

The essays in this book have grown out of a personal love/hate struggle: my rebellious but often dazzled, beguiled but skeptical, always intimate relationship with cultural images. I come to my criticisms of these images from deep inside this house of mirrors, not from the position of detached spectator, wielding high-powered theory to cut like a scythe through my “ordinary” responses, but with respect for those responses (“incorrect” as they sometimes are, and angry and embarrassed as they sometimes make me). They keep me honest and they teach me about this culture. I do not think that one can do responsible criticism in any other way.

In *The Republic* Plato presents a parable well known to students in introductory philosophy classes. He asks us to imagine our usual condition as knowers as comparable to life in a dark cave, where we have been confined since childhood, cut off from the world outside. In that cave we are chained by the leg and neck in such a way that we are unable to see in any position but straight ahead, at a wall in front of us, on which is projected a procession of shadow figures cast by artificial puppets manipulated by hidden puppeteers. In such a condition, Plato asks us, would not these shadow images, these illusions, seem to be “reality” to us? They would be the only world we knew; we would not even be aware that they were artificially created by other human beings. If suddenly forced outside the cave, we would surely be confused and even scornful of anyone who tried to tell us that this, not the cave, was the real world, that we had been living inside an illusion, deceived into believing that arti-

ficial images were the real thing. But our enlightenment would require this recognition.

Never has Plato's allegory about the seductiveness of appearances been more apt than today, but note the contemporary twist. For Plato, the artificial images cast on the wall of the cave are a metaphor for the world of sense perception. The illusion of the cave is in mistaking that world—what we see, hear, taste, feel—for the Reality of enduring ideas, which can only be “seen” with the mind's eye. For us, bedazzlement by created images is no metaphor; it is the actual condition of our lives. If we do not wish to remain prisoners of these images, we must recognize that they are not reality. But instead of moving closer to this recognition, we seem to be moving farther away from it, going deeper and deeper into the cave of illusion. Many of the essays in this book are about the seductiveness of those illusions, the deceptive “virtual realities” they create and the actual human realities they obscure and mystify, and the consequences of this deception on some of the most intimate (bodily, sexual, emotional, and also “political”) aspects of our lives.

That we live in an image-saturated culture has come to seem normal, routine, to us. But our great-grandparents would probably have their brain circuits blown if they were plunked down in our culture. Massive and dramatic cultural and technological changes have taken place in an extraordinarily brief period of historical time—and so recently that we have barely begun to chart their effects on our perception, cognition, and most basic experience of the relation between reality and appearance. The images are much more ubiquitous in our lives today than they were just a decade ago. The technology for producing them is far more sophisticated, and those who produce the images seem to have no compunction about using that technology in the service of a deceptive verisimilitude. The glamorized images of movie stars of the past—Ingrid Bergman, Greta Garbo, Merle Oberon—were always presented to us bathed in visual cues (soft focus, dramatic lighting) that signified illusion, the magic of the medium. Today our created images boldly attempt to “pass” as reality. Cut and spliced music

CDs present themselves as continuous performances. Body doubles are used routinely in movies to make the less-than-ideal bodies of stars into the icons that young girls then emulate (hating themselves because they are not as “perfect”); moreover, 85 percent of those body doubles, according to Shelley Michelle (who stood in for Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*), have had breast implants. The Dior ad (figure 1), which claims to show a real human body, was almost certainly generated by a computer!

Even less radically reconstructed images are usually massively retouched before they get to us. A few years ago *Harper's* magazine tried to make a point of this by printing the invoice *Esquire* had received for photo retouching of a cover picture of Michelle Pfeiffer, a picture that was accompanied by copy that read “What Michelle Pfeiffer needs . . . is absolutely nothing.” But what Pfeiffer's picture alone needed to appear on that cover was actually \$1,525 worth of chin trimming, complexion cleansing, neck softening, line removal, and other assorted touches. *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham said he had published the invoice to “remind the reader in an amusing way that there's a difference between life and art.” Such a distinction, however, is fast fading in an era when the constructed image has become, as Stewart Ewen puts it, “the conclusive expression of reality.” So Pfeiffer's *Esquire* photo was retouched. Who cares? She's gorgeous in the picture, and we want to date her or be her. Who cares that the body depicted in the Dior ad is not “real”? We want to look like it anyway.

