

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## Beauty and Civilisation. Buffon's considerations on human somatic features in *Histoire Naturelle de l'Homme*

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**Abstract:** The presence of an aesthetic judgment in an anthropological, scientific study may seem incongruous. One would think that the human body should be approached only in terms of 'objective' criteria of functionality and measurable proportions. However, to our surprise, two adjectives keep coming up in Buffon's description of the human body in his *Histoire naturelle de l'Homme*: 'beautiful' and 'ugly'.

To be sure, it is possible to determine that a person is beautiful through measurements and observations of bodily and facial symmetry, but most often, these proportions are not enough to explain why we find a person beautiful. How does Buffon think about beauty when he writes the *Natural History of Man*? Does he understand it as a classificatory tool based on an objective system of measurement, or does he use his personal preference? On what criteria does he judge the physical aspect of the varieties in the human species?

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The presence of an aesthetic judgment in an anthropological, scientific study may seem incongruous. One would think that the human body should be approached only in terms of 'objective' criteria of functionality and measurable proportions. However, to our surprise, two adjectives keep coming up in Georges-Louis Leclerc comte de Buffon's description of the human body in his *Histoire naturelle de l'Homme*: 'beautiful' and 'ugly'.

To be sure, it is possible to determine that a person is beautiful through measurements and observations of bodily and facial symmetry, but most often, these proportions are not enough to explain why we find a person beautiful. At most, it defines an ideal. Vitruvian man has a perfectly balanced

form, but he will not necessarily be considered beautiful by all his observers, who may not find him attractive or feel a particular pleasure in seeing him.

Time and again, philosophers have tried to define beauty, by assimilating it to the notion of ‘truth,’ as Shaftesbury and Baumgarten did. Kant, by claiming that beauty is found in an object when it has its own, rightful and harmonious form, and it conveys a feeling of pleasure that cannot have any other finality. He also discussed human beauty in connection with someone’s moral inner:

‘from this standard ideal of the beautiful we must still distinguish the ideal of the beautiful, which . . . must be expected solely in the human figure. Now the ideal in this figure consists in the expression of the moral; apart from the moral the object would not be like universally and moreover positively (rather than merely negatively, when it is exhibited in a way that is [merely] academically correct).’<sup>1</sup>

Others, by bringing feeling into play, have identified beauty and virtue: Diderot, in his *Encyclopedie*, suggests that beauty may be seen as the ability for a being or a thing to fulfil its function or reach its purpose. Voltaire, for his part, argues in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, that beauty is a concept relative to the observer: ‘Ask a toad what beauty is: he will answer that it is his female toad, with her two big round eyes coming out of her little head.’<sup>2</sup> In this latter case, we may surmise that beauty is what will produce an attraction whose goal is that of perpetuating the species. Yet, there is no denying Voltaire’s judgemental temperament, and the sarcasm in his statement cannot be missed, as the ugly toad cannot possibly know what true beauty is. Thus, some species and even some races might have a more trustworthy judgment than others.

How does Buffon think about beauty when he writes the *Natural History of Man*? Does he understand it as a classificatory tool based on an objective system of measurement? We may answer affirmatively in view of the fact that bodies are often described by him in terms of proportions. Nevertheless, while the elements that constitute ugliness are clearly stated, beauty remains a vague concept for the reader. Expressions such as a ‘well-shaped’ nose or a ‘shapely’ waist do not offer any precise information about what these organs may look like. Does Buffon see beauty as a ‘contamination of form over substance’, perceiving ‘beauty as a proof of goodness and ugliness as a proof of evil’ as Jean-Charles Jobart puts it?<sup>3</sup> This can only be true to a limited extent since Buffon also affirms that ‘misshapen body may contain a beautiful soul’ (68). Finally, does Buffon consider beauty as indicative of men’s aptitude to fulfil their natural functions? This is the most plausible hypothesis, even if it cannot be completely satisfactory. Indeed, on what criteria could such a judgment be based? In judging an organism’s aptitude

to survive and thrive, wouldn't qualities such as physical hardiness, energy, and moral fortitude be more pertinent than beauty?

It seems, therefore, that the use of the adjective 'beautiful' cannot be a trivial matter, but that it's one that brings additional, important information to the data compiled in the *Histoire naturelle* about humans and the different groups they form. What is this information, and in what way can it shed light on Buffon's discourse on the human in the eighteenth century?

