

# PH9GU-30 Appearance and identity in visual culture

**22/23**

**Department**

Philosophy

**Level**

Taught Postgraduate Level

**Module leader**

Heather Widdows

**Credit value**

30

**Module duration**

10 weeks

**Assessment**

100% coursework

**Study location**

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

---

## Description

### Introductory description

This module focuses on key topics in philosophy and related disciplines which are concerned with engagement in beauty practices and body-modification in an increasingly visual and virtual culture. It will explore the changing value placed on appearance, as measuring up to beauty ideals becomes increasingly connected to identity. It will consider how the demands of beauty are changing, as the current ideal becomes more dominant and demanding. Dominant, in that it applies to more people more of the time, applying to professions and demographics which it previously didn't, and to boys and men as well as women and girls up and extending into illness and old age. Demanding, in that more is required to attain the grade, from the naturalising of body hair removal, such that this is now regarded as a health and hygiene practice rather than a form of beautification or adornment, to the routinising of body modification, in the form of cosmetic surgery, tattooing, diet and exercise. The module will also consider how and the extent to which the increased focus on appearance changes what we value and how we perceive ourselves and others and how we should respond as individuals and collectively.

### Module aims

The module will enable students to crucially engage with philosophical debates around

appearance. The module will equip students to understand how appearance is valued, how it is connected to identity, and how this is changing as culture becomes more image-based. It will introduce students to key ethical debates about how appearance norms should be addressed, including: whether engagement is a 'choice' which should be respected; whether some practices, such as some types cosmetic surgery, should be prohibited; whether objectification of the body (or some bodies) is always harmful; and whether lookism should be regulated in a similar way to sexism and racism.

## Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Illustrative topics include:

- Is the current dominant ideal of beauty different from past ideals, and does this matter?
- What does it mean to say 'our bodies are ourselves'?
- How does identity connect to appearance?
- Does changing the body change the self?
- Has beauty become a value framework?
- How useful are critiques of objectification in a visual culture where images of faces and bodies are ubiquitous?
- What place do the moral emotions of blame and shame have in policing beauty engagement?
- Does intention matter to the ethics of body modification?
- Can we untangle 'choice' from 'cohesion' in the current cultural moment?
- Is it unethical, morally suspect, to engage in beauty practices and modification?
- Should we regard all types of body modification, body building, cosmetic surgery, make-up, in a similar way? If not, what criteria should we use to distinguish between practices?
- Should we regulate certain forms of body modification? Are there criteria we could use, for example, with regard to the risk involved, or the motivation?
- How does beauty impact on inequality? Does it enhance equality that men are increasingly subject to unrealistic body ideals as women have long been? Does beauty subvert power hierarchies?
- Is 'lookism', appearance discrimination, similar to sexism or racism?
- Should lookism be illegal? What would be the protected characteristic?
- What duties do individuals have in responding to the beauty ideal and appearance norms?

## Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- By the end of the module the student should have an understanding and knowledge of the value of appearance in contemporary culture and of how beauty ideals and engagement are theorised in philosophical debate.
- By the end of the module the student should be able to participate in debates about how appearance matters in contemporary culture, and to articulate arguments for and against different positions in a systematic and clear way.

- By the end of the module the student should be able to analyse and critically evaluate arguments for different understandings of appearance, and ethical responses to appearance norms, and come to an independent assessment of their relative merits.

## **Indicative reading list**

- Bartky, S.L., 2015. *Femininity and domination: Studies in the phenomenology of oppression*. Routledge.
- Chambers, C., 2022, *Intact: A Defence of the Unmodified Body*. Allan Lane.
- Chambers, C., 2004. Are breast implants better than female genital mutilation? *Autonomy, gender equality and Nussbaum's political liberalism*. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 7(3), pp.1-33.
- Hooks, B., 2014. *Black looks: Race and representation*.
- Irvin, S. ed., 2016. *Body aesthetics*. Oxford University Press.
- MacCallum, F. and Widdows, H., 2018. Altered images: understanding the influence of unrealistic images and beauty aspirations. *Health Care Analysis*, 26(3), pp.235-245.
- Mason, A., 2021. What's wrong with everyday lookism?. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 20(3), pp.315-335.
- Mason, A. and Minerva, F., 2022. Should the Equality Act 2010 Be Extended to Prohibit Appearance Discrimination?. *Political Studies*, 70(2), pp.425-442.
- Nussbaum, M.C., 1995. Objectification. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 24(4), pp.249-291.
- Papadaki, L., 2010. What is objectification?. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 7(1), pp.16-36.
- Thomason, K.K., 2015. Shame, violence, and morality. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 91(1), pp.1-24.
- Widdows, H., 2022, April. II—No Duty to Resist: Why Individual Resistance Is an Ineffective Response to Dominant Beauty Ideals. In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (Vol. 122, No. 1, pp. 27-46). Oxford University Press.
- Widdows, H., 2021. Structural injustice and the requirements of beauty. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 52(2), pp.251-69.
- Widdows, H., 2018. *Perfect Me*. Princeton University Press.
- Young, I.M., 2005. *On female body experience: "Throwing like a girl" and other essays*. Oxford University Press.

## **Subject specific skills**

Students will be able to (a) crucially engage with philosophical debates around appearance; (b) understand how appearance is valued, how it is connected to identity, and how this is changing as culture becomes more image-based; (c) gain understanding of key ethical debates about how appearance norms should be addressed.

## **Transferable skills**

(a) The ability to communicate information (verbally and in written form) to people both expert and non-expert in the field; (b) The ability to analyse, evaluate, critique and apply complex information gathered from reading, reflection, reasoning or communication; (d) The ability to effectively manage schedules and deadlines.

---

## Study

### Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	18 sessions of 1 hour (6%)
Seminars	9 sessions of 1 hour (3%)
Private study	273 hours (91%)
Total	300 hours

### Private study description

Reading, seminar and essay preparation

### Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

---

## Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Students can register for this module without taking any assessment.

### Assessment group A

	Weighting	Study time
7500 word essay	100%	

### Feedback on assessment

Feedback on essays will be provided on the coversheet for the essay, addressing standard areas of evaluation and individual content.

---

## Availability

### Courses

This module is Option list A for:

- TPHA-V7PN Postgraduate Taught Philosophy and the Arts

- Year 1 of V7PN Philosophy and the Arts
- Year 2 of V7PN Philosophy and the Arts