With created images setting the standard, we are becoming habituated to the glossy and gleaming, the smooth and shining, the ageless and sagless and wrinkleless. We are learning to expect “perfection” and to find any “defect” repellent, unacceptable. We expect live performances to sound like CDs, politicians to say nothing messy or disturbing, real breasts to be as round and firm as implants. Even our idolatry of the competitive athlete—strikingly exhibited in our celebration of the 1996 Olympic contenders—has become aestheticized into a visual iconography of the perfected body. A few weeks before the opening of the games, major photo-essays appeared in *Vanity Fair*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Life*. Replete

Dior

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Because it works.

DIOR SVELTE
CELLULITE CONTROL COMPLEX

This unique complex, with four natural plant
extracts, produces maximum results in record
time – without massage. In just
one month, there's a visible
improvement in the appearance
of the silhouette, a lessening of
that “dimpled” cellulite look, a
silky new smoothness in skin
texture. Join the thousands
of women who have already
become satisfied users.

NEW SVELTE
1.25 oz (35.23 g)
1.25 oz (35.23 g)

Christian Dior
BOUTIQUE
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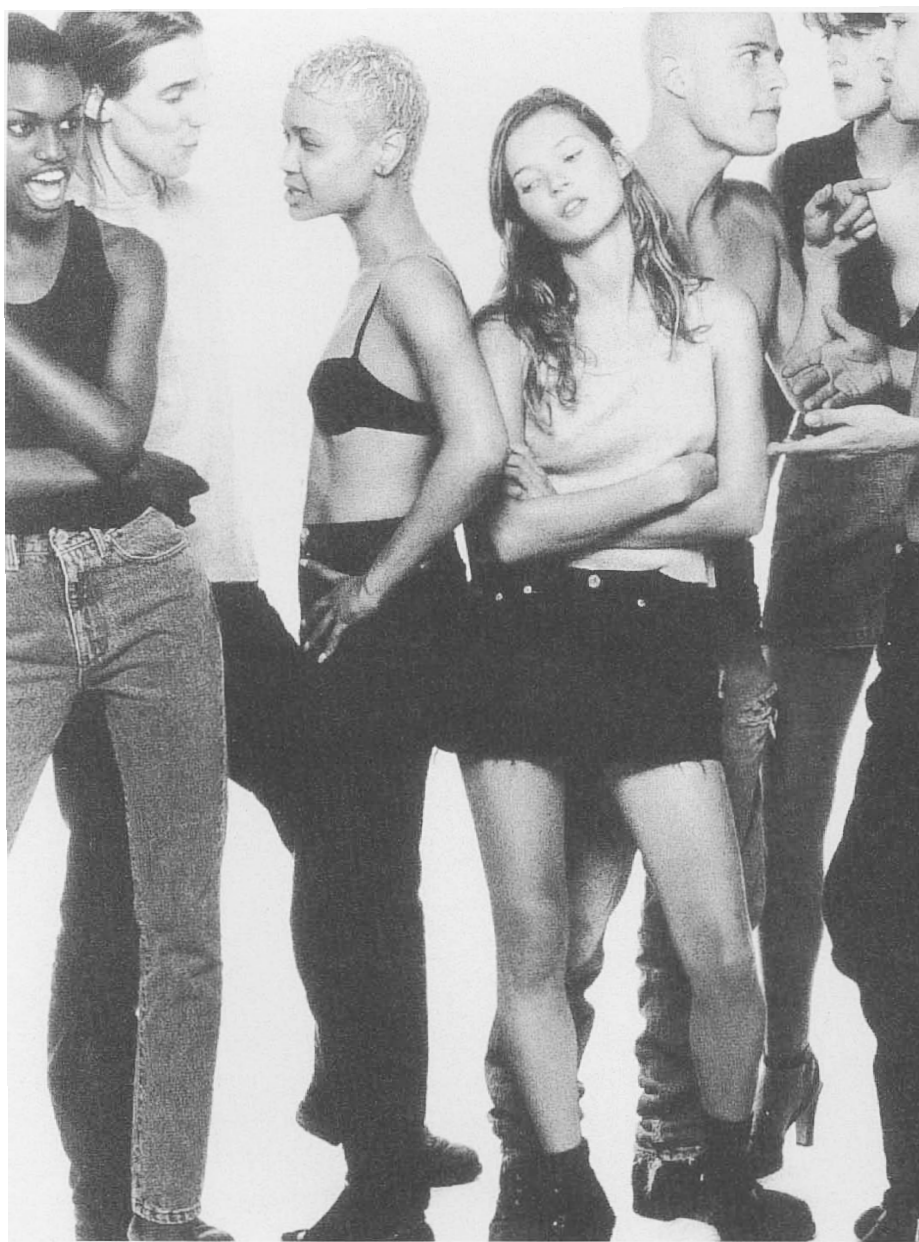
The effectiveness of our Svelte has been proven in independent dermatologic-controlled clinical studies. Of the
100 women tested, 77% saw a reduced appearance of cellulite, 40% improved skin tone, 57% improved skin texture.

