

Chapter 1: An Attractive Face

There aren't many things more desirable to own than an attractive face. In terms of your overall level of attractiveness, nothing makes such a big contribution to it as your face. If your face is attractive enough you can make a whole career out of it. And although there are some cultural influences, basically it is something we are hard wired for. We are interested in people and we want to look at their faces. Look at the covers of magazines and week in week out people with attractive faces make up the majority of the covers. Babies will look for longer at an attractive face than an unattractive one.

So is it possible to highlight the features of an attractive face? The advent of computer imaging allowing faces to be manipulated and their features changed has meant that we now can do experiments where we can find out what features make some faces more attractive than others. This is an interesting area to apply the scientific method. To professional scientists like myself turning subjective feelings into hard quantitative data is in itself an intriguing subject. But I imagine that a general reader will be much more interested in the conclusions that have been reached than the way those conclusions were drawn in the first place. But before I plunge in, just a word of warning about symmetry.

If you do some research you will find that some people have concluded that people find symmetrical faces attractive. There is no particular reason to doubt this, and in fact it does sound reasonably plausible. The suggestion was that symmetry resulted from the embryo developing according to the pattern laid down by the genes and that the better the copy the more symmetrical it would look. But it turns out that this was in fact the result of symmetry arising out of other factors that promoted attraction. This was shown rather elegantly by a simple experiment where photos of faces were created where one side of the face was of a mirror image of the other side. These faces did not register as particularly attractive. (http://www.uni-regensburg.de/Fakultaeten/phil_Fak_II/Psychologie/Psy_II/beautycheck/english/symmetrie/symmetrie.htm)

I point this out for two reasons – one is that it shows how easy it is to get misled by data from scientific experiments. Sometimes things are related in ways that have no relation to the ideas you start from. But also it was a relief to me because I am very fond of a line from Edgar Allan Poe, who said "There is no exquisite beauty... without some strangeness in the proportion.". This has always been my opinion too. The truly beautiful face to me personally has some element that marks it out from the commonplace, sometimes a feature that might ordinarily be considered unappealing.

An Attractive Male Face

The majority of men don't find one another attractive, so are very aware that they don't really have a clear idea of what impact their face has. I picke up

this exchange on Craigslist, edited a little to take out noise but all the original words:

< new_realm > What features do women look for on a man's face that makes him handsome or attractive. How do women decide if a man is a "hunk"?

I need description of each part of the face.

< anonymous reply> Square jaw is good.

Trim your eyebrows, nose hair, ear hair. Caterpillar eyebrows are no good. Unibrows - equally bad.

If you have no chin, that's a real turn off. E.g. from the bottom of your bottom lip to edge of your chin, your chin actually slopes back. That's not good.

< new_realm > ok...

now about individual parts:

lips -- fuller or thinner?

eyes -- bigger or smaller?

forehead -- bigger more exposed or smaller ?

< Anonymous > Ok then...My hubby has a square jaw with a cleft chin that I find extremely sexy. A strong jawline gives me goosebumps!

< Anonymous> As I said, it all depends on how it fits together. Nice eyes...a square jaw with masculine features...nice nose, full lips but not too full. Nice skin and coloring.

< Anonymous > First, I don't want a "hunk" I want a REAL man - who doesn't care about his looks. No ego, no vanity ... no headache for me. Aesthetically, I prefer guys with dark DARK features: brown/hazel eyes, black hair, dark brooding eyebrows, a prominent chin. I am describing my SO! :)

Think Mr. Big (fr Sex and the City), Paul Newman, Al Pacino.

Oy! ♥

Well there is some food for thought there, but of course we can't use internet chat forums as solid data. So according to scientists, what makes a male face attractive?

Computer graphics have made it possible to investigate the attractiveness of faces in ways that would have been extremely difficult in the past. The University of Regensburg in Germany and their amazingly interesting

beautycheck website is one of the groups that have been working in this area.

Here are a couple of morphs. These were produced by continually blending original photographs that were judged either attractive or unattractive, a sort of Darwinian process that probably matches pretty closely how real face shapes change over time. Here are their conclusions about male faces.



Computer generated ugly face



Computer generated handsome face

I have tried these out by asking a range of women their opinions of them. The consensus agreed with Regensbug about which one was more attractive. But interestingly there were some objections. They said that he looked arrogant. They also said that he lacked personality. I put this one down to female intuition. He obviously does lack personality in a very literal sense as he is simply a computer image. Ugly guy was described as looking friendly.

I found this very interesting. Presumably good looking guys can get away with being arrogant. But if you aren't a natural babe magnet, you probably have to work harder at your charm if you want to get some attention?

With teutonic efficiency the Germans have listed the actual attributes that they have identified. So what kind of male face do women find attractive? There is a preference for darker skin, a narrower facial shape, not a plump one. The lips should be full and symmetrical. The upper half of the face should be broader, the cheek bones higher and the lower jaw more prominent.

The jaw and cheek bone shapes found attractive are indicators of higher levels of testosterone during development. In fact there have been studies relating attractiveness to testosterone levels. Although it does look like something is going on, it may not be as straight forward as the higher your level of testosterone, the more attractive you are to women. What does seem to be true is that features like a more prominent jaw that are the result of high testosterone appear to make the possessor look more dominant. But there

doesn't seem to be a strong link between perceived dominance and perceived attractiveness. Dominance and aggression of course are very much two edged swords when it comes to reproductive success. It only really works when you are the most dominant and aggressive male around. Being the second most dominant in a group is more likely to give you problems. An interesting twist on this has come to light recently when the appeal of dominant males was compared to the appeal of status. It turned out that prestige was much more appealing than dominance. Some dominant traits were found to be appealing in some contexts and repelling in others. My own take on it is that dominance is only useful if it allows you to achieve status. In itself it isn't a particularly attractive trait.

There are other drawbacks to having a high testosterone level too. The dangers of taking steroid tablets are well known, but having an above average testosterone level poses similar risks. I certainly wouldn't advocate doing anything to increase your own natural level of testosterone. The health risks could be serious.

There is also some effect of the menstrual cycle on women's preferences. When at your most fertile you have the strongest preference for highly masculine testosterone rich male faces. Why this should be is a bit mysterious since humans tend to court over time periods much longer than the menstrual cycle.

So basically guys, you have a minefield here. There isn't much you can do to make your face slimmer, but I guess that an early Elvis style haircut that makes the overall profile longer would help. If you are taking a photo for a dating site make sure that it is not taken from below, since that will tend to make your face look fatter. A slight angle to make sure that the jaw can be seen in profile would probably be beneficial.

But the other message is that women are just more complicated than men. Their preferences vary over time and according to context. The one thing that does seem to be foolproof is to enhance your prestige – so although looking good is important finding a way to appear successful is probably going to help a lot too.

References

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