

Measuring Up

- talking back to Leonardo, rationality and the idea of perfection.

As soon as you saw people as things to be measured, they didn't measure up."¹

Leonardo's iconic drawing isolates the perfect (male) human figure in the centre of a rational universe described by the immaculate geometry of square and circle.

At the time when Leonardo made this drawing, an educated man could understand the whole of the cutting edge science of his day and still have time left over to become proficient in the arts. It seemed possible that with just a little more knowledge we might understand everything, that a little more study would soon find a cure for all our ills. It's a nice dream, but it didn't happen. The more we have learned, the more we have discovered that we still don't know, and it is no longer possible for any one person to understand more than a small part of current scientific thinking; most of us can't even understand the equations that say that the world may be chaotic and impossible for anyone to understand. Rationality has not produced the lucid comprehension of a rational universe that it promised in the Renaissance, finding instead that each new level of understanding reveals an ever greater complexity.

Leonardo's drawing describes the proportion of the human figure, but all human figures are different. All humans are different, but we cling to the idea that there is some ideal, some dream of perfection for which we should be aiming. Every culture has a model for what a human being should be, and what all these models have in common is that a superior person is considered to be one whose behaviour supports the survival of that culture. In a tribal society beset by enemies a man might aim to be a great warrior, and a woman to be the mother of many sons. In the stable, hierarchical societies of Mediaeval Europe or Imperial China virtue consisted in faithfully performing the role into which you were born and respecting those above you. In the period of European expansion into what was to become the USA, the key virtues were toughness and willingness to take risks - the 'pioneer spirit' necessary to acquire the land from its original inhabitants and transform it into European-style farms and towns.

For us in the contemporary west the idea of what makes a good person is communicated through the media, and most of the printed and broadcast media are funded from advertising revenue. This constrains the range of possible content, as if the advertisers feel that anything said might lessen our eagerness to buy their product, they will withdraw funding. Added to this influence there is the direct impact of advertising itself, a multibillion pound industry devoted to convincing us that if we eat the right stuff, exercise enough, buy enough, go on enough holidays and read enough self-help books we could be perfect (or at least good enough). A continual demand for new products is essential to economic growth, and to achieve this demand it is necessary to create a sense of continual dissatisfaction, the feeling that our lives are not good enough yet. Without our carefully cultivated sense of inferiority, western consumer culture would collapse.

"I don't care if it hurts I wanna have control,
I want a perfect body, I want a perfect soul."²

The two failed dreams, the dream of a rationally comprehensible universe and that dream of a perfect human being, intersect in Measure Up, where Leonardo's two-dimensional delineation of perfection becomes a three-dimensional denial of its possibility. The perfect man has become a far-from-perfect middle aged woman. The impassive subject of our gaze is looking back at us and seems to be amused by the view, whilst her refusal to keep still and behave like an object is wrenching the immaculate geometry out of true.

I wonder what would happen if we could give up striving for control, if we relaxed our ferocious pursuit of an ever-receding perfection for our selves and our lives?

What would the world look like if we stopped seeing human beings as isolated objects in competition with each other?

Nice dream.