FIGURE 1
Computer-generated “reality”

with gorgeous photographs of chiseled muscles and firmly set jaws, coolly and dramatically glamorized à la Robert Mapplethorpe (in the *Life* feature, the athletes were all naked), these stories focused to an unprecedented degree in sports coverage on the rock-hard beauty of the athletic body. (Why am I reminded of Leni Riefenstahl here?) In the *Life* article blurbs accompanying the photos praised the low body fat of the athletes as though the lean physique was as significant an accomplishment as athletic skill and dedication.

But even our habituation to perfection is masked by illusion. Lately I've been reading a lot about a new "inclusiveness" in ideas about beauty, "anti-fashion" fashion, and the like.¹ In a 1996 editorial for the trendy magazine *Interview*, Ingrid Sischy celebrates the end of "the old limited ideas of beauty." We now live in a culture, she says, where beauty has had "its chains taken off." Now, I am not opposed to beauty. I love looking at beautiful faces and bodies, and I enjoy "beautifying" myself. I don't consider our powerful responses to physical beauty as base or superficial either. Far from it. The beauty of the human body, as Plato describes it in the *Symposium*, is the presence of the Divine on earth. Such beauty not only draws us to each other but awakens the soul to the beautiful and good beyond the particular body to which we are attracted, inspiring spiritual aspiration, artistic creativity, philosophical speculation, the desire to better the self. Put more simply, beauty lights up the world for us.

But just what culture is Sischy writing about? A world in which beauty was "unchained" to release all its diverse and unexpected forms would truly be wonderful. But ours is a culture in which personal want ads list rigid specifications for weight, body tone, youthfulness! Racial diversity? Calvin Klein's CK One ad campaign—an exemplar of Sischy's "revolution" in beauty—seems to be making the visual point that whether you are male or female, young or old, gay or straight, black or white, you are required to have the same toned, adolescent-looking body (figure 2). The female cast of NBC's Thursday night comedy lineup, beginning with the



