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Skin-deep and hair-raising.
The meaning of skin and hair colour

The colour of your skin and hair is inextricably bound up with your body, as biological data that are allotted to you by nature at birth. The colour of your hair changes throughout your lifetime. When you are young your hair is usually lighter in colour; in puberty it gets darker; and as you age it turns grey. The colour of your skin on the contrary does not change, although the nuance of the skin colour can fluctuate. This is especially true of white skin because it is subject to the influence of various factors like climate, health and emotions.

For example, you can turn scarlet from the sun, white from the cold or from nausea, yellow from a malfunctioning liver, red from anger or embarrassment, or green from envy. The skin thus always expresses something – often involuntarily and sometimes despite our efforts to suppress it. As such, it becomes our emotional and physical barometer.

The body belongs not only to nature but to culture as well. The colours of the skin and hair are therefore more than just physical data. They also play an important role in social relationships and cultural values. To give an example: for the upper class at the beginning of the twentieth century white skin had to be as white as possible because only the lower classes were exposed to the sun, like the farmer who labours in the field or the sailor who stands on deck in all kinds of weather. This ideal was turned around in modern times with the introduction of leisure time and travel opportunities for the upper class, who came home with a tanned skin from holidays in distant places, while pale-faced labourers slogged away long hours in factories.

Sociologically, the colour of

skin and hair is tied in with the complicated concept of 'race'. This is a controversial notion from a biological point of view that nevertheless has made deep inroads in social relationships. In the last centuries, a hierarchy emerged under the influence of Western colonialism focusing on the Aryan ideal of white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes and giving it a higher status than darker skin, black hair and brown eyes. The word 'white' received connotations of purity and beauty, as in the expression 'lily-white skin'. Hollywood has even developed a specific system of lighting to give the white female star a halo of radiance.¹ Yet the significance of white is not only positive, as the stereotype of the dumb blonde clearly shows.

During the 1960s, the black civil rights movement in America used the slogan 'black is beautiful' in order to reverse this humiliating hierarchy. The fight against racial prejudice can also be seen in the changing use of the words 'black' and 'white'. Americans of African origin were first called 'negroes' (which literally means 'black'), then 'coloureds' or 'blacks' and now 'African-Americans' in order to avoid the association with biological 'race'.

Hair and skin colours cannot be changed permanently, but you can decorate or dye them temporarily. Because so much social meaning is attached to skin colour, people from every age and culture have embellished their skin by dyeing it or decorating it with tattoos, piercings and scars. Up until recently, Western culture regarded such body decorations as primitive, but in modern times the body has increasingly become a fashion object by which people can express their identity.² In recent years, we have thus seen that the 'lower class' cultural expressions of tattooing and piercing have become widespread and are now more or less acceptable. Yet, excessive painting of the

skin is still rare; children may like to paint their skin at parties, but adults usually limit skin-painting to exceptional situations like Carnival celebrations or football matches.