### I. WHAT IS THE BEAUTIFUL?

'The body of a well-made man must be square. . . In the woman, everything is more rounded. . . The man has strength and majesty; the graces and beauty are the prerogatives of the other sex.' writes Buffon, at the beginning of the chapter 'On the virile age'.<sup>4</sup> Male and female beauty seems to be defined by their reciprocal opposition. A man with attributes considered pleasing in a woman will be considered ugly, and the reverse is equally – if not more – true. Thus, the man must be slim, his muscles 'sharply defined' and 'the facial features strongly drawn' (58). The first elements to consider, according to Buffon, are not those on which the eye lingers in general. The man must be majestic rather than beautiful, and it is first of all his posture that must indicate his place in the world. Because he stands upright, on two legs, he dominates with his height the other living beings, 'his firm and bold step announces his nobility and his rank' (59); 'he touches the earth only by its most distant extremities; he sees it only from afar, and seems to scorn it' (59). Feminine beauty is very different: it consists of curves, with softer forms and finer features" (58). A round face, a small mouth curved in an almost permanent smile, announce joviality and sweetness, which are among the qualities most prized and expected in women. In the eighteenth century, many artists and thinkers from Louis-Sébastien Mercier to Immanuel Kant, construed masculine beauty as sublime: imposing, even menacing; while woman's 'prettiness' was seen as harmless and comforting.<sup>5</sup>

The first element that characterises beauty in a woman is the whiteness of her skin, while the man is more tanned, partly because he is supposed to spend more time outside. In addition to the fact that this sexual asymmetry – along with a higher-pitched voice and a smaller size – would excite men, it would also reveal greater fertility. Again, the aesthetic preference accompanies the need to procreate. Other characteristic elements of the woman are the roundness of her breast and her waist, thick and long hair, whether blond or brown, scarcity of body hair, a soft, cheerful countenance, and an overall youthful appearance.

Beauty is, according to Buffon, essentially European and Western:

' . . . the inhabitants of the northern provinces of Mogul and Persia, the Armenians, the Turks, the Georgians, the Mingrelians, the Circassians, the Greeks, and all the peoples of Europe are the most

beautiful, whitest, and best-made men in the whole world...'<sup>6</sup>  
(218).

The naturalist establishes a systematic link between the beauty of the peoples in question and their whiteness. The two terms seem equivalent. Women, in particular, are beautiful because they are white. On the other hand, people with darker skin can only be beautiful despite their color, as evidenced by the example of the Spaniards who 'are born very white and are very beautiful; but as they grow older, their complexion changes in a surprising way' (223) - the adversative expression implying that the darkening of their skin degrades their appearance. Moreover, in order to understand more precisely what a beautiful face looks like, according to Buffon, it suffices to take the opposite of the typical Black eunuch, presented as the epitome of hideousness: 'they are meant to have a very flat nose, a horrible expression, very large and thick lips, and in particular, black and sparse teeth' (34). Thus, a straight or an aquiline nose, eyes (either blue or light brown), a small mouth, and white teeth and skin constitute an ideal face.

The beauty of the body is only evoked through proportions borrowed from ancient sculptures (traditionally divided into ten sections or 'facets'), but the face is described in much more detail and is thus more impactful.<sup>7</sup> Buffon dwells on the importance of the eyebrows, which must be expressive; the mouth, that he wants small and smiling; and even details such as dimples are evoked among the amenities of a charming face. The eyes, especially, are the center of the '*tableau vivant*' (61) that constitutes the face, and 'the eye belongs to the soul more than any other organ' (59). He develops:

The most beautiful eyes are those that appear black or blue. The vivacity and the fire, which constitute the principal character of the eyes, appears more piercing in dark colours than in half-tones of color...<sup>8</sup> (61)

Conversely, irises that are too light make the eyes seem too wide and vacant; these are eyes that 'tell us nothing, as their expression appears fixed or frightened' (61). Beautiful eyes are those that communicate feelings, eyes that speak to the observer.

People who are short-sighted, or who are shifty, have much less of this external soul which resides mainly in the eyes; these defects destroy the physiognomy and make the most beautiful faces unpleasant or deformed.<sup>9</sup> (59-60).

From these remarks, it appears that it makes no sense to evaluate the beauty of a face in terms of proportions. Instead, we must observe its ability to communicate. People capable of expressing themselves without having to say a word, are more attractive. On the other hand, those who fail to communicate through their appearance, stand a good chance of being perceived as ugly.

Appearance is thus more a societal issue than one of individual taste, and this is true even for men: ‘the variety in the manner of dressing is as great as the diversity of nations,’ explains Buffon, who regrets such vanity. However, he recognises the need to make oneself as beautiful as possible in order to be able to communicate most efficiently.

In eighteenth-century Europe, clothing, jewellery, wigs, makeup and other ‘mouches’ indicated a person’s social status. Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell states that ‘the point of wearing cosmetics during the eighteenth century was not to look beautiful or natural, but to look rich’.<sup>10</sup> For example, ceruse white, a lead-based formula used since ancient Greek times, was a popular way of whitening and smoothing the skin (at the risk of seriously damaging it). In so doing, people respected a color code inherited from the past, when brown skin belonged to field workers, while the aristocracy, who stayed inside, kept a pale skin. The emerging bourgeoisie and the new noble classes were especially keen to emphasise this status difference with makeup, so as to ensure that it remained visible. It was the source of much criticism. Mme de Pompadour, for example, experienced such criticism, since her perceived excessive use of cosmetics signalled an ambition that many considered excessive.