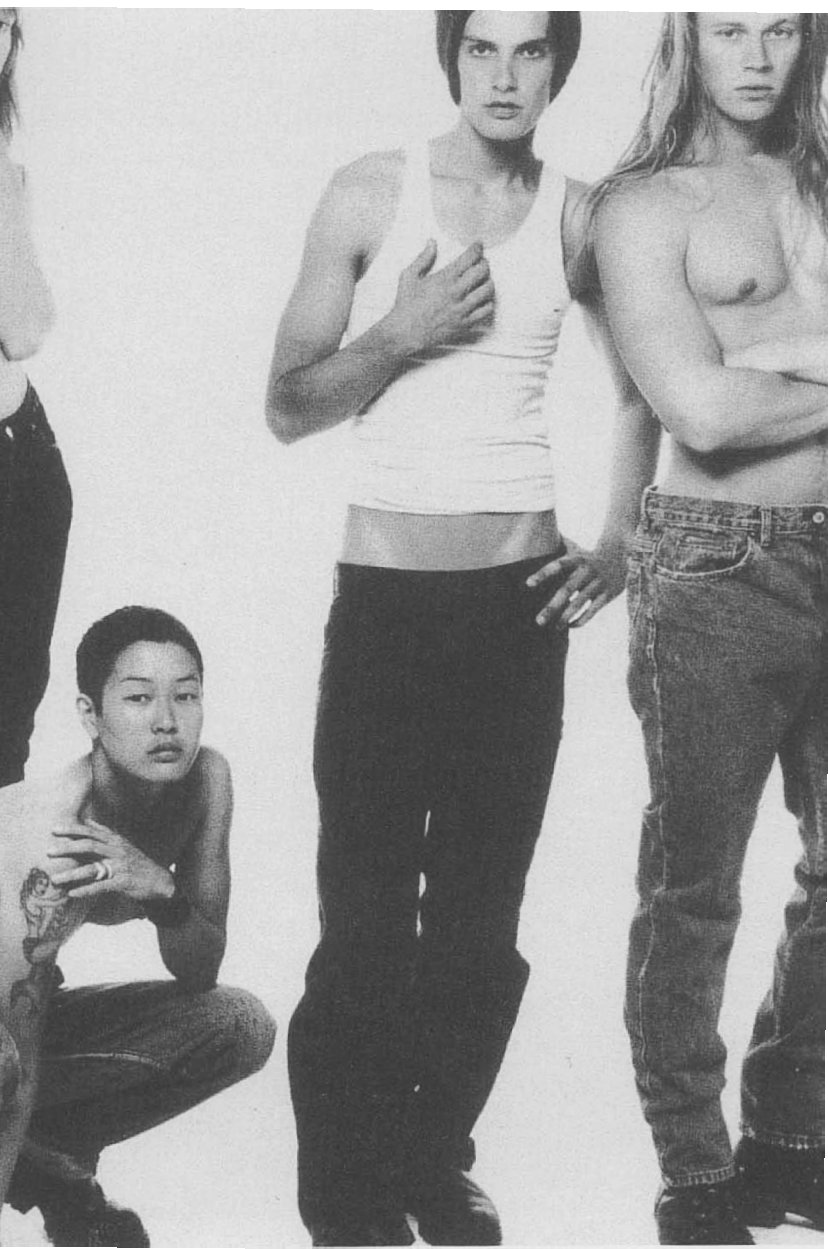


FIGURE 2

Commercial diversity?

fabulously successful *Friends*, has got to be the tidiest, tiniest—and whitest—collection of bodies ever assembled in one place. Don't show me avant-garde photographs. Look at *Newsweek*'s October 1996 cover story on JFK's bride, Carolyn, which touts her "clean, classic" patrician good looks as the "perfect image of the American girl" and provides step-by-step instructions for looking just like her (be blond, pluck your eyebrows, and—above all else—lose weight); then check out the statistics on eating disorders, plastic surgery, and the diaries of nine-year-olds convinced that they must be physically "perfect" in order to be loved.

We've always had icons of high fashion, a style nobility. But few people today regard our contemporary icons as belonging to some out-of-reach world of (extremely expensive) glamour and artifice. No, we're encouraged to believe that we can have at least the bodies, if not the lifestyles, of the rich and famous. My undergraduate students, whatever their genetic predisposition or cultural heritage, want to look like the women on *Friends*, hair straight and swinging, buns tight, breasts perky. And why not? The technology exists and it's becoming cheaper all the time. Your hair doesn't swing like Jennifer Aniston's? No problem—a good "relaxer" will do the trick. Buns need work? If the StairMaster doesn't carve them into steel, liposuction will vacuum out your unsightly excess. Breasts too small or saggy? Cosmetic "augmentation" will ensure that they stand at attention. If you can't afford to perfect yourself, your flawed body becomes a physical announcement that you are not among the success stories, the beautiful people, those who are able to get their act together and "Just Do It!" in this land of limitless opportunity. Poverty has always been visible on the human body, but with money now able to buy perfection, the beauty gap between rich and poor is widening into a chasm.

And those of us who are years beyond perkiness? The current cultural hype is that fifty, even sixty and seventy, can still be sexy. As if! The reality is that the movie stars and models are establishing new norms—achievable only through continual surgery—which make those of us who

actually look older at fifty than we did at thirty seem like crones! Over the past five years my diagnosis of the emergence of a culture of infinitely malleable “plastic” bodies, which I first detailed in my *Unbearable Weight* in 1993, has been borne out dramatically.² There’s barely a movie or television star whose upper lip has not recently become magically fuller—and thus “younger” and sexier, according to our current aesthetic codes. (African and Semitic lips are now “in style”; our noses have yet to make the grade.) Even Heather Locklear, platonic form of the WASP princess, has suddenly acquired a plump upper lip. And has anyone noticed how these actresses are all beginning to look alike? During the heyday of the *Twilight Zone*, there was an episode about a futuristic culture in which everyone, at a certain age, would choose one of two or three available models of face and body. They’d then go into some sort of apparatus and a few moments later would emerge, transformed into an identical copy of the model they had chosen. Cher and Faye Dunaway, it appears from recent photos (figures 3 and 4), have found the inventor of that apparatus. Or the same plastic surgeon. But this is not the twilight zone; this is the culture we live in.