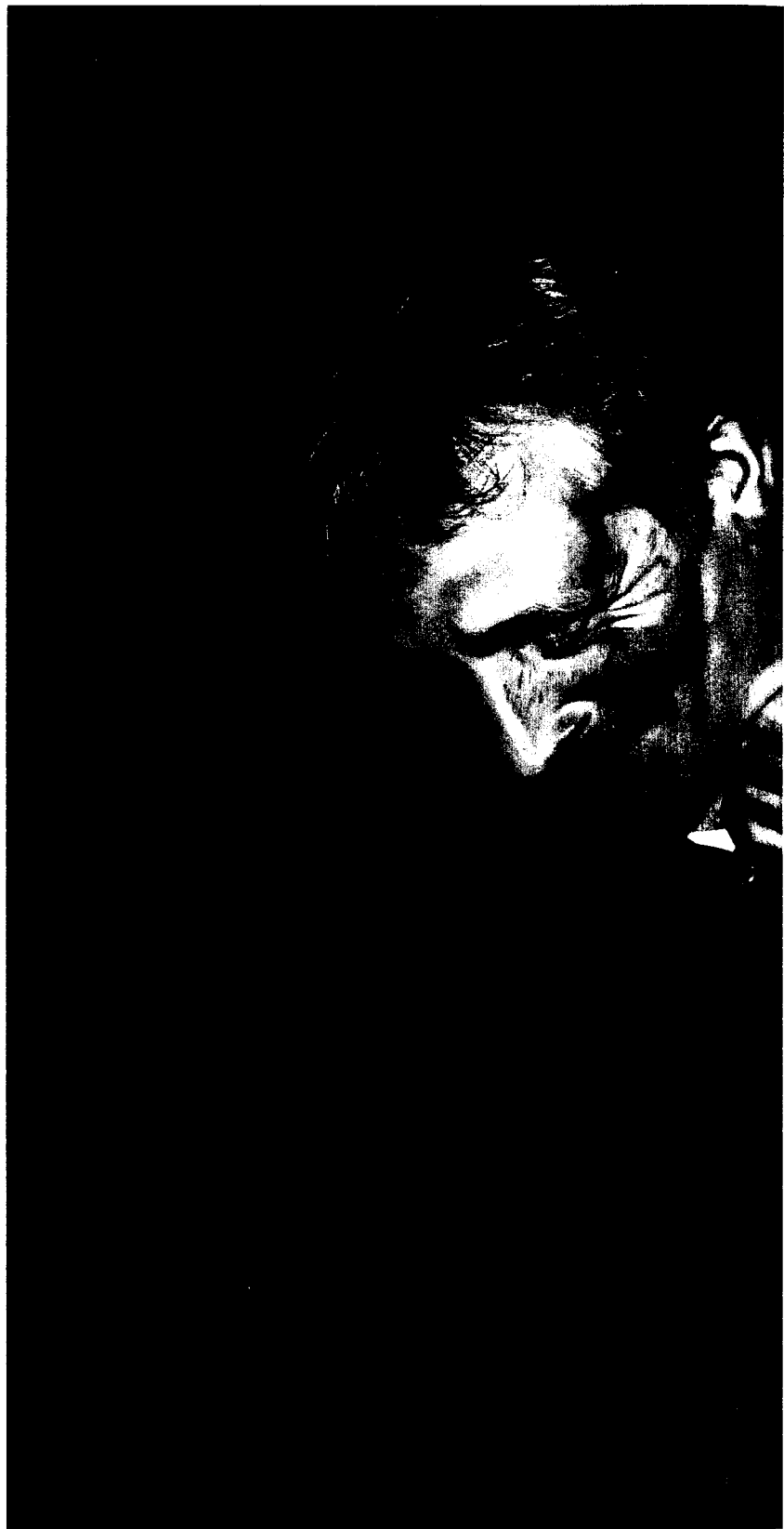
Actors use grease paint on stage or in films to enhance their expressiveness. Such make-up can run from natural to excessive, depending on the genre. In fantasy like science fiction or horror films, more make-up is used than in realistic drama, and in comedy the make-up is applied more heavily than in romantic sitcoms. In Hollywood films, it is important to use make-up in the best possible way to turn actors into glamorous examples of flawless beauty. Actors or actresses who play roles that require 'ugly' make-up are therefore greatly admired. Even people who appear on realistic programmes like politicians on television talk shows are made up because the bright lighting makes the skin look dead without grease paint. Paradoxically enough, dead people are made up for their funerals for the same reason.

In contemporary culture body decoration is called 'cosmetics'. Make-up is applied almost exclusively to the face and is chiefly used by women, hardly ever by men. It looks funny when male politicians appear on television with too much make-up on, because the norm for men is no make-up at all and anything put on the face should therefore remain as invisible as possible. In the case of the female face, colour is applied by means of foundation, blusher, eye shadow, eyebrow pencil, mascara and lipstick. It seems there is a biological reason behind this: the blush on the cheeks, the colour on the lips and the larger-looking eyes are subtle ways of imitating the effects of sexual arousal. In daily life, make-up is usually a close approximation of the natural skin colour, but sometimes it takes on fantastic or



Thierry Mugler, Chimère evening-ensemble, autumn/winter 1997-1998

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Louise to Poele, VVVSOP, 2009,
from the *Farmers* series





excessive forms, such as at glamour parties, in subcultures like punk or gothic, or in the extreme fashion shows of John Galliano or Alexander McQueen. This exuberant body decoration can be understood as a grotesque exception, a colourful way of letting off steam in the drab, grey reality of the daily routine.

