

S colpire

In a passage from the Renaissance treatise *De sculptura*, published in 1504, the author, Italian poet and humanist Pomponius Gauricus (1481-1530) celebrated the abundance of sculptures in ancient Rome, commenting that in the city “the imaginary people (*populus fictus*) of statues was equal to that of the living population”. Time gradually refuted a statement that was undoubtedly hyperbolic back then. The exemplary role of sculpture as a formal model was replaced by other, more efficient technologies in the production and broadcasting of images, though fortunately museums and art collections still treasure copies of that *imaginary people*. We may thank them for the fact that those have reached us.

In the history of the gradual decline of statues, it is relevant to point out a peculiar phenomenon that reached its peak between the first half of the 20th century and the first third of the 21st: tourism. One of its varieties, the so-called cultural tourism, revived an interest in art of the past which, naturally, included statues. This kind of tourism experienced continuous growth since its origins and became massive. Despite the insistence of experts, scientists and investigators who alerted that the model was economic and ecologically unsustainable. Warnings that the irrationally over-inflated bubble would soon burst were never heeded and its expansion seemed endless. It was only temporarily interrupted by regular crises of the capitalist system. And, in certain locations, for specific reasons such as natural catastrophes and armed conflict. It was not until 2020, due to the sudden appearance of the pandemic caused by the virus named COVID-19, that it was even possible to imagine a post-tourist world. Global restrictions on mobility were imposed. This gave way to an unheard of scenery of deserted stations and airports, closed hotels and restaurants, empty cruise ships, beaches and museums. The many commercial premises

that had proliferated in every town and city, around the places more frequented by tourists, also remained closed. These shops were intended to satisfy the demand of gifts and mementos. Objects which, incidentally, were globally known as souvenirs.

They can be contemplated nowadays in the halls that many museums devote to the archaeology of that period. Some of those museums display them next to the famous works of art of which they were copies. Often their crudeness is telling of industrial manufacture. They bear only a rough resemblance to the originals, with little respect for scale and media.

Amongst those souvenirs, the number of replicas of famous sculptures involving the female body, usually young and mostly nude, comes to attention. They are characters and scenes that refer to ancient Greek and Roman mythology.

Different institutions, libraries and archives guard, almost like relics, the remains of other interesting cultural products too, that saw their rise and decline in the same years, alongside the tourist souvenirs: profusely illustrated periodic publications that were specifically devised to be consumed by women readers. Not all magazines were the same, and they were distinguishable in terms of the space and relevance granted to different subjects. These could range from the life of mundane and famous personalities to specific information of a practical nature. They generally promoted, in a vague but continuous manner, “lifestyles” summed up in specific social practices and in the consumption of certain products. The textual and visual contents overlapped and intertwined with the slogans and images of commercial advertisements that, usually, took up most of their pages.

Amongst the subject matters these magazines deal with, we find that what the media themselves vague and imprecisely denominate “beauty” is pervasive. Despite it being

omnipresent, these publications rarely venture a definition of, or reflection on, the aforementioned concept. In the same way that the souvenirs replicated works of art where their condition as such was indisputable, the “beauty” that “women” magazines revolved around was also definitely beyond the question. Beauty was a goal that women ought to aspire to by their very nature, beyond the fact that the ideal constantly revealed itself as a social and cultural convention forever subject to interpretation, evolution and change,

Although the reasons something was considered beautiful or not lie in its material nature, the most widespread notions regarding beauty were, on the contrary, characterized by an inclination to take on an ethereal and metaphysical hue. The reflective turns are riddled with references to “harmony”, the “proportioned”, the “ordered”, “compliant” or “adequate”. These expressions bear within them an acceptance, an obedience to a canon which acts as reference but is not mentioned literally. Far from remaining constant, beauty and taste display an extraordinary mutability. Only one characteristic remains unalterable: the interests of the dominant group are normalised through the normative concept of good taste.

The fact that the most pervasive beliefs regarding taste judged it as belonging to the sphere of the subjective, to the supposedly sovereign realm of the private, is what turned it into something more easily exploited as the support and reproduction mechanism of the social conditions of inequality. And in a patriarchal society, the fundamental inequality lies in the inferior status and subordination of women altogether. In the aim of building, reinforcing and reproducing that subjugation, there is an assorted intertwining of varying discourse and practice. Ranging from the brutal exercise of physical power to the subtle threats of discrimination against whoever appears not docile enough. One of the more repeated strategies, perhaps due to its efficacy, could be denominated *the obligatory nature of beauty* for women.

