century, and learn which facial feature reveals a propensity toward greed or ambition or unreliability may strike us as quaint and relatively useless in comparison with our modern, rigorous techniques for reading human capabilities and potentials. On the other hand, when we do encounter individuals with striking or anomalous physical appearances, say, they are unusually tall, have a strong body odour, perhaps, they blush irrepressibly, stutter in their speech or have uncontrolled body twitches, in short, when our social relations with another become so infested with obvious physiological signs that we cannot see beyond them, then the endurance of the physiognomic perspective into the modern world seems unassailable. It seems that the more obvious the physical trait, the more willing we are to read the other’s character from it. As it is through our public conduct that much of our self-image is presented to others, when the social encounter is dominated by appearances and the mannerisms of the physical body, then our sociality is made more vulnerable to the influences of the received meanings and preconceptions of our times.

To accept, in the twentieth century, that character is summarized in our bodies, that personality and individuality are a function of our appearance and physical prowess, confronts us, to some extent, as an unlikely article of faith. Yet, when we consider the popularity of practices such as cosmetic surgery, strenuous exercise and dieting, which transform our body shape and appearance and which are frequently undertaken on the belief that our sense of self will be more assured when our appearance is different, then we are forced to consider that a continuity of thought with that of the physiognomists may be
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being expressed. Why else, we must ask ourselves, is there a proliferation of commercially available and therapeutically endorsed strategies and techniques regularly advertised in the mass media which promise to produce a new self and transform the old? Why is so much time and money spent on the shaping of our physical appearance, and how is it that the industries succoured by these efforts, such as the fashion, cosmetic and health industries, are so successful? We may decline to endorse the view that we judge by appearances because it seems such a superficial and inherently unjust idea, but, at the same time, it is apparent that we do so.

Heller (1989) has pointed out that the authenticating narratives employed to explain our times are not necessarily grounded in facticity. Some ideas gain an authority at one level but fail to convince at another. Ideas that go unquestioned in the course of everyday life, and which exist as self-evident truths, may not pass as real or true on a more abstract philosophical or intellectual level. These ideas are myths; in their everyday usage they do not reveal themselves as such, nor do they suggest that there are different ways of looking, that there are differences in kinds of knowledge, differences between fact, interpretation and fiction; instead, they appear as if true. The ways in which we currently understand personal identity or character illustrate the point. Our present views on identity are grounded in the ambiguous principles of physiognomy and other unexamined assumptions of human nature. These ideas, which work as authenticating narratives of the modern age, give a sense of facticity to various patterns of perception and habits of conduct. Yet, such narratives are authoritative without necessarily being factual, and in the following chapters of this book, this is illustrated with an account of the endurance of the physiognomic perspective into the modern era.

The physiognomic perspective is found in contemporary attitudes toward physical appearance, especially those which legitimate the deliberate reshaping of the body to approximate prevailing norms. Where a reliance on physical appearances as an expression of character can be seen to exist, opportunities are created for fictive portrayals of the self in which individuals can be spuriously assigned or claim for themselves a wealth of
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virtues. Understanding human character from appearances, styles and images is an authoritative narrative of modern social life which has a significant influence on our habits of sociality. For instance, individuals who have physically groomed themselves in accord with prevailing definitions of beauty and attractiveness can feel confident of having constructed for themselves an appropriate and successful social identity. Such individuals have absorbed the prevailing values and have produced a social demeanour and sense of identity which will successfully carry them through the everyday world. Yet, the sense of self enjoyed by these individuals is, ironically, constituted from the received meanings of the times. That is, their sense of self is an embodiment of the representational fiction of a self. This sense of identity is a concatenation of prevailing ideas, yet it is experienced as unique because these elements and ideas have been idiosyncratically arranged by circumstances. Such a self can be said to be accidental (see Heller 1989).

Using the idea of the self as an authenticating narrative of the times is not equivalent to saying that personality is an imposed, uniform, pre-figured or structured phenomenon. The individual's sense of self has not been perfectly absorbed from the external; unique biographical circumstances have differentiated each individual to a great extent. In our acting in accord with prevailing meanings we come to think of ourselves as being in possession of a personality or character. This belief does not constitute a realm of subjectivity, nor do our unique circumstances constitute a self or sense of personal identity. Importantly, the authenticating narrative which determines that there is an entity known as the self is itself a repository of the received meanings of the times. Thus, the narrative which authenticates the self tells us that we are in possession of a character, a personal identity, a putative reservoir of subjective experience merely because we act in the world. The consequence of such a narrative is that it authenticates a self-centred self.

Such a sense of self works well enough at the prosaic level of daily social intercourse but when the constituents of the self are called for, we find ourselves speaking through clichés, platitudes and received meanings. The authenticating narrative that
we have condensed into character reveals a self that is a representational synthesis of contingencies. This is vividly illustrated through our commonsense belief that character can be thought of as immanent in appearance and that human physiognomy can reveal a great deal of the individual’s character.