Like body decoration, the practice of hair dyeing is not a modern invention but has been around since time immemorial.³ Thanks to developments in chemistry it is now of course possible to dye the hair all the colours of the rainbow. Most people, however, stick relatively close to their own natural colour, the exception being the aforementioned subcultures – punk (pink, green or blue hair) and gothic (pitch-black hair).

Hair dyeing has a number of striking aspects. First, as with cosmetics, there are major differences between men and women. Almost all women dye their hair, a step that men are much less likely to take. Here cultural roles play a role: in northern European countries, hair dyeing is far less common among men than in southern countries. Second, it is interesting that women often keep on dyeing their hair long after it turns grey. Middle-aged men are almost all grey, while women in that age bracket still have blonde, brown, red or black hair. In a culture in which youth is the ideal, grey hair is not attractive as it betrays old(er) age. In contemporary culture grey hair is not a sign of wisdom that commands respect; rather, it suggests a loss of strength, beauty and attractiveness. For many women, it is a pivotal decision to let one's hair go grey and to stop dyeing it.

A third salient aspect is the advancing spread of blonde hair throughout the world. Ever since the Second World War, the beauty ideal has been dominated by blonde hair and blue eyes. In

this context it is interesting to know that blonde hair in adults is actually a myth, since only five percent of them continue to have naturally light-coloured hair after puberty.⁴ This means that almost every adult blonde woman is an unnatural blonde who dyes her hair. The most iconic blonde movie and pop stars are actually brunettes: women like Marilyn Monroe, Brigitte Bardot and Madonna. In the Netherlands, Princess Máxima, a striking blonde, is really a dyed brunette.

