



MINIMAL SCENTS SMELL OF NOTHING BUT HYPOCRISY

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The trend for undetectable perfume and no-makeup makeup conceals a minefield of vanity and self-delusion

There are two types of cosmetics, in my analysis. Lipstick and mascara. Oh, and blusher. Hang on: and powder and eyeliner and moisturiser and perfume and hairspray. Blimey, there are loads. And styling mousse and hair dye and spray tan and unnecessary surgery. Do shaving products count? Maybe. Hats? No. Even tiny, sparkly impractical hats that don't keep the rain off? Fascinators and tiaras and coronets and the like? No, I think we're entering the realm of clothes and jewellery. What about stick-on sequins? And moustache wax? I'm thinking of changing my look.

But there are, I still think, two types of cosmetics. You can remember it like diabetes: type one is naturally occurring and type two is something you've clearly done to yourself. Except, obviously, nothing is naturally occurring in the field of cosmetics. So type one is what appears to be naturally occurring (ie a lie) and type two is the open truth. Concealer on the one hand, painted nails on the other. Or actually on both, as a rule.

Lipstick is generally type two: a lipsticked person is not usually claiming that's their natural lip shade. If they were, people wouldn't buy different lipsticks to go with different outfits, which I'm pretty sure they do. And no one thinks they're implying that, after some nuclear mutation incident involving a chameleon in a lab, they now have the power to change their own skin pigmentation. No one impishly asks if they can also swivel their eyes independently of one another or pick up snacks with a rapidly emerging mega-tongue. Everyone accepts it's lipstick. They might say "Nice lipstick".

Cosmetic surgery, meanwhile, is obviously type one. No one's going to say "Nice surgery". It's not a sign of taste and self-respect to have gone under general anaesthetic and been selectively carved to reverse what our culture considers to be the uglifying effects of getting older. It's supposed to look like nothing has happened, even though it's often obvious something has. So it's rude to mention.

People who get facelifts just want to look like they haven't aged. They've secretly paid money to look lucky. Then again, they were lucky to have the money. But that's why bad cosmetic surgery can make someone seem so ridiculous. The spurious claim they're making about their biological good fortune is further undermined by the indisputable evidence that they didn't even catch a break in their choice of surgeon.

The reason I've been musing along these lines is that, according to a recent news report, perfume is changing cosmetic types. You'd think it was pretty solidly type two: deodorant might be type one, a denial of our inherent BO, but people who smell of perfume or aftershave aren't seriously claiming it's exuded organically. Ambulances would be called. Nevertheless, the latest fashion in perfumes is for them to be hardly detectable by the human nose. As Ben Gorham, one of the creators of "Elevator Music", a minimalist scent launching this month, put it: "The idea is that its wearer is noticed, not the perfume." Perhaps it comes with a free comedy hat.

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Other examples of hip new barely scented scents are "You", for "millennials" who, according to its creator, "like scent to be personal"; "Dauphine" – "The concept is extreme cleanliness," says its designer; and the godfather of the trend, first made back in 2006, "Escentric Molecule 01", described by the New York Times as "one of the top-selling niche fragrances of all time", though I suppose you could wear it wherever you like. These products are "the olfactory equivalent of no-makeup makeup, in which people spend hundreds of hours, and dollars, to look effortless".





To say this is a bit emperor's new clothes is an understatement. The emperor's stylists at least claimed their clothes were detectable by some. These perfumers are marketing substances they admit are virtually unnoticeable to everyone. They talk of bringing out people's natural scent but, if that was appealing, minicabs wouldn't have little Christmas trees hanging from their rear-view mirrors. Perhaps it's all a ploy to sell more deodorant, to be applied as soon as the perfume kicks in.

Another cosmetic straddling both types is hair dye. Which type of cosmetic it is seems to depend, broadly and as a generalisation (so don't say "That's a generalisation!" because I've admitted it's a generalisation), on gender. Dyed hair on a woman is seen as type two, and on a man as type one. For women, hair-dyeing is culturally accepted as an overt cosmetic choice – in fact, it gets called "colouring", a word that implies agency and choice. But for men, it's simply hair dye, suggesting concealment. It's lying about having gone grey, just as a toupee is lying about having gone bald.

It's odd. Lots of men don't like going bald or grey, ostensibly because of what it looks like. But you can very effectively change what it looks like. Yet, somehow, any attempt to make such a change is associated with shame – we're a world away from bald men openly saying: "Yes, I went bald and I didn't like how it looked, so now I wear this terrific wig!"

There are clearly people who think being bald makes you look like a loser – but there's a broader agreement, even among those who don't mind baldness, that you're an enormous loser if you try to hide it. Unless, of course, you successfully hide it, in which case you look like a winner who never had the misfortune to go bald.

The type one cosmetics lie is about luck and vanity – hiding the absence of the former and the presence of the latter – and, as with all issues to do with appearance, it inevitably gets tangled up with sexism. On the surface, it seems unfair on men that there's shame attached to them dyeing their hair when women can openly colour theirs. Underlying that, though, is the deeper unfairness that old-looking men are allowed to be newsreaders and old-looking women aren't.

So when women try to "reverse the effects of ageing", it's a way of coping with the patriarchy. When men do it, they're just kidding themselves about death.