We already mentioned that the model of beauty for the female body could display more or less changing features that opened the canon to shapes that had been discarded at a different time: more or less bust, more or less hips, body mass, height, skin tone or hairstyle. One constant is always highlighted among them: youth. The praise of youth (or its appearance, that is to say, the exhibition of its outward signs) is found across the history of the representation of the female body in the imaginary of the patriarchy. It is notorious in the two cases we are referring to: the statuary that is designated as classical (both originals and reeditions, updates or new versions) and the popular magazines for women. And, very prominently, in the advertising they carried. Moreover, the quotes and mythological reverberations are not to be ignored in slogans and commercial brands.

The myth and its tenacity make up an ideal field of study for the analysis of the workings of a culture. Particularly in times of crisis, the myth offers a familiar, known and safe reference that allows for the rewriting of the past to outline a frame of legitimization based on which a troublesome future might be organised. The struggle of feminist movements and their accomplishments in the sphere of legal and human rights, and in the evolution of tradition concur with an intense circulation of these images that illustrate the mandate, decreed since antiquity, of a total availability of the female body.

The chapters responding to this same outline are countless in mythology: a passionate male and his uncontrollable desire at the sight of a beautiful young female –that is, both at the peak of her sex appeal and her reproductive capacity– are involved in the classical sequence of abduction, rape and procreation. Olympus being the domain of the male rapist, none can compare to the supreme predator, Zeus *father of gods*. The fate of his victims (Danaë, Antiope, Callisto, Leda, Io, Europe...) shows that there is a twofold exemplary purpose in the myth: she who is insubordinate and rebellious is punished, while she who accepts the honourable destiny of becoming the medium for the needs of the male to engender and give birth to his aspirations is rewarded and praised.

The female body as biopolitical territory, the exercise of power on raw flesh, its permanent availability and the violence this entails are not always easily perceived, for they are blurred in the narration by the range of disguises and schemes devised by gods and men in order to achieve their goals. Or wrapped in the rhetoric of the foundational heroic deed.

In the Musei Capitolini, in Rome, the hall known as the Horatii and Curatii Room is decorated with a series of frescoes painted by Giuseppe Cesari (1568-1640), known as Cavalier d'Arpino, between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. The frescoes imitate tapestries that would cover the walls and portray a selection of episodes from the history of ancient Rome. This majestic hall is used to host important ceremonies. For instance, the spectacularly failed European Constitution was to be signed here, with much ostentation, in 2004. Before that, in 1957, the Treaty of Rome, the origin of the European Union, had been signed. There are pictures of the ceremony: an all-male gathering, all clad in the ritual uniform suit proper to authority and flaunting the unique distinctions of their sex: unanimous ties, a few moustaches, bald spots... surveyed by the eternal and stern gaze of the statues of popes Urban VIII and Innocent X. All of them reunited under the lavish frescoes. One of those frescoes depicts The Rape of the Sabine Women, a celebration of both the unconquerable virile drive and the required surrender of women to their abductor's, to their rapist's cause. Who in turn are never named as such. In this regard, euphemism is the standard. Horror encovered, concealed, ennobled, thanks to the mesmerizing glimmer of art and culture.

Nowadays, when the development of technology ceaselessly distills sophisticated control mechanisms gradually growing more subtle, flexible, fluctuating... we are surprised at the simplicity of the mechanism through which the rapturing beauty of those images managed to desensitise brutality and justify structures of domination. When confronted with those bodies, those faces, we cannot help but seeing the commemoration of violence on women's lives, their reduction to commodity, consumer item, an instrument for sexual pleasure and reproduction.

A recurring fantasy in the advertisements of the time can be detected in that period of hyperconsumerism: technical progress and medical science could mould bodies to the hegemonic ideal of youth and beauty. Paying was enough. The body was moulded according to the demands of satisfying a canon fantasized by the male gaze. There are numerous instances of the procedure being referred to in terms connected to sculpture: *sculpt*, *sculpted*, *sculptural* are endlessly repeated. And products branded with names such as *Sculpture*, *SculpturElle*, *Le Sculpteur*, *Body Sculptor* are offered.

The expression *de sculptura* (on sculpture, about sculpture), in the eyes, in the ears of Spanish language speakers, might suggest the idea of *desculpture*, of *unsculpture*, of a disrupted, upturned sculpture. Likewise, the verb *sculpt* is *scolpire* in Italian. *Colpire* means *to strike*. A play on words allows us to read the initial “s” as a privative particle, similar to our prefix “de”, thereby reversing its meaning: *de-strike*. Our assignment to critically re-read sculpture, the mythology of the sculptural figure and its mutations in consumerist culture, seeks to identify the violence women faced for millennia, to neutralise, revert, undo it. Until that violence is nothing more than resonance, the remembrance of an abject order, of a time fortunately past. And may it remain in the past. Not in ignorance. Not cast into oblivion.

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