Physiognomy may be considered a discarded intellectual relic from our pre-scientific days yet, on examination, it can be seen operating in contemporary society, albeit rewritten into a modern form. The tenets of physiognomy are not factual, neither are they systematic nor consistent, rather, they have been modified by many proponents over many centuries. Some physiognomic perspectives maintained that there was an essential or given self which emanated through certain physical features. This meant that human character was a fully formed ‘interior’ and unmodifiable by experience. Other perspectives did not completely overlook the influence that circumstances may have on the individual, and proponents of these insisted that human character could be altered by experiences. This latter approach regarded character more as a summation of both interior predispositions and external influences.

The kernel of the physiognomic perspective was that the physical appearance of the individual reflected much of his or her character. Physiognomy viewed human character as immanent in appearance, yet it could absorb into its paradigm the human desire to fashion, adorn, emphasize and refashion the body. After all, whether appearances were inherited or cultivated, the value of appearance was unequivocal, and the chthonic belief remained that appearances were telling summaries of personal character. Fashioning or cultivating an appearance was merely the opportunity to realize the self more fully by maximizing the virtues suggested by physical attributes. So, in the physiognomic view, hair colour, the size of eyes, ears, nose and chin, the mobility of the mouth and lips, the height of the forehead, the shape of the face and the presence of wrinkles, could all be taken as signs of the self, irrespective of whether these were natural formations or had been deliberately styled and shaped.

At first glance, it would seem that we moderns would not
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accept the physiognomic idea that character is an inherent quality embedded within us and revealed through appearance; we are more inclined to see ourselves as self-produced, the result of our own efforts, desires and interests. And yet, in our strong interest in appearance and our deliberate attempts to fashion and shape the body, we have tacitly endorsed the essential idea of the physiognomic perspective that the image and appearance of the individual is somehow representative of character and sensibility. In so doing, we have created the opportunity for bestowing upon individuals a host of spurious virtues and vices.

It is the value accorded the image, above all else, which carries the ancient physiognomic perspective into the modern era, even though, at the same time, we recognize that linking self-identity with physical appearance produces a myriad of anomalies. For example, what does it suggest of the individual’s character when s/he possesses an unconventional body which does not demonstrate the usual standards of mobility, dexterity and proportion? Are those individuals with spina bifida, cerebral palsy or Down’s syndrome of flawed character and irreversibly different from others? Does the acquisition of a slow degenerative disease like Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s bring about a change in essential character? If so, this would present an anomaly in the physiognomic system. By the same token, we could ask whether the owners of anarchic bodies also become the embodiments of unconventional identities? Furthermore, what sense can be made of conduct which is self-polluting, for example, when individuals regularly imbibe too much alcohol or consume too many calories? Are these instances of an individual in possession of a rebellious body, and by implication, a rebellious character?

Regarding the physical body as being the repository of character and as having a life of its own which can emanate into the social situation and influence the nature of our social relations is not the way we commonly think of the self. At the same time, though, there are numerous circumstances where we do regard the body as capable of independence as if it could act against us, be a liability, even betray character, such as when it
succumbs to illness (Sontag 1977) or shows signs of self-abuse or a disturbed self-image as in cases of anorexia nervosa (Bruch 1978).

It would seem, then, that a reading of human character through an interpretation of bodily signs, while a common practice, is thoroughly confused. The knowledge of self and identity that may result from these speculations is replete with anomalies. Yet, it is paradoxical that in the high regard we have for the way we look, we are accepting this narrative as if it were true. To this extent, we cannot claim to be any more sophisticated in our understanding of human character than those in previous eras who interpreted it through the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy, chiromancy, phrenology and astrology. Indeed, the present popularity of astrology and our frequent reliance upon physiognomic interpretations of bodily characteristics indicate that examples of unsubstantiated pseudo-scientific ideas, some of which are quite remote from any principles of orthodoxy, are still widely held (Wrobel 1988). When we blithely apply such ideas to the conduct of our social lives, we, in the late twentieth century, may well be as gullible and as conceptually jejune as any generation before us.

It is the argument of this book that as long as we continue to value physical appearances, and sustain the enormous industries which trade on this value, namely, the consumer-oriented cosmetic, fashion and therapeutic industries, we authenticate a narrative of human character which is spurious. Furthermore, by sustaining an emphasis on image and appearances, we prevent the emergence of a narrative which would give birth to a capacity for reflexivity and subjectivity, and a sense of self in which universal rather than narrow and contingent values were predominant.

Finally, a word on how the argument has been presented. The book is divided into three sections: the first, consisting of chapters 1 and 2, explores the physiognomic view and illustrates how its tenets have instructed our contemporary views on the human form; the second section, chapters 3, 4 and 5, describes how the body is fashioned in the contemporary society and how it has been employed as a sign expressive of the
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individual’s self-conception; and the final section, chapters 6 and 7, presents a theoretical exploration of what consequences may apply to the nature of social life when the signs of the self, that is, appearance and a fashioned self-image, are construed as synonymous with character.
Part I

The Physiognomonic Body