Not all the illusions of our image-bedazzled culture have to do with glamorized visual images and fantasies of bodily transformation and perfection. It is virtually a truism that politics today is almost purely about images, spin doctoring, how various policies “play,” and so forth. In the Menendez, King, and Simpson trials we’ve seen how effective skillful manipulation on the part of image-conscious lawyers can prove; in each of these trials the defense—aided and abetted by the sympathies and susceptibilities of jurors—was able to construct an alternative reality to replace the evidence of the case. Rush Limbaugh and other self-proclaimed conservative guardians of truth continually fudge the line between entertainment and information, but so too does left-leaning filmmaker Oliver Stone. His fictional documentaries of the Kennedy assassination and the Watergate scandal are such an inseparable stew of fact and fantasy that one





FIGURES 3 AND 4

Different hairstyles, converging faces

shudders to think of the next generation learning its history lessons from them—as it undoubtedly will, despite Stone’s disclaimers at the start of the films.

Ours is an “infomercial” culture in which the desire to sell products and stories continually tries to pass itself off as “helping” and “informing” the public, satisfying their “right to know.” We get our deepest philosophies of life from jingles and slogans. The fantasy-governed, pumped-up individualist rhetoric of commercial advertisements—like “Just Do It!” or “Know No Boundaries,” or “I’m Worth It!”—has become the ethics, political ideology, and existential philosophy of our time, constituting what is probably the only set of communally shared ideas we have, providing people with the one coherent (if reprehensible) set of standards they draw on in justifying their own behavior. The ethical code of Nike and Revlon! Talk about puppeteers being in charge of reality!

We are not helped to see through these illusions by contemporary beliefs about the “relative” nature of truth—beliefs that one doesn’t need to be fully aware of or have had a college education in order to hold. Talk shows convey the message that everyone has his or her own version of things; some teachers, unfortunately, reinforce that message with theory about the infinite interpretability of texts and the perspectival nature of all knowledge. I have used such arguments myself and still believe that they have validity. But they are not absolutes, and they are no longer as useful or illuminating as they once were in the days when fixed and dogmatic conceptions of reality seemed to be the chief enemies of human communication and understanding. In some quarters, of course, the old enemies remain. (Give me a postmodernist over John Silber any day!) But arch-conservative Silber aside, today most people behave less like deluded philosopher-kings than like captives in the cave of the image masters. In a world in which appearances can be so skillfully manipulated, the notion that everything is “open to interpretation” is no longer an entirely edifying one. Without toppling into absolutist conceptions of truth, we need to

rehabilitate the notion that not all versions of reality are equally trustworthy, equally deserving of our assent.

Adults of the baby-boom generation or older sometimes scorn or dismiss the notion that cultural images have such power over our lives. I think that they are out of touch with their students, their children, the culture, and possibly themselves. Recently I gave a talk to a group of academics and health professionals. My topic was the cultural consequences of the images of physical perfection that now surround us. I used examples from my own life as well as other material, most of which appears in various essays in this book. At one point someone in the audience—a therapist—called out derisively: “Well, why don’t you just turn off the television!” Another cavalierly dismissed the idea that young women’s problems with eating and body image had grown any worse over the last thirty years. A third said he thought my perceptions were skewed by my “emotional overinvolvement” with the material. He himself did not think these body issues were all that important. Barely a moment later he was expressing his concern that his still-growing daughter add some inches to her height.

Such responses are culturally uninformed. (“Just turn off the television!” Right. Tell that to your adolescent patients. Try doing it yourself, doctor.) These reactions also betray a lack of critical consciousness of the individual’s participation in culture. Just where does therapist number three think his anxiety over his daughter’s height comes from? Does he not remember when he was growing up in the fifties and 5’4" was the tallest a girl could get before being considered a giantess? As to emotional involvement with the material, I consider that an asset, not a liability. Unless one recognizes one’s own enmeshment in culture, one is in no position to theorize about that culture or its effects on others. But unless one strives to develop critical distance on that enmeshment, one is apt to simply embody and perpetuate the illusions and mystifications of the culture (for example, communicating anxiety about body weight and height to one’s children). So, for me, the work of cultural criticism is not exactly like that

of Plato's philosopher, whose enlightenment requires that he transcend his experience of *this* world and ascend to another, purer realm. (Actually, I'm not so sure Plato believed that, either, but it is certainly the way his ideas have been dominantly interpreted.) Cultural criticism does not so much ask that we leave the cave as turn a light on *in* it.