Buffon makes minimal mention of European dress and makeup, but is very sympathetic towards certain beauty rites of the past, like those of the ancient Muscovites: he recognises an aesthetic that he understands because it’s familiar to him:

... women knew how to put on red, pluck their eyebrows, paint them, or form artificial ones; they also knew how to wear jewels, adorn their hairstyles with pearls, dress in rich and precious fabrics. Doesn’t this prove that barbarism was beginning to end ... ?<sup>11</sup> (224).

Elaborate hairstyles, jewels, elegant clothes, trimmed eyebrows, and red lips: these make sense to the naturalist.

On the other hand, many other practices make the naturalist visibly circumspect. It is difficult for him to see the beauty of female lips and chins painted in blue, as practiced by the desert Arabs, or to appreciate the smile of a Chinese woman whose teeth have been blackened by the use of betel. Moreover, some forms of makeup have the effect of blurring the border between the sexes. Arab women, for example, blacken their eyebrows, Buffon notes disapprovingly. Nowadays, in the theater, actresses who have to play male roles darken them exaggeratedly, and so do drag kings. The illusion of fuller eyebrows lends the face a more severe expression.

Nevertheless, more than being simply a question of aesthetics, the radical character of the ornaments and body alterations described in the travel accounts that are Buffon’s source (such as pulling out the eyelashes, piercing the nose, or tattooing) seems particularly to disturb him. He finds these practices questionable on several levels. First of all, the result is permanent,

and Buffon points out that the designs thus inserted under the skin are ‘ineffaceable’ (256) and that they will remain ‘for the rest of one’s life’ (212). In the West, ornaments are only meant to be a temporary embellishment, but in these countries, they lead to a definitive transformation of nature. Second, tattoos are often made with dangerous substances. He writes about young Arab women that ‘in order to appear more beautiful, they draw figures in blue color on their whole body with the point of a lancet and vitriol’ (211). He adds that ordinary women in the desert ‘prick their lips with needles, and put gunpowder mixed with ox gall over it so that the mixture penetrates the skin’ (212). Chinese women use a white cream that ‘spoils their skin so badly that they appear old before the age of thirty’ (191). (Let us note that the same was being said of the ceruse white used by French aristocrats.) Now, for Buffon and his society, the beginning of a woman’s mature age marks the end of her beauty. Such a makeup thus seems to produce the opposite effect of what it is supposed to accomplish.

Sometimes, the search for beauty leads the peoples evoked in *Histoire naturelle de l’Homme* to employ even more extreme processes. The author refers, for example, to the account of La Barbinais Le Gentil about Chinese women:

He assures that women do everything they can to make their eyes appear small, and that young girls, as instructed by their mothers, continually pull on their eyelids, in order to have small and long eyes. . . <sup>12</sup> (191).

Here it’s not only a question of improving one’s appearance or hiding signs of old age with makeup, nor of putting one’s health at risk in order to permanently color their body with unnatural colours. It is a question of deforming their features at the price of suffering. Some peoples go even further and modify the shape of their bones. The Caribbeans, in particular, flatten the forehead and nose of their children shortly after birth and tighten the ankles of young girls so hard that their calves grow preternaturally. Finally, the ‘Savages’ in North America are suspected of transforming their entire bodies, as they display ‘monstrous’ deformities. The adjective ‘monstrous’ expresses well the revulsion that such an alteration of the body produces. Although it is never mentioned, there is no doubt that Buffon, in keeping with the Christian beliefs of his society, condemns the disfigurement of what the ‘Creator’ has formed perfectly. These manifestations of voluntary denaturation seem to accompany the degeneration already indicated by poor morals, dark skin, and surrounding, undomesticated nature.

## II. THE THREAT OF DEGENERATION

In the short chapter entitled ‘About Monsters’, located at the end of the *Histoire naturelle de l’Homme*, Buffon mentions bodies whose specificities are not inherited and whose distinctive traits are not specific to a race nor

to a civilisation. He thus distinguishes three main categories: monsters by excess, monsters by defect, and monsters by ‘the reversal or inversion of parts’ (315). These categories include Siamese twins, cyclops, and people whose internal organs are reversed. Monsters exist beyond genders and races, and the particularities he evokes do not lessen the fundamentally human character of these individuals.

More than two centuries later, Georges Vigarello, in his *Histoire du corps*, presents a slightly different definition of the monster, based less on human biology and more on fears and legends:

The manufacture of the monstrous body obeys the first principle, Hybridisation. There must be a man in the monster and something else, of the order of animality. From the examination of these images, we can guess the rules of distribution, of the interweaving of the human and the bestial in the monstrous representation.<sup>13</sup>

According to Buffon, the beauty of man relies on elements that distinguish him from animals. His eyes, framed by a row of upper and lower eyelashes, appear ‘more beautiful and [his] glance softer’ (62). The forehead ‘is one of the most notable parts of the face’ (62); the placement of the hairline defines it and ‘contributes the most to the beauty of its form’ (62). Human beings’ long hair located mostly on the top of their head also differentiates them significantly from the animals, whose body is either smooth, as the batrachians, or completely covered in hair, feathers, or scales: ‘it is a defect to be bald’ (p.62). Finally, beauty also depends on a central appendage: the nose. As it is not seen on animals, a nose with a high bridge is more beautiful than a flat nose. Similarly, jaws should not be prominent, and teeth must be white. Buffon will not support Camper’s ‘facial line’, but he seems to approve some ideas that will be picked up later by naturalists such as Lavater and Dufresne. According to the latter, ‘[physical] ugliness is factored on the degree of distance of the beings called ‘superior’ [from those who stand below them]; from such ugliness stem moral ugliness and a lesser intelligence.’<sup>14</sup>

Now, in Buffon’s work, the physique of foreign populations, and more precisely the physical traits described as ugly, presents characteristics that blur the frontier between man and animal. In ‘*Variétés dans l’espèce humaine*’, he mentions the flat noses of the Tartars; strong hairiness is often associated with bestiality and ugliness. The people of Yeço are ‘very hairy on the body and even on the face’ (194). Chileans have, according to Buffon, ‘the hair black, flat and coarse as horsehair’ (263). These comparisons are often unflattering, despite the fact that Buffon approves of the Arabic expression ‘the eyes of a gazelle’ (212) to designate women with pretty eyes. Even when she is beautiful, the exotic woman remains wild in Buffon’s mind.

The animality, the bestiality even, of certain peoples, is expressed both through their practices and their physical appearance. The Arabs, for exam-

ple, 'live, like the Tartars, without rules, without police, and almost without society; larceny, kidnapping, robbery, are authorised by their chiefs' (210). In addition, their refusal to cultivate, organise and maintain the land repulses the naturalist, and the savagery of such a way of life impacts their physical aspect:

The common women are extremely tanned: besides the brown and swarthy colour which they naturally have, I found their figure entirely ugly...<sup>15</sup>

In keeping with the Biblical model of Adam, the first man, who was placed in the Garden of Eden in order to cultivate and guard it, Buffon puts these words in the mouth of the prototypical man: 'Raw Nature is hideous and perishable; it is I, I alone, who can make it pleasant and alive' (*Histoire naturelle*, vol. 12). It is man's duty to transform space, to organise it, and to fashion it, to imprint his presence on it by making it beautiful and functional as well. For that reason, the naturalist considers nomadic people, and the Amerindians in particular, as 'disinherited'; that is, as having given up their inheritance. I am using here the term employed by Michèle Duchet, apropos this passage in volume 21 of the *Histoire naturelle*:

... far from using this territory as his domain, he had no empire [power; governance]; having never subjected either the animals or the elements, having neither tamed the seas nor directed the rivers, nor worked the earth, he was himself only an animal of the first rank, who existed in nature only as a being of no consequence, a kind of impotent automaton, incapable of reforming or assisting it...<sup>16</sup>

On the verge of animality, these human beings are so denatured that they are 'devoid of arts and industry' (254). The ugliness of their appearance reflects the ugliness of uncultured nature.

Nevertheless, cultivating the land is not enough to build a complex society. A level of civilisation can also be evaluated through the men's appearance and especially the color tone of their skin. A poor man, most often confined to physical work, will be darker than a rich man. The more white-skinned individuals a nation has, the richer and the more civilised it is. The Indians of the Americas, who have copper-toned skin, despite the medium and high latitudes they inhabit, are tanned because too few of them are scattered over too vast a space to come together, so that they don't even feel the need to come together to form a truly solid society.

According to Buffon, the color of the skin is mainly the consequence of the climate. However, it also varies depending on the food, and on the people's manners:

... in a same race of men blackness depends on the greater or lesser ardor of the climate: it may take several centuries and a succession of a great number of generations for a white race to take on the color brown and to finally become quite black; but it seems likely that within a certain amount of time, a white people transported from the north to the equator might become brown or quite black, especially if these same people changed their manners, and used for food only the productions of the hot country to which they had been transported.<sup>17</sup> (251).

Thus, the example of the Copts indicates that white people who become black seem to have regressed.

... although they cannot deny that they have lost their nobility, sciences, the exercise of arms, their own history, and their very language, and that from an illustrious and valiant nation they have become a vile and enslaved people, their pride nevertheless goes so far as to despise the other nations.<sup>18</sup> (215).

This kind of fall is what Buffon calls ‘degeneration’. Following the monogenetic theory that he shared with others in his time, the naturalist supports the idea that man comes from a single parent tree, distinct from that of the animals. His ancestor would thus have been a white man. Indeed, according to Buffon, the white man is the most beautiful kind of man, and he exists in the most favourable environment for the development of life, neither too hot nor too cold, and abounding in varied food sources. Moreover, he observes that in all parts of the world, and among all races, white individuals that is, people with albinism, may be born. Conversely, he states that the opposite phenomenon has not been observed; no black individuals are born to an exclusively white population.

From this theory, it follows that man is doomed to degenerate. His only hope of not falling from his first, most perfect state lies in the establishment of a solid society based on firm moral principles. Nevertheless, whiteness is not always a sign of improvement: in certain circumstances, whiteness may be a sign of degeneration. If a population regains its whiteness without prior interbreeding with Caucasians and without a prior improvement of its morals, that is a sign that it is moving further away from perfection. Indeed, ‘nature as perfect as it can be has made men white, and nature, when altered as far as it is possible, makes them white again’ (261). This change of color is to be considered as a further step in degeneration, and the Albinos are a case in point.

The Albinos, because they are not a race but rather individual accidents, demonstrate to Buffon’s eyes a degeneration that validates his general theory. Indeed, their white color, which does not come from any parent, is accompanied by a physical deficiency: ‘they are all much less strong and less vigorous than the others, and ... they have extremely weak eyes’ (261).

If too much exposure to the rigours of outdoor life, brutality, and a lack of refinement in industry, food, and morals can bring men closer to the beast, the best way to avoid falling from their original state is for men to gather and protect each other within a culture endowed with practical and moral rules.

Civilised people who live in relative affluence, who are accustomed to a regulated, gentle, and quiet life, who, thanks to a good government, are sheltered from extreme misery, and cannot lack the necessaries of life, will, by this reason alone, be composed of stronger, better-looking, and better-made men than a savage and independent nation, where each individual, drawing no help from society, is obliged to provide for his own subsistence, to suffer alternately from hunger or the frequent excesses of bad food, to exhaust themselves with work or weariness, to experience the rigours of the climate without being able to avoid it, to act in a word more often as an animal than as a man.<sup>19</sup> (225).

Therefore, the more civilised a nation is, the more beautiful its people are. The Tartars are described as ugly; but, the Mongols, ‘who of all these peoples were the most civilised, are still today the least ugly and the least badly shaped’ (188). For this reason, too, Buffon links the absence of religion, and thus of morals, with an external ugliness. Without a higher reason leading the men of a society to look after each other, they return to a state of wild beasts whose daily fight for survival alters their features and deforms their bodies.

### III. WOMEN AND BEAUTY

Among those populations that are presented as ugly, women’s appearance is viewed more favourably. Because they are female, they are supposed to be naturally prettier and whiter. But this is only possible if the people they belong to have reached a certain level of affluence. If they are poor, then women must help by working outside, and their skin, features, and forms deteriorate like those of their men:

Most Moorish women would pass for beautiful, even in this country; their children have the most beautiful complexion in the world and very white bodies; it is true that the boys, who are exposed to the sun, soon turn brown; but the girls, who stay at home, retain their beauty until they are thirty years old . . . <sup>20</sup> (217).

Often, when people are presented as entirely barbaric, when their morals are judged vicious, and the nation appears almost irredeemably perverted, one simple formula becomes the crowning judgment of this decrepitude: the women are then ‘as ugly as the men’ (187). Even the fair sex cannot remain so in a society that does not protect its members.

According to Buffon, Moorish and Turkish women are quite beautiful and can remain so for some time because they are protected from the environment by solid constructions: precisely what American Indians, for instance, lack. Thus, their seclusion indicates that people value their virtue, and that sexuality - that animal remnant in man - is under control. The Moscow Lapps, who are presented as the paragon of female ugliness, bathe naked with men, and are offered to foreigners who are meant to honour them by sleeping with them. The absence of modesty accompanies a physique as degraded as their virtue.

The women thus function as cursors pointing to the moral state of the civilisation in question. If they go naked or display unbridled sexuality, they are repulsive in the eyes of an 18th century Westerner, and such behaviour indicates that their society is decadent.

At the time Buffon was writing, France was experiencing an upheaval in its social organisation. For the longest time, the nobility had been divided into the categories of the 'sword' and the 'robe' (the army and the judiciary) but it had progressively opened its ranks to the moneyed bourgeoisie. A noble title had an economic value since the possession of land or of a royal office brought a permanent income and exemption from most taxes. It also had a moral value, since the ancestors' virtue had to be passed on to the descendants by seed or blood.

The idea that new nobles, whose souls and bodies were those of commoners, would accede to a position formerly reserved for people of quality, gifted with talents and virtues since birth, was disturbing. If the people are no longer guided and protected by their elite, the wretched shall remain wretched, and everyone shall work to survive instead of developing their nation's strengths. This fear of societal collapse haunts the 18th century and the works of Buffon.<sup>21</sup> Some imagine that the loss of beauty compared to the ancient models preserved through statues is a sign of this decline. Winckelmann, for example, writes: 'The most beautiful body among us would perhaps resemble the most beautiful Greek body as little as Iphicles resembled Hercules, his brother'...<sup>22</sup>

As is often the case with social anxiety, this fear of a collapse crystallises around women, social animals if there are any, notably in the eyes of Buffon. Women, especially elite women, appear as objects of consumption to be devoured with one's eyes; a refined object whose elaborate grooming and dressing up sessions (*la toilette*) become a spectacle: the performance of a being who tames her appearance for the enjoyment of her guests.<sup>23</sup> What she displays of herself is a signifier of her social status. She must be pleasing and welcoming - within the limits of propriety, of course, because:

The women had beauty as soon as they knew to respect themselves enough to refuse all those who wanted to attack them by other ways than those of the feelings ...<sup>24</sup>(78).

Women's beauty, according to Buffon, is one with their virtue. It is the capacity to transform their body into an object of desire to be exchanged only for the security of marriage.

Beauty is a code of communication, all the more so in the highest social spheres. Their pallor, often artificial and highlighted by veins sometimes painted on the skin to make it appear diaphanous, mimics youth. In the same way, the color red on the lips draws attention to an attribute that loses color and shape as the woman ages.<sup>25</sup> Blush on the cheeks mimics the effect of embarrassment and confusion on a young girl's face, which eighteenth-century men find irresistible. Buffon seems to forgive women for cheating with the laws of nature. He even seems to expect a woman to emphasise her body and face, perhaps because beauty and an aristocratic bearing are matters of performance and discipline: 'the empire of beauty . . . supposes the art of making it stand out' (78).

It appears from the examples in '*Variétés dans l'espèce humaine*' that the only way to regenerate, or at least to slow down the process of degeneration depends on the woman who must, through miscegenation, reintroduce into her weakening stock characteristics of the white race. It happened with the Persians, who were 'ugly, badly shaped, heavy, with a rough skin and a coloured complexion' (208). Nevertheless, they managed to salvage their race by mixing this degenerate blood with a purer one:

. . . the Persian blood has now become very beautiful, by the mixture of Georgian and Circassian blood; these are the two nations of the world where nature forms the most beautiful people: also there is almost no man of quality in Persia who is not born of a Georgian or Circassian mother. . .<sup>26</sup> (208).

This regeneration is done on the maternal side since women may be traded and exchanged (Circassian women were highly prized in the Ottoman slave market), while men's duty is to remain in their country to defend and consolidate their society. Thus, the biological input would come from the mother, and the cultural information would be inherited from the father. However, beauty is not enough for humankind to maintain its original state of perfection: the example of the Copts proves that if people live without morals, they are condemned to evolve in harsher conditions and see their skin turn brown, thus marking the first stage of degeneration.

Beauty, as Buffon envisions it, is therefore a significant factor in his natural history of the human body. The reader may not always be able to visualise it; the notion may remain vague, confined to a few generic elements, contrary to ugliness which is detailed in an almost clinical way. But beauty is not an end in itself: it is a tool of analysis for the naturalist, who uses it to measure the state of a population, its level of culture, and its possible state of denaturation. Beauty can also be considered a set of codes resulting from education: a cultural code rather than an experience of the senses. This is why

ornaments and other aesthetic habits vary enormously from one civilisation to another, making the work of the naturalist difficult at times. In some cases, the brutality of certain bodily alterations, such as tattooing, or the use of toxic products, take on the role of physical cursor to determine the state of the society being studied.

Culture and beauty are linked, but the environment is not to be neglected either, since the climate and the food grown locally greatly influence the outward appearance of the inhabitants. Buffon recognises that a group of Europeans transported to another environment is likely to see their habits change, their life become harsher, and their skin change from immaculate white to a more pronounced tan. Therefore, the *Histoire naturelle de l'Homme* is not an ode to outright, unabashed colonisation, despite a discourse that asserts the superiority of the white man over all other living creatures, and despite the naturalist's repugnance for peoples he judges to be brutal, and for a nature that is not being used to its fullest. The example of horse breeding is informative in that respect:

If one brings horses from Spain or Barbary [North Africa] to France, it will not be possible to perpetuate their race; they begin to degenerate from the first generation, and by the third or fourth these horses of Berber or Spanish race, without any mixture with other races, will become French horses; so that, to perpetuate these beautiful horses, one is obliged to cross the races by importing new stallions from Spain or Barbary.<sup>27</sup> (291-292).

Spanish and Barb horses, breeds superior to French horses, once they are transported to France degenerate within three or four generations and become indistinguishable from French horses, *even though they have not been bred with any French horses at all*. Environment alone is sufficient to alter the physiology of humans and animals alike. Thus the qualities transmitted by blood and semen can be preserved only by restoring breeding with specimens of the country of origin. It is therefore necessary that the group that inherently possesses these abilities remain established in its original environment in order to provide pure blood to be mixed with the degraded blood present in other parts of the world.

Hence, the more sustainable way to keep the human species from degenerating further is not to resettle a white population in spaces occupied by non-whites. Nor is it to mix people of different races to dilute the characteristics of one group over several generations as Corneille De Pauw detailed in his *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains* - about which Buffon expresses some reservations. The most durable manner to stop denaturation is to transform the environment so that it does not affect people as much as it does in the most barbaric civilisation. It means building cities, with a higher density of population, houses, and edifices to protect from the influence of

the air and the sun. It also means sometimes establishing farming systems to provide food more consistently. Buffon is proposing an impossible cultural colonisation that would preserve, in theory, the freedom of people who are, despite their possible ugliness and savagery, still part of one single species, and that would lead their nature to recover partly from denaturation.

Buffon's use of beauty as a language and a cultural code makes it possible to distance his work from the physiognomic treatises and other racist studies based on mathematical measurements that would follow the publication of *Histoire naturelle de l'Homme*. Less systematically racist, although still biased in favour of white people, Buffon affirms a commonality to all human beings; women are the fair sex, and they must remain so. Maintaining a clear limit between men and animals depends on this subtle balance between nature and artifice.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Kant 1987, § 17:6, B235, 83-84.

<sup>2</sup>Voltaire 1752, 'Beau' in *Dictionnaire philosophique* I: Abbé - Critique, eds. Ulla Kölving et al., tome 35, 1-666.

<sup>3</sup>Jean-Charles Jobart 2012, 190.

<sup>4</sup>Georges-Louis Leclerc de de Buffon 1749, 58-59 (1989). All subsequent quotations of Buffon come from this edition of the *Histoire naturelle* unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup>'...there is a savage "male", "serious" beauty that characterises terrible mountains, terrifying abysses, or certain "steely" beings, solitary and virile; and on the other hand, one finds a cute prettiness in "society," made of vanity and inconstancy, of frenzy and "effeminate" softness.' Véronique Nahoum-Grappe 1988, 11. (All translations are mine).

<sup>6</sup>'... 'les habitants des provinces septentrionales du Mogol et de la Perse, les Arméniens, les Turcs, les Georgiens, les Mingréliens, les Circassiens, les Grecs, et tous les peuples de l'Europe sont les hommes les plus beaux, les plus blancs et les mieux faits de toute la terre...'

<sup>7</sup>'The height of the body is usually divided into ten equal parts, which are called faces in terms of art, because the face of man was the first model for these measure-

ments.' (74)

<sup>8</sup>'Le plus beaux yeux sont ceux qui paroissent noirs ou bleus. La vivacité et le feu, qui font le principal caractère des yeux, éclatent d'avantage dans les couleurs foncées que dans les demi-teintes de couleur...'

<sup>9</sup>'Les personnes qui ont la vue courte, ou qui sont louches, ont beaucoup moins de cette âme extérieure qui réside principalement dans les yeux ; ces défauts détruisent la physionomie et rendent désagréables ou difformes les plus beaux visages.'

<sup>10</sup>Chrisman-Campbell 2013.

<sup>11</sup>'...les femmes savoient se mettre du rouge, s'arracher les sourcils, se les peindre, ou s'en former d'artificiels; elles savoient aussi porter des pierreries, parer leurs coiffures de perles, se vêtir d'étoffes riches et précieuses. Ceci ne prouve-t-il pas que la barbarie commençoit à finir...?'

<sup>12</sup>'Il assure que les femmes font tout ce qu'elles peuvent pour faire paroître leurs yeux petits, et que les jeunes filles, instruites par leur mère, se tirent continuellement les paupières, afin d'avoir les yeux petits et longs...'

<sup>13</sup>'La fabrication du corps monstrueux obéit au premier principe, celui de l'*Hybridation*. Il faut de l'homme dans le mon-

stre, mais aussi autre chose, de l'ordre de l'animalité. On devine à l'examen de ces images des règles de répartition, de distribution, d'imbrication de l'humain et du bestial dans la représentation monstrueuse.' In Georges Vigarello 2005, 383.

<sup>14</sup>Pierre Camper, *Dissertation physique sur les différences réelles que présentent les traits du visage chez les hommes de différents pays et de différents âges*, quoted by Claudine Sagaert 2012, 248.

<sup>15</sup>'Les femmes du commun sont extrêmement hâlés: outre la couleur brune et basanée qu'elles ont naturellement, je les ai trouvées fort laides dans toute leur figure... ', excerpt from *Voyage fait par ordre du roi dans la Palestine*, par M.D.L.R., p. 260, quoted in de Buffon 1749, 211 (1st edition) - 1989.

<sup>16</sup>'...loin d'user en maître de ce territoire comme de son domaine, il n'avait nul empire ; ne s'étant jamais soumis ni les animaux, ni les éléments, n'ayant ni dompté les mers ni dirigé les fleuves, ni travaillé la terre il n'était lui-même qu'un animal du premier rang, et n'existait pour la nature que comme un être sans conséquence, une espèce d'automate impuissant, incapable de la réformer ou de la seconder...' Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle*, ed. by the Comte of Lacedpede, Paris, 1817, vol. 6: *Des animaux domestiques*; 'Des animaux communs aux deux continents,' p. 519. See Michèle Duchet's commentary of this text in Duchet 1971, 246.

<sup>17</sup>'...dans une même race d'hommes le plus ou le moins de noir dépend de la plus ou moins grande ardeur du climat : il faut peut-être plusieurs siècles et une succession d'un grand nombre de générations pour qu'une race blanche prenne par nuance la couleur brune et devienne enfin tout à fait noire ; mais il y a apparence qu'avec le temps, un peuple blanc transporté du nord à l'équateur pourrait devenir brun ou tout à fait noir, surtout si ce même peuple changeait de mœurs, et ne se servait pour nourriture que des productions du pays chaud dans lequel il aurait été transporté.'

<sup>18</sup>'...quoiqu'ils ne puissent pas nier qu'ils aient perdu leur noblesse, les sciences, l'exercice des armes, leur propre his-

toire, et leur langue même, et que d'une nation illustre et vaillante ils ne soient devenus un peuple vil et esclave, leur orgueil va néanmoins jusqu'à mépriser les autres nations.'

<sup>19</sup>'Un peuple policé qui vit dans une certaine aisance, qui est accoutumé à une vie réglée, douce et tranquille, qui, par les soins d'un bon gouvernement, est à l'abri d'une certaine misère, et ne peut manquer des choses de première nécessité, sera, par cette seule raison, composée d'hommes plus forts, plus beaux et mieux faits qu'une nation sauvage et indépendante, où chaque individu, ne tirant aucun secours de la société, est obligé de pourvoir à sa subsistance, de souffrir alternativement la faim ou les excès d'une nourriture souvent mauvaise, de s'épuiser de travaux ou de lassitude, d'éprouver les rigueurs du climat sans pouvoir s'en garantir, d'agir en un mot plus souvent comme animal que comme homme.'

<sup>20</sup>'La plupart des femmes maures passeroient pour belles, même en ce pays-ci ; leurs enfants ont le plus beau teint du monde, et le corps fort blanc; il vrai que les garçons, qui sont exposés au soleil, brunissent bientôt; mais les filles, qui se tiennent à la maison, conservent leur beauté jusqu'à l'âge de trente ans...'

<sup>21</sup>'It appears in particular that the fear of a generalized physical degeneration was directly linked to the contestation of the values of the monarchic society and to the certainty that the time lived under the influence of a political and social decadence.', in Martial Guédron 2002, 29.

<sup>22</sup>J.J. Winckelmann, *Réflexions sur l'imitation des œuvres grecques en peinture et en sculpture*, quoted in Guédron 2002, 34.

<sup>23</sup>In her article 'Beauty and the Beast: Animals in the Visual and Material Culture of the Toilet', Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell 2013 highlights the link between the exoticism of *toilette* staging and the image of the tamed animal, which delights the eyes of the spectators. This is particularly visible in representations of 'toilette', where parrots and other small tropical animals appear among the perfume bottles and rice powder. Rather reveal-

ingly, Buffon chose to present a small monkey, the ‘white-throated sai’ on a dressing table and not in the jungle, in volume 15 of *Histoire naturelle*.

<sup>24</sup>‘Les femmes ont eu de la beauté dès qu’elles ont su se respecter assez pour se refuser à tous ceux qui ont voulu les attaquer par d’autres voies que par celles du sentiments...’

<sup>25</sup>There was a clear dominance of the colours white, blue and red in the way women dressed and the makeup they wore. Frances Slaney 1896 has interpreted that choice as a subtle reference to the Virgin Mary, whose body is desirable, because not degraded by sex, then by death, and thus reassuring.

<sup>26</sup>‘...le sang persan est présentement devenu fort beau, par le mélange du sang

géorgien et circassien ; ce sont les deux nations du monde où la nature forme de plus belles personnes : aussi il n’y a presque aucun homme de qualité en Perse qui ne soit né d’une mère géorgienne ou circassienne...’

<sup>27</sup>‘Qu’on amène des chevaux d’Espagne ou de Barbarie en France, il ne sera pas possible de perpétuer leur race ; ils commencent à dégénérer dès la première génération, et à la troisième ou quatrième ces chevaux de race barbe ou espagnole, sans aucun mélange avec les autres races, ne laisseront pas de devenir des chevaux français ; en sorte que, pour perpétuer les beaux chevaux, on est obligés de croiser les races en faisant venir de nouveaux étalons d’Espagne ou de Barbarie.’

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