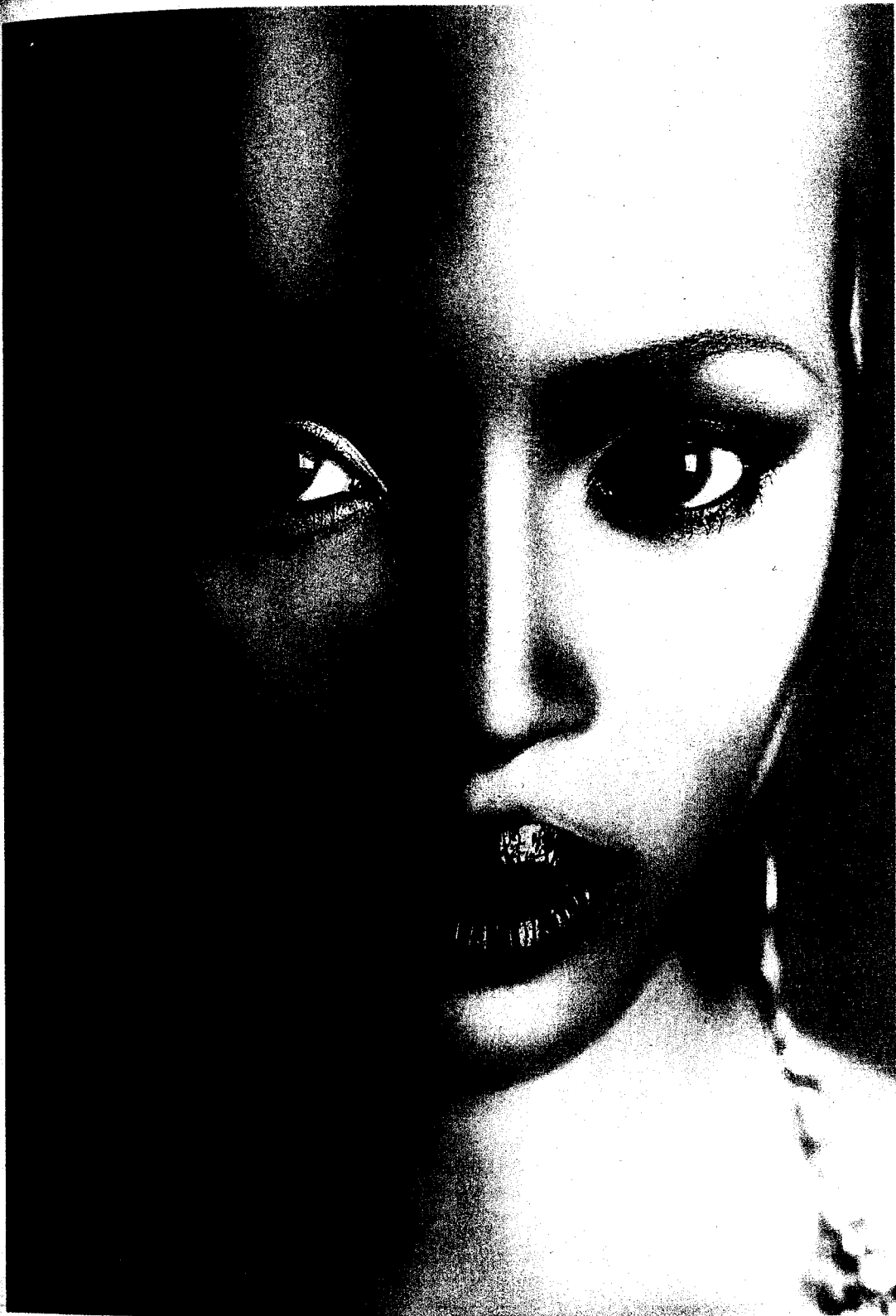
The blonde norm has now become so dominant that it can be found in countries where dark hair is much more common. It is striking to see how many female TV announcers or TV stars on Italian, Spanish, Greek or Turkish television are (unnatural) blondes. The desire for blonde hair can even be found among women from ethnic groups with naturally black hair. Almost all Bollywood stars have dark eyes and black hair, but the Indian film star of the moment, Aishwarya Rai, has green eyes and light-brown dyed hair. African-American female pop stars like Beyoncé Knowles, Mariah Carey, Mary J. Blige and Tina Turner or models like Oman and Tyra Banks, tend to strip their kinky hair of its racial characteristics: their hair is not only straightened or relaxed, but is often dyed a much lighter colour as well, sometimes even blonde. In performances or photo shoots the women actually often wear wigs. There are fashion photos of Naomi Campbell with straight blonde or curly red hair instead of her own kinky black hair. In other photos she has green or blue eyes, achieved by a combination of contact lenses and photoshopping. The prevailing blonde beauty ideal is apparently so prescriptive that it is considered cool and trendy to dye black hair blonde. The opposite is unthinkable: a blonde model like Doutzen Kroes or Claudia Schiffer would never

wear brown contact lenses or dye her hair a darker shade.

We see here once again how skin and hair colour acquire social meaning. The colour of skin and hair are among those physical aspects that are never without significance but have far-reaching consequences in society, as we can see from the striking differences between women and men, and black and white people. Perhaps the colourful worlds of advertising and fashion helps us prepare for a greater diversity of colours on the skin or in the hair, whether from nature or out of a bottle. A 'rainbow coalition' may introduce a more colourful world for women and men, and for black and white people alike.

Notes

1. Richard Dyer, *White*, London: Routledge, 1997.
2. Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.
3. Jennifer Craik, *The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies in Fashion*, London: Routledge, 1994.
4. Joanna Pitman, *On Blondees*, London: Bloomsbury, 2003.



Seb Janiak, photo of Naomi Campbell
for the French *ELLE*