Cultural criticism clears a space in which we can stand back and survey a scene that we are normally engaged in living in, not thinking about. In that space, we can function not merely as consumers of cultural pleasures and rewards but also as phenomenologists and diagnosticians of those pleasures and rewards. As a consumer, I get mild enjoyment from *Friends*, relaxed by its affable predictability and tempted to cut my own hair like Jennifer Aniston's. (But I know my own, which I used to iron in the sixties, wouldn't swing right.) As a cultural critic, my responses to *Friends* become material for concerned reflection on the current fantasies of our culture; I think, for example, about how all these women remind me of Mary Tyler Moore in her early TV shows, and I wonder what this says about cultural nostalgia for that model of femininity. As a forty-nine-year-old whose face has quite suddenly, it seems, decided to make me over on its own terms, I buy alpha-hydroxy face creams with calming and exotic French names like "Primordiale" and "Bienfait Total." As a cultural critic, I think about how we are rapidly creating a world in which a Martian, leafing through a magazine or catalog from earth, would come to the conclusion that human men and women are two different species, one of which ages and the other of which doesn't. As a consumer and a Simpson case junkie, I rush out to buy the latest in the seemingly never-ending effluence of books about the case and devour it like candy. As a cultural critic, I think about the long-term consequences of all these competing versions of "history" being manufactured out of the machinery of consumerism. What may be a tasty treat for the consumer can appear a poison to the cultural critic.

It is essential that we cultivate the practice of turning a critical light on popular culture, particularly among our children and students, who were

born into this world of created images and are an important target of its seductions. The consequences of remaining in the dark, intoxicated by the illusions cast on the wall, are beginning to become apparent: the collapse of any intelligent political discourse (we prefer soothing images, heart-warming anecdotes, euphemistic rhetoric), the inability to sustain love relationships (we expect them to be like the movies, where “love” is visually coded by playful romps on the beach, photogenic sex, dinners in chic restaurants, and where all human beings have great clothes and live in terrific apartments), a perilous detachment from the realities of environmental damage, and of course the distractions and dangers of trying to *become* the bodies in the technologically fabricated images that surround us. That pursuit not only drains and diverts us from more communal, socially directed projects of change but is treacherous to physical health and psychological well-being. Disordered patterns of bingeing, purging, exercising, and dieting are virtually the norm among high school and college women. And any “real” woman who tries to keep up with the movie stars in the “unreal” (airbrushed, filtered, surgically altered, technologically cut-and-pasted) state in which they come to us has a hard if not impossible task ahead of her. Not to mention trying to look like a computer-generated image!!

Some of the paths our culture is following today are at the edges of a Brave New World that we ought to think twice about entering—as individuals and as contributors to the shaping of our culture. For we all are culture makers as well as culture consumers, and these transformations don’t happen without our participation. In promoting their products, advertisers frequently invoke the stirring rhetoric of freedom, choice, and individualism; academics, on their part, have lately become infatuated with “agency” and “resistance.” But both commercial and scholarly rhetoric and arguments often boil down to a celebration of how “creative” we *already* are as individual consumers of this culture. I don’t deny that this culture provides many opportunities—if one has the money—for personal enhancement and creativity. And I don’t disdain those choices. I do not feel at all

superior, for example, to the woman who has a face-lift in order to feel young and attractive for just a little while longer before she becomes culturally invisible; believe me, I understand where she's coming from. But I prefer to reserve my congratulations for those choices that are undertaken in full consciousness that they are not only about "creating" our own individual lives but constructing the landscape of our culture. Each of us shapes the culture we live in every moment of our lives, not only in our more public activities but also in our most intimate gestures and personal relationships, for example, in the way we model attitudes toward beauty, aging, perfection, and so on for our children, friends, students, lovers, colleagues.

In reminding people of these public responsibilities, am I being judgmental about their personal choices? Some might see it this way, and perhaps in some sense they would be right. But because I experience myself as so completely "inside" the dilemma of finding my way in this culture, I think of my criticisms—of cosmetic surgery, for example—less as a judgment of others than as an argument with myself, a way to shore up my own consciousness and resolve, which is continually being worn down. Cultural criticism, for me, isn't about lacking sympathy for people's personal choices (or my own—and they often require that I let myself "off the hook"); it's about preserving consciousness of the larger context in which our personal choices occur, so that we will be better informed about their potential consequences, for ourselves as well as for others. But this requires vigilance. The more a cultural practice is engaged in, by greater and more diverse numbers of people, the more "normal" it seems and the less likely we are to point the beam of evaluative or critical consciousness in its direction. In this way, even the most bizarre cultural practice can become part of the taken-for-granted environment of our lives, as unremarkable, as invisible, as water to goldfish in a bowl. Thus, before we can figure out what to do, we first have to learn to *see* with something other than bedazzled eyes. I think Plato was dead right about that.

Where I think Plato is less useful to us is in the notion